

THE SEVERED LANGUAGE

Nanni Balestrini, Gianni Pettena,

Gianni Emilio Simonetti

LAURA BULIAN GALLERY

4.4 – 7.6.2019

+ performance *Darkness* by Sergio

Racanati 23.5.2019 at 19.00

Intoxication

critical essay by **MANUELA GANDINI**

Nature does not admit norms, neither does life (...) hypocrisy does not change nature

Giuseppe Chiari

1953, Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The wall of Rue de la Seine was the dirty, rough canvas on which Guy Debord scratched the phrase *ne travaillez jamais* (never work). It is a literary work, a political statement, a hymn to idleness and unproductivity in defence of life. These three words appeared in Paris – three words destined to become the leitmotiv of 1968. Three words that were opposed – as reported in issue 8 of the Situationist International bulletin – to the humiliating and false words written over the entrance to Auschwitz: *arbeit macht frei*, work sets one free. That concentration camp slogan is so perverse that it paralyses thought. “What happens to words when they cannot be pronounced or understood as if they were true?” asks Balestrini. For Marcel Duchamp “Language is an error of humanity”; for John Cage “Syntax, like government, can only be obeyed. Hence, it does not have many reasons to exist”.

In 1945, at the age of 20, the Romanian Jew Isidore Isou invented Lettrism – a failed, subversive project for a paradisiacal society. – These literary guerrillas felt the necessity to pulverise the bourgeois narration, sabotage films and break the numerical limit of letters in the alphabet.

Instead, in 1957, members of the Situationist International saw a necessity to *decipher* the information of the generalist press, to x-ray events, to expose lies and decode messages aimed at the mechanisation of souls. Artists, activists, poets and freaks shattered, dismantled and re-edited language.

Through the revolts of the 1960s the great stories decayed and crumbled, crashing into new existential concepts. Within this climate, Nanni Balestrini, Gianni Pettena and Gianni Emilio Simonetti, worked on the subversion of the language used in entertainment, the media and institutions. They adopted a practice of *diversion* in every discipline by taking words and images from films, commercials, standardised discourse, official language and advertising. These were not new forms or new narrative devices, but printed and digested phrases, drawn from the news, mundane language, comics, editorials, billboards and the courts. The stereotypes of the culture industry became material for a semantic subversion, so as to build new visions, change the backdrop of everyday life and escape from voluntary slavery.

2019: Under the current climate of restoration, normalisation and recession of the imagination, the endeavours of Pettena, Simonetti, Balestrini prove to be vital and necessary.

Pettena, the anarchist, immediately refused official architecture and was among the founders of Radical Architecture. Simonetti, a political activist, essayist and founder of the magazine “La Gola”, was an exponent of both the Situationist International and the Fluxus movement. Balestrini, an unrepentant movement activist, gave rise to Group 63, wrote “Vogliamo Tutto” – the bible of the sixties – and founded “Alfabeta”. In their practices the word is a guerrilla weapon in literary, essayist and sculptural terms. If there is an active nihilism in Pettena’s work, in other words, a desire not to add artefacts to the urban context but temporary *situations* that transform semantic points of view and diktats; in Simonetti’s performances there is an interdisciplinary compendium of scattered fragments of the city, advertising and psychoanalysis. History is brought back to life, the stomach is activated in culinary performances and the ear, in musical scores, has to come to terms with the eye. It is multi-sensory bafflement. Balestrini, instead, uses titles and subheadings from the press to build gloomy landscapes of meaning. City barricades become wallpapers stained with black blood. The word explodes and becomes visual substance, the symptom of a putrefying society. In 1968, Pettena immersed awkward institutional words into the urban fabric as if they were superhuman entities. CARABINIERI, MILITE IGNOTO (THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER), GRAZIA & GIUSTIZIA (term relating to the Italian Ministry of Justice) in three-dimensional writings, two meters high. The first two, installed in artistic events (in Novara and Ferrara), highlight their underlying sarcastic essence. GRAZIA & GIUSTIZIA instead, carried during a procession in Palermo, part of a protest against the politically motivated sentencing of Aldo Braibanti to nine years in prison for psychological subjugation and homosexuality. In *Prayer for Aldo Braibanti*, Giuseppe Chiari - who worked with Pettena in organising various activities in defence of the playwright – wrote: “The true sadist does not torture / the true sadist PUNISHES CORRECTS / does not allow his senses to participate in this act of punishment / from above he is indifferent / and in a position of absolute presumption he knows what the victim’s GOOD is / the victim’s HAPPINESS / the thoughts of the victim are of no importance TO CALL HIM VICTIM would be to betray himself INSTEAD HE CALLS HIM SICK”. A threatening use of punitive language prevails, ascribing guilt by exercising abuse of power over those who are “not normal” and considered diseased. Defending Braibanti, Pettena uses the commercial ampersand conjunction (&) to denounce the manipulative practices of the Ministry of GRAZIA & GIUSTIZIA. The artist’s disruptive action consisted of parading the fatal letters through the city of Palermo like a funeral cortege. The words walked along the street on the shoulders of men heading towards the shore, one by one the letters were cast into the sea, dissolving their meaning.

Taking the constituent elements of the Fluxus movement’s performance, Simonetti mutated ordinary things. He broke down and reversed language; he ripped the hands from clocks. At different times, he re-staged the same actions which were revealed as symptoms – “because form makes it possible to classify symptoms” – performing acts of appropriation on what was taken for granted so as to reconfigure new horizons of meaning. The image becomes a musical note, writing becomes graphic and stretches along the line of visual and aural micro-catastrophes.

With ritual gestures the figures return like in a puzzle on canvases that are always different, and likewise in videos and installations. Hands that sew, political pornography, philosophical echoes, extinct noises, comic artefacts and the shrapnel of revolutions, hang over an inevitable failure because “we always knew it would end badly” (Deleuze). Like the findings of conceptual excavations, these details ripped from the whole find their place in the white space of memory. The story repeats itself in a loop in an installation with a long title *Essa non ha sangue abbastanza perché una spada colpevole per causa sua arrossisca* (It has not enough blood in it to make a guilty sword turn red). A map of the island of Kronstadt is drawn on a beautiful carpet. There, in 1921, a sailors’ revolt against the Bolsheviks ended in a massacre. A pile of copies of “Pravda”, the official newspaper of the Soviet Union, stand on the carpet, it is a pedestal for an ox heart that has been sewn back together with needle and thread, and to which a metronome gives back the beat: compensation, however slim, for the victims of Stalinist deception and violence.

Balestrini hurled words into a discontinuous space on surfaces where the eye moved in alternate directions. He broke the linearity of the text and spread the sentences across space, so that colonies of words acquired meanings that are no longer unambiguous. The eye constructs new and different meanings. The work was the result of editing and post-production; nothing was original. The redirected images in his videos, infinitely recombined, or the letters that exploded on the canvas, created an emotional rereading of reality (reality?).

If this is constructed from the order of the language and its impositions, urging consumption and obedience, the action undertaken by the three artists is still one of disrupting hierarchies and impositions by bringing the word elsewhere, inventing scenarios against a linguistic simplification that is bringing forth generations of totally robotic men and women. “Some call him pig!” was written on a billboard in Minneapolis in 1971, it showed a policeman giving mouth to mouth resuscitation to a child. Pettena takes this photograph and in his involuntary irony he changes its context.

The Severed Language ends with *Darkness*, a cross-media performance by Sergio Racanati, which draws the viewers in and projects them into marginal, post-industrial spaces, littered with debris, madness and rubble. The triumph of the man-machine interface as the only habitable space has become the new frontier of domination and incommunicability between beings. The performer’s scenario is a panorama that turns out to be terminally ill: the ultimate lack of direction. Language has been fragmented by the violence of technology, by the control of artificial intelligence and by *the Weltanschauung* of Silicon Valley, for which “it is not the extinction of the “human race” that is established but, more specifically and more subtly, the eradication of the *human figure*” (Eric Sadin). Without taking on the role of Cassandra, yet bringing the apocalypse back to its literal sense: a revelation of meaning!

Manuela Gandini
Milan, 2019

