

I SHOT MERCURY TO MAKE THIS EXHIBITION

11 January - 17 February 2018

Simona Andrioletti
Fabio Dartizio
Mariia Fedorova
Susi Gelb
Diego Miguel Mirabella
Catalin Pislaru
Alice Ronchi
Stefania Ruggiero

«The place of the poem - or, rather, its taking place - is therefore neither in the text nor in the author or reader: it is in the gesture through which the author and reader put themselves into play in the text and, at the same time, are infinitely withdrawn from it.»

Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (2009)

[Disclaimer: the following three paragraphs may contain a considerable amount of curatorial gibberish]

The collaborative artwork *No Ghost, Just a Shell*, conceived by Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe in 2012, was somehow like a collective tale in which the main character, AnnLee, was given to twelve different artists. Each of them was asked to create a psychological and historical background to her, so that her personality could grow through time and use. The story of AnnLee made me wonder if there is a proper way to read an image and, moreover, the artwork that is using that image. By saying "image" I mean the complex of iconographic and visual means that the artwork contains within itself, so I assume that a piece of art is more than the sum of its parts. The question that arises, then, would be how can we properly read this whole entity if the artistic act is already a translation *per se*? Of course there are some images that can be read easily than others, because they use a common grammar which speaks clearer to its readers. If we think about Pop Art, for instance, that due to its use of popular signs and symbols is now acknowledged by the multitude, it goes without saying that some translations can be easier than others, *apparently*. After all, it takes less effort to read the world outside by using a canon that has been taught to us since we first entered the realm of images. But what are the limits of this operation?

The Italian semiotician Umberto Eco once said that a translation is, in part, a sort of betrayal¹. In Italian, these two idioms have the same root, so that they also sound misleading (see the verb *tradurre*, which means "to translate", and *tradire*, which means "to betray"). This may lead us to consider that every time we try to read something we make an act of translation and, as a consequence, of betrayal to the text/artwork and its author. Moreover, we should keep in mind the nature of the alphabet we use for our reading activity: we grew up into an environment that has its

¹ Eco, U. (1990), *Experiences in translation*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2001.

own history, rules, institutions, modes of behaviour, that uses a certain language and sees things in a certain way. All these variables converge into a network that activates the Foucauldian notion of *dispositif*², which serve to orient and guide us through the particular society that produced it. Is it possible to step beyond this innate apparatus and try to think and look at things in a different way, in order to fully understand something? It may be now argued that, given these premises, to acknowledge something as a whole is simply utopia, but nevertheless it could be useful for us to first test the reliability of the tools we use for this purpose: first and foremost, that of our apparatus. We shall start by asking ourselves what 'knowledge' is and when is it that we can argue we have 'got' something correctly. In fact, here comes Eco again to remind us that language always says something more than its unaccessible literal meaning and that, by stopping at a first stage of interpretation, we suddenly kill Mercury, whose core activity is to deliver messages to the other Gods.

As I am just another reader as you are, the previous statements could fall in the very same traps I have hitherto mentioned. It is true, in part, that I've killed Mercury to make this exhibition, because I'm using my own *dispositif* to judge some artworks because of my hierarchical position, putting them on show to support my curatorial interests. As Eco remarks, the author's intent is often misread, and this is why I invited eight artists to gather some thoughts around their own artworks. I wrote something as well and the result is a sort of *cadavre exquis* to share two different points of view, just to make you consider if and how things can be seen differently. What I would like you to do now is to step from here and challenge your thoughts. Each artist on show has been chosen because of her or his attention to the idea of knowledge and representation and/or to the limits that the act of acknowledging something brings within itself. This has brought many of them to put in question the idea of archetypes and the way we see, translate and read the world.

[The following paragraphs contain less curatorial babble and more about the artists, I promise]

To step from the notion of "archetype" is the main purpose of Stefania Ruggiero (1987) and Alice Ronchi (1989), who both play with shapes and flat images in order to highlight that there is an alternative way of looking at things, showing that something reminding us of an object or a situation is most often something else. Eventually, Stefania's practice turned out to pay much attention to this process rather than its subject, through questioning the idea of 'growth' that every construction - whether made of concrete or thoughts - brings within in itself. Her canvases are just a first stage of a singular and personal project that is still in progress and could potentially grow in as many directions as one could think. The contrary may be said of Alice, who always comes back to the objects, that may form her own classification of the world she sees and experiences. On a different stage of thinking to the archetypal is situated the work of Catalin Pislaru (1988), whose main interest is drawing as the most ancient way of understanding reality, the very first attempt to try converting a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional support. Since then, each attempt to make it has been a history of adaption and elaboration, which for Catalin forms the basis to dig into the medium itself. Stepping from his own heritage and memories, the artist translates visual outputs to bring the pictorial medium forward and highlight its aesthetic qualities through a conscious and unexpected juxtaposition of different media.

Classification comes as a common practice in the work of Susi Gelb (1985), whose quest for shaping another kind on knowledge focuses on the creation of environments where synthetic and organic, sensations and scientific accuracy, encyclopaedic knowledge and speculation meet. I think of her studio as a laboratory where the artist enters as the alchemist and for whom all her creations are not just objects, but a way to answer questions that relate with matter, subjects from the technological and natural world, and our way of layering them to create hybrid forms of thought. Layering is an ever-present concern for Diego Miguel Mirabella (1988), whose new series of zelliges disclose fragments of a text emerging from abstract compositions that are peculiar of the Moroccan tradition. The artworks are actually produced in Morocco and then shipped to the artist's studio in Bruxelles, staging a physical detachment that is just the beginning of a process of communication, interpretation, causality, faith, and mutual learning between the artist and the African craftsman he works with.

² Giorgio Agamben gives a clear and detailed reading of Michel Foucault's idea of the "*dispositif*" in Agamben, G. (2006), *What is an apparatus? and other essays*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

The involvement of different people in the making of the artwork sometimes comes as a necessary thing. The already mentioned learning experience that derives is often felt as irreplaceable, even when it asks to reconsider the idea of authorship. Simona Andrioletti (1990) constantly welcomes this instance: the majority of her artworks are made in collaboration with others and as well as the idea of converging together functions in terms of social relation, it also suggests a physical proximity in space and time and, by reflection, a virtual distance from what is missing or misinterpreted in terms of heritage and identity. Actually, these topics seem to be felt paramount for a whole generation of artists, which includes Fabio Dartizio (1989) and Maria Fedorova (1989). The two took part to a residency program in Tokyo and then worked together at the last Folkestone Triennale. This proximity served as a basis for *Space grows young again*, a video that tells about personal and shared moments in the making of the artworks presented at the Triennale, while compressing different displaced sources of experience, knowledge and tradition to showcase their clash in the artists' personalities. They have been touched and changed by each situation and each encounter made on their path, embodying the rootless *Homo Viator*³. This process is narrated through the means of parody, which helps the bittersweet mock to the idea of one's own individuality to emerge, but still collides with its inner need for "old time religions".

[Plot-twist]

As Agamben pointed out in the quote afore-mentioned, the taking place of the poem (shall we say "artwork"?), its ontological *raison d'être*, is neither in the text itself, nor in the author or reader, but in the potentialities that their meeting can breed within each of them. The same happens when we see an artwork and when we come back to see it again: the contemporary work of art resonates in the moment of the re-looking. To come back and re-think actually looks like the only way to avoid killing Mercury while it runs around.

C.C.

³ See Bourriaud, N. (2002), *Postproduction. Culture as screenplay: how art reprograms the world*, New York, Lucas and Sternberg.