

FOR A TIME

Text by Hubert Besacier

LILIANA MORO

Ensa Bourges: École nationale supérieure d'art de Bourges

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Prato, March 1997, on the stage of the Teatro Fabbricone, Virgilio Sieni's dancers are moving to music by Bach¹... A rapture: slowly, at the speed allowed by a kind of seated crawl, two bodies move forward, two hampered, hindered bodies bound one to the other, two women striving to co-ordinate their every movement in order to advance, sit, rise up, accompanied, as if by laboured breathing, by the sporadic groans of an electric keyboard instrument itself tied to their double body.

In the fleeting intrusion by a foreign, factual and incongruous body, the recomposed time of performance suddenly gives away to the real time of event. The bound body of the artist (Liliana Moro), weighed down by the double (Giovanna Lué) experiences its own contingency in time, gives itself up at an act without acting, consciously breaking with the image of the aerial body required by dance, the suggested weightlessness of the dancers' bodies.

Here they no longer move to the pre-established musical score, but produce their own sound by their own action: a vital stridency that spurts out like a corporeal prosthesis, or like the whistling of the mute Marx Brother.

They are engaged in what, in the days of the Judson Church Theater, Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris would have called "task performance"².

Neither dancer nor actor: involved in the exposition of a character, of a mimetic attitude, of a fiction, but active.

Sign of the times: traditionally, when a playwright or choreographer brought in a visual artist, it was for the costumes, a set or, at the very most, a scenic device, to achieve a certain scenographic tone.

But the history of modernism has also witnessed the recurring fantasy of the total artwork, the

attempt at interdisciplinary fusion. The Sixties and Seventies thought they had achieved this. But the idea was lost in Italy particularly, in the lure of the “New Spectacularness” which grew out of the myths of the Transavanguardia, when the uncompromising awkwardness of the artist was gradually neutralised by the seductions of theatre. Today there is no longer any room to compromise.

When the choreographer like Virgilio Sieni invites Liliana Moro to intervene in one of his shows, this is not to attempt a fusion or to make her play a role, but to bring about the confrontation between two irreducible modes.

Unlike the Sixties and Seventies, the role of artists is no longer to revitalise the arts of the stage. But nor is the assertion of their singularity bound up with Greenbergian purism which stipulated that each discipline should be rigorously confined to its specific field of competence.

Because artists no longer stand foursquare on the modernist certainties. Because artists no longer have tools that are theirs alone and that would make their situation immediately identifiable, or found a typical genre or language.

The action of the artist consequently appears a constant proving, an assaying in every sense of the word: they are tried and tested at the same time as they test and experiment. As for the “task” to be performed, its nature has undergone a marked change. Strict minimalism objectivity is obsolete. Artists must draw on their personal resources: those of everyday life, of childhood, of the most banal and most powerful experiences alike. No medium, no avenue can be either privileged or neglected.

The field in which the artist moves is not predefined. His or her domain of competence must be redefined from one day to the next. It is no longer enough to choose a technique or a medium that is generally identified as belonging or unmistakably referring to art.

The existence of this artistic territory is a real only insofar as it is constantly occupied, explored and called into question. Probing its limits by uncompromising incursions into other territories, questioning its codes by displacements and permutations so as to foil what might so easily unfold into the law of a genre (performance, for example, or sculpture) all this requires extreme rigour, constant vigilance, it implies maintaining oneself in a state of acute attention, with the capacity to redefine at any time the appositeness of an action.

And so, when a conventionally artistic technique (drawing, modelling, bronze casting) is introduced, then the reference to the law of the genre must make sense, and this in turn requires consummate mastery, whether this is the attribute of the artist’s or delegated.

When Liliana Moro completed her studies at the Accad mia di Brera, she had acquired a thorough grounding in traditional techniques and media, but none of them was the determining factor in her work.

Her first priority was this constant proving. She at once became involved in the creation of the Milanese art space, the “Spazio di Via Lazzaro Palazzi”, and review, “Tiracorrendo”, both indispensable tools designed to ensure that the process of experimentation, and the confrontations it implies, should continue without hiatus.

From her very first works she practised the mixing of genres, combining ordinary and sophisticated objects, using sound, drawing, images and actions. Existing in the movement between object, body and sign, the artwork was not a closed whole but a succession of phases in which an idea, a vision and observations were assayed. A simple transition between two states. Thus, a corporeal action, initiated in the spectacular event of a public performance (*Il rovescio della medaglia*, Trento, 1994) later took on a more detached form through the medium of photography (*Giovanna e la luna*, 1996) and, subsequently, that of sculpture (*Giovanna e la luna*, 1997). The question of the body remains present, but in the form of the figure, which has become increasingly removed from this process of assaying.

These transitions from one state, one stage, to another, serve by their very mobility to counter the traps of the perception which constantly form new screens. The artist works tirelessly to vary the angles of approach the better to prevent effects of adhesion.

In May 1997, at the Centre d'art contemporain Geneva, Liliana Moro presented the explicitly titled *Salti* (Jumps/Switches), a series of signs made up of elements from a toy track to which she added an equivalent series of pencil drawings on the same scale³.

The analogy at work here is not an end in itself. It is but the effect of a complex process which brings into presence a configuration resulting from the artist's manipulation of prosaic, everyday, real objects, many of them child-like, implying an endless movement: that is to say, giving onto abstract categories, and the mental, conceptual schema that is formalised by drawing.

Apart from the fact that, as is often the case with Liliana Moro, we move from the real object to the sign via the simulacra that are the model and the child's game, the piece rests not on a demonstration or decantation of the real by means of signs, but a simultaneous presence of two different modes of origin and reality, two different kinds of principle, and on the resonance of one within the other. It is the reversibility of this interaction which produces meaning.

Spring 1997, Liliana Moro takes up a residency in Bourges. A time of being receptive, isolated

A time for the evolution of a work in progress.

Four plastiline statuettes with accompanying photographs are sent to Naples⁴. They reproduce some of the postures of the two bound bodies that moved across the stage of the Teatro Fabbricone. This *Studio di un possibile equilibrio in movimento* (Study for a Possible Equilibrium in Movement) constitutes the second phase of the Prato performance. There too the artist goes from a physical trial to its distanced representational statuary which should, in its ultimate phase, lead to the creation of bronze sculptures.

During the residency, Liliana Moro, also recorded the sound track for the video installation at La Box, *Un temps* (For a Time). Once again, the title is limpid, referring explicitly to a double reality: that of the process whereby the artwork develops in sequences, and that of the vital experience that inspired a new piece of work here, the necessity of communicating without mastering the local language, the trial of such isolation and the effort to break out of it.

By drawing on Beckett, Liliana Moro take us back into a world of constraint and hindrance. Language is hampered. There is a rift between speech and the understanding. Movement must be accomplished in spite of the obstacle, like the bodies of the *Canti marini* (Marine Songs) which echo the frequent reptations of Beckett's creatures. For the new work, the operative agent resides in this parallel with the dramatic script.

The artist has removed the dialogues from the first act of *Waiting for Godot* while what the playwright wrote for the body and the eye: the directions for the movement and manner are here expressed through the voice. Action feeds speech.

The device is simple. No more than four images. From left to right: an eye, a mouth speaking French, and eye again (the same one) and a mouth speaking Italian. Two times the same eye, two times the same mouth. The eye and the mouth of the artist recorded in the middle of watching and speaking.

Two different videos of the same eye, observing at different times. A single subjective viewpoint, a duality in time. Two videos of the mouth articulating in two languages the mother tongue and the foreign language.

The litany of attitudes that Deleuze called Beckett's "motive refrain"⁵.

The eye observes, the mouth speaks. These images are projected side by side, frontally, to avoid any loss of attention. While they occupy the whole width of the wall, their format remains deliberately limited. The spectacular is not banished. They do not constitute a wall of images. Nor do they play on the effect of intimacy. And yet this is well and truly an intimate experience. The artist's personal implication is patent: her voice, her eye, her mouth all free us from any literary or theatrical ambiguity.

The visitor is put into direct contact with this reality. Becomes immediately aware, in between,

of the physical interdependence of the gaze and the spoken word.

The spoken word is shown in two ways: its attention is required by the text, on which it will instinctively try to image acts. But it also follows the activity of the eye which focuses on the lips, spying each movement that may help it overcome the obstacle of the language.

In Liliana Moro's earliest pieces, in Brera, they eye and the ear were also brought into play (*Scatole Nere*, 1986).

In a striking ellipsis, the eye here is directly attached to the mouth.

The word is made flesh, just as this double intimacy is suddenly made visible in the inflection of the mother tongue, its perfect fluency, and in the resistance of a language that is not mastered, but that one nevertheless tries to render intelligibly.

This double monologue is diffracted through the texture of language. The eye listens, the voice becomes matter and colour. We share the sense of bewilderment at an oral expression in which any exact superposition of languages would be vain. We can only struggle with an irreducible approximation.

Uttering speech in a foreign land...for a time...for a fragile piece, halfway between the visible and the audible, in which we sense the imminence of new displacements.

Translation: Charles Penwarden

Notes

1 *Canti marini*, I and II.

2 "task performance".

3 *Fatto in Italia* (Made in Italy), at the Centre of Contemporary Art Geneva (May-October 1997) and ICA, London (October-December 1997).

4 Exhibition by Vincenzo Cabiati and Liliana Moro, curated by Sergio Risaliti, Naples, June 1997.

5 Gilles Deleuz, *L'Épuisé* published with Samuel Beckett's *Quad*, éditions de Minuit, Paris.