

Time gapes

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(Translation: Ian Harvey)

For some time now the art world has accepted and on occasions even paid due tribute to performances. After a brief period of uncertainty, the market soon adapted and started trying to use and exploit any medium that bore witness to events which in themselves were utterly ephemeral and lacked the concreteness that art objects had hitherto possessed. Videos, photos, drawings and materials used by artists and/or spectators, audio tapes, etc., underwent a change of status: the fetishistic impulse of collectors transformed them from straightforward documentary evidence of a particular performance into real works of art. However, if we look at the question from another point of view, we can see that our knowledge of important works such as those by Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Gina Pane and many others is the direct result of the survival of these testimonies and the care with which they have been preserved. If we were not among the lucky few who were present in person at these events, it is only thanks to these videos and photos that we have become acquainted with works that have become a fundamental part of our cultural heritage. It is precisely out of these testimonies, and the wake or deposit which these performances have left behind them, that one of the most singular and profound aspects of Katia Bassanini's work has developed. That residue, those significant leftovers, have become the starting point and often the principal player in Katia Bassanini's work. This aspect of her research seems to me so deeply rooted in the work itself that it could almost be taken as a paradigm (or at least as a privileged viewpoint) to interpret her entire oeuvre. The objects and sculptures she has exhibited on various occasions can be considered as residues of something that has already happened, or is on the point of happening, and a similar attitude can also be found in many of her videos. The artist herself often defines these events as "actions without a public"; each time they are constructed in such a way as to involve us as witnesses to situations where the action is often reduced to a minimum and the focus is on semantic ambiguity. The very clothes presented on this occasion can be considered potential performances, possible short-circuits between truth and fiction which blend pain, despair and satire. Here we have clowns' costumes with bombs that are obviously fake but which cannot disguise the fact that behind this apparently harmless game a world is at work where the reality is ever more tragic and painful.

Residues on the one hand, and potential performative objects on the other, make it clear to us that another element is involved, namely present time, which is never openly accepted and almost always crushed between the expectation that something will happen and the memory that will survive the act itself. Clearly, this is not a rejection of the contemporary world in favour of a lost paradise or of a future full of promise, but it is rather an expression of the anxiety which living in the contemporary world brings with it and which manifests itself openly in the continual need to wear masks which we hope will protect us (or at least make us accepted in the eyes of the others) but which in fact only fuel our uncertainties. In this context I find Wrecks one of Katia Bassanini's most complete works. In this video a series of masked figures find themselves repeating gestures and waiting for something on a beach: the title suggests a shipwreck, but this is only one of several possibilities and not necessarily the most concrete or most real.

Performances necessarily imply taking personal risks, risking not only one's ideas and points of view, but also especially one's own body (even though it is not always Bassanini

who carries out her own actions). With my body I measure my space, I create my rituals, I acquire knowledge. The Italian title of David Grossman's latest book (*Col corpo capisco* – I understand with my body) expresses this idea very well (the title refers to the second story in *In Another Life*).

In *The Happy Man* the belly symbolises well-being, abundance, the opulence of the rich man (or could it in fact be a tramp?) and the explosion of the ball/belly at the very least suggests the loss of a sense of security and of that forced euphoria which has nothing to do with the well-being of the soul, but only with that of the body.

In many of her works, Katia Bassanini shows us bodies deformed by accessories that change a person's appearance: false beards, wigs, disguises that have frequently emphasised her strong connection with *commedia dell'arte*. Equally often, however, her works contain more or less open sexual metaphors. We find numerous references to sport (it is no accident that this is practically the only western ritual that allows men to touch, embrace and even kiss each other) and its ambiguity as an exercise in strength and sexual sublimation. And again we find these subjects in her drawings, photographs and actions, with or without a public; a leitmotiv that becomes constantly enhanced with further details. Movements and rituals are highlighted: the "classic" celebration of winners of Formula 1 races spraying foam from bottles of champagne; symbols of success such as chaotic mountains of cups and trophies; actions and body postures - for example, hugging a vaulting horse is seen as being like riding a motorbike or having sex; contacts between bodies, as in boxing, but also, more paradoxically, in football. This kind of sexuality takes place in a virtualised present, and the possible (or perhaps imaginary) sexual act proper is left as a development that might occur in an uncertain future.

Objects and bodies, concepts and sensations, are placed on the same level and, almost as if to demonstrate Perniola's theories about the sex appeal of the inorganic, there is neither action nor climax; no conclusion is reached and even less a final catharsis. We find this hypothesis also confirmed by the understated tone of the videos which always use a fixed point of view and a montage which is so basic as to be barely noticeable. One might suppose that Katia Bassanini's plan is to eliminate all technical artifice (almost denying that there is any kind of post-production) because what happens is placed before the eyes of everyone; it simply occurs.

By depriving the event of the contrivance of contemporaneity, Katia Bassanini puts the spectators in the position of being able to decide autonomously both the moment of use and in a way the narrative itself, thus establishing a more intimate relationship almost akin to complicity. Narration is very much a part of her work, but it is never entirely defined or fixed in all its component parts; we can only catch echoes or traces of the story of an event that has already happened somewhere else.