

Julien Collieux in conversation with Vittorio Santoro
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Vittorio Santoro: Here are my new works on paper.

Julien Collieux: We mentioned them last time, did we discuss them?

VS: No, you just asked me to be more precise in my statements, and I tried to speak in a more detailed way about my method of working.

JC: I came to the opinion that you use your hand like a machine, because you first visualize these text works on a computer, to see how it will look later when you transfer the texts to paper in pencil. I also said that you use your hand like a computer printer.

VS: These terms—usually pairs of words—I design beforehand on the computer, as far as the font and the size are concerned, and only transfer them later to paper using pencil. With this second step I intend to make these texts seem more personal. What interests me is this kind of easily evoked and ultimately simulated personal aura. The computer is just a tool that saves me time.

JC: You do make all decisions on the computer.

VS: But this doesn't mean I don't allow myself to make any changes when transferring the words to paper. It seems to me that a term written in pencil exudes an aura of "immediacy." I want to bring this connotation into the work. The difference between pencil drawings and computer print outs, which represent an entirely different kind of visual noise, plays a role here. The concepts have, I think, a stronger impact when they are transferred with pencil to paper, simulating a kind of personal trace. I am consciously using this word, "simulate"... I imitate the standardized font with the pencil, but I can hardly get it quite the same twice.

JC: A personal trace, modeled on a machine.

VS: I want to sustain or support this ambivalence: it's a handwriting that does not want to unmask personality, but imitates a computer font—up to a certain point... it's like an anonymous letter made of cut-out letters pasted on the page. While the letters themselves are not personal, the way in which the presence of the anonymous author shines through gives the letter a disarming quality. The person is only present in the reader's imagination...

JC: So a handwriting that conceals itself behind the task of "printing"...

VS: When you see this writing on paper, it's clear that a person wrote it, but strangely enough, the source cannot really be named, no graphological conclusions can be drawn. No letter is linked to another letter.

JC: You've chosen a certain aesthetic solution for the lettering.

VS: I want to emphasize that it's what the terms refer to or connote that determines the form that's selected. It also decides whether and how they overlap, whether they are superimposed onto each other, whether the reading direction is changed or not. I attempt to play with all the interference that results from the combination of the two terms, HUMAN TRAGEDY/POLITICAL EXPLOITATION, COMA/DEATH, CALM/INDIFFERENCE. The words in these terminological pairs refer to a similar state, but from very different perspectives. They are terms that perhaps are working toward a discursive relation with one another. Each term allows us to think of a certain area, and the combination suggests something behind the logic. And the combination seems somehow plausible.

JC: This combination also allows... a certain poetry to emerge.

VS: You call it poetry. My ambition is to address a specific attitude. What I want to explore in this work are social patterns of behavior and thought. In a certain way, I first test these works on myself. I first find out for myself whether the words in this combination somehow fertilize one another. They are not just random words. Some have concrete socio-political, others more psychosocial connotations.

JC: Here I am reading COMADEATH....

VS: The letters MA are connected to the DE, which means they overlap, allowing me to make these words dependent on one another, even if the words refer to two different aggregate -conditions.

JC: They evoke certain associations. To what extent do you try to control them?

VS: At first, I choose to combine certain concepts. I can't know in advance what they trigger in the beholder. I direct the way the concepts are understood up to a certain point, but the -intrinsic relationship between the words or concepts is not always clear to me, either. To give the terms more room for interpretation, one should remain very precise in their combination.

JC: So you're not engaging in some kind of surrealist game or "écriture automatique", but you do want it to seem as if the words came together coincidentally. But you remain in a sense beyond the limits of an illustrative method.

VS: I don't consciously suppress this combinatorics, but it's not part of what I'm aspiring to. Behind the selection of these concepts lies a certain curiosity and a kind of daily attention to issues one feels tied to. But as much as possible I try to avoid giving the beholder any chance for identification. The work thus becomes in my view more diffuse, perhaps also more uncanny. The words are just there, they are isolated, but they refer to very particular conditions. In my view, they become much more gripping than when they surface in sentences, that is, within a narrative context.

JC: Do you ever think about words in a visual sense? I, for example, have no visual concept of words.

VS: Nor do I. But I am conscious of the fact that some words in a given language have a more -attractive visual appearance than others. But what probably interests me is the sound that they produce when spoken. Maybe sound can trigger something visual in your mind.

JC: And when you attempt to imagine a written word, in what form does it appear?

VS: I don't think of a visual appearance, I think more of the associations that are triggered. Take this word on the page, COMA: for me, it triggers associations of the story of that American woman who lied in a coma for fourteen years. It lets me think of how this human tragedy was used and instrumentalized by politicians. Maybe it was this case that triggered the word combinations COMA/DEATH as well as HUMAN TRAGEDY/POLITICAL EXPLOITATION, that might be it.... I rarely ask how I arrive at the terms, or exactly what caused the combination. Sometimes they're founded in quite real occurrences; sometimes they come from my own thoughts. Nonetheless I know when concepts surface in my mind which ones I want to include in a work, and which ones I don't, or not yet.

JC: Do you read the newspaper more than you listen to the radio?

VS: I read the newspaper everyday, but I'm listening more and more to the radio.

JC: Every word can be robbed of its meaning, by saying it fifty times over, for example. The learned "meaning" that we associate with the word is shed from the sound of the word.

VS: This phenomenon of "emptying" meaning by way of a repeated action, this loss of reference points, is something that interests me. Informative here is the title of a book by William Burroughs, *The Naked Lunch*. He was asked how he arrived at this title. He answered that once while eating he looked at a fork that he'd been twirling about on a plate for some time. Suddenly, the fork and the food on the plate disappeared from his perception. He said he could no longer recognize the fork as an object... It seems the more one concentrates on something, the more our cognitive capacity is weakened.

JC: The meaning of a word is not as fixed as one might think.

VS: Yes, really strange. What's clear to me is that meaning is determined by a historical, cultural, social background. But what happens when this background is attacked, contaminated, disturbed, or withdrawn? Does everyone have something like a very personal meaning that goes untouched by external occurrences? When it comes to the terms I draw on paper this is quite likely the case. They exude a meaning, because we are used to presuming this. But these terms or texts are also able to tell us something about social mechanisms—or having something tell it to us.

JC: This makes me think of a video by the Spanish artist Lidia Dalmau. It shows the pages of a book as they are turned. For each page, we are given a brief moment to see a few words. The eye seeks out its own story. In addition, some words are marked in some way. They are words like "appear" or "disappear," written in Catalan.

VS: What else can I show you?

JC: Maybe a few videos? These sketches here on the wall—they represent the spatial installation of your new video *Moving Towards You...?*

VS: Yes, that's what I'd like to have as the best possible setting.

JC (after watching the video): What was that text on one of the monitors? "It's a dangerous thing to confuse children with angels..." Unfortunately I couldn't read the rest....

VS: The text on the screen is a fragment of a monologue given by a kind of former child prodigy in the movie *Magnolia* "I confuse melancholy and depression sometimes. I am sick and I am in love. It's a dangerous thing to confuse children with angels. No, it is not dangerous to confuse children with angels." I think I used this fragment because I liked the scene in the film so much. A former child prodigy, now older, philosophizing drunk in a bar about his past and his life, and nobody really seems interested. Maybe he's talking to himself, or to the person inside himself that he thinks he no longer is—his past self. I liked inserting this, how should I put it, idiosyncratic moment in an office environment.

JC: Let's come back to the architecture of the video installation. I was interested by the feeling of spatial disorientation. It goes well with both the spoken and the written text, and supports a particular mood.

VS: With the installation architecture, a space in the exhibition room with a pair of two-way mirrors and an entrance, I am trying to suggest certain decisions to the beholder. The beholder can watch the video outside this interior space, through a window that is outfitted with a two-way mirror. But he can also walk into the space: there it's easier to see the video, and the sound quality is also better. This possibility of choice interested me. I was also trying to dismantle a unified dramaturgical-visual logic. That's why there's "documentary" lighting and at the same time a "filmic" camera work as well as a certain kind of editing, and the film paradigm isn't fully met.

JC: I had the impression that every object, every piece of paper plays a role, and is part of -staging. Although we find ourselves in a very ordinary office space, we have the feeling of moving to the limits of the surreal.

VS: The contrast between the office space and what happens there is important. The office space is so uncinematic, that the events that take place there seem like "manipulations." In reality, the office is an administrative office of an art and media academy. I wanted a real, existing, functioning office as a film site. This kind of office has a very generic visual logic that's expressed in the furniture, for example, and is hardly specific to any one country.

JC: Are the sentences the woman speaks on the telephone also film dialog?

VS: No, most of them are so-called "Quotations of the Day" that appear every day in *The New York Times*. I made a small selection of these from the past three years. The quotations come from very different persons, and heterogeneous contexts.

JC: They are spoken so that the sentences seem natural. I was trying the whole time to follow the dialog, attempting to imagine what the person on the other end of the line might be saying.

VS: I'm glad it's perceived that way. That means that I was able to create a plausible monologue/dialogue from various sources. The illusion works. The difficulty was having these quotations spoken like a conversation, with the emphatic turns of phrase, breaks, and delays that characterize a conversation.

JC: The spoken text of the female figure consists only of quotations, and is not a thoroughly spoken dialog. It's a trap. That's the fascinating thing: those that have entered the trap notice it. Otherwise the whole thing wouldn't work as a trap.

VS: Of course, what I do in this film can also be understood as a play with language, content, and source.

JC: This video has three different final sequences, but this is only really noticeable after the third sequence.

VS: These various final sequences serve to simulate a kind of climax. The beholder notices quite soon what the sequences are supposed to effect, that one is again watching the "main part." And he's in the loop.

JC: That's easy to understand: like when you watch a film...

VS: I don't see my videos as films. They only use in part a kind of filmic strategy. They narrate no more or less linear stories. They have no comprehensive dialogs; the point is not to sketch the character traits of certain figures. Some of my videos make use of this paradigm, but they do not meet the expectations linked to this. Interesting for me is the element of the loop: no beginning, no end, everything becomes surprisingly important... something that stands on its own, that becomes independent... this strategy of repetition mimes a kind of obsession. I am interested in this strange feeling that happens when you watch a certain sequence eight or ten times, certain aspects always appear different. This probably says something about our need to force the visual into a linguistic logic, in a comprehensible statement.

JC: Is that one reason why the texts in your videos aren't very easy to read?

VS: In *Moving Towards You...*, we tried to make the texts on the screens and on the pages legible. Just in the video *The Radio*, there's a sign where a sentence, a quotation from a Hitchcock film, can only be read after repeated viewing. This was a strategy to allow the beholder to succumb to the loop. Even the camera work was committed to this idea: the whole video is one single uninterrupted sequence, with no cuts.

JC: These irritations dispersed throughout the video serve to lure the beholder into a labyrinth. He or she is lured in by trying to load a disorienting situation with meaning.

VS: I've often asked myself why something that we think is meaningless still has a kind of aura. And nonetheless, my efforts are not nihilistic attempts to discredit meaning. I am trying to shake up my own preexisting assumptions, paradoxically in order to make some issues clearer, more legible, easier to discuss. And I want to communicate these issues in such a way that our readiness to concern ourselves with them is constantly stimulated.

JC: Surely chance also plays a role in your work.

VS: Chance is an important factor in my work. A work in which there is no room left to chance and whatever else might happen is uninteresting. I do set certain rules for myself, but I can break them in the work as I do it. This isn't a program, for sure, but it is a stimulating constant. I don't want to indulge in any kind of automatism, but also place my own decisions in question. Intuition is one of the few capacities that should be trusted.

Julien Collieux is an artist living in Berlin.

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