

This is an edited version of a conversation between Elisabeth Lebovici and Vittorio Santoro that took place on 27 December 2006 in the canteen of the Schauspielhaus Schiffbau in Zurich.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT WORDS

Let's talk mainly about your text-based work. Tell me about the work *How Can I / Make it Right, March - August (2005)*, which is being shown next at the Tate Modern?

It's a sentence split in two. One part of it is reversed horizontally, the other vertically. After I had made up my mind about this piece, I decided that I would write the sentence on two sheets of paper and would start on 1 March and end on 31 August 2005. Six months, half of a year. I liked this kind of arithmetic. Like saying a glass is half empty or half full. I had received a grant to stay in Berlin at that time, and decided that this work should be the half of my stay there.

So every morning, every single day, I would wake up and write, or better, trace the same sentence on the exact spot where I had done it on the precedent day. At the end of the six months, whatever would be, would be. It wouldn't matter, I would frame the two sheets of paper and this would be the work.

It's a diptych that should ideally be shown not on a single wall, but on two separate adjacent walls of a corridor that is not too wide. Because I want people when they see one part not to fully see the other one.

What is incredibly moving to me is how you install writing into time. There is the time of your writing, when you make the decision of writing the same sentence, going in the same tracks of the same words every single day for six months, or for more than a year, as with the work you are doing now, and that lapse of time, even if we don't know its length, is shown on the paper. Time is involved in the injury to the writing. In your texts, in your installations, the element of alteration, of injury, makes of your texts something like a positive construct on a loss. They build on loss, as in eighteenth century landscapes of ruins...

With this kind of work, I want to discover something. I don't want to put on paper something that I already know. Most of the time, it's a very simple sentence. There is no danger in being obvious if what you are being obvious about is also exciting. So what happens if you repeat this sentence over and over again, for a month or for a year? Does it still "mean" the same thing in the end? At the moment I'm doing a work, if you would ask me when it's finished, I don't know. It writes *Vergeht Vergangenheit*, which means "does the past pass"? I started this work in 2005 in Berlin, maybe the city inspired me, but I could have started it anywhere. It's specific, but it's not specific enough that you can say, "Oh it's about Berlin, its history, its territory, etc." I am not trying to actively sew historical or autobiographical seeds. You mention that my activity is like a positive construct on loss; I would also emphasize that is also a revaluation of what we consider appropriate or "valuable". To claim and reclaim a territory for the self. This is probably the practice I am applying. The daily practice provoked me to think about how and what am I trying to say in the work. I did not want to create a placeholdering for our longing for what art

should be. Even if injury, loss, alteration and time-inscribed practice is relevant, if not intrinsic to the work, ultimately when one experiences the work, suddenly everything is in the present tense.

The daily discipline or routine that consists of writing the same words on the same piece of paper is indeed what you call your work. Is this work your art? Is it your work of art?

This is something which strikes me as important. Of course, when you repeat a sentence, you repeat it also physically, therefore you feel yourself, you feel a certain quality of the space around you, and you feel also that the sentence is something within you, but has a further meaning outside of you. Either you do feel this or you don't.

When I started doing this work, I wanted something detached from myself, but something that also records a kind of imprint of myself, although not keeping track of identity. In that sense, it's not my handwriting, my personal calligraphy. I make it, yes, but I wrote it in a way that imitates a mechanical quality, without its being made by a machine. Since it's produced by hand you experience a sort of contingent human trace: so it's not this and it's not that. Then what is it? This space in-between I find very interesting, trying to be very personal, but not so personal that you can find out something about the psychology of the writer, as is done in graphology tests. You really can't. It is also a work of art because I simply declare it as such. You can also see it as a physical exercise. That's up to you. I am emphasizing this, because I don't want to believe in the artist as a kind of genius, and that what he or she does is something made only for a few select individuals. Anyone can write a sentence on a sheet of paper. Everybody can do it! And why don't they? Because they don't find it relevant to spend ten or fifteen minutes every day with this kind of practice. OK, it helps that I'm an artist, while they do other things; but I want to believe that it's the only thing that makes a difference, just because I decided to spend these fifteen minutes. It's only about that, because I take the time to do it.

The texts are handwritten, but in capital letters...

I use capital letters to reject a personal identification. The work should allow all viewers to feel addressed. I conceived that in making a work that is conceptual in a broad sense of the term, it could paradoxically also be very personal. That was my point of departure. What I also like is that I know how it looks at the beginning, but will never know how it looks at the end. It's always about chance. In the morning when I do this one sentence, just in front of me, on the table, there's a cup of tea or a cup of coffee. Maybe one day this cup will spill over. What's happened then? Chance can come into the work. I wouldn't mind, you know; of course I wouldn't overturn the cup on purpose, but a stimulating constant factor in the work is that chance is also part of its concept.

How to you know the work is finished? Do you know?

Some of the works, like *How Can I / Make it Right, March – August* have been ended. It was supposed to last six months and it did. With the one I am doing now, I choose another way of finishing, I leave it open-ended. So because I'm a romantic type, in a strange way, I'd say that I'm going to leave Paris for the summer, where I am currently living, at the end of May. So when I go, the last day that I spend in Paris, it will be the end. I don't know why I put it that way. If I have the feeling it has to be continued after that, I will continue it, of course. But

because it's a work that I wanted to be part of my daily life wherever I am travelling during the time of its execution. I want it to be detached, but so that it can infiltrate a certain portion of the day. That's probably why I set down this kind of rule. But, you know, I never ask myself such questions...

But these questions are asked via your work. And in terms of relations to social history, to the way work is performed in society: how do you relate to that? In the twentieth century, as Giedion put it, "mechanization takes command." Of course, it's less true today, but the mechanized gestures of the working class were a sort of typeface for twentieth century labour history, don't you think?

At the beginning, a couple of years ago, when I had to talk about my work, I was very suspicious and intimidated about the word "work". I come from a family where work meant waking up at 4 o'clock in the morning in order to be at work at 5. My father was a truck driver, so I felt kind of strange talking about something I wrote on paper or made as a photograph, which actually took only a couple of seconds, as "work". Despite this, I do not believe that that would be why I started to do some works that stretch into time – 6 months, maybe two years: perhaps I had to work on it, physically, besides working mentally. As others have said before: to think about yourself is not quite the same as experiencing yourself physically.

Would you say it's a way of delaying its objectification, or at least of putting aside the objective quality of a work of art? Just as the conceptual artists would refuse to make an object, wanted to get rid of it in their own pronouncements?

Of course, I play with the quality of the work as an object. That is. Is the work the daily physical exercise? Or the sheet full or graphite at the end of the defined period? Or the semantic value of the sentence? Or a framed sheet of paper? Or a long-term study? Or a combination of all of these?

Is there such a thing as performing a sentence?

Well, yes. I am thinking about one of Marina Abramovic's early performances *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*. In the video of the performance, one can see Marina aggressively combing her long hair while repeating the sentence "art must be beautiful, artist must be beautiful." She combs her hair so long that her scalp begins to bleed. The actual performance, lasting almost an hour, is obviously not only about performing a text for a long time: in her case, it's probably the mental state that can be reached by way of pain. I suppose that the performance would not have had the same impact without the obsessive repetition of the spoken text. A text is as "pronounced" as an act. As we know, a written sentence is not a recording of the human voice but a formal manifestation of language, which can outlive a voice.

How do you make them up? How do you construct them? You seem to pick a lot of oxymorons?

Some of them look oxymoronic without really being so. They are not really contradictions in terms. The two-words works usually define two different states with specific connotations, or states strangely related to each other, as COMA/DEATH, HYSTERIE/IDEOLOGIE; WALL, PORTE/MUR, DOOR; AMERICAN/EUROPEAN BANALITIES; AUFPUTSCHMITTEL/NARKOTIKUM; CALM/INDIFFERENCE; FEAR/APPLAUSE; VISIONAIRES/VOYEURS... I force the words in a binary system. I am doing different kind of textual works that I use for different contexts. In other text

works I try to find sentences that can evoke another kind of meaning despite the context where I first came upon them or thought about them. Sentences that seem ambiguous but actually aren't. Most of the sentences are taken from what I hear on the radio, read in the newspaper, but also on packages of the products when I go to the supermarket, things like that. I then try to find out what kind of reverberation they can activate in me and for what purpose I want to use them.

One of the works I've been doing for about the last three years is collecting a certain number of sentences and sending them off to somebody I know. I ask this person – who has no artistic intentions – to write these sentences down on a quite large sheet of paper that I previously specified. I instruct this person as to the size of the paper and the use of pencils, always the same. This person is then completely free to write the whole sentence, only a fragment of it, to repeat it and so on. After that, this person will send me the sheets of paper, I will sign each, frame them and this is the work. The written sentence now has a pictorial quality, because of the way it is written. I like to think that I gave this person the possibility to focus on the sentences in any way he might find opportune. Even if only for a short period of time.

To be active, language takes two; the enunciator, the receiver.

Well, is it legitimate to ask for the possibility that I, who chose the phrase, let's say the enunciator, can also be the receiver? I think, yes, because when the sentence comes back to me "performed" on a sheet of paper, I am in the exact position that this person was, when he received the sentence from me. When I see it on paper, it's a completely new experience for me, and that's what I want, to act only as the impulse of origin, and to use chance as an important factor. The rules involved in the concept are in a way so precise, but they guide and control the work until a certain point. What will happen then is very much out of my control. I never know in advance how the sentence will come out on paper... and I like that ...

A particular sentence functions in that way as a quotation that would be activated through your work?

Yes, I'm activating it by involving them in another context. The semantics of language are not something fixed. You can express different things by using the same sentence, besides their denotative or connotative aspect.

We are both using a language that is foreign to us. We are both making an effort to communicate in this language. Is there a poetic aspect to your sentences? I know that you have literary connections that you have borrowed from writers....

Maybe there is a poetic aspect, but I have no declared ambition in this sense. It happens that I borrow sentences from people I have known, from people whose writing is close to me. You know that I am very fond of Paul Bowles' writing, and if you read his work, you notice that he was someone who used language in a way that seemed quite "pragmatic." It's a delight to be transported by the denotative aspect of his texts and to decipher the connotative subtext within. It's amazing how he could be so lucid without being strictly objective.

Why did you add a relation to music to your text works....

I suppose you are referring to the collages I recently showed in Bordeaux, entitled *Une certain idée de...*, that feature records I broke. I chose specific records that mean something to our Western culture, like the Beatles, or Glenn Gould's Bach recordings. These records are seen, quite rightly, as true achievements in their specific fields. We

consider these musicians as geniuses. I made these collages in relation to the two spacecrafts Voyager I & II launched by the NASA almost 30 years ago. These spacecrafts carry messages inscribed in a phonograph record telling the story of our world to hypothetical extraterrestrials. I often thought about the kind of messages that the two spacecraft carried out into space, and the way the selection of these messages was made. In my opinion, every symbolic capital that we transport with our achievements, any kind of achievement that we have constructed, shifts. Even these musicians are only important in a certain frame of time and under certain social viewpoints. I chose these music records because they are available everywhere, everybody knows about them, they have a history inscribed through their myth. I chose them not because of my personal taste, but because of their popularity. I wanted to work from these premises.

What do you experience, by putting those commonplaces in the context of art?

I want to use "those commonplaces" like a matrix, a matrix that allows me to exemplify a certain view. I like to use objects that we all are familiar with and subvert them. The view of two Venetian blinds, like in the show in Bordeaux, hanging from the ceiling, adjacent to each other without being in front of a window can be quite disquieting.

Your work could be related to the work of Robert Smithson.

Are you thinking of entropy? I would never dare relate my works to his. "Entropy" is perhaps evoked in my work, and not in the sense of a fatalistic process. I smashed the records included in the collages not to undermine their symbolic value. I tried to interrupt and question the construction of their myth. Smithson's contribution continues to be inspiring, although the contexts have shifted. I don't see myself as being in the same genealogy really, for my background is quite different from his. His arguments seem to come from within the system, and they managed to disrupt it. I don't think I was ever as close to the system as Smithson was after all.

You are somebody who works in a number of mediums. Is that the only way to speak about our times?

When I have an idea, I just look for the medium that can translate it in the most effective way and which seems accurate for me, without consciously making the medium a big issue. Every medium has its own atmosphere. It comes from somewhere, has its own history. I think that to speak about our times does not necessarily mean to use specific mediums. The attitude towards issues is more relevant. When I was in Berlin, I started "simply" doing works on paper, besides video and installation, asking what would happen if I worked within the realm of a simple sheet of paper. So I started making collages and at the same time continued my text works. Two years ago, I started a group of collages that went on for 12 units. The group is titled *There is something you should know*, and it's a work that I am really proud of. Each collage is rather tiny. It's probably easier doing a big installation than such a work on a small sheet of paper that still has to have a strong impact, also visually. I liked the challenge. Some months ago, when I saw Vija Celmin's drawings retrospective at the Pompidou Centre, I was impressed by how powerful they are. Drawings on a sheet of paper often not more than 30 x 40 cm.

Isn't it from a sentence by Douglas Gordon, "There is something you should know"? He also made a piece "it's better to know" and "it's better not to know"... A kind of ambiguity you like, right?

Yes, I like the abyss that can be opened by two contradictory sentences that are only supposed to define opposite states. There is no such thing as this duality: black or white, right or wrong. There is always something in between and beyond. The six two-words-text works titled as a group *Anticipation* I did for a show at *Public* in Paris emphasize this kind of ambiguous relationship.

Language has always been put in relation to the Law. So it means that it sharpens a territory, which is law, and an outside of the law, which is outlawed? Outside language?

I don't want to work outside a system, but insist that inside the system there is not only a single choice but many. Even if we know that in a system choice is illusory and participation quite obligatory. These are notions we have grown up with. To think that we actually have different choices produces fear in most people. If you go outside the system, you relate, if you are lucky, to people who probably can't understand you. I want to be understood. I don't see art as occupational therapy, I aim to influence the way I relate to people, and the way people relate to me and to an almost organic extent, the way I look at the world.

You mean that there is some kind of power left to the spectator, indeed, the reader of your text works?

It's the same power that I had doing the work: the power to think about it. Spectators have exactly the same power, if they take the time. They have the power to engage, also to contradict my assertions. To paraphrase something I read lately: the beholder can navigate in the artwork as in a minefield of participation and control. I like the beholder to be able to discover the small opportunities where conformity breaks down and possibilities, even limited ones, accrue. But they have to take the time.

If I bought your work, would I also acquire the right to use it, writing the same sentence every day?

You can take exactly the same sentence; do exactly the same thing. You wouldn't have to buy it. I'm not thinking I own the sentence. I'm just the one who has decided to take time to do those things. This is already an important act. The physical work is only a trace of the impulse I want to produce. And sometimes the trace has a more ambitioned impact than the originary impulse.

Again a reference. What do you think of On Kawara's work?

Of course, it's a great inspiration. It's clear, and not only for the text-related works of mine.

"I'm still alive"...

Yes, I am still here.... I am still asking the same questions. Replying with different answers.

Date Paintings: Maybe the sentence that I write every day is also a *date painting*, even if it is graphite on paper, but with On Kawara's practice, the painting has to be finished within a day but for me it isn't. On the contrary. On Kawara is very important to me, as is Felix Gonzalez Torres, but also people before him. I like De Kooning very much, for instance. Why? Well, the question is how far should you go in dismembering a so-called certainty, in his case mostly disfiguring a figure, to obtain a more lucid view. How far? Maybe then you'd understand why I like him...

That's why your use of the political isn't exactly the one that use language as a slogan, Barbara Kruger, even Jenny Holzer...

Probably because I don't believe art should be a vehicle for propaganda. The act of choosing the way to communicate with an imaginary public is already a committed act without the need to reinforce it with a specific iconography or message. I admire Jenny Holzer very much. Her work does not look like "political art", does not bear exasperated signs, but nobody could say her work is not committed.

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