

Vittorio Santoro in conversation with Rahma Khazam, Paris, August 2012

Rahma Khazam: “It was the Opposite of a Voyage” is the title of your exhibition at Galerie Jérôme Poggi in Paris. What does it refer to?

Vittorio Santoro: “It was the Opposite of a Voyage” evokes a passage in Claude Lévi-Strauss's book *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) that sets the scene for the meticulous description of a sunset that follows. In this passage, Lévi-Strauss describes how the ship to Brazil on which he was sailing was no longer a means of getting from A to B: on the contrary, it had come to seem like a fixed spot around which the world revolved. He wanted to highlight the idiosyncratic nature of personal experience, given that everyone experiences the same sunset differently. In his book, which is part empirical research, part personal vision, he explores the question of how to convey subjective impressions in terms that his readers could understand.

As an artist, I also come up against the question of making myself understood. How one experience things and whether or not one can pass these experiences on to others is the theme underlying my show.

RK: So you're exploring the gap between public and private, objectivity and subjectivity. Are you saying that all these levels of interpretation co-exist and there is no single reality?

V.S.: I'd say that's central to many of the situations we find ourselves in, and it's also true of the works in the show. The tear-off calendar sheets in my installation *Days* (2012) call attention to dates – which are both highly universal and extremely private – and to the different interpretations to which they give rise. The dates I chose mean something to me: they are dates on which something occurred of which I would like to keep a trace and which I indirectly share with others through the work. So the piece is not only about how one can communicate one's memories of a particular day, which will always be very personal, but also about what it means to give priority to my interpretation over someone else's, given that each person's experience is as valuable as that of any other.

R.K.: The tear-off calendar sheets in *Days* recall the date paintings of On Kawara – an artist who has been an important inspiration for you, whereas the copper plates covering the calendar sheets could be read as an allusion to Carl Andre.

V.S.: Carl Andre once stated that for him the periodic table of elements was the equivalent of the colour spectrum for a painter. He regarded the metals he used in his works as physical manifestations of the pure substances inscribed in the table and chose them for their distinctive properties. I take some of his reflections as the starting-point for my piece.

R.K.: Alongside references to early conceptual and minimal art, you also make repeated use of particular objects – such as the venetian blind. What does it mean to you?

V.S.: The venetian blind conjures up many different associations for me: it can be a decontextualized ready-made without a function, a membrane that filters daylight, a metaphor for the separation between the private and the public and between a person's outward appearance and inner thoughts, or simply an assemblage of white aluminum strips arranged horizontally. I cannot give you a definitive answer as to what it 'means' in each case but what I can tell you, is that all the works in the *Goodbye Darkness* series have at least one venetian blind in them. In this exhibition I am showing the fifth piece in the series, in which the blind rests on a metal plinth through whose slits the light from the bulb positioned inside it can pass. You might want to know that the plinth has the same dimensions as the concrete box of Bruce Nauman's *Concrete Tape Recorder Piece*

(1968), which contains a tape recorder playing a recorded scream. In Nauman's piece, you can only see a block with an electric cable coming out of one side of it, and of course, you are unable to hear anything even if you plug in the cable. Minimalism was the term given to art that did not claim to represent the artist's inner life, as was the case of abstract expressionism. But whereas Nauman's piece can be interpreted as a critique of minimalism and its desire to depersonalize art, my work is playing with the history and perception of these forms and materials and confronting them with the present.

R.K.: For Nicolas Bourriaud, confrontations between heterogeneous discourses are typical of twenty-first century thought. He writes: "This search for a productive compromise among singular discourses, this continuous effort at coordination, this constant elaboration of arrangements to enable disparate elements to function together, constitutes both its engine and its import." (1) It's a description that seems to me to fit the way you and many other contemporary artists work. That said, there are important differences in the way each of you links the components of your works. I would say that your pieces fall between two extremes: on the one hand, archival works in which there are close links between the different elements and on the other, the work of Ryan Gander, who in his *Loose Associations* lectures, groups together facts that bear little or no connection to each other.

V.S.: I agree that my work lies somewhere between these two extremes. I assemble references to different historical or contemporary events in order to highlight the way society functions, whereas I see Ryan Gander as proposing an associative methodology that departs from the usual relational criteria. If we have anything in common, it may be that we are both suspicious of "monuments" and the purposes for which they are built.

R.K.: Whereas he makes loose associations, you make links that have a meaning but at the same time eschew clear-cut narrative. For instance, the calendar sheets in *Days* evoke continuity, which is closely linked to memory, and the copper likewise alludes to continuity because it has high electrical conductivity. Yet although we can piece together fragments of the work, the overall 'statement', if there is one, eludes us. The same applies to *Good-bye Darkness V* (2012), which is all the more enigmatic in that it seems to oscillate between control and chance: there's the feeling that the different elements have been assembled haphazardly, yet together they engender an intriguing web of associations as well as strong visual sensations that were obviously thought out beforehand.

V.S.: Even if it is not my main goal, it's very important for me to employ elements that together will have a strong but subtle visual impact, as this is the first point of contact with the public. When they go further into my work, they will realize that many of the works are, among other things, about highlighting the power structures in society. I try to create the visual equivalent of these social mechanisms and structures, in order to explore their functioning and their impact on human behavior.

R.K.: Another piece you're presenting in the show is an 18 part photo work titled *Searching for... (One Day and Night in Amsterdam)*, (2012), which corresponds to an action that the artist Bas Jan Ader would have carried out had it not been for his untimely death in 1975. So it's not a reenactment in the sense of Jeremy Deller's work, or even Tom McCarthy's book *Remainder* (2005). You're not looking at what actually happened, but at what might have happened.

V.S.: No, it's not a reenactment. I am interested in the idea of carrying out an action that could have happened but did not work out because of an untoward event. It's this unexpected and unannounced suspension that is interesting to think about.

R.K.: Another aspect of the Bas Jan Ader work that fascinates me is that it seems to underscore, even more than the other pieces, the difficulty of grasping someone else's experiences.

V.S.: That's true. But even more than that, it highlights his unflinching commitment - or what I like to call his 'stoic passion' – to his artistic vision, despite the physical and mental challenges involved in making his ideas intelligible. If Bas Jan Ader had arrived in Amsterdam, he would have made the work called *Searching for the Miraculous (One Night in Amsterdam)* – which echoes a previous work made two years before in Los Angeles, where he walked with a flashlight through the city toward the Pacific Ocean. But he was never able to do the Amsterdam piece because he went missing at sea. So I took the structure of the work, and went to places in the city that meant something to me. I also researched places that were relevant to him (the spot where he performed *Fall II* (1970), the address of the gallery where he would have had the show that he did not do, etc.). I tried to intertwine my approach and what I understood of his, although in my case it was a task that was even more 'senseless' because I went around with the flashlight not only at night, as he suggested in his title, but also in daylight, and I had no precise idea of what I was looking for. So the piece is not only about my ability or inability to create the work he never made, it's also about the emotions and associations I experienced while doing so: rapture, divagation, freedom but also solitude, incomprehension and unrelenting effort. I trust the 'logic' of associations. When I'm working on a piece, I say yes to this association, or no to another, and bit by bit, it falls into place.

(1) Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2009, pp. 43-44.