

**Fanni Fetzter in conversation with Vittorio Santoro**  
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Fanni Fetzter: The title of the catalog for the exhibition is *Everything's Not Lost*.

Vittorio Santoro: Yes, that's the title I chose. I often take for my work texts or titles that come from some every-day source. That can be a song on the radio or a quotation from a film, even the description of a product in a supermarket. I see a combination of different terms that I think are put in an interesting way, so that I use them for my text-works or indeed as titles of a work. It is a transfer, just like if you would twist and turn a prism where the light is filtered and makes something else visible. "Everything's Not Lost" is actually the title of a well-known song by Coldplay, and through the transfer, a new light falls on it. Furthermore, the combination of "everything" and "not lost" is intriguing.

FF: Usually you'd say either "everything is lost" or "nothing is lost." For me, this title sums up the attitude of your work. It is a word-game that plays with ambivalences and breaks, like the disruption by the last word. Furthermore, the phrase radiates optimism. It is not a whiny phrase or a call for hopelessness or an attack on certain authorities. The phrase is grounded.

VS: It has something of a gentle request, but otherwise I haven't given it all that much thought. I liked the phrase because of its inner contradiction. I wasn't sure how good an English title would be, but it suited me that English as a language sounds nicely impersonal. A language that I don't link so much to any certain person or position.

FF: English is also a very democratic language. You can understand the title without having to know all that much English. Unlike with a French quotation, which assumes more knowledge. With that, it is easier to exclude some people.

VS: Yes, perhaps...

FF: This title, which comes from a pop song, exudes optimism vis-à-vis this world. Your kind of optimism, however, is differently connoted than in certain works by other contemporary artists. The hyper, playful, happy-making way that these works have is not so much part of your strategy. Your works sometimes resonate with an existential consciousness.

VS: Breaks, splits, asymmetrical polarities, contradictions etc. interest me, both in a psychological and a social sense. With *Good-bye Darkness II*, an installation I recently showed in Berlin, I tried to channel such contradictory displacements into an inconspicuous everyday object.

FF: When you take an object or found footage or a title, a sequence of dialog or film, then these become

completely parts of your work. The use of these elements is not limited to quotation.

VS: Rarely do these elements remain quotations, and if they do, then not in an arbitrary sense.

FF: You love being ambiguous in your works. You could propagate a specific attitude or message through your works, but you always choose a solution where the beholder is forced to develop an almost confrontational relationship.

VS: Yes, that's right, even though the form is often unspectacular. My work is ambiguous because I am convinced that artistic work is not well suited to propaganda. I want to find out something through my works, rehearse, perhaps solidify it for myself. In the best case, such efforts can be replicated in the beholder. You should never underestimate the changing and ambivalent presence of a work.

FF: Do you want to challenge the audience's willingness to take a stand, even if it is ambivalent?

VS: Yes, every solution you find can be revised, changed. It is up to everybody to find his or her own attitude to a work, a topic, or indeed society. And that also applies to me in my work. The video installation *Moving Towards You...*, which is shown for the first time in the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Thun, will be shown in a room designed especially for this projection, which will be installed in the exhibition space in a specific way. This room has two two-way mirrors. One of them has the mirrored side towards the exhibition space; with the other one it is the other way round. Actually, you could also see the projection outside of the room specially constructed for this purpose, through one of the glass openings. I want to give the beholder two ways of viewing the video: inside the constructed room, and outside of it. When you are inside, you notice that the projected video also has a specific phenomenological effect that cannot be noticed outside. If you are inside the projection room, the experience is different.

FF: I've observed that your work, even when it addresses largely existential topics, generally bears no traces of resignation. Your works often show a very direct and yet rather reserved interest in social questions. A case in point is *It's all in your mind/C'est tout dans ma tête*, a diptych of two collages on paper. You once explained to me that the English part represents the universal, social voice, and the other part a more private voice.

VS: Art spurs me on to make decisions every day, to think about what the options are. Sometimes it is very difficult to resist the temptation to conform. But conformism or, worse, to see yourself as a victim, is evidence of a passive attitude. That can also be a solution sometimes, but in the long run it doesn't satisfy you. As far as the work *It's all in your mind/C'est tout dans ma tête* is concerned: the second part, the private experience, does have a hint of resignation. The voice probably has accepted, or even resigned itself to the message of the other part. That is always a danger; what is important is that you recognize that and think about it..., that you think about the abuse of power.

FF: How is that connected to your own biography?

VS: I don't know. In the 1960s, my parents emigrated from Sicily to Switzerland. Like all emigrants it was not easy for them to get their footing in the new country. They worked hard, and they were driven by a vision. Maybe I was influenced by this attitude of looking ahead. But a direct access to my biography has

never been the point or the theme of my work. Whenever a work is transparently autobiographical, it is to me tautological, since all our actions, our thinking, our interests are personal. Some people would like to see me as a *secondo*, as somebody who came from beyond the border, who had a difficult time standing his ground etc, that would lend some support for the legibility of my work, and my work could be received in that light. Topics like exclusion and borders in general are important themes for me. But I refuse to see my works only from a biographical perspective. The way in which a piece works as a legible sign should be simple. Nevertheless, the work should resist the need to be interpreted. That is not where the value of a work lies.

FF: If your art would work only as autobiographical research, it could be viewed voyeuristically, but that would have nothing directly to do with the audience. But if you conceive your themes in a broader framework, then it addresses me, and paradoxically it simplifies participation. Your works make a claim for commitment. They communicate that it is important to see oneself as an active part of this society, in the context of a collective responsibility.

VS: Today it is easier to claim a work is engagé or “socially committed” than to say that the work has nothing to do with anything concrete and that it is merely a surface onto which a lot of things can be projected. This might indeed be a fashionable and cynical attitude, but not the whole truth either. I am interested in moral questions. Morality is not the goal of the artistic work, but a means. The social scientist Jan Philipp Reemtsma once said: “We are what we do, and we are what we promise not to do.” This duality interests me, as well as the question whether art, apart from other functions, also has a social reason to exist.

FF: And yet, you have a positive view of humans, the view for example, that the audience is willing to engage with a reduced visual language such as yours. I say that because your work is not so much characterized by spectacular forms.

VS: I’m not so sure whether my view of humans is generally all that positive. I have a notion of the audience that perhaps is not very democratic. I don’t want to make art that addresses everybody or has to please everybody. It would make me happy if a lot of people would take my works as a spur to thinking, but I know that this isn’t the case. I can only hope that my language is accepted. Viewing art has also a lot to do with practice and discipline. But I am also aware that my works have to employ mechanisms of visual seduction.

FF: Your work *AN/ÄSTHESIE Part I&II* is emblematic in the way in which you deal with certain topics. This work speaks of the ability to feel, not of sensitivity, let alone sentimentality. It is important to you that your works are not half-hearted, that they exude a certain optimism, that they make answers possible, and yet you are careful that they are not too cozy. You could also, and that would be perfectly justified, make works that would seem liberating, beautiful, calming. Works that would offer a counter-reality, an escapism, which is offered by many contemporary artists at the moment. In this context I am thinking of works like *Plate (Birds)* that pictures colorful birds. This picture is framed in a specially manufactured aluminum frame which itself seems like a cage.

VS: The budgerigars were photographed in an aviary. Yes, the frame reinforces this isolation.

FF: Earlier you mentioned that you yourself want to find something out through your works: almost as if you were testing your sensitivity.

VS: I don't want to see art as therapy. If my work had a declared aim, I would hope it would strengthen my relationship to the world. For me, art has no purpose if it doesn't create a more intense link to this world, if it doesn't allow me to confront certain questions that can be -answered with integrity... Art is a place where you feel simultaneously strong and vulnerable. A place where you can silently and without pleasure defame yourself. A place where the banal often remains banal. And indeed a place where you learn to be humble.

*Fanni Fetzler is the director of Kunsthau Langenthal.*

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