

The following text is an extract of an e-mail correspondence between Vittorio Santoro and Daniel Kurjakovic´ that took place between the middle of September and the beginning of October 2003.

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DK: Let me first come back to a term that you have used at times. You refer to “filters” that exist when one deals with the environment.

VS: I have become increasingly aware of how hard it is to form an unbiased opinion on worldly events and on our own needs – a detached opinion. Our thoughts are subject to various “interferences” that resemble, let’s say, voices of sirens. These interferences do not merely bewilder us, nor only smudge our “focus”. It is essential that I somehow interiorize them rather than succumbing to them... With “filter”, I also mean to suggest that one should develop a greater awareness of one’s own sensibility than is demanded, or permitted, in everyday life. I would like to protect it, even accord it a more prominent role. Our “inner life” is as valuable for us and for society as the products with which we are continually confronted by society.

DK: How does this “inner life” manifest itself?

VS: With “inner life” I express my wish to grant our intentions a place in everyday life. I point to the desire to fathom frontiers within us, to maintain a sort of “structural autonomy” and to elaborate defense mechanisms. The more we know what we do not want, the easier it probably becomes for us to communicate with the environment and to look our own conformism right in the eye.

DK: Sometimes one finds oneself confronted with the difficulty of pondering an existential question and, for that very reason, dispensing with action. This can make you despair of the multilayered: Hamlet’s dilemma. But even if it were not so, we are capable of a profoundly mental existence. I mention this point as your work in Paris seems to be concerned with the “mental”.

VS: I guess your question relates to the work *Plate (for Paul)*¹. It was an attempt to translate a recurring mental state, in which recollections trigger diffuse feelings, into something visual, something physical. Moreover, I liked the idea that an object of detached and sober appearance radiates something that is in contrast to its own aspect. One sees a plate rotating around its axis. As the plate gets close to the wall, it seems to scrape the plaster at one spot. The front and back side of the plate are painted white, while the lateral area in-between made of aluminum has been left untreated. On this area, a quotation by Paul² has been written: “And the past? I remember it as you remember a landscape, an unchanging landscape.” Only a part of the text is ever visible. I wanted my work for the Yvon Lambert Project Room to underline this obsessive and almost hallucinatory facet. The inner edge of the room where the wall joins the ceiling has been rounded off. The borderline is blurred.

DK: My question was not only linked to *Plate (for Paul)*. Take the diptych *It's all in your mind/C'est tout dans ma tête*³. The work seems to address a dimension that occurs before our actual will. It also seems to revolve around the perpetual question, whether our thinking and our sensations are real or imaginary...

VS: The work *It's all...* consists of two framed paper works on each of which one of the two sentences of the title can be read. The sentences are formed from single letters clipped – according to their respective language – from French and American newspapers and magazines. One realizes that the two sentences are only seemingly verbatim translations of each other. The work obviously plays with different connotations. There is some undecided dimension to it. It raises the question whether what is “before” our will is something unconscious or something that lies beyond our action and sphere of influence. Doubts have, for me, an attractive component; they demonstrate that at least two solutions are possible. Or both at the same

time? You ask yourself: does the need arise first or is it preceded by the awareness of it? To help oneself by claiming it's just a question of "different perspectives" is, in any event, a fallacious solution, a lifebelt at best. We have the capacity of putting ourselves in a flurry which prevents us from sensing our own unrest. Art confronts us with this kind of self-deception, albeit only in whispers. I like to think that the left part of the work represents a voice with social undertones, whereas the right one stands for an internal voice that seems to surrender to the persistent public voice.

DK: The work not only touches questions of the consciousness but goes beyond that, into the psychosocial sphere.

VS: Perhaps this sphere moves between the consciousness and the social. This area is most probably where different outer and internal impulses become psychotropic. And still, I guess what leaves a mark is determined by various factors, the intensity of which is modifiable, to a certain extent. It seems crucial that this intensity not be controlled exclusively from the outside. Sure, this depends on the knowledge that one has of oneself, of the internal "humus" that one should foster, I think.

DK: The fact that reality often cannot be clinically divided into oppositions – into good and evil, into inside and outside, into close and remote, into authentic and stage-managed, into 'mine' and 'yours' – appears to materialize in the Project Room not only literally as in the diptych, but spatially, too – through the "false" light, refracted by the Venetian blinds, for instance, or the curved area where the ceiling joins the wall. A plausible question could be: are those interventions a matter of intuition or do they emanate from analysis?

VS: The analysis follows the intuition, I guess. Those interventions do not form an intrinsic part of the works in the Project Room, they serve, as far as *Plate (for Paul)* and *It's all...* are concerned, as a sort of protection or frame rather, and shape the perspective I propose. With the light that comes through the blinds, I wanted to underline the fact of *mise en scène* that characterizes any exhibition room. Obviously, the blinds constitute a membrane, which they always do, sort of... Besides, I would like to decrease the biographical element in this work of mine. I consider the conscious use of one's own biography in a work of art a bit dangerous.

DK: I see your point... why you're skeptical about biography. Pat Steir observed once that she does not have to render anything biographical because as soon she goes out on the street it already is personal...

VS: Right. In a way, I have always felt that the biographical, when it is recognizable, implies an overdose of information. For instance, at the moment you see a lot of artists from the Balkans. It's as if the curators almost expect these artists to consciously mirror the "pain", the "inner turmoil" from the war of the 1990s. With this point-of-view, some artists "discover" their own biographies. That is what I mean by 'dangerous'. The works of art that I find interesting are the ones that, all of sudden, appear from beneath the water like spies. They know about us, more than we had assumed. They present us with our identity card, which we believed had been misplaced.

DK: What you say conjures an eerie world, in which suspicions, conspiracies and secretiveness reign: the world as a spiegelkabinett or labyrinth. Our conformism lies perhaps in the fact that we align ourselves with such a world, that we drift and do without Ariadne's thread... When we spoke about "humus" some days ago, you mentioned Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and brought up the appropriate image: men that internalize a book so that it becomes "their" book...

VS: The world is presumably the other side of a mirror that we have learned to recognize within us. A foggy labyrinth, and one cannot master every corner with confidence. And yet, if we do not have access to one's own fears, we lack a vital tool for orientation. Some time ago, in a conversation between a brain researcher and a psychotherapist, I read the sentence: "Someone who doesn't fall doesn't learn how to get up." This is a truism as we know. To fall is not a disgrace, but staying on the ground is. At the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, the people defy the oppressive society in which they live, which does not abide the written word, by each person learning a book by heart. They surmount the angst and maintain a place within themselves that cannot be controlled from outside. The awareness of fear and the confidence to prevail over the latter is something of a job. The courage to nurture that place should be possible. What do you think?

DK: I feel that without that anxiety there is no thinking, there is no path to the point of pain from which thinking makes any sense at all. And there is a second angle: this angst, this fear, finally, not to suffice in what I am doing, thus not to be justified, is closely linked to the desire for a life which is vast and devoid

of this kind of justification. I hold people in high esteem who are able to live that way, for others like us metaphors remain – which is not little... Your remarks on the courage to foster that place where one realizes fear remind me of your work *My Recollections Through Somebody Else's Memory*⁴, on which you collaborated with your friend. The friend, now an adult, “extended” the scanned drawings he had done as a four-year-old by adding scenes he newly made according to some accounts from your childhood. At first I paid more attention to the mnemotechnical element of that work, while, now, I am drawn to the interaction, on one side, between baring and openness (of one person to another, of the artist with respect to the viewers), and fear, secrets, shame, on the other. You have treated this subject, which is kind of “charged”, with reserve and without pretension, which, it seems to me, marks many of your works.

VS: In *My Recollections...*, it was important to see how internalized visual signs determine representation. Needless to say, that friend never experienced what I recalled, he rather translated visually my childhood memories, which in turn inevitably implied the use of his language. It was interesting to see that the codes that determined his present drawings were not more elaborate than the ones he had internalized as a small child. That amounted to a peculiar continuity between past and present, yet there was also an apparent rupture. One decides perhaps already at a very early stage how to communicate with the world, so that others can understand. There is probably a sort of base, a common denominator. At some point one also chooses by what means one should communicate. I then tried to work out how to show a work like this. As children's drawings are, in themselves, seductive, I wanted to deprive them of their nostalgic undertone. Intuitively, I decided to alter the room in which they were to be exhibited in a certain way: The line structure that I created by tracing the twelve inner edges of the room with the aid of yellow adhesive tape was turned by about 20 degrees around its horizontal axis. I think that I am looking for rules when making art. When you establish rules for yourself you are in the position to break them through your work. That is almost certainly why it makes sense to try and engage in something like art. With one's method of making stuff one reveals a great deal of one's own relation to the world and to oneself. I do not expect “confessions” from art. I believe that as a map is not an image of a landscape, a work of art is not a true casting of an idea or intuition. And still, I know that it is like a dish that one has prepared and that one can make use of. I know the work will drive me into the corner. It is as if one stares into a wolf's eyes that are shimmering and yellow. What is going to be the next move? Which decision will get you out of here?

DK: Let us resume the question concerning openness and shame.

VS: What intrigues me in elements as openness, shame and guilt is the fluidity that connects them. Where does guilt come from? In a new video work⁵ I explore some of these points... Openness and shame involve, in a way, an evaluation of oneself, which occurs rather consciously. They say guilt can be defined as a sentiment that makes us aware of having acted contrary to social and moral expectations. Nevertheless we know, the reasons for human behaviour are often much more complex than we are able to explain in the aftermath. Even if I am aware that I can have only a momentary insight into this kind of “consciousness”, I am still tempted to delve into these opaque motivations and contradictory impulses.

Translated by Sebastian Lohse

1) *Plate (for Paul)*, 2000/03
Electric motor, aluminium plate, steel pole, white metal paint, graphite on aluminium
Aluminium plate: 27x65x6cm
Steel pole: size varies with installation

2) Paul, a deceased friend

3) *It's all in your mind/C'est tout dans ma tête*, 2003
Diptych
Collage (newspaper and magazine clippings) on paper, wood frames (untreated oak)
Each 55x85 cm

4) *My Recollections Through Somebody Else's Memory*, 2000/01
Installation
5 digital prints mounted on aluminium (different dimensions), various color markers, yellow adhesive tape

5) *The Radio*, 2003
Single-channel video installation (16:9)
Projection screen, DVD-player, amplifier, four stereo speakers

Sound: Norbert Möslang

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