

# Between “Merely” Seeing and “Already” Reading

Language as a Visual Medium

Ulrike Groos

Almost all of Vittorio Santoro’s works use a medium with which we are very familiar: language. In a world oversaturated with visual and acoustic stimuli, he goes back to this *ur*-medium as the foundation of our thinking and our communication, and builds his visual worlds with letters, words, and sentences.

By directing his curiosity and attention to events and topics that surround us every day and concern us—sometimes more, sometimes less—, he explores the possibilities and power of terms in our patterns of behavior and thought. With his wordplays and his links of words and images he tracks the ramifications of our thinking. Santoro works with language in many different media: in photography, in drawings and collages, but also in installations and videos. As early as the 1980s, long before he turned so decidedly to this topic, Santoro published a volume of poetry in Italian entitled *La Voce e le Mani*. An important reminder that his own texts and those by others, his reading of and working with texts, influence his dealings with language and words as well as the reflection of them in his own works.<sup>A</sup>

Since we are always surrounded by language, what he has heard or read is for Santoro the most important source for what constitutes language in everyday life. Heard as monolog or dialog in films, as refrain in pop songs, as advertising slogans on the radio and television, read as texts in newspapers and magazines, or as titles in museums. Santoro’s works show various methods, which on a formal level generate numerous text variations. Apart from writing his own texts, he draws on found texts from the print media, extracts words, sentences, or short texts from their original context, isolates or fragments them, and creates new links with photographs that he also comes across in newspapers. Or he links found and invented terms, lets them stand alone on a white paper background, superimposes them on one another, runs them in a straight line, or changes their reading direction.

Whether these words are drawn freely by hand, with the aid of a stencil, designed on the computer, or -engraved, whether the works are classically framed, whether they hang in a corner in an exhibition space or public space, or whether they are just loosely pinned to a wall, whether they are illuminated by spot-lights or broadcast via loudspeakers—all these possibilities demonstrate the broad spectrum of forms, placements, and presentations of Vittorio Santoro’s works. There are not just formal cross references between individual works that explicitly allow for mixed forms, but also in terms of content the works can often be infiltrated into other contexts and have, for example, psycho-social or political connotations. Thus, many of his works process the ideas of other works or represent a memory of earlier pieces.

(Word-)image collages (glued, drawn, on paper)

The idea of creating works from already present texts by reassembling colorful or black-and-white cuttings of letters or words in a collage, is basically a familiar idea to which Dada and Fluxus artists referred and which is also familiar from blackmail letters because they ensure the anonymity of the writer—far removed from his personal handwriting.<sup>B</sup> Unlike Dada and Fluxus, Santoro sees his “cuttings-art” not as a provocation or protest against the bourgeoisie or as emphasizing absurdity or actionism. They also lack the threatening quality of blackmail letters. Rather, Santoro in this process is interested in the formal structure of the image, because a collage, with its principle of cutting out, cutting apart, fragmenting, shifting, and reassembling, reorganizes the image tectonically. A good example for this is the 2005 work *There is something you should know (Komposition)*. Here, two new compositional forms are developed: on the one hand the visible image composition with the differently placed musicians and their instruments, and on the other hand the “audible”, i.e.

imagined new sound composition. Both are brought about by the slight perversion of the chosen order.

Santoro's only seemingly anonymized texts are above all word-image poems which let a kind of personal trace of the unknown author shine through, even if this person only exists in the imagination. Here, as in most of the other text works, he isolates moments of meaning—be they images or texts—out of their found context, as it were out of the frame of an already achieved evaluation, and opens these moments up to the personal, biographically influenced access of the beholder.

Santoro made his first collage in 1998. In his sound piece #1 *Untitled (2 different voices, 2x2 identical texts, 2 different languages, differed in time: 4 seconds, with intermezzo and epilogue)*, which was first broadcast on the Swiss radio station DRS2, we hear two voices—a male and a female one—who speak alternately German and English texts.<sup>c</sup> The texts don't seem to make sense, because it is a string of advertising texts, slogans, and headlines, read as if one continuous text. The sentences cut out from newspapers and reassembled anew, printed in the catalog, are the script for the speakers. On the one hand, the reading has a clear structure because of the special articulation of language. On the other hand, however, the texts seem arbitrarily put together, confusing because of the varying content and the meanings ranging from trivial to intellectual. In the end, through the deconstruction of language, which is multiplied by the mass media, new meanings and surprising contexts are brought about: almost newly invented states of being.

In the important group of (word-)image collages already mentioned above, Santoro links photographs cut out from newspapers with a text drawn by him: *There is something you should know* (2005), series of twelve collages. This series was made during Santoro's stay in Berlin in 2005, which was made possible by the studio grant of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture. The idea for this originated in his interest in the use of images by German newspapers in comparison with Swiss newspapers, with which the artist was familiar. Not all, but only five collages of this series contain a text drawn with a paper stencil. Because the stencil consists of very thin paper, the writing appears comparatively tremulous and personal—basically pure appearance.

The later works of the series have liberated themselves from the text-image dualism and clarify Santoro's slow thematic shift towards more abstract and diffuse contents. The text establishes, like his other text works, a certain activity or a state and does not stand in any directly recognizable context with the press photo-graph assigned to it on the paper surface. The statement "There is something you should know", pregnant with meaning, is not really taken up again and remains unsolved. The suggestive direct address does not explain what one could or should know. It also remains open whether this is irrelevant or important, joyous or threatening. Whether and how the photograph cut out from a newspaper and the drawn text next to it can be connected depends on the respective choices. They are motivated by a special attention to topics that appeal to Santoro. At the same time, the artists moots the (im)possibility of recognition.

It also becomes clear that Santoro consciously uses the photographs for his own purposes. They appear without captions and with small, almost invisible manipulations, for example a minor alteration in the section of the picture. As far as the mentally condensed short text works are concerned, their lyricism reveals itself precisely in these skilled, if not ingenious combinations of text and image. Here Santoro shows himself very obviously in agreement with Max Ernst's definition of collage: "Collage-technique is the systematic exploitation of accidental or artistically provoked conjunction of two more or less alien realities on an apparently unsuitable level—and the spark of poetry that ignites at the approximation of these realities."<sup>d</sup>

Text works (made on the computer, drawn, on paper)

This work group has the widest range in terms of execution and presentation. It is a series of similar works, made in 2004 and 2005. They all have the same landscape format (29.5 x 42.5 cm) and show words written with a soft and a hard graphite pencil. These terms are usually placed in the center of

the paper, and they overlay or mirror each other. Almost always it is two words that were designed on the computer (in terms of font and size) and then transferred onto paper with a pencil. The fact that an individual handwriting is still recognizable makes the texts seem more personal and direct—an ambivalent impression that is merely simulated by the imitation of the computer font. The order and prevalence of the terms results from their connotation. The terms themselves can be based on completely real events and then represent, as a word pairing, a similar state from very different perspectives.

In the exhibition *Inherent Discrepancy*, recently at the Paris art space *Public*, there were six unframed drawings, distributed over various walls: together they formed an installative work group with the title *Anticipation* (2004-05). With a specially choreographed illumination, the works were lit by five spots at intervals, which created a particular, slow, pulsating rhythm. The very fragile drawings bore a pair of terms each. *Untitled (Coma/Death)* or *Untitled (Human Tragedy/Political Exploitation)* for example recalled the case of the American -woman who lay in a coma for fourteen years, and whose life-support machines were finally turned off—a case that received attention throughout the world.<sup>E</sup>

A further example is *Untitled (Applause/Fear, November 2004)* (2004), also exhibited in Paris. In this work, too, two words that are not comparable in either orthography or meaning are superimposed on one another. The letters are delicately drawn with a pencil, and precisely executed. The term “applause” is easily legible and written dominantly, whereas “fear” disappears under the former’s first four letters and thus seems pale and as if erased, yet remains visible. The linkage of these two terms came from a recollection Santoro had of November 4, 2004, the day on which George W. Bush was reelected as American president. Santoro followed the election on the radio, and later in his work he processed two ambivalent memories: on the one hand the applause and jubilation of the Bush supporters, and on the other the emotions of fear and uncertainty that had been encouraged in the American population, and which had helped making this reelection possible. A mere intimation, a tinge, comparable to the soft pencil line that forms the letters “fear,” expressing the creeping emotion of fear very well. An uncertain sense of discomfort that interferes with the enthusiasm of the others, just like the careful and clear writing is disturbed by the formal overlaying. These superimpositions prevent a linear reading, but they leave a lasting impression by the beautiful appearance of the delicate word formations, the wording of which has a deep and multifarious meaning.<sup>F</sup>

This work group clarifies Santoro’s philological engagement with language particularly well because he increasingly uses wordplay and ambiguity. The spectrum of language in this selection is explored in its ambiguity of meaning and the question of the identity of words and meanings. Memories, both everyday and exceptional, shared experiences as well as fleeting thoughts, and real or fictive impressions serve as triggers for these pairs of terms, which can cause different associations in everyone, and can be applied to many situations.

Text-installations (inside and outside), videos

I would also like to mention two further groups of text works, first the videos where words are important elements, and which are discussed in this catalog elsewhere (cf. the essay “Divided Consciousness” by Kathleen Bühler), and also the text works that Santoro links as installations with spatial situations. Favorite sites for this last group are the inside corners of a room that simulate a mirroring with the two adjacent walls, a promise of mirroring on which Santoro however never actually delivers, and the outer corners of a building, where the play with visibility accommodates his ambiguous word-compositions particularly well.

An example of these is *Untitled (We All Want to Believe)* (2004). White letters are engraved on black synthetic plates, with the effect that a personal handwriting (in contrast to the drawings) is no longer recognizable. The texts are neutralized, the seemingly personal element is lost. The signs in the corners pervert their model insofar as the signs with which we are all familiar, and which can be

found on buildings with their completely sober descriptions of certain functions and professions, now bear sensual texts. Their high placement also reminds us of signs on street corners in the public sphere.

A further example for a diptych is the collage *It's all in your mind/C'est tout dans ma tête* (2003). The first part of the texts was cut out from American magazines, the second from French ones. The diptych is hung as if the two parts were mirroring each other in a corner, on two walls. It is not a mirroring on the level of content, however, because the two languages stand for an external, social and an inner, individual voice, respectively. At Kunstmuseum Thun, this diptych is presented in a room with another, almost identical diptych, where the French part is replaced by an Italian one. Several spot-lights emphasize the different perspectives by increasing and decreasing illumination—all the way from glaring light to complete darkness.

Vittorio Santoro stages language explicitly as a visual medium. The beholder perceives these works between “merely” seeing and “already” reading. In the direct perception they cause first of all a great deal of aesthetic and sensual pleasure—in the sense of visualized language—, which however still “works” completely independently of their literal sense. The construction and distinctiveness of his poetic texts only become accessible in a next step, through careful reading.

For his words and texts Santoro usually chooses English, because the artist, who grew up between southern Italy and the German-speaking part of Switzerland and now lives in Berlin and Zurich, says of himself that he does not have a mother tongue, and that English stands for the broadest comprehensibility. Since the double-coding of words and wordplays is a linguistic phenomenon, Santoro also likes to move in other languages. But one thing always stays in the foreground: the visual and also acoustic sound of words. And thus, Santoro extracts words and phrases that he particularly notices, that fascinate him and that he then links up to form completely new, surprising fields of thought.

- A) I would like to refer here to the collaboration with the American writer Paul Bowles for the books *The Pleasures of Merely Circulating* (Memory/Cage Editions: Zürich, 1995) and *The Time of Friendship* (Memory/Cage Editions: Zürich, 1995). After Bowles' death, Santoro dedicated an installation to him, *Plate (for Paul)*, which also bears a quotation from an interview with Bowles in *The New York Times*. See also Vittorio Santoro, *It's all in your mind/C'est tout dans ma tête* (Memory/Cage Editions: Zürich, 2003).
- B) «Nehmt eine Zeitung. Nehmt Scheren. Wählt in dieser Zeitung einen Artikel von der Länge aus, die Ihr Eurem Gedicht zu geben beabsichtigt. Schneidet den Artikel aus. Schneidet dann sorgfältig jedes Wort dieses Artikels aus und gebt sie in eine Tüte. Schüttelt leicht. Nehmt dann einen Schnipsel nach dem anderen heraus. Schreibt gewissenhaft ab in der Reihenfolge, in der sie aus der Tüte gekommen sind...» (aus: Tristan Tzara, «Um ein dadaistisches Gedicht zu machen», in: *Sieben Dada Manifeste*, 1920)
- C) Vgl. die Publikation *Andere Räume, andere Stimmen/Other Rooms, Other Voices – Audio Works by Artists* (Schweizer Radio DRS: Basel und Memory/Cage Editions: Zürich, 1999).
- D) zit. aus Max Ernsts biographischen Notizen *Wahrheitsgewebe und Lügengewebe*, 1962.
- E) Weitere Beispiele waren *Untitled (American/European Banalities)* und *Untitled (Calm/Indifference)*.
- F) Ein anderes Beispiel, das sich auf die Wiederwahl von Bush bezieht, ist *Untitled (Ideologie/Hysterie, November 2004)*.

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