

## **In Theory**

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*The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.*

Antonio Gramsci

As heart-stopping as it appears in terms of the inhumanity of violence, its disregard of the vitality of life, it is very hard not to read the brutalized and battered corpse of Pier Paolo Pasolini memorialized in the documentary image of his death as anything more than a very powerful message of repression. A warning. No random murder, no clinical assassination, the mutilation of this body as a means of achieving a punishing death reeks of vengeance. A political execution that inflicts severe pain is a symbol of bitter retribution, and in the case of Pasolini, his politics, his homo-sexuality, and his libidinous and fierce cultural production, are thought to be the causes of his savage, mortal beating. The reasons for his death are perhaps more subtle and complex.

In dealing with death, even violent death, contemporary experience has inured us to all but the harshest of visceral realities. The exposure to and the palliative effects of forensic analyses which can document, explain, and account for the vicious experience of a world rife with war, illegal trafficking, domestic violence, and the hatreds of racism or anti-gay bigotry alleviates the trauma of our witness to daily atrocities. But the powerful social and psychic effects of symbolic, illegitimate 'justice' are compelling. Lately, especially for the West, media-distributed beheading is a gruesome reminder of the political capital inherent in public violence. The nature of Pasolini's killing is less overt, but no less politicized, being widely publicized rather than televised in real time. But it is all the more electric because of the remarkable nature of his cinema in the representation and reading of his culture, and the fact that it was so indelibly, aggressively specific in its silencing. His murder was an attack on art as much as an attack on a gay man, although it was that too.

In this disquieting image, a mute, disfigured body, face up and prone against the pavement, a controversial cultural and political activist is rendered entirely impotent and invisible. Displayed perfectly still,

inalienable, and divorced from any discursive platform, save that of the documentary photograph, the archive of the time and place of death. The identity of the corpse is unrecognizable in relation to the living identity of Pasolini. It is an effective erasure. It is a powerful counter-narrative to the ambitious cultural and political defiance pursued through his work.

In *Theorem*, the longest and perhaps most elegiac of John Di Stefano's works presented in *Bandiera Nera*, the distressing image of the mutilated body of Pasolini is overlain with the complete English subtitles from *Teorema*. The quiet presence of the work is an act of veneration and meditation. Di Stefano uses the script, in concert with the image of death, to rethink the creative relationship between political discourse and cultural production, to consider how the work can continue to reverberate through history, and meanings can shift and inflect even in or especially because of a deep sense of loss. Pasolini's murder is both profoundly meaningful and devastatingly meaningless, an aggressive, repressive act, meant to silence the revolutionary voice, speech so redolent of tangible potential that its reflection continues to sustain thinking and motivate action.

In this key work, Di Stefano stakes an artistic position and proposes his working methods for *Bandiera Nera*. In its selective appropriation and meditative recalibration of the work and the positions of a key iconoclast of revolutionary Italian cinema, *Theorem* proposes the kind of thinking, the process of creative strategy that is a necessary to the systemic cultural analyses that underpin his artistic practice. The concerns that permeate the work are compulsively discursive and somewhat forensic, examining and evaluating bodies of information for clues to meaning, and postulating their capacity for inflection or inversion through subtle shifts and repositioning of images and materials. Di Stefano also exercises extreme care in harnessing the site and external sources of his subject matter to reinforce his critical account of the political and aesthetic practices that influence and affect his artwork. As a coherent exhibition *Bandiera Nera* represents a kind of thesis, in which key moments in Pasolini's work, the ideas of Gramsci's political philosophy, or the historical and cultural realities of the city of Rome, impact the evolution of Di Stefano's commitments as an artist and intellectual. Each work is a kind of 'theorem', about social politics, about identity, about language, or about art, but not necessarily in that order. The key elements of his works in *Bandiera Nera* include a recursive relationship amongst image, language, and narrative, and the way in which objects and space frame and delineate ideas and connective traces across different forms, as well as the way in which public and personal history, politics, theory, philosophy, construct and affect and can shift identity. That is, of course, a considerable range of content. The questions and complexities of these issues, triggered primarily in relation to Pasolini's history, are then resolved into aesthetic experience endemic in the works of art, not as a conclusive result or determined proposition, but as a speculative account, or meditative rumination on the very nature of the artistic self, the creative practitioner, and their role and voice in public discourse. An ongoing, reflexive inquiry in the work of contemporary art.

Inevitably, as an artist, Di Stefano's project results in the visualization and the materialization of visceral, experiential artifacts, works that carry meaning not just in terms of specifics of images, through the devices of figuration, picturing or narrative, but in terms of space, form, and materiality. The nature of meaning in art is not constrained to the tropes of form and or the language of history, but is recast through the manipulation and reconfiguration of materials, conditions and environments. Video art and video installation in particular can frequently be constrained by the tyranny of the image or the implied narrativity of the moving image. Even in the museum space, the context of the viewing room is often oppressively cinematic, a darkened space constructed for a close-up (and sometimes interactive) experience of the image. Incorporating sculptural elements or reconfiguring the space to delimit the narrative, surveilling centrality of the video projection are critical to permit a cognizant visceral engagement that is not subject to the more common distancing, observational priorities of video art. An immersive experience is conditional, and often is subject to the power of the moving image and the tendency of video to utilize its capacity for infinite modulation and variation. Slow motion, the slowing of time, and the consequent articulation of the image in detail has been a powerful and recurring way of disrupting the narrative flow and forces the viewer to engage more intently with the image. It is frequently used in the context of highlighting identity, and how the visual cues of social relations, codes of appearance and the arrangement and demarcation of space, will define and refine identity. In three works, *Senza Parole*, *Punto*, and *Ponte (Verticale)*, Di Stefano reimagines the intentionality of actions and events two Pasolini films, *La Ricotta* and *Accatone*.

*Senza Parole*, or in English 'Without Words' or 'Speechless', implies being dumb-founded or being silenced. In this title Di Stefano shows his affinity with the subtleties of language and the incidental effects of translation. The work consists of an Olivetti typewriter, of the type Pasolini would have used, with a single, excessively long sheet paper threaded through the typewriter. Projected onto the paper is an excerpt from the title sequence of *La Ricotta* of two men dancing the Twist. The inordinate length of paper and the antique typewriter can imply the body of work and the intellectual/political positions produced in Pasolini's work. Two men dancing together can be read as unaffected pleasure or even *joie de vivre*, but in this sequence, Di Stefano slows down the action, allowing the viewer to focus on the movement, the touch, and the physicality of the bodies of the men, empathetically highlighting the ubiquitous homoerotic capacity of unadorned masculine imagery.

In a scene appropriated from *Accatone*, *Ponte (Verticale)*, translated as 'Bridge (Vertical)' Di Stefano's video slows time considerably more to show a man jumping from a bridge over the Tiber River in Rome. The slowing of this falling man is acute and suggests a near suspended moment in time, in which we focus not on the man, but on his situation, his context, what has motivated him to jump, and what this jump, this descent, means. Di Stefano suggests this suspension, of the figure and of time, located on a bridge that

separates or links two classes of communities in Rome is the kind of indeterminate and powerless space occupied by those in the process of shifting between or reaching across classes. Still, the hardening of borders and the isolationism of classes show no signs of decay.

Immediately following this jump scene, Di Stefano selects a moment of vaguely distasteful or unpleasant action as a rejoinder to the seductive fall. In *Punto*, the slowing of time in this video, emphasizes the viscerality of the bridge jumper, having survived, spitting aggressively towards the camera. It is, of course, a confronting, defiant, and demeaning act, showing contempt for interdiction or authority. The physicality of this gesture, especially in slow motion, reinforces the power of emotion and the intention driving it. Di Stefano here suggests this contemptuous gesture nevertheless lacks any efficacy or power to resist or change systems of oppression and control, but can nonetheless communicate their anger through this universally contemptuous gesture.

In *Volgar Eloquio*, or 'Vulgar Address', Di Stefano takes another tack on the process of cognitive apprehension. In a literal sense writing is produced on a typewriter and captured on video. The account of this writing is in real time, no longer or shorter than the actual time of typing. Yet the pace of the production of the text, appears to be slow, elongated, suggesting a shift in time as awareness of the text, its intent and meaning is anxiously, impatiently anticipated. The text narrates Pasolini's inner turmoil of solitude while walking along the streets of Rome. The experience of a text, an encounter with a narrative, through either reading or listening, will almost never approximate, even closely, the process of writing it. As this video projection proceeds and the narrative emerges, the slow revelation of the text has a correlative effect, both to the subject of Pasolini's soliloquy and the form of its presentation in Di Stefano's video. *Volgar Eloquio* has a mesmerizing, gripping effect that conflates looking and reading by way of the large scale projection of the physical and tangible process of producing text on paper. The image is not so far out of scale to dwarf the viewer, but is sufficiently resized to convey an out of body, somewhat miasmic sense of unease.

In more specifically referential vein, in *Ponte (Orizzontale)*, which translates to 'Bridge (Horizontal)', Di Stefano appropriates two inscriptions from a major public monument in Rome. A series of monoliths built during Mussolini's Fascist reign in Italy record key dates commemorating major events of that regime. After the fall of the fascist government, two inscriptions documented the end of that period of history in a clinical, matter of fact style that public text requires, 'The End of The Fascist Regime' and 'The Implementation of the Italian Republic'. Di Stefano presents two 1:1 scale rubbings (on paper) of the inscriptions of these final two marble monoliths. The ghostly nature of rubbings, their sense of impermanence, their lack of precise definition, and their often pallid tonal range, while authentically connected to the archeology of the site, the tangible materiality of history suggests an air of fragility surrounding these inscriptions. Not that Fascism as a viable political agency is returning anytime soon, but

that fascism in a social sense, or perhaps in a technological idiom, is already re-infiltrating our institutions and re-permeating our cultural formations in a dangerously lingering manner that can potentially subvert both memory and vigilance.

In another rubbing, *Gram/Sci*, Di Stefano subtly disrupts the assumptions of political/theoretical nexus that underpins activism and activist art. This work consists of a 1:1 scale rubbing on paper of the inscription on the grave of Antonio Gramsci, the father of Italian communism and a political prisoner during Mussolini's fascist era. A red fluorescent light, a strangely muted ambient spectrum, illuminates the installation. In this work, the divided name is a disturbing fracture, a powerful schism that produces a broken entity. A Marxist theorist and Communist politician, Gramsci's work on the powerful, secretive, and coercive nature of cultural hegemony, especially as it erodes liberty seems increasingly prescient. It could be suggested that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the currency of Gramsci's work is still necessary, but that little progress has been made in addressing the rampant power of capitalism to ignore or ameliorate, and at times crush, dissent. Di Stefano's thought to recall Gramsci's work, but distort it by scything a rift through the name, producing the intriguingly hyphenated amalgam, *Gram/Sci*, in effect casts doubt on the theoretical enterprise, while endorsing the possibility of some future shift in the interplay of power relations, driven by a new suite of theoretical analysis and insights.

In a recent sound work, *Silence, Please*, Di Stefano's focus is on site and language, and is drawn from one of Rome's most extraordinary buildings, The Pantheon. The piece consists of a field recording of the echoing ambient sound of tourists as they move around the cavernous space as well as amplified pre-recorded audio played through loudspeakers in the Pantheon space asking tourists for 'Silence, Please' in five different languages. The work activates some intriguing elements of the site's relatively recent history, and its contemporary role in political debate. As the burial place of the last kings of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II and Umberto I, it is a site of vigil for some monarchist organizations, which have provoked occasional clashes with Republicans. The amplitude of this work is extended because of the unique historic significance of the site, and its surprisingly taut contemporary political resonance. The fact that it is also a key tourist site provides the opportunity for Di Stefano to further activate his concern for the role of language and translation in social relations. A seemingly innocent and familiar crowd control protocol in a place of reverence and memory, the invocation to silence, in multiple languages or multiple 'voices' as it were, in this context, within this iconic Western location makes the issues of difference, political difference and cultural difference, more tangible and potentially more infractious or dangerous. And further, the machine-driven power of the disembodied voice-command suggests a kind sinister system of control that elegantly reprises Di Stefano's interest in uncovering the repressive cloaking of dissent.

The attention to language and issues of understanding and perception are carefully modulated in Di Stefano's work to resonate with ideas of dislocation, transition, and alienation, and the titles of his work, as

well as the title of the exhibition, in Italian, are designed to convey a signifying power that extends beyond the inclusively descriptive. The titles are inherently part of the work; key triggers to the intensity and extent of theoretical and political connections that course through the work. It is not surprising then that images or texts of the 'Black Flag' are absent from this exhibition apart from the title of the project composed in Italian. In this case the references of the title should not be constrained by selective rendering, but can, in theory, be thought of as referring to all the possible readings/meanings of *Bandiera Nera*/Black Flag.

A powerful, redolent symbol for mourning, for revolution, for anarchy, and for a fearsome, intractable resistance that would accept no quarter, the sharp political imbrications of the 'black flag' are eloquently detached by being inscribed here in Italian as *Bandiera Nera*. The translation from English serves the dual purpose of isolating and focusing on the destabilizing function of dislocation, sublimation, and misunderstanding, or in some cases simple ignorance of unknown or unlearned language, while at the same time invoking the political capital of the symbol of the black flag. Thought of as the opposite of the universal symbol of surrender, the 'white flag,' the 'black flag' has been deployed as a symbol of resistance to oppression or disruption to exploitative systems of authority. Yet in the face of the putative defeats in revolution or acts of anarchy, a more nuanced reading of the black flag/*bandiera nera*, seems to gravitate towards providing an elegiac symbol of defeat, a corraling, embracing insignia of loss of power, authority, independence, or even life.

It is not that, in a rather demoralizing but ironic popular culture dictum, 'resistance is futile,' and assimilation is inevitable, it is rather that in the real world the ideologies and material systems of contemporary experience are so fluid and mutable, mobile systems resembling hyper-mutating modular organisms, that proposing and enacting change or representing or articulating difference is in a constant state of transactional exchange, a flux of compromise and accommodation. The unfixed, imprecise natures of the institutions that exert control over daily experience require a calculated reflexive capacity of reactive and opportunistic mutations. Despite the tragedy of Pasolini's murder or the illusory nature of the unrealized goals of Gramsci's socialist idealism, the ongoing mourning of these losses need not be a subdued process. In the face of the undiminishing political volatility and oppressive/secretive military/technological tyrannies of contemporary experience, the kinds of formal references, historical reflections, and analytical accounts Di Stefano makes of the present in *Bandiera Nera* ensure the relevance and resonance of their projects remain.