

I hid my dance behind a pile of furniture.

A place for the writing of Barbara Manzetti

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The form of something

For the visitors who break into Barbara Manzetti's writing – because the door is always open – there is nothing to show them how to find their place. Moving a stack of books sitting on a chair, perhaps. And maybe a sweater, a guitar, a cry, a perfume, a memory, too, before they can think about sitting down at a table where, next to a pile of old blank pages that are turning a shade of antique rose, someone has set out a kitchen knife as a sort of pen. After these precautions and the bit of physical effort, the visitor can take a seat. With the risk however of disturbing an order of the things. The space is perhaps already occupied, or soon will be, by the smell of soup, a child or an ageing minister. The visitor to this writing will have to get used to the simple but never definitive presence of objects that have been meticulously arranged in their disorder, the back-and-forth, a rapid, silent fall, collapse, too and even sometimes disappearances. He will see right away that this space, entered into on tiptoes, is in the form of something and that each object has found its place in an unsteady balance in that something. The form of a kitchen, an escape, a skull, how should I know? There is no form that this space seems incapable of taking on. But not a single one that could be entirely named.

The form of a body

Let us borrow from Barbara – promising of course to return it to its place when we're done – a statement that serves as a title, a program, perhaps even the face of a living art to come: performance in the form of a book. By what sleight-of-hand can the book, a proudly immobile and mute object, lend its form to action? Not as a recipe (a performance based on a book), as an accessory or the décor (performance with a book), but rather carefully thought out like a gesture, with its own particular composition. It is also possible to understand the statement as the act of writing in public and that would solve everything. Writing as a performance, a scene on a stage. But it would be too simple and probably too simplistic to stop at this obvious banality. And a shame too, to miss mulling over this paradox that is the very flavour and fragility of Barbara's experiences. Really a shame not to continue trying to keep to this form of a book, like a sort of slightly off-kilter thing, a thing that doesn't come easily. To see more clearly into the matter, we could dawdle around on the dance side of things, since the writer in question here is a dancer.

See the history of the book form as a figure that stands up to its own execution. A figure so difficult and so impeccably abstract that it would literally eject the body from the theatre of operations. We think then it is a clever, radical way to get rid of the burden of the show; dance without the show, so then without the body either. It is a very current question, how to qualify all the operations that escape the confines of the stage. Let us be clear here, the stage means the space, but above all, the stage means time. Beyond the by-now ancient posture of performance as exterior to the stage, to seek not the place but rather the time for a work of art? While she maintains a particular relationship to the presence of the body, Barbara Manzetti intensely lives this search for a show with infinite boundaries, without limits, without beginning or end, without place, that is to say without any particular intensity that would allow one to locate it here rather than elsewhere, before or after. The show is dismissed, the stage is deserted, but the body does not completely disappear, left to the paradox of the painter who says to his model “Just act like I’m not here”, the model answering “But you ARE there!” Perhaps the form of a book is a horizon, the utopia of a body that gradually disappears until it is only a voice, a bodiless voice. Imagine a voice floating about in space, whispering in people’s ears, yelling and singing, telling all sorts of things. A voice that looks at you. There you have the beginning of a form.

The form of a body

But let us come back to her writing. In the beginning, we want to grasp it, catch it. We go to jump on it, shut its mouth so that we could look more closely at it, like a rare bird that had been captured. Difficult. Because the thing had a tendency to flee. A zigzagging sprint, a race that stops abruptly in the middle of the course. And then takes off again. We’ve never seen anyone run like that, with that pace, steps rapid and cut short. And then stop squarely. Let us take a Kenyan athlete, for the unmatched pace of his race but also because Kenyan athletes are used all too rarely as a tool for a demonstration, which I certainly regret given the amazing potential that they have for it. So, let us take a Kenyan athlete, but one who suffers sudden short-term memory loss and suddenly no longer knows what his body was doing just seconds before. We can even imagine him changing directions regularly, creating a sort of never-ending race. At precisely that moment, an informed spectator understands that it is some kind of art and not a sporting event at all. He’ll think perhaps of asking for his money back, but he hesitates. Because a doubt remains, and around him no one seems overly bothered by how astonishingly long the race is. The entire story will continue to insolently resemble something that it is not. Art that will go about its business secretly, hidden behind the appearance of an athletic event – or something else depending on the context. All it took was a slight rupture, a small tear in the order of things for one object to become another. As for the example that concerns us, we can imagine that our runner does indeed end up crossing the finish line (like in the Olympic marathons shown on television where the athlete collapses as soon as he stops running), but long after the winner does and indeed, after what conventions would call, strictly speaking, the race. He arrives outside of the framework. He often represents a country that we can’t place on any map we know. The thing did indeed take place, but outside of the event, spilling over its boundaries. Writing as a voice without a body, we were saying, but also as a space without boundaries. Everything tends to disappear then, acting by subtraction to create the famous book form. We think we recognize it during a public opening. But these pages of cramped writing skilfully piled up are perhaps only to fool us. You should really look at the deck of cards, the lists, the post-its and above all, the writing living between these forms if you wish to seize the breadth of the (meta)form of a book that is being imagined before our very eyes.

In the form of a skull

“Come in, come in. Would you like a little soup? A sweater to wrap around your shoulders, a shawl perhaps. Hang up your coat, your mouth, your eyes, make yourself at home, take whatever you like. But do step carefully, for you tread the inside of my skull” That is what we imagine posted at the entrance of this form of the book, which is an interior form. Barbara’s performances, and therefore her texts, work with this sort of zoom-in function. We are in a city where there is a street, in a street where there is an apartment, in an apartment where there is a room, the kitchen perhaps, and so on down to the space we find ourselves curled up in, which seems surprisingly like her brain. The paradox of the open door, when it is the door to the subconscious, an invitation that we accept not without some uneasiness. For we are rifling through someone else’s drawers, we are sleeping in her bed, smelling the scent of her clothes, her skin, walking through the field of her obsessions, watching the film of her life full of smiling people who we will never know other than as anonymous ghosts. It is up to us to find the hiding places, the envelopes under the bed, the false bottoms, to act like those investigators who look for clues week after week, poking around where no one is expecting, inspecting the dead body in search of its secret. With perhaps the strange dream of being like the inspector in Twin Peaks, and finding under the fingernail of the dead Laura Palmer, now silent forever, the first letter of a book.

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