

Patrizia Giambi and the Negative of Language

Without infancy human beings would have no language. And no history either. Infancy is the sign – as Agamben puts it – that the individual has not always been a speaking being. That no individual, in other words, is in language as if in his or her element: where this should be understood as a fixed or limited repertory, if not as a true instinct. The imperfect interpenetration with the world, which is a typical trait of infancy (and of its forms of adaptation and uninterrupted learning), is nothing but the matrix of language. A congenital disorientation of the individual is what lies behind an undefined world of gestures through which he or she has to find a way, always and once again. In unexpected contexts, with no established habits, no fixed rules.

Thus the realm of gestures becomes the original nucleus of a condition of communicability that displays such a wide range of faculties that it is never exhausted in a definite number of realizations, but capable of ever new expressions. These potential acts, even after being translated into language, will never be able to bridge our gap in communication.

Let us take a children's game like that of hand shadows. Opening the palms of the hands in the opposite direction to a source of light, and placing the thumbs one on top of the other, you can create the projected image of a flying bird. The hands remain what they are, appendages of our body, but their external profile turns their shadow into the silhouette of an animal. I am reminded of this simple and elementary trick when looking at a far more complex construction like that of Patrizia Giambi's 'four chairs': *Untitled*, 1991. An early 'but already mature' work, as someone wrote at the time.

It consists of four black-and-white photos in which the word 'chair' is written in four different languages. Cut out of paper, the letters of the word are placed at right angles to a horizontal plane (that of a sheet of paper, a page?) in such a way that their shadows cast the image of a chair. In fact what I see even before reading the word 'chair' is the silhouette of a chair. Yet it is an entity in negative, a ghostly double, with respect to the illuminated bodies that make up the word. This shadow is not an image of the word (made of five or six letters of the alphabet) but the 'other' of the word: it turns its being into appearance. Critics have always been quick to make a connection with Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, but it could not be farther from that example. Certainly, we could say that we are dealing here with semiotics as Peirce understood it: the *index* of the photo that fixes the scene, the *symbol* of the word and the *icon*, finally, of the image. But it is more than that.

I don't know whether Patrizia Giambi was aware of an experiment conducted by Piaget in 1927 on the explanations given by some children of the origin of the shadow. 'Pointing to (five years old) Stei's shadow on the ground,' Piaget asked: 'Is there a shadow there?' 'Yes, the chair made it' was Stei's reply. The child was not able to recognize his own shadow and transferred it to the chair on which he was sitting. Perhaps he did not recognize it because the projection was horizontal, on the ground, whereas he was in a vertical position. But above all – it is thought – because the stage of the shadow is not that of the identification of the I but that of the identification of the other. So, despite coexisting within the same image, the word chair and its shadow express an original gap, they present the difference as such. We could also say, along with Broodthaers or Foucault, 'this is not a chair' but, even in this case, we would not grasp that element of the ineffable (that spectral character) which Giambi always insinuates into the image. The shadow here is a bit like the voice (or the movement of the lips) in her modified typewriter of 1992 and 1993. But we could also extend the core of this research to the combinations of signs in *Shape* (1993), to the randomness of *Metro Elastico* (*Stretching Measure*, 1994), to the precarious nature of *Summer Solstice* (1996) and to the ashes of *Personaggi poco corporei* (*Not Very Corporeal Figures*, 2013). And so we come back again and again to that original imperfect interpenetration between signs and things, that constitutive negative, that positive and unshakable difference which is also at the centre of the new version of the work with the chairs: *Carta dei 25 anni* (*25-Year Survey*). With a rotation of 360° it is now small chairs made of paper that are projecting the image of the word chair onto the plane – and, once again, as a shadow.

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