



Carlos San Millán - Objects on the Table #1

# THE REAL THING

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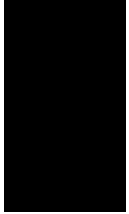
**ABSTRACT.** The article proposes to tackle the relation between an object of art and its interlocutor/spectator or artist, individuating in Roland Barthes' *punctum*, the core aspect of this more often than not, uneven conversation, within which a 'thing' deprived of its own voice, imposes strikingly with the intention of becoming 'something'. A 'real thing' – in its power to open new space-time portals, to even cancel the death and transience, inviting the other part in a dialog to enter the facticity of here and how – when encountered directly and disarmingly, touches the profound chords of the self of its 'discoverer'. The article, thus, pauses on different meanings of the term 'thing', finding, in Tom Stoppard's, Romeo Castellucci's and René Magritte's works, the examples of the encounter with the matter which simultaneously grounds itself and goes beyond itself.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** Barthes, punctum, real thing, living thing, Castellucci

*There is, I suppose, a world of objects which have a certain form, like this coffee mug. [...] But politics, justice, patriotism – they aren't even like coffee mugs. There's nothing real there separate from our perception of them.*

Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing* (1982)

## .1.1 THEORY / THE LIVING OBJECT, THE REAL OBJECT

 In his book *La chambre claire*, Roland Barthes elaborates on *punctum*; it is, he states: «sting, speck, cut, little hole-and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)» (Barthes 1981: 27). In his attempt to understand the

nature of the art of photography, Barthes decides to focus on a detail able to rip out a particular photograph from the body of all the other photographs – from, so to say, the art of photography itself – and make it become his own, meaningful to him, speaking to him. In other words, through the *punctum* – this «pointed instrument» (*Ibidem*: 26) able to make a wound in the body of the object of art and in the heart of its discoverer, the photography – essentially unknowable and mysterious – discloses, for an instant, its irresistible charm, its senseful presence. Using this inductive methodology, the philosopher, thus, finds himself closer to the essence of the demeanor of the art he examines. The mark, which makes itself the protagonist of the *paysage* it inhabits, which «overwhelms the entirety of my reading» – Barthes writes (*Ibidem*: 49) – becomes, thus, the key to experiencing not only a particular artwork, but maybe the art in itself. Is it necessary to lend oneself – one’s own private memory of that precious necklace in Van der Zee’s photograph, as Barthes does, letting himself being profoundly touched by the object of his interest and examination – in order to be able to find *punctum*? If it is, how does the ‘found’ object communicate with the self of its discoverer? If it is, where does *punctum* collocate itself between these two dialoging entities? Could *punctum* hurt ‘my’ object, the same way it could hurt ‘me’?

Before engaging in further analysis of above posed queries, it is important to make a couple of clarifications around the nature of the object, which is, in Barthes’ case, capable of communicating something deeply personal, capable of leaving a permanent mark on the surface on which its roots happen to prosper. The object which will be treated here is an object of art: the material entity appearing inside an aesthetical framework. The term ob-

ject, will be, thus, regarded – either in its manifestational entirety or as a part of a whole – as an entity available to establish a dialog inside certain pre-established semiotic confines. In other words, what will be analyzed is a necklace in a photograph, a necklace appearing in a performance, a necklace in a novel, etc. A necklace on the neck of ‘my’ grandmother, nonetheless, is not the object which this text proposes to tackle, at least this is the case to the extent to which it appears to be still ‘unfound by myself’ as its observer, until it still passes un-interrogated by ‘my’ intuition, by ‘my’ interest, by ‘my’ desire. It has still not become something ‘for me’ – as Barthes writes: «“For me” is not subjective, nor existential, but Nietzschean (“after all, it is always the same question: What is it *for me*?...”»<sup>2</sup>. It still has not become Aristotelian *pros emas*, «by us», or Hegel’s *für uns*; i.e. – as Remo Bodei writes: «a subjectivity that is (not yet) in tune with the truth»<sup>3</sup>. In other words, a necklace on the neck of ‘my’ grandmother, accidentally captured by a mirror, behind ‘my’ back – as in *Las Meninas* famous scenery: the faces of the portrayed rulers appear behind Velázquez’s back, as if they were observing themselves and the situation they were in, from the other room – would not be of interest to this research, if ‘I’ were not in ‘real’ Velázquez’s position: looking, from the other room, both at ‘myself’, and at the object of ‘my’ gaze<sup>4</sup> (4). That is to say that the object of art, (as the object of this analysis), is the one which looks back, in Benjamin’s terms, which, when being interrogated, interrogates in return<sup>5</sup>(5). The object which – as in case of Velázquez’s painting – hides a question at its very center, in its heart. Even more so, it hides a specific question made ‘by me’, ‘for me’ myself who is asking. ‘What is it for me?’

Moreover, to pause on a few, among innumerable queries around this com-

1 James Van der Zee, the photographer, whose art is cited by R. Barthes 1981: 53.

2 «E ancor più: è questo per me! Il “per me” non è né soggettivo, né esistenziale, ma nietzscheiano (“...in fondo, è sempre la stessa domanda: Che cos’è *per me*? ...”», R. Barthes 1975: 13 (italics are the author’s, trans. by V. Baltić).

3 Bodei 2015: 13 (brackets added by V. Baltić).

4 D. Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, (1656, conserved in Museo del Prado, Madrid).

5 Cf. Benjamin 2012, 2014.

plex relation between an object of art and its interlocutor, and therefore, around the nature of the object of this analysis, I would ask Jean Starobinski for help. In his book *Trois Fureurs*, Starobinski examines, among other, the reasons for madness which led Ajax to his tragic decisions, and, even more importantly, engages in some kind of meta-analysis, pointing out with great precision the methodological insufficiencies in which the reader/the spectator/Ajax's interlocutor may fall, when approaching his story. In Sophocles' tragedy, Ajax dies already in the second act, leaving his body – around which burial, revolves the rest of the tragedy – visible, impaled at the stake until the end. For Starobinski, it is not possible to reconstruct this hero's story à rebours, since the external eye could never grasp the real reasons which pushed Ajax into the death. Even more so, Starobinski traces a precise line which divides irremovably Ajax's story from Ajax, the character himself, i.e.: his suicide. In other words, in order for Ajax's story to be regarded as an object of art, Ajax, the character of that story, Ajax, the Velázquez's mirror in his story, must stay alive. His suicide, as Sophocles treats it, is just that, the fact, the immobile body occupying the stage not for the survivors to ask 'why', but for them to verify 'what'.

Starobinski claims that a character not threatening to 'contradict' the person who observes/narrates about/tries to connect with him or her, is a 'dead' character, while, it could be added, in case of Sophocles' tragedy, that the dead Ajax, still in position to generate conflict among survivors, to influence the development of the plot, while in death, is still alive (Starobinski 1987: 12-13). To kill one's interlocutor, a character, an object of art, it is enough to ask 'why' to their existence. A story is then completely abandoned to the arbitrariness of the 'other's perspective', of 'my' perspective, when 'I' decide to narrate it retroactively, and thus, 'falsely', when I decide not to communicate with 'my' object *vis à vis*, not to risk to be seen while looking,

to get captured by Dionysus' maddening gaze (*Ibidem*).

For Starobinski, the suicidal act, in particular, functions, in this sense, as a paradigmatic full stop. It negates the analytical endeavor with great authority (*Ibidem*). It introduces pregnant silence into the discourse. Ajax's dead body, thus, with all its immense weight (Ajax was known, not only for being one of the most valorous war heroes, but for being also physically strong and robust; here the metaphorical meaning of his largeness is valuable), as the act of suicide, with innumerable consequences it leads to, must be regarded in the totality of their imminence. In other words, for Starobinski, it is not possible to ask 'why', in order to try to reach the 'truth' behind what happened to Ajax, without crushing into the wall of the fact, of the dead body, of the suicide. It is not possible to glimpse the truth, without being impeded by your interlocutor.

The question that raises spontaneously is, thus, if our search is directed towards the truth or towards the bearer of the questioning. Bodei distinguishes Aristotle's *auto to pragma*, «the thing itself», from already mentioned *pros emas*, «by us», pausing on Husserl's enlightening statement: «We do not at all want to settle for “pure and simple words” [that is, a purely symbolic understanding of words]... Meanings that are revived from distant, confused intuitions, from indirect intuitions, cannot be sufficient for us. We want to return to things themselves» (Bodei 2015: 12).

In order to be able to deepen Starobinski's proposition, appealing, within it, to Benjamin's famous thesis on «aura» (Benjamin 2014) – which cannot be approached here, yet would certainly be consulted at least intimately by anyone who cannot resist the exertion of intertextuality's centripetal force here – I would like to recall another painting: Magritte's *La reproduction interdite*<sup>6</sup>. Who or what (almost) forbids the reflection? Letting aside Magritte's poetical intuition and reasoning – object of many interesting studies,

6 R. Magritte, *La reproduction interdite*, (1937, conserved in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam).

unfortunately not strictly relevant here – I would indicate similarity between this artwork’s ‘demeanor’ and the function of Ajax’s suicide within Starobinski’s theoretical discourse. That is to say that the object which explicitly negates itself to the gaze – yet, in order to be able to do so, continues to exist among other objects, as it is the case with the antagonist in the Magritte’s painting, i.e. the book, re-establishing the threatened order of things – acts similarly as Ajax, who locks the spectator’s vision in one irremovable point, in a blind spot: his dead body on the stage. In this, cruelest, the most irreverent, as in many other ways in which an object asserts its presence, its aliveness (even within death, negation, precisely through death or negation), it claims its own perspective as inalienable. Following this line of thought, it could be claimed that an object of art, subversively incoherent, disrespectful of ‘my’ desire, ‘my’ interest for it – even ‘my’ pain – cannot be Aristotle’s *auto to pragma*, but dares to ask Barthesian: ‘What is it for me?’

In *La reproduction interdite*, the man who (almost) manages to present himself as absent – making essentially the same *Gestus* as Velázquez’s couple, i.e. dislocating his own gaze outside/at the periphery of the picture, in order to acquire ‘objectivity’ (the term here should be intended in the vastest sense possible) – is the perfect example of a dead man on the stage. The authority this mysterious character is the bearer of, has something to do with the death for many reasons: from covering of the face – with his gaze occupying the outer position (It. *al-di-là*) – to the material qualities his body denotes – it looks almost like a silhouette of a body, porous, weightless, immobile; thus, if the mirror cannot reproduce this face, it might not mean that the mirror itself is deficient (the book testifies to it), but that the character itself is a foreigner, so to say, to this world. There is something deeply disturbing and illogical in this Magritte’s character’s presentation (one of many of his protagonists who struggle to recognize themselves, who struggle to ‘breathe’), as it is the case with Ajax’s suicidal act, famously ‘explained’ by the hero himself in his ‘deception speech’:

«I’m going on the path I have to tread./ Do as I say, and soon perhaps you’ll find/ that, even if I am for now unfortunate,/I shall have been kept safe» (Sophocles: 690). There is, in the demeanor of both of these characters (as the last words of Ajax’s extraordinary speech denote), firm and irremovable co-presence of the opposing forces, which seem to support both of the dead bodies to stay upright. There is an underlying ‘why’ which both of the objects (the negated reflection and the suicide) rest on, without ever even hinting to a possible resolution of the posed query. These two objects of art show with unequivocal conviction the mechanism by which unsolvable ‘why’ becomes ‘what’.

Maaïke Bleeker, in her *Locus of Looking*, quotes and complements Derrida, finding an interesting syllogism which can help us dealing with the intricacy Magritte led us into. The man with his face same as his nape, must be, in Bleeker’s terms, «always already dead» (Bleeker 2002: 127-128). Bleeker writes:

«Barthes understands the punctum in terms of a facticity that allows him to go beyond representation, the effect of which he describes as being absorbed into what he sees (“I entered crazily into the spectacle”) to be united with that which the spectacle presents to him» (*Ibidem*).

Bleeker, thus, defines Barthes’s *punctum* as what «evades representation», «what cannot be named» (*Ibidem*: 127). Moreover, when the philosopher observes the photograph of his dead mother, he suddenly finds himself into a realm which excludes the signs of her abduction from the present, i.e. death and time. What unfolds in front of this ‘hurting’ Barthes, is, it may be said, an emotion, maybe love for his mother, who revives for an instant, as if she had never died, as if she could never die, in front of him. Instead of being actually present, thus, alive, or absent, thus, dead, she becomes «always already», thus beyond life and death.

For Barthes to feel this unrest in front of an old photograph – Bleeker writes – the difference between sign and its referent must be obscured in such a way that the observer finds him or herself under

the impression of sharing, at least briefly, the reality with the photographed object. This photography's inclination towards «life-likeness» makes it, as it is also the case with the theatre, capable of creating an «illusion» of some kind of infinite present, Derrida's (or Heidegger's) «always already» tackles (*Ibidem*: 128).

We know very well that what we see is always already dead, that it is a representation of something absent, yet some photographs allow as momentarily to enter this absent world, to be absorbed into it and experience what is seen as present, as here and now, and as a thing in itself rather than as a representation (*Ibidem*).

It is precisely this Bleeker's anchoring onto the 'reality' of the relationship between an object of art and its observer/interlocutor, onto the *kairos* created by this improbable encounter of the two incommunicable realms, to show us one of the possible ways to understand the meaning of Barthes' *punctum* and its importance in a dialog, which an object of art establishes with its alterity.

The factual object, filled by blatant Magrittean irresponsiveness, was found and questioned by Barthes, so that the image of his mother, otherwise unrepresentable, visible only through Barthes' eyes, could speak. His late mother (or the idea of her) hides the best kept secret of all, the one concerning her current state of consciousness, the one concerning the meaning of life, yet – while she obviously cannot reveal anything, however hardly she might want to when stubbornly asked by her son's loving gaze – she regards his questioning with maybe even greater gift than the one of the truth: her (absent) presence. The features, the memorable details of this (for Barthes) extraordinary woman captured on a photograph, speak only to the philosopher, in the words he could recall; her hand caresses his head with an almost imperceptible touch, which hurts him badly, but, at the same time, promises liveliness beyond any material boundary.

'What is it for me?' – the philosopher asks. If there were not for Barthes posing that question, there would not be an answer the old photograph gave him, through the *punctum*'s sting. If there were not for Barthes pronouncing that magic formula, the object which opened a portal for the philosopher to go and reach his mother, «allowing him to embrace this always already dead people as they were living» – Bleeker writes (*Ibidem*) – would not respond. If there were not Barthes' 'what is it for me', the mother would not be able to state 'what is it for her', would not be able to re-position the image of herself among the many objects Barthes' reality is made of.

That is to say that, 'for me', does not resolve entirely in this egocentric research of some kind of hook into the reality, some kind of life vest preventing 'me' to drown into the non-meaning. 'For me' means also to gamble with the unknown, to be ready to ask even when there is certainty that the other will not respond, even when the other responds with the question; to ask, precisely because the other will not respond, and by doing so, to show oneself as ready to lend that other, the voice of your own questioning; to ask precisely because the other will respond with the question, and by doing so, to show oneself as ready to be seen, to be capable to relate directly, without intermediaries, truthfully. 'For me' means to refuse the 'why', to give away any arms, to respect the mystery, acknowledging the deficiency even of 'my' very well put question; it means observing the beauty of a question which does not pretend to be answered, of an object let be.

'For me', or 'by me' in order to establish a dialog, cannot but acknowledge the possibility of the other's silence, the other's resistance to reveal any 'why'; i.e. it must engage in a peaceful co-presence with its object of interest. 'For me', must cherish deep understanding of the probability by which the other is absent<sup>7</sup>. It must come to terms with the absence, in order to be able

7 «Philosophical understanding demands that we abandon ourselves [*sich übergeben*] to the life of the object or – which amounts to the same thing – that we have it present in our minds and express its interior need», G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in Bodei 2015: 13.

to glimpse the presence within. It must go beyond the 'why', exit oneself, to meet the other, to meet the unknown.

The *punctum* is a sign of a collision, which might be, (become) between us «always already». Differently from *studium*, moved by some kind of worldly interest, protected by a proper critical distance of the observer, responding to the 'likeability' of the argument in question – as Barthes explains – *punctum* distrusts analytical thinking, definitions, rational explanations, preferring to torment its interlocutor with unanswerable queries. With *punctum* – which targets directly the human heart – only that very heart can measure. It is, as already tackled through Starobinski's considerations regarding Sophocles' Ajax's story, unanalyzable; it is – as Barthes specifies – unchangeable, totally identified with an old, profound wound which does not even know of its own existence, which, however carefully approached, proposes the incessant more of the same, similar to Magritte's forbidden reproduction. *Encore!* – for Jacques Lacan – is the word of love (Recalcati 2019).

### 1.2 READING / ON LOVE

For Slavoj Žižek, love is (in his well-knowingly provocative terms) evil. His conception of it, nonetheless, is very useful here to further elaborate on the connection generated through Barthesian puncture, on the mysterious affinity between a subject and an object. Žižek introduces his theory by embracing the whole of the Universe, regarded as (almost) «nothing», as a «positively charged void». Within this nothingness, inclined towards a change, in this empty space of mere possibility, things could emerge, «things exist by mistake». The philosopher borrows this idea from quantum physics, considering, thus, the Creation in itself, as some kind of «unbalance», a «cosmic catastrophe»<sup>8</sup>. In other words, in order for something to come to life spontaneously, in order for some kind of disturbance of the void to take place, things must go «terribly wrong».

Yet, the catastrophe – as it often happens with Žižek's repent turns in reasoning – must be sustained. The mistake must be assumed – the philosopher proceeds – and in order to counteract the void, it is necessary to go to the end: «we have a name for this: it's called love» (*Ibidem*), Žižek states. Love is violent, even evil, since it excludes: «[...] love is not 'I love you all', love means 'I pick out something', and it is again this structure of imbalance... Even if this something is just a small detail, a fragile individual person, I say: "I love you more than anything else"» (*Ibidem*).

This picking out something which is more valuable 'for me' than all the rest, this decision to cut out everything else but, is, as it could be noticed in the previously developed theoretical examples, the mechanism by which the two entities in question connect. That is to say that the 'real' connection – what Žižek defines love – is not possible, if it does not presuppose the sharing of a profound essence of the self, of 'my' personal vision on the whole, however fallible, lacking, shaken. 'I' cannot connect with 'my' object, if I do not decide to confide in it, if 'I' do not leave 'my' wound unguarded, open, 'un-healable': 'this is me', 'this is it for me', 'this is what I am seeing'. 'I' cannot connect if 'I' do not share 'my' knowledge of the world, however precarious or unskilled, the vision from my corner. As we saw previously with Starobinski's proposition on how to understand Ajax: there should not/would not be Ajax's decision, without Ajax to decide; or through the wondering about Magritte's mysteries: the figure without the face is informed by an inward gaze, by what is left of the connection if the principal connecting source is removed, dislocated, put into brackets. The object of art, thus, states precisely the same thing which its interlocutor/observer should state in order to be able to connect – as Žižek's conceptualization of love shows: 'this is me', 'this is it for me', 'this is what I am seeing'. Even more so, if the connection pretends to be

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek: *Love is evil* – YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg7qdowoemo> (accessed: 29 July 2024).

‘real’, it states: ‘I am the object (of art), the ‘what’. Let me be such’.

In order to be able to further deepen this notion of love in between the two: *me*, and the object; or even more precisely: ‘me’, and ‘my’ object – whereas the term ‘mine’ does not denote belonging, in the strict sense of term, but rather (as Barthes claims with the adjective «Nietzschean») the establishing of (loving) connection – I would like to recall a theatrical *piece* from 1982, which explores different meanings of the term ‘thing (in itself)’, to reach, through some kind of thematic *mise en abyme*, its transposition into the idea of ‘something’. In other words, as Barthes writes: «By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no more “anything whatever”»<sup>9</sup>.

Tom Stoppard’s *Henry* – from a critically acclaimed *piece* *The Real Thing* – is a playwright (some kind of Stoppard’s *alter ego*), a middle aged man who easily passes through life, dissociating from any incumbent difficulty by using words as his most precious weapon. The words, («innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, describing that, meaning the other, so if you look after them you can build bridges across incomprehension and chaos» (Stoppard 1982: 55)), he praises, which served him so effectively during the years, take their revenge, when the playwright finds himself by the end of the play absorbed right inside the plot of his own drama. His life revolves in a way to assign him a role, he himself had previously assigned to one of his actors, Max: the one of a husband who has been cheated on. When Henry is confronted, by his daughter Debbie – who shows similar, even though maybe more insightful, cynical tendencies of her father – Henry states the following, referring to, at that point somewhat precarious, relationship he has with his wife:

Our lovers share us with the passing trade.  
But in pairs we insist that we give ourselves to each other. What selves? What’s left? What else is there that hasn’t been dealt out like playing cards? A sort of knowledge. Personal, final,

uncompromised. Knowing, being known. I revere that. Having that is being rich. You can be generous about what’s shared – she walks, she talks, she laughs, she lends a sympathetic ear, she kicks off her shoes and dances on the tables, she’s everybody’s and it don’t mean a thing, let them eat cake. Knowledge is something else, the undealt card, and while it’s held, it makes you free and easy and nice to know, and when it’s gone, everything is pain. Every single thing. Every object that meets the eye, a pencil, a tangerine, a travel poster. As if the physical world has been wired up to pass a current back to the part of your brain where imagination glows like a filament in a lobe no bigger than a torch bulb. Pain (*Ibidem*: 68-69).

## 2. PRAXIS / ROMEO CASTELLUCCI AT TRIENNALE MILANO

In 2022, I had the opportunity to collaborate as a dramaturg with the theatre director Romeo Castellucci, on his formative project *La quinta parete*, produced by Triennale Milano and the Ministry of Culture of Italy. The program was designed to provide, through a series of rehearsals and lectures, an opportunity, for the participants (mostly visual or performing artists), to interrogate their own art, with the aspiration of gaining new perspectives on it.

I would like to pause here on some of the creative practices Castellucci, and his collaborator, choreographer and philosopher Silvia Rampelli, proposed to the participants in the project, in relation to the treatment of their artworks, or more precisely in this context, of their objects of creation. What seemed to be important for Castellucci and Rampelli to pass across to the participants, was not the invite to acquire the method (more often than not personal, and directly inapplicable to diverse types of personalities, working habits etc.), but rather the appeal to assume a certain (creative, working) posture, to get familiar, as much as possible, with a particular good practice when dealing with the art.

The laboratorial work was organized in a series of chapters, i.e. exercises, which served as hints to start a poetical reasoning. Every artistic proposal was assumed as valid, and would deserve the subsequent analytical comment, by Castellucci

<sup>9</sup> Barthes 1981: 49, italics are the author’s.

and Rampelli and, if willing, by other participants. The work also included multiple theoretical lessons brought by external lecturers, and a final confrontation with the audience.

The overarching theme of the project, was the 'fifth wall' (It. *la quinta parete*), as what Castellucci defines the «spectators mind-body», «the definitive stage – the spectator's part»<sup>10</sup>. This director's intuition by itself could justify my decision to share the experience of collaboration with Castellucci within the thematic framework of this article. In this sense, the fifth wall, could be intended, inside the perimeter of this text, as a host for the disorientation, 'my' gaze falls into when confronted with the dazzling charm of the art; the fifth wall as a place of questioning. On the other hand, my choice to share the insights gained through dramaturg's position in Castellucci's workshop, is supported – maybe even more significantly than within the thematic scope – by a particular aesthetical approach the two artists adopted during the project. There is a certain *modus operandi*, which, when translated into the materiality of creative proposals the participants shared, was able, I claim, to offer another precious outlook onto the relation between not only 'myself', and 'my' object, but 'myself', as an artist, a creator and 'my' object of art. I would, thus, like to show here – even though in a relatively fugacious manner, due to the limitations of the format – the possible ways – Castellucci and Rampelli proposed – to communicate with one's idea, with an intuition, an object of interest, in order to gain the ability to transmute it in something else, multiple times, incessantly, exploring the boundaries of the spectator's vision, of one's own vision, which, as in Velázquez's case, enters and exits opposing realities.

The workshop developed on two substantial levels: the one, of the action, and the other, observational (even though, it could be claimed that the observation is

only another form of action). The first level, thus, presupposes the observation from a point of total surrendering to the fact, the consignment to an action 'I' am fully implicated in; while the second, asks distancing, with the aim to observe one's own observation and to register, subsequently, when something alters constant flow of inputs<sup>11</sup>. It is about being aware of how my attention reacts to the external and internal stimuli, – Rampelli claims – what does those recall in me (*Ibidem*). It is a direct confrontation with the alterity, the work on a non-prejudicial co-presence.

The artistic research starts by individuating one's own nucleus of perception, the «grounding point», which asks to be received by an artist, in a factual, material encounter: «It is about embracing the fact» – Rampelli states (*Ibidem*). Since it is impossible to think of a performative action, of an object of art outside of its physical manifestation, it is necessary – according to the artists – to remain anchored to the facticity of the meeting. This encounter with the fact (It. *incontrarsi nel fatto*) provokes a crash, a collision, which cannot but wound the parties involved, giving life to Žižek's «imbalance», to the spark which emerges from a previous nothingness, which illuminates the impossible relation between 'me' and the reality 'I' discovered (*Ibidem*). This encounter gives life to enigma, which must be confronted in the only actually practicable field, i.e. factual reality. Going even further, Castellucci refuses the 'secretness' of the meeting altogether, exchanging it terminologically with 'darkness' (It. *oscurità*), as a strictly optical category (Perrier 2022: 124).

In this sense, when 'I' find 'my' object, 'I' try to determine its material qualities, situating it within my own positioning in the space-time. It is, thus, crucial to collocate one's object of art/performative action through a careful examination of its circumstantial conditioning: 'Where is my object? How much time does it take

<sup>10</sup> *La quinta parete: un progetto di Romeo Castellucci* – YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlV-TlVwA-Sc&t=200s> (accessed: 29 July 2024).

<sup>11</sup> S. Rampelli, rehearsals, as the part of the project *La quinta parete*, Triennale Milano, November-December 2022 (translated by, from the notes of V. Baltić).

for it to show? What does the light do to it? How does that other object influence it (*Ibidem*)?' Remo Bodei writes:

The concepts of *rem tene, verba sequentur* and *res ipsa loquitur* also relate to this model of automatic unfolding of a thing: "If you have grasped the essential nucleus of your argument, the words will come by themselves"; "the thing speaks for itself." It is obvious that, in rigorous terms, an object external to our consciousness is incapable of speaking; in grasping the thing, in going beyond the mute object, our thoughts give voice to the "substance", to what nourishes it in the process of understanding (Bodei 2015: 14).

It is precisely this Bodei's «giving voice» to the things, which construes here into a guiding creative force. It is about capturing an aspect of the thing, and questioning it. Questioning means trying to deconstruct the object of interest in all its material, manifestational aspects. This point of interest, nonetheless, does not have to become semantically justified or any more elaborate than a hint of intuition, since it is not, again, its meaning the artist should try to capture, but its appearing. The questioning, thus, is not intended to arrive to an answer, but to unfold in its totality. It is self-sufficient agency, it does not resolve into something else, it acts as a beating center of the co-presence established between 'myself' and 'my' object. 'I', thus, question 'my' object, in order to give it an opportunity to express itself. Therefore, 'I' – as Castellucci and Rampelli propose – never go beyond the form, beyond 'what' an object gives me indiscriminately, generously, by its very existence: 'this is me', 'this is it for me', 'this is what I am seeing'.

After capturing this potential, this little magnetic field, the *punctum* – it could be stated, using Barthes' terms – the second step in relating to 'my' object, in substantiation of its presence within my scope of observation, develops through further questioning of its 'what'. For Castellucci and Rampelli, it is not about the contents, it is the form that bears all the aesthetical pregnancy; 'I' do not proceed by 'why', but

by 'what' and 'how'. In other words 'my' question, at this point, still does not seek for an answer, but, nonetheless, wants to be stated clearly.

Castellucci's claim, that it is in the form, on the surface («the surface has to be smoothed, precise, able to reflect»), in the material aspects of an object of artistic research, that the creative process should position its flywheel, leads to a subsequent work on perfecting the enquiry around these aspects<sup>12</sup>. Concentration on the material qualities of an object taken in exam, thus, allows the artist, to be able to subtract the 'background noise', with the prospect of arriving, finally, at 'my' shape/at this *Ur*-form which, in Castellucci's terms «could not but be the way it is» (*Ibidem*). The found object, as a diamond in the rough, should be carefully polished, cleaned of anything which could obscure its shine – the artist, its first spectator, was able to capture and rescue from the void. «It is necessary to sharpen the weapon», Castellucci states, «to leave a mark» (*Ibidem*).

The questioning of a privileged object – which, through the obvious insufficiency, and, so to say, the 'unfairness' inherent to this Žižekian method of extrapolating one thing among all the rest, emulates the movement of the intrinsic elusiveness in the cognition of the nature of art – provides – precisely through this imbalance (*pars pro toto*) – the possibility for an object of examination to crack open, to expand in its liveliness. In order for this to be possible, for *my* object to be able to bloom amid «anything whatever», it is necessary to carry out the third step in Castellucci's and Rampelli's creative path: «Confide that the others can grasp the thing that you are leaving. It is not yours, it is no one's. Bring an object and leave it be – Rampelli suggests<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> R. Castellucci, rehearsals, *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> «Fidati che gli altri possono cogliere quello che tu lasci. Non è tuo, non è di nessuno. Porta un oggetto e lascialo», S. Rampelli, rehearsals, *ibid*.

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