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Working whilst Talking, Talking whilst Working
Language at Work in Mauro Folci's Art

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Introduction.

The aim of this text, through the exploration of figures and situations put forward by Mauro Folci's work, is to reflect upon some forms of language, such as chatter, and on the ways in which language attempts to escape domination – as in the call of the duck uttered by Fabio who works in a call centre in *Concerto transumante per flatus vocis*, for instance. At the same time, we intend to reflect on the way in which Art, in all its expressions, is subjected to the pressure of utilitarianism and how it re-integrates all those actions which pose a threat to its survival. Phenomena such as repetition and anthropogenesis are also examined, in a special way in Paolo Virno's works and Mauro Folci's performances, viewed from the angle of the absolute performative. It is our belief that a philosophical approach, born of several conversations with the artist, is the most appropriate to discuss Mauro Folci's artistic output and its deep theoretical implications. This analysis takes into account the texts that Mauro Folci himself has written to introduce his projects, his lessons during the seminar *Conceptual Buildings and Architectures: Patterns of Representation of the Imaginary and the Real City*, and scholarly literature produced around his work. We have put into focus the issues that recur in the artist's performative works and his philosophical ties with modern thinkers and writers such as Gilles Deleuze, Paolo Virno and Samuel Beckett.

Language set to work is the main theme of Mauro Folci's work, and a careful analysis of its workings reveals how some expressions of contemporary art are based on the reiterated attempt at finding a crack in this impasse. One could suppose that artistic expression is reinforced when the artist is compelled to begin his research time and time again. A new beginning is one of the mind's greatest possibilities, as is the potential to create anew and to outgrow clichés, or to recognize them at least. Through Mauro Folci's example we observe how contemporary art expresses itself by transferring the interplay of all forms of knowledge that the artist has at his disposal into the work or into its performance. Without being a scientist, a philosopher or a sociologist, the artist weaves his web of borrowings, through which he takes possession of the contents and methods of other possible ways of looking at the world. The less Art is guided by fixed criteria of representation, the more it turns to the most varied forms of expression, with narration endeavouring to strip itself of linearity and representation.

Mauro Folci's installations and his performative works are mostly the result of a choice of characters, figures and types, as well as entire communities, with power of speech as the main theme. In Deleuze's terms, we could say that the artist creates refrains through these figures drawn from everyday life, as well as from the news, documents, direct testimonies or books. Characters as leitmotifs are drawn from a reality in which – as in the case of Florido D'Orazi, the character that sets off *Kadavergehorsam* – they often occupy a place similar to that of an old, dear memory that has been forgotten. The artist proposes figures-refrains because his characters reproduce the primary expressions of language, such as chatter and the absolute performative. These operations are not portraits. Conversely, the characters and figures themselves form the matter from which the artistic expression of their presence in the world is born.

Mauro Folci's works generally come together in layers, often presented in different places and at disjointed times. It is only in rare cases that Mauro Folci's work is the result of a unique expression, as in the installation *Badanti*. In most cases, a constant performative aspect

constitutes the foundation upon which the artist builds conceptual objects and creates videos from recuperated films, with his work being the result of different situations and implications.

II

Badanti and Meta-chat at the Bar.

In this first chapter we will focus on chatter as an essential expression of language, analysing in particular two works that Mauro Folci has devoted to this theme: *Badanti*, [*Live-in Carers for the Elderly*], an audio recording (2006) and *Chiacchiera al bar*¹ [*A Chat at a Bar*] (2004), the recording of a conversation which the artist orchestrated at a bar in the popular borough of San Lorenzo in Rome. This conversation involving Mauro Folci, journalist Raffaella de Santis, philosopher Paolo Virno, sociologist Tito Marcis and artists Alberto Zanazzo and Gianfranco Baruchello dealt with the subject of chatter in contemporary society, which was set by the artist. *Badanti* is an audio recording of the conversations and the daily nursing operations that two domestic carers, one from Romania and the other from Croatia, entertain with and devote to the elderly ladies whom they look after, with, in the background, all the sounds of a house in which people are talking and working at the same time.

In spite of their common methodology structured around the simple act of recording, these two projects on chatter are extremely different. The conversation amongst intellectuals at a bar could be defined as a ‘meta-chat’: it is a chat about chatting whose aim is to individuate its rules and structures, a conversation entertained whilst having a drink at a bar; during the exchange, thought is stimulated to go beyond the self-conscious awareness that compounds it when it is transferred into writing. In addition, thought expressed through conversation makes explicit the conditions from which it takes shape: the fortuitous character of intuitions and the rhythm that in-forms the mind, interrupted sentences and mumblings, breathing and cough, hesitation and aggressiveness, attempts at mediation, the translation of a person’s thought into another person’s thought, background noises which often affect the course of the conversation, banalities and innermost convictions, clichés. The recordings of *Badanti* and *Chiacchiera al bar* preserve the background noises of body and space and several moments of silent waiting, when words fail. The transcription of *Chiacchiera al bar*, with which this project was first presented, respects the improvised and punctuation-free nature of the conversation. The emphasis of a conversation that engrosses the speakers is all there, as well as the bare moments of silence, the broken sentences and a sense of something incomplete, produced by the succession and the overlapping of voices, at a stage when thought has not found its finished syntactic expression yet. The exchange is riddled with suspended thoughts: the arguments expressed in each intervention are never finished, but always outstripped by another speaker’s interpretation. The fragmentary nature of the exchange, a mode of language that usually fades in the air, motivates the artist’s choice not to rearrange or punctuate the conversation in its transcription. The dialogue is the expression of roughly shaped thoughts which have not been polished, contrarily to what happens in writing, when reasoning is stripped of all dross and all attempts to emerge from the obscurity of the mind.

A further level of interpretation of this work emerges from the circumstance that the participants chat about the fact that people chat: this conversation occurs between people

¹ The transcription of this conversation can be found in the appendix.

principally concerned with philosophy, and its conversational nature contributes to approaching what is also the object of discourse precisely through the form chosen.

Gregory Bateson defines as *metalogues* those exchanges which deal with the rules of exchange itself: ‘A metalogue is a conversation about some problematic subject. This conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the subject.’² Bateson finds in exchange, intended as contingent thought urged by circumstance, the most successful opportunity to say something new. Novelty is the result of chance, or better still, of the appearance of chance in a cycle which inevitably reiterates clichés. The possibility of introducing novelty is found precisely in this succession of repetitions and clichés. Bateson clearly explains how everything is born of something, and how thought processes must repeat themselves inexorably and commonplaces reoccur for invention to be possible. The mind is an intricate series of landscapes, and novelty does not suppress its foundations but rewrites or translates them, since it is impossible to include something too different in a context that is not ready to receive it. It is only with time that new things become norm, repetition, clichés themselves. Even the most innovative artistic trends, Situationism for example, are reclaimed by a context that re-appropriates them through the very same channels that the artist had used to escape it; to all appearances it is an inevitable process, a continuous fight to which only an always renewed research can be opposed, following an absurd logic which involves the ability to free oneself of one’s work, as Camus points out in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which a work of art is likened to an absurd medicine.

The issue of the re-utilization of artistic experiences is also dealt with in *Chiacchiera al bar*. In his first intervention, Mauro Folci expresses his favour towards constant displacement, even in relation to one’s own work; Virno observes that art’s main problem is the creation of new languages; Tito Marci, steering the conversation back to chatter, summarises from this angle the key points touched upon, and repeats the concept (shared by all speakers) that chatter, traditionally a way to avoid work, has now become an instrument of capitalism. According to Tito Marci, this idea proves Foucault’s genealogical theory according to which new forms are immediately incorporated in the system as soon as they are established. Difference is quickly neutralized through repetition, and the artist’s role is to break free, reiterating his breach, modulating his interventions and upsetting all that he has already achieved.

Virno asserts that having no guarantees that the artist’s decision to break free might benefit his adversary is intrinsic to acting in the public arena. From this point of view, the stance of Situationism, in its research of modes of expression that escape commodification, is for Virno an ethical but unfounded choice if considered within reality. In his emphatic conclusion, the philosopher states that the risk of being exploited is inevitable, because “the things that I am doing here and now” are destined to escape one’s control in as much as they are accomplished under other people’s gaze. Zanazzo quotes Pasolini’s words on the sense of responsibility which weights on all of our actions, since we are part of the landscape and through our very existence we become an example and part of the game, even when we try to free ourselves from its rules.

In *Chat at a Bar*, Carla Subrizi discusses the relational aspect of chatter. According to Subrizi, chatter “is rather instrumental in the establishing of a relationship [...] if I can talk to

² Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Italian edition used: *Verso un’ecologia della mente*, Adelphi, Milano, 1976

you for ten minutes I have established a communication that satisfies me from the point of view of personal relationships, and I am not sure how relevant it is if you say something or not...so, really, it is neither a high or a low plane...". There is a more primitive element in language that transcends the meaning of each utterance, which becomes manifest in chatter, and that is the relational aspect. Building on Bateson's theories, we believe that each exchange between human beings is primarily the establishing of communication, i.e. that we are primarily communicating through body language: "I like you, or, I don't like you", concealing or revealing the intentions that language articulates using a different mode through which it more or less subconsciously has the possibility to confirm or deny what the body expresses. Chatter is a conversation on several intertwined themes that can be banal and engaging at the same time, with no rules other than talking in order to communicate something that goes beyond language and concerns relationships. What is in play is a discussion on the structures of our relationships: we talk to be considered and win respect from others, who share the same desire. This concept is clearly expressed by Bateson during a conference: "It is a foible to use a syntax and a system of categories suited to the discussion of things that can be manipulated, when in reality we are talking of structures and relationships. And yet, this is exactly what is happening in this room. I am here talking to you, whilst you are listening and gazing at me; I am trying to persuade you, to show you things the way I see them, to win your respect, to show you mine, to arouse your interest and so on. What is happening in reality is a discussion on the structures underlying our relationship, and all this in conformity with the rules of a scientific convention on cetaceans. This is what being a human being means. [...] Preverbal mammals communicate only when it is necessary, and essentially use signals on the structures of relationships. Vice versa, human beings use language, which is essentially oriented towards things, to discuss relationships. Cats ask for milk expressing their dependence, while I demand your attention and perhaps your respect by talking about cetaceans."

We thus feel that chatter, taken as a conversational mode that can deal with any topic and whose most important feature is the participants' opinion, reveals, more than any other ways in which language occurs, our essentially relational nature. Bateson believes that the features of preverbal communication are the remnants of a communicative practice that preceded language, in which the priorities are establishing communication and understanding who holds power and authority and who is more inclined to acquiescence. In short, as is the case for all mammals, it serves the purpose of establishing the right kind of relationship with our interlocutor. This kind of communication is established mostly through involuntary gestures, pauses, rhythms and expressions of the body, something which language cannot suppress but only emphasize or try to repress sometimes to no avail. There is a pre-individual and relational aspect that goes beyond our control, transcends language and can be said to coincide with the body's ability to produce language: before becoming an utterance, breathing is nothing but exhaling air from our bodies, pure power, aphasia.

It is clear that in our era even the most uncontaminated and unconscious processes of the body are involved in production, commoditized to achieve an effective communication and used as the foundation of work relationships. Focussing on language, Mauro Folci explores the territory of creativity and relationships, invaded in our times by market forces in which chatter becomes a commodity. An effective expression of this praxis is found in the figure of the live-in carer for the elderly. However, if the relational ability of the carers is quantified by means of their salaries, the worlds created by the women's encounters are unknown to us; the installation created from the audio recording of a day in the homes where the carers and the elderly ladies

live expresses that territory of feelings, narrations, clichés, mutual expectations, daily waits and conversations, in which the four women's anonymous voices on an ordinary day reflect those of thousands that share the same working relationship. The reiterated clichés in the conversations between the elderly ladies and their carers are essential both to their exchange and to the women's uniqueness, protected by the clichés that appear to transcend national boundaries. Commonplaces are ready-made ideas that come useful when language does not provide other formulas to express those feelings conceived in our body and that find a general, simplified expression in clichés. These provide the much needed shelter from the hyper-semanticity to which language is subjected in our media-dominated society. Anthropologist Ernesto de Martino uses the term 'cultural apocalypse' to define certain crises of language, when the latter shows ambivalent symptoms, i.e. the simultaneous presence of an excess of semanticity and a contradictory lack of meaning. In truth, semantic inflation as well as aphasia are intrinsic possibilities of language. The anthropologist demonstrates how the excess of semanticity coincides with lack of semanticity, monotonous signals and clichés. According to De Martino 'we must point out that, as concerns meaning, the same behaviour can occur twice in the same individual: as the symptom of a crises and as the symbol of reintegration'³ During times of cultural apocalypse, human beings 'lose their presence', i.e. their meaning of being in the world, or Heidegger's *dasein*. semantic excess and discourse freed from solid references find refuge in monotonous signals and clichés, the usual remedies for those who cannot feel at home.

III

Concerto transumante per flatus vocis.

Of course commonplaces, clichés and chatter are not here subjected to criticism. Following Virno, we can find in Benjamin, especially when he deals with mechanic reproducibility, the precursor of a thought concerning the study of those experiences in which human beings test their language and expressive abilities. Benjamin's approach is defined by Virno as 'historic-natural', concerning the study of the modulations of certain invariable characteristics of human nature and their historic diversification, as with chatter and curiosity. Heidegger censured chatter on account of its lack of authenticity. On the contrary we believe that in chatter lies the most typical expression of what is impersonal, of the yet not identified characteristic of human beings that Gilbert Simondon defines pre-individual.⁴ Simondon considers human beings split between a side that is singular and individualized, unique to each individual ('because it was him: because it was me', said Montaigne) and another, defined 'trans-individual' or 'pre-individual' i.e. that side of ourselves turned to collective experience which exists only in relationships and is expressed through impersonal constructions such as 'people say' 'people believe' and such, as it happens during a conversation. Specific pre-individual characteristics of human beings have the characteristic of potentiality, they are faculties. Potentiality is the

³ Ernesto DE MARTINO, *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi naturali* (1977), Einaudi, Torino, 2002

⁴ Gilbert SIMONDON, *L'individuation psychique et collective* (Paris, Aubier, 1989) Italian edition used: *L'individuazione psichica e collettiva*, DeriveApprodi, Roma 2001.

opposite of action. Although it is impossible to think of potentiality as split from action, it is wrong to confuse potentiality with potential actions, with the ‘almost now’. Potentiality is equivalent to ‘not now’; what is potential is not considered an action that has ‘not happened yet’ but is about to become reality. Potentiality is antithetic to action because it does not become act. Potentiality is the ability, ‘being able to’ or ‘being inclined to’ love, think, talk, feel pleasure. A particular memory, the love we feel for somebody, an utterance, a certain thought are all actions. On the other hand, the intellect, language and memory are potentialities, a characteristic which bears witness to human beings’ poor instinct and chronic disorientation. That which is potential or an ability is defined by Virno as a ‘repetition of anthropogenesis’. What is repeated and why? The paradox contained in the term ‘drug’, in its acception as both a remedy and a poison, is essential to his discussion: at some critical times in history or in the life of an individual, the phenomenon of repetition constitutes a cure, as well as the manifestation of the symptom itself. The simplest example of this is that of an adult who, ‘at a difficult time, speaks his/her thoughts aloud. His/her monologue matches the similarly loud and extroverted soliloquies through which children communicate nothing more than their power of speech.’⁵ With this practice, the adult stages the origins of language in children and in humankind. ‘*Once upon a time becomes one more time*’.⁶ At a moment of crisis, man’s appropriation of language is unconsciously reiterated, and the reiteration of the crisis redeems the crisis itself. All utterance reproduces the primordial anthropogenic experience of the origins of language, the latter celebrated in *flatus vocis*. Origins do not exist because ‘origins are always incumbent’. Language constantly repeats its origins: ‘It is quite illusory to believe that where language is concerned the problem of origins is any different from the problem of permanent conditions.’⁷ Language is different from any historic language with its grammar rules, *langue*. ‘Each time a speaker produces an enunciation, he or she needs to appropriate language’, says Emile Benveniste.⁸ Rather than occurring once and for all, human beings’ appropriation of language is called into question in each singular *flatus vocis*.

The issue of the absolute performative is central to Virno’s and Mauro Folci’s discussion on language as potentiality. Virno explains how the absolute performative manifests itself in the expression ‘I speak’, in the self-referential nature of words, which, in making discourse coincide with its object, make sound articulate, the voice a ‘conceptual resolve’ and breath and the body - the physiological traits of the human voice - ‘a peak of logic’.⁹ To say ‘I speak’ is to refer to the act of speaking, is to talk about the fact of talking - just as an abstract painting does not represent anything but itself and the possibilities of its medium, which become the object of the medium itself. Virno finds in the absolute performative another example of the re-evocation of the salient phases in the process of enunciation, an apotropaic repetition or ‘protective repetition’ that is typical of moments of crises, as we have seen above. ‘The absolute performative, by revealing us as the carriers of the power of speech, restores or confirms the transcendental unity of the Ego, which had faltered for a moment.’¹⁰

⁵ Paolo VIRNO, *Quando il verbo si fa carne. Linguaggio e natura umana*. Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2003, p.87.

⁶ *ibid*, p.79.

⁷ Fernande de SAUSSURE, *Course in General Linguistics*, Open Court Publishing, 1986, p. 9. Italian edition used: *Corso di linguistica generale*, Laterza, Bari 1970, p.18.

⁸ Emile BENVENISTE, *Problems in General Linguistics*. University of Miami press, 1971. Italian Edition used: *Problemi di linguistica generale*, il Saggiatore, Milano 1971, p.77.

⁹ Cfr. Paolo VIRNO, *Quando il verbo si fa carne. Linguaggio e natura umana*, p. 42.

¹⁰ Above, p. 48.

The issue of the power of speech or the potentiality to produce speech is central in *Concerto transumante per flatus vocis*, conceived during the seminar held by Mauro Folci at the Fondazione Baruchello in 2005. The first stage of the seminar was devoted to the exploration of individual and collective forms in which words attempt to abandon the mode of instrumental communication. It was observed how reflecting on language today is connected to the issue of the ‘workforce’ (potentiality and pure ability) with which language tends to coincide. Breathing and the voice were also objects of research together with a reflection on the ritual dimension of the absolute performative. The dimension in which the body persists or insists and overcomes the supremacy of language was also explored. Language in its aspect as breath is pure potentiality to speak: the potentiality is a universe of involuntary signs that resist organisation and actualisation into language. The individuation of involuntary and pre-linguistic characteristics is at the foundation of Mauro Folci’s work, who in *Concerto Transumante* found another peculiar character from which a layer of his work derives: Fabio, a temporary worker in a Call Centre in the outskirts of the city of Milan, who talks about a strange sound which he is forced to emit in order not to be understood by the people whose job it is to check that his voice is used uniquely for the duties specified in his contract, i.e. selling. Fabio says: ‘We survive by inventing a noise, signalling the fact that we want to take a coffee break, a sort of bad imitation of the sound of a door closing in an underground train. When colleagues hear this sound they turn to face each other, and we continue the conversation through our gazes, which say ‘do you want to take a coffee break?’ and if you do this [a particular facial expression that Fabio shows], you let your colleagues know that you can’t. It is a language without words made up of inarticulate sounds’. As Mauro Folci explains, ‘It is in this oppressive workplace that Fabio’s sound originates, a sound similar to a duck’s quack, an animal sound that tells of an absurd prison-like Call Centre in which talking to colleagues is forbidden. In Fabio’s quack resonates an ‘empty voice’ that tells, if we listen carefully, of the resistance to the tyranny of production and of the desire to take back control over one’s life. [...] Fabio’s quack is the undifferentiated voice of the animal before language is articulate in words, it is a sound devoid of a referential meaning, pure biological foundation. It is the ‘white noise’ of breath, of blood circulation, of the stretching of tendons, of bile, an inexpressible voice that places itself on the abysmal side of what is “animal” in a “human” being’.¹¹ The real communication between people relegated to the chairs of a Call Centre for many hours escapes the market economy to which the voice is subjected, using a relational communication that does not need specific contents but only sounds to be expressed.

After the analytic phase, the seminar entered an operative phase that was structured in three stages: firstly, the group was invited in the homes of friends and acquaintances, who invited other people to the presentation and discussion of the project and to the concert’s rehearsal. The project was explained in its phases: first the artist’s home was to be emptied and all his possessions stored on the roof-racks of the “musicians” cars. Subsequently, the participants were to go into the empty flat and begin a ‘concert for winds’ in that their only task was to breath and not say a word. The concert would end once all the participants had come in and gradually left, in the space of about forty minutes. In talking about his work, the artist says: ‘There is a house. It is lived-in, with all its objects, its furniture, its books, its electrical appliances and its family photo albums, a space of the self made up of layers of memory and full of sentimental value. It is a home that keeps the traces of the passage of time, a calendar marked with indelible symbols. Now it is a matter of thinking about its bareness, of

¹¹ Mauro Folci - *Concerto transumante per flatus vocis*. Fondazione Baruchello, Roma 2005

emptying it of everything, of ‘*dispossessing it of all its possessions*’ in order to let it be occupied again by a crowd of people as if they were a herd of cattle. A home emptied in order to better listen to its original otherness, to house, and let oneself be contaminated by, a herd of men and women which gradually thickens and cements, through body contact, in an animal world that is both primordial and sacred. A true house move, a procession of people and things, an animal transhumance, a translation of places: everybody brings and leaves something, everybody translates and betrays something’¹²

With *Concerto transumante*, Mauro Folci can be said to have ‘created an image’ just like a refrain, dissolving all references to personal memories and to rationality, reducing people to sheer breath and stripping them of the words with which to cover or uncover their bodies. Language has been deposed and has bared the body through breath and the herd-like proximity to which people have submitted. Once the room has been emptied of all personal references, people have found themselves in an original condition of physical promiscuity and animal relationship, joining their breaths in a concert. Rather than representation, the type of image created with *Concerto transumante* concerns process, something destined to dissolve but valid for its ‘internal tension, force mobilized to create a void or to open fissures, to loosen the grip of words, to mop up the transpiration of voices, to free oneself from memory and reason, a small, non-logical, amnesic, almost aphasic image, now suspended in the void, now quivering in the open.’¹³ Mauro Folci has concentrated into an image a landscape of situations revolving around Fabio’s squawk: there is a rich tapestry of people, places and relationships in a delimited space, the artist’s home: a square room, white and empty, the container of a humanity whose sole ‘task’ is to breathe.

IV

Translation: Nachdichten.

Mauro Folci’s *Concerto transumante per flatus vocis* reminds us of another performance dating from 1994, also based on silence, which this time expresses the respect and mourning for a community that has inflicted death upon itself: a mass suicide on the part of 140 Brazilian Indians from the Guarani Kaiowa community in Jaguapire, Sao Domingos on the Mato Grosso, on the border with Paraguay. The terrible decision was taken on Monday 31 January 1994 following the federal judge’s sentence binding the Indios to give their land over to the *fazenderos*.

On the same day the news came out, Mauro Folci staged his performative work in the courtyard of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Brera, where he was teaching at the time. In the text presenting this action, named *Nachdichten* (a German term which means ‘to translate’) he again refers to the theme of breath. The author reports that according to some recent studies, most cases of suicide amongst the youth of the Kaiowa tribe concern those who have scarcely been in touch with whites and are between the ages of ten to seventeen, when the shaping of identity is at a particularly delicate phase. “It is the time when one’s voice breaks. These tribal groups equate the voice with the soul: the way they kill themselves through hanging, asphyxia or poisoning, all involve the throat and leads us to consider the deep connection with breathing and air, a symbolic and archetypical theme, ‘the aerial element as the substance of the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 23

ascensional scheme itself” (G. Durand).¹⁴ The performance is staged in silence: a person standing within a crocodile shaped outline made up of a variety of objects such as pebbles, pieces of plastic, tools, pieces of chalk and wood, distributes leaflets where it is written ‘Today 140 Guarani Indios have killed themselves’. A black rubber bird that can be unfolded like a travel size mandala is placed near the first shape by the entrance, with a stove, a chair, a desk with a typewriter and a book of poems by Rilke on it. Foreign students take turns to sit at the typewriter and translate fragments of Rilke’s poems.

The act of translating gives the work its title. In his text about this performance Mauro Folci quotes a passage from a letter that Marina Cvetaeva wrote to Boris Pasternak, about translating Rilke’s poems: ‘Today I want Rilke to speak through me. In everyday language this is called translation (how much better the Germans put it – *Nachdichten!* Follow a poet’s footsteps, fraying a path which he first frayed. So that if *nach* means ‘after’, *dichten* is that which always exists again, one more time. *Nachdichten*: to fray anew a path on footsteps that grass invades instantly). But ‘translate’ has another meaning. Translating not only into (into Russian, for instance), but also across (the river). I will translate Rilke into the Russian tongue, as he will some day translate me to the other world. He will translate and betray me, and by betraying me he will take me to a different place.” It is this sense of betrayal implicit in translation that fascinates Mauro Folci. The students’ translations of Rilke’s poems do not follow the usual logic path, they ‘betray’ the words through a ‘phonetic transcription’, i.e. transferring sound into their language; rather than translating the signified, they translate the signifier and thus invent new words.

V.

L’esausto, the Donkey and Nihilism.

At a meeting during the conference on the metropolis held at the Faculty of Architecture of Roma Tre University, Mauro Folci presented a performance, *L’esausto*, [*The exhausted*] in which an Architecture professor, Francesco Ghio, was called to play the role of an exhausted man who has also exhausted his power of speech. Sitting at a desk with a map of Europe over which is a dead donkey, the figure holds a microphone in his hand and tries to take the floor, but cannot utter or finish a single sentence. Language is restrained and ‘the exhausted’ is deprived of his voice and its ability to articulate sounds into words. After several attempts to address a speech to the astonished audience, the exhausted is thrashed by a group of children emerging from a side door, who shout words from a passage in Beckett’s *Westward Ho!*: ‘Less best. No. Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. Naught not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worst. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worse. Unlessenable least best worse.’

This performance is Mauro Folci’s second foray in the theme of exhaustion. A first installation was shown at the Change & Partners Art Gallery in Rome, in 2006: a big wooden table with a transparent glass surface displays a sort of nativity, with a donkey in clay lying on a green European continent with clay mountains. On the wall hangs a tapestry with the last

¹⁴ MAURO FOLCI, *Testo di presentazione alla performance*, Milano, 1994.

frame of the film *Au hazard Baltazar*, by Robert Bresson. The donkey occurs in both versions of *L'esausto*, whose title prepares us to the fruition of the work by edging us towards the conceptual plane of exhaustion, the latter always represented as death in the figure of the donkey. Death is the Ego's inescapable passage in its process of transformation into something previously too big to be defied: the donkey however, once its Christian virtues of long-suffering and humble endurance of pain are laid down, is the penultimate figure. Following Nietzsche, in Mauro Folci's vision, death is not the reversion to inorganic matter, but a chance for transformation and transmutation of values which the donkey takes upon itself. The donkey must die in order to be born again. He must take on chance as if it were a divinity and an opportunity to say yes to life, a yes that might wish for more of the same again, by chance.

In Mauro Folci's theatrical rendition, the characters of the donkey and of the architect are not accidental. As a symbol, the donkey has always been rather ambiguous, and both demonised and deified in the Christian tradition. If its hooves, its mundane character have confined it to the sphere of evil figures, its Christian qualities and its endurance of heavy work have pushed its image towards a symbolism closely related to the divine. Bresson's donkey fully embodies these two meanings: from happy beginnings through outright adoration, the donkey ends up being exploited to exhaustion only to die in a valley surrounded by a herd of sheep, killed by accident by a gunshot fired against smugglers by a customs policeman. Also Nietzsche's donkey, in *Zarathustra*, is moulded on Christian symbolism. However the philosopher's donkey represents Nihilism, being capable to say nothing but 'yes' (I-A) and bear the heaviest burdens. The donkeys' 'yes' must change into the Dionysian 'yes', since the former is simply the hypocritical acquiescence of people who can't say no. Mauro Folci's performance combines the figure of the donkey with that of the architect, dumbfounded in front of the desolate map of Central Europe over which the dead donkey lays. A maker of both material and conceptual constructions, the architect represents the failure of modernism and its sinking into western Nihilism: he is attacked by a group of children reminiscent of the Nietzschean child, a key figure to overcome reactive Nihilism; at the same time, their aggressiveness likens them to the figure of the clown in the prologue of *Zarathustra*, in which he attacks a tight-rope walker whilst on his rope between two towers and makes him crash to the ground. Mauro Folci's title for this work, '*the Exhausted*', applies to both the donkey and the architect and opens up the meaning of this work to multiple interpretations. We are simply proposing one possible deciphering of a work which, because of its conceptual nature, leads the observer in a multitude of directions which the signs, materials, figures, symbols and concepts of performance and installation work evoke.

Mauro Folci's work is based on Deleuze's *The Exhausted* about Beckett, a borderline figure that insists on exhausting all that is possible and create a single image, 'simply one image', as Godard would say. The theme of exhaustion (exhaustivity) in Beckett's work 'does not occur without a certain physiological exhaustion', according to Deleuze.¹⁵ To be exhausted is different from being tired: whilst the first has renounced any preferences, the second still has the strength to lie down and sleep, to set himself an aim; the exhausted has exhausted everything and sits down with 'hands and head in a little heap'¹⁶. Far from doing nothing however, the exhausted must deal with many useless things and their segmentation in space

¹⁵ Gilles DELEUZE, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith, Michael A. Greco. Verso Publishing, 1998. p. 152

¹⁶ Samuel BECKETT, 'Afar a bird' in *The complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski, Grove Press 1997, p. 232-234.

and time. His gestures do not come from need or a particular purpose or meaning: in the exhausted there is an exhaustion of all that is possible through meaningless plans and schedules. 'For him, what matters is the order in which he does what he has to do, and in what combinations he does two things at the same time when it is still necessary to do so, for nothing.'¹⁷ In Mauro Folci's representation, the exhausted does not even manage to start talking, whether because he is not confident enough or perhaps because he has too many plans and schedules which appear meaningless to him just as he is about to begin talking. Mauro Folci's exhausted is also disoriented; the characteristics of disorientation and neoteny are specific to human beings, who tend not to acquire lasting habits because of their existence in a world which is not an environment, just like the ecological niche of an animal that stretches its body, like a prosthetic limb. Rather, the human animal lives in a state of persistent insecurity. In providing a shelter from the dangers of the outside world, traditional communities tended to reduce such condition. As they are deprived of the specialized instincts that allow other animals to survive, human beings have to create their environment time and time again. We are in a state of persistent disorientation. But the interesting swing in Virno's thought and Mauro Folci's work is the interpretation of these species specific conditions in contemporary life: the ability to react quickly, i.e. the habit of not acquiring long-lasting habits is the most valued professional skill in the post-Fordist era, in which the term 'flexibility' recurs daily, in bar conversations just as during political debates. If the superabundance of stimulus used to be a condition that had to be reformed and which found in customs handed down from generation to generation an effective correction to an original, precarious state, nowadays insecurity is 'the positive breeding ground of labour processes'.¹⁸ Nowadays the norm according to which traditional societies are upset in their repetitive customs by innovation is turned upside down. Innovation does not encroach upon a foundation nor does it uproot anything, since there is nothing familiar from which we would be alienated. Innovation builds on a state of permanent renewal. What is set to work is the flexibility originated from this continual alienation. It is outside the world of work, while we are waiting to find a job, that we acquire the skills that work demands. Thus post-Fordist capitalism puts sociality itself - i.e. that which was previously considered as a free time activity and removed from the sphere of work - to work. While repetitive work used to be juxtaposed with the inconstant flow of city life with its shocks, now Nihilism has 'become part of the production cycle, is *put to work*. Only people who have experience of the permutations of city life know how to behave in the factories of the *just in time*.'¹⁹

VI

Caduta

Mauro Folci's performance *Caduta* [*Fall*], commissioned for the white night of scientific research, was first presented at the Institute of Nuclear Physics in Frascati on 22

¹⁷ G. DELEUZE, *Ibid*, p.154.

¹⁸ P. VIRNO, *Diagrammi storico-naturali. Movimento new-global e invariante biologico*, in *Forme di vita, La natura umana*, AaVv, DeriveApprodi, Roma, gennaio 2004, p.111

¹⁹ P. VIRNO, *Grammatica della moltitudine, Per un' analisi delle forme di vita contemporanee*, DeriveApprodi, Roma 2002, P.88.

September 2006. It was inspired by a story narrated in Plato's *Teeteto*, in which Talete from Mileto's fall into a well while he is contemplating the sky provokes laughter in a Thracian servant, who mocks him for his contemplation of distant things and his distraction from what is near him. Widely considered as the first philosopher, Talete was primarily a naturalist, as was the norm at that time. His figure is interesting in that he conjugates two modalities that hold an ambiguous position in contemporary thought: if philosophy and science are two clearly distinct disciplines, this separation does not survive in the new forms of production. Talete's thought reoccurs in the history of western philosophy, as Hans Blumenberg reminds us in his book *Il riso della donna di Tracia*.²⁰ Blumenberg points out the separation between theory and practice that underlay this anecdote, relating the positions of the philosophers that have taken one or the other side. According to Mauro Folci, in today's contemporary production cycles this separation can no longer exist, because instrumental thought has completely swallowed speculative thought. Referring back to Talete, Mauro Folci continues to investigate his favourite themes: in this case, the fall and the ensuing laughter are two conceptual elements that can be ascribed to the invariables of human nature and to its historically determined expressions. Laughter is a unique human characteristic, since only when they are more or less consciously humanized do an animal or a puppet make us laugh. The initial project required that a scientist invited to talk about his work at the Institute would perform a sudden fall, but when none of the scientists agreed to participate, the original idea was modified and actors were hired to enact abrupt falls in key places in the Institute. Each fall stirred surprise and laughter, which the project aimed to investigate.

In his study of laughter, the philosopher Henry Bergson came to the conclusion that it represented a censure towards attitudes to be corrected because they oppose the *élan vital* with which he identified life itself.²¹ According to Bergson, we laugh at body postures and movements which betray a sort of mechanicalness, looking as if they were effected by an object rather than by a person: mechanical and repetitive actions stifle the *élan vital* which finds its most authentic expression in fluidity and grace. Laughter has the same punitive value of a blow with a stick, it is a pedagogic mechanism of selection in human species: if I laugh when you fall, you will try not to fall again until, paradoxically, we will reach a hypothetical stage in human development in which falling will no longer be possible. Bergson also claims that laughter freezes the process of empathy, in that someone who provokes laughter loses the empathy of the person that laughs at him, but at the same time creates a complicity between the mockers. On the contrary, Mauro Folci finds in the connection of laughter with what has provoked it the expression of a true acknowledgement. Far from being censorious, the servant's hilarity is rather the empathic acknowledgement of the philosopher's share of humanity. Absorbed by the contemplation of the sky, the philosopher is pulled back down to earth by his fall. Suspended between his celestial aspirations and his ties to earth, Talete, by falling, makes the servant laugh because she acknowledges not only his humanity, but the human condition itself. Whilst grace belongs to animals (which adapt harmoniously to their *environment*) falling only affects human beings (who live in the *world*), and provokes laughter which in this sense expresses the acknowledgement of a species specific characteristic.

In Mauro Folci's view, through the concept of the freezing of empathy, Bergson describes the symptom of an extreme situation in which language goes round in circles: the

²⁰ Cfr, Hans BLUMENBERG, *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman: A Prehistory of Theory*. Italian Edition used: *Il riso della donna di Tracia: una preistoria della teoria*. Ed. il Mulino, Bologna 1988.

²¹ Cfr. Henry BERGSON, *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Italian Edition used: *Il riso. Saggio sul significato del comico*, Editore SE, 2002.

acknowledgement of another's humanity might not happen, as in the case, for instance, of a Nazi official who does not acknowledge a Jewish person as belonging to the human race but as a mere object that can be laughed at and even obliterated. Sometimes this recognition that we all naturally share does not take place because of the censorship enacted by language: to kill a Jew, the Nazi must first tell himself that this is an object and not a human being. What was lacking was the victim's possibility to exercise the double negative that free language allows him to use, and say 'No, it is not true that I am not a human being'.

VII

L'ameno appena in tempo.

During his lectureship at the Valle Giulia Faculty of Architecture, Mauro Folci presented *Sciopero* (*Strike*, 2002), a short video based on raw footage shot by an amateur in 1972 in Milan that documents the Bombelli factory workers' protests. Bombelli's was the second factory to be occupied in Milan, after Pirelli. From four hours of footage, the artist created a video divided in four chapters: *food*, (much eating and negotiations), *money* (expressions of solidarity), *rest* (the tents and the picket line by the factory gates) and then the last, most significant chapter, the *boundary wall*, showing the workers jumping over it and setting out to march in the city. 'This scene is very important, as it is meant to represent the beginning of the end of the Fordist factory. On one hand, the exit from the factory and the liberating, joyful invasion of the city centre – the factory as a hellish place and the city centre as a place full of life where people feel like being together – on the other hand, the dissemination of factory life which does not disappear but expands fluidly in the territory, among the streets and in the homes, giving shape to the new integrated factory. It is the city, the territory, relationships, language, the bodies yearning for the new factory, it is here that the new materials for production are found, which are, essentially, the peculiar linguistic abilities of human beings.'²²

In the post-Fordist metropolis, material work processes can be empirically described as a series of linguistic acts, a sequence of assertions and symbolic interactions. It is undeniable that 'the communicative action' prevails in all industrial sectors. Thus the factory does not disappear but comes back in its new guise of a 'just in time' establishment, analysed in a work that Mauro Folci entitles *L'ameno appena in tempo* (*the agreeable just in time*) evocative of the new system of production. Presented at the Fondazione Baruchello, this work is set out in different spaces and modalities and was inspired by a State Television documentary tracing the history of the Italian car industry, and of Fiat in particular, from its origins to the present. Mauro Folci took some footage from the video and printed the images as digital photographs which were enlarged so that the details were pixelated. The voice over commentary of the original documentary was rerecorded separately and played before visitors entered the room covered with the photographs of the workers. The artist describes this phase of his work: 'a female voice-over commentary, which suddenly sounds soft and seductive like the voice of a tour leader whilst talking about the factory at Melfi, introduces us to a somewhat idyllic workplace which, in radical contrast to that Fordist model that seemed intended mainly as a place of atonement of an original class sin, is a place of 'real democracy', and even more, as if factory life heralded the divine acknowledgement of the 'eternal good'. The photographic

²² M. FOLCI. *Sciopero*, 2000.

portraits seem suspended in a dimension outside of time, steeped in a metaphysical atmosphere, as if in a surreal thriller, and the workers look just like actors, young and handsome; distracted from the work at hand, their gazes go beyond what is visible, emanating a strange light that collective imagination and much iconographic representation of ecstasy have associated with the state of grace, and yet it is the expression of efficient production. The commentary tells us, and the images prove, that Melfi's industrial estate was designed to soften the impact with the 'monstrous machines' and create an ecological environment: *no dirt or materials on the floor (not even at the assembling bay) little noise (even at the presses), no smell (not even at the varnishing shop) and where the workers' intervention is required, the body is positioned in such a way so as to facilitate operations.* Similarly to the Toyota establishment in Ohio, Melfi is '*an interplay of gazes, gestures, interpretation of colours of the various notices waved by the workers in charge of the final assembly, to signal the kind of detail needed.*'²³

The artist has chosen to analyse the organizational structure of the integrated factory because its meaning transcends it and because he thinks it is 'an effective means to understanding today's dynamics of power and capital'. The taking apart of documentary does not constitute the final phase of the work. In an article published by the daily newspaper *La Repubblica*, Raffaella De Santis commented on the operation thus: 'The off-synching, the operation by which the video is taken apart and stripped of its wholeness becomes a way to lacerate the idyllic world created by the images and expose its falseness. Idyll needs harmony and cohesion. It is sufficient for the relationship between the different parts to be disrupted for the whole system to fail. It is a wound, an act of denunciation.' In her conclusion, the journalist acknowledges that talking about the factory without rhetoric and, most importantly, without feeling that it is an outmoded topic can affect reality.

Mauro Folci's work also takes up a section of the park of the Fondazione Baruchello, characterized by a harmonic, unspoilt, ancient-looking hilly landscape. Here the artist had a hole dug in the ground, 'A room under the open sky, dug in the earth, measuring 3x3x3 metres; the perpendicular walls and the floor are as smooth as the earth allowed. There is no furniture and only three lumps of earth on which to sit. It is another strong, polysemic structural element that is the opposite to the integrated factory. Not an invitation to contemplate, or a space reminiscent of a cave, but rather a crowded square, a public space in which a thought of resistance and action interact, in Arendt's acceptance of setting something in motion, beginning a new discourse. It is a work that seeks to establish a mental place of belonging – we are inside the earth, not in the centre of it – and the tension towards true human nature, which cannot be defined by work. A space to drum up a libertarian thought that can elaborate answers to the new capitalistic strategies and extremist practices of surveillance and control of the labour force following a totalising project that aims to control the bio-politic productivity of the multitudes.'²⁴ De Santis describes the situation she participated in thus: 'some guest prisoners (an art-critic, the exhibition curator, Carla Subrizi, a sociologist, Laura Fiocco, a philosopher, Paolo Virno, Toni Negri, Giuliana Commisso and the artist) have been let into the room and left to engage in conversation, without a set script nor moderators. The audience gathered outside to observe what was happening underground. [...] Sheet metal, cars, cuts, bodywork, sheeting, assembling. Little by little the factory materialized in the discussion, until the

²³ M.FOLCI, *L'ameno appena in tempo*. Fondazione Baruchello, Roma 2003

²⁴ Ibid.

integrated productive system in the tireless production cycle was visualised.’²⁵ Mauro Folci reminds us that ‘Already in the 1960s, Ferruccio Landi maintained that there was a homogenisation between linguistic production and industrial production; the extent of this homogenisation is very clear today. The structure of the economy, is a communicative structure permeated and supported as it is by the grammar of verbal and non-verbal signs, form and symbols. Participation, flexibility, self activation, being able to read the flow of information and to communicate, these are the tools of the “new” worker, opportunistically invested with personality – the shift from individual/labour force to person/worker is crucial in this respect – that lead us to almost view work as free hermeneutic activity, with information and communication becoming the analytic tools in the exertion of control.’²⁶ According to Laura Fiocco, the factory must be narrated because the possibility to exert control hinges on its aesthetic beauty. Mauro Folci’s underground room seems the mirror image, turned upside down towards the centre of the earth, of Bentam’s tower, referred to by Foucault when he explained the mechanisms of power and bio-politics, and asserted that it more or less unconsciously inhabited the gestures, attitudes and words of all men. This image too holds the characteristics of the image-refrain: a geometrically determined space filled with people who are free to talk and say what they want. An ordinary space, although different: a cube inside the earth, where the figures are both words and postures, where the earth induces conversations that are being listened to from the outside by the audience, who is also forced to assume unusual positions. Thus the space can give rise to motor and linguistic refrains, facilitate the return to earth, to a pre-individual dimension, in which language, encouraged to express the factory, can take new forms.

‘Beyond Melfi Fiat factory’s futuristic aesthetic lies a different reality: suffice to consider the high turnover, to shift the observation point to understand how eloquently these images bear witness to the mystification that the integrated factory produces through a complex system of communication (*kanban*) which is vital to achieve the *just in time*, but which, edging the determinant of the order towards a reversed vision, from the client’s rather than from the management’s point of view, creates the illusion of the occultation of commands. In other words, it functions strategically, as it emerges clearly from Fiocco, Commisso, Sivini’s fieldwork (in *Melfi in time*), as an ideological force in that it regulates social relationships. This goal has always been endorsed by the Fiat management, mindful of the question of imposing discipline on the workforce and of the factory governability. I am thinking of Romiti during the period of reorganisation and repression of the labour movement at the end of the 1970s and more recently, of Magnabosco praising the ‘*just in time*’ as ‘an organized system able to produce its own antibodies’²⁷

VIII

Cadaverous obedience: Kadavergehorsam, Sisyphus and Effetto Kanban.

Mauro Folci remembers a state of political and cultural ferment in Rieti in the 1970’s and wonders what has happened since then. The right wing parties have gained great

²⁵ Raffaella DE SANTIS. *Mauro Folci: l’arte, la fabbrica, il lavoro. L’Unità on line*, 12 maggio 2003.

²⁶ M.FOLCI, *L’amenò appena in tempo*.

²⁷ Ibid.

consensus. A strong figure to express the libertarian philosophy in that city was needed, and found at the outset of the twentieth century: Florido D’Orazi. Born in Rieti on 30 May 1881 to a family of modest means, he joined the socialist party as a young man after militating in the ranks of the *Arditi del popolo*, the first antifascist association in Italy. In 1912 he played a leading role in the farm labourers' and sharecroppers' revolts in the countryside around Rieti and was first sentenced for incitement to revolt and class struggle. He founded farm labourers unions in the region and in 1919 established the Trade Union Headquarters in Rieti, of which he was the acclaimed provincial secretary. The 1920's strike survived in the city inhabitants' collective imagination as the cattle strike: all the cattle of the valley around Rieti was abandoned along the town walls for three days and three nights. Forced to go underground by the advent of fascism, he devoted himself to form secret trade unions of farm labourers and craftsmen. He was arrested in 1926 and sentenced to five years internment on the island of Lipari, where he met Carlo Rosselli. Florido D’Orazi, who passed away in 1952, played a crucial role in the diffusion of libertarian thought and action around Rieti. Fifty years later, Mauro Folci seizes the opportunity to draw well deserved attention to this figure with an action-installation in the territory around Rieti where Mauro Folci lived as a young man. Reappearing against a background of widespread cadaverous obedience, this figure is revealed as even more luminous and legendary by contrast: and it is this passive background that Mauro Folci means to highlight and censure, through the title of his project presented first in Rieti and a second time in Rome. Commissioned by the province of Rieti to plan a project that concerned the territory, the artist rescued this figure swallowed by the waters of forgetfulness. He researched traces of his actions in old archives and interviewed D’Orazi’s grandson on a car journey to the trade unionist’s haunts, in an effort to resurrect his memory from the same fields whose labourers he had incited to revolt from the condition of passive obedience. The same obedience as ever, that found by Anna Arendt in the figure of Eichmann for instance, that of today’s Rieti and of the contemporary world. The term *kadavergehorsam* was used by the German philosopher in her book *The Banality of Evil*; Eichmann himself had uttered it during his trial when defending cruelty turned into laws by which he faithfully abided with the passivity of a corpse. The fact of not being responsible for his actions, just like a corpse, was reassuring for Eichmann, a law-abiding citizen. Eichmann insisted that he was doing his duty, making his compliance to the law coincide with his personal practical reason, in contrast with Kantian principles according to which the latter should urge us to look beyond laws to the sources from which they spring. Unfortunately this attitude does not come naturally but needs to be stirred up, something that Mauro Folci’s operation partly aims to do. This project is also constituted by different layers and dislocated in two settings, represented by two cities. To put into focus the fragments that shape it we will start from Rieti.

Realized three years before *Concerto transumante per flatus vocis* this operation has the same pivotal elements, a word and a character which help us understand the different layers that constitute the project. Just as the temporary worker’s inarticulate sound - similar to the one signalling the doors closing on an underground train - was the word around which the *Concerto transumante* was built, *Kadavergehorsam* is in this case the word or formula that sets off the project together with the figure of Florido D’Orazi, as we have seen. Asked by Mauro Folci to carry out an etymological analysis of this word, Latinist Giuliano Ranucci explains how it was introduced in German language as a result of the influence of the Latin locution ‘perinde ad cadaver’, i.e. ‘in the same way as a corpse’, an expression used by Saint Ignatius to describe the kind of submission owed to our superiors. This locution was borrowed

from a passage in the *Life of St. Francis* written by Tommaso da Celano, who illustrated the Saint's idea of obedience when he likened his prostration to God to a dead body. Thus a connection is made between Eichmann's attitude with respect to Hitler, Saint Francis' to God and humankind's to power. Cadaverous obedience, like the fall and the performative absolute, is a constant of human nature corrupted by language, a medicine to lead us back to a state of grace and take us away from it at the same time. We will now focus on the paraphrases Mauro Folci adopts in his investigation of how cadaverous obedience translates into modernity. In Rieti his action consisted in three phases that composed an itinerant work whose elements were modified to suit different situations and relationships. Firstly, three large white banners with the word *Kadavergehorsam* written in black were hung in three streets of the city and left there for two weeks without further clarifications. The second phase consisted in having flyers dropped from the town hall tower by three women of different generations. On this flyer was the reproduction of a page from *The Banality of Evil* in which Anna Arendt analyses the word used by Eichmann in his defence from the accusation of having devised the 'Final Solution'. On the back of the flyer the German word is repeated. The third phase consisted in the installation in a room of Florido d'Orazi's home of 6 screens that showed films documenting the research conducted and the authors (Giuliano Ranucci, Latinist, Carla Subrizi, art historian, Tito Marci, sociologist, Fabio Mauri, artist, Domenico Scudero, art critic, Arthur Huber, theologian silenced by the Vatican, and Mauro Folci) reading the text they wrote for the artist's project with their backs to the camera.

The project was also shown in Rome, under the title *Effetto Kanban (The Kanban Effect, December 2002)*. This title refers to the Kanban, a sort of 'clocking-in card', which Ohno himself defined as Toyotism's key principle, functioning as a support to the flexibility in production adopted by the Fiat Sata plant in Melfi. As Mauro Folci explains in his essay presenting the exhibition, 'The Kanban is that form filled out by the client of the car company which details all the options for his car, and which establishes the production plan at the manufacturing stage in the factory. From the viewpoint of organization, it represents a system of communication to achieve the 'just in time'; the effect it has of concealing the controls, as it were, reverses the perception of the determinant of order, from the management to the client, and works strategically as a regulating force of social intercourse'²⁸. Although the exhibition had a harder life in Rome than in Rieti, as the white banners that were hung on the rationalist-style buildings of the Sapienza University Campus the evening prior to the inauguration were taken down by the police and by some university workers, it went on regardless. A worker hired on a six hours a day temporary contract for the entire duration of the exhibition was given the task of carrying a series of crates with a lift truck across the University compound main square. The entrance of the museum was walled up and the performance began with the signing of the contract; the latter was posted up on a notice board by the front door, next to a copy of the Italian law which regulates pro tem assignments contracts. The worker's labour is filmed and shown live on a monitor placed in the square. Forced to repeat an absurd task, the worker immediately reminds us of Sisyphus, the Greek hero whom Camus writes about in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, whose task was to push the same rock up a mountain from the top of which it inexorably rolled back down. The worker is but re-producing a gesture, his load only needs to be carried from one side to the opposite side of the square. No other objective underpins his repetition: we all have our rock to push up and chase down a mountain. In *Effetto Kanban* the worker carrying the empty crates with his lift truck is – just as every temporary worker –

²⁸ M.FOLCI, *Testo di presentazione della mostra*, Roma 2002

confused as to who his real employer may be: ‘The pro tem worker cannot be sure whether the tyrant who forced him to such brutal work is the artist or the temping agency’²⁹

However, language is the thread that links our analyses and that which interests Mauro Folci the most. According to the artist, the word *Kadavergehorsam* possesses ‘a weight density of added value’ and has the appearance of a story-board underpinning the progress of western man. This word survives through the centuries and modulates its referents: from the lips of Saint Francis to those of Saint Ignatius it goes beyond the religious context directly into a political context and through Heichmann’s lips. Mauro Folci sees a further reach of the term in our times and dares a movement in his tenaciously materialist thought, deducting from the idea that if goods are fetishes and that, if goods are nothing but language itself, personal relationships themselves, performed through language, become fetishes and hide an omnipresent production design which language would inscribe in every utterance. As the artist writes, ‘A path showing how the process of secularisation has transformed a concept that belongs to the spiritual and religious plane into a political category, or better still, how through the paradigms of modernity and action *Kadavergehorsam* was transposed into an economic category. In a world shaped by productive reason, by market forces which turn the individual into an economic subject, in a context of liberalization of the job market and fierce competition, being obedient corresponds to a condition without which access is denied. The new layout of the system of production, in which information plays a strategic role, structurally imposes flexibility and job insecurity, whilst at the same time favouring collaboration and loyalty to one’s employer, a servile attitude which identifies with communication and determines the fact that working hours are no longer circumscribed and separate from the rest of one’s time, but invade one’s entire existence, where ‘dead work’ has completely absorbed ‘live work’ putting to work all of human resources, creativity and life. It is the language of form, of art itself, that organizes the production and distribution of goods. Images and words have become means of production, and sensations, emotions and feelings equated to fixed and circulating capital [...]. General intellect, the widespread knowledge that only through ‘live work’ it was possible to eschew the crystallization into capital is today reduced to ‘dead work’, one that is not linked to machines but to communication that has been changed into a sort of linguistic assembling line. Today goods are produced with the use of language, or to put it better, wealth is produced through the community as it is identified with the concept of linguistic work. However, if according to Marx the essence of goods is the result of their hiding and invisibility, in the exchange of things (goods) of production social intercourses, and if today value is created and circulated through the community and the consumers themselves through the use of language, then social relationships themselves can be considered fetishes.’³⁰

IX

An open air factory

In his *Philosophical research* Wittengstein compares language to an ancient city, whose development is to be ascribed to a spontaneous germination rather than a conscious planning: a maze of streets and squares, of old and new houses and houses with additions

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

through time, the whole thing surrounded by new suburbs with a regular grid of streets and uniform houses. This similitude should be reversed however: it is rather the contemporary metropolis that is mirrored in language. It appears as a maze of utterances, metaphors, proper nouns, prepositions, verb tenses and aspects, disjunctions, implications. Nor is this a merely instructive analogy. The metropolis is to all purposes a linguistic formation, an environment constituted first and foremost by discourses that have taken a concrete form, predisposed signs, materialized grammars. Finding one's way in a big city means experiencing language. This new situation creates optical illusions. Of course the virtually unlimited proliferation of linguistic games, the emergence of provisory dialects, the multiplying of dissimilar voices are all undeniable events. Nonetheless, if we bound ourselves to stare with amazement at this exuberant plurality it is easy to conclude that it eludes all analytical approaches. As a matter of fact, Postmodernism claims that we are in the presence of a net without the mesh: all determination fails before Proteus. City life in its forms – which the new jargons often create rather than reflect – would be definable only through a rosary of 'no longer' and 'nor like that'. A real paradox: the metropolis seems now inexpressible precisely because of its eminently linguistic essence. This kind of representation unconsciously restores the utopian emphasis for the 'totally other'; however the ineffable, slippery but desired 'other' is but the present state of things. The infatuation for the plurality of discourses infuses language with all the myths with which liberalism infused the market. The centrifuge communication, fuelled by countless independent locators, is extolled with the same arguments which were once used to praise the free circulation of goods: a paradise of rights, a realm of equality and reciprocal acknowledgement. The prêt-a-porter hermeneutics replaces political economy. Can multiplicity really weaken domination? Or isn't the latter strongly articulated in each of the 'many'? The evaluation of the new metropolis cultural contexts prompts two antithetical but related interpretations, to some extent: on the one hand the optimism of those who find in the multiplication and contamination of languages the proof of a definite decline of strong and authoritarian role models, and the beginning of a new era characterised by pluralism and tolerance; on the other hand, the pessimism of those who recognize in the unleashing of differences a mere standardising expedient. Despite their differences, both opinions share some premises and reach essentially similar conclusions. An example of how these two positions are articulated can be found in Mauro Folci's project on chatter begun in 2004. In the audio recording of the conversation between Alberto Zanazzo, Carla Subrizi, Paolo Virno, Tito Marci, Raffaella De Santis and Gianfranco Baruchello held at a bar in the fashionable area of San Lorenzo in Rome there is a reference to the Fiat factory in Melfi from the viewpoint of the artist's performance *L'ameno appena in tempo*. This had taken place some time before at the Foundation Baruchello.