

FEDERICA SCHIAVO GALLERY

GABRIELE PORTA  
THE INNER EMOTION  
OF BEING ALIVE

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TEXT BY RICCARDO CONTI

## THE DARK MIRROR

The faces of the people we know, the shape of objects that are most familiar to us and the places that we inhabit, all overlap like in a dream. The outlines of what we see add up and our witnessed reality freely reveals its contradictions.

In front of such deep and ambiguous images our own identity is always at risk. In this condition of mental abandonment, even the most important things are symbolically equivalent with the subliminal rest that flows before our eyes when awake.

When looking at some of Gabriele Porta's work I happen to register, with renewed stupor, a similar experience. My conscious cognitive relation to the images is suddenly diluted into an uncertain, unstable and primitive perceptive condition.

A similar sensation accompanies the encounter with this last project titled *The Inner Emotion of Being Alive*, a complex work but essential in his esthetical outcome. The centre of this small exhibition is a short film shot in 16mm showing the close-up of a chimp.

The camera is focused on the animal's head, motionless, as if lingering on that face, following and participating to this stillness and suspension.

The image, slow and silent, is there in front of us. Nevertheless we do not know if the animal is portrayed in abandonment or in death.

The many fragments that compose the project find their reason of being on this very possibility. It's from the essence of a cognitive element and from the possible essence of life that the various elements take their perceptible and retained energy.

In a photograph near by we see an open book placed on the floor with some grass and snow. The book is a collection of novels by Giovanni Verga, open on the final page of the novel *Nedda (Bozzetto siciliano)*, written on and around 1874. The light beaming on this image comes from a sequence of 19 slides showing the pages of yet another book: the short story *The Cemetery where Al Jolson is Buried*, written in 1985 by the American author Amy Hempel.

The two texts overlap and blur into each other. As in the mnemonic and dream process, all things find a new meaning, possibly even more complete, by way of their mixing and then reconstructing as one single identity. Both the stories, although coming from completely different contexts and imageries, partly outline the same tragic theme of loss, and specifically the dramatic moment of a mother witnessing her son's death.

In the conclusion of Verga's novel we read:

*The poor little girl had no milk, as her mother had too little bread. She wasted away quickly, and Nedda tried in vain to squeeze the blood from her breasts between her tiny lips. A winter's evening, at sunset, while it snowed on the roof and the wind shook the badly closet front door, the poor girl, cold and livid, her hands contracted, fixed her glassy-eyed stare upon her mother's burning eyes. She shivered, and never moved again.*

Nedda shook her, and held her tight against her breast impetuously. She tried to warm her with her breath and her kisses, she kneeled in front of her, eyes dry and open wide.

- Oh! Bless you, whom are dead! – she exclaimed – Oh blessed Virgin Mary! You have taken my daughter so she would end her suffering!

This is instead the conclusion of Hempel's short story:

*I think of the chimp, the one with the speaking hands. In the case of the experiment the chimp had a son. Imagine the surprise of her trainers, when the mother, before anyone could suggest it, started making signs to the newborn.*

*Baby, play ball*

*Baby, drink milk*

*And when the baby died the mother stayed on top of its body, and her wrinkled hands moved with animal grace, forming several times the words:*

*Baby, come embrace*

*Baby, come embrace*

*Talkative in the language of pain*

Starting from the possible encounter between two worlds, so dissimilar but which constitute and shape the same feeling, Gabriele Porta structures his investigation which not only meditates on this tragic theme, but is driven towards the analysis of such profound instances of our existence that they not only require a cold or compassionate glance, but also a subconscious visual status, that allows the viewer to invest images from his own experience, mediated by culture, but above all by life itself.

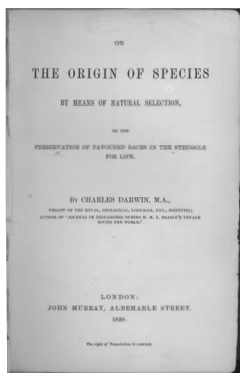
In these, as in other work by Gabriele Porta, with an explicit language, he discreetly approaches feelings of beauty, fear, mercy, separation, love. He does this without ever debasing them, and above all without retracing sensationalist clichés, but rather trying to give the smallest and residual details of these larger themes, the dignity of the classic tragedy.

For this project the artist also produced a series of works on paper. Amongst them a triptych titled *Looking for Beginning* (2009). The three oval drawings are executed with graphite and framed behind red colored glass.

They show three prehistoric and savage looking views: reproductions of three original illustrations that accompany the first edition of *On The Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin.

In those three drawings, filtered by that transparent red surface that makes the yet more remote and distant, we recognize patches of jungle, crystallized, where the human figure is absent and seems forbidden.

The writing of the English naturalist is here taken into consideration not only for its scientific value, but also because Darwin himself, as a writer, expressed a new and universal alphabet, and in fact he inscribed our name in the book of life, of progress, of



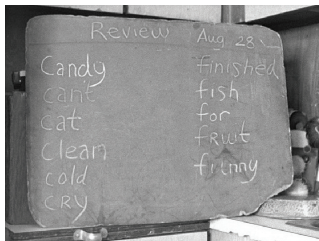
mutation. Deleting it from the one of death and from the stasis of "eternal life".

Whilst writing her short story, exactly 100 years after Darwin's essay, Amy Hempel could already refer to the discussed experiments to teach the basis of communication to monkeys through the American language of signs. This aspect can be found in the fascinating documentary by Barbet Schroeder *Koko: A Talking Gorilla* (1978), and is not secondary in Gabriele Porta's project, as in the apparently good intentions of teaching symbolic



communication to these animals, lies a profound torment and the unconscious cruelty of man towards his equal and towards his environment.

What are the truly human qualities? In the impossibility of answering this question, the scientist, the writer, or the artist, feels the need to look to those animal faces (just like Koko or the chimp in Porta's shot), as if looking at his own reflection, that nevertheless gives back a different image. Not a deformed one but a slower and more mysterious one, that at times we think we recognize, and at others feels suddenly alien.



*The Inner Emotion of Being Alive* includes another series: *Untitled* (2009). The seven works, enclosed in a large pass-partout and frame, show seven different reproductions of 'Pietà', chosen by the artist from books and guides on Renaissance painting. The small colored images immediately show an

intervention: where the body of Christ should be we have a void. The artist deleted the figure from the image. The subject of the 'Pietà' is rendered partial, the outline of the human figure is visible, but its features are denied. The Virgin Mary and the other figures seem alone and abandoned to their condition. Similarly to Verga's *Nedda*, there seems to be only space for the great pain of loss, and obliterating Christ's figure, the artist seems to breach the dogma of the possibility of the body's resurrection, returning it to mortality.

This kind of erosion of the image is not new in Porta's production. In several works he uses sheets of dark grey sandpaper, on which he prints images, as if film frames: reproductions of other works of art or photographs of various provenance, that the artist characterizes with small white pencil interventions.

The metaphorical character of the material suggests a continuous process of friction between two surfaces, the slow, reiterated and erosive encounter between opposite things that produce the overlapping of two images or of two human extremities.,

There is always something consuming the images, eroding them and confusing them: It is mostly our own gaze that obliterates things every time we stare at them and we retrace them with our eyes.

In the case of *Frieze* (2006), Gabriele produced for the London occasion a frieze made of tens of erotic images of young boys, printed on sandpaper. The 'frieze' was installed in the proximity of the ceiling, running along several walls and its figurations were hardly perceivable. At first sight it looked like a black minimal line, decorating a passageway. Also in this case the frieze has an ancient connotation as the visual modality and set-up of those 'corrosive' images showed the same (in negative) aspect of those partial and amputated anatomies, seen in the museums where the classic temple ornaments are kept.

From the artist comes no judgment: of the ambiguous images, charged both with eroticism and innocence. They



once again manifest themselves as if through a dark mirror, where the Self collides with the simple language of images, suspended on the thread of allusion and the unspeakable.

The rough and black material on which these as well as other Porta's works are printed creates a duplicity that tricks comprehension in order to penetrate with its emotional content directly in the subconscious.

It is in fact peculiar to remember how sandpaper was used by Guy Debord in one of the several applications of the concept of *détournement*, the action which tends to invert the meaning of certain images, environments and events, in order to re-appropriate them. Debord in fact invented, together with the Danish artist Asger Jorn the book cover of his *Mémoires* (1959) with sand paper. It was done so that every time the volume was put away on the shelves of libraries it would slowly destroy the nearby volumes.

With similar actions and gestures, Gabriele Porta creates examples, fragments that in a potentially infinite realm, reaffirm the same direction. The most profound differences that we presume to be irreconcilable, find here a silent way to coexist. The realm of culture and of nature, find an hypothetical point of encounter.



The documentary truth of the chimp's sleep renders real the rigidity of the bond of the religious representation, and vice versa, the image of the animal is empowered with a ritual aura.

Differently to many artists, especially of the latest generations, I do not think Gabriele Porta, is truly interested in cinema as a means of expression, and neither as source of imagery. The references to film that from time to time he plays with in certain works, are to be read as references to 'things' that exist in reality. As depositary images, fallen from one of the many activities of man.

In the case of one of the most articulate works of the young artist, *Yasujiro Ozu Trilogy* (2007), Porta seems interested in retracing the deep furrow left by the Japanese author; rather than in celebrating important works by the most influential non-cinema directors. Such a furrow can be read today as a single and intense performance,

stretched on a whole career span. Yasujiro Ozu's work, over 53 films he shot the same movie over and over again, can be considered a total work of art.



Not by chance Gabriele conceived some stages of his own trilogy fixing patiently through etching and drawing, several film frames, as if to rediscover and trace Ozu's prodigious ability to fit an entire lifetime within a single and essential slow shot.

In using simple visual ideas, Gabriele Porta intensely investigates the tie that joins man with time and space, and man's relation to human beings. Such observation does not go through a more or less articulate narrative, but rather stems from the attempt to represent visually those experiences and how we recognize ourselves in them.

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Charles Darwin, On The Origin of Species title cover, 1859

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Barbet Schroeder, Koko: A Talking Gorilla, 1978

Gabriele Porta, Frieze, 2006

(page 5)

Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, Mémoires book cover, 1959

Gabriele Porta, Yasujiro Ozu Trilogy, 2007