

Footnotes 13-18

Bringing Strange Rumours to Your Dreaming Mind

Meris Angioletti



<sup>13</sup> *The Mind Is a Muscle* is a performance in multiple parts created by Yvonne Rainer in 1968, written for seven performers and juxtaposed with films and texts, and presented for the first time in April of that year at the Anderson Theatre in New York. The work's principle medium - dance - becomes a technically crude and conceptually complex exploration of what it means to create an image for a public that is actively present. Using the physical and mental space of the theatre as a model for a community, the performance explores the dynamics of cultural creation in act. The actions the dancers were required to perform are simple and ordinary; dancing becomes one activity among many, like walking, eating, getting dressed or working. A situation is created of a dance of everyday life. The highest point of stylisation is reached, capable of "weighing the quality of the human body toward that of objects and to the foreground" (C. Wood, Yvonne Rainer, *The Mind Is a Muscle*, Afterall Books, London 2007, p. 3). In this contact between behaviour and language, the human body becomes a ready-made, caught in its anonymity, made up of interaction and cooperation on one side, substance and inertia on the other. Though it does not cancel out the emotional presence, *The Mind Is a Muscle* creates a change in the notion according to which meaning is generated by the individual expression of innerness, and in this duality it constructs minimal gestures, which reprocess the body in a primary mechanism of being and staying. The body is at the same time present and absent, empathic and abstract, taken up by a physiology of white noise, in which it is possible to intuit the continual activity of the brain in transparency.

<sup>14</sup> In his *Philosophy of Composition* (1846), Edgar Allan Poe wrote: "The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world." The romantic image of the death of the beloved object finds an equivalent in what Bachelard calls the "Ophelia complex", where the theme of death combines with that of

drowning and waters. There is nothing realistic about the image of Ophelia floating in the water, and hence those who read of it, even if they have never witnessed anything like it, recognise it because it is directly connected to a "natural primitive imagination" (G. Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves*, Librairie José Corti, 1942). It is water dreamt in everyday life, the water of the pond that is "ophelised", that is covered with sleeping beings, beings that let themselves go and float, that die, reabsorbed by the water's movement. Objects of affection and images that emerge from the water and are then dragged to the bottom again, disintegrated into the stream of thought. If applied to art, this absence of the object of desire re-emerges, in altered form, in the disappearance of the work of art as understood in the traditional sense from Duchamp to the conceptual art of the Seventies. In Duchamp's case the example appears even clearer by rereading his entire oeuvre in light of *Etant Donnés*, 1947-66: a female body visible only from a peephole and closed behind a door which cannot be opened. The ready-made becomes, then, the symptom of this loss of the object, for which conceptual art has written the eulogy through irony, the stream of thought and philosophy, reaching a zone of tension between fragments and seriality, between subject and language, where "the personal 'art coefficient' is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed" (Salt Seller, *The Writing of Marcel Duchamp*, New York 1973, p.139).

<sup>15</sup> In December 2010 at the F. C. Donders Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging in Nijmegen experiments were carried out in mapping brain waves that studied the relationship between the creative process, emotions and mental activity. In the first of these experiments the test subject S.T. was asked to listen to a playlist of musical tracks chosen by himself, and imagine for each track an improvised composition that continued it. The collected data, recorded with functional magnetic resonance imaging

(fMRI), poses interesting questions about the validity of scientific language as a method for making the invisible visible: when the subject actually moved a part of his body in response to the musical stimulus, or when he simply felt the intention of making the gesture without actually doing so, the active parts of the brain were the same.

The imagination, the coefficient of intentionality and gesture, remains a difficult zone to access, a slippery and transitory zone which "relentlessly metamorphoses the substance of being. [...] A being which is above all awakening and who awakens in consciousness as in the form of an extraordinary impression" (G. Bachelard, op.cit., pp.12-14).

This point of tension between scientific transparency, as an attempt at directly writing nature, and opacity of the subject, as a territory without a defined shape or boundaries, redefines the limits of consciousness and of knowable capacity: where is the subject while emotions, thoughts and movements are mapped and translated into scientific data? A body is isolated inside a magnetic field, visible only from the observation glass, and disappears mysteriously in its translation into wave form. Once again the dialectic between hyper-subjectivity and the disappearance of the subject retraces the paradoxical boundary between Romanticism and Conceptual Art, defining romantic conceptual art as one which demonstrates "mistrust of an attitude that considers itself above the entanglements of subjectivity and emotion, except that, instead of opposing it with the demonstrative presence of the artist's own body, it prefers to sensualise the supposedly clear process with its own logic, making it contradict itself."

J. Heiser, *A Romantic Measure, in Romantischer Konzeptualismus*, exh. cat., Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Nuremberg, 10 May-15 June 2007).

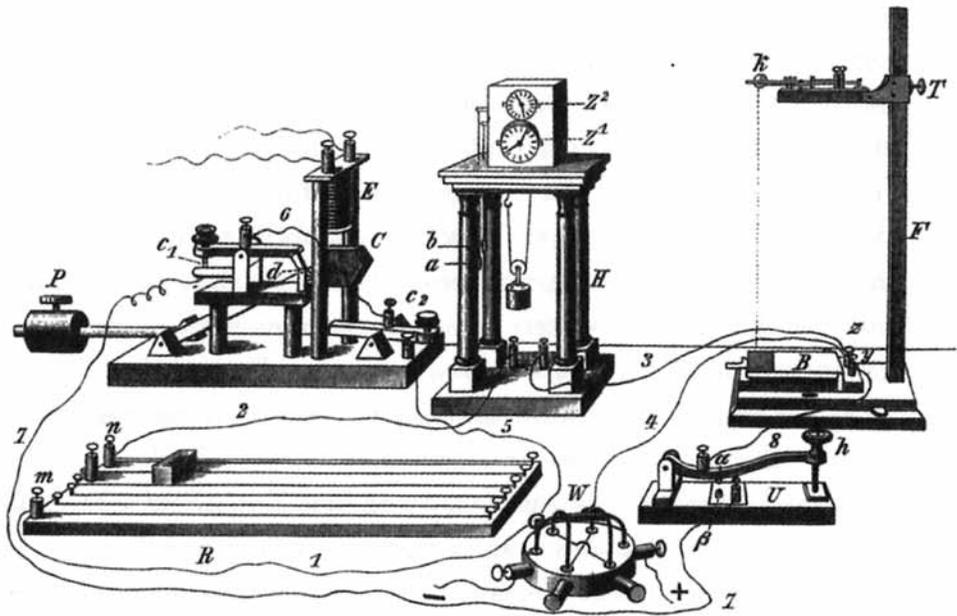
<sup>16</sup> [...] *C'est qu'un souffle, tordant ta grande chevelure,  
A ton esprit rêveur portait d'étranges bruits;  
Que ton coeur écoutait le chant de la Nature*

*Dans les plaintes de l'arbre et les soupirs des nuits;  
[...]  
[...]* It was a breath of wind, that, twisting your great hair,  
Brought strange rumours to your dreaming mind;  
It was your heart listening to the song of Nature  
In the groans of the tree and the sighs of the nights;  
[...]  
A. Rimbaud, *Ophélie*, translated by Oliver Bernard

<sup>17</sup> It is to Franciscus Cornelis Donders (1818-1889), ophthalmologist and physiologist, that we owe one of the main contributions to experimental psychology. In a historical moment in which it was thought that psychological processes could not be analysed in temporal-spatial terms, and that they were therefore foreign to every form of measurement, Donders conducted the first experiments on the speed of thought, establishing with certainty that, at least for simple processes, consciousness was also a measurable fact. Thanks to direct observation and to the precision with which the experimental method guaranteed access to a brain in action, Donders thought that he was able "to spy on Nature directly". This utopia of transparency has however been strongly diminished in recent times, and terms such as 'watch' and 'observe' have been more realistically replaced with 'record' and 'measure': even the crudest and simplest experiment, such as measuring the pulsations of the cranium, can be visible only if translated into a graph. The science of measurement thus reveals itself to be an alphabet, a translation of consciousness, which remains visible only from the peephole.

<sup>18</sup> When Robert Barry wrote in his *Psychic Series* (1969) that: "Everything perceived in the unconscious by the senses but not noted by the conscious mind during trips to Baltimore, during the summer of 1967", he called attention to a mental space that is private and not





completely accessible even to the artist. If, on the one hand, the phrase may be understood as a refusal by the artist to communicate with the viewer, on the other hand this very refusal is asserted with clarity, opening a paradoxical discussion about its meaning and its definition as a work of art.

The *Psychic Series* investigates the problem of the materiality of art in favour of silent transmission, documented by a single phrase: that which emerges is a voice, a distilled thought, without qualification or explanation, as if Barry were testing the limits of what language is capable of communicating.

<sup>19</sup> The concealment of the body-text goes back to Blanchot's question about the fate of literature: "still more surprising is the fact that there is an answer and even a rather simple one: literature moves towards itself, towards its essence, which is disappearance" (M. Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*, Gallimard, Paris 1957, p. 265).

**Meris Angioletti's** artistic research is focused on the relationship between scientific language and narration. In her projects she uptakes and develops elements borrowed from such disciplines as psychology, literature, physics.

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