

All that remains

by Emi Fontana

It is *Traces*, a twenty-minute video, by Fiamma Montezemolo that gives the title to her solo show at the Magazzino d'Arte Contemporanea in Roma. *Traces* was made in 2012, and it is with it that Fiamma, for the first time, merged her practice of years of anthropological work in Tijuana, at the borders between Mexico and United States, with her intention to join her voice to the artistic discourse. It is with a meditation on borders that she indeed trespasses from the language of ethnography to the one of contemporary art. In the video, Fiamma approaches the wall that separates the two countries, directly and poetically, addressing it with the second person pronoun. She attributes a masculine identity to the wall, extrapolating it out of false neutrality, as if the wall was an anthropomorphic presence, having its own biography, its own faults and its many stories. Toward the end it becomes clear that any possibilities of totally dismissing it and the wish for its complete dissolution are utopian. The only hope that remains is for an alchemical transformation that would defeat its "questionable virility converting it into its traces." It is in this moment that Fiamma slips from one territory to another and the end of the video becomes a poetic statement from which her artistic practice unfolds.

The word "trace" is an indication of the existence or passing of something; there is a transient quality to it that hints at a process of transformation. We do not get the original, but its remains, whatever is reverberating from the archetypal to us.

Two years later Fiamma will return to the Tijuana-San Diego border to make another video titled *Echo*. An echo is commonly defined as a sound or series of sounds caused by the reflection of sound waves from a surface back to the listener. In the case of Fiamma's *Echo*, the surface is once again the highly charged territory of borderlines. This time the field is swarming not solely with the colorful and rowdy daily life of Mexico, but also with sounds and visions from the many contemporary art installations created by artists from different nationalities and exhibited for the different editions of the public art event *InSite*, held from 1992 to 2005. Reflections and sound waves are what will remain of these works and it is indeed the subject matter of *Echo*, the 39-minute video essay by Fiamma Montezemolo that will be screened at the MAXXI on June 5th. *Echo* is a puzzling artwork, originally commissioned for a show on *InSite* that eventually took a different route and was produced by the artist herself and West of Rome and premiered in Los Angeles in October 2014. *Echo* is defeating the narrow definitions of media and genres. It alternates a bare, rather crude in style ethnographical approach, with a poetic language dense with metaphors and analogies. It is indeed an inter-medial work that uses drawings, video, interviews, phone calls, diagrams and poetic associations; it gives voice to the artists as well as to the ones from the populations who were touched by the works. Amongst others, it raises one main issue: what is the function of spectacle in the so-called "social art" and who is the audience for it? Who is Narcissus and who is Echo? Who is echoing whom? No answers are given and more questions are raised. A diagram subtends the underlining structure of *Echo*. The video starts with a graphic representation of all the original works shown with a halo around each of them, as a reminiscence of Benjamin's idea of the aura of uniqueness of the art object. Eventually the dots connect and then dissolve again at the end, when the works are represented as they appear now, exploited by time and unforeseen usage, stripped of their aura.

Field notes is the title of a new work realized for the show at the Magazzino d'Arte Contemporanea; the artist-anthropologist has arranged fragments from her field notebooks in the fashion of a constellation, projected on the wall. The diagrammatic structure that was already present in *Echo* returns. Each segment of the constellation stands for an emotion, a concept or an affect experienced during fieldwork, as it was recorded in her notes. Each of these affects and concepts is associated with one color; when two or more segments cross, the colors juxtapose creating a new color determinate by their sum, according to color

theory. A farther transformation has occurred when the resulting color got transferred from the rules of painting to the computer palette. The viewer is invited to click on the mouse activating different parts of the constellation with a voyeuristic participatory action toward emotions we often try to bury, like anger, envy, frustration, but also intimacy, joy, affinity.

Bronislaw Malinowski is considered the father of modern anthropology; his diary was posthumously published in 1967 and it covers the periods of time he spent in New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands (1914-1915 and 1917-1918). The publication of a diary that was never intended to be public and that the author meant exclusively as form of self-analysis ended up to be a central piece in the transformation of contemporary anthropology and eventually contributed to modify the positivist idea of objectivity in ethnographic studies, with rippling effects in other fields.

Fiamma Montezemolo's constellation is, after all, a diagram of emotions, affects and concepts. For a long time we have carried on with the notion of a parallel between scientific views and an objective approach. Diagrams are often used to give credibility to scientific presentations and enunciations. Diagrams are also often expressions of analogies and associations to sustain instead a poetic view of the world.

The scientific establishment trembled when Malinowski's diary was published. For a long moment the often not so noble emotions expressed in the diary, seemed to defeat the greatness of scientific observations coming from the Cultural Anthropology giant. Clifford Geertz, another illustrious anthropologist, was initially horrified by the journal, but years later he brilliantly compared the publication of Malinowski's diary with another game changer event: the release, just one year later, in 1968, of the book "The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA" an autobiographical memoirs of that great discovery written by James D. Watson. This book was also highly criticized for bringing in to the realm of scientific discovery, strong biographical elements, like unconventional behaviors and the use of LSD.

In *Field Notes*, Fiamma openly exposes and shares her sentiments and emotions in connection with her scientific work, inviting the viewer to participate in the process of their layering and to observe the formations of an emotional palette.

If feelings, emotions and personal biography could be part of scientific discovery and observation, if we all agree that the notion of scientific objectivity was nothing else than a myth died in the last century, then the language of ethnography and anthropology could smoothly cross over to the language of contemporary art. We have already seen this happen since the sixties. A powerful new wave of crosspollination started in the early nineties, often in relation with issues related to identity politics. Artists appropriated the language of ethnography and anthropology or even mimicked their practices.

In 1995 Hal Foster writes "The artist as ethnographer?" in which he strongly critiques what he calls the paradigm of the quasi anthropologist artist in contemporary art. He also critiques as delusional the artist relaying on the field of anthropology as the site where the political transformation of the artwork is going to happen. This is a very important point that we find in *Echo*. Anthropology is the field of alterity and as such, from the sixties on, contemporary artists have adopted it as lingua franca. One more warning in Foster's article is about the practice of "self-othering" that from one side is politically important and subtends any artistic practice based on identity politics, but if abused it can lead to total self-absorption and we'd say to a new form of narcissism, ethnographic narcissism. Fiamma Montezemolo's work travels in the opposite direction. She in fact migrates from cultural anthropology into contemporary art crossing the borders against current. She utilizes and exposes the methodologies of the field she is originally coming from, not to self represent her own identity, let alone to define her alterity as Caucasian Italian female, living in United States, but instead to grasp onto a reality that often composes itself through a dance of alterities and otherness, participants and observers.

The Three Ecologies is the other installation in the show: it consists of three Moroccan traditional rugs sewn together to cover a big portion of the gallery space. The artist cut out eight holes in the texture of the carpet that she personally purchased at the Medina in Rabat, from which eight cactus plants are springing out. The title of the work refers to a 1989 essay by Felix Guattari. The three ecologies of Fiamma's carpet are the texture of culture, the nature of the plants, and the social interactive aspect of the visitors of the gallery that

are invited to use the carpet as a space, hopefully conducive of a moment of meditation in which these three fundamental aspects of the human experience are seen as inextricably woven together. Finally the field of the carpet is the one in which everything is coming together: what remains and what matters is the interconnection and relations amongst things, amongst beings, the awareness that the thing is never the thing, that the map is never the territory. All of this with the knowledge we cannot understand the world through separate fields and hard science, that the isolation of disciplines, names, and definitions are ultimately arbitrary. The only remaining way is to try threading the world back together, describing contrasts and contradictions taking place in an endless process. We continue to zoom in and to zoom out, knowing that “we can never step twice in the same river” as Heraclitus would say. This was the favorite quote of Gregory Bateson, one of the most important thinkers of the last century. In the work of Fiamma Montezemolo, the idea of an open field strongly resonates with Bateson’s message of mental ecology. Today, looking at the world this way seems an imperative for all of us in all areas of our lives; but even more so for the ones who carry intellectual and social responsibilities, like thinkers, cultural producers, and artists.