

New formats of art

Interview with Raffaella della Olga

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SC: *I would like to start by talking about the two types of art you've been working with in recent years, namely works on colored cloth with various sorts of cutouts and shapes, and works on paper made using mechanical typewriters. Are these two processes linked to two different modes of expression, or are they two aspects of the same work method?*

RDO: The typewriter led me to fabric, partly because I often imagined it as a sewing machine. There is, after all, an etymological relationship between *textum*, text, and *texere*, weaving. Thread or ink ribbon both run on two supports that leave a mark, and then there's the sound, and the hatching or shading, and the lines of stitching. Today, I can't separate the two processes; it's a sort of hall of mirrors, because in the end, while I'm sitting for hours writing on the typewriter, I follow trajectories that I also find on certain fabrics, or vice-versa. The book is the matrix of what goes on the wall – the two things complete one another.

What prompted you to use typewriting and the book as a medium?

Sometimes things happen, and they just impose themselves on you. In any case, it was a long process. I started composing typewritten visual poems in 2011. Before that I was obsessed with the camera – I took photos only at night, by the light of the full moon. My relationship with the image – whether dreamlike or real – has been a constant since my Academy of Fine Arts years; that's where I "appropriated" a work by Gino De Dominicis, *In principio era l'immagine*. But at the time – it was 2000 – I didn't know anything about myself nor about art in general. Then in 2007 I stopped using photography, and in 2009 I made what was for me the fundamental discovery of *Un Coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard* by Mallarmé. I delved into that poem with passion and real fascination, and even fear, given its importance, but I think at that time I was able to draw on something very profound. In any case, the element of simultaneity between text and image that underlies it clearly sums up what's important to me, in the aesthetic and formal sense. That discovery created a more intelligible trajectory in my work, and from that moment on the book has been my means.

How did you deal with your work on the Coup de dés... in practical terms?

Initially I did research to gain an understanding of the intellectual climate of Mallarmé's era, trying to accumulate as much information as possible. Then I analyzed the poem in greater detail – the object, the book, its format, the typographical layout which was revolutionary at the time, the value of the space, the use of the page. And since Mallarmé had, among other things, compared his book to a star-studded sky, a constellation of letters, I decided to cover every single letter of the poem – the 1914 Gallimard edition – with phosphorescent powder. The book is “activated” by the light of a flashlight and can only be read in the dark. Activation, on, off, rest: those are the dimensions at work.

This idea of the text as a constellation – you radicalize it in the visual sense, moving on from an “erasure” and then a highlighting of the text in another way...

Yes, that's right. The constellation and the fragment are things that have always spoken to me. For a long time, the constellation was a reference point for me, a sort of possible orientation. Because that's the significance of constellations – they let us orient ourselves. You look at the sky and universal things come to your mind: truth, things that are equal for everyone, without distinctions. That work made me reflect a lot – I'd spent months in a micro-space, a poem just twenty-four pages long, but with a cosmic scope. I like the idea of the relationship between micro and macro, between immanence and transcendence, and of occasionally reading something linked to alchemy too, but always as a diversion or a hobby.

There's a very important 20th century tradition centering on the relationship between poetry and the visual, from Futurism to Dada to the neo-avant-gardes of the '50s and '60s, in which various groups worked on the idea of “visual poetry.” Was that a term that had already interested you in the past, or did you come to it just recently?

With his *Coup de Dés*, Mallarmé, who died in 1898 without having seen the book published, anticipated the early-Twentieth-century avant-garde movements. That's where I learned the “rules” of spatialization. It was the first step, the incipit, that would later lead me to become interested in various movements, in particular the concrete poetry of the Brazilian group Noigandres, the work of Eugen Gomringer and the *lettristes*.

In 2007 you quit Italy and moved to Paris. Why that move, and what did it mean for you?

It let me go farther, because it distanced me from a world that threatened me, that threatened the new, little identity that was slowly taking shape. One of the books that struck me in that period was *Steppenwolf*, in which Hermann Hesse speaks of an “emergency exit”: for me, the Academy of Fine Arts, which I attended in the early 2000s, had been an emergency exit from a dimension that didn’t belong to me – I started a career as a lawyer –, as was the decision to call myself Raffaella Della Olga, which is not my family name, because I realized – and later understood more fully – that I needed a space of my own, where it was no longer necessary to dialogue with the paternal figure, with my inheritance. So, I realized I was free to have what I wanted, to be able to invent another life for myself. Paris helped, although there were many difficulties, and today I’m sure I’m in the place that’s right for me.

How would you assess the period of your education and training today?

Positively! I added things, and I love to add things! There’s a film that played an important role for me, Fellini’s *Giulietta degli spiriti*. In the final scene, after Giulietta has conquered her ghosts and her anxieties, she comes out into the open, dressed in white. There’s a wide-open horizon in front of her, expanding before her eyes. She’s freed herself. When she turns to go back inside, she hesitates, thinking for a moment of returning to her old world, but a friendly voice is there to guide her, to make sure she doesn’t lose herself. Now, her steps are leading her towards something new. How to look ahead is the best thing I learned, I think.

After you gave up photography, what did you do?

I was invited to New Delhi, India, for an artist’s residency. That journey, along with another one in New York in 2011, helped me to break out of a sort of paralyzing shyness. In New York I got my first typewriter, an Olympia, and composed my first visual poem, *Rating letters poem*, made up of 41 rating agency notations. I had known the world of finance, speculation and business in the past – my father’s death in 1988 had obliged me to deal with his company, and in the early 1990s I was really into the stock market: that’s where I first encountered the triple “A”.

The typewriter also pertains to my family landscape – we had two in the office. The decision to use the language of ratings agencies (A-B-C-D, + and -, 1,2,3) came easily to me because its few elements possess a strong and efficacious expressive power, and they can talk about crises (like the subprime crisis), monetary value, political choices. If a country has a triple “A”, it has economic status, while one with a “CCC” rating is near to bankruptcy. Languages like the language of finance are encrypted and accessible only to those with the training and the tools to understand them - for everyone else they’re abstract and incomprehensible, and I started to work on this disparity. Another constructive experience I had was with OuUnPo (Ouvroirs d’Univers Potentiels), an experimental group made up of artists, curators and researchers that I was involved with for about three years. We organized work sessions in Europe and internationally around specific themes – in my case, Catastrophe and its legacy -, with the aim of creating on-site workshops, performances and concerts and establishing contact with the artistic sphere of the place. I had the chance to participate in four geographically-far-flung sessions: Tokyo, Porto, Beirut and Gibellina.

Did you adopt the book format for you typewritten works from the start?

I haven’t told you about the tracing paper yet: its transparency was the thread that led me to create books, albeit gradually. Initially I used the typewriter in a conventional way, as in instrument for writing. Then I typewrote on fabric, mainly white cotton (*Aladdin, I _ / *), opting for specific forms like a tablecloth or wearable pieces. Later I replaced the ink ribbon with colored carbon paper and *papier calque*. Accumulating written-on sheets of paper, carbon paper, copies, copies of copies, and thanks to the transparency of the tracing paper, I tried to assemble or create a play of layering, obtaining a volume, something more dynamic, and this convinced me to use the book format. And then, if you consider the fact that I need to be autonomous and I have some idiosyncratic feelings as far as containers like frames or stretchers are concerned, you can imagine why the book format became my *modus operandi*. To me, a spider is a nice image of a self-sufficient being.

As far as your works that use rating agency notations are concerned, did you base them on a specific system of variations and permutations? How do you decide, for

example, the format, the page layout of an individual book, or of several books in a single series? In other words, what are your compositional criteria?

It depends. In the case of the typewritten works that reproduce rating agency notations, I created graphic forms inspired by the flows and graphics of the stock market. I composed three of them (T_1 , T_2 , T_3), always maintaining the same designs but varying the chromatics. The first is typewritten in black, the second with different-colored carbon papers and various types of papers, and in T_3 I replaced the notations with marks. In any case, I don't have a single criterion of reference. I type a certain number of sheets with a certain type of texture or with a specific subject, as in the case of *Alphabet*. For example, in this period I'm experimenting with various types of *moirage* – there are so many combinations, thanks to the colors of the carbon paper, which amplify the work's plastic value. I've always had Sol Lewitt's *Xerox Book* in mind, the series of 24 permutations of squares on the page. I mean, the idea of starting with a few elements to create complex forms.

Has your system of signs always remained the same as the initial one, then intentionally limited?

More or less. I've set myself the rule of using few elements, but I don't follow a protocol. You might say that I've somehow managed to modify or convert the specific use of the typewriter into something unusual. Working on books, I realized that accidents or unexpected results let you open up to new possibilities and make new discoveries. I modified a few elements of the typewriter keyboard, for example rubbing out the number "8" from the key with the hyphen – I filed off the number, and that allowed me to create a sign/non-sign. Then at a certain point I eliminated the ink ribbon from the typewriter, and carbon paper became the sole means by which a character leaves a mark. From that moment on, with this impression method, I've been able to invent a sort of writing based on various types of woven supports – fabrics, plastic knits, etc. – that leave traces on the paper through the carbon paper. Division into squares is always the underlying basis – it's sort of an obsession: lines, squares, checkerboards, grids. If I follow a grid I don't get lost; it's a sort of structure that allows for a play of transparencies, a layering of lines that generate other elements, and a sense of movement, of animation, that's also in my works on fabric. How can I put this...

it's like, through removing something, I added a vast number of variations, and this allowed me to avoid repeating myself in repetition.

For me, two ideas arise from your books. The first has to do with time. There is effectively the presumption of a lengthy time required for material fabrication, a dimension of meditation in the atelier, a space that creates both separation and intensification. The second has to do with the relationship between geometry and space: on the pages of books, and in fabric works as well, although you work exclusively in two-dimensions, at a certain point you produce a suggestion that I might call rhythmic spatiality - a three-dimensional, kinetic component. But first let's talk about the question of time. Your work instinctively brings to mind Boetti and Sol Lewitt, who you've just cited yourself, two artists who share your obsession with permutation, in which a more or less complex set of instructions is applied until no further variations are possible, and the "waste" of time that this entails. Which is of course a paroxysm - it's not necessary to "carry out" all the permutations if we possess a summary form, an algorithm, as Rosalind Krauss noted in a text on Lewitt. Obsessively counting and re-counting not only eats up the artist's time, but is also the equivalent of inserting an element of entropy, of dépense, into a system that would otherwise seem perfectly rational. For Krauss, Sol Lewitt's models are Beckett's characters, like Molloy, for example. The creative operation literally consumes a lifetime and produces nothing else except the consumption of time - it's a senseless operation, but also a form of ascension, of mysticism without transcendence, perhaps. Do you feel something like that?

I've never explicitly formulated all of this, but I can tell you that consuming time lets me give aesthetic form to my obsessions. I feel the need to produce, and time is linked to that, the need to effectively make something exist. I have a great inner energy, a sort of fire within me, and I need to express myself by doing. Doing is necessary, but there's definitely a meditative component as well, because I don't use up all my energy in repetition - on the contrary, I invent a world for myself, I become aware of sensations, I feel extremely strong emotions. You were talking about Sol Lewitt... he called himself a mystic, but what is a mystic today? During my stay in India I read the Vedas, which are still a reference point for me.

Does carrying out a repetitive action help you to free your mind? Boetti said in an interview that for him it was important that all decisions be made in advance, so that he could feel free during the execution phase...

The mechanical, repetitive gesture doesn't limit the circulation of images. There's a sense of security in repeating oneself, and chance plays a very important role, and I like that. I don't know how to explain it – there's a sort of blind faith in the doing.

Is the atelier useful, or indispensable, for this exercises in concentration, for a productive use of time?

The atelier was a revelation: since I've been here – three years -, everything has exploded in an incredible way. Before, I always had the sensation of not completely belonging. For a long time I felt like I was in exile, wandering without knowing where to stop. And then, when I started working in this studio - where there's space, there's silence, where I'm alone -, everything took on an augmented intensity and clarity: time, energy, desire, determination – here I can achieve everything. I conceive and create books, from the first page to the binding; I create a sort of extremely simple economy that lets me be autonomous, and not to have to depend on anyone. Solitude gives me a sense of well-being – I come to the studio and I'm happy.

Let's go back to the question of space. In your career you've passed from writing, and thus in a way from sense, to the pure a-semantic succession of signs, points and lines that take on increasingly complex forms: weaves, multiple layers, different materials, frottages etc. But in the passage from the Coup de Dés... to more recent books, the fundamental book format persists. Does this mean that the idea of the pages following one after the other, the implicit progression of time and "narrative," is still important?

Yes, I often think that I write abstract narrations. Why maintain the book form? Because I've realized that I need a performance aspect, the presence of the other entering into the volume... A line on a sheet of paper hung on the wall remains two-dimensional, but when it becomes a book it acquires space and depth. I discovered this idea of spatiality only by working in the atelier; before that I'd never been aware of it. The typewriter, after all, is an object we no longer use, but that doesn't mean anything: the way I use it, it's no longer the old typewriter. So, this idea of spatiality and volume came about thanks to superimpositions or layerings that I discovered by chance. I don't draw; I don't use pencil gestures. I set myself before a keyboard, I make a mechanical gesture, and I don't really know what I do, because each time I always have a blank white page with a grid

of squares in front of me – it’s just a matter of following the squares. I know – because then little by little you create a sort of language that you recognize, because you’ve put an element behind you, because you pass over it twice, because you use the carriage return or you change a pitch – I know that something will happen, but there’s always a bit of a surprise effect. I still have some of the imprinting of darkroom work, a suspension between a before and an after, a revelatory transitory action. In short, what I did between 2002 and 2007 with the camera has come back in other forms, with carbon papers, tracing paper, composition and light. In the Mallarmé poem I had the impression of having done what I did during my nocturnal explorations by moonlight. I exposed the film for X amount of time, so the negative could receive as much moonlight as possible.

The typewriter is based on Cartesian coordinates, a system of rows and columns – in other words, on an orthogonal grid that suggests a constant, universal order. All of your geometric patterns effectively meet this criterion. But it seems to me that especially during this last year, the grid has been broken up a bit – it seems there’s an element of something off-kilter, leaning, sliding towards the oblique.

I have typewriters for different formats, A3 and A4, but I was also lucky enough to find an exceptional one in A0 format: the carriage measures 90 centimeters, which lets me insert much larger sheets, and move them in various directions so I can impress on the paper an unlimited number of motifs or textures. The possible formats are multiplied, and lines can circulate.

So the new spatiality is also to some degree the effect of an expansion of the technical means you use to produce images?

Yes, and I can again go back to that exercise of patience – but also of fascination – that I experienced working on *Un coup de Dés...* After the phosphorescent powder of the text has been “charged up,” after it’s been excited, so to speak, in the dark it gives off a luminosity that passes through the other pages, and by means of this transparency creates a greenish nebula, a mysterious trail of light that can be compared to what we see in the sky with the constellations near to Earth and those farther away. Probably, the gesture of adding luminosity that was visible through several pages was a significant experience that has stayed with me all this time. I like the idea that when you turn the page there’s this effect of childlike wonder.

Thinking about what you've said about your experience with photography and your work in the darkroom that returns when you work with carbon papers, really all of your work on paper is based on a sort of transference, or imprinting, or "indexing" – in short, on an image produced indirectly, without manual intervention, despite the fact that handwork obviously is a very important part of it. In reality, there is always an intermediate layer between your hands and eyes and the surface on which the image appears: you press the typewriter keys, and colored matter is transferred by the carbon paper to the sheet without the possibility of continuous control on your part. And the process has become more complicated: in your latest large-format books, frottage and complex layerings are added to mechanical writing. But really, in a way, from the very start you've freed yourself from the need to manually make marks, entrusting yourself instead to consistent, real, "objective" processes that order and disembodify the gesture of your hand, including the "cuts" in fabrics, which we haven't spoken about yet. Do you agree with this interpretation?

Carbon paper is a very particular support, because it has a dynamic material that's only activated when it's rubbed, and the gesture has to be energetic. This meant I could use it in various ways: for example, I can take two weaves, insert a carbon paper and see what comes out... there are a lot of possibilities. I also use an iron, a source of heat, to produce images. It's a further step, an idea of multiplication: with the iron I create a copy of a copy, the repetition of a sign that's repeated on another support. Here the idea of permutation comes back into play: rather than throwing away marked-up, used carbon papers, I reproduce their signs on fabric, on paper, on a wall... it's the multiplication that interests me, the part that remains "latent."

Why is that?

Because I realized that there's an element of myself that is latent, obscure. Some interior processes, experiences and encounters have brought it out and made its potential emerge. I've come to understand something that's probably etched into my being – maybe the idea of a mantra, the concept of probing something that is repeated. The idea that one element contains another, which can contain another, and another, is basically an ideal of spatiality, temporality, amplification and expansion... I've always had this idea, of looking inside and not outside. A thing can be implosive, but then in imploding can trigger other things within.

The idea of the copy, the double, the mirror, is certainly a characteristic that I recognize in myself. The geometric support suits me because it's clear-cut, it can be done quickly. When the process becomes too intellectual, I no longer have that sensation of something "made," which I do have with something I obtain through manual work. That's why I use heat to reproduce forms, and strike keys to make impressions on paper: I probably like to captivate myself and others; I have the illusion that I can transmit a certain idea of beauty.

And what is your idea of "beauty"?

Well, one of the things that was important for me, amid all of the reading I've done, is the dialogue between Diotima and Socrates in the *Symposium* on the idea of Beauty and Good. Their reflections really penetrated my mind. At the time – around 2007 or 2008 – some remnants of my law studies were still giving off low-frequency vibrations. I'd given up the idea of a career as a lawyer by then, but I was fascinated by that passage where Diotima associates the idea of excellence and wisdom with the terms moderation and justice. Learning about Beauty so as to transfer it to the world.

Going back to the suggestion of space, and signs that appear and disappear, and the latency of the image, all of these aspects seem to me to define a very specific spatiality on the pages of your books, without referential value and phenomenological in nature: it's what appears only when we're really standing "in front of" your work. But let's talk about your works on fabric. I first want to note the fact that you use very particular colored fabrics: Scottish, African and European fabrics with geometric motifs. Although they come from places that are culturally very diverse, they have the use of geometrics in common, and although complex, they're based on very simple elements: squares, rectangles, circles, rhombuses, and diamonds, arranged on regular grids. I want to ask you first of all how and why you began using color-printed fabrics, and what methods you use to work with them.

Fabric was an element I added to paper; initially it was white cotton, on which I traced lines and graphic shapes. Paper can't be sewn, but fabric can, and it let me explore ideas about form and volume. When I created *I_/*, a four-color typewritten cape, I imagined it being worn, but also hanging, like a sculpture, to highlight the absence of a body. Later I included pre-printed fabrics, and that was around the same time that I eliminated some characters from the typewriter. And that's how I was able to reproduce tartan or Scottish plaid motifs. There's a

legendary place in Paris for choosing fabrics – the Marché Saint Pierre market –, and that’s where I found the fabric that later became *Stoffe (Le grand bleu)*. When I cut fabrics to remove a fragment, I’m doing the inverse of what I do with the typewriter: on a white sheet of paper, I imprint a sign, then a color and then a form, while with fabric, which already has its form, I subtract, cutting with a craft knife.

So you “cut” the surface of printed fabric following its geometric pattern?

Yes, and it’s already happening at the moment I choose a fabric – I mean, the work has already begun with the selection of fabrics. I’m probably guided by an underlying image that brings to mind the perforation of photographic or cinematic film, and Paul Sharitz’s *Frozen Film Frames*. When the fabric is cut in a systematic, rhythmic way – that is, following a rhythm, because the “emptying” of an element of fabric is associated with a division –, the component of light creates a form/volume, a new optical sensation accentuated by physical movement.

That is, it’s linked to the viewer’s position in the space – the image changes with variations in point of view?

Yes. The question I start with is “what is an image for me?” How can I represent the idea/image I’m dialoguing with? It’s as if the fabric is inhabited by an abstract figure – it’s a sort of place where I intervene with a precise gesture, without going outside the edges; I mean, if it was a flower, I couldn’t do it, because I don’t have the patient required to reproduce flowers. The line, on the other hand, constructs me and constructs the work at the same time. It’s a sort of sharing: the line holds me, and with the line I hold the work that’s being constructed, because by removing, by emptying, I arrange a new order.

You often present fabric on a wall, folded upon itself with the two surfaces hanging a few centimeters from each other, and this generates a duplication and a transparency. That is, the pattern is cancelled out, but at the same time is complicated. Another aspect has to do with the fabric’s final form, which is not always quadrangular. You give it the shape of clothes – a shirt, a cape, as you mentioned –, and among the forms to be hung on the wall there are irregular rectangles and triangles that suggest different sorts of dynamism. Is this an intentional reference to the shaped canvases of a certain vein of abstract painting? Is it important for you to contravene the perpendicular grid?

I understand what you're talking about. Even in my extreme rigor, I don't impose a set rule. And then, I don't paint. For me, fabric is something you can manipulate, fold, iron. It has a certain sensuality, and it transmits sensations through touch. I don't delimit it within a frame. Its versatility suggests an idea of performance to me.

What changes when you move from fabric to the projected image of fabric, as we see in some of your recent works?

Certainly the possibility of exploring the optical/light dimension of the support. I manually construct slides, for the 6x6 format, overlaying weaves to highlight and enlarge them using the projector. Light passes through the trajectories of the threads and recalls abstract motifs – it's as if the fabric is de-materialized.

You started out with a tactile relationship with paper and carbon paper, frottage, and then moved on to fabric, which is already a distancing, because the relationship with the material is mediated by the craft knife you use to make cuts. The slide is an even further extreme in de-materialization. Do you think this is the current leaning in your work, or are these still complementary phases?

I think there's unity in the idea of the fragment, a unity that converges on something more complex. This unity is made up of things that may be distant from one another, but for me there's a single common thread. I think that's why I like using all of the methods together.

Impacting the space, then, not just the two-dimensional space of the wall, but three-dimensional space as well?

Or investigating? Fabric per se already has a three-dimensional element, in terms of its graphic composition and colors, at least that's how I see it. My intervention amplifies this intrinsic aspect, giving it volume. And that's also why I want to differentiate myself from painting – what I do is more sculptural, in a certain way. With the typewriter keys, I'm hammering, hammering, hammering – continually hammering on the sheet of paper...

Sculpting and also materially bringing to the surface within the space, as in the case of your books?

Yes, the book is an object – the two-dimensionality of writing necessarily becomes a constructed support and a mounting. When I've finished writing something like fifty sheets, I take some time to make a selection, to decide which

page to put with which other page, because there's a play of encounters and juxtapositions that happens only at that moment there. I see my work in terms of productivity – I have to *do*, doing is my obsession: doing rapidly and concretely, to satisfy an inner need. There's a quote I read in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* - "Muss es sein? Es muss Sein!" ("Must it be? It must be!") – a phrase Beethoven wrote on the manuscript of one of his famous quartets. That's this inner need.