Beatrice Merz, Alberto Salza and Gabriella Belli (Ed.), *Marzia Migliora. Velme*, Catalogue of solo exhibition (Venezia, Ca' Rezzonico) Fondazione Merz - Hopefulmonster Editore 2017.

VELME: Quartet and reprise

A Masquerade

The universe is made of stories,
not atoms.
MURIEL RUKEYSER, *The Speed of Darkness*

Characters: a cruise sperm whale
a girl with a mud mask (*moreta*)
black men (naked & displaced)
rock-salt jewellers
the Latin motto
a rhino horn (of gold)

Sets: the lagoon of Venice
a *velma* (mudbank)
the entrance, portico and rooms of Ca' Rezzonico
multiple mirrors

Backdrops: *The Alchemists*, painted by Alberto Longhi
The Foyer, painted by Francesco Guardi
The Rhinoceros, painted by Pietro Longhi
The New World, painted by Giandomenico Tiepolo

As had been happening for some time, the giant sperm whale dredged the lagoon water behind itself. The girl watched it leave, while standing on the soft sand that was her home. Between her feet she saw living clods of sediment that could finally breathe and others that were about to risk suffocation. She took a step back, slipped out of her white dress, tore a tiny piece of it and clenched it between her teeth. Then on her face, she adjusted the spider web she had previously gathered from a bush, using some spit to keep it in place. She stretched out her arms and let herself fall face-down in the sludge.
With some difficulty, by opening her fingers, she managed to free her body from the mud. She cleaned herself as much as possible, but let some mud dry on her face, kept in place by the web and the piece of cloth: a black *tondo* like an African mask. Taking care not to crack the crust, she wiped off the remaining muck on her chin and all around. Then she opened two big circles for the eyes. She donned her dress and turned to face dry land. She saw a palace, gently sliding towards her, its mouth wide open. While she was being absorbed by it, she managed to glimpse a plastered motto: *Si Deus pro nobis*. The sentence remained suspended, like an anxious thought. And then she wandered in the immense empty portico that connected the mainland to the sea. She understood that this space was supporting and conditioning the architecture of the whole palace. In its structure she felt the tiredness of its ghosts: she thought she glimpsed millions of human bodies turned to dust by centuries of work and festivities, hanging like a pink fog on the architecture, in the flooring, inside the cracks. For those who have been abandoned, hell

has no geometry: therefore, space-time bent back on itself and the girl found herself crawling through a wormhole.
Bursts of light brought her back to sanity. Dazzled by the illumination, she stumbled into a kind of factory: goldsmith's counters were mass producing bizarre shapes from blocks of white gold, an alchemical activity initiated millions of years before. She felt like crying and her tears melted the blocks that then reformed as pure salt. She wanted to lick the blocks, but was prevented from doing so by her mask.
Disturbed, she stepped back and reappeared in the ballroom, where she met the naked black men. They stood motionless along the walls, entangled with monsters, vines, rags, chains. All were supporting something: their white glass-paste eyes seemed to bulge from the effort, illuminating the ballroom. Four moors were out of place, turned towards the wall and a step back, a step marked on the floor by ivory piano keys, black and white like a wish. The girl looked at their beautiful backsides. The air was crackling because of the taut limbs of a particular moor. He was taller than the others and held an impossible rock on his head. The girl checked the distance separating him from the wall, and it seemed to become shorter by a micron, maybe less. And she made a mistake.
She approached the telamon, put her hands on his hips and pushed. At that moment the universe collapsed and the girl – prey to synchronicity – experienced dreams beyond the speed of light. She saw architectural capriccios and tapestries with allegories of her own marriage; she played a harpsichord; danced with centaurs and was propositioned by satyrs; she washed in pure water and sat on a gilded throne; she met ghosts of jacks-of-all-trades and lords of leisure; a red-coated moor brought her a letter she was unable to read; in the end, she gambled away her dress out in a *ridotto*. For a nanosecond she could see other girls wearing identical masks, frozen by some kind of spell. A little further, an enormous armoured beast showed the resection of a horn on its nose, obscenely exhibited by a cretinous tamer for money, to be later shown off like a phallic knick-knack. She resisted all the trials that palace threw at her in the space-time crumpled by gravity waves, but when she suddenly saw a kestrel dropping on a flock of sparrows locked inside a closet, she felt like shouting. 'Umph', she managed to mumble. The sound cracked all the mirrors and created thousands of glass shards. Their reflections vibrated in a mute question: *quis contra nos*? The girl took fright.
In order not to fear the future, she walked backwards, the way the harpooners row backwards towards the giant sperm whale and their probable death. Behind her, she heard a loud clamour. With her arms outstretched, she explored the air. A gentleman swore when she indiscreetly touched his bottom, while an urchin made her a dirty proposal. Then the girl turned around and found herself part of a crowd in front of a peephole from which a magical light emerged. Everybody wanted to have a quick look. 'I hope to see a better world', said a Pulcinella who had taken his mask off. At risk of tearing her dress, the girl fought her way through to see. As soon as she stared into the peephole, her eyes lost all colour and the girl vanished inside the structure with a great swooshing sound. Only the black mask made of mud remained as a witness to her adventure. And only those with the courage to meet the variable geometries of the grand palace will be able to glimpse her within a *boudoir*, seemingly busy in making herself up in a regression of reflexes that carry her far, far away, to the infinite. Away from there.

A dialogue

One of the instruments of Evil is dialogue.
FRANZ KAFKA, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*

– The museum is a story-telling machine.

– Once I asked some people (people not involved in art) to come and visit the storerooms of a gallery of 20th-century artists. I left them alone in front of paintings dealing with their professions. They were supposed to narrate something. To a nurse working for the Emergency NGO in war zones I showed an enormous Sironi, with fleeing horse and fallen soldier. All in earthen colours.

– I'm thinking of the mud in the Great War trenches, where everything happened internally, in the souls of the heaped-up, classless soldiers and in the soil substratum that howitzers would use to bury them.

– The nurse spoke about *buzkashi*, a sort of an afghan polo game where the carcass of a goat is the ball. He made clear that, during wartime, the goat is sometimes substituted with an enemy's head. Everything was taped and replayed in the museum as an audio-guide. You put on the earphones and start a trip in somebody's else's shoes: three or four stories by non-critics; that way you see with your own eyes the picture they were looking at; you listen to and live somebody's else story. There is a tight bond with people's professions: hence my interest about doing, about how deep one's profession marks one's identity through work.

– In you, I see a complex relationship with human labour, a constant tension towards doing, the alchemy transmuting profession into art. Where does it come from?

– It's a thorny question. It goes back to my origins in a farming family, where most men fell ill as a consequence of physical fatigue, a fatigue that led to no fortune or economical prosperity or even out of debt.

– The blood-debt is the uniting force of the Somali herders, by means of the group of collectors. In our culture, debt is guilt, the inertia of exploitation. We have to negotiate the palace to extinguish any debt, adopting our way.

– What irritates me like nettles is how a museum representation is classist. Visitors see a kind of mansion, but they perceive the slaves through the patrician's you-are-nothing look: it's so normal to have a naked slave around, even though it be sculpted in ebony. As an artist I feel a duty to produce works regarding people, not my life story. I like tackling thorny, prickly themes; not to resolve them, but so that my works become a question. A thought you'd never have if you'd gone on a picnic instead. If the viewers leave with some confusion that has moved them, that's good. As I did with the ebony moors.

– In Mauritania I met slaves, real slaves. One had been tied up in the desert, left to die. He managed to survive, but showed the signs of an immense struggle.

– Look at my hands. These are hands that have worked a fair deal; I've done ten thousand different jobs. Art and working in the kitchen, at the same time.
In order to get the raw matter for one of my installations at Ca' Rezzonico, I managed to go down a mine to look for the rock-salt myself, because I like seeing inside the earth, to gain a sense of our insane exploitation of it. The blocks of rock-salt are a dumb matter that has never seen the light of day. It was there, motionless. Today the place is an ant hill, busy with enormous machinery. There are no workers any more: the white gold is blown up automatically.

– And there they come, the illuminated goldsmiths.

– I know the world of goldsmith workshops first-hand. The workbenches in the exhibition, worn by years of use, are relics of a bankruptcy, just to stick to our leitmotiv. They are still full of the artisan's un-mechanised craftsmanship. The hallmark on the ingot is called *unghiata*, 'nail scratch', and represents a purity of 99.99%. The blocks of rock-salt on these benches are the seats of the church I visited inside the mine; it was dug out, not built. Exposed to the light, my work moves towards the sea: the salt is going back home, to the *Sofferte onde serene* of Luigi Nono, who captured the sounds of work, boats, ferries, splashing from the lagoon. The waves, *le onde*, are serene when you look at them without seeing. But underwater, the sponges suffer: the sea is a synthesis of man's activities upon Venice's nature, like elsewhere.

– In one of your research notebooks there's the drawing of the name-sign of Venice, California: it resembles the words ARBEIT MACHT FREI at Auschwitz. A few words beyond: decay, eustasy, subsidence caused by huge ships, the wake from boats, the sinking of the mudbanks, turbo-blowers, hydraulic dredgers, Filipino clams versus the local ones of the lagoon, benthonic fishing: it's war against the sea. Reef balls and iron rods against bottom-trawling: they are lethal protection tools, just like preventively cutting rhino horns to stop their contraband. It's the Natural History of Destruction.

– And I make a golden horn, placed on a small table in front of Pietro Longhi's painting. The table, which has always been there, is aligned with the rhinoceros in the picture, a kind of a Barnum's freak show. My artwork is a synthesis, a symbol that carries with it an enormous quantity of information. In alchemic form it agglutinates the quintessence in an object. Of the thousand things enclosed within the horn, one will arrive at the onlooker. Why a horn? Illegal trade? Why gold? A question will arise. Any work is a stratification of data and research, like an exposed *velma*: if the sea withdraws, something is sure to emerge.

– Maybe in a mirror, where everything is reversed.

– The mirror is the most banal way to bring an onlooker inside the work of art, but it works. *Quis contra nos*. A mirror with the question but no question mark, repeated at different levels. No pushing to interaction. I keep it motionless and you cannot help but read it as a question to yourself. Who against us: we are all accessories to the destruction. I won't be able to divine the riddle, but I can agitate the waters. A trifle.

– The Congo fetishes have a small mirror in which the sick person is reflected. Driving a nail into the statuette, the witchdoctor kills the disease. Franz Kafka begins his *Blue Octavo Notebooks* this way: 'Everyone carries a room about inside him. This fact can even be proved by means of the sense of hearing. If, […] when everything round about is quiet, one hears, for instance, the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall'.

– It's the ghosts in the palace: they move the mirrors.

– Actually, there's no trace of who built the palace, of who served in its rooms, and not even of those who luxuriated in it. What remains is "pink fog". That's the definition the Marines give to a human body when it's hit by a shell from a 155mm howitzer.

– Like face powder sprinkled in a boudoir, exactly where the *moreta* – the woman who cannot speak because she holds her mask with her teeth – finds temporary refuge. What material can silence be made of, I wonder?

– They say that mutism is an attribute of perfection. The *moreta* is inhibited from speaking by her little black mask. What to do with a mute heroine?

– To run away you don't need words, but actions. I let her get out of the painting; I let her leave the palace. Lips sealed like a fish; she doesn't speak, but she gets on with things.

– Like the artist?

– What a sensation it is being the heroine of a story; this never happened in my life before! The mask of plastered gauze is in reality shaped from a cast of my face. I liked the contradiction that I, as artist, can have my say; I speak through my works. And by chance, instead, I close a word-inhibiting mask inside the plastic showcase. It's no accident that I shaped it from my face.

– In Africa, among the Dan of the Ivory Coast, I saw similar masks. These are called 'runner's masks', and they go at full speed through the villages, to warn of danger. That's why they have large holes for the eyes.

– Eyes so wide, forcedly open; they do not even blink; flip flap.

– In the Japanese manga, at the moment of *kawaii* (cute!) teenagers have enormous wide-open eyes, like when a newborn baby stares into other people's eyes, looking to gain awareness about the human terrain. Not to look out, but so that one can gaze within them.

– One day I filmed my face under a spotlight from a film set. The light is excruciatingly bright. I started counting down to check for how long I could manage to keep my eyelids widened; and I count. One, two, three, four. An exercise to keep one's eyes wide open and force the humours to veil them.

– Maybe that's how the *moreta*'s eyes lose colour. And yours.

– And the statues of the palace have their eyes always open too. And the characters in the paintings too: here nobody sleeps.

– As far as we can see. But are we sure that nothing is happening while we aren't looking? Are the armchairs, lined up all around, really in a proper order?

– Let's have a look at the family crest, with its motto. It's unfinished and the *moreta* can't let go. There the lack rules, and she starts to tidy everything up. She identifies herself with Clara the rhinoceros in the painting in which she is co-protagonist. Clara the rhino is lacking its wild dignity, incomplete because of its hacked-off horn, hindered in being itself, scorned, tamed.

– The artist's primary function is to recreate some order from chaos.

– But the *moreta* is becoming progressively more agitated: I feel some discomfort and stop everywhere there's discomfort; the mansion is unwholesome, there's a charge of death in

it, and I row facing backwards, like the whalers on their way to be killed by Moby Dick. In a boudoir.

– I'm told that the word comes from the French verb *bouder*, to pout.

– So let's pout against the whole world, then.

The chamber anthropologist

Hell is empty and all the devils are here.
ARIEL, in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare

The anthropologist is the worst thief in the world: he steals culture. Therefore he is always on the run. The human terrain is supposed to be inscribed on the vacuums of his mind without any distortion. One day I was on the shore of Lake Turkana after a three week trek in a lava desert. I tried to wash the dust off my face. A camel herder told me: «You can wash all you like: you'll never become black like me». In another African desert, I danced with the bushmen to acquire visions about the spirit world. I became afraid and I realised that an anthropologist is not an artist: he does not understand colours and is a poor dancer.
For seventy thousand years, artists have been confronting a rock face. At the outset, the dances amongst stroboscopic firelights generated colourful phosphenes and entoptic strange forms inside the dancers' eyes. Then, in chemically altered brains, everything became vision. This is how the trips into the spirit world began, beyond the rock face. After a painful awakening you would start to touch the rock, to caress it with pigments, to scratch it with stones, so that any marking could become narrative and metaphor of the spirit world. You know the *here*, you dream the *beyond*: in between, thin, there stands the raw matter of the rock face. This is the three-sided world of the shamans: works of art contain the three dimensions of realism, dream and hyper-matter, separated by the veil of transcendence.
Entering an eighteenth-century palace with a third-millennium artist, the anthropologist is well aware of the risks he is going to face. He knows that some human groups consider an object and the spirit dwelling in it as coincident: therefore any art piece loses its function if ruined and should be immediately replaced so as not to disperse the spirit. What may ever happen if you alter the psycho-physical room structures in the palace? Would the walls crumble or the characters in the paintings come alive? What in hell are we doing amongst ebony negroes and conceptual exhibits, within a palace hovering uncertainly between land and water? One may start to consider the potential danger of a rhinoceros, crazy with pain because of its horn resection; or the spell of a feminine face hidden by a tiny mask that makes the wearer literally speechless.
Mask and person are synonymous. By itself, the mask has the innocence of the dead, who are not interested in being observed any more. A mask stripped of its frills, motionless (dance is an integral part of the mask, and vice versa), would not be considered a mask by any African, just as we would find it difficult to recognise Saint Mark in a fourteenth-century altarpiece without a lion at his feet and book in hand. What would Little Red Riding Hood be without her coloured cape? A lost girl.
I have come across rhinos on rock paintings inside caves, in the desert engravings, in the African savannah. On a morning of idiocy, I even tried "side-swiping" with them. But how much of a rhino is there in a cut-off horn, begilded and put on show to the public?
The act of watching is not passive: it implies the establishment of a relationship between an object's shape (external to the individual) and a formal model of space perception

(culturally defined on biologic bases). Thus, perceiving means projecting a latent image of oneself. People in jungles and deserts are said not to have writing. But they have “the gaze”, by which they manage to connect images (drawings on a cloth, a symbol in an ornament, the dancer’s gesture) to memory, in fixed and repeated sequences as if their minds were being directed by a syntax.
The gaze is not neutral, it does not simply register, but starts operating a series of relationships involving humans’ cerebral architecture, to the point that we might say: the image is a biologically necessary product, because what we visually perceive is not what exists in absolute terms, but we see it the way it is being transformed by our mind. Objects are not “things”, but “ontograms”, things that write. The horn of a rhinoceros is a mutilated-life-narrating nib. The mask, torn from the face, keeps repeating itself in mirrors that contain written words become objects. An ebony moor looks as though it is motionless, but it’s turned towards the wall, the interface to freedom. All the tears compressed in the rock-salt by the hellish suffering of men and women, take us back to the sea. And never has the sea been a friend to man.

Lost in quantum translation

The world of the quark has everything to do
with a jaguar circling in the night.
ARTHUR SZE, *River, River*

Like during Pink Floyd’s concert without an audience in Pompei in 1971, in Africa they perform to the spirits of the dead. And in Venice, for whom should people paint and accumulate pictures on the walls? What heavens and hells are spread on the floor? Where is everybody? Is anybody there?
It is incorrect to say that, with the artist, we go and see what is hidden under the carpets; we intend to be ferrymen *through* the carpets (the animals that provided their wool, the plants and minerals their colours, the knotters’ fingers, the tramplers’ feet, the owners’ pride, the eyes of whoever is looking at them now). And dust, for sure. The problem comes with the fact that dust is a two-dimensional version of deep events: its particles have accumulated next to each other during different times under different conditions; and they have been mixed up by human and climatic agents. Now they are entangled (intertwined, inseparable, permeable) like mayonnaise, a complex system of egg, oil, lemon, salt and air (everybody forgets about the air) that, once assembled, it is impossible to separate out back into its components. The proxemics of dust particles was rearranged by its life history: different times coexist under the carpet. These particles are like the stars.
When I look at the sky, I see cubic stars. Of course, to us they appear on a plane, just like the landscapes of Venice through the grids and *camera lucida* of painters, or simply spread on a palace’s windows: we inside and the lights outside. But the plane projection we call “starry sky” is made out of celestial bodies with different pasts, some extinct, some dying off, some exploding; one is here, and the one that seems the nearest on the projection plane is instead in another dimension (backwards in space and remote in time). The starry sky is a space-time paradox: at the same time (synchronicity) we see different times.
Stars and dust particles communicate via wormholes, interconnected space-time shafts that are the shortcut between one point of the universe and another at more than the speed of light, made possible by the shriving up of space and time inside black holes. For physicists, it is not clear if it would be possible to pass through a wormhole without destabilising it or being killed.

A place like Ca' Rezzonico is dripping with chrono-diversity: layers on layers of actions and objects that have taken place there – a place with defined area and history – over time. It is a multidimensional place: besides the known three, you also have history, culture and the space-time contraction. In a condominium, you can literally pass through your neighbour if you walk across a landing at a different time (sometimes a scent in the air is sufficient to give you this sensation). Consequently, every place we move in today, or any exhibited object, places us face-to-face with a cloud of probabilistic ghosts.
And here we arrive at quantum physics. The observer creates the experimental object by means of a correct interference between observed and observer. This principle claims that the simultaneous measurement of position and momentum of a particle has almost impossible uncertainty values. Either you know its speed or you know where the particle is. For classical physics and common sense this is an absurdity. It is not enough. The observer perturbs the observed, which is brought out of the cloud of its probabilistic states (*Eigenstaat*) only by measurement itself.
In substance, our universe is made of interferences: light can be a wave and/or a particle according to the experiment we are dealing with. Light does not have properties of its own, but it acquires them in the interference by and with the observer: which is the bread and butter of the artist. We have to highlight the world's *n* dimensions: pictures are not flat, but dense with multidimensional stratigraphic information to be revealed (who, what, why, when and the me that is looking). Sculptures, notwithstanding Michelangelo's opinion, do talk. They tell stories that are complex in a mathematical sense and involve the mutiverse, the set of possible universes created by its observers. These observers utilise models involving a profound serial construction: what is a thing, of which material should it be made, why does it have a given form, why does it change (that is: when it ends being this thing and becomes another), when and by which physical or psychic signals can we say that there is nothing left.
Giandomenico Tiepolo put a hole in many of his paintings: in a fence, in a screen, in the wall. This represents the negotiation between here and there that shows us the way to arrive at the Cosmodrome of the *New World*, where a peephole leads us away. Lost.

Reprise

These equations are not even wrong.
WOLFGANG PAULI, about quanta

To the anthropologist the continuum of human beings – genetically and culturally indissoluble – is oceanic: individuals and groups mix nonstop like waves on the beach or in the high seas. We, today, are temporary emergences, like the *velme* or mudbanks. *Velme* do not emerge: it is the sea that regularly recedes, sucked away by the cruise ships or absorbed by the expelled sands of prehistoric pile-drivers. Thus the artist has to remove the sea, or crystallise it forever in blocks of rock-salt.
This is the catastrophe of John von Neumann's infinite regress: any measurement is itself a quantum system containing uncertainty; a second measurement, used to monitor the first, contains its own dose of uncertainty, and so on to infinity. This uncertainty ends with the experimenter. This is what happens to the abandoned *moreta* mask, its gag bit still wet with saliva, lost between two barber's mirrors that multiply it to infinity. Someone save her.

Marzia Migliora

Alberto Salza