

Subverting Identity: Cesare Viel's Performative Works

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Abstract: “Enough with us, you, them/Enough with me, you, her/Enough with him.” The identity issue is one of the major topics in the performative works of the renowned Italian artist Cesare Viel (1964), as it emerges from the above quoted incipit of the script of his first performance, *I Folletti irritati*, held during the Art Fair in Bologna, on 28 January 1996. The identity questioned by Viel in his works is neither a monad nor the subject of a sort of histrionic autobiographical narration. As a part of the self that reveals itself during the performative action, it is a blurry entity constantly modified by the discrete and uncertain crossing of presences, spaces, and times, which are in turn liable to change and to be reinterpreted. This concept of a constantly subverted identity is explored through the metaphoric representation (*Infinita ricomposizione*, 2015), the lecture-performances devoted to his favorite writers (Cesare Pavese—*Ritratto di un amico*, 2000), the re-enactment of events of his youth (*Lost in meditation*, 1999), the camouflage (*To the Lighthouse. Cesare Viel as Virginia Woolf*, 2004, 2005, 2017), in the latter case following a line that, from Marcel Duchamp's “*Rose Sélavy*”, crosses 20th century art, culminating in the disguised self-portraits by Andy Warhol and Urs Lüthi. This contribution aims to highlight the dialogue that Cesare Viel consciously engages with influential theoreticians of performative and relational identity such as Judith Butler, Adriana Cavarero, Gilles Deleuze, to name just a few of them, which the artist subtly recalls when he states: “What's identity but a ‘difference’, a continuous deviation from what we think we are?”

1. Introduction

The Post Human traveling exhibit, curated by Jeffrey Deitch in 1992, represents the first effort made in Europe to collect and systematize some of the most significant artistic reflections regarding identity and corporeity, reflections that had been developed during the eighties and the early nineties by artists such as Cindy Sherman (consider, for example, the *Untitled* works, obscene compositions of anthropomorphic figures and organic and inorganic elements). Although many celebrated artists are absent (Orlan and Stelarc, to name a couple) and although there are occasionally theoretical overlaps between “post-human” and “trans-human” in the catalogue's

text¹, for Deitch the research that led to curating this exhibition forebode the season of the post-human: “The modern era might be characterized as a period of the discovery of self. Our current post-modern era can be characterized as a transitional period of the disintegration of self. Perhaps the coming “post-human” period will be characterized by the reconstruction of self” (Deitch 1992, p. 32). Continuing with this reasoning, Deitch states:

Many contemporary people have little sense of past and little sense of future, only a sense of the present. Disconnected from traditional family history, people are more prone to start their self-identity with the present. There is less need to psychologically interpret or “discover” oneself and more of a feeling that the self can be altered and reinvented. [. . .] Reality, fantasy, and fiction are merging into the inspiration for a new model of personality organization. The interchangeable identities of Madonna and the extraordinary self-transformation of Ivana Trump are examples of this shuffling of reality and fantasy into a reassembled fictional personality that quickly becomes fact. The search for the absolute “true” self has been replaced by a constant scanning for new alternatives. (ibid.)

Two years later, the exhibition entitled *soggettoSoggetto* (24 June–28 August 1994), curated by Francesca Pasini and Giorgio Verzotti at the Castello di Rivoli, near Turin (not surprisingly *Post Human* was held at this venue 1 October–22 November 1992), revives this questioning of “modern” identity. Whereas “modern” identity had been conceived as monolithic and often predetermined, a “mobile perspective” was now favored (Alfano Miglietti 1997, p. 65).

Far from the interest that *Post Human* places on the social representation of the body/simulation or of the enhanced body (Deitch dedicates a large part of the catalogue to tabloids images taken from advertising and elsewhere, which express the social questions about new bodies, efficient minds, rapid communications), *soggettoSoggetto* can be inserted in the trend labeled by Nicolas Bourriaud a few years later as “Relational Art” (Bourriaud 1998). This movement was already taking shape in the early 1980s, for example, with Maria Lai’s celebrated installation *Legarsi alla*

¹ Keeping in line with (Subrizi 2008): on the one hand, the post-human individual moves away from the anthropocentric position traditionally reserved for human beings, sets himself in ontological continuity with animals and nature, and tends towards a hybridization with his own technological inventions; on the other hand, the trans-human individual, by means of technology, desires to level and resolve the undesirable defects in the human nature (such as illness and aging), thereby remaining well within an anthropocentric position. Jeffrey Deitch seems to make his own trans-human assumptions writing in the *Post Human* catalogue: “Our society will soon have access to the biotechnology that will allow us to make direct choices about how we want our species to further evolve. This new techno-evolutionary phase will bring us far beyond eugenics. Our children’s generation could very well be the last generation of ‘pure’ humans” (Subrizi 2008, p. 30).

montagna in 1981: this installation counted on a close collaboration between the artist and the people of her hometown, Ulassai, in Sardinia, a veritable subjugation of the latter to the mountain dominating it.

The contemporary peculiarity that Italian curators aim to exhibit is that of the “intersubjective” relationship among the artists, their works and the spectators, which calls into question the connection “subject–object” in favor of “subject–subject”; it is generally deemed that the relationship between a human being and environmental elements that surround him/her can no longer be exhausted in a unidirectional dynamic of possession, but rather that it should develop into an encounter. Francesca Pasini writes:

“As I become, I remember you” (Iragray, *To be Two*, 1994). And this is the perception that I have of art: it is never connected to the possession of the object, but to *my becoming*, that is, to that development of awareness which can take shape by capturing that which strikes me about a color, an image, a phrase, a sound, and translating it into an expression of my own. It is an intersubjective movement that allows me to bring a moment to life and at the same time gives consistency to the perception of my contemporaneity, whether I stand in front of artwork from the past, or I participate in an artwork of the present.² (Pasini and Verzotti 1994, pp. 12–13)

Besides well-known international artists such as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Philippe Parreno, or Wolfgang Tillmans, some Italian artists of the generation of the 1960s are also represented in the exhibition *soggettoSoggetto*, including Maurizio Cattelan, Eva Marisaldi, Vanessa Beecroft, Liliana Moro, and Cesare Viel.

In the present paper I examine specifically the works by Cesare Viel, performance artist and professor at the Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti of Genoa, dividing them into two categories and following a chronological order whenever possible. On the one hand I analyze works that counterpose an identity in continuous performative construction to the presumed binary nature of gender identity; on the other hand, I consider works where Viel incorporates the stories and identities of subjects other than his own—often literary figures—in a process of narration and, more importantly, of auto-narration, far from the representative forms and the mimesis of theater. His works are analyzed with a particular regard to the theoretical and philosophical

² My translation from Italian: ““Mentre divengo io mi ricordo di te” (L. Iragaray, *Essere due*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1994). E questa è la percezione che ho dell’arte: non è mai legata al possesso dell’oggetto, ma al *mio divenire*, cioè a quella crescita di consapevolezza che trova forma nel trattenere ciò che mi ha colpito di un colore, di un’immagine, di una frase, di un suono e nel tradurlo nella mia espressione. È un movimento intersoggettivo che mi consente di rendere vivo il ricordo e al contempo dà consistenza alla percezione della mia contemporaneità, sia quando mi trovo di fronte all’arte del passato, sia quando partecipo a quella del presente”.

points raised by the artist himself in seminars and workshops held at the University of Genoa in 2018 and 2019. Carla Lonzi's concept of "relational identity" and Adriana Cavarero's "narratable identity", for example, are the basis of the two categories outlined above, as well as Deleuze's theories on the "deterritorialization" and Judith Butler's reflections on the "performative identity of gender".

2. What Kind of Identity?

In *Soggettosoggetto* Cesare Viel exhibits a video installation entitled *Androginia* (Figure 1). Here, for the first time, he confronts the issue of identity as a process in continuous transformation, which he will further develop. Two aluminum-lined, photographic panels are lowered from the ceiling in the room housing the work. Each panel is set opposite to a monitor, set against a wall. The monitors show a video of the artist reading a text of his own creation, dubbed respectively by an Italian and an English actress. The panels show photographic portraits of the two dubbing actresses in a cutting room, with lines taken from Viel's typescript placed next to them (Figure 2).

This is not a simple speech that is recorded and dubbed but the result of an actual performance with no audience. It is carried out in a recording studio and achieved thanks to montage, violating the performative ideal of *hic et nunc*³ to obtain the surprising effect of alienation, helpful in surpassing a rigid understanding of identity⁴.

Well then, it's me that's talking to you. A person with an age and an experience. You that are listening to me, will look for a reason, an aim and a motive in my words. You that are seeing me, will try to identify a move that betrays a particular element or an identity in my presence. You will try to perceive a person. (Pasini and Verzotti 1994, p. 119)

The video starts with these words, almost challenging the preconceptions of the spectator regarding gender identity, with the caveat to not confuse the multiplicity of identity with multiple identity. We are in front of a specific person, with set characteristics, which do not correspond to the dichotomous distinction between

³ One of the first artists to display his body on video, thereby removing himself from the audience, was Bruce Nauman, whom Viel refers to in his action *Seasonal Affective Disorder*, which was inspired by *Art Make-Up* (1968), a video where Nauman applies make-up of various colors to his face and upper body.

⁴ In a lecture held at the University of Genoa on 13 March 2019, Viel defined this room as a "Brechtian box", making an explicit reference to the technique of alienation used by the German dramatist, which conveys the impossibility of completely identifying with the representation on the stage, and, consequently, the ignition of an analytical flame that investigates the social issues being represented.

male and female and, above all, are not fixed but rather in a magmatic sequence of calm and excitement.

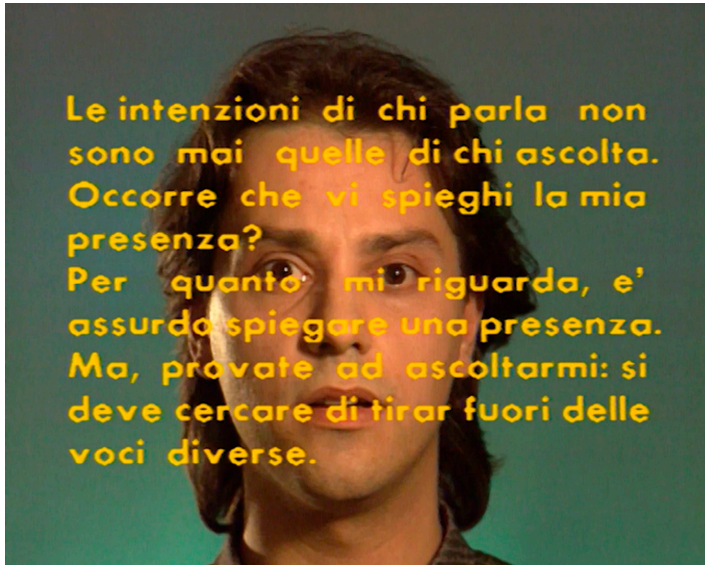


Figure 1. Cesare Viel, *Androginia*, 1994, video, color, sound, 8', courtesy of the artist. Used with permission.



Figure 2. Cesare Viel, *Androginia*, 1994, installation, two monitors, two videos, two color photographic panels on aluminum, 110 × 120 cm each, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Castello di Rivoli, photo Roberto Marossi. Used with permission.

These ideas can be traced back to Gilles Deleuze's writings, a philosopher read regularly by Viel and a point of reference for his art. Deleuze held lectures on Spinoza at the University of Vincennes between November 1980 and March 1981, where he expressed the concept of the individual as a composition and a relationship of infinite bodies, continuously related to external influences which determine its capacity to express its own power⁵. The individual, in fact, is power and its body is "defined by the ensemble of relations which compose it, or, what amounts to exactly the same thing, by its power of being affected".⁶

In relation to this, it reacts to the encounters with the bodies that surround it, developing or consuming its own power; thus, it bears witness to a continuous variation in intensity, a topic that has a central role in several of Viel's works.

The philosopher and art critic, Carla Lonzi, who was among the first in Italy to deal with the issues of self-awareness and difference of the sexes, represents another source of inspiration for *Androginia*. In particular, within her dialogue with the sculptor and ex-partner Pietro Consagra, from which the book *Vai pure, Dialogo con Pietro Consagra* came into being, Lonzi is critically at odds with the system of society, of art, of relationship, and of the individual, a system dominated by an individualist perspective and, in the last analysis, a male chauvinistic one. She opposes this with a system radically based in reciprocity and relationship, by which to reach real self-awareness as well as awareness of the other: "For me relationship means reciprocal knowledge and a conscious modification of oneself

⁵ One of the many examples with which Deleuze disseminates his lectures can help to clarify this point and to comprehend how this concept relates to the individual, chiefly on a physical level:

"vous rappelez que les infiniment petits reçoivent constamment des influences du dehors, ils passent leur temps à être en rapport avec les autres collections d'infiniment petits. Supposez qu'une collection d'infiniment petits soit déterminée du dehors à prendre un autre rapport que celui sous lequel elle m'appartient. Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire? Ça veut dire: je meurs! [...] sous l'action de l'arsenic, les particules infiniment petites qui composent mon sang, qui composent mon sang sous tel rapport, vont être déterminées à entrer sous un autre rapport. Dès lors cet ensemble infini va entrer dans la composition d'un autre corps, ce ne sera plus le mien: je meurs!" ("www.webdeleuze.com", <https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/40>).

"you recall that the infinitely small are constantly influenced from the outside, they pass their time by being in relation with other collections of the infinitely small. Suppose that an infinite collection of the infinitely small is determined from the outside to take another relation than the one under which it belongs to me. What does this mean? It means that: I die! [...] under the action of arsenic, the infinitely small particles which compose the blood, which compose my blood under such a relation, are going to be determined to enter under another relation. Because of this, this infinite set is going to enter in the composition of another body, it will no longer be mine: I die!" ("www.webdeleuze.com", <https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/42>).

⁶ Translation from French by Timothy S. Murphy: "doit être défini par l'ensemble des rapports qui le composent, ou, ce qui revient exactement au même, par son pouvoir d'être affecté" ("www.webdeleuze.com", <https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/11>).

within this framework. For this to occur, all the other aims of life must be secondary” (Lonzi 2011, p. 12)⁷. These other aims of life are, fundamentally, self-affirmation and improvement of the individual condition. This attitude substantiates the cultural myth of the protagonist, according to which the individual, a man in particular, behaves, develops his self-awareness, and creates a self on his own, extracted and removed from the environment that surrounds him. In the artistic sphere this myth is strictly connected with the romantic idea of the artist as a genius devoted to his artwork, unconcerned with relationships and identities outside himself, unless they are instrumental to or useful for passive incitement. Carla Lonzi refutes this point of view: “This activity which I carry out [. . .] is ultimately based on human relationships, on reciprocal knowing, on the demolition of the cultural myth of the protagonist. It’s based on showing that things always unfold through a dialogue, that truths are always in relationship. [. . .] It is a culture [the one of the myth of the protagonist], indeed a way of becoming conscious that changes when another historic subject enters and says ‘look, things are not at all like this, I know because I have become conscious of what I represent, and I’m sorry but I will no longer allow a schematization that excludes me, that doesn’t correspond to the truth and doesn’t mirror my experience at all’”⁸ (ibid., p. 40).

Carla Lonzi does not in the least call into question the limits of gender, rather she emphasizes the differences in male and female attitudes. On the other hand, Cesare Viel in *Androginia*, while reclaiming the relational dimension suggested by Lonzi, advances the hypothesis of an identity without boundaries. It is an identity which, entrusting itself to the flux of desire and the urge to break free from norms and standards(I will return to this point), takes charge of its own becoming: Viel replaces the boundaries of gender, which impede the flow of becoming, with the divergences, which exalt the power of that flow.

Cesare Viel presented one of his first public performances, *Seasonal Affective Disorder*, at Artra Gallery in Milan in 1998. The artist is seated in front of a long table that is covered with colorful sheets of paper, cosmetics and a mirror. He puts the make up on and colors his face while a recorded voice—his own—describes and

⁷ My translation from Italian: “Per me rapporto significa conoscenza reciproca e modificazione cosciente di sé all’interno di questa. Perché ciò avvenga tutti gli altri scopi della vita devono andare in sottordine”.

⁸ My translation from Italian: “Questa attività che svolgo io [. . .] in definitiva si basa sul rapporto umano, sulla conoscenza reciproca, sulla demolizione proprio del mito culturale del protagonista. Si basa sul far vedere che le cose si svolgono sempre attraverso un dialogo, che le verità sono sempre in rapporto [. . .] È una cultura [quella del mito del protagonista], appunto, un modo di prendere coscienza delle cose che cambia quando un altro soggetto storico entra dentro e dice “guardate, le cose non stanno affatto così, lo so io perché personalmente ho preso coscienza di quello che ho rappresentato, e mi dispiace ma non lascio più che avvenga una schematizzazione che mi esclude, non corrisponde a verità e non rispecchia affatto la mia esperienza”.

comments, somewhat contemptuously, on the situation, acting as a hidden alter-ego and so adding a certain note of alienation.

In the book *Cesare Viel, Azioni*, edited by Carla Subrizi in 2008, the artist reports having read about the illness known as “Seasonal Affective Disorder” in a reportage written by Luigi Malerba. The disorder strikes inhabitants of Northern Europe due to a lack of sunlight in winter. Viel states: “This particular environmental condition supposedly causes a deep depression in some individuals, bringing a person to the painful perception of a loss of that meaning which each of us constructs daily in order to live. I thought it could be a great inspiration for a possible project”⁹ (Subrizi 2008, p. 24). The disorientation provoked by a state of depression, inertia, and fatigue is the starting point for a reflection on identity, which Viel sees in constant movement and flux, in a continuous process of deterritorialization. Referencing Deleuze again, “Territory only has value by reason of movement by which one can exit. [. . .] There is no territory without a path for exit from the territory and there is no exit from the territory, that is deterritorialization, without at the same time an effort at deterritorialization elsewhere”¹⁰ (Deleuze 1996, 00:14.37). These feelings produce the overwhelming impulse to cover his face with make-up, to remove it and apply it again—to enter a manifestation of identity, and then come out of it. Despite the absence of excitement or dramatization, Viel’s gesture is that of a frustrated groping around, whose outcome collapses in the search itself; the concept of an objective is shattered and the failure, the mistake, is accepted as a real and integral part of the search for identity:

This impossible state of being, this condition of soul’s misery, of dismay, in other words, of confusion, would have caused this man, whom I saw—or rather glimpsed, because I only saw him from behind (as I was behind him)—to start thinking that he was someone else and to begin to furiously apply make-up to his face, his eyes, his mouth. Honestly, almost outrageous! And above all, I think, because in the end he’s still the same person, himself, in other words the same one, who indecently tries to be someone else,

⁹ My translation from Italian in (Subrizi 2008, p. 30): “Questa particolare condizione ambientale produrrebbe in alcuni individui un profondo umore depressivo, e porterebbe alla dolorosa percezione della perdita del senso che ognuno di noi si costruisce quotidianamente per vivere. Ho pensato che si trattava di un ottimo spunto per un possibile lavoro”.

¹⁰ My translation from French: “le territoire ne vaut que par rapport au mouvement par lequel on en sort [. . .] il n’y a pas de territoire, sans un vecteur de sortie du territoire, il n’y a pas de sortie de territoire c’est-à-dire de déterritorialisation, sans en même temps un effort pour se reterritorialiser ailleurs, sur autre chose”.

instead of really becoming someone else, he becomes himself trying to be someone else.¹¹ (Subrizi 2008, p. 30)

Returning to the reflection on the identity of gender, blatantly interpreted from a relational point of view, in 1999 Cesare Viel produced a video, *Domande d'identità*, in which he interviews people he encounters on the streets of Milan. The artist, in this case, has an important forerunner: Pier Paolo Pasolini who, during the filming of his documentary *Comizi d'amore*, travelled throughout Italy with an almost encyclopedic effort to interview people from every region, age-group, and gender, and from different social and working classes, and collected opinions about taboo, sexual habits, matrimonial law, and public decency. Pasolini went on to, with the help of the writer Alberto Moravia and the psychoanalyst Cesare Musatti, put the public relationship Italians had with sex and the awareness with which they behaved within the sexual sphere under the microscope.

Thirty-five years later, Viel seems to renew the Pasolinian intent, albeit moving forward with a more simplified, and less analytical, approach. Certain themes in *Comizi d'amore*, such as the right to a divorce or to commit honor killings, the lawfulness in keeping women in an inferior status, have since been surpassed by a progressive development of awareness—or of righteousness. However, certain others, such as the difference between homosexuality and so-called “normalcy”, seem to be as yet unresolved. Interviewed by Viel on the right to gay marriage (in Italy in 1999 this law had not yet been contemplated), one girl responds: “They too have a right to live, for pity’s sake, if they were born like that . . . but only if they were born like that! I discriminate against those who are not gay, yet who perform homosexual acts. But those who are gay, poor souls, what can be done? Just as there are disabled people...unfortunately it’s not their fault”¹². (Viel 1999, 00:04.30).

What mainly interests Viel in this sort of action/investigation is understanding how people consider gender identity. Through questions regarding “tolerance” towards homosexuals, acceptance of their right to marriage and to adopt children, the artist attempts to examine questions such as: “is sexual difference natural? Are we born a man or a woman, or do we become one? Is it a cultural question

¹¹ My translation from Viel in (Subrizi 2008, p. 30): “Questo stato d’animo impossibile, questa condizione di miseria dell’anima, di sconcerto, di confusione insomma, avrebbe portato questo tizio che qui ho visto, o meglio ho intravisto, perché l’ho visto sempre di spalle (io restandogli dietro), a incominciare a pensare di essere qualcun altro e a truccarsi con ostinazione il volto, la faccia, gli occhi, la bocca. Insomma una cosa quasi indecente! Soprattutto, dico io, perché in fondo è sempre la stessa persona, cioè se stesso, il medesimo insomma, che cerca indecentemente di essere un altro e, invece di diventare realmente un altro, diventa un se stesso che cerca di diventare qualcun altro”.

¹² My translation from Italian: “Hanno diritto di vivere anche loro, per carità, se sono nati così ... Ma solo se sono nati così! Io discrimino chi non è gay, chi lo fa. Chi invece lo è, poverino, cosa bisogna fare? Come ci sono gli handicappati . . . Purtroppo non è colpa loro”.

tied to schooling, to family, to a country's culture, to society?"¹³ (ibid., 00:02.50). It is significant that often the dialogue is interrupted early on, due to an excess of hostility or because of the embarrassment of the interviewee, and you encounter a sort of "scandalous barrier", which blocks the dialogue before it can touch upon the themes that are central to Viel's art. With regard to this, it is interesting to cite the conversation between Pasolini and Moravia half way through the film *Comizi d'amore*:

- What you understand cannot shock you [...] A person who is shocked is someone who sees something which is different from them and, at the same time, threatening. Not only is it different, but it also threatens the person, both physically and in the terms of the image this person has of themselves. Outrage is fear of losing one's personality, it is a primitive fear [...]
- Indignation is thus part of our conservation instinct ¹⁴ (Pasolini 1964, 00:48.19)

Therefore, one could consider scandal as a sort of agent of containment of the subject, which impedes recognition of the legitimacy of an identity in the making: *Domande d'identità* reflects on this agent. It provokes it, it probes its limits and uncertainties, but it also reveals the necessity of admitting its presence and its power in Italian society, which after 35 years does not appear to have changed at all, as far as conformity and cultural rigidity are concerned.

To conclude on the relationship between Viel and gender identity, it may be useful to consider a passage from the preface of the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler, an author that Viel associated with off and on. It summarizes the profound meaning of the performances taken under consideration until now:

The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question. When such categories come into question, the reality of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be "real," what we

¹³ My translation from Italian: "La differenza sessuale è naturale? Si nasce uomini e si nasce donne oppure lo si diventa? È una questione culturale legata alla scuola, alla famiglia, alla cultura di un Paese, alla società?"

¹⁴ "Le cose che si capiscono non scandalizzano ... La persona che si scandalizza vede qualcosa di diverso da se stesso e, al tempo stesso, di minaccioso da se stesso. Non soltanto una cosa è diversa, ma minaccia la propria persona, sia fisicamente sia nel senso dell'immagine che questa persona si fa di se stesso. Lo scandalo in fondo è una paura di perdere la propria personalità, è una paura primitiva ... ""Lo scandalo è un elemento dell'istinto di conservazione" ((Pasolini 1964), 00:48.19).

invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. (Butler 1999, p. XXIII)

3. Cesare Viel as ...

Between the nineties and the beginning of the new century, Viel's art takes a slightly different turn. Staying within the line of reasoning of multiple identities, it no longer presents itself blatantly inside the question of gender in the strict sense, but moves its attention to the investigation of narratable identity. He openly refers to the essay *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti, Filosofia della narrazione*, published in 1998 by Adriana Cavarero, important philosopher on the subject of sexual difference¹⁵.

Why [...] is the meaning of identity *always* entrusted to others' telling of one's own life story? Hannah Arendt would have no trouble unpacking this strange paradox, it follows from the fact that the category of personal identity postulates *another* as necessary. Even before another can render tangible the identity of someone by telling him/her his/her story, many others have indeed been spectator of the constitutive exposure of the very same identity to their gaze [...] "The urge toward self-display by which living things fit themselves into a world of appearances' makes of identity an in-born [*in-nato*] exposure of the *who* to the gaze and to others' questions [...] Only in Arendt does this cosmic feast of reciprocity marry with radical phenomenology, which for her is concentrated in the formula for which "*Being and Appearing coincide*" [...] The expositive and the relational character of identity are thus indistinguishable. One always appears to someone. One cannot appear if there is no one else there.¹⁶ (Cavarero 2000, p. 20)

¹⁵ In the artwork *Tu che mi hai disegnato* (for more in-depth information see: (Valenti 2015)) the reference to Cavarero's essay is evident, but, as we will see, the theories of the Italian philosopher also have a major influence on other works by Viel.

¹⁶ Translation from Italian by Paul A. Kottman: "Perché ... il significato dell'identità è *sempre* affidato al racconto altrui della propria storia di vita? Hannah Arendt non avrebbe nessuna difficoltà a sciogliere questo strano paradosso. Esso consegue al fatto che la categoria di identità personale postula sempre come necessario l'*altro*. Prima ancora che un altro possa rendere tangibile l'identità di qualcuno raccontandone la storia, molti altri sono stati infatti spettatori del costitutivo esporsi dell'identità medesima al loro sguardo ... "L'impulso all'autoesibizione, [che consiste] nel reagire col mostrarsi all'effetto schiacciante dell'essere mostrati" (Arendt, *La vita della mente*), fa dell'identità un in-nato esporsi del *chi* allo sguardo e alla domanda altrui ... In Arendt questa festa cosmica della reciprocità si sposa con il fenomenismo radicale da lei concentrato nella formula per cui "Essere e Apparire coincidono" (Arendt, *La vita della mente*) ... Il carattere espositivo e quello relazionale dell'identità sono perciò indistinguibili: si appare sempre a qualcuno, non si può apparire se non c'è nessun altro" (Cavarero 1997, pp. 31–32).

Obviously, the themes of gender that interested Viel until now do not disappear into thin air; on the contrary, they continue to make up a robust theoretical and methodological basis. Nevertheless, there is an evident willingness on the part of the performer to concentrate his work on authors and artists who have made their mark on his life, and those who have become constructive parts of his identity: he incorporates them, evokes them, speaks of them and, at the same time, narrates himself through their concerns and words without indulging in any staging and without leading the audience into a process of identification. “Witnesses of the self”: he defines them as such in one of his lectures held at the University of Genoa in the Spring of 2019.

In 1999, Viel planned a performance in Turin in room 346 of the Hotel Roma, the same room where the writer and poet Cesare Pavese took his life at the end of August in 1950. The intention of the artist was to read a short text entitled *Ritratto di un amico* to a few people at a time. The text, by another Torinese writer, Natalia Ginzburg, was written to remember her friend and colleague who passed away prematurely. With this reading, Cesare Viel wants to be a conscious medium in an environment charged with energy and meaning, “creating an emotional short circuit and promoting the experience of shared mourning” (Viel 1999, 00:01.29). On 24 November 1999, the day before the performance, two articles appeared in the main daily newspaper “La Stampa” that questioned the legitimacy of Viel’s intentions: one by Pavese’s granddaughter and the other—more incendiary—written by the critic Lorenzo Mondo, who goes so far as to accuse the artist of being a “vampire”, wanting to make a spectacle of the tragic death of the writer¹⁷. Under the pressure of this “scandal”, the hotel managers denied the artist permission, previously given, to use room 346. They proposed, rather, that he meet his audience in the lobby. The artist declined their offer, choosing to call off the act. The next day, the people who had reserved to attend the reading found Viel in front of the entrance to the hotel. After explaining what had happened and his reasons for canceling the performance, he distributed photocopies of *Ritratto di un amico*, revealing again his tendency to be a relational artist.

As in the case of *Domande d’identità*, it is interesting to note the social reactions when it comes to facing a limitation or a taboo, in this case the one represented by death: scandal, scorn, denial, shame, and fear.

In 2000, Viel returned to reflecting on Pavese’s death and to what had happened the year before. With the help of director Gianfranco Barberi, he produced a film entitled *Hotel Roma (Ritratto di un amico)*, in which he finally holds the disputed reading in room 346 (clearly without an audience) and commits himself to a metaphorical

¹⁷ Lorenzo Mondo, *Vampiri abusivi*, “La Stampa”, 24 Novembre 1999.

“dérive” in Turin, whose aim is not to actualize a psychogeographic situationist map or to discover the unity of environment or influential trends, but to conduct a difficult and sober study of the slugs of a city that does not exist anymore, trying to trace back in them the presence of Cesare Pavese¹⁸:

The city that was dear to our friend is the same as ever. There’s been some change, but nothing much: they’ve added trolleys, built some subways. There are no new movie houses. The old ones still remain with their long-ago names, names whose syllables, when repeated, reawaken our childhood and youth [. . .] Our city, we realize now, resembles the friend we lost, who loved it dearly. It is industrious, as he was, frowning in its fevered, stubborn busyness, yet at the same time indolent, inclined to be idle and dream. In this city that so resembles him, we sense our friend come to life again wherever we go. At every corner, at every turn, it seems he might suddenly appear—the tall figure in his dark martingale coat, face hidden in the collar, hat pulled down over his eyes¹⁹. (Ginzburg 2002, pp. 62–63)

The film shows the artist progressively affirming his own presence in the room: his books, his cigarettes, his unmade bed, his clothes. His inhabiting the room is the departure point for a dialogue with the dead writer rather than his theatrical personification or interpretation. In fact, we perceive the consistency of Viel’s actions for the length of the whole film: a sense of tense and insoluble suspension, which allows one to distinguish him from the writer with whom he establishes a relationship of reciprocal narrative. This sense of non-presence is all the more felt in a hotel room, which is by definition a transitory space, but its substance also echoes in Viel’s later performances.

¹⁸ Dérive, born as a playful activity within Lettrism, is established as a conscious act of urban wandering during the development of Situationism: its aim is the crossing of different environmental units that constitute a city (an environmental unit is the psychogeographic version of a neighborhood, separated from its usual urban context). Their mapping is based on influential streams which develop from the state of mind of the person moving through those places. For more in depth information, as well as for bibliographic information about the theory of dérive developed by Guy Debord and regarding Situationism in general, see: (Careri 2006; Lippolis 2007)

¹⁹ Translation from Italian by Lynne Sharon Schwartz: “La città che era cara al nostro amico è sempre la stessa: c’è qualche cambiamento, ma cose da poco: hanno messo dei filobus, hanno fatto qualche sottopassaggio. Non ci sono cinematografi nuovi. Quelli antichi ci sono sempre, coi nomi d’una volta: nomi che ridestano in noi, a ripeterli, la giovinezza e l’infanzia . . . La nostra città rassomiglia, noi adesso ce ne accorgiamo, all’amico che abbiamo perduto e che l’aveva cara; è, come era lui, laboriosa, aggrondata in una sua operosità febbrile e testarda; ed è nello stesso tempo svogliata e disposta a oziare e a sognare. Nella città che gli rassomiglia, noi sentiamo rivivere il nostro amico dovunque andiamo; in ogni angolo e ad ogni svolta ci sembra che possa a un tratto apparire la sua alta figura dal cappotto scuro a martingala, la faccia nascosta nel bavero, il cappello calato sugli occhi.” (Ginzburg 1962, pp. 15–16).

“Woolf wrote enlightening pages about male–female gender, and about the androgynous mind of the artist. The question of identity in my work is a strange version of Arianna’s thread: it never led me out, but maybe had me enter further into the labyrinth. It was inevitable to meet Virginia Woolf sooner or later and, somehow, to be possessed by her”²⁰, writes Viel in the introduction to his first performance dedicated to the English author: *To the Lighthouse, Cesare Viel as Virginia Woolf* (Figure 3). If its productions and dynamics change based on the location in which this performance takes place, the fixed point of this action is the “halfway” disguise, for which Viel uses a portrait of Woolf taken by Gisèle Freund two years before the author’s death. Viel wears a wig and make-up, a silk blouse with a velvet ribbon, a dark jacket, and men’s trousers and shoes. What happens is what the performer himself calls “a gradual aesthetic convergence”, strengthened by the presence of an actual set with a sofa, a table, a twenties-style lamp, and the photograph of Woolf that inspired the whole action. During the performance, Viel’s recorded voice recites parts of the second chapter of *To the Lighthouse, Time Passes*, a text with great performative power (it recounts how natural forces on the Island of Skye won back the abandoned house of the Ramseys), while the artist, seated, experiences together with his audience the vision evoked by the novel’s passages. This performance takes place in a room of Teatro degli Atti of Rimini in October 2004. A year later, at PAC—Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea in Milan—the performer got up repeatedly from his seat to walk along the railing of the internal balcony. In 2017 the artist decided to take this performance to the Teatro Sociale of Camogli, a historic Italian theater that had recently reopened in the little town of the Ligurian Riviera. The average spectators of this theater were mainly accustomed to symphonies and traditional plays or dramas: Viel’s minimalistic gestures, his distinctly notable disguise, and his placid, continuous, narrating voice caused a sense of unruliness and boredom in an audience so foreign to contemporary forms of art expression—in a brief phone conversation the artist himself told me that his gallerists, colleagues, and friends who attended the performance referred to the annoyance and displeasure felt by the audience. Ideally, boredom conquers the visual space that is being progressively occupied by forms of entertainment to which the contemporary individual submits himself: a relational “net” is woven, upon which the art of narrating and listening is based. One enters into a dimension where time has no direction towards a given target, but is felt as pure marching of time. The mechanism of boredom makes any sort of identification impossible for the spectator. Viel does not present himself as an actor,

²⁰ My translation from Italian in (Subrizi 2008, p. 66): “La Woolf scrisse pagine illuminanti sul genere maschile e femminile, e sulla mente androgina dell’artista. La questione dell’identità nel mio lavoro è uno strano filo d’Arianna: non mi ha fatto uscire ma, caso mai, entrare sempre più nella dimensione del labirinto. Era inevitabile prima o poi incontrare Virginia Woolf e, in qualche modo, farsene possedere”.

he does not pretend, he does not dramatize, he does not act, rather, he performs an act, and he shows himself as he acts. The aspect of boredom was perhaps less obvious in the spaces where the artist previously presented this performance. To let boredom emerge, an inexperienced audience was necessary. In this way, Viel achieves what he defines as “A physical and a metaphysical body. A fragmented screen, onto which others project parts of themselves, elements of desire, fears, emotions”²¹ (Subrizi 2008, p. 118). “The performance”, continues the artist,

can be the metaphorical space of a politics of sharing glances and bodies. A space where the performer may stand next to the others like a strange presence, discrete but unsettling. The body displayed in the performance is inevitably also a political body. The performing act consigns the body of the performer through its own exposure [. . .] to the other’s glance. A public and private self always in tension, an intersecting-self crossed by other selves who appear on the set, even if they are not completely aware. In fact, because they are not aware²². (ibid., p. 118)

The reference to the body of the performer as a political body brings us to consider one of Viel’s actions from 2003, which refers to the events of the previous year at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow. The theater was occupied by a group of Chechen independents who took 850 civilians as hostages while a show was taking place, asking for the immediate retreat of Russian troops from Chechnya. After days of negotiations, special Russian forces were able to penetrate the theater where the attackers were barricaded, thanks to a large amount of gas derived from fentanyl (a potent synthetic opioid painkiller) that was pumped into the theater. Thirty-three members of the separatist group and 129 hostages died during the seize as well as in the days following, due to wounds by firearms, heart failure, or suffocation.

The hostage crisis at Dubrovka Theater received growing media coverage from the beginning, reaching its peak once the journalists had full access to the inside of the theater. Photographs of the “black widows” piled up, lifeless, on the armchairs in the theater and often still wearing their explosive belts, were seen by the entire world.

²¹ Cesare Viel, *Il corpo relazionale della performance*, paper held at the conference *Le politiche del corpo*, Fondazione Baruchello, Rome on 29 May 2005. In (Subrizi 2008, p. 118). My translation from Italian: “Un corpo fisico e metaforico. Uno schermo frammentato, sul quale gli altri proiettano parti di sé, elementi di desiderio, paure, emozioni”.

²² My translation from Italian: “La performance può essere lo spazio metaforico di una politica di condivisione degli sguardi e dei corpi. Uno spazio in cui il performer stia accanto agli altri come una strana presenza umana in modo discreto ma perturbante. Il corpo esposto nella performance è inevitabilmente anche un corpo politico. L’azione performativa consegna il corpo del performer allo sguardo dell’altro attraverso l’esposizione del sé [. . .] Un sé pubblico e privato sempre in tensione, un sé-intersezione attraversato da altri sé che si mettono in scena, anche senza esserne completamente consapevole. Anzi proprio perché non ne è consapevole.”

In the introduction of *Il corpo del nemico ucciso*, the historian Giovanni De Luna talks about the bodies that he used as sources in writing his essay, bodies of victims of war: “in the majority of the cases these were bodies that were posed, dramatized, displayed in the best light to be photographed” (De Luna 2006, p. XIII). With a view to this, the bodies of the “black widows” can be defined as media bodies: impotent and harmless, exposed to the gaze of the audience, in a process of spectacularization of death triggered at the moment in which the theater was repossessed.



Figure 3. Cesare Viel, *To the Lighthouse*. Cesare Viel as Virginia Woolf, 2004, performance, Teatro degli Atti, Rimini, photo Carlo Fei. Used with permission.

Viel’s performance, entitled *Operazione Bufera* (Figure 4), reclaims one of the most iconic images of the entire media operation that developed around this massacre, and it restates it, or “re-mediate” it, in a manner that is similar to the one used for the portrait of Virginia Woolf. The subject in question is a fallen Chechen woman kamikaze spread out on a red armchair, head bent backwards, mouth half open, with a veil over her eyes. Viel, lit by a spotlight, appears to the audience sitting in the same position as the “black widow”, on a seat similar to the one in the Dubrovka Theater, but dressed as a man. In an environmental audio his recorded voice speaks aloud the possible stories and thoughts of some individuals present in the Dubrovka Theater during those dramatic days: a kamikaze, a hostage, a Chechen militant. Once again, Viel let other bodies pass through him, resorting to a narration that always makes clear his external position with respect to the events that surround the individuals he is talking about.



Figure 4. Cesare Viel, *Operazione Bufera*, 2003, performance, Piccolo Teatro Carambolage, BZ, color photo printing, 124 × 87 cm. Used with permission.

In this way, Viel rejects the alleged truth of live broadcasted news and images. In the setting that the audience has access to, at the Klein Kunst Theater in Bolzano or at the Fondazione Baruchello in Rome, Viel's body, clearly disguised, is a delayed body: it relates to a precise referent—to the image of the Chechen kamikaze—and at the same time it signals its distance from it, while his voice artificially recreates the supposed thoughts of the people who were inside the Dubrovka Theater. He takes inspiration from the newspaper and television news, with the awareness that whatever is reconstructed is definitively lost²³. Unlike the past performances, the artist does not engage in a dialogue with the protagonists of the hostage-taking—not even with the Chechen militant whom he impersonates—but he reflects on the process of dissemination of images, presenting himself as a simulacrum body. He does not incarnate them, but their media images.

²³ I refer to a contribution by (Alphen 2001) concerning the re-actualization of the Holocaust in the works of Christian Boltanski.

In one of Cesare Viel's last performances, *Verso Jorn* (Figure 5), held in October 2016, the pre-recorded voice of the artist is played in the living room in Casa Museo Jorn, in Albisola Marina, a little town on the Ligurian Western Riviera. Viel attempts to outline an emotional geography in the home of Asger Jorn, where the Danish artist lived from 1957 until close to his death. He tries to orient himself inside a stream of personal memories evoked by the place where he acts (Viel also lived in Albisola Marina from the age of 7 to 22; then he moved to Genoa to get his degree in Art History with a thesis on Asger Jorn and the Co.Br.A group), which inevitably meets with artistic impressions and theoretical references (particularly with Guy Debord's Situationism and Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's "thousand plateaus"):

I wanted to make a map of this whole process, but its borders are not clear to me, they get lost more and more; they unravel; they drift. It is impossible, I realize, to make a rational map, complete with these strange movements, groping around in the dark. Honestly, I cannot make this map in this room, because of all the overlapping levels: a complete and contradictory stratification of all the emotions.²⁴ (Viel 2016, 00:11.45)



Figure 5. Cesare Viel, *Verso Jorn*, 2016, performance, Casa Museo Jorn, Albisola Marina, photo Cocis Ferrari. Used with permission.

²⁴ My translation from Italian: "Pensavo di fare una mappa di tutto questo processo, ma i confini di questo disegno non mi sono chiari, si perdono sempre di più, si disfano, vanno alla deriva. È impossibile, me ne accorgo, fare una mappa razionale, esauriente di questi movimenti così strani, a tentoni nel buio. Insomma, non mi riesce di fare questa mappa in questa stanza, tanti sono i livelli che si accavallano uno sull'altro: una stratificazione intera e contraddittoria di tutte le emozioni."

Viel creates a physical and metaphorical map (like the body he was alluding to previously) of this “mutable current”, through the movement of some ceramic potsherds found in the basement of Jorn’s house, a proper example of the synthesis of the arts. Viel echoes here another of his performances, *Infinita ricomposizione* (Figures 6 and 7), in which, with the help of four assistants, he places and replaces colorful felt pieces on the black floor of the Pinksummer Gallery in Genoa. The forms are enlarged shapes taken from some of Henri Matisse’s paintings, an artist which Viel considers “able to cancel the hierarchy of compositional planes and create new meanings through their constant becoming”²⁵ (Valenti 2015, p. 101). Here the performer acts like a sort of shaman who feels the various levels in the room: he gradually becomes aware of them, he explores them and lets them be explored without prescribing a univocal way to do that, rather indicating a mutable point of tension, a variable path of power that vibrates between the gaps. “Maybe we can make a map that goes crazy, that jumps, a map that breathes, that wheezes and coughs, and even sings, [. . .] an unexpected map, invisible, made of dust, of dirt, of leftovers and remains, a map of losing one’s way”²⁶ (Viel 2016, 00:12.20).



Figure 6. Cesare Viel, *Infinita ricomposizione*, 2015–2019, PAC Milano, photo Lorenzo Palmieri. Used with permission.

²⁵ My translation from Italian: “capace di annullare le gerarchie dei piani compositivi e creare nuovi sistemi di senso attraverso il loro costante divenire”.

²⁶ My translation from Italian: “Forse si può fare una mappa che impazzisce, che salta, una mappa che respira, che rantola e tossisce, e forse anche che canta [. . .], una mappa imprevista, invisibile, fatta di polvere, di terriccio, di rimasugli e residui, una mappa del perdersi”.

In a lecture he held at the University of Genoa in Spring 2019, Cesare Viel declared his intent to get to a minimal degree in his actions in opposition not only to the request from the contemporary society for activeness and achievement, but also to what we could call the “performant side of the performance”, to the so-called “endurance performance”²⁷. The latter celebrates the pure, and at times spectacular, endurance of the artist’s body. Viel indeed intends to work on the opposite aspect of boredom, “namely the first level of the unfamiliar: once boredom passes, a strong, non-utilitarian attention is activated towards an experiential journey which stands at the center of the performance”²⁸. The spectator is thereby encouraged not to be surprised and astounded by what he observes, but rather to concentrate and increase his own emotional and intellectual alertness.



Figure 7. Cesare Viel. *Infinita ricomposizione*, performance, 2019, PAC Milano, photo Lorenzo Palmieri. Used with permission.

It is first and foremost on a similar conceptual level that Viel develops both his criticism regarding the biological and cultural separation between masculine and feminine and his belief that identity is all but an independent construct, solid and

²⁷ In *The Burnout Society*, the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2010) speak about the passage, precisely in late Capitalism, from the “obedience-subject” to the “achievement-subject”.

²⁸ Cesare Viel in the lecture held on 27 February 2019 at the University of Genoa.

self-contemplative. The alternative he offers is a fluctuating identity, protean and relational.

In an interview with the art critic Emanuela De Cecco about the conceptual and practical development of his work, the artist states:

The form that seemed to me to be the most appropriate one was the dialogue, the conversation. [. . .] Confronting the proposition of language with the awareness of speaking has helped me to reconsider an ethical dimension by making use of the possibility to say to myself: it is me speaking and therefore I am conscious. (De Cecco 1992, p. 64)

Hence, the shaping of a critical identity in Viel's works is enucleated foremost in becoming aware of himself as an individual, through a dialogue, to then become different-from-himself, within a process that is never fully accomplished but is in an ongoing transformative tension. For this reason, it is important to conclude by quoting once again from the text of *Androginia*, a sort of manifesto for all of Viel's work to date:

We all have to really think that we are plural, and that gradually become something that wasn't there before. A person who didn't exist before, but one makes oneself heard because one constructs oneself together with other people's voices and presences. The other that I am, the outside that belongs to me: because we are all involved. I know I could be very happy if the pretences that I'm working out were useful in giving a new sense to identity. It's difficult: I don't want to offer all of this as an accomplished fact. So, I tell myself: don't think of a fixed identity but think, rather, of anyone who is searching one's own existence for a path without prejudice, without set limits. (Pasini and Verzotti 1994, p. 119)

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