Along the Line – Language at the Threshold

Statement by **Claudia Mongini**, researcher and moderator of the Symposium **Language as ART – CODE as Memory**, as part of the Fluviale festival.
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FLUVIALE moves along a line. Across places, borders, languages and histories. A line that connects different territories, but that also encounters interruptions, discontinuities and transformations. A line may indicate a direction, mark a boundary, leave a trace, or become a written sign. Yet none of these functions belongs to the line forever. What a line does depends on the relations in which it participates.

The three artistic positions presented in Mikulov approach language from very different directions: through photography, performative writing and literature. In what follows, I would briefly examine how these artistic practices unsettle the idea of language as a predetermined field, revealing language itself as a process of experimentation.

Ewa Kaja — The uncertainty of the visible

In her photographic series *WBH, Westbahnhof 2019–2024*, Ewa Kaja returns over several years to a woman living at a tram stop near Vienna's Westbahnhof. The woman occupies a highly visible public space. She is surrounded by the movements of the city, by passengers, traffic, architecture and advertising. And yet, being visible does not necessarily mean being recognised. This observation might initially suggest that Kaja's photographs seek to make visible someone who has remained socially invisible. But I think the work raises a more difficult question.

The woman was already visible. What is at stake, then, seems to be not visibility itself, but the very conditions determining what is visible. By addressing passers-by through familiar visual codes, the advertisements in her surroundings promise ways of life, consumption and belonging. The woman's presence interrupts these codes.

Yet the photographs do not simply oppose two social realities. Nor do they place the woman in another predetermined place within an established order of meaning. They do not offer any revelation of identity or explain her situation. Rather, I would argue, the photographs disturb the apparent self-evidence of that order.

We recognise a public space, its functions and its visual language. But the relations through which this space becomes intelligible are no longer so obvious. What belongs to the foreground, and what constitutes the background? What attracts our attention, and what allows something to remain unnoticed despite its continuous presence?

Marshall and Eric McLuhan's reflections on the relation between figure and ground in *Laws of Media* (1988) may be helpful here: perception does not concern isolated objects alone; what appears as a figure depends upon an environment that usually escapes our attention. Kaja's photographs invite us precisely to reconsider this relation between figure and ground, which is extended once we take its temporal dimension into account. Because the work develops over several years, the images emerge from repeated encounters, from a relation whose development cannot be entirely anticipated. The photographer is therefore not an observer standing outside the situation; her own development becomes increasingly intertwined to the conditions through which the work takes shape.

Sabine Müller-Funk — Writing, tracing, erasing

In Sabine Müller-Funk's *Writing along the line, along the now*, writing becomes a performative event: the act of inscription unfolds in time, before the audience. This work follows an idea previously developed in *Leerschrift* (2013), where writing is produced by removing sand with a vacuum cleaner. The operation pursued by the artist is remarkable in its simplicity. We ordinarily imagine writing as the addition of a mark to a surface. Erasing, by contrast, means removing that mark. But here the very removal of material is what produces the inscription. And the continuation of that same operation can eventually make the very writing disappear.

Writing and erasing are therefore not simply two successive, opposed activities. The very operation that makes writing possible can also lead to its disappearance. What Sabine Müller-Funk's work problematises is the distinction through which we usually separate the production of a sign from its destruction. It is by addressing writing from this angle that Müller-Funk raises a difficulty intrinsic to the process through which writing emerges.

We generally approach written language through recognisable signs. We identify letters, words and sentences, and understand them as relatively stable forms that can be read and repeated. But what happens when we explore the operation through which these forms emerge? A written trace is not only a completed sign. It also belongs to a material process, to a movement, to a particular duration. *Writing along the line, along the now*, focuses on the relation between the line and temporal presence. The line suggests extension, perhaps continuity. The present moment, however, cannot simply be extended or preserved in the same way.

A gesture takes place. Letters, words and eventually sentences appear. Yet the movement continues, and what has appeared may finally disappear by being overwritten. The different temporalities of gesture, inscription, recognition and erasure do not necessarily coincide: the performance invites us to consider whether writing can ever be entirely separated from the heterogeneous operations through which it takes place.

Sabine Müller-Funk adopted the image of a membrane to describe something that separates while allowing contact, something whose permeability is never simply given. A membrane does not merely divide an inside from an outside, but allows the two realms to enter into relation. Translated into language, this perspective draws our attention to the material and temporal operations through which distinctions are established. The line is no longer simply the outline of a sign, but part of an active process of unfolding.

Rhea Krčmářová — An ocean without a continuous origin

Rhea Krčmářová's *Böhmen ist der Ozean* introduces yet another relationship between language and the world: the Czech region of Bohemia is transformed into water, becomes an ocean. Towns such as Benešov, Mikulov and Brno appear as islands. Familiar places remain recognisable, but their geographical and material relations have changed. This does not mean that places disappear. Their names and historical associations remain. What is reorganised is the materiality of the territory together with its relations.

The literary text produces a geography that cannot be identified with the geography of a map: this imaginative transformation takes place within narratives concerned with migration, memory, linguistic loss and the discontinuities of family history. Krčmářová's writing invites us to consider what happens when the past is not available as a continuous narrative, when memories contradict one another, and when stories are transmitted, transformed or lost. Places survive in language even when the relations that once connected us to them have changed.

What, then, does it mean to speak of an origin? We often imagine an origin as a point from which a history unfolds, a place to which different experiences can ultimately be traced back. But an origin is not always something that can be recovered. An origin is also something that takes shape through the very attempts at remembrance, narration and imagination: the literary geography does not restore a lost territory. Historical reality is not replaced by imagination. Different orders coexist instead: geographical places, historical experiences, inherited narratives, personal memories and literary invention. This transposition, however, does not mean that different orders come to form a continuous whole; rather, it expresses relations emerging in between.

Bohemia becomes an ocean. The ocean connects and separates, carries and displaces. Its movements do not establish a single, stable order. In a similar way, literary language becomes not simply a means of preserving an identity, but a space in which different histories and possibilities of belonging encounter one another. Belonging itself need not depend upon the reconstruction of an uninterrupted origin.

Along the line

Ewa Kaja's photographs question the apparent self-evidence of the codes through which we perceive and interpret the social world.
Sabine Müller-Funk's performance unsettles the distinction between inscription and erasure by focusing on the material operations of writing itself.
Rhea Krčmářová's literary and artistic work reshapes the relations between language, memory and geographical belonging without necessarily returning to a continuous origin.

The three different artistic practices interrelating in the exhibition introduce different temporalities and modes of expression. And it is precisely this difference that interests me.

In my philosophical work on Leibniz, I have been concerned with the problem of how to think genesis without reducing it to the unfolding of an already established unity. The differences

between these three artistic positions invite me to approach the exhibition in terms of heterogenesis: a process involving different operations, discontinuities and relations whose outcomes cannot be determined in advance. It requires us to think not an already constituted order, but one that allows us to follow relations in their formation, without assuming that they belong to a single structure.

The line may connect, separate, interrupt, inscribe or displace. Its possibilities emerge differently within each artistic practice. It does not constitute a boundary between two already constituted domains, nor a universal principle through which all distinctions arise. It is, rather, a threshold: a place where other relations may become possible, and where we cannot know in advance what form they will take.

This is what the works gathered in Mikulov offer us: an experimentation with other possibilities of language, in which language is not something we already possess but a process in the making. It is in this movement of experimentation, where the line neither simply divides nor simply connects, other relations begin to take shape, and with them other realities that we cannot yet name.