

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 3 *Combined Issue 3-4 Spring/Autumn*

Article 26

1989

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Tricia and Milazzo, Richard (1989) "David Carrino: Signed Temporality," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 3 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol3/iss1/26>

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David Carrino: Signed Temporality

Tricia Collins & Richard Milazzo

The use of language in art is often associated with the conceptual in art, with an epistemological rather than a perceptual model, in an effort to establish a rational rather than a merely visual order of things, a public rather than a merely personal or individual or private order of things. It reflects an objectifying tendency, an effort to question fundamentally the definitions of art and to establish more objective parameters or criteria for art, for its critical practice. It places its language, and language in general, exclusively in the public domain. But, by the same token, this endeavor often reduces the symbolic order of art, of criticality, and of language itself, to the rules of signification, to a manageable signifying domain, denying the visual, the phenomenological, the world of appearances and sense-experience, and arbitrarily restricting itself to mental experience, to the self-reflexive activity of mind. Conversely, it reduces the psychological, the ulterior, and meaning itself to a public experience of language. It reduces the lived itself to the games of language. The lived, as such, genuflects to the pride of language.

This objectifying process was reflected in Joseph Kosuth's use of *definition* to examine art's relation to the Social in the 1970s, as opposed to his use of *interpretation* in the recent work to explore the relation between the psychological and the Social or subjectivity and the Other. While the approach took for its subject the public content or positive economy of language, the latter assumes a far more dynamic approach that takes for its subject the private content or negative experience of meaning.

David Carrino's work is a language-based practice but one that refuses to deny the visual, the phenomenological extensions of the

world and the psychological extensions of subjectivity, and limit itself to the logical necessities and ideological ramifications of language. On the contrary, it relies, ironically, upon the visual aspects of language; upon its idiosyncrasies, such as those occasioned by the use of script, the use of the hand; it relies upon the sensations of language, upon its prejudices, its utter superfluities. Applying ink either to craft or rice paper, and then mounting it on silk with wooden dowels, Carrino imitates signatures and fragments of script, isolating phrases and passages of text from various manuscripts and personal letters by nineteenth-century authors, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, as well as more contemporary figures such as Helen Keller. There is a frailty in their material construction, a sense of vulnerability in these works, that is not dissimilar to the temporary or ephemeral and impalpable quality of Robert Rauschenberg's *Hoarfrost* series from the mid-seventies—works which were made by applying ink to unstretched silk. By appropriating writings from certain well-known public figures, and yet not selecting from their "objective" texts but from their private letters, and by mimicking their handwriting, this gesture articulates the desire to encompass the Other as a specific or individual Self within the reflexive world of objects and language. The objectifying qualities of the act of appropriation are qualified both by the personal content of the language and by placing the emphasis upon the unreflexive qualities of the handwritten letter, that is, upon the unreflective dimension of the "body," literally the hand, rather than upon the mechanical properties of a typewritten text. The qualification and emphasis, here, indicate a tendency toward post-appropriation values.

Above and beyond the natural difficulties generally involved in deciphering these texts, Carrino records "problems in legibility" as well, not in an attempt to establish their readability but in order to create a receptive mood, a meditative field, for the subjective function of consciousness. He even accentuates, or rather, generates these "problems" intentionally, very selfconsciously or unnaturally, by mimicking, let us say, the script from part of a letter written by "Emily," and then "signing" it "Jane." Here he has moved beyond the prejudices of languages, toward trying the pride of language. That the body of the letter is by Emily Dickinson and the closing is by Jane Austen underscores a displacement of identities that speaks generally in Carrino's work to mortality, superfluity, psychological loss, disabled sensibilities, the vulnerability and ephemeral nature of lived experience—all of which reflect, ultimately, the consanguinity and pathos of unsigned souls.

In effect, the rules of language, in Carrino, are displaced by the more amorphous realm of textuality, by the unmanageable or “unreadable” portions of experience; by the actualities of language and desire, by personal actualities, the idiosyncrasies and illegibilities of love, of human extension; by the irregularities of language and experience. The model of language is displaced by its mortality, by its actual circumstances in the world; it is a language specific to a fault. The handwriting, the handwritten or physical aspect of this language, functions as a trace of the temporal, as a trace not only of the mind but of the body; it is the trace of endured or signed temporality. The signature, in a sense, is the briefest possible self-portrait of the human being. Understood in this way, and in the widest sense of terms, language is extended across being. It is a language-based practice that traces the history of lived rather than generic temporality. On one level, it takes for its object the history of subjectivity; on another level, it records simply the historical trace of the personal, of the lived. In other words, Carrino’s practice does not wholly surrender the objective level of language to its subjective manifestations. These levels, in fact, assume the responsibility of a wider, more abstract range of signifying functions—even while the sense of caring, in Carrino, as in Ross Bleckner’s work, would seem readily to supplant merely a sense of responsibility.

In the end, Carrino’s practice involves a language that is simply “at a loss for words.” It refuses to use language against this loss—against subjectivity or against appearances, against the personal, the individual, or the private, against the superfluous order of things, against itself. It is a language closer to the casualties of feeling, closer to the actualities of considered experience than to a language exchanged in public, transacted professionally by knowing subjects according to the necessary order of things. It is a language that is written, but perhaps never spoken, never exchanged. Or perhaps, it is a language barely exchanged, a language that goes undetected. Like the language of exchanged letters, it is private, broken, concerned, impatient, hidden. It is the language of an examined life steeped in wishful thinking. A language, perhaps, “unlucky at love”—“mad and sweet.”