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Autodiffamazione. Presentation

by *Silvana Sinisi*¹

The staging of *Autodiffamazione* relies on the abstract means of light and sound and on the dematerialised intervention of the recorded image – the only real physical presence is that of an empty chair, placed symbolically to emphasise the actor's absence from the stage. Rejecting also the mediating role of text, Carella's mise en scène appears to express a need to re-appropriate theatrical experience by vindicating the demiurgic role of the director as sole author of the performance: the human presence is cut, and with it what also disappears is any kind of margin for the unexpected – here, all of the theatre's components are brought back to the objectivity of a system based on the regulated rate of mechanical forces. The operation begins and ends within an idea-project that is an intransitive and self-significant event: the focus shifts from the level of communication or of expression to a sole interest in the mental processes underlying a syntactic organisation of signs.

The spectators, as prime referents of the theatrical tradition, are effectively expropriated: the front door is boarded up and acts as a screen upon which images from Pino Pascali's funerals are projected. Carella explains: "I wanted to regain possession of something – but this implies subtracting that something from someone else... I wanted to take the spectators out of their place, the actors out of their role, and I wanted the door through which the spectators should enter to produce a funeral instead."² The image of the funeral is provocatively emblematic, as is the empty chair placed on the stage. Shown in 1976, in the midst of the decline of what was known as Image Theatre, the radicality of *Autodiffamazione* lends the performance the value of a manifesto: the inauguration of a new, analytical line of research in Italian experimental theatre. A line of research that was closely following the development of the visual arts and that saw the deconstruction of the machine of representation, and a systematic investigation of its parts, as the model for a possible refoundation of the theatre. Carella played a key role with regard to this new trend, not only through his practice, but also because of his organisational support as author of the cultural strategy pursued by the Roman basement theatre Beat '72.

In *Autodiffamazione* the action is entrusted mainly to the abstract presence of light, which measures and defines space and time in the form of beams, slides and film. It is a light whose function is essentially analytical: that is to say, it is self-significant rather than representational or functional, illuminating itself rather than a situation or an actor.

Using a projector's light box without its frame, Carella builds a series of abstract-geometric images, playing with the composition and decomposition of a large white screen framed like a French window. The same screen is used to show a video of a training session with Steve Paxton, while on another, placed at right angles to the first, the audience watches a film of a La Monte Young concert and sees the hovering picture of Mayakovsky. The human figure *does* appear in this work then, but objectified by the use of the cold medium of photography; the human figure is thus just another mobile element on stage, absorbed by the mechanisms of the medium of light.

Light also analyses its own expressive potential in the performance: the beam of a reflector frames the chair, and its range of variations – from maximum intensity to gradual fade-outs – gives the impression of the chair as an autonomous object with its own life, in a process that is reminiscent of the mechanisms used in futurist object dramas.

Nevertheless, the fact of breathing life into objects does not affect the overall coldness of the operation. The chair is successively duplicated in its photographic image projected on the wall, establishing a linguistic relationship between the object and its representation, almost a quote from Joseph Kosuth. In addition to light, sound also – in the form of a piano piece by Keith Jarrett – intervenes actively in the construction of the event. However unlike light, which changes and breaks down in space, the music provides a continuous flow that is independent and parallel to the movement of the image, which gets fixed and frozen in the time of collective spectatorial concentration.

¹ Extract from S. Sinisi, *Dalla parte dell'occhio*, Edizioni Kappa, Rome 1983, pp.156-158.

² From an interview by Franco Quadri and Silvana Sinisi with Carella, published in *L'avanguardia teatrale in Italia*, Einaudi, Turin 1977, vol. II, pp. 567-68.