PLESSI
THE SOUL
OF STONE
THE
PUSHKIN
STATE
MUSEUM
OF FINE
ARTS

ПЛЕССИ
ДУША
КАМНЯ
ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ
МУЗЕЙ
ИЗОБРАЗИТЕЛЬНЫХ
ИСКУССТВ
ИМЕНИ
А.С. ПУШКИНА
THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ANCIENT SCULPTURE AND FABRIZIO PLESSI’S VIDEO-SCULPTURE. INTER-SEMIOTIC TRANSLATION AND ICONIC RHETORIC

SILVIA BURINI

For his project in the exhibition space of The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Fabrizio Plessi put the focus on the need for dialogue between works of art and signs that belong to other historical periods, i.e. between antiquity and modernity, which has always existed. After all, history, as pointed out by Yuri Lotman, is first and foremost a form of human narration, a way in which man interprets and tells events because, when no interpretation or storytelling exists, no causal link can be established between what occurred before and what comes after, and no collective and/or individual perspective is available to capture the meaning of human experience.

History is the eye of the present enlightened by cultural self-consciousness, it is human memory made true by the present, looking at the past and reinterpreting it. To understand what history is means to understand language; the secret of history is in the mystery of its language. Mr. Plessi’s language, in this case, is his video art. Needless to say - but it may be worth recalling, since this is his first exhibition in Russia - Fabrizio Plessi is among the pioneers of video art in Italy and the first artist who has used a TV monitor as a true art medium, onto which he pours unstoppable flows of digital water and fire. Sound performances, ephemeral architectures, TV-studio sets and stage sets have
offered backdrops for Mr. Plessi’s video sculptures, where the use of technology is scaled down to the level of natural elements. On multiple occasions, Mr. Plessi has participated in art shows, i.e. the Venice Biennale (from 1970 onwards) and the Kassel’s documenta. His anthology exhibitions were hosted by the world’s leading museums, such as the New York and Bilbao Guggenheims, the Rome Scuderie del Quirinale, the Berlin Martin Gropius Bau, the Valencia IVAM, the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Barcelona Miró Foundation. In 2011, the “Venice” Pavilion of the Venice Biennale was re-opened, after having been closed for a number of years, with Plessi’s magnificent exhibition titled “Vertical Seas”. Other site-specific installations of the artist were seen at the Venice Piazza San Marco, the Agrigento Valley of the Temples, the Palma de Mallorca Lonja, the Hall of Giants of Palazzo del Te (Mantua), and the Venice La Fenice Theatre. As we know, many achievements of contemporary art consisted in repeated revivals of the past. This revival is behind the dialogue of the Italian artist with the prestigious Russian museum. Fabrizio Plessi identified 16 busts in the collections of The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (copies of ancient originals) which are used as the pivotal element of his work “The Soul of Stone”. Multimedia technologies dig into the surface of these sculptures and replicate their intimate formal structure by creating, in a play of mirrors, a copy that is truer than the original; the same theme is encored in a few large-sized drawings of the artist, which form part of an exhibition route that is nearly excavated in the same soul of the Museum building. In the third hall, which hosts the second part of Mr. Plessi’s one-man exhibition, those technologies surprisingly reinterpret another episode of ancient mythology, Giulio Romano’s fresco of the Fall of the Giants in the Mantua Palazzo del Te, a remote updated version of the initial part of Ovid’s Metamorphoses. This time, one of Fabrizio Plessi’s favourite themes, water, calls to mind the primordial deluge; waters are mirrored in the installation monitor, and significantly elicit tales of conflicts, crises and rebirths originating from an elementary substrate that shapes our destiny for good.

This paper mainly discusses the video sculpture titled The Soul of Stone, which was for the first time presented at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2009 in the context of a project promoted by the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere e Arti at Palazzo Loredan. The artist’s and curators’ idea behind this installation was to combine two projects into one - “The Soul of Stone” and “Rolling Stones”, in order to relate the contemporary ‘text’ of Fabrizio Plessi to century-old spaces differing from each other, while trying to outline the broader theme of a dialogue that the artist purports to establish with a semiotically significant exhibition space, such as that of the Pushkin Museum and its hosted works of art. In the case of Rolling Stones too, a site-specific project initially designed for the Mantua Palazzo del Te was re-contextualised. The underlying theme is that of ‘transposition’, or translation of a work of art. A ‘text’ formerly situated in a given space, with a specific semantic and spatial relationship with a museum area, was ‘translated’ or ‘transposed’ into another context. We will start from an axiom of Yuri Lotman about the “text” as an absolute real object that contrasts with the subjectivism of the scholar; in general, a text does not exist per se. It is inevitably inclusive of a conventional, historically determined context. The text substantially exists as a counteragent of non-textual structural elements.

ORIGINAL OR COPY?

In the video sculpture The Soul of Stone we are faced with a basic problem linked to the relationship between original and copy. The very definition of video sculpture relates to terms differing substantially from each other, i.e. sculpture and video. What is more, the heads, i.e. copies of ancient sculptures, chosen by the artist in the Pushkin Museum collection already have a complex semiotic relationship with their original. The theme is, therefore, extremely intriguing and complex. I will try to analyse the relationship established by Plessi’s work and the copies of ancient heads kept at the Muse-
um through a new medium introduced in this relationship, i.e. the video. In so doing, my overview will start from the translation theory of Roman Jakobson, which was also developed by Gideon Toury (1986) and Umberto Eco (2001). I will then hint at the concept of textuality of culture of Yuri Lotman, and finally make reference to Lotman’s definition of “iconic rhetoric”. Let us first take a step back. Problems connected to the relationship between originals and copies, or plaster casts, in ancient art and their repetitions have long involved specialists in many areas. In the first treatises on Greek art, no explicit difference was established between an original and its possible copies. The problem was rather whether they had to be considered as authentic copies of Greek art or creations of the Roman period in Greek style. What is more, many datings and stylistic studies were attempted, and conducted, on the basis of restorations made during the Renaissance period or later, which substantially changed the aspect of sculptures. The difference of ancient copies from originals pertains to significant elements as well as minor details systematically analysed during the 19th century. As a result, in the context of ‘copy-criticism’ (Kopienkritik), a method was developed through which researchers, via a detailed study of parallel copies, attempted to reconstruct the Greek original by comparing a significant number of Roman sculptures, and managed to identify typological similarities, which were indicative of the fact that those copies had a common model. The ancient copy of a sculpture can therefore be significantly different from its model and those differences can result from repeated copying; the prototype of a copy is likely to have been a copy, originally, and that copy, in turn, could have been created by copying another copy. When Greek sculptures were imitated, Roman details were often added and each copy, despite the mechanical reproduction of the original’s dimensions, was unique through the individual use of details. It is to be wondered where the copy ends and the original (re)starts. In these cases, can we talk about a copy in the modern sense? Some specialists consider the copies of original works as true, others prefer to use the term “free copies”, and still others call them “imitations” i.e. a “new originals” on the principle that each copy, as illustrated above, is per se original. Fixing the limits of this phenomenon and the causal relationship between its expressions is by no means easy. With regard to forgeries, in a note on the margins of its 1963 paper Teoria del restauro, Cesare Brandi warns: “Forgeries are misinterpreted when one believes they can be treated from the pragmatic standpoint of a “history of fakes”, rather than by an approach that departs from the concept of forgery”. In case of Plessi’s video sculpture, the question becomes even more entangled since we need to consider the context of contemporary art with its renewed concepts of “true” and “false”. This is so because, in the meantime, as Walter Benjamin puts it, a devaluation of the art’s hic et nunc has occurred, which has in turn implied the failure of what critics call “the aura” of a work of art, i.e. the artistic process becomes symptomatic and the art’s meaning goes beyond the merely artistic sphere. When a reproduction is multiplied, no single event but, rather, a quantitative sequel of events occurs, and if a reproduction becomes original, then the artistic quality of the object of art also changes. So, instead of observing the copy of a copy, we have in front of us an art object that derives from a different relationship with the original work of art- this is also behind the shift made from sculpture to video sculpture.

DIALOGUE, TRANSLATION, TRANSFER AND TEXT

That is why we find it very useful to make reference to Roman Jakobson’s essay On linguistic aspects of translation (1959). The researcher divides translation into three possible forms, or ways of interpreting a sign depending on whether it is transposed into other signs of the same language, another language or a system of non-linguistic symbols. These three forms of translation must be specifically designated. The “linguistic” form consists in inter-
interpreting signs by means of other signs of the same language. The “inter-linguistic” form, or translation in strict sense, consists in interpreting original signs by means of another language. Finally, “inter-semiotic” translation, or transmutation, consists in the interpretation of linguistic signs by systems of non-linguistic signs. For instance, a form of inter-semiotic transposition from a system of signs to another is the shift from the art of language to music, and from ballet to cinema or painting. As demonstrated by Toury, this type of structure is first and foremost based on verbal systems, but perhaps leaves out translations made from a non-verbal system to another. For this reason, the researcher proposed adding a type of inter-semiotic and inter-systemic translation, i.e. one that considers the translation of a non-verbal system into another.

In other words, the type of process to which Toury makes reference substantially involves ‘transfer’ operations, which start from an individual semiotic entity that belongs to a given system and lead to the creation of a new semiotic entity in a different system. That type of process can be defined as inter-systemic or, better said, trans-systemic. In other words, for a “transfer” operation to be identified, the two entities need to have something in common. This common element is what is actually transferred beyond the boundaries of the semiotic system. As a result, a transfer operation presupposes the existence of something constant in the transformation. Accounts must therefore be taken of the type of entities involved, as well as their codes or systems, because a certain type of relationship between codes is necessary in every type of transfer (or translation). As Umberto Eco observes, translation is one of the various forms of interpretation and, as such, it is never a merely linguistic affair. Of course, to translate means, chiefly, to make a text intelligible to a reader who speaks a different language. But translation has expanded the communicative scope of verbal messages beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries. Now, we need to clarify what we mean by “text”. To continue our discussion, reference should be made to Yuri Lotman’s proposal, which starts from the concept of text and elaborates a theory of “textuality of culture”. By further developing Ferdinand De Saussure’s structural approach, Lotman expands the notion of discourse and text and ultimately considers any expression of culture as text, i.e. verbal and non-verbal works of art, byt (Russian for “the daily sphere”), amusements, fashions, customs, games, political activities and, in general, all forms of social life based on a conventional system of cultural signs accepted by a given social group; these signs are designed to “shape” all facts of cultural life and are meant as secondary cultural codes. Their identification and study have become possible by analogy with the structural conception of language. That is why they are collectively called “secondary modelling systems”.

The concepts of culture, language and text still need to be clarified. Culture is a condition required for the existence of any human community. By culture is meant non-genetic information as a whole, i.e. non-hereditary memory that the human race acquires by storing and retaining information. The fight for memory cannot be dissociated from the intellectual history of humanity, and in fact the destruction of culture manifests itself as a destruction of memory, i.e. the demolition of “texts”. However, for a portion of reality to become heritage of collective memory, it needs to be translated into codified information. This task is fulfilled by culture, whose basic function is to structurally organise the world that surrounds man. Life sends its signals, which remain unintelligible unless they are translated into signs meant for communication. Signs form part of a single cultural universe called “semiosphere”. Communication underlies the functioning of culture and its language types, each of which is organised by one or more codes; every communicative act involves the transmission of information by a language (or code) for a sender and a receiver to enter into a relationship. This is behind the concept of “textuality of culture”: culture is meant as text in all of its expressions, even when it manifests itself as an image. Something is meaningful for us when it places us in a context of interpersonal relations;
e.g. if a black object is an umbrella and a person holds it upright, then it means it is raining. Semiotics extends the concept of language to any system that is intended for communication and uses signs. From this angle, language and culture are indivisible; the former is immersed in a cultural context whereas the latter has as its core a structure similar to that of natural languages. Therefore, the concept of language, which is extended to any system designed for communication, includes: natural languages (e.g. Italian, Russian or English), whose function is merely to name reality, artificial languages (e.g. mathematic symbols, road signs, etc.), which are used in specific situations and, finally, what Lotman calls secondary languages, i.e. codes that are normally defined secondary modelling systems and allow us to change a sector of reality into a text of culture. These communicative systems are built after the model of natural languages, convey a peculiar representation of reality, knowledge and culture, and substantially create a reality model (e.g. a myth, religion, rite or piece of clothing); in other words, these phenomena are built as a text and provide indications on themselves and the type of cultural logic that exist in every society. This sphere also extends to the theatre, cinema, painting, music and art, i.e. languages organised in a special manner. ‘Text’ therefore means any codified communication according to an orderly system of signs created by man. In The Structure of the Artistic Text19, Lotman bases himself on the axiom that each system intended for communication can be defined as a language. But if art is a special means of communication, a language organised in a particular manner (our concept of language derives from the broad semiotic definition: “any ordered system which serves as a means of communication and employs signs”), then works of art, that is, messages in this language, can be viewed as texts. [...] In the same sense, we can speak of the “language” of the theatre, cinema, painting, music, and of art as a whole, as a language organised in a particular way. [...] By singling out syntagmatic and paradigmatic bonds in painting (cf. the works of L. F. Zegin, and B. A. Uspenskij), and in cinema (c.f. the essays of S. M. Eisenstein, Yu. N. Tynjanov, B. M. Ejsenbaum, and C. Metz), we can discern semiotic objects in these arts, i.e. systems constructed on the model of languages. Inasmuch as man’s consciousness is a linguistic consciousness, all types of models erected as superstructures on that consciousness – and art among them – can be defined as secondary modelling systems. This art can be described as a sort of secondary language, and the work of art as a text in that language. [...] In the same sense, we can speak of the language of the theatre, cinema, painting, music, and of art as a whole, as a language organised in a particular way. SIC [...] Every language makes use of signs which constitute its vocabulary (sometimes we say its “alphabet” – these concepts have identical meanings for the general theory of sign systems). Every language has certain rules for combining these signs, every language has a given structure and that structure is organised in accordance with a hierarchical scale. This concept, which was conceived and developed by Lotman in the late 1950s, corresponds to his intellectual evolution as a literature historian who interpreted each phenomenon parcellary with its historical background. Structural theories enabled Lotman to explicitly work out a similar approach and place at the heart of its theory the notion of “cultural text”, which can adequately be deciphered by a bearer of the corresponding code or by a researcher who has reconstructed the model (grammar) of this code.

“OWN” AND “OTHER PEOPLE’S”:
FABRIZIO PLESSI AND ICONIC RHETORIC

Lotman’s artistic and cultural dilemma revolves around a few fundamental issues, one of them clearly being that a dialogue can be established between different semiotic systems, which can therefore enter a regime of “inter-semiotic” or even “inter-systematic” translation. In a dialogic system – argues Lotman – what is “own” (svoe) can be clarified by what “the other” is (chut-
That assumption underlies the urgent problem of “influence”, which was extensively and clearly discussed as a problem related to “rhetoric” in the essay *Painting and the language of theatre. Notes on the problem of iconic rhetoric*. In this paper, the researcher reiterates that rhetoric is among the most traditional philological subjects, but redefines the term in a totally personal manner:

A rhetorical text, as opposed to non-rhetorical, can be defined as a structural unit of at least two (or more) subtexts represented by means of distinct and mutually untranslatable codes. These subtexts can be logically ordered entities, and, therefore, different parts of the text must be read by using different languages, or must function as different layers, evenly distributed throughout a text. In the last case, the text presupposes a double reading, for example, daily and symbolic. 20

This double referentiality, or double reference to different semiotic systems, creates what Lotman defines a “rhetorical situation”, where rhetoric means the transfer of structural principles from one semiotic sphere to another: Rhetoric – the transfer of structural principles from one semiotic sphere to another – is also possible at the junction of other arts as well. In this process a very important role is played by the totality of semiotic processes at the dividing line between word and representation. 21

It seems to me that this type of operation is a good way to interpret the type of artistic strategy adopted by Fabrizio Plessi in this project. Plessi engages in a true inter-semiotic translation by relating the copies of heads kept at the Pushkin Museum to their “transmutation” i.e. a video image create through a re-contextualisation process. In this way the transfer is not merely formal but also semantic, i.e. *sdvig*, as Sklovskij puts it, or an explosion (vzriv) to use Lotman’s terminology. 22 Plessi translates an ancient text for the benefit of today’s art viewers and makes it better understandable to everyone. He re-codifies it through a contemporary medium and consequently shifts from sculpture to video sculpture. Lotman’s theory of rhetoric defines the rhetorical effect as a clash of signs belonging to different texts or systems, which therefore causes a structural renewal of the meaning of the dividing line between closed systems of signs:

“Rhetorical texts include all those with a contrapuntal conflict within the single structure of different semiotic languages.” 23

Plessi does not merely bring to our attention a contemporary “copy” of ancient copies, but also changes the artistic source language. The outcome is a new text, within the above meaning:

“The peculiarity of a material does not impose any significant restrictions on the art, but affects the nature of its language. None who is familiar with the history of the art will dare forecast how the artistic source language will be changed in the hands of a great artist.” 24

The artistic source language has therefore been changed, or transmuted, in the hands of Fabrizio Plessi into a situation that can consequently be defined as one of iconic rhetoric, at least in the sense I have previously illustrated. The discourse on this video sculpture, *The Soul of Stone*, has consisted in using a “molecular” and “non-atomic” type of semiotics as a heuristic instrument in order to describe a horizon that includes a multiple-sign system, better said a dialogic or even polyphonic horizon, to use Wladimir Bachtin’s terminology:

“Culture as a mechanism for processing information, as a driver of information, necessarily finds itself in a condition of collision and mutual tension between various semiotic fields.” 25

Therefore, in the works of Fabrizio Plessi on display at the Pushkin Museum, ancient and contemporary art are substantially in an inter-systemic relationship of tension and sometimes collision, although in a single cultural horizon. Once again, Plessi translates an age-old theme, that of an ancient copy and its reproductions, translations and transmutation, thereby making viewers able to decode - through a contemporary language they are familiar with - an ancient phenomenon that belongs to a different era, and to perceive...
video sculpture brings it again to our attention and, in so doing, becomes a
precious copy. This memory has been handed over to us over time and now
acquires a new, non-nostalgic angle. What is more, an exclusively historical approach is
no longer sufficient. Quite clearly, a change of strategy is needed. Contem-
porary art needs to be looked at and its authenticity assessed from a totally
new perspective. “For contemporary people, a theory of forgeries that relies on ethical grounds
is neither a gambling game nor a route de-
torrent”. Clio, daughter of Mnemosyne, “is
not a passenger in a railway carriage travel-
ing from one point to another, but rather a
pilgrim moving from an intersection to
another and choosing a route”. History
in another game must not be a route de-
cided by a story but rather a system where
“chance and regularity” seem to be incom-
patible and seem as two possible conditions of the same object.


Ed. Cfr. Walter Benjamin, Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduier-
barkeit, 1955, Italian translation L’opera d’arte nell’epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica, Torino, Einaudi, 1956, pages 22-
33.

sentazione . . . cit., pages 111-112.

For contemporary people, a theory of forgeries that relies on ethical grounds can no longer suffice. Quite clearly, a strategy of change is needed. Contemporary art needs to be looked at and its authenticity assessed from a totally new, non-nostalgic angle. What is more, an exclusively historical approach is likely to distort the broad, instrument-aided view that today’s art requires.

The new original, i.e. the video sculpture *The Soul of Stone*, is a memory-rich copy. This memory has been handed over to us over time and now video sculpture brings it again to our attention and, in so doing, becomes a real, totally new, contemporary type of relationship with modern eyes.

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