

SILENCE FULL OF STORIES

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MARILÁ DARDOT AND ELISABETH MILLQVIST*

Elisabeth Millqvist In your oeuvre you constantly engage with language, you shred books and fill an entire room with the remains of the pages, you film cities at night searching for hidden words in the lights, you make books without words and you replace forbidding garden signs with quotes from famous writers. I would say, language is the material that you continually use – it is inseparable from your work. How would you describe your interest in language?

Marilá Dardot “The world is as big as the things I know how to say”, I heard from one Brazilian writer, Bartolomeu de Campos de Queirós. I agree with him, I think we have to name to know, that we can only understand ourselves and each other and change the world through language. The word is what organizes the chaos, it is what there is between me and you that enables us to think together, to discuss, to agree and disagree. Not only that, but it opens up to us all the possibilities of fiction and poetry, of flights of fancy and storytelling, of histories and utopias. It is a creating machine, and it is that power that interests me and intrigues me so much.

Reading what I have just said, you may ask me: “But then why on earth aren’t you a writer?” – and I wouldn’t be certain how to answer. Maybe it’s because of a series of events and coincidences and life choices I’ve made have brought me here. Or maybe it’s also because I believe there is something beyond and before language, and to me that is a challenge.

EM How do you relate to the Brazilian artists who came before you? I’m still thinking here about the connection with literature. For example, the grupo neoconcreto in the late 1950s attracted poets. Lygia Pape made several works actually titled “books” – and so on.

MD I was born in 1973 and so I grew up listening and dancing to the music of Tropicalism, watching cinema novo, experiencing Neo-concrete art. From them I learned

to see and be in the world. I would say they had great influence, perhaps more on my life than over my work.

Lygia Pape, especially, had a more direct role in my formation as an artist. I was her pupil at a workshop at the Pampulha Museum towards the end of the 1990s. That was three intense days during which we did and discussed the exercises she proposed to us around haiku verses, we talked about our work, listened to her stories. She was a brilliant person, delicate and at the same time very incisive, and today I think that experience was important to my early research.

Silence has always intrigued me, perhaps because I am actually a silent person. Here in Brazil it seems strange to be quiet, it makes people uncomfortable. And I think we are living in a time of great anxiety: everyone wants to talk at once, everything has to be narrated, posted, twittered; no-one can stand not communicating for one second. Even art exhibitions are more and more mediated, there is always a monitor, a discourse, a text, an audio guide among us. I miss silence, time for thought, for contemplation.

When I visited Wanås, I felt a silence in the air, a dense silence full of stories. It was as if those works of art scattered through the woods could speak to me, and that place let me hear them and talk to them. That made me feel really good; it was an intense, welcoming experience. So I thought that my work had to talk about that silence, to say that it is not a void, a nothing-ness – on the contrary, it is a polyphony. And you have to be open and attentive to hear all that silence whispers.

EM In your work for Wanås, you quote the Brazilian writer João Guimarães Rosa (1908–1967): “In silence there is never silence.” Can you describe why you selected this quote?

MD When I got home, I went back to my file on silence and I found that phrase, which to me seemed perfect for what I was wanting to say. Although I mentioned to you during the process of creating the artwork that the phrase came from a book by Guimarães Rosa, to me it is important that its authorship should not be stated explicitly in the work, because that mentioning brings in the author’s whole universe, and the phrase’s universality is lost.

EM In an earlier work from 2008, *In words of words for words, palabras*, you exhibited an archive of sentences that contain the word “word”. You also told me that you keep an archive of silence. Tell me more about how you work with archives?

MD In 2004 I started a file of phrases with the word “silence”, in an attempt to understand the multiple meanings of that word. I go along marking those phrases in the books I read, and then I organize them into folders with themes like “silence and death”, “silence and secret”, “silence and pleasure”, “silence and landscape”, etc. I also keep files with the words “book”, “happiness” and “word”.

Those files cover certain fields that I am interested in, and I go to them sometimes when I am creating. The phrases’ authorship is not always made explicit in the art, because taken out of context they are phrases that could be anyone’s. I think that once they are launched, they come to belong to the world, and I use them as if I was a painter portraying a landscape.

EM For this new work you made ceramic letters that form the words and then placed the sentence on the ground in three languages, Portuguese, English and Swedish, like Scrabble. The letters become sculptural and at the same time invite viewers to keep on creating new words with those specific letters, making a strong link to performance and participation. The audience is important to you and the shared creativity. Can you tell me more about this aspect of your work?

MD I’ve never created anything on my own. My work usually relates either to an author, a book, a work of art, sometimes to visitors at the exhibition: there is always an Other at some stage of the process. Dialoguing, sharing, comparing experiences and not having complete control over the outcome are procedures that interest me. In the case of the artwork I created for Wanås, there was first a conversation between me and that place, which led me to research in my file on silence. Once the chosen phrase is placed there, it becomes open. Like letters of an ongoing game, that first statement can be transformed by others, by the visitors and also by nature, which will register and then successively remove its traces on the grass.

EM The work at Wanås derives from an earlier work, *A Origem da Obra de Arte* [The Origin of the Work of Art], 2011. The title refers to the 1936 essay of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, but in that work you don't quote him. Instead, you offer 150 planting pots shaped like letters. The visitor is provided with soil, seeds and gardening tools in an open construction made for the work. The Brazilian curator Adriano Pedrosa writes of the work: "Rather than an installation per se, this is an invitation to the artwork and to work itself, through which the spectator will sow the letters in order to place the pots around the Museum's gardens, thereby composing (or not) words out in the open." The act of planting in the letters has a beautiful inherent poetry, can you elaborate a bit about this idea?

MD That work started out as an irresponsible response to Heidegger's text. I say irresponsible because I did not intend to discuss it academically, but to react to the impressions it made on me. The text used terms like "earth", "instrument" and "world". So I thought of an artwork that would use those terms as materials for constructing a work of art that would not be accomplished until they were combined with men's will and caring and the action of nature. The work's title is playful, because it seems to be saying that such an origin does not exist, that what there is, is an ongoing process of construction, a building site, a garden of ideas.

The pots in the shape of all the letters of the alphabet open up the possibility that everything can be said there, of starting an open-ended conversation with the world, of sowing ideas in an open field. Planting those letters is to be able to see them germinate, grow, flower and die, to have them undone to compose others, to react to the imponderable, to the elements, the seasons, to what is outside us.

EM Guimarães Rosa, what is it in his writing that interests you?

MD Guimarães Rosa is one of those writers who play with language: he invents, inverts, composes, makes music and dances. It's hard to read, but when it captures you there's no way out, another world opens up, one completely different from ours.

EM I want to ask you one of Jeppe Hein's questions. What does happiness taste like?

MD Salt skin under the sun.

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