

## BETWEEN EXCESS AND EXCEPTION: THE PROFANATION OF THE NEWSPAPER I VERA LINS

Published in [Documenta Magazines Online Journal/ Canal Contemporâneo, 2007.](#)

"Public diaries" is what Leila Danziger calls her most recent works, which mobilize memory and oblivion in the pages of newspapers taken away from their normal use as disposable items and reworked as art, or poetic objects.

Newspapers propitiate oblivion. While providing the experience of shock and horror through exposure to catastrophes as banal or everyday events, their language induces oblivion or forgetfulness, and a quick overview of what they show us as fait-divers. But there is another process at work here too. The artist's gestures make them into a topology, a place where something happens.

Over a period of months, newspapers are put through a gradual process with layers exposed to sunlight and flaking or peeling away on being folded and imprinted or stamped. But this sensitive operation is an intervention that poses certain urgent issues as "running sores". What should be remembered and what forgotten? It also forces newspapers to endure and suffer the action of time and be conserved or transformed.

News items are latent - letters, their ink and that of the images are peeled away - and remain as shadows. In the first series, grayed from exposure to sunlight, a few yellowish images remain. In the first work, the shadow of a heart is left after all the interventions, above it a photo of a group of colored boys on a bench in a street. In the second (1) is a photo of a street child wrapped in a blanket. In the third (2), a body is stretched out on the ground with the name Carlo (recalling Genova, 2001). The fourth (3) shows boys wearing masks during a riot in a detention facility for minors (referred to as "Febem" in Brazil) who appeal for the non-forgetting of what is a banal scene on the streets. Over those images, imprinted like a headline in red are Paul Celan's words: "To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing", that speak through double negation of the exile of the artist and abandonment of bare life bereft of political dimension, shown in the photos. And of anonymous and banal violence against this bare life, "a life not worth living."



Fig. 1 – To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing (public diaries), stamp on newspaper, 56 x 32 cm, 2006.

The language of communication is hollowed and neutralized and the language of poetry takes its place. It is reborn from a denial. A Utopia? But these lines are in red, also for a sore.

Visible with these yellowish images in the natural light to which the newspaper page is exposed for months, is the state of exception that has now become the rule. As if after sedimentation, real life comes to the surface. The concentration camp, not just as history but as our current inhuman condition, becomes present in the city, as citizens become pure biological bodies abandoned to a violence that is all the more effective for its being anonymous and banal. This is the perspective of the camp, as Agamben<sup>1</sup> sees it with these images of bare life, in which public and private are confounded. Marginalized colored bodies bring to mind the slavery not resolved by abolition, but continuing in a different form through the massive production of poverty on the industrialization of the country. Progress

and destruction walk hand in hand. The state of exception that “has now reached its maximum development worldwide” is the outcome of unlimited growth of industrial activity. Unfettered accumulation generates a surplus that has to be spent or otherwise explode into war. So alongside exuberant production emerges armed conflict, and fabulous wealth evaporates. Bataille<sup>2</sup> states that the growth of productive energy must be assigned a purpose other than war, and a peace dynamic created. On this basis he supported the Marshall Plan for promoting less unequal distribution of resources and circulation of wealth. Every system that has a certain amount of energy must spend it.



Fig. 2 – To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing (public diaries), stamp on newspaper, 56 x 32 cm, 2006.

The newspaper that modern man read as if it were morning devotions, is here profaned as a product of the integrated State of spectacle (Debord); it is given a use other than its normal one. The merchandise of the world of the spectacle, of which it is part, is violated, reduced to ruins, and other meanings have their place, as if they had been emancipated.



Fig. 3 – To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing (public diaries), stamp on newspaper, 56 x 32 cm, 2006.

Report language remains in the shadow, its noise partially silenced and over it flash different words that appear in the folds, composing a rhythm like musical scores, sometimes empty, other times with one or another word as leftovers, residues. In another series, the concentration camp is recalled by Marguerite Duras's words in *Hiroshima mon amour*, written in French, in garish red. They also raise the question of the name, as posed by Benjamin. War, love and language are together and vibrant: sentences in French such as *Je n'ai plus qu'une seule mémoire, ton nom*. Folded pages now spilling over with meanings on this support; while avant-garde artists had collage prevail over painting; this support now became the very canvas where something happened in a new alliance between thinking and poetry. The leftover and somewhat faded heart in the first image speaks of excess, tumult, energy matrix for everything.



Fig. 4 - For Ana C. César, stamp on newspaper, 120 x 32 cm, 2004.

Another series has more color. Ana Cristina Cesar's diaries are called on in a verse that speaks of memory: *I was a girl and already writing memoirs, grown old* (Fig.4). And another poet, Orides Fontela speaks of naming again: *Choosing a name is everything* (Fig.5). The question of naming is center stage to be analyzed. How to give a name, what name to give to what we see or feel. A reflection on language and names based on Benjamin is posed. The language of communication through which it is informed is replaced by poetic language in which it speaks with the language, in which it is engulfed and does not communicate any content but itself in motion. For Benjamin, Man does not say anything when naming, but is said through language, is spoken. The speech of things

is bourgeois, as is the language of newspapers. But language communicates in the name. The name is that through which nothing communicates more, but through which language communicates itself and does so absolutely. After the fall from grace, the word lost its connection with knowledge, now it must communicate something: the name became a means, language just chatter. The name can recover its power in the language of poetry, or art, when it is not just communication of the communicable, but at the same time symbol of the non-communicable.

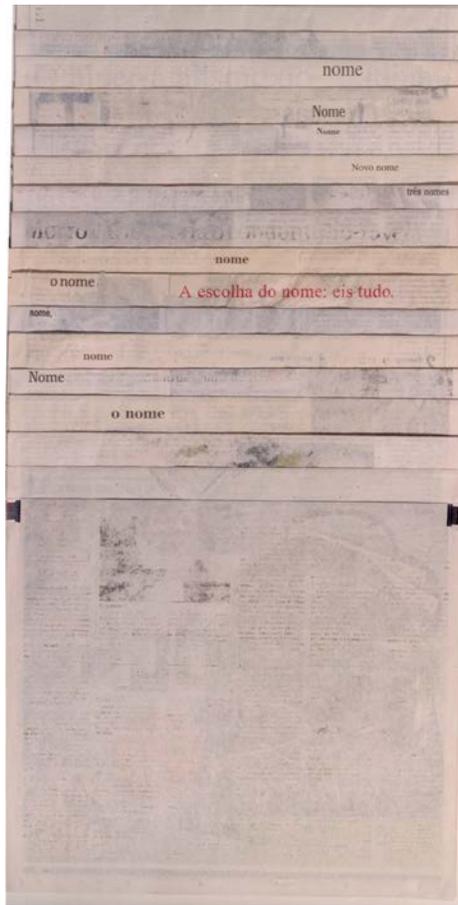


Fig. 5 – *For Orides Fontela*, stamp on newspaper, 112 x 32 cm, 2001.

All Danziger's work with the newspaper is in the direction of silencing chatter and giving form to this non-communicable. And quoting Schiller with Benjamin<sup>3</sup>, on the former's Letters on aesthetic education: the true secret of the artist is destroying matter through form. Here the matter destroyed is newspaper, as it peels away along the folds and becomes a musical score. The 'report language' Mallarmé spoke of is destroyed in an

attempt to recover the faculty of naming. Several languages are present, Portuguese, French from Duras, and Spanish from Borges. Tension between memory and oblivion is seen in the words of Funes the Memorious, in these lines from one of the works: *Mi sueños son como la vigilia de ustedes*. In another work, the word forget is imprinted between empty spaces. The idea of imprint replacing manuscript critically maintains mechanized writing, the contention of gesture. In our recent art history, during a period of political repression, Carmela Gross imprinted a brushstroke.

The newspaper is no longer something with a utilitarian purpose, but becomes poetic object, finality with no end. It again becomes the excess from where everything comes, announced in the first image by the faded heart that speaks of tumult, of ourselves as energy lavished without reason in these gestures moved by the desire to intervene, to make art. According to Bataille, we are solar energy that is lost, lavished without reason. Art is this lavishing without any other reason than a desire that is there and so abolishes limits imposed by the rule of the state of exception. Like thought, is a negative way, that undermines the established - in this case, the ideology that shapes newspapers and their information.



For Irineu Funes, stamp on newspaper, 170 x 32 cm, Centro Cultural Sergio Porto, 2004.

Both Debord and Agamben analyze the State; the State of the spectacle and the State in which exception becomes rule are superimposed. Where does art stand in relation to the possibility of change? As a contemporary of the French Revolution, Schiller also took up the issue of the State and freedom. He poses the aesthetic State as a 'necessity in refined or well harmonized souls', to produce a culture that would prevent any abuse, and produce freedom through freedom. In it, excess too, as imagination and abundance, profusion of forces, would lead to aesthetic play, to freely chosen quest, to the construction of true political liberty.

But what happened at the time of Bataille's writing was more related to an open wound and affliction. For Bataille, the experience of excess is unrestricted abundance, wanting the impossible, no tasks to perform, no duties to fulfill. Art, as a blind task, is endless Kantian finality - in Schiller too, fleeing from the utilitarian world through indifference. Knowledge is access to the unknown. But this movement ends in a refusal to all solutions - radical thinking after the Second World War ends in silence and sore, torment and affliction, as one sees in a poet like Paul Celan, as shown by Danziger's diaries. As in these red works with the mercury chromate formerly used to cure sores - a reference in a text by the artist, following the newspapers, the sore does not heal.

The aesthetic state survives as an ideal (not even in Schiller was it immediately possible) and appears in Marcuse's interpretation of the latter's thinking in "Eros and Civilization". In discussing Freud, Marcuse sees the principle of life as Eros opposed to strong repression in the modern industrial state; we may imagine a different type of civilization with a different type of productivity.

*Schiller's Letters on aesthetic education*<sup>4</sup> criticizes the business spirit, asks why we are still barbaric, and affirms that the State is still remote from its citizens. The division between sense and sensibility should be abolished, he says, so that the State will be modified, and the pathway to the intellect has to be opened up by the heart - therefore the formation of sensibility is the most pressing need of the age. While stating that beauty has to do with equilibrium, he says that it is just an ideal and never achieved in real life. The imagination leaps towards the play of aesthetics, to the quest for free form. In the ludic urge that unifies sensitive and formal impulses we have living form.

This living form attained by art may be Benjamin's dialectical image, charged with time to bursting point, an afflicted representation, as we see in the empty spaces and silences in yellowed photos tensioned with words in "Public diaries." Bataille sees this when he says that what we seek is this shadow that we do not know how to apprehend - poetry, the profundity or intimacy of passion; but we are wrong because we want to catch hold of this shadow. In *Moyens sans fins*<sup>5</sup>, Agamben sees Bataille's thinking with its concepts of sovereignty and sacred as unusable:

(To have mistaken such a naked life separate from its form, in its abjection, for a superior principle-sovereignty or the sacred-is the limit of Bataille's thought, which makes it useless to us.)

Agamben rejects the separation between bare life and political life. As with Schiller, life, or matter, only becomes free on acquiring form and then, if it becomes organic life. It requires the transition from blind life to form, i.e., from sensation to thought, which takes place in the aesthetic state: in the physical state Man just suffers the force of nature; he is freed from this power in the aesthetic state and dominates it in the moral state. For Agamben, thought is a form of life; it is life inseparable from its form. Schiller poses the aesthetic as the path necessary to solve the political problem - the greatest of all works of art would be the constitution of true political freedom. Although illuminating, Schiller connects art and thought, there is a certain aestheticizing purity in his philosophy, perhaps a sign of the historical period.

Agamben, in a new European and global situation in which the concentration camp has become the secret matrix of political space, seeks to reexamine ideas about the State, nation and territory, to which end the figure of the refugee, and the concept of "the people" are mobilized. He says that language has to be disconnected from grammar and "the people" from the State. The concept of sovereignty and constituent power should be abandoned or totally reformulated. The real situation we live in is that of a supranational police state. The state of exception is now a planetary one: the normative aspect of law may be eliminated and denied by governmental violence that ignores international law and promotes a permanent state of exception, while still pretending to apply law. This opaque area where public and private are combined should be our starting point.

Which is what the artist's work does by intervening in newspapers, in this product of the state of exception, or the "state of integrated spectacle" denounced by Debord. In the title itself, words are joined and intimacy and public space change places - public diaries, and the experience made present by the gesture is that of language. Imagination here takes the leap towards aesthetic play, as Schiller would say, in search of free form. But this form is contorted in torment, it is critical. Here we find Bataille's notion of excess.

For Bataille, while philosophy is silence, any solution is rejected; for Agamben, it is language, in which thought and poetry are articulated. And the thinking that emerges, as gesture in which life and art find each other, has political potency.



To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing (public diaries), stamp on newspaper, 56 x 32 cm, 2006.