

DANIELA COMANI

THE BEGINNING THE END / L'INIZIO LA FINE

with text by Veronica Santi e Matteo Bergamini

Opening Friday 11 December from 3 pm to 8 pm
12 December 2020 - 20 February 2021

The idea of the eternal is mysterious and with it Nietzsche has embarrassed many philosophers:
to think that one day everything will repeat itself as we have already experienced it,
and that even this repetition has to repeat indefinitely!"

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

After weeks of synaptic struggles, I came to the conclusion that Daniela Comani's work *The Beginning The End* has a subliminal and revelatory possibility, expressed in retracing her artistic process and in the subsequent emotional abandonment of it, in favour of something deeper, which refuses a definition but which concerns us closely.

Based on appropriation and manipulation, Comani's art could be definable as a "maniacal and personalized analogic cataloguing". Throughout six years, in *The Beginning The End* the artist has identified, transcribed on cards and then collected on her blue-sky table in Berlin the opening and closing sentences of more or less well-known novels, mainly written between the Twentieth century and the early Twenty-first century. This work led, at first, to the creation of a book including two stories: *The Beginning*, which combines a syncopated, artist-sought and non-linear narration with the beginnings of 212 selected novels; and *The End*, which lines up the 212 final sentences of the same novels of *The Beginning*, respecting the same sequence.

In the first, we see an alternation of landscapes, night and day, the great themes of literature, such as birth, childhood memories, the creation of one's identity, the relationship with the family, the death of a parent, journeys – both real and imaginary – work, events, and loves. All of this is achieved by crossing the four seasons - ranging from Sylvia Plath's "strange sweltering summer" in *The Bell Jar*, to the spring of that day when "cherry trees will blossom", as wrote Christa Wolf's in *Störfall*.

In the second story, *The End*, the idea of death recurs more frequently and each sentence comes to our eyes as an isolated verdict, or as microclimates of textuality that relocates us in unconscious territories. We stand on the threshold of a door that sometimes is closed, sometimes is open to specific perspectives and sometimes leaves us in front of infinity.

The two stories are one next to the other, as if they were each other's mirror. With the same length, they meet exactly in the middle of the book. Moreover, they interlace in their respective beginnings and ends ("The sun had not risen yet"... "Here the sea ends and the earth begins"/ "The waves broke ashore"... "Here, where the sea ends and the earth awaits"), highlighting a harmony that seems to suggest a circular and endless reading. Ideally, almost lysergically, these matches between the beginning and the end of the novels in the two stories *The Beginning* and *The End* make me think of magical locks that harbour the unfolding of a stolen plot and seal the literary artwork.

The perfection and the symmetry, formal and conceptual, emerging from *The Beginning The End* (this time without the conjunction "and") underlies the artist's idea and choices, and that is visually clear in the

other formalization of the work on display: a diptych in which each painting shows one of the two stories. Here the sentences are enclosed seamlessly within the frame and the silences, those of turning the page or those resulting from the blank spaces, are eliminated, offering a symbolic and hypnotizing perspective on the work.

Not only Comani took possession of literary quotes, but she carried out two manipulations of the sentences.

First of all, she changed the gender of the person, from male to female. The action recalls an already-used technique of the artist in order to investigate the submerged part of our collective consciousness, eroded by stereotypes and gender issues. For example, in the series *New Publications* (2007 - ongoing), the covers of famous Western literature classics have been modified by changing the main character's gender (some hilarious examples include: *Monsieur Bovary*, *The Little Princess*, *The Rampant Baroness*, *The Lady of the Rings*).

The second manipulation resulted in the change, wherever necessary, of the subject, expressing it in the first person singular, in order to harmonise the entire narration. Here too, we recall previous works by Comani, namely *Cover Versions* (2007 - ongoing), where the artist reinterpreted famous covers of *The Times* and *Der Spiegel*, by embodying the main character and linking all the events to the same actress, Comani herself, albeit disguised each time. Another example comes from *It was me. Diary 1900-1999* (2002), a journal where the narrator, from 1st January to 31st December, retraces all the events which have marked the Twentieth century, alternating the oppressor and the victim's perspective.

Albeit the technique is the same of *It was me. Diary 1900-1999*, the use of the "I" in *The Beginning The End* brings out something weird. In fact, while in the first case we are enraptured by the story, we identify ourselves with the heaviness of "Short 20th Century" and we emotionally participate in the events which have marked our families and our lives, in the second case we perceive a "rascal" ego, towards which we do not sympathise, as an impostor hiding somewhere, inside or outside us. And clearly, it is not the third and "neutral" ego of the artist, which, from time to time, embodies a different character.

The feeling is amplified by the backstage of Comani's work that is also on view. In the book *The Beginning The End*, in fact, the famous chosen writers are only listed, but it is quite difficult, with the exception of some cases, to understand which novel the quote belongs to (who remembers the beginning and the end of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*? Or *1984*? And *The Portrait Of Dorian Gray*?). As opposed to *It was me. Diary 1900-1999*, here the artist provides us with "solutions", by covering an entire wall with 424 cards documenting from her analogic work. Each one of these cards carries single phrases, at times modified, composing *The Beginning The End*, together with the original sentence, translated and in original language, the title of the novel and the name of the author. Like in an assembled puzzle, this vision gives us clarity, it delights us and nourishes our curiosity, it tickles our memory. However, it also makes us feel uncomfortable. Despite everything, this whole picture and the amount of information give a cryptic result. The boundaries, the beginning and the end of the artwork, no longer seem defined concepts. On the contrary, they are quite blurred. Rationality and perfection in the artwork falter. The two stories *The Beginning* and *The End* reflect the one into the other, showing "multiple self" in a labyrinth of mirrors. Who is the narrator? Who decides the beginning and the end of an artwork?

It is not a Twentieth century dilemma, and the distrust leads us to find some exceptions throughout the text, wisely spread by Comani. For example, immediately in the first page of *The End*, we remark the absence of the first person ["And they thought they saw a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions when, at the end of the journey, *the girl stood up* first, stretching *her* young body"]. A poetic license from the artist...Or a system error? Authorial choices...Or encrypted codes?

Somehow, the way we read *The Beginning The End* seems to be related to how we navigate in the web: traveling from one place to another of hypertext, navigating through its immensity; it talks about how we became virtual flaneurs, surfing randomly. It also shows how we manage and collect information, without feeling the need to read the web in a linear way, and so on. Losing course, or going adrift is an integral part of the experience of reading a book of appropriations as it has come to us. In any case, originality does not exist. Only authenticity exists.

However, there is a secret: it is impossible to suppress the expression of the self. Even when we do apparently "non-creative" actions, such as retyping a couple of lines of text, we express ourselves in different ways. A certain act of choice and re-contextualization can tell us as much about ourselves as the story of our mother's cancer operation.

And then there is the emotion: yes, the emotion. But rather than in a coercive or persuasive way, this writing conveys emotions in indirect and unpredictable ways: the feelings arise from the writing process, rather than from the author's intentions.

Finally, there is a hidden code: for each digital image, internet page, mp3 song or mp4 video, there is an alphanumeric translation, apparently illogical and incomprehensible to most of the people (for example, opening XML video, converting a .JPEG image into .txt or using an ATBASH system). Precisely due to this new environment, some kind of books are written not to be read, but to be thought about. And there are books that, in their construction, seem to imitate, and simultaneously comment on, our link with digital words, thus proposing new reading - or *not* reading - strategies.

Literary critic Marjorie Perloff has used the expression *non-original genius*, arguing that due to technological changes and developments, particularly the Internet, the common definition of genius - that is, an isolated romantic figure - is to be considered as obsolete. From her point of view, today's writer is a programmer who imagines, builds, executes and takes care of a *writing machine*¹, rather than a cursed and suffering genius.

But then, why that uncomfortable feeling?

In a narration absolutely devoid of a standard consequential logic, *The Beginning The End* is an apparently "non-creative"² work that unmasks our "artificialized intelligence". This expresses a contemporary cognitive method, not yet mature but already deeply internalized, almost mechanically I would say, by our brains. As if there is an "artificialized-I" inside us that pushes to get out ...

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¹ Patchwriting from "CTRL+C, CTRL+V. Scrittura non creativa" by Kenneth Goldsmith, Nero Editions, 2019, pg. 136, 273, 16, 11, 187, 7.

² To be considered in the sense given by Kenneth Goldsmith, see previous paragraph.