

STAND WITHOUT STANDING

A text by
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Ever since the way of presenting and promoting products of all kinds known as the “stand” became a big, big aspect of socioeconomic practices, from the small craftsman to major corporations, there has been no such thing as a trade fair without stands. From ham fest to bric-a-brac and from there to contemporary art, ceramics and the latest start-ups, you cannot exhibit a product other than “on the stand”. These rented spaces ranging from small to large that are easy to assemble and take down, with their variety of designs, are the producers’ shop window and image, the topographical and symbolic space of the transaction between salesman and customer. The incredible number of fairs held every year, their constantly rising attendance figures and “visits to the stand” prove, if proof is required, the need for physical contact, both between individuals and between subjects and objects, while of course contributing to that highly abstract process that consists in shunting around capital. The stand is a space where concrete, self-demonstrative, literally scenographic form is given to that Marxian notion of “commodity fetishism”, wherein relations between individuals “do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things.”¹ The reification of human relations that stems from this resonates strangely with Claudia Triozzi’s piece *Stand*, which also presents different versions of a product: herself.

Or, more exactly, images of herself. Although the artist is present, albeit on the margins, and although she has put the current image of herself on display through photographs (taken by Olivier Charlot) and films, so many images in

which she plays at being someone else, *Stand* is a space of presentation where the self-promotion of a self-image, of a physical and moral identity, is tantamount to self-mockery. This form of presentation can indeed turn into an effective advertisement or switch suddenly to the slashing of prices or aesthetic value, this bargain basement demotion depending on whether fans of a certain kind of contemporary dance agree to go to other stands than the ones they are used to. This is certainly not an essential trait of Triozzi's piece, but the fact of presenting, in a way that is barely metaphorical, other products on the stand really is rather amusing when you think of the constant partitioning of contemporary dance, which carefully avoids exotic produce.

Claudia Triozzi thus promotes her images in a space that is all but empty, the room being thinly scattered with photographs that protrude from the walls, then disappear behind partitions, giving way to other panels in a sequence worthy of a small magic theatre. Moved by invisible operators, the panels slide and disappear mysteriously into the walls only to reappear elsewhere to tell a story about this main character, a woman we would associate—no doubt because of her hair and general appearance—with the 1960s. The beginning of the piece is musical and vocal but not visual, for even the two performers (Claudia Triozzi, Michel Guillet) are at the edge of the stand, and thus not directly involved with the manipulation of the panels. The voice and the music are, however, physically present on the stand inasmuch as they participate in the unfolding of the images, of their substance and matter, so to speak, and influence the spectator's possible interpretations. Essentially improvised, the vocal part can totally change the message of a given image from one presentation to another, as its sounds suggest, say, sighs of pleasure or, another time, groans of anguish or pain. But that is overstating it, for most of the time these are onomatopoeic noises that are difficult to identify—rumbles, guttural gurglings with no obvious meaning. And this is also true of the films: yes, they are only images, only masks, postures and mimicry, and we can grasp their juxtaposition of roles and make-believe, but we still cannot find any narrative structure here. Indeed, can we even say that this is a narrative or a linear story? Might it not, rather, be an attempt to assemble disparate elements in order to give them a meaning?

The first meaning we look for, when the piece begins, concerns the connections we should be able to make between the vocal sounds and the images. Why inarticulate sounds instead of a text or words, since a few words would help us understand what is traditionally taken as self-evident, namely, the interaction between a narrative and a representation. *Stand* has elements of theatre, cinema, song, performance and dance, as have several other pieces by Triozzi. Up to now, though, it was possible to follow a narrative thread that offered a few hints about their unfolding. Contrary to what one might expect, what we have here, apart from two filmic sketches, is a kind of a complete muteness regarding what is

happening on the stand and at the same time an abundance of all kinds of vocal and musical manifestations. A continuous ostentation with a meaning that is relatively inaccessible but sensed, goes hand in hand with perfectly clear non-meaning language, as if an attempt was being made to dissociate the manipulation of images and the electronic/vocal sounds. The gesticulations of the female character heighten the general incongruity—she seems stunned, dismayed, surprised or aware of her attitude—as do her surprising appearances alongside a clown, or her equally surprising poses, a cross between old-fashioned glamour photography and glossy photo novels. The surreal and also seriously comical aspect of the female models in some of the photos even brings to mind those paintings in which Dalí presents Gala in hieratic poses taken from the great tradition of portraiture. We do not really know how we should read the images on this stand, which also evoke advertising, fashion magazines and movie babes, if not in terms of the fact that they all depict certain moments in a woman's life.

Anyway, these moments are a little crazy—that is, if we judge by the first, tone-setting image in which we see a woman in her kitchen captured in the middle of a playful jump for the camera. There are echoes here of those celebrity photos taken by Philippe Halsman—notably Marilyn Monroe and Salvador Dalí. He explained that his models, who were so used to being exposed to the public eye, relaxed their self-control at the moment of jumping and at last looked spontaneous. But here, the young woman looking at us makes this putative spontaneity another way of striking a pose, a humorous pose that is trying to hide psycho-physical traits more than to reveal them. Indeed, all the other images take the form of *mise-en-scènes* that are sometimes exaggerated and fantastical, and in which both the expression of the femininity associated with a certain period and the places with which it is supposedly associated—kitchen, bedroom, lounge—offer an over-the-top image of woman as an object of contemplation and desire. The relative undress, the knowing looks, the languor of the abandoned body, a touch of eroticism and false modesty, the broad, false smile flashed at viewers at the very end of the piece, all have a hollow feel because they are—deliberately—overacted. The two films in which the female character appears mark the two extremes of the reifying gaze of the Other, which we suspect is probably masculine, in one, the woman has to “play the statue” and in the other she must “act dead”: in other words, stay still. Certainly, as the model points out, “When you're dead, you don't do much.” This is woman as a magnificent, untouchable object, like Baudelaire's vision of Beauty:

“Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,
Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,
Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour
Eternel et muet ainsi que la matière.”²

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital* (Book I, Part I, Chapter I, part IV), Penguin, 1985, p. 166.

² Charles Baudelaire, “La Beauté”, *Les Fleurs du mal*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1998, pp. 24-25. (“I am lovely, o mortals, a stone-fashioned dream/ And my breast where you bruise yourselves all in your turn,/Is made so that love will be born in the poet,/Eternal and silent as matter is timeless.”)

But the divinity presented to us here is more like some diva being pursued by paparazzi.

And, as is so often the case, the images stolen from stars' lives show them in a very different light, lacking now in panache, grandeur and status. They are sadly banal. And yet it is this perfect banality, coupled with the completely artificial moments abundantly provided by the movies, photography and television, that heightens their aura, for these men and women belong in another world and yet are like us. The ordinary middle class flat where some of these scenes occur both attests this belonging to the life of common mortals and suggests a kind of manifestation not expected in such a place, as if stardom were being miraculously visited on them. The atmosphere of this flat, which some may judge lacking in standing, contaminates the impression that we get of the female figure, or that she herself seeks to give of herself. Witness the filmed scene where the "actress" is frightened by a little dog and suddenly leaves the sofa she is sharing with it. Her public image is, from that moment on, caught by an irrepressible and intimate reaction.

Stand exhibits this dual public and private life, with both its hidden and private sides, since backstage and onstage eventually come together. Many directors of stage and screen have used such reversals of dramatic space, making the background the stage and the stage something to be hidden from the gaze. *Stand* may thus be like a backstage space, where sets are put in place, moved, hung up, dragged around, suspended, unfolded and struck in order to ensure a fully functional illusion on the other side. However, the panels go on being manipulated on another, still invisible side, as if by a kind of interlocking of onstage and backstage space, to which correspond photographs showing images of images, sets within sets, faux-real actors in faux-real action.

Mixing together slices of life captured live by a curious and indiscreet photographer, posing sessions for a magazine, film or TV series, and a live voco-musical performance, *Stand* promotes a world of falseness and mendacity, of factitiousness and illusion: what happens both inside and outside the stand is 100% acted. However, the false and the factitious seem to have differing effects on the characters who, while still part of some strange fiction, seem more at a loss than in control of their actions and movements. The figure of the clown becomes the emblem of a staging so excessive that it heightens its realism, like those sketches in which, most of the time, clowns make us laugh precisely with their misfortunes. No doubt the unhappiness, too, is acted, but the fact that we can laugh at the pain inflicted and the humiliations or vexations suffered by others is intriguing. Laughter is a way of throwing off the weight of real, known unhappiness or its possibility, of momentarily escaping the thought of our own wretchedness. While it has its humorous or slapstick side, *Stand* does not make us laugh. It is not a jolly piece. On the contrary, it distils an uncertain, somehow hesitant melancholy that cannot or does not want to

declare itself but remains present throughout.

The sounds of the voice have a lot to do with this impression of melancholy or sadness which is all the more disturbing in that the live corporeal expression is simultaneously in phase with the circulation of images and at odds with it, to one side, both literally and figuratively. The voice is reduced to minimal expression, and the photographs and films of the making of possible images of women, or of a certain kind of femininity, or even of human relations, underscore their reification. In the absence of articulated language in the vocal performance, the body is a thing that groans, cries, sighs, grunts and blows, but it is no longer a body of speech even though it remains a speaking body. The clown and its female double, who is also made up and disguised, are seen as images of the body onto which general notions are projected, to the detriment of any real physical and psychological identity. Their singularity is obliterated, disappearing behind the masks and the roles they are made to play. Certainly, the actors' bodies played the game; they put on another personality, another image. But by the very intensity of their persuasiveness they were demonstrating that real bodies often seem less real than bodies that are covered over by costumes, finery and make-up. Some of the movements between the stand and the offstage tend, in contrast, to exploit the classic theme of the actor and his double. This is the case, for example, when the performer comes onto the stand and, with her back to us, mounts a horse, whose posterior is visible to us, then turns slowly round to face us while mimicking some of the photographs we saw earlier. The figure offstage goes with the figure in the images, creating a new image that is no doubt more alive because it is concretely present, but at the same time a superlative image because the real body eventually comes to be identified with the acted body. At this point we no longer really distinguish between the body as image, as a thing, an object of contemplation and various forms of exchange, and the body of flesh that was so powerfully present in its vocalisations throughout the piece. As with the possible inversions of stand and off-stand, the reversal is now complete: we are no longer in a relation where the living body can be told apart from the represented body, but in a situation where all presence is transformed into representation.

If we take what must happen on a stand seriously, then we find ourselves confronted, not with relations between people but with relations between people that involve things and are inscribed in them, insofar as bodies are reified and are now no more than images of themselves. They are images that are apprehended during the symbolic exchange that the spectators engage in with them. The fetishisation of the body—here the starlet, actress, clown, diva, naked model—is not, fortunately, the last word spoken on this stand as if to clinch the sale and confirm the fact that bodies are consumables, like any other product—a situation that has become familiar since the advent of mass culture. If the clown is sad and the young woman frightened, they are still playing roles,



Claudia Triozzi, *Stand*, 2004. Photo by Olivier Charlot.

and their acting is integrated into their appearance and form of self-representation. Even if the facial expressions in the black-and-white images that appear over the stand bring to mind certain images of Anna Magnani, or any other Neo-Realist images of female faces expressing tragedy, it's still only theatre. And this avatar of the sad mask from Greek theatre finds its counterpart in the joyous mask of the final scene. Now a single, whole entity, the performer and actress flashes us a big, dazzling smile. But what exactly is she laughing at?

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