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Dire et Chanter Les Passions est une revue internationale à comité de lecture, créée en 2020 par Marc Jeannin et David Pouliquen (par ordre alphabétique), qui publie des articles scientifiques d'excellence rattachés à la thématique principale de l'expression vocale des passions.

La revue propose des sujets de réflexion interdisciplinaire de qualité en lien avec les différentes productions de la voix et les émotions qu'elles suscitent, dans de nombreux domaines.

Elle publie, en format numérique et sur demande en format papier, des articles de chercheurs français et internationaux venant de tout le spectre des Sciences humaines et sociales ainsi que des Sciences formelles.

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PASSIONATE ERRANCY: L'ATELIER DELL'ERRORE IN DRAWING AND PERFORMANCE

Angela Albanese
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It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a “narrative”, and that this narrative is us, our identities. If we wish to know about a man, we ask, “What is his story — his real, inmost story? — for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us—through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions. . .”

O. Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*

Stories, whether extracted from memory or fruit of the imagination, are also made of absences – they are the result of all the material that gets discarded.

S. Hustvedt, *Vivere, pensare, guardare*

In *Healing Fiction*, published in 1983, James Hillman talks about the importance in psychotherapy of treating not solely the patient, but the stories the patient tells. Of course, a person enters into a therapeutic process with a problem or symptom, but it's also true that what the therapist hears is not the psychic pain directly, but its narration. Citing the emblematic story of one of his patients, he says, “I believed her story to be her sustaining fiction” (1983: 17). The stories of patients, the mode and style of their tales, are for Hillman as crucial as the symptoms, and the therapist must not seek to translate the story immediately into clinical, specialized language. Rather, the therapist must listen attentively and then tell the story back to the patient, enriching it or reducing it to its essentials, suggesting elements to complete or present the stories to the patient in a different light. Listening to healing stories or ones that call for healing means first of all to position oneself “in attentive service [. . .] within an imaginative reality” (Ivi: 73).

The idea that narration can be regarded with full legitimacy as a cognitive behavior and a conduct typical of the species of *homo sapiens* (cfr. Cometa 2017, 2018, Barenghi 2013), and that telling stories revealing passions, traumas, and emotions is necessary not only for the teller but also for the listener, is by now consolidated as knowledge in cognitive science, psychoanalysis, and literary theory. But what happens when words alone cannot be the only expressive vehicle? What happens when language, mere speaking, which after all is neither the first nor the only way of representing the world to ourselves, is not enough, and must resort to the body and ally itself with other arts—for example, corporal modes such as drawing and theater—to bring to the surface a magma of otherwise inexpressible passions?

This is what happens in the creative laboratory Atelier dell'Errore (Art Studio of Error), conceived by visual artist Luca Santiago Mora in 2002 as an integrative project of the Child Neuropsychiatry Department of Reggio Emilia Health Services, and subsequently of Papa Giovanni XXIII Hospital in Bergamo. At the Atelier, adolescents with more or less severe cognitive disabilities—“learning difficulties, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's, X-fragile, hyperkinesia, and including the mysterious, omnivorous category of autism” (Santiago Mora 2013) formulate stories

through drawing; specifically, through drawings of fantastic, monstrous animals, mostly insects, which they invent to defend themselves from their fears, nightmares, and the prejudice of the world outside. “For the most part,” Santiago Mora explains, “a child comes to the studio already set in the conviction of being unable to draw. Often, and memorably, they come out with peremptory proclamations such as “I cannot draw”. This is the *you can't draw* inflicted on them in school, which they immediately sublimated into an absolute. This is the challenge. But it is extremely hard to pull them out of those convictions of theirs” (Ibidem).

In 2015, the Atelier, which is limited exclusively to adolescents below legal age, was augmented by the Atelier dell'Errore BIG, the *Advanced School of Specialization and Professionalization in the Visual Arts*, established at Reggio Emilia's Maramotti Collection of Contemporary Art. BIG was initiated by the parents of participants in the first Atelier who, having grown beyond the age covered by the national health service, were no longer eligible for state-sponsored programs in Juvenile Neuropsychiatry.

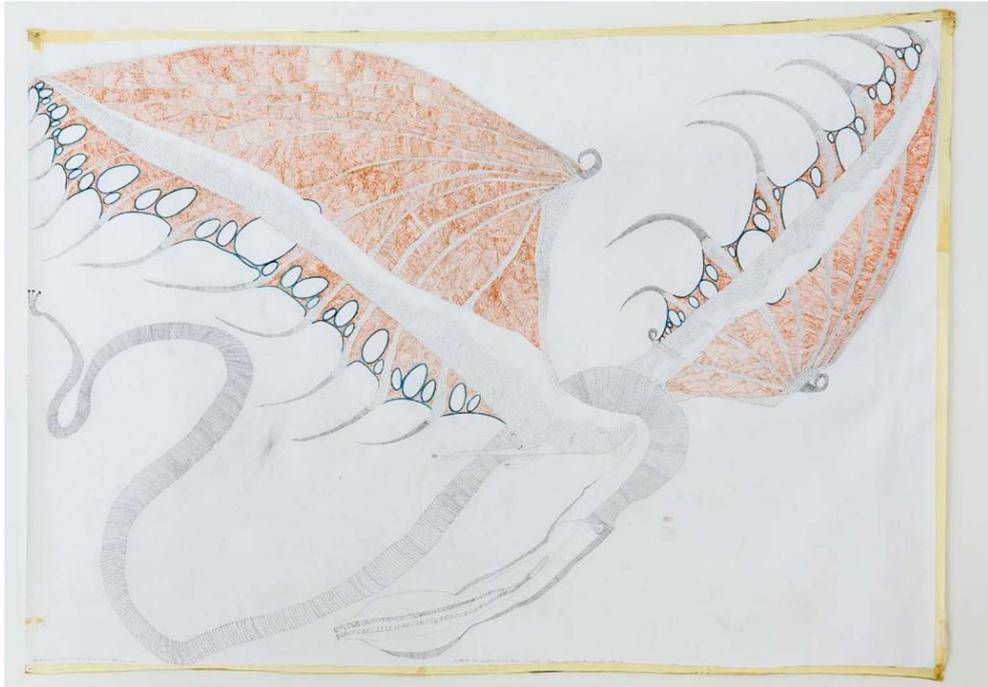
In addition to being an efficacious “complement to the clinical activities of Juvenile Neuropsychiatry”, the Atelier is “also a work of relational art, and as such has been featured in many exhibitions and events related to contemporary art in Italy and abroad” (Belpoliti 2016: 246). The project's self-definition as “relational art” is decisive, because it stresses the primacy not exclusively on the works of art produced by the participants, but of the studio's work overall: it is the process, the place, and the activity itself which is the “relational artwork”, rather than the finished object put on display.

The work produced is the outcome of an inter-subjective experience and a collective practice in which the participants collaborate to create drawings of fantastic animals under the discreet guidance of Santiago Mora, who accompanies rather than imposes rules, adopting a role of a “maestro” who is “a peer but an older one” whose main function is to supply the young artists with “paper and pencils and a little technique” (Candiani 2016: 191).

The Atelier imposes no restrictions except for three irrefutable rules: the subject matter (only animals); the materials (only pencils, colored pencils, and wax pastels on A4-size drawing paper); and a prohibition on erasure. Santiago Mora emphasizes that “the studio has no reverse gear: erasers are absolutely forbidden. Instead, go forward, proceed from what there is, from what you are. This is a bit what one learns from life as adults: to ennoble a defeat, to transform it into something surprising, unexpected, un-hoped for” (Santiago Mora 2013).

Since erasure is not allowed, it often happens that the material and symbolic location of a single drawing sheet is not enough to contain the suffocated emotions of the young artists, the monstrous, shunted stories they keep inside. During the process of collective composition, the animals can grow to huge dimensions, enriched with details and new story fragments which spread across additional sheets placed alongside the first one as the figure expands. An example of this is the drawing entitled *The Phoenix Who at Night Punishes Davide Who Beats Up Children*, 198 x 273 cm (that is, roughly 16.5 x 22.7 feet), or *The Huge Iron-Spider from Curnasco*, which measures 300 x 240 cm (25 x 20 feet) and was chosen as the cover image for the bi-lingual volume *Atlante di Zoologia Profetica/Prophetic Zoological Atlas* which includes about forty Atelier drawings, accompanied by critical commentary by various contributors¹.

¹ Edited by Marco Belpoliti and published in 2016 by Corraini Edizioni, the book is a catalog of the Atelier exhibition *Uomini come cibo/ Men as Food*, on display in Milan from June to September 2015 on the occasion of the Milan Expo.



La Fenice che di notte castiga Davide che picchia i bambini / Phoenix who at Night Punishes Davide who Beats Children
 Giulia + Laura, Atelier dell'Errore, 2015
 Tecnica mista su carta / mixed media on paper (198 x 273 cm)



L'Immane RagnoFerro di Curnasco / The Huge Iron-Spider from Curnasco
 Nicolò + Nuru + Nicolas + Luca, Atelier dell'Errore, 2015
 Tecnica mista su carta / mixed media on paper (300 x 240 cm)

The total ban on erasure means that every single mark made on paper, even the mistakes, are important, first because they become an irremovable part of the animal slowly taking shape through the movement of the young artists' hands, coming to unpredictable life on the page, as well as because they are fruit of the relations among the various participants. The drawing configures an intersubjective, relational experience that is necessarily aesthetic and ethical, if we take intersubjectivity in the way neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese perceives it, as primarily intercorporeal, an experience of bodies interacting one with another:

The discovery of mirror neurons brings us to a new notion of empirical intersubjectivity connoted first in time and primarily as corporality. [...] The capacity of comprehending the other as an intentional agent, far from depending exclusively and principally on mental and linguistic abilities, is strongly dependent of the relational nature of the action. Intercorporality thus becomes the key source of our knowledge of others. (Gallese, Cuccio 2014: 311)².

“The relational work of art” created by the adolescents of the Atelier originates in the body: in bodies that draw, bodies interacting with other bodies working on the same emergent artwork, bodies that share a difficult process of realizing their own subjectivity and presence in the world starting from their relations with others, who together weave an experience that is human and cognitive even before it is aesthetic.

The central role of drawing as corporal experience in the activity of the Atelier dell'Errore brings to mind the striking observations of French art historian Henry Focillon, whose short essay “Éloge de la main” published as an appendix to his *Vie des Formes* (1934), affirms the absolute centrality in artistic creation of the physical action of the hands as they transform matter, a labor never disconnected from the intellect. “The hand”, Focillon writes, “is action: it grasps, creates, at times one would say it thinks. [...] And art is made by the hands. They are the instrument of creation, but above all they are an organ of consciousness.” (Focillon 2002: 106, 114). Among the highest forms of art stands drawing, on which Focillon concentrated particularly, because in drawing the hand more than any other part of the body, becomes a privileged instrument of vision and consciousness: “The magic power of the hand that nothing can hold back or slow down, even when it proceeds slowly, with studied attention (Ivi: 121). At the base of any artistic result is the hand's knowhow, which is always *thinking* rather than a mere “docile servant” (Ivi: 123) of the eye and mind. “In the artist's studio,” he continues, “the attempts, the experiences, the divinations of the hand [are] written everywhere” (Ivi: 123), granting full citizenship to “the accident”, “the disaster”, and error. “The artist”, Focillon says in reference to the work of Katsushika Hokusai, “receives with gratitude the gift of chance, [...] appropriating it unhesitatingly, bringing a new dream to life. The artist is a prestidigitator [...] capable of profiting from his errors, his failed attempts to grasp, to make new games: and nothing has the elegant grace of what is produced in response to a *gaffe*” (Ibidem). In the realm of creative experience, the error is nothing but “the irruption of the unforeseen in a universe where it cannot fail to find a place, where everything is poised to welcome it. It's enough to seize it on the fly and bring out all its hidden power” (Ibidem). Focillon almost seems to be describing the Atelier dell'Errore, where the mistake is the foundational element of the young artists' experience. Santiago Mora explains the origin of the studio's name: “we practice the controlled stumble and recovery, its benign inversion. We consider the error, the slip and fall, to be constitutive of life, of every life, of every human being. After all, the mechanics of molecular biology teach us that if there hadn't been mistake after mistake in the miraculous helix of our DNA, we would still be billions of perfectly aligned bacteria” (Santiago Mora 2013).

² Vittorio Gallese and his working group made the important discovery of the mirror neurons. Central to their research is the elaboration of a neuroscientific model on intersubjectivity, defined as *embodiment*, and linked to this, a theory of subjectivity conceived as intersubjectivity, and this in turn seen as intercorporeality, as empathy, and as the relational nature of human consciousness and aesthetic experience. For an introduction to Gallese's prolific work, see Gallese 2007, 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2017, Gallese, Guerra 2015.

When complete, every drawing is given a title, which is usually not assigned by the work's creators, but by other participants, called "the denominators", thereby further highlighting the relational nature of the work. The titles by themselves, even without the monstrous protagonists they name, constitute a form of narration, as seen in a selection of examples: *Pangolin Vomiting to Attract the Attention of a Female*; *Night Avenger Devours Classmates I Get Close and They Go Away and Say I Stink*; *TurinOceros Who Runs Over the Highway*; *Isopod Mud and Blood They Call Me Mongoloid and I React and Defend Myself*; *Sexual Sharkist Kissing Its Own Wounds*; *Blind Fly Bluffing and Fighting Matteo Who Beats People and Especially Me*. As Antonella Anedda sharply observes, "The images would not be conceivable without these monster-titles: long and snaking, jumbled yet recognizable, grammatically flawed yet perhaps for that reason more alive than so many dead letters." (Anedda 2016: 50).

The titles themselves are enough to indicate the complex and variegated phenomenology of error that arises from the cognitive challenges faced by the Atelier artists, which result in extraordinary and highly expressive grammatical inventions. Their renderings in English, made by Franco Nasi, a specialist in "extreme translation", for the bi-lingual publication of the *Atlas*, attempt to preserve and convey the linguistic serendipity of the titles, which benefit from phenomena typically regarded as erroneous, including misspellings, word salads, hypercorrectness, neologisms, invented verbs, and even surprisingly refined acrostics, such as the denominators' term BOSS for *Bambino Obeso Senza Speranza* (in English, Obese Hopeless Child) and the abbreviation for Atelier dell'Errore, *AdE*, which in Italian is a homonym of Hades³.

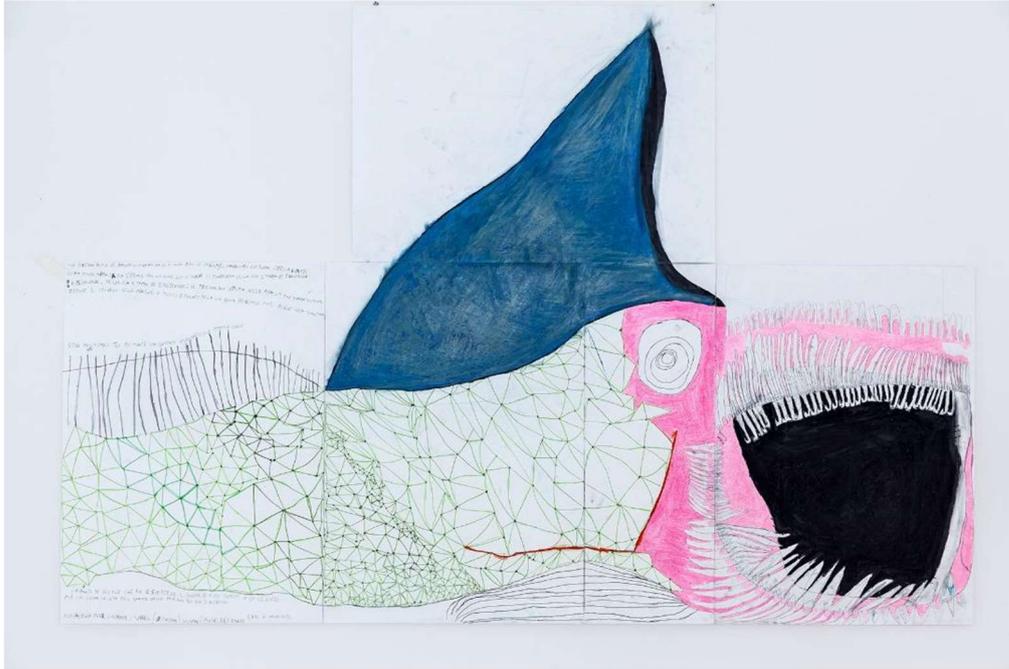
The drawings are true iconotexts, not only for the narrative titles assigned to them but also for the explanatory notes, these too featuring orthographic errors and striking, unpredictable and highly evocative neologisms (Nasi 2018: 226-228). These notes may be located either at the margins or within the drawings themselves, a form of ekphrasis that serves to describe individual sections of the monstrous insect's anatomy. For example, the drawing entitled *Southern Pharkus* is accompanied by a note explaining: "(Southern Pharkus) is the evolution of fear: he hunts for Marco and Jacopo (my mortal enemies who call me BOSS and makes them live in their own nightmares)." (Belpoliti 2016: plate 38). Another, equally expressive, whose title—already a story on its own—is *I'm the Boss of the Plavaterina Who Protects Me from Vittorio Barale*: "(This Plavaternia) is big and so devours more than 196 thousand people first of all Vittorio Barale who beats me on my neck and on my back, he calls me popsicle, steals my money and trips me secretly and I tipslip." (Ivi: plate 14). At times the texts are so long as to constitute a narrativization of the image (cfr. Cometa 2012), as demonstrated in the elaborate ekphrasis of the drawing entitled *Night Fury Whispering Death*, which we cite here in full:

Has extendable bones so to make them into an indestructible armor made of bone (and) a circuit of electric shocks that makes men's hart explode in a second, after that he suks the life out of people's harts so that he can evolve.

He can become little, people squash him, but he is too hard, people freeze, he becomes Omegalomade again, suks out their souls, he makes it enter into his ey, he evolves and transforms into his 2nd stage of evolution: the Megalopade.

In his 3rd stage of evolution: the Merganchen spits orange bubbles that when they hit people's brain expodes and everyone enter into his mouth thinking that it was a cave. (Belpoliti 2016: plate18)

³ *Traduzioni estreme (Extreme Translations, 2015)* is the title of Franco Nasi's monographic study of particularly complex texts such as lipograms, pangrams, anagrams, acrostics, doggerel, nonsense verse, and more. See Nasi, 2018, for a detailed analysis of the linguistic inventions of the Atelier and a theoretical reflection on his work on the *Atlante/Atlas*.



Furia Buia Morte Susurrante / Night Fury Whispering Death - Wael, Atelier dell'Errore, 2015
Tecnica mista su carta / mixed media on paper (120x175 cm)

At a certain point in its history, the Atelier dell'Errore felt the need to find other means to tell its stories. The work called for new translations and metamorphoses. Thus was born the idea of bringing to life, through staging, the animals represented in the plates, recounting, according to the modes of mimetic representation, what happens in the creative laboratory of the drawing studio. The 'Error' thus became errant, and the artists in the studio, along with their guide, translated and re-spatialized the tale of their emotions from their drawing papers to the theatrical stage.

As we well know, the theatre is organically the realm of *as if*; it is fantasy and a mode for creating unreality. The audience at a theatrical performance is aware of participating in a fiction to which, with the complicity of the actors, it decides to adhere for the duration of the enactment, as though it were true. The time and space of theatre, like that of fables, are a special time and space in which the categories of reality are suspended. In this suspended space and time, the theatrical event takes shape as a game of *as if*, a pretended truth. Dropped into the game, the spectator takes part by pretending to believe that what is happening on stage is real. The dramaturgy of *AdE*, however, immediately explodes all our expectations as spectators complicit in a fictional reality, because the actors are not actors and, above all, because there is no fictional construction, no mimetic Aristotelian compromise. Rather, each performance tells the story of the young artists of the Atelier, interwoven with the stories of the animals born from their creative imagination.

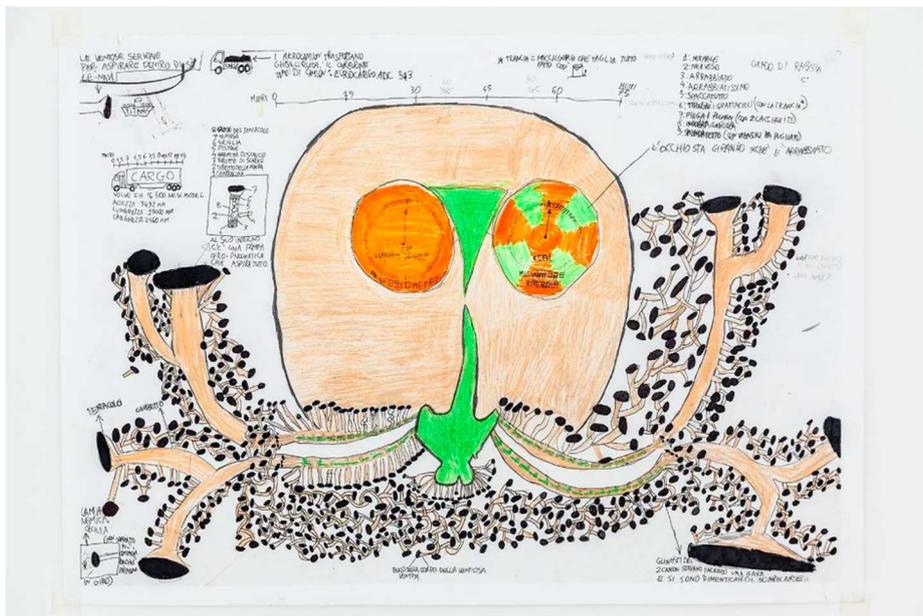
This is what took place, for example, in November 2018, when one of their first, quite singular performances, entitled "Little Errant Liturgy", was presented at the Teatro dell'Arte Triennial in Milan. On this occasion too, Santiago Mora served as the guide, a narrating voice seated at a simple school desk, a discreet, understated stage manager whose liturgy of small movements provided directions for the young artists, just as he does in the studio when their tools are paper and pencil. Mora created the narrative frame for this wonderful container of stories, which opened up on a nearly bare stage. On the left stood the school desk of the "slightly older peer"; at right, seated with him on the floor, two young artists bent over sheets of paper, drawing. In the center of the stage was a large conical pile of sand, like a dormant volcano ready to reawaken.

As they worked, the first of many stories appeared on an upstage screen as wide as the stage: a video image, dancing on its knees, of one of the two artists in flesh and blood at work at

the same moment, drawing on paper sheets laid on the stage. More visual stories followed one after another on the screen, alternating with images of flaming lava, volcanoes about to explode, swarming anthills. These chthonic images were visual translations of Hades-*AdE*–The Atelier dell'Errore, a shadowland where unseen figures labor away, where stories germinate out of discarded refuse, a site for the creation of images that reproduce the incandescent lives and unquiet spirits of adolescents.

The images of lava, an anthill, and a drawing (by Nicolas) entitled *The Remora AdE* projected on the screen, together serve to manifest what Heraclitus declared, that “Hades and Dionysus are one” (Heraclitus 1980: 55, fragment 123). The obscurity and invisibility of Hades is identical to the explosive fullness of Dionysus, god of ecstasy and theatre. In the studio, the artists discover the freedom to design monstrous animals that defend, vindicate, and render them justice. In the same way, the theater, etymologically identified as a time and place for making visible that which cannot at first be seen, becomes a place for giving form and voice to the same monsters. On stage they incarnate the beasts in speech, describing for example the terrifying red right eye of the *Remora AdE*, which “rolls in rage” and is called “anger meter” because it measures the level of fury roiling the body of the artist. The levels of anger are identified in increasing degrees:

- 1: normal
- 2: nervous
- 3: angry
- 4: very angry
- 5: smashes everything
- 6: tears down skyscrapers (with shears) (shears: cutting machine made like this...)
- 7: folds buses (with 2 screwdrivers)
- 8: hunchbacks gorillas
- 9: smashes the roof (with boxing tools). (Belpoliti 2016: plate 7)



Remora AdE / Remora AoM - Nicolas, Atelier dell'Errore, 2015
Tecnica mista su carta / mixed media on paper (50 x 70 cm)

During the performance, the stories rendered visually on the screen are interwoven with the individual stories of the artists themselves, recounted in words by Santiago Mora, together with the miraculous tales of the fantastical monsters they generated. *Relative-Eating Bone-Grinder*, *the Jellyfish-Dragon with Balls on Its Head*, *The Huge Iron-Spider from Curnasco* and other drawings are shown on the screen and described verbally at the same time, like a sort of ekphrastic contest between

pictura and *poësis*, complicated by the performative dimension of narration. The surprising result is that through the bodies of the acting non-actors, the drawings seem to detach from their static reproduction on the screen, becoming material and animate. The “dynamization of the images” (cfr. Cometa 2012), an ekphrastic technique that creates a sensation as though the images were moving, is reinforced by the interaction between words and the rhetoric of gesture, body, and stage. A vital relation, a coming-to-life, arises between the drawn animals and the bodies of the artists who have generated them: an incarnation, in the etymological sense of becoming flesh, of the images in the bodies of their artificers.

In a brief but powerful comment written in 1932 (but published posthumously) entitled *Storytelling and Healing*, Walter Benjamin reflected on a remarkable pain therapy invented by the wife of his friend, philosopher Felix Noeggerath:

The answer dawned on me when Noeggerath told me about the strange healing powers of his wife’s hands. What he said about her hands was this. “Their movements are highly expressive. But it is not possible to describe (*beschreiben*) their expression... It is as if they were telling a story.” We have learned about the healing powers of storytelling from the Merseburg magic spells. It is not simply that they repeat Wotan’s formula; in addition, they explain the situation which led him to use it in the first place. We know, too, that the story a sick man tells the doctor at the start of his treatment can become the first stage in the healing process. And this provokes the question of whether storytelling may not provide the right climate and the most favorable precondition for many a healing—indeed, of whether every illness might be cured if it could only float along the river of narrative—until it reached the mouth. If we reflect that pain is a dam that offers resistance to the current of narrative, it is evident that the dam will be pierced when the gradient is steep enough for everything that crosses its path to be swept into an ocean of blissful oblivion (*Dasein*). Stroking marks out a bed for this torrent. (in Cometa 2017: 350-351. Engl. Transl.: Benjamin 1999: 724).

In a comment on this passage in his book *Why Stories Help Us Live (Perché le storie ci aiutano a vivere)*, Michele Cometa observes that what Benjamin describes is not “properly speaking, a story—that is a verbal/auditory experience—but a visual and performative experience” (Cometa: 351). The movement of the woman’s hands constitute a narration, as though they were telling a story. In fact, they are themselves a narration of great therapeutic potency.

The hand movements of the teenage artists of the Atelier as they create their drawings, just like their bodies on stage, recount emotions, shape images, and weave stories. The tales for the most part are terrible: tales of fear, anger, justice and vendetta, more than can be told in the acceptable discourses of daily life. The mute gestures and the bodies of the young artists narratively articulate the magmatic life they contain. For the “normaloids”, it feels like lifting a stone and discovering an unknown world beneath, swarming with elemental vitality. You can’t unsee it.

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