UNDECID- ABILITY

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Silvia Bottiroli

MULTIPLYING THE VISIBLE

The word *undecidable* appears in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* written by Italo Calvino in 1985 for his Charles Eliot Norton poetry lectures at Harvard University. In the last months of his life Calvino worked feverishly on these lectures, but died in the process. In the five memos he left behind, he did not only open up on values for a future millennium to come but also seemed to envision future as a darkness that withholds many forms of visibility within.

Calvino's fourth memo,[1] *Visibility*, revolves around the capacity of literature to generate images and to create a kind of "mental cinema" where fantasies can flow continuously. Calvino focuses on the imagination as: "The repertory of what is potential; what is hypothetical; what does not exist and has never existed; and perhaps will never exist but might have existed." [2] The main concern that he brings forth lies within the relation between contemporary culture and imagination: the risk to definitely lose, in the overproduction of images, the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut and in fact of "*thinking* in terms of images." [3]

In the last pages of the lecture, he proposes a shift from understanding the fantastic world of the artist, not as indefinable, but as *undecidable*. With this word, Calvino means to define the coexistence and the relation, within any literary work, between three different dimensions. The first dimension is the artist's imagination – a world of potentialities that no work will succeed in realizing. The second is the reality as we experience it by living. Finally, the third is the world of the actual work, made by the layers of signs that accumulate in it. Compared to the first two worlds it is "also infinite, but more easily controlled, less refractory to formulation." [4]He calls the link between these three worlds "the undecidable, the paradox of an infinite whole that contains other infinite wholes." [5]

1. Out of five, the sixth lecture was never written, as the author died suddenly and the series remained unfinished, and yet published with its original, and now misleading, title.

2. Italo Calvino, *Visibility, in Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 91.

3. ibid, p. 92.

4. ibid, p. 97.

5. ibid.

For Calvino, artistic operations involve, by the means of the infinity of linguistic possibilities, the infinity of the artist's imagination, and the infinity of contingencies. Therefore, "[the] attempts to escape the vortex of multiplicity are useless." [6] In his fifth memo, he subsequently focuses on *multiplicity* as a way for literature to comprehend the complex nature of the world that for the author is a whole of wholes, where the acts of watching and knowing also intervene in the observed reality and alter it. Calvino is particularly fascinated by literary works that are built upon a combinatory logic or that are readable as different narratives. The lecture revolves around some novels that contain multiple worlds and make space for the readers' imaginations. The common source to all these experiments seems to rely in the understanding of the contemporary novel "as an encyclopedia, as a method of knowledge, and, above all, as a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world." [7]

Therefore, let's think visibility and multiplicity together, as: a multiplication of visibilities. They are traits specific to artistic production and define a context for the undecidable, or rather for undecidability, as the quality of being undecidable. Calvino seems to suggest that literature [8] can be particularly productive of futures, if it makes itself visible and multiple. Which is to say, if it doesn't give up on involving radically different realities into its operation modes and doesn't fade out from the scene of the 'real' world. We might stretch this line of thought a bit further and propose that art's potentiality is that of multiplying the visible as an actual counterstrategy to the proliferation of images that surrounds us. A strategy that is capable of producing different conditions of visibility. Embracing what we are capable to see but also think and imagine, to fantasise and conceptualise; and bringing into existence different configurations of public spaces, collective subjectivities, and social gatherings.

ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL WORLDS

In fact, undecidability is a specific force at work that consciously articulates, redefines, or alters the complex system of links, bounds, and resonances between different potential and actual worlds. In this sense, undecidability is a quality specific to some artworks within which the three worlds that Calvino describes meet and yet remain untouched, autonomous, and recognizable.

An artwork can indeed create a magnetic field where different actual worlds coexist and, by living next to each other yet not sharing a common horizon, generate a potential world. Then 'potential' does not mean 'possible.' In fact, something is possible when it contains and under certain terms performs the possibility of its actualisation, a world is potential when it can

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6. ibid, p. 98.

7. Italo Calvino, Multiplicity, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, cit., p. 105.

8. Or 'art' which is the term I will use below for the rest of this essay.

maintain its potentiality and never actualize itself into one actual form. In particular, the potentiality generated by undecidable artworks is grounded in a logic of addition and contradiction that is specific of art. A logic of 'and… and… and…' as opposite to the logic of 'either… or…' that seems to rule reality.

Artworks are places where contradictory realities can coexist without withdrawing or cancelling each other out. They can be sites of existence and of experience where images let go of their representational nature and just exist as such. None of the images of an artwork are being more or less real than the others, no matter whether they come as pieces of reality or as products of individual or collective fantasies. It is the art(work) as such that creates a ground where all the images that come into visibility share the same gradient of reality, no matter whether they harmoniously coexist or are radically conflicting.

If every work builds up complete systems that are offered to its visitors or spectators to enter into – if the invitation of art is often that of losing the contact with known worlds in order to slip into others – something radically different happens within an art that practices its undecidability. Here, spectators are invited to enter the work's fictional world carrying with themselves the so-called real world and all their other fictional worlds; a space is created where all these worlds are equally welcomed. The artwork may then be navigated either by only choosing one layer of reality, or by continuously stepping from one world to another – different dimensions are made available without any form of hierarchy or predicted relations.

Such dynamics seems to occur in performative works in particular, as the contemporaneity of production, consumption, and experience that is typical of performance intensifies the possibility of undecidable links between different realities. Moreover, in the live arts the curatorial context is normally visible as well and provides one more layer to the work by framing or mediating it.

AZDORA

A good example of an undecidable artwork is Markus Öhrn's *Azdora*, a long-term project that was initiated and coproduced by Santarcangelo Festival in 2015. As the festival artistic director at that time I had the chance to follow and support the project. The work was triggered by the encounter between the artist, in Santarcangelo for a research residency, and the feminine condition present in traditional family structures in this region of Italy. In particular, what struck him was the figure of the 'azdora,' a dialect word that means the 'holder' of the house and of the family – the woman who is in charge of the domestic life and of the labours of care. This figure is at the same time powerful, subordinate, and even repressed: through her devotion, she is sacrificed to the family and to the care of the

relationships that keep it together. Interested in investigating this feminine figure and the possibility that it suggests of a matriarchal societal structure, the artist made a call for 'azdoras' to work together with him on the creation of a series of rituals and later on a concert. Both the rituals and the concert revolve around the possibility of emancipation and the exploration of the wild, even destructive side of the figure of the Azdora. Twenty-eight women committed to a long-term project together with Markus Öhrn and dived into his imagery and artistic world made of diverse ingredients among which were the tattoo culture, the cult of bodybuilding, and the noise music practice. At the same time, the 'azdoras' were asked to bring in their own ingredients; imageries, concerns, and desires. Together with the artist and the female musician ?Alos and with the mediation of the festival, they embarked into the adventure of entering a place that did not exist yet. Creating a new set of rules and behaviours for themselves and for the spectators who would eventually join their rituals, attend their noise concert, or bump into their interventions in the public space during the festival period.

Similar to other artistic projects that one could trace back to the practice of undecidability, *Azdora* mingles different realities and fantastic worlds and also activates a participatory dynamic, yet preserving "the grey *artistic* work of participatory art." [9] In other words, it creates and protects a space of indeterminacy. In fact, *Azdora* is at the same time a performative picture, an artistic fantasy, a community theatre work, an emancipatory process, an ongoing workshop, a social ritual, and a concert. Furthermore, from the project a documentary movie and a sociological survey have been produced,[10] multiplying the possibility to access the work from different angles and via different formats. If the coexistence of different media already implies different angles, durations, discourses, and forms of spectatorship, the performance itself keeps an undecidable bound between its real and fictional ontologies. The performative work of *Azdora* is then intrinsically 'political' according to Rancière's definition of 'metapolitics': a destabilising action that produces a conflict vis à vis what is thinkable and speakable. *Azdora* allows different interpretations and produces conflicting discourses, yet remaining untouched. This does not necessarily mean complete though as, on the contrary, it is generating a multiplicity of different gazes that are all legitimate and complete but yet do not exhaust the work. This is what makes the performance itself unfulfilled and thus incomplete and open.

A MULTIPLICITY OF GAZES

An undecidable artwork is, in other words, a site where different and even contradictory individual experiences unfold and coexist, with no hierarchical structure and no orchestration.

9. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London-New York 2012, p. 33.

10. Respectively by the independent filmmaker Sarah Barberis and by the researcher Laura Gemini at the Urbino University.

It is a site where spectators' gazes are not composed into a common horizon but are let free to wildly engage with all the realities involved, connecting or not connecting them, and in the end to experience part of the complex 'whole of wholes' that is the artwork (while being aware or unaware of the existence of other wholes and of other gazes).

What is peculiar to this kind of artworks then, and what within them can produce an understanding of the place of art and of its politics today, is that they generate a multiplicity of gazes and of forms of spectatorship that also coexist one next to the other without mediating between their own positions and points of view. The multiplicity of gazes produced and gathered by undecidable artworks does not compose itself into a community, as there is no 'common' present. Rather, it generates a radical collectivity based on multiplicity and on conflicting positions that are not called to any form of negotiation, but just to a cohabitation of the space of the work. Spectators and their views and imaginations are acknowledged as equal parts of a collective body that exist next to each other. They don't fuse in one common thought and don't see or reflect one common image, yet effect each other by their sheer presence and existence, operating as a prism that multiplies the reality it reflects. A space of communication is opened here that is not meant for unilateral or bilateral exchanges, but rather for a circulation of information and interpretations – both of fictions and projections. A circulation over which no one – not even the artist – exercises a full control. The place of the author is then challenged and responsibility is shared with the audience not as a participant,[11] but rather as an unknowable and undecidable collective body that receives, reverberates, and twists it.

Multiple forms of public spaces and collective subjectivities thus arise and start inhabiting a productive time that goes much beyond the artwork itself and is still loaded by the specific geography of infinities that it has produced. The kind of collective body that undecidability produces could of course be seen as an image of a possible or future societal structure, but it is rather an enigmatic subject: it is not there to actualize itself but to keep being a sheer, glimmering potentiality. Indeed, as a practice of undecidability, art produces a collectivity, a future time, and an elsewhere, but does not claim any agency over them. It rather operates in a regime of prefiguration,[12] which is to say it does not tend towards a pre-existing, visible image. On the contrary, it proceeds in the darkness in order to produce different forms of visibility within it.

Undecidability could then be detached from art and applied to curation, instituting processes or even to politics at large: the

11. An active group of spectators invited to exercise their agency over the artwork

12. See Valeria Graziano, *Prefigurative Practices: Raw Materials for a Political Positioning of Art, Leaving the Avant-garde*, in Elke van Campenhout and Lilia Mestre (ed.), Turn, Turtle! Reenacting the Institute, Alexander Verlag, Berlin 2016, pp. 158-172.

unfolding of its resonances and consequences already opens this possibility and even beckons it. Nevertheless, acknowledging it as specific to art, and thus as a means without ends, seems to better protect the inner nature and the intact potentiality of a quality that does not make itself available for any use and does not serve any agenda, but stays autonomous and operates by creating its own conditions all over again.

Ultimately, a political dimension does spring from an art that practices its undecidability and from its encounter with a multiplicity of gazes. Preserving it is possible also by curating the relation between the artworks and their spectators and by setting the conditions for an intensity that can last in time and reverberate much wider and much longer than in the actual shared space and time of the performance. Through the combination of the encounter between undecidable art, multiplicity of gazes, and a curatorial dimension a condition of existence is produced that is intrinsically and utterly political. As it is, with Samuel Beckett's words in *The Unnamable*, about being "all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling".

UNDECID-ABILITY

Jozef Wouters has been active as a scenographer and artist since 2007. Wouters often departs from questions and ideas that gradually take shape inside and outside the boundaries of making. Strategic spaces thereby enter into dialogues with social processes and the power of the imagination; sometimes functional, sometimes committed or absurd, but always with a focus on the things that preoccupy him as an artist and as a person. Wouters' own work often relates to a specific location, such as *All problems can never be solved* (2012) for the Cité Modèle in Laeken and the *Zoological Institute for Recently Extinct Species* (2013) for the Museum of Natural Sciences in Brussels, and his Decoratelier performance *INFINI 1-15* (2016) for the main auditorium at the Brussels City Theatre (KVS). Wouters is an integral part of Damaged Goods, the Brussels based company of choreographer Meg Stuart. He initiates projects as an independent artist in residence, using his Decoratelier in Brussels as a base.

Jozef Wouters

If you say the word undecided I see someone walking around, restless, searching. But if you say the word undecidability I see someone who is standing still. Someone standing next to something in doubt.

(...)

It seems to be a choice, an ability: the ability to linger, to remain undecidable. It makes me think of a balancing act, a thing that is not yet in its final position, has not fallen and, maybe never will -- forever tilting in a situation that is deliberately undecidable.

(...)

In fact undecidability needs to be a choice in order to become a value, an ability, an attitude.

(...)

Undecidability can be found by looking for weakness in one's own work, standing next to it, pointing to its vulnerability. People say this is my weakness: I stand next to my work and talk about it. It might be true. But that is the weakness I am looking for. Together with an audience, I want to look at the work in a state of doubt. I need to stand next to it, looking at it and looking with it, doubting it and doubting with it. This position of doubt, often literally on the right hand side of the work, is the state I want to be in.

(...)

In a letter written to his patrons, Michelangelo complains that the Vatican is forcing him to provide a wooden scale model of his design for Saint-Peters Cathedral. There was a fear he would die without completing the project and his vision would be lost without a precise scale model. In his letter Michelangelo writes that he prefers clay because it can be remodeled easier while wood finalizes the design too much and leaves no space for doubt.

(...)

Now I have to think of a chair we placed on a playground in a social housing neighbourhood in Brussels. I did a project there called [i] All Problems Can Never Be Solved[i] which began as a fictional architecture office called 'Bureau des Architectes', that was working in and with the neighbourhood for six months. During that project someone asked us for more places in the neighborhood playground for the parents to sit to watch their children. So we placed a chair that doesn't decide where one should sit.

BUREAU DES ARCHITECTES

Cité Modèle
Hoogplein 1
1060 Laeken

Bruxelles, 12 septembre 2012

Cher Responsable des Espaces des Jeux de la cité Modèle,

Il y a quelques semaines, le Bureau des Architectes a placé une chaise au terrain de jeux. Cette chaise est une maquette pour un meuble publique qui ne décide pas ou quelqu'un doit s'assoir.

Parce que la première chaise a été volée toute de suite, nous avons décidé d'attacher une autre chaise au banc avec une longue chaine. Ainsi, l'utilisateur aurait encore un radius d'action de 4 mètres.

Ce matin nous avons constaté que notre proposition architecturale a été retiré par vos ouvriers. Ils nous ont dit qu'une chaine ainsi longue risque d'être utilisé par quelqu'un qui veut étrangler quelqu'un d'autre.

Nous proposons donc de raccourcir la chaine jusqu'aux 120 centimètres. Cette longueur peut combiner une liberté de mouvement avec un minimum de risque de strangulation.

Nous espérons que ce compromis vous plaît,

Cordialement,

Bureau Des Architectes

Translation of French letter.

BUREAU DES ARCHITECTES

Cité Modčle
Hoogplein 1
1060 Laeken

Brussels, September 12, 2012

To those responsible for the playground of the Model Neighborhood,

A few weeks ago, the Bureau des Architectes, placed a chair on the playground.
This chair is a maquette for a piece of public furniture that does not (want to) decide
where someone has to sit down.

Because the first chair was stolen immediately, we decided to place another chair but
this time attached to a fixed bench with a long chain. So, the user of the chair will still
have a radius of action of 4 meters.

This morning we found out that our architectural proposal was being removed by your
workmen. They told us that which such a long chain we would risk someone using it
to strangle someone else.

For that reason we propose to shorten the chain up to 120 centimeters.
That length might combine a freedom of movement with a minimum risk of
strangulation.

We hope that this compromise pleases you.

Cordially,

Bureau des Architectes

In the end we had to decide to pour the chair into a concrete block.

(…)

Undecidability is something else than flexibility. A flexible space postpones the necessary choices. A flexible space seems to be an apology. "Sorry for not being there," says the architect who designs a flexible space. Flexible walls are not the future. Flexibility is the past excusing itself for not being present.

(…)

I imagine different times, realities and fictions present simultaneously. It doesn't matter what is true and what is not, what is reality and what is fiction, they don't need to be separated. They can just exist next to each other in undecidable relations. To think of time as not linear but layered. In relation to city planning and the question how do we make the city, I try to think about the past, present, and future as simultaneous.

(…)

Right now many artists seem to question the future as a concept. I think that might be because the future is hijacked by tech companies in Silicon Valley; commodifying the future as an update, a version one can buy, depriving it of its metaphorical quality to be both dark, bright, unknown, free, and undecidable.

(…)

This text is composed of fragments of a conversation that unfolded when Nienke Scholts brought Jozef Wouters the word "Undecidability" in his decoratelier in Brussels on November 17, 2017.

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Other issues in this series:

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team, creators of (To) Come and to See.

More words coming up!

**For more information about this series
contact Nienke Scholts: nienke@veem.house**

Every issue is printed in a limited edition of 50.

EDITORIAL NOTE

If you were to propose a word for the future, what would it be? What language would it be in? How would this word sound when you say it out loud? What would this sound evoke in peoples minds? What would it perform?

Words can conjure up worlds. With language we can name, describe and give birth. It is said that we are within a so-called crisis of imagination; that we can't imagine alternatives for the current dominant systems that are failing. What does that say about language and the way we use it, and what potential is there in language to change this crisis? If we want to re-imagine our ways of being in and with the world, could we then start to describe it differently?

Words for the Future is a many-voiced series of ten words that point to the possible imaginations of various futures. Ten people from diverse fields of knowledge - ecology, sociology, experimental architecture, education, linguistics, philosophy, i.e. - are asked to propose a word for the future.

Each of them writes a text that unfolds the desired or foreseen way of thinking or doing, this word defines for them. At the same time an artist, in whose work this particular word seems already latently present, is invited to respond to it. By bringing both the essay and the artistic responds together in one publication, each issue becomes a dialogue around one word.

The texts and images that arose seem not only as glimpses of what possibly lies ahead, even more perhaps, these words and visions are engagements with the present. With this vocabulary of re-imagined words we might be able to begin to speak about the yet unnamed imaginaries that we notice around us, and have for the future.

Enjoy the journey through the worlds of these words,

Nienke Scholts
October, 2017