

„A Material Community of Things“
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The life and work of Terry Fox exemplifies the difficulty in separating the artist and the artist biography. His work originated in a period in which one believed in the power of art to effect genuine personal and social transformation. His was not an „anti-art“, but rather an identification with essential communication, as much towards the external, the environment and the spectator, as towards the internal, to consciousness and awareness, to birth and death itself.

His work speaks to us in a hermetic and often coded dialogue, performed with the most basic and fundamental materials, yet we are addressed directly, either through a shared performed experience, or through a well-earned recognition of the fragility of life, the twisted paths and the limits of memory. Terry had a confidence in the communicative power of immediacy, of simple actions, of resonance, and of language and sign, not only in interaction with a public, but as a personal practice for himself.

A sense of this dual function of artistic practice was defined early on within his own biography: an extremely personal research on the one hand, and the observing public on the other. Terry pointed this out in relation to performance practice: „What I make is something for me and something else for the person who watches.“¹ The „...only people who would be able to understand that space, that sculpture, would be the ones who'd seen it being created. I wasn't performing for the people: I was working with objects and the audience could see what was happening.“² This dichotomy between perception/observation and individual and group experience was at its most acute in his early body-performances of long duration. Terry was confident in the connective tension between him, as performer or initiator, and those present as the observing public. In the course of preparing this exhibition, I have come to understand the ways in which this communicative potential infuses all of Terry's work. Themes from distant periods and with contrasting materials and mediums interact, suggesting a network of possibilities that has made the planning process especially compelling.

In Terry's work text and sign are correlative, the text is a visual, acoustic and sculptural field which functions as a veil, a cypher. We must dig and uncode in order to arrive at meaning: an invitation to poetic correspondances. Arrangements of objects form a kind of symbolic grammar, in some cases forming phrases of representation, in others an overlapping of allusions which deceive us in their simplicity. Savagely honest at times, Terry's vocabulary is at once personal and universal, just as in its reception his work conceals as much as it reveals.

¹ Terry Fox Interviewed by Achille Bonito Oliva, *Domus* 521, April 1973

² Terry Fox Interviewed by Willoughby Sharp, *Avalanche*, Winter 1971

Terry collected books on secret signs. When he lived in Naples, his apartment was continuously broken into. A neighbor suggested that he put the sign for the “evil eye” on his door after which he was never broken into again. There were early performances in the States involving hobos and bums. He created a book containing fifty-two “Hobo Signs”,³ the images with which they left as message-marks for others who would follow in their footsteps.

In 1969, Terry asked two blind musicians in San Francisco to sing on the street before an open pit and mailed invitations for this street event, titled, „*Public Theater #3: What do Blind Men Dream*“. One of the blind musicians, who Terry referred to later as a „beautiful lady“ explained to him that the body should make itself a „bad host“ for an illness in order to be rid of it. Illness had always been his companion, his body an archive of incisions and interventions, but also a landscape, a path. His „Elemental Gestures“, remain prescriptions for live and recorded transformation: this body could be our body, the blood our blood, the actions our rituals. The re-enactments of paths through the labyrinth could be our traces. In the labyrinth we meet ourselves. Hermann Kern, who wrote one of the most important historical books on the Labyrinth (in which Terry’s work is noted)⁴, presumes that in ancient times the labyrinth was originally a dance movement which was only understood by the dancers through the markings on the „dance floor“, but incomprehensible to those on the „outside“.⁵

Having had little formal education in the arts, Terry was mostly self-educated and he maintained a complex relationship with the artistic community. He matured as an artist in a world of galleries and exhibitions where his work was often bought and sold - yet he longed for distance from the commercial urban centers. He gravitated again and again to Europe, most often to Italy, where he had lived in his youth. His decision to come to Liège, Belgium from Florence in the 1980’s reflected a desire to have the best of both worlds: a site near to the cultural centers of North Europe and remaining invisible in a marginal working-class city (with a large Italian population) and most importantly, to be left alone.

I lived next door, and I often visited in the late morning for an espresso. Terry would create ensembles of found objects, collected from the abundant flea markets in a city filled with the unemployed. The items would be arranged as in a rebus, as pseudo-relics, or as optical puzzles. I would notice them in the corners of the kitchen, or in his library, - yet they always disappeared when I visited the following day. I would prod him for the whereabouts of a no-longer visible work, only to be answered with indifference and annoyance. I once pushed him a bit harder, and he answered, „Oh, yes, that one - I made that only for myself.“

His house on the Rue Pierreuse: a Museum of Curiosities: an ascending tower of mind-states, each floor revealing the next rung, recalling the stages of the labyrinth. When I visited, Terry would devilishly unveil an item from his collection of unique artifacts as a medieval monk might show his special relics: exceptional books, found and rare items.

³ Kunstraum München, *Hobo Signs*, Kunstraum München, 1985.

⁴ Kern, Hermann: *Labyrinthe. Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen 5000 Jahre Gegenwart eines Urbilds.*, Hermann Kern, Prestel, 1999

⁵ vom Scheidt, Jürgen, Interview mit Hermann Kern, das der Bayerische Rundfunk am 27. Mai 1993, <http://www.hyperwriting.de/loader.php?pid=563>

He especially prized his books by Antonin Artaud, for whom he dedicated an artist book: „A.A.“.⁶ In „The Theater and its Double“, Artaud wrote, „...the need to act directly and profoundly upon the sensibility through the organs invites research, from the point of view of sound, into qualities and vibrations of absolutely new sounds, qualities which present-day musical instruments do not possess and which require the revival of ancient and forgotten instruments or the invention of new ones. Research is also required, apart from music, into instruments and appliances which, based upon special combinations or new alloys of metal, can attain a new range and compass, producing sounds or noises that are unbearably piercing.“⁷

David Ross writes in this volume that “If there ever *was* such a thing as a video artist, it wasn’t Terry Fox.”⁸, and I would say that he was also not a sound artist, yet had understood the audible as not merely an accompaniment to the visual field but as a medium in itself - long before “sound-art” had clearly been defined as an artistic practice. Terry abandoned working in video to maintain his independence from institutional production, yet he continued to work intensively with sound until his death in 2008. His sound installations and performances are legendary and essential yet remain a component to a coherent whole. He treasured sound as a medium for direct transmission and reception, unhindered by the baggage of language and history, functioning as purely visceral experience. He was attuned to the perception of resonating waves in space and in initiating vibration in physical materials. Terry revelled in the sympathetic oscillation of harmonic overtones generated by the transverse excitation of steel wires in architectural spaces - a phenomena which he discovered and developed –sculpturally dissecting a space into a vibratory suspension. For a performance he once arranged for an airplane to circle overhead, its single engine resonating sympathetically in tune with a homemade string instrument being performed in a pit below.

Marilyn Bogerd, co-founder of “Site” in San Francisco, introduced me to Terry’s work and noted our corresponding interests in durational performances on vibrating strings. She introduced me to Terry’s fraternal twin, Larry Fox in New York. Terry began with brush and paint, Larry with a photo camera. We visited him on the Bowery and watched 8mm home movies from their childhood: young Terry and Larry swimming in a radioactive lake near Seattle. I was not to meet Terry in person until some years later.

Terry, who referred to his drawings and performances as “sculpture”, might have had in mind Walter Benjamin’s “language of things”: , “...the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language...” and that ...“we are concerned here with... ..languages issuing from matter; here we should recall the material community of things in their communication.”⁹ I can sense Terry watching us, laughing

⁶ “A.A.”, 1971-72, Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

⁷ “The Theater and its Double”, Antonin Artaud, , Translation by M.C. Richards, Grove Press, New York 1958

⁸ Terry Fox: Not a Video Artist, David Ross, 2015

⁹ „On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”, Walter Benjamin, in Angelus Novus, 1966 (Gesammelte Schriften, Frankfurt: Surkamp, 1972-77)

gently, as we attempt to do justice to the “things” he left behind. That these “things” remain in active “conversation” makes use of a unique dialect of the arts, where sound is silent and objects speak.