

CLAUDIO PARMIGGIANI A SAN LUPO

con un testo di / avec un texte de /
with a text by Éric de Chassey

SilvanaEditoriale



A (Great) white silence

Éric de Chassey

We live in a noisy world. Not only in relation to sounds but also to images. Hence more than ever the need to make these noises stop, so that we are able to perceive what communication theory would call signals and what I would describe more as the things that really concerns us (if I use this rather vague expression for designating everything that might be the object of our attention, it is in order to avoid using an essentialist language or moreover a normative language, which would be particularly misplaced given that the stakes here are actually concerned with our freedom). Retreat, retirement, “a desert” in the traditional Christian monarchist sense of the idea, are all initial solutions; but at the same time, they imply a form of negation of the world as it is, a negation that we might regret: for numerous artists, this has nevertheless been a possible horizon, those who makes the absence of music the culmination of a musical composition, the absence of the object or image the culmination of a creation in the visual arts. Another solution, not in opposition to the world but burrowed into it, so to speak, touching its nerves, consists of creating situations, objects or images that bring those that experience them as close as possible to that which is not noise – should remain nameless in order to avoid returning to the state of noise. The work that Claudio Parmiggiani has just created in Bergamo, like the rest of his work, is informed by this second solution. It is difficult to explain how and to describe the effect it has in an impersonal way, but if the reader allows, I would like to begin with my own experience in an attempt to define this effect. The first time I entered the Oratory of San Lupo, Parmiggiani’s work hadn’t been installed – it hadn’t even yet been created by the artist – and I found myself in a really interesting space but full of noises, visual as well as acoustic. Just like any other visitor I imagine, I then began to consider the complexity of the construction, housing a simple volume in an irregular space, which via numerous small elements corrected the consequences of its elevation on a very narrow urban plot of land. There was a certain feeling of monumentality within what were after all restrained dimensions, achieved through a play on the extreme verticality, emphasized by the multiplication of floors. During a visit that turned into a stroll, and thus quite appropriate for looking at eighteenth century architecture, my



gaze paused on a more or less harmonious myriad of details – early XXth Century ceiling, disparate ecclesiastical furniture, wooden balustrades or on the contrary made from flat white iron painted with trompe-l'œil, areas of flat colour painted more or less recently on the walls. And quite naturally, the conversation turned to the most diverse subjects with the people that were in the building at the same time as me.

When I came back after the work had been installed, the situation had completely changed. The elements that were secondary to the site, nevertheless still present, were no longer noticeable for themselves but functioned as a passive decor, not erased but simply reduced down to their secondary position. In retrospect, the most impressive thing was the silence that reigned: the conversations that had begun outside were interrupted and only resumed once we had left the building. This was certainly not due to a state of amazement, a spectacle so disproportionate that the spectators are reduced – by force – to astonishment (what Kant called the sublime, undoubtedly, and which has become so trivialised since the technological means of modern entertainment have outweighed tenfold the panoramas of the nineteenth century). In fact on examination, none of the elements in Parmiggiani work for the Oratory of San Lupo are particularly spectacular – quite the opposite. By the way, the artist explicitly asked that there be no artificial lighting to highlight this or that element, opting for the unique resource of natural light, one that forces the visitor to acclimatise to a slower mode of perception than the one he or she is used to. The dust itself, that covers the floor and the bells that are placed upon it, is nothing like the dust you see in horror films or ghost trains in theme parks: it seems to have been deposited there over the course of many long years, the result of abandonment rather than the extreme attention that in reality was the cause of its dispersion. Still it appears finally to be less the sign of negligence than of the pure passage of time, that touches in this way everything we see before our eyes. Time materialised by the dust and a few cobwebs on some of the bells, or between them, the dust making them visible; a time that extracts everything from the agitation of the present and carries it to another register (that can be counted in hundreds of years rather than minutes, even though the dispersion of the dust hardly took a few minutes, using a technique borrowed from the theatre), visually unifying them through the same non-colour and the same non-matter.

As almost always with Parmiggiani, this work appears initially to be a rearrangement of elements that can be found in previous works. The disused bronze bells deposited on the floor had already appeared in 1993 with *La Casa della Campana di Pietra*, presented for the first time in Prague, or *In silenzio a voce alta*, in Modena in 2005. They had found themselves in a seemingly disorganized pile in the work *Senza Titolo*, shown in 2006 in the gothic sacristy of the Collège des Bernardins in Paris. But never before in a work by Parmiggiani, have the bells occupied the space in this way, with such profusion (there are forty, of different sizes), coming to rest in three corners of the rectangular room, in diverse numbers in different parts of this room, like the butterflies in earlier works (*Psiche*, for example, the idea for which appeared in a drawing in 1970). Never have so many of them appeared not only with their crowns but also fragments of their yoke (generally incomplete, as if the bell had been torn out of its original position to transport itself to the heart of what is in fact only part of a much bigger work). Up until then, this characteristic was applied more to bells that were presented in isolation, like those that appear with a pile of books in two works (in *L'Isola del Silenzio*, 2006, exhibited at the Brigidines Chapel in Brussels, or in *Campo dei Fiori*, 2003, from the Carisbo Foundation collection in Bologna). Neither had a gathering of bells co-existed in this way before with an isolated bell suspended by its clapper by a thick rope (this configuration had appeared in the work *Senza Titolo*, presented on its own in a room at the Governor's Palace in Parma, in 2010, for the artist's major retrospective exhibition there). But, as always with Parmiggiani what we might believe to be just a new combination of existing elements is well and truly a specific work, with a specific meaning, not comparable to the sum of significations present in earlier works containing similar elements. The reason for this can be found in the artist's extreme reticence to produce



objects which are unnecessarily added to those that exist already, as well as in what I would dare to call his honesty, that stops him from using or creating anything alien to him – which undoubtedly leads him to use a limited vocabulary, a limited list of materials, completely linked to his own individuality and personal history. And so the population of bells covered in dust that he placed in the Oratory of San Lupo, in such a way that it appears to have always been there, is not made up of interchangeable elements but rather differentiated individuals (or objects that each have their own personality and make each one a specific image). There are at least two types: a group of three unequal parts (two bells placed on top of each other in a corner, a small group of eight in another, and finally a group of several dozen in a third corner), characterised by its passiveness, and a central individual, with particularly imposing dimensions (a bell weighing two hundredweight). The isolated hanging bell clearly evoked a hanged man in the work at Governor's Palace in Parma that I just discussed. It is no longer as clear with its incarnation at the Oratory of San Lupo. This derives from both its position in the room space (very different from Parma, where it was placed in the corner of a room, in front of a window), from the length of the rope, from the co-presence of the other bells, and from its overhanging a hole in the floor, edged with marble and with just the sufficient dimensions for the diameter of the bell to pass through. All of this, not counting the precise dimensions of the bell and its clapper, does not eliminate the evocation of a hanging. I even thought, during the visit that I'm discussing here, of the extraordinary series of photos taken in 1865 by Alexander Gardner representing the executions of the judged conspirators after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, with the bodies suspended from a large scaffolding in front of a crowd of onlookers and soldiers at arms, with the ditches below and the graves already dug in the neighbouring prairies – without being able to see the executioners. Or further still the decapitations during the period of the Revolution (because the bells, as I said, are equipped here with their crowns). But the object-image created by Parmiggiani doesn't just limit itself to this evocation, it also made me think of Titian's painting representing the deposition of Christ, where the body of God who had become a human being, not straight but on the diagonal, with a large elongated form (the right arm) coming out of the main form (just like the clappers in relation to the mouth of the bell), finds itself temporarily above a rectangular tomb (whose ambivalent aspect in the Oratory of San Lupo is emphasised by the inscription in Latin marked on one of the marble edges: "ET EXSPECTO RESURRECTIONEM MORTUORUM").

All of these bells evoke the possibility of sound, even music. But they do so *in absentia* because it is clear that in this situation, none will be produced. Their silent presence, their primary character of being material objects, is a means for realising that all sounds are finally resolved in silence, not the silence of absence or idleness but the silence of fullness (and yet this feeling of fullness, in the mental resonances evoked by the images, goes hand in hand, in the here and now of the materiality of the objects, with that of absence and emptiness, potentially melancholy). As the metaphorical dust spreading everywhere indicates, all signs of life have fled this place. The religious function (or liturgical) of the bells, which is to sing out the glory of God and call upon living people to come and worship Him, cannot happen (even if some of the bells are equipped with their clappers, they are in positions that stop them from ringing). All that remains is this ensemble of silent relics, subtracted from life, in a space that has itself been subtracted from its original life (one of worship) for a very long-time. Relics that are for the most part present in a passive way, surrounding one of them who is suffering martyrdom. Relics that at the same time give back to this place – as a synecdoche for our world – its fundamental silence. As if were created in this way, not a white noise (whose emission, as we know, makes the ringing even less perceptible to those that experience it and in consequence facilitates concentration), but a white silence, that absorbs all the noise of the world.