

Genealogy of a Research

Riccardo Giacconi in conversation
with Emanuele Guidi & Antoine Marchand

EG: Your research *The Variational Status* unfolds around three main figures from different geographies and temporalities. Could you start by reconstructing the genealogy of this research and define who those characters are and how their stories meet and overlap?

RG: In 1959, historian Eric Hobsbawm published *Primitive Rebels*, a series of essays on individuals and groups who “have not found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world”¹ – those people he calls ‘pre-political’. Their means of expression comprised rituals, cults and acts of violence, disregarded or disdained by historians as clumsy, irrational and frequently unsuccessful.

The Variational Status follows in the footsteps of Hobsbawm’s approach, insofar as it tries to present a selection of examples of what he might have called ‘pre-political’ characters. At the same time, it slightly departs from his viewpoint or, rather, tries to pursue it in two directions. First, it concentrates on a selection of figures whose primitive or inarticulate political potentiality has been actualised only elsewhere and/or later – in different historical, geographical or cultural contexts – and, at times, despite or beyond their own intentions.

Secondly, the focus of this research is on stories rather than on people. It sets out to study a series of examples of how and under what circumstances a story may survive outside official historiography, and how it may become a catalyst for political narratives.

In particular, I am interested in the connections between episodes of solitary, inarticulate and pre-political resistance and narrative forms that either diverge from today’s mainstream media standards or have disappeared, in part or completely. Though mostly

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*, University Press, Manchester 1959.

unrelated and disregarded, the stories related in this research have acted as latent references for acts of revolt, rebellion or resistance outside political devices and consensus mechanisms. The focus is on the moment in which tradition (that is, the act of transmission) becomes a form of resistance to power and to the political sphere. Sometimes, a pre-political tension can be better identified through the study of non-official documents, narrative variations, legends, folk traditions and traces than through historiographical constructions.

These three figures may serve as starting points for an investigation into the status of documents, how stories are traversed by different social and political currents, and the connections between pre-political acts and outdated forms of transmission. These stories are conveyed through specific narrative forms, be it puppet shows (as in the case of Colombian puppet character the *espirtado*), *cantastorie* (‘street storytellers’, where the assassin Simone Pianetti is concerned), anarchist pamphlets (with regard to the Italian private soldier Augusto Masetti). *The Variational Status* presents such stories as intrinsically inseparable from their forms of transmission.

AM: Would you compare this research/investigation process to that of an archaeologist, putting situations and their protagonists back into the realm of the visible and the audible?

RG: The term ‘archaeology’ always reminds me of the time when I, Andrea Morbio and many other friends were attending Giorgio Agamben’s courses at the IUAV University in Venice. While archaeology is a research for an origin (*arche*, ἀρχή), according to Agamben that origin is not something that occurred once in the past in a precise, chronological moment, but rather it is a force, an intensity that keeps acting in the present.

While working on this investigation, for example when I was interviewing puppeteers in Bogotá, I felt that that I was not looking for historical information to reconstruct



Riccardo Giacconi, *The Variational Status* (detail), mixed media installation, 2016.

an event in the past *as it was*. Rather, I felt like I was trying to follow a current, an intensity that was flowing right there where I was, in that specific moment. For the research into the *espiritado*, such current was the gradual unveiling of an apparently mysterious triangular constellation linking puppetry, anarchism and something that may be labelled either sleepwalking, possession or ecstasy.

The intention to study something like a puppet character as a document might seem incongruous. A document is usually defined as fixed, stable, certified by an institution within a system of knowledge. A puppet character, instead, is intrinsically based on *variations*; it is an ephemeral, polymorphic entity that is actualised every time it is used. It is impossible to catch it in its pure essentiality, or to pinpoint a specific origin, like a signature on a contract. In short, it is impossible to define in it what Roberto Bazlen would call 'first-timeness' (*primavoltità*).

But I would like to answer your question by presenting two passages. The first is by historian Carlo Ginzburg:

Against the tendency of postmodern skepticism to blur the borders between fictional and historical narrations, in the name of the constructive element they share, I proposed a view of the relation between the two as a competition for the representation of reality. But rather than trench warfare, I hypothesised a conflict made up of challenges and reciprocal, hybrid borrowings. [...] Fiction, fed by history, becomes material for historical reflection or else for fiction, and so on. This unpredictable intermingling can come together in a knot, or in a name.² [...] Precisely because it is important to distinguish between reality and fiction, we must learn to recognise when one becomes joined to the other, each transmitting something that we might call 'energy.'³

Following Ginzburg's insight, we may look at this form of archaeology as a reflection on a 'knot' of reality and fiction (or, more precisely, of reality and forms of transmission).

2 Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*, University of California Press, Oakland 2012, pp. 2-4.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

The second passage is included in a recent preface by anthropologist Michael Taussig to his 1980 book *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Taussig states that “only literature, meaning fiction and forms of documentary overlapping with fiction” (what he calls ‘fictocriticism’) is able to reflect on “how ideas work emotionally and paint a picture of the world on account of the way they are put into language.”⁴ I look at the figure of the *espiritado* as exactly that: an object of study that encompasses within itself fictional and documentary elements, narrative and historical relations.

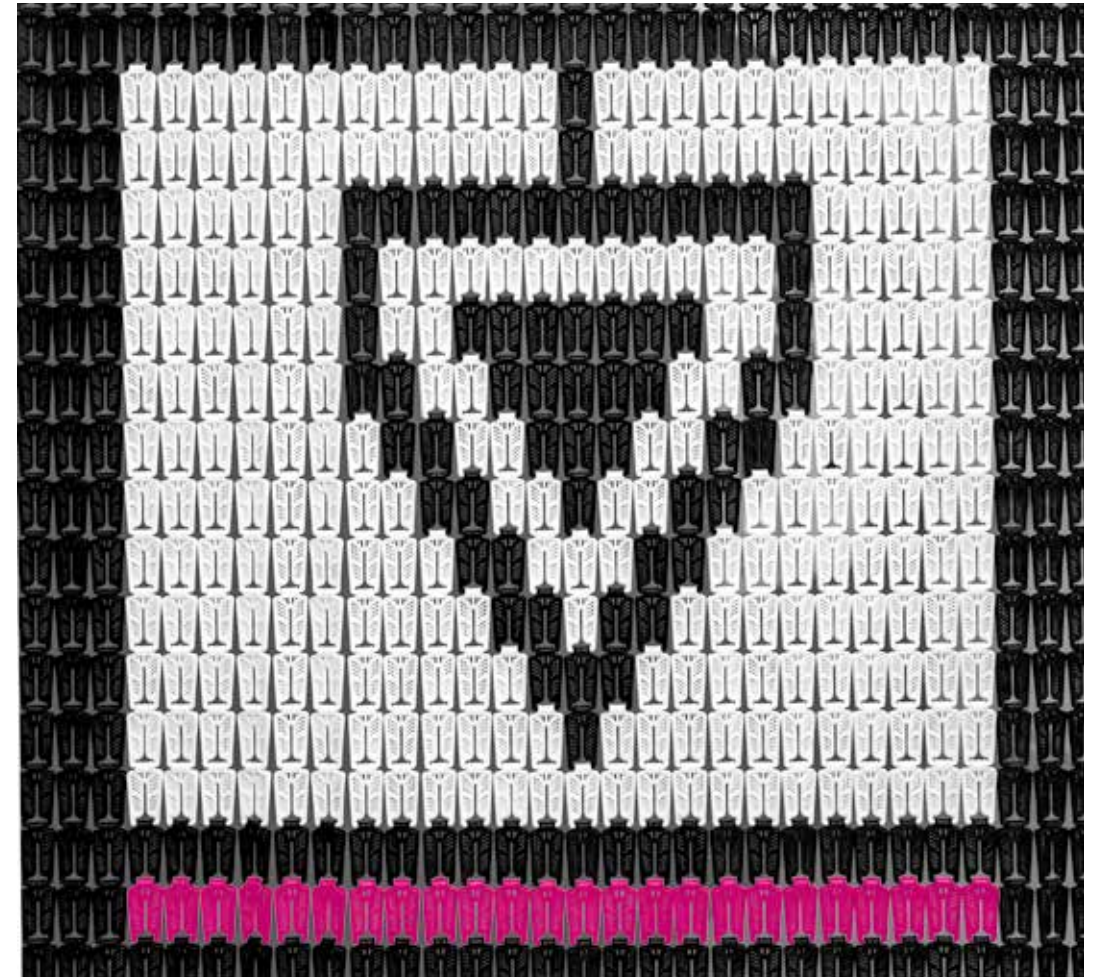
4 Michael Taussig, “Preface to the Thirtieth Anniversary Edition” in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2010, p. xii.

5 Augusto Masetti, Interview with Italian television journalist Sergio Zavoli, 1964. <https://archive.org/details/IntervistaAugustoMasetti> (accessed 26 April 2015).

EG: The way you frame the notion of document as something variable is embodied – by the figures you look at – in the idea of ‘amnesia’: a notion that on one hand is a form of refusal, and on the other calls for an act of re-assembling, re-constructing and re-transmitting, as you put it, (micro-)histories. Could you describe what happens to these characters, how their ‘fates’ are intertwined?

RG: Amnesia is the element that links Augusto Masetti and the *espiritado*, and it is the reason why I started investigating a possible connection between the two. The character of the *espiritado* was supposedly inspired by an episode of amnesia, which followed the killing of a policeman in a Colombian village (something strikingly similar the story of Augusto Masetti). Nonetheless, the variability of the accounts, and the lack of accessible documentation referring to it, render this episode almost a legend. This is particularly so if we consider that amnesia after a riotous or violent act against authorities is a recurring theme, worldwide, in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

On 30 October 1911, private soldier Augusto Masetti (1888-1966) fired a gunshot in the parade grounds of the Cialdini barracks in Bologna at Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Stroppa by way of protest at the war in Libya. Stroppa was superficially wounded to the shoulder, and Masetti was arrested. Subsequently, on several occasions Masetti stated having had a 36-hour long blank in his



Riccardo Giacconi, *The Variational Status* (detail), mixed media installation, 2016.

memory, from the night before the event to the following morning.⁵ Despite the fact such lack of memory was subsequently denied by Masetti himself, his act and his alleged amnesia prompted a long-lasting plea for his release and a worldwide unrest in the anarchist movement, with pamphlets in his favour published throughout Europe and in the United States.⁶

Masetti's amnesia proposed a certain paradigm for a perfectly anarchist riot act. By not remembering having accomplished his action, the subject is detached from it, as if instituting the model for a proto-political gesture situated outside any framework of responsibility: a perfect emblem of an anarchist riot act, according to some. Masetti himself, when asked whether he repented having shot at his colonel, answered, "I cannot have regrets. How can you regret something you don't know you have done?"⁷

Considering the worldwide attention received by Masetti's gesture,⁸ it is not surprising that news of it reached anarchist circles in Colombia right after 1911. Bogotan puppeteer Iván Alvarez Escobar, who also regularly writes about anarchism in Latin America, puts forward the hypothesis that Masetti's gesture might be at the origin of the *espiritado* character. This could have occurred either *indirectly* (Masetti's gesture might have inspired acts of revolt against authority, therefore serving as a model for the 'amnesiac' killer of a policeman in the Colombian village who, in turn, inspired the *espiritado* character) or *directly* (the story of the 'amnesiac' killer of the policeman in Colombia could be a distortion, a reverberation of Masetti's gesture, whose story might thus have been adapted to another geographical context).⁹

AM: How are you going to articulate these stories in the exhibition, both theoretically and in terms of the installation? Do you consider them as one global installation or three different proposals?

RG: Simone Pianetti is the subject of an ongoing investigation that we have been carrying out with Andrea

6 For example, cfr. *Madri d'Italia! per Augusto Masetti*, published in Lynn, Massachusetts, USA, 1913.

7 Augusto Masetti, cited interview with Sergio Zavoli, 1964.

8 Laura De Marco, *Il soldato che disse no alla guerra. Storia dell'anarchico Augusto Masetti (1888-1966)*, published by Edizioni Spartaco, Santa Maria Capua Vetere 2003.

9 Cited interview with Iván Alvarez Escobar.



Riccardo Giacconi, *The Variational Status* (detail), mixed media installation, 2016.

Morbio since 2010, studying his figure as a catalyst for different modes of narration and appropriation. So far, the project has been presented through performances, readings, films, lectures, leaflets (or *fogli volanti*) and three re-enactments of one of the original puppet adaptations of the Pianetti story.

On the other hand, the exhibition project for Bolzano and Reims is focused on the *espiritado* character, on its possible links with Masetti and on a specific puppet script that I found in Colombia, *El Diablo en el pozo* ('The Devil in the Well'). The script is the only one I was able to find explicitly involving such a character. The exhibition is conceived as a deconstruction, a cutaway view of a puppet show: a puppet, a backdrop and a voice.

The show starts with a marionette, specifically produced in dialogue with the Carlo Colla & Figli Marionette Company, one of the most renowned puppetry companies in the world, with nearly three centuries of activity to their name. Since there are almost no visual traces of the *espiritado*, the marionette seeks to propose a hypothesis for a variation on the character, playing on the very absence of documentation relating to it.

The marionette is abandoned on the floor, performing an automatic choreography activated by a mechanism that pulls its strings. This series of movement reproduces *hypnic myoclonia*, that is, those involuntary twitches that occur as a person is just about to fall asleep.

Together with the marionette, the exhibition features a plastic curtain, which serves both as a storyboard for the various episodes of *El Diablo en el pozo* script, and as a visual reference to the traditional backdrops used in puppetry.

The third element is a soundtrack, conceived especially for the exhibition. It is made up of a series of audio materials bringing the different stories together into a single pattern: fragments from interviews, field recordings, archival footage and Foley sounds. It accompanies the marionette and the backdrop like the voice of the puppeteer in a puppet show.

The exhibition also features a series of archival materials related to the *espiritado* and Masetti. Among them, I have printed a series of posters about *El Diablo*

en el pozo, taking an ancient photograph of a poster advertising the puppet show as a reference. In order to reproduce the original design, I collaborated with the printing workshop 'Carteles La Linterna Edigraphos' in Cali, Colombia, using their letterpress printing machines from the 19th Century.



Riccardo Giacconi, *The Variational Status*, mixed media installation, 2016.

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