Text as Voice

In his seminal text from 1970, Albert O. Hirschmann described the two main means we have, as citizens, to express discontent in a democratic society. We can either abandon our homes and leave (*'Exit'*), or we can speak up and protest (*'Voice'*). If we lived in a state of complete democracy, all individuals would be equally able to exercise these two tactics. But no such democracy exists. In Zurich, in London, in Delhi, in Rome, the upper echelons of society will never be forced to leave—nor even to raise their voices. Lawmakers automatically consider the interests of the wealthy. They fear 'capital flight'— when the rich move their assets to another polity—and therefore systematically design policies that accommodate capital-owners, often at the direct cost of the poor and disenfranchised. This is *structural power*.

Power through mere presence.
Influence without exit, and without voice.

Just as the well-off are structurally privileged, the poor are inherently disadvantaged. Few are the politicians who pay heed to the young waitress, who must leave the Italian peninsula to find a stable job. For persons from this social class, a potential exit will fail to induce any societal change. For these, the only way to make a difference is to make use of their voices. And to do so to the extent that they'll likely find themselves screaming.

Voice—or political contention—comes in many shapes. In auditory form, we hear it from demonstrators on the street, legislators giving speeches, or political pundits on TV. But more commonly, voice is raised non-verbally: via static text and images, disseminated widely in essays and pamphlets, or exhibited boldly, in the public sphere. Seen from this perspective, where script is political voice, the textual artifacts presented in ALL CAPS can be interpreted as a cross-section of voices, all of whom compete for attention in contemporary Rome. This is a Capital city: a city where smartphone advertising is as common as graffiti that advocates for a woman's right to choose.

The public dissemination of short-form text is a mode of political expression that is subject to its peculiarities. When displayed in public, the aesthetics of a political text often tell us more about the person or institution who wrote it, than the actual contents of the text itself. Multiple examples that embellish the walls of Born's installation are a testament to this. Striking is

certainly the word 'TRASMIGRATORI', taken from a famed inscription that adorns the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. When read in isolation, without prior knowledge, the words of this inscription are hard to assign to the right-wing authoritarian government that was responsible for commissioning it:

VN POPOLO DI POETI, DI ARTISTI, DI EROI, DI SANTI, DI PENSATORI, DI SCIENZATI, DI NAVIGATORI, DI TRASMIGRATORI[1]

More telling are instead the aesthetic choices surrounding the presentation of the statement. Capitalized, classicist letters, where the first letter, 'V', replaces a 'U'. It is via these carefully contemplated visual decisions that power is communicated. Magnitude, technique, and style all converge to highlight the historical importance of the 'Italian people'—and to assert the dominance of a repressive regime.

Another paradoxical inscription is 'É TUTTO MIO'[2]: a scrabbled text snippet found on the wall of an abandoned flat in the 'Serpentone Corviale'. The Serpentone is a massive public housing project located in a suburb South-West of Rome. Originally designed to house 4'500 residents, it is now largely empty. Former tenants, mainly low-income foreigners, have been forced out from the complex to allow for renovations that are continually delayed. And yet here, in an abandoned, dejected building, someone has forcefully asserted their ownership of space. In this instance, again, aesthetics are equally (if not more) telling of the authorship that underscores the text.

Differences in the aesthetics and placement of political text reflect how power is distributed across different groups in society. Unlike the well-off, the disadvantaged must voice their concerns twice as loudly to be heard. And yet, they are granted nearly no space to do this. The city of Rome represents an extreme example of this. Here public spaces are designed to encase historical monuments: white marble fountains that attract flocks of tourists, who are busy ticking sights off bucket lists as they gallivant across Europe. Reduce from that scene an additional margin for advertising space on billboards and building scaffolding. Redact the large

[1] English translation: '*A people of poets, artists, heroes, saints, thinkers, scientists, sailors, wanderers'*

[2] English translation: *'It's all mine'* or *'Everything is mine'.*

storefront signs, with logos of Italian designer brands. And exclude the signs that have been erected to show vacationers the quickest routes to the Vatican Gardens. What remains is very little space. Limited space for the people of Rome.

The engravings that line the walls of the MACRO are certainly not designed to deliver a political message. But via their shape and contents, they allude to the many power dynamics that underscore socio-political relationships of the city and its history. And they raise a series of important questions about those who have privileged access to public space.

Why does the city primarily invest in ancient beauty?
Why are some visual forms still considered beautiful despite their difficult historical legacies?

And most of all:
How can these questions be debated inclusively, when so many are stripped from access to the cityscape?

'*Prendiamoci la città!*'[3] goes a famous left-wing saying, also visible on Born's installation.

Where voice is expressed in text, the city is a canvas.
And reclaiming it is reclaiming one's right to speak.

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[3] English translation: '*Let's take the city!*'