Walking in Silence
Celine Condorelli

A group of people walks uphill holding placards that show nothing but the glistening of a winter's day. They are marching slowly and sternly, looking straight ahead or down at the empty road; they are dressed warmly, most of them wearing thick jackets of dull colours, and the sky is steel grey. The street sits between two lines of austere flat-fronted buildings with white facades, their windows empty. There are some cars parked on one side of the road, but no one to be seen except the protesters themselves, walking past skinny bare trees. They are walking towards us and past the indifferent city street, soon they are behind us.

A group of people walks uphill holding placards that show nothing but the glistening of a winter's day. The march is silent. There are no slogans written, none declaimed, we cannot hear any songs; it just walks on. The placards are held low, some of them obscuring the faces of those carrying them. The atmosphere is heavy, the marching incomprehensible, almost menacing. It points at something always slightly paradoxical about marches and protests, which are both an actual movement and a metaphorical one. Protests walk towards something which they cannot get physically closer to by walking, as it is a destination which is not in the present, but a possibility somewhere in the future, they physically walk towards the projection of a desire.
They walk in order to change something: it is a movement of the body aimed at provoking a movement of politics. This is walking for walking, as a demonstration of will and of choice, 'standing up' for these and what they imply, but also doing so in alliance, taking sides with a cause, and accepting to be implicated in it.

A group of people walks uphill holding placards that show nothing but the glistening of a winter's day. They are walking in order to be seen to be walking, walking to carry a message, walking as the God Hermes flies, the bearer of the message. What are they walking for? Did the placards hold a message we can't see anymore? Is the reflection too strong for us to read? Did their message become invisible or get washed out along the way? What was the message and what happened to it? Was there ever a message? What are they saying to us now? And what future are they walking towards?

A group of people walks uphill holding placards that show nothing but the glistening of a winter's day. At some point, the largest banner, at the back, catches some light and through its seemingly homogeneous whiteness large letters shine faintly into two words: MORE OPPORTUNITIES. In the winter of 2007 a demonstration is staged by Barbara Holub on Looe Street, outside the Plymouth Arts Centre.
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We are taking our future into our hands.

What the plea 'more opportunities' (which is also the title of the exhibition) signifies is not the fact that there isn't a message, but precisely that the message is missing. And what is revealed is the very place where this message should be: written all over the placards, carried through the streets of the city. It is this absence that is exposed and exhibited by the demonstration, made to appear before us and blinding us with its glare. Through the silent demonstration we encounter a lack: it does not and cannot speak, like a ghost who refuses to communicate in a language we can understand; it is impenetrable, we do not know where it has come from or what it is saying, but continues walking nevertheless. What is the specter of this marching, what is it that haunts it that we cannot, but should see?

We tried with all the strategies we knew - demonstrations, rhetorical figures, sometimes playful, at other times absurd - to explode the system.

In another film, rows of people are shown advancing, walking in a orderly column on the sidewalk, occupying its entire width, at a steady pace, with a certain lightness, a well-behaved column which appears to have no tail. It seems the march consists exclusively of men, marching side by side, a lot of them smiling; they are dressed properly, their clothes freshly ironed. Carefully combed hairstyles from another time, the longer haired boys suggest it is the 60's. The men speak about poverty and struggle, the struggle of keeping a home and maintaining their life outside work. They speak of their wives. And the wives, at some point arrive, they are running to join their men, their boys, they join in as if they had been kept away by some chore, maybe the washing had to be done, or dinner to be cooked. And they are all laughing. With housedresses and funny handbags, they are holding hands. There are children on bicycles coming in and out of the demonstrators, sometimes leading ahead. It is sunny and the shadows are crisp, every leg doubled, the street filled with twice as many figures as those that are actually there.

The walking carries a certain dignity, one of language and of place; they know that this is the appropriate language, the right place for what is happening and what needs to be happening, it belongs to them in this instance, it is theirs to use. They have known it was there for a long time but have never used their knowledge. The television presenter says they haven't had a strike in 300 years, but today they are walking and representing themselves. The walking is brisk, not fast, but determined, straight and clear; they are going somewhere: to the dockyard.

It is the 8th August 1969 and the Plymouth dockyard workers are demonstrating for the first time, demanding that the naval base meet the 3,5% increase on pay. The dockyard is a major employer in the city and has coexisted harmoniously with its inhabitants for over three centuries.

While the demonstrators make their way towards the dock, fragments of a song emerge, words seemingly disconnected from the celebratory atmosphere of the event: "… we shall overcome…" The song rhythm is paced and fragmented, punctuated by cheers.

"We shall overcome" was an anthem of the US civil rights movement, originally a gospel song written in 1901. It was transformed into a political hymn in 1945, by the mostly female and African American members of the Food and Tobacco Workers Union in a 5-months strike held against the American Tobacco Company. Lucille Simmons adapted it and sung it to end each day's picketing. The song was a few years later taken up by the young student activists at Highlander, the research and education centre deeply involved in the civil rights movement, as the school was a focus for non-violent protests, brutally squashed by the police. Highlander played a vital role in spreading "We Shall Overcome" amongst other songs throughout the Civil Rights Movement: they were sung across the American South in marches, rallies and jails, and became representative of the movement. Resonating from place to place, from struggle to struggle, the song spread around the globe, helping to keep spirits high in the face of injustice and segregation, and was sung on a sunny day in 1969 on the way to the dockyards, which are now closed.

We were working towards the destruction of something, not the construction of another ideology.

Stills from the 1969 demonstration populate Holub's exhibitions, as do fragments of texts, disconnected phrases alluding to stories and narratives we do not have. Disconnected moments, alluding to stories and narratives that are not our own, the short sentences sound like slogans, and pace the show with moments of extreme optimism. Scattered amidst the other pieces, they feel like declamations, mottos, manifestoes and ambitions: dreams and desires either quoted or invented. The photographs too have an aural quality, they sound as a voice, going out and coming back, faint, but present, a refrain: they are not the voices of history and they do not speak with authority, but they makes it and themselves felt. They need to be listened to differently to be heard, not so much as language, but as sounds, as modulations and articulations, speed, rhythm and pitch.

"The voice is the materiality of speech, located at the articulation of body and discourse. And what such listening offers is access to what the speaking subject doesn't say". (Roland Barthes)

We are taking your future into our hands.

How can we listen beyond language, beyond what our ears can distinguish as sense? How can we hear voices spoken through silence? Demonstrating without words, Holub's performance does not offer us slogans or propaganda; there isn't a simple, populist message for us to recognize and digest. We are not given the few plain words, which would allow us to dismiss the campaign, reject its message by making it recede into a generic background of such-like events and homogeneous language.
Instead, it haunts us; the demonstration, a ghostly, empty frame, alone and without content. Exposing the obsolete nature of the street protest, it also points to a linguistic drought, to a society without messages, without songs of liberation to sing. Liberation from what?

From the distance of our reality we become tourists in our own city.

It is indeed the idea of protest that has shifted, changed beyond recognition. We are no longer able to recognize words spelled out on placards because they read like marketing campaigns, and sound exactly like the slogans developers employ to launch new buildings, "urban quarters" and promote speculative projects. Placards themselves are mostly used for advertisement, carried for pay rather than for conviction. But does this mean language failed us, failed to bring about the changes of a generation singing for a better future? Perhaps slogans did not manage to change the word but they were carriers for something, for a certain form of political imagination: their importance lies in the politics of their imaginative affect. When the most radical of those messages get appropriated and absorbed by commercial corporations driving privatization, they are transformed in that simple gesture from drive to consumable, from beneficial to profitable, from declaration of support to marketing campaign.
But a protest however, is always in support, even a silent one - it may appear more like mourning, a mourning for something or someone who got lost along the way. The silent protest talks of histories without words, those that haven't been spoken and cannot be heard because too many things were left unsaid; it asserts the presence of voices that were muted by their being perceived as simply noise and protests against silence by making us see it. It announces itself and through that gesture, refuses to offer a voice.

The idea that words cannot alter reality is acceptable. But differences in our conceptual system, brought about by changes in language, do change what we experience as reality and they influence the way in which we perceive the world and in which we act in accordance with those perceptions.

"Attentiveness to the aural properties of speech and voice, to its pre-significatory state, a listening in the barthian sense of the term, strike me as interesting tools through which to think about dissensual political spheres. The voice of the other, is always on first hearing a noisy and senseless utterance. It's a field of articulation that operates on registers that are out of tune with the dominant melody of the sensible. Democratic non-sense then, is interesting not because its content is meaningless but because it attests to the lowly status of an unauthorized voice within an assumed and common language of deliberation. The drive for semantic legibility, for a common language, is synonymous with consensual view of the political sphere. What we hear as noise or as non-sense, we are always listening to from the privileged position of authorized discourse. The noise of the utterance, the grain of voice, the stutter and splutter of speech, dispel the fiction of a common language."
Beatrice Gibson, This is a lecture on nothing, 2007

Who says we are not taking the future into our hands?

The changes due to the privatization of the dockyards in Plymouth culminated in the development of daily tours for which the navy officers function as guides. The tours are part of the attempt to transform the area into a tourist destination, a transition disturbingly taking place while the dock is

still partly active. As the working and the historicized dock overlap, the latter turns it into a monument of itself, with men appearing as both workers and exhibits. The working dockyard is strangely fictionalised through this spectacle, and starts to depict a romantic activity from another time, one with ambitions vastly different to our own.
The melancholy seeping through aspect of Holub's work is exactly the measure of distance between the utopian, optimistic moment of a day of protest in 1969, and the commodity driven world we now inhabit and promote. And yet her work takes place in exactly those democratic means used in the attempt to change the world, or at least its conditions - structures of civic participation like election campaigns, support and protests.

Holub acknowledges this irresolvable contradiction, and invents a "retro-utopian model" which both declares its aspects of re-enactment and consciously proposes imaginations of the future, or at least a future. In fact, the slogans mostly come from such endeavours, modernistic utopias, writings by superstudio, or fragments from the 60's sci-fi "journey to the bottom of the sea" but they are used here to suggest an imagined society.

Castells says in 2000 about his own work "*we do not need new urban ideologies or clean meaningful urban utopias – let people create their own urban myths".* If we are to take his suggestion seriously, it suggests that it is also the way in which visions are articulated and described that needs to evolve, away from ideology towards myth-making; to talk about it, it requires the right vocabulary, adjusted or invented towards expressing a particular set of ideas. What more appropriate language for such inventions than that of science fiction? Science-fiction works in creating possible worlds close enough to our own to function as critiques and models; its imaginary elements are largely conceivable within our established reality and its recognized laws, but using subtle or obvious differences between the two it allows to explore, through speculation, alternative social or political arrangements, thus becoming a voice for certain possibilities or imaginations.
The protest will continue to exorcize the loss of slogans until it becomes itself unrecognizable, part of a narrative of a different kind, a sort of anthropological relic; its only chance of survival being the reinvention of its language, being how protests are exercised. It does not suggests that imagining the future is possible but renders explicit our very inability to imagine that future.
Meanwhile the failure it reveals – of ideologies, of means and possibilities – by refusing to offer us images of the future, is exactly underlining the fact that we do not even know how to think of the future, unless we remember and reinvent how to imagine in the first place.