

“If I had to create a god, I would lend him a “slow understanding”: a kind of drip-by-drip understanding of problems. People who understand quickly frighten me.”

Roland Barthes, translated by Rosalind Krauss

NEITHER.

When contemplating an exhibition that launches the new venue of a Brazilian born gallery in Brussels, my first thought was: what do I think of when I think of Belgium?

Searching for a concept for the exhibition, I remembered a conversation I had with my grandfather. My grandparents were avid explorers, in the 1980s they left Brazil and embarked on a world tour that covered four continents. Many years later, while talking about the experience, I asked my grandfather which place he liked most. Surprisingly his answer was: Brussels. He told me it was because they have French food in German portions.

While wandering about my grandfather’s anecdote and the Belgium he experienced in the 80s, the little I know about the countries’ fragmented history brought to mind the concept of neutrality. The term ‘neutral’ associated to state policy is disconcerting. To what extent is it possible to remain impartial in the name of stability? Lets instead think of the “neutral” as experiencing a state of nuance in the margins of language and thus culture.

In Roland Barthes’ seminar on the Neutral (1978) he describes his work methodology as follows: “To prepare for this course, I took the word ‘neutral’ for a series of walks along a certain number of readings, relying on the procedure of topic (...) I didn’t take ‘neutral’ for a walk in a grid of words, but a grid of readings, that is, a library’. It was not by chance that the library chosen by Barthes was in his countryside home in rural France, which, according to the author, was a time-place where the loss of methodological rigor was offset by the intensity and joy of free reading.

To suggest a reflection on the idea of Neutral by transposing this concept to an art exhibition is, above all, a free exercise of looking for a different way to make oneself present in the struggles of our time. This is a time when taking sides is urgent – as it has always been – but the routes and methods to do so need revision. Barthes’ Neutral is neither a consensus, nor indifference, nor taking sides. On the contrary, it is active. It is a way of ‘baffling’ the paradigm before it leads us to one side or the other. If there is meaning, there is paradigm, and Neutral is the desire to stay in the moment just before the crystallisation of any concept, idea or recognizable category. The Barthesian Neutral is nuanced; it is always searching for a third term that offers a new kind of awareness – removed from binary oppositions.

Within the exhibition space, Barthes’ Neutral takes form by freely replicating his predilection for fragmented writing, described as the result of a stubborn affection rather than a rigorous methodology. Every artwork in the exhibition holds the seed of this floating ‘neutral’ in itself. Some do not subscribe to any specific category, deliberately staying in the margins of language. Others echo the ‘figures’ or ‘twinklings’ quoted by

Barthes as possible embodiments of the Neutral, as androgyny, sleep, displacement, drift, weariness or colourlessness.

What are the necessary elements to create an atmosphere a home or any active propositional space – the exhibition as a welcoming environment? The gallery space is shared by both the hosts and the guests and Barthes' concept is like the first chair placed in an empty house, in relation to it, each element negotiates their position accordingly. "I don't construct the concept of Neutral, I display Neutrals," Barthes states. It is not a definition he – or we – are after, but a gathering of instances.

This new space that now binds us rests between moving in and feeling at home, in a place within Brazil and Belgium, that is no longer a family home and is not yet a fully-functioning commercial gallery. By taking this conscious pause – respecting the distance and the journey – the show recognizes harmony and conflict while taking the time for this gallery to become – once again – what it already is.

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