



**Nanni Balestrini**

## **ILLUSTRATED VIOLENCE**

This show constitutes the first Spanish exhibition featuring the artistic, political and publishing career of Nanni Balestrini (Milan, 1935 – Rome, 2019), presented in a comprehensive itinerary. Balestrini was one of the most relevant Italian intellectuals to emerge in the 1960s, and was one of the most firmly committed to the processes of aesthetic and ideological dissidence taking place in Italy in the period.

**19.03 – 23.05.2021**

[LA VIRREINA]  
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DE LA IMATGE

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**Barcelona**



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Organised in collaboration with the Soprintendenza archivistica e bibliografica of Lazio, the exhibition, which takes its title from a Balestrini novel from 1976, is articulated in four chronological sections. It also represents the first exhibition of a body of documentary material from the author's personal archive.

The first section, which covers the period from 1961 to 1969, brings together Balestrini's poetic and visual production of the time, while also focusing on his activity with Gruppo 63 and his earliest work with digital technology (such as *Tape Mark I*, 1961). It also includes his collaborations with musicians such as Luigi Nono and Hans Werner Henze.

The second section, taking us from 1969 to 1979, explores Balestrini's contribution to the dissident activity of Potere Operaio and Autonomia Operaia. Other aspects in the section include: the novels *Vogliamo tutto* (1971), *La violenza illustrata* (1976) and *Vivere a Milano* (1976) with photography by Aldo V. Bonasia; the poetic cycle of the Signorina Richmond and the various radio plays written for the RAI in 1973; the founding of the magazines *Compagni* (1969) and the mythical *Alfabeta* (1979); and, finally, the political process known as *Processo 7 aprile*, where he was legally incriminated, leading to his exile to Paris in 1979. Works that stand out from this period are his collages using newspaper headlines and images from the mass media, as Balestrini created a language that combined discrepancy, political agitation and poetry.

The third section focuses on the period from 1980 to 1999, when his writing activity was more intense, as he published as many as fifteen different volumes, including novels, poetry anthologies and experimental books. It was in this period that key works were released, including *Blackout* (1980), *Gli invisibili* (1987), *L'orda d'oro*, with Primo Moroni (1988), *L'editore* (1989)

and *Ifuriosi* (1994), amongst others. During the period he was in exile he also founded the newspaper *Change International* (1983), while back in Rome, where he returned in 1984 after his abolition, he started the journal *Bestia* (1997). In 1995 his collaborations with the Franco-German cultural television station ARTE began, along with the cultural channel RaiSat. Furthermore, in 1999 he created the cultural web site RaiSat Zoom. In 1993 he participated in the Venice Biennale, while his work continued to broaden to include research into non-verbal language, while also exploring social concerns, as seen in work employing objects and materials from everyday consumption.

The fourth and final section features a review of Balestrini's work from 2000 to 2019, along with his most important books: *Parma 1922. Una resistenza antifascista* (2002), *Tutto in una volta* (2003), *Sandokan. Storia di camorra* (2004), *Carbonia. Eravamo tutti comunisti* (2013), *La nuova violenza illustrata* (2019) and the three-volume edition of his *Poesia completa* (2015-2018). His most significant work includes *L'ombelico del mondo*, a television programme for the RAI, directed along with Paolo Fabbri, Sergio Opina and Lello Voce, the poem-opera *Elettra* (2001) and *Tristanoil*, an experimental piece shown in Kassel at the 2013 documenta. The section also presents a selection of work from the series *La Tempesta perfetta* (2015), where Balestrini explores the visual and linguistic ramifications of the Giorgione painting *The Tempest* (1508).

*Illustrated Violence* is part of a series of relatively autonomous exhibitions within the programming of La Virreina Centre de la Imatge. The series explores the careers of creators considered seminal for their work in a diversity of epistemological, aesthetic and political ruptures taking place over the past sixty years. All of them—Alexander Kluge, Copi, Ketty La Rocca, Paula Rego, Susan Sontag, Barbara Hammer and Nanni Balestrini—were born in the 1930s.

## AFTER THE DEATH OF NANNI BALESTRINI

Raúl Sánchez Cedillo

Nanni Balestrini passed away on 20 May 2019, at the age of almost 84. Writer and poet, revolutionary activist, visual artist, publisher. Now the necessary task begins of collecting and publishing a vast and varied body of work, hardly known to the wide majority of people who follow literature, poetry, design and performance art.

More than simply being Italian, Balestrini was a Milanese character. It will be difficult for us to understand his trajectory if we do not take into consideration the importance of Milan during the republican postwar period, the city we see in Antonioni's *The Night*, industrial and commercial, bourgeois and working class, but above all the centre of both the publishing industry and the emerging contemporary art market. Milan was the counterpoint to Togliatti's PCI Rome, if you like, the melting pot of popular nationalist ideology. Milan was something else: the intellectual motor of Italian capitalism and, therefore, prey to the need for an intellectual labour power that no longer corresponds to the Gramscian figure of the organic intellectual, but one that breaks directly into the cultural production mechanisms of advanced Fordist capitalism, in which the cultural content of the goods, their "immaterial" component, becomes increasingly important. In this scene marked by the "subsumption" of the intellectual workforce, grew the Balestrini who eventually became part of the editorial team of *Il Verrì* magazine, founded by Luciano Anceschi and situated in the terrain of what was known as the *neoavanguardia*, an experimentalist point of view towards literature with a special attention to literary language as such. From this milieu emerged the Gruppo 63, Balestrini's first collective foray into aesthetic political action. As is the norm, the literary group barely had an impact in the 1963 that gave it its name, but, unlike other literary avant-gardes that became part of the literary canon decades later, Gruppo 63 is hardly known in present-day Italy. Though the same cannot be said about its members: in addition to Balestrini himself, and the aforementioned Luciano Anceschi, other members of the group included Achille Bonito Oliva,

Umberto Eco, Furio Colombo and Edoardo Sanguineti, along with other consecrated or highly consecrated names in contemporary Italian and European literature. In its manifesto, in which Balestrini took part, the meaning of the group is exposed:

In fact, behind that name there was a spontaneous movement caused by an acute impatience towards the dominant state of all things literary: works that could perhaps even be considered decent but that for the most part lacked vitality . . . They were the last flare-up of neorealism in literature, a faint populist echo of the great cinematographic period of the Rossellinis or the De Sicas.

These were the emerging issues that, in parallel, would receive an exhaustive treatment from the Rome-based group of *operaista* magazine *Quaderni Rossi*, through the pen of Alberto Asor Rosa, author of *Scrittori e popolo*, an Italian classic on populism in literature, whose criticism was aimed at, among others, the Pier Paolo Pasolini of *Ragazzi di vita*, and of the poem that gave rise to the expression “political Pasolinism”, the well-known “The PCI for the Youth”, written on the occasion of the confrontation in Valle Giulia between police and students that marked the beginning of the Italian '68. But let us not get too ahead of ourselves. The Balestrini of the early 1960s is immersed in precise and concentrated literary and artistic experimentalism. This approach is inseparable from collective work and construction. Balestrini's main focus is directed towards the conditions of the production of text, to experimenting with the literary device itself. In the background is a practical critique of the institution of literature and its figureheads, beginning with the author, their intention, their condition as a (bourgeois) subject, owner of their word, and in full control of their enunciation. This is the period of his computer-generated poems (and he was probably the first to do it) *Tape Mark I* and *II*, created between 1961 and 1963 with an IBM 7070 computer and based on literary texts of different origins, whose combination was generated by applying an algorithmic rule designed by Balestrini himself. Of the hundreds of illegible verses, Balestrini selected the most interesting based on their poetic effect. The text “Language and Opposition”, written

in 1961, corresponds to this period. In it Balestrini describes the poetry program of the present:

A fundamental approach for making poetry then becomes the “pestering” of words, ambushing them while they get tied up by periods, imposing violence on language structures, pushing all their properties to their breaking point. It concerns an attitude aimed at pursuing these properties, the intrinsic and extrinsic charges of language, and provoking those knots and those unprecedented and disconcerting encounters that can make poetry a veritable whip for the reader's brain, which moves routinely and blindly, immersed to the forehead in the commonplace and repetition.

Thus, poetry as opposition. Opposition to the dogma and conformism that threatens our path, that solidifies the footprints left behind, that crushes our feet, attempting to immobilise our steps. Today more than ever, this is the reason for writing poetry. Today, in fact, the wall against which we throw our works is shock-resistant, soft and malleable it opens ajar without resisting the blows—except to trick and absorb them, and often manages to retain and incorporate them. It is therefore necessary to be much more cunning, more ductile and more skilful, in certain cases more ruthless, and to bear in mind that direct violence is completely ineffective in an era carpeted with viscous quicksand.

Much more ambitious was the production work for his first novel, *Tristano*. Here Balestrini's idea was to use the same technique to produce a novel, whereby each copy would be different from the other, that is, a serial novel made up of copies containing a different story. However, neither the technical conditions of the period nor the disposition of the publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli made it possible. The novel was published with a single base text. Only recently has the original project been taken to press by the DeriveApprodi publishing house.

In this period we see an approach and certain works of enormous interest, but that do not abandon the ambivalence of the

criticism towards modern art and culture that is common to structuralist works in the human sciences. The problem of the meaning of literary or artistic enunciation was not solved by means of experimental work, but was left wide open. The sovereign subject of literature remained off-centre, but the risk was that of the elimination of the ethical and political tension of the enunciation, absorbed by a transcendent and technocratic structural and combinatorial logic. It was necessary to return from structure to the collective subject of enunciation. From the chain of enunciations to the social and political process of narration.

That was the resolve of the collective effort behind *Quindici* magazine, in this case based in Rome, which was first published in 1967 with Balestrini as publisher. *Quindici's* concerns were not too far from those of Gruppo 63, but he gave them a focus more linked to the portents of what was to come, and in particular to the beginning of the student protests and the anti-imperialist struggles in Vietnam and Latin America. The vast epicentre of '68 was to be decisive for the future of *Quindici*. The conditions, meanings and stakes of cultural work had taken a Copernican turn. Precisely that tension led to the end of the magazine in 1969, and to the separation of paths among its protagonists: some at the service of the workers' and student struggles that reached incandescence in 1969; others to enter the publishing industry to whose modernisation they had contributed so much.

During the *Quindici* period, the militant transformation of Nanni Balestrini takes place and, as we shall see, will not cease to have an effect on his work. The growing politicisation of the magazine led Balestrini to come into contact with the groups and individuals who were the protagonists of the struggles, among them one of the great figures of the Roman '68, and later of the Italian "long '68" and working class autonomy, Oreste Scalzone. Thanks to the meeting with Scalzone, Balestrini would participate in the founding of *Potere Operaio*, the main group of political *operaismo* together with *Lotta Continua*. During this period, Balestrini works for the Giangiacomo Feltrinelli's publishing house, the same publisher that, after the terrible massacre in Piazza Fontana on 12 December 1969, organised by the Italian secret services in direct connection with



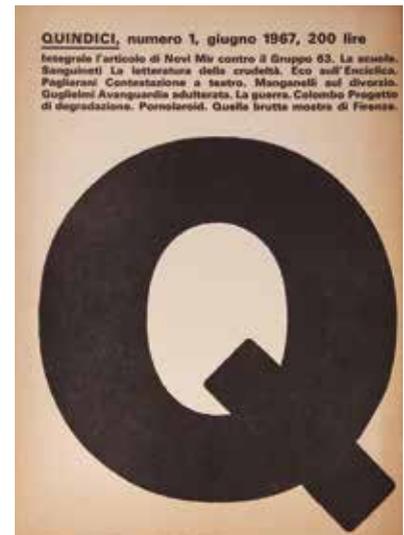
*Vogliamo Tutto*, 1977

*Rosso*, 1976



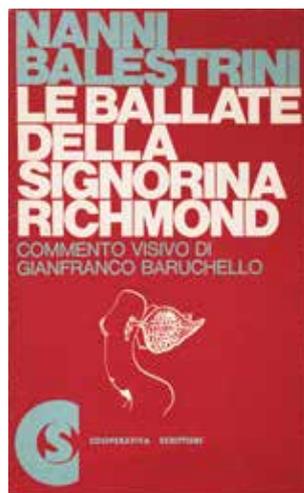
*Potere Operaio*, 1973

*Quindici*, 1976





*Tristano*, 1966



*Le ballate della signorina Richmond*, 1977



*La violenza proletaria*, 1975-2016

the command of the Atlantic alliance and armed fascist groups, decides to go underground.

The “Hot Autumn” of the “mass worker” struggles, but especially the episodes of the previous summer at the FIAT factory in Turin, with the great battle of Corso Traiano in the massive Mirafiori complex, are the living material that makes up *We Want Everything*, the quintessential *operaista* novel. In it there is both experimentation and a search for a mass audience. The novel was a great success. The structure becomes the subject. Collective, polyphonic, without ceasing to be individuated. Alfonso, a FIAT worker, recounts the process of the struggles, the assemblies, the employer and police repression, while his story is mixed with texts from the leaflets of the workers’ assemblies and groups like Potere Operaio:

Comrades, let us refuse work. We want all the power, we want all the wealth. It will be a long struggle, years, with successes and setbacks, with defeats and advances. But this is the struggle that we have to start now, a violent fight to the end. We must fight to end work. We must fight for the violent destruction of capital. We must fight against a State founded on work. We say: yes to working-class violence.

In *We Want Everything*, the epos of the workers’ struggles is presented as abstract subjectivist work in that it is an ungovernable, autonomous, collective labour power that demands more wages for less work, without caring in the least about the country’s macroeconomic balance. Let us dwell for a moment on the way in which that effect, that result or transformation, is the product of a precise concatenation between technique, form and content. He who wrote the text you are now reading was surprised to learn, years after reading the novel, that much like in *Tristano* or *Tape Mark I and II*, the source texts for *We Want Everything* were not “created” by Balestrini; nor are they, as in the work of Dos Passos, a collage of public texts alongside images and situations fruit of the author’s imagination. Balestrini’s role is more that of a sampler, a remixer, a text jockey that treats textual flows and sources with metrical and combinatorial rules. The protag-

onist's story is the result of a conversation with Alfonso Natella, a member and activist of Potere Operaio. "Documentary" material, metrical and combinatorial treatment: epos of the mass worker as a revolutionary subject:

What truly interests me are two things. For me, art is a question of form, not content. I've spoken about these things by chance, because I was passionate about them. I experienced the 1970s from the inside but I could've written about other things. If I hadn't been in Italy for example... What interests me is the way in which I've written these books from two angles. One is the idea of the epic as opposed to the traditional bourgeois novel, whose protagonist confronts society and most of the time ends up badly; and if she is a woman, always ends up dead. What I call an epic belongs to the genre of the collective social history of a people who struggle, and that's why my characters have no name. They're not bearers of a psychology that individualises them, they are collective characters, they are any FIAT worker, any militant, etc. For me, this is a fundamental choice. I don't write novels these days because I simply can't find collective characters any more.<sup>1</sup>

But Balestrini's militant work during this period is not limited to the production of novels. He is in charge of the design, layout and printing of *Potere Operaio* newspaper, and produces several typographic collages for the group, which today continue to impress due to their combinatorial beauty. The first beats of the 1970s in Italy mark a turning point in the course of the popular and workers' struggles. On the one hand, the high point of the mass workers' struggles is settled with conquests on a legal and institutional level: the workers' statute, one of the most advanced in the world, and the factory councils, an institutional mediation that only relatively displaces the hegemony of trade union representation. On the other hand, however, in tune with the or-

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<sup>1</sup> Iván Maté, "Chi vuole tutto non muore mai, Nanni Balestrini", *Contrabandos*, 2016, <http://contrabandos.org/conversacion-con-nanni-balestrini>.

ganised response of the elites of the Atlantic system and the conclusions of the Trilateral Commission on the "limits of democracy", the "strategy of tension" that began with the state massacre of Piazza Fontana becomes systematised in provincial Italy.

In this context, the groups born during the workers' movement of 1968, Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua, not only experience the crisis of the generalisation of the struggles, but are also drawn into an extremist dynamic that does not correspond with the average behaviour in the factories. Meanwhile, in the FIAT factory, the introduction of the first automatic systems in the manufacturing process, used tactically against the sabotaging capabilities of the strikes, begin in 1973. The spring of 1973 is that of the armed occupation of FIAT Mirafiori, a battle won but which tastes of defeat, because the mastermind of capital had already decided that tactical automation in large factories, and the displacement of the production of surplus value to the territory, were to give way to what years later would be called "post-Fordism". Within the workers' vanguards, the point of view of a separate armed resistance begins to grow. In other words, this is the moment when the Red Brigades begin to become a benchmark for the most qualified and politicised sectors in the factories. Meanwhile, the admonitions of the Trilateral begin to collect pieces: the coup d'état carried out by Kissinger and Pinochet against Allende's Unidad Popular in Chile led the PCI secretary general, Enrico Berlinguer, to formulate the proposal based on the "historical compromise" with the Christian Democracy party and make the decision to not govern alone, even though it had obtained 51% of the votes.

In this dense field of tensions, which would mark Italian society to this day, Balestrini is fundamentally dedicated to political work. Once again he finds himself among the instigators of the Autonomia Operaia project, with its epicentre in metropolitan Milan, in which the new driving forces of the socialised workforce—the Circoli del Proletariato Giovanile, the free radios, the first occupations of social centres, the emerging feminist movement, the autonomist assemblies in the big factories—make up a new and rich movement which, in the metropolises, battles over the disputed territory with the employers.

Between 1974 and 1976 he experiences an extraordinary period that helps mature the hypothesis of a new political subject and a new political figure of social production: the social or socialised worker. This is the premise of the newspaper *Rosso* (1973–1978), a guiding light in the Milanese autonomist galaxy, in whose production and design Balestrini takes part. The State's strategy of tension and the (increasingly armed) response of the workers' groups and proletarian youth, along with the role of the mass media in the design of said strategy and in the criminalisation of resistance is the object of *La violenza illustrata* [Illustrated violence], Balestrini's third novel, published in 1976. Political violence is inseparable from its mediated narrative. The first chapter of the novel collects the newspaper chronicles about the statements of US Marine Lieutenant William Calley at the judicial hearing on the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, committed on 16 March 1968 by US soldiers against several hundred unarmed civilians, to then, in the following chapter, move on to the newspaper chronicles about the autonomist "guerrillas" in the streets of Milan. In the rest of the chapters, Balestrini works with narrative materials in which the legitimisation of violence is the push. Each of the chapters is headed with the names of the different narrative/institutional figures through which these acts of violence are narrated and justified, wherein all of them begin with the letter D: deposition, description, deduction, dissertation, digression, deportation, declaration, documentation, direction, demonstration. In the latter, under the subtitle of "Writing and destruction. Writing and liberation", it states:

The feeling that your head explodes the feeling that an explosion can rip your head off the feeling that your spinal cord is compressing everything in your brain crumples the feeling that your soul pisses you out of your body. The need to seize the object from the closest possible distance in research or better said in illustration in reproduction. Or one can identify the meaning of the words one can only guess the use of hissing sounds it is absolutely unbearable prison officers visits courtyards seem like a movie headache uncontrollable flashes the construction of sentences the grammar the syntax.

Reproduction as it is presented by the language of newspapers differs unequivocally from literary text uniqueness and duration are closely intertwined in the latter as are lability and repeatability in the former. The feeling of turning to ashes inside the feeling that if you could say what is happening it would come out like a stream of boiling water that boils for life. Instead of basing writing on ritual the foundation is established on another praxis that is its being based on politics.

As we know, the high points of the spectacularisation of this violence lie between two different events which took place between 1977 and 1978. On the one hand, in the spring of 1977 a new type of movement emerges in various cities across Italy, mainly in Rome, Bologna and Milan. Its fundamental members are the autonomists, the Metropolitan Indians, the feminists. On 17 February 1977, the famous expulsion of the general secretary of the CGIL, Luciano Lama, from the Sapienza University of Rome by the Roman movement, marks the definitive break between the PCI and the new movements born in the Italian "long '68". But the main spectacularisation of the '77 movement takes place in Milan, during the demonstration that took place on 14 May to protest against the arrest of the movement's lawyers. At the end of the day there was an armed confrontation between an autonomous group separated from the bulk of the demonstration, the collective of the Porta Romana neighbourhood, which started a shootout with the police in the central Via de Amicis, as a result of which police officer Antonio Custra fell dead. The famous photograph of the hooded youth in firing stance with his Walther P38 was taken at that moment. That snapshot perfectly encapsulates the media operation to distort both the '77 and autonomist movements. Gunslinging, despair, individualisation. Umberto Eco contributed notably to this in an article about that photo published in the *Corriere d'informazione*:

This photo is unlike any of the images that had served as an emblem of the idea of revolution for at least four generations. This image evokes other worlds, other narrative and figurative traditions that have nothing to do with the proletarian tradi-

tion, with the idea of popular revolt, of mass struggle. The collective element remains, but the individual hero displays the terrifying isolation of the heroes of American police films or the lone gunmen of the Wild West.

The photograph became one of the icons of the so-called Years of Lead. Recently, Sergio Bianchi, then a young militant of a Milanese autonomous collective in the orbit of *Rosso* magazine and the vocal source for Balestrini's *The Unseen*, wrote the book *Storia di una foto* [Story of a photo], in which he reconstructs what happened in a completely different sense from Umberto Eco's description. That photo hid the essentials: they were not individual, desperate gunmen. The other photographs of the incident prove it. The "autonomist with the P38" in the photograph was part of the Porta Romana autonomous collective that organised the action, he was just another person who was part of that incident. Individualisation makes it difficult to understand what was happening in the city in the confrontation between the forces of the "historical compromise", the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party of Italy, united against subversion and determined to forcefully eliminate that revolutionary anomaly. We must keep in mind that the armed violence of the revolutionary groups in Italy was always defensive, a response to the strategy of tension organised from within the State, which resulted in the use of weapons against social protest and in dozens and dozens of protesters killed by the police.

The other high point is, without a doubt, the kidnapping and subsequent assassination of Aldo Moro in 1978. That coup by the Red Brigades was directed against what they envisioned as the "heart of the State", but also against the galaxy of workers' and proletarian autonomy. The State of the "Historic Compromise" responded with the "line of firmness", and the outcome is known to us all. The death sentence against autonomy and the '77 movement had been pronounced. That photo of the captivity of Aldo Moro, an isolated prisoner, a bargaining chip between the BRs and the Italian State, only contributed to giving it a tragic humanity.

Following the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro, the galaxy of workers' autonomy ran out of time and space to

prosper, or even persist or resist. The situation became particularly serious in Milan, where the *Rosso* scene, to which Balestrini belonged, had its epicentre. During the course of a few months, the territory of the Milanese metropolis, which seemed to be the most favourable ecosystem for the revolutionary hypothesis of the social worker, became an unbreathable and dangerous hell for autonomous struggles. The strategy of tension had triumphed. The ways of life rehearsed during the years of the explosion of post-socialist behaviour (the rejection of assembly line work and of alienating work in general, life in community, the transformations and tensions of gender relations, the direct re-appropriation of goods, the move towards more cognitive and affective work, the occupation of collective living spaces) were dragged into a spiral of militarisation that made them unsustainable. A large number of feminist women decided to abandon this war-like scenario, while the autonomist groups were torn apart by the tensions towards the militarisation of the movement and the impossibility of practising a directly communist transition, both in the struggles and in the exercising of counter-power.

There is no political defeat that is accompanied, in its occurrence, by the awareness of its causes, just as one cannot know both the position and linear momentum of a particle at the exact same time. Yet for the most veteran of Milanese autonomists, a great many signs announced a catastrophic event. Some of them were experienced by Balestrini in the first person. There is one that usually goes unnoticed, and that is the role played by the Milanese progressive bourgeoisie during those years. Not only did their sons and daughters nurture the ranks of the various groups and collectives; they were also sympathetic towards the movement, and even ended up financially supporting many of the political and business initiatives in the autonomist realm.

I moved to Milan in 1975 and set up a publishing house called Ar&a, which was actually a consortium of publishing projects established in order to share the load of certain functions that are very expensive for a small publisher, such as writing, sales and advertising. Some already existed, others were set up for the occasion: there were Libri Rossi, L'Erba Voglio, the pub-

lishers of *Aut Aut* magazine, Squilibri and others. We ended up bringing together ten of these projects, which allowed us to be publishers without having all the professional skills to do so, seeing as Ar&a took charge of all that: layout, typography, advertising and distribution. It all ended up stalling because of the repression, which in those years was beginning to toughen. For example, I was sent several search warrants, but above all—and this only became known somewhat later—there was another key factor. One of the partners in the project was Luigi D'Urso, a friend of Bifo's, who was from a very wealthy family. His father was an important lawyer. In the beginning Luigi had put money into the Ar&a project and worked with me and with the others, and obviously this caused trouble; so much so that one morning in 1977, in Rome, a Carabinieri brigade went to the father's house to explain that his son was up to no good. His parents got scared, grabbed their son and sent him abroad, and everything was paralysed, and they also lost a lot of money. At that point the environment was very harsh; I thought about creating a magazine that would position the intellectuals in front of that situation, to face what was happening. In the early years there had been an almost moving enthusiasm on the part of the intellectuals; when the game started to get tough, with the heavy repression and the birth of the Red Brigades, they began to retreat, not all of them, but certainly some of them did. The general retreat took place after Moro's kidnapping and in the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

By 1978, the *Rosso* scene was already immersed in a process of decay. The newspaper stopped being published and its historic headquarters on Via Disciplini, in the centric Milanese neighbourhood of Ticinese, ended up closing down. This second half of the 1970s motivates Balestrini to resume writing poetry. From 1974 he begins to compose what would become the series of *Le ballate della signorina Richmond* [Miss Richmond's Ballads], undoubtedly Balestrini's most important poetic work.

<sup>2</sup> "Intervista a Nanni Balestrini", Commonware, 20 May 2019, <http://commonware.org/index.php/gallery/884-intervista-a-nanni-balestrini>.

Miss Richmond functions as a poetic operator of ironic distance, of the implacable gaze on Italian *cattocomunista* culture and politics, that works and reworks the textual materials of the present time to then pour them into quatrains with fierce intelligence. Miss Richmond's appearances would not end with the political catastrophe of 7 April 1979, but continued throughout the 1980s, when the "consociative" regime formed by the DC and the PCI gave way to the Pentapartito governments, in which Craxi and Andreotti managed a bacchanal of corruption, privatisation and destruction of the official workers' movement that would end in 1993, less than fifty years after the Republic's birth in 1948. In the first instalment of the *Ballate* series, written between 1974 and 1977 and whose chapters were first published in magazines such as *Linus*, an antiphon appears amidst Lama's unfinished speech at the University of Rome on 17 February 1977 and the slogans, ironic and irreverent, of the students, autonomists and Metropolitan Indians which, as we know, led to the escape of the CGIL secretary along with his service of order, thus marking the final divorce and antagonism between the PCI, its organic bloc and the movements of the Italian "long '68":

*XI. MISS RICHMOND PROPOSES  
THAT THE LAMAS STAY IN TIBET*

*the workers have come here  
to discuss to speak to listen calmly  
today's demonstration will not take place  
in Chile the tanks in Italy the unions*

*as someone said with the tanks  
thousands of workers and students want to  
meet to discuss a problem  
lama or no lama lama or no lama*

*vital to all of society we are deeply  
in agreement with the demands expressed today  
by the youth of renewal and change  
more work less pay more work less pay*

*from the university and from all over the country  
the student protest is just the issues raised  
are ours precisely for this reason we say  
more sacrifices more sacrifices more sacrifices*

*that the groups that aim to separate  
the students from the workers' and popular movements  
manifestly work for the common enemy  
some people don't lama some people don't lama*

*to those forces external and internal to  
the university that does not want change  
it is necessary to give rational and real objectives  
less holidays more exploitation more hours less pay*

*to a protest that results in otherwise is in danger  
of remaining in nihilistic rejection  
and in angry and exasperated reaction  
nobody lamas nobody lamas*

*to the serious problems of the university  
to those who scream that we want to bury  
the movement we respond  
the pci is not here lick that ass over there dc*

*that we've never thought to act  
without and much less against the great  
youth masses we must fight and overcome together  
Argan and Paul VI united in the struggle*

*the great battle for renewal  
of the whole of society defeat and overcome  
fascism's reactionary temptations  
Andreotti is red Fanfani will soon be too*

*the involuntory provocations all violence  
or irrational temptation that breaks  
the windows that destroys the faculties  
who doesn't lama doesn't make love*

*it doesn't affect Malfatti but harms  
the students' cause the workers' movement  
and there is no rhetoric in all this  
shoot up Luciano shoot up*

*he has fought fascism too  
diligently defending the factories  
preventing their destruction we are  
boss power boss power*

*we have come here with neither the strength nor  
the paternalistic arrogance of having the  
fair line in our pocket we want to discuss  
lama frustrate us lama frustrate us*

*with everyone what path should we take  
what are the goals of our struggle  
it is necessary that from today we get  
lama now and free of charge*

*together a common mobilisation effort  
to isolate and defeat the patent and  
masked enemies of our cause  
now's the time now's the time misery for all who work*

*we've been in an open conflict for two years  
and a half over the university that affects thousands  
of teachers of workers of the precarious  
we'll pay for it all we'll pay for it all*

*that struggle will be led by  
the trade union confederations with all their  
weight and effort we must end  
unions and pci fascism is all we see*

*that conflict soon and well to then open  
a constructive and proficient discussion  
on the profound reform of the university  
fool fool fool fool*

*this structure today marked by deficiencies  
insufficiencies inabilities and for a  
fundamental class closure that excludes  
houses no shacks yes houses no shacks yes*

*thousands of workers of workers' children  
from the right to culture and study  
we want a different university that praises  
35 lira 500 hours 35 lira 500 hours*

*the detailed study effort  
of young people to change the country  
needs qualified contributions  
get out get out the new police*

*from technicians and intellectuals we cannot  
waste the youth's energy  
it is necessary instead to transform  
lama is mine and I manage it*

*the anger and protest that are born  
from a condition of exasperated marginalisation  
of young people who today lack a perspective  
long live the sacrifices long live the sacrifices*

*of politically driven work  
of positive renewal  
please lama don't go  
we still want lots of police*

On 7 April 1979, the major repressive operation against Autonomia Operaia takes place. With it, Pietro Calogero, assistant to the prosecutor of the city of Padua and closely linked to the Venetian PCI, seeks to attribute the responsibility of the entire armed struggle and all subversion in Italy since the Hot Autumn of 1969 to the group of militant intellectuals of *operaismo* and autonomy. The epicentre of what Calogero calls the Organisation, with a paranoid O, was to be found at the

University of Padua and had its head, its “bad teacher”, in Toni Negri, who was accused of organising an “armed insurrection against the powers of the State” (a criminal offence created during fascism but which survived the anti-fascist constitution of 1948) and, last but not least, of being the mastermind behind the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro. The story is well known. In the crosshairs of what Calogero himself called his “theorem” was also Nanni Balestrini, who by a joyful turn of fortune escaped arrest and was able to escape over the Alpine border, like so many other thousands of heretics and rebels from the peninsula throughout history:

I had no idea I was one of the people they were searching for. I was in Milan; there were three people who hadn't been arrested yet: one was [Franco] Piperno, then there was [Giambattista] Marongiu, who was on the ferry from Sardinia to Italy, and then there was a third person, but the newspapers claimed they didn't know who that was. I bought a newspaper one afternoon, a week after the arrests, and read on the front page that the third wanted man was Balestrini. I immediately began thinking about escaping, went to stay at an unsuspected friend's place, then went to meet my sister in Courmayeur, and then, dressed as a skier, crossed the border skiing. I made it into France and went to Paris. They searched for me in Rome at the home of an ex-partner of mine, Letizia Paolozzi, but it's still not clear why they didn't look for me in Milan; some say they didn't really want to find me.

From exile in France, Balestrini could take measure of the ongoing personal and political tragedy. He then decided to dedicate a project he had been developing since 1977 to those persecuted on 7 April, a lyrical piece called *Blackout*, in reference to the 1977 blackout in New York and the phenomena of subversion and re-appropriation it sparked during that infernally hot July. Balestrini wanted Demetrio Stratos to be the performer of the piece. Stratos was his friend, but above all a great sound artist and vocalist, revolutionary activist and singer in Area, a band that was closely linked to the Bolognese '77 movement.

Stratos' sudden death in 1979 put an end to the initial performance project. But from its ashes rose a poem that expresses the varied meanings of the blackout, in which the violence of the political and social contexts of the moment resounds.

The poem is made up of four sections, each 12 pages long. Each section is headed by one of the definitions of the term 'blackout': "a loss of memory of an event or fact"; "the extinguishing of all stage lights to end a play or scene"; "suppression, censorship, concealment, etc."; "A momentary lapse of consciousness or vision". After each definition there is a second title, this time in Italian, followed, in parentheses, by a second subtitle, corresponding to a tempo of interpretation of a classical sonata: "Transformation (allegro)", "Instigation (andante)", "Persecution (minuetto)", "Inhibition (rondò)". The agogic indications of the poem allude to a different temporal scansion for each section which, in its interpretation, are designed to influence its reading. A remnant perhaps of the original multimedia project with Demetrio Stratos. For its conclusion, the author introduces a section titled "Composition", which is made up of a diagram and the ensemble of texts—in the section titled "Sources"—used by him as compositional materials for the work. Precisely this last section, along with the initial images, allows for a better understanding of its structure. The second image displays a square divided into four horizontal "strips", in the same way that the poem is subdivided into four sections. The twelve smaller rectangles in each strip correspond to the twelve pages in each section. Each horizontal strip is thus divided into four squares, each of which is subdivided into two right-angled triangles by a diagonal line that divides them from the bottom left, in such a way that each triangle on the right is equal to the triangle to the left of the following triangle. Thus, horizontal strips are formed in the centre of it, images of parallelograms that create an effect of "wave-like" displacement from square to square. This displacement reflects the movement of insertion of the stanzas of each source, seeing as each geometric figure corresponds exactly to one of the sources used by the author for the composition. In this combination, disparate textual sources are mixed, giving

rise to a heterogenesis of an enunciation that goes beyond the signifying text and even the text grammar, given that photographic fragments that relate to the events referred to in the poem are integrated into the composition. Perhaps *Blackout's* original approach is closer to what Félix Guattari would later define as machinic orality, that is, the reconstruction of the polyphony and multiplicity of the substances of expression in enunciation, against and beyond grammatical, institutional, individual, personological, algorithmic sutures, but under the new anthropological conditions of the machine body of a capitalist production system which disguises itself as life.

A tourist guidebook of Mont Blanc; articles taken from the Italian press about the tribute concert to Demetrio Stratos; articles and reports about the New York blackout that appeared in the Italian press; fragments of Toni Negri's *The Mass Worker and the Social Worker*; newspaper reports on the fall of the Skylab space station; extracts by Ugo Foscolo; the arrest warrant for the "7 April" case, drawn up by public prosecutor Prieto Calogero; press photographs, including one of the brain of militant Giannino Zibecchi, crushed by a Carabinieri lorry in April 1975; the voice about the zombies in the book *Il vampiro* by Ornella Volta, etc. Such are the sources of the composition, woven exactly like a patchwork that enunciates the end of an era:

#### Blackout, "Instigation (andante)" (extract):

13.

*the vocal chords do not vibrate as a result of the air pushed out by the lungs but from impulses in the center of the brain transplanting the spinal chord is a most difficult operation the voice as an instrument of drives behind which there is an entire universe of desires attentive to the area that lies between the psychic universe and the communication links between thought and word the development of an absolute vocal system brought to the limits of discovery*

*each day it is necessary to completely wash away the blood  
as someone said it was a performance that broke through the  
current communication gap  
the things I do are spoken about by everyone  
sing with the voice to liberate it from the conditioning of a  
cultural prison  
an attempt to free ourselves from the condition of listener and viewer  
to which culture and politics have accustomed us  
when the lights went out the niggers raged boasted a black youth  
after a few minutes the night was illuminated by fires the streets  
invaded by looters*

14.  
*hospitalized since April 25th in critical condition at Memorial  
Hospital in New York with bone marrow aplasia  
an attempt to free ourselves from the condition of listener and  
viewer to which culture and politics have accustomed us  
who considers every expressive frontier impoverished and  
ventures beyond without fear  
each day it's necessary to completely wash away the blood  
this work should not be assumed a listening that suffers passively  
transplanting the spinal chord is a most difficult operation  
bonfires in the streets an explosion of Afro-Latin vitality a  
torchlight procession to lofty Broadway  
the music was drowned out by the howling of alarms and the  
sound of broken glass  
for the vast majority in the streets it is a festival a Christmas  
night a New Years in July  
after a few minutes the night was illuminated by fires the streets i  
nvaded by looters  
prices skyrocket but there won't be pricing when we're finished  
Broadway won't exist  
a woman called me and said they are travelling on Bushwick  
Avenue like buffalos*

15.  
*like a game in which lives are at risk  
each day it is necessary to completely wash away the blood  
it's as if a fever had struck them they came out with trucks vans  
caravans anything that could walk*

*a woman called me and said they are travelling on Bushwick  
avenue like buffalos  
at 9:30 pm the lights went out at 9:40 pm they were already  
ravaging the shops  
we're going to take what we want and what we want is what we  
need  
in the Bronx inside an Ace Pontiac reception room they knock  
down a steel door take 50 new cars start the motors  
simultaneously and then walk away  
after a few minutes the night was illuminated by fires the streets  
invaded by looters  
the metal grilles for the protection of shop windows are unhinged  
with crowbars knocked down by cars and torn with brute force  
a fifty-year-old woman with a shopping bag enters a store saying  
today she shops for free  
a third street was demolished as if it had been bombed reported a  
police official  
the music was drowned out by the howling of alarms and the  
sound of broken glass<sup>3</sup>*

The Italian counterrevolution not only produced a generation lost between prison, terrorism and, above all, heroin and depression. More than 7,000 people were arrested and prosecuted for political crimes during the second half of the 1970s and early 1980s. With its active and even dedicated support for the repression of the new workers' and proletarian movements born during the Italian "long '68", the PCI would sign its own death sentence. As it struggled to make itself presentable to the Yalta-born Atlantic world, the restructuring of Italian capitalism ended its hegemony over the industrial working class. While it dedicated itself, with Stalinist fury, to expelling the autonomist workers from factories and the "bad teachers" from universities, a certain Silvio Berlusconi was preparing the hegemony of televised turbo-capitalism that would turn first Milan and then all of Italy upside down, putting an end to that "work-based Republic", as stated in the first article of the Constitution of 1948.

<sup>3</sup>Nanni Balestrini, *Blackout* [Translated by Peter Valente], Oakland, CA: Commune Editions, 2017.

That Milan in which Balestrini's political and poetic projects were born had already become an object exorcised by the official chronicles of the Years of Lead, which served as the intimation of amnesia and the cancellation of the immediate past. During the 1980s, the Milan once invaded by the new ways of the proletariat youth and feminist protests became the Milan of *paninari* teenagers who dressed according to the most conventional codes of American fashion and proudly devoured their Big Macs; into the Milan that became the headquarters of Mediaset and therefore of a capitalism that now mainly exploited an immaterial, cognitive, creative labour power, born alongside the preceding cultural revolutions, exploiting it to the point of exhaustion and ethical and political decomposition. The Milan that would be sold in Italy and Europe as the "Milano da bere". In those early stages of the decade, Nanni Balestrini found himself condemned to political exile in France. In Provence, he lived for a few months with Sergio Bianchi, a young *autonomista* from the outskirts of Milan who experienced the tragic and shattering parable of the '77 movement. His voice would serve for the composition of what is undoubtedly Balestrini's best-known novel published internationally, and the one that best connected with the new political subjectivities born in the 1990s, *The Unseen*. In it, impossible worlds alternate: on the one hand, the revolt of the young proletarians of the Milanese hinterland, who flee to the Lombardian metropolis like Barbarians in search of ways of life and struggle that bring together knowledge, the rejection of work under employer submission, counter-power and the direct re-appropriation of wealth, a form of communism free of never ending mediations, either by (socialist) party or employer. On the other hand, the world of special prisons created to lock up thousands of autonomous militants and armed groups, where the horror of repression is compounded by the decomposition of the ethical and political fabric that had been created in the preceding decades and that was exacerbated with the defeat of *brigadista* terrorism: the assassinations of comrades who repent, revenge between groups, and the distant echo of an Italian society that had already become desensitised, by means of Canale 5 or om-

nipresent heroin, to the fate of those generations who wanted to change their destiny and that of the country.

Navigating between enthusiasm and defeat, a determining place in the novel is occupied by the development of the feminist subjectivation of female autonomist comrades, a fundamental process, insofar as it reveals the political and micro-political links between an autonomous practice that, under male domination, was incapable not only of expressing or exercising other forms of power and force, but also another sense of time, of the body; a practice ultimately incapable of exercising an autonomy based on an ontological difference in regard to the worlds of patriarchy and capital's power of command. That historical schism within the movement of '77 was to have dire consequences for the ecology of said movement and is still being felt today in the makeup of Italian protest movements:

the women at the centre talk more and more among themselves and if they're talking about the men it's clear that they're not talking about them in the way that we talk about them typically male when you come down to it even there at the centre the women are always regarded as women in other words differently and the women who come to the centre are still given ratings sized up and gossiped about the usual stuff that men do everywhere and as time goes on the women emphasize their separate meeting times and separate conversations and if one of us goes up to them while they're talking they chase him away after a bit we get pissed off because we can't make it out we start teasing them and they turn aggressive they withdraw among themselves they go around in a group they leave in their cars without us they have private discussions and they give us dirty looks so what the hell has happened one evening they don't turn up at all and for the whole evening we talk about it we speculate with rumours and malicious gossip Cotogno is given the job of finding out about Valeriana even though he's not too keen because he knows Valeriana better than we do and in fact Valeriana gives him short shrift as soon as he tries asking her questions she chases him away she tells him to mind his own business and stop spying for all the

other shits which means us Lauro and Lupino have a try with Mora and Verbena just the same result and I try with China and we end up having a row everyone's rattled a few days go by and we see a small group of them at the centre pinning up a poster on a wall it announces a meeting the next evening they're fixing it with drawing pins and sellotape talking among themselves as if we weren't there . . .

what shitty behaviour we all look at one another in amazement our eyes meeting Menta goes on you treat us like dirt and you even pretend to be surprised but as from today it's over unless there are some changes we're leaving well leave then shouts Ortica losing his temper what's keeping you back ok it's still Menta speaking but first we want to make it clear what shits you are what pieces of crap no different from other men despite giving yourselves airs as revolutionaries and the vanguard of the proletariat but in your relationships with us you're the rearguard about the same level as my father and my grandfather Lupino is genuinely surprised but what's going on what's happened what's this all about this is a funny way of doing things a funny way of discussing things you disappear for a week and you turn up again with a poster for a meeting ok and then you come here and tell us that we're all shits I really don't understand.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the violence and density of the cancellation and the political and cultural repression of the Italian "long '68", absorbed by the ill-fated Years of Lead, amalgamated with a mortal sin against society, we have to go back to the horror of repression of the Paris Commune of 1871, the massacre, imprisonment and banishment of thousands of Communards, and the shame bestowed upon their memory. But the truth is that, although 30 or 40 years later the Paris Commune had become the patrimony of the international workers' movement, to this day there are still political prisoners and exiles from that period of Italian history, while militants and intellectuals such as Toni Negri or Oreste Scalzone continue to be presented as "bad

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<sup>4</sup> Nanni Balestrini, *The Unseen* [Translated by Liz Heron], London: Verso, 2011.

teachers" by the sombre heirs of the PCI, and continue to be charged with heinous crimes, even though the courts have ruled otherwise. It is necessary to take into account this exercise of repression and excision to understand the importance of the project to reconstruct those decades that Balestrini, together with Sergio Bianchi and Primo Moroni (a fundamental character of Italian and European culture and politics, who died in 1994), began to undertake in 1987, and would end up being *The Golden Horde: Revolutionary Italy (1968–1977)*, a thick multi-voiced volume in which the processes, contexts, circumstances, agents and events in both the cultural and political fields of the Italian "long '68" are reconstructed and narrated by some of its situated protagonists and interpreters. *The Golden Horde* is a milestone in the unapologetic reconstruction of those years, and enables the first critical interpretations and narrations of the main passages, as well as the signalling of discontinuities and turning points. It undoubtedly marks the beginning of the end of the Years of Lead and is presented as a tool at the service of the new generations of autonomous movements, who would experience a renaissance which began in the Milan conquered by the Lega Nord with the acts of resistance directed towards the successive eviction operations at the historic Leoncavallo social centre, in parallel to the global impact of the Zapatista uprising on 1 January 1994, and which led to a "silver age" of the Italian autonomous movements up until the mid-2000s.

With the composition in 1989 of *L'editore* [The publisher], a novel dedicated to the publisher and revolutionary Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who died on 14 March 1972 due to the explosion of the device that he himself was trying to place in a transmission tower on the outskirts of Milan as part of an action by the armed group he founded, the Gruppi d'Azione Partigiana, Balestrini puts an end to the trilogy of novels about the "long '68".

For Balestrini, the 1990s are marked by a return to poetic and cultural activity in the new Italian media, political and institutional landscape, dominated by the hegemony of Berlusconi and the slow and guilty agony of the progressive axes, inheritors of the PCI. Once again alongside Sergio Bianchi, he is present in the creation of fundamental magazines for critical thinking

of a *postoperaista* nature, such as *DeriveApprodi*, which would become a publishing house, and which today is the main alternative Italian publishing company. For *DeriveApprodi*, Balestrini contributes poems which would later be collected in the anthology *Caosmogonia e altro* [Caosmogony and other things] (2017). But his main instrument of enunciation continued to be his novels, as always born of encounters with new realities. Yes, Balestrini's novels respond to something fundamental: they are the testimony of encounter, of the clinamen of two worlds that intersect, and it is those worlds that speak. As Ilaria Bussoni wrote on the subject:

What always speaks is the impersonal nature of the circulating enunciations, which are consistently attached to a word function that can take on the form of a leaflet, a newspaper headline, a militant's intervention in an assembly, or the choral refrain of the *binchas* in the stadium stands. That's why the material that the poetic operation extracts is always what has already been said, in whichever form. The thing is that Balestrini has earned the epithet of "the laziest writer to have ever existed", of whom Umberto Eco affirmed that "exaggerating a bit, he's never written a single word of his own". Balestrini's words have always been those of others, those capable of reverberating with reactivations and variations, repetitions and incipit, on the lives of others, agents of a diffuse and often collective narrative function, which finds their most suitable expressive format in the epic.<sup>5</sup>

From these encounters, two novels were born that portray the social and subjective landscape of the popular classes of the Italy of the neoliberal counterrevolution, *I furiosi* [The furious] (1994) and *Sandokan* (2004). The former was born from the chance encounter between Balestrini and members of the Brigade Rossonere ultras

<sup>5</sup> Ilaria Bussoni, "La nuova vita che arriva. Una poetica per la vertigine della sovversione", *Opera viva*, 19 June 2019, <https://operavivamagazine.org/la-nuova-vita-che-arriva>.

<sup>6</sup> "Intervista a Nanni Balestrini", op. cit., <http://archivio.commonware.org/index.php/gallery/884-intervista-a-nanni-balestrini>.

group, Milan's radical *curva*, established in the 1970s as a youth club linked to the autonomist movements but later transformed into a group that, having lost its political compass, functions as a machine of war, self-defence and survival for the Milanese proletariat. The latter tells the story of a boss of the Neapolitan Camorra, years before Roberto Saviano portrayed a justicialist and hypocritical version of the organisation in *Gomorrab*. The encounter is the condition of the procurement of collective enunciation:

*We Want Everything* was born from the encounter with Alfonso; *The Unseen* from the encounter Sergio Bianchi; *I furiosi* after having encountered the Brigade Rossonere at the Calusca bookshop in Milan. I liked the idea of telling the stories they told each other. The book about the Camorra is also this: casual, like the others. I went with Sergio to Aversa to present *L'orda d'oro* in a small bookshop, then we went to have pizza, and a young man who was at the talk began to tell me these stories. I've always tried to narrate collective stories, through the languages of those characters: instead of describing them, I use their language, and that's already a description in itself. It's more difficult these days, but of course I would like to include the precarious and migrants: but the precarious are scattered; to tell the story of a precarious person means telling a thousand stories, there isn't just one that serves as an example; likewise, it's difficult with migrants, their stories are highly individual, their lives follow their own course.<sup>6</sup>

In the territory of poetry, Balestrini composed *Caosmogonia* in 2010, an extended poem in which a new political and poetic breath is felt, which would come into effect only a year later with the Arab springs, the 15M movement and Occupy Wall Street. In its fifth section, "Preliminary Instructions", we read:

*our world is disappearing  
sunsets follow sunsets  
you can hear its sonorous tear  
the blood running the life that flees  
on withered corroded sheets of paper  
caressing the still visible words*

*caressing the still visible words  
supreme famous fictions dissolve  
on withered corroded sheets of paper  
sunsets follow sunsets  
in an immense hostile chaotic reality  
we don't know who we are or where we're going*

*we don't know who we are or where we're going  
old certainties depart  
in an immense hostile chaotic reality  
supreme famous fictions dissolve  
our urgency for order is cancelled  
in a grid of infinite possibilities*

*in a grid of infinite possibilities  
we try each time with different words  
our urgency for order is cancelled  
old certainties depart  
everything branches out decomposes gets mixed  
experiments do not produce a yes or no*

*experiments do not produce a yes or no  
but a continuous stream of possibilities  
everything branches out decomposes gets mixed  
we try each time with different words  
no search for absolute answers  
now that each development is marked by discontinuity*

*now that each development is marked by discontinuity  
a radical and definitive break from evolutionism  
not a search for absolute answers  
but a continuous stream of possibilities  
the question is where can the chain be broken  
the main contradiction is constantly changing*

*the main contradiction is constantly changing  
in the violence that disrupts everyday life  
the question is where can the chain be broken  
a radical and definitive break from evolutionism  
materialistic contingency theory  
the moment when the one gets split in two*

*the moment when the one gets split in two  
observing the event from partial perspectives  
materialistic contingency theory  
in the violence that disrupts everyday life  
in the variable duration of the circumstances  
heterogeneous forces are composed on a common line*

*heterogeneous forces are composed on a common line  
conforming to a non-predetermined relationship  
in the variable duration of the circumstances  
observing the event from partial perspectives  
decompose and recombine into alternative equilibria  
writing as a flux not a code*

*writing as a flux not a code  
associative and cumulative constructions  
decompose and recombine into alternative equilibria  
conforming to a non-predetermined relationship  
enriches the meaning by making it ductile  
form freed from the swamp of syntax*

*form freed from the swamp of syntax  
a sequence of images fired like slogans  
enriches the meaning by making it ductile  
associative and cumulative constructions  
to make the reader a participant by resetting language  
against abuse convention the emptying of meaning*

*against abuse convention the emptying of meaning  
no longer dominated and dominant but force against force  
to make the reader a participant by resetting language  
a sequence of images fired like slogans  
the attack must be meticulously prepared  
from a revolutionary perspective*

*from a revolutionary perspective  
another world is appearing  
the attack must be meticulously prepared  
no longer dominated and dominant but force against force  
you can hear its sonorous tear  
new life comes running through the blood*

The last decade of Nanni Balestrini's life was dedicated to a great endeavour, the founding of the new era of *Alfabeta* magazine, christened as *Alfabeta2*. The magazine began its publication in June 2010, with an editorial staff formed by Balestrini himself, María Teresa Carbone, Andrea Inglese and Andrea Cortelezza. This time the new *Alfabeta* would treat political issues on the same level as cultural ones, devoting sustained attention to creations of European political and critical thought, in attempts to animate an Italian intellectual scene plunged into the deepest apathy and conformism with the status quo, when not dominated by criminal justicialism which, after the Mani Pulite investigations and the hegemony of Berlusconi, became the creed of the inheritors of Gramsci and Togliatti's PCI. The magazine had to abandon its printed publication in 2014 and become a website, active until Balestrini's death, after which it was decided to terminate the company.

Nanni Balestrini continued to explore his poetic and political concerns until the end of his days, always in search of the emerging enunciation among the exploited and oppressed produced by the neoliberal capitalist regime. During the last months of his life, spent between France and Italy, the apprehension of the ontological alternatives that open up in the crisis of the civilization of capital did not escape him, as can be read in one of his final poems, *Le radiazioni del corpo nero*, with which I would like to end this text in memory of the Milanese poet and militant.

## Black-body Radiations

What is a poetry if not an operation of language that deactivates its informative functions to make possible that particular and joyful use of language that we precisely call poetry?

Giorgio Agamben

1

*let's not expect anything else  
turmoil and implosion  
we did it all but  
the crowd turned us in  
I contemplate their greed  
decomposition their unforeseeables  
unstable contortions  
the shadow of nothingness flutters around  
unmasked in cracked  
horizons for useless companies  
there where we are lacking  
dreamt sound sources  
pulsating solstices explorations  
or astounding illusions*

2

*recalcitrant hostages  
we dive knowing everything  
into intermittent landscapes  
the weight is added  
of atrophied commemorations  
numbed phalanges  
struggle to bite without  
clinging without cause and without  
blame we've seen  
everything there isn't  
already unable to reestablish  
a previous order  
ill-fated dissolved  
in discontinuous cancellation*

3

*brittle future bellows  
delusional destinies  
here we are still swollen*

*in the limping words  
the undaunted ballad  
in the final ring  
on the shore of a dry sea  
in which to sink memories  
withered rapacious words  
berated for the last time  
battered in the empty sky  
fits of rage to not succumb to  
cynical conspiracies or  
terrifying armistice*

4

*quick raids  
steep ascents  
always remain  
cheeky metaphors  
appear in the morning  
soon they draw vowels  
metaphysical figurations  
come and go  
rainbow fractions  
alphabetic whisper  
they multiply all around  
heartrending sublimations  
the lightning bolt destroys*

5

*triumphant exile  
sweetly hasten  
cracks in language  
submerge outbreaks  
chewed on spit out  
discordant blowguns  
mirror neurons reflect  
to remind us who we are  
words turned off  
disintegrate mute  
in the faded ink  
discontinuous masturbations  
from the window looking out  
hangs the dead hand*

6

*verbal excrement  
vertical ecstasy  
it's been good  
uncertain verifications  
shuddering invisible  
iridescent beauties  
in the open sky  
anticipate burning  
the future past  
furious rips  
prophetic vocalisations  
programmed by symptoms  
voluptuous symmetrical  
inconsistent bowel movements*

7

*physically disconnected  
absorbs everything without reflecting  
outer worlds dissolve  
eternal visions crumble  
new laws expand  
incandescent spectres  
rarefied language  
rhythmical unrest  
emits energy waves  
particles quanta  
syntagmas flow  
density frequency  
semantic dissipation  
tending towards infinity*

8

*mental emotion  
the bird that perches  
dare to invent  
kill radiate  
shredded images  
torn up imaginaries  
flutter around exhausted  
variables in time  
wavering certainties*

*liquefied words  
scattered ashes  
searching for minimums  
in the cracks*

9  
*locked inside  
to crush is enough  
dilates mixes  
bare feet  
die standing  
muted clouds  
bite the darkness  
they often give up  
elongated eyes collect  
gasping fibrillation  
brittle sparks  
rapid roars  
blood stains  
chimerical dissipations*

10  
*hands bearing down  
burning alive  
dawns float  
smoking voices  
hanging from the branch  
enough running away  
over the broken glass  
rolled up instant  
labile devour  
feverish sublimations  
the star implodes  
after the collapse  
pure poetry  
we will make it*

*Paris, 17 August – Rome, 11 November 2018*

## BALESTRINI, OR THE POETICS OF THE APOCALYPSE OF LANGUAGE

Laia Carbonell

In 1976 Nanni Balestrini wrote the experimental novel *La violenza illustrata* [Illustrated Violence], using news clips from communication media that were then manipulated and reorganised literarily. The aim was to visualise the amount of violence nesting in the journalistic texts we are fed on a daily basis. This same operation would be tirelessly repeated in the form of poetry, collage, video installation, sculpture or play, as if he were a gleaner of all forms of violence around us, transforming them into works of art while raising our awareness, enabling us to react against them. Nowadays, seen with the passing of time, his entire work comprises a vast mosaic of an artistic and life position that denounced the abuse exercised by power over the Italian working and popular classes over the 20th century. Antonio Negri ironized in this way on the subject of coherence in Balestrini: “Nanni has always been a politician. First he did politics with poems that undid all forms of linguistic fabric in reviving the signs of alienation that constitute them; later he reconstructed these signs in the revolutionary events described in his novels; now he has begun to do politics with collages... The coherence of his project bothers me a bit.”<sup>1</sup>

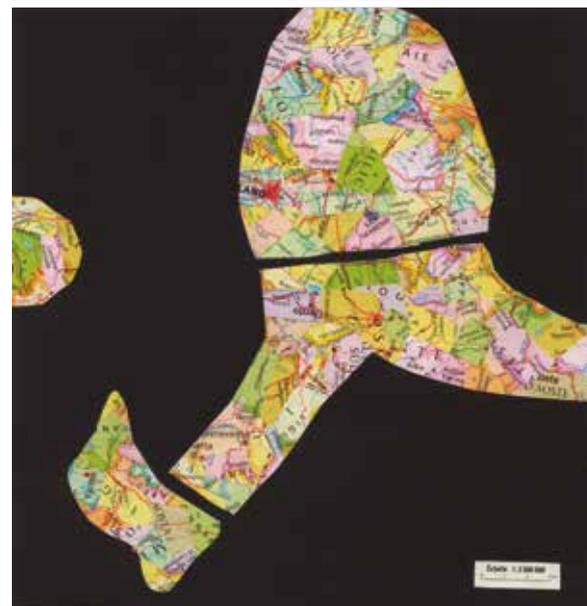
Nanni kept the postcards Negri sent to him from the Rebibbia prison when this latter was held, accused of being the intellectual author of the assassination of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades. After a kidnapping that lasted fifty-five days, the body of Moro had been found in the boot of a car, parked part way between the headquarters of the Italian Communist Party and the Christian Democrats. Each of Negri’s postcards, with the Bernini sculpture of the Triton Fountain as their leitmotif, was saved with great care, along with so many other tesserae of the Balestrini project dedicated to gathering and recreating all possible ways of illustrating violence. How many workers’ demonstrations had the Bernini Triton in Piazza Barberini been witness to? How many

<sup>1</sup> N. Balestrini, *Con gli occhi del linguaggio*, Milan, Fondazione Mudima, 2006.

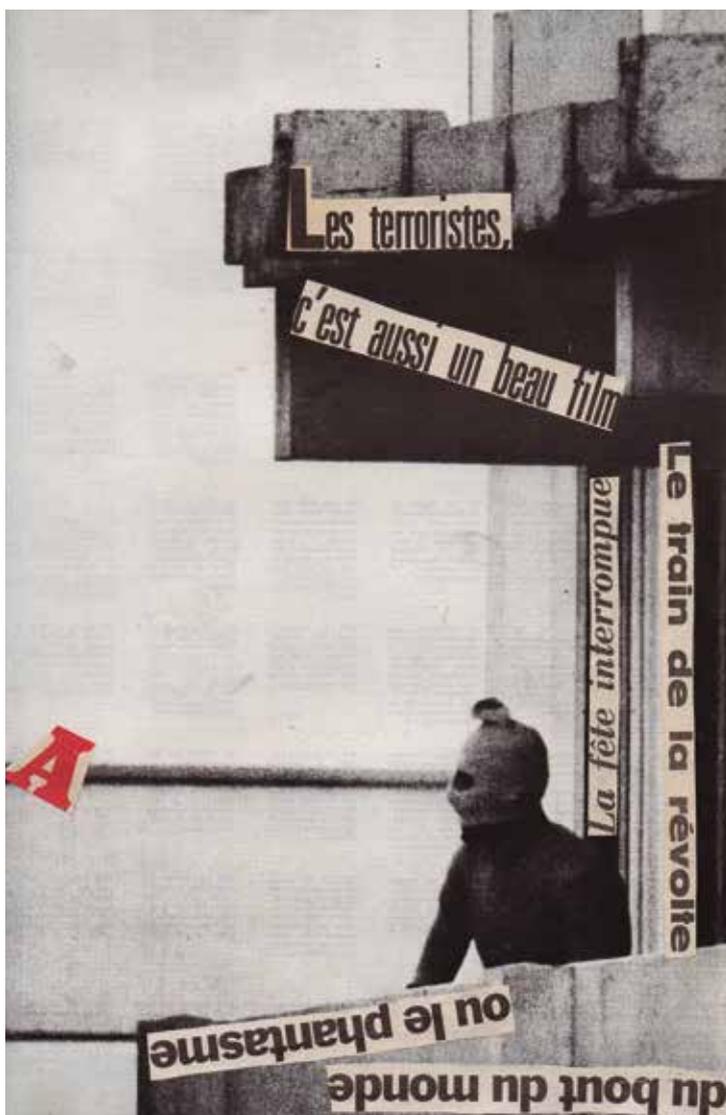
more would it serve as the backdrop to? On 21 November of last year, while the world was awaiting the miracle of the first vaccinations against Covid-19, the square continued to play out its role, this time for new protests for housing rights in the face of the health crisis: “Senza casa non c’è cura” [No home, no healing], read a banner with the Bernini fountain behind it.<sup>2</sup>

The image of this Triton, herald of Poseidon, aid to the argonauts as he blows the conch shell horn, agitating the waters, is no longer just another postcard amongst the collection of monuments to pick from in the souvenir stand in front of the Coliseum—it has now taken on a new meaning. It has become a communicative sign in times of censorship and repression. The entire possible relationship between these two colleagues is encapsulated in a shared postcard of a conventional and rather anodyne nature, representing just a small fragment of Italian heritage. The very heritage used to whitewash a good part of the corrupt dirty laundry of the entire country, just as Balestrini would denounce in the collage series *Ytalia in saldo* [Ytaly on Clearance] (2005), which combines cut-outs from Italian tourist postcards with messages advertising deals and sales.

In the same year he produced *Ytalia in saldo* he did the collages entitled *Ytalietta*, found in part at the end of the exhibition. These collages invent a new cartography of the country by cutting out and repasting map fragments, disordering the territory while inventing new forms. The country becomes modellable, reorganizable, multiple—and the Earth is no longer flat. Rather, it can be dismantled into any pieces we might imagine, creating the maps of our own shared utopia, founding a new site or explaining history in a different manner, as he did in his novels. The trilogy *La grande rivolta* [The Great Revolt], comprised of *We Want Everything* (1971; English edition 2016), *The Unseen* (1987; English edition 1989) and *L’editore* [The Publisher] (1989), works as a micro-historical narrative of Italy’s Years of Lead, which he further took apart and analysed in depth with Primo Morini in *L’orda d’oro* (1968–1977). *La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* [The Golden Hoard (1968–1977): The Great Revolutionary Wave, Creative, Political and Existential] (1988). *Carbonia: We Were All Communists* (2013),



*Ytalietta 6*, 2006



*Les terroristes*, 1980

*Sandokan* (2004; English edition 2009) and *I furiosi* [The Furious] (1994) gave voice to Italian lumpen subalternity in the 20th century. Balestrini's characters narrate a collective history without psychology, in a reconstruction of the voices found on the outermost extremes of society.

*The Unseen* is the voice of the politically repressed during the Years of Lead, young people who represent the union of student activism and the workers' movement. Balestrini himself was subject to this repression; he would go into exile to Paris after being accused with other members of the Autonomia Operaia group, on 7 April, 1979, of subversive association, being a member of an armed organisation and participation in 19 assassinations, including the death of Aldo Moro. Dedicated to Sergio Blanchi, the book weaves together two parallel story lines: the present circumstances of Sergio, held in prison and witness to how the repression served to squash an entire movement, while he took part in prison revolts; and Sergio's past, narrating the precedents, ideas and actions that brought the State to repress him, leading to his incarceration.

In the first scene of *L'editore*, Balestrini describes in great detail the autopsy of the cadaver of the perpetrator of a failed terrorist attack: "The brain was now exposed the expert dissector has taken from the braincase the encephalon the brain the cerebellum and after the bulb examining carefully the cranial base to determine to what degree and to what depth the contusions and haemorrhages found on the exterior have affected the inside of the cranium."<sup>3</sup> This scene runs parallel to the collage entitled *Ytalia autopsia* [Ytaly Autopsy] (2006),<sup>4</sup> where Balestrini invents a new map of the Italian peninsula with the internal parts of the human body, as if with an autopsy he might evaluate the wounds that had led to a country's death: "The country had adapted to cynicism and opportunism, to televised vulgarity and intellectual stupidity. The history of the previous

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.romatoday.it/politica/manifestazione-movimenti-a-roma-oggi-21-novembre-2020.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from the author's translation of N. Balestrini, *El editor*, Barcelona and

Madrid: Virus editorial and Traficantes de Sueños, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> N. Balestrini, *Con gli occhi del linguaggio*, op. cit.

period, the impulses, enthusiasms and hopes of a good part of an entire generation had been erased and mystified by the mass media.<sup>5</sup> The dead body of the editor Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, which appeared on the cover of every newspaper<sup>6</sup> in March 1972 after an attempt to blow up a high voltage transmission tower in Milan, is the cadaver that agglutinates all the contradictions of another social body: the left-wing intelligentsia in relation to violence, since it is one thing to support armed struggle in Cuba or Algeria, and quite another to do so in one's own country. Various collages in galleries 4 and 5, done in Paris, such as the series *Le Monde* (1979), *Volumes* (1980), *Les terroristes* (1980) and *Signes* (1981), dissect and criticise the gentrification of certain sectors on the left.

*We Want Everything*, as he explains in the prologue of the 2003 edition, aspires to be the history of Italy's working-class mass in the late 1960s, thus creating "a collective character who personifies the leading figure of the massive wave of struggles of those years"; a new typology of working-class individual who was non-specialised, mobile, from the south of the country, with no specific trade, with a new bond to the machine and the factory, and "who has no relation to the old communist tradition, with the classic organisational channels of the party and the union."<sup>7</sup> This worker's voice is constructed on the basis of various interviews, making it possible to weave together a story that goes into great detail on how the Fiat Mirafiori factory worked, along with all forms of autonomous struggle.

Nanni defended the idea that autonomy in worker's struggles was the key for future political activity, and that the technification of the factory gave workers greater free time. The idea of autonomy, such as taking advantage of techno-scientific advances in artistic creation, would bring Balestrini to create works that tend towards the fullest liberation of the work from authorship, by means of autonomous systems. In this sense, in

<sup>5</sup> Translated from the author's translation of the prologue of N. Balestrini, 2016, *El editor*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> See the central galleries of the exhibition, which bring together most of the articles

Balestrini saved on the Feltrinelli case.

<sup>7</sup> Translated from the author's translation of N. Balestrini, *Lo queremos todo*, Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2006.

the first gallery of the exhibition we find *Tape Mark I* (1961), the first poem conceived for computer, which combines text with an electronic calculator using three sources: *Hiroshima Diary*, by Michihiro Hachiya; *The Mystery of the Elevator*, by Paul Goldwin, and the *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tzu. In his first novel, *Tristano* (1966; English edition 2014), he again came to explore the possibilities provided by the electronic calculator (the prototype of the present-day computer) in recombining a single text so that two exact copies of the book might never be made. It was not until 2007, with digital printing and the software of Vittorio Pellegrineschi, that the book was able to be printed in the terms it was originally conceptualised. This entire process of automatization, autonomy and expansion of his artistic work culminated with the audio-visual piece he presented at documenta 13 in Kassel, which can now be seen in the final gallery of the La Virreina Centre de la Imatge exhibition: *Tristanoil* (2012). This computer-generated film recombines 139 separate clips in 10-minute episodes each, composing a hypothetically infinite piece which in Kassel began on 9 June 2012 and finished on 16 September of the same year: 100 days and some 2400 hours to denounce the destruction of the planet and the exhaustion of its natural resources by the late-capitalist system. Beneath a layer of shifting petroleum, and with Balestrini's voice reciting parts of his novel *Tristano*, the film autonomously combines images of natural disasters like the *Prestige*, explosions at nuclear power plants like Chernobyl, fields of oil refineries in Azerbaijan, the war in Sudan, tsunamis, rubbish dumps, Wall Street scenes from the financial crash of 2008, with fragments from the mythical series *Dallas* inserted for good measure. Based on the life of a family in the oil business in Texas, *Dallas* was the first great television series to be exported to dozens of countries during the Cold War, impregnating the homes of half the world with its neo-liberal model of life and success, like the oily sheen that soaks the entire Balestrini film.

The primary source material for his works was drawn from the vast heap of information and messages found around us, rearticulating it all in an ideological, poetical and formal sense. The vestigial remains of the information society, in Balestrini's

hands, are reframed, put to the stress test, exploited and hacked until their meanings are turned upside down, activating the violence that emerges between the origin of the collages' components and the meaning these recombinants take on. He shakes up conventional language through fracture; he restarts it, splits it in two, cuts off all negotiations and conversations, impeding the message as it was originally planned. He halts and disorders the sound and the story, giving them a labyrinthic quality that cannot be transited by the conventions of linguistics or genre. The continuity of the discourse, its regular development and functionality, is suspended. Balestrini renounces all presumed and imposed linearity for a text, reutilising the words and breaking open the meanings, not just to illustrate the related violence but creating a new form of it, a violence of its own: *La poesia fa male* [Poetry Hurts]. This would end up being the title used by Balestrini for two different works: a collage and a collection of satirical poems that distil his poetics, turning poetry into a whip made to lash away in the reader's brain. The collection of verses entitled *Intermezzo. La poesia fa male*, takes the nomenclature of the short comic operas that are performed in the intermissions of more "serious" operas, so as to defend poetry as a violent, dirty and disturbing game, distancing it from academic strictures and the terms of good taste:

*generations of hypocrites of masters of  
imbeciles of goody-goodies of pedagogues of  
paedophiles of cheats of candid stinking  
souls*

*have continually tried to  
inculcate an edifying pathetic  
tearful good-willed vision  
of a thing*

*which by nature is  
in opposition to what exists  
by means of the word*

*mortal and inexorable unseemly and  
confrontative shameless and  
corrosive poetry is  
the apocalypse of language*

...

*Poetry is an  
unending  
apocalypse*

*or is not*

*poetry is continuous explosion and  
continuous revolution and continuous  
rejection and continuous destruction  
of shit accumulated  
thanks to the criminal kindness of  
globalised homo economicus*

*poetry is spitting fiery  
and poisonous words into  
his dull eyes*

*poetry is the rain of blood and fire of  
piss that will drown the vile bastard  
race of the western white male  
with his bombs his banks his designer assholes*

...

*poetry  
really  
hurts  
shit yourselves  
the beast of the apocalypse has come<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> English translation of author's translation of the poem "La poesia fa malissimo", in N. Balestrini, *Caosmogonia e altro. Poesie complete volume terzo (1990-2017)*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2018.

## LA POESIA FA MALE

### Public programme

Under the revived title *La poesia fa male* [Poetry Hurts], and in line with Balestrini's invitation in the letter addressed to readers opening the poetry book *Blackout* ("Dear peaceful and unexpert reader, the pages you are about to read are an explicit and urgent invitation to violence"),<sup>9</sup> La Virreina Centre de la Imatge has invited ten poets with understanding of experimentation in image, music and words to graft into Balestrini's poetic and visual work. Four work sessions over the month of March will give way to a festival in May 2021, with performances, talks and recitals related to the figure of Nanni Balestrini.

### CELESTE ARAÚJO

Braga, 1979 is a researcher and film programmer. A member of the programming team of Xcèntric, the cinema of the CCCB, she is writing a doctoral thesis on Luigi Nono. She studied Social Communication at the Universidade do Minho and Advanced Studies in Philosophy at the University of Barcelona. She has worked as a journalist for *Público* (Portugal) and is the editor of *Blogs&Docs*, where she coordinated the section "Fugas". She has also published texts in *Musik im Metrum der Macht*, *Arte y políticas de identidad*, *Els Peus d'Ícar*, *Archivos de la Filmoteca de Valencia* and *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*, amongst others.

### MOHAMAD BITARI

Damascus, 1990 is a Palestinian poet, translator, journalist and playwright from Syria, and a political exile in Barcelona. He was born in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, where he went on to study Spanish Philology and Theatre. He has published in various Arab dailies, such as *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, *As-safir* and the online publication *UltraSawt*. He has done poetical and cultural translations from Spanish and Catalan to Arabic, including Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Miguel Hernández, Tomas Cohen and Miquel Martí i Pol. Bitari is the editor of the book of Syrian poetry *Jo sóc vosaltres. Sis poetes sirians* (Sodepau, Pol·len edicions and Godall Edicions, 2019).

### FRANCESC GELONCH

Juneda, 1974 is an art historian, writer, graphic designer and interdisciplinary artist. He has published the poetry book *La mandra no és un ocell* (LaBreu Edicions, 2016). As a playwright, with Teatre Kaddish he premiered the work *Casagemas*, directed by Xavier Giménez Casas, which was presented at the Museu Picasso of Barcelona in 2016. His works in experimental cinema have been seen in international festivals.

### LOLA NIETO

Barcelona, 1985 has a PhD in Spanish Philology from the

University of Barcelona. Together with Antonio F. Rodríguez and Laia López Manrique she coordinates the journal of artistic creation *Kokoro* and the publishing house Kokoro Libros. She has published *Alambres* (Kriller71, 2014), *Tuscumbia* (Harpo libros, 2016) and *Vozánica* (Harpo libros, 2018).

### ANNA PANTINAT

Barcelona, 1977 is a playwright and the author of poetry books such as *Construcció de la nit* (Fonoll, 2012), *De sobte, un estiu* (LaBreu, 2014) and *Qui no s'anomena* (Món de Llibres, 2018). She sings, plays keyboards and the theremin and is a member of the punk band Pentina't Lula. With Daniel Ardura she runs the music label Repetidor Disc.

### MÍRIAM REYES

Orense, 1974 is a poet, videocreator and translator. She experiments with audiovisual writing and multimedia recitals. She has published the poetry books *Espejo negro* (DVD, 2001), *Bella durmiente* (finalist of the XIX Hiperión Poetry Prize, Hiperión, 2004), *Desalojos* (Hiperión, 2008) *Yo, interior, cuerpo. Antología poética* (Argentina, 2013), *Haz lo que te digo* (Bartleby, 2015), *Prensado en frío* (Malasangre, 2016) and *Sardiña* (Chan da Pólvora, 2018).

### RAQUEL SANTANERA

Manlleu, 1991 is the author of three poetry collections: *Teología poética d'un sol ús* (Viena Edicions, 2015), *De robots i màquines o un nou tractat d'alquímia* (El Gall Editor,

2018) and *Reina de rates. Crònica d'una època* (Pagès Editors, 2021). She is one of the three programmers for the l'Hororiginal poetry series and the driving force behind Els Vespres Malgastats, in the region of Osona.

### ORIOL SAULEDA

Sant Pol de Mar, 1993 creates improvised poetry, without even trying to do so. He has references like the living word of Maragall or the happy new ears of Cage. He has published the odd book and CD. He does not search for paths: he makes them up, like everyone does.

### MARIA SEVILLA

Badalona, 1990 is the author of the poetry collections *Dents de polpa* (Adia Edicions, 2015), *Kalàixnikov* (Món de Llibres, 2017) and *Plastilina* (Fonoll, 2021), as well as the plaque *if true: false, else: true* (Fonoll, 2020). She is writing a doctoral thesis on the novel *La passió segons Renée Vivien*, by Maria-Mercè Marçal. Her poems have been translated into Spanish, English, Turkish and Croatian. Since 2019 she has been one of the three programmers of l'Hororiginal.

### MARIANA SPADA

Concepción del Uruguay, Argentina, 1979 has published *Ley de conservación* (Gog and Magog, 2019). She has lived and worked in Barcelona since 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Translation of the author's translation of N. Balestrini, *Blackout*, Madrid: Ediciones Acuarela, 2006.

**Curator: Valentín Roma**

DL B 4733-2021

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**Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday  
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Free entry**



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