

## **Tomaso Binga: A Silenced Victory**

Daria Khan

*Night-time procession. Their mouths modulate sounds echoing primitive modes of communication, they stick tight together, they hold on to each other, they lift up their torches. [...]*

*...traversing our own condition as sign, standing up to the provocation from the roadside, from 'outside', means going collectively and politically towards the tunnel of regression. Being with other women and experiencing again the condition of seclusion, the intimacy which blinds and divides, the impossible communication of contact. [...]*

*...penetrating by an act of will the aphasia which tries to seek compensation with the language of the body. Regression, as a positive value, is what the women's movement is introducing into the political universe.<sup>1</sup>*

This abstract from 'The Nurse's Language,' written in 1978 by Elisabetta Rasy,<sup>2</sup> provides an entry point for understanding the work of Tomaso Binga and the sociopolitical context of 1970s Italy. The text describes one of the first feminist demonstrations which took place in Rome in 1977 around the central train station Termini. The demonstration was symptomatic of the realisation that women in Italy were politically invisible and mute. At this decisive moment, women began to learn to act in public spaces, to raise their voices and to speak.

Aphasia – an inability to speak – and the search for new modes of expression, have been subjects of Tomaso Binga's work since the early 1970s. Using language and writing as her artistic tools, and working across a variety of mediums including poetry, performance, collage and installation, Binga aimed to draw attention to the marginalised position of women during this era, through a prism of empathy and humour.

Her pioneering work emerges from the backdrop of the 1970s, a decade characterised by the sociopolitical determination of various groups, including the second wave feminists. This movement erupted in postwar Italy, in response to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and the increasing mystification and

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabetta Rasy, 'An Interpretation: marching in the night,' (1978), in *Italian Feminist Thought. A Reader*, ed. Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Rasy, *La lingua della nutrice. Percorsi e tracce dell'espressione femminile* (Rome: Edizioni delle Donne, 1978)

idealisation of motherhood by the Catholic church. The Italian feminist uprising insisted on reconsidering women as political subjects, reclaiming women's right to self-determination, and autonomy over their body, work and sexuality.

Although the movement had a profound impact on the political consciousness and identity of Italian women, its legacy has remained elusive. Italian writer Lea Melandri characterised the movement as a 'revolution without memory.'<sup>3</sup> Her words are echoed in the closing line of Binga's landmark acrostic poem of 1976, declaring: 'Una Vittoria Zittita' (A Silenced Victory).

Bianca Pucciarelli Menna adopted her male name Tomaso Binga in the early 1970s as an ironical act aimed at challenging and appropriating male privilege. Taking the first name Tomaso was a witty gesture, part in homage to the leader of Italian Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944). Binga had been fascinated by the futurist poet since she was a child, but she was aware, too, of his fascist leanings and blatant misogyny. In appropriating his name, she removed the central 'm' from 'Tommaso', so as to undermine what she considered to be the word's masculine character. By weakening the central double 'm', Binga destabilised the sound and visual core of the word. This act represents renunciation of the master's tradition in order to establish one's own rules, and it underscores and anticipates Binga's artistic mission to shift the patriarchal structure of language.

Her chosen surname 'Binga' was a distorted spelling of an infantile pronunciation of her real first name, Bianca. In its new version, the name obtained a rigid and vocal 'g' at its centre, instead of the tender and muffled 'nc'.

Tomaso Binga is one of the leading figures of the verbo-visual poetry movement of the 1970s, in turn influenced by the concrete poetry of Italian Futurism. Binga moved beyond the formalism of visual and sound compositions by creating poems alive with irony, humour and political concern.

Binga performs and recites her verbo-visual poetry in a gestural, humorous and sometimes exaggerated articulation – chanting and shouting in an escalating manner that tests the expressiveness and effectiveness of each text. Voice and speech are crucial and constructive elements of Binga's work. In her poetry, the voice takes on a visual shape, its intensity expressed in the dilated forms and bold letters of her writing, or as emotions woven into the repetition of lines and in the distortion of orthography and syntax. By playing with subtle slippages of meanings, and by mutating the structure of letters and the architectonics of words, Binga widens the variety of interpretations and potentialities of language. Words dilate and swell as if searching for better ways to express their meaning, or else to lose their predetermined meaning so as to acquire new mental and sensorial dimensions.

Binga persistently exposes the rigidly ascribed gender binaries and the sexist nature of language in which the feminine is conceived exclusively in relation to the

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<sup>3</sup> Lea Melandri, 'Una rivoluzione senza memoria', in *Liberazione*, (8 March 1997).

masculine. She experiments with the possibility of reformulating language, filling it with feminine presence and agency.

In 1976 Tomaso Binga began work on a series of alphabets, in which she mimicked the shape of letters with her own naked body (*Alphabetiere Murale*, 1976). Hands, arms, legs and feet become essential elements in formulating language, which is materialised and embodied by the female form. Binga produced numerous alphabets: those in which each letter of the alphabet corresponds to a different plant (*Alphabeto Officinale*, 1981), or alphabets in which the artist's naked body, posturing as different letters, interrupts illustrations in children's ABC books (*Alphabetiere Pop*, 1976).

The alphabet works shown at Mimosa House come from the recent series *Alphabeto Proverbiale* (2009). For each letter, Binga combines a colourful image from an ABC book with a phrase in which every word begins with the corresponding letter: 'A for Ape' (Bee) – 'Arte e Armonia' (Art and Harmony); 'B for Barca' (Boat) – 'Basta Bugie' (Enough Lies); 'C for Cane' (Dog) – 'Cantare non Contare' (Sing not Count); and 'D for Dado' (Cube) – 'Dare non Dire' (Give not Say). The letters invade and threaten the images; each phrase reads as a succinct political manifesto. Binga illustrates the potency of language and the versatility of meaning itself.

In 1972 Binga started to use 'asemantic' writing (*Scrittura Desemantizzata*), an automatic, illegible writing, which the artist identified as 'subliminal and silent' and as 'a living being, which proliferates like cells invading the environment.'<sup>4</sup> The process of asemantic writing became a tool to liberate oneself from the heaviness of imposed linguistic meanings and rules. Writing became an act of cancellation of language itself.

Asemantic writing is embedded into Mimosa House's first floor installation *Carta da Parato* (Wallpaper), a recreation of an immersive installation from 1976, originally made for Casa Malangone in Rome. Binga describes the difficulty of finding a person willing to offer their house for the project, but eventually someone agreed. She can only guess why: 'either because they loved art, or because they hated their landlord.'<sup>5</sup> By coating the walls with the free and fluid lines of asemantic writing, Binga acknowledged the invisible and muted presence of women confined to domestic spaces, signalling at once their aphasia and their creative potential.

In her 1978 version of the wallpaper installation at Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna in Bologna, Binga activated the wallpapered environment with a performance. She wore a dress made of the same wallpaper and read her poem 'IO sono una carta' (I am a piece of paper). By dissolving herself into the

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<sup>4</sup> Tomaso Binga, 'Il mio nome maschile', in *il Corpo della scrittura*, ed. Gino Dorflès, Elverio Maurizi and Tomaso Binga (Macerata, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Binga's description of the work from 1970, unpublished.

environment and creating a tableau vivant, Binga asserts – ironically, unapologetically – her own presence in the room:

i **Am A Piece** of plain **PaPer**  
i **Am A Piece** of stamped **PaPer**  
i **Am A Piece** of packing **PaPer**  
i **Am A Piece** of writing **PaPer**  
i **Am A Piece** of wall **PaPer**

i **Am A Piece** of p**A**Per  
i **Am A Piece** of p**A**Perbo**Ard**  
    **A Piece** of c**Ard**bo**Ard**

**A...cArtriDge**  
**And must be... fiiiiiiired !!**

**BOOM...!#6**

In 1977 Tomaso Binga created one of her most significant works to date, one that synthesised her creative and political intentions. She invited friends and relatives to a wedding: 'Bianca Menna e Tomaso Binga Oggi Spose' (Bianca Menna and Tomaso Binga Brides Today), the invitation announced. Guests joined the artist at Campo D gallery in central Rome for a ceremony of marriage between the artist's two selves – 'Io e Io' (I and I) – the civil 'I' of Bianca Menna and the linguistic 'I' of Tomaso Binga. The exhibition celebrated the seven year relationship of Menna and Binga by showing two photographs of the newly wedded; arriving guests contributed greeting cards, telegrams and small gifts to the display. The artist appeared in androgynous attire, wearing a white embroidered shirt, bell-bottom trousers, and slicking back her hair.

Binga's two identities are methodically split in a photographic diptych hanging on the wall on the first floor of Mimosa House. The photograph on the left features Tomaso Binga in a suave suit and large glasses, surrounded by signs of intellectual labour: a desk and typewriter nearby, and white sheets of paper in hand evoking a creation to come. Blissfully isolated from reality, as represented by an abstract background, this tongue-in-cheek depiction caricatures male creative genius, as represented by Tommaso Marinetti and other art patriarchs of the 20th century. The photograph on the right, meanwhile, features an original photo from Bianca Menna's own wedding in 1959. The bride is surrounded by all the accessories of a respectable ceremony: a white car, a white dress and a white bouquet of flowers. The bride tenderly, almost timidly, glances at the viewer, proclaiming her devotion to Tomaso, her life partner, and her commitment to art itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by Jacopo Bengi

The white bridal objects also allude to the artist's name Bianca, which translates to 'white' in the Italian, a significance which Binga addresses in one of her poems:

name Bianca white  
white is an adjective  
adjective used as noun  
as noun in the abstract  
white white white  
colourless flavourless odourless<sup>7</sup>

Wordplay is pervasive in Binga's work. The word 'Spouse' in the work's title has been given a feminine ending, instead of the conventional masculine spelling 'Sposi', a way to emphasise the feminine in both the artist's identities. This slight linguistic adjustment opens up a political dimension, a queering of grammar that transcends the surface of paper with material and social urgency.

In the early 1970s, Binga made works from polystyrene; *Angel* (1971) included in Mimosa House's display, is the first artwork she ever made. Binga was fascinated by how the empty boxes were shaped by their former contents. The polystyrene container which makes up *Angel* is lined with an image of a woman dressed in white, torn from a fashion magazine. Binga cut the image into fragments, a dissection inspired by the Futurists' attempt to grasp the unfolding of movement and the fragmented, panoptical reality of the modern world. Using similar methods, Binga's polystyrenes explore the condition of women, the destruction of nature and the rise of a consumerist society.

In Binga's polystyrene works, the relation between cavity and image becomes an exercise in communication and relation: in some cases the images inside try to escape the visual field of the viewer; in others, they are there to fill the voids with their presence.

In later polystyrene works, the artist engaged in semiotical play, adding letters to the images, which act simultaneously as contents and as containers. In the 1972 work 'Silence', the title word is obsessively repeated, as if in an attempt to overcome its meaning through the act of repetition.

*Angel* is a precursor of an artistic practice that would develop over the next few decades into the full-bodied, blaring, uninhibited potency of poems like *Lilith* (1978). Described in Biblical apocrypha as the first wife of Adam and as a night daemon, Binga's Lilith becomes a symbol of female ubiquity and freedom:

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<sup>7</sup> Tomaso Binga, *Radio Taxi Story ovvero AUTO BIOGRAFIA*, 1987. Translated by Berenice Cocciolillo and Andrea Casson

I am li li li li li  
I am Li lith  
I am coeval  
and not with Eve  
Adam to love and lure  
I pass clay ey  
arte fact  
airy breath  
I am earth air fire

( crazed/earth ) ( stagnant/air ) ( caged/fire )  
) ) ) ) ) NOOOOOOOOOO ( ( ( ( (

in the woods above  
the sea inside  
the sky  
I live living  
**I Am**  
li li li li li  
**I Am**  
li berty  
**I Am**  
Lilith<sup>8</sup>

Binga understands language to be the dominant system of patriarchal oppression. By reinventing language as a performative, bodily and political entity, she turns language against itself, exposing its inadequacy. By queering the semiotic system of language, she attempts to liberate words from their conventional and gendered means of expression. Her poetry – at once acute, irreverent and sardonic – is imbued with female agency and rebellion.

In her most recent works – such as the poem *Utero in affitto* (Uterus for rent, 2016) and a series of works of paper, *Vengo da te solo per un tè* (I come to you just for tea, 2018), both included in Mimosa House’s show – Binga continues to confront the abuse of women and their political vulnerability. Her oeuvre, which she has produced over 50 years, asks us to revisit both the achievements and shortcomings of 1970s feminism, as Binga urges us to continue to resist ‘not only with our voices and with poetry, but with our whole body becoming word.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by Berenice Cocciolillo and Andrea Casson

<sup>9</sup> Tomaso Binga, interview (2019), my translation

The text is written on the occasion of the solo exhibition, 'Tomaso Binga: A Silenced Victory' at Mimosa House (September to December 2019) curated by Daria Khan.