

Silent letters

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The act of inscription always involves a certain blindness. A kind of invisibility that lies between the first instance of thought or experience, and the subsequent marking of it as documentation. This is the silent, unseen space, as Verne Harris reminds us, where memory works and invents.¹ It is in these unseen, unspoken acts of remembering and imagining, that the event is in fact, shaped.

When I first received contact about the lettera27 project – now almost four years ago – I was intrigued by the proposal of a missing letter: the idea of an absent supplement to the usual 26 A-Z alphabet. What would that supplement look like?

What words would begin and end with that letter?

Would it be a silent letter?

Like the “h” in “white” or the “w” in “answer”?

White is not actually a colour. And answers require firstly, a question.

The idea of the supplement implies that there is a lack, a need for support. A supplement must be introduced because it completes, or facilitates something else, but should remain secondary: invisible.

The acts of tracing, marking – and with it the game of recording/erasing – are very much part of the same story of an imaginary alphabetical supplement. What is it that an extra alphabetical letter, the blank page of a notebook, the offhand sketch by an artist, the embryonic idea, and the lettera27 project built on virtual correspondence (email, disembodied skype and PDF attachments) hold in common? It is their invitation of an invisible support structure.

The work of support structures, according to Céline Condorelli, ‘invites us to rethink our relative positions in the world’.² The structures which provide support are often peripheral – like a silent consonant or the trace of an erased pencilled line. And yet ultimately, these structures exert an essential force upon another thing: be it artistic, historical, architectural in nature. The affirmative role of this kind of “scaffolding” is underrated in that we tend to separate its importance from the final product.³ We do this, apparently, to maintain the distinction of the autonomous, freestanding object. We seem unwilling to admit that the vulnerability, nay, the paradox of support

¹ Harris, V. 2002. “A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive,” in *Refiguring the Archive* (Springer: Johannesburg) p 73.

² Condorelli, C. 2009. *Support Structures* (Sternberg: Berlin) p 12.

³ Mark Cousins elaborates on this in Condorelli, p 21.

structure is that despite its character as temporary or fragile or invisible, it in fact reveals the implicated interdependency of the supported and the supporter.

The notebooks presented here by lettera27 are in that sense affirmative actions towards a kind of archive. And I want to think about “archive” here not as something static, with a capital A, just as I want to move away from thinking about Africa as something essentialised. Yes we know from the famous Trinidadian writer VS Naipaul that ‘the African soul is a blank slate on which anything can be written, onto which any fantasy can be transposed.’⁴ But what if we were to embrace this blankness and transposability within the context of our discussion on invisible support?

The episteme of contemporary artistic practice (both local and international practice) in this part of the world (read: *africa*) has been largely underwritten and unseen due to actively repressive structures in the past, and the lack of more supportive circuits in the present (the digital divide being only one of these). The economy of visibility – whether this be via archives, in exhibitions, in art collections – is precarious and the few who are then transposed onto the “blank slate” described by VS Naipaul, often play first the role of cultural broker or overexposed national representative, and secondly, artist. This is a well-worn argument. But it persists.

There must be a third way possible: a way to supplement obscurity (the silent letter in the alphabet) without pandering to the market structures built around the exotic or the especial. We are in need of support structures built to produce blindness so that we begin seeing art history from the point of ignorance – what we don’t know. Reimagining, reshaping, because of the mediate blank space of forgetting and transposing.

Thomas de Quincey described a certain missing element in the process of creative thinking as ‘*discurrendo*’. Here ‘by running about to the right and the left, laying the separate notices together,’ one could ‘thence mediate derive some third apprehension.’⁵ That third apprehension – which takes into consideration the support, the unrepresented, the fragile – is only possible at the cross section of parchments. The silent letter is only heard within the context of the word around it. You don’t hear the “b” in “debt” and in “doubt”.

These artists’ notebooks, presented by lettera27, are the kinds of fragile archives which expose that third invisible apprehension: the trace, the erasure, the blank space – the contingencies and “*discurrendo*” supplementing creative practice anywhere (not only here). These are the silent letters: missives, addressed to a world of relative positions. They inscribe the unseen scaffolding of interdependence.

⁴ VS Naipal, 1980.

⁵ Thomas de Quincey cited by Paul Carter in his *Material Thinking: the theory and practice of creative research* (Melbourne University Publishing: Carlton, 2004) p 5.