

To use words like a spoon

Francesca Astesani

Dear Marie,

I take up your invitation to add words to a string of conversations you had with fellow artists Frederik Worm and Cally Spooner, which shaped the meta-textual spine of your solo show *The Falling* at Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. The exhibition, which was just one of the manifestations of a project that expanded in space and time, took place between October 2021 and March 2022, and I have been one of the last ones to enter its spaces, just like these sentences curl around the tail of the project's incarnations. I have not directly been part of the conversations that moulded the project from within, yet they were echoed in the exchanges I have, in turn, had with you. Within the dialogic structure underpinning *The Falling*, my words cannot entirely be mine (if they ever can be) and before they are even written, they reverberate with the significance your discussions have assigned to each specific creative process. Not least, making room for my own distortion, they reflect the gravitational pull created by the works' distinctly combined body.

I have entered the metaphorical (and actual) space of conjunction between these individual artistic practices following your trail, starting with a visit to the southern Swiss town of Giornico, where you and Frederik had been twice to visit *La Congiunta*, the museum that architect Peter Märkli built in 1992 to host 33 bronze sculptures by his lifelong friend and collaborator Hans Josephsohn. On that same day, we convened for dinner at an Italian restaurant in St. Gallen, where we all travelled to attend the closing weekend of your exhibition. Over supper, we talked about the museum's name. You and Frederik had assumed that it simply meant a 'joint'. Like an elbow, or a knee. Yet to an Italian native-speaker like myself, the name sounds curious and nearly untranslatable. Despite the intuitive connotation you picked up, to me *La Congiunta* is an ambiguous form which appears grammatically unusual - if not entirely wrong - when denoting a building.

On the one hand, the article 'la' suggests that the word it precedes should be read as noun. 'Congiunta', in that form, means 'female relative' - which would make a charming name for a museum, although admittedly a little bizarre. On the other hand, one could read 'congiunta' as an adjective, meaning 'joined together, united'. Yet the word's position following the article suggests reading 'congiunta' as an adjectival noun; or as a *thing* which is 'joined together'. In both instances, the name suggests a sense of intimacy, something which is reflected in the museum's system of leaving its visitors in charge of opening its door themselves, with a small key collected at the local bar.

Following the first pandemic lockdown in Italy, the word 'congiunto' suddenly became the object of emotional debates when, during a mild loosening of strict isolation rules, it was used by the government to define the type of encounters permitted by law. After weeks of home confinement, Italians understandably lost the plot over the word's meaning. If strictly interpreted, it meant that it was only visits to relatives that were allowed, no matter how distant in blood relations. After the announcement, a shower of memes flushed social media, and hundreds of articles were written in incredulity. As a result, the government had to concede that 'stable partners' were also types of 'congiunti', effectively changing the word's meaning by thinning blood with affective bonds. This meagre concession turned a blind eye to the value of erotic, non-stable partnerships on the one hand, and of stable, non-sexual relations such as friendship, on the other.

Besides celebrating Hans Josephsohn's work in the shape of a brilliant meeting between art and architecture, *La Congiunta* is a physical testimony of what friendship can be, and, perhaps more importantly, do. The museum offers a model for a definition of a kind of affective solidarity where two or more thinking bodies and objects become 'with' each other, enriching each other's manifestations without erasing their original individuality. Joined - but not fused, so to speak. A similar dynamic is explored in the solo exhibition you went onto in St. Gallen, more than a year after your first visit to Giornico. I see the show as a linchpin through your work, where layers of spoken words, movements and objects have manifested in a period that spilled out of both ends of its opening and closing dates.

The Falling encompassed the works of other artists, with the clear agenda of not muddling each other's artistic premises. It unfolded as a process, and created the grounds to accommodate your works side by side with a performance by Cally Spooner, two photographs by Frederik Worm, and a sculpture by the late Hans Josephsohn. The different pieces were going to be connected in a way that conceptually resembles what Franco Berardi defines a 'conjunctive concatenation': a creative act composed of a series of 'and, and, and...', which does not have to respond to a pre-conceived pattern or embedded program. A 'conjunctive concatenation is [a] source of singularity' writes Berardi, 'it is event, not structure, and it is unrepeatable because it happens in a unique point in the net of space and time'. Such conjunctive methodology is based on the creative principle of non-necessary conjunctions, and has a character of synchronicity bound to a specific time and array of associations. The works come to exist together in a combined picture, bound to the show's specific conditions, each ready to be released and re-imagined in different circumstances.

This focus on types of connectivity, which forms the show's extended methodological frame, clearly materialises in two sets of sculptures shaped as connectors. The first two, titled *The Stretch* (2021), are placed outdoors and are formed as enlarged **mechanical springs**. The second group is *Plies* (2021), composed of five glass enamelled copper sculptures, shaped from sections of shoehorns. Both works find their material premise in objects that facilitate encounters between two parts. Furthermore, in the case of *Plies*, another confluence plays out on the objects' surface. In the enamel production process, copper and glass become inseparably joined through firing and remain together, though distinctively separate, when they cool off.

In his analysis of how builders' thought-processes influence construction, Tom F. Peters marks a distinction between joints and connections. In their verbal form, in English, they are synonyms, but as nouns they express a difference: while connection establishes a continuity of function, a joint describes its discontinuity. He writes: 'the joints in our bodies are an example that combines both words: they connect our limbs, but at the same time they permit movement too. Therefore, some aspects of our joints are connections, namely where the function is continuous: "the thighbone is connected to the hip bone", as the song goes. Yes, it is joined together in the sense that it is connected, but that does not characterise the joint: movement does!

This brings me back to our conversation over the meaning of 'congiunta'. Peters' description of our bodily joints, discontinuous according to structure and continuous according to movement, sheds new light on your intuitive reading of the word. As I flip through the pages of the book you and Frederik made together as yet another manifestation of *The Falling*, the crucial role that motion plays throughout the project assumes a new clarity. Undoubtedly, the title itself is suggestive of movement. A stumbling perhaps, or, as I always liked to read it, a feeling of indulging in the laws of gravity. Yet the book realises this proposition in its own way, by incorporating movement not as its object, but as its expression. Part exhibition catalogue, part artist book, the publication collects a selection of photographs Frederik took of the display, insisting on subjectivity and proximity, rather than objectivity and overview. The choice of

allowing a certain repetitiveness amongst the images, combined with the design structure, invites me to look through it like an old-school animated book. Flipping through the pages, the sculptures are set in motion and, as the exhibition acquires an almost filmic quality, the essentially performative nature of *The Falling* emerges with great clarity.

Movement also features diagonally in my own interpretation of *La Congiunta*. Not entirely a noun or an adjective, it is at once an object and its description. This hybrid status between something 'which is' and the definition of a 'quality of being' sets something in motion, a form of elasticity between the stability of the object, the thing as such, and the changeable possibilities of its ways of being. A similar tension was inhabited by the copper pieces that belong to the series *Sills* (2021). The four sculptures are equally the object and the movement that creates it again and again. The thin shells were, in fact, made initially as hand-bent shapes, yet their form is also the result of the interaction between their hanging system, made of straps and metal hooks, and the pull of gravity. The resulting, relatively unstable forms inhabit the tension between the opposite movements of pushing away and holding close. The same paradoxical position is conveyed by the instructions underlying Cally Spooner's performance, *An Exchangeable Solo Built from the Knowledge of Two Non-Exchangeable Groups* (2016/21), in which Magdalyne Segale performed the conflicting instruction of being 'intimately bound and violently separate'.

The piece, originally performed by a group of dancers, had gone through a process of translation into a solo choreography and, in the absence of other performers, the museum's walls, floor and columns became the 'other' body to push and embrace. In the same hall, the four copper sculptures, installed both high on the walls and closer to the floor, framed this space in a dynamic outline, holding the presence of the performance in the subtle traces that Magdalyne's body left on the building. As you wrote in the artist's text that accompanied the show, the sculptures are both shapes and gestures: folds folding, bends bending – to which I add: hosts hosting.

The dynamic between the different positions of being a host and a guest is one of the meta-narratives explored throughout the whole project. While friendship, in its most positive form, can be considered an affective alliance between equals, where states of antagonism are confined to the outskirts of a 'meeting of affinities', the relation between hosts and guests can play out on an asymmetric terrain. They both have obligations towards each other, although these are marked by subtle power disparities. Simply put, the host opens up a space, while setting the basic rules for the guest who enters it. The guest can, in turn, negotiate those rules, but only within limits before becoming unwelcome.

This relationship is, however, foundational in two ways, since host and guest each need each other to fulfil the nature of their role. In my mother tongue, these two different positions are surprisingly expressed by the same word: 'ospite'. This absence of vocabulary can be interpreted as a sign of the intrinsically reciprocal nature of duties across the threshold of hospitality. If a host is someone who opens up a space, what happens when the roles collapse and both become 'ospiti'? For instance, how has Hans Josephsohn's bronze sculpture *Untitled* (1990) 'operated' in the outdoor area you made available to it? The late sculptor's work was invited into your show with the curious task of 'making room' for your sculptures in a semi-forgotten stretch outside the museum. Josephsohn's piece, through its volume and vertical presence, was the space-opener for your work, becoming at once your guest, and your host. A true ospite!

I imagine that this labour of pushing open a field, of making room, might share some of the delimiting, enclosing attributes of parentheses placed around a text. I think of a famous literary host, Clarissa Dalloway, and of the parenthetical devices that Virginia Woolf used in the novel to shift narrative viewpoints; building a multi-personal yet individuated stream of consciousness. Throughout the text,

the profuse use of parenthesis allowed Woolf to create a sense of simultaneity, blurring the boundaries between sources of consciousness without erasing the distinctive character of each perspective. The parenthetical device's potential for building a synchronic flow of individual spaces within verbal expressions correlates, in *The Falling*'s artistic strategy, with the conjunctive concatenation mentioned above. Together, they keep things both separate and joined in a set of connections open to possible future additions and re-interpretations.

Parenthesis, in English also beautifully called 'lunulae' after their half-moon shape, are commonly called 'round brackets'. 'Brackets', in contrast to their function as linguistic signs that primarily separate sections of text from the main syntactic construction, are also used in building as devices designed to connect two structural elements, supporting a vertical load or strengthening an angle. Even simple brackets, such as L-shaped ones, hold the complex tension of keeping things together without letting them collapse onto each other. Not surprisingly, on a formal level, brackets are functional elements your practice dedicates consistent attention to. *The Falling* is no exception: the two sculptures *The Stretch* (2021) are formally composed as enlarged brackets; in *Plies* (2021), the shell-like pieces are attached to the pillars via bronze supports tightened around a thick slab of silicone rubber, which prevents them from sliding down the columns. The hanging devices, as was the case for *Sills* (2021), are here a constitutional element of the sculptural object.

In the last room of the exhibition, as I was ready to leave after observing the enamelled pieces and their fixtures, two photographs by Frederik Worm came surprisingly into my field of vision. Because of their placement, the pictures are most likely noticed last, as one's attention is directed first to the five sculptures hanging centrally in the space. Although mounted together, they still appear modest in size and depict, almost distractedly, two mundane moments: one an image of a young woman brushing her teeth lying on a bed, side by side with another image of a window covered by a semi-transparent curtain. The encounter with these pictures turned the exhibition on its head, just as I turned on my feet to leave it. The prosaic intimacy of these images suddenly reshuffled the show's formalistic character, its composed presence and overall coherence. They both depict a threshold of a sort - if we allow ourselves to consider tooth-brushing as a gesture that frames our daily activities, marking a passage between day and night, and vice versa. The photographs' perplexing presence built a sill for the exhibition, a base for an imaginary threshold so thin it is easy to overlook and trip over. This surprising moment flipped my perspective as the museum's architecture, the works, and their words staggered around me in the uncomposed manner that accompanies a fall.

Stumbling is usually a quick affair; by the time we realise we're falling, we are likely already on the ground. *The Falling*, however, decelerates this precipitousness. Here, the determinate article is not connected to a noun, but to a verbal form that indicates a continuous action or an adjective. This formulation, not dissimilar from *La Congiunta*, expands the metaphoric space of a fall, putting brakes on it so that it can unfold in slow motion. Instead of finding ourselves face-down, wondering what had just happened, *The Falling* contrasts the hastiness of gravity. It sketches an image where things float downwards rather than falling sharply, rearranging themselves around each other, shifting perspectives and relations as they move. Ultimately, I have come to see it as a complex yet alluring invitation to find the space for a reflective position within an involuntary movement.

Francesca Astesani, 2022

Written in response to the exhibition *The Falling* by Marie Lund, with works by Hans Josephsohn, Cally Spooner and Frederik Worm, at Kunstmuseum St Gallen, 2021-22