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Table of Contents

Gabriele Biotti – <i>Editorial Note - Visual History</i>	3
Florian Brody – <i>The Digital Penumbra of Memory</i>	8

Maria Duarte Furtado Marques and Elena Stanciu – <i>Horrors of History and Colonial Imaginaries. The Construction and Representation of Black Embodiment in Them (2021)</i>	26
Louise Francezon – <i>(Re)building Women’s War Memory in Biographical Cinema: the Case of Female Spies’ Films in Post-war Britain</i>	51
Elisa Oliver and Jonathan Whitehall – <i>‘The Past Dreams the Future Present’: Dream as Political Visual Historiography in the work of Artist and Film Maker Derek Jarman</i>	72
Steve Ostovich – <i>Visualizing Historical Trauma in Claude Lanzmann’s ‘Shoah’ (1985)</i>	89
Stefania Guglielmo, Tiziana Lentini and Barbara Priolo – <i>Contemporary Migrations Between Cinematographic Representation and Historical Reconstruction: the Cases of ‘Human Flow’ (2017) and ‘Fuocoammare’ (2016)</i>	105
Edoardo Rugo – <i>Representation and Dismissal of the Past in Pasolini’s Cinema</i>	124
Aurélia Gafsi – <i>Representing the Last Military Dictatorship in Argentina: The Example of the Graphic Novel ‘ESMA’ (Juan Carrá, Iñaki Echeverría)</i>	140
Ewa Grajber – <i>Representations of the Past in Visual Form as a Tool in Educational Process. An Example of History of Spain Till XIX Century</i>	165
Antonella Sbrilli – <i>A Wall of Dates: How a Work of Art Can Make the 20th Century Readable, Audible and Traversable</i>	182
Tiziana Lentini – <i>Life Narration and Storytelling</i>	196
Chiara Corazza – <i>‘The Eternal Paradox of History’: An Analysis of W.E.B. Du Bois’s Autobiographical and Fictional Writings</i>	199
Wolfgang Büchel – <i>The Biographical Darkness. On the Fragmentation of Life Narratives</i>	210

A Wall of Dates: How a Work of Art Can Make the 20th Century Readable, Audible and Traversable

Antonella Sbrilli

Those Registry files were connected to real fates

Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (2012)

It Was Me

“August 2nd. Bologna. Bomb attack at the main railway station. A bomb with 20 kg of explosives hidden in a suitcase goes off. 85 people die, more than 200 are severely wounded. I survive”. Those familiar with the history of Italy recognise that this phrase refers to one of the most severe attacks during the so-called “strategy of tension”: the terrorist bombing of the Bologna Centrale railway station on the morning of 2 August 1980. The phrase seems taken from a diary of someone deeply and personally involved in the tragic event, but it actually comes from an artwork, a monumental and at the same time impalpable work, entitled *Ich war's. Tagebuch 1900-1999 (It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999)*. As stated by the title, the work effectively presents itself in the form of a diary, but it is a particular diary that spans the entire twentieth century, concentrating a selection of epochal events in a virtual leap year of 366 days; the dates and the entries are recorded one after the other, from January to December, as if all the facts had happened, in different years, to the imaginary author, who appears sometimes as a responsible, sometimes as a victim, sometimes as an active, sometimes as a passive party (Fig. 1).

The dates are reported in the format month day (January 1st, January 2nd...), without reference to the years in which the events occurred. “While the life events of 366 days are told in chronological order, the sequence of historical events is broken” (Misiano 2019: 18): for this reason, the work is accompanied by a chronology that allows to individuate at which year the sequence month-day refers. Moreover, since only the year appears in the chronology, without further explanation, it is up to the visitor to reconstruct the protagonists and the context of the event, looking for information in sources. This is an important feature of this work, that involves people to actively participate in the

reconstruction of a century of history, condensed into one year. The Italian Berlin-based artist Daniela Comani realized it from 2002 in various audio and textual versions: it can be listened to like a radio chronicle lasting one hour, in various languages, including German, in which the work was originally conceived; it can be read by leafing through a book, with a different layout from language to language; it can be looked at, printed on canvas and mounted on a large panel, like a wall of dates and words, of varying dimensions depending on the location.

A version of 3x6 meters printed in net vinyl is preserved in the permanent collections of Bologna's Mambo Museum; other versions have been presented in 2011 at the 54th Venice Biennale for the San Marino Pavilion, and in other significant venues in Europe and Asia: Paris, Budapest, Moscow, Hong Kong, sometimes in relation with anniversaries of historical events connected with the places of exhibition. The quote at the beginning, for example, was chosen in 2012 for the official manifesto that commemorated the 32nd anniversary of the Bologna bombing: printed in Italian as an epigraph on a grey background, the phrase lists a series of the data, including how much explosive, how many dead, how many injured, closing with the bare statement "I survive" ("Io sopravvivo").¹ In the juxtaposition between the terrifying information and the final use of the first person lies one of the peculiarities of this work and its impact, that transports the history in a personal, intimate dimension: "It is history read through the filter of the self" (Madesani, 2006: 5) (Fig. 2).

Another excerpt from Comani's wall of dates can illustrate this mechanism: "*January 2nd. Berlin. I was able to look into my Stasi files*". Searching within the chronology, one finds that this entry refers to the year 1992, when the archives of the GDR security service were opened. Like one of the characters in the film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), the anonymous subject saying this sentence can learn about the controls to which his/her daily life has been subjected and the records of the events that concern him or her. There is another major aspect of *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999* in fact to be mentioned: all the events reported, wars, attacks, edited books, suicides, treaties, discoveries and so on are told by the author in the female first person, immediately perceptible in Italian already from the title *Sono stata io*. "Gender assumptions get flipped" in Daniela Comani's universe (Knight, 2015), as observed by the Los Angeles Times' art critic Christopher Knight, referring to a corpus of works – *Daniela Comani's Top 100 Films, My Film History* – where the titles of great classics switch from male to female and vice versa. Among them are *The Godmother*, *Rocco e le sue sorelle* (*Rocco and Her Sisters*), *Catman*, *All the President's Women*, where Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford become Carla Bernstein and Roberta Woodward, with a touch of lipstick added on their lips in the retouched poster of the movie. The artist hijacks the titles and the illustrations on the covers of famous masterpieces of world

literature, too, in another series of works: *New Publications Edited by Daniela Comani*, where *The Old Woman and the Sea*, *La petite princesse*, *Le promesse sponse (The Betrothed Brides)*, *Mr Dalloway* and *Monsieur Bovary*. These appear together on the shelves of a library that applies and disseminates Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* narrative invention of gender change. While these conceptual and visual manipulations take place on fictional works and on their characters, *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999* deals with historical documented facts of the 20th Century, reported by a female narrative voice who takes charge of each, as a leader, a decision maker or an anonymous survivor, a passerby. "The dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular, between the impersonal and the personal are characteristic of any narrative. People tell their life stories, which in their turn reflect their era" Viktor Misiano asserts, adding that "At the same time, when people are talking about their era, they inevitably draw on their personal experience. Unlike most narratives in which this background is hidden, the structure of Comani's piece *per se* makes it clearly visible" (Misiano, 2020: 19). Reflections about the main issues of individual, public, private, personal, impersonal, singular and collective are triggered via a visual artwork that uses the means of writing and recording, and calls visitors to involvement and commitment.

The Author and the Context

Born in Bologna in 1965 and graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in her hometown, Daniela Comani moved to Berlin, the city of the divided sky (*Der geteilte Himmel* of Christa Wolf's novel) right in 1989, the year of the demolition of the Wall. In the Berlin of the nineties, between reunification and reconstruction, political landslides and social experiments, she continued her education, starting an artistic activity oriented towards the themes of gender stereotypes, cultural habits, memory, and expressed through photographs, drawings, videos, performances, installations, assemblage, editorial productions (www.danielacomani.net). While she was settling in Berlin, expectations toward the end of the century and the millennium grew all over the world, with the resulting popular media hype, publications and research that have resonated, directly or indirectly, with the creation of this work; and to which this work is added, as a creative testimony of an epochal passage. In 1990, the essay by the American historian Hillel Schwartz, *Century's end: a cultural history of the fin de siècle from the 990s through the 1990s*, was published, which analysed and compared the recurring characteristics of the millennial dates and the end-of-century crises.

In 1994, the volume by British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short*

Twentieth Century, 1914-1991, came out, whose title would become a sort of slogan to define the twentieth century: the short century, with its phases, the age of catastrophe, the golden age and the landslide, which corresponded to the fall of the Soviet Union and the demolition of the Berlin Wall.

The topics of preservation, archiving, storage in art had been faced by a groundbreaking travelling exhibition (1997-98), promoted by the Haus der Kunst of Munich, *Deep Storage – Arsenale der Erinnerung* and showed in Germany and USA (Schaffner and Winzen, 1998).

The year 1999 saw the publication of Aleida Assmann's research on cultural memory *Erinnerungsräume, Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, which brought into play the themes of responsibility and collective memory. A little further back, stands also the research of the German artist Hanne Darboven (1941-2009), with her work *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983 (Cultural History 1880-1983)*, realized in 1980-83. An impressive installation consisting of 19 sculptural objects (among them a statue of Bismarck) and nearly 1600 works on paper, postcards, photographs, magazine clips, manuals, visual documents of a century of high and low culture, of public and private relics. An “opus magnum” on time, history and memory, a great archive that, juxtaposing a huge amount of disparate visual documents, “rewrites other stories with different and unexpected implications” (Subrizi, 2012: 106). As Daniela Comani recounts, in that period of time, she began “to perceive almost physically the heaviness of the century that was ending, like an Atlas holding the vault of heaven on its shoulders”.² During the decade, she had been already working on collections of newspaper clippings, photos, notes and texts, which served her for different research all deeply related to the theme of the individual facing history. The accumulation of the events of the century becomes a dominant thought until she decides to concentrate precisely on this accumulation, to make it the object of an Atlantic work in terms of breadth and objectives. She began to collect articles from Italian and German newspapers and magazines, photographs, short news items, at first without any preconceived intention. The clippings accumulated on tables and desks in her studio, stratifying in horizontal palimpsests, in piles and in boxes. The choice fell on singular facts, biographies that struck her. A first use of this material can be found, starting in 1995, in the series of so-called *Double Drawings*, drawings of faces and figures taken from the periodical press and outlined on tracing paper, so that they can be superimposed. Double portraits, multifaceted, multiple, such as the one dedicated to the truly multiple personality and tragic fate of Tamara Bunke (1937-1967), guerrilla and secret agent, interpreter and revolutionary, German and Argentine, as well as Cuban. The media are the source from which to draw to tell single emblematic stories, avatars of larger stories, of history tout-court. It was in January 1999 that the *It Was Me* project began to take concrete shape, moving in the direction of narrating the 20th century from the side - as mentioned

above - of an imaginary subject, victim, responsible, co-conspirator, witness of all that the century had produced, two world wars, the fall of secular empires, the Holocaust, dictatorial regimes, weapons of mass destruction, colonialism, capitalism, terrorism, feminism, protest, hope for a better world. In the background there are the ten years spent in Berlin and the materials already collected until then, used for the double drawings and kept in the atelier, in what Comani herself defines as a personal, open archive, not organized according to scientific criteria. The oxymoron of a chaotic archive renders well the nature of this accumulation, casual but not ineffective, in which the serendipity effect (one finds one thing while looking for another) plays a creative role, moving reflections and research on new, sometimes unexpected paths. The idea of using the countless clippings and photos, notes and texts, to tell the story of the 20th century from the side of a single subject, an imaginary individual who has crossed the century, needed, in order to be realised, to find a support structure.

The Calendar Structure

As a support structure for *It Was Me* project, Comani identified the system of partitioning time based on dates: the calendar, a system capable of offering a grid to the dispersiveness and co-presence of the events that have occurred, endowed with a nature that is both public and private, administrative and identitary. In the matter of calendar, the name of Hanne Darboven has to be mentioned again; since the 1960s she had been operating on the notations of time in calendrical works containing conceptual, mathematical and visual aspects. And in relation to dates, a reference has to be made to the Japanese On Kawara (1932-2014) with his *Today series* began on January 4th 1966. Every day he hand-painted on canvas the date of that day, attaching sometimes on the canvas' back pages from the newspapers of the same day, with the constraint that if the work had not been finished by the end of the day, the artist would have destroyed the canvas (Lee, 2004: 288-308). Not by chance, with On Kawara, Comani participated in the collective exhibition *Lesen*, at the Kunsthalle of Sankt Gallen in Switzerland, in 1996. Another figure related to the representation of time is Roman Opalka (1931-2011), an artist of Polish origin who lived in France and Germany: he represented sequences of progressive numbers, starting with 1 in 1965 and going on until death covering canvases of numbers while counting them in Polish: a dialogue between Opalka's and Comani's works has been significantly proposed in the exhibition *Accoppiamenti giudiziosi* (Opalka and Comani, 2013). The force of the calendar's grids has attracted not only the artists' creativity, but also curators of major exhibitions and catalogs. To provide an example of the permanence of the calendar format and the

interactive potentialities of its use: in 2017, the *Documenta 14* exhibition, held in Kassel and in Athens and dedicated to artistic research of a political, social, ecological and participatory nature, offered - alongside the catalog - a *Daybook*. It was a diary-agenda governed by a double chronological criterion: the grid of the shared conventional calendar and the wandering days in the memory of the surveyed artists, who had been invited to choose the memory of a day in their lives. These two time-lines mixed past and present, individual chronology and shared time, leaning on the familiar day-month sequence of calendars (*Documenta 14: Daybook*, 2013).

The Method

Once Comani had chosen the framework - the grid of 366 boxes - it had to be filled in completely, selecting a fact every day, for a total of 366 events that would represent, in a meaningful way, all the years of the century. As noted above, the account of the facts would not follow the succession of years but would take place day after day in a single calendar year, from January to December. Moreover, since the first version of the work was conceived for an audio installation, a sort of radio chronicle of the 20th century, read by a speaker without interruptions, the century would be condensed into an hour of listening. In this audible version listening goes from January 1st, correspond to the foundation of the German Communist Party on January 1st 1919 to December 31st, corresponding to the escape from Cuba of the dictator Batista on December 31st 1958. In the book and the display, however, access to the dates (and to the data) is not necessarily sequential; the reader can consult the diary as he or she wishes, going from one date to another according to personal curiosity, suggestions, and references.

To achieve her goal and get on with the job, the large personal archive collected over the years by Daniela Comani is systematized, so that no date remains empty and no year is uncovered. Classifiers appeared, the practical black-covered *Ordner*, and tables of correspondence between dates and events were drawn up. Comani began to methodically frequent the libraries of Berlin (the National Library, the Amerika-Gedenk-Bibliothek), consulting databases and viewing microfilms of vintage newspapers and magazines. The work followed a precise procedure: she took the news from the archives, deposited it in her personal filing cabinet and then poured it into the order of the calendar. In this passage, however, that news incurred in the change mentioned above. Whatever was being talked about, the proclamation of Fascism, or the first space flight, the news, in a dry, concise, almost protocol-like language, was always given in the first person that in some languages, specifically in

the Italian version, turned out to be female. This aspect introduces a relevant fictional element in the making of this many layered levels artwork. Daniela Comani recounts that, during the months of work, the book she had on her table was *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar, the writer of *Archives of the North*, capable of transforming the traces of private, family and historical memories into subtle and powerful narrative material. The tutelary deity, always present behind her back, was Borges, with his masterful passages from the real to the imaginary via historical details. It is in this perspective, that the entry “September 27th I take my life in Port Bou on the border between Spain and France” can report a suicide: the one actually committed in 1940 by Walter Benjamin, once and for all, and another one, recurring every September 27th, when someone reads the statement. Thus, throughout 1999, while Europe was discussing the euro, while NATO was intervening in Serbia and Roberto Benigni was winning an Oscar for *Life is Beautiful* (and while the whole world was waiting for the year 2000 with the dread of the millennium bug), Daniela Comani attended to her daily work of research and classification of those facts that led to the Holocaust, to the Balkan conflicts, to European unity and to technological globalization, transcribing and photocopying paragraphs, eyelets, agency launches, essays and articles. In making this, she imagined a life made up of many lives that would tell the selection of events, one day at a time, one day after the other.

Day, Month, Year

Scrolling through the calendar of *It Was Me*, the irreverence towards chronology disconcerts and attracts, forcing one to go back and forth in history, to an effort of identification, to a profitable activity of thought. One tries to remember, without going immediately into chronology, in what year, October 10, “I” occupied the secretariat of the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf; and who “I” am. In this case the first person singular pronoun refers to Joseph Beuys and the year was 1972.

In this anamnesis, personal memories overlap, we remember where we really were on some crucial dates in collective history, whose impact has fixed our position in time. We try to imagine where our parents or grandparents were in a single, precise day in history, while huge events were happening.

When *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999* is exhibited, visitors scroll through the wall of dates, stopping on one or the other. Interviews made during the show *Dall’oggi al domani. 24 ore nell’arte contemporanea* (Macro Museum Rome, 2016) show that people looked for important dates in their own lives and those of their loved ones; once checked the year, comparisons with important dates in their family life were activated. Others tried to verify their historical competence on the facts of the

20th century, tested their memory and intuition. A few were just watching the work, without questioning. This is the strength of *It Was Me*: the first-person involvement, declared in the form of the statements, is confirmed and enacted by the behaviors of people interacting with the work, that becomes - to take up a concept from the call of this issue dedicated to Visual History - “a space of interaction, between creation and reconstruction, between imagination and fact”, to which we can add, between the flow of history and oneself. There is always *me*, committing nefarious deeds, or making humanitarian decisions, or succumbing to nature’s adversity, or surviving, as in the passage from August 2nd.

It Was Me In The World

When Comani was invited to participate in the commemorative poster of the Bologna bombing with an excerpt of *It Was Me*, she accepted with the aim to “develop a historical memory”, “for a form of respect towards the victims and their families” and to reach the younger generation”, who often ignore “this never solved case.” (Naldi, 2012, XV)

The effectiveness of *It Was Me* format for approaching history is demonstrated by other invitations received for commemorative events. In 2016, in occasion of the 60th anniversary of Hungarian Uprising (October-November 1956), the Goethe Institut in Budapest and the OSA Archivum have motivated the exhibition of the work with these eloquent considerations: “The 20th Century was shaped by violence. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was one of these violent events. The 60th anniversary is an occasion for the Goethe Institute and the Open Society Archives in Budapest to present Daniela Comani’s fictional / historical diary *It Was Me*. This project is like a diary about 366 days: from January 1st to December 31st. The events are actually from the entire history of the last Century, and the narrator writes in first person, as if these events are personal. One day, the narrator is the victim and the day after the offender. The 23rd of October is also part of Comani’s diary”. (AZ ÉN NAPLÓM A TI HÍREITEK, 2016) (Fig 3).

It Was Me is clearly described in its structure, conceptual framework, and visual form: a “fictional/historical diary” that keeps track of important events of the 20th century. Among them, the date of the beginning of 1956 Hungarian Revolution stands out: “*October 23rd. Hungary. Following a mass demonstration for democratic freedom, the armed popular resistance against my governing system begins*” (danielacomani.net). A diary entry - expressed as a line in a wall of dates - becomes the bait for recalling a tragic, collective experience through the testimony of an anonymous imagined participant.

During the exhibition in Budapest (October 19 – November 27, 2016), *It Was Me* was also the cue for exploring the reception of the events in Hungary in western TV and printed press (*My Diary – Your News / AZ ÉN NAPLÓM A TI HÍREITEK* 2016), proving to be a way of inviting historical and documentary research. Indeed, the international vocation of this work is proved by the many translations both of the audio installation (German, English, Italian, Russian) and the written version. Originally composed by Comani in German in 2002, it has been translated by the artist herself in Italian (2007): *Sono stata io. Diario 1900-1999*; and then in many languages worth mentioning: in English (by Ann Cotten, 2007): *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999*; in Swedish (by Jenny Tunedal, 2008): *Det var jag. Dagbok 1900-1999*; in Chinese (2008): 我曾經。日記1900-1999; in French (2010): *C'était moi. Journal 1900-1999*; in Hungarian (by Duró Gábor, 2016): *Én voltam. Napló 1900-1999*, and in Russian (2019): *Это была я. Дневник 1900-1999*. Each translation brought with it different effects and reactions, not to mention the visual changes that the various languages have caused to the formal aspect of this work of art.

In the Winter 2007-2008, Daniela Comani released a particular “local” version of the *It Was Me* format, dedicated to her city of choice. *It Was Me. Around Alexanderplatz in 32 days. 1805-2007* tells two centuries of Berliner history, choosing 32 real events which took place around the famous Alexanderplatz (Comani, 2007). From the “9th January. Heavy mortar fire at Alexanderplatz: I fight for the so-called Spartacus Rebellion and declare a general strike” (1919), to “12th October. Tonight I watch *The Punishment Begins* on TV: the first episode of Fassbinder’s adaptation of the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin” (1980), the chosen dates retrace large and small facts connected to the square. Written in typewriter style and in the first person singular, as if the chronicle were a private diary, with the artist as the originator of the events, all the 32 entries were published on as many large billboards installed in the underground station of the Linie U2 in Alexanderplatz. As with *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999*, also in the case of this work, the year corresponding to the diary’s entries were reported on a separate chronological panel. Also, in this case, visitors, passers-by, underground users could look at the work, read the phrases, wonder about the years, check data, revive memories, travel through time. A virtuous and critical circle is activated by this artwork, that proves itself a platform to put history at disposal.

Notes

¹ Signed by the Comitato di solidarietà alle vittime delle stragi (Committee of solidarity to the victims of massacres), the manifesto Bologna 2 agosto 1980/2012 Per non dimenticare (Not to

forget) reports the Italian text, with some slight differences from the English version: “2 agosto. Bologna. Attentato alla stazione ferroviaria centrale. Alle dieci e venticinque esplose una bomba nascosta dentro una valigia nella sala d’aspetto di seconda classe. La miscela di tritolo e T4 distrugge parte dell’edificio e uccide ottantacinque persone, mentre più di duecento vengono ferite. Io sopravvivo”.

² I thank the artist for the information and the documents made available during the collaboration for the exhibition *Dall’oggi al domani. 24 ore nell’arte contemporanea*, Macro Museum, Rome (29 April – 2 October 2016), where a version of *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999* was exposed.

Images: courtesy Daniela Comani

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The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Germany, 2006)

Fig. 1



Visitors in front of Daniela Comani. Sono stata io. Diario 1900-1999 (It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999), digital point on vinyl, cm. 300x600, exhibited in Rome: Macro Museum, 2016

Fig. 2



Daniela Comani, Detail of the installation view in the exhibition MY DIARY – YOUR NEWS / AZ ÉN NAPLÓM A TI HIREITHEK and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 from the perspective of the western press / En voltam. Naplóm 1900 – 1999 és az 1956-os forradalom nyugati visszhangja, OS A Archivum and Goethe Institut Budapest, 2016