

Certain intellectuals who were active in Stalin's Russia produced works that for a long time didn't find their way onto the shelves of the libraries in countries that lay under Soviet influence. For them to be blacklisted, it was enough for them to be suspected of potentially undermining the stability of a system based on ideological conformism. However much silence breeds silence, the goal of suppressing the voices of these intellectuals did not always have a positive outcome in the long run. For some of them, the initiation of rehabilitation processes in Khrushchev's Soviet Union had given them back an important place in the history of Russian culture. The power of writing and art in general, but also science which borders on philosophy, offers different ways of viewing the world. When the intellectual's subjectivity arouses fascination, there is a risk of people becoming enamoured once again. And love, as we know, cannot be tamed. The threat that this represents for the political authority is therefore all about the concept of faith and the unconditional love that faith requires. Nowadays, as ever, the powers that be, whether great or small, expect blind adoration that leads one to hear redemption in their every word. They allow no room for doubt. The theme of incarceration and destruction of art and freedom of thought by the political authority is the theme of brutality against fragility. Abel Herrero, a native of Cuba, deals with this theme in the *Removed* exhibition, being held at the Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba José Martí, in Havana. The exhibition presents fifteen portraits of fifteen Russian intellectuals who were persecuted during the Stalinist era, whose work was hidden away while they were alive and which has still not found its rightful space in Havana's library. Herrero has therefore focussed on a country, Russia, and on a generation which, as the title of Roman Jakobson's famous essay on Myakovsky and the circle of intellectuals who shared the bitterness of the authorities' hostility, sums it up, squandered its poets.¹ But rather than concentrate on authors like Myakovsky, Pasternak, Bulgakov, Brodsky or Yesenin, who were also famous because of the attention they enjoyed in the West, and excluding the presence of visual artists in order to place greater emphasis on the power of the written word, Herrero portrayed the poets Osip Mandelstam, Aleksandr Vvedensky, Nikolay Oleynikov, Nikolai Klyuev, Marina Tsvetaeva, Nikolaj Gumilev, the writers Boris Pil'niak, Isaac Babel, Yevgeny Zamjatin, Daniil Kharms, Andrei Platonov, Yury Osipovich Dombrovsky, the literary critic Aleksandr Voronsky, the philosopher, mathematician and theologian Pavel Florensky, the theatre director, actor and theorist Vsevolod Meyerhold.

Known to Slavists the world over, these authors are nowadays particularly respected and studied in their homeland, where they are now considered to be iconic figures. What they have in common is the ill fortune of being born in an unhealthy period of history which made martyrs of them all: Mandelstam and Pil'niak perished in the gulags; Babel, Florensky, Meyerhold, Klyuev, Gumilyov, Vvedensky and Oleynikov were executed; Voronsky died in prison, Kharms died in the psychiatric unit of Stalingrad prison, Platonov of tuberculosis and starvation in Moscow; Tsvetaeva committed suicide, Zamjatin died in poverty in Paris, where he had escaped; Dombrovsky was arrested many times and deported, rehabilitated, and was then battered to death by unknown attackers shortly after one of his books was published. Their stories leave no doubt over the climate of terror in those years and the price that these intellectuals paid for the simple fact of being free thinkers.

Driven by admiration for them and feelings of empathy, Herrero portrayed them with a single colour, black, on large scale canvases (180 x 200 cm), making the size of the work a means of restoring adequate visibility to them in a space that they had been denied. "A State Library like the Havana Library", explains Herrero, "where censorship has long been operating, probably still shields information and biographies by *controversial* authors even now". If there were traces in Havana of the lives of these characters, they would have been collected in files and certainly accompanied with small photographs cut out of or sourced from Soviet archives. They would be grey, faded, anonymous photographs. In Plaza de la Revolución which is overlooked by the National Library, the figures of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara other heroes of the Cuban Revolution tower over you." ² In presenting the large-scale faces of the banished Russia intellectuals, devoid of rhetorical elements, in the Havana National Library, Herrero also aims to counter the emphasis of the great celebratory portrayals.

Herrero outlined these faces with no basic sketch by applying what he considered to be the required quantity of black oil paint directly onto the canvas. To create the grey scale, he exploited different densities of colour, which he made interact with the white of the canvas, which was purposefully not very absorbent. The illusion of light emerging from the painting derives from the white of the canvas. The image is therefore

achieved by spreading black oil paint and removing the excess, a method that does not allow the painter to work on the painting any further once the colour has dried. This creates the paradox of a figurative work created with a swift stroke which recalls action painting from the Fifties. The expressive technique and method used to create these paintings make the subjects appear to be impalpable apparitions who do not struggle to impose their presence, despite being deprived of their substance.

As much as Herrero portrays the faces of intellectuals whose lives were dedicated to literary narration, the painting gives no other information beyond the name in the title. Each of these subjects is the key character in a dramatic history, but since they are not instantly recognisable characters, their faces are not enough to evoke their histories, as instead happens with most the subjects of the 48 portraits of writers, scientists, composers and philosophers, all white men, born between 1824 and 1904, presented by Gerhard Richter at the Venice Biennale. Richter excluded politicians and artists from this solo illustrated volume of portraits for which photographs were sourced from encyclopedias and dictionaries, and turned into grey scale on canvases of the same size (70 x 55 cm). At the same time, he homologized the portraits using a painting that froze the image in the softness of grey tones tending towards monochrome, while removing signs that were too prominent.

As much as we find ourselves looking at characters who are universally accepted as key figures in world culture, Richter did not give importance to the literary dimension and did not intend to tell their stories. As he himself stated, what he was interested in was “the non-literary language of images”. The linguistic intention (one might instinctively say conceptual) was confirmed by the desire to show that, despite these being paintings, “the literature is invalidated. The characters become anonymous.”^{III}

“The absence of politicians and female figures was dictated by the meandering theme in this cycle - yet also present in other works - which is the theme of the loss of the paternal figure for an entire generation of Germans who were deprived of their fathers because they died in the war, or because they were psychologically or physically destroyed by the war, or because they were traitors because they had committed crimes against humanity. If he had included portraits of politicians, Richter would have found himself painting the key figures of the Third Reich as well. He therefore identified the paternal figures of his generation in the intellectuals regardless of their nationality. Including artist portraits would have created misunderstandings, since he was an artist himself. As it has been said, Herrero has also excluded the figure of artists, but in his case this choice was dictated by the fact that *Removed* highlights the role assumed by the written word in the formation of a style of free thinking.

The reference to Richter is compulsory, representing his work in a moment of change which exercised a strong influence on later generations and affected a part of the production of artists who matured their own independent style, like Eberhard Havekost, Wilhelm Sasnal, Luc Tuymans, Johannes Kahrs, Richard Phillips, Rudolf Stingel and Herrero himself. But while Richter’s work dematerializes historic remembrance, Herrero restores materiality. He makes it appear out of black smoke. Taking white from the colour of the canvas, he neutralises the significance of black as the colour of mourning.

Richter used grey tones and soft focus as a means of demonstrating his relationship with the apparent reality, so that it was clear that what he was painting is not reality. He used grey as “absence of colour, loss of opinion, denial.”^{IV} Herrero instead makes soft focus and grey tones the moment of transition which allows the faces of the Russian intellectuals affected by the Stalinist purges to resurface in Cuba from the oblivion to which they had been condemned in the Soviet Union. The subjects portrayed by Herrero are well-known in Russian culture, rather than being universally recognised as key figures of global culture. Their history demonstrates that being exiled has always brought about effects. In Richter’s portraits, you need only observe the face of Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein and Oscar Wilde, Igor Stravinsky or Giacomo Puccini to connect them to their lives, whereas in Herrero’s portraits, the faces of personalities like Alexander Voronsky, Osip Mandelstam or Yevgeny Zamiatin force us to go and seek out their history, and take in the reality of their lives. The method of portrait construction used by Herrero, continually discarding colour and stripping away detail in this way brings with it the narration of what these individuals suffered. This is how narration and language coincide in the *Removed* cycle of paintings.

Removed by Herrero reworks the theme of the role of the artist and the function of art. There is nothing the artist does that is not legitimate. Art can have a comforting role; it can help us find serenity or, on the contrary, it can arouse beneficial turmoil within us, which helps us become aware of a personal or collective existential condition. Herrero has most definitely gone for the latter option.

I · Roman Jakobson, *Una generazione che ha dissipato i suoi poeti. Il problema Majakovskij*, Italian translation, Einaudi, Turin 1975.

II · Abel Herrero, conversation with the artist, Milan, 13th January 2017.

III · Gerhard Richter, interview with Babette Richter, in *Gerhard Richter, Text, Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2009, pp. 442-443.

IV · Gerhard Richter, interview with Peter Sager, 1972, Italian translation in Gerhard Richter, *La pratica quotidiana della pittura*, Postmedia Books, Milan 2003, p. 49.