Angela Cavalieri’s Travelling Words

Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.

The experience of travel is central to Angela Cavalieri’s ongoing exploration of language. Many of her imposing linocut images were made in response to travels to Italy, particularly Rome and more recently Barcelona. However even before Cavalieri embarked upon her first journey to Europe, she had been a mind traveller, traversing the vias and piazzas of Italian villages and cities in word pictures created by the stories narrated by her family. Cavalieri was born in Melbourne to migrant parents from Calabria in southern Italy. Her first language was Italian and she did not speak English until she attended school. A pivotal moment for Cavalieri took place when she first learnt to speak and write English words in the classroom. Unable to understand the lessons, Cavalieri recalls feeling alienated and frustrated. This experience found expression in her artist book entitled La mia prima lezione, 2007. Reminiscent of a school exercise book, Cavalieri has scrawled across the final pages ‘Scusi non capisco niente’ which translates as ‘sorry I don’t understand anything.’ Her unfamiliarity with the dominant language rendered Cavalieri a foreigner in her own country of birth. However the displacement experienced through the language of one culture was counterbalanced by the familial links with another. Through stories told to her as a child in her native language, Cavalieri imagined the places remembered by her parents. Language imbued her with a sense of belonging to a place to which she had not yet been.

These experiences of language are played out in the works in the exhibition Parole Viaggiante which surveys Cavalieri’s practice over the past seven years. This body of work represents a decisive shift from Cavalieri’s earlier figurative works following her artist residency at the British School at Rome in 2003. Although she had incorporated text in early lino-prints and her first exclusively text based work, the artist book Quattro pagine, was completed in 1999, it was really in response to this residency that she became solely preoccupied with the aesthetic and conceptual possibilities of creating images that combined language with architecture. Cultural geographer Steve Pile observed that people do not live in a village or city as such but rather inside the mental picture they have built of it. And this mental picture is as much created through words and stories as the stone and concrete that construct a physical space. As
Cavalieri experienced in school, language can both include and exclude. ‘[It] shapes and fashions the frame in which experience is set’ and different languages do this in diverse ways. Language spatializes understanding of place and culture by constructing linguistic walls and passageways through which subjectivity is channelled and moulded. The very architecture of spoken language - the rhythms and sounds of utterance, the tempo and cadence that gives life to words - create an understanding of place as much as the content of specific words and the sentence structures used to convey meaning.

In Cavalieri’s practice Italian and Latin words are used as building blocks to construct visual edifices redolent of classical Roman architecture. In images such as *Scripta manent*, 2006 and *Le città e la memoria*, 2008, word snippets echo along arched corridors beckoning the viewer to embark on a journey through the stories and proverbs of Italian culture. This has been expanded more recently to include the influence of Spanish language for instance in the work, *Entrata*, 2010, which was made following Cavalieri’s residency in Barcelona last year. *Scripta manent* is based upon Francesco Borromini’s seventeenth century perspective gallery at the Villa Spada in Rome, which Cavalieri visited in 2003. Borromini’s receding row of columns and upward sloping mosaic floor, designed in collaboration with mathematician Giovanni Maria da Bitonto, creates the illusion that the colonnade is over four times longer than it is in reality. In Renaissance Italy converging linear planes of equal weight created harmonious proportions thought to be expressive of divine space. The logic of perspectival space adhered around a single-point perspective which assumed an immobile spectator fixed at a central vantage point. In Cavalieri’s images this takes the form of a small inky-black arch which is located at the conclusion of every colonnade. Each receding portico visually propels the viewer on a journey towards this black void. Is it an abyss or a blank screen upon which the viewer projects their fantasies and desires? Or perhaps it is the end point which can lead to deeper understanding. Italo Calvino states in *Invisible cities* - an account of the travels of explorer Marco Polo narrated to Kublai Khan - that it is as much in the ‘void not filled with words’ that the traveller finds true understanding and a deeper sense of self. According to Calvino ‘your footsteps follow not what is outside the eyes, but what is within, buried, erased’ and perhaps this is the true destination of travel.

The colonnade in Cavalieri’s image *Le città e la memoria* is constructed from the text of one of Calvino’s fifty-five imaginary cities in the original Italian language version, *Le città invisibili*. Cavalieri says she selected this city ‘because it gave me a sense of history, memory and infinite time.’ However Cavalieri’s remembered city eschews the measured perfection sought by Italian
architecture. Cavalieri’s word edifices are not symmetrical but decidedly off-centre. Imagined places rarely align with the traveller’s experience of an actual space. In Cavalieri’s images this also leads to a consideration of the ways in which the frames through which we make meaning shift register over time. The past is never a fixed entity but subject to reinterpretation as it is retold and remade through memory and language. Calvino observes that ‘the traveler’s past changes according to the route he has taken.’\(^\text{16}\) This has resonances for migrants both in the experience of travel to a new country and following return, often decades later. When Cavalieri was a teenager she accompanied her parents on a journey back to their village. It was the first time they had visited their homeland in twenty-five years. Cavalieri notes the experience left them bereft. ‘They lost their sense of belonging.’\(^\text{19}\) Culture itself is never static but in a constant state of evolution. Geographical displacement can produce affirmations of culture in the social imagination of the traveller that over time solidifies and becomes disconnected from the transformations of culture that take place in the homeland. Hence the dynamic of displacement experienced through migration is a double displacement upon return. And the longer the time lag before return, the more severe the experience of loss can be. When recalling this journey Cavalieri remembers how she felt ‘out of step’ with her originating culture. She recollects the amusement of her Calabrian cousins regarding her pronunciation of the dialect. Her peers in the village thought her quaint because her speech patterns and vocabulary reminded them of their grandparents. Cavalieri describes feeling as if she was in a ‘time warp,’\(^\text{10}\) an experience common amongst many migrants.

In his essay on cultural identity and diaspora, Stuart Hall observes that because the past continues to speak through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth, cultural identities are always unstable points of identification. Hence cultural identity can be seen as a constant state of ‘becoming’\(^\text{11}\) – a movement that takes place in duration as well as space. This is what informs Cavalieri’s text based works. They both affirm her relationship to her Italian heritage while also privileging this as a positioning that shifts over time.

Cavalieri comments that in her architectural works she wants to recreate the sensation she often has when entering and re-entering a city. ‘It always feels like a continuous journey and although cities vary, it appears you are in the same space and you can be dissolved into it.’\(^\text{12}\) This experience underpins the artist book, Le città continue, 2009. When opened, the book has a sculptural presence which makes tangible the experience of movement through the arched passageways. Each archway leads to a repetition that collapses difference into an impression of
sameness. As the products of human desire, cities are marked by universal ambitions and fears which renders all cities fundamentally the same. In Calvino’s tale the traveller Marco Polo explains to Kublai Khan: ‘[t]raveling you realise that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents.’ The physical presence of cities recede in the sensations and memories that mark the journey. This is because travel is essentially a symbolic journey through imaginary places in search of an answer, the story of life or the discovery of a self within.

One of the world’s most visited cities, Rome, is for Cavalieri, a ‘city written over.’ Many buildings have stone inscriptions on floors, walls, ceilings, over archways or around the contours of domes. As Cavalieri comments, ‘buildings have histories, they contain their own stories within their structures.’ The title of the work Scripta manent refers to the Latin proverb, ‘scripta manent, verba volent’ – spoken words are fleeting but the written word remains. However while the written word transcends time its meanings are also liable to change. Cavalieri notes that words can be ‘overlooked, abandoned or forgotten,’ or, like Latin, entire languages can die out or become unintelligible only to be rediscovered in the modern city centuries later. The writings of Italian philosophers and story tellers provide a fertile source for many of Cavalieri’s images. Dante Aligheri’s story of his epic journey through the nine circles of hell, accompanied by the Roman poet Virgil, is a medieval tale of the possibilities of redemption through travel. This text is reconfigured by Cavalieri in her image, Imbuto, 2004. Cavalieri studied several early illustrated copies of Dante’s Divine comedy at the Vatican Library and Archives. She describes the ‘great moment’ of holding and turning the vellum pages particularly one illustrated by Botticelli. In Cavalieri’s image tendrils of narrative are arranged in a serpentine movement around a funnel shaped vessel giving form to Dante’s descent into the inferno. In Dante’s tale the seventh circle, which encompasses violent sin, is characterised by a river of boiling blood which the traveller’s must perilously cross. This is articulated in Cavalieri’s work by red ink poignantly evoking the horrors the travellers must overcome.

In all of Cavalieri’s prints the palette is tightly controlled. Colour is generally restricted to one or two shades. Milky browns, cool slates or flinty blues are used to depict architectural features and evoke the stone structures they are based upon. Recent work incorporates flat planes of rich hues of red ochre, dark violet or saturated blue creating a vivid backdrop to the conversing figures in the foreground. The figurative shapes are usually depicted in simple black and white graphically summoning the history of the printed word. The development of the printing press
in the fifteenth century helped disseminate written text, facilitating the standardization of language and democratising knowledge. Cavalieri’s practice draws upon this history, both in her iconography and her technique. But she pushes against the limitations of the medium, demanding the viewer engage in a different relationship to the image. The scale of her works commands the body of the viewer and has a presence that accords with the stature of the Italian literary giants whose words she often appropriates. Each print can take from two to eight months to produce. The vast assemblages of lino are each skilfully chiselled in a mirror reverse of the final composition. Many of her images span over two metres in dimension and are printed on to canvas rather than paper because canvas provides greater weight and durability. The process of ‘printing’ also requires long periods of labour taking up to six hours in some instances. Unlike traditional methods her prints are not put through a press but each section of the image is individually hand rubbed, a process that often involves a team of labourers. She also uses oil paint in addition to ink which sits on the surface of the canvas endowing the image with a textural quality. Up to five layers of ink are meticulously applied to ensure a thick, even application and registration is carefully calibrated to achieve precise alignment when the great quantity of canvas is unrolled over the top.

The massive Tell tales, 2010, was a particularly challenging image to print requiring the labour of five helpers. At over three and a half metres in width this print harkens back to early scrolls. In this image Cavalieri has turned her attention away from the built environment to the undulations of landscape. From a distance the work appears to depict a rocky outcrop, its ragged contours creating a jagged horizon line against a sky blue backdrop. Closer inspection reveals that these are the profiles of four of Cavalieri’s favourite Italian writers: Dante Aligheri, Giovanni Boccaccio, Luigi Pirandello and Italo Calvino. It is a lineage that traverses the history of Italian literature over the past five hundred years. With their heads tilted back, their chattering words bump and dovetail permeating the skyline with their stories. In this work the words of the scribes give shape and form to their features, encapsulating the idea that words dwell within us. We are brought into being through language. Indeed it is through language that the ‘I’ is constituted. Words give form to what can be said, or even thought, and by whom, hence the very concepts that underpin societies are limited by their linguistic nature. By slicing, isolating and magnifying text, and arranging along a vast horizon line, Cavalieri plays with the calligraphy of words to give material presence to the ways in which we are both embedded in language and language is embedded in us.
It is also through language that connections to culture are affirmed and familial links strengthened. This is behind a number of works including *A Viva voce*, 2007/08, which comprises a large scale print accompanied by a sound installation. The image sets the profiles of two heads at the far edge of the canvas facing each other. Words weave in the air as visible threads linking the speakers in bonds of kinship. The sound recording is edited from an original 1970s reel-to-reel recording of Cavalieri’s relatives from southern Italy. Some were illiterate so the spoken voice was the only way that communication could be maintained between family members. Because telephones were not widespread at this time, the sound recording provided an important means of staying connected across distance. One of the voices on the recording is ninety-year old nonna. She has since passed away but her voice reverberates through time linking her with future generations. This work sets in tension the spoken and written word. It resists the impermanence of speech giving it a prominence often undermined by printed text. Historically the story teller was a person of power until the printing revolution transferred this power to print media. However words as a form of communication are always dependent upon an ‘other.’ Calvino states in *Invisible cities*: the ‘listener retains only the words he is expecting... It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.’ Language is never a pure transference from one person to another, but is marked by synthesis, interpretation, misinterpretation and reconstruction. Meaning is also registered in how language is spoken - in the inflection, intonation and emphasis given to specific words. Cavalieri often rewrites conversations she overhears and is interested in the language of chatter and gossip. This is manifest in works such as *Chiacchierone*, 2010, which translates as chatterbox; the self portrait, *Certe cose non si scrivono*, 2010, ‘certain things are not written;’ and her most recent artist book: *Certe cose non si dicono*, 2010/11, which translates as ‘certain things are not said.’ However it is *The spin on my world*, 2011, which most playfully evokes the way we are constructed through language. Liberated from the square edges of the page, Cavalieri has created a self portrait comprised of four profiles depicted in the round so that right side and left side, top and bottom are rendered meaningless. The black and white print is motorized and sits upon a cornflower blue backing board enabling the portrait to pirouette on its axis. Individual words and phrases blur in a spinning movement that creates a whirling vortex of language. With each revolution language is given its own momentum as individual words and phrases become indistinct. This gives visual form to the way in which language pervades us, not as a discrete entity, but as a force of impression and sensation.
In all of Cavalieri’s images, words and stories are mobilized as vehicles of culture that infuse us with an energy of their own. By fragmenting and recombining slithers of text from Italian proverbs, written and oral narratives and inscription on public buildings, Cavalieri revisions her Italian heritage revitalising her connection to culture. Words travel through time and space bridging generations and vast distance. As a child growing up in Australia, Cavalieri’s dominant experience of her originating culture was through language. By piecing together travelling words, from shards of her cultural and familial past, Cavalieri creates a personal semiotics that gives material presence to the prominence of language as an invisible force that shapes subjectivity.

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2 Angela Cavalieri in conversation with the author, 12 February 2011.
9 Angela Cavalieri in conversation with the author, 10 February 2011.
10 Ibid.
12 Cavalieri, ‘Building stories.’
14 Cavalieri, ‘Building stories.’
16 Cavalieri, ‘British School Residency.’
18 Calvino, *Invisible cities*, 123.