

First printed on January 23, 1932 (23-1-32; a date which is also a palindrome) *La Settimana Enigmistica* (Puzzle week) is the oldest puzzle magazine in Italy, a periodical which features not only crosswords but riddles, rebuses and many other mind games. Its tagline reads: ‘*Since 1932, the healthiest and cheapest pastime.*’ It prides itself on being the magazine with the most imitations - over its 91 year run, a deluge of successive puzzle periodicals have entered the Italian news circuit; eg. ‘*oggi enigmistica;*’ ‘*mese enigmistica;*’ ‘*tutto enigmistica*’ (puzzle day; puzzle month; puzzle everything). It is also itself an imitation. The first ever edition copies the cover design - and concept of alternating the ‘celebrity’ on the cover between a man and a woman - from an Austrian puzzle periodical titled *Das Ratsel*, 1931 (The Riddle). The face of the ‘celebrity’ in question will be inserted into the crossword on the cover and suggests a likeness to a news periodical. But even the few prose based columns in the publication that could be likened to news are instead trivia, like the ‘*Forse non tutti sanno che...*’ (‘perhaps not everyone knows that...’) column and the ‘*Si può crederci... o no?*’ (‘can you believe it or not’) column. Enigmistica does not even publish ads. All of its characteristic design motifs like the masthead typography (aside from the addition of colour printing in 1995), have been preserved throughout time. In its whole lifespan it has always circulated on a perfectly punctual fortnightly basis, with the exception of only two historic occasions:

...number 607 was published on 4 September 1943, instead of 21 August, and warned on the front page: “The savage enemy raids of 13 and 16 August, which devastated our editorial and caused very serious damage to the printing press and distribution office, have prevented us, in spite of all our efforts, from publishing this number with the usual regularity.” Issue 694, which came out on 14 July 1945 — instead of 28 April — clarified “The historic events of the last few weeks have prevented this number from being published with the usual regularity

This unrelenting consistency and commitment to the practice of puzzling have earned it the status of a modern tradition in Italy. Crosswords are also a capital-M-Modern tradition the world over:

the crossword could only be born in New York in the 1910s, at the same time as everything that made up the horizon of the modern, from the assembly line to cubism, from reportage journalism to jazz music. Empty, the crossword puzzle is an orthogonal grid of boxes; full, it is an alphabetical kaleidoscope in which the words of the language and the names of the world are fragmented and recomposed ... limited to a journey on the subway or a stop in an armchair during the weekend.

This excerpt from the blurb of Stefano Bartezzaghi’s *L’orizzonte verticale. Invenzione e storia del cruciverba* (The vertical horizon. Invention and History of the Crossword) superimposes the two-dimensional profile of the crossword onto the image of urban gridlock and towering skyscrapers - the Koolhaasian *Delirious* dynamic metropolitan matrix. By taking Settimana’s crossword patterns and turning them into warps and wefts, Stojanovic transposes this modern tradition onto the ancient tradition of weaving. The trivial transforms into the folkloric. Who’s to say whether a piece of information is trivia or tradition, canon or conspiracy, fact or faith?

“Many critics have described them as “pure” or “essential,” and indeed all the modernist commandments are in place here” says Christine Mehring of Palermo’s *Stoffbilder* in Art Forum, 2002. *“Still, at a time when irony reigned (Polke) and Conceptual artists considered a canvas merely a good joke (John Baldessari), Palermo continued to care about painting.”* This anachronism is pertinent because although Palermo was practicing over the purported canonic shift into Postmodernism, he maintained an almost Utopic modernist sensibility - not unlike Stojanovic. There is a certain projected loftiness and self-seriousness in those ‘*modernist commandments*’ typical to those canonised patron saints like Agnes Martin and Mark Rothko, to whom Palermo’s and Stojanovic’s work draws initial association. They use colour blocking in a similar diffuse, spare, sublime way, but the likes of Martin and Rothko have some abstract sort of *message*. Stojanovic’s *Fabric Paintings*, in their reference to socialist Serbian interior motifs shine a light in an easterly direction. The ‘east’ is an extremely vague term which at some times refers to Eastern Europe, at others to the {outdated notion of the} ‘*orient*’, but is often a catch-all similar to ‘global south,’ referring to anywhere that isn’t in the streamlined, industrialised, capitalist core-Anglosphere. The parts of the world where you’re discouraged from using the postal service. Stojanovic was unable to send excess luggage from Italy to Australia, or even to Serbia for fear it would become inexplicably held up or lost. This calls to mind an anecdote from my Nana who would send her Christmas cards to India a month or two early, lest the stamps got stolen and would need to be resent. For all the ridiculousness of systemic corruption, the culture and spectre of socialism in the “*eastern*” canon imparts — both in the embedding of a community-minded philosophy, and through the coping mechanisms sustained from facing historic adversity — a greater levity to its overall oeuvre. Mladen Stilnovic is another of Stojanovic’s influences. He too was Serbian, and lived and worked in Croatia. His art, like many other “eastern canon” artists (here meaning, of the socialist cultural canon) features a focus on colour and formalist pairings, tinted with a balance between folk aesthetic and tongue-in-cheek critical commentary. In the ‘works’ section of his website, there is a work called “work” featuring this passage:

[sic] “*Laziness is the absence of movement and thought, just dumb time – total amnesia ... indifference, staring at nothing, non-activity, impotence ... Those virtues of laziness are important factors in art. Knowing about laziness is not enough, it must be practiced and perfected. Artists in the West are not lazy and therefore are not artists but rather producers of something..... Their involvement with matters of no importance, such as production, promotion, gallery system, museum system, competition system (who is first), their preoccupation with objects, all that drives them away form laziness, from art ... Artists from the East were lazy and poor because the entire system of insignificant factors did not exist. Therefore they had enough time to concetrate on art and laziness. Even when thay did produce art, they knew it was in vain, it was nothing.*”

For Stilnovic, even correct spelling is rendered arbitrary and capitalist. His sentiments are important to digest on two planes: liberate yourself to simply being stereotypically lazy. But also, laziness is a form of resistance against “matters of no importance, such as production,” or such as the modern western conceit of individual expression. A joyousness and openness evolves from perfecting “dumb time, total amnesia.”

The aforementioned pertinence of Mehring’s quote is also applicable because a care for colour and sensory experience will never become totally extinct. To allow colour to wash over you like a tidal wave, and texture to enclose you in its arms is enough reason to do away with the text on this page. I have been waiting for the moment where I can allow my mind to wander away from words and drift into sense and memory...

Sound panels; large felt rectangles, mattresses for noise, filtering out harsh frequencies... blinds rationing the light; carpet and the static transmitted through socks and skin to be delivered to the delicate follicles of hair... floor-to-ceiling windows cropping a vast plane of yellow, like gazing into an aquarium of honey...

The crossword format brings its own unique syntax, wherein the grid economises letters and fabricates unexpected word sequences, and the clues summon double (or more) entendres. ‘*Words...are acrobatic things... a label spotted in a Sainsburys vegetable aisle will read “mange tout” but then it morphs into “Man get out”*’ says Sue Purcell, a cryptic crossword writer profiled by The Guardian in an article titled ‘*How do I become... a cryptic crossword compiler.*’ Purcell goes on “*The T of ‘tsar’ would have to be interlocked to make it clear we weren’t looking for ‘czar’ ,” she says. “And the ‘s’ or ‘z’ in words like ‘organise’ should never be interlocked so people can spell it either way.*”

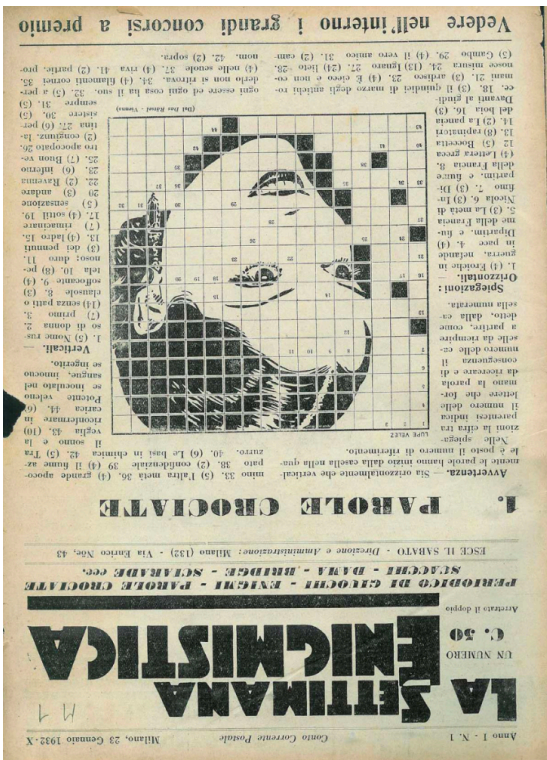
All crosswords rely on shared knowledge amongst a readership - trivia - and the rules guiding interlocking are created to foster shared understandings. While puzzles often seem like a solitary task, they cannot be made or used without the principal of a shared social tapestry. ‘Every move the puzzler makes, the puzzle maker has made before’ says George Perec in the foreword of his epic tome ‘*Life a User’s Manual.*’ Here, he speaks more specifically about the format of the artfully constructed jigsaw puzzle:

‘Two fragments of cornice made to fit each other perfectly when they belong in fact to two quite separate sections of the ceiling, the belt buckle of a uniform which turns out ... to be a metal clasp holding the chandelier, several almost identically cut pieces belonging, for one part, to a dwarf orange tree placed on a mantelpiece and, for the other part, to its scarcely attenuated reflection in a mirror...’

The exploit of every artfully executed puzzle is displacement and disguise. The ability to assimilate. This is something Perec - whose writing uses puzzles both in literary practice and in aesthetic subject matter - knew well. He is known for such texts as ‘The Void’ (*La Disparition*, 1969) which is missing the letter E throughout the entire text, and is also a whodunnit, and the aforementioned ‘Life A Users Manual’ (*La Vie mode d’emploi*, 1978) wherein each chapter moves through the rooms of an apartment block like a knight’s tour of a chessboard. His agility with ideas of displacement, of taking something out of its context and placing it obliquely into a new one, could be partly attributed to his own personal history, as a Polish Jewish expat who lost his parents in the war, taking up a new culture and name — his former surname Peretz had too Eastern European of a flavour.

This lineage is familiar also to Stojanovic and the artist Blinky Palermo — to whom the Fabric Paintings pay homage. Both artists were adopted as children and have undergone more than one name change. Stojanovic has inclined towards the name which reclaims her Eastern European heritage. As for Palermo — who was born Peter Schwarze in the then-Soviet-Republic Leipzig, to become a Heisterkemp when adopted along with his twin — his tutor Joseph Beuys told him he was the lookalike of American mafioso and Boxing Manager Blinky Palermo, when he wore a certain hat. The seminal Blinky was also living under an alias — otherwise known as Frank Palermo; so the Blinky name had some in-built interchangeability. Palermo was discovered by Stojanovic via the reference of his name in a painting by Julian Schnabel: ‘*The Unexpected Death of Blinky Palermo in the Tropics*’ (1981). These are a few of the ways in which Palermo is a sidenote in another man’s story. Additionally, mention of him tends to be with respect to his friend Gerhard Richter. An anecdote follows that the creation of Richter’s early ‘*Colour Palette*’ painting series involved Palermo randomly calling out colours and Richter swatching them into a suite of randomly combined paintings - a process which would remove subjectivity from the colour fields and evoke feelings either inherently resonant or nullifying in each combination. This randomness or primality may not be readily apparent in Richter’s *Colour Palettes*, and this quality of an obscured cerebral process marks a pertinent distinction both in the Western art canon (shifts from Modern to Postmodern) and to his friend Palermo’s approach. His work was more concerned with the senses, phenomenological experience and intuition - therefore being associated with a Modernist impulse. The *Stoffbilder* (Fabric Paintings) followed a parallel but inverse methodology to Richter’s *Colour Palettes*. Palermo procured lengths of commercially dyed, store-bought fabric, had combinations sewn together by both his and Richter’s wives and then mounted them over painting stretchers. While for Richter the automation was in the colour combinations, for Palermo it was in outsourcing the work. The subjective colour combinations were of primary, singular importance - no description necessary. *“According to those who knew him, Palermo was not articulate about his work ... he never spoke about his work in theoretical terms*’ writes Anne Rorimer in a profile for Art Forum, 1978. It must be noted though, that Palermo died young (age 33; and in an uncertified manner) and the wordless mystery of his intentions can be partially attributed to his corporeal absence. This undoubtedly lends him a mythic aura. Stojanovic claims a spiritual connection with Palermo, and also prioritises the colour experience over the word — after all, her use of crosswords do away with the words. *“The colours are ... reminiscent of socialist apartment blocks in Belgrade in particular, these colours are something that have stayed with me”*.

Giacomo Papi of *il Post* is nonetheless able to detail that the *Settimana* HQ has resided at the same location since time immemorial, with an unmarked intercom and two Columbian newsagents in the square who “*only know that [Settimana] arrives to be sold together with the many others.*” This dubiousness and vagueness could speak to some huge national secret or something more Kafkaesque - a banality and randomness that most people don’t like to believe about agencies that hold any status or authority. Like when *K* of Kafka’s *The Trial* finally finds the headquarters of the enigmatic court which has been persecuting him, it is denoted by a small card, written in a ‘*childish and unpractised script*’ in the attic of a block of flats where ‘*the poorest of the poor threw their useless junk*’. *K* then cannot decide if he is comforted or debased by the utter humility of the whole operation and its ability to command so much authority over him.



Acrobatic Things by Gabriella D’Costa

Accompaniment text for Jacqueline Stojanovic’s *Fabric Paintings*, Hayden’s Gallery, May 2023

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