

Marco Maggi: Initialism (From Obscurantism to Enlightenment) 11.19 Posted by Alfred Mac Adam



INSTALLATION VIEW: MARCO MAGGI: INITIALISM (*FROM OBSCURANTISM TO ENLIGHTENMENT*), JOSÉE BIENVENU GALLERY, NEW YORK, 2019. PHOTO: UGO CARMENI, UGO CARMENI STUDIO.

Marco Maggi has brought about the improbable union of Plato and Stéphane Mallarmé. Specifically, the marriage of Plato's allegory of the cave in the Republic and Mallarmé's *Un coup des dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, his polyphonic text, meant to be read simultaneously at several levels in order to be understood. Process, especially the educational process, is a key element here: in a darkened gallery, the viewer, flashlight in hand, traces Maggi's scattered text as it follows the wall. We are moving, as his title suggests, from darkness to illumination.

Well, maybe. In fact, by using the flashlight to pinpoint specific episodes of his non-sequential narrative, we act out an inverted version of Plato's cave dwellers. Chained, with a fire behind them, they see only the shadows of things, and this they call reality. Maggi reverses this by having us behind the flashlight trying to decipher what he has inscribed on the wall. We can't of course, just as we cannot read Mallarmé's poem on several levels at the same time, so we have to rely on our dodgy visual memory to come up with some idea of the totality.



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This enactment of the collapse of visual perception paradoxically supports Maggi's notion of "initialism," the progressive decay of words in our society into abbreviations. One danger of the term "initialism" is its similarity to the *Lettrism* French Dada movement of the 1940s. But where the lettrists sought to reduce language to letters, a kind of minimalist abstraction, Maggi is decrying the corruption of language through acronyms. From this perspective, he has managed to turn abstraction into cultural criticism.

Fortunately, he does not leave the viewer stranded on the wall. We realize that the bits and pieces we've just seen are, in addition to being an allegory about our inability see the whole of life because we are blinded by its fragments, the elements swirling around in Maggi's imagination. Memories, epiphanies, the junk media throw at us daily: all these things come into focus in the thirteen works, collages in fact, that constitute the second phase of the show.

Here the letters we found using the flashlight come home to roost. *Letterist (Slide Typewriter C)* (2019) deploys the letter C in such a way that it ceases to be a letter and becomes instead a pattern made up of five blue squares in the horizontal members and ten in the vertical. The closer we get to this piece the more we realize that texture and surface are important factors here, that C looks like a fortification, or at least the plan for one. Squared off, with its broadest side defending the center of the piece, it seems composed by a military engineer and defies attack. Maggi, like Mallarmé, leaves nothing to chance, except the possibility of our understanding the work above and beyond its formal beauty.

The same problematic--the elusiveness of meaning, assuming there is one--prevails in the magnificent *Palindromo* (2019). A palindrome can be read right to left or left to right and mean the same thing: Madam I'm Adam. But this diptych--the artist stipulates a one-inch space between the panels--is not composed of mirroring halves. You may "read" these compositions made of self-adhesive paper on paper in either direction, but in the end you will be left with only a confused image rather like a printed circuit for each side. Again, all is premeditated, nothing left to chance in the composition. We have the experience, but we miss the meaning.

The letters decay even further in the five "Waiting to Surface" works. Maggi makes us into astronauts descending onto the surface of a strange planet. As we move closer to, for instance, *Waiting to Surface (U)* (2019), we discern structures, patterns, and, yes, the letter U, but we realize that deciphering this image is impossible. But Maggi's incomprehensible letters make artistic sense; those of the acronym makers leave us dumbfounded.

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