

The Frontiers of Theory

Poetry in Painting

Writings on
Contemporary Arts
and Aesthetics

Hélène Cixous

Edited by Marta Segarra and Joana Masó



Poetry in Painting

The Frontiers of Theory

Series Editor: Martin McQuillan

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Poetry in Painting

Writings on Contemporary Arts and Aesthetics

Hélène Cixous

Edited by Marta Segarra and Joana Masó

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Sources

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'Hélène Cixous, en art comme en rêve', Joana Masó and Marta Segarra. Trans. Marianne Choquet, unpublished in English. (A different version under the same title was included in Hélène Cixous, *Peinetures. Écrits sur l'art*, Marta Segarra and Joana Masó (eds), Hermann, Paris, 2010.)

1. 'Paintings'

'Peinetures', in Hélène Cixous, *Peinetures. Écrits sur l'art*, Marta Segarra and Joana Masó (eds), Hermann, Paris, 2010. Trans. Laurent Milesi, unpublished in English.

2. 'Spero's Dissidances'

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'Faire voir le jamaisvu'. Transl. Beverley Bie Brahic, published in English and in French in Roni Horn, *Rings of Lispector (Agua viva)*, Hauser & Wirth-Steidl, London, 2004.

5. 'Portraits of Portraits: The Very Day/Light of Roni Horn'

'Portraits de portraits. Le jour même de Roni Horn'. Trans. Eric Prenowitz, published in English in *Roni Horn* (catalogue), CAC Málaga, Málaga, 2008.

6. 'K – A Notebook'

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7. 'Shit, No Present: Faecetious Serrano'

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'*Hériter/Inventer* avec Jeffrey Gibson'. Trans. Ilaria Migliardi and Nicole Cee, published in English in a brochure of an exhibition of Jeffrey Gibson's works, 2007.

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10. 'Sonia Rykiel in Translation'

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11. 'The Train Stop, or Anna's Resurrections'

'L'arrêt du train, ou résurrections d'Anna', in Karine Saporta-Peter Greenaway, *roman-photo*, Hélène Cixous, Daniel Dobbels, Bérénice Reynaud, Armand Colin, Paris, 1990. Trans. Beverley Bie Brahic, unpublished in English.

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- Plate 2* Ernest Pignon-Ernest, *La mort de la vierge*, 1990. © Galerie Lelong. Courtesy of the artist.
- Plate 3* Roni Horn, *Agua Viva: The dense jungle . . .*, 2004. Silkscreen on Saunders hot press W/C. Ed. 1/2, 129.5 × 129.5 cm. © Hauser & Wirth Galerie.
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- Plate 5* Andres Serrano, *Simple Shit*, 2008. © Courtesy Yvon Lambert.
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Images © Hauser & Wirth Galerie

Series Editor's Preface

Since its inception Theory has been concerned with its own limits, ends and after-life. It would be an illusion to imagine that the academy is no longer resistant to Theory but a significant consensus has been established and it can be said that Theory has now entered the mainstream of the humanities. Reaction against Theory is now a minority view and new generations of scholars have grown up with Theory. This leaves so-called Theory in an interesting position which its own procedures of auto-critique need to consider: what is the nature of this mainstream Theory and what is the relation of Theory to philosophy and the other disciplines which inform it? What is the history of its construction and what processes of amnesia and the repression of difference have taken place to establish this thing called Theory? Is Theory still the site of a more-than-critical affirmation of a negotiation with thought, which thinks thought's own limits?

'Theory' is a name that traps by an aberrant nominal effect the transformative critique which seeks to reinscribe the conditions of thought in an inaugural founding gesture that is without ground or precedent: as a 'name', a word and a concept, Theory arrests or misprisons such thinking. To imagine the frontiers of Theory is not to dismiss or to abandon Theory (on the contrary one must always insist on the it-is-necessary of Theory even if one has given up belief in theories of all kinds). Rather, this series is concerned with the presentation of work which challenges complacency and continues the transformative work of critical thinking. It seeks to offer the very best of contemporary theoretical practice in the humanities, work which continues to push ever further the frontiers of what is accepted, including the name of Theory. In particular, it is interested in that work which involves the necessary endeavour of crossing disciplinary frontiers without dissolving the specificity of disciplines. Published by Edinburgh University Press, in the city of Enlightenment, this series promotes a certain closeness to that spirit: the continued

exercise of critical thought as an attitude of inquiry which counters modes of closed or conservative opinion. In this respect the series aims to make thinking think at the frontiers of theory.

Martin McQuillan



Plate 1 Nancy Spero, *Goddess Nut II*. Courtesy Galerie Lelong.



Plate 2 Ernest Pignon-Ernest, *La mort de la vierge*, 1990. Galerie Lelong. Courtesy the artist.



Plate 3 Roni Horn, *Agua Viva: The dense jungle . . .*, 2004. Hauser & Wirth Galerie.



Plate 4 Maria Chevska, *Vera's Room*, 2002. Courtesy the artist.



Plate 5 Andres Serrano, *Simple Shit*, 2008. Courtesy Yvon Lambert.



Plate 6 Jeffrey Gibson, *Second Nature*, 2006. The Eiteljorg Museum.

Hélène Cixous, in Art as in Dreams

Joana Masó and Marta Segarra

There are, in the life of my eye, two or three paintings in the world that lead me. There is *The Slaughtered Ox*, Rembrandt's rawest self-portrait, there is the half-buried or unearthed *Dog*, Goya's self-portrait in yellow. There is *Pink Writing*, Hantai's self-portrait.¹

Art has always been at the heart of Hélène Cixous's *oeuvre*, first of all in relation to those artworks presented as 'poetic fellows'² of her literary work. These paintings – *The Slaughtered Ox*, *Bathsheba at her Bath* and *The Jewish Bride* by Rembrandt, *The Dog* by Goya or Hokusai's *The Thirty-Six Views of Mont Fuji*, *The Rouen Cathedral* series by Monet, *The Study for the Woman Ironing* by Picasso . . . – are commented on in the many Cixousian fictions and essays which reflect on both painting and literature.

Hélène Cixous has also devoted entire texts to painting and to the arts in general; among the earliest we find 'The Last Painting or The Portrait of God',³ texts on Rembrandt⁴ – already published in English – and others which have been especially translated for the present volume, such as the piece on the French artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest, on the famous fashion designer Sonia Rykiel or on the choreographer Karine Saporta. From 2000 on, Hélène Cixous multiplied her texts written in collaboration or in *complicity* with a diverse selection of contemporary artists' works, in particular Simon Hantai, with whom she published the beautiful book, *Le Tablier de Simon Hantai*, and Pierre Alechinsky, in a volume soon to be published by Galilée. Cixous also wrote shorter texts on other contemporary artists – Maria Chevska, Jeffrey Gibson, Roni Horn and Nancy Spero – which are now difficult to find as they appeared in foreign catalogues or rare art books. This volume, *Poetry in Painting*, gathers some of these texts devoted to specific contemporary artists or artworks, written between 1985 and 2010, among which are some previously unpublished in English. Nonetheless, this cannot be a

comprehensive collection, since in recent years H el ene Cixous has been devoting more and more pieces to the arts, constituting a sort of work in progress.

These texts cannot, however, be described as art criticism, nor simply regarded as critical essays, because Cixous responds to the artworks as a poet, *reading* them as if they were poems. Within these writings – whether they be the fruit of personal encounters with an artist’s work or, as in some cases, specific requests for commentary on it – Cixous insists on exploring the powerful proximity of pictorial and literary writing: in the text ‘Portraits of Portraits’, about the American artist Roni Horn, she echoes Baudelaire’s famous verse – ‘my fellow, my brother’. H el ene Cixous states that the questions ‘What is painting?’ and ‘What is writing?’ are ‘inseparable’: ‘these halves are related’; these halves present themselves to Cixous ‘as non-simultaneous twins’;⁵ ‘I am deliberately swapping the semantics of pictorial art with that of the art of writing’. In their way of being at the edge and working with the elusive, Cixous recognises, not only in the writer but also in the artist, a marginal and dissident figure. The writer and the painter are ‘poets’. This word returns in a great number of Cixous’s writings, attempting to name the artist. As such, and along with Bachmann, Artaud, Rimbaud, Dante or Mandelstam, Nancy Spero is, according to Cixous, a ‘poet in painting’, ‘with the poets’ tattered soul’, ‘of the poets’ species’.

The first contribution to this volume, ‘*Paintings*’, was created by the author especially for this collection (in its French original version). It describes Cixous’s relationship to the materiality of painting itself rather than to philosophical questions about art or aesthetics. The writer plays with the signifier *pain* included in *painting* in order to stress the violence and the ‘combat’ contained in the act of painting or creating a work of art. She writes, ‘I know it by hearsay, one is at *pains* to create artistically, especially in painting. We have numerous evidence of the pain felt by painters. Of their ways of being at pains, of painting painstakingly’.

The following chapter, ‘Spero’s Dissidences’, is devoted to the American artist Nancy Spero, whose work was itself inspired by Cixous’s *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Cixous sees in Spero’s art a powerful claim for the misfits and the victims, those who also fight social structures: ‘Woman the poets, woman the revolutionaries, woman the dreamers, woman the Vietnamese people [. . .] woman the Jews, woman those deportees’. Chapter 3, ‘Ernest’s Imagic’, deals with Ernest Pignon-Ernest’s ephemeral street art works which have found their place on the walls of cities like Naples more often than in museums. We see here a connection with Spero’s affinity with the excluded as Cixous describes

how the artist ‘takes to the Street of the surface of memory, rereading its legends, bringing back those who have drowned in oblivion and rejection, dragging the banished up from exclusion’. This text is thus an exploration on Pignon-Ernest’s ‘image of women’ in painting, re-echoed by Cixous through the figures of the Mother and the Virgin.

In ‘See the Neverbeforeseen’, the longest piece of the volume, Cixous addresses the installation by New York artist Roni Horn entitled *Rings of Lispector* (2004). This art installation includes sentences from Clarice Lispector’s *Água viva* translated by Cixous. For her part, Hélène Cixous has extensively written on Lispector, whom she considers the most remarkable example of *écriture féminine*. She comments on Horn: ‘Water is her fellow, her family, her chosen kin, her non-finite sexual possibilities. Now she males now she females’. The next chapter, ‘Portraits of Portraits. The very day/light of Roni Horn’, addresses the same artist and the explicit indecisiveness of her photographic work. Horn’s portraits stand out as a way to deconstruct fixed identities, as well as the relationship between the subject and the object of the portrait. Cixous poetically *reflects* – as if in a mirror – on this deconstructive process: ‘Who are you, Face, you who I am, you who look at me without seeing me, you whom I see without knowing whom [. . .] What is you? Who am I, you?’

In ‘K – A Notebook’, the author comments on the exhibition *Vera’s Room* by London artist Maria Chevska, based on everyday objects, rendering an analysis of the domestic and confessing her own ‘strange and clandestine passion for domestic cotton cloths’. What do the refusal, the eviction and ‘these paper crumplings, strewn on the floor’ tell us about a *piece* of art and its politics? About the bits of form, the ‘thing’ and the ‘object’? Following these lines of questioning into a different frame, in ‘Shit, No Present: Faecetious Serrano’, Cixous addresses the work of the controversial photographer Andres Serrano, calling for a reconsideration of how scatology operates in art through the notions of rest and reminder. What is interesting here may not only be the *status* of art but also the very singular way in which Hélène Cixous points out signifiers that pass between Serrano’s *Shit* and psychoanalysis (Freud), literature (Genet) and thought (Derrida), among others.

The following text, ‘*Inheriting/Inventing* with Jeffrey Gibson’, refers to a different kind of artwork. What interests Cixous in Gibson’s work is the artist’s relationship to land and to (familial) history, as Gibson belongs to the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and is half Cherokee: ‘We inherit a name, a connection, a memory, a history, hidden obligations from past times. The five acres of land in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, what do they hold in store for their (future) owner, Jeffrey

Gibson? What will this piece of land mean to him? This *piece*? This land? How many ghosts?' Cixous continues this reflection on history and time in 'Filming the Becoming Invisible', in which the memory of the Holocaust is the driving force behind Ruth Beckermann's film, *The Paper Bridge*. As Cixous reminds us, the image is both a kind of writing and an archive: 'This is not a documentary, this is a living work, that pushes the art of film beyond its common ground with poetry, tales, introspection, by putting the most subtle resources of metaphor and metonymy in the service of the desire to Safeguard'.

Moving into other forms of performance and visual culture, Chapter 10, 'Sonia Rykiel in Translation', deals with one of France's best-known fashion designers, and some of her most distinctive creations: long and small sweaters with strass – rhinestones – stripes and laces. Here Cixous's analysis can resemble Barthes's *Mythologies*, since she reads Rykiel's garments as a 'body's dream', seeking a broader experience of the 'proper' body – which includes supplements, accessories and *others*. This experience of the body is also present in the last text, entitled 'The Train Stop, or Anna's Resurrections', where Cixous discusses the work of French choreographer Karine Saporta while focusing on the process of movement between death and life in a reflection on dance and poetry. Cixous's fictions conserve the metaphoric range of the artistic figure only in order to render ambivalence, the in-between passage; for instance Saporta's dance which 'doesn't stop dying and struggling, falling down and standing up again – surviving'. Nancy Spero's women can also be called on here: they give a figure to 'all those who find themselves thrust to one side, half inhumed and not exhumed, and among whom one can cite a great number of minorities and, besides minorities, one majority, the woman majority'.

Nonetheless, in Cixous's work, these figures figure as much as they disfigure. Because, with them, the writer *figures* not only the sudden passage, the break and the dying, but also the expected event in Roni Horn's *Cabinet of*. What is to be read, also, in these 'things' with which Maria Chevska and Nancy Spero people their installations, if not the Cixousian gaze always in search of what is beneath the form? We sense this *beneath* throughout all of her texts, under various names: beneath the train of the continual present, 'a still restless, unstable, undecided era', this space 'before' straight forms sought by Roni Horn in *Rings of Lispector*. Indeed, it is in all that is beneath this word 'before' that Cixous seems to deliver the literary and artistic coalescence of writing – and the dream: 'this 'before' has probably never *existed* except in dreams. In dreams or in art'. Here, art or the dream may be able to accommodate this 'It' which haunts *Le Tablier de Simon Hantai*, as well

as the ‘polymorph creatures that cannot be defined, but are still familiar, that transcend the dividing lines between sex and species’ created by Jeffrey Gibson.

Among the multitude of figures, which deconstruct form through the angle of the other, the self-portrait constitutes one of the dominant themes of the Cixousian approach to art and writing. With Cixous’s eye on these famous paintings in the History of Art, the self-portrait always seems to paint something other than one’s self, animal or writing: ‘There is *The Flayed Ox*, Rembrandt’s rawest self-portrait, there is *The Half-buried – or Unearthed – Dog*, Goya’s self-portrait in yellow. There is *Pink Writing*, Hantai’s self-portrait’.⁶ To self-portray comes back then to ‘deconstruct the entire traditional unthinking approach to the thing called Portrait’,⁷ both in art – in the *Portrait of an Image* by Roni Horn – and in literature in Montaigne’s *Essays*, Cixous would say.

Both the self-portrait and the poem are inhabited by a certain slaughter. It is in this sense, as well, that one could read the citations of Tsvetaeva’s poems in the text Cixous devotes to Karine Saporta’s choreographies. Because it is from ‘the poets’ tattered soul’ and from this Tsvetaeva verse cited by Cixous – ‘After all, the soul is just our capacity to suffer’ – which writing and art spring. In fact, when Hélène Cixous, in her ensemble of writings on the arts, weaves these literary references into the suffering of the danced poem and ‘the pain’s seed’,⁸ she hands us the core of her aesthetic approach: the wound, ‘the cut is the quick of every creative state’.⁹ We know how much Cixousian fictions draw on a certain childhood of the wound, an ancient e-motion we find still intact in the ‘inner orient’ of Sonia Rykiel’s starred jackets. But it is perhaps Nancy Spero’s poignant paintings that cry out the most from the needle pricking deep in the soul. In Cixous’s text, the ‘Speroiic’ women cry out to protest – the war, the camps, phallocentrism – as did those other ancient and ghostly women, the Furies in *The Perjured City*, who wake up in 1991 following a judicial failure in democracy. All of these ‘woman’ figures cry out in art as they do in literature, perhaps because they are familiar with dreams, because they are made of ‘*such stuff as dreams are made of . . .*’¹⁰

Translated by Marianne Choquet

Notes

1. Hélène Cixous, *Le Tablier de Simon Hantai*. Paris: Galilée, 2005, insert.
2. Hélène Cixous, ‘Spero’s Dissidances’ (Chapter 2 of this volume).
3. ‘The Last Painting or the Portrait of God’ (originally published in 1983), trans. Sarah Cornell, Susan Sellers and Deborah Jenson, in *Coming to*

Writing and Other Essays. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

4. 'Without end, no, State of drawingness, no, rather: The Executioner's taking off' (originally published in 1991) and 'Bathsheba or the Interior Bible' (originally published in 1993), both translated by Catherine A. F. MacGillivray, in *Stigmata. Escaping Texts*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
5. Cixous, *Le Tablier de Simon Hantaï*, op. cit., p. 35.
6. Cixous, *Le Tablier de Simon Hantaï*, op. cit., insert.
7. Hélène Cixous, 'Portraits of Portraits. The Very Day/Light of Roni Horn' (Chapter 5 in this volume).
8. Hélène Cixous, 'The Train Stop, or Anna's Resurrections' (Chapter 11).
9. Hélène Cixous, 'See the Neverbeforeseen' (Chapter 4).
10. Cited by Hélène Cixous in *The Perjured City or, The Awakening of the Furies*, trans. Bernadette Fort, in *Selected Plays*, ed. Eric Prenowitz. London and New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 114.

Paintings¹

There is no art which is not an act of sublimated resistance.

The individual that I am is in a state of response to painting. I do not paint, but at the moment when I say 'I do not paint', I say something which is true but which I could also alter by saying that if I paint, I do so otherwise. At the moment when I say that I cannot help beginning to paint otherwise, saying to myself that I will be carried away by the signifier 'paint', 'pain', therefore that I will associate 'paint' [*peins*] and 'pain'. I know it by hearsay, one is at *pains* to create artistically, especially in painting. We have numerous evidence of the pain felt by painters. Of their ways of being at pains, of painting painstakingly [*à la peinture et à la peine*]. There are extremely notorious examples, the most notorious at pains in painting being probably Van Gogh . . . But I think that this kind of combat in the throes of *painting* [*qui font peinture*] is a feature of painting. I take a small step sideways: there are some painters who are not at pains, there are painters whose genius is full of joy, Picasso for example. But most painters are seekers, explorers who produce major breaks in the history of painting, I envy them in a way, because I say to myself that, when in literature, the neighbourly art, one is driven towards breaking away from tradition, it is less perceptible; there is a kind of generalised resistance of reception to the breakaway gesture in literature. Because of the institutional structures, of reception in the guise of the readership, of critics, etc.

As I am saying all this, I realise that the works that call me, to which I respond, those whose call I *hear*, are often paintings, one or two paintings, which alone have sprung up from the whole of such and such an author's painted work. (I am deliberately swopping the semantics of pictorial art with that of the art of writing.) I cannot say that Rembrandt and Hantaï are of the same painting, and yet there is something in common, and this or these things in common, which are rather difficult

to define but which I am trying to grasp, precisely have to do with ‘dissidence’, the word I used as the title of the text I wrote about the works of Nancy Spero, this great, rebellious New York woman artist. It so happens that every time dissident acts are violent operations. By saying ‘operations’ I am quoting: it is the word, quite ordinary and informal in French, which Derrida re-inscribed and emphasised in *Veils* in order to squeeze out [*exprimer le jus*] its violence, by recalling then that the cause of the text which I had authored, and which is called ‘Savoir’, was an *operation*. As he always does, as he always signs, he obviously plays upon all the applications and resources of the word ‘operation’ in French. A word which, when it is translated into another language, does not work. This Latin word exists in all languages but ‘surgery’, not ‘operation’, is used in English to talk about the surgical act. This draws attention to what the ‘operation’ contains since it is at once the Latin *opus*, the making or producing of the *opus* (*opus* is the word kept in music: *such and such* an *opus*, i.e. *such and such* a work); but at the same time it goes with the operation, which is a way of making an *oeuvre* but which can also be – and here I am keeping within the remit of the French idiom – a military operation, therefore a manoeuvre. One can see the resources of violence emerging from this word. This can be a diversion [*détournement*] operation. The French word secretly associates *oeuvre*-making and a form of violence, but a form of violence whose aim is not necessarily destruction; a violence which would be at once productive or which could be curative. A surgical operation is supposed to redeem, improve or else limit damage, but one limits damage through damage. Hence this ambivalence, this damage in order to de-damage, this deconstruction of damage is carrying itself out.

Never do I find myself holding forth in front of a painting: in front of a painting I react. Either I hear nothing – I use the word ‘hear’ deliberately –, I remain apathetic, passionless, I am unimpassioned [*apassionnée*]; or, on the contrary, I am deeply *moved*, I am affected and of course I have absolutely no idea why. This is when my thoughts start drifting towards writing. In front of such and such a painting which touches me, I take notice of it, I *re-mark* the emotion. And I put it aside because I am on the side of *jouissance* . . . And only much later, sometimes, when summoned, solicited or else when I am writing, can I begin analytically processing this painting which moved me, having remained lit up in my obscurity. I began by asking it and wondering: what is this emotion made up of? Where does it come from? Where is it going? What does it say to me? I am not a ‘lover’ of paintings or of any other art, for that matter. I am somebody who lends herself to experiences which are vital, decisive, coming from elsewhere, and which of

course relate to 'me'. To 'me', to the me I do not know, my unconscious, my receptive surface. Which is in any case peculiar to art. One receives a work, whichever it is, only if it speaks to us in a language which is at once ours and not ours. It is at once me and not me. Same for literature, it's me-not-me.

I am thinking here of what I consigned in a text: 'There are in the life of my gaze a couple of paintings in the world that lead me. There is *The Flayed Ox*, Rembrandt's rawest self-portrait, there is *The Half-Buried* (or unearthed) *Dog*, Goya's self-portrait in yellow. There is *Pink Writing*, Hantai's self-portrait.'² (And I think I am right not to have said 'in my life' because it is a matter of optics.) Experiences which, by associating with one another, by settling [*se posant*], eventually make up a whole set and this set operates, inscribes something. *The Flayed Ox*, *The Dog*, *Pink Writing* . . . What is the dominant feature? What is it about? First of all, it is about the transposition of me into an animal, it is about animality. Or rather it is about the animal that therefore I am (following), as Derrida would say. But it is a transfigured animal, an animal in painting, and at the same time there is none more animal than those animals in painting. There is none more flayed, more cruelled, more prone to violence, than the flayed ox or the half-buried dog. I did not choose court puppies, even though, perhaps, they would seduce me. But it so happens that I did not choose them and that I was not chosen. I could have been lost in admiration for horses. But I also realise that, if I were to feel horsey [*faisais cheval*], it would be in front of certain hindquarters. I believe it is Géricault who circulates bits of horses, but incredible bits they are, not *the* beautiful horse: something else, precisely, a bit, a slice, a synecdoche. I realise that if I shudder, it is always around a scene which paints me, which paints me again, what we are. The equivalent of the pain which is in us. From this point of view *The Flayed Ox* is for me the absolute (I wrote so in my texts on Rembrandt). Thus it took me years before making up my mind to get into *The Flayed Ox* and say to myself: why precisely this *Flayed Ox*, which for me is the king, the emperor, *the* painting? Why does it appear to me in such majesty, with such power? Of course the painter's genius, Rembrandt's genius, is first of all what Genet would say: to deconstruct the accepted hierarchy, to make the secret of equivalence be perceived: one man is as good as another. Every man is worth every man [*Tout homme vaut tout homme*], not half. A calf worth a calf, not half [*Un vaut vaut bien un veau*]. A calf is already as good as an Ox [*Un veau vaut déjà un Bœuf*]. In his gallery there are Bethshebas, magnificent women, upper middle-class bourgeois, and, equivalently, there is the flayed ox, which is therefore the very man or the very woman. And the

day when I sat down at my table to write, when I settled myself in front of *The Flayed Ox* while saying to myself: 'let's talk', I had a real shock: of course, and it's the very mystery of a painting, God knows how much I had looked at this one painting, but I had never received its text; I had received the radiation, the blow, but not the text. When I settled myself to *read* the ox as one does a book, I suddenly saw the staircase I had never seen. The *Flayed Ox* is at once a sort of huge thoracic cave which can be explored via a purple and gold staircase. It is a staircase which leads to the mystery of life and death. I took it more than once, in my painterly texts: I saw that this ox is, basically, a sort of royal tent with the ribs inside forming a flight of steps . . . There are many other flayed oxen which are descended from Rembrandt's, which are themselves also spectacular, but the original, the one that leads, the leader, is this one. There emanates from it – I can only very briefly evoke it here – an incredible pain [*douleur*], but this pain takes form. To put it otherwise, it's a tragedy – the tragedy of the *tragos*, that is to say, of the goat [*bouc*] which is also destined to be flayed – it is *the* tragedy.

When one discovers *The Dog* by Goya – I discovered my own half-buried dog very late, twenty or thirty years late – one could say that it is the reverse of the Flayed *and* Beheaded Ox: one can only see the *head*, not the body of the dog. One cannot see the head of the ox, because he doesn't have one any longer, and one can see the head of the dog only, since the body has been made to vanish. For me these complement and associate with each other. I could suggest to the ox that he takes the dog as his head and to the dog that he takes the flayed ox as his body . . . But it's the same being, it's the same torture, it's the same absolutely brilliant movement of these very different painters, who do not belong to the same epoch, who do not have the same historical experiences but who have the same spiritual experiences. Rembrandt and Goya, masters, and very great artists, of cruelty in all its guises. The cruelty framed by Rembrandt since *The Anatomy Lesson*, the cruelty contextualised by Rembrandt's universe, a certain Holland – but painted with a scalpel, paintbrushes are scalpels – and then the fabulous cruelty witnessed by Goya, the cruelty of wars, of slaughters . . . Curiously the one painting by Goya which upsets me most profoundly does not drip with blood, on the contrary: on the canvas some *covering* is at work. Having seen it very late, at the Prado, I had a shock precisely because the beauty of this painting is the opposite of that of the *Flayed Ox*. Indeed it seems incredibly simple: it is an expanse of some motionless yellow in the upper part of the painting, another yellow expanse in the lower part, everything is dirty and saffron, and then there's this head whose fate cannot be decided by anybody. One will never know the story of this dog, but one

can tell it to oneself endlessly. The exact title of the painting is *The Half-Buried Dog* (*El perro semihundido*). One does not know what this half burial is. Is it being buried completely? Is it being inhumed or exhumed? Is this dog fleeing for safety or being saved? The painting is a question. It is the half painting [*tableau à demi*], the painting that makes us think about burial, about halves [*le demi*], about the already and the still [*l'encore*], etc. . . . But the vision is so powerful that I think it completely eliminates, represses or distances a realistic thought. The thought which would wonder in what circumstances, in which narrative there could be a bit, the third of a dog. What would the adventure be? Now this questioning is marginalised by the power of the thought which imposes itself. I could tell you millions of dog stories (including those of the dogs that lie buried in some narratives by Clarice Lispector), where doghood [*chienneté*] or *perritude* is associated also with life and death themes. For what the animal-that-we-are introduces or brings back towards us is the fate we reserve to the animal as if it were not us, and the fate we reserve to the animal is death, a violent death. This dog was The Dog so much that I saw nothing else but him. I came to forget about My Dog, the first and last of the dogs, Fips, the main character of the *Rêveries de la Femme Sauvage*, my brother and my son, the murdered saint of the Algiers garden.

And *Pink Writing*? Is it an animal? Perhaps. Yes, the ox is red, the dog is yellow, and the writing is pink. Of course it's not only that. Pink writing is a strange operation, an utterly extraordinary experiment of exhumation-inhumation: Hantaï spent a year of his life, a year which happens to be liturgical and most sacred, exhuming-inhuming, since the two gestures call each other up. What? Organs perhaps. Religious organs. *Entrails*. Entrails would be the Catholic heart and the Jewish heart, a cross and a star which are almost invisible, by dint of having been inhumed-exhumed for a year and covered over by successive layers of what has no thickness and no volume, that is to say, by writings [*écritures*]. Therefore inhumed-exhumed palimpsestically by a year of texts written in several inks. It would be like the ultimate metaphor of what takes place between the ox and the following, what comes following, in the life and death of an ox, the mortal life of an ox, or of a dog (it can be swapped, these are substitutes), until they get converted into text. At once therefore the ox writes, one writes the ox, one writes its pain, its martyrdom, and then, in the cruel sublimation which follows, there would be like a sort of dematerialisation, but one that remains very concrete, until the ox becomes writing. We're left with the leftovers of the ox, the ox colour [*couleur*], the ox-pain [*douleur*].

I'm not saying that Hantaï thought about that; this is where my story

of a gaze becomes activated, operates, performs the operation, for there's no reading of art without that operation, without an artist-reader being there in order to perform this deciphering. These paintings in progress are eventually left to a kind of repose: the artist, at a certain point, stops *operating* on the work and gives it over, like a flayed ox, to the following gaze, the spectator's or the reader's. There's a moment when the activity which surrounds these exhumations-inhumations is suspended on the producer's side in order to be entrusted, or given over, to the reader-consumer. This moment interests me a lot but I don't have much to say about it, because I think that the producing artists, Rembrandt, Goya, Hantai, must be feeling a painful moment of separation . . . I remember an artist who could not let go of his work and, although the painting was already in a museum, who happened to go back and add a drop of paint. He was a very great painter, I don't recall who as he is more than one; I wonder whether it was not Bonnard. In this case the museum or the gallery tells you 'no way, the thing is signed, allocated [*assignée*], detached, it's not yours any longer'. Painters experience this, they suffer from this separation. Writers can keep some sort of carnal bond with a text, even if it is published. Whereas painters feel that something has been ripped from their flesh, something which then circulates in the world of money.

One last remark: I don't know art history or very little. It's a big gap in my knowledge but perhaps it's a productive one. Nor am I an art critic. When I go and see paintings, it's the mysterious person I am within myself and the person that writes that look at the painting. I occasionally say to myself that I should know more about it, because of course if I knew more, I would read otherwise. My relationship to art is a childhood relationship, it's the writing in me that plays with the other writing and asks for, or listens to, these painted books. But out of self-interest, I must admit: I make them accountable for the sake of writing [*demande raison de l'écriture*], I say to them: in what ways are you a kind of writing? How do you write? And also: I myself paint what often painting tells me. Because the painter is somebody who is in a state of permanent afterthought and repentance [*repentir*], every work is a formidable accumulation of penitent afterthoughts. The painter, the artist, never stops touching up, correcting, correcting himself, displacing . . . That fascinates me: the artist in writing touches up and repents through his penitenti [*reprend et se repent*], but fewer times, I would say, because writing sets down [*dépose*] – at least mine does as well as that of most of the writers I am fond of, except Artaud – writing is an acrobat who moves about with wires. There are wires and threads [*files*], even if these are buried, even if they can be interrupted from time to time, there

is some thread. In painting there may not be any. Ultimately this is how I am in a relation of endless discussion with an art whose modalities are other than those of writing, but which proceeds from the same surges and the same torments.

* * *

Hélène Cixous now answers the question about the relation between feminine figures and vision in her approach to art and literature: from the metonymy of dissident women in Nancy Spero's works to the Proustean young girl read by Nerval, from those old women or Furies in Aeschylus as well as Demeter's and Persephone's mother-daughterly love in Partie and Illa, to Rembrandt's Jewish Bride.

The question of history, of culture's reserve of traces, wherever a special fate has been reserved to woman, is one of the paths I have taken, one of the galleries (in my galleries) which I have crossed, which I cross from time to time. 'Young girl', I could take this idiomatic indication as a paradigm, it's 'young girl woman' rather than 'old woman' since when one says woman one should be able to mean women of all kinds and ages, but it's obviously 'young girl woman', that is to say, a threatened figure, destined for violence or rape. This inflection in the question brings us back to the huge tradition of all cultural productions and all that belongs to the history of civilisations, where, in our time and age, a reflection with a feminist emphasis would by necessity find a place: one must indeed note the violence which is most specifically inflicted to *what is woman* in the whole of humanity. When I was speaking of the animal, I meant the universal. But, by association and in fairness, one can establish a relation of equivalence between the animal, woman, the poet, the Jew, the deportees . . .³ The list is endless of all those who find themselves thrust to one side, half inhumed and not exhumed, and among whom one can cite a great number of minorities and, besides minorities, one majority, the woman majority.

For example, let's return to Rembrandt, whose force carries beyond agencies of repression and who therefore deals with woman in splendid fashion, who loves woman. One can see he loves her because there are not only charming young girls in his works but also all kinds of old women, which means he is not guided by appetite, by a predatory instinct or by a classical phallogocratic structure, but by amorous curiosity towards all forms of human becoming. Now it is true, and art testifies to that, that there is a myth-making projection in most works, literary works as well, which assigns a *role* to woman as a person, and this role is very classically (with the exception of great men of letters who go

beyond that) what one knows, and what has been noted and taken into account by psychoanalysis, for example when busying itself with the question of hysteria. One hystericises women by wanting to fill their mouths with sand, by wanting to shut them up, by treating them like dogs . . . Literature and arts in general bear witness to this peculiar fate of which I'll say – for we're living in a time when one can almost turn back a little – that the acme of the awareness came with the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth century when historically women started fighting for women. I say the twentieth century because we're at a time when we still think in terms of 'women's liberation movement', and this is historically dated: the 1960s, the 1970s. What is called 'women's liberation movement' springs into existence, emerges from ground and silence [*sort de terre et sort de taire*], from being silenced, at the beginning of the XXth century, when women's struggles begin in the West. And these are real women's struggles, with the struggles of women at work, whom work makes aware both of their usefulness and of the scorn in which their work, equal to men's, is held – these are all the women's struggles in the world of workers. In the parallel, bourgeois world there's the sudden, and by the way most interesting, emergence of women who start struggling for a voice, to give their voice, to have a say, to have the right to vote. This begins in England with the suffragettes, who were thus called disparagingly because they were asking for *suffrage*, the right to put forward a shard, a broken piece, in order to vote.⁴ *Suffrage*, what a word! What suffering breath [*souffle*]! What raging outbursts . . .

In France the first novel will have been the portrait of a great woman by a great woman. And should one have forgotten the Princess of Clèves and Madame de La Fayette, the immutably phallogocentric *Head* of the French State has taken it upon himself to recall to what extent phallogocentrism is insatiably swollen with the powerless desire to eliminate, nowadays as much as in the days of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the wondrous achievements of women's intelligence.

Our century is a century when, in successive waves and taking different forms, the question of women's silence and ban comes to the fore with piercing intensity, even if previously, in literature and in art (more than in philosophy), one has long seen and heard woman as being. But in literature, well beyond politics' mental closure, there will always have been a place for radiant women. Sometimes in a manner which is already transforming and deconstructive, for example in a certain number of Stendhal's texts . . . At the same time, if, in the extraordinary greatness of Balzac's works, women can be found whose power – their know-how and ability to do things [*le savoir-faire et le pouvoir faire*] – is recognised, most of the time Balzac's women characters are women-victims,

these are duchesses or fallen women, who have strengths but who are mired in passionate love affairs and masculine speculations, and whose fate is settled in advance, even if and although they are loved, or *because* they are loved, according to the paradigm of *Une passion dans le Désert* or of *La Peau de Chagrin* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*), sentenced to death . . . What about 'women' in Proust? This is an extremely complex theme. Proust's dissident sexuality is at work, and this dissident sexuality is such that 'female' characters in Proust have an extraordinary aura but as *amphibians*. Albertine, Madame de Guermantes and all the others, except mamma and the adorable grandmother, are amphibians: one does not really know what kind of women they are, if they are women, rogues and chimeras, and then these women are *looked at*. Looked at in particular by this narrator of genius. One can see him suspending this form of scopic drive directed towards woman, who is thereby transformed into an object, only in love that does not *look*, but that gazes upon the sublime faces of his mother and grandmother. Otherwise these women, these Gilbertes or Guermantes, are looked at, phantasmatic and fascinating. The upshot of that can be found in Marguerite Duras, where there are only *looked-at-women*. Fixed and pinned on butterfly plates as objects for the one who looks.

At the time of the 'women's movement' I wrote *Partie*, a most peculiar book, which I wrote for fun weaving different mythical or mythological sources, one of them being contemporary mythology, the myth-making, myth-creating, mytho-poietic discourse of the 1970s, half-psychoanalytical half-philosophical, predominantly Lacanian, where the question of feminine sexuality, of women's desire, of femininity, felt as unknown and unexplorable from the point of view of the gazekeeper [*regardien*], keeps being asked obstinately. All these questions on which I was reared in my salad days and which have always seemed to me to be exhuming-inhuming questions, and which first bespeak curiosity, the fact that they come from men of course, that these men are taken aback and that they look at this *thing* as a bizarre animal, upon which besides, as men, they bring to bear discourses in which few women recognise themselves . . . this stems in particular from Freud's declarations which for long, for very long, have left their mark on 'modern' mentalities and which say that there is only one libido, and that it is masculine. In desire or rather joy, woman's ability to climax is made secondary, it is a sort of consequence of this uniqueness, of this primacy, all being boiled down to the one and this one is masculine and phallic. As the world was resounding with this myth-making insistence, I wrote *Partie* for fun whose title, through homonymy, immediately says that there's something ungraspable in *partie*: she's gone, it's a part, there's a party, it's

also a game of cards, a part of the sexual parts, etc. . . . You can decline its polysemy and homonymy to infinity. Thus I circulate in this text both the echoes of these theories which were applied like grids or prison gates [*grilles*], and the myths of yore, which we inherit; even if nowadays one no longer knows them at all, these Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythologies are permanently at work in all political thoughts and positions. From these most active Judeo-Greco-Latin mythologies stems the eternal allocation of roles, women having a certain type of destiny which is always linked to masculine supremacy. The myth poets of Antiquity knew what they were doing: they were putting to fable the socio-political structures of their civilisation. They were the first analysts. Besides psychoanalysis never did without resorting to myth in order to prop itself up and to illustrate itself. When Freud commits himself, he does so with Oedipus or Moses in front of him. What would he have done without these mythologies? Mythologies about which one can say that they are pre-Freudian: it's been the same reading of the gendered universe for millennia, it hasn't changed. The marvellous force of ancient myths is that they poeticise what will become theorised later in analytical or philosophical discourse, for example in the thought which comes after and since psychoanalysis, that is to say, Derridean philosophy. When I write *Partie* I weave all that for I realise that there are only symptoms in the genetics of mythologies and that these symptoms are figurative, or as a Freudian Lacan would say, metaphors. I'm not fond of totally abstract non-figurative painting. I respond to figure rather, even if it is a deconstructed figure, for me there's a figure. Figure must be-fall [*Il 'faut' figure*]. Figure failing us [*faussant compagnie*], dis-figuring itself, pre-figuring or over-figuring itself.

Let's take the fascinating, totally unknown, forgotten, neglected story of Demeter and Persephone: it's an extraordinary story. Demeter is a goddess of the earth, of fertilities, the apple-of-whose-eye is her beloved daughter Persephone who has a mishap for when she wanders across fields in the happiness of her juvenile youth, her ill luck is programmed. As she plucks white flowers which are supposed to be narcissus, indeed she bends sort of carelessly. Her most distant double could be Little Red Riding Hood. As Little Red Riding Hood she forgets the prudence which girls are taught: 'careful, don't wander off on your own because the wolf's going to eat you'. These are figures of the unconscious, which appear as such in dreams. All of a sudden the wolf is there and eats her. Demeter is the mother who would have advised in vain. At this moment comes the one who is hungry, who gets out of his lair and eats her up. It's Hades, the god of the underworld. It's the fate of any Kore, of the young girl. She is at once raped and married by Hades. Rapeseused

[*Violépousée*]. This brings about mythical and religious consequences because Demeter belongs to Hades' family. It's also an incestuous story. The mother goes and pleads with the uncle, the brother, the rapist, so that from time to time he lends her her daughter back on earth. This brings about rites, festivals of return to earth (as for my half-dead dog), of recall underground, linked to figures, figures of flower and fruit . . . The gaze is interrupted: because she's become invisible, then she will become visible again. This intermittence is also similar to vegetation cycles-rites. All this can be found in texts by those wonderful Hellenists who have begun working on myths analytically, like Jean-Pierre Vernant and his heirs. When I was little, I read mythology passionately without realising I was reading analysis and that I was reading our own stories. When I wrote *Partie* I wove in a *moiré*, mosaic text all these reveries, all these phantasms, all these violent scenes in which, each time, one can see at once the removal [*enlèvement*], in all the senses of this word, the wrenching, the uprooting of the feminine figure and, afterwards, its occasional return. This return is linked to something which is very beautiful and on which I keep insisting (but when I did so at that time, I was much less aware than now): to complicity, to solidarity, to the love between mother and daughter, to the mother-daughter lineage trying to resist the violence of sovereigns, of phallocratic bosses. The sources for these most political scenes have always been for me ancient legends, even before I could analyse their political, analytical contemporary message. There's an extraordinary freedom in myth, one can do the impossible: when one is dead, one comes back, one can go back down to hell, etc. . . . As if what cannot be atoned for always came with a phantasmatic atonement through poetic grace. And we owe this to the unbelieving tradition of Greco-Roman religions, because they believe and do not believe . . . There are gods, goddesses, but one knows to what extent they are anthropomorphic and to what extent they are the representations of drives . . . There are many interdictions, but there are some for gods and goddesses too, everybody pays, spends their time paying. Which is very reassuring. Everybody pays, including the gods who are supposed not to pay, that is to say, the main gods, the father gods. It's very 'moral', after all: totally immoral, but of an immorality which constantly comes with some sort of ethical retribution. I dare say that when the Greeks and the Romans were living it, it must have helped them a lot, nothing being stable, nothing being irreversible since there can be a return, even if it's very short-lived. The blind see. Tiresias sees all the better since he is blind – this seeing unseeing [*non-voyance*] obviously matters to me in particular.

Hélène Cixous finally answers some contribution from the audience about the new exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, elles@centrepompidou, women artists in the collections of the National Museum of Modern Art, 2009–2010.

In the world of art, as regards women's presence, this is where we are: we're still at the stage of affirmative action. One must give way in a voluntarist manner, which is absolutely scandalous for it is 'the least one could do'. Nancy Spero, to whom I paid a tribute in a text, is a great woman artist who must be 83 years old,⁵ who was in the prime of life and art in the 1950s and who suffered tremendously from the marginalisation of women in New York. She was the founder of a group of women artists who demonstrated with all their strengths against the exclusion they were the victims of in art galleries, in museums, although they were magnificent artists. In part of her works, which I am very fond of, she sticks out her tongue at those artists who were then crowing, who could be great male artists but who attached no importance at all to what women could achieve, nor to the non-place that was earmarked for them. The political question poses itself interminably for it is also true that when one makes room for women by putting them all together as women, one makes a reductive gesture because one limits and categorises them as women. 'Men' are the universal, women are half the universal. No artist feels like being partitioned thus. Everyone wants, and it's natural, to be able to be received and read in all their complexity: woman with man, animal, bare or dressed tree, and more than that . . . That's what art is about: a crossing. But art does not regulate or settle the world. This also gives rise to attitudes of denial. In the 1970s I was annoyed by the fact that some people, women whom otherwise I liked very much, could not accept the passage, the crossing, the other's dye rubbing off on them [*teinture par l'autre*]. There were no sexual differences, they said, one is neuter, and that settled it. It is much simpler to 'settle' by neutralising. If, on the contrary, one does not neutralise, then one is *in truth*, and thus in these contradictions which traverse 'truth': trans-truth [*transvérité*].

Translated by Laurent Milesi

Notes

1. We have gathered in this introduction some fragments (revised by the author) of Hélène Cixous's dialogue with Joana Masó, Eric Prenowitz, and Marta Segarra which took place on 30 May 2009 during Hélène Cixous's seminar at the Maison Heinrich Heine in Paris.

2. Hélène Cixous, *Le Tablier de Simon Hantäi* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), Author's Note (trans. L. Milesi).
3. '[. . .] the massacre of all that is 'woman' on the Soil of the World, woman the poets, woman the revolutionaries, woman the dreamers, woman the Vietnamese people [. . .] woman the Jews, woman those deportees' ('Spero's Dissidances').
4. This refers to the Latin etymology of 'suffrage', which is recalled in the former practice of using 'an object, as a pebble, a marked paper, or the like [. . .], to indicate a vote given'; see *OED*, s. v. 'suffrage, *n.*', 3. b. [Trans. note.]
5. Unfortunately Nancy Spero died a few months after this seminar by Hélène Cixous, on 18 October 2009.

Spero's Dissidances

A Season in Hell

Spero, she screams, two notes she lets out every couple of panels or paintings on war, torture or cruelty, just as a bombing is followed by an incredible, all-white silence, just as, after the silence between the eleven hours of the deadly night, one can hear, like the song of the early morning bird soon before the second bird's reply, one can hear the sing-song call: 'Do you live?' one of them whistles, *Spero*, the other answers. *Spero*: I hope. 'Do you still live?' I believe so, yes, I hope so. That two-note song is her own scream, which she utters *after* the initial *explosion*. First the disaster, then Survival's somersault. From the cadence of the repetition and the renewed dance, one can really see that Nancy Spero is of the poets' species.

A poet in painting. As a poet, with the poets' tattered soul, she begins with the end. Today is the end of the world, Violence and Oblivion trample the Earth underfoot, ten thousands years since Marduk killed Tiamat, he has disembowelled her, eviscerated and flattened her, drubbed her, turned her flesh into a fine paper film, made lampshades with her skin and soap with her fat, and it goes on, the massacre of all that is 'woman' on the Soil of the World, woman the poets, woman the revolutionaries, woman the dreamers, woman the Vietnamese people on which Helikopter, the Americans' god of devastation, drops its shitloads of excremental bombs, spews its runny torrents of poisoned sperm, ten thousand years it's been going on, the end of the world, woman the Jews, woman those deportees, Helikopter puts the humans through its grinding swastika'd blades, nowadays as in the days of Marduk in the shower of sperm shells and phallic turds, how not to say, she thinks, that all those who are born under the sign 'woman' (that is, all those who are for the flowers, for laughter, for the splendour of daybreaks, for the delights of running on Greek sands, for Archimedes' overwhelming

jubilation, the scientists, the poets, the children, the champions *running on and for life*) are doomed to the fate called *Victimation*, what awaits those magnificent creatures is butchery, the body's quartering, decapitation, the dismembering already experienced by Osiris the god-born-for-death, the dispersal of the pieces or else, if you prefer, exclusion, banishment on the spot, the ablation of presence, the instant transformation into nothing, the suspension of being. Helikopter or the US Armed Forces version of the animal Geryon – the aircraft discovered by Dante, the giant amphibian, the legged anaconda, its wings and flanks painted with knots and roundlets, whose bulky frame is used to carry the two travellers in canto XVII from *Inferno*.

And now she, Spero, raises her head of hope [*espérance*], her minute human grasshopper's head, and she observes the morals of the Vile Solar Cockroach without blinking. With a powerful leap of the visionary imagination she reaches the top of the stage in the upper right-hand corner of the Universe. From there she can see all that the cowardly humans do not want to see. She has Timon's fiery gaze on Athens. The world seen from the Dragon Helikopter is a puddle full of the floating corpses of human insects whose Massacres are repeated. In Spero as in Dante, Artaud and Mandelstam, Truth manifests itself in images of a terrifying poetry, of the kind that can be seen in the haunting looks of yet untamed little children: it is this opera of nightmares, where the serpents and rats crawl through the holes into the entrails of the soul, where daddy is a bloodthirsty wolf, where nobody is unaware that History is a cannibal. She strips War bare. She raises appearances below the word 'Disaster', below the word 'terror', which name and classify appalling facts, now she catches sight of the teeming crude mysteries which surpass the strengths of description. What cannot be told in words alone she tells in images, hues and cries. As we have known since Bosch, *drawing is dauntless*. She draws what cannot be erased. Spero, the illuminated artist of atrocities, joins the masonry of the Witnesses of the Worst: Guernica's visionary, the martyred painter of War Disasters. She belongs to the great company of the Plague victims and of the Watchers, those that See. *They* know that the World Brain is teeming with engines of death and that, in order to give Survival a chance, one must fly over the sidereal void of a chain of poetic lookalikes with bodies of hermaphrodite angels.

Wherever she goes, in Europe, in High Antiquity, in the Middle Ages, among the pagans or the Christians, the phallosidious gods are everywhere the same, killing and trampling. What's the point of having been born? she thinks. If I'd known! Then an enormous Anger grips her, its burning tongues penetrating her chest, set her heart ablaze, an Anger bigger than herself, and now her fright and sadness turn into intoxicat-

ing strengths, and at the very moment when she laments and believes herself to be discouraged, she feels that this wounded heart won't die nonetheless, that there is in her a strength stronger and a light more luminous than nothingness and its monstrous circus, and while she wends her way between the craters blasted open by the bombs, her head surrounded by the slobbery beasts of napalm and the swarms of locusts from the apocalypse, while she walks along the Walls of the Museums in search of an entrance door, but there is no door for coloured beings, small children, and woman peoples, only prohibition signs, while she runs under the black defecations of regiments of eagles, while the maws of the Male Bombs holler: 'you will always stay *Outside*', and she staggers along in the dust of Empires, up surges a new joy from the inferno of horrors, allowing a marvellous, powerful person to *Soar* whom she carries within herself and who she is, and at the moment when the Anger within her draws its shrill scream, from this Red Scream wafts lightly upwards, just like the consoling curve of rainbows outlined against the black mush of hurricanes, the silhouette of a person still alive, who will always fly over the destruction, who lives a life in which death does not triumph and beauty cannot perish.

Sometimes this Apparition, this body whose curve is adorable, mysteriously adorable, adorable like the very mystery of Grace, is called *Nut*. For indeed she resembles in every feature the *Sky goddess* [Cielle] under whose canopy the Egyptians sheltered their dreams of immortality, in times immemorial when they had the secret of the Book of the Dead. Nut or Hope. I can imagine Spero's joy when, one day (I don't know which one, it's her secret), some day, she discovers the exact image, the very drawing of her own soul, and when, in a flash of revelation, like Proust receiving in his mouth the message of immortality concealed in a mouthful of madeleine dunked in tea, she *recognises* the *form-thing* which *is herself*. I can imagine the scream which wells up in her throat. It is an Athletic Hallelujah. She has her Vision. Her Vision writes itself like a musical note beyond the stave. Like half a divine minim. O! U ∩ ! 'For only when we meet them do we come anywhere near this exaltation which causes our own words to enchant us and others to say: it's beautiful!' Proust murmurs.

Henceforth Nancy Spero's whole work, immense in time and scope, is driven, escorted by *Nut* the revealed, on the wings of her dream [*la révélee. La Rêve ailée*].

She breathes in [*respire*] deeply the air of grace: I was about to die and I'm not dead, oh Life! Everything resounds, during those fifty years of panting, from this worried, exalted feeling which stirs within Augustine's *Confessions*.

What does the Saint confess? The vast book of memory has a key. It is only three words long: *Sero te Amaui*. Three words whose breathing sigh is redolent of all the mingled sadness and joy of the world. 'I have loved you too late' says the Saint. That is his confession and his genius. To whom does he address this sublime, unthinkable confession? To Beauty. To God *loved in the feminine of his Beauty*. To Beauty as the femininity of God. *I have loved you too late. Sero-te-amaui!* From those three words arises the most beautiful profession of faith, the founding act of the mystery of love, for aeons of human time: I have loved you *sero*. *Sero*: too late. Too late, but still not too late. For while I did not love you yet, oh Beauty, while I had not *seen* you yet, you already loved me. You were saving me, you have saved me, you found me before I found you. You were waiting for me. You were hoping for me. *Spero*, I hope [*j'espère*], Beauty thought. Yet the Saint was lacking one letter. Only one letter. *Sero*. There was a delay. There's always a delay. You were with me, and I wasn't with you. What I have just recalled, this formula of a pain which both can and cannot be atoned for, this delay which will soon turn back and open onto grace, is the history of Beauty, the history of the work of art, the history of the work of Spero.

I resume. At the beginning there is *Sero*.

At the beginning everything was black, the paintings that came to me were blackening before my very eyes, she remembers. In those days the words that come are led by *No*, Nancy's *No*, in all languages, *No*, *Nein*, *Nem*. It is the *No* of the rebel artist. A *No* for a *No*, a tooth for a tooth. The *No* of Stephen Dedalus: 'I shall not serve'. I shall not bend [*plierai*], I shall not pray [*prierai*], I shall scream: *I do not challenge*. The *no* of Ingeborg Bachmann to the nightmare Father in *Malina*. In those days she, Spero has no visage, no visa, and no passport: unacceptable. What men do to men makes you want to yell. What men do to women is Hell. *Do?* What am I saying! *Undo*. Pound [*Défont. Défoncent*]. This is why she starts (to) paint, in order to scream 'I do not'. One had to scream, not to make oneself heard but to hear oneself. She screams. In painting. She paintscreams. Signs the screams in painting. The explosions, the blows, the deaths, the prisons, she screams them out. See this extraordinary *manifesto* of the Spero Rebellion titled *Homage to New York*. She screams it out in 1958. I adore it: it makes me scream with laughter. It is the first of her self-portraits. A Self-Portrait of Nancy and Spero as two clowns posing next to the tumescent Monument to the Abstract, which is erected in the guise of a funerary phallus, a tongue of stone flanked by Spero and Nancy's two tongues, well alive and pulled downwards. A stroke of genius: you'd believe you're in an Expressionist abstract version of a deconstructed Midsummer Night's Dream. The ass is not who one

thinks. From the Abstract only illegible initials are left. One has eyes only for the two lovely clowns, the bad pupils wearing dunce's caps, the mutant pranksters, fools right out of a necropolitical comedy. No provocation, says the thing animated by the couple, *I do not challenge*, all those stony phalluses, those forefingers pointing obscenely, those hollow consonants, I do not challenge them. Preterition but also a thumb on the nose, sign language. A conjuration in both senses of the word, that is, evocation and exorcism. Chicago against New York, it is the Trojan War, Tiamat sticks her tongue out at Marduk, figurative art doesn't give a damn about abstraction. Nancy and Spero do not *take up* the challenge – they (masculine-feminine) ape the stony pretentiousness of the Erected. She does not challenge [*défi*], she slips away [*se défile*]. She mistrusts [*se méfie*] the challenge. What she proposes is an altogether other challenge, an alternative challenge, a dis-figuration of 'tomb' into 'tongue', a liquidation of stone, a mock-homage à la Lewis Carroll. Instead of the dry, the wet, instead of the capitalistic inventory, the miserly cipher of glory, two ostensibly clandestine, clownish dullards.

A manifesto in the guise of a Farewell: at the very moment when Spero opens her eyes, the abstract expressionists are in power. A whole history of modern art stands erect in front of her and lays down the law. She cannot bear the dilution of cruelty in abstraction. As we know, she is not the only one who wants to *fuck up* the museum wall, not the only one who says 'fuck off' to the history of art. Spero the clown astride on Phallelikopter's back has a most powerful, most insane guide to Inferno: the thunderstriking Artaud the Momo, the martyred predecessor who spat out the famous text of April 1947.

Ten years since language left,
and that in its place came
this atmospheric thunder
 this lightning,
in front of the aristocratic squeezing
 of beings
of all the noble beings
 of ass,
cunt and coc . . .

Dix ans que le langage est parti,
qu'il est entré à la place
ce tonnerre atmosphérique
 cette foudre,
devant la pression aristocratique
 des êtres
de tous les êtres nobles
 du cu,
con, de la pine . . .

Ten years, in 1958, since Artaud screamed 'Ten years since language left . . . ?

and now the letter of the 'madman', kept in a lunatic asylum for pulling some exorcist moves, comes to Spero right on time to draw the truth from the grave

What will Artaud have bequeathed her? First the paradox of the

letter: language has left, *the letters remain*. Strokes of genius, the *Codex Artaud* set out on a grammatic revolution. The task is to resurrect the Deadword [*Mômort*], to rewrite Artaud, to help him up by seeding him again with his own letters. Dying letters, letters nearing death. *Skeletons*. Dead letters. Remains. Codices are the becoming drawing of the letters of Artaud's name. *Spero operates, s, p, o, re*, one decomposes the name and rebuilds the world by paronomasia on the name of the world, from name to world.

She will have invented the extraordinary beauty of the body letter, of the body of the letter, of the body to the letter, of the body literalised in Π, in pi, in η.

We are letters pending delivery/in suffering. We are written (texts). Through magically mixing the pictorial and the literal, she causes the drawing to spring up within the letter. One must push the letter as one pushes out a silent scream. By reiterations. To the point of Geometry. One returns to the origin of the text as a weave. Rediscovering the drawn, the drawnness [*le dessin, la dessinabilité*] known to the East – whereas the West has no calligraphic tradition.

Spero is a response to Artaud's complaint lodged in those terms:

SEULEMENT DE SEPTEMBRE 1937 A AUJOURD'HUI IL M'EST ARRIVÉ QUE J'AI ÉTÉ ARRETÉ. MIS EN PRISON À DUBLIN, DÉPORTÉ EN FRANCE. INTERNÉ AU HAVRE. TRANSFÉRÉ DU HAVRE A ROUEN. DE ROUEN À SAINT-ANNE À PARIS. DE SAINTE-ANNE À VILLE-ÉVRARD. DE VILLE-ÉVRARD A CHEZAL-BENOÎT ET DE CHEZAL-BENOÎT À RODEZ. TOUTES MES AFFAIRES M'ONT ÉTÉ PRISES PAR LA POLICE ET TOUS MES PAPIERS ON ÉTÉ PERDUS. ARTAUD

ONLY FROM SEPTEMBER 1937 TO THIS DAY I HAPPENED TO HAVE BEEN ARRESTED. PUT IN JAIL IN DUBLIN, DEPORTED TO FRANCE. COMMITTED IN LE HAVRE. TRANSFERRED FROM LE HAVRE TO ROUEN. FROM ROUEN TO SAINT-ANNE IN PARIS. FROM SAINTE-ANNE TO VILLE-ÉVRARD. FROM VILLE-ÉVRARD TO CHEZAL-BENOÎT AND FROM CHEZAL-BENOÎT TO RODEZ. ALL MY BELONGINGS HAVE BEEN TAKEN BY THE POLICE AND ALL MY PAPERS HAVE BEEN LOST. ARTAUD

and which she records (thus all is lost except the complaint). Thus all the – lost – papers return, ghosts and hosts, gathered and replayed. And likewise all the – lost – body pieces are glued back on the sperical paper-space. S does her job as a New York Isis. She picks up Artaud, his débris and waste, and makes *speroglyphs* out of them. As if she, SP, were a PS of Artaud's. His postscript, his *après coup*.

Artaud, art ho! not at all, Artaud's mortar [*pas trop tôt, marteau d'Artaud*],
Tardy, tarot

I couldn't have borne to know
You alive your
despair.
Spero

These speroglyphs are Artaud's lost language which she will have found, and grafted onto her sacred scroll.

Second, the Momo will have given her the example, the strength, the courage, the urgency to *Talk-cause* [causer] *a scandal in Painting*. Art, no, we're not going to let them confiscate his thought. Art does not mean or want to say nothing. It sees, it only enters into a struggle. *It means/wants to say*: 'it *means/wants to say*', it does not only mean, as the idiom leads us to hear and understand, it signifies: it is translatable. It means or wants to say *Want*. There is something to say. Spero has so much to say to *us*. Her mind really made up to deal blows to those she addresses. Her letters-drawings have an address, harangue and apostrophise the passers-by violently. Spero *Wants* to free herself from the US spectre which parasitically lives off the world's body but she also *Wants*, through the shock of her drawings, to shake us and drag us out of our somnolence. Spero is a fighter. She attacks the sleep of conscience, but also the supports, stability, art in the Museum of the Blokes, the static, stagnant state of the work of art. Besides, no support. One must let the creatures loose under the vast sky. Deliver the Prometheuses. Let loose the drawing, whether it leaks air or water.

Illuminations. Time for women

If Hell is a denunciation of man's deathly march, Paradise is a celebration of woman's flight. You're destroying the world? I must toss the surviving women into the heights. Who will prevent me from inventing another world? Another body? 'Women': ornithological phalanxes, these groups of exuberant female travellers are the expression of *the instinct of insurrection*. After the Helikopters, the celestial Swimmers, *unbound*. Below, under torture, they were *bound*, tied hand and foot, shackled, handed over, sacrificed, women hostages of sadisms. In that other time, under this name 'women', a crowd of fairies rewrite another history. And they may not be putting on airs but they are *the queens of air*.

The Speraic women are like the verse of the Divine Comedy: they rush forward, recede, from terror, do not come to rest, do not rest, escape but answer one another, are alone, but take turns like powerful musical notes. So strong, running champions, solitary stars, surviving goddesses, leapers over the abyss. From their beauty, their air of victory, their arms raised like wings, their steps eager to dance, I guess they are the daughters of the dream of freedom of a female being tossed into the invisible prisons by the old history. They are the emanations of an indignant soul. From Hell's matter she derives invincible Prides.

Let's leave the sons running after the father, they say, let them follow in the footsteps of the – capital – beheading lord, we the daughters are going to vanish into thin air [*jouer les filles de l'air*] and clear off with our tongues. And breaking in a single leap with the old logic that subdues speech – the thought of Father and Sons, Inc. – they briskly leap across the virgin space. Where do their acrobatic flights take us? To the edgeless, bottomless, ageless depth where, by dint of flitting about and appealing to lost and found times, by dint of warding off past and future millennia, by dint of prophesying the end of terror and the birth of a new body, they succeed in hallucinating the return of the good goddess, *Nut the female Sky* [*Cielle*], who left us long ago and forgot us under the earth. A marvellous weightlessness follows the era pounded by Bombs. Beauty returns from exile. Venus, whom one had stopped believing in, comes to be reborn anew. The age of *Dissidances* has begun. Unbound, absolved coming from all countries, mischievous, how delightful and funny they are, these bodies which *no longer allow themselves to be upset!* These bodies which no longer submit to opposition, to attribution, to prohibition, to exclusion-inclusion. If I fancy a bunch of penises, they (masculine-feminine) say, these bodies absolved from sexual opposition, I pluck one out; if I want more than one, who will prevent me from enjoying them as I wish, the more breasts one has, the more one feeds, the more the merrier.

I suppose others would call this pluralisation 'fetishism'. I myself believe that Spero's joyous heroines are more the *couldn't-care-less* type, tenants of the unconscious, which, as we know, doesn't know what 'no' means, and which cultivates grafting and supplements. This is why we *recognise*, with an exclamation of delight, the elegant *Revenante* with the delicate polysexual organs like the fruits of the tree of good and evil. We had seen her in a dream, this female being with Leda's swanlike necks, her little triangular breasts lined up like children's drawings, her long thin Josephine Baker legs wearing or perhaps crowned with stiletto heels, and slim as a graceful warrior. And who does not pose. Who moves all the time. Who moves time. Makes it scream with laughter. And yet . . .

Let one sneak to the deep of the soul, into the workshop; Spero is a

slender [*ténue*] woman who doesn't really know how to behave herself [*se tenir*], who speaks with a sincere anxiety, clears her throat, stands up, a light shadow behind the radiant bodies of her creatures. One of Giacometti's filiform figures. Which endows her ebullient characters with a minutest trembling, as if those aeronautical figures could feel under their wings, under their leaps, that their author is secretly a fragile woman bearing the marks of the tortures from a bygone time, a faltering woman who is pursued and hounded. It is this surmounted awkwardness which lends to her creatures the uncanny charm which softens the excess of triumph. All these beings belong to the secret company of the 'It's too good (to be true)'. They have Marlene Dietrich's disturbing power, the power of the mask of hyperfemininity, as if, having been previously unsure of being suitable, suited 'women', women programmed-to-be-feminine at the service of the Phallus, they were *laying it on thick* today. They mock the desire which they arouse, as do the Divas, these great enigmatic mezzo-sopranos whose hermaphrodite voices are lodged beneath Tancrede's cuirasses and the gold trimming of operatic costumes. 'Who are I?' those Divine Comedians ask us, haunting the ceilings of installations or the long murals of Subway Station 66. Now shrouded in the golden folds of a mosaic cloak, now carried away in a dazzling circus number in the Theatre of Femininity as in the masterpiece with the amusing name of *Premiere*. One can find in *Premiere* the clownish spirit of the *Homage*. In 1993 as in 1958, the little mercurial demon of twin bisexuality is up to its tricks. *Premiere* is a hilarious case of homonymy transposed into image. It is a phantasmatic machine. A woman is also another woman. A woman is more than one woman and a bit of a bloke too. *Premiere* is a title, it is the proper noun of an installation which frolics on the walls of a Viennese theatre. It is the name of the first performance of a show. It is a French word in English. It designates the person who comes at the top of a listing. Who can assert to be the First here? *Premiere* is always in the process of getting back on top of things. *Premiere* dances its way out of chronology. The last is also the First. *Premiere* is always first, whatever its place in the syntax which flits about in all directions. Each woman comes from another woman. Each woman is the first of her species. It is a fairy-like version of the chicken-and-egg. Each one comes before, overtakes, recalls, chases, follows each one. A woman is a whole set of women. Each time unique and each time the same returning with a difference. With the difference of a today. *Premiere* is a flying jugglers' number. A genealogical merry-go-round. Womans [*La femmes*], always more than one, sway(s) and dance(s) from one incarnation to the other. *Premiere* is the Afternoon of a Fauness. *Avatar dance*. A female dancer is outlined as an aboriginal figure rushing

eastwards while at the same time, an Egyptian siren, she dives and raises the same arms that open in the provoking flight of a Mistinguett wearing long black gloves. This number is performed without a ground, in the imagination of the Woman Dreamer, who for the occasion has taken the appearance of Yvette Guilbert, at least what remains of the character once immortalised by Toulouse-Lautrec. The Spero Music-Hall is the fancy version of the Theatre of Cruelty but with Mallarméan erudition. Everything happens as if in Oneiria or else, as Shakespeare would say, in Illyria. With the Truth effects of which the Dream is the commander. These processions of musician angels, these parades of Vulvic-Girls, these be vies of Promethean Bacchantes, these filchers of fire, these droll mixtures of Ulysses and Siren, who dash along a roll of comic strip, carrying under their arm the penis pinched from some drowsy One-eyed Phallograt, all these characters illustrate – against all odds and the century’s clichés which apply themselves to selling some image-of-woman-as-passive, etc. etc. etc. – the Life’s Virtue of the one who is always the First to Laugh-and-Run [*à Rire et à Courire*], in all circumstances. She runs after no one, She is the very Running. What does she do? *She Soars*. She substitutes some *Sore* for *Sort* (fate), the *Soaring* that she is. The Premiere is Polyglot. If a tongue locks her in, she comes out the other. She kicks about with arms and legs, toys with condensation, substitution, propagation, replacement. She is in a continuous *Quotation*. She is like the quotation from Dante cited by Mandelstam. *The Speroquotation* is not a borrowed quotation, is not a repatriation of the representations-of-woman, and is not a claim of ownership. It is a cicada. A grasshopper. A hope [*espérance*]. Clutching the air, she no longer lets go. She climbs up in irrepressible ascents, recites, excites, resurrects, again!

Also, by dint of quoting and surexciting, *she will have incited* [*suscité*] *the female Sky* [*Cielle*], where henceforth her peoples multiply. *La Cielle, si elle*.

It is under the *Ceiling* hung like a tender shield, like a silk for its revolutions, that I see the most moving, the most secret, and the most dissident self-portrait of the artist scurry away: it is this ‘Old’ ‘Vietnamese’, overwhelming with Truth, multiplied by the Speed and brevity of Life. The Vietnamese is her mental double. The Vietnamese is an old woman and a woman always young. She is the soul of Vietnam. She is the eternal young Old Woman. She is the principle of Vitality. In dreams Spero sees herself running as fast as her legs can carry her, she is young-old, Vietnamerican she smokes, accelerates, with a frown, she advances. Portrait of the Advance. An advance upon Life or upon death? She goes. An oldyoung Cicada chirruping: Sp, Sp, Sp, aspire, *espère* . . .

Translated by Laurent Milesi

Ernest's Imagic

Quick, leave!
City!
Visible invisible
Virgin
Virgil
Vigil

Son of the Virgin! Quick! Live! The time has come, twilight, the right time, the second hour or the thirteenth, Nerval's hour, Rimbaud's hour, smugglers' hour, the hour for pasting up, the best time for Ernest, in-between time, time for the forever-bereaved-son to squeeze between earth's knees, mother's knees, time to go back to the source for his mother. A visitor to the most tender Hell – which is the Paradise under the pavement, under the City, under the stone folds of her limbs, where the our loves' beloved shapes wait, patiently, on their backs, in secret, o our mothers! our grandmothers! whose children, with powerful invocations, call you back to survival's luminous obscurity.

'My images are City-born', he feels. He thinks-images. Magical thinking. *Imagic*. I take him at his word-image: here is the City, pregnant, imprinted.

In the beginning of the story, in the first place, as myths would say, the City was Nea-polis – the City-Newborn. The newly born [*la jeune née*]. Born Greek daughter of Cumes, the land of the Sybil. To be born, to give birth, to be reborn is her lot. Renea-polis, from one language to another, with more than one memory, the Very-Old is forever new.

When Ernest turns up for her, nearly three thousand years ago, she brings the Mother-City, the City of cities, the grandmother of cities, back to life; from city to city, somehow driven, led, feeling his way, he has been seeking her, and finally the most-City of cities is Naples. There, in the entrails, she was waiting for him, from all her eternities. In fact many Naples were waiting for him. Simultaneous Naples, entranced

saintly Naples. Naples? ‘They are Cities!’ Maybe it was for Naples that Rimbaud uttered his cry of delighted recognition.

But what does this mean? This astonishment, this *remark*? This rapturous delight? We say: ‘Cities’ and we know not what we name. If we exclaim to ourselves: but they are Cities! it’s that they seemed to be something other than cities. Undecidable, swarming, mountains, lands, volcanoes, plethoric traces. Cities? ‘The apotheoses collapse and meet high fields where the seraphic centaresses gallop among the avalanches.’ I have just quoted one of the thousand definitions that shake the dust from the word Cities. ‘Cities’ or ‘Naples’ for Ernest is this: short magic syllables like those tiny paper flowers that a Japanese Proust soaks in a porcelain bowl of water and suddenly they unfurl, spread out, turn into houses, streets, churches doll hospitals, street vendors, motorcyclists, litters of kids, and all the Europes with their sea [*mer*] and their tunnels underground. *Apotheosis* and *collapse*: there you have the double theme of the great poem traced out by Ernest. One with the other. One promising the other.

Everything he thinks *images*, sees-together, *sees* the secret’s secret, the invisible visible in the visible. He works through illumination. By means of his illuminations Ernest is a revealer. A dream-unveiler [*révélateur*]. He doesn’t ‘know’ what he ‘says’, he ‘says’ that which is *rêvé*aled, with the force of Truth, to the poet and only the poet. Here is the secret’s formula: a *thing*-of immortality is a *true thing* when it is *also simultaneously* another *thing*. I quote Ernest’s words:

In Naples I elaborated two essential ways of proceeding, one based on the rites of death and their connection with the underground, the other on the image of women. Naples has a tendency to venerate women. By means of an image I wanted to stigmatize the intersection of these two things. I’d discovered several possibly suitable places, thought about several images ‘drawn’ from Neapolitan painting, and worked on them. Mattia Preti, Solimena Giordano, Artemisia Gentileschi. I wandered the city with all these things stored in my mind. Caravaggio’s ‘The Death of the Virgin’ resisted me, if I dare say, it caused me problems. [. . .]

I’m not sure why the idea of setting it all by itself in the street didn’t strike me as possible. Citing the Madeleine, who is in the foreground of the painting, meant constructing a perspective, an effect of depth which wouldn’t work in those narrow streets. I walked around Spaccanapoli a lot, it’s a long street, very narrow which, as its name indicates, cuts Naples in two. [. . .] I noticed two old women sitting in the doorway of a chapel. Every day I saw them; they were selling contraband cigarettes and floor-cloths. And one day, just because their square wooden table was in a different place, it hit me that they and their paraphernalia could be the hinge I sought between the image and the street, play the part Madeleine plays in the painting’s foreground . . .

This alchemist's self-portrait 'I wandered the city with all these things stored in my mind' – doesn't that sound like Genet, Genet's erotic and vainly nostalgic vagabondage, his wandering around cities that he ravines with his orphaned grief? Both grafter and grafted, in search of somewhere to deposit his storehouse's seed. He has in his bones a cortege of great women, artists and their creations. Haunting and haunted, he too is one of those ghosts in search of a stage, a place to make an appearance. There's a close relationship between the secret forces of a *place* and the likelihood of a spectral crystallisation. A ghost requires some kind of support, response, in order to 'come back'. It's always the same thing: as Shakespeare knew, the ghost knows what might annihilate it, and what will allow it to make an appearance. Follow me, Hamlet the ghost tells his son Hamlet the artist, to where I can tell you the secret.

Just as Ernest needs the City's spaces, so 'The-Death-of-the-Virgin', a fragile and powerful incarnation of a Life, requires precise conditions before its ship can come in. 'The-Death-of-the-Virgin', he tells us, this venerable, austerely sumptuous being, was not cooperating. The Visitor is in charge. She imposes her needs, her desires, the conditions of her translation, of her passage from inner image to visible transfiguration.

Not here, 'The-Death-of-the-Virgin' tells Ernest, keep looking, find the place, don't put me with the street apostles, but don't leave me all by myself in the street either.

No apostles? Everything seems to enjoin the artist-officiant to separate the subject of his project from the group of mourners. No grief-stricken envoys. Here you will not show any compassionate or superstitious attendants: the narrowness of the street and the circumstances, and the force of the dying woman dictate this splendid austerity.

Why? At dawn, lying on the wall canvas, she appears in all her nature's grandeur: Virgin before the Virgin, Virgin virgin of any church. Virgin mother for any and all passersby. She goes before and she comes after. She was there before the Christian drama already. The lover who at death awaits me. A woman from the Greek parts of town. A modest worker. Already, a thousand years before Christ, she was here, quietly dying at the end of a laborious life. Ernest responds to her need to rest and his predecessor's clue; he comes in the deconstructive wake of Caravaggio. In those days – Shakespeare's, exactly – the queen of hearts was already dying of death, sans angels, sans age, like Cordelia. Never had death been so real: Montaigne says this is the act with only one character, the hour a man or woman passes alone, a solitude virgin of commentary, example, attenuating circumstances. It's not just because she was too much a woman that she was chased from the temple where Caravaggio put her. It's also that already she didn't have the raiment,

the veils, the wings, the makeup, the travesties that disguise mortality's stark cruelty. A Virgin who really dies – how obscene.

So this voyage's delicate obscenity is resuscitated by Ernest four hundred years after the last extremities' first explorer. One night, we see him draw-glue the truth about Death. Off she goes, alone, the hard way, pasted up, sent off. Still beautiful and absolutely mortal.

It seems like a dream. In Dream Street, the dreamer'd noticed 'two old woman sitting in the doorway of a chapel. Every day I saw them . . .' Upon waking, our dreamer recognises in the two old street vendors, in the raw, the modern doubles of the Virgin-and-Death. Now in the Street there's a Drawing and its Double. The three women are the three figures of the Mother's Transformation. Which is which? – we don't know. Together they compose one and the same patience. The Vision could be called 'The Smuggled Virgin' or 'Old Women with Floor-cloths'. An emotion that takes up the whole of the stage. Impossible to say what's literal and what's figurative. Everything is performative. The floor-cloths are shrouds, the rags are veils for the poor. The little table comes from a flea market near Caravaggio. The street gives birth [*enfante*]. The street is cracked [*en fente*]. As always the Dream brings about the deconstruction of the opposition between the surface and the depth. Infinite depth of surfaces. The whole world is interior. One of the old women has no name. Ernest looks at the magic Street. It [*elle*] is as beautiful as an illuminated page of the unconscious. It has the untold duration of dream realities. So long as she lasts, she is eternal. So long as he dreams things go on happening today three million years ago. Permanence sets up shop in Impermanence Street. We know that the two old women sell to live and nobody buys floor-cloths. Except Ernest: he draws humanity on paper rags.

As we see, Ernest is a Seer.

He is a de facto member of the marvellous freemasonry of Seers. (1) A seer 'sees' through his clairvoyance, his own secret: he *sees* the secret without violating it. (2) A seer recognises (himself) (in) another seer. Something, some alchemical formula, circulates and is transmitted between seers. A language is spoken. As soon as he hears Caravaggio, Ernest speaks it, this too is his language. Precursors speak the same language.

Oh yes, I said 'hears'. It's natural. Caravaggio is a language that shouts, sings, chants, murmurs, bursts out laughing, refuses to be muzzled. So a painting can make sounds, I will be asked. Yes. A painting speaks the language of colours, the music of volumes, of the light that steals from the shadows. All you need to do is listen. This is why, for one thing, whenever Ernest goes to the City – a moment of passion – to

say what he has to say to it, what it says to him, he always chooses the moment of communion – of uninterrupted dialogue par excellence, and this is when the day's cacaphonic noises are stilled, when these finally return to the breast of silence where tears and confidences flow, and this is *at the heart* of Night. Then, in good time, the time of the benevolent arms that Rimbaud hopes without hoping to ever find again, she returns, one finds her again at last, she whom we adore, whom we lose by day, whom we so often believe we will never find again. And whether her name is Naples, Algiers or Paris, the revenant is always the same: the Woman or Mother who is going to die before us, before whom we lose our lives, but who is given back to us if we give ourselves to her, Night, again Virgin of death, having crossed this Acheron whose course resembles like two peas in a pod the long thin slit of Naples's sex.

At night he doesn't sleep, he dreams, what I mean is: he does *the dreamwork*, he takes to the Street of the surface of memory, rereading its legends, bringing back those who have drowned in oblivion and rejection, dragging the banished up from exclusion. And since 'all the legends are renewed and elk run through the towns' he turns himself into an elk and runs between the clamped thighs, threading the slit of this living-metaphor that its myriad inhabitants call Spaccanapoli. What does he do, in the City? With the City? Who is he, this illegal, who makes himself one with the re-appearitions, who makes walls start to breathe again, makes traces and tracks sigh, who honours the Woman-City's love?

In the shadows someone says:

'I am an ephemeral and not too unhappy citizen of a metropolis described as modern because every taste known has been elucidated in the houses' furnishings and exteriors as in the city's plan.'

Here, in the narrow street, at this moment we see that he is in *City*, along with the greatest of the walker-Seers. *City* is an *Illumination*. Ernest is another ephemeral, and citizen-other of a nycapole that he illuminates and which illuminates him.

– Read me, says Naples, find the signs of my passage, says the Mother, make my hand once more, in the blotches on the walls recognise my body's true shape. I have been so true. Deliver me from among the sacred fakes. Believe in me and remake me anew [*crue*]. Young or old, who cares. Don't let me fade into the clichés. Look at me truly the way the son *In Search of Lost Time* looks at his mother truly, as she was, with her wrinkles, one eyebrow askew, this splotch on her eyelid, all these slight impurities which are Mama's unique beauty. Don't lie to me, make me lifelike, as big and as small as life. A woman the way I was in humanity. I had a bit of a tummy at the end. Above all don't erase it.

Time does that. Draw time's pain. Ruin me and love me as I loved life.
Do you hear, Ernest? Quote me well and truly. Don't efface the horror,
work at capturing life's horror,

How it is short and cruel, tough and beautiful,

Make me to the scale of truth. Find its proper excess; I advise you: in
order to preserve my *life-size*, make me 'a little bigger'.

In dream, she tells him: draw me a hair's breadth bigger. And he
does so, literally. Lean close: do you see the hair? That's his signature.
For her. For him. She's always had this whisker under her chin. Which
linked them: her to him. It's as if this wicked, mischievous hair [*fil*] grew
there for the sake of her son [*fil*s]. She herself never noticed it since it was
tucked away underneath. From time to time the son plucks it delicately,
his mother's whisker. They chuckle. The great thing is that the whisker
grows back. It comes back. They begin again. Allegory of maternal love.
The same love between mother and son.

My hypothesis: this whisker is the original whisker with which Ernest
took his first brush steps

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Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic

See the Neverbeforeseen

I On the banks of 'Agua Viva', Roni Horn, in secret

One reads *Agua Viva*, if one can *read agua viva*, if one knows how to *read* running water. I say the sentence 'one reads *Agua Viva*' and it seems to have in mind a 'book' by Clarice Lispector that bears on its cover the title *Agua Viva*, if it is a book. But the sentence might also be thinking of some Roni Horn images, called Water, called Wonderwater, eloquent images, photographs.

Come closer to Clarice Lispector's 'book' called *Agua Viva*. It's not a book exactly. It's another genre. It's a sort of a thing. This volume, this book-thing, Clarice Lispector herself wasn't sure she could call it a book, publish it as book, and even she didn't really know how she would let it be nor how she would let herself let it be what, yes what, for if the thing was made in words, in sentences of thoughts, in the thoughts of before thought and in the thoughts behind thought, the sentence-things that had come to her over several years had had the freedom and the necessity of migratory animals, schools of fish, flights of birds, half thought ricochets, quarter thoughts, all that was alive, each coming moment was alive but there wasn't any road leading from one point to the next, nor any point of departure nor port of arrival, none of the things that usually make what one calls a book, no story, no yarn, no thread no direction, no order, no whole, only the hammering pulse, the moments. Finally a friend helped her gather all these drops together, all these jets and streams, helped her, urged her, made up her mind to put these spurts together, juxtapose them, pretend one moment came after another moment, that these liquids crystallised, that these breaths and gusts and whirlpools could fall into lines.

All that was gathered into the frame or the vase of a book-thing but with the understanding that the title would tell the truth: this is not a book like other books. It is water. It is life in its liquid state. Its name is

Running Water. *Agua Viva* is like the name of a princess or a fairy. This book thinks only of living, thus of flowing, flowing out, disappearing, recollecting its forces, cascading. This book-thing is a portrait of one of the cosmic elements. In drawing the portrait of water, the artist – is she or he a painter? a photographer a poet? – draws her own portrait as well, she slips in and out of water as of herself. ‘The author’ is nowhere and everywhere, the author is each part, each whole, the author does not construct, he or she receives and blends in. One has no idea whether the author is man or woman, and it doesn’t matter, the author is in it, the author is part of the flow of the text.

So Clarice Lispector, who didn’t know what to do, had – like the man in Genesis – to take dominion over all these species and creatures, and give them names. The naming took place, as always since the Bible. And she called the thing of things *Agua Viva*. But right away *Agua Viva* is not what you think. ‘What I say is never what I say but something else’. As soon as I speak it is something else. The minute I name Running water, I am out of the water. Right away *Agua Viva* is also *Agua Viva* that is to say a jellyfish or *medusa* in Brazilian. For don’t forget this water lives in the Brazilian language. This water and this Clarice speak Brazilian. And I add that Brazilian speaks other languages as well, water turns into other waters as it licks at the edges of the world. That’s why when it reaches New York and Roni Horn bends over its surface and its movement, *Agua Viva* allows itself to be heard in English, it has a different sparkle, it says something else but *the secret always speaks the same silence*.

Among foreign languages we understand one another also. So strangeness is a special *taste* I can taste in the other’s language.

Hence *Agua Viva* as water flows without stopping and without form, is ongoing and, as jellyfish, takes a shape, and is discontinuous, is born gives life and dies. But *Agua Viva* the jellyfish/medusa looks like a frozen water and, sculpted in the shape of a bell with tentacles, it floats, water outlined in formless water, like a translucent umbrella, an abstract of water. In French I say *méduse*, which Roni Horn’s language calls Medusa on land, but jellyfish in the water. What I say is something else again. In French, medusa remembers having once been Greek Medusa, who having slain a thousand warriors with a glance ends up decapitated by Perseus.

– but I am not going to tell that wonderful, terrible story here: it leaves its mark everywhere, on *Agua Viva*, on our dreams, on the works of Roni Horn, on human passions, on idolatries, everywhere that a secret exists to attract and threaten desire, everywhere the longing to see is at the risk of your life, there is *Agua Viva Medusa*. *Agua Viva Medusa* is powerful and fascinating. She is a sort of hidden god. She calls and does not answer. She is god’s hidden watermark.

The neutral, visible mask of the invisible

It is she who drives the painter, the artist of things, to see, to draw, to photograph, to pursue the invisible that lives hidden behind life

It is she who promises not to tell and not to reveal but in exchange she promises, she promises to promise, she pro-poses, she puts forward, she swears there is something else, and that it is worth looking for even if one is never to find.

O que te falo nunca é o que eu te falo e sim outra coisa. Capta essa coisa que me escapa e no entanto vivo dela e estou à tona de brilhante escuridão
Água Viva says. (p. 24)

In another language Roni hears the order, or maybe it is a prayer entrusted to her. ‘What I tell you is never what I tell you’ is another thing. Capture this other thing, which is the bright side and the dark side of the thing I tell you. In my language I tell you one thing that is another thing, what I tell you with word is *a thing*, the words make thing, the words are things.

My language passes into another language.

‘More than one tongue’, my tongue speaks more than one tongue, Jacques Derrida tells me. *More than one/a tongue/language* is one of the four brief serious mocking algebraic definitions, one of the four other things of the thing called *deconstruction*.

Capture this other thing that the movement of deconstruction releases, *Água Viva* says. It escapes me – I live on what escapes me, but I need you to set a limit – yours not mine – to this flight, to this endless freedom.

Who, if ‘you’, if a ‘thou’ didn’t hear the call, might go mad.

Who, you? People you’ve never met, future proximates. Among them Roni Horn turns up one day. She heard the call. And she will have answered, according to her art; she ‘captures’, she fishes. She feels at home in lispictorian waters. ‘Reading’ Clarice Lispector she feels that the I who speaks is sometimes Roni Horn. For example, when she hooks the following sentence from the stream of the writing:

Tu és uma forma de ser eu, e eu uma forma de te ser: éis os limites de minha possibilidade. *Água Viva*

‘You are a form of my being me, and I am a form of being you: hence the limits of my possibility.’

She feels she finds herself in ‘your’ sentence, has written it in another life. Then she was called *This is you, this is me*.

That's because inventors of truth, those who don't look to describe and represent, but who surrender in forms, to primitive forms of ever-since-the-time-or-from-the-very-beginning, rediscover the same experience of before-wanting-to-understand as man-the prehistoric artist. The *same* experiences each time unique, each time different.

Each captures this moment of revelation according to his capacities and his tools.

'So writing is the mode of someone who uses the word as hook; the word goes fishing for what is not the word'

When the non-word takes the hook, something writes itself

Então escrever é o modo de quem tem a palavra como isca: a palavra pescando o que não é palavra.

Água Viva, p. 44

Roni's hook is drawing; drawing goes fishing for the hidden designs of sentences. Roni goes fishing in *Água Viva*.

She captures whatever speaks to her in her language, forms of her being she calls *Rings*.

Ring, Circle, Zirkel, Kreis, Umring, Ring

What's a *ring*?

A Ring rings preteutonic, Old-English, age old. A ring has always already started b/ringing two beings into one bond. *Ring* recalls the wedding band, attachment, the Book of Common Prayer: 'The manne shall geve unto the womanne a ring'. The Ring brings together. Encloses. Holds. Promises. Threatens. But Ring has more than one trick up its sleeve, more than one turn as it goes around. Ring never stops spinning, around its round, its ringing. Spring.

You have no idea who or what you speak of when you say: *Ring*.

Roni Horn's 'Rings' are sown on a field of rubber, like daisies or glowwords. You have no idea what sex or genre Roni Horn's Rings are. You don't know if the rings are connected to or disconnected from one another, whether they are coming together or running away. They have one thing in common: the curve.

Is (a) ring a word, a thing, a call, a small circle of (real or simulated) precious metal, frequently set with precious stones?

Ring

1. A small circlet of precious metal, frequently set with precious stones, or imitations of these, for wearing upon the finger either as an ornament or as

a token (*esp.* of betrothal, marriage, or investiture), and sometimes for use as a seal.

2. A circle of metal, etc., of any dimension, employed as a means of attachment, suspension, compression, etc.

3. The border, rim, or outer part of some circular object, *esp.* of a coin or a wheel

4. One of the annular joints of the bodies of caterpillars and insects

5. One of the concentric circular bands of wood constituting the yearly growth of a tree (1671)

6. One of the raised circular marks at the base of the horns of oxen or cows, varying in number according to the animal's age (1725).

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (on historical principles). Third edition 1964. Oxford UP Amen House, London

or a ripple,

or a circle of persons

or a circular space for riding or racing

or boxing or fighting

or the peal of church bells,

or a quality in the voice the sound

of a trumpet

or the last syllable of an English verb in the progressive form, the last breath of *tiring*, *hiring*, *hungering*, *hammering*, *fingering*, *othering*, *bothering*, *mothering*, *transferring*.

Then there are the magic Rings. The Ring of King Gyges gives invisibility. The Ring of the Niebelungen gives infinite riches. *Ring* has unforeseen powers. These powers spread out of our control.

In her studio, her forge, Roni Horn has created forms or things she calls: *Rings of Lispector*

– R. H.'s of L.

– What are the/these *Rings of Lispector*?

The expression *Rings of Lispector* is an objective and subjective genitive. As an objective genitive, these Rings are composed of a material, Lispector, a sort of gold or water or psychic being, a magical element. As subjective genitive the Rings belong to Lispector, Clarice Lispector, the genius of the Brazilian language. These Rings change their nature or meaning according to how the reading touches and wakens them.

Generally one considers Clarice Lispector to be a great Brazilian writer. She writes fictions or short stories whose form at first glance has the familiar and geometric look of a printed text and whose content springs from the most remote most unknown reaches of thought. All the

same, generally, reading these 'books' one follows the printed lines like familiar furrows traced on the chaosmos.

Coming to Clarice Lispector, Roni Horn sets up camp on the least visited, most unfamiliar terrain; she sees the magma of everything in the process of thinking-being-thought and with the curiosity and the passion of a biological archaeologist she samples the instants. If she were a literary critic, she might pick a sentence. Cut herself out a chunk of text between two points. Not at all. Roni horns the Lispector out of the order of language she seizes it in flight, the quick of it.

These 'Rings of Lispector' seem to be circle-shaped fragments snipped from 'Lispector'. In literature one would call these samples *quotations*. In Roni's studio these quotations undergo alterations, a reshaping of the body, a delicate plastic-surgical interpretation. For starters, that which toed the straight line of writing is detached, unchained, released from its logical grounding. Once these pieces of text have been torn out of their traditional printed flat surface, they are grafted to another body. Here they insinuate themselves into the thickness of the rubber with which they blend but don't dissolve. Never have we seen such sentences. Ripped then rippled, rubbering, rubberrings, ringriting.

Roni rounds off the straight lines. She sees the circle hidden in the line, the marrowy, supple secret within the rigidity. Replaces the hard building materials with the flexible element. Roni says *no* to *iron*, yes, yes to running water. 'I feel then that I'm close to fountains, lakes, and waterfalls, all abundant waters.'

Water is her fellow, her family, her chosen kin, her non-finite sexual possibilities. Now she males now she females (now she nowns now she males now she females now she everywhere).

Is this still writing or rubberwriting or

To be sure, all these new bodies with their sinuous ways were hiding in the paper volume but someone had to think of them for them to show up.

Never before having seen such sentence-things, you wonder. You don't know their name. They haven't been named yet. A new kind of happening. A language happening? Furthermore these language happenings are partly drawn in the thick, elastic, springy, supple material of natural rubber. Unlike the flat writing of sentences strung out in rows on the paper of books. The verbal rubber things are spread out on the flat horizontal surface of a floor. When one realizes this, one's whole body suddenly feels the urge to adopt a totally displaced and never before attempted reading position. Yesterday, reading, one had the book in front of one's eyes. Face to face. All of a sudden one finds it underfoot.

On the other hand, a certain number of these verbal-things look to be tattooed on an upright screen, shimmering in a square of coloured

silk or a square of silk colour as if they had just lighted there – blinking signal lights of coleoptera –

stopping not for long. Already dusky some seem to sink like a sun on the horizon. Some still jump around. All seem to be sloughed skins, states of trance, phrases of metamorphosis. In other words instants of being. Breath itself. Blinks. On and off.

Nor does one know who is the cause or author – if there is one, and if there's only one – of these visual events. At first sight, one hasn't even much of an idea of how to look at them, or to read them besides while they remember having been readable once they've become pretty unreadable.

on Rubber-silk-vegetable-animal-vertical-horizontal-Roni-Clarice-on off

you have to go up, down, turn around, skirt, dive into, mirror, reflect on the transfiguration of the lispector world into the horn world, by a mirror trick – broken – a mirror trick in the shape of a ring which curls up around itself, wants to surround itself.

Readable unreadable. Lisible?

Suddenly I experience the becoming readable of the unreadable, the becoming unreadable of the readable.

Read, look at, touch, see, all these processes that I believed familiar have been jarred loose and displaced.

– I am going to have to find new names for previously unknown modes of perception. The 'sentence' whose company I was used to, in its fixed, pinned down, easy-to-look-at form now flops like a fish, darts about unpredictably.

Is this reading, what's going on between the thing to see and my gaze and my brain? Is it unreading? Is it believiseeing? It is something like the old ways of hunting with bows and arrows, or going fishing with a line or a harpoon, it's all about errors of interpretation, lack of certainty. I am in the state of Proust's narrator when, lying on his back in a field, he hears a buzz – very far off very high up a vague insect, a sort of wasp whose species and size are undecidable, black speck on the blue, for the first time in the history of human memory, and a few seconds later literature's first airplane enters the consciousness and pages of a notebook. The waspairplane appears for the first time on earth as in heaven. Vanishes. Never to return. Remains, noted, a snapshot of genesis. So Clarice Lispector lay down in the field of the earth under the sky on the day, at the hour, at the instant things come out of matter. It is not easy to find oneself in this first place at that moment without a memory. One has to have gone back through all the times and the blinding and deafening knowledge

piled up by the centuries, on the eyelids, on the lips of thoughts, on the eyelashes of the ears. This requires a long, tenacious insistence, an urgent slowness, the stubbornness of a donkey or cow, a ruminating indocility, a refusal to run after Consuming and Communication, those idiot goddesses of the economy at top speed. It means you have to park yourself in front of the gate of thing, in front of the gate-thing of a thing, until the soul of thing has ripened, until the hatching of you and me, until the light lights up. It means you have to listen to this unknown wasp buzzing for a long time, not recognise it, not recognise it, keep yourself guessing, until at the end of its slow approach it draws itself airplane. One needs patience, delay in order to approach with delicacy. And when you arrive at the moment of seeing, then you must seize in flight, with all the means and tools of your body, the snapshot of the dazzling. To see what one has never seen is extremely difficult. To see the neverbeforeseen of the neverbeforeseen is very difficult. To make us see the neverbeforeseen of the neverbeforeseen is what Roni Horn does. She makessee. She slips into the skin of the vibrant, chopped-up murmur of the jazzy song improvised by Clarice Lispector. She transmits into the seeable the syncopated music of this recording of instants.

Clarice Lispector didn't write a book. For three years she jotted things that happened down on scraps of paper. At the end the time – three years, three rings – contained a mosaic of things that touched in space. This assemblage was gathered into a cradle of paper.

Here I must recall the presence of the Muses of *music* and *musaïc* in the creation of Agua Viva and the Rings of Lispector. From Greece come the Muses whose primitive form is the verb μα'νωμαομαι (maomaï) which consists of thinking in exaltation, in desiring to think.

Here let me recall quickly and well that the antic *museum* is a temple populated with the impulses of creations and teeming with primal vibrations – where the muses-medusas, the Desires and the Exaltations, lived.

Agua Viva has come to be the name of a garden of exaltations painted in words.

One cannot remain in a state of continuous 'exaltation', saints levitate then come back to earth. Flights land and take off. The cut is the quick of every creative state.

Roni Horn is the poet of the cut, the musician of rests, of voids, of rhythms. She draws *by ear*. She records the in and out of breath. She makessee the inaudible, and it is like a resurrection of that which we have lost and forgotten

A dozen times Clarice Lispector warns us: ‘*I only work with lost and found (things)*’.

Hear me, she tells us. Listen to what I am saying, to each thing and all that I say. She says. Work with the lost and found (things), not even *things*, she says. Before being after being things or beings.

Only

achados e perdidos (Agua Viva, p. 193)

she says here

Only with the *achados* and *perdidos* words (masculine in Brazilian)

And there, painting the silence of the portals; everything amplified by a silence of things lost and found on earth/

de coisas perdidas e encontradas (Agua Viva)

I sense a long road and dust right up to the arrival at the dwelling of the painting.

Sinto uma longa estrada e poeira até chegar ao pouso do quadro (Agua Viva)

Take into account, consider the white space (*Agua Viva*, p. 135) while waiting for the next moment

Go for a breather: the no-place where everything is going to exist (*Agua Viva*, p. 89)

Khaki

To lose and to find, to lose to find, to find to lose to find the losing,

it is losing and finding that is the labour, in labour the work of art goes into the silence of the lost and found things towards the *quadro*, the square, painting, the screen, the cube, the simplest of shelters where the found lost, or the lost found go to rest. To find without losing, to lose without finding, doesn't make a work of art. Found thing is lost. He or she who knows, and who has learned everything, and has not yet lost anything, is not in labour. It is finding and losing, losing the object found, finding the lost, and only the lost makes the work.

– What does Roni do so as ‘not to transpose the portal’ but to lose-and-find, to lose in order to find? In order to make-see the lost-part of the finding?

– She feels. And she makes-feel a long road and dust. (I note the disjunction, the syntactical disarticulation, the status of dust, this without-form and without end, and hence without article)

For this she allies herself with the 'white' she makes as much room as necessary, and as much time for the white space which is waiting for the next moment, the arriving at the 'painting', at the camping place. The 'white space' here is *khaki*.

Khaki is the colour that comes to Roni in order to paint the length of the road, the air of time

This is obvious for her, naturally.

The white space has to be khaki

Khakee reached the English language in 1898

Coming from India, coming from Hindi. Khaki, when it was in India, was the name of the *colour of dust*

– *What is khaki?* I asked Roni.

(It was November 2004 in London. Khaki had covered the whole road from Old Delhi to Piccadilly Circus)

– Khaki is like white to me, it contains all colours doesn't express *one* thing, includes everything says Roni.

– You are dust and to dust you will return say I.

First of all Roni paints 'the road' so that the series to live and to die to die and to live again can make itself felt right into the square of the screen.

– Why is the screen exactly square?

(129.5 × 129.5 cm)

– To preserve its neutrality, the expressionlessness. To let the dust be khaki, purposeless.

To love the lost and the finding with equal love.

So as not to add, not to prefer, not to insist choose privilege interpret-hierarchise embellish.

– This khaki doesn't soil; it blends in with the natural dirt, which is neither dirty nor clean.

– The khaki colour is dust. It's the no-place where everything comes into existence.

– How to make one feel a long road, which is time spent thinking the 'negative desire': the desire not to transpose. The desire to paint in matter the word-things of Clarice Lispector, word-things whose desire is to paint the music between the realms of the living?

– So Roni Horn feels the need to lay a floor of rubber on the ground, as a ground. As if the rubber tree grew out of the dust.

And under the reality of appearance, the apparent reality, under the City, the jungle continues, as prehistory always keeps watch over history and the unconscious ramifies under thought.

Roni's rubber

is a natural rubber. Let us follow the rubber tree. What a long way it has come from its source to 196A Piccadilly, London W1J 9DY in the Hauser & Wirth Gallery, where it comes to rest inside the mahogany-coloured walnut panelling, pausing in its very old travels to give itself time to reflect. Here two continents' vegetations meet: European walnut and Peruvian hevea.

Rubber (caoutchouc) comes from latex, this viscous sap this vegetable milk secreted by the laticiferous cells of the hevea or rubber tree.

Here I am in front of the hevea, a big tree, beautiful as its name. And its first name Hheve comes to us from Quechua. And Quechua is the language, almost extinct but still alive on the high plateaus of Peru and Bolivia, that was once the official language of the Incas. Now Roni Horn's talking floor silently remembers having been Inca in another life.

When, opening the heavy door of 196A Piccadilly, we suddenly find ourselves, somewhat intimidated, setting foot on what is no longer a floor, not a virgin expanse, is –

we don't know, we haven't the science or memory but we feel, intimidated, from our toes to our head, that in a single step we have just entered another world. Wholly other. From one step to the next into another time. Without recognising I recognise. I have already seen but never before seen.

This is the first time that – I walk on a book – in metamorphosis. I feel I'm in a dream

—

Something in this space called for rubber.

Something called Lispector

Something called for the silk screens.

A need to touch speech, to lay speech flat and pick it up, knead it, sculpt it, rub it efface it

—

Yoking the abstract to the concrete:

Writing is the mode of someone who has the word as bait: a word fishing for what is not a word.

The word is bait, the word goes from the bank or the edge where the angler stands into 'the water' where the non-word bites, the word goes hunting and fishing.

The word itself is a thing being that bites and is a non-word.

And *draw* words, take apart sentences of words and put them back together again, cut, paste, set them one beside the other, in order to fish the air around the words, make room for silence, for what-is-not-a-word that precedes, prepares, follows, *rub* words together, take them apart

But what is reading? Perhaps reading is always walking, finding one's way then pouncing, going after, getting lost, brushing up against. Suddenly, enough, cutting-unpasting. Spring upwards –
Backtrack. Stand and wait at the turn of a – 'phrase'?
Suddenly – no more road –

R Rubber Roni

- Rubber says Roni – 'changes your relationship to the world'
- Hard-softness I say. A quality of language?
- Rubber says Roni 'reflects your presence, is affected by your presence'.
- The hardness of softness. Softness in hardness
- Very sexual.
- It yields and does not betray. The elasticity of the body in love.
- Rubber has always been with me. I worked with rubber in the seventies. I knew rubber before Clarice.
- God sculpted man out of a clod of earth. Right away man had elasticity.

In the beginning in genesis man is pure rubber-naked rubber. Afterwards, due to modesty, man felt himself driven to put a frame around the boundlessness of the naked body without nudity, to cover it up. Elasticity awakens the desire to touch, to print the pressure of fingers, of palms of the soles of feet.

Rubber responds. Renders.

- I saw this space. Revisit the rubber, I had that in mind. Rerubbering.
-

Rings of Lispector? What happens when a text becomes an art object in space? And inversely, when an art object in space turns itself into a book?

Rings of Lispector is like a book, has something of a book, is not a book, is a book torn to pieces. What does it mean, to read this book? Which end to pick it up by? How to grasp it? Does it have a right side up, a wrong side down?

When I speak of Clarice Lispector is it Roni Horn I'm speaking of? Speaking or moving from one object to the other, from one dream into another dream, from one form to its other form or its wholly other form?

Does it have any order? Or many? An art object in space (Roni's) does not prescribe in any obvious manner, one order or direction of 'reading'. When I receive the photos of *Floor* that Hauser & Wirth sends me, hence detached from their floor, from their base, from their mooring in their Piccadilly home, I don't know how, from which angle to look at them. Everything goes round and round, all the tricks the sentence has up its sleeve and all the tricks that crafty Roni plays on the sentence are played and played again. I can make the image turn on its axis, describe circles, turn the hands of meaning. Someone – the sender – Roni – has drawn an arrow that indicates . . . what? a suggestion, a choice, the way in

the way out, how to find the staircase, the floor above, the street? The arrow is giving me advice, but I don't need to take it. In what order do I look-read? The object – the thought – the words?

When I come in the door of 196A I see a floor of 'sentences' swaying in an invisible wind

I move around. I am followed, surrounded, preceded by orange inscriptions, I am looked at by white writing that comes and goes in the bottomless depths of a vertical plane, the way reflections of things rise or sink in the superficial depth of a mirror again and again I can start in the South in the North to the left that I right, I can walk around a section that is standing up. I can play and be played upon by the incalculable resources of the object in space.

– And the book? Once there was a book here. Its title was *Agua Viva*. As an art object in time, in theory the book offers itself to be read in a more restrictive continuity than the object-in-space. But the original book already began on each page on each line, it brimmed over and ran away, it argued with itself, doubled up, doubled back on itself, ignored all limits.

Roni's Rings obey this non-order, reflecting, repeating, pushing the improvisation that presides over *Agua Viva* to an extreme. Roni Horn

exercises *her right to a point of view*. She cuts her own form of being out of what Lispector has cut out. Right away we have a new dialogue, a back-and-forth, a startling scene between Narcissus and Echo. But be careful, don't let yourself be taken in by the seeming order of a dialogue in which Narcissus begins, then Echo answers.

Let's take a look at the scene: what if Echo Horn began? Like this:
 – (. . .)
 By a blank, an edge, a margin, a silent opening.

—

Agua Viva, Running water taken to pieces. A series of portraits of Agua Viva in snippets and beads signed Roni Horn

The portrait in Ring of Lispector is by Roni Horn. Who can say who is author of the work entitled: Roni Horn Rings of Lispector?

Who, of the pair, commands, who obeys, who follows who or what begets? Who enchains what?

—

A Ring is (not) a circle. A Ring is already metaphor. Roni also likes circles, the arctic for example. But here she has chosen Rings, which are thought circles, humanised, circles seen, brought-to-life circles.

From a geometric point of view a circle is a line, has no depth. The substratum of a circle is a plane. You see the rings in space.

The rings are linked. Rings can be linked. Rings think of linking. A ring is a tie. A ring is a link in a chain. The ring that you put on your finger is forever a chain link. It makes you think of breaking. Desire and calculation lie hidden in rings.

The ring is never alone, it is around something

A ring always contains a threat, a promise

Are the Rings of Lispector like the Borromean rings that link three rings together? Link three arts? Three realms?

II 'Yes, I want the ultimate word'

Ultimating the ultimate

How to translate 'the intangible' without touching it? How to translate the translation, the movement, the passing from a (my) language/tongue in your mouth, the feel of touch, the taste of taste? The flower of the

flower? I mean *la fleur de peau*? The flower grazing the skin? How to caress the flower of the skin?

Can words paint the intangible? A name, a word's name, has it weight? Is it imponderable? Is the word an object? Or a dream? Or the dream of an object?

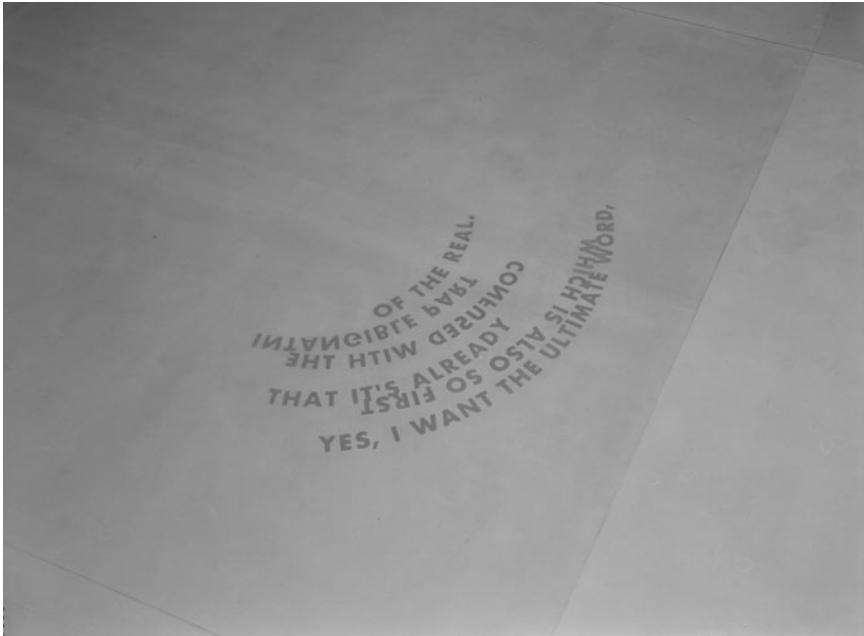
Is there *a* word for touching the intangible part of the real with *a* breath? If this word exists what is it called?

Is the name of this word God? or a god?

Or – perhaps it is the name of the word one is incapable of pronouncing in the present, that never exists at present? Is it the name of the word that, shaped in the mouth, gets extinguished as it rises to the lips as if the 'outside' air had blown out its soul? The name of the ultimate word, the word for what is just before and just after me, is the word of being-dead, barely dead, just-barelydead, the word that squeezes and haunts me. I cannot say it out loud, but I can think it. I feel it on my tongue when you tell me die in the inside of my mouth stuck to your mouth, you paint it with your tongue on my tongue, nobody hears, it is in secret.

What I am incapable of saying, that which no *I* can ever say, the intangible firstlast, it is not impossible to let it be guessed, to leave it to be guessed, to inscribe its trace, its ghostly presence, *to point* to the place where it might have been.

This may be what Roni Horn has done:



She may have taken the thought of the last word right to the extremity right to the edge of lastness.

To guide thought and the impossible word to its port of detachment she manoeuvres every bit as precisely as if by magic she were piloting the boat of a sentence to make it confess, cough up the goods.

You have to perform the moment of ruin. Photograph the invisible. How does she go about this? Let's see how this intangibilisation works.

She takes the sentence that expresses the desire (hers, mine, poets', philosophers') to accede in our lifetime to the name of the thing that is not in our lifetime. This thing cannot show itself face to face, it cannot show itself from this side, it cannot write itself from a to z, nor from left to right, nor from top to bottom, right away it is in a foreign country it is only on the other side, one cannot see it face to face, it has always already gone on, it is always already, it is so first that we cannot witness it and it cannot itself bear witness to itself, since already nothing or nobody comes before it, right away it is already the remains of its passing, its wake in the mirror.

The sentence goes after the thing. Roni follows it right to the end. She heeds its anguish, its twists and its turns. She does not straighten it out, she adopts its aporias, she does not try to fix, to bring it to its senses, turn it inside right. When desire takes the underside of desire, she lets the sentence turn back, roll over, curl up, she lets the sentence drop to the bottom of the word, world whirled to the rim of space, the sentence breaks up but doesn't annihilate itself,

'the ring I gave you was glass, it broke'

says Clarice's voice, the ring is always glass it always breaks, what remains are the fragments. The remains are not scattered to the winds. They remain in the same haphazard space. The break is not nothingness. Life stopping is not annihilation. It's only a breach of contract. The pieces remember everything. They collect at the foot of time. Time is an archaic frame. It is the simplest, the most archaic, the most elementary. It is like a screen. It is that neutral colour that stands on the horizon of thought. It is the invisible, unsubstantial membrane of the unconscious, the nothing on which desires and dreams project themselves. It can be blank, empty or suddenly teeming.

Now the broken glass sentence lies at the bottom of its psychic reach. One piece has fallen outside, outside time. We see it is missing. It is like a mouth that has broken its front teeth. Roni doesn't fill it. She keeps the gap.

The broken sentence has a history, but before the history that Roni Horn has illustrated, is the prehistory:

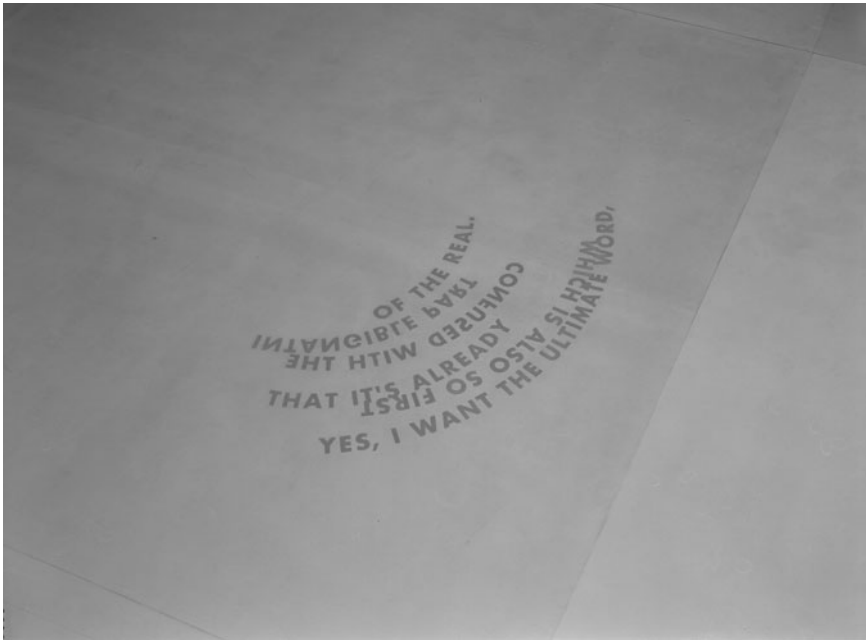
1. in the beginning, in Lispector, this was the sentence:

Sim, quero a palavra última que também é tão primeira que já se confunde com a parte intangível do real.

Água Viva (p. 18)

Yes, I want the ultimate word, which is also so first that it's already confused with the intangible part of the real.

2. here, in a later moment of time, is what Roni Horn's first reading made of it:

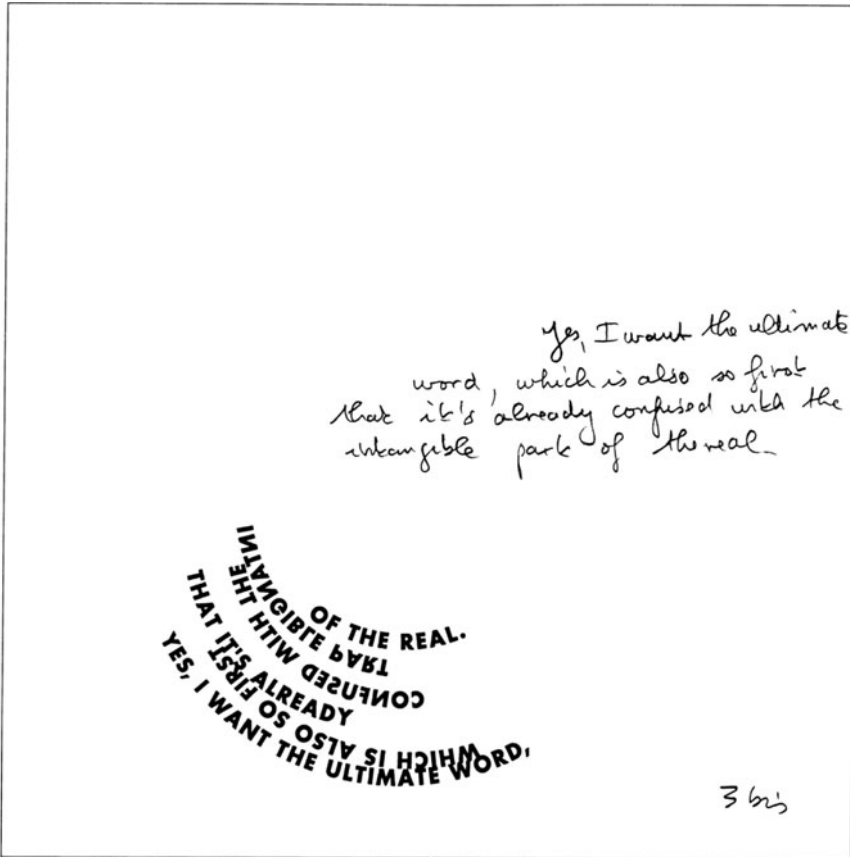


3. next the sentence cut itself up, thus:



But like the androgynous creature that is cut in halves in Plato's *Banquet* the two parts long to get back together

4. Later, as life goes on, the sentence gets twisted, divided up, it runs away from and desires itself, in fits and starts, fractions, toing and froing in all directions and that gives us this sort of thing:



One could date the epochs or geobiological eras of these mutations by consulting Roni Horn's computer memory.

5. Should one imagine that the long genesis has arrived at its contemporaneous end, one would be wrong. A moment later, the exsistence, become a bowl of Ring shavings or cuttings, is caught in the very fine net of a silk screen. Now it is processed serigraphically. One last slippage, planned or unplanned, willed, foreseeable, accidental or unexpected, occurs. As if, impelled by the fear of being caught in a frame, the creature had tried to flee, to slip, before it was *too late* (*sero* Latin says), from the serigraphy, *in extremis*.

This last leap has been caught and fixed – for eternity, if there is any – like a Pompeian body, say that the body of *Gradiua* has been 'photographed' in a snapshot of ash and held forever in the tenth of a second of a slight leap.

And here is what remains of the exsistence:



Two things about this:

1. What's left of the first apparition is the mark of the bottom of the pleated tunic upon which the movement of a mad dash, barefoot in sandals, under the burning noonday sun, has printed the mobile and ravishing shape of a cockleshell or a fan.

2. What has vanished, saved from death or in death is the part at the very bottom of the swaying: the fragment: – *he ultimate w* – that an archaeologist or analyst could reconstitute

—

I have been able to trace 'the history' of the sentence's metamorphoses for I have had access to the archives of this work. But what about the museum visitor, or spectator, who will discover once and for all and for the first time the thing that, in the end, has been classified, coded, and named, like this:

Horn 30302

Agua Viva: Yes I want . . .

Thing whose name henceforth is: *Yes, I want . . .*

I think the newcomer will be responsive to that which has reached its purified state of Remains conserved in the state of Remains. Let's stand before this 'picture' along with him or her

The work stages the endless deconstruction of *the question of the beginning and the end* at the level of meaning and sentence.

Is the 'sentence' always a sentence? Something in my gaze, in my brain that is, wants to *compensate*, to reconstruct, find again – while accepting the never-before-seen.

Yielding to habit one might think that the sentence '*begins*' with *of the real*, and one would not be wrong. One might also think, retracing one's analytical steps, that the beginning of the sentence is at the end. Hard to decide what governs the 'text', what orders which meanings. The first is not the first, the ultimate is not the last, *of the real* seems to be a whole, a part, the end of a whole without a whole and this is perhaps an as-yet-unthought definition of the real.

One might also be tempted by the palindrome: *real-lear*. These language bites are perhaps a mad king's stutterings though not as mad as his daughters would have us believe.

In this 'sentence' that *thematizes* the question of the beginning and the end – the chicken and egg dilemma – Roni Horn plays graphically and textually with the old brain teaser: who/what came first?

Everything has always already-begun responds Jacques Derrida. The end remains? Always one wishes to know when it begins and when it will end.

And Roni Horn? Roni Horn and Clarice Lispector: who begins who ends?

Roni Horn sets down the curvature: curvature of the eye, of the amphitheatre, of the fan, of the footstep. She would always have had a preference for circles, that is the without beginning and without end. But does the circle have a chicken? Is it absolute? Roni cuts. She cuts what's cut. She cuts it again. She cuts over that. The minute she cuts, out of the cut grows another beginning or an end which begins all over again.

I look at the silk screen, I don't know what side I am on or which end. Punctuation and the absence of punctuation fascinate me in the same way. The silk screen lets us see the continuity of colour and word. The 'sentence' comes to 'the end' of colour, to 'the end' of time. Or maybe saffron is the semiotic magma that precedes and gives rise to the moment of articulation. Suddenly colour opens its mouth and we see hear *of the real*. Everything that goes before is therefore saffron or another hybrid of yellow or of khaki, the indefinable held note, the yellow silence *of the real*?

What has gone? *Ultimate*. The intimation the ultimatum of the end. But one sees a trace of its disappearance: there is a bite, a break. *Ultimate* fell by the wayside. Perhaps it is this *falltimate* plunge that causes the twitching, the aftershocks.

There is no more ultimate to yearn for, or maybe: there's no *ultimate* in reality. No end in reality. No last word. Unless the scene's last words are *Yes, I want . . .* the tail-turning title that purely wants, pure want without object, pure cut of the want left in want . . .

Yes I want . . . the name of this state comes to put an end to this hustling-bustling story.

Like an avowal and an affirmation.

Thus 'I want . . .' (that in English speaks of both the desire and the lack, the lack which awakens the desire) is this endless tension, to no end, towards the intangible. All the force is in the Yes, the affirmation of the urge

—

The word *intangible* has not vanished like the word *ultimate*. It is still there but disguised, a ghost of itself, signature of the mystery of the desire that in lacking desires, that desires lacking what it desires, so as to invent the resources to keep itself alive. One day I tried to capture the secret of the intangibility of the intangible. I said:

– *Intangible* we say of that which cannot be touched.

Not touched but by what? By our fingers? By the palms of our hands? By our feet?

But that which we cannot *put our finger on*, what my hands cannot perceive, sense, verify, be it thing, person, animal, any tangible being, that which shrinks from *contact*, or which escapes *contact*, can it not be touched in other ways? Is touch always and only tactile? Is the world not handed to me, at dawn, *in the palm of my eyes*?

– *Intangible* is a Latin word. Mostly we forget this. As is true of most words memory has lost touch with its roots, etymology has disjuncted: the roots are in dictionaries, forgotten – in our mouths at the tips of our pens the word cut off, decapitated.

Are we always aware that Mother *Latin* is there when we think we are pronouncing an English word? *Latin* touches us without our being

conscious of it, ghost or soul of the word, intangible spirit of the tact that comes down to us from the vast, mysterious family deriving from the phoneme *tag*.

– *Tact, contact, intact, integral, contagion, contamination, contiguity, contingency, tangent*, the sense of touch and its words touch our physical and mental life, it sets in motion and organises all our movements and all our passions it takes charge of our coming together our drawing apart our rejections our flights, it distributes illness and health, it loves and it repels.

– For touch, the act of touching and the sense of touch cannot exist without *thou*, without *thou* the animate and inanimate being that, coming towards me, comes on until it reaches me, until it *comes in contact with the skin* of my body, of my heart.

– The only touch is of ‘thou’. I cannot touch you unless you touch me. On contact, initiative, domination, precedence stop. Who touches is touched. The active is simultaneously passive.

Touch conceals all kinds of violence and all kinds of gentleness, as well as all the violent gentle things. In a certain sense all touch is violent. The softest of touches puts a limit on intactness, yours or mine. Our languages (French, English, German, Hindi – each of them) keep on trying to touch the mysteries of the sense of touch by sending out words to probe the air and our thoughts about the idea and the desire to touch.

Each language has its own way of putting *a tag* on the experience of touching and translating its significance. Roni Horn’s language makes us feel the *rims* of touching.

Spanish says *tocar*, in memory of Latin *toccare* (rad. *tokk*) and *me llega*: I am touched, for the emotion, what ‘touches’ the soul, but with what sublime and transparent ‘fingers’, fingers of imagination and reminiscence. *Me llega* literally *it reaches me* (*llegar*: arrive at, happen to, reach the spot). Everything that happens to me touches me. What happens is an event. The touch (of/to) the soul is the most intangible of events. The French *toucher* employs an infinitive as noun. French touch chooses to highlight the gesture, the act. Gesture is underwritten by time. Portuguese *tocar* plays the music

What does the Argentinian *tango* say to us? *I touch*. Here we have the dance that touches, we touch one another and with what force!

Tastsinn says German with the sense of groping, when you can’t see, you look with your hands, *du tastest*. *Tâter* trembles and doubts like

blind old Isaac attempting to recognise his son with his fingertips, come that I may feel you with my hands he says, for hands do not err; your voice is Jacob's, he says, but your hairy hands are my Esau's hands. Thus it is said that all the senses can err, save touch. I can believe my fingers, my palms, my skin.

But *tâter*, can you hear? is the twin of *taste*. Who gropes at length with his hands – or feet in order to know by the skin, also *tastes* from the English *taste*, tastes therefore; tastes what? *The taste* water has for Roni's feet, the taste of the fabric for my hands, the taste of wine on my tongue, the taste of the word on my fingers – tongue of my thought. The taste without savour of the word intangible.

English *taste*, which was formerly Latin *tastare*, an offspring of *tangere*, reminds me that it all begins with the tongue. As a nursling I take my first lessons in the world with my tongue as hand. I put everything in my mouth, it is my tongue that tastes and thinks and keeps or rejects everything that approaches me in the world. Is it good or bad, friend or enemy? asks my tongue of the objects that approach it. Including my feet and the toes I suck. For my toes are also 'thou' during this period of my life.

Noli me tangere, touch me not, do not try to touch me, says Jesus to Mary Magdalene, it is the third day of his death, don't touch me for I am no longer and I am not yet, I am no longer living, I have not yet 'ascended to my father', I am dead, still dead, don't go and touch death: this is impossible. I have been stricken with *intangibility*. Yet there he is. Only *with her hands* does she not touch him. With her eyes she touches and he is touched. What if she couldn't see him? She would touch him with her ears, with her voice, with silence. There are so many ways of touching without touching, without touching be touched, to be in the continuity of the real.

Fass mich nicht an the German Jesus says, and the word becomes rougher, more authoritarian than the graze of *tangere*, this is a touch which takes hold of, seizes, shuts up, it doesn't go by, it doesn't lie side by side like a tangent, it doesn't stroke, it grips and encircles. This *anfassen* warns us that in caress capture lies in wait.

French invented *tact*. *Tact* touches with such great delicacy that it seems not to touch what it grazes at all, to speak only in a roundabout way and in a murmur. One doesn't feel the weight of tact. Tact thinks and isn't ponderous. Tact is so rare and so precious that it becomes an intangible treasure. One says that someone 'has tact', as if one could possess this virtue which consists in not-having, in not-taking, in being-careful-not-to-alter or disturb.

When Proust's narrator touches the taste of the madeleine in his cup



of tea, he touches time with his tongue, for the first and last time. Tea's orange fragrance of time.

The intangible is not eternally intangible. She who is able to translate it into language makes it flower again, ephemeral but perceptible.

Without touching me, because they withdraw, because they lighten, the Rings of Lispector touch me in another way: they make me feel the rapidity, the ungraspable part of thought, they make me see the invisible as it makes itself invisible.

Apophases – Ruings

Without knowing it, without touching it, without *showing* or demonstrating, Roni brings in, draws the space and the trace of this without-place and without root, this 'part' that has departed, this being-thing without being, of which, by apophasis, a certain mysticism 'speaks' – that is from afar, in words that stand apart, 'in a still small voice'

– the mysticism of Angelus Silesius for example.

All these white spaces, these blanks, which add silences, murmurs, absences to the sentences, all these spaces these ellipses, departures, these gusts of air, this world of the unutterable that lives hidden in the caverns of thought, in the pits of discourse, in street corners, these vanishings, these sudden amnesias, this letting of ghosts into reality, are some of the traits that recall negative theology, 'the daring that consists in going further and elsewhere than is traditionally allowed', Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le Nom*, Galilée, Paris, (p. 18), in leaning out over the void at the risk of falling.

One sees that all these Rings are committed to the equivocal, the dislocated, the unravelled.

These are *Ruings*. One does not know whether they are there to respond to the most insatiable urge to repair, whether they are roused by attraction or dispersed by a desire to flee, flee themselves. Or whether they bear witness, in their convulsions and inversions, to the seismic forces that the orderly progress of language must resist. The orderliness of the text has been swept away by autonomous or maybe even autonomist movements. In place of a bound succession of pages subordinated to the age-old rule of the book, an artefact so powerful that over the centuries it has come to seem like a natural being, in place of the significant mass, an army of lines arranged without a shudder of complaint into the format of pages, even in the case of a book by Clarice Lispector with its unusually bold thinking, Roni sets loose, truly unchains, revolutionises the history of the utterance and the usual centralising, quasi-police-state regime of the book. The 'sentence' explodes. It is thrown out of

orbit, ex-orbited. But the point is not destruction. No it is liberation, revelation, de-hierarchisation: what was once hidden is in full view, the secondary becomes just as main as the main, there is no this-side-up.

All these themes, which derail classical logocentric thought, are those to which Clarice Lispector gives utterance. They are the philosophical 'characters' of her work.

Whereupon Roni adds, carries on, illuminates, incarnates in forms of being, the murmur of thought. As if she answered, precisely and with astounding fidelity, Lispector's call: 'hear me, hear my silence'. Yes, she 'hears', that is *she receives*, understands, takes in and reincarnates Clarice Lispector's final dreams in visible space. Creation on creation. Virtuosity with extreme sensitivity. Astounding invention of the text of the text. Roni gives a second life. A written text is always waiting for the 'reading' that assures its survival, its resuscitated countenance.

Similarly a play by Shakespeare or Aeschylus is a dead letter, coming into its own only at the breath, the kiss, the touch of a director-messiah. Rare is the messiah.

Kafka says he always turns up the day *after* the end. This is too bad, but it is a posthumous consolation. Stendhal expected his readers, the 'happy few' as he said *in English*, so foreign did he imagine them, in the year 1936 at the earliest. But Lispector's happy few are already arriving.

It is not only to Lispector that Roni gives the magic ring.

Roni Horn's reflection-re-creation holds for all great writing and reading: in transporting the written thought out of its paper and card habitat, in unsticking and lifting the tape of its discourse off in order to transport it still living into a wholly other space, never before seen 'in reality' but which is surely not without kinship to or unlike the 'originary' space, gone for good before it ever made it to paper or parchment.

If these Rings fascinate and move us it is because they remind us of a forgotten time, a prehistory, a still-restless, unstable, undecided era when the verbal elements danced around the eclipsing light waves, light-darkness-light, describing curves. The lips' curves. It was 'before' straight lines, but this 'before' has probably never *existed* except in dreams. In dreams or in art.

Impossible to emphasise enough the degree to which and with what consequences writing in its western manifestation *was forced to fall into line in a book*. Thrift, thrift! Thrift of time and space, thrift of effort, of physical and mental exertion: writing is above all a technique invented to transmit, reproduce, keep, register. The first tablets we have are inventories. Once upon a time I would have written you on a flat surface. Writing you with a reed on clay is unwieldy, if for a book I must

have a flat surface paved with stones. Yes, the material constraint was all important. How cumbersome, to write you, before paper. Therefore form came before content. The tablet brought about the linearity and order of the writing. And you too, you read in order from beginning to end, without losing the thread nor any time. Until Chinese paper came along.

– Yes writing is flat, but that doesn't imply that flatness of representation is necessary. We are remarkable beings, insofar as our brains can represent space in three dimensions.

The space which looks flat has depths. What to call these flat depths that furrow the silk, open the screen without the least relief to celestial infinities?

Yes we are the masters and subjects of writing as a technique. But behind Greek thought lies the germ of writing as an art, which can do the impossibles

The paper book is the result of having had to invent linear writing. But no one has yet managed to bring water, dreams, art 'into line', nor to domesticate everything that Clarice Lispector calls 'the *immonde*'. The *immonde*, literally *unworld*, that is that which is not *mundus* not proper or 'clean', at least by most people's standards, that which is not tamed, arranged, captured, castrated, that cannot be appropriated, made proper, not useful, not usable. That which occupies space and time 'for nothing'. Profitless. One does not publish the *draft* of a book. One publishes a finished book, compact

Flat, of course.

Imagine *a round book*. Imagine round or almost round books. A library of round books! What a waste of space. And besides how to read them?

But Roni Horn must have dreamt of a round book, or a river-book, without beginning or end. If she has forgotten this dream, I remember it. A book tumbled out of the sky and broke. Not only was the book round, but it might turn into a round tree. A dream tree. A mathematical tree. Maybe it was one of the lost trees of paradise: the tree of speech with silence. Or the day-and-night tree. From root to leaf it is a continuity with discontinuities. At each knot or crook of the vital continuity, branchings. When it woke up, the round tree that was a book fell apart, it fell to the ground in veins and twigs of words, and in quivering palms. A voice, rising from the book in pieces, said:

the dense jungle of words wraps itself thickly around what I feel and live and transforms [. . .]

A densa selva de palavras envolve espessamente o que sinto e vivo, e transforma tudo o que sou em alguma coisa minha que fica fora de mim. (*Água Viva*)

The Ring, yearning for the link, brings about the break. Desire is the dream of breaking out of the circle of the ring without shaking off the dream of its rule. Even as they break away the curves of the broken sentence long for enclosure. The discontinuities paint the seasons of time. Here, in the gap, a little time has passed. Over here a little future will come.

The Stage/Scene

And all these dishevelled events take place on a stage

these instants under/deconstruction, these extravagances, promenades, wanderings have a frame. The inside frame has an outside frame. The inside frame is an Art Gallery packed with layers of memory. The Hauser & Wirth Gallery cannot and does not wish to forget that in another life it was a bank. In 1925 its visitors and its hosts as they came through the doors had business transactions, financial ventures, trade with far-away lands, America or Asia, on their minds. The bank is a world book of accounts, the kind of book to send one's imagination tripping. One has to conjure up the London trader in rubber and precious woods. He dreams of changing the jungle into pounds sterling. From the outside, the building has never looked like a bank. It has always already donned a theatrical mask. The distinguished and ironic mask of an upper-class Englishman. This elegant and mocking building abuts modest-looking Wren Church. To complete the Gallery's metonymy – a bank of dreams and daring artworks – the space between it and the worn little church is now a courtyard full of curios, cheap antiques, sellers of old lace, maps of former, now-dismantled empires, china and cutlery, a tiny museum for a vanished culture.

The buildings dispose their cubes around the square of Piccadilly Circus. One of the major problems of Greek geometry was squaring the circle. Is the frame part of the work of art? Is it outside, is it in?

196A Piccadilly stands like a figure against the back of the church, which itself stands out against a background that ultimately blends into the whole history of the city of London, and vibrates, as it fades into the distance, with an energy still palpable inside the bank transformed into a frame for distant inner adventures. Who can pin down the beginning and end of the space Roni Horn entered one day with her dream of installing, according to yet-to-be-invented rites, an inestimable treasure

of artworks in search of a frame to take the creative spirit, with its secret energies, as far away as possible? She enters, watchful, alert, as Rimbaud in Abyssinia, belted in gold, dreams of trading posts where the fruit of his adventures will be entrusted to the luck of the draw, to winner takes all.

The support, the staging, the frame of a visual work can amplify or betray, expand or muffle its impact. The frame can oppose, divert, attack. Or magnify the inwardness of the work it accompanies.

The frame is an art Gallery which is like a theatre, with a difference: the difference is that when one enters the theatre of the Gallery, right away one is on stage, in the stage, in the centre of the stage, which one must cross in order to reach *the edge* – what Jacques Derrida has called the *parergon*

Hors-d'œuvre (outside-the-work, extraneous matter) the clothing of the statues, which comes both to adorn and veil their nudity. Hors-d'œuvre stuck to the edges of the work nonetheless, as to the represented body insofar as – such is the argument – it does not belong to the whole of the representation. *La Verité en Peinture (The Truth in Painting)*, p. 66

– the first step of the frame, the edge of the edge, edge of the stage where, on the left-hand side, a staircase climbs to the balcony of the Gallery-theatre. Thus one has tasted – touched – with the tip of one's toe, groped – seen – touched, 'looked' from within at the rubber stage floor that one is a part of without being properly part of it, one has been the guest . . . or the character, the passerby, walk-on, a new sort of ghost in the machine, in the play. First 'reading' first 'look': as if for the first time I took in a visual artwork with my feet. A new kind of relation, a new contiguity, new continuity is offered when I come through the door. I take off the shoes that prevent contact, and I walk delicately on the words: the words, the sight of the words modify the entire physicality of my body, make me light, wary. Am I going to walk on the face of the sentence lying on the ground? Am I going to brush across it? Go around it? At this point a new kind of walking, of stepping, of reading, from a distance, askance, is born. I recall, as I move slowly pensively, that Freud said the act of writing was experienced as an equivalent to walking on the body of the mother.

Now I climb the steps which lead to the gallery of the Gallery. The gallery has a balustrade of small wooden pilasters.

From the balcony I have a second view of the work spread out below. To see from above. To see below from above. The balustrade is yet another *parergon*, a frame which frames a work – floor – rug – stage – page. From one side. On the other the balustrade is the edge of a different part of the building.

The balustrade with its columns forms the dis-continuous link with the building of the Gallery, its upper floors, its walnut-panelled walls

Behind the balustrade, the 'American Room' 'the first floor office' secretly breathes. Here is where Rimbaud's trader agents might have gone about their business. Here is where some silk screens catch me off balance and all of a sudden considerably complicate the New Reading I was starting to get the feel of on the ground floor. I find myself standing in front of the same sentences with a different look. From horizontal the text becomes vertical, all the viewpoints shift. And the 'Rings' which snaked across the ground, whose form was dictated and finished off by the Gallery walls, are here detached, singled out and set on silk squares. Right away I *see* that the segments that led a contemplative vegetable existence on the ground mean to argue with the edge here, the crest, the arrest of the frame, to escape, to undermine the apparent flatness of the screen with bottomless abysses. The same broken Rings but a revolution is going on. Running off in all directions.

The pupil

Each and every work in the Horn space requires its own utterly different, particular, sort of reading, a different gaze. Each square with its restless, mobile, appearing-disappearing inhabitant stirs up two simultaneous kinds of seeing: the usual linear-coded seeing, which the brain orders and obeys. A second kind of seeing that jostles, turns upside down, dispenses with, inverts, reverses the past-seeing, challenges the seeing-master who stands guard in the brain. The two kinds of seeing knock against and overdetermine one another. The new seeing stands out against the background of the old seeing, suddenly interrupted. The old seeing tries to fight back. A trace of the finalised old linear seeing is needed for the irruption of the seeing which disorders and cuts.

By dint of having always already seen I have forgotten, lost the sight that sees (in) the instant. My brain is a master who believes in advance and makes me see what's expected of me, what everyone sees. I see according to the authorised version. So in the end I have never yet seen what I have always already seen.

Now Roni takes the old construction apart and with a clack of her magic cutting, I am *pupil* again

The duel between ways of seeing regenerates, resuscitates an era emptied of *déjà vu*, in which each thing was able to come to the light for a first time. Yes, this is a world of first times, like childhood reinvented, given to the eye that lets itself be disarmed to see. Things come on stage

as in the genesis of the world, in the splendour of their mystery and they introduce themselves to us in words. And as I see-hear them I think with thoughts that I have never before thought.

The mirror happens to me. The mystery of the mirror happens to me. The mirror sends me a letter. How to read it? I see before I read. I see tiny words

I see. The words make a tiny pupil. The pupil is right in the middle of the silk square. The perfection of its placement is contradicted by the fragmentation of the circle. A tiny parcel of infinity enters the finite.

Once upon a time I would have followed the old order keeping to the familiar path – I would have ‘read’:

the tiniest piece of mirror is always the whole mirror.

Now before settling into the age-old reading rut, I *see*. According to Horn’s point of view I see *mirror* detached. I see a circle of words going from right to left as if mirrored, but the letters follow each other as if out of mirror.

Is this word *mirror* part of the whole or is it the whole? Or *nothing* at all, the *nothing* of the all?

What is a mirror? I reflect. I have to reflect (myself). I have to reflect on the absolute mirror. I have to see the pure mirror. I have to try to *see* the mirror, with a seeing-purified-of-looking.

In general, we don’t see the mirror, we look at ourselves in the mirror. Nothing is less visible, more used than a mirror. The mirror is the servant of my self. The mirror is the thing from which I begin. I don’t respect the mirror, I make use of it. The mirror, so to speak, is nothing, the Nothing from which everything makes its way to me. To the me.

In set theory the empty set is the primitive nothing from which everything crystallises. Except that the empty set can be anything at all. Clarice Lispector is a mathematician of life. *Agua Viva* is *like* a theory of sets.

The empty set can be a violet, an attractive man, and the turtles, a scrap of paper in the street,

anything at all, absolutely anything about which there is nothing to say, but which is the starting point for the crystallisation of a universe.

Agua Viva is a water of words in which nothings are afloat, get swept away pell-mell, and maybe one of them is the empty set. In the flux of nothings, perhaps the mirror is *the* primal scene of everything, the zero, the set termed empty because it contains no elements, one cannot decide where it belongs

The mirror is perhaps the thing-witness of me, the witness without a witness. Even infinitesimal the mirror is infinitely powerful.

In my opinion Roni Horn bent over *Agua Viva* by accident without knowing it was a living mirror and suddenly what she felt crystallised into signatures of the universe. She saw herself seen, she who is usually the one who is trying to see.

There are, there always already were, snapshots of Roni in *Agua Viva*

The mirror is the being that most fascinates Roni. The mirror, its sources and resources. The liquid mirror and the iced-over mirror. Roni tries to photograph the mirror in its pure state. What Clarice Lispector calls its 'thingy mystery'. The mirror is very difficult to set free, as a pure state, as being, for it is too useful to the human subject. It is caught in the exchange. It is even more neglected than a dog, for in addition it is mute

Set the mirror free to find its thingy mystery is the metaphor of Roni Horn's liberating action in relation to words forever trapped in syntax, tame animals, animots. The words themselves, unchained, without speech tones, but not without meaning, she dreams she will set in so much silence that they become wholes, but infinite. She is looking for a way to give the mirror back speech. To the word and to the thing. The 'sentences' have two tricks up their sleeve: they say one thing, and they make a work of words with word-pieces.

What I tell you is never what I tell you
but something else.

Mirror is also something other than the word, the name and the familiar uses of the mirror object

In order to approach the whole of the mirror with all its parts one needs to *capture the thing that slips away*. But how on earth to capture the thing-that-slips-away? By definition it escapes capture. All that's left is to capture the fleeing of the thing, to catch its flight! To invent a style called captinterrapture.

Which is what Roni does: she snips off, she puts *mirror* back in the water of the world, she catches the word on her hook and throws it back into the flow of discourse. She takes sides with the side. This is one way of deconstructing the totalitarian phantasm of the whole, the power of the biggest and strongest. She is interested in the fragment as being smaller, she prefers the smallest mirror of all. Becoming the smallest of all is one of the versions of escape Roni invents in the series of silk-screens. The smallest of all is every bit as powerful as the biggest. More. The force of attraction and seduction of the smallest of all, the small all,

is greater than that of the bigger all. It makes us want to see because it manages to appear all but ungraspable.

What is shown: all the possible ways of escaping from a frame, an enclosure, a state of arrest hence a house, a cage, an institution, a border, a whole. Disbelonging.

Ultimate ultimate

It is as if Roni Horn was 'capturing' the mystery of ultimates, the furthest of the furthest, the beyond of the beyond, the even later of the last.

It is as if she had reached the point on the north pole where the south pole begins

It is as if she had prepared the stage of space for the coming of the Messiah, he who, Kafka tells us, will turn up not on the last but on the very last day. It is as if *the last* were not *the last* for there is a *last laster than the last*, without taking into account *the lastests of the last*.

It is as if she drew the *lasting of the last*, the held note of the instant, or the *stretching out* of the instant; a dream of time, the time of a dream. In this dreaming of the dreamingstant Roni Horn leaves grammar and enters the exploration of the dimension of subjectivity. She draws *the place without which nothing impossible happens*.

Intimations

Not in the frame, not without the frame.

Yes, I want the ultimate word,
of the real.

Of the real
that it's already.

Yes, I want the ultimate word
(not) on one side, (not) on the other side

I want the nowness of the now and the nowing of the now, the nowingness of the now, all the imperceptible palpitation of the now as it nows, the justbeforenow pre-nowing the now the postnow still being in the nowing,

and all these infinitesimal zones of time which are the folds and the blown breaths of the instant, that Clarice Lispector calls

agora é o domínio de agora,

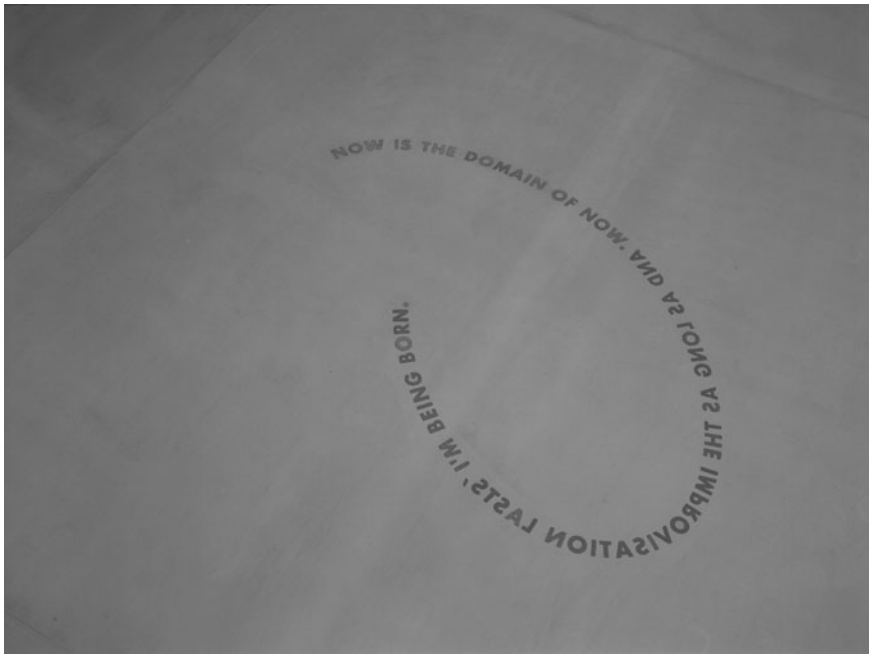
the realm without thickness, but infinite, of an instant which lasts as long as its name *Agora, Now*,

I want the being that doesn't have but that is, and whose name in Brazilian makes the shortest sentence in the world:

é.

That which goes on vibrating after the sound

How to make us feel the intimate, subjective duration of a Now – Agora? By catching more than one aspect of a same Agora. For one instant is always already another one, at that instant. One instant is more than an instant. A thought instant a lived instant, an instant plus me, is always right away two times. As I am not without you. Here then is the trace of a single instant in its passage through Roni Horn:



One *sees* the instant's spiral, the geometrical and philosophical simultaneity, the myriads in the same.

I want what I have, I want what I don't have.

Want says the lack of the word that keeps want alive.

I want to want the word that is the cause of want. The last, the ultimate word is neither present nor past. It *has just passed* it leaves the trace of its cut quivering, the white print of its disappearance, its breath on the lip. I want the word that I shall never in my whole life know. That unique word, the one that is the last word and the name

of the instant-always-already, the word that goes past, the password, the word in a trance, the word that doesn't have time, the word I don't have time to – the word that turns up and was already future, that is, past.

One day this is what I called the ultimate word:

'That word there is mehere, for when I am here even when I am not here, the proof, doesn't that prove even when I am only the proof, there, that there I am even, even myself, there?'

For the first time in the world, I believe, Roni Horn has 'drawn' a portrait of the word of there-even-when-I-am-not-there.

As the model passes, is passing, she draws each passing footstep, the word seen from in front, from in back, glimpsed, just before just after, the word is no longer, the *nétance*, the not-beingness. The simultaneity of living and dying, of the back and the front. An impalpable density of mourning reigns over this entire expanse. And yet what remains has a kind of perfection, a beauty-of-its-own. A beauty which pours from its very being cut off. It is as if she *were drawing* the name of the Without, of the *Sans*, of the pure cut, of which Jacques Derrida has made himself the philosophical draughtsman. Citation 100 to 115: *La Vérité en Peinture (The Truth in Painting)*. The *Sans*, the *Without*, is not nothing. Being not there but still there in the *nétance*, not-beingness itself, it is not easy to 'represent'.

Roni has had to *invent* a sort of *negative theography*: in order to portray the Ultimate Word which is also the so very first that it is rather a degree, a variation in the intensity of the light, she has had to create a vast piecemeal space, a sort of castle of new ruins, composed of wild ground and walls in the form of unjoined squares surrounded by open space and emptiness. Then in every single section of wall make erasures, chinks, nicks, collapsed parts. Put entry-exits to facilitate the 'visible invisible' circulation of a ghost.

The see-otherwise allows us to see the invisibility of the ghost.

Oh all that we don't see when we see!

And here is someone, Roni Horn, who comes to bear witness to everything that we fail-to-see and fail-to-think.

– No, she is not the philosopher of the almost-not-seen.

– She is its artist prophet, its medium.

For one thing: how does she know that Dominion-Now viewed 'from above' describes a twisted spiral?

She doesn't know with knowledge. 'Just because' is how she knows. She receives.

And Futura Bold?

Futura Bold: Who or what is that? The name of a character in an unpublished James novel?

An unknown woman who turns up on a page of *Agua Viva* then vanishes?

No. It is the name of the typeface with which Roni Horn embodies these remains, snippets, vestiges, seeds or *Agua Viva* extracts. Like a pseudonym for the here uncertain 'author'.

I note that Roni did not transcribe the *Rings* by hand, did not copy out the fragments in her own hand. She trimmed their stalks, she pruned from the forest of words, she set these *Rings* free and let them float off into bottomless space.

Futura Bold is *just because*. When I asked Roni about the typeface, she had no explanation. *Futura Bold* turned up and seemed 'beautiful' or necessary, without any why.

The *Rings* could only have happened in *Futura Bold*. Such are the overdeterminations, messages that come from the matter. These overdeterminations defy analysis. Their why is secret – but beyond question.

Just because, without reason – sans raison – is the answer to *why*. What a shame that this Sans (without) has no counterpart in English. I need this French Sans to anchor the drift of my reveries, to link the *Rings*. For, it must be said, *Sans* is the pseudonymic signature of the undecidable author of all these parergonic events that have taken place on the stage of the Hauser & Wirth Gallery, 196A Piccadilly, London, as wounded ships come to rest in the open arms of a port.

I'm going to need *Sans*. *Sans* so rich, in its homonymy, by the luck of the French language, a sans that is not a lack, sans that gives me so much to think about in its confusions and distinctions, this *sans* which sounds like *cent, sens, sang* (a hundred, sense, blood), this 'sans of the pure cut' that names the trace of an absence, this *sans* which has a word for a name and whose invisibility marks a totality to which it does not belong, this *sans* which is in the place of and does not exist

Jacques Derrida asks if this *sans* is translatable.

This point of view of not-knowing organises the field of beauty. The beauty, let us not forget, we call natural. This point of view lets us see that an end is in view, that there is a form of finality, but one does not see what the whole, the organised totality, is in view of. One does not see what its end is. A certain point of view, suddenly [*de but en blanc*], bends the whole so that it falls short of itself. But this falling short does not deprive it of a part. The falling short deprives it of nothing. It is not a shortfall.

The beautiful object, the tulip, is a whole and it is the sense of its harmonious completeness that releases its beauty to us. The *sans* of the pure cut is without lack, sans/without lacks nothing. And yet in my experience of the completed tulip, of the fullness of its system, my knowledge lacks something and this is necessary for me to find this totality beautiful. This something is not some thing, it is not a thing, even less a part of the thing, a piece of the tulip, a bit [*bout*] of the system.

La Verité en Peinture, p. 102 (*The Truth in Painting*)

Will it let its body to be ripped from its tongue (French) without (sans) losing what life remains to it? *Sine? Ohne? Aneu? Sem? Without?*

Beauty cannot do without this without [*ce sans*], it has to do only with the without, it gives us nothing to see, especially not itself, save with this particular sans, and none other. Furthermore it doesn't give itself to be seen with this sans, since it has nothing to do, as we have just said, with sight, or at least, strictly speaking, with the visible.

La Verité en Peinture (The Truth in Painting), p. 103

This *Sans* is without author, it is the *sans* of the *Sem autor* of *Agua Viva*.

What about *Sem autor*? *Sem Autor* is the signature of the 'true thought' which takes place in *Agua Viva*. True thought thinks itself, the way *Futura Bold* just happens. The 'true' thing work of art in space comes – from the most distant reaches of art, beyond conceptualised thought – to the first silk screen, Roni Horn's support, like a foreign thought. Comes with such freedom that it seems 'authorless'. And, indeed, who's to say who is the most author among people whom the arc of a thought has pierced to the heart?

Sans Why or *Without-Author* is the blissful state of Clarice Lispector at the end of *Agua Viva*, and of Roni Horn surrounded by the *Rings of AV*, first one, then the other so overtaken by the gorgeous freedom of the thought fragments they have passed on that – the work *appears* (only appears) in the splendour of a thing without an author.

Roni Horn feels this Without-Author strolling among the new ruins of her earthly constellation. The author-Without is so equivocal and undecidable that 'he' is noticed, like any real self-respecting ghost, in the *masculine*, a sort of anguished and anguishing giver of life. It is an *il*, a *he*. This *it finds itself* (*il se trouve*) now –

Este não precisa mais pensar *e encontra-se agora perto de grandeza do nada*. Poderia dizer do 'tudo'. Mas 'tudo' é quantidade, e quantidade tem limite no seu próprio começo. A verdadeira incomensurabilidade é o nada. *Agua Viva* (p. 242)

The portrait of this ghost caught by Roni traces nearly the same spiral as the trace of the *Now*

One sees that 'the author-without' and the instant are two of a kind, propelled by a great force into empty space.

The trajectory lets us see the thrust of the thought, like a discus thrower.

He now wheels and plunges into the abysses of the unconscious, towards the primal scene beyond any scene, which is *nothing*. The *nothing* (other name of the author Without) who belongs to no one, about whom there is nothing to say, who is of course bigger than anything, the ungraspable nothing, which beckons but does not let itself be taken or encircled, which goes on its dizzying way, goes on . . .

Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic

Portraits of Portraits The Very Day/Light of Roni Horn

These are not people, these are not things: what Roni Horn has meditated on, followed, observed, hunted, sketched, drawn, grasped cut up, edited, cited, are the figures of her secret questions, the oracular faces to which Roni Horn turns and returns in every way the question that haunts her: ‘Who are you, Face, you who I am, whom I follow, you who look at me without seeing me, you whom I see without knowing whome, you in whom I look at myself, you who would not be without me, you whom I envelope, you who seduce me and into whom I do not enter, who are you, who is this being promised subjected to my gaze, to my objective, this being docile to my law, and who remains totally impenetrable for me? What is *you*? Who am I, you?’

This. This *This* is Roni Horn. Roni Horn is this. *This*, speculation. She looks at herself in the mirror of another face. Face-seen by Roni Horn. What looks at her, touches her. She does not know why. She would like to know what affects her. Moves her genius.

Autoheteroportraits of Roni Horn, as Face.

These are not photographs, these are portraits of looks that don’t allow themselves to be taken, snapshots of instants, series of winks of an eye.

These are series. The idea is not to add, it is not to correct, it is to assemble into a phrase the imperceptible events of appearances, the traces of a light, fleeting timeweather, which are deposited on the surface of a face-figure. It is a system of writing, of recording phenomena which are produced in the contact between a living being and *temps*, as time and as weather.

Each series is a whole. Each whole collects a corpus around a singular subject-support, which was the object of a separate publication, signed Roni Horn.

But if you see Roni Horn’s volumes, books, installations one after

the other, you discover that each instalment is part of an *ekphrasis*, is a moment in a quest, the fragment of a whole whose face remains secret. From a certain moment on, all these figures, which were originally distinct, appear to be bathed in a sort of limpid water, a transparency which swathes in a single light the objects of Roni Horn's gaze, suspended in the very daylight of Roni Horn's anxious thought. Roni Horn thinks. She draws what she thinks, that she thinks.

As if all these portraits had been captured in the same (light of) day in the same season. This season is childhood. The time of insatiable curiosities. The mad desire to discover what is in the *Cabinet*. Who is, is not, there? There is a Cabinet, a container. The Content is enigmatic. We do not know what it is, what, who. We do not know what will happen, who is coming, what is contained. She does not know. This is what she paints: the enigmatic, the undecided. How can one paint the undecided?

Cabinet of: Portrait of the born-undecided [*l'indécis-né*]. Of the undrawn [*indessiné*].

To draw the undrawable.

Who? Whom? Whome? Youwho? I look: 'you are the weather' or 'This is me, This is you', that is 'Portrait of an image', my shemblable my freer, *Index Cixous*, if it's not you it's therefore¹

your spectre, the hero of *Cabinet of*, brilliant book of nobody.

In the beginning there would be a waiting *Cabinet of*. Of? We are still waiting for the Messiah. *Cabinet of* is the portrait of the idea of the Messiah. We see the remains of the idea of the Messiah. There is no one here yet, except for the grimaces of an extraterrestrial given over to the passions. Sonogram of the emotions of a secret being. In the time of Genesis what is the weather [*temps*]? Mist of snow and blood. Prenatal anxiety. What will the Messiah's face look like?

We do not know him, he has neither name, nor contours, nor features. And yet we recognise the cries.

White cries, red cries. Photos of cries. She watches herself growing dreams of cries. In dreams the most heart-rending cries are drawn in white.

You are the weather. Nothing is more idiomatic and more surprising than this address. *You are the weather* plays between the singularity of the individual and the generality of the weather. What is more, the weather changes. Anything can happen. What characterises *the weather* is that it is a series of events. *The weather* is itself by definition heterogeneous. The address *You* is undetermined. There is address, but who is *You*? God? The reader? The character? Emily Dickinson? Roni Horn? You? The person who plays the main role in this philosophical play?

The elusive strangeness of the character called Weather, calm to look at, a calm which by the name promises the storm. Weather lightly, calmly, androgynous, undecidable. Neither good nor bad, beyond. Very slight variations of pressure, of expressions. An intense passivity which lets happen. *Lets* and *makes* happen. A sort of authority without violence, which calls for and retains the gaze because this gentle authority *looks at us*. Without blinking, without seeing us.

The face: slightly enlarged. Treaded like an enlarged detail. *The weather* is our enlargement. The detail draws our attention to another detail.

It is a *Pearl*. Perhaps *You are the Weather* is addressed to her, the pearl. Or else perhaps it is the pearl who says to me: *you are the weather*. I am the calm. The agitation is her, Roni Horn, if it's not her, it's you.

This is thus the portrait of a pearl.

Pearl of pearl. The face with blue eyes.

Undecipherable on an opaque blue ground: pearl of Iceland. Thisland
Seen up close:

Pearl en abyme. Pearl on the right ear.

Aura of nearly pearl invisible at first glance.

To the right barely gilded pearl

Appearance-disappearance of the point of signature.

To the left on the neck, symmetrical pearl, beauty spot, 'mole' Shakespeare would say, on Lucretia's breast, the only ornament, replies. The motif of the pearl returns, insists. Pearls of water on the nostrils, pearl rolls down a cheek. The perception of the reiterated pearl makes us think of a literary, analytic experience: the signature is hidden in the text.

Bit by bit this pearl calls up the memory of other pearls, transparencies, mixtures of light and opacities, spectre of the veil which *makes* the nudity of Rembrandt's Bathsheba.

The pearl is the only clothing of the 'unknown woman' who is Weather's spokesperson. The unknown woman has no name, in the first place, like the Weather she speaks. No proper name? Until on a certain page we learn that her name is Margrét, in reality. Margrét *margaritas*, *margarites*, in Greek, is the word for pearl. The Greeks knew the pearl by the intermediary of Alexander. The Pearl travels. The Unknown woman is the pearl itself.

At the end of the voyage we only see the damp sparkle of the original pearl.

How does one portrait engender another? Does she know the workings of this genealogy?

Portrait after portrait, portrait according to portrait, portrait of

portrait, portrait of what has no features, at least in appearance, portrait of the weather, portrait of time, portrait of *of*, she continues her adventure, crossing through the child, the clown, which are awoken in her, called fascinated by these familiar strangers who come to her, by chance and necessity, who do not resemble her at all, except in this point of contact as small and defined as a pearl, where she recognises a *je ne sais quoi* which touches her, for the flash of an instant: there! This is me! This I-don't-know-what which charms her, presents itself in disguise, as is always the case in love. By love she is guided. She draws what she loves, she loves what she portraits, but it is an artist's love. She desires collecting, not a person, a being, but the *je ne sais quoi* that moves her.

Let us not be mistaken, she does not do the portrait of H el ene Cixous or Isabelle Huppert. She captures the charm-pearl of unknown women, who speak to her under the names. Under the book in H el ene Cixous, under the image in Isabelle Huppert, this is what interests her: the emanation, the essential core, the tear of the secret, the *je ne sais quoi*, which makes the Face.

Portrait of an Image (with Isabelle Huppert) therefore deconstructs the entire traditional unthinking approach to the thing called Portrait, the use made of the word Portrait, when it is referred to people.

For this to happen the Portrait must personify the image. The difference between an image and a *face*: the face sees you. The image does not see you. Is seen. The gaze of the Portraitist gives a figure to the image.

If the image has a portrait, this is because it has eyes: the portrait eyes the image. Opens its eyes. And the image gives itself up to life. To reveal the portrait of the pearl hidden under the image, to allow one to hear the silent cry of the messiah locked in the *Cabinet of*

And afterwards?

She is always waiting for another of those absolutely singular, unforeseeable You who will come to respond to her cry:

Are you too one of my othermes?

Come! you co-me!

She paints everything in the plural. She paints the singular plural. The Face's – always more than one.

14 March 2007

Translated by Eric Prenowitz

Note

1. This is a reference to the famous line in La Fontaine's fable 'Le loup et l'agneau', 'Si ce n'est toi c'est donc ton fr ere': 'If it is not you it is therefore your brother'. [Translator's note]

K – A Notebook

The stuck, left on K of Kasmiach
Tracks that go towards the horizon
portrait of longing: over there! over there!
form cone the cone thus
of paper or cloth or lampshade recalls

Who's going on a journey? A woman from the back
Is she one? Is she two? Fair dark?

Who's going away from us, who's no more than a double invisible
look and before these unknown women the canvas palely luminous and
without the edge of the unknown?

Back. Working from the back. They look at the world and the world's
face was a back.

A few black dots on the world's skin: these are towns.

Seen from very far away.

I close my eyes and I see the furthest-possible
before me: the world
behind me: time

Immigration act 1971

Refusal of an Entry Clearance (No right of Appeal)

Who is refused?

The writ of refusal is lying on the side
The refusal, the same one –for decades now
In all languages

Violence of words, spiteful verdicts

The peace of objects
Straight after the refusal, the eviction
2 bowls of milk (2 bowls standing on the side)
As if we should read: cats not permitted
Or No animals admitted

Enigma of Cloth

Coming from cloth, going to cloth

My passion for noble fabrics, heavy muscular silks from Cambodia, gossamer silks from India, that would explain it: they come from far away to form an alliance with my body so as to create my clothes. It's a clothpoetic collaboration in silk, dreaming of luxury, of voluptuousness, of metamorphoses

But what can I say about my strange and clandestine passion for domestic cotton cloths, for my attraction to squares of large porous cotton or seersucker, in short for dishcloths, preferably small ones, for hand towels in honeycomb stitch.

What can I say about the seduction wrought upon me by these 'things' apparently without market value, and which yet seem to me so desirable that, more than once, I've stolen them, from some hotel or other. There, I've just admitted it here: I've been a thief of little cotton cloths.

And if I admit it here, it's because it's through a dishcloth and cotton thread that I first linked up with my friend Maria Chevska. As soon as I saw her installations made up of threads of cloth torches, I recognised a certain very ancient environment, like flags, the insignia or first manuscripts of an inaugural country or time

Where does the force of this extreme attraction come from?

I look through her book, and they are there straight away these paper crumplings, strewn on the floor, these linens these towels, these silhouettes sometimes recumbent, sometimes suspended, hanging, stretched out, fleeting, sometimes flying up to the top or the bottom or

or sketches of dream planes flying west to east keeping close to the inverted wall of a room.

I search, I look, I follow, I receive. The towel changes and spins another cotton. Suddenly the slide alters speed and path.

Yes, that's it: all the inertia and all the movement meet in this piece of fabric that contains within its modest appearance the thousand virtual

forms of the world's objects. From this rag can come men, women, children, birds, drapes, hairstyles, parasols, handkerchiefs, marriage veils, clouds, dolphins.

It's the primordial skin on which the first of the gods practised his hand.

He practised his hand. And afterwards he gave a hand, endlessly handed on, with no outside and no inside to the hand of every human child.

The piece of pure or mixed cotton is the remains of the original body, tapestry of God's womb, we cling to in order to cross the tempests of time. Where is the child who has not refused to sleep and part from the maternal arms without having, in exchange, the bit of cloth that connects and protects?

Handkerchief

That's why you wave a handkerchief. Changing the obvious use of the handkerchief, saved for the nose, and making it the final severed link, the sign of farewell, the extension to the arm, the hand, the heart, once the departure has taken place. Then there only remains him and you, shrunk by separation, hardly bigger than a corner of a handkerchief, detached, isolated, the train has gone, the world has gone, the handkerchief flutters, alone. It is sketched at the top of a page on the left, reduced to a sort of hieroglyph of regret, tiny and feeble flame of the bereavement.

Yet from one side someone remembers you on the edge of the platform and draws you in miniature, from the other side a vague crowd gathers round, it was spring continuing to return once time has gone.

Ribbons flower in young girls' hairstyles, the young girls are themselves ribbons, still bits of cloth taken from life.

How lovely the weather was that day, of which we no longer know anything.

Maria's book,
is it a book?

A Stroll?

The absent-minded running of an ancient dream

A trunk full of traces, of time past:

Town corners – Brimming bowls

Metaphor and Metonymy

Two houses: Two bowls

Is a house not a bowl turned upside down?

Is it book? Is it time? Where is the stage?

Are we inside? Are we outside?

Is Maria's book a strolling of ghosts? Or the ghost of a stroll of ghosts? On the fractured stage of the book, human beings are distant, vague, traces. The human world is in the past. The sheets and towels are in the present. Envelopes are the present. Lives fade at dream windows.

I leaf through the book of hours of a traveller who remembers times when she wasn't born, the room where objects await the arrival of the mistress of the place with a cat's patience.

The detached details grow, the synecdoche takes the dimension of the whole, a slipper says the woman who left this island, this town, deserted. Modern version of Friday's footprint

This is a breadtext, a bread-text

The camera films the state of bereavement.

It's a scattered mosaic of dying memories. They are going to expire. They expire. The camera films the remains of stories, the final moments of final moments.

A still room, with no one inside. No one's room.

Stillness remains. Even the movement is struck by stillness

Who then is no one?

Who doesn't live here?

You'd say the theatre of K's dream. Of K? Of Kafka? Of someone who suddenly had to flee. Or else is in front of the Law's gate, the building, or in front of the gate of a book or town, and who doesn't dare go in. But . . .

The trouble is there's no door. Where's the door? We see the walls clearly, the windows, the floors, but no door.

You, who wander, are you inside? are you outside? Who were you, invisible subject of the enigma?

Are you the person they refused to allow in?

Exclusion

Suddenly in the middle of these life fragments, two pages of signs, and what signs!

On my left hand an alphabet of signs for the non-hearing, twenty-four expressions for hands, fingers, addressed to the person to whom fate has refused entry to word and sound.

On the right the refusal meant for the asylum seeker, the verdict, modern-day version of 'You will not enter the Promised Land'.

Will this book be the memorial to the Unknown Immigrant then?

The words of refusal are so heavy, so implacable that the form has fallen on its side. This guillotine has severed the destinies of millions of fugitives in our twentieth century teeming with exiles.

Immigration Act 1971

Refusal of an Entry Clearance

No right of appeal

Arbeit macht frei

You who knock here, abandon all hope

Frozen violence of phrases, inhuman spite

lives cut short

The peace of objects, so little time after the eviction. Instead of the act of rejection, two milk bowls, lying on the side.

Like a thought of hospitality.

And yet, in the vicinity, no cat?

As if we must read: cats not permitted or No Entry even to cats.

So the full bowls will be abandoned and behind these images that arouse regret we'd fear some recent catastrophe, like Chernobyl.

So who goes, who doesn't go?

Would it be P.? Or K?

Is it an *Answer*? These letters that show themselves, but disguised, these initials that stammer on a page, on a wall?

We'd say a secret signature.

It's a name that would have begun with P in another life, or K, perhaps in Prague?

And then the letter would have been injured, stopped, detained, held captive by a wall of sticky ties. It's because it gave signs of wanting to flee, it had sketched a step, stretched out a leg, announced a path.

Stop! Halt! You'll go no further, K.!

But look at the art of staging: it's precisely the constraints that testify to the inspired soul of this letter. A letter? A number. That of the artist who lives at the bottom of Maria's mental room, the other in secret. On the slab of her absence of house we can read her 'true' name: Vera Kasmich. Vera Kasmich or Maria Chevska in truth.

We are always at least two in the same body and the same story. As we know since Archimedes' first line in the sand. As Kafka reminds us: we are human beings with two rival hands, beings with two souls that attack each other, beings broken up and dislocated

Memories

We will understand nothing from this trembling, troubled archive, without recollecting the history of war in the century scarcely past, and especially the history of the one we have called *the second* world war, the war that remembered the First and announces the Third, the hinge between the two pages of the century.

Someone here, in this album, remembers and forgets, remembers and forgets to reconstruct the existence and the *execution* of a being, emblematic figure of these times slashed from the vital term.

Who remembers whom?

Is it the one condemned to death who remembers two pages later these two houses in the mist? Or are they the two houses that remember in the mist the one who lived there before?

Or do the two living houses think of the death that awaits them? They and the young man with his eyes bound?

Blindfold: another cloth.

You have to read this book, look at it, remember it, with bound eyes, decipher it through the scraps of oblivion that veil it.

Translated by Susan Sellers

Shit, No Present: Faecetious Serrano

You gave a start? You recoiled?

You said to yourself: 'I don't feel the urge'?

Wait! Don't leave.

There's something there.

If you felt the urge to leave, it is something, isn't it? An urge not-to is still an urge, a movement, life, which protects itself, which repels and pushes again [*qui repousse, qui re-pousse*].

I too gave a start. I was about to leave. I stayed.

What held me back? On the one hand the *force* of the strike. Or the strike of the force [*coup de force*]. But what strike and what force are we talking about?

On the other hand, and I'll return to this, it is this question of the *Remainder*, so often and so powerfully tackled in literature and in philosophy, it is this *Remainder*, around which so many magnificent thoughts turn, called by the mysteries of the *Border-Thing*, this left over, which *touches* (upon) the limit, my, his or your limit, makes this theme of 'the limit' tremble, under the shock of its sudden emergence, our relationship to ourselves being uncertain, and forces us to interrogate the *Where* of the beginning and of the end, of being and non-being. Of life and death.

The Remainder resists, by definition, any definition.

Any assured recognition.

Let's cast a first glance at these images of immediately *unheimlich* Things. What can that be? But for the given name, one would not be able to say, one would be worried, disturbed.

Who remains, what remains, contravenes the secret laws of time and place. It's finished. It continues. It 'subsists', out of body, without a domicile. What remains lingers, subsists, beyond the time allocated through time, *despite* the flow of time. The remainders, remaining and remained, hold, *after* all. Disturb what one believes one can imagine as a limit, a border, and an end.

The remainder is neither nor and is not, the remainder exceeds the ontological mode, the remainder presents itself to and evades the question 'What is?' The remainder is a *what-can-that-there-be?* which remains unanswered

In the immense polysemy of the remainder, of what falls outside what it is the remainder of, among all the senses which remain more or less stuck to the remainder 'as such' the artist, whose entire work happens to be fascinated by remainders, will have been led ineluctably towards the Remainder which most resists sublimation.

As for Jacques Derrida, so many of whose texts remain as monuments to the Remainder, literarily as well as philosophically, he once chose to distinguish four plus one of those.

the remainder *as such*, the remainder with all its polysemy, with at least the four senses which one can distinguish and which I am trying to formalize (the remainder as what remains and abides [*demeure*], the subsisting substance, the food remains, namely the reliefs, the mortal remains, the remainder as the residual product of a subtraction, and I will soon add the rest of what always remains to be paid, which always remains to be settled in an insolvent debt because it is originary and in front [*devant*] of which we are always and forever in debt, having to [*devant*] settle, having to pay the creditor, the donor who comes before us and in front of us)

Under the name of Shit, Andres Serrano pushes us to face that *what* in us, which is a remainder from us and does not remain to us, which we erase absent-mindedly, through automatism of our thought, which we evacuate every day. Andres Serrano makes himself the guardian of the Repudiated.

'Shit' makes no fuss [*chichis*]. It's straight and to the point. It is not *politically correct*. It is *politically direct*. It's what he could do *most*. To attract in order to repel or to repel in order to attract. To pay attention to what *interests* nobody. To reinvest what is shat in unadorned fashion, without keeping it in the eroticocomic register of a Rabelais or a Shakespeare.

He presents us *Plain Shit*.

As is well known, the theme of the '*shithole*' runs through the whole of literature, commands the Bible from *Leviticus* onwards, and organises the rites and myths of hygiene.

I think of what has remained to me forever of *What remained of a Rembrandt torn into small, very regular squares and rammed down the shithole*.

I immediately think of what remains, in the fourth volume of Jean Genet's works, of this title whose lengthy whole is successively reduced to *What remained of a Rembrandt torn into small, very regular squares* . . . then to *What remained of a Rembrandt* as if the title had had to yield to the natural law of being cut up for delivery [*débit*].

I think of the unrelenting repetition of the evocation of disgust/distaste [*dégoût*] in Genet, until there is almost nothing left of it anymore. I think of the strange taste of dis-taste.

I think of the construction of the taste of distaste. Of the invention and the division of the edible and the inedible by the unknown genius who wrote *Leviticus*.

Thou wilt eat *that*. This *that-there* will be inedible.

This is dirty. That is clean. *That's how It is*.

All that is is by division, as we've known since the Bible, it is God who began by dividing in order to begin. First it is the creative division. Later the God *makes* [fait] the creatures. *First* the animal creatures. Then the humans. The God divides. Divides himself.

These objects are not always well made. It even happens that, displeased with his products, the God decides to wipe them out. To bury, to forget these drafts, these smelly traces. A flood and one begins to *do* [faire] again.

Shi(t)stories

What remained of the strange word 'Shit' nowadays resembles an onomatopoeia, an eloquent phoneme, which mimes the sonorous expulsion of spit. Shit with a short, dry, taut I.

'Shit!' is an American interjection which has a double contemporaneous history.

'Shit!' like *merde* in French, tells you to fuck off. It expresses anger and scorn

But 'Shit' becomes in the sixties the name for a most desirable *consumer* product, marijuana, this weed which spreads throughout society under this name which had become commonplace and fallen out of use. Increasingly frequent. This word which, like the designated thing, used to be 'forbidden', 'looked down on', is now not only trivialised but outmoded. Shit no longer stirs, it's the ordinary. One does not even say it anymore. It goes up in smoke – Do you smoke? one says. – How can this fall be explained? By comparison with the other drugs, the high, hard, expensive, lethal ones, Shit is worthless. Its provocative, subversive value is gone. At most shit remains a bit *dodgy* like the *joint*.

Two words on the *Joint*: this word carries the ambivalence of this shit, which having become desirable in the twentieth century, gives shit back some golden prestige, adding to the forbidden matter the aura of contestation, the romantic flavour of rebellion, the shine of ordure opposed to order. In *Joint* are joined connotations of resistance to the edicts of the clean and proper. The same cigarette is used for the whole group, communion is mimicked in shit. And then the *joint* joins the object of communing [*communiance*] to the place known as the *Joint*, the dodgy place of indefinable promiscuity.

All this already belongs to the past.

Remains the force of the monosyllable 'Shit'

Shitations

What do we do when we utter the word 'Shit' with the small satisfaction of the stroke of the tongue which raps against the upper teeth and the roof of the mouth? As if we were poking a little [*tirait un petit coup*] with – a reptile's tongue.

In so doing one forgets the genealogy, so ancient and so rich, of this term of Indo-European origin. Look at its root: *skei*. It says: to cut, to separate, to split, to set aside, to decide. It marks the unconscious and history with its skizzing [*skizzante*] force, it shares, divides and underlines all that's shareable and dividable in the world until it settles on shit in modern times: *Scheiße*, *Kot*, *Schiet*, *Schiete*, and all the near relatives [*cousinage*] that have spread in Germanic as well as Romance languages, which schiz [*schizent*] round this theme of separation, partition, of what institutes sides and shores, and traces a parting (German *Scheitel*) through the hair in order to style it [*coiffer*]. One would see that the *Shittery* [Shitaison] or the *Shitation* is everywhere. And everywhere even when it arranges the fine volumes of a hair, it is accompanied by the shadow of an archaic suffering, the impossible dream of a non-separation.

Shit brings us back to the figure of the Androgyne in Plato's *Symposium*, to this myth of the division of an amphibious being who suffers from having been cut off from their other half in legendary times and secretes in reaction the mystery of love, this glue which sublimely sticks the pieces together. This is when I note the etymological heritage: it is the part thrown [*rejetée*] downwards, towards oblivion, to which the word marking decision comes back.

The split is cursed [*maudite*]. Ill-spoken [*médite*]. One would like to expel expulsion but in vain. One projects the negative outside oneself, one calls dirty what one does not keep within oneself.

Shit, therefore, *acts*. The catalogue of Shock-Thing unedeniably *strikes home*.

Shit is both thing and act. An act of anti-art art. First Shit attacks. Has a certain public in its sights. Shit is an anti-American American act. In the *Cock-Snooks* [Pieds-de-Nez] series. Imagine a tribe called Cock-Snooks who wants to get the dominant Unightedstayd [*l'Étazuni*], the theologico-conservative mainstream, the immense politico-puritan network into a terrible state. The Cock-Snooks put on a shit costume, wrap themselves up in cack-coloured, brownish-yellow canvasses and go about haunting cities, art galleries, museums, churches and institutions. Do you recognise us? they say. We are the work of your Eliminations.

Shit irrupts into the filtered quiet of the volumes of galleries-houses-museums. It shakes, worries, causes the spectator's body to twitch

These Immobiles communicate a movement. Besides these strange lumps are perhaps not immobile, in truth and deep down. Who knows?

I have already seen this Immobility somewhere: it is the one which 'animates' the terrifying, immobile wolves sitting on *the wolf man's* tree perfectly quietly and without making any movement on the branches of the tree, on the right and left sides of the trunk, and which do nothing but stare at us. These wolves, these Immobiles, these turds, these Cock-Snooks *stare at us*.

I imagine a four-year-old Andres as a Honduro-Cuban version of the Wolf Man, the hero of *The History of an Infantile Neurosis* (Freud 1918) who left us the famous picture entitled *Tree with 6 or 7 branches and with 6 or 7 white wolves facing*. Having fallen asleep in a mock-Gothic church, he dreamt this terrifying dream of the Turd-Tree. He will never forget it.

It will be up to us to analyse or to refuse the anxiety which this strange staring [*regardement*] causes us.

The Shits are the totems of the Cock-Snooks tribe. Perched on the branches of the Galerie Yvon Lambert, immobilised during the brief, endless time of a dream, they stare at us and we don't see their eyes.

We are forced to notice that there is *a force* at work there. *A force* and *a farce*.

Force

With all the brute force of a – feigned? – naivety, he takes on the ideological, political, theological, Catholico-American machine, which is at one, body and image [*fait corps-image*], with what Jacques Derrida

called 'the sacralizing, poisoned hierarchic of this accumulated *culture* [the French *cu-cul*: arse – must be heard here], between Europe and American colonization'.¹ It is as if he exorcised through these electroshits all these complacent, worrying figures which teem within the American Institution of Right-Thinking [*bienpensance*] under their costumes their cassocks their attributes and trinkets

Shit is antidotal and antisacerdotal. 'A drastic remedy [*de cheval*]', as the phrase goes. The virulence of the poison is measured by the force of the remedy

– The farce is in bad taste, some will say. They want us to swallow that? This emetic hash?

How long gone is the coprophagous time of infancy when one takes everything to the mouth in order to know with the tongue, and when the taste of things is still undecided.

Sentinels

It was the name which my father, the young doctor Georges Cixous, had given them. They were everywhere in the childhood woods of Algiers, along the footpaths [*sentiers*], under the maritime pines, in the fine timber of the bois des Arcades, on the hills where the Bâinem forest stretches. We were seven and eight years old, barefoot my brother and me, on dad's brisk footsteps, 'watch out, a sentinel!' We walked with a lively pace, to life, escorted by these small monuments, mostly human, sometimes left by dogs. One must imagine the waft of sun-warmed scent which alchemises Algeria, a blend of pine needles, purulent red earth, wormwood, mastic trees, droppings [*crottes*] caked by the blazing heat, now mineralised now still honoured by flies, those regular dung-eaters. Yet under the earth of the forest, hallowed into a secret graveyard, the small corpses of the nurslings too soon dead returned to the vast maternal matter. Thus my Georgic father had sublated [*relevé*] and transfigured with a magic word the excrements which accompanied us.

Who was keeping whom, in the primal forest run over in all directions by children above and below the earth? Life death? Death life?

Nature works towards cleaning the dead by ingesting it anew [*ravaler le mort*].

It was paradise and we had no knowledge of disgust.

In order to find the way and the step which take me near the portraits of matter drawn by Andres Serrano, I realise that I need to go back to the time of the *Songs of Innocence*. I was keeping watch over my life in Algeria, a violent beautiful country where all (that was) Rejected, person thing, being, returned. The walls and divisions did not divide the excluders from the excluded, poverty and ulcer shone like stars in the capital streets. What is *behind* is *in front*, in uncompromising Algeria. One cannot *do* as if one did not see what one drops behind.

To make a Subject out of the Reject, to pick up [*relever*] the dregs, make room for the Expelled in the Museum galleries, is his project. Andres Serrano is of those who are born without scales on their eyes

Refuse

I need this word which the English language borrows from Latin. The excrement, in English, is refuse(d). Let's follow the thread of the term: one can refuse only what is given. Shit, the speck of shite [*chiure*] is given/refused. A gift promised to be refused and avoided.

Let's return to its source, the rich Latin *fundere*, that is to say *to pour*, used about liquids and especially molten metals, by analogy, one 'melts' or 'fuses' [*fond*] all that can be spread: grains, rays, sounds, odours, spoken words, *et cetera*, and among the 'coetera', what remains of a thing, of a group of things, of people, there remains the remains of remainders, the part which is designated in opposition to the other. It is what remains from the remainders that is poured/back or re/verted [*re/verse*], thrown back [*rend*], and that sometimes makes one feel like throwing up [*rendre*].

Subsequently, from the earthy roads of my childhood the familiar nickname of my younger brother comes back to me; I had completely forgotten it yesterday in the Algiers gully. We used to call him Little Peter Dung [*Pierre Crotte*]. – Yourecall, I say to the former child, that we used to call you Little Peter Dung? – Whereas there was no justification for it, says my brother the veteran paediatrician doctor, because I developed sphincter control early. – But who named you like that, I wonder? – You did, obviously, Pierre my brother says in a resounding, deep baritone – Out of dungarees [*décrotté*]? Surely there remains a bit of affection for stones and dung [*pierres et crottes*], our first materials. 'My brother dung', as Saint Francis of Assisi would say. My brother donkey. My brother body, the saint used to say. How many brothers

are granted us when we dwell in humility. Downwards, sitting or lying on humus.

– The cohort of the Shits, this haughty tribe photographed by Andres Serrano, would, according to you, signal towards humility? Does it not seem to you that all these lumps of dung erect rather than lower themselves?

– According to me it is less an erection than a rehabilitation. The artist relieves [*relève*] the singularity of each ejection by identifying and qualifying. ‘Shit’ is not what one unthinks it is, he thinks, it is not the uniform, formless, characterless matter. He deals a final blow to any form of anthropocentrism.

– The extraordinary variety that is revealed: processes of identification are related to sublimation.

– The shock is that it gives me a shock. This shock is caused by the return of the shunned [*fui*].

The Shits take up rank among the Shunned, the excluded, the abhorred, the avoided, the plague-stricken, the sick whose wounds burst on hospital beds, the annihilated homeless, the leper whom Julian the Hospitaller tries not to embrace.

The tribe puts everybody to the test of limits: whom or what can I not bear *seeing*? Seeing, that is, *touching* with the fingers of the eyes.

I admit: I affectionately take my cats’ stools in my fingers. A young mother, I congratulate my little one on its fine poo. A mistress, I do not reject the lover’s stools. So? It is therefore non-me, non-mine, that I repel. That I do not approve of. Here I am in my home [*chez-moi*]. Non-me, remain in your home! *Noli me tangere*.

The artist’s calculated cheek [*culot*]: as soon as we enter the exhibition room, we are done for, up shit creek.

Doing

Shit *does/makes* [*fait*]. What?

Pivot. Reflect-flee-think-repel-think repel-repelthink.

Bristles [*hérissé*]. Brings out the secret mainsprings of the word *ordure*.

Ordure, a term whose sounds are more ample, more substantial in French than dry English Shit, knows a lot about our life and death drives. Remember: *ordure* comes from Latin *horridus*, depicting our hair(s), feathers, thorns standing on end [*dressement*], the whole

epidermic hedgehog [*h erisson*] which we human animals use as a mock-armour, an apotropaic ornament. We respond to what addresses an unbearable message to us by an equivalent standing on end.

A tooth for a tooth, hair for hair.

What does this message, this puzzle [*r bus*] of ordure tell us? – This: ladies and gentlemen, you will be this manure tomorrow.

But who would want to ‘think’ that?

– The whole elaboration of our human ‘elevation’ consists in distancing ourselves from both our *obscene* extremities, in separating-detaching-cleansing-purifying ourselves from the filthy motions [*remuements orduriers*] of birth and death. *Inter urinas et faeces nascimur*.

In order to live we busy ourselves casting off our sloughs. We pretend to be virgin and free from mortal remains and decomposition. We disown ourselves in bits and patches. Poor us, the denizens of heightened buildings, champions of denial, defenders of the Clean and Proper, we scaffold distances, walls, skyscrapers, classes, borders, in order to separate ourselves from our improper proper part. We furiously distinguish ourselves from our animality. We forget our natural mortality every day.

Shit breaks the truce. It’s the jack in the box. You open the door, the package unsuspectingly and shit jumps to your nose.

– To your nose? you say. Isn’t it to your eyes?

– Yes, it jumps to your eyes. But as we testify through our start of repulsion, our eyes have a nose.

Seeing gives one to smell/sense [*sentir*]. Whoever *gives* one to ‘see’ makes one smell/sense. Seeing, sensing, all our senses are activated in imagination. When Stendhal gives back to death all its strike force, by *making* (a concrete making) me *see*, under the page of the battle written in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, the grime which coats the corpse-like bare feet of the corpse of a dead soldier, when he depicts his green-coloured corpse-feet, when he makes me discover the death of feet, the dead feet turned green, I sense that it is this detail which shouts truth and almost makes me faint.

The detail magnified by focalisation, the focalised, faecalised detail, tears through our protective shield. It is the finger or the fang [*dent*] of death – for death bears a grudge [*une dent*] against us.

What does the artist do?

He knows what he is doing: *he does/makes*

Violence

Laugh

Horror

Sway

Fear

A blow/trick/stroke [*coup*] (bad, good, of the wand or baton)

The Conductor

Pass out cold

...

and above all what he always believed he was *incapable of doing*

I said it one day 'I dug a hole in my mother and threw myself in it'. I changed to the status of the most miserable human creatures in our eyes, my mother's as well as mine: gamblers, drug addicts, bewitched, discredited people. I did not fly: I pierced the shell of the earth, I disembowelled it, scooped out. I made my mother pay for it. Without any explanation. That took place in Manhattan. The history of art can vouch for it: this kind of excess always takes place in Manhattan after beginning in Brooklyn. I should have stopped but I went all the way.

Whenever I say to myself: 'I will not write this book, that's settled', I begin writing it

Whenever Andres Serrano says to himself: 'I will not take this photo', the photo is taken

This is not a provocation; this is an invocation, a surreptitious convocation. A decision but a passive one. Some years ago he was groping in his darkness: where is the limit? He has always tried to keep himself on the limit. The limit was: 'I will do nothing, I will not create, with children and I will do nothing with shit'. The law spoke with Serrano's stubborn accent: '*I won't work with children, I shall not work with shit*'.

What he did not want to do, got done.

Then he went from New York to Colombia, and from Colombia to Ecuador: and this is where Shit was waiting for him. He goes where he would never go himself

Thus goes the artist: towards the impossible, but there's always an impossible waiting for him behind the horizon of the impossible he believes he approaches.

He would not have been able to work at shit and with shit for anything in the world.

From one day to the next it happened. It got done. One will never know why

I too at this very moment am doing something I did not want to do: I am writing a shit-filled [*merdicole*] treatise. Without my own disapproval, I would never have indulged in such an exercise.

He had said: With Shit, never. And there you are.

Likewise: With children never.

Now ghost children prowl in the streets, in front of his windows.

Is he going to make the sacrifice?

It occurs to me that perhaps, he will have already done this ‘work with children’.

For he is fully aware of the famous Freudian equation: faeces = children = money.

Shit could be in secret a school, a flight of orphans. A gang of ragamuffins.

Shit is theory

A theory of Ghosts.

The question will always have been of the difference between the living and the dead.

A fly walks over the face of *Strange Shit. Fly, Fly, flirtation.*

This fly is perhaps Psyche, the soul of Shit

Comedy

When, at the turn of a page of the catalogue *Comédie-Française*, I catch sight of a photograph of the artist, something holds me back; my eye becomes sharp, curious, precise. I see the straight, light-cloured hair in a crew cut, erect, pulling the face upwards. I see the freshly brushed, shiny boots. Between both neat extremities, the plinth and the head, also neatly done, spotless, spick-and-span, dressed up to the nines, the body traces a neat, slender movement clasped into a tight sports outfit. The artist’s body is a sculpture. It sculpts an ethereal volume, an invisible body, perhaps a head, in which a thought is photographed, an idea in search of its embodiment.

The body is dressed in sober, sombre, supple, dense, dancing, assured fashion. It knows what it wants to do. No smudge. Clean Poo. Clean Shit in clean shirt. He gives an actor (from the *Comédie-Française*) the direction of a gaze.

One can see Serrano is an operator of gazes. He wants you to see. He wants you to see what you do not see. He wants to take a photograph of your gazes – before any expression. He wants to disarm eyes, unseal them, widen them, hold them back, feed them with these images he has in his head. He undresses, removes the make-up from the figures of people and things, then he re-costumes these naked-objects, fashions an

edge for them, dips them in a raw light, prepares them. The costumes too are naked and dipped in amber. The colours are dominant, overbearing. Naked. Naked? Yes.

What there is not, that's what strikes: *No veil*. His art and craft is that: *nudification through photography*.

He does not state it, he acts it out: he paints *écorchés* only. The citizens of the *America* ark, no matter how motley coloured, all nudified. Nowhere to fall back to or hide. Eyes like those of newly born. Like future dead bodies. The flashy apparel, headgear of all kinds, badges, jewels, hair slides, all the details are crude, nudified.

So are the dung of Shit: *Excrements exhibited to the naked eye*.

A light device spreads a similar lividness over all these faces, imagifies them.

When I turn round in the gallery and look back on the whole of Serrano's work, I realise he keeps pursuing the same idea:

the question always comes back to the difference between the living and the non-living.

That's what makes us shiver. The non-living is already . . . there. The non-living is still alive.

Shit casts a retrospective light over antecedents

One cannot separate the gallery known as *America* or the *Comédie-Française* album from the *Shit* collection. *Shit* is a part of the whole. All is shit. It is what befalls [*J'advenant*]. The avatar, the ultimate incarnation of these processions.

Most of the *Shits* look like heads in the throes of decomposition.

It is a hypothesis of Serrano's: if one so much as lingers with a look of 'investigation', one will believe one sees a dog's head, the recollection of a wolf. There is perhaps a memory of an aspect of yore in remainders

And in the heads of *America* which burst with carnal vigours, the way of all flesh is announced, just as in the beheaded parade of the *Comédie-Française* it is proclaimed that life is a temporary mask. The time of a play

There is some hidden Janus in these figurines: the plus, the excess, this supravisibility is that of I-anus [*J'anus*]. Such a protuberance of the surface is a sign of the forceful spectrality of the secret bottom of things [*fondement au secret*].

When Genet sees the top, he sees the underside, when he dwells in a museum, there is:

Something like a scent from a cowshed. When he merely sees the busts or the heads of characters, he cannot help imagining them standing on a dunghill. In Berlin, Hendrijke, one does not see the manure, one smells it. The table of the Drapers' Guild is set on straw, the five men smell (of) [*sentent*] manure and cowdung. *Sentent* in both senses of smelling and smelling of. They are infused with the stench, they exhale cowdung; Genet inhales the double odour.

Beneath Hendrijke's skirts, beneath the fur-lined garments, beneath the levites, beneath the painter's extravagant robe, the bodies fulfil their functions well: they digest, they are warm, they are heavy, they smell, they shit.

(*Euvres Complètes*, p. 22; our translation)

An impression of disgust

Some horrible details even: dirty moustaches, which would not be much, but hard and stiff as well

the bristle set almost horizontally above the tiny mouth ruined by bad teeth, gobs he would spit between his knees at the carriage floor already soiled by cigarette butts, paper, pieces of bread, anything that in those days made a third-class compartment dirty, in the look that stumbled against mine, I discovered, experiencing it like a shock, a sort of universally human identity.

(*Euvres Complètes*, p. 22; our translation)

I discovered, says Jean Genet, Serrano's precursor, experiencing it like a shock, a sort of universally human identity

His look was not another's: it was mine that I encountered in a mirror, *inadvertently and in the solitude and oblivion of myself*. I could translate what I experienced in this form only: I was flowing [*je m'écoulais*] out of my body, and through the eyes, into that of the traveller *at the same time as the traveller was flowing into mine*. Or rather: *I had been flowing*, for the look was so brief that I can recall it only with the help of this verbal tense.

[. . .]

What then had been flowing out of my body – *je m'éc . . .* – and what was flowing out of this traveller's body?

Je m'éc, he says

Christ too is a bloke [*mec*]

Rembrandt too digests and shits.

So does the mother. She/shit(s) too [*Chiemère*]

Serrano too is a bloke

He rediscovered in turn the *principle of equivalence* stated by Genet: ‘any man is as good as another’. Just as a calf is worth a calf [*un veau vaut un veau*]. Any stool [*selle*] is as good as another stool.

The Principle of Ecclesiastes: Nothing new under the sun. The difference is implemented by the cutting, the editing, the staging, the lighting, art.

‘Any man’, I said to myself, says Genet, Serrano muses, ‘behind his charming appearance or monstrous to our eyes, *retains* a quality which seems like an extreme resort, and which, in a very secret, perhaps irreducible domain, makes him be what any man is’.

This thought of a secret, irreducible residue leads them, Genet and Serrano, to the slaughter house [*abattoirs*], to see.

Now they don’t fail to find this equivalence in the fixed, though not expressionless eye of cut-off sheeps’ heads, laid in a pyramid on the pavement.

– Where shall I stop? they ask themselves.

Don’t go and think that this apocalyptic discovery reduces pain.

On the contrary: it is the wound that is irreducible.

A sheet of sadness overcomes [*s’abat*] him. He turns this sheet into the backcloth for his visions.

Serrano ghost series

He moves forward, conducts his battle, sorts out in orderly Series. He can’t help it: the singular, the particular is immediately taken up and replayed in the series. Peoples, columns, societies, processions, gangs, collectives, companies smell/sense and think through him,

in theories,

in theory

one never knows when it stops

A series thinks, calls, recalls another series

Rites form. In Serrano’s head each time a new play declares itself, the same backdrop is hung for these formations appear in a theatrical aura.

Ancient choruses, death awaits them, there will remain from them this residue of a look.

Let’s make the following Gulliverian experiment:

Let *I* be such an image of Shit: one diminishes it till its size is no bigger than a rabbit’s dropping. It no longer frightens us. If on the contrary one

magnifies it several times, we are stricken with fright: it seems to us as threatening as the mountain of temptation which appears to Francis of Assisi in a hallucination.

When the repressed returns, it stalks back with the sweeping force of a tidal wave. Swollen by the uncontrollable spirit of revenge. Then, how afraid we are of being swallowed up by what we expelled. Afraid of peoples who eat into the continent which belongs to us. Afraid of beggars. Of lepers. Of the poor. Of devouring hatred. Afraid of invasion. Of contamination. Of drowning. Afraid of being killed by garbage [*ordure*].

Theoria

They come to us in a solemn, organised procession, as a *theoria*, a deputation sent by a city to a solemn festival, used to do. Like a cortège repairing to a temple or to a burial.

A cortège of crumbling colossi. Why do they impress us? What there is not: there is no landscape behind these furrowed sculptures which furnishes the ruins and the remainders. No distant memories behind the characters, no hills, valleys, rivers or cities, no bell towers or minarets.

The colossi are desolate and isolated. Originless and futureless. Lumps abandoned on the stage of a deserted Theatre.

Nothing remains but the remainders in Serrano's world. The environment has completely disappeared. The scraps of humanity are preserved in a flask.

Beyond the opposition between the clean and the unclean [*impropre*], the Shittery lines up in orderly fashion in front of the artist, and poses, with a model's neutral patience, for the photographer. A docility creeps over the Sequence. Passivity, patience even, passion pushed, far from the cry or the sigh, to the point of silence. What silence!

One has never seen such a silent procession

And yet

When my eyes rest on a painting of faeces, I cannot prevent my gaze from retreating, trembling and then becoming evasive. As if it had inadvertently touched the faecal fire. As if, a small child, it had feared that the wolves might rush from the painting to meet it. It takes a great mental effort to bring it back in front of the painting. – What is it then, there, that makes you run away? That is only a small pile of primal mud. Says my thought.

It's not me, it's my memory as a chastened [*échaudé*] child which reacts in fear. The child playing within me among the desires and ruins has been warned that that is dirty, dirt itself. Dirt that protects itself through the emission of a stench.

Is Photography odourless? Only 'in reality'. But we are never in real-reality. We are in fantasy-reality. It stinks in fantasy, still more internally.

One cannot simply say that the Series of Serrano's Shitsters stinks.
Nor can one simply say that the Shitsters do not stink.
One cannot say that photos have no smell. Nor that they have one.

Who will reveal for us the origin of Dis-taste. Analytic legend has it that the sensation of distaste/disgust seems to be primitively a reaction to the smell of excrement.²

And later also to what it looks like.

And later to the idea. The idea of the smell, the idea of what it looks like. What is called 'shit' stinks. One calls shit all which one wants to make disappear. The series of the condemned is endless: black shit, jew shit, bull shit, . . . a list to be completed in all the countries, at all times . . .

Shit, the unsung hero, the homeless, the man in the street, if he slips in between America and the Comédie-Française, on the same stage, it is because Andres Serrano naturally grants them *the right of asylum*.

Any element, thing, shard, residue, peeling can attract attention and for a moment be the object of a gaze. Snapshots of the world of squalor [*monde de l'immonde*].

'If my theatre stinks it is because the other one smells nice' states the declaration of rights for all that exists to reside on earth, according to Genet.

Recruitment

They were about to return to dust. There He comes and holds back the residues, interrupts the fate which leads them to (sur)render [(*se*) *rendre*] to nature. They are stopped short. Reinscribed. Archived in a memory, humanised. He charms them and attracts them into a narrative, installs them in a vast configuration. He lends them names. With one shot of

the camera, these piles of being heading towards non-being are put on display. Blown up. Magnificent. They are stars. And he, Andres (his name is Man), is like the guardian of threatened species, the chief of the ark of nothingnesses.

Shcryptonymy verbarium³

As in an inverse movement to his drive to collect and sublimate matter, the use of the word *Shit* is a common reducer, a standard generic term, just as the title of a book is a convenient reduction for a worldwide content.

Everything happens as if the artist had branded this patiently gathered flock with an owner's seal. Thus does Biblical man with animals.

But on earth, faeces are also *words*, as anthropologists and farmers know. The faecal verbarium is immensely rich and poetic, on a scale with the friendly exchanges which build up the coprobiological economy. Take the following *augurs*: columbine, golden, smoked, pounded, grafted, left [*laissées*], mirror, knotted, wrinkled, vain, club-shaped [*cordylées*]. Such are the traces left us by the passages of the winged race or by cervids, wild boars, hares and other brothers neither more nor less wild than humians [*humiens*]

Augurs, I say: for actually they are the factors of growth, the increasers of harvests. One just needs to know how to read.

Of imagination

One does not smell one's own smell, notes Montaigne. As for the other's smell it is the odious idea which disturbs me. I smell it even before smelling it.

Dirt is proper [*le propre*] to the man of the City.

The man of the earth knows the value of manuring [*fumures*] which fertilises his field.

What has not been separated out, what cannot be assimilated through the cycle of this body comes back in the cycle which produces the life supplies

– Still, one does not eat one's excrement, there's a limit, isn't there, one says to oneself.

– Yes, one does, one eats again. Whatever the species, all the wild creatures, for example when they suffer from deficiencies in pancreatic

enzymes, absorb these rich stews which restore the subject's balance. Minerals, trace elements, fibres, proteins. Dung is no mean thing. Take a vet's word for it.

It is the humanised animal creatures who have internalised domestic behaviours of repulsion

What Serrano does: a double act [*double coup*]. On the one hand he transgresses, he sickens the various advocates of established sublimations (the religious profession and other museums). On the other hand he *fattens* [*engraisse*] his camera. He transgreases.

And the suricates?

not only are these small colonies grace itself (I especially have in mind the Suricata Suricatta from South Africa, their agility, their elegance, the solicitude they show to one another, well beyond the family circle)

but there's nothing more entrancing yet than their anal secretions. Nothing has ever been inhaled which is more odoriferous than their musk.

Perhaps *Mother's Shit* exhales such a scent? It does not show on the photo, but I like the idea of the thing.

When I ask Andres Serrano if the portrait of *Mother's Shit* is related to a personal mother, his maybe, I say to myself, he makes it clear that it is the stool of a mother from Ecuador. His delivery man brought it back to him. I get worried: are you sure it was really the present from a mother? The man could have deceived him about the Origin of the Thing. One never knows. A substitution can be done quickly. It's frequent. – *I had to take his word for it*, he says to me. I took his word for it, I took his word for granted.

I take his word for it. If there had been a ploy, he would have been alerted by a sign

Still, the mother is something sacred. A son makes no mistakes, at least in his desire. As if there were only one mother. *Mother's Shit* is therefore a mother's stool indeed. You see?

Reconnections (scene)

The remainder-body which is no longer part of the body, which no longer forms one body with the body which he was a part of yesterday,

the departed remainder-body will not remain lost, not doomed to the total corpse. Here is a Passer-by ready to adopt it.

He gathers faeces. He protects them from pounding, from abstraction.

With each deposit he returns the name and the distinction, with the precision of the scientist mindful of the differences between species. That's the least he can do: salvation. To render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, unto the Tapir the things which are the tapir's, unto the pig, the jaguar, the rabbit, the wolf, the dog too, and make an Ark of the Shits with a difference. And to render unto the Specks of shit [*Chiures*] their infinite diversity, their expressiveness, their peculiar characteristics.

In a moment he will lay them on a small table, as an officiating priest would on an altar, one will unfurl behind the icon a cloth curtain of a carefully chosen pastel. Everything will be performed with tact. Displayed against the pale background, the pile will gain in intensity.

The officiating priest will adjust his tripod and furbish his optical ciboriums.

Now the ceremony will begin.

I won't be surprised to hear Artaud's ghost chanting, behind the curtain

[I am]

I am doing

[Shit on me.]

Yo kutemar tonu tardiktra

Yo kute drikta anu tedri

Negative shit-theology

What, in the names of Deucalion and Pyrrha, and the incensed privy and the licensed pantry gods was this disinterestingly low human type, this Calumnious Column of Cloaxity, this Bengalese Beacon of Biloxity, this Annamite Aper of Atroxity, really at, it will be precise to quarify, for he seems in a badbad case?

(*Finnegans Wake*, p. 179)

It's not Duchamp's polite/polished urinal

It's not Man Ray's prayer

It's not polite/polished

It's not red

It's not blue

It's not white

It's not black

It's not beautiful
 It's not elegant
 It's not smooth
 It's not hollow, except once, through the trick of a prod of the thumb
 It's not made
 It's done

These are not reused
 These are not recuperated
 These are not Louise Bourgeois' bone hangers [*os-cintres*]
 These are not objects
 These are found nojects

What remains from the idea of abandoned children

He knows analysis *and uses it/helps himself to it.*

Matter

All this is perhaps nothing but a monument to the mother, of whom (only) these unpretentious fragments remain.

For it is from her, *mater*, that all matter flows. Now *mater* the first insofar as she is the trunk of the tree regarded as the producer of offshoots and offspring [*rejetons*], the hard part as opposed to the bark and the leaves, the one which supplies timber, is the mother with the child, the childbearing mother. As *mater* she is the nurse, as *materies* she is the aliment and food, and the fed.

Matter is the matter of Serranian research, Andres' torn-apart mother, the theme and content of his observation.

In the end he will not have rejected the rejected. Save, the offspring [*rejeton*].

Tale

There was a little boy, shrewd from his earliest days, who knew a thing or two about not being made to do things [*à qui on ne la faisait pas*].

His first memory is of having bitten the woman next door on the cheek. He can still see her: a twenty-five-year-old woman with big breasts and a lot of rouge. Apparently it was this red on her cheeks

which aroused him. A cardinal scarlet. Sat in the middle of the meadow, the cheek was exactly level with him. – ‘Kiss me, Andres’, she said. He didn’t want to. She got cross. He took a firm bite. It was held against him as a crime. He was told he was a monster. He remembers the vivid colours of the scene. The woman wore a garnet-coloured pendant.

As one will have recognised, this memory is reconstructed from the life of Henri Brulard, that is to say Stendhal. It is as true fake as the memories of the life of Andres Serrano: vivid colours, attractive and forbidding bodies, bites from the teeth. There were also animal corpses made revolting by the indifference surrounding them.

At age five he rebelled against the sacred history told by his nurse, criticising the weak points of the sacred text with ruthless severity. To begin with he rose up against the character of suffering of the figure of Christ. There was according to him nothing beautiful, nor fait about it. He brought his criticism to bear on God the Father: if he was omnipotent, he was to blame if men were mean and doing evil and dirty things. Following which they went to hell. All that made a scandal. To the question: did Christ have a bottom? the nurse replied that Christ had been a man. To the question: had Christ also shat? the nurse walled herself up in silence.

When he was ten he did his first communion and had his first ejaculation. Until then, when he saw three little piles of horse dung next to one another on the road, this forced him to think of the Holy Trinity. He stopped going to church. At least to the ‘American’ church, the one that faithfully sticks to the tale without the distancing of metaphor. One will find him later having become a ruthless photographer, the artist of stolen obscenity.

he got the charm of his optical life when he found himself (*hic sunt lennones!*) at pointblank range blinking down the barrel of an irregular revolver of the bulldog with a purpose pattern, handled by an unknown quarreler who, supposedly, had been told off to shade and shoot shy Shem Serrano should the shit show his shiny shnout out awhile to look facts in their face before being hosed and creased [. . .] by six or a dozen of the gayboys.

(*Finnegans Wake*, p. 179)

Catastrophes

Droppings, excrement, other names of catastrophes. *Cacas* (poos) are little catastrophes.

The Tsunami, according to American anthropologist James Siegel, has been experienced by the inhabitants of Atjeh, in Indonesia, as the Great

Catastrophe of Cacastraphes. This population from Sumatra has always smoked its most ancient epics and its folk tales by taking Caca into account. Thus there is an Interpretation of the Shits, just as in India the issue of the remainders occupies a decisive place in Hindu mythotheology. The gods themselves are residual residents.

I return to the Great Catastrophe. According to Siegel, the main effect of the Tsunami which engulfed, smashed and carried everything away, is an obsession for Garbage. A man lost seven family members killed by shit. They did not drown. They were hit on the head by Litter. O horrible, horrible!

Still nowadays, the giant mass graves are covered in debris and garbage. Death is one thing, garbage is another thing. The Great Catastrophe is that the violence done to the world was such that the work of mourning lost any meaning, any possibility; shit has not been reingested into the circuit of natural fertilisation. The universe is broken. The ghosts that roam everywhere are no longer frightening. All beings are ghosts. The town is full of people who are dead. You never know whom or what you are talking to. The Tsunami caused the sudden emergence of the absolutely Unassimilable. Come from nowhere it is going nowhere.

The Bible tells us that when God, furious at seeing that what He had done gave off a stench, and not the smell of incense and musk which He was expecting, decided to evacuate the unpleasant Creation, he flushed the toilet and the Flood cleansed the pit. But in Atjeh the Flood is a tidal wave of garbage. So, is it the end of the world over there?

Yet, the anthropologist tells us, young people can be seen this spring clambering up the mounds of refuse and making love up there on layers of 'garbage'. I imagine some come with cameras.

Shit, no present?

I said he knows analytic litter [*litière*], this *litter-letter* which Joyce heaps up in *Finnegans Wake* and on top of which is perched the original hen (Belinda of the Dorans is her name) which scratches *this zogzag world*, this world of shit, in order to extract *a goodish-sized sheet of letterpaper originating by transshit from Boston (Mass.)*, at once a wafer, a fragment and – literature. It is this litter which he scratches, this son-of-a-hen, pushed by the *need*, the hope, to be done one day with this damned Interminable Analysis. But what from whom could possibly put if not an end but at least a truce to this labour? What from whom could deeply alter the course of this bricklaying/demolition [*démoullition*]? As

one can guess, this is what Andres, the Last of the Shits that he is, is thinking about

I look at his *Self-Portrait*, this portrait of the artist in deep shit. Now what's wrong? There's something lacking for his satisfaction.

Do you see the Absence?

There was the Mother's present.

And then?

No present [*pas de cadeau*] from the father?

That's what he is thinking about.

The Series you have just seen, no matter how signed it is by the self-portrait of the artist with a dog, is on hold.

The offspring (from the unconscious) is stubborn. He gives up on nothing.

Not that he has forgotten or repressed.

But he has not been able to obtain the desired ones in due time. That supreme idea and crowning imposed itself to him, as always in such cases, *a little too late*. There are two of them, but it is always the same in two guises, that are still lacking. These are *Holy Shit* and *Freudian Shit*.

He can see them very clearly in his head. When he asked his delivery man, a taxi driver, to supply him with the stool of a priest which would have become *Holy Shit*, 'at one day's notice', says the driver, 'it's too short'. – One day? Too short. One does not know how much time would have been necessary in order to obtain the present from the father.

As for *Freudian Shit*, he is making the request to his psychoanalyst. He spoke to him about his dream long ago.

One must imagine the scene, with all that analytic reflection will have given us to think about the 'present' and its equivalents, one must imagine the analyst.

It's not so simple to do this. Such a crap present [*cacadeau*]. I know something about it.

– *I have to push for some Freudian shit*, Serrano says to me. I have to push for that

Now I push him for real.

Maybe he thought I was pretending? Now it's for good.

Now is the time to push

The time has come to push, he says

Evil be to him who evil thinks.

Honeys wore camelia paints (*Finnegans Wake*, p. 113)

This Freudian slip, he will add it as a P.S. *Pee ess*.

Translated by Laurent Milesi

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Artaud le Moma* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), p. 22; our translation. [Trans. note]
2. Let us reread *Five Psychoanalyses* and the case of the Wolf Man.
3. I borrow this signifier, formed on the word *herbier* (herbarium), from Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *Le Verbier de l'Homme aux loups* (Aubier-Flammarion, 1976), translated in English as *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

Inheriting/Inventing with Jeffrey Gibson

Is this a fairy tale?

It started out like a fairy tale and a legal transaction at the same time, like a brilliant idea or like a notarised statement on officially stamped paper:

One day I will inherit five acres of land in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, which came to my family through the Federal Indian Allotment Act during the late 1800's. This piece of land did not support the farming lifestyle of my family then and I question the value of this land to my lifestyle in 2004. The Infinite Anomaly: Tahlequah, Oklahoma series of paintings will document my exploration of this personally and politically charged landscape.

What does *inherit* mean? From whom do we inherit? What do we inherit? *What* do we inherit? When we inherit 'property', movable or unmovable property, we receive at the same time the huge question of inheritance, of a gift and of a debt.

We inherit a name, a connection, a memory, a history, hidden obligations from past times. The five acres of land in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, what do they hold in store for their (future) owner, Jeffrey Gibson? What will this piece of land mean to him? This *piece*? This land? How many ghosts? Just traces that have almost vanished? This piece of land is talking already, murmuring and quieting down again. Holding the scenes of past passions and grief. But not only that. Look how the land returns. It is returning, right *now*, not in the *past*. It is returning for Jeffrey Gibson like all land, *humus* comes back for all *human* beings. A part of them, like the original landscape, without a face.

It so happens that the 'owner' is the opposite of an *owner*. He is a young artist. An artist: by definition someone who wants to break with heritage, with the inhibiting part of heritage – with debt and repetition

– but without committing treason, being true and untrue, holding back and exceeding. Collecting and disobeying. Overflowing. Jeffrey Gibson is a real artist: one of those who *wishes* to take the existing world and create a new world. He is a tailor cut from the same cloth as all great adventurers of art: someone who knows how to *cut*, choose the unusual, and to be open to any event. And on top of that: to mend. To undo and reunite.

When you are from a Cherokee tribe, how can you forget and how can you not forget? How can you not be Indian? How can you not be labelled, preceded, marked by clichés? You have to find a *not* that is not negative, but dynamic.

The extraordinary coherence of all young men: he does not destroy, he deconstructs all oppositions and exclusions: he circumvents and displaces sexual oppositions, nationalisms, intolerances, which will be in his way on his journey of initiation. In response to all negative experiences, he creates shapes and voluminous, visual objects that seem to thematise beginnings.

When I first met him, he was a young art researcher at the Royal Academy in London. Jeffrey was creating large dolls, with skin made of plant tissue, creatures that seemed primitive and ultra-modern at the same time, bodies of cotton, designed and embroidered with quotes, as if the skin were a most sophisticated messenger, as if the surface had depth. And all language was embodied by this improvised demiurge. An encounter of modernist European expressions and the language of Tahlequah on the skin.

Jeffrey Gibson is not *nostalgic*, dedicated to return, to *nostos*, through regret. He is a revival artist, curious about transposition, an inventor of transfigurations. Like all revival analysts, he is interested in the remains, in what remains to become part of the future, in what among the particular remains can give rise to new life.

On a sombre background of remembrance, with a family history burdened by poverty, injustice, war, repression, mud, humiliation, he releases streaks of brightness, bright flashes like a child's laughter. Sour balls, raw brushstrokes that make your mouth water. A comedy of colours for a new world.

Guided by a profound intuition, this work is ethical as well as political: it represents the energy of life, germination, growth and outgrowth. The young man is a perceptive witness to the violence inflicted on man by man, and, within the genealogy of cruelty, to the woman beaten by the beaten man, warned by the violence that the victimised inflicts not on the stronger but on the weaker than him, and knows best the hostilities, persecutions and transfers of evil. This heritage, he rejects. He sides

with love, protection, the powers that resist phallocratic despotism. He sides with the grandmother, the one that made dolls.

That's what Jeffrey calls *The Indivisible Polybreed*, a rich paradoxical designation. Here, the plural does not get divided, does not separate, but extends the differences. A shimmering network, a fugue variation with strings and ribbons, like DNA taking off in flight. Living poetry.

These mothers of his make polymorph creatures that cannot be defined, but are still familiar, that transcend the dividing lines between gender and species: *Beguiling pulse* – is it a mineral or a bird, a plant or music? Visual alchemy that reminds us of, that makes allusion to old foliage becoming flesh. As if he were catching, within the metamorphosis, the moment of passage *between* two states of being.

The grape fingers of these living things leaning on the frame of a painting are sending out a reflection of a dream. Are we inside or are we outside?

Fantastic displacement of genesis:

First the animals, then the earth.

Now comes a time during which he will *remodel* the earth. It is a cosmic time. To create the earth, take (some) earth, and *have it painted*.

An as of yet unprecedented act: 'inherit' the earth, not as property, not as an inheritance, but as a *material* to be painted, as a material used to make paint. Painting with *the earth*. Reversing the traditional cycle of dust-to-dust to become magnificent recycled dust in art. This earth which he feels is full of time. The material remembers the future.

The past, as it comes back through the shape of our body in different ways, is a mix of uneven cobblestones on a square in the present. It is the irregularity that *catches* the moment and creates an event.

Jeffrey Gibson wants to deviate from what was called 'landscape'. This anomaly of a 'landscape' resembles geo-psychological shapes, a different nature, translated from the inside, organic.

What is an anomaly? An irregularity that forms the beginning, that startles. Something that interferes with habit, disassembles, shakes up reproduction. Introducing anomaly would mean really loving your neighbour, a stranger, loving the first being that crosses your path as you love yourself.

Something that is not but should be transmissible: a 'message' of the non-human mother nature. A kind of secret contained in this powder called earth, and which exceeds the game of the proper-improper, of the masculine/feminine (what is the sex of earth?) which is not part of the truth as *homoiosis*, as adequacy, but which gives power to the inadequate, to the abnormal. Displacement without rejection, without

denial. That would be like creating *the portrait of the earth with* mixed earth pigments, allowing the earth to make its self-portrait, Jeffrey being the medium and the grandchild. Making the earth speak in ribbons of colours and in colours.

April 2005

Translated by Ilaria Migliardi and Nicole Cee

Filming the Becoming Invisible

‘Do you know Hagazussa?’ asks the film Voice. Hagazussa, says the Voice, was a witch who, from travelling up and down the roads from village to village – like the horse cart whose tracks we’re following over the ribbon of road that fades as we go, into the drizzle at the end of the screen – became invisible: all that remained were the tracks of her invisibility, the tracks and the invisibility. That which is invisible, you know, is only what has the power of invisibility. Presence, ghostly power. The film’s Voice is soft, bewitching, monotonous, tenderly ghostly. Invisible. Present. Potent presence of the Voice that conjures up.

‘Do you know Ruth Beckermann?’ I (Hélène Cixous) don’t know her I say. But when I take the *Paper Bridge, die Papierne Brücke*, with its roads, its voices, its mists, its rivers, its ways, I recognise her, right away I’ve always known her. Joyfully I re-member and greet her, a poet in images, a painter in words, a Voice that listens to the voices of the old days, the voices of time, today. When everything has been effaced, when everything has gone up in the smoke of the camp’s chimneys, or been buried, dug into trenches or cemeteries, they too endangered, the voices remain – the innumerable voices of all colours, tones, timbres, accents, that flew in the air of the Austro-Hungarian Empire where Ruth Beckermann’s family like mine (the Kleins, the Jonases) went about their work and prospered, like the Kleins and the Grosses, the Jews of Paul Celan’s ‘Conversations on the Mountain’, all those musical speakers in the German language with their delectably spicy accents, the Romanians, Ruthens, Jews, Armenians, Hungarians, Poles, Ukrainians, all coexisting and floundering in the streets of Bukovina, that sometimes Austro-Hungarian province, then Romanian, then Russian, caught up, like so many other countries, in the landslides of history, carried from shore to shore, from nationality to nationality. This is the Ruth Beckermann family story. This is the story of the Klein family, which was German Hungarian, Czechoslovakian and today Slovakian – and

tomorrow? They all speak some kind of German, either the 'Hoch', the elegant, the noble, the pure, or some pigmented alloy of Yiddish or Viennese.

Oh the voice peoples, who go away, grow invisible. When they aren't there any more, who'll be 'the witness's witness?' Along comes Ruth Beckermann's voice, comes the voice that listens, looks and records. With a tape recorder and invisible camera. No this is not a documentary, this is a living work, that pushes the art of film beyond its common ground with poetry, tales, introspection, by putting the most subtle resources of metaphor and metonymy in the service of the desire to Safeguard. Guard what? The signs, the lines, the sublimated spirit of the Lives of a certain world, of a certain culture, very precise, and at the same time synonymous with humankind. Think of a loving, exemplary anthropology. The marvellous representativeness of an individual standing for the universe.

With metaphor and metonymy, by means of transference, displacement, condensation, by horse cart and ferryboat, sailing over land and water, space is uninterrupted, time is uninterrupted. Today pays a visit to yesterday. Ruth Beckermann, born in Vienna, returns to Vienna, her round trip, that of life itself takes her to Israel, Palestine, Radautz, the Astrakhan tailor's shop gives on Ruth Beckermann's shirtmaker-father's shop, behind it I see my great grandfather's bag factory, grandfather's burlap factory, the skins touch the heart, the hands meet. One travels. Not to arrive. Not even to leave. To be at the window and watch beings and cities go by.

The window: the first window: is that the Vienna house through which Ruth Beckermann doesn't look, asks the voice? But who's looking out? Who's looking out the curtained window at this intersection in the noble city of Vienna? If that's not her, Ruth Beckermann, then it's the cat. It's not just Jews who look out in this film, not only voices. There is also: the cat. In the beginning at the window, there's the cat. At the end there's the cat at the window.

I watch this sublime film. My cat comes to watch the magic screen of the eternal present with me. She sits (she's a female cat) in front of the film cat.

So the film goes: from cat to cat. One window calls up another window. One bridge leads to another bridge. An iron bridge turns into a paper bridge. A legend tells a story. The roll of paper becomes a film. Action! The first window crystallises the second window. The Voice is at the window. We don't see the inside this time. Our gaze travels outside, now the City glides by. The outside conjures up the inside: the invisible inside is a bus. Outside, Vienna. We come and go. Going, we travel

toward Vienna's west side. Coming back we take the invisible Bus which looks in the opposite direction, Eastwards.

The bus is a metaphor. Of course. Metaphor also or extension of the camera. The Voice is in the Bus the way the soul is in the camera. We take the bus to watch the city glide by. The cart brings the gaze, the gaze follows the cart's back, in the slow fade of the here-below world.

The loft: *up there*, where everything happens, by sublimation. Imagery 'says' that memory is the high point of view, the on high.

The procedure: a mise-en-abyme, but natural, in ever-deeper layers, as in a life recollected, reaped: life is a story, the story creates the life.

The heart's camera stares hard at each scene. I have come from far, it says, says the Voice, the Camera, to look through the lens, through time's keyhole, drawing the curtain aside, for in order to *see* that which is so resistant and so precarious, *what remains*, you need the sort of sleight of hand that *makes things appear*, an optical spell. Here we recognise the Veil at work, the Veils, Curtains, mists, different thicknesses of glass. Vapour. 'Vapour' on the frozen sea which by means of its hybrid, liquid, solid surface – mingles Romania and Yugoslavia.

Vapour – Veil, unveil. Unveil. Reveal. The Mikvah's thick vaporous veils. Ah! the Mikvah. A little changed, this Mikvah in Czernowitz. Now the bodies we pick out through its opaque mists, are Bukovina peasants, who are perfectly right to use this strange disaffected sauna. These bodies aren't those of Jewish women any longer. Do you know about the Mikvah?

In England, says my Aunt Eri (92 years old, life journey: Osnabrück, Paris, Osnabrück, Turkey, Haifa – Palestine, Köln, Manchester), in England still today in 2006 all the girls, if they marry, they go to the Mikvah. It was, it therefore is, the ritual purifying bath for Jewish women. After menstruation, before the wedding. Now these mingled, sturdy female bodies are those of peasants.

A child walks in memory of father Beckermann, a child in the Voice, a child in the long street of Czernowitz, in the film.

Who's speaking? Sometimes I, sometimes you. Who is looking? Looking like a child agog with curiosity.

Eve my mother (95 years old Strasbourg Germany Osnabrück Paris Oran Algeria Paris) Eve Klein looks at Ruth Beckermann looking. Looking like children who look.

I am sitting in the dining room and I am looking at The Paper Bridge. I am sitting with my mother Eve Klein and my mother's sister Eri. Eve my German mother is 95 years old, my petite aunt is 92. We are looking. Through one eye I am looking at Ruth Beckermann looking at the life of her family, her parents, the Jews, those from Vienna, those from

Bukovina, from Israel, Russia, from all over, called 'the survivors'. I am looking at Ruth Beckermann surviving the survivors, following them living them, followliving them.

Through the other eye I am looking at my two ageing goddesses looking at these other Jews, The Paper Bridge Jews, the same but different, my two old globe-trotting goddesses, Germany to begin with in the beginning Osnabrück from there to Algeria, to Palestine, Hungary, Austro-Hungary, Czechoslovakia, then to Germany, France, England, the USA, from there to Israel, to France.

Like the endless merry-go-round of human elements whose memories are forever flickering, glimmering like the Chanukah candles.

At the same time I look at myself glancing from one side to the other side.

These glances intercept one another from shore to shore, they cross bridges that go from the visible to the ghostly, from the present to the past, they return charged with time, the past is still breathing, in no rush to become the past past. It has the uncertain consistency of rivers.

Sometimes the past skips like a child, sometimes it shuffles, in the streets of Radautz, in the mud of Czernowitz. Czernowitz, a city without age, as if there was just one century, ancient, still going on. Czernowitz, where Ruth Beckermann's father was born. And Paul Celan, the greatest German-language poet of this endless century. The Voice doesn't mention his name. I don't know why. Maybe it's like the name of God? He is Everywhere nowhere.

Ruth Beckermann thinks of Oma Rosa, her Viennese grandmother who survived the war by pretending to be mute, hiding in the toilets of Vienna.

Now and then Oma went into the forest to speak to her Voice with her Voice. Can you forget your own voice? This is a real question. This is the question of the Film's Voice. Oma's own voice is also the voice of Ruth Beckermann's Voice: a voice will survive so long as it's heard.

It is also the voice of Omi Rosi, my grandmother Eve and Eri's mother. From voice to voice. We the echoes. As the Voice, Ruth Beckermann, says, from a certain point of hearing, 'everything is simple'. Everything is so simple in this film, so sublimely subtle and attentive, everything is so delicate that it might escape your attention.

For example: the three peasants in their headscarves, shy, Jewish (this doesn't show) with the chicken. The woman strokes the chicken. It's her chicken. Then she slashes its throat. Everything is so simple. The throat-cutting is ritual. I shut my eyes the minute I saw the knife. I know. My aunt watches the chickens being plucked. They pluck. Yet another kind of unveiling. 'I remember us doing that', says my aunt Eri.

'My mother got the chickens, the maid does the rest'. The throat-slitter. 'The *Schauchet*, says Eri, that's a kind of Yiddish word'. *Schauchet*: the one who does things Kosher, and also circumcisions. 'That rabbi keeps busy in what is left of that country where Jews can't decide what to do: they want to leave and they want to stay. Leavestay. – 'Yiddisches deutsch' Eri says. To start with, my two Germans wavered: Viennese is one thing, German something else. Gradually they slipped through the window into the film. Everything's stubborn and simple. How well I know this stubbornness, this endurance. The endurance of the cemetery with its thousand mossy tombs, Herbert Gropper who takes us to visit the dead reaps the benefits of our visit: thanks to Ruth Beckermann's film he becomes immortal. His mockery, his cordial voice, his humour will outlive him. So here's someone else with the chic (chic: *Geschick* the skill, the craft, *Schicksal* destiny) to pass over, from one shore to the other. As for the cemetery, it will be ringed to help it resist time. At least two hundred years. After, we'll see.

The endurance and the stubbornness of Frau Fosenheck, who bursts with pride: hasn't she *two*, still two, pupils. Pupils of what? Why of *Ivrit* of course. Her pupils emigrate. She's becoming invisible too. Except for the film.

The Voice listens, says nothing, lets live. Treasures, humble pearls of humanity. We're going to cry. We laugh. 'I like Romania', she says softly, 'because everyone's corruptible: no system can last'. Eri says: 'when the Romanian Jews came to Israel we said: Bolt your doors. Jewish or not Jewish, a bunch of thieves'. I laugh.

Who is what? A face, as if painted. Surprise: it's in water colours. Now the extraordinary Theresienstadt Scene begins. Who are we, where are we? These are make-believe Jews, more Jewish than Jewish. They act the dead, they act the survivors, they act themselves. They're going to be filmed in a re-enactment!!! What differences between Jews, Jews who act Jews, post-Jews, Jewsonfilm, Jews who film and so forth. It's mind-boggling. Cruelty builds itself a grotesque, magnificent nest *in the wings*. Thanks to Ruth Beckermann's genius we remain on the brink. No pathos. Theresienstadt, where Omi's sisters and brother died.

Are we not actors, spectators in the world theatre?

This is how we save and are saved: the atrocious reality becomes theatre, the tale told on one condition: you must have a gaze that's soft as a voice that stays as calm as immortality. Different species of the living and the survivors are prompt to quarrel, to insult one another, to each his truth or his tricks.

A veil brings this minimal terrifying saga to a close: the white tablecloth, its plastic goblets turned upside down. The yellow chairs are

empty. Are we perhaps frail, resistant goblets turned upside down on the world's cloth? The cloth becomes a frozen sea. Or are we the hard ice cubes, which may melt? Everything depends on the onlooker's gentle contemplation.

World seen through eyes without violence, Ruth Beckermann's judicious eyes, how beautiful you are.

The gaze is not innate: the Voice confides that it has grown into this gaze, it's the one voyage, that will at last have *arrived* somewhere. That has serenely reconciled itself with all reality's cruel, wounding and shameful aspects, as with the figures of love and faithfulness. This Gaze of Ruth Beckermann's must have looked at itself; once upon a time it looked with shame at the Jewish merchants of Vienna: with an ashamed Jew's gaze. Now this Gaze has learned to See. Simply see: Life. Which is beautiful, which makes us laugh.

In the end is the Silence, suspension of torment. The silence of Photos that allow themselves be looked at and which look at us. Focus on the human faces. Here is a little girl. Photos of the Voice. It is her signature: to look with the intensity and the innocence of a little girl.

Or a cat.

In the end, in front of the window, is the cat: 'Am I a Jew? Or a Jewess?' wonders the cat, who is maybe female.

In the end I think of Ruth Beckermann, of the poised Voice of her Gaze. The grace of her attention. Passion without passion. Compassion. We are indebted to her for this moment of Goodness.

Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic

Sonia Rykiel in Translation

My star-spangled sweater: it inhabits my closet like a discreet primitive divinity. Like an allusion to night. We watch over one another. Sometimes I wear it, sometimes it wears me.

My sweater manifests night's luminous presence in all its modesty, up above and in my closet. The Great outdoors comes indoors too.

Sometimes I wear a warm starry night. Night as a wool cardigan? And why not? What else could make us think of the night in every woman, of what is soft, what's silent, black, glimmering black and soft? Here is the starry breast that still modestly enfolds us.

And all of this, this world, in this sweater? Yes because it's so simple. Black all over, with tiny diamonds – not real ones – clinging like stars in the warmth of the night. It isn't a costume. Not a disguise. Not a detour. 'The Night': like a child's drawing, with all its attributes, the Great Real Night with stars pinned to its great black bosom.

All of which is to speak of the enigma of this piece of clothing cut out of a simple piece of warm night: a continuity exists between the world, the body, the hand, this garment. The hand of the child who draws the Night, the hand that scoops up stars, the hand that fashions a star-spangled sweater. From the sky to the body, the stars make their way, in their formations.

This garment comes from very far away. I'd never seen it before, I've known it forever. It comes from the origins. It comes from the remains of the immemorial origins in the deepest, most distant regions of my memory, where memory doesn't remember, has no pictures, is nothing yet but the stirrings of life.

This garment comes from some Orient, from an East that still throbs deep inside. It wells up from a beginning, gushes out at the surface of me, and it is.

What is this inner orient? Nothing outlandish. The most intimate part

of me, the archaic site at once troubled and calm, where the body felt itself take its first steps. The garment is ordinary; its model: the feeling the body has of itself inside itself; the secret body of the body. Sonia Rykiel designs this feeling.

I go to Sonia Rykiel's as to any woman's; in short, I go home. As I step into my friend, the closet: eyes closed, I go in. With my hands, with eyes in my hands, with eyes that grope like hands, I see – touch the body that hides in the body.

Coming into the outer world, expressing itself in wool, in jersey, in visible shapes, the intimate doesn't *show* itself, doesn't put itself on display. There is no break with the body that hides in the body. But continuity. Transmission of the secret, all but imperceptible revelation.

One single fabric. The edges aren't edgy: the garment doesn't come to a sudden stop, doesn't declare its hemlines, doesn't flag its borders. Soft unhemming of the fabrics, the earthly fabric goes on, altering a little, gradually, its colour, its substance. The world's skin.

And the seams? I mean the inside, I mean the outside, I mean the outside where the inside's outside-in?

My mother says:

'Funny – you've put your sweater on inside out again'.

'It's Sonia Rykiel'.

The seams being visible is the non-modesty appropriate to writing.

Writing likes to let its composition be savoured. Ever since the Bible, writing lets its wrong side be out: let there be no more wrong side.

The most delicious of meals: first the friend serves you a dish whose recipe is marvellously complicated, but in the end the taste is simple. It is one, it is unique.

So I ask the friend how she did it. First the friend tells me the story of the dish – how she made it, where she bought her fillets, her oysters.

Next she sits down at a little table and writes out the recipe. The recipe keeps the taste of the dish, the story of the dish. Now that I see how the dish was stitched I find it even more delicious. I am entrusted with the dish.

I am entrusted with the dress.

Non-violence of these garments: the Sonia garment doesn't turn against the body, doesn't attack it, doesn't try to show off. Doesn't shy away, doesn't get defensive. Some garments are shields, some are mirrors, shimmery, dazzling, that attract and repel gazes, garments like armour, garments that square the body off, set it straight, garments that

are ready for anything. I've had some. Not many. I've never been fond of them. I slipped them on to go to war.

The Sonia garment is designed for peace. For skin that breathes like an animal in its pasture, for the palm of the hand. Doesn't want to be noticed. Lives and lets live. With Sonia I feel at home. I enter the tender ancestral tent, and in its peaceful and close shelter I become friendly, I am my friend and I am the world's friend.

It's an alliance, a marriage, an agreement: of foot with sand, flesh with water. I enter the garment. As if I put on water. I step into the dress as into water that surrounds me and without effacing me transparently hides me.

And here I am dressed as close to myself as I can get. In myself almost.

In Sonia Rykiel's shop one finds ornaments, accessories, details which don't come to the body but which secrete colours, contemporary painting, the world of representation. For me, these are simplicity's underpinnings, the easel, the frame from which black night seeps.

One day I tried on a striped sweater and I couldn't wear it. The sweater strip-striped me and itself. I returned to solid colours, self-colour, unison.

Clothes which are not raucous street demonstrations, but the world in fine. Body's insistence: imitation of the one and only curve into which a body flows.

I will speak of the dress:

the Sonia Rykiel dress doesn't take me by surprise. It comes to me, attunes itself to me, as me to it, and we resemble one another. Between us we have our memory of nomad fires. The dress dresses a woman I don't know and who is also me.

There's a woman who is all women. A woman who exists in all the paintings and in all the countries and in all the houses; slender or sumptuous, broad-boned or slender, we recognise her by her vivacity, her enthusiasm, by the grace that quickens the monumental body as readily as the diminutive one.

This woman needs her whole body to embrace life, to do things, to touch, delight.

Probably she's the inspiration for Sonia Rykiel's dress. This dress (there's only one) proves that someone who calls herself woman exists, joyously, from the beginning of time and that she knows what to do with her body in the world.

She's a woman without angles. A woman who flows into the world, a woman who doesn't cut herself off from the world or herself.

Through all the dress's pockets, she finds her body, she circles back.

A long curve of a woman, like a tree, a river, a woman who doesn't end, a woman who's one long slow meander.

A woman who feels herself live who translates herself into all women like the course of a river.

And the dress adopts and pursues its slow course.

I say: the dress. I call every piece of clothing a 'dress'. I who only wear pants and a top. And I insist upon this lack of precision: for the two-pieces of the outfit translate into 'dress', a sinuous curve that merges the garment's ostensibly separate pieces. The water parts, closes over again.

The dress doesn't separate the inside from the outside, it translates as it shelters. Frail enchantment of a metaphor that doesn't efface its source.

Sonia Rykiel fashions the body's dream: to be one, freely, with the legs, belly, hips, arms, air, sea, space.

I said *one* dress, *a single* dress. For in truth there's only one. A dress but full of dresses. A dress that holds within itself countless dresses.

A musical dress, which gives birth to thousands of notes. A dress that enfolds a *Kyrielle* of dresses. Anagram's enchantment.

What's in a name, in some names? A Kyrie-el of names, of fateful signs, of prophecies. There are names that sibyl and play on the ears.

Sonia Rykiel's name, her sonorous dress I mean, is like *Sa Robe* – her dress – strewn with sounds, signs, myriad offspring.

There are names condensed like dreams: a bouquet of syllables that unfurl and send the five senses, the hundreds of sounds bouncing off the cardinal points of the imagination.

What's in Sonia Rykiel? Who is *elle*? Who, *she*? You hear her laugh, unwary host of a treasure of sounds, of fabrics, of a *kyrie el* of questions, dreams, shards of foreign languages, Greek, Russian, litanies of woollens, of invocations to a Creator – who, we have to say, has showered her with gifts – *Kyrie eleison*.

I listen seriously to these messages in translation. If Stéphane Mallarmé had been called Otherwise, would he have everywhere inscribed his yearning for a strange never-to-be-crowned hymen? I wonder.

And there are dresses like dreams full of history, of people known unknown. Dresses pregnant with dresses and women. So the dress is itself – herself – like the dream, a voyage. A dress that hides in its folds the great voyage into proximity and intimacy.

This dress has a dream of the body, the voyage of the body within the body, the child in the mother, the woman in the woman. That's why we feel so comfortable in it.

We feel loved.

The Dress, let me call it Gradiva. It makes me think of Jensen's adorable Gradiva, the eternal young woman who having resuscitated the man from the stones, and herself from the ash, suscitated in Freud a text with the charm of an adored daughter.

I call it Gradiva, for along with the story's beautiful young woman dressed in the river's myriad folds, the dress contains life, replenishing itself. And in its name, the name of the woman filled with being, Gradiva, 'the woman in sum'. A summum of woman?

17 December 1984

Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic

The Train Stop, or Anna's Resurrections

We are taken in by the dancer's extremities.

We are entangled in the dancer's hair. Dance of the let-down hair.
But there won't be any letting down, no disentanglement, no *denouement*. Her hair spellbinds us:

hair of different era, age-old hair.

The hair plays games with us. Unveilings – veilings. Grows.

Exuberance is beauty. Said Blake. Dishevelment: the hair is a veil, a cape, a flag, a muleta, a banner, a pall.

Isn't hair always the body's foreign part, its secret place?

Hair of strangers, of foreigners. Hair that is a sign.

Uncut hair, in a world where everything is cut.

Where is the hair leading us on to?

Into the world of dreams. Where women have a water nymph's flowing hair.

Frightful hair, which frightens us.

Sometimes we say: what beautiful hair! The beauty is in the length.
Hair long as life. Hair brandished, fluffed up, spread out, free.

Which women aren't.

Women are fiancées. Betrothed. Promised to. The fiancées . . . ?

Are alone.

The Jewish Fiancée (Bride), the oriental fiancée, the Russian fiancée.

What promise, what is promised to the promised?

To what end? The Fiancée falls.

The hair becomes an 'accessory'. A transitional object. Necessary.

Becomes a veil, a hanging, a curtain.

A costume. Indispensable. Can you imagine Hindu women without their saris?

Same game for the shoes, same stakes. Slippers.

Antislippers.

Oh yes, now I remember: once upon a time there were ballets onstage in the theatres. Classical dance. With tutus, tutu-ish things. No, I don't remember. Here we're in another world. Here there are women.

And dance doesn't repeat itself, doesn't imitate itself.

Here the dance 'means'. 'Signifies' rather. '*Deuten*'.

Makes us feel. Makes us suffer. The Fiancée is here on sufferance.

There are women. It's all about their destiny: life so close to death.

We are in school and already the tracks, the train is coming. The desk bangs shut. The axe falls. The doors open – and close. It takes your breath away.

This 'thing' I'm looking at, this show, but of a different kind, unfamiliar, I'm told it's a 'play'. *Une pièce* . . . in pieces. Lives in pieces, played.

So this thing I'm looking at, with a lump in my throat, is supposed to be a 'play', a piece of 'theatre'. But it's theatre in an inaudible language. The language is readable.

The characters are violently mute, as in Grimm: the sisters, the fiancées, are condemned to silence for seven years. And for seven years they hold their tongues, on pain of death. The music and the words stowed in the body. The painted mouths clamped shut. For seven years, not a word. But all the signs. The eyes cry out as they had to in Griffith's films. And beyond a doubt, I tell myself, this muteness gives rise to something heartrending. To this vision of anguish. Can you hear me? the bodies shout. Can't you hear me? shout the bodies of Anna Karenina and Nastassia Filippovna. This body is nothing but a cry. Cut off. The muteness spreads like snow over the proper names, scarcely heeded, promptly buried . . .

This is the play of women whose tongues are cut: Cordelia, Anna, Lavinia, you and me. They speak otherwise. And their tale is structured differently from that of a spoken tale. With sweeping gestures they act out their tragedies. Help! they plead with their hair, their fingers, with their danced silence. In spoken tales they were left for dead in the second to last chapter. The men get to finish – the last word, no matter how tortured it is, is theirs. Filippovna Rogojine and the Prince outlive Nastassia Filippovna. They come back, in the body of a woman who dances, to breathe new life into their story, and finish it off for themselves. Give themselves life and death.

Here we have a ‘story’, which is not told. But illustrated, conjured up, as in a Dream. With the violence of Dreams. One difference: my dreams are not set to music. Karine Saporta’s Dream is conducted by a piece of music. The music is as stabbing as a wind that won’t die down. As a memory that refuses to be snuffed out.

This is a Revenant-Tale: ancient images, fragments issuing from memories as old as lavender-scented armoires.

The Tale patched together, made into one piece again, revolves obsessively around its lost secret.

The scene is set in a memory that has holes in it, which is haunted.

The images come from very far away and unfold in the bodies of the astonished dancers.

These women are beautiful: very different and yet the same. You might say: Nerval’s ‘hollyhock’, his enchanted one.

They come to us in the shape of ‘The-Wood-Eyed-Fiancée’. The dancers are *resuscitated*, still stiff with loneliness and death.

The Fiancée: death and resurrection. The fiancée (she is multiple) doesn’t stop dying and struggling, falling down and standing up again – surviving. Passing, time runs through her, old age and youth lodge in the same body, bent, broken, ready to soar. (Unless this is Jensen’s Gradiva, the fiancée who rises from Pompeii’s ashes, the young woman with a jaunty step, who comes back to the heart of spring two thousand winters later; *Gradiva rediviva*.)

What the ‘dance’ ‘says’ as nothing else can: youth in old age’s, age already in youth: what great plays dare to tell us: young Cordelia is broken, what ‘dance’ reminds us of: we are not just a mouth – the whole body thinks and wants to translate. The scene is set in the flesh and the joints.

The fiancées are made of wood brought to life. Women become wood, or bushes . . . This is where the stop is: stops dead, stops alive, who knows which? Stopping is an essential part of movement. The dance stops dead, at the angle an emotion makes with its opposite. All of a sudden the dancer is a stick of wood. There is some wood. Wood, as Ovid tells us, contains endless suffering. It bleeds, it weeps, it burns, under the bark, it remembers. Here we have the stopping within the movement.

The fiancées are garbed in glorious tatters: tatters acted, danced. Never will Russian poverty have been displayed with so much charm. I saw the dance of the great poet Akhmatova’s dress, a rip under one arm, her shoe with its mended heel, the second-hand coat, too baggy, too

long, too short, the tatters are beautiful. And underneath, under the too big coat, all of a sudden one catches a glimpse of the infinite lightness nothing can exile: under the cape, the dancers' legs; they are of course the legs of the soul. The soul, says Karine Saporta's dance, has a body forever young.

'After all, the soul is just our capacity to suffer' – nor more nor less, writes Marina Tsvetaeva, who knew so much about suffering, that is, the capacity to hear the pulse of life and transcribe this pulse . . . '(suffer not with the head, nor the teeth, nor the throat, nor – nor etc. – only suffer – and that's all)'. This, Marina reveals to us, is 'the seed of the seed of the poet – the intensity of the suffering'.

From pain's seed the poem is born. From pain's seed springs the poem danced, but not without suffering with your head, neck, back, hands as well.

These dancers suffer, tremble. What one calls the 'saccade' (this is something I read in the newspaper about Karine Saporta) is just the broken chain, the lightning turn, the sudden passage from one state to another, the spiritual *versatility* that is the magic, the secret of great Theatre. It's the wellspring of drama. Jolt, retreat, reject, forswear, in a blink. The 'saccade'? No – the coup de théâtre *in* the body.

The body is the theatre. Which it should always be and rarely is.

Then one sees the grace in the awkwardness, desire's slippages, the body's lapsus, the confusion, the denial, I'm going I'm not going, I want inverses itself, becomes I don't want, this yes is full of no.

The two women's hands frantically seek one another, miss, panic, find one another: this is love.

Sometimes this Russia of the imagination has a whiff of India: the hands', the wrists' poignant eloquence. But here the eloquence is always blocked, the hands are twisted by an invisible grip, the body is subjected to torture but delicately. Violence reigns but without disordering grace.

The dancers start back, suddenly, so gently, they are thinking animals. Suddenly, in the back of my mind, a scene from the silent movies starts to roll. *The Wind*, remember? The women's eyes in *The Wind*: in them one saw the world buckle in the strong gusts. What was outside was inside the eyes – here it's the same, the world is in the bodies. The village, the steppe, being abandoned, winter, in the bodies. Grace and disgrace dance together.

Yet how still they are, these women's faces.

The faces: insist. Pure, outlined, represented, imagined, imaginary faces. Women who look painted. Make no mistake: the faces are painted, motionless as in Noh or Kabuki drama. Because the whole

body is a face. The soul paints its pangs from top to toe – on the body's canvas. And we bend to and project our pains upon the women's almost expressionless masks. As in Noh drama. On the expressionless face the emotions' canvas. *We* are the ones who bring these masks to life. Height of theatrical art: these women resemble our hidden souls.

And there are accessories – not just the hair – that naturally become, as in our dreams' supernatural reality, part of the body. Or maybe the bodies divide and the parts metamorphose.

There are suitcase scenes – suitcase-scenes analogous to portmanteau-words, scenes in which the signifiers are packed with significations. The scene is itself a suitcase – or a trunk [*malle*] – or a *male*. Inside, the departures – successful-failed, pregnancies-abortions, forgotten-remembered – pile up. This woman is carrying a suitcase: is she going somewhere? Go? Now she's in the suitcase. The suitcase goes. Carries the woman. The suitcase is big. The suitcase which signified evasion, flight, freedom, encloses the woman: tomb, portable coffin. The suitcase carries the woman nowhere. You never know what's inside a suitcase, what hope or threat a suitcase contains.

Now the woman's dead, in the casket, in the box. In the belly. A suitcase is a promise of departure, adieu, separation.

But who knows what separations the adieu, the suitcase, has in store for us. Maybe it's myself I'm going to lose?

All this, this long meditation on the paradoxes of departure, of detachment, fits in a suitcase. In a suitcase with woman. Suitcase, synonym of sex, synonym of woman, synonym of unconscious. Yes, that's where we are being taken, in this magician's, the unconscious's suitcase. One thing for another, by a sleight of the dance, one thing beside another, in its stead.

What's outside enters.

The suitcase – is also a body, a carapace: like a hopping turtle it moves towards the tracks that run through the first grade classroom: a train is coming along, through childhood, through the time of apprenticeship, and carries off, displaces, deports, derails [*dé-railler*] everything.

We however (ensconced in our suitcase-armchairs) are enthralled, transported, dreamt.

This woman, Karine Saporta, has found the door to the unconscious. Everything happens very fast here, by metamorphosis, metaphorically. Wait! We aren't done with the suitcase. In the suitcase is the woman folded up like a foetus. A beautiful big woman bends over and picks it up, the burden, as if it were a feather. A dance miracle? The big woman is grave, impassible. But the body suffers too. The weeper weeps without tears. A character risen from the ground of belief. How strong she is,

we murmur. But isn't everything possible, in Dreamland? A woman in a suitcase carried by a woman as if they (woman + suitcase) weighed less than a dead child?

I, a writer of plays for the theatre, am amazed: here the dream is made real. Here, on a *real* stage, is the dream. Without realism. Pure fantasy. The dream with its lightning shortcuts, its ellipses, the turbulence of emotions too rapid to be translated into words, expressed in this splendid Morse code, with its polysemy, its witticisms, its dark humour. One might laugh in amazement if one's heart didn't feel the pangs.

For we recognise the chronicle of our misfortunes in these scenes – so-allusive – these flashes of lightning.

All is magical. The desks are enchanted into sleighs.

The sleighs come to life, the dancers take us in hand, and we believe we see snow and on the snow, familiar legends.

Out from under a little wooden desk comes a horse and carriage straight out of Pushkin. Take one desk: it becomes, in magical order, a sleigh, a horse, a carriage. The train shudders to life and we are the carriages. Bodies within the train's body. What's a train, for us, *in us*? It's this, this quivering of the body, of the soul, the imminence of departure, abandon, of life turned upside-down and inside-out.

The 'play' mimes the paradoxes that weave and twist our lives. Painful simultaneity of contraries: we are attached-detached; we cling to the ropes that hang us. One day Marina Tsvetaeva will swing by the neck from the branch of the Yelabuga tree.

I spoke of women.

And men? Men are women too. I mean: in the women there is sometimes a hint of man. As, in the school, there's a train. We are traversed . . . This great big beautiful woman who has lifted us – along with the suitcase – up, this strange, fierce woman who, with her silent, compassionate face, troubles us, this woman who has carried us as the Virgin carried Christ, this deep and sombre woman with her long young hair, look, she has no teats, at the end, we see her bare-chested and her breasts are a man's breasts. And we resign ourselves: so she was a man, this woman? But who's to say this man wasn't a woman at heart? Sometimes a man is a woman. The mystery is not in the hair, but in the full heart.

And all of it, the trances, the mysteries, the mix-ups, the sexual indecision, without a word, no commentary, the way things are under reality's veils.

Karine Saporta found the way.

And what about the men then?

I'm going to talk about bulls. About dancers. About Chimène's bulls. Her strong and ambiguous herd. Half-naked bulls. Or half-bulls. Or half-men.

These bulls are fragile. In the arenas of the theatre, what occurs is not representation but revelation. The bulls' poignant fragility is also, I recognise, that of dancers and actors. The bull doesn't know whether he is beast or man. Doesn't know, when he lunges, whether he will kill or be killed. A bull is hesitation. And suddenly: the magnet of an attraction [*aimantation*]. Karine Saporta's bulls are like Jean Genet's unicorns. One encounters them off in a field, of rye, of armchairs, where, invisible, the border passes. The border is always invisible. It's the uncertainty that grips the body and turns it this way and that. I who am you. Sinuous bulls, swan-bulls, horse-bulls. The bull wears skirts. The skirt is also the rump. The bull is lightness itself: there is something winged [*aile*] or female [*elle*], in this body. The trunk is gnarled, all the rest is veil. I said trunk, but trunk is *torse* . . . *torso*. The torso is crazed. Possession is what this about. The torso dances. Eros, or Pan, flit across the flesh's field, or perhaps we have here the Spanish soul of the dance.

This is about torso and *torse*. About masculine becoming feminine, along the fault [*tort*] line. Between the toro and the torero, like the soul's movements, the enigma of amorous hostility, vine-like, twists and turns. Attack becomes desire, attraction repulsion. This is the truth about love, tortuous and restless love, that fears satisfaction like death. Love that flees what it seeks.

At love's extremity: repulsion.

At the toro's extremity, the torero. The torero contains the toro, as the suitcase contains the woman. At one end, one throws oneself into the arms of the other, or maybe between the paws, impelled by terror, by seduction.

The torso is tormented. This is because of the incarnation of the toros'-toreros' soul in this body part. And all of a sudden I learn that the stage, the soul, of this struggle is truly in this Cornelian thorax, the seat of the passions: the chest is hairless. The toro is stripped naked. Its skin is soft.

There you have Karine Saporta's art: in the baring of the flesh, that is, of the soul. Language of the passions. And the costumes too are a revelation. These costumes which are also, marvellously, entranced. Both weighty and airy, covering the better to denude, but always with restraint. Costumes of flesh and movement.

Art of allusion, of barely grazing. So the strongest spells work: by evocation, by contiguity, by propagation. The dance gets to me. I am touched, there, in the back of my mind, startled, as by one of Tsvetaeva's brutal poems.

Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic

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