

# TRACING LOSS, TOUCHING ABSENCE

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## ABSTRACT

This research considers an artist's encounter with works of art that carry or evoke the affective traces of an experience of loss. Examining images, photographs and sculptural objects and installations that inscribe and in turn expose absence in presence, this research through writing as a practice simultaneously investigates and performs the work as a response to loss. The thesis proposes that the work of art evokes loss by materialising absence. The work of art, like the work of mourning, works by inscribing a trace of the affective experience – the absence of the presence of the *other*. It is through the *affective materiality* of the work of art that we come to sense loss; when confronted with, and wounded by, the inscription of absence and its powerful relation to time.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, the study shows how loss can silence but also move us to create a new language when existing forms of representation fail to signify. Shifting between asignification and signification, the new poetic language carries an imprint of the body; it reconnects to affects to inscribe loss. In the languages of writing, photography and sculpture, I suggest, art attempts to give shape to what cannot be said, to what cannot be shown, to what resists representation.

Through close readings of works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Louise Bourgeois, the thesis suggests that by resisting representation these artists create works in which textile materials indicate a fundamental encounter with a material sign that gives rise to affects. I analyse works in which fabric is infused with the trace of an absent *other*. The analysis of contemporary works rubs against the narratives of the origins of art in the 'Corinthian Maid' and in the history of prehistoric handprints on cave walls, both of which reveal the gesture of inscribing a presence that anticipates absence. The study draws on philosophy to consider that what is inscribed is not only the absence of a presence but existence; what is inscribed is the vestige or trace of a 'passing through the world'.

The research is generated by a transformative encounter with loss and with art that invites yet resists interpretation; an affective encounter through which what is *other* can touch, and what touches can be thought. Art, I suggest (after Deleuze), can move us to recover the creative potency of thought in order to inscribe the singularity of the encounter. To write through loss is to write what is impossible to represent and yet insists on being written.

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**AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Signature: 

Date:



INTRODUCTION

**WEAVING WORDS AND SILENCE**

I write because I so deeply want to speak. Though writing only gives me the full measure of silence.<sup>1</sup>

Clarice Lispector

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<sup>1</sup> Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, trans. by Stefan Tobler, ed. by Benjamin Moser (New York: New Directions, 2012), p. 6.

## INSCRIBING THE ENCOUNTER

I encounter works of art that unsettle me. What I see touches me and draws me close, yet it leaves me silent. I am affected by the loss I sense in the works, in their materiality. In these works, loss is not represented through a narrative of biographical events, but presented through traces – the affective traces of an experience of loss; the indexical traces of a presence. They invite yet resist interpretation, opening up a space for an encounter with what is *other*, what is unknown. The affective encounter with art presents the work not as a knowable object, but as a work that evades being known, a work that speaks in silence. This encounter wounds, for it awakens the affect of an experience of loss: facing the *other's* loss in the present causes the body to suffer the pain of the losses of the past and of the confrontation with the losses of the future. Wounded by the encounter, I am moved to write, to find a voice that can respond to loss, to works that unfold that which cannot be represented – that which silences.

I write as an attempt to get to the other side of silence, to say what cannot be spoken, to inscribe the trace of the unsayable, to interweave word and silence. I write to give voice to the silence that rises from the unspeakable encounter with loss, from the loss I sense in the encounter with works of art. How to respond to the loss sensed in the encounter? There is no answer to this question, only silence, the silence that vibrates in the question itself and is felt through the body. I sense loss and tremble. Like a perverse oracle, the tremulous body that suffers the violence of loss' inscription, its wounding, points to this trembling, to this silence. Falling silent and trembling are its response... It says: write in response to what makes you tremble, what destabilises, what reverberates, what touches, what wounds, what silences. Perhaps the only way to write about the wounding encounter is to *write through loss* – to trace the wound of loss, to touch the absence it exposes.

This project is generated by the encounter with works of art that carry and awaken the affective traces of an experience of loss. The writing is an attempt to listen to the body that senses loss and trembles in silence; for whom writing is impossible and yet offers a possibility for inscribing a trace of what cannot be represented. The text that emerges from sensing loss is written *through* loss. It performs through the writing a response to loss that also drives the making of the work of art. This is not a solipsistic exercise, for the writer already inscribed by loss writes in response to an *other*; perhaps without the encounter there would

be no text, no writing of what demands to be written. By responding through writing to the encounter with works that give rise to a sense of loss, the writer transforms the text into a space inhabited by the relatedness of people and things, a space in which to inscribe an affective response. This study is a response to being affected, wounded by works of art and images.

I am affected by the works of Louise Bourgeois and of Felix Gonzalez-Torres: touched by the loss I sense in them, by the presence of an absent body presented by their materiality. I sense their use of fabric indicates an affective connection; it seems to carry the traces of the absent *other*. Absence inscribed on matter. A similar inscription can be found in archaic examples that resonate with works by Bourgeois and Gonzalez-Torres. The analysis of contemporary works rubs against the narratives of the origins of art in the 'Corinthian Maid' and in the history of prehistoric handprints on cave walls, both of which reveal the gesture of inscribing a presence that anticipates absence.

I write as an attempt to respond to the call of the artworks. In the process I trace the wound they have inflicted, touching its contour as I touch the scar of an old wound, closed but not forgotten. It is strange how I can always go back to the wound, I know exactly where it is or, rather, my hands know – they reach towards it without the need to see, they remember its site, they hold the memory of the wound, a tactile memory. A tacit memory. A memory that is not spoken but felt, hushed like a secret that pulsates. 'I keep hidden what needs to be hidden and needs to irradiate in secret'.<sup>2</sup> A secret is a form of silence. The works are laden with silence, for they also hold their own secrets. This research does not try to decipher them, but attempts to unfold how the work of art presents what cannot be represented. In the languages of writing, photography and sculpture, I suggest, art attempts to give shape to what cannot be said, to what cannot be shown, to what resists representation. It is by resisting representation that the artists discussed in this thesis find a way of expressing what appears to be an impossibility: the works present loss by *materialising absence*.

What you encounter here is a voice that has emerged from silence, carrying the traces of a wounded language, weaving words and silence to speak of an encounter.




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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

By awakening the affect of an experience of loss or separation, at first the encounter with art silenced me and, for not knowing how to deal with this silence, I filled it with words. Too many words. Words that came from looking elsewhere, from seeing too much, from too much reading, from too much 'research'.

I am reminded here of a text by Mieke Bal I read at a turning point in this project. In 'Research Practice: New Words on Cold Cases', Bal writes about the pitfalls of research; of how we do research because a 'visual thing grabbed our attention enough to motivate the research', only for us to lose it when we tried to get closer to it. Bal considers research 'that desperate attempt to get it back, or to finally get it'. She refers to an early experience of 'doing' research, of wanting to go beyond the level of intuition concerning a particular description in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. On the suggestion of her professor, she read 'everything published on Flaubert'.<sup>3</sup> Bal says this was a waste of time and all but killed her project, as well as being an exercise in procrastination, which is counter to research and is not research, she contends. Bal realised all that reading was not helpful because she 'read without knowing what to look for'. She suggests that research is not only the preparatory stage before writing, but also what happens alongside it, for in the process of writing one might recognise the gaps in the reading. Furthermore, there can be also gaps in the looking: if researchers just repeat established interpretations of works of art without thoroughly attending to the works themselves, they would not only be risking recirculating a clichéd and wrong interpretation, they would also be reconfirming 'false knowledge' and not adding to it, as Bal observed when researching a painting by Balthus.<sup>4</sup>

The encounter with the work of art and careful looking is paramount, Bal contends, to escape this blinkered view, this refusal to see. But looking carefully and repeatedly is no guarantee of elucidation. Bal writes about realising that the more she looked the more the painting eluded her. This ultimate elusiveness, she suggests, makes visual artefacts attractive; it draws us to them, it activates the encounter.<sup>5</sup>




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<sup>3</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Research Practice: New Words on Cold Cases', in *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, ed. by Michael Ann Holly and Marquard Smith (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), pp. 198-199.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 201-204.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 204.

In the encounter with the work we need to awaken our senses, as Susan Sontag contends:

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.

Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.

The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art — and, by analogy, our own experience — more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.<sup>6</sup>



Georges Didi-Huberman also considers the encounter with the work of art and looking very important. In *Confronting Images*, he explores the relationship between seeing and knowledge – the paradoxical act of gazing at an art image and the competing desire to know. Didi-Huberman emphasises the need to engage with what is seen before proclaiming knowledge of it, for if one is impelled by a desire to *represent* what the work seems to veil, if looking becomes a way of grasping what is seen, one can also ‘see’ too much and miss what is *presented* by the work in the encounter:

Often, when we pose our gaze to an art image, we have a forthright sensation of paradox. What reaches us immediately and straightaway is marked with trouble, like a self-evidence that is somehow obscure. [...] feeling ourselves alternately enslaved and liberated by this braid of knowledge and not-knowledge, of universality and singularity, of things that elicit naming and things that leave us gaping. ... All this on one and the same surface of a picture or sculpture, where nothing has been hidden, where everything before us has been, simply, *presented*.

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 14 (emphasis in original). ‘Against Interpretation’ was written in 1964 and Sontag’s assertion is still valid.



We can, conversely, feel dissatisfied with such a paradox. [...] want to *represent to ourselves* in a more intelligible way what the image before us still seemed to hide within it. We might then turn toward the discourse that proclaims itself a knowledge about art [...] whose status thus can be summed up as offering *specific knowledge* of the art object, this discipline is as we know called the history of art.<sup>7</sup>

When confronting Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* in the monastery of San Marco, Florence, a fresco that 'creates a vague impression that there isn't much to see', Didi-Huberman contends that the gaze should not seek to clarify everything straightaway but distance itself. This would be a form of suspended attention that does not rush to reach conclusions; it would include a moment of 'not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of *letting go of one's knowledge about it*'.<sup>8</sup> Gazing at Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* he is grasped by the patch/'whack' of white wall.

Didi-Huberman points to the way knowledge can obscure seeing – how what is assumed to be visible and legible in the work competes with what is invisible and ineffable.<sup>9</sup> He suggests that seeing not only involves visual perception, but also requires seeing beyond the visible. If on the one hand we need to look at the image or art object, to pay attention to the object of our study, on the other hand we need to escape the 'tyranny of the visible' that offers 'certainties'.<sup>10</sup> How can we stop thinking about what we are looking at as wholly decipherable because visible? Didi-Huberman turns to Sigmund Freud's 'dream-work' and his insistence on the dream's 'fragmentary presentation'. He reflects on '*dream-forgetting*' as a way of broaching *something* of the visual object; it seems that we should try to 'forget' as if awakening from a dream, for if the dream solicits interpretation of its fragmentary remains it does not afford a totalizing interpretation.<sup>11</sup> Didi-Huberman writes on the potential of seeing what was hidden by knowledge by closing our eyes:

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<sup>7</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. by John Goodman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), PDF ebook, p. 1 (emphasis in original).

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 11-16 (emphasis in original).

<sup>9</sup> Didi-Huberman extends his discussion on the visible and invisible in Fra Angelico in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 144-147, 155-158.

So the most beautiful aesthetics [...] will be those aesthetics that, in order to open themselves completely to the dimension of the visual, want us to close our eyes before the image, so as no longer to see it but only to look at it [...] Such aesthetics are always singular, strip themselves bare in not-knowledge, and never hesitate to call *vision* that which no waking person can see.<sup>12</sup>

In *Ninfa Moderna*, Didi-Huberman also proposes that in order to see better we must close our eyes:

To open our eyes, we must also know how to close them. An eye that is always open, always vigilant – a phantasm of Argos – dries out. A dry eye could perhaps see everything, all the time. But it would not see well. To see well we need – a paradox of experience – all our tears.<sup>13</sup>

Lacrimation is not simply a metaphorical means to clean or lubricate the ‘dry eyes’ of a viewer who sees too much, to offer respite; tears offer an image with less detail, an image of what is seen that escapes the constraint of the visible. Tears blur the visible. In producing a blurred vision, tears undermine knowledge of the visible; they destabilise the discourse that claims to have total knowledge of the art object for they are an experience of ‘un-knowing’.<sup>14</sup> Rather than being in control, tears indicate, as Georges Bataille suggests, that we are clearly overwhelmed, affected by the experience of ‘not-knowing’.<sup>15</sup> Didi-Huberman points out that although we need to open our eyes to be attentive to the object, by closing our eyes, and thus producing tears, we can understand how it affects us (by ‘looking back’ at us or by being the object of our ‘concern’).<sup>16</sup> If we approach the work of art to seize it, to understand it, it is us in turn who are seized by it;

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 157.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa moderna: essai sur le drape tombé* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), p. 127 (my translation).

<sup>14</sup> The reference here is to George Bataille’s critique of absolute knowledge in favour of a ‘non-knowledge’ or ‘un-knowing’. See Martin Jay, *Downcast eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 223. Didi-Huberman’s *Confronting Images* includes an epigraph by Bataille: ‘Not-knowledge strips bare. This proposition is the summit, but should be understood as follows: it strips bare, hence I see what knowledge previously had hidden; but if I see, I know. In effect, I know, but what I knew, not-knowledge strips it barer still.’

<sup>15</sup> See Georges Bataille, ‘Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears’, trans. by Annette Michelson, *October*, 36 (Spring 1986), 89-102, (p. 97).

<sup>16</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa moderna*, p. 127. Didi-Huberman writes in French ‘comprendre en quoi il nous regarde’, playing with the double meaning of *regarder*.

our eyes close in order to experience what it returns to us.<sup>17</sup> For Didi-Huberman, it returns our gaze and opens itself, presents itself to us. What is seen and sensed in the encounter with the work of art that evades being known – the work that speaks in silence about the invisible and the ineffable – is not limited to what is represented; if it surprises us, is because it presents itself to us. To see it well we need all our tears.



In the affective encounter with works of art, what they return reverberates in the body, invoking not what is already know, but fragments of what had been forgotten, traces of lived experience and of memory. Thus, if I close my eyes is not only to produce tears that blur the visible and the legible (to 'un-know'), it is also to touch what has been affectively inscribed on the body and to listen to its pulsation. I must close my eyes to listen to the silence of the work, the silence that speaks through images. Behind my eyelids, I wait for images to well up like tears.

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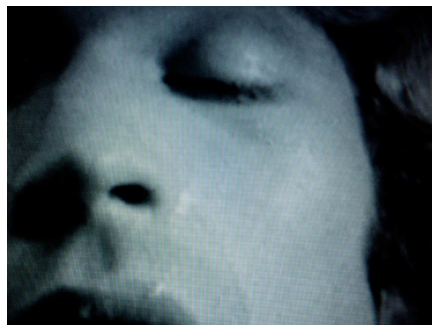
<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 136.

## THE TASTE OF TEARS

For a long time, I kept my eyes wide open like those of the ill-fated Argos Panoptes, trying to see everything, all the time, until I stopped seeing. I had lost sight of the project by 'seeing' too much – looking at too many things, 'researching' too much, reading too much. Like in Mieke Bal's example, I read 'without knowing what to look for'. I was researching and reading 'thematically' but without affect, and risked losing the original impulse of the project: if sensing loss in the encounter with art gave rise to it, I seemed to be numbing the pain of the encounter. Loss and absence were becoming a 'theme' of the works that I had planned to incorporate in the thesis (a motley collection of case studies). Instead, I eventually realised I needed to address what pulsed in some of the works and reverberated within me.

Before any sustained writing on art, I was making art impelled by affective forces relating to loss and absence. This project thus arose in part from my artistic practice, and from the encounter with art that affected me deeply and made me want to write rather than (at least for a while) continue with my studio practice. Although the passage from artistic practice to writing could posit a break, I felt there was something in common with my practice as an artist and my interest in writing about the art that had touched me: both were a form of response to loss, in which the materiality of the work played a very important part. Yet, in the beginning, my approach to the writing differed from my approach to making art. It was as if I wanted to understand what I had not yet written, to know before seeing, before properly engaging with the work. Perhaps I was searching for certainties in the work that eluded me, but knowledge was obscuring what I saw, what I sensed. I wanted to see again what I had glimpsed earlier, what was being hidden by knowledge. I needed to see what was veiled, to allow it to open itself, to present itself and, in turn, to allow me to touch again that wound that had been (re)opened by the encounter with art.

I had to recover the force of the encounter with loss and with art that generated this project. For this, I needed to close my eyes in order to touch what had been affectively inscribed on the body. I needed all my tears to write this text.



It was an encounter with a poignant work of art enveloped in tears and silence that invoked the fragments of what had been forgotten, reawakening the affect of the encounter with loss, and of the loss sensed in other works of art. I was visiting the 30th São Paulo Biennial in December 2012, when I came across a room dedicated to the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader.<sup>18</sup> Built inside the airy white modernist pavilion, the room's dimly lit interior made it difficult to see. My eyes were immediately drawn to a silent film showing a man crying: his face fills the screen, his eyes are closed, tears bathe his cheeks and fall on his open mouth, he licks his lips to savour them. He also wipes away his tears and sighs. His head goes up as he inhales and falls down in dejection. He bursts into tears, his face contorts somewhere between grimace and grin. His eyes downcast, he never looks directly at the camera, always somewhere else, the elsewhere of pain. A pain of which we know nothing, for there is no narrative, no explanation as to why he is weeping, no reason given for such display of sadness. The title of the work, *I'm too Sad to Tell You*,<sup>19</sup> points to the overwhelming surge of affect that washes away words, to the sadness that dissolves words in the salt of tears.

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<sup>18</sup> See Luis Pérez-Oramas, with André Severo and others, *Catálogo da 30ª Bienal de São Paulo: A iminência das poéticas* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2012), p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> On the photograph and film *I'm too Sad to Tell You*, see Rein Wolfs, ed., *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006), pp. 40, 78; Erik Beenker, 'The man who wanted to look beyond the horizon', in *ibid.*, p. 13. See also Alexander Dumbadze, *Bas Jan Ader: Death is Elsewhere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 152-154.



**Figure 1.** Bas Jan Ader, *I'm too Sad to Tell You*, 1971, film

(photograph by the author)

Looking at this man's face, exposed to his sadness and vulnerability, I feel vulnerable in turn – exposed and wounded by that which, in touching, can hurt. In confronting his tears, I am confronted with my own. I close my eyes and savour the images that well up behind my eyelids, tasting them as if they were the salt of tears.

– I remembered you, when I kissed your man face, slowly, slowly kissed it, and when the time came to kiss your eyes – I remembered that then I had tasted the salt in my mouth, and that the salt of tears in your eyes was my love for you. But, what bound me most of all in a fright of love, had been, in the depth of the depths of the salt, your saltless and innocent and childish substance: with my kiss your deepest insipid life was given to me, and kissing your face was the saltless and busy patient work of love, it was woman weaving a man, just as you had woven me, neutral crafting of life.<sup>20</sup>

Clarice Lispector

<sup>20</sup> Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, trans. by Idra Novey, ed. by Benjamin Moser (New York: New Directions, 2012), p. 6.

*I'm too Sad to Tell You* opened up a space where the encounter with other works could resonate. By showing that the affective impact of the work of art does not arise simply from a thematic explanation or from a narrative of biographical events, but from what a work presents – a work that sustains a relation to the body and awakens the affective traces of an experience – Bas Jan Ader's film made me turn to those works that similarly reverberated within me. It confirmed what I had intuited but perhaps had initially resisted: that one does not write *about* loss in relation to artistic practice without writing *through* loss, through its deferred tears and ghostly grief; *with* loss as a companion. Furthermore, in its silent agitation, *I'm too Sad to Tell You* spoke to me about the need to accept and understand better the silence and tears that come before words in the confrontation with loss.

#### ON TEARS, SILENCE AND WORDS

None has ever lived in the present the death of a loved one. The death of a dear parent at first eliminates us. At the time not a tear for my father, not a tear for your mother. Nonetheless god knows we have rivers of tears to shed. Where have they then gone? Elsewhere, far away, into the future, to the neighbor's. They will return later, indirect, displaced. For the friend we will weep the tears that were first extracted before the body of the beloved. The great griefs come to us disguised, long after, as ghosts, when we believe them far removed, it is then they come, slip, unrecognizable, anguishing, in incomprehensible forms, changed into vertigo, into chest pains.<sup>21</sup>

Hélène Cixous

Even if the tears have deserted us, the grief has never gone away. It comes into being by coming to us, thus never far away but always close at hand, lying dormant. The traces of loss are embedded in us like a fire we believe extinguished, a fire that only needs to be doused with tears to be revived... tears that come long after, tears that flow from us – not only for the *other* but also for ourselves. Here we see the tears of the world and see the world through tears.

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<sup>21</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'What is it o'clock? Or the door (we never enter)', trans. by Catherine A.F. MacGillivray, in *Stigmata* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2005), PDF ebook, pp. 59-60.

Tears that silence. Here, in silence, we can encounter and welcome the *other*, listen to the *other* who speaks words soaked in tears and silence. These words reawaken affects and reveal the possibility of inscribing the traces of loss through writing.

*Ego silebam et fletum frenabam...*

I remained silent and restrained my tears  
Saint Augustine

To be silent, to stem the flow of tears... Saint Augustine encounters loss, as he narrates in his *Confessions*, and his outward response is a silent, voiceless grief.<sup>22</sup> The loss was that of his mother, Monica, who after a fever had only a few days to live and issued a command, “Bury your mother here”; his reaction was contained and mute: ‘I remained silent and restrained my tears’.<sup>23</sup> ‘Here’ was a foreign land on the other side of the Mediterranean, away from their homeland in North Africa. Her command, motivated by an awareness of death and the impossibility of return, presented him with the inevitable: he was soon to be separated forever from the mother. Faced with her impending death, the former professor of rhetoric cannot articulate in words his sorrow, nor does he allow tears to flow their natural course. Augustine fights the tears back again at her funeral (tearful laments were not fitting, according to him); his response is stoical, ‘I pressed her eyes closed, and a huge wave of sorrow flooded my heart and flowed outward in tears, yet at the same time my eyes, under the forceful command of the mind, repressed their flow until they were quite dry’.<sup>24</sup> It takes an effort not to cry, to hold back tears like a dam holds back a river. The walls Augustine erected eventually broke under the strain of grief. Only a few days after his mother’s burial, already living with her absence, does Augustine overcome his initial stoicism and lapses into tears, for his mother and for himself. Addressing God in writing he says:

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<sup>22</sup> It is estimated that *Confessions* was written around 397 to 401 AD. See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Vernon J. Bourke (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (IX, xi, 27), p. 254. Monica died in 387 AD.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (IX, xii, 29), p. 255-256.



It was a relief to weep in Thy sight about her and for her, about myself and for myself. I gave free course to the tears which I was still restraining, permitting them to flow as fully as they wished, spreading them out as a pillow for my heart.<sup>25</sup>

Through crying and through writing Augustine can express his loss and remember his mother. To speak and to cry through the text, to allow tears and words to flow, to carry and to leave traces. A trail of tears inscribed on the face, words inscribed on the page. In tears and in the text there is a trace of the *other*, the absent *other*, the one who has been lost. '*mater defuncta est*'.

Saint Augustine's account of his mother's death in *Confessions* presents us with loss and its traces – the traces of the other inscribed in tears and in silence, in prayer and in writing.<sup>26</sup> His narrative exemplifies the bodily reaction and the deferral of language that may accompany loss, revealing the affective character of the writing or creative work that follows – an inscription that can touch us even after centuries have elapsed. Augustine's painful confrontation with life and mortality leads us to encounter other losses, perhaps those yet to be articulated.

Like Augustine, when faced with loss we may experience a blanking of bodily and linguistic responses: we are stunned by loss; our tears are dammed, our speech is muted. We suffer a blow that causes or forces our eyes to remain dry and our voices unheard, unable to articulate the sorrow. Grief is felt, and yet its outward manifestation is suppressed by shock. Joan Didion wrote about grief coming in 'waves' the day after her husband died:

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (IX, xii, 33), p. 258.

<sup>26</sup> Although Augustine's *Confessions* is frequently referred to as an autobiography (even as the first Western autobiography), this view is disputed by those who stress its nature as an extended prayer. See, for example, Garry Wills, *Augustine's Confessions: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 22; John D. Caputo, review of Jean Luc Marion's *In the Self's Place: The Approach of St. Augustine* (2012), <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/36791-in-the-self-s-place-the-approach-of-st-augustine/> > [accessed 18 November 2013]; Michael Mendelson, 'Saint Augustine', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/augustine>> [accessed 1 November 2016]. In choosing to refer to Augustine's account of his mother's death, my text does not intend to wander into the merits of its religious discourse or its narrative of biographical events. Augustine's account serves as an example of the narration of an encounter with loss and the response it elicits.

Tightness in the throat.

Choking, need for sighing.

[...] I woke alone in the apartment. I do not remember crying the night before; I had entered at the moment it happened a kind of shock in which the only thought I allowed myself was that there must be certain things I needed to do.<sup>27</sup>

Even if there are no words or tears in our immediate response to loss – whether of a person, a relationship, a thing or a place – the body may still respond.<sup>28</sup> It is as if by holding back tears and words we attempt to dam the flow of pain. However, we seem unable to stop the grief of loss surging over time, flooding time itself, eventually submerging our face in tears, drowning words and meaning. We drown in silence, even when we speak. In the face of loss, words, like tears, seem insufficient and yet excessive. The language of loss appears to be one of scarcity; the world becomes poor, we become impoverished. Yet, loss demands that we speak, somehow, if only to try to make sense of it. (Are we not already *sensing* it?) But how can we say anything when words desert us, when we are only able to sigh and to cry?

Je pleure  
Roland Barthes

For those whose living is associated with words, lives underpinned by writing, words may never completely leave. Written words can be ‘an attempt to make sense’ of an experience of loss, as Joan Didion puts it.<sup>29</sup> Words remain, even if they lie about the page like the ruins of lost worlds, a scattering of fragments, the remains of language. Roland Barthes began to keep a diary of his grief the day after his mother died. Handwritten on small slips of paper, these fragments were

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<sup>27</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), p. 28.

<sup>28</sup> From a psychoanalytic point of view, this lack of response can be seen as corresponding to a state of depression, triggered by a new crisis. British psychoanalyst Darien Leader argues in his 2008 book, *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*, that experiences of loss and unresolved mourning are at the heart of much (but not all) depression. See an interview with Leader in Renee Lertzman, ‘On loss and mourning’, *The Psychologist*, 23, 7 (July 2010), 574-577, <<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-23/edition-7/interview-loss-and-mourning>> [accessed 1 November 2016]. In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva indicates that language is a way of negotiating loss, but the speech of the depressed reveals an incapacity to use language to symbolise. Depressive discourse is punctuated, or punctured, by silence. This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>29</sup> See Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, p. 7.

collected and published posthumously as his *Mourning Diary*. In this fragmented diary he noted the encounter with a photograph of his *maman* as a child, the one that for him corresponded to the image he had of her (he writes about the discovery of the 'winter garden' photograph, and of 'rediscovering' his mother, in *Camera Lucida*, published two years after her passing). Overwhelmed by this discovery, all he could summon were tears. 'I weep', he wrote.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the tactile saltiness of tears offers some kind of comfort, tears as 'a cushion for the heart', to cite Augustine; or as Hélène Cixous indicates, to 'perform' tears for others affords a sort of happiness in the midst of suffering:

I know that it's not my mother whom I lost; it's my father who died and whom I didn't weep for, my father whom I loved. I obviously mourned him, in other ways, but I shed no tears. There is a frightful happiness in tears, in certain tears, which is connected to the theatre, to representation, to the fact that there are witnesses. One weeps in front of witnesses, in company. In a certain way, one is happy. One doesn't realize it because of the suffering. But it brings happiness just the same. Unhappiness is having no one to weep with. No one to remember with, no one to tell.<sup>31</sup>

Like tears, words may offer comfort if we are able to share them.<sup>32</sup> Initially, however, our own words may seem meaningless, unable to articulate the depth of our grief, the affect of loss, incapable of comforting the inconsolable... Words fail us. We fall silent and fall into words. We may start stating facts, referring to details and chronology, simply narrating events. Clichés become a shortcut to communicate that which we cannot speak. Our words do not seem to come from us, but from a common archive of sadness, despair, dejection, apathy. Our speech is contaminated by traces of the speech of others – we appropriate words that we find resonant and repeat them, mingled with those arising from our own

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<sup>30</sup> The full entry reads: 'June 13, 1978: This morning, painfully returning to the photographs, overwhelmed by one in which *maman*, a gentle, discreet little girl beside Philippe Binger (the Winter Garden of Chennevières, 1898). I weep. Not even the desire to commit suicide'. Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. by Richard Howard, ed. by Nathalie Léger (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'In October 1991', trans. by Keith Cohen, in *Stigmata*, p.39.

<sup>32</sup> To many, telling (and listening to) stories of loss may prove to be useful or therapeutic. The role of storytelling and narrative in expressing grief and coping with loss is widely discussed in the literature of psychotherapy. See, for example, Robert A. Neimeyer, Laurie A. Burke et al., 'Grief Therapy and the Reconstruction of Meaning: From Principles to Practice', *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 40, 2, (2010), 73-83; Cecilia Bosticco and Teresa L. Thompson, 'Narratives and Story Telling in Coping with Grief and Bereavement', *OMEGA*, 51, 1, (2005), 1-16.

experience. We start paraphrasing, citing, grafting, repeating others and ourselves, going around in circles, circumambulating...

trying in vain not only to cry but, I don't know, to stop myself crying, *et fletum frenabam*.<sup>33</sup>

Jacques Derrida

When confronted with the imminent death of his mother, Jacques Derrida could only summon words, not tears, as he writes in 'Circumfession': 'already burying her under the word and weeping her in literature'.<sup>34</sup> Thus speaking and crying through the text, in words that flow unlike the tears he does not shed. To write his mourning, Derrida borrows the words of Saint Augustine.<sup>35</sup> He repeats the words of a mourner to speak of tears.<sup>36</sup> This language of unshed tears comes from another time, in a foreign language that is not his own (perhaps as foreign to him as French sometimes seemed to be).<sup>37</sup> He is bereft and bereft of language, even though words seem to be all he has to mourn his mother. These are words written in silence, silent yet eloquent like the unshed tears that flow into dry eyes. '*Ego silebam et fletum frenabam*'.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Circumfession', in *Jacques Derrida*, by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 53. Derrida wrote 'Circumfession' in 1989-1990, as his mother lay dying in Nice.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Circumfession', in *Jacques Derrida*, p. 262. He seems to chastise himself for writing her death, burying her twice: under the word and under the earth.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida writes; 'I have to confess that my relation to St. Augustine's *Confessions* is a little strange. If I had to summarize what I am doing with St. Augustine in *Circumfession*, I would say this. [...] I play with some analogies, that he came from Algeria, that his mother died in Europe, the way my mother was dying in Nice when I was writing this, and so on. I am constantly playing, seriously playing, with this, and quoting sentences from the *Confessions* in Latin...' See Jacques Derrida, 'The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida', in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, ed. by John D. Caputo, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), pp. 20-21.

<sup>36</sup> On repetition and citation in Derrida's 'rhetoric of mourning', see Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, 'Editor's Introduction: To Reckon with the Dead: Jacques Derrida's Politics of Mourning', in *The Work of Mourning*, by Jacques Derrida (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 21-23. In citing Augustine, and referring to those who have quoted him, my text points to the inevitable repetition of language we use to engage with the experience of loss.

<sup>37</sup> Apparently, Derrida had a problem seeing French as his 'own' language. Born in Algeria and descending from Sephardic Jews, his family had already lost their ancient languages – Ladino and Hebrew, as well as Arabic, the language of their adopted country. 'I speak only one language', he declares, 'it is not mine.' See Adam Shatz's review of *Derrida: A Biography* by Benoît Peeters (2012) in Adam Shatz, 'Not in the Mood', *London Review of Books*, 22 November 2012, 11-14. On the relationship between language and identity for Derrida, see also John D. Caputo, 'Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida's Confession of Prayer', in *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*, ed. by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 96.

For Derrida the silence is not total; when mourning a friend he cites his or her words. The words of the dead and the words of Augustine reverberate within him. He returns to these words, citing them is a way of interiorizing the *other*; they act as a point of alterity 'within' the text.<sup>38</sup> Citing allows the *other* to speak within us. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas note in their introduction to Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* that Derrida's citation of Augustine in 'Circumfession' works to connect the saint's singular mourning of his mother, Monica, to others: not only is Derrida addressing the imminent loss of his mother, he is also foreseeing his own children mourning his death.<sup>39</sup> Thus through this movement across time and generations, what is unique (mourning an individual) is, at the same time, shared. Shared through return and repetition. Derrida returns to a past older than his own past and to a future beyond his own future in his mourning for his mother. In mourning he returns to her name, to her image, to her; he returns to her and she returns to him, as memory, as trace. The trace of the *other* lodged in the one left behind.

It is in language that Derrida inscribes himself as a mourner by inscribing a relation to the *other*. In *The Work of Mourning*, a collection of texts written after the deaths of friends, writers and thinkers whom he feels indebted to, Derrida offers the texts as gifts to the departed friends. Judith Butler writes on his 'debt':

These are authors that he could not do without, ones with and through whom he thinks. He writes only because he reads, and he reads only because there are these authors to read time and again. He 'owes' them something or, perhaps, everything, if only because he could not write without them: their writing exists as the precondition of his own; their writing constitutes the means through which his own writing voice is animated and secured, a voice that emerges, importantly, as an address.<sup>40</sup>

In addressing the dead friend, Derrida's writing performs mourning; in surviving the friend he reveals that friendship is structured by mourning from the beginning:

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<sup>38</sup> See Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, 'Editor's Introduction', in *The Work of Mourning*, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> 'Throughout this text, citation appears as the vehicle by which Derrida both recalls Augustine's singular mourning for his mother, for her alone, and links this mourning to others, allowing for both singularity and relation, something absolutely unique and yet nonetheless shared'; *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, 'Jacques Derrida', *London Review of Books*, 4 November 2004, 32.

*Philia* begins with the possibility of survival. Surviving – that is the other name of a mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited.<sup>41</sup>

With survival comes the impossibility of speaking of the friend's death. Derrida begins many of the texts in *The Work of Mourning* pointing to this difficulty, to the death of the friend as unthinkable and unspeakable.<sup>42</sup> Yet, as he also indicates, mourning demands that we speak; 'Speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness'.<sup>43</sup> Breaking the silence, Brault and Naas indicate, is a matter of ethical responsibility – how to speak of the loss of the *other* without using it for one's own advantage? It seems that for Derrida there is no writing without responsibility, for it must respond to the *other* who is absent 'outside' us but present 'inside' us.<sup>44</sup> The absent *other* comes to inhabit us as *images*; they are *images* 'for us', inscribed 'in us' as memory.<sup>45</sup>

The writing marked by silence and by tears of Saint Augustine and of Jacques Derrida – writing marked by surviving the loss of the mother and of the friend – carries the impossibility of speaking of such loss. Still, speak they must, if only to let the *other* speak in them. Instead of being an attempt to recover presence through representation, of inscribing presence, their writing inscribes absence.<sup>46</sup> Writing is 'condemned to open the way to absence'.<sup>47</sup> For Derrida, writing 'constitutes the absence of the signatory, to say nothing of the absence of the referent. Writing is the name of these two absences'.<sup>48</sup> Writing as determined by the trace of what is absent; writing as trace. Derrida's trace, Gayatri Spivak writes, is the 'mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida quoted in Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, 'Editor's Introduction', in *The Work of Mourning*, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> See Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 72.

<sup>44</sup> See Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, 'Editor's Introduction', in *The Work of Mourning*, pp. 8-11.

<sup>45</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the relationship of writing to absence, see Simon Glendinning, 'Language', in *Understanding Derrida*, ed. by Jack Reynolds and Jonathan Roffe (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 9-10.

<sup>47</sup> See Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary* (Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 123.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida quoted in *ibid.*

present'.<sup>49</sup> Although Derrida's trace is a linguistic concept, the traces of the lost *other* in his writing seem to reverberate with the force of the physical inscription suggested by the word 'trace' – vestige, trail, spoor. Like the spoor of a wild animal, what the *other* left behind marks their passing. 'Every trace marks the absence of a presence'.<sup>50</sup>

The *other* is inscribed 'in us'; we are marked by their passing. This inscription is not only a trace of loss, but also of love. For to love is to prepare the ground for the pain of loss; every love, every attachment, bears the cruel promise of a future absence.

Grief and mourning begin long before the event, begin in the first day of love.<sup>51</sup>

Hélène Cixous

One always fails in speaking of what one loves<sup>52</sup>

Roland Barthes

Long before the event of loss or separation, there is love, love that one fails in speaking. Perhaps one attempts to speak of loss to accommodate the suffering inherent in love, only to risk a double failure. Why should it be so difficult to speak, to write of loss? In 'One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves', Barthes offers an interesting perspective on the poverty of speech occasioned by love that could be useful to think through this question. In his analysis of Stendhal's failure in expressing his love for Italy in his travel journals, an attempt that is full of repetition and platitudes, Barthes asserts that the difficulty of language begins with sensation. 'Any sensation, if we want to respect its vivacity

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<sup>49</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, corrected edition), p. xvii.

<sup>50</sup> Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, p. 122.

<sup>51</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'What is it o'clock?', in *Stigmata*, p. 59.

<sup>52</sup> 'One Always Fails in Speaking of What One Loves' is the title of Barthes's last complete essay, see Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

and its acuity, leads to aphasia'.<sup>53</sup> Writing begins where one fails to speak. It is the attempt to overcome total silence; the attempt to inscribe on the page what is imprinted on the body by sensation. The body already carries a text. Even before it articulates speech, the body seems to speak beyond words through gestures, tears, cries, gasps, sighs.

This text, like grief and mourning, began long before the event of writing, it began long before it was written. The text was already inscribed on the body but was lying dormant, awaiting for an encounter, for something to press on the body, so that it could be expelled like a sigh. Not a cry nor a gasp, but a sigh – the deep, long, audible breath capable of expressing sadness, resignation, relief or frustration. Sighing, like sobbing, is also a reaction to grief, an 'utterance of the unuttered'.<sup>54</sup> Whereas sobbing constricts and overcomes the voice, sighing seems to offer a release for breathing, to regain the voice. The sigh seems to remember something held in suspension, left behind, something that that hurts and which language tries to forget or fails to convey. 'Sighing is caused by the Drawing in of a greater Quantity of Breath to refresh the Heart that laboureth', wrote Francis Bacon in *Sylva Sylvarum*.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the shaping of air into a voice and into words, a sigh is a form of non-verbal communication; it is the body *gesturing* through the air it expels. In its literary sense, a sigh implies the deep yearning or grieving for something or someone lost, unattainable or distant. Something absent. Sigh, for Roland Barthes, is a word that 'comes from the body, which expresses the emotion of absence':<sup>56</sup>

*to sigh*: 'to sigh for the bodily presence': the two halves of the androgyne sigh for each other, as if each breath, being incomplete, sought to mingle with the other: the image of the embrace, in that it melts the two images into a single one: in amorous absence, I am, sadly, an *unglued image* that dries, yellows, shrivels.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), p. 55.

<sup>55</sup> Francis Bacon, quoted in Steven Connor, *Beyond Words*, p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).



A sigh is the sounding of absence by a body that, involuntarily, reacts to a deeply affecting encounter or memory. The body speaks without words through a sigh.

If the text is expelled like a sigh, it is because at its core there is absence – not a nothing but a thing. A thing that is missing, a lack, a thing lost or yet to be lost, or perhaps a thing never possessed but still desired. If the text invokes absence, it is because love is its fertile ground. Like grief and mourning which begin with love, as Cixous shows us, absence also arises from love. That which is not desired or loved is not registered as absent; what is loved gives rise to an intense feeling, a yearning. Barthes tells us the Ancient Greeks had a word for the longing inaugurated by absence: *pothos*. (In the *Cratylus*, Plato contrasted *pothos* with *himerós*, desire for what is present.) ‘*Pothos*’, Barthes writes, ‘desire for the absent being’.<sup>58</sup> He also links *pothos* to the ‘desire to write’.<sup>59</sup> *Pothos* is a subtler form of *pathos*, combining the lovable with the mournful, the desire to love with the desire for what is not present.<sup>60</sup> *Pothos* is the mark left by sensing absence, an emotion that throbs with what is out of reach. The text sighs for the absence it senses, it tries to give shape to it.

Barthes writes of the need to manipulate absence by making ‘an entrance onto the stage of language’. Language for him is ‘born of absence’, and he alludes to the child’s game of throwing away a spool and retrieving it, acting out the mother’s departure and return, responding to her absence.<sup>61</sup> This is, of course, the Fort-Da game as discussed by Freud, who observed his grandson playing with a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it. The boy, holding the reel by the string, would throw it away from view whilst exclaiming what was interpreted as *fort* (gone), and would follow this with the toy’s recovery accompanied by a

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978-1979 and 1979-1980*, trans. by Kate Briggs, ed. by Nathalie Léger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 132.

<sup>60</sup> On *pothos*, see also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Roland Barthes and Mourning*, Lecture at The University of Chicago's Logan Center for the Arts (November 2014), <[http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/georges\\_didi\\_huberman\\_video/](http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/georges_didi_huberman_video/)> [accessed 12 December 2015]. In this lecture, Didi-Huberman indicates Barthes’s use of the word *pothos* in *La Préparation du Roman (The Preparation of the Novel)*. He discusses how this word allows Barthes to subvert *pathos*, to make it subtler. ‘What works perfectly for Barthes’s project in the word *pothos* is that it refers at the same time to both the lovable – *l’aimable* – and the mournful – *funèbre*. It refers to passionate desire to love, central emotion, and on the other hand it refers to desire for a thing far off and absent. This is nostalgia, this is missing, even mourning.’

<sup>61</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, *op. cit.* p. 16.

joyful *da* (here).<sup>62</sup> He performed this game repeatedly. Freud's interprets his grandson's actions and utterances as a renunciation and compensation for his mother's departure. According to him, by staging the disappearance and return of the object the child converts a distressful experience into a game with a pleasurable ending. Furthermore, Freud points out that the boy turned an overpowering experience of passivity into a game in which he had an active role – he could now control absence. The symbolic play exposes the need to create a language in order to master absence through repetition. This game where presence and absence are opposed and enmeshed points to the rise of gestures and of language in face of the absence of the object. It is the child's response not only to the absence of the mother, but also a response to the recognition of absence itself.

Absence is the common thread that links all the chapters in this thesis. The absent body is evoked or is indexically imprinted on matter through vestiges of contact – in works of art, in ancient tales, in prehistoric caves. It touches the body that bears witness to affect in order to write. This is the body that tries to touch things with words, words that inscribe absence even further.



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<sup>62</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), XVIII, pp. 7-64.

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

**Chapter 1 – SENSING ABSENCE, WRITING THROUGH LOSS** – draws on psychoanalytic theory of mourning and melancholia (Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva) to examine how loss can wound and silence, but also move us to create a new language when existing forms of representation fail to signify. Shifting between asignification and signification, the new poetic language carries an imprint of the body and the traces of lived experience; it reconnects to affects to inscribe loss and infuse language with meaning. Both art-making and writing work through loss to articulate something of the significance of the relation to an *other* and to register their absence. Drawing from Maurice Blanchot, the chapter also discusses the relationship between writing, absence, distance and knowledge. Writing as the desire to respond to the work, approaching it through a conversation that attends to its affective dimension; not privileging comprehension but being open for an encounter with the unknown, open to being touched by that which can wound.

**Chapter 2 – ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER, INSCRIBING ABSENCE** – looks at the prehistoric handprints on cave walls, guided by texts by Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy and Georges Didi-Huberman. Born of a touch, the image is imprinted with time and charged with the force of a gesture rising from the body. The imprint of a hand evokes contact, proximity, and also speaks of a distancing. For if touch survives in the image, it does so as a vestige, the trace of a presence – a trace that exposes existence to the imager in the cave and to us through an indexical mark left by a body that points to its absence. The handprint is the ‘contact of an absence’. The chapter draws on philosophy to consider that what is inscribed is not only the absence of a presence but existence; what is inscribed is the vestige or trace of a ‘passing through the world’. The encounter with the prehistoric image reveals the relevance of the inscription and unveiling of absence in the subsequent analysis of contemporary works. It could be suggested (after Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg) that the prehistoric image has a relation to contemporary works that is dialectical and anachronistic – the contemporary becomes ‘readable’ when it rubs against the image from the past whose *pathos* survives in it. The past leaves its marks on the surface of the present.

**Interlude – TRACING ABSENCE: THE CORINTHIAN MAID AND THE SHADOW OF THE LOVER** – looks at another narrative of the origins of art from the ancient past that opens up a space to think about the contemporary work of art: the tale of the ‘Corinthian Maid’ as recounted by Pliny the Elder. It first examines how the image emerges in the tale as a gestural response to a future loss: the Corinthian Maid traces the outline of the shadow of her lover’s face on the wall before he departs. The image emerges from being affected, from a gesture that has gathered in its fold loss and memory, presence and absence, intimacy and distance. In circumscribing his shadow, she is inscribing and unveiling a trace; the line as a vestige that carries absence *in* presence. The portrait of the lover unveils a future yet to come, that of the portrait as memorial. Originating where love and loss meet, the image anticipates and circumscribes absence.

**Chapters 3 and 4 – LOUISE BOURGEOIS: WEAVING ABSENCE and FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES: TOUCHING THE ABSENT BODY** – discuss the main examples of contemporary artistic practice in this thesis. Bourgeois and Gonzalez-Torres do not explicitly illustrate the rich emotional content that infuses their formal and material exploration, and yet, since the relationship between art and life is at the centre of the practice of these two artists, there has been a tendency in critical discourse to interpret the work through a biographical slant. Rather than referring to their biography to enrich our understanding of how their engagement with lived experience and with memories is inscribed in the work of art in a singular manner, whilst keeping the work open to multiple meanings, reductive discourses use it in an attempt to ‘explain’ the work and fix its meaning. It could be said that what this kind of commentary misses by treating the artwork as a recognisable object of knowledge is the engagement with the work of art itself, with the affective forces that impelled its making, with what the work presents rather than represents. The encounter with the work is an encounter with something unknown, an encounter with what is *other*, an encounter to which the viewer responds affectively to what is not said. Through close readings of works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Louise Bourgeois, the thesis suggests that by resisting representation these artists create works in which textile materials indicate a fundamental encounter with a material sign that unsettles and gives rise to affects. I analyse works in which fabric is infused with the trace of an absent *other*; works that present the absence of a presence and further inscribe it in matter.

Perhaps it is the confrontation with absence that chokes, that requires the body to sigh. To paraphrase Barthes, perhaps the text, as a sigh, expresses the emotion of absence. Emerging from the body, the text, like a sigh, is shaped by absence and is itself a reification of absence. Barthes reminds us that absence only exists because there is an other, it only exists as its consequence.<sup>63</sup> What has already been inscribed on the body by an other, by an experience of love and loss, requires an encounter to rise to the surface, to emerge as writing. This research is generated by a transformative encounter with loss and with art that invites yet resists interpretation; an affective encounter through which what is *other* can touch, and what touches can be thought. Art, I suggest (after Deleuze), can move us to recover the creative potency of thought in order to inscribe the singularity of the encounter. To write through loss is to write what is impossible to represent and yet insists on being written.

This thesis attempts to unfold how the work of art wounds the viewer by evoking or awakening the affective traces of an experience of loss. It proposes that it is through the *affective materiality* of the work of art that we come to sense loss; when confronted with, and wounded by, the inscription of absence. The work of art, like the work of mourning, works by inscribing a trace of the affective experience – the absence of the presence of the *other*. This text is a trace of the encounter with works of art that evoke loss by materialising absence. Works that inscribe absence further into the trembling body of the viewer.

Embarrassed and almost guilty because sometimes I feel that my mourning is merely a susceptibility to emotion.

But all my life haven't I been just that: *moved*?<sup>64</sup>

Roland Barthes

One cannot hold a discourse *on* the “work of mourning” without taking part in it, without announcing or partaking in [*se faire part de*] death, and first of all in one's own death.<sup>65</sup>

Jacques Derrida

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<sup>63</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 43 (emphasis in original).

<sup>65</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 142 (emphasis in original).

It's so hard to speak and say things that can't be said. It's so silent.<sup>66</sup>

Clarice Lispector

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<sup>66</sup> Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*, p. 47.

CHAPTER 1

**SENSING ABSENCE, WRITING THROUGH LOSS**

For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia.<sup>1</sup>

Julia Kristeva

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 3.



## TRACING THE WOUND

How does one respond to loss? Is it possible to write about loss if the writing does not emerge from loss itself, from sensing loss? Perhaps not, as Julia Kristeva suggests with the writer raked by melancholia. The writing that emerges from sensing loss is inscribed with loss itself, the loss already imprinted on the subject who writes, the one who is written and writes through loss.

I encounter resonant works of art that inscribe traces of loss, the presence of an absence. When facing them a sense of loss emerges, rising like foam from the waves of memory, then crashing, pulling me under to sound the depths of an unfathomable sea. I sense loss and tremble, aware that to speak of the loss I sense in the encounter with art requires me to suffer the pain of loss, its wounding. Giving voice to loss demands that I re-experience the pain of the losses of the past and confront the losses of the future when encountering the *other's* loss in the present; it demands that I relive and live their impact in the present of living, in the present continuous of writing. Thus to be affected by a loss that is not my own is to sense loss anew, as if it were a present. This gift is the present of *being* affected, sensing and scenting loss, following its trail. Tracing loss is a tracing of traces. To trace and retrace loss, to search and re-search its traces, is to attend to what passes and leaves in its passing a trace, a trail. Perhaps the trail leads me back to the first loss – the one I have already forgotten, the one I remember every time I encounter loss. What I recall is not the event (I cannot narrate it), but its affective impact. I remember being wounded by it. Do I shape this wound or do I take its shape? To write about loss is to write through loss; to write is to trace the contours of a wound.



In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Julia Kristeva refers to how, for the melancholic, disenchantments experienced in the present seem to 'awaken echoes of old traumas [...] I can thus discover antecedents to my current breakdown in a loss, death, or grief over someone or something that I once loved.'<sup>2</sup> No love without loss or the fear of losing; no encounter without an unexpected awakening. What is awakened is the affect of an experience of loss,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

absence or separation that wounds the fragile subject – a subject shaped by a variety of encounters, contaminated by what is *other*.<sup>3</sup>

The reawakened affect can either be translated into signs and expressed, or buried and therefore disconnected from a form of affective expression that would allow the individual to make sense of the loss. Loss can either be a wound that is traced or an enveloping wound into which the subject collapses. Loss and its accompanying affects are the centre of the melancholic/depressive experience, the suffering subjectivity that constitutes this experience is characterised by an inability to lose and the collapse of symbolic function, which is unable to compensate for the lost object.<sup>4</sup> As Kristeva writes in *Black Sun*, 'My depression points to my not knowing how to lose – I have perhaps been unable to find a valid compensation for my loss?'<sup>5</sup> This inability to lose, or 'intolerance for object loss' as Kristeva also refers to it, is also considered by Sigmund Freud in his theorisation of the different responses to loss in the seminal essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). In this text he establishes a distinction between the successful working through the loss and the letting go of the lost object (mourning) and the failure to do so and the incapacity to move beyond the loss (melancholia). In contrast to this stricter opposition, in *Black Sun* Julia Kristeva uses the terms 'depression' and 'melancholia' almost interchangeably to refer to a composite whose borders are blurred. It is worth turning our attention to Freud's essay and further discussion of mourning and melancholia before returning to Kristeva's thinking on loss and the relationship between the melancholic/depressive experience and the collapse of symbolic function in more detail.

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<sup>3</sup> Kristeva uses the term *subjectivity* as an alternative to the traditional comprehension of 'self', since persons are subject to a variety of phenomena that shapes them, including language – 'the term subjectivity better explains people's relationship to language. Instead of seeing language as a tool used by selves, those who use the term *subjectivity* understand that language helps produce subjects.' See Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 2004), PDF ebook, pp. 1-2 (emphasis in original).

<sup>4</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 10; Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2004), pp. 95-96.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 5.

### 'MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA'

In 'Mourning and Melancholia' Freud writes about these two types of responses to loss and comes to interesting conclusions: both mourning and melancholia are caused by the loss of or separation from a loved person or ideal. This could be the death of someone, the breakup of a relationship, the separation from a place such as one's country etc. Anything that was important to the person, to which their 'capacity for love', or libido, was attached. For Freud, the work of mourning involves an attempt to withdraw the libidinal attachment from the lost object. The attachment needs to be withdrawn, its nature transformed, because it is emotional energy being invested in the lost object, energy that needs to be eventually freed up to be reinvested in a new object. In melancholia, there appears to be no such withdrawal of libidinal ties with the object.

Whereas *mourning*, Freud writes, 'is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on', in *melancholia* 'the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted).'<sup>6</sup> Freud makes the point that for the melancholic it may be difficult to recognize what has been lost: he may know *who* has been lost, but not '*what* it is about that person that he has lost'. Freud continues and says that melancholia may relate to 'an object-loss that is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious'. What he infers from this is that the melancholic suffers an 'unknown loss' that, analogous to a loss processed through the work of mourning, still absorbs the ego in a similar internal effort. Perhaps this 'unknown loss' is a loss so traumatic that is withdrawn from consciousness, the loss of an object whose traces are inscribed in the unconscious and which in turn inscribe a sense of loss on the subject.

The melancholic, like the mourner, has the arduous task of detaching the libido from the object. Yet, in melancholia, the subject remains tied to it, unable to let go, suffering to protect that which may have been already threatened by loss. For scholar Alessia Ricciardi, Freud's choice of example of a jilted betrothed girl points to melancholia arising 'in response to an ideal loss, not an actual death',

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<sup>6</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Collected Papers*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), XIV, pp. 243, 245.

that is, melancholia deals with an ideal or abstract occurrence of a loss.<sup>7</sup> As the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes after Freud about the possibility of melancholia being also the paradoxical mourning of a future loss, the melancholic could also be suffering for what may never have been possessed but is experienced as if lost:

According to Freud, the dynamic mechanism of melancholy borrows its essential characteristics in part from mourning and in part from narcissistic regression. [...] melancholy is also a reaction to the loss of a loved object; however, contrary to what might be expected, such loss is not followed by a transfer of libido to another object, but rather by its withdrawal into the ego, narcissistically identified with the lost object. [...] although mourning follows a loss that has really occurred, in melancholia not only is it unclear what object has been lost, it is uncertain that one can speak of a loss at all. "It must be admitted," Freud writes, with a certain discomfort, "that a loss has indeed occurred, without it being known what has been lost." [...] Freud speaks of an "unknown loss" or of an "object-loss that escapes consciousness". [...] if we wish to maintain the analogy with mourning, we ought to say that melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object. [...] From this point of view, melancholy would not be so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost. If the libido behaves *as if* a loss had occurred although *nothing* has in fact been lost, this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it never has been possessed appears as lost [...]<sup>8</sup>

Following on from Agamben and paraphrasing Kristeva, perhaps we could say that a present loss can awaken echoes of future traumas, the traumas of losses yet to come. Therefore an encounter with loss in the present forces us to confront not only the losses of the past but also those of the future. The phantasm of a future loss is reflected in the mirror of Narcissus, overlapping our own reflection, and perhaps we do not realise that composite image is the reflection of our ideal. The

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<sup>7</sup> Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 19-20 (emphasis in original).

ghostly reflection flashes up the realisation that something we love or admire could be lost, causing dejection and anger, casting its 'shadow of despair' on the vulnerable self.<sup>9</sup>

In *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*, British psychoanalyst Darian Leader suggests that the kind of mourning that may come long before the loss of the object can be explained by the notion of 'anticipatory grief', which shows that 'the object already contains the possibility of its non-existence'.<sup>10</sup> Thus in every love, in every attachment, resides the cruel promise of a future absence. In place of an image of the love object, a image of nothingness is produced, filling up those who mourn in advance with dreadful spectre: 'That the person we love could always be absent.'<sup>11</sup> Leader notes that this phenomenon may occur even when death is still a long time away, such as when a child realises that the parent will one day be gone.

There is a scene from Michael Haneke's powerful film *The White Ribbon*<sup>12</sup> that illustrates the notion of anticipatory grief well, and also points to how bereavement is marked by an empirical absence. After hearing that someone in the village has died, a small boy called Rudolf asks his sister "what is *dead*". Anna, the sister, tries to explain 'death' to him in a way appropriate to his age, but since she says that everyone has to die one day, Rudolf 's curiosity drives him to question will his immediate family die too one day? Will Anna die? Will their father die? Will he himself also die? She confirms every one of these future deaths, but tries to ameliorate their impact by saying this will not happen "for a very long time". Rudolf is thus made aware of the loss of everyone he loves at some point in the future. Following the thread of his own logic, he is also reminded of the absence of his mother and, realising she did not "go on a trip", understands her absence as an irrevocable loss. Thus, in a very brief space of time, Rudolf apparently feels the pain of actual and potential loss. The character of Rudolf shows a child who is caught in the powerful grip of grief, torn by loss, mourning retrospectively and in advance; sad *and* angry, he does not say anything else and pushes his soup bowl off the table.

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<sup>9</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Darian Leader, *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 140.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>12</sup> *The White Ribbon* [*Das weiße Band, Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*], dir. by Michael Haneke, (Sony Pictures Classics, 2009) [on DVD].

Mourning, as Freud indicates in 'Mourning and Melancholia', is not only an affective reaction to loss but also a task, an active process, what he calls *the work of mourning* (*Trauerarbeit*), which is performed to 'overcome' the loss. Mourning, as American writer Joan Didion observes, requires action:

Until now I had been able only to grieve, not mourn. Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention.<sup>13</sup>

Quoting French historian Philippe Ariès and English social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer on the rejection of public mourning and the trend to treat mourning as a 'morbid self-indulgence', Didion remarks on the way grief is hidden in our time since 'death now occurs largely offstage'; hidden from view as if loss never happened. In Freud's time as in our own the expectation is to get over the loss. And yet, do we really get over a loss? Or do we work through it to find a way of making that loss part of our life, of living with loss, as Darian Leader reminds us. 'Successful' or completed mourning, therefore, would not be a complete detachment from the lost object, but the result of a process through which we *renegotiate* our relationship to them.<sup>14</sup> Despite his initial formulation in 'Mourning and Melancholia' pointing to mourning coming to an end through the transference of the libido to another object, Freud admitted in a letter of 1929 that one could never fully compensate for a loss:

We will never find a substitute [after a loss]. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually, this is how it should be, it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.<sup>15</sup>

It is not only the strength of love that impacts on the mourning process, but also, as Freud elaborates, it appears the degree of ambivalent feelings of love and hate towards the person we have lost is a decisive factor in mourning; not dealing with or repressing this ambivalence, the mixture of love and unconscious

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<sup>13</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> See Havi Carel, 'Death and the Other: The Ambivalence of Mourning', in *Dying and Death: Inter-disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Asa Kasher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud quoted in Darian Leader, *The New Black*, p. 98.

hostility, can turn the rage towards the mourner and hinder mourning.<sup>16</sup> At first, the anger provoked by the loss may be directed at the lost object, but in melancholia, Freud believes, narcissistic identification with the lost love-object blocks the transfer of libido to another object and with it comes the hatred directed at one's own self. Melancholia is thus marked by ambivalence, which for Freud was absent in 'normal mourning' or, if present, would transform it into 'pathological mourning': 'the conflict due to ambivalence gives a pathological cast to mourning and forces it to express itself in the form of self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object, i.e. that he has willed it.'<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the turning of the anger away from the lost object toward oneself could be seen as stemming from a feeling of guilt. This would give rise to the lowering in self-esteem that is a central characteristic of the melancholic person, who may even delusionally expect to be punished.<sup>18</sup>

If mourning is understood as a process of working through loss that can be completed over time, in melancholia mourning remains unresolved and, in a sense, infinite. Recall how Freud relates the impasse of melancholia to the idea that one knows *who* has been lost but does not know *what* has been lost in them. As Leader also reminds us, this separation is important for the completion of the work of mourning, struggling with it may block this process. Furthermore, in both mourning and melancholia there is deep dejection, inhibition of activity and loss of interest in the outside world, but what becomes impoverished in mourning is quite different to what happens in melancholia. For Freud, the central feature of melancholia is a lowering of self-regard.<sup>19</sup> Freud writes, 'In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself'.<sup>20</sup> Or, as Leader puts more bluntly, 'In mourning, we grieve the dead; in melancholia, we die with them.'<sup>21</sup> Even if we do not die with them, part of us does, because it was already part of them.

The work of mourning is further complicated by us having to let go of the relation we had with the *other* because our identity, our self-image, is embroiled

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<sup>16</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Collected Papers*, pp. 250-251, 256-258; see also Darian Leader, *The New Black*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Collected Papers*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>19</sup> See Darian Leader, *The New Black*, p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Collected Papers*, p.246.

<sup>21</sup> Darian Leader, *The New Black*, p. 8.

in the loss. As Darian Leader explains, if we see that a part of ourselves was also part of them and therefore is also lost, we need to give *consent* for that part of ourselves to go as well; this 'part' is 'the image of who we were for them'.<sup>22</sup> Leader gives as an example of the relation between the self-image and the gaze of the other the loss suffered by Joan Didion, who after her husband John Gregory Dunne's death wrote:

For forty years I saw myself through John's eyes. I did not age. This year for the first time since I was twenty-nine I saw myself through the eyes of others. [...] We are imperfect mortal beings, aware of that mortality even as we push it away [...] when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all.<sup>23</sup>

In mourning her husband, Didion also mourns *who* she was for him, who she no longer is. The image she had of herself for so many years was the image she had *for* him. A representation of herself structured at an unconscious level. A representation that conferred on her a certain identity – an anchor of her relationship, an image composed for the *other*. The loss of the husband forces her to confront this self-image. She needs to mourn the 'imaginary object' she was for the other in her mourning of him.<sup>24</sup> Him, whom she no longer can ask anything; whom she wonders 'what would he have said?' The mystery of mourning, as Jean Laplanche suggests, also involves the confrontation with the 'ultimate enigma of the Other' and those questions that will remain forever unanswered.<sup>25</sup>

For the mourner to detach their libido from the lost love-object, and not die with it, they need to 'let go' of the relationship as it was, as it no longer is; they need to *perform* the work of mourning in order to *renegotiate* the relationship. According to Freud, the *work performed by mourning* consists in returning to the lost object repeatedly through what he calls 'reality-testing'. Reality-testing is done by approaching the internalised representations of the lost object, our 'memories and expectations' of it, from many different angles – a repetitive going back to

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<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 145-50. I am indebted to Leader's reference to Joan Didion and his discussion of the mourner's confrontation with the loss of their self-image in mourning the *other*.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, pp. 197-198.

<sup>24</sup> See Darian Leader, *The New Black*, p. 162.

<sup>25</sup> See Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning*, p. 4.



them, again and again, combining and reshuffling them – to confirm that the object has been lost. Through the long and difficult process of reality-testing the mourner registers the absence of the lost object as real:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. [...] Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.<sup>26</sup>

Freud's emphasis on the 'performing' aspect of mourning indicates that mourning does not just happen without effort, but that the loss needs to be worked through and that this is done 'bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy'. Time is crucial to the work of mourning. In 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud asserts that 'in mourning time is needed for the command of reality-testing to be carried out in detail, and that when this work has been accomplished the ego will have succeeded in freeing its libido from the lost object'.<sup>27</sup> This implies that the ego will be free to form new attachments. It will have a free space where another object could go.

Yet the work of mourning also prolongs the existence of the lost object in the psyche and, if successful, internalises it through the process of memory, of remembering. We preserve the dead, not allowing them to be forgotten. *The work of mourning is also a work of memory*. But by remembering the dead *as dead* we register their absence and acknowledge the loss. Acknowledging the loss is a kind of killing. A killing of the dead. For Freud, mourning can only take place if the lost object is acknowledged as dead through a symbolic killing.<sup>28</sup> This second killing is needed so that their absence is registered symbolically. 'Killing the dead', writes Darian Leader, 'is a way of loosening one's bonds to them and situating them in a different symbolic space'.<sup>29</sup> The mourner's effort is to inscribe the lost object in a symbolic space, a space of representation.

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<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *Collected Papers*, pp. 244-245.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>28</sup> Darian Leader, *The New Black*, p. 114.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124. Leader also refers to the 'artificial distance' required by the mourner to situate the loss in a symbolic space, see *ibid.*, p. 77.

Drawing from his experience as a practicing psychoanalyst, Darian Leader notes in the unconscious processes of his patients the importance in mourning of selecting representations for the construction of a symbolic space, where things can stand for what has been lost, where representations of the lost object are 'represented as representations'. According to him, the unconscious construction of a symbolic space, a space of representation, is an important stage in the work of mourning. This is the place the lost object now inhabits, indicating that it is no longer real and that the living no longer inhabit the same space as the dead: the lost object now occupies an artificial space suggested in unconscious manifestations by devices such as frames and stages.<sup>30</sup> Leader writes about one of the best known examples in literature of objects becoming symbolic of memory and loss, of a lost love object; 'In the famous example, Marcel Proust's taste of a madeleine dipped in tea or sight of a cracked paving-stone in Venice acted as conduits for overpowering sequences of feelings, ideas and emotions linked to a lost love'.<sup>31</sup> In the stage set up by mourning, the lost object is presented to us through things that can stand for it and the memories that surround it, alongside the feelings they give rise to. What is at stake for the mourner is how to articulate these representations in a way that corresponds to the significance of the loss suffered.

The mourner engaged in the work of mourning is immersed in both its temporal and spatial dimension. We have seen earlier that this painful, long and gradual process – which is performed over time and through memory – demands an expenditure of psychic energy that takes its toll on the subject, resulting in introspection or disinterest in the outside world that lasts, according to Freud, for a limited span of time. The tempo Freud attributes to the mourning process, as Alessia Ricciardi reminds us, matches that of the 'pensive meticulousness of analysis'.<sup>32</sup> Bit by bit, memory, as both site of recollection and process of excavation of the past, montages representations of the lost object. As discussed earlier, through these representations the mourner challenges their memories and the hopes they projected on the one they lost, and slowly renegotiates their relationship. Moreover, by acknowledging rather than denying the loss, they can move away from the space the lost object has come to inhabit and yet discover a way to live with that loss, to make it part of their life, to make it *real*. The *real*

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<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 100, 103-105, 111.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>32</sup> Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning*, p. 25.

revealed by the arduous task of 'reality-testing' – which, as Freud has shown us, consists of showing 'that the loved object no longer exists' – is the reality of an absence.

The work of mourning thus unveils an absence, an absence that the mourner/melancholic in their attempt to preserve the lost object can struggle to articulate, to express through language. Yet, it seems that finding a way to express what appears to be an impossibility is essential in mourning. For Freud, mourning can take place when there is a passage between systems of representation in our minds – from unconscious 'thing representations'/'thing-presentations' (connected to the perception of things) to conscious 'word representations'/'word-presentations' (linked to words and speech) – as Leader explains:<sup>33</sup>

Freud suggests that mourning can be carried out because of the possibility of a movement between thing representations and word representations. This is facilitated by the preconscious system of the psyche which binds the two systems together and which enables a passage from one network to the other. As each aspect of the thing representation is made subject to the judgements of mourning, so the feelings linked to it are fractioned in what Freud calls a 'detail work'. They move from the thing representation to the acoustic image of the word and then to speech itself.<sup>34</sup>

In melancholia however, as Freud observes, there is an aporia between the two systems of representation, that is, word representations no longer function as the means to access thing representations, which thus remain out of reach in the unconscious. It is as if a thick membrane stops words from accessing the presentation of things inscribed in the unconscious. Ineffable things, untouched by words. The melancholic is someone who seems unable to touch things with language. Like a wretched soul trapped forever in limbo, the melancholic circles around the absence of the lost object without being able to touch it; unable to transform that absence into an expressive language, to articulate and to inscribe

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<sup>33</sup> Both 'representations' and 'presentations' appear in academic literature in relation to these concepts. On Freud's 'thing-presentation' and 'word-presentation', see Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnak Books, 1988), pp. 447-449.

<sup>34</sup> Darian Leader, *The New Black*, p. 189.

it. The subject needs to inscribe the absence of the lost object as real, or risk remaining trapped in melancholia, forever attached to loss itself.

#### ARTICULATING LANGUAGE, ARTICULATING ABSENCE

Perhaps the struggle with language in melancholia tells us something about what happens when words lose their connection to unconscious things, things linked to the experience of loss of the melancholic subject. As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis helpfully point out, thing-presentations are distinct yet closely related to the notion of 'memory-traces', which are registrations of an event; 'the presentation recathects and revives the memory-trace'.<sup>35</sup> Thing representations reanimate the memory-traces of the event and words, in turn, bring it to consciousness. The unconscious thing representation, therefore, is the presentation of the memory or the memory-trace of an event; that is, of an (unpleasurable or pleasurable) experience of the external world that leaves residues that Freud refers to as *affects*. Memory, for Freud the 'persisting force of an experience', can also give rise to an affect, as in when it is not a perception but a memory-trace that arouses the affect.<sup>36</sup> So, when a thing representation becomes associated with a word representation the experience can pass to consciousness, alongside the affect linked to it. It may be that by evading the absence of the lost object rather than acknowledging and attempting to symbolize it, the melancholic is in effect suppressing the words that would allow for the affective experience of loss to enter consciousness. As opposed to this evasion, verbalisation would allow the melancholic to connect words to the affects linked to an experience, to make speech meaningful and to reflect the loss, to register the absence. Loss would be symbolically inscribed when the thing represented in the unconscious is articulated through a language that evokes something of the experience, a language that carries its trace. When loss stitches grief into memory, it makes a weaving out of absence. This weaving is language.

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<sup>35</sup> Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p. 448. For their discussion of memory-trace, see *ibid.*, pp. 247-249

<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' (1895), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), I, pp. 361, 383, 416, 438.

If temporary sadness or mourning on the one hand, and melancholy stupor on the other are clinically and nosologically different, they are nevertheless supported by *intolerance for object loss* and *the signifier's failure* to insure a compensating way out of the states of withdrawal in which the subject takes refuge to the point of inaction (pretending to be dead) or even suicide.<sup>37</sup>

Julia Kristeva

The melancholic/depressive subject does not know how to lose and has been unable to compensate for the lost object through language. For them, the signifier fails to signify; words do not connect to the objects and affects of their experience of loss, they fail to register absence. Since language itself stems from the absence of the referent, is there a link between the subject's failure to acknowledge loss as well as register the absence of the lost object and their difficulty with language? Is this a kind of resistance to engage with absence? If so, could this resistance also be seen as a form of defence mechanism, a flight from meaning? As Adam Phillips posits in his review of Kristeva's *Black Sun*, the melancholic would flee language in order to avoid the possibility of meaning that it offers, which is perhaps more painful than depression itself; 'The desolate apathy of depression is less painful than the meanings it attempts to blank off.'<sup>38</sup> But this denial may turn out to be more self-destructive than the confrontation with meaning. Therefore, a commitment to language and the possibilities of meaning not only may be less destructive, as Kristeva indicates, but also a way of finding a compensation for a loss – of learning how to lose.<sup>39</sup> Using language to signify implies accepting a loss; 'If I did not agree to lose mother, I could neither imagine nor name her', writes Kristeva.<sup>40</sup>

An engagement with language would thus involve an engagement with absence; it would be a way of acknowledging it. For in embracing signification the subject accepts a set of signs that signify 'precisely because of the absence of the object'.<sup>41</sup> Still, it is not a matter of simply using language as a tool to communicate. In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva goes further than what could appear as just an instrumental

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<sup>37</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Adam Phillips, 'What is there to lose', *London Review of Books*, 24 May 1990, 6-8.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.* See also Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 187-188.

<sup>40</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

use of language for the melancholic. She suggests that, in the face of the symbolic collapse indicative of an unwillingness to mourn, the melancholic/depressive subject has to recover symbolic power through the formulation of a new language; a language that rises from the encounter with the *other* under the *black sun* of melancholia to capture the unnameable.<sup>42</sup> In Kristeva's view, this new language is also in excess of symbolic discourse and disrupts it, as in the case of poetic language, a language in which rhythms, tones and affects are meaningful.<sup>43</sup> She is interested in how meaning is constituted, and how it relates to lived experience, through a language that reflects the struggle against symbolic abdication.<sup>44</sup> 'Aesthetic and particularly literary creation [...] constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject's battle with symbolic collapse.'<sup>45</sup> For Kristeva, the artist is 'melancholy's most intimate witness'; engaged in this battle, the melancholic imaginary is set in motion by loss, mourning and absence.<sup>46</sup> 'The artist consumed by melancholia is at the same time the most relentless in his struggle against the symbolic abdication that blankets him ...', she writes.<sup>47</sup> Without a confrontation with absence there would be no writing, no language, no art; without an experience of depression/melancholia no creative act. To give shape, through language, to an absence that was there before language, and without which language would not be. Perhaps it is only by engaging with absence and by infusing signifiers with the affects of an experience of loss that the melancholic can attempt to make them meaningful again.

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<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>43</sup> As Noëlle McAfee points out, the 'shattering of discourse' is the theme of what she considers Kristeva's major work, *Revolution in Poetic Language*. See Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between language and meaning in philosophy more generally and in Kristeva, see Kelly Oliver, 'Kristeva's Revolutions', in Julia Kristeva, *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. xi-xxix.

<sup>45</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 24.

<sup>46</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'On the Melancholic Imaginary', *new formations*, 3 (Winter 1987), 5-18, <[http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/newformations/03\\_05.pdf](http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/newformations/03_05.pdf)> [accessed 5 July 2016], p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 9.

## RECOVERING THE SYMBOLIC, RECONNECTING AFFECT

Kristeva's writing reflects the psychoanalytical perspective that attributes the possible concatenation of signifiers ('words or actions') to a process of mourning for 'an archaic and indispensable object', and also to the corresponding emotions.<sup>48</sup> However, if the mourning for the archaic object is unfulfilled, from loss stems not language but the heavy silence of empty words, the sullen silence of depression/melancholia:

Conscious of our being doomed to lose our loves, we grieve perhaps even more when we glimpse in our lover the shadow of a long lost former loved one. Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in a mirage. Talking about depression will again lead us into the marshy land of the Narcissus myth. This time, however, we shall not encounter the bright and fragile amatory idealization; on the contrary, we shall see the shadow cast on the fragile self, hardly dissociated from the other, precisely by the *loss* of that essential other. The shadow of despair.

Rather than seek the meaning of despair (it is either obvious or metaphysical), let us acknowledge that there is meaning only in despair. [...] there is no imagination that is not, overtly or secretly, melancholy.<sup>49</sup>

The depressed person, Kristeva states, is riveted to a psychic object, which is a memory event belonging to lost time that is renewed when verbalised; a memory located within the imaginary and symbolic psychic space:

When I say that the object of my grief is less the village, the mother, or the lover that I keep and put together in the darkroom of what thus becomes my psychic tomb, this at once locates my ill-being in the imagination.<sup>50</sup>

Riveted to the past and dwelling in the imaginary realm, for Kristeva this melancholic linguistic and temporal phenomenology exposes 'an unfulfilled mourning for the maternal object', a mourning for the maternal body (a

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<sup>48</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6 (emphasis in original).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

preobject). She draws on the psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan to reaffirm the melancholic's attachment as an attachment to the archaic maternal object, an attachment to the 'Thing' which is the unsignifiable real. 'The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing', Kristeva writes, positing 'the "Thing" as the real that does not lend itself to signification'.<sup>51</sup> She also notes that 'Freudian theory detects everywhere the same *impossible mourning for the maternal object*'.<sup>52</sup>

The inaugural loss of that 'essential other' – the maternal body – occurs at a time when the infant still does not discern itself as separated from her and before it acquires language.<sup>53</sup> Still, the separation is necessary for the child to enter the 'symbolic order' – to use language to signify, to symbolize and to name, and to constitute its sense of self or identity – thus turning away from the 'semiotic domain' of bodily drives and rhythms which is indicative of the bond with the mother.<sup>54</sup> The inability to overcome this traumatic separation from the mother at such an early stage of childhood (while still immersed in what Kristeva calls *chora*, a maternal space) gives rise to depression and melancholia that reactivates loss and is manifest in language through the depressive discourse of the melancholic person, a speech punctuated by silence and semiotic irruptions.<sup>55</sup> Depressive discourse is punctured by silence. As Kristeva indicates in *Black Sun*, language is a way of negotiating loss, but the speech of the depressed reveals a

<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 13. For a discussion of the maternal in Kristeva's *Black Sun*, including her indebtedness to object-relations theory and the work of André Green, see Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the "Good Enough" Mother* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 53-78.

<sup>52</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 9 (emphasis in original).

<sup>53</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 5-6. See also Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, pp. 59-62.

<sup>54</sup> See Sarah Cooper, 'Julia Kristeva', *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought*, ed. by Christopher John Murray (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), pp. 378-381. For an introductory discussion of the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* in Kristeva's thought, see Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, pp. 13-18, and Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, pp. 25-27: 'the notion of the symbolic [...] encompasses everything to do with communicative discourse, especially utterances with propositional content which *say* something (to someone). The conception of the symbolic therefore covers the field of the meaningful object, that is to say, a representation, idea, or thing. Semiotic functioning, on the other hand, is the nondiscursive aspect of meaning and subjectivity, given an expanded conception of language, that is to say, one not restricted to the idea of language as the signifying medium. Semiotic functioning embraces the less visible role of tone, gesture, and rhythm, for example, in meaning and the innovative capacities of subjects.' Beardsworth also points out Kristeva's debt and departure from Jacques Lacan in the distinction she makes between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974).

<sup>55</sup> In the second chapter of *Black Sun*, 'The Life and Death of Speech', Kristeva draws on her experience as a practicing psychoanalyst to delve into the speech of the melancholic. See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 33-68.



tenuous hold on the symbolic, an incapacity to use conventional language to signify (to communicate meaning). Depressed persons not only reject the signifier for, as they see it, its seemingly absurd and arbitrary nature, but they also deny the 'negation of loss' deemed to be a means of overcoming it through language, as Kristeva explains:

Signs are arbitrary because language starts with a *negation* (*Verneinung*) of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. 'I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother', is what the speaking being seems to be saying. 'But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language.'

Depressed persons, on the contrary, *disavow the negation*: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted.<sup>56</sup>

The depressed build a shield against loss to no avail – they are already wounded. So is their speech; their language the trace of a wound. In melancholia, language manifests the wounding of the subject, who is unable to speak within the symbolic order of representations, i.e., unable of using logical sequences to express clear meaning, to communicate. For them, language loses its role of making sense and speech becomes fragmented, repetitive, monotonous, lifeless and eventually mute or quasi mutistic.<sup>57</sup> Their sorrow appears unreachable, their sadness incommunicable, their affective experience of loss and mourning not translated into language. It is as if their attempt to defend themselves from loss places them behind a wall that offers no protection but isolates and threatens to drown them, for it is a sea rampart where the ocean of sadness storms within.

The '*depressive affect*', sadness, can be seen as a defence against fragmentation, for it offers a form of affective cohesion of the self. The sadness of the depressed is the shield they hold against loss, but one that is only a fragile protection to what threatens to overwhelm them (they are 'defended against Eros by sorrow but

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<sup>56</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 43-44 (emphasis in original).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

without defence against Thanatos').<sup>58</sup> 'Sadness', writes Kristeva, 'is the fundamental mood of depression [...] Sadness leads us into the enigmatic realm of affects – anguish, fear, or joy.'<sup>59</sup> Affects are, she asserts, a '*psychic representation of energy displacements* caused by external or internal traumas', an 'archaic inscription of inner and outer events'.<sup>60</sup> The term *affect*, commonly defined as emotion or desire that can influence action or behaviour, in psychoanalytic theory denotes the expression of psychic drives and energy. 'Affect', 'emotion' and 'feeling' often seem to be used interchangeably, thus it is also helpful to think of André Green's use of 'affect' as 'categorical term grouping together the qualifying subjective aspects of the emotional life in the broad sense'.<sup>61</sup> The affect of the melancholic is a sadness strange yet utterly familiar as one's own name, the name to which one answers when called; a sadness as recognizable as one's reflection in the mirror, but the reflection into which one sinks like Narcissus; a sadness one remembers, but which is older than oneself.

I'm writing to you today out of sentimental necessity — I have an anguished, painful need to speak to you. It's easy to see that I have nothing to tell you. Just this: that I find myself today at the bottom of a bottomless depression. The absurdity of the sentence speaks for me.

I'm having one of those days in which I never had a future. There is only a present, fixed and surrounded by a wall of anguish. The other bank of the river, because it is the other bank, is never the bank we are standing on: that is the intimate reason for all my suffering. There are ships sailing to many ports, but not a single one goes where life is not painful; nor is there any port of call where it is possible to forget. All of this happened a long time ago, but my sadness began even before then.<sup>62</sup>

Fernando Pessoa

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23

<sup>61</sup> André Green, *The Fabric of Affect in the Psychoanalytic Discourse*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> Fernando Pessoa quoted in Alfred Mac Adam's introduction to Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet: composed by Bernardo Soares, assistant bookkeeper in the city of Lisbon*, trans. by Alfred MacAdam (Boston: Exact Change, 1998), pp. 21-22, xxv.

For the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa sadness is inescapable, life always painful. The suffering he cannot forget creates an anguished need to speak and yet he writes he has nothing to tell in the letter addressed to his friend Mario de Sá-Carneiro. Perhaps there is too much he feels that telling is not enough to say it; his sadness is archaic and unrepresentable. Still he longs for it, for the comfort he finds in sorrow. Sadness is the affect that the melancholic writer nurses and savours; life, as he puts it, pains him 'bit by bit, in sips'. Similarly, a writer like Dostoyevsky has such an 'intimacy with affect', as Kristeva points out, that he attributes our humanity more to a 'longing for voluptuous suffering' than to a 'quest for pleasure or profit'.<sup>63</sup> Dostoyevsky seems to find delight in suffering, cultivating sorrow in himself and extolling it in his literary creations and his correspondence; affect's centrality is clear from this excerpt of a letter he wrote in 1869:

The main thing is sadness, but if one talks about it or explains it more, so much more would have to be said. Just the same, sorrow is such that if I were alone, I should perhaps have become ill with grief.<sup>64</sup>

Sadness is central but cannot be entirely expressed. The melancholic text imprints the disquiet that comes from this impossibility. It points to the always-present possibility of failing to translate experience into words, of words failing to represent affect. Yet, affect clings to the words, rubs against them, energizes them, for it is both 'energy flow *and* psychic inscription', as Kristeva defines it. Sadness marks the body of the writer and the surface of the melancholic text. Once again, Fernando Pessoa's writing exposes this melancholic imprint:

My soul today is sad to the very marrow of my bones. Everything hurts me – memory, eyes, arms. It's like having rheumatism in every part of my being. The limpid brightness of the day, the great pure blue sky, the steady tide of diffuse light, none of this touches my being. I remain unmoved by the light autumnal breeze, that still bears a trace of unforgotten summer and lends colour to the air. Nothing means anything to me. I'm sad, but not with a definite or even an indefinite sadness. My sadness is out there, in the street strewn with boxes.

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<sup>63</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 179.

<sup>64</sup> Dostoyevsky quoted in *ibid.*, p. 176.

These words do not convey exactly what someone feels. But I'm trying in some way to give an idea of what I feel, a mixture of various aspects of me and the street below which, because I also see it, belongs to me, is part of me, in some intimate way that defies analysis.<sup>65</sup>

Like the boxes scattered on the street are the vestiges of the things they once contained, sadness is the residue of an experience. The residual aspect of affect can be noted in the definition offered by David Macey: 'Affect is not a direct emotional representation of an event, but a trace or residue that is aroused or reactivated through the repetition of that event or by some equivalent to it.'<sup>66</sup> Through repetition, sadness re-inscribes itself. Sadness is the residue of a loss, a trace drawn into a thread, woven and put on like a garment to protect a vulnerable, melancholy body; a shroud of affect that both covers and reveals a mood as if it were cloth enveloping a body; a reaction to trauma and its trace:

On the frontier between animality and symbol formation, moods – and particularly sadness – are the ultimate reaction to our traumas, they are our homeostatic recourses.<sup>67</sup>

Kristeva uses the term 'mood' to refer to a kind of representation that signals energy displacements caused by traumas and that stamps one's entire behaviour and sign systems (such as motor functions and speech): 'moods are *inscriptions*, energy disruptions, and not simply raw energies'.<sup>68</sup> Moods lead to a form of 'signifiante', that is, to meaning produced through both the semiotic and the symbolic dispositions, a meaning that would not be offered by the symbolic alone.<sup>69</sup> In the subject's intertwining of the semiotic and the symbolic modes in the signifying process, the first discharges energy and affects into the latter, where it leaves its traces.<sup>70</sup> For the semiotic, as Kristeva explains the term in its Greek sense, is a 'distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved

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<sup>65</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Serpent's Tail, 2010), pp. 45-46,

<sup>66</sup> See David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>69</sup> Kristeva's translator, Leon S. Roudiez, offers a definition of 'signifiante' in his introduction to her *Desire in Language*, see Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A semiotic approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora and Alice A. Jardine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 18. See also Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, pp. 38, 65-66

<sup>70</sup> Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, pp. 24, 27.

or written sign, imprint, trace, figuration'.<sup>71</sup> Semiotic discourse is marked by affect and, in turn, marks and disrupts symbolic discourse. Kristeva maintains that both modes are inseparable in a '*signifying practice*, that is, a socially communicable discourse like poetic language'; for the semiotic and the symbolic dispositions are two preconditions of language as social practice.<sup>72</sup>

How does the imbalance of the semiotic and the symbolic dispositions impact on the melancholic subject and why is it relevant integrating both modes of discourse? On the one hand, devoid of language the depressed person becomes a prisoner of affect, unable to inscribe the loss in a sign, to articulate it, to signify the loss and thus to make sense of it. On the other hand, without the inscription of semiotic traces language appears to be meaningless for the melancholic; the subject experiences signifiers as empty 'because they *are not bound* to semiotic imprints (drive-related representatives and affect representations)'.<sup>73</sup> In other words, 'words become detached from their affects'.<sup>74</sup> Semiotic imprints are thus crucial in restoring to depressive discourse the symbolic power excluded by the denial mechanism, that is, the denial of the symbolic or the denial of the 'negation of loss' offered by language. Kristeva says that analysis reserves the possibility of strengthening the subject's cognitive capacities and of reconnecting words and affects:

By analyzing – that is, by dissolving – the denial mechanism wherein depressive persons are stuck, analytic cure can implement a genuine 'graft' of symbolic potential and place at the subject's disposal dual discursive strategies working at the intersection of affective and linguistic inscription, at the intersection of the semiotic and the symbolic. Such strategies are real counterdepressant reserves that the optimal interpretation within analysis places at the disposal of the depressive patient.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, n. 24, p. 264.

<sup>72</sup> Julia Kristeva quoted in Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, p. 24 (emphasis in original). McAfee writes that Kristeva never explicitly defines 'signifying practice', but that her use of it points to 'the ways in which bodily drives and energy are expressed, literally discharged through our use of language, and how our signifying practices shape our subjectivity and experience'; see *ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>73</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 52 (emphasis in original).

<sup>74</sup> See Kelly Oliver, 'Kristeva's Revolutions', p. xxii.

<sup>75</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 52-53.

The subject at the intersection of affective and linguistic inscription, at the intersection of the semiotic and the symbolic, is not a stable and unified self but what Kristeva calls *le sujet en procès* – a subject in process/on trial. The subject emerges in an encounter with what is other to itself, where subjectivity is always ‘in process’ and not a stable and fixed ‘self’ or identity;<sup>76</sup> ‘the speaking subject *makes and unmakes himself*’ within the signifying system that is language.<sup>77</sup>

Recall Jacques Lacan’s elaboration of the relationship between language and subjectivity: the subject comes into being through symbolic practice, and the entry into the symbolic realm (the acquisition of language) requires a separation of the child from its mother, a departure from the Imaginary realm. The subject is thus a speaking being produced in language. Like Lacan, Kristeva is concerned with the relationship between language and subjectivity. She draws on and diverges from Lacan in her conception of subjectivity by arguing that the logic of language, of the Symbolic, is already operating in the presymbolic and within the material of the body.<sup>78</sup> One has not completely departed from the presymbolic imaginary, since its traces can be found in the semiotic mode.<sup>79</sup> For Kristeva, the subject is constituted thus not only by being an ‘I’ that speaks, but also by being a body that speaks; a subject that brings bodily energy to language through a signifying practice that *discharges* bodily drives through the use of language, rather than representing them.<sup>80</sup>

Kristeva’s project, contends Kelly Oliver, is to reconnect bodily drives to language both in her theoretical work and also in her clinical psychoanalytical practice. Hence in her writing, she continues, Kristeva brings the body back into language and language back into the body. It is worth quoting Oliver’s passage from her introduction to Kristeva that further explicates the relationship between subjectivity, affect and language:

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<sup>76</sup> For a brief discussion of the concept of ‘the subject’ and its subverting of notions of self and identity, see David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, pp. 368-369.

<sup>77</sup> Julia Kristeva quoted in Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, p. 14 (emphasis in original).

<sup>78</sup> See Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, p. 37.

<sup>80</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 14-15. See also Kelly Oliver, ‘Kristeva’s Revolutions’, p. xvi.

She often diagnoses a gap between her analysand's words and his or her affects. Affects are physical and psychic manifestations of drive energy; recall that drive energy has its source in bodily organs and its aim in satisfaction of desires. Kristeva describes a phenomenon whereby it seems that words become detached from their affects and the corresponding drive energy, and the job of the analyst is to try to help the analysand put them back together again.

A fragile connection between words and affect is set up during a child's acquisition of language and simultaneous acquisition of a sense of self or subjectivity. If this connection between words and affects is broken or never established, borderline psychosis can be the result [...]

Her strategy of including her notes from analytic sessions, peppered with the words of her analysands, brings the speaking body into theoretical discourse. These speaking bodies are articulating the pain of living in worlds where symbols have been detached from affect, where the meaning of the words has been detached from the meaning of life, from what matters.

The affective or semiotic element of language matters in the double sense of giving language its *raison d'être* and its material element.<sup>81</sup>

The gap between words and affects is the gap of a gaping wound, open wide, split, splitting the subject from language itself. Without access to the realm of objects and signs, the melancholic person is unable to symbolize loss and remains attached to an unnameable 'Thing' and not to an 'Object'. The melancholic is a wounded narcissist whose only object is *sadness*, 'the most archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound [...] a substitute object they become attached to, an object they tame and cherish for lack of another.'<sup>82</sup> Sadness is the affect loss has inscribed on the subject, infusing a body that still remembers being a body at one with another body, yet to be separated from the *other* and its surroundings. It points to the wound inscribed on a self that is not yet self. Sadness emerges as an affect from an encounter with the *other*, and to oneself as *other* for another. Affect, as Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth

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<sup>81</sup> Kelly Oliver, 'Kristeva's Revolutions', pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>82</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 12.

remind us in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, refers to those 'visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing'; affect as a force that 'marks a body's *belonging* to a world of encounters'.<sup>83</sup> Sadness marks a subject who, in encountering the other, becomes aware that there is no subjectivity without separation. Sadness, as Kristeva puts it, is 'the imprint of a separation':

Literary creation is that adventure of the body and signs that bears witness to the affect - to sadness as imprint of separation and the beginning of the symbol's sway; to joy as imprint of the triumph that settles me in the universe of artifice and symbol, which I try to harmonize in the best possible way with my experience of reality. But that testimony is one produced by literary creation in a material that is totally different from what constitutes mood. It transposes affect into rhythms, signs, forms. The "semiotic" and the "symbolic" become the communicable imprints of an affective reality, perceptible to the reader (I like this book because it conveys sadness, anguish, or joy) and yet dominated, set aside, vanquished.<sup>84</sup>

In aesthetic creation that bears witness to the affect of sadness, the melancholic finds a language that can, at last, touch things to articulate their absence; a language that is meaningful for it carries the traces of life, of lived experience. Its meaning depends on both the symbolic and the semiotic elements of signification through which, as Kristeva points out, an 'affective reality' can be expressed. What loss has inscribed on the subject is in turn inscribed on the text; not as a direct representation but as a trace of that event, as affect. By accessing an affective mode of expression, whether through analysis or a creative practice, the melancholic subject may be able to give voice to experiences whose meaning cannot be articulated solely by symbolic discourse. Hence, for a meaning to be produced that reflects the subjective aspect of emotional life there has to be a better integration of the symbolic and the semiotic; words, images, materials or gestures need to *reconnect to affect*.

Kristeva shows that the affect-driven semiotic mode of signification brings bodily energy back into discourse; it instils meaning into language, but a meaning that

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<sup>83</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds, *The Affect Theory Reader*, (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1-2 (emphasis in original).

<sup>84</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 22.



she says is 'translinguistic' or 'non-linguistic' since it is irreducible to the symbolic element of language.<sup>85</sup> In her view, poetic language would be a way of harnessing the surge of affect and semiotic processes (rhythms, alliterations, condensations, displacements) that, in the depressive, comes into conflict with the 'linguistic armor' and 'symbolic constructs'.<sup>86</sup> Poetic language is a transformative work that recovers the relationship of the symbolic and semiotic aspects of language by exposing symbolic discourse to the return of 'semiotic functioning',<sup>87</sup> by opening itself to unconscious forces. As Kelly Oliver highlights in *Reading Kristeva: Unravelling the Double-bind*, its heterogeneity reveals how meaning can emerge not only from the signifying (symbolic) elements of language, but also, fundamentally, from the nonsignifying (semiotic) aspects of language, such as rhythm and tone, that *affect* the reader/listener.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, Oliver continues, poetic language for Kristeva indicates a 'signification in process' and thus a subject-in-process, challenging the notion of stable meaning and stable identity; the subject as a body that belongs to a world of affective encounters. Poetic language points to a subject that *becomes subject* in the *encounter with the other*, affecting and being affected in this encounter. One could say that the semiotic markings of poetic language – whose transformative power can be extended to poetic visual art and other aesthetic practices – help the work to communicate *affectively*.

Poetic language unveils the possibility of aesthetic creation to function not as the *representation* of an external object, but as its own 'appearance as a work',<sup>89</sup> its own *presentation*, whose meaning emerges in the *encounter with the work*. In response to loss or to an impossible separation, the artist creates a language that is connected to experience but that does not *represent* it; rather, it is itself a site of experience as it recovers the affective force of loss and absence. This new language assembles words, images, notes, materials, objects, memories, physical traces; it is a way of coming into contact with the one who has been lost through other things, a way of touching their absence. Art can be a poetic language that reconnects affect to a material support, a language whose materials are imprinted with affect.

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<sup>85</sup> See Kelly Oliver, 'Kristeva's Revolutions', pp. xiv-xvi.

<sup>86</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 64-65. For an account of poetic language in Kristeva's early thought in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, see Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, pp. 25-53.

<sup>87</sup> Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, p. 26.

<sup>88</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*, p. 182.

<sup>89</sup> Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, p. 47.

It is through an assemblage of a multitude of things and through an effort of translation of a poem by the Roman poet Cattulus – an elegy for his brother – that Anne Carson mourns for her dead brother in *NOX*, a book-epitaph for a brother ‘lost to her long before he died’.<sup>90</sup>

1.0 I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he’s dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history.

Carson thinks about history, noting that the etymological meaning of the word is ‘to ask’. The brother’s history is and will remain unknown to her. Still, she can ask; for the asking ‘is not idle’, rather, it is a journey into that unknown:

1.1 [...] It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself. [...]<sup>91</sup>

One can make something out of the unanswered questions, perhaps fashion it into something that carries itself like a poem, like Cattulus 101 translated by Anne Carson:

*Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed -  
I arrive at these poor, brother, burials  
so I could give you the last gift owed to death  
and talk (why?) with mute ash.  
Now that Fortune tore you from me, you  
oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,  
now still anyway this - what a distant mood of parents  
handed down as the sad gift for burials -  
accept! Soaked with tears of a brother  
and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.*<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> For a review of Anne Carson’s *Nox*, see Meghan O’Rourke, ‘The Unfolding’, *The New Yorker*, 12 July 2010, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/07/12/the-unfolding>> [accessed 16 August 2016].

<sup>91</sup> Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), unpaginated.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).



I encounter artworks made with materials imprinted with affect; they are gifts meant not for us but for the many (people? dreams?) who are already ash. The affect evoked by a present encounter in turn awakens the affect of an 'unknown' experience (not remembered, not narratable). The encounter awakens the affect of an experience of loss, absence or separation; it rouses a force that rises beyond the horizon of knowledge and carries the trace of the 'forgotten' event. The encounter with loss and absence in the present evokes events whose capacity to affect has not been diminished but, rather, intensified by subsequent experiences. This encounter also elicits an anxiety about future losses, reinforcing their inexorability. These experiences sediment over time, settling to the bottom of the self, and resurface when shaken by new encounters. The subject I am always in the process of becoming is like a snow globe gifted as a souvenir of loss.

Whilst I have forgotten the event, I now realise I speak of nothing but this event. Yet, I cannot name it, narrate it, represent it. (Perhaps I speak of it allegorically?) Yet, I return to it as if travelling in time towards a lost past I cannot access, a dwelling I cannot enter. Maybe it is more accurate to say that it returns to me, but this return is not accurate, clear, precise; the event is a blurred image dissolved by time. What returns is its bittersweet taste, its leaden weight, its blinding brightness, its fugitive flashing shadow. My body remembers what my conscious mind forgets. But this forgetting is not simply the repression of the memory of a single traumatic event, of a loss. Rather, it is a way of preserving a memory-trace; a trace that makes an affect surge forth, a trace of what has been lost. Imprinted on the body the memory of another body, the desire for another body, the absence of the *other's* body. Sadness as an instrument of scarification. A wounding loss is inscribed on the body and I carry the scar of this wounding. The wound throbs as if it had never healed. I have forgotten the event but not its affective impact; this throbbing is how I remember being wounded.

Once the wound closes up we speak of it no longer, but we never forget it.<sup>93</sup>

Hélène Cixous

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<sup>93</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'What is it o'clock?', in *Stigmata*, p. 54.

Where one wound closes another one opens. I am wounded again, only this time by the works of art and texts I encounter; they reopen the old wound that perhaps has never fully closed and inflict a new one, whose outline I trace as I write. Writing is not an attempt to close the wound, but to keep tracing its contours as one might trace a silhouette – a dark, solid mass without details and nevertheless recognizable. Recognizable as the sense of loss that surfaces in writing; recognizable as the sense of loss that emerges from the artworks, although I am not able at first to name or identify what in them affects me. I am surprised, touched, disturbed, wounded by something in them I cannot pinpoint. Roland Barthes referred to the inability to name as ‘a good symptom of disturbance’. ‘What I can name cannot really prick me’, he wrote, making reference to what he termed the *punctum* of photography (something in the photograph that holds and affects the viewer, often a detail, whose impact does not stem from its obvious meaning but, rather, from a private one).<sup>94</sup> I realise that what pricks me is akin to the Barthesian *punctum*, and thus trying to immediately locate and name the impact of art is perhaps an attempt to pin it down, a fruitless endeavour. The failure to name shows the moment when the writer cannot master the language that categorizes and bestows names, the moment when she is touched and wounded by objects and by words.

I encounter artworks that wound, and want, or need, to write about them, for something in them touches and pricks, something hurts. And yet the pain is welcome, as it makes me feel alive, a body pulsating with pain and life.<sup>95</sup> I welcome the pain, even though I know it comes from the inside as much, or more, than from the outside; even though I am pierced by arrows that heighten my sense of vulnerability. To be vulnerable is to be exposed, susceptible to harm, open to the possibility of injury. Vulnerable comes from Latin *vulnus*, a wound, indicating that a boundary can be broken. To be vulnerable is to be exposed and wounded, open to that which, in touching, can hurt. To be open to a touch that can wound, the touch of a pointed object and the touch of the *other*; and to be opened up by this touch, going outside of myself to a place where I can encounter the *other*.<sup>96</sup> Opening up myself to be wounded again, I write.

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<sup>94</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 51.

<sup>95</sup> James Elkins categorises pain as the ‘general condition of being alive’ and as a ‘nonverbal experience of sensation’. See James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>96</sup> Esther Teichmann refers to the Barthesian *punctum* as an encounter with otherness that is ecstatic, a going out of oneself, ‘a physical penetration of the self, a violation of the

## WRITING, TOUCH, DISTANCE

To be touched and to be open to a touch that can wound. When writing, I always search for a touch. I try to be touched again, for I am aware of the distance writing puts between myself and the world. The desire for a small laceration to occur at this point of contact is not an attempt to reduce my distance from the world, it is so that the text can become the place where blood is collected; it is dreaming of words to flow like blood; 'once the right vein has been found, no more toil [...] the inside gives itself up and you can do as you like with it, it's me but I'm no longer there'.<sup>97</sup> The words, like blood, are me where I am not; they are the sign of a wound, still bleeding. Words are separated from me yet they are also my skin, where I touch the world.

Writing is perhaps always the desire to respond to a call from a distance, the awareness of a distance and the search for a touch, for a point of contact; it is the gesture that allows me to reach for the wound without the need to look at it. The text becomes the space where I am touched again by things that are now distant, and where I try to reach for them in an effort to grasp or to make sense of something which may be ultimately ungraspable or incomprehensible, but nevertheless touchable (at a distance). What is a touch, if not that which indicates our distance from the other? A distance that touching, as proximity, tries to overcome whilst maintaining it. As such, distance is a precondition for touch; in distance there is always potential to touch. 'In distance, and perhaps only in distance, can there be relation, can there be relation of touch, can there be relation that touches.'<sup>98</sup> Thus in writing, in language as a space of distance from the world, there is the possibility to relate, and to relate to what is distant or different. Here, in writing, the possibility of touching. I write so that I can be touched by what is other than me, touched by what is always distant.<sup>99</sup> I am touched at a distance.

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body, which places the viewer in passive adjacency [...] This viewing of an image is a form of erotic contact with alterity, driven by the desire to touch and encounter the real of the other.' Esther Teichmann, 'Falling Into Photography: On Loss, Desire and the Photographic', (Doctoral thesis, Royal College of Art, 2011) <<http://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/id/eprint/1173>> [accessed 16 April 2014], pp. 77-78.

<sup>97</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Circumfession', p. 12.

<sup>98</sup> Julia Hölzl, 'In/possible relation: Being, Time, Death', *POLIGRAFI*, 17, 65/66 (2012), 119-137, <<http://www.poligrafi.si/Content/pub/BodilyProximity.pdf>> [accessed 14 May 2014], (p. 121).

<sup>99</sup> This may go some way to 'explaining' my break from making art to writing, a move from being an artist to an attempt at being a writer, an artist who writes. Both making

What is distant draws us nearer, but as we approach it withdraws from our grasp; yet, it touches... Maurice Blanchot uses the term 'fascination' to refer to a moment when we are captured by something we cannot quite grasp and yet cannot renounce. What Blanchot calls the 'indecisive moment of fascination' for the writer is an experience connected to a desire to seize, to impatience and inspiration, and to uncertainty. The writer, stirred by Orphic desire, is drawn to and attempts to reach for 'an object that has become its own shadow', impossible to master or to grasp, through words that have also become their own shadow.<sup>100</sup>

In 'Orpheus's Gaze', Blanchot writes that the myth of Orpheus exposes a struggle essential to art: to approach the object Orpheus must turn away from it, and by turning toward the object he allows it to escape.<sup>101</sup> Eurydice is the obscure object of desire that lures him, the one he can only possess in his song, the one he risks losing forever by looking at it. In his song she is already lost, but it is as the object of his gaze that she is driven irrevocably into the shades, into the underworld. Yet his movement is necessary, the work demands it; to not look would amount to a betrayal of his desire and thus he would no longer be an artist:<sup>102</sup>

When Orpheus descends toward Eurydice, art is the power by which night opens. Because of art's strength, night welcomes him; it becomes welcoming intimacy, the harmony and accord of the first night. But it is toward Eurydice that Orpheus has descended. For him Eurydice is the furthest that art can reach. Under a name that hides her and a veil that covers her, she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend. She is the instant when the essence of night approaches as the *other* night.<sup>103</sup>

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art and writing involve distance and proximity, but I feel writing brings me closer to the *other*, to what is distant, and to myself as *an other*.

<sup>100</sup> See Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. and with an introduction by Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 25. On fascination and inspiration and its connection to the myth of Orpheus in Blanchot, see Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 48 – 51; Esther Teichmann, *Falling Into Photography*, pp. 93 – 96, 104 – 105; Ann Smock, 'Translator's Introduction to Blanchot', in *The Space of Literature*, pp. 9, 14.

<sup>101</sup> See Maurice Blanchot, 'Orpheus's Gaze', in *The Space of Literature*, pp. 171 - 176.

<sup>102</sup> See Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, p. 49.

<sup>103</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'Orpheus's Gaze', in *The Space of Literature*, p. 171 (emphasis in original).

Orpheus's art cannot bring Eurydice back to life, cannot recover what has been lost. His work is to bring her from the dark depths in to the light of the day that would give her the day's form, but she is now veiled by darkness. His gaze is the act that consummates her disappearance; his song now can only be a lamentation. By looking back at her, he reaffirms the distance between them; he confirms her absence. It is in turning towards the 'obscure' Eurydice that Orpheus opens up a poetic space, where what cannot be recovered returns as an image. The image of what he desires but cannot possess outside of the song, the image that fascinates him:

Orpheus's error seems then to lie in the desire which moves him to see and to possess Eurydice, he whose destiny is only to sing of her. He is Orpheus only in the song: he cannot have any relation to Eurydice except within the hymn.<sup>104</sup>

Orpheus's desire, as Blanchot tells us, is not to see her in the clarity of daylight but in her 'nocturnal obscurity, in her distance', who she now is and not who she was. By turning towards her, Orpheus touches Eurydice in her 'shadowy absence' and draws her toward him. In his song she is present, presented under a veil that does not hide her absence but, rather, reveals it as 'the presence of her infinite absence'. Like Orpheus's song, perhaps all *writing unveils the presence of an infinite absence*.

'Writing begins with Orpheus's gaze', Blanchot states. This is the fascinated gaze that transforms desire into inspiration; that transforms a vanishing face into an *image*; that turns toward what cannot be seen and attempts to touch that which cannot be grasped; that reinforces the absence of the lost object. What inspires Orpheus is Eurydice's absence, the shadow of her presence.



The writer does not see the object, only its dark shadow. To write is thus to sink into a darkness in which one cannot see but where it is still possible to glimpse what continuously emerges from and returns to the shadows. Like Orpheus, the writer may not succeed in bringing the object into the clear light of the day, but the work may bring the object into the world concealed in its shadow. In this

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

realm of shadows, language withdraws from the instrumentality of representation and allows an image to emerge – the image into which the thing withdraws.<sup>105</sup> This is not an active contact, Blanchot says, since seeing implies a separation. But, in seeing, a separation turns into an encounter, which leads him to ask what is given in this encounter:

But what happens when what you see, although at a distance, seems to touch you with a gripping contact, when the manner of seeing is a kind of touch, when seeing is *contact* at a distance? What happens when what is seen imposes itself upon the gaze, as if the gaze were seized, put in touch with the appearance? What happens is not an active contact, not the initiative and action which there still is in real touching. Rather, the gaze gets taken in, absorbed by an immobile movement and a depthless deep. What is given us by this contact at a distance is the image, and fascination is passion for the image.<sup>106</sup>

The fascinating image is given to us by ‘contact at a distance’. In fascination we are robbed of our power to grasp, to comprehend fully that which attracts us – we are unable to give meaning; we fall into silence, fall into the image that speaks to us.<sup>107</sup> What we see at a distance touches us, but this is not the ‘sight’ of a classical scheme, where seeing is equated with understanding.<sup>108</sup> This is another sight, one that is seized in fascination, where seeing is no longer possible: ‘Whoever is fascinated doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity; it seizes and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance.’<sup>109</sup> Absolutely, at a distance.

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<sup>105</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 30.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>107</sup> As Blanchot writes: ‘To write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking [...] I bring to this incessant speech the decisiveness, the authority of my own silence. I make perceptible, by my silent mediation, the uninterrupted affirmation, the giant murmuring upon which language opens and thus becomes image, becomes imaginary’; Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 27. See also Blanchot’s extended footnote on page 34 of *The Space of Literature*, a preamble to a discussion of the image that he develops in the section ‘The Two Versions of the Imaginary’.

<sup>108</sup> David Summers refers to ‘sight’ in the classical scheme of Plato and Aristotle as ‘the closest to the faculties of judgement and reason’. David Summers, ‘Representation’, in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 4. See also Liliane Papin, ‘This is Not a Universe: Metaphor, Language and Representation’, *PMLA*, 107, 5 (1992), 1253-1265, (p. 1256); ‘In Western languages in particular, the process of thinking is linked to seeing (imagination, reflect, speculate, focus, inspect, insight, etc.)’.

<sup>109</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 33.



At a distance, I see the image that envelops and touches – the image that makes me write. This writing is the desire to respond to a call from a distance, to search for a touch. It is a writing fuelled by the question of how what is distant (*other*) can touch – writing as a fire fuelled by distance.



The relation between writing and its distance from the world unfolds in Blanchot's texts in ways that address the relationship between language, creativity, negativity, absence, loss, knowledge, being, subjectivity, alterity and death (understood not as demise, but as a question of the subject's own 'nothingness' or limit of subjectivity). Fascination shows how the subject becomes passive or receptive in face of the object of fascination/image. It is this 'passivity in us' that Blanchot searches for. As Ulrich Haase and William Large observe in their study of Blanchot, this is a passivity 'which would allow us to be responsive to what is other than knowledge'; a passivity that allows the subject to experience something other to themselves, to encounter the *other* in their singularity.<sup>110</sup> In Blanchot's view, everyday language denies this singularity by establishing concepts that are universally communicable:

In daily life, to read and hear implies that language, far from giving us the fullness of things in which we live, is cut off from them, for it is a language of signs, whose nature is not to be filled with what it aims for but to be empty of it. Its nature is not to give us what it wants to have us attain, but to make it useless to us by replacing it, and thus to distance things from us by taking their place, and taking the place of things not by filling itself with them but by abstaining from them.<sup>111</sup>

Distance is essential to language, as Maurice Blanchot reminds us – the distance from concrete things enables language to come into being, but it does so by 'destroying' the thing which it represents.<sup>112</sup> For Blanchot, words negate the

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<sup>110</sup> See Ullrich Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 55, 66.

<sup>111</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'The Language of Fiction', in *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 75.

<sup>112</sup> As Haase and Large point out in their study of Blanchot. 'The essential character of language is its power of abstraction; that is to say, its *distance* from the reality of things. This distance Blanchot and Mallarmé interpret as the power of language to negate the actual, individual concrete thing, for the sake of the *idea* of a thing: in language, writes Blanchot, "speech has a function that is not only representative but also destructive. It

physical thing: 'Words, we know, have the power to make things disappear, to make them appear as things that have vanished.'<sup>113</sup> The idea of language as negativity comes from Hegel, for whom the concept negates the reality of the thing, making the object absent. According to Blanchot, language as communication 'forgets' this absence, concealing it in the concept communicated by the word. But if language destroys the thing by turning it into a representation (a word used to express a *concept*, a substitute for the absent, negated thing), *writing*, as Blanchot imagines it, does not disguise the absence of the thing in the word, in the representation, but exposes it by also negating the concept. For Blanchot, the language of literature produces, as Haase and Large note, a double absence – both of the thing and of the concept.<sup>114</sup> We are thus faced with the presence of the vanished things – 'real things' transformed into 'pure absence' – as Blanchot notes when he speaks of the poem as that which 'oscillates marvellously between its presence as language and the absence of the things of the world.'<sup>115</sup> In the light of Blanchot's statement, it would seem that writing is an attempt to create (its own) presence in face of the absence of the world, not by naming things and trying to recover their presence, but by using language to recapture their absence.

Rather than becoming the means to grasp the thing (by forcing it to signify) and to make it present (as concept), language shows the separation between us and the world and maintains this distance. 'Language inscribes the distance that separates us from the reality of the world.'<sup>116</sup> Writing, as we have seen, rather than trying to cover the absence of the thing by representing it, unveils it and interrupts the possibility of making it present.<sup>117</sup> To write, therefore, is to confront

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causes to vanish, it renders the object absent, it annihilates it'''. See Ullrich Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 31 (emphasis in original).

<sup>113</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 43. This echoes Jacques Lacan's dictum: 'The being of language is the non-being of objects'; see Thomas Brockelman, 'Lacan and Modernism: Representation and its Vicissitudes', in *Disseminating Lacan*, ed. by David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 219.

<sup>114</sup> See Ullrich Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, pp. 30-34, 36. 'If the word links to another word, rather than to some idea outside the text, then what we have is not an item of information, but an infinite displacement of meaning that cannot be stabilized in a single interpretation. Blanchot describes this displacement as the power words have, when they are no longer tied to the function of the concept, of destroying themselves'; *ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>115</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 45.

<sup>116</sup> Ullrich Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 61.

<sup>117</sup> On representation and presence, see Azade Seyhan, *Representation and its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism* (Berkeley; Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p. 4.

the distance between the one who writes and things, between the word and the world, and to inscribe this distance.

In writing, one becomes aware that the world is experienced and, mediated by the text, stands at a remove from experience.<sup>118</sup> As the distance from the reality of things that gives rise to language points to the absence of the object negated by the word, so does the distance from an experience that words try to represent indicate a loss of that experience (it is already in the past). 'To write about experience is to lose it', as Richard Stamelman asserts, implying that writing as a distancing from the world, from the present and presence of experience, is writing as loss, as it cannot recover what has been experienced.<sup>119</sup> Stamelman writes that the loss of an experience can be articulated, 'even if the experience—in the fullness, immediacy, and presence it once had—cannot.'<sup>120</sup> The fullness of experience cannot be represented because its immediacy is unseizable; representation is inadequate since it points to a referent that will always be absent.<sup>121</sup> And the word is what preserves this absence. The word, which for Blanchot 'exists only because what "is" has disappeared in what names it'.<sup>122</sup> The word, which keeps the world at a distance. Stamelman, after Blanchot, observes: 'Writing destroys being-in-the-world, replacing it with being-in-language.'<sup>123</sup> For him, Blanchot is on the side of absence:

It is to absence that Blanchot wishes to remain faithful. The word he speaks obliterates the immediacy of the thing it expresses. It envelops that thing in a void, which makes it both absent and distant. Language signifies, thus, not the thing but the absence of the thing and so is implicated in the loss.<sup>124</sup>

Writing inscribes the loss of experience.

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<sup>118</sup> Drawing on Blanchot, art historian Michael Ann Holly writes about the melancholy that accompanies the discipline of art history, and asserts 'writing of any sort pushes the raw phenomenological experience further and further into the background. It is an activity that promises warm solace but delivers cool distance.' See Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Stamelman, *Lost beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x. A melancholic tone is palpable in Richard Stamelman's study.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>122</sup> Maurice Blanchot quoted in *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>123</sup> Richard Stamelman, *Lost beyond Telling*, p. 41.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

The being that dwells in language may become painfully aware of their separation from the past and from things; of encountering them already as ruins, as fragments that, gathered and reassembled in writing, no longer mask an absence but unveil it. Writing thus reveals the world as lost, as absent. It writes loss itself, rising and foundering as a gleaming shadow under a veil of melancholy. What remains of the encounter with the world is a trace, and writing may be nothing but the trace of an experience, the trace of an encounter. The question of writing becomes a question of inscribing this trace, the trace of an absence; of preserving absence, and not of trying to make the absent thing present again as concept, as a wholly knowable thing (with the promise of a fixed meaning offered by representation). The writing of loss does not try to represent the loss in order for it to be comprehended (an impossibility?), but writes through loss as its only possibility – a trace of the incomprehensible, a trace of the unknown.

#### WRITING THE UNKNOWN

Writing thus has to struggle with the desire to comprehend and to master, the desire to overcome the distance from the world through the grasping of language. As concepts arise in language to designate those things from which we are distanced, seemingly offering us knowledge of the world, distance is not overcome but instated by ‘a language of signs’ that distances ‘things from us by taking their place’. Implicit in comprehension is a force or violence, as Blanchot writes in *The Infinite Conversation*:

Even comprehension ... is a grasp that gathers the diverse into a unity, identifies the different, and brings the other back to the same through a reduction that dialectical movement, after a long trajectory, makes coincide with an overcoming. All these words — grasp, identification, reduction — conceal within themselves the rendering of accounts that exists in knowledge as its measure: reason must be given. What is to be known—the unknown—must surrender to the known.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1993), p. 43. On the relationship between knowledge and violence, see: Gerald L. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 126 – 127; Ullrich M. Haase, William Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 75.

How, then, can we then escape this violence in writing, in critical writing on art? And is such a thing even possible? Are we not always aiming to comprehend the work, to unpick its meanings, to place it in context? Does not our desire to know, to frame, to grasp what is unknown by always referring to what is already known, ultimately reduce the work to 'only an interesting object of study' – a graspable object, an object of knowledge? For Blanchot, the work is a 'presence of being', an event. When the work is only 'an interesting object of study', it is no longer a work (an event), as he writes in 'Characteristics of the Work of Art':

The work is a thing among others, which men use, in which they take interest, of which they make a means and an object of knowledge, of culture and even of vanity. In this capacity the work has a history, and scholars, cultivated men of taste consider it important. They study it, its history, and the history of art which it represents. But in this capacity it is also nothing more than an object, which finally has no value except to our concern for achievements, whose knowledge is a mere form.

The work is not a work when it is only an interesting object of study, a product among other products.<sup>126</sup>

Perhaps to escape the violence that comprehension suggests and to be in touch with the work as *event* (and not as a 'product among other products'), we should be wary of rushing to comprehend, to impose a fixed meaning by forcing the thing to speak or to speak over it. We should be wary of making it conform to what is already known by forcing it to become present as concept, as category, and thus graspable. (Grasping, identifying, reducing; why the desire to grasp when we can touch? Touched by the excess of meaning, being open to more than can be comprehended.) Maybe we should examine, as Maurice Blanchot shows us, our relation with the unknown, to the *other*.<sup>127</sup>

In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot is concerned with speech and the ethical relation to the *other*, the *other* who 'approaches me in speech as the stranger and as the unknown', and interrupts me in order to speak.<sup>128</sup> This focus on the *other* reflects the influence of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's approach to ethics on Blanchot, although they diverge in their approach to the relation between writing

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<sup>126</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 228.

<sup>127</sup> See Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>128</sup> See Ullrich M. Haase, William Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 76.

and ethics. Whereas for Levinas writing is unethical, for Blanchot writing exposes the writer and the reader to otherness, to 'the outside of language', and in their relation of strangeness to the text they have a relation that is comparable to that of speech.<sup>129</sup>

Blanchot stresses the importance of maintaining a 'relation with the unknown' by preserving the distance that exists between the self and the *other*; by relating to the *other* through conversation, where language is a response rather than a way of approaching the *other* as an object of knowledge (and in the process defining or categorizing them). To engage in a conversation is to engage with the difference of the *other*. In a dialogue with the *other*, the self and the *other* maintain their separation, their distance; it is this distance that sustains the conversation.<sup>130</sup>

In Georges Bataille, Blanchot found a powerful interlocutor, one who was present through his speech:

What is present in this presence of speech, as soon as it affirms itself, is precisely what never lets itself be seen or attained: something is there that is beyond reach (of the one who says it as much as the one who hears it). It is between us, it holds itself between, and conversation is approach on the basis of this between-two: an irreducible distance that must be preserved if one wishes to maintain a relation with the unknown that is speech's unique gift.<sup>131</sup>

I would like to bring the basis of Blanchot's model of conversation, as an *encounter* with what is *other*, as a guide to approach the artworks discussed later in this thesis: writing as a response to the work, rather than as a form of mastery that seeks to turn the work into an object of knowledge. This chimes with Blanchot's approach to the experience of 'fascination' discussed earlier (that moment when we are drawn to something we cannot fully comprehend and yet cannot renounce). It also connects, more broadly, with the affective response that arises from an encounter with the work and which is linked to the lived experience of the writer.

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<sup>129</sup> For a discussion of the impact of Emmanuel Levinas on Blanchot, see *ibid.*, pp. 67-84, 78, 80.

<sup>130</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 75-76, 83-84.

<sup>131</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 212.

In conversation, the *other* calls and I respond; a response that is only possible because of the distance between us. It is the encounter with the mystery of what is *other* that solicits me to speak. Thus, in my encounter with resonant works I speak in response to their call, not aiming to have a firm grasp of them but rather to explore the possibilities of facing the unknown, of creating a space through writing where there can be relation with the work, and with what the work invokes. To write about art is to encounter the work as the unknown that resists general categorization; as that for which there is no fixed, stable meaning, only that which emerges from the reverberation of an encounter. It involves not knowing, a 'reading' of the work that is 'innocent', similar to what Blanchot proposes in the reading of texts:

Reading is ignorant. It begins with what it reads and in this way discovers the force of a beginning. It is receiving and hearing, not the power to decipher and analyze, to go beyond by developing or to go back before by laying bare; it does not comprehend (strictly speaking), it attends. A marvelous innocence.<sup>132</sup>

Like the innocent encounter with literature, the innocence of the encounter with the work of art amounts to an event to which we must come unprepared, a space of revelation which is startling because what we see was unforeseeable. We enter the work's space and encounter what presents itself in the moment we attend to it, that is, when we also make ourselves present by paying attention to it. Emptied of what we know, and open to what the work presents, we allow the work to be and allow ourselves to respond to it in a way that does not privilege comprehension but which is beyond or in excess of comprehension. We open ourselves for an encounter with the unknown rather than sticking with a recognition of what is already known. For Gilles Deleuze, writing on Proust's 'search for truth' (the truth of signs), the encounter offers the possibility of thinking, for thought attempts to escape conventional significations; 'Truth depends on an encounter with something that forces us to think and to seek the truth. [...] It is the accident of the encounter that guarantees the necessity of what is thought'.<sup>133</sup> The fortuitous encounter with what can be thought because it invites thinking.

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<sup>132</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 320; quoted in Ullrich M. Haase, William Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 23.

<sup>133</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 12.

The *encounter* is thus a moment that stimulates thinking, or to think 'beyond representation', as theorist Simon O'Sullivan, following Gilles Deleuze, indicates. He quotes from Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* to contrast *encounter* with *representation*, which is a recognizable object that only shows what is always already in place: 'Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*.'<sup>134</sup> Whereas an object of recognition – a representation of the world – reinforces habitual ways of being in the world and confirms existing knowledges and beliefs, thus hindering thought, an object of a 'genuine' encounter disrupts knowledge and impels us to see and think the world differently.<sup>135</sup> The encounter is thus both a moment of rupture and of affirmation, 'the affirmation of a new world'. Art, O'Sullivan says, is such an encounter.

Art, for O'Sullivan, is a complex event that seeks to create something new; an event that opens up a space for the unexpected, for the unknown. This brings to mind Blanchot's view of the work as an event, that which has a 'presence of being'; it also recalls his assertion that the work is no longer a work when it is merely as an 'object of knowledge, of culture' or an 'interesting object of study'. O'Sullivan, like Blanchot, also notes that art is 'not only an object of knowledge', for, he continues, 'art is antithetical to knowledge'.<sup>136</sup> To encounter art is to open oneself to the unknown, to resist certainty and to have a new encounter with the world.

Jean-François Lyotard is another philosopher who brings up the problematics of reading art as a determinable object of knowledge or of culture. He is critical of the way art is confused with a cultural object, since theories of art are produced, as all theories of objects are, 'in order to determine them'. 'There is no history of art [...] There is a history of cultural objects', he asserts.<sup>137</sup> In 'Critical Reflections', Lyotard returns to his 'long indictment against the history of art' (in *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour*) and writes that the work of art is not 'merely a cultural object, although it is that too. It harbours within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of

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<sup>134</sup> See Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (Basingstoke; New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1-2.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>136</sup> Simon O'Sullivan, 'The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 6, 3 (December 2001), 125-135, (p. 125).

<sup>137</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *Karel Appel, A Gesture of Colour / Karel Appel, Un geste de couleur*, trans. by Vlad Ionescu and Peter W. Milne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), p. 91.



associations that overflows all the determinations of its “reception” and “production”.<sup>138</sup> Beyond its existence a cultural object, art’s excess points to an intensity that overflows, as Lyotard suggests, its ‘reception’ and ‘production’; works of art exist beyond theories and discourses ‘appropriate to anthropological givens’.<sup>139</sup> Since, he advances, understanding is powerless to do anything about the excess of material presence in art, it cannot touch it. Criticism cannot touch ‘the otherness that, in the work, *resists* commentary’.<sup>140</sup> What, then, has art history been missing? How can commentary relate to the work of art? For Lyotard, commentary on art needs to attend to its affective dimension, to the work’s affective gesture:<sup>141</sup>

It is a grave and common error to impose a classification by periods or schools on works of art. In reality, you’re only classifying cultural products, which belong in effect to observable phenomena of historical reality [...] But what there is that is art in works of art is independent of these contexts [...] Gestures, which are neither contents nor forms but the absolutely *emotive power of the work*, make no progress in the course of history. There is no history of art as gesture, only as cultural product. The *power to affect* sensibility beyond what it can sense does not belong to chronological time.<sup>142</sup>

In ‘The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation’, O’Sullivan too turns to the concept of affect in order to account for the power of art. He notes that what defines art is the *aesthetic*, pointing out that this dimension was often missing in thinking on art, a kind of ‘aesthetic blindness’.<sup>143</sup> For him, the emphasis a type of art history places on the signifying character of art, an

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<sup>138</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Critical Reflections’, *Artforum* (April 1991) p. 93, quoted in Simon O’Sullivan, ‘The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation’, p. 125.

<sup>139</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *Karel Appel, A Gesture of Colour*, p. 91.

<sup>140</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 31, 33, 87.

<sup>141</sup> For a discussion of affect across the work of Lyotard, see Julie Gaillard, Claire Nouvet, Mark Stoholski (editors), *Traversals of Affect: On Jean-François Lyotard* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); see especially Section II: Affect in the Work of Art and in Commentary.

<sup>142</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables (Moralités postmodernes)* (1993), quoted in *ibid.*, p. 5 (my emphasis).

<sup>143</sup> O’Sullivan attributes this to (at least) two factors in the discipline of art history: first, Marxism (“The Social History of Art”) and its emphasis on the moment of production, creating a tendency to explain art historically; second, deconstruction and its inclination to hinder historical interpretations. See Simon O’Sullivan, ‘The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation’, pp. 125-126.

understanding of art as representation, leads to a reading that misses something essential. This something is art's affective dimension. Art's aesthetic power, O'Sullivan claims, can be thought through the notion of *affect*. Moreover, art produces *affects*, which he defines, following Brian Massumi, as 'moments of intensity, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter', *immanent* to matter as well as to experience. And he also refers to affect, after Spinoza, as the effect of a body on another body:

Following Spinoza, we might define affect as the effect another body, for example an art object, has upon my own body and my body's *duration*.) As such, affects are not to do with knowledge or meaning; indeed, they occur on a different, *asignifying* register. In fact this is what differentiates art from language – although language, too, can and does have an affective register; indeed, signification itself might be understood as just a complex affective function (meaning would be the effect of affects).<sup>144</sup>

This engagement with affectivity is in line with what Patricia Clough termed 'the affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences – a turn that for her often still follows the 'circuit from affect to subjectively felt emotional states' and which she wants to move away from to focus instead on those aligned with the idea of affect as 'pre-individual bodily forces augmenting or diminishing a body's capacity to act'.<sup>145</sup> Clough neatly summarises Massumi's definition of affect as 'bodily responses, autonomic responses, which are in-excess of conscious states of perception and point instead to a 'visceral perception' preceding perception'.<sup>146</sup> Massumi's opening of the body to 'autonomic responses', she explains, places affect as autonomous not only from conscious perception and language, but also from emotion: he suggests that if emotion is a narration of affect or a conscious perception, it is only so as an 'autonomic remainder', an 'excess of affect'.

I have a reservation about this interpretation of affect in 'pure' biological terms – the emphasis given to the body and its 'autonomic responses' in detriment of what I perceive more as a cycle of different responses, where both affect and the meaning we derive from it constitute the work's *affective power*. Therefore, even though I tend to agree that affect – and thus the affective dimension of the work

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> See Patricia T. Clough, 'The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine and Bodies', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25, 1 (January 2008) 1-22.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

of art – is in excess of signification and disrupts (pre)established meanings, I find the apparent rejection by affect theorists like Clough and Massumi of what is ‘subjectively felt’ as emotion (as it is deemed to be all conscious) and of the connection between affect and meaning problematic. I am not alone in this, albeit I cannot claim to be fully engaged with the developments and the lively debate taking place in the ever-expanding field of affect theory.

In ‘Philosophy and the ‘Affective Turn’’, Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martyn Lloyd indicate in a contradiction in the ‘affective turn’: a ‘turn to affect’ implies a turn away from minds and towards bodies that should also be a turn away from the philosophical separation between mind and body; however, when narrowly construed this ‘turn’ tends to re-enact dualist accounts of the subject, and this occurs especially when the non-intentionality of affect is emphasised.<sup>147</sup> This privileging of the body over the mind and emphasis on the non-intentionality of affect is also noted by Ruth Leys in ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’. In this article she identifies this tendency by ‘new affect theorists’ who, after Silvan S. Tomkins, ‘interpret the affects as non-intentional, bodily reactions’ and thus as a system separated from cognition. As Leys exposes, this separation of affect from meaning assumes the subject has no knowledge of the objects that cause their affects and that they are simply triggered by various objects (mere ‘tripwires’); that affects are ‘capable of discharging themselves in a self-rewarding or self-punishing manner without regard to the objects that elicit them’.<sup>148</sup> Now, intentionality in the phenomenological sense is an orientation toward objects, being conscious of another person or thing; ‘To be affected by something’, Sara Ahmed writes, ‘is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things. To give value to things is to shape what is near us.’<sup>149</sup> Hence to be affected by something would imply a contact with an object that resonates with the subject and not just any object acting simply as a ‘tripwire’. Objects, perceived through the senses or evoked through memory, elicit affect from subjects also because of their context. Ahmed writes:

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<sup>147</sup> This analysis is included in their introduction to the *Parrhesia* issue on affect. See Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martyn Lloyd, ‘Philosophy and the ‘Affective Turn’’, *Parrhesia*, 13 (2011), 1-13, <[http://parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia13/parrhesia13\\_lacaze-lloyd.pdf](http://parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia13/parrhesia13_lacaze-lloyd.pdf)> [accessed 31 August 2016], (p. 6).

<sup>148</sup> See Ruth Leys, ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry*, 37 (Spring 2011), 434-472, (pp. 437-438).

<sup>149</sup> Sara Ahmed, ‘Happy Objects’, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, p. 31. On intentionality, see also David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, p. 202.

We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things. An object can be affective by virtue of its own location (the object might be *here*, which is *where* I experience this or that affect) and the timing of its appearance (the object might be *now*, which is *when* I experience this or that affect). To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to “whatever” is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival [...] if you are given something by somebody whom you love, then the object itself acquires more affective value: just seeing something can make you think of another who gave you that something.<sup>150</sup>

The encounter with matter, objects or works of art is an encounter with things that have the potential to affect us because they have the capacity to evoke something for us. Writing about textiles, touch and signification, Claire Pajaczkowska suggests that textiles have a ‘capacity to “hold” meanings’ that is related to the trace of the hands that make them (hands that hold and touch too).<sup>151</sup> For Pajaczkowska, the haptic quality of textiles evokes an affective register; textiles convey meaning by eliciting the unconscious bodily memory of an absent body and a time of tactile contact:

The temporality of the tactile, haptic quality of the textile as sign depends on a paradox of presence and absence. The sign denotes meaningfully when it pertains to a referent that is absent. The sign then performs a memory-like function of retaining, in consciousness, what has been lost to the senses. The iconic serves to retain visual similarity, whereas the indexical serves to commemorate haptic presence, and it is the interplay between the absence of the contact and the presence of the sign which sets in motion the memory of a time in which tactile contact was present. This play of memory serves to form a connection in consciousness, to the unconscious bodily memory of the past body.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33 (emphasis in original).

<sup>151</sup> See Claire Pajaczkowska, ‘Tension, Time and Tenderness: Indexical Traces of Touch in Textiles’, in *Digital and Other Virtualities: Renegotiating the Image*, ed. by Anthony Bryant and Griselda Pollock (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

The textile touch that evokes an affect linked to a memory of bodily touch calls to mind Freud's and Kristeva's thinking on affect to which I referred earlier in this chapter. Recall Freud's theorisation of the memory-trace of an event – memory, as the force that persists of an experience that is already past, can give rise to an affect. And as Julia Kristeva shows, verbal language becomes meaningful when the affects associated with an experience are inscribed into words. By extension, things become meaningful for the affects that are inscribed in their materiality.

Perhaps the 'becoming meaningful' is key here; things are not inherently meaningful, but only become meaningful through a process of affective inscription. My perspective on affect is thus closer to that of psychic inscription theorised in psychoanalysis by Freud and Kristeva, and encompassing the relationships between affect, memory, consciousness, the unconscious, emotion *and* meaning in relation to a subject who orients their body towards the world, towards the *other*. A subject who is affected by what is *other*.

This is the subject who encounters the work of art, in an encounter that is neither purely rational and knowledge-based nor purely sensual, for the subject is neither purely a mind nor merely a body. The *aesthetic encounter* with art, like the 'fundamental encounter' described by Deleuze, is an encounter that *invites thinking*. Reinforcing this Deleuzian view, Ernst Van Alphen writes that art 'does not illustrate or embody a proposition, but it embodies sensations or affects that stimulate thought. It is the affective encounter through which thought proceeds and moves toward deeper truth.'<sup>153</sup> So, although for some the work may seem to be 'independently' communicating something affective, it is rather inviting a response from the viewer. As Griselda Pollock writes on art and interpretation, she does not attribute 'human capacities to things':

Thus art objects do not think, nor have affections, nor do they want things of me. They cannot desire nor can they perform fundamental linguistic functions. Art happens to and through the encounters between subjective elements, even if objectively transmitted and materially supported.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Ernst Van Alphen, 'Affective operations of art and literature', *Res: Anthropology and aesthetics* 53-54 (Spring-Autumn 2008), 20-30, (p. 22).

<sup>154</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'What if Art Desires to be Interpreted? Remodelling Interpretation after the 'Encounter-Event'', *Tate Papers*, 15 (Spring 2011), unpaginated, <<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/15/what-if-art-desires-to-be-interpreted-remodelling-interpretation-after-the-encounter-event>> [accessed 27 August 2016].

Artworks, Pollock suggests after Bracha L. Ettinger, desire to be interpreted. Her understanding of interpretation is as 'a collaborative work solicited by the artwork', and the work is, in turn, an event that promotes an encounter with an otherness that stimulates new thinking:

Ettinger presents art as a kind of gift, packaged in its own materialities that are at once spurs to perceptions, feelings and thoughts as well as connections with existing cultural meanings. [...] Interpretation, then, is not the exhaustive definition of what art is and where it comes from but is instead an engagement to work with it as a gift-event, that in doing something, brings about change in the culture itself: it generates new meaning. [...]

The point of interpretation, therefore, is not a fixing of meanings to artists, forms, iconographies or practices as occurs in the dreadful recurrent phrase 'this work is about...'. It is a work of analysis that aims to enlarge the text of culture through the co-creation with the working of art of otherness which sustains plurality, and preserves some hope that there are domains yet to be known.<sup>155</sup>

Affect – understood as the trace of an experience – is, I suggest, the *catalyst* for both the artist and the viewer. The artist recovers the affective force of an experience to make the work itself the site of an experience. Beyond comprehension, we are touched by a work that *does* something to us, that *affects* us because we are open to what the work presents rather to what it could 'represent' according to a given 'script'. Following Deleuze, Elizabeth Grosz writes on the relationship between art and affect; 'Art is the art of affect more than representation, a system of dynamized and impacting forces rather than a system of unique images that function under the regime of signs.'<sup>156</sup> The affective encounter with art presents the work to us not as a knowable object – one whose iconology can be studied and identified – but as art that evades being known.

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 3. I find Deleuze's proposition interesting in relation to the importance he gives to *affect* over *representation* (in the sense of being mimetic or corresponding to a given meaning), although his suggestion is, as Grosz points out, 'in opposition to those philosophical or phenomenological approaches to the arts that analyze their intentionality or the mutual engagements of subjects and objects in artworks', *ibid.*

Rather than asking 'what the work is about', in our encounter with the work of art, we start asking 'what does the work do?' or 'how does the work of art *work*?' Any approach that just privileges meaning or signification over the affective encounter with the work as an event does not do the work justice to what the work *does* – to how it impacts on the bodies that come into contact with it *and* the minds that attend to it; to how it invites interpretation that generates new meaning. Yet, something will always remain unknown, for art does not produce concepts to explain itself, as Grosz again turning to Deleuze, contends:

Art, according to Gilles Deleuze, does not produce concepts, though it does address problems and provocations. It produces sensations, affects, intensities as its mode of addressing problems, which sometimes align with and link to concepts, the object of philosophical production, which are how philosophy deals with or addresses problems. Thus philosophy may have a place not so much in assessing art (as aesthetics has attempted to do) but in addressing the same provocations or incitements to creation as art faces – through different means and with different effects and consequences. Philosophy may find itself the twin or sibling of art and its various practices, neither judge of nor spokesperson for art, but its equally wayward sibling, working alongside art without illuminating it or speaking for it, being provoked by art and sharing the same enticements for the emergence of innovation and invention.<sup>157</sup>

Earlier, I mentioned I would like to use Blanchot's model of conversation to approach artworks, that is, to be open to an encounter with what is *other* and allow it to speak, rather than speaking on behalf of it. To enter into a conversation with the work of art is to be open to the unknown without making it surrender to the known. If knowledge aims to grasp, in the act of grasping we risk losing the relation to the work as it unfolds in the time of the encounter, in the time we attend to it. In contrast, in the 'innocent' encounter with the work it is us who are grasped by it; in attending to it we are gripped by it, in fascination, we are gripped by its affective force, by what is distant and yet touches.

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<sup>157</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, pp. 1-2.

In responding to a work of art I find myself in a state of fascination that robs me of the power to grasp. I thus attend to the work with no desire to give a precise name to what I encounter or to know the arc of its inception in order to master its description, to use knowledge as a shield. Rather, I attend to it with openness, open to the unknown, open and therefore vulnerable to the wounding object. I am drawn to the work and in attempting to respond to its call aware that I am responsive to something in excess of knowledge, responsive to the affective operations of art. I am touched by what is unveiled as a trace of loss and a materialization of absence in works where bodies that are no longer present are evoked. The encounter with the work is inscribed on me as a wound that I, in turn, inscribe on the page as if tracing its contours. This wound has the shape of an infinite absence. Perhaps every inscription gives shape to what has been and will be lost, inscribing forever the presence of an absence.



CHAPTER 2

**ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER, INSCRIBING ABSENCE**



**Figure 2.** 'Panel of the Wounded Man', Lascaux

These paintings before us are miraculous, they communicate a strong and intimate emotion. Yet for all that they are only the more unintelligible. We have been advised to relate them to the incantations of hunters who thirsted to kill the game they subsisted upon, but it is these figures, and not the hunger of the hunters, which stir us. And so we are left painfully in suspense by this incomparable beauty and the sympathy it awakes in us.<sup>1</sup>

*Georges Bataille*

Lascaux should be both what is most ancient and a thing of today; these paintings should come to us from a world with which we have nothing in common, the barest outline of which we cannot even suspect, yet they should nonetheless make us, regardless of questions and problems, enter into an intimate space of knowledge. This surprise accompanies all works of past ages, but in the valley of the Vézère, where, in addition, we are aware that the age is one in which man is just beginning to appear, the surprise surprises us still more, while confirming our faith in art, in that power of art that is close to us everywhere, all the more so that it escapes us.<sup>2</sup>

*Maurice Blanchot*

In the darkness of the cave, an encounter with that which still eludes us, what leaves us wonderstruck, what we cannot completely explain but fully sense. An encounter with images enveloped in the shadow and silence of the cave, in the mystery of a distant world. Immersed in the vast blue ocean of silence, in the black of the cave and in the night of not knowing, we attempt to name the nameless, to grasp at images on walls solid and unyielding. Our encounter with the other who is our ancestor and the mute images they left in the cave is an encounter with an otherness that cannot be fully grasped, with images that appear as if by miracle and which have been miraculously preserved. In the images that inscribe their absence we see marks of a being and of a passing,

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, trans. by Austryn Wainhouse (Geneva: Skira, 1955), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'The Birth of Art', in *Friendship*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 1-2.

traces of an existence which is other but that addresses our thought and our affect across an immense temporal distance. An otherness transformed into images that are touching, and which continue to haunt us. In our being touched by these images, what are we recognizing in their otherness?

In *The Muses*, Jean-Luc Nancy refers to our being touched by the images left in 'the caves of our prehistory' not only on account of their antiquity, but 'because we sense the emotion that was born with them, this emotion that was their very birth'.<sup>3</sup> What was this emotion? Was it also an emotion that involved recognition? Any engagement with this question can only be a purely speculative gesture, guided by a response to the images themselves, in this case a response at a distance, mediated by yet other images, since one does not have a personal, immediate sensual experience of the paintings in the caves. It is also guided by texts that do not primarily theorise the precise function of the cave images, but which respond to them and try to follow the gesture of the cave painters – musing on their operations, speculating on their encounter with the images, and reflecting on what they also do to us. Here, by turning to the paintings in the caves, and by paying special attention to the imprints of hands, I try to think and sense what this kind of image – as image and vestige – presents; and what they, at the core of their inscription, share with the works discussed in this thesis. What can these paintings, in their muteness, tell us about our encounters with a number of works of art, as well as what do they say or help to unveil about the operations of the artists? The encounter with the paintings in the cave – guided by the textual responses they elicit, principally from Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy and Georges Didi-Huberman – offers an opportunity to open a space to think about how to respond to a number of contemporary works of art which present matter imprinted with significant traces. In the darkness of their ancient mystery, and without ever fully surrendering it, the images from the caves of our prehistory may still help to illuminate contemporary concerns.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 74.

## IN SEARCH OF THE WONDERFUL

I insist upon the surprise we experience at Lascaux. This extraordinary cave fairly staggers its visitors: it unceasingly rewards that expectation of the miraculous which is, in art and in passion, the most profound aspiration of life. We often belittle, call childish this need to be wonderstruck... but we set right off again in search of the wonderful.<sup>4</sup>

*Georges Bataille*

So many attempts have been made at deciphering the enigma of the paintings on the walls of caves like Lascaux, perhaps the name that came to stand, before all other caves, as the wondrous site of a magnificent discovery. Alongside Altamira in Spain, and Chauvet, also in France, Lascaux is considered one of the most famous and spectacular sites of Upper Paleolithic cave art in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Estimated to date from around 17,000 years ago, the paintings have been studied by specialists from diverse disciplines and variously interpreted: as ‘works of pleasure’; as elements of rituals of sympathetic magic linked to the hunt (thus being instrumental in nature); or as mythical narratives conveying specific meanings. More recently, a controversial theory by French prehistorian Jean Clottes interprets the paintings in prehistoric caves as relating to shamanism, whereas for Norbert Aujoulat, another French prehistorian and geologist, the order of the layers of superimposed images in Lascaux points to a link between the fertility cycles of important animals and cosmic cycles (relating thus to their mating and the seasons).<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps because many theories about the meaning of cave paintings have been debunked, or because of the impossibility of having a unified theory that explains them, scholars like Aujoulat are prepared to accept that they may never know exactly why the paintings were made and what they mean. They seem

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<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of Lascaux and Chauvet, see the entries in The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, <[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/lasc/hd\\_lasc.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/lasc/hd_lasc.htm)> and <[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chav/hd\\_chav.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chav/hd_chav.htm)> [accessed 15 September 2015].

<sup>6</sup> For a brief introduction to interpretations of Lascaux, see the official Lascaux website, <[http://www.lascaux.culture.fr/#/en/04\\_07.xml/index3.html](http://www.lascaux.culture.fr/#/en/04_07.xml/index3.html)> [accessed 15 September 2015]. For an outline of the interpretative responses to cave art, see chapter 6 of Andrew J. Lawson, *Painted Caves: Palaeolithic Rock Art in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Judith Thurman, ‘First Impressions’, *The New Yorker*, 23 June 2008, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/23/first-impressions>> [accessed 16 September 2015].

even unwilling to try to interpret them: ‘the more you look, the less you understand’, Aujoulat says.<sup>7</sup> Whatever their original meaning or function, they strike us with their power. We feel their force even though we do not fully comprehend them or, on the contrary, *because* we do not fully comprehend them. The view of Aujoulat, the late world's expert on the caves at Lascaux, mirrors Georges Bataille's quote at the beginning of this chapter in its contention of the inherent unintelligibility of the cave paintings. We are still in the dark, and it seems better this way. Better not to throw too much light into the darkness of the cave and allow it to envelop us in its shadow and its silence. Rather than search for precise meanings that will remain inaccessible, I propose we now follow Bataille into the cave of Lascaux, in search of the wonderful.

Directly we enter the Lascaux cave, we are gripped by a strong feeling we never have when standing in a museum, before the glassed cases displaying the oldest petrified remains of men or neat rows of their stone instruments. In underground Lascaux we are assailed by the same feeling of presence – of clear and burning presence – which works of art from no matter what period have always excited in us.<sup>8</sup>

Georges Bataille first visited the Cave of Lascaux in 1954 with the Swiss publisher Albert Skira, in order to research his study of its paintings – *La Peinture préhistorique. Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art* (*Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*) – published in 1955.<sup>9</sup> In this commissioned work, Bataille draws from many disciplines, such as archaeology, anthropology and the history of religion. This rich interdisciplinary approach mirrors the academic discipline of prehistory itself, and contributes to his insights into the paintings of Lascaux, which are ultimately connected to his viewing experience of the images *in situ*, as scholar Carrie Noland claims.<sup>10</sup> However, before Bataille can develop his more innovative theoretical response to the paintings of Lascaux, he is confronted by the meanings already attributed to them by the existing scholarship on Paleolithic image-making – such as the scholarly recommendation to ‘relate them to the incantations of hunters who thirsted to kill the game they subsisted upon’. Despite his refusal of the meaning attributed to the art by the comparative

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<sup>7</sup> Norbert Aujoulat, quoted in Judith Thurman, ‘First Impressions’.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Kendall, *Georges Bataille* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 199.

<sup>10</sup> Carrie Noland, ‘Bataille Looking’, *MODERNISM / modernity*, 11, 1 (2004), 125–160, pp. 126, 128–129.

ethnography of the time, which focused on the instrumental nature of the images and their place in rituals of sympathetic magic, Bataille's text is not exempt from the 'prejudices and fallacious assumptions' proposed by the Eurocentric archaeological and ethnographic sources that inform it.<sup>11</sup> Key among these is the narrative of human evolution, which he employs to place 'Lascaux man' at the centre of not only the history of art, but also of the history of humanity; he even opens his account with this gambit:<sup>12</sup>

Resolutely, decisively, man wrenched himself out of the animal's condition and into "manhood": that abrupt, most important of transitions left an image of itself blazed upon the rock in this cave. The miracle occurred at Lascaux.<sup>13</sup>

For Bataille, as Christopher Fynsk explains, 'the question of the human and the question of art are indissociable – the one emerges in and with the other.'<sup>14</sup> Influenced by the works of Henri Breuil and Fernand Windels, two well-respected prehistorians of his time, Bataille argues that the images found at Lascaux signal the birth of art, as the title of the book indicates, as well as the passage from animality into humanity. 'Lascaux's name thus symbolizes the ages when the human beast yielded to the subtler, keener, unfettered individual we are.'<sup>15</sup> Bataille is keen to emphasize that this 'subtler individual', 'Lascaux Man', was like ourselves and suggests that we are receptive to the paintings in the cave because we belong to the same species. For him, Lascaux was both our cradle and our 'earliest *tangible* trace', the first sign of both art and man:

Every beginning supposes what preceded it, but at one point night gave birth to day and the daylight we find at Lascaux illumines the morning of our immediate species. It is the man who dwelt in this cave of whom for the first time and with certainty we may finally say: he produced great works of art; he is of our sort.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132–135. See also note no. 16 for a comment on the Eurocentrism of Western Europeans prehistorians.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Fynsk, 'Lascaux and the Question of Origins', *POIESIS: A Journal of the Arts and Communication*, 5 (2003), 6–19, <<http://www.egspress.com/articles-pdf/lascaux.pdf>> [accessed 10 August 2015], p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Yet, it is not the question of origins, whether of art or of humanity (in opposition to animality), that I wish to emphasize here, even though as it has been already discussed, this is a central concern for Georges Bataille in *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*.<sup>17</sup> As it shall become clearer, I am more interested in *how*, by attending to the images themselves in the space of the cave, he comes to account for their emergence and for their impact on the spectator, as if addressing us across the abyss of time. ‘Lascaux Man ... speaks to us through these paintings’, Bataille writes. What is Lascaux Man saying, what is this ‘message’ communicated through art? If the message communicated is the idea of humanity itself, this message apparently cannot be simply translated into an unambiguous verbal formula as it does not have a ‘univocal meaning’ – its sense unfolds as the images are perceived, remembered and reflected upon (and written about repeatedly by someone like Bataille, claims Edward Casey).<sup>18</sup> It seems that for Bataille the question of what message is communicated is partially answered by taking into account *how* the message is transmitted, i.e., through a visual language that allows us, as belonging to the same species, to apprehend it.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it appears that it is not only the recognition of an ancestry that allows for this communication to take place across millennia, but that the paintings have *aesthetic qualities* that impact on us, the modern viewers, and this is *how the paintings speak to us*. This points to these images occupying a place and operating beyond their historical context, even though this context also informs our reading of these images. As scholar W.J.T. Mitchell points out, Lascaux is both a historical and a nonhistorical site, and what allows these images to speak to us is ‘the fact that they transcend history, that they leap across historical boundaries’, thus defying the idea that history can account for everything. For Mitchell, they are not exactly intelligible to us, yet they speak, they ‘show themselves to us, and we understand something.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In ‘Lascaux and the Question of Origins’, Christopher Fynsk deals with some of the questions concerning art and origins that still arise from Lascaux, and discusses studies by André Leroi-Gourhan, Georges Bataille, and Jean-Luc Nancy in response to Lascaux. Fynsk also situates Lascaux’s name ‘as a as a kind of metonym for a vast range – in space and time – of painted figures on cavern walls in Western Europe’.

<sup>18</sup> Edward S. Casey, ‘Bataille: Discerning Edges in the Art of Lascaux’, in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, ed. by Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), pp. 179-180.

<sup>19</sup> Carrie Noland, ‘Bataille Looking’, p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell in conversation with Gottfried Boehm and others, in *What Is an Image?*, ed. by James Elkins and Maja Naef, Stone Art Theory Institutes 2 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), p. 40.



These images are witnesses of an era, mute witnesses; for they can offer no testimony, they are testimony itself. If they have a message for us, it seems to have something to do with the very act of inscribing the message, and with the message left as trace. Detached from any putative immediate function, whether social, religious or ritual, the art in the cave is the trace of a passage and, if we follow Bataille, is itself the passage that gives birth to the human who is 'of our sort' – the passage into humanity. For Bataille, it appears, art transmits the message and is the message itself; constitutive of human evolution, art it is the sign 'of *our* presence in the real world'.<sup>21</sup> Art thus as a sign that communicates, as the realization of the power of communication, as Maurice Blanchot suggests in his commentary on Bataille's Lascaux:

It does not seem that the Neanderthal man, as Georges Bataille insists, had even the faintest idea of artistic activity, and this is troubling. This indeed leads us to think that in the very place where what we call work (turning things into objects, into weapons, and into tools) was discovered, the power of affirmation, of expression, and of communication was not necessarily grasped, the power of which art is the realization.<sup>22</sup>

Our presence in the real world has been 'reconstituted' from the fragments left by our ancestors. Grounded in the narrative of human evolution, Georges Bataille speculates on the material vestiges of prehistory and posits the development of the human in connection to the emergence of art by noting that the being that preceded Lascaux Man, *Homo faber*, left behind tools and not art. Tools reveal the 'objective reality' of 'rudimentary humans'; art communicates the 'reflection' of ancient man's 'interior life'. Bataille refers to tools as relating to 'everyday utilitarian activity' which still required intelligence and skill in their making, whereas art for him was a figuration of 'signs which have the power to seduce, which are bred of emotion and address themselves to it'.<sup>23</sup> (Here we see in Bataille's reference to emotion the resonance of his text in Jean-Luc Nancy's formulation at the beginning of this chapter, linking emotion to the birth of the image, to which we will return later). Encountering the paintings on the rock, Bataille felt he was in front of the marks left by this being who resembled us, and who had just found the power to create something beyond tools, a being who

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<sup>21</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'The Birth of Art', p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 18.

had entered into a world of symbolic play. Bataille believed Lascaux was witness to the traces of an important shift. Even though he was aware that anthropological opinion mostly believed that the birth of *Homo sapiens* did not coincide with that of art, but rather came before it, Bataille insisted on the shift from work to play – art or aesthetic activity as a form of play, a game played by *Homo ludens*.<sup>24</sup> For him, the meaning of Lascaux was connected to this leap from the world of work to the world of play, the passage from *Homo faber* to *Homo ludens*, the *Homo sapiens* who not only had started to reflect on his ‘interior life’, but who was further distinguishing himself from animals and from the ‘human beast’ through art.<sup>25</sup>

These beings that seemed to be further distancing themselves from animals were, as John Berger writes about the earlier cave of Chauvet, ‘acutely aware of being a minority overwhelmingly outnumbered by animals. They had been born, not on to a planet, but into animal life. [...] Beyond every horizon were more animals. At the same time, they were distinct from animals.’<sup>26</sup> Aware of their being immersed in a mass of animals, were these beings who painted in the cave thus recognizing their similarity to fellow human beings and their distinctness from the familiar animals? Were they, who had been so much closer to the animals inhabiting the earth, any closer to answering, without asking, the perennial question of ‘what makes us human?’ Or were they recognizing in the animals and in the animality they were already shedding something essential in their own constitution?

Bataille writes of the surge of ‘enduring animality in us’, which is quelled by prohibitions and that, in turn, is enacted at feast-time as a form of transgression. In his words, ‘play is the transgression of the law of work’.<sup>27</sup> As Carrie Noland claims:

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<sup>24</sup> *Homo ludens* is a term created by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, which Bataille borrows to further distinguish ‘Lascaux Man’ from his predecessor. See *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> John Berger, *Here is Where We Meet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, pp. 37-38. For a discussion of transgression in Bataille’s writing on Lascaux, see Suzanne Guerlac, ‘Bataille in Theory: Afterimages (Lascaux)’, *Diacritics*, 26, 2, (1996), 6–17; Suzanne Guerlac, ‘The Useless Image: Bataille, Bergson, Magritte’, *Representations*, 97 (Winter 2007), 28–56. See also Richard White, ‘Bataille on Lascaux and the origins of art’, *Janus Head*, 11, 2 (2009), 319-331, <<http://www.janushead.org/11-2/White.pdf>> [accessed 20 September 2015].

Bataille needs the emergence of modern man to coincide with the birth of art not only in order to explain the power of Paleolithic imagery to communicate across millennia, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, to support his major thesis: that image-making is a form of transgression, a sign, therefore, of the presence of the very prohibitions that make humans human.<sup>28</sup>

If work and the production of tools had already started to separate men from animals, art – as play, as the domain of *Homo ludens* – increased this distance, marking a passage from nature to culture. As Bataille indicates in *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, in order to pass from beast to human, man had to transgress the instrumentality of work. (The transgression he refers to is ‘the religious transgression that relates to the ecstatic sensibility, which is the source of ecstasy and the core of religion. It is connected with the feast...’<sup>29</sup>). But, at the same time, transgression involved an approximation (but not a return) to nature, an evocation of the animal world the evolving human was leaving behind.<sup>30</sup> Thus, through sacred ritual, our ancestor hoped to recapture something of the animal’s sensual relation to the world, a world that still was an extension of their own being. Image-making, therefore, creates a ‘sensuous reality ... which modifies the world, responding to our desire for something miraculous...’, which Bataille considered to be the central objective of image-making.<sup>31</sup> He believed ritualized behaviour thus caused the body to move, to produce gestures whose material traces are what one encounters in the cave. They are the images of Lascaux, part of rituals whose function is unknown and secondary to the aesthetic impulse of those who traced them, as Bataille insists:

We do not know what these rites were, but we are encouraged to believe that the execution of the paintings comprised one of their elements. Tracing a figure did not, perhaps, on its own constitute a ceremony; but it was certainly an essential part of a ceremony. Tracing was an *operation*, religious

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<sup>28</sup> Carrie Noland, ‘Bataille Looking’, p. 132.

<sup>29</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, p. 37. This religious activity is supposed to be of an animistic orientation: our ancestor, still in a nascent self-awareness, was not completely distinct from the animal, but rather a ‘cousin-spirit’. On the self-awareness of the early human in the view of Hans Jonas, see Colin Campbell, ‘From ‘Unity of Life’ to the Critique of Domination: Jonas, Freud, and Marcuse’, in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, ed. by Andrew Biro (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 143-149.

<sup>30</sup> Suzanne Guerlac, ‘The Useless Image: Bataille, Bergson, Magritte’, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Carrie Noland, ‘Bataille Looking’, pp. 135–136.

or magic. . . . Concern for the final effect clearly emerged at Lascaux—in the arrangement of the Great Hall, or in the Gallery, for instance. However, of this we can be sure: the final effect of the ensemble was of secondary importance. Only the operation [of tracing] corresponded to the underlying intention. The majesty of the cavern appeared afterwards, serendipitous, like a gift, or the sign of divinity.<sup>32</sup>

Bataille's own sensuous encounter with the paintings in Lascaux informs his text and underpins his insights. His is a body that is moved as it moves and pulsates with the images he encounters. As Carrie Noland asserts, it is Bataille's 'specific viewing experience', his 'sensual, somatic knowledge' of the caves that gives his perspective freshness and thus able to produce, she claims, an original account of Lascaux. In his privileged position of a body moving within the cave, looking at a jumble of figures of tangled and superimposed lines, a bewildered Bataille is pushed to the limits of vision, oscillating between decipherable and indecipherable figures, to intuit and theorise that here image-making is linked to the 'rhythmic repetition of inscriptive gestures' performed during a state of ritualized trance.<sup>33</sup> By focusing on the movements that produced the figures and the movements that the figures produce, Bataille, Noland suggests, emphasizes the importance of the energy that is transmitted to us – the energy of the moving bodies that executed the images. Furthermore, this raises the question of what these images, in their rhythm and pulsation, *do* to our bodies. In discussing the relevance of superimposition in Bataille's study of Lascaux, the mass of entangled figures, Noland refers to Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of a movement that perdures beyond the forms and after consuming the corporeal kinetic energy that produces them – 'an extraordinary *movement* that confounds the spectator'.<sup>34</sup> According to her, Bataille seems to suggest that our 'material bodies' have an important part to play in the perception of these images. The resonance between our bodies and these 'moving' images relates to how we respond viscerally to that which we apprehend through vision; '[t]he images of Lascaux are therefore movement (space, duration) made *sensible* to us through our eyes ... we see movement and are moved...'<sup>35</sup> On movement, Bataille writes,

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<sup>32</sup> Georges Bataille quoted in Carrie Noland, 'Bataille Looking', pp. 151–152 (emphasis in original).

<sup>33</sup> Carrie Noland, 'Bataille Looking', pp. 126–129.

<sup>34</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman quoted in *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>35</sup> Carrie Noland, 'Bataille Looking', p. 152 (emphasis in original).

At Lascaux, gazing at these pictures, we sense that *something is stirring, something is moving*. That something touches us, we are stirred by it, as though in sympathy with the rhythms of a dance; from this passionate movement emanates the beauty of the paintings.<sup>36</sup>

The force of Bataille's writing emanates from a passionate encounter with the pictures at Lascaux. What in them is stirring and moving moves and stirs him. He is touched by them and, in turn, his text touches the reader. Bataille's writing is a kind of gesture that extends the passion of the movements inscribed on the cave walls, an inscription showing the transformation one undergoes upon viewing these marks. Arguably, it is in this gesture that we may find a model for a response not only to the cave images, but also to a number of contemporary works of art which present matter imprinted with significant traces. Rather than in his philosophical investigation of transgression and of the sacred, it is in the inscriptive gesture, as well as in the emphasis he gives to the recovery of the world of sensual immediacy and to the image as the trace of a gesture or the imprint of a contact, that we start to see a viable way of speaking about the indecipherable.

To write about the encounter with that which leaves us bewildered, what leads us astray in search of meaning and yet does not disclose its mystery, requires that we retain that initial sense of wonder of the encounter, of what we see. We need to allow ourselves to be struck by wonder – wonderstruck like Bataille looking at the baffling images in Lascaux – whilst balancing this fascination with knowledge. To be sure, Bataille's book is guided and even constrained by knowledge, by the scholarly research on prehistory available to him at the time and his own philosophical agenda, yet his response to Lascaux ultimately has value because it encourages us to look, and to inscribe the force of the viewing experience. As Maurice Blanchot writes, Georges Bataille's *Lascaux* thus offers an opportunity for the images to shine forth:

It should be said that the book he has devoted to Lascaux is so strikingly beautiful that we are persuaded by the obviousness of what it presents. Of what we see and of what it invites us to see – in a text that is assured, scholarly, and profound but that, above all, does not cease to be in an

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<sup>36</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, p. 130 (emphasis in original).

inspired communication with the images of Lascaux – we can only accept the affirmation and recognize the joy. It seems to me that one of the great merits of the book is that it does not do violence to the figures it nonetheless tears from the earth: it endeavors to shed light on them according to the brightness that emanates from them, a brightness that is always clearer than anything that explanations can offer us in order to clarify them.<sup>37</sup>

Bataille's text, in its continuous dialogue with the images in the cave, urges us to look, and perhaps we could say that there is no substitute for an encounter with these animated images in Lascaux. Since, except for a few experts, most of us cannot enter the cave, we cannot experience its darkness and its silence; we cannot feel the ceiling of the cave sloping over our heads and place our body between the bulging walls. Nor can we follow the 'uneven surface of the rock wall and the perspective in each of the various rooms', which were fully exploited by the 'cave artists'.<sup>38</sup> The most vivid reflections on the images of Lascaux and similar painted prehistoric caves come from those who viewed them in person but whose remit was not to decipher them; those whose bodies were touched by their images (I am thinking here of Bataille in Lascaux, of course, but also of John Berger's and Werner Herzog's viewing of Chauvet).

Lascaux offers its images to eyes not afraid of seeing, to bodies not afraid of sensing. Looking here is not passive; the body is receptive to the movement it perceives in the images, to the kind of dance that mark-making performs. 'What we feel at Lascaux, what touches us . . . is that which moves', Bataille, the embodied observer, writes. He thus links the affective impact of the images to the way they materialize movements and transmit their energy; the energy of that archaic being whose repeated gestures were imprinted on the cave walls. These marks imprint the energy of the gestures; they register the physical force applied to the rock and the duration of the movements that created them.<sup>39</sup> As mentioned earlier, if the art at Lascaux communicates a message, this message is connected to very act of its inscribing, to the *aesthetic qualities* that impact on us and to the condition of the message left as trace. This is a trace of the wonderful. We only have to look, and sense.

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<sup>37</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'The Birth of Art', pp. 2-3.

<sup>38</sup> Albert Skira in his foreword to Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Carrie Noland, 'Bataille Looking', p. 150.

Perhaps in Lascaux and in the other caves of our prehistory – and maybe even at a distance from them, through engaging our body in a virtual visit to the caves or a 3D film<sup>40</sup> – we are able to sense the life that pulsed in these archaic bodies, to feel the throbbing of their existence, the continuity between these bodies and the world. What our ancestors have left behind is the vestige of a life unknown to us, yet an experience of being that we can recognize. Just as Bataille can recognize in the images left by ‘the artists of the grotto’ of Lascaux beings that could desire, imagine and create things beyond the utilitarian, beyond useful works, beyond interdictions; beings who could communicate something of themselves through these inscriptions on the cave walls. This communication was a form of exposure of humanity itself in ecstatic relation between the human and the natural, as Christopher Fynsk states: ‘Where humanity so exposes itself as it retraces the threshold between humanity and nature and rhythmically enters a world-play that it brings to form in the work of art, communication occurs.’<sup>41</sup> Bataille’s *Lascaux* indicates that with art, and through gestures rising from the body, our ancestors are seemingly able to communicate the idea of humanity itself, and address us with the news of our own existence.

*“Lascaux Man” created, and created out of nothing, this world of art in which communication between individual minds begins. And thus Lascaux Man communicates with the distant posterity today’s mankind represents for him – he speaks to us through these paintings ... At Lascaux, more troubling even than the deep descent into the earth, what preys upon and transfixes us is the vision, present before our very eyes, of all that is most remote. This message, moreover, is intensified by an inhuman strangeness. Following along the rock walls, we see a cavalcade of animals... But this animality is nonetheless for us the first sign, the blind unthinking sign and yet the living intimate sign, of our presence in the real world.*<sup>42</sup>

*Georges Bataille*

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<sup>40</sup> See the official Lascaux website, <<http://www.lascaux.culture.fr>>. On Chauvet, see <<http://archeologie.culture.fr/chaudet/en/>> [accessed 25 September 2015]; and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, dir. by Werner Herzog, (Creative Differences, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Fynsk, ‘Lascaux and the Question of Origins’, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, p. 11 (emphasis in original).



**Figure 3.** Handprint, Chauvet



Deep in the cave, which meant deep in the earth, there was everything: wind, water, fire, faraway places, the dead, thunder, pain, paths, animals, light, the unborn ... They were there in the rock to be called to. The famous imprints of life-size hands (when we look at them we say they are ours) – these hands are there, stencilled in ochre, to touch and mark the everything-present and the ultimate frontier of the space this presence inhabits.<sup>43</sup>

*John Berger*

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<sup>43</sup> John Berger, *Portraits: John Berger on Artists*, ed. by Tom Overton (London; New York: Verso, 2015), p. 5.

**SELF OUTSIDE OF SELF, EX-SISTENCE EX-POSED**

Stepping into the cave after Georges Bataille is to step into a world that is more threshold than world, or the threshold of a world that appears with a gesture. A place, to be sure, but a place of beginnings and of passage – the threshold between the human and the natural – a place where the human continually re-inscribes and reinforces its existence in this gesture of inscription born of human ecstasy. According to Bataille, as discussed earlier, in the ecstasy of a trance our ancestor creates art that can communicate the idea of humanity itself. This is the human who could present its own existence and tell us of our own presence in the world. Jean-Luc Nancy, writing after Bataille in ‘Painting in the Grotto’, argues that it is through the mimetic act that *Homo sapiens* comes to know itself as human, for the figure it creates ‘displays its existence in a world’.<sup>44</sup> If the human is made aware of its own existence and humanity through the ecstatic gesture that gives birth to it, this humanity is exposed alongside its strangeness, as Nancy contends in the opening page of the essay:

Man began with the strangeness of his own humanity. Or with the humanity of his own strangeness. Through this strangeness, he presented himself: he presented it, or figured it to himself. Such was the self-knowledge of man, that his presence was that of a stranger, monstrously similar [*semblable*]. The similar came before the self, and this is what it, the self, was. Such was his first knowledge, his skill, the quickness of the hand whose secret he wrested from the very strangeness of his nature, although he did not thereby penetrate a secret, but was penetrated by it, and himself exposed as the secret. The schema of man is the monstration of this marvel: self outside of self, the outside standing for *self*, and he being surprised in face of self. Painting paints this surprise. This surprise is painting.

Everything is given at one blow in this monstration: the society of fellow men [*des semblables*], the troubling familiarity of animals, the subject looming up from its death, the suspended sense, the obscure obviousness. [...]

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Fynsk, ‘Lascaux and the Question of Origins’, p. 13. The first version of Nancy’s essay ‘Painting in the Grotto’ was published in *La Part de l’œil* (No. 10, 1994), ‘devoted to Georges Bataille and aesthetics’. This reference to the earlier version appears as a note to Chapter 4 of *The Muses* (p. 117); yet, as Fynsk points out, there is no reference to Bataille in the text.

The pleasure men take in mimesis is made up of the troubling feeling that comes over them in the face of recognizable strangeness, or in the excitement that comes from a recognition that one would have to say is *estranged*.<sup>45</sup>

In the cave, the human born of an ecstatic gesture is exposed to its own human existence and strangeness. There, the human presents itself to itself as a stranger, an *other*, a monster that appears and warns of its existence and strange humanity. In the cave, ecstasy, exposure and existence point to the strange (from Latin *extraneus*, external) condition of being on the *outside*. In 'ecstasy', one is placed outside of oneself, as its etymology indicates: ecstasy comes from Greek *ekstasis* 'standing outside oneself,' based on *ek-* 'out' + *histanai* 'to place.' Similarly, the origin of the word 'expose' (from Latin *ex-* 'out' + *ponere* 'put.') is linked to the idea of 'put or set out'. Lastly, 'existence' comes from late Latin *existentia*, that in turn originates in the Latin *existere*, 'come into being' (from *ex-* 'out' + *sistere* 'take a stand'). The human began by exposing and being exposed to its being; it began with the strangeness of presenting being as existence, as a coming into being, appearing, being there.

Before turning again to the human and the painting in the cave, I would like to attend to some key concepts in Nancy's thought that are palpable in his 'Grotto' essay. These may help us in thinking through his account of the emergence of the sense of the human with art, of existence as co-existence – being as always being-with – and of art as presentation, which is the perspective I want to use in the analyses of artworks. The brief turn to the etymological roots of words relating to a 'being placed or put outside' listed above, words that appear in both Bataille's and Nancy's texts, connects to Nancy's interest in the notion of 'the outside', present in his philosophical project through concepts such as 'existence' and 'exposition'.<sup>46</sup>

In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy postulates that *existence* is a singular 'ex-position of being', and that in humanity 'existence is exposed and exposing': existence, exposed as singularity, in turn exposes the singularity of Being as such in all

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>46</sup> On Jean-Luc Nancy's fascination with the notion of 'the outside', see Erich Hörl, 'The Artificial Intelligence of Sense: The History of Sense and Technology After Jean-Luc Nancy (By Way of Gilbert Simondon)', trans. by Arne De Boever, *Parrhesia*, 17 (2013), 11-24.

beings. The difference between humanity and other beings constitutes its singularity – a singular that is always plural, a singular that engages *with* others in a plurality of singularities. The key argument of *Being Singular Plural* is that being is always ‘being with’ and that to exist is to co-exist. ‘Existence, therefore, is not a property of *Dasein*; it is the original singularity of Being which *Dasein* exposes for all being ... humanity ... is *in* the world insofar as the world is its own exteriority, the proper space of its being-out-in-the-world’, he writes.<sup>47</sup> In Nancy’s lexicon ‘existence’ is ‘ek-sistence’ (a term he borrows from Martin Heidegger); ‘ek-sistence’ is a manner of being as ‘being “outside” of itself’, as Ian James articulates in his study of Nancy’s philosophy.<sup>48</sup> The human in the cave exposes its singular existence, its ecstatic existence – its being-outside-of-itself.

Turning again to the influence of Heidegger on Nancy, Martta Heikkilä reminds us that in Nancy’s thought the *ek-static* nature of being and being’s mode as ‘ek-sistence’ are based on a reading of Heidegger’s *Dasein* (literally meaning ‘being-there’), which refers to the mode of being of ‘man or humanity’ as ‘ecstatic’, i.e., it ‘extends outside of itself’.<sup>49</sup> Nancy’s engagement and indebtedness to Heidegger’s thinking of being can be viewed as a crossing of that thinking that allows him to develop a critique of the German philosopher’s ontology and to think beyond it. Ian James points out that whereas Heidegger’s thinking reasserts subjectivity and stable identity (‘the heroic singularity of a people’), Nancy rethinks Heidegger and the ‘event of being’ not as a unifying gathering or oneness, but as an opening of a world where the mode of being is ‘being-to’ or ‘being-toward’ (to itself and to the world) and by implication ‘being-with’ (but a being-with no longer based on shared identity).<sup>50</sup> The *with* of being-*with* precludes the idea of identity of the subject, of the self with a fixed identity, of the

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<sup>47</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 17-18 (emphasis in original).

<sup>48</sup> Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 101.

<sup>49</sup> Martta Heikkilä, *At the Limits of Presentation: Coming-into-Presence and its Aesthetic Relevance in Jean-Luc Nancy’s Philosophy* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 32, 39. On *Dasein*, see also David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, p. 82: ‘In philosophy, the word is traditionally used to refer to any mode of being or existence ... For Heidegger, *Dasein* ... refers to the mode of being... of human beings, as opposed to the being ... of things or entities.’

<sup>50</sup> Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, pp. 101-105, 177. See also Ignaas Devisch, ‘Jean-Luc Nancy’, in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/nancy/>> [accessed 11 November 2015]. Devisch remarks that unlike Heidegger’s ‘being-with’ (*Mitsein*), Nancy shows that ‘We are always being-with, but this being-with is no longer a substantial being-together out of a shared trait, identity of race’.

self as selfsameness. Rather, for Nancy, the self is based on its relation to itself, on its coming and presence to itself, of the coming into the world and of being-towards (*être-à*) the world. The being of 'being-there' (*Dasein*) is being toward something.<sup>51</sup> The being of being-there is there, dis-posed, in a disposition towards the world, an ecstatic existing, existing ecstatically in the *there* of the world.

In its ecstatic nature, being is being *there*, being dis-posed, exposing its disposition to the world and the disposition of the world. 'Someone enters a room', Nancy writes, and 'before being the eventual subject of a representation of this room, he disposes himself in it and to it'.<sup>52</sup> He who enters, visits or crosses a room exposes the disposition of all 'that is (in) the room'. Furthermore, he also exposes himself, and it is 'in this way that he is [a] "self"'.<sup>53</sup> That is, he who enters the room is a self in relation to itself and to the room, a self existing ecstatically in the *there* of the room/world, exposing and exposed. Simon Critchley observes:

The self is the element that comes to itself in the there of the world [...] the self comes to itself insofar as it is disposed (pre-reflectively, pre-cognitively, pre-representationally) towards the world. [...] Being a self, for Nancy, is through and through based in the "with", the with-world and the with-others [...] To-be-there is to-be-with and to-be-with is to make sense, to understand that sense is something that "we" make.<sup>54</sup>

And sense, like being, *is* when it is towards something (being, as Heikkilä observes, is practically another name for the notion of sense in Nancy's philosophy).<sup>55</sup> 'All being is being *towards* something (*être-à*), which signifies that senses emerge only out of relations between singular beings', that is, a relation between singulars.<sup>56</sup> (Heikkilä notes that Nancy speaks of 'singulars', and also of 'self' or 'existent', to avoid using the term 'subject'.<sup>57</sup>) The self outside of self,

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<sup>51</sup> Martta Heikkilä, *At the Limits of Presentation*, pp. 21, 121, 125.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Simon Critchley, 'With Being-With? Notes on Jean-Luc Nancy's Rewriting of Being and Time', in *Studies in Practical Philosophy*, 1 (1999), 53-67, p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> Martta Heikkilä, *At the Limits of Presentation*, p. 114.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73 (emphasis in original).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

being outside of itself, being out in the world, exposed to the world and to itself, appearing in the world and with the world, making sense.

For Nancy, 'sense' is not signification (which would be an exact and fixed meaning); rather, sense is polysemic (like 'sense' in English, *sens* in French can refer to direction, meaning or bodily sense – touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing). Sense, preceding the separation between the sensible and the intellectual, is in excess of signification.<sup>58</sup> Ian James further articulates Nancy's *sense* and its site of passage: 'the passage of sense is ... the opening of a spatial world as meaningful or intelligible, but is also the contact or touch of something concrete or material.' Sense thus – operating in excess of the traditional philosophical distinction between the intelligible and the sensible – is prior to conscious thought or cognition and it is the precondition for linguistic meanings and signification. In Nancy's 'bodily ontology', sense is 'material', for it implies that through our embodied existence we generate bodily know-how, we make sense of the world by orienting our bodies toward the world. Sense takes place between bodies, and the body is the site of passage of sense or, as Nancy puts it in *Corpus*, 'the site of the body is *the taking place of sense*'.<sup>59</sup> In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy writes:

The ontology of being-with is an ontology of bodies, of every body, whether they be inanimate, animate, sentient, speaking, thinking, having weight, and so on. Above all else, "body" really means what is outside, insofar as it is outside, next to, against, nearby, with a(n) (other) body, from body to body, in the dis-position. Not only does a body go from one "self" to an "other," it is *as itself* from the very first; it goes from itself to itself; whether made of stone, wood, plastic, or flesh, a body is the sharing of and the departure from self, the departure toward self, the nearby-to-self without which the "self" would not even be "on its own" ["à part soi"].<sup>60</sup>

The body, being 'what is outside', is exposed. In being ex-posed, the body exposes the mode of being as 'existence': this is the being of *Dasein* – being-there,

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. See also Jeffrey S. Librett, 'Sense', in *The Nancy Dictionary*, ed. by Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 213-215.

<sup>59</sup> Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, pp. 94, 106-107 (emphasis in original). As James observes, Nancy's thinking of the body and of space relates to that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For a discussion of the role of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology on Nancy's account of embodiment, see *ibid.*, pp. 121-130.

<sup>60</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 84 (emphasis in original).

being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, the 'essence of *Dasein* lies in its existence', that is, the human being as a 'who' shaped by a finite existence, by existence in time.<sup>61</sup> Existence, as Nancy explicates it after the German philosopher, is the 'ek-static' nature of being – existence is ek-sistence, the ex-position of being which exposes its singularity. 'A singularity is always a body, and all bodies are singularities'.<sup>62</sup> Unlike Heidegger, who apparently does not speak much about the body, Nancy starts from the question of the body to articulate the relation between the body and existence, which could be called 'exposure': existence exposes the body and the body is the exposure of existence.<sup>63</sup> Existence is the being there of being, the being body of being. Being-with is the being with of bodies, of bodies interlacing, of bodies being exposed and exposing existence, where existence is a singular exposition of being. In *Corpus*, Nancy writes that bodies are 'places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a *there*, a "here," a "here is," for a *this* [...] The body *is* the being of existence. The body registers the fact that "existence has no essence, but only ex-ists".<sup>64</sup> That is, the body is what is outside and it exposes existence as a manner of being that is being outside of itself, being-*there*. Thus 'bodies are existence, the very act of ex-istence, *being*'.<sup>65</sup> The body is the 'being-exposed' of being, exposed to itself and to the world, ex-sisting, ek-sisting, addressing itself from the outside in what Nancy calls 'exscription' or a 'writing out' of itself.<sup>66</sup> In *exscribing* itself, the body thus exists; it exists by exposing itself to other bodies and to the world: "Ontology of the body" = exscription of being. Existence addressed to an out-side'.<sup>67</sup> The body – dislocated, displaced – exscribes itself on the wall of a cave.

It is the 'existence addressed to an outside' that we find when returning with Jean-Luc Nancy to the painting in the grotto. By leaving a mark on the wall of the cave, our ancestor displays his existence in the world, that is, his coming into

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<sup>61</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, reprinted 2010), p. 67. See also Simon Critchley, 'Being and Time, part 2: On 'mineness'', *The Guardian*, 15 June 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jun/15/heidegger-being-time-philosophy>> [accessed 23 November 2015].

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Daniele Rugo, *Powers of Existence: The Question of Otherness in the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy* (Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, 2010) <<http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/2643/>> [accessed 25 November 2015], pp. 21, 116.

<sup>64</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) p. 15 (emphases in original).

<sup>65</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 19 (emphasis in original).

<sup>66</sup> See Martta Heikkilä, *At the Limits of Presentation*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>67</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 19.

being in the world, appearing in the world and *with* it, alongside it. This ancestor, that we take as human, addresses us with the news of its existence, exposing it as singular, ecstatically; the human is a body exposed to itself, to other bodies and to the world: self outside of self, ex-sistence ex-posed. Existence exposed alongside its strangeness, for the body extended and inscribed outside of itself (*eks-scribed*), on the rock's surface, exposes a resemblance that surprises, for it is an apparition or presentation of a self that is unrecognizable to itself. Yet, it is through the exposition of its existence through the alterity of a figure that it recognizes itself, 'or rather, it recognizes the "strangeness" of its being'.<sup>68</sup> The human in the grotto thus comes into being as it is exposed, as it is put outside of itself and stands outside of itself, in the strange recognition of a self-recognition or a resemblance that resembles itself. In the cave, the human is always *extraneus*, external, a stranger.

'Man began with the strangeness of his own humanity'. He stood there, facing the recognizable strangeness presented to him, the strangeness of the image that was made present by him as he revealed himself as 'self outside self', where the outside stood for self. The outside is the condition of the stranger. As a stranger he is unrecognizable to himself. Yet, it is only as a stranger that man can recognise himself; outside of self is where he is exposed and recognises himself as human. In this exposure to alterity in the cave, man sees himself as strange and estranged from himself, both in the distance that separates him from the image and, if we follow Bataille, in the distancing from the human beast he was when not yet human. Displaced, he figures his coming into being as he stands at the threshold, detached like the line he traces, figuring out what he is by tracing a figure. For Nancy, the traced figure is the 'trace of the strangeness that comes like an open intimacy', the opening where man is exposed and in this ex-position comes into being:

The traced figure is this very opening, the spacing by which man is brought into the world, and by which the world itself is a world; the event of all presence in its absolute strangeness.

Thus, the painting that begins in the grottos ... is first of all the monstration of the commencement of being, before being the beginning of painting.

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<sup>68</sup> Christopher Fynsk, 'Lascaux and the Question of Origins', p. 13.



Man began with the knowledge of this monstration. *Homo sapiens* is only what it is by virtue of *Homo monstrans*.<sup>69</sup>

*Homo sapiens, Homo monstrans*; the man who knows, the man who shows. His knowledge, as Nancy writes, is that he begins with monstration; he begins by being exposed and by showing his own beginning, by being brought into the world and by bringing a world into being. He begins by seeing himself outside of himself. Yet, he does not see himself, for what he sees facing him is a 'stranger, monstrously similar'. Thus, by looking, he has an encounter with alterity, an encounter with an otherness that is his own, and, in turn, presents himself to us as our human 'other'. Our ancestor is brought into view through the graphic inscriptions, indexical marks that he makes and leaves behind. He comes into view through what he traces and what is a trace of him.

Our ancestor 'gives himself to be seen first by himself and then by the whole of humanity, which comes after him', writes Marie José Mondzain in *Homo Spectator*, suggesting that the images in the grotto produce the first spectator.<sup>70</sup> Echoing Bataille, Mondzain detects in the images 'a signal addressed to us', 'a signal destined for our look'. But are we simply spectators? If these images are addressed to us, all they ask is that we look? And by looking at the images in the caves, what do we see? Like the ancestor in the grotto millennia ago, we see ourselves seeing; we are exposed to seeing and traversed by seeing something that is not only other but also similar. We see in the traces left by the being who preceded us the otherness in which we can perhaps recognize ourselves, see ourselves as being strangely similar. To look at these traces is to become aware of a becoming of self in the image; to see the self in relation to itself, to its coming and presence to itself and to the world, its being towards the world, exposed and exposing. *Homo monstrans* shows that we are not simply spectators but also participants, engaged because the images demand a response to what they show us in their singularity.

Whereas Georges Bataille's response to the images is underpinned by his viewing experience in the cave of Lascaux, Jean-Luc Nancy's response is not

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<sup>69</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, p. 70.

<sup>70</sup> Marie José Mondzain, *Homo Spectator* (Paris: Bayard, 2007); excerpt from Chapter 1 trans. by Patrick French, <<http://patrickfrench.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/homo-spectator.html>> [accessed 24 November 2015]. In this book, Mondzain does not make any direct references to either Georges Bataille or Jean-Luc Nancy's, although her perspective seems to have been influenced by both.

founded in an immediate sensuous experience in a prehistoric grotto. Rather, it is grounded in his philosophical exploration of art as 'presentation' rather than 'representation'. This involves thinking about art not as 'representation' – i.e., not as having a substitutive function or reproducing an 'original presence' – but rather as 'presentation' – as the exposition of being that comes into presence as a singular presence and not as presence in general.<sup>71</sup> Influenced by the ontological notions of Martin Heidegger, Nancy's assumption is that there is no being (or subject) 'in general' and his thinking on 'being as a singular relation and exposition' lies behind his thinking on art, as Martta Heikkilä asserts. However, the philosophers differ in how they see the relation between art and the notion of 'truth' (or the 'true' underlying reality that art could present): in contrast to Heidegger's thinking of art as bring forth the truth of being (truth understood as 'unconcealment' – *aletheia*), for Nancy art presents *sense* (which is distinct from truth and from signification). According to Heikkilä, Nancy thinks of being as something that 'comes into presence' or is 'born into presence', where 'birth' is an event and thus one can think of 'being as a singular event or a taking place'. A being or thing, in its singularity, 'takes always place in its material *there is*', as well in its singular relation to another.<sup>72</sup> It thus seems that one needs to think of the question of materiality that exists in the relation between singularities, between one and *another*. Nancy is able to think the image in the grotto not from the perspective of an immediate sensuous viewing experience, but from thinking the 'material *there is*' of the body and the inscription in the cave, as well as the body that relates to the other in the grotto and *exscribes* itself in writing. A writing that here invites us to imagine the unimaginable:

Let us imagine the unimaginable, the gesture of the first imager. He proceeds neither at random nor according to a project. His hand advances into a void, hollowed out at that very instant, which separates him from himself instead of prolonging his being in his act. But this separation is the act of his being.<sup>73</sup>

The invitation to imagine the first imager's gesture demonstrates that Nancy, though not visiting the cave, 'follows the artist's hand right along the surface of

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<sup>71</sup> For a short introduction to 'presentation' as a key philosophical concern for Jean-Luc Nancy, see Martta Heikkilä, 'Presentation', in *The Nancy Dictionary*, pp. 190-192.

<sup>72</sup> Martta Heikkilä, *At the Limits of Presentation*, pp. 14, 114, 256, 287.

<sup>73</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, pp. 74-75

the cavern wall'.<sup>74</sup> This allows him to reflect on the exposition of being in the grotto, to consider this exposition of being as embodied existence – being is being-there, exposed in its bodily ex-sistence. Being is being-with, the being of bodies disposed to one another, whether animate or inanimate; thus human and rock, oriented toward each other, exist ecstatically in the *there* of the world, in a material *there* is. The imagining of the creative act thus shows that Nancy's philosophical approach to the question of the image in the cave considers the materiality of the cave itself and the presence of 'the first imager' there – his role in exposing the world by appearing with it, alongside it, separated from himself. In order to see what *Homo monstrans* has to show, we have to imagine his gesture, to follow him into the darkness of the cave, be prepared to have an encounter with that which, after millennia, still touches us. Like our ancestor, we stand at the threshold of a beginning, surprised and touched by the image in the cave; touched by the hand 'left like a trace that leads to nothing but the wall of the grotto...'.<sup>75</sup> Saying we have to follow him into the cave is already to speak of an image, to imagine the world that appears with a gesture.

To imagine the scene of a beginning we have to stand outside of that scene, faced with the distance that witnessing the 'being there' implies, witnessing its own being. Being there not at the end of an activity and not for an end, but in the process of being, always there, against the wall of the cave. He pushes so close to the rock that what is visible becomes invisible, a blur, a hyperopic encounter. An encounter with the rock, earth, pigment, charcoal, texture, resistance and the feeble light of a lamp... a light so incongruous with the darkness of the cave that seeing seems easier in the dark, when the walls do not move with the flickering flame. The cave feels like the end of the world, a world turned inside out. Or turned into itself, as fleshy folds and glimmering calcite tongues hanging from the ceiling of the cave, falling like dribble from the roof of a mouth left open for too long. A mouth open in a gasp, gasping for air after the ecstatic dance trance in the rarefied air of the cave. A mouth open to take in air after blowing the pigment paste onto the wall, close up. Two or three steps back, or the distance of an outstretched arm, within reach of the wall to touch or re-touch the painting, peeling himself away from the wall. Another two steps back to see the mark left on the wall. There, as a vestige, the trace of a hand.

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<sup>74</sup> Christopher Fynsk, 'Lascaux and the Question of Origins', p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, p. 77.

Thus, the traced hands, probably with the help of some stencilling technique (what are called 'negative hands'), which are today the earliest known paintings [...] these hands present nothing other than presentation itself, its open gesture, its displaying, its aperity, its patefaction – and its stupefaction. The hand posed, pressed against the wall, grasps nothing. It is no longer a prehensile hand, but its offered like the form of an impossible or abandoned grasp. A grasp that could as well let go. [...] Detached from any taking and from any undertaking other than that of exposing itself, in a chiromancy with nothing to decipher, the hand of the first painter, the first self-portrait, shows itself naked and silent, assuming an insignificance that is altogether denied when it grasps an instrument, an object, or prey.<sup>76</sup>

The hand, pressed against the rock, is open, exposed; exposed and vulnerable as the being whose body is imprinted on the cave wall. No longer the hand that makes or grasps prey, this hand is now useless, naked and silent. Detached from the body, the hand does not speak of the rituals in which it may have participated; quiet, it does not break the silence of the cave. Yet, in a cluster the hands dance as if taking part in a ritual of their own, or is it our eyes that dance following them? Each hand a pulsating pause between movements, like the thump of heartbeat that breaks the silence of the body inside an anechoic chamber. If the images of animals in the cave appear to move, the imprint of the human hand could be said to be arrested movement, the moment when the hand feels the force of the rock. Each single hand is static, the only movement the steps toward the wall, the arm stretched in advance of the body that touches the rock, the encounter with a resistance, with a limit. Palm and fingers pressed against the dense stony surface. Here, more than the movement of a dance, we sense pressure against the resistance and density of the rock and the force necessary to make an impression. In this encounter there is both gravity and weightlessness, for meaning does not weigh down the imprint of the hand on the wall, which is anchored there, detached from the body, floating without a name. The hand does not signify, but shows that the being that preceded us was there, that it existed. 'Being simply existing'.<sup>77</sup> The hand that touches the rock exposes the space that separates two bodies as the bodies touch, for touch presents the 'moment of sensuous exteriority'.<sup>78</sup> Both detached from the body and anchored in it, the hand

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

is suspended and fixed to the cave wall as an image, an image that is silent and which for Nancy exposes detachment:

Image, here, is not the convenient or inconvenient double of a thing in the world: it is the glory of that thing, its epiphany, its distinction from its own mass and its own appearance. The image praises the thing as detached from the universe of things and shown to be detached as is the whole of the world.<sup>79</sup>

The stretched-out hand is traced or imprinted on the wall and within the limits of its form – its border a blurred edge created with crushed charcoal or pigment paste – it inscribes the human whose gesture made its existence manifest. Through gestures rising from a body coming into contact with an inanimate body, the prehistoric human exposes and is exposed to its existence. The image of an open hand in the cave presents existence in a world, where existence, as Nancy asserts in *Corpus*, ‘has no essence, but only ex-sists’; there, on the outside, existence is exposed as a manner of being that is being outside of itself, being-*there*. There, on the cave, it communicates its humanity and existence to itself, and addresses us with the news of our own. Essentially, our prehistoric ancestor communicates the ‘passion of existence itself – an emotion before the fact of being’;<sup>80</sup> a wondrous encounter. The human in the grotto trembles at its coming and presence to itself, of its coming into the world and of being-towards the world; for what surges forth in the event of being is the opening of a world where the mode of being is ‘being-to’ or ‘being-toward’ (to itself and to the world) and by implication ‘being-with’. Its being in the world brings a world into being. The mimetic gesture gives birth to a form, a painting that is the ‘the monstration of the commencement of being, before being the beginning of painting’; it presents the strangeness of being that also fills the first imager, and us, with wonder, as Nancy writes:

Man began in the calmly violent silence of a gesture: here, on the wall, the continuity of being was interrupted by the birth of a form, and this form, detached from everything, even detaching the wall from its opaque thickness, gave one to see the strangeness of the being, substance, or animal that traced it, and the strangeness of all being in him.

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>80</sup> Christopher Fynsk, ‘Lascaux and the Question of Origins’, p. 14

At this man trembled, and this trembling was him.

If we are moved, fascinated, and touched in our souls by the images from the caves of our prehistory [...] it is not only because of their troubling antiquity, but rather because we sense the emotion that was born with them, this emotion was their very birth: laughter and fear, desire and astonishment in the face of this obviousness, as powerful as the wall of massive rock, according to which the figural contour completes what cannot be completed, finishes the non-finite, and does not thereby withdraw it from the infinite but, quite the contrary, gives it the dizzying space of its presentation without end.<sup>81</sup>

He touches the wall of massive rock and, for the first time, 'he touches the wall not as a support, nor as an obstacle or something to lean on, but as a place, if one can touch a place.'<sup>82</sup> This is the place where the estrangement of being happens, the place where being is exscribed. The hand that touches the solid wall thus opens a distance; it separates the first imager from what was left by and of his gesture on the surface of the rock. The imprinted hand is the mimetic gesture that in its resemblance of itself resembles nothing, much less the body that created it, the being whose absence is already configured by this imprint. 'Not a presence, but its vestige or its birth, its nascent vestige, its trace, its monster.'<sup>83</sup> There, as a vestige, the trace of a hand. There, in the monstration of self outside of self, he is exposed in his absence.

In a single blow, in a same first gesture, about twenty-five thousand years ago, the *animal monstrans* shows itself. It would show nothing if it did not show itself showing. [...] For to show [*montrer*] is nothing other than to set aside, to set at a distance of presentation, to exit from pure presence, to make absent and thus to absolutize.<sup>84</sup>

The *animal monstrans* shows itself showing. In order to show, it needs to absent itself, to withdraw the hand that has just drawn on the cave wall. This hand 'opens the gaping hole of a presence that has just absented itself by advancing its

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<sup>81</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, p. 74.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

hand.<sup>85</sup> The hand that draws and is drawn does not equate to pure presence, rather, it touches the place where the interruption of being happens to allow for the exposition of being, being-there, ex-posed. The hand on the wall of the grotto exposes the coming into presence of being in this singular event; in the materiality of a *there is*, a mark left on the rock, the taking-place of being. What is left is not only the imprint of the hand as trace, as vestige, but also the vestige of a 'birth into presence'. The hand imprinted on the rock does not represent, rather, it presents itself as vestige, marking the passage of a being and its touch right there at the wall. As Nancy points out in 'The Vestige of Art', the vestige is 'the remains of a step, a *pas*. It is not its image, for the step consists in nothing other than its own vestige'.<sup>86</sup> The *animal monstrans* shows the strangeness of the monstration of being, of self outside of self, of making existence manifest by absenting itself and, in turn, presenting itself alongside the world, a presence already withdrawn from the scene of its inscription.

We may not know precisely why they left such marks on the walls of the caves; in their darkness we immerse ourselves in the night of not knowing, wonderstruck by this encounter with an inscrutable past. We are touched by the images left in 'the caves of our prehistory' not only on account of their antiquity, as Nancy points out, but rather because our affective response seems to parallel that of our forebear in the cave: in our encounter with the *other* who is our ancestor and the images they left behind, their vestige, we are exposed to the passion of existence itself; in their otherness we sense the emotion of being as simply ek-sisting, the existence of a body ex-posed, existence exposing a body that moves, gestures, touches. Our prehistoric ancestor touches the solid rock, touching in advance of seeing, leaving an imprint, a material trace of its gesture and its existence. With this gesture, the *animal monstrans* exposes the outline of its own absence, the strangeness of a resemblance that is already a vestige. We see in advance of touching; by seeing vestiges of hands on the wall of a cave we are exposed to a world of sensual immediacy, touched by 'phantom hands'. The paintings of hands in the grotto – at once painting, touch, vestige – inscribe and expose an absence; they are marks of the passage of a being and its touch, traces of an existence. We may not know why these marks were made, all we know is that *being* was *there*, simply ek-sisting; presenting the world itself as the site of a passing.

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>86</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, p. 98 (emphasis in original).

## THE CONTACT OF AN ABSENCE

If Casteret [...] called the hands of Gargas “phantom hands”, it may be because he sensed the paradox at work in these imprints: the collision of a *there* and a *not-there*, of *contact* and of *absence*. The imprint in this sense as the *contact of an absence* explains the power of its relation to time, which is the ghostly power of the ‘revenant’, of remnants: things departed, far away, but that remain before us, close to us, signalling to us their absence.<sup>87</sup>

*Georges Didi-Huberman*

The imprint of a hand, born of a gesture, gestures to its own survival as one of the earliest paintings, an image born of the direct contact between body and material support. The form of the contact image is not so much the product of formal invention as it emerges from a touch and comes to resemble what generated it through the simplest of processes. This ancient process of imprinting produces an image that, in semiotic terms, is both iconic (it resembles the object it depicts) and indexical (it is produced by contact with the object, by a physical or existential connection).<sup>88</sup> These terms are drawn from the semiotic theory developed by C.S. Peirce, but of special interest here is the notion of index, which refers to a sign that relates to its object by a relationship of ‘existential contiguity’, such as a footprint.<sup>89</sup> For although the formal similarity to the hand of the imager allows the recognition of human presence in the cave, the affective force of the image seems to stem from its indexical character as a residue or trace of that presence – for the handprint to appear, the hand must first make contact and then be taken away. The index points to the imprint’s immediate relation to the body, to the capacity of a process to produce a direct material record of touch that displays our ancestor’s singular existence in the world. In this encounter with the paintings of hands in the cave – the hands of children, women and men – we are faced with signs that in their physical relationship to their referents indicate their absence. The hands imprinted on the wall of the cave are, to use Didi-Huberman’s phrase, ‘the contact of an absence’; therein they pulsate with *the power of what touches beyond time, as that which survives*.

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<sup>87</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par contact – archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l’empreinte* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2008), p. 47 (emphases in original) [my translation].

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>89</sup> See David Macey, *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, p. 201.



The image as the survival of contact – of a gesture that becomes image and matter – coincides with that which survives in the image – touch itself, or rather, its vestige, the trace of a presence. As trace, the handprint is an impression directly taken off the real, like a footprint that announces the passing of a being. A material vestige of someone no longer present. As the trace of a presence, the handprint is an indexical mark left by a being now departed, it is the index manifested as trace. As such, the imprint bears a relation to time, for it recalls an anterior event or an object that was present in the past. This object, now absent, infuses the mark with its spectral presence; the index as trace points to ‘past presence and present absence’.<sup>90</sup> In common with the prehistoric handprint, the works discussed later in this thesis manifest their condition as the ‘contact of an absence’ through their operation, which is that of the trace. Similarly to the imprint, their materiality exposes the residue of presence through a gesture that survives as that which touches.



The imprints of hands in the caves of prehistory are images born of contact, a contact that survives in them; the past of their making touching the present of our viewing. How to think about survival in relation to the image made by contact? How to consider the knotting of different times in the imprint? How to read the image?

In his book *La Ressemblance par Contact – Archéologie, Anachronisme, et Modernité de L’empreinte*, the French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman proposes to think the imprint from an anachronistic point of view, that is, not limited to the circumstances of the time of its creation but, rather, as an image that conjugates the different times of the survivals it embodies: the imprint is an image that is the survival of its absent referent; an image that survives and thus traverses time; an image in which heterogeneous times are subsumed and irrupt; an image of the forgotten that returns; an image whose temporal model is ‘survival’.<sup>91</sup> To think the imprint as anachronistic image is to think of an image

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<sup>90</sup> For a discussion of the ‘index as trace’, see Margaret Iversen, ‘Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace’, *Tate Papers*, 18 (Autumn 2012), <<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/18/index-diagram-graphic-trace>> [accessed 30 November 2016].

<sup>91</sup> Didi-Huberman’s approach to the temporal complexity of the imprint is guided foremost by Aby Warburg’s concept of *Nachleben*, translated by him into French as ‘*survivance*’, or ‘survival’. See Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘Panofsky vs. Warburg and the

that belongs to its own time but is simultaneously the conjunction of distinct temporalities, as per Walter Benjamin's concept of 'dialectical image':<sup>92</sup>

It is not that the past casts its light on the present, or the present casts its light on the past: rather an image is that in which the Then and the Now come into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the Then to the Now is dialectical: it is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.<sup>93</sup>

In suspending the linear progression of time, the dialectical image is that in which the 'Then' becomes graspable in the 'Now of cognizability' or the 'Now of readability'. That is, the past may attain a readability at a particular point in time, when its singularities and their interrelations become visible.<sup>94</sup> The image Benjamin speaks of is not linked to representation but to an instantaneous cognition or insight: the dialectical image appears in a flash; the image is a flashlike cognition.<sup>95</sup> Like an analogue photograph exposed but not yet developed, knowledge has a time of latency – it remains unconscious until it can

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Exorcism of Impure Time', trans. by Vivian Rehberg and Boris Belay, *Common Knowledge*, 9, 2 (Spring 2003), 273-285; Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par contact*, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> In *La Ressemblance par Contact*, Didi-Huberman refers to Benjamin's formulation of the concept of the dialectical image as a remarkable hypothesis on the anachronism of works of art; see Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par contact*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12 – 13, 109. On the imprint as an anachronistic object, see the book's opening text: 'Ouverture – Sur un Point de Vue Anachronique', pp. 11-23. For a sustained discussion of anachronism, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2000); or its Spanish translation, *Ante el tiempo: Historia del arte y anacronismo de las imágenes*, trans. by Antonio Oviedo (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo, 2011).

<sup>93</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Supposition of the Aura', in *Walter Benjamin and History*, ed. by Andrew E. Benjamin (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>94</sup> On Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image', see Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Georgina Paul, Rachel McNicholl, and Jeremy Gaines (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), PDF ebook, pp. 17, 45, 109 *et passim*. On Benjamin's articulation of readability see Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space*; Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Opening the Camps, Closing the Eyes: Image, History, Readability', in *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog (1955)*, ed. by Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), pp. 84 – 125.

<sup>95</sup> Writing about the 'image' as a key concept in Benjamin's theoretical work, which is 'famously characterized as thinking-in-images', Weigel states: 'In his epistemology the image is linked not to representation but to a simultaneous, instantaneous cognition (*Erkenntnis*) or insight (*Einsicht*).' Sigrid Weigel, 'The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-Based Epistemology and Its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History', *Critical Inquiry*, 41, 2 (Winter 2015), 344–366, (pp. 344–345) (emphasis in original).

come to the fore at a different time; it is through language that the movement of the image as flash of lightning (perception) is arrested as thunder (reflection):<sup>96</sup>

[...] knowledge comes only flashlike. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.<sup>97</sup>

Benjamin associates the flashlike irruption of an image with the moment of awakening, the threshold between dreaming and wakefulness. 'The Now of recognisability is the moment of awakening', he writes.<sup>98</sup> He employs the figure of 'awakening' to indicate a readability that is not a 'deciphering of clues', rather a 'reading of memory traces'; for him awakening and remembering are intimately related.<sup>99</sup> As Sigrid Weigel reminds us, Benjamin's concept of the readability of images is based on a theory of memory, and probably owes much to Sigmund Freud's model of the topographic structure of memory.<sup>100</sup> The Benjaminian image, readable in the 'Now of cognizability' and offering a not yet conscious knowledge of things past, could thus be linked to Freud's conception of the readability of memory traces inscribed in the unconscious.

Now let us briefly turn our attention to Freud's model of memory. In order to think how the psychic apparatus can have an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and also store 'permanent memory-traces', Freud examines the interplay between its two systems – perception-consciousness and the unconscious – through a model of memory that has become known as the

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<sup>96</sup> Sigrid Weigel, 'The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images', pp. 351-352.

<sup>97</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 351, 365-366. For a discussion of the figure of lightning in Benjamin, see Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 21-26; for the author, Benjamin's vocabulary of lightning 'names the movement of writing and inscription' and is connected to the 'flashes of memory'.

<sup>98</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in Gerhard Richter, *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), p. 193.

<sup>99</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space*, pp. 102 – 109. On 'awakening', see *ibid.*, p. 102 *et passim*: 'In the early sketches for the *Passagen*, Benjamin works at a dialectical mode of observation which he himself terms a 'Copernican turning point in the perception of history' [...] and which he discovers, in connection with the relation between dream and consciousness, in the constellation of awakening: on the threshold, then, between dream and waking. The turning point in the perception of history [...] is to be understood thus: that awakening, characterized as the 'exemplary case of recollection' [...] gives access to a different kind of knowledge of things past, to 'a not yet conscious knowledge of the has-been' (GS V.2, 1014) or to the dream form of the past which has left its traces in the present [...].'

<sup>100</sup> See Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space*, pp. 43, 99, 106. Weigel suggests that although not always explicit, a clear affinity between Benjamin's and Freud's theory may be contended.

'Mystic Writing-Pad' after a child's toy. This toy, called *Wunderblock* in German, consists of a celluloid sheet and a sheet of waxed paper over a slab of wax. By exerting pressure on the top layer with a stylus a graphic mark is made; the graphic trace on the paper disappears once the top sheets are lifted, but a material impression remains on the wax below as trace and is legible under suitable lighting.<sup>101</sup> Overtime, the wax tablet retains the vestiges of the marks made by the stylus as a permanent network of traces. Freud uses the 'Mystic Writing-Pad' as a metaphor for memory, offering an image of the layering of conscious and unconscious mind, and the inscription and readability of memory traces.

Freud employs the concept of the readability of 'memory traces' to suggest a relation between memory, consciousness and the unconscious. These permanent traces are for him 'the foundation of memory', a form of writing whose readability is never straightforward nor accomplished in its entirety, involving as it does the form of a distorted representation.<sup>102</sup> In Freud's model, consciousness receives new perceptions but retains no permanent trace of them, whereas the unconscious becomes engraved with a writing palimpsest, a network of enduring traces that remain hidden (the unconscious for Freud being analogous to the wax slab of the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'). Only momentarily do the mnemonic traces become discernible, rising into view and disappearing again, their readability bound to what Freud refers to as the 'flickering-up and passing away of consciousness in the process of perception' (they are readable at the instant a connection between perception and permanent trace is established).<sup>103</sup> The flickering readability of memory traces in Freud finds its equivalent in Benjamin's readability of the images of the 'Then', who in a similar vein writes that '[t]he true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its cognizability, and is never to be seen

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<sup>101</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'A Note upon the "Mystic Writing-Pad" (1925)', in *General psychological theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. by Philip Rieff (New York: Touchstone, 1997), pp. 207-212. See also Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', pp. 18-19.

<sup>102</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space*, pp. 105. For an analysis of Freud's 'Mystic Writing Pad' and its relation to writing, see Jacques Derrida, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005), PDF ebook, pp. 251, 278 – 287.

<sup>103</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space*, pp. 105, 109.

again'.<sup>104</sup> This image is a flashlike cognition, a dialectical image that appears in a flash, a not yet conscious knowledge of the 'Then'.

In Walter Benjamin's 'thinking-in-images', memory develops like a photographic plate when exposed to impressions. Yet, it is due to shock, he contends, that we retain enduring 'memory-images', since shock isolates 'memory-images' from ordinary memories. Shock is part of memory's operations and its production of images.<sup>105</sup> The example he gives in the autobiographical 'Berlin Chronicle' is that of the connection between remembering the details of his childhood bedroom (which otherwise would have been forgotten in their familiarity) and being given news of a relative's death by his father. In Benjamin's metaphor of memory as photographic plate, shock is a moment that helps to illuminate the scene to be imprinted on the 'plate of remembrance', like a flash obtained from a magnesium flare:

Anyone can observe that the length of time during which we are exposed to impressions has no bearing on their fate in memory. Nothing prevents our keeping rooms in which we have spent twenty-four hours more or less clearly in our memory, and forgetting others in which we passed months. It is not, therefore, due to insufficient exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance. More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixes the room's image on the plate. It is we ourselves, however, who are always standing at the center of these rare images. Nor is this very mysterious, since such moments of sudden illumination are at the same time moments when we separated from ourselves, and while our waking, habitual, everyday self is involved actively or passively in what is happening, our deeper self rests in another place and is touched by the shock, as is a little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match. It is to this immolation of our deepest self in shock that our memory owes its indelible images.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in Sigrid Weigel, 'The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images', p. 365.

<sup>105</sup> See Sigrid Weigel, 'The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images', pp. 361-363. On the photographic metaphor and shock, see also Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 80-81.

<sup>106</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, part 2: 1931-1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others; ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland

Benjamin creates an image of a deep self burnt by a flash of lighting that illuminates what had been cloaked in darkness by habit; a flash so strong that breaches the psyche's protective shield in a manner similar to Freud's description of the rupture of the protective layer by powerful 'traumatic' external excitations.<sup>107</sup> Shock thus can be said to play a part in impressing an image on the 'memory-plate'. And that image of the forgotten past may eventually resurface in consciousness in a flash, allowing a recollection of the significant traces imprinted in the deepest self, or unconscious.<sup>108</sup> Benjamin, like Freud, is preoccupied with the relationship between memory and consciousness, with the 'writing' that flashes up out of the traces impressed on things and on the body. He views memory as a medium and also as a scene, the scene of writing, since scenic images become readable like writing; it is in the scene of individual and collective memory that he locates the reading of the traces and images of history.<sup>109</sup> Benjamin did not structure his recollections of childhood as chronological autobiography, but rather as 'discrete expeditions into the depth of memory'.<sup>110</sup> Thus in his model of memory the image of excavation becomes a favoured representational allegory:

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This determines the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. They must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand – like

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and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 632-633.

<sup>107</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', pp. 22-23. See also Sigmund Freud, 'A Note upon the "Mystic Writing-Pad" (1925)', p. 210.

<sup>108</sup> On Benjamin's reflection on temporal displacement, see Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), pp. 130-131.

<sup>109</sup> For Benjamin, 'history appears not in the temporal dimension, but as a scene. The historical scene and the scene of writing are thus identical for him, since the scenic images of history become readable images—like writing.' See Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and-Image-Space*, pp. 43, 100-101.

<sup>110</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, 'Benjamin's Passagen-Werk: Redeeming Mass Culture for the Revolution', *New German Critique*, 29, (Spring – Summer 1983), 211-240, (p. 219).

precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery – in the sober rooms of our later insights.<sup>111</sup>

Memory, as both site and process of archaeological excavation, brings to the surface fragments of the past. The dialectical image emerges from the traces of the past as a transient and involuntary moment of remembrance. It emerges as a lightning flash, irrupting as an image of the past (or the past condensed into an image) collides with the present moment in which it can be read; past and present forming a constellation of incandescent stars that, in the dark, burn with enough intensity for an image to emerge from its luminous points.<sup>112</sup> In the encounter with the images of the past, it is not a history of the past but *memory* – as the ‘scene of writing’ – that brings to the present what had been hidden. Thus what is at stake is not a chronological reconstruction of past events, since the pure or ‘exact past’ does not exist, but a ‘decanting’ of the past through memory; memory as a ‘non-historical’ montage of time.<sup>113</sup> Memory suspends historical time (understood as a linear progression, history as progress) and by rubbing the past against the present introduces anachronism. The time we confront ‘is not the time of dates’, as Didi-Huberman suggests in *Devant les temps*, but something different, a time called memory:

This time that *is not exactly the past* has a name: it is *memory*. It is memory that decants the past from its exactitude. It is memory that humanises and configures time [...] It is memory that the historian summons and interrogates, not exactly “the past”. There is no history that it is not commemorative or mnemotechnical [...] memory is *psychic* in its process, *anachronistic* in its effects of montage, of reconstruction or of a “decanting” of time. One cannot accept the commemorative dimension of history without accepting, at the same time, its anchoring in the unconscious and its anachronistic dimension.<sup>114</sup>

Memory brings into view those details or fragments that flash up and disappear again; it makes visible the collision of contradictory temporalities. It is necessary

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<sup>111</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Berlin Chronicle’, in *Selected Writings*, p. 611.

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin connects the figure of the constellation to the dialectical image in a letter to Gretel Adorno, see Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light*, pp. 28, 139 (note 27).

<sup>113</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ante el Tiempo*, p. 59 (all translations from the Spanish are mine, unless otherwise stated).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60 (emphasis in original).

to appeal to the 'Then', to summon it, to accept the shock of memory whilst refusing a return to the 'past' in order to produce a dialectical image.<sup>115</sup> Thus, through memory, we are not encouraged to return to the past, but to return to the fragile moment of awakening (a dialectical moment in Benjamin's eyes) and to read memory traces. Readability can only irrupt in the Now. From the collision of the Then and the Now an image emerges, an image in which heterogeneous times come together into a *constellation*, bright stars, a flash that illuminates the memory it contains.



In the opening pages of *Devant le temps: histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, Georges Didi-Huberman articulates the link between time and image (in his example a painting), and the image as a site of memory. He places the image as central in thinking temporality, for it carries in itself memory – a montage of heterogeneous times. His encounter with a mottled painted surface, a patch below the *Madonna delle Ombre* by Fra Angelico in the convent of San Marco in Florence, stops him in his tracks and leads to an analysis that highlights how this image (neglected by art historians) allows him to recognise the memory it contains and evokes, how it exposes anachronism as internal to images, how it intertwines heterogeneous times:

Whenever we are before the image, we are before time. [...] Before an image, however old it may be, the present never ceases to reshape, provided that the dispossession of the gaze has not entirely given way to the vain complacency of the "specialist." Before an image, however recent, however contemporary it may be, the past never ceases to reshape, since this image only becomes thinkable in a construction of the memory [...] But how are we to be equal to all the temporalities that this image, before us, conjugates on so many levels? And first of all, how are we to account for the present of this experience, for the memory it evoked, and for the future it promised?<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Supposition of the Aura', in *Walter Benjamin and History*, p. 8.

<sup>116</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant les temps*, pp. 9-10. English translation taken from Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism', trans. by Peter Mason, in *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art In and Out of History*, ed. by Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 31, 33 (emphasis in original).



The painted surface of the marginal panels in the Dominican artist's fresco is for Didi-Huberman an '*extraordinary montage of heterogeneous times forming anachronisms*.'<sup>117</sup> The French thinker offers a reading of Fra Angelico as an anachronistic artist, that is, both an artist of his time and against his time; an artist who manipulated times that were not his own. Therefore, this kind of visuality should be contemplated, Didi-Huberman writes, from the 'perspective of its memory' (its manipulations of time) – the work contains the historical past (its contemporary) as well as the '*more-than-past*' of memory. The latter becomes accessible through the '*more-than-present*' of an act of reminiscence in the form of a shock, an irruption of time such as that classified as 'involuntary memory' by Proust and Benjamin.<sup>118</sup> The image, in its anachronism, unveils a temporal complexity – it manifests a disruption of time.

Didi-Huberman considers anachronism a fertile approach, for it shows that images are complex and overdetermined, temporally impure objects.<sup>119</sup> If images are temporally impure, if anachronism is part and parcel of them, if they carry their own memory, would they not need a different kind of engagement, one that takes into account the intertwining of the different temporalities contained and evoked by them? The history of art would thus be already, as Didi-Huberman asserts, an anachronistic discipline. Furthermore, this points to a recognition of 'everything past' as anachronistic, as he writes in *Confronting Images*:

The grandeur and misery of the historian: his desire will always be suspended between the tenacious melancholy of the past as an *object of loss* and the fragile victory of the past as an *object of recovery*, or object of representation. He tries to forget, but cannot, that the words "desire," "imagination," "fantasy" are there precisely to remind him of a fault that makes constant demands of him: the past of the historian — the past in general — stems from the impossible, stems from the *unthinkable*. We still have some monuments, but we no longer know the world that required them; we still have some words, but we no longer know the utterances that sustained them; we still have some images, but we no longer know the gazes that gave them flesh; we have descriptions of rites, but we no longer

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<sup>117</sup> Didi-Huberman, 'Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism', p. 38 (emphasis in original). Didi-Huberman identifies at least three temporalities at play in this image, which borrows from both visual and textual traditions; see *ibid.* pp. 37-38.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 40-41.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 42.

know either their phenomenology or their exact efficacy value. What does this mean? That everything past is definitively *anachronistic*: it exists or subsists only through the figures that we make of it; so it exists only in the operations of a “reminiscing present,” a present endowed with the admirable or dangerous power, precisely, of *presenting* it, and, in the wake of this presentation, of elaborating and representing it.<sup>120</sup>

In Georges Didi-Huberman’s critique of a traditional art historical practice preoccupied with progress and continuity, anachronism is offered as an alternative model to consider temporality. To think art history as an anachronistic discipline, he turns not only to Benjamin’s notion of ‘dialectical image’, but also to Aby Warburg’s concept of *Nachleben* – afterlife or ‘survival’. These two German thinkers are for him the ones who best analysed the sedimentation of history in memory, showing that time is the true dimension of images and, reciprocally, the image is the true dimension – or ‘readability’ in Benjamin’s words – of history.<sup>121</sup> Didi-Huberman’s approach provides a model with which to consider the complexity of artworks, a model that challenges the interpretative ‘certainties’ of art history.

According to Didi-Huberman, orthodox art history shuns anachronism and attempts to interpret images echronistically, that is, from the perspective of ‘the artist and his time’, assuming that the image is made up of legible signs and thus open to an interpretation that will determine its meaning. In contrast to this he challenges the assumption that the image’s ‘visibility’ would imply a direct ‘legibility’, i.e., that the image is entirely readable, that everything is already coded and awaits interpretation, that to see is to know.<sup>122</sup> Didi-Huberman is reluctant to impose meaning on the image; his approach recognises that meaning is deferred and unstable and that the image is a rupture (‘image as rend’) in the field of the visible – rather than a visual symbol, he sees the image as a symptom.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 38 (emphasis in original).

<sup>121</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘La condition des images. Entretien avec Frédéric Lambert et François Niney’, *Médiamorphoses*, 22 (2008), 5–17, <[http://documents.irevues.inist.fr/bitstream/handle/2042/28239/2007\\_19\\_06.pdf?sequence=1](http://documents.irevues.inist.fr/bitstream/handle/2042/28239/2007_19_06.pdf?sequence=1)> [accessed 15 March 2016], p. 12.

<sup>122</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between the visible, the legible and knowledge, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, pp. 11–16. In *Confronting Images* Didi-Huberman analyses and critiques at length the discipline of art history.

<sup>123</sup> For an overview of Didi-Huberman’s critique of art history and approach to images, see Matthew Rampley, ‘The Poetics of the Image: Art History and the Rhetoric of

His is a productive use of the notion of symptom in order to reject the type of interpretation offered by those who attempt to decipher the image as if it were a coded message, which he takes issue with: 'The symptom needs to be *interpreted* and not *deciphered* (as the iconologists, heirs to Panofsky's legacy, would like to decipher 'symbolic forms'). The symptom is first a 'silence in the subject supposed to speak' or, put in another way, a 'symbol written on the sand of the flesh'.<sup>124</sup> The symptom does not have an unambiguous meaning – unlike the symbol, it is semantically indeterminate, open to interpretation.

The symptom offers Didi-Huberman a model with which to consider the disruptive power of the detail in an artwork, to think the '*not-knowledge*' that arises from an encounter with an image. Whereas idealist history of art (with its privileging of ideas over materiality) would take the detail to perform a symbolic closure (to represent an idea, to offer the 'key' to a painting's interpretation), Didi-Huberman sees the detail, or *pan* as he refers to it (meaning a section or part), as having the potential to disturb the assumed transparency and coherence of mimetic representation.<sup>125</sup> The section of a painting, for example, not only resists explanation but also points to the structure of which is part; by drawing attention to itself the *pan* brings to the fore the materiality of the paint, its intensity, surface and depth. The pan as symptom presents itself as something that 'obscures the situation': '*a "pan" is a symptom of paint within the picture*'.<sup>126</sup>

Drawing on Freud's work on the symptoms of hysteria and the formation of dreams, both disguised manifestations of unconscious processes, Didi-Huberman writes on the concept of the symptom:

[...] the symptom is a critical event, a singularity, an intrusion, but it is at the same time the implementation of a signifying structure, of a system that

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Interpretation', *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 35 (2008), 7-30, pp. 19-25. On the relevance of the symptom in Georges Didi-Huberman's project, see also Chari Larsson, 'And the Word Becomes Flesh: Georges Didi-Huberman's Symptom in the Image', *EMAJ: Electronic Melbourne Art Journal*, 8 (April 2015), <[https://emajournal.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/larsson\\_and-the-word-becomes-flesh-didi-hubermans-symptom-in-the-image.pdf](https://emajournal.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/larsson_and-the-word-becomes-flesh-didi-hubermans-symptom-in-the-image.pdf)> [accessed 12 February 2016].

<sup>124</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the symptom paradigm', *Art History*, 24, 5 (November 2001), 621-645, p. 640 (emphasis in original).

<sup>125</sup> See Nigel Saint, 'Didi-Huberman, Georges', in *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought*, pp. 173-174. See also the essay 'The Detail and the Pan', published as an appendix to Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, pp. 229-271, esp. p. 269.

<sup>126</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 261 (emphasis in original).

the event is charged with making surge forth, but *partially, contradictorily*, in such fashion that the meaning is expressed only as an enigma or as the “appearance ‘of something,’” not as a stable set of meanings.<sup>127</sup>

The symptom veils itself, metamorphoses, moves and displaces itself. Rather than being a direct representation of a single traumatic origin, according to Freud the symptom is overdetermined, it can mean various things at the same time. It is this sense of slippage of signification or meaning of the symptom that Didi-Huberman brings to his project, as he sustains: ‘The *symbol*, ordinarily made to be understood, becomes *symptom* the moment it displaces itself and loses its primary identity, when its proliferation suffocates its signification, transgressing the limits of its proper semiotic field.’<sup>128</sup> To speak of the symptom is to speak of semantic ambiguity, of unstable meanings.

Didi-Huberman stresses that his borrowing of the notion of symptom from the conceptual universe of psychoanalysis is in no way whatsoever connected to a *clinical* ‘application’ for solving the enigmas of art; rather, it has to do with activating a *critical* paradigm to question representation, to mount a ‘critique of knowledge’ that interrogates the very foundations of art history and the position of the historian as the ‘*subject who knows*’.<sup>129</sup> His critique of representation, attentive to a theory of *figurability*, invokes the possibility of opening up the writing of art through an attention to the ‘*visual* and the *figurable*’, which are subject to what he calls a tyranny: the first under the tyranny of ‘the *visible* (and of imitation)’, the latter under that of ‘the *legible* (and of iconology)’. The work of *figurability*, a kind of displacement that Freud refers to as ‘considerations of presentability’, is important in unconscious formations such as dreams and involves a paradox: figuring consists in *modifying figures*, not producing or inventing them, and thus in performing ‘the insistent work of a disfiguration in the visible’.<sup>130</sup> The symptom becomes a critical tool with which to think ‘not-knowledge’, to consider what *presents* itself in the image as opposed to what is assumed the image *represents*:

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

<sup>128</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the symptom paradigm’, p. 640 (emphasis in original).

<sup>129</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, pp. 6-7, 161-162, 262 (emphasis in original).

<sup>130</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 7-8, 209. See also Freud Museum London, ‘Interpretation of Dreams’, <<https://www.freud.org.uk/education/topic/10576/subtopic/40025/>> [accessed 19 May 2016].

Such are the stakes: to know, but also to think not-knowledge when it unravels the nets of knowledge. To proceed dialectically. Beyond knowledge itself, to commit ourselves to the paradoxical ordeal not to *know* (which amounts precisely to denying it), but to *think* the element of not-knowledge that dazzles us whenever we pose our gaze to an art image.<sup>131</sup>

The image seems to ask that we surrender ourselves, that we relinquish knowledge in a dialectical moment in which we do not grasp the image, but allow ourselves to be grasped by it instead.<sup>132</sup> In this encounter with the art image, with the artwork, we are dazzled by that which is often assumed as a portion of a legible totality, but that instead escapes both totality and knowledge by setting itself simultaneously as *a part* and *apart*. The symptomatic detail brings our attention to the material specificity of the artwork and disrupts knowledge, de-centering the subject of knowledge, placing us instead in the position of the 'subject who does not know'. In doing so, it disturbs the presumed certainties regarding representation and chronological history. Didi-Huberman offers a definition of the symptom which points to its disruptive power; the symptom as a notion that denotes a visual and temporal paradox:

The visual paradox is that of *apparition*: a symptom appears, a symptom arises, interrupts the normal course of events [...] What the *symptom-image* interrupts is nothing other than the normal course of representation [...] one could think it in terms of an *unconscious of representation*. As for the temporal paradox, one recognizes that of *anachronism* [...] What the *symptom-time* interrupts is nothing other than the course of chronological history. [...] one could think it in terms of an *unconscious of history*.<sup>133</sup>

The *symptom-image* makes manifest the discontinuity of time and of a representational order in its weaving of heterogeneous times and of multiple memories, in its bringing together of a number of meanings that can be contradictory and destabilised, in its bringing to the fore and distorting what had been repressed from consciousness. Thus, for Didi-Huberman, to think the historic object (the object of study) one has to also think it as anachronistic and

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<sup>131</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 7 (emphasis in original).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>133</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ante el Tiempo*, pp. 63-64.

symptomatic – ‘there is only a history of anachronisms’, ‘there is only a history of symptoms’ – as he writes in *Devant le temps*.

Didi-Huberman’s thinking of art images as anachronistic and symptomatic is greatly influenced by the German art historian Aby Warburg, whom he considers the first to offer a critical formulation of the convergence of heterogeneous temporalities in a visual object.<sup>134</sup> In this anachronistic montage where things past and present mix, we have a mode of temporality that is not that of history in general, implying a ‘direction’ or ‘temporal progress’, but one which is closer to the temporal dimension of the ‘symptom’.<sup>135</sup> Warburg thus sought to escape the conventional art historical model – based on continuity, evolution, transmission, influence and progress – in order to formulate a new temporal model for art history that could account for the complexity and anachronism of time in images and motifs that return repeatedly like symptoms, like ghosts of the past haunting the present.<sup>136</sup> Fittingly, Warburg conceived his history of art as ‘ghost stories for grownups’, a history of art whose core concept is *Nachleben* or ‘survival’:

In Warburg’s work, the term *Nachleben* refers to the survival (the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs – as opposed to their renaissance after extinction or, conversely, their replacement by innovations in image and motif. Almost every section of Warburg’s *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek* opens with a collection of documents related to artistic survivals, the concept was so fundamental to the structure of his thinking. Formed within the context of Renaissance studies – a field associated by definition with revival and innovation – Warburg’s concept of survival assumed a temporal model for art history radically different from any employed at the time. He thereby introduced the problem of memory into the *longue durée* of the history of motifs and images: a problem that (as Warburg himself observed) transcends turning points in historiography and boundaries between cultures.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par contact*, p. 13.

<sup>135</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 178.

<sup>136</sup> On Warburg’s challenge to the art historical tradition advanced by Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) and Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), see Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante: Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Minuit, 2002). For a focused examination of the ‘symptom’ in Warburg’s thinking about images in relation to the Freudian symptom, see Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the symptom paradigm’.

<sup>137</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, ‘Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time’, p. 273 (emphasis in original).

With survival being key in Warburg's theorisation of cultural forms, Didi-Huberman cites the investigation of the survival of cultural forms by British ethnologist Edward B. Tylor as an important 'anthropological source' for Warburg's development of *Nachleben* as a temporal model for art history:

Admitting that the present bears the mark of multiple pasts means, above all, to allow for the indestructibility of an imprint of time, or times, on the forms proper to our present life. [...] Tylor speaks of 'the strength of these survivals' by which, using another metaphor, 'old habits maintain their roots in a ground overwhelmed by a new culture'.<sup>138</sup>

Warburg, Didi-Huberman writes, was extending Tylor's analyses by examining the survivals works of art embody – what in them emerges not as the result of artistic influence, but rather as the surfacing of a '*ghostly and symptomatic time*', a haunting of 'spectral memories'.<sup>139</sup>

By contrast with phenomena of "rebirth" and the simple transmission through "influence," as we say, a *surviving image* is an image that, having lost its original use value and meaning, nonetheless comes back, like a ghost, at a particular historical moment: a moment of "crisis," a moment when it demonstrates its latency, its tenacity, its vivacity, and its "anthropological adhesion," so to speak.<sup>140</sup>

The surviving image comes back to haunt, infused by something of an original energy or force of other times and places in its continued life or *afterlife*. For Warburg the work of art is a medium of 'social memory' that figures cultural contents; his *Mnemosyne* project a mapping out of European culture's visual memory that deals with 'the absorption of the expressive values of the past' through the analysis of 'the representation of life in motion', the representation of human gesture.<sup>141</sup> The image is charged with the force of these corporeal gestures that survive across time, what Warburg termed the *pathos formula* (*Pathosformel*), an affective formula. The image-gesture, the vestige of a

<sup>138</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology', *Oxford Art Journal*, 25, 1 (2002), 61-69, p. 63.

<sup>139</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time', p. 274 (emphasis in original).

<sup>140</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. xxii.

<sup>141</sup> See Aby Warburg, 'The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past', translated and with an introduction by Matthew Rampley, *Art in Translation*, 1, 2 (2009), 273-283.

movement infused with emotion, is, in turn, engraved in memory in a process that could be compared with the leaving of a trace (akin to the psychoanalytical theorisation of the 'memory trace').<sup>142</sup> Images thus enmeshed in circuits of time and memory pulsate or flash, bringing to the fore what they share in the interval of their differences – they unveil 'a state of the emotions' and not simply an attribute of the external world.<sup>143</sup> For Warburg, as Didi-Huberman points out, a *history of images* is within the realm of a *psychology of expression*: 'This not only means that *Nachleben* should be thought of as a *psychic time*, it means that the *Pathosformel* should be thought of as a *psychic gesture*.'<sup>144</sup> It is not about creating a classification of the corporeal gestures, he continues, but considering *pathos formulae* as the visible symptoms of a psychic time. Warburg shows that the surviving image is anachronistic, where the past adheres to the present, leaving traces of many pasts. For Warburg, cultural forms retained their vitality in their afterlife, their *Nachleben*, as the expressive gestures unconsciously inscribed that survive in memory:

And, is this not what Rilke meant by the gesture, 'this gesture that comes back from the depths of time'? Isn't this the *Pathosformeln* as the movement of an afterlife? Yet, how are we to understand the memory resurfaced by this gesture, this image imprinted with time to which it gives life and movement?<sup>145</sup>

*Georges Didi-Huberman*



The handprints of our forebears in the caves of prehistory are images imprinted with time, charged with the force of a corporeal gesture that survives. These imprints survive like a fossil, a trace of past life. Like a 'trace fossil', they preserve the movement and passage of that prehistoric existence through the imprinting

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<sup>142</sup> See Sigrid Weigel, *Body-and Image-Space*, p. 139.

<sup>143</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the symptom paradigm', p. 622. Didi-Huberman quotes Gertrud Bing, who became a Director of the Warburg Institute in the 1950s.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* The indebtedness of Warburg's thoughts on the 'psychology of expression' to Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) has been noted by the art historian Ernst Gombrich; see Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods: An Anniversary Lecture', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 62 (1999), 268-282, (p. 271).

<sup>145</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Dialektik des Monstrums: Aby Warburg and the symptom paradigm', p. 641 (emphasis in original).



of the extremities of bodies. Gestures imprinted on cave walls; gestures infused with the emotion of seeing the self outside itself, displaying its existence in the world, with the world, an existence addressed to an outside, to us. We encounter these fossilized images and collect them in our systems of knowledge and in our imagination, just like prehistoric humans collected fossils of shells alongside real shells and sculpted ones: 'our ancestor also loved those very ancient things, such as these fossil forms, that he was careful to set apart whenever he found them.'<sup>146</sup> Thus in Lascaux, regarded by Bataille as the site of the origin of both art and humanity, humans were collecting forms whose origin went even further back, to a time unknown to them, to a past that adhered to their present.

In their collection of fossils and shells, both found and represented, the Then and the Now collide like in the 'dialectical image' Walter Benjamin conceptualises.<sup>147</sup> Creating an anachronism, this assemblage of similar forms from different times allows the present to *present* the past not as origin, but as that which only comes to the fore through the operations of a 'reminiscing present'. In collecting fossils our ancestors were unaware of their 'origin'. Perhaps they tried to direct their gaze towards the beginning of things or to imagine such a beginning, just as we try to imagine the beginnings of our own humanity through the traces left by them. The prehistoric human handles the fossil, recognising in it something of its present life. The shell he knows in the now of his own existence to be fragile, inhabited by a soft body, appeared from the distant past transformed into a rock-hard body, fossilized, solid and with no room for anything else to enter or to exit. By imprinting his hand on the rock he may imagine himself preserved forever, into a future unbeknown to him. Like the fossil, the imprint of a hand points to something that was once there and is now a trace, not fully living yet not completely dead. What survives on the rock wall is a gesture. As Didi-Huberman asserts, imprints are not only anachronistic 'things', but operate as the 'reminiscing present' of a past that never ceases to 'work', to transform the surface or material on which they imprinted their mark. The past leaves its marks on the surface of the present.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par contact*, pp. 40-42.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14. As Didi-Huberman remarks in a footnote, the 'reminiscing present' (*présent réminiscent*) is a temporal model proposed by Pierre Fédida.

In the dark caves, feebly illuminated by charcoal torches or stone lamps filled with animal fat, our prehistoric ancestors imprinted their hands, showing the cave as a site of their passage through the world. They touched the rock, their hands loaded with pigment, exerting pressure, the pressure of a body pushing against a hard surface to produce a positive image. They also used their hands as a mask, tracing their contour with colour, taking the hand away and leaving a negative image behind. Each touch a singular gesture, a gesture that says 'I am here where I touch'. Only, whoever touched the rock is no longer there, already no longer there after touching and stepping back, distancing their body from the wall. The imprinted hand, an ubiquitous feature of parietal art, whether executed in positive or negative, marks the place of a paradox: the presence of an absence. 'I am there when I am no longer there'. The imprint of a hand, born of a touch, evokes the notion of contact, of proximity. Yet, it also speaks of a distancing. For, as a sign of the imager in the cave, as the material mark of a body that is no longer there, the imprint of a hand signals to us the absence of this body.

To be human is to produce the trace of one's absence on the surface of the world and to thus constitute oneself as subject, a subject who will never see himself as an object among others but who in seeing the other shows him what they might share: signs, traces, gestures of welcome and withdrawal. To make an image is to give the other something to see, including oneself, as a subject separate from oneself, to show the other the trace of successive withdrawals and uninterrupted movements.<sup>149</sup>

Marie José Mondzain

What survives in the prehistoric imprint of a hand in the cave is the exposition of existence through a gesture: the contact between skin and rock, the transformation of contact into image, a mark left by a gesture that took place in the distant past. Here, in the present, an encounter with a past addressed to the future, the collision of a *there* and a *not-there*. Here, touch concretized as trace, the trace of an ongoing past, flashing as an image pointing to the absence of its referent, to its own survival and the survival of a gesture.

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<sup>149</sup> Marie José Mondzain, *Homo Spectator*, p. 37; translation of excerpt from Chapter 1 by Patrick ffrench, *op. cit.*



**Figure 4.** Negative hand, Chauvet

**LES MAINS NÉGATIVES**

Marguerite Duras

They are called negative hands, the hands found in the Magdalenian caves of southern Atlantic Europe. The contours of these hands – placed wide open on the stone – were coated in colour. Often in black, or in blue. Sometimes in red. No explanation has been found for this practice.

In front of the ocean  
under the cliff  
on the granite wall

these hands

open

Blue  
And black

Blue like the water  
Black like the night

The man came alone into the grotto  
which faced the ocean  
All the hands are the same size  
he was alone

The man alone in the grotto  
looked into the noise  
into the noise of the sea  
the immensity of things

And he cried out

You who have a name you who are endowed with identity I love you

These hands

blue like the water

black like the night

Flat

Pressed on the grey granite

So that someone would see them

I am the one who calls

I am the one who called who cried out thirty thousand years ago

[...]

Thirty thousand years

these hands, there, black

The light refracts on the sea and makes the stone wall tremble

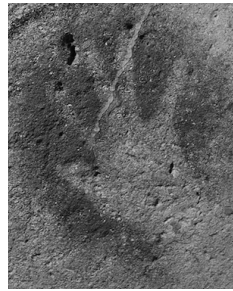
I am someone I am the one who called who cried out in this white light

Desire

the word has not yet been invented.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Taken from the 18-minute film *Les Mains Négatives*, dir. by Marguerite Duras (Les films du Losange, 1979) [my translation]. For the text in French, see <<http://www.derives.tv/les-mains-negatives>> [accessed 20 November 2016].



INTERLUDE

**TRACING ABSENCE:  
THE CORINTHIAN MAID AND  
THE SHADOW OF THE LOVER**

*De pictura satis superque. contexuisse his et plasticen conveniat. eiusdem opere terrae fingere ex argilla similitudines Butades Sicyonius figulus primus invenit Corinthi filiae opera quae capta amore iuvenis, abeunte illo peregre, umbram ex facie eius ad lucernam in pariete lineis circumscrisit, quibus pater eius impressa argilla typum fecit et cum ceteris fictilibus induratum igni proposuit, eumque servatum in Nymphaeo, donec Mummius Corinthum everterit, tradunt.*

Of painting I have said enough and more than enough, but it may be well to add some account of clay modelling. It was by the service of the selfsame earth that Boutades, a potter of Sikyon, discovered, with the help of his daughter, how to model portraits in clay. She was in love with a youth, and when he was leaving the country she traced the outline of the shadow which his face cast on the wall by lamplight. Her father filled in the outline with clay and made a model; this he dried and baked with the rest of his pottery, and we hear that it was preserved in the temple of the Nymphs, until Mummius overthrew Corinth.<sup>1</sup>

Pliny the Elder

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<sup>1</sup> This short account comes from Pliny's *Natural History*, book XXXV.151. See Pliny the Elder, *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, trans. by Katherine Jex-Blake (London; New York: Macmillan, 1896), p. 175.





**Figure 5.** Joseph Wright of Derby, *The Corinthian Maid*, 1782-1784

## CAPTA AMORE

We are not told her name, this daughter of a potter called Boutades. The names by which the Corinthian Maid is referred to, Dibutade or Butades, do not completely rescue her from anonymity. They only tell us from where she originates, from which land and whose loins, as befits a myth of origin. The tracing of a shadow cast by an oil lamp is an action motivated by a desire to inscribe the presence of a future absence. The mark on the wall becomes a trace, a trace unfolding as gesture and vestige that points to an apprehension of loss. Dibutade, who had been captured by love (*capta amore*), in turn wanted to capture the beloved, if only through her gesture, to imprint him in memory. Her gesture, through a repetition that involves sight and blindness, produces a memory trace. Against the wall, she creates a space where she interweaves her body with that of her lover. The fingers that traced his face now hold a stylus, a tool that displaces touch, inscribing a wound on the wall. In touching his shadow, Dibutade senses (she feels it and is made aware of) the distance, the spacing that exists between them. She touches not because she is close to him, but precisely due to her separation from him. In so doing, she encounters the limit of her own body, and his body as that which is not hers. She is thus not only inscribing an outline on the wall, but exscribing herself. The Corinthian Maid's portrait of the lover draws into the light (it unveils) a future yet to come, one in which his body will be an always present absence. The portrait touches because it touches upon the limit – not the limit of life itself, but the limit where we touch, and are touched, by the *other*.

## IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY

If the soil gave her father his material, the Corinthian Maid gave the history of art a story. Dibutade's legend gave rise to a new iconographic tradition, inspiring many works of literature and visual arts, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Within the field of history of art, interest in the story was for a long time mainly concerned with examining the symbolic and aesthetic import of this new iconography and its popularity. More recently, the tale has become something of a trope in art writing, but at the same time it still inspires artists. Why does it still hold our attention? Before moving on to an overview of contemporary readings of the story, it may be useful to see how it became so popular over 300 years ago.

Among the many works the tale inspired is a 1668 engraving after Charles Le Brun by François Chauveau (the earliest known depiction of the story),<sup>3</sup> paintings by the Scottish Alexander Runciman (1771) and the English Joseph Wright of Derby (1784); all of which are entitled *The Origin of Painting*. This common title is indicative of how, in later retellings and representations, the story is employed to illustrate the origin of painting as the act of tracing the contours of a shadow. This act also accounts for the origin of drawing, as exemplified by the Belgian Joseph Benoît Suvée's painting of 1793, *Dibutade, or the Invention of Drawing*. This mythical origin is attributed to the legend even though Pliny does not make either of these claims for Dibutade in his description of her role in the invention of clay modelling. In the chapter on painting he refers to the role of the shadow in the beginnings of painting as a matter of universal agreement: 'The origin of painting is obscure, and hardly falls within the scope of this work [...] All, however, agree that painting began with the outlining of a

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<sup>2</sup> For a survey and discussion of these, see Robert Rosenblum, 'The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism', *The Art Bulletin*, 39, 4 (December 1957), 279–290; George Levitine, 'Addenda to Robert Rosenblum's "The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism"', *Art Bulletin*, 40, 4 (1958), 329–331; Ann Bermingham, 'The Origin of Painting and the Ends of Art: Wright of Derby's Corinthian Maid', in *Painting and the Politics of Culture: New Essays on British Art 1700–1850*, ed. by John Barrell (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Frances Muecke, "'Taught by Love": The Origin of Painting Again', *The Art Bulletin*, 81, 2 (June 1999), 297–302; Shelley King, 'Amelia Opie's "Maid of Corinth" and the Origins of Art', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37, 4 (Summer 2004), 629–651.

<sup>3</sup> See Frances Muecke, "'Taught by Love": The Origin of Painting Again', p. 298.

man's shadow'.<sup>4</sup> As for drawing, he relates 'the invention of linear drawing is attributed to *Philokles* of Egypt, or to *Kleanthes* of Corinth'.<sup>5</sup>

Pliny credits Dibutade's action as inspirational in the invention of relief modelling by her father, Boutades. But seemingly, the origin of bas-relief<sup>6</sup> did not excite the imagination of artists to the same extent to merit interest in its representation compared with the daughter tracing the shadow. We do not have a visual legacy of Boutades pressing clay into the outline traced by his daughter, who always takes centre stage. The popularity of the legend of Dibutade peaked in the second half of the eighteenth and the first two decades of the following century in the period of Romantic Classicism. Art historian Robert Rosenblum, writing in the late 1950s, asserts that this could be explained by the period's fascination with clean contours and the flattening of forms, 'linear purity and relief style', and an appreciation of the 'amorous sentimentality' of an 'antique tale of love's fidelity'<sup>7</sup> (which might explain the lack of interest in Boutades). The amorous aspect of the story is picked up again in the late 1990s by Frances Muecke. In "'Taught by Love': The Origin of Painting Again', Muecke attributes to the frontispiece by Simon Gribelin (in the 1716 edition of Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy's *The Art of Painting*) an important role in the dissemination of the legend and its iconography in England – the poem was well known among artists in this country in the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> In Gribelin's engraving Dibutades's hand is shown being guided by Cupid, who helps her to trace the shadow.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, after almost two millennia, it is the Corinthian Maid who casts her shadow over us. And we, like her father, try to fill in the outline she made; this time not with clay, but with meaning.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of other accounts that consider painting's beginnings in relation to shadow see the first two chapters of Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997); Cristelle L. Baskins, 'Echoing Narcissus in Alberti's *Della Pittura*', *The Oxford Art Journal*, 16, 1 (1993), 25-33; Robert Rosenblum, 'The Origin of Painting', pp. 279-281.

<sup>5</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, p. 85 (emphasis in original).

<sup>6</sup> The Corinthian Maid appears in the opening lines of the chapter titled *Plastice*, or *Modelling*, which follows Pliny's discussion of painting in *Natural History*.

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Rosenblum, 'The Origin of Painting', pp. 282-287.

<sup>8</sup> Dibutade's legend 'was a traditional theme in didactic poems on painting', as George Levitine points out in 'Addenda to Robert Rosenblum's "The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism"', p. 330.

<sup>9</sup> See Frances Muecke, "'Taught by Love': The Origin of Painting Again', p. 297.

If before the emphasis was on style, iconography and the romantic narrativisation of loss, art historians now also employ it to question the narratives of art and art history, for example, illuminating aspects of gender bias and artistic hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Mansfield, writing about the myth of the painter Zeuxis 'Selecting Models', refers to Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhof's analysis of Joachim von Sandrart's treatise (*Teutsche Academie*, 1675-79), which contains illustrations of both Zeuxis and Dibutade's myths: 'She argues that Zeuxis functions as a masculine exemplar of academic methods and goals in contrast to Dibutadis (the Corinthian Maid), who personifies the manual, decorative, and reproductive arts'.<sup>11</sup>

Using the Maid's tale to throw light on the gendered structures of art (and its history) is an interesting critical approach. Although this project does not participate in this particular debate in art history, as its focus is on relationship between the anticipation of loss and the inscription of absence, it is interesting to note the role of the female 'artist' in the appropriation of the tale. By choosing a woman, Dibutade, as a figure to depict the origin of painting or drawing, artists and writers reflect a vision of women as (pli)able to be 'guided' by love, to be affected enough by emotion as to act on impulse. Were it not for her feelings, Dibutade would not have traced the shadow of her beloved on the wall; she would not have felt the pain of his imminent absence and the desire to keep a trace of his presence as a memento. If to act on impulse suggests an irrational gesture, then this association may reinforce the negative notion that women are less rational than men as to be guided by love or passion. But in this case the impulse drives an act of creation. It is important not to forget that impulse comes from Latin *impulsus*, an incitement, the drive or force behind an action. Perhaps we could say that some of the force of her gesture remains and is passed on when the story is told; from all its pictorial and literary versions folding over each other something powerful emanates and acts upon us.

The relevance of the story is no longer connected to any putative origin – whether of painting, drawing or clay modelling; nor to iconological, formal or

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Ann Bermingham, 'The Origin of Painting and the Ends of Art', and Shelley King, 'Amelia Opie's "Maid of Corinth" and the Origins of Art', where King states that Opie's poem changes the maid's narrative from one of the origin of art to one of origin of the female artist.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Mansfield, *Too Beautiful to Picture: Zeuxis, Myth, and Mimesis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 62.

sentimental readings. *Dibutade*, herself a legend (a thing to be read), has become rather an originator of narratives (things to be read).

The Corinthian Maid's story has come to be used as trope, tool and framework in a number of contemporary texts on art. Art historian Simon Schama refers briefly to the legend when he states: 'Art begins with resistance to loss; or so the ancients supposed'.<sup>12</sup> Art critic Michael Newman opens his discussion of drawing in the essay 'The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing' with the Maid's narrative, questioning the location of her act: 'Does drawing begin with the outline, or the shadow, or something in between the two, marks that are no longer shadow but not yet outline?'<sup>13</sup> The philosopher Jacques Derrida – who used Suvée's *Dibutade* to open an exhibition he organised at the Louvre in 1990 – also refers to this 'exemplary narrative' when he argues that 'blindness' is present at the origin of (all) drawing:

[T]he narrative relates the origin of graphic representation to the absence or invisibility of the model. Butades does not see her lover, either because she turns her back to him – more abiding than Orpheus – or because he turns his back to her, or again, because their gazes simply cannot meet [...] it is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw, as if one drew only on the condition of not seeing, as if the drawing were a declaration of love destined for or suited to invisibility of the other – unless it were in fact born from seeing the other withdrawn from sight.<sup>14</sup>

Turning away from her lover whilst tracing his shadow, being 'blind' to him, she can only draw from memory. And it is memory in relation to historical events that is of essence to art historian Lisa Saltzman's project, who asserts that 'Pliny's tale allows us to understand something of how and why memory and visual culture are conjoined in the present'.<sup>15</sup> Saltzman invokes the story and uses it as a framework to analyse examples in contemporary art practice that employ 'visual techniques and technologies' (as strategies of representation and remembrance)

<sup>12</sup> Simon Schama, *Hang-Ups: Essays on Painting (Mostly)* (London: BBC Books, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Newman, 'The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing', in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act: Selected from the Tate Collection*, ed. by Catherine de Zegher (London: Tate Publishing; New York: The Drawing Center, 2003), p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 5.

similar to those employed in Pliny's story; namely projection, silhouettes and castings.

From these examples it is clear that the legend has had much offer to the imagination of art writers, who weave ideas with the few threads unpicked from Pliny's text (and this sometimes results in points of convergence between the studies which invoke it, including this one). To invoke the legend seems to be both a case of returning to, or tracing, the story of Dibutade as told by Pliny, as well as of Dibutade returning to us; haunting us as if it were.<sup>16</sup> We invoke her, like the summoning of a spirit or a ghost, to conjure up words. Rather than a straightforward attempt to produce meaning, this conjuration could perhaps be said to be an attempt to *make sense* (and to touch); to illuminate some themes as well as to project other shadows, and to produce an affect similar to that which her gesture has produced.




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<sup>16</sup> I re-encountered the Corinthian Maid at a lecture on Lotte Reiniger and shadows given by Marina Warner at the Royal College of Art, London, on 11 November 2009. I then completely forgot about her story until I attended another lecture by Warner, on shamanism, in 2010. Dibutade resurfaced in my mind, even though she was not mentioned on this occasion. This re-encounter has a part in my wanting to write about Dibutade and the relevance of her gesture to the contemporary work I will examine in this thesis. Even if I do not mention her directly, her hand will still somehow guide the portrait I create of that work.



**Figure 6.** Joseph Benoit Suvée, *Dibutade, or the Invention of Drawing*, 1793



## AGAINST THE WALL

In a painting by Joseph Benoît Suvée, Dibutade is leaning against the body of her lover, tracing his shadow on the wall with a stylus. Although this has been often described as an embrace,<sup>17</sup> would it not be more accurate to say that he is supporting her, stopping Dibutade from collapsing at the moment the shadow pulls her with the weight of an object? The shadow, usually perceived as immaterial or hollow, seems here to embody solidity; not that fleeting impression we know it to be. (Her own shadow is to right of his, touching it.)

Her hand caresses his shadow as she traces. The fingers that traced his face and felt the soft skin now hold a stylus, a tool that displaces touch, replacing direct contact with distance. She presses the stylus against the wall, inscribing a wound that mirrors the one inflicted on her by the separation from the lover. The hard tool coming against the hard surface almost seems to cancel the encounter of the two soft bodies. The grasping of the tool she uses to mark the wall becomes the apprehension of loss – a moment in the future that is already grasped in the present. Perhaps she is already imagining the time when she will be tracing the outline of his absence with her fingers. For now, she circumscribes the void of a present, soon to be past, that from the moment of his departure she will contemplate, even when she is not looking at the inscription on the wall. Loss is at the centre of her experience, and is already imprinted on her. In turn, she tries to imprint him in memory.

Dibutade does not know yet that the memory of the lover rests not on the image on the wall itself, but on her not forgetting how she traced him. In the process of tracing his outline she outlines what is shared and what is imagined, the ideal of the lover. The outline is the red cordon that surrounds the fragments of her memory, the thread that links them. When Boutades presses clay into this outline and makes a ceramic relief, he is replacing his daughter's singular traces of memory and the tracing embedded in her with a representation, a material substitute. What Dibutade already knows is that the world one tries to hold on to perhaps is not the world anymore, but the shadow or trace of a world which has already been lost.

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<sup>17</sup> 'Here in the empty, somber darkness of the potter's workshop, the Corinthian maid intensely records the Greek profile of her lover, while he in turn demonstrates the comparable fervor of his love by being unable to avert his glance from her face or to resist the temptation to embrace her waist'. See Robert Rosenblum, 'The Origin of Painting', p. 286.

## THE TRAIT OF THE PORTRAIT

The maiden invented the art of modelling figures in relief. She was in love with a youth, and while he lay asleep she sketched the outline of his shadow on the wall. Delighted with the perfection of the likeness, her father, who was a potter, cut out the shape and filled in the outline with clay; the figure is still preserved at Corinth.<sup>18</sup>

Athenagoras

The likeness of which Athenagoras speaks, the one that delights Boutades, arises from a simple line, a contour. This line is an outline as much as it is a trait:<sup>19</sup> a particular feature, a distinctive characteristic.<sup>20</sup> This outline features the character of the lover in the legend of Dibutade, and bounds his likeness. As a trait (from Latin *trahere*, to drag) the line draws forth the likeness that is the *portrait*: an attempt to make the singularity of the one who is depicted emerge.

The importance of the line as means to achieve a likeness is advocated by the well-known portrait miniature painter Nicholas Hilliard who, writing at the turn of the seventeenth century, emphasises the superiority of the line's quality against that of the shadow in creating a good resemblance:

As for exampel though the shadow of a man against a whit wall showeth like a man, yet is it not the shadowe but the lyne of the shadowe which is so true that it resembleth excellently well. As drawe but that lyne about the shadowe with a coall, and when the shadowe is gone it will resembel better then before.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art*, Appendix xi, p. 227. 'According to Athenagoras, the youth was not going away, but asleep'. p.174, note 4.

<sup>19</sup> Writing about Hubert Damisch and his project *Traite' du trait* (an exhibition curated by him at the Louvre in 1995, accompanied by a catalogue of the same name), Brendan Prenderville points out that the rich connotations of *trait* in French are not shared by the English word 'trait'. See Brendan Prenderville, 'Discernment', *Oxford Art Journal*, 28, 2, (June 2005), 213-226.

<sup>20</sup> In his essay on drawing, Michael Newman also refers to Damisch (and his invocation of Pliny's story to establish the 'distinctiveness of the "trait" of drawing'). Newman suggests this may be best translated as 'mark', if not 'trait'. See Michael Newman, 'The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing', p. 106 (note 4).

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in John Pope-Hennessy, 'Nicholas Hilliard and Mannerist Art Theory', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 6 (1943), 89-100, p. 96.

The question of likeness is central in curator Duncan Thomson's discussion of portraiture.<sup>22</sup> For him, Pliny's version of the Corinthian Maid is 'more appropriate as a paradigm for the art of portraiture than as simply a prototype of the origin of painting'; since for the portrait to become a likeness it is important to render accurately the distinctive features of the individual's face through direct observation of the subject. He points out that, as in the story of Dibutade, the portrait can thus become a substitute, reflecting a social interaction between artist and subject, and functioning as a memorial. Thomson locates the origins of a concern for individual likeness in the classical world.

This origin is also mentioned by Jean-Luc Nancy in 'The Look of the Portrait': 'The Roman portrait, both of ancestors and of illustrious figures, is the first moment of the portrait proper'.<sup>23</sup> As it becomes apparent in his text, the portrait is not about likeness proper. Nancy draws attention to the pitfalls of the representation of distinctive features or traits. 'In a bad portrait', he says, 'the separate elements of representation are not focused into the unity of a resemblance and constitute a mere enumeration of traits'. For him, on the other hand, a good portrait is the one where resemblance mobilizes or arranges these traits in order to show an absence that is the place of 'being-before-itself' (as one's face that is invisible to oneself and outside of oneself is an absent face, presented to itself). We could say the good portrait makes us 'believe' in the singularity of the subject. Traditionally this has been linked to the idea that it captures the 'soul' of the subject (a notion linked to what, as Nancy points out, Hegel thought to be the expression of 'inner life', and painting as the point where exteriority meets interiority).<sup>24</sup> Nancy shows that the portrait resembles when it 'resembles a portrait'.<sup>25</sup> That is, the resembling of a portrait rather than resembling an original, for the original of the portrait (its model) may not be singular, but multiple.

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<sup>22</sup> Duncan Thomson is former Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. See Duncan Thomson, 'Portraiture', in *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*, ed. by Hugh Brigstocke (Oxford University Press, 2001). *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Royal College of Art. <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t118.e2107>> [accessed 17 February 2011].

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, trans. by Simon Sparks (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 235.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 224-26, 233. Nancy also points out that, by not examining any particular portrait and its materiality and technique, Hegel 'fails to dwell on an essential trait of the process of spirit [...] the fact that it is nothing other than self-relation mediated through a departure from the self'.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, p. 233. Nancy is quoting Jean-Marie Pontévia.

How important was the idea of true likeness in Dibutade's legend? From its many retellings, it appears that an attempt to capture likeness, to create an image that resembled the lover, was at the heart of the maid's action.<sup>26</sup> In face of separation, and driven by her feelings for the youth, she traced the outline of *his* shadow so that she could have *his* likeness. Her gesture stems from a recognition of the beloved, or something of him, in the shadow. The outline ('the lyne of the shadowe'), although lacking in detailed visual information, nevertheless contained enough to affect Dibutade and to make her act. Marina Warner refers to the silhouette created by the Corinthian Maid in her discussion of phantasmagorias. She attributes the 'inherent recognizability of an outline' to the fact that the 'onlooker supplies features from memory, so that the act of looking and filling in the shadow activates his or her memories'.<sup>27</sup> When encountering what is in effect a fragment, the act of *looking at* becomes, simultaneously, an act of *looking into* (oneself).

So we may say that the likeness is not immediate but produced cumulatively and gradually, in that it is supplemented from one's memories and thus subjective. The recognisability is therefore inherent and not inherent in the outline, since it depends on this supplementation. There is something already missing from the image. Dibutade, as both maker and viewer of the portrait, engages in a process that seems destined to failure or collapse, for it needs to be propped up by memory (as Derrida reminds us in *Memoirs of the Blind*). She needs to bring her memory of the lover's face to the mark on the wall twice: whilst tracing it and when viewing it. The tracing is as much informed by the indexical image she *sees* cast on the wall as by the image she *has* of him, an intimate image as well as one composed of the multiple images of him that she has accumulated (similar to Nancy's assertion of the impossibility of establishing the portrait's original as a single model). As such, his image is for her something that it can never be for anyone else distanced from it. But that is not to say that it does not have an affective impact on the viewer, precisely because of the tension between intimacy and distance. It is an image that stands at a distance, and this is part of its mystery and its melancholy. Now, would this not indicate that the portrait (*his*

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<sup>26</sup> 'Eighteenth-century anecdotalists, in their spirit of cheerful utility, and much taken with Pliny's Corinthian Maid, took the story as an account of art's ambition to copy physical reality rather than a parable of wistful passion. Joseph Wright of Derby's painfully literal rendering of the scene thus turned poetry into a demonstration of early graphic technique'. See Simon Schama, *Hang-Ups: Essays on Painting (Mostly)*.

<sup>27</sup> Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 159-160.

portrait) instead of being a true likeness is the trace that most closely resembles the image she has of him? In *looking at* the portrait she is also *looking for* the trait of the portrait, tracing it all over again. For Dibutade, the memento became a memorial, the eventual destiny of every portrait. More than a likeness, the portrait inscribes absence in presence.

## IN ABSENTIA

The earliest surviving painted portraits are examples of memorial portraiture, 'painted whilst the Gospels of the New Testament were being written'.<sup>28</sup> They are the Fayum portraits, mummy paintings from Roman Egypt of the first and second centuries A.D. (Pliny the Elder was writing in the first century A.D. In his time, the legend, although succinctly told, would have found great resonance due to the contemporary context of memorializing rituals.) These painted panel portraits show that, whilst maintaining Egyptian funerary customs, the funerary arts evolved to incorporate a Greco-Roman painting tradition whose beginnings can be traced to Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.<sup>29</sup>

The funerary panel portraits are greatly admired for their apparent individuality, being described as 'startlingly realistic' and 'remarkably lifelike', which thus places emphasis on their mimetic aspect. But wouldn't mimesis be only part of their appeal, born out of a desire for an apparent veracity? And isn't mimesis, as Jean-Christophe Bailly points out in his book on the Fayum portraits, precisely the indication, and evocation, of an absence? Bailly quotes Jean Pierre Vernant on the precise definition of *mimeisthai* (the Greek root of mimesis): 'to imitate, to simulate the actual presence of what is absent'.<sup>30</sup> From this we gather that when encountering the [mimetic] image we never encounter the referent, only the imitation of its presence. We encounter the presence of an absence. Representation is already filled with absence. It thus seems that we are drawn strongly to the absence embedded in a likeness. *We are touched by absence.*

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<sup>28</sup> John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> <[http://www.metmuseum.org/special/ancientfaces/ancient\\_more.html#collection](http://www.metmuseum.org/special/ancientfaces/ancient_more.html#collection)> [accessed 19 February 2011].

<sup>30</sup> See Jean-Christophe Bailly, *La Llamada Muda: ensayos sobre los retratos de El Fayum*, trans. by Alberto Ruiz (Madrid: Ediciones AKAL, 2001), p. 80 (my translation) [Originally published in French as *L'Apostrophe Muette: Essai sur les portraits du Fayoum* (Paris: Hazan, 1997)].

On the occasion of *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt*, an important exhibition of Fayum portraits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philippe de Montebello, then director of the museum, remarked: ‘these ancient faces still engage the modern viewer by the directness of their gaze and their evocation of a long-gone society’.<sup>31</sup> The gaze was directed at the painter who, painting mostly in encaustic, sometimes in tempera, infused the life of the sitter on the panel. In their rich materiality, the Fayum portraits seem to come alive. They engage us today, yet they were never intended for posterity; the gaze focused on the immediacy of the present and on the only future known to them – the certainty of death. The Fayum portraits exist in different temporal registers and touch us on two accounts: as ghosts, ancient faces gazing at us intensely from the past; and as faces that also gaze into their future, and in turn gesture to the future (theirs and ours, a future beyond their own).

John Berger suggests the Fayum portraits speak of a parting as well as of being alive; they speak of the image that lives on in memory and is haunted by that parting:

The sudden anguish of missing what is no longer there is like suddenly coming upon a jar which has fallen and broken into fragments. Alone you collect the pieces, discover how to fit them together and then carefully stick them to one another, one by one. Eventually the jar is reassembled but it is not the same as it was before. It has become both flawed, and more precious. Something comparable happens to the image of a loved place or a loved person when kept in the memory after separation.

The Fayum portraits touch a similar wound in a similar way. The painted faces, too, are flawed, and more precious than the living one was, sitting there in the painter’s workshop, where there was a small of melting beeswax. Flawed because very evidently hand-made. More precious because the painted gaze is entirely concentrated on the life it knows it will one day lose.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 15, 2000–May 7, 2000. See <<http://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2000/ancient-faces-mummy-portraits-from-roman-egypt>> [accessed 4 December 2016].

<sup>32</sup> John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, pp. 59-60.

We know through the context in which they were produced that, in spite of an apparent fullness of life, the Fayum portraits are a likeness to mark the place of death. Death, in turn, is marked or made manifest by absence. The shadow the Corinthian Maid traces is not only that of her lover, but the shadow of death, of future absence. It is absence that Bailly places as the condition for the creation of the image, and the 'reason for the portrait', in the narrative of the Corinthian Maid. He speaks of a double absence conjured by the portrait: 'the absence due to distance [...] sees the ghost of a definitive absence'.<sup>33</sup>

The absence brought by distance or separation opens up a horizon that extends beyond vision; beyond what can be seen, the ghost of death, awaits the event of death.<sup>34</sup>

The role of the portrait is to *look out for* [guarder] the image in the absence of the person, regardless of whether this absence results from distance or from death. It is the presence of what is absent, a presence *in absentia* that is charged thus not only with the reproduction of characteristics but with presenting presence insofar as it is absent; with evoking it (invoking it, even) and with exposing it, with manifesting the retreat in which this presence is maintained. The portrait recalls presence in both senses of the word: it brings back from absence, and it remembers in absence. As such, then the portrait immortalises; it renders immortal in death.<sup>35</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy

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<sup>33</sup> See Jean-Christophe Bailly, *La Llamada Muda*, p. 106.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida speaks of the event as something we do not see, whereas the ghost or the spectre can be seen. 'I have come to insist more and more on this distinction between specter and phantom on the one hand, and revenant on the other... Like "phantasm," "specter" and "phantom" carry an etymological reference to visibility, to appearing in the light'. See Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow ...: A Dialogue*, trans. by Jeff Fort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 230.

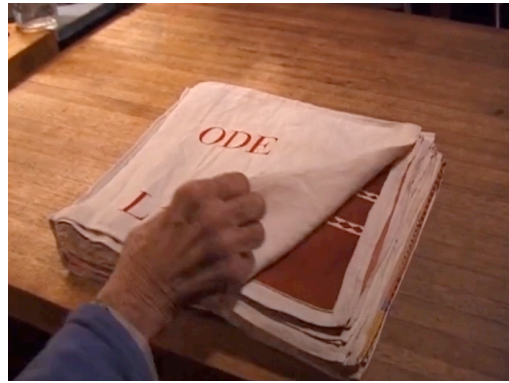
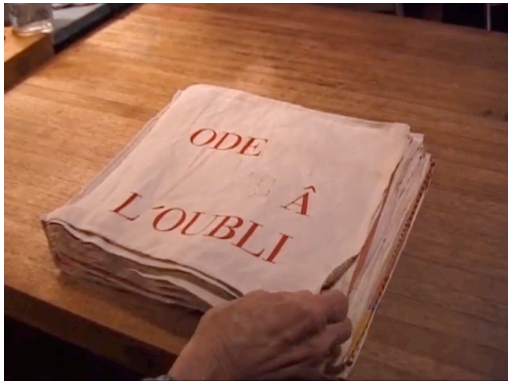
<sup>35</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, p. 235 (emphasis in original).





CHAPTER 3

**LOUISE BOURGEOIS: WEAVING ABSENCE**



**Figure 7.** Louise Bourgeois turning the pages of *Ode à l'oubli*, screenshots from Brigitte Cornand's film *La Rivière Gentille*

## ODE À L'OUBLI

In the film *La Rivière Gentille*, the timeworn hands of Louise Bourgeois turn the pages of a fabric book; her skin itself a fragile cloth, folds and covers her bones like soft crepe draped over a stone.<sup>1</sup> The book cover is a soft white square on which is printed, in red, 'ODE À L'OUBLI' ('Ode to Forgetting'). Embroidered in white, just to the left of the letter 'A' and almost imperceptible against the white background, is the monogram 'LBG'. Her hands carefully separate the pages and smooth the fabric on the back of the just turned page, almost as if she were caressing the fabric and at the same time trying to reach for something that has already passed. As she turns the pages, abstract images unfold, visually arresting and rhythmic. The succession of squares, grids, circles, ovals, dots, stripes and checks can pulsate, as if in a continuous movement of expansion and contraction, or be calming. White, red, blue, pink, yellow, brown and black vibrate and hold a stillness. Motifs are repeated and rearranged. Although the patterns and colour combinations are never exactly duplicated, for the viewer there is a sense of déjà vu. Two pages of text interrupt this parade of images. The first is placed halfway, the second towards the end of the 36-page book. Printed in red on a white background, they are both quiet and startling: 'I had a flashback of something that never existed', reads the first. The second phrase announces 'The return of the repressed'. Bourgeois does not say anything throughout. Towards the end of this excerpt she sings, the singing resonates with the rhythm of the abstract patterns. With her index finger, she taps the label printed with her name and sewn to the inside of the back cover, drawing attention to it. She then closes the book, examines its spine and declares: *c'est tout*.

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<sup>1</sup> Brigitte Cornand, *La Rivière Gentille*, (Paris: Les Films du Siamois and Centre Pompidou, 2007). An excerpt of this film about Bourgeois is available online on the Pompidou Centre's channel; see <[http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xe6yhg\\_la-riviere-gentille\\_creation](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xe6yhg_la-riviere-gentille_creation)> [accessed 17 February 2012].



*C'est tout*. There is nothing more to say, there is nothing outside the book, Bourgeois seems to indicate. For an artist whose statements seemingly have a confessional quality, often appearing to offer a full account of the events in her life and the emotions that motivated the creation of her art, saying “*c'est tout*” is the equivalent of being silent, of resisting trying to speak about what cannot be (directly) spoken. ‘How can one possibly speak about what has been “forgotten” but insists in reappearing as “the return of the repressed”?’ Bourgeois seems to ask by inserting the Freudian phrase towards the end of *Ode à l'oubli*, the fabric book she made in 2002.<sup>2</sup> As Freud has shown, what has been repressed or ‘forgotten’ returns to consciousness in a different form – distorted, displaced, transformed.<sup>3</sup> Like dreams and bodily or psychological symptoms, artistic creation can be said to relate to lived experience. This is true for Bourgeois, who, in an interview with Donald Kuspit, declared:

I am not interested in art history, in the academies of styles, a succession of fads. Art is not about art. *Art is about life*, and that sums it up.<sup>4</sup>

In commentaries on the work of Louise Bourgeois the relationship between art and life has not only been explored but overexploited, generating discourse that can be reductive and that relies heavily on her biography to ‘explain’ the artwork, treating it as a recognisable object of knowledge. What this kind of commentary misses, in my view, is the engagement with the work of art itself as an encounter with something unknown, an encounter with what is *other*, an encounter to which the viewer responds *affectively* to what is not said. Therefore, one needs to pay attention to the affective – to what passes into the body as a pulsation – rather than focusing on the symbolic – what passes through and into language.

There is a challenge in attending to work about which so much has been said, especially everything that has been said based on the life of the artist and her psychology. But before discussing what I see as the problematic relationship between Bourgeois’s work and the biographical and psychobiographical readings applied to it, I would like to return to the encounter with her work (and

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<sup>2</sup> See Louise Bourgeois, *Ode à l'oubli* (unique artist’s book, 2002, MoMA Collection)

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 398-399.

<sup>4</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923 – 1997*, ed. by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (London: Violette Editions, 1998), p. 166 (my emphasis).

briefly to her biography), which will lead me to explore in particular the question of the affective force of the works that incorporate or are mainly made from fabric.

In my successive encounters with Louise Bourgeois's art, I have become more and more drawn to the use of fabric in her late work. I was touched by it without being able to identify at first what precisely in these works affected me. Yet, I was aware that the use of fabric and textiles stirred something in me, a kind of sadness. Perhaps it was seeing the old garments she incorporated in works like *Cell (Clothes)* of 1996, which I encountered in her retrospective at Tate Modern in 2007. Hanging like ghosts in a 'room' made out of doors, the empty or padded used clothes evoke the memory of a body and a mood of melancholy. The atmosphere is mournful and a sense of loss emerges from the artwork. Yes, a sense of loss, I thought. Although many of her works have a melancholic atmosphere, the sadness invoked by the use of fabric seems to go deeper, for alongside it there is the tenderness of touch that the textile also evokes. Watching *La Rivière Gentille*, it is touch that becomes tangible in the segment where Bourgeois flips through the pages of *Ode à l'oubli*.

## THE FABRIC OF LIFE

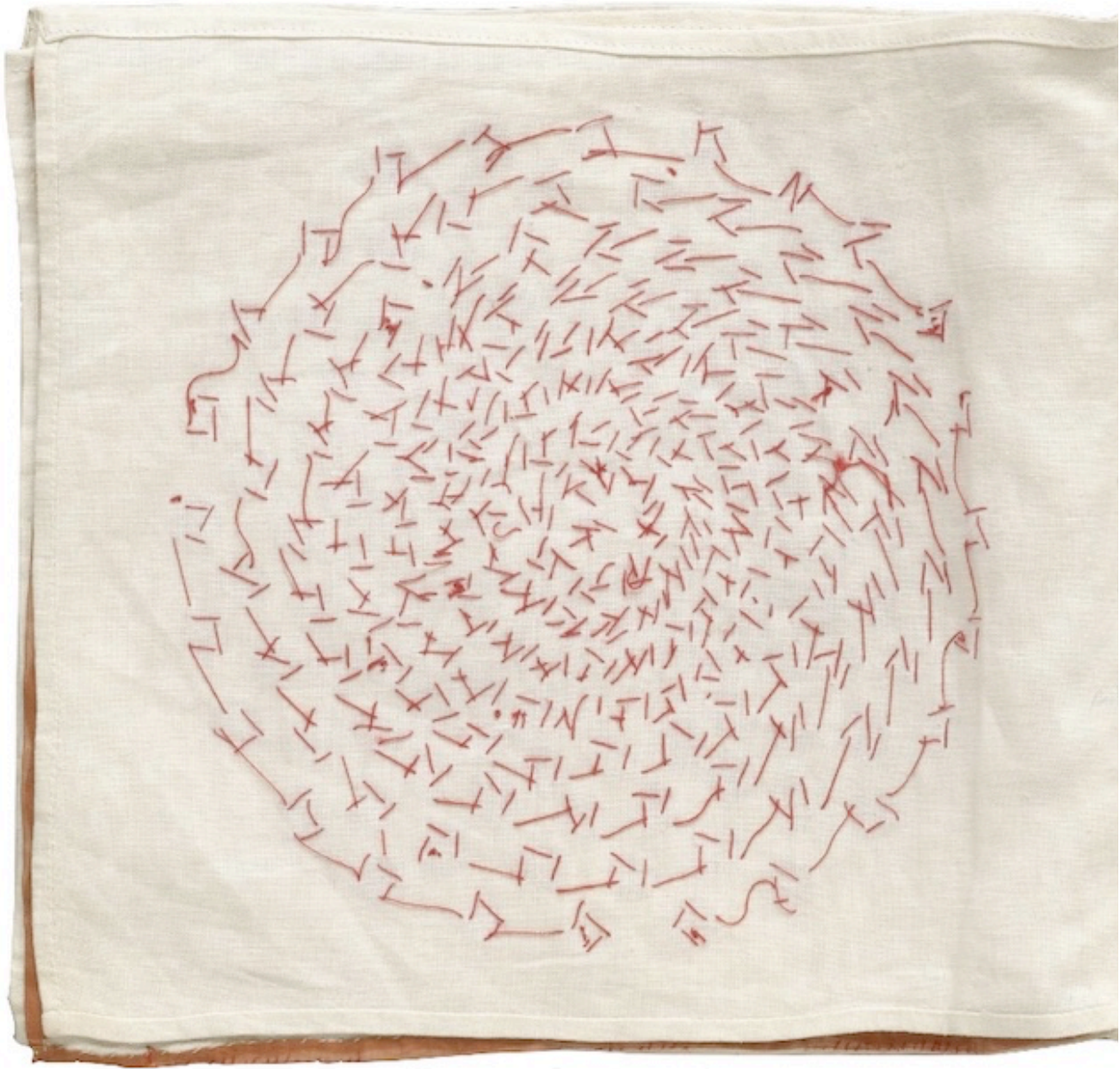
*Ode à l'oubli* is a fabric book composed of abstract images, fabric collages the artist created using fragments of her own used clothing and household textiles. As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the book also contains fragments of text – an enigmatic sentence and a phrase that allude to memory and unconscious psychical processes. Bourgeois's interest in creating illustrated books relates to her admiration for them as objects, and throughout her career she worked on book projects.<sup>5</sup> Her earliest is *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*,<sup>6</sup> made in New York in 1947, where she combines nine engravings with nine parables that reveal her witty take on the tragedies of everyday life as well as alluding to those darker moments inherent in living. In contrast to this early book, *Ode à l'oubli* does not 'tell stories'. With its floppy, soft structure, it is unlike most artists' books too, closer perhaps in format to those fabric books for toddlers that are meant to be touched, or even to a 'soft book' by artist Claes Oldenburg. Beyond the vibrancy of its images, *Ode à l'oubli* has a tactile quality that, I suggest, contributes to its impact on the viewer.<sup>7</sup> The affective dimension of this piece is closely connected to its material support.

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<sup>5</sup> For a catalogue of Louise Bourgeois's book projects, see MoMa's excellent online resource, *Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints & Books*, <<http://moma.org/explore/collection/lb/books/books>> [accessed 4 October 2016], which is the source of all the images of *Ode à l'oubli* that illustrate this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> See Riva Castleman, *A Century of Artists Books* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), pp. 76, 150.

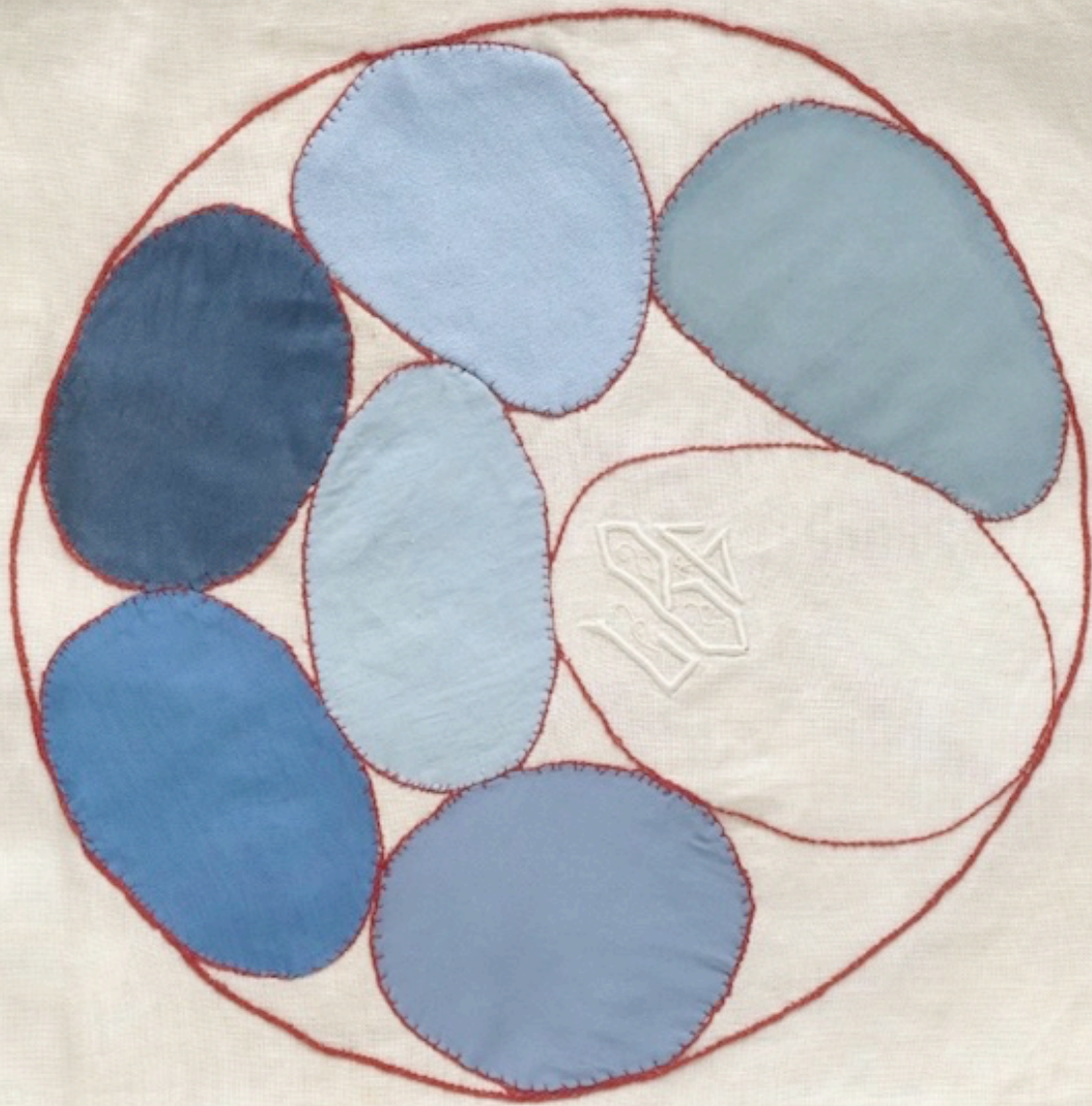
<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the images in this work could be examined from the perspective of 'haptic vision'. Originally formulated by the nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl, this concept has been taken up and expanded by film theorists in recent years to account for embodiment and the senses in moving images. See, for example, Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992) and *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); or Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2000). However, in this text I choose to concentrate on the relationship between the tactile materiality of the work, the body and memory of the textile, rather than on the duality between optical and tactile vision.



**Figure 8.** Louise Bourgeois, *Ode à l'oubli*, 2002 (Untitled, no. 4 of 34)

Fabric illustrated book with 35 compositions: 32 fabric collages, 2 with ink additions, and 3 lithographs (including cover) (28 x 31 x 4.5 cm)





The material and the processes employed in the book imply the close connection the textile has to the hand that makes and touches; to the time it takes to make and to the memory of touch; to the intimacy and tenderness of the tactile.<sup>8</sup> The textures of the different fabrics invite touch: 'Fine linen, silk, chiffon, netting, tulle, burlap, and synthetic nylons and rayons signal the fingertips: soft, rough, smooth, delicate, sturdy.'<sup>9</sup> These fabrics have been transformed through cutting, appliqué, stitching, embroidery, weaving, patchwork and lithographic printing, among other techniques.<sup>10</sup> Many of these techniques have been usually associated with the domestic space, with 'women's work', whose ambivalences have been keenly noted by feminist art historian Roszika Parker. For Parker, Bourgeois's work 'brings out the deeper meanings of textiles' evocation of women [...] The strength of her work lies in her ability to use fabric to convey psychological processes'.<sup>11</sup> If some of Bourgeois's sewn, stuffed figures convey pain and vulnerability, the inclusion of a personal archive of fabrics in the sewn book perhaps conveys vulnerability by pointing to the memories the textiles may evoke for the artist – the memory of place, of touch, of relation. We, in turn, are invited to imagine the past lives of these textiles, such as the linen from napkins once used to set the table, or the silk from slips worn under chiffon dresses. At the same time, we may wonder about these private spaces and the body once covered by these clothes, now fragmented and transformed into a book that touches.

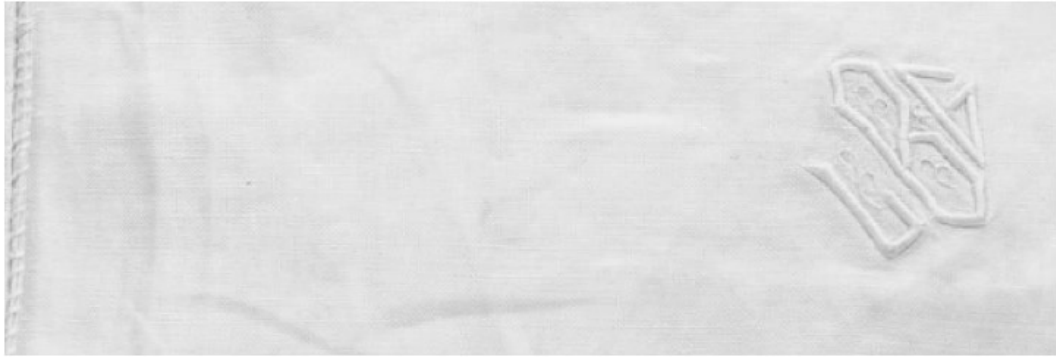
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<sup>8</sup> See Claire Pajaczkowska, 'Tension, Time and Tenderness', pp. 141-142.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Wye, 'Louise Bourgeois', in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. by Cornelia H. Butler, Alexandra Schwartz and Esther Adler (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), p. 276.

<sup>10</sup> Bourgeois made the original volume in 2002. A limited edition of 25 was produced in 2004, which turned out to be a tour de force by the team of Judith Solodkin's lithography studio Solo Impression (also responsible for printing the text in the original book). This printing studio practically morphed into a sewing workshop. For a discussion of the production of the limited edition, see Amy Newman, 'Louise Bourgeois Builds a Book From the Fabric of Life', *The New York Times*, 17 October 2004, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/arts/design/louise-bourgeois-builds-a-book-from-the-fabric-of-life.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/arts/design/louise-bourgeois-builds-a-book-from-the-fabric-of-life.html?_r=0)> [accessed 4 October 2016].

<sup>11</sup> See Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010), pp. xviii-xix. *The Subversive Stitch* was originally published in 1984, and Parker only includes Bourgeois in the new Introduction of the 2010 edition.



This touching book, with its varied textures and patterns, invites the artist to touch its pages. They are made from fabrics that have a personal and intimate connection to Bourgeois: linen napkins and hand towels monogrammed with the initials LBG (Louise Bourgeois Goldwater) that came from her wedding trousseau, fragments of old household linen and of the clothes she no longer wore. They are the fabrics of her life. Stained with the marks of use and of time, the pages bear trace upon trace of the past. Layers of cloth imbued with the memory of a life and of family life, of time lived and of time shared. The book thus appears to unfold itself not only as a formal, but also as an affective project. This is a book to be *felt*, a tactile book with textures that invite touch and recollection. And as it is the case in the entire oeuvre of Louise Bourgeois, these different dimensions are not singly present in the work. Rather, they coexist. They are enmeshed, interwoven like the material chosen by the artist for the book.

Before making *Ode à l'oubli*, Bourgeois had already incorporated textiles in many of her sculptures and installations, including printed fabric, embroidered bed linen, her own clothes and fragments of tapestries. Among these are the performance *She Lost It* (1992); the installations *Cell I* (1991), *Cell (Clothes)* (1996) and *Spider* (1997); and the piece made with old bones and dresses, *Untitled* 1996.<sup>12</sup> What made her progressively concentrate on textiles in the last two decades of her life? Was fabric chosen due the physical restrictions imposed by old age? Or did it relate to a period of introspection and examination of a long life and the place of the past in that life? Frances Morris – who co-curated Bourgeois's 2007 retrospective at Tate Modern – writes that the artist had become less mobile due to extreme old age and stopped going to the Brooklyn studio. She was, in a sense,

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of *Untitled* 1996, see Griselda Pollock, 'Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses: Louise Bourgeois and the Question of Age', *Oxford Art Journal*, 22, 2 (1999), 71-100; Linda Nochlin, 'Old-Age Style: Late Louise Bourgeois', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), pp. 189-190.

confined in the space that was her Chelsea home. Morris adds that fabric is an unusual material choice for the making of sculpture, for 'without innate form or substance, fabric can neither support itself nor carry a load'.<sup>13</sup> But she also reminds us that the artist had an intimate connection to fabric going back to her childhood and the experience of learning to repair tapestries in her mother's workshop. Thus fabric could be seen as a choice relating to Bourgeois's increasing frailty, to her exploration of the idea of structure and support in sculpture, as well as a way of reconnecting to the past, to her formative years in the tapestry workshop.

Jerry Gorovoy, her longtime assistant and friend, offers another commentary on Bourgeois's use of fabric. Speaking on the variety of media in which Bourgeois worked, he says that 'when she got older she wanted to work with soft materials', adding that throughout Bourgeois's career, 'all these formal evolutions came or were attached to her emotional life'.<sup>14</sup> This assertion points to a choice of material not born only of a practical or a formal interest, but to how fabric possibly had increasingly associative qualities for the artist, creating spaces for her to inhabit. Rather than being an aid in the narration of particular events, the material was key in an affective journey. This was a journey that took place in time, where the past was not part of linear time, but another space to be explored and reconstructed, the space of emotions she sought to relive, as she expressed in this interview from 1997:

In my sculpture, it's not an image I'm seeking, it's not an idea.

My goal is to re-live a past emotion.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps it is telling that the use of fabric became more prevalent in the last decade or so of her life. During this period, Bourgeois excused her absence from public engagements by saying that 'she no longer travelled in space, only in time'.<sup>16</sup> Textile matter seems to be for her a kind of 'time machine', especially in

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<sup>13</sup> Frances Morris, 'I Do, I Undo, I Redo', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Jerry Gorovoy in conversation with Dr. Ulf Küster (curator, Fondation Beyeler), 04 September 2011, on occasion of the exhibition *Louise Bourgeois: À L'Infini*; <<http://vernissage.tv/2011/09/15/louise-bourgeois-a-linfini-artist-talk-with-jerry-gorovoy-at-fondation-beyeler/>> [accessed 4 October 2016].

<sup>15</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 357.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted by Jerry Gorovoy, 'The Louise Bourgeois I knew', *The Observer*, 12 December 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2010/dec/12/louise-bourgeois-obituary-by-jerry-gorovoy>> [accessed 10 October 2016].

the form of clothes that resonate with life and act as triggers for memory, as Bourgeois suggests here:

You can retell your life and remember your life by the shape, weight, color, and smell of those clothes in your closet. They are like the weather, the ocean – changing all the time.<sup>17</sup>

What did Bourgeois seek to remember through her clothes when, in the mid 1990s, she asked her assistant Jerry Gorovoy to empty all the closets and bring down her old clothes, those of her mother, of her husband and of her children? Apparently, they were kept because she had a fear of throwing things away. For Gorovoy, it seems that her use of these clothes as raw material indicated a desire for preserving what she could not bear to discard, a wish for these things to outlive her, to carry on beyond her death (a subject she never discussed). He also thinks the clothes opened up for her a relationship to memory. They are signs perceived through the senses. Fabric thus not only invites touch, it *touches*. It evokes memories, emotions, the passage of time and the spaces in which time unfolds, with all the losses and gains that this may imply. With its ability to evoke memories that bring joy or sorrow, memories that heal and wound, fabric both comforts or protects and renders vulnerable.

Memory appears to be key to the making of *Ode à l'oubli*, but the fabric collages made from personal scraps of cloth are not illustrative of past events. If its title and only pieces of text hint at memory, forgetting and the unconscious, its illustrated pages appear indicative of a relationship to memory that remains enigmatic. Are these remembered shapes? Are the patterns evocative of things dear to the artist? Or do they reflect a rhythm that is as vital to the artist as a heartbeat is to a body? Writing for a portfolio of her drawings, Bourgeois considers how after a terrific initial tension, 'slowly line, shape, space and color, like notes on a score, begin to form a rhythm'.<sup>18</sup> The repetitive, abstract, geometric patterns in *Ode à l'oubli* pulsate and have an affinity with music, which the artist found 'curative and calming'.<sup>19</sup> Among the formal elements that for her induce calm, the grid 'is a very peaceful thing [...] There is no room for anxiety

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<sup>17</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in Brooke Hodge, 'Clothes', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Louise Bourgeois: Artist's Portfolio* (Madrid: La Fábrica, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Marie-Laure Bernardac, 'Music', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, p. 184.

... everything has a place.<sup>20</sup> The visual rhythm of the patterns and colours can, like music, resonate with the viewer in an affective or bodily manner. Curator Deborah Wye – who was responsible for Bourgeois’s retrospective at MoMa New York in 1982 – also highlights the ‘musiclike’ effect of the book’s abstract patterns, adding that as an ensemble they do not create any narrative.<sup>21</sup>

*Ode à l’oubli* is infused with memories, but does not narrate them. It seems to point to memory as a process of association, a remembering that is always in flux, rather than as a fixed archive that can be accessed like entries in a dictionary. It seems that we are faced with the agitation of an affective memory, an encounter with material that leads to sensations and to the recollection of the past. Once again, in the 1990s, Bourgeois pointed to the close connection between clothes and memory:

Clothing is also an exercise of memory. It makes me explore the past: how did I feel when I wore that. They are like signposts in the search for the past.<sup>22</sup>

The Proustian overtones of Bourgeois’s statement about clothes – and, by extension, we could say this also applies to the fragments of household textiles and tapestries she uses in her practice – indicate a relationship to memory not based on voluntary recall. Rather, as it was the case in Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, it points to how memory can be unlocked through the senses when evoked by a ‘material sign’. Such a sign can reawaken affects connected to what was experienced in the past, and to how the past bears on the present. The material, sensual sign she encounters brings past and present together; it discloses the essence of a past thing which offers the possibility of meaning, for the ‘material meaning is nothing without an ideal essence that it incarnates’, as Gilles Deleuze suggests in *Proust and Signs*.<sup>23</sup> The meaning of fabric for Bourgeois may be related less to a historical association she has with the material (as in the explanation that she used fabric simply *because* of her family involvement in the tapestry business) than to the affects fabric ushers and

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<sup>20</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in Lawrence Rinder, ‘Calm’, in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Deborah Wye, ‘Louise Bourgeois’, in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, p. 276.

<sup>22</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 363.

<sup>23</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, p. 9.

that force the artist to unfold the meaning implicated in this particular material sign. Fabric stimulates an affective memory, it makes images arise from the past. The past which she claimed is a source of obsession for many:

A lot of people are so obsessed by the past, they die of it. This is the attitude of the poet who never finds the lost heaven, and it is really the situation of artists who work for a reason that nobody can quite grasp. Except that they might want to reconstruct something of the past.<sup>24</sup>

The past that Bourgeois said, in the late 1980s, she was not interested in revisiting:

I find the past terribly painful though I am tied to it. It's unresolved. Yet I have no taste for re-visitation. It's a landscape you have gone through and explored, and outgrown. Only tomorrow is interesting.<sup>25</sup>

The past that cannot be abandoned, as the artist declared in the early 1980s, but has to be recreated:

You can not arrest the present. You just have to abandon every day your past. And accept it. And if you can't accept it, then you have to do sculpture! You see, you have to do something about it. If your need is to refuse to abandon the past, then you have to re-create it.

Which is what I have been doing.<sup>26</sup>

Art historian Mignon Nixon situates the beginning of Bourgeois's 'reconstruction of the past' in the late 1940s, associating the production of her first sculptures, a series of wooden figures called *Personages*, to a work of mourning performed by the artist.<sup>27</sup> After her marriage to Robert Goldwater in 1938, the artist moved to New York, leaving behind family and friends in France (eventually occupied during the War). 'I was missing certain people that I had left behind. It was a

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<sup>24</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 277. This quote comes from a limited edition publication, Louise Bourgeois, *Album* (New York: Peter Blum Edition), which was based on the 1983 film *Partial Recall*, shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>27</sup> Mignon Nixon, 'Louise Bourgeois: Reconstructing the Past', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, pp. 228-229.

tangible way of re-creating a missed past', Bourgeois explained.<sup>28</sup> These figures that act as surrogates for the figures of the past that were lost to the artist, 'substitutes for the missing' as Nixon suggests following Bourgeois, were carved in the roof space of her apartment block at 142 East 18<sup>th</sup> Street, near Gramercy Park. They mirror the skyline of skyscrapers, but are not about New York. They are her personal skyscrapers and, as the artist has stated, they reflect the human condition because, like the skyscrapers, 'they do not touch'. The wounding of separation is transmuted into fragile figures, unable to stand by themselves, always in need of support (of a pole, of a wall, of a base, of others). Unable to admit she missed those 'left behind' in France, Bourgeois articulated the pain of separation by recreating them:

As soon as I arrived in the United States I began to suffer from homesickness. But it was a subterranean, unconscious land that I longed for. So without knowing why, I began to re-create presences... I re-created all the people that I couldn't admit I missed. I'd never admitted it, but the fact is, I missed them desperately.<sup>29</sup>

The past is not 'recreated' by the artist so that it can be narrated but, instead, is to be experienced again as an affective inscription. If early in her career Bourgeois used reclaimed wood and simple techniques to reconstruct the past by making surrogate figures (re-created presences), in her late work she turned to fabric in order to relive an emotion from the past. Fabric becomes the medium to access memories that bring back that which has been lost; the material that exposes the 'travel in time' and the encounter with the past and lost objects. Fabric, and the way it unfolds time, seems to be Bourgeois's *madeleine*, for it incarnates something, an ideal essence of a person or place, or of one's own life in times past and, with it, a way of reliving a past emotion. Only what has been forgotten (*oublié*) can return with such a force. Perhaps *Ode à l'oubli* pays homage to the force of what re-emerges after being forgotten or suppressed.

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<sup>28</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in *ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>29</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, trans. by Deke Dusinberre, ed. by Philippa Brinkworth-Glover (Paris; New York: Flammarion, 1996), p. 54.



## STEEPED IN THE PAST

What emerges in the present is the affective force of the past. The encounter with matter reawakens affects of past experiences – of love, loss and absence; of intimacy and separation – whose traces are inscribed on the artist. (The encounter with fabric may also be contaminated by present experience and spark the anticipation of losses yet to come and the fear of separation or abandonment.) She, in turn, inscribes these affective traces on the work of art, creating new forms and a new language. Recalling Julia Kristeva's theorisation of the melancholic's creation of a new language as a way of finding a compensation for loss, the artist creates a material language that reconnects to affects – therein lies the potential for meaning to be unfolded, for it relates to and evokes lived experience.

## THE MATERIAL SPACE OF CHILDHOOD

Louise Bourgeois's memories are intimately connected to the materials, sites and spaces of her childhood. These were the places where relationships developed and dramas unfolded. For Marie-Laure Bernadac, the work of the early 1990s exposes the house as the central theme of Bourgeois's entire oeuvre; 'the house, which has consistently provided a basic organizational framework. Whether expressed as femmes-maisons, as lairs, or as cells, her work has been articulated around the house as a metaphor for the body, a dialogue between container and content'.<sup>30</sup> A reading of her art in relation to architecture was the subject of the exhibition *Louise Bourgeois: Memory and Architecture*, held at the Reina Sofia in Madrid.<sup>31</sup> In 'The Architecture of Trauma', one of the essays in the accompanying catalogue, Beatriz Colomina asserts:

All of Bourgeois' work is rooted in memories of spaces she once inhabited [...] If all of Bourgeois' work is concerned with the physical locations of her memories, these spaces are all domestic and all associated with trauma.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> *Louise Bourgeois: Memory and Architecture*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, November 1999 – February 2000.

<sup>32</sup> Beatriz Colomina, 'The Architecture of Trauma', in *Louise Bourgeois: Memory and Architecture*, ed. by Carlos Ortega (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1999), p. 29. Colomina extends her analysis to include the spaces occupied by the artist in New York.

Much has been written about Bourgeois's exposition of her traumas through the reference she makes to these spaces in her work, particularly the installations. She was making work as if building houses, where memories and emotions both prop up the structure and are sheltered by it. The works known as 'cells' seem to epitomise her preoccupation with spatial relations and emotional states; an attempt to structure memory and allay fears (each 'cell' 'recreates a place inspired by fear', she has said). But memory here is not strictly a recollection of actual events, memory as a collection of fragments is allied to imagination to become a kind of fiction that requires the artist to recollect fragments of the past and mix them with the emotions of the present.

Rather than focusing on the stated traumas of her childhood, as if tracing symptoms back to the original trauma, what interests me here is her engagement with materiality and how this may reveal the affective imprint of the sites and spaces of Louise Bourgeois's childhood. I am interested in examining how these sites and spaces – and the activities that took place therein, such as sewing and tapestry weaving and restoration – contributed to shaping her engagement with matter, specifically with textiles.

Before turning to her personal history, I would like to turn to the words of German thinker Walter Benjamin, whose autobiographical *Berlin Childhood around 1900* offers an insight into how images of a place he once inhabited resurfaced through his excavation of an irretrievable past. The memory of childhood emerges as if from a deep slumber, as Benjamin writes:

For a long time, life deals with the still-tender memory of childhood like a mother who lays her newborn on her breast without waking it.<sup>33</sup>

Life can silence memories for a very long time. But just as the baby in Benjamin's sentence will eventually wake up, what has lain dormant for so long is suddenly reawakened, and childhood memories surge forth from the spring of the past. The Proustian nuance in Benjamin's text is not accidental – the German writer was a translator of Proust. But if for the French novelist the encounter with things – whether a madeleine soaked in tea or uneven paving stones – occasioned

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 38.

the resurfacing of memories of a lost time, for Benjamin a more purposeful 're-collection' was in place.<sup>34</sup>

In *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Benjamin creates a montage of vignettes that are 'expeditions' into his childhood memories.<sup>35</sup> The texts stem from an anticipation of loss: the realisation that he would be exiled from Berlin and everything that the city contained, as well as the future losses latent in the city. He thus wrote of the process of remembering his childhood as a form of inoculation against longing. Yet in writing about the places his memory revisited, he also mapped a terrain with markers that pointed to the future. In these texts, Benjamin not only documents his personal experience, he also reflects the changes wrought by the arrival of the twentieth century. He detects the 'traces of what was to come' in the spaces of his childhood.<sup>36</sup>

Benjamin's rich narrative throws light on his native city and its environs, on objects, on domestic interiors. For instance, he describes his grandmother's apartment as a 'giant bloom of plush'. The German writer, however, is not merely creating a narrative of an upper-middle-class childhood in Berlin's West End. He is bringing to the fore the affective power of things and places, and this in turn illuminates the role they have in the 'theatre of memory'.<sup>37</sup> But the theatre of memory stages a play filled with ghosts, for Benjamin is aware of the irretrievability of the past. Benjamin's ghosts reveal the intimate and important connection we have with the world of matter, which we may not be always consciously aware of, and one that his text sometimes invests with an almost animistic quality. One of the telling passages in the book is the account of the hiding places in his house, places where he would be 'enveloped in the world of matter'; 'The child who stands behind the doorway curtain himself becomes something white that flutters, a ghost'.<sup>38</sup> By immersing himself in matter, the child becomes aware of its properties and power.

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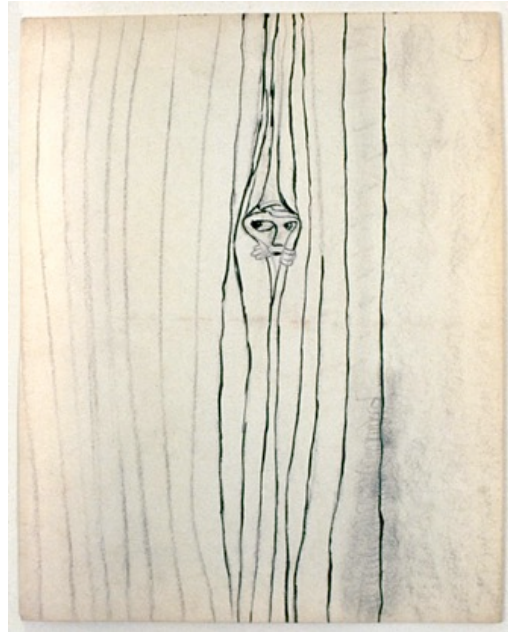
<sup>34</sup> For an examination of what the search for 'lost time' meant for Benjamin and Proust, see Peter Szondi, 'Hope in the Past', in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, pp. 10-21.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin wrote the texts in the early 1930s and revised them in 1938. Although many of the individual pieces appeared in periodicals, they were only published as a book posthumously.

<sup>36</sup> See Peter Szondi's commentary, 'Hope in the Past', in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> In *Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin speaks of memory not as 'an instrument for surveying the past but its theater.' See Howard Eiland, 'Translator's Foreword', in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, p. xii.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, p. 99.



**Figure 9.** Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, 1950, ink and charcoal on paper (35.5 x 27.9 cm)

Textiles exerted their power on Louise Bourgeois, who from an early age was immersed in her parents' tapestry restoration business. 'Tapestry was the family tradition, the family business. The idea of tapestry was in my family for generations', she said.<sup>39</sup> Tapestry for her was also architectural, a place where the child could hide and also learn to appreciate its material qualities:

In the beginning tapestries were indispensable, they were actually movable walls, or partitions in the great halls of castles and manor houses, or the wall of tents. They were a flexible architecture. [...] I, myself, have very long associations with tapestries. As children, we used them to hide in. This is one reason I expect them to be so three-dimensional – why I feel they must be of such a height and weight and size that you can wrap yourself in them. [...] My personal association with tapestry is for this reason, highly sculptural in terms of the three-dimensionality.<sup>40</sup>

The spaces of Bourgeois's childhood were environments where domestic life and working life were enmeshed. Her parents, Louis and Joséphine Bourgeois (*née* Fauriaux), had a gallery in Paris dealing in antique tapestries, which they also restored. Her father procured old tapestries and her mother – who came from Aubusson and whose mother originally owned the Paris gallery – organized their restoration with the help of assistants.<sup>41</sup> Young Louise, born in Paris in 1911, helped too. Aged only 11, she started drawing the missing parts of the tapestries.<sup>42</sup> 'I became an artist', she declared, 'whether I wanted or not, when my parents, who repaired Aubusson tapestries, needed someone to draw on canvas for the weavers. Very early it was easy for me to draw the missing parts of these large tapestries'.<sup>43</sup> This background information, beyond offering a degree of historicity, points to something other than the simple progression from a child's interest in drawing to becoming an artist. The family home-cum-tapestry workshop was where, as a child, Bourgeois started to acquaint herself with the *labour of art*. Her childhood 'apprenticeship' in the tapestry business led to a

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<sup>39</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>41</sup> Apparently, and contrary to common perception derived in part from the artist's 'explanation' of her famous 'spiders', Joséphine Bourgeois was not a weaver. See Frédérique Joseph-Lowery, 'Through the Eye of a Needle', <[www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/lowery/louise-bourgeois6-15-10.asp](http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/lowery/louise-bourgeois6-15-10.asp)> [accessed 20 September 2011].

<sup>42</sup> The missing parts would often be the feet of people or horses' hooves. See Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, pp. 14, 166.

<sup>43</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in Frances Morris, ed., *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 286.

lifelong fascination with making that would find expression in her sculptural and graphic work, where we find references to needles, scissors, shuttles, skeins, yarns and threads. The different tools, materials and processes required for the repair of tapestries retained their power for Bourgeois throughout her life.<sup>44</sup>

The labour in the tapestry workshop required a deep engagement with materials and processes, as well as with its physical location. Tapestries are imbued with a strong sense of place, as indicated by being named after the towns where techniques were developed and production was concentrated – for example, Arras, Aubusson and Beauvais. These sites of production were ‘anchored’ in the geography of the place, having to be located close to rivers for the washing of the tapestries and the dyeing of the wool.

Rivers ruled the movements of the Bourgeois family, being a major factor in a series of family relocations. In 1912, they followed the Seine from Paris to Choisy-le-Roi, and lived in a house with an attached atelier. During World War I, with Louis Bourgeois away fighting, the rest of the family went to the Creuse, to Aubusson, the source of the artist’s maternal line. In the year that followed the end of the war, they finally moved to a house in Antony, where the Bièvre flowed through the garden (in Choisy, the Seine was not so easily accessible from the workshop). The Bièvre had the appropriate levels of tannin needed for the dyeing process, higher than those of the Seine.<sup>45</sup> Tannin is a mordant that allows the dye to ‘bite’ the fabric, improving colourfastness. The mordant remains in the fibre, becoming part of the fabric that takes the dyes as if the colours were memories that were not allowed to fade away.

Like the colours held in the fibres of textiles, the memories of rivers stayed with Louise Bourgeois. These bodies of water were a constant feature of her childhood, and like their flow, the memories associated with them could be calm or turbulent. Rivers were a playground and a field of exploration, as she used to go for long walks with her father – from Antony to Clamart, from the Bièvre to the Seine.<sup>46</sup> There is reason to believe that these walks resulted in fond memories,

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<sup>44</sup> Bourgeois discusses her tapestry background in a conversation with Patricia Beckert recorded in the late 1970s; see Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, pp. 117-122.

<sup>45</sup> See the ‘Chronology’ section in Carlos Ortega, ed., *Louise Bourgeois: Memory and Architecture*, p. 281.

<sup>46</sup> See Rainer Crone and Petrus Graf Schaesberg, *Louise Bourgeois: The Secret of the Cells* (Munich: Prestel, 2008), p. 20.

preceding as they did a more emotionally distressing period (this has been written about extensively and I will not reiterate it here). Thus rivers seemed for the child a site of curiosity and of pleasure. For her parents, rivers were a site of business and for their employees, the tapestry workers, a site of toil.

If a river could be seen as a source of life and livelihood, a site of pleasure and a hive of activity, it soon turned into a site of despair. Louise Bourgeois's mother died in 1932, the young woman's grief flowed like the Bièvre. Bourgeois threw herself into her grief and into the river, only to be rescued by her father.<sup>47</sup> The void left by the loss of her mother was so immense it drew her towards the arms of death. It was as if after such a loss there was nothing left but to lose oneself.

How much of this loss is embedded in her work with fabric, in her attention to the tools and processes of tapestry making? And how much of the other losses she had suffered? *Ode a la Bièvre*, another illustrated fabric book by Bourgeois made in 2002, is a poignant and revealing reminder of the permanent loss of a significant site of her childhood: the Bièvre river itself, which had been filled in by the time she visited Antony with her children in the 1950s.<sup>48</sup> The book made to remember the Bièvre opens with Bourgeois's sweet memories of the river:

The Bièvre River.

It was because of that river that we bought the house in Antony. The Bièvre cut across the garden in a straight line. With the soil from that river we planted geraniums, masses of peonies, and beds of asparagus. There were hawthorns, pink and white tamarisk, and trees of cherries. Pears and apples grew on espaliers on the stone wall. There were boxwoods. And honeysuckle that smelled so sweet in the rain.<sup>49</sup>

The palpable pleasure of Bourgeois's memories of the Bièvre is reflected in the fabric collages, which also reflect its mystery and its force. But by the time she arrives at the last page of the book there is palpable melancholia:

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<sup>47</sup> Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 168.

<sup>48</sup> For a background of the project and images of the *Ode a la Bièvre* book, see <[http://moma.org/collection\\_lb/browse\\_results.php?criteria=O%3AOA%3AE%3A14%7CA%3ANC%3AE%3A1&page\\_number=12&template\\_id=1&sort\\_order=1](http://moma.org/collection_lb/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AOA%3AE%3A14%7CA%3ANC%3AE%3A1&page_number=12&template_id=1&sort_order=1)> [accessed 10 October 2016].

<sup>49</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Ode à La Bièvre* (unique artist's book, 2002). See <[http://moma.org/collection\\_lb/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=173722](http://moma.org/collection_lb/browse_results.php?object_id=173722)> [accessed 10 October 2016].

I had gone back to Antony with my children to see the house where I had grown up and where the river Bièvre flowed through the backyard. But the river was gone. Only the trees that my father planted along its edge remained as a witness.<sup>50</sup>

It is perhaps as a witness that fabric stands in Bourgeois's oeuvre. A witness to the past, to lived experience, to the passing of time, to labour, to craft, to emotions, to her memories, to the spaces of her childhood and of her life. Fabric as a witness to what no longer is or is about to disappear, but which nevertheless infuses its fibres with their affective force and mystery. She steeped herself in the memories and emotions of the past as she, as a child, immersed herself in the alchemy of the tapestry workshop.

In the beginning was the restoration of the Aubusson tapestries (then called 'arrases'). A family (father, mother and three children), their house backing onto the workshop of the family concern, which employed some thirty women-workers. This was at Choisy-le-Roi, on the banks of the Seine. A hot humid place, the air replete with odours: aromas of old dyes, smells coming from the wool wound onto spiral-shaped spindles, the scent of natural colorants because *maman* preferred natural to chemical ones. Floodwaters and the uncertain sky. A flock of women intent on weaving – no, 'conceptualising' (as Louise Bourgeois said of her mother); saving the beauty of the past, re-beginning it. The child steeped herself in this alchemy, which was neither ancient nor modern but an eternal reincarnation.<sup>51</sup>

Julia Kristeva

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<sup>50</sup> See <[http://moma.org/collection\\_lb/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=173744](http://moma.org/collection_lb/browse_results.php?object_id=173744)> [accessed 10 October 2016].

<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Louise Bourgeois: From 'Little Pea' to Runaway Girl', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, p. 246.



**(UNDER)MINING BIOGRAPHY**

Louise Bourgeois has created works of art that reconnect to the affects of the past; works that relate to and evoke lived experience. Without explicitly illustrating the rich emotional content that infuses her formal exploration, these suggestive works are open to multiple meanings. In the discussion of her art we can find texts that deal more broadly with subject matter – core themes of female subjectivity, sexuality, childhood, trauma, abandonment and aggression. Increasingly, however, the centrality of Bourgeois's emotional life in her art has inspired the circulation of narratives mined from her biography, especially of her vocalised fears and traumas. In this respect, she has declared how art is a way of exorcizing them:

My work is a series of exorcisms... I make work with my concerns. I make work with all my failures. When I say the trauma of abandonment, I really mean what I say.<sup>52</sup>

A narrow interpretation of *her* words has induced many critics to correlate them to an explanation of the meaning of *her* work. This has led, in turn, to discourses that concentrate on her autobiographical dramas or traumatic memories as a way of extracting the meaning of the work of art.<sup>53</sup> Instead of opening up the meanings of the work, these reductive interpretations are constraining. Rosalind Krauss, writing about the collages of Picasso in the context of a critique of 'an art history of the proper name' or 'art as autobiography', refers to the 'maneuver of finding an exact (historical) referent for every pictorial sign, thereby fixing and limiting the play of meaning' as questionable.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, searching Bourgeois's words for an exact historical referent that might 'explain' the meaning of a particular work or series is an attempt to fix the meanings of her art.

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<sup>52</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, pp. 245-6.

<sup>53</sup> Even after Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' it is surprising we still get bogged down with the idea of the 'authorial intent' of the artist, who supposedly decides what the work means, a perspective that tends to ignore the viewer's encounter with the work. See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977). For a discussion of the problematics of authorship, see Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, 73, 2 (June 1991), 174-208, pp. 180-184.

<sup>54</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1986), p. 39.

It seems that Bourgeois's words relate more to the experiences and emotional forces that impelled her to work than to the meaning of her art. In his preface to the book *Destruction of the Father/ Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997*, Hans-Ulrich Obrist states, 'Bourgeois' words – spoken and written – are less about the meaning of her art than about the emotional forces behind it: namely, her autobiography, past and present experience.'<sup>55</sup>

What kind of relationship can we have to the work of Louise Bourgeois if our encounter is mediated or influenced by critical discourses heavily informed by her (auto)biography? Does knowing about her life and psychology add to our experience or does it overdetermine the work and thus, in a sense, limit our experience of it? Is it desirable, or even possible, to consider her work without knowledge of her life? Curator Nancy Spector does not think so:

In Bourgeois's universe, art is a recuperative practice; it can invoke and heal the deepest emotional wounds. With this understanding, it is impossible to consider her richly symbolic oeuvre independently from the story of her life [...]<sup>56</sup>

To criticise the excessive reliance on Bourgeois's (auto)biography in readings of her work is not the same as to dismiss the stories of her life. There is value in exploring, rather than exploiting, aspects of Louise Bourgeois's biography. This is not a way of feeding *a priori* assumptions about her work, but of enriching our understanding of how her own engagement with memories and with the past is inscribed in the work in a singular manner.<sup>57</sup> The discussion of her 'apprenticeship' in her parents' tapestry workshop is a good example of the intersection of biography, subjectivity-in-process, memory and the impact of the affective force of the past. As I briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, the past in the form of a narration of her childhood and her memories has been amply discussed and has become problematic as a reference point in the analysis of her

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<sup>55</sup> Hans-Ulrich Obrist, 'Preface', in *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, ed. by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy Spector, introductory text to the exhibition *A Life in Pictures: Louise Bourgeois*, Guggenheim Museum, NY, June 27 – September 12, 2008; see <[http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/sackler\\_louise/](http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/sackler_louise/)> [accessed 17 October 2016].

<sup>57</sup> An example of this operation is the analysis of the series *Personages* by Mignon Nixon seen earlier, which takes into account an aspect of the artist's life – her experience of separation after moving to New York – and how this relates to a psychic exploration of mourning that is reflected in the making of the work. See Mignon Nixon, 'Louise Bourgeois: Reconstructing the Past', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris.

artistic practice. Bourgeois's work has been subject to (psycho)biographical readings that are reductive, rife with speculation about her psychic life. Various commentators have often assumed that childhood torments have been translated into the work in a rather obvious manner. In a sense, they have fallen into a trap set by the stories Bourgeois has told, by statements like this:

All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood.

My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, it has never lost its drama.<sup>58</sup>

Bourgeois appears to have offered something irresistible for both critics and viewers of her work: through a narration of the events of her life, she seemed to provide an explanation for the work, a kind of confessional voiceover that became the thread with which to embroider her life.

#### EMBROIDERING LIFE

The use of Bourgeois's biography in the discussion and presentation of her art was ushered in by a piece titled *Child Abuse*, a photo-essay published in *Artforum* in 1982, to coincide with her retrospective at MoMA New York.<sup>59</sup> There was a shift from an approach that considered what the artwork suggested to one based excessively on her biography and statements, fixed on explaining what the work is supposed to represent or mean. As the American art critic Robert Storr points out in 'L'Esprit géométrique', prior to her revelation of personal events in this piece, Bourgeois's work was mostly interpreted in terms of its metaphoric or formal qualities, or in relation to other artworks. After the *Artforum* piece, many texts have been published, that, for Storr, are 'filled with more or less critical repackaging of her stories, the less critical examples in effect being ventriloquist's

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<sup>58</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 277. She also cites this almost verbatim in the documentary *Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine*, dir. by Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach (Zeitgeist Films, 2008) [on DVD].

<sup>59</sup> See 'Child Abuse', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, p. 80. See also 'Louise Bourgeois: Album', in Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, pp. 277-285.

dummies in bound form'.<sup>60</sup> This leads us to ask: why the need to repeat her stories? As a form of critical laziness, what Storr so aptly calls 'ventriloquist's dummies', these texts perpetuate the image of the artist as a perpetually tormented and traumatised person. In them, the artist's statements and biographical narratives become fodder for psychobiographical interpretations.

Psychobiography, we are told by its proponents, applies 'psychological theory and research to individual lives';<sup>61</sup> it aims to 'understand personality' and 'uncover the private motives behind public acts',<sup>62</sup> such as the making of art. In such a scenario, Bourgeois's declarations could be seen both as an attempt to frustrate the psychobiographers (who might think 'there is nothing left to uncover'), or a gift to them ('maybe there is *even more* to uncover'). In the essay 'Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses: Louise Bourgeois and the Question of Age', Griselda Pollock points to psychobiography as a questionable approach to the work of Bourgeois; 'The problem with psychobiography which has in recent years progressively afflicted the slightly enlarging field of Louise Bourgeois studies is that it is both bad art history and bad psychoanalysis'.<sup>63</sup> Pollock suggests a possible approach: 'against psychobiography yet for acknowledgement of psychic inscription'.<sup>64</sup>

One could say that the biographical approach has been greatly encouraged by Bourgeois's 'candid' statements. Her explanation of the meaning of iconographic elements - such as the spider representing the artist's mother - just ends up being reiterated by the critics.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps Bourgeois wanted to avoid reductionist attempts at deciphering her art, and offered her own version of 'originating events', such as the story of the philandering father.<sup>66</sup> From the 'revelations' of

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<sup>60</sup> See Robert Storr, 'L'Esprit géométrique', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, pp. 21-22.

<sup>61</sup> The psychobiographical approach goes back a long way. The first modern example of the application of psychological theory to the life of a prominent individual is considered to be Sigmund Freud's analysis of Leonardo in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910). See William Todd Schultz, *Handbook of Psychobiography* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 136.

<sup>62</sup> See <<http://williamtoddschultz.wordpress.com/what-is-psychobiography>> [accessed 24 April 2012].

<sup>63</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses', p. 88.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>65</sup> Writing about the explicit narrative and autobiographical nature of Bourgeois's cells, Frances Morris refers to how the artist has explained in detail the iconography of the cells and their contents. See Frances Morris, 'I Do, I Undo, I Redo', p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> It seems that Bourgeois's own interpretation is a narrative that both lures and attempts to control commentators and the public. See, for example, Griselda Pollock, 'Old Bones

Bourgeois, critical discourses have proceeded to (re)narrate the events of her life, attempting to create a precise symbolic relationship between biography, subject matter, form and matter. Sadly, the narratives have also given rise to reductive commentary that infantilises the artist, portraying her as the neurotic, if not insane, 'spider-woman'; or treated her as an eternal 'girl-child'.<sup>67</sup>

A straitjacket of the 'neurotic artist' is imposed on Bourgeois by art historian and curator Germano Celant. In 2010, Celant curated *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works*, an exhibition concentrating on Louise Bourgeois's use of textiles in her late work.<sup>68</sup> In his introduction to the accompanying catalogue, 'Dressing Louise Bourgeois', a psychobiographical emphasis is palpable – he seems to take upon himself the task of offering a fixed and definitive analysis of her psychological pathology. He punctuates the text with references to her 'anxieties and neuroses', her 'feelings of fear and anxiety', her 'fears and torment', her 'horror of self', her 'suffering and paranoia', her 'lack of affection', and to how on her 'long journey through suffering' the work seems to be a way of 'escaping suffering and fear'.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Celant links recurring imagery, like the spider, to the 'therapeutic' potential of the work: 'The spider is a symbol of learning and of taking possession of her own psychophysical and neurotic condition, but at the same time the vehicle of a possibility of mending emotional wounds'.<sup>70</sup> That such assured 'diagnosis' and 'prognosis' should be questionable seems obvious.

Celant dresses Bourgeois with the garb of the 'artist as a tormented genius', confining her body of work as a somewhat formally sophisticated but infantilised response to the to the emotional trauma caused by aforementioned 'suffering'. This is a suffering that for so many commentators is rooted in Sadie's affair with

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and Cocktail Dresses', p. 87; Mieke Bal, 'Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder', *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 25, 1 (Winter 2002), 180-202, pp. 181-183; Martin Sundberg, 'Pillar – A Gateway Figure? On a work by Louise Bourgeois and her Relationship with Art History', *EMAJ: Electronic Melbourne Art Journal*, 5 (2010), <<http://emajartjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/sundberg.pdf>> [accessed 28 January 2014], p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> For Germaine Greer, Bourgeois helped to maintain the legend of being a 'lifelong girl-child' in the narrative of the father's affair with the English governess. Germaine Greer, 'Louise Bourgeois's greatest creation was the contradictory story of her life', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/jun/06/louise-bourgeois>> [accessed 5 February 2014].

<sup>68</sup> *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works* was first shown at the Fondazione Vedova, Venice (5 June – 12 September 2010). The exhibition then travelled to London, where it was held at Hauser and Wirth (15 October – 18 December 2010).

<sup>69</sup> See Germano Celant, *Louise Bourgeois: The Fabric Works* (Milan: Skira, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Bourgeois's father and her subsequent feeling of rejection; it is as if her other life experiences paled into insignificance in face of this early event, an event that the artist herself helped to mythologize by stating:

And she slept with my father. The thing about Sadie is that she lived in the house. And she stayed for ten years – the formative years of my sister and myself. The story of Sadie is to me almost as important as the story of my mother in my life. The motivation for the work is a negative reaction against her.<sup>71</sup>

What ensues from all the pages filled with this kind of narrative are yet more pages by commentators exploiting this narrative. The psychologising of both artist and work can be overwrought and questionable, for it can lead to facile interpretations or to writing that just stays at the anecdotal level. However, psychoanalysis can offer a relevant framework with which to consider the work of Louise Bourgeois, for it helps us to think through the reverberation of lived experience within the work and its materiality. In this respect, this thesis suggests connections between psychoanalytic theories of mourning and melancholia and the work of art as a response to loss. Bourgeois's engagement with psychoanalysis is well established. Not only did she undergo psychoanalysis for almost three decades, in the early 1960s she intended to train as a child therapist at New York University (the project was never realised).<sup>72</sup> As Donald Kuspit suggests, 'Bourgeois acknowledges the crucial importance of psychoanalysis for her art as well as life. Psychoanalysis informs and inspires her art, which in turn is inconceivable without psychoanalysis and calls out for psychoanalytic understanding'.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, through psychoanalysis she could 'realize' in her art 'her intimate relationship with Others', he writes. A considered approach inflected by psychoanalytic theory may help to counteract the simplistic psychologising tendency.

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<sup>71</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 283.

<sup>72</sup> See Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press/October Books, 2005), pp. 6, 206, 267, 279 n.15.

<sup>73</sup> Donald Kuspit, 'Symbolizing Loss And Conflict: Psychoanalytic Process In Louise Bourgeois's Art', in *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed, Volume I*, ed. by Philip Larratt-Smith (London: Violette Editions, 2012), p. 130.

But not even Kuspit seems to resist a reading of what he sees as the ‘symbolism’ of Bourgeois’s work to demonstrate how she ‘creatively compensated’ for her ‘anxiety aroused by her lack of a penis’ by ‘making phallic art’. He wonders about the meaning of Bourgeois’s work by applying psychoanalytic theory with a heavy hand. He argues that her art is ‘deeply rooted in her penis envy – her art was vitalizing compensation for her depressing lack of a penis, a memorial to the loss of a penis she never had’. He asks: ‘Does the spiral staircase symbolize an erect penis, the spider web symbolize a collapsed – detumescent – penis? Are the abundance of penis-looking works in Bourgeois’s oeuvre [...] evidence of her penis envy?’ And referring to the sculpture *Femme Couteau* (c. 1969), Kuspit wonders if ‘the fact that some of her elongated shapes incorporate breasts indicate her bisexuality’.<sup>74</sup> This approach seems to offer very little about the art itself, and I am not sure it offers much in terms of a discussion of the viewer’s response to the work.

What may be of value to those seeking to engage with the artist’s psyche are her ‘private’ writings (her diaries and ‘psychoanalytic writings’). This is Kuspit writing about the parallel between the psychoanalytic process and Louise Bourgeois’s writing: ‘Bourgeois’s material – from a psychoanalytic point of view her writing can be read as process notes of her self-analysis; that is, notes she kept on her psychic process as she experienced it – readily lends itself to psychoanalytic interpretation’.<sup>75</sup>

The artist’s engagement with the theory and practice of psychoanalysis and the relationship between art and life is at the centre of a major travelling exhibition and publication – the aptly named *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed* – both curated and edited by Philip Larratt-Smith.<sup>76</sup> As well as sculptures and drawings, the exhibition includes the artist’s recently discovered ‘psychoanalytic writings’. For Larratt-Smith, these writings ‘elucidate the interconnections

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<sup>74</sup> Donald Kuspit, ‘Symbolizing Loss And Conflict’, in *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed*, pp. 136, 138-140.

<sup>75</sup> Donald Kuspit, ‘Words As Transitional Objects: Louise Bourgeois’s Writings’, in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, p. 300.

<sup>76</sup> The exhibition *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed* was held at Fundación Proa, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 19 March - 19 June 2011; Instituto Tomie Ohtake, São Paulo, Brazil, 8 July - 28 August 2011; Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 16 September - 13 November 2011; and Freud Museum, London, 8 March 2012 - 27 May 2012. The publication contains unpublished writings by Louise Bourgeois, as well as a collection of essays from art historians and practicing psychoanalysts. See Philip Larratt-Smith, ed., *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed*, 2 volumes (London: Violette Editions, 2012).

between her own psycho-analysis, her readings of psychoanalytical literature, her eccentric artist output, her symbolic relationship to materials, and her formal invention'.<sup>77</sup> Larrat-Smith asserts that his selection of works for the exhibition aims to 'highlight the enduring presence of psychoanalysis as a motivational force and a site of exploration' in Bourgeois's life and work.

As we have seen, reading Louise Bourgeois's work in the light of biographical details and narratives filled with statements and speculation about her psychological motivations has become commonplace and problematic. The narratives have caught the popular imagination and helped to disseminate Bourgeois's art and persona, which for some critics is at the level of a 'cult'.<sup>78</sup> The correspondence between art practice and a cathartic process, so characteristic in interpretations of Bourgeois's work, has often found an empathetic response. However, these overloaded emotional narratives seem to have also detracted from and somehow trivialized her practice, providing fodder to her fiercer critics too: the supposed references to biographical events in her work are far too literal for some critics.<sup>79</sup> The detailed memories of these events are so widely known that there seems to be no point in repeating them yet again; suffice to say they are painful, and are revealed in interviews and texts. And this is a reason for the criticism sometimes levelled at her, with some commentators saying that, once you know her story, the 'symbolism is only too obvious'.<sup>80</sup> But the critics

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<sup>77</sup> Philip Larratt-Smith, 'Introduction', in *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed, Volume II: Psychoanalytic Writings*, p. 14.

<sup>78</sup> Matthew Collings (a TV art critic and writer) refers to her alleged 'showbiz appeal', while deriding Bourgeois's work as bad and overrated: 'Stuart [Morgan] single-handedly wrote the blueprint for the cult of Louise Bourgeois that we now have to suffer: this high artist of undigested experience, within whom lurks a minor and derivative but sympathetic creator of textures. But then again, she's got a great act on a personal level'. See Matthew Arnatt and Matthew Collings, *Criticism* (London: Rachmaninoff's, 2004), p. 23.

<sup>79</sup> A critic on the cells: 'Generally, they are among Ms. Bourgeois's most suggestive constructions, yet even here she can be distressingly heavy-handed, using materials for symbolic value rather than for evocative presence and belaboring the literal. In one cagelike structure, festooned with tapestry to recall her family's restoration business, a spider -- an equivalent of her mother, Ms. Bourgeois says -- crawls up the side. In another, a giant spider embraces the cage. Get it?'. See Karen Wilkin, 'A Long Career's Obsessions', *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 April 2009, <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123966086422014775>> [accessed 10 October 2016].

<sup>80</sup> Richard Dorment, 'Louise Bourgeois: The shape of a child's torment', *The Daily Telegraph*, 09 October 2007, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3668414/Louise-Bourgeois-The-shape-of-a-childs-torment.html>> [accessed 10 October 2016]. Even a sympathetic critic reviewing Bourgeois's 2008 Guggenheim retrospective can find the life 'history' problematic: 'We've heard about all of this many times, and that's O.K. [...] The trouble is, even the most intriguing story has its limits, its fixed set of characters and situations. And Ms. Bourgeois's story [...] has been the sole lens through



themselves are often limiting their engagement with the work to a level of reading iconography stemming from autobiography, and come to see the work wearing all these narratives like blinkers.<sup>81</sup>

One can only agree that if the work is very illustrative it loses its power, especially when this is compounded by an explanation of every single element. It does not leave much space for the viewer to engage with the work and relate to it (bringing to it his or her own subjectivity). However, in Bourgeois's work the meanings are not fixed. It is us who often attempt to fix them, hanging to her words as if following a canonical text.

It seems that the problem is not with what Bourgeois herself says, or even that she says it, or relating the words and the work to the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, but with what is taken from what she says and how it is passed on and on as a sort of 'pathological' narrative that 'explains' the work and the intentions of the artist. To ascribe so much importance to the 'intention' of the artist, to mythologize it as heroic even, misses the artwork itself; it misses its visual, material and affective impact. The assured analyses of 'psychobiographical criticism' can detract from the encounter with the work, concentrating as they do on symbolism, whereas some psychoanalytical commentaries invite us to look at the work anew and enrich our encounter with it.<sup>82</sup> In the following statement, Bourgeois herself appears to be making an appeal to the viewer to encounter the work directly and to pay attention to it, for the words around it may be dealing with a 'side-issue':

An artist's words are always to be taken cautiously... The artist who discusses the so-called meaning of his work is usually describing a literary side-issue. The core of his original impulse is to be found, if at all, in the work itself. Just the same, the artist must say what he feels...<sup>83</sup>

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which her art is viewed, so faithfully and consistently that you would be very surprised to find any surprises in a retrospective'. See Holland Cotter, 'Raw Materials of a Life, Revealed by Sculpture', *New York Times*, 27 June 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/27/arts/design/27bour.html>> [accessed 10 October 2016].

<sup>81</sup> Richard Dorment again: 'The cage means imprisonment; the marble house her memory of childhood; the guillotine its brutal end'. See Richard Dorment, 'Louise Bourgeois: The shape of a child's torment'.

<sup>82</sup> I am thinking here of Mignon Nixon's *Fantastic Reality* and her discussion of dislocation and motherhood in Bourgeois's work.

<sup>83</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 66.

### THE ENCOUNTER WHERE MEANINGS ARE MADE

It is the encounter with the work, I suggest, that is critical to engaging with the work's physical presence and its affective dimension. The importance of the encounter with Bourgeois's work above and beyond the reading of biographical narratives is also emphasised by critics such as Mieke Bal and Robert Storr. Storr draws attention to the formal qualities of Bourgeois's work and suggests an 'unreading' of it. Bal's critique of 'biographism' is even more emphatic, and she highlights the importance of engaging with the work in the 'present time of viewing' for understanding what the work does.<sup>84</sup> Another voice critical of the focus on Bourgeois's biographical tales is novelist Siri Hustvedt. In an article titled 'The Places that Scare You', Hustvedt indicates that the meanings of Bourgeois's work are in excess of the narratives attached to the artist's life and are produced in the encounter with the work:

The work has its own oblique vocabulary, its own internal logic or anti-logic, its own stories to tell, and these resist an external narrative, no matter how titillating. *Its meanings are made in the encounter between the viewer and the art object*, an experience that is sensual, emotional, intellectual, and dependent on both the attention and expectations of the person doing the looking.<sup>85</sup>

Hustvedt indicates how difficult a task is to interpret Bourgeois's work, since the art object and the biographical narrative surrounding it have become inseparable. She advises the viewer to 'look long and hard at the work' before reading anything and, taking her cue from Robert Storr, even to unread all of it.

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<sup>84</sup> Both of these stances are discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

<sup>85</sup> Siri Hustvedt, 'The Places that Scare You', *The Guardian*, 6 October 2007, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/06/art>> [accessed 10 October 2016] (my emphasis).

## CRITICAL (UN)READING, OR ABSTRACTING THE ENCOUNTER

In his essay 'L'Esprit Géométrique', American critic Robert Storr calls for an 'unreading' of Louise Bourgeois's practice and for an encounter with the work with all the senses and an open mind.<sup>86</sup> He asserts the dangers of concentrating on narratives in detriment of the formal qualities of Bourgeois's work. Storr suggests we would be wise to avoid 'textual strategies of interpretation' – whether it is the artist's story-telling or the psychoanalytic framing of her artistic practice – and instead consider her 'habits of formal articulation' in order to encounter her work *anew*. According to him, the degree of abstraction of her late phase of work, especially the sewn-fabric pieces, offers a different perspective to the 'biographical and psychoanalytic half-truths that she and others have propagated'. But Storr admits himself of also being guilty of the charge of helping to disseminate 'those stories' that can 'restrict deeper inquiry', and whose 'constant flux and ever-increasing proliferation have fostered a critical literature on Bourgeois that consists preponderantly, and to a detrimental extent, of recapitulations of and psychoanalytic commentaries on these stories'. He adds that 'their mesmerising textuality has distracted people from, and in some cases blinded them to, the manifest physical and perceptual realities of Bourgeois's art and, in particular its essential, protean abstractness'; by which he means how an image or form can take on a life of its own once detached from a depictive function.<sup>87</sup>

Storr proposes an 'unreading' of Bourgeois's practice that by extension involves a disregard for her biographical memories. But the question of memory and remembering still comes to the fore in Storr's discussion of Louise Bourgeois's practice in a way that for him suggests an understanding of the abstract aspect of her work in relation to a fading of the artist's memory. As Storr points out, the

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<sup>86</sup> To emphasise the formal aspect of her work, Storr offers an explanation of Bourgeois's operations. But first, he seems to suggest that we should be aware of the breadth and depth of the artist's knowledge of historical and modern art. Apparently this is not to indicate that she was directly influenced by one movement or style over another, but that she could reconfigure what Storr calls 'stylistic binaries' to produce her work. Above all, he cites *inversion* as her key operation, which for him had a basis in Bourgeois's knowledge of mathematics. He proposes that this understanding allowed her to transform forms and to perform operations that concentrated on fusion more than on division, and that this reversibility applied not only to space and matter, but to meaning as well. The example given is how two casts of *Sleep II* (1967) were joined to form *Janus Fleuri* (1968). See Robert Storr, 'L'Esprit géométrique', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, pp. 29-30.

<sup>87</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

artist used to claim to remember every major incident in her life and, moreover, confessed she was unable to forget. This in itself can be a source of pain, binding the accidental mnemonist to a chain of recollection impossible to undo. But memory, like a picture left in the sun for too long, may fade in old age. With Bourgeois's grand old age in mind, Storr asks, 'but if memory is assumed to be both the source of someone's creative drive and their subject, what is left when that memory gradually fades or deserts them?'<sup>88</sup> He answers this question by referring to the 'degree of abstraction' of Bourgeois's production of drawings, prints and sewn-fabric pieces. Storr suggests that she responds to the abstract patterns found on textiles and on paper. Furthermore, he links her mark-making to the 'unbated impulses' behind her 'gestural musings', such as her *Insomnia Drawings*.

But wouldn't the abstract patterning of Bourgeois's work also point to affective, bodily rhythms that are vital to the artist and affect her in a way that music does? At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to how the abstract patterns in the fabric book *Ode à l'oubli* have an affinity with music, which the artist found 'curative and calming'. The images pulsate, they have an affective charge that passes into the body. Another element of the Bourgeois's late works using fabric is their tactility, how they evoke the sense of touch, how they invite an affective response. Even though Storr mentions the sewn-fabric pieces as good examples of the high level of abstraction present in the late work, he does not offer an analysis of their materiality. He does not explore the *fabric* of the work. Perhaps this is due to his resistance to what he calls the 'artist's voice-over explanation' of the fabric pieces. He does not accept that driving 'her activity and choice of materials is the experience in her parent's tapestry workshop restoring the damaged Aubussons and Gobelins [...] her life-long hoarding of garments and the symbolic repair of psychic damage caused in her youth and early womanhood that she has achieved by reclaiming and reusing these mementos'.<sup>89</sup> Storr believes that what is important is how she effects transformations by employing 'twentieth-century stylistic idioms' and the 'primary operations of the imagination' of her old-age style, which include her response to existing abstract patterns.

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Whilst I would tend to agree with Storr on the implausibility of the interpretation of this body of work simply as a 'symbolic repair of psychic damage caused in her youth', the omission of a discussion of the materiality of the work only reinforces his formalist perspective (predicated on visuality). In asking for Bourgeois's work to be reconsidered in the light of abstraction, he omits the textile material from the discussion. Storr leaves *stuff* out.<sup>90</sup> His discussion thus leaves out the affective power of the work's materiality. Perhaps this is understandable, since he is concentrating on the formal aspects of the work; perhaps is a way of escaping any reference to her biography and focusing on what he refers to as her preoccupation with 'the transformational grammar of form'.<sup>91</sup> I am not totally persuaded by the 'formalist' alternative offered by Robert Storr, for the works by Bourgeois that incorporate fabric solicit a response that is not exclusively, and passively, visual. Rather, they demand that, in the encounter, viewing the work becomes an act of participation; they invite embodied viewing.

#### ENCOUNTERING THE WORK, WORKING THE ENCOUNTER

The Dutch literary critic and cultural theorist Mieke Bal shares Robert Storr's objection to the excess of biographical criticism and his desire for the viewer (including those who write about art) to engage closely with the physical presence of Louise Bourgeois's artwork and participate in its narrative. If Bourgeois's work calls for spectator participation, I suggest this not as radical an invitation as that of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1920-1988), in which the viewer can have an active participation in the execution of the work or alter their perception through 'relational objects'; projects that insist on the affective dimension of art and on the reconnection of art and life.<sup>92</sup> Bourgeois's work (the

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<sup>90</sup> The word 'stuff' comes from Old French *étouffe* (material); "'stuff," a translation of the French *étouffe* or cloth. Stuff has become, colloquially, a term used to designate generic "thingness," or unspecified materiality, in a way that gives eloquent expression to our culture's ambivalent relationship to textiles and to the tactile'. See Claire Pajaczowska, 'On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 3, 3, (2005), 220-248, p. 221. Would Storr's omission of material from the discussion indicate an ambivalence towards the tactile?

<sup>91</sup> Robert Storr, 'L'Esprit géométrique', in *Louise Bourgeois*, ed. by Frances Morris, p. 35.

<sup>92</sup> See Suely Rolnik, 'Molding a Contemporary Soul: The Empty-Full of Lygia Clark', trans. by Clifford Landers, in *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom: Lygia Clark, Gego, Mathias Goeritz, Hélio Oiticica, and Mira Schendel*, ed. by Rina Carvajal, Susan Martin and Alma Ruiz (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999). For an interesting discussion of 'spectator participation', see Pedro Erber, 'Theory Materialized: Conceptual Art and its Others', *Diacritics*, 36, 1 (Spring 2006), 2-13.

world of art) contaminates life (the world of the viewer) in a different way, but one that still affects the viewer. It still involves objects and matter as mediators that demand a visual *and* bodily involvement. In effect, Bal contends that the work demands the viewer engages in a bodily participation in the act of viewing in the 'time of now'.<sup>93</sup> But unlike Storr, who in order to discuss Bourgeois's abstraction resorts to contextualising the artist's awareness of art,<sup>94</sup> Bal is not interested in the 'historicizing accounts that avoid iconography while remaining committed to a view of the history of art as an ongoing probing of issues of form'.<sup>95</sup> Bal chooses to concentrate on the discussion of a single work to unfold her argument – the 1997 *Spider* installation, part of the series of *Cells*.

'Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois' Spider as Theoretical Object' is Bal's first instalment of her argument against art writing's reliance on biographical narratives to interpret Bourgeois' work (and, by extension, an examination of art writing itself).<sup>96</sup> For her, these are in effect narratives of anteriority – where the work is reduced to conveying a narrative as if it were a mere illustration of the story that precedes it. She reminds us that iconographic analysis frequently searches for antecedent artworks to construct a visual affiliation; or else describes pictorial elements by referring back to textual sources. Bal refers to the fusion of biographism with iconography as a form of narrating the artist's life, which ultimately limits the work's play of meaning: 'This is what iconography does to Bourgeois' work: the spiders are metaphors for the artist's mother; the tapestries come from the parents' workshop.'<sup>97</sup> For Bal, this deployment of narrative comes to naught, since *Spider* has no specific content to narrate. Rather, the work alternates between sculpture and architecture, in which narrative has a place as a 'tool, not a meaning'.<sup>98</sup> As a tool, narrative is an element of the encounter, as opposed to being what guides the making of the artwork or its meaning. It has a place in the viewing (the work invites narrative in the present), but does not subjugate the work to it as she suggests:

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<sup>93</sup> See Mieke Bal, 'Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois' Spider as Theoretical Object', *Oxford Art Journal*, 22, 2, (1999), 101-126, (p. 112).

<sup>94</sup> See Robert Storr, 'L'Esprit géométrique', pp. 28-32.

<sup>95</sup> See Mieke Bal, 'Narrative Inside Out', p. 118.

<sup>96</sup> The article appeared in a special issue of the *Oxford Art Journal* dedicated to Louise Bourgeois.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. -115-116.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

The narrative of viewing rivals the narrative of memory whose presence one senses yet cannot grasp. For the memories here are not narrated; they are just put there, like the found objects they, in fact, are. [...] Through the need to experience the temporality of looking, the narratives that turn this Cell into a house also slam the door on the viewer trying to read the stories. Her stories of the past glue to our stories of looking, but remain opaque.<sup>99</sup>

Against the idea of a predetermined narrativity, she proposes *Spider* as a 'theoretical object'<sup>100</sup> – a work of art that puts forward its 'own artistic and, here, visual, medium to offer and articulate thought about art'.<sup>101</sup> In other words, the work makes us think (and in turn think about how to speak and write about it). It proposes its own theory through its materiality; through its presence that is presented to us every time we encounter it and continues to fascinate in all its strangeness.

Bal's 'Narrative Inside Out' article evolved into a short book: *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*. Here she continues with her project of proposing another approach to art writing, one that is centred in the encounter with the artwork and does not rely on disciplinary tenets such as iconography or historical lineage:

I contend that art-writing must sever the all-too-tight connections between disciplinary dogmas, such as those relating to influence, context, iconography, and historical lineage. Instead of following methodological programs, art-writing [...] ought to put the art first. It is from the artworks of contemporary culture, not from the tradition of the disciplines, that methodological procedure and art-historical content must be derived.<sup>102</sup>

This goes against attempts of placing Bourgeois's work within the history of twentieth-century sculpture, comparing it to the work of, for example, Rodin, Picasso or Brancusi. As Bal points out, the idea of framing Bourgeois's sculptural exploration via modernist 'influence' collapses when one becomes aware of

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>100</sup> For a discussion of the concept of the 'theoretical object' in Bal's analysis of Louise Bourgeois's *Spider*, see Pedro Erber, 'Theory Materialized', pp. 4, 6-7.

<sup>101</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Narrative Inside Out', p. 104.

<sup>102</sup> Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. xi-xii.

Bourgeois's relationship to baroque sculpture. By dialoguing with both modernism and the baroque, Bourgeois's work, Bal proposes, 'undermines (art-historical) narratives of anteriority', that is, it cannot be explained by or reduced to a single 'source of influence'.<sup>103</sup>

Whilst her text gradually reveals interesting insights – for example, the idea of the work proposing its own theory and the importance of the encounter – it also becomes even denser; her thinking and language more convoluted, baroque even, as art historian Linda Nochlin points out in her discussion of the book.<sup>104</sup> Perhaps a 'baroque' art-writing reflects another aspect discussed by Bal – *Spider's* relation to a 'Baroque past'. In *Louise Bourgeois' Spider*, Bal expands on her engagement with baroque thought in 'Narrative Inside Out'.<sup>105</sup> She comments on the role of *Spider's* scale and topology, and on the aspect of embedding offered by the work:

For topology destroys linearity by making embedding, not sequence, a principle of narrative time. Embedding, an enfolding of one thing within another, a body within a body within a house. Each element of *Spider* comprises both itself and the whole of which it is a part. This is not simply a move away from narrative to architecture, but the invention of an architecture that encompasses the very material out of which it also consists: sculpture, bodiliness, narrative.<sup>106</sup>

For Bal, Bourgeois's architectural exploration of a baroque spatiality involves a flipping of scale that places the body simultaneously inside and outside. *Spider* unfolds itself as it enfolds the viewer in its 'architecture' in the present time of viewing. The work thus invites viewing as an act that happens in time through a process of interaction whose account, in turn, takes form as a narrative. This 'performative narrative' done by the viewer offers an alternative to the anteriority mode. The work, with the help of the viewer, integrates embodied viewing with narrative in an interplay of space *and* time:<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 45-47.

<sup>104</sup> Linda Nochlin, 'Don't you cut your lunch up when you're ready to eat it?', *London Review of Books*, 24, 7, (4 April 2002), 12-13.

<sup>105</sup> For a discussion of 'baroque thought' and of the relationship between scale and contemporary art, see Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>106</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Narrative Inside Out', p. 123.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.



For, if narrative is an account deployed in time of a series of related events which, in turn, occur in time, then the process in which the viewer stands before, or where sculpture is concerned, walks around the object and is infused by the effects and affects it emanates, can only be reconstructed, analysed, and criticized in a form that renders that movement through time.<sup>108</sup>

Bal believes that writing about art should not be a substitute for the art, but a supplement to it. The writing should 'lead the reader (back)' to the work. If founded on 'seeing with intelligence', art-writing then becomes a way of asking 'not where the work comes from, but what the work *is, means, and does* in the present time of viewing'. Art-writing, Bal asserts, needs a close engagement with the work itself; this not only contributes to the analysis of the visual work of art but can also offer an account of the process of looking.<sup>109</sup> Bal looks closely at *Spider* to write against the 'intellectual laziness' of biographical art criticism that even avoids engaging with the visual nature of the work:

Since estranging criticism from its obsession with the biographical is my first goal, I will engage a single work closely, so that its visual properties and cultural significance can be brought to the fore. I have selected one of Bourgeois' most famous and most frequently exhibited works, her 1996 installation *Spider*. I have chosen it both for its public accessibility and because it triggers biographism most strongly, almost irresistibly.<sup>110</sup>

Mieke Bal continues with her examination of the problem of biographism in art criticism in the essay 'Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder'. She employs a new concept to guide the discussion: autotopography, a term coined by art historian Jennifer A. González to characterize personal objects that embed a person's 'psychic body' to such an extent as to serve as 'autobiographical objects'.<sup>111</sup> This concept, Bal says, 'refers to a spatial, local, and situational 'writing' of the self's life in visual art'; it both relates to and differs from autobiography (a writing of one's life). To resist criticism's tendency to read Bourgeois' work as autobiographical, Bal once again engages in a close reading

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider*, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>110</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder', p. 180.

<sup>111</sup> For an extended definition of 'autotopography', see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 262.

of *Spider* in order to bring to the fore its visual properties and cultural significance. In her view, this installation elicits biographism ‘most strongly’, for, as Bal writes of some of its elements, ‘The huge spider hovering over an iron cage “is” the artist’s caring mother, and the fragments of tapestry decorating the cage come from her parents’ workshop in tapestry restoration’. The autobiographical elements within the *Cell* construct a domestic environment that, Bal proposes, shapes Bourgeois’s ‘fiction of autobiography’, creating a personal atmosphere infused with the artist’s memories.<sup>112</sup>

At first sight, the indexical use of personal objects in the installation – the perfume bottles, the fragments of tapestries etc. – seems to suggest the possibility of reading them as signs in the narrative of Bourgeois’s life. However, as Bal argues, these fragments from (or suggestive of) the artist’s past cannot be read as such, since they are related to memories that are personal to the artist, and thus inaccessible. She calls them ‘memory traps’ – memories that cannot be read directly as narratives for they refuse to tell a story. And whereas to the purveyors of psychobiography this may seem like a golden opportunity to decipher them to *uncover* her memories and intentions, there may be more to be gained by experiencing their mystery. Neither the viewer nor the writer can precisely account for the import of these objects; yet they sense something in them, they are affected by the embodied architecture that houses these objects.

On the site of *Spider*, these objects are part of an autotopography: the ‘terrain of an individual ideal construction of material self-representation’.<sup>113</sup> They are not just autobiographical through proximity, but through an investment. A factual object and a construction; fact and fiction. The works as autotopography, as a ‘place of the fictional self’, becomes a stage where artist and viewer come together.<sup>114</sup> The objects are part of this *mise en scène*; they evoke images, creating a mood that is felt by the viewer, Bal indicates. Through them, the past is ‘narrativized into the present of viewing’.<sup>115</sup> For Bal, the work is not a spectacle that Bourgeois offers, but a stage:

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<sup>112</sup> Mieke Bal, ‘Autotopography’, pp. 180-181.

<sup>113</sup> See Jennifer A. González, ‘Rhetoric of the Object: Material Memory and the Artwork of Amalia Mesa-Bains’, *Visual Anthropology Review*, 9, 1 (Spring 1993), 82–91, p. 82.

<sup>114</sup> Bal suggests that Bourgeois’s visual rhetoric is a form of adapting life to serve as autobiographic fiction. She expands on the idea of the fictional self through a discussion of the structure of the dream (dream as fiction), after psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas’s account of dreams in his *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. See Bal, ‘Autotopography’, pp. 185-189.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

Presenting a spectacularly imposing spider, she offers no spectacle, for the spider cannot be seen at the same time as the cage to which the spider draws the viewer. The perfume bottle and other objects from ordinary life are simply there, inscribing the sense of home on which the narrativity depends. Instead of spectacle, *Spider* offers only a stage on which – in which – the viewer is invited to act.<sup>116</sup>

Bal's text reveals the place of the viewer as another character in a staging where the artist is not fully in control of meaning, for 'The director is not the artist but the work'. The viewer engages with the work and its inherent narrativity through his or her own body, in the present, to play a part in the construction of meaning. The work is a drama that unfolds. In this drama, the 'real' fragments of the past come to inhabit the present. 'Materiality, then, is the language that builds the fictional site called autotopography', writes Bal.<sup>117</sup>

As autotopography, the work resists being translated into a discourse that narrates Bourgeois's stories of the past through objects; it resists an 'element-by-element translation for rendering or explaining the work as a whole'.<sup>118</sup> The work of art is not used to translate concepts but, following Bal, is itself conceptual in its materiality; it invites thought through our embodied looking, through our experience of its materiality. 'Materiality becomes the source of a renewed relationship to art, no longer exclusively dependent on visibility'.<sup>119</sup> Bal suggests that the material fragments 'beckon to the past', inviting it to 'become part of the virtual present of a fictional autotopography'.<sup>120</sup> The work is the site of a presentation, and not of a representation. It is where, by inscribing the past in the present through matter, Bourgeois 'writes' her *self* without narrating it. It is by opening up its unlimited signifying potential through its materiality, rather than by being determined by the grid of a preestablished narrative, that the work comes to *matter* in our encounter with it. Meanings are made in the encounter with the work.

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>118</sup> See Mieke Bal, 'Narrative Inside Out', p. 124. For a discussion of the relevance of translation in Bal's project, see Pedro Erber, 'Theory Materialized', pp. 4, 7, 12.

<sup>119</sup> Pedro Erber, 'Theory Materialized', p. 11.

<sup>120</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Autotopography', p. 199.

After a work is finished, then you say, Ah, my God! **This** is what I meant!<sup>121</sup>

Louise Bourgeois

Bourgeois's statement shows how, even for the artist, meanings are not preestablished, but are made in the encounter with the work and are in excess of the narratives attached to the artist's life. This observation goes against the assumption favoured by (psycho)biographical criticism that the artwork represents the artist's intentions, that it narrates her life. As suggested earlier, the trap set by her stories and statements, as well as by the personal atmosphere of the work, invites this kind of biographical reading. But the 'autobiographical objects' of Bourgeois's memory-infused 'autotopography' do not illustrate her past. Instead, the opposite occurs – as fragments of her past that remain inaccessible to the viewer, they deepen the mystery of this inscription of self for the viewer. Whereas for the artist, I suggest, the material fragments reawaken or present a map of her memories. Through the work, she has an encounter with the past and with the absent *other* that infuses matter, with memories that are felt.

What we don't feel, we forget. I have come to think of Bourgeois as an artist who roams the antechambers of a charged past, looting it for material that she reconfigures as external places and beings or being- places.<sup>122</sup>

Siri Hustvedt

For Bourgeois, the past is a source of affects that reverberate and offer the artist the possibility of articulating through art the dimension of subjectivity that, as Julia Kristeva shows us, is shaped through the encounter with *otherness/others* (within and without) and is always in process. In her exploration of subjectivity in sculpture in *After-affects | After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum*, Griselda Pollock turns her attention to Bourgeois's *Child Abuse*, the well-known project published in *Artforum*:

Far from considering this project in *Art Forum* [...] as a confession and explanation, I read it as the vocalization of subjectivity in crisis, speaking in shifting voices, addressing Sadie, the mother, the parental couple and the world to whom the "speaker" apologizes for her agitation and to whom

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<sup>121</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 285 (emphasis in original).

<sup>122</sup> Siri Hustvedt, 'The Places that Scare You'.

she formally addresses the issue of how art practice and a past that will not go away are related in the *act of making*, not in the image that is made.<sup>123</sup>

Here one could draw a parallel between Pollock's emphasis on the artist's 'act of making' (as a process and not a finished product) and subjectivity as a process never completed. For Pollock, then, perhaps what is Bourgeois's most 'autobiographical' project, the one that ushered biographical critical discourses is not seen as a confession but as a kind of gesture that coincides with the more receptive feminist cultural moment, interested in psychic life, the body and the sexual.<sup>124</sup> Pointing out that the subjective is not synonymous with the autobiographical, Pollock refers to Pawel Leszkowicz's placing of 'the engagement in Louise Bourgeois's work with the psychic, the unconscious and subjectivity on a non-autobiographical plane'.<sup>125</sup> Pollock's critical gesture avoids the biographical in favour of emphasising Bourgeois's subjective inscription in the making of the work.

Running counter to the idea that the artwork is made following the 'intention of the artist', Pollock proposes that 'only afterwardly' the work, as a 'long-term creative structuring', 'faithful to its affective foundations', produced 'narratable and retroactive understanding' for the artist.<sup>126</sup> This resonates with Bourgeois's reference to the connection between her unconscious motivation and the understanding that comes after the work has been made:

Today in my work there is a strong emotional motivation, but it is held in a kind of formal restraint. The two things have to be together. The motivation is emotional and murderous or whatever you call it, but the form has to be absolutely strict and pure.

It is not conscious motivation. It is unconscious motivation. After a work is finished, then you say, Ah, my God! **This** is what I meant!<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Griselda Pollock, *After-affects | After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 107 (emphasis in original).

<sup>124</sup> See *ibid.* See also Griselda Pollock, 'What if Art Desires to be Interpreted?'

<sup>125</sup> Griselda Pollock, *After-affects After-images*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>127</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father*, p. 285 (emphasis in original).

Pollock refuses to treat Bourgeois's work 'as a kind of self administered therapy by whose cathartically confessional means she abreacts her obsessive memories of childhood'.<sup>128</sup> Instead, she engages with selected works and intersects them with the psychoanalytical concepts of seduction and mourning; she discerns in the work a formal continuity that leads her to read, for example, *Maman* as a 'form for a bereaved feminine subjectivity calling out to the missing *m/Other*'.<sup>129</sup> She reminds us that Bourgeois lost her mother in 1932. But rather than being a reductive biographical explanation, Pollock's reading of *Maman* as an invocation of the missing *m/Other* shows that the sculpture cannot be identified with a single traumatic event of loss and separation. Bourgeois lost her husband, Robert Goldwater, in 1973, and Pollock suggests that this event could have been the precipitating event that awakened affects of previous losses – the loss of both parents and her exile from France. Bourgeois thus spoke of the impact of the losses of people in her life when asked about the biggest losses in her life:

The death of my husband and the death of my mother. So 1932 and 1973 are dates that I cannot forget.<sup>130</sup>

And in response to Sartre's assertion '*L'enfer c'est les autres*' [Hell is other people]:

[...] for me, *l'enfer d'être sans toi* [the hell of being without you], the absence of the Other. [...] The fear of losing – this is very important to me. ...Evanescence gives birth to the fear of losing.<sup>131</sup>

In writing after the encounter with the work and the writings of Louise Bourgeois, what is at stake is the challenge of finding a way of approaching the work whilst still listening to what the artist has to say. For Bourgeois's relationship to writing also reveals a poetic force. There is something she says in writing at the end of her long life that could be interpreted as being consistent with the revelatory nature ascribed to her art, that of a 'woman without secrets'.<sup>132</sup> It comes from a series of large-scale works on paper made in 2010 and

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<sup>128</sup> Griselda Pollock, *After-affects After-images*, p. 89.

<sup>129</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 27-28 (emphasis in original).

<sup>130</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in Griselda Pollock, *After-affects After-images*, p. 109.

<sup>131</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in Donald Kuspit, 'Symbolizing Loss And Conflict', p. 130 (emphasis in original).

<sup>132</sup> Louise Bourgeois quoted in Lucy Askew, 'Infinite Threads', in *Louise Bourgeois: a woman without secrets*, texts by Lucy Askew and Anthony d'Offay (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2013), p. 73.

provides the title for the series. Next to a hand-coloured etching showing a naked woman, the artist writes in pencil: 'I Give everything Away'. Perhaps rather than interpreting this statement as relating to the revelation of secrets, we could see it as the divesting of everything that is material and extraneous to the body, and the gesturing to an enigma: the distancing of oneself from life itself, a 'being-towards-death' that is exposed by this poignant series of prints and the writing it incorporates:

*I give everything away*  
*I distance myself from myself*  
*From what I love most*  
*I leave my home*  
*I leave the nest*  
*I am packing my bags*

If, as this thesis suggests, Bourgeois's work that incorporates fabric is a materialization of absence, a form of response to the experience of loss, her relationship to memory would not be one of recollections that are represented in the work. Rather, the art object would expose how the artist who has an affecting encounter with everyday objects and matter that appeal to memory can transform the materiality of this encounter into the materiality of the artwork. Fabric, I contend, is infused with traces of lived experience, with traces of loss. Bourgeois works with fabric and inscribes these traces into sculpture, intimating the affective impact of an unspeakable encounter with loss – the loss of others and the anticipation of her own.

The materiality of Louise Bourgeois's late work with fabric offers us a way to approach the question of loss as an underlying theme in her art. It also allows us to consider the viewer's response to the work as an affective journey, where fabric evokes touch, a relationship to others and to time. In relation to memories, I suggest that her choice of material is not simply a nostalgic way of recovering the past.<sup>133</sup> Rather, it is a way of dealing with memories more akin to the work of mourning and melancholia. The work with fabric emerges from her encounter with past and future losses – separation, exile, death and her own mortality are

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<sup>133</sup> Susan Stewart writes on the 'social disease of nostalgia': 'By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative.' See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) [reprinted 2007], p. 23.

woven into the textiles she kept over a lifetime. She transforms them into artworks that carry the traces of the lost objects; they carry the trace of the other and the other as trace. For a woman who never threw anything away, who accumulated a lifetime's worth of beautiful clothes, house linen and old rags, late in her life and practice she finally gives everything away.



If Louise Bourgeois's late work with fabric is often mediated by (psycho)biographical readings that tend to have nostalgic overtones, or discourses that overemphasise the connection between her experience in the parents' tapestry workshop and the symbolic repair of psychic damage, how else does one account for the affective force of the work? In my encounter with it, rather than being touched by a narrative of loss based on the artist's biography I was affected by the materiality of the work itself, by its physical presence. Loss seemed to emerge from the work, from matter, rather than from readings of the work that may indicate a direct correlation between these pieces and any specific losses Bourgeois suffered. I felt that the work was perhaps the artist's response to the losses experienced over a lifetime, and that it had more power than personal statements and biographical narratives.

The writing that emerges from the encounter with Bourgeois's work is inscribed with loss. Thus to write about work that in its incorporation of fabric elicits an affective reaction is to perform a response that emerges from the materiality of the work of art itself and from the body. This is what I have attempted to do in the following essay, '*Peaux de Lapins, Chiffons Ferrailles à Vendre: Louise Bourgeois as Ragpicker*',<sup>134</sup> in response to the cell of the same name, written for the catalogue of the exhibition *Louise Bourgeois. Structures of Existence: The Cells*.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> See Dionea Rocha Watt, '*Peaux de Lapins, Chiffons Ferrailles à Vendre: Louise Bourgeois as Ragpicker*', in *Louise Bourgeois: Structures of Existence: the Cells*, ed. by Julienne Lorz (Munich: Prestel, 2015).

<sup>135</sup> *Louise Bourgeois. Structures of Existence: The Cells* – Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 27 February – 02 August 2015; Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, Russia, 25 September 2015 – 07 February 2016; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain, 18 March – 04 September 2016; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, 13 October 2016 – 26 February 2017.





PEAUX DE LAPINS, CHIFFONS FERRAILLES À VENDRE: LOUISE BOURGEOIS AS RAGPICKER

And almost at once I recognised the vision: it was Venice, of which my efforts to describe it and the supposed snapshots taken by my memory had never told me anything, but which the sensation which I had once experienced as I stood upon two uneven stones in the baptistery of St. Mark's had, recurring a moment ago, restored to me complete with all the other sensations linked on that day to that particular sensation, all of which had been waiting in their place – from which with imperious suddenness a chance happening had caused them to emerge – in the series of forgotten days.<sup>136</sup>

Marcel Proust

Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased.<sup>137</sup>

Italo Calvino

Venice, June 2010. The fierce noon sun was beating down on the stones of the Zattere, where the steps of passersby raised a fine dust that tasted of brine. The floating dust was sticking to my skin, which, despite the underlying pinkish tone of a body afflicted by the heat, had started to take up the colour and gleam of marble in the blinding light—skin shining like the white façades that seemed suspended above the water. This city of water is one of intensified sensations, I reflected, my thoughts crisscrossing like the canals and the streets that cut across each other, landing momentarily on the stability of dry land only to waver again as they tried to navigate to their destination. As I walked along the promenade, I considered the stability of thoughts and of meaning; our desire to grasp the meaning of things; the meaning of my own thoughts as immersed in and suspended from reality—how they were fed by sensation and memory, by images and the imaginary. On my way to see an art exhibition in a former salt warehouse, I had a vision of a salt palace that looked like marble, and I tasted its saltiness. It occurred to me that the marble of palazzi and statues was not too dissimilar from the flesh of salted cod left hanging to dry, not that different from my own skin covered in sweat and dust in the stickiness of a Venetian summer.

<sup>136</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol. VI: Time Regained*, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 217–18.

<sup>137</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 78.

The exhibition was Louise Bourgeois's *The Fabric Works*, held in the Magazzino del Sale at the Fondazione Vedova. It was there that I first encountered *Peaux de lapins, chiffons ferrailles à vendre*. My memories of the *Cell* are shot through with sensations experienced in the city and in the gallery space, with the contrast between the intense light and heat outside and the cool darkness of the long, narrow, cavernous room. In the venue, I had the sensation of being touched, enveloped by the fabric used in the work as much as by my own clothes and skin. I felt confined by the steel cage of the *Cell*. Against the light, pendulous elements within it, I sensed the weight and gravity of my own body. I had started to inhabit the *Cell*, entering it without stepping inside, both sensing and being the sensed.<sup>138</sup> This encounter made me more aware of the presence and materiality of Bourgeois's work, and of my body in relation to it.<sup>139</sup> It was an awareness that exceeded seeing, and now I try to remember what I saw.

If memory's images are being erased as I write, perhaps I am trying to write through the traces of memory, the traces of an erasure. In order to write, I want to see, like Hélène Cixous, 'what is hidden amongst the visible'.<sup>140</sup> What arises from the encounter with the artwork informs the writing and holds mystery. (To hold this mystery, one cannot attempt to uncover the artist's memories or their putative symbolic representations, but must remain open to the affective force of the work through the engagement with its materiality.) I want to keep the encounter alive, and for this I need to write. I need words. Cixous asserts: 'Without words as witnesses the instant (will not have *been*) is not. I do not write to keep. I write to feel. I write to touch the body of the instant with the tips of the words.'<sup>141</sup> I think of Louise Bourgeois as a poet of touch. In response to Bourgeois's *Peaux de lapins*, I write to touch upon, and to be touched again by, what inscribes itself on matter and on the body.

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<sup>138</sup> Writing about painting and sensation, Gilles Deleuze refers to the body as both subject and object, both giving and receiving sensation: 'As a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed.' Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 35.

<sup>139</sup> As Mieke Bal has written on Bourgeois's *Spider* (1997), the impact of the work on the viewer is connected to a temporal and spatial experience also involving the exhibition space. See Mieke Bal, 'Narrative Inside Out', p. 105. The present essay is informed by Bal's suggestion that the writer should be guided by the encounter with the art object, engaging closely with its material presence.

<sup>140</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Writing Blind: Conversation with the Donkey', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, in *Stigmata*, p. 115.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

## PEAUX

*Peaux de lapins* has a strong tactile presence. Soft gauzy fabric sacs hang within its hard shell, and a pillar of stacked, smooth marble fragments stands crowned with a ring of lush fur. The *Cell* invites touch, but everything is out of reach, enclosed in a metal cage where the body cannot enter; still, the gaze can penetrate through the barrier of industrial expanded steel mesh. It seems possible to see everything at once, yet so much remains unseen, either partially hidden behind translucent fabric or invisible because in full view. Unlike many of Bourgeois's *Cells*—crammed with found objects, her relics, and objects that she made—*Peaux de lapins* is open, ethereal, almost empty. Rather than objects, it appears to contain bodies, or body-related forms and textures. The *Cell* suggests a room inhabited by ghostly presences that float above the ground, as if the bodies have dissolved into a vaporous cloud of diaphanous fabric. In this self-contained space, the suspended cloth-bodies gather, surrounding the single columnar body made of marble: bodies confined in a structure that unfolds itself as it enfolds the body that encounters the work.

This *Cell* confirms Louise Bourgeois's abiding interest in the corporeal. 'For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture', she declared.<sup>142</sup> From the early trapped bodies of the *Femme Maison* series and the totemic forms of the *Personages*, to the late works on paper and the stuffed fabric figures, her art is populated by bodies, be they figurative, metaphorical, or metonymical. Their constant presence—whether whole or fragmented, human or animal, visceral or somatic, as body parts or as bodies missing parts—is somehow both reassuring and disturbing, yet always fascinating.

Except for the tiny black stuffed fabric figures hanging upside down, in *Peaux de lapins* there is no figuration or representation of bodies. The body is evoked, not depicted. The marble column recalls Bourgeois's stacked pieces from the 1950s, such as *Femme Volage*, and likewise appears as a surrogate for a real person. Its skewed form seems vulnerable as it twists, the bleached spine of a body stripped of its flesh. In contrast, the fabric elements are fleshlike in their colour and yet fleshless, empty, flaccid, oscillating between body, body part, internal organ, and

<sup>142</sup> Louise Bourgeois, 'Self-Expression is Sacred and Fatal' in Christiane Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall* (Zurich: Ammann Verlag, 1992), p. 195, reprinted in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans Ulrich-Obrist, eds, *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923–1997* (London: Violette, 1998), p. 228.

skin. They are reminiscent of shrouded figures, of breasts, of scrota, of wombs, of membranes, of skins without bodies.

The fabric sacs hang like bodies nestled together for comfort, but there is no comfort in them. Holding nothing, no figures, no nourishment, they are empty breasts, barren wombs, dried sacs—the site of an absence, the site of a lack.<sup>143</sup> They hang like flayed skin, like flesh stripped of its body, absent bodies: hanging like Marsyas, who was flayed alive by Apollo;<sup>144</sup> hanging in folds like fabric, like the skin of St. Bartholomew.

It is as skin that the fabric sacs touch me. In touching, skin is inescapably touched, and it becomes not only the surface of contact, but also of intimacy and tenderness. The skin that covers the body is a continuous surface open to sensation, to touch, and to the touch of the gaze. Wearing its own visibility, skin both hides and exposes. It conceals the workings of the physical body that it houses, yet reveals or betrays the body's responses to physiological or emotional events through changes of colour and texture. Skin makes visible the body's encounter with the world and the passing of time through bruises, scratches, cuts, freckles, wrinkles, scars. It regenerates and repairs itself. Inscribed from within and from without, skin is a protective and permeable barrier, a vulnerable membrane at the body's limit, a liminal boundary between self and world.<sup>145</sup> A membrane stretched tautly in youth, skin is slack in old age—sagging, falling into folds, hanging in heaps. As it ages, it no longer repairs itself so effectively. Old skin is paper-thin and embroidered with blue veins, a translucent parchment where life is written, a fabric worn by time. In *Peaux de lapins*, the hanging cloth—stained cheesecloth skin—evokes the flesh-coloured skin of a withered body, deflated corporeality, all that is left behind by a body that has already escaped its envelope.

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<sup>143</sup> They thus contrast with some of Bourgeois's late work, in which there is an emphasis on the maternal, fertile, nourishing body, such as in the series of blood-red gouaches *The Good Breast* (2007) and the fabric sculpture *The Woven Child* (2002). In relation to lack, in a notebook from ca. 1995–96, Bourgeois writes, '[...] an absence is a well that / must be filled an empty stomach that must be filled / a hole without water, a river dried out. / There must be ways to fill.....that empty / sac – that lack.' LB-0827; © The Easton Foundation.

<sup>144</sup> The word 'skin' can be traced through the Old English *scinn* to the Dutch *schinden*, meaning 'flay, peel.' *Peaux de lapins, chiffons ferrailles à vendre* was first shown at the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, in dialogue with Jusepe de Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas* (1637), which depicts the satyr's punishment.

<sup>145</sup> For a cultural history of skin, see Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

## CHIFFONS

Remembering her childhood, Louise Bourgeois recalls the cries of the *chiffonnier*, or ragpicker, who would walk the streets shouting, “*Peaux de lapins, chiffons ferrailles à vendre*”. This cry not only gives the *Cell* its title, but the methods of the ragpicker also resonate with those of the artist: a habit of casting eyes on what has been cast aside, scavenging for fragments, salvaging among the discarded for what can be put to new use. Like Baudelaire’s ragpicker, who ‘sorts things out and selects judiciously’ and ‘collects, like a miser guarding a treasure’,<sup>146</sup> Bourgeois collects objects and materials from her past, from her home, from her Brooklyn studio, from the city, from her wardrobe, from her own work, from a world full of stuff. She collects and reassembles the scraps of sensation and the rags of memory, transforming into art the debris of a life, the materials inscribed with life’s traces.

For the hanging sacs in *Peaux de lapins*, Bourgeois gathered fabrics: cheesecloth acquired from her printmakers, a black see-through bag that belonged to her, and open knit sacks. For the stuffed figures, she used rags and metal. She also incorporated her own fur collar, a stole made of fur pom-poms, metal chains, and scraps of marble, remainders of earlier carved sculptures. The artist selected fragments from the physical world, salvaging them from oblivion and reanimating them through new juxtapositions. Perhaps Louise Bourgeois, the ragpicker, understood that a fragmented object always carried in itself the possibility of becoming something else.

The ragpicker worked in silence and never looked at anything that was whole. His eyes sought the broken, the worn, the faded, the fragmented. A complete object made him sad. What could one do with a complete object?<sup>147</sup>

Anaïs Nin

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<sup>146</sup> Charles Baudelaire quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 349.

<sup>147</sup> Anaïs Nin, *Under a Glass Bell* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 60.

Of all the varied objects and materials she amassed, Bourgeois increasingly turned to fabric in the last years of her life. Rather than aiding in the narration of particular events, textile matter was key in an affective journey, as evidenced in her statement on garments:

*[...] Each garment has a  
history, a past, a raison-d'être  
behind each garment there is a  
person not me, the other example  
Antunez, Robert, the children, Alfred,  
my mother, the neighbors, a  
friend, jealousy of a girlfriend –  
verify, reverify, relive the past  
it is archaeology [...]*<sup>148</sup>

And we ourselves know that garments have a history, and that behind each garment there was a person who is now absent. We know what it is to encounter the clothes of the departed and our own clothes from times past. They hang like ghosts inside wardrobes and behind doors; they lie folded in drawers—folded like the house linen kept for so long that, yellowed and crisscrossed by time, it is nothing but the vestige of a home, the furnishing of a home without bodies, an empty house. Like the house and its inhabitants, the fabrics age. They become frayed, scorched, stained, threadbare, barely there and yet . . . there, to remind us of what once was. Fabrics embody loss and materialize absence; they are fragments carrying the imprint of other bodies, other places, other times.

Fabric evokes the bodies that it once touched and covered, bodies now absent. What I see but cannot touch nevertheless touches me at a distance. I am touched by the fabric-skin of *Peaux de lapins*. In this *Cell*, Bourgeois reveals fabric as the material through which the body can be inscribed and which 'becomes' body, infused with the memory of living, of embodied existence, and of touch. Bourgeois's *chiffons* wrap the wound of absence; they carry the trace of the other and the other as trace. Here, sensation and memory resurface; *Peaux de lapins* inscribes matter and body with life's traces.

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<sup>148</sup> Louise Bourgeois, ca. 1995. Loose sheet: 9 x 6  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (22.9 x 16.2 cm). LB-0782. © The Easton Foundation; quoted in Philip Larratt-Smith, ed., *The Return of the Repressed, Volume II: Psychoanalytic Writings* (London: Violette, 2012), p. 187.



**Figure 11.** Louise Bourgeois, *Peaux de Lapins, Chiffons Ferrailles à Vendre*, 2006

Steel, stainless steel, marble, wood, fabric and plexiglass (251.4 x 304.8 x 403.8 cm)



CHAPTER 4

**FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES: TOUCHING THE ABSENT BODY**



**Figure 12.** Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled"*, 1991 (Detail)

Billboard, dimensions vary with installation

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Daylight enters the room where a bed lies empty. Out of this light the artist makes a photograph of the unmade bed. At the heart of the photograph lies emptiness.

...

At this point, I was empty too. Did not know what else to write. The plenitude of the photograph of an empty bed had left me at a loss for words. I was stunned into silence by this image; taken aback by the apparent banality of a simple object that seemed to evoke something beyond description, beyond words, yet containing the possibility and promise of all that cannot be said but insists in being spoken. Banality and silence. To speak of simple things can be unbearable, for they can give rise to uncontrollable affects, they can stir sadness and make you choke. The artwork lured me to speak when it could only be measured by silence. I needed words to speak of my encounter with "*Untitled*", 1991, but they were not forthcoming. Perhaps I could write something about my first encounter with it, I thought. Not in my travels, not in a museum nor in gallery... It was most likely that I had first seen it in a book, or it could have been a magazine, or even a postcard. I could not remember, and did not want to make it up. The direct confrontation with the image left me in a state where I was not able to think of a good way of writing about it. Obviously, I had to try again. (Perhaps all I needed was to give voice to the silence that arose from the image, a confrontation with the silence of what is familiar.)

...

Daylight enters the room where a bed lies empty. Out of this light the artist makes a photograph of the unmade bed. At the heart of the photograph lies emptiness.

The photograph is haunting. Like a presence that cannot be seen or heard, only sensed, it surprises and robs the air that one needs for speaking. One does not speak but gasps, chokes. I am touched by this image, by the melancholy its emptiness suggests, by the tenderness the textiles evoke, the tenderness of touch. I sense loss and choke on unspoken words. The image renders speechless not because one does not have words to communicate what one sees, but because one finds difficult to articulate the encounter with the unknown that the image presents. The encounter with a work of art that awakens affects demands a response that has yet to find expression in words. Faced with this, I see why it

can appear easier to believe in the possibility of grasping the work by going through what is already known, such as the biography of the artist or prevailing interpretations; yet this only seems to create an illusion of mastery and the churning of empty words. Is this an attempt to avoid the impact of the haunting photograph?

Perhaps all the reading I have done so far on the artist is a way of deferring the full confrontation with the work, and the difficulty of writing on this elusive photograph. I 'prevaricate' by 'doing research'. Turning to writings on Felix Gonzalez-Torres and on *"Untitled"*, 1991 – in the hope they would help me to recover a voice that could respond to the affective force of this work – makes me realise the image is drowning in a sea of words. The haunting photograph floats among them, and many of the words circle around four capital letters: A I D S. The words make me feel dizzy. I want to forget them and touch the image again to steady myself. I want to turn away from the words and try to remember the image. But before doing this, I recall one sentence that has become lodged in me, an entry Gonzalez-Torres wrote for the biography section of a book:

1991 Ross died of AIDS, Dad died three weeks later, a hundred small yellow envelopes of my lover's ashes – his last will<sup>1</sup>

Maybe now I start to understand why it is so hard to speak about this image – I am choking on its ashes. ***"Untitled"*, 1991 is made with the ashes of the past, with the ashes of love. The bed is an ashen trace that has smudged the surface of the photograph.**

Perhaps photographs are always smudged by ashen traces, even when they appear clear, even when they mirror reality. They blur our sight whilst claiming to show everything there is to see, in this case a bed, but what do they stop us from seeing? For Roland Barthes, 'in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes'.<sup>2</sup> I close my eyes in an attempt to see the image.

...

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York; Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2006), p. 371.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 53.

I see the bed as if I were standing at its foot, looking to where a headboard should be. I cannot remember a headboard; the first thing that comes into my mind's eye are the two pillows bearing deep indentations, side by side, touching. It is as if I could almost touch and smell them (not freshly laundered, but bearing the mild scent of effortless slumbered bodies). These pillows draw me to this image and affect me, as one is moved by perceiving beauty in ordinary objects; or by the memory of contact, by the intimacy of touching. But they also unsettle me, so I try to look away from them by scanning the crumpled light-coloured sheet whose folds are the topography of intimacy. The top sheet does not go all the way up to meet the pillows; no effort has been made to make this bed, it is as if someone has just got up and left. There is no bedspread, no blanket (but neither can I see the foot of this bed, where sometimes a bedcover slides to); there is only a top sheet that points to a mild season, or a warm room. Is the bed still warm? Does it still hold the warmth of a body or has it already turned cold? The bed is lit by daylight, softly. Soft are the pillows where two soft bodies had once lain, side by side, touching.



How good it is to touch [...] How dangerous it is! Suddenly, in the silence and in a backward glance, or a glance that is too close, too absorbed, I vibrate with the vibration of another body, of other matter. What makes itself know here, what presses upon me and I press upon, is a consistency, a density, a bearing, an allure. This pressure, this eagerness, concentrates my entire presence into the parts that are in contact. Everything else disappears, faints, vanishes.<sup>3</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Touch: Tact, Contact, Contagion', in Alexander García Düttmann, Jean-Luc Nancy and Olivier Richon, *Picking Up / Bouncing Back: RCA Photography 2010* (Royal College of Art, 2010) [exhibition catalogue], p. 16.

## STAGING LOSS

I start thinking of Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled", 1991 as a kind of portrait, but one that instead of showing bodies shows the vestige of their movements, the trace of the pressure they exerted on the pillows, a trace of their weight. The materiality of the bed no longer holds bodies, but has become a bearer of traces. These traces touch me. They are a kind of wounding, what Roland Barthes calls the *punctum* of a photograph.<sup>4</sup> He says that sometimes the *punctum* is deferred, only later revealing itself, what the photograph 'cries out in silence'. Barthes writes about the silence of the photograph:

The photograph must be silent [...]: this is not a question of discretion, but of music. Absolute subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort, of silence (shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence). The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah: "Technique," "Reality," "Reportage," "Art," etc.: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

I am aware that even my attempt to see the image afresh in my mind cannot escape what I know about it, its cultural, historical context (which Barthes calls *studium*<sup>6</sup>). Perhaps I know too much about this photograph, yet I still find it poignant, *puncturing*. Its traces rise into my affective consciousness. In remembering the image, I realised my strongest recollection was of the pillows with their deep imprints; this is what became impressed on me: an absence presented by indexical traces. I sense the photograph is a portrait of absence. I am not alone in this kind of affective response to the traces "Untitled", 1991 presents – Carol Mavor writes about the empty bed being 'alive with crumpled sheets and the indexical remains of loss', and of her being 'moved by the indentation, where a head once rested on the white, white pillows'.<sup>7</sup> The indentation moves the viewer, who associates it with the absence of a body and the mark it has left on the soft material, an indexical mark.

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<sup>4</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 55.

<sup>6</sup> For Barthes, the *studium* is informed by knowledge, whether technical, cultural or historical. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust, and D. W. Winnicott* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 138.

Yet, if we are to follow Margaret Iversen's assertion that the impressions on the pillows have been staged as a still-life, we become aware this indentation is not the 'literal' index of a head.<sup>8</sup> She adds, 'this fact does not diminish the power of the work to draw attention to something that existed in the past'. In directing attention to something present in the past, the trace is a 'witness to anteriority'. Iversen points out that such an operation, that of the 'index as trace', is employed in many works by Gonzalez-Torres. The indexical trace is the vestige of a presence, a past presence; the mark left by someone who is now absent, a present absence. Even if the imprint on the pillows is staged, and not the result of physical contact with a head resting on them, the photograph still presents a double portrait of absent human bodies. This is what we know: depicted here is the bed the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres shared with his partner, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS in 1991.<sup>9</sup> What existed in the past were two bodies that once occupied the double bed; two lovers, Felix and Ross. The staged photograph stages loss.



To stage is to present a performance, it is both to perform and to present; staging is a mode of presenting and the presentation itself, the enactment of a drama. It is an active process that places the viewer in the *present*. Presentation suggests the possibility of something becoming or unfolding, a disclosure. Martta Heikkilä, in her discussion of 'coming-into-presence' in Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy (in the light of Heidegger's notion of being) asserts the importance of differentiating between 'presentation' (*Darstellung*) – a 'coming-into-presence', being as disclosedness – and representation (*Vorstellung*) – which implies substitution and repetition.<sup>10</sup> Heikkilä writes:

"Presentation" means to him, first of all, "exposition", which in every discourse borders the sense of significations [...] **Presentation is nothing else but presence before any signification, letting the thing present itself "in truth"**.

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<sup>8</sup> See Margaret Iversen, 'Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace'.

<sup>9</sup> There is little written about Ross Laycock, apart from when he is mentioned by Felix Gonzalez-Torres in his texts and interviews, or by others writing in the context of the artist's work written. For Laycock's obituary, see Joe Clark, *OUTWEEK*, 27 March 1991, pp. 32-33, <[http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow\\_91.pdf](http://www.outweek.net/pdfs/ow_91.pdf)> [accessed 20 October 2016].

<sup>10</sup> See Martta Heikkilä, *At the limits of presentation*, pp. 79-80, 89-91, 186-198.

Representation, in turn, takes a signification to its limit, [...] representational thinking strives to give a thing a fixed identity, and at the same time to define the ground it emerges from. [...] representation has a substitutive function as regards the represented object, if the represented thing is understood as a picture or as an idea that is brought before the subject.<sup>11</sup>

The difference between presentation and representation is not always clear-cut, and depends on how something effects an unfolding or disclosure, how it gestures to something that exceeds itself. This could be the unfolding of a narrative or sensory perception, perhaps a mood, which would be in excess of any determinant meaning.<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy holds that art is 'the presentation of presentation', i.e., the world is presented to us and artistic production is a 'doubling of world disclosure'.<sup>13</sup> He suggests that the world is presented as sense and it is this presentation of sense that art presents, thus creating an impact, what Ian James refers to as 'affective force'.<sup>14</sup> This falls outside signification, although it might coexist with it. Nancy considers the technical and material dimension (technique) integral to the work's presentation. We can infer this is because it lends to the work an expressive dimension or material embodiment. This allows a chain of signification to occur, which is not fixed and simply symbolic (where one thing stands 'exactly' for something else). In this context, the work is not a fixed entity, carrying fixed meanings, but is 'born into presence'.



The photograph of an empty double bed stages loss, for it invokes the intimacy of a relationship, of sleeping together, of sharing a bed, of touching... whilst containing a gesture that indicates the loss that relationship. The photograph further displaces touch. The bed, a place of sleep and of pleasure, becomes a place of pain. The image is a fragment of the artist's life and of his pain.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90 (my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> Ian James, *Presentation and Technics*, lecture, Royal College of Art, 1 February 2010.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> See Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, p. 9; 'sense is not meaning or signification, but rather that which, at the outer limit or in excess of signification, makes meaning and signification possible'. On sense, see also my section 'Self Outside of Self, Ex-sistence Ex-posed' in Chapter 2 of this thesis.



Taken by Gonzalez-Torres in 1991, the photograph was first shown in 1992 as part of MoMA's Projects series. *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres* was installed in the museum's Projects gallery and plastered on twenty-four billboards across New York City.<sup>15</sup> 'Twenty-four in number, they commemorate the date of the death of the artist's lover, Ross', writes Anne Umland in the brochure that accompanies the display of the picture in the museum space, and which provides visitors with the personal context of the piece, as well as with a discussion of its social and political dimension.<sup>16</sup> The billboards, in contrast, are not accompanied by any caption or text; they stand silently amidst the urban chaos. The work is open-ended, open to many different readings by the many viewers who encounter it.



**Figure 13.** Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled", 1991

Billboard, dimensions vary with installation

Installation view: *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. 16 May – 30 June 1992. Brochure. [With billboards in 24 New York City locations]. Photographer: Peter Muscato

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

<sup>15</sup> On *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, MoMA, New York, May 16 – June 30 1992, see <<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/368?locale=en>> [accessed 20 October 2016]. See also Anne Umland, 'Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Umland, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

For the artist, keeping the meanings of the work open is crucial, for it is a way of including the viewer. Asked about how the engagement with the work, with 'gay life', and the fact of having a lover who has died, affects the project, he answers:

It's also about inclusion, about being inclusive. Because everyone can relate to it. It doesn't have to be someone who is HIV positive.<sup>17</sup>

The photograph is inclusive because it is elusive, its meanings are not fixed. Yet, because of its impact on the artist's life and on society at the time, it is HIV / AIDS that provides the context for much of the discussion of this work. Susan Sontag's book *AIDS and its Metaphors* exposes the fatalistic and moralistic response to the disease in the 1980s:

With AIDS, the shame is linked to an imputation of guilt; and the scandal is not at all obscure. [...] It is not a mysterious affliction that seems to strike at random. Indeed, to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far, as a member of a certain "risk group," a community of pariahs. The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, jobmates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity and, among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution.<sup>18</sup>

Sontag abhors the notion of AIDS as 'plague', which she sees as 'the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood.' But, she says, 'one should hardly be surprised that many want to view AIDS metaphorically – as, plague-like, a moral judgment on society. Professional fulminators can't resist the rhetorical opportunity offered by a sexually transmitted disease that is lethal.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres interviewed by Ross Bleckner, see Ross Bleckner, 'Felix Gonzalez-Torres', *BOMB*, 51 (Spring 1995), <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1847/felix-gonzalez-torres>> [accessed 2 December 2016].

<sup>18</sup> Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 24-25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.



**Figure 14.** Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled", 1991

Billboard, dimensions vary with installation

Installation view: *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. 16 May – 30 June 1992. Brochure. [With billboards in 24 New York City locations].

Location #1: 2511 Third Avenue/East 137th Street, Bronx

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



**Figure 15.** Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled", 1991

Billboard, dimensions vary with installation

Installation view: *Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. 16 May – 30 June 1992. Brochure. [With billboards in 24 New York City locations].

Location #12: 27 Cooper Square/northeast corner East 5th Street, Manhattan

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

'Twenty-four in number, they commemorate the date of the death of the artist's lover, Ross.'

## AIDS: BETWEEN PRIVATE PAIN AND THE PUBLIC ARENA OF ART AND ACTIVISM

AIDS was part of Gonzalez-Torres's life and became woven into the fabric of his work. AIDS permeates "*Untitled*", 1991. The circulation and discussion of this image, as of much of Gonzalez-Torres's work, often foregrounds its social and historical context: the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s and the discrimination of homosexuals.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps too much emphasis has been given to the historical context of "*Untitled*", 1991, which sometimes appears to impute an instrumentality to the image that verges on the didactic, and nothing could not be further from its openness and the way it invites the viewer's participation. Yet, this context cannot be ignored. Yes, we know the biographical and historical context in which this piece was produced and the impact AIDS had in it.<sup>21</sup> Although this knowledge may expand the understanding or contribute to the affective impact "*Untitled*", 1991 has on the viewer, it also risks foreclosing a meditation on the image in favour of the contextualisation of the artwork and the establishment of facts.

Considered as a document, this photograph records the aftermath of an event – the death of the artist's lover – against the social and political background of its era. And as a political work it becomes subsumed into a campaign for gay rights and AIDS awareness. The risk is to start seeing the photograph only as a 'document' and as a calculated political work rather than a work of love, loss and mourning, a memorial for Ross, that also effects a form of social activism by affecting the people who encounter it. Rather than being *about* politics, his art seeks to act *as* politics, as Anne Umland explains:

[...] Gonzalez-Torres is uncomfortable with the label "political," fearing that the larger meanings of his work will be impoverished. Yet his art is far

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, David Deitcher, 'How Do You Memorialize a Movement that Isn't Dead?', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, pp. 201-203; and the first chapter in Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995), pp. 1-36. Beyond academic texts and exhibition catalogues, the emphasis on AIDS and gay activism is ever more present in the circulation of the image in web-based media – innumerable blogs and posts in social media sites refer to the social and political dimension of the piece.

<sup>21</sup> On the relationship between the artist's personal history and the social and political dimension of his work, see, for example, Rainer Fuchs, 'The Authorised Viewer', trans. by Greg Bond, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, pp. 105-115; Roland Wäspe, 'Private and Public', trans. by Jeanne Haunschild, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Catalogue Raisonné, Vol. 1, Text*, ed. by Dietmar Elger (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1997), pp. 18-21; Simon Watney, 'In Purgatory: The Work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, pp. 333-347.

from political in the limited sense of the word. It does not simply illustrate a programmatic message at the expense of form. It is not, in other words, *about* politics. If anything, it seeks to act *as* politics, to trigger action of some sort, any sort, inspired by the artist's fundamentally romantic desire to "make this a better place for everyone."<sup>22</sup>

If it is a political act, it is because for an artist who did not separate art from life, or aesthetics from politics, the work performs, subtly and affectively, a private life in public.

In her essay written to accompany 1992 exhibition of "*Untitled*", 1991, Umland refers to the play between public and private to counter what she sees as the problem of discussing Gonzalez-Torres's solely in the context of the AIDS crisis. She voices the concern that in introducing her discussion of the original presentation of the artist's project with an account of the personal circumstances behind the work, 'there is a chance that this work will be misinterpreted as being only about AIDS'.<sup>23</sup> The artist was fully aware of the potential of bringing these two spheres of life together – by choosing to publicly display a private space, the scene of a personal event, Felix Gonzalez-Torres not only questions the invasion of private space by legislation,<sup>24</sup> but also activates the potential of what, before him, feminists had expressed with the phrase 'the personal is political'.<sup>25</sup>

[My work] is all my personal history, all that stuff... gender and sexual preference.... I can't separate my art from my life.<sup>26</sup>

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

<sup>22</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Anne Umland, 'Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 245 (emphasis in original).

<sup>23</sup> Anne Umland, 'Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 241.

<sup>24</sup> 'In the 1986 case *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the [US] Supreme Court determined that the zone of privacy – the area in which in principle we can call our own – does not encompass a private individual's right to engage in certain sexual acts'. See Anne Umland, 'Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 245.

<sup>25</sup> Gonzalez-Torres was influenced by the activism of feminists. In a sense, they were his foremothers. He states: 'The last thirty years, with psychoanalysis and Marxist theory and feminism more than anything else, studying how subjectivity functions, this division between private and public becomes very questionable.' See Joseph Kosuth and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 'A Conversation', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 358.

<sup>26</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Anne Umland, 'Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez-Torres', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 241.

If art cannot be separated from life, to what extent does our knowledge of the artist's biography or personal details influence our reception or interpretation of the work? Does it add to the encounter with the work or is it detrimental to it? Perhaps it all depends on the balance between what is known and what remains a mystery; or on how what is known still allows for other possible associations and meanings. In the preface of the book she edited on Gonzalez-Torres, his close friend and fellow artist Julie Ault ponders on the perils of having firsthand knowledge, of disclosing personal information in the discussion of the work and how this might interfere with the viewer's construction of meaning:

Firsthand knowledge is a privilege yet it also causes dilemmas. Is privately obtained knowledge best kept private or can it justifiably be communal? For instance, I may think certain information speaks directly to why a feature of a work of art is the way it is or speaks to what catalyzed a series of works. But does such speculative revelation have productive public application, could it expand the understandings of Felix's work? Or would it fix meanings – which the artist himself was unwilling to do – at the expense of viewers' processes?<sup>27</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres explored the tension between private and public life in his artistic practice, as *"Untitled"*, 1991 exemplifies – what could be more private than the bed one shared with one's lover? What could be more public than a giant billboard, a space usually reserved to advertising? Private concerns drove his work, especially after the death of Ross, but the artist was reticent about divulging his personal life – 'I am not the work', he often said.<sup>28</sup> However, as Ault indicates, Gonzalez-Torres also gave interviews in which he spoke of the connection between his practice and his partner's illness and death, an experience that impelled him to create new forms.<sup>29</sup> He did not speak publicly about his own HIV positive status though. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, born in Cuba in 1957, died from AIDS in Miami in 1996. Our knowledge of the artist's biography seems to add to our reception and interpretation of his work, whose impact is also due to those four capital letters that come back to haunt us.

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<sup>27</sup> Julie Ault, 'Preface', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. ix.

<sup>28</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in *ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. x, xii.

Although the impact of AIDS in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's life and artistic practice is undeniable, another critic who contends his art is not only about AIDS is Robert Storr:

[...] his art is not solely or even primarily dedicated to the AIDS epidemic. The elegiac qualities so central to his aesthetic are deeply embedded in a critical awareness and ambition that reaches past that crisis, even though in the end it became the lightning rod for all his concerns'.<sup>30</sup>

Had his work been only about AIDS, it probably would not have had the same affective impact; for to respond to the work one does not 'have to be someone who is HIV positive', but someone who can understand or share what it means to love and the pain of losing a loved one. This is how Gonzalez-Torres includes the viewer – he allows them to engage with the work also as subjects in history, as bell hooks puts it.<sup>31</sup> Speaking of another photograph in a letter to a collector, the artist sums up the nature of his practice:

[...] this work is also about including the viewer in a visual process that includes beauty as form of contestation, a work that is politically charged, even illegal in our country. It is also about the history of pain, and the forced invisibility on certain types of love "that dare not speak its name." [...] Pain, as so many things in our culture, is a political act when a pain that is supposed to be hidden suddenly gets exposed in the "public" arena.<sup>32</sup>

Though attitudes toward homosexuality and LGBT rights have improved in the past 25 years, and although there has been amazing advances in HIV treatment, it is important not to forget the impact that this work would have had when originally exhibited. Even more so when contextualised at the time. One of the billboards, placed in the West Village, a neighbourhood that was particularly

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Storr, 'When This You See Remember Me', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> See bell hooks, 'subversive beauty: new modes of contestation', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p.177.

<sup>32</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres, letter dated February 8 1994, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 173.



affected, even had flowers and candles left underneath it.<sup>33</sup> People were losing lovers and friends, parents, brothers and sisters, daughters and sons. The fast growth of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s meant that there were tens of thousands of AIDS-related deaths in that decade; tens of thousands of vacated beds... back then there was no effective antiretroviral therapy and to be HIV positive was to be condemned to death.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, homophobia was still rife and institutionalized.

These issues were at the centre of the artist's life – who, as we know, was also HIV positive – and whose early artistic career coincided with the onset of the AIDS epidemic that robbed him of many friends. Many of his pieces manifest a pervasive sense of loss and mourning, reflecting the inevitability of death that accompanied the diagnosis of the disease. Gonzalez-Torres's work sometimes also took a more overt activist form. One such example is *AIDS Timeline*, a project from 1989 done in collaboration with Group Material, which he had joined in 1987.<sup>35</sup> Another example of activist work is “Untitled”, 1989, a billboard consisting of a ‘dateline’ – white words on a black background listing key moments in the history of the gay struggle. It was displayed on Sheridan Square, site of the Stonewall Rebellion, which it commemorated.<sup>36</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres was actively engaged with queer politics, as a citizen and as an artist. However, his work avoided the usual representations of queer bodies and AIDS victims. It is poetic and subtle, and purposefully contrasted with the

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<sup>33</sup> See Peggy Phelan, ‘Haunted Stages: Performance and the Photographic Effect’, in *Haunted: Contemporary Photograph / Video / Performance*, ed. by Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010), p. 58.

<sup>34</sup> By the end of 1991, around 200,000 AIDS cases had been reported in the United States, and the number of deaths by 1992 had gone beyond 100,000. See the section ‘Growth of the Epidemic in the United States from 1981 to 1996’ and ‘Table 3 - AIDS Cases and Deaths, by Year and Age Group, Through December 2001, United States’ in ‘Epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in the United States’, <<http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite?page=kb-01-03#S1.4X>> [accessed 10 April 2013]. See also ‘Table 1’ in the site ‘Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’, <<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm>> [accessed 10 April 2013]. For UK figures, see <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-15853743>> [accessed 10 April 2013].

<sup>35</sup> See Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Group Material, *AIDS Timeline*, dOCUMENTA (13): 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts, 100 Notizen - 100 Gedanken # 032 (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011), PDF ebook. For more on Group Material, see Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>36</sup> See the artist's statement and a reproduction of the work in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, pp. 198-199.

demonizing and the heroizing images of AIDS sufferers in the media and in art.<sup>37</sup> In an interview with Robert Storr, the artist declared his problem with the ‘so-called gay-art’, and how he tried to circumvent the traps that kind of art could fall into. Wittily, he remarked how he wanted to see in what way a homophobic senator, for example, would explain to his voters ‘how pornographic and how homoerotic two clocks side by side are’.<sup>38</sup> The objects can be understood as metaphors: strings of light bulbs, pairs of clocks and mirrors to allude to his love for Ross; endless supplies of sweets spread over floors to point to the fragility of the body and the transience of life. By avoiding mimetic representation of these contested bodies, Gonzalez-Torres helped to bring the discussion of AIDS and queer sexuality into unexpected places and to engage a diverse range of viewers; his art was neither created to shock nor for a target audience.<sup>39</sup>

“*Untitled*”, 1991 is open enough to resonate even with viewers not aware of the context in which it was created. And this is especially true for those who encounter the photograph in its successive billboard incarnations around the globe. When it was originally displayed on twenty-four billboards across New York City, there were no captions, no explanatory text, no predetermined meanings. The work was open and the viewer could thus bring his or her own meanings to the image, and this was very much how Felix Gonzalez-Torres liked to operate as he asserted:

Things are suggested or alluded to discretely ... because “meaning” is always shifting in time and place. Also, this isn’t really my language, but the language I learned. So I’m reluctant to give something a name imposed on me. You have to deal with who your public is: Whom are you making these things for? Whom are you trying to establish a dialogue with?<sup>40</sup>

As we have seen earlier, the artist often spoke of ‘including the viewer’. It was very important for him to engage the audience, and this also informed his work, as Nancy Spector states in her book published to coincide with Gonzalez-Torres’s

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<sup>37</sup> On the politics of representation of AIDS and gay men, see Simon Watney, ‘In Purgatory’, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, pp. 336-337, 345.

<sup>38</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Robert Storr, ‘Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion’, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 238.

<sup>39</sup> An interesting anecdote involving a museum guard and an exhibition visitor is given by Robert Storr in his essay ‘When This You See Remember Me’, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p.5. Storr also refers to this episode in a interview with the artist, see Robert Storr, ‘Felix Gonzalez-Torres: être un espion’, p.233.

<sup>40</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, pp. 17-18.

1995 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. She maintains that his interest in a minimal, understated aesthetic related to his desire to seduce and challenge the viewer, who would contribute to the creation of the work's meanings.<sup>41</sup>

Gonzalez-Torres's work had a role in highlighting issues relating to AIDS and gay activism, however, his art is never didactic. Even when there are more overt political references, there are no direct explanations. The work is infused with poetic resonances and a beauty that affect people in different ways; it has an affective impact that goes beyond signification. It is therefore problematic to see his work in instrumental terms of communicating a meaning relating primarily to such issues. The work carries multiple meanings, complex and often veiled, and invites the viewer to reflect and respond from their own perspective, from their own experience. This is possible because the artist leaves room for the audience to connect to their own experience and memory, as cultural critic bell hooks writes of "*Untitled*", 1991:

This art returns us to experience, to memory. What we feel and know with our senses determines what this absence means. There are many ways to "read" this image. Those who come to it with autobiographical details from Felix Gonzalez-Torres's life can see projected here the loss of his lover, the impact of AIDS, the power and pleasure of love and loss, the anguish of grief. Yet for the masses of viewers who saw this work without such intimate details, this black-and-white image of an empty bed is a shadowy place to be entered not through empathy with the artist, but by way of one's own relationship to loss, to absence, to leave-taking, to remembered grief.<sup>42</sup>

The openness and continued relevance of Gonzalez-Torres's work is attested by its inclusion in many exhibitions and publications dealing with issues relating to AIDS and queer sexuality, and also with other important themes, such as love, loss and mourning – for his work performs what art historian Douglas Crimp referred to as the necessary combination of 'mourning *and* militancy'.<sup>43</sup> The

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<sup>41</sup> See Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>42</sup> bell hooks, 'subversive beauty: new modes of contestation', in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p.178.

<sup>43</sup> For a measure of the continued relevance of Gonzalez-Torres's work in exhibitions and texts dealing with the relationship between art and AIDS and gay struggle, as well as

universality of such themes points to other possible readings of the work. What is there, in the photograph itself, that tells me of its historical context? Nothing. It is the photograph of an empty, unmade bed. But as I have suggested, it is difficult to escape the context of this piece if we know anything at all about Gonzalez-Torres's biography or practice, and this shows us the militant aspect of his practice. Nevertheless, it is also important to try to go beyond the context of the AIDS crisis to perhaps see what the image presents to us.

Beyond its timely political dimension in addressing the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, *"Untitled"*, 1991 endures as a work about love and loss, a personal loss that reflected a historical moment of multiple losses. These numerous losses have been memorialised by projects like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which through a communal effort brings to the fore the collective dimension of deaths due to AIDS-related causes.<sup>44</sup> Each panel – made by a lover, admirer, family member or friend – commemorates the life of an individual, a name among so many names. The Quilt is a project about the devastating impact of AIDS; it records the lives lost to the disease, and embedded in it are also the lives of those they left behind.

*"Untitled"*, 1991 is not *about* AIDS. It does not represent AIDS through the dying and the dead, as was the case in other artworks of that era, for instance, the photographs of Nan Goldin. It references its impact on an individual's life, presenting loss through an absence, the absence of Ross, who died from AIDS. Thus, essentially, it is AIDS that is part of *"Untitled"*, 1991. The snapshot-like photograph was made in response to a personal loss suffered by a man, a sensitive artist, whose lover had died. The photograph is made out of light, love and loss. The marks left on the bed invite the viewer to think not of what AIDS does to the body, but of what it does to the one left behind. If the silent image speaks to society and to the powers that be, it seems to say 'this is what AIDS does to people: it robs them of the one they love, of passion, of intimacy, of light'. Its mourning is its militancy.

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with love, death etc. see the 'Biography' section of The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, <<http://felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org>> [accessed 30 October 2016]. Tellingly, his work also illustrates the cover of Douglas Crimp's book on the importance of AIDS activism, see Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS And Queer Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT, 2002), p. 149.

<sup>44</sup> On the AIDS Memorial Quilt, see <<http://www.aidsquilt.org>> [accessed 30 October 2016].

Perhaps Gonzalez-Torres's photograph is moving because it does not represent the sick, suffering body, whose immune system has been compromised, but instead confronts us with the ultimate impact of the illness – the absence of that body. Invoked by this presentation of absence is the suffering of the body, and the grief of the one who witnessed the suffering and survived the loss. Contrast “*Untitled*”, 1991 with the image of another loss, the photographic portrait by AA Bronson of his partner, the artist Felix Partz (this other Felix is already dead).<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 16.** AA Bronson, *Felix, June 5, 1994* (1994/99)

By moving away from the dominant representations of AIDS of its time, by not showing an image of a dead body or a representation of a body riddled by disease, “*Untitled*”, 1991 invokes instead the memory that one holds of the absent body, of its warmth and its touch. The photograph of an empty bed has a stronger affective impact than one where a body is present. I am touched by a photograph showing not a body, but the emptiness of a vacated bed.

<sup>45</sup> This photograph by AA Bronson was included in the exhibition *HIDE/SEEK: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, October 30 2010 - February 13, 2011. The exhibition also included work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (*Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, a pile of cellophane-wrapped sweets stashed in a corner); see < <http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/hideseek/> > [accessed 30 October 2016].

Despite its emptiness, what *"Untitled"*, 1991 presents is not nothingness, but absence, or rather, the materialization of absence. I suggest that the framing of emptiness and the presentation of the materiality of the bed through photography help to make visible this absence. The photograph creates an affective presentation of materiality inscribed with traces of a former presence, traces of a beloved that has been lost, a *presence in absentia*. Absence exposes loss, it unveils it.



Loss unfolds itself in time and space; it makes its presence felt by presenting absence. Loss is made visible by absence. In framing emptiness, the photograph stages loss by doubly exposing absence: that which is embedded in the materiality of the bed, and that present in the logic of photography itself. Photography, as Roland Barthes has argued, is the medium of future absences. For Barthes, every photograph points to death – ‘the photograph tells me death in the future’ – its power lies in its ability to foreshadow mortality. *"Untitled"*, 1991 is a memorial for Ross, who died on 24 January 1991. Only five years later, Felix Gonzalez-Torres died on 09 January. The artist’s death already foreshadowed in those deep impressions on the two soft pillows where two soft bodies had once lain, side by side, touching.

## FRAMING THE EMPTINESS OF THE EVERYDAY

At the centre of the photograph by Felix Gonzalez-Torres lies emptiness, in an empty, unmade bed. What is there, in the emptiness of that photograph, that is affecting?

To engage with this question, I turn to another emptiness in photography: the work of Eugène Atget. The emptiness in Atget's work was first critically assessed by Walter Benjamin in the early 1930s, who saw his photographs as evidencing history, having 'exhibition value' as opposed to 'cult value', and thus possessing a 'hidden political significance'. It is, therefore, not only emptiness his photographs and Gonzalez-Torres's have in common, for they have also been read or appropriated as political images, or at least images full of political potential. As discussed earlier in this chapter, commentary on the work of Gonzalez-Torres often emphasises its political dimension in the context of gay activism and the AIDS crisis of the late twentieth century. The political reading both enriches and impoverishes their photographs, and complicates the consideration of their affective force, since it competes with our contemporary encounter with them *as images*. We encounter them long after their production, outside of the context in which they emerged and the discourse that immediately followed. We encounter them in a time significantly different to that of their original reception. Rather than trying to fix these images in a place clearly demarcated by their own time and by established readings, I choose to trace another path, one that leads me to encounter or confront them now, *as images of the real*. The point is to show how the resonant 'emptiness' of Atget's work can help to illuminate the role emptiness plays in Gonzalez-Torres's photograph. In other words, I am proposing that Atget's work is not simply a parallel historical example in its exclusion of the human figure, but that, in and of itself, it also shares the fundamental operations of Gonzalez-Torres's: an attention to the everyday and to traces of presence; a presentation of emptiness that unveils the melancholy of a vanishing yet to come.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> In approaching the 'emptiness' in Eugène Atget's photography in a chapter devoted to the examination of work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, what is being sought out is not a chronological iconography of 'emptiness in art' (representational), from Atget to Gonzalez-Torres, but a resonance, a way of looking at empty spaces and seeing or unveiling something in them.



**Figure 17.** Eugène Atget, *Rue St. Rustique, Montmartre, 1922*

In his 1931 essay, 'Little History of Photography', Walter Benjamin discusses how the 'empty' photographs of Eugène Atget (1857–1927) were forerunners of surrealist photography's 'estrangement between man and his surroundings', and thus a way of puncturing the assumed stability of bourgeois subjectivity increasingly manifested in conventional portrait photography.<sup>47</sup> For Benjamin, both early portrait photography, in the form of the daguerreotype,<sup>48</sup> and the later commercial studio portrait were infused with what he terms 'aura'. Aura is, in his words, 'a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be'.<sup>49</sup> It is the

<sup>47</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 507-530.

<sup>48</sup> In his introduction to Benjamin's 'A Small History of Photography' essay, Christopher Kul-Want writes that 'Benjamin's discussion of the early daguerreotype is suffused with melancholy. This is because Benjamin's encounter with their aura cannot be reproduced for the revolutionary purposes of the present [...]'. See Christopher Kul-Want, ed., *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 103.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings*, p. 518.



uniqueness of aura that will be demolished by the operations of photography as a technology, he contends. In other words, photography could destroy aura through its logic of reproducibility, by making approachable that which was distant, by no longer relating to the idea of authenticity or of an original.<sup>50</sup> Thus, it follows that if the photographic portrait was auratic,<sup>51</sup> then by withdrawing the human subject the photographer would de-auratise the image. It is this move from auratic to non-auratic, from cult value to exhibition value, that Benjamin attributes to Atget the documentarist 'bearing witness', as Howard Caygill explains:

The beginnings of photography in portraiture mark for Benjamin a transition from cult to exhibition value. The photographic portrait of "loved ones, absent or dead, offers the last refuge for the cult value of the picture" ... Early portraits are, as a consequence, auratic, a property which is dissolved as photography moves from evoking remembrance to bearing witness.<sup>52</sup>

If the presence of an individualized, unique subject conferred auratic or cult value on the photographic portrait, it is not surprising that Benjamin would find Atget's documentary style of deserted streets revolutionary, full of a political significance which he makes more explicit in his best-known essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. In order to speak of the importance of Atget's oeuvre and method in the mobilisation of new functions for the work of art, Benjamin contrasts it with the aura of the human face in early photographic portrait, itself a form of memorial:

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<sup>50</sup> For an examination of the concept of aura throughout Benjamin's writings, see Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry*, 34, 2 (Winter 2008), 336-375. As she asserts, the prevalent understanding of aura stems from readings of Benjamin's essay of 1936, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', better known in English as 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

<sup>51</sup> For an analysis of aura in relation to photography in Benjamin's writings, which also examines the 'seemingly paradoxical notion of a photographic aura', see Carolin Duttlinger, 'Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography', *Poetics Today*, 29, 1 (Spring 2008), 79-101.

<sup>52</sup> Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 106. For Benjamin's exposition of 'cult value' and 'exhibition value', see Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn, ed. by Hanna Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), Section V, pp. 218-219.

It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty. But as man withdraws from the photographic image, the exhibition value for the first time shows its superiority to the ritual value. To have pinpointed this new stage constitutes the incomparable significance of Atget, who, in around 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them like scenes of a crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.<sup>53</sup>

For Benjamin these melancholically beautiful early portraits are as auratic as those conventional photographic constructions of bourgeois subjectivity whose atmosphere he finds stifling. But if on the one hand Benjamin denounces the auratic quality of these photographs due to the presence of a human subject, on the other hand he asserts: **'to do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations'**.<sup>54</sup>

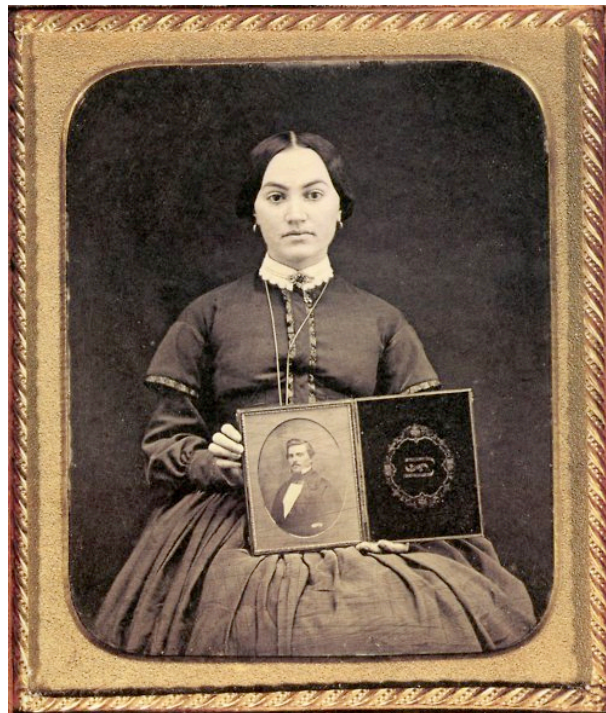
An unpopulated photograph seems to renounce that which made the new technology of photography so popular in the first place: the recording of specific characteristics. None more so than those of the human face, and in turn its place in evoking remembrance. The representation of the individuality of the human subject constituted one of the main attractions of photography (as it had been for painting, with which early photography was often compared), and contributed to its value as an object in the 'cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead'.

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<sup>53</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, pp. 219-220.

<sup>54</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings*, p. 519 (my emphasis).

Throughout history, the ritualised remembering of loved ones would often have involved a physical trace of their lives – the physical objects or fragments they had left behind – not only personal and domestic objects like items of clothing and jewellery, but also fragments of the body like hair. With the invention of photography, the visual imprint of their appearance on material – on glass, metal or paper – becomes the medium of remembrance *par excellence*. Photography thus opens up the possibility of holding the semblance of the absent loved in one's hands, rather than only in memory. It becomes a way of touching the absent body.



**Figure 18.** Photographer unknown, *Woman seated, holding daguerreotype, c. 1850*

In *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, Geoffrey Batchen offers fascinating examples of early photography showing photographs being touched or held. In them we see people holding daguerreotypes, *cartes de visite* and albums, displaying them for the viewer or gazing at them wistfully.<sup>55</sup> Touching the image, yearning for the absent body. If we put to one side what Benjamin has to say about the production of photographs on an industrial scale, and

<sup>55</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum; NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004). In this wonderful book, Batchen examines the relationship between photography and memory, exploring how the embellishment of photographs and their incorporation into hybrid objects of remembrance seems to reinforce their affective power – they touch and can be touched.

concentrate on how the presence of the human subject in photography is inextricably linked to this yearning for the absent body, we are forced to ask: how could photography do without people?

From the advent of the medium in the 1830s, the desire to present the human subject stumbled upon technological constraints, such as the long exposure (usually outdoors) needed to sensitize the early photographic plate. With the evolution of technology, photography moved indoors, to the studio, and commercial photographers concentrated on the business potential of portraying individuals, counting on the increasing efficiency of the production techniques of prints, such as the *carte de visite*, for their enterprise.<sup>56</sup> It was obvious, as Benjamin also points out, that commercial photography did not have much to gain from 'doing without people', since the photographic portrait was its mainstay. The commercial photographer, like the miniature portraitist that preceded him, and which photography rendered obsolete, traded not only in pictures but also in the notion that photography could render the truth of its subject by means of verisimilitude – a truth to appearance. The mimetic photographic portrait furthermore displayed a subjective 'truth' reinforced by the sitter's clothes and carefully selected accoutrements and, paradoxically, by the artifice of the setting in the photographic studio; all of which contributed to the notion of individual subjectivity.<sup>57</sup>

It is against this commercial background and exaltation of bourgeois subjectivity that Benjamin, a Marxist, praises the incorporation of the face that is no longer a portrait – no longer the exaltation of an individual, no longer auratic. He sees this exemplified in the films of Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, and in the photographs of August Sander.<sup>58</sup> Benjamin seems to admire Sander's objective,

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<sup>56</sup> For a brief discussion of the evolution of the portraiture genre in commercial photography, see Helmut Gernsheim and Alison Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), pp. 116-119.

<sup>57</sup> 'Each decade in the *carte* and later Cabinet period has its specially characteristic accessories. In the 'sixties they were the balustrade, column and curtain; in the 'seventies the rustic bridge and stile; in the 'eighties the hammock, swing and railway-carriage; in the 'nineties palm-trees, cockatoos and bicycles; and in the early twentieth century it was the motor-car, for snobs'. See Helmut Gernsheim and Alison Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography*, p. 121.

<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings*, p. 519. For a discussion of subjectivity and the photographic portrait, see Benjamin. H. D. Buchloh, 'Residual resemblance: three notes on the ends of portraiture', in *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art*, ed. by Melissa E. Feldman (Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), pp. 53-69; in particular Buchloh's analysis of the conjunction of Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Sander in Walter Benjamin's text, pp. 56-57.

'scientific' pictures of a series of faces as much as Atget's empty Parisian interiors, streets and squares. Sander's pictures offer a record of the physiognomy of different classes of people according to their occupation and social type, just as Atget's document different classes of objects. When Atget did include people, these were systematic recordings of the lowly workers and traders enmeshed in the fabric of the city. Of interest among his populated series are his pictures of those who plied their trade in the streets of Paris: the hawkers and the ragpickers, the fish sellers and the prostitutes. Atget seemed keen to record life at the margins. This was not an incidental choice, but one that reflected the photographer's leftist personal politics, as the Atget scholar Molly Nesbit asserts in her book *Atget's Seven Albums*.<sup>59</sup> His empathy for the city's poor and the urban working class is palpable in these photographs. He does not hide to look at them, but stands there with his camera as they look directly at him.

Remarkably, Walter Benjamin does not refer to these populated pictures in the 'photography' essay. He seems at pains to highlight the emptiness of Atget's unpopulated photographs, his role as a pioneer in a new kind of non-auratic photography that produced pictures that 'pump the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship'. These are photographs filled not with people but with things. Atget recorded details that went largely unnoticed, like a ragpicker who casts his eyes on what had been cast aside. 'He lived in Paris poor and unknown, selling his pictures for a trifle to photographic enthusiasts scarcely less eccentric than himself; he died recently, leaving behind an *oeuvre* of more than 4,000 pictures', Benjamin writes.<sup>60</sup> It is as if Atget, like the ragpicker, were also at the margin of society for being poor and eccentric. However, by failing to comment on how Atget conducted his photographic business, Benjamin romanticizes him as an odd character who produced thousands of pictures out of a drive to document history. What Benjamin fails to mention is that Atget was also, like those he derided, a commercial photographer; albeit one who did not service the needs of the bourgeois subject nor the aggrandisement of the city. The emptiness in his pictures was certainly born of a sensibility uncommon in his time, yet it was probably also born out of necessity: he needed to foreground the things themselves.

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<sup>59</sup> Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Nesbit shows that Atget subscribed to *La Guerre Sociale*, a socialist-anarchist paper, and to *Le Bonnet Rouge*, a pacifist periodical.

<sup>60</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings*, p. 518.



**Figure 19.** Eugène Atget, *Staircases*, c. 1900

Street views, empty parks, courtyards, façades, doorways, shop windows, shop signs, door knockers, bedrooms, staircases, railings, fireplaces... all these were recorded systematically, and constituted a catalogue of the materiality of the public and private spaces that surrounded the absent figures. As a commercial photographer, Atget was going against the grain of more lucrative studio photography by excluding the human subject. He focused instead on the urban topography; on the streets, buildings, interiors and architectural details. Nevertheless, his was not exactly a personal artistic project, as the sign – *Documents pour Artistes* – hanging outside his studio indicated. Atget was in the business of selling ‘documents’, as he called them: to artists and craftsmen to use as reference material; to institutions in France and abroad, like the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.<sup>61</sup>

Atget’s work method indicates an objective way of documenting and classifying places and spaces, architecture and objects, which in turn constitute a form of archive of the everyday. But these were things that were in the process of disappearing. His drive to document ‘Old Paris’ could be seen as a response to the rebuilding of the city, the demolition of streets and buildings that were making way for a modern, gentrified Paris. He was a photographer-archivist, a witness to the changes wrought by modernity, whose photographs provided evidence of this transformation whilst memorialising the city. His pictures also foreshadowed the disappearance of a way of life, of Parisian streets seething with life.

For Benjamin, Atget’s work was important in his discussion of the concept of aura and its decline, and significant for its political potential. In this study, I am interested in the role emptiness plays in the unpopulated images, and in our encounter with them. The emptying of the city is perhaps reflected in the emptiness of his photographs. They bring to the fore the way photography memorializes what was present at the moment the shutter was pressed: that

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<sup>61</sup> Molly Nesbit’s research for *Atget’s Seven Albums* uncovered the photographer’s list of clients and Atget as a kind of one-man photo agency. See also John Szarkowski, *Atget* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000); John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg, *The Work of Atget, vol. 3: The Ancien Regime* (London: Fraser, 1983). Atget sold around 600 prints to the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, see, for example, <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1058081/door-knocker-paris-france-photograph-atget-jean-eugene/>> [accessed 25 October 2016]. In 2012, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, mounted an exhibition titled *Eugène Atget: “Documents pour artistes”*, see <<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1216>> [accessed 23 March 2013].

which was there then. Temporal and spatial presentness is always subject to change in the future. Atget's photographs reinforce the memory of what is in the process of being forgotten, or perhaps they even contribute to a kind of forgetting by archiving it. I would contend that these empty images produce an affect akin to the melancholia that Benjamin ascribes to the presence of the human face in early photography. Yet no figures are present. What do we see in the withdrawal of people from these photographic images; what do we see in their emptiness?

**As man, woman and child withdraw from the photographic image, the city withdraws into itself and grows silent. Instead of reverberating their footsteps, the city now muffles them as if it were a blanket. What is a city then, if not that which enfolds people? The city exists for this kind of embrace. And when people immerse themselves in the city they always leave something behind, like the strand of hair they leave on the clothes of those they hold. They leave and they leave behind... It is only after they have left that we see what has been left behind – an empty space full of traces.**

Atget frames Paris as a city awaiting ruination rather than as a bustling metropolis. His unpopulated images bear the traces of human inhabitation and activity that act as markers of a vanishing world and vanishing subjects; hence his interest in documenting the detail as if he were at 'the scene of a crime'. His looking at the fragments of the everyday point to subjects whose absence can only be discerned by the traces of their presence, or by the erasure of these traces. Where can we find now the physical traces of the blacksmith's courtyard or of the ragpicker's shack? These traces have been successively erased, but paradoxically they owe their 'existence' not only to Atget's photographs, but also to the fact that they have been erased. Their vanishing is a good example of what Jacques Derrida calls '**an erasure which allows what it obliterates to be read**'.<sup>62</sup>

...

Sometimes, after time has elapsed, that which has been erased from the city is in a sense unconcealed and becomes 'visible'. It seems that we are afflicted by something akin to nostalgia for events or times we never experienced. In the city of my birth, Rio de Janeiro, there was a hill in what is now the financial district of

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<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida quoted in Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, p. 20 (my emphasis).



the city. It was called Morro do Castelo, and on it there were important colonial and religious buildings. This hill was completely flattened in the early 1920s. But when people think or talk about that specific area, especially when thinking of the transformation of the city and the destruction of colonial architecture, they will often recall what was there before – something they have never seen (some not even in pictures) but which exists for them because it has been effaced.

...

Both Atget and Gonzalez-Torres are witnesses to a vanishing and the traces it leaves behind. They look at what could easily go unnoticed and offer a kind of evidence; they make visible, or evident, what was concealed. Evident comes from the Latin *ex-videre* – out of seeing, coming from seeing. And seeing is what we think we do when we look at photographs. But what does the photograph as *studium* (in its technical, cultural and historical cloak) not show us? ‘The necessary condition for an image is sight’, Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka smiled and replied: ‘We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes’.<sup>63</sup> This conversation between Gustav Janouch and Franz Kafka is quoted by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. In Chapter 22, Barthes considers how the affective impact of a photograph, which he calls the *punctum*, can be deferred. Sometimes the *punctum* is only revealed later, when the photograph is no longer in front of the viewer and is remembered. Roland Barthes takes his cue from Kafka: ‘to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness’.<sup>64</sup>

Following on from Kafka and Barthes, we could say that we see *after* seeing the photograph; *after* ‘shutting our eyes’ we see, or sense, the detail that affects us. The vanishing is *evidenced* by the detail, by what is inconspicuous, which through the lens becomes visible and wounds us. The image we hold in our mind’s eye is the scar of this wounding, its trace; for if people withdrew from the photograph, they have not left the image, which holds their absent presence, their vanishing and their traces. The photograph as the trace of a vanishing, the trace of an absence. Gonzalez-Torres’s photograph thus offers another kind of evidence: it makes visible the absence of the lover in the emptiness of the everyday.

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<sup>63</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 53.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

### IN THIS EMPTY, UNMADE BED...

Like the city which Atget examines, the bed presented to us by Felix Gonzalez-Torres is not only an object, but also an empty space that bears traces, a space shared by lovers who have been separated by death. As Anne Umland recounts, Gonzalez-Torres's decision to photograph the bed may be linked to the memory of a poem by Wallace Stevens (from a book given to him by his lover, Ross), in which an intangible space is built from imagination:

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,  
We make a dwelling in the evening air,  
In which being there together is enough.<sup>65</sup>

The bed is the dwelling of lovers whose absence from the photograph brings to the fore this space that was shared. The bed is where the lovers' existence is exposed – like the handprint left on the cave wall, the bed with its crumpled sheet and the imprints on the pillows expose the artist (and us) to a 'self outside of self'; the self comes into being by being exposed, by being disposed towards the world. By implication, the self is only a self in its co-existence – being as always 'being-with'.<sup>66</sup> The bed is the material thing that allows us to see this inscription, this exposition of self.

The bed, a thing among things, is where love and pain lie, side by side, as do dreams and nightmares, births and deaths. It is also a piece of furniture that subsumes other things: pillows, mattresses, bed sheets, blankets... "*Untitled*", 1991 is the photograph of an empty bed, but one that is full of things, *meaning-full* things. If we search for their hidden meanings they do not answer back, for they can only speak of themselves. This bed does not signify, this bed *is* (a bed). This is what the photograph shows us, this is what we see: the bed lies empty, awaiting for a body to lie therein; it holds the traces of a departed body. Perhaps the mystery is that there is no mystery, no hidden meaning in things, as the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa writes in *The Keeper of Sheep* (XXXIX):

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<sup>65</sup> Wallace Stevens, from *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour*, quoted in Anne Umland, in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. by Julie Ault, p. 241.

<sup>66</sup> See my section 'Self Outside of Self, Ex-sistence Ex-posed' in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The mystery of things, where is it?  
 Where is that which never appears  
 To show us, at least, it's a mystery?  
 What's the river know about it and what, the tree?  
 And I, being no more than they, what do I know about it?  
 Whenever I look at things and think what men think of them,  
 I laugh like a brook freshly sounding off a rock.  
 Because the only hidden meaning of things  
 Is that they have no hidden meaning at all.  
 This is stranger than all the strangenesses,  
 And the dreams of all the poets,  
 And the thoughts of all the philosophers—  
 That things really are what they appear to be  
 And that there is nothing to understand.  
 Yes, here's what my senses learned all by themselves:  
 Things have no meaning – they have existence.  
 Things are the only hidden meaning of things.<sup>67</sup>

For Pessoa, through the voice of his heteronym Alberto Caeiro, the world is a place to be absorbed through the senses, one in which 'to think a flower is to see it and smell it' and 'to eat a fruit is to taste its meaning', for 'thoughts are all sensations'.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps in seeing the photograph of the bed we sense its softness and its warmth; we sense it as a place to rest, to sleep and to embrace the lover. Passion and tenderness. The most intimate of spaces we can occupy. And yet there is something unsettling in the image of the bed, for in its emptiness we sense the vast and cold desert the bed becomes once the one left behind has to return to it on his own.

The double bed Gonzalez-Torres photographs no longer functions as a double bed, for as we already know there is no doubling of bodies there. Even if as an image the bed continues to function teleologically – for the image points to its use, to the way beds welcome bodies to rest – it is as an image of bodily imprints that the photograph makes us see what is missing from the picture. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, from its advent photography was inextricably

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<sup>67</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *The Keeper of Sheep (O Guardador de Rebanhos)*, trans. by Edwin Honig and Susan Margaret Brown (Riverdale, N.Y.: Sheep Meadow Press, 1997) [bilingual edition], p. 97.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

linked to remembrance, to absence and longing, but this usually involved the portrayal of a human subject. Gonzalez-Torres's photograph of a bed removes the figures, the human subjects, but not the trace of their presence, which is embedded in the materiality of the bed. Its materiality, in turn, calls attention to the absence of the bodies. The image flickers between showing the bed as a comforting space and as a material thing that exposes the absence of the human subjects.

The photograph of the bed reveals how everyday things are filled with absence, which is as true for the artist as bereaved lover as it is for us. For in encountering the artwork we are returned to our own experience and memory. We return to things as material signs and to our investment in them, of which Peter Schwenger writes:

For many, the familiar presence of things is a comfort. Things are valued not only because of their rarity or cost or their historical aura, but because they seem to partake in our lives; they are domesticated, part of our routine and so of us. Their long association with us seems to make them custodians of our memories; so that sometimes, as in Proust, things reveal us to ourselves in profound and unexpected ways. Yet all this does not mean that things reveal themselves, only our investments in them. And those investments often carry with them a melancholy in the very heart of comfort [...]<sup>69</sup>

The melancholy we sense in objects comes from the associations we make, or from how they come to stand for something else, often something we have lost. In the psychoanalytic theorisation of responses to loss, an important stage in the work of mourning is the construction of a symbolic space. In the stage set up by mourning, the lost object is not represented directly to us, but presented through a thing that can stand for it. The object, material or space is impregnated by loss, by its traces. 'We surround ourselves with material things that are invested with memories but can only stand for what we have lost.'<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, back cover.

The bed is a thing that carries indexical marks, a physical thing connected to the lost object; a 'material sign' that gives rise to an affect – the intensity of feeling for what has been lost. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*", 1991 presents the relationship between the living artist and the dead lover through the bed they shared. The bed is a material sign that stimulates an affective memory and forces the artist to think through matter, to unfold what is implicated in it. Mourning and melancholia rise from the bed. Through the image he remembers the body that is no longer there, but which is imprinted on the fabric of the bed – the ephemeral trace which the artist, in turn, fixes in the photograph. The vestige of a presence. At the heart of the photograph lies an absence presented by traces. In this empty, unmade bed, lies absence.

In the empty, unmade bed, lies not only the absence of the artist's lover but of the artist himself. In this empty double bed there is a double intimation of mortality. Like Gonzalez-Torres, we bear witness to a vanishing and the traces left behind, only this time the vanishing is that of the artist. "*Untitled*", 1991 becomes a marker of the relationship between the living spectator and the dead artist. It points to both a death in the past and a death in the future, a death already foreshadowed in the making of this image.

But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence.<sup>71</sup>

Roland Barthes

A photograph is a trace of the death of the moment held forevermore.<sup>72</sup>

Carol Mavor

<sup>71</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96 (emphasis in original).

<sup>72</sup> Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 68.

## AN ASHEN TRACE THAT HAS SMUDGED THE SURFACE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Photography presents subjects in their absence, and thus becomes the compelling medium for the exposition of absence itself. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who initially trained as a photographer, had a profound relationship with the medium. His art, as Nancy Spector insightfully states, ‘contemplates and exemplifies the very conditions of the photographic medium – its technology, its semiotics, its socioeconomic implications, and its cultural mythologies.’<sup>73</sup> Among the conceptual implications of photography the artist explores (as highlighted by Spector), the one that seems particularly relevant in this discussion is ‘photography as indexical sign’. Earlier I referred to the role of the indexical marks in “*Untitled*”, 1991, even though, as Iversen points out, the impressions seem to have been staged and would not be, therefore, a ‘literal’ index. The index’s relationship of ‘existential contiguity’ to the object is interesting because it also pivots around absence. For an imprint of a part of the body to appear, such as a footprint, the foot must first make contact and then be taken away. The bodily imprint is a residue or trace of physical presence.<sup>74</sup> The photograph is also a trace, a trace of the world that it depicts and to which it has a physical connection. For Susan Sontag, too, the photograph is not only an image but also a trace, for it is ‘something directly stencilled off the real’.<sup>75</sup> The photograph is an image that only appears because light has fallen on a referent that is now absent, but whose trace remains.

Gonzalez-Torres’s work draws attention to absence, to what existed in the past, to the trace as a ‘witness to anteriority’ – to what is left behind after a loss but also to the joy of a fleeting moment. His art makes us notice in the mundane the traces of presence. As Nancy Spector suggests, his art continually intersects with the indexical:

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<sup>73</sup> Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, p. 90.

<sup>74</sup> For a brief discussion of the index, see my section ‘The Contact of an Absence’ in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>75</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 154.

The concept of the index as a sign contingent on the empirical world – a world that can only be narrated in the past tense – reverberates throughout Gonzalez-Torres's art. As a metaphor for the photographic process itself, his work intersects with the indexical at every turn. [...] Gonzalez-Torres frequently depicts the index itself in melancholic photographs that bear the signs of absence, of an almost forgotten human presence: "of what was, but no longer is." Such images were first used in the artist's photographic jigsaw puzzles. One dating from 1988, *Untitled (Cold Blue Snow)*, shows only footprints in the snow, their impressions about to melt into the icy ground. [...] Footprints are again the subject of a recent series of eight lush photogravures, *Untitled (Sand)*, (1993 / 1994). [...] Imprints of the absent body are equally central to the artist's 1991 billboard of a double bed marked with the fresh indentations of two heads on its pillows. It is the trace of previous inhabitants that injects meaning onto this picture, however open-ended that meaning might be: the bed itself merely a backdrop to this silent tableau of pleasures past, of vanished intimacies, of loss.<sup>76</sup>

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's art is an art of traces. The imprints on the bed, the footprints on sand or snow are obvious examples of indexical traces that evoke contact by presenting the body through its absence. The anteriority of contact. The body that has been caressed has no physical trace of that touch, though it holds a memory of it inscribed as an affective trace, a trace of experience. Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*", 1991 invokes the memory of touch, and invites us to remember what is inscribed on the body. Like the fabric that in its fibres holds scents, creases, stains and tears, the body bears the marks of its passing through the world and the passing of time; the body is the fabric of our experience. It bears witness to life and to love, to absence and to loss. It finds itself as self and exposes its existence in touching, for touch is, as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, the 'moment of sensual exteriority':

Touch is proximate distance. It makes one sense what makes one sense (what it *is* to sense): the proximity of the distant, the approximation of the intimate.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, pp. 113, 117.

<sup>77</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, p. 17 (emphasis in original).



**Figure 20.** Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Cold Blue Snow)*, 1991

C-print jigsaw puzzle in plastic bag

9 1/2 x 7 1/2 in.

Edition of 3, 1 AP

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York





**Figure 21.** Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Sand)*, 1993 / 1994 (Detail)

Portfolio of photogravures on Somerset Satin paper in silk covered archival box

Eight parts: 12 1/2 x 15 1/2 in. each

Edition of 12, 6 APs

Published by Edition Julie Sylvester, New York

© The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



CONCLUSION

**WEAVING WORDS AND AFFECT**

## THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

Coming to the end of the journey I undertook with this research project, I sigh. More than relating to relief, sighing corresponds to the hope I had at the beginning of the writing process that this text would be expelled like a sigh. The search for an answer to the question 'How does one respond to the loss sensed in the affective encounter with the work of art?' led me to think not of a thematic of loss in art or a systematic taxonomy of loss, but to think from the starting point of the singular experience of a body that is affected, that thinks through what it senses, what it feels, what it 'remembers' as a trace of experience. A body that suffers the violence of loss' inscription as a wound and is often rendered silent by it; a body for whom writing is impossible and yet offers a possibility for inscribing the singularity of the encounter with loss and *otherness*. Writing here is part of the journey of a body that gestures through the words it expels like a sigh in order to regain a voice that can respond to loss, to works that evoke loss. This is the voice that, affected by loss and absence, speaks the language of silence and sorrow; it speaks a language that has been wounded. Yet, in the space of the affective encounter with works of art and images and texts, the body of the writer conjures a foreign voice that can pass from the side of silence to the side of words. If writing emerges from silence without negating it, writing always maintains a relation to silence, since silence is needed to listen to this other voice and the voice of the *other*. Silence is the lining of my words. These words are a response to encounters that reawaken affects and compel this body to think, to engage in conversation with other bodies – bodies of artworks and bodies of thought – through writing. My writing is fuelled by the encounter with art and with loss; an affective encounter through which what is *other* can touch, and what touches can be thought.

In this thesis, I have suggested that in sensing loss in the encounter with the work of art the writer's response involves the resurfacing of affective traces linked to an experience of loss. In encountering the *other*, I turn towards what reverberates within me. It is from this position of being affected that I am moved to write, a movement against symbolic collapse, away from a fall into complete melancholic silence. In my main examples of contemporary artistic practice – Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Louise Bourgeois – I contend the artists perform a similar movement, creating works that inscribe the presence of an absence. This inscription is a gesture that can also be identified in the ancient tale of the Corinthian Maid and in the 'images in the caves of our prehistory'. What is inscribed is not only absence but existence; what is inscribed is the vestige or trace of a passing through the world, the world which loss transforms into the site of a passing.

Loss is significant for it is that which silences us but that at the same time moves us to use language. Loss, as Julia Kristeva shows, can move us to *create* a new language, a language that in the form of art or writing she calls a 'counterdepressant'. I would argue this new language could be thought as well in relation to the sense expounded by Sigmund Freud in 'Mourning and Melancholia', as a kind of response to loss that effects a working through loss. Recall that mourning is an active process that inscribes the lost object in a symbolic space. Mourning sets up a stage where the lost object is not represented directly to us, but presented through a thing, a 'material sign' that gives rise to an affect – the intensity of feeling for what has been lost. Loss impregnates a material, an object or a space with its traces; it brings the past to bear on the present through things that carry indexical marks or through chance encounters with things that are otherwise connected to the lost object. Gilles Deleuze writes about such an affecting chance encounter in *Proust and Signs*:

It is more surprising that the sensuous signs, despite their plenitude, can themselves be signs of alteration and of disappearance. Yet Proust cites one case, the boots and the memory of the grandmother, in principle no different from the madeleine or the cobblestones, but which make us feel a painful disappearance and constitutes the sign of a Time lost forever instead of giving us the plenitude of the Time we regain [...] Leaning over to unbutton his boots, he feels something divine; but tears stream from his eyes, involuntary memory brings him the lacerating recollection of his dead grandmother. 'It was only at that moment – more than a year after her

burial, on account of that anachronism that so often keeps the calendar of facts from coinciding with the calendar of feelings – that I realized she was dead ... that I had lost her forever.’ Why does the involuntary recollection, instead of an image of eternity, afford the acute sentiment of death? It does not suffice to invoke the particular character of the example from which a beloved being rises up once more, nor the guilt the hero feels toward his grandmother. It is in the sensuous sign itself that we must find an ambivalence capable of explaining that it sometimes turns to pain, instead of continuing in joy.<sup>1</sup>

For Deleuze, what is revealed by the sign in Proust is truth, and truth depends on an encounter with ‘something that forces us to think’; what is thought is the result of a violence the sign works upon us.<sup>2</sup> In the contingent encounter with the ‘sensual signs’ of involuntary memory, the encountered sign is something that brings past and present together, something that discloses an essence.<sup>3</sup> Proust writes,

[...] let a noise or a scent, once heard or once smelt, be heard or smelt again in the present and at the same time in the past, real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, and immediately the permanent and habitually concealed essence of things is liberated.<sup>4</sup>

What the material sign brings forth is not the thing as it was in the past, but its dematerialized essence; what thus appears in the present is not the thing one might have searched for, but rather its unfolding. The past thing unfolds itself in the present, transformed and capable of transforming the subject.

In the encounter with the things of the world, the artist, like the writer, may come across powerful things that reawaken affects, things that unsettle and demand interpretation. The artist who undergoes the violence of a material sign is forced to think, to seek the sign’s meaning not by reiterating what is known – its explicit or conventional signification – but by being open to the unknown – being attentive to the world, to what inhabits it and what constitutes them. Therefore, it is not by explaining the sign but by ‘explicating’ it, by unfolding the meaning

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> See Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Literature* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Proust quoted in *ibid.*, p. 40.

implicated in the sign that appeals to memory or to desire, that the artist is able to transform the matter/materiality of this encounter into the matter/materiality of the artwork.

In the case of the artworks discussed in detail in this thesis, I suggest that the artists' selection and presentation of material indicate a fundamental encounter: the encounter with a material sign that forces the artist to think through matter, to unfold what is implicated in it, to unfold the worlds it holds. I contend that for Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Louise Bourgeois, the use or presentation of fabric in the work can be thought as the result of an encounter with matter that ushers in an affect that destabilizes the subject and stimulates creation. The encounter forces a 'thinking through' fabrics and their context, the environments in which they are inserted and the bodies they hold. Fabric becomes an 'affective material' for it carries an affective connection for the artist – to life and to the experience of loss; to touch and intimacy; to joy, sadness and fear. This *material reverberation* is not limited to things that were once in direct contact with what is now absent, but vibrates from matter that, in unfolding the essence of loss, has the power to affect the subject by stimulating an affective memory, by making images arise from the past. Like Proust's example of Marcel's reaction to the boots and the memory of the grandmother (the boots were his, they did not belong to his grandmother but made him recollect her earlier gesture of removing them for him and unfold her essence),<sup>5</sup> things can give rise to affects when they reactivate a memory-trace, when they are fragments of experience, when they embody traces of loss. The work moves the artist to the other side of silence though it speaks silently. Through the work and its materiality the artists point to an unspeakable encounter with loss.

#### LOSS RESISTS REPRESENTATION

The unspeakable experience cannot be 'spoken', cannot be represented as a linear narrative of facts, for facts do not account for its intensity. To speak of the unspeakable experience of loss, to give shape to it, demands the invention of a language that embodies or evokes something of the encounter with loss, that carries its traces. These are the traces that the artist or writer blanketed in silence

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<sup>5</sup> See Miguel de Beistegui, *Proust as Philosopher: The Art of Metaphor*, trans. by Dorothée Bonnigal Katz, with Simon Sparks and Miguel de Beistegui (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 61-63.

rescues to inscribe into a new language that is a response to loss. As Kristeva indicates, we need to create a new language when the available signifiers fail to signify, when we are faced with the impossibility of expressing what cannot be said and what cannot be shown directly, an impossibility that insists in being expressed through the body. It surfaces as a sensation, a throbbing, a pulsation of the body in its aliveness to the experience. The body remembers what the conscious mind forgets; what returns, returns as a flash.

Although this is not my approach here, the notion of 'forgetting' by the conscious mind and 'remembering' through the body could also potentially be thought in terms of a response to 'trauma' and thus discussed using the framework of trauma theory, which would imply a move toward the historical source of the trauma in order to analyse its impact.<sup>6</sup> As trauma theorist Cathy Caruth comments on essays that examine trauma's implications 'for the ways we represent and communicate historical experience', trauma 'both urgently demands historical awareness and yet denies our usual modes of access to it. How is it possible [...] to gain access to a traumatic history?'<sup>7</sup> I would suggest that in the artists' response to loss what concerns them is not the representation and communication of a historical experience of loss, but an intimation of its affective impact. The traces of an experience of loss are remembered through the body, they are inscribed on the artist. What loss has inscribed is in turn inscribed on the work as an affective trace of experience. Rather than a narrative representation, we have art as the site of an event where something *happens* – where the artwork's affective force impacts on the viewer in an encounter that compels thinking.

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<sup>6</sup> I decided against turning to trauma theory and having a discussion underpinned by the concept of trauma in this thesis for two reasons: first, although loss can be traumatic, I do not want to pathologize the artists nor psychoanalyse them (neither am I equipped to do this); second, trauma theory often emphasises collective historical events to avoid focusing on 'individual pathology'. Trauma theory seeks to situate trauma historically and in relation to a larger sociocultural context in order to analyse it, especially through the aspect of the 'testimony' of the survivor of trauma. For an annotated bibliography of trauma theory, see Susannah Radstone, Noah Shenker, and Janet Walker, 'Trauma Theory', in *Cinema and Media Studies, Oxford Bibliographies Online*, <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0147.xml>> [accessed 22 September 2016].

<sup>7</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'Recapturing the Past: Introduction', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. and with introductions by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 151.



## THE AFFECTIVE ENCOUNTER COMPELS THINKING AND REVEALS ABSENCE

As I have suggested in this thesis, tracing loss is a tracing of traces, a tracing of material vestiges and of affective inscriptions. This research is an attempt to unfold how the work of art evokes or carries the affective traces of an experience of loss and has the capacity of transferring the affect to the viewer, who senses loss in the encounter. This has led me to think through the discussion of responses to loss offered by psychoanalytical theory; to think through writing itself as a form of response to an encounter with art and to a wounding. It has also caused me to respond to texts and images outside of artistic practice, such as the tale of the 'Corinthian Maid' and the prehistoric handprints, in which, as in the artworks, I also identified the *inscription of an absence*. It is such an inscription that now I see as fundamental to conclude my thoughts on the practices and works discussed in detail in this thesis. Absence pulsates throughout the text, but it took me quite long to see it throbbing.

Drawing from Freud's notion of 'reality-testing' in the work of mourning; from Kristeva's assertion of the need to reconnect affect to language to overcome silence; from Blanchot's idea of writing as a revelation of absence and from the discussion of handprints of our forebears in the caves of prehistory, I contend that the artists' engagement with absence is a crucial operation in their transformative response to loss through the formulation of a new visual language. In verbal language, an engagement with language implies an engagement with absence, for, in embracing signification, the subject accepts a set of signs that signify 'precisely because of the absence of the object', as Kristeva writes. Absence underlies the signifier, yet, as Blanchot notes, language as communication 'forgets' this absence by creating a substitute, but the language of literature produces a double absence – both of the thing and of the concept. And perhaps, the subject who mourns a loss tries to forget or avoid absence too. But in mourning, through the work of mourning, what is unveiled is absence. The mourner has to register absence to acknowledge loss; articulating absence is a necessary but difficult task. It is a struggle to find a way to express what appears to be an impossibility. The experience of loss and the confrontation with absence belong to the order of what cannot be said, of what cannot be shown, what resists representation. It is by resisting representation that the artists discussed in this thesis find a way of expressing an impossibility: the works present loss by *materialising absence*.

In this research, I have argued that the artworks evoke loss by inscribing the absent body as trace on matter – the trace of a presence, of existence, of touch, of a passing. This materialisation of absence, of a body invoked or indexically imprinted, is, I believe, what confers the works their affective power. Thus it is through the materiality of the artwork, through the use and presentation of what I call an *affective materiality* inscribed with absence that we come to sense loss, for we are touched by absence. Loss is not represented through a narrative of biographical events, but presented through works that sustain a relation, through material, to the body; through the indices and traces of absent bodies and the spaces they occupy, the spaces the artists themselves once occupied, the artworks inscribe the presence of an absence. By unfolding that which cannot be represented, the works invite an initial response through sensation and memory, rather than just the reading of a personal story. In this encounter with the *other*, with *otherness*, the subject emerges; the subject is a body that belongs to a world of affective encounters. It is thus from the exchange of affective forces between subjects, between bodies, that the work has the power to effect a transformative, meaningful encounter and to stimulate the writer to recover the creative potency of thought in order to write what is impossible but insists in being written. Writing amounts to inscribing the traces of an encounter – an encounter with the *other*, an encounter with absence, an encounter with traces.

Living means leaving traces.<sup>8</sup>

Walter Benjamin

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), p. 169.

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