

Agnès Thurnauer  
The place is the word, the word is the place

“Not with my hand alone I write:  
My foot wants to participate.”  
Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*<sup>1</sup>

I  
Ground

1.

Socrates had as much contempt for the ‘playfulness’ of writing as he had for ‘artistic illusion:

“The painter’s products stand before us as though they were alive: but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words”<sup>2</sup> For someone who, like Socrates, trusted the dynamic word of dialogue, of voice, writing was something suspicious: without the presence of an author, without someone to answer for it, it seems lifeless. It is there, however, in that distance, in that void it creates, that we may find its uncanny prophetic power, which was never understood by the philosopher. It is this power, and because she has already felt it in her body, that drives Agnès Thurnauer to use signs and text in her painting: “sentences and whole paragraphs of texts I read opened new spaces in my body, created correspondences with other fields, weaving an ever changing web” (...). And now, the artist says about her works: “Just like images, words elicit space.”<sup>3</sup> Where can we find this new space?

2.

To be born is to be cast into a world that precedes us. And that world is discursive, a construct of language. Language itself is the archive of our history and identity, a territory of underground strata. Notwithstanding, we often forget this *soil* as it remains unseen, hidden under the surface of our daily lives: but it is this forgotten unseen that allows us to see and read the world, that dictates what we see and how we interpret it (and language is our first perception of the world). Not a recurring topic, seemingly absent, there is a preexistent structure that organizes how we can understand ourselves and the world. Language is *extimacy*. That is the *ground* that is revealed to us in Agnès Thurnauer’s *Matrice*. The strangeness of a floor that has been written on, a floor we can walk on, where we can sit, talk, see, think, and be—but that remains cryptic, fragmented, inapprehensible. Just like in her painting, this installation is a geography that offers us the possibility of a “physical promenade that elaborates meaning”, because “language is more a space than a tool”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> Agnès Thurnauer, *Journal et autres écrits*, p.33.

<sup>4</sup> Agnès Thurnauer, *Journal...*, p.121.

3.

Just like Socrates, Jesus Christ was a Master who wrote no books “and had no library, as far as we know”—as Fernando Pessoa ironically reminds us. The only words he ever wrote were written on the ground and could not have lasted: in the first lines of the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, we are told that the scribes and the Pharisees brought Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery, and asked for his judgment—the Law of Moses dictated that she should be stoned to death. Logos incarnated, Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and answered them, and again he bent down and wrote on the ground. Against the stability of the law, inscribed on stone by the finger of God (Ex. 31, 18) this inverted messiah also writes with his finger, but on the dust on the ground.

4.

We cannot know what Christ wrote on the ground. But with that writing he defined the space, he signaled it and transformed into a *place*: a *body-logos* transforms the space into a *space-logos*.

5.

For Agnès Thurnauer painting is a *lieu de parole* (a place of word)<sup>5</sup>. Not just in the most immediate sense of painting or drawing text, but in the sense that all painting is a critical space, a materialization of thought. A performance: a thought being acted before the painter, before the beholder. It is a space and a time of investigation, of movement, of restlessness. It is the space and the time to establish relationships between different and unexpected elements that ask for the spectator’s creative attention. *Matrice* points towards the fact that thinking is, after all, a kind of dance—a relation between body and space.

6.

In front of *Matrice*, I go back to Louis Marin’s question: “What ‘consubstantial’ relation links language to space and to the body?”<sup>6</sup>. The author will later say that *place* is what allows us to understand this co-consubstantiality: “What is a place? A fragment of space endowed with its own unity, (...) A place signifies the *relation* of a given space to a function or characteristic of the being that is indicated and exhibited there in its absolute individuality; in other words, a place is the relation of a space to the only possible epiphany of being within it: the body. A place is a body-space (...). From this point on, then, places belong to narrative (...)”<sup>7</sup>. *Matrice* offers us that understanding: a close affinity between language, body and space.

## II.

### Babbling: the end, the beginning

1.

After an auspicious beginning as a writer, the silence. Lord Philip Chandos, the son of the Count of Bath, could write no more. He just couldn’t. Like he explained in the

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<sup>5</sup> Agnès Thurnauer, *Journal...*, p.22

<sup>6</sup> Louis Marin, *On Representation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 124

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 125

famous letter he wrote to Francis Bacon in 1603, he felt that words decomposed on his mouth the second he used them. They crumbled apart, rotting, empty of meaning. Losing the capacity to think, talk and write coherently he avoided, from that moment on, all literary production: “For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts (...). Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back-whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.”<sup>8</sup>

2.

Just like this field of debris we find in *Matrice*, at some point of our lives we all have felt words shattering, falling and breaking into pieces, losing their power or gaining new ones, failing us, failing to say what we mean. They assail us, escape us, and render us incapable of saying no matter what, of having something to say. Lord Chandos—or rather, Hofmannsthal through Chandos—succumbed to the awe of the presence of things, unable to write about them. Words became ghosts, with lives of their own, they looked back at him opening new spaces that gave him vertigo and led into the void.

3.

Paul Celan also felt this failure of language, but he kept on writing. In fact, this failure was a necessary condition of his writing. In Celan, language aims to transform into an open silence, it can never convey all. It is in tatters, it has no redemptive power. His words are babbled, syllabic, unhinged. They taste like ash. They are already a remnant. More than a purported transparency, he gives us the “illegibility of this world”<sup>9</sup>, he makes us “talk to one-way streets”<sup>10</sup>. With no faith in the power of language, believing only that “no one conjures our dust” through the word.<sup>11</sup> But his writing does not proclaim the death of language, it assumes its frailty, its failures and shortcomings: shattered and in ruins, it still is our home.

4.

In the poem *Tubingen, Janner*, thinking of Hölderlin and of his favorite word, which he kept repeating towards the end of his life, Celan wrote:

“Should there come  
should there come a man  
should there come a man to the world, today, with  
the lightbeard of the  
patriarchs: he would,  
if he would speak of this  
time, he  
would only babble and babble,  
ever-, ever-  
moremore.  
 (“Pallaksch. Pallaksch.”)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter And Other Writings* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Celan, *Sete Rosas Mais Tarde*, p.165

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p.169

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p.103.

<sup>12</sup> Celan, *sete rosas...*, p.105:

“Kame,  
kame ein Mensch,

5.

In 1891, while writing *On Aphasia: A Critical Study*, Freud took Hughlings Jackson's description of a disease of the language that results from a "speech remnant": words or expressions that, because of some trauma, become the patient's last words, as he meaninglessly repeats them. As an example, Freud tells the story of one of his patients who "had the curious speech remnant: 'List complete': he was a clerk who had a stroke immediately after he had laboriously completed a catalogue." Freud confesses to have experienced a similar experience with language: "I remember having twice been in danger of my life, and each time the awareness of the danger occurred to me quite suddenly. On both occasions I felt 'this was the end,' and while otherwise my inner language proceeded with only indistinct sound images and slight lip movements, in these situations of danger I heard the words as if somebody was shouting them into my ear, and at the same time I saw them as if they were printed on a piece of paper floating in the air."<sup>13</sup> Once again, this description is rich with vaporous, phantasmagorical words, vanishing and silent words that stare back at us. The words of the end. "Cette fois, c'en fait de moi." The list is complete. A recurring remnant that, through reception, denies its own purpose.

6.

If there is the babbling of the end, there is also the babbling of the beginning. For Thurnauer, *Matrice* is the "birth of language".<sup>14</sup> The words she used to describe how this installation came to be—and its title—tell us something about this birth: "*Matrice* came out of the painting like Jonas from the whale"<sup>15</sup>. Winnicott uses the same expression when describing the relationship between a baby and his mother, and the relation-separation they establish with each other: "Babies come up out of the sea and are spewed out upon the land, like Jonah from the whale. So now the sea-shore was the mother's body, after the child is born (...)"<sup>16</sup>. According to Winnicott, it is in this space, *in between*, in the way one experiences this distancing and nearness, in the trust or the insecurity one might have felt, in the existence and the success of the transitional objects, that appears the 'potential space', the place of playing and culture. The place of language as play.

7.

*Matrice* is the opening of a potential space, framed but free from the absolute definition of fate, free from the weight of the inescapable: here we can still hear the multiple and strange sounds of an "indistinct and immemorial babble" we knew how to utter before we learnt some finite and particular language that made us forget that initial "limitless

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kame ein Mensch zur Welt, heute, mit dem Lichtbart der  
Patriarchen: er durfte,  
sprache er von dieser  
Zeit, er  
durfte  
nur lallen und lallen,  
immer-, immer-  
zuzu.  
("Pallaksch. Pallaksch.")

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Aphasia; A Critical Study* (New York: International Universities Press, 1953), p.

62.

<sup>14</sup> Agnes Thurnauer, *Journal...*, p.121.

<sup>15</sup> Agnès Thurnauer, an interview with Alexandra Frau, p.98.

<sup>16</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing And Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

phonetic arsenal”<sup>17</sup>. They seem about to be forgotten but, without this loss, we cannot talk.

8.

The pieces of *Matrice* are the pieces of a game, they define a territory of play. Uncertain, as are all games. Just like the game played by Medea’s children, with small bones, in the fresco from Pompey, *La Medea da Pompei, Casa dei Dioscuri*, now in the Naples National Archaeological Museum. Pascal Quignard described the painting: “almost in the center of the fresco, the two children, Mermeros and Pheres, play with the little bones *they are about to become*<sup>18</sup>. To play with what we are—or will be. That is the game of language.

9.

In the words of the artist, *Matrice* is “an osseous structure that comes out of the painting.” This structure opens a space now, a space of nowness, of eternal now: a beginning. A space all works of art should open. A space of infancy. An infant time. One that predates the formed word and productive and useful time; one that removes us from our usual world, from our authorized and familiar language. This is what the work of art demands the spectator: the opening of a new space, a potential space, a space for waiting and attention that, being provoked by an exterior stimulus, can only happen in the most intimate spaces of oneself. Just like reading. The work of art can transform the spectator into an empty original uterus, a matrix, ready to give birth. It can offer him a *state of birth*.

### III Emptiness

1.

A ‘matrice’ is a matrix, a template. A container that can be used to reproduce a shape. In this case, letter molds. But these templates are in a state of disintegration—or formation?—like pieces of a puzzle, more or less recognizable. Nevertheless, the center of this work of art is not in these broken molds or in the matter that forms them, but in the empty space that makes them useful.

2.

Emptiness is the space for receiving. As Laozi wrote:

*Clay is thrown to shape a vase  
And make of void and form a pair,  
And a vessel’s put to use.  
Door and window vent a room  
And make of void and form a pair,  
And a room is put to use.  
Thus the value of what is  
Depends for use on what is not.*

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Pascal Quignard, *Sur l’image qui manque à nos jours* (Paris: Arléa, 2014), p.28.

3.

What is true for the vase and for the room is also true for language, with the work of art, and with man. They are also built around the void. Inevitable and indomitable space. Plastic space.

4.

Reflecting on the centrality of the empty tomb in Christianity, Louis Marin advances the question: “Does every speech act, every narrative as an act of narration or production of the operation that transforms experience into discourse, result from such a lack, from a gap or breakdown in experience? Does discourse as a whole aim to fill the originary lack that produces discourse, and in which discourse is produced in order to reduce that lack?”<sup>19</sup> We use language to reduce that lack: the strangeness of our experience of the world and of the life we strive to make sense of. In the search for words to fill that gap we remake language at the same rate we remake the world. But instead of filling the gap, words dig deeper into it, they create it, they are its very essence because they carry emptiness, the void, within them: language is the carrier of death. Language, as Hegel explained, suppresses the real external being, creating an ideal existence. Language denies the perceptible external world as man takes it *into himself*. Words are mourning made image or sound. They are our way of coping with absence.

5.

In the perplexity of the void we are thrown into by this piece, uncertainty and incompleteness still exist: it wants to destabilize shapes. It does not simply open gaps in the signified, but in the signifier itself. In this hollowed out alphabet, there is imperfection and maladjustment. There are no one-way streets, only dismembered bodies that create a *place of wandering* for our own body: it institutes a void for deambulation. Against common-place, it proposes a place of commons. There, where we can fall, is the place where we have to learn how to dance.

6.

“To write—Blanchot told us—is first of all to want to destroy the temple before building it (...) To write is finally to refuse to pass over the threshold, to refuse to ‘write.’”<sup>20</sup> When producing a work of art one cannot repeat the gestures of another, the model of another, the language agreed on by style or fashion. One needs to refuse the Law written on stone and risk writing on dust. Artistic work is the production of interruptions: opening empty spaces, fissures, rupturing the safety of our social and cultural world. Introducing new forms of resistance and attrition. It should always present itself as a foreign language—even when it seems our own, we are no longer able to recognize it—written on the dust that is us. It makes our place tremble, unveiling some of its foundations: revealing us a part of the ineffable, the guarantor of all we can say.

7.

The title of this essay was taken from a poem by Angelus Silesius, a 17<sup>th</sup> century mystic:

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<sup>19</sup> Louis Marin, *On Representation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 122

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Book To Come* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 206.

*“The place is the word.*

The place and the *word* is one, and were the place not  
(of all eternal eternity!) the *word* would not be.”<sup>21</sup>

Just like Agnès Thurnauer so often does, the author makes a play of words: *Der Ort ist das Wort*.

It is as if the correlation of identity between Place and Word is so absolute that even sound identifies and confounds them. To the mystic, the place where life happens is the Verb itself, the proto-word that penetrates and creates all. But beyond, or afore, the theological interpretation, we can intuit another meaning in this text: man no longer lives in a physical world, the place we inhabit is a place of words and reading. All we touch transforms into language—this divine power of creation is also a curse, just like Midas’s. We ourselves are the echo of past texts, entangled in history, narratives and fictions we have received from others since the day of our birth. Just like this text, we are an assortment of influences and collages. This is a fragile place, a place of ash and dust, because words are made in our image. Or is it that we are made in their image?

8.

The work of Agnès Thurnauer throws us into the open: more than defined words or defining discourses, it offers us a potential place where something may yet arise, undefined, something to come. An emptiness that allows exceedance, we enter the playful and supple kingdom of infancy.

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<sup>21</sup> Angelus Silesius, cited in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.57.