

Bracha Ettinger: off (*hors*¹) figures

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Bracha Ettinger off (hors) figures: a paper on the work of visual artist, philosopher, and theoretician of French feminist psychoanalysis, Bracha L. Ettinger. Ettinger has held recent solo exhibitions at the Historical Museum of St. Petersburg, Peter and Paul Fortress (2013); Museum of Fine Arts (Beaux-arts), Angers (2011); Tapies Foundation, Barcelona (2011), and the Freud Museum, London (2009). Recent group exhibitions include those at the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (2013-2014) and the Pompidou Centre, Paris (2010-2011). She is author of *Matrix. Halal(a) - Lapsus*, MOMA Oxford (1993) and *The matrixial borderspace*, University of Minnesota Press (2006). Two volumes of her selected writings (*Matrixial subjectivity*) are soon to be published by Palgrave-Macmillan.

It was in a small confined studio, situated off the courtyard of her Parisian apartment, where Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger was working at the time when I first met her. I was just 22 years old then, and was astounded by the fact that one could successfully manage the life of an artist and a psychoanalyst's practice. I was also impressed by the enormous range of her current work including the translation of texts by Jacques Lacan from French to Hebrew. In Paris at the end of the 1980s, her work could have only appeared as a meteorite; there was no trend whatsoever with which to associate it. It was, without a doubt, that aesthetic singularity that attracted me thus to her work. The following year, in 1988, the artist called on me to write for the catalogue of her exhibition at the Musée de Calais. I realise today that the first lines her work had inspired in me were clearly announcing the theses that I would develop twenty years later, in *The radlicant* (2009):

One winter, upon her arrival to Europe, Bracha Ettinger marveled at the massive presence of these migrating birds which she had always observed traversing Israel on their way to Africa, which she had always imagined as absolute nomads – no shelters, no stations – and here they were accompanying her to her own exile, bringing her to consider the aerial view as an emblem of the re-conquest of the self in the voyage ...

¹ *Hors* in French: off, out, apart, beyond, aside, except.

We have been led by the evolution of “late capitalism” to envisage all aspects of human life in function of the mass, numbers, sums and amounts. We are now so accustomed to think quantitatively that it would seem difficult for us to approach art in any other way than in these very terms or their equivalents, and in function of the tangible effects that it is supposed to produce. The *critical* dimension of the contemporary *oeuvre* is thus being readily judged by the yardstick of its social efficiency. To cite only two recent manifestations of this, among the most visible are the biennials of Istanbul in 2009 and Berlin in 2012, which even demanded that artists declare their political allegiances. *Artists, be efficient in your dissidence from the system*: such is the trap set before contemporary art, the blind spot through which it might topple over, in turn, into the religion of pragmatism.

When each and every aspect of human life would be able to justify its utility before the Tribunal of Economism, art will simultaneously be victorious as media and extinct as art, and its ideological defeat will be all the more bitter. That is why, in the aesthetic domain, it is crucial to hold fast to the, apparently harmless, question of *singularity*. In an era where a situation is considered worthwhile only by its becoming emblematic; when the facts count only in the strict measure of their capacity to become marketable *information*; where specificities must of necessity belong to classes, genres or cultures in order for themes to be taken into consideration; the *irreducible* character of a situation, or the *unicity* of an event, must be considered as invaluable today.

Still, contrary to appearances, the concept of art has evolved much less over these past decades than certain notions that underlie it and certain schemes and devices which accompany it. We no doubt have turned our attention away from the most effervescent zones of mutation, in favour of the institutional concept of art, which is more suitably circumscribed, more *massified* and anyway, more easily detected. It is, however, in the margins of art – under the visible layer of figures and forms, in the bond between the sensible and the traced (and in the evolution of the status of the traced) – that considerable upheavals were being fomented.

If there is a notion that finds itself in crisis today, it is indeed that of *inscription*. How do we inscribe something? And where? In what manner? Here is what does not seem obvious anymore in the era of the touch screen. While the book – as object and medium (support or even depository) of the word – finds itself today in jeopardy of being replaced by other formats issuing from the digital revolution, there is an entire scriptural economy that has been insidiously calling itself into question. The whole gamut of the traceable and its modes of reception find themselves, in return, affected: the page of a book; the canvas on its mount; the

television monitor; the white walls of the exhibition hall – so many receptacles planned for a classified multitude of gestures of inscription.

One must resort to the means of contemporary epigraphy in order to register the new forms of the traced and the modes of inscription that have appeared since the end of the twentieth century, but here it will be enough to evoke certain effects of this emergence. The painting? The notebook? It is through these two formats that I am going to approach Bracha Ettinger's work.

Scoriae

Since the 1980s, Ettinger has worked with reprographic means that have become more widely used today: first the photocopier, then the scanner. Starting with the industrial means of her time, she incorporated the photocopier into the pictorial process. The *Eurydice* series, for instance, which began in 1992, clearly shows the process of successive transformations through which her *oeuvre* constitutes itself. On the one hand, the document, or the drawing from which she begins and thus departs; on the other, the cold equipment with which the artist operates. The original image is not merely reproduced; it is submitted to a complex game of decisions within which the machine, deploying the whole range of its mechanisms, coalesces into its own material. The imprint of flash; the fixation of errors and impurities; the traces of the sweeps effectuated by the "luminous brush"; the sudden interruptions; the ridges; the points: the image placed by Ettinger seems to be moving further away with each movement of the machine; it is then reloaded with her manual interventions, before fading away again in the photosensitive vessel. A pictorial surface remains that is not extraneous to the *aura* as defined by Walter Benjamin: *the unique apparition of a far-away*.

This drive to make the image disappear through the interposition of successive versions or copies has been further reinforced, since the turn of the new millennium in the first decade of this century, by the recycling of some of her own works as they are passed through the scanner. It is clear that the iconographic material she uses gives meaning to these technical manipulations, to this ghostly (phantomic) appearance of the image, as well as to this symbolic of the distancing farther-away. The question is: how to represent the Holocaust? How to even evoke the *Shoah* as a pictorial "subject" without falling into abjection; without slipping into pure sentimentalism which would deprive her *oeuvre* of any productive potential or would suppress and revamp it through its being swallowed by another register, namely, that of testimony?

Ettinger's artwork does not address the Holocaust nor the past, but rather the enduring traumatism that the Holocaust has engendered, which is, as such, always present. Its subject is the obliteration of the memory in its "figurative" dimension and the persistence of a symptom, in acute *vivide* state. Furthermore, Ettinger's work arises out as a 'traumanatomy', to use Rosi Huhn's (2011:113) expression;² in other words – a general study of the shock, by means of active remembrance. Medically, trauma is an injury endured by the organism; traumatism, or psychological trauma is its resultant traces; its consequences. Ettinger's artwork thus presents itself as the presentation of consequence-images, the origins of which turn out to be deliberately fluffed, vaguely

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unreal, such as these screen-memories or those painful endeavors at recollection that surge along within the psychoanalytic cure. In her work's iconography, the documents serving as material are placed under the influence of parasites that obstruct the access to them: lines; *scoriae* and

cinders; mechanical defects; progressive dilution of the definition. They appear thus coated with fine layers whose paradoxical nature is their being, evidently, produced by the light of an appliance. Yet they turn out to have a striking assimilation into dust or ash. The technique, in this dance of irreproducibility, reveals a sombre truth that plainly pertains to Ettinger's practice. It is, therefore, the organisation of the *defectiveness* of the technique that founds her method of composition, deliberately placed under the sign of the dust, the grain of sand that jams up a functioning, but also evokes the trace of time in its passage. The accumulation of *scoriae* and of defected traces finds a relation to the image that is profoundly indexed upon the psychoanalytic practice, insofar as, much more than materially bringing forth the event itself, it materialises the *degree of distancing-away* with regard to the event.

But a second range of forms exists in Ettinger's work, which constitutes precisely the juncture of her practice of an artist and that of the analyst: the notebooks. Small in scale, un-crisscrossed, these notebooks simultaneously keep her company during free time and accompany her analytic sessions. In general, they are born out of those moments of *floating listening* proper to psychoanalysis, within which the unconscious of the analyst must connect and respond to that of the analysand. The pages of these small notebooks are thus riddled with drawings, words and phrases; sometimes coloured masses are imbued, suffusing the paper. All of these, in any case, are born out of an encounter with the mental universe of the other; but we could better define them, no doubt, by qualifying them as professional *residues (rebutts)*; as excretions emanating from a social practice; as derived products of the unconscious while it is laboring. At first glance, the drawings and aphorisms figured there seem to belong to

2. In using the term "traumanatomy", Rosi Huhn addresses both the anatomy of trauma and the anatomy of dream (from the German language).

the automatic pilot of any artist; but here, connected to a “tracer”, the unconscious functions in a regime of inscription that can only be qualified as *dialogical*. Incriminating evidence, brought from this zone in which the human spirit proves to be highly receptive; open to all stimuli as well as its own phantoms, Ettinger’s notebooks also represent instruments for negotiation with the other; relational tools in the interiors of which co-presences organise themselves.

The common point between the paintings and the notebooks resides in a principle strongly affirmed: the *transformation/distancing-away*. By the interposition of technology in the first case, and in the second case, through the “floating listening”, it is about giving positive value to the act of distancing-away-from. We should linger over the true nature of this constitutive distancing-away in Ettinger’s paintings, and over the reasons for which she also constitutes the filigreed hyphen that bind together some important figures of contemporary art since the 1960s.

When Gerard Richter evokes the past of Nazi Germany, for instance, it is under the features of *Uncle Rudi* (1965), a painting that presents some apparent similarities with Ettinger’s. Although Richter’s original document is much more decipherable, it too is a black and white image, streaked from the mechanical reproduction, clearly recognisable as a *painted photograph*, whereas Ettinger uses the photographic cliché only as a point of departure for a long trajectory. Their only common point resides in the traumatic effects produced by the material. Richter’s use of the material to achieve these effects departs from a banal and familiar image – that of a smiling man in German military uniform. He exhibits the source of the artwork clearly – a picture magnified up to the point of becoming blurred. It is not only the visible distance taken by Richter from his subject (the familiar banality of absolute evil), but also from his document (a family picture), that constitutes a remarkable pictorial act. The recuperation of such a shot, which must have existed in most German households in the 1960s, constitutes a truly political act – that of opening the drawers or exhibiting the garbage can ... but whereas Richter’s painting ultimately magnifies the original document, this is not the case with Ettinger, who dilutes it to the point of conferring thereupon the faint consistency of a phantom; of a memorial spectre. Her forms seem to be captured in a ferocious battle against oblivion or even foreclosure.

Sinthôme, number omega and relations

What Ettinger’s artwork designates is the importance, both metaphysical and political, of our *mental rubbish dump* (*déchetterie mentale*): through the act of recuperation of the daily effects of analysis what is played out is the daily drama of this selective

sorting to which everybody delivers themselves, consciously or not, with regards to the concrete facts of one's existence. What to keep? Where and how to arrange it? And mainly, what does "to keep" mean? In French, the double sense of the word *garder* (to conserve, but also to "increase the guard" in relation to an object coveted by others) implies a whole repertoire of gestures.

Early twentieth century art is traversed by a general problematic of the rejected or discarded, at once expressed through the binary of high culture/low culture and through the omnipresent thematics of social exclusion. This problematic represents the specific declension of a constitutive theme of Modernity: indeed, modern art constituted itself by attacking the then-prevailing consensus through that cultural hierarchy: what had been considered worthless became the very object of the new painting; the "noble" subjects were abandoned. Courbet's groups of nameless humans or waves, Manet's asparagus, Pissarro's factory chimneys, and Degas's dance rehearsals bear witness above all to an enterprise for the valorisation of social *residue* and for the exaltation of the prosaic. The Impressionist painting thus took hold of everything that was previously moved *off* sight or relegated to the background of a painting ... And all the art of the twentieth century would be caught in this spiral of *re-valorisation of the rejected*: the insignificant; the banal; the stain; the formless; the repressed; the terror as well as the appalling would become its major subjects; its intellectual mechanic indexes the universe of *recuperation*. More generally, it is haunted by this ethic of division between the useful and useless; the accepted and refused; the licit and illicit. It is therefore quite logical that a number of historians date the birth of the modern movement to 1863 – the year of the *Salon des Refusés*.

Ettinger's notebooks offer a particular twist to this intellectual drive, in the sense that they take place *halfway* between the wilderness of free time and a social vocation; between automatic scribbling and scientific notation. As receptacles of the working unconscious in process, they form themselves as they go, like a storage warehouse of a productive activity. The place where the *scoriae* embody *the formal focal point of her paintings represents the subject of her notebooks*.

It would be, however, abusive to trace a parallel between the psychoanalysis – invisible center of this "noted" production of the artist – and just any indexing of the unconscious under the auspices of the production of mental waste/garbage. It is not under this rapport (unconscious = waste/garbage) that Ettinger's notebooks have the attribute of the *residue*, but as *visual-plastic detachments from the Real of psychoanalysis*. Indeed, the graphic and chromatic *scoriae* that we find in them represent *what exudes from a conversation*; its supplement; its emerging outlined addendum; simultaneously centered and *off (hors)* the exchange.

In order better to discern the importance of this notion, we must go back to the more general question of detachment and of the outside in Lacanian theory, which is not unrelated to the modern thematic of the rejected I have mentioned above. In one word, it is the domain of the *off* (*hors* – a French word that translates as *off*, *except (from)*, *out (of)*, *apart (from)*, *outside (of)*, *apart (from)*, *beyond*, *aside (from)*) that sustains the art of our epoch. Moreover, in his topological efforts of the 1970s, Jacques Lacan insisted on figures that do not have an outside such as the *Möbius strip* and the *Klein bottle*, which are both forms in a closed circuit with no external edges to any exterior whatsoever. By contrast, Lacan also designates that which detaches itself from the signifying chain as a source of mental dysfunction. On this point we cannot overlook the intellectual and friendly proximity that engaged Lacan and George Bataille in the 1930s, even before the former had actually founded the groundwork of his doctrine.

It is striking to realise that Lacan's theory of the *Sinthôme*, decades later, strongly evokes Bataille's theory of *heterology*, defined as the "science of all that is other"; a discourse of the residue; the scum and the inassimilable – as is the Lacanian Real. The *sinthôme*, a concept that Lacan elaborated upon during his seminar of 1975-1976, is defined as a *spare-part-symptom* – a part literally disengaged in order to malfunction, the role of which is none other than to hinder the functions of the individual by the mere fact of its detachability. Lacan gives as an example a grandiose "spare-part" of world literature – *Finnegan's wake* by James Joyce – that permitted its author to *invent a function* for his symptom.

It is through this register that Ettinger's notebooks inscribe themselves; spare-parts of the analysis which had come precisely to *invent a function* for the *rapport* between the analysand and his/her analyst, but also between the unconscious of the artist and that of the other. A function, that is, a specific position inside which the inert can finally *become productive and a generator of possibilities*, *and creates a zone* where traditional roles are being efficiently redistributed. By this, they represent veritable supplements. Situated *off* (out-of, apart, beyond the limit of and aside from) the *œuvre* and *off* the analytical practice, they form a mental figure inside which the one and the other will join, together but otherwise interwoven, as a direct result of the fact of such detachment from the grand categories under which we have learned to define and recognise them.

Such could be the meaning of the presence of these many *omegas* we find here and there in Ettinger's painting since the 1980s. For the mathematician Georg Cantor, "omega" denotes the totality of existing prime numbers. This number of numbers, which contains them all, authorises thinking on *actual* infinity and not

just a *virtual* infinity. Consequentially, there could exist an “omega” plus one, plus two, plus three, etc. ... In the succession of human activities, art occupies the place of the number “omega”, since it contains them all; since it covers all the possible forms, plus one – that one we just don’t know yet ...

It is in this sense that Ettinger’s artwork, and notably her notebooks, proves to be haunted by the relational sphere: the relation is forever the horizon of the “plus one”, and her artistic practice strives for the exploration of this supplement by systematically placing herself *off*-self.

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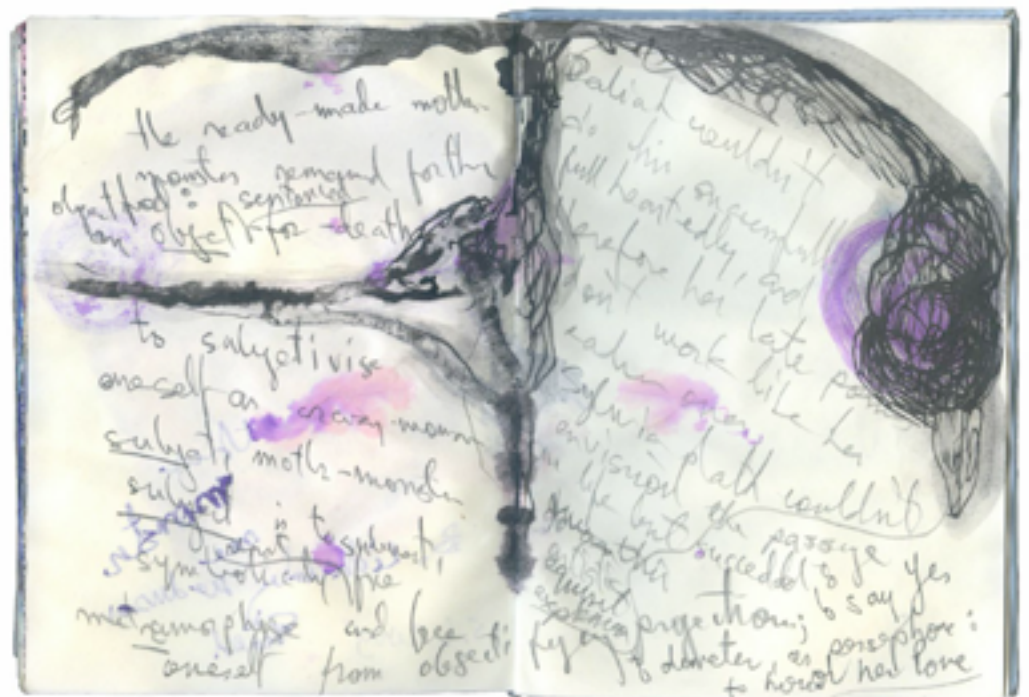


FIGURE N° 1



Bracha L Ettinger, 2008-2013. Selected pages from Grey-blue notebook. 145 x 215 mm.



FIGURE **N° 2**



Bracha L Ettinger, 2008-2013. Selected pages from Grey-blue notebook. 145 x 215 mm.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Bracha L Ettinger, 2008-2013. Selected pages from Grey-blue notebook. 145 x 215 mm.



FIGURE **Nº 4**



Bracha L Ettinger, 2008-2013. Selected pages from Grey-blue notebook. 145 x 215 mm.



FIGURE N° 5



Bracha L Ettinger, 2008-2013. Selected pages from Grey-blue notebook. 145 x 215 mm.



FIGURE N° 6



Bracha L Ettinger, 2008-2013. Selected pages from Grey-blue notebook. 145 x 215 mm.

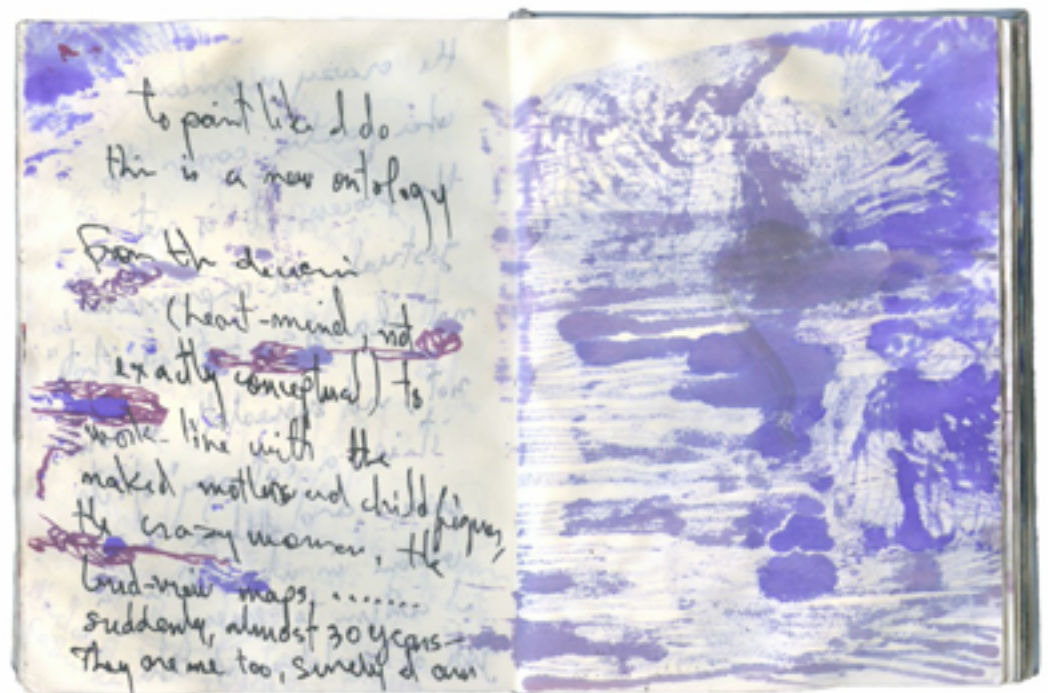


FIGURE N° 7



Bracha L Ettinger, 2008-2013. Selected pages from Grey-blue notebook. 145 x 215 mm.

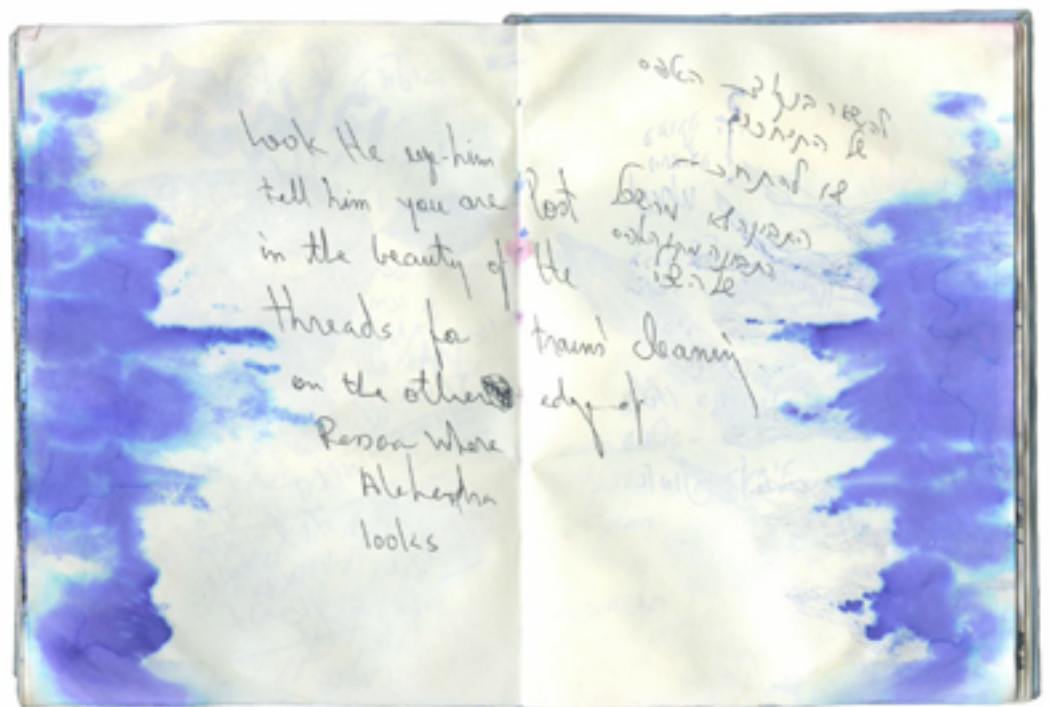


FIGURE **Nº 8**



Bracha L Ettinger, 2008-2013. Selected pages from Grey-blue notebook. 145 x 215 mm.