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thurnauer: *vt* and *vi*, to paint in the second person

ABSTRACT

Many of the figures in Thurnauer's paintings who fix us with their gaze have been borrowed from the work of Manet, the artist who organized so many of his paintings around a face-to-face confrontation of viewer and work. The painting returns the viewer's gaze with total impartiality, making us see our own motives and investments more than the illusion that the figure in the painting will accommodate them.

Issues of language often surface literally in paintings by Thurnauer; written language appears sometimes as part of the material fabric in which human figures move or recline. The textual elements are not superimposed on the figures but appear to exist in the world they inhabit, requiring the painter to relate figure to ground in a process of interlacing. When the viewer's eye traverses the painting it falls under the magnetic influence of the text to the extent that viewing must succumb in some degree to the operations of reading with its specific rhythms and expectations.

In these paintings, visual and verbal languages provide us with different maps of the same territory; and Thurnauer's hybridized representations argue that the world can only be rendered through a dialogue, an interlocution of different forms, genres, media. We approach her work, not as viewers whose function is predicated through a gaze regulated according to the distorting demands of consumption or control, but as readers engaged in a critical activity seeing around the edges of historically produced versions of the self.

The museum installations of paintings by Agnès Thurnauer (first Angers, now Nantes) are a making manifest of one of the most important organizing principles of her work: its persistent approach towards, its adaptations of, its conviviality with, the canonical art historical genres, motifs and gestures of the past.¹ Her paintings are often in part like recitations in a female voice of those authoritative male formulations that have acquired the status of pronouncements on the scope and agenda of western art practice. In her subtler, more sceptical, and more playful tones, which have changed the emphasis, the accentuation, and most importantly, the inflection of these resonant statements—once so mobile and mobilizing but now a little stiff and uncooperative—she has opened up a new space for the woman artist. Equally importantly, she has opened up a space for the critical viewer of a field in which the historical contexts for these acts of painting have been lost, in the repetition of torn-off shreds, bits and pieces of the original embodiments, fragments that have been inserted between quotation marks and launched on a separate career of their own. Thurnauer reminds us that the perception of art is often clouded, shrouded even, by an atmosphere that is filled with these particles we breathe in without thinking, without remembering that they were once created out of nothing, that there was a time before they existed; that they might have been conceived, and performed, and perpetuated, to very different effect.

Thurnauer is an historical artist in a post-historical situation, restoring a sense of perspective to these relics of a lost history, these parings and clippings that have been caught up by the hot air of publicity and now float in a kind of timeless dimension. But although her work is always posterior to the history of art it is also anterior to it, and in this doubleness it is not timeless but folded back on itself. In her short text “Aujourd’hui Lascaux,” Thurnauer describes her studio practice as taking place in an environment equivalent to that in which the history of art is anticipated and inaugurated while being wholly reconfigured and transformed:

Lascaux is the place I happen upon in my work, when I hold myself back in the face of what arrives on the canvas, when what is revealed there is all questions, uncertainties, sudden illuminations. Lascaux is where I am when I’m in the studio, in this space closed off from the world, where all silences and all noises alike reach me amplified to an extreme, more naked and much clearer even than at the point of emission. There, everything

¹ This essay was published originally in French translation in *Agnès Thurnauer: Now When Then* (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 2014).

can be heard, just as everything can be said, through painting. (133, my translation)

This return to the imaginary moment before the creation of all painting—all that has survived and been recorded, all that is now part of the history of art—is the situation of the contemporary artist enabling the work that has never been seen before: it is separated from Lascaux by 17,000 years, but it mirrors, in a “sudden illumination,” the same moment. The artist carries the knowledge of art history forward to the present, but that present is also the point before the inception of an alternative history, one that may be precipitated by her work.

This fascination with the historical achievements of art, in the very act of imagining how differently their messages might have been formed, how differently they might have been “heard,” is behind the artist’s continuing preoccupation with the “matrices” that she has been working on for the past several years. These resin casts of alphabetical letters are the building blocks of language, but they are disposed in arrangements that make no linguistic sense; they exist in a state before grammar and syntax have been imposed, before even a recognizable language (French, English, Italian . . . ?) has been chosen for them to be part of. Their capacity for the endless combination and re-combination of elements corresponds to that of language itself.

Thurnauer herself regards the “matrices” as the shoals, reefs and sandbanks of language, using a vocabulary suggestive of submerged and hidden meanings in a medium that is inherently fluid and unstable. She merges language and art in proposing the inaccuracy, the unreliability of our existing conceptual grids, our maps and charts, to make readable a set of materials that are always changing shape, always changing the relationship between depth and surface, and above all, always challenging our sense of being in control of the medium, always testing our ability to grasp and manipulate its elements. In conversation, her own way of characterizing her relationship to the practice of painting is to say “I’m swimming” (Thurnauer, Interview) and she describes the act of abandoning herself to the medium as one that produces the strangely comforting sensation of being buoyed up by it. In French, she uses the verb “traverser,” both actively and passively, to evoke the experience of mental and physical immersion in the work. The relationship between the embodied subject and the process of painting, therefore, involves the artist observing the way her own body behaves in reaction to the evolution of the project, as well as observing the way her understanding of the work involves a de-focusing of her subjective vision, and a re-focusing, adjusting to the expanded vision the work itself seems to insist on.

The relationship between language, in its condition of constant organic change, and its rules, which also change but at a much slower rate, provides a dynamic parallel to Thurnauer's understanding of how the activity of painting relates to the institutional and discursive contexts that frame it. Her "predella" series gives the parallel an essential structural role, through the frequency with which imagery is conditioned by text and vice versa. The "now" paintings epitomize the handling of this relationship. The word "now" preserves its meaning despite being incarnated in different fonts, one for each painting, while the range of different cloudscapes that surround the word offers a model for the way that each enunciation of the word "now" must refer to a unique moment in time, a unique set of conditions. The word has a seemingly permanent use-value but its referent changes with every single use in historical time.

The inability of conventional framing—of institutional and discursive frameworks—ever to capture or contain the experience of painting for the artist, or the experience that the finished painting offers to the viewer, is rendered in material terms, and even theatricalized, by the use of the physical frame, of the edges of the painting, to show how painting always exceeds the limits devised for it. Many of the predellas consist of pairs of canvases that share a single verbal message, insisting on the lack of synchronization that inheres in any attempt to make the textual message function as a translation of the painting's meaning. Thurnauer herself has used the prosodic term "caesura" to describe the suture, both binding together and separating, the divided halves of these binary works. The relationship between text and image is not one of commensurability, but of parallel activities in which performance always moves beyond established criteria: beyond the available conventions of meaning. The words divided between canvases include "id / ea," "soli / tude," "ran / dom," "fig / ure," "win / dow," and "pain / ting," while ready-made phrases include "not / yet," and "prime / time." The latter two examples help to clarify what is stake when the artist chooses to paint serially, when she sets out systematically to make the individual work porous, open to the influence of other components in the assemblage as a whole. Two works are enough to make a sequence, to hesitate the boundaries of the individual painting, although Thurnauer has experimented also with threes and fours, and has exhibited large numbers of these fissile paintings in a way that appears to give a cellular structure to the overall predella project. The breaking up and distribution of the textual messages is the clearest signal of the conditional mood in which these paintings exist, but the use of imagery contributes equally to the realization of the open-endedness that is fundamental to Thurnauer's practice of painting. The spatial porosity of this work, the permeability of

its boundaries, is actually a form of recording its response to the flow of time—its acknowledgement that time is one of the tools used in painting; time as a medium of change and transformation. As the artist herself has observed, “your arm is not the same each day” (Thurnauer, Interview). The artist’s body and mind move through time, leaving behind a set of provisional answers to a series of minutely adjusted questions.

Perhaps increasingly, Thurnauer’s work performs as a visual expression of the poetics of the version, where the proliferation of versions represents an exponential increase in the distance travelled from the very idea of an original. The slippage of meaning between versions becomes increasingly busy and compulsive, acquiring particular intensity in the beautiful “winged” predellas painted between 2007 and 2009. Here, the imagery has been generated to a significant extent from the slippage between the French words and phrases “*prédelle*,” “*près d’elle*” and “*près d’aile*.” The homophony of the French language allows the word for a series of small paintings to be moved conceptually and literally into proximity with female subjectivity and then further into proximity with the idea of a wing. The image of the wing outspread then turns it into a visual metaphor for a palette, and the palette is literalized by the application of a spectrum of colours to the spreading feathers. Feathers or “*plumes*” are traditional writing instruments, and their presence in the language that refers to writing has outlived their practical use. “*Écrire au courant de la plume*” refers to a kind of writing where the pen itself appears to do the thinking. Thurnauer’s painting allows the medium of language to do the thinking in the choice of visual content, but her own use of that content has placed the emphasis on slippage and distance, on allowing the work to take flight when it has been fully transformed, when the relationship between original and version, between literal and metaphorical, between figurative and conceptual, has been rendered vertiginous. The viewer’s experience of the painting is governed by a sense of movement between different possibilities, of only ever being able to grasp fragments of meaning, parts that come away from a whole, just as the images of wings are of anatomical parts, limbs detached from bodies. The painting articulates quite literally the underlying bone structure of these wings, just as a painting in the *nature morte* tradition would do, but the painting also articulates metaphorically the language which joins the wing to several different bodies of meaning.

These are wings that could grow a new body which would exist in a gravitational field determined by the mind of the viewer. In the *Grande Prédelle* series, each painting includes a used palette, attached to the painted surface of the canvas depicting a wing. Although the palette is superimposed on the wing, making it appear an afterthought, it also takes precedence over

the wing, since its use is a precondition of the image ever taking shape on the canvas. The appearance of the wing, with its graduations of colour, is a strong pretext for the addition of the palette, while the end to which the palette is the means suggests that all palettes have the ambition of wings in the first place. Neither palettes nor wings are used as elements of description but of metaphor, of substitution and metamorphosis. In the hands of Thurnauer, the identity of painting is not to be lodged in any one body or form but in the movement from one to another.

The predellas incorporate key linguistic signs as part of their visual content but activate language at a conceptual level for the most part. In the *Origine du monde* works, and in more recent paintings such as *Les Lecteurs*, written language appears as part of the material fabric in which the human figures appear. The textual elements are not superimposed on the figures but appear to exist in the landscape, requiring the painter to relate figure to ground in a process of interlacing. When the viewer's eye traverses the painting it falls under the magnetic influence of the text to the extent that viewing must succumb in some degree to the operations of reading with its specific rhythms and expectations. In *Les Lecteurs*, the figures included in the visual field are themselves engaged in the act of reading. They are clearly removed from different points of origin and drawn together, bringing with them hints of the different times and places from which they have been disengaged. The engagement of reading brings them into the same—or a very similar—experience of time, which is comparable to that of the viewer, for whom reading the painting is a hermeneutic exercise that cannot be terminated. The relation between the text the viewer sees and the texts the readers see is inscrutable, while the relations between the separate parts of the text available to view are innumerable in character, since they have ceased to belong to the bodies of meaning they derive from, yet remain withheld from bodies the reader wishes them to have.

In *Les Lecteurs* and *Reflexion on reflection*, the individual letters that provide the textual dimension of the work are capital letters shorn of the diacritics that would confine them to French or any other single language. They are arranged in a grid pattern that stays on the same plane despite the changing angles of the tables, costumes and backdrops that share the same space. In both paintings there is one figure whose gaze is directed out towards the viewer, although in *Reflexion on reflection* the gaze is supplemented by projecting camera lenses, trying to thrust beyond the front of the canvas. Many, perhaps most, of the figures in these paintings who fix us with their gaze have been borrowed from the work of Manet, the artist who organized so many of his most important

paintings around this face-to-face confrontation of viewer and work. Although Thurnauer herself speaks of the need to “take the canvas by surprise” (Thurnauer, Interview) while in the throes of composition, the viewer meeting the finished work is likely to be taken unawares by this unwavering regard. The sense of disadvantage the viewer experiences forestalls their capacity—perhaps readiness—to eye these female figures with the expectancy of a customer or consumer. The painting returns the viewer’s gaze with total impartiality, making us see our own motives and investments more than the illusion that the figure in the painting will accommodate them.

In the recent *Exécution de la peinture*, a naked artist with her back turned to the viewer takes on the central role we might expect to be given to a nude model facing the viewer. However, the figure on the canvas being painted by the artist is another version of the barmaid from the *Folies Bergère*, taken from the painting that perhaps undermines the position of the viewer more than any other canvas by Manet, since its manipulation of the arrangements seen in the mirror behind the barmaid does not correspond to the view a mirror would give in reality. The viewer seems to usurp the place of a top-hatted customer who is seen, from the wrong angle, in the mirror’s reflection. And this substitution renders her glance at the viewer an especially complex one. Who is she actually looking at, and what is her attitude to their reciprocal gaze? Thurnauer has added extra layers to these questions, surrounding the barmaid with an array of press cameras, and providing the viewer with a new gaze to mediate their own perception of the girl: the imagined, but unseen, gaze of the female artist. The cameras are directed not at Manet’s barmaid but at Thurnauer’s artist, or that is our initial assumption, until we realize that, like Manet’s mirror, they are actually pointing in another direction, straight past the naked artist to connect more directly with those for whom their images are intended. If Manet’s painting represents the arrival of the social being organized by the dynamics of the spectacle, Thurnauer’s painting captures the extent to which the spectacle has engrossed almost all the space available for representation. Encrypted within this space—existing within the same space but operating according to a different code—is the closed circuit of the reciprocal gaze that connects the female artist and the girl at the bar. This is the artist of a critical painting that comes into being with Manet; the critical artist is composed by the gaze of Manet’s painting, although she holds in her hand a brush that authors anew the girl who was once Manet’s subject. The critical artist is posterior to an art history that hinges on the experiments and disclosures of Manet, anterior to another history in which the artist is either female or one who stands in the place where a female artist should be.

In a recent conference at Yale University, Thurnauer specified how her painting had arrived at a point which shares in Manet's discoveries while also departing in another, twenty-first century direction. Her response to Manet's *Olympia* turns on the complexity of the gaze: "Olympia is the painting taking visual stock of me. It is not so much its own nakedness but more me being stripped naked by the fact that it is staring back at me. . . . Olympia's nakedness strips me bare" (Thurnauer, Seminar). In her own, twenty-first century, version of the painting, the figure of Olympia is held within the field of a text consisting of all the words synonymous with "woman" in the history of the French language, from the twelfth century to the present. By bringing together this multitude of definitions, Thurnauer's painting emphasizes the poverty of definition, the impossibility of a definitive version of woman:

The word is a definition, a frame, but the figure escapes all definition. . . . Olympia cannot be reduced to a definition. She is naked and free like painting. She is eternally looking at us and eternally brings our eyes to life. (Thurnauer, Seminar)

This beautiful idea, that the painting looking at us is what brings our eyes to life, proposes an utopian freeing of our vision, but it also necessitates a critical painting that must be resumed and maintained, and renewed in each successive work.

Three of the four cardinal points of the Nantes installation are occupied by the Manet-inspired paintings *Olympie*, *Reflexion on reflection* and *Exécution de la peinture*, but right at its centre are the three female portraits that reflect for Thurnauer three essential facets of painting that have to do with the language of cognition, the language of desire, and the language of feeling. The title given to each of these canvases is *You*, since the gaze directed at the viewer by the painting is enlarged, dilated, more than in any other work by Thurnauer. Just as the three female subjects cannot represent individually only one of the three separate languages of cognition, desire and feeling—since all three women exist in the realms of all three languages—so the viewer cannot be constructed exclusively by the gaze of only one of the three figures: they can only be brought to life by all of them.

The intensity with which Thurnauer insists on the reciprocal gaze in her work, and the passion with which it has been sustained, reflect a deep and resourceful critical awareness of the social politics within which contemporary painting operates; but it also has deep roots in her own experience. As a child, her earliest awareness of the obligations that come with

reciprocity, together with a realization of how relationships are mediated by language, took form in the company of an autistic brother who did not speak. The lack of verbal response, the silence of the interlocutor, places a responsibility on the one with language to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the one for whom language does not do its work in the open. The language of the first person is therefore always implicated with language that is stored in the second person. In Homeric Greek, it was possible to speak with a “dual voice,” but this grammatical possibility has not survived in fossilized form in modern Indo-European languages, except in Slovene. There is a profound sense in which all of Thurnauer’s painting communicates itself with a “dual voice,” but it does so most dramatically in the series of paintings entitled *Big-Big and Bang-Bang*, whose characteristic iconography greets the viewer at the entrance to the Nantes exhibition in the trio of paintings *Now, When, Then*.

The two enigmatic figures that cross from one canvas to another in this trio of works can be found crossing the whole of Thurnauer’s *oeuvre*. Their symbiosis is often associated with the genesis of representation through being contained within an outline that evokes traditional depictions of both the *sindone* and the handkerchief of Veronica. Both were supposed to have preserved the perfect impression of the body of Christ, through chemical transformation, although which came first and which second in this chemical process, which took the active and which the passive role, is precisely the question behind Thurnauer’s dual personages. The juxtaposition of the three paintings with titles that obscure the relationship between them in the very act of seeming to offer temporal markers, borrows its authority from the temporality of autism, an experience of time in which linearity makes little sense, in which the relationship between events is not felt as a chain of connections but as an amplification, an intensification of something that floats freely in a time without measure.

Thurnauer’s dual figures populate her output recurrently and cannot be tied to any particular phase of her development as a painter. As the one with language, she now addresses her work as if it were the silent but eloquent interlocutor in a relationship of intimacy that she conducts in public. Written language is an integral part of that relationship, not solely through its incorporation into the visual information on the canvas, but through the parallel activity of keeping a diary, requiring the painter to turn her back on the canvas in order to use a word processor. She describes her method of composition as one of “pouring” words onto a screen, without ever pausing to make corrections, transferring to her language-work the methods of free expression more common to painting and, *vice versa*,

transferring to the use of paint the kind of editorial oversight more common to verbal language-use.

In her painting *Les Lecteurs*, the two figures, one male, one female, both chosen from the history of painting, share the space with a framed map of the world. The world is represented by the familiar image achieved through the systematic distortions of the Mercator projection; this is how we perceive the world although we know its image is an artificial one. Both visual and verbal languages provide us with maps of the same territory; and Thurnauer's hybridized representations argue that the world can only be rendered through a dialogue, an interlocution of different forms, genres, media. When we approach her work, it is not as viewers whose function is predicated through a gaze regulated according to the distorting demands of consumption or control, but as readers engaged in a critical activity that sees around the edges of historically produced versions of the self. While we look for the subjects of Thurnauer's paintings, we are the subjects that they construe; there is no priority in this exchange, and no way of coming to terms with it; rather, it is in the territory without maps, in the uncertain borderland between the first and second persons, that strangely familiar no-man's-land, a female *terra nullius*, that the voice of twenty-first century painting is both lost and found.

230

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Agnès Thurnauer,
Les Lecteurs.
Courtesy of the artist.



Agnès Thurnauer,
Autoportrait.
Courtesy of the artist.



Agnès Thurnauer,
Matrices.
Courtesy of the artist.