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SILLAGE
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DEBRA PHILLIPS

ARTSPACE
SYDNEY 1993
sillage [sijaz] *nm* NAUT. wake; wash AV. trail
Death is the impossible question. A barren limit, or at best, the bounds of existence. An interruption could be explained, maybe, but the radical disruption of all forms of continuity invalidates any explanation. Divinity, totem, supernatural being was what the dead ones were urged to become, for the sake of the living, also. As possibility is foreclosed, only what could be remains, the sole belief – if one wishes, needs so.

As it undoes any meaning, then, we have to recourse to metaphors to simply speak about death, attempt to describe it. However, “metaphors have to be described as well”¹ so that they are not taken for the elusiveness of reality itself. We can feel how they bear on what they symbolise, touch, with their ingenious, particular angle of incidence.

To consider the end of life as a return to ashes, to dust, to the non-individual, is in a paradoxical way to evade the question. If each human life is crucial, it is as a crux: “being present” is the ability, in bringing together at each moment, in a definite place, at a certain time, the elements received and acquired to create from them possibility and meaning which were not to be found in the given circumstances. Subjectivity is “what can hold within oneself its own contradiction”² in the sense that contradiction does not come prior to the undertaking of the individual to form her/his existence on the perceived terms of an impossibility: particular interest versus the needs of the community, the want of solitude, independence vs desire, commitment to relationships, the search for high ethical standards vs the pressures to compromise, striving to celebrate life vs witnessing a war or being taken into it.

Existence must be recognised in its own dimension as that which transcends set biological and social orders into questions and answers which are personal, specific to each individual, the invention of new directions. It is also in that sense that “the philosopher is too much involved with life to set any attention onto death”.³

“These marble statues, these gravel alleys...”⁴

Statues slowed down into poses, they are significant, privileged
moments on the setting of indefinite time; they appear as if they were incarnations of preliminary forms, less expressing life than models designed from immemorial time, standards to which life should conform.

Statues, in European squares or cemeteries, set examples of noble intention poised in thoughtfulness or the energy, the upsurge of an ideal — a pure action — the intensity of the will, of desire can be read also in the streaks, the veins that the marble stone retains. On Australian mausoleums, made of fair, monochrome limestone, a ponderous stillness adds to human figures’ absent gaze, caught into the proximity of death...

As in the Middle Ages works of art were made to be looked at by God, the statues are meant to be seen from a perspective on life, not from within it. The metaphor, then, displaces the viewers’ or mourners’ concern from human existence abandoned as uncertain to the visible assurance about the Beyond in the fixed form inclusive of a set, unvarying content.

The enumeration on the slabs of stone of the dates of birth and of death — span of an outer time, makes sense for us only as echoing greater public events: 1801 — the Napoleonic empire and its military campaigns, 1793 — the Terror, the worst period of the French Revolution, the dates of the First World War... In which way these people were affected or had part in the shaping of such situations, being among the masses who pressured a repressive order to the breaking point, or one of those who thought that the revolution should stop and society settle where their bourgeois privileges began?

Thus the numbers engraved on the stone — abstract features — provide only a metaphor for History, not for the inner time and involvements or conversely the non-commitment of these people when they were living.

Yet, a revolution or a war force upon human beings extremes of experience, in which, unless they renounce to any avoidable concern, they have to find resources to unify by their deeds, their actions, in their very being the most estranged contradictions. Such are endeavours, passions, ordeals and achievements, discoveries, fulfilments that, naively, lapidary dates cover.
Perhaps there could only be a defective, clumsy representation of the individual struggle: being subjected to collective and personal events, striving to act, to have an effect in response; the necessity and aspiration to become one by bringing together the receptive and active aspects, \( I \) and \( me \), real "time is stitching" \(^5\) them into a single presence. Time is but the thread of our subjective journey, most often a trace which is not visible, at work within one's acts, in the memory, the way one looks, one feels, the way to make of the life of oneself and that of others more of an achievement.

Disserved by the familiarity of images which fit institutional orders, we still perceive, against our own experience that the movement takes a given place into space and time. It is so when something of the human scale is removed. We do know that movement creates space and time, the living movement, within, without, creates a change, "instead of fitting within a closed ensemble, opens out the whole".\(^6\)

The experience as a child by Proust of the essential dimension of life when he sees, travelling on a countryside road the steeples of Martinville's church far way at the turn of the road, then, getting closer, hiding from the view with the bends of the road, to reappear, remote, before disappearing for ever, this experience is real even in the failure to grasp it in words or concepts, because it is the metaphor of a double movement, two independent movements which at times converge or break apart.

Is not life perceiving in the relative movements, that of oneself refracted by the movement of what appears and is revealed, coming from afar or close to oneself, the inflection, the quality of a presence revealed by that which it relates to, being with it?

What is your own movement in this installation? Debra Phillips makes us move into this metaphor rich of relative movements about life – about death – not without emotion and the realisation of what they may be for each of us, in the community of human beings.

Brigitte Carcenac de Torné

Godard (1) Hegel (2) Spinoza (3) Robbe-Grillet (4) Deleuze (5 & 6)
Trace of a crater from the battlefields of the Somme, France 1991
aeroplane pilot • architect • art critic •
artist • barrister • cabinetmaker • captain • chairman • chemist •
chief physician • civil engineer • commander • composer •
councillor of Paris • director • doctor • dramatic artist •
engineer • engraver • explorer •
fishmonger •
geographer • inventor • knight • laboratory assistant •
former magistrate •
mayor • merchant • mining engineer • mother •
musician • novelist • nurse •
officer • orator •
orientalist • painter • parliamentarian •
pensioner • poet • resistance fighter • sculptor •
senator • senior member of the council of state •
singer • statuary • a stranger •
teacher • traveller •
vet • vicar •
writer •
pilote aviateur • architecte • critique d’art •
artiste • avocat • ébéniste • capitaine • président • chimiste •
médecin en chef • ingénieur civil • commandeur • compositeur •
conseiller de Paris • directeur • docteur • artiste dramatique •
ingénieur • graveur • explorateur •
poissonier •
geographe • inventeur • chevalier • préparateur •
ancien magistrat •
maire • négociant • ingénieur des mines • mère •
musicien • romancier • infirmière •
officier • orateur •
orientaliste • peintre • député •
pensionnaire • poète • résistante • sculpteur •
sénateur • conseiller d’État •
chanteur • statuaire • un inconnu •
professeur • voyageur •
vétérinaire • curé •
écritain •
Les Nuages d'antan, d'ailleurs et d'ici

Ecrire sur les nuages, voici ce à quoi Virginia Woolf disait, en plaisantant à peine, qu'elle aurait voulu passer toute la vie. Pourquoi les nuages? Parce que ce sont des paysages mobiles, presque aussi fragiles que les visages humains.

Distorsions, gonflements, effilochements, dispersion, effacement, ils sont prêts à adopter toutes les formes possibles, acrobatiquement, c'est à dire jusqu'au bout d'eux-mêmes, à l'infini de leur vita brevis. Les humains ont aussi leurs orages et leur transparence, mais peu s'essaient à des figures élaborées, se pliant aux exigences de la légèreté. Plutôt que de passer par tant de couleurs comme les bandes de nuages, moutonnant ou fumées éparses, offertes à l'oblique changeante du couchant, le geste, le mouvement propre à quelqu'un en accord avec soi-même et (ce) qui l'entoure, ou plus exactement animé par cette harmonie instaurée entre soi et les choses, passion et savoir, exprime une nuance particulière, donne une certaine coloration, une pure vibration à ce qui vient réserver dans l'espace, enfin à l'espace même. C'est ainsi que l'on reconnaît les siens.

C'est le bleu plus tendre de la mer à cause du calme, du silence rempli de l'écoute affectueuse de quelqu'un assis à côté de soi... La discrète ironie qui passe dans le sourire de celui qui communique avec élegance des idées faites de clarté qui accompagnaient la venue du crépuscule dans un amphithéâtre... Le doigt pointé, magistral, le front en avant de celui qui forçait à penser, rudement parfois, et prouvait dans le geste et sa parole incantatoires que les mots, en effet, tels des piolets ne doivent point être maniés comme des cure-dents... Les gestes quotidiens de celle qui ne se payait pas de mots et traitait chacun pour ce qu'elle ou il était. Des gestes qui ont, simplement, la couleur veloutée et chantante des pensées de son jardin...

Ainsi ceux dont la présence est devenue la qualité d'un rythme, d'une couleur, ont formé, forgé les nervures de notre connaissance. Mais ils sont également, comme les nuages, imprévisibles, ils gardent encore dans leur geste, l'expression particulière de leur visage, leur regard un mystère qui nous est si précieux, une grâce qui nous fait ou ferait dire: "Tu as des nuages dans les yeux".
Writing about clouds is that which, almost in earnest, Virginia Woolf said she could do all her life. Why clouds? Because they are landscapes, nearly as fragile as the human face.

Distortions, bellowings, fraying, breaking up, wearing away, they are ready to undergo any possible metamorphosis, versatile right to the infinite where their *vita brevis* belongs. Human beings have their storms too and their own transparencies, but not all attempt elaborate figures, striving for an exacting lightness. Rather than going through so many colours like flocks of clouds, fluffy or spreading into smoky streaks, exposed to the oblique rays of setting suns, the gesture, the very movement of someone in chord with herself or himself, and others, or more exactly animated by a harmony created between oneself and things, passion and wisdom, expresses a definite hue, *nuance*, gives a particular coloration, a pure vibration with what dwells in space or with space itself. It is where our gratitude for them is grounded.

So soft is the colour of the sea, because of the welcoming silence of someone sitting by one’s side... The serene irony of a smile comes to rest on the face of a man who communicates, elegantly, brittle, clear ideas which accompany the coming of dusk into the lecture hall... Pointing a finger, impervious, and lifting his head, he who forced one to think, severe at times, proved in his gestures and speech, not unlike an incantation, that words, just as ice-picks and he knew both, must not be handled like toothpicks... The everyday gestures of a woman who did not delude herself and took everyone for what she or he was. Simple gestures which had the velvety and singing colours of the pansies of her garden...

Thus those of whom the presence has become the quality of a rhythm, of a colour, have formed the sensitive network of our knowledge, but who as well have the elusiveness of the clouds, and retain, in their gestures, in the expression of their face, their gaze, a mystery so precious, a grace that makes one say or desire to say: “Beautiful clouds pass by in your eyes”.

Brigitte Carcenac de Torné
Fingerprints, bronze from *Sillage #1* 1993, 68 x 43 x 40mm
Catalogue

_Sillage # 2_ (not illustrated) 1993, 230 b/w photographs mounted on aluminium, each 150mm x 400mm
overall dimension 1500mm x 9000mm

_Sillage # 3_ (not illustrated) 1993, 52 b/w photographs mounted on aluminium, each 95mm x variable lengths
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Thank you to the following individuals and families for supplying their fingerprints in wax for 
*Sillage #1:

Appleby • Blau • Burns • Cummins • Dang • Davies • Ely • Fortescue • Groves • Hand •
Heyes • Irving • Jubelin • Kleem •
Laing • Laurent • Mutsui • Njoo •
Outram • Phillips • Powell • Quagliata • Rainbird • Redgate •
Roberts-Goodwin • Schwarz • Tyssen • Urquhart •
Vickers • Williams • Wylie •
Young • Zahalka •

Acknowledgements:
David Aukland, Michele Barker, Edgar Blau, Maureen Burns,
Brigitte Carcenac de Torné, Narelle Jubelin, Esther Samra.

Special thanks to Robin Blau.

This publication is produced for Debra Phillips’ exhibition *Sillage* at Artspace, October 23rd to November 13th, 1993.

Published by Debra Phillips and Artspace, Visual Arts Centre Ltd,
The Gunnery, 43 - 51 Cowper Wharf Road, Woolloomooloo, N.S.W. 2011, Australia.

Artspace gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Australia Council, the Federal Government’s arts funding and advisory body and the N.S.W. Government’s Ministry for the Arts.

This project was assisted by the Australia Council, the Federal Government’s arts funding and advisory body.

This catalogue was partially funded by the National Association for the Visual Arts with financial assistance from the N.S.W. Government’s Ministry for the Arts.

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