

## A white page and two dots

The first image I had of Elisabet Norseng's work was a sheet of paper from a pad with two painted dots. The art surfaces at its initial state, after recognising the clear field of the image it completes its first step, an initial gesture which establishes the moment of origin, its own *Kosmos*. The punctiform dust, more than the forms which are the negation of being, is tomb of the absolute, both negating itself and laid out on the edge of its disappearance, progressing through reduction. It becomes but a grain of the explanatory aspect of the figure, though now eroded. It shows *nothingness*. In the end this work removes all representation, it ends up depositing the primacy of figuration while indeterminacy, negation and deprivation prevail. But is all of this, I ask myself, born from a Platonic desire of the reconciliation of the idea, or rather is it only the extreme gesture that subtracts art to its positive definiteness. The form of nothingness holds within itself the totality of forms, in an expected inexistence of these forms in the world, and it pushes itself to determine the indeterminable, the appearance of nothingness, the white page.

The paradigm of white is empty of signification, it condenses into analogical associations which communicate absolutely nothing. It can be deduced that, on the level of content, there is no signification in the manifestations of presence and of optical data, even if they can be bent so as to signify. This significant void is definable after it has been entitled by its indication, a shift from a state of objective presence of something in the world, to a state of something that is not in the world but is to the world, in the sense that it shows itself to the world, it makes its debut, since before it was not there. The world plus the white page is a modified condition, 'meta-tactically' possible

and it repeats that which it is, through the negation of an apparent essence. With this it does not want to be an ontological subtraction, but something existing as a pure 'non-signal' of existence. Categories not existing a priori, the exhibition of the void, the manifestation of the condition of presence, is the way in which it formally presents and signifies since it is nothing other than the signifier and, at the same time, the signified in its pure state. Thus, this pure signified does not result in being the content of the white page, but the white page itself. It is not, therefore, the page to be painted white in the same way in which the painting is not a painting before it has been painted. If this condition of the object-painting existing before its being painted, it would permit the cryptogenesis of a condition *in absentia operis*, which we see in some artists who are only concerned with the components of painting in the moment which precedes their effective employment. This instrumental predisposition has within itself the potential construction of something generic, the use of ideas rather than the development of a fact. It is an arena in which the expectation and the claim to determine a destiny of things becomes frustrated through the analysis that precedes the assembling of canvases, colours, stretchers, paper. In reality, the white page starts to exist only in its open exhibition, in the state of a resolved painting, not as the moment of painting as neither potential nor act. Note well, in saying this I do not mean to negate conceptual art its legitimacy, on the contrary, by using painting as a typological reference, a structure of art can be rebuilt, a structure made with choices of codes which become organised, building that ontological system which makes us define that thing: the 'white page' and not a sheet painted white; it is like saying that art exists before its application in paint. As such it is a language which is code preceding the *Parole*, and, however creatively it can be put to use, it remains a fixed code where the plane of the content essentially

remains the understanding of the adequate spatialization of its manifestation. Art exists before the painting of the picture, and the white page is painting in its universality not in its specificity of application, that is how the plane of the signifier goes to join with that of the signified.

In all, it is also fair to see the white page from a symbolic perspective of a logical-linguistic type; I am using the term 'symbolic' when this designates that process where intelligence arrives at the point of distancing itself from the mere presence of things in the world, replacing them with a compensative representation taking the form of semi-abstract images or of completely abstract word-images, only thought of as a nominal concept. The symbolic becomes the principle description of a process of 'humanization', phylo-genetically when it enters into spoken language, and auto-genetically when it passes from sensory-motor data to imitative and object play data.

The term symbolic, to give an example, is also used in information technology when denoting formal languages which simplify cognitive operations. The inconvenient thing that occurs when we separate our white page from our selves with a series of verbal, visual or gestural signs, is that of flattening the symbol on the sign. In investigating the sheet as a symbolic image, one can run into an excess of specialization, therefore confronted with all the facts inherent to the conceptualisation of the 'picture-thing', we cannot oppose anything apart from logical formal, analytical and discontinuous investigations and its status as a real and true painting. But what if we project everything in a different direction, where the symbol is codifiable only by someone who knows the 'coded' language, a fascinating depth of latent and secondary signifieds would open up which emerge every time the apparent sense is substituted by the secret sense and vice versa, something considerably more

inviting than cold semiotics.

We realise, in this case, that the white page is an *anaphoric or typological* symbol, since there is the picture itself to unite the signifier and the signified which becomes, according to an argument proposed by Alleau, the “typical signification which is both model and trace”<sup>1</sup>. If the objective presence of the paper is transcended, up to the point of being considered expression or projection, it brushes against the Platonic condemnation of the image and begins to accept the conditions of a vision that is essentially light. Light, in certain cases, is given the value of form, in other more generic cases of vision, the white page, in such a case, is a space that has a mental perimeter and functions as threshold. The space that opens beyond anticipates ‘one who acts’ - π\_\_\_\_\_ - in this real field, transfigured by an internal ‘I’. Within the totality it looks for the limit of articulation up to the point of compromising the last possibilities of something materialising. In the effort of ‘seeing-within’ (*‘veder-ci’*) something, we see something and we free the form from every mimetic tribute, in a few words, we see it signify itself. The image of this represented ‘nothingness’ is set free from an apparent state to a certain idea of the void which has as its extreme consequences the claim of bearing witness to the invisible, counting on a special passive condition of looking, for which: participating in the contemplation of the void, one ‘is looked at from the void’. Participation and immersion are characteristics of the passion which drives towards ecstasy: *ek-stasis*, that is to come out of oneself towards somewhere else. In this state of things, aspects generated by the white are present, which, apart from the absence of colour and its own zero degree, it traces back to a sense of ordinary fear and defines the method of handling on the part of artists. There is something almost divine in the infinite potential of whiteness,

whether accepted as emptiness or essentially saturated by human experience, when it is realized through thick laying, through tensions resolved through outrage, as with Fontana or Burri, for example. And yet, the dawn of the white page is the metaphor of a world on which signs can be incised so as to invent a private space. This space is essentially a particular surface which ceases to be the agonised spectre of an ideal state, unmovable from that extra-temporal world where, from Neoclassicism, the highest form of beauty arose.

The surface is one of the fundamental plastic means, in a grammar known to all from Kandinsky's writings. It is understood as the ground and it is destined to accommodate the content of the work.

#### T w o   d o t s

The dot, which is the discrete and denotative presence of this surface, becomes a sign of reference for the eye and, once again the *link between silence and word*, it is testimony of a materiality. In writing it measures language and it signifies silence. In this analogy with writing we find the logical anchorage of painting, almost an explanation of it or a continuation, a comment. *Jose Saramago* says in the *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*: "Two days after I started writing, and in all this time the two paintings had progressed towards their inevitable end [...]"<sup>2</sup>. The introduction to the paradigm of phonetic writing is crucial: it establishes the representation dependent on language, the same language which gives things their names and with which the time of things is narrated. Language in western tradition is voice, hearing and, therefore, word, from which writing is a representative by-product and an ideal structure which serves to give, in a certain sense, a functioning to the surface

as does painting. There is a link, in a certain sense, a functioning to the surface as does painting. There is a link, in fact, with some theories of art surrounding the ownership which painting has to mark out the contours of surfaces, to de-write, in such a way so as to reduce itself to the indivisible essence of the dot. Without this, the coherent continuity of the plane assumes the phantasmic value of the frontal-abys, of the disturbing impossibility of the penetration of a void continuously put into discussion by the hypothesis of depth which defines its limits and essence. In its apodeictic vulnerability there is a potential barrier of the idea of the infinite. However, "the infinite", according to Jules Vuillemin, "is the genus of which the continuum is a species", therefore it is unfair to attribute to the lacking edging or marking of the space the discouragement generated by a place that is too big for the eye and for the consciousness of the man who, in its presence, falters and fears for himself. The space is coherence of form, because it configures the urgency. And it is inevitable to define how the entitling of the empty white sheet manages to give the co-ordinates of the imagination. Alphonse Allais entitled one of seven monochromes from *Album primo-avrilesque* edited by Ollendorff in 1897, *Première communion de jeunesfilles chlorotiques par un temps de neige*. This untouched 'Bristol' board, of a whiteness in which the hypothesis thickened like a fog which only the reading of the title managed to dissipate. This rejection of colour has ancient roots. Already with Aristotle this route was the only way out of Platonic 'iconophobia'. The place of art was the line and in the *Poetics* the superiority of the white space circumscribed by drawing was sustained, compared to a casually coloured surface. From then on a certain academic credo has been formulated on the basis of a secret opposition between a rigorous dawn and the chaotic sensuality of colour. In whiteness, in fact, the possibility of achieving a purity creeps in, which is also the

possibility of action and a receptacle of mental images, a silence rich in possibilities. In this idea of purity a myth is hidden, a powerful aesthetic fantasy, which can reach a moral act. The desperate need to clarify and highlight in order to achieve the extreme graduation of colour, is the desire to restore the Absence. I would like to take this absence as a starting point to speak about Elisabet Norseng, about her works, from that which Sergio Rispoli holds: the "interiorisation of an extreme Nordic landscape, dominated by the absolute whiteness of expanses of snow, by limitless voids and by silence."<sup>3</sup> Instantly the vision of such a horizon tells of the anxiety of the artist projected and included in this enveloping expanse. Here, every action defines a background, a limit, and creates the support to bring the hand back down from that existential leap into a nothingness which is, essentially, the lack of references. This state of things stops at the moment in which a spatial consciousness is formed which moves in response to bodies or minute entities, the only redemption of the white page from the hyperbolic acceptance of the 'empty nothingness', a definition that overlaps into the dizziness of the sublime. These are the dots of Norseng:

*The dots make the forms  
and down they fall  
with the nascent shadows.<sup>4</sup>*

The solidity of the minute entity, the dot, has in itself the charge of the action in what Kandinsky called: "The first meeting between the instrument and the material surface, the basic surface". The impact is also the moment of recognition of the physical characteristics of the surface, which becomes the external and final objective layer, the most external of something. The emancipation of the sheet from its own generic condition of space to reach the

particular of the constructed support, takes place with the recognition of an image-aspect of it. "The configuration", in Olivetti's reasoning, "of the intentioned positioning of the support is realized as resolved contiguity: contact"<sup>5</sup>. The punctiform entity is sustained by a solid reality which is the alteration of the physical dimensions of an object that is limited, bordered and separated from the rest of the world by a marginal line which emphasises the depth.

*[...] A conscious touch  
suspended, like music.  
Its very form  
of a painting.  
Like opinion  
change in various ways.*

If the conscious gesture generates a space, it also generates a 'mutated consciousness' of that place that assumes the specific characteristics of a picture. Among the works of Elisabet Norseng there are some of the late-Eighties such as *Terst* (1988, 150 x 69 cm, Indian ink on paper, Private Collection, Rome) with a 'Tachiste' flavour, for no other reason than the repeated trajectory of the sign which allows the radius of the wrist as a psychophysical projection to be sensed. A kind of 'rain' of signs able to twist the ordinary flatness so as to suggest hypothetical depth. Inevitably the semantics of oriental calligraphy enter into the game which anticipate an effective presence of the emptiness of the page, such a condition being highlighted by a *Gestaltic* idea, I would suggest, for which the background is never a space where the sign is placed but has a formative function as it is a constitutive factor of an image: this image produces its own space.

The complete picture redeems the void from its characteristic as mere container, elevating it to a constructive and dynamic function. Such a function can characterise in three-dimensions that which in principle had an exclusively two-dimensional value, as it does not place itself solely as a pause between two interventions but it circles them and provides the sign with a depth. And so the trajectories of the sign make themselves sometimes thinner and other times heavier, suggesting a time of production no longer read from right to left or from top to bottom but from near to far and vice versa. This weakness of the sharpness of the sign in its arrangement on the surface does not produce listless evanescence but developments of that which is by nature graphic to a body in a plastic space, suspensions, I would suggest, of masses in expansion. I am thinking about one of Elisabet's works of 1989, *Tagen* (39 x 27.5 cm, Ink on paper, Tenerife): where two entities of the sign share the same space, one dense, almost scratched, the other articulated and dominant. A liquid yet solid stain. The void is not divorced from the fullness, it is not external, if anything it is in the heart of fullness, whether a dot or an articulated line, everything is permeated in its density by a vital breath.

*Having vanquished the void*

*The new is unveiled*

*You can create universes*

*Impossible to anticipate*

It seems clear by now how the objective phenomenon is the only one responsible to open the doors to the imagination, in the moment of vision, indeed, the the superiority of the ontology of the work is materialized and understood as an unconceivable *Universe in absentia rerum*. This derives from a predispo-

sition on the part of the of the artist to face up to the originary elements of the work which do not allow conditions that precede its manifestation, it does not belong to any system of relations if not to that fixed by those elements which, although minimal, regulate the whole.

Norseng's dots thicken making themselves the dust of the invisible, it escapes from the centre of the work, marking a horizon of liquid imprints. The trace is the testimony of a passage, it is the synthetic relationship of a concept, the painting for antonomasia (*Blue Picture*, 1996) or the originary geometric elements, the circle and the square, pure forms which never abandon their emotive matrix.

That which appears to be a Suprematist composition based on 'superimposition' is in reality colouration. The titles of the works testify to this, diluting the glacial quality of the geometry through the gradual transparency of colour.

Norseng, although an explicitly convinced assertor of an 'additive' art made of 'few elements positioned on a surface maintaining a certain openness'<sup>6</sup>, she dedicates herself to reductive synthesis of the cognitive process represented by those isolated gestures in a space which is already the context of the work. In this way we can understand the obvious tearing off of the page as an incontrovertible sign of the connection with the everyday. This action, intended as an ordinary practice, transforms the paper of Elisabet Norseng into the notes of a diary which does not at all want to break away and isolate itself from the passing of existence. At the same time, by not evoking particular stages of an event, these notes are not the prose of a lived experience, but rather an equilibrium achieved in a moment of high concentration, in a moment in which a

close relationship between the sensitive and the intelligible is established; a relationship which can filter into the continuous questioning of the void of the page as if that were the chosen place to experiment with a re-employment of emotion. I am not surprised when I hear about the sublimity of Elisabet Norseng's work, provided that this term is intended as an attempt to show that which extends across the power of representation in sensibility. Only in this way, it seems to me, can one understand Norseng's 'militant' poetry: an occasion of the renewal of the function of the images. We can hypothesise, at this point, a condition of working suggested by Blanchot, who sustains the sacrifice of the artist for the work generates an empty space in which only the call of the work itself resonates, a point in which the painting has nothing to say, since it always starts again from scratch; basically this is turned in search of nothingness, which is the anonymous part of its very existence, a double sense of life with no grip on the real. We call all of this 'vacuity', as Artaud called it, or Non-Being as it was instead for Valéry, certainly it is a suspension that tends towards a state of nothingness of the image that is no longer psychologically analysable, nor an acknowledging reflection of a formally fixed archetype. Undoubtedly collected from a repertoire of real perceptions, the little interventions, Elisabet Norseng's 'actions' on the torn out pages of a pad pushing their perforated edges into the world, the margin catching hold real life. Chronicle of an intimate event, they follow one another like a meditative practice resulting from a temporary suspension from the succession of contingent facts, this white page with two dots, a revelation of an existential *punctum*.

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Translated by Sarah Ciacci

- <sup>1</sup> R. Alleau, *La science des symboles*, Paris 1976
- <sup>2</sup> J. Saramago, *Manual de Pintura e Calligrafia*, Lisbonne 1983, p.70
- <sup>3</sup> S. Rispoli, *Elisabet Norseng. Fuggevole come la neve*, Salon Privè Arti Visive, Rome 1999
- <sup>4</sup> E. Norseng, *Fuggevole come la neve*, Rome 1999
- <sup>5</sup> A. Olivetti, *Sul dipingere*, Cadmo, Rome 1990
- <sup>6</sup> E. Norseng, *Trancinence, time and presence: The Work of Elisabet Norseng*, unpublished