



Fragments of the world, fragments of the body

Antoni Tàpies' "Black Drawing 1-V"

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At the origins of all the work of Antoni Tàpies (Barcelona, 1923) is the drawing. His first known works, from 1943 onwards, are drawings on paper in pencil, charcoal and Indian ink. Tàpies has been drawing ever since. "Even in the latter half of the 1950s and the early 1960s when my attention was apparently taken up with what have been called my 'matter paintings', I never stopped drawing or working with paper", Tàpies has stated in a conversation with Manuel J. Borja-Villel, which is included in the catalogue of his exhibition *El tatuatge i el cos. Papers, cartons i collages (The Tattoo and the Body. Paper, Cardboard and Collages, 1998)*. Tàpies' drawing knows no material frontiers or techniques. "I have always worked in the conviction that there is a total interconnection between the drawing, the collage, the painting, etcetera, and have constantly endeavoured to 'traverse' previously established frontiers and categories, especially when academics or the cultural industry are involved", he confirms.

The drawing, the line, the imprint becomes the singular and unmistakable writing of Antoni Tàpies, moving through all his work as an enigmatic sign. "Every work of art is writing, and not only that which is presented as such; it is hieroglyphic writing whose code will have been lost and whose content is partially determined by that loss. Works of art are language only as writing",

wrote Theodor W. Adorno in his book *Aesthetic Theory*, as Xavier Antich notes in his essay "*L'èsser i l'escriptura. Una aproximació a l'obra sobre paper d'Antoni Tàpies*" (Being and Writing. An Approximation to Antoni Tàpies' Work on Paper)

In Tàpies' work, however, everything is within reach, *Tocant a mà* (At Hand), as the poet J. V. Foix says. Everything is pure presence and evidence. A hand is a hand, a cross is a cross, a wineglass is a wineglass. Of course every hand is different, every cross is different, every wineglass is different. It is perfectly true to say that, in Tàpies' work, no sign is repeated, no sign is the same as any other. His entire work is pure becoming, change, mutation, transformation. And it is precisely the repetition of themes and motifs that enables us to verify this movement, this energy and quiet, subtle vibration that Tàpies' work transmits.

Perhaps it is in drawing that Tàpies reveals in a more radical way his awareness of the fragmentation of the world, the fragmentation of the body, which characterises our society today. It is from this awareness of fragility and fragmentation that the unfinished becomes possible. The artist himself has unambiguously said as much. "For me, the fragment is related with the fact of leaving things insinuated, unfinished... In the East they are masters at this as well. The fragment, in

this sense, presupposes, more than anything else, a denial of idealist logocentrism. It is a view of the world that is close to Chinese cosmology and Hericlitean philosophy, where the essence of the being is becoming, and where things are part of a continuous flux, which means that they are not complete in themselves.

My interest in the fragment is part of a single desire to apprehend and express the cosmos, and even to “cosmosize” humble and insignificant things. They are both part of the same phenomenon. The whole cosmos is found in a small fragment, though not necessarily as a totality”.

The new series *Dibuix negre* (Black Drawing, 2005) consisting of five small (23.8 x 16.5 cm) drawings, in paint and ink on paper, includes some of the signs of multiple and open readings that frequently appear in Tàpies' work: the imprint of the open hand on a black-painted corner of the paper, recalling the mourning armbands of bygone times (I); a form that resembles a human head whose outstanding features are a number of curved lines, like thick hair, two lines that might be eyes, a profile that looks like a nose and a mouth formed by a horizontal line crossed by five smaller vertical lines, in a sign that Tàpies has at times used to represent a skull (II); a finger-marked wineglass, a cross and other lines (III); some haphazard-looking, interlinked signs in the shape of an S that are finished with a black mass in the form of a heart (IV); and, finally, some crossed-out lips within a square that might be a box or an envelope, with a cross below (V).

The title “Black Drawing” is a simple description of the colour used, but it can also denote a certain state of spiritual gloom, of mourning, of pain. Are they independent drawings or do they have a narrative thread? They testify, no doubt, to some moments of life, some fragments of the world, some fragments of the body. Is the palm of the hand, the artist's own? Probably.

Are the finger marks on the glass made by the same hand? It is possible. It could be the artist's hand or it might be that of any human being. The individual gesture can be a universal gesture. Yet, throbbing in these apparently anonymous signs that are easily recognisable as Tàpies' writing are uneasiness and solitude. It is the uneasiness and solitude of the human being, with his passions and his everyday life. A fragment of the world, a fragment of the body can tell us more about the enigma of existence than any prosaic story.

Throughout 2005, Tàpies produced other splendid drawings that have not yet been published. Some are reproduced for the first time in this review. I shall refer to just two works that have had a particular impact on me: “*Perfil i T*” (Profile and T, page XX) and “*Crani dibuixat*” (Cranium Drawn, page XX). These are startling drawings of very unusual composition. A long profile with a black head occupying almost the entire oblong sheet of paper shows us a mouth that is open in the act of crying out or in pain. There is a small black cross in the mouth and a big letter T, also black, inside the head. Behind the head, going from the top to the bottom of the sheet, are other letters in alphabetical order, from A to H. The T and the cross might suggest that this is the profile of the artist himself but, since we are given no other clue, it could also be the profile of any man showing his pain. With a remarkable economy of means, Tàpies achieves a powerful expressive density. In “Cranium Drawn”, a simple black line in pencil draws a cranium that has, directly in front of it, the profile of a young figure. From the mouth of the cranium flies an arrow aimed at the nascent mouth. Is it death that feeds life? Is it the thought of death that gives us life? It is difficult to say so many things with so few elements. Many are the anonymous voices that, like those in Beckett's theatre, speak to us in Tàpies' work. In the writing of Tàpies echoes our world II