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Antoni Tàpies and the Violence of Texture

"Concrete looks terrible; it must be painted." *L. Barragán, 1981.*

Preface:

In lines with the theme of the conference, it might be relevant to pay attention to the relation between architecture and other disciplines. The impact of inter-textual connections, as a pertinent mark of the post-critical discourse, is not only an emerging paradigm but a renewed emphasis that disciplines can only survive through influence.

In considering the influence of other fields of inquiry on architecture, it might be secondary to review the authority exercised by architecture itself on other disciplines. Yet within the context of the conference theme it may become necessary to follow such a course. Not only because the context of interdisciplinary exchanges stipulates a certain diversity in treating the sources and directions of influence, but because influence itself is a complex concept that may involve more than just one layer, and one more than one direction. Since textuality has disrupted the notion of stability and originality, influence has also come to imply random and infinite connections between texts. And as texts chart between locations, recognizable sources are not always straightforward. This, of course, renders the whole concept of influence very vague and slippery at the outset.

From this perspective, it is tempting to pay attention to how the notion of architectural *texture* has been manipulated by a non-architectural domain, namely painting. A focus on the work of Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies is highlighted, especially in relation to what is often called his "walls." The interest in this topic is twofold: first, it shows that architectural ideas can affect other disciplines, including painting. Second, that an architectural notion highlighted outside architecture is often associated with other notions, which may or may not be architectural. In the case of Tàpies, texture will be seen under the heading of violence, both as a historical background of the artist's life and as an artistic technique of rendering.

Examining the appropriation of architectural texts by other disciplines does not particularly imply an interest in the idea



of relevance, in whether a given importation of architectural notions by another discipline is itself worth-considering from an architectural standpoint. Rather, it tries to establish a context by which architecture can investigate its concepts outside its own boundaries, that it may be more aware of the complexity of its theoretical nature. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, architecture has often taken back what was borrowed, and then promoted it in a new way. The Twentieth-century debate regarding fenestration, for example, was preceded by the Nineteenth-century poetic interest in window symbolism. "Computer architecture" is another example, whereby an architectural notion traveled to another domain, namely computer science, then came back in order to trigger digital conceptions of architectural design. A given metaphor, therefore, often swerves from the architectural path, then comes back home as a new promise. This form of prodigality seems to be worth considering especially in determining the cognitive nature of the architectural discourse as a whole.

From this perspective, it is tempting to pay attention to how the notion of architectural *texture* has been manipulated by painting. Texture of course signifies the palpable, tangible details inscribed in any text and refers to the distinguishing elements which are separate and independent of the text's structure. Within our context the term is taken to imply affinities with the concept of surface detail as found in painting, sculpture and architecture. The import of texture in architecture emanates from the fact that the discipline operates not wholly in abstraction, so as to be solely a reflective phenomenon, but within in the realm of making. The discipline's destiny is to therefore submit itself to the requirements of empirical life which texture is supposed to represent. This leaves to argue that unless and until it actually exists as a physical surface, an architectural object is little better than a mere speculation on a space that has been reduced to geometrical intelligibility. From another angle, texture could also be understood as a correction of the exaggerations of "logic" that cause the colorful local details to disappear into the grayness of systemized abstraction. Under this formulation, architecture can be equated with "sensuous richness," "fullness of presentation," "immediacy," and "concreteness." All these attributes assume the form of sensory intensities and tactile associations, although the definition could be made more complex if we pay attention to the individual technical subtleties and patterns of a given architectural entity.



Because it requires weight, density, light and color, an architectural object inherently shares strong grounds with painting since in both the material characteristics of the surface constitute the very identity of that surface. The modality of assigning a given color to a wall, for example, differs little from applying a color to a blank canvas despite the dimensional differences that separate the two exercises. In both, the effort to promote a given effect implies that materials, which have their own physical characteristics, refer to certain feelings and emotions and are, therefore, chosen not for the usefulness they add to whatever functional or structural service required but also because they accommodate themselves to expectations that are fundamentally aesthetic. Even when the textural treatment applied to the architectural object may not bear a technological resemblance to the way a given product is used by the painter, there is nonetheless a striking resemblance between the two. This explains the almost-intuitive attraction to painting that many architects demonstrate. The Mexican architect Luis Barragán, just to stay within the bounds of the starting quote, is a case in point. We are reminded that he, Barragán, borrowed some colors from the 'fighting cocks' of his friend the painter Jesús Reyes, particularly the blue and magenta of some of the walls in the Gilardi house. In his early work, especially in the banisters, latticework, doors of turned wooden spindles and glass, and the occasional window, piece of furniture, Barragán also borrowed colors from the French illustrator and landscape artist Ferdinand Bac. The Mexican architect also at times copied certain color combinations from Choukhaeff's illustrations for Pushkin's play Boris Godunov. And so on.

This is if we look at the subject from an architectural standpoint. But if we turn to painting and endeavor to inspect how architectural notions and techniques engage the production of painted objects, we may find a significant answer in the work of Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies, especially in relation to what is often called his "walls." The interest in this orientation is twofold: first, it shows that architectural ideas seem to influence other disciplines, such as painting. Second, that an architectural notion highlighted outside architecture is often associated with other notions, which may or may not be architectural. In the case of Tàpies, texture will be seen under the heading of violence, both as a historical background of the artist's life and as an artistic technique of rendering. Violence in itself, may not be a primary architectural category. But as crystallized on the surface of walls, by whatever

agency and for whatever finality, it necessarily acquires an architectural dimension.

Now in the hundreds of works Spanish artist Tàpies painted over nearly half a century, violence develops like a substitute of censored tears. At the root of this artistic expression we find a suffering that sometimes expresses itself brutally, and sometimes through a calm process. A body of work whose essence is quasi-traumatic, whose signs have only to be brought back to some rough memories to acquire meaning. Essential to the understanding of this traumatic art is the condition where painting is emptied of a content, where it is no more than a density of signs and sensations built up on the canvas as gestures, tones, distances and light. The result immediately explodes into substances, not specific contents. The content, if it exists at all, is in an embryonic state; as if the artist's role is not to represent an achieved meaning as much as to determine the vocation of a failure.

The specific reasons which kept Tàpies' art in this state of incomplete creation, so far from the work of Picasso and Miro for example, are to be possibly found in the way the artist grew up between the walls of Barcelona. After the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, in which they unsuccessfully opposed the Fascists in their struggle to preserve their cultural identity, the Catalan people suffered a harsh repression from General Franco. Tàpies, who was born in 1923 in Barcelona, remembers the measures the dominant Franco regime took to annihilate the Catalan language and culture in the post-war period, when the autocrat outlawed the speaking of Catalan in the schools and on the streets, outlawed publication of materials in Catalan, imposed strict censorship, and maintained secret police in the province. Thriving cultures such as the Catalan and the Basque, which the languages kept alive, threatened Spain's strength as a nation-state. Graffiti and Civil war:

After some surrealist beginnings, Tàpies began to build up a particular personal style related to *matière* painting, or Art Informel, a movement that focused on the materials of art-making, combining the techniques and forms of "action painting" with his own deep sense of human pathos. This particular treatment of texture and material, a sensibility that has lent his paintings the unmistakably rich, mottled, and ancient character of a Spanish wall, started with a fascination with graffiti.

"Everything contributed to the fact that my first works of 1945 had already met with the street graffiti and the whole world of repressed

protest, clandestine but living, running along the streets of my country."

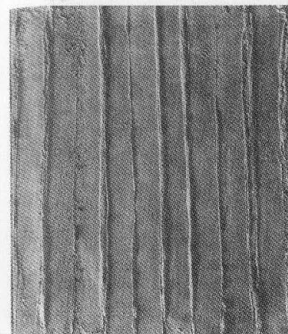
Reflecting further upon the origins of his fascination with walls, he wrote:

If I have to give an account of the way I have slowly come to realize this suggestive power of images of walls, I have to go back to my early days. I have to go back to souvenirs from my teenage and young days between walls, walls between which I witnessed wars. All the drama that was suffered by adults, every atrocious thing invented by an epoch which, among other catastrophes, seemed to drift to its own impulses, all that was taking shape under my gaze. In the city where thanks to family tradition I made it a habit to feel that I was at home, all the walls bear witness to the martyrdom of our people, to the inhuman arrests inflicted upon it.

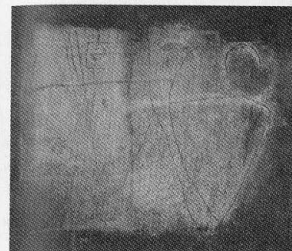
He had begun down the attack path which is that of the marauder of the blank wall. Walls block access and vision, but also provide a backdrop for graffiti and the effects of the passing of time, and Tàpies' steady use of this prototype and the miraculous mixture of materials through which it is communicated enclose his endeavor to illustrate the violation of representation. The tool of the graffitist is of course the sharp point of tools, used to scar, maul and ravage the smooth stuccoed surface of the canvas. The practice is that of a breach, the intrusion onto a territory that is not the graffitist's own, the adulteration of a ground initially consecrated to another purpose. The effacement of that purpose takes place through the act of dirtying, smearing, scarring and excavating. However minimal the content, the consequent mark has a substance made up of the physical surplus left by the marker's infiltration: the smudge of graphite, the mark of ink, the wound thrown up by the penknife's laceration.

The journey to the desert

The form of the mark as present in these early graffiti is the clue, which dwells inside the dominion of hints and gestures. With the years, the tendency to favor hints and gestures then took a different path. Out of the early frantic movement, the gesticulation, the inexhaustible dynamism, out of scratches, strokes, scars, divisions, subdivisions applied to each millimeter of matter and to each one hundredth of the millimeter, a "leap" suddenly occurred. The eye was not perceiving graffiti suggestions any longer, as every scratch was melting into a uniform paste. By mixing paint with earth, glue and marble



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dust, he started to produce "wall pictures." The new work includes paintings with thickly impastoed, scratched or scraped paint in a dramatic style with severe architectural metaphors and earthy color, often reproducing the corrosion and ware through time of doors and walls. The new technique resulted in textural richness, but its more important plan was the examination of the transformative qualities of matter. With a frenzied and intense resolve he zealously delivered himself to the test of forms until each canvas became a battlefield where modifications multiplied to infinity. That which was ardently boiling in graffiti, moved on its own accord into a new landscape. The thousands of scratches turned into thousands of dust grains, of grains of sand. A totally new setting suddenly presented itself, thus opening the most intimate essence of things. Suggestions of unknown molecular structures, corpuscular phenomena, universe of galaxies, microscopic images. Dust symbolism, ash symbolism, symbolism of the earth. This is what he called the long "journey to the desert."

The no-meaning of walls:

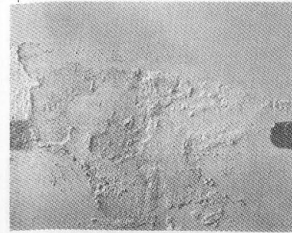
When asked to explain his walls, Tàpies replied,

What I want to say is that I don't think that in my work images have to be looked at as detached pretexts whose role would be limited to support plastic components. To the contrary, my walls, my windows or my doors, at least in their suggested image, maintain their reality without losing any of their archetypal and symbolic charge.

Is it then a return to the "subject"?

We know today that things, in the structure of artistic expression, can magically be there, or not, can appear, disappear, go from one side to the other, trigger associations and so on. Everything is possible because everything happens in a field that is wider than the field defined by the format or the material content of the canvas. The latter is in fact nothing more than a support which invites the viewer to the bigger game of the one thousand and one visions, of the one thousand and one feelings. A talisman that erects or destroys the walls and windows inside the most remote regions of the mind. The "subject" can therefore be either in the canvas or in the head of the viewer. "I have said on several occasions that reality cannot be in the painting; it cannot exist save in the head of the spectator."

From another angle, those who have touched on Tàpies work know well that his oeuvre bears little relation to what might



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be called art engagé, or committed art. His is an earthly work of a dramatic moment that seems to eternally expand anxiously. A work that says little about the daily, of its mise-en-scène and its accidental appearance, as unbearable as this might be. No Guernica here. The commitment is elsewhere. The dedication of Tàpies is a commitment within violence. A situational response, a masked violence, an open violence. To be able to install in front of our gaze the "ugly," the scrap, the rubbish is the way for him to question the dignity of waste, to mock the legitimacy of things useful and to dissipate the too-much. A violation of usages: this is the other task. Within the official euphoria, Tàpies makes it a task to spell discomfort. He brings things down indeed. But nothing, or almost nothing "positive" is achieved in his paintings. Almost nothing, except perhaps an incentive to take into account something elementary and primary. To make us aware of the occurrence of an event.

If Tàpies' canvases can be said to have the constitution of an "event" it is because they reside in the order of the trace and are produced by its violence against the very possibility of presence. But violence is not just an outcome of its being the deposit of a crime; it is instead a requirement of the constitution of the marker's having been distanced from himself. By deleting his own presence he leaves only his trace. Thus even at the time he, the marker, attacks the blank canvas, he strikes in a tense that is no-longer. Entering the scene as an unlawful agent, he is aware that the mark he produces can only take the form of a hint, which he hands over to a future that will be carried on without his attendance. In so doing his mark cuts his presence away from himself, dividing it from within into a before and an after. This is another aspect of violence: temporal incongruity.

Some have tried to find in this approach a distortion of some imposing order, of its destruction from within as it were. Similar to what Gaudi did when he, like Balzac before him, placed himself in the center of the capitalist society and not only reminded that society of the ideal exigencies which it championed, but also proceeded with a flood of violence, an abundance of forms, of colors, of phantasms the least of which ridiculed the same society and its programs. Unlike Gaudi, Mirò and Picasso, however, Tàpies has had nothing to oppose, and no metaphysics to be preached. To be specific, there is no clear beyond-ness in his case, and no confidence in idealized discourses either, especially those which look down upon the daily and the close. Beyondness is regarded

suspiciously because Tàpies, perhaps like Nietzsche before him, considers metaphysics an attempt to take by force the most fertile fields, that is a pure manifestation of violence. And like Adorno he seems to realize that what constitutes the violence of metaphysics is not so much the mechanism of transcendence in itself, the transfer to another order of reality that fails to recognize that which is immediately given, but rather the mechanism of grounding, the process that claims to reach a promised "other" and to establish itself in its disclosed presence.

This reluctance to metaphysics is substituted by an attraction to the immediate in its material, architectural form. Tàpies' love of poor materials is expressed in the way they meet and intersect in order to form a unity that alludes to the birth of life (earth, mud, straw, wood..) but also to death and deterioration (dust, rubbish, excrement..). These materials are not static, placed here and there in a random fashion as it were. They are set into action by a gesture and transfigured by a gaze according to the rules of a whole figurative vocabulary (foot, mouth, eyed hand, skull, body) which represents nothing in itself but which sends the viewer few signals nonetheless. As Xavier Antich has noted, Tàpies does not look down on things even the most insignificant ones; he loves them, pursues them and listens to them, lets them speak. He is enchanted by the aroma of damp earth, the touch of cut grass that will soon be straw, the trunks and wood, by marble dust and varnish. Perhaps unwittingly, there is here an aesthetic of everyday and a restitution of the mystery of the banal. Unlike old aesthetics, obsessed with imposing forms on things, Tàpies lets the material choose its own form, only a print behind, the trace of someone giving up his place. With the passage of time he has gradually emptied his great constructions of material signs and left them stripped on the verge of silence, at that limit where all things speak by remaining mute, articulate through their very dumbness.



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Pushed to its limits, matter is ready to receive and to keep alive the pervasive and slicing trace of a human being kept aside and condemned to silence. To perpetuate itself, matter calls for the occurrence of a human sign, a sign which from canvas to canvas reveals and hides itself, provokes and upsets reading. But Tàpies would not accept a sign unless it is both adulterated and stricken by mutism, that is unless it has become a sign of no-meaning, or better a sign that awaits the arrival of meaning. Such a sign is a quick-tempered gesture that slashes the canvas, a gesture that designates the indefi-

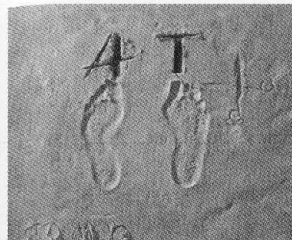
nite and eliminates the arrival of every hope. Non-articulated, it remains buoyant and suspended, a challenge to thought and sleep, a dispersed language that remains within reach nonetheless. From canvas to canvas, Tàpies digs in the architectural land, in his souvenirs, in his imaginary universe of books and in things unseen. He scratches those accumulated thicknesses again and again and would not give up until he has completely brought them near whatever his desire declares to be clear and final. Only then does he stop.

Conclusion

We here touch on the question which the work of Tàpies seems to ask, namely that this work creates less and designates more. A language that is constantly in a state of delay. But it's precisely on the logic of this universe which exists only as a void that Tàpies' painting is predicated. From this emptiness he departs; to this lack his gesture responds. The preciseness of a given touch comes from the fact that whatever is sought in the universe takes its place within a sensible and mental realm that is fundamentally unknown, a realm affected in its most existential definition by negation. To rescue these unknown possibilities of meaning from the unknown to the status of physical reality constitutes for him the very definition of artistic invention.

The artist has to always invent; he has to throw himself into the unknown, rejecting every prejudice, including the study of the so-called 'traditional' techniques and materials. I cannot conceive of the artist except in terms of adventure, of moving from one stage to another without the fear of jumping in the void.

Tàpies' aesthetic is always advancing. Yet, it is constantly returning to its origin, to the ancient fascination of the architectural gesture, primary and radical, which leaves prints on things. The eloquence of the work does not depend on mastery of the material as much as on a capacity to reveal the silences hidden within it. Standing at the opposite side of formalism, his art, like architecture, is profoundly concrete. It entertains a discrete relation with the empirical world, a relation that is not facilitated by representation. Gray, ochre, brown, dirty surfaces. Crosses, arrows, letters, vague figures and the very things we discover each time we walk in the streets of our cities. This discharge of gestures, objects, of insignificant materials which belong to our daily landscape and which Tàpies' paintings make us perceive, appear to us as if we see them for the first time. Because of the world he obliterates and erases, Tàpies offers us the premises of a



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dawning world. The scribbling of children, the stains, the foot-prints, the primitive hands, the living letter that is obsessively repeated, the T cross, this first symbol of unity made out of the meeting and unification of two opposite forces. Then the letter A, the symbol of beginnings. These are values which besides their insistent reference to the *Ars Combinatoria* of Ramon Lull, the Twelfth-Century Catalan mystic so much admired by Tàpies, come to be added to the initial letters of the painter's name (A)ntoni (T)àpies. Initials which necessarily claim a legitimacy to their inscription since Tàpies in Catalan means "wall." A rare case where a painter's proper name carries so much reference to architectural plasticity and creation. A world is here taking shape in the form of a signature which Tàpies has always defended the principle, not out of egotism but as a unifying principle of an otherwise multiple and dispersed production. Triggered by violence, often articulated by means of a violent language, the oeuvre of Tàpies targets the occurrence of a meeting whereby the architectural eye will embrace textural intensities as present in painting. His work is striving to offer a space for architectural meditation and inspiration, a fragile support that vacillates for a moment, then disappears into nothingness.

Illustrations

- 1 Composition in white on cardboard, 1953. Paint on cardboard. Exhibition Galeri Stadler. Paris, 195
- 2 Grey relief, 1958. Mixed media on canvas 81x65 cm. Private collection
- 3 The Cry. Yellow and violet, 1953. Mixed media on canvas 97x130 cm. Private collection, Barcelona
- 4 Lead grey with two black marks, 1958. Mixed media on canvas. Private collection, Milan
- 5 Composition black and white, 1954. Oil and Vanish on canvas. Private collection, London
- 6 Flama, 2000. Marble dust, varnish, paint, oil pencil and pencil on wood.
- 7 Petjades I tisoires, 2000. Marble dust, varnish and paint on wood.