Everlyn Nicodemus
Between Silence and Laughter

Jean Fisher

Between 1984 and 1986 Everlyn Nicodemus made three installations in three widely different contexts — Skive, Denmark (1984), Dar el Salaam, Tanzania (1985) and Calcutta, India (1986) — which came to be collectively entitled 'Woman in the World'. In each case, the work consisted of a period of intense dialogue between the artist and local women, followed by an equally intense period of writing and painting 'on the spot', culminating in an exhibition where images and poems were shown alongside one another. Each exhibition may be said to be a portrait of community — not a community (not the 'Skive' or 'Dar el Salaam' or 'Calcutta' that an anthropologist might document from 'native informers'), but the hopes and fears, anguish and pleasure that could be shared in that moment when the artist entered into communion with the individual lives of the women involved.

The processes involved in the 'Woman in the World' project direct us towards a dual theme in the artist’s work, namely, the quest for human unity, one which would alleviate the burden of individual isolation that is the tragedy of modern existence, and the centrality of creating and making to the fulfilment of this endeavour. 'Woman in the World' forges a dual passage for the creative process; word and image are henceforth to reappear in the artist's work in various modalities, as painting and drawing, poem and critical essay, and at times combined on the same surface in collages.

Today you are a shadow
Tomorrow a mirror
Broken into thousands
of splinters.
Heavy with fear
Surrounded by an
impenetrable forest.
The day after...
Perhaps a human.
Silent Strength No 56, 1990, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Photo: Kristian Romare
The Wedding No 83, 1994, oil on canvas, 6 panels total 240 x 300 cm. Photo: Kristian Romare
The mood captured in the series of paintings from Skive is expansive. The full-volumed female figures, executed with an economy of line worthy of Matisse, fill pictorial space, pressuring the edge of the canvas. Hands, the sign par excellence of the act of making, figure prominently, or multiply and mutate into musical quavers that chatter or beat a rhythmic tattoo across the surface. Silence is broken by the sound of many voices.

The sense of exuberance is sustained throughout the series. In the canvases from Calcutta, the figures, despite their frequent facelessness — a reflection of the anonymity of women in Indian public life —, possess a full-bodied presence and collective strength. They are images that hold a message of solidarity in the face of the disempowerment of women, and repressed peoples throughout the world, by a dominant symbolic order that denies them a 'proper' place. More than any physical location, this means a 'belonging' and a space of action within language — which is to say, a place from which they can represent themselves as agents of their own destinies. To be denied political agency is also to be denied the power of self-representation and self-extension, an act of making one's self, both collectively and individually.

To transgress this interdiction, however, is put one's self in jeopardy: to be exposed as 'improper' and hence to risk being cast, as it were, outside the city gates. Thus, for Everlyn Nicodemus there begins a period of creative isolation that is nowhere more eloquently expressed than in the series of pencil and ink drawings entitled 'Object' (1988). The setting is a room; windows are indicated, but no light penetrates this bleak interior. Its sole occupant is a hunched figure seated in a chair so unstable that it provides no sense of repose. It sits and waits with an air of apprehension. The figure is delineated and yet trapped, immobilised in a state of suspended animation, within the skin of marks that form it and the walls by which it is enclosed. Above all, the figure's sensory, motor and conceptualising faculties — hands, feet and head — are all but withdrawn into the swollen bulk of its body. We might say that this self has 'taken leave of its senses'. If sound is evoked here, it is that of an inner throbbing, magnified when the voices of the exterior become faint and muffled.

The dis-figureing of the power of making, seeing and speaking suggested in these drawings finds its analogy in Elaine Scarry's description of the 'unmaking' of the self's world experienced under conditions of extreme duress like torture:

> It is intense pain that destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and object.

For Scarry, this is not simply the deconstruction of the made world, but the 'deconstruction of the structure of making itself', by which the conceptualising faculties of both victim and perpetrator are dehumanised — a scenario that we have met before in Frantz Fanon's description of the psychic economy of the colonial relation in The Wretched of the Earth. Indeed, it is in depriving the colonised of its own language that the coloniser then justifies his right to cast his diagnostic gaze over the mind and body of the other and pronounce it 'infantile', 'primitive'.

Scarry argues persuasively that bodily pain is at the heart of the human

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1 Everlyn Nicodemus, from the collection of poems, Elekkiteng, My Sun!, 1985.


creative drive, since, in the projection (embodiment) of the body through the made object — the author uses as examples a chair and a coat —, a reciprocation (disembodiment) takes place by which the former gains relief from discomfort while the latter gains 'sentience': the objective world becomes animated as it releases the body from pain. If the maker is the first beneficiary of this relief, the replication and circulation of objects in the world potentially extends such relief to others; in this way the effect of making is profoundly social.

From this perspective, therefore, the drawings of 'Object' perform the fundamental act of creating and making: capturing a moment of paralysis and self-loss before giving way to action, whereby interior sensation is displaced metonymically to the exterior. Thus, the body is projected into a sign that can then be transformed into further signs by which the self, and other selves, may be re-made over and over again. In extending the relay of signs, the 'Object' drawings open a passage to a new series of paintings, 'Silent Strength' (1989-90). The contours of an interior space remain in the bold drawing or blocks of colour — orange, rose madder, green — made more vibrant in their juxtaposition with black. Here, too, are windows, but unlike 'Object', a radiant, external light is now caught and reflected by the forms in the interior. The body has regained some of the scale, movement and vitality of 'Woman in the World'; it explores and perhaps struggles with the oppressive surfaces of the space; it multiplies, becoming two, four... And, together with the reappearance of hands, is the introduction of blocks of script in a mantra-like repetition of the phrase, 'silent strength'.

_The marriage_  
_between dreams_  
_and nightmares_  
—that is life._  
_In the dream_  
_you dance,_  
_oh, so naked,_  
_mankind._

It is tempting to read the series 'Silent Strength' as a struggle to re-embody the imagination as the sustaining power of life itself, where the light that penetrates the 'room', as in Samuel Beckett's _Imagination Dead Imagine_, figures the ebb and flow of a potential dialogue between the exterior world and the interior of the skull. "No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah," begins Beckett's narrator, "no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine. Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit. Till all white in the whiteness the rotunda. No way in, go in, measure."  

'Silent Strength' speaks perhaps of the self's attempt to reclaim the body and measure its distance from the space it occupies. In the following series, 'The Wedding' (1990-94), however, the metaphysical dimension of the struggle in which Evelyn Nicodemus is engaged emerges more clearly: it is what we might call the 'taking place of language' itself. It is also the period during which the artist embarked on a new phase of writing and her re-emergence into the public sphere through the publication of critical essays and conference participation.

'The Wedding' series is inaugurated by a group of canvases in which the
From *Black Book I*, 1995, 27 x 27 x 2 cm.
Photo: Felix Tirry

From *Black Book III*, 1995, 27 x 27 x 2 cm.
Photo: Felix Tirry

Installation of ‘Spaces’ and ‘Confronters’ at Sala de Exposiciones, Alicante University, 1997. Photo: Kristian Romare
Confrontiers. La Belgie, 1997, glass-fronted wooden box with mixed media, 34 x 28.5 x 10 cm
figure struggles with, or perhaps even becomes one with, the image of death itself: "the marriage between dreams and nightmares..." These images, however, give way to a set of large canvases, diptychs and triptychs, in which the room is now opened to a sweeping curve of whiteness. The figure may be diminutive, curled into a ball as in The Wedding No.74 (1992), or trapped within a crucifix (the doubled sign of death and resurrection) as in The Wedding No.76 (1993), but, significantly, the depicted body has also undergone a further projection into hand and foot prints, which trace a path across the white expanse of the space. The hand print is not only the most fundamental sign of making, it is also a rudimentary articulation of language: a displacement of 'natural' or living voice and body into a sign which nevertheless embodies their trace. The significance of these presences in the work deflects us from taking too literally the references to death which, despite its obvious negative implication, does not lack a productive dimension. More to the point is that the artist's imbrication of death with the processes of language discloses the intimacy of their relation within western metaphysics. Thus the trace conjures up Heidegger's Dasein (Being-the-there), which (given the implied presence in most western terms of their opposite) is also the 'not-here': not the locus of the living body, which is now absent, but the place of language, which is a non-place. Put simply, the self, displaced into the realm of language, is never where it is said to be — a fact which makes a fiction of all claims by a 'self' to a locatable identity.

Through the artist's weaving of death and language (both visual and verbal), we may begin to appreciate the enormity of the dehumanisation process that takes place in concussive encounters like Fanon's colonial relation: loss of consciousness (memory and language) reduces the human to the status of the animal, robbing being of the possibility of death — that anticipation absent from the animal which does not die but merely ceases to live. In western metaphysics, according to Giorgio Agamben,

To experience death as death signifies, in fact, to experience the removal of the voice and the appearance, in its place, of another Voice [the taking place of language] (presented in grammatical thought as gramma, in Hegel as the Voice of death, in Heidegger as the Voice of conscience and the Voice of being, and in linguistics as a phoneme), which constitutes the originary negative foundation of the human word. To experience Voice signifies, on the other hand, to become capable of another death — no longer simply a deceasing, but a person's ownmost and insuperable possibility, the possibility of his freedom. [...] For this reason, the Voice, the originary logical element, is also for metaphysics the originary ethical element: freedom, the other voice, and the other death... that makes language our language and the world our world and constitutes, for man, the negative foundation of his free and speaking being.6

The liberation of Voice inaugurated by 'The Wedding' paintings comes to fruition in the 'Black Books' (1995-) and gathers momentum throughout the artist's subsequent work. The 'Books', made of hand-made paper, strictly speaking, are less books in the conventional sense than more intimate, miniaturised series of 'paintings'; and yet, at the same time, the fact that the earlier paintings accumulate over time around a particular set of themes, renders them, in a sense, 'narratives'.

However, what takes place throughout the recent work is an enfolding movement, where, as the material language of art expands beyond painting to include found elements from the external world, as well as references to the
world of art, so the number of potential 'voices' — one could also say 'stories' — from this world embraced by the work multiplies. And stories, as Michel de Certeau argues "found spaces". Conversely, he adds, echoing Scarry, where stories disappear there is a loss of space: "...deprived of narrations [...] the group or the individual regresses toward the disquietening, fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct, and nocturnal totality." Even the oval shape and introduction of textured materials that recur throughout these drawings and collages seem to signal a break with the rigid geometry of the rectangle to encompass the world in its entirety, however elliptical it may be. Above all, collage enables a decisive break with the narrow angle of vision of western perspectival tradition in which subject and object are hierarchically located, introducing the possibility of a manifold space-time more congenial to the complexity of memory and experience.

The first 'Book' begins, for instance, in the 'place' of the artist, the studio. Referring to the activities of painting and writing, the pencil and ink drawings become more complex as collage elements — newspaper items, textured surfaces, pure inscriptions — are incorporated. The second 'Book', meanwhile, is composed entirely of coloured abstractions whose dynamic movement is reminiscent of Russian Suprematism. Whilst this particular moment in art history may have appealed to the artist because it represents the first modernist movement in which women occupied the field on an equal footing with men, it also introduces a pictorial space in which the 'figure' (in a general sense) is finally liberated from the gravity of the natural world.

Some rocks
thrown into the water
some sentences only,
the rest is
under streams
and reflections
in clouds.⑧

The themes that we encountered in the earlier paintings continue to preoccupy the paper works, oscillating between a despairing rage against the social wounds inflicted on women, as they are inscribed across the body, and the reparative dialogues between body, space and inscription, death and language. The liberation of material process in the 'Books' nevertheless opens the way to a plurality of new pathways, in which the world is contemplated from different perspectives.

One such pathway is 'Con-frontiers' (1996-), a series of small, wooden, glass-fronted boxes presented in an upright position. In the first group of the series, Power Lines I, II and III, each box is internally divided vertically into three by glass partitions; a black and white photograph of antique sculptures of women from three continents, Africa, India and Europe, (familiar 'trophies' of war and plunder in the western museum) presides over the more diminutive toy soldiers and weapons that command the foreground of the box. The exception is Writing is Silver, in which the whole spatial field is occupied by the fanshaped letter-hammers of an old manual typewriter. The use of glass serves a similar function to the window-panes depicted in the earlier paintings, or the use of grid-like materials in the collages which gain prominence in the recent 'Internettning' series as the metal mesh that covers the inscriptions on the work's surface: it defines and separates spaces, yet opens a conceptual passage between


them. Writing is Silver may be linked to two further 'boxes', Quoting Ibn Khaldun I and II, that develop the contemplation of writing and making. The colour photograph in the first of these two works is taken from a 6th century manuscript depicting a monk writing at a desk. Three small terracotta pots (yogurt containers for the refreshment of travellers at roadsides in India) contain various 'tools' for communication: pencils, fishbone, magnetic audiotape. In the second, the colour photograph is taken from an Arabic-Spanish manuscript depicting African chess-players. Here the pots contain raw materials for paint: chips of green Malachite, yellowish lumps of gum arabic and blue Azurite stones. In both works a short quotation from the 14th century philosopher Ibn Khaldun (an important influence in the development of the artist’s thought), referring specifically to writing and knowledge, is inscribed on the back. In the first:

To write means drawing and shaping letters in order to signify audible words which, in their turn, express thoughts. Words are the mould of thoughts. The vessels in which the water is brought from the sea may be of gold, silver, mother-of-pearl, glass or clay. But the water is the same.

And in the second:

Everyone can have ideas and be intellectually aware of which ideas he or she prefers or dislikes. No technique is needed for that. But the combination of words in order to express ideas demands a technique.

Throughout Everlyn Nicodemus’s work, writing, or inscription, alludes to the space of thought and imagination — an infinite, weightless space-time of immeasurable possibilities which releases the body from a physicality grounded by the disciplinary restraints of a social order that has actively worked to repress women’s self-realisation. From this perspective, the motif of the flat, formal grid that appears in various disguises throughout the artist’s work becomes symbolic of the disciplinary gaze of the privileged western Cartesian subject. Indeed, the somewhat pompous yet at the same time comical silhouette of a man that occupies the grid in 'Spaces' (1996-97) might be this very same Cartesian subject.

In drawing a comparison between two different philosophical perspectives on the relation between subject and world, that of Descartes and Leibniz, Tom Conley points out that for the former the material world is mapped out from the axis of a thinking subject in a space conceived as geometric:

...When the subject moves into space, it transforms one of the corners of the square or rectangle of its periphery into the site of a new centre, around which new extremities are established, and so forth, until space is conquered.

Whilst for Leibniz,

...everywhere the subject swirls in the midst of forces they [sic] exert stress that defines the individual body, its elasticity, and its bending motions in volumes that produce movement in and of extension…"

Descartes’ privileged, centred subject establishes himself and colonises the field, whilst Leibniz’ subject is, by contrast, unfixed, always susceptible to
changes wrought by shifting perspectives and relations. It is, of course, the former that comes to dominate the western point of view, the very same panoptical gaze by which the coloniser objectifies, identifies and disciplines the colonised body.

This has a particularly poignant resonance for a black woman artist seeking a space of action in a Eurocentric art world that despises as 'inferior' the modernist productions of 'others'. Addressing the issue of the West's relation to African modernism in several critical essays, Everlyn writes:

[Modern art producers from alternative cultures] are not only accused of being behind or of imitating the West but looked upon as naive and unable to play the
game according to the rules; they are thus, from the very beginning, dismissed from the field.\(^\text{10}\)

African artists are expected to follow the pattern of what the Eurocentric world nominates as an essentialist 'traditional' African art, while being deprived access to the global cultural capital that is, seemingly by divine right, the patrimony of the white artist. But the 'woman in the world' refuses the imposition of an identity that is located in myth-based assumptions of geographical origins, or of an art based in nostalgia for a fantasised past. "What is it, for instance, to be an African?" she asks. "It is something I know nothing about; or, at least, it is a thousand things. [...] My experimentation with thinkable identities — just as the handling of colours, forms, symbols — opens up a world to me.\(^\text{11}\) Identities, finally, may have less to do with origins per se than with the way they are subsequently negotiated with the encounters of lived experience. The artist, then, might concur with Fanon when he insists, "I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future. [...] In the world through which I travel I am endlessly creating myself.[...] I am my own foundation."\(^\text{12}\)

Over there on the asphalt
the language swishes by.
— Not ours!
— Not ours!
The silence of women
and the ocean
encircle the earth.\(^\text{15}\)

The question is, how does one found a place from which to speak and, more urgently perhaps, from which to be heard? What forms of aesthetic, ethical or political agency are available to those who, paradoxically, remain outside the city gates but inside the walls? Founding, as Evelyn's work shows us, concerns our positioning in space and language, and it here we must look.

In The Practice of Everyday Life, an exploration of the procedures in popular culture for evading dominant society’s disciplinary discourses, de Certeau makes a distinction between ‘place’ and ‘space’. In identifying the structures and practices that characterise place, he draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, defined by stability, territoriality and univocal procedures of which its inhabitants are largely unconscious. Bourdieu's habitus, along with his discussion of positioning within a possible field of action, is also the subject of an original critical analysis by the artist in her exploration of the structures by which the non-European artist is effectively excluded from participation in the habitus of the dominant art world.\(^\text{14}\)

For de Certeau, place delimits a field of power and is ruled by the law of the ‘proper’: "...the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions." Space, on the other hand, has none of the stability of a 'proper':

Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporarilise it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization,
transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts.\textsuperscript{15}

To activate space is to challenge the frontiers or limits of place; it is to mobilise Voice in the \textit{performance} of language (what linguists might call \textit{parole} as distinct from \textit{la langue}). Although there may be no escape from a language that is not one's own and into which one has been assimilated, what nevertheless makes a difference is its reappropriation, transformation and adaptation to \textit{one's own dimensions and rules} — a play whose ultimate weapon against the limit is laughter itself. These 'procedures of consumption', far from being passive, are extended forms of production, tracing other interests and desires than the system intended and insinuating themselves into its interstices so that, little by little, fractures appear in the apparent seamlessness of its discourses.

If I have in this essay contextualised the artist's work within the terms of western philosophical thought, it is because it is precisely with its more grotesque, inhuman assumptions that the artist's work does battle. Among the most pressing tasks Everlyn Nicodemus demands of us is to dismantle the western discourse of 'self' and 'other' with its consequent unequal positionings; to recognise, in fact, that these are not natural but constructed categories in which the 'other', like the 'self', does not exist outside the discourse that produces it. To recognise this, as the trajectory of the artist's work suggests, is to begin the reinvention of the self and its rehabilitation into a differently constituted communion of souls, a communion — profoundly ethical — that dwells without a 'proper place', yet moves within an immense space resonant with the sound of a liberatory laughter.

\begin{quote}
Giggles
tittering.
The heaven
is shaking.
Laughter.
And the clouds
bare their
teeth
behind
the spreading fingers.
— Women!\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

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This essay was commissioned by the University of Alicante to accompany the exhibition 'Everlyn Nicodemus: Displacements', May to June, 1997.
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