

From: *Anna Boghiguian*, curated by C. Christov-Bakargiev, M. Vecellio, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 19 September - 10 December 2017), Skira, Milano 2017, pp. 42-51.

## ***Possibly... He Was the Lamb. Anna Boghiguian's Expanded Book***

**Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev**

*To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was." It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.<sup>1</sup>*  
Walter Benjamin

Everything Anna Boghiguian makes is a book, whether it looks like a book or not.

She often writes on her painted drawings, executed on thick rough sheets of acid-free paper that she chooses carefully. A true connoisseur of materials, she knows that these sheets, usually from 190 to 300 grams in weight, are strong enough not to wrinkle once her work on them is finished. She frequently finishes them by brushing hot wax over them, so as to forge a layered, compressed, more translucent, harder surface. The result is encaustic tablets that appear very old and contemporary at once.

Each work on paper, usually the size of a page in a large book, belongs to a series that grows around a certain topic—the poet Constantine Cavafy's portrayal of the decadence of empire; the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's considerations on the eternal return of history and his critique of the bourgeois notion of progress; Rabindranath Tagore's enlightened view of decolonization. Sometimes, a topic echoes over a long period of time with other works, creating a series of series, like waves of recurring thoughts. These could be compared to a sequence of selected still frames, but they harken back to the illustrated book, itself an ancient precursor to cinema. Indeed, it is in what might appear a minor activity—that of book-making and book-binding—that Boghiguian's commitment lies. Such an activity might appear obsolete in the post-internet age, and yet is manifesting itself more and more at the core of the entanglements of mind and matter today. Boghiguian also cuts, and she does so in two distinct ways. Firstly, in continuity with avant-garde collage, she cuts out details from images found in magazines and on the internet and glues them onto her paintings so that drawing and photography merge into one single new medium, again reminiscent of a book. Secondly, she cuts the background out of her larger drawings in order to achieve lace-like images of figures that float in space. Here, the world our eyes see beyond her world merges with the drawing in the forefront. Her cutting emerges from the tradition of paper puppetry and popular theater. Cutting was a political action of great empowerment for the Berlin Dada artists, who criticized the rise of the financial capital that was to go hand in hand with World War I. In the wake of the rise of photography, film, and industrial reproduction of images, connected with craft and the "low" arts of childhood play and decoration, scissors became for those artists, as for Boghiguian, a tool that repeats the violence of modernity as well as a tool for radical emancipation.

From her beginnings in the 1980s up to today, Boghiguian has made artist's books. After her first bound books, their pages opened outwards like leporellos onto the walls of her exhibitions. Then

they became series of individual drawings that scrolled like separate film stills on a wall and finally, around 2011 and 2012, in Sharjah and in Kassel, she began to create installations of drawings, combining them into architectural structures and spatial arrangements. In these giant pop-up books, space is experienced as continuously folding and unfolding. Traversed by viewers, these installations become a form of expanded book, able to create an embodied theater of intellectual and aesthetic resistance to the remote, indirect, and mediated experience of much life in the digital age. To experience one of her works today means to turn the pages and read a book of life where we wander as characters and as readers, unfolding a folded universe with glimpses of knowledge.

A book is made of a sequence of pages, each bearing a part of a story bound to the content of the preceding page and anticipating the following. It is an object that offers a linear physical experience on the part of the reader, yet its story generally assumes the reader/listener's mental ability to leap forward and backwards in time, to recognize repetitions, patterns, variations, and constellations. Boghiguian tells stories of the past, assuming an authoritative truthful voice and harking backwards to see that which cannot be understood up close today due to our lack of perspective, distance, and honesty. The implied aim of facing backwards to engage with the making of our future's past—*jetzzeit*—could be to teach and warn us, with tools that Cassandra did not have, about the here and now, to see how past conflicts have generated present ones. This is what Walter Benjamin may have meant when he wrote in early 1940, during the darkness of European fascism and war, of a “messianic gaze” able to counter the chronicler of mere information associated with notions of naïve progress (then the newspapers and radio, now the internet and social media) with the history-teller (then the dialectical historian, now perhaps the artist). For Benjamin, the story is a unit of shared experience, a form of commonality imperiled by war and trauma. In his 1936 essay, “The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov,” he asked, “With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent, not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? [...] Never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.”<sup>2</sup>

In Benjamin's 1940 *On the Concept of History*, written shortly prior to his dramatic suicide in Portbou later that same year, the “Angel of History” is “turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble [...]. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.”<sup>3</sup> Yet in his *Addendum A* to the *Theses*, he opposes an active revolutionary form of history writing to passive historicism. He argues elliptically that the historian is able to escape this condition of the Angel by establishing causal nexuses that enable us to see through superficial teleological notions of progress towards forms of emancipation of consciousness: “no state of affairs is, as a cause, already a historical one. It becomes this, posthumously, through eventualities which may be separated from it by millennia. The historian who starts from this ceases to permit the consequences of eventualities to run through his fingers like the beads of a rosary. He records the constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. He thereby establishes a concept of the present as that of the here-and-now, in which splinters of messianic time are shot through.”<sup>4</sup>

When I first came across Boghiguian's work in Thessaloniki in the 2007 exhibition *Heterotopias* curated by Catherine David, and again in 2009 in the 11th Istanbul Biennial curated by the collective WHW, I was struck by her small A4-sized figurative drawings made of many marks. Unframed and pinned to the wall, they were as direct as a filmstrip. Rough-hewn and raw in their

draftsmanship, they seemed to convey an empathetic relationship with pain, an awareness of the billions of lives that simultaneously live on the planet in cities around the world. There appeared to be a story that I could not piece together or understand, and writing that I could not read. There was an intimation of meaning but no possibility of capturing definitive knowledge. I learned that they concerned Cavafy and Alexandria, his poems that looked at history and the decadence of the Hellenistic period in Egypt, a topic at the core of one of Boghiguian's early artist's books, each copy unique and hand-painted, published in 1997 by Fata Morgana, a small publishing house dedicated to artist's books based in Montpellier, France. Boghiguian's style appeared connected to the raw expressionism and multiple perspectives of radical early twentieth century artists such as Max Beckmann (1884–1950) or Hannah Hoch (1889–1978). Her drawings appeared out of synch with most of the post-conceptual work that artists were making at that time, as if a style and personality had suddenly erupted into the art world from the outside. And like an outsider artist, her work reminded me of the obsessively full *horror vacui* drawings so typical of Art Brut painters like Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930).

Over the following years, body parts appeared in Boghiguian's small works—eyes, the brain, a gaping mouth, the ear—and references to the non-human world of materials: bees and honeycombs, salt, cotton, waterways. In common to all the works, there is an element of critique and denunciation of injustice, the pain that political leaders cause through their decisions, taken without being in touch with the consequences they provoke in the daily lives of people and in the environment, “on the ground.”

When I finally met her in Berlin in early 2011, I learnt that she had trained in visual art, music, economics, and political science in Egypt and in Canada, and had studied art with the Egyptian surrealist-expressionist-abstract painter Fouad Kamel (1919–1973). The sense that she could have been an outsider artist but was not, was the strongest impression I had, and after visiting her in her Cairo rooftop studio later that spring, I invited her to participate in DOCUMENTA (13). She was a traveler, at home and in exile everywhere, an artist reflecting the conditions of the precarious subject of our post-industrial times: homeless (although she always kept her base in Cairo), performative, a skilled worker in her field, and always on the go. A keen observer and critic of the world and its differences, she was aware of every step she took. How deeply knowledgeable she was of history, of philosophy, of myths, how much she reads and studies, how much she surfs the internet for articles and opinions and how aware she is of current events and even of the goings on of the art world. How contemporary she is on the web, reading texts and descriptions and finding images that provide her with the raw material she is able to articulate at a distance—many stories interconnected through different moments of history in the world. Not ascribing to any specific religion, she speaks of the Dalai Lama, the cosmic ocean of wisdom in Tibetan Buddhism, a tradition committed to compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, contentment, and self-discipline through secular ethics and universal values whereby all humans seek happiness and not suffering; she speaks of the promotion of religious harmony and an understanding of the common core of all religions; and she speaks of peace and the conservation of the natural environment, of which humans are only a part, interacting with non-humans.<sup>5</sup>

There is a prehistory to paper in the ancient Egyptian use of the pressed and dried papyrus plant for writing. The macerated and disintegrated fibers that turn into what we today call paper, however, were first made in China and reached the West through the Islamic world in the eleventh century. With paper, culture and knowledge could circulate and thousands of books were created and collected in the Middle Ages both in the East and in the West. Paper was often made from recycled textile rags until industrial mills where paper was produced from wood developed in the nineteenth century. Every material, every pigment, has both a chemical composition and a political history, and

none are innocent. The history of materials is a history of trade, conflict, power, injustice as well as a history of inventiveness and the aspiration towards emancipation and justice. At the start of her work, in Egypt, Boghiguian bought her paper from the trash collectors who would produce it from rags, all the while teaching them to draw.

In Boghiguian's practice, one work on a sheet of paper leads to the next, and the next, and the next, in a prolific manner, like a voice speaking out boldly, conscious of there being few listeners. Astonished by the beauty of people, of places, of plants and insects, of small children, she is skeptical and vigilant, not surprised by how people often let each other down, betray each other, steal from each other, bomb and kill each other, rarely rising to their full potential. She makes images that turn into script in ways that are almost illegible, verbal language that transforms back and forth into visual imagery. Hers is a knowledge you cannot fully grasp; you see a little bit of it, you read words tumbling into phrases and catch glimpses of understanding here and there. Her works refer to a form of knowledge that cannot ever be fully constituted or held together as a form of power.

It is not her aim to make it hard for us to decipher the texts; she writes in a quick and sloppy way with a paintbrush in order to maintain a spoken voice, telling her audience about history. This is not storytelling in the sense of making up stories as fiction, it is always about *history-telling* and stories of human interactions. It is a return. In Boghiguian's view, history is one long chain of unfinished business triggered by single individuals, often anonymous, attempting a dialectical synthesis of conflicts that never seem to achieve their intended outcome. She tells us, for example, how one single slave could have triggered the slave revolt in Haiti, which somehow turned into the French Revolution, which in turn migrated into the American Civil War and then became the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Most recently she has discussed the Vietnam War and the Korean War as precursors of situations of conflict today, and she speaks of Charlottesville and the American Civil War. At each repetition of conflict, we are confronted with a new turn of unresolved history.

Boghiguian is a very social person, always meeting strangers and friends, talking with people and asking questions. When she draws and paints and waxes, she can be seated at a table with other people around. The activity of conversing seems to go hand in hand with painting and speaking. Yet it is when she is alone that she writes on her painted drawings, following an inner auralty, a voice that is speaking through the silence outside. In these text-images she tells stories of historical traumas that relate to wars and revolutions and to their causes according to a materialist historical perspective, and she speaks of the relationship between art and life against the backdrop of history. Perhaps out of a form of modesty, however, even in the case of her participation in *SaltWater: a Theory of Thought Forms* in Turkey in 2015 or as a representative of the Armenian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial that same year, she does not refer to the Armenian genocide nor to the stories of her family and how they might have survived it, emigrating to Egypt. On the occasion of dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, thinking of the waves of history and their interconnectedness, I asked Boghiguian to exhibit her work alongside *Leben? oder Theater?* by the late Charlotte Salomon (1917–1943) in the Museum Fridericianum because both artists had made series of painted drawings combining written language and painting that referred to interactions in personal life against the historical backdrop of conflicts. A Jewish-German artist born in Berlin, Salomon was murdered in Auschwitz in 1943 at the age of twenty-six, five months pregnant. Between 1941 and 1942, she created 1,325 gouaches using only primary colors. From these, she selected 769 for a work she titled *Life? or Theater? A Play with Music*—overlapping images with text and musical cues, exhibiting both artistic and cinematic references.

Near to Salomon's works in Kassel, Boghiguian created her *Unfinished Symphony* (2011–12), a grand installation exploring the roots of German Nazi-fascism in unresolved conflicts of World War

I and further back in the colonial period—Europe’s rape of the south of the world coming back to haunt the heart of its culture in the twentieth century. *Unfinished Symphony* was made up of sculptural and installation elements as well as over 100 works on paper exhibited in a unique way over holes cut into large panels of wood covering windows overlooking Friedrichsplatz, so that a form of non-electric lightbox was created as the natural light would seep in through the waxed drawings, shutting out the world yet allowing its light to enter. The work delves into the history of Germany, migrations, refugees, the cotton trade, and agrarian revolts.

While a student at the American University in Cairo in the late 1960s, Boghiguan wrote a paper on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), reflecting on the master/slave dialectic. Hegel’s analysis of the movement of history and the movement of self-consciousness as a dialectic of encounter with otherness and the ability to get beyond a master/slave relation appears prominently in her work.

On three early drawings referring to the ear made in 2001, Boghiguan wrote in a dreamy, personal tone, looking inwards:

*In the words that I collected and put away in / my thoughts were systems of reasoning or Dialects — / thinking — Methods, relation —> times / Words described who I am or who I transmit / To be through the sound system I build images / of cities unique to that particular city. That I / dream of [...] or remember in the depth of my / mind the sounds of a city, the song of a crow / makes India to me, yet the crow is everywhere / in each Country I visit, but the way the crows sing / in India is particular to that peninsula — From Ear to ear to eye [...] From ear to ear to / “They” ear-dropped into all my / Thoughts, my words and actions / They wove a story that made / Out of me a Criminal, but / What was The Crime Political / Social or Religious, or all Together / A Fabrication I threatened / Something, Somewhere to the established / Systems of politics That power that / Controls the system or everybody; life / I couldn’t throw Stones to the existing / System, as I cannot say I do not have / My own Sins — But neither can I relate / To the woven story of my existence / That I can’t recognize as I or i. The word created my mind images took meaning Stories was/is woven through the words that I have / the passage from the outer ear to the Land of my inner ear formulates a given description of a set of action lived: / through hearing i created or met the world by where my inner self, and created descriptions of the world within my mind. I stored the information necessary in my luggage — The luggage that i was born with. / the words i heard expressed / or explained to me what the world is about, and when I created stories in my mind I used those vocabulary that was given to me / In a world of silence there is no words, no singing of birds, or traffic noise, it is the Silence of lack of Hearing different from Silence, the Silence of Infinity.<sup>6</sup>*

For Hegel, a person can become a conscious subject, an individual, only when confronted with another who is also a subjectifying consciousness, and subjectivity is born out of this very encounter. In a master/slave condition, there is an imbalance based on the fear of the slave and on the master’s envy of the slave’s ability to produce and create. From this imbalance comes a tension and the slave establishes a position of subordination that allows the master to be a master, who is finally subordinated to the slave’s potential freedom. The master needs the slave to recognize himself as a master, so the master depends on the slave. Revolt is the impulse towards change and the emergence of the slave’s consciousness from the master/slave dialectic towards the goal of the ultimate balanced relationship between two self-conscious individuals.

Born in 1770, Hegel watched with enthusiasm the French Revolution unfold and was profoundly interested in the Haitian slave revolt (1791–1804), which brought the first successful liberation of slaves and the birth of an independent state of free citizens. He was fascinated by the concept of freedom and equality. He believed in a unified state, a synthesis of contrasting realities between individual and universal laws. For Hegel, history is thus not a series of random events but a dynamic evolution. It can be understood and its details explained through an analysis of cause and effect. While Hegelian in her thinking, Boghiguian has developed her own particular phenomenology of mind whereby she envisages the emergence of a new mind set as an embodied brain, an organ that will be able to transform only if it can become aware of its past condition of conflict. For Boghiguian, “Hegel’s dialectic is an image of the movement in history in general, a dialectic between an old brain and a new brain, and for the new brain to emerge, one must return to the old brain, which can be then transformed.”<sup>7</sup> Boghiguian does not see the mind as abstract but rather as an embodied brain. She paints body parts, the eye, the ear, the gaping open mouth related to barbed wire, an old brain shot through with pain, an ear alluding to our inability to hear foreboding voices of history.

Only by looking backwards and becoming conscious of its old superseded self can the new brain develop. Like Hegel, Boghiguian sees causes and effects everywhere and shares a perspective through which she believes human destiny tends away from conflict, towards the unification of opposites in a form of synthesis. However, in contrast to an early modern philosophical worldview that hinges on an idea of transformation and progress through the resolution of conflict, she sees humans turning round and around the same problems and knots in history, attempting to resolve conflicts but always evolving new ones. While revolt and the revolutionary impulse express the need for change and a new brain to produce itself, revolution and conflict are often based not on looking backwards in order to move forwards, but on an insane destruction of the past, as if a *tabula rasa* could resolve situations. This destruction of the past is both physical and mental, and catapults humans into chaos over and over again.

Boghiguian depicts people in power throughout history who make decisions to bomb or attack, yet are far detached from the actual incarnated experiences that occur as consequences of these decisions—the pain and suffering on the ground itself. She denounces this hypocrisy in her texts. In her language, she is the artist of the book. The book is her technique. You turn the pages of her books even in her installations, where she uses sails and cloths that fold the space. Once unbound, her book does not revert to being a large flat sheet of unfolded paper, but evolves as a complex structure, like the Beckmannesque multiple perspectives that appear inside each drawing. Her seventy notebooks and artist’s books are the core of the work. She remembers where each has been distributed, and challenges her audience to care for them. The book is the origin in the Mediterranean of our notion of painting; there were no portable paintings at first, but there were books in Mesopotamia, Jordan, Egypt, something that could be carried during travels, a depository of knowledge to be shared. Then the images came out from the books into the small triptychs that could also be folded and closed, and the paintings on wood gave way to rolled canvas in the sixteenth century with the rise of the merchant economies of Europe. The history of painting on the landscape, in caves or as fresco, or on the body is another trajectory, which differs essentially from our notion of what a painting is. So in the era of the explosion of the book into the complex web of the digital age, aware of the naïve and potentially catastrophic attitudes of those who would merely celebrate that departure from the culture of the book into a civilization of the bit, Boghiguian returns backwards to the brain that made the book in order to reimagine our relation to life and the world at this fragile turn in history.

While in Turin this year, Boghiguian researched Friedrich Nietzsche's time here, especially the fall of 1888, during which, like Benjamin writing *On the Concept of History* in 1940 just prior to his suicide, he looked backwards at his entire life and oeuvre through his short autobiographical book *Ecce Homo*, just before suffering a psychological crisis in January 1889 and leaving Turin. He never published again. We are also at a turning point—a tipping point where the impulse to be free and unchained, unbridled by bourgeois conventionality is at high risk, a time when the doors of history might be closing again. In this recent series of drawing-paintings, *An Incident in the Life of a Philosopher* (2017), Boghiguian writes:

*Nietzsche was not old / when one day while / walking the piazza / he saw a Horse / being beaten / badly by a horseman / it was so badly / beaten the horse / fell on the floor / Nietzsche ran to / rescue the horse he / fell as he assisted / cried the police arrived / and led him to the police / station on Pò street, / eventually, he returned / to his room, where he / stripped naked and went / into frenzy into a dance / of Dionysian nature, he / proclaimed that he was / Jesus on the cross, and he / took over his kingdom, / by putting the Pope into / prison and the / Kaiser of Germany. The landlady / heard the / sound of his / room, called his mother / who took him / to a sanatorium / and then home / that where he / died his / sister / Elizabeth / took / care / of him / it is possible / that his / “catatonic” state / was a way to reign / the world. He / played and composed / music during / these years / before he died / He was obsessed of / Eagles mating / Lambs, possibly / he was the Lamb.*

Boghiguian tells us this story of Nietzsche's encounter with and embrace of a beaten horse; of his compassion for the horse and his disdain for those of his time who were rushing towards twentieth-century modernity, towards ecological crisis, towards a notion of technological progress that, if unbridled by self-consciousness, could crash into the shards of World War I—as shortly thereafter it did. With her pencil drawings, her paintbrush, her pot of melted wax, her scissors, her written words, she asks us: weren't those moments with the horse actually the most sane moments in the life of an insane society?

*Turin, August 21, 2017*

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Benjamin, Thesis VI from *On the Concept of History* (also *Theses on the Philosophy of History*), 1940. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theses\\_on\\_the\\_Philosophy\\_of\\_History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theses_on_the_Philosophy_of_History), accessed 20/08/2017.

<sup>2</sup> W. Benjamin, “The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov,” in *Orient und Okzident*, October 1936; first English publication in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by H. Arendt, transl. by H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> W. Benjamin, Thesis IX from *On the Concept of History*, 1940, transl. by D. Redmond, translation used with permission, Creative Commons, [http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses\\_on\\_History.PDF](http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.PDF)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/three-main-commitments>, accessed 20/08/2017.

<sup>6</sup> A. Boghiguian in C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Notebook 40* (Kassel and Ostfildern: documenta GMBH and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> From a conversation with the author, July 2017.