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“The process of painting is endless.” The practice of Bracha L. Ettinger

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“The process of painting is endless.”¹ I would like to start with this note by Bracha L. Ettinger, found among her innumerable annotations intertwined with drawings, sketches, patches of color, words, word-images, short texts, fragments in the making or on the verge of vanishing, in the unquenchable and indefinable flow that is the very essence of her notebooks—the primary focus of this publication. As direct and seemingly simple a sentence as it may be, the artist herself, who quotes it to me along with other phrases as we get down to talking about painting, is unsure whether to define it as “an observation or maybe a lament.”² The reason why I’ve alighted upon it is because, in its polysemic openness, it encompasses the breadth, depth, and visionary nature of the entire *oeuvre* of Ettinger, or “Bracha,” as she prefers to be called as an artist.

Painter since her childhood, alternating between pursuing a profession as a psychotherapist and psychoanalyst and accepting herself as an artist, in what was a courageous personal decision, Bracha first publicly unveiled her painting in the early 1980s, at a time when artistic language was heading decidedly toward materiality and figuration.³ Her art, however, moves in a completely different direction. At its heart is a large number of notebooks: small, portable jotters in which she has drawn, scribbled and written. She uses them as an integral part of her life, alongside her meticulous, laborious and ever-so-slow output of oil paintings, which are also characterized by small proportions and reference a deep and private dimension. Over the years, Ettinger has developed and consolidated her work as a theoretical feminist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst, writing many texts of the highest academic value. Looking back at it from the present, I think it is possible to look at this production as an integral part of her artistic path and not just as an element intertwined with it. Whether one prefers to keep the artist separate from the theoretician, or whether one wants to bring everything back to Bracha the artist, there can be no question: Bracha blazes an untrodden trail.

Bracha’s key concept is the *matrixial*, which she developed since the 1980s.⁴ A symbolic space that redraws the formation of the human subject by looking at the prenatal condition, during which the becoming-mother and foetus interact, the *matrixial* goes beyond the phallogentric, oppositional approach that Lacan defined in his studies. Radiating out from the *matrixial* in the space that it opens up are further concepts developed by Bracha, who has invented an original, poetic, expressive vocabulary to convey them. *Metramorphosis*, *corpo-Real*, *transjectivity*, *transsubjectivity*, *distance-in-proximity*, *wit(h)nessing*, *carriance*, *borderlinking* and *borderspacing*, *copoiesis* and *proximity-in-distance* are just some examples of her neologisms and new syntactic constructs. Their disruptive consequences for thinking subjectivity, the object, the gaze and art are comparable, I believe, to the transition from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican system. Revolutionizing our way of looking at, interpreting, and questioning ourselves, others, the visible and the invisible, the *matrixial* offers new, unsettling possibilities for cultural elaboration. As well as moving beyond the frontiers that separate ego and non-ego, the *matrixial* continues to transcend oppositional structures and addresses

coemergence. We can only guess at the scope of Ettinger's thought, considering that computers, on which we depend in most of our active lives today, are for the moment mostly machines based on a binary system while the virtual space they originate involves coemergence.

To look at her theories as an expression of a wider artistic project rather than as a separate intellectual investigation is to acknowledge the profound value of Bracha's notebooks, drawings and paintings as a primary locus of her theoretical output. This does not mean that her paintings are conceptual; nor that, as one might assume, the painting's initial conception and formulation takes place in her notebooks. "The painting," Bracha explains, "is the birthplace of concepts, yet it is not conceptual. I don't think about what to paint, I'm just painting, drawing, and I take notes. Ideas will come out of it." Therefore, if her artistic project stems from the process of painting, this same process may be considered a "practice," a term that, I believe, most suitably sums up her form of active meditation, which engages the artist constantly and uninterruptedly, taking shape through its own development. Bracha calls it "artworking."

To delve into Bracha's practice, one might examine the specifics concerning the notebooks and the paintings, in view of the fact that the artist herself associates them with different forms of her unconscious. Even if Bracha uses the notebooks with extreme freedom, bereft of hierarchies, hopping from shopping lists to theoretical notations, completed drawings, and wholly germinal sketches, they are, literally, linked to the sequence of pages on which they are made, unlike the paintings, which are characterized by a stratigraphic structure. Layer by layer, the paintings grow upon themselves, composed in a multitude of drafts, using techniques that include initially collecting and processing archival images, employing mechanical means of reproduction like photocopiers. Whereas the notebooks mainly trace a horizontal development, the paintings are structured vertically, their depth intrinsically emerging from the physical overlap of each pass from which they are made, whether with powdered pigments or oil paint.

And yet, drawing on the artist's own thinking, her focus on what belongs to a condition of coemergence, the *matrixial* can also explain the relationship between her notebooks and paintings, the way in which they flow porously into one another. What we have here is, in fact, a relation of constant continuity. Bracha always carries her notebooks with her. When her assiduous painting practice becomes physically exhausting, as it does in the middle of the night, she turns to them to accommodate the natural continuation of her thoughts, whether formulated in words, images or a combination of the two. The dawn of a new day may return the artist to painting, but that is not always the case. This shows how the concept of time is as crucial to the notebooks as it is to the paintings. And yet, precisely because they are different forms of the artist's unconscious, the time may be brief, contracted, and defined—as is true of some notebooks produced during a specific month—or deep and extended—as is the case with most of the paintings, which, despite their small size, Bracha usually executes over the course of several years. A further area of proximity is the presence of "pentimenti" in both the notebooks and the paintings. The artist tells me that she never erases anything from her notebooks. If erasures and traces of words appear, they are to be perceived as an artistic intervention in the visual field. To Bracha, traces "are like waves in the sea. Like in a spiral, they move around elements and then transcend them." The same applies to her paintings: in what is part of a process that alludes to an infinite becoming, despite their infinity of layers, nothing is truly erased, and phantoms appear like a "memory of oblivion".

If, in its very nature, the process of painting has no end, in a sense, for Bracha—because it generates

theoretical thought, continues in the notebooks and then continues again on the canvas of the painting—I wonder whether it has a beginning. How does Bracha start a painting? The artist answers this question by telling me that she never begins with a blank canvas. By way of example, let's take the selection of works in the exhibition that this catalog accompanies: *Eurydice Nu Descendrait no. 2* (2006–13), *Eurydice no. 54* (2015–16), *Ophelia – Medusa no. 2* (2006–13), *Eros – Pietà no. 1* (2015–19), and *Eros – Pietà no. 2* (2015–19). Although arranged as series, these paintings have organic relations with each other. Focusing on female figures whose stories reiterate experiences in which love, trauma, *jouissance* and death intertwine, the works declare their proximity to the sphere of myth, siting themselves not so much in a location already inhabited by defined and formulated grounds, but rather in a space where they are in gestation, which is properly the *matrixial*. Like holograms suspended through the depths of time, Bracha's paintings never appear definitively. Continuing to emit their vibrations, their co-presence of light and darkness, before and together with the eye of Bracha herself, as well as of those who look at them, they perform a *metramorphosis*, understood both as an encounter and as a form of knowledge. Artist and spectator-participant are configured both as potentially “the one who heals and is healed.” In her own words, what happens can be described as follows: “healer-artist working through transmission of imprints and transformation; painting as object of ‘fascinance,’ contemplation and initiation intensive enough to care-carry the viewer; viewerlooking, being touched and being healed through the artwork, potentially becoming also the one who heals traces of trauma embedded in the painting—trauma of the feminine unconscious, trauma of war, trauma of the world.”⁵ As Bracha writes, the process of painting is endless.

¹ The notebook with the mentioned quote is published in this catalog at pages 46-47.

² Quotes from Bracha are taken from recent conversations with the artist over the course of 2021. My reflections on her work have matured over time, starting with my first encounter with her works at ICA – The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston in 1995, while I was working on the exhibition and catalog curated by Catherine de Zegher, *Inside the Visible. An elliptical crossing of 20th century art in, of, and from the Feminine* (ICA – The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, The Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrijk, Flanders, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London 1996).

³ The first public exhibition of the artist's works took place in the context of the collective exhibition *Lieux d'artistes, XXIIe Biennale de Paris*, curated by Egidio Alvaro (selection curated by Diagonale Espace Critique, 1982). Her first solo exhibitions were: *Visite d'atelier*, Studio Visits project, CNAC – Center Georges Pompidou project, Paris, 1983; *Bracha Ettinger*, Diagonale Espace Critique, Paris, 1984. In Italy, her work was exhibited for the first time on the occasion of *La Ville, le Jardin, la Mémoire*, curated by Laurence Bossé, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Académie de France à Rome, Villa Médicis, Rome, 1999 (catalog Académie de France à Rome, Villa Médicis, Rome and Paris-musées, Paris, 1999).

⁴ The artist has publicly presented her theories since 1991. A list of some of her main texts follows (with their first date of publication): Bracha L. Ettinger, “Matrix and Metramorphosis,” in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 4. no. 3, pp. 176–208 (1992), from the conference held at the 5 *Kunsthistorikerinnen Tagung*, Hamburg University, July 19, 1991; *Matrix. Halal(a) – Lapsus. Notes on Painting*, 1985–1992, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993; *The Matrixial Gaze*, Leeds: Feminist Arts & Histories Network, Dept. of Fine Art, Leeds University, 1995; *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006 (texts by Bracha L. Ettinger with introductions by Judith Butler, Griselda Pollock, Brian Massumi); *And My Heart Wound-Space*, artist's book published on the occasion of the 14 Istanbul Biennial, Leeds: Wild Pansy Press, 2015 (texts by Andrew Benjamin, Nicolas Bourriaud, Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Bracha L. Ettinger, Ruth Kara-Kaniel, Tina Kinsella, Griselda Pollock, Oded Wolkstein). The entire corpus of Ettinger's writings is being prepared. Today two volumes that collect her writings up to the 2000 have been published: *Matrixial Subjectivity, Aesthetics, Ethics. Volume 1: 1990-2000*, edited by Griselda Pollock, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020 and *The Matrixial Borderspace, op. cit.* The first catalog published on the artist was *Bracha Ettinger*, edited by Egidio Alvaro, Diagonale Espace Critique, Paris 1984 (texts by Catherine Weinzaepflen). Recent books on the artist include *Art as Compassion. Bracha L. Ettinger*, edited by Catherine de Zegher and Griselda Pollock, Brussels: ASA Publishers, 2011 (texts by Christine Buci-Glucksmann, Judith Butler, Catherine de Zegher, Rosi Huhn and Griselda Pollock).

⁵ See Bracha L. Ettinger, “Art and Healing. Matrixial Transference Between the Aesthetical and Ethical,” in *ARS 06 Biennale*, exhibition catalog, Helsinki: Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006, pp. 68–75; 76–81.