

Drawing Desire, or How I Feel Much Better Today Than Tomorrow

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Andiamo a Ostia. For this engaged amateur, writing for his artist friend, art is a passage from Rome to Ostia; a dropping of habitation and habit, a retreat from eternal busyness and seeming *dolce vita*. Through the works of Robert Estermann one is draughted to Ostia, Rome's beautiful unmannerly opening. Arriving in Ostia we are fresh paint; as the son of what comes about, everything becomes lighter and clearer, for the sun and the sea are always modern.

Arrivo domani. Happiness is either an announcement, *arrivo domani*, of its coming tomorrow, or the lingering memory of its visit to us yesterday. The happiness of anticipation is dreamy and aerial, like a wind; the happiness of remembering is reassuring and watery, like the waves on a beach. The happiness in the works of Robert Estermann is of the anticipatory kind, there is a suggestion that something is coming, that something will be happening, perhaps a *Left Hand Corner* (fig. p. 32). The sentiment is less that of the event of *événement*, than the coming of *avènement*. Like the authors of fairy-tales and romances, the artist succeeds in keeping his audience pregnant with anticipation. By this effect, the artist addresses the child within us, for it is the child who is happiest the day *before*, in anticipation of what will come; the parent is happiest the day *after*, in the satisfaction that disaster was averted. In matters of art, everything must look perfect, by unknown rules; such is the sentiment of *avènement*.

Urbi et Orbi, et ex-Orbi. Closed systems are either paradoxes or just appear to be closed. The opposite of real is illusion, not imagination. Hence art is never illusion, except by illusion, for art is of the real, an imagination of the real. Imagination is a circuit between the actual and the virtual, an exorbitant becoming-other, directional but not directed. Without art and exorbitant imagination, politics is a prisoner of our eye-sockets. Robert Estermann bestows us with some exorbitant eyes that we look again at how we eye, and collectivize, social and political issues. For democracy is not just the governing of the people by the people, but also a governing *for* the people, and, with Aristotle, a governing *to the advantage* of the poor.¹ The demand for governmentality² to the advantage of the poor is not exorbitant, for the possible is a temptation that the real always finishes up accepting.³

*Mo-mo-mot d'ordre.*⁴ Language is an instrumentality for getting what we want. Hence the basic utterances of language are not propositions and judgements but commands and slogans, and sometimes commands that we stutter. The command is the unsaid doing of what we say. Now thinking

pertains not to this commanding language, rather thinking is a practice of collective embodied memory. Art is a form of thinking, more incursive than discursive, and Robert Estermann's works can be understood under this aspect, as drawings and dispositions against the ordering oppression of language. With his drawing *Ladder to the Moon* (fig. p. 69), the artist suggests that the moon comes of age by our erecting a ladder to the moon that the moon's words can physically step down to us.⁵

The Doing of Art. The gestus of phantasmagoric capital has reached an apotheosis in the figure of Simon de Pury, the performance-auctioneer-artist. His materials are the names of contemporary artists, collectors' phone numbers, and a lifetime of looking at, and hence being looked back at by, history's – and Hegel's – “gallery of paintings.”⁶ So completely different are the materials and gestus of Robert Estermann's art practice; here the much more is a “mu-mu-much less is more”, silence is ensembled, and there is a heightened *Anschaulichkeit*,⁷ each work a crystal of an unknown event still to come, as in the drawing *Crystal (Whiteboard Series)* (figs. pp. 30/31). And yet there is a commonality of practice, a similar precision with which drawings and performances here, and auction-performances there, are dramatically structured for maximum effect. Only the effect produced in the audience is different; there the enchantment to bid higher, and here the arousal to imagine anew. Phantasmagoria works because speculative illusion is loud and vague, art works because it discloses a truth of existence. The questions for the 21st century are these: will we, the bourgeoisie, let everyone become bourgeoisie?, and if yes, how will bourgeois habits have to change?, and who might show us how much less is more? Memory is a roof, a ceiling of our thoughts, an ordering of time, incapable of producing anything new; the real world is thought unlimited, the unhoused, the space of imagination. In Robert Estermann's work there is still hope that imagination is a door handle which can unfinish history, that art can go beyond art. As in the closing passage of Samuel Beckett's *L'Innomable (The Unnameable)* (1953), “perhaps they carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be silence, where I am I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.”

D is for . . . The letter “D” is a kind of guiding thread running through Robert Estermann's recent work. In one *Gebilde* 8, “D” is for *Doors for Towelie* (fig. p. 60), in another, “D” is for *Distant Riders* (figs. pp. 89–103), and uniting them, “D” is for *D (Desire for People and Unity)* (figs. pp. 59, 60); together, “D” is for “Door Distant Desire”. Amidst the drawings is a dissemination of lesser “D”'s; *Moving through Space (The Great Divide)*, *Ladder to the Moon*, *Left Hand Corner*, *Two (Clouds and Shadow)*. In the drawing *Untitled (Making Small Circles)* (fig. p. 78), we learn from the artist that “Since I was young my desire was towards things getting round”; the artist strives to draw round circles, but “D”'s keep coming back. As a disseminating operation that implies actual or empirical non-presence, the letter “D” is a signature of the artist, and, as one drawing title suggests, it is a *Flat Signature (Signature without End)* (fig. p. 32).

Drawing Desire. Robert Estermann's installations are assemblages of desire, and they are drawings of desire in both the art-drawing and the attractiondrawing senses. The artist's Pantheon is populated by contemporary

working heroes, and through a lingering contemplation of his drawings and photographs, our own desires are drawn out, just as a face draws out a smile. And because these modern-day *kouroi* and *korai* rarely smile, we do it for them. The smile is the mind's orifice, an exit from whence everything disappears. What remains with us, to carry us back to Rome or out to sea, is only the feeling for the artist, a feeling of pure affirmation, "yes, I feel much better today than tomorrow."

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279b 4 – 10.

² Governmentality is a concept introduced by Michel Foucault that, firstly, expands the scope of governing to include self-governing, and, secondly, links governing with mentalities.

³ "Le possible est une tentation que le réel finit toujours par accepter." Gaston Bachelard, *L'Intuition de l'instant* (Intuition of the Instant) (Paris: Stock, 1932), p. 55.

⁴ From *mot d'ordre*, literally "order-word", a French term for slogan. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use the term to refer to the imperative function immanent to language; a statement both gives an order and produces an order. See Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp 75 – 89.

⁵ It could also be from the moon, and down the ladder, that indirect discourse is thrusting itself. Again Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (note 4), p. 84: "Indirect discourse is the presence of a reported statement within the reporting statement, the presence of an order-word within the word. Language in its entirety is indirect discourse. [. . .] My direct discourse is still the free indirect discourse running through me, coming from other worlds or other planets."

⁶ At the moment of the culmination of historical time, the members of Hegel's "gallery of pictures" no longer mean what they show, rather they mean what they mean in so far as they are admitted to the gallery. See the last paragraph of the final section, "VIII. Absolute Knowledge" from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807, 1910, English translation by Baillie).

⁷ *Anschaulichkeit* is a German word which could be translated as graphicness, but that leaves out the contemplative, and intuitive, aspects of *Anschaulichkeit*.

⁸ *Gebilde* is an untranslatable German word with a *Gebilde* of meanings, including structure, creation, formation, pattern, shape, figure. Within its sway is also the German word *gebildet*, with its old-fashioned meanings of educated, cultured, cultivated, shaped. Would the world be any different if knowing the right brands, artist names, and restaurants would make us not cool, but *gebildet*?

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