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The article is devoted to Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's 'Inferno' from 1958-1960. Instead of focusing on the allegorical or symbolic aspects of this project, the author tries to analyze the historicity that stems from the artist's specific method – or as the article tries to prove: quasi-technique – of "solvent transfer" invented not long before the work on illustrations and developed during its realization. The article discusses this method in juxtaposition with two important contributions to the discussions about the importance of the artist's technique for the understanding of his or her broader significance. The first is George Didi-Huberman's book on the imprint as a prototype for anachronistic reflection on art, the second – Jacques Derrida's essay on Artonin Artaud's drawings and his practice of "unsensing the subjectile". While drawing upon those two texts the author of the article analyzes various aspects of temporality implicated in the method of solvent transfer and thus also in the project of Dante's reading.

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(2013), My też mamy już przeszłość. Guy Debord i historia jako pole bitwy [We Too Have Our Past. Guy Debord and History as a Battlefield] (2015), Foto-konstelacje. Wokół Marka Piaseckiego [Photo-Constellations. On Marek Piasecki] (2016), Migawki z tradycji uciśnionych[Snapshots From the Tradition of the Oppressed] (2017), Chaplin. Przewidywanie teraźniejszości [Chaplin. Prevision of the Present] (2017), Lekcje futbolu[Lessons of Football] (2019), Azyl [Asylum] (2022), Wyższa aktualność. Studia o współczesności Dantego [Higher Actuality. Studies in Dante's Contemporaneity] (2022). He also writes a blog: pawelmoscicki.net

The Medium of the Present. Rauschenberg's Displaced Method

If there is one thing that surely connects artists from different epochs – that can bring closer, say, a medieval poet and a contemporary visual artist – it is the necessity to cope with the present and orientate themselves in the labyrinth of the time they inhabit. For no present is a simple object or a friendly environment, and no one knows this better than those who try to create an image of it. Robert Rauschenberg said in an interview: "I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, by the excess of the world. I thought an honest work should incorporate all of these elements, which were and are a reality."[1] How can an artist cope with the excess of the world? With what means is he able to bear the weight, complexity, and overwhelming power of the time in which he happens to live? Because the excess of the world is always an excess of time too, since the present in fact consists of heterogeneous elements from different temporal dimensions. It gathers together the relics of the past and the projects of the future, mixing them with whatever could be considered as actual experience. The "here and now," in this sense, is the name of the framework in which the excess of time coincides with the excess of the world.

On occasion, when confronted with the overwhelming power of their times, artists take a step backward and try to find an answer to the issues of the present in the archives of the past. Thus, they often return to historical precedents or try to use established and recognizable means of expression. This was certainly one of the ideas that Rauschenberg elaborated on in response to the excess of time he confronted when, at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, after a series of experiments with his *Combines*, he sought a new opening, or perhaps a new status for his art. Maybe that is where the idea of illustrating Dante's *Inferno* came from. But how exactly can the shadow of a great

masterpiece of world literature enable an encounter with the present instead of creating a shelter protecting the artist from this confrontation?

The excess of time – and this is clear in Rauschenberg's words – never reaches us directly, but always through a set of mediating apparatuses, through media that frame, shape, and distort it rather than simply making it available. The present is not only inevitably mediated but even hyper-mediated, and the more it is, the more technically advanced the society it concerns. Its excessiveness and inaccessibility are consequences of the degree of its mediation. In the face of this excessive presence, the artist is forced to invent a set of tools that would serve to shape the image of time on his account. That is why his main task is to invent a technique, or rather a quasi-technique. So, the invention of the artist would consist of the creation of a quasi-technique on the margins of techniques that he encounters and inherits in the confrontation with his times. Painting, photography, and drawing are never sufficiently useful by themselves in this encounter, but have to be animated by their particular and often idiosyncratic use, deformation, or questioning. Jean-Pierre Séris explains that the pseudo-techniques of contemporary artists are often based on the most trivial, insignificant, and primitive gestures, such as scraping, fingerprints, laceration, dripping, or action painting. "In fact, a significant portion of 20th-century art consists in deriding the technicality of art, professionalism in all arts, replacing the profession with casual and liberating humor."[2] Instead of "pseudo-," meaning "false," "feigned," "erroneous," one should perhaps talk of "quasi-technique" – "kind of," "as if," "resembling." This quasi-technique would be a displaced technique, a known medium functioning in an unusual way, outside of its common area of application. As Gilbert Simondon demonstrated, the perfection of the machine does not depend on the degree of its automation, but rather on the margin of its indeterminacy, its capacity to function outside of a scheme.[3] The

same goes for artistic quasi-techniques: their usefulness is proportional to their ability to absorb and contaminate other techniques, to make them available and question their limits at the same time. For, since the excess of time is partly the consequence of the degree of mediation, one is able to connect with it through the deactivation of the medium, through detours and deviations introduced into the repertory of available techniques.

Along these lines, Rauschenberg's solvent transfers create a space where – as Leo Steinberg put it – "the images – each in itself illusionistic – kept interfering with one another, intimations of spatial meaning forever canceling out to subside in a kind of optical noise. The waste and detritus of communication – like radio transmission with interference; noise and meaning on the same wavelength on the same flatbed plane."[4] *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* is a work of stunning complexity, in which the overload of time is reflected by the coexistence of the various visual procedures and narratives both underlining and blurring the relation of Rauschenberg's work to the *Divine Comedy*. Perhaps the best description of the general nature of this series as well as its technical heterogeneity was given by Jean-Pierre Barricelli:

> The XXXIV Drawings for Dante's 'Inferno' (1958–60) are basically rubbings: newsprints and news images wetted by lighter fluid and transferred, reversed, onto paper, the resulting impressions abetted by graphic media like pencil, watercolor, wash, crayon, gouache, and a few collages. The rubbed images can be strange shapes that acquire energy from the more clearly identifiable objects placed in their vicinity, but the composition remains heterogeneous, in [Rauschenberg's] own words, a 'random order' whose total effect is one of connected, and ultimately of cohesive,

> allusions directly (though not always immediately) relatable to the poem. In this manner, too, the XXXIV Drawings hang together by kinetic energy.[5]

Thus, in his work Rauschenberg organizes a multilayered response both to the complexity of his times and to Dante as a reference point that mediates the encounter. Using his quasi-technique enables the artist to effect "a clash of opposing registers and worlds: canonical authority and popular culture, ancient and modern, Christian and secular, structural order and improvised contingency."[6] Somewhat paradoxically, though, he proceeds not by quoting Dante in order to find a response to the excessive nature of the present, but rather by transforming the "ephemeral language of the contemporary American mass media"[7] into a set of quotations from the *Divine Comedy*. The "kinetic energy" mentioned by Barricelli could stem from this dynamic clash of different temporalities, in which the excessive character of both the present and the past comes into play. From Calvin Tomkins we know that Rauschenberg "never read more than two cantos ahead of the one he was illustrating."[8] Perhaps his work on the illustrations to Dante was in a sense a reconstruction of the poet's journey in a new era and in the new medium. Instead of simply illustrating the poem, Rauschenberg sought its quasi-equivalent, a resembling distortion that could open a way to draw himself into the present.

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But how exactly does the solvent transfer work? This process of image production was precisely described by Joanne Morra, the author of several important essays on Rauschenberg's work with Dante. "By soaking a torn or cut out magazine or newspaper image in lighter fluid, placing it face down on a paper, and then rubbing the back of it with an empty ballpoint pen, Rauschenberg was able to 'transfer' the image onto a sheet of paper."[9] The method was born in the early 1950s, when Rauschenberg used dry comic strips from newspapers and magazines, eventually

returning to the procedure in the Dante drawings while extending and refining it. Here, he used turpentine to wet the picture torn from the newspaper, and an empty ballpoint pen to rub against the back of the image.[10] The majority of the photographic images come from *Sports Illustrated* and *Life* magazines published between 1958 and 1960, exactly when Rauschenberg was working on the Dante illustrations. He never treated this method mechanically, and used it with all the freedom and subtlety one could draw from it. Thus, the images he transferred onto paper could coexist, and at times even overla p with one another. The artist cut them into pieces, accompanied by watercolor stains, colorful shapes, letters, scribbles, and arrows that at times indicate the direction of the image's kinetic energy.

Solvent transfer is, therefore, less and more than a technique, since it establishes a very specific coincidence of "indexical and iconic practice, mediated both in its prosthetic method and through the type of popular, mass-produced imagery employed."[11]

In her essay, Morra connects the transformative force of Rauschenberg's technique with the psychoanalytic notion of transference, closely related to the artist's body and its exposition in the drawings. The manual gesture of rubbing the back of an image is a way to transform oneself into a living medium between various types of visual narratives and – more importantly – between different temporal dimensions and their socio-political contexts. What interests me here is the more general (or more technical) problem of the status of the images constructed through solvent transfer. Their transferential character would relate to the process of the emergence of historical narrative or tendency, rather than to the way the artist's body could be inscribed into it.

The quasi-technique used by Rauschenberg endows the Dante drawings with specific quasi-characteristics, making them almost impossible to classify according to existing art-historical

vocabulary. Graham Smith, for example, compared Rauschenberg's illustrations with collage:

> As in collage, the transfer drawings are identical in size to the originals. Unlike collage, however, the images are reversed and the drawings are spectral, immaterial reflections of the originals, because the manual process of printing the images, by rubbing the backs of the photographs with an empty ballpoint pen, produces second-generation pictures that are seen through a veil of hatching."[12]

Are the Dante illustrations a kind of collage? Yes, but they are also a kind of drawing, a kind of painting, and a kind of visual atlas. Each such categorization includes only a small aspect of this complicated and heterogeneous series of images. Does solvent transfer change photographs into barely visible spectral and veiled images? Yes, but at the same time it brings to the fore their most crudely material aspects, making them "responsible" for the historical importance of the artwork. Solvent transfer is a trivial and non-artistic technique which, as Ed Krčma insists, does not correspond smoothly with the nature of the *Divine Comedy*. "The transfer technique enabled Rauschenberg to inscribe images of just such a varied cast of contemporary characters directly into the fabric of his drawings. Its de-skilled facture stands in dramatic contrast to the extraordinary craft of Dante's own poetry, the rhyming tercets, formal symmetries and internal consistency of which constitute it as one of the most celebrated and complex achievements in the history of poetic construction."[13] In Rauschenberg's work, a similar complexity is achieved through completely different – if not opposed – means, which defy any search for regularity or structural rigor.

Rauschenberg's illustrations are far from an attempt to sustain the authority of the poem as a cultural object and a venerable part of tradition; on the contrary, the artist seeks to expose the *Divine Comedy*, as he exposes himself, to the brutal and chaotic

dynamics of the present, with all its visual complications. The materiality of the process of transferring images from mass-media communication into the space of the drawing shows that the distortion of visual archives – the deformation of initial photographs and the poetic quality of literary references – is a necessary condition for the encounter with historical disarray.[14] In its epic journey through the lands of suffering, humanity has to find its expression in the form of a collection of remainders, remains, scraps of news, political events, sports stories, etc. This dramatic narrative, a spectral and material act of destruction, this tortured epos of contemporary culture which attacks the viewer with contradictory sensual data, denies any attempt to sustain the distinction between form and content, figure and background, etc. As Ed Krčma rightly underscored, the

> transfers should not be divorced from the connotations of their specific facture. Creative and destructive, handmade and readymade, material and spectral, careful and indiscriminate, iconic and indexical, manual and photographic: the transfer method allowed Rauschenberg to negotiate some of the most pressing contemporary painting and drawing, as well as to forge new relationships between art and everyday life.[15]

The transfer procedure is a proper act of transmission, which tries to connect the past with the present to ensure the continuity of historical experience. Thus, all the paradoxes of this quasi-technique are eventually also paradoxes of temporality. That is why, trying to describe the way the artist confronts his present, I concentrate here on the meanings and contexts of Rauschenberg's method rather than any symbolical or allegorical interpretation of his reading of the *Divine Comedy*.

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Rauschenberg made clear more than once that what interested him above all was not communicating a message through pictures, but rather entering into an experiment

with barely explicable phenomena: "The effort of the concentration of my energy on a message would limit me, and I prefer to go toward the unknown" – as he said in a conversation with André Parinaud, adding that: "If there was a specific message, I would be limited by my means, my ideas, my prejudices. What interests me is a contact."[16] The tactile aspect of image production was always intriguing for him, as evidenced by *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), a work in which the coming into being of an image is based on the gesture of wiping out a drawing made by another artist.[17] The same gesture of rubbing returns in the drawings for Dante's *Inferno* as part of the more complex procedure of solvent transfer, which eventually is about seeking the unknown, bringing images into a state of derangement.

Some critics have tried to present this quest as an attempt to replace the symbolic aspect of art with visceral and bodily experimentation. Helen Molesworth, for instance, claimed that Rauschenberg "desublimates the hand of the artist, allowing it to smear and rub, press and glue, privileging tactility over sight."[18] In the case of the Dante drawings at least, the question is much more complicated, since the artist does not build a hierarchy between tactility and sight or between the higher and lower registers of expression. The whole point of using the solvent transfer technique is to bind those different aspects, to make them work for one another. Visual form emerges from material contact, at the same time being constantly displaced, deformed, and blurred by it. And the more precise the tactile scrutiny of the archival material is, the more complex and ungraspable the images it creates. This paradox was pointed out by Rosalind Krauss, when she observed that the gesture of rubbing brings two different, if not contradictory, effects. Firstly, it consists of the fact that "individual images are framed, something heightened not only by the many found, internal frames within individual images [...] but by the numerous

rectangular elements collaged to the pages."[19] In other words, the pictures seem bigger in the transfer version thanks to the additional frames introduced by the very act of rubbing. Secondly, however, "the rubbing's visual blur promotes the sensation that the images are 'veiled'," [20] so it makes them look distanced, smaller, and less accessible. This pulsating rhythm, in which images move to and from the viewer, emerging from the surface only to sink back into it, echoes the kinetic energy introduced to the drawings by the tactile character of the solvent transfer.

In this contact, nothing is too simple. The solvent transfer has a lot in common with the technique of the imprint, only the object stamped on the recipient surface is not a physical entity or a body, but a picture torn from an illustrated magazine. Still, the literal and physical contact responsible for the reproduction is very similar. On the other hand, the very act of reproduction is not automatic; its automaticity rather comes from the repeated gesture of the artist's hands and not from a machine or program set once and for all to produce an infinite number of copies. This may be another important characteristic of the quasi-technique: to use obsolete modes of production in order to overcome the limitations of more "advanced" and technically refined ones. Rubbing the back of a picture with a ballpoint pen may seem very banal, but its effects – visual, theoretical, and temporal – are quite astonishing. The hand "released from the task of mimesis"[21] by the rudimentary work of rubbing – as Ed Krčma claims – is still a drawing hand, making visible figures appear on the surface of the work. Figuration seems like a side-effect of the brutal and meaningless contact of the pen with the transferred image – a precisely elaborated accident. It is an unheard-of drawing, in which the relation between the movement of the hand and the emergence of a figure becomes completely contingent.

The illustrations for Dante's *Inferno* are then quasi-drawings

and quasi-imprints at the same time, just as they could also be presented as quasi-painting. The coexistence between drawing and imprint seems to be the core of the solvent transfer invention and a key to the work's inherent dynamics. This is why it seems useful to juxtapose Rauschenberg's series of works with Georges Didi-Huberman's complex and extensive discussion of archeology, modernity, and the contemporary uses of the imprint technique. In his book *La resemblance par contact* [*Resemblance through Contact*] he discusses many aspects of this technique, which pertain to the demands experienced by the viewer and the critic in front of Rauschenberg's Dante illustrations.

For Didi-Huberman the imprint is above all – surprisingly, perhaps – a method of creating unpredictability. The supposedly mechanical act of the impression of one object on another in fact opens up a multitude of possible effects, most of which are not predictable or programmable. "Making an impression is then making a technical hypothesis, to see what it looks like, quite simply. The result is not short of surprises, obsolete expectations, or sudden openings of new horizons."[22] The hypothetical method is not far away from what I, above, have called a quasi-technique, which transforms a simple physical activity into something creating problems and concepts rather than simply producing a pre-designed object. Didi-Huberman calls the imprint both a process and a paradigm, claiming that it "combines in itself the two meanings of the word 'experience,' the physical meaning of an experimental protocol and the gnoseological meaning of an understanding of the world."[23] The same ambiguity can be spotted in Rauschenberg's solvent transfer, since it also provokes questions rather than answering them. It experiments with the method of representing visual material and, in consequence, with the representation of history in both senses – of orienting oneself in the present and deciphering the past heritage exemplified by Dante's poem. Thus,

the drawings for *Inferno* also – as with the imprint – multiply the possibilities of the form, which is never rigorously "pre-visible" but stays "problematic, unexpected, open."[24]

A second, crucial aspect of the imprint, extensively commented on by Didi-Huberman, is its ability to invert (or at least question) the distinctions organizing the discourse on art since the Renaissance. The imprint evokes the most primitive state of images, their origin from the most trivial act of impression. For that matter it also functions as if the montage of images and the creation of images themselves could be synchronic (since an impression both creates an image and is literally a montage of two objects) – as if the act of exposing and the act of creating the image could coincide (since in the imprint this distinction does not matter), and as if being and form could derive from existing in a structure (and not the other way round).[25] Another distinction that the imprint overcomes is the one between presence and representation, since in the latter there is the necessity of the former. The same goes for the opposition between realism and schematism, drawing from nature and reproducing a pattern: here the singular object is a matrix for itself – it requires literal reproduction and realistic rendering in the same gesture.[26] In the case of Rauschenberg's quasi-technique, the opposition that it puts into question in the first place is the one between indexical and iconic images. The pattern comes from a photographic reproduction torn from a magazine, and its imprint on a sheet of paper is made possible by the manual gesture of rubbing, which could be treated as a primitive or deranged form of drawing. Both media seem to overlap and evolve into a dynamic mixture. Every form – as Didi-Huberman wrote – is "reunited with a counter-form in the same apparatus of morphogenesis."[27] This paradox has deeper meaning because it touches on the relation between the uniqueness of the artwork and its mechanical reproduction. When it comes to the imprint, it overtly stages the inevitability of this contradiction and its unresolved

nature. As Didi-Huberman writes: "On the one hand, contact (or striking) guarantees the power of the one; on the other hand, generation (or emission) guarantees that this power is able to reproduce indefinitely – at least as long as a matrix exists – and above all not to get lost, not to dissipate in the dissemination it allows."[28]

Rauschenberg came to the idea of illustrating Dante's poem after years of experimenting with different usages of reproducible media introduced into painting in order to tear it apart from the inside. Here, the method of the solvent transfer functions as a technique of reproduction and a way to stop the process of an image's dissemination. It is the last imprint, since the photograph is no longer useful after the process of its transfer through drawing. The dynamic of the imprint starts with the uniqueness of the contact of two objects to be disseminated through the creation of a matrix, only to give room to contact again every time the form is used to create another object resembling the initial one. In turn, in the dynamic of solvent transfer, the initial moment is a gesture of selecting an image from the multiplicity of reproducible material. It is reproduced again only with the use of a specific, manual technique. Its journey ends in a unique picture, in which the reproducible photograph appears as an echo or spectral reminiscence. Physical contact, however, remains a crucial moment of this process, without which the whole circulation of resemblance would not be possible. If the imprint both celebrates and petrifies the presence of the real object, solvent transfer does the same to the imprint that the circulation of reproducible images leaves on viewers and the very tissue of historical experience. It points to another specter haunting the present, which comes neither from the noise of today's media coverage nor from any recognizable moment in the past: the awkward and obscure spectrality inscribed in every process of historical transmission.

The central concept animating Didi-Huberman's book is that of

anachronism, for the imprint does not complicate anything as much as it complicates temporality:

> What is the temporality of an object produced by impression? It is that of a paradox of an object, because all historicity seems to be forfeited therein. On the one hand, the object from the imprint refers to something like punctual temporality, which is not unlike the 'has been' Roland Barthes was talking about in his book on photography. [...] The temporality of the imprint shows itself there, equally indisputable and resistant to identification: it is very close to the phenomenon (it interests, as I said, the phenomenologist), but it is already very far from the fact (indisputable but unattainable, it irritates and lets down the positivist historian).[29]

Being intimately implicated in material processes and simultaneously defying any fixed temporal or historical location, the imprint introduces anachronistic temporality. Furthermore, the imprint "excludes itself from all the history of style,"[30] since it is just an impression of the real object, independent of any surrounding aesthetic conventions. Here again, solvent transfer proves its specificity. The movement of rubbing is the most primitive stage of drawing, and its effectiveness depends on it being devoid of any stylistic ambition. The cruder and blunter the gesture, the more clearly the photograph appears on the recipient surface. On the other hand, Rauschenberg's drawings are extremely expressive, and the transferred photographs seem to be set in motion. Style reappears from the contaminated nature of the method, from its incompleteness and openness. The specificity of this anachronism relies on the singularity of each appearance, each visual event contained in the illustration. It is material and rudimentary on the one hand, and intensely moving and allusive on the other. It comes from today and refers to the past, which – one must add – it does not resemble at all.
This impurity of historical experience is the subject of

Rauschenberg's work.

This is also how one could define modernity, which is not at all compatible with any linear model of history and progressive stylistic emancipation, be it of Clement Greenberg's or anyone else's origin. For the artist, as for Didi-Huberman, the value of modernity resides in its ability to "proceed by bold anachronisms, i.e. by assembling historical references that may be contradictory, but whose dialectical relationship [...] manages to form an original configuration, overwhelming because uninscribed in the axioms of the humanist art historian."[31] Rauschenberg's quasi-technique activates the same audacious play with temporality, in which it additionally implicates a literary monument from the past. Thus, fleeting images from contemporary mass culture suddenly gain gravity and start to comment on metaphysical instances or mythical episodes from Dante's poem. They do it in their ephemeral appearance, fixed on the surface of the drawing and changed into something monumental, even if that is just the trace of a particular event, a scratch of historical turmoil.

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Rauschenberg's insistent use of the solvent transfer method in his illustrations for Dante underlines the importance of the surface, which is no longer a simple background for figurative representation but an active element in the emergence of the image.[32] It is more important still, since it holds a dynamic encounter between drawing, photography, and painting, not to mention all the contextual dimensions referred to by the artist's montage. Joanne Morra even compared the function of the surface in those drawings to "the projected surface of the other (image/history/culture) onto the drawing as skin (ego)."[33] This intriguing interpretative trail, suggesting that Rauschenberg's drawings are in fact a series of experiments with the representation of his own body, has only one limitation: an excessive concentration on the autobiographical aspects of

Rauschenberg's work (not at all inexistent), thus blurring its wide range of interests and epic scope.

It is hard not to associate *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno* with drawings by Antonin Artaud and, more specifically, their interpretation by Jacques Derrida. Juxtaposing these can show both the intimate connection and eventual separation of the two practices exactly along the individual/collective axis. Although the importance of Artaud's theatrical project for a whole generation of neo-avant-garde artists in the 1950s and 1960s has not escaped the attention of scholars,[34] the same is not true when it comes to his drawings. Their fairly late discovery only strengthens the sense of their secret but effective complicity with artists such as Rauschenberg.

The essay Jacques Derrida devoted to Artaud's drawings revolves around the figure of the "subjectile" and the phrase "to unsense the subjectile," the title of the text. Like almost every other word, Derrida used the French verb *forcener* in at least a couple of senses, bearing a multitude of associations and overtones, in reference to the raging act of challenging the surface or the substructure. The whole point of Derrida's theoretical and literary *tour de force* is to show the inaccessibility of the subjectile, its irreducible semantic and conceptual flickering, which in no sense questions its fundamental importance and imposing presence in Artaud's drawings. What, then, is the subjectile? "Subjectile, the word or the thing, can take the place of the subject or of the object – being neither one nor the other."[35] In traditional art-historical discourse, this can be associated with the material substratum of the image or its symbolical background. But where does the former end and the latter begin? How to plot the line between these two dimensions? In Artaud's drawings – most often, if not always, combined with the letters to friends or public figures he sent from mental asylums – this difference is completely ignored or overtly challenged. That is why the subjectile starts to function in

Derrida's comment as a concept recalling the whole range of possible figures and roles that the welcoming ground of the image can assume.

Since there is no firm ground for the image, figuration changes into a sort of choreography in which the artist inaugurates conflict with all kinds of forces.

> Beginning by subjective, subtle, sublime, also pulling the il into the li, and ending with projectile. This is Artaud's thought. The body of his thought working itself out in the graphic treatment of the subjectile is a dramaturgy through and through, often a surgery of the projectile. Between the beginning and the end of the word (sub/tile), all theses persecuting evils emerging from the depths to haunt the supports, the substrate, and the substances: Artaud never stopped naming, denouncing, exorcising, conjuring, often through the operation of drawing, the fields and the succubi, that is the women or sorcerers who change their sex to get in bed with man, or then the vampires who come to suck your very substance, to subjugate you to steal what is most truly yours.[36]

This is a sample of the battle of nerves and senses unleashed in Artaud's drawings. It proves that what is at stake here is not putting one thing (the figure) on the other (the surface) in order to make a representative picture (based on their simultaneous dependence and separation), but a complicated play of forces and tendencies with no unifying principle. Instead of drawing, Artaud is forcing himself through those forces, challenging the surface/subject/substrate/sublime with his own scattered aspects, affective dominants, and introjected demons.

> I am calling spurt or jetée the movement that, without ever being itself at the origin, is modalized and disperses itself in the trajectories of the objective, the subjective, the projectile, introjection, objection, dejection, and abjection, and so on. The

> subjectile remains between these different jetées, whether it constitutes its underlying element, the place and the context of birth, or interposes itself, like a canvas, a veil, a paper 'support', the hymen between the inside and the outside, the upper and the lower, the over here and over there, or whether it becomes in its turn the jetée."[37]

One banal thing to be said among all those attempts to fill the figure of the subjectile with all possible meanings and associations is that Artaud constantly attacked the surface of his drawings, perforated it, burned it, and pressed with all his weakened forces, as if he wanted to provoke, lure, or exorcise some magic force contained within it. He treated the material ground of the image "as that which participates in the forceful throwing or casting, but also as what has to be traversed, pierced, penetrated in order to have done with the screen, that is, the inert support of representation. The subjectile, for example, the paper or the canvas, then becomes a membrane; and the *trajectory* of what is thrown upon it should dynamize this skin by perforating it, traversing it, passing through to the other side."[38] That is why Artaud's works – of a kind that that are both difficult and reductive to call "art" – are never purely visual, but contain necessary supplements in the form of letters, captions, subtitles, and the whole range of glossolalia resonating with the forces he discovered around himself.

The subjectile is also no longer firm ground because Artaud transformed it into a complex medium. It is the border "between *beneath* and *above* (support and surface), *before* and *behind*, *here* and *over there*, *on this side* and *on that*, *back* and *forth*, the border of a textile, paper, veil, or canvas, but *between* what and what? How can we enter, by perforation or deflowering, into what has no consistency apart from that of the between, at least unless we lend it another one?"[39] The intermediate character of the subjectile is again impossible to localize; it is not

even a frontier, but rather the air of clashing figures and planes; it is nothing outside the inevitably false and erroneous attempts to give it shape. The *tour de force* that Artaud undergoes in the most visceral dimensions of his existence, Rauschenberg initiates on a whole other level. The conflicting trajectories of affect and haunting spirits are replaced by various cultural, political, economic, and social tendencies filtered through the complex play with Dante's poem – once more a battlefield. The gesture of rubbing alone could be taken as yet another example of "unsensing" or challenging the surface, which responds with the cascades of images emerging from its flatness. Here as well, the whole operation of translating *Inferno* into the contemporary idiom is supplemented with single letters, arrows, divisions of the frame, etc. This playing with surfaces, the dynamic set of conflicted trajectories, provokes another medium to come forth. It is a battle of mediation, which intensifies instead of withdrawing for the benefit of cultural identity or consistent representation.

In his essay on Artaud, Derrida compares the figure of the subjectile to the concept of *khora*, taken from Plato's *Timaeus*.[40] It is a being of the third kind, apart from the division between things and ideas. It is a container of all things, allowing them to take shape without ever becoming visible as such. This indifferent, amorphous, indeterminate receptacle provokes furious attacks from Artaud, who tries to get rid of it once and for all, which inevitably changes into a series of recurrent acts of giving it new identities, shapes, and properties.[41]

> The subjectile is never literally what it is. We always speak of it by figures. You perhaps are thinking that, forcing the thing a little [...]. No, the subjectile has no history. It is what has no history, even if its name has one, for it never exists under that name. It is in any case what is made for, destined to have no

> history. The history, others would say the myth, only recites its tropes and the interminable permutation of its figures.[42]

Here, we get to the point of divergence between the intimately correlated projects of Artaud and Rauschenberg. It is not that the latter claims that the unattainable surface he challenges has a historical identity or a shape it could finally assume. Displacing the game of Artaud onto the general cultural level, Rauschenberg seems to find that surface in spite of everything, although "finding" here is just another way to express losing oneself in it. Still, the project of his Dante illustrations consequently traverses its own trajectory, chasing after the only proper name for this thing or space that cannot be reduced, neither to an object nor to any form of subjectivity; this something that eludes every name and every image, even if it provokes or calls for them all; this non-historical, undefined, at once most rudimentary and most abstract, most proper and improper entity, no matter under what name it actually functions. Its name is *history*. And its diminutive – no less problematic and nightmarish – is *the present*.

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1 Mary Lynn Kotz, *Robert Rauschenberg: Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 99, quoted in: Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory" (1997), in: *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge – London: The MIT Press, 2002), 125.

2 Jean-Pierre Séris, *La technique* (Paris: P.U.F., 1994), 253–254, quoted in: Georges Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte* (Paris: Minuit, 2008), 28.

3 See: Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact*, 34; Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode de l'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969), 10–11, 134–147.

4 Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism" (1972), in: *Robert Rauschenberg* (2002), op. cit., 29.

5 Jean-Pierre Barricelli, *The Conscious and the Subconscious: Rauschenberg and Dali Face Dante*, *Comparative Literature Studies* vol. 24, no. 4 (1987), 354.

6 Ed Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante: Drawing a Modern Inferno* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2017), 34.

7 Ibid., 34. In this sense, the Dante drawings are a continuation of the *Combines* technique. See: ibid., 35.

8 Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Picador, 2005), 144.

9 Joanne Morra, "Rauschenberg's Skin: Autobiography, Indexicality, Auto-Eroticism," *A Journal of Culture, Theory, Politics* no. 46 (Spring 2002), 54–55.

10 See: Calvin Tomkins's Papers, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York (IV.C.19), quoted in: Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 180.

11 Morra, "Rauschenberg's Skin," 55.

12 Graham Smith, "'Visibile Parlare': Rauschenberg's drawings for Dante's *Inferno*," *A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 32:1/2016, 77.

13 Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 55.

14 For the elaboration of this deformative aspect in Rauschenberg's work in the context of psychoanalysis, see: Joanne Morra, "Drawing Machine: Working through the Materiality of Rauschenberg's Dante and Derrida's Freud," in: *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*, eds. Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra (Cambridge – London: The MIT Press, 2006), 279.

15 Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 111.

16 Quoted in: Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge – London: The MIT Press, 2007), 267.

17 See: Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," 29.

18 Helen Molesworth, "Before 'Bed'" (1993), in: *Robert Rauschenberg* (2002), op. cit., 88.

19 Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," 114.

20 Ibid., 114.

21 Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 133.

22 Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact*, 31.

23 Ibid., 32.

24 Ibid., 33.

25 See: Ibid., 40.

26 See: Ibid., 47.

27 Ibid., 54.

28 Ibid., 72.

29 Ibid., 122.

30 Ibid., 123.

31 Ibid., 109.

32 See: Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," 113.

33 Morra, "Rauschenberg's Skin," 56.

34 Joseph, *Random Order*, 254–255.

35 Jacques Derrida, "To Unsense the Subjectile," in: Jacques Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Cambridge – London: The MIT Press, 1998), 61.

36 Ibid., 62–63.

37 Ibid., 75.

38 Ibid., 76.

39 Ibid., 71.

40 See: Plato, *Timaeus*, 49 A – 52 E, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1572/1572-h/1572-h.htm (accessed January 10th, 2020). Derrida himself wrote an extensive commentary to this dialogue in his *Khôra* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993).

41 See: Derrida, "To Unsense the Subjectile," 136.

42 Ibid., 139.

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