

The Drawing Center's

# DRAWING PAPERS

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**Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger**

**The Eurydice Series**

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## ...respicit Orpheus

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### i. some circles

In the eleventh book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice comes to its bitter end with a brief and intense series of overlapping looks and glances. Orpheus has been torn to pieces by the Maenads; his severed head, in a formal yet unbearable symmetry with the beginning of the couple's woes, is almost bitten by a snake that Phoebus drives away, and so his shade is finally freed to find his loved one. It speeds back into the underworld. The two are thus reunited after life:

Hinc modo coniunctis spatiantur passibus ambo,  
Nunc praecedentem sequitur, nunc praeuius anteit  
Eurydicenque suam iam tuto respicit Orpheus.<sup>1</sup>

Now, after death, Orpheus and Eurydice can go side by side, or one before or after the other; and he can look back at her, not as he was able to do before her first death, but in a new way, as he had been forbidden to do, but had done, in his longing to assuage her in their passage of escape from the underworld. Between a beginning in life and an ending in death, there is a half-life-half-death. A journey back, between death and a previous life, is staged as the condition to be remitted in the end, in the endless end of the afterlife; to be remitted in the fluctuating syntax of the look restored from all imaginable directions. As if it, the mere look, had become a general light, like the gaze itself.

And, moreover, after what a moment of destruction! The Maenads triumph over Orpheus' power to charm things and beings through their drowning of his sound. It is the condition for their murder of birds and beasts, their inflicting of unutterable mourning on nature, humans, demigods alike. The trees shed their leaves, the rivers swell with their own tears. A restoration in the afterlife is an abstraction, difficult to imagine in this excess of misery, an abstraction turned into representation only in Ovid's poetic procedures, in the uncanny scansion of his verse: At the very end of his story Orpheus looks back, at last, at what comes after the end.

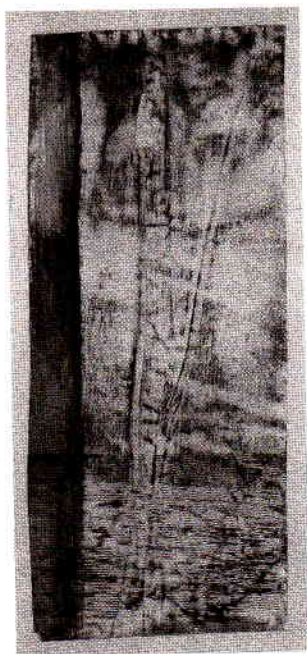
Only lyric poetry is possible after Auschwitz: "this impossible forgetting," as Christine Buci-Glucksmann puts it in one of her essays on Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger.<sup>2</sup> Adorno closes the stable door millennia after the beast has fled: The intricacies of the relations between seeing, life, and death in Ovid's poem, the layerings of trace and figure, warn us that deferred action indeed precedes its naming: After Auschwitz, Orpheus still sees.

If Lichtenberg Ettinger's *Eurydice* follows in the lineage of these mythologies—Ovid's, and for that matter—then her restaging is as much in the facture as in the figure: in the manner in which it works on us as we look, in the promise that look and gaze will elide one another, even as the figure is difficult to look at. Nothing is forbidden or foreclosed by the beginning or the end of some story, of Auschwitz, or of Orpheus: But this nothing, which is not forbidden, is

something before consciousness, before having looked at the work. It is neither a pleasure nor a threat. Rather it's a matter of belief: not a system of belief, nor a matter of seeing as believing, but of believing that you've seen.

In *Borderlines* (1999), an exhibition curated by Paul Vandebroek at the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, passing through the double sequence of Berber carpets, and, within it, through Lichtenberg Ettinger's exhibition *Artworking*, was an experience that remembers Ovid's after-life: It was that of an undoing, in one of the ways that art can be; not vertiginously sublime; not puzzling or perplexing, which are some lesser conditions of the sublime; rather it was appeasing, or assuaging; almost enjoyable, but taking the breath away, not sharply, but nonetheless, away, draining ... a relief from the responsibility to understand, in the gap between the figures and their shades, between the figurations of the Berber women in a design lay-out orchestrated by Zaha Hadid and the different densities of the shadows of Lichtenberg Ettinger's paintings, set out from the walls in their harsh metal frames. Indeed the framing of the carpets as of the works had an aspect of funerary severity which, an insistent repetition of the orderings of light and dark that between them freed multiple particularities of mark and thread to mingle with each other.

Looking at this Eurydice, Lichtenberg Ettinger's, positions us in Orpheus' aporia. Which is to say that either that image evades our gaze or, if we do fix it, we do so on the sole condition that it refuses our projection. Lichtenberg Ettinger's painting sometimes looks like this; I mean that it looks exactly like this, like something that refuses or redirects the look, but does so not by evasion but rather in making a mystery of the trace that it reveals, in making it unavailable as the screen for some possible projection or the symptom of an imaginary wholeness.



*Eurydice No. 16*, 1994–1996  
Mixed media with oil on paper,  
mounted on canvas,  
21 3/4 x 10 1/16 in. (55.3 x 25.5 cm)

Take the transitions between, let us say, *Eurydice No. 9* and *Eurydice No. 16*, and let us take them as if we knew little about them, their fabrication or their subject, as if their iconology had been forgotten, impossibly, in attention to their making, but their making also forgotten, as if it too had no significance, as if the photocopier were just one means among many. That is to say, let us take them without a certain drama of knowing and without the underdetermined gestures of revealing what we know tautologically in what we see.

How can we account for the emergence, rhythmic organization, structuring force, and disappearance of the sharp horizontal marks, the shape of fine brush-heads, the shoal of glazings, overpaintings, uncoverings, if not as things that both matter and matter not at all? To set out to decide how these metamorphoses suppose those of the figure, of the woman, of the women, of waiting, of turning to us and away from us, and also how they precipitate something in the space between one image and the next, which emerges from them as another figure of our seeing, is to define the object in saying "I will look at this figure and fix it there" or "I will isolate that meaning and arrest it here." And so, at the same time, it is to take on the risk of destroying the longing for the object. This is a conundrum, concerning the desire for a knowledge that solidifies the object and that which never coincides with it.

Thus the persistence of the face(s) and that of the marks are neither dependent nor independent, but rather both depend upon an accident of agency, the abstract agency of the swarming marks and the focal point of the figured gaze, *Eurydice's*, in their intended and accidental coexistence. Neither artist nor viewer is equated to the image, which itself is a faked or a confected site of agency, like transference. This is painting in one of its ways of working, and this making faces in Lichtenberg Ettinger's *Eurydice* is one of the things that painting does and undoes.

The tautology is cunning: overdetermination is of itself unavailable in any restaging of its motions, and that is what it is; but the tautology also contradicts itself, in its infinite openness—*respicit Orpheus*.

"He began by drawing..." is the beginning of an end insofar as it poses the image as a question of the past about the future.

As in Rogier van de Weyden's *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin*, here there is an imagined beginning of the ending of the non-representable quality of the divine and, at the same time, the beginning of a purpose or finality, which is to suspend the divine in representation. The very idea of a concordance between the eye and the hand is an aporia here in their determined separateness; the saint's vision is distracted between what he draws, the face of the Virgin at whom he does not look, and its devotional object, the child, that he regards askew, and adores, even as his hand fills the tablet with her image. We might say that the distracted and the devotional dis/engage each other so that the sign Van de Weyden makes is not iconic, but rather the tracing of a state or a condition and, simultaneously, a strange denial of the already constructed scene itself, baldachin, columns, figures, townscape, river, sky, and so on. To name the parts as painted, to follow the details of the painter's brush, to imagine the voices of the couple, their voice and look directed away from the act that is the condition of their being visible, is moment by moment to engage with a visibility, and a power over it, that Luke's founding gaze denies.

An art-historical iconography of this tale of representation would misrepresent it in this way. It would fail to realize that it is this determined thing, the scene, the narrative, the event, that,

despite itself or on account of itself, allows the gaze and object to confound each other. There is nowhere to look.

For, were we to take this work, Van de Leyden's, as being lay, that is to say as concerned with what the painter does, as in modernist painting's detachment from the object, then, as a substance of the artwork, in the very indistinctness that it generates, the work that this painting does would relate to that of Lichtenberg Ettinger's own work. The more so given that the Saint's perverse, dysfunctional seeing suggests that, in this scene of equal measure and measured calm, he is attending to a silence, or to an indistinct hush of voices, city, nature. Which is a way of attending to oneself.

Lichtenberg Ettinger herself listens as she draws and paints, her notebooks fill with words, images, and distractions during her practice as an analyst. Comments, reminders, ideas, and shapes, shapes that belong here, as they are drawn, and there, as they were already in her art, with an uncertain space between them that remembers this other space between eye and hand.

Like this shape, that might once have been the shoulders of a woman dressed, that haunts her work, a sign drawn free from its origin, to play, to settle, to drift, to signify now in the notebooks, now in another image, but that is neither a context nor a thing; it is neither an icon nor an icon's discourse.

This shape is something seen and something heard, copied, scratched, painted. It is not a concordance of two senses, but a separation and a touching of them.

What is this listening? What is heard? Is it the patient's voice or the scratching of the listener's pen? On a borderline between the two, it's a thought that belongs to neither, but only to the moment of its being shared. Because the work is a marking of this trace and at the same time a work of art; because it bears resemblance to the achievements of the unconscious and



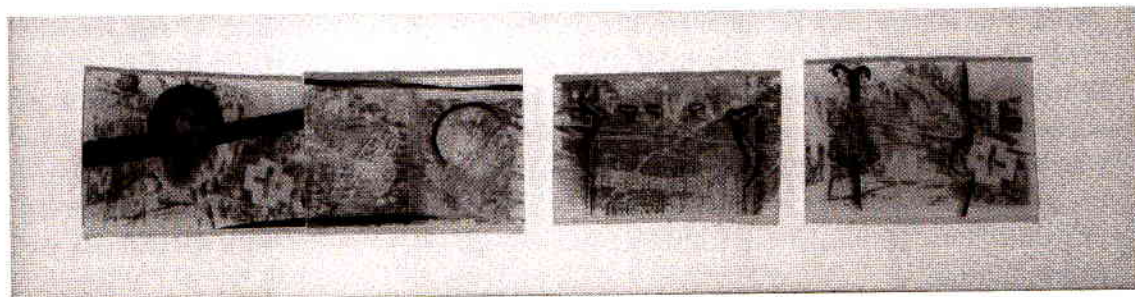
ROGIER VAN DE WEYDEN,  
*Saint Luke Painting the Virgin*,  
known as *St. Luke Madonna*, c. 1435-40  
Oil on wood, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

also uses the analyst's means of enabling the deciphering of its enigma; because, in the conjuncture, this always remains a mystery, the viewer assumes the position both of the patient and of the analyst and, in his or her singularity, falls between both functions as if this falling were the experience of the affect.<sup>3</sup>

27 But perhaps another image for the self-consciousness of modernity, which is, amongst other things, the recognition of the unconscious, is John Cage's anechoic chamber, the perfected figure of a self-reflexive musical narcissism, of narcissus as his own self echoing to itself. Lichtenber Ettinger draws on our narcissism, on the desire to recognize oneself, and asks us to go beyond it, towards a loss that is the loss of self, what Kristeva might call our néantisation, or the recognition of self-otherness, in the spaces between figure and liaison, between syntax, chora, and the thetic cut.<sup>4</sup>

Eurydice is a woman who disappeared, let us agree to this "fact"—but is it the painter Orpheus who fails to bring her back? Are the paintings the failed narcissism of echoing the painters' self in figuring the loss? Not, in "strictly" or "classically" Freudian terms, a primary narcissism, but more secondary; it is not a matter of the artist as an infant, nor as a fully pathological adult, but more one of a proper turning in on the self as the site for the staging of the image; as the place out of which the image is made to appear in the world. In a kind of art, an art of *Nachträglichkeit*, (deferred action) the political and the self resignify each other in a syntax and a grammar of reified illusion we name the work of art: Seeing the gaze is the evanescent moment of the mystical experience, for which only the preparation leaves a record, and of which the preparation is at the same time the trace. This is one reason why the extermination camps and Orpheus can occupy a common field of vision as an artist's work. Remember Orpheus who makes it to the underworld, and walks now in front and now behind Eurydice, and that the question of order and of looking back is resolved by the deferral of desire to the other side of death—the figural space of this resolution and of the object.

This might not, as we have usually supposed, be a matter of trauma but of the epistemic; that the two are not identical goes without saying; that the poetic form of a way of knowing might resemble trauma and need its trace is less evident. This seems important enough if one is to unload the resonance of trauma and abjection and allow the epistemic and the cognitive to be overdetermined, open to absorption and a loss of self that is assuaging.



*Family Album—Means of Transportation*, 1988–89 Mixed media with ink on paper, mounted on canvas, 40 x 160 cm.

In *Artworking*, picking away at the enigma of thought and work, of displacement and identification, of the making and ordering of concepts, Bracha's exhibition executed a mystery rather than an explanation. Or, rather, the affect was beside the point, a drifting rather than a point of discharge. Set aside from the manifest argumentation, from the particularity of the images or their source, it was more as if slipping into an emotional and intellectual atopia or suspense than being seized in a moment of sharply arrested focus. The juxtaposition and interweaving of the different kinds of surface (from photocopied and degraded paper to woven wool) the overlapping of text, light, and shadow, together, in the end, disabled the control of critical inspection, leaving in its place a certain inattention or distraction). The distraction of a loss, but not a melancholic loss; just of oneself, or the burden of feeling fully present.

Within the *Borderlines* exhibition, then, the transference became a metaphor for the loss of the "Cartesian" subject, in all its always and already hysterical fragility, insinuating into its place another mobile, attentive subject, which reveals itself intact only at the moment of suggestion. In Brussels I sat down and waited, as I am sometimes wont to do before a work of art. Like Rogier's *Saint Luke*.

## ii. some lines

After these irrational circulations of perplexity, I want to add a few straight lines to my discussion of this work. If you read through the catalogue of the *Artworking* exhibition, the essays devoted to the work of Lichtenberg Ettinger by Rosi Huhn, Brian Massumi, Griselda Pollock, and Christine Buci-Glucksmann, or Paul Vandebroek's *Azetta* study of the Berber weavings, which draws on Lichtenberg Ettinger's own writing to delineate or name the feminine in their handwork and traditions, a number of questions circulate and return in different ways.<sup>5</sup> In part these correspond to my experience, in part transforming it or contradicting it: But one way or another it seems that there is a consensus around them. They are: questions of presence and absence as much in painterly technique as in the semantic values of the images; temporality and the figured materials/signs in the discrete units and in their interplay between so many images, and the implications of these uncanny effects for viewing; the force of affect as beside or between rather than in the images; trauma and the inadmissibility of origin; the co-presence without hierarchy of the feminine and the phallic in the relations of the subject, the object, and the other (the matrixial); the audible and the visible in their imbrications and, by extension, the contiguities of seeing and listening (a matter of importance for the *Eurydice* series which forms the core of the current exhibition).

I want to acknowledge the richness of these essays without having directly engaged with them other than through the work itself. In that most closeted of relations with artwork that being with this work truly is, a certain reclusive formalism allows an affect to be written more adequately than would a critical debate. Lichtenberg Ettinger's visual works are of the kind where tracking the surface from one mark to another, and then from one fragment to another image, is already a project so ambitious that the constitution of an ensemble of whatever it is that constitutes the images as such leaves little enough energy to deal with the ambient discourse on them.

This is their warning for the art historical procedures of iconology.

The paintings have no iconography. Recurrence is not the same as icon, nor do traces have

specific names that tie their past and present, and this is a matter of historical and theoretical importance. Think, for example, of a passage in Vandenbroeck's *Azetta* when he is discussing the complex intercultural life of motifs such as the toad or the bull, and how much these unfixities have in common with some of the verbal and grammatical duplicities of Hebrew in mingling tense and number. Birth and the feminine, forgetfulness and anxiety for the toad in its transmigrations of meaning, the elision of "I am" with "I will be" in Hebrew, these refused designations take code and syntax away from any one.<sup>6</sup>

It is fateful for me then that Rogier van der Weyden's *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin*, my figure for the ellipsis between eye and hand, should have an a/effect I recognise from Lichtenberg Ettinger. This repetition of the character of the artwork sustains the aporia of recognition, because even as I identify her subjects in all their tragic and outraging historicity, I figure their affect in an altogether other myth. Here, there is no Jewish thought, or maybe there is the thinking of an unknown Berber's weaving.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, the reflections that have accumulated around her work position Lichtenberg Ettinger's painting and her writing at the heart of a contemporary philosophical reconsideration of the subject; the subject of enunciation as well as the subjects on which we focus our attention. And this is not so much a function of the anxiously late phase of institutional and rather formalistic poststructural or deconstructive thinking that dominates the academies and broader critical discourses today as much as it is that of a newly emerging consciousness of the necessary and desirable loss of rule as such, and of the decay of the regulatory power of syncretic quasi-systems.

Judith Butler's recent essays in the art of falling between Foucault and Freud, or in slipping out of a system of rigorous alternatives, factitious combinations, and over-easy *différance*, could be seen to represent this need for philosophical particularities that might refigure the subject out of its existing critical dissolution.<sup>8</sup> It's a matter of making one's way somewhere else, between times, objects, materials, and concepts, marking coordinates to arrive somewhere, rather in the way one made one's way through the "Borderlines/Artworking" exhibition, like a ship before the meridian had been measured, and clock-time set from it.

For, as it stands, the inherently eclectic character of what we call inter- or transdisciplinary cultural thinking, which makes a rigor of multiplicity, is liable to maim or to split the work of art that registers the trace, or the signs of traces, without inscribing them in finite *semèmes* or units of meaning that may be disposed of in one another of its many categories. Work such as Lichtenberg Ettinger's is too old to match up to such efficiencies, too old to readily articulate the representational demands of a completed gender or sexuality or of a cultural identity, though it derives from these; rather too old the way the unconscious itself is, in its formation before particularity, in its ancient strata, in its evasion of teleological meaning for the passing requirements of the simpler logics of the present.

It's old like Kant finding the rules as he goes along, only to have them blow up in his face, in the face of the sublime or the unattainable purity of the categorical.<sup>9</sup>

In the end, the question is neither one of the material (dust, paint, shadow, whatever) nor of its support (paper, canvas, perspex, wall), nor yet of its meaning; that is to say that it is not one asked to secure a teleology for the materiality of the image as an ensemble of relations that constitute it and its perceptual location (intention, social condition, moment, aesthetic

possibilities, etc.); but rather one concerning what comes before the image in its relation to what comes after, as the aporia of its being seen, or staged in vision. This aporia of seeing and seeing through at the same time, which is one rather like the “exploded” time of analysis, unpicks the relations between those aspects of the work, those names for apprehending its (codable) particularities, and is at the same time constitutive of the singularity of this work.<sup>10</sup> This is why, as work in the frame of psychoanalysis, it is not at all like work made to look like the discoveries of psychoanalysis, as was that of the Surrealists with their automatic procedures for example, or attempts to double-guess the appearance of the unconscious in dream form à la Dali.

Its newness resides in this then, in its refusal to adhere to a name, other than in the space where names fail, the space of deferred action or of the afterlife.

#### NOTES

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Books IX–XV (Loeb Classical Library, 1999), 124, line 60 ff. See Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 27, “Pour me laisser aller à quelque métaphore, Eurydice deux fois perdue, telle est l’image la plus sensible que nous puissions donner, dans le mythe, de ce qu’est le rapport de l’Orphée analyste à l’inconscient.” Translation from source cited above: Here now side by side they walk, now Orpheus follows her as she precedes, now goes before her, now may in safety look back upon his Eurydice.
2. See Buci-Glucksmann’s remarkable and beautiful essay “Eurydice and her Doubles—Painting after Auschwitz,” in *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Artworking 1985-1999* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts and Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000), 71–90.
3. For my thinking around this phrase, see J-B Pontalis, “ÇA en lettres capitales,” in *Ce temps qui ne passe pas* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1997), 96–121.
4. See Julia Kristeva, *Sens et non-sens de la révolte* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), for a discussion of *néantisation*. See Henri Meschonnic, *L’utopie du Juif* (CITY: Midrash/Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), 146 ff. “Le grammaire de l’écoute” may be usefully compared with Kristeva’s own discussions of listening in analysis.
5. *Artworking 1985-1999*, *ibid.*
6. Paul Vandebroek, “Idéogramme et code” in *Azetta, L’art des femmes berbères* (Brussels: Ludion/Flammarion, Palais des Beaux Arts Bruxelles, 2000), 173–235.
7. See Meschonnic, 87 ff. for a discussion of the problem of defining or designing a Jewish thought or a kind of thought being named as such.
8. For example, her *Antigone’s Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
9. See Pontalis, *op cit.*, for a reflection on Kant and Freud.
10. André Green, *Le temps éclaté* (Paris: Minuit, 1999).