

A paper given at *Painting/Looking* Symposium, during (*detail*) exhibition at Usher Gallery, Lincoln, 16 April 2015

His dizziness increased; he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious little patch of wall. "That's how I ought to have written," he said. "My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall."¹

The 'little patch of yellow wall' which held the gaze of the writer Bergotte as he dies in Proust's epic novel, is of course, iconic. The repetition of the phrase and the event within the context of the novel gives this detail great significance, which is not, as Miguel de Beistegui argues in his book *Proust as Philosopher*, because it is intended to symbolise the painting as a whole but rather it has the 'ability to draw within itself people, places and affects that are essentially heterogeneous'. He goes onto say:

A fragment can be a part that reveals the whole; it can be the microcosm of a macrocosm. But it can also signal a reality of its own, juxtaposed in relation to another, but not leading to a higher unity: a multiplicity of differences, or a set of relations, rather than a gathering of identities, or an organisation of units.²

This paper is attempt to think about painting from the point of view of painting itself, rather from the position of the external observer; it is a position that may itself imply a fragmented unity³. It is an attempt to get close to the thought that properly belongs to a specific painting. This painting *La Garganta de Albers, Las Muelas de Gaudi* (Albers' Throat, the Teeth of Gaudi) (2003) is one I have never seen but I have looked at its reproduction many times in my studio, and I have made many paintings based on my fascination with what I imagine it to be. The reproduction, which I come across as I leaf through the pages of a catalogue of his work, is effectively a fragment too; never its literal stuff of printed ink on a page (that feels glossy to touch) but an image always doubled by an imaginative space that includes memories of looking at other paintings by Usle in the flesh and by memories of putting paint on a surface myself.

In the centre, in the upper half of the painting is a motif, a copy of an Albers painting or a least it may be (for I haven't discovered which one yet). The motif recognisably belongs to

¹ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: The Captive*, (London 1996), p207

² Miguel de Beistegui, *Proust as Philosopher: The Art of Metaphor*, (Abingdon, 2013), p102

³ See Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, (London, 2000), pp166-167)

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Albers' Homage to the Square series of paintings which he began in 1950 and made during the final twenty six years of his life. Having said that it is upside down; Albers' squares gravitated towards the bottom edge not the top edge⁴ and the white border on the outside is unusual in Albers oeuvre; a copy of a reproduction rather than a painting, perhaps?

It's not 'a little patch of yellow wall' for it is an image in its own right but as a fragment of Usle's painting how might it '...signal a reality of its own, juxtaposed in relation to another...'? How might it relate to other fragments in the painting as a patchwork of pieces juxtaposed, stitched together; rather than a whole and continuous piece of fabric or a finished garment? If we go back to the title we might suppose that the other fragment has something to do with the architecture of Gaudi; eccentric shapes that mimic external features of his buildings. How do the Albers and Gaudi fragments come together, not to create some higher unity (Greenberg's properly instantaneous experience of painting), but as de Beistegui describes as 'a multiplicity of differences'?

I have been interested in this painting for the few years but like so many chance encounters with influential moments there was no clear reason for this that I can remember. Something caught my eye but *that moment* was not exactly chosen. The decision to write in relation to this painting was not made from a selection of alternatives; it wasn't made because I had something to say. That moment of sustained fascination became an opening and a challenge not to let it pass - to notice it – an interruption as if something from the outside broke the continuum of my purpose-orientated perception. A paradoxical moment, perhaps, when what was undoubtedly new and alien was also a moment of familiarity – a connection to on-going questions in the studio, no doubt, but also a chance encounter with what seemed to have been waiting to happen.

'Therefore Proust, summing up, says that the past is 'somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it.'⁵

If what grabbed my attention was what Proust refers to as involuntary memory then it was also beyond the 'reach of the intellect'; present in the material object of the painting or rather in its image on a page in a book, picked up, flicked through, pored over; present 'in the sensation which such an object arouses in us'. Not a conscious act of remembering,

⁴ The 'world turned upside down, perhaps?

⁵ W Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (London 1992), p155

involuntary memory is an unconscious remembrance. In a very significant sense it is, therefore, not the memory of lived experience but suggests the possibility that with every perception or lived experience there is an accompanying unconscious 'unlived' experience; a time that doubles that which we are aware of – a 'fold of the real' . Or to put it another way each perception produces a virtual image that was never present but which returns, at certain moments; moments of chance when there is no purpose or goal to achieve.

'By "involuntary memory" Proust understands something like those "unconscious remembrances" which, randomly triggered by some sensation, some spoken word or some encounter, arise from the very depths of our being and from the forgetting to which a wilful intelligence and a wilful memory, both orientated wholly towards practical action, would have condemned them.'⁶

It may be that Usle's decision to include a motif that copies an Albers painting was informed by the irruption of involuntary memory – that we can never know and, it is surely more relevant to ask how that Albers motif operates in the painting and how, in the words of the art historian Hubert Damisch, we can allow "ourselves to be educated by it"⁷.

To acknowledge the role of involuntary memory is to find a way to think beyond the image of the motif (beyond observation and what can be described) and to allow ourselves to be educated by what we cannot recognise. Although the motif recognisably refers to Albers oeuvre that is only a semblance. Following in Albers footsteps, Usle experienced, as a physical act, laying specific colours next to one another in a geometric format, he felt the reversal of the gravitational orientation, the reduction in scale; the translation of one picture into a motif or figure embedded into a picture of his own. The specificity of the motif is more intriguing than a simple visual image and a general sign for Albers. If we think for a moment about how involuntary memory differs from the conscious act of remembering then, as Proust reminds us, it is triggered by a sensation; we do not go looking for it. Active memory, on the other hand, searches for what it will recognise in the past and for what associates with what is current; it is essentially representational (so if we focus on the image as, say an ironic reference to Modernism, we immediately move away from the thought that belongs to painting towards the idea of postmodern appropriation). When involuntary memory forces itself into consciousness what returns is not the image of what was once experienced and which can be recalled and located in time; the irruption of involuntary memory is the return of the virtual past (which doubles the time of the present) which is not fixed (because it's not a

⁶ Miguel de Beistegui, *Proust as Philosopher*, (Abingdon, 2013), p38

⁷ Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, (Massachusetts, 1995) p162

representation); what returns is a sensation – a memory of feelings which remain a memory of the body...

I am not claiming that this memory belonged to Usle (it is 'unlived') but instead that involuntary memory becomes schematised in the work of art. This is an important methodological difficulty; the challenge being to locate, with reference to the painting, the condition of possibility for the irruption of involuntary memory, not through observation but by constructing something in writing; a schematic equivalent. So, it becomes necessary to use the tools of writing to produce another space; a metaphor, perhaps, for the painting, made in writing.

It seems appropriate to begin by using a figure that belongs to writing; the metonym. Roman Jakobson made a famous distinction between metaphor and metonymy in his essay 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances'⁸: the metonym being a figure of speech that operates through contiguity or context (the horizontal axis of language) and metaphor a figure of speech that operates by similarity (the vertical axis of language). Although this essay does not fully follow Jakobson's definition it does begin with the idea that the Albers motif operates metonymically by association with Modernism: its discourses and practices. It is a *part* of that history of painting/culture which it brings into the painting through a relationship of contiguity, by association.. Although what exactly we mean by Modernism is another matter, suffice to say at this point that Albers can be understood to exemplify utopian ideals about truth; the essentialism and historicism of Modernism and the pleasure of eyesight, perhaps. But these are generalisations and Albers work is quite specific. Importing the motif is both to introduce the specificity of Albers experimentations metonymically (i.e. by association all of the other paintings in the Homage to the Square series) and actually; as a formal arrangement of those experimentations: the rhythm of colours as they interact with one another across the surface, the chromatic interval between colours, the weight of colours, Usle's reversal of the gravitational weight of the composition. The Albers motif sits as a metonym in a position that mimics the reverse gravitational organisation of the repeated squares; to the top, in the centre. Its particular position (that mimics the central square of Albers' own painting) implies a repetition that extends the rhythm of the colours; that extends the rhythm of the intervals between different chromatic intensities, across the surface of the painting. Not literally but figuratively speaking, of course; for it is perhaps rhythm that Usle's painting draws out of Albers squares; rhythms that irrupt involuntarily through the coloured material stuff of the painted surface.

⁸ in Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Massachusetts, 1997)

Like a keynote the 'throat of Albers' generates the tempo and tone, the rhythm, the interval – the wind or voice of the work – an emanating rhythm that animates the 'teeth of Gaudi'. The sense of contraction and expansion which are made sensible by the quantity/quality colour relations of the Albers square are repeated across the surface as the intensity of the red punctuates/or is covered over by the scumbled white paint; the positive and negative shapes pulsate as if the breath of Albers were playing a tune on Gaudi's ivories. The Albers square operates as a pseudo centre (evoking but not engaging with the structure of figurative composition, and its compositional hierarchy) whose role is not so much to be seen but to displace vision and move the work of the painting along; akin to the role played by the goal of the game which is to set the game in motion and sustain play but which has no real value itself. On the other hand, Gaudi's eccentric facades, translated onto a two dimensional surface, amplify the structure of Albers' painting by creating the warp of a colour field with the weft of the interval which weaves in and out of the saturated picture plane. It is as if Usle's painting becomes a site for 'dispersing' 'Albers' rather than reifying his work as a completed object of art history: the fragment we call Albers (its image) both 'draws within itself ...affects that are essentially heterogeneous'⁹ but at the same time it becomes many Albers ('a multiplicity of vessels')¹⁰ a moment of dispersal that happens as a relation with another heterogeneous part. Rhythms, interval, forces freed from the form of the pictorial surface to play on the empty (devious) façade of Usle's painting.

If the Albers square is a metonym then the same cannot be said of the Gaudi façade, not least because the notion of the façade has possibly a metaphoric relation to the picture surface. It is interesting to note that the reference to Gaudi is implicit; in fact, without the title would it be possible to make such a connection? This lack of resemblance is significant.

In a lengthy and complex discussion of 'the art of metaphor' in Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* de Beistegui sets out:

...to show that , from a properly poetic perspective, one l'd qualify as onto-poetic, metaphor no longer involves comparison and involves resemblance even less...metaphor will turn out to be the transposition to the poetic level of an otherwise philosophical issue, namely that of difference. The distinctiveness of metaphor lies in its ability to present or schematise difference: metaphor is the sensible figure of difference, its poetic schema.¹¹

⁹ Miguel de Beistegui, *Proust as Philosopher*, (Abingdon, 2013), p102

¹⁰ Ibid, p105

¹¹ Ibid p76-77

I am mindful that it may be problematic to follow de Beistegui original and unfamiliar understanding of metaphor that he worked out in relation to literature, in an analysis of painting. However, let us continue by suggesting that the Gaudi façade does operate metaphorically in relation to Usle's painting; the idea of a "Gaudi façade" lends itself to or doubles the pictorial façade. But this is not to say that the picture surface represents the façade of one of Gaudi's buildings (although it's true that the idea of the flat plane of a building does resonate with the idea of flat plane of the picture surface.

However, de Beistegui insists that resemblance is not the condition for bringing the two terms of the metaphor together. As he says 'Metaphor doesn't reveal shared or common qualities' ...[but]... 'discloses another level of the real...that moves beneath the fixed world of genres and species'¹²

So, if it is not resemblance that brings the Gaudi façade and the pictorial façade together then what is the logical similarity that connects them? In actuality we cannot speak of the Gaudi façade as a fragment that operates metaphorically, alone, for it is the juxtaposition of the Gaudi fragment and the Albers fragment that creates the real metaphor (or to make an analogy with the concept of "arche-writing" developed by Derrida to denote that which is prior to the hierarchisation of speech and writing) arche-metaphor because it overcomes the opposition between metaphor and metonymy¹³.

Conventionally metaphor involves seeing the same in what is different¹⁴ . However the arche-metaphor and the surface proper are heterogeneous terms that cannot be compared. The arche-metaphor cannot be conceived of as an object (or a noun) for it operates as a *relation* or tension between two different, heterogeneous axes of the vertical and horizontal; the x and the y – the horizontal (contiguous) metonym and the vertical metaphor (substitution). In other words it is an *Idea*.

However, the question remains that if the two terms: the Idea of the arche-metaphor and the real surface of the painting, don't resemble one another what is the *logical* connection which binds them together? Let's imagine two planes which co-exist in parallel: the picture plane and the flattened plane of the arche-metaphor.

¹² Ibid, p77

¹³ Ibid, p93

¹⁴ And is not therefore temporal for it does not disrupt 'the ontological order that runs from the identity of the genus to the difference of the species'. p76

The picture plane: Just as the x and y dimensions of the picture plane are measurable and motifs, colour and so on describable, the picture plane, as an object of perception can be discussed; agreed or disagreed about. As well as being a real object, what is perceptible – the painting - is also a contraction, a memory of paintings' past and as such (rather like a species of animal or plant life) it develops through the codes and conventions which make up its 'genetic code', a history of observable, conscious decisions. Accordingly, this 'abstract' painting is an expression of that history, just like an animal or plant is an expression its history of evolution. The history of painting can be a history of many things, but if we accept the idea that history is not fixed but at certain moments (of encounter) the past is re-ordered then what past does this 'present' create? (Rather like Oedipus radically reinterpreted his past the moment the truth of who he had killed and who he had married was revealed),. But what I really mean is that (as this is a matter of discourse and not painting) a history of painting is created that is, not a formal taxonomy, but a history of discourse; dialectical terms that are structured by difference through opposition and which operate in discourse 'outside' the work; identifying characteristics and so on.

In parallel to the appearance of the painting (the literal plane of the picture perceived in the present) let's imagine situated the plane of the **arche-metaphor**. I will call this the plane of the past. It is the plane that schematises forgotten time; the kind of forgotten time that is not retrieved by an effort of memory but regained only by chance, through involuntary memory. (p51) 'It is a virtual state of time; a past that not actually been experienced yet'. The tricky question that has to be asked if we are to say something specific about the organisation of Usle's painting is how do the heterogeneous axes of Albers and Gaudi schematise forgotten time on this plane of the arche-metaphor? Is it actually possible to answer this question because it would be contradictory to discuss the Albers and Gaudi references as identities that we describe? We are forced to try to grasp the nature of the *relation* of these (differential?) fragments that is created through their juxtaposition. Perhaps, all we can say is that it is as if the irruption of involuntary memory is the moment when both Albers and Gaudi become different from themselves through the material object of Usle's painting; a moment when the "unlived" which accompanies each perception is able to return, distributed differently as it were in new relations, actualised as sensation. This moment is not a moment of comprehension but a moment of paradox where contradictions co-exist. It is a moment in which Albers becomes Gaudi and Gaudi becomes Albers; not to become homogenous and cancel each other out but (through an act of time) through metamorphosis; by connecting their difference they are brought together. (p93)

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How might this virtual metamorphosis displace/dislocate the perceptual object, the image of Usle's painting?

What is interesting about the choice of an Albers motif is that Albers' oeuvre exemplifies Modernism's withdrawal from the façade. The façade is the face which fronts a hidden complexity. In Old Master painting, such as Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, we can't see the back of Bacchus but we credit his mass to his façade on the picture plane. As the evolution of abstract painting put greater emphasis on the material stuff of paint the notion of the façade gradually diminished as painting was turned inside out, and expression located on the surface of the painting rather than behind the façade of depiction. So we could say that, in juxtaposition with Gaudi it is as if the façade has returned, both as a visual sensation of Usle's abstract painting but because Albers painting has become a fragment of Gaudi's façade.

Likewise, Modernist architecture turned buildings inside out, also diminishing the importance of the façade and, as Hubert Damisch has argued, replacing the facade of Baroque architecture as a sign of value with the architectural plan. The façade loses a fictive quality and becomes literal. Going against the grain, Gaudi did his own thing and developed an architecture rooted in an interest with the organic world. Usle's painting doesn't picture a specific Gaudi façade but the façade becomes pictorial, tied to the motif of an abstract painting synonymous with the picture plane.

It seems then that Usle's painting borrows the façade from Gaudi as a trope. In effect the façade returns; separated/freed from its function in painting (facing out to the viewer) to replace what Greenberg insisted upon as 'the integrity of the picture plane.' By replacing this insistence on flatness, per se, as the structural condition of abstract painting with the 'façade' (or rather 'facadeness' – the pure and empty form of the façade, its essence) created by the transformative power of the arche-metaphor, a different relation of part to whole is opened up – not one in which each part is subsumed by the overarching condition of the declared, continuous flatness that is 'the integrity of the picture plane' (synthesised instantaneously) but one in which the parts 'signal a reality of their own'; operating as elements that are part of something different.

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