

The letter A (and the Archivist)

Live in your finite collection of memories, carefully polishing each one.
Half a life set behind glass and pinned to cardboard like
a collection of exotic insects.
You'd like to live behind that glass, wouldn't you?(...)
You'd like to but you can't, can you?¹

Two game cards, two Aces of spades, two letters A, one Here and one Before.

Before all the letters (which, today, give their place to an orthography of dots, circles and balls) disappeared, these annotations composed notebooks that, over the years, recorded a complementary fabric between the images and the writing, between the line of the drawing and the drawing of the text. Two game cards – a gamble-**chance** – providing the material/letter that triggers the record. Glued to the wrapping paper of a “charcoal inkwell (Japanese style)”, they behave like ideograms, by contagion. In a manner similar to the image-based Japanese writing, they combine objects to produce concept: Here-Before, Before-Here (game cards never get inverted). In 1992, this was one of the notes that filled the pages/mementos of these books (diaries?) under construction.

The notebooks/books seem to accomplish the ideas for the construction of one of the many objects that are inscribed in it: “The law of the jungle – hungry books,” in which each **book** swallows the next, forming a chain of swallows, all in one, a good metaphor for Ralph Gehre's process and work.

For we are not dealing with **collections** that accumulate and from this accumulation form themselves as a work. We are dealing, rather, with metabolism... and with the construction of a minimum and **recurring** repertoire that creates signs (indexes) of the contents of the pages.

These records have existed, for some time, in the series “Poor Devils.” Incrusted on the artist's canvas or already liberated from the space circumscribed by it, images/collages of scraps appear, which create a dialogue with their genealogy and which, seen with the notebooks, bring on the most vivid memory of the birth of the technique, in the text of Apollinaire and in the works by Braque and Picasso. They recall a certain ACE of clubs that is recurring in the cubist still-lives... given: bottles, game cards, visiting cards, and... dice. From that moment on, by enthroning the wordplay in the artistic space (and by the consequent unveiling of the materiality of the letter, the work of the calligrammes² and of the collages), a perennial traffic establishes itself between the image and the writing, between low and high

culture, between the visible and the what is intuited, between what is disposable and objects of value (and this is always subjective). The condition bequeathed to the contemporary artist is, therefore that of collector, of decoder, of proponent of **enigmas**. And, of course, of progressively eliminating matter, in order to recompose it later – through the reinsertion in the expressive space or through a formed **version**³.

More than a collector, Ralph is an archivist. He organizes and catalogues the leftovers of days, which he collects, when they approach him. Some times, his collection is made through a photographic record: a thousand photos in dimensions of 10 by 15 cm, documents of precious “almost nothings” to be read as only one thing (whatever the composition chosen for them). Photos stored in piles inside boxes, which, when opened, reveal the whole, never a single image, never something to be recognized and catalogued as unique, different from the others. Less than the content, what is unveiled is the **method** of the recording: the minimal form, tributary to countless sources. The excesses are removed from the figurative line, which characterized his work. In order to store plenty, the annotations must become as concise as possible, almost schematic, almost a suggestion of form.

Until they become a **repetition** of patterns inscribed on the raw canvas – he is a painter and draftsman, and it is the method of painting and of drawing that the series developed in 2000 deals with. As well as with the writing of mute images. If we throw a quick glance at his India-ink on tubox, we see a writing without writing. It is there, it insinuates itself, but it is formed with an alphabet of a single sign: **the dot**. End of the period, end of the line, beginning of the supposition. The result is from the same logic path that produces the transparent painting of this same sign, or its appearance through the (almost transparent) painting of the background, which highlights it – its opposite, or the opposite of nothing. The minimal again... but sustaining itself (and being sustained) by the method.

In his last series, he deals with the name. His name, his signature used as raw material (and that is certainly the utmost suppression of elements!). Once more, it recalls the experiences by the poet Apollinaire, who before naming the calligrammes temporarily called them “lyric ideograms.” In one of them, called “*Cœur couronne et miroir*” (Heart crown and mirror), his name, in capital letters, appears at the center of the shape of the mirror, whose form is composed by words that say something like “in this mirror I am surrounded alive and real such as the angels imagine themselves and not the way reflections are...”⁴ The name materializes the supposed mirror image. And it stretches the imaginary construction that the specular image is. In other words, the letter gives body to the body, by naming. And it

causes a strange discomfort to the reader, who is faced, before the text (before the work?) with the signature... or with the authorship overlapping the work.

Ralph's new projects, wallpapers and stickers, also for walls, mirrors or other surfaces (for now), are prints of his name, in which they almost disappear because of the repetition as a pattern. Like the name that is repeated out loud repeatedly, it becomes deformed, becomes a distorted speech, becomes pure acoustic image. What is, logically, self-referential by excellence, a narcissistic exercise, becomes, through repetition, a process of the (un)known/recognized, of alterity, annulment through obstinate affirmation.⁵ It becomes something else... line and no longer name. The artist, now, begins a process (even through legal means) of freeing himself from his signature – that which gives him identity – so as to incorporate it to his work, as a raw material. And for this, another will have to develop, already destined to disappear... like everything.

It is a memento... like in a movie in which, in a conversation, Ralph told me about with enthusiasm: "Memento." In it, an amnesiac man tattoos his body with facts from his life. And he distributes around his room notes about basic actions, of which he is incapable of remembering (waking up between 10 at night and 8 in the morning "go back to sleep," if it is 8 in the morning, "brush your teeth"). Two photos on the wall define his condition: one is a scan of his brain ("this is your brain"); the other shows himself at his wife's funeral. On the body there is a tattoo of what is, at the moment, his signature (which he, however, cannot recognize): the triggering fact of his present state and what he can do to recover himself... But he will not be able to remember this either, which makes this inscribed body a pure letter, pure mark, pure memento.

NO is the tattoo/work – the heir to the "Poor Devils," a reflection of another "No" (work from the series)⁶ – inscribed on Ralph's left arm about seven years ago. A denial that is a mark. A memento that is, however, pure emptiness: reminding of nothing. Its status is that of a scar, the memory of a story that will never be remembered, but only reconstructed through fragments, vestiges... like the poor devils. After all, for an archivist of the world the inscription/mark/reminder has to be a NO, so that only the structure remains, the spot marked by memories, whatever they may be. For the carrier of his own memory (of which he abdicates as a narrative, in order to conserve its method of organization), the scar is a signature, it is **matter/letter**: NO.

The same issue is being pointed to... Amnesia, Apollinaire... the same as Ralph's. Here and Before have contingent meanings. As a last instance, we still have the letter... and its mark.

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¹ Excerpt from the character Earl's monologue/dialogue, in the short story "Memento Mori", by Jonathan Noland, which inspired the film "Memento", by Christopher Nolan (in which the character is called Leonard).

² The calligrammes were created by Guillaume Apollinaire as textual images, in which the sequence of letters forms the image to which they refer and demand a double reading: semantic and formal. The poet's research also brought an enlargement of typographic possibilities, in which the aesthetic of the letters was more important than the functionality of the means of reproduction. This research was contemporary with Cubism but also with Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism and Dadaism, all of which were involved with the idea of the textual image and of the image-based text.

³ In a text presented as a lecture, Ralph identifies four crafts of the artist: *the craft of survival, the craft of denuding, the craft of giving up, and the perennial craft of questioning.*

⁴ Loose translation from Apollinaire, Guillaume, *Caligrammes*, Paris: Gallimard, 2000.

⁵ In an e-mail sent to Chico Amaral, the artist talks about the choice of working on his name. After postponing a project that would treat insertions in stone as insertions in the human, as glances of the emptiness/real that haunts us, he describes his new project: "...I had drawn a few large pieces in marble, slabs of white marble with many holes, like Swiss cheese. (...)It's too expensive to talk to about emptiness, about what doesn't have its own body, about what completes itself in the gaze, in the imperfect, in the incomplete. The incomplete is too expensive. So I will speak about another identity. Not the one we form to remain upright, standing up. The other's identity, the one on which we put credit, the one that all speak about and recognize, the identity of the stereotypes, of the summarized personalities. I will talk about brands. I've invented several of logos with my name and I'm working on stickers for walls and for painted steel bars, impressions on leather and cloth, impressions of my name, of my signature..."

In the next e-mail he says: " I'm capable of changing directions and choosing between marbles, balls, holes, and names with the same ease. I believe it's all the same thing, since I am always speaking of only one thing. I'm happy with the finding of working on my name, this enigma of being a name, something that isn't pronounced properly, at the same time imported and a hick, a name people always get wrong, a name nobody confuses, but who nobody can spell either. Finding a look for this name, my name, assuming my name as a basic graphic image for my work is, more than everything, assuming my name."

⁶ In 1997, while I waited for some photocopies to be made, I found several reproductions of this "no" inscribed on skin: a photograph of part of the artist's name, without any other identification, besides the tattoo, being photocopied. The mark of anonymity.