Review of Hélène Cixous, (eds) Marta Segarra and Joana Masó, *Poetry in Painting: Writings on Contemporary Arts and Aesthetics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

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This is a collection of writings by Hélène Cixous on the arts, mostly recent, though supplemented at the end by two older essays, on the fashion designer Sonia Rykiel and the dancer and choreographer Karine Saporta respectively. Like everything Cixous writes, these writings are intimate, fragmentary, and resistant to linear readings. As the editors write in their introduction, Cixous responds to these works of art as a poet, as another form of poetry. Frequently, she has a personal relationship with the artist, and in each case describes what the art means, most profoundly and elusively, to her. There is a fourfold dynamic, from the artist to the art, and from Cixous herself to both. The writing thus has a dream like quality; one never quite knows where Cixous is leading us, and at each point she is talking about the most important things, while trying to communicate the often bewildering sensual experience of the artwork and the fantasies and metaphors it evokes within her. The writing is intensely aware and responsive to the interconnections between conscious and unconscious: "it's the mysterious person I am within myself and the person that writes that look at the painting" (p. 12). Like the art she looks at, hers is an analysis, both of the work and of herself as she looks at it. The paintings to which she responds are explorations, often in pain (p. 7), and dissident (p. 8), and provoke an equally intense self-exploration. The dissidence connects these works with Cixous' commitment to feminism. For Cixous, feminism evokes everything resistant to dominant phallocracy ("the animal, woman, the poet, the Jew, the deportees…" [p. 13]). It is the agent of transfiguration. She opposes the essentialism that reduces and limits women to "half the universal"; for her, woman, art, and feminism are about crossing, the ability, for instance, to transpose oneself into a man, an animal, a tree. This is exemplified by the painters and paintings she most admires, such as Rembrandt's Flayed Ox or Goya's Half-Buried Dog, with its suggestion of an untold story, the love, in Rembrandt, of women, young and old, the animal whose ribs form a staircase that leads to the mystery of life and death (p. 10).

The first piece in the collection is called "Spero's Dissidances," published originally as part of a retrospective of the American artist Nancy Spero's work in 2008. Cixous contrasts Spero's political paintings, particularly her spindly, cartoon like depictions of the horror of the Vietnam War, with her flying women, all of whom embody the hope embedded in Spero's name, and of whom the mythic archetype is Nut, the goddess of the sky. Spero rebelled, both against the exclusion of women in the art world of the 50s and 60s and against the dominance of the Abstract. She excites Cixous' sympathy because of her courage, her political honesty, because she "wants to shake us and drag us out of our somnolence" (p. 27) and take us to a world of dream-like possibility, where "cielle" becomes "si elle."

The next text, "Ernest's Imagic", is about the street artist, Ernest Pignon-Ernest, and in particular an image of Caravaggio's "Death of the Virgin" superimposed on a street in Naples. It is about the city, in its many incarnations, and the dead virgin-mother, who is resuscitated through the dreamwork of Pignon-Ernest's images. The magic of Ernest's "Imagic" is precisely the ability to make the invisible visible.

There follows the longest essay in the collection, on Roni Horn's exhibition "Rings of Lispector (Agua Viva)" (Hauser and Wirth, London, 2004). It is a subject close to Cixous' heart, since Horn covers the walls, floors and ceilings of the gallery with fragmentary quotations, in rings, from the novel *Agua* Viva by Cixous' favourite author, Clarice Lispector. Like everything Cixous writes, it attempts to communicate the sensation of the work of art, its multiple associations, in her mind as well as in the public world, and its mystical and apophatic aspect. Hers is a reflection on writing, reading, and the visual and tactile imagination. For example, she considers the history of rubber, with which the floor of the exhibition is paved, before discussing with Roni Horn the sensory and sexual significance of rubber ("It yields and does not betray. The elasticity of a body in love"), and its associations with the creation of Adam in Genesis. In the beginning, she says, man was pure rubber, before he was driven to frame and cover up his body (p. 48). Rubber is implicated in colonial exploitation and in the metamorphosis of vegetation into furnishings; it is imprinted with other languages, such as Quechua, and introduces us to another world (p. 47). But it is also a metaphor for *Agua Viva*, the living water of the book. In this water, writing is fishing: "a word fishing for what is not a word." Reading, similarly, is a process, that walks, runs, pounces, gets lost, stops short (p. 48). What the exhibition does, as Cixous shows through minute examples, is scramble the already hallucinatory world of *Agua Viva*, in which the dialogue of Lispector and Horn becomes a narcissus-like play of mirrors. In this play Horn takes the initiative; as the Echo, she reflects back the worlds of Lispector and Cixous. The tiniest part of the mirror reflects the whole (p. 67). This is one of the ways the composition is deconstructive, since it exposes the totalitarian fantasy of the whole. But the real focus is on the mirror itself, not on seeing oneself in it. The mirror is that which cannot be seen in the mirror, it is "the Nothing from which everything makes its way to me" (p. 67). Horn enables one to see the intangible, the word beyond the word, the silence and spaces between the words. Cixous devotes some pages to the paradox of touching the intangible, and the interconnections between touch, tact and taste in several languages. The rings of the title "Rings of Lispector" are not only metaphors, since they interlink different thoughts (p. 50), but they are "equivocal, dislocated," twisting in different directions, like Borromean circles, and magic (p. 62).

Another, very short, essay is dedicated to Roni Horn's portrait of Isabelle Huppert, which, Cixous says, deconstructs the entire tradition of portraits, by communicating the face, not the image, and is succeeded by one on Maria Chevska's alter ego Vera Kasmiach, in her exhibition "Vera's Room."

The next contribution is for Andrès Serrano's exhibition, "Shit" (Galerie Lambert, 2008), with its accompanying book. Serrano is famous for his "Piss-Christ", in which an image of the crucifixion is immersed in the artist's own urine. "Shit," a collection of 66 blown up photographs of faeces of various animals, initially repelled Cixous, she tells us, as it did Serrano himself. It breaks a taboo; through it Serrano confronts that which is most repudiated by us (p. 85). As the remainder, it is that which cannot be accommodated into our culture and language, and thus remains the object of fascination. As she does perennially, Cixous invokes the "unknown genius who wrote Leviticus" (p. 87), with its code of inclusions and exclusions; Genet, whom she sees as Serrano's precursor (p. 97); Derrida; Joyce, and, of course, Freud. Serrano is a "Honduran-Cuban version of the Wolf Man" (p. 89), whose immobile white wolves represent his turds looking at him. Similarly, the faeces in the gallery look at us: "immobilised during the brief, endless time of a dream, they stare at us and we don't see their eyes" (p. 89). As art, they are an anti-art, confused maternal matter, just as they stand for an anti-American dissidence, and the rebellious impulse that connects the expletive with the communion ("joint") of marijuana. At one point, Cixous compares the exhibition with the Ark, which preserves animality despite divine disgust (p. 103). The essay ends with catastrophe, the mountain of garbage after the tsunami, and with comedy: the "holy shit" of a priest, the "Freudian shit" of Serrano's psychoanalyst (p. 107).

The last essays, as I have already indicated, are brief and more varied. "*Inheriting/Inventing* with Jeffrey Gibson" concerns the Cherokee artist Jeffrey Gibson's reinvention of his inherited landscape, not as nostalgic return, but in "what remains to become part of the future" (p. 120). An equally creative return is Ruth Beckermann's film, "Paper Bridge," her documentary account of her family's story through the Shoah and of her grandmother's return to the lost world of her childhood. Beckermann's voice, which recollects the vanished past, is interwoven with Cixous' own fraught relationship with her German-Jewish mother, and their shared traumatic histories.

The collection concludes with Cixous' piece on Sonia Rykiel, a reflection on the relationship between clothing and women's bodies and also between herself, who hardly ever wears anything but pants and a top, and the world of fashion, and an exuberantly joyous impressionistic account of Karine Saporta's dance. She ends with words that could perhaps describe Cixous' book: "So the strongest spells work: by evocation, by contiguity, by propagation. The dance gets to me. I am touched, in the back of my mind, startled, as by one of Tsvetaeva's brutal poems" (p. 131).