

The blackboard paintings as lexicon and manifesto

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Intensity and sensation

Diena Georgetti's earliest works appeared as enigmatic, fragile chalk markings upon blackboard surfaces. With an irrational scrawl which sat awkwardly between hand-writing and drawing, Georgetti's alien texts arrived on the scene with an austere intensity which was at once existential, haptic and out of the ordinary.

The self-titled blackboard paintings employed a deliberately strange lexicon of German and Latinate words, oblique in meaning, yet redolent with associations. The bodily scale of the works, the eccentricity of the hand, the evidence of transcription and erasure, underwrote a complex play between form and content, presence and absence, which was both archaic and modern – of flesh and unflinching spirit.

Georgetti's evocative word-drawings drew attention to an inferred content, making the viewer work towards interpretation. At the same time, their arcane, corrupted language served to distance meaning, so that the works could be *viewed* as pictures, rather than *read* as texts.

Georgetti's paintings – whether the early blackboards, or her more recent amalgamations of marginal forms snatched from the modernist canon – are rarely illustrative or narrative, notwithstanding their largely figurative content and evocative titles. Her paintings make themselves felt as material objects, organic bodies, which reject the idea of the work of art as simply a representation of reality. Instead the work is presented as a new reality in and of itself, the painting as a machine, something which does – rather than signifies – things.

What is it that they do? One of her early blackboard texts provides a cue: *Realizzate die substanzen* 1992. One possible reading of this ambiguous text – for the words and phrases resist any fixed identity or singular meaning – might be an invocation to *realise the substance of things*: to register the visual qualities of painting at a deeply sensual level; to turn unintelligible figures into matters of fact and being.

The blackboard paintings achieve a synthesis of phonic, tactile, literary and visual resonance. They are an embodiment of pure sensation – understood in a Deleuzian sense – whereby 'it is the painter's task to make us see a kind of original unity of the senses and to make a multisensible figure appear visibly'.¹ For Deleuze, sensation is located within the object, within the work itself – 'the fact, the place, the event' – and at the same time oriented towards the subject, the viewer, for whom the work has its

affect – upon ‘the nervous system, vital movement, instinct, temperament’:

[Sensation]... is indissolubly both things, it is being-in-the-world, in the phenomenological sense. At the same time, I *become* a sensation, and something *happens* through sensation, one through the other, and one in the other’.²

By invoking such a reading, I hope to focus upon the ways in which Georgetti’s works establish themselves as independent autonomous entities, with their own life and enigmatic logic, whilst also acting directly on the nervous system, on perception. They are of the material world, and yet redolent with life’s mysteries.

In writing about Diena Georgetti’s work, I am chastened by the artist’s recognition that:

To describe the abstract inner world of a picture [...] is difficult because it’s already been described – as a picture!³

The blackboard format suggests a pedagogical context, and raw unmediated expression, reinforced by a formal proximity to the blackboards of Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner, and the faltering *écriture* of Cy Twombly. A related motif at the heart of these delicate, sensitive works is an appreciation of the vulnerability and instability of language as a carrier of meaning. Georgetti’s words and phrases fail to signify in a conventional sense, and resist being read in terms of the content/form duality common to philosophical understandings of art.

Georgetti’s early mode of drawing/writing is performative and corporeal, with bodily intensity and intention. By imposing bodily constraints upon the writing/drawing process – working with eyes closed, writing upside down, or with the *other* hand – the blackboard texts are a form of writing ‘unlearned’ and ‘denatured’, pushed to abstraction at the limits of image and language. Robyn McKenzie has eloquently described Georgetti’s psychoactive mark-making processes as ‘a spillage of energies, accompanied by a hypersensitivity, a demanding acuity of perception’.⁴

The blackboard paintings act upon the viewer. In their unpredictability, we sense their contradiction. We almost inhale the residues of dust that emanate from their surfaces. Their material texture conjures memories of learning, making mistakes, rubbing out and re-writing: ‘Re-awakening in us an awareness of the miraculous element in writing, her work rehearses the possible transformations of the everyday’.⁵

ENHALTEN ANALYSEN
PRACTISCH SPIRITUS PRIMITIV FUNKTION
OPTIMISCHER EVOKATIVE
DIREKT FORMLOS NATUR
ABSTRAKT PHANOMONE
KONKRETE ACTION

Collected together, the primal, anarchic energy of these philosophical life-forms realise, in the words of fellow artist Eugene Carchesio, ‘a darkened space of thought’ and ‘poetry of severe purity’.⁶ Looking back at these phantom-like abstractions, with their primitive manufacture and metaphysical questioning, Georgetti’s curious texts seem prescient, as a lexicon and manifesto for the artist’s subsequent work.

Devil in the detail and demons in the picture

The artist’s leap from blackboard to orientalist paintings of 1993–4 was unexpected, even shocking for some, suggesting a flawed modernity and retreat into graphic pattern-making. *The time of your miracle will soon be over* 1994⁷ saw the artist adopt the format of modestly-scaled Japanese-style paintings with narrative scenes in bold black and white outline. Vulnerable figures clad in oriental costume are subject to elemental forces, mountainous landscapes, lightening bolts and supernatural terrors.

News of the existence of the world 1994 depicts a woman seeking enlightenment from a scroll which unfurls from the sky. An arcane heraldry of organic and geometric motifs energises the painterly field. With a funereal countenance and allegorical force reminiscent of the Victorian Gothic, the woman is witness to harsh laws of nature, in a state of confused horror at the strange appearance of her world.⁸

With the force of nature, and free of habit and custom, Diena Georgetti’s art is intriguing for its complex, peripatetic nature; remarkable for leaps of faith and flights of fancy and freedom, as she moves from one style to the next – deviating back, forth, and sideways...

The artist’s embrace of multiplicity and difference is deliberate and technical, and variously involves processes of copying, collage, constraint, collaboration, and fantasy as a springboard towards unexpected, unconscious revelation. Where the blackboard paintings called upon aberrant drawing processes to refigure text as image, the series of ink drawings presented in her 1993 exhibition *The whitening of the recent darkness*⁹ employed a Rorschach-style method

of asymmetrical folding and printing to achieve involuntary compositions of impossible design, such as in *The flash that illuminated the fall* 1993. *Patent* 1999, a collaboration with Anne-Marie May, saw the production of paintings by Georgetti, and woollen latch-hook rugs by May, made by tracing and adjusting the work of the other into their own.¹⁰ Finding other people's art more truthful and trustworthy, and amateurism preferable to proficiency, the artist returns repeatedly to awkward, unnerving beginnings.

Georgetti's more recent paintings from the series *BLOK PLASTIK* 2006 and *The humanity of construction painting* 2006¹¹ are unorthodox amalgamations, polychromatic assemblages, which vibrate with art-historical memory. Forms from the margins of the art-historical canon – purism, vorticism, and obscure branches of British surrealism, for example – are re-staged in unique configurations, but never reducible to, and always independent of these precedents. Further incompatible motifs are added: a Pierre Chareau tapestry design from the *Maison de Verre*; home furnishings and decorative art from *Domus* magazines of the 'sixties and 'seventies; *haute chaussures* from Pierre Hardy; and jewellery from Schiaparelli; so that each painting is a sum of knotty parts, with devil in the detail, and demons in the picture.

For all the copying and montage, you don't find paintings like Georgetti's elsewhere. As a metaphor for displacement, and a means to uncover new ways of seeing and being, the idiosyncratic constructivism of paintings such as *I keep falling over, I keep passing out, when I see a face like you now that I don't think of you* 1998 serves to forge new connections, rebuild relationships and allegiances between different camps.

Stepping into other people's skin, re-assembling the art of others through her own desire, Georgetti seeks to make paintings which would otherwise be unknown to her; she seeks to become startled by a painting as it comes into being, so that the work becomes 'a revelation rather than a full stop'.¹²

Insanity is the best way to communicate your deepest felt truths

Art in general – and Georgetti's in particular – bucks attempts at definition. Just as soon as a new work, form or movement comes into being, achieves recognition or ascendancy, still newer works and forms will appear which make plain the redefinition of that which precedes them. And so the earlier work, on the brink of description and categorisation,

is rethought and remade afresh by its own consequences, which it can never predict.

Georgetti's is a zig-zagging, itinerant and marginal art which moves feverishly in patterns of variation and instability. Her paintings exemplify the close-range, haptic, tactile space (as opposed to long-distance, optical space) that Deleuze and Guattari saw as defining nomadic art, and its barbaric, Gothic and modern successors.¹³ Whole worlds are contained within these humble, sensitive paintings which harness and recreate the energies and mystery of being.

Insanity is the best way to communicate your deepest felt truths is the title of a work from 1994. It describes, perhaps, the ways in which Georgetti's paintings – 'pictures of a flawed seriality and a kind of awkwardness'¹⁴ – operate against the sovereignty of consciousness and rationalism. Miraculous for their utopian spirit, warped reasoning and strange genius, it is the self-declared awkwardness, perhaps, that keeps her paintings alive, as planes of intrigue; as a true sign of life, and struggle against death.

1. Gilles Deleuze, 'Painting and Sensation', from *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*, [1991], in Constantin V. Boundas, (ed.), *The Deleuze Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 187–192.
2. Gilles Deleuze, 'Painting and Sensation', p.187.
3. Dena Georgetti, 'On The Humanity of Abstract Painting', unpublished letter to Hamish McKay, 2002.
4. Robyn McKenzie, *Dena Georgetti: Dare la Precedenza*, 200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, 1993, n.p.
5. Robyn McKenzie, *Dena Georgetti: Dare la Precedenza*, 1993, n.p.
6. See Eugene Carchesio, 'Dena Georgetti: Rest de Kreatur', *Eyeline*, no.10, 1989, p.36; and, by the same author, 'Dena Georgetti', *The Boundary Rider*, 9th Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1992, p.108.
7. Dena Georgetti, *The time of your miracle will soon be over*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, 1994.
8. See Dena Georgetti, 'Artist's notes on *News of the existence of the world*', in an unpublished letter to Jenepher Duncan, Monash University Museum of Art archives. For an extended discussion of these works, see Judith Pascale, *Dena Georgetti: The Civilisation of the Abstract*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, 1994.
9. Dena Georgetti, *The whitening of the recent darkness*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 1993.
10. Dena Georgetti and Anne-Marie May, *Patent*, RMIT Project Space, Melbourne, 1999.
11. Dena Georgetti, *BLOK PLASTIK*, Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, 2006; and *The humanity of construction painting*, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, 2006.
12. Dena Georgetti, in conversation with the author, 6 May 2008.
13. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, The Athlone Press, London, 1988, pp.492–500.
14. Dena Georgetti, 'Artist's statement', in David Thomas (ed.), *PCP / Post Contemporary Painting*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2004.