

## The Hermaphroditic Image

*The forest has become austere as a tomb from the nocturnal presence of the unhappy hermaphrodite.*

— Lautréamont, *The Songs of Maldoror*

The drawing is one of great delicacy, the line seeming barely to graze the page, at the outer reaches of the visible. A girl with fetchingly cascading hair and small breasts is lying eyes closed on a mattress in disarray. A crumpled sheet at her feet and, falling to the floor, an oversewn eiderdown like one of those old Provençal bedcovers: anyone so inclined is free to linger over the tiniest part of her anatomy. Thick hair with a suggestion of an invasive plantlike pattern, as if this beauty has been sleeping since time immemorial. Firm breasts which evoke less the sensuality of the flesh than that, cold and smooth, of marble. Her long, slender legs marked off on the upper thigh by what might be a ribbon. Has she kept her stockings on? She is naked or – worse than naked – undressed. But what about this upright phallus at the junction of her thighs? A cock as stiff and straight as the body is outstretched, as male as the sleeper is female. Marble too, this cock. And not for nothing: the artist went to sculpture

for this fine priapic creature. More precisely to the famously ancient *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, second-century Roman, now in the Louvre. That's where she went for sure, except for one detail, a detail that speaks volumes about the art of Anne Laure Sacriste. For this drawing is no copy, far from it, but the outcome of a literal overturning: of both the hermaphrodite's pose and the effect produced. In the Louvre sculpture, what we first take to be a woman is presented on its stomach, offering the eye rounded buttocks, a supple back and a slim neck left visible by short, curling hair. It's only as we move around the work that we discover what is concealed by these desirable proportions, the androgyny that only a male sex organ, also asleep, abruptly betrays. Sacriste's hermaphrodite, by contrast, is lying on its back, hiding its curves the better to deliberately exhibit its erect penis. A straightforward overturning, then? A conscious choice, amid this fundamental ambivalence, of confronting us with the male pole where the artist of old disturbed us with a female posterior? A woman artist's choice? Don't bet on it. For where the sculptor made play with a duality – a face of both sexes, followed by revelation for the circling beholder – Sacriste confronts us simultaneously with two supposedly mutually exclusive genders. Breasts and male organ in one glance; and it is this collision, this perturbation at once violent and delicate of the gender boundaries, that makes this drawing emblematic of her oeuvre. Impossible here to plead, as in the Louvre, entrapment as an excuse for one's desire. This is no game of hide and seek, but rather a face to face intended for those who accept the ambivalence of their desires. For unmistakably, this phallic woman is alluring.

What the artist imposes on this ancient sculpture, and on those who look at it, is exactly what she inflicts – to use a term that conveys the violence which, in her work, is hidden beneath the mask of delicacy – on all the works of art of the past. For she ceaselessly feeds off the history of her craft, even if, in her case, tribute always takes the form of betrayal of a secret: a sort of owning-up. So when she takes Ingres as a point of departure and duplicates his pictures in black, it is not so much a simple exercise of replication as a way of making the originals say what their creator habitually hushed up, he who concealed the truth of his art behind dogmatic moralising. "Drawing is the integrity of art," declared the painter of the *Grande Oda-lisque*. In the dark mirror held out to him by Sacriste he becomes his own perversion. Not that Ingres, who turned out a few erotic drawings for himself, presents the Comtesse d'Haussonville as a sensual, liberated woman; but because here the portrait – and the shift to black lays bare the fact, just as the sex organ of Sacriste's hermaphrodite is laid bare – is much less a homage to reality than the product of a man's passionate love for his skills as a painter. Fascinated by his dazzling virtuosity as a draughtsman, Ingres uses his models to express his love for himself. And this is what Sacriste reveals in this reduction of his paintings to gleaming trceries on a black ground. A homage? Doubtless – assuming that Ingres would have put up with being unmasked like this.

And so Anne Laure Sacriste does not reverse, she unveils, proffering the dark and the visible sides at the same time. If her art is hermaphroditic, this is its way of juxtaposing things supposedly mu-

tually exclusive. And in doing so it does not render the ambivalent less ambiguous; at the very least it confronts the beholder with the ambiguity of his relationship with ambivalent things. In matters of gender or genre – sex or art – Sacriste is no believer in boundaries that constrain identity on the pretext of defining it. And if she enjoys turning the hermaphrodite on its back, she never hesitates to do the opposite, either. She's not the kind of artist you pigeonhole. Just look at what she does with Courbet. What a strange way of following in the footsteps of someone who, from *Les Sources de la Loue* to his snowscapes, revealed in the crudest possible way the measure of sex and blood to be found in any landscape: how strange to produce in their wake images that are deliberately slick – flat, stripped of all painterly texture –and black into the bargain! And yet there is nothing less toned-down than these pictures, which – because they are also haunted by another surge of memories: Böcklin, Friedrich et. al. – reveal how much of the calamitous can lurk in Courbet's supposedly life-affirming desire. As if her gaze could turn the painter from Ornans into a composer of nocturnes. Don't forget, Courbet was a Romantic before trampling all idealism in the mud; but it is always the self-portrait of *The Desperate Man* that is hiding behind *The Origin of the World*. Anne Laure Sacriste, or the return of the repressed.

Thus does she advance, in an endlessly renewed dialectic of unmasking and veiling. If the "black series", which she also calls *Mystery*, is the negative – in a quasi-photographic sense – of Courbet, as well as of Poussin and certain others who haunt her imagination, how are we to describe her *Paradis Artificiels*, works manifestly intended

as a further reversal – to white – of the black series? What is the negative of a negative? And where, in these negatives called "Mystery", in these pseudo-positives she also terms *Crying Landscapes*, does the revelation called in photography "development" take place? For the first thing that strikes you about Anne Laure Sacriste's work is that there is no way in. Or, more exactly, that the artist sets up a permanent tension between the feeling that you could maybe enter and the physical sensation of being kept at a distance: no choice but to stay outside. Because while the painter has a clear predilection for spaces one may theoretically enter – grottos, caverns, undergrowth, subterranean springs – her way of painting them means that if you get too close you'll end up banging into them, as if they were screens. Take a look at the photos in her catalogues showing her in back view, standing or sitting in front of her pictures. A reminder, for sure, of the way Caspar David Friedrich, one of the painters she has looked closely at, loved placing figures seen from behind in his landscapes. But where Friedrich put them there as connections, as ways of inducing empathy between landscape and viewer, Anne Laure Sacriste, who certainly no longer believes in restoring the lost oneness of all things, poses in front of her large drawings. In front, not inside, like one more obstacle to our ability to enter. But if she did let us in, would we still be forced to face the irreducible ambiguity of her art? If we venture too close to the hermaphrodite's torso, can we still see its penis? And distance, this confrontation with a vertical, impenetrable surface, which is pushed to paroxysm in the *Paradis Artificiels*: is it not the precondition for the lucidity demanded by her art? The artist likes

black, for sure, and milky white too, but she shuns blur, preferring a honed, incisive practice of line and tracery. Because here it's not a question of forgetting oneself, of getting lost in some shifting, comfortable space, but of attaining to a higher form of lucidity. The lucidity that lets you see the dark side of each thing, but without disregarding what's immediately visible. Artificial paradises, then, lit with the harsh light of truth. Not the lucidity the reference to the Baudelaire poems might seem to suggest – but the artist plays with literary references the same way she plays with the art of the past, turning them inside out like suddenly double-sided gloves – and not truth born of the ingestion of some illicit substance, but real actual paradise under artificial light, all the more paradisaical in that every shadow and every place where the ambivalence of things and people might be concealed has vanished. Sacriste's paradise is ambivalence looked straight in the eye.

So what do we see? And what do we call that which systematically seems to be both something and its opposite: this hermaphroditic world that maltreats language itself by breaching the principle of non-contradiction's tenet that no thing or being can possess a property and its antithesis at the same time. For in Sacriste's world a thing is not first black then white, a landscape is not attainable then inaccessible, a work is not seductive then repulsive. No, in this world everything is black and white simultaneously, seducing and repelling at the same time. This singular state of affairs, in which contraries unite without their irreducibility ever dissolving into nothing, finds its most powerful expression so far in the *Crying Landscapes*. How then are we

to speak of it without calling up contradictory pairs of terms and stressing, in each case, that each term is just as relevant as the one it is associated with? Then, of course, we can point to the form this takes, all these roots and tubers whose proliferation invades the entire surface. But in the same way we have to acknowledge the abstract power of these strange runs – negative, white, reserved – that storm the surface like some irresistible force for deletion. Works that are saturated, but voided too, like textureless drippings, flat paintings.

For here everything, including her way of painting, is driven by a kind of dialectical demon that unflaggingly summons same and opposite, so as to squeeze out the tension of their contradistinction. Painting, for Sacriste, springs from the confrontation between contradictory poles, like an electric arc. And so the *Paradis Artificiels* are like substanceless gushings, in which the artist devotes all her strength to squeezing out the white that deletes instead of the colour that covers. If these landscapes are crying, what is there in their tears that renders their surfaces so delicately nacreous?

Fundamental to the oeuvre is a kind of rejoicing in impurity. A kind of way of escaping everything that ties you down, renders you describable, situates you, puts you away in a drawer in the art history archives (and most of all in those good old modern categories). All of Anne Laure Sacriste's art is a sort of overturning of Formalism and its purity fantasy. To Modernist reduction of painting to its flatness, and to art's devotion to expressing the specificity of its medium, Sacriste prefers impurity, the jumbling of genres, effects, textures and sexes. As a Baudelarian she worships artifice, not artistic autonomy. Like the

poet, she sees artifice as the prerequisite for art, the only means of "rising above nature so as to vanquish the heart and strike at the mind." Artifice? In other words, the opposite of the natural: the lie which, under cover of resemblance to the world seen, refuses us all access to the world hidden. Thus her turning of the hermaphrodite on its back, but also her coating of her works with black, or with white, all proceed from the same intention: the refusing of servile imitation of an untruthful world so as better to reveal – by artifice – its other side. The black and the nacre are make-up, the instruments of a maquillage of the world which is the precondition for the revelation of its strange beauty, in which repulsion becomes one with the most ardent desire. As for the ribbon on the sleeper's upper thigh, is it indeed a garter or, when we look more carefully, a link between a girl and a strap-on?

I do not know if Anne Laure Sacriste is acquainted with *La Fanfarlo*, one of the most singular, most hybrid of all texts, falling precisely between poetry and prose, and the only short story Charles Baudelaire ever wrote: "Among all the half-great men I have met in this terrible Parisian life, Samuel was more than any of them the man of bungled masterpieces – a sickly fantastic creature whose poetry shines much more in his person than in his works and who, towards one o'clock in the morning, between the blaze of a coal fire and the tick-tock of a clock always appeared to me like the God of Impotence – a modern hermaphroditic god – an impotence so colossal and so enormous that it becomes epic."



A text that seems made for Anne Laure Sacriste. Not because "bungled masterpieces" are her thing, but because her substanceless gushings and her constant comings and goings between the solid and the hollow, between each thing and its opposite, are all (over)turnings of impotence into works of art. To exhibit the duality of the world in a pitiless light, to demonstrate that each principle goes side by side with its opposite, and to make this confrontation the very instance of creativity – that's what hermaphroditic creation is: the work of an artist who has realised that to cease to be impotent, you have to set to work on the negative.

— Pierre Wat

*English translation: John Tittensor*