Encyclopaedia of Silences: Prehistory and Modernity

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- 1 As he emerged from the Chauvet-Pont d'Arc Cave in the Ardèche department, discovered in December 1994 when a breath of air was detected coming out of a crevice, the British art critic and writer John Berger remained dumbstruck in front of the camera.¹ In the cave, all is silent and obscure. How can one describe the drawings produced almost 31,000 years ago – 15,000 years before Lascaux and Altamira – without disrupting any kind of chronological narration? How can one render the incredulity before the black charcoal lines, preserved in such a dazzling state of freshness by the damp atmosphere, they could almost have been drawn the day before? How to recount and share the feeling of connection with an immemorial time in a sealed-off space, the impression of understanding the enigma of Cro-Magnon people – the ultimate “*Homo Pictor*” (Hans Jonas) – on which so much is still to be discovered?
- 2 Barely out of the cave, John Berger was intercepted and interviewed by a documentary crew which he was accompanying on location as a researcher. He is asked a rather predictable question for someone who has spent his life writing about pictures: “What did you see *over there*?” Suddenly John Berger whips out a tape recorder he used to capture a few impressions of what he saw and heard during his subterranean excursion. He is surprised to hear that his voice, besides being beyond-the-grave deep, should be so slow – times passes sluggishly underground. He murmurs a few words, outlines thoughts: “Silence. I switch the lamp on my helmet off. A certain quality of darkness. In this darkness, silence becomes encyclopaedic, condensing everything that has taken place in the interval between then and now.”² “Encyclopaedia of silences”: it is impossible to find a more appropriate, or laconic, phrasing, because these silences generate voices instead of stupefying the mind; to record them spawns drawings and ultimately, writing. Far from being a rational enterprise, this encyclopaedia becomes a fictional matrix, an inexhaustible reserve for narratives. In the cave, John Berger, who taught several generations *Ways of Seeing* (to quote the title of his most famous book,

published in 1972), felt he had entered a huge intestine. He let himself be guided by the scientists who were inventorying the animal forms painted with vigorous strokes, all perfectly integrated to the crevices and irregularities of the rock wall. Although the cave is now permanently closed to the public, the drawings are still well-known, thanks to the 3D documentary film directed by another visionary, Werner Herzog (*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 2010). Unable to verbalise his feelings in front of the animal representations, John Berger – who also taught us how to look at animals – eventually starts drawing on absorbent Japanese paper, trying to recreate the same visual production conditions, the same roughness.

- 3 The silences John Berger touches on seem clearer when one simultaneously reads the two following books, both published in 2019: *Préhistoire : l'envers du temps* and *Saisis par la préhistoire : enquête sur l'art et le temps des modernes*, approaching them like two refined and fascinating enquiries into the relationship between prehistory and modernity. The two authors, Rémi Labrusse and Maria Stavrinaki also co-edited the issue no. 147 of the *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, and co-curated, along with Cécile Debray, *Préhistoire : une énigme moderne*, an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. On this occasion, they extended, spatialized, developed and “tested” their critical discourse, by re-establishing the discussion between prehistoric artefacts and contemporary artworks on new bases.³
- 4 “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me”: Blaise Pascal’s phrase acts as a caption for the drawing by Odilon Redon (c. 1870) analysed by both authors, in which a simian figure with a human face climbs to the top of a dried-up looking mountain. Plunged in the silence and solitude of a bare and spectral landscape, suspended between ether and earth, “the impenetrable minerality remained mute, and it was this mutism which was shattered by the subject’s dread”⁴ During the 1830s, a few decades before the drawing was made, prehistory was discovered, or rather invented, “the result of a network of desires, actions and thoughts that converged towards this revolution in the representation of time”⁵. There was now a precise date for the creation of the times preceding history, integrating them into a chronological orbit. However, the position of prehistory was still uncertain: “a child born motherless, a mother dead childless”, following Salomon Reinach’s⁶ expression inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in his 1889 text on the art of the late Paleolithic which Maria Stavrinaki quotes in her book. From that point onwards, time has done nothing but go backwards, like a “retrograding Apocalypse” (Honoré de Balzac), surpassing the Biblical mosaic narrative. Time progressively retracted towards the Lascaux cave, then the Pech-Merle cave: from Prehistory to an a-human, antediluvian world, from organic to vegetable life, to the age of the Earth. Geological time (the life of the Earth), biological time (life on Earth), anthropological time (the humanisation and acculturation of humans), following the division suggested by Rémi Labrusse: by stretching out time in what resembles a *regressus in infinitum* – or *ad uterum* in the case of caves –, the position of humanity seems increasingly diminished.
- 5 The silence of the past, likewise, has become increasingly dense. Paradoxically, the more humans take up the scientific and imaginary challenge of understanding their ancestors’ life, the more they are confronted to the abyss of a *mundus inferior*; the more they improve their ability to explore faraway times, the more they can appreciate the shrinking of their own civilisation; the more the past spreads out, the more humanity’s position in regards to history – of which it has considered itself the absolute master – is

marginalised. Despite efforts to control and domesticate the past, “silence is its major key”, writes Rémi Labrusse⁷, who devotes a decisive chapter to the immemorial, where history and theory intertwine. He defines the immemorial thus: “neither oblivion nor memory, but rather that which, from within an anonymous and disindividualised past, obscurely moves inside the experience of the present, giving it an unfixable temporal density”.⁸

- 6 The prehistoric fragments we are left with are just as mute: polished stone tools, engraved objects and artefacts, bones and fossils, portable art and wall paintings of animals and women, caves and megaliths, dinosaurs and simian creatures; a material and incomplete corpus which has become the battleground for conflicting interpretations. The remains leave us faced with their mutism and their resistance to rally behind a coherent narrative, *de facto* signalling “the failure of the historicist enterprise”⁹, as the “historicist excesses ended up leading to the destruction of history”.¹⁰
- 7 It is therefore unsurprising, at this stage, to note the silence of historians regarding prehistory. How is one to take into account the aesthetic nature of tools or collective and nameless wall paintings? The expansion of the powers of historicity reaches its limits here, shattering the very notion of limits themselves. The chronology of art history is unwilling to include such a long duration in relation to this order of hyper-historicity, “that reaches from natural history to prehistory and from prehistory to history”¹¹ by offering “access to reality as a whole”¹². One can recognize the effects of positivist and rational modernism, whose progressive linearity crumbled throughout the 20th century, weakened by wars, tragedies and nuclear threats. Contrary to art historians, artists have understood that the material and mental prehistoric chronotope is defined by the present, and that prehistory, however distant it may be, gives access to the “clear and burning presence” that Georges Bataille experienced in Lascaux. The prehistoric times of artists are given in the present tense, or presentified, like the drawings John Berger was so visibly stunned by. According to Stavrinaki, modernity was founded upon this feeling.
- 8 Rémi Labrusse and Maria Stavrinaki defend the idea that the prehistory of artists is a past that speaks to the present, a past that suddenly bursts into the present, like an epiphany or a sudden idea. “Prehistory is never untouched by the present: it is fertilised by the present as much as it fertilises it”¹³; as such, it is suffused by an ambivalent feeling, a mix of attraction and repulsion: “prehistory proves to be a wonderful tool for producing ‘defamiliarisation’”¹⁴. However, if exile from chronological time grants access to a different type of time, populated by imagination, there is still a risk of diving into an uninhabited and abysmal world. Such is the case with fossils, models for sculpture and photography as well as material traces of past extinctions, a *memento* inasmuch as humans and human civilisations, like any other living species, could also one day be faced with a fossil dimension, a geological future. “The myriad extinctions potentially revealed by the depths of the earth anticipated the future extinction of humankind”¹⁵. Past and present are engulfed by a vortex: “Concern for the past and apprehension of the future merge together, the idea of a human-less Earth can be understood in the past as well as in the future tense”¹⁶. Going back in time, the quest for origins ends up turning around and reversing itself: “It cannot be stressed enough: from its constitution as a field of knowledge and time-consciousness object to this very day, prehistory has always been connected to the idea of the ‘end’”¹⁷. The

interest in fossils during WWI; the exploration of enigmas by the Surrealists during the 1930s; the connection between Hiroshima and Lascaux, masterfully examined by Maria Stavrinaki in a chapter on post-history; the interest in caves in these times of nuclear threat; the search for origins as a tool for legitimation, or even appropriation, of a Neolithic cultural exception: it is impossible to disjoin prehistoric imagery from the historical circumstances into which it emerges, to the point one could exclaim, following Robert Smithson: “I’m interested in the politics of the Triassic period”!

- 9 Our uncertain future, all at once distant and cumbersome, explains this interest in modernity and prehistory. A human-less Earth coincides with surpassing anthropocentric thought (according to which every stage in history is crowned by human action), as well as with our times haunted by the sixth extinction. Finding refuge in prehistory can help us catch a glimpse of the reverse side of time, of what will happen rather than what is moving away: “prehistory appears most clearly when the end of the human species becomes plausible”¹⁸.
- 10 Is prehistory an “encyclopaedia of silences”? “There is” – or “there was” – takes on different forms, which Rémi Labrusse and Maria Stavrinaki analyse by weaving unexpected links with contemporary artistic productions, which also infused the exhibition rooms at the Centre Pompidou. The artists were able to translate silences into words and pictures, taking up the challenge of narrating the unspeakable and showing the unrepresentable. These silences still must be filled in: such is the ambitious project of prehistory confronted with modernity. Using the logic particular to visual arts, Rémi Labrusse and Maria Stavrinaki delve into these excessive times that go beyond humans and time itself –, the chasm opened by prehistory and the silences marked by the “interval between then and now”¹⁹.

NOTES

1. Lévy, Pierre-Oscar. *Dans le silence de la Grotte Chauvet*, shot from 2000 to 2002, and distributed in 2002 by ARTE France, 52 minutes.

2. Berger, John. “Première visite à la grotte Chauvet : une (pré)histoire peut en cacher une autre”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 2002, p. 20-21. Also published in *Grotte Chauvet Pont d’Arc : impressions...*, Editions du Chassel, 2007, p. 15-27, (Ardèche Fragments). Edited by John Berger, Jean-Marc Elalouf, John Robinson, Jean-Jacques Salgon.

3. Cf. *Préhistoire et art contemporain : une histoire d’hommes*, Les Eyzies-de-Tayac: Musée national de Préhistoire; Bordeaux: Frac Aquitaine, 2013. Ed. by Claire Jacquet, Karen Tanguy; *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, Antwerp: Extra City and Middelheim Museum; Milan: Mousse Publishing; Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2015. Ed. by Mihnea Mircan, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei; *Neo Preistoria: 100 Verbs*, Zurich: Lars Müller Publisher; Milan: Triennale, 2016. Ed. by Andrea Branzi, Kenya Hara; *Art of Prehistoric Times. Rock Paintings from the Frobenius Collection*, Munich: Prestel Verlag; Berlin: Martin-Gropius-Bau. Ed. by Karl-Heinz Kohl, Richard Kuba, Helene Ivanoff, 2016.

4. Stavrinaki, Maria. “‘Nous nous échappons à nous-mêmes’ : la découverte et l’intériorisation de l’âge de la Terre (XVIIIe-XXe siècles)”, *Saisis par la préhistoire : enquête sur l’art et le temps des modernes*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2019, p. 29

5. Labrusse, Rémi. “Notre préhistoire”, *Préhistoire : l'envers du temps*, Paris: Hazan, 2019, p. 4
 6. Reinach, Salomon. *Antiquités nationales : Description raisonnée, Musée de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, I, Epoque des alluvions et des cavernes*, Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1889, p. 168-169
 7. Labrusse, Rémi. *Op. cit.*, p. 4
 8. Labrusse, Rémi. “L’Immémorial”, *ibid.*, p. 48
 9. Labrusse, Rémi. *Ibid.*, p. 48
 10. Stavrinaki, Maria. “Introduction”, *ibid.*, p. 15
 11. Labrusse, Rémi. “Notre préhistoire”, *op. cit.*, p. 4
 12. Labrusse, Rémi. “L’Immémorial”, *ibid.*, p. 54
 13. Stavrinaki, Maria. “Trois artistes : Joan Miró, Jean Dubuffet, Claes Oldenburg”, *op. cit.*, p. 311.
 14. Stavrinaki, Maria. “Introduction”, *ibid.*, p. 14
 15. Stavrinaki, Maria. “Le temps long de l’homme”, *ibid.*, p. 75
 16. Labrusse, Rémi. “Une ‘Apocalypse rétrograde’”, *ibid.*, p. 45
 17. Stavrinaki, Maria. *Op. cit.*, p. 77
 18. Labrusse, Rémi. “Notre préhistoire”, *Op. cit.*, p. 10
 19. Berger, John. *Op. cit.*
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AUTHORS

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A former art historian in residence at the Villa Médicis, **Riccardo Venturi** is currently investigating the ideas of porosity and geological imagery, at the intersection between visual and environmental humanities. He recently co-organised two conferences: *Towards an Aesthetics of Geology in the Age of Anthropocene* at the 44th Annual Conference & Art Book Fair, Association of Art Historians (AAH), Courtauld Institute of Art & King’s College, London (5-7 April 2018); and *Matter and Materiality: from Removal to Reenactment* at the 35th CIHA (Comité international d’histoire de l’art) in Florence (September 2019). He has just published “*Let Asphalt Flow!*”: Robert Smithson à Rome, 15 octobre 1969, as part of the exhibition *La Fin des forêts*, “Viva Villa” Festival, directed by Cécile Debray (Avignon: Collection Lambert).