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Exhibition review –Centre Pompidou, Paris, 11 September 2019 – 20 January 2020

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- 1 Imagining new curatorial approaches to revisit Francis Bacon's work offers a challenge in more than one way, maybe all the more so when the exhibition is thought through for a foreign public. *Bacon en toutes lettres*, on view at The Centre Pompidou in the Autumn of 2019 and early weeks of 2020 was meant to be one of the highlights of Paris' artistic season—a season that will no doubt remain one of the most stimulating ones in recent years. When elaborating the show, Didier Ottinger, deputy director of the Museum of Modern Art, could overlook neither the lasting passion French art lovers have entertained for Bacon's work,¹ nor the previous exhibitions devoted in Paris to the leading figure of what has been defined as “the School of London.”² *Bacon en toutes lettres* is, in that respect, a learned and sophisticated show, that reveals an aspect of Bacon's work hitherto little known to the French public—the influence literature had on his work—, while gratifying it with works fully matching one's idea of Bacon as the painter of tortured flesh and sublime affects.
- 2 Seminal to the definition of that subtle dialectics was the already rich history of retrospectives devoted to Bacon by leading Parisian institutions, and Ottinger's show must first and foremost be understood as entering in a dialogue with these previous shows. The Centre Pompidou had already organised a monumental monographic exhibition on Bacon in 1996. Curated by Bacon's friend David Sylvester—known for his interviews with the artist published in 1975 and for his Biennale show of his work in 1993 that won him the Golden Lion—the 1996 show vastly contributed to Bacon's aura in France.³ Even more foundational and more immediately relevant to this year's show was The Grand Palais retrospective of 1971 that may be said to have introduced Bacon to the French public. The memory of that retrospective underlies Ottinger's curatorial choices and haunts the show with the sombre light of private tragedy. While being a success, The Grand Palais retrospective is also associated with the death of Bacon's partner and model George Dyer who took his life only a few days before the opening of the show. By focusing on Bacon's artistic response to that loss and on the last two

decades of his career—he died in 1992—, Ottinger thus chose to tread a thin line between the private and the public. By examining how the artist confronted grief and guilt, he offers a reflexion on art's power of transfiguration and transcension.

- 3 Quite poignantly, the first two rooms function as haunted chambers with triptychs and works that predate The Grand Palais show and Dyer's suicide. Most of these works feature him and testify to the inspirational role he had in the fashioning of Bacon's visual language. While overpowering the visitor with the sheer presence of their brutal monumentality, the triptychs hung in room 2 can only be read in hindsight as elegiac visions of a body soon to become a ghostly presence on the horizon of Bacon's work. Just as poignant, although in a minor key, is the photograph of Bacon by André Morain, taken in front of The Grand Palais on the day of the show's opening. Materializing a suppressed threshold in Bacon's career it intuitively signals a change in the very material of his inspiration, his lasting passion for monumental bodies and the rawness of flesh taking on a far darker and intimate tonality.
- 4 The next seven rooms offer a twofold exploration of Bacon's private confrontation with loss and death and of his parallel experimentation with the limits of figuration, Room 10 showing a film interview of the artist which, as expected, kept the visitors spellbound. Turning its back on the linear and ultimately teleological interpretation of Bacon's stylistic evolution over the last two decades of his career, the show opts for an intertextual reading of his later works, by dramatising a series of encounters between the artist and some of the great literary figures who haunt his work: from Aeschylus to T.S. Eliot or Michel Leiris. From one room to the next, the works are presented in an order that flouts the historical logic and engineers thought-provoking and sometimes deliberately puzzling juxtapositions between works of different periods as well as between his paintings and the literature that haunted the artist throughout his career.
- 5 The architectural lay out of the exhibition materialises these dialogues by inviting the visitors into dark rooms in which one can hear extracts from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Georges Bataille's disquisition on the slaughterhouse ("L'abattoir," a text from *Chronique-Dictionnaire* from 1929), but also T.S. Eliot's opening to "The Burial of the Dead," from *Four Quartets*, or Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. The puzzling nature of the parallels is compounded by the fact some of the texts are read in the original language, thus intensifying the defamiliarising effect on the French audience. These dark literary caverns carve chambers within the gallery space meant to invite us to reflect and ponder on the mysterious logic of intermedial inspiration and on the no less opaque work of transmutation that goes into the making of a work of art. Among these influences Aeschylus' is undoubtedly the most persistent and most powerful one, and the show is an exceptional occasion to see works directly inspired by *The Oresteia*: the dark *Triptych* of 1976, now held in a private collection, *Study for the Eumenides* (1982, Frederick R Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles), and *Ædipus and the Sphinx After Ingres* (1983, Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon). And one cannot gloss over Bacon's more personal relation with his close friend, Michel Leiris, whose *Miroir de la tauromachie* (1981) features among the texts being read from in the show's literary chambers, and that is echoed in *Study for Bullfight No. 2* (1969, Musée des Beaux-Arts of Lyon) and in a late work, *Study of a Bull* (1991, private collection).
- 6 Just as striking is what the works' hang tells of Bacon's lasting and exacting dialogue with his great forebears, Rembrandt of course (see his *Carcass of Meat and Bird of Prey*, 1980, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon), but also Ingres and, more widely, the tradition of

Renaissance and academic sculpture. *Bacon en toutes lettres* in that sense does not only pay tribute to the artist's intimate dialogue with literature. It also testifies to Bacon's monumentality and his dialectical relation with academicism. Throughout his career, he returned to figuration's litmus test: the exacting language of the study from the human body. *Seated Figure* (1974, private collection), *Studies from the Human Body* (1975, private collection) or *Study from the Human Body* (1983, The Menil Collection, Houston) all evince not only a remarkable mastery of the language of academic sculpture and its emphasis on anatomy, but a capacity to put such mastery at the service of experimentation. The 1983 *Study* looks back to Renaissance sculpture in order to look forward to the moment when the body disappears in the language of pure colour.

- 7 Ottinger's curatorial decisions play here a key role as they break the sense of linear development in order to produce collisions between works belonging to very different moments of his career. Left to establish his/her own connections between Bacon's literary influences, the visitor is similarly left to trace iconographic and emotional connections between the works. The visitor can thus fully grasp the lasting coherence of Bacon's pictorial grammar, even as it evolves. In that regard, and in spite of his complex attachment to figuration, Bacon strikes us as a daring experimenter who pushed back the limits of figuration. The presence of rarely shown works, held in private collections, is here of crucial importance. *Blood on the Floor-Painting* (1986) and *Blood on Pavement* (1984) give us to see Bacon grappling with figurative form as it dissolves in the materiality of the pigment and, symmetrically, with abstraction as it morphs into identifiable forms, in this instance, the most organic one, blood on an anonymous surface.
- 8 In keeping with the deliberately ahistorical arrangement of the works, the pedagogical apparatus is kept to a minimum, so as to allow the visitors to experience these encounters empirically and draw their own intuitive and ultimately sensorial conclusions.⁴ In that sense Ottinger's exhibition seems to be wary of the more philosophical approach to Bacon's work that, in the wake of Gilles Deleuze's influential *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation* (1981), has dominated Bacon's reception in France, although Deleuze's own take on his work was itself already of a neo-empiricist nature.⁵
- 9 Revisiting Bacon's work for a 21st century audience necessarily implied reflecting on the legacy of the influential shows that fashioned his lasting aura in France; it also required a break with the dominant narratives woven around his work. It consequently required daring museographic choices that revealed him in his full complexity: both a painter of flesh and a painter's painter immersed in the monumental history of art, both a lover of form, colour and pigment and a lover of words. Profound and sensitive, erudite and empathic, *Bacon en toutes lettres* will no doubt go down in the history of Bacon's museography as one of the most successful and enlightening exhibitions to have been devoted to the towering master of contemporary English painting.

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NOTES

1. A conference was organised at The Centre Pompidou on the occasion of this exhibition in October, that was aptly entitled "Francis Bacon: une passion française?" Among the contributors was the art critic Michael Peppiatt, who also contributed to the exhibition catalogue.
 2. The expression was first used by R.B. Kitaj in the introduction to the catalogue of the show he curated in 1976 at the Hayward Gallery, *Human Clay* (Hicks 11).
 3. For an insight into that show, see *Francis Bacon. Retrospective*, 27 juin – 14 octobre 1996. Last accessed 03 April 2020. https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/ressource.action?param.id=FR_R-6ce34429ca406266c3e1dc37f7a3¶m.idSource=FR_E-251f8e45cf32f087b9a1c2afa132f6da
 4. One should here mention one of the texts Michel Leiris devoted to his friend's art, *Bacon le hors-la-loi*, in which Leiris insists on the affective nature of Bacon's works : "Face à une toile de Francis Bacon, il n'y a donc à s'abîmer pas plus dans la délectation que dans la réflexion. Regarder et se laisser saisir, c'est simplement à cela que l'on est invité" (48).
 5. For another empiricist reading of Bacon, see Didier Anzieu's chapter in *Francis Bacon ou le portrait de l'homme désespéré*: "Bacon, Beckett, Bion: pour un renouveau empiriste," pp. 41-61.
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