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Art and the Divine

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A Master of Philosophy Thesis

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Abstract

My research is an enquiry into the nature of divine grace in the making and contemplation of art. It is, therefore, practice led and operates through phenomenological processes that explore three encounters: firstly, experiential - my art practice, secondly, historical - the theoretical context of my reflection and sources and thirdly, lyrical - the mode of my writing and the assimilation of my research. The study of Sandro Botticelli's painting, *Mystic Nativity*, 1500,¹ juxtaposed with aspects of Arte Povera² and my own contemporary practice, steers my theoretical study. This strategy has revealed various fields of thought; philosophical, esoteric and psychoanalytically informed feminist scholarship. The shift in perception that juxtaposition affords contributes to my understanding of an unseen dynamic integral to metaphysical thought. With this in mind I focus upon the way in which Botticelli has depicted the hay that circulates around the form of the Christ child in this Nativity painting. My investigation into the nature of this overlooked dimension detected in *Mystic Nativity* has enabled me to find a way to articulate the divine in art.

The research operates through a number of practices – art, writing, conversing and contemplation. My artwork explores spatial and haptic elements in the form of installation. Here an experiential encounter extends the reflection of my sources in further unforeseen sites of contemplation and practice. In my writing I seek to articulate a lyrical encounter of my own artwork and the art that I contemplate.

This research responds to the themes: hay as membrane; hay as calligraphy; and the palimpsest. In my first chapter, 'Painting the Picture', I consider the intellectual and historiographic context in which *Mystic Nativity* was painted. The Florentine scholar, Marsilio Ficino was Botticelli's mentor. Ficino was the founder of the Platonic Academy

¹ Sandro Botticelli, *Mystic Nativity*, 1500. National Gallery, London.

² Arte Povera is the term given to a generation of Italian artists' whose work explore the subversion of cultural and political systems in their explorations of a direct encounter of the art work.

influential in the intellectual life of Renaissance Florence. The theme of the palimpsest is evident as I investigate the diffusion of knowledge through the humanist scholarship and their translation of ancient texts. In my second chapter, 'Hay as Membrane', I explore contemporary thought that considers the Other: variously described in the theory of Emmanuel Levinas - as feminine; by Simone Weil - as divine; by Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger - as a matrixial dimension; and by Julia Kristeva - as lyrical. These theorists contribute to my interpretation of a pre-articulated and circulatory, transient and overlooked, dimension. I have come to understand this as a feminine dynamic that contributes to our subjective development and operates beside the formation of meaning. My last chapter, 'Hay as Calligraphy', looks at the language of the Other and the ever-evolving language of art. I review my installation, *Hay in Salem Chapel*, in these terms. Walter Benjamin presents a phenomenological approach to language through his concept of the archaic and these thoughts return me to the theme of the palimpsest. The semiotic thought of Julia Kristeva and Mieke Bal helps to reveal new discursive approaches with which to engage with *Mystic Nativity*. Their research supports my exploration of the quality of interchange that may take place.

In my conclusion I refer to the significance of the practice of art as the site where the immanence of a feminine dynamic interacts with the metaphysical. Luce Irigaray's thought concerning the innate quality of the divine within our subjective makeup informs me as I reflect upon the current practice of Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci in their artwork called *Prayers*.³

This research aims to open up new sites for thought and ways of appreciating the divine. I have placed the experience of that encounter in the frame of making and contemplating art, initiated from my personal experience.

³ Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci. *Prayers* a series of actions with every day materials, 2005. Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2008.



Fig. 1. Sandro Botticelli, (1445-1510). *Mystic Nativity* 1500, oil on canvas, 108.6 x 74.9 cm.
National Gallery, London.

Introduction

Sandro Botticelli⁴ painted the *Mystic Nativity* in 1500 (*fig. 1*).⁵ It is the only painting that he signed. My thesis has developed through the contemplation of this devotional work. I conceive of the divine as an encounter with grace, however momentary, and in this thesis I frame that event in the making of art. This encompasses concepts of divinity, language and the operation of a feminine dynamic co-residing with the metaphysical. My research therefore is led by my practice and contemplation of art.

The heart of my research enquires into the nature and manifestation of divine grace, and the participation of art in this encounter. It asks what are the articulated and the pre-articulated elements that contribute to such moments, the site of such an encounter, and how art manifests such an encounter. This quest has originated from an appreciation that a distinct, but otherwise unclassified, communication takes place whilst I make art, as well as in my appreciation of particular artworks, under certain circumstances. At these times I engage with a sense of reason that is beyond appearance and language. Animated in its own way, this sense of accord eludes categories and terms. Flexible and elusive, it seems to flow in unstructured channels, and because of this, it is characteristically diverse. I present and seek to decipher some of the elements that contribute to this communication. Thus my enquiry focuses upon Botticelli's depiction of hay, circulating around the figure of the Christ child in *Mystic Nativity*. Botticelli's concerns with language are evident in this painting. He explores the written word in the proclamation that includes his signature,⁶ inscribed at the top of the painting, to the depiction of the incarnate word of God in the gesticulating Christ child. My research however has been initiated by an investigation into the movement of the hay in *Mystic Nativity* that supports the form of the Christ child. From my contemplation and investigation into the hay I have found a way to articulate the divine in art practice.

⁴ Allesandro Botticelli, 1445-1510, born in Florence where he lived with his family for most of his life.

⁵ Sandro Botticelli, *Mystic Nativity*, 1500. National Gallery, London.

⁶ The proclamation reads, 'I, Sandro, painted this picture, at the end of the year 1500...' I give a full translation of this written proclamation fn 119, p. 29.

I approach my research through three encounters, historical — the context and background of theorists and artworks; lyrical — the expression and operation of thought, and experiential — my art practice. The exchange between various elements underlies this phenomenological research and relates to philosophical thought, art theory, art practice and spiritual exploration. This research therefore operates through a number of practices, which includes art, writing, conversing and contemplation.

My own artwork engages with the haptic⁷ and spatial⁸ aspects of installation. Captured on film, unforeseen elements are recorded during the event. The installations explore the delicate and potential interchange of substances, spatial and contingent elements that initiate an experiential encounter. When collaborative the art project is offered a further freedom of thought in which the installation is considered; a balance of seen and unseen aspects that encompasses the notions of service, accord and the overlooked. A key strategy in this research is the placing of a Renaissance painting beside the concerns of Arte Povera, a term given to a generation of Italian artists of the late 1960s, and my own contemporary art practice. This juxtaposition enables me to appreciate the value of the hay as substance that contributes to thought. In *Mystic Nativity* the hay is depicted as a trope, meaningful on many levels, but in my installation *Hay in Salem Chapel* (fig.2)⁹ the hay is encountered through experience and its meaning is articulated through sub-symbolic means in our psyche. My art practice extends the written research by exploring possible and new sites for reflection both in the making and in the works.

The circulation and the spread of transformative thought is key also to a response to the written word and the practice of writing. In this my writing explores the possible collapse of distinctions¹⁰ between fields of thought and modes of writing. I explore the nature of my response to the theoretical texts I study. This underlies my approach to my own writing so that a nuanced feeling may be discerned through the text. It follows that the

⁷ Haptic is the term given to perception through the sense of touch.

⁸ Spatial aspects include an awareness of the objects in the space around us adjusted to our body's position in space. Spatiality requires an integration of information from all our senses.

⁹ Amelia Mulvey and David Brinkworth, *Hay in Salem Chapel*, 2006, installation of hay and sound, DVD and digital photograph, Hay on Wye.

¹⁰ Pollock, Della. See 'Performative Writing', cited in Peggy Phelan Jane and Lane, (eds.) *The Ends of Performance*. London: New York University Press, 1998, p.80

production of knowledge through the practice of writing is therefore a reflective but participatory process.

Contemplating Botticelli's Nativity painting, I engage with an historical encounter of Renaissance thought that contributes also to my reflection of contemporary theory. My study therefore draws from collected tendential strands of thought across a number of fields; ancient knowledge, philosophy, twentieth century Judaic thought — concerning the spiritual and the psyche, and psychoanalytically informed feminist scholarship. Further practices come to light through the nuances of the research I have undertaken and inform my exploration of a lyrical encounter. These practices bring to light subjective and intersubjective conditions through which I investigate an unstructured response to my art practice and my theoretical study. This open practice takes place in note taking, written or drawn, and as collected fragments of insights that contribute to the realization of unforeseen realms of significance.

Mystic Nativity initiates a contemplative engagement, which, on one level, reveals the ancient and classical Greek thought that supported the intellectual climate of Renaissance Florence and, indeed, Christian doctrine, and on another level the operation of thought, on which my investigation centres.

The background to my study

Botticelli depicts in *Mystic Nativity* a palimpsest of thought — mystical, philosophical and religious. The clear discernment of ancient knowledge is a defining principle of the humanistic scholarship that developed in Renaissance Florence where Botticelli lived and worked for most of his life. Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499),¹¹ the founder of the Platonic Academy in Florence and a mentor of Botticelli, was a major Renaissance figure who facilitated ancient knowledge by his groundbreaking translations of firstly Plato's Dialogues followed by his translation of Plotinus' Enneads. The circumstances and excitement that gave rise to Ficino's translation of Plotinus, the assimilator of Neo-Platonist thought from which humanist scholarship was largely inspired, as well as Ficino's own philosophy of contemplation and accord, are key elements in my own

¹¹ Marsilio Ficino was the founding director of the Platonic Academy, Florence, 1462 and tutor to Lorenzo de Medici. He was a physician, philosopher, translator, musician and in later life a priest.

considerations of various kinds of knowledge. It is Ficino's counsel that lies behind the structure of this Nativity, which I refer to in my first chapter, 'Painting the Picture.' This historical encounter draws from Paul Kristeller's clear and extensive scholarship.¹² Fundamentally present in Kristeller's account of Renaissance thought is the transitory nature of knowledge from one culture to another. Ficino's life exemplifies the diversity and the transition of knowledge through his various professions. But it is his philosophic practice and counsel — that only through contemplation and love can we experience truth, through which we gain philosophic and spiritual insights, that has an especial relevance for my interpretation of Botticelli's painting. *Mystic Nativity* depicts the soul rising from the loving embrace of the angels; from the teaching of Christ and Mary's devotion; to the dance of angels.

Divine grace

My study is not concerned with doctrine, and my explanation of the terms that I use is aligned to what is presented in the painting. It is written, however, with a Christian understanding of the divine in mind and informed by philosophy. The Christian faith presents God as father, supremely loving and omnipotent, originating from Talmudic sources (ancient Jewish texts). In *Mystic Nativity* Botticelli also incorporates the divine in Plotinian terms. Plato (428-348 BC) portrayed God as the supreme artisan who moulds nature and all forms. Significantly Plato conceived of two realms, the infinite and perfect realm of heaven and the reflection of that realm, finite and imperfect, on earth.¹³ Botticelli paints the golden opening of heaven and the earth below, the dancing angels look both up into heaven and down at the Nativity on earth. For Plato, perfect reality lay elsewhere and we aspire to rejoin with the perfect forms that dwell in heaven from whence our souls had descended originally – in effect we look upwards to this transcendent wisdom. Aristotle's (384-322 BC) view explored God as imbuing the universe with order and purpose. It was a view of the divine that employs a downward gaze of order and ethics on the world from above. Aristotle's view of the soul was that it was not separated from the body and this is reflected in the Christian doctrine. Jesus took human form in body and soul. The

¹² Kristeller, Paul O. *The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains*. US Harper and Row, 1965.

Renaissance Thought 2, Papers on Humanism and the Arts. US: Harper and Row, 1965.

Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance. US: Stanford University Press, 1964.

¹³ Taylor, A E. See 'Timaeus and Critias' in *Plato The Man and His Work*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1960, p. 442.

Neoplatonist, Plotinus (204-270 BC) introduced the concept of God, as the Good, and the source of the universe, from which lesser beings sequentially emanate.¹⁴ The Neoplatonists had a more speculative view and incorporated ancient Gnostic beliefs. They conceived that the soul was a divine entity, which has to descend into the body. Christian tradition took on both Hebrew and the two Greek traditions in its thinking about the soul. The thought of both Plato and Plotinus resonate in this Nativity and therefore in my interpretation.

My address to the divine is also informed by contemporary research and art. In this frame the examination of an encounter with the Other sheds light on what has become the main focus of my research from a close reading of *Mystic Nativity*, and the processes of my art making. As well as depicting the intellectual climate of his day discernable as the humanistic scholarship of Florence, Botticelli's visual elements incorporate a political voice, and more discreetly, references to what I have come to appreciate as a feminine presence. Thus my focus has been drawn from the forms depicted in the painting to the slightest of details, namely the hay that circulates around the figures of the Holy Family and the animals. My studies have led me to explore this dimension as firstly, Other, initially in the terms that Emmanuel Lévinas explored the Other as feminine, countered by Luce Irigaray's insights into Eros and the intellect, and secondly, as a means of participating with what is divine, as explored from the onset, by Simone Weil through her concept of grace. The Other is acknowledged through concepts of difference, as in what is divine and external, unknown and ungraspable, and in comparison, as partial and marginal, overlooked and elusive, qualities that I engage with in my practice. Our relationship with what seems to elude us, but which is intrinsic to our knowing, is a realm constantly explored. The elusive seen as a dynamic prompts questions that theorists grapple with. Integral to my research is the varied nature of a relationship with the Other from a number of theorists, which relates to the development of subjectivities. My second chapter, 'Hay as Membrane' expands upon this area of investigation.

By linking the Other to the feminine, and the unknowable, Lévinas' concept fuelled the argument that the feminine is unacknowledged in metaphysical thought. The debate from

¹⁴ Plotinus, see 'The Divine Names', *The Enneads*.. Stephen MacKenna, (trans.), Faber and Faber Ltd. 1969, p. xxv.

feminist philosophers has produced a deep and fascinating enquiry into the ethical notions of the Other and the use of language.¹⁵ My third chapter, 'Hay as Calligraphy' seeks out the encounter between language and the Other of language. In the paragraphs that follow I firstly lay out the key theorists, their concepts, terms and relationship to my work in 'Hay as Membrane' as a pre-articulated realm. I then proceed to the key theorists that support my considerations of 'Hay as Calligraphy', the nature and movement of another language and one that manifests in art. In my conclusion I draw the strands of my enquiry together in a reflection upon the practice of art.

Key theorists

Emmanuel Lévinas' (1906-1995)¹⁶ exploration of the nature of the Other in *Time and the Other*¹⁷ moves from a phenomenological consideration to an ethical quest rooted in ancient Hebrew texts.¹⁸ The Other (*autrui*) is unknowable to us, but benign. 'It is neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge. One must recognize its exceptional place among relationships.'¹⁹ Lévinas' philosophy assumes that primarily we are responsible for the Other's well being. He conceives of the Other as external to us and eventually comes to decipher his understanding of the Other through Talmudic²⁰ teachings. Therefore Lévinas seeks an inscription of the Other realized in an encounter, rather than realizing the Other as innate. His thought moves from the description of the relationship with the Other, famously described as a caress, to meeting the 'face', (*la visage*), of the Other. In this Lévinas turns from phenomenology to ethics through the 'primordial phenomenon of gentleness.'²¹ The quality of gentleness is a characteristic of Lévinas' exploration of the Other and of his further thought concerning the infinite. Through these aspects of

¹⁵ See Chanter, Tina. (ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Lévinas*. USA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, 1906-1995, French philosopher and Talmudic commentator, born Lithuania, naturalized French in 1930.

¹⁷ Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, R. Cohen (trans.), USA: Duquesne University Press, 1987

¹⁸ Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. A. Lingis. (trans.) USA: Duquesne, 1969.

¹⁹ Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 88.

²⁰ The Talmud is the sacred book of Jewish faith.

²¹ 'By virtue of its intentional structure gentleness comes to the separated being from the Other. The Other precisely *reveals* himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness.' Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*, A. Lingis (trans.), USA: Duquesne, 1969, p. 150.

Lévinas' thought I have found a way to explore my reflections upon the relationship I have with my art practice and study. Lévinas informed my thoughts of how the divine may intercede in the processes of knowing. He was the first theorist to introduce me to the qualities of the Other as feminine and, formatively, to consider what seemed to elude the grasp of reason as gentleness and a vital dynamic of contemplative thought. His later interest in the ancient Hebrew texts as sources that supported his philosophical explorations in the relationship with the Other, and the infinite, also resonates with the Judaic thought that I have become acquainted with in my research.

Luce Irigaray (b. 1932)²² however presents a contrast to Lévinas in an acknowledgment of the Other, and of the feminine. She has written extensively in a response to Lévinas' metaphor of the caress.²³ For Irigaray the Other exists within, as well as outside of ourselves, it is a wonder that is immanent, and her concept of divinity arises from this. Whereas Lévinas explores ethics as external, however delicate, proceeding from a morality already lodged in a language, Irigaray's focus is upon 'the walk between love and thought'²⁴ where the Other is recognized and communed with only because we know and love ourselves. Therefore in her exploration of metaphysical systems of thought, from the classical to the present day, Irigaray looks beneath and across, reinterpreting the vertical aspects of transcendence to re-discover feminine subjectivity in the divine by the inclusion of Eros in wisdom.²⁵ Her concepts of difference and of the passage between the differences is a formative concept of this thesis and brings to bear concepts of proximity and understanding. These values are inherent in the Nativity, from the juxtaposition of forms at the centre of this painting to the setting of the Nativity itself, in the threshold of a cave. Theoretical and philosophical debates, as well as academic practice, are dramatically redefined by Irigaray's concepts in which Irigaray's contemplation of immanence reverses the love of wisdom into the wisdom of love. Because of this the articulation of thought through art is also re-defined and aspects of conceptual art practice

²²Luce Irigaray, b. 1932. Born in Belgium and is a French feminist, philosopher, linguist, psychoanalytic, sociologist and cultural theorist.

²³Irigaray, Luce. *To Be Two*. M. Rhodes & M. Cocito-Monoc, (trans.) London: Athlone Press, 2000.

Thinking the Difference. K. Montin, trans. London: Athlone Press, 1994.

²⁴Irigaray, Luce. See *To Be Two*, M. Rhodes & M. Cocito-Monoc (trans.), London: Athlone Press, 2000, p. 109

²⁵See *Key Writings*, Luce Irigaray (ed.), London: Continuum, 2004

reveal the significance of Irigaray's philosophy. We can bring to bear Irigaray's thought in the innovations of Arte Povera that sought a direct encounter with materiality in the processes of abstract thought, which I shall elaborate upon later.

Irigaray's capacity to bring love and feminine subjectivity to the fore of theoretical thought is reflected in Simone Weil's examination of her religious experience. Weil explored her spiritual life as participating in her analytical thought. Deeply felt and avidly philosophic, both Weil and Irigaray introduce the spiritual as a process that takes place within. It is a shared experience, but not subsumed by the external or another. Weil and Irigaray also both considered the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, in their exploration of the divine, which influenced Botticelli's religious and political thought through traumatic events. Weil as an agnostic, and born some thirty years earlier than Irigaray, observed in the Catholic mass an encounter with grace, while Irigaray's experience within the Catholic Church has precipitated her exploration of the divine in feminine subjectivity. Irigaray and Weil inform my enquiry into the nature of grace and its experiential encounter with the intellect.

Simone Weil's (1909-1943)²⁶ exploration of a divine Other encompasses the Gnostic belief that the female soul moves as a descent to redeem the world. The nature of this belief has intrigued me. In my art practice, *Honey Stream*, 2003 (figs. 3, 4)²⁷ installed in the foyer of Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, I had been concerned to find the lightest means possible to suspend a flowing and sweet golden thread in the central architectural space of a Victorian foyer. *Gravity and Grace*,²⁸ is a compilation of Weil's religious writings made after her death in 1943 by her confidant, Gustav Thibon. Weil opened up for me a further way of realizing a relationship with that which is Other to me, but is integral to my artwork and reflection. Divinity, Weil deliberated, can only be

²⁶ Simone Weil, 1909-1943. Born in Paris, of Jewish descent, a French philosopher, Christian mystic, and social activist.

²⁷ Amelia Mulvey, *Honey Stream*, 2003, installation of honey, blue drum, copper pipe and glass showcase, Birmingham Institute of Art and Design. This installation was exhibited as the final show of my MA in Fine Art at BIAD and immediately preceded this research.

²⁸ Weil, Simone. See *Gravity and Grace*, E. Craufurd & M. von der Ruhr (trans.), London: Routledge Classics, 2002.

manifested through God's grace, that is, God's relationship with mankind.²⁹ Gravity prevents us from receiving grace. Weil understood gravity as a force that pulls us from God who was at an unfathomable distance from us. God had abandoned the world in order that humankind may develop spiritually. Weil understood divine grace as the only means that could reverse the pull of gravity. The aspects explored by Weil as attributes of grace have become key elements in my art, and explore space, void, movement and the qualities of lightness. They are aspects that bring about a shift of focus that Weil experienced as employing the whole soul and body. Thibon wrote in the introduction to the publication of her journals, '(Weil) actually experienced in its heart-breaking reality the distance between "knowing" and "knowing with all one's soul", and the one object of her life was to abolish that distance.'³⁰ This shift, for Weil, resulted in a direct connection to another realm of possibilities.³¹ In her pursuit of grace Weil contemplated the overlooked, the infinitesimally small and the transient, '...faithfulness to the passing moment reduces man to truly nothing and thus opens to him the gates of eternity.'³² Her approach to her life was one entirely driven by seeking the divine, through scholarship, friendship, political activism and private devotion — she pursued the divine in the secular world. Brought up as an agnostic, Weil was well aware of her Jewish inheritance through her wider family. Characteristically Weil remained outside of an organized religion all her life and her method of writing her journals in aphorisms presents a vivid appearance of ancient knowledge rekindled in the light of her unorthodox religious thought. These journals reveal knowledge sought from her philosophic background,³³ the New Testament and her spiritual life revealing a dialogue on many levels. Weil's ability to apply discordant thought towards a shift of meaning has a far-reaching relevance in my response to ancient knowledge and the meaning of the hay's movement in Botticelli's painting.

²⁹ 'The science of divine things that deals with the nature and attributes of God and his relations with mankind.' *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, prepared by William Little, C.T. Onions (ed.), London: Clarendon Press, 1933. Entry 4.

³⁰ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, intro. ix.

³¹ 'I feel the presence of my friend directly. It is the same with life's circumstances...and God.' Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 24.

³² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, intro. p. xxiii.

³³ Weil came first in her year for philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1928, her contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, came second.

Aligned to my art practice³⁴ Lévinas, Irigaray and Weil inspired the exploration into a relationship with the Other, a feminine dimension, and the nature of grace. I have from the beginning of my theoretical research drawn from mystical and analytical Judaic and continental thought of the twentieth century. It is an approach to thought that emerges out of a modernist background and political changes in the search for a new dynamism. This thought is reflected in writing and art, but does so accompanied by a reappraisal of ancient knowledge. Later this strain of Judaic consideration — that of spirituality and the human psyche — is developed in the research of Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, Griselda Pollock and in the thought of Walter Benjamin. As part of my reflection upon the nature and qualities of the palimpsest, a major theme of this thesis, I quote at length from Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940)³⁵ essay, 'The Task of The Translator'. The extract exemplifies the phenomenon of thought seen through Benjamin's sense of the archaic — the presence of ancient time that transforms. Both Benjamin and Weil grasped contemporary and Marxist thought, which they later moved away from, but out of which was instigated a return to a deep and individual investigation of ancient texts, in the light of the turmoil of their present day. A similar fascination with the past abounded in the culture in which Botticelli's art was immersed. This era too was undergoing dramatic social and political changes. Florentine intellectuals looked to Classical thought and further the ancient knowledge of the Pre-Socratics in their assiduous translations of ancient texts, which could be described as a pursuit into an inheritance of thought, if not an archaeological pursuit, in their reappraisal of the divine and of civilization.

Weil's political views and esoteric focus have been influential in the new considerations of art practice of the late 1960s.³⁶ To those who had read her, Weil offered insights into the dislocation of established thought and practice. The work of a generation of Italian artists known as Arte Povera examined a direct experience of phenomena and thought. Their work and philosophy introduced an innovative use of materials and performance

³⁴ Mulvey, *Honey Stream*, 2003.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940. Born in Berlin and of Jewish descent. Benjamin was a German intellectual, philosopher, literary critic, and translator. He was associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory.

³⁶ See 'New times, new thoughts, new sculpture' Jon Thompson. In, *Gravity and Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture*, London: South Bank Press, 1993.

into art practice. My contact with Giovanni Anselmo,³⁷ an early protagonist of Arte Povera, affirmed Weil's influence, seen in his artwork as a constant engagement with the dynamics between balance and matter, the invisibility of which he referred to as grace. In *Untitled*, 1969, stone suspended as high as possible on a wall by a steel cable, 1969 (*fig. 5*),³⁸ we see Anselmo's gaze aligned with the distance that exists between him and the hanging rock. Inherent in this distance is the knowledge that the stone lessens in weight the further it is from the earth.³⁹ This work serves to represent my own alignment to what is unseen, falling between the aspects of space and conversing elements, weightlessness and conflation, material and immaterial elements. The enquiry into the encounter of divine grace and art first explored through Botticelli's depiction of the Incarnation and the flesh of the Christ child rapidly became for me an enquiry into the active aspects of the *hay*. Essentially this alignment is the practice of contemplation, seen in *Untitled*, stone suspended...(*fig.5.*) in which diverse factors contribute to a transformative and often only glimpsed at transient accord.

Transformative processes take on unexpected resonances and the alchemic processes, which Anselmo subtly engenders in his art as the interchange of unseen energies is in the art of Jannis Kounellis,⁴⁰ a major figure of Arte Povera, presented as live events. Kounellis' work establishes the experience of an alternative perspective that is made up of multifarious elements all contributing to a spatial encounter. In this the preconceived sense of perspective manipulated on a flat plane, introduced to art notably during the Renaissance in Florence, is uprooted by Kounellis' installations. This shift of perspective includes the unexpected amidst an encounter with materiality and fragments from the past. My own response to certain spaces, substances and the senses, through which various modes of knowing are brought into accord, has been informed by the impact of Arte Povera. Aspects of Arte Povera — the free use of diverse processes and the poverty of production, locate the contemporary encounter I research of art and the divine.

³⁷ Giovanni Anselmo, b. 1934, Turin. I talked informally with Anselmo before the opening of his first solo exhibition in the UK, *When the stars are coming one span closer*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2003.

³⁸ Giovanni Anselmo, *Untitled*, 1969, stone suspended as high as possible on a wall by a steel cable. Cited in *Gravity and Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture*, London: South Bank Press, 1993.

³⁹ Lumley, Robert. *Movements in Modern Art, Arte Povera*. London: Tate Publishing, 2004, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Jannis Kounellis, b. 1936, Piraeus, Greece, and moved to Rome in 1956.

Kounellis seeks from such encounters the ‘indispensable’⁴¹ and ever developing other language in his art which, in a number of his art works, has been generated by the bodily presence of animals and birds (*fig. 6*),⁴² flaming gas jets and molten tar. An architectural and historical appreciation is essential to his considerations of the fleeting and uncontrolled moments of the present.

Botticelli’s concerns, religious and historiographic, philosophical and political, play an active part in *Mystic Nativity* whether they are depicted, as the learned men and the shepherds worshipping at the Nativity, or revealed as a subtext, as in the depiction of hay. The subtle inclusion of political concerns in Botticelli’s painting relates to the concerns of Arte Povera in that both probe a fundamental questioning of cultural and political systems, but through an oblique angle. Therefore the juxtaposition of this Renaissance Nativity painting with the art work of Arte Povera reveal in both instances a shift of response from one structure of thought to another realm that is almost imperceptible, but undeniably there. *Hay in Salem Chapel*, 2006, installed in Salem Chapel, Hay-on-Wye (*fig. 2*)⁴³ directly referred to the way in which Botticelli explored the hay as a hidden inscription as well the direct shift of meaning enabled by the values of Arte Povera. More recently the current practice of Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci⁴⁴ whose work, too, is supported by certain Arte Povera artists, inform my exploration of materiality and metaphysics.

Weil died as the Second World War drew to an end. Born a decade later, Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger (b.1952)⁴⁵ is a practicing psychoanalyst, feminist theorist and artist.

⁴¹ Kounellis. Cited in Adachiara Zevi, ‘An Engaged Modern Painter’ in *Jannis Kounellis Modern Art* Oxford UK: 2005, p. 17.

⁴² Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1969, twelve horses, Galleria L’Attico, Rome, 1969. Cited in Lumley, *Movements in Modern Art...* p. 34.

⁴³ Mulvey *Hay in Salem Chapel*, 2006, installation of hay and sound, Hay on Wye, DVD and digital photograph.

⁴⁴ Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci have been working together since 1996. I talked with them after their UK premier show at the Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2008. They have presented their work at the South London Gallery on a number of occasions and exhibit internationally.

⁴⁵ Bracha Ettinger, b. 1948, of Jewish descent, lives and works in Paris and Tel Aviv. Ettinger is an artist, psychoanalyst and theorist.

As Ettinger has collaborated with Lévinas it is interesting to see where the thoughts of these thinkers converge, and part, and I begin my second chapter by quoting Ettinger and Lévinas in conversation to illuminate the subtleties of these differences.⁴⁶ Both are deeply involved in an articulation of the feminine, but through very different means. Ettinger raises a hitherto unnamed dimension, specific to femininity, to the level of a symbol, which she terms the ‘matrixial’.⁴⁷ By so doing the matrix finds a place in theoretical discussion thereby opening up unacknowledged avenues through which to explore the various aspects that mitigate subjective thought. Notably Ettinger’s research has developed through her practice as an artist, which examines the ‘transgenerational’⁴⁸ memory of the past that Weil was a part of. The concept of transgenerational memory echoes throughout my research as I explore a relationship with the Other. It is an innate awareness of what has not been directly experienced but which is known as fragments and feelings in the psyche by the following generations to which an original trauma has occurred. My interpretation of the transgenerational however does not only depend on trauma as a mitigating but remote factor. I appreciate transgenerational as formative overlooked nuances of jouissance as well as regrets, insights and events that are not necessarily associated with either our lineage or traumatic events. Piera Aulagnier,⁴⁹ a colleague of Ettinger, termed these nuances as ‘pictograms.’ Aulagnier’s research into these partial images that evoke transgenerational connections informs Ettinger’s art, which investigates deep and personal veins of multiple and developing subjectivities including the unknown and the distant.

Key theme: Membrane

In the central space of *Mystic Nativity* I detect a quality I liken to a membrane. Meaning seems to fall on one form only to evaporate and engage with another painted element. The process seems to add a thickness to the space in between the forms, in part caused by an

⁴⁶ Ettinger worked with Lévinas for several years and collaborated with him in publications and discussions as in ‘Time is the Breath of the Spirit,’ a conversation with Lévinas, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1993.

⁴⁷ Ettinger, Bracha, ‘Metamorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace’, in *Rethinking Borders*, ed., John Welchman London: Macmillan Academic, 1996, p. 125.

⁴⁸ Cited in Pollock, *Generations and Geographies*, p. 271.

⁴⁹ Piera Aulagnier, 1923-1990. A physician, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst whose research explored the use of image in the expression of un-articulated trauma.

awareness of a plurality of meanings taking place.⁵⁰ But chiefly my concept of the membrane explores a sense of connectivity, and evaporation. It hovers between states of being, protective and intuitive, expectant and knowing. I conceive of the membrane as the most fragile of networks, able to rejuvenate and mostly invisible. A momentary thickening seems to have made itself apparent in the caul-like veil that hangs from Mary's head. Elsewhere in the painting I see the drawing up of the hay, from the manger into the ass's muzzle, as another indication of the transitory presence of the membrane. Ettinger's art and research informs my reflection upon this quality. In her essay, 'Metramorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace',⁵¹ Ettinger brings to light a pre-symbolic realm of development based on feminine, prenatal interrelationships that encompass the generative concept of a 'beside'.⁵² In this matrixial dimension, a marginal and unconscious space, subjectivities are able to develop beside one another where, at a sub-symbolic level, change takes place reciprocally.⁵³ The organizational processes of what Ettinger terms 'metamorphosis' continually tune and retune the network of developing subjectivities taking place in the matrix. Ettinger describes these processes as 'difference-in-co-emergence' and 'distance-in-proximity' between co-emerging 'I's and non-I's'.⁵⁴ Ettinger proposes that subjectivity does not depend upon the abjection of the matrixial, as in psychosis, but rather, subjective development is nurtured and supported by the constancy of a matrixial dimension. Ettinger's research reveals the processes of what she has termed, metamorphosis, which operates between partial and emerging subjectivities that tune and re-tune in the shifting margins of the matrix. This connectivity takes place between threads of sensitivity, 'aerials', 'antennae', or, 'psychic links', the sense perceptions that are the closest to bodily senses. It is useful here to understand that Ettinger conceives that the manifestation of subjectivity through these co-emerging elements results in an encounter, referred to by Ettinger as the, 'matrixial stratum of subjectivization'.⁵⁵ The stratum comprises of a zone of encounter between the external and the intimate, where

⁵⁰ Bal, Mieke. *Quoting Caravaggio, Preposterous History*, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 111.

⁵¹ Ettinger, 'Metramorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace', in *Rethinking Borders*, p. 125.

⁵² Ibid. p. 126.

⁵³ Ettinger, 'Metramorphic Borderlinks...' *Rethinking Borders*, p.126.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

between the entities neither inclusion, nor expulsion takes place, but rather a continual co-emergence and co-fading. These three areas of matrixial activity are observed and reflected upon through Ettinger's various practices. I reflect upon the movement of the hay and the processes of my artwork through Ettinger's research.

Numerous notes written whilst she has been engaged in artwork and from talking with her patients, discontinuous and seemingly random, have become for Ettinger a source from which her theories have formed.⁵⁶ She describes her note taking as a 'side practice' explaining that the notes are a way of trying to grasp what had already appeared as an idea in her art.⁵⁷ The piecing together of an idea, such as Ettinger describes, and I have practiced in this research, reaches across an expanse of time and experience, where random and unforeseen elements contribute freely, to be realized in their own time. Thus the concept of a relationship, where a mutual enquiry and anticipation of further development of the individual's subjectivity is alongside the movements of the Other, is a determining aspect into the diversity of ways in which the divine may be encountered at a fundamental level.

Griselda Pollock (b.1949)⁵⁸ examines a covenantal aspect of the matrix in her essay, 'Gleaners in history or coming after/behind the reapers...'⁵⁹ Pollock has written extensively on Ettinger and reflects upon Ettinger's artwork in her reading of the Book of Ruth in the Old Testament. In this essay Pollock brings to the fore the contributing nature of the matrixial dimension, as a vital dynamism, operating through acts of atonement and covenant indicating a renewal of the feminine in the concept of God. Pollock's observations also throw light on the act of gleaning, which has informed my approach of gathering tendential strands of information and the quality that such a method of acquiring information enables. Subtly, through her text, Pollock instils the sense of the archaic as a

⁵⁶ Ettinger, 'Working Through' a conversation with Craigie Horsfield in *Drawing Papers*.24. C. de Zehgher and B. Massumia, (eds.) New York: The Drawing Centre, 2001, p. 37.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Griselda Pollock b. 1949. Born in South Africa. Professor of Social and Critical Histories of Art and Director for Cultural Studies at Leeds University.

⁵⁹ Pollock, 'Gleaning in history or coming after/behind the reapers: the feminine, the stranger and the matrix in the work and theory of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger.' In *Generations and Geographies*, p. 266.

facilitating factor that allows a matrixial understanding to circulate. The past is thus reactivated and renewed by the circulation of a matrixial dimension.

In the political and social context of modernist thought, *Vision and Difference, Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*,⁶⁰ Pollock examines the spaces in which feminine activity takes place, albeit diagnosed from the point of view of restriction. My reading of Pollock here draws upon the distinctly phenomenological aspects of these spaces. My reflections on Botticelli's imagery have revealed similar concerns. Botticelli places the ancient mystical knowledge at the heart of his Nativity in the form of the ox and ass in close proximity to the Holy Family. Pollock's reading of Ettinger's work, and her reference to the places of femininity,⁶¹ reveals the potential of the feminine operating at subjective, cognitive and spiritual levels of development. Pollock also points to the healing aspect of art and maintains, as does Julia Kristeva, whose writing I examine in my last chapter that we are entering into a 'therapeutic' age.⁶² The unacknowledged elements of a feminine specificity in the discourse of art, spanning the social, political and spiritual concerns, can be addressed through the inclusion of a matrixial gaze.

Ettinger's research, and the analysis of Julia Kristeva both derive from a Freudian background of thought. Thus a communication between divinity and the individual's subjectivity cannot be investigated in a contemporary context without reference to Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) influential concept of the Oedipal complex.⁶³ Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), a pupil of Freud, elaborated upon the Oedipal complex in his theory of the *object a*, the lost object and his later theories of the mirror stage, whereby the child develops a sense of identity, also have a significant impact upon Ettinger and Kristeva's

⁶⁰ Pollock, Griselda. *Vision and Difference, Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. London: Routledge, 1988. © Griselda Pollock, 1988

⁶¹ Pollock, Griselda. See *Vision and Difference, Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, London: Routledge, 1988. © Griselda Pollock, 1988

⁶² Pollock, Griselda. *Looking back to the future, essays on art life and death*, The Netherlands: G+B Arts International. © OPA 2001. p. 141.

⁶³ The Oedipal Complex is named after Sophocles' protagonist, who unwittingly murders his father and marries his mother. Freud devised this influential concept, involving castration and lack, from this myth. I draw from Ettinger's explanation of Freud's and Lacan's concepts of lack in 'Metamorphic Borderlinks...' in *Rethinking Borders*.

theoretical work. However, Ettinger disagrees with the Freudian concept that supports Kristeva's thought that the matrix can only be acknowledged through psychosis. Connected to male specificity and the trauma of lack, the Oedipal complex grounds subjective development in a phallic paradigm and so encompasses the realms of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic — the realms through which the psyche emerges. Ettinger's research explores this complex through a dimension that is connected to a female specificity and intrinsically one that works beside developing subjectivities. Rather than lack as a paradigm for subjective development, the matrix offers endless possibilities. It is important to note that the feminine is not specific to a gender, and to a lesser extent, neither is the Oedipal complex. It is, rather, the mechanics and the perspective that the Oedipal complex imposes that is questionable.

I explore, therefore, an encounter in the terms of the matrixial dimension. It encompasses the non-verbal and the felt, and can take place between partial and whole entities, both subjectivities and objects. In the event of an encounter a resonant depth is activated in the subjectivities involved, which opens to further potentialities.⁶⁴ Inherent is the proximity, the conflation of difference, which precipitates an encounter. Weil describes this phenomenon in her concepts of grace and we engage with a shift of experience, intrinsic to such as encounter, in the directness of Arte Povera. I have traced indications of these encounters from Botticelli's painting, historical and philosophical, religious and self reflective, but the innermost encounter is not laid out — it occurs between the forms. This is the dynamic that Anselmo referred to as grace and a dynamic that Ettinger explores through the matrix, and one that I explore through my art as an experiential encounter, direct, elusive and transformative.

This painting offers an almost complete experience of divinity within the central space of the cave and the Nativity, and leads me to a reappraisal of Plato's influential concept of the chora (the matrix) as a place (or receptacle) in which becoming takes place.⁶⁵ Ettinger opens up this concept by transporting the matrix into the realm of symbolic meaning,

⁶⁴ Ettinger, 'Working Through' in *Drawing Papers*, 24. p. 40.

⁶⁵ 'We have now to take into account a third concept which we shall find obscure enough that of the 'receptacle' or 'matrix' in which 'becoming' goes on...Sensible things we apprehend, of course, by sight and the rest of our senses; "place," as we have just said, by a curious kind of thinking.' Cited in Taylor, *Plato, The Man and His Work*, p. 456.

rather than an empty space, and Pollock offers further phenomenological insights into the dynamism of the matrix.⁶⁶ Kristeva borrows from Plato's notion but examines what has remained mysterious to reveal a flow of non-determinate signs, a realm she identifies as semiotic and further describes as the chora. Kristeva's explores semiosis,⁶⁷ the processes of sign production, as an abundance of active feelings, bodily rhythms, and as poetic language.⁶⁸ I explore Plato's conception of chora as place, but more intimately, as locus. The proximity of haptic sensations between the forms, benign and intense, participates with the palimpsest of knowledge inherent in the centre of this painting momentarily creating a locus that enables the Incarnation to take place.

Key theme: Calligraphy

The Incarnation of God's word is central to my thoughts of subjective development through language and the place of a feminine dynamic in this process. In this vein I seek to decipher what is both visibly inscribed in *Mystic Nativity* and what I detect is an alternative inscription, which is barely seen. The visible inscription is presented on the discernable layers of thought that I have already referred to as a palimpsest. Botticelli was deeply involved with language and the transition from the written word into another mode, as we can see from his use of a proclamation written in Greek at the top of the painting.⁶⁹ Visually Botticelli combines in his Nativity painting the abstract and mystical writing of St. John⁷⁰ with the details of Christ's birth from St. Luke's⁷¹ gospel and so

⁶⁶ Pollock, Griselda. *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts Feminist Readings*, London: Routledge, 1996, p.267.

⁶⁷ Semiosis is the process, or activity, of sign production. "The signing rather than the signs themselves... the inscribing rather than the inscriptions." Silverman, Hugh. In *Cultural Semiosis, Tracing the Signifier*, Hugh Silverman (ed.), London: Routledge, 1998, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Silverman, *Cultural Semiosis, Tracing the Signifier*, p. 8

⁶⁹ 'I, Sandro, painted this picture, at the end of the year 1500 (March 24th, 1501, of the Roman Calender) during the troubles of Italy, in the half year after the first year of the three and a half years, of the loosing of the devil, in accordance with the fulfilment of the eleventh chapter of St. John, in the second woe of the Apocalypse; then he shall be chained according to the twelfth chapter, and we shall see him trodden down as in this picture.' Deciphered and translated from the Greek by Herbert Horne. Cited in, *Botticelli, The Nativity*, intro. Lionello Venturi. London: Longmans, 1949.

⁷⁰ The Gospel According to St. John, The Holy Bible, Douay Version, London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956, v.1, v. 5 and v. 14. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the light shineth in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.'

presents the divinity of God's word incarnated in the Christ child as radiance, and as flesh.⁷² The term mystical refers to the process of bringing higher consciousness into a relation with other contents of the mind, the immanence, therefore, of the temporal with the eternal. The 'barely seen' has a nature and a writing all of its own and from this I have conceived the term calligraphy. It is a term that refers to the ways in which meaning is conveyed and expressed, and the sense of a flow — free and individually styled. The movement of the hay throughout the locus of the Holy Family and the animals prompted my notion that the hay could be appreciated as calligraphy — a movement of thought, not unlike a dance of a to-ing and fro-ing between the picture and our contemplation. Kristeva's concept of the lyrical, and the poetic word, as a realm of expression that escapes the laid down structure of language, supports my conception and informs my considerations in my last chapter, 'Hay as Calligraphy'.⁷³

Julia Kristeva (b. 1941)⁷⁴ examines the participation of knowing in semiosis. Her psychoanalytically informed thought concerning semiosis has revealed a new discursive approach with which to engage with *Mystic Nativity*. Kristeva identifies the symbolic as apparent in the establishment of the sign and the laid down codes of grammar in language, and the semiotic as that which relates to a space of uncertain articulation. *Desire and Language, A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*,⁷⁵ is a collection of essays that spans the development of Kristeva's thought over ten years. At the forefront of her argument in these essays lies the relationship of language to the writer. Kristeva looks at an intersubjective process that takes place between structures of thought, and a plurality of meanings. Kristeva introduced the term *intertextualité* as the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, the text is thus accompanied by a new articulation. Allied to intersubjectivity in Kristeva's and Mieke Bal's research (whose work also

⁷¹ Ibid. Luke 2 v. 7-8. 'And she brought forth her firstborn son and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them at the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds watching and keeping night-watches over their flock.'

⁷² Drury, John. *Painting The Word, Christian Pictures and their Meanings*, London: Yale University Press and the National Gallery, London, 1999.

⁷³ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 65

⁷⁴ Julia Kristeva, b. 1941. Born in Bulgaria, Kristeva has worked as a psychoanalyst and academic in Paris since 1965.

⁷⁵ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 1979.

contributes to ‘Hay as Calligraphy’) the concept of intertextuality is formative. This concept owes much of its meaning to the analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin (1897-1975), a Russian formalist, who brought to light the discursive nature of written text. A Bakhtinian analysis of literature realigns the authority of a single construction of thought to uncover the mitigating and dialogical relationship between structures of thought.⁷⁶ With these concepts Kristeva further scrutinizes a visual language in ‘Giotto’s Joy’.⁷⁷ Kristeva begins this essay by locating the very moment of separation between words and ‘that from which words have withdrawn.’⁷⁸ By so doing Kristeva draws Giotto’s use of space and colour into a translation of what is beyond words — into the unruly realm of the semiotic chora. Central, therefore, to Kristeva’s analysis of language is the presence of a maternal aspect. The concept encompasses the continual process of subjectivity within the ‘simultaneously dual but alien space’ of motherhood.⁷⁹ Botticelli also presents us with the maternal seen as Mary’s monumental figure against the ass and bending towards her gesturing baby. My own investigation of how the word and flesh interact is informed by Kristeva’s insights into a mediatory operation between nature and culture through the maternal. The key insight is that this lyrical⁸⁰ aspect makes meaning possible alongside the symbolic code of language. I have also drawn upon Kristeva’s reflections upon female mysticism in her correspondence with Catherine Clément, published as *The Feminine and the Sacred*.⁸¹ Kristeva explores the sacred not only as an unwritten inscription but also as that predating the religious.⁸² These letters explore, in the privacy of a solitary practice, the nature of the sacred and women. The text has a freedom and a meandering that reveal insights into experiential encounters, both personal and shared. The correspondence also reveals

⁷⁶ Kristeva, Julia. See ‘Word, Dialogue, and Novel’ in *Desire in Language, A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, L. Roudiez, (ed.) T. Gora, Al. Jardine (trans.), Columbia University Press, 1979, p. 64.

⁷⁷ Kristeva, ‘Giotto’s Joy’ in *Desire in Language*.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 210.

⁷⁹ Ibid. ‘Motherhood According to Bellini’, p. 237.

⁸⁰ Kristeva’s concept of the lyrical includes a sense of infinity. It is aligned to her concept of the poetic as an operative part of the unarticulated realm of the semiotic chora. The lyrical is a manifestation of an un-encoded and forever free flowing nature of this realm. It is, therefore, linked to the maternal and contributes to cognitive meaning.

⁸¹ Clément, Catherine and Kristeva, Julia. *The Feminine and The Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, UK: Palgrave, 2001.

⁸² Ibid. p. 29.

aspects of collaborative thought in which considerations are reviewed and exposed, reappraised and reiterated.

A deep reading of visual elements is, as Mieke Bal (b.1946)⁸³ points out, a participating part in our consideration of an artwork. Through the process of semiosis, Bal picks out how we as viewers become engaged with a painting. Reading in this sense, ‘is a form of meaning-making’.⁸⁴ These processes rely upon a passage of time, in which the significance between one element and another is revealed. Bal’s analysis is formative in my concept of a calligraphic approach to the deciphering of, and the taking part in, an interpretation of *Mystic Nativity*. I examine a number of her concepts, and explain them in my text. For example, Bal’s concept of a perspective that takes for its orientation shifting vantage points and conversing views, which Bal terms, focalization. I also explore Bal’s concept of quotation, the continual exchange with what we presume is the past and the possibility of what could be in the light of the present. These concepts are developed in *Quoting Caravaggio, Preposterous History*. Other concepts, such as transference and self-reflection, are explored in, *Reading Rembrandt, Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*.⁸⁵ Bal’s ideas employ a movement, a projection from, or penetration into, the artwork through time, and a semiotic process of thought. I examine the calligraphic qualities of the hay revolving around Bal’s approach to the detail, its part in self-reflection, and its inherent intersubjective process. This process of producing meaning proceeds from the subject and the object, rather than the closure of objectivism or in contrast subjective interpretations.⁸⁶ Inherent in my response to the hay is the activity of the detail — its vitality and mobility. In this aspect performativity has a particular place in the quiet and largely private reflection of an investigation into the spiritual aspects of art. Through a reflection upon details and highlights in *Mystic Nativity* a performative aspect, inherent in

⁸³ Mieke Bal, b.1946, is a founding director of the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis and the professor of the theory of literature at Amsterdam University.

⁸⁴ See Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, p. 89.

⁸⁵ Bal, Mieke. *Reading Rembrandt, Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press Academic Archive, 2006.

⁸⁶ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, p.36.

what is depicted, is revealed. By exploring the detail as an utterance⁸⁷ it can be transported from its citation into another realm and opens to a meaning that is further than its original placement. My intention, however, is not to embark upon the immense and developing research into performativity in this thesis, but rather to note the dynamic of the detail. The hay traverses several functions, serving as food, fodder and litter. As a calligraphic detail its significance enters into the realm of a written language, a meaning I explored in my installation, *Hay in Salem Chapel*, 2006. Therefore the participation of the hay's qualities and movement accompanying the intensity of the Incarnation and Mary's intercession, in the light of my research, releases an expression. The inscribed banners flow amidst the movement of the angels, but the hay with the utmost humility, transient and overlooked, abundant and light, participates with the Incarnation of the word and the prayers of Mary.

Semiosis, formatively introduced into my research by Kristeva and Bal, opens up the possibility that images can produce meanings normally denied to the visual thus enabling haptic and spatial elements to converse. Bal's research in the field of semiotic analysis informs my understanding of ways in which art can be read; Kristeva presents the participation of knowing in semiosis. Through the lyrical and the poetic realms that delve into an unstructured area of expression Kristeva uncovers a means to express the inexpressible. Both theorists are involved in an exploration of how the psyche emerges into language, which underlies the concern of my investigation into how the word becomes flesh and flesh the word. My appreciation of the locus, the incarnated word and the essential language of art through the circumstances of reciprocity and accord is illuminated by an investigation into the lyrical.

Theoretical approach

My methodology is more aptly described as my theoretical approach. My reflection upon Botticelli's visual terms in *Mystic Nativity* has led me to the areas of research that I consider: philosophy, the feminine and the nature of emerging subjective thought. This route of enquiry manifests in the several modes of my practice — art, writing, contemplation and conversing. Therefore the gleaning of information and examination of

⁸⁷ John Austin (1911-1960), a leading linguistic philosopher who mapped out the theory of the speech-act made up of variously delivered utterances. See Audi, Robert. (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

the particularities of my sources takes on the practice of contemplative engagement. From this activity I am able to consider fragments and pieces of information without imposing a category upon my material but rather seeing it as potentially affecting another element of research. This is evident in the consideration of the formlessness of the hay which has led to my investigation of Ettinger's research into a matrixial dimension operating in the formation of our subjectivity. In the various encounters of the strands that contribute to my research I seek to distil, momentarily, a nuance of thought.

The fragments of reality were also examined for their significance in Benjamin's highly individual perception of things.⁸⁸ In a subtle gathering of such fragments Benjamin reveals a multi-faceted resonance of thought that echoes Plotinus' innovative view of 'the Good' emanating through a multitude of facets too innumerable to know. Intrinsic to this resonance is also the arresting of thought that Benjamin brings into the mode of his writing. His aim was to bring the concept of experience to the fore of philosophic learning, rather than allow the experience of meaning to supersede it.⁸⁹ Benjamin's phenomenological endeavour is akin to Lévinas approach to the written word. Both philosophers were immersed in seeking a language that does not damage the subtleties of subjective transformation and the relationship with the Other. This is a major consideration of my work. Benjamin's written exploration of the language between the two worlds of meaning and of reasoning, and his participation in an array of sensation, arrest my own considerations. He has explored a reflection of himself through his writing to reveal, not a closure of self-exploration, but the openness of an intimate enquiry that penetrates through the appearance of what he sees. His writing reveals the mystical in an interplay with the here and now.

In the expression of Benjamin's practice of contemplative observation the enigmatic plays an acknowledged place in our reasoning. Jane Rendell⁹⁰ explores Benjamin's thought in a similar vein in her concepts that involve the movement of thought between disciplines of

⁸⁸ Arendt, Hannah. Intro. *Illuminations*, p.17.

⁸⁹ Vasseleu, Cathryn. *Textures of Light*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 96.

⁹⁰ Jane Rendell is an architectural designer and historian, art critic and writer, and Director of Architectural Research at the Bartlett, UCL.

thought.⁹¹ The extract from Benjamin's essay, 'The Task of the Translator', at the beginning of my last chapter serves to lay the ground that this thesis has been engaged with — that of moving from one realm to another with alacrity, but also through the thicknesses of time.⁹² It plays a formative part in my concept of the palimpsest and the diffusion of knowledge that is fundamental to an understanding of Botticelli's work, the Florentine culture, and permeates my investigation into contemporary concerns. This extract therefore informs my considerations of a matrixial dimension, as in the sense of transgenerational subjectivity. And as I move towards the calligraphic qualities of the hay I explore this quote in the terms of a phenomenon of an unwritten inscription. Hannah Arendt, in her introduction to *Illuminations*,⁹³ relates the fascination Benjamin had for the minute, in which the macrocosm is concentrated. The hay that is barely seen, and depicted in different modes in *Mystic Nativity*, holds my attention with a similar intensity, where substance takes on a new role in creating meaning.

Art practice

The dialogue with the Other, or as I have come to realize it, the conversing in an encounter with the Other, is expressed through a variety of languages, from a variety of elements. Conversing in this sense takes place in an accord of all elements speaking at once, in clarity and multiplicity, a step away from the to and fro of dialogue, to a lighter communication. Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci pursue a gentle and constant re-engagement with the materiality of substances in their examination of the metaphysical. Though unspoken, gesture, light, materials and spatial aspects converse freely, but equally, in the give and take of their co-ordinated movements. In a series entitled, *Prayers*, Cool and Balducci return again and again to the execution of simple tasks with a variety of everyday materials and precisely put into play what they examine as belief in their practice. My own work similarly explores the everyday and contemplation, as with the Nativity, the fundamental and the extraordinary go hand in hand.

⁹¹ See Rendell, Jane. 'Allegory, Montage and Dialectical Image'. In *Art and Architecture, A Place Between*, London: IB Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2006, p. 75.

⁹² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 4.

⁹³ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, H. Zorn (trans.), London: Pimlico, 1999.

Central to my practice is the encounter with space and the manifestation of unseen elements that reside, or are on the periphery of what is inherent in the space. The space that I explore is both internal and partially cognized, and external — assimilated through the senses. The interchange between these two areas is what I seek to keep open in my art. My investigation into the hay offers a way of understanding the immanence of the spiritual in the secular world. Therefore my practice of art circulates between aspects of pre-articulated sensations and the activity of communication. The installations play their part in a language that has no formality; a language that forms and re-forms through spatial and haptic nuances, proximity and distance, contingent elements and accord. The spaces I contemplate are not empty but filled with fleeting stimuli. My art practice seeks to align momentarily certain elements.

Writing practice

This thesis seeks to open the possibilities of thought and assimilate processes from a new perspective. This new perspective could best be described as arising from knowledge that takes place between areas of cognitive thought — the site of the experiential encounter is thus explored in my art and in the descriptive and reflective passages in my text. In this strategic aim I refer to Rendell's practice of site-writing.⁹⁴ In her reappraisal of Benjamin's dialectical argument Rendell uncovers the 'possibility of meaning'⁹⁵ in the spatial considerations that Benjamin's dialectic and allegorical writing poses. Rendell elaborates upon Benjamin's mode of writing in her notions of site-writing, and walking, as part of the practice of writing about art. In this practice various known and unforeseen elements contribute to an articulation of the site of an artwork. Language is renewed by improbable ephemera as well as by information that is assimilated through a spatial, and physical orientation. Provocatively this orientation inspires the assimilation of various projections of thought. The ground too plays an elusive but fundamental role in the concept of site-writing. The sense of contemplative walking 'reclaims,' as Rendell puts it, 'concentration,'⁹⁶ which provides an escape from the real world and becomes a new mode, or site, for critical response. Thus the passing of time through a landscape is

⁹⁴ Rendell, Jane. 'Site-Writing: Enigma and Embellishment' in *Critical Architecture*. J Rendell, J Hill, J Fraser and M, Dorrian (eds.), London: Routledge, 2007.

⁹⁵ Pensky, Max. *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* cited in Rendell, *Art and Architecture, A Place Between*. London: IB Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2006, p.81.

⁹⁶ Rendell 'Site-Writing: Enigma and Embellishment' in *Critical Architecture*, p. 150.

inherent in site-writing and manufactures a language that is in a direct relationship with all aspects of the artwork. Spatiality is implicit in the interaction of these communicative factors. Michel de Certeau's (1925-1986)⁹⁷ concepts of *espace* (space) and *lieu* (place) enter the arena of these considerations at this point. Rendell explains that de Certeau's notion of space is that it is socially produced. Place, on the other hand is the position and the location of various elements.⁹⁸ 'Space,' de Certeau writes, 'is composed of intersections of mobile elements...like a word when it is spoken, that is when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization...'⁹⁹ His argument proposes that space is constituted by a practice, and Rendell's work is formatively informed by de Certeau's concept, as is the practice of Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci, whose artwork I refer to in my conclusion. My art also explores through substance and space the articulation of an encounter with what is beyond words. And the contemplative space of possibilities in subjective thought directs my approach to my writing as it does in my contemplation of *Mystic Nativity*. To this end I intersperse descriptive passages in my text that are written in a response to my own art and the art I am considering. I consider the array of material through similarities and juxtapositions, and eventually lay aside pieces and rearrange others in the assimilation of my text. It is a process that works through layers, as well as across an expanse of thought and experience, in a movement that returns and moves forward, in order for the elements and pieces of information to be aligned, as in a woven cloth. My writing has developed as I have appreciated the transformative affect of observation and reflection upon various aspects. I explore a contemplative yet participatory process in my writing in order to present new possible ways in which to appreciate art as part of a divine encounter.

Thesis structure

My methodology determines the structure of this thesis. The structure articulates three encounters; an historical encounter; an experiential encounter and a lyrical encounter. These encounters are intertwined. In my first chapter, 'Painting the Picture' the historical

⁹⁷ Michel de Certeau a French Jesuit scholar of social science and philosophy. His thought is influential in contemporary art theory. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

⁹⁸ Rendell, *Art and Architecture, A Place Between*, p. 18.

⁹⁹ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.117.

account of Florence also describes the cultural and intellectual climate of Renaissance Florence. The chapter explores the scholarship of Botticelli's mentor, Marsilio Ficino, and humanist learning that influenced and surrounded Botticelli. The themes of knowledge written and deciphered, encompassed in the concept of the palimpsest, prepares the ground for my subsequent investigation into the evoked and subjective encounter that also resonates in *Mystic Nativity*. Aspects of this classical and esoteric thought are considered alongside my research in the following two chapters, 'Hay as Membrane' and 'Hay as Calligraphy.' These two chapters are lyrical encounters, through which I aim to weave signification from the interpretation and contemplation of my research and art practice.

'Hay as Membrane' starts with a review of my art practice that has led to an exploration of the phenomena of grace which is, in Weil's terms, the direct encounter with God, a divine Other. I look at Giovanni Anselmo's work and the philosophy behind Arte Povera in this light. My own use of substance in my practice has led to reappraisal of *Mystic Nativity* in which the circulation of the hay has opened up an investigation of the development of a specifically feminine subjectivity. Through Ettinger's research, and Pollock's elaboration of her work, I look at the locus of a matrixial encounter and its operation in the realignment of the relationship with the Other.

'Hay as Calligraphy' contemplates the comprehension and a development of Botticelli's visual language. I therefore start with a description of *Mystic Nativity*. The chapter is written under three sub-headings in order to identify the several aspects of the subtle of language I am investigating. Each section introduces an element that contributes to an encounter with the Other of encoded language. 'The Palimpsest' refers to the phenomena of meaning through a reading of Benjamin's text, 'The Task of the Translator', and includes a reflection upon Kounellis' art and the emergence of an essential language through art. In 'The Detail' I explore Bal's analysis of visual details that expose the self through the passage of the Other. Under 'Word' I explore Kristeva's research into the poetic word. In this light I start the section with a description of my practice, *Glass Strands*.¹⁰⁰ Kristeva's elaboration of Bakhtin's linguistic philosophy has led to a semiotic analysis of the mediatory aspect of the word as a passage to the lyrical Other, loved and anticipated. I include Kristeva's speculative thoughts about what could be called sacred in

¹⁰⁰ Amelia Mulvey, *Glass Strands*, digital print, 2004.

which Kristeva reflects whether her notions of nothingness invoke religion or literature. *Hay in Salem Chapel* is a parallel outcome of my contemplation upon the possible calligraphic nature of the hay in *Mystic Nativity*. I describe my artwork at the beginning and reflect upon it at the end of this chapter.

My conclusion draws the themes and tendential strands of this thesis together, contemplation, accord and the operation of thought. It is realized in the manifestation of the metaphysical in art through the means of what I have come to appreciate as a feminine dynamic. I close with a reflection upon the art of Cool and Balducci, who likewise explore the activity of the metaphysical resonating through human gesture and materials in their practice called *Prayers*.

1. Painting the Picture



Fifteenth century map of Florence, detail.

To gain insights into the philosophical, poetic and cultural influences connected to Botticelli, this chapter introduces the major figures of the Florentine Renaissance. Their influence leads to a deeper look at the intellectual climate of Florence and at the Platonism of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). Ficino, the counsel of many Renaissance intellectuals, including Botticelli, drew from humanist learning and Neoplatonist thought, the areas of knowledge that chiefly stimulated and sustained the theological, philosophical and artistic debate taking place in Florence. Botticelli's contact with the de Medicis and with Ficino produces in Botticelli's art a distillation of Renaissance thought in visual terms. Aspects of that thought, the metaphysical strains, the mystical considerations, the ways in which the actual process of learning took place, explored by the seminal activity of humanist scholarship, were communicated through Ficino. The writings of Plato (427 BC-347 BC), to Ficino and his followers, contained the key to the most important knowledge of mankind: the knowledge of himself — that is the knowledge of the divine and immortal principle within him. Ficino's talent lay in communicating this principle as

a living ideal for his age, synthesizing Plato's dialectic, and the metaphysics of the Neoplatonist Plotinus (204 BC-270 BC), into the doctrine of Christianity. I trace this thought in the structure, the images, and the details of *Mystic Nativity*, in order to discuss in this chapter the thought that is apparent in Botticelli's painting.¹⁰¹ The chapter also gives a brief history of Florence, to describe the location of Botticelli's working life.¹⁰²

Two prominent members of the de Medici family, Cosimo de Medici (1389-1464) and his grandson, Lorenzo de Medici (1449-1492) were central to the cultivation and expression of Renaissance learning, and central to the development of both Ficino's output and Botticelli's art. Cosimo de Medici began the political dynasty of the family. He was an imaginative man and used his inherited wealth, from his powerful banking father, and his own considerable means, to enrich Florence with libraries, buildings and the arts.¹⁰³ His political contribution was in line with his learning and concerns. He sought balance and peace, between the rivalling factions of Northern Italy without recourse to the Holy Roman Empire. After his long life he was awarded the title, *Pater Patriae*, Father of the Country.

Lorenzo de Medici, later to be known as Lorenzo il Magnifico, grew up to be one of Italy's most accomplished poets, a patron of writers, philosophers and artists, and a wily politician at the forefront of the Renaissance. His grip on Florence was through direct and indirect means. Kenneth Clark observes, 'Florence had ceased to be a republic in anything but name, and for almost thirty years it was virtually ruled by that extraordinary character, Lorenzo de Medici.'¹⁰⁴ In their own way the de Medicis reflected the expansion of thought and life that Florence as a city represented. They became an enormously powerful

¹⁰¹ I draw from Kristeller's works on the Florentine Renaissance to inform me: *Renaissance Thought, The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains, Renaissance Thought 2, Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*.

¹⁰² I have chiefly drawn my information from Mallet, M. 'Politics and Society 1250-1600', and Holmes, G. 'Renaissance Culture'. In, *The Oxford History of Italy*, G Holmes. (ed.) New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

¹⁰³ Brunelleschi was responsible for many buildings in Florence, Donatello, Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi, (Botticelli's first painting master), were confidantes of Cosimo, and amongst others in his patronage.

¹⁰⁴ Clark, Kenneth. *Civilisation A Personal View*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1969, p. 106.

patrician force and for several generations were dynamically involved in all aspects of the city's life.

Interwoven through the development of Botticelli's art is the influence of the de Medici family, and formative to both, was the influence Marsilio Ficino. Ficino was intimately connected with the de Medicis as that of a friend and counsel. His father had been Cosimo de Medici's physician and Cosimo recognized Ficino's scholastic gifts and peaceable disposition early on. He picked out Ficino at the age of fourteen to become the director of his long held plan to establish a Platonic academy in Florence. Cosimo's son, Piero, who with less prominence followed the path of his father, employed Ficino as the tutor of his son, Lorenzo.

Botticelli was brought up in the thick of the emerging High Renaissance, but in artisan circles. With true Renaissance enquiry and nurture Botticelli's father had sent his son to be taught painting by Fra Filippo Lippi, after failed attempts to engage him in a scholarly education. Botticelli only wanted to draw and even his work in his brother's goldsmith workshop didn't answer his artistic needs. The Lippi studio was close to the de Medici palace and Botticelli was, no doubt, acquainted with the brothers, Lorenzo and Giuliano¹⁰⁵, from his youth. Later Lorenzo was to become the patron of Botticelli, and surrounded by the court of the de Medicis, Botticelli produced ambitious paintings, *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus*,¹⁰⁶ that broke new ground, absorbing the diverse philosophical and poetical discussion as well as the flamboyant life style of the leading Florentine family. It is with *Primavera* that the particular link with Ficino and Botticelli is recorded. Ficino spent hours discussing the progress of the painting with Botticelli and Ficino became almost as important a figure in the development of Botticelli's thought as he had been for Lorenzo.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Giuliano was murdered by a rivalling papist family, the Pazzi's. The de Medici's retaliation caused them to be expelled from the city in 1494. However Lorenzo's popularity was such that he was reinstated and governed Florence until he died.

¹⁰⁶ However, it was for Lorenzo's cousin, Lorenzino, that Botticelli produced his groundbreaking paintings, *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus*.

¹⁰⁷ Formaggio, Dino. *Botticelli*, London: Oldbourne Press, 1961, p. 13.

Florence was a thriving international banking city by 1400. Botticelli lived in a culture where science and innovation were visually conveyed and expressed. The Florentines were fascinated by the uses of various materials and by the exploration of substances. Renaissance Florence made discoveries and generated trade. There were cultural and commercial exchanges of all kinds. It was a city where philosophical thought, secular and religious, was discussed alongside rhetoric, poetry recitations, music making and art. Life was expressed in the delight and manufacture of artefacts in gold and in glass. Banquets and pageantry displayed skills and artistry, scholarship and opulence. In this milieu Botticelli visually presents the mystical.

Originally founded by the Romans along the banks of the river Arno, Florence created its wealth from the wool and silk trade. Through their own special history and turbulent relations with the church the Florentines had become an autonomous society. The disposition to govern themselves had no doubt been engendered by their determination and success in holding out against the Holy Roman Empire, but it was also due to the way the city grew from its mercantile wealth and its famous guilds, *Arti*.¹⁰⁸ Its trade and international banking dealt with an oblique but potent exchange of foreign learning and influence. This growth was echoed by the first reinforcement of the city walls by Matilda, the sole surviving Countess of Tuscany, in 1078. The walls were erected in gratitude for the support the city had given her against the invasion of Henry IV, and further speedy enlargements of the walls took place in the twelfth century. Florence had displayed its independent commitment to hold out against invasion by being the only Tuscan city to offer Matilda support. In the year of her death in 1115, Matilda granted Florence independence. During this time of great expansion many new religious orders, Franciscan, Dominican, Servite and Carmelite, established themselves within these recently enlarged and fortified city walls. The religious orders built vast complexes of convents for work and study, and many more churches, within the medieval network of Florence's streets. The urban layout of medieval Florence spread out like a patterned carpet with occasional breaks devoted to religious institutions.¹⁰⁹ By now the populace of Florence had formed a

¹⁰⁸ 'Arti, (Guilds), were formed in 1200 to promote the interests of the traders and bankers in the face of conflict between the pro-imperial faction, the Ghibelline, and the pro-papal faction, the Guelphs.' *The Rough Guide to Italy*, London: Rough Guides Ltd, 2001.

¹⁰⁹ Ingersoll, Richard. *Cities and History*, www.owlnet.rice.edu/~arch343/lecture9.html [4.6.09.]

commune made up of secular leaders drawn from the major social groups of nobles, merchants and foot soldiers, and had become one of the first republican cities in Europe.

Looking across the city from the height of Piazzale Michelangelo,¹¹⁰ it is Brunelleschi's dome of the Duomo, Giotto's bell tower, and the monument to civic power, the tower of the formidable Palazzo Vecchio,¹¹¹ that dominate the timeless, red tiled roof tops. Punctuating the inner city skyline in the fourteenth century were high towers originally built for military purposes; later the towers were lowered and became homes, or part of a palace, from which their owners governed the surrounding area. Florence had been divided into quarters soon after Matilda's walls were built. The quarters were named after the city gates, and with the growth of mercantile wealth suburbs were established around these entrances, and along the banks of the Arno. The expanding numbers of immigrants from the countryside came to work mainly in the textile trade. In this prosperity and relative calm the vernacular tongue evolved as a literary language in Florence earlier than in other parts of Italy. Amongst the educated Florentines philosophy and theology were debated enthusiastically. However, the university, founded in the fourteenth century, was not a predominate force. Florence was open to intellectual currents that came from a different disposition of thought, which was discussed in the chancery of the republic and in private circles of the leading families.

Cosimo de Medici was one of the first generation of Renaissance humanists. His intellect was steeped in the Platonist doctrines: the eternal presence of universal forms in the mind of God, the immediate comprehension of these ideas by human reason, and the incorporeal nature and the immortality of the human soul.¹¹² Cosimo's conception of establishing an academy dedicated to the discussion and expansion of Plato's thought existed for years as a group of learned men, poets, musicians and artists who circulated around the Medici court. When the academy was eventually housed in the Villa Careggi

¹¹⁰ Piazzale Michelangelo is situated on the hillside south of the Arno and west of the city. Its location offers a panorama of Florence.

¹¹¹ Palazzo Vecchio was built to celebrate the political success of the guilds at the end of the thirteenth century and was the seat of the government of Florence, the *Signoria*. The members of the *Signoria* were chosen from the ranks of the guilds. Later it became the home to the de Medicis.

¹¹² See intro. *Plato, The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters*, Edith Hamilton and Hunting Cairns. (eds.) New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1961.

in 1462, it carried on as it always had done, mostly in discourse of a much broader nature than that of more sober academic institutions. Under Ficino's directorship games and the liberal arts were included as part of the comparatively relaxed curriculum and sociable life style. Ficino's notion that the academy should offer the experience of the original Platonic school by the banks of the Illisus guided the nature of his own directorship. The banks of the Arno supplied a similar idyll in those days in which to contemplate and to enquire. The Academy was renowned in Europe for the assembly of brilliant minds and became a place of pilgrimage where learning and counsel was sought from Ficino who was, as is evident from his letters, an exceptional communicator.¹¹³ True to Cosimo's foresight and Ficino's intellect the academy evolved to fill the gap between the dogmatic theology that was based on Aristotelian scholasticism and the, hitherto, overshadowed metaphysics of Plato. The academy established philosophical discourse where the diverse strains of learning in line with the humanist scholarship were considered as viable truths. It was to this renowned centre of learning that Pico della Mirandola, a notable free thinker of the Renaissance, travelled to seek counsel with Ficino. Ficino was so inspired by his discourse with Pico on the assimilation and broadening of Platonic thought by the Neoplatonist, Plotinus, that he immediately set to work on a translation of Plotinus' *Enneads*.

Pico della Mirandola's exceptional capacity for learning and his lively mind may have been immortalized by Andrea Verrocchio (1435-1488) in his painting *Tobias and the Angel* (fig. 7),¹¹⁴ as the figure of the archangel, Raphael. The fair curls and height of this figure that, with a radiant face turns in conversation to an animated Tobias, are thought to be a portrait of Pico at the time of his stay in Florence.¹¹⁵ The apocryphal subject matter too reflects Pico's own philosophy. Thought that avidly explored all aspects of pagan and religious beliefs, and ancient languages, in his conviction that spiritual and philosophic

¹¹³ Cited online, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*. Vol. 1., London: Fellowship of The School of Economic Science, 1975. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marsilio_Ficino [18.09.06.]

¹¹⁴ Andrea Verrocchio, *Tobias and the Angel*, 1470, National Gallery, London.

¹¹⁵ This may be a fanciful, but a poetic suggestion of Walter Pater's, 'a young man, not unlike the archangel Raphael, as the Florentines of that age depicted him in his wonderful walk with Tobit...' In *The Renaissance, Studies in Art and Poetry*, London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1925, p. 37.

knowledge stems from a diversity of God's creation, not at variance with each other.¹¹⁶ Although Ficino and Pico's conceptions differ somewhat, they were, in a modern sense, collaborators in thought. Ficino maintains in his metaphysics the dignity of man at the centre of the universe and 'man's universality reflected in his relation to all parts of the universe and in his unlimited aspirations.'¹¹⁷ Pico sets man free from the hierarchy of principles and substances, inherited from medieval thought. Man's dignity is not considered in his universality, because he is detached from a hierarchy, man 'can move upward and downward according to his free will.'¹¹⁸ Pico represents a shift in the systems of thought. In *Tobias and the Angel*, we see a dialogue taking place, enlightened by the manner in which the two figures encounter one another, responsive, different and spirited. They are, in fact, communicating what they know to each other, listening, imparting and directing from their very different realms of existence. And in perfect accord as they walk along, lightly engaged, giving and receiving. The painting, produced by the studio of Andrea del Verrocchio hangs in the National Gallery beside *Mystic Nativity* and at a right angle to it. On the other side of Botticelli's Nativity hangs Fra Filippo Lippi's large painting of *The Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome and Dominic* (1485). Botticelli had learnt his craft in both these studios. This corner displays a pocket of the varying aspects of Renaissance thought; the apocryphal story from the Book of Tobit in Verrocchio's painting; the deep meditation of ancient esoteric thought and the new Christian logos in Botticelli's Nativity, to the sensual aspect of a figurative narrative in Lippi's *Virgin and Child*. *Tobias and the Angel* presents the participation of knowledge with an encounter of the unknown. The spirited figures explore love and expectancy. As Clark points out, the humanist ideals were more clearly reflected in art than in any philosophical doctrine.¹¹⁹ Essentially humanist enquiry was a cultural influence that permeated thought and offered a fresh look at ancient knowledge.

¹¹⁶ Centuries later Weil sought too to find the transcendent wisdom in the diversity of religious traditions and beliefs.

¹¹⁷ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought 2, Papers on Humanism and the Arts*, p. 108.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 109.

¹¹⁹ Kenneth Clarke describes the Florentines, 'They were curious, they were extremely intelligent, and they had, to a supreme degree, the power to make their thoughts visible...the Florentines loved beauty.' *Civilization*, London: BBC, 1996, p 101.

The term *studia humanitatis* was used by Cicero and other Roman authors to refer to a liberal and literary education and was reinstated by the fourteenth century scholars to describe the overall and extensive study of the Renaissance humanists.¹²⁰ Although the backbone of their education reflected the late medieval classical education of grammar, logic and rhetoric, known as the *Trivium*, and the *Quadrivium*¹²¹ (the liberal arts), the humanists included history, poetry and moral philosophy in their curriculum. The defining difference was that the Renaissance humanists added a comprehensive knowledge of ancient literature in their discovery and passion for the Greek language. Whereas medieval scholarship had been in the direct tradition of Roman antiquity, with learning and communication entirely carried out in Latin and within the Catholic Church.¹²² They predominately associated themselves with Plato as a reaction to Aristotelianism and set about deciphering and bringing to light ancient Greek texts as well as the ancient pagan philosophy and the theology that preceded Plato.

A profound change had taken place in intellectual enquiry in Western Europe from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, as Greek texts translated into Latin by Arabian scholars became available. The most notable scholars being the Arabic commentaries on Aristotle by Avicenna (Ibn Sena) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd), two major ninth century Arabian commentators and followers of Aristotle. These commentaries, as well as Arabian science and philosophy, were significant in the formation of the Florentine Platonism. So in Europe there was a growing corpus of scholars whose study fuelled both philosophical and scientific learning. The Renaissance humanist expanded on this influx of knowledge. Their work in uncovering these texts revealed a knowledge that had been ‘unacknowledged’ or unknown in the study of the medieval scholars. Historically, the initial steps of a sense of archaeology occurred through the uncovering of text in ancient palimpsests. Paul Kristeller, traces the first indications of a sense of literature, as opposed

¹²⁰ Petrarch (1304-1374), poet and thinker, laid the foundations of humanism.

¹²¹ ‘The two parts of the medieval curriculum: The *Trivium*...grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, the last ranging from bare logic to the combination of pagan and Christian philosophy that led to Scholasticism, and *Quadrivium*...geometry, including some geography, arithmetic, astronomy and music. As late as the seventeenth century the exercises contained in the *Rhetores Graeci* were used in the schools of Europe.’ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. M. Cary. (ed.) Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949.

¹²² The Middle Ages were concerned with reconciling pagan classics with Christianity, but this was mostly carried out within the Catholic church and in Latin.

to documentation, developed by the humanist scholar as they explored ways in which to transcribe the language of one culture to the language and culture of another. In the margins of the manuscripts that he was engaged in translating, the Florentine translator wrote notes. Kristeller picks out a delicate, but profound effect of learning, that is a diffusion of knowledge, spread across a vast region of lands and cultures, readily responded and added to by the humanist scholar.¹²³ What we identify as the clarity of forms and expression, the telling detail and the elegance of presentation, characteristic of Renaissance art, is a reflection of the humanist approach to learning. Significantly this new learning, explored for its own sake and often pursued by individual study, was not subordinated to religious and theological doctrine. Thus the secular became amalgamated, or represented, within philosophical and theological concerns. Many of the humanists became teachers and in their own way carried on a rhetorical tradition that displayed their ability to orate and write.¹²⁴ The dialogue that the Renaissance humanists had with the past was an essential stimulus, not only to their own presentation of their scholarship and identity, but also in the cultural and intellectual climate of Florence.

Botticelli presents in *Mystic Nativity* layers of thought. Behind and through the cave, which is no doubt a reference to Plato's metaphor of enlightenment,¹²⁵ we see a wood of little upright trees, topped with dark foliage that sways in the breeze. The trees are set against the light green of sunlit grass. The ancient world is viewed in its vibrancy as a living, growing presence that surrounds the events on earth. We are directed subtly to acknowledge the ground from which the trees grow and from which the cave has been formed. The animals too are part of this archetypal vista, but are also portrayed as strangely in the process of rising from it. The ass has stepped onto a rock to feed, and the ox's gaze is beyond the picture frame. As a further stage of enlightenment takes place we note the introduction of the written word. On the roof of the stable angels sing from reading a missal, and inscribed banners flow from the palms the angels hold. Most

¹²³ See Kristeller, *The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains*.

¹²⁴ The humanists reformed handwriting, and what we know as our Roman characters was based on the Carolingian minuscule, which they had mistaken for early Roman script.

¹²⁵ See 'The Republic' Bk. VII, 514a in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters*.

obvious, though, is the proclamation written in ancient Greek letters at the top of the painting that invites us to read *Mystic Nativity* as a page from a book.¹²⁶

Displayed in showcases at the Dominican convent of San Marco are large parchment pages that must have been pored over by the Renaissance scholar as we do now, wondering at the written note, or the versals¹²⁷ written in rich black ink - an observable phenomenon of the script displaying the vitality of learning. Greek learning was rediscovered through contact with Byzantium. The flow of academics, manuscripts and icons from Constantinople had been taking place over the centuries that this centre of Greek culture had been threatened by a Turkish invasion. It is interesting to note that there was a concerted effort by humanist scholars, and Byzantine intellectuals, to safely deposit ancient manuscripts in Latin, Greek and other languages, in Italian libraries, as in Florence, where they formed through copious copies, the basis of the first books.¹²⁸ Some of the first manuscripts of polyphonic music and plainchant are also laid out in the San Marco library. The development of the stave lines in the twelfth century transformed the availability of music. With the ability to write the note on a stave each sung part could be transported to new choristers without the human voice to carry it, much in the same way as early the manuscripts carried ancient knowledge. Botticelli's art explored the excitement and the contemplation of just such a communication through a variety of images. The angels dance a step like a note, and further down, behind the back of Joseph's iconic curved form, we see a group of learned men, their luxuriant hair crowned with olive.

It was from Cosimo de Medici's collection of Byzantine manuscripts that San Marco's library had been fed. Cosimo de Medici had his own private chapel at the convent, where later in Lorenzo de Medici's day, Girolamo Savonarola, a notable protagonist in the history of Florence's troubled times, presided as the prior. Ficino's library also contained a mass of early Byzantine parchment. And through that melting pot of influence,

¹²⁶ See fn 65 p.19.

¹²⁷ Versal is a calligraphic term for large letters based on Roman capitals. They are as much drawn as written, and are used to designate the beginning of a verse or piece of text.

¹²⁸ From *Byzantine Manuscript Sources*, by Paul Hassall online: www.fordhamedu/byz/byz-mss-art.html [09.09.09.]

discovery and decipherment, a clear, delineating and detailed aspect of thought becomes apparent, the exploration of the humanists of Florence. So we see a transition of thought distilled in *Mystic Nativity*, which instills as well, a sense of seeing beyond. Jonathan Jones observed, 'His greatest paintings don't just illustrate myth, but distil it into a pure substance that cannot be translated back into words...' ¹²⁹

Ficino's philosophy particularly explored this influx and synthesis of ancient knowledge and Ficino practiced medicine, astrology, philosophy and theology. He had a deep knowledge of musical theory and was a practising musician. The translation of ancient texts and well as an instinctive feeling for sound, scales and harmony, no doubt, led to his love of poetry. Music and dance were significant features of classical learning and were understood not as separate arts but as elements of certain types of lyric and dramatic poetry.¹³⁰ Both Plato and Aristotle employed this sense of 'music', derived from the Greek term for the Muses, and in so doing kept the current of Pythagorean thought active. Pythagoras (c 569-475 BC), with the apocryphal writings of Zoroaster, Hermes and Trismegistus represented early pagan philosophy and theology, and Ficino identified this ancient thought as preparing the way for Plato.¹³¹

It is related how Ficino picked up his lyre, when at a meeting of writers that had become tense and depressed in discussing the threat of a Turkish invasion, and altered the prevailing mood of gloom to one of optimism.¹³² Perhaps Ficino's interest in the mystical and the magical attributes of ritual manifests in this narrative — it certainly points to his interest in the Orphic Mysteries.¹³³ This story indicates the continual turn to the lyrical,

¹²⁹ Jones, Jonathan. In a review for the Botticelli Exhibition, 2003, Musée du Luxembourg, Paris.
Arts.guardian.co.uk/critic/feature [10.07.2004]

¹³⁰ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought 2, Papers on Humanism and the Arts*, p. 168-169

¹³¹ Ibid. p. 64.

¹³² See *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Intro. Vol. 1. London: The Fellowship of The School of Economic Science, 1975. Online <http://easyweb.co.uk/~orpheus/ficino.htm> [10.10.2007]

¹³³ 'Orpheus, the founder of Orphism. His fame in Greek myth as a singer is due to the poems in which the Orphic doctrines are set out. He was able to charm whom he wished, the trees, wild beasts and even stones were attracted to him. Orpheus has been represented on board the Argo with a lyre in his arms. In the catacombs, where he is painted as singing, the Christians referred to the representation as the Prince of Peace, of whom Isaiah speaks.' *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949.

which Ficino sought in his philosophy. It also brings to light the lyrical as a means to true insight. The poetic and the lyrical are pursued in Ficino's metaphysics as a means to the activity of thought. The ambience of the Platonic academy and of Ficino's own demeanour and thoughts was one of accord — accord between individuals and accord throughout the diversity of beliefs. And apparent too was the seeking of sharing of knowledge. It was not the power through an individual's knowledge that was divine, it was the harmony nurtured through responsive minds and thoughts. The love that arose between those learning from one another was what Ficino recognized as divine love.¹³⁴ He sees the collaboration between the attributes of knowledge and love as a special role in the development of the soul. 'By thinking and loving an object, the soul establishes a kind of unity with it, and in a sense acts upon it and transforms it.'¹³⁵ The transformation is seen as a dynamic of thinking. You could say that philosophy, theology, the arts and the experience of life was all geared towards the principles of divinity. Love interacts with the divine and in the philosophy of Ficino. And behind all the study and discourse there was Ficino's fundamental concept that it was through contemplation that the individual nurtures a direct spiritual experience and makes an inner ascent towards God. 'The withdrawal of consciousness into itself becomes a separation of the soul from the body, and the higher vision disclosed to the soul in the experience of meditation becomes a knowledge of the intelligible world.'¹³⁶

Kristeller observes that Ficino adopts certain Christian and personal modifications for the interpretations of this experience, such as the further development of Plato's philosophy in Neoplatonism. This synthesis is visually explored in *Mystic Nativity* as the transition from ancient thought to the new logos, found in the Incarnation of God's word in the Christ child. The layers of thought revealed by a deeper look into Botticelli's painting also reveal Ficino's fascination with another amalgamation of thought. Plotinus reworked the metaphysics of Plato and introduced his own mystical approach. Maria Gatti clearly observes that *The Enneads* of Plotinus explore the background to a new inspiration and

¹³⁴ Known as Platonic love. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, p. 47-48.

¹³⁵ Ibid. p. 97.

¹³⁶ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought 2*, p. 94.

unity of the ancient doctrines.¹³⁷ This approach was termed Neoplatonist by modern scholars to distinguish the broadening and reviewing of Platonism that took place. From the genre of Neoplatonism Ficino developed his own esoteric interests.

Plotinus' thought entered into the realm that fell between metaphysics and the mystical. He proposed a complex cosmology that consisted of three main hypostases; the One, the Intelligence and the Soul that in a productive unity enable the emanation of all existence. The One, in Plotinus' thought is so obscure as to be unidentifiable. 'It is everything and nothing, everywhere and nowhere...the centre of a vibrant conception of reality many of whose facets resist philosophical analysis.'¹³⁸ John Bussanich writes,

For Plotinus, however, Intellect cannot grasp the One in itself because it is beyond being and form. The potential Intellect is in fact actualized or perfected by contemplating or 'looking at' the One...but what it sees is not, so to speak, the One itself but the image of the One its inchoate vision has multiplied...The products of this fragmented vision are i] the actuality of pure thought, *noêsis*, and ii] the multiplicity of forms of being.¹³⁹

My own fascination with Plotinus' thought is laid out in this quote. Bussanich realizes three distinguishing concepts of Plotinus' philosophy; the principal of emanation is not simply causal, but also contemplative; the multi faceted nature of this supreme principle and the production of pure thought as an operation between innumerable and developing elements. In this last aspect this thought touches upon phenomenology that was to be developed centuries later in Husserl's philosophy. It also has a bearing on aspects of Ettinger's research regarding the matrix and the forming and transforming of subjectivities, which I explore in my next chapter, *Hay as Membrane*. But here Plotinus withdraws from the abstract, so important in metaphysics of scholasticism, to the contemplation of matter as a means to the divine. Plotinus conceived contemplation as a force that held the unity of the One, the Intelligence and the Soul together. Contemplation

¹³⁷ Gatti, Maria. 'Plotinus: the Platonic tradition and the foundation of Neoplatonism.' In Gerson, Lloyd (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge: CUP, 1996

¹³⁸ Bussanich, John. 'Plotinus's Metaphysics of the One'. In Gerson, Lloyd. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge: CUP, 1996, p. 38.

¹³⁹ Ibid. p. 52.

is an act whereby the object of contemplation empowers the one who has viewed it.¹⁴⁰ Ficino raised the awareness in Florence that art was much more than artisanship; it reminded the soul of its divine origins.

Thus far *Mystic Nativity* delivers — in the structure of the painting, in a reading of the images and in ‘the rhythm of detail’,¹⁴¹ a diversity and a transition of thought. We can see Ficino’s Platonism in the salvation of the redeemed souls towards the divine. The narrative is placed in horizontal zones that progress upward, from earth to heaven and downward from heaven to earth. The angels dangle crowns and gain weight as the depiction of them descends. We can recognize the stages that the soul may travel through, accompanied by angels at each level, as Ficino’s synthesized cosmology.¹⁴² Ficino’s hierarchy of ethereal beings, whose purpose it is to illuminate our way to the divine includes his distinction of the gradations of air. These grades have accompanying manifestations of their airy levels. Heaven is the celestial fire. The upper air, ignited by heaven, is the aether. The middle air is pure air, and the lower air is vaporous and impure.¹⁴³ These are distinct in *Mystic Nativity*. The strange little stream and dusty cracks that create the lower platform of the painting denotes the lower air, as does the appearance of steely grey, diminutive devils. The clarity of the view, through the cave to the landscape beyond, signifies pure air. The request of the angels to look at the infant Christ, and the gaze of the angels who read music from a book as they kneel on the thatched roof, also indicates clarity of sight in the transmission of knowledge. Above, other angels dance in the rising blueness of the aether, lit up by the gold of the celestial fire.

The Nativity, placed within the threshold to a cave surrounded by a wood and the prominence of the animals reminds us of ancient religious deities as Kristeller reflects, ‘In this implicit tolerance toward other religions, Ficino comes very close to a concept of

¹⁴⁰ Moore, Edward. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/p/plotinus.htm#SSH2c.iii> [16.06.09]

¹⁴¹ ‘...the *rhythm of detail*, which finds its justification with which each detail is conceived’. Venturi, Lionello. *Botticelli*, London: Phaidon Press, 1971, p. 5.

¹⁴² I refer to Allen, Michael. ‘Socrates’ Inspiration’. In *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino, A Study of His Phaedrus Commentary, Its Sources and Genesis*, London: University of California Press © by The Regents of the University of California, 1984.

¹⁴³ Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino*, p. 12.

natural religion.’¹⁴⁴ But central to this painting is participation of the soul. This Nativity was painted for private devotion and, with this in mind, Ficino’s concept of the human soul is pivotal in a reading of the structure of *Mystic Nativity*. Ficino, departing from Plato and Plotinus, places the human soul at the centre of the universe. In this the humanist doctrine of the dignity of man is influential, but what Ficino adds is his concept that the position of man in the universe not only has a bearing on man, but on the universe. Ficino seeks the relationship between forces and affinities that hold the universe in place as part of the development of the soul in the quest for divinity. His view incorporates a ceaseless movement of relation between airs, ethereal beings (*demons*),¹⁴⁵ and substances.

The soul is the greatest of all miracles of nature, for it combines all things, is the centre of all things, and possesses the forces of all. Therefore it may be rightly called the centre of nature, the middle term of all things, the bond and juncture of the universe.¹⁴⁶

The strains of learning from the east, so exciting to the humanists in their uncovering of ancient texts, play a part in the formation of Ficino’s cosmology and metaphysics. My interest has been the nature and manner of how the divine was understood to integrate with human aspirations at the time that Botticelli painted *Mystic Nativity*. Through Ficino I find the place that contemplation, as an active source of revelation, takes in the reappraisal of ancient knowledge. This chapter paints a background to my investigation in subsequent chapters, into the evocation of Botticelli’s visual elements — elements that promote an understanding of an alternative inscription written, or rather, painted, at the heart of this painting.

¹⁴⁴ Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, p. 49.

¹⁴⁵ The idea of a personal demon that corresponds to the attribute of a personal deity became subsumed in the Christian notion of a guardian angel. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino*, p. 18-19.

¹⁴⁶ Kristeller, transcription from Ficino’s *Opera omnia*. Cited in, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, p.43.

2. Hay as Membrane



Sandro Botticelli, *Mystic Nativity*, 1500, detail.

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: I'd like to ask you a question about the clarity of the feminine. At one point you spoke of the feminine as a flight before light.

Emmanuel Lévinas: In other words: not to show oneself. A flight before demonstration.

BLE: I took it as a metaphor for a kind of movement of disappearance. Not to be fixated by the look. For me, in the Matrix, a kind of withdrawing/contracting (*rétrance*) before the light of consciousness leads to meeting with an unknown other. Is there an interiority that is not the passage of the infinitely exterior? What would Eurydice say? Can the subject-women have a privileged access to the feminine?

EL: I think that the heart of the heart, the deepest of the feminine is dying in giving life, in bringing life into the world. I am not emphasizing *dying*, but, on the contrary, *future*.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ From 'Time is the Breath of the Spirit: Emmanuel Lévinas in conversation with Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger', Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993. In *Looking back to the future, essays on art life and death*, Griselda Pollock, The Netherlands: G+B Arts International, 2001, p. 160.

This chapter contemplates the intensity peculiar to an extraordinary but fundamental event. Pinned to the wall in front of my desk I have a black and white dogged eared photocopy — an enlarged detail of *Mystic Nativity*. The grey inky tones of the copy provide both the sense of a document and the intimacy of glimpsing deeply into an undeciphered world. I look up and down from the photocopy to my writing. What is it that pervades as stillness? Is it Mary's transparent veil that echoes the luxuriant fall of her hair? Or is the light that falls on the green grass growing beyond the trees that evokes a sense of distance yet warmth. Or is it a defined stillness caught in the clear gaze of the ox and the inner contemplation of the Virgin? I reflect as I type and look again at these images swinging back and forth between the senses and abstraction. Caught in between, but constant and vital, is another world of wonder — one that Irigaray would declare as immanent and that Lévinas would refer to as the face of the Other. And Ettinger reveals this Other as an aspect of the matrix, '*rétrance*'. My own observation draws upon the quality I find inherent in this painting that of looking through the visual to haptic sensations and abstract thought. In *Mystic Nativity* I am presented with the unfathomable depths of contemplation.

Botticelli depicts both the conditions of the birth of Christ and God's word incarnate in the body of the infant; the prosaic and intimate circumstances of a birth and the deeply embedded process of language entering into a symbolic realm. My reflection upon Botticelli's intimate zone of the Nativity, where each element is in close proximity, but depicted in its singularity, has revealed to me an almost tangible presence. For this reason I have referred to the hay as an active, but silent manifestation of this presence and have likened it to a membrane, infinitely light, transient and connective. To elaborate on my interpretation I start with a review of the development of my study from my initial inspiration to explore Lévinas' concept of the Other. My practice and the event of *Honey Stream* ran parallel to his description of an encounter with the Other which he metaphorically described as *la caress* in *Time and the Other*, 'The caress is a mode of the subject's being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact... The caress is the anticipation of this pure future [*avenir*], without content.'¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 89.

Lévinas develops his work from exploring the feminine Other in his metaphor, as an erotic relationship to an ethical relationship, a relationship that is accomplished in desire, a concern for justice and language, which challenges the complacency of the self. These concerns also indicate the infinitely delicate nature of the balance between the Other and the self, and throughout Lévinas' work he strives in his language to accommodate such a delicacy. His philosophy too shifts from the mediation of phenomenology to a metaphysical ethics. However, his first conception of the anticipatory desire, towards the transcendental feminine Other is retained in his later conceptions of the 'idea of the infinite', 'metaphysical desire' and 'the relation to the face' found in *Totality and Infinity*.¹⁴⁹ Lévinas incorporates in his notions about the Other an 'incommensurable' aspect, as Cathryn Vasseleu puts it, that is, in a sense, irrevocable. His approach is to put ethics, the responsibility for the 'incommensurable Other', before 'philosophical thought and the primacy it gives to the self.'¹⁵⁰ This is a pivotal difference in Lévinas' thought that heralds his investigations into the dynamics of the Other and further, the divine. It incorporates his concept of the 'future' that is intrinsic to his relationship with the Other, from the anticipatory aspect of the caress to his quest, 'What is there other than being?' explored in *Totality and Infinity*. Lévinas own movement of back and forth in his practice of writing, his experience of life¹⁵¹ and his inclusion of ancient texts into his what could be described as a spiritual existentialism of the twentieth century preludes the articulation of an unarticulated operation — a matrixial dimension. Conceived of as an external encounter, and consequently metaphysical, Lévinas' enquiry constantly reforms itself into the future. Ettinger's query, 'Is there an interiority that is not the passage of the infinitely exterior? What would Eurydice say? Can the subject-women have a privileged access to the feminine?'¹⁵² introduces an antidote to the exclusively external nature of the Other, considered by Lévinas, by the inclusion of internal sub-symbolic and un-named realms of knowledge. This further acknowledgement of the feminine, a relationship that was partially articulated by Lévinas' thought, has deepened my response to the relationship

¹⁴⁹ See Lévinas, Emmanuel. 'Metaphysics and Transcendence', *Totality and Infinity*, A. Lingis, (trans.) USA: Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 51.

¹⁵⁰ Vasseleu, Cathryn. *Textures of Light*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 75.

¹⁵¹ Lévinas was interred in a prisoner of war camp during the second world war and members of his family were killed by the SS.

¹⁵² Ettinger, 'Time is the Breath of the Spirit...', In Pollock, *Looking back to the future...*p.160.

that I have with my practice. But it is in the fragments gathered from Lévinas — an overall sense of vulnerability at the heart of philosophy that he initiates, thereby loosening the grip of a metaphysical paradigm lodged in a masculine perspective,¹⁵³ that I have found intriguing. So that at the heart of Botticelli's Nativity painting I see too this loosening of concepts, the hay makes visible another dynamic at work amidst the metaphysical thought that informs this painting.

But of course Lévinas' terms are provocative, a provocation he makes use of in his writing method, by a juxtaposition of terms as well as in the framing of his notions of the feminine in the temporal and the external. The ensuing debate about his terms from feminist philosophers has produced a deep and fascinating enquiry into the ethical notions of the Other and the use of language. It brings the place of the feminine to the forefront of philosophy and of the sacred. *Honey Stream* (fig. 3, 4) was produced with these thoughts in mind. In a formal, late Victorian foyer I suspended a fine thread of honey. It flowed from a copper pipe that reached into the high central roof space of the entrance hall. The honey fell onto the glass top of a showcase and a spherical disc of gold formed. Tiny air bubbles glistened in the sweet stickiness, and an almost inaudible sound of splattering occurred as the honey hit the centre of the expanding golden disc. The honey fell through the night, in the morning the disc had flattened further into a thin layer and spread to the rim of the showcase. The distorted irregular shape was like a slice of amber.

The conditions under which an encounter with the Other become articulated framed this work. The vertical drop of the very fine, sweet thread, transient and barely visible was to manifest a sense of alignment to a hidden aspect. It was an event that engaged a haptic sense of space through the senses distilled by the light and architectural space of the foyer. But it was also in the collective endeavour that this work operated through, even when the honey thread fell at night and the high up blue drum slowly emptied in the quiet of the locked building. From beehive to rural industrial estate, from technical help and the polishing of the brass frame, it was an expanse of contribution that produced this quiet work. *Honey Stream* opened up for me a further dynamic, but not one I could define,

¹⁵³ Ziarek, Ewa. See 'The Ethical Passions of Emmanuel Lévinas.' Cited in Tina Chanter, (ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*. USA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, p. 94

except through a sense of grace, and this proved to be the impetus for my further research into *Art and the Divine*.

From the beginning of my studies the writings of Simone Weil have been formative. Weil, who is recognized in spiritual terms as a mystic, as well as a scholar of philosophy and a political activist, also precursors in her thought the diversity of change in the art world that came in the 1960s. Weil's examination of desire, time and space in spiritual terms presented the art world with new considerations and, for some, the confirmation of a new dimension with which to engage in contemporary practice.¹⁵⁴ Her concepts of void and of grace translated into the emptying out of sculptural forms. The opening up of the art object¹⁵⁵ and the reappraisal of what art was, and what art could be, expanded the realization of thought.

Weil's habit of writing in aphorisms means that there is no summation of her thinking. Her thoughts are a reflection on varied philosophical and theological sources, from the east and the west, from ancient to contemporary thought, and her aphorisms tend to jolt preconceptions of doctrine.¹⁵⁶ In unravelling the aspects of her thought a concept of Gnostic belief comes to the fore.¹⁵⁷ In this cosmology, the feminine soul moves as a descent to redeem the world. 'Grace is the law of the descending movement.'¹⁵⁸ In another passage Weil again links the feminine to grace, this time as the element of water, and again the movement descends.

God passes through the infinite thicknesses of time and space; his grace changes nothing in the play of those blind forces of necessity and chance...it penetrates our souls as a drop of water

¹⁵⁴ Yehuda Safran declared in reference to *Gravity and Grace*, 'If you want to understand sculpture, read this.' Jon Thompson. 'New times, new thoughts, new sculpture'. In *Gravity and Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture*, London: South Bank Press, 1993.

¹⁵⁵ See Krauss, Rosalind. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. USA: MIT, 1981.

¹⁵⁶ Fielder, Leslie. Intro. In Weil, *Waiting for God*, E. Craufurd (trans.), NY: Harper & Rowe, 1973, p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ 'Gnosticism shares with Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, the concept of creation and redemption as a great drama, focused on man, a drama in which the individual worshiper plays a primary role.' <http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/essays/gnosticism.htm> [11.11. 08]

¹⁵⁸ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 4.

passing through strata without affecting their structure, and there it waits in silence until we consent to become God again.¹⁵⁹

In my own concerns of manifesting momentarily an unseen alignment via the stream of honey, my later reading of Weil revealed elements that the artwork directly touched upon, but that I intellectually had not yet considered. I find certain passages from Weil's religious writings are active in my practice without making themselves apparent except under scrutiny at a later time. Her thought oscillates between the infinite and the poverty of moments, described in her writing by the desire to feel directly. She enters into a haptic appreciation of the infinite so that void and contact are explored not as irretrievably apart, but appreciated variously with different areas of our knowing in which we partially take part.¹⁶⁰

Echoed in Germano Celant's¹⁶¹ term, 'Arte Povera', is his claim that, 'Poor art, preferred essential information.'¹⁶² It is a provocative declaration, both in its political and cultural sense. Arte Povera bypassed the cultural pomp of art, its literal translation being Poor Art. The essential information Celant referred to was the direct information made possible from a complete reversal of artistic intention to the lack of it, from authorship to a multi dimensional and inclusive approach, and from passivity to expressly individual action. The artists sought to bring to the fore a direct experience of art through a renewed philosophy of impoverishment. This led to an unprecedented use of materials and minerals, procedures and phenomena, to the inclusion of animals and various forms of energies. Art was transferred from the gallery wall, and its modernist frame, to engage in the fundamentals of life itself. The term Arte Povera is also peculiarly Italian in origin.¹⁶³ It challenged the social and political systems through a reference to the mystic, St Francis, who is renowned in the Catholic Church for his call to the poor life, his direct mystical encounter with animals and the environment. In the accompanying catalogue to the first major exhibit to include Arte Povera artwork in Britain, *Gravity and Grace, The*

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. Intro. p. xxii

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 23, 24.

¹⁶¹ Germano Celant, b. 1940, the foremost critic and promoter of Arte Povera.

¹⁶² Celant, Germano. 'Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War', 1967. In Christov-Bakargiev, Carolyn (ed.) *Arte Povera*, London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2001, p. 194.

¹⁶³ Lumley, Robert. *Movements in Modern Art, Arte Povera*, London: Tate Publishing, 2004, p14.

Changing Condition of Sculpture 1965-1975, Jon Thompson pays tribute to the impact of Weil's thoughts that were politically provocative and a personal spiritual exploration.¹⁶⁴

The centrality of the art was effectively destroyed and organized perspectives displaced in Arte Povera works. Art could now take place in the home, institutions, and formatively, in the open air. We can see this in Giovanni Anselmo, one of the first artists to be closely associated with the movement, and his use of fundamental forces and substance to challenge the hold of abstract form. He arrests our attention in his art in order that we contemplate the quality of energetic processes. Our individual response to this participates in an unprecedented and unique outcome as we enquire through a haptic sense not at odds with a philosophical sense. We are coaxed by Anselmo's work to take part in energetic forces that are outside of ourselves, and the transition from the bodily to the elemental is rapid, ungraspable and smooth. The poverty, therefore, of Arte Povera lay in the paring down of an empirical encounter to its bare essentials, in which the integrity and particularity of the material becomes a site for contemplation, and a potentiality of what is not seen, as in *Untitled*, 1969, stone suspended...(fig. 5). When I talked to Anselmo, before his opening at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham 2005, he expressed the inherent aspect of grace in the processes of his work. An unseen but active energy that he seeks to instil in, and through, and between, his artwork; the pieces in the gallery upstairs resonating with those placed in the lower gallery. I asked whether we are called upon in his work to take part in this transformation of energy? Anselmo answered by talking about the new piece of work he had created for the Ikon exhibition. The work consisted of granite blocks placed it seemed, at random, on the gallery floor.¹⁶⁵ The stone showed the basic sawn cuts made early on in the process of refining the material. At either end of the slab a row of half moon grooves indicated how the grey stone had been prepared before it had been sawn. The slabs, roughly the size of an old fashioned school desk and a good step up in height, invited a simple response to immediately climb up on them and to walk across from stone to stone. I wondered at their weight placed on the first floor of the gallery. Anselmo talked about the stars; they are always there, whether we see them or not. By stepping onto the blocks we have a different perspective. In that step up, we take

¹⁶⁴ Thompson, Jon, In *Gravity and Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture*, London: South Bank Press, 1992.

¹⁶⁵ Anselmo, Giovanni. *When the stars are coming one span closer*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2005.

one step closer to the unseen constellation. We become one step less heavy. The exhibition reflected another span, from his first work to this latest piece. He affirmed the influence of Weil's spiritual exploration in his practice with a shrug of his shoulders, 'You have understood,' he said.

I, the world, things, life – we are all situations of energy. The point is not to be fixed, but to keep them open and alive – like life processes. Because...to work with energy requires total freedom in choosing materials.¹⁶⁶

Anselmo's retrospective show coincided with the beginning of my studies. The discussion I had with him was part of an intense contact that also took place indirectly. On one occasion I had observed his careful review of the curation of his work taking place the evening before the opening of his show. I was preparing to talk to him and was struck at the time by an unacknowledged communication — at least that was what my quiet insight seemed. We were all wholly there in the brightly lit gallery, the artist and his works, the curator of the gallery and myself, and whilst Anselmo and the gallery director talked, sitting on the floor next to one of the works at pains to understand each other, other subtle communications were taking place amongst elements and thoughts. I had another chance and indirect contact as I travelled back from seeing Jannis Kounellis' retrospective show at Modern Art Oxford.¹⁶⁷ I was aware from a partially overheard and animated appraisal that Anselmo was talking of his compatriots work. It dawned on me as I listened in on the conversation that Anselmo's animation came from his ability to take part in the artwork, and his appraisal was not removed from that initial involvement. The intensity that I noted in the conversations I had overheard, and later in my own with Anselmo, arose from the focus upon a particular transition. This is a kind of concentration that is peculiar to a communication of thought. It is the same intensity that I contemplate in *Mystic Nativity* — from the ass's solid stance upon a rock and our participation in the quiet intensity of the Nativity to a lighter existence that Botticelli makes visible above the roof of the stable. Here the treetops sway beneath the light steps of the angels, the dance gives way — as does the layer of cloud, to a golden transcendence. Stepping up upon the granite blocks in Anselmo's installation resonates too with a spiritual exploration. We orientate ourselves not with gravity but with paradoxical possibilities. We align ourselves imperceptibly as in

¹⁶⁶ From the exhibition guide to his work, *When the stars...* Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2005.

¹⁶⁷ Jannis Kounellis, Modern Art Oxford, 2004.

Weil's metaphor of grace — the passage of water through the layers of earth, with the laws of physics, distance and weightlessness to the infinite. We are, as the alternate title to Anselmo's work indicates, 'Here and There'.

My initial reasons for choosing the *Mystic Nativity* took their impetus from my art practice and centred on the potential energy inscribed in the body of the Christ Child. I had planned to make a large figure of an infant in glass crystal following on from the theoretical concerns that informed *Honey Stream*. Two figures had come to mind as I considered the meaning and terms by which the glass figure of an infant would be significant; a bluish, see-through cherub that offers Christ the cup of salvation high up in the sky as Christ prays in the garden of Gethsemane in a painting by Giovanni Bellini, *Agony in the Garden* (1465) (fig. 8)¹⁶⁸ and Botticelli's pale translucent Christ Child, gesturing with hands and feet, as Mary bows her head in devotion before Him, in *Mystic Nativity* (fig. 9). These figures have a mute strangeness about them in their painted flesh, their stance and shape. Around them an intensity hangs in the air, a suspended moment of sacrifice. The cherub belongs to that realm of angels that are closest to God,¹⁶⁹ and embodied in this see-through figure are the qualities of otherness and the expectation of a whole other language to be known. How has this figure appeared? Has thought produced it? For me the cherub questions the materiality of thought, materializing another realization.

The pale flesh of Botticelli's infant Christ, as he articulates with his hands and kicks his legs, lying on a cascade of white cloth, could well be interpreted through the visual elements that Botticelli employs — especially those images closely surrounding the gesturing Christ child. The attentive ass is already feeding from God's abundance on the hay, while the infant points to his mouth indicating another source of nourishment is about to take place. Christ's teaching is to become our spiritual nourishment, and Mary in her very private devotion has already taken that step towards this new source. The height of her body reflects her link to the divine. The cave and the forest represent the primordial

¹⁶⁸ Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516), *Agony on the Garden*, 1465, National Gallery London.

¹⁶⁹ A hierarchical concept of angels was received through Dionysius the Areopagite who was influenced by the mystical Neoplatonist thought. Israel, Martin. *Angels, Messengers of Grace*, UK: SPCK, 1995, p. 4.

world of nature standing behind the Nativity.¹⁷⁰ The order of man establishes itself in the neatly clipped thatch of the stable roof and the stark upright posts that support it. In fact this visual language establishes and directs our thoughts. But the gesturing hands of the child also indicate another closeness that is formative in our contemplation. The child responds to the benign head of the ass, his curled fingers articulate a direct response to the proximity of ass's muzzle. This intimacy likewise indicates an incarnation taking place.

By tracing my thoughts backwards I clearly see my concern with a particular substance as a parallel manifestation of the formation of subjectivity and thought. But with these thoughts the use of glass crystal in my next project presented far-reaching problems, practically and philosophically. In the end the glass infant became too literal for me. The mechanics of the project and the image itself placed my investigation upon a defined form. The glass may have taken over as a substance, as I had envisaged it, and aspects of the glass figure might have resonated too heavily in a taught language, not of the partially seen and cognized language that I was beginning to become aware of. I came to see that what lay beneath and what was strewn around Botticelli's infant was the focus of my quest. What was the significance of the barely visible litter scattered on the ground from the plentiful fodder in the manger? The language that I was attempting to engage with needed to be more carefully understood. And, as I see now, needed to be deciphered through quite other means. Bellini's blue cherub was already in the sky. He appears not as floating but as standing. One foot flatly placed on nothing steps toward us, the other propels him forward as though he has just stepped through the ether, balancing the chalice with the paten on top with the palm of his right and the light touch of his left hand. Balance and transience are combined.

Botticelli's particular rendering of the hay's fragility, its profusion and spread, and almost undetectable circulation throughout the central space of the Nativity, evokes a presence. The hay comes in and out of our focus as its quality takes a gentle hold of our senses. At the centre of Botticelli's nativity is a woven manger, brimming with its golden strands. The ass bends his head towards the mound of hay as he munches, his mouthful reminiscent of a draft of sparkling water, falling as it does from the sides of his mouth. But the hay returns to dryness again as we begin to pick out the light airiness of its realm.

¹⁷⁰ Foucault, Michel. 'The Prose of the Word'. *The Order of Things*, UK: Routledge Classics, 2002, p. 39

Strands stick through the façade of the manger's side, a seed head brushes against Jesus' hair and more hay against Mary's blue cloak. Randomly criss-crossed underneath the odd wooden arrangement for propping up the baby, we see glimpses of gold at Joseph's feet. The hay is specific to the domesticity of the Holy Family and the animals. It seems, in its delicacy and its bare visibility, to have manifested itself only for the duration of this truly intimate and contemplative moment. The devotion of these painted marks begins to awaken an understanding in us. The 'barely seen' has a nature all of its own.

In Botticelli's depiction of hay I have found a way to discern what could be described as the otherness of thought. That is, the otherness of the thought that has been made visible in *Mystic Nativity*. In this quest I attempt to trace the stirrings of knowledge, from the exterior world of learning to the interior appreciation of our unformed, but nonetheless profound development that pervades consciousness. This is a consciousness that we do not shed from ourselves when we enter the illuminated outside world; it is a realm of knowing that nurtures our intellect continually, but its source seems forgotten in an instant, and too elusive to trace.¹⁷¹

I experimented with making the form of a child out of wire (*fig. 10*).¹⁷² The wire opened out the space in which to consider another mode of inscription, not upon a surface or within a substance, but as part of a process. As such the figure was partially made, and I can remember the significance I felt that my own physical movements in taking the photograph were integral to that figure. I lay on the floor and extended my arm holding the wire form against the light of a window, in my other hand I held a heavy 35ml camera. The fleshy quality of my hand, like a dark bud, against the almost abstract linear whirling wire manifested a transitory, but deeply felt, interaction — an interaction between what is hidden beneath the physical, looking for the potential of writing in a linear form, a trace of unarticulated knowledge.

Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger's theory of the matrix, a symbolic network that relates to a feminine aspect of subjectivity, offers insights into the significance of the barely seen — a

¹⁷¹ Aulagnier, Piera. Cited in 'Metramorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace'. In *Rethinking Borders*, p.131.

¹⁷² Amelia Mulvey, *Wire Child*, 2004.

presence that reverberates between the forms and the depiction of the hay set within the threshold of a cave in this Nativity. Within this domestic realm, new meaning is enabled, through a 'matrixial' process. Ettinger has deciphered this process as one where subjectivities are able to develop beside one another. Here, at a 'sub-symbolic' level, subjective elements provoke change reciprocally.¹⁷³

'Gradual clarification of these ideas in the field of psychoanalysis has led me to develop the concepts as follows: *matrix* I understand as a psychic border space of encounter; *metramorphosis*, as a psychic creative border link; and the *matrixial stratum of subjectivization* reveals subjectivity as an encounter of co-emerging elements through metramorphosis.'¹⁷⁴

As the concept of the matrix implies, we are from the onset placed in the consideration of an unconscious and, 'unknowness whose presence is registered at the level of unconscious desire as non-visual, non-symbolic traces....'¹⁷⁵ Ettinger returns continually to her conception that this space is multifarious; knowing, meaning and relating become partial, and transforming, subjective entities. These rarefied relationships are based on the pre-natal interrelations that take place in the womb during gestation. This is a realm of being where the uncognized Other is at its most intimate, but not yet apprehended by any of the means by which, in our separated state, we learn to assimilate 'an-other'.

Ettinger's work spans a breadth of knowledge and activity as a psychoanalyst, feminist theorist and a painter. In a lecture given to postgraduate students, Ettinger referred to the significance of her notebooks.¹⁷⁶ Out of a miscellaneous collection that includes insights from her analysands, images, memories, and a flow of impromptu ideas, her theories have taken shape. But it is in the making of her artwork that Ettinger has come to realize the nature of what she has called the 'matrixial filter'. 'In the opening to an unconscious matrixial event-encounter,' Ettinger writes, 'the artist can't not-share with an-other, she

¹⁷³ Ettinger, *Rethinking Borders*, p. 126.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 125

¹⁷⁵ Raine, Ann. 'Embodied geographies: Subjectivity and materiality in the work of Ana Mendieta' cited in Pollock, *Generations and Geographies*, p. 246. Anne Raine refers to the pre-natal cohabitation of the child in the womb in this quote.

¹⁷⁶ Ettinger, Bracha L. European Graduate School, 2007. Online. http://www.egsedu/Bracha_L.Ettinger. Video clips 1/11-11/11. [14.08.08]

can't not witness the other.'¹⁷⁷ Ettinger interprets the Other as a 'non-I', and explores Lévinas' inherent gentleness in his approach to the Other, in her own terms; not as unknowable, but as co-emerging. By witnessing 'I' and what is 'non-I' the separate, but emerging subjectivities become 'partialised, vulnerable and fragilised'. The artist doesn't build a defense against this fragility but freely embraces it.¹⁷⁸

In *Dry Grass* (fig. 11)¹⁷⁹ just such fragility was embraced. My thoughts concerning the stirrings of a language in connection with grief were explored. Foremost in handling the grass, finally as a monoprint, was the quality of its material delicacy to express an equally delicate interchange — the interchange for me between new feelings not yet realized, only glimpsed. The black ink impressed upon the paper captured the flow of the grass and inscribed a beyond, parts and fragments, open and echoless, a past and a future, without weight.

I return again to the locus of the hay in *Mystic Nativity* from which to explore the creative and psychic process of metramorphosis, in which links between emerging subjectivities are formed within the marginal areas of the matrixial dimension. The hay circulates from the manger towards the ground, and in this area another realm of enlightenment is moving — the horizontal level, or the borderland, of the overlooked. In this area Ettinger's concept of metramorphosis seems to operate. Here the gaze does not function, unless at the edges. Peripheral vision is hinted at, both in the way we look at this area and in the way that the ass steadfastly looks at the infant's gestures. This intimate zone is charged with meaning through, I propose, the processes of metramorphosis. This concept contains the elements of change, at the thresholds between being and absence, as in memory and oblivion, and is the special threshold of Ettinger's reflection in her artwork.

Ettinger's highly complex research stems from a specific inheritance of faith and race. The cause of psychosis that Ettinger looks to reveal, decipher and atone for, via her analysis and art, is the unexpressed, transgenerational memory whose silence becomes a

¹⁷⁷ Ettinger. 'Co-poiesis' in *Ephemera*, theory and politics in organization, vol 5 (X) p. 2. Online, ephemeraweb.org [20.10.08]

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Amelia Mulvey, *Dry Grass*, 2004, monoprint, 40 x 60 cm. 2004.

fixed, but honourable, mute background to those who survived the holocaust and became parents.¹⁸⁰ The indelible mark that this silence leaves in the next generation calls for careful and deep thought that trammels through the profound areas of our developing subjectivity. In the fragmented oil painted marks and the loose degraded ink of the photocopy on which she paints in *Autistwork no.1* (fig. 12)¹⁸¹ Ettinger encounters the nature of metramorphosis. In my own encounter with her work I return to a particular part of the image again and again. In my memory I seemed joined to the faint lyrical marks indicative of an arm cradling a child — but I have remembered the image incorrectly. It is in my mind's eye I have produced a child that characteristically turns on his mother's arm. Later, when I see the photograph that Ettinger has constantly reflected upon as she works in her studio — there is the mother and child I had envisioned. It is in this photograph that the mother and child are seen. They are not included in the group of women, so poignantly depicted in the photocopied ground of *Autistwork no.1*. Though I have not witnessed Ettinger's working processes it seemed, in my response to *Autistwork no.1*, that an all-encompassing knowledge, when captured for a moment in our consciousness, evades symbolic codes and conflates historical time. I experienced this realization again when later I got in touch with Ettinger to ask for an image of her work for my thesis. Her response to my work, which I had briefly described in my request, struck a deep chord of direct communication, albeit of just a few words. In the hinterland of our awareness we embrace the fragile border.

Characteristically the metramorphic consciousness slides to the edges, escaping the fixed gaze. 'Through this process the limits, the borderlines and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones.'¹⁸² There is a knowing of what is not there, the being 'with-in' and 'with-out'. Here we begin to comprehend the feminine aspect participating in a creation with the Other. Emanating from 'diffused' feelings of pleasure and displeasure from both the artist, in her act of

¹⁸⁰ 'My parents are proud of their silence. It was their way of sparing others and their children from suffering. But in this silence all was transmitted except the narrative. In silence nothing can be changed in the narrative which hides itself.' Ettinger, 'Matrix. Halal(a)-Lapus Notes on Paintings', in Pollock, *Generations and Geographies*, p. 271.

¹⁸¹ Ettinger, *Autistwork no.1*, 1993, oil and photocopied dust on paper mounted on canvas, 32.5 x 28 cm. courtesy of the artist.

¹⁸² Ettinger, 'Matrix and Metramorphosis' in Pollock, *Looking Back to the Future*, p. 143.

making art, and also from the viewer, the matrixial affects us. It slides in an alternate manner from the ‘pre-determined phallic channels’ — those channels of thought that ensue from a symbolic structure. Rather we discern it through feelings and evocations of ‘silent alertness’.¹⁸³ The links are fragile, gathering and dispersing in their differentiated entities, easily disturbed, almost undetectable, one thing then another, and very much akin to the distribution of the hay in *Mystic Nativity*. In my interest in the nature that the hay instils Griselda Pollock’s reading of Ettinger’s work is meaningful. Pollock assimilates through her reading of the Book of Ruth in the Old Testament the symbolic nature of the matrix. From the perspective of Ettinger’s familial history of the holocaust and from Ruth and Naomi’s history of devastation, Pollock gathers the facilitating qualities that the matrix engenders and draws from the Book of Ruth the acts of atonement and covenant from Ruth’s alliance with Naomi, across the several thresholds of death, family, exile, religion and finally birth. Pollock proposes that art through the matrixial encounter creates a similar space of atonement. I draw from Pollock’s decipherment of Ruth’s story the act of gleaning that is lowly, continuing and contemplative. My apprehended and archetypal image of the mother holding a child, Ruth’s endurance and steadfast labour in gleaning fragments, singular and overlooked, has imprinted upon me the knowledge of another response to the world. The silent alertness initiates accord and atonement — the especial attributes of Ruth, the Moabite, manifested in her act of gleaning in the fields of Boas.

I have pondered why I should be so determined to use Ettinger’s analysis in my thesis as I proceed by focussing more and more deeply on the most delicate of details at the centre of Botticelli’s *Nativity*. I am aware that at the heart of this scene we are surrounded by images and evocations that are not fixed, either in the dialectic of male and female, or as things being different from what they appear to be. I am drawn to the ox, I do not see him a beast of burden, I see a face, and what does he gaze upon? Is it me? His eyes are so clear and deep. He completely arrests my attention. Do I join in his far-away contemplation by longing to put my arms around his soft neck? Ettinger has indicated a realm that is mobile beyond what we can easily comprehend, its operation is so deep and ‘beside’ at the same time, manifested in my reverie of the ox.

¹⁸³ Ettinger, *Rethinking Borders*, p. 130.

There are notable ‘besides’ in this painting, indicating a special relationship in each case. The culminating awareness is of something other than what is seen; its being — through a nearness, if not touch — is articulated. The softness of the ass’s ear against Mary’s veil is one such encounter of thought and experience. The hay strands at Joseph’s upturned sole, are another. With an appreciation of a matrixial dimension in mind we can read these relationships between forms and haptic nuances with further insight. The hay, overlooked but constantly present, contributes to making meaning. Pollock elaborates upon the revision of the matrix that Ettinger’s analysis has enabled.

Ettinger...began to intimate another dimension of the feminist project to see through the phallic system and to see through to something that is not phallic but co-resides with it, at times an alternative, at times a supplement, always a relief, sub-, rather than pre-Symbolic.¹⁸⁴

In an essay ‘Modernity and the spaces of femininity’ Pollock addresses the social and political environment that created different spaces for men and women in the modernist culture of Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century. Through her observations of the paintings by Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) Pollock explores the environs to which most middle class women and their households were confined, their relationships and activity in them. *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (fig. 13)¹⁸⁵ opens up an intriguing reappraisal of space. Through Cassatt’s unusually low viewpoint in this painting we are launched into quite another level of looking. The level opens up another response from us, intimate and, for me, claustrophobic. As Pollock points out, Cassatt ‘disarticulates’ the conventions of geometric perspective.¹⁸⁶ Those conventions are the organization of objects projected onto the flat plane of the canvas and calculated in a mathematical way so as to give the illusion of space and three-dimensional form. Mathematical calculations of perspective have governed the representation of space in European painting since, notably, the Florentine Renaissance of the fifteenth century. Of course the excitement of being able to create an illusion of space, and the multifarious manipulations of that space by artists from the early

¹⁸⁴ Pollock, *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts Feminist Readings*, p. 268.

¹⁸⁵ Mary Cassatt, *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, 1878, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 129.8 cm. Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon, National Gallery, USA.

¹⁸⁶ Pollock, Griselda. *Vision and Difference, Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. London: Routledge, 1988. © Griselda Pollock. p. 64.

fifteenth century on, has been a fascinating preoccupation. Subtleties of philosophic and spiritual reflection have been explored again and again through this means.¹⁸⁷ But such a formula can radically influence how we perceive not only what is around us but structures of thought and behaviour, as it singles out just one position from which the painted scene is intelligible; and persuasively ‘establishes the viewer as both absent from and indeed independent of the scene, whilst being its mastering eye/I.’¹⁸⁸ Cassatt’s is a profound, defiant move.

Our awareness in *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* roams around an alternative perspective of large furniture, and floor space, and engages us in a felt and mobile response. We move towards various interchanges taking place between our subjectivity, the space in the painting, the blue furnishings, the young girl and Cassatt’s invisible psyche. Everywhere in Cassatt work’s there are arms — arms of nurses and mothers, chairs and tabletops, balconies and loges, making their presence felt, as the blue arms of the chair do in this painting (and also as the dramatically receding carpeted floor does). Pollock writes, ‘Phenomenological space is not orchestrated for sight alone but by means of visual cues refers to other sensations and relations of bodies in a lived world.’¹⁸⁹ This is an experiential and a susceptible space. In this space the young girl’s limbs display an awkwardness to come, and her expression betrays a knowingness of this. The restriction points to an overflow, a spilling over into another space, an unwritten one. Through the sea change from felt observation to painterly interpretation the visual cues resonate an expansion. Perhaps this is why the blue swamps the rest of this painting.

Blue is a colour that is often present in Cassatt’s paintings, not as the ethereal blue of space and sky, but as flecks of colour throughout the wraps of clothing or towels, even in the moulding of the children’s flesh. It has to do with an intensity that is benign. Julia Kristeva explains, ‘the identification of objects...comes into play after colour

¹⁸⁷ See White, John. *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, © John White, 1987.

¹⁸⁸ Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. 65.

¹⁸⁹ Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, p. 66.

perceptions'¹⁹⁰ in our early development, and the shortest wavelengths of blue are the earliest to appear. It has a decentering effect, the colour is picked up by the rods of the retina's periphery and not at the centre where the objects form is fixed. Through the colour blue, Kristeva argues, the subject returns to 'the archaic moment of it's dialectic... before the fixed, specular 'I', but while in the process of becoming this 'I' by breaking from instinctual, biological (and also maternal) dependence.'¹⁹¹ I see Cassatt's use of blue as a clue, much as Botticelli's use of the hay strands, that manifests an alternative assimilation of what is taking place in these paintings. Cassatt's line of sight conflates the adult view with the perception of a child and thus encompasses knowingness and the apprehension of a younger mind. There is a tussle here, between what Gabriel Marcel calls 'Closed time...the time in which nothing really new can occur because everything has been determined by the past,'¹⁹² and the jostling advent of a new, Other, sense of space. This new sense of space is integral to a vaster dynamic, one explored by Cassatt and Pollock, and one that I have found in *Mystic Nativity*. It is to do with location and conditions, a dimension that Pollock defines in a concept of proximity and compression. As such it is not only the closeness of forms, as in Mary's back and head almost against the ass, but also the compression of felt sensations, as in the sprawl of the young girl's limbs in the blue armchair. The space felt bodily, emotionally and intellectually, overlapping and formative, in the confines of the domestic and the overlooked. Such intensity can bring to the fore in our consciousness knowledge that may exist in the slightest of traces, or knowledge repressed, as in my reflection on *Autistwork no.1. (fig.12)*. The surfacing of such subjectivity can be transformative and give rise to a potential that surpasses what we think we know.

My focus falls on, and then through, the central area of Botticelli's painting. Again the archetypal forms, the jagged arm of the stone cave, the ox and ass, play a part in evoking a locus of meaning. Here the Other participates not as an external unknown, revealed in an ungraspable anticipation, but as loved and as an another, internally and externally

¹⁹⁰ Kristeva, Julia. 'Giotto's Joy'. In *Desire in Language, A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, US: Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 225.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Straus E W. and Machado A. 'Gabriel Marcel's notion of Incarnate Being'. In *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Schilip P. (ed.) The Library of Living Philosophers, USA: Open Court Publishing Company 1987, p. 191.

received. The animals contemplative gaze and their eyes, so meaningfully portrayed, draw us into a place where difference is different in another way, not the uncanny¹⁹³ that is frightening, but the uncanny that is with us. We slow down in one sense and quicken in another. And in doing so we project ourselves through the cave's entrance into its dim interior, hollowed out by water in another age, to enter the strange green landscape on the other side. We explore the weightlessness of the air above the swaying tree tops where, in the blue sky, a circle of angels dance, and withdraw to the intimacy of the animals' shelter; a smelt, felt, quiet preserve. The animals in their closeness to the figures allow us into the locus of the Nativity.

The hay in its meanderings indicates for me the very processes of thought. Throughout my considerations the complex attributes of the membrane are at work, renewing and enlightening, but remain unfixed. Interweaving with the concepts of locus and matrix are the formative conceptions of Plato and his sense of chora — the matrix, as 'place', laid out in *Timaeus*.¹⁹⁴ Plato expounds the feminine aspect as the 'third nature' or place, which makes up God's creation of the universe. The first two natures according to Plato are the intelligible archetype and its visible copy. But in order for these two discriminate natures to work in accordance, a third nature is necessary. 'Sensible things we apprehend, of course, by sight and the rest of our senses; "place," as we have just said, by a curious kind of thinking.'¹⁹⁵ Ettinger relieves the chora from being unacknowledged and curious to be recognized as a dynamic symbol. It becomes in Ettinger's research 'a signifier that transports into meaning and consciousness another set of relations through which to imagine, fantasize and think subjectivity.' However, in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*,¹⁹⁶ I have found an extension of Plato's notions about the matrix as place, in the guise of locus. This idea of place in which an extraordinary development of substance, subjectivity, learning, expansion of the soul takes place is played out again and again in various

¹⁹³ Freud maintained that repressed infantile complexes arose from the fear of lack, the Oedipal complex. The uncanny proceeds from this fear, where the once known object becomes estranged. Ettinger reinterprets the processes of different emerging subjectivities and reverses the anxiety of the lost and unknown into the terms of 'I's' and 'non-I's'. See Ettinger, *Rethinking Borders*, p.144-145.

¹⁹⁴ Plato's account of the creation of the universe in 'Timaeus' *Plato, The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters*, p.1151.

¹⁹⁵ Taylor, *Plato, The Man and His Work*, p. 456.

¹⁹⁶ *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, p. 456.

reflections on the matrix. Plato's thoughts circulate around substance and vacancy, formlessness and impressions, eventually to allow a poetical sense of the matrix to manifest in a description of the time of day, the gods of the clear rippling river, Illisus, the verdant grass, and the light through the trees, as Socrates discusses and expounds to Phaedrus the nature of true knowledge. In the dialogue of *Phaedrus* an extension of Plato's thought of chora as place becomes a poetic sense of locus. It is this nature of the chora that later I shall examine through Julia Kristeva's work, in line with her reflections of the lyrical. In this chapter I focus upon the conditions that contribute to the expansion of subjective knowledge and growth. In Plato's poetic account the dialogue that takes place between Socrates and Phaedrus, also takes place between the elements of the place. All are in accord, all communicate, all serve to enhance, to calm the senses, and animate the intellect, to explore a suspended moment in the spirit of place, and the personal soul.

Ettinger explains through a matrixial prism her reappraisal of Lacan's three key mental fields of subjectivization; the 'real', the closest physic space to the body, in which Ettinger emphasizes the links to feminine bodily specificity, the 'imaginary' that exposes phantasies, and here Ettinger discerns the matrixial operating beyond the phallic phantasies for both men and women, and the 'symbolic' in which the matrixial contributes to subjectivity, art and culture.¹⁹⁷ These partial, several and various potential subjectivities are in the wings, on the margins of our consciousness, and not pinned down to any particular location or particular time, but gently moving from one nuanced 'space' to another at a speed we can't quite grasp; from the archaic and the primordial to the present and beyond. Piera Aulagnier describes these events of part subjectivities as 'pictograms', quietly and constantly occurring through life. Aulagnier's research indicates that every experience whether its source is internal or external, produces representations on several levels at once: in the real, in the imaginary, and in the symbolic pictograms. Here phantasies and thoughts conjointly record any given event - events that resonate throughout our lives via the conductable threads of metramorphosis. They are as Ettinger conceives, 'Traces of the unviewable, out-of-the-signified *Thing*, of... archaic sensorial events which ignore *the image of words*, cannot be repressed, yet they are regarded as psychic events.'¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Ettinger, *Rethinking Borders*, p. 126

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 131.

Our senses seem to fall upon the focus of our contemplation. This mode of seeing gently brings us in touch in *Mystic Nativity* with a movement across, where random stalks, fragments and seed heads, punctuate the space around the manger. It is the space in which the dust rises as we sweep a floor, or in the process of gleaning, the space where the hand picks up from the ground what has been left behind. This is a potent space that harbours a special relationship between, over, and through, the elements of a landscape. Arte Povera repeatedly explored the various ways in which landscapes, real and abstract, might be traversed. As Kounellis anticipates, the potent space creates the possibility for a new language to emerge. Botticelli's hay eluding structure by sticking through the weave of the manger, ignoring gravity in its circulation, and in its plurality of modes indicates another dimension in which we can take part. The hay becomes a membrane through which to reflect, explore and encounter, transient though it is. When seen as a subtle, generative condition, moving between subjectivities, watchful and nurturing, independent yet transformative, the vastness of this dynamic dawns and the hay takes on a calligraphic agency.

3. Hay as Calligraphy



Amelia Mulvey, *Hay as Calligraphy*, 2006.

Botticelli presents *Mystic Nativity* as though it were a page in a large book.¹⁹⁹ Running across the top of the painting he has painted an inscription in archaic Greek letters.²⁰⁰ The proclamation has the effect of placing our response to the narrative and lyricism of the painting in the parameters of reading a text. Angels dance with palms held upright between their clasped hands and entwined with banners that float and twist in the air. Crowns dangle amid the dancing steps and tree tops sway beneath the angels' feet against a clear blue sky. But the dance takes place between two realms, for a golden opening has appeared breaking apart a thick, rippling, multi-coloured cloud, so that the circling of the

¹⁹⁹ *Mystic Nativity* measures 108.6 cm x 74.9 cm.

²⁰⁰ The apocalyptic proclamation quotes St John the Divine and includes Botticelli's signature. The proclamation echoes the zealous teaching of Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498). I have given a full translation in fn 65, p.19.

angels takes place within the limitless gold of heaven and the blue sky of earth. Below their dance the angel figures take on more weight; three kneel on the neatly thatched roof of the stable and sing from a missal. Under the roof is the domain of the Nativity where the animals and Holy Family shelter. The rocky wall of a cave, from which the stable has been fashioned, anchors all the forms with its striated sides, and within its threshold the Holy Family and animals are closely packed. Mary's kneeling form rises dramatically beside the ass that stands on a rock, one planted hoof is visible. His form is stationed above Mary and we can detect the soft markings across his broad back. A large manger is centrally wedged between the figures, but is oddly unnoticeable. Its woven side just catches the light and, from the glistening contents of hay, the ass feeds and the ox's majestic red brown head is raised. Joseph's body, wrapped in thought, echoes the shape of a child in the womb, as he sits crouched on the ground behind the infant. We do not see Joseph's face; we see instead the dome of his bald head and his white curled hair, his arms and hands and the upturned sole of his foot. This is a rare, deep look at Joseph's thoughtful figure not often placed so close to the Christ child and very rarely on the same level. Between the Byzantine swirl of Joseph's form, and Mary's long knees, there is a protected, intimate zone. Here the Christ child rests against a prop draped with a luxuriant white cloth. His body faces Mary, whom he seems to be beckoning with his hands and feet. The muzzles of the ox and ass breathe into this space and add a soft warmth. To the right and left of the Nativity individual angels usher two groups of men to see the infant. On the right we recognize the shepherds in their sparse clothing. One perplexed shepherd reaches to his head feeling the oddness of an olive headdress. On the left side the figures are more difficult to identify. They look like scholars already donned with olive crowns and cloaks — perhaps they are from the ancient world? Behind the cave a dark wood grows and through the trees we glimpse the ethereal green of distant sunlight on grass. In front the ground slopes away from the caves floor into a zigzag path. A brook is painted on the left hand side, only discernable by the reflection of its stone bank. The path twists at the bottom edge of the painting to outline the lowest plateau in this painting — a green verge upon which another triad of angels embrace three men. These men also have olive twined upon their heads — angels and men bearing an emblem of peace. Numerous little devils, pulling spikes from their various bodies, flee into cracks or are swallowed up in the ground. Two small greenish faces are just visible under water, whilst from left to right across the base of the picture the rescued mortals gain strength enough to stand, their arms clasping their angel; their faces pressed together. In the sky above the echo of their

embracing arms is light and full of movement as here the embrace has been transformed into a dance.

Botticelli depicts a narrative that reads from top to bottom, but also from earth to the unfurling cloud; our gaze is drawn upward through the levels of this painting as well as down. However, it is the centre of this painting that is the main focus of my thesis. In this chapter I investigate the circulating quality of Botticelli's depiction of hay that I refer to as calligraphic. This notion occurred to me as I traced the literary and philosophical background to this painting and realized the various ways in which *Mystic Nativity* is inscribed with meaning, from narrative to evocation. The calligraphy of the hay is discernable in its beauty and singularity, however hidden that may be.

'Hay as Calligraphy' explores various strains of thought that all examine the otherness of symbolic language, by which I mean, the concealed and untamed meaning resonating through the organized and determinate meaning of language. I have therefore made use of headings to identify my reflections on each strand: 'The Palimpsest'; 'The Detail'; 'Word'; 'Hay in Salem Chapel'. Under 'The Palimpsest' I look at the phenomena of meaning and the trace this may leave through Walter Benjamin's writing. Accompanying Benjamin's thought is a sense of archaeology, largely understood by Benjamin as an historical period of time, which instils and transforms meaning. Benjamin's mystically sensed self, reflected in his references to transformation and alchemy, are drawn from his knowledge of ancient Kabbalistic texts. He reflects upon the same ancient texts as the Neoplatonists — as does the philosophy of Lévinas and Weil. However, in a phenomenological approach, Benjamin attempts to uncover the process of thought in response to the intellectual climate of his day. The quote from Benjamin's essay, 'The Task of the Translator' frames my own sense of the contemplative, which I illustrate by a personal encounter with an ancient palimpsest. The palimpsest is a theme from my earlier investigation into the climate of learning in which Botticelli painted, and the activity of humanist scholarship in Florence. In a wider sense the theme encompasses the palimpsest of Botticelli's life and concerns, as well as my own reflections on ancient and present day thought. Platonist and Neoplatonist thought weave through my contemporary reading and observation of contemporary art practice, encompassing the spiritual and subjective concerns of my study. Also included in the concept of the palimpsest are the varying, but overlapping, insights into the encounter with the Other; the thought of Lévinas,

concerning the caress and Otherness; Ettinger's encounter with the Other engaged with through a sub-symbolic knowingness; and Weil's direct encounter concerning grace and the divine Other. It informs my practice and my considerations of Arte Povera, where both classical and phenomenological concerns are integrated in the artwork of Jannis Kounellis.

Under the heading, 'The Detail', I draw from Mieke Bal's research, where I initially formed an appreciation of the hay as participating in a visual language. In reading the subtleties of such a language the detail becomes a potent projection of new meaning. Rather than the phenomenon of meaning, Bal's theories investigate visual terms in art that pertain to the self, and in this means of expressing the self, a distinct, but visually inspired encounter with a marginalized Other is articulated. This section explores Bal's theories in unravelling the detail in seeking its alignment to a hidden language.

In my penultimate section, 'Word', Julia Kristeva takes my enquiry further into an engagement with the Other through her analysis of lyrical and poetic writing and art.²⁰¹ I examine the hay as a language that is beyond the symbolic and yet is integral to knowledge. The word, as Kristeva elaborates, intersects one realm of expression with another. I interpret the hay strands as similarly taking part in this process. Kristeva's perceptions of a lyrical Other arise from the concept of maternal love in which a loved but unknown Other is awaited and is realized. Her analysis opens up language to a space of meaning, and as Bahktin intimates in his theories, that converses with the Other. The introduction of the discursive nature of art and literature inspired by Bahktin in both Bal and Kristeva's writing throws light on my own practice and the performative and participating value of the hay. My reflections on these theorists and my own intuitive response to *Mystic Nativity* has initiated a performative outcome in *Hay in Salem Chapel*, where central to my considerations was the transformation of the word into another mode — that of an experiential and lyrical encounter with the hay's substance. I therefore start with a description of my artwork, and conclude my chapter with a reflection of *Hay in Salem Chapel*.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 65

²⁰² Amelia Mulvey and David Brinkworth. *Hay in Salem Chapel*, 2006, DVD of installation, Hay on Wye.

Hay in Salem Chapel

Salem Chapel has been built on the old castle walls of Hay-on Wye. It is little used now, but had been a centre of worship, hymn singing, celebrations and the formative events of rural life. The bare walls are decked here and there with old photographs — Sunday school notables and past ministers. Tattered hymn books are stacked at the ends of the wooden pews and plastic flowers decorate the piano. I can remember going to a concert here on a sunny afternoon — the good acoustics of the building are well known in Hay, and stepping out afterwards to delight in the wooded hills surrounding the little town, busy with the Hay festival.

Hay in Salem Chapel was conceived as a further response to the chapel when I visited again in quieter times. Now the Sunday school, attached to the main building, is being used as a gallery, and on this second visit the chapel lay dusty and bedecked with cobwebs. I mounted the stairs to the rickety balcony, once the domain of the choir. Spread out beneath me the box pews presented a wooden interlocking structure. Suspended on long wires the lights hung poised at intervals in the roof space. Through the windows a green sunlight flickered.

The hay was delivered from a local farm and stood on the pavement. Strands were being blown down the street. We began to shift the bales to the back of the chapel, through the massive oak door and over the well-worn doormat. Later we set up the sound system on the balcony. Whilst I cut the string of the hay bales, David began to produce a loop of sound from the rafters. It was very quiet, and little by little curious visitors began to come into the chapel. The hay was abundant, there was plenty to spread and shake out from the bales. I took trailing armfuls down to the pews at the front of the chapel first. Slowly the mounds developed from the floor up. I immersed my arms to raise the airy mass. It was like preparing a bed. The smell of the grass gently permeated the dusty air. At the back of the chapel two women talked softly – I caught phrases, memories of childhood and other associations of ideas. As the day went on the hay took over. Another couple gingerly climbed upstairs and joined Dave playing his guitar. From the balcony a sea of hay floated over the pews.

The next morning the hay had settled. The chapel smelt like a barn. Outside the rooks were cawing in the dark trees opposite. We viewed the expanse and trod over the hay along the messy aisles. It was beautiful and transient; thoughts of how to clear it all away took hold. In the end a riding school came with their lorry and with huge sacks. In a couple of hours the chapel was swept clean. The wide door let in the afternoon noises of Hay and the unfiltered sunshine in a shaft of light.

The palimpsest

In his essay, ‘The Task of the Translator’, Benjamin wrote an explanation of what he considered a critique to be.²⁰³

‘Critique is concerned with the truth content of a work of art, the commentary and its subject matter. The relationship between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the work’s truth content is the more relevant the more inconspicuously and intimately it is bound up with its subject matter. If therefore precisely those works turn out to endure whose truth is most deeply embedded in their subject matter, the beholder who contemplates them long after their own time finds the *realia* all the more striking in the work as they have faded away in the world. This means that subject matter and truth content, united in the work’s early period, come apart during its afterlife; the subject matter becomes more striking while the truth content retains its original concealment. To an ever-increasing extent, therefore, the interpretation of the striking and the odd, that is, of the subject matter, becomes a prerequisite for any later critic. One may liken him to a palaeographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the stronger outlines of a script referring to that text. Just as the palaeographer would have to start with reading the script, the critic must start with commenting on his text. And out of this activity there arises immediately an inestimable criterion of critical judgement: only now can the critic ask the basic question of all criticism — namely, whether the work’s shining truth content is due to its subject matter or whether the survival of the subject matter is due to the truth content. For as they come apart in the work, they decide on its immortality. In this sense the history of works of art prepares their critique, and this is why historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a funeral pyre, its commentator can be likened to the chemist, its critic to an

²⁰³ Arendt adds that Benjamin used the Kantian term, *Kritik*, in his text, perhaps obliquely referencing the use of the term, not in its ordinary meaning as criticism, but as in Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason.’ Arendt, Hannah. Intro. ‘Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940’, *Illuminations*, H. Zorn, (trans.) London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 10.

alchemist. While the former is left with wood and ashes as the sole object of his analysis, the latter is concerned with the enigma of the flame itself: the enigma of being alive. Thus the critic inquires about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of life gone by.²⁰⁴

This piece of Benjamin's writing has been at the back of my mind ever since I conceived of the hay as the telling strokes of a calligraphic script. My fascination with this piece of text developing over time and parallel to my quandary of appreciating these fragments – humble, overlooked and incomplete, as beautiful, evocative and powerful. A gentle collision took place in my reflections; the quality of the hay strands, their glints and uncontrolled scatter, Benjamin's text, and my recent experience of seeing an exhibition of ancient Islamic palimpsests.²⁰⁵ The small gallery was dimly lit, but each exhibited ancient document or open book had its individual illumination. I proceeded slowly from panel to panel. I remember the pleasure I felt of an almost tangible quality of meaning not yet deciphered as I intently gazed into the gently lit showcases. Varying sizes of parchment, some made from gazelle vellum, the edges worn and misshapen, were no bigger than the palm or span of my hand. Across the page, from right to left, curious letters flowed, written by scholars who had travelled vast distances from the Middle East to Africa in the pursuit of learning. The text was sometimes punctuated with flecks or arabesques that momentarily arrested the current of writing to invite a diversion into another space of decipherment. On some pieces the presence of washed out marks floating beneath the inky inscription allowed my gaze to enter the fabric of the page, and in the illumination of the small showcase, to a sense of seeing through the text and parchment way beyond. In front of me lay learning that had been hidden, stolen, sought after and transported from land to land. The translucent vellum delivering traces of what should not be read or what, in the further urgency of communication, had been written over.

²⁰⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 10-11.

²⁰⁵ Exhibition of Ancient Islamic Manuscripts from the archive at Birmingham University, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2005.

Benjamin sought to precipitate thought itself from the written word and sentence structure, rather than allowing the writing to serve as a medium for that thought.²⁰⁶ This process allows for the manifestation of a highly personal and subtle language to form, as the reader apprehends the fragments that contribute to the text, and the various twists and turns of Benjamin's writing. We become engaged in a phenomenal response. Layers of appearance and thought structures are revealed as Benjamin reflects upon the lasting value of a piece of text, fragment or artefact. Arendt relates in her seminal introduction to Benjamin's essays in *Illuminations* the fascination he had for small objects. One such artefact being two grains of wheat on which the entire *Shema Israel* had been inscribed. 'The tiniest essence appearing on the tiniest entity.'²⁰⁷ It was the phenomenon and not the ideas that captured Benjamin's sensibility.

Benjamin's thought employed a dialectical approach. In his self-examination of what a literary critic was Benjamin saw the truth of an artwork as separating through historical time from the subject matter pertaining to the artwork. Benjamin's analysis was, as Arendt described, like an alchemical process whereby Benjamin traced the transmutation of the real elements of the artefact into 'the shining, enduring gold of truth.'²⁰⁸ His use of the dialectic precipitates new, and contemplative, sites of reflection, as we read through the layers of his metaphors — metaphors that outline the rebirth of truth content, from its embeddedness in the subject matter of a work, to Benjamin's analysis of its eventual separation from the work and its manifestation as a transformed phenomenon. In this transformation Benjamin's reflections suspend the movement of temporal and continuous time and juxtapose the past to the present. The suspended moment allows a trace to break away from a linear process of time to produce a sudden, and sometimes unexpected, image.²⁰⁹ The truth, to which Benjamin refers, essentially lives, and its phenomenal nature is fluid rather than fixed. It is an enigma that is glimpsed at, and, as such, overcomes

²⁰⁶ For these key elements of Benjamin's writing. I have referred to Ferris, David. 'Introduction: Reading Benjamin'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. David Ferris (ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

²⁰⁷ This was an observation made by Benjamin's friend, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), a Jewish philosopher of Hebrew mysticism. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 17.

²⁰⁸ Arendt, Hannah. Intro. 'Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940', *Illuminations*, H. Zorn, (trans.) London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 11.

²⁰⁹ Bürger, Peter. Cited in Rendell, in *Art and Architecture, A Place Between*, p. 77.

distance and time. The elusiveness of the image brings it into close proximity to us.²¹⁰ I have found that the unexpectedness and closeness of an encounter with the phenomena of truth are key attributes to a further understanding of the timelessness of the hay and of the hay's locale. The hay reveals, and enables, a continual access to the past, and because of its variable formless modes, other unforeseen possibilities of thought. In the midst of my reflection upon a glimpsed at transition I find an aspect of Plato's metaphysical conception of the ideal Forms, inherent in the structure of *Mystic Nativity*, coming to light in a new way.

Plato conceived of participation between the object, its attributes and the unchanging Form residing in an upper realm. He spoke of things as striving towards the Form to which they owed their existence. In this the imperfect reflection of the Form seeks the ideal of its ethereal counterpart. The complex interaction between concrete and abstract manifestations of the Form and the ideal reflection of all such nuances, finds a parallel in Neoplatonist thought concerned with the self and the soul. The Neoplatonists explored Plato's notions of the Forms in further esoteric notions of the self. The self is realized through contact, however it may be conceived, with the soul. There was much discussion across the Orient and Europe as to the fabric of the soul, and its emanation. This knowledge was documented in ancient Hebraic, Jewish and Arabic sources. In these considerations a divine archetype is realized, whether as a heavenly double, guardian angel, or as a 'pre-existent heavenly garment with which the soul is clothed in its prenatal, paradisiac existence.'²¹¹ Certain mystical sources conceive the soul as woven from the deeds of the individual. As such the luxuriant white cloth swirling beneath Christ's physical form finds a counterpart as his divine, prenatal, self. In this light the cloth makes visible for contemplation a connection between the woven, the matrix and the divine. We are aware, in *Mystic Nativity*, of Botticelli working within his own symbolic milieu in which he depicts a crystallization of thought in the details of his painting. As in reading across a page we can follow through a layer of thought. From the inside wall of the cave to the fall of Mary's veil we meet each surface and gesture with a delicate picking out of highlights. The soft brown coat of the ox that rises to form a furrow around the outward

²¹⁰ Vasseleu, Cathryn. *Textures of Light*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 96

²¹¹ Gershom Scholem *Tselem: The Representation of the Astral Body*
<http://www.wbenjamin.org/walterbenjamin.html> [12.12.09.]

turning gaze of his eyes; the silvery tips of the ass's ears that intersect the ox's horn on one side and Mary's veil on the other side of his bowed head; and the hands of Mary where the gentle bent knuckles reflect the light from her face and articulate her prayer. Botticelli's details pervade the palimpsest of *Mystic Nativity* that explores the activity of ancient knowledge alongside the Nativity of Christ. But my quest has developed into an exploration of these details through a contemporary prism of phenomenological and feminist thought that includes spiritual and psychoanalytical issues. Botticelli's details make both possible, and we participate in making meaning by our decipherment and our movement of thought, thereby making available a new delicate layer of contemplation.

These considerations: the proximity of living phenomena; the constant seeking and the alliance between matter, the matter of thought, and perfection; the dynamic of accord communicating between elements that are transforming, oscillate in my reflections. Perhaps the banners spiralling around the angels' palms and twirling in the air no longer need messages to be meaningful. It is, rather, their weightless rippling that is significant. The Plotinian scholar, Francis Cornford (1874-1943) offers insights into the lyrical nature of thought and identifies this movement as a harmony²¹² that specifically intermingles the pastoral with the cosmos, and the divinity of the domestic with the sublime. The attention to this harmonious moment provides the setting in which the soul may grow, as in the case of Phaedrus and of Socrates, where Plato's dialogue lays out the nuanced elements enabling the focus of the intellect through a sense of accord with the spirit of the place. This response is probably best described as a suspension. It emerges to consciousness through a highly charged trope, or combination of effects, and the speed of the emergence seems integral to the assimilation of it — too slow and the point is missed.²¹³ It is obviously deeply involved with the actual process that the artist is engaged in, which indicates the particularity of the artist's own visual language. I explore the emergence of this dynamic in my artwork through haptic and spatial encounters, infinitesimally light and transitory. Botticelli's response to the dynamic of harmony is captured throughout his painting in moments of movement that are arrested; embraces; a mouthful of fodder; the steps of a dance.

²¹² A Pythagorean concept explored by Plato and the Neoplatonists.

²¹³ Cornford, F. M. 'The Harmony of the Spheres', in *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays*, W. K.C. Guthrie (ed.) London: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

In the projection of truth and its transformation into phenomena Benjamin experiences what he refers to as a 'pure language'. 'A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.'²¹⁴ These observations come close to a mystical encounter whilst engaged in an empirical response. We can trace exactly these observations back through time to Plotinus who advocated a shift from contemplation of the abstracted divine to the contemplation of matter, as a means to be united with divinity. 'The actuality of pure thought' emanated from a contemplation of 'the multiplicity of forms of being.'²¹⁵ We can also detect this thought projected forward in the considerations Jannis Kounellis and the concerns of his contemporary practice, developed from conceptual aspects of Arte Povera. Central to Kounellis' oeuvre is the sense of an 'indispensable' language manifested in art.²¹⁶ Kounellis' art juxtaposes a realization of the concrete artwork viewed against a classical ideal — a dialogue with the past as a means to generate an ever-evolving language of art for the future. The fragments of another era are explored in the possibilities of a revitalization of their meaning.²¹⁷ Bordering between the concrete and the ephemeral, Kounellis' art includes birds and animals, ballet dancers and violinists in the transformative re-experience of life. We are placed in the midst of the language Kounellis is engaged with. The vegetation is alive, the animals are present and the coal heaped. The considerations of Arte Povera reached through materials and empiricism to natural beauty to release the rational subject 'in favour of a multi-dimensional self, willing to follow the natural or chance direction of the materials themselves.'²¹⁸ As such Arte Povera engaged with what was a reappraisal of existence towards a new way of life. The juxtaposition of substance to phenomena realigning haptic and spatial encounters to contemplative thought.

²¹⁴ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 80.

²¹⁵ Bussanich, John. 'Plotinus's Metaphysics of the One', in Gerson, Lloyd (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge: CUP, 1996, p. 52.

²¹⁶ Adachiara Zevi, 'An Engaged Modern Painter', in *Jannis Kounellis*. Modern Art Oxford UK: 2005, p. 17.

²¹⁷ Ibid. p. 15.

²¹⁸ Christov-Bakargiev Carolyn. (ed.) *Arte Povera*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2001, p.24.

When I first saw Kounellis' seven burlap sacks filled with various goods (*fig. 14*) I was rooted to the spot.²¹⁹ Such a flow of meaning emanated from the artwork and from myself that I found I could not remove my attention from the line of stout, rough, burlap bags, the necks rolled back to reveal their contents. The sacks contained earthy produce: white rice, black coal, coffee beans and dried pulses — sensations and thoughts ranging from sustenance and culture, trade and cultivation, were at the same time raw and eternal. I came upon them unexpectedly. The gallery space in the Tate Modern was vast and other seminal Arte Povera exhibits filled the lit areas. Here, on the floor as I turned a corner I was suddenly enthralled. My encounter was immediate and transformative. I received, rather than perceived, a depth of perception through the weight and concreteness of what I gazed upon. In looking down I became in touch with the ground and a quite other process of perspective formed through a fundamental connection with the artwork. My groundedness gave way to participation with what had been harvested or dug from the depths of the earth. I wanted to run the pulses through my fingers, to nudge the bag of rice with my foot, to draw nearer the aromatic coffee beans. This was a perspective engaged with, like no other. It worked upwards through me from core to heart. In my memory I see the sacks stacked against a passage wall as though placed there for the time being before being delivered to another destination. In fact this artwork originally belonged to the contingencies of the moment. The planned exhibit had been intercepted at the customs, so that Kounellis had to create this exhibit on site.²²⁰

The unplanned subtly presents itself in Kounellis' exhibits. At the most recent major exhibition of his work in Modern Art Oxford, 2005, one of the galleries was filled with a platform made of market stalls. On the splintery wood was arranged numerous tableaux of Kounellis' art; the gold fish in a glass bowl, rippling around the blade of a immersed kitchen knife; raw cotton billowing over iron supports; a bedspring with a role of lead laid on its mesh. The market trestles were from Oxford's central market — their evocative power unblocked the identity of the gallery's space and, like the sacks, evoked transactions made across the world. Amid the work of installing the show I watched

²¹⁹ Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1969, seven burlap sacks filled with grain, beans, pulses and coal, *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, Tate Modern, 2001.

²²⁰ *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle, Bern, 1969.

Kounellis wander and lightly touch an iron beam, conversing in his own terms with the fresh site of his artwork.

In *Untitled*, 1969, seven burlap sacks... the very essence of Kounellis' language is generated. At the onset a dialectic opening out, 'reshaped' and 'resplendent'²²¹ in a new site in which a refreshed realization may take place. In this it is the empirical encounter that provides the means by which a new language is engendered through a phenomenal, if not alchemical process of transformation, often referred to in Kounellis' work, as a shifting of our senses into a new appreciation. These are transitional spaces that may be architectural as in the site of his art, or evoked, as in the potential transformation of matter into energy. Kounellis' language is made operative in a continual and creative adjustment to place, materials and potential energies. And as the dimly lit and mundane manger in *Mystic Nativity*, Kounellis' oeuvre resonates through an orchestration of elements. The manger's flat woven side faces us, a glint of hay visible at its rim. It too is part of a tableau of all that flows between the intimate locus of the Nativity, which the animals and the family cohabit for the time being. The presence of the manger bearing intense traces of knowledge, unknown and concealed, that we relate to in close, but overlooked, proximity. When such intensity hangs in the air, the hay circulates.

My own affiliations in this thesis to the concerns of Arte Povera lie in the ephemeral phenomenon of entirely new precepts in the communication of art. So the angle from which I approach Arte Povera is not primarily from the more exposed concerns of a political nature in which Arte Povera cultivated a stance against systems,²²² but the 'asymmetric'²²³ nature of the association of ideas, experience and behaviours that Arte

²²¹ Zevi, 'An Engaged Modern Painter' *Jannis Kounellis*, p.28.

²²² Formative in the climate of thought surrounding of Arte Povera is the social philosophy of Umberto Eco. See Thompson, Jon. 'New times, new thoughts, new sculpture'. in *Gravity and Grace: The Changing Condition of Sculpture*, p. 25, and the political thought of Theodor Adorno 1903-1969, a collaborator with Benjamin at the Frankfurt school. Adorno conceived of truth as being mediated, not absolute. See Sedgwick, Peter. *Descartes to Derrider, an Introduction to European Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, p. 78.

²²³ Celant's meticulous observation of the developing dialogue in Arte Povera artworks liken Arte Povera to a way of life, 'It aspires to appear sudden and unpredictable...it is an asymmetrical way of existence...' 'Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War', in Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, p. 194.

Povera deployed. The asymmetric approach reveals an interwoven political stance and introduces, as the hay does, a nuanced participation — an operation that exists beside differences, in intimate, and life changing circumstances. In the palimpsest that the Nativity painting reveals — a palimpsest of Botticelli's thought, we are led to look through the layers that comprise this thought. By doing so we take part in a spatial encounter. The layers are articulated by details, much like the telling flecks, arabesques and half erased marks of the ancient palimpsest. It is in this light that the manger of hay and the haltered head of the feeding ass indicate an interwoven sub-text in *Mystic Nativity*.

Botticelli was deeply troubled by the execution of Savonarola, a zealous Dominican friar,²²⁴ who came to Florence as a reformer, requested by the papacy to bring about a religious revival amidst the decline of religious values and moral conduct in Florentine society. But Savonarola's equally flagrant criticism of the papacy resulted in his excommunication and finally his death. Savonarola was hung with a fervent Dominican monk, an adherent, and then burnt at the stake. Botticelli had been influenced by Savonarola, (his brother was also a *piagone*),²²⁵ and even Ficino had been interested by Savonarola's rhetoric for a time. Hay was a favoured symbol of the friar's in his preaching and in his sparse life style. The hay stood for humility and righteous thought from which peace would come. Savonarola slept upon a straw mattress and exhorted that man should feed from the humblest of foods, like the animals. A subtle metonymy is found in the lowly substance of hay as a tribute to Savonarola's passion, and in a lighter shade of signification, to Botticelli's passion too.²²⁶ The large manger is inconspicuously placed in the centre of the Holy Family and animals. Sticking through the closely woven wall of the manger are odd glints of hay, reminiscent of flames. The wonderful abundance of the fodder overflows the sides — like the flames flickering through the faggots laid at the scaffold — several layers of meaning begin to appear as the tension of another

²²⁴ Friars were common all over Italy at this time. They were an effective way of teaching the learned and unlearned, and preaching in the vernacular carried on the tradition of oration.

²²⁵ *Piagone*, an adherent.

²²⁶ Jones points out that in Savonarola's 'fantastical merging of real and revelatory history' Botticelli found 'a language in which to talk... a means to express both political and religious sentiments.' Jones, Jonathan cited in the catalogue to accompany the Paris exhibition in 2003 of Botticelli's work. www.guardian.co.uk/art/critic/feature. [22.10.06]

narrative, tugs at these details. We see the iconographic rendering of the manger relating to a religious trope. Between the narrative of Savonarola's teaching and the evoked narrative of his death, a transference takes place onto the layer, (that is, the difference), of what we saw first time, but no longer need in our fresh take through the alternatively written story. A further layer is formed as we detect Botticelli's own imprint. In our progressive deciphering of these texts we let go of the iconography and pass into another stage of knowing, freed from the constraints of one meaning to allow our subjectivity to respond 'immediately'.²²⁷ We become aware of the hay's qualities as a substance alongside its attributes that pertain to spiritual and political ideals. The hay in *Mystic Nativity* performs a quite other political voice, not a proclamation, or a resistance, but a complete shift of focus that is glimpsed at, apprehended, and acknowledged to consciousness by an assimilating process that operates in and out of a symbolic order. In fact it is not a voice as such, more a reverence for the active, overlooked participation of thought and qualities, the very nature and nurture of things, and thus retains its humility and its integrity.

The detail

My initial interest in Mieke Bal's work has been in the uncovering of the deft, but fundamental, language that manifests through an artist's work, particularly the concealed meaning that Bal connects to the detail. In *Reading Rembrandt*²²⁸ Bal takes to task a realm of detail untouched by conventional art theory. These details are subsumed into a representational meaning and because of this, the Other, that Bal exposes through her reading of details, could well be described as marginalia. Bal cites the painted gold flecks in a Rembrandt self-portrait and reveals, through an orchestration of perceptions, a potent record of self-reflection and cultural complexities.

The detail is however able to distance itself from even a sub-text. It can purely oscillate between the supporting structures it delineates and its own separated and groundless existence. But what seems ephemeral to us in the unattached detail is due to our lack of sensitivity to a different state of existence. As groundless the highlight or detail can speak through structures. In this Benjamin's separation of truth content and subject matter sheds

²²⁷ Bal, see 'Recognition, Reading Icons Reading Stories'. *Reading Rembrandt*, p. 179.

²²⁸ Bal, *Reading Rembrandt, Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, 1991.

light. The detail has the intrinsic power to transform into a phenomenon. So the ins and outs of Bal's reflection are meaningful specifically in the participation of meaning taking place in Botticelli's highlights and details of the hay. If the flecks of gold create meaning other than the description of sheen upon Rembrandt's clothing, or an allusion to royalty in his occupation as a painter — if the flecks can be understood as the record of an intense reflexive encounter that the self takes through a passage of the Other, so the singularity and beauty of Botticelli's hay could be interpreted along these lines. Botticelli presents us, almost imperceptibly, with various modes and operations of the hay's substance. These aspects are given both concretely and subtly — we see it as food, bedding and litter; the strands also evoke water, flames and calligraphy. In this vein of possibilities, between substance, form, and abstract thought, the hay's nature is seen and read in Botticelli's painting. The finesse of the painted hay reflects an encounter with the palimpsest of various narratives. It also reflects the encounter with the several subjectivities of Botticelli, and crucially, as a reflexive participation with the overlooked Other — a feminine dimension. Seen in this context the nature of the detail connected to the hay in *Mystic Nativity*, introduces a matrixial operation at the very conception of metaphysical thought.

My focus upon the random hay strands and glinting highlights is not entirely tied to the more bodily interpretation that Bal deploys. By this I mean that Bal's insightful method entails focalization, a conceptual means of theorizing informed by the various views from figures or other forms in a painting. The physicality of perception is at the root of this concept and takes place through a phenomenal and corporeal realm of understanding in Bal's research. My investigation is to see the relevance of these psychologically based phenomena in participation with what could be understood as divine and, therefore, both innate and transcendent.

Another distinctive element of Bal's theories for this study and my practice lies in her propensity for the spoken word. In a review of her work Bal clearly lays out her intentions and her methods. One such practice is to 'always allow the object "to speak back"'.²²⁹ The detail, as a speech act, performs way beyond the environs of its pronouncement. The detail cannot be contained, or know its intention, because, as well as reaching through the

²²⁹ Bal, *Looking In, the Art of Viewing*, p. 261.

background in which it is placed, it reaches out into a future, not yet conceived. Botticelli's interests in the performative elements of his painting are apparent from the proclamation in archaic Greek, to the angelic gestures, and the images that articulate meaning. The silent ass and gesticulating infant play out a relationship, and all around them relationships are enacted and subjectivities shift.²³⁰ By this means a flexible script is delicately entwined in the subject matter of the artwork. The hay projects towards me as it brushes against the hair of the infant or the sole of Joseph's foot, and recedes into the picture frame to play out other roles of meaning. As I trace its movement the hay becomes for me the calligraphy of an elusive and sensual encounter. I am reminded of a moment in *Hay in Salem Chapel*, captured on the film, when a woman echoed my gesture of spreading the hay by delicately shaking out her own handful — meaning was revealed, inscribed and transformed in a gesture.

In a seminar given to accompany her exhibition *Nothing is Missing*,²³¹ I observed Bal's zest to throw light on significant, yet overlaid expressions. The video explored the hidden voice of a mother's loss when their offspring migrate from home to seek work. The camera was unmanned in order that the spoken words and gestures of loss, expressed by the mother to her absent loved one, were recorded only in the intimacy of a close companion. The oblique performance, elusive and private, amid gestures, gaps and contingent elements, was in keeping with Bal's research. However, I think a finer line exists between the means to uncover and the delicacy of revealing. The opportunity of talking to Bal reinforced my observation of her work — her underlying impetus to enter into an intersubjective realm of analysis.²³²

But more meaningful to me in my approach to certain performative aspects of my work, and of the hay, is the attribute that Bal assigns to the detail of mobility. The detail is freed from its visual support in Bal's work, but not from the psyche of the artist or that of the viewer. I propose in this thesis that the detail takes place in a dance that manifests another realm of activity — through subjective transformations, to be sure, and here I

²³⁰ Pollock, Della. See 'Performing Writing'. In *The Ends of Performance*. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, (eds.) NY: New York University Press, 1998, p. 89.

²³¹ Bal, Mieke. *Nothing is Missing*. A multi-channel video installation shown at UCL. 20. 09. 08.

²³² Bal, *Looking In, the Art of Viewing*, p. 260.

acknowledge that the viewer and the artist take part in the initiation of this process — the calligraphic dance through a palimpsest of subjectivities. It is with this in mind that Julia Kristeva's investigation of the smallest unit of the structure of language, the word, inspired by her reading of Bakhtin, brings further qualities of the hay to light, that of a lyrical pursuit.

Word

The serenity of maternal love is a deferred eros, desire in waiting. By deferring and waiting, that love opens the time of life, of the psyche, of language — the time unknown, about which one cannot and does not wish to know anything, for better or for worse.²³³

Mary's very prominent position and her internal contemplation place her maternal state at the centre of the Nativity and of the Incarnation. We see a towering figure, an axis between the ground, where her garb lies in folds beside the folds of her baby's wrap, and the mark of a cross on the ass's back. Her blue cloak and her red dress are a surge of colour. I examine the thick mottled brown of the cloak's lining and wonder could it be fur? The edge of her form is fascinating too — the ass's soft receptive ear intercepts the finest layers of her covering, the pressure of the baby's foot pulls the cloak into a taut diagonal. Her hair spills over her shoulders and the most intimate material covering of her head, the delicate veil, hangs without any form, like a rag. The transition from word to flesh and flesh to word has taken shape in her. All around her are deep in the intimacy of contemplation, the ox, the ass and Joseph, and a little further from the space of the Nativity, those drawn into this space by the angels.

The maternal that Botticelli displays in his figure of Mary came to me in a different guise. Under the heat of a blowtorch, I melted and stretched glass strands (*fig. 15* and *fig.16*).²³⁴ Between my leather clad hands I awkwardly held pliers and waited for the glass rod to melt in the heat. In the hiss of the blue flame I cautiously pulled at either end of the glass rod and the molten strand drooped, about to break. I lifted the thread and it twisted as my arms moved out of sync. In the cooler air the glass thread instantly hardened. Sometimes the delicacy of the twists and tendrils snapped, the glass unable to bear its new form.

²³³ Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and The Sacred*, p. 56.

²³⁴ Amelia Mulvey, *Glass Strands*, 2004, digital print from photograph, 40 x 60 cm.

In another context these strands delivered an unexpected nuance. Held upright and seen through the lens of a large format camera, I witnessed another inscription. The tendrils in their varying sharpness of focus, and the intervals between them, seemed to present a panoramic view of another's life. In the intensity of the moment I understood the strands, both as the past events, traumas and jouissance, and a continuing existence of an individual's life, inscribed for a moment in the glass strands and made apparent through the privacy and the frame of the camera lens.

The glass forms are flexible in the way they manifest meaning for me, and in my enquiry they deliver a language — a silent writing, between substance and form, suspension and space. Eventually I laid the linear green shapes on a white surface to photograph, drawing their significance into the more studious realm of the room in which I studied and wrote. In this context the strands played out my original intention, which had been to explore the conditions in which substance takes part in language. These thoughts are the backdrop to the photograph of the horizontal glass forms casting their shadow on a white ground.

Botticelli depicts in *Mystic Nativity* the Incarnation of God's word in the body of the infant Christ. I first studied this painting in the terms of the infant's body. What clue was here that could enlighten me about this extraordinary event of a word being made flesh? I stuck to a literal interpretation of word and flesh in my quest, but I became arrested by the elements around the infant in Botticelli's painting rather than the body of the child. In this formative reflection of the hay as participating in language, I follow the route that Kristeva brings to light via her psychoanalytical approach to linguistics. This is an approach that does not ignore the physical and biological contribution to the psyche's ability to assimilate signs. Kristeva identifies this process as closely related to the infantile and pre-Oedipal²³⁵ state of the child in the womb and identifies this field of experience as semiotic and as the chora.

²³⁵ Kristeva's complex analysis takes from many disciplines of thought not least from the psychoanalytical theories of Freud, and from Lacan's reappraisal of Freud's Oedipal complex. Lacan's Mirror Stage, whereby a child identifies with an image outside himself, being the major framework that Kristeva unravels in her own exploration of the symbolic.

Kristeva maps out how an individual's identity and power to communicate is manifested with the assimilation of a linguistic symbolic order. But anterior to a linguistically symbolic state, is a space of free flowing non-determinate signs and feelings that is the domain of semiosis. In her acknowledgement of this realm Kristeva's analysis differs from the semiology founded by Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913).²³⁶ The semiotic, in Kristeva's terms, is free from a laid down syntax and determinate meaning of a symbolic frame, and becomes part of a stream of meaning from the realms of felt senses — emotions and drives — where determinate meaning is suspended. The written and spoken word is intrinsically part of both these realms; as a part of an organized language — and therefore in it, and as a signifier that gives meaning to that which is outside language.²³⁷ It is within the semiotic chora that poetry and the lyrical is realized, as a transgression of formal logic. Kristeva traces semiosis through the maternal and the pre-natal Other that is loved and unknown, anticipated and nurtured, free flowing and non-determinate, to the spoken and written word.

Kristeva's meditation on the chora as a dynamic, channelled through eros and the maternal, also borrows from Plato's concept of chora to integrate a sense of space in which 'becoming goes on'.²³⁸ However, Kristeva's object is to elucidate what Plato saw as mysterious and incomprehensible. Kristeva's conception of semiosis is of a lyrical space that escapes the code of language and operates freely, yet does so through relating to that code, if not challenging, it. This is passionately expressed in a passage about the use of colour.

With the emergence of the great Christian paintings of the Renaissance, the independence of colour and form appears *in relation to* the signified (theological norm): with respect to *narrative* and *representation*. It appears independent precisely because it constantly *pits itself* against the ever present norm. It tears itself from the norm, bypasses it, absorbs it, goes beyond it, does something else — always in relation to it.²³⁹

²³⁶ Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913) was a Swiss linguist who founded an understanding of signs, semiotics, via his concept of the signifier and the signified.

²³⁷ Silverman, Hugh. (ed.) *Cultural Semiosis, Tracing the Signifier*, London: Routledge, 1998, p.8.

²³⁸ Cited in Taylor, *Plato, The Man and His Work*, p. 456.

²³⁹ Kristeva, see 'Giotto's Joy', in *Desire in Language*, p. 215.

In my further exploration of a sacred process through Kristeva's theories, her conception of *intertextualité* comes to the fore. Pursued in her essay, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel',²⁴⁰ Kristeva builds her concept from the discursive nature of text, brought to light by Bakhtin in his concept of dialogism. Intertextuality, Kristeva maintains, saturates text with meaning, written and uttered, as signs and quotations are transformed into a new articulation. Kristeva describes this process in linguistic terms, 'diachrony is transformed into synchrony'.²⁴¹ Thus the historical development of language is transformed into the relationship that exists between things occurring at the same time. Again the power of continuum enables, in its wake, the taking on of ever enlarging possibilities of knowing. Inherent, therefore, in the concept of intertextuality is the integration with the transfinite.

Relevant to my observations of Mary's figure like an axis, the folds of cloth on the ground and the circulation of the hay, is Bakhtin's mapping out of a horizontal status of the word. His concept is of a projection across from the subjectivity of the writer to that of the reader — and a vertical status, the word's orientation to its literary background. Kristeva, through her concept of intertextuality, elaborates upon these dynamic projections and the word becomes an 'intersection of textual surfaces'.²⁴² The word inserts the self into writing via the 'reading-writing' of the text.²⁴³ The word's operation in this light becomes a mediatory element, acting between structural modes, 'ambivalent'²⁴⁴ meanings and, intrinsic to its makeup, spatial aspects. It is in this sense that Mary's monumental figure resonates, as a figure that harbours both the making and the meaning of the word, through all the intertextual surfaces. 'The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.'²⁴⁵ Mary's figure maintains the irreducibility of a dual aspect to the word.

²⁴⁰ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 1979.

²⁴¹ Diachrony means the development of a comparative study through history. Synchrony means the simultaneous occurrence of events. Ibid. p. 65.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid. p. 65, 69.

²⁴⁴ Bakhtin called the two axes of the word's projection, *dialogue* and *ambivalence*. Ibid. p. 68-69.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 66.

Botticelli painted out of a climate that was actively discovering the attributes of literature and was deeply involved in this sense. His visual terms take a further leap into discursiveness that, with a background of semiotics, we can contemplate more fully. I am exploring the transformation of the word into flesh, referred to in Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* as a divine event, and, initiated by this study, the emerging psyche of the flesh into word. My reading of Kristeva has raised speculative thought that these two events run parallel. Kristeva brings to the forefront the birth and rebirth of psyche's ability to engage in both realms of being, through the maternal, both maintaining its freedom of uniqueness and openness, in the relationship with the symbolic. In this the language of the artist finds its existence and Botticelli's imagery takes part in both doctrinal narrative and the lyrical.

In a publication of her correspondence with the anthropologist, Catherine Clément, Kristeva pursues a dialogue about the feminine and the sacred.²⁴⁶ The letters between the friends reveal personal and intimate thought, and a freedom of expression. The letters are written in solitude in the transitory times between the events of life, travel and work. Reading the repartee between both women is like handling a highly coloured embroidered cloth. Both women disclose their observations and wonderment of the times they have witnessed, a female expression of freedom. Clément describes religious fervour and practices from her travels and Kristeva cites female mystics and their unique contribution to spiritual thought, their ecstasies, scholarship, art and music. One of Kristeva's letters relates how two separate revelations from her past came together in her understanding of the sacred. One was the power of thought, rather than the religiosity of her Orthodox upbringing, and the other was a realization of nothingness. The sacred for Kristeva, as she reflects upon these realizations, has to do with the endurance of thought beyond death, and with humility. 'To imagine thought as a life beyond life proper, and life as a thought more powerful than death or one's personal destiny.'²⁴⁷ More emphatically Kristeva states, 'I am convinced that this conjunction of thought and of the nothing can and ought to be celebrated as "sacred".'²⁴⁸ At the close of the letter Kristeva speculates whether she is invoking a religion in her thought or literature. Suspended between thought and otherness a constant communicative dynamic exists available to us in works of art.

²⁴⁶ Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and The Sacred*, 2001.

²⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 48.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 49.

Mystic Nativity was painted at a time of great political, cultural and religious turmoil. Botticelli's personal thoughts are reflected in his sombre picture of the Nativity. But another formative concern of this painting lies in the manifestation of language. *Mystic Nativity* embodies a literary corpus and Botticelli's considerations address, with great purpose, knowledge issuing from, and escaping, the written word. I find a fascinating parallel in Botticelli's inclusion of the hay, precisely at the most intimate and intense area of his Nativity painting. In a painting that pertains to a discernible and vertical flow of meaning via the written word, both philosophical and theological, a contrary flow is suggested surrounding the depiction of hay. The hay inspires in me deep reflection. I am intrigued and transported by its beauty and its potential meaning. But my encounter with the meaning is fragile, the counter flow of logic eludes definition, and its intersection is almost imperceptible.

The hay has for me indicated what would otherwise be invisible — that is the participating feminine dynamic. Botticelli engages with a gentle, but fundamental flow of gravity and of grace, in this painting as fall and rise. The hay presents an even more elusive component – for me the nature of the flow of transformation. By introducing the feminine and the maternal⁷ into subjective responses we can begin to comprehend and communicate with subtleties in *Mystic Nativity* that are barely visible. We can respond both to an historical aspect of knowledge and symbolism, as well as the living and contemplative engendering of knowledge, a palimpsest of knowledge that includes the behind and the beside and the lyrical.

Hay in Salem Chapel explored the potential of these qualities. In the gestures and responses of those who visited the installation, a myriad of sensations and concepts were shuffled and reshuffled. Some turned their back on the hay in the pews to purposefully look at the walls where old photographs hung, or at the imposing organ pipes and podium. Others sat for long periods occasionally exchanging memories quietly. Some revisited to note the filling up of the chapel with a substance so benign and transient that it seemed they needed to keep an eye on it, and still others tentatively handled the hay as though they had not known it before. The strange was beautiful.

Conclusion



Sandro Botticelli, *Mystic Nativity*, detail.

I have measured the distance from the objective.

I have seen the sacred in the common object.²⁴⁹

In my conclusion I return to the inspiration for this thesis, the contemplation of Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*. This picture has informed my art practice and has shown me a way to articulate the divine as made manifest in art. My research has developed a deeper and broader understanding of the subtleties of art and its potential encounter with the divine. It has led me along a path that has revealed the process of our emerging, subjective selves and echoes another potentiality — that of an encounter with what is beyond us. Operating at the heart of these encounters is a relationship that is concealed, but essential to our expression and to accord; a feminine dynamic. The sense of what is

²⁴⁹ Jannis Kounellis, Artist Statement, 1978, in Christov-Bakargiev. *Arte Povera*, p. 249.

greater than our cognizance, in the light of this relationship, opens up for me new possibilities of what is divine.

As with the hay, which Botticelli has painted with such delicacy circulating around the forms of the Nativity, the nature of the encounter between art and the divine is transitory. I have in 'Painting the Picture' followed the transitory nature of knowledge from the context of thought in which *Mystic Nativity* was painted to the less visible signs of another realm of knowledge. The traces and signs of this operative and fundamental knowing are fleeting, concealed and formless. Therefore they emerge, from the sides, or beneath, as glimpsed at elements in what Ettinger refers to as a matrixial borderspace. In 'Hay as Membrane' I have focused upon the central locality of Botticelli's Nativity and examined the space between the forms as a borderspace in which subjective elements are transformed and develop. The fine and ethereal threads of this knowing and growth I have likened to a membrane and this image reflects my intuitive response to the matrix as in the terms of Ettinger's research. Also reflected in this term is a personal fascination with the weave of a mystical substance through which knowledge passes and is generated.

Placed between what enters into the symbolic realm of cognition and learning, and the sub-symbolic realm of knowing and transforming, my investigation has explored the processes of language. In 'Hay as Calligraphy' I sought to explore an emerging, Other language that relates to a symbolic code, but has a variable, and a mediatory nature. First touched on in 'Painting the Picture' through the decipherment of ancient palimpsests by the Renaissance humanist, I elaborate upon language and literature by exploring phenomenological thought, and the processes of semiotic analysis. In my reflections upon Benjamin's approach to writing, and his archaeological sense in the contemplation of artefacts, I have found a sympathetic vein in which to explore the 'indispensable language' that art continually evolves. Kounellis' art practice is formative in a further exploration of this language and has informed my own practice in the use of substance and in the use of transformative, haptic and spatial aspects that mitigate a profound response to what is tangible and to what is unseen. Thus we are shifted from one realm to another through a re-formed sense of perspective that engages us afresh in a new participatory language, one that takes place in a spatial encounter. Weil's exploration of divine grace resounds in these considerations. It is in this spatial encounter, in which we take part, that a practice of language is found. Kristeva's analysis returns me to the nature

of the encounter with what is beyond the written through her identification of a realm that operates outside of an encoded language. Kristeva describes her research informed by psychoanalysis as being ‘grafted’ onto semiology.²⁵⁰ She identifies a choral space operating between the real and imaginary of our psyche the components of which are lyrical and indeterminate; she points to the word as intersecting these realms. Her further reflections speculate that the sacred could mean what is suspended between thought and the nameless. I detect in the movement of the hay in *Mystic Nativity* a calligraphic trace of meaning that traverses both realms. This closely connects with the processes of the Incarnation — that of God’s word manifested in the Christ child. Botticelli’s image of Mary resonates with the becoming of the word as embodied and, as my research has revealed to me, the participation of the maternal in a language that is both lyrical and symbolic. In this event, the nature of which has been my quest throughout all my study and practice, the transcendental meets with the innate.

It is at the transformation from the subjective to the transcendental that Irigaray’s thought becomes relevant in my concluding reflection upon a practice that explores both the subjective lived self and the metaphysical. My understanding of her writing has slowly developed alongside the apprehension that the forms in Botticelli’s devotional painting were supported by a circulating dynamic made manifest by the hay. Irigaray places divinity in a special relationship with nature, one that is conceived as participating with it, not as a celebration in man’s transcendence as different from it. Her sense of transcendence therefore resides in an individual’s subjectivity — an internal response to a loved self, and from this to a beyond of the self in an engagement with the elements. In her writing, metaphors of earth, air and light are as significant as her metaphors of our bodily existence - of breath, touch and jouissance. Irigaray’s thought, as I have indicated in my introduction, runs parallel to phenomenological aspects of Arte Povera. Her differentiated, but receptive and ever becoming self is in accord with Anselmo’s installation of granite slabs, *When the stars are coming one span closer*.²⁵¹ This communion celebrates the transcendental as sensible, immanent and part of us, as we partake in the wonder of the world beyond. And crucially it involves an accord in the

²⁵⁰ Kristeva. *Desire in Language*, intro. p.x.

²⁵¹ Anselmo, *When the stars are coming one span closer*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2005.

encounter, and the conversing, with a multiplicity of Others.²⁵² Irigaray introduces a whole new aspect to language operating through a symbolism that is informed by a constant flow of a transcendental that we are at one with. Thus an open dialogue ensues, communicating with elements in a language that enables a becoming through conversing with it. The future is not removed from us but it is a potential accompanying each one of us as we participate and contemplate in accord with our own subjective selves, with the world and with the elements. So it is through a reflection upon Irigaray's concept of the sensible transcendental that I culminate my enquiry, in this thesis, of the transformation of material being into a metaphysical space of knowing. Here language gives way to response and is assimilated through balance, 'the walk between love and thought',²⁵³ expressed for me in Botticelli's painting by the circling angels, lightly treading the air above the Nativity. Irigaray's exploration of the caress is of an 'awakening',²⁵⁴ a 'gesture-word',²⁵⁵ particular to each one, to both, and as a means of return to each one, and to both. Distance and difference is maintained, cared for, experienced and defined, through touch — the interface, so to speak, through which thought continuously moves and is conceived and re-conceived. 'Subjectivity, therefore, arrives at spirituality whilst remaining sensibility.'²⁵⁶ In Irigaray's inclusive thought the Other is not reduced to an external ethic and a capital 'O',²⁵⁷ but is as the breath, within and without. In the movement of the breath the innermost and infinitely light encounter of our transcendence and our life takes place. Irigaray's is not an approach, but the very flow of life, always mysterious and always intimate, with the other as our passage to subjectivity, thought and prayer. Under these conditions, in which emerging subjectivity opens into a spatial encounter, I believe the metaphysical becomes manifest in the immanence of being and the synchronization of this process is an expression of grace. With these thoughts in mind I have chosen to end my thesis with the art practice of Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci as an expression of this experience.

²⁵² Irigaray conceives of a multiplicity of others: male and female, male and female other's, the other and the other's other.

²⁵³ Irigaray, Luce. See *To Be Two*, M. Rhodes & M. Cocito-Monoc (trans.), London: Athlone Press, 2000, p. 109

²⁵⁴ Ibid. p.25.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 26.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 50.

²⁵⁷ Irigaray. *To Be Two*, p. 19.

My first live experience of Cool and Balducci's practice was at the Site Gallery in Sheffield, 2008. I was alone. In the first gallery a video played a loop of *Prayers* (figs. 17, 18 and 19)²⁵⁸ — a series of simple processes enacted with everyday materials. I had seen stills from this piece. Through the entrance into a long room, lit by a row of high up windows, I caught a glimpse of a slight figure moving to and fro between several pieces of furniture and equipment. Cool seemed to be preparing for her performance. But as she moved around, laying out two sheets of paper on a table and drawing up a chair to another, I became aware of my own watching, which until then had been seeking an interpretation of her movements. Cool's actions moved from what I presumed had been preparation imperceptibly to a series of manipulative practices with materials ranging from paper to string, from adhesive tape to cotton wool.

Seated at a table Cool quietly placed her hands on the two sheets of paper. She adjusted the sheets so that their edges met in front of her. As she attempted to engage the exact pressure against each edge, in synchrony, so that they simultaneously supported each other and rose up together, I found myself involved directly with her endeavour. Cool's actions were purposeful and repetitive. Each attempt was a co-ordination between hands and eyes, action and attention. Above her the light came in through the window and defined the matt-ness of the paper, a thin line of shadow beneath it, and the slight shine from the formica-topped table. The edges of the paper slipped over each other several times. Cool methodically slid the paper edges into alignment and tried again. Finally the paper sheets held the tension between them, they flattened against each and rose into a vertical. Cool's hands lightly curved up from the flat table and supported the sheets. And again her movement from one state into another was seamless, her hands opened and the paper sheets parted and opened. At the same speed at which they had risen the sheets curved over the delicate support of Cool's hands and came down onto the table (fig. 17).

When the day at the gallery ended I met Cool and Balducci to talk about their work. We worked hard to understand each other. We did not speak each other's languages fluently. Balducci took pains to make clear certain tenets of their art. He firstly expressed that there was no sentiment attached to what they did and that the work resisted criticism because,

²⁵⁸ Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci, *Prayers*, 2008, digital prints, courtesy of the artists.

as he put it, there was ‘no foothold’. The lack of foothold repels an egoistical response, or to put it another way, closure. He related how when in New York the cleaner had seen their practice after the gallery had closed and had referred to it as their ‘exercises.’ This, Balducci remarked, came closer than most art critics to understanding what they did. The subtlety of what they attempt needs to be practiced. It is immaterial whether they are watched or not. However, when their practice is seen, we are engaged, through following Cool’s movements, in a quiet tension. The title of this sequence, *Prayers*, refers to the resonance of the transcendental in the human body. An ongoing event in which every element has an equal timbre of reciprocity and accord; the light through the window and the length of the string, the weight of the cotton wool and Cool’s forehead (*figs. 18 and 19*). *Prayers* is a body of sequences, some only practiced live and some only filmed, that continually seeks to find the balance between the metaphysical and what is immanent. Belief, as Cool and Balducci explore, is a dynamic that exists free from doctrine and encoded faith. In their work they maintain a practice with common objects and materials, and with contemplative but attentive actions, to allow the nature of belief to find an expression in what they do. It is like the hay that explores in its manifestation the uncertainty of the moment, the suspension of expectation, the open dialogue, here apprehended amid the carefully negotiated actions of Cool and the materials she lightly touches.

Thoughtfully Balducci wrote down the names of artists whose work ‘sustained’ their own. But their interest in early Flemish tiles was the most telling for me. I can picture the old tiles I knew as a child, the rough earthenware edge, the open background of Dutch sunlight, the loosely drawn little figures, a cloud and a full blown sail, all smooth under the crackled glaze and always alive in a moment of life.

On my train journey home I felt my mind lighten, a crystal clarity seemed to have cleared a new space in it. Later I looked up Giorgio Colli (1917-1979), an Italian philosopher, whose thought influences Cool and Balducci’s practice. I found that Colli’s writing specifically addresses, ‘the totality of the event as an “expression” of something (immediacy) that escapes the capture of knowledge.’²⁵⁹ My experience seems to be in line

²⁵⁹ See Colli, Giorgio. *The Expression of Philosophy*, 1969, cited online http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giorgio_Colli [25.09.09.]

with what Colli would deem an expression of philosophic thought. It is interesting that Colli's philosophy draws from his study of pre-Socratic wisdom (the ancient thought that informed Plotinus, and later, Ficino and Pico dell Mirandola) in his search for the derivation of authentic logos.

The expression of the metaphysical resonating in the 'common object'²⁶⁰ is explored in Cool and Balducci's art practice. We engage in a moment of transformation whilst with Cool and Balducci, ordinary materials and measured actions are taken to task. It is relevant that neither artist has written, or does write, about their collaboration. The logos they explore finds an alternate site in which to be realized; in practice, in the open encounter, and in reflection. Perhaps the sparkling space I found in the intimacy of my reflection was a manifestation of a transcendent accord.

This thesis, *Art and the Divine*, had led me to appreciate the participation of art and writing, research and contemplation through a phenomenological process. In my appreciation of semiosis I have seen how these various strands interweave to form a practice that is art. The site of this practice is both transcendent and innate, both metaphysical and immanent, as is the movement of the hay in Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* around the figures of the Nativity. It is felt 'directly'²⁶¹ and through its overlooked and transient qualities maintains a link to a feminine dimension, the key to the divine. In the synchronization of such an encounter I find divinity.

²⁶⁰ Kounellis, *Arte Povera*, p. 249.

²⁶¹ Weil, 'I feel the presence of my friend directly. It is the same with life's circumstances...and God.' *Gravity and Grace*, p. 24.

Illustrations



Fig. 2 Amelia Mulvey and David Brinkworth, *Hay in Salem Chapel*, 2006, installation hay and sound, Salem Chapel, Hay on Wye.



Fig. 3 Amelia Mulvey, *Honey Stream*, 2003, installation, honey, copper pipe, blue drum, Birmingham Institute Art and Design



Fig. 4 Amelia Mulvey, *Honey Stream*, 2003, installation, Birmingham Institute Art and Design

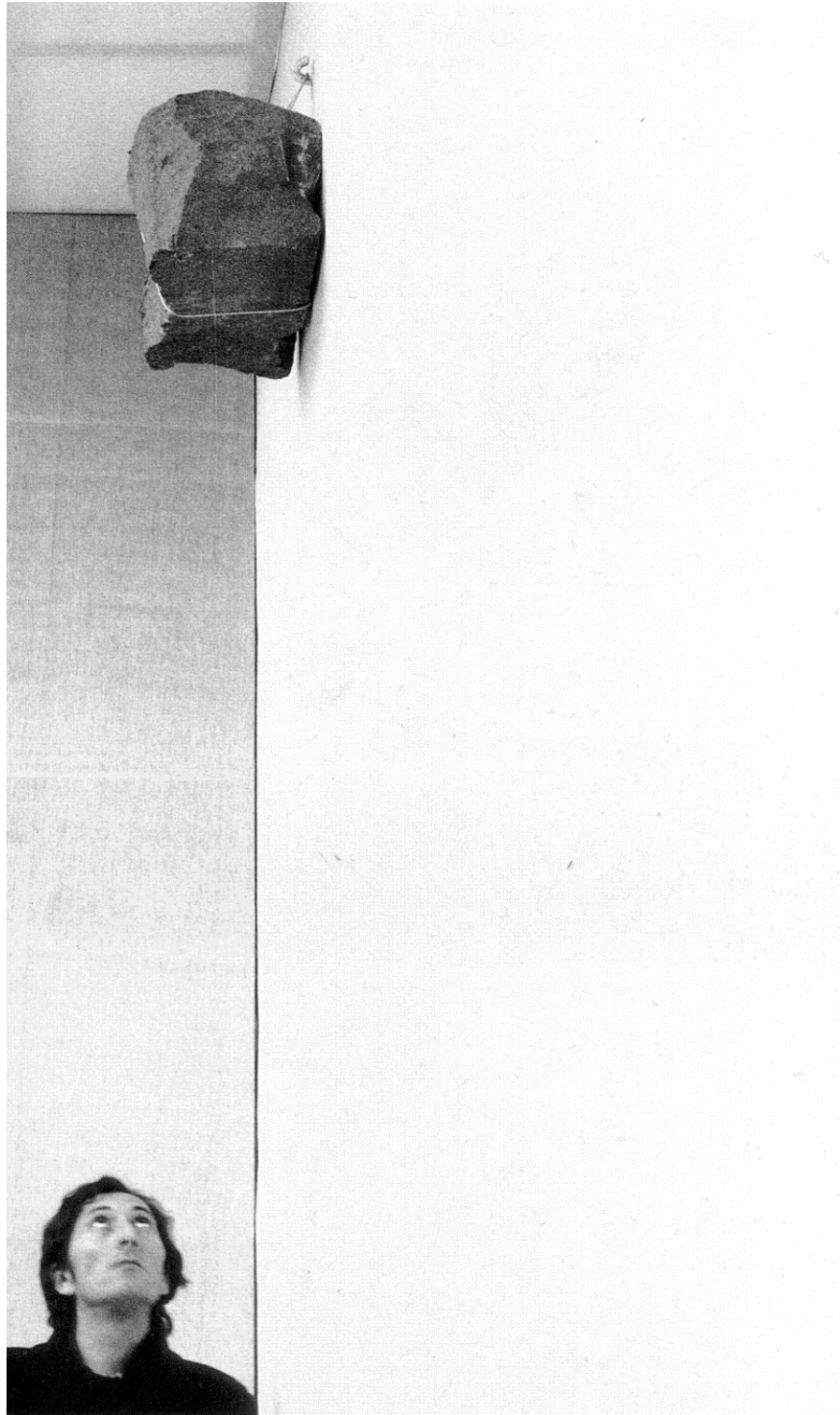


Fig. 5 Giovanni Anselmo, *Untitled*, 1969, stone suspended as high as possible on a wall by a steel cable, 60 x 30 x 30 cm. *Zero to Infinity, Arte Povera 1962-1972*, Tate Modern, 2001.



Fig. 6 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1969, twelve horses, installation, Galleria L' Attico, Rome.



Fig. 7 Andrea Verrocchio, (1435-1488) *Tobias and the Angel*, 1470, egg tempera on poplar, 83.6 x 66 cm, National Gallery, London



Fig.8 Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516), *Agony in the Garden*, detail, egg tempera on wood, 81.3 x 127 cm. National Gallery, London



Fig. 9 Sandro Botticelli, (1445-1510). *Mystic Nativity* 1550, detail, oil on canvas, 108.6 x 74.9 cm, National Gallery, London.

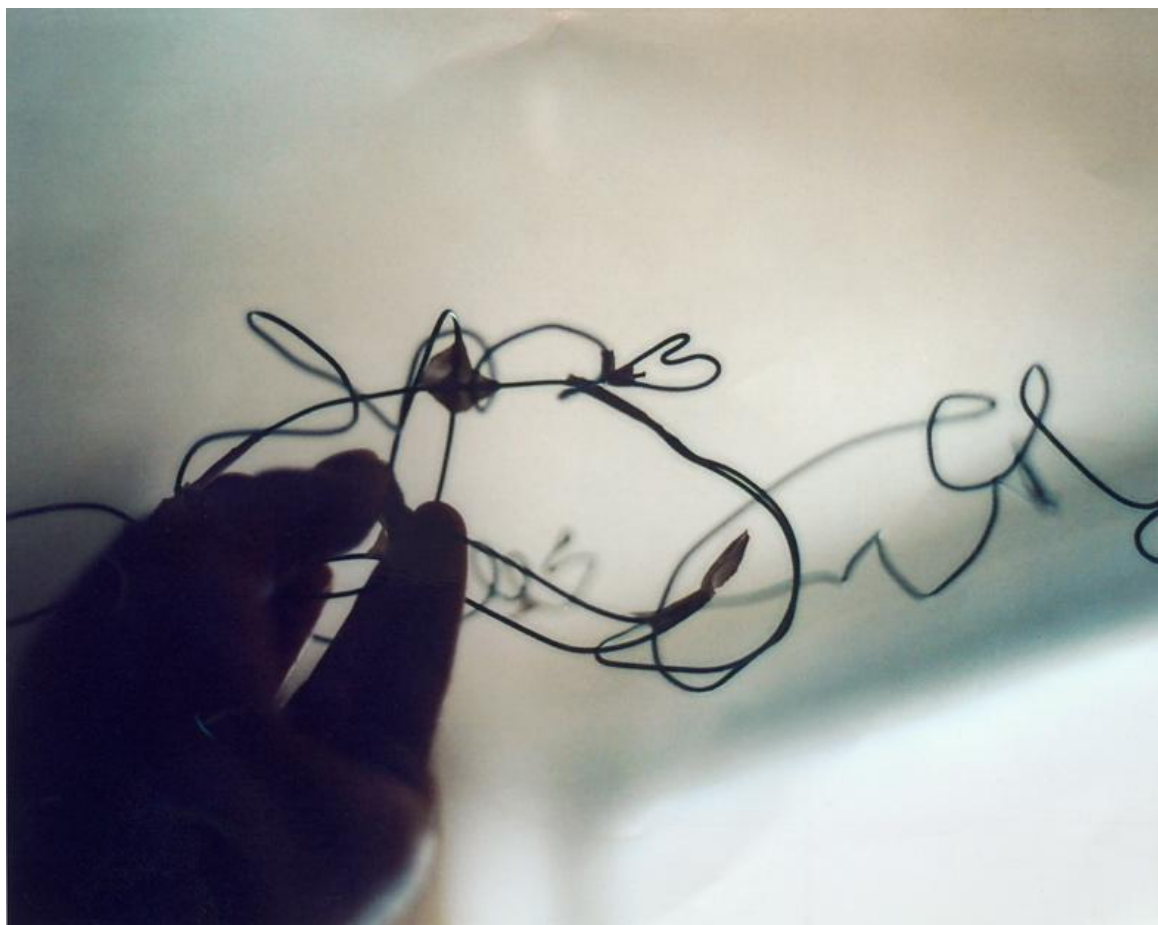


Fig. 10 Amelia Mulvey, *Wire Child*, 2004, digital print from photograph, 22 x 30 cm.



Fig. 11 Amelia Mulvey, *Dry Grass*, 2004, monoprint, 40 x 60 cm.



Fig. 12 Bracha Ettinger (b. 1948), *Autistwork no.1*, 1993, oil and photocopied dust on paper mounted on canvas, 32.5 x 28 cm, courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 13 Mary Cassatt, (1844-1926) *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, 1878, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 129.8 cm, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, National Gallery, Washington.



Fig. 14 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1969, seven burlap sacks filled with grain, beans, pulses and coal, 1969, *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, Tate Modern, 2001.

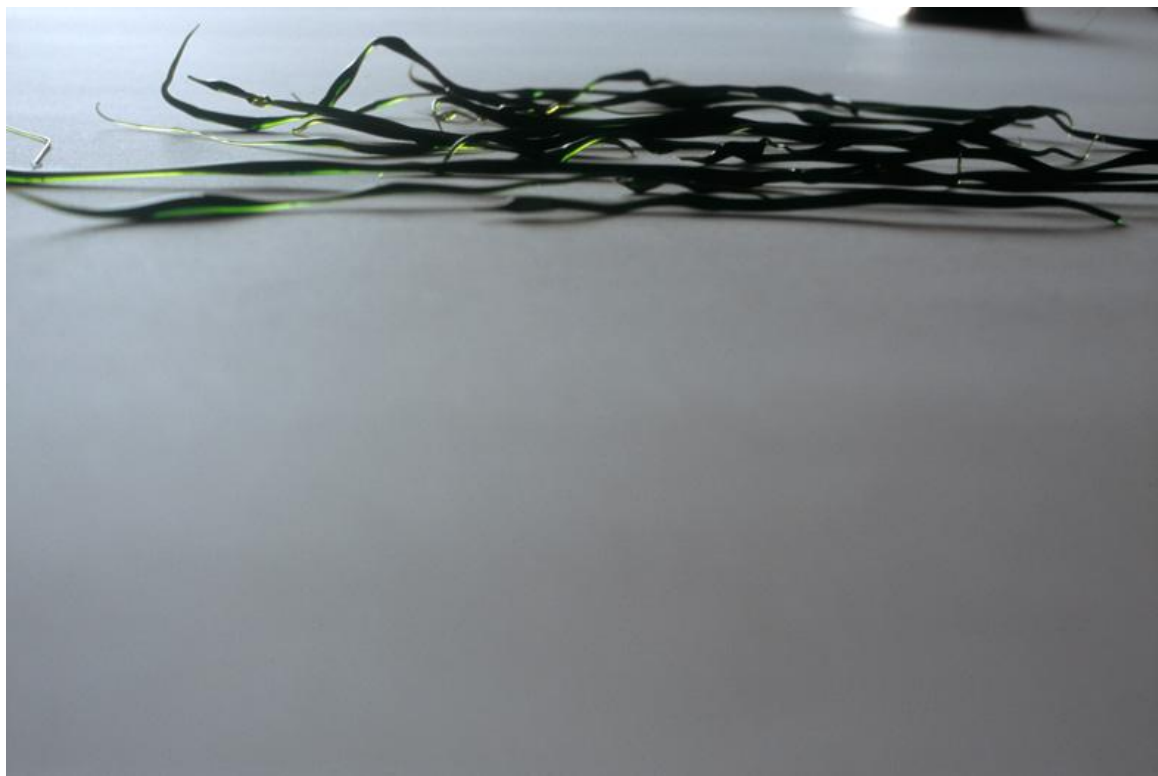


Fig. 15 Amelia Mulvey, *Glass Strands*, 2004, digital print from photograph, 40 x 60 cm.



Fig. 16 Amelia Mulvey, *Glass Strands*, 2004, digital print from photograph, 40 x 60 cm.



Fig. 17 Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci, *Untitled*, 2008, table and paper, courtesy of the artists .



Fig. 18 Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci, *Untitled*, tape and table, 2008, courtesy of the artists.



Fig. 19 Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci, *Untitled*, cotton, string and cardboard tube, courtesy of the artists.

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