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Sarkis *Punctum*

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Ghost Story for the Very Adult

It was in Switzerland and Germany, rather than Paris, that Sarkis started exhibiting regularly in 1969. Berne, Basel and Geneva became the sites for the genesis and appearance of a body of work, now mapped out by the exhibition *Punctum*¹. But it is today that Sarkis is talking for the first time about his relationship with a country. To do so, he is bringing in the Swiss writer Robert Walser, having seen in the author of *Seeland* (1920) the ideal companion for exploring – just as Walser crossed over the region of “the three lakes” during his untiring hikes and solitary wanderings – the territory of his recollections. While Walser was activated by the urgency of someone about to lose his memory and the fundamental need to take stock, Sarkis takes the time to collect, organise and stratigraphy his “memory sites”. Their mingled echoes invite us to moments of contemplation, effort, rest, or solitude, inhabited by the presence of *floating bodies* – *Beuys, Aram Iynedjian, Robert Kramer, Paradjanov*²– that incite us to feel the eternity of the moment, and succumb to the appeal of *the beautiful and silky darkness*³.

Using again the same modus operandi as for *L'Atelier depuis 19380...* installed since 1994 just nearby, the gallery has been filled by exogenous pieces. In part conceived and produced in his studio in Villejuif, they have been rounded off in the exhibition space, which has been transformed into a temporary studio, by endogenous objects. Detinged with the characteristics of the space, they in turn soak into the space; this is the ultimate and necessary step for the exhibition to take on its full proportions, and final form... so as to make it “take place”.

Since the 1960s, with the arrival of installations, exhibiting inevitably became a form of staging. Sarkis has conceived his show like a cinematographic montage of items gathered from his archives and works: photographs, drawings, stained-glass, sediments, scraps, residues, sounds, colours, architectures, ghosts, History, the past, present and future. The photographs – a medium that “irrigates” his entire body of work – tell a tale, while their juxtapositions lead the spectators to form analogies. The eye of the viewer lights up the photos, making them present. Overall, the result is a genuine atlas of memory⁴. “...The photographs

¹ The exhibition's title alludes to the *punctum*, described by Roland Barthes in his essay devoted to photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980). The *punctum* is “what touches me”. A detail that attracts the attention, an “unexpected mark” which is not composed intentionally and cannot be analysed. “It is a supplement which I get head-on, a spark which makes things move. After this shock, or explosion that expels all forms of knowledge, culture or codes, a photo is no longer middling. A force, which is often metonymic, runs through it.”

² The words in colour refer to the pieces that can be found in the *Punctum* exhibition.

³ All the quotes in italics come from Robert Walser's book, *Seeland*.

⁴ From 1924 to 1929, the art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) worked on a projected text-less history of art entitled *Mnemosyne*. This work took on the appearance of an unfinished atlas which Warburg also called “Ghost Story for the Very Adult”. This Atlas is based on montage techniques. It brings together in a single work forms from all cultures, analogically. In the work of Sarkis, they are many references to the German art historian Aby Warburg.

are incarnations of the disappeared, in particular the photographs of those who have left us. In any case, through these images, they really take on a kind of ghostly presence. And that has always intrigued me. It has nothing to do with a phenomenon that might reveal something mystic or mysterious. It is just a vestige of an archaic way of seeing things”⁵.

Painted things are genuinely capable of dreaming, smiling to themselves, soliloquising or being sad.

Walser saw this clearly: works become lifeless in solitude and constantly become recharged from relationships. There is a permanent point about attracting the visitors’ gaze so as to avoid an indifference that reduces works to nothing. They suffer from a lack of attention and Sarkis makes use of numerous strategies to maintain a focus. Positioned in four superimposed drying frames, the photographs seem to have emerged from the bath that has brought out their content. The prints are black like coal, so that no colours can work into them. And yet, most of the selected photographs were initially in colour. Black and white is used because it freezes. In films, black and white introduces a flashback into the narrative, while colour sets the image in the present. Sarkis has his own colour symbolism, and when he uses fluorescent tones they are generally associated with childhood, because these nuances have only recently appeared in the production of colours. The highlights using oil paint on his photographs bring the images back into the present, and produce around them a translucent halo which constantly spreads out, as if the aura of the work were being brought to life.

It was perhaps less the object itself than the soul of the object that had been painted...

The chronological reach of the *Punctum* exhibition takes in almost fifty years, or almost half a century of creation. As a nod towards the Swiss clock-making industry, *Seeland* and *Austerlitz*, books by Walser and Sebald are decked with clocks deprived of second hands. Instants are no longer marked. Narratives are dilated and become telescoped, while the past breaks abruptly into the present. **The pioneer works** by Sarkis, which can be seen in his photographs, are lit up by a new light, then return to the present. As suggested in the writings of Walser and Sebald, fertile space-time leaps are offered to the visitors. From archive images of his work, there is a shift from “the memory of one work to another”.

Sarkis is the only artist living in France⁶ who is taking part in the show *When Attitudes Become Form*, in which Harald Szeemann, at the time the director of the Bern Kunsthalle, wanted to bring out “everything we haven’t yet seen, which came after ‘Pop Art’ and ‘Minimal Art’, works perfectly integrated into their surroundings while questioning reality and where... no clear sign indicates that they should be seen as ‘works’ rather than ‘things’”.

This was the period during when Sarkis put together a radical artistic vocabulary, matching his political commitments, producing assemblages of “poor” and industrial materials: tar, cables and electrical transformers, galvanised sheet steel, neon lights, rubber, Plasticine, sheets of insulating aluminium. Nor did he hold back from using a military aesthetic with camouflage paint.

This was the period of the **“clandestine” studio set up in a garage on Avenue de Choisy** and **the sculptures hidden in the abandoned school**. “My works made of tar, or mechanical parts ... used to live in the complete darkness of my absence. I turned on my little light, I set going *Cinq rouleaux en attente* for their sound like a phone meter, or else the little wheel that used a metronome to convey my heart beats. I closed the door on myself.” The use of an electric beat is there to inhabit the work, but also to free it from the physical presence of the artist. Some pieces give off a sort of warning which is there to hit out, in opposition to a reassuring, conventional art. In 1985, Sarkis exhibited at the Bern Kunsthalle *Ma mémoire est ma patrie*. This is a memory that attempts to construct and reconstruct itself through “satellite” works forming a diaspora. As an exile, doomed to live far from any reference land, other than those he invents, Sarkis uses cameras, tapes and records to keep alive his memories. These “memory safes”, as he defines them, are

⁵ Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald (1944-2001) was a major modern German literary author, who regularly grafted photographs and archives onto his narratives. His practice of collecting images and montage, as well as the way of seeing that he set about developing, owed a great deal to painting and the cinema, in particular the style of Eisenstein and Godard.

⁶ Sarkis was born in Istanbul in 1938. He has lived in Paris since 1964. Alain Jacquet is also participating in the exhibition. He does not live in France but in New York.

⁷ *When Attitudes Become Form – Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information*, exhibition catalog, Kunsthalle Bern, 22.3-27.4 1969.

constantly present in the works they also constitute.

Expressions, concepts and series were to arise successively and become part of his work:

The *Blackout* cycle started in September 1974 at the Handschin gallery in Basel before continuing in Geneva. The series takes its title from military terminology – a *blackout* means being the creation of silence about a topic – and was started by Sarkis after the Cyprus crisis of July/August 1974. But a *Blackout*, is also the momentary absence of memory, a black hole, hence the use in this series of rolled tar, a sanded grey protective material that becomes black when heated, “a material that spits out its energy like a dragon”.

As for *Kriegsschatz* (1976) it is a critique of colonial history, pillage and the policy of keeping and exhibiting objects taken from their cultural origins and conserved in luminous, hygrometric, thermal atmospheres that are alien to them. *Kriegsschatz (Trésor de guerre)* is a German word, because it was during a residency in Berlin that Sarkis made the connections between the values of western art and a colonial ideology. “It was from this time that he started to bring into his sculptures and installations images or objects coming from non-western countries, outside Europe, in confrontations that are at once duels and conversations”. The corollary of *Kriegsschatz* is the theft of the identity and meaning from pillaged objects in an aesthetic quarantine. Sarkis systematises his collection of objects which he “reloads” during a long stay in his studio. Subsequently, *Kriegsschatz* has been completed by the notion of *Leidschatz (Trésor de souffrance)*, under the influence of Aby Warburg who, in 1928, defined *Leidschatz* as the booty of a suffering humanity. *Kriegsschatz (Trésor de guerre)* then becomes *Leidschatz (Trésor de souffrance)*, as an oxymoron.

“For the Surrealists, a ‘wild’ object, a child’s drawing, a madman’s collage or a painting by Miró are often equivalent. The Surrealists were inventive when it came to the continuity of human desire. They discovered the point from which one could and still can look at humanity, but not from its origins, instead through what it can produce in terms of symbolic forms and their capacity to be grasped together. No one had thought to do that before and no one, since then, has shown up this ambition, except perhaps for Sarkis.⁸” *Blackout* and *Kriegsschatz* thus both allude to a dialectic between the visible and the invisible. This dialectic can perhaps also be seen in the [photograph of a tree](#) which focuses on the border zone between the airy and underground lives of a tree: the earth, from which the trunk emerges, and where the roots rub together, before digging in and forming ramifications that mirror its branches. The tree is knotty, vigorous, and its dark trunk brings out puddles, revealing recent rain.

L’Atelier depuis 19380... is a space like none other. In a hut made of wood, recalling the monks’ cells in the San Marco Monastery (Florence), Christian Bernard invited Sarkis over twenty years ago to set up one of his studios on the first floor of the Mamco. This austere space lit up by the light of the day and the works, initially contained few pieces – *Viola d’amour*, *Ma chambre de la rue Krutenau en satellite...* and restricted furnishing. A lay ritual is performed every week: a lady friend of Sarkis brings flowers to the studio. This visit and the presence of flowers keep the studio alive and inhabited. At the beginning of each year, the stained-glass window in front of the door is reproduced as a watercolour depicting the coloured blocks that make it up. Sarkis regularly comes to work in his studio in Geneva. Year by year, the studio has become so extensive that it has turned into an essential part of its host museum. It is occasionally set out in other spaces in the museum for low-key exhibitions such as *Conversations* (2005), which can be thematic and ambitious, such as *Sculptures obscures* (1996), *Hôtel Sarkis* (2011), or re-usable such as *L’Atelier d’Aquarelle dans l’Eau* (2004) until its rebirth in 2017, after a year’s eclipse, on the fourth floor of the museum. The studio with its modified proportions is now experiencing a period of plenitude while revealing its entire content.

Ever since the commission for the stained-glass windows at the Abbey of Silvane (2001), Sarkis has constantly returned to this medium which exalts light and colour. **The stained-glass windows** on show display [views of medieval Armenian churches](#) which Sarkis has run over with one of his fingers, leaving behind a coloured trace which chemistry and the heating of the glass have transmuted into “gold”. Their superimposition gives rise to a fresh effect of stratification. The transparency of the windows is thus reduced, but the superimposition of the traces heightens the object’s body, producing an abstract, condensed form, as an accumulation of actual traces, a conglomeration loaded with the additional

⁸ Christian Bernard, commentary on *One More Time – L’exposition de nos expositions*, Mamco, October 2015.

memory of places that Sarkis has visited, and what they evoke, they are also charged with the awareness of their final disappearance. Overall, this evokes a *memento mori* with, on one of the dryers, the [hidden church of Yerevan](#), protected from destruction during the Soviet period by the buildings around it, which formed a rampart and obscured it from view. On the wall, the stained-glass windows are detached from the others, like separate bodies which are nonetheless closely linked to other bodies scattered throughout the exhibition. When shown differently, the pieces incite other analogies and interpretations. Sarkis, like Walser, places ritual and the sacred in the world. In their works, opposites are attracted and coincide – hot and cold, light and shadow, sound and silence, memory and oblivion, a storm and a rainbow, balance and disorder, the hidden and the visible, the contents of the temple and what is in the world.

... beasts graze peacefully with their idyllic bells round their necks, peace, joy and freedom, harmony and beauty, motion and health, close or faraway mountain chalets, bird-song and the chiaroscuro of forests, noises, scents and colours, the mingling of the human, woven with the divine, all the little particular things that are understandable, then once again immense, an incomprehensible universe...

Walser owned little and, according to Sebald: “He kept himself away from History and ended up in an asylum”, giving up on the world. In his books – *Der Gehülfe*, *Jakob von Gunten*, *Geschwister Tanner* – Walser never stopped bringing in characters with furtive existences, as a sign of renouncement. In homage to his aunt, Sarkis produced a piece [A la limite du silence](#) (1989-1990) made up of twelve colour photographs taken in Istanbul, shortly after her death, in the house where she lived. The photographs are accompanied by words written up in neon lights, by Gilles Deleuze, taken from the preface to *Bartleby* – another figure of renouncement – created by Herman Melville. Sarkis’s aunt, the only female butcher in Istanbul, was in her own way a kind of *Bartleby*, because she “preferred not to” change her modest life, thus showing a kind of lack of attraction for change.

Walser withdrew from the world and completely stopped writing in 1933. During his last walk, snow covered the landscape. There is both pathos and dignity in his final photo portrait: his body lying down with snow forming a mantle of mourning, with the traces of his footsteps still visible, and his hat, the essential companion of his peregrinations, which had tumbled down just beside his arm, as though Walser were taking leave of the world with a last farewell. While he had wanted to “defeat gravity”, he here seems borne down by the snow he had celebrated:

It snowed again, then the flowers started to open, the mountain was red and white with them, and the little houses almost smothered beneath this lavish coat. During the night, the wonderfully beautiful moon spread out its pale gleam across the trees that were so delicately white.

So, sometimes, even after springtime comes, there falls a deep layer of snow that changes everything into a withdrawal from the world.

Equipped with lipstick, Sarkis drew on white paper [the last landscape visited by Walser](#). The colour heats up the icy background that engulfs him glacially. The red sun, the ruddy flame, the rufescent sleet and the incandescent trees refuse to take on the colour of grieving and instead adopt the colour which is *par excellence* the first one to have been made and used by mankind, representing blood and life. Walser had the sensitivity and view of a painter, exulting in front of the power of colour.

The young tender green was like a leafy blaze, a clear burning, smiling, a sparkling of kisses, a young desire. The blue colour also threw out flames to such an extent that two fires were kindled. As if it were possible to bloom and burn at the same time...

One day, he lived through a wonderful, unforgettable storm, during which he observed above all a darkish pathway that ran alongside the rail-track and which the storm, raising up a dust storm, brushed across with a stunning violence. All sorts of men, women, or children were running away quickly as though pursued by an unleashed monster. The whole situation, with its panic, dust, dense steam, damp wind, created an immense impression and made up a scene which was as worrying as it was attractive. Then suddenly the thunder broke out, heavy rain fell over the rooves, streets and fleeing people; lightning tore apart the sky, everywhere around was plunged suddenly into strange shadows. Then, as ever, the world looked more desirable and gracious. Breathing more freely, people came out onto their doorsteps,

attracted by their being open, cleansed, with everything clean, shining, drenched, while giving signs full of friendship, in the streets, trees and houses gleaming and hailing joyfully.

Sarkis is not just a creator of forms, he is also a trafficker, a stalker⁹ who affronts and transcends historical events so as to “put history back on the right track”. A peacemaker working to get over traumas. With seven tubes of paint, which he presses to release the colours, he has formed a **rainbow** to chime with **Respiro** (Venice 2015).

Sophie Costes

(Translation Ian Monk)

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⁹ Allusion to the Tarkovsky film, *Stalker* (1979). In a war zone, there is a place with a room where all beliefs and desires are still possible.