

'Le blanc souci de notre toile'

Writing White in Modern French Poetry and Art

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*Abstract*

White has the value of an optical sensation that exceeds colour: it is the condition of light, the sum total of all the colours of the spectrum combined. While it can therefore signify totality, it is also synonymous with the unfinished, the colour of the blank canvas, and the empty page. Perhaps on account of this ambivalent status, at once stopping short of and transcending perceptible phenomena, white has the power to evoke a more spiritual realm that might lie beyond the three dimensions of the material world. Unsurprisingly, then, white holds an iconic status in the development of abstract art and modern poetry alike. Examining a range of instances from Mallarmé to Malevich, Apollinaire to Arp, Didi-Huberman's reflections on the work of Simon Hantaï, Sarkis and Esther Shalev-Gerz, and the intermedial poetry of Caroline Bergvall, this reading of colour will explore some of the different .significations that white has acquired in poetry and art writing

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### *Prologue*

In 1816, 'La Méduse', a French Royal Navy frigate, set sail for Senegal with the aim of reclaiming the colony for France. Captained by Hugues Duroy de Chaumareys, an officer of the Ancien Régime who had not navigated for over twenty years, the ship ran aground on a sandbank to the north of Cap Blanc, some sixty miles off the coast of Mauritania. The captain and the governor promptly secured their own places on lifeboats, but one hundred and forty-seven people were forced onto a makeshift and wholly inadequate raft. These occupants comprised a mere twenty sailors alongside what Jonathan Miles terms 'an explosive grab-bag of mercenaries, captives and ex-convicts, all furious with the French leadership'.<sup>1</sup> Towed initially by the other lifeboats, the raft was deliberately cut loose by an officer in the governor's lifeboat after only a few minutes. After thirteen days adrift, the effects of dehydration, starvation and violence had left only fifteen survivors by the time the raft was finally discovered and rescued. The national outrage that greeted the news of the scandal did not prevent the survivors from being stigmatized when it was discovered that they had resorted to cannibalism in order to stay alive.

Théodore Géricault's iconic painting of the raft (1818–19) depicts poignantly the forlorn hope of the survivors straining to attract the attention of a boat visible on the distant horizon. Aided by numerous sketches of dismembered limbs and dead bodies from the Paris morgue, and informed by the first-hand accounts of a survivor, Alexandre Corréard, Géricault's painting is a monumental portrait of humankind in

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Miles, *Medusa: The Shipwreck, The Scandal, The Masterpiece* (London: Pimlico, 2008), p. 98

<sup>2</sup>See the official site of the Musée du Louvre:

[http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car\\_not\\_frame&idNotice=22541](http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=22541)

extreme circumstances and a furious indictment of the Restoration government for allowing the disaster to happen. Stylistically, the painting is remarkable for its much-analysed pyramidal composition, but equally so for Géricault's powerful use of a starkly reduced palette, in which numerous shades of white and off-white are particularly dominant. The skin of the survivors is difficult to distinguish from that of the dead; they share an ominous pallor that recurs in the foaming waves and the glow of the sky; a prominent and significant exception is the uppermost figure waving a ragged tricolore, whose dark skin is bathed in warm light. A passionate advocate of abolition, Géricault wanted his painting to shame the Restoration government, not only for its disgraceful act of treachery in abandoning the raft, but also for its .advocacy of slavery

The scope of the present essay does not allow us to consider the cultural representation of white from the perspective of social history and race; Richard Dyer The essay will allude to a few recent <sup>3</sup>.and others have analysed that subject in depth incursions of a predominantly aesthetic monochrome into the socio-political arena; the initial focus, however, will rest on some of the ways in which an aesthetics of the .achrome has established a central place in modern French poetry and art

### *?White or neutral*

The colour white, and the word 'blanc', have undergone a significant evolution over the centuries. As Anne-Marie Christin observes, in the ideogrammatic writing systems of ancient China, Egypt and Mesopotamia the material support was an important element of the signifying process, whereas the introduction of the Greek alphabet established an arbitrary, rather than mimetically contiguous, relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997).

between signifier and signified; in so doing, it brought about the need for the reader to decipher the phonemes, thereby pushing the blank spaces into the background and  
<sup>4</sup>.reducing them to an absence

White has a privileged place in Western cultural and religious history: Michel Pastoureau has noted that the equation in Christian theology of white with good and black with evil derives both from the Old Testament and from nature's patterns of day and night; from the eleventh century onwards, liturgical practices established a system John Gage tells us that, in the <sup>5</sup>.of representation based solely on black, white, and red Medieval era, light was understood to have a double identity, as *lux*, the light source, and *lumen*, the light reflected from surfaces. The most reflective substances were also  
<sup>6</sup>.the most valuable as they were believed to embody or even generate light

In modern French usage 'le blanc' has a double meaning: it signifies the colour white, but can also denote blank space – *les blancs d'un texte*. In the latter capacity, the term carries the sense of an absence or a gap, and in this context is often regarded as being equivalent to a non-colour. As the opposite of the colour black that is most frequently associated with the act of signifying through writing, typing, drawing, or painting, white takes on the status of a neutral, unmarked surface. In childhood we are taught to read words, and to look *through*, not at, the blank spaces between them. As Pastoureau points out, this way of thinking marks a shift from the use of the term *blanc* in previous centuries, when the notion of 'colourless' would be determined by whatever support was used for writing, such as grey stone, a buff-coloured piece of

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<sup>4</sup>Anne-Marie Christin, *Poétique du blanc: vide et intervalle dans la civilisation de l'alphabet* (Paris: Vrin, 2009), pp. 15–16

<sup>5</sup> .Michel Pastoureau, *Noir: Histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Seuil, 2008)

<sup>6</sup> .John Gage, *Colour in Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), p. 20

parchment, cloth or animal hide; he reminds us that the equivalence of white with the neutral space of writing is a relatively recent phenomenon that began with the advent<sup>7</sup> of paper

Stéphane Mallarmé presents one of the best-known instances in modern times of restoring to the white space of the page the status of a fully signifying element. His reputation as one of the most important poets of the modern era is inseparable from his being considered one of the most difficult; an aspect of this perceived difficulty is his penchant for allusion over assertion, and his desire to refine and distil words to their merest essence. A recurrent trope that connects Mallarmé's earliest poems with his final ones is the notion of the constellation; thus, 'Apparition', written in 1862 when Mallarmé was twenty years old, finds him uniting his present feelings of love and memories of childhood into the composite, synaesthetic image of a snowfall of :perfumed stars

Qui jadis, sur mes beaux sommeils d'enfant gâté  
 Passait, laissant toujours de ses mains mal fermées  
<sup>8</sup>.Neiger de blancs bouquets d'étoiles parfumées

Seen as a whole, his poetic career resembles a long trajectory towards a poetics of effacement in which the 'notion pure' divests itself ever more of material form. Thus, in 'Ses purs ongles', the idea of a constellation is expressed through the image of a : 'septuor' of 'scintillations'

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<sup>7</sup>Michel Pastoureau, 'Le blanc – partout, il dit la pureté et l'innocence', in *L'Express*, July 2004 19

<sup>8</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Apparition', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, texte établi et annoté par Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1945), p. 30.

Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor  
 Que, dans l'oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe  
 De scintillations sitôt le septuor<sup>9</sup>

His poem originally entitled 'Toast' and later renamed 'Salut' marks a further step in – this trajectory towards the ineffable in which colour – and especially white transcends a merely aesthetic function and becomes an exemplary expression of Intended to be printed in small type – an <sup>10</sup>. Symbolism's metaphysical concerns instruction ignored by his publishers – the poem establishes a highly suggestive connection between the white surface of the page and the as yet unrealized creative <sup>11</sup>. 'act: 'n'importe ce qui valut / le blanc souci de notre toile

The trope of the constellation, and the equation of the white sail of the seafaring vessel with the blank space of the page and the creative process, famously reaches its climax in Mallarmé's final and most experimental poem, *Un coup de dés* First published in the periodical *Cosmopolis* in 1897, this <sup>12</sup>. *jamais n'abolira le hasard* work represents the culmination of his spatialization of the page in which poetic form is dispersed into an expansive signifying web. As Malcolm Bowie observes, Mallarmé's negative response to the demands of conventional linear discourse plays '

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<sup>9</sup> Mallarmé, 'Ses purs ongles très haut...', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 37–38.

<sup>10</sup> Françoise Meltzer contends that colour in Symbolism is a direct expression of epistemological crisis. See her 'Color as Cognition in Symbolist Verse', in *Critical Inquiry* 5 (2) (1978), pp. 253-73.

<sup>11</sup> Mallarmé, 'Salut', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 455.

*Un*<sup>13</sup>.’a crucial part in making his texts into “open” or “pluralised” semantic systems  
*coup de dés* is rightly hailed as a major influence on the twentieth-century avant-garde  
 .in its liberation of the page from the constraints of linearity

In the oft-cited preface, Mallarmé already draws attention to his unusual practice of treating the blank spaces with as much importance as the printed areas, encouraging his readers to do likewise. As he asserts, the white areas of the page are no mere backdrop against which the text articulates a given meaning; on the contrary, they are active agents that shape and direct our reading experience

Le papier intervient chaque fois qu’une image, d’elle-même, cesse ou rentre [...] cette distance copiée qui mentalement sépare des groupes de mots ou les mots entre eux, semble d’accélérer tantôt et de ralentir le mouvement, le scandant,  
<sup>14</sup>.l’intimant même selon une vision simultanée de la Page

The poem’s radically unconventional form foregrounds its chromatic presence, not only through the expanses of white space, but also in the text, which itself derives a tonal quality both from its radically unconventional typography and *mise-en-page*, and from the signifying function of its words. Mallarmé’s contention that these are prismatic subdivisions of the Idea’ implies that the words’ combined presence may ‘be equated with the sum of all colours: white. This analogy of words with elements of colour points towards the notion that tonality is bound to a chromatic auditory scale: while the poem displays a profound preoccupation with colour, Mallarmé’s preface also asserts his indebtedness to music, which invites us to see *Un coup de dés* both as

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<sup>13</sup>Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 152

<sup>14</sup> Mallarmé, ‘Préface’, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 455.

a written score and as a *performance* text that exists in a latent state and is actualized in the act of reading. Ever attentive to rhythm, cadence and dynamics, he deals with the poem as if he were discussing a musical composition; in this context, the blank spaces are as important as the printed words in creating the desired effect

In the body of the poem itself, white is prevalent and frequently multi-referential: ‘*cette blancheur rigide*’, ‘*cette voile alternative*’, and ‘*envergure*’ could all refer to the vessel’s sail, or equally to the page itself; ‘*plume solitaire éperdue*’, positioned high on a virtually empty page, hints both at a seagull and at the poet’s task; the abundant references to whiteness and emptiness (‘*L’Abîme*’, ‘*Blanchi*’, ‘*voltige autour du gouffre*’) (draw our attention to the physical shape of the open pages, the poem’s experimental form, and the abundant empty spaces that intersperse the text and help to shape it

Anna Sigrídur Arnar has examined the many references in *Un coup de dés* and in Mallarmé’s essays to the effects of flickering or twinkling light and particularly to electrical energy; as she contends, ‘For Mallarmé electrical metaphors functioned as an invisible force uniting the dispersed fragments of text – but the fluid and variable nature of this force simultaneously encompasses dispersion and synthesis, For Arnar, the many allusions <sup>15</sup>.fragmentation and cohesion, mystery and revelation to the light of the stars and electrical energy can be understood figuratively as indicative of Mallarmé’s ideas on cognition: ‘In some of the later essays in particular,

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<sup>15</sup>Anna Sigrídur Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist’s Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 218



he speaks of flashes of light or thunder to convey the moment of comprehension and  
<sup>16</sup>.illumination that can be sudden and brief

The inter-sensory analogy that Mallarmé establishes between colour and auditory effects – in this case white and its crystalline silence – has illustrious precedents in French poetry. Baudelaire’s ‘Correspondances’ evokes ‘forêts de symboles’ in which ‘Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté, / Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.’ His poem ‘L’Albatros’, depicting the eponymous birds with their ‘grandes ailes blanches’ as ‘ces rois de l’azur’, may have inspired Rimbaud’s image of ‘rois blancs’ in ‘Voyelles’. Rimbaud’s alignment of the colour white with the letter E is also grounded in the visual connotations of the letter’s physical shape; both paleness and a barbed form account for the string of associations with which Rimbaud likens the letter: ‘candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes, / Lances  
 ’.des glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d’ombelles

A similar conflation of visual and auditory sensation, and an analogous privileging of the physical form of letters and words as being of equal importance as their semantic function, characterize Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (1918). While the shaped poems with an ideogrammatic character most suggestively accentuate the word’s capacity as a visual signifier, some of the most intriguing invocations of colour imagery occur in those poems that employ a more traditional linear structure. ‘Liens,’ the inaugural poem of the volume, opens with the line ‘Cordes faites de cris’, ‘  
 From this relatively solid <sup>17</sup>.which endows sound with an almost palpable physicality

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<sup>16</sup>.Arnar, *The Book as Instrument*, p. 221

<sup>17</sup>Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘Liens’, in *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre*, in *Œuvres poétiques*, texte établi et annoté par Marcel Adéma et Michel Décaudin.

Préface d’André Billy .(Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1956), p. 167

position the poem moves to a more ethereal, imperceptible realm in which the colour white is an important catalyst: ‘D’autres liens plus ténus / Blancs rayons de lumière / Cordes et Concorde’, of which Timothy Mathews writes: ‘Links, feelers into the present, are not only sensuous but tenuous, vast and uninformative, as white as light, For Susan <sup>18</sup>.’”weaving a texture of contourless, abstract images - the “present Harrow, these lines articulate ‘[t]he luminous transformation of unfathomable human Ethereal though they may be, these <sup>19</sup>’ .suffering in a dream of sublime harmony blancs rayons de lumière’ do have the power to bind across space; in this respect they ‘ call to mind the shards of light that appear just as strong as the Eiffel Tower in Robert Delaunay’s numerous paintings of that structure from 1910–11. His *Tour Eiffel* in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, (, )dated 1910 ,1911) deploys just three colours: red is used for the Tower, and black for the shadows cast by the Tower and its surrounding buildings; the largest proportion of the canvas is in modulations of white, as if to suggest that no force other than light itself has shattered the structures into the fragmented forms that we see before us. Apollinaire championed Delaunay’s art in the pre-war years, hailing his work in various reviews written for *Les Soirées de Paris*. In re-reading ‘Liens’, it is easy to see how Apollinaire’s collapsing of linear syntax into concise, telegraphic utterances was at least in part a response to Delaunay’s kaleidoscopic distillation of the pictorial .subject

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<sup>18</sup>Timothy Mathews, *Reading Apollinaire: Theories of Poetic Language* (Manchester: .Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 152

<sup>19</sup> Susan Harrow, *The Material, the Real, and the Fractured Self: Subjectivity and Representation from Rimbaud to Réda* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 71.

Delaunay's extensive study of colour contrasts owed much to the mid-nineteenth-century chemistry research of Michel-Eugène Chevreul. The latter's writings, far from confining themselves to the domain of science, meditated at considerable length on the nature of abstraction and the implications of his findings for different artistic forms. Arguing that colour, form and scale in works of art are all abstractions of the subject, Chevreul notes that 'les attributs choisis par le statuaire ou le peintre ne sont pas autre chose que des *abstractions* séparées d'un modèle [...] la<sup>20</sup>.réunion de ces abstractions plus ou moins modifiées est l'œuvre même de l'artiste

In Georges Roque's words, '*la couleur constitue déjà une abstraction*, et le savant qui<sup>21</sup>.l'étudie procède donc par abstraction

A decade into the twentieth century, Delaunay developed his own theory of abstraction based on Chevreul's theories of simultaneous colour contrast. Writing about his own paintings, Delaunay uses verbal and musical analogies. For him, colour<sup>22</sup>.creates 'des dispositions orchestrées se déroulant comme des phrases en couleur

The affinity between art and a certain auditory quality plays a central role in Kandinsky's landmark book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. He writes of white as a harmony of silence', and sees this not as a negative trait but rather as one charged 'with potential

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<sup>20</sup> Michel-Eugène Chevreul, *Lettres adressées à M. Villemain sur la méthode en général et sur la définition du mot FAIT relativement aux sciences, aux lettres, aux beaux-arts, etc., etc.* (Paris: Garnier, 1856), p. 91. Cited in Georges Roque, *Art et science de la couleur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), p. 462.

<sup>21</sup> Roque, *Art et science de la couleur*, p. 461.

<sup>22</sup> Delaunay, cited in Roque, p. 401.

white, although often considered as no colour (a theory largely due to the [...] impressionists, who saw no white in nature), is a symbol of a world from which all colour has disappeared. This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. A great silence, like an impenetrable wall, shrouds its life from our understanding. White, therefore, has this harmony of silence, which works upon us negatively, like many pauses in music that break temporarily the melody. It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities. White has<sup>23</sup> the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age

### *Towards Infinite White*

A near-contemporary of Delaunay, and contributor to Kandinsky's and Franz Marc's *Almanach der Blaue Reiter* (1912), Hans Jean Arp produced myriad textual, visual and sculptural works that evince a long-standing preoccupation with the particular physical and suggestive properties of white, and with constellation as a literary and artistic trope and a metaphor for the creative process. A defining early breakthrough in his work occurred, not while studying art in Paris, but when he left that city for rural Switzerland, where he lived in isolation at the foot of Mount Righi. As he later acknowledged, its austere landscape had a marked and lasting impact on his development as an artist

De 1908 à 1910 j'entrepris les premières tentatives pour venir à bout des formes d'art conventionnelles acquises et des préjugés hérités de la tradition. Je lisais, dessinais, et observais par la fenêtre de ma petite chambre les nuages de neige passant comme un lent rideau devant les montagnes. C'était

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<sup>23</sup>Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1977), pp. 77-78

bien un paysage de rigoureuse abstraction, que celui qui m'entourait. J'avais  
<sup>24</sup>.tout loisir de m'adonner à la philosophie

This experience gave rise to what Arp would later recognize as a defining and prolonged engagement with the monochrome in which white plays an especially central role. In the 1920s he began to produce series of reliefs to which he gave the generic titles *Constellations* and *Configurations*; mostly painted on a white ground with white and sometimes black relief shapes, these have an identity that sets each individual work in relation to all the others, since they offer myriad variations on fundamentally similar themes. As the titles of these series suggest, Arp considered the works that carry them as being linked to one another like the stars that form a constellation; as with Mallarmé, this trope is not only expressed graphically in the finished work, but also offers a structuring principle for the creative process, not least in the poems that share the title *Configuration*. The all-white reliefs come closest of all his works to sharing the signifying characteristics of the biomorphic sculptures that he named *Concrétions*, many of which were made from plaster, a material that he considered to be entirely worthy of a completed sculpture, and by no means a mere .raw material for casting in bronze

For all the similarities between the white reliefs and the biomorphic sculptures, their respective relationships to real space set them apart: while a sculpture possesses a totality of form and inhabits a literal, three-dimensional space, a bas-relief as a general rule tends to summon forth another, representational space of which it presents a segment, usually framed off and scaled down. While freestanding

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<sup>24</sup>Hans Jean Arp, 'Ainsi se ferma le cercle', in *Jours effeuillés: poèmes, essais, .souvenirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 327–29 (p. 327)

sculptures offer the spectator the luxury of multiple points of view, reliefs must work within the radically limited parameters of their virtually flat space and their frontal viewing position. In spite of these differences, Arp's plaster sculptures and his reliefs alike assert their identity as objects with a reality of their own. In both forms, the works' whiteness is a crucial element of their identity: their suggestive potential is enhanced, not diminished, by the elimination of so many norms of visual representation. They do not seek to illustrate or represent a given subject-matter; they abandon chromatic colour contrast in favour of achromatic white; their forms invite .changes in light to modulate their surface

In 1960 Arp created *Vers le blanc infini*, an album that derives its particular character from the close interplay of its textual and visual elements. The eight etchings and eight poems that the album contains endow it with an elegant balance. As its title suggests, the notion of whiteness is central to this work, and this can be seen from the outset in the *mise-en-page*, which gives sizeable amounts of space to the expanses of white paper that envelop the printed areas. The edges of the sheets have the irregular quality of the artists' paper that have been used to make this object; the sheets are large, with a central fold, but their edges have not been cut by a guillotine and are unbound. As a result, this album sits mid-way between an artwork and a book; its textual and visual elements have equal importance, and consequently it .corresponds neatly to Anne Moeglin-Delcroix's definition of a *livre d'artiste*

The final poem, 'Une onde blanche', invokes whiteness as the colour of :infinity, asserting an equation of white with latent promise

Les miroirs de tes yeux  
 de tes lèvres  
 de tes paroles

.devenaient vides et perdaient leurs échos  
 Tes mots tombaient dans le gris  
 .qui ne laisse aucune trace  
 Gris dans le gris ta vie s'écoulait  
 .comme une source grise aux langues éteintes  
 Mais la dernière fois que je te vis  
 tu fus une onde blanche  
 décidée à retourner pour toujours  
<sup>25</sup>.dans le blanc

These last three lines are the only printed elements in an otherwise blank double page allowing the words to open up onto a vast expanse of white space. Briony Fer, discussing the early twentieth-century avant-garde, observes that white 'held a powerful place in the imagination as a pure beginning of monochromy rather than its Susan Sontag, writing in 1969 on the aesthetics of silence, notes that, by <sup>26</sup>'endgame that time, art had become 'more than ever deliverance, an exercise in asceticism' and Arp's lines <sup>27</sup>'was no longer 'a zone of meditation, preparation for spiritual ripening

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<sup>25</sup> Jean Arp, *Vers le blanc infini* (Lausanne: La Rose des Vents, 1960), n.p.

<sup>26</sup> Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art after Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 28. Her remark is made with specific reference to Malevich but relates more widely to the international avant-garde.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence', originally published in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), pp. 3–14. Reprinted in *Dancing Around the Bride: An Anthology* (Exh. Cat., Philadelphia Museum of Art/ Barbican Art Gallery London, 2013), pp. 109–15 (p. 110).

cited above seem to inhabit both realms, at once marking a closure and evoking the possibility of something transcendental

### *Silences rétinien*

Sontag's definition of the 'aesthetics of silence' calls to mind the Hungarian-born French painter Simon Hantaï, whose work is explored by Georges Didi-Huberman in *The task is complicated, first, by the* <sup>28</sup>. *L'Etoilement: conversation avec Hantaï* inscrutability of Hantaï's artistic production, which evolved from scribbled gestural works of the late 1950s to his definitive practice of tying huge canvases in regular grids, painting the exposed surface and then untying them to reveal repeated but irregular painted grid patterns in different colours. The challenge of accounting for such resolutely abstract artworks is further compounded by Hantaï's reluctance to explain them, a fact that prompts Didi-Huberman to refer to the artist as 'celui qui, <sup>29</sup>. depuis des années, a choisi le silence

Hantaï's unusual technique of folding the canvas support is just one of the ways in which his art deserves to be understood in terms of a refusal or undoing of the customary practices associated with artistic production

Hantaï exig[e] l'impossible d'un renoncement progressif au calcul pictural, à la virtuosité technique et compositionnelle, à la maîtrise des rapports entre figures et fonds, tout cela que le 'pliage comme méthode' aura introduit sous l'espèce <sup>30</sup>. d'une ascèse entêtée

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<sup>28</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Etoilement conversation avec Hantaï* : (Paris: Minuit, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Didi-Huberman, *L'Etoilement*, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Didi-Huberman, *L'Etoilement*, p. 14.



One consequence of the sequence of folding, tying, painting, and then untying the canvas is that it leaves a grid of unpainted blank canvas across its entire extent. The finished work – untied, straightened out and stretched – reveals the star-like white spaces that the tying had kept out of reach during the painting process. These blanks, along with the painted areas of the canvas, offer an indexical trace of the series of manual operations that have given rise to the finished artwork. As Didi-Huberman observes, on the one hand, the blank spaces modify the relationship between figure and ground; on the other, they point to an effect of modulation

Hantaï referred to his folding practice as a way of divesting the process of all artistry, and thereby asserting the artwork as the work of an artisan. Didi-Huberman writes of ‘une sorte d’aveuglement processuel’ that enacts a series of paradoxes, starting with that of the invisible and the visible, or the ‘visibilité pure’ examined by Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, Hantaï himself identifies with Cézanne’s reaction to the violence of a white light so powerful that its effect on objects is one of modulation (*la modulation*) rather than modelling (*le modelé*). Hantaï in turn practises what Didi-Huberman describes as ‘*la modulation colorée du blanc*’: on Hantaï’s own admission, since 1973 what mattered most to him in his work was not what he had painted, but the white spaces that the artist defines as ‘silences rétinien’, a term adopted by Jean-Michel Meurice as the title of his documentary about Hantaï in 1976. These retinal silences are not absolute, but are inflected by whichever colours surround the white areas of canvas

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<sup>31</sup> Didi-Huberman, *L’Etoilement*, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Didi-Huberman, *L’Etoilement*, pp. 77–78. The title of Meurice’s film is *Simon Hantaï ou les silences rétinien* (1976).

The notion of blindness calls to mind the connections that Georges Bataille draws between light and violence. Writing in the dissident Surrealist magazine *Documents* in 1930, he inverts the conventional poetic depiction of the sun as embodying mathematical clarity and the spiritually sublime; by contrast, he notes that the sun is the most abstract of all phenomena, as its sheer brightness makes it impossible for the naked eye to look at it. As a result, Bataille argues, the act of staring at the sun ‘s’identifie à l’éjaculation spirituelle, à l’écume aux lèvres et à la He goes on to observe that according to some ancient mythologies <sup>33</sup>. crise d’épilepsie the sun was associated with animal sacrifice or with the headless body. Bataille concludes from this that ‘le summum de l’élévation se confond pratiquement avec une <sup>34</sup>. chute soudaine, d’une violence inouïe

Elements of Bataille’s disruptive reading of white reappear in Didi-Huberman’s book *Blancs soucis*. The book contains two essays, ‘Le Lait de la mort’ the first of these deals with the film by Sarkis, <sup>35</sup>;’ and ‘Blancs soucis de notre histoire *Au commencement, l’apparition* (2005), one of a series of twenty films that all share the prefix ‘Au commencement’. In the film, milk is poured onto a surface on which a letter k has been painted. The artist’s finger dips into the milk and makes a flower-shaped watercolour stain appear on the surface. Didi-Huberman reflects on ancient painting techniques that either use curdled milk to make a gluey substance or mix

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<sup>33</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘Soleil pourri’, in *Documents: archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie, variétés. Volume 2: Année 1930* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), pp. 173–74 (p. 173).

<sup>34</sup> Bataille, ‘Soleil pourri’, p.174.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Le Lait de la mort’ )2005(, pp. 9–65 and ‘Blancs soucis de notre histoire’ )2011–‘ .pp. 67–116, in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Blancs soucis* (Paris: Minuit, 2013( ,(12

Taking his lead from Michelet, he explores the idea <sup>36</sup>.milk with chalk to make a base that milk, contrary to popular imagination, is everything but clean and pure: ‘le lait – émulsion opaque toujours au bord de se déshomogénéiser – sera bien tout ce qu’on veut, sauf “pur” Miraculeux, certes, mais toujours près de tourner, de cailler, de “bleuir” Milk is also associated with taboos, and has <sup>37</sup>.de fermenter, de grumeler , properties of a sexual nature in the sense that it ‘contient dans sa formation même et <sup>38</sup>.le sang féminin et le sperme masculin

If this suggests a disruption of the conventional portrayal of white, then a different kind of disturbance can also be observed. In a performance of a J. S. Bach flute piece by Marc Hantaï, the artist's son, Didi-Huberman identifies ‘deux plans d’immanence’: the first of these consists in the melodies created by Bach; the second level is constituted by the ‘désordres rythmiques’ of the musician’s breathing. As Didi-Huberman concludes, ‘les *blancs* étaient donc bien les *soucis* du corps The blanks thus represent the <sup>39</sup>.interprétant à l’égard de sa partition à interpréter champ de possibilité corporel’ of the musical score, its latent bodily presence, ‘ Here, Didi-Huberman echoes the <sup>40</sup>.unwritten yet forcefully present in the act of recital comparison that Kandinsky made a century ago between the colour white and the kind of silence that marks a pause in a musical performance. This corporeal colouring of silence was taken to its logical conclusion by John Cage’s experiments with silence. Rather like Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918), which

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<sup>36</sup> .Didi-Huberman, *Blancs soucis*, pp. 21–32

<sup>37</sup> .Didi-Huberman, *Blancs soucis*, p. 31

<sup>38</sup>.Didi-Huberman, *Blancs soucis*, pp. 32, 35–38

<sup>39</sup> .Didi-Huberman, *Blancs soucis*, p. 69

<sup>40</sup>.Didi-Huberman, *Blancs soucis*, p. 70

demarcates two quite distinct modulations of off-white rather than a ‘pure’ white, every performance of Cage’s composition *4’33”* – often incorrectly referred to as *4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence* – has confirmed that total silence is never achieved, since it is always inflected by the musicians turning their sheet music, by audience members moving their seats, breathing, shuffling, coughing – so many reminders that .silence is a relative concept

The symbolism of silence is at the heart of Didi-Huberman’s second essay in *Blancs soucis*, a meditation on Esther Shalev-Gerz’s 2005 installation, *Entre l’écoute et la parole: derniers témoins. Auschwitz–Birkenau 1945–2005*, based on the testimonies of some sixty survivors of the Nazi concentration camps. The installation reflected not only on the survivors’ words, but also on silence. Exhibited at the Hôtel de Ville de Paris in 2005, the work invited the spectators to engage with it in a space almost devoid of sound, the only audible element being the almost imperceptible *paroles chuchotées*’ of the survivors’ voices in headphones. A continuous loop of ‘filmed excerpts of survivors was projected onto three video screens; their editing contains what Didi-Huberman terms a series of ‘silences montrés’ which are also *silences montés*’ – a lengthy montage consisting entirely of pauses in the witnesses’ ‘accounts, ‘les brefs moments de “blanc” Silence here has become <sup>41</sup>.dans la parole .the tangible manifestation of the memory of the unspeakable

### *En noir et blanc*

In contradistinction to white, black is most commonly conceptualized as a metaphor for negative ideas such as the void or evil. Kandinsky, writing some two decades before Hitler’s black-clad henchmen set about consigning Western civilization to the

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<sup>41</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Blancs soucis*, p. 76.

flames, identified black with connotations of ‘something burnt out, like the ashes of a funeral pyre, something motionless like a corpse. The silence of black is the silence of death. [...] Not without reason is white taken as symbolizing joy and spotless purity, In his poem ‘Todesfuge’ (Death Fugue), written in the <sup>42</sup>.and black grief and death immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Paul Celan’s image of ‘black milk’ has become one of the most vivid symbols of the everyday evil experienced in the :Nazi death camps

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends

wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown)

<sup>43</sup>(we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night

Evolutions in science and thought have helped to transcend the conventional binary understanding of black and white and to see these not as opposite poles but as complementaries that share certain properties. Optical science has taught us, for instance, that black shares with both white and grey the equal wavelengths of all of its constituent hues, and that the eye, in order to channel light to the retina, requires the While John Gage notes that the positive/ <sup>44</sup>.central dark regions that are the pupils negative valorization of white and black is embedded in much Western culture, this was not the case in ancient Judaism, and certain strains of Christian mysticism in the

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<sup>42</sup>.Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 78

<sup>43</sup> Paul Celan, *Poems. A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1980), pp. 50–53.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Gillian Pocock, Christopher D. Richards and David A. Richards, *.Human Physiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, repr. 2006), p. 203

early Middle Ages held that God resided in darkness. As he puts it, ‘in the case of Western societies as well as in non-Western ones, colour-usage cannot always be<sup>45</sup> understood in terms of colour-science

In the artistic context, too, black, famously excluded from the Impressionist palette, has reasserted itself in the hands of some highly acclaimed artists. For over sixty years, French artist Pierre Soulages has worked exclusively in black paint. Even this most obdurate of colours is not immune to light, and indeed derives its *raison d’être* from the light reflected by the glossy striations on the surface of the paint. As the title of his exhibition ‘Noir lumière’ (1996) suggested, even black acquires a degree of luminosity when viewed in the light. In Barbara Anastacio’s short film, *Pierre Soulages: Outrenoir (2015)*, Soulages reveals the full importance of light to the intended effect of his art: far from being incidental, accidental or dispensable, it is the very key to the realization of the painting’s essence, for without it the artwork would be depleted or even annulled. *Le véritable outil [...] n’est pas dans le travail; c’est la lumière qui est l’outil. Parce que c’est toujours ce qui se passe sur la toile qui me dirige*<sup>47</sup>.

Soulages goes further: his realization that even a canvas completely covered in black paint exudes a particular quality of light had a restorative effect on him in a period of artistic crisis: ‘je me suis aperçu que je ne travaillais plus avec du noir, que c’était la matière du noir, les états de surface du noir qui créaient une lumière. Cette

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<sup>45</sup> John Gage, *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p. 30.

<sup>46</sup> *Pierre Soulages: Outrenoir* (dir. Barbara Anastacio, 2015)

<sup>47</sup> *Pierre Soulages: Outrenoir*

lumière-là c'est une lumière secrète, une lumière qui n'est pas évidente, qui venait du  
<sup>48</sup>.noir

*Epilogue: Drift*

Black and white are the defining achromatic characteristics of Franco-Norwegian poet Caroline Bergvall's *Drift* (2014), in which the Mallarméan trio, 'constellation, récif, *Drift is a* <sup>49</sup>.étoile,' and the attendant dangers of drifting at sea, also hover into view multimedia textual, visual and auditory work encompassing a book, an exhibition and a performance created by Bergvall in collaboration with percussionist Ingar Zach, computer artist Thomas Köppel, and playwright Michèle Pralong. This work is not only intermedial, but also diachronic: Bergvall uses the theme of seafaring to connect Viking legends and the anonymous tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Seafarer'; alongside these archaic sources are contemporary texts including a report on the tragic, and entirely avoidable, death of sixty-two migrants from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Eritrea, Sudan, and Ghana on a small inflatable boat between Tripoli and the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2011. Most shocking is the fact that the boat was spotted by vessels from different nations and photographed by military aircraft, but was left

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<sup>48</sup> *Pierre Soulages: Outrenoir.*

<sup>49</sup>Caroline Bergvall, *Drift: Essays, Intergenre, Poetry* (Callicoon, N.Y.: Nightboat Books 2014). The accompanying exhibition and performance piece toured a range of .venues in the UK and the USA in 2014 and 2015

adrift and unaided until all but ten of its occupants had died of thirst or drowned in the  
<sup>50</sup>.waves

The book assembles an array of textual and visual elements: these include Bergvall's poems; her log of the creative process; loose translations of *Hävamål*, an ancient Gnostic poem of Norwegian origin; a series of drawings of narrowly grouped horizontal lines in black ink overlaid with freer curving lines; another series of ink drawings consisting of a single Nordic rune repeated several times over in different densities. The central section of the book is printed on black paper; it contains an aerial photograph of the boat, the report on the 'left-to-die' migrant boat incorporating testimonies from some of the survivors, and a series of images of real and imaginary constellations. One of these images depicts in white, stellar dots, the outline of the Additionally, the installation <sup>51</sup>.migrants' boat, appropriately known as a Zodiac boat included works on a grey background inscribed with nearly-invisible texts; a large black screen displayed a digital projection of shoals of isolated white words that drifted and clustered in moving islands before agglomerating into a dense fog or reef. The words became illegible, apart from a few whose contours became visible for a  
<sup>52</sup>.time before returning into the mass of letters

The treacherous negotiation of space – linguistic, physical, temporal, as well as genre-specific – forms the thematic basis of this piece and connects with what

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<sup>50</sup> Bergvall refers to the 'Report on the Left-to-Die Boat' prepared by Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani and SITU Research, Goldsmiths, University of London, April 2012.

*/http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat*

<sup>51</sup> Bergvall, *Drift*, pp. 61–93.

<sup>52</sup> Extracts of the performance can be viewed on

<http://www.carolinebergvall.com/drift-performance.php>



Bergvall has called a ‘hyphenated practice’ in her earlier work. The various elements of *Drift* are extremely heterogeneous, and it is the reader’s and viewer’s task to piece them together in a quasi-forensic manner and tease out the connections between them. What gives this multiperspectival work an overarching unity is its account of the long history of navigating at sea, the dangers of doing so, and the centuries-old heritage of seafaring as a literary trope; the drift of languages across time and space and the elusiveness of knowledge are additional leitmotifs. Bergvall’s project inevitably raises questions of an ethical nature, not the least of which relates to the troubling implications of presenting a human tragedy in an aesthetic context. To confront the materials variously written, drawn, recorded, assembled, digitized and projected is an absorbing aesthetic experience, but one that is also deeply unsettling on account of the ethical issues it raises and the light it sheds on the humanitarian challenges and .failures of our time

This reading of white (and, occasionally, black) has brought us full circle: having begun with Géricault’s compelling visual representation of a political and humanitarian scandal affecting France and its colonial ambitions, it ends with a poetic response to a very twenty-first-century tragedy of migration. The direction of displacement is no longer from the colonial power to the colonized, but the drift of the dispossessed towards the forlorn, elusive hope of a better future. In a globalized world, national borders may be crossed, but only by some, and even at sea, those borders can still determine whether human beings have the right to live. As Bergvall’s work suggests, when nations choose to consign a *blanc souci* to their blind spot, even the brightest constellation is not enough to save *the souls of their fellow humans from .the eternal silence noir*