Due to production problems with the last edition of Tension only part of Keith Broadfoot and Rex Butler's article on Bette Mifsud appeared. We apologise to the writers and the artist, and for any problems this omission may have caused our readers. We now publish the article in full.

BETTE·MIFSUD

THE ABDUCTION OF SIGHT

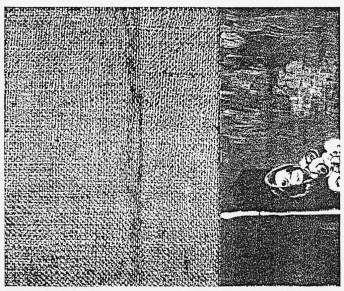
KEITH BROADFOOT AND REX BUTLER

In an article entitled 'The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)', the critic Georges Didi-Huberman traces the various attempts to decipher the stains on the Shroud of Turin, the efforts to make them figurative and hence proof of the resurrection of Christ. And, indeed, for Didi-Huberman, the two processes would be identical; the lifting up of the figure of Christ from the weave of the cloth would be absolutely identical to the rising up of Christ after his crucifixion. The decipherment of the Shroud of Turin takes its place in the very narrative of the Passion of Christ.

To draw the figure up from the rest of the stains which make up the Shroud, it would be necessary to forget the support, to make the support transparent (and, Didi-Huberman says, the exegetical task of making the stains figurative would not in fact stop until every part of the Shroud had played its part in the narrative of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, until every part of the Shroud had been uplifted in this way). But this would have as its result an image literally without a support, lacking evidence; an image which seems to hover over the support without touching it. The enigma here would be how the figure - now immaterial, only two dimensional - manages to stay upright when it is seemingly without any support. And this would be the Shroud in its aspect as Icon.

But there would also be another side to it, as Didi-Huberman emphasises. For the Shroud must, after all, serve as proof that Christ actually touched it, that Christ was real. There must be evidence of contact. And this contact must be, by necessity, non-figurative, non-mimetic. It must be simply a stain. As Didi-Huberman says: "The absence of figuration therefore serves as proof of existence. Contact having occurred, figuration would appear false. And the risk of metaphor, which can only be overcome through a process of infinite figurative *Aufhebung*, is precisely the detail of the stain. Following Bachelard, Didi-Huberman comments that the epistemic nature of detail is both anti- and ante-categorical. Detail then at once both defies categorisation and creates the conditions for infinite categorisation. The impossibility of seeing the absolute resemblance of the stain to itself - the exclusion of the possibility of the stain proving itself - allows the infinite proof of the stain, the infinite figuration of the stain. In a sense, the very impossibility of proof - of the stain itself - allows an infinite proof.

The rhetoric of the proof generated by the Shroud of Turin is thus dependent upon a pure resemblance. It is this pure resemblance that Didi-Huberman refers to as a "fantasy of referentiality" - a fantasy which grounds the possibility of a passage between the Indexical and the Iconic. And it is a question of a "fantasy" of referentiality because if this referentiality can only be proved through the abduction of a pure resemblance, it will always by definition escape all possibility of representation as such. Referentiality could never be attained because the referentiality of a pure resemblance, being a resemblance that only ever resembles itself, could only ever present itself - and present itself precisely in terms of what Didi-Huberman calls "excessive naturalistic detail". It is always this detail which is the mark, for Didi-Huberman, of the fantasy of referentiality. But the irony of this detail is that if Didi-Huberman is speaking of the conditions for figurability, through the application of Freud's concept of *Rucksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*, there is always in fact a detail which escapes the possibility of representability and the means of staging. This detail is perhaps what Lacan called the tychic point, in that the term 'tuche', as Lacan takes it over from Aristotle, designates the "encounter with the real" - an encounter which is essentially a *missed* encounter. (Also, insofar as the 'tuche' refers to the process of metaphorisation, the encounter with the real is always an encounter that takes place through a metaphor - that passage from the Index to the Icon, the literal to the figurative - that is always missing.



Untitled, 1987. Black & white photograph, wood. 102 x 153 x 10 cms.

And it is interesting to note in this regard that Didi-Huberman speaks of the passage from the Index to the Icon as the re-narration of the Passion of Christ - for it is, indeed, only on condition that this passage cannot be narrated, that this first narrative of Christ's Passion, but also that of the passage from the Index to the Icon, is missing that it can be narrated - or more precisely, re-narrated. That in a sense that endless proof or faith in Christ's resurrection is only possible because of Christ's very disappearance. So that we would always be - like that aporia or circularity we spoke of before - either too soon or too late for the moment of Christ's resurrection. We could either have proof or faith, the Index or the Icon, but never the passage from one to the other; we could never have both.)

And it is thus perhaps no coincidence that Lacan should also speak of this tychic point in terms of the stain. It is this stain that Lacan locates at the origin of mimicry and as decisive in determining the split between the eye and the gaze. With reference to the stain, Lacan writes that: "There is no need for us to refer to some supposition of the existence of a universal seer. If the function of the stain is recognised in its autonomy and identified with that of the gaze, we can see its track, its thread, its trace, at every stage of the constitution of the world, in the scopic field. We will then realise that the function of the stain and of the gaze is both that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness". But to understand the significance of the equation made here between the gaze and the stain, and that it is the tychic point that is located between the Indexical and the Iconic, we need to consider the singular quality of this gaze. Lacan, in developing Sartre's conception of the gaze, argues that "when I am under the gaze, when I solicit a gaze, when I obtain it, I do not see it as a gaze". Lacan specifies in fact that "the gaze sees itself...the gaze I encounter...is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other". The gaze is thus a perfect self-equivalence, a perfect reflection. The gaze sees itself as a perfect resemblance. But the gaze therefore, as a perfect imitation would be the absence of imitation, it would imitate nothing, and this would be precisely its power and blinding brilliance. In this respect the gaze is itself that "fantasy of referentiality" Didi-Huberman speaks of. It is precisely the impossibility of the gaze seeing itself its own perfect resemblance to itself that allows it to see everything else, that allows everything else to be seen. In a sense, what cannot be seen, then, but what allows everything else to be seen is that equivalence between the stain and the gaze, the uplifting of the stain and the uplifting or abduction of sight itself...

...And it is in the art of Bette Mifsud that we perhaps see (but could we ever see?) this attempt to present the very moment of figuration itself, that first narrative or metaphor joining the figurative and the non-figurative, the figurative and the literal. An attempt to present representation itself, which would be precisely the attempt to present the detail - that tychic point, or what Barthes, following Lacan, calls the *punctum*. An attempt that, as we say, could only ever be out of time, could only ever be either too soon or too late, in a space at once too close (Indexical) and too far away (Iconic). That is to say, her work would follow in a sense that avant-garde project outlined by Lyotard of presenting the unpresentable, which would be for us precisely the attempt to present representation itself, that actual moment of representation - figuration - itself. An attempt that like Lacan's encounter with the real would always be uncertain, always in a way missed; that moment would exist only in the possibility that it is not presented, that it is always missing, always unpresented; it would be present only when it is not present. And we are thinking here perhaps of Lyotard's famous question *Is it happening?* Which would be for us *Is representation happening?* A questioning, like Lyotard's, that has led Mifsud increasingly to explore the limits of technology (and it is perhaps no accident here that the whole question of the figurability of the Shroud of Turin arose only after the photographer Secondo Pia took a photo of the Shroud, that the figure of the Shroud only exists within the photograph - no accident that the punctum for Barthes is precisely an effect of the camera, of the analogical image, that image of "perfect resemblance", "excessive detail").

Which is perhaps to say the image of "perfect resemblance", "excessive detail"). Which is perhaps to say the limits of technology in their proper sense, that which technology cannot represent: representation, technology itself. As Mifsud has discovered, it is ironically only by pushing technology to its furthest extent, its perfect equivalence with itself - and her work is one of the few in Australia to engage in questions of technology as such - that we can see what it cannot represent, what its limits are. It cannot represent itself, it cannot (as Lyotard says) give us an idea of technology, of representation itself. It cannot, we might say, prove itself, cannot account for its own ceaseless proof. It can prove anything except proof itself. And it is in this limit that the possibility of a truly critical art would lie, that the possibility of criticism as such would lie today.

In Mifsud's latest work, an installation at Melbourne University's George Paton Gallery last year, a series of satellite photos of the Murray River in flood are shown, across the room from a stereoscopic photograph of the Arc de Triomphe and some blown-up and superimposed colour photostats of Fragonard's *Rinaldo in the Garden of Armida*, all framed by a frieze of magnified butterfly sperm. In all of these the enigma of depth and surface, the fact that all these photos (particularly those of the Murray) could either be close-ups or taken from far away. In all of these the questions of framing, scale, reproduction: questions, Heidegger reminds us, *par excellence* those of technology. But perhaps most interesting here is the fact that all of these works take as their subject-matter *transmission* itself (whether the sexual transmission of the butterfly sperm or the telecommunicational transmission of the satellite). The ambiguity, indeed, of the supports of these images, of where exactly they exist (whether that stereoscopic photograph in which two photographs are superimposed to produce a virtual, three-dimensional image or the series of photocopies where the image only finally exists in the eye of the viewer). That whole question of the passage or detour - it would be that precisely between the Index and the Icon - we saw with the Shroud of Turin; that question of transmission we see in technology. What we see, in other words, in these Mifsud works is the audacious attempt to imitate not something given, some thing or product of technology, but precisely the giving, the very productivity of technology itself. An imitation that could only be itself non-mimetic (for there would be literally nothing to imitate, or only a thing's transmission or disappearance), but which would resemble technology precisely in imitating nothing. That would present the unpresentable idea or proof of technology in a way that technology itself is unable to. All this as the stain must, as Didi-Huberman notes, imitate not something, some actual incident or event in that drama of crucifixion, but the very act of the drama itself, the very rising up or transmission of Christ himself. And it would only be in the name of this absence or transmission, that name - Christ's perhaps - that no one could speak for, that name which must be erased for the narrative to begin, that art and criticism would be possible today.

Indeed, these themes around the Shroud have engaged Mifsud for a number of years. At an early show held at the Union Street Gallery in 1986, 'Pictures', there was a similar exploration of this enigmatic space between depth and surface, the Index and the Icon: that very space of representation. A space there implicitly associated with the ineffable, the unspeakable through a Byzantine Christ-head, subject itself to the same ambiguity as the image on the Shroud of Turin, the same miracle that for it to be seen it would have to be both Indexical and Iconic at the same time. (To follow Lyotard's typology for a moment, if classical painting is three-dimensional, that space of the transparency of the support, the invisibility of the canvas, and modernism is two-dimensional, the presentation of the support itself, the support as opaque and without an image; if classical painting is the art of the Icon and modernist art that of the Index, the figure as opposed to the signature - post-modernism would be the articulation of these two: no longer the simple difference between the support and the figure as in classical painting, nor their equivalence as in modernism. Rather, the support and figure would resemble each other in their mutual *disappearance* or *transmission*. The figure would no longer represent the product of the support as in modernism, but the very productivity of the support - (another artist we can think of who does this: US video artist Gretchen Bender). A project followed up with a series of installations for the Various Artists Ltd. which again explored this ambiguous space of the modernist grid and the way that there too - despite its pretensions to the origin of pictorial space - something necessarily precedes it, that 'presupposition' we see in Didi-Huberman: that of a certain figurability, a passage from the Index to the Icon, outside of which the grid could not be seen.

But it is perhaps in a show at Sydney's Artspace in 1987 that we saw Mifsud's work deal most openly with these concerns of the unpresentability of the detail, the disappearance of the image and the support, the enigma of the figure. In particular, two of the works there - one, we believe, of a Flamenco dancing figure on a transparent acetate support, the other a detail from a painting by Derain - raised very apparently these issues of the limitations of both an idealism and a materialism in the analysis of art: the way there that the image can perhaps be understood to hover somewhere between the Index and the Icon, neither entirely free from the support nor entirely rooted to it, neither too close nor too far away. It is from this impossible point that Bette Mifsud works, and from this impossible position that we must attempt to write. A point that has perhaps been too easily called the point-of-view in the history of art, but which would be that point - already two - where faith and proof meet and separate, a point where that great narrative of art begins and ends. That point of the first narrative, where the figure is at once raised and erased, crucified and resurrected. Which would be to say that in these works (and in 'Hallucinations and Other Facts', that show at the George Paton Gallery) Mifsud is not so much imitating anything seen as the very act of seeing itself. Not representing something seen but presenting the very act of seeing itself. The 'detail' we see in those pictures is precisely that 'excess', that gift of sight itself, that passage to infinity between that excess that allows imitation and that excess that is imitated, between that excess that does not exist outside imitation (the Iconic) and that excess that allows imitation (the Indexical). The true infinitude of sight, the gift of production of sight itself, is not either one as such, but the passage between them; not simply either the equal or the unequal, but the passage between the equal and the unequal. It would be the passage to infinity implied in Mifsud's imitation of this very excess of sight; the gift - our abduction - of sight itself (given we know not by whom, by God perhaps - which is why the Shroud of Turin is so powerful for us, for it is there that we 'see' precisely this 'advent' of the visible, the 'unending baptism' of sight itself).

> ONE OF THE FEW WILLING TO SPEAK IN THE NAME OF A CERTAIN UNPRESENTABILITY: AGAINST ART, AGAINST SCIENCE, AGAINST TECHNOLOGY.

A project, and a paradox - that of representing not the seen but seeing - that defines Lyotard's Sublime. In 'The Sublime and the Avant Garde', Lyotard cites Merleau-Ponty speaking of Cezanne's attempt to "seize perception and render it at birth - perception 'before' perception, the wonder of 'it happening'. I would say colour in its occurrence, at least as regards the eye". The paradox of the Sublime, and of this attempt to present representation itself, of speaking of the absolute proof of this passage from the Index to the Icon that cannot be seen - the possibility of an ethics and a criticism based on them - is that of speaking in the name of something that precisely cannot be represented, of speaking in name of that which has no name, which cannot be named, which cannot be spoken in the name of. It would be the paradox of speaking of the impossibility of knowing the proof - of necessity in a way to prove this. The paradox itself of the post-modern or ethical - and Bette Mifsud one of the few ethical artists today in this strong sense. One of the few willing to speak in the name of a certain unpresentability: against art, against science, against technology. To speak in the name of something that cannot be represented, cannot be analysed, cannot finally be proved. In the name of a certain feeling perhaps. Of a certain rising up.

'The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)' by Georges Didi-Huberman is published in October 29. The work by Derrida on metaphor referred to comes from an essay entitled 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy' published in *Margins of Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, 1982. The quotation from Lacan came from two essays published in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Books, 1977: 'The Split Between the Eye and the Gaze' and 'Anamorphoses'.