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NOTE

This contribution is part of a larger dialogue of four articles and one response piece that form the current issue of JOLCEL. The other contributions are “Between Reading and Viewing: Mapping and Experiencing Rome and Other Spaces” by Klazina Staat (pp. 7–42), “The *Incipit* Miniature of the Morgan Gospel of John” by Barbara Baert (pp. 44–67), and “Language on Display: Latin in the Material Culture of Fascist Italy” by Han Lamers (pp. 69–101). The response piece is “Towards a Codico-Ecology of Latin” by Vincent Debiais (pp. 139–47).

Looking at Latin 1911–1965–2019

An Ancient Language in Modern Art*

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the presence of Latin in art from the beginning of the twentieth century until today. It analyses works by Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Joseph Kosuth, Giulio Paolini, Rosemarie Trockel, Ian Hamilton Finlay and William Kentridge, and compares their engagement with the Latin language. The article is structured according to the different ways in which these artists unsettle the status of Latin, be it through semantic confusion, material recontextualisation or textual destabilising.

* I owe the joy of writing this article to Han Lamers' encouragement, to Koi Persyn's and Lina Vekeman's inspiring impulses, and to Johanna Dose's help with finding some of the works of art in Munich and Vienna. A first version of the article was presented during my time at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Neo-Latin Studies, and, in a later stage, part of it was presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for Surrealist Studies in 2022. The feedback of colleagues on both occasions greatly improved my arguments, as did the generous comments of the anonymous peer reviewers. Obtaining remote access to video installations is not easy nor was direct access during the pandemic; without the help of Philipp Selzer (Kunstmuseum Basel) I could not have written the section on William Kentridge. The auction houses of Lempertz, Strauss & Co., and Sprüth Magers, as well as Adam Reich, the Fondazione Paolini, the heirs of Ugo Mulas, and the Stuart Collection in San Diego, in addition to the studios of William Kentridge and Joseph Kosuth and The Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay magnanimously allowed me to reproduce images of the works under consideration. I thank Wim Smets for checking the English.

1 Introduction

I first thought about Latin in the context of modern art while exploring the Kunstareal in Munich. In the Brandhorst Museum I saw a quote from Roland Barthes’ famous essay on Cy Twombly (1928–2011) that was lettered on the wall next to the American artist’s *Untitled (New York City)* from 1968.¹ The passage in question dwells on the *ductus* of Twombly’s lines and their playfulness. Later that day, in the Pinakothek der Moderne, I came across a self-portrait by Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) where he holds a Latin text in his hand. It struck me that in an environment largely dedicated to artistic innovation and radical departure from tradition, I had to rely on my knowledge of an ancient language twice. I was curious whether de Chirico represented the end of an era, or whether Latin continued to appear in art during the second half of the twentieth century and into our present millennium.

Before looking more closely at Latin in art after World War II, it is worth considering the backdrop against which the artists and their audience use(d) Latin. Common places of encounter, I imagine, would be the streets of a historical European city, Catholic churches, schools, classical music and printed text editions. The order in which they are mentioned reflects a decreasing number of people exposed to them. First, church dedications, university mottos or classically inspired memorials could be experienced by many without much effort and without paying attention to their Latinity at all. However, some special cases might have instilled a feeling of surprise in the attentive observer, such as the Latin inscriptions from fascist Italy that mark civic buildings by stressing duties of everyday life that contrast with the stater phrases found elsewhere.² The second most common place to encounter Latin would have been the Catholic Church, where it was the usual language for prayers and reading until a few decades into the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas the cityscape and Mass both were a widely shared experience until the increasing secularisation of Europe, classical music, Latin education and text editions have been restricted to a much smaller group. Moreover, listeners of, say, Mozart’s *Requiem* or Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* arguably pay more attention to the music than to the words.³ Language-focused school curricula and textbooks are, in their own way, restricted too. They traditionally focus on ancient authors, with a special place reserved for canonical authors like Cicero and Vergil. The minority who read these authors at school often belonged to higher social classes. In fact, knowledge of an ancient language would have been a confirmation of this status and helped to preserve it by offering access to better schools, universities and jobs.⁴ While working class people admittedly engaged with classical culture, the role of Latin language acquisition appears

¹ Barthes, *Cy Twombly : deux textes*, 47.

² Marcello, “Building the Image of Power,” 332; I thank the author of this article for inspiring conversations during our stay at the British School at Rome.

³ Mostue, “*Carmina saecularia*: Latin som operaspråk.”

⁴ Kitchell, “Solitary Perfection?”; Lister, “Exclusively for Everyone.”

to have been rather limited as compared to art historical and philosophical participation in ancient culture by non-elite learners.⁵

These four areas in which Latin has recently operated, share durability as their common factor. Inscriptions may have different degrees of erosion, but are meant to exist for many decades and centuries. This goes for the ancient ones as well as for the twentieth-century bronze characters that spell out the *Res Gestae* of Augustus underneath the Ara Pacis museum in Rome. This is, tellingly, the only remaining feature of the original fascist construction around the ancient monument.⁶ Larger texts, rendered on parchment or paper through handwriting, movable type or digital printing techniques, are more vulnerable to change. Nevertheless, the principle of immutability remains the same: A letter switch or word omission is to be avoided, and if harm is already done, to be reverted. When it comes to Latin liturgy, the correct wordings are even sacred. At last, in the period of societal change that were the 1960s, Latin lost the privileged status it had enjoyed for over two millennia. Françoise Waquet ends her history of the Latin language with the 1969 reforms that postponed the teaching of Latin at secondary schools in France with two years, from the sixth to the fourth grade.⁷ Other countries also reduced Latin classes in secondary schools, and universities continued removing Latin as an admission requirement.⁸ At the same time, a pivotal event in the history of Catholicism irreversibly weakened the position of Latin, which had been a symbol of tradition and a “bond of unity” for the Western Church.⁹ Although the Second Vatican Council did not abolish Latin altogether, more room was given to vernacular languages and priests were encouraged to do “the readings and directives, and some of the prayers and chants” in any assembly’s mother tongue.¹⁰ During the 1970s, vernacular languages would generally take the upper hand over Latin.

The 1960s also saw the rise of conceptual art, the creation of digital tools, and a changing relationship between capitalism, colonialism, the inequality of the sexes and other societal issues on the one hand and artistic creation on the other hand. The role of language in art became more important to repurpose or deconstruct the aesthetics of advertising, to make political statements, to explore the possibilities of magnetic recordings, and so on.¹¹ I want to look at the role Latin played in these dynamics of artistic reconsideration and change. As mentioned before, its association with tradition and what could be called the conservative establishment, makes it an unlikely motor of rupture with the past. Because the language became incomprehensible for an increasingly larger group of people, it had little chance of once more becoming the medium of broad cultural innovation. For the same reasons, however, Latin emerged as a potent symbol for the worlds that were coming under scrutiny or had vanished already. Nevertheless, we

⁵ Goff, “The Greeks of the WEA,” 220.

⁶ Nastasi, “Piazza Augusto Imperatore.”

⁷ Waquet, *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign*, 271.

⁸ See, for example, Forrest, “The Abolition of Compulsory Latin and Its Consequences.”

⁹ “De Sacra Liturgia,” 52.

¹⁰ Pope Paul VI, “Sacrosanctum Concilium.”

¹¹ A general overview of language in visual art is Ross, *Language in the Visual Arts*.

will see that it can also act, surprisingly, as the language of modernity. The *symbolical* function—rather than a literary one—sets twentieth- and twenty-first-century usage of Latin apart from earlier centuries. Not the way Latin is composed, not the literary allusion, nor specific metres are of much importance anymore. Latin’s *Latinity* is all that matters, for it is the connotations of the language itself, be it social, historical or religious, that need to be activated.

I will focus on the ways in which Latin was unsettled by post-1960 artists in a variety of ways, roughly corresponding to the modes of durability and decline described above. How did they put Latin’s authority to question, and destabilise its claims to normativity in education, literature, and religion? We will consider a range of cases from Latin’s semiotic and semantic confusion at the hands of Joseph Kosuth and William Kentridge, to its material recontextualization by Rosemarie Trockel and Giulio Paolini, to Ian Hamilton Finlay’s play with textual stability. I selected these artists on the basis of several parameters. I aimed to include works that address issues important to their (and our) times, for example, the gender balance in Trockel’s work. Secondly, the artists represent different regions from New York to Scotland, to Germany and Italy, all the way south to Johannesburg. Even if the works discussed in this article problematise some preconceptions about Latin, they certainly confirm its transnational reach. This geographic diversity allows to look at various takes on the Latin heritage determined in part by the national art scenes they stem from. As regards the media of the works of art, I spread the scope from oil on canvas to white cube installations to manifestations in the public space, and manipulated video. Most importantly, the works under consideration deal with language explicitly. Many other artists have employed Latin ‘in the background’. Joseph Cornell, for example, glued a page from Bacon’s 1623 *De augmentis scientiarum* (*Advancement of Learning*) on the walls of one of his boxes.¹² This choice is meaningful beyond doubt, but it does not inquire the logocentrism, physical durability and textual exactitude of the Latin tradition to the same extent as the works under consideration. In light of this, it is worth noting that Cornell, by using a printed page, physically recycled the text, rather than re-creating it with his own hands as the artists did whom I will discuss. My choice is not exhaustive, and I have had to leave out some fascinating works of art which I found in the galleries and museum or auction catalogues which I consulted. Of those, I would like to highlight a couple including a series of works by Anselm Kiefer, who evokes Latin’s sacral connotations, and a work by Ceryth Evans, who brilliantly uses Latin to thematise the traps of capitalism by presenting a famous Latin palindrome in the markedly modern form of a circular neon light.¹³

2 Mystery and subversion: Giorgio de Chirico (1911/1920) and Max Ernst (1919)

First, I would like to sketch the prehistory of Latin’s new role on the basis of three works from the early twentieth century. They not only set the tone for what

¹² Hoving, “The Surreal Science of Soap,” 28.

¹³ “Anselm Kiefer *Aperiatu Terra*”; Evans, “*In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*”.

was to follow, but were even explicitly taken up by later artists. Let us, then, return to de Chirico's previously mentioned self-portrait from 1920, and consider it in relation to an earlier self-portrait from 1911 which likewise features a Latin phrase.¹⁴ This 1911 painting depicts the profile of a young man with his head on his hand melancholically staring into the void against a blue-green background. It is modelled after an iconic photograph from 1882 of Friedrich Nietzsche.¹⁵ De Chirico greatly admired the German philosopher, who strongly influenced his artistic philosophy and practice.¹⁶ The composition is surrounded by a painted brown frame bearing a trompe l'oeil inscription reading "et.quid.amabo.nisi.quod.ænigma.est?" ("And what shall I love if not the enigma?"). The letterforms remind the viewer of ancient inscriptions, as does the replacement of spaces with subscript interpuncts. At the same time, the position of the feigned inscription implies its posteriority to the portrait, as if the painting was finished first, then the frame was put around it, and finally, the inscription was carved into the frame. Before turning to the literary evocations of the inscription, I want to look more closely at the other work.

In 1920, de Chirico portrayed himself turned halfway to the viewer, in a pose that consciously cites Renaissance portraits.¹⁷ By this time, de Chirico had declared himself to be a classical painter who relied on earlier painting techniques—"Pictor classicus sum" ("I am a classical painter").¹⁸ The colours as well as the Italianate palazzo against the background of a blue sky strengthen this impression.¹⁹ In the painting, de Chirico holds a plaque between the fingers and palm of his right hand while showing it to the viewer. The inscription on the tablet reads "et.quid.amabo.nisi.quod.rerum.metaphysica.est?" ("And what shall I love if not the metaphysical side of the world?") in the same letterforms as on the self-portrait from 1911. Whereas the epigraphic text on the first painting shared the space with the viewer, this one belongs to the world of the painting, where it cannot be touched, but only looked at. De Chirico's pose is reminiscent of Botticelli's *Young Man Holding a Roundel* or Memling's *Portrait of a Man with a Roman Medal*, which reflect the antiquarian interests of quattrocento humanism.²⁰ Despite the invented inscription, the plaque successfully pretends to be an ancient artefact and calls to mind the keen separation felt by Renaissance intellectuals between themselves and the idealised world of antiquity. De Chirico's painting adds a second chasm to this, namely between the twentieth century and the Renaissance, which Nietzsche had called "die letzte große Zeit" ("the last great age").²¹

¹⁴ De Chirico's *Self-portrait with Euripides* from 1922 also has a Latin phrase: "Nulla sine tragoedia gloria" ("No glory without tragedy").

¹⁵ Schultze, *Nietzsche*.

¹⁶ Merjian, *Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City*, chap. 1 in particular.

¹⁷ Kaschek, "Giorgio de Chirico," 152.

¹⁸ de Chirico, "The Return to the Craft," 237.

¹⁹ "By 1920, it was Perugino's profound horizons and deep skies seen between arches and colonnades that embodied a "magnifico senso di solidità e di equilibrio"" and about a decade earlier, "de Chirico had taken notice of Raphael's painting, emphasizing the sky and temple as important elements of metaphysical revelation." Brazeau, "Building a Mystery," 26 and 37.

²⁰ McFarlane, *Hans Memling*, 14.

²¹ Nietzsche, "Götzen-Dämmerung," 138.

What are the implications of de Chirico's Latin usage in these paintings, apart from stressing the loss and revival of classical and early Renaissance aesthetics? André Breton's (1896–1966) opinion of them is quite clear from his essay *Le surréalisme et la peinture*: "tant de portraits à menton fuyant et à vaine devise latine ne peuvent être le fait que d'un méchant esprit."²² In the same column, he reproaches de Chirico, whom he had once appreciated, for now making fascist art. The association of the *devises* with fascism is warranted by the ideology's strong investment in presenting itself as an heir to ancient Rome through Latin among other means.²³ However, it remains to be seen whether the Latin *devises* are as empty as Breton wants us to believe. In a way, de Chirico's inscriptions (as well as the *Pictor classicus* statement) function as heraldic mottos, traditionally composed in Latin. Around the same time, the Belgian painter James Ensor adopted one after he was named baron in 1929 by King Albert I. His maxim "Pro Luce" ("For the light") prominently featured in a recent exhibition at the Munich Kunsthalle as a self-commentary on his bright artworks displayed there.²⁴ *Et quid amabo...*, both of them, can be read as programmatic statements as well. The first one hints at the enigmatic character of de Chirico's works, the second one spells out the epithet he himself bestowed on his art: metaphysical.²⁵ The mottos express his unconditional and unavoidable love for "the enigma contained within the appearance of ordinary objects, [...] the transcendent essence of phenomenal reality."²⁶

The choice for Latin fits into this bent for the enigmatic and inaccessible. Moreover, it makes a sharp distinction, whether intellectual, social or otherwise, between those with and without an understanding of it. De Chirico, who distinguished between the common aspect of objects and "the other, the spectral or metaphysical which can be seen only by rare individuals in moments of clairvoyance or metaphysical abstraction" would certainly have been sympathetic to such an idea of separation.²⁷ His use of Latin likely wants to stress the existence of "Rang, Grad, Ordnung zwischen Mensch und Mensch," to quote Nietzsche's latest work *Ecce homo*, which de Chirico was well-acquainted with.²⁸ The hieratic aura of Latin as the language of the Church adds another dimension to this, which resonates well with the later Nietzsche's return to and expropriation of religious ritual.²⁹ In various ways, then, de Chirico's linguistic choice attunes with the "magnificence" he perceived in the columns and blue skies of quattrocento art, and which he strove to revive on his own canvases as the expression of a philosophical idealism.

²² "So many portraits with receding chins and vain Latin mottos can only be the work of a wicked mind." Breton, *Le surréalisme et la peinture*, 16.

²³ Lamers, Reitz-Joosse, and Sanzotta, eds., *Studies*; Lamers and Reitz-Joosse, "*Lingua Lictoria*"; Lamers and Reitz-Joosse, *The Codex Fori Mussolini*.

²⁴ *Fantastisch real: Belgische Moderne von Ensor bis Magritte*. 15 Oct. 2021 - 6 Mar. 2022, Kunsthalle, Munich.

²⁵ E.g., in de Chirico, "Arte metafisica."

²⁶ Storchi, "Metaphysical Writing and the 'Return to Order.'"

²⁷ de Chirico, "On Metaphysical Art," 450.

²⁸ "Rank, degree, order between man and man." Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo," 362.

²⁹ Ruin, "Saying Amen to the Light of Dawn."

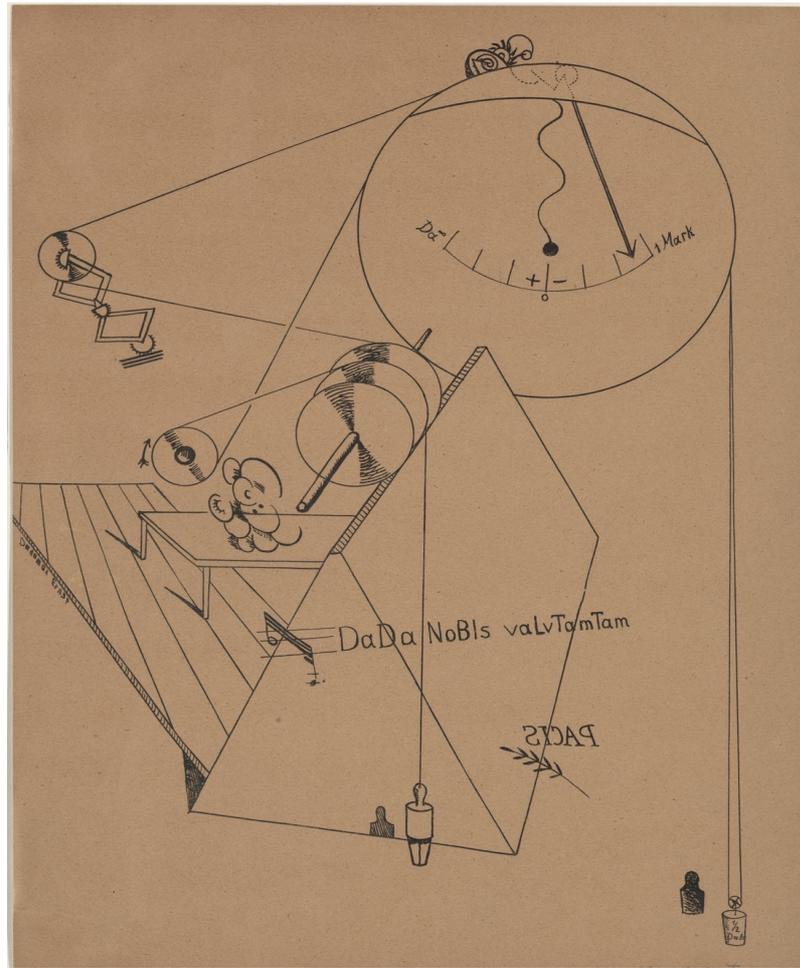


Figure 1: Max Ernst, *Fiat modes, pereat ars*, 1919.

More than is the case in de Chirico's self-portraits, but in a very different way, Latin as the language of ritual and religion is the backbone of *Fiat modes, pereat ars* (*Let there be fashion, down with art*, fig. 1) by the German Dadaist Max Ernst (1891–1976). The title is macaronic, mixing the French word *modes* ('fashions') into the phrase without putting the verb in the plural and thereby insinuating that *modes* is a Latin noun in the singular form. This sober lithograph on brownish paper contains a faceless tailor's dummy, inspired by de Chirico's *The Great Metaphysician*, surrounded by a mechanism of cables, weights and pulleys that are connected without functional logic. The allusion to industrialisation, to "the anonymity of modern life and the way individuals can be manipulated in the modern world" bestows a striking modernism on the piece.³⁰ Amid all this stand Latin phrases in irregular type. What to make of this confrontation of the modern and the old? Where does the burlesque subversion, announced by the macaronic title, fully manifest itself? From top to bottom, one first reads "DaDa NoBIs vaLvTamTam" as the extension of a music staff, and, below that, "PACEM". "Dada nobis valutamtam" is a corruption of the liturgical formula "dona nobis pacem" ("grant us peace"). It is part of the acclamation of the Lamb of God right before

³⁰ Spies and Rewald, *Max Ernst*, 10.

Communion takes place. Similar punning on a liturgical formula was hailed four decades later in Mikhail Bakhtin’s appraisal of medieval and Rabelaisian grotesque. Bakhtin recalls the example of “Venite, apotemus” (“O come, let’s have a drink”), which plays on the hymnal line “Venite, adoremus” (“O come, let us adore”).³¹ Does the parallel between Ernst’s linguistic travesty and Bakhtin’s interpretation of medieval jest run deeper than the pleasure of a joke?³² The Russian critic interprets the medieval humour sociologically and argues that in this period “not only does laughter make no exception for the *upper stratum*, but indeed it is usually directed toward it. [...] One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state.”³³ Clearly, his analysis and its tacit sympathy for the *lower strata* is rooted in the class awareness that had developed at the end of the nineteenth century and eventually led to the Russian Revolution and the foundation of the Soviet Union, in which Bakhtin lived.³⁴ Should we also consider Ernst’s play with Latin as an ideologically inspired attempt to criticise the powers that be?

To begin with, “dada” can be read as a repeated *da*, which would be a synonym of *dona* (imperative “give”). It is, of course, a humorous reference to Ernst’s own artistic environment, which resonates with the signature “Dadamax Ernst” on the left side of the work. “Valutamtam,” on the other hand, is more layered. The stem *valu-* reminds of words like *validudo*, denoting physical well-being and hence not unexpected in the context of prayer. At the same time, *Valuta* is the German word for currency and, more specifically, for the value of one currency in relation to another—note that on the right of the curved axis in the circle, we read “1 Mark”. Embedded within a prayer, it throws up the uneasy relationship of the Church with the accumulation of wealth and its take on social issues. Changing a prayer for peace with a request for financial support appears to be criticism of the Church’s position towards the working classes in an industrialised society.³⁵ The allusion to moneymaking is especially trenchant because the Lamb of God is an image of the self-sacrificial nature of Jesus Christ and, by extension, His Church. Thirdly, *-tamtam*, formally a feminine singular accusative, satisfies the Dadaist’s pleasure in the mere sound of language as exemplified by Hugo Ball’s poetry. Its syllables visually jump out, as the alliterative *t-* is capitalised twice, somewhat reminiscent of early modern chronograms. Because of the loudness of drums called *Tamtam* in German and other languages, the word has come to signify ‘fuss’ from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.³⁶ This new connotation could have been attractive to Ernst and might well pick at the pomp and circumstance sometimes associated with Roman Mass and at the financial costs of liturgical splendour.

³¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 86.

³² See the fourth issue of this journal for a consideration of playfulness and Latin.

³³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 88.

³⁴ For the connection between Bakhtin and Marxism, see Brandist, “The Official and the Popular in Gramsci and Bakhtin”; Brandist, “Bakhtin, Marxism and Russian Populism.”

³⁵ Thirty years earlier, the Church had made its position on these matters known through the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

³⁶ Kluge, “Tamtam.”



Figure 2: Joseph Kosuth, *Clock (One and Five), English/Latin Version, 1965.*

Finally, there is the word “*pacis*” (“of peace”), which visually stands out from the rest of the drawing. It is, moreover, underlined with an olive branch, the traditional symbol of peace. Given that *Fiat modes, pereat ars* was made in 1919, only one year after the cataclysm of World War I, the typographical inversion of the word is self-explanatory. *Pacis* is a genitive form, which links it grammatically to the previous three words. This addition narrows down the request for money to a request for the benefits of peace—and, perhaps cynically, of its disruption. In combination with the imaginary mechanisms occupying the rest of the lithograph, we might even hear a plea for giving the benefits of modernisation to the group denoted by “*nobis*” (“us”). Instead of exploiting Latin’s loftiness, Ernst makes it an object of ridicule for picking at the established institutions of Church and State, and for raising problems that were distinctive of his own time.³⁷ We will now see how from the 1960s onwards, the incongruity between Latin and modernity that is apparent in Ernst, has become the general attitude.

3 Sign: Joseph Kosuth (1965)

Clock (One and Five), English/Latin Version (1965) (fig. 2, from here on referred to as *Clock*) is a creation by the self-proclaimed conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth (1945). It consists of a random clock, a life-size picture of that clock, and photostatic enlargements of three different entries from an English-Latin dictionary. The lemmas are ‘time,’ ‘machination,’ and ‘object,’ and their translations cover a wide semantic range from, in the first case, *tempus* (“time”) to *aevum* (“era”) to *occasio* (“right moment”). *Clock* belongs to a series of works, the so-called *Proto-Investigations*, which share the same setup of object, picture and dictionary lemma, a setup which is elsewhere repeated with a shovel, stool, saw and rake. Every object is itself the basis of a sub-series, which is differentiated through the language of the reproduced dictionary entry. There is an all-English version, but there are also versions where the dictionary entry translates from English into another language. The bilingual works come with a certificate and list of instructions stating that they can only be exhibited in countries where the language in question is spoken

³⁷ He is not the only one to do so: The concrete poetry of Dragan Aleksić, published in a Dada Tank number from 1922, is a good example. In a cacophonous poem, we read the following verse: “½ rebeka + ORE-MUS”. The word in block letters means ‘let us pray’ and is the priest’s call for prayer after which the congregation usually stands up. Aleksić, “Krozolit oax.”

by a large number of the population. Thus, the German *Clock* can only be exhibited in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, whereas the Dutch version would be limited to Dutch or Flemish exhibition spaces. English, as both an international language and Kosuth's mother tongue, is exempt from this restriction, as is Latin. Clearly, *Clock* is "concerned with the relationship between words and objects (concepts and what they refer to)," a key theme in Kosuth's oeuvre which has its roots in Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *signifiant/signifié* ('signifier'/'signified') and Charles Peirce's ideas on the index/icon/symbol triad.³⁸ How does the concept of *Clock* respond to earlier philosophies of language, particularly of the Latin language? What does *Clock* say, more specifically, about the relation between Latin and our direct experience? Finally, what is the position of Latin with regard to the exhibition restrictions imposed on the works?

In a way, Kosuth is an offshoot of late antique language philosophy, mediated by modern reflections on Western logo-centrism. Jesús Hernández Lobato has pinpointed fourth- and fifth-century influences on the postmodern linguistic turn and its forerunners. For example, "Wittgenstein's obsession with Augustine's *Confessions* is well known, and it exerted a vast influence on his thinking."³⁹ Also Kosuth, whose thinking relies heavily on the Austrian thinker, has adopted St Augustine as an important source for his conceptual artworks.⁴⁰ His engagement with the bishop of Hippo is, however, in English. As indicated in the introduction, contemporary art incorporates Latin primarily as a symbol, and less as the medium of specific texts.⁴¹ It is worth looking at the artist's own statements on the role of Latin within his exploration of words and their meaning. Fortunately, the archives of Tate Modern in London preserve a letter written in 1974 by Kosuth to Richard Morphet from the museum.⁴² Morphet had asked for clarifications of the certificate, which was, apparently, written in an unclear hand. Kosuth's elaborate answer contains some interesting statements on his relationship with the Latin works and on the language itself, which we will now look at.

To begin with, he writes that Latin is dead. Whereas the vernacular versions interact on a more profound level with speakers of those languages, the Latin version "functions only operationally, not really. (As if ...)." Although the *Proto-Investigations* are mainly concerned with "the "trans-linguistic" aspect of European (Western) culture," as Kosuth wrote to Morphet, *Clock* appears to lay bare more fundamental questions of translatability.⁴³ Latin is the one language that is

³⁸ Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," 30. It is in this context perhaps worth reminding that de Saussure's diagrams in his posthumously published *Cours de linguistique général* are mostly in Latin, although the entire text is in French.

³⁹ Lobato, "Late Antique Foundations of Postmodern Theory," 57.

⁴⁰ See Kosuth, 378 (+216., *After Augustine's Confessions*) and 215 *Twice* (+216., *After Augustine's Confessions*).

⁴¹ Kosuth has made at least one work with texts by a Latin author. For a large Ovid exhibition at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome, he provided neon quotes from the classical poet, with English translations in various degrees of accuracy. The occasional nature of the work sets it apart from the early inquiry that is *Clock* and its meaning does not appear to transcend the question of how Ovid's verse can function as pithy quotes on Instagram; see Jewell, "Ovidio at the Scuderie Del Quirinale [Review]."

⁴² Kosuth, "Letter to Richard Morphet." I am grateful to the archivist who provided me with a scan of the letter, which is only partly reproduced in the online catalogue of Tate.

⁴³ Letter from Joseph Kosuth to Richard Morphet.

common to the entire European culture, and has been considered its “bond of unity,” as I previously mentioned. It is, however, also locked in the past, so that a translation from English to Latin is not only transnational or trans-linguistic, but has to bridge time as well. Kosuth’s *Clock* is about the mechanical time-measuring instrument, which became widespread in the fourteenth century only and thus has no name in classical Latin. As a consequence, our concept of ‘clock’ can never be really translated into Latin as new words cannot become operational in a past communicative context. This partly explains why our *Clock* does not contain a dictionary entry for ‘clock,’ in contrast to the modern-language versions.⁴⁴ Its Latin translation which Kosuth would have found in his copy of *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary: Latin-English and English-Latin*, is ‘horologium,’ originally used for a water clock or sundial.⁴⁵ The juxtaposition of the lemmas ‘time,’ ‘machination’ and ‘object’ seemingly appears as an attempt to create a compound denoting the mechanical clock, something in the line of ‘a time-mechanism-thing’. *Clock* points to the tension between an object and the irremediable lack of a word for that object in a given language. This tension is not only a linguistic issue; on a profounder level, *Clock* hints at the difference in world view inherent in languages. Kosuth wrote that “At the time of this work, and for several years after (roughly the “Proto-Investigations” through the Fifth Investigation) I was perhaps overly influenced by the Whorf-Sapier [*sic*] hypothesis.”⁴⁶ Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), a student of Edward Sapir (1884–1939) at Yale, had stated that “The forms of a person’s thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his own language.”⁴⁷ Whoever understands a clock to be the object on display in the artwork, lives in a different world from that of antiquity and the Middle Ages,

when time was more organic and bound to the experience of nature and oneself.⁴⁸ It must be said that the assumption behind this is rather classicist, as it excludes the Neo-Latin literature where *horologium* can mean exactly the object on display.

An interesting afterthought on *Clock* are Kosuth’s words that “this English/Latin version is the only one from this series which is not in my possession. I have made an effort to keep all of the English/Latin works.”⁴⁹ He appears to consider them more private than the rest, possibly because their language really belongs to no one. Is his stance, then, comparable to de Chirico’s esoteric celebration of the enigma, which

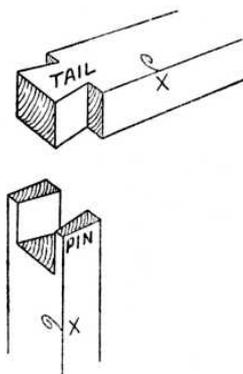


Figure 3: Dovetail joint.

⁴⁴ For example, Kosuth, *Clock (one and five) English - Norwegian*. Another reason can be simply aesthetic: the lemma for ‘clock’ is only one word long (*horologium*).

⁴⁵ The typography of the photostats corresponds to the 1904 edition of the dictionary, or a reprint of it.

⁴⁶ Letter from Joseph Kosuth to Richard Morphet.

⁴⁷ Whorf, “Language, Mind, and Reality,” 252.

⁴⁸ See Quinones, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time*.

⁴⁹ Kosuth cites a changed relationship between himself, Nigel [Lendon] and his gallerist Leo [Castelli] as the reason in his letter to Richard Morphet.

can only be reached by a few illuminated minds, including himself? I would not go as far as that, but the exceptionality of Latin does appear to be closely related to the artist’s ultimate control over his work. It is, so to say, the purest realisation of his concept. Kosuth speaks of “a decoding device for the whole system—the way my myths dovetail with our myths” (original underlining). The concept behind a work is the most important aspect of artistic production for Kosuth and his desire to keep the ‘key’ to *Clock* therefore appears natural. A Latin key, so to speak, is least likely to get stolen. At the same time, Kosuth has underlined “my” and “our” after the dash, thereby stressing that his works are ultimately about bringing world views into contact with each other rather than marking the boundaries. The metaphor of a dovetail, although not uncommon in English, is significant here. Figure 3 shows how the small trapezoidal pin sticks out from the entire wooden board and fits into a same-shape recess in the other board. If Latin is the dovetail, then what are the larger parts it joins? I believe that Kosuth’s metaphor hints at the open-endedness of Latin. Whereas vernaculars work automatically in a certain linguistic context, the Latin version needs one more step. If considered functionally dead, Latin needs another round of translation, building a possible bridge between English and all the other languages at once.

4 Material: Giulio Paolini (1969) and Rosemarie Trockel (1988)

Later conceptual art, including *arte povera*, made use of Latin in a very different way from Kosuth’s linguistic propositions. This may be due to the different receptions of Wittgenstein’s philosophy in the USA and on the European continent.⁵⁰ In any case, their recontextualization of Latin does not take place on the basis of meaning, but of its materiality. They abandon the typical association of



Figure 4: Giulio Paolini, *Et. quid. amabo. nisi. quod. ænigma. est?* 1969.



Figure 5: Giulio Paolini, *Quam raptim ad sublimia*, 1969.

⁵⁰ Buchmann, “Art after Wittgenstein,” 275.

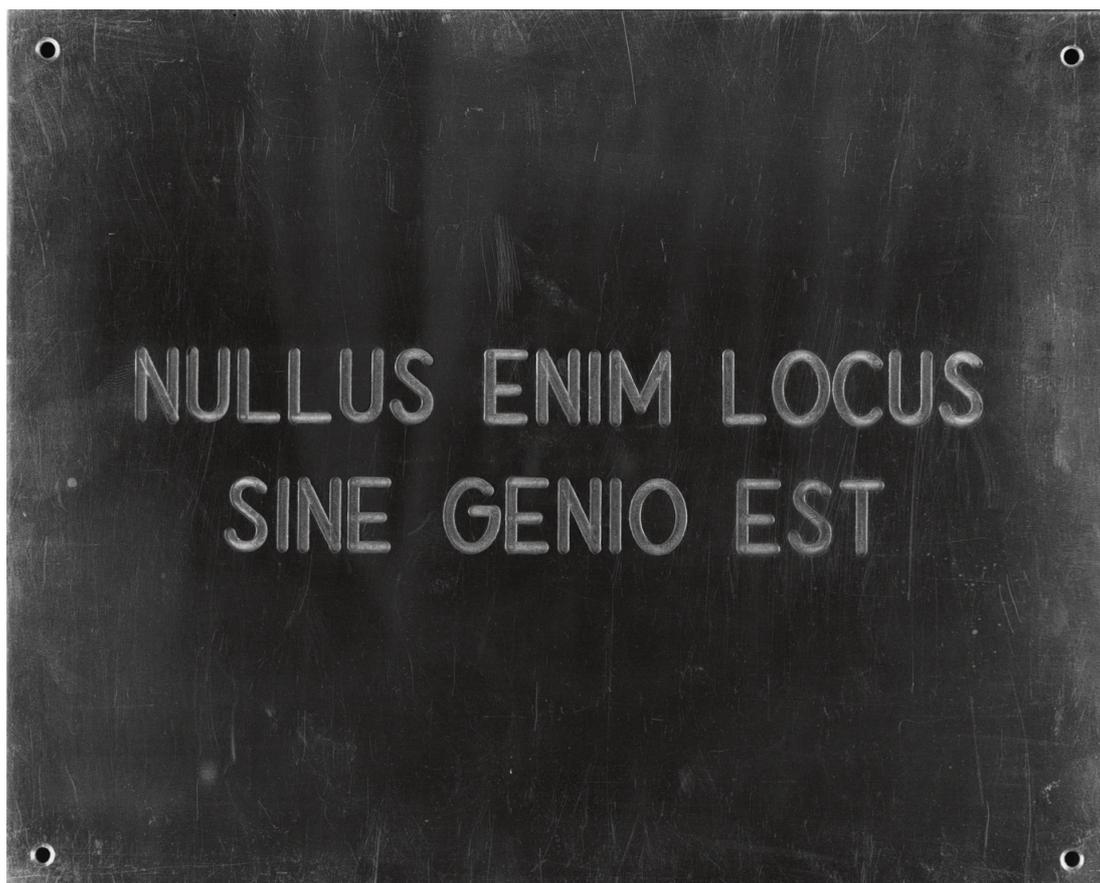


Figure 6: Giulio Paolini, *Nullus enim locus sine genio est*, 1969.

Latin with durable stone and well-produced reference works which we encountered in the works of de Chirico and Kosuth, and to which we will return below. Instead, they adopt transient means of public display such as business cards and improvised banners. Those are typical media of the post-war business world on the one hand and the culture of indignant protest often associated with the 1968 revolts on the other hand. Banner and business card are short outbursts of communicative energy, aimed at making an immediate impact, rather than slowly act on the recipient. When they have fulfilled their functions of initiating a possible collaboration or voicing one's opinion by means of a block lettered slogan, they are doomed to fade at the back of a drawer or in the corner of a storeroom. This completely goes against the slow reading usually associated with Latin.⁵¹

Several works by Giulio Paolini (1940) feature Latin on such objects as I described here. I will start with three banners, created in 1969, one of which refers to de Chirico's previously mentioned 1911 self-portrait, from which it borrows

⁵¹ In Nietzsche's words, "tief, rück- und vorsichtig, mit Hintergedanken, mit offen gelassenen Thüren, mit zarten Fingern und Augen" ("deep, considerate, careful, with private interests, with open doors, with tender fingers and eyes"), see Nietzsche, "Morgenröthe," 17.

the Latin phrase “Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est.”⁵² The second banner reads “Quam raptim ad sublimia” (“As quick as possible to the highest place”), and in an interview from 1995, the artist remembers

che completai la trilogia con una terza citazione: “Nullus enim locus sine genio est”. Le tre frasi valevano come pronunciamento, professione di fede, ma anche consapevolezza della loro irripetibilità, confinate come sono in una lingua antica e lontane da ogni possibilità, verifica o riappropriazione.⁵³

The conflation of the three quotes into a single way of expressing the idea of unrepeatability and, so to say, unverifiable dogmatism, obfuscates the varied origins of the quotations. The source of “Et quid amabo...” is indicated by the retained inter puncts and font, which makes the reference truly visual, rather than intertextual. The text has become all image, an art historical reference in the first place.⁵⁴ In contrast, Paolini found the second phrase written on the floor of the Vatican Museums, and keeps no visual trace of its origin.⁵⁵ The third one, which also features on a metal plate better corresponding to the paradigm of durability against which the banners gain significance (fig. 6), is drawn from the fourth-century commentary by Servius on Vergil’s *Aeneid*.⁵⁶ What to make of these eclectic and idiosyncratic choices? As we have seen, Kosuth’s *Clock* is not primarily concerned with time or mechanics, but with how we talk about them. In a similar way, Paolini is more interested in what is being said about art and literature than in the works themselves. His three quotes act on a comment level, from de Chirico’s self-reflection to Servius’ poetic interpretation. Interestingly, while looking for such material, he automatically ended up outside the Latin literary canon. Apart from its reflexivity, Paolini’s use of Latin willingly wrecks the usual modes of communication. Let us have a look at the context in which the works under consideration were created. Originally, the banners were put up as part of an installation in the public sphere. “Et quid amabo...,” for example was stretched between two balconies on opposite sides of the street at the corner of Piazza del Duomo and Via Cinque Giornate in Como during the art manifestation *Campo Urbano* (fig. 4). Later, they featured in more traditional exhibition spaces, where their arrangement underlined their inherent ephemerality. As figure 5 shows, the banner was hung from its top left corner, so that the text became only partly legible. The short moment of announcing the message written on the cloth had

⁵² *Et in Arcadia Ego (I am in Arcadia too)* by Ian Hamilton Finlay, another of whose works I discuss below, also uses a Latin phrase to refer to an earlier artwork. In that case, it is Nicolas Poussin’s famous painting *Les bergers d’Arcadie*, where the same sentence features on a tomb.

⁵³ “I completed the trilogy with a third quotation: “Nullus enim locus sine genio est [Every place has a tutelary spirit].” The three statements acted as a pronouncement, a profession of faith, but also as an awareness of their unrepeatability, confined as they are to an ancient language and remote as they are from every possibility, verification or re-appropriation.” Disch, “Interview with Giulio Paolini,” 297.

⁵⁴ It is instances like this that made Italo Calvino conclude about Paolini that “La pittura per lui equivale alla storia della pittura.” (“For him, painting is the equivalent of art history.”) Calvino, “La squadratura,” xii. Immediately after this foreword by Calvino, we find “Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est” as a traditional book motto to *Idem*. See Maria Francesca Pepi, “Italo Calvino e Giulio Paolini”; Soutif, “Filigranes,” 80ff.

⁵⁵ Lageira, “Ni le soleil ni la mort,” 132.

⁵⁶ Servius, *Servianorum in Vergilii carmina commentariorum*, vol. 3, v. 5.95.



Figure 7: Giulio Paolini, *Quam raptim ad sublimia*, 1969.



Figure 8: Giulio Paolini, *Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est*, 1969.

passed forever. This is the unrepeatability which Paolini mentioned earlier. But to what extent was the Latinate banner ever capable of conveying its message? De Chirico's mottos heightened the mystery and elatedness of his painting; he wanted, I recall, to capture the hidden reality of the world. In 1920, he even withdrew the Latin text into his world, into the world of the self-portrait itself. Paolini stays true to this mysterious "remoteness" of the phrase by adhering to the use of an ancient language without further explanation. He adheres to the earnest sacredness that seemed at play in de Chirico as well, by insisting that his pronouncement is "a profession of faith". At the same time, however, he inflated the message to the dimensions of a slogan visible from afar and to a large group of people. Away with the intimate, tactile connection with an ideal past, whether antiquity or the Renaissance; instead comes the loudness of the (political) manifestation. Paolini mixes the unverifiable nature of a metaphysical Truth à la de Chirico with the unshakable conviction of demonstrators. Ironically, the traditional sign of protest and revolt appears rooted in an old cultural tradition as well as in the discourses of power to which Latin is ultimately tied. This is not to say that the banner corroborates the idea of Latin as a language of prestige and long-time durability. When its cloth hangs down in quiet fatigue, it intimates the finiteness and relativity of all ideas and words—vernacular or Latin.

More in line with de Chirico's employment of the Latin phrases as an ennobling device are the business cards which Paolini made around the same time when the banners were created. The same words as before are printed in gold ink underneath his name, where usually the occupation of the person is given. Specifically about "Quam raptim..." in this format, Paolini said that "[e l]'ai pris presque comme un titre de noblesse et comme un défi."⁵⁷ I read these words only after connecting Ensor's motto "Pro Luce" with de Chirico's programmatic lines of Latin as discussed above. Indeed, I was surprised to find the same interpretation being made by Paolini for his own artistic practice. As with the banners, however, these physical carriers of the quotes destabilise the 'magnificence' of the mottos' original setting. The photo of fig. 8 rather evokes the sleek normativity of a business representative than the mystery of a clairvoyant philosopher. While de

⁵⁷ "I have taken it taken almost as a title of nobility and as a challenge." Lageira, "Ni le soleil ni la mort," 132.

Chirico’s portrait self-consciously built on the self-fashioning of Renaissance humanists, Paolini moves away from the creation of a noble intellectual persona. Instead, he embeds the Latin quote in a parody of the corporate identity culture that rapidly expanded during the 1960s and after.

Almost all the artists in this article are male, because it proved not easy to find female representatives of Latin in art. In fact, a work by the German Rosemarie Trockel (1952) thematises this gender disparity. Figure 9 shows a scarf on which a Latin phrase is knitted in irregular letters: the over-famous “Cogito, ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) from René Descartes’ *Principia Philosophiae* (*Principles of Philosophy*).⁵⁸ In comparison with Paolini’s banner, Trockel’s textile work accentuates even more the question of a woman’s field of action being at home as opposed to in society. However, the scarf could equally be interpreted as a banner, be it of a smaller size. Trockel’s “knitted works are ironic comments on the traditionally feminine occupation of knitting,” which usually took place in a domestic environment.⁵⁹ Throughout much of history, philosophical publications and Latin learning were, on the other hand, reserved for men on the public stage. *Cogito, ergo sum* visualises Trockel’s liberation from such stereotypes, and conceiving of the scarf as a banner allows her subversion to work out. The statement “I think, therefore I am” is a claim to recognition as a being whose thoughts and voice count. Trockel’s appropriation of perhaps the most normative language of male philosophy in western Europe fuels her assertion more than if she had adopted the earlier French version “Je pense, donc je suis” (“I think, therefore I am”).⁶⁰

Cogito, ergo sum questions the authority of the famous maxim through its own production process as well as through the association with mass communication in a more poignant way than Paolini adopted. Trockel did not do the knitting herself but programmed a machine to create the pattern. She considered the culturally inferior status of wool and knitting, and wanted to investigate “ob das negative Klischee überwunden werden kann, wenn der handwerkliche Aspekt aus dem ganzen Komplex herausfällt, wenn das Strickmuster vom Computer gesteuert



Figure 9: Rosemarie Trockel, *Cogito, ergo sum*, 1988.

⁵⁸ This is the version of which a copy was recently sold during Auction 1178 at Lempertz (Lot 432).

⁵⁹ Lübbren, “Trockel, Rosemarie.”

⁶⁰ Descartes, *Discours*, 50.

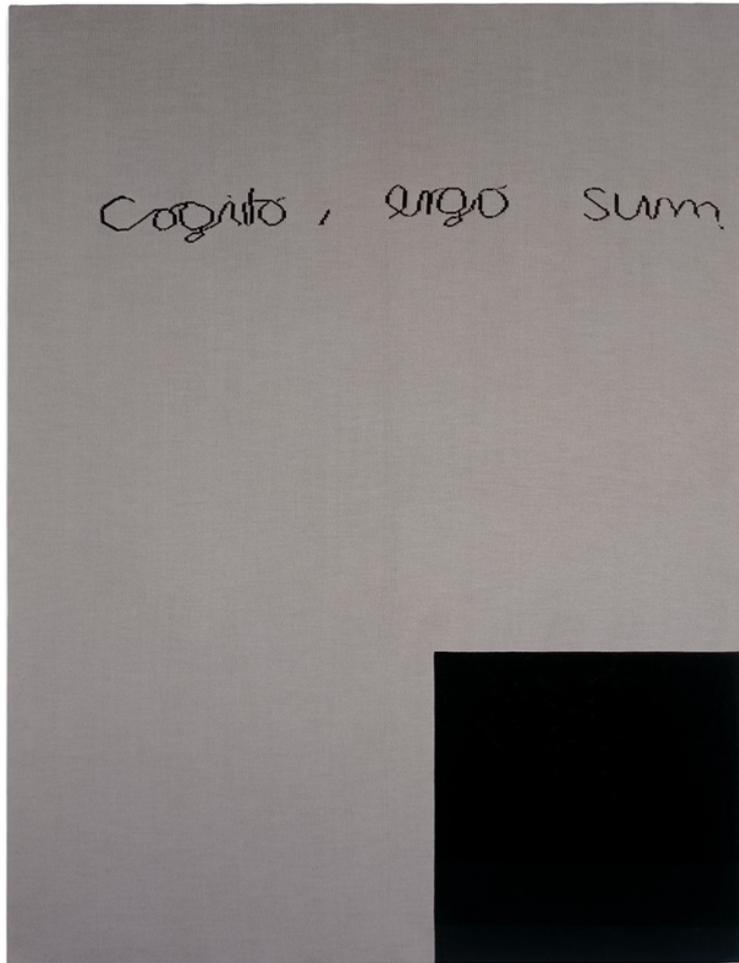


Figure 10: Rosemarie Trockel, *Cogito, ergo sum*, 1988.

entsteht.”⁶¹ On the language level, Descartes’ words lose their original meaning when ‘uttered’ by modern technology, for its expression offers no proof of human existence anymore. While Kosuth stated that certainly “at least on one level a change of language can change the work quite significantly,” Trockel manipulates the proposition’s meaning by means of a different ‘voice’.⁶² The clash of the French philosopher’s truism with our modernity is amplified through the use of Latin, which stresses the gap between his and our world. Moreover, Trockel creates a tension between Latin and mass communication. Unlike Paolini, she avoids the paradox between her medium and linguistic distance by using a very famous quote which many people will recognise. Nevertheless, the work’s dialogue with Trockel’s other knitted works casts it into an unexpected context. Some of these pieces repeat logos like the Playboy rabbit and the Woolmark symbol in a parody on repetitive fancy work patterns in women’s magazines and the banality of certain iconography. She thereby joins *Cogito, ergo sum* to the league of broadly shared,

⁶¹ “Whether the negative stereotype can be overcome when the craft aspect is dropped from the whole complex, when the knitting pattern is created under the control of a computer.” Trockel and Drathen, “Endlich ahnen, nicht nur wissen.”

⁶² Letter from Joseph Kosuth to Richard Morphet.

but trite cultural references. The original work (fig. 10), of which the scarf is an edition with the same title and Latin phrase, has a black square in the corner, “so als sei Malewitschs „Schwarzes Quadrat“ bestenfalls noch als Flicker zu gebrauchen.”⁶³ Latin, here seemingly used as a symbol for the philosophy of the past, shares in this same mixture of commentary and plain mockery of cultural benchmarks.

5 Text: Ian Hamilton Finlay (1987)

Ian Hamilton Finlay’s (1925–2006) interest in the classical tradition is omnipresent in his poetic garden Little Sparta.⁶⁴ A recurrent theme is the passing of time, the loss of culture and the impossibility of reconstructing the past. They have often been explored in relation with the French Revolution, a point of radical rupture. For example, *The World has been empty since the Romans* pretends to be a restored ancient inscription on a broken marble frieze. Instead of the Latin or Ancient Greek text one would expect on such an object, we read the English title of the work chiselled in the stone. The same phrase appears on an unpolished plinth in Little Sparta. “While evoking notions of age and imperfection, the plinth heightens the sense of emptiness bemoaned in the quotation that it prominently presents to the visitor.”⁶⁵ “The World has been empty since the Romans” is a



Figure 11: Ian Hamilton Finlay, *UNDA*, 1987.

⁶³ “As if Malevich’s “Black Square” could only be used as a patch at best.” Hübl, “Spurenelement.”

⁶⁴ “Little Sparta.”

⁶⁵ Folio, “The World Has Been Empty since the Romans,” 278.

translation from the revolutionary Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just's report from 1794 on the arrest of the more moderate Georges Danton.⁶⁶ Another example of such allusions to the French Revolution is *Quin morere (Die)*, which consists of a guillotine blade, reminding the viewer of the decapitations during *la Terreur*. In the metal is written a verse from Vergil's *Aeneid* about Dido's suicide plans to escape the pain after Aeneas has left her: "Quin morere, ut merita es, ferroque averte dolorem" ("Die, as you deserve, and ward off your pain with the sword").⁶⁷ The irony here is baffling, and one is unsure what to make of this defective killing machine and the tragic lines of poetry.

The work that interests me here is titled *Unda (Wave)*, and exists in several versions.⁶⁸ Some feature the Latin *Unda* only, while other ones add the French *vague*, English *wave* German *Woge* and Italian or Spanish *onda*. "The sound of the words contributes to the imagined effect of a wave's build up and resolution, as the vowels and consonants progress through sounds with more impetus to the softer and gentler sounds in the Latin *unda*."⁶⁹ It is interesting that Latin comes at the end of the series, where the outpour of sounds comes to an end, or perhaps stretches out infinitely. The most evocative execution of the work's concept, in my opinion, stands on the sports fields of University College San Diego (fig. 11). It was completed in 1987 and is, according to the university's web page, Finlay's "first permanent outdoor work in the United States."⁷⁰ It consists of one smaller and four equally large blocks, lying next to a sports field, with the symbol ∩ and four letters carved into them in different patterns. They appear unfinished, with long half cylindrical cavities still clearly visible along the edge. These are traces of holes drilled into the stone to split it off in the mine or later in the artist's workshop. Like the previously mentioned plinth carrying the citation of Saint-Just, *Unda* activates the spectator's memory of archaeological artefacts in which time has been paused. Additionally, the location with a view on the Pacific Ocean, and the materiality of the yellowish limestone render the work more evocative than earlier versions in concrete and glazed mosaics.

Barbara Baert has proposed "the sea/marble conflation as a model of creative potentiality."⁷¹ Although chemically and physically a different material, Finlay's blocks take part in this artistic paradigm. The unpolished surface undulates on every side, thereby underlining its aquatic character. In addition to this, limestone bears a geological memory of the ocean waves, since it consists of organic deposits

⁶⁶ "Le peuple français ne perdra jamais sa réputation : la trace de la liberté et du génie ne peut être effacée dans l'univers. Opprimé dans sa vie, il opprime après lui les préjugés et les tyrans. Le monde est vide depuis les Romains, et leur mémoire le remplit et prophétise encore la liberté." ("The French people will never lose its reputation: the trace of freedom and genius cannot be erased from the universe. Oppressed during their life, it oppresses in turn the prejudiced and the tyrants. The world has been empty since the Romans, and their remembrance fills it and still prophesies freedom.") de Saint-Just, "Rapport sur la conjuration," 331.

⁶⁷ Vergil, *Aeneid*, 4.547.

⁶⁸ One stands in Stuttgart, near the Max Planck institute, a second one is in Livingstone and yet another one is part of Little Sparta.

⁶⁹ "Wave, Vague, Woge, Onda, Unda."

⁷⁰ "Unda."

⁷¹ Baert, "Marble and the Sea," 39.

from the sea. As Adrian Stokes wrote, “all limestones [...] possess a substance that provokes from water.”⁷² Moreover, the letters chiselled in the stone engage in what Baert calls the “dynamic between the not-yet-quite but already-becoming.”⁷³ They visualise the gradual development of the word *unda*. Read from left to right, the artwork starts with the single symbol ʌ, which proof-readers use to indicate that two adjacent letters need to be reversed. In the following three blocks, we see the word *unda* spelled incorrectly, but with the ʌ indicating the necessary change: unald, uɹna, nɹuda. On the last block is written ʌunda, correctly and with the ʌ pushed to an insignificant position. The ʌ-symbol has the form of a wave, and as it rolls through the letters in a recessive movement, the word *unda* brings itself into shape. During this generative process, the word *nuda* appears, naturally evoking a naked woman (*nuda* is the feminine singular form of the Latin adjective *nudus*, -a, -um which means ‘naked’). The image of a naked woman on the waves conjures the Venus Anadyomene motive, the goddess depicted at the moment when she is born from the sea as an adult. At the hands of twentieth-century authors, it had become “a poetological figure of the origin of new artistic forms” and thus again refers to the previously mentioned creative potentiality.⁷⁴ The image had a long tradition before Botticelli famously used it in his painting *The Birth of Venus*, which reflects the intellectual and artistic climate of fifteenth-century Florence, looking back at antiquity with interest and admiration. Apparently, as in de Chirico’s 1920 self-portrait, Finlay’s use of Latin in *Unda* is as intricately connected with (Renaissance) classicism as with classical culture per se.

The allusion to Botticelli leads us into a period of linguistic standardisation, as well as textual criticism. Humanist scholars tried to restore ancient authors through comparison of manuscript witnesses, and aimed to purify Latin grammar and morphology.⁷⁵ The texts which humanists established were disseminated in unprecedented numbers by means of the newly invented printing press. The way Finlay treats the word ‘unda’ and its constituent letters as objects that can be dismantled and reassembled, strongly relies on the practice of textual emendation and the handling of moveable type, indeed.⁷⁶ The mechanical reproduction of texts from the Renaissance onwards necessitated a thorough correction of the printing proofs. Metathesis, the transposition of letters, is one such common error for which early modern printing houses developed the corrector’s signs to which ʌ belongs.⁷⁷ Did Finlay read Stokes, who writes that “limestone is the humanistic rock?”⁷⁸ *Unda* puns on the cultivation of textual stability by linking it to the shakiness and variability of the sea. Moreover, the artist lets the meaning of his work emerge from a seeming mistake, as we have seen. Like Ernst’s variation on a fixed liturgical formula, *Unda* points to the possible signification behind even the

⁷² On the same pages, Stokes writes that marble is “metamorphosed limestone. [...] marble shares with limestone all the qualities that concern us.” Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, 31.

⁷³ Baert, “Marble and the Sea,” 37.

⁷⁴ Goth, “Venus Anadyomene,” 36; see also 23.

⁷⁵ Reynolds, *Scribes and Scholars*, 207–41.

⁷⁶ I borrow the notion of words as objects from Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*, 2–3.

⁷⁷ Grafton, *The Culture of Correction*, 28–29.

⁷⁸ Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, 32.



Figure 12: William Kentridge, *Staying Home*, 1999.

slightest diversion from standardised language. As noted above, Finlay also likes to disturb his textual ready-mades with surprising juxtapositions or physical carriers. *Unda's* wit is increased, because correction signs evidently do not make sense in epigraphy. One cannot swap engraved letters like moveable type—they are forever set in stone. Correction must take place by reworking or completely erasing the already carved letters.⁷⁹ Instead of presenting a petrified truth or the final reconstruction of the past, Finlay celebrates associative thinking and mutability. While alluding to the ancient world by having a Latin inscription in stone, he stresses the past's ongoing realisation by means of proofreading marks. We cannot be sure anymore whether the plinths have eroded, or are not yet finished. In this way, Finlay's concrete poetry goes against the grain of a possible perception and reception of antiquity as unchanging and normative.

6 Meaning: William Kentridge (2019)

The South-African artist William Kentridge (1955) is best known for his politically inspired works, as well as for the foundational role of traditional drawing in

⁷⁹ See Cooley, "Epigraphic Culture in the Roman World," 310–11.

his artistic output.⁸⁰ Both aspects are connected—during his education, Kentridge had little access to the developments of European and American avant-garde art—and intersect with Kentridge's third characteristic, his questioning of (colonial) time.⁸¹ In *The Refusal of Time*, for example, he examines "a subjective sense of time as operating at a different pace in different situations."⁸² Some of his drawings have reappeared in animated films, while others served as decors for opera productions. One such production in particular, of Shostakovich's *The Nose* after a story by Nikolai Gogol, indicates Kentridge's interest in the subversive and satirical.⁸³ Another opera, *Waiting for the Sibyl* (2019), features drawings on dictionary pages and thereby demonstrates the importance of text and the fluidity of looking and reading for Kentridge.⁸⁴ Twenty years earlier, the artist had made a very similar series of etchings, entitled *Sleeping on Glass* (1999). One of these (fig. 12) represents four stone pines, mounted with the *chine collé* method on pages from a Latin edition of Vergil's *Aeneid*.⁸⁵ At first sight, the words remain on the background, but on closer inspection, the rubric "staying home" and the trees typical for Rome interact with the story of Aeneas' errands and his foundation of the city.

Drawing Lesson 50: Learning from the Old Masters (In Praise of Folly) picks up on many of those characteristics. The video installation constantly refers to perhaps the best-known satirical piece of literature from early modernity, Desiderius Erasmus' *Stultitiae laus (The Praise of Folly)*. On top of that, it engages with historical theories of art and their application to modern draughtsmanship. Kentridge's usual way to make his animation films "is to have a sheet of paper stuck up on the studio wall and, halfway across the room, my camera."⁸⁶ In *Drawing Lesson 50* the paper is still stuck to a wall, but also put on the table. Furthermore, the only scene is filmed in two uninterrupted takes, which were edited to appear as one by superimposing the second take on the first one. The resulting palimpsest shows Kentridge sitting in front of himself, involved in a chaotic discussion. This encounter, which suspends our linear concept of time, can also be seen as an internal dialogue. Indeed, the most important event in the film is not Kentridge's drawing process, which is only mimicked anyway, but the conversation he has with his doubled self. A conversation is, perhaps, said too much, as the ludicrous exchange of words lacks any mutual understanding. The Kentridge on the left of the screen (LK) pedantically asks theoretical questions like "What is your view on the double logic of art? Or, to put it differently, on the double responsibilities of the artist?" When the Kentridge on the right side (RK) fails to answer promptly, LK proceeds by giving the answer himself.⁸⁷ In a judgemental tone, he asks: "How is it that you come to be in these rooms?" All this time RK shuffles through some

⁸⁰ Graves-Smith and Chilvers, "Kentridge, William."

⁸¹ Christov-Bakargiev and Kentridge, "In Conversation," 3.

⁸² Hughes, "The Temporality of Contemporaneity," 593; Agbamu, "Smash the Thing."

⁸³ Gough, "Kentridge's Nose."

⁸⁴ Christov-Bakargiev, "On Defectibility as a Resource."

⁸⁵ Manchester, "Staying Home."

⁸⁶ Kentridge, "Fortuna," 26.

⁸⁷ "The first logic is the logic of the world and the responsibility of showing the world as it is or as it appears to be. The second responsibility is that of the form itself; what one owes to the tradition."

books until he starts to recite in Latin from Folly's first speech in *Stultitiae laus*.⁸⁸ LK does not appear to understand him, and continues his impromptu examination of RK, while the latter goes on citing from the same passage.⁸⁹ That RK also answers the questions about Erasmus' biography to the point and in English, does not seem to impress LK and it becomes clear that the real dispute here is about the value of contemporary art in comparison with the technical exigences of historical aesthetics. When LK asks, "Can you give me three reasons why your work should be in this room amongst these paintings," he means the Kunstmuseum in Basel, where *Drawing Lesson 50* made its debut. On the wall behind RK and LK are charcoal copies of Hans Holbein's portrait of Erasmus and of paintings by Paul Klee and Pablo Picasso that are on exhibition in the museum (fig. 13).⁹⁰ LK criticises an assumed smoke screen of difficult ideas that tries to hide the sham that, he implies, some (modern?) art is, and to which RK seems to belong.⁹¹ He questions the artistic talent of RK and ridicules his ruminations on the art of drawing:

This is an embarrassment. I apologise. And then you have him talking all about Paul Klee and his pet line and taking his line for a walk. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

LK's references to monochrome painting, and to the proximity of text and image are clearly puns on Kentridge's own work. Furthermore, the artist has used Paul Klee's saying that "drawing is taking a line for a walk" as the title for a video and at least once discussed it in a public conversation.⁹² Or does LK really talk about RK taking his pet *lion* for a walk? The diction is ambiguous, and when we look in the left corner of the background, we discern a basic drawing of a maned feline. It is a silly word joke, of course, to add wit to the derision of this drawing metaphor. It is, however, also a joke with art historical implications: Klee was reportedly a great lover of cats and the left drawing strongly resembles one of his paintings of lions.⁹³

⁸⁸ "At sane parum sit mihi vitae seminarium, ac fontem deberi, nisi quidquid in omni vita commodi est, id quoque totum ostendero mei muneris esse. Quid autem vita haec, num omnino vita videtur appellanda, si voluptatem detraxeris? Applausistis." ("But it would be little enough for me to assert my role as the fountain and nursery of life, if I did not also show that all the benefits of life depend completely on my good offices. After all, what is this life itself—can you even call it life if you take away pleasure? ... Your applause has answered for you.") Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 19.

⁸⁹ "Do you know when to use a sable brush or when to use a horse? ... Have you studied the golden mean? Have you studied the law of composition? ... Do you know anything about Erasmus and the city of Basel? Do you know the dates of Erasmus here in Basel? ... Do you respect the holy quartet of art making: the image, the idea, the surface, and the edge?"

⁹⁰ Starting from the third image on the left in clockwise direction: Picasso, *Homme, femme et enfant*; Holbein the Younger, *Erasmus*; Holbein the Younger, *Bildnis des schreibenden Erasmus von Rotterdam*; Klee, *Senecio (Baldgreis)*.

⁹¹ "He is embarrassed about his painting. He failed at oil painting; at the arts school, the report was: "He must apply himself more diligently." His high school teacher said to his mother: "He is tender, but not talented." If you let him, he will go on and on about monochrome painting being like writing or printing, about drawing being halfway between looking and reading. This is all sophistry; these are words to shore up a limited ability. He would have been better advised to be a seller of soap or a mender of shoes. This is an embarrassment. I apologise. And then you have him talking all about Paul Klee and his pet line and taking his line for a walk. *Quod erat demonstrandum*."

⁹² Kentridge, "Learning from the Absurd," 01:01:43.

⁹³ Kandinsky, *Kandinsky und ich*, 117 and Klee, *Löwen, man beachte sie!*



Figure 13: William Kentridge, video still from *Drawing Lesson 50*, 2018.

What does *Drawing Lesson 50* have in common with Erasmus' *Stultitiae laus* apart from its delicate wit? Through the personification of Folly, Erasmus repeatedly mocks the pretentiousness of the learned culture he himself was part of. It is therefore an apt model for Kentridge to joke about his own artistic statements. At the same time, Folly is a model of humorous self-praise, and when LK interrogates RK on matters of artistic skill, he really demonstrates his own expertise and, by extension, the competence of the real William Kentridge. The use of Latin specifically has the same mix of earnest and irony. On the one hand, Latin stresses the historical period that *Drawing Lesson 50* wants to pay tribute to, namely the sixteenth century of Hans Holbein. In several respects Erasmus' Latin is the equivalent in humanist literature for “the golden mean,” “the law of composition,” and “the holy quartet of art making” in the visual arts. At the same time, the Latin vocabulary and grammar are foremost “obstreperous obstacles to reading and understanding more than they are the signifiers of conceptual referents or the transparent media of meaning.”⁹⁴ RK's theatrical performance of the *Laus* dramatises the communicative chasm between him and LK. But what does each side represent? True, LK's pedantry has little to do with modern notions of art and one feels slightly annoyed by his condescending tone. On the other hand, it is hard to side with RK's gibberish, and one wonders if answering an English question in Latin is not equally pretentious. The opposition between RK and LK seems almost nonsensical since both are so out of tune with our time. The Latin words only highlight that the sixteenth century has difficulties speaking to us. Simultaneously, Kentridge draws our attention to what a historically grounded art has on offer, and his way to do so is at once visual, theatrical, and textual. If we listen more carefully to what RK says, one better appreciates his position. He

⁹⁴ Morris, “Drawing the Line,” 130.

clearly plays the role of the wise fool: confused and unintelligible, but for those who understand more to the point than his adversary. RK appears steeped in the culture of which LK can only hail the abstract principles. Against LK's dry argumentation, RK finds the right passage to stress the value of pleasure as a crucial ingredient for life.⁹⁵ *Jouissance* and contemplation, earnest and jest appear as connected through Latin in 2018 as they did a century earlier.

7 Conclusion

I want to conclude with some afterthoughts about looking at the works discussed without knowledge of Latin, and about the main sources for Latin in modern art. Having relied on my knowledge of Latin for analysing single art works, it is time to ask whether they must be read at all in this way.⁹⁶ Gary Breeze, a lettering artist who has worked together with Finlay, has said in an interview that "I've used Latin and Greek a lot mainly to set the viewer one step away from simply reading the text, and perhaps one step closer towards seeing an artefact; a thing of beauty, hopefully, and a mystery."⁹⁷ Breeze is, clearly, relying on most people's *inability* to read Latin. His aims are mystery (remember de Chirico and Paolini) and physical beauty (remember *Unda's* transformation of a word into an object). The exploration of "the parochial versus the global" comes only second for Breeze, and, indeed, has not been prominently present in any of the works discussed above.⁹⁸ Do the modern artists under discussion require a knowledge of Latin from their public? In fact, do they themselves know Latin well enough to engage with it in a profound way? Kosuth has indicated in his letter to Morphet that he did *not* master the languages he used for his *Proto-Investigations*. Kentridge's *persona* makes so many reading mistakes in *Drawing Lesson 50* that one wonders if what he is reading makes any sense to him at all. While Ernst's variation on a hymnal verse presupposes familiarity with Latin Mass, the joke itself depends entirely on the vernacular words *Tamtam* and *Valuta*. Only de Chirico seems to require an understanding of his motto to participate in his self-portraits, but when Paolini cites it about half a century later, the symbolical value of Latin dominates. As I wrote in the introduction, Latin's Latinity is predominant, and its function is mostly alienating. Nevertheless, there are several levels at play, and the one I have analysed in this article requires at least the willingness to put some effort into understanding the Latin text—in most cases, a dictionary or the internet will suffice as auxiliary tool.

We have seen that Latin is primarily used to raise issues of our time and not as a means of historical reflection. This partly explains why there is so much post-classical material and comparatively little Vergil or Ovid—whom I had originally expected to dominate this article. Indeed, the texts sought out by the artists under

⁹⁵ "Quid autem vita haec, num omnino vita videtur appellanda, si voluptatem detraxeris?" ("After all, what is this life itself—can you even call it life if you take away pleasure?") Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 19.

⁹⁶ Mary Jacobus rightly decided to "not only [include] the question of 'reading' but also the arts of illegibility" in her book on the literary veins through Cy Twombly's art; Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly*, 21.

⁹⁷ Wood, "In Conversation with Gary Breeze," 216.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

consideration share a level of proto-modernity. Servius, far from a canonical author, belongs to late antiquity, “the postmodernity of the ancient world.”⁹⁹ While periodisation is often problematic, the figures of Erasmus and Descartes are representatives of what is broadly seen as (early) modernity. *Praise of Folly* specifically resonates with today’s criticism of the Catholic Church and the questioning of established authority, although the historical reality might be more nuanced. Descartes’ gives voice to the modern demand for rationality. Also Cornell’s use of a scientific text by Bacon, briefly mentioned in the introduction, perfectly fits within this pattern and I have come across other examples. While Neo-Latin studies were (and are) still fighting for recognition in an increasingly interdisciplinary academic world, artists around the globe have scooped up its main sources for their own goals. Without the obstacle of a deep-rooted classicism, Latin’s later heritage naturally offered itself in various constellations. There is, admittedly, no huge amount of Latin in art after 1960, but what exists testifies to the language’s continuing cultural potency. Sometimes it throws up philosophical questions, as in the case of *Clock*. More importantly, however, it allows us to see what Latin means outside of the university. If we do not want to accept Kosuth’s declaration of Latin’s death at face value, perhaps his and other art can help us to understand how it currently lives.

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⁹⁹ Lobato, “Late Antique Foundations of Postmodern Theory,” 52.

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unknown. Reproduced by courtesy of the Fondazione Giulio e Anna Paolini, Turin.

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