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An Archaeology of the Future – The Universe on the Other Side of the Skin

This essay does not aim to present a chronological survey or to provide detailed descriptions of individual artworks but to indicate ways for the viewer to engage with and ponder on Sophie Bouvier Ausländer's strategies for 'worldmaking' as presented in her work. Her 'worlds' are generated by fundamental themes which coalesce. My purpose is to unpack some of them.

Circumstantial and serendipitous moments, for instance when a chance meeting or an encounter with a book, painting or other point of reference brings to light numerous connections between people, places and ways of thinking, are a form of journeying, though such instants on the voyage collide, intersect and then dissipate, are overlooked or forgotten.

The streets around the Slade School of Fine Art in London had been for me an extension of the domesticity of my living space, twenty years or so before I returned there to do my PhD. Walking around these streets allowed for a certain way of thinking, I found myself engaged in a form of suspended thought, whereby ideas were realised during the repetitious act of walking the same streets. I became acutely aware of the impossibility of noting everything around me, the buildings, shopfronts, their displays, the pavements and street signage, as Georges Perec had demonstrated in his experimental psycho-geographical novel *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*. It was some years after my PhD, through a mutual friend, the artist Andrew Bick, that I came to examine Sophie Bouvier Ausländer's work. Bouvier Ausländer had chosen the Slade art school, part of University College London (officially called UCL since 2005), for her practice-based PhD.

The Slade was founded in 1826 as a secular university, independent from the state church and its orthodoxies. The utilitarian ideals of its

founders, among them prison reformer Jeremy Bentham, were educationally and societally egalitarian. Scientific inquiry, law and its critical and historical evolution took centre stage, hence the preoccupation with mathematical order, symmetry and asymmetry in the ancient Greek architectural embodiment of the rhythmic geometries of proportion. Unlike Oxford and Cambridge, the university was quick to develop departments of astronomy, archaeology, geology, zoology, pathology etcetera, with teaching collections. Of note too were the ideas of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, for instance his *Critique of Judgement* (published around thirty years before UCL's foundation) which drew attention to the parallels and similarities, in the revelations afforded by the telescope's measuring quantification of the planetary system and the microscope's penetration of the interior structures enclosed within the surface, that bind them as instruments to extend and measure space in opposite directions.

The Slade architect, William Wilkins (1787–1839), who also designed London's National Gallery and Royal Academy (both then housed in the same building), like his peers had journeyed to the ancient ruins of Italy and Greece, where he gave close attention to their geographical and cartographical terrain. He documented the topography, recorded structural details and building materials in annotated sketches juxtaposed with site maps. Wilkins' architectural approach was to combine the classical with the science of the new curriculum, which included astronomy. It was not until 1905 that the two small rotundas he had designed as observatories were built in UCL's main quadrangle. Each had a sliding roof through which the telescopes could study the universe. Within a few years, light pollution rendered these 'astronomy sheds'

redundant and the university observatory relocated to Mill Hill.

For her PhD exhibition, Bouvier Ausländer chose one of these 'sheds' for her site-specific installation *Ways of Worldmaking / Self Portrait* (2019) a modular, portable and changing sculpture. I was already aware of her practice and, in particular, *Ways of Worldmaking / Self Portrait*, the critical, experimental bibliographic project she was developing in part with the Slade and the UCL library, which was first commissioned in 2013 and completed in 2016 as the award-winning public sculpture installed in the entrance hallway of the Gymnase school in Renens, a suburb of Lausanne, Switzerland. I encountered the later version of the free-standing, book-filled structure of eight units, echoing the walls of the cupola. The space between the walls and the library was small, but there was enough room for one person to walk around freely inside and outside the structure, browsing the books as they went. Some books were turned around, the spines only visible from the inside of the bookshelves. Bouvier Ausländer referenced the books in the bibliography of her PhD. Many were from the UCL library, others were her own. The artist's system is cross-referenced with the library's standard Dewey cataloguing which provides additional information – some books denoted as gifts from a previous library, the donor records its provenance which now traces its component functionality embedded in the artwork. The presence of the books, now re-shelved in the library, continues to be encountered by their university readers and is recorded in Bouvier Ausländer's cartouche key index. (I was intrigued by this creation of an additional layer of documentation and impressed by the support and commitment provided by Elizabeth Laws, the art librarian, to enable the concept's materialisation. I can't imagine many

university libraries are willing to allow their books to become incorporated and coded within an artwork).

To encounter Bouvier Ausländer's *Ways of Worldmaking / Self Portrait* is liberating; it is as if the artist takes the viewer into her confidence and gives them permission to approach it in any way, there is no suggestion of a beginning point or the closure given by a fixed ending, no start or finish. The title evokes ways of thinking about the production of art and includes American philosopher Nelson Goodman's book of the same name, positioned appropriately at the sculpture's centre. (Goodman's book investigates the arts and their cultural production and explores methods of their critical dissemination). The sculpture's auto-referentiality is reinforced by the books' arrangement, which is in effect is a constantly evolving form of self-portraiture. Walter Benjamin's short, conversational essay 'Unpacking My Library' offers an immersive and experiential way of approaching the work. The unconfined library formation removes the ambiguous 'mild boredom of order', a feeling Benjamin experienced when books were classified. Instead the juxtapositions offered do not relate to Dewey standard cataloguing or any other recognised bibliographic system and the sculpture can be configured in different ways, as a straight line, a curve, or echoing the walls as in the cupola. In Bouvier Ausländer's London studio it formed an enclosure in which to sleep and it was newly configured at Patrick Heide's gallery. In *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, Georges Perec lists numerous different methods and systems for the ordering of books – alphabetical, by author, type, category – and by doing so raises speculative questions to provoke the rationale and its justification. Contradictions and confusions presuppose a space, or a series

of proximities, it accesses time which is no doubt not as separate from spaces as we think.

Ways of Worldmaking / Self Portrait, a sculptural library, functions as an architectural symbol in the school for books as society's units of construction. The selected books are emblematic of the world's art books and the world's art practices. The relief operates symbolically as well as practically – what projects outwards, the spines and their titles, are tangible and legible; and what is hidden from view by implication is deeper, has histories and therefore associated memories. A library of books, Bouvier Ausländer's reference and reading material, becomes a self-portrait – mirror-like it marks out development, change and aging. It is auto-referential. Grasping the books in one's hands actualises haptic qualities connecting the physical with the cognitive 'to hold a world in one's hands'. For Benjamin, holding the books as he unpacked them invoked discursive recollections; of their contents, objecthood, the subjects they conjure, as well as the transactions and occasion of their purchase. Reflections like these are familiar to the bibliophile, the collector or anyone engaging with the potential of fresh, new encounters with cultural and historical concerns. It is like going back to go forwards, an archaeology of the future, one sifts through the layers of an accumulated formation, the sedimentation of iconography through its cultural, societal, political, geographical and geological production.

Our planet, the earth, its terrain and cartography provide the springboard for Bouvier Ausländer's approach. The design and drawing of the library is diagrammatic and renders symbolic links between practices and world views. Maps are read through what has become a standardised coding. In English and in French this is called the 'legend'; the key to deciphering the symbols and signs scattered across the surface. Immediately,

there is a functional appropriation of the way a connection is made between the legend as a story and the features it denotes on the terrain. Legends rendered into story form, impossible or implausible accounts of existence, while the map's legend 'speaks of the land'. Lines indicate parameters dividing regions, denote territories, borders between countries – often arbitrarily divided by conquerors intent on carving up vanquished lands across continents, in particular in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas, finally toward the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century being seriously reconsidered. And in some parts of Europe the lines and borders have been in a state of flux whereby one generation has three different nationalities and passports.

Growing up on a farm in Switzerland, the experience of the surrounding environment, keeping chickens and growing vegetables, making music and ceramics are channelled through Bouvier Ausländer's practice which although essentially sculptural, is not privileged over painting, performance, installation, sound and its implications. It is occasionally explicit. Tactile experience, three dimensionalities of our bodily intuitions, touch, associations and memories, and spatial awareness is translated into various forms. Each proposes the interconnectivity between the visible and tangible, rendering interior feeling into three-dimensions or, including sound and time, a four-dimensional actuality.

Bouvier Ausländer's name reflects an intertwined lineage of language and the land. The French word *bouvier* translates as cattle-keeper, and her husband's surname, Ausländer, is German for foreigner, making a separation between a name rooted in the land and the outsider. The unravelling of the past symbolised by her name identifies the motivation that drives the socio-

political, linguistic and geological preoccupations present in her work. It informs the durational process intrinsic to her creative endeavour, revealing the past through a process of unpicking, much as one would do when making alterations in sewing. The delineation of territories and their constant unravelling is a major thread. Through her application of materials she memorialises fragments from the past, recollections from the present, and gives structure to an archaeology of the future. The concertina movement this suggests connects the layers – strata – which Bouvier Ausländer unpeels to expose and recover. If we consider the strata as varying and discontinuous time capsules spanning above and below the earth's crust, we can envisage moments of its rupture as events. These can be applicable meteorologically, as with any kind of climate change, or geologically, how earthquakes and volcanic eruptions form the terrain of our mountain ranges and valleys, the shape of our oceans, rivers and lakes.

Maps form the basis of her 2017 *Avalanche* series. The title *Avalanche* evokes the phenomenon of rapid falls of ice and snow, dislodged by a change of temperature, a vibration or movement. In Switzerland it is a regular occurrence. An avalanche may be on the edge of occurring for years, waiting for a trigger. It is a dramatic, uncontrollable and unpredictable event that builds in momentum until its abrupt cessation. Its course covers over and obliterates any recognisable terrain with new densities of ice and snow. Its effect can be cruel but its look may be beautiful. The series uses maps of varying ages, some new, others much older. They differ in scale and are sometimes glued together to increase the size and shape. Obliterated by layers of paint of differing tonal range and density, they make use of the creases from the original folded position

to shape the visible grid which remains in slight relief, re-purposing the value of its previous functionality. Bouvier Ausländer works into this surface, pressing into it with the tool used for dry-point etching. As in the printing processes of dry-point, the nib cuts into the surface. The lines are applied in parallel, aided by the use of a metal ruler to make various grids. Like musical staves, they suggest a score, counterpoint, fugues or other composed sequences. The paper can wear thin and even tear. On the painted paper it causes paint to flake off unpredictably to reveal the layers below and expose remnants of the underlying object. Bouvier Ausländer's uncovering of a tiny portion of a route map calls attention to its surface and raises in practice a consideration of this membrane as synonymous with skin – porous, skin-like representations of the earth's surface allude to what lies beneath and above. Her more recent *Austerlitz/Radar* series, Bouvier Ausländer uses waxed maps. And in *Radar* she incorporates the scraped-off paint fragments onto the surface of a sheet, of which she creates a fragile mirror image of this composition by pressing a sheet of tissue paper over the top, presented together these create a visual palindrome.

The *Avalanche* series favoured (although not exclusively) Michelin route maps. For different generations these are familiar maps for their particular folding methods. They trigger memories of driving across France, summer holidays and regional explorations – navigated by a parent in the front passenger seat, before the rite of passage of one's own navigation. Now, of course, our maps are phones, small in scale. They can be zoomed outwards or inwards and that tactile procedure of unfolding, laying out and route planning becomes less a spatial experience, but one governed via satellite, pragmatic and rapid.



The gift of a number of aerial maps from a pilot friend provided the starting point for the *Radar* series. These maps have graphic inscriptions, linear formations and codes and are the keys for navigation. Plans of cities, for instance Amsterdam, show the transportation intersections of the docks, railway stations and road networks. In this body of work, Bouvier Ausländer introduces grids formed of diagonal lines, echoing the maps' navigational signage with the vertical-horizontal axis. The scraping reveals glimpses of the sea, coastlines, towns and roads, trainlines.... From an aerial perspective, glacial latitudes can be seen below, appearing like lakes, sometimes connected and linked over a long distance; at times so frozen and embedded within the earth they appear fixed in place. They are beneath the level of percolation; isolated; they don't flow.

A web of constructivism echoes through Bouvier Ausländer's work revealing her critical engagement with modernism and its renewed contemporary relevance, specifically constructivist's spatial ideologies and its potential impact on our buildings and public spaces. Legacies from Swiss constructivism (Paul Klee, Richard Paul Lohse, Fritz Glarner, Camille Graeser and Sophie Taeuber-Arp) are present in her preoccupation with the body in space, geometric and grid formations, and interplays between two and three dimensions as shown in the multi-coloured, illuminated squares of *UPSIDE DOWN* (2013), a site-specific work made for the ceiling of the entrance hall of Av. d'Ouchy, 4-6, Lausanne, commissioned by Mobimo Lausanne, the owners of the former industrial estate, a commercial zone with a McDonald's, shops and bars, a couple galleries and the city's school of jazz music, with few traces of the former community. Additionally, the American engagement with

constructivism (Charles Biederman and Robert Natkin) is a useful comparison – Natkin's responses to the challenges of working with architects and planners for public building commissions and installations as well his thinking about painting and its performativity. He described how one needed to approach painting via 'the tongue of your eye', combining a spatial experimental knowledge with a form of sensual knowledge and sensibility.

Needing new material while in London, in February 2019, Bouvier Ausländer acquired a group of British Geological Survey maps which chart the different ages of bedrock and use a brightly coloured coding, disconnected from its referents and unlike the more naturalistically derived symbols and signage employed on other maps. Different types of temporality and discontinuity can plummet more deeply into a profoundly buried point of origin by unearthing strata of horizontal and vertical time zones – into and out of the earth's crust. Archaeological and geological digs have the potential to generate new knowledge, discover something out-of-the-ordinary whose beginnings lead us to return back to its prehistory. Rocks are composed from living tissue which gives the stone its colouration, for example porphyry's deep red is created by molluscs, fossilized into the matter to form veins, striations and patterns – hidden layers of compressed paintings. The shift to geological maps brings with it a strong vibrant use of colour more varied in range and tone than in the previous maps' series.

In her work, Bouvier Ausländer uses her body as a conduit via the element of performance in her actions and process, but her engagement with performance was manifest in *air du 03.09.2005* (2005). The performance, for which Bouvier Ausländer was awarded first prize, was



occasioned when property developers LO Gestion for Lausanne-Ouchy, who since the 1990s had offered low rent studio space to artists in the Flon district, at that time Lausanne's industrial area, decided to serve notice on the studios and more or less simultaneously set up a competition for a day of art events. Like so many developers, they intended to capitalise on the increased real estate value, escalated to a large extent by the artists' presence in the area. A great deal of publicity surrounded their 'opportunity for artists' open call competition. The strategically managed PR operation maximised attention by involving the public in the day, transforming the site into a fairground for artists' stalls. Bouvier Ausländer remarked it was like a circus or zoo, with the artists as the spectacle, 'performing' for the public. The conditions were for the production of work made outside, on the spot, to create an entertainment of stalls and booths, displaying mainly traditional arts and crafts pursuits, often seen at local fairs. In effect, the developers were cynically 'buying back' artists' skills, the very same through which they had previously satisfied their lease revenue. The competition aimed to grab attention, status and ultimately cultural capital. It is and was, by the artists as much as their newly reprocessed patrons, a cynical embrace. Bouvier Ausländer channelled her rage by mirroring this transaction with an audience-facing proposal which won the competition.

air du 03.09.2005 refers to Marcel Duchamp's *air de Paris 50cc* (1949), an empty ampoule he bought from a pharmacy and gave to his friend and patron Walter C. Arensberg. As art, a glass vial containing nothing but air could be insubstantial, profound or both and molecularly air is not nothing. Famously the glass broke, which of course begs the question of the veracity of the air, still referred to in the title as 'Paris' air.

Bad air of course refers to a stench, as well as the bad atmosphere caused by the resounding realisation of a community's exploitation for commercial gain.

Bouvier Ausländer sat behind a stall on which she displayed a group of coloured cards. She invited the visitors to draw whatever they wanted on the cards with a bold, black felt-tipped pen. She had hired a street organ, characteristic of traditional fairs, whose mechanised sounds of music set a tone and mood for the occasion. (The Swiss are famous for their clocks and engineering of mechanical parts, it is a national skill and export). While participants were drawing, Bouvier Ausländer punched holes into the cards in a time-synchronised response. During the day she linked them together to make a music roll for the organ. The roll was hung for display and then fed through the machine to play the sounds of the audience participation, collected, spatially re-envisaged and echoed in duration.

In February 2014, I saw Bouvier Ausländer's contribution to *IMMATERIAL*, the Slade's MPhil/ PhD research week that included an exhibition at the Slade Research Centre in Woburn Square. She had made two site-specific wall installations, one black and one white, entitled *Skin*. The white component consisted of sheets of white-painted tracing paper piled up and spread across a small shelf, hidden beneath. On the opposite wall, a huge shingle of tracing paper, blackened with ink, was layered over the wall in a dark vertical spread which hung looming and shadow-like into the space. Torn into pieces, the edges of the paper, the 'core', had resisted coloration and revealed the whitish transparency of the paper's functionality. Both the ink and gouache disrupted the paper's translucency and increased its tendency to crack. Bouvier Ausländer decided to facilitate this, in a way accelerating its aging process. On the black

L'air du 3 septembre 2005, Flon Street Painting, Lausanne, performance with cards, felt-tipped pen and street organ.



Labours of love
 Bo, Orum, se et fugia
 inis ped quat ut labor
 solliaeprae suntint as
 dicia cus

¹First commissioned by Beaconsfield Gallery in 2015 "Painting / Mare Vostrum" was part of the group show *Harnessing the Wind*, curator Naomi Siderfin, with Ellie Harrison, Monika Oechster and Naomi Siderfin <https://beaconsfield.ltd.uk/search/Harnessing+the+Wind>

²A tangential but relevant connection between Bouvier Ausländer and the *Financial Times* is through a competition the newspaper devised in 1914 called *Changing the Map of Europe*. Treated as a game, readers were presented with a map showing pre-war European borders and invited to guess the outcomes or terms of peace of WW1, drawing on the 'new' borders accordingly.

³In 2011, French tabloids had provided the starting point for Bouvier Ausländer's *Nouvelles* series, a group of four wall-mounted sculptures like dented heads or worlds, a play on word "new" and with what is 'news' and 'information' made from shredded the newspapers. The text is not readable but the process of making the sculptures is revealed by a line drawn by peeling tape from the surface to expose the papier maché and traces of letter form.

wall, the thin, white edges made a drawing which became increasingly sculptural as she played with volumes, thickness and strata. Leaving via the derelict fire-exit stairs, I observed how her work echoed the flaking paint in the stairwell, the signs of aging.

The following year, as artist-in-residence at Beaconsfield, London, Bouvier Ausländer continued the momentum of *Skin* with another durational, expanding and self-destructing sculpture made with plastic sheets stretched and hung over a spherical armature of barbed wire¹. Pouring liquid PVA onto the sheets Bouvier Ausländer then sprinkled dirt, dust and graphite on them. (A nod to nearby Graphite Square, in Vauxhall, and the conventional use of graphite). The sheets were stretched over the frame, which became larger and increasingly unwieldy. When dried, the paint peeled like sunburnt skin, creating its own disintegration. As she worked, her protective clothing was ripped by the wire, its function to control and restrict constantly present but being crushed under its own weight. Bouvier Ausländer continued to re-think this work. In 2019, a version titled *Mare Vostrum* was created in situ at the Musée des Beaux-Arts du Locle, Switzerland. The title (from the Latin, 'your sea') points ironically to the European programme entitled, 'The Mare Nostrum Operation' began by the Italian government in 2013 to address the migrant crisis, bringing to safety thousands of refugees whose only means escape to Europe was via the Mediterranean Sea. This began a monumental crisis of constant displacement with nations assuming this problem was not their problem. Also implicit are the layers of Mare Nostrum's double meanings; the sea and 'our' mother suggesting ongoing, multiple ways of reflecting and of world-making.

The same year, she began to use the *Financial Times*², with its distinctive flesh-pink colour, combining political and social concerns with her approach to obliteration and revelation³. The inevitable associations with the nature of skin, previously referred to in *Skin* and *Mare Vostrum*, continue explicitly with her use of the *Financial Times* broadsheet, first employed by her to create an artist's book, *Labours of Love*, using the weekend issue of 22–23 June 2019. 'Labours of Love', an article header left exposed, gives the work its title. The poem's structure comes from the words or phrases remaining after the painting of white gouache. The combination of whitewash and the paper's colour reinforces the power and control of the financial markets, still implicitly bound with the death throes of white colonial power.

The Financial Times Series followed, the broadsheet open, its pages covered with paint, with only small fragments of the original surface remaining visible, elusive glimpses of a letter, a photograph, echo the surface's disruption, built up and then scratched into. The action is accompanied by irregular removals and flakes, losses that necessarily occur in the process. These elements are characteristic. They coincide with the outbreak of Covid-19, and are grouped by the platitudinous phrases 'How do you feel?' or 'What do you feel?' Bouvier Ausländer's actions serve to remind us of the literal and metaphorical marking of time that the global pandemic has caused, one hundred years after the Spanish Flu, epidermising the breaches of time, symbolic of archaeology's movement between past and future. *The Financial Times Diaries* (2020) offer a visual journal, a mysteriously subtle political memorial to a shift in international and cultural world views.