



Communication on the Wall Antoni Tàpies

*The long night;
the sound of water
says what I am thinking*
Gochiku

Whenever I am asked to explain what people call my walls, windows, or doors, I try to make it clear immediately that I have done fewer walls, windows, or doors than they imagine.

My response can be interpreted in two ways. First, as an invitation to envision those walls, windows, or doors – which, in fact, may very well appear in my paintings – as fundamentally a form of artistic organisation. Second, as a warning that these images, as in most works of art, were not intended to be an end in themselves, but rather a means to a more distant end. But those walls, windows, or doors, like so many older images that have paraded across my canvases, do not cease to be there, and far be it for me to deny them. However, I don't think that these images in my work should be considered a mere pretext through which to pursue certain artistic ingredients, just as it is said that certain 'themes' were for the

Impressionists or *Fauves*, 'themes' from which, it is sometimes added, abstract or Informel artists would later liberate themselves. On the contrary, my walls, windows, or doors – or, if nothing more, the suggestion of them – stand there without evading responsibility, retaining all their archetypal, symbolic baggage.

Is this a return to the 'theme'? The response once again must be ambiguous. Nowadays, we know that in the structure of artistic communication things, magically, are sometimes both there and not there. Appearing and disappearing, changing from one thing into another, they become entwined, they set off chains of associations... Anything is possible! For everything takes place in a field infinitely larger than that which delimits the size of the painting or grander than that which appears physically in the painting. The painting is simply a 'support' that invites the viewer to participate in the much broader game of a thousand and one visions and feelings. It is the talisman that builds or tears down walls in the deepest corners of our spirit, that opens, and sometimes closes, the doors and windows in the constructions of our impotence, our slavery, or our freedom. So, the 'theme' can be found in the painting, or it can reside solely in the mind of the spectator.

If I were to tell the story of how I became aware of the evocative power of wall imagery, I would have to go quite far back. These are memories from the adolescence and early youth I spent shut in behind the walls within which I lived out the wars. All the dramas the adults were living through and all the cruel fantasies of an age – that, amid so many catastrophes, seemed to drift according to its own impulses – were traced and inscribed around me. All the walls of a city, which, in the family tradition, was so much my own, bore witness to the horrors and the inhuman reversals that were inflicted on our people.

Beyond any doubt, however, cultural memories naturally heightened the effect. And as I was absorbing everything from archaeological treatises to the counsels of Da Vinci, from the destructive spirit of Dada to the photos of Brassaï, little wonder that they should all have contributed to the fact that my early works, of 1945, have an air of street graffiti and of an entire world of protest – repressed clandestine, but also full of life – that was also making its way across the walls of my country.

Later came my 'time of solitude'. And in my tiny bedroom-studio began those forty days in the desert that I am not sure have come to an end. With a desperate and feverish zeal I took formal experimentation to maniacal heights. Each canvas was a battlefield on which the wounds were to multiply over and over again, to infinity. And then came the surprise. All that frenetic movement, all that gesticulation, all the unending dynamism of those gashes, blows, scars, divisions, and subdivisions that I inflicted on every millimetre, on every hundredth of a millimetre of matter, suddenly took a qualitative leap. The eye could no longer perceive the differences. Everything came together in a uniform mass. What had been burning ebullition transformed itself on its own into static silence. It was like a great lesson in humility visited upon unbridled pride.

And one day I tried to arrive at silence directly, more resignedly, offering myself up to the fate that governs all profound struggle. Those millions of furious clawings were transformed into millions of grains of dust, of sand... A whole new landscape, as in the story of one

who goes through the looking glass, opened before me as if to communicate the most secret innerness of things. A whole new geography illumined me from surprise to surprise. A suggestion of rare combinations and molecular structures, of atomic phenomena, of the world of the galaxies, of microscopic images. The symbolism of dust – ‘to become one with dust, this is the deep identity, that is to say, the internal depth between man and nature’ (Tao Te Ching) – and of ash, of the earth whence we come and to which we return, of the solidarity that is born on realising that the differences between us are no greater than those that exist between one grain of sand and another... And the most sensational surprise was to discover one day, suddenly, that my paintings, for the first time in history, had turned into walls.

By what strange process had I arrived at such precise images? And why, as their first viewer, did they make me tremble with emotion? Clearly, nothing is for naught, and there had to be an explanation for it all. Was it the culmination of a process of fatigue brought on by the proliferation of a facile *Tachisme* the world over? A reaction so as to get away from anarchic Informel? An attempt to escape the excesses of the abstract in a fervent search for something more concrete? Did I see in this a chance to touch ever more primordial ground, the most extremely pure and essential elements of painting that the masters of the previous generation had urged me to search for? Perhaps in another artist all of this would have gone more or less unnoticed, or had a more or less transitory effect. But how could it not leave its mark on me? The strange destiny of a name¹! It seemed that the odd omen I had heard explained some years before by a follower of the occult sciences regarding the influence of one’s name on one’s character and destiny was being fulfilled in me. The fact is that within a short time I became aware of a series of possible experimentations that, in the coming years, would become my great passion and that, beyond any doubt, have borne their fruit and achieved more or less resonance in the art world.

How many suggestions can be derived from the image of the wall and all its possible permutations! Separation, cloistering, the wailing wall, prison, witness to the passing of time; smooth surfaces, serene and white; tortured surfaces, old and decrepit; signs of human imprints, objects, natural elements; a sense of struggle, of effort; of destruction, cataclysm; or of construction, re-emergence, equilibrium; traces of love, pain, disgust, disorder; the romantic prestige of ruins; the contribution of organic elements, forms that suggest natural rhythms and the spontaneous movement of matter; a sense of landscape, the suggestion of the primordial unity of all things; generalised matter; affirmation of and esteem for the things of the earth; the possibility of a varied and combined distribution of great masses, a sense of falling, of the bottom falling out, of expansion, of concentration; the rejection of the world, inner contemplation, annihilation of the passions, silence, death; twisting and tortures, quartered bodies, human remains; the equivalent of sounds, clawings, scrapings, explosions, shots, blows, hammerings, cries, reverberations, echoes in space; meditation on a cosmic theme, reflections for contemplation of the earth, of the magma, of lava, of ash; battlefield; garden; playing field; the destiny of the ephemeral... So many ideas filed before me,

¹ The word ‘tàpies’ in Catalan also means a specific type of wall.

one after another like cherries being plucked from a basket. So many things arose that appeared to establish a proud kinship between me and those philosophies and wisdoms I so esteemed!

What a great surprise later to learn, for example, that the work of Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen, was called *Contemplation of the Wall at Mahayana*. And that the Zen temples had sand gardens forming striations or fringes similar to the furrows of some of my paintings. And that the Orientals had already defined certain elements or sentiments in the works of art that were unconsciously blossoming then in my spirit, ingredients known as *sabi*, *wabi*, *aware*, *yugen*... And that in Buddhist meditation, they also seek the support of certain *kasinas* that sometimes consist of earth placed in a frame, in a hole, in a wall, in charred matter...

Can all these things I have done continue to be called 'walls'?

Far from the cliché that people have formed of the artist, with all its onus of originality, personality, style, etc., that allows the work to speak in the outside world, for the author there is, above all, a core of more anonymous thought, of collective thought, of which he is no more than the modest servant. This is surely the area where the wisdom that underlies all the ideologies and fateful contingencies of the world must be stored. It is the impulse of our instinct to live, to know, to love, to be free that has been preserved and revived by the perennial wisdom. The ways in which it becomes definite, which cannot be ignored if its messages are to be understood, are the necessary episodes of the very laws of growth that art displays in any given moment. The image of the wall, with all its innumerable resonances, naturally constitutes one of these episodes. But if it has any importance in the history of stylistic chains, it can be nothing more than having reflected for a moment this common treasure that all men create in the course of centuries, in moments of profundity, and without which the artistic task would always be superfluous, banal, pretentious, or ridiculous. A place where styles, schools, trends, isms, formulas, and walls themselves are, in and of themselves, no guarantee of authentic expression.

Antoni Tàpies, 'Comunicació sobre el mur' (Communication on the wall), *La práctica de l'art* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1970).

Painting: Antoni Tàpies, *Forma negra sobre quadrat gris* (Black Form on Grey Square), 1960.