

Hélène Sarrazin *Mater /Materia*

Maria Zimmermann Brendel

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MATER / MATERIA

Hélène Sarrazin



MARIA ZIMMERMANN
BRENDÉL

(trauma can be defined as loss, pain, emptiness, fragmentation) the question Butler poses is: "How to write in it and of it"?⁴ No wonder Hélène Sarrazin turned to the past to reconnect to a literary classic, in order to establish a level of communication, and in order to express that which is difficult to articulate. But in reconnecting with a literary giant, she also disconnected with it, in part, by extracting not directly from Homer, but from an already processed source of the ancient bard's novel, from the introduction to the *Odyssey* by Meredec Dufour and Jeanne Raison (Paris: Bordas, 1988), who situate the novel's content anew, isolating issues of contemporary currency, which are taken up by the artist in *Mater/Materia* and transformed. In appropriating and transforming her initial source, turning it into a new production of surface and sound to strongly affect the beholder, the artist situates her installation as an allegorical paradigm, her activity being neo-allegorical. The neo-allegorist, or neo avant-garde artist, recedes into the past while returning from the future repositioned by innovative art in the present.⁵

Allegory / melancholy

We can view *Mater/Materia* as a new trajectory in Sarrazin's art practice. Her use of allegory allows the layering of discourses and temporality which attracts and intensifies the experience of the beholder. Her previous work focused often on the tangible material object, made of wicker and wood, where the object's presence and exterior surfaces were given emphasis demanding much space when showcased, and where the beholder was in a viewing-observing role. The installation at Gallery Skol, by contrast, is visually minimal, focusing on the interior spaces of memory via sound-waves and faintly «sketched» surface-traces, touching the psychic space of the beholder, thus positioning the

spectator centre-stage. By removing the object and replacing it with space and sound (and ultimately with the beholder) there is initially a sense of loss, foregrounded by the presence of (an) absence — a melancholia of sorts. But the melancholic is characteristic of the allegorical paradigm, linked with absences in order to effect fullness in the viewing/listening subject. A melancholic tension can be located in the artwork's shift between past and future with which the work redefines its own trajectory and that of the beholder, who is repositioned and displaced in this viewing/listening dynamic. This Janus-like aspect of looking backward and forward is intrinsic to allegory, it establishes historical connectedness while disputing historical fixedness of inherent meaning, making the novel work unstable for discursive, personal, and emotive engagements. In stepping into the installation of *Mater/Materia*, one is confronted with loss while filled with imaginary plenitude; that is the dialectic of allegory. There is the sonic lavishness of approaching and receding waves, that attempts to rescue what is no longer there to fill the gap of a loss with fullness and coherence, which the spectator experiences when s/he is touched by the *real*. This installation lends itself to that original fullness before the split occurs between mother/child, providing the viewing/listening subject with an image of sonic and specular coherence. The allegorical paradigm with its opacity and transparency, revealing while concealing with its focus on detail, on space and temporality, demystifies the *real* while inscribing it onto the beholder.

Skin-traces

But the faint, almost decorative surface traces left on the wall can also become very tangible, and point to touch and to human skin, to the embrace and to the touch of the *other*.

Hélène Sarrazin, *Mater/Materia*, 1999. Detail. Centre des arts actuels SKOL, petite salle. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

When Hélène Sarrazin initially proposed *Mater/Materia* for installation at Gallery Skol, she used literary excerpts to communicate and situate her work — to successful ends. After all, how is one to describe an installation in a small room composed of recorded sounds of water, traces of plaster on the walls with dust on the floor to evoke waves receded — a space the spectator is to occupy for viewing and listening? The literary work used by Sarrazin is an introductory excerpt from the ancient classic, Homer's *Odyssey*, which references the Achaeans who, ignorant while travelling to new places, found themselves surrounded by waves of water whose sounds they could neither hear nor understand.

As one walks into Skol's *petite salle* through a low doorway, made particularly small by the artist so that spectators would have to bend down to enter, the audiovisual components are what immediately affect the beholder.¹ Sounds can be heard of the waves of the sea approaching the shore, breaking and receding, their noise increasing and decreasing with the ocean's performance. Played continuously via four small loudspeakers suspended from the ceiling and couched in decorative halogen lights — the familiar,

soothing, beautifully sonic atmosphere envelopes the listener. Memories are instantaneously recalled by these sounds, secured by the enclosure of the small room. One is made wanting. However, after being swayed by the familiar sounds thus "travelling" in space and in time to the *mater* (mother) and to *materia* (materials, objects and subjects), the spectator's eyes adjust to the dimly lit room only to find surface traces. Vertical and horizontal striae on the walls and rubble on the floor become a stark remainder of the traces of an absence.

The real

The *real* has left, momentarily, or is made overly present in memory, as the spectator is being touched (*touché*) by the sounds of familiarity. For, the *touché* is what initiates a productive engagement, confronting the spectator with the *real*. The *real*, I suggest, is the traumatic absence, the memories of plenitude, of fullness, of *in utero*² evoked in this artwork. The *real* is that "which is non-narrativizable, having no sure identity," as theorist Judith Butler phrased it.³ And, having no direct language either with which the *real* could be articulated, being the effect and remainder of a trauma