

A Crash Course: A Conversation with *Conversations with Antoni Tàpies.*

If you google Antoni Tàpies, you will find many of his images online. You will also discover a link to the Antonio Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona (www.fundaciotapies.org) where I first encountered his work at the end of my first Grand Tour back in 1994. Besides Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró, Tàpies is the only other artist to have an entire museum in Barcelona devoted to his work. If you don't know his work, please log on.

Denise Levertov's *The Freeing of the Dust* shows a Tàpies on its cover, the only book of poetry published in America that I know of to have done so. To love the cover of a book more than the book itself! To experience poetry more in an image than through words.

Tàpies has worked closely with many poets in Catalonia, including Joan Brossa. Over the years, I have managed to track down a few of the more affordable tomes (a facsimile edition of *Novel•La*; the deluxe limited edition of *U no és ningú*; and an unnumbered copy of *Frègoli*) which contain original lithographic works to accompany texts in a language I cannot read, books shipped from Spain after the countless hours I have spent in various rare-book rooms at the New York Public Library, staining such pages with the oil from my fingertips. Better than where one is told *not to touch*, it is in various reading rooms that I have found myself able to participate in a ritual of sanctioned desecration.

The fetish of the book in an age of downloading frenzy!

There is, however, a book, that you can get more easily a hold of (www.bookfinder.com), Barbara Catoir's *Conversations with Antoni Tàpies* published by Prestel in 1991. The back cover is empty except for a single quote from the book, a quote I keep near at hand on my writing desk:

“People who have found true knowledge fall silent. If I were a philosopher I would stop painting: I'd do nothing at all. That would be the silence of Zen. The only thing to do is to carry on searching for the light: I haven't found it yet, and that's why I paint.”

After having read Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* decades ago and answering his challenge in my deepest darkest hours with, “Yes, I must write!,” here I am faced with a new kind of artistic ambition, one of possibly doing “nothing at all,” that is, if I were actually able to find “true knowledge” which Tàpies admits to having failed at.

This quest for “true knowledge” seems of a different order than your typically accredited graduate writing program where workshop participation and a few academic courses and/or craft lectures can buy you a terminal degree. Rather, when I read the writings of Antoni Tàpies, I feel as though I were slowly ascending a mountain in order to sit at the feet of a living Master.

The first third of Catoir’s book is devoted to an essay called “In the Labyrinth of Signs.” Here, one is introduced to a generous biographical sketch of Tàpies and an overview of his work. The remainder of the book stands as an interview arranged into eighteen sections which include: The Artists and Success; Mystical Experiences; What I Seek to Achieve with my Art; Madness—Dreams—Psychoanalysis; Chaos and Order; Surrealism; Art and Politics. The kinds of responses Tàpies makes often unsettle me with their candor, declarations which are free of self-congratulation:

“I myself don’t know if I have, in fact, been successful. Perhaps I have enjoyed a *success d’estime*, but in spiritual terms my success, if it exists at all, has been only very minor. My activities have never had anything to do with the idea of becoming famous or achieving success. I have always been concerned with getting people to listen to me.” (p. 69)

Here’s his response to whether art can ever be popular:

“It is clearly apparent that art, these days, is a minority interest. I find that regrettable. In my country the process of educating people towards a receptiveness for art, poetry and music is very slow. But that’s a matter for the Ministry of Education rather than for the producers of culture. The information one receives about culture is often indigestible. What is lacking is a kind of basic training that starts in childhood.” (p. 70)

Basic training. What if instead of pouring billions of dollars into the military-industrial complex, we . . .

And here’s his take on Kazuko Okakura’s *The Little Book of Tea* which Tàpies read himself as a child:

“As an introduction to the world of the East I still consider it unsurpassed. It contains a Taoist fable about a harp which only one person was able to play. The story is an object lesson in aesthetics and the philosophy of life, speaking of the mutual state of receptiveness which is essential to the understanding of art.” (pp. 81-82)

What I love about looking at paintings by Tàpies is often not getting the point, not being able to find a way in, at least not right away. Like the work of Cy Twombly or Agnes Martin, his work forces me to slow down, to get humble, to tune into another frequency.

And that ambivalence of not knowing if what I’m looking at is “great” or of it’s “shit.”

The way a work of art can flicker, seduce and repulse.

As for his personal god:

“You’re right: there’s no immediate connection between my work and the dogmatic forms of religious art. However, the religious phenomena I’m talking about has very little to do with official religions. My personal god is not to be found in heaven but on earth, as in the wisdom of the Orient.” (p. 96)

And on Borges:

“Don’t forget that my mother tongue is Catalan, not Spanish. And as far as Borges is concerned, I haven’t read much of his work, but I find his political attitudes repugnant. I’m convinced that these human failings also leave their mark in his writing.”

Tàpies cannot help but see a correspondence between the politics one embraces with the marks one leaves on the canvas or empty page.

After watching the Twin Towers fall while standing on the Hoboken pier, I found it difficult to turn to contemporary American poetry for solace in the immediate aftermath. So it has been in the shadows of Guantánomo or Abu Ghraib. Yet these were the very demons all of us wrestled with in a session called “Dirty Wars” last year at the PEN World Voices Conference in New York City. And beyond. *Hic et nunc*.

I have very few answers as to how to live as an artist in these most “interesting times,” but Antoni Tàpies has certainly trod this well-worn path. In his twenties, Tàpies was involved with a surrealist journal called *Dau Al Set* or “the seven-sided die,” an impossibility that only the imagination could overcome. And it is in that spirit that I leave these words for my 85-year-old mentor whom I have never actually met.