

BIBLIOGRAPHIC OFFICE

Fore-edge Painting

With Tauba Auerbach, Kerstin Brätsch, Cansu Çakar, Enzo Cucchi,
Camille Henrot, Victor Man, Andrea Salvino, Andro Wekua

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MACRO – Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome

Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History

WORKS ON DISPLAY—GUIDEBOOK

Starting in 2020 the MACRO – Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome has been transformed into a single, large, exhibition project, understood as a site and vehicle of cultural production, titled *Museum for Preventive Imagination*. The museum is conceived as a three-dimensional magazine, subdivided into different themes and formats that function as columns to accommodate heterogeneous content and combine languages, poetics and generations apparently distant from each other, making them resonate together.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC OFFICE is the column dedicated to the potential of publishing—from magazines to fanzines, ephemera to artist's books. *Fore-edge Painting* responds to this framework and enacts a new exploration of the universe of publishing, addressing different contexts, time frames, places and practices of the contemporary and of the past. Eight international artists have been invited to freely come to terms with the historical tradition of decorating the fore edges of books with paintings and illustrations, giving rise to original works with a hybrid nature, which are sometimes invisible at first glance.

The practice of decorating and painting the vertical edge of the pages of books to indicate their content or their owner dates back to the Middle Ages, when volumes were stored lying down. Towards the end of the seventeenth century and during the two centuries to follow, this technique became popular in England, where artists and craftsmen began to make “disappearing” paintings on books—secret images that appear only when the pages are fanned. Floral decorations, landscapes, vernacular or erotic scenes were made by spreading the pages, often followed by gilding of the edges to conceal the work.

The volumes selected and transformed into artworks by Tauba Auerbach, Kerstin Brätsch, Cansu Çakar, Enzo Cucchi, Camille Henrot, Victor Man, Andrea Salvino, and Andro Wekua are displayed at MACRO and in the Sala del Disegno of Palazzo Zuccari, headquarters of the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History since 1913. *Fore-edge Painting* is thus a double exhibition, both playing with the ambivalence of these works and extending beyond the walls of the museum. On the one hand, it presents an unusual landscape composed of books decorated employing a technique from the past in a contemporary art museum. On the other, it brings contemporary painting into the historic spaces of one of the world's most important libraries and research institutes on the history of art.

The exhibition is organized in collaboration with Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History.

TAUBA AUERBACH

(San Francisco, California, 1981)

oOoOo (*The Art of Hand Lettering*), 2021

OoOoO (*The Art of Hand Lettering*), 2021

Graphite on paper

Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Helm Wotzkow's book is one of the key hand-lettering guides, from which Tauba Auerbach learned lettering principles while working at New Bohemia Signs—the longest running sign shop in San Francisco, dealing exclusively with hand-painted signs. At the time, the artist recalls, "I would do practice letters every day, as an apprentice, and the letter 'O' was always one of the hardest".

KERSTIN BRÄTSCH

(Hamburg, 1979)

Ancestors field I, excerpt from *Brut (Incubation)*, *Para Psychic* series, 2021

Ancestors field II, excerpt from *Brut (Incubation)*, *Para Psychic* series, 2021

Watercolour and ink on paper

Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

The watercolours painted by Kerstin Brätsch on the fore edge of *The Red Book: Liber Novus* by psychiatrist Carl G. Jung (*Ancestors field I*, exhibited at MACRO), as well as on the *Divine Comedy* illustrated by William Blake (*Ancestors field II*, displayed at the Bibliotheca Hertziana), make reference to the artist's recent series of drawings titled *Para Psychic*. While the original set of drawings is vertically oriented, they take a horizontal approach to map a "complete and dense cosmos", as the artist explains, "showing multiple, simultaneously existing dimensions and timelines with no hierarchy to structure it". "They trace a lineage to my ancestors—Brätsch writes—and their connectedness to all beginnings... A path towards an expansion of consciousness, a living organism

in itself, the drawings lead us to a perspective that goes beyond the constraints of a human mind. Their entangled compositions branch out like the rhizome of a fungus, where visible and invisible energy sources intertwine to create a constant movement of transcendence, transformation, and transition”.

Brätsch decided to paint two volumes which both interpret a spiritual approach to artistic expression. On the one hand, by painting the reader’s edition of *The Red Book*—an edition in which the original calligraphic manuscript of the text is omitted—the artist wished to reintroduce the notions of painting and imagery back into it. On the other hand, by reproducing her watercolours on the fore edge of William Blake’s *Divine Comedy*, a set of illustrations remained incomplete at the death of the painter, she wanted to intrude into the void that haunts the volume, complicating it and opening it up to further interpretations.

ÇAKAR, CANSU
(Istanbul, 1988)

Bedside book of consolation: Headache, 2021

Bedside book of ignorance: Insomnia, 2021

Mixed media

Courtesy the artist

A critique to the fanaticism and bigotry that thrive in the contradictions of Turkey’s modernization process. With her drawings, Cansu Çakar has decided to reshape the compendium *Gizli İlimler Hazinesi* (The Treasure of Occult Sciences), a well-known two-volume collection of Islamic formulas, rituals, and superstitions. The artist transformed one volume into the artwork *Bedside book of consolation: Headache*, which is exhibited at MACRO. The second volume was turned by Çakar into *Bedside book of ignorance: Insomnia*, on display at the Bibliotheca Hertziana. After the closing of dervish lodges and *zawiyas* (religious schools and gathering places) during the founding years of the Republic of Turkey, these superstitions circulated in anonymous booklets, published to maintain and strengthen fanaticism during the shift towards secularism. These textbooks of popular public theology—havens of nonsensical formulas for fertility, good health and wealth—are published today in cheap editions as bedside readings.

ENZO CUCCHI
(Morro D'Alba, Ancona, 1949)

Senza titolo, 2021

Senza titolo, 2021

Ceramic

Courtesy the artist

“It is a form of nostalgia, somehow a way to preserve memories”, says Enzo Cucchi while explaining the way in which he relocated the idea at the core of the exhibition, that of the fore-edge painting technique, into an even more ancient world. “The artist must be able to go even further back in time, and ceramic is the oldest of materials, which has limitations that must be observed”, he adds. The geometric containers, as well as the skeletons and books, represent “recognizable memories”. For Cucchi, “The old skeleton is the truest of things, the most real one—a journey of initiation”. The two ceramic vessels the artist created for the exhibition ship the books—“a form of memory”—to another universe. They introduce them into an arcane landscape, which is of the artist’s own creation.

CAMILLE HENROT
(Paris, 1978)

Three Questions, 2021

Three Questions, 2021

Acrylic paint on paper

Courtesy the artist

A desire to collect, represent, and claim ownership over all knowledge has been at the centre of Camille Henrot’s work since making her film *Grosse Fatigue* (2013) as well as the immersive environment *The Pale Fox* (2014). To address this impossible—yet very human—drive for universal knowledge, the artist has chosen to paint on some volumes of the *Dizionario Enciclopedico Italiano* (Italian Encyclopaedic Dictionary). The figures painted by Henrot recall those of sphinxes—hybrid mythical creatures, guardians of passageways as well as of knowledge and wisdom, preventing access to whomever could not answer their riddles. The figure of the sphinx plays with the notion of revelation, just like the painting

on the edge of the book. “Both reveal and conceal information”—the artist explains—“both, open and close”. Yet here the sphinxes are tied to each other by a leash, or grasp the edge of the book with their claws. For Henrot, in fact, “knowledge can be freeing and alienating at the same time”.

VICTOR MAN
(Cluj, Romania, 1974)

Gerusalemme liberata, 2021

Abbazie del Lazio, 2021

Mixed media

Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

The books chosen and painted by Victor Man are dedicated to some of his beloved itineraries in the city of Rome. In particular, on the volume *Abbazie del Lazio* (Abbeys of Lazio), exhibited at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, the artist depicted a landscape recalling the ancient Appian Way. The epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered) by Torquato Tasso, which is on display at MACRO, makes reference instead to some sites on the Janiculum Hill. First of all, the church and monastery of Sant’Onofrio, where the poet spent the last years of his life, dying in its cloister on 25 April 1595—the night before he was to be crowned with laurels by Pope Clement VIII. Not far from the monastery the so-called Oak of Tasso also stands, an ancient oak tree long associated with the poet, who according to legend spent much of his time sitting underneath its branches, waiting for an official recognition of his works. The quote painted by Victor Man on the fore edge of *Gerusalemme liberata*, “ROMA O MORTE” (Rome or Death), is carved in the portico of the Mausoleo Ossario Garibaldino, on the Janiculum as well. A monument that hosts the remains of the patriots fallen in the battles to liberate the city of Rome from the papal troops between 1849 and 1870.

ANDREA SALVINO
(Rome, 1969)

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Intérieur d'un couvent, 2021

Totò, 2021

Mixed media

Courtesy the artist

The two works in the exhibition by Andrea Salvino were made in the same spirit with which the artist has already worked on a number of used books in the past. Salvino lives in Berlin, where in some of the city's neighbourhoods, during the weekend, inhabitants leave various objects including books along the sidewalks. Passers-by are free to pick up these discarded materials and Salvino has collected several volumes in this way. The artist has chosen two small editions on which to paint. The painting on the little Bible exhibited at MACRO is made with tempera. The image depicted is a frame from *Intérieur d'un couvent* (Behind Convent Walls), a 1978 film directed by Walerian Borowczyk and a classic of 1970s erotic cinema. While making this artwork, Andrea Salvino writes, "I couldn't help but wonder how in the history of art the majority of, let's say, erotic artworks are often of small dimensions and that, apparently, most of these are stored in the Vatican libraries and museums". The portrait painted by Salvino on a copy of *Durchs Wilde Kurdistan* (Through Wild Kurdistan), a popular adventure novel by German writer Karl May (1842–1912), on display at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, is actually an image of Totò in *What are clouds?*, the episode directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini for the anthology film *Caprice Italian Style* (1968).

ANDRO WEKUA
(Sukhumi, Georgia, 1977)

Pirosmani, 2021

Untitled, 2021

Mixed media

Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

Through his subjective approach, Andro Wekua has transformed two volumes, including a catalogue of Georgian naive painter

Niko Pirosmani (1862–1918), almost in an effort to reframe, or re-enchanting fragments of reality, or from the past. «In my work it's a question of attempting to create something both artificial and natural—the artist once stated—artificial figures that have to do with something real. I can see many things sharply, while I can perceive others only as a blur. If someone tells me that I've just read up a memory and it doesn't correspond to any true experience, I'm almost ready to believe it. These things are at the boundary between memory and dream—especially because they're only present in fragments».