

# Instead of Writing

By Tina Pandi

Scribere necesse est, vivere non est

[Writing is a necessity, living is not]

Attributed to Heinrich the Sailor

Vilèm Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*

In 1987, the philosopher Vilèm Flusser, in his *Does Writing Have a Future*, questioning the future of writing in our contemporary era where technical images dominate, recognized the necessity of writing for those who “their being is expressed in, and only in, the gesture of writing”.<sup>1</sup> During approximately the past decade, Nina Papaconstantinou’s hybrid output has been incorporating the feverish act of writing – from its most primeval forms to its most modern ones – to the process of drawing as a necessary existential condition of sorts. Without constituting a grammatological or literary study, her artistic pursuit is persistently fermented through words, literature and language. In the artist’s oneiric and refined universe, books are the raw material for the creation of her own visual language.

The work of Nina Papaconstantinou, who has studied literature and drawing, turns to the material of language itself, investigating the relationships between image and text, writing, trace and texture, as these are transformed and configured through the lines of the texts that she appropriates from various aspects of literature. The artist gathers the scribe’s tools – such as, for instance, pencil, ink, blank paper, books, and carbon paper – to subject the, handwritten or printed, text to a continuous translation process, from its manual, painstaking editing to its digital or mechanical reproduction. The extensive transformations of the body of texts,

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<sup>1</sup> Vilèm Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, translated by Nancy Ann Roth, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press (Electronic Mediations, vol. 33), 2011, p. 4.

which she attempts through the practice of drawing, by transcribing, tracing, inscribing, piercing, enlarging, scattering and assembling texts, and manipulating illustrations from fairy tales and short stories, are suggestive of her reflections on narrative and fiction, communication and its concealment, trace and gesture, time and memory, language and, through it, imagery.

The exhibition *Anti-graph* constitutes the largest presentation of Nina Papaconstantinou's work to date, assembling for the first time a significant part of her work, created from 2001 to this day. The unfolding of works in space creates an open-ended narrative, a diffuse, fluid textual tissue with no beginning or end, in which stories, fairy tales and fables, private, secret confessions and personal testimonies, and illustrations of short stories and other texts interweave and penetrate one another. Among the enigmatic heroes who inhabit Papaconstantinou's work we find real and fictional characters, such as Hansel and Gretel, Justine, the boy who went forth to learn fear, Marquis de Sade, the town musicians of Bremen, Dante, Anne Frank, Aris Alexakis, Count Monte Cristo, Sylvia Plath, Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, Robinson Crusoe, Eugene O'Neill, Virginia Woolf, Angela Carter, and the artist herself.

From the typographic poem of the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé "A toss of the dice will never abolish chance", Guillaume Appolinaire's *Calligrammes* and the futurists *parole in libertà* to concrete poetry, fluxus and the linguistic turn that conceptual art took through the works of Marcel Broodthaers, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, and so on, the material, spatial presence of language and the typographic layout of the text were an object of artistic research and experimentation. In Nina Papaconstantinou's case, the relationship between language and her work is multifaceted. The pleasure of and passion for reading and writing are transformed into delicate drawings that make use of language's materiality and reinscribe the narrative richness of literary works into their metaphoric and symbolic depth. From her large-scale drawings *Dante, Hell* and *Dante, Paradise*, which allude to descriptions from the *Divine Comedy* by forming gates-openings to an invisible world, to the concealed embossed writing in *Sylvia Plath: The Missing Journal* and the letter plot in her six works *Brothers Grimm, The Six Swans*, which borrow the practice of knitting from the fairy tale (that eventually

breaks the spell that bound the brothers), her works develop an open-ended and diverse relationship with their written sources.

In a first reading of Papaconstantinou's work, we would argue that the communicative function of language is put into question in her drawings. Through an "intersemiotic" translation of the text into image, the artist creates a non-codifiable system of graphic symbols, disarticulating the meaning of the appropriated texts. Although their linguistic origin and derivation is always identifiable, her drawings-texts waver on the boundaries of the "decipherable": they suggest their hidden, undeclared aspects behind the words and set off *cryptography* as a fundamental element of writing. According to the view put forth by Roland Barthes in his essay "Variations on Writing", "cryptography could be considered as the innermost tendency of writing: illegibility, instead of expressing a declining or deviating situation of the manuscript system, could be seen as its truth".<sup>2</sup> Papaconstantinou's interest primarily lies in the enigmatic territory that is found between letters and words, where slips and linguistic lapses prevail. The muscular act of writing, "scription" and its result (scripture)<sup>3</sup> give rise to a cryptic alphabet, a galaxy of impenetrable signs and traces, which redefines the terms for viewing and reading the artist's work.

Echoing the modernist notions about the text as a diffuse tissue,<sup>4</sup> appropriation and transcription are transformed in Papaconstantinou's work in acts of creation and production. The artist weaves the thread of her stories primarily through the time that is inscribed and consumed for the production of her drawings. The laborious

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes "Parallages epi tis grafis", *Apolafsi – Grafi – Anagnosi*. Athens : Plethron, 2005, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes defines scription as the physical act of writing that encompasses the hand's trajectory. Roland Barthes, *ibid.*, pp. 187, 234.

<sup>4</sup> "The 'writable text', usually a modernist one, has no determinate meaning, no settled signifieds, but is plural and diffuse, an inexhaustible tissue or galaxy of signifiers, a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes through which the critic may cut his own errant path...All literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bear the traces of 'influence', but in the more radical sense that every word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the individual work". Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 119.

act, the time-consuming process of drawing, the gesture of writing itself, becomes the determinant *par excellence* of her work. Thus, Papaconstantinou's textual drawings narrate the adventure and story of writing. In the process, time is of vital importance. Each drawing is a proof of the time that was needed for its production. The inner time of text transcription mingles with the inner time of the narrative, as well as with the time put by the viewer to view-read the works.

Nina Papaconstantinou is one of the artists who work exclusively with drawing as their main – primary – means of expression and rose to prominence during approximately the past decade. Since the 1960s, the ontology of drawing has been put in a post-medium condition, as this has been proclaimed by Rosalind Kraus, which cannot be understood solely through the definition of its morphological characteristics. The 1960s and 1970s brought a radicalization of the approaches to drawing, incorporating a large number of processes, materials and techniques. In its extended conception, drawing encompassed everything from Eva Hesse's and Agnes Martin's works on paper to Dan Flavin's and Sol LeWitt's photocopied pages of *Scientific American* and working notes, or John Cage's score, which were shown in 1966 in the exhibition *Working Drawings And Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed as Art*, as well as the line formed by Richard Long's footsteps in *Line Made by Walking* (1967). In Papaconstantinou's drawings, the notion of the process, this highly tautological condition of "drawing", which was associated with a number of conceptual and post-conceptual practices, meets and intersects with narrativity, story telling and fiction.

The kernel of the works displayed in the exhibition is *Library*, an installation in progress that begun in 2004, including more than 40 drawings to this day. In each of these works, Papaconstantinou copies in multiple layers on blue carbon paper, word for word, an entire literary text, so that the final drawing produced is an imprint of the carbon paper on the surface of the paper. In these drawn palimpsests, the successive, repeated writings accumulate on a unified surface. The density and strength of the imprint of the carbon paper varies according to the length of the text, the size of the lettering, the origin of the alphabet, the book's number of pages and the genre of each text. During the process of transcription the artist follows the typographic layout and organization of the printed text on the book's page, abiding

by, as the case may be, the conventions of verse or prose. A distinctive feature is the greater density of writing on the left side of the drawings based on plays, such as Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias* and Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, or the concentration of the text only on the left side of the page in poems, such as Miltos Sachtouris' *Color Wounds*, Federico Garcia Lorca's *Sonnets of Dark Love*, or Odysseus Elytis' *Heroic and Elegiac Song for the Lost Second Lieutenant of the Albanian Campaign*.

Each new layer of text suddenly refutes itself during the moment of its writing, since it is abolished by the next one that will follow in a Sisyphean, laborious attempt to reproduce the text. The exacting and time-consuming process of transcription imitates and at the same time parodies the process of text preservation, which was common in the monastic copying workshops of the Middle Ages, the so-called "scriptoria". The text as a mnemotechnic tool, which fulfils the mnemonic function of writing, gives its place to an accumulation of signs, symbols and traces, the remains of a bodily process, of the physical activity of writing. In the process, the bend, the movement, the direction in which a letter is drawn, the so-called "ductus",<sup>5</sup> which has been analyzed in palaeography, exposes the hand's trajectory and the decisive participation of the body.

The prolific body of texts in the library – which includes works by authors from M. Karagatsis, Dylan Thomas and Antonin Artaud via C. P. Cavafy, John Berger, Guillaume Apollinaire, to Tristan Corbière, Giorgos Cheimonas, Virginia Woolf, Lou-Kiang-Tseu, Nikos Kavvadias, Walt Whitman, Théophile Gautier and Edgar Allan Poe, and many others – comes from the artist's personal library. Only the titles of the works denote the source of origin for each text. The first drawing in the library – which the artist created in 2001, wishing to investigate how "such a powerful text can illustrate itself"<sup>6</sup> – is the *Book of Revelation*. Papaconstantinou realizes Walter Benjamin's discovery, put forth in his 1931 essay entitled "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting", that "of all the ways of acquiring books, writing them

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<sup>5</sup> Ernst von Alphen, "Looking at Drawing: Theoretical Distinctions and their Usefulness", *Writing on Drawing, Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*, Steve Garner (ed.), Chicago, IL: Intellect Books, 2008, pp. 63–65.

<sup>6</sup> From a personal conversation with the artist.

oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method";<sup>7</sup> books, as she describes, "are written from the mind to the hand", so that she can appropriate them and make them her own.

The artist visualizes a "labyrinth of letters", the Borgesian "Library of Babel",<sup>8</sup> in which we wander among an inexhaustible combination of letters and words. The metaphor for the universe as a library, Stéphane Mallarmé's phrase that "Everything, in the world, exists to end up in a book", find their expression in her work: books do not imitate reality, but instead invent and create it.

Following the two poles of any collection, order and disorder,<sup>9</sup> which are described in Benjamin's text, the index of books in the artist's library vacillates between sensible arrangement and classification and the chaos and passion of a personal collection. To the "chaos of memories", which, according to Benjamin, characterizes every library-collection, are incorporated the collector's personal experiences, memories and stories of acquiring each individual book. The books that we read and define us invest alternative ways of seeing reality with already written words. In Nina Papaconstantinou's *Library*, books, the more or less important ones, are the tesserae that form a self-portrait of the artist. In this sense, the universal character of the library intersects with a prosopocentric and autobiographical dimension.

The exact opposite of her library and drawings-books, in which entire texts are shrunk in a drawing surface, are the 15 drawings based on manuscripts by the literary scholar and translator Aris Alexakis, with whom the artist had worked in the context of Greek language teaching. Papaconstantinou photocopies the notes taken

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting", *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, London: Pimlico, 1996, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel", *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, New York: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 112–118.

<sup>9</sup> "Thus there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books. For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?", Walter Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 62.

by the scholar, in the form of a travel journal, during the course of his research on 19<sup>th</sup> century travelers. The text, the word, the letter of the manuscripts is digitally enlarged to such an extent that they dissolve and hover in specks and signs, which the artist traces on transparent paper. The blanks between the letters, the blurry edges, their curves and shadows, make up a non-codifiable writing. The constellations of signs and dots mobilize the surface of the transparent paper. The form of the line and of the graphic symbols captures the handwriting of their creator, sketching his self-portrait.

The texture and image of the text is traced by the artist in a series of works with pierced texts. The etymology of the word *text* is derived from the Latin verb *texere*, which means, among other things, “to weave”, emphasizing the materiality of language. The text, as far as the narrative that unfolds and the way in which stories interweave and develop are concerned, is a textile, or, as Virginia Woolf has argued, “fiction is like a spider’s web”.<sup>10</sup> The words are intertwined, interwoven like the threads of a cloth. The elaborate, laborious work put in by the artist for the production of her drawings is analogous to traditional female handicrafts, such as embroidery and weaving, as regards the diligence, the counting, the control, the discipline, the accuracy and meticulousness demanded during their execution.

In *Family Reunion* (2009), the artist transcribes passages from T. S. Eliot’s play with the same title, which she proceeds to digitally manipulate. Placing a piece of paper behind the surface of the printed text, she pierces the letters with a needle, creating thus a relief on the surface of the paper behind them. The layout of the incised text on the paper’s perimeter resembles a decorative embroidery motif, while the alteration of low and high reliefs follows the rhythm in which the play’s characters, Harry, Amy or her sisters, appear in succession and speak their words during the unfolding of the plot, and more specifically in the climax of its ending. In *Ego* (2010), passages from the chapter on “The Theory of the Libido: Narcissism” from Sigmund Freud’s *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* are inscribed in high

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<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production*, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press/London: Associated University Presses, 2001, pp. 29, 31.

and low relief on the left and right side respectively of the paper's surface, so that the one appears as a reflection of the other. *Writing*, whose etymology can be traced back to the Greek word *graphein*, meaning "to sculpt, to scratch, to dig", using a sharp wedge-shaped tool,<sup>11</sup> becomes in the pierced texts a gesture of disrupting and grooving the surface of the paper.

In her two collages entitled *Anaïs and Henry* (2011), fragments of the love letters of Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller, which document the course of their erotic and intellectual relationship, are reproduced by hand, using archival ink on paper. Then, they are broken into pieces and dexterously made up into two puzzles-mosaics, one with Nin's letters and one with Miller's letters, whose few parts consist of scattered letters, fragments of words and blanks. In *Monte Cristo* (2011), a random assemblage of white embossed letters from the chapters of Alexandre Dumas' classic novel with the same title, which refer to Edmond Dantès imprisonment for fourteen years in an island prison, spreads like the thoughts that overwhelm the character's mind within the four walls of a stifling room-cell.

The starting point for Papaconstantinou's investigation of the relationship between text and image was her involvement in fairy tale illustration, and more specifically the series of four drawings entitled *Landscapes from Hansel and Gretel*, which begun in 2001. The term *pictorial*, traditionally associated with drawing, defined, not without a pejorative tinge, a descriptive kind of image which developed a direct and "legible" relationship with the text, often drawing elements from fairy tales, familiar stories and folk fables. In her drawings *Landscapes from Hansel and Gretel* (2001–2010), Papaconstantinou traces enlarged details from her own illustrations for the Brothers Grimm fairy tale with the same title, mainly the scenes where the two siblings wander about in the forest. The artist enlarges the images on her computer, prints them, and then patiently traces with a Conté pencil every single piece of grain on paper. The shifting of the paper and the addition of a second layer of writing that distorts and conceals the human figures behind the dense accumulation of marks creates in the end an image behind the image. The travel, the wandering traced by the eye to detect the figures behind the dark grid of drawing is

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<sup>11</sup> Vilèm Flusser, *ibid.*, pp. 11, 48.



connected with the practice of narrative and story telling that unfold in time. The struggle between light and darkness, the prevailing antithesis of fairy tales, is deployed by the artist in the process of concealing and revealing the image.

A significant part to Papaconstantinou's approach to and reworking of the fairy tales played the influence of the British novelist Angela Carter. Carter's work is characterized by an extensive intertextuality, having incorporated and absorbed literary borrowings that range from Marquis de Sade and Charles Baudelaire to William Shakespeare, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, above all, the fairy tales and folk tradition. It is through the subversive reading and critical reexamination of patriarchal myths that Carter turns this array of sources into the main character of her work.<sup>12</sup> Carter's *Company of Wolves* (1979), on which Neil Jordan's screenplay was based, is a revolutionary retelling of the fairy tale of the Little Red Riding Hood, who discovers her beastly, sexual side and is eventually rescued from it. In Papaconstantinou's work with the same title, the screenplay, which is reproduced in the artist's hand in miniscule lettering, is literally transformed into an unexplored textual tissue.

Although absent from the field of painting, Marquis de Sade's provocative text, *Justine or the Misfortunes of Virtue*, lies behind the series of drawings entitled *Seven Bed-Time Stories (Justine)* (2010). The series consists of seven works based on engravings taken from the 1797 Dutch edition of the book by Marquis de Sade. The needle piercings on paper sharply outline the erotic tangles of the figures, while the rest of the surface is covered in pencil lines. The shading that defines the background abides by the resistance put up by the paper, creating at the same time a new texture on its surface. The perforations on paper testify to the intrusion of the body during the creative process, setting off the drawing surface as a field in which dreams, yearnings and the dark side of human imagination prevail. For the second series of *Seven Bed-Time Stories (Brothers Grimm)* (2011), the artist draws her material from the "bedtime stories" *par excellence*, the fairy tales, and more specifically the illustrations of four fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, *Little Red*

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<sup>12</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 193–194.

*Riding Hood, the Town Musicians of Bremen, The Story of a Boy Who Went Forth to Learn Fear* and *Founding-Bird*. The heroes of the images – the wolf dressed up as grandmother, the hunter, or the hanged men on a tree – are not defined by needle piercings, as in the previous series, but are described with greater intensity with pen.

The multiple temporalities of writing are investigated by the artist in a more recent series of works as well, which is connected with journals, either as texts or as images. Papaconstantinou sets forth from journals by actual persons, such as those by Sylvia Plath and Anne Frank, as well as by literary characters, such as Robinson Crusoe or the Count Monte Cristo, to create a personal journal that unfolds in 28 relief self-portraits of the artist during the process of making journal entries. Attempting to locate the common element in the journal keeping practice, one would refer to time, to the recording of a date before each entry. In the pages of the book *Diary (Robinson Crusoe)* (2008), on the cover of which is engraved with gold leaves the title *Nine Thousand Nine Hundred Twenty Eight Days*, Papaconstantinou has embroidered with thread each of the 9928 days that, according to the narrative of the book by Daniel Defoe, the character spent as a castaway on the island. Each embroidered line corresponds to one day. This image is a metaphor of Robinson Crusoe's practice of carving lines on wood – a writing of furrows and memories – to mark the passage of time.

Papaconstantinou's journal primarily conveys the attempt to make, often in a subversive vein, a private, secret confession that was meant to remain in the sphere of the private. The first work in this series is *Sylvia Plath: The Missing Journal* (2008), which is based on Sylvia Plath's journals. The poetess began to keep journals with an obsessive dedication in her childhood, continuing to do so until her death, and even argued that "It's hopeless to 'get life' if you don't keep notebooks".<sup>13</sup> The starting point for the production of this work by Papaconstantinou was the fact that after Plath's suicide, Ted Hughes "lost" one of her journals, while he also destroyed a second one, which was a record of her final days. Papaconstantinou rewrites with inkless pen passages from Sylvia Plath's journals, so that only the relief imprint of the

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<sup>13</sup> Papaconstantinou has copied this phrase from Sylvia Plath's journals into her own journal-work book.

text is left on the paper. In an attempt to restore, to “repair” the cohesion of the narrative, the artist sews with black thread one page to another. The hidden relief text suggests the idea of a private confession, whose intensity and passion have been lost, leaving only its trace behind the lines on the white piece of paper.

In *Diary of a Young Girl* (2010), the artist incorporates passages from the first twenty eight diary entries by Anne Frank, from the day that she received her diary to the period that her family spent in a hiding place in the Netherlands. The *Diary of a Young Girl*, one of the world’s most widely read books, published by her father Otto Frank, the only survivor of the occupants of the attic, is for the artist mainly the testimony of a teenage girl with her youthful passions, thoughts and the conflicts peculiar to her age, as these are documented during a journal cycle of 28 days. The artist transcribes the text on very thin paper, having beneath it the pages of a copybook, so that only a very thin imprint with ink appears on their surface. Without ever detecting the elements of writing, the intensity of the imprint varies according to the thickness of the tip of the pen that is used each time by Papaconstantinou. Any persistent attempt to read the text seems to constantly evade and escape as the viewer leafs through the pages of the copybook.

The journal series is completed in the exhibition with *Self-Portrait Diary* (2010–2011), which includes a series of twenty eight portraits of the artist. The works are based on photographs depicting the artist making journal entries, taken on twenty eight different days during the course of a year. Papaconstantinou digitally manipulates the photographs, transforming them into black-and-white images made up of dots. Using a pen as a stylus, she engraves the outline of her bent figure in the studio. The twenty eight images are connected with one another to form an unfolding polyptych. The self-outlined artist is visible and at the same time imperceptible, depending on the viewer’s viewpoint.

The feverish act of drawing is put into an analogy with the gesture of writing, which turns both to the inside, as a secret process of self-knowledge, and to the outside, to the reader-viewer. The persistent act of writing, the meticulous and obsessive involvement with drawing as an existential condition, realizes “nulla dies sine linea”, a quote by Pliny the Elder that means not a day without a line drawn. In this light, all of the exhibited works compose and outline an open-ended,

heterogeneous and ever-changing personal diary of the artist with thick-set and even blank pages, which has as a vital tissue the memory and pleasure of writing.

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