

# STONE, HE SAYS

[ENRIQUE ASENSI. PORTRAIT OF THE SCULPTOR-  
POET (YES, IN HIS SOLILOQUY)]

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*Stone is the first solidification of the creative rhythm, sculpture of essential motion. Stone is the petrified music of creation.*

Juan-Eduardo Cirlot (1958)<sup>1</sup>

*What can be shown cannot be said*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921)<sup>2</sup>

## 1. SAYING

Now, as a I reread a letter from **Enrique Asensi** (Valencia, 1950) written a few months ago, I am struck by his use of “soliloquy” to describe his approach to artmaking. The letter also spoke of “unclouded and happy days of solitude”, *et in Arcadia* his sculptural world, a life in entropy that the artist revealed, underscoring his attempt “to express the unsayable in words.” After his ruminations on the place of his forms in space, Asensi went on to write about time, and on time, in which he endeavoured to capture “the trace of the formless”, mentioning Plotinus and, he concluded, among his goals was to illuminate beyond, before adding his aspiration to clarity and proportion, the beauty and imperturbability he has relentlessly pursued throughout his long-standing and highly productive career, widely recognized in the European sphere.

Such enigmatic remarks prompted my whispered response: “sculpture, secret he says,”<sup>3</sup> which I then used as the title for my essay on his work. Given the mutual confidence of having conversed together on so many occasions, our words would often give way to silences, with friendship and speechlessness being a true experience of thinking as we contemplated the *arrière país*,<sup>4</sup> the hinterland of Avinyonet where his sculptural forms came into being, an alert landscape with the shimmering quicksilver of the sea in the distance. My words returned with a conundrum gifted to us by Maurice Blanchot: “Where we think we have words, ‘a virtual trail of fires’ shoots through us.”<sup>5</sup> Perchance this is why I have always thought that, for Asensi, conceiving sculptures is a mysterious coming-into-being rising in a space that is constantly reactivated, like a miracle between mourning and desire, “the materialization of forms in space, the sculptures becoming present in the space of the world, then a time emerges that reminds me of what Beckett called ‘blessed by heaven’, without limits on

enjoyment, the vision fascinated and dissolved in shoreless radiance, sculptures whose appearance grows in space and in time.”<sup>6</sup>

The sculptor’s quest for boundlessness is stranded aground, exiled and engrossed in a questioning of forms and space, scenes of a true receptive being as he practices what I believe to be a spiritual approach to the sculptural form, one that ought to be contextualized in the mystical experience of this poet of stone and metal forms on the wall, and also on ground level. One that dwells in an inner chamber yet, moreover, his sculptures are mesmerized in the face of the mysterious vastness of the natural world. Regardless of whether it be a wall or the open space of a room, ultimately Asensi’s proposition clearly opts for an enactment of the artwork as an expression of willingness, perhaps a declarative statement: come and see, see the invisible, for it proclaims the slowness of the gaze until the eyes begin to droop. The consummation of the visible, like an immobilized truth, the void is replaced by forms that will lend meaning to the meaningless, meditations enacted by Asensi in a space that throbs with life like the affirmation of one who has found no answer, the enigmas of space left to perform the work of the visible.<sup>7</sup> He is able to demonstrate that processes of absence can exist along the road to creativity, moments of pause to allow forms to take place, because one cannot achieve the image without an acknowledgment of the winding path of creation, but also of the failure and the abjuration that correspond to moments of its inherent boundlessness, which is ultimately to reveal the abyss from which forms are born. Therein his precious gift, like one who has accepted a yielding to self-erasure in the liminal space of creation.

“Wall works”, as Asensi calls them tautologically, the petrified music, as Cirlot might put it, in league with the material he harmoniously transforms in frequent clashes of disparity; steel and stone, he says. We can see some of the sculptures and relief works that leave a record of these couplings, here metal, there a heart of rock, and German dolomite, a versatile stone able to take on various embodiments.<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps alabaster and diabase, sitting alongside steel and bronze in some exquisite freestanding sculptures now on view at the Ana Serratosa gallery. Likewise, he also makes good use of the materials’ expressive properties, whether it be their natural or their transmogrified appearance: rough and smooth; light or dark; flat form or cleft open to space; raw unhewn stone and the pristine flatness of steel like a mirror eschewing reflection; planes joined or layered; a coming together or a touchless separation with a line of void; stone enclosed within the steel square like a stony Malevich, or perpendicularity to the wall or indeed suspended from it. The disclosure of the sculpture with all its weight or the delicate inlay of brass and diabase jewellery that makes one think of the *rive gauche*.

To reflect on the materialization of forms in space is to reveal an anomaly. Many of Asensi’s compositions seem to arise from a primary absence, the unveiling of what, once exposed, gravitates back to its origin in a mysterious intimacy. His sculptures articulate an impact that reaches into the depths torn open in an innerness where thought is laid bare and erected in space by the artist akin to a cataloguer of yearned-for missing images. Forms born free in space, reliefs he regards as sculpted paintings, or, in the artist’s own words: “each one of my sculptures is like an image, a perspective of a whole, of the Whole. They are actually perceptions formulated in various ways, by means of various

perspectives. All these images or sculptures want to reveal the same thing, they are three-dimensional, but they are often symmetrical, revealing the same form on the front and on the back. At the end of the day they are two-dimensional works freestanding in a space. My works, especially the ones leaning against a wall, are highly influenced by the concept of the painting. I sculpt paintings, that is what I do.”<sup>9</sup> I view the stone, metal and light in his works as synthetic, in the same line as his large monumental projects like the highly poignant *Tres*, which blessed St Peter’s Church in Cologne (2019-2020) and brought me to mind of an oft-cited quote by Duchamp when speaking about Brancusi: “this mystical tendency, combined with an intellect capable of developing an idea, and a really marvellous technical skill that can visualize it,” which was the proposal of a limitless space.<sup>10</sup>

The radical presence of matter, whose epiphany we know to be stone as nature, while steel or bronze stand for knowledge and culture.<sup>11</sup> An interlude of estrangement in which his work is composed, like an inaccessible proximity, and yet Asensi’s work is not so much the process of inquiry but rather the exposition of the process of an sculptor who reneges his own self, in a kind of silent crossing through space and, in doing so, reaching a threshold (a word the artist is fond of using as a title), a quiet gaze in pursuit of a secret access to a place of silences<sup>12</sup> that, between being and non-being in an intractable enigma, becomes a nascent dawn-like space.

## 2. SILENCING

Conversing in silence, as I said earlier, it would seem as if Asensi’s task has been to create like a road to himself—a heterotopia, to borrow a term from Michel Foucault—a place outside the shared space, a mystic expanse where conversation fades into nothingness. Sculptures in aphonia, as if arising from an abyss that opens up at the exact moment before the narration begins to unfold, like a baffling story that can never be recounted precisely. An emotional upheaval of the gaze that launches it on a peripatetic path, driven forwards and backwards, from stone to steel and back again, observing convergences and divergences yet overwhelmed in the act of sharing such bold contemplation. An unfolding of visions in the development of a new beginning, a journey reverberating with the tension of the real. In his restless musing he appears to send us back to that absent presence erstwhile known as the sacred,<sup>13</sup> the journey between suffering and desire embarked upon by great artists. Ultimately, his is a declaration of beauty which he boldly proposes in that wasteland or, in his own words: “Yes, beauty as a concept of proportions, coherence, an intuition of the universe. I use this beauty as a tool because what I want to express is neither beautiful nor ugly—it simply IS. It has its own reality and its own truth, indifferent to us even though we are part of it.”<sup>14</sup>

An exercise in situations that appear to take place in the manifestation of otherness, the representation of a balance between silence and its exteriorization as a way of representing its mute independence: neither the gaze nor much less these words will manage to fully comprehend its possible meanings, to grasp the work that embraces the truth of what bears its own errancy, the suspension of

meaning as an abandonment of meaning to the search for meaning. Withholding conclusions and, in this way, allowing thought to open up anew.

Contemplating the artworks in this exhibition I realize that this is a silent choreography, like a voice divested of all beginning or end, akin to Mallarmé's orchestration of silence. To create silence, toing-and-froing as one thinks about something that could exist but never ceases, yet one thought is concatenated to another thought. An intense self-absorbed artist, withdrawn into the secret of a non-transferable intimacy which he resolves by means of the expression of these enigmatic forms, following a secret melody, like those oriental poems, songs strung together in which each one adds its verse to the single poem.

Intimacy lays claims to vastness. With what he expresses in his works Asensi is displaced towards his own constraint; impatiently awaiting we listen to his voice grow silent only to then resurface, endlessly surviving; from its own estrangement it empowers the sense of otherness and restraint that appears to be the same feeling capable of liberating him and, then, other verbs and mysterious forms arise from the rupture.

Enrique Asensi, between matter and light.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> CIRLOT, Juan-Eduardo. *Diccionario de símbolos*. Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1988, p. 362. Revised version of his *Diccionario de símbolos tradicionales*. Barcelona: Luis Miracle Editor, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Tractatus 4, 1212*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. Inc., 1922, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Both the extracts and the spirit of Enrique Asensi's letter as well as the cited text were published in the catalogue of Asensi's wonderful exhibition held at Museo Francisco Sobrino in 2024. Likewise, we recommend the account also included in it of the conversation we held on the occasion of another exhibition by the artist at Museo Salvador Victoria, Rubielos de Mora, on 5 March 2022.

<sup>4</sup> BONNEFOY, Yves. *L'Arrière-pays*. Paris: Mercure de France, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> BLANCHOT, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> DE LA TORRE, Alfonso. *Enrique Asensi: escultura, dice secreto*. In: "Enrique Asensi. Presente y Umbral. Obras 1999-2023". Guadalajara: Museo Francisco Sobrino, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> ESTEBAN, Claude. *Le travail du visible, et autres essais*. Paris: Fourbis, 1992, pp. 109-123. In "Destins de l'image", "Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse", no. 44, Gallimard, Paris, November 1991, pp. 297-302.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning this issue, Enrique Asensi recently underscored the various appearances of dolomite, a German stone. Conversation with the artist, 11 February 2025. In the same sense, on the works in this exhibition, there is a dominance of: "German dolomite and steel, at times patinated and at times the black steel is left as is and generally of a thickness between 5 to 10 cm." (written 25 January 2025).

<sup>9</sup> "I see myself as a sculptor of perceptions, given that I express myself through sculptures, which is to say, my sculptures are my words". SEIPPEL, Ralf-P. "Mis esculturas son mis palabras." In *Skulpturen Park. Parque de Esculturas Enrique Asensi*. Berlin: Kehrer Verlag Heildelberg Berlin, 2016, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> SCHLIMBACH, Guido. "Mis espacios no tienen límites." In *Tres*. Cologne: Galerie Seippel Verlag Köln, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> As I have mentioned before, on the meeting between steel and stone, Hartmut Kraft declared: "in few words, nature joins culture." KRAFT, Hartmut. "Mastaba" in *Enrique Asensi. Tres*. Cologne: Galerie Seippel Verlag Köln, Ralf-P. Seippel. 2019, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Eduardo Chillida, 31 December 1960. CIRLOT, Juan-Eduardo-CIRLOT, Lourdes (ed). *De la crítica a la filosofía del arte*. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1997, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> NANCY, Jean-Luc. *La mirada del retrato*. Buenos Aires-Madrid: Amorrortu Editores, 2012, p. 57.

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<sup>14</sup> SEIPPEL, Ralf-P. "Mis esculturas son mis palabras." *Op. cit.* p. 19. The use of uppercase is, of course, from the original.