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## A City Is A Sign Unsigned

*Stella Chachali*

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## STELLA CHACHALI

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens – University of Potsdam

### A City Is A Sign Unsigned

#### 1. Introduction

In this paper I will focus on the collage-print *Switchboard for the Spiritually Scheming Mind* (2021) (see fig. 1) of the series *A City Is A Sign Unsigned* made by the artist and writer Moira Barrett. From now on I will refer to it as *Switchboard*. Firstly, I will briefly describe the medial border-crossing of that print and how the different materials operate by organizing an iconotextual artifact, a doorbell, which shifts between art and handicraft. Roland Barthes' theory about the co-presence of the *studium* and the *punctum* and Georges Didi-Huberman's concept of the *patch* will assist to comprehend how the divergent media are becoming active agents in this intermedial complex. Then, I will try to analyze the inscribed words on the bells that emerge as a written, unwritten and rewritten palimpsest. The multiple layers of the textual signs interweave a patchwork, which gives rise to certain hermeneutical paths. Finally, I will attempt to interpret the action of bell-ringing and pre-doorbell state by using Emmanuel Levinas' theory of Otherness.

The collage-print *Switchboard* belongs to the series *A City is a Sign Unsigned*, a series of inscribed collage-prints using the streetscapes of Athens as raw material. As the artist explains:

I first visited Athens in 2019 and fell in love with its anachronistic cityscapes, which embody bricolage at every turn. This series sees my poetry and collage practices come together, both to illuminate the poetics of the street and to further poeticize the city through my own iconographic vocabulary made up of its many patterns and textures. My inscribed gateways, doorways and doorbells build on Walter Benjamin's *Schwellenzauber*, or the quotidian occultism surrounding thresholds and their ornamentation as a physical pictorial genre embedded in our daily gestural habitus. (Barrett)

The cityscape is the screen upon which new poetic ways of making do, of bricolage are inscribed. This urban screen is already a surface made of divergent layers, layers of architecture and design but also layers that are built through everyday practice related to urban spaces and the utilization of everyday rituals. The given cityscape is not only located in space but also emerges through the temporal transformations. For the exact same reason this sign is unsigned, as one can conceive only traces of this material process and evolution. The spatial and temporal *narratives* of everyday life are getting lost and displaced by the vehemence of a renewed presence. Another reason why the sign is unsigned is because the everyday practices constitute a cultural activity without always intending to produce culture. These ways of operating are unsigned or, even better, not signed by a creator rather than by the different collectives of social life. Although the artist signs the collage-prints with her name, she is negating it at the same time through the title of the series. Thus, there is an interesting division between

the creator and her artistic production, which leads to the emancipation of the artwork.

Using the urban surface as her material, that is already a surface of different layers of intensity and operation, Moira Barrett chooses the medium of the risoprinter and the silkscreen in order to artistically process the cityscape. The silkscreen is a printing technique that uses a mesh to transfer ink onto a substrate, except in areas that are impermeable to the ink by a blocking stencil. The chosen technique is also related to the *Sign Unsigned* complex. The artist does not intervene directly in the surface, but in an intermediary way through the paper stencils that she has made. These stencils function both as a pattern that manipulates the ink thrown upon them and also offers a new artistic imprint in the original material. The artistic process is operated by hand and reflects a work of art that is the result of struggling. The material initially resists and then obeys in the mapping that the patterns indicate. The paper stencils offer certain directions to the ink and lead them in specific paths.

## 2. A medial border-crossing

What makes these paper stencils so intriguing is not only the fact that they are charting a new material path, but also the fact that there is an interplay between different medial forms that presents a relationship between the *sayable* and the *visible*, between textual and pictorial representation. Poetry comes together with the collage and bricolage operation in order to poeticize everyday life and to construct a fantastic cityscape. Using Roland Barthes' theory of *Camera Lucida*, we could presume that the visual signs in the collage-print represent the *studium* that makes the image a material that can be decoded and analyzed (25-27, 42). The *studium* according to Barthes is a kind of education, knowledge and civility that activates the functions of information, representation and signification (28). Thus, when we are referring to the *studium* of an image, we perceive the inscribed visual signs as an accumulation of information that has to be studied and therefore classified, in order to lead to certain conclusions. As a result, the spectator becomes a cultural participant of this visual scene and takes the position of the inspector who is dealing with the cultural signs. In this manner, when we confront the collage-print of Barrett we can see and recognize the doorbells and the Athenian mosaic walls with their ornamentation and repetitive patterns. The visual confirms what can be expected to be seen in a doorway in an old building of Athens. It is the consequence of a shared knowledge deriving from the repetitive experientiality of a certain cultural body.

Returning to Barthes' theory, the textual signs in the collage-print represent the *punctum* (25-26, 43-46), which strikes us with its affective, "lighting-like" (45) power. It emerges "like an arrow and pierces" (26) us. Why does it strike us and function like a sting? This question brings us to the second topic of the discussion. It is because the horizon of our expectations, namely the *studium* is disturbed. Rather than names of the residents, we can read words with an abstract meaning, symbolized signs in the form of imperatives, what could also be read as a visual poem. I cite some written words from the collage-print: "wait", "watch", "pray", "promise", "hint", "hedge", "imply", "interpret", "bid", "bribe", "demand", "defer" etc. Most of the words are organized in alliterative couples, a pattern that is however not always followed. Apart from this missing link, there

is no significant semantic connection between them. It is only the fact that they indicate an imperative that must be followed, an action that must be taken. The artist also sees them “as options, a limited amount of choices you have when you are presented with circumstances beyond your control” (Barrett). The viewer of the image and reader of its text has to act if he or she wants to ring the bell. The bell ringing that is in itself a certain action, comes together with a decision that has to be made.

Before we analyze the condition of the pre-bell state, it is significant to return to the concept of the *punctum*. The narrative signs of the print constitute a *punctum* as they bring the representational system to disorder and make a rupture in the expected iconotextual artifact. If one recalls the alternative concept of *punctum* proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman, these words emerge as a *patch* (229-271) (*pan* in the original French text), a layer that disturbs the harmony of the represented surface. This *patch* is a “particolare” (Didi-Huberman 248) that strains the surface and has the effect of a *sovereign accident* (252, 256, 260-261). It is described as a sovereign accident because of the suddenness of its appearance and its powerful and destructive effect upon the whole representation. If one transfers this theory to the *Switchboard*, they can confirm that the written words have a similar effect upon them. The inscribed words emerge as ruptures in the surface of the cityscape and give space for different zones of intensities. The whole work is consumed by them, since when the viewer of the bricolage recognizes their significance and reads them, they can no longer return to their first impression and expectations. The textual signs infect the surface of representation and unsettle the perception of the collage. It's no longer an ordinary representation of a doorway with bells; it is something more that requires reflection and even action.

### 3. A written, unwritten and rewritten palimpsest

The fact that the original words with the names of the dwellers of the apartments are unwritten and then other words are rewritten upon them, renders the prints as a palimpsest with different *patches*. The original written text is dislocated and disfigured. The surface is stained from the newly written words that present a cipher of art and non-art intertwined. The rewritten surface signifies the division between reality (the document of the names of the residents) and aesthetics (the fictionality of words distributed in the place of names). The names are unsigned, negated in order to be resigned. That leads the spectator to a further question: Why are the names of the doorbells removed? One could give a twofold answer to that question. Firstly, the names are written in Greek, an alphabetic system unknown to the artist, who explores the streets of Athens not as a tourist but as a flaneur, who lets herself be affected by the atmosphere of the streetscape. This kind of flaneur does not apprehend the gateways with their ornamentation as topographic parts related to practices of urban space but as passages that bridge everyday life with a poetic experientiality.

Another possible explanation could be that the artist attempts through this series of collage-prints to make up a new city, a fantastic scenography, where the streets are seen and perceived as a surface of iconotextual references and objects. The artist becomes a walker, who experiences the city as a poetic

and mythological space. She is like the walker that Michel de Certeau describes in his book *The Practice of Every Day Life*:

First, it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities and interdictions, then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements. (98)

Thus, the gateways, the doorbells or the stairs become beings transformed by the passer-by, who is mapping a new cartography with textual and visual signs. The unreadable words inscribed upon the doorbells become fluid and are replaced by invented words. It is not only that this creative process poeticizes everyday rituals but it also develops a play-function. The artist displaces the unreadable names with imperatives that bring the spectator to the position of a game-player, who has to make a decision and choose which doorbell they would prefer to ring in that certain moment that confronts the collage-print. Which button will the spectator press? Which order must be followed? I cite from the print: "COERCE", "CONTROL", "SNATCH", "SPOIL", "SCATTER" or "SQUANDER"? In this invented iconotextual city the spectators are emancipated and free to make their own selection, each one of them will open a new world of possibilities. The spectator of the bricolage becomes an agent of this imaginary intermedial world and participates in the creative process.

#### 4. Bell-ringing and pre-doorbell state

Finally, I would like to shift to the last topic of the paper and describe briefly how one could analyze Barrett's work through the lens of Levinas' philosophy and specifically through his essay entitled "Enigma and Phenomenon" (65-78), which was published in French in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 62 (1957). This analysis leads us to the other side of the collage-print, the one that is not visible to the spectator. It is the side of the one that receives the call coming from the bell ringing. It is the condition, which Levinas describes as a pre-doorbell state, and refers to the stage before the *otherness* of the one that makes the call is recognized. The philosopher stages a scenography in order to illuminate his reflections: "Someone unknown to me rang my doorbell and interrupted my work" (Levinas 68). Levinas characterizes it as an absolute disturbance, deriving from the fact that an absolute *alterity*, that one of the *Other* (*Autrui*) invades into the *Same*, thus into myself (68). This intrusion of the radical *alterity* discomforts the *Being*, as it interferes in his reality and brings a disorder. The *Other* that rings the bell appears and claims its presence by demanding time.

When the doorbell rings the order of the *Being* is disturbed by throwing in front of him or her a world of infinite possibilities (Alford 26-27). The one that rings the bell is not yet recognizable and therefore it could be anyone. This exposure to the unknown on the one side and to infinity on the other, is translated as an intrusion and as an apparent interference of the *Other* in the *Same*. Levinas defines it as the intervention of the *alterity*, which disturbs the *phenomena* as an *enigma*, which is transcendence itself (74). It is transcendence because the prox-

imity of the *Other* discomforts the *Being*, which normally excludes all *alterity*. It is significant to explain which response Levinas gives to this *enigma*, to this ringing doorbell. He gives a moral response:

[...] the I approaches the Infinite by going generously toward the You, who is still my contemporary, but, in the trace of Illeity, presents himself out of a depth of the past, faces, and approaches me. I approach the infinite insofar as I forget myself for my neighbor who looks at me; [...] I approach the infinite by sacrificing myself. Sacrifice is the norm and the criterion of the approach. (76)

The stranger, who is making the call and opens the world of infinite possibilities, is identified here as the *neighbor*. Proximity also plays a significant role that is linked to the mere confrontation with the *Other*. The *neighbor* who approaches me obliges me to forget myself. He or she interferes between me and myself and demands to occupy a certain space, which presupposes the notion of sacrifice. In order to approach the *alterity* and face it in its pure infinity one has to *sacrifice* oneself.

So, to return to the *Switchboard*, it is the spectator of the work of art, the potential agent that has to select the correct doorbell who takes on the role of the *neighbor*. We, as *emancipated spectators* (Rancière) are supposed to make the call, ring the bell and intrude upon the *Being* with our *alterity*. The imperatives inscribed in the doorbells make this decision even more complicated, since behind our call there is a certain demand and expectation, which is given by the artist as a possibility. The spectator offers his *otherness* and demands a *sacrifice* to be given for it.

## 5. Conclusions or how to operate an intermedial *Switchboard*

I would like to conclude by summarizing all the different aspects that have been mentioned above regarding this collage-print of Moira Barrett. Firstly, one can perceive the work as bricolage between art and handicraft, between visual and textual signs. The interchange of different material forms and representational systems makes the intermedial result even more intriguing; there are no definite borders between the different media types as they overlap each other in complex patterns of similarities and differences. The *sayable* becomes *visible* and the *visible sayable* in an effort to find a channel of aesthetic communication. The co-presence of the visual and the textual signs, namely of the *studium* on the one hand and the *punctum* (or alternatively of the *patch*) on the other, gives a methodological orientation about how the interart relation is constructed and how the different medial forms have been organized upon the collage-print.

Secondly, one can read the *Switchboard* as the map of a fantastic cityscape, as a cartography instructed by the artist, who as a flaneur passes by the everyday rituals and transforms their significance. The artistic surface, the switchboard has different layers of narrativity and visibility, as the names of the dwellers have been negated and disposed of, in order to be poetically displaced by some abstract orders. It is not only the content of the written words but also their functionality and operativity that have been changed. They have lost their usability and gained an aesthetic interartistic power.

Last but not least, Levinas' philosophical thoughts on *enigma* and *phenomenon* provide another perspective to the collage-print. We as *emancipated spectators* take the role of the *neighbor* and the place of the *Other* that intrudes to the *Being* and manifests its own *alterity* by making the decision to ring the bell.

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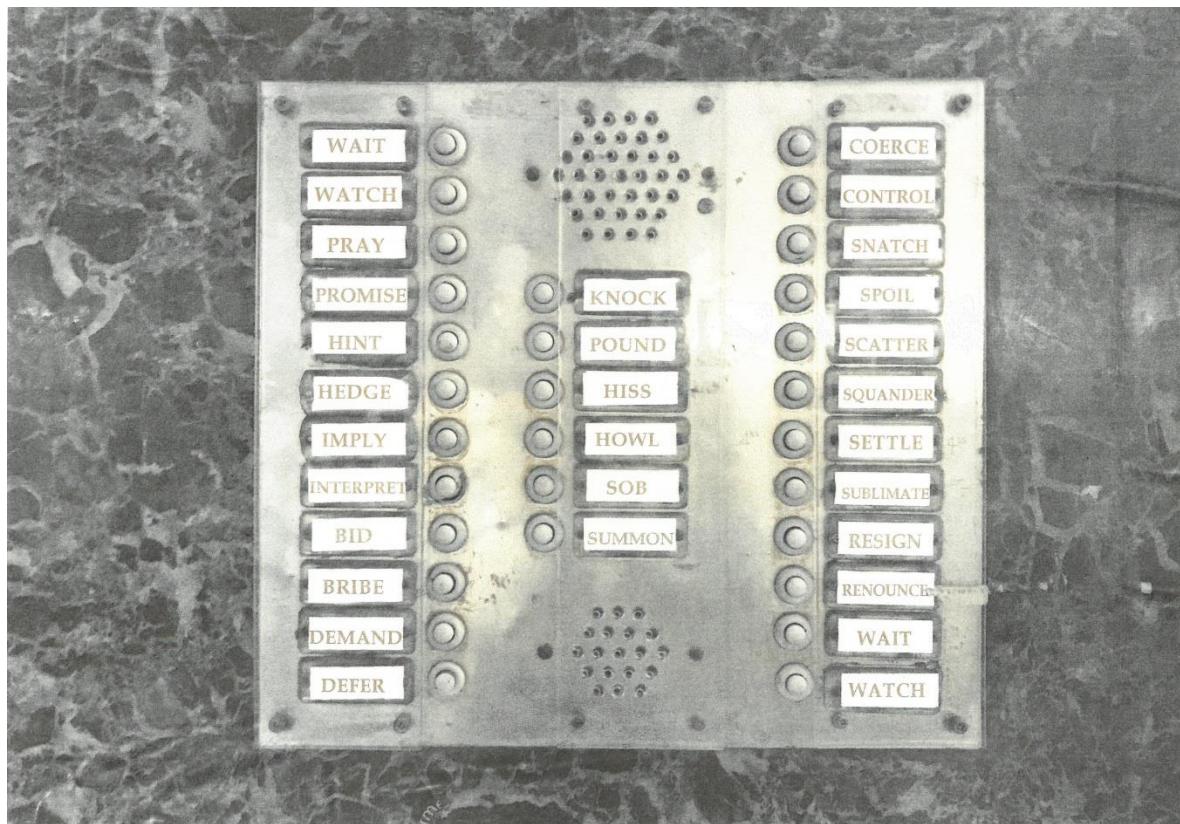
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Figure 1: Moira Barrett, *Switchboard for the Spiritually Scheming Mind*, 2021, digital collage risograph print.

**Περίληψη****Στέλλα Χαχάλη****Η σειρά *A City Is A Sign Unsigned***

Το άρθρο εξετάζει την εκτύπωση-κολάζ (collage-print) *Switchboard for the Spiritually Scheming Mind* (2021) από τη σειρά *A City Is A Sign Unsigned* της καλλιτέχνιδος και συγγραφέως Moira Barrett ως μια διαμεσική περίπτωση, για να τεθούν ερωτήματα σχετικά με τα όρια μεταξύ κειμένου και εικόνας, τέχνης και χειροτεχνίας. Το κολάζ αναλύεται ως ένα τεχνούργημα κατασκευασμένο από διαφορετικές εικονοκειμενικές επιστρώσεις, οι οποίες ποιητικοποιούν τις καθημερινές τελετουργίες του αθηναϊκού αστικού τοπίου. Η μελέτη επιχειρεί να αναλύσει τα οπτικά και κειμενικά σημεία αυτού του χειροποίητου χρησιμοποιώντας τις έννοιες του *studium* και *punctum* του Roland Barthes, με στόχο να διερευνήσει τη λειτουργικότητά τους στο διαμεσικό πλάτωμα και να τα προσλάβει ως δράστες ενός εικονοκειμενικού παιχνιδιού. Στη συνέχεια, η ανάλυση μετατοπίζεται στο περιεχόμενο της εκτύπωσης-κολάζ, δηλαδή στο αναπαριστώμενο κουδούνι εισόδου και στις ποιητικές λέξεις που αναγράφονται σε αυτό. Γιατί διαγράφονται τα ονόματα των κατοίκων και στη συνέχεια αντικαθίστανται από ποιητικές προσταγές αφαιρετικού χαρακτήρα; Τέλος προτείνεται η θεωρία της ετερότητας του Emmanuel Levinas, για να διασαφηνιστεί η θέση αυτού που λαμβάνει το κάλεσμα από το χτύπημα του κουδουνιού.