

Peter Soriano, *Other Side*

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New York streets. Spray paint marks on the ground in yellow, red, orange, on pedestrian crossings or in the middle of the road; a language unintelligible to the uninitiated. Arrows, zigzags, measures of distance, letters going in all directions. *On the New York Times* website I come across these "street markings": a photo of a street in Chinatown where the ground is strewn with them. So on Peter Soriano's home turf in New York there are these signs on the ground. They are very precise codes, scribbled by city employees who mark out the streets; but to outsiders they invariably appear to be abstract symbols, defying interpretation. What's interesting and surprising at first glance is that they're on the ground and not on the walls, like graffiti; this stresses a horizontality of surface, a space to be moved across and experienced.

For the last few years Peter Soriano has had two studios in New York. The first, in Brooklyn, has big windows looking out onto the distant tangle of elevated freeways, with their continuously moving streams of cars and trucks, their roads crisscrossing into the distance endlessly. This studio was the birthplace of the sculpture series *The Other Side*, which Soriano has been working on since 2008. In the corners of the room, between two windows and along the long wall facing them, are extended spray-painted marks interconnected by varying combinations of taut cables and aluminium tubing. The outside is everywhere in this studio: when he began *The Other Side* it was as if the artist was keeping a diary of his gaze shifting in response to the activity around him. These pieces are a record of a directional eye operating out of a spatial context in which a number of vectors are at work; open spaces with steel lines and graphic signs assembled on the wall, they chronicle the artist's thought-trajectories as he contemplates space. Together with the cables, his rectangles, circles, crosses and arrows construct areas where sign, language, space, colour and form intermingle.

The second studio is in the center of his Warren Street loft in downtown Manhattan, and here the perspective is the opposite: no windows with direct light and no view either. The three walls of the studio end here: to one side is an opening onto a big room, on the other a corridor. This studio is a place for pausing—for meditation if you like—since it offers no direct access to the outside. It summons not the eye, but the memory and an assembling of different mental images. In this space the work changes: the pieces making up *The Other Side* continue, but in a sparer form, it would seem. This studio is a place where he lives, passes through or spends time every day. Where he can scrutinise his creations at any moment, watching them interconnect visually and set up interplay. Here, in 2011, he added numbers to the series. He also thought of putting vertical bars between them, an idea he quickly dropped: what counts is the associations. "What is the next one?", he asks.¹ What he wants is the engagement with one very long wall at the Jean Fournier Gallery in Paris, not easy considering the narrow space does not permit a viewer to step back. The numbering recalls the figures Matisse added to each of Christ's pauses in the artist's Stations of the Cross in the Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence—an approach that takes us into the realm of narrative. The highly schematic lines in Matisse's work link up with each other in a way that enables a host of modes of interpretation. The numbers are there to direct the meaning of the narrative: the lines of the drawing, sometimes totally intertwined between one station and another, can send the viewer off in different directions. A leg becomes a back, the contours of a simplified body are just lines pursuing each other into each new drawing, and the result is a work containing more than one narrative: the well-known story of the Stations of the Cross and the underlying narrative of Matisse's lines, in another register. It is in this second narrative that the powerful tension of the work resides. Other narrative, *Other Side*.

Soriano meditates on the connections between space and idea; he examines not only the distance between things but also the relationship linking drawing and sculpture to signs and the language as a set of visual symbols. This new paring-down of his pieces goes hand in hand with a correlation between their individual elements. It is as if once deprived of the outside, or of their visual source, the situations he had been employing are now finding ways of being transcribed and reconfigured by memory, which result in a tension that is more mental than visual.

Narrative and the measuring of things

When I visited the Warren Street studio in March 2011, the works were overlapping each other all the way up the wall. The Matisse connection is more overt here. The studio remains the place where ideas develop and interconnect. And the entire wall is used, generating overlays of associations that don't necessarily match the order of the numbers. For the exhibition at the Jean Fournier Gallery the following September, the artist amplified and radicalised his scope: all along the gallery's main wall, on the left as you enter, and divided by a central column, he opted for setting out his pieces in ascending numerical order, orchestrating the whole with intervening spaces. The process continued through the right angle at the end and across the back wall. The word "narrative" comes to mind with regard to these works, in the sense Dominique Petitgand intended when he wrote, "Something has unfolded, point by point, and you know where it ends."² You find this with Soriano, too: works or "stations", an ordered, continuous unfolding and an end confirmed by a group of signs whose signification is close to that of the period.

Other Side. The opposite direction to the one you know, or different from the one you usually take. Alfred Kubin's *The Other Side*:³ back to the narrative, the territory of dreams and borders, of counterpoint. The other side of the mirror, the other side of the road. The second direction, the one you didn't opt for at the beginning and which you'll maybe end up taking. In the exhibition *Other Side g(NUM)BERSf + Dessins* at the Jean Fournier Gallery, Soriano cleared a possible path: a succession of numbered pieces through which he organises a phrase, or a phrasing. In his text "Peter Soriano's New Direction(s)"⁴ Raphael Rubinstein emphasises the role of the wall to the point of suggesting its inclusion on the list of the artist's materials. The wall is, indeed, an integral part of these works, as is the surrounding space. For Soriano the wall is not just a surface for hanging works: it is also the reference point, the place from which distances are assessed. The base and point of departure for determining or defining a measuring of things. Space, the wall surface, lines and graphic signs form a syntax for thought through an alphabet that includes all these data.

Starting in 2006 Soriano refers to his wire pieces as *Situations*, a term referencing not only the surrounding space—the "site"—but all the attendant circumstances as well. A situation designates a geographical position, the set of conditions in which a person or an object is located. For the artist it echoes the notions of site and "non-site", of physical and fictional loci—and even virtual ones, in the sense of an Internet site. At Jean Fournier Gallery in 2011 his goal was to create a new relationship with the site by placing his works side by side. It was no longer enough to juxtapose them: they were numbered as well. An initial numbering in red had been crossed out and replaced, in brown, with the numbers in ascending order. The figures in red correspond to the initial layout of the pieces, which are redistributed in subsequent shows according to the characteristics of the exhibition space. Each new layout gives rise to a different numbering, with each element both autonomous and part of an ensemble. For the artist the figures have a meaning. From his very beginnings as a sculptor he was interested in the distance between things. Moreover, many of the drawings by other artists that catch his attention include numbers: Donald Judd and John Cage have left us signed drawings made up solely of calculations, and what interests Soriano is that the calculations and the measurements become themselves works of art. He calculates the distance between himself and the wall and sets up a tension between the two. By installing his pieces in ascending numerical order, he establishes a tempo, a counting of time. Eight phases, measurements or positions. Eight positions to see.

Situation in eight phases: language and pictoriality

Eight phases: the first a simple tension between two cables, at whose ends an arrow and a sideways T gravitate towards the same circle, pushing in the same direction. The second using three cables and two opposing movements: a double-ended arrow (the mathematical sign for equivalence—equal to) inside square brackets (marking a zone of tension) and another arrow pointing downwards from one aluminium pipe to another (indicating a

direction). The third a long downwards movement (a red arrow and a cross), with a cable forming a taut acute angle to the right. The fourth a single cable parallel to the floor with, at one end, a period framed by red parentheses to which four small arrows point. Always the aim being to contain a situation. The fifth: several cables, a parenthesis, converging arrows. The sixth: two cables ending with a rectangle, while another horizontal cable ends with a downward-pointing arrow. The seventh: a work straddling two walls, with one segment ending in a vertical plane with, once more, an arrow. On the adjacent wall, a small protrusion. The eighth concludes the series: a segment of a straight line ending with a perpendicular plane extended by an arrow. The two elements are directed towards each other, as if marking a pause at the end of a sentence. The arrows, rectangles, circles, crosses and other signs make up an alphabet; and are given unity via a syntax created by the artist and articulated with cables and aluminium tubes. According to Paul Klee, the use of an arrow infuses a work of art with movement and direction. Arrows are everywhere in the Soriano oeuvre suggesting, perhaps, not so much an alphabet of components as a dynamic vision and an assessment of space. The double-ended arrows offer equivalences: equations in which two situations are placed in reciprocal tension, in competition. Creating associations, establishing equivalences, circumscribing situations, converging elements: functions of the mind translated into purely visual language.

At the same time it is as if Soriano the sculptor is returning to the fundamentals of painting. A flat surface, lines, colours, zones of tension: elements referencing a pictorial vocabulary. At issue in these pieces are surfaces, and schema. Which brings us back to the role of the wall as the fundamental surface—the sheet of paper or the base. Planes take shape out of the relationship between the lines of the cables and the wall, or simply of the cables. Between a straight line and a plane another plane can be drawn. On these planes, or surfaces, Soriano inserts signs; and what is involved here is painting, for the coloured spray defines, delimits and constructs a space. How far can the hand and the line it traces on the wall go? These markings are limited by the artist's gestures. And yet these markings and gestures can be replicated: once his works are completed, the artist provides instructions or user's guides allowing anyone at all to reproduce them, as long as the assembly plan is adhered to. These lines and signs can be remade, retraced and adapted to each new exhibition space. Similarly his colours are industrial and he deploys them according to the code they can set up in relation to each other. In this use of "instructions" Soriano's method reminds us of Sol LeWitt. "The artist's will is secondary to the process he initiates from idea to completion,"⁵ LeWitt said. The re-creation of the work hinges on executing these instructions. In LeWitt's proposals for wall drawings or exhibitions, the instructions leave a degree of freedom to those carrying them out.⁶ On the one hand this kind of work prefers idea to realisation, while on the other it permits all possible permutations and tends to exhaust any given system. The comparison with LeWitt and Minimal Art stops there: in Soriano's case, each work is unique and is connected to a specific gesture involving the entire body. Moreover, Soriano speaks of sculpture in classical terms. In what way are his pieces actually sculptures? Their materials are highly tangible—aluminium tubing, steel cables—but their relation to gesture and use of industrial materials recalls that of an artist like Renée Levi (we return to painting). Levi has also made spray paint, with its graffiti associations, one of the markers of her work. What counts for her is the move from colour as gesture to pure gesture, while each time asking herself, What is a painting? The canvas or the wall becomes a stage for the gesture, with painting taking the form of a movement in space. As she sees it, painting is defined as an event in space, one which in turn involves and triggers a movement on the part of the viewer.

Soriano's concerns also have to do with space and colour. Yet in creating pieces like these, is he not asking himself, what is a sculpture? He seems to be reducing the medium of sculpture to a limited number of elements, while at the same time gesture gives rise to a considerable distancing from the medium. In the case of both Soriano and Levi, gesture is at once removed: it is gesture recreated, gesture referencing an entire history of painting (painting in general and Abstract Expressionism and gestural painting in particular) or of sculpture (a gesture of reduction or assemblage, a gesture of drawing within a space), in order to replay that history. The use of the spray paint generates an additional distancing from the medium: with the spray can you don't touch the working surface, you remain at a

distance or out of phase with it, you tag a surface, you mark it, you identify it (as in tagging a photo on the Internet), you put your imprint on it. The means of sculpture are reduced to the gesture, to the interest in the materials, to the creation of a space. And so the sculpture loses its character as object, becoming an activity that can be replayed anywhere and entailing the time required to a mark it out. Materials, gesture, marking out, space and time: these are the fundamentals of this activity, to which dimension of language must also be added.

But are we really talking about a language? In these works everything seizes up: most of the time the numbers and signs are crossed out, the square brackets that identify a proposal shut it in, the arrows are cancelled out with crosses. All these things confront language with a blind alley or an obstacle, in the sense of Beckett's "peintres de l'empêchement": "There are always these two kinds of artists, these two kinds of impediments [empêchement]. Object as impediment and eye as impediment. But these impediments we took into account. Adaptation took place. They were not part of representation, or only barely. Here they are part of it. By far the greater part, one might say. What is painted is the impediment to painting."⁷ Object as impediment and eye as impediment: terms that strike a chord when we look at Soriano's work. On the one hand the work loses its status as object, gradually de-materialising itself; while on the other a style develops that articulates the impediment, the stumbling block, the impossibility of affirming, the difficulty of stating. More than reducing sculpture to its minimum, the artist is making a kind of counter-proposal: showing that it can still exist when its means—its dimension, its visual complexity, etc.—are restricted. In 2006 Soriano wrote a wonderful text titled *Memory and Remembering Badly (La Mémoire fautive)*,⁸ in which he speaks of the lapses, displacements and confluences that occur in dreams, an amalgamation of various situations and events. In Soriano's work signs combine, in association with vectors moving from one point to another, as if language were foregoing meaning in order to concentrate on the actions, processes, displacements and fusions at work in the mind, and in the memory when it summons up visual events it has recorded, worked on and analysed, and whose evolution it is trying to reconstruct: through drawing rather than narrative, through visual rather than verbal thinking.

Process and rhythm

Process is to be taken here in the sense of the temporal development of a form open to all possible variations. In the course of three years Soriano's Situations have simplified. There are now fewer colours—mostly only red and orange—and the economy of the cables and associations of signs has become stricter, with each sculpture corresponding to a straightforward situation of tension between two or three elements. The numbering suggests the use of bars in music, with the musical reference appearing on several levels: the unfolding of Soriano's sculptures takes place simultaneously in space and time, making us think of John Cage, who saw process as "compositional" and bringing chance into play. Cage speaks of his works in terms of "structure" and "method": "The notation took the form of whole notes in space, the space suggesting but not measuring time."⁹ The score of a piece like *Cartridge Music* (1960) includes solid lines, dotted lines, dots, and circles with numbers inside them representing stopwatches. Each line designates a slice of time, the musical activity being defined, for example, by the entry and the exit of the dotted line in relation to the direction of the stopwatch.

Cage posits the equivalence of a form and a sound, of a temporal unfolding and a space. Soriano's numbering of his pieces betokens a similar approach, and the phrase "suggesting but not measuring time" can be a clue to understanding what he is doing. The materials are different—lines in space, aluminium tubes, aerosol marks, numbers—but he too is structuring a progression, bit by bit, where a structural division of the wall corresponds to different pieces. This temporal organisation references the functioning of visual memory: to what extent can gesture draw and retrace what has been at work in the artist's memory? How far can the artist go in this reconstruction? These are the questions raised by Soriano's work, the striking thing being the creation of a relational space whose elements amalgamate

reciprocally and processually. Nonetheless, the comparison of Soriano's wall sculptures with musical scores has its limitations: the sculptures are not intended to be performed in any way. Nevertheless, Cage's idea of a process capable of engendering various forms of interpretation finds an echo in Soriano's work, in that the latter proposes a set of combinatorial rules involving a limited number of signs which do not indicate sounds, but rather reference movements of the body and the gaze. These enigmatic sculptures have to do with a singular interpretation of space expressed in temporal form. At the same time, the fact that his instructions or user's guides can be implemented by others represents, to a certain extent, a return to the playing of a score: a listing of gestures to be repeated in other spaces.

In investing gesture with this kind of importance, these sculptures maintain a link with displacement in their account of a gaze in ceaseless, conscious movement; with performance such that a gesture is repeated with each new version; and with the de-materialisation of the work of art. In this they provide a highly contemporary redefinition of sculpture at the outer confines of gesture, rhythm and language.

Drawing v. sculpture

In his drawings, with their outlining of spatial visions on a plane surface, Soriano continues his meditation on space, language and the relationship of the body to what is external to it. The individual works are also called "site" drawings, and include the Brooklyn series of 2010, in which the same figures and spatial configurations are repeated as pencil sketches and sprayed marks—arrows, circles, signs—sharing the paper. Even so, the urge to encapsulate an idea takes a freer form here, one less tied to a simple, predetermined, schematic outline.

What we also notice here is the presence in the drawings of figurative elements that effectively situate a space via the use of specific objects—a paint roller, the angle made by two walls, partitions in his studio—whose intervals he measures using a system of arrows. Here the double-ended arrow crops up again, either indicating an equivalence or simply measuring a space. To adapt the space of the drawing to the space surrounding it, he overlays multiple sheets of Japan paper, folding them progressively one over the other. Unfolded, these sheets give an idea of the real space involved. "In the site drawings I bring together a large quantity of Japanese paper—it's thin but tough, and folds easily—and I put it on the floor of the room I want to draw. What happens then is as if I were addressing the paper and the space at the same time. A three-way dialogue starts up. My eyes can be caught by the space between me and the window, or by a direct apprehension of the depth of the window frame. I fold the paper to assemble different parts of the drawing, like someone putting together a clumsy video."¹⁰ If everything in his sculptures comes down to the measuring of things, the drawings would seem to take the idea even further. Soriano folds space until it becomes a map—he folds space the way you fold a map. At the same time he inscribes it not with signs, but with elements—figures—of reality. As if everything schematised as sculpture in real space appropriated a figure in the space of the drawing.

The same concern with a dynamic vision of space that we find in the sculptures is at work in the drawings. In an interview the artist said of the drawings, "It was as if I were making a film about what I see. These drawings show how my eye moves in space, from one element to the next. I'm inventing a language that conveys what the eye sees: a light effect, what's going on in my head as it absorbs what I see around me. I become aware of my gaze. I enter into what I'm looking at: the light or a window, seen through the movements of a lens oscillating between several distances, it moves and it's the movement that interests me."¹¹

Some of the recent drawings are much more abstract. In the Brooklyn Studio series certain spatial elements are still recognisable, but the graphic signs take up almost all the whole of the paper. These strange drawings / scores, these signs translated out of real space, are unmistakably calling for a reinterpretation of that space. A mix of the abstract and the figurative, in their relationship with space the drawings are more evocative of the work of Iannis Xenakis, whose musical composition method combined conventional scoring with strange drawings he called "extra-temporal architectures". Whatever the technique employed, the musical process is always approached as a montage of different sound sources

or masses. And Soriano's drawings, too, are the outcome of a montage. We are witnessing a spatialisation of the thought processes, but this time in the image mode: adaptation of the drawing to the real space; drawing of signs and forms, and measurement of the distance between those forms via overlappings and juxtapositions, in simultaneously structured processes.

Just as Dieter Roth has countless ways of conceiving a drawing or a book—reworking, for example, all his books for his *Gesammelte Werke*—or creates several versions for each of the forms he invents, Peter Soriano suggests, with this new vocabulary, an extension of his formal possibilities. There is a great pictorial quality in his oeuvre, but notably in the drawings: colours and signs proliferate on a surface made vibrant by successive layers of paper and coloured gouache, aerosol or pencil outlines that far surpass anything in other contemporary practices.

As scorings / interpretations of space, Soriano's works put space on display in a way that has no equivalent today. The artist looks at space with the eye of a draughtsman and a sculptor: simultaneously as a map to be deduced from reality and a dynamic idea to be introduced into that reality. What is truly impressive about the sculptures is that they give form to intuitions most often expressed through drawing: thought drawings, musical score drawings; while the drawings themselves embody the ideas of a sculptor—descriptions of media in their purest state—while concomitantly offering what seems to be the germ of changes to come. At the same time language is very much part of the Soriano agenda: his vision of the world and real space is expressed in a specific formal language made up of gestures and signs, drawings and symbols, offering a window onto infinite visual evolution. As a language of obstacle or of the other side, these works manifestly point to a pathway hitherto unexplored.

English translation by John Tittensor

Notes

1. Interview with the author, New York, 5 March 2011.
2. Dominique Petitgand, interview with Guillaume Desanges, in *Notes, Voix, Entretiens* (Paris: Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, ENSBA, 2003).
3. Alfred Kubin, *The Other Side*, trans. Mike Mitchell (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2000).
4. Raphael Rubinstein, "Peter Soriano's New Direction(s)", in *Other Side..* (IDOL, AJAC, IONA, EMEU...), (Paris: galerie Jean Fournier, 2008), p. 6. Article consultable on http://petersoriano.com/T_PSNewDirections.pdf.
5. Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art", in *Art-Language*, vol. 1, no. 1, (Coventry: 1969). Reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 849-51.
6. In his "Proposal for the exhibition at Oberlin College" of 16 February 1970, LeWitt says, "On a preferably white plaster wall use a hard pencil (6H or harder) to draw an indeterminate number of straight lines. Each line must be perpendicular to the preceding one." Thus the choice of pencil and the "indeterminate" number of lines is left to those doing the drawings.
7. Samuel Beckett, *Le Monde et le Pantalon*, followed by *Peintres de l'empêchement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990), pp. 56-57. Author's emphasis.
8. Peter Soriano, *La Mémoire fautive* (Paris: Little Single, 2006).
9. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 2011), p. 30.
10. Peter Soriano interviewed by the author, excerpted as "Peter Soriano, du dessin-signe à la pensée visuelle" [Peter Soriano: from Drawing as Sign to Visual Thinking], in *Roven*, no. 5, 2011.
11. *Ibid.*