

A Marginal Note on *Chapter 29's* "Quaytman Margin"

Fernando Zalamea^(*)

In this short text, I explore succinctly the idea of a "Quaytman Margin," which I hope to study further in a larger book essay, *Howe-Quaytman Margins* (in progress, 2020-2021). I restrict myself here to a marginal comment on R. H. Quaytman's *Chapter 29* L.E.S. show (seen at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, October 2015), and on her previous exhibition catalogue, *קקן, Chapter 29* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2015). In a rough first approach, Quaytman's work can be understood as an *expansion of our frames of reference*, a multidimensional opening to geometrical thinking, textural imagination, historical awareness, contextual sensibility. In that *enlargement of vision*, narrow margins explode, and in new trans-surfaces, trans-perspectives, trans-formations, *Quaytman Margins* capture a richness of *residues and debris* intertwined with the complexity of the World where they are embedded.

In *Chapter 29*, Quaytman discovers, in the bottom-left corner of Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920)—a painting offered to Walter Benjamin—a previously unnoticed mark "LC" that nurtures an amazing *multiplication of creativity* in Quaytman's approach. Through the relentless discipline of the artist and following thorough research, Quaytman uncovers that the "LC" stamp points to an engraving of a Lucas Cranach portrait of Martin Luther, on top of which Klee draws his *Angelus*, something never before imagined by any scholar. From this discovery Quaytman constructs a series of new perspectives, frames, ramifications, and textures, where the complexity of history explodes (from Luther to Cranach to Klee to Benjamin to Quaytman to ourselves). In his theses *On the Concept of History* (1939-40), Benjamin refers to Klee's *Angelus Novus*, and he imagines a pile of debris before the Angel, representing a storm that "we call progress" (9th thesis). Moreover, in the 17th thesis, Benjamin suggests an "apocatastasis" situation captured by debris: "the lifework is both preserved and sublated *in* the work, the era *in* the lifework, and the entire course of history *in* the era." From residues, and ruins, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1927-40) tries to recover a full picture of 19th century Paris. In the same vein, Quaytman's *Chapter 29* unfolds a full complexity of interpretations (historical, sociological, religious, aesthetic) departing from the almost invisible "LC" mark in the margin of a painting.

^(*) Universidad Nacional de Colombia, <https://unal.academia.edu/FernandoZalamea>, fernandozalamea@gmail.com

In many ways, one may consider the works of the artist, the poet, or the mathematician, as processes to *render visible what seems to be invisible*. In those undertakings, *margins* become essential. In fact, a direct look at a center explodes with blinding lights that hinder the many shades that a *true* vision requires, and, on the contrary, an indirect look at a margin allows to apprehend the many subtleties of *penumbra*, where many forms of obscurity and superposition are related to deep layers of creativity (none other is the central goal of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, 1924-29). Quaytman's works in *Chapter 29* explore systematically those *multiplicative properties of the margins*: mixing woods, gesses, oils, inks, screens, Quaytman's new *constructive art inventions* multiply the references to Reformation (in its hope but severity), Angels (in their ascent but fall), Nature (in its glory but hardship), Geometry (in its diversity but unfathomability). From a *marginal perspective*, as the one adopted in Quaytman's entire *oeuvre*, and in *Chapter 29* in particular, *no reduction* of knowledge is thus possible, and a full circulation around the *many leaves* of human nature is shown as a necessary condition for its "reasonable" comprehension (if we follow Peirce's 1904 *summum bonum* understanding, where "reasonableness" is related to a common growth of reason and sensibility).

In this paragraph, Arabic numerals between parentheses (*xy*) refer to page *xy* of the catalog of the Tel Aviv show. Many *marginal and deep* themes appear in *Chapter 29*. First, (A) *opening multidimensional vision and thinking* addresses the shortcomings of narrow views and limited perspectives, and helps to escape platitudes: "we wish our work to resemble books in differing degrees" (51), "our images circle around words, behaving a little like hieroglyphs floating in unfurled pictorial space" (52), "he/she (zhe) demurely gazes askance into the world distance" (53), "was the *Angelus* paying homage to or defacing what it obscured?" (55). Second, (B) *unfolding space and time* addresses planar horizons and punctual time, and fosters germs of tolerance and awareness: "pay close attention to what happens at the edge of an image" (51), "scroll fluttering in the wind" (53), "navigate around the drama of the vacated space of the blank canvas" (57), "each individual painting becomes something else because of its neighbor (...) this is the hieroglyphic, the lateral way of looking at my work" (57). Third, (C) *navigating plasticity and continuity* addresses rigid and separated contextualizations, and opens a path to connect the many layers and screens of the World: "enter the waves (...) images circle around words" (52), "a topological geography connected to art history is emerging" (60), "negate with an upside down sunrise sparkling on a cyan sky and hang it on a diagonal" (60), "images survive the growing pile of debris and destruction in front of the *Angelus Novus*" (61). From margins to the whole, processes (A)-(C) help the wanderers of Quaytman's installations to *look beyond*, never quite happy to accept first impressions, always wondering for the invisible patterns hidden behind art and life.

It is fascinating that those invisible patterns can also be finely plumbed through higher mathematics. In this paragraph, sequences of numerals between parentheses (x.y.z) point to sections x.y.z of my lectures *Critique/Poetics, Walter Benjamin, and Higher Mathematics* (a short seminar inside Fred Moten's course *Black Performance: Poetics of Violence*, New York University, 2019, pdfs available). First, (D) beyond *obverses* ("defacing what is obscured"), *residues* ("edge of an image"), and *thresholds* ("diagonal"), one can profit from Cauchy's Residues Theorem (1825), which shows a profound harmonicity between interior and exterior in complex variables (2.5.1, 2.5.2), and from Riemann-Roch's Theorem (1857-65), which explains in a profound way the threshold between number (arithmetic) and space (geometry) (2.5.3). Those theorems can be applied both to revisit Benjamin's "awakening" (in the *Arcades Project*) (2.6.2), and to provide new lights into Quaytman's art constructions (2.7.1, 2.7.2, 2.7.3). Second, (E) beyond *foldings and unfoldings* ("books in differing degrees"), *discrete and continuous varieties* ("navigate around the drama of vacated space"), and *post-trans ruptures* ("images circle around words"), techniques from Topology (Listing 1847, Riemann 1851-57) (3.5.1), Sheaves (Leray-Cartan, 1942-51) (3.5.2, 3.5.3), and Categorical Topology (Grothendieck 1958-70) (3.5.4), help to appreciate with new eyes Quaytman's work (3.7.1, 3.7.2, 3.7.3).

Combining together all five perspectives (A)-(E), we obtain a beautiful *ramified surface* (what is called a "Riemann surface"), where art, history, philosophy, and mathematics dialogue in many natural ways. *Naturality is obtained from a systematic consideration of the margins*, something that an artificial central and dogmatic imposition could never achieve.