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Briques de corps (Pink Feeling Blue), 1973, oil on linen.

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Part I The Epistles

Brilliant, gorgeous, painted, gay,
Vivid flaunting, tearaway,
Glowing, flaring, lurid, loud,
Screaming, shrieking, marching, proud...
High-keyed colour, colour lie.

Derek Jarman, *Chroma*, June 1993

My colour dreams I REMEMBER.

Derek Jarman, *Chroma*, 1988

Huguette Caland died on September 23, 2019, in Beirut, Lebanon. Tasked with writing a factual, succinct, and coherent obituary about Caland's life for a newspaper, the author turned to screeds of notes, annotated papers, photocopies of archival documents, and out-of-print exhibition catalogues. Lamenting Huguette's loss, a great burden tugged at them. Questions stirred in their mind—ones unasked, unimaginable, ones that were swallowed up in the silent air between them—engulfed by the belt that buckles time itself. Since then, they have attempted to maintain regular correspondence with Huguette, using the epistolary form—in ink and in fibrous undyed pulp—to conjure, reason, and summon an awakening. Here, in Part I of this volume; they seek to decipher how best to locate a context that is not theirs alone to tell. Below are a few of their epistles, some are summatively composed for the purposes of this volume.



Nude Letters, 1991, mixed media on paper.

Dear Huguette,

I am filled with feelings of merriment to be writing to you, even if the tentacular ligaments of the mind do not catch the cleft of the slow-moving orb that spruces the imagination.

It is late afternoon, and I sense as though I am encased in a bulbous magenta and yellow plume—a queer cloud of entropy. It is a scene fashioned out of an ocular collision, as my hand and eyes retroactively attempt to stitch together the experience of feeling my way through an entire room of your *Bribes de corps* paintings at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid.

We—me and my intellectual sparring partner, Sofia—thought it would be luxurious to spend three nights on the occasion of your opening so that we could visit you three times. We slept in a hotel recommended by Carla Chammas, a Lebanese Palestinian gallerist and curator who had introduced me to the life and work of your beloved friend, Helen Khal. Reputedly owned by the Escada family, this Cassa for Art was no bit as ostentatious as the price tag. Yet it did have a handsome, if austere reading room from which to make conference calls, and in which to welcome your daughter Brigitte, who drank water as I sipped chamomile tea the morning after the opening of *Huguette Caland: A Life in a Few Lines* curated by Hannah Feldman.

I had hoped that this moment of your first “European” retrospective might offer an opportunity for a certain kind of suturing to begin.

We started this project of our *ongoing conversation* too many an aphorism ago. Still, the dream of its prospective (re)-awakening continues to function as lifeblood: Is this why I sit here sifting through dozens of notebooks filled with letters authored to you, each written after your death? It all began with a definite sentence from a hospital bed, “Dear Huguette, today I understood that imagination is and has always been my *only* homeland.”

The route of this construction of the imagination was embedded in me from language that I had come across in your own writing. Script that you had authored in a document given to me, labelled, “Sketchbook No. 2.” Its blue—or was it black?—linen spine blooms into a marbled cover gushing with three efflorescing hand-painted forms that lead us to your black pen, which demarcates the site of your inner dwelling.

One of the more striking reminiscences from my trip has been squaring the image of your youngest, darling Philippe, who presented in all black tonight, clad in what appeared to be custom-made wares. Was this the same individual with whom I had communicated with from your home in Appleton? I had spent the evening before my visit watching him in a movie that he’d written and directed called *Death in Ojai*, which was a loose retelling of the life of Abel, and his sacrifice, the second son of Adam and Eve, slain by his elder brother Cain in Genesis 4:1-16. Set during a global pandemic, I felt such an intimate connection to Philippe, perhaps because I too had studied cinema and had believed I would live within the confined 16:9 aspect ratio, the ocular bosom predicated for the silver screen.

I was so excited to meet him that when he did not

initially recognize me, not for want of trying, I was a little crestfallen. So embarrassed, I wished that I could disappear into one of your smocks, which were tucked into the corners of the space, dimly lit, cleaved as if into each-other, handsomely protected by museum professionals from *too much* light—natural or artificial.

Melancholy’s literary metaphors wear thin today. Here, everybody believes that they can transmit tear drops via social media. On my third and final visit to the museum, I came to realize, whether intentionally or through a feat of persistence, that your square paintings from the 1970s, which are very rudely misrepresented in translation, in some instances, as “Body Bits,” have delineated a field of body poetics all their own. Here I am drowning in color fields, the deep blue hues of Henri Matisse’s lifelong depression. The misery that took him to Africa in pursuit of a healing, which began his wayward extraction of pattern and the vestiges that fashioned them into being. You too, in your *Bribes de corps* paintings were negotiating several forms of interior conflict. But your overlays, the way in which the oil—runs, thick and thin, unwavering—swims back and forth, through space and time, unswervingly manages to conceal the trauma from immediate decoding.

At first, looking, looking, I assumed that you had deluded me, us. Your pictographic planes seemingly simple. As I dance backwards and forwards amongst the *Bribes*, they transpire as unpretentious weightlessness. A bounce like the weight of air itself. Compressed within, melancholy finds its release, in the crevices of the body form, portended, distended, itself. At this Spanish museum,

I am finally standing in an entire room, a *Bribes de corps* panopticon—360 degrees of heaven and hell—of life itself. The spectator is at a threshold of being, of breathing. Held at a precipice, about to be heaved off the cliff's edge, wandering with luster, what precisely is a *Bribes de corps*? The fact is, its definition eschews the singular. For it is felt, akin to a flutter, and *just like that*, it can dissipate, gone, in seconds.

Descriptively: Transmogrifying constellations of body limbs, edging, surfaces of skin, loose, loose, looser than eternity itself, perspiring. The *Bribes de corps* paintings are joints skipping across through and across voids, filling gaps of brutal time with layers of oil, first applied thickly, thinned out, applied thickly again, before an inversion occurs. An arabesque, *Las Meninas*, Noah Davis's *Pueblo del Rio*, all come to mind, mushrooming until they dissipate.

Artist Lubaina Himid, also a painter, who encouraged me to “get on with it,” has said that individuals such as us, scarcely forget the pain of the places that we leave behind. In your pictures, there is so much pain, but I realize now that it was a form of survivalism, or perhaps, what today I have come to learn we call, “survivance.” The aching was entirely your own. You noted in one of your sketchbooks that you felt “you could never lose control.” “I feel a necessity in controlling my emotions,” you recalled in 1991. You professed that this allowed you to avoid controlling others. Such a peculiar acquisition—of mastery, of constraint, a duplicity of one. By maintaining a hermetic seal of the self, you could free those around you. But now that you are gone. Everyone seems more obsessed with you than ever. As though your life was *pure* mythology. Aren’t all erotics but the product of a certain kind of agreed, received, perceived lie?



Untitled, (Bribes de corps), 1980 oil on canvas.



Part II

It Went Straight To My Heart

Her smile was addressed to me/It went straight to my heart/I realize how many times, since then, I have thought of it, and how important it was to me.../ When I spoke of my one life being the most important fact of my work of art/ I mentioned the importance of every single thing happening to me/ The exchange...my personal “digestion” of it. The exchange of a smile is one of the best things in this world. A smile coming from a little eleven-month-old baby is undescriptably rejoicing [sic].

Huguette Caland, December 25, 1990 [Huguette's 4th Christmas in Venice, California]¹⁶

Actually, silence is best.../I have nothing against words...on the contrary. But how to conciliate [sic] with the same strength visual and intellectual communication. For me the ultimate communication is silence.

Huguette Caland, Venice, 1991¹⁷

Self portrait, 1967, oil on linen.

*Today I am sad and fed up
Maybe I am tired of having no money.
Sure money helps. I would buy lots of paper and canvases.
I could use them without concern of waist [sic]. I miss large
beautiful white Belgian linen—I would first go ahead being
scared...[sic]*

*Even a few hundred dollars on paper; even a few hundred
dollars on paper.*

Merde. Merde et Merde [sic].

Huguette Caland, Venice, April 22, 1991¹⁸

Happy week-end [sic].

*Sold work went to many openings—not to a lot of people
—discovered a lot about “so-called friends”...
going to Paris soon—Brigitte is carrying her first child, my
first grandson—I will leave L.A. as I am beginning to enjoy
it most.*

Leaving it happily.

*I will be working in Paris [for] my first exhibition in California
—hopefully when I will come back, in a few months—I feel
I below here now [sic]—and that my home is really Venice.
I love Paris. It will feel good to visit there for the first time since
I have nowhere of my own for the first time since 1970...
Callas is singing—I love Callas. I love life—*

Huguette Caland, Venice, April 30, 1991

(Yesterday Paul and I were married 39 year) [sic]¹⁹

*a written thing except if you destroy it is so much
more “comfortable”*

Huguette Caland, 1991²⁰

*Beginnings, or
how to re-situate a Memoir,
re-counted incongruously—
purposefully mis-aligned,
just like time itself*

*Huguette Caland*²¹

Born in 1931 in Beirut, Lebanon, amidst a chaotic political backdrop.

Died 2019 in Beirut, Lebanon, peacefully.

Huguette Caland

Born in 1931, the only daughter of Bechara Khalil el Khoury, who would become Lebanon's first President. Caland would marry a French man, Paul, whom she had known since her youth, and together have three children: Pierre, Brigitte, and Philippe. Despite her creative disposition and playful demeanor, Huguette's first artwork did not transpire until after her father's death in 1964. In photographs and newspaper clippings, she is seen draped in her signature kaftans, which were produced from her own designs. Although an outsider, she is seemingly a part of what was referred to as the “Golden Era” of the 1960s—also known as the Lebanese cultural renaissance—and is often spotted alongside her friend and teacher, the artist Helen Khal. After her first solo exhibition at the not-for-profit space Dar Al Fan, in 1970, Caland leaves her family in Lebanon to settle anew in Paris, France. In 1987, she permanently relocated to Venice, California, where she lived until her return to Lebanon in 2013.



Bribes de corps, 1973, oil on linen.

Here she died in 2019. Throughout her life, recognition did not come easily, but her commitment to artmaking was fueled by self-belief and perseverance.

Huguette Caland

Plump was the only child of the President's daughter, born in 1931. By age twelve, she had her eyes fixed on what she wanted, but she kept that to herself. She did not seem to shudder when her bedroom was raided in the middle of the night—the result of what today would be called, in Lebanon, the plight of a PEP: a Politically Exposed Person. Perhaps she swallowed the violence, along with her pride, stuffing herself, contouring her body with the necessary padding, until she felt protected.

In 1970, she relocated to Paris, where certain “dreams,” if they were ever dreams, materialized. This included designing a capsule collection for Pierre Cardin—making her the only woman from Lebanon “on record” to have designed a collection for a fashion house that has been associated with Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture.²² Huguette’s collection was entitled *Nour* translating from the Arabic to *light*—an apt metaphor for an artist whose presence radiated, efflorescing across space and time, even though she remained largely unknown in the realm of art for most of her life. In 1987, her two sons encouraged her to relocate to Venice, California, where she designed her own home and set up a studio. It was the place where she lived and worked until her return to Lebanon in 2013, where she died in 2019. The contour and shape of her art—if one had to surrender to a singular body of work—would be her *Bribes de corps* series, largely made in Paris in

the 1970s. They are encapsulated by the intensity of their chroma and the methodical configuration of their line and shape—silhouettes that are as loose as they are precise in embodying a multiverse. They are neither exotic, nor erotic. They are a quintessence of an artist negotiating the very concept of what it means to construct their own ontology.²³

Huguette Caland

Huguette Caland's existence, her life and her art, has never been a secret. Claims to her "discovery" equates to laziness, or market opportunism. She was born a public figure, and many believe should be circumscribed to a pivotal role in late modernism and early global contemporary art. Squaring the person and the art is a negotiation, and a struggle. When she was twelve, her father Bechara spent a frightening time imprisoned, before his ascendency to the presidency. Huguette had already made up her mind at this point that she would marry Paul Caland.

In her youth:

Huguette began the study of the piano but abandoned this for visual art. Although much levity is given to her adult training, the most formal training that Caland received in art occurred in her childhood.

During this time, her art teacher Fernando Monetti (born 1899 in San Gimignano, Italy) was a specialist in the fresco painting technique, according to his biography.

Opposite: *Elle et Lui*, 1978, oil on linen.





A Note on Method: Epistemic Objects

When teaching practicum seminars, be it in the realm of fine art, curating, narrative fiction, or screenwriting courses, much energy and time is spent encouraging participants to explore the embodied experience of their characters and, in turn, their audiences. Here, the fundamental difference between narrating exposition and the expressive act of embodied action is the trick that, as educators, we seek to teach. That is—we wish to support our students to reveal what it means to feel implicated within the creator's thoughts, feelings, actions, and intent. The oft-quoted adage, "show, don't tell" rings true here. This is especially relevant in writing about Huguette Caland who wrestled with the credence of giving voice to her artworks.²⁵ When I began the process of writing about art more than two decades ago, I decided to animate artists' lives as much as the objects that they created. In time, the ethical praxis of withholding narrative details in the various spaces where I found myself working—as I learned more about the ethics of conservation, provenance research, acquisitions, and artists choices, including the histories they choose to suppress—engendered a series of expressive, living acts for me as a museum leader as well as an author.

None would prove as challenging to my mindset as my study of preventive conservation practices, in both a western and a non-western sphere, in an age of climate

Opposite: *Bribe de corps*, 1973, oil on linen.



Untitled, 1968, oil on linen.

Following: *Untitled (Bribes de corps)*, 1975, colored pencil on paper.

emergency, where the temperature cannot be stabilized, but rather exists in free-fall. This would be the case for Caland's work for instance, which lived much of its life in a country such as Lebanon—a nation constantly savaged by unceasing conflict. The awareness of these facts led me to a kind of "doing" where my "reading" of the art cannot be separated from the hundreds of hours spent considering where those objects have travelled from and where they might return to. Over the course of writing this book, I have also flowed-in my own technical knowledge and dexterity as an artist to embody the circumstantial and culturally located position of Huguette Caland. This lifelong commitment—of the cross-stitch between research and practice—has been why I have found it imperative to work within the bounds of the museum field and the academy. The methodology that I have deployed is one gleaned as much from the sciences as it is from the realm of the humanities. It employs the concept that Hans-Jörg Rheinberger has termed as engaging with "epistemic objects."²⁶

Out of several methodological approaches, throughout, I have followed the advice of the many conservators with whom I have worked over the years—to allow the artwork to "speak to me"—to introduce itself to me in every fathomable and fashionable manner, just as an anthropologist allows a person to speak to them through certain ethical frameworks. I believe that this role is, to an extent, performative, throughout the duration of writing. A process that encompassed several years of preparing drafts, only to throw them away, my aesthetic practice became one of trial and error—of acquiring knowledge from Huguette's lived biographical experience of making art, a life of creative

impulses I have followed for over fifteen years.

In this time, I have created paintings deploying kindred techniques and starting points; constellated a palette and constituted a preparedness using the same brushes, paint, stretched canvas, canvas size, and paper. At times, I have developed the same working conditions and time constraints; tackling the subject matter of the body, the organ, the distended form, the ligament, the wound, the bruise, the fragment, and the city, to learn from them as objects that are used in the production of knowledge and scientific inquiry. To reach this space has involved extended periods of pause and contemplation. Reflection and deflection. The Reembrance of ideas and their refraction. It has been both grueling and painful, physically and psychologically.

The distinguishing facet to Rheinberger's concept engages the "hybrid" representation of the object—the atemporal tangible artifact, which can conceptually represent and encompass the idea of inquiry as a mode of "learning."²⁷ The process is indexical, archived, logged, and deployed as a mode of tracing, mapping, and convening with history—with time itself, to stare it down, to interrogate its shortcomings, and to propose what it might have looked like from the vantage point of the present.²⁸ It shall unfold and find its expression here—naturally, imperceptibly, tangibly—as the intention of admitting one's method has more to do with declaring one's implication and subjectivity, as well as the intense labor involved in distilling the intricacy of such a life and its politico-aesthetic practice. I hope that it will inspire and embody Huguette Caland's spirit as it has haunted mine all these years.

