

Photography as a Writing Machine: Notes on Christian Dotremont's “logoneiges”

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ABSTRACT

In 1963, during a trip across Lapland, Christian Dotremont began to contrive his “logoneiges”, artworks which take “logogrammes” – creations between calligraphy and verse – to the limit. In this case, the white of the paper is replaced with the infinite whiteness of Lapland’s landscape. Indeed, the “logoneige” would disappear if a “second writing” were not added: the photographs themselves. By analyzing the writings of Dotremont alongside those of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, I propose that photography is not only a mere witness in the “logoneiges”, but a writing tool that re-produces the poetic sense. My aim is to dissect this multiple time that creates triple writings, in comparison to “logogrammes”, in an attempt to prove the poetical reach of this singular machine.

KEYWORDS

Christian Dotremont; writing; logogram; experimental poetry; photography; logoneige.

RESUMO

Em 1963, durante uma viagem à Lapónia, Christian Dotremont começou a forjar os seus “logoneiges”, obras de arte que levam os “logogrammes” (criações entre a caligrafia e verso) ao limite. Nesse caso, o branco do papel é substituído pela brancura infinita da paisagem da Lapónia. Com efeito, o “logoneige” desapareceria se uma “segunda escrita” não fosse adicionada: as próprias fotos. Ao analisar os escritos de Dotremont ao lado dos de Roland Barthes e Jaques Derrida, proponho que a fotografia não é apenas uma mera testemunha dos “logoneiges”, mas uma ferramenta de escrita que re-produz o sentido poético. O meu objectivo é dissecar esse tempo múltiplo que cria escritas triplas, em comparação com os “logogrammes”, numa tentativa de provar o alcance poético dessa máquina singular.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Christian Dotremont; escrita; logograma; poesia experimental; fotografia; logoneige.

Out of all the experimental poets that emerged throughout the second half of the 20th century, Christian Dotremont is perhaps one of the most interesting ones, despite having been insufficiently studied. Born in Belgium in 1922, his life was tragically marked by the contraction of tuberculosis, evoked in his autobiography *La Pierre et l'Oreiller* as “the catastrophe”, of which he eventually died after long stays in several hospitals. In fact, this illness was the crucial factor that interrupted the whole project of the CoBrA group (an acronym for Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam), whose founder and secretary was Dotremont. Despite its short career, this northern international league of artists was one of the most active heirs of revolutionary Surrealism; it was established in 1948 as a consequence of the fusion of several artistic movements of Northern Europe – to wit, the Danish abstract-surrealist group (with Asger Jorn, Ejler Bille, Mortensen, Henning Pedersen and Egill Jacobsen), the Dutch experimental group (Constant, Corneille, Appel, Rooskens, Brands, Wolvecamp) and the Belgian revolutionary surrealist group, encouraged by Dotremont himself.

Some of them are especially appealing because of the close attention they pay to the artistic creation as a form of non-rational knowledge that broadened the surrealist automatism. Indeed, CoBrA experimented in almost all the formats with the act of writing, since they explore its materiality in both individual and collective experiments which, as Dotremont says, totally overtake illustration, in the style of Barthes's *Empire of Signs*:

This is no longer about painters who paint in their painting a poem by a poet or by themselves; it is no longer about poets who, inspired by a painting, write a poem on paper, outside this painting; it is no longer about painters imitating more or less vaguely writing, or calligraphy, or typography; and it is no longer about illustration, the process of division (Christian Dotremont, 1998: 78).¹

Against this background, and under the influence of Gaston Bachelard's writings², Dotremont creates the invention for which he will be best known:

1 (All translations are mine unless otherwise noted; I thank Ignacio Planes for his support).

2 The whole group was in contact with his philosophy, especially with the texts about poetic materiality, see BACHELARD, Gaston (1941). *L'eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris: J. Corti, for instance.

the *logograms*. These mechanisms reach those margins where painting and writing are no longer distinguishable, since both are texts; they constitute a genuine investigation into the nature of the scriptural event. In his logograms, in opposition to phenomena such as “calligrams” (a text whose design has a visual composition related to its meaning), Dotremont wants to leave beauty aside and focus on what he calls “the verbal-graphic inspiration”³, where the desire for meaning brings together speech and writing in the same place. In fact, he declares not only his lack of attention to the art of drawing but his ineptitude in it:

I am incapable of drawing, I have practiced drawing, and it doesn't work at all, even if it's figurative, abstract or both. Even in Cobra, it's not possible for me drawing or painting... I need words, a text, inventing a text to arrive at this drawing (Jean-Clarence Lambert, 1981: 133).

Serge Linarès affirms in his text “Christian Dotremont: dialogues de l'homme double” that this enterprise is entirely poetic, because “the genre of poetry is unique in that it persists, unlike others, in making the material assets of the language bear fruit”.⁴ Although Dotremont was a truly singular artist, it is pertinent to quote here another poet who, also as an *amateur*, tried to deconstruct Western writing with the same force in his calligraphic experimentations: Henri Michaux (Belgium, 1899–France, 1984). Dotremont and Michaux were both Belgian poets, both travelled through the whole world and, most importantly, both were fascinated by the creative possibilities offered by the different expressive forms of language.

However, even if their strokes are very similar, Michaux painted to decondition himself from writing, while Dotremont's work focuses on exploiting the mechanisms of writing. For that reason, and in spite of all the exhibitions they shared throughout their lives (and posthumously)⁵, Michaux himself criticized Dotremont's work. Pierre Alechinsky, part of the CoBrA group and a close friend of the two artists, recalls that he once took Michaux to see a solo exhibition of Dotremont but they arrived too late, when the gallery was closed. However, Michaux saw in the dark Dotremont's pieces, and he perceived a kind of copy of his own work. Alechinsky made the point

3 “My aim is neither beauty nor ugliness; my aim is the unity of the verbal-graphic inspiration; my aim is that source.” DOTREMONT, Christian. “J'écris, donc je crée” in *Traces*. Brussels: Jacques Antoine, 1985. 15.

4 LINARÈS, Serge (2007a). “Christian Dotremont: dialogues de l'homme double”, *Choses tues – le rait, la trace, l'empreinte*. BOURJEA Serge. Montpellier: Presses de l'Université Montpellier-III. 55.

5 The following exhibitions can be taken as examples: *Écritures. Graphies Notations Typographies* (Fondation Nationale des Arts Graphiques et Plastiques, Paris, 1980), *Poésure et peinture, d'un art, l'autre* (Centre de la Vieille Charité, 1993), *Coups de crayons, taches d'encre* (Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles, 1996) or *L'Écriture dessinée. Rodin, Duchamp, Dotremont chez Balzac* (Maison de Balzac, 2015).

that the traces were images-words, something very different from his asemantic *œuvres*, to which he answered: –Logograms? This is another thing then. He writes–” (Pierre Alechinsky, Pierre Vilar, 1995: 20).

Beyond this paradoxical elective affinity – studied by several researchers⁶ –, this anecdote serves to close the introduction illustrating the aesthetic complexity of the logograms in their artistic context. In fact, we can locate the origin of his interest for the logograms in 1951, when he becomes fascinated by a rock he discovers with some runes engraved in it. Subsequently, from 1962 onwards he begins to create logograms in color, although he immediately shifts to black ink, possibly due to his color blindness – maybe because it is the color the writer and the painter share.

Nevertheless, my analysis of Dotremont’s oeuvre, despite engaging with his biographical deeds, requires a first specification. In this article I explore “writing” in the very sense this term has in the thought of two philosophers that have taken it beyond representation: Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. I am dealing, first of all, with the notion of *scripture*, that is, “this gesture by which a hand picks up a tool (point, reed, pen), presses it to a surface, advances it heavily or caressing, and traces regular, recurrent, rhythmic forms”⁷.

The gesture used in the logograms differs, for instance, from the Surrealists’ automatic writing⁸, as it de-automatizes the tics that the so-called *phonocentrism* has introduced in its materiality, as a consequence of its vicarious condition⁹. On the contrary, these “first-draft manuscripts” are based, as

6 Mainly PELARD, Emmanuelle (2012), *La poésie graphique. Christian Dotremont, Roland Giguère, Henri Michaux et Jérôme Peignot*, University of Montréal; KAWAKANI, Akane (2011). “Illegible Writing Michaux, Masson, and Dotremont” *The Modern Language Review*. Vol. 106, No. 2: Modern Humanities Research Association. 388-406.

7 I owe this translation to Aarnoud Rommens – in ROMMENS, Aarnoud (2017). *The Art of Joaquín Torres-García. Constructive Universalism and the inversion of abstraction*. New York: Routledge. 108 –, who nevertheless quotes a compilation – BARTHES, Roland (1985). *The Responsibility of Forms*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 102 – which does not include said text. The original excerpt in French can be found in: BARTHES, Roland (2002). *Œuvres complètes, vol. IV: 1972-1976*. Paris: Seuil. 267.

8 «Through the painting-words by COBRA and through my eastern-western discovery, I try to show writing as it is, creating material forms that exceed plastically the “signification” of the text. We have then gone further and closer than Surrealists, who, through “automatic writing”, had considered the text with no writing.” DOTREMONT, Op. cit., 1985. 17.

9 «On the one hand, true to the Western tradition that controls not only in theory, but in practice (in the principle of its practice) the relationships between speech and writing, Saussure does not recognize in the latter more than a narrow and derivative function. Narrow because it is nothing but one modality among others, a modality of the events which can befall a language whose essence, as the facts seem to show, can remain forever uncontaminated by writing. “Language does have an oral tradition that is independent of writing” (*Cours de linguistique générale*). Derivative because representative signifier of the first signifier, representation of the self-present voice, of the immediate, natural, and direct signification of the meaning (of the signified, of the concept, of the ideal object or what have you). Saussure takes up the traditional definition of writing which, already in Plato and Aristotle, was restricted to the model of phonetic script and the language of words. » See DERRIDA, Jacques (2016). *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press. 70.

Pierre Alechinsky has claimed¹⁰, on an exaggeration of writing where an almost formless text arises spontaneously, exceeding – overflowing – the alphabetical representation.

Thus, they summon what western Linguistics has traditionally amputated (with notable exceptions such as H. J. Uldall and the Copenhagen School), namely, the very scriptural physicality, the “extralexical”: the *scriptions*, which we must call “graphs” rather than “signs”, as they do not possess meaning but rather significance, insofar as this dynamic process comes to an end in every use. Moreover, they are interrupted in their abstraction by some tiny lines written in pencil, which most often talk about language itself, thus replicating and transcribing the graphs. It is therefore a double writing, which works as a strategy for seeing and not only reading poetry – to quote this particular logogram (Figure 1) and for that to happen it must be illegible:



Figure 1.

I have gone beyond the wall of legibility so that we see the writing. Because, when we read a text, we do not see the writing properly: we decipher the signs, and look for the references. Whereas, when the text is illegible, when the writing is illegible, we see it as forms (Jean-Clarence Lambert, 1981: 162).¹¹

It is an obstruction that also *splits* the time of writing and that of reading, where the hand *anticipates*, as a logogram from 1971 reads: “my hand is

10 ALECHINSKY, Pierre (2004). “Dotremont et l'exagération”. DOTREMONT, Christian. *J'écris pour voir*. Paris: Buchet Chastel. 103.

11 “[F]or writing to be manifest in its truth (and not in its instrumentality), it must be illegible” BARTHES, Roland (1985). “Masson's Semiography”. *The Responsibility of Forms*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 155.

a horse that trots and even gallops and breaks the obstacles...” It is his hand, indeed, that guides Dotremont’s reflection, whose reach shows us that writing itself is visual and, therefore, those representational devices such as the aforementioned calligrams have little to do with a text.

However, even though illegible, any graph – any trace, we might say with Derrida¹² – continues lending itself to being read, which does not mean that it is reducible to meaning, to a *logos*, to speech. Every graph is a possibility of writing, Dotremont tells us in his relevant article “Signification et sinification”, published on the Cobra revue n°7 in 1950 (Figure 2).

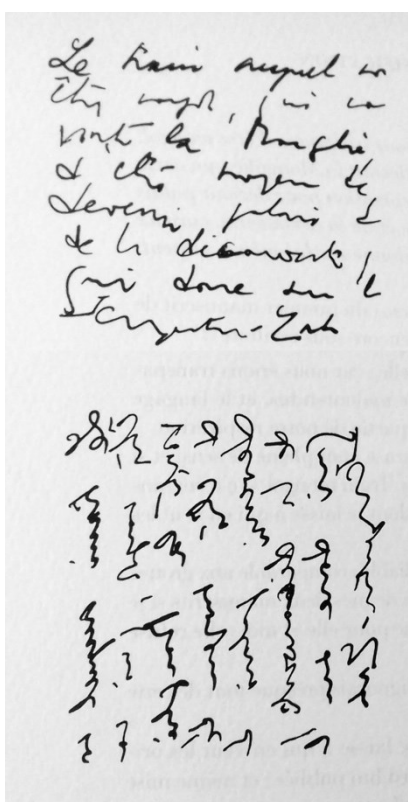


Figure 2.

12 «The immotivation of the trace ought now to be understood as an operation and not as a state, as an active movement, a demotivation, and not as a given structure. Science of “the arbitrariness of the sign”, science of the immotivation of the trace, science of writing before speech and in speech, grammatology would thus cover a vast field within which linguistics would, by abstraction, delineate its own area, with the limits that Saussure prescribes to its internal system and which must be carefully re-examined in each speech/writing system in the world and history». See DERRIDA, Jacques. *Op.cit.* 90.

When he takes a sheet from one of his manuscripts with a sentence laid down and turns it over from recto to verso and then from left to right, he discovers *another* writing, claiming that he had always been “the blind scribe of an unknown writer”.¹³ His reading might be surely mistaken, but it is one that nevertheless reveals that any graph, either oriental or western, possesses this trace-like nature, that is, it carries within itself an otherness that exceeds any stable meaning, an arbitrariness, a *différance* by means of which the illegible raises the possibility of endless readings, in this case through a simple shift of positions.¹⁴ Such a repetition is, however, always different, enabling the trace neither to confine itself to the present of its inscription, nor to that of its scrivener, so that significations/*sinifications* are always to come.

One might assume that Dotremont was fascinated with what we might call – borrowing the term from Heidegger and Badiou – the *evental* [*sic*] procedure of the trace and its strange time, that is to say, the fact that the graph is written only once but, at the same time, potentially rewritten by incalculable alterities. Hence, he will experiment with that temporality in semi-handwritten letters, spaced writings where the same word is written in diverse situations, as well as experiments with light emulating Gjon Mili¹⁵, and particularly *logoneiges* (I will be using the original name), which deserve special attention because of how the event is re-produced there – as we can see in this picture of a *logoneige* called “Jure moi de jouer” (“Swear me to play”), created in 1976 (Figure 3).

13 «When “reading” with the same method all my manuscript or almost all of it, then another of my manuscripts, I realized I wrote always Chinese. Then I remembered another story: that of the decoder, who applied a false grid to a coded text and was able to read perfect coherent sentences, even those he had expected to read» DOTREMONT, Christian (1998). “Signification et sinification” in *Op. cit.* 100.

14 “Better, the play of difference, which, as Saussure reminded us, is the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play [...] Here, therefore, we must let ourselves refer to an order that resists the opposition, one of the founding oppositions of philosophy, between the sensible and the intelligible [...] What am I to do in order to speak of the *a* of *différance*? It goes without saying that it cannot be *exposed*. One can expose only that which at a certain moment can become *present*, manifest, that which can be shown, presented as something present, a being-present in its truth, in the truth of a present or the presence of a present”. See DERRIDA, Jacques (1982). “Différance” *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press. 5-6.

15 «When hospitalized with tuberculosis at a sanatorium in Eupen (Belgium) in 1953, he starts employing the technique of Gjon Mili, the so-called “writing with light”: a technique with which Asger Jorn was also experimenting at the time, which consists in shining a flashlight into an open camera objective, thus creating a pattern of white lines on the developed photographic image». VAN GELDER, Hilde (2007). “Christian Dotremont’s theory of photography”. *Collective inventions surrealism in Belgium*. Louvain: Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography and Visual Studies. 227.



Figure 3.

As Hilde Van Gelder argues in her article “Christian Dotremont’s theory of photography”, the Belgian artist had a long connection with this art. He wrote several texts about the photographic image and he even began to create a treatise on optics.¹⁶ As their very name suggests, *logoneiges* follow the same procedure of the logogram – spontaneous stroke and transcription *a posteriori* –, although the material is not ink but iced water, and said transcription now becomes the title. Nevertheless, they could not be understood without bearing in mind his almost obsessive attachment to the Lapp territory, where he creates these “proto-land art” writings, throughout his 12 travels to Lapland from 1956 to his death. As mentioned above, he was attracted to Runic writing and the enormous snow fields, marked by what he described in a letter as “black sign-trees, sign-beings...”.¹⁷ Such concept of the landscape is undoubtedly touched by Chinese aesthetics, inseparable of its writing and its cosmical echoes, with which he was well acquainted.¹⁸

Though I cannot dwell on this issue here, for Chinese calligraphers writing-painting a landscape means rewriting, partaking of the graphs already

16 “Throughout the 1940s, Dotremont intensively studied the essence of the photographic act. Photography, he found, has offered a radically different perspective on the world, so different that he came to believe that the ontological principles of photography – as he distinguished them – can teach us an altogether new way of producing artistic images of all sorts”. VAN GELDER, Hilde (2007). *Op. cit.* 211.

17 “In this immensity of snow, this immense stationery with some black signs that are trees, beings, shacks, silos...” LAMBERT, Jean-Clarence (ed.) (1981). *Grand hôtel des valises, locataire Dotremont*. Paris: Galilée. 130.

18 He studied Mandarin and was fascinated with cursive script. Imitating the mad calligraphers, he would draw his logograms standing up, and he eventually married an oriental woman, Ai-Li, with whom he settled in Paris in 1941. Moreover, he gave voice to Pierre Alechinsky’s film *Calligraphie japonaise*, as a product of his travel to Japan and his correspondence with the avant-garde calligrapher Shiryu Morita.

in motion within nature itself¹⁹, graphs never distinct from those of art, in a sort of “earth writing” that takes the whole earth as a writing desk. Following Serge Linarès, “Oriental” calligraphy is characterized by the destruction of the difference between the one who writes and the one who is written.²⁰ Similarly, for Dotremont the landscape-page would be another body where the writing-trace is once again inscribed – perhaps the original body. It is no coincidence that Février, in his famous *Histoire de l'écriture*²¹, locates its invention in the footprinted snows of the Aurignacian or Magdalenian cultures, since so does Dotremont in these two logograms: “neigeuse source origineuse” (1978) // “–Good morning, says history/ to prehistory, / it is snowing/–It is a rest,/ answers prehistory.” (1964).

That alleged first vestige, that trace constituted by snow, is the logographic space for the 12 surviving artifacts in which Dotremont goes to the roots of writing, right back to “pre-literal writing” (in Derrida’s terms). He radicalizes the fugacity of the graph’s journey, in a desire to “write the words as they travel”, to quote one of his poems.²² In the *logoneige* – unlike the logogram – this engraving is extremely ephemeral, for there is no support: with the help of a stick or his own body (hands, feet), he draws a white-on-white graph – sometimes legible, sometimes not –, which from one moment to another disappears, and yet triggers, in this interval, the abovementioned event that writing is. We can read in one of them that we are facing a “new semantics”, a pre-literal one, which could not be read-seen were it not for the addition of another *strange writing*, the photographic one, which is key throughout this text (Figure 4).

19 «Thus, it translates his thoughts around “writing together with nature” into a collaborative and performative act, which can be now defined as a proto-Land art activity» VAN GELDER, Hilde (2007). Op. cit. 210.

20 “To give flesh to writing is, according to the lesson of eastern calligraphy, not to distinguish the object from the subject. There is no other imitation than rhythmic, since the phrasing becomes the occasion for a sensitive encounter between the writer and reality”. LINARÈS, Serge (2016). “La main calligraphe. Manuscrit et poéticité”, CHOL Isabelle; MATHIOS Bénédicte; LINARÈS Serge. *Livres de pOésie, Jeux d'eSpace*. Paris: Honorechampion. 544.

21 FÉVRIER, James (1948). *Histoire de l'écriture*. Paris: Payot.

22 “To write the words as they travel/ so much more than me/ as they rush to the top/ of their birth/or shiver from heat/ or from cold or suddenly weave themselves against the cold”. DOTREMONT, Christian (2004). *J'écris pour voir*. Paris: Buchet Chastel. 56.



Figure 4.

Contrarily to the immensity of that “écripaysage” (as Emmanuelle Pelard puts it²³), where the graph expands itself beyond the frame, here, however, the photographic frame encloses it again (in the exhibition market as well), setting a specific angle, annulling the spatial coordinates, while sending us back to black and white. In fact, in Pelard’s view this constitutes a third different creation, the “photo-logo-neiges”.

Even though it is true that we are dealing with a different device, I find it problematic to assume there is any evidence of what she describes as an “iconic semantism of the writing” or, in another article, as “a transcription of normal writing”²⁴, since another type of trace permeates this semantic system, one not submitted to the operations of the *logos* and which thereby breaks a “past perfect”: the cut of the light, that very light that melts – destroys – the snow-writing and, at the same time, that same light which perpetuates it and regulates the viewing of the *logoneige*. The instantaneity of the *logoneige* that dissolves echoes the instantaneity of the photograph that freezes, repeating a vestige so ephemeral that it can scarcely testify – probably the thinnest trace of those Dotremont has followed.

It is the thin transparency of the “natural trace” – if this paradoxical expression might be of any use – in contact with the “artificial trace” of silver halides that perpetuates “what-has-been”²⁵, following what Roland

23 PELARD, Emmanuelle (2011). “La passion de la trace: une genèse du logogramme et du logoneige de Christian Dotremont” *Trans* 12. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle.

24 “Moreover, by this gesture, Dotremont has chosen to restore the logogram to a material and linguistic framework, insofar as the snow-photo-logone is a photograph, with finite dimensions, also constituted by a transcription in normal writing, below”. PELARD, Emmanuelle (2013). “La photographie en réponse à l’utopie de l’écriture: le logoneige de Christian Dotremont”, *Textyles* 3. Liège.

25 BARTHES, Roland (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Barthes deemed the essence of photography. In the *logoneige*, Dotremont shows that every writing is written (performed) only-once and each-time, but it is, *at the same time*, rewritten elsewhere, here thanks to a luminous trace that preserves, in the almost imperceptible instant of the release, the slow fading of the graph.

It captures an interrupted, undone event, then, which aporetically provides some continuity to a “being-there” that literally never was. These sun-drunk swells of snow²⁶, in the words of another logogram, are moreover read only with Dotremont’s eyes. The trace of his eyes, that of his hands on the snow, as well as the light going through both of them in the silver trace, make the “photo-logo-neige” a real palimpsest of absent gestures. The stroke outlives us but on condition that it becomes a specter, a residue revived each time it is impressed on photographic paper. Rather than a “photo-logo-neige”, we might then be facing vestiges of *logoneiges*, which may be a more appropriate name to emphasize the strictly processual nature of these devices.

Consequently, and to conclude, the *logoneiges*, as opposed to logograms, actually represent the blind spot of logographic experimentations. We will never know their true aspect; only this artificial, prosthetic re-production remains, the only capable of rewriting them here, “or rather elsewhere”, as another *logoneige* reads.

The remainders of *logoneiges* show that the scriptural event cannot take place by itself, organically, but artificially, scripturally. Such representation lacking an original turns photography into another “writing machine”²⁷, another gesture, perhaps the one that best exposes this unresolved temporality in the artist’s work.

Thus, we would not be dealing with an index, as Pelard suggests, but traces of traces, whose first referent, a trace as well, has been erased – it is already out of sight. Literally, the *logoneige* disappears for having been seen, a consequence Dotremont never foresees when he draws them and, paradoxically, the highest peak of his experiments with writing. They are seen and erased by his own gaze or that of his companions: the photo-logo-neige is really a negative of the *logoneige*, its inverted double – a copy that does not correspond to any original or assume any meaning as given. Indeed, this artist searches for the original traces, but these were already there as latent images, open to any impression. In other words: there already was, in its origin, a repetition, a sign, a graph, the writing. He replicates a stroke that was already replicating itself. Finally, following Dotremont, if real poetry is

26 “Snow swell/ drunk of Sun” (1978, logogram, Dotremont-Hugo Claus, 60x40 cm, collection Claude Lorent).

27 Notes on the relationships between poetry and photography see ROMERO, Arantxa (2015). *Imágenes poéticas en la fotografía española. Las visiones de Chema Madoz y Manuel Vilariño*, Murcia: Cendeac.

that one where writing has its word to say, it would read in a pre-literal, ever-hiding gesture: “follow my traces” (Figure 5).²⁸



Figure 5.

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