

1. Refer to the footnotes on page 95 for explanations of some of these references.
2. The archive begins in October 1972 and ends in April 1974.
3. The other is *A Letter from Beirut* (1979, 50 min.)

Square, Mountain, Square: Etel Adnan's Double Signs

"There's a duality in my life as in my thinking, and it works because I accept it rather than favoring one side or the other. It's a dialectical movement. I accept that the same things please me and displease me, that something can be true and not true at the same time, that I am one thing and its opposite, and this ad infinitum."¹

SQUARE (I)

Etel Adnan did not study to be a painter. There was no instruction, no curriculum, no apprenticeship; she just began painting. She recently described this moment as follows: "Since the beginning, when I was in front of a canvas and I had no idea of where to go, I painted a red square."² As Adnan recalls it, her decision was impelled by an intense attraction to the sensuous materiality of unmixed red pigment: its luminosity and purity, perhaps also its sense of unconstrained potential.

This story begins to tell us something important about Adnan's singular sensibility. It does so in ways that transcend her vocation as a painter, extending not only to her work in other media (tapestries, artist's books, films), but also to her lifelong commitment to literature as a poet, novelist, playwright, and journalist. On its face, Adnan's story is almost disarmingly matter-of-fact: Having no idea how to start painting, she simply started painting, beginning with a basic shape in a primary color. If at first this might seem naive, whether willfully or not, in time one begins to sense something altogether different in Adnan's approach, something subtle, courageous, and even profound. And while we would do well to be skeptical of origin myths—especially those we tell about ourselves, or about art—there is nonetheless something compelling about this red square, about the quiet force it continues to exert across an interval of nearly 50 years.

In one sense this is because the red square serves as a kind of skeleton key to Adnan's oeuvre as a painter: first the early abstractions, then the subsequent turn to landscapes, which have been her primary

mode for decades. Surveying this body of work, we see traces of the motif again and again. One early canvas (*Untitled, #a14*)³ is structured by a bold seam of vermilion, a lateral band composed of smaller square and near-square forms, and offset by squarish fields of maroon, black, maize, and fern green. In other abstractions the square is partially obscured by other shapes: off-white blotches, putty-colored streaks. It seems to lurk in the background, as part of an underpainting; it appears as an afterimage, an echo, a lingering stain. In more recent paintings of Mount Tamalpais (*Untitled, #045, Untitled, #017*),⁴ the red square makes an uncanny, improbable return. Apart from spring wildflowers and a few species such as poison oak, which briefly change color in autumn, Adnan's characteristic deep red hue is scarcely seen in wild Marin. And yet here it is, punctuating views of the mountain's flank in winter and spring, jarring the otherwise even expanse of green and gold that covers the Northern California coast. There it is again, as an afterimage this time, suffusing a sunset seen over the Mediterranean from the Beirut Corniche. There it is again, and again.

Adnan has rejected the idea of progress in art, suggesting that some of her earliest paintings are her best and claiming that "the first works, like the first notes in a piece of music, hold everything that one will do in the future."⁵ If the red square, viewed retrospectively, seems to possess something like this potential, what might it tell us, apart from Adnan's preference for certain forms and compositions? One clue lies in her intense attraction to color, an experience she has compared to innocence, inspiration, direction, and even a kind of epiphany. "Pure colors," she has said, "are so beautiful that one does not dare to mix them."⁶

Such statements strongly recall those of Paul Klee, an artist for whom Adnan has expressed a deep sense of kinship, even something comparable to what psychoanalysis terms primary identification.⁷ If, for Klee, painting enabled a form of transcendence—"Color and I are one," he famously said—Adnan's love of color draws from a similar, quasi-primordial affinity with sensation. For both artists, this concern cannot be reduced to a kind of hermeticism, a cult of private meaning. Rather, it suggests a way in which a heightened attention to perception allows the age-old Kantian divide between phenomena and noumena to be bridged on a concrete, extra-philosophical level. To cite Klee's often-quoted phrase, "Colors are where our brain and the universe meet."⁸

The analogy between Klee and Adnan is powerful, and extends to their compositional sensibilities. Klee also operated between land-

scape and abstraction, and he had a similar interest in primary colors and fundamental geometric shapes. It could be overstated, especially if we fail to note Klee's long-standing engagement with color theory, both as a painter and a professor at the Bauhaus. (While Adnan has read her share of color theory, citing Josef Albers and Kazimir Malevich, she claims that it has had relatively little effect on her practice.)

Having said this, it would be a greater error to ignore another essential, but less obvious, precedent for Adnan: the revolutionary aesthetics of the Soviet avant-gardes. After all, the red square was one of the core motifs of Suprematism, as articulated first by Malevich and then reiterated by El Lissitzky. One could trace an entire history of early Communist aesthetics by studying the changing significance of the square: Malevich's pre-revolutionary abstract icons (*Red Square: Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*); El Lissitzky's 1922 children's book *A Suprematist Story of Two Squares in Six Constructions*; the intermedia experimentation of the UNOVIS collective, whose members signed their works anonymously with a black square, using this same symbol on badges and cufflinks to mark themselves in public; the sublation of painting into architecture, exhibition, and social space in the *Proun Room*; the plangent elegy of Lissitzky's *Memorial for Rosa Luxemburg*.⁹

Adnan is well aware of this history, and has in fact acknowledged that her love of red was deepened by its association with socialism.¹⁰ However true this may be, it brings us to a certain impasse. Is it really possible to draw equal inspiration from Klee and Lissitzky? Is the red of fresh pigment the same hue as the red of revolutionary aspiration? How, if at all, can we bridge the difference between an aesthetics of sensory absorption and a politics of committed engagement? To put the question another way: What sort of sign is the red square?

One answer comes from Adnan herself, who has said, "I live under a double sign."¹¹ In these reflections, I want to consider what it might mean to think of the square as such a sign—one that marks an affirmation of the tension between opposed tendencies. Adnan has avowed the need to ceaselessly work through such conflicts, positioning herself between things that are "true and not true at the same time."¹² This doesn't entail somehow simply accepting that one lives with contradictions; rather, this is something like a dialectical movement.

Having said this, we stand to lose her meaning here if we think of this term strictly through the lens of Marxian theory, with its familiar

teleology of escalating syntheses. Adnan's dialectic is thoroughly heterodox, almost to the point that one wonders whether to call it by that name. It might recognize Marxism, but one doubts the reverse would hold. If Adnan's practice embraces the rigors of observation, it is also deeply intuitive, evocative, and occasionally opaque. It is sensuous and cerebral, worldly and intimate, consistent and makeshift. Though full of oppositions, it does not seek to synthesize them, but rather to abide among them. In keeping with such an approach, this essay will chart movements between some of Adnan's many different concerns. Like Adnan herself, it will shuttle from Beirut to the Bay Area; from painting to poetry to journalism; from abstraction to lyricism to polemic. In doing so, it tries to avoid falsely reconciling her contradictions, her many double signs. Instead, it means to follow the feeling that Adnan evokes when she writes: "It's nice being here in discontinuity."¹³

MOUNTAIN

To the mountain, then. For Adnan this can only mean one place: Mount Tamalpais, which she has described as the most important "person" in her life.¹⁴ Since moving to Sausalito more than 50 years ago, Adnan has returned to Tamalpais again and again as a subject in her painting and poetry. Those who have lived in the Bay Area might well understand the powerful attraction of this mountain as a place where people, thoughts, and images can linger and dwell. People who know "Mt. Tam" can speak to its rich variety of distinctive, often contrasting features: dry woodlands and sparse chaparral on the eastern flanks; damp, dense redwood groves on the side that surges up from the Pacific. A hike can take one through numerous microclimates and even what seem like entirely different ecosystems; it might also cross the steady tourist traffic on Highway 1, a reminder that the mountain's protected habitats are not only adjacent to the nearby city, but gain their identity from opposition to it.

The presence of Tamalpais is strong in Adnan's depictions of it, despite their relative abstraction. Flashes of colors that might at first seem incongruous—slate, cherry blossom, cerulean—nevertheless recall the feel of the mountain's diversity, giving the paintings something like a sense of *terroir*, an impression of the distinctive qualities particular to a given place. This connection is surely the product of Adnan's decades-long practice of observing and recording her surroundings in Marin. Yet while each new landscape thus takes its place within a protracted

series—echoing the otherwise-unrelated long-term timekeeping practices of Hanne Darboven or On Kawara—the paintings are themselves produced in mere hours. Adnan never revises them. Perhaps it is this opposition that allows the paintings to evoke so sensitively the tensions between revelation and concealment, between the abiding and the transitory.

Adnan has spoken of the San Francisco Bay fog in terms that show a similar attentiveness to the larger implications of everyday natural phenomena. She has compared the arrival of fog over the mountain—a daily event during the summer months—to "the coming of a new living being, the entering in the world of an extraordinary event."¹⁵ One imagines her watching fog with the sort of reverie that many of us recall from childhood; a sense, perhaps only partly imagined, that solitary, immersive observation of the world might tell us everything we need to know about it. This state of absorption is not to be confused with solipsistic withdrawal. In a moving tribute to the deceased poet Youssef Ghoussoub, Adnan describes an official literary dinner at which Ghoussoub was present, but did not speak. Whereas some may have seen the poet's silence as shy or haughty, Adnan perceived "a superior communication," in which he was at once "absolutely present for everything" and "wrapped in a daydream."¹⁶

With this in mind, the mountain begins to take on other qualities, its abiding silence serving as a cipher for all that is present but unsaid, even unsayable. In this sense, Adnan's attraction to Mount Tamalpais marks her not as a landscape painter, but as an advocate for all the complex potential of interior life, for long, silent days given over to reflection, questioning, and craft. And yet the mountain is always touched by earthly conflicts, no matter how aloof it may seem. This is clear from its history, in which the mountain was expropriated by European colonists from the Coastal Miwok Indians who had lived there for centuries. According to legend, the Miwok held the peak to be sacred, but told early settlers that it was bewitched. Whether or not this was so, the very name of the mountain preserves a trace of these opposed claims of sovereignty. As Adnan wrote in her essay "Journey to Mount Tamalpais": "The Indian called the Mountain Tamal-Pa, 'the One close to the Sea.' The Spaniard called it Mal Pais, 'Bad Country.'"¹⁷ This double meaning is a place where what might seem to be an intensely solitary practice effectively turns itself inside out, opening out onto historical and political concerns.

One wonders whether this conflicted history resonates with

Adnan's, marked as it has been by a protracted experience of exile and civil war—first in her parents' lives, and then in her own. How could an adopted home, no matter how inviting, not still bear the imprint of the land left behind? We can see something like these traces in certain of Adnan's landscapes (*Untitled, #002, Untitled, #040*), which could portray either Northern California or Lebanon, no matter how disparate these may seem. We can sense this aftereffect even more strongly in her recent poem "Celestial City," which contains a stanza that opens by evoking the mountain's "magic over the fog," before swerving toward thoughts of sorrow, war, and the "funereal wave" of civilization. It closes, "blessed be the poor."¹⁸

SQUARE (II)

This returns us to the square—not the red square but the public square, the forum in which Adnan has long spoken. Her most explicit interventions in this sphere came in her work as a journalist in 1970s Beirut writing for *Al-Safa*, a start-up French newspaper.¹⁹ As Samir Kassir has written, the Beirut press at that time was "a microcosm of a microcosm," a hothouse of contestation reflecting the nation's increasingly fractious politics.²⁰ Within this volatile situation, Adnan carved out a role for herself as an outspoken culture editor, one not afraid to take confrontational stances.

In the absence of a stable democratic public sphere, Adnan and her colleagues set about modeling one. Adnan conducted interviews with artists such as Jean Khalifé and playwrights such as Thérèse Aouad.²¹ She wrote moving elegies for Ghousseub and other poets.²² She wrote incisive critical texts on the mediation of the U.S. war in Vietnam, examining how the perversely photogenic character of the war enabled it to function as a form of consumable entertainment, even as it also became "a ghost who haunts each family and who never appears." (Such a view deftly punctured the inflated sense of technological progressivism that characterized much early writing about the electronic media, most famously that of Marshall McLuhan.)²³ Adnan presciently wrote about the Algerian Revolution as anticipating the decolonization struggles that would sweep North Africa and the Middle East—struggles whose effects are still being felt today, and which in another sense have yet to be won.

In a text commemorating those Algerians who died fighting for independence, Adnan would write: "Let's give voice to these poets."²⁴ The analogy between revolutionary and poet is not new in Arabic litera-

ture, but neither is it a relic; in fact, it played a role in the recent uprisings of the Arab Spring.²⁵ Such a connection might prove jarring to those who expect Adnan's poetry to be contemplative, pastoral, or quietist, much as her paintings might initially seem to be. It is not just that the social character of language makes such remove untenable, as she has held on numerous occasions. Rather, it is that poetry can serve as a political catalyst through its capacity to reorder the categories by which we recognize, name, and "think" the world. In the poem "Celestial City," Adnan effects this remapping by cutting unexpectedly between New York and Baghdad, contrasting the "faithful stream" of the Hudson with that of the Euphrates, which "smells of corpses."²⁶ We are left with the sensation of these two rivers, one seemingly serene and the other befouled, merging together in an uncanny stream of verse.

A streak of brave pessimism cuts through Adnan's poetry and criticism, which has denounced the barbarism of neoimperial warfare alongside the more insidious forms of repression that shape everyday life. In a recent text, titled with the neologism "Enclosurement," Adnan lashes out against "people closing in on themselves," allowing their homes to become cages and their minds prison cells.²⁷ This acquiescent self-limitation in the North echoes the much more punitive forms of enclosurement that prevail in the South, whether in the form of refugee camps or the soft ghettoization produced by restrictions on migration and trade. (This is to say nothing of the ever-increasing enclosure of common resources under conditions of advanced capital.) Adnan's metaphor of enclosurement, which she draws from the progressively tightening architecture of Dante's *Inferno*, finds perhaps its strongest expression in her 2002 poem "Jenin," written to denounce the deaths of dozens of Palestinians in an Israeli military operation in a West Bank camp. In Adnan's account, these deaths are just one instance of a larger necropolitics that aims to turn entire cities into mass graves. From this perspective, it is as if the square has become malign, marking not absorption or liberation but constriction, rigidity, and imprisonment.

To what, then, should we turn, if even the square is a sort of double agent, liable to turn against us? Adnan's answer: doubleness itself, but only insofar as it is refracted through art, literature, hope or love. I close here by adding one more example of such duality to those already cited. In a recent essay, Adnan mentions one of Friedrich Nietzsche's last writings before his breakdown. "I am a rendezvous of experiences," the philosopher wrote, which Adnan interprets as a "double attraction"—his

movement toward the world, and vice versa.²⁸ In her opinion, this was not a marker of incipient madness, but rather of radical generosity and love. We might say that Adnan has herself served as a similar rendezvous, a point of encounter between the square and mountain, in all the senses of these multivalent terms. In doing so, she has produced countless acts of loving generosity, each of them marked by her own distinctive double signature.

Notes

1. Etel Adnan, "Etel Adnan in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Autumn 2011," in *Etel Adnan*, ed. Andrée Sfeir-Semler et al. (Beirut/Hamburg: Sfeir-Semler Gallery, 2012), 111.
2. *Ibid.*, 109.
3. This numerical label corresponds to the categorization of works in the same Sfeir-Semler catalogue: *Etel Adnan*, 18.
4. *Ibid.*, 40, 41.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. "I think that Klee is the first painter I fell in love with. I was obsessed. . . . A Paul Klee picture created an ecstatic effect in me. I was inhabited by these paintings. . . . [Klee's paintings] make you feel that you know his soul more than your own." *Ibid.*, 113.
8. As cited by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and Mind," *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 141.
9. For an analysis of the politics of Soviet modernism see chapter 5 of T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 225–97.
10. Adnan, "Etel Adnan in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Autumn 2011," in *Etel Adnan*, 109.
11. *Ibid.*, 111.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Etel Adnan, "October 27, 2003," published online in excerpted form at <http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/from-october-27-2003> (accessed on April 1, 2013).
14. Sean O'Toole, *Frieze Blog* "Looking Back, Looking Forward: Part 3," December 26, 2012, <http://blog.frieze.com/looking-back-looking-forward-part-3/> (accessed April 1, 2013).
15. Adnan, "Etel Adnan in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Autumn 2011," in *Etel Adnan*, 115.
16. Etel Adnan, "Tribute to the Departed Poet," *Al-Safa*, October 25, 1972, 9 (included in this volume on page 11).
17. Etel Adnan, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press), 15.
18. In its entirety, the stanza reads as follows: "The mountain is exercising its / magic over the fog / every day a fatal day; / sorrow's gut reaction is to ignore / war – a daily bread. / This civilization is spreading its / funereal wave, / blessed be the poor." Adnan, "The Celestial City," in Adnan, et al., *The Belladonna Elders Series 5* (Brooklyn: Belladonna Books, 2009), 5.
19. For an overview of this period, see Simone Fattal, "A Few Years in Journalism" (included in this volume on page 6).
20. For Kassir's account of journalism in pre-Civil War Beirut, see Samir Kassir, *Beirut*, trans. M. B. Debevoise (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 498.
21. Etel Adnan, "Chatting with Jean Khalifé," *Al-Safa*, December 13, 1972, 9 (included in this volume on page 37) and Etel Adnan, "The Poet Thérèse Aouad Makes Her Theater Debut," *Al-Safa*, January 24, 1973, 9 (included in this volume on page 49).
22. Etel Adnan, "Tribute to the Departed Poet," 9.
23. Etel Adnan, "Television and War," *Al-Safa*, October 30, 1972, 4 (included in this volume on page 21).
24. Etel Adnan, "In Honor of the Algerian Revolution," *Al-Safa*, November 1, 1972, 9 (included in this volume on page 29).
25. For an account of the role of poetry in the Arab Spring, see Mazen Maarouf, "The Poetry of Revolution," published online at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/201283014193414611.html>. [Accessed on March 11, 2013.]
26. Adnan, "The Celestial City," 7, 10.
27. Etel Adnan, "Enclosurement," *e-flux journal* #22 (January 2011), published at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/enclosurement> (accessed March 20, 2013).
28. Adnan, "The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay," in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed., *DOCUMENTA (13): The Book of Books* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 94.