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The Measure of Nothingness

Ceylan Öztrük at Friart Kunsthalle

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Ceylan Öztrük's solo show *Matter of non*, on view from October 3, 2021, until January 29, 2022, at Friart Kunsthalle, is an exhibition unraveling at the threshold of nothingness, understood as a generative field of possibilities. Or it is a material speculation on the relationship between sculpture and writing, marble and its carving, matter and its removal, art making and death, as well as a philosophical quest on the limits of human thinking and knowing, performed at the edge of the clouds of unknowing.





Exhibition view, Ceylan O?ztru?k, Matter of non, Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg, 2021, Courtesy of Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg

«So tell me something about the deceased.»[1] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P1] Thus begins Ceylan Öztrük's story in her book titled The Motive. It is the story of Mestor, a former sculptor who carves headstones in a workshop near a cemetery, and Jacques, a former academic who, in order to pursue his quest into the hereafter, entrusts flower seeds with questions and plants them in the graveyard soil hoping to harvest the answers of the dead from the flowers in bloom. Or so it seems. Delving further into the narrative, one begins to wonder if the real weaver of the plot is not rather the architect whose sister, diagnosed with cancer, is about to die and needs Mestor to engrave her tombstone. Or, perhaps, the tumor making its way inside the organism, or marble and its carving, matter and its removal. If the story is about the threshold of death and what lies on the other side, call it absence, nothingness, the void. A story about the palpable and the impalpable, the known and the unknown. The entry points are many, and so are the threads one can follow.
The same can be said of Ceylan Öztrük's exhibition Matter of non, currently on view at Friart Kunsthalle, that accommodates the book, displayed in the space as if it were a sculptural component. The Motive was written by the artist while preparing the show, the labor of writing and that of sculpting being carried out in parallel. The concomitance of the two practices resulted in the imbrication of the respective outputs. On one hand, the sculptures and the other works on display, lights and reflections included, seem to function as a spatialization of the prose?not as an illustration, but rather as an extension of it, enabling one to sense certain elements of the story such as the orange quality of the afternoon light pouring through the windows of Mestor's workshop, or the carmine shades and pulsing veins of the Rosso Levanto marble. On the other, the prose operates as a chart or map to navigate the exhibition, picking up the narrative threads running through it and suggesting several possible ways of breading them together. Matter of non and The Motive feed and augment the experience of one another, giving the impression that one could read the show and visit the book.





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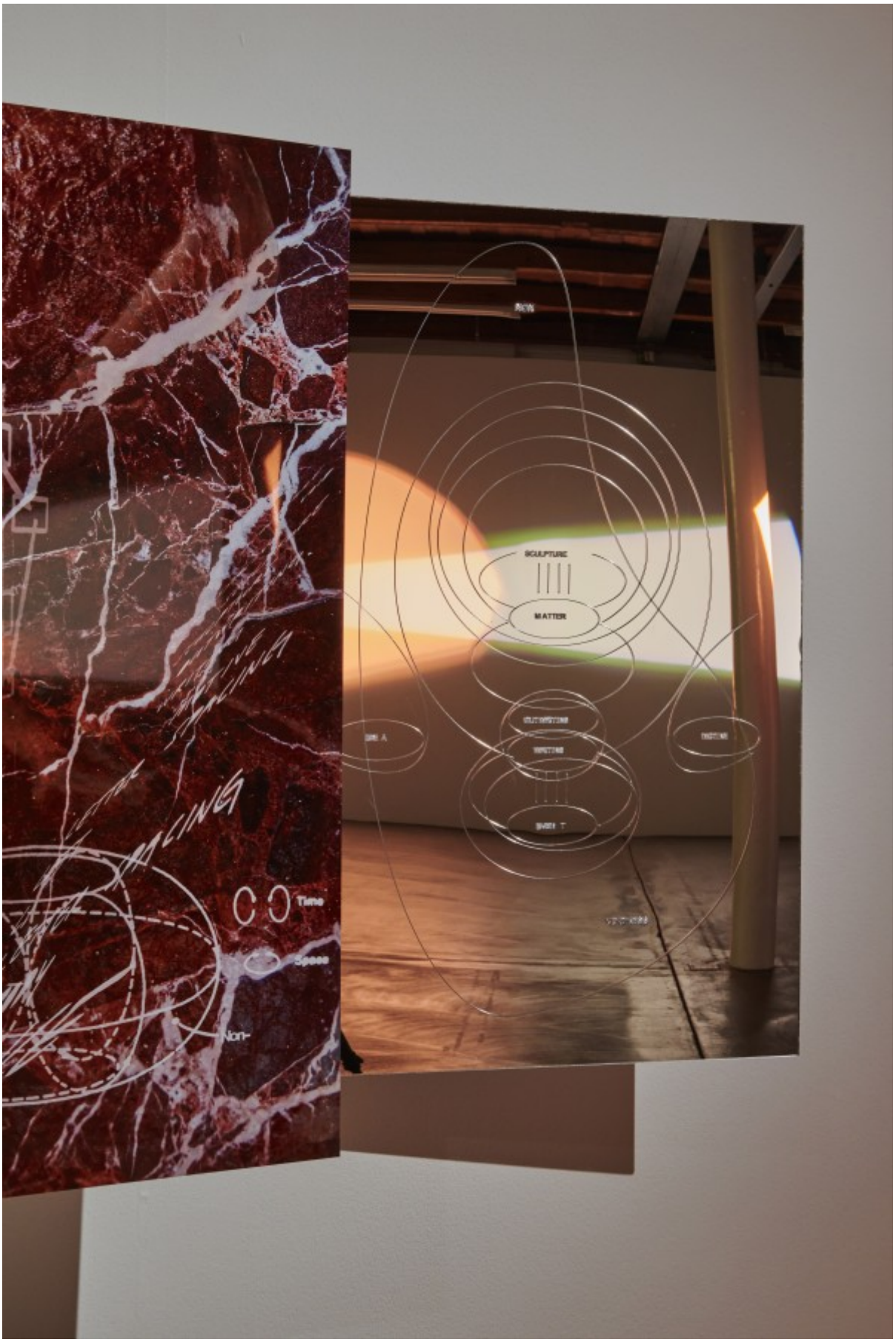
The resonance between the two invites the reader/visitor to reflect upon the entanglement of sculpture and writing, as it appears in the craft of tombstones. Both operations are indebted to absence, to the void, their matrix residing in the very act of carving, of removing matter. In other words, the void is the common denominator structuring both text and sculpture: an equation Öztrük materializes in her work, where spacing?that is, the empty spaces in between the written letters?is turned into a compositional principle. In *Matter of non*, spacing recurs

and operates as a generative field of possibilities, giving shape to the sequence of watercolors preluding the show, as well as to the marble sculptures and the mirror silhouette, with related reflections, where the outline of the interstices dividing hypothetical letters is detectable. These works crystallize the relationship of complementarity?and not of opposition?between matter and its absence, or between the finite form and its infinite possibilities of existing otherwise: a relationship that makes the two terms at once «mutually exclusive» and «mutually necessary», as described by Karen Barad after Bohr.[2] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P2] Like the tumor and the organism it grows into, to exist one needs to annihilate and replace the other. Yet without the other, one cannot exist, as the other engenders the very conditions for it to be.

This dangerous cohabitation constitutes one of the tropes in *Matter of non*, as well as a narrative drive in *The Motive*. In the latter, Öztrük employs another metaphor to express the mechanism of substitution «complementary» implies, shifting the focus from a biological process to a cultural practice. «The headstone business is intriguing,» she writes. «We put the dead in the same ground from which we quarry the marble. … The piece of marble is their last remnant on earth.»[3] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P3] Put differently, at the moment of the passing, the body of the deceased and the marble of the headstone swap places, making room for one another in their respective worlds, as they move on to occupy one another’s former position. It is all a matter of replacements, negotiated at the thresholds of existence.







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The lugubrious exchange invites the reader/visitor to ponder once again the proximity between death?or non-being, nothingness, the void?and the art of sculpting marble: a proximity evoked in Matter of non by the visceral look of the Rosso Levanto sculptures, which operate as a tacky metaphor of flesh and stone meeting in a piece of marble that looks just «like a piece of life.»[4] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P4] As such, it is put under scrutiny in the glare of clinic lights: placeholders for science, medicine, technology, and computation, and all the forms of institutionalized knowledge they engender, that in the book are embodied by the shady figure of a professor resolved to know «what to do with the deceased»[5] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P5] or how the dead is to be administered. In the show, the medical lights also lit a set of aluminum prints representing four portions of four different kinds of stone. Two of them depict the surface of the Rosso Levanto, zooming once again into its visceral appearance. The other two picture the abstract patterns inscribed into a darker stone, possibly the Nero Portoro Quartz also featuring in The Motive. The display seems to make visible diverse scales of thinking and knowing, evoked by the different materiality of the stones: the organic/human scale, the mineral/geological scale, the planetary/cosmic scale?so vast is the scope of the human epistemic ambition. The cluster of prints also includes two x-rays of a throat accommodating a tumoral mass and a diagram engraved on a mirror, which attempts to render the exhibition and make its underlying quest accessible.



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Yet, the mirroring surface hit by the glow of the clinic lights is blinding, it reveals the paradox of a device designed to resist what Eugene Thacker names the «horror of philosophy» and dispel the «clouds of unknowing,» or to provide an entry point to a blind spot that is, by definition, unknowable, unthinkable.[6] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P6] When it comes to those places the human mind cannot reach, the scientific method and its epistemic tools reveal their inadequacy, for the unthinkable is an excess that neither science nor reason can fully encompass. To probe the unknown and unravel the arcane of nothingness, perhaps

flower seeds would better light the way.

[1] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#a1] Ceylan Öztrük, *The Motive*, Fribourg: Friart Kunsthalle, 2021, p. 5.
[2] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P1] For more on the concepts of nothingness and infinity elaborated through the interpretative lens of quantum physics, I refer the reader to Karen Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness: Infinity, Virtuality, Justice*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012, pp. 4–17.
[3] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P2] Ceylan Öztrük, *The Motive*, p. 16.
[4] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P4] Ceylan Öztrük, *The Motive*, p. 19.
[5] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P4] Ceylan Öztrük, *The Motive*, p. 26.
[6] [/b-n-l/the-measure-of-nothingness/pdf#P4] For more on the «horror of philosophy» and the «clouds of unknowing,» I refer the reader to the preface of Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: The Horror of Philosophy*, vol. I, Alresford: Zero Books c/o John Hunt Publishing Ltd., 2011, pp. 1–9.

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