

Manuela Filiaci, *Everything Is a Hieroglyphic*, 1994, oil on paper, 115 x 42 in. (292.1 x 106.7 cm) (artwork © Manuela Filiaci)

The rhizome is an anti-genealogy.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

A certain streak of rebellion runs through various phases of Manuela Filiaci's work. She has produced huge, colored scrolls of oil paint on paper. The rolled edges of these objects challenge the idea of a painting hanging flat on the wall, under a nail and inside a frame, the way traditional paintings do. On the contrary, Filiaci's scrolls would like to be touched and opened out

even further. In addition, the scrolls' wavy sides reinforce the transformation of oil paint into free-breathing color—the latter acquiring the force of a being that wishes to be light and water at the very same time. Yellow, blue, red, and green move, flow, walk, and change themselves on the surface of the paper. Many of Filiaci's scrolls carry subtle markings like those left on an old wall in a place or a space soon to be lost forever.

See-through grilles, elongated arcades, off-center geometrical forms, the vanishing profiles of balconies, along with subtle innuendoes about street corners or temporary piles of things, float away or slowly emerge from fields of colors. The fields, in turn, develop out of palimpsestlike structures, as if one transient mood led to another passing atmosphere. The scrolls slide the eye across their roller-coaster surfaces, so that viewers may open themselves up to an uninhibited range of emotions. Filiaci's scrolls offer themselves as memory-screens, while the columnlike supports of monuments and the framing devices of architectural facades have been abandoned for a wave of color rolling itself off the walls onto the viewers' bodies.

A second, equally anticonformist gesture, more carefree than melancholic, motivates Filiaci's installation in which a bookcase becomes a boxcase. In comparison to the scrolls, Filiaci's work on boxes is less about the past and memory and much more about the fun of constructing something new. Yet, as the linguistic pun in the title itself suggests, *The Boxcase* relies on the technique of saying something by way of negation, namely to assert a series of formal intuitions, while hiding behind an ironic twist. Within this framework of hide-and-seek, the box itself becomes a structure open to many metamorphoses: it is linked to the suitcase but, in Filiaci's case, the box is almost always empty; it is also used to give gifts, but again, with Filiaci, the outside of the box is the gift; finally, the box is supposed to store something, but the artist makes sure to use so many boxes that it becomes impossible for the viewer to remember any one of them as the specific container of something important.

Each side of every box is painted, carefully yet spontaneously, until all the boxes, with their contradictory, playful facets, are arranged on the shelves at various angles. The final ensemble looks as if rows of boxlike books had freed themselves of cover and binding, beginning and end, to the point of acquiring a brand-new stance of their own, nearly pushing each other off the shelf, well outside the linear orientation of the written sentence. *The Boxcase* achieves a splendid oxymoron of anarchy and harmony. By having the outside count more than the inside, Filiaci overcomes memory through imagination.

## Artist Portfolio

Angela Dalle Vacche

### Scrolls, Boxes, and Trees: Manuela Filiaci's Work

The epigraph is from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 11.

Manuela Filiaci, *Something Absent*, 2000,  
oil on linen, 54 x 36 in. (137.2 x 91.4 cm)  
(artwork © Manuela Filiaci)

This rejection of memory, however, relies on color alone, since there is no predictable pattern to the refashioning of the boxes' volumetric shapes into multiple waves of quasi-abstract, semilegible hieroglyphs: mountain profiles, building contours, upside-down spires, open fans, chains, razor edges, broken umbrellas, slanted doorways, series of windows, hourglass shapes, balloon motifs, and all sorts of vegetable and geometric outlines inscribed on flat, arched, triangulated, split, stained, scratched, spotted, and shaded sections of red, yellow, green, blue, orange . . . As soon as it covers the box, the color behaves in an erratic fashion, by streaking, bleeding, invading, blocking, sustaining, and unraveling its grain under a private alphabet willing to generate a moving sequence of images. In *The Boxcase*, the box, by definition a closed space, becomes an open one, because the colored outside facets win over all lateral boundaries.

In the transition from the scrolls to *The Boxcase*, it is as if the architectural traces inscribed on the scrolls had returned with a new level of urgency in the chromatic writing of *The Boxcase*. Old, sketchy memories have become new imaginative leaps aspiring to an ornamental and self-referential status, so that their outlines lose all containment and unravel into a flamboyant array of color. In short, these boxes mark the end of classical architecture and the end of traditional writing, while they announce the beginning of a new kind of transitional signature ready to address the weaving of many strands of outside hierarchies or causal structures.

One could say that both the scrolls and *The Boxcase* turn architecture, painting, and literature into small, humble objects to be held, moved, opened, folded, and repositioned, as if representation for Filiaci was more a matter of living with art than looking at it. Comparable to beings that curl up in distress or restlessly change their shapes, the vulnerable scrolls and the whimsical boxes are the two stages leading to the discovery of a stronger and original voice in Filiaci's recent series on the motif of the tree. In keeping with the provocative stance of her previous works, Filiaci's trees have no roots and no tips. In a sense, they are all body, while the incongruity between their thick trunks and thin, truncated branches suggests an aura of vulnerability. On the other hand, the power of these trees lies in their margins, for no leaf resembles any other one, even when they stem from the very same twig or protrude from an armlike extension.

With an upward bent, little leaves stand up under an invisible sky, for these new forms of growth appear to have been abandoned on the earth, an invisible place where no root would dare to hide. Indeed, the trees themselves look like roots or remnants of trees. Once again, Filiaci takes the viewer on a walk where the architectural elements of her scrolls have been replaced by a strangely sparse forest of surviving vegetal beings. Suggesting the red-white-and-blue pattern of some national flag, a few trees stretch themselves into the infinity of an airless landscape. Yet, from time to time, the abstract interval between two trunks acquires a life of its own, and a foggy, pale, yellow night takes on a rose blush. With their branchlike arms open, these trees look like shamans chanting along a wave of empty and full spaces. To be sure, the tree is a visual icon traditionally associated with origins, derivations, influences, and levels of power. In complete opposition to this idea of the tree as genealogical model, the artist has proposed a dance of rhizomelike embraces.





Manuela Filiaci, *Real Cubism*, 2000, gesso and oil on cardboard boxes, dimensions variable (artwork © Manuela Filiaci)

Manuela Filiaci, *The Boxcase*, 2000, gesso and oil on cardboard boxes on wooden shelves, dimensions variable (artwork © Manuela Filiaci)

More specifically, the leaves never touch each other, but they all sing their joyous and painful differences. In comparison to the scrolls' retiring attitudes, or to the boxes' ambivalence about internal structure and external reception, these trees have come to terms with who they are, where they come from, and what they stand for. They are naked bodies, flaming cylinders, or radiating pipes; they can look like famished organisms or exude the drenched texture of underwater fossils. They do not hesitate to display their age, their experience, and, most important, their definitive, indelible acquisition of one single color, functioning like an unchangeable name. But this name is outside language, it can be only felt, exchanged, and spoken through the viewer's willingness to open up to the emotional risks of the colors Filiaci handles in such a polished, decisive way.

The vertical thrust of Filiaci's trees may hardly seem comparable to the horizontal tuber of a potato, which is the example most used to explain the rhizome as an alternative structure of development in contemporary life. Put another way, this descriptive model has emerged to replace linear history with more fluid links, since traditional social ties have been replaced by either temporary, virtual, or intentional communities. On the other hand, Filiaci's trees look like rhizomes due to their lateral and quasi-extraneous growths, while all their upward-drawn leaflets seem to lift each tree away from the gravitational pull of death, taking the heavy as well as the frail trunks away with them, into an aerial and utopian trajectory of hope and renewal.

Angela Dalle Vacche is an associate professor of film studies at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. She is the author of *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema* (Princeton, 1992), *Cinema and Painting: How Art Is Used in Film* (University of Texas Press, 1996), and *Diva: Early Cinema, Henri Bergson, and Italian Women, 1900-1919* (forthcoming, January 2007). She is also the editor of *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History* (Rutgers, 2002). With Brian Price she has coedited *Focus on Color: A Film Reader* (Routledge, forthcoming, 2006). She has taught at Vassar College and at Yale University, and she has also been the recipient of a Fulbright Grant, a Mount Holyoke College International Fellowship, a Mellon Fellowship, and a Rockefeller Grant.

Manuela Filiaci, born in Vicenza, Italy, works and lives in New York.