

## About the exhibition 'Palimpsest'

### Full title: 'Palimpsest: a sculptural investigation into materiality in the works of Annie Ernaux'

'Palimpsest' is a made-up word combining 'palimpsest' and 'self'. A 'palimpsest' is a document where one text has been erased (literally 'scratched out') and another written over the top. Annie Ernaux considers the palimpsest as a way of thinking about a kind of knowledge where past and present overlap. At the end of her book 'The Years' ('Les Années') she calls it the 'palimpsest sensation' ('la sensation palimpseste'). In the works of Ernaux, "*Each time the same event is re-written, it generates a new sense of opening, an invitation to reinterpret the past*"<sup>1</sup>. This statement by Ernaux scholar Elise Huguény-Léger emphasises how writing in Ernaux is akin to a palimpsest.

Annie Ernaux's writing is as much about writing as it is about events in her own life. Susan Diab noticed and was excited by how experimental Ernaux is in her work and how the material reality of life forms an ever-present in which her characters are situated. Diab steeped herself in Ernaux's writings out of a genuine desire to enter her world, which felt so much like her own, collecting visual materials along the way. Objects found on the street, photos taken of things seen on daily walks around the artist's neighbourhood or on her site-visit to St Andrews, words leaping off the page in French or in their English translation, which she combined and put into different arrangements in her studio.

In addition to these activities Diab carried out research in several areas finding about the origins and history of The Byre Theatre, using a digitised archive to peer into its early days. She talked to its architect about the development of the current building and its specific features, travelled to the Bodleian Library in Oxford to meet a curator of manuscripts and viewed and considered ancient palimpsests up close. She visited a war museum to touch silk parachutes in an attempt to understand their strength and airiness. And once a month throughout the process she met up with Elise and Fabien online showing them the visual forms which were emerging, and benefiting from their thoughts and ideas about Ernaux: "I learnt so much from this generous sharing of their scholarship as well as their own creative responses to my ideas and from reading articles about different, relevant aspects of Ernaux's writings, which they recommended to me".

Languages are the other main factor that contributed to the making of this exhibition: Diab's previous studies in French and German including research into

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<sup>1</sup> 'The present time of writing has no "authority value", as writing remains open to interpretations. Paradoxically, this movement of re-reading the self does not lead to a sense of completion of the literary work, nor does it constitute a finite story. Each time the same event is re-written, it generates a new sense of opening, an invitation to reinterpret the past.'

*Le présent de l'écriture « n'a pas valeur d'autorité », l'écriture reste ouverte aux interprétations. Il est paradoxal que ce mouvement de relecture de soi n'aboutisse pas à un effet de complétude de l'œuvre, ne constitue pas une histoire finie, arrêtée. Paradoxalement, chaque reprise d'une même situation génère une nouvelle ouverture, un appel à reprise du passé.* Elise Huguény-Léger, 'Annie Ernaux : une écriture palimpseste? Inscriptions, effacements et possibilités de réinvention dans son œuvre', in *Annie Ernaux : le temps et la mémoire*, eds. F. Best, B. Blanckeman and F. Dugast-Portes (Paris : Stock, 2014), pp. 51-68, p.66.

early German Romanticism, specialising in women and writing before taking up a life in art. The works in this exhibition bring languages and art together: *“the interplay between the two seemed natural and so was inclined to bring about creative sparking”*.

Take as one example the print entitled ‘Ma quête’, ‘My quest’ in English. It is hoped that viewers will also hear in that title the word ‘maquette’ denoting a small-scale model for a larger sculpture. Language, translations, slippages between one language and another, images arising out of and back into words and words giving rise to pictures, informed by memories and experience, all of this come into play in the making of the exhibition. That same print shows an image of a young girl dressed in first holy communion outfit, a Catholic rite of passage. The rays around her are from an agate, a semi-precious stone with bands of white arranged concentrically, she stands against a digitally manipulated image of a gate. Agate, a gate, maquette, ma quête. Whilst the title came after the image, the pairing of an agate with a gate happened entirely under the radar of the artist’s conscious mind.

An exhibition across languages requires a glossary and this provides some extra keys to open ways into the work. It is hoped that those and bringing your own experiences and repertoire of visual and verbal memories into the mix might create newer and fresher versions of the works, both Diab’s and Ernaux’s and activate new openings in the present to the past and back again.

[Byre World ‘Meet the artist’ talk Wednesday 9 October, free but you are advised book](#)

[‘Palimpsest’ exhibition blog](#)



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## About Annie Ernaux

Since the publication of her first book, *Cleaned Out*, in 1974, Annie Ernaux's writing has continued to explore not only her own life experience but also that of her generation. Some themes threaded through her work over more than four decades, relate to the body and sexuality; intimate relationships; social inequality and the experience of changing class through education; time and memory; and the overarching question of how to *write* these life experiences. A summary of ten main themes are engraved on the terracotta shards of 'Ostraka' on Level 2. With the French on the front and with the English translation on the underside, the fragments form a kind of 'revision' kit both for translation across French and English and as a way into Ernaux's concerns.

In Ernaux's work the most personal, the most intimate experiences are always understood as shared by others, and reflective of the social, political and cultural context in which they occur. Having published three autobiographical novels (*Cleaned Out*, *Do What They Say or Else* and *The Frozen Woman*), Ernaux turned away from fiction with the publication of *A Man's Place*, about her Father's life. In this process she has invented narrative forms that constitute new directions in life writing. The collective autobiography, *The Years*, covers the social and cultural history of France since her birth in 1940 to 2007.

Ernaux has also published diary extracts and 'diaries of the outside', where she describes her encounters with others in public spaces such as supermarkets, trains and the Paris metro. She focuses on the process of writing in her notes on work in progress and memoirs that link the description of intense personal experiences with reflections on writing.

Photography features throughout Ernaux's writing. Dispassionate, detached descriptions of photos of herself at different stages of her life as if she is writing about someone else make frequent appearances. The disconnect from the specifics of her own experience achieved by portraying photographs in this way is just one example of how her own life and memories overlap with the reader's, making them more general and reaching towards a more universal voice. The photographic project that forms *L'Usage de la Photo* where she collaborates with her then lover Marc Marie is perhaps her most direct reflection on how the photographic image and experience interconnect. The subtext of her own treatment for breast cancer throughout this work with the repeated imaging of her body done to her by those undertaking her medical care adds another dimension.

It is perhaps memory itself, and its sometimes involuntary revealing of images from earlier in life, which provide Ernaux with her richest store of imagery. Recalling a tube of toothpaste lying on a bed down to the detail of its brand name in a scene of huge importance from her young adulthood leads Ernaux to call memory "a lunatic props-mistress" ('la mémoire est une folle accessoiriste' in 'Mémoire de Fille'). Such seemingly random details provide a kind of path of stepping stones crossing over between the specifics of her own experience and those of the reader's.

Annie Ernaux was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2022 for "the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory."

[Official Annie Ernaux website](#)

## About Susan Diab

Susan Diab is a sculpture-focussed artist, writer and academic based in the South-East of England. Before art she gained a degree in Modern Languages (French and German) from Oxford University (1982-86) and carried out doctoral research into 'L'écriture féminine' (women's writing) within early German Romanticism. Her postgraduate studies led to a Hanseatic Scholarship (1988 – 1990) which she spent in Hamburg and was living in Germany when the Berlin Wall fell.

Over the past two decades Diab has worked on a number of public art commissions including with Hove Museum, the Towner Art Gallery and Hastings Museum and Art Gallery. In 2019 – 2021 she worked as artist-in-residence with the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, the Medical Research Council's Brain Networks Dynamics Unit (which is a neuroscientific research lab investigating cures for Parkinson's Disease) and with the Oxford branch of Parkinson's UK to work towards developing wearable technologies to improve the quality of life for people with Parkinson's.

With 'Palimpsest' she is building on insights derived from her earlier involvement with literary concerns to combine them with a visual arts research practice. The works on show derive directly out of her ambition to investigate how aspects of her previous literary and linguistic studies can be brought together with research into visual forms to shed new understandings on each. The exhibition seeks to extend the dialogue with Ernaux's work out from the context of an academic conference into the broader, public arena of exhibition in a public space, The Byre Theatre, within St Andrews University. The project 'Palimpsest' is a new venture and new collaboration between the School of Modern Languages at St Andrews and Diab's sculptural practice.

Her previous published writings investigating the social context existing around personal experience, fit within an academic approach which has come to be known as 'autoethnographic' research. In 2018 Diab devised and curated an exhibition called 'Autoethnos' shown in C&C Gallery, London. For this she created five new sculptural forms as 'portraits' of the experience of existing and growing up in her primary family context to see how autoethnographic approaches could translate directly into visual forms.

Diab is a founder member of the Artist Studio Group APEC (Art Producing Economic Community) in Hove which celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. She now holds an Honorary Research Fellowship at the University of Brighton where she was a Senior Lecturer in Fine Art Critical Practice.

["Palimpsest" exhibition blog](#)

[University of Brighton Research profile](#)

## Glossary of terms

**A is for Pomme** 'Pomme is French for 'apple'.

**Canard** 'Canard' is French for 'duck' as in the water bird. A 'canard' is also used in English to mean a 'hoax' or a 'baseless rumour'.

**Ostraka** An 'ostrakon' was a sherd of ceramic which would have been used as voting slip by ancient Greeks upon which citizens could write the names of those politicians they wanted banished from the city. After they were used they were thrown onto rubbish tips so large collections of them have been uncovered by archaeologists. It is from this word that we get the word 'ostracise'. Ostraka is the plural of 'ostrakon'.

**C'est ça** French for 'that's it' or 'this is it' is used in conversation when agreeing with something someone else says. In an interview with Michelle Porte Ernaux uses this phrase twice, once to refer to when she knows she's managed to put successfully into writing just what she was trying to say and another time to refer to the entire project of writing itself as being 'it' as in 'the point of existence'. It is in this paragraph as well that Ernaux compares words to stones and writing with lifting rocks from a riverbed.

**Chose** Past tense of the English 'to choose' as in 'I chose something' but also 'la chose' is French for 'thing'.

**Fantom** An old-fashioned spelling of 'phantom', a ghost.

**Gentle mortal** From a quote in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' a play by William Shakespeare and is a term of endearment used by the Queen of the Fairies, Titania, towards the character called 'Bottom' with whom she has been tricked into falling in love and whose head has been transformed into a donkey's while he was sleeping.

**Giclée print** A high quality print made on a large-format printer using between 8 and 12 jets of ink as opposed to the more usual 3. The French verb 'gicler' means 'to spray' or 'to squirt'.

**Ma quête** French for 'my quest'. It is a homonym, or a word that sounds the same as another word, for 'maquette', which is a French word used in English to denote a small, scaled down model for a larger sculpture.

**Monde** 'Le monde' is French for 'the world'.

**On the tapis** 'Tapis' is French for 'carpet' or 'tapestry' and the French phrase 'sur le tapis' literally means 'on the carpet' and is used to mean 'on the table (for discussion)' or 'up for discussion'. The French word 'tapis' is used in the English phrase 'on the tapis' with the same meaning, though it is possible that this is more usual in US English.

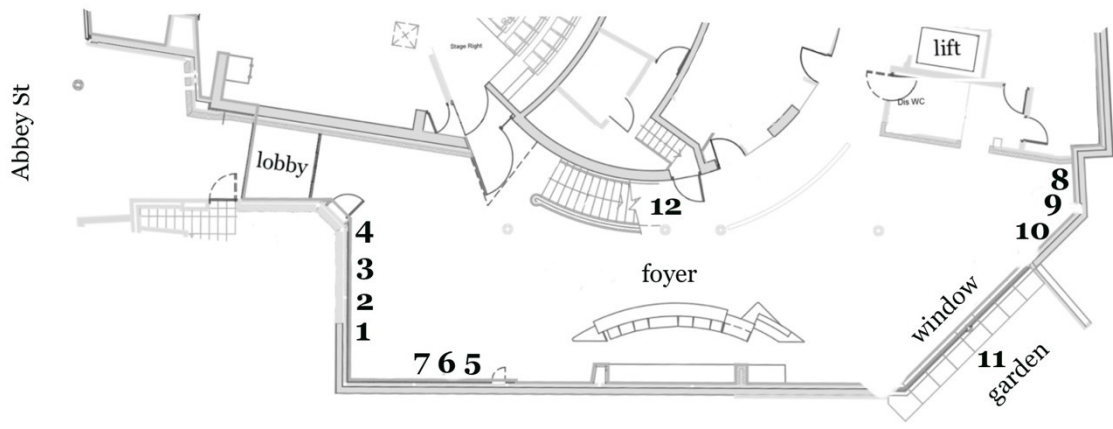
**Palimpsest** A 'palimpsest' is a document where one text has been erased (literally 'scratched out') and another written over the top.

**Train-train** 'Train' is French for 'train' and 'le train-train quotidien' means 'the daily routine'.

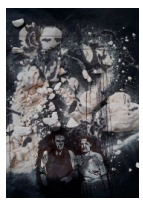
Compiled by Susan Diab

**'Palimpsest' Exhibition Key to location of works**

**Level One Byre Theatre**



1 – 10 are giclée prints



**1** *Ancestors*



**2** *Vroom*



**3** *Group*



**4** *Fantom*



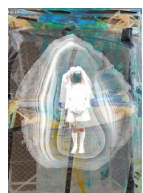
**5** *Chose*



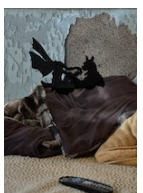
**6** *Canard*



**7** *You guys*



**8** *Ma quête*



**9** *Gentle mortal*



**10** *Le train-train*



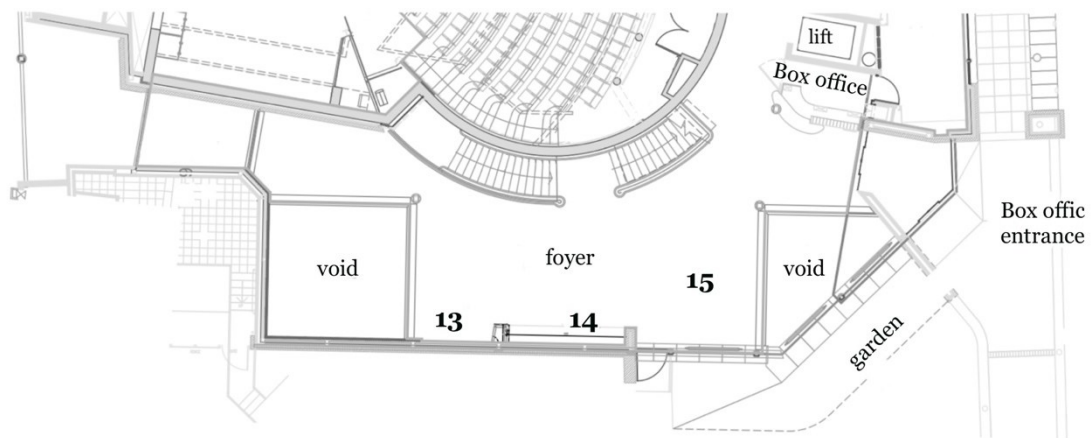
**11** *For all those denied an education, ceramic (in garden outside)*



**12** *On the tapis, carpet, granite*

## 'Palimpsest' Exhibition Key to location of works

### Level Two Byre Theatre



**13** *Sign*, die-pressed metal



**14** *Ostraka*, terracotta, velvet, wood



**15** *A is for Pomme*, repurposed computer packaging, brass

All works are for sale, price upon application to the artist: [info@susandiab.com](mailto:info@susandiab.com)



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## Thanks and credits

The artist thanks:

Annie Ernaux whose writing inspired the whole exhibition. Thank you for making the entrance to The Universal that bit wider. Annie Ernaux, dont les livres ont inspiré toute l'exposition. Merci d'avoir rendu plus large l'entrée à L'Universel.

Élise Hugueny-Léger and Fabien Arribert-Narce for your support, encouragement, scholarly and creative insights and friendship. *Elise et Fabien pour votre appui, votre encouragement, vos contributions érudites et créatives et votre l'amitié.*

Jan McTaggart Deputy Director and Head of Programme and Marketing and team at the Byre Theatre.

The University of St Andrews' Impact and Innovation Fund and team.

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Dr. Joanna Allen, Research Impact Manager, The University of Brighton.

Dr. Peter Toth, Cornelia Starks Curator of Greek Collections, Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Charles Hutcheon and James Renwick at Tangmere Military and Aviation Museum, Chichester.

And John for everything.