The work of Antoni Tàpies does not fall neatly within the parameters of traditional art history; for, customarily, it has been lodged between two worlds, that of the modern, which was coming to a close when the Catalan artist began his career in the early 1950s, and that of the postmodern, which had yet to manifest itself. Tàpies's painting is perhaps too object-based for critics who sought an essential Greenbergian purity and too gestural, expressionist, and constrained by the restrictions of the frame for those who focused on the aesthetic of the expanded field, as defined by Rosalind Krauss. However, the vivacious welcome his oeuvre enjoyed from critics such as Michel Tapié, Giulio Carlo Argan, and the Spanish writer Juan Eduardo Cirlot might today seem excessively personal and mystical, remnants of a humanist past that are now distant, remote.

Heir to Spain's brilliant early avant-garde, whose most celebrated members included Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Salvador Dalí, Tàpies is unquestionably the leading figure in the country's art world of the second half of the twentieth century and has remained an influential presence in Spain for over sixty years. In addition to his work as an artist, his numerous activities and initiatives (for example, he founded one of Barcelona's most active art centers) keep his name in the spotlight, public acclaim that has often masked his art. As a result, the discourse around his work has been reduced to cliché. More interested in responding to larger and more general issues than to those relating specifically to his own work, he has been relatively silent with regard to his painting and, with the exceptions of his theoretical texts "Communication on the Wall," "Nothing Is Mean," and "Art against Aesthetics," he has not offered sufficient keys to an understanding of his practice.

What is unique about the work of Tàpies? Why does it still continue to attract us? First, perhaps, because his paintings do not conform to any canon. To describe them as Abstract Expressionist or Informalist is imprecise. It represents an attempt to view the work through concepts that the artist had rejected by the time he had produced his mature work (the so-called matter paintings). While it is true that his acknowledged references originate in Miró and Picasso and that his elective affinities are found in Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell, Tàpies belongs by age and attitude to a generation in which the mark of the ephemeral and the use of writing is fundamental. Although he expounds opinions that contradict the views expressed here, a position that undoubtedly results from particular historical contexts, such as that of Spain under Franco, his work engages the fringes of the modernist legacy. While modernist painting was fundamentally nonnarrative, antirhetorical, flat, and painterly, Tàpies's art is based in narrative and delights in rhetorical devices; it does not respect the flatness of the canvas but instead folds back onto itself. Tàpies explores the materialist basis of painting in an exceptional manner. His work reflects both the material of the form and the form of the material, without annulling their differences as orthodox modernism would. Tàpies's works maintain a structural ambiguity that complicates their assimilation into systems that gravitate toward normalization and commodification. Split between object, painting, and writing, his works have sculptural and tactile qualities that, while clearly engaging with the precepts of painting, avoid any form of idealism. As a result, despite the evidence of a certain inclination toward aestheticism, Tàpies's paintings never fall into mere decoration nor could they be described as fetichistic. To the contrary, his virtuosity is instilled in the form of rhetoric—in a material form of writing that cancels out the decorative.

When Tàpies is painting, he is actually writing. As a successor of Mallarmé, he reinterprets "A Throw of the Dice" through Antonin Artaud's notion of abyssal experience. The passivity of the noun is thus replaced by the transitive nature of the verb: Tàpies is not a painter, rather he paints; and by doing so he opens up fissures in our perception of a seamless world. His canvas is the sheet of paper, the skin through which we, the viewers, might experience the world and tease out our relationships to it. Thus the action of writing constitutes the limitless ineffable element found in this heterodox tradition of modernism. In contrast to works defined by Socialist Realism, a popular narrative form of the 1940s and 1950s, Tàpies's painting can never be described as illustrative. Instead, his painting is political in its poetics. As Jacques Rancière alleges, works of art are announcements that transform our perception of the world. The more artistic they are the more political they are.

For Tàpies, art is intrinsically linked to magic—magic more akin to the illusions conjured by a fairground magician, however, than the shamanic rites invoked by Joseph Beuys. Nonetheless, Tàpies is aware of the cynicism of an era in which classification devours all and in which creative work is located at the center of our economic system. In his practice, there is no room for the Romantic idea of the artist as demiurge, as the possessor of universal and transcendent truths. The artist's attempt to bring about political change has been defeated time and again in the modernist era. Tàpies knows that art is trickery, and what is important is not the final result but the game itself, the emotional relationship established between artist and viewer through the object. Herein lies the mystery of the artistic act; and that unmentionable secret allows us to exist or coexist with no functional requirements or imposed identities.

Manuel Borja-Villel, Director, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid
Antoni Tàpies: The Resources of Rhetoric
Dia: Beacon, May 16–October 19, 2009

1. Ni portes ni finestres (No Doors or Windows), 1993
   Mixed media on wood
   118 1/4 x 98 3/8 x 61 1/8 inches (300 x 250 x 15.5 cm)
   Private Collection, Barcelona

2. Cos de matèria i taques taronges (Body of Matter and Orange Marks), 1968
   Mixed media on canvas
   63 3/4 x 51 1/4 inches (162 x 130 cm)
   Private Collection, Barcelona

3. Palla i fusta (Straw and Wood), 1969
   Assemblage on canvas
   59 x 45 5/8 inches (150 x 116 cm)
   Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona

4. Gran vernis sobre fusta (Large Varnish on Wood), 1982
   Mixed media on wood
   76 3/4 x 133 3/8 inches (195 x 340 cm)
   Fundación Telefónica; long-term loan to Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

5. Braç (Arm), 1985
   Mixed media on canvas
   68 3/4 x 118 1/4 inches (225 x 300 cm)
   Private Collection, Barcelona

6. Pintura-relleu (Painting-Relief), 1945
   Oil on canvas
   18 1/8 x 15 inches (46 x 38 cm)
   MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Fons d'Art de la Generalitat de Catalunya

7. Composició (Composition), 1947
   Oil on canvas
   15 x 18 1/8 inches (38 x 46 cm)
   MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Fons d'Art de la Generalitat de Catalunya; Former collection of Salvador Riera.

8. En forma de cadira (In the Form of a Chair), 1966
   Mixed media on canvas
   51 1/4 x 38 1/4 inches (130 x 97 cm)
   Private Collection, Barcelona

9. Pintura ocre (Ocher Painting), 1959
   Marble dust, sand, pigment, and latex on canvas mounted on wood
   95 x 74 1/8 inches (241.5 x 190 cm), unframed
   MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Fons de l'Ajuntament de Barcelona

10. Gran matèria amb papers laterals (Large Matter Painting with Side Papers), 1963
    Mixed media on canvas
    102 1/8 x 76 1/4 inches (260 x 195 cm)
    Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona

11. Roig i negre amb zones arrençades (Red and Black with Removed Areas), 1963–65
    Mixed media on canvas
    64 x 64 inches (162.5 x 162.5 cm)
    Private Collection, Barcelona

12. Quatre quadrats grisos sobre marró (Four Grey Squares on Brown), 1959
    Marble dust, sand, pigment, and latex on canvas on wood
    76 3/8 x 66 1/2 inches (194 x 169 cm)
    MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Fons de l'Ajuntament de Barcelona

13. L'escala (The Ladder), 1974
    Mixed media on wood
    98 3/8 x 118 1/8 inches (250 x 300 cm)
    Fundación Telefónica; long-term loan to Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

14. Matèria en forma de peu (Matter in the Form of a Foot), 1965
    Mixed media on canvas
    51 1/4 x 63 3/4 inches (130 x 162 cm)
    Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona
Antoni Tàpies was born in Barcelona, Spain, in 1923, into a family of booksellers and Catalan nationalist politicians. During protracted periods of illness in his adolescence, he began drawing and developing a serious interest in literature. In 1944, after abandoning law studies at Barcelona University, he began to work as an artist. Tàpies first exhibited his work in the late 1940s and had his first solo exhibition in 1950 at Galeries Laëtianes, Barcelona, and his first New York solo exhibition in 1953 at Martha Jackson Gallery. He first traveled abroad to Paris in 1951, where he met Pablo Picasso, and in 1953 he visited New York, where he met Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Hans Hofmann. In 1984, he established the Antoni Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona. Retrospective surveys of his work have been presented at such venues as the Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover, Germany (1962), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1962), and the Kunsthauz Zurich (1962), the Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna (1968), Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1973), Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (1977), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1980), Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf (1989), and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (2000). In 1993, Tàpies and Cristina Iglesias represented Spain at the 45th Venice Biennale. Tàpies lives and works in Barcelona.

Bibliography, arranged chronologically