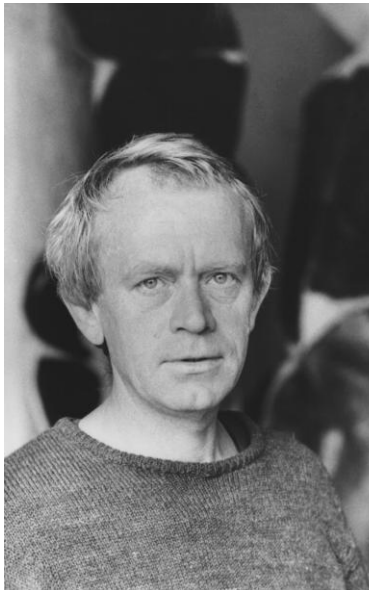


## Paul Rodgers/9W Obituary

RECLUSIVE EUROPEAN ARTIST, SIMON HANTAÏ IS DEAD AT AGE EIGHTY FIVE  
 (BORN BUDAPEST 1922 - TO PARIS 1948)

**Simon Hantaï, artist of legendary reclusion, who nevertheless enjoyed almost mythical status in the French art world and a major position in the Pompidou Center's account of post-World War II art, died in his sleep during the night of Thursday, September 11, at his home in the 14th arrondissement of Paris.**

Hantaï's American reputation was mostly confined to specialists, although he exhibited in New York with the Pierre Matisse Gallery during the nineteen seventies and again in 1982 at the André Emmerich Gallery. He never personally visited the United States.



Simon Hantaï. E. Boubat, 1968

As commentators, beginning with André Breton, have pointed out over the years, Hantaï was a fiercely independent artist, motivated above all by an ethical reflection on art. Throughout his career he insisted, uncompromisingly, on the aesthetic primacy of art over its commercialization. This defense of art's integrity obliged Hantaï to live in self-imposed isolation, yet he saw his work as deeply engaged with the world and with the question of human fate.

The aesthetic story of Hantaï's career is also very complex. He continued to successfully explore the aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism with original, major work in the 1960's, when the consensus was that it would be impossible to make significant painting after Pollock. He also strongly refuted the 'formalist' criticism of abstract painting, then current, insisting instead that art must contain vital intellectual content. Further, the technique of painting that he invented, called 'the folding method', pointed the way towards the 'Process' aesthetic of 1970's art, thus allowing Hantaï's thinking to anticipate the position of the American avant-garde land artist and theorist Robert Smithson. Hantaï's aesthetic position refuted the notion that advanced contemporary art would in the future be the exclusive preserve of sculpture and new media.

Simon Hantaï was born December 7, 1922 in Bia, a small rural town outside Budapest, Hungary. He was of Roman Catholic Swabian heritage, his ancestors having fled religious persecution in post-Reformation Germany. He later recollected that in his rural environment there was no tradition of visual art but that he identified with the reformation music of Schutz, which his forbearers had brought with them under special papal dispensation. Three of his sons, Jérôme (gamba), Marc (flutist) and Pierre (harpsichord) would later emerge as prominent interpreters of the Baroque on the contemporary classical music scene. He further recollected that he had lived to the age of sixteen without access to electric light. For an artist whose career spanned the second half of the twentieth century, and remained at the forefront of artistic innovation, rather than signifying an anachronism, this remark may be taken to question the claim of technology to represent the sole measure of modern culture.

He studied at the School of Fine Arts in Budapest and was prominent in anti-Nazi student circles during the War, narrowly escaping detention and quite possibly worse. After the War, he presented a manifesto of free artistic expression to Georg Lukács, who would briefly become Minister for Culture in the pre-Soviet Hungarian revolutionary government of 1956. Hantai recounted that he was told, perhaps ruefully and with regret by Lukács, that he should come back to see him in fifty years. Shortly afterwards, Hantai left Hungary with his newly-wed wife Zsuzsa. They first crossed Italy on foot, visiting the sites of the Italian Renaissance. Then, when summoned back to Budapest, where he would undoubtedly have been sent to Moscow for integration in the Soviet art system, they made their way to Paris, taking up permanent residence there in late 1948. In 1966, Hantai became a naturalized French citizen.

In Paris, Hantai quickly began to learn about developments in avant-garde artistic circles and gravitated towards the Surrealist movement that André Breton was intent on relaunching, after his return from war-time exile in New York. According to the story, Hantai anonymously deposited an art work outside Breton's apartment door, which led to his first exhibition at the Etoile Scellée Gallery in 1953, prefaced by Breton himself, who wrote: "Again, as it happens once every ten years, a great new beginning ...". However, Hantai would not long remain affiliated with the Surrealists. He became interested in the 'new American painting', which would be known by the name of 'Abstract Expressionism', and especially in Jackson Pollock. He was disappointed to be told, on inquiring more closely of André Breton and Marcel Duchamp about this strange and exciting new art, that he should not pay it attention. The artist later recollected that Duchamp, in exasperation, finally exclaimed to him: "Alright, if you insist, take Gorky, but above all, not Pollock, if you follow him you will be lost!"

However, the questions raised by Pollock's art seemed central to Hantai, especially the Surrealist technique of 'psychic automatism', derived from Freudian psychoanalysis, as a means of achieving access to the unconscious life of the mind. He broke in 1955 with Breton and the Surrealists with a letter in which he declared his intention of exploring "the non-figurative consequences of automatism."

What had originally interested Hantai the most in Surrealist art was its openness to the exploration of new techniques, which was strongest in the work of Max Ernst, notably collage. He also stated that what interested him in the American painting of the nineteen forties and fifties was that it uncovered "what was really at stake in modern art, beyond aesthetic considerations, the non-formalist aspect."

Over the next few years, Hantai cast restlessly about in different styles, quickly abandoned, until in 1958 he set himself the task of attempting to copy, in minute, illegible script, throughout an entire calendar year, the accumulated theological, philosophical and poetic wisdom of western culture, in an apparent effort to overturn language and extract its pictorial essence. Hantai has stated that he was driven to undertake this work out of desperation. Such feelings were shared by many in the post-war period: Samuel Beckett and Barnett Newman, among others, notably come to mind. What emerged, in Hantai's case, was a beautiful, mysterious and monumental painting, measuring almost 11 x 14 ft. in size. Much as was the case with Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the painting perplexed Hantai's inner circle and remained in the shadows of the artist's studio for almost two decades, until it was illuminated by a ground-breaking text from the French critic Marcelin Pleynet in the catalogue for the artist's 1976 mid-career survey exhibition at the French National Museum of Modern Art, then housed on Avenue President Wilson in Paris. The painting, titled *Ecriture rose* – 'Rose-Colored Writing-Work' –

now constitutes one of the cornerstones of the Centre Georges Pompidou's permanent collection and figured as the frontispiece for the catalogue of the museum's summer 2008 exhibition *Traces du Sacré*. In his preface to the exhibition catalogue, Alfred Pacquement, director of the Centre Georges Pompidou, heralded the painting as "a timeless masterpiece".

The *Ecriture rose* painting took Pollock's technique and focused it on the notion of 'process' in language. In doing so, it allowed Hantai to break through to his own original, signature technique of painting, known as 'the folding method'. This technique, in which the unstretched canvas is folded, so that a surface of positive and negative space is created, situated art at the cross roads between modern philosophy and science where the origin of time and the cosmos are explored. For Hantai, the folding method offered the freedom to reinvent form and color, to meditate on what is given for the eye to see and what remains invisible.

The folding method reflected Hantai's understanding that modern methods of industrial production in economic life were having a vast impact on subjective experience. Hantai intended the folding method as a response to this predicament, and it is in this respect that Hantai's work can be related to Andy Warhol and Minimalism.

Beginning in 1960, with a series titled the *Mariales* or 'Cloaks', the theme of landscape is clearly evident. A later series, the *Meuns* of 1967-68, turns to consider the figure. With the *Studies* of 1969, a new dislocation of form enters into play and the white background of the canvas asserts its independence. The artist stated, "It was while working on the *Studies* that I realized what my true subject was: the resurgence of the ground beneath my painting." In 1973 with the *Whites*, the white canvas ground is given full and active expression. The theme of energy releasing light and revealing color became central to the artist's concerns. However, in the early *Tabula* paintings, in which he explicitly referenced the Minimalist grid, Hantai will also look back to personal memory, notably referring to a photograph taken around 1918 of the mother that he had been forced to leave behind when he went into exile.

Hantai never returned to Hungary. Again, his attitude towards his homeland may have resembled that of Picasso who swore never to revisit Spain as long as Franco was alive. Hantai felt the division of Europe into East and West keenly. The folding method expresses this physical and cultural disruption in its sundered forms. Not even when the Communist system collapsed and the borders were opened did the artist relent. By then it was too late for him. Near the end of his life, more than ever, everything for Hantai had to be said, and lived, through painting. However, the future may recognize that a consolation, if not a cure, for the tragedy of industrial civilization in the two World Wars of the twentieth century was pre-figured in Hantai's art. Nor did Hantai ever lose his attachment for his native home. He would walk on the open expanses of the Isle de France, in the vicinity of his summer residence near Fontainebleau, mentioning on one occasion to this writer that it reminded him of the Central European plains of his childhood.

Hantai exhibited regularly in Paris with his long-time dealer Jean Fournier, first at the Galerie Kléber, where Fournier was director, and then at the Galerie Jean Fournier. He also had numerous museum exhibitions in France, notably his mid-career survey in 1976 at the Musée d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou. Hantai represented France at the Venice Biennial in 1982. Shortly afterwards, he announced that he would cease to exhibit, and withdrew into a life of reclusion.

In 1998, looking back, he stated to Le Monde newspaper:

“The reason was that I became uncomfortable with the situation. I felt that the art world was going wrong. I was starting to receive commissions. I was being asked to paint the ceiling of the Brussels opera house. Society seemed to be preparing to paint my work for me. I could have obeyed, many, perhaps most, painters do. The prospect did not coincide with my desire. (...) I withdrew from the center, because the ambition to occupy a position at the center of things has no meaning. It prohibits you from maintaining an independent vision.”

In 1993, then director of the Pompidou, Dominique Bozo, had announced an Hantaï retrospective in the museum's calendar, to open October of that year. The exhibition never took place because the artist declared his unwillingness. Nevertheless, in 1997 at the age of seventy-five, the artist made a donation of five major paintings to the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris as a gesture to the city which had received him from political exile 50 years earlier. The museum responded with an exhibition and a catalogue. Hantaï agreed to show his late work in an exhibition titled, *Leftovers and other Paintings*, at a private art foundation in Paris in 1998. The following year Hantaï also showed a selection of works at the Westfälisches Landesmuseum in Münster, Germany. This exhibition spanned the folding method, 1960-1995, curated by Erich Franz, and included a catalogue, and was carefully overseen by the artist.

After this last show, Hantaï returned to his life of reclusion and maintained public silence until his death. His last years were partly occupied by a joint endeavor with the leading French philosophers of the day, first Gilles Deleuze, and later Jaques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, with whom he published a book, *La connaissance des textes*, which serves as a postscript to his oeuvre.

The *Leftovers* series constitutes a distinct and authentic 'late phase' in the artist's work. Coming into existence some fourteen years after they were originally painted, the *Leftovers* in some concrete sense may appear, to the viewer, like *posthumous works*. The paintings of this series seem to observe us from a point of suspension in a time warp, as if containing a truth that the artist has decided not to tell. Or maybe they are the portrait of an artist who has shown us much, and now invites us to think for ourselves.