

AN OPEN LETTER TO LOUIS MENAND, ON THE PUBLICATION OF HIS: ‘TOP OF THE POPS – LIVING IN A WARHOL WORLD - DID ANDY WARHOL CHANGE EVERYTHING?’ (A CRITIC AT LARGE - THE NEW YORKER, JAN. 11, 2010.)

or, SIMON HANTAI & ANDY WARHOL – THE FATE OF MODERN ART IN THE POST-SECOND WORLD WAR ERA.

“The grand compositions of certain painters express a desire to force the mind into accepting an official ideal. The disappearance of academic construction in painting, on the other hand, opens a path to the expression (even to the exaltation) of psychological processes that are the most incompatible with social stability.” Georges Bataille¹

Dear Louis,

Did Andy Warhol change everything? I have been reading your essay, which seems to me to be in the best New Yorker tradition. It’s immensely enjoyable and, at the same time, provides a compelling, and fresh, overview of a story that has been told many times. This question may be simply intended to highlight Warhol’s enormous influence on contemporary art. However, it also cannot help but raise another question as to whether the great tradition of modern art, up to and including the mid-century American masters of Abstract Expressionism, Newman, Pollock and Rothko, has simply run its course? Somehow, fatally linked to that proposition, is the notion that a profound shift of philosophical belief may have taken place and that art may no longer have the same meaning that it once had. So the question might be rephrased to bluntly ask, is modern art dead, and has art, aside from its market index, quite simply been made redundant?

Warhol has always been, and remains, a most fascinating character. There is no question but that he had extraordinary intuition. He knew where the nerve center of modern art lay and he succeeded in bending it to his will in order to produce a body of work which was both at the level of his abilities and met the ambitions and expectations of his contemporaries. Bend it to his will? This has the ring of an oxymoron. It would perhaps be more accurate to speak of an inversion of will, a vacuity, which can be felt at all levels of contemporary life. How strange and subtle of Warhol to have felt this weakness in his time and to have built it into an “official ideal”² that today we call ‘contemporary art’.

I think you go to the heart of the issue early on when you say: “The essence of Warhol’s genius was to eliminate the one aspect of a

¹ In Georges Bataille, 'Architecture (from Documents)', 1929, *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, vol. 1, p. 171. In the preface to the edition, Michel Foucault has written: "We now know: Bataille is one of the most important writers of his time".

² See quote above by Georges Bataille, in which he contrasts academic and modern art.

thing without which that thing would, to conventional ways of thinking, cease to be itself, and then to see what happened."³ With this, his flying machine is up in the air and the crowd can begin to applaud. From then on, the great 'Warholian' themes unfold with a complacency that will, in due course, make Arthur Danto 'a philosopher of art'. What are those themes?

#1 Well, first off, of course, identity with the artifacts of everyday life. Baudelaire would have approved, or would he? In any case, Warhol, as you point out, understands that he must not show his cards: "Soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles (...) did he paint this stuff because he thought it was great or because he thought it was junk? Is his work a commentary on the shallowness, repetitiveness, and commercialism of consumer culture, or is it a celebration of supermarkets and Hollywood, a romp with the vulgar – a commentary on the highbrow Puritanism of the fine-art tradition?" Johns, as you mention a little later, but perhaps not Rauschenberg, also understood this.

#2 The second theme that Warhol explores, as you point out, is the debate over high and low culture. Here Warhol knows that he is on solid ground. He understands that American society is powerfully motivated by populist, democratic aspirations. He also understands that, as the 1960's are ushered in, a new clientele for contemporary art, knowing nothing of modern art and without any interest in learning, is emerging. Bob Scull⁴ is the prototype. This is a clientele which understands the world in terms of the business model and cannot see why every aspect of life, including art, should not be covered by it. It can hardly fail to sense a deep complicity with an artist who will declare, as Warhol later did, that "the best art is business."⁵

Abstract Expressionism was perceived to be the enemy of this new emerging art world. The 1960's detected and proscribed 'intellectualism', 'introspection' and 'elitism', all fatally contaminated by roots in 'European art', and insisted, inquisitorially, that they must be stamped out. In this connection, if the art world of the 1960's came to detest Abstract Expressionism, it is far from clear that it understood Cézanne, Bonnard, Matisse, Giacometti, or even Picasso, or any other modern artist, any better. It is interesting that this antipathy did not affect the financial standing of these artists. They, and along with them the Americans, de Kooning, Newman, Pollock and Rothko, had been listed on the 'major' index and the price of their work has continued to escalate. In this connection, we should notice the assumption on the part of our society that market endorsement of art will buy its complicity. Somehow society imagines that, because it has paid whatever millions for this or that painting, it has somehow passed the SAT's of art historical appreciation. Nevertheless, to this day, in all popular critical accounts of Abstract Expressionism, the writer will feel an obligation to denigrate what he or she supposes to be its 'difficulty', 'self-indulgence', or 'pretension'. We are confronting a discourse of prejudice.

As you recount, Warhol played the game with great skill. "No one did more to promote the perception that he was a naïve interloper

³ This and all further quotes by Louis Menand from "Top of the Pops," Louis Menand, *The New Yorker*, January 11, 2010, pg. 57.

⁴ In this connection, it is interesting that Acquavella is currently showing "Robert & Ethel Scull: Portrait of a Collection," Acquavella Galleries, April 13 - May 27, 2010.

⁵ *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*, by Andy Warhol, Mariner Books, 1977.

in the art world, a commercial illustrator who just didn't get what all the high seriousness was about ..." When Emile de Antonio asked him about how he became an artist, he replied: "You used to gossip about the art people and that's how I found out about art". Warhol positioned himself as the perennial outsider, even though he now appears as the ultimate insider in a world that he himself set up.

#3 Then, there is the issue of framing these themes at the level of 'criticism' and 'philosophy'. What we encounter here is the 'Danto-esque' theory, as you point out, that "Pop changed everything". This takes shape, you again explain, as a critical debate with Clement Greenberg, who maintains (your terms) "the historical necessity of abstraction", "art that explored its own formal possibilities", in other words, "art about art". His opponents argued for art as "a celebration ... of what every American knows", namely that "fine art is a commodity too". Danto performs the sleight-of-hand of transforming this latter populist provocation into 'philosophy', by arguing, in your words, that "in the end the only difference between an art work, such as a sculpture that looks like a grocery carton, and a real thing, such as a grocery carton, is that the first is received as art and the second is not". The conclusion: "At that moment, art could be anything it wanted. The illusion-barrier had been broken".

It seems to me that a moment of pause is necessary here. You have described one instance of Danto-esque sleight-of-hand, with his notion that context defines art. Is this conclusion not another? Surely, this is not an argument that art could be anything "it" wanted, but rather that it could be anything that anyone with the ambition to call him or herself "an artist" or, maybe, "a collector", wanted "it" to be. Henceforth, social value will define art or art will represent social value. Aesthetic and intellectual experience will cease to exist. This amounts to an immense grab, does it not, of aesthetic and intellectual sovereignty? If it is already established that art is a

commodity, then it appears that Danto's sophistry adds value, so that art becomes a 'super-commodity', a puppy dog, maybe, or a medicine cabinet. Henceforth, the financial value that the market of the social world affixes to works of art will be definitive. However, surely an "illusion-barrier" can only be broken, if there is indeed an illusion-barrier to break. If what is valuable in art is not its capacity to be turned into a commodity, even if it can be, then where is the illusion-barrier? Maybe the only illusion to be broken is Danto's syllogistic 'philosophy'?

Danto gets us to where he is thanks to Marcel Duchamp. Here, of course, the general reader has some heavy-lifting to negotiate, which he or she is likely to delegate to the numerous specialist-commentators of that other artist's immense influence on contemporary art. Very briefly, as you say, "Duchamp eliminated the element of imitation in art, and Warhol imitated him". Duchamp did this with his 'ready-mades', a snow shovel or a urinal, for example, industrial objects contextualized as art. Warhol then makes a sculpture of a Brillo box that looks exactly like a Brillo box. The 'ready-



Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964 made' allows Danto, or so he thinks, to maintain that 'Pop' is 'high art' or "art about art", the "next step"

after Abstract Expressionism, and that he is Greenberg's heir. Duchamp turned objects into art⁶. Danto may have a point that Greenberg's formalist argumentation about the essential properties pertaining to painting as a medium, such as 'flatness', may have turned art into objects, and objects, it must be acknowledged, lend themselves to commodification. However, in that case, Greenberg may be a disciple of Danto and not the reverse. So can we just agree that both Greenberg and Danto conceive of contemporary art as a series of steps in a syllogistic argument towards a craven state of commodity exchange?

Then, as you recount, Danto has his "second epiphany" at the 1981 Whitney Biennial, when he encounters the advent of the new, revisionist, fashion-art movement, 'Neo-Expressionism'. At this point, and I quote you: "Danto's response, he later wrote, was: This is not what was supposed to happen next. But then he thought, so what was supposed to happen next? He realized that nothing had to happen next. All styles were now equally available. And he decided that, with the Brillo box, the history of art had come to an end." Art had become, as Danto put it, 'philosophy'. Another, more widely used term for this predicament, is 'conceptual'. Contemporary art has become 'Conceptual'. Or, maybe, one could say, 'conjectural'? The question is, of course, has an "illusion barrier" grown up around 'Conjectural Art', excuse me, 'Conceptual art'? It has been interesting to read Denis Dutton, another 'philosopher of art', writing recently in the op-ed pages of the New York Times, an article entitled "Has Conceptual Art jumped the Shark Tank?"⁷ Dutton rhetorically states that "somewhere out there in collector land is the unlucky guy who will be the last one holding the vacuum cleaner and wondering why". This is indeed the nightmare of art investment today.

#4 The last major theme of your piece is the very important issue of the relationship of art to the means of industrial production in modern society. You advance the following proposition: "There is no single narrative of modern art. From one perspective, modern art can be interpreted as a movement toward formal purism, the way Greenberg interpreted it. From another perspective, though, modern art is all about impurity. Applied art, anti-art, art combining high and low elements, commercial and industrial design: they form a tradition that runs right alongside Cubism and Abstraction. Pop art was a continuation of this second tradition". You then mention the history of Dada and the Bauhaus, the teaching of Moholy-Nagy, the influential essay by Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", which are all seen to culminate in Warhol's silk screens.

Warhol called his studio 'the Factory' and, it is true what you say, that he was "fascinated by the boundary between the human and the mechanical". Again, it is true that the arrival of industrial production methods raises an enormous question for the tenets of creative

⁶ Clearly, Duchamp's action has incited an enormous and over-whelming response in contemporary culture, to the point that it might be worth the time to give it a second look. There is an evident 'machismo' effect in the story of the 'ready-mades'. An object is introduced into the complex symbolic structure of culture. The culture of art is abruptly over-turned in favor of a positive ordering of familiar artifacts. At the same time, it is hard to overlook the perverse complexion to Duchamp's thinking. Far from the stand-up endorsement of male values that Duchamp's 'ready mades' might promise, the 'urinal' can as well be seen as an obscene vulva into which the aesthetic skeptic contemptuously urinates. No doubt, this kind of 'sophisticated' interpretation would have appealed to Duchamp himself and can be taken as proof of profundity by his many admirers. Or maybe it seeks to strangle modern art in the archaism of the fetish.

⁷ "Has Conceptual Art Jumped the Shark Tank?" Denis Dutton, *The New York Times*, Op-Ed Section, October 16, 2009.

art. What would become of the mysterious passage of human experience into art, from the biological to the cultural, which had always been conveyed by the artist's 'hand', when it found itself confronted by modern technology? What would become of the artist's vocation in a society that is based on the machine? Would the artist of the future become a 'conceptual designer'? As you remark, Moholy-Nagy in his autobiography wrote: "I was not at all afraid of losing the 'personal touch', so highly valued in previous painting. On the contrary, I even gave up signing my paintings. (...) I could not find any argument against the wide distribution of works of art, even if turned out by mass production." We might ask here, whom do we judge the greater artist today, Matisse or Moholy-Nagy? Whatever!

No doubt, Warhol was attentive to Moholy-Nagy's arguments. However, is it enough to present two sides of an argument? On the one hand, we are asked to believe that we have 'high art', dedicated to formal invention, following the path of an 'abstraction' which is divorced from, and indifferent to, contemporary human experience. That's 'Greenberg'! I think I'll pass, thank you, we hear the reader murmur. On the other, we have 'Pop', taking its subject matter from mass media and every-day life. Well, we all identify with a little piece of every-day life, right? So, yes, I'll go for that! But aren't there always at least three sides to any good argument? There certainly are in this argument, but it requires us to reshuffle the deck of the other two.

Jackson Pollock, Abstract Expressionism and 'Automatism'



If we look carefully, we will see a quite different source of engagement with this issue of mechanical production in modern art. It does not come from outside the argument as it has been framed above but from within what you call the "movement of formal purism", sponsored by Greenberg. However, it does not align itself with Greenberg and it is neither 'formal', nor 'pure'. I am referring to the innovative painting technique of Jackson Pollock. Pollock? He was Greenberg's boy, right? No. When Pollock moved his hand, holding a stick laden with paint, through the air above his canvas, allowing the paint to fall onto the surface below, without any physical resistance, this was no 'formal' gesture on his part. He was introducing a mysterious, doubtful new freedom into art and, at the same time, conceptually affirming the removal of his conscious mind from the process of painting. Again, to confirm, this was not a 'formalist' endeavor. The removal of consciousness in Pollock's technique equates with the human disconnect in working the production-line of a contemporary job. The difference would be that Pollock is seeking enjoyment and freedom, where the industrial worker can only expect a wage.

I surmise that Warhol also paid very careful attention to what Pollock had done. But, again, there should be no mistake here. Pollock was not in pursuit of formal purity when he invented

Jackson Pollock, in his studio, 1950 his new technique of painting. He does not enter the bogus high/low lists of contemporary art

discourse as an adversary of 'St. Andy' Warhol, the dragon slayer of 'elitism'. Pollock was seeking to access some other experience, a corporeal experience, which had been repressed by conscious rationality. We may scoff, but we do acknowledge, do we not, that Pollock is a great artist? So how do we account for this enterprise, explicitly embraced by the artist himself? Pollock clearly stated that he was in pursuit of 'unconscious' thought. The intellectual framework for this endeavor had been provided by Freud's 'psycho-analytic' philosophy and translated into art via the Surrealist technique of 'psychic automatism'. There was nothing 'formal' or 'pure' about what was involved here. On the contrary, it was about the force of sexuality and the dissolution and reformation of human identity. How do we get around that?

What must be stated at this juncture, and emphasized again and again, is that Greenberg does not represent the artists who have been collected under the name of 'Abstract Expressionism'. Greenberg, a pragmatic and brilliant reviewer of gallery exhibitions, early spotted the talent of these artists, most notably Pollock, but his proscriptive and teleological-minded 'modernist' theories of 'flatness' and 'color', and what-have-you, developed out of the theories of 'significant form' by English critics Bell and Fry, do not represent the art of the Abstract Expressionists and were emphatically repudiated by those artists. The Abstract Expressionists saw themselves as heirs to a great tradition of modern art that had grown up to engage the changed conditions of our world. If we look carefully at the history of modern art, we will see that it specifically confronted the dimension of the new mechanical age, which had been ushered in by modern technology. All the instances of great break-through in modern art, for example, the Impressionist rejection of the division between line and color and the consequent abandonment of perspective, had been a response to this new reality. Earlier still, it can be argued, modern art was born when Géricault took the destructive disaster of Napoleon's wars as his subject. None of this content in modern art can be explained by 'formalist' criticism.

By the 1940's, when the Abstract Expressionists were coming to maturity, a new technological cataclysm had overtaken modern society. Quite contrary to Greenberg's assertions of 'art about art', the formal invention in their work was aimed at making art that could address this experience. When we read the writings and statements of the leading Abstract Expressionists, we see that they were continually struggling with this issue. One response, given by Pollock in a radio interview in 1950, is enough to make the point:

Question: "Mr. Pollock, there's been a good deal of controversy and a good many comments have been made regarding your method of painting. Is there something you'd like to tell us about that?"

Answer: "My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique."⁸

Formal innovation in Abstract Expressionism, it would appear, was a response to the destruction of human life and value at Hiroshima

⁸ Jackson Pollock, radio interview 1950, collected in the catalogue raisonné ed. O'Connor/Thaw.

and Nagasaki!

It appears that these artists had much more serious business to address than what can be extracted from the accounts of critics and art historians. Toward the end of his life, Newman stated: "About twenty five years ago for me painting was dead. Painting was dead in the sense that the situation, the world situation, was such that the whole enterprise as it was being practiced by myself and by my colleagues seemed to be a dead enterprise (...) I felt the issue in those years was: what can a painter do? The problem of the subject became very clear to me as the crucial thing in painting. Not the technique, not the plasticity, not the look, not the surface: none of these things meant that much. The issue for me ... was: what are we going to paint?"⁹ Newman was here explicitly rejecting the formal approach to art that commentators routinely attach to his work. For his part, Rothko stated: "I belong to a generation that was preoccupied with the human figure and I studied it. It was with utmost reluctance that I found that it did not meet my needs. Whosoever used it, mutilated it. No one could paint the figure as it was and feel that he could produce something that could express the world. I refused to mutilate and had to find another way of expression."¹⁰ In 1948, a group of artists, including Newman and Rothko, formed the 'Subjects of the Artist' school to explore the issue. The way forward, emerging from this collective effort, it turned out, was to be into what is termed 'abstraction', but an abstraction engaged with, not separate from, the real world. In fact, Rothko was to state: "My art is not abstract; it lives and breathes."¹¹

Acceptance of Modern Art

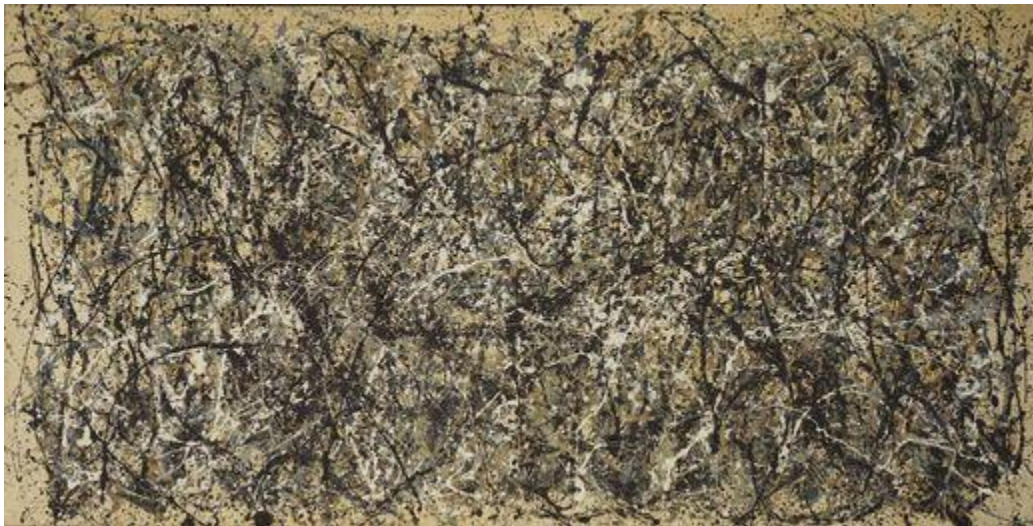
Pollock died prematurely in a car crash in 1956 at forty four years of age. Newman and Rothko worked on until 1970 when the former died of a heart-attack at the age of sixty five and the latter committed suicide. These great Abstract Expressionist artists created modern art in America. At the time that they were developing their aesthetic thinking, in the early 1940's, when the future of western civilization hung in the balance, it was not at all clear to many Americans that they should get involved in those stakes. The Abstract Expressionist artists, on their own authority, linked the destiny of cultural life in the United States with modern art. However, by the late '50's, the American art world had already turned against them and abandoned any attempt to explore their vision. It did this by embracing an entirely spurious 'formalist' account of their work and by adopting 'Pop' art in its place.

Why did this happen? The Abstract Expressionists believed in the international vocation of modern art, but the American art world wanted its own national school. The Abstract Expressionists considered art to be a new kind of visual 'thought' and they associated it

⁹ Interview with Emile de Antonio, 1970, from *Barnett Newman, Selected Writings and Interviews*, by Barnett Newman, University of California Press, February 12, 1992, pg. 302-303.

¹⁰ Lecture at Pratt Institute, 1958, taken from *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, by James Breslin, University of Chicago Press, April 18, 1998, pg. 394-395.

¹¹ Mark Rothko quoted in *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, by James Breslin, University of Chicago Press, April 18, 1998, pg. 276.



Jackson Pollock: One (Number 31, 1950) 1950, oil and enamel paint on canvas, 106 x 210 in / 269 x 533 cm



Simon Hantai: Cloak (M.a.1), 1960, oil on canvas, 90 x 77 in. / 229 x 196 cm

with contemporary philosophy. Freud has already been mentioned, but there were also Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. A later thinker, of central importance for modern art, Georges Bataille¹², was not known to the Abstract Expressionists, but they would have been entirely attuned to his understanding of the world and his writings now are essential to understanding their art. These thinkers understood that, parallel with transformation in the economic field, brought on by the industrial revolution, philosophy would have to rethink metaphysical and social value and, ultimately, art would have to shift human identity. Viewed as a social entity, the art world that was taking shape in New York in the 1960's had no notion of, nor interest in, such issues. Lastly, it might have been foreseen that an art, constituting itself as a kind of thought, would take a dissident stance in relationship to social value. There is a profound dissidence of value in Abstract Expressionism. In contrast, the emergent 1960's art world wanted to constitute itself on a commercial basis and so promoted an art that could adapt to the prevalent business ideology of American society. The mind-set of the time was conformist. Abstract Expressionism didn't fit. Pop and Minimalism did.

The question has to be asked as to whether modern art was ever accepted in America? However if, regrettably, the answer may be no, we may also discover, when we retrace the history of modern art in Europe, focusing on its greatest practitioners, Géricault, Courbet, Manet, Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso, that these artists were equally at odds, not to say in total conflict with, the values of the societies in which they lived. In a letter to Pissarro, dated 2nd July, 1876, from L'Estaque, Cézanne expressed the predicament of the modern artist in France with the complaint: "If the eyes of the locals here could kill with their murderous glances, I'd have been done for long before now. My presence does not seem to sit well with them."¹³ There are further accounts that, for example, when Cézanne, late in life, would walk in the streets of his native Aix, where it should not be forgotten that he was a man of affluence, thanks to his father's successful business career, the local children would throw stones at him. It may well be that European society

¹² Georges Bataille (1897-1962), French anti-academic writer and philosopher, whose enormous importance for our understanding of modern art and thought has become apparent only very slowly and with grave misgivings on the part of the philosophical establishment and his academic commentators. Bataille must be situated in the descendance of 'anti-system', post-Hegelian philosophers, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Bataille attended the famous series of lectures by Alexandre Kojève on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes [1933-1939], which introduced Hegel to France. Bataille was a resolute opponent of Breton and the Surrealist movement, which contrary to many accounts, he never joined. Bataille was championed by the Tel Quel group from its inception in 1960. He enters the mainstream of American art, not through the academic translation of his writings, and accompanying commentary, which has progressed apace in recent decades, but rather through the work and thought of Robert Smithson, who owned a copy of *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, Ballantine, 1962, which was the first translation of Bataille into English. As a brief indication of how Bataille's meaning has been understood with great difficulty, it is perhaps worth remarking that this English title to his first translation contains a glaring error. Bataille notably did not employ the term "eroticism", preferring instead to adopt the term of "erotism." Bataille wants to distinguish between the general term of eroticism, pertaining to the sexual in a general sense and his own interest in the transgression of taboo, which seeks "to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity, a feeling of profound continuity" (Erotism, 15). Erotism, then, through the transgression of the taboo opens up the realm of the sacred. The transgression allows man to go beyond the profane, reveling in the feeling of continuity. For an early presentation of Georges Bataille in the American art world, see *The Subject of Art*, by Paul Rodgers, Artlog USA Special Issue, 1981, and the preface to the catalogue accompanying *3000°*, an exhibition at Paul Rodgers / 9W, 2002, catalogue available online at www.paulrodders9w.com.

¹³ *Correspondance* by Paul Cézanne edited by Rewald, Grasset, 1978.

did not accept, nor acknowledge, modern art any more than did America. Certainly, I can affirm that the society out of which I came¹⁴, did not acknowledge modern art. It just did not exist. Modern art appears to affront the norm of social value. Could one say, in a spirit of speculation, that there is an analogy between modern art and homosexuality, in so far as social censure is concerned? In this connection, I read in the newspaper that finally American society, the military included, after how long, is ready to acknowledge homosexuality. I don't see any comparable evidence that it is ready to acknowledge modern art. Nevertheless, accepted or acknowledged, or not, modern art has existed and it is the great art of our time. The question that we apparently have to answer today is, does it still exist?

There seems to be a universal assumption today that art should 'reflect' society and its values. Pop art certainly 'reflects' the glamorous image that our contemporary consumer society would like to see in itself. Minimalism also reflects the industrial model on which the modern economy is based. Modern art, on the other hand, as already stated, has constituted a profoundly dissident culture. It does not 'reflect' anything. Perhaps the standard to be adopted, then, when considering our question of whether modern art is still a vital force in the contemporary art world, is less to ask whether contemporary society acknowledges and accepts modern art and more to answer whether there have been major practitioners of modern art at work in the decades following Abstract Expressionism. If we can find no such artist, then let us just agree that modern art is over. If, however, we can identify a major artist, equal in originality and achievement to Pollock, Rothko and Newman, who comes to artistic maturity in the 1960's and works throughout the following decades, then should this not be accepted as proof that modern art has not been dead during all this time?

Already, in the 1950's, the word in the New York art world was that no such artist could possibly exist. The argument ran that it would be impossible to paint after Pollock. As the 1960's got under way, it was further indicative of this mind-set that those who endorsed Pop, Minimalism and the succeeding movements of contemporary art since World War II, continued to assert vehemently that no such artist did exist. By the 1980's the term of 'Post-Modern' had even been coined in order to settle the matter, once and for all. "Modern art" had become an historical entity, disconnected from the 'contemporary art' that had supplanted it. The only problem is that artists have indeed continued to practice modern art. I could mention a number, but, of course, a limited number. Look back across the history of modern art. It is true that modern art has never had many proponents. According to my criteria, it is enough to mention just one: the European painter, Simon Hantai, who died in the night of 11th September, 2008, after a long career which spanned the second half of the twentieth century. Hantai's case explicitly refutes the death of modern art.



A Modern Artist after Abstract Expressionism

The Hungarian-born artist, Simon Hantai lived and worked in Paris, an exile from Communism, where the force of his personality and art gained widespread respect. The Centre Georges Pompidou has the largest collection of his paintings, upwards of thirty, and has long considered him to be a major protagonist of modern and contemporary art.

¹⁴ Dublin, Ireland, 1951-

There is usually a room dedicated to his work in the permanent collection of the museum, in proximity to its holdings of Abstract Expressionism. Paintings also hang on walls in New York and Los Angeles, and doubtless elsewhere in the United States. However, his name remains obscure in the world of international contemporary art. A recent study by the critic and art historian Carter Ratcliff begins: "In Europe, Simon Hantaï has long been recognized as a major painter. In the United States, he is nearly unknown. This is odd because he is one of the very few artists, European or American, who responded to Jackson Pollock's poured paintings in a genuinely original manner. Pollock invented a new way to paint and Hantaï did the same. (...) he dispensed with the traditional process of picture-making as thoroughly as did Pollock, who exchanged his brush for a stick from which to drip and pour his pigments. Keeping his brush, Hantaï redefined his art by redefining the canvas."¹⁵

Hantaï demonstrated a very clear understanding of the stakes of modern art and specifically set himself the task of extending its reach into the post-World War 11 era. Arriving in Paris in 1948, he quickly took a prominent position in the Surrealist movement that Breton had re-launched after his return from New York. Breton curated the artist's first exhibition and wrote in his preface: "Again, as it happens once every ten years, a great new beginning..."¹⁶ However, Hantaï quickly became aware of Abstract Expressionism in America and approached both Breton and Duchamp in order to learn more. Both had come into contact with the Abstract Expressionists in New York during their wartime exile there, but Hantaï was surprised to discover how they were resolutely hostile to any mention of the American artists. The account, now legendary, goes that when Hantaï pressed Duchamp further, the inventor of the 'ready-made', in exasperation, declared: "Alright, if you insist, take Gorky, but above all, not Pollock. If you follow him you will be lost."¹⁷



Simon Hantaï, in his studio, 1973, E. Boubat

It is interesting to note here that Hantaï was entering modern art in exactly the same way as had the Abstract Expressionists ten years earlier. In an early essay 'Surrealism and the War', from 1945, Barnett Newman had explained why. "We must not overlook that the great contribution of surrealism was in its revival of subject matter, which had been deliberately avoided by the strong antirealist

¹⁵ *Hantaï in America*, by Carter Ratcliff, published by Paul Rodgers / 9W, 2006.

¹⁶ Preface, by Andre Breton, to Simon Hantaï's first exhibition "Peintures" at L'Etoile Scellée Gallery, Paris, 1953.

¹⁷ This and further remarks by Simon Hantaï, unless otherwise noted, were recounted in numerous conversations with the present writer.

program of modern art. We can now see much more: that the subject matter of Surrealism was the most important of our time and definitely linked to our time."¹⁸ So much for Greenberg. However, Newman also stated that "the objections raised to the movement are valid. Its use of old-fashioned perspective, its high realism, its preoccupation with the dream ...". It should be noted, that these were all aspects shortly to be embraced by Pop. As you point out, Duchamp was entirely comfortable with Warhol, but here, I affirm, not with Pollock.

The Abstract Expressionists were interested in Surrealism for the possibilities opened up by the technique of 'psychic automatism', associated with the Freudian practice of verbal 'free association'. The aim of these techniques was to gain access to the mind's 'unconscious'. These ideas provoked virulent public hostility at the time. Has this hostility since diminished? Surely not, if anything, it has continued to increase right up to the present day, becoming an ubiquitous, amorphous and implacable antipathy amongst the public. One might wonder why Freud's thinking remains so offensive? Freud himself explained the situation with the concept of 'resistance.'¹⁹ In any case, for the Abstract Expressionists, 'psychic automatism' became a graphic technique, which tended to dissolve the figurative outline of classical composition and opened up the inner experience of the body to cultural thought. To the casual viewer, the painting might appear 'abstract'. For the painter, it was really that the eye of consciousness, preserved as fetish in Surrealism, had been replaced with a new creative force.

The Abstract Expressionists had to break with Surrealism in order to achieve their mature work. Already in the same essay of 1945, quoted above, Newman had asserted that: "Surrealism is dead". Hantaï had to make the same discovery and he was helped by the example of the Abstract Expressionists. Duchamp had told him to eschew Pollock. However, Hantaï felt that the key issue was posed in Pollock's innovative painting technique. Pollock had spoken further of what took place there for him. In a short piece, published in the first and only issue of *Possibilities* in 1947/48, he had stated: "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is a pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well."²⁰ The Surrealists sought an objective presentation of psychic life. Pollock's technique sought to dissolve the status of the object. In 1955, Hantaï wrote to Breton, declaring that he intended to explore "the non-figurative consequences of automatism" and formally announced that he was making a definitive break with the Surrealist movement.

¹⁸ *Barnett Newman, Selected Writings and Interviews*, by Barnett Newman, University of California Press, February 12, 1992.

¹⁹ For a definition of "resistance", see *Le Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*, Elizabeth Roudinesco and Michel Plon, Fayard, 1997, pg. 898.

²⁰ Statement from *Possibilities Magazine*, 1948.

Hantaï, Warhol and Mechanical Production

As mentioned, Hantaï was drawn to Pollock's technique. When we look at Hantaï's break-through paintings in the 'Cloaks' series of 1960-62, we see that he experimented with dripping paint. However, Hantaï was not interested in copying Pollock's idiosyncratic painting technique as an end in itself. He was interested in the same practice of automatism that had motivated Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists. The suspension of the artist's conscious mind in the act of painting and the sense that independent forces were at work in its composition were what compelled Hantaï's attention to Pollock. What interested him, perhaps above all, in Pollock's technique, was how it shifted the relationship between artist and painting. As mentioned earlier, it may be surmised that Warhol saw an analogy between Pollock's discovery and the new mechanical means of industrial production that had come to dominate contemporary society. Hantaï certainly did. In any case, during the middle and late '50's, with or without a connection to Pollock, both Hantaï and Warhol were attentive to the fall-out from mechanical production. Both could see its alienating effect, how it



Andy Warhol, Campbell's Soup Can, 1962

divorced the maker from the made, how the human subject found itself somehow ‘suspended’, or ‘bracketed’, by what we might call a ‘failure to connect’ in mechanical labor. Hantai and Warhol may not have been aware of each other during those years. Indeed, Warhol may never have been aware of Hantai. He had accepted a leading role in the Vanity Fair of the emerging post-war New York art world and this, no doubt, kept him busy. On the other hand, very little escaped Hantai’s attention and certainly not Warhol.

Hantai led an increasingly secluded life. He preferred to stand apart from the post-war art world, given the terms on which it was developing, and maintain independence of mind. This allowed him to consider Warhol’s contribution to contemporary art with detachment. To this writer, he remarked years later: “Yes, I took note of Warhol, at some point. Not the Pop subject-matter, which is local and incidental. That didn’t interest me. What I remarked was his use of silk-screening as a technique to engage mechanical production. It introduced anonymity”. However, it is crucial for us to distinguish the critical difference of approach between the two responses of Hantai and Warhol to this issue of mechanical production. In the case of Warhol, the artist adopted the technique of silk-screening as an embrace of the mechanical model. He accepted mechanical production on its terms and cultivated the alienation of personality that it generates. It could be said that Warhol’s approach had the one-dimensionality of mechanical production. Hantai, on the other hand, invented his own painting technique, ‘the folding method’, in order to explore, through analogy, the troubled exchange between human experience and mechanical production. The difference of outcome in these two approaches is monumental. Warhol’s embrace of mechanical production led him to abandon modern art in favor of Pop as a form of post-Surrealism or a sort of vestigial classicism; Hantai found that, via ‘the folding method’, he had gained access to the rich tradition of modern art and had acquired the ability to channel its insight and experience, aesthetic and philosophical, into contemporary art. Of course, Warhol’s choice earned him fame and fortune. The ultimate value of Hantai’s position has yet to be measured.

Simon Hantai invented his painting technique of ‘folding’, known simply as ‘the folding method’, in 1960. As such, it pre-dates Warhol’s silkscreens and also the beginnings of Minimalism and Process.²¹ From that year on, until his death in 2008, across an expansive body of work, organized in series, he explored the surprisingly broad range of possibilities that this technique afforded: the *Cloaks*, the *Catamurons*, the *Bandages*, the *Meuns*, the *Studies*, the *Watercolors*, the *Whites*, the *Tabula* series, *One and Two*, the *Tabula Lilas*, the *Left-Overs*. ‘The folding method’ took shape as the practical synthesis of a ten year struggle with the intellectual issues contained in the history of modern art. Hantai maintained the firm conviction throughout his life that these intellectual issues of modern art had contemporary validity and that artists today should pursue them in their work. ‘The folding method’ quickly revealed itself to be capable of achieving that ambition. It presented a new and original way of exploring the potential of ‘automatism’, inherited from Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists; it engaged the colossal cultural issue of mechanization; it revealed the inadequacy of ‘formalist’ criticism, with its untenable notion of ‘purity’ as a bastion against populism; it pioneered the notion of

²¹ There is an interesting parallel between Hantai and Yves Klein. Hantai was very aware of Klein in the Parisian avant-garde circles of the early 1960’s. There is also a clear distinction to be established. Klein, like Hantai, was processing the influence of Pollock. However, the technique of the anthropometries enclosed him in a direct reference to an imprint of the body. The anthropometries continued the tradition of naturalist representation. Hantai’s technique, on the other hand, as we have just seen in his letter to Breton, sets out to reinvent the figure in abstract form.

‘process’, which would be taken up by leading innovators of post-war American art, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Bruce Nauman; it opened up new access to the metaphysical dimension of space, finding its counterpart in modern science; finally, it gave modern expression to one of the most fundamental and abiding philosophical questions of our culture, that was laid down by Paul at the beginning of the first millennium; was argued by Augustine and Pelagius; motivated the elaboration of Catholic theology across the Middle Ages; and resurged again in the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the emergence of the Modern Age: namely that of the relation of free will to fate.

I understand that such broad allusions will shock our assumptions about contemporary art. We don’t expect, nor want, an artist to engage such issues. However, no one can tell a modern artist what he, or she, can or cannot do. Society abandoned artists at the beginning of the modern era. They awoke to find themselves without patrons and in a world in which the old beliefs had been shattered. Modern artists, from that moment, have based themselves on a defense of the integrity of their intellectual freedom. That is who they are and no one can take it away from them. Rothko had made the monumental assertion: “Painting certainly is a result of thinking. It causes thinking. It, therefore, can certainly be a form, or means, of thinking, a means of philosophic thought.”²² However, Rothko’s views on art have been ignored or set aside. Hantaï continued to develop Rothko’s insight. In ‘the folding method’, Hantaï discovered that the material of his canvas, or rather, his manipulation of the canvas material, in the process of making his painting, became a vehicle for philosophic thought. In ‘the folding method’ the canvas *thinks*.

The Folding Method: Matter thinks



In inventing ‘the folding method’, Hantaï had the industrial process as his reference model. There is a crucial exchange between artist and material that takes place in ‘the folding method’. Given the transformation of the means of production in the modern world, Hantaï had asked himself whether the artist could continue to maintain the position of an independent creative mind, bringing his work into existence by an act of personal will. Pollock had introduced a ‘suspension of consciousness’ into the painting act, but to do so he had had to remove his hand from the canvas. The canvas lay passively on the floor, as the artist’s hand passed over it. The canvas remained an inert surface, requiring the creative act of the artist’s “handless” gesture to give it meaning. For Hantaï, the basic model of mechanization, transforming ‘raw’ material into socially useful products that no longer carry the personal trace of their makers, had rendered human behavior intolerable. When Hantaï considered Pollock, he could see that the American artist had courageously undertaken one immense step in breaking this relationship of the human exploitation of matter. Pollock had reinvented the human side of the creative equation. What remained now, for Hantaï, was to give life to matter itself, to incorporate the canvas as an active element in the making of the painting.

²² Rothko, quotes in, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, by James Breslin, University of Chicago Press, April 18, 1998, pg. 260.

To make a painting using ‘the folding method’, Hantaï first spreads his unstretched canvas out on the ground, much as Pollock had done. Commentators have remarked that the gesture of taking the canvas off the vertical axis of the wall and placing it on the horizontal of the studio floor, symbolically serves to overturn the hierarchical organization of cultural thinking. In Hantaï’s case, as an artist who believed that painting was an analogue for human action and thought in general, this was certainly in his mind. Hantaï, then, specifically understands that his ‘folding method’ has the significance of removing art from the realm of the ‘symbolic’ and of placing it in the ‘real’. This brutal ejection of painting from the ‘symbolic’, in which matter is ‘discarded’ into ‘nothingness’, has the most shocking consequences, as we shall now see in two photographs of ostensibly very different subjects²³. First, I would



respectfully refer the reader to the accompanying tragic illustration of the My-Lai massacre of 1968 during the Vietnam War and then compare it with the contemporaneous studio scene showing the artist surrounded by his ‘Meun’ series, still under production. The ‘Meuns’ were painted in 1967/68 and this photograph is from 1968. The impression of ‘entering the real’ of the first photograph is perhaps one of the most singular elements of modern experience and must surely be linked to the culturally destabilizing impact of modern technology of which, of course, photography and the mass media are aspects. We need, therefore, to take stock of what is happening to modern culture, through technology, in this photograph. The army photographer has brusquely come upon this scene of horror, which has happened moments before. What we see is an image torn from the ‘real’ and placed in the mass media. Looking now at the photograph of the artist’s studio, we see the ‘folding method’ under production with an

My Lai Massacre, March 16, 1968 analogous transfer from the ‘symbolic’ to the ‘real’. The irony of comparing these two photographs is overwhelming. The image of the studio intersects and fatally overlaps with the scene of massacre. However, Hantaï’s painting does not ‘illustrate’ My-Lai. That would be obscene and the artist would never have thought in that manner. Hantaï is working in the medium of abstract painting, which we have been told by contemporary criticism is preoccupied with formal issues. He is domiciled in a small village near Fontainebleau, perhaps the French equivalent of My-Lai, but many thousands of miles away in a country at peace. However, as we have remarked, the logic of Hantaï’s folding method has led him to temporarily place the ‘symbolic’ activity of art in real time and space and this is the outcome. Hantaï’s painting has endowed itself with the means to apprehend real experience even to a point of extreme horror. Two minor remarks are perhaps worth making here. First, it was mentioned that Hantaï’s painting has been shifted ‘temporarily’ into the ‘real’. This is because, as we shall shortly see, it will be brought back into the ‘symbolic’ at the end of the process so that it can become a work of art. Secondly, it was said that Hantaï was working in a context of peace. However, in 1968 he would have been acutely aware, through modern media, of the events taking place in Viet Nam and at

²³ The categories of the 'symbolic', 'real' and 'imaginary' are now familiar to all readers of Jacques Lacan.

sixty miles from his village of Meun, the social upheaval now known as the May '68 revolution in Paris was getting underway and would very nearly overturn the French government. The 'Meuns' were not painted in tranquil times²⁴.

I have written elsewhere that the canvas becomes for Hantaï an immense topography surrounding him, in a manner which also anticipates the approach of the celebrated land-artist Robert Smithson.²⁵ In 'the folding method' Hantaï works the canvas as Smithson will move rock and earth to make his 'Spiral Jetty'. Canvas is treated as raw material, to be labored in real-time and space, as elsewhere it is worked on the factory floor. It should be noted, at this juncture, that Hantaï has made a fundamental break with the task that artists had previously assigned to themselves. Henceforth, he would no longer consider his blank canvas as a passive surface onto which he would project his creative imagination. He and his canvas would work together to make the painting. Hantaï, like Pollock, had become engaged, in the reinvention of the creative act.

To proceed with the description of 'the folding method': Hantaï folds the canvas in different configurations, depending on which series he is working. The canvas is an artifact being manipulated in three-dimensional space. The canvas undergoes a contraction or 'collapse' as portions are folded in, leaving an outside and an inside to the material. A dynamic of positive and negative space is set up. Again, to maintain the parallel with Smithson, it is impossible not to remark that this 'collapsing' of the canvas parallels the physical process of 'entropy' which so fascinated the younger artist. When the canvas has been prepared in this manner, with the complex organization of folds tightly fitted together, it is only then that it is ready to be painted. It is important for Hantaï in this process, that the canvas has been an active, and more specifically an inter-active, element in an exchange with the artist. The physical properties of the canvas have been brought into play and will, in due course, contribute, along with the artist's intention, in determining the ultimate



Simon Hantaï, in his studio in Meun, 1968, E. Boubat

²⁴ The analogy between Hantaï's painting and scenes of horror in real life becomes more comprehensible when one is aware of the important role that is played in Bataille's philosophy by the investigation of extreme and aberrant experience. There are also, of course, precedents for the treatment of horror in modern art, the most famous being Picasso's *Guernica*. It should also be noted that the Abstract Expressionists, most notably Newman in his remarks about the atom bomb, were keenly attuned to this dimension in modern art. The *My Lai* scene is all the more obscene from a contemporary art perspective because if this were a 'post-modernist' art photograph, the subjects would just get up and walk away afterwards. Nobody walked away from *My Lai*. How does 'post-modernist' art account for that?

²⁵ See "Jackson Pollock's Influence on Contemporary Art - Simon Hantaï & Robert Smithson," by Paul Rodgers, published by Paul Rodgers / 9W, 1999. Available online at www.paulrodgers9w.com.

composition of the painting. Once all this is set, the artist's hand and brush can begin to methodically cover each discreet area of exposed canvas surface. That portion of the canvas lying buried in the folds will remain untouched by the brush. Hantai spoke of the hand holding the brush as 'exploring' the canvas like it was an unknown, virgin terrain. It is impossible to ignore the erotic allusion in this remark. The 'folding method' ultimately reveals that it is exploring, by analogy, the physical folds of the human body. He also spoke of how the painting was accomplished by rote, with the mind of the artist elsewhere. Two further stages remain. After the act of painting has been completed and the canvas has been given time to dry, it must be pulled apart, prizing open the folds and exposing the portions of white canvas that the brush could not reach. A strange, unforeseen composition emerges, to be discovered for the first time by all, including the artist himself. Then, as a last step, the canvas is flattened out, mounted on a stretcher, and placed back up on the wall. With this last act of replacing the painting on the wall, Hantai reclaims his canvas from the realm of the real world, where it had been made, and reestablishes it in the symbolic world of art.

The 'folding method' represents both a reduction and an expansion of painting. It instigates a drastic simplification of painting and an enormous renewal of its complexity. Hantai has taken the pictorial tradition and reduced it to the level of matter. The canvas is brought down off the wall and denied its role of window onto the natural and cultural beauty of the world. It becomes a formless, shapeless rag, underfoot, on the studio floor. The process of preparing and painting the canvas then becomes a series of banal steps that are taken separately, in isolation from each other, and must be repeated over and over again. Art confronts mechanized production. The painter is forced to abandon his artistic prerogative of composition. The talent which allows him to represent what the viewer would no doubt perceive as a vision of ideal beauty, is set aside. In exchange, he must accept the physical struggle of bending his body down to manipulate a process of production. The canvas is heavy and clumsy. Its folds are obtained by twisting and compressing the material. With each fold, a portion of the canvas is thrust out of view and forced to divorce itself from the surface above. The fold undermines the surface integrity of the canvas. As the work proceeds, the canvas is in a state of structural collapse. There is a real measure of violence and despair in the task. Hantai starts from the premise of matter and then proceeds to pulverize and annihilate its structure. The artist is disorienting his senses. If there is meaning in this process, it must be wrung out of the recalcitrance of the material. Yet, at the same time, the realization begins to dawn in the viewer's mind, that Hantai has accepted this menial task, has stepped into the 'real', or rather, allowed the 'real' to enter his painting, trusting that something of value for the human eye will emerge out of this seeming dilapidation.

However, ultimately, is it not the status of the eye in our hierarchy of senses which is at stake here?²⁶ Hantai himself made a famous statement about 'the folding method', often quoted in the literature on the artist, in which he addresses this crucial issue. "Painting exists because I have to paint. But that is not enough to justify it. Painting implies an interrogation of the act. The problem presented itself in the following manner: how would it be possible to overcome the esthetic privilege of talent? How would it be possible to render the exceptional banal? How could one discover the exceptional in the banal? Folding was one way to solve this problem. The act of folding came out of nowhere. It was simply necessary to put oneself in the position of those who had not yet seen anything. Put

²⁶ See the discussion of the hierarchy of the senses in "Hantai in America," by Carter Ratcliff, published by Paul Rodgers / 9W, 2006.

oneself in the canvas. It was possible to cover the folded canvas without knowing where the edge was to be found. One no longer knew where it would stop. It was even possible to go further and paint with one's eyes closed."²⁷ This notion of rendering "the exceptional banal" inevitably evokes Warhol.

It is clear that both Hantai and Warhol intuitively sensed that art must address the cultural implications of modern technology, which places matter at the center of human thought and endeavor. However, what is equally clear is that their responses to this challenge were very different. Warhol was happy to identify himself with the industrial process and used it as a means of making art. Warhol's iconic silk screen images are an industrial product, separated from the subjective human presence of the artist. Hantai, on the other hand, with his invention of 'the folding method', introduced the concept of mechanical production into a dynamic exchange with the art of painting. Hantai admitted the industrial process into art in order to demonstrate how the two differed and how, in bringing them together, it might be possible to discover a whole new understanding of 'creative production', in which the human subject could maintain its presence in the work. What needs to be restated here, once again, is that Warhol's decision led him to abandon modern art, while Hantai's solution to this problem led him into an engagement with all the issues that modern art had explored throughout its long history. The contemporary art world has followed Warhol's example and we can see where that has led. It might, therefore, be worth while for a moment to consider where Hantai's lead would take us.

Combining Future and Past in a New Vision

The story goes that Clement Greenberg's art teacher, Hans Hoffman, on a visit to Pollock's studio, and after viewing examples of the artist's poured paintings, advised him to study after nature. A note of condescension can be detected in the remark. Pollock's response was: "I am nature."²⁸ The first series of Hantai's folded paintings, executed in 1960, can be viewed, from one perspective, as landscapes. They represent the first encounter of the artist with his new method of painting, in which the mind descends to the level of matter. These large format paintings carry the scars of this first titanic encounter of mind and matter. They are witnesses to a volcanic struggle which has thrown up a vast, fragmented geologic landscape of mountains and valleys in their expanses of folded canvas. Liquid matter appears to have been forced up from below and now lies cooling and hardening on the surface. The paintings contain both mobility and stasis. The folds cluster together and then, unfolding, swarm across the all-over composition. They are in a range of earth-tones, greens and browns, with a dominant hue of blue as if to bind sky and land, earth, air and water, together. The viewer scans this complex creation, as if from above, but simultaneously the eye is brought down to align itself with the horizontal axis of the painting and navigates the dense web of folds spreading out in all directions. When looking at these paintings, can we not imagine ourselves standing on Robert Smithson's 'Spiral Jetty'? The viewer also understands that this landscape must be experienced as a body and that, in looking, body and landscape become one. It is in this sense that Hantai named the series '*Manteaux de la vierge*':

²⁷ Simon Hantai quoted in *Hantai*, by Geneviève Bonnefoi, coll. de Beaulieu, 1973.

²⁸ Statement by Jackson Pollock from studio visit by Hans Hoffman in 1942, from *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings and Other Work* ed. O'Connor/Thaw, Yale University Press, 1978.

'Cloaks of the Virgin'.

In 1967, Hantaï presented another distinct series of paintings titled *'Meuns'*, after the name of the village near Fontainebleau where he had moved with his family a couple of years earlier. The *'Meuns'* have a very different aspect from the *'Cloaks'*. Where the *'Cloaks'* may be taken to allude to landscape, the *'Meuns'* are clearly 'figure' paintings. However, these are figure paintings arrived at through an exploration of "the non-figurative consequences of automatism", as the artist had stated in his historic letter to Breton. As such, they challenge the great figure painting of twentieth century art, notably that of Matisse, Picasso, Bacon, Dubuffet, Klein and de Kooning. The mention of Picasso is apposite. The *'Meuns'* conclude the first phase of paintings made with 'the folding method' and, to mark this achievement, the Maeght Foundation of St. Paul de Vence honored Hantaï with a one-person exhibition in 1968. Picasso, of course, lived in the vicinity of Vence and it does not seem too far-fetched to surmise that he would have seen this exhibition. Would the omnivorous eye of Picasso have found inspiration in the younger artist's 'abstract figures'? It is worth reviewing the output of Picasso's last years, both the composition and his increasingly spontaneous and fluid paint treatment, with Hantaï's *'Meuns'* in mind, in order to decide the answer to this question.

The first phase of 'the folding method' roughly spans the decade of the 1960's. In 1969, following the *'Meuns'*, Hantaï executed another, very different, series where painted and unpainted abstract shapes interlock. These are the *'Studies'*. Then, in 1971, he spends an entire year painting a series of small format watercolors in which these interlocking shapes struggle to free themselves from their all-over structure. In 1973-74, the series of *'Whites'* appears, their title emphasizing that the unpainted white 'background' of the painting has broken through to assert a new and independent identity. There has been a major transformation in play across these three series and a new understanding of pictorial composition has been discovered. The artist himself has stated: "It was while working on the *'Studies'* that I realized what my true subject was: *the resurgence of the ground beneath my painting*".

The practice of automatism in modern art served to dissolve the external outline of the figure in the interest of gaining access to the 'unconscious'. At the same time, it set up a movement in the execution of the painting act, thinking of Pollock's paintings, which served to pass the energy of the painter's body into his composition. This invisible, corporeal presence would be taken up by Robert Smithson and Bruce Nauman and gain the term of 'process art' in the course of the 1960's. It has been seen that Hantaï, with his invention of 'the folding method' in 1960, both built on Pollock's pictorial innovation and pioneered the extra-pictorial concerns of these younger artists who would work in the fields of sculpture and new media. Hantaï had redeployed Pollock's practice of 'automatism' by developing a 'system' of painting, modeled on mechanical production. The first major discovery of this method was that matter, specifically the material of the canvas, became an essential, active element in making the painting. From that moment forward, the artist had fatally situated the creative act of painting in the real world, beyond the symbolic sphere of art, and his initiative, mind and body, in the material process of the painting. The 'unconscious' had been externalized to lodge in the material world. Clearly, notions of formalism based on Kantian metaphysics, as in Greenberg's criticism, were no longer relevant. Now, with this "resurgence of the ground" of painting, a whole new structure of vision has emerged.



Simon Hantai, Study, 1969, 116 x 176 inches

We must address again this ‘folded’ canvas that Hantaï would have us believe might become a painting. The artist will paint the total expanse of canvas surface available. At the same time, through the process of folding, portions of the canvas have been turned inwards and must remain unpainted. The full composition of the painting remains hidden. Its ultimate configuration will depend on the quantity of canvas that has been folded out of sight and remains beyond the reach of the artist’s brush. If we take the painted surface to represent the phenomenal outward appearance of the world, with which we are all familiar, the world of color, of form, of nature, what then will be the significance of this quantity of canvas, pre-painted only in white primer, that lies in the reserve of the fold, waiting to burst forth when the painting is opened up? A dynamic interaction of painted and unpainted surface, seen and unseen composition, positive and negative space, has been set up. It was mentioned a moment ago that ‘the folding method’ served to lodge the Freudian ‘unconscious’ in the canvas. Now, here, this ‘unconscious’ mass of repressed material, both psychic and physical, is in resurgence, to become, in the artist’s words, “the true subject of my painting”.

It is quite possible, at this point, to shift metaphors from the Freudian construct of the ‘unconscious’ over to those of contemporary physical science, which has been engaged in speculation on the origins of matter and the universe. In recent years, modern scientists have been recording data which indicates the existence of ‘invisible’ or ‘dark’ matter, or energy, in the cosmos and have advanced the hypothesis that they may have made the unthinkable discovery of negative matter forming out of nothingness at the beginning of time. In another development, it is being suggested that time may flow backward, allowing the future to influence the past.²⁹ Hantaï’s practice of the ‘folding method’ in painting should be considered in relationship to these speculative notions of contemporary physics. The ‘fold,’ then, contains a dynamic negative energy, moving in reverse, which must be released in order for the canvas to become a finished painting. Negative energy is being shown to exist at the origin of positive creation. Just at the moment when it appeared, through Hantaï’s invention of ‘the folding method’, that art would be defined by its material, a metaphysical dimension reemerges.

Cézanne, Matisse ... & Bataille

We have suggested that, in contrast to Warhol’s abandonment of modern art, Hantaï’s adoption of ‘the folding method’ opened up access to its accumulated aesthetic thought. This new discovery of the active ground in his painting, made through the experience of working on the ‘Studies’, ‘Watercolors’ and ‘Whites’, established an explicit concern in Hantaï’s mind with themes that had been explored by both Cézanne and Matisse, centering on light and color. Hantaï, through ‘the folding method’, had treated color as material in the ‘Cloaks’, the ‘Meun’, and yet further in the ‘Studies’. In the ‘Watercolors’, which inevitably evoke Cézanne’s exploration of that medium, color becomes intangible and transparent. The ‘Whites’, their title being an explicit evocation of the new autonomy of the unpainted ground, contain two different color palates. In 1973, the focus is on the full spectrum of color, which emerges from the ‘Watercolors’. However, in the following year of 1974, Hantaï shifts his palette to earth tones, again, inevitably evoking Cézanne.

²⁹ Jeff Tollaksen, *Discover Magazine*, April 2010, pg. 39.

There exists a literature on modern art. It is not found in the academic accounts of art history, nor in the efforts of critics to make sense of the most contemporary artistic developments as they are presented in the galleries, though these may, and do, contain scholarly knowledge and intuitive insight. It is to be found in the essays, correspondence, and recorded statements of the great modern artists themselves. Newman stated: “An artist paints so that he will have something to look at; at times he must write so that he will also have something to read.”³⁰ If one doubts that there is integrity of aesthetic thought in modern art, or whether that thought is relevant today, one cannot do better than to turn to the correspondence of Cézanne and Matisse. In a letter to Charles Camoin of 22nd February, 1903, Cézanne declared: “Everything, above all in matters of art, comes down to theory, developed and applied, in contact with nature.”³¹ The modern physicist could only agree. Cézanne continues: “Couture used to say to his students: Keep good company: go to the Louvre. However, once you have absorbed the great masters that are to be found there, you must hurry to go outside and refresh, through contact with nature, the instincts and artistic sensations that live inside you.”



Paul Cézanne, *La Montagne Sainte-Victoire, seen from the Bibemus Quarry*, 1897 experience of painting. Reading this statement, the notion that

Cézanne advocated an alliance between accumulated aesthetic experience [the Louvre³²] and modern scientific methodology. However, as Cézanne progressed ever further into his work, he became more and more aware that modern science confronted him with an infinitely complex and unstable equilibrium of light and color in nature. His correspondence records the drama. In an important passage in his letter to Emile Bernard of 23rd December, 1904, he stated: “Without any possible risk of contradiction, I affirmatively assert the following: an optical sensation occurs on the surface of the eye, through light, which obliges us to classify with semi-tone or quarter-tone the planes which are represented by our sensations of color. *Light, therefore, does not exist for the painter.*” Cézanne knew this from his

³⁰ Statement by Barnett Newman to "Tiger's Eye", from *Barnett Newman, Selected Writings and Interviews*, by Barnett Newman, University of California Press, February 12, 1992.

³¹ This and all further quotes by Cézanne from *Correspondance* by Paul Cézanne edited by Rewald, Grasset, 1978.

³² It should be noted that the museum as an institution emerges at the dawn of the modern era and is directly related to the development of modern art. The Louvre, previously a royal palace, became the repository of the spoils of Napoleon's conquests across Europe, and most notably Italy. It is interesting to consider how, as society took shape in the 19th century, following the French Revolution, a new economic model was developed, under the direction of a city-based middle class, the notorious 'bourgeoisie.' The central cultural institution of this new order for the visual arts was the academic salon (much like our art fairs and auctions today), which represented official taste and conducted the sale of art. The Louvre museum in contrast was the repository of the great art of the past, and became an essential resource of the dissident artists engaged in inventing modern art. It is worth just stating, therefore, that the aesthetic of modern art comes out of studying art history, whereas academic art represents an ideological illustration of 'official' (see footnotes 1 & 2 on pg. 1), what we call today 'popular', taste.

the painter is not concerned with light, may seem curious. The glory of Cézanne's painting is always taken to be his rendering of light. However, here we discover that scientific observation presents paradoxical findings. Should we attach any particular importance to Cézanne's remark or should we consider it a clumsy aside without central bearing on what the artist was trying to impart about color? Certainly, reading the letter in 1904, its recipient would not have been able to situate it in a broader context of modern thinking. However, a reader today, who is familiar with the great French philosopher Georges Bataille, will extract a very different sense of its significance. Georges Bataille discusses what Cézanne knew from experience. When we open our eyes to solar enlightenment, the outcome is blindness. Thus, our accumulated cultural bank of metaphor, associating reason with light, is rendered obsolete.

Cézanne's statement is complex and seems to anticipate Georges Bataille's philosophical thinking on the role of the sun's energy and the notion of excess in his theory of 'General Economy'.³³ For Cézanne, who had painted in the open air, under the full force of the Mediterranean sun, Bataille's thesis would have made perfect sense. Light must be mediated through the colors of nature. It could not be confronted directly. The great drama of Cézanne's life is to be found in his struggle to capture his color sensations of nature in the face of a corrosive, disorienting light-force beyond physical containment. This predicament led him to make the famous statement in another letter to Emile Bernard, of 23rd October, 1905, near the end of his life: "However, now, old as I am, approximately seventy years of age, the color sensations of light provoke abstractions in me so that I am unable to cover my canvas, nor pursue the delineation of objects when their interstices are tenuous and delicate. The result is that my image or picture is incomplete." It is this difficulty of being unable to 'finish' his painting, so that small areas of unpainted primer are left visible, constituting a kind of 'remainder' in the painting, that led Cézanne's treacherous boyhood friend, Emile Zola, in his critique of the 1896 Salon, to declare him an "aborted painter".

Cézanne and Bataille were of different generations and the great painter did not have the benefit of reading the philosopher's work. However, Bataille's thought is now central for our understanding of Cézanne. On the other hand, Bataille died in 1962, two years after Hantaï invented "the folding method." Bataille's writings, elaborated from the mid 1920's on, were contemporary with the first half of Hantaï's life, when he was developing his own intellectual and artistic thought.³⁴ Cézanne's painting and Bataille's writings

³³ Bataille advanced the thesis that the sun constitutes a source of 'excess' energy, which the human organism is unable to process. Looking further into Bataille's thinking, we see that it queries our normal assumption that economics is based on scarcity. Bataille stands this idea on its head and presents, instead, what is to the casual reader the paradoxical notion that Economy is not a matter of allocating scarce resources but rather of dealing with an overabundance. The 'General Economy' is thus predicated on the notion that there is a surfeit of energy in the world and, therefore, any economy, looked at from a total perspective, will in fact end up by producing more than it can usefully consume, leaving room for a useless squandering. Bataille lays out his theory of the 'General Economy' primarily in the *Accursed Share*, vol. 1, and then examines various historical cultures to demonstrate his theory in action. This preoccupation with solar energy should be associated with Barnett Newman's remarks on the atomic bomb. Also for any spectator of recent American military policy in the Middle East and Asia, along with the financial collapse of 2008, Bataille's theory of 'General Economy' may appear to have an ominous relevance.

³⁴ Hantaï first quoted Bataille, along with Nietzsche, in catalogue notes for his May 1956 exhibition "Sexe Prime, Hommage à Jean-Pierre Brisset", Galerie Kléber / Jean Fournier, Paris.

both played very major roles in the advanced intellectual and artistic circles of the Paris milieu, frequented by Hantaï in the 1960's, in large part due to the work of the Tel Quel group.³⁵ Cézanne's and Bataille's thought about solar excess is central to an understanding of the significance of Hantaï's discovery, made through the 'Studies', 'Watercolors' and 'Whites'. As previously stated, Hantaï realized, while working on these series of paintings, that in the process of 'unfolding' his canvas, background surged forward in front of the nominal subject of his painting. Hantaï perceived this background of unpainted white canvas as a source of excess energy which disrupted how the eye viewed color in nature. The 'Whites' of 1974 render this disruption explicit and open up a new approach to the cézannian problematic of light and color. The unpainted canvas in Hantaï's composition is not experienced as a failure, in the way that Cézanne seemed to fear, but rather it constitutes an essential component, perhaps, as Hantaï came to believe, the essential component of his painting. As the folded canvas opens, the color tones of natural vision come apart and the previously untouched, white primed canvas of the folds expansively emerges to assert an autonomous, underlying negative, metaphysical structure to reality.

Hantaï's discovery of the active, autonomous ground of his painting is one of the transformative moments in modern art. It is essential to understand that it was made in an aesthetic dialogue with Cézanne. Once this had been achieved, it opened for exploration the vast field of light and color properties that led Hantaï into a further dialogue with that other great heir to Cézanne's vision, Matisse. Hantaï's interest in Matisse had run parallel with his interest in Cézanne. In particular, he had been attentive to the first exhibition of Matisse's Cut-Outs in Paris, which had generally provoked skepticism on the part of the art world.³⁶ This influence is already being explicitly felt in the Meun series of 1967. Now, the question has become specifically that of light and color. Following his completion of the 'Whites', Hantaï took up the task of exploring these two pictorial elements in the vast series, in two parts, named Tabulas, which was to become the focus of the latter part of his career.

Cézanne had insisted that the painter must focus his attention on the local colors of nature, rendering them in semi and quarter tones. "Light, therefore, does not exist for the painter", he had declared. Matisse, on the other hand, reversed this order in his 'Fauve'

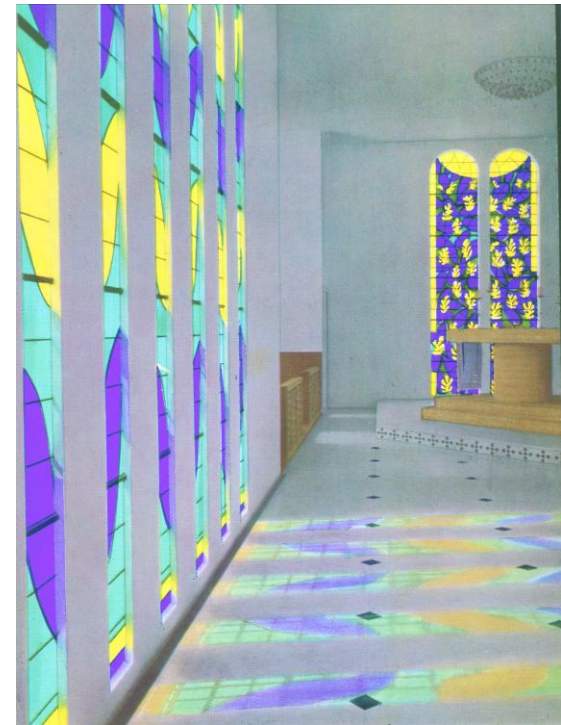
³⁵ Tel Quel was centered around a magazine of the same name, founded in 1960. Tel Quel was immensely influential in advanced literary and artistic circles in Paris. The principal protagonists of the group were Phillipe Sollers, Marcelin Pleynet and Julia Kristeva. The group was in constant dialogue with other leading French intellectuals of the day, notably, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. These and other writers published in the pages of *Tel Quel*. In 1972, Sollers organized a famous colloquium on Artaud and Bataille at the cultural center of Cérisy-La-Salle. See minutes published in edition 10/18, Christian Bourgois, 1973. Pleynet was the specialist in visual art of the group, and had immense influence on the art scene in Paris at the time. See the bibliography of his writings, which includes *L'Enseignement de la peinture* (1971) and *Art et littérature* (1977), ed. Le Seuil.

³⁶ Henri Matisse, *Papiers Découpés*, Berggruen Gallery, Paris, 1953. In conversation with the present writer, Hantaï recounted the occasion of his exchange with Pierre Matisse, son of the painter, when Pierre wanted to represent him in New York in the 1970's. The two men met in Paris. Hantaï explained to him that he was very interested in his father's late cut-outs and was dismayed to learn in return from Pierre that he had little regard for that work and declared it to be of no importance. This produced a breach between the two and although Pierre Matisse exhibited the artist on two occasions, he did so without the artist's cooperation.

paintings, by making the discovery that, rather than light revealing color, color could create light.³⁷ Matisse had taken Cézanne's unpainted canvas as the point from which his painting would make its departure. On this white ground, he proposed placing what he called "pure color". Matisse discovered that color activated the white canvas as a source of light. Matisse also made another discovery in his Fauvist period, namely that color in his painting did not need to serve nature. He remarked: "When I apply a green, that does not indicate grass; when I apply a blue, that does not indicate the sky."³⁸ Making the point a different way, he stated that color "is only the exterior," continuing that "Fauvism came from separating ourselves entirely from the colors of imitation." Fauvism represented, therefore, a 'dislocation' of color from the natural world. It constituted the 'liberation' of color from Cézanne's struggle to render the local effects of nature.

Matisse's discovery of how color can function and have meaning independently of nature, endowed his painting with an extraordinary new, expressive power. Nor did Matisse fail to grasp the amplitude of this discovery. He stated unequivocally: "To have discovered the secret of color's expressivity is a great modern conquest."³⁹ Matisse situated his discovery in an art historical overview of admirable lucidity. "To say that color has rediscovered expressivity is to retrace its history. For a very long time, color was nothing more than a complement of drawing. Raphael, Mantegna or Dürer, like all the painters of the Renaissance, constructed with drawing and then added local color." Then, fast-forwarding through the centuries, Matisse asserted that this organization of line and color was overthrown by the invention of modern art. "From Delacroix to Van Gogh, and principally through Gauguin, in passing by the Impressionists who cleared the ground, and Cézanne who, through introducing colored volume, provided the decisive impetus, it is possible to follow the stages of this rehabilitation of the role of color, which is the restitution of its emotive power."⁴⁰

In order to measure the full import of Matisse's color discovery, it is necessary to inquire more closely into what should be understood by this discussion of "expressivity". In the famous text entitled 'A Painter's Notes', published in 1908, Matisse made a statement which got him into a lot of trouble with the pundits of contemporary art and notably with those who have always considered Picasso to somehow possess more significant credentials as modern art's most important exponent. In trying to capture the goal of his painting, Matisse had advanced



Henri Matisse, la Chapelle du Rosaire des Dominicains de Vence

³⁷ For the development of this thesis see, *Henri Matisse* by Lawrence Gowing, Museum of Modern Art, First Edition, 1966.

³⁸ "Courthion, 1942", from "Ecrits et Propos sur l'Art" by Henri Matisse, ed. Hermann, *Notes d'un Peintre*, 1908.

³⁹ "The Studio, 1935", from "Ecrits et Propos sur l'Art" by Henri Matisse, ed. Hermann, *Notes d'un Peintre*, 1908.

⁴⁰ Henri Matisse, writing to Diehl 1945, from "Ecrits et Propos sur l'Art" by Henri Matisse, ed. Hermann, *Notes d'un Peintre*, 1908.

the unfortunate analogy of “a good armchair”, which would “refresh from their physical toil” all those “workers of the mind”, such as “literary artists”, but also, even more unfortunately, “businessmen.”⁴¹ This was too much to stomach for the New York avant-garde of the 1960’s. Matisse’s reputation and, along with it, the reputation of painting as a legitimate medium of contemporary art, has never really recovered. However, if this statement is to be taken at face value, there is surely a contradiction, or paradox, in what Matisse is suggesting. If we look more closely into the matter, we may come away with a very different interpretation of his simile. It should be remarked that Matisse is not offering ‘aesthetic’ or ‘spiritual’ relief. He is offering ‘physical relief’ for ‘intellectual effort’? Who would need that?

Philosophy in Transition

The symbolic order, since at least Plato, has rested on the distinction between low and high, matter and spirit. Human reason has been thought to operate a separation of mind from the animal instincts of the body, establishing a realm of pure thought. Historically, this hierarchy of values has become allied with religion. Sure enough, Matisse declares in the same statement that the subject of his painting evokes “what one might call the religious feeling that I have for life”. Matisse, however, has introduced a ‘dislocation’ between color and nature. In the larger passage, in which reference is made to the armchair analogy, we can read the following consecutive quotations: “What I am looking for above all is expression” (...) “I want to attain the state of sensations which produces the painting.” (...) “It isn’t possible for me to copy nature in a servile manner. I am forced to interpret it and to make it serve the painting.” (...) “The dominant tendency of color should be as best as possible to serve expression.” (...) “The choice of my colors does not rest on any scientific theory: it is based on observation, on feeling, on the experience of my sensibility.” (...) “What interests me the most is not the still-life, nor landscape, but *the figure*.”⁴² True to this remark, Matisse will elaborate a vast oeuvre across half a century, dedicated to the luxury of the female nude. Perhaps the contemporary critic who coined the name of ‘Fauvism – of the Wild Beast’ was not so far off the mark as art historians have generally maintained. Matisse had installed an Epicurean sensuality in modern art.

Picasso and Matisse treat the same subject, albeit in two very different manners. As modern artists, both wanted to break away from the history and cultural conformism of nineteenth century academic art. The purpose was to return to and rediscover the aesthetic experience of human culture, which in the age of Sigmund Freud acknowledged its origins in sexuality. For Picasso, this effort would continue to be conducted principally through a graphic inspiration. For Matisse, who had discovered what he called “the exaltation of color”⁴³ it would involve the exploration of what Freud called ‘sublimation.’⁴⁴ Matisse was speaking of the modern artist’s task in

⁴¹ "Ecrits et Propos sur l'Art" by Henri Matisse, ed. Hermann, *Notes d'un Peintre*, 1908.

⁴² "Ecrits et Propos sur l'Art" by Henri Matisse, ed. Hermann, *Notes d'un Peintre*, 1908.

⁴³ "Propos rapports par Tériade, 1952" from "Ecrits et Propos sur l'Art" by Henri Matisse, ed. Hermann, *Notes d'un Peintre*, 1908.

⁴⁴ "Term first used by Sigmund Freud in 1905 to take account of a particular human activity (literary, artistic and intellectual creation) without evident relationship to sexuality, however drawing its force from sexual energy, to the extent that it changes direction towards a non-sexual goal through giving social value to the object." See the discussion of sublimation in *Le Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse* Elizabeth Roudinesco and Michel Plon, Fayard, 1997.

breaking away from academic vision and recapturing this vitality of life. The issue is quite unequivocal from the following statement: “When artistic means have become impaired, so diminished that their powers of expression are exhausted, it is necessary to return to the essential principles which have formed human language. These are the principles which ‘return to the source’, retake hold of life, and impart life to us. Paintings based in refinement, in subtle gradations, in syntheses lacking energy, summon up in protest beautiful blues, reds and greens, matter that stirs the well of human sensuality.” This sensuality, conveyed by color, “acts upon our senses like a reverberating gong.”⁴⁵ It will lead, via the process of sublimation, to his Dominican Chapel of the Rosary in St. Paul-de-Vence and a transcendent vision of light.

Hantaï will now enter this exploration of the cultural value of color and light. However, it will be remembered that in inventing the ‘folding method’, Hantaï had been focused on defining the creative process in terms of matter. It has also been stated that this concern with matter reflected a further interest in incorporating mechanical production and the industrial system inside the creative act. The whole first phase of ‘the folding method’, stretching from the Cloaks (1960-62) to the Meuns (1967-68), had been concerned with the exploration of art as matter. It will also be remembered that the artist’s fundamental discovery, namely that the ‘folding method’ activated the background of his canvas, was born out of treating the canvas material as a participant in the manufacture of the painting. In the ‘folding method’, a portion of canvas material turned itself inside the fold and, therefore, became unavailable to the paint being applied by the artist’s brush. This unpainted canvas, associated in the artist’s mind with the white, unpainted ‘remainder’ in Cézanne’s painting and, again, with the primed, white canvas, serving as the initial inspiration for Matisse’s painting, was for Hantaï, from his reading of Bataille, perceived as a source of negative, ‘excess’ energy. In Hantaï’s painting, this unpainted canvas would re-emerge, at the moment of unfolding, to drastically transform both the act and the outcome of the painting itself. Again, as previously mentioned, by the time of the ‘White’ paintings of 1974, the independent ground of primed, unpainted canvas, had been admitted as the true subject of Hantaï’s painting, taking this ‘negative’ charge from the fold and transforming it into a ‘positive’ work of art.

Hantaï, Warhol... & Bataille

A complex transformation has taken place here in the perception of matter, which will reveal why Hantaï’s art develops so differently from that of Warhol, as discussed earlier. It is a fundamental difference of understanding between the two artists about the nature of matter itself. The underlying assumption of Warhol’s work is that matter is a positive entity. Duchamp had previously taken the unexpected step of abruptly introducing a material object, nothing less than a urinal, into the realm of art and culture. This brutal arrival of the object into art had elevated the status of the object and diminished that of art. Following this example, Warhol had made art out of the iconography and production process of consumer products. Quite simply put, Warhol reasoned that the economic

⁴⁵ "Propos sur la Chapelle du Rosaire des Dominicains de Vence" from "Ecrits et Propos sur l'Art" by Henri Matisse, ed. Hermann, *Notes d'un Peintre*, 1908.

process took material and made it into products for human consumption. He acknowledged that this process had become central to how people conceived of their social and personal identity. Contemporary America thinks of itself in terms of its economic out-put. In the post-war era, America had become a ‘materialist’ society. As a consequence, Warhol would take this economic agenda as a model for his art. A Warhol silk-screen is a thing in the world, which reproduces other familiar things, represented as art. The fascinating ramification of this stance is that, contrary to the hope of personal fulfillment promised by commerce, a sensation of ‘alienation’ or of something lacking, sets in. Both Warhol, and his viewer, experience this sense of social ‘alienation’ in his work. We identify with it and, therefore, we conclude that Warhol’s art has somehow defined who we are.

What of Hantai? Paradoxically, the ‘folding method’ leads him in a contrary direction. Instead of inviting the ‘object’ to take its place in art as a positive entity, as Duchamp and Warhol had done, he takes the activity of art and situates it outside in the real world of objects. When Hantai takes his canvas off the wall, as Pollock had done before him, and places it on the floor, he disrupts the vertical/horizontal dichotomy of the symbolic. His canvas exists as material in real space. In doing this, he has, albeit temporarily, removed his painting from the cultural order of the ‘symbolic’. Art has been thrown out into the ‘real’. It is important that Hantai specifies how he cannot ‘see’ his painting during the process of making it. It has become culturally ‘invisible’. Robert Smithson would have called Hantai’s canvas, during this process, a ‘site’. Only when the canvas is unfolded, flattened out, mounted on stretcher and put back on the wall, does it reenter the symbolic order of art and become visible, or, again as Smithson would have said, does it become a ‘non-site’, a work of art. It is time now to identify this ‘reserve’ of the fold, and by extension the entire canvas situated outside the symbolic, in the dimension of the real, during the painting process, as a ‘negative entity’ or simply as a ‘negativity’, since by definition it does not exist in human discourse or thought.⁴⁶ By the same token, we can see how Hantai’s practice engages modern physics and the most contemporary thinking on the origin of the universe, as mentioned earlier.

Hantai made this discovery, that the fold constituted a ‘negativity’, through the practical exploration of the possibilities offered by working with the ‘folding method’. However, he was able to think through the significance of what he was doing with the benefit of his knowledge of modern philosophy, and notably that of Georges Bataille⁴⁷. In making this last remark, it should be mentioned that Hantai also viewed Cézanne and Matisse from the perspective of Bataille’s profound critique of the ‘idealist’ tradition in Western philosophy and ideology. Matisse had spoken of ‘pure color’ and of moving from matter towards the ‘spiritual’ in the work of his

⁴⁶ These remarks must be situated against the background of Hegel’s philosophy and specifically of Kojève’s consideration of the Hegelian notion of ‘concept’ that he develops in ‘Concept, Time and Discourse – Introduction to the System of Knowledge’. The central point here is that philosophy, necessarily functioning in language, does not have direct access to, or directly treat, the material world, but only the linguistic representation of that world which necessarily replaces it in thought. Therefore, by the act of establishing a concept, of necessity the object at its origin is banished from the mind. “In taking the notion ‘concept’ instead of the notion of ‘Being’, I wanted to remind us that from the outset one can obviously only speak about that which one is speaking, so that in the last analysis (which is philosophical analysis par excellence, at least since Kant, but in fact already since Plato) one speaks, everywhere and always, even ‘necessarily’, not of Being, as such, but of the Being of which one is speaking, that is to say of what ‘corresponds’ to the notion of ‘Being’”. This argument allows Hegel, in Kojève’s formulation, to define man as a ‘negativity in action ...”

⁴⁷ Ironically, this view amounts to a complete reversal of Arthur Danto’s notion of art becoming philosophy in the work of Andy Warhol.

later years. Hantai, on the other hand, is on record as stating: "Impurity is the true situation."⁴⁸ Clearly, when one gives full consideration to the profound relationship between Hantai and Matisse, it is necessary to sort out the difference between their philosophical views on this key issue of 'purity' in art.

Georges Bataille & the Misery of Philosophy

These words by Hantai, that "impurity is the true situation", carry us back to the 1920's and the vitriolic polemic between Breton and the Surrealist movement, on the one hand, and Georges Bataille, on the other, which fundamentally is a debate over what would constitute 'beauty' in modern art. Bataille's central concern here was to combat 'idealism' wherever he detected it in modern thought. Bataille had encountered Surrealism in its earliest days, of the mid-1920's. However, he always had the deepest reservations and he never joined the movement. Breton's aesthetic position was centered around the notion of 'the marvelous'. "Let's get right to the heart of the matter" he had declared in the First Surrealist Manifesto (1924) "the marvelous is always beautiful, no matter what form it takes, it is only the marvelous which is beautiful."⁴⁹ Bataille identified an 'idealist' mind-set, underlying this notion of the 'marvelous', and he applied himself to combating it at every turn. In 1929 he employed the review *Documents* to oppose Breton and all forms of 'idealism'. Michel Surya, Bataille's biographer, has called *Documents* "a war machine against Surrealism."⁵⁰

The debate was very unsettling for Breton who had a much less rigorous philosophical background than Bataille. Indeed, Breton, for whatever reason, perhaps out of philosophical insecurity, more likely because he was at bottom a conventional thinker, was hostile to many strands of modern thought. For example, he expressed strong distaste for Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. His understanding of Freud has also revealed itself to have been extremely shaky and was based, this according to Freud himself, on a complete misunderstanding of the dream.⁵¹ Breton considered Freud the central inspiration for Surrealism and considered himself his major exponent in the fields of literature and art. If it turns out that Breton's understanding of the issues falls short on this crucial point, how can it fail to raise doubt about the whole Surrealist enterprise, and all its spin offs, including Pop and the whole panoply of Post-World

⁴⁸ See *Hantai in America* by Carter Ratcliff, for a discussion of impurity in Hantai's paintings. Ratcliff takes the quote above from *L'Etoilement: Conversation avec Hantai*, Georges Didi-Huberman, Les Editions de Minuit, 1998. Hantai would often evoke this Bataillan notion of "impurity", notably in numerous conversations over the years with this writer.

⁴⁹ Andre Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Gallimard, 1962, pg 24-25.

⁵⁰ For an account of the complex relationship between Bataille and surrealism, see Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*. Notably, the chapter "Don't waste my time with idealism!" pg 112, and "The donkey's kick", pg. 118.

⁵¹ On this question, see Marcelin Pleyne "La peinture et le surréalisme et la peinture", in *Art et Littérature*, Le Seuil, 1977, in which Pleyne examines the relationship between Surrealism and Psychoanalysis, citing J.-L. Houdebine (*D'une lettre en souffrance*, Freud/Breton, 1972). Apparently the Surrealist's had invited Freud to contribute to a "collection of dreams". Freud declined, writing in reply, "I ask you to please take note of the following point, that the literal enunciation of dreams, what I call the 'manifest' dream, has no interest for me.." He then continues, "a collection of dreams, without their associations, without knowledge of their circumstances, such a collection has no meaning for me, and I cannot imagine what meaning it could have for others."

War II avant-garde movements? The question confronts a conceit which is routinely maintained about art. The notion reigns that art is an affair of the eye and not the mind. According to this thinking, such theoretical issues are secondary at best and perhaps not even relevant. We can only go along with this outlook if we ignore the celebrated quotation of Cézanne, above, deny the proposition of Rothko, following, and seek to neutralize Hantaï's contribution to 'modern art' by viewing it as some gratuitous post-script to 'modernism'⁵². Such treatment is an abuse and betrayal of these artists.

Bataille's response to Breton's notion of the 'marvelous' was 'base materialism'. This notion insisted on adherence to the properties of matter, rejecting any translation of those properties into ideational form. In 'base materialism', therefore, thought of matter refuses to become idea. It may be acknowledged here that Bataille was invoking Nietzsche's program of taking the 'logos' out of the hands of philosophers and giving it back to the artists. This is, after all, what Rothko and Hantaï demanded. Breton's advocacy of the 'marvelous' was an attempt to reverse this effort. We may also feel that Heidegger's philosophy, and Hegel's before him, were immense efforts to reassert the prerogative of philosophical idealism in face of this epistemological shift. We may even feel that, at some level, in spite of himself, Bataille yielded to this same inclination in his fiction. In any case, Bataille struggled all his life, with enormous integrity, to found a new understanding of thought in matter. As his thought gained in complexity, he introduced a new term to accompany his quest, that of 'heterogeneity'. Where does all this leave our notion of 'beauty' in modern art? Hantaï's response was to state that: "we must turn towards what is caste from grace."⁵³ Hantaï's painting is capable of revealing great beauty in extension of the cézannian and matissian aesthetic of color and light. However, there is always a counter tendency in his work, this turning towards the paradox of heterogeneity, which introduces a new understanding of 'beauty' into modern art.

The 'Tabulas'- A Modern Synthesis

All of these foregoing considerations will be collected in the *Tabula* paintings. The story of the '*Tabulas*' is much more complicated than might appear at first glance. To recapitulate, by 1974, Hantaï had fully come to understand the import of his discovery of the active role played by the 'background' in his composition. This discovery was associated in his mind with the unpainted areas of Cézanne's canvas and with how Matisse had discovered sublimation through the separation of color from nature. Hantaï would incorporate both these elements in the '*Tabulas*'. However, Hantaï had also come to understand, through his reading of Georges Bataille, that this 'background' in his painting constituted a reserve of excess physical force, ultimately derived from the theory of 'General Economy'. When this notion of physical energy is admitted into philosophical discourse, which of necessity takes place in language, matter is transformed into a 'metaphysical' category of negativity. In taking up the challenge of addressing the issues of color and light, that he could now understand from his close engagement with the work of Cézanne and Matisse, Hantaï resolved, once again, to process them through his 'folding method', in other words, through a return to matter, only this time with the crucial

⁵² I use the term "modern art" advisedly, to distinguish from "modernism," which I take to be associated with Clement Greenberg's formalist criticism.

⁵³ In French, Simon Hantaï stated "il faut tourner vers l'ingrat."

difference that matter will be understood in this new manner, namely as a metaphysical category of negativity.

It is possible to divide Hantaï's oeuvre, employing the 'folding method', into two halves. The first begins in 1960 with its invention in the series entitled 'Cloaks' and is completed with the 'Whites' of 1974. During this fifteen year period Hantaï discovers and explores the whole range of pictorial experience from its inception in matter to its dematerialization in light. Hantaï had taken as his point of departure the lessons of Pollock, and more generally Abstract Expressionism, and had moved on to an evaluation of Cézanne and Matisse. The second half of this oeuvre is covered by the 'Tabulas'. In the 'Tabula' series Hantaï resolved to sum up all he had learnt in his painting experience and make one grand all-embracing statement. The context now comprises the various art movements of the post-war period, most prominently, Pop and Minimalism. We have already described how Hantaï shared with Warhol an interest in mechanical production and how, indeed, this interest is at the origin of the 'folding method' itself, contemporaneous with, or pre-dating, Warhol's early silk screens. With the 'Tabulas', which adopt the reductive geometric motif of the square, the explicit reference has shifted to Minimalism. It is impossible to look at the first series of 'Tabula' paintings and not see that they aggressively confront Donald Judd's Minimalist prescriptions. At the same time, there is also no way to avoid the realization that Hantaï has a complete disregard for the aesthetic of Minimalism and the positivist, mechanistic ideology which underlies it. In the 'Tabula' series, Minimalism is taken in charge, turned upside down and ransacked.

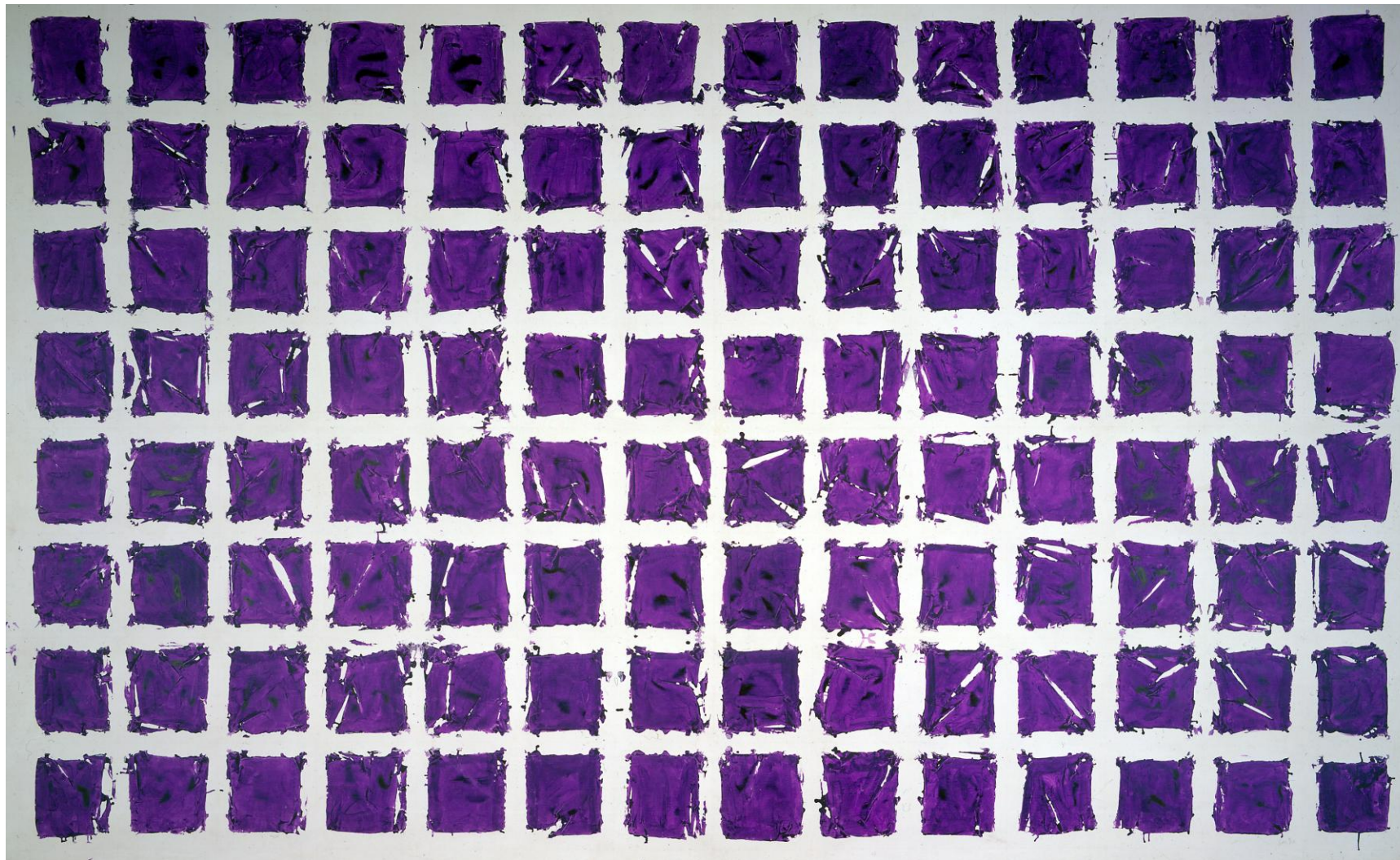
The 'Tabula' series is based on the motif of the square. In the first series of 'Tabulas', the squares are small, relatively uniform, densely painted so as to emphasize their materiality, and are laid out in orderly rows as if they had been made to order on a production line. However, we already know enough of Hantaï's method, involving the exchange between the artist's hand and the canvas as a contributing element in the manufacture of the painting, and his interest in 'automatic' process, to anticipate that the painting will function quite differently. Sure enough, when we begin to attune our eye to the painting, we will see that the squares are not at all uniform. In fact, no two squares are the same. Each square deploys itself in a display of infinite variety of form. Production is being undermined by re-production, mechanics by biology. Form engenders form, though not in time, nor with any evolutionary purpose, but rather freely and for its own sake, quite possibly moving back in time. Contrary to proposing the homogeneous uniformity of mechanical production, Hantaï's painting celebrates heterogeneity.



Donald Judd, Untitled, 1966, with Carl Andre sculpture pictured below

However, there is also a further element in these 'Tabula' paintings which turns the industrial model entirely on its head. The artist makes this issue explicit in the catalogue of his 1976 mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris.⁵⁴ Here we find,

⁵⁴ "Hantaï" Musée national d'art moderne, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Paris, 26 mai - 13 septembre, 1976.



Simon Hantäi, Tabula (Violet), 1980, 117 x 189 inches

serving as frontispiece for the publication, a black and white photograph of the artist's mother, whom he had been forced to leave when he went into exile from the Hungarian Communist regime in 1948. Hantaï had taken this keepsake with him when he left Budapest, as it transpired never to return, and it was now identified as the inspiration of the 'Tabula' paintings. In the photograph we see the artist's mother wearing a long skirt of light cloth, pressed in geometric rectangles, according to a folk custom among Hungarian women. Sharp creases have been impressed in the material and each form is tightly aligned to the next in a rigid pattern. The effect is of a flattened, stiff and polished surface intervening between the viewer and the wearer's physical presence, as represented in the photograph. When we look at the 'Tabula' paintings, we realize that what Hantaï has done is to open up these rigid, geometric folds in order to discover the maternal element beneath. Is there a child who does not retain, throughout its life, the fond memory of the warmth and odor of its mother's skirts? Now, this intimate human memory is transposed to the realm of art, through the medium of painting. The white canvas of the folds separates the squares in tight, irregular lines, needing and compressing the negative charge of matter that seeks to escape from beneath.

Hantaï conceived the initial approach of the 'Tabulas' in the early 1970's. Examples were included in the artist's mid-career retrospective in 1976 at the Centre Georges Pompidou, when the museum was housed on the Avenue President Wilson in Paris, before the 'Beaubourg' facility, where it is now located, had been built. After a hiatus, in large part occasioned by the museum exhibition and a film on the artist's work, made for television, Hantaï executed a second series of the 'Tabulas' at the beginning of the 1980's. This second series represented an enormous explosion of creative energy in which the tightly painted squares of the first series expand and sunder, letting the white canvas background break through and once again assert its rights over the painting's composition. Color becomes transparent, evoking the release of light. Then, by extension, in quick succession, another sub-series appears, entitled '*Tabulas Lilas*', 'white on white' paintings, or rather white on raw, unprimed canvas, which push this apotheosis of dematerialized light to its limit with their own extraordinary discovery. In the raw canvas background, playing off the painted white forms of the composition, is released an infrared rosy glow of dematerialized colored light which puts the viewer in mind of the interior of Matisse's chapel in Vence. However, Hantaï does not, as did Matisse, associate this visual phenomenon with religious spirituality. Hantaï will not abandon his attachment to matter nor disregard his discovery that matter metamorphoses into its opposite. The artist intended to present these '*Tabulas Lilas*', at the 1982 Venice Biennial, tacked on the walls of the French Pavilion, as an 'all-over' installation project. However, the paintings are extremely fragile, due to the vulnerability of the raw canvas to light and the Venice project was finally shelved for practical considerations. The '*Tabula Lilas*' remain virtually unknown to the present day. Hantaï then painted a series of immense canvases, measuring in the range of twenty by forty feet, which were presented at the CACP Bordeaux in 1982. In these paintings Hantaï sought to force the 'folding method' to its physical outer limits. These enormous paintings, it turns out, shift the artist's attention from dematerialized light back, once again, to matter.

The Fold – Modern Art in Contemporary Society

A drastic and abrupt shift of emphasis is now, once more registered in Hantaï's work following the Venice Biennial of 1982, which caused much confusion and misunderstanding among those who were following the artist's career. Through a complex revolution of

outlook, the physical once again assumed a metaphysical status, though this time not in pictorial production, but rather at the level of thought in the artist's mind. This thought process, as we have seen, had been anchored in the long development of the artist's work. However, now it emerged that it was also reflected in his evaluation of the contemporary art world as a social entity. Surveying the contemporary art world of the early 1980's, Hantai concluded that it had become preoccupied, to the exclusion of all other considerations, with this question of mechanical production informing the work of Warhol and his own. Warhol, as we have seen, accepted mechanical production at face value. For Hantai, however, the 'folding method' had been conceived in order to explore the mechanism of production in aesthetic terms. Now Hantai found himself confronted with an art world which accepted artistic production for its commercial and social value. He could find no room any where in the institutions of the 1980's art world for his aesthetic pursuits. Matter as he had conceived it in aesthetic terms, was being transformed into nothing more than a product of exchange. At this point, his fundamental difference with Warhol reemerged in sharp outline. Warhol had notoriously declared that "The best art is business." In response, Hantai took the diametrically opposite view and declared that he would no longer exhibit in the commercial gallery system. Henceforth, he would confine himself to his studio, alone with, on the one hand, his paintings and, on the other, the accumulation of books and documentation which had served to shape his aesthetic understanding throughout its long process of development. Increasingly, Hantai conceived of his work as an on-going intellectual process of examination and interrogation of the issues relating to modern art. He shared his insight in these matters with a small group of mostly other artists and writers. I know how Hantai lived this period of his life because I was one such who made his way regularly to the austere, independent, three, or is it four, story house behind the metal gate and railing, bordering the Parc Montsouris in Paris's fourteenth arrondissement.

This attitude on Hantai's part, in the latter period of his life, made the art world extremely uncomfortable. The decision to no longer exhibit, provoked consternation and a large measure of suppressed resentment. It was assumed that, if he would no longer show his art, then he must have stopped working. Why, just at the moment that his work was beginning to reach a wider range of viewers, when he had received the honor of representing France at the Venice Biennial, would Hantai choose to withdraw? Surely, any other artist would have seized the opportunity to capitalize on this success. Did his action betray a lack of gratitude? Was this arrogance on his part? Had he, in fact, stopped painting? Had the inspiration of his work dried up? Did he no longer know what to do? Those who were admitted into his confidence knew that the real situation in the studio was quite the opposite. Just as the genesis of Hantai's work in the 'folding method' reposed on the premises that aesthetic experience lodged in matter, so he had always considered, in agreement notably with Rothko, that matter must organize itself as a form of thinking. If art failed as thought, then it would cease to have any significance or interest. Hantai had concluded that, quite to the contrary of his many doubters, the only way to keep his art alive in those closing decades of the twentieth century, and beyond, was to place an uncompromising emphasis on the intellectual content of art. It is tragic to consider that this fierce and inflexible adherence to the aesthetic and intellectual integrity of modern art may well have cost Rothko his life in 1970. Hantai was able to conceive his situation differently, although not without great difficulty and personal cost, by remaining true to his fundamental aesthetic vision of the 'fold'. What did this withdrawal into the studio and apparent, though misleading, inactivity signify? As a first-hand witness, I can confirm that, Hantai had simply assumed the same function of 'negative space' in regard to the social world that the canvas fold played in his painting.

The Left-overs

The stance that Hantai adopted in 1983 preserved the independence and vitality of his art and allowed him to produce the last great phase of his 'Tabulas' series, to which he gave the title 'Left-Overs'. The 'Left-Overs', it should be noted, are dated '1981-94/95'. In other words, throughout all this time, when the artist had supposedly ceased painting, in favor of an obscure process of intellectual reflection, he had in fact been endowing himself with the means to continue painting. More than this, he had, apparently, never ceased to paint. To the contrary, he had simply asserted, in collegial agreement with Rothko, and for that matter Newman, that an artist paints through thinking. One more time, Hantai's attitude during those years had proved the opposite of what the contemporary art world believes. To those who would transform artists into workers in the luxury trade, urging artists to forget the endeavor of modern art and produce for the economic machine, Hantai replied that without thought there will be no art.

In order to grasp the achievement of the 'Left-Overs', they must be situated in the context of the broader arc of the 'Tabula' series and, at this point, we can finally understand how these paintings, constituting the second half of the 'folding method', make one monumental, all-encompassing statement. The first series of the 'Tabulas' addresses itself to a systematic exploration of mechanical production with the tenets of Minimalism clearly present in mind. Then the artist, in the second series, delivers matter over to the expansive power of cosmic energy. In the 'Tabulas Lilas', matter 'dematerializes'. At this point, the artist would appear to accept the promethean challenge of extending the reach of his canvas beyond pictorial measure in a further sub-series of 'super-sized' paintings presented in Bordeaux. Perhaps these canvases were an experiment to see if his painting could confront the cacophony of the contemporary art world on its terms. Perhaps, having made these paintings, and having installed them in the cavernous spaces of the Bordeaux facility, Hantai may have taxed himself with hubris. After all, he, despite his extraordinary powers as a painter, would remind his interlocutor in conversation that "we, in ourselves, are nothing but an instrument ...".

In any case, we should consider carefully the artist's actions. After a period in excess of ten years, he made the decision to destroy these vast paintings. However, he did not destroy them all. One, perhaps two, he set aside. The rest he laid out in the garden of his house in the country one summer and began the task of cutting, folding, and burying them in a corner by the wall. It may have seemed to him a lugubrious task. Certainly, confronted by an art world which worshipped the rewards of production, it could only have reinforced a sense of isolation and aloneness. However, as he worked, his painting spoke one more time to him. He recounted that as he cut the canvases into sections for disposal, he began to be aware that the parts functioned differently, some more than others, from the whole. The down-sized elements had been transformed from the whole by a drastic change of scale. In conversation, during this time, Hantai alluded often to Newman and his understanding of scale in painting.⁵⁵ One more time, the authority of heterogeneity asserted itself and at its center Hantai found the human subject, his subject, the subject which he had caste into the scale of the 'folding method,' when he acknowledged that he would have to take the artistic measure of this industrial production which dominates our

⁵⁵ For Barnett Newman's discussion of scale see, "Through the Louvre" by Pierre Schneider with Barnett Newman, recorded from Newman's first visit to Paris in 1968, published in *ARTNews* in 1969.

lives, both with enrichment and annihilation.

The 'Left-Overs' are austere works. Elsewhere, I have remarked that the exploration of light has been set aside.⁵⁶ These paintings seem to reverse the process of expansion and suck light back into a timeless, measureless, negative origin. I have also said that these works appear to me as posthumous. I don't mean this in the conventional sense of works which are discovered after the artist's death. I mean that, in some mysterious manner, they were painted posthumously by the artist, which means that he is still living, and thinking, or at least his painting is alive and thinks. Is this a case of time flowing backwards, as contemporary physicists are positing? The 'Left-Overs' constitute an authentic 'late phase' of the artist's career, a privilege given to few. Do they carry a message of despair for humanity, nourished by the long, dolorous tale of exploitation, deprivation, brutality and burlesque that modern history offers up? One thing is sure: these paintings have earned the privilege of considering that question. What ever else they are, they are not abstract forms on a flat surface, intent on realizing the inherent properties of their medium. Nor do they simply assume that the social conformity of contemporary society, striving to find meaning in short-term compensation, offers a viable alternative for art.

So, must I answer the question? Speaking for myself, and I believe, speaking in dialogue with my friend Simon, I would say, standing now in front of one of the finest examples of the 'Left-Overs', that, No, they carry no message of despair. In this, I would say that they, and Hantai's entire oeuvre, distinguish themselves from Warhol's art. To the contrary, they align themselves with that last word of James Joyce's writings, yes!, echoed, despite all appearance to the contrary, by the message of Georges Bataille's philosophy.⁵⁷

Visitors to the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art today in New York have the opportunity to view the vision of modern art in Jackson Pollock's two great masterpieces 'Autumn Rhythm' and 'Number One'. For a similar Rothko experience, they must travel to the Tate in London. For Newman, we can travel to the National Gallery to see his 'Stations of the Cross' in their own installation. There is nowhere in the United States where they have a similar opportunity of seeing where Simon Hantai took modern art in the years after 1960 and up to the year of his death in 2008. Perhaps one day that opportunity will be given to them. It might be said that the exhibition which accompanies this text tries, provisionally, to make a beginning. In any case, it has to be said that today the contemporary art world is in a kind of stand-off with modern art. Much remains to be seen.

Unless, of course, it proves otherwise. For fifty years the contemporary art world has been engaged in a collective effort to destroy the aesthetic legitimacy of modern art, or can we simply say, of art? Fifty years? Actually it has been much longer, since the attempt goes back to Duchamp⁵⁸. So let's acknowledge that this phenomenon spans an entire century. Of course, behind Duchamp stands the whole history of academic hostility to modern art throughout the nineteenth century. So, in fact, this effort spans two centuries, the

⁵⁶ See "Simon Hantai Life and Work," ed. Paul Rodgers / 9W, 2008, pg. 32. Available online at www.paulrogers9w.com.

⁵⁷ "In opposition to the No towards the real, which is implicit in the term surreal, Bataille says yes to the world, up to and including the horror which it contains," Michel Surya *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography* Verso, 2010.

⁵⁸ On the subject of Duchamp, I will just say that I agree with everything that Robert Smithson said about the Grand-Master of Conceptualism. (See interview with Moira Roth in the recent Retrospective Catalogue, "Robert Smithson", The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2004. Pg. 80.)

entire period of modern art? However, contemporaneous with this attempt, the great tradition of modern art has been created by Géricault, Courbet, Manet, Monet, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Bonnard, Giacometti, Newman, Pollock, Rothko, Hantai and, of course, so many other artists. This struggle is, no doubt, part of a much larger cultural drama, consisting of modern thought's endeavor to reshape cultural values and the implacable enmity of contemporary society, either that with conservative religious background, or that of the commercial entity which has replaced it in our modern secular society, or that of the current curious mish-mash of religion and commerce to be found in the United States today. The purpose of this essay has been, first of all, to attempt to make the case for the continuing existence of modern art and, secondly, to urge its on-going support. The issue today is to acknowledge that we have a choice and, at the same time, to understand, with Hantai, that we are only instruments of another will. As Yogi Berra, the great hero of American folklore, has put it: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it".

Paul Rodgers, Jan.- April, 2010