

Thoughts on 'Simon Hantaï – under the direction of Dominique Fourcade, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, Alfred Pacquement – Centre Pompidou, May 22nd to September 2nd, 2013'.

"... Without forgetting what enables him at the same time to be and not to be the great artist of his century". Marcelin Pleyne in his text 'Simon Hantaï: 'Written Painting and Painted Writing'', published in the accompanying catalogue and dated 'Paris, August 2012'.

The biography and life's-work of Simon Hantaï (1922-2008) offer an extraordinary example of what it meant to be a modern artist in the second half of the twentieth century¹.

In this summer of 2013, the long-awaited retrospective of Simon Hantaï has finally taken place. Why long-awaited? The French national museum of modern art had given Hantaï a mid-career survey exhibition of his work in 1976 at its previous location on Paris's Avenue President Wilson. Perhaps the serendipitous association of Hantaï with the American 'internationalist' President of the First World War is fitting. Hantaï came from the provincial background of a small village near Budapest, travelling to Paris in 1948 as a refugee from Communism and in search of engagement with the broader horizons of modern culture. Hantaï would identify with the internationalist aspirations of modern culture and associate his work with its fortune.

This fortune of internationalism has been doubtful since President Wilson's time². While the great modern artists, without question, wanted to reject national identities, which brought the continent of Europe to ruin in two world wars, they perhaps more practically identified with the concept of the modern city. Walter Benjamin had called Paris 'the capital of the nineteenth century'. It was to Paris, therefore, that Simon Hantaï gravitated and it was there that he found an intellectual and aesthetic context which allowed him to develop his powerful and complex understanding of what it meant to be a modern artist in the second half of the twentieth century.

¹ In putting these thoughts down on the computer screen, I am mindful of why I should undertake this task. I have stated elsewhere that I do not consider myself to be either a critic or an art historian. I looked at these professions, such as they are, and chose not to follow them. The prospect of eclectically covering the art world from year to year, important and necessary though this may be, did not attract me. As to becoming an academic art historian, there were too many methodological concerns for me to feel comfortable in that role. The notion of art history as a discipline, defined by a method based on enlightenment and scientific principles, did not seem adequate to the task of understanding modern art. The very notion of an academic account of modern art, which after all established its identity in opposition to the Academy, seemed mismatched. Instead, I wanted a sustained and significant engagement with modern art. This led me to personal involvement with artists themselves, to the point that I began to feel myself to be an advocate for their work. In time this led me to collect, advise collectors and open an art gallery. Above all, it led me to look at art in a way that it is hard to do, even in a museum. In the case of Simon Hantaï, I realize with surprise that I have probably spent more time looking at his work than most anyone alive and certainly more at the particular paintings that I most frequently look at, because I live and move in their vicinity. It has been an extraordinary experience.

² Internationalism should not be confused with today's buzzword 'globalism' which would seem to be more about economic homogeneity and the effacement of cultural difference.

Hantaï always understood that modern art was engaged in the stakes of human destiny in his time. He had seen Communism role into Eastern Europe and impose its ideological strait-jacket. He felt deeply the division of the continent into east and west, with the 'iron curtain' between, and he never accepted it. He also understood that the ghosts of Fascism still circulate in our contemporary societies. When this writer brought to his attention that the National Front had pasted campaign posters of a certain 'Lehideux' over the bill-boards announcing his show at the private foundation, Espace Renn, in 1998, he declared: "You see, they recognize an active space and they want to smother it. If those people had been in power in 1948, Zsuzsa and I would not have been able to make our life here. They would have thrown us out!" He sent a photograph of the bill-board to Art press magazine, where it became the subject of an editorial page. Paris took in the Hantaï's in 1948 and in 1997, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their arrival in Paris, Hantaï gave the Museum of the City of Paris an extraordinary gift of five large format and ten small format paintings, to show his gratitude.

Simon Hantaï died thirty two years after his mid-career exhibition on Avenue President Wilson. Throughout all that time there had been no major retrospective at the national museum, or Centre Georges Pompidou, now known more popularly as 'Beaubourg', in the Marais section of Paris. Does this indicate that the French museum constituency had lost interest in the artist? No, not at all! Dominique Bozo, president of the Pompidou, had announced the retrospective as early as 1993³. This exhibition was never realized. When the current director, Alfred Pacquement, took up his post in 2000, he also sought to carry forward his predecessor's intention. As it turned out, he had to wait till after the artist's death in order to realize the project. This Hantaï retrospective, therefore, has taken twenty years to organize and it will be the last major exhibition of Pacquement's tenure at the Pompidou, as his retirement has been announced for December 2013. It should be seen not only as a tribute to a great modern artist, but also as testimony to the constancy of purpose of two museum directors in bringing a difficult but important project to fruition. They have performed a genuine service to the cause of modern art. In the current state of contemporary culture, based on the Society of the Spectacle, it is not at all clear that an Hantaï retrospective would be a priority for the new curatorial team which will take over in 2014.

Upholding Modern Art

So the French national museum of modern art has finally been able to make good on its long-standing intentions of organizing a Simon Hantaï retrospective. Why did it take so long? The short answer is that the artist did everything in his power to defer this retrospective. Why? Hantaï felt deeply reticent about the state of modern art in the second half of the twentieth century. He believed that modern art, over its long history, spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, had developed a coherent tradition of intellectual and aesthetic experience. It was this tradition that he sought to engage and develop in his work. However, he had come to feel that in contemporary art there was a determined effort being made to set this modern art tradition aside. It was being advanced that modern art was now of only historical

³ See magazine of the Georges Pompidou Center, 15 Sept. – 15 Nov., 1992, when Hantaï's retrospective was programmed to open 28 October, 1993, in the museum's Grandes Galeries.

interest, that contemporary art was responding to new social conditions and was developing another aesthetic. Hantaï did not agree with this entire rationale. He maintained that modern art was contemporary and that to view his work in ignorance of the intellectual and aesthetic context of its background in modern art would only be misleading. Consequently, he insisted that any retrospective of his work should be preceded and accompanied by an investigation of the modern aesthetic. The French museum world would never take up this challenge⁴.

There was also another, related, matter. In 1983, or thereabouts, Hantaï had declared publicly that he was renouncing commercial representation of his work in the system of the contemporary art world. He maintained this position until his death in 2008. In taking this decision, he made clear that he felt compelled to do so by conditions in the contemporary art world. As he saw it, the contemporary art world's increasing commercialization of art, from 1960 on, driven by popular taste and changing fashion, and the notion that art was a business like any other, was a key reason for its hostility to modern art. Over the next fifteen years, in place of exhibiting his work, Hantaï undertook a rigorous exercise of interrogation to defend an intellectual and aesthetic understanding of modern art. He conducted this effort in largely oral form through a discursive exchange with a small inner circle of associates. His purpose was to ask the crucial question, as to what was the identity of modern art?⁵ To his interlocutors, this discussion developed, not only an aesthetic, but also an ethical dimension of Socratic character, with the answers, of course, contained in his painting. This hiatus in exhibiting his work, from the Venice Biennial of 1982, where he showed at the French pavilion, till the exhibition at Fondation Renn in 1998, was deeply resented by an art world which had embraced spectacle and economic production as values and neither could nor cared to understand Hantaï's position.

This legacy weighs heavily on the posthumous retrospective and its catalogue. If the exhibition represents a model of purpose in bringing a great modern artist to the attention of a twenty first century public, the catalogue is a quite different matter. Can we say, when we read this accompanying catalogue of the Pompidou retrospective, that it explores the 'modern aesthetic', as Simon Hantaï urged the French art establishment to do during all those years? Does it even acknowledge, with Hantaï, that a modern aesthetic exists? It is hard to find much evidence of this in the string of monographic notes, signed Dominique Fourcade, and offered as this retrospective's principal evaluation of the artist's oeuvre. Instead, these notes make a special point from the outset of rejecting the artist's intellectual position. Fourcade is at pains to state, in the preface, that: "the more I discovered, the greater was my feeling that Simon Hantaï had only elaborated his discourse as a form of modesty, a kind of protection, in order to create a screen between his painting and us – and even, perhaps especially, let's be clear about this, to create a screen

⁴ This intellectual interrogation, on the part of Simon Hantaï, should be seen in relationship with the extensive effort of critical re-evaluation undertaken by Tel Quel, the Paris based literary group, from its inception in 1960. It is worth remarking that this date of 1960 coincides with Hantaï's invention of the 'folding method'.

⁵ When I speak of Hantaï's views on these and other matters, I am drawing upon an on-going conversation with the artist from the late 1970's forward. For my relationship with the artist, please see the recent interview that Gwenaël Kerlidou conducted with me, now on YouTube, and my essay 'Simon Hantaï and the International Scene' in Art Press #402, July-August, 2013.

between his painting and himself..." In other words, Hantaï's fierce interrogation of the intellectual and aesthetic foundations of modern art, conducted over a fifty year career, and his relentless insistence that such modern understanding was rooted in the form of his work and guided its development, was simply an elaborate effort to mislead everyone, including himself. What, then, does Fourcade suggest should replace concern with intellectual and aesthetic content? He gives his answer: "beauty" born "in a context of wonder and anguish".

Surrealism and its fall-out

The reader needs to understand that Dominique Fourcade is committing a calculated act in setting aside what he calls the artist's 'discourse' and in replacing it with an undefined and immutable notion of 'beauty'. We will find here a crucial struggle to understand modern art. This invocation of beauty has to be understood in the historical context of developing ideas about modern art in the early twentieth century and must be associated with two very important voices in that struggle: André Breton and Marcel Duchamp. It is necessary to give some thought to these earlier protagonists of aesthetic investigation, Breton and Duchamp, because Simon Hantaï was personally and directly engaged with both of them.

A fundamental transformation had taken place in modern art during the 1920's. Previously, figures such as Matisse and Picasso had looked at the task of becoming a modern artist differently. Their focus was on the example of previous masters, such as Manet, Cézanne, Gauguin and others. They were aware of the innovating tendency in modern art, thinking through their own innovations of Fauvism and Cubism, but they did not conceive of modern art as an explicitly ideological endeavor. With Breton, the task of becoming a modern artist became just that. André Breton's Surrealism, with its emphasis on the Freudian unconscious, set out to offer an account of the modern aesthetic⁶. Breton's ambition was to define beauty on his terms.

Surrealism has been enormously influential in the contemporary art world. In the 1940's Breton took his Surrealist movement to New York in order to escape the Second World War in Europe and he encountered an emergent generation of artists there. These American artists of the 1940's, who have been grouped together under the name of Abstract Expressionism, at first enthusiastically embraced Surrealism. They too, finding themselves faced with the upheaval of the world war and seeking to discover their artistic identity, were preoccupied with questions of ideology and the intellectual and aesthetic content of modern art. However, the two groups were soon to quarrel. André Breton had declared in the first Surrealist Manifesto of 1924: "Let's get right to the heart of the matter, the marvelous is always beautiful, no matter what form it takes, it is only the marvelous which is beautiful", thereby sparking a vituperative polemic with the great French philosopher Georges Bataille, who considered this notion to reveal an 'idealist' bias.

⁶ For a discussion of the relationship between Breton and Freud, see Marcelin Pleyne, *'La peinture et le surréalisme et la peinture'* in *Art et Littérature*, Le Seuil, 1977. Translated by Paul Rodgers, with an introduction by Stephen Bann, in *Comparative Criticism Vol. 4*, ed. E.S. Shaffer.

The Abstract Expressionists took issue with Breton, rejecting the fantastic imagery of Surrealism, which sprang from his statement about 'the marvelous', and retaining only its technique of 'automatism', as opening access to the 'unconscious'. This technique of 'automatism' led them to abandon representation and adopt a practice of what we call 'abstract' art. Although these artists did not know the philosophy of Georges Bataille, they had in fact taken sides with him against Breton on this fundamental issue of what constituted modern beauty. In the meantime, Breton had returned to Paris where he set about re-establishing the Surrealist movement and it was there, at the end of 1952, that he met Simon Hantaï.

Marcel Duchamp, a long-time fellow traveler with Breton, was another figure who nurtured a tenacious ambition to shape the modern aesthetic. He took his starting point from the well-known story of modern art's rejection of the Academy, which trained contemporary artists in the nineteenth century, according to certain rigidly prescribed precepts: adherence to a hierarchy of genres; historical and mythological subject matter; the notion of an idealized vision, achieving illusion of the subject, attained by a neutral paint surface; and, a fondness for allegory. Duchamp proposed to radically extend this principle of rejection of the Academy to the whole history of art: "No, because when I go to a museum, I don't have a sort of stupefaction, astonishment, or curiosity in front of a picture. Never. I'm talking about the old masters, the old things ... I was really defrocked, in the religious sense of the word. But without doing it voluntarily. All that disgusted me." He concluded by stating that he had a desire to "wipe the past right out" because "I doubt its value [that of art] deep down"⁷ Henceforth, the issue of beauty could be set aside as redundant, having no significance for the modern world. It needs to be affirmed that no modern artist had rejected the history of art. To the contrary, every leading modern artist from Gericault to Cézanne had urged apprentice artists to study in the Louvre, after the masters. Matisse and Picasso, and the other major artists of the early twentieth century, maintained this essential position. Now Duchamp advocated that this training be set aside. Beauty would be replaced by the notion of 'intelligence', thereby laying the foundations for the broad and diverse tendencies of what we group today under the contemporary term of 'conceptual' art.

Modern Art, Post-WW11

Hantaï had to navigate this complex, deceptive aesthetic and intellectual terrain after his arrival in Paris in 1948. Although this is now sixty, going on seventy years ago, the questions he then faced are still central for every artist today. Should one study the masters of the past, be they Pollock, Matisse, Picasso or Cézanne or, for that matter, Piero and Giorgione, or should one's primary reference be contemporary ideology? The answers he gave to these questions made him into the artist he was to become, a central figure of the second half of the twentieth century who, by predilection, occupies a place of marginal dissidence in the value structure of contemporary art.

⁷ In *Interviews* by Pierre Cabanne.

After a period of orientation in Paris, during which time he took stock of the diverse scene of modern art, notably fixing his attention on Picasso and Cubism⁸, and further on Matisse, particularly the recent cut-outs, in December of 1952 Hantai placed a painting, of Surrealist inspiration, at the front door of André Breton's apartment. It was a fateful act. Hantai had accepted the challenge of exploring the intellectual and aesthetic issues of modern art in the twentieth century and would plunge into an ideological maelstrom, in the company of its two great impresarios, Breton and Duchamp. This period of Hantai's life would last eight years. It was lived with intensity. Much of its significance remains obscure⁹. What is clear is that Hantai joined the Surrealist movement and was welcomed as its most talented new adherent. Then, just as precipitously as he had arrived, he departed, violently repudiating Surrealism and breaking all contact with Breton¹⁰. It is worth noting that this personal development closely follows, at an interval of ten years, that of the American painters who had engaged with Surrealism in New York.

What in fact had happened was that Hantai had indeed discovered the American painters, Jackson Pollock primary among them. At the time, he naturally inquired of Breton and Duchamp, since they had spent the war years in New York and had met these young American artists, what they thought of this innovative

⁸ Commentators on Hantai's work generally stress his relationship with Cézanne and Matisse. In doing this they are following the artist's lead. In later life these two artists were constantly central to Hantai's thought and Picasso was passed over in silence. Nevertheless, we know from letters written to friends back in Budapest, that Picasso was central for Hantai when he arrived in Paris in 1948. Jean-François Revel also bears witness to Hantai's attention to John Golding's classic book on Cubism, which appeared in 1959, just one year before Hantai invented the 'folding method' (catalogue of Jean Fournier Gallery – *Peintures 1960-67*). In it he states: "Hantai himself, a few years ago, after having read *Cubism* by John Golding, told me of the feeling that this book had given him, one of a total change of plan, or return to a sense of seriousness, of a direct and complete critical appraisal of his purpose." I have made the case in an Open Letter to the Museum of Modern Art (posted on paulrogers9w.com) that Cubism, and especially Picasso's sculpture *The Guitar*, played an essential role in the genesis of the 'folding method'.

⁹ The Surrealist period of Hantai's oeuvre, and its aftermath, have recently attracted fresh attention, largely due to the PhD theses of Agnez Berecz and Molly Warnock, the latter published in French as *Penser la peinture: Simon Hantai* (2012). This attention paid by these writers testifies to the abiding attraction that ideology maintains for the academic mind. In spite of the wealth of answers proffered, my own view is that the period raises mostly questions. One also has the impression that the retrospective would like to give new emphasis to this period, even going to the point of moving the inspiration of Surrealism up to the series of the 'Meuns', by including a selection of intermediary paintings, notable for their viscosity, that the artist had intentionally overlooked in retrospect. It must be acknowledged that the artist himself opened the door to this by including an admittedly very powerful example (cat. #86) in his exhibition in Münster in 1999. Fourcade refers to this painting as "one of the most beautiful of this kind of *Meun*". In contrast, Hantai told me in Münster that his reason for showing the painting was that he thought "it was good for the Germans to see that painting"! It remains that the whole tendency of this great series of the 'Meuns' marks a final separation from Surrealist influence.

¹⁰ Opinions will differ as to Hantai's relationship with Duchamp. Certainly, he was an important figure for Hantai and we can probably relate the latter's fierce commitment to intellectual and aesthetic content to Duchamp's emphasis on linking art to intelligence (See Georges Didi-Huberman, *A Bouquet of Blue Flowers and of Flowers of Evil*, in the 2013 Simon Hantai catalogue published to coincide with the Centre Pompidou retrospective). Hantai's famous statement that the 'folding method' allowed him to paint "with eyes closed" can also be related back to Duchamp's call for a 'non-retinal' art.

painting, being made in New York. Much to his surprise, he found them implacably hostile. He was told to forget this American painting, and especially Jackson Pollock. Hantai's intuition told him otherwise. He insisted and finally, at some point, as he recalled, Duchamp, in exasperation, burst out "Alright, if you must, take Gorky as an example, but if you follow Pollock you will be doomed!" Hantai followed Pollock, which led in time to his invention of 'the folding method' of painting¹¹.

It should also be noted that Hantai had begun to take the measure of Georges Bataille in the mid-nineteen fifties and the philosopher would remain a central reference of his thought for his entire life. Bataille was Breton's nemesis. The rupture with Surrealism, at the intellectual and aesthetic level, therefore, was absolute for Hantai, even if traces will remain in his work as it moves forward. So, when Fourcade speaks of Hantai's painting, using the formula of "beauty ...in a context of wonder and anguish", which so clearly echoes Breton's evocation of 'the marvelous', and when he dismisses Hantai's "discourse", in other words his passionately articulated intellectual and aesthetic point of view, which sought to separate itself from Surrealism and embrace modern art, this Fourcade is taking sides with Surrealism, explicitly making a play to drag Hantai back into Surrealism and, thereby, striking directly at Hantai's decision to pursue the course of modern art.

The Modern Aesthetic

Hantai invented the technique of 'folding' his canvas in 1960 and pursued it with enormous energy up until his declaration of withdrawal from the contemporary commercial art world in 1983. He then lived on until 2008. During all this time, Hantai focused his attention on an inquiry into the intellectual and aesthetic meaning of modern art, asserting that contemporary art had lost its path and that it was urgently necessary to refocus its attention. This period of intellectual examination is of almost equal length to the previous period of the 'folding method'. It appears that Dominique Fourcade would set this latter phase aside. He would appear to believe that this focus on intellectual examination was error on the artist's part. We are

¹¹ Dominique Fourcade has made the point in his notes that the practice of 'pliage' or 'folding' did not at first constitute a method, but that this came into play at a later date (the term is employed in the 1967 Jean Fournier catalogue, op. cit.). This seems like a valid observation, although a minor one. Hantai always spoke of his folding as a method and he dated its adoption to the year 1960.

There is also a tendency among recent commentators to query the relationship between the invention of the 'folding method' and Jackson Pollock's painting. It needs to be emphasized, in first instance, that this relationship is not based in style. Hantai, though attentive, of course, as a painter would be, to the originality of Pollock's 'pouring' or 'throwing' technique, was primarily focused on the thinking behind it. He recognized that the heuristic notion of the 'unconscious', revealed by Freud, constituted an epistemological rupture of enormous proportions in the history of western philosophical thought. He could see that Pollock was working with this in mind.

If one wants to consider the relationship of Pollock's technique to that of Hantai, perhaps it is interesting to think of Pollock bearing down on his canvas from above while Hantai emerges from beneath the canvas. One may be thought to complete the other. It is also interesting to think of how Pollock works with continuity of line where Hantai introduces rupture. All this may be considered against Georges Bataille's discussions of 'discontinuity/continuity' and in terms of the 'figure/ground' and 'line/color' debates which span the whole history of western aesthetics.

presented, therefore, in the retrospective catalogue, with a bizarre thesis offering, on the one hand, homage to the achievement of the artist's oeuvre and, on the other, rejection of its aesthetic values.

Such a view completely overlooks the historical context in which Hantaï developed his work and fails to grasp his particular contribution to the history of modern art. In the post-war period, the issue of what direction modern art would take was in play. On the one hand, we have Breton's notion of 'the marvelous', which Duchamp will transform, via 'the intellect', into a 'ready-made', in the long-run preserving the model of representation and transforming it into a fetish of the object in consumer exchange. The post-war movements of Pop and Minimalism illustrate this option. I maintain that it abandons modern art. On the other, one has the union of modern thought, of Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille and much else, with modern artists, notably Newman, Pollock, Rothko, and others, most notably, it may now become apparent, a certain Simon Hantaï, who carries these concerns across a half century and into our own day.

These are hardly small matters, since there is very little understanding or agreement today on what constitutes the aesthetic of modern and contemporary art. Indeed, only isolated voices would even raise the question of a 'modern aesthetic' and relate it to its sources. Instead, we have an art historical account based on 'movements', Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism et al., with the whole placed under the umbrella term of 'Modernism'. Sure enough, Fourcade tells us on the first page of his notes, following the preface discussed above, that although Hantaï, due to his Hungarian background, "had grown up in almost total ignorance of modernism", by 1955, his painting '*Sexe-Prime. Hommage a Jean-Pierre Brisset*' was "the confirmation of his entry into the modernist scene". This statement needs to be looked at more closely. Let me, for a moment, for the sake of argument, acknowledge that this statement has an element of truth. Let's agree that '*Sexe-Prime*', a major painting in the development of Hantaï's oeuvre, is a 'modernist' painting. In that case, it must also be made clear that, with his invention of the 'folding method' in 1960, or perhaps more accurately, with his great '*Ecriture rose*' painting of 1958-59, one year previously, Hantaï categorically rejected Modernism and joined the ranks of 'modern' artists from Gericault to Pollock. We can then say that if he pursued Surrealism over a four year period, he spent not much more than three as a 'Modernist'.

I have argued elsewhere against this identification of 'Modernism' with modern art¹². I maintain that these are two very different entities. I have stated unequivocally that Simon Hantaï is not a 'modernist' artist, but rather a 'modern' artist. Modernism has a long and complex history. It can be presented in very different ways. For its advocates, it is a style of 'high art', in which the representational model gives way to 'abstraction'. For its detractors, it is an elitist practice, enclosed in 'formalist' preoccupations, cut off from, and irrelevant to, contemporary life. For Hantaï, who was focused on the inter-action between modern thought and art, this polemical debate had no interest or, indeed, substance. In response to Fourcade, it

¹² See *Talking Points for a Working Definition of Modern Art in the Twenty First Century*. Paul Rodgers, 2011. (Available at paulrodgers9w.com)

must be asserted that, as it is false to present Hantaï's painting in terms of Surrealist aesthetics, it is also false to do so in terms of 'Modernism'¹³.

Fourcade Contra Hantaï

I must confess that I was puzzled by Dominique Fourcade's catalogue notes. Here is the nominally close friend and associate of the artist, of decades' standing, who is at last entrusted with what could have been the definitive monograph in the catalogue of his retrospective, so long deferred. And yet we find instead a string of miscellaneous notes, in which a tone of reproach and disapproval, of censure of the artist, unmistakably makes itself felt. Dominique Fourcade must have known Hantaï from the early 1970's on. Had there been no development in his understanding of the artist's endeavor over all those years? It should be remarked that the catalogue cover carries the title 'Simon Hantaï – under the direction of ...' What retrospective of a major artist, published by any museum, places him under the tutelage of the curators in this manner? It is almost as if Hantaï stands accused of some misdemeanor and must now be placed in the protective custody of these curators. So, a complete failure to engage Hantaï's life work is compensated by a tyrannical desire to control its meaning.

¹³ The issue of Fourcade's relationship with 'modernist' criticism is somewhat ambiguous. There seems little doubt that he broadly accepts the term as applying to modern art, including that of Hantaï. Yet it is an eccentric 'modernist' who can write: "with *Écriture rose* the painting becomes an angel"!

In one regard at least, he strongly shares a view held by Clement Greenberg and other 'modernists', namely that one can never allow the presence of the artist to interfere with interpretation of his work. Greenberg put this view forward under duress when artist after artist, endorsed by him (Newman, Rothko, Pollock), disassociated himself from the critic's views of their work.

Fourcade expresses himself with vehemence on the issue. In his preface, he states that: "the fact of having been a close friend of Simon Hantaï (...) would not help me with the task in hand". Later he declares: "I hate relying on the words of painters, I find that lazy. Great painters do other than what they say, something completely different from what they believe, they are overwhelmed by their painting and it is for us to discover it by scrutinizing their works." Curiously enough this diatribe is delivered following a quotation from a text by Hantaï, which in the previous sentence Fourcade has pronounced to be "one of the most beautiful texts about painting that I know"! More curiously still, he will later declare in connection with a text by Matisse that "sometimes it is in his words that a painter is a painter"!

But yet another example: in the catalogue of his 1976 mid-career survey, Hantaï had established the parallel between the square motif of the *Tabula* series and a photograph of his mother, wearing a skirt of similar pattern, which the refugee from his homeland had carefully preserved. This association is celebrated in the Hantaï literature. One can imagine the significance of this photograph for the artist from this gesture. It has the further value, and this was always clear in the artist's discussions, that it served to mark his separation from the possible 'formalist' interpretation of his work. To those who would see an abstract or reductionist inspiration for the *Tabulas*, Hantaï wanted to emphasize their connection to memory and personal experience. Fourcade remarks that this analogy "obviously intended by Hantaï" and "instantly picked up by everyone" was "in my opinion accepted too quickly". It is almost as if, in disenfranchising the artist and disapproving of his 'commentators', Fourcade's principle purpose is to demonstrate his mastery of insight over whatever matter is on hand. And then, just as curiously, no insight is ever delivered beyond, of course, the grand pronouncement that the paintings are "something enormously beautiful"!

This disapproval and failure becomes more marked as Fourcade's text progresses through its account of the artist's work. When we come to the *Studies* series of 1969, Fourcade speaks disapprovingly of a "Machine-like violence, a machination." Adding, "What can we expect? We are disconcerted. It seems as if he wanted it to appear as if it had been made by no one¹⁴." Arriving at the *Tabulas*, we find that Fourcade's doubts have spread further. He quotes a very significant statement by the painter in 1998 to the effect that: "*Pliages* were destined to be smoothed out, as much smoothing out as possible"¹⁵. Some background is necessary here. Hantai understood that when he took painting off its perpendicular axis and laid it on the floor, as his working method required, following Pollock's example, he was taking it out of the 'symbolic' and placing it in 'real' space and time. He always intended, and retrospectively this issue became ever more acute and urgent for him, that after the painting was made, it should be placed back in the 'symbolic' space of art. Fourcade understands nothing of this and, in any case, why should he, since he doesn't feel he needs to, as it would only be deferring to the artist's 'discourse'? He continues: "A little further on in the same text, in summary he [Hantai] says (...) that he would have liked to flatten the *Mariales*". This is too much for Fourcade. He incredulously throws up his hands: "what rage had taken hold of him, which appears to us to be against nature, against beauty?" This remark is astounding for a poet of the French language, with the tradition from Baudelaire to Artaud as background! It is clear that Fourcade stands with Breton, against Hantai and the modern aesthetic.

We have come to the heart of the issue. For Fourcade, like for Breton, beauty identifies with nature. This is in explicit rejection of the modern aesthetic. The true situation between Fourcade and Hantai has in fact been present throughout these monographic notes, searching for an opportunity to explicitly declare itself. Sure enough, the opportunity occurs. As an afterthought on the series of *Meuns*, Fourcade evokes "the relationship between sculpture and Hantai's work". His thesis is that, since "folding his canvas meant giving it volume", [Hantai] "passed through a sculpture phase". Fourcade then drops his bomb-shell: "I have thought for a long time (...) that Hantai would have lost nothing by exhibiting those folded canvases before they were painted, by showing them as sculptures, which is what they were at that stage". Then, as if he fears that we may not have been paying sufficient attention, he seeks to reinforce his point: "We have not finished with this, for he should have exhibited at the same time, we insist on this, in the same exhibition, some of these *pliages* once they had been painted, but not yet unfolded."

This dogmatic language, couched in an assumption of authority, is extraordinary. However, first, why is this a bombshell? Fourcade has himself already given the answer when he quotes from Hantai, above. The artist insisted that he wanted to "smooth out" his canvas after folding. This "smoothing out" is essential, if one listens to what Hantai tells us, for the aesthetic of his painting. Hantai's reason is that, while he

¹⁴ It may be interesting, in this connection, to consider my case for a parallel between Hantai and Warhol in my catalogue essay: *Simon Hantai & Andy Warhol - The Fate of Modern Art in the Post-Second War Era* (available at paulroddgers9w.com), which accompanied the 2010 exhibition *Simon Hantai Not For Sale in New York* at Paul Rodgers / 9W.

¹⁵ It should be remarked that this notion of 'smoothing out' coincides with the 'modernist' emphasis on 'flatness', although they spring from very different sources. With particular reference to Greenberg's position, 'flatness' was specifically meant to emphasize the 'objecthood' of the painting, whereas for Hantai 'flattening out the canvas' after the 'folding' process was complete was to affirm the painting's 'symbolic' status beyond the object. The 'modernist' notion that the painting medium had defined 'flatness' as its essential physical property meant nothing to Hantai.

understood and welcomed engagement with a phenomenological 'real', which is inherent in the process of 'folding', he did not want this 'volume' to determine his painting. His painting does not pass through a 'sculptural' phase just because it is three-dimensional in the 'real'. That would be to accept the descriptive logic of Duchamp's 'found object' and also Greenberg's notion that a painting is defined by 'flatness'. To the contrary, he wanted to take the lived experience of making his painting in real space and time and present it in pictorial terms, as a two-dimensional entity hanging on a wall, symbolically 'outside' of real time. This is what Hantaï wanted for his painting. But Fourcade does not want this. Fourcade wants to identify his painting with nature and present it as a product of real space and time. Hantaï does not want this, but Fourcade does.

The issue of 'discourse', as the voice of authority, is central. Hantaï placed an extraordinary emphasis on the 'discourse' of modern painting over the last twenty five years of his life. Fourcade, and he is not alone, strongly disapproves. He considers Hantaï's discourse to be worthless and the twenty five years wasted. He wanted Hantaï to spend that time silently painting 'beauty', in accord with nature. He, like Breton, wants to be the arbiter of the discourse on 'beauty'. However, modern artists have been too often betrayed to allow others control their discourse. They have created the notion of a 'discourse of modern painting', as their possession. It exists in the correspondence of Cézanne and in the writings of Matisse. It exists in the extensive writings of Newman, Motherwell and Rothko and in the briefer accounts of Pollock's outlook. Fourcade wants to set aside Hantaï's discourse so that he can impose his own aesthetic judgment on his painting, in direct contradiction of the artist. He would never have dared to make this open declaration of the 'sculptural' properties of Hantaï's painting during the artist's life-time. Now that the artist is gone, he thinks he can get away with it.

Again, look at Fourcade's language: "We have not finished with this, for he should have exhibited at the same time, we insist on this, in the same exhibition, some of these *pliages* once they had been painted, but not yet unfolded". Why, then, didn't Fourcade go ahead and do this? Why didn't he take paintings off their stretchers and refold them and install them in the retrospective exhibition the way, according to him, they should have been presented? Perhaps there are future plans to do so? Fourcade likes to say "let me be clear about this..." Well, let me be very clear about this: Hantaï did not do that, because he did not want to do that. If there were to be any such plans to do so in the future, it would be in violation of the artist's wishes. It is at this moment that Fourcade reveals himself to stand in regard to his 'friend' Simon Hantaï in the same false relationship as Emile Zola stood in regard to Paul Cézanne.

Fourcade's notes trail off with his remarks on the *Tabulas*. He has nothing to say about the *Left-Overs*, the series of paintings which come from the long years of reflection after 1982, handing that task off to his colleague Alfred Pacquement in a subsequent text. Clearly again, Dominique Fourcade wants to mark his displeasure with Hantaï.

Conclusion

What is the meaning of modern art? Is modern art still being made today? How does one become a modern artist today? Why is contemporary art so hostile to modern art? Is it ignorance, inability or just

antipathy? And is modern art the great art of our times, or not? A recent article in Bloomberg finds a noteworthy parallel in the fact that the Pompidou Center has run exhibitions of Simon Hantaï and Roy Lichtenstein side by side over this summer¹⁶. Hantaï was born in 1922 and Lichtenstein one year later in 1923. Their work, however, could not have been more different. After noting that Lichtenstein's talent lay in "pastiche", the writer remarks that Hantaï "lived in a very different world". Lichtenstein's world was the local commercial art world of New York after the Second World War and he defines it in terms of social comedy. Hantaï's world is that of thought and art embracing two hundred years of modern international culture.

As the contemporary art world begins to take the measure of Hantaï's example and achievement, it will encounter the stumbling block of his withdrawal and silence after 1982. It is hard to understand that Hantaï imposed this regime upon himself in order to protect the integrity of his art and that of the larger tradition of modern art which was his, and is our, heritage. Commentators, and we can take Dominique Fourcade as representative of this view, have suggested that Hantaï stopped painting. I would suggest that the truth is quite contrary. Hantaï withdrew from the art world in 1982 in order to make the case that the act of painting should not be confused with producing art work for a market. He felt that painting was, in first instance, an intellectual act and that to paint without content for a market would deprive art of meaning and value. So, the issue for Hantaï was not to stop painting, it was how to go on being a painter, how to go on painting in a meaningful manner, when confronted with an adversarial context which denied painting. This is why Duchamp's withdrawal from the art world is admired, while Hantaï's will raise scandal.

The issue throughout has been modern beauty¹⁷. Art offers, and we hungrily search for, beauty. There is great beauty in Hantaï's oeuvre, we feel. However, what appears beautiful has shifted across time. Had a

¹⁶ Lichtenstein's New York Girls Join Paris Recluse: Review by Jorg von Uthmann, Aug. 4th, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-08-04/lichtenstein-s-new-york-girls-join-paris-recluse-review.html>

¹⁷ In this connection, one enormous issue for modern art after WW11, and one that is central to Hantaï's oeuvre, is its relationship to color and light. Specifically, would it be possible for a painter to reconnect with the experience of color and light contained in the work of Cézanne and Matisse, after the experience of the war? Coincidentally, over last winter there was a very interesting museum exhibition, '*destroy the picture – painting the void, 1949-1962*', curated by Paul Schimmel, showing at the Museums of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and Chicago. What becomes clear is that these artists of the 1950's, while genuinely engaging the catastrophe of the world war, could not move beyond it. What they were able to say in terms of art remains locked in that time-frame. Light and color are notably missing. It is as if this art is left to explore the darkness and cold of matter following exposure to the searing flash of atomic combustion. If we compare the art in this exhibition against the achievements of the great modern artists of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, it looks like art has had a nervous break-down. Of course, I think it is clear that this is the critical point of view of the curator. Art had had a nervous break-down for good reason.

Hantaï was not included in this exhibition, although that was a mistake, since he made an important contribution in his work of the 1950's to its theme. However, the 1950's was a transitional period for Hantaï. His break-through invention of the 'folding method' in 1960 allowed him, by a very complex path, to ultimately move beyond the period and its concerns by re-engaging with modern art and specifically with Cézanne and Matisse in the fields of color and light. The Pompidou Hantaï retrospective does not really explore these great themes of color and light in his work. That would have required allocating much more space to the *Tabulas*, especially the second series of 1980/81. As to

painting from Hantai's 'Meun' series, the same that Fourcade grandly affirms to be "something enormously beautiful", been presented in fifteenth century Florence, there is every reason to believe that the leading aesthetes and artists of the day would have thought it ugly and certainly incomprehensible. The Florentines of the Renaissance had a vision of beauty based in Neo-Platonism. We no longer share this view of the world, although we still agree that Renaissance art is beautiful on its terms. Notions of beauty change and new beauty is discovered. The great issue of Hantai's oeuvre was to explore what constituted modern beauty in his life-time, specifically the second half of the twentieth century, which had undergone unprecedented ideological and technological turmoil, to the point perhaps of presenting a new experience of life.

Hantai, like all great artists, set out in search of beauty, hopeful that he would discover it on his terms. Some would say that beauty no longer lies within our reach in the second half of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty first century. Some would like to hold onto 'the marvelous'. Hantai wanted to invent a new beauty, which would take form in his painting through his understanding. If he had failed, if he had not understood, there would be no reason to mount a retrospective of his work. Since he has succeeded, is it not of interest, is it not even urgently necessary, if we love art and its changing visions of beauty, that we inquire into how he achieved this through his mysterious 'discourse' on the aesthetic of modern art? Many would like, Dominique Fourcade among them, to set aside this 'silent discourse' of the artist, which he invites us to share with him, in order to appeal to an ideology of conventional beauty or to discard beauty entirely. Such an effort indicates an unwillingness to enter into the aesthetic thought of Hantai's paintings or deny that the paintings contain aesthetic thought. Surely, the purpose of giving thoughtful reflection to Hantai's achievement is to reject that reactionary attitude in favor of an energetic endorsement of modern art of the past, the present, and the future. That path leads through Simon Hantai.

Paul Rodgers

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the catalogue, Fourcade alludes on a number of occasions to Hantai as a great 'colorist', without ever developing what that might mean in the history of art and thought.