

Simon Hantai: Round Table Discussion

Abstract

The objective of the Round Table was to open up a discussion around his work with questions that are specifically from a non-French position. Isabelle Monod-Fontaine's role, as one of the three curators of the 2013 Paris exhibition and François Rouan's relationship to Hantai, as both a friend and a younger painter are intimate perspectives in relation to Hantai's life and work. The discussions look at key issues in both the production and the reception of Hantai's painting. The relationship between method and process is opened up as a key distinction, against the background of American art and painting. Hantai's withdrawal from the studio and his uneasy relationship to the art world are also discussed.

This Event was organised by Mick Finch and Daniel Sturgis for the The Journal of Contemporary Painting, in collaboration with the University of the Arts London and took place at the Institut Français, Royaume-Uni, London on Tuesday 3rd June 2014.

The members of the round table were the French artist François Rouan, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, who was one of the three curators of the Centre Pompidou Simon Hantai' exhibition in 2013, Philip Armstrong and Laura Lisbon, an artist, both of whom teach at The Ohio State University and, along with Stephen Melville, curated the As Painting: Division and Displacement exhibition at the Wexner Center, Columbus, Ohio in 2001, London based artists Stuart Elliot and Andy Harper, and Mick Finch and Daniel Sturgis who are artists who teach at the University of the Arts London and are Associate Editors of The Journal of Contemporary Painting. Contributions from Stuart Elliot and Andy Harper can be found elsewhere in this issue of the Journal.

Keywords

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MF: This event will open up a discussion around Simon Hantaï's work in the light of the recent retrospective of his work at the Centre Pompidou (2013) and also a number of other shows, most notably at the Villa Medici, Rome(2014), at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest and other shows in commercial galleries such as the Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York (2010) and recently, here in London, in a group show at the Timothy Taylor Gallery (2014). Thus there is an increasing reception of Hantaï's work in a contemporary context. We want to discuss this reception as well as what Hantaï has meant and does mean in a French context.

We have Isabelle Monod-Fontaine here who was one of the three curators of the retrospective that took place at the Pompidou this summer. She was the directrice adjointe of the Musée National d'art moderne at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and has done a huge amount of work on Matisse's paintings, so there are lots of relationships to Hantaï that are interesting to think about. We also have the painter Francois Rouan here, who is an artist who has been practising since the 1960s. I think many in this audience will know him as someone connected with the French Supports/Surfacesⁱ group of painters. The developments in François' work links directly to Hantaï in many interesting ways. Both Isabelle and Francois knew Hantaï well.

To start with Isabelle. The Hantaï retrospective at the Pompidou took place recently. What were the challenges and difficulties of putting that show together? For many years Hantaï's work was not seen so you were showing an artist who had not been publicly available for a long time. Could you start by talking about these sorts of challenges?

IMF: Yes, I can give a context to the exhibition. Hantaï' was both very well known but absent from the scene at that same time; although he was incredibly well known in the early eighties, and is represented in many public collections. It was at this time when he was well-known in the eighties that he decided to withdraw and pull away from all public presentation in a rather mysterious way. From about 1982, for about 15 years, he was absent. I say 15 years, because actually in 1998 he was on the scene again in a particular way, with an exhibition and a book by Georges Didi-Huberman. This was a donation of paintings that he presented to the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, which was accompanied by a catalogue with notes, by Hantaï, about the donationⁱⁱ. It was a very important exhibition at that point.

From 1998 to 2008, he withdrew again. Even in the very last years, he refused all attempts to have a retrospective. It was only after he died that I was able to start thinking about creating that exhibition, along with Alfred Pacquement, from the Musée national d'arte moderne and also Dominique

Fourcade. Pacquement is a great spokesman and Fourcade was a frequent visitor to the studio from the nineteen-seventies onwards, through the eighties and the nineties.

My own relationship with Hantaï was less engaged, but more intimate through friends I knew who frequented his studio. It was a great responsibility, that I started in about 2011, to programme this exhibition, to find a shape for it, and create something that would cover the full extent of his work. We really felt a duty to reveal, show and make visible a lot of his work. I have to say that there had already been a very small retrospective – when Hantaï was still working and in the thick of it, in 1976ⁱⁱⁱ. But there was a need now to show the totality of his practice. There hadn't been a big publication about him, so we began to gather the works, to constitute a proper body of work that was coherent. You can't avoid there being an angle, but there was an effort to create a base, an ordering of his work, a proposition for that ordering.

MF: There is an audience that is familiar and understands Hantaï's paintings and in how they develop from *Peinture (Écriture rose)* (1958 – 59) onwards and in the successive series of works that he is most commonly known for. How were you thinking in terms of presenting this work, as documenting or tracking this change, or researching the method? How were you thinking about that development from the *Mariales* (1960 – 1962) through to the end of the exhibition?

IMF: We believed we were following the rhythm of his own work, his series', some of which happened in very rapid succession, and others that were slower.

MF: Was there a sense that you were going to show the whole body of Hantaï's work, complete and with a sense of his withdrawal from painting at the end? Those last 15 years, where there seems to be a preoccupation with something reprographic, the digital work, was that difficult to handle in terms of the sense of the exhibition?

IMF: It was a choice rightly or wrongly to show his paintings from the fifties through to the eighties, and actually leave out, exclude that absence that he had. I am aware of course that in the different shows, one show was at the Villa de Medici in Rome [2014]^{iv} they did include that last reprographic aspect of his work. But it was a conscious choice to show paintings in Paris.

LL: Maybe I could ask Isabelle to elaborate a little bit on the job of the chronology? If the exhibition starts at a certain point, the chronology does a different thing. Your mentioning of the catalogue is important. It really is such a significant document. It's both in French and English. For those of us

who don't read French, it's such a resource, and part of that from my reading is the extent of the chronology, which reveals a number of elements of Hantaï's intellectual life, including the conversations. I just wonder if you might talk a little bit about the challenges of the chronology.

IMF: Yes it's true that the catalogue and the exhibition are complementary and address different aspects of the work as is usually the case with these shows. You can feel the chronology from the show – it's clear; but also the catalogue demonstrates the incredible unfolding of his intellectual thought. To some extent it also reveals, with extracts from work he had spoken about and his own intellectual development, there's a lot of work that shows chronologically the thinking process and how it develops. It is really the moment to acknowledge the incredible good fortune of working with the Hantaï family, Hantaï's wife and children, helping us, particularly in showing all the work that we put patiently to them. They are also cataloguing the work. Without that the exhibition would not have happened.

MF: Before we go to François, there is a question which addresses both of you: it's to do with what François has said, for him Hantaï was like a reading of Matisse through Pollock. This is an aspect of Hantaï that seems essential. In a way the method he developed, the way he worked the paintings, connects with his thinking through the relationships between Matisse and Pollock. There seems to be different receptions about this side of Hantaï's work. Certainly in New York Hantaï is seen as a 'process' artist. It seems that this is not at all how people in the French context have understood him. Maybe this word 'method' is more accurate than 'process'? Does this difference mean anything to you – is that something you would think about?

IMF: I think that we should let the painter talk about this, as someone who has felt the effect of Hantaï on his generation. Obviously Hantaï had seen the Matisse cut-outs in '49, and again in 1960, and Pollock afterwards... over to you François...

FR: Before I begin, I want to insist on one point: how much Isabelle and Fourcade and Pacquement were devoted, and really pushed to impose this exhibition on the Pompidou, on this big space, given the incredible resistance to it. At the risk of speaking rather rapidly about the whole issue, right from the sixties and seventies, there was an absolute rejection, or defiance, against certain aspects of this – which was not admitted by the sumptuous bureaucracy of experts, a defiance that comes from people who basically had a huge hatred of the idea of 'tableau' – of painting. Paradoxically, Hantaï was working within that context, and against it. I don't want to go on too long about that whole issue from the sixties, because it's now that matters. But I have to say that for me, for all my life, I own my own artistic life as a stand against this rejection. In that stand there are two

figures who are absolutely essential and matter to me, strangely contradictory to each other: one being Hantaï, and the other one being Dubuffet – very different. To try to summarise Hantaï's stand, as differentiated from Dubuffet, I would start by saying that the madness of Hantaï was the attempt to deal with theoretical ordering of modernism as represented by Clement Greenberg. Around Hantaï was a very sophisticated gathering of at once unusually reserved and sophisticated Catholics, alongside a group of young thinkers and artists who were dealing with the context of Marxism at that point, and even submitted to it.

IMF: Within this I just wanted to mention one of these groups, François Mathey, who was the Head of the Musée des arts décoratifs in Paris, which put on a show of Matisse cut-outs in 1961.

FR: The plea that Mathey represents, stands against, or holds up, is against the teaching of Greenberg, and the rejection of singularity, and particularity. Greenberg, replies with a clear and pedagogic positioning: whereas Dubuffet is radically opposed to that, radically anti-cultural, against the cultural machine. All of that underlines the complexity of the French situation. Apparently, the French were able to talk about everything, except what we had to say. Deep down the Hantaï exhibition showed the rich developments of his work, and also, in the late sixties, seventies, the big divide between what the painter did for real on the canvases, and what he felt obliged to declare, in particular the notion of the pliage, the folding as a method, to fold, paint, and open out.

PA: François – I'd like to come back to Mick's reference to method, to 'folding as method,' which is Hantaï's famous statement about the work. And my question is whether this emphasis on 'method' is the same as 'process'. It's very interesting that when Hantaï gets reviewed in the U.S. after the retrospective, it tends to get played out as some kind of 'process' art. So what is at stake when we are talking about 'method' here, or even 'technique'? It's a similar problem to tressage^v in your own work. I think what's important here is that this emphasis on 'method' or 'technique' is one of the first things that figures like Deleuze, Lacan, and Damisch foreground in their writing about your work. Also important here is that this helps us distinguish, let's say, the reception of the work from Greenberg and certain readings of formalism, in the sense that 'folding as method' means that the work, like tressage, is made out of its own exteriority to itself—if I can put it in those terms. What is most intimate to the work is its 'outside', so there is no substance, there's no form, no formalism in a reductive sense, there's no flatness, there's no materiality that is not divided from itself, open to its 'outside'. Starting from questions of 'method' and 'technique', the implication of this shift in emphasis seems to me a significant aspect of Hantaï's work and its reception.

FR: Matisse said that painters had to pull out their tongues, and like Hantai, he talked a lot, nevertheless. Within the pictorial complexity of Hantai's work, it's incredible to note how much work, overwork, the repeats in the folding, the covering of the art, how much there is, how much energy is spent in the small white areas, the monk-like devotion to these tiny areas of the painting that are left. To end, within that context, the reception was that it was sort of a majestic walk to a desert. It led to the absence, to the end of his painting. Confronting that philosophical, declarative aspect of method, what Breton called the psychic automatism within the process of Hantai, the whole idea of folding as a 'method', was also a matter of working with something that was not predictable, there's no advance thought. So the painter is looking at what he is uncovering and unfolding, literally.

DS: I was just thinking a little bit about the relationship with Matisse, and it's wonderful to be doing this talk here in London at the moment that the Matisse cut-outs exhibition is on at Tate Modern. Of course, Hantai referred to the fold as like a cut. One of the things I was thinking about in this relationship to Matisse was how strategic Hantai was with it. In a short piece of writing by Matisse from the fifties, Matisse talked about how he didn't like the game chess, because he didn't like the way symbols, for each chess figurine were static within it. For me this also connects my thinking about Hantai's relationship to Duchamp perhaps and the way Hantai's work entwines these two modern-masters. The idea of a 'method', Hantai's pilage, combining ideas from these two artists and being built or developed with a strategic vision and clarity. I wonder if you could respond?

FR: With the French context it is still very tangible that, while the French answer to the Turner prize is the Prix Marcel Duchamp, the Duchamp prize, that they follow Duchamp. They will accept painting from England, Germany, and especially America, but they remain Duchampistes. In my point of view, first of all the admirable idea of stopping painting, as Hantai put it, to sort out his files, just at the time when there was an exhibition of his work in Bordeaux[1981]^{vi} and another major idea, to represent France at the Venice Biennale; within that context there is no possibility of the tableau – the tableau that shocked Clement Greenberg as a luxury object – there's only a possibility of environments. For me, that is in terms of folding something. I think this is very important, that his withdrawal is at this time.

MF: François, you and Simon Hantai worked on projects with the Le Fresnoy. You were making video there and Hantai made digital scans and prints. There seems to be this curious relationship between a very autographic process, at the heart of his studio practice, then in his later years, he became very involved with digital, reprographic work. Could you talk about this a little? There seems to be a connection.

FR: Going back to conversations I had before Hantaï died, he was fascinated, he had a sort of child-like fascination for the digital. It was probably a joke, but he said what's the point of painting, the inkjet digital printers can paint better than we do. At the risk of being a provincial Dr. Freud, we have to think about what an extraordinarily active thought, the process of working on your knees on the painting is for so many years, and the fatigue of that, you only have to know about gardening to know what it's like. The fascination of an old man for the digital, came with a transfer of thought, the idea of all of that bodily struggle, the suffering, going to, thanks to the digital, into something that is disembodied. In a sense, that is what Duchamp was trying to do. To end, as a homage to Simon Hantaï, my own homage before my own ending comes, would be a spiritual nose in the depths of the body, in the corporal, the physical.

PA: Can I turn this back to Isabelle and ask – is it fair to say, then, that one of the terms that Hantaï is not interested in is 'abstraction'? Is that a relevant question? Because we've come up with a lot of terms, and we've made a number of references, but one of the things that we have not used is the word 'abstraction'. I wouldn't say that this is a specifically French problem, but is there something interesting in our references to Hantaï about the discourse or the non-discourse of abstraction in this context?

IMF: That's a really fascinating question, and a real question. What's interesting, in the Pompidou exhibition, is the room of surrealist works which were 'figurative', really upset people who knew his later work.

FR: I am totally in agreement with what has been discussed here, although I don't think it was Hantaï's biggest preoccupation, the notion that he was coming up with something other than abstraction. One does forget in France an important context is, that if Hantaï painted works, tableaux, incredibly singular even within the surrealist works, they are terribly personal. They don't fall within the sort of general surrealist pattern. It is very important to observe that even in the works in which there is great complex thought, it turned within France to this notion, and he turned to this notion, that the idea of the environment of the exhibition, and how important the environment is for the works – for the process.

MF: We'd like to open up, to see if there are any questions from the audience?

Q1: Just a simple question about the 'process' and the 'method' – if somebody can talk about it a bit further? Thanks.

AH: It's interesting that the catalogues show a lot of him actually working on the floor, and making the paintings, and tying the knots, and then painting them. And their physicality is really powerful to understand.

MF: With the Pompidou and Rome exhibitions there was a film that shows Hantaï working in his studio at Meun. But you're asking this question more about what is this distinction between 'process' and the 'method'? We were talking about this earlier, the reason we've raised it is because the reception of Hantaï seems to be as a 'process' artist, as a 'process' painter and perhaps this is linked to the fact that there was a lot of process painting in the nineties. Stuart, what would you understand by a 'process' painter in the nineties?

SE: Well, I suppose it had to do with a certain coming together between aspects of minimalism and painting. So if you think of the, not automated, but industrialised ways of making, what someone like Donald Judd would use to produce his objects, trying to bring some seriality of a similar kind into painting, and maybe, in doing so, using certain sorts of physical apparatuses to do that. Whether, Bernard Frize is a good example, perhaps, making tools in order to do that. Whereas with this distinction between 'method' and 'process' I think it has something to do with how it implicates, in Hantaï's work, with his approach to working through the paintings, implicates a subjectivity there. It touches on this question of the 'personal' I think. It's very complicated, and I'm not sure, it's one of those distinctions that I think you can cohere, but it takes quite a lot of unravelling.

Q1: I wanted to ask about Japanese origami? Which is a folding 'process', or 'method'? It is very much linked to logic, in Eastern philosophy where it's really like a skill, that you have to spend a lot of time to develop. Would you say it has something to do with 'process', or 'method'?

LL: I'll try to make a stab at that. I would say, no, origami is absolutely not a method. But I'm trying to think of why it doesn't figure alongside 'method', a term that we seem to want to linger with as a better term in relation to the work of Hantaï than 'process'. Of course, part of the context for my thinking about 'process' is connected to Process Art that develops in the US in the early seventies. When we put *As Painting* together in 2001, part of the question was how to deal with discussions around abstraction going on in the US, which included several strains of process oriented work. At a similar time to Process Art in the US, the work of Hantaï, Rouan, and others seemed to provoke painting quite differently—including the possibility of a process or 'technique that's been raised to a concept'. I take that idea from Yve-Alain Bois' book *Painting As Model*, published in 1993, in which he quotes Hubert Damisch writing about Jackson Pollock. I wondered: what does that mean?

What does that look like? I hadn't heard Pollock talked about in that way. What set of conventions were Damisch and Bois working from?

Now back to origami. On the face of it, not only does the technique not raise to the level of a concept, but it also doesn't seem to account for another kind of important drift which I found in the literature surrounding Hantaï: this demand to produce while un-producing, to make and un-make. I'm reminded of this by Didi-Huberman, when he says [in a text that we've translated for the Journal] that the focus Hantaï should really have is on the 'structural impurity of the work'. Apparently that was an idea with which Hantaï completely agreed, one that continued to engage him. I think this conversation between Didi-Huberman and Hantaï from 1997 is interesting to reflect upon, especially as it chronologically links with some of Hantaï's digital works, as well as the burying and cutting of paintings.

And so, what is the place of this 'structural impurity' or of deconstruction, emerging in the intellectual and artistic climate of which Hantaï was a part? Despite so many delayed translations and exhibitions coming to the US, I still feel impurity is a really significant part of this 'method'/'process' question; that, as opposed to method, 'process' often seems to be interested merely in production. Instead, the concept of impurity recognizes that, inside of process or production, there is an unmaking that potentially raises a technique to a concept, or a process to a method.

Q2: For me, it is very important with Hantaï, this notion of revelation. The idea of the black, the filling in, the covering over, the removing of the black, but also the unfolding, what is revealed when you see the emptiness of the canvas in between. I have a question, that was cited in the Kasmin Gallery [catalogue?], the fact that he withdrew was also to do with his refusal to participate in the art market.

IMF: Yes, it's a complex thing throughout his life, but yes there was that thing which was discussed in a letter to Dominique Bozo, which is in the catalogue. He wrote to him, a good friend, and who was the head of the Pompidou: just after the Pompidou opened, he described it as a bazaar, every sense of the word, a bizarre market-place. He was disgusted by that and by this manipulation of art in that market-place.

PA: The question of revelation – it is a very theological term, right?

Q2: I didn't necessarily mean it in this way.

PA: But I think we've seen with Hantaï that it's a very difficult question, because the theological aspect of that revelation is also implicated here. I don't know if this is addressed extensively in the retrospective catalogue,

but it seems to be a very complicated part of Hantaï's thinking, as well as the reception of his work. How do we think of a revelation that doesn't just show but withdraws in showing? How do we think of a revelation that effaces itself in putting itself forward and presenting itself? That revelation is not something that's just given to you. And so I think there's a phenomenological aspect of that too, but it intercepts with something which I think is extremely difficult, that we can't simply pretend that it doesn't exist. I think there's something there that Hantaï was thinking through, that he was thinking through with others, and this is a problem that still needs to be addressed. It's not simply of problem of being secular either.

MF: Philip, would you say it's present in *À Galla Placida* [1958–9]?

PA: Yes, but I think it's present right from the beginning.

FR: Two different aspects in reply to that: First of all, Hantaï was not alone in standing against the art market, because Jean Dubuffet wrote in the sixties a book about the current cultural policies and how they were tied up with that. Then, in terms of the folding, and the origami question – it's not to do with that, it's to do with the practice of the 'tache', which in English would mean both stain and mark, it's something between both; which Alexander Couzens did in his time, to reveal light, the idea of making the marks, that's really about what's around the mark. Also, Hantaï could have used, or had more money, but he was very monastic, he did not want to spend money on systems, on computers, to develop that side of things, which he could have done. I find this somewhat painful.

MF: We have another question.

Q3 (Jean Matthee): On several occasions during the late eighties and early nineties I had the pleasure of dining with David Sylvester and Lawrence Gowing^{vii}. On one of these occasions we discussed at length the work of Simon Hantaï and Francois Rouan in the context of a tradition that included the 17th century Dutch experimental landscape artist Hercules Seghers^{viii}. We discussed the stakes of the different foldings of the material supports in the practices of these artists. And in relation to this we considered: the all over proliferations, the ontology of becoming and the pliable topological spatiality within which fluid thresholds fold the inside of the outside into the inside.

Having an interest in Hantaï and Rouan's practices the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan collected and wrote about Francois Rouan's braided works^{ix}.

Lacan was inspired by and referenced Rouan's practice in his theorizations of psychoanalysis. Rouan reversed the hard won forms of Renaissance space to emptiness. In different ways both Rouan and Hantaï performed this reversal by means of baroque folds. Lacan was interested in the stake for the subject of this reversal from space to emptiness. This reversal from space to emptiness destitutes false goods for the subject through an ethical act of sublimation, at the extreme limit of the death drive, that is on offer in the practice of art. For Lacan this act has the potential to reconfigure the chain of what is. We posited this transformation to be at stake in the work of Simon Hantaï, Francois Roan and Alan Stocker.

We also considered the stake of the fold in these artists' practices in relation to the question of the fold in the work of Gilles Deleuze. We discussed the fold in his book on Foucault and also what at that time was a forthcoming recently translated and published work by Gilles Deleuze on *The Fold: Leibnitz and the Baroque*^x.

Later on David Sylvester sent Alan Stocker and I inscribed copies of books on Simon Han and Francois Rouan.

So my question in relation to Hantaï is do you think his silence at the end was a form of resistance against the market, or do you think his withdrawal was a destitution of his symptomology that Hantaï had finally exhausted through his practice? Was his silence an act of desire or merely a symptom? Or was his silence the exhaustion of a symptomology and hence the realization of desire?"

Do you understand the point I am making and the question I am asking? This is addressed to Francois

FR: I'd like to thank you for that brilliant, sympathetic analysis which is very close to what is at stake with Hantaï, across his life, across his work. This is not an affirmation, but what I feel is, beyond what was touched on already his withdrawal, in the face of this evolution of the cultural arena, the market-place etc.. He might have smiled at the current Tate today, I don't know if you've gone to the Tate today, he was trying to work through in a way all the things, the questions, that you talk about, very much so. Nevertheless I do feel that the ending is also a symptom of a fatigue, a sort of physical fatigue, rather than an intellectual one.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Supports/Surfaces were a group of artists that were active between 1969 and 1972. The group was comprised of Vincent Bioulès, Louis Cane, Marc Devade, Daniel Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, Jean-Pierre Pincemin, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi, Bernard Pagès and Claude Viallat. The group challenged the principles of what constitutes painting. This was manifested in the form of exhibitions and writing much of which was published in a journal that came out of the groups activities, Peinture, cahiers théoriques.

ⁱⁱ This donation is represented here in this edition of the journal in the form of images of works and with Hantaï's notes.

ⁱⁱⁱ This was a retrospective of Hantaï's work at the Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art modern, Paris, 26 May – 13 September 1976.

^{iv} Simon Hantaï, The Villa Medici, Rome, 12 february – 11 May 2014.

^v Tressage is a process of weaving together material. In the case of Rouan's work he will make to canvases the same size and cut them, retrospectively, vertically and horizontally into strips and then weave them together.

^{vi} Simon Hantaï 1960–1976, Bordeaux, CAPC, Entrepôt Lainé and Ensemble d'oeuvres de très grandes dimensions conçues pour l'espace central de l'Entrepôt Lainé, 15 May–29 August 1981.

^{vii} Lawrence Gowing, David Sylvester and Jean Mathee met to discuss the texts they were planning to write on the British artist Alan Stocker who also used a folded material support.

^{viii} Lawrence Gowing lectured, wrote and published on Hercules Seghers.

^{ix} During this time Jean Mathee was embedded in the Lacanian psychoanalytic field as analysand and training analyst while completing her Ph.D. in Philosophy at the Royal College of Art on: Ethics, Sublimation and the Death Drive in contemporary art practice. She was also Lawrence Gowing's studio assistant for some years in the late seventies and eighties.