

## Simon Hantaï

### Editorial Introduction

*Technique in this sense cannot be simply reduced to a procedure [procédure], but rather sees itself elevated to the rank of the work's generating principle, in its form as much as in its operation (too long obscured in favor of "content"), and right down to the material...<sup>1</sup>*

Since the early 1960s Simon Hantaï's reputation in France was established in the light of his work being regularly exhibited up until his withdrawal from the art world in 1982. His work has had a consistent impact on French artists, most specifically the generation epitomised by the groups *Supports/Surfaces* and *Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni*. In France he is regarded as a major post-war artist who initiated a crucial rethinking of painting in the wake of Pollock and Matisse. However the effect of Hantaï's has been restricted, until recent years, to its reception in France. An exhibition at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in 2010 and a major retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in 2013 have contributed to a growing interest in and recognition of Hantaï's work outside of France. This issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Painting* is an intervention within this emerging reception. It is an attempt to present to a primarily non-French audience the sense of the development of his work from the early 60s until the beginning of his 'silence' in 1982. This body of work was marked by a methodology of folding and working un-stretched canvas in a series of ways that was distinct from painterly approaches that were abundant elsewhere. He worked through the three dimensional, material potential of the picture surface, in a way unlike any of his contemporaries. At the same time his method identified a pictorial condition allied to Pollock's gesture and all-over sense of painting and the late Matisse's integration of the cut and collage that became a major 20<sup>th</sup> century pictorial regime. As with Pollock and Matisse we find with Hantaï images of his studio practice increasingly situating the work. The canvases are worked on the floor of the studio where they are folded, or crumpled, tied and knotted, rolled flat, painted and ultimately unfolded before being stretched. This was an intense physical labour where Hantaï was in effect 'working blind', working within the physical sense of the surface's thickness rather than upon the exposed flatness of the picture plane. Even before Hantaï withdrew from the studio he was involved, through his method, in a series of withdrawals, becoming distant as the 'artist' in face of his work and raising many important questions amongst which 'the author' is perhaps not the most significant. As Hantaï said 'So why paint? To work through obstacles outside and within me. Neither at the beginning, nor at the end—no ownership'. Hantaï's withdrawal from a face-à-face with painting in favour of an engagement within its interspaces brings to mind his own words, 'In order for folding as "method" to appear as a possibility, capable of responding to a limit situation, and which happens through painting as thought...' Thought is perhaps the consequence of his invention of a topography of painting's dispositive where the method he refers to is applied as a kind of ontology of painting, revealing itself in successive states and forms.

The texts here navigate between many aspects of Hantai's production. Within the work itself from the 1950s until 1982 but also during the years of his withdrawal from the art world in his relationship and correspondence with a series of significant interlocutors where he continuously explored the questions his work raised through dialogue rather than from within studio practice. These dialogues have been obscured from a non-French speaking audience due to the absence of translations of these texts. This is a problem that this issue of the Journal directly addresses in the translated texts included here by Hubert Damish, Georges Didi-Huberman, Jean-Luc Nancy, François Rouan and from Hantai himself. The latter are the notes for a donation of paintings he made to the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris in 1998. These notes and the accompanying images give an insight into Hantai's thinking but also functions for the reader as an essential reference in terms of the sense of his method for the texts included here. Philip Armstrong and Laura Lisbon's introduction to this collection of translated texts provided key contextual material for the reader.

Alongside these translated texts stand three transcribed texts. With the means of a round table and two interviews the reflections of Daniel Buren, Éric de Chassey, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine's and François Rouan; two artists but also long standing friends of Hantai's and two art historians (who have worked on significant exhibitions of Hantai's work) have been documented. The value of using these means was to use the form of dialogue, outside of a French discursive context, to open up the complexities of Hantai's work and reception to a new audience. Questions about Hantai's work, silence and withdrawal, reception and the problematics of exhibiting his work are discussed from the perspective of people close to Hantai and his work. The introduction to these transcripts offers specific context for the reader.

Similarly a text by Anna Hantai, Simon's daughter, originally published for a retrospective in Budapest.....(ref)...

Laura can you flesh out?

Stuart Elliot

Dan can you flesh out?

Visual Essay by Andy Harper with texts (by Andy Harper?) and Robin Mackay

Dan can you flesh out?

Artists texts

Laura can you flesh out?

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Damisch, H. (2005), *Rencontre en champ/contrechamp: La peinture en mal d'explic(it)ation*, Paris: Galerie Jean Fournier.

A translation of this text by Jennifer Branlat is included in this edition of the Journal entitled *An Encounter in Shot/Reverse-shot: Painting in Want of Explic(it)ation* .