

In the fall of 1958, Simon Hantaï stitched two pieces of fine linen together to form a 329.5 by 424.5 centimeter large wall on which to paint. Neither a garment nor a diptych, but a surface to work on for the year to come, the linen nonetheless preserved its capacity to evoke such ordinary objects as articles of clothing asking to be handled day by day, while also resembling some ritual object, an icon promising illumination and calling for ceremonies to be experienced.

After stitching, Hantaï covered the linen with multiple layers of white industrial oil paint which he then sanded and polished with a bent razor blade to form a smooth, white surface on which he could write. On the first Sunday of Advent, he marked the carefully prepared fabric with the sign of a Greek cross and a star of David, and started to inscribe it with texts assigned to each day of the liturgical year by the Ordo. The copying of these prayers and Biblical readings prescribed by the Catholic Church was soon followed by a different order of texts — excerpts from the writings of Ignatius of Loyola, Schelling, Hegel, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard, Freud and Heidegger. Hantaï copied prayers and treatises, words of worship and statements of faith. The liturgy of Christian tradition thus rewritten into histories of Western philosophy was further complemented by his inclusion of numbers that registered the dates of his life and of each passing day of the work in black ink.

Executed in the mornings throughout the liturgical year of 1958-1959, *Écriture rose*'s different forms of textual regimes, cultural matrices and graphic systems of inscription found their place on the surface erratically. The fragments of the collective, historical memories of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition were transcribed and montaged together through the mechanics of copying in an apparently random order. The painting's horizontal, rhizomatic structure relied on the allover composition of late modernist painting and reflected the often arbitrary and subconscious order of remembering. The almost entirely illegible network of multicolored lines, scribbles and letters gave rise to an unexpected chromatic effect making the wall sized canvas seem pink. *Écriture rose* is pink despite itself, a product of Hantaï's successive use of red, green, violet and black India inks, a choice informed by the colors of Christian liturgy. An optical illusion which is both indeterminate and immaterial, the pink emerged accidentally, as a surprise. Its disembodied opticality worked against the tactility of writing, while its allover effect, by virtually unifying the surface of the painting, counteracts the fragmented and irregular rhythm of the script. The process of painting as a spiritual exercise, the liturgical symbolism of the pigments and the immateriality of the pink prompts the viewer to consider *Écriture rose* as both a manifestation and a metaphor of illumination, as a double of lighting and enlightenment.

Copying is a mechanical and quasi-automatic form of writing which, even in Hantaï's rarely legible scribbling, required the humility to suspend one's authorial agency while transmitting the thoughts of others. Presupposing a meditative state, it liberated the writer from the burden of meaning production and thus not only prompted but also paralleled a mnemonic exercise. To copy is to encounter and subdue oneself to what exists already, whether religious confessions, fragments from Hegel, or long

* This essay greatly benefited from Zsuzsa Hantaï's insights and comments. I am grateful for her attention, time and kindness.

forgotten personal memories. A process of philosophical and spiritual inquiry, the execution of *Écriture rose* was also a contemplation on life and personal history.

Écriture rose declares one of the most significant ruptures in Hantai's life and work. It is a summation whose preparatory work was started ten years after the painter's arrival to Paris and it is an opening which led to the introduction of the *pliage*, Hantai's distinctive method of painting for decades to come. It is a wall that divides, yet also a screen which, through the mnemonic work invested in its making, fuses the places, practices and ideas that marked Hantai's oeuvre. An unusual document of collective and personal histories, the painting and its year-long execution are marked by traces of memory. What was there to remember? And what was there to forget?

Figures in a Landscape

“We have been in Paris for two weeks. It's a terrible, fascinating, cruel and terribly big city. It's a tremendous Babel. I am still dizzy (...)”, wrote Hantai to Péter Kuczka, his friend in Budapest, on September 23, 1948. Soon after their arrival after a summer spent traveling in Italy, the painter and his wife, Zsuzsa learned that the twelve-month grant provided by the Hungarian Ministry of Culture for Hantai to study in Paris was revoked.¹ Deprived of their institutional networks and resources, they began their life of exile in a “half victor, half vanquished” France.²

During the first years after their immigration, Hantai's pictorial production was marked by a broad range of practices and interests. While many of his newly produced works were the results of experimentation and reflected his growing acquaintance with postwar Parisian art, others, like the medium sized canvas titled *Bathers*, expanded on his early works which, for the most part, were executed during his studies at the mural division of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest. Completed in early 1949, *Bathers* follows the formal and thematic features of such multi-figurative, large-scale works as *Group-Portrait* or *La Joie de vivre* (1946) and *On the Balcony* (1947). A scene of imaginary Arcadia where almost identical, nude yet de-eroticized bodies are set in a flattened and shallow landscape, *Bathers* combines the pictorial idioms of 15th century Italian frescoes with the decorative impulse of the *École de Paris*, especially of Pierre Bonnard's painting.³ The figures, despite the occasional overlaps of their bodies and their frieze-like arrangement that is further emphasized by the isocephaly of the composition, appear isolated both from each other and the surrounding space. The ambiguities that characterize the relationships of bodies and spaces and the peculiar features of the female nudes imprint *Bathers* with a cultivated archaism and naiveté while also displaying

¹ The sudden change in cultural politics and the severing of grants abroad was a result of the rapid Stalinization of Hungary that started with the launch of a new political organization, the Hungarian Working People's Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja) in June 1948. Cf. *A fordulat évei, 1947-49* [The Years of Communist Takeover, 1947-49], eds. by Éva Standeisky, Gyula Kozák et al., (Budapest : 1956-os Intézet, 1998); Péter Kenéz, *Hungary from the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² For the phrase “half victor, half vanquished” see Pierre Nora, “Generation”, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of French Past*, ed. by Pierre Nora, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 528.

³ Implemented during his studies in Budapest, Hantai's familiarity with Italian wall painting was furthered in the summer of 1948, when he visited, among others, Venice, Ravenna, Florence, Urbino, Sienna and Pompei. His interest in the French modernism of the interwar years was promoted by the highly popular seminars of François Gachot, a professor of French language and civilization at the Academy. Zsolt Karádi, “François Gachot és a magyar kultúra” [François Gachot and Hungarian Culture], *Kortárs*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1998): 89–98. Mária Illyés, “Elemi élmények szintjén” [At the Level of Elemental Experiences], *Művészet*, vol. 25, no. 7 (1984): 44-47.

Hantaï's commitment to synthesize allusions to the history of Western painting as well as to that of his own. *Bathers* summarizes the pictorial concerns that were already present in the first period of Hantaï's oeuvre and therefore it is less a departure from than a farewell to his early work.

The painting that most clearly reflects his adoption of the painterly idioms available in postwar Paris is *Painting (Composition)* of 1950-51. Formerly known as the *Tree of the Clerks*, the large-scale canvas merges the motif of figures in a landscape with biomorphic shapes that evoke bird's nests, vegetable tissues and cellular formations. The signs and the organic forms that encapsulate the branches of the tree are applied by the scraping and blotting of the multi-layered ground, while their spacing is secured by the light blue over-painting that unifies and flattens the background. Hantaï's paint application was indebted to those pictorial processes that, from the mid-1920s on, had been employed by various generations of Surrealist painters and as a consequence of their alleged contingency, were often considered as examples of Surrealist automatism. Hantaï's reliance on the pictorial techniques associated with Surrealism in *Painting (Composition)* also engendered a shift in his treatment of pictorial space. Instead of mapping and projecting space, however shallow and flattened, as in *Bathers*, here, he reversed its depiction and folded it back to the painting's surface. Starting with a canvas treated with multiple coats of paint, he scraped off certain areas and thus excavated the surface to make visible the strata of color underneath. Such reversed handling of the materials remained at the core of his painting throughout the 1950s as well as in the period of the *pliage*. The decorative pattern of multi-colored drips at the lower regions of the canvas is evidence of another change in his painting process. Running upward, the dribbles of paint indicate that he altered the position of the canvas during his work and thus abandoned the fixed verticality of the surface as a screen of projection.

In 1950, in a series of single figure paintings Hantaï transformed the eerie nudes of *Bathers* and the odd, puppet-like characters of *Painting (Composition)* into phantasmagorical creatures that belonged neither to the human nor to the animal world. The static, centrally positioned figures of *The Young Fly D. is Flying Away* and *Cut Emerald Eye*, as if to compensate for their inertia, are flecked by trickling paint, and along with their scraped and textured backgrounds recall the materialist practices of Wols and Jean Dubuffet. As horrifying as it is enchanting, Hantaï's bestiary is akin to both John Ruskin's grotesque and the Surrealist concept of the marvelous. It is therefore not surprising that *The Young Fly D. Flies Away* was included in January 1953 in Hantaï's first solo exhibition at the Surrealist gallery L'Étoile scellée.⁴ Shortly after the closing of the show, James Johnson Sweeney, the Guggenheim Museum's newly elected director acquired *Cut Emerald Eye* for the exhibition *Younger European Painters* and thus secured Hantaï's first and for a long time last transatlantic presentation.⁵ Not only did they play an

⁴ *Simon Hantaï*, catalogue by André Breton (Paris: A L'Étoile Scellée, 1953). Located at 11 rue du Pré-aux-Clercs, the gallery opened on December 5, 1952. Hantaï's exhibition, featuring sixteen works, was on view from January 23 through February 21, 1953. Prior to this show, Hantaï's work was presented only once in Paris in a group exhibition that took place in early 1950 at the Galerie Huit. A cooperative founded in 1950 by American artists near Notre Dame, at 8 rue Saint Julien le Pauvre, Galerie Huit featured works by Al Held, Burt Hasen, Jules Olitski, Shirley Jaffe, Raymond Hendler, May Stevens, Sam Francis, Robert Rosenwald and others.

⁵ *Younger European Painters: A Selection*, (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1953). On view from December 2, 1953 through February 21, 1954 the exhibition also presented works by, among others, Degottex, Hartung, Capogrossi, Burri, Mathieu, Loubchansky, Soulages, Riopelle and

important role in the early manifestation of his practice, these two paintings — as opposed to the majority of Hantai's early works that after the introduction of the *pliage* in 1960 were uniformly unnamed as 'painting' — also escaped the erasure of their original titles. Although according to the painter most of his titles were chosen randomly from children books, *The Young Fly D. Flies Away* seems to be drawn from a late-19th century illustrated natural science school textbook, from a page about the metamorphosis of flies.⁶ While the combination of the phantasmagorical and the organic in *The Young Fly D. Flies Away* appears merely to prefigure the iconography of Hantai's Surrealist paintings, the metamorphosis of flies also proposes analogies, in a true Surrealist fashion, with his transmutation of the peculiar females into creatures of the uncanny.

Surface Excavation

"A sort of summary of the history of painting from the 20s to the 50s", wrote Geneviève Bonnefoi about Hantai's early work in Paris.⁷ Whether a summary or just a phase of experimentation, the work he realized between 1948 and 1952 informed all subsequent periods of his oeuvre. Characterized by the simultaneous use of diverse painterly procedures, the layering of the surface, the production of indeterminate forms and scarred textures, his early 1950s work explored the physicality of the gesture and the materiality of paint.

The fusion of organic and gestural abstraction achieved by scraping, blotting and dripping was expanded in several other works that belong to a sequence called "topo-morphic paintings".⁸ [AM 1990-197, AM 1990-198] Two of these — *The Fertility of the Fields* of 1951 and *Solidified Dew* of 1950-51 — are still known under their original titles and thus it is verifiable that they were also part of Hantai's exhibition at L'Etoile scellée. The "topo-morphic" paintings introduced geometric shapes that interrupt the fluidity of scraped marks and sometimes ornament, sometimes structure the clusters of forms resembling internal organs. Hantai's play on the adjacency of geometric order and organic disorder is often supplemented by the use of dyadic perspective which collapses the topographical and the perspectival and combines the horizontal field of nature with the vertical field of vision thus introducing a series of spatial dislocations onto the canvas. As their engagement with such binary oppositions as the relations between space and surface, figure and ground, organic and geometric suggest, the phrase "topo-morphic" in their collective title relates not only to the spatial issues of painting. Combining topology and morphology, surface and space, "topo-morphic" is also the reverse of Euclidean space. It is not a metric but a morphologic space that also implies the morphology of living organisms.

Whether they are tangled, calligraphic shapes, crusty surfaces, or decorative, vividly colored geometric clusters, Hantai's marks are evocative of dissected organisms, cells, fossils and subterranean formations. Calling to mind Joan Miró's floating

Vasarely. Hantai's painting was reproduced on page 10 of the catalogue as well as in *Art News* to illustrate Robert Goldwater's exhibition review. Cf. Robert Goldwater, "These Promising Younger Europeans", *Art News*, vol. 52, no. 8 (December 1953): 15.

⁶ Émile Gripon, *Éléments usuels des sciences physiques et naturelles à l'usage des écoles primaires*, Vol. 1 (Paris ; Editions Belin, 1887), p. 79.

⁷ Geneviève Bonnefoi, *Simon Hantai* (Beaulieu : Abbaye de Beaulieu, 1973), p. 6.

⁸ Hantai's term, "topo-morphic", is quoted by Anne Baldassari, *Simon Hantai* (Paris: Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992), p. 22.

colored backgrounds and Max Ernst's use of over-painting and vegetal imagery, the "topo-morphic" paintings rely on the pictorial repertoire and iconography of Surrealism to which André Breton applied the label of automatism in 1939.⁹ He considered the aleatory procedures, gestural approaches and increased attention to the materials of painting that characterized the work of the newest generation of Surrealists, including Wolfgang Paalen, Esteban Frances, Matta and Kurt Seligmann, as a revival of Surrealist automatism. This return to automatism, although the connection was unacknowledged by Breton, expanded on Ernst's more than a decade long Surrealist work and on Miró's recent cardboard and Masonite based "savage paintings". Ernst, who introduced the techniques of grattage, frottage and over-painting in his mid-1920s work, and Miró, whose paintings addressed the notion of Georges Bataille's formless, were highly visible and equally influential in postwar Paris. Their work was featured at a range of contemporary exhibitions and provided a model for artists associated with postwar Surrealism as well as with the circles of art brut, Informel and lyrical abstraction.¹⁰ An example of the transformative expansion of Surrealist processes and iconography in early 1950s Parisian painting, Hantaï's "topo-morphic" work takes what Breton classified under the label of automatism and uses it as a trope or a device. While it deploys the vocabulary of postwar Surrealism as a rhetorical device, Hantaï's early 1950s work also retains its capacity to deviate from preconceived notions of Surrealism's unstable image. The highly saturated, butterfly colors of *The Fertility of the Fields* and *Painting* [AM 1990-197] are out of sync with the heavily scraped underworld of organic matter, and the aggressively overworked and desecrated surface of *Painting* [AM 1990-198] subverts the compositional apparatus and the esthetic considerations characteristic of Surrealist painting. In Hantaï's work it is not only the image that is unstable and ready to morph into something else following the dictates of Surrealist alchemy, but painting itself, understood as a process as well as a system of organization, is unsecured.

In a series of small scale works painted in 1950 on both paper and canvas the disintegration of the pictorial surface is furthered by collage and calligraphic marks.¹¹ The scraped surfaces and gestural lines appear without figures and recognizable shapes on multilayered grounds composed of cut and paste paper and coats of paint. [AM 2004-21/FK23] By the inclusion of newspapers and magazines Hantaï further eliminated the topological unity of the surface and by swiftly painting and scarping over the newsprint — using brush handles, razor blades and rulers — he produced richly lacerated surfaces that merged processes of painting and writing and reflected on the dynamism of the moving body. Many of Hantaï's contemporary works feature recycled canvases both out of economic necessity and due to his obvious interest in subtractive methods of paint application. Working with already painted canvases he scraped, blotted and rubbed them to disrupt their plane and fragment the

⁹ André Breton, "Des tendances les plus récentes de la peinture surréaliste", *Minotaure* no. 12-13, May 1939. Reprinted as "The Most Recent Tendencies in Surrealist Painting" in Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row, [1965], 1972), pp. 145-150.

¹⁰ Cf. *Max Ernst, exposition rétrospective*, textes de J. Bousquet et M. Tapié (Paris: Galerie René Drouin, 1950); *Joan Miró, peintures* (Paris: Galerie Maeght, 1948); *Joan Miró* (Paris: Galerie Maeght, 1950).

¹¹ As noted by Marcelin Pleynet, some of these small, paper-based works were executed on magazine pages that featured reviews and commentaries on art. Marcelin Pleynet, "La levée de l'interprétation des signes ou Les Manteaux de la Vierge", *Simon Hantaï* (Paris: Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1976.)

stability of their surface. Works such as *Painting* of 1950 [AM 2003-90] demonstrate Hantai's familiarity with the gestural tendencies of contemporary French abstraction appeared in the calligraphic paintings of Hans Hartung and Degottex.

Throughout the 1950s, Hantai's practice was dominated by the simultaneity of different pictorial modalities of non-representational and figurative forms. *Fourth Molt*, a 1951 painting formerly in the collection of José Pierre and on view at Hantai's first solo exhibition, evokes processes of transformation that occur in the natural world under a title that seems once again to be prompted by Émile Gripon's textbook and its chapters on the metamorphosis of silk worms.¹² Divided into four rectangular units suggesting grids and tabular images, the painting features different configurations of scraped and blotted forms that appear on varied backgrounds. Some of these allude to tissues and organs, while others seem to be nothing but the traces of a hand that moved across the surface to strip away layers of paint. By the impression of a hand in the lower right hand quadrate of *Fourth Molt* — calling to mind the handprints of Pollock in *Number 1A* of 1948 and on the walls of late Paleolithic caves — he claimed space for the body in painting and contravened the illusionistic depth of the biomorphic forms.

The Idea of a Projection

An extension of the “topo-morphic” sequence, *Painting* of 1952 [AM1989-407] reiterates the rectangular structure of *Fourth Molt* and evokes the tabulated images and spirals of such Surrealist works as the *Jeu de Marseille*, a collective collage drawing executed by Breton, Wilfredo Lam and Oscar Dominguez in 1940. *Painting* seems to contain spiraling geometric shapes, organs and ovoids, machine parts and planetary formations as well as interlocking tubular structures that meander through other shapes. The pictorial field is destabilized by the intersecting planes and by the floating circular and elliptical shapes. Based on a series of disjunctions between plane and space, static and dynamic, the work decomposes the visual coherence and the static immediacy of painting.

The spiraling forms of *Painting* bring to mind a whole set of associations, ranging from the helices of the *Jeu de Marseille* and Kandinsky's floating geometries through Roger Caillois' interest in the vortex of shells to Dali's exploration of Leonardo's logarithmic spiral. In all of these contexts, the spiral appears as a communicative vessel that mediates between natural occurrences and scientific abstractions. *Painting*, however, shares the most with Marcel Duchamp whose notes on the analogies between three and four-dimensional perspective read as its supplement.

The vanishing point of lines corresponds to a vanishing line of planes in a perspective. On the vanishing line in perspective, there are several vanishing points (meeting of different groups of horizontal parallels). By analogy, there

¹² Meaning ‘fourth transformation’ or ‘fourth sloughing’, the title refers to the shedding of animal skin as well as to the final phase in the transformation of insects. Cf. Gripon, 1877.

will be several vanishing lines all belonging to the same vanishing plane, and becoming of the intersecting lines of the different groups of parallel horizontal planes.¹³

Not only do the spherical and elliptical shapes of *Painting* seem to gyrate in space and traverse the disjunctive planes as erratic vectors and “vanishing lines” in a seemingly multidimensional space, the tubular structures also offer a link with the bachelor machine of Duchamp. Looking like hybrids between the malic molds of the *Large Glass* and the mechanomorphs of the 1912 painting, *La Mariée*, Hantaï’s network of tube-shaped vessels further complicate the already complex space and iconography of *Painting* by bending the gender of the Duchampian apparatus. Informed by Duchamp and mediated through his knowledge of Matta’s postwar work and in particular by his Duchampian suite, Hantaï’s pictorial inquiry into the mechanics and erotics of space was an interlude, albeit a constitutive one.¹⁴ As *Erased Duchamp* [AM 2003-92], a work that he painted in 1951 and covered with a stream of dripping oil paint nine years later demonstrates, in order for him to continue to paint, Duchamp, at least momentarily, had to be defaced.

Two Pieces of Fabric

“Everything is there, but neither seen nor thought. The canvas is folded, painted green, then unfolded and washed with black.”¹⁵ Hantaï’s terse description of the first folded painting that he realized in 1950 proposes a beginning, an arch-history of the *pliage*. Hantaï’s process was almost as simple as his summary suggests. He folded and crumpled the unprimed canvas, then secured its creases and covered it with oil paint. After it dried, he unfolded it, smoothed it and then applied a layer of thinned black paint to blind the white gaps and cover the reserves. The result is *1950*, an allover painting that resembles a soiled rag and whose textural and chromatic irregularities preserve the memory of its own making. Acting not as a painter but rather as an artisan or a craftsman, Hantaï’s process is reminiscent of the work of those textile dyers who during his childhood still practiced traditional blue-dyeing in his native village Bia. By excavating the surface of painting, Hantaï’s early work thematized the canvas as a space and a place, an opening and a boundary, a window and a wall. Yet it was the folding and creasing of the canvas that made it possible for him to overcome the limits of painting, however temporarily, and to dispose of the layering, superimposition and excavation of the surface while also breaking the plane as a field of representation. The process mobilized the support and through its sculptural, relief-like handling subverted the figure-ground dichotomy of painting. By folding the canvas Hantaï left the mark making process to the material. In thus reducing the expressive potential of the gesturing body, he took the surface of painting for what it really is – a piece of fabric.

¹³ *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. by Michel Sanouillet, trans. by Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, [1973] 1989), p. 91.

¹⁴ Matta’s “Duchampian suite”, a series of paintings he started to work in the early 1940s during the Surrealists’ exile in New York, hoped to re-address the *Large Glass*’s mapping of desire and optics not against but via painting. Cf. Katherine S. Dreier and Matta, *Duchamp’s Glass, La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même: An Analytical Reflection* (New York: Société Anonyme, Inc., The Museum of Modern Art, 1944); Romy Golan, “Matta, Duchamp et le mythe: Un nouveau paradigme pour la dernière phase du surréalisme”, *Matta* (Paris: Musée national d’art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, coll. Les classiques du XX^e siècle, no. 6, 1985), pp. 37-51. Matta’s recent work was presented in May 1949 at the Galerie René Drouin and in June 1952 at the Galerie Nina Dausset.

¹⁵ *Donation: Simon Hantaï* (Paris : Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, Paris-Musées, 1997), p. 14.

1950 was followed by a series of other works that revoked its consequences and turned the folding into a painterly motif. *Collage*, a minuscule work from 1950-51, is one of these after-effects of the folded canvas, but also an exception. It is based on a black and white magazine photograph that Hantaï cut and then painted in oil around the edges. The found picture showed a mummy wrapped in heavy shrouds of linen that the painted edge reframed as if to re-enfold the already draped corpse. The body underneath the carefully arranged layers of linen remained still visible enough to be considered as a human figure or at least as a remnant of a body once alive. Similar to the folded canvas, the painted photograph also challenged the function of the support and the pictorial order of figure and ground. Imprinted by the body not on top but from beneath, the shroud shifted the operation of the index by reversing the relationship of the support, the mark and the mark making body. To grasp what this reversal entailed and to be able to turn the episode of the *pliage* into its realization as a method Hantaï had to wait a decade. In 1960, he returned to the insights of 1950 and substituted folding for painting, then, in 2001, he revisited the painted photograph and replaced the folds with a series of digital prints titled *Shrouds*.

Bone & Mirror

Simon Hantaï like his namesake Simon Magus, may well have haunted ‘the abode where the root of all things has its foundations.’ I am reminded once more of those marvelous engravings (signed Soemmering, Scarpa, Walter, Caldini, Albinus, etc.) illustrating certain nineteenth-century anatomical albums in which each architecture of texture of the human organ finds its pictorial analogy in some vegetable structure: a uterus matched with a tobacco flower, for instance, or the inner structure of the ear with a Peru balsam-tree. Such elements introduced to each other could not fail eventually to embrace each other so closely as to blend into one, and we are in fact in the presence, here, of a universe which expresses their perfect conjugation. And which expresses Simon Hantaï himself perfectly, too, for he had to be practically bullied into agreeing to ‘exhibit’, being intensely reluctant to allow himself to be caught up in the commercial circuit which is today that worm that gnaws artistic expression. This reluctance reveals to us a rare quality of his type of *inner resonance*, the sole basic factor upon which infinite confidence can build with absolute sureness. Once again, as happens perhaps once every ten years, *a great departure*.¹⁶

André Breton’s words introduced Hantaï’s first solo exhibition on January 23, 1953 at the Galerie L’Etoile scellée, the recently secured exhibition space of the Parisian Surrealist group. For a thirty year old artist and a recent émigré to have his first solo exhibition in association with the last surviving movement of the historical avant-garde was indeed an auspicious start. Hantaï’s

¹⁶ Cf. André Breton in *Simon Hantaï* (Paris: A L’Etoile Scellée, 1953). Breton’s text was reprinted in *Médium, informations surréalistes*, no. 3. (January 1953) as well as in his *Le surréalisme et la peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 237. The above translation is from Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, p. 237. Considered by the artist as inconsequential, the Surrealist period received little to no attention from art historians, critics and curators, and when mentioned it is most often referred to as Surrealistic. On the missing historiography of the Surrealist years see Bernard Blistène’s texts in *Donations Daniel Cordier: Le regard d’un amateur* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989); Gérard Durozoi, *Histoire du mouvement surréaliste* (Paris: Hazan, 1997); Jan Gunnar Sjölin, “Writing the Painting Materials for a Study of Simon Hantaï’s Work, 1953-1959,” *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* vol. 70, no. 3 (2001): 129-156.

meeting with Breton took place in December 1952 soon after his thirtieth birthday. On December 7, his own birthday, he left a package in front of Breton's door at 42 rue Fontaine. The wrapping contained *Regard*, an object-painting of a dried reptile skeleton painted by wax featuring the handwritten inscription "Look into my eyes / I will look for you / do not pursue me." Breton included *Regard* in the inaugural group exhibition of L'Etoile Scellée in December 1952 where it was placed near Marcel Duchamp's *Feuille de vigne femelle*. Hantaï, surprised to see his own work on view, met Breton for first time during his visit to the gallery.¹⁷

Out of the sixteen works listed in the exhibition brochure four are still known by their original titles, and can thus be identified: *The Young Fly D. Flies Away*, *Solidified Dew*, *Fourth Molt* and *Collective Narcissus*. The last, another object-painting that Hantaï completed shortly before the opening, emblemizes the mythopoetic Narcissus of Surrealist mythology.¹⁸ A naked, sexless yet overtly eroticized figure, Hantaï's Narcissus is a hybrid monster with an animal skull for a head and an open torso showing its florescent green inside. Sitting on a giant cobalt blue egg, a motif that also appears in Dali's *Metamorphoses of Narcissus*, the creature holds a mirror behind his skull with its left hand made of a chicken foot. *Collective Narcissus* summarizes Hantaï's Surrealist practice which relied on the painted imagery of hybrid and often violently erotic creatures as well as on the incorporation of objects that – as described by the Swedish poet, Ingemar Gustafson, who visited the studio in early 1955 – included "butterflies, branches, skeletons of birds, flying in a dark wardrobe, shells, more shells, a gilded mirror with a seahorse on the glass, leaves, dolls, corals, crabs, skulls, shimmering white in the semi-darkness."¹⁹

"I am he," states Narcissus after recognizing his mirror image in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – "I am another," writes Arthur Rimbaud in *Letter of a Seer*. Emblemizing the duality of self and other, Narcissus is a figure of the double and by the same token an embodiment of Freud's uncanny. Enchanted by seeing his own reflection, Narcissus also exemplifies the libidinal aspects of seeing, the interrelatedness of vision and desire. As his early 1950s work operated through hybrids and doubles both structurally and thematically, Hantaï's interest in the myth of Narcissus comes as no surprise. *Collective Narcissus* recapitulates his amalgamation of biomorphic and organic forms and his blending of the erotic with the abject. The image of the egg, a sex cell and fertility symbol, and the presence of animal remnants act as insignia of the Freudian drives of Eros and Thanatos, whereas the 'collective' refers to the joint presence of human and animal, dead and living.

The Domain of Violence

The monstrous eroticism of *Collective Narcissus* is revisited in a pair of large scale works titled *Female Mirror I* and *II* that Hantaï completed after his solo exhibition. Painted in seductive, high-chroma colors with hyper-realistic, shaded details, the

¹⁷ I thank Zsuzsa Hantaï for this information.

¹⁸ On the Surrealist readings of Narcissus's myth and on Dali's 1937 painting the *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* see David Lomas, "on [Dali's] narcissism: an introduction" in *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 171-86.

¹⁹ Ingemar Gustafson, "Ar du levande?", *Salamander* no. 1 (1955), p. 34. Quoted by Jan Gunnar Sjölin, "Writing the Painting Materials for a Study of Simon Hantaï's Work, 1953-1959," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* vol. 70, no. 3 (2001): 129.

works feature scraped and gilded backgrounds that reiterate the theme of reflection proposed in their titles. Forming a double, the two paintings are based on giant hybrids and on free floating sexually charged biomorphic forms that, as Breton wrote, “*embrace each other so closely as to blend into each other [in] a universe which expresses their perfect conjugation.*” Although written before the execution of the painting, the word “conjugation” is particularly appropriate to describe the copulation of the half animal and half human and by resonating with the reproductive processes of molecules and single-cell organisms it offers a comprehensive take on Hantaï’s bestiary. What the phrase “conjugation” cannot account for is the violence of the *Female Mirror* paintings. The vaginas, breasts and buttocks that engulf the small organ-like shapes and appear on the distorted giants invite us to consider these works as competing projection screens of psychosexual fantasies that mutilate and hybridize the female, the other body. The sexually charged subhuman imagery of Hantaï’s paintings suited the Parisian Surrealist sensibilities of the 1950s especially well. Replacing the poetic exaltation of the “amour fou” of prewar years with an interest in the libidinal and the bestial after their New York exile, the new direction of Breton’s group culminated in the last international exhibition of the movement, devoted to the subject of Eros.²⁰ Another historical frame for these works is offered by the myth of the Great Transparents that Breton proposed in the closing section of his “Prolegomena for a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else” as follows:

Man is perhaps not the center, the focus of the universe. One may go so far as to believe that there exist above him, on the animal level, beings whose behavior is as alien to him as his own must be to the day-fly or the whale.²¹

Putting the animal above the human to conjure up “hypothetical beings” as Breton suggested is to elevate the bestial and visceral like Hantaï and Matta did.

“Une démolition au platane”

During the years of his adhesion to Surrealism between December 1952 and March 1955, Hantaï’s activities within the group were rather limited. In addition to a small body of work consisting of paintings, collages and a series of graphic works that illustrated the first issue of the new Surrealist journal *Médium*, he signed a few Surrealist tracts, participated in collective games and questionnaires as well as in a meeting between Breton’s group and Guy Debord’s Situationist International that discussed their plans to protest against the official celebration of the Rimbaud centennial in Charleville.²²

²⁰ Cf. Exposition *internationale du Surréalisme: 1959–1960 (EROS)* (Paris: Galerie Daniel Cordier, December 15, 1959–January 9, 1960). On the postwar shift regarding eroticism see José Pierre, “La Seconde Guerre mondiale et le deuxième souffle du surréalisme”, *Paris–Paris*, 1992, pp. 205-6.

²¹ André Breton, ‘Prolegomena for a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else’ in *What is Surrealism?*, Rosemont, pp. 276-285. Originally published in the first issue of the Surrealist periodical *VVV* in June 1942 in New York, Breton’s text was illustrated by Matta who later that year also painted a large-scale painting bearing the title *The Great Transparents*.

²² Hantaï’s illustrations for *Médium, communication surréaliste* employed an animal and biomorphic iconography without the violent eroticism of his paintings. Cf. *Médium, communication surréaliste*, no. 1. (November 1953). For the tracts of the group signed by Hantaï see *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives I-II*, ed. by José Pierre (Paris: Losfeld, 1982) and the website http://melusine.univ-paris3.fr/Tracts_surr_2009/Tracts_2_2009.htm (Accessed on November 11, 2011). For Hantaï’s participation in the Surrealist games see *Les jeux surréalistes, mars 1921 - septembre 1962*, ed. by Emmanuel Garrigues, *Les Archives du Surréalisme* 5, (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 176, 201-215. For the meeting of October 1954 and the ensuing debates known as ‘The Charleville Affair’ see <http://debordiana.chez.com/francais/commence.htm> (Accessed on November 11, 2011)

Hantaï's last contribution to postwar Surrealism occurred in "Une démolition au platane," a short text written with Jean Schuster and published in the January 1955 issue of *Médium*.²³ Hantaï and Schuster aimed to redefine the notion and practice of Surrealist automatism, thus contributing to the recent reevaluations of automatic writing undertaken both outside and within the Surrealist group by Asger Jorn, Adrien Dax and Michel Carrouges.²⁴ Condemning the deflated décor of contemporary Surrealist painting, they declared that "poetry, whether plastic or verbal, leads to abstraction," and referred to the work of Duchamp and Matta as examples of a new sort of automatism that combines the erotic with the intellectual and thus expands on the purely interior model of Breton.²⁵ The rather surprising conjunction between Duchamp's conceptual and aleatory practices and Breton's automatic writing was informed by Hantaï's interest in the *Large Glass* and its painterly reconfigurations by Matta as well as by Carrouges's recently published book on Duchamp.²⁶

The necessity to reconsider the practice of Surrealist automatism as defined by Breton, whose "interior model" emphasized its "pure psychic" nature and similarity to "magic dictation," became apparent with the emergence of gestural abstract painting in France.²⁷ The possible reconciliation of the corporeal contingency of gestural abstraction with the "pure psychic automatism" of Surrealism had a special importance for Hantaï whose painting since the early 1950s had been shaped by both. "Une démolition au platane" documents his struggle to circumscribe his own practice within the theoretical framework of Surrealism. Less than two months later, he gave up trying and at the opening of the group exhibition *Alice in Wonderland* unexpectedly broke his connections with Breton and the Parisian Surrealists.

Gesture & Painting

Curated by the prominent critic Charles Estienne who, since the opening of L'Etoile scellée, also acted as an advisor to Breton, *Alice in Wonderland* brought together the works of the non-geometric abstract painters and the Surrealists.²⁸ The painting Hantaï presented at the show belonged to a series of semi-abstract works that expanded on his earlier application of grattage and dripping while also relying on the arbitrary motions of the body.

Throughout his attachment to Breton's group and parallel to his object-paintings and collages, Hantaï continued to explore the corporeal dimensions of painting and the contingency of pictorial materials. His large-scale calligraphic paintings,

²³ Jean Schuster—Simon Hantaï, "Une démolition au platane", *Médium, communication surréaliste*, no. 4. (January 1955): 58-62. The title is a quote taken from *The Magnetic Fields*, the first literary example of automatic writing that Breton and Philip Soupault published in 1920 during the years of the Paris Dada. Cf. "Temptation to order a new refreshment: a plantaneous demolition, for instance."

²⁴ Asger Jorn, "Discours aux pingouins", *Cobra* no. 1. (1949) in Mirella Bandini, *L'Esthétique, le Politique de Cobra à l'International Situationniste (1948–1957)*, trad. de l'italien par Claude Galli (Montpellier: Sulliver et Via Valeriano, 1998), pp. 191-193 ; Adrien Dax, "Perspective automatique", *Almanach surréaliste du ½ siècle* (Paris: Edition de la Nef, 1950), p. 24 ; Michel Carrouges, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950).

²⁵ "La poésie - plastique ou verbale - ramène à l'abstrait." Cf. "Une démolition au platane", p. 61.

²⁶ Michel Carrouges, *Les Machines Célibataires* (Paris : Arcanes, 1954).

²⁷ For Breton's definitions of automatic writing see Breton, [1965], 1972. For the postwar redefinitions of Surrealist automatism see Elza Adamowicz, "Le surréalisme après 1945: Le chaud et le froid", *Ceci n'est pas un tableau: Les écrits surréalistes sur l'art* (Paris: L'Âge d'homme, Bibliothèque Mélusine, 2004), pp. 197-229.

²⁸ *Alice in Wonderland* (Paris: Librairie-Galerie Kléber, March 1 – March 22, 1955). The exhibition featured works by Bernard Childs, Corneille, Jean Degottex, René Duvillier, Roger-Edgar Gillet, Simon Hantaï, Jan Krizek, Marcelle Loubchansky, Wolfgang, Paalen, Toyen, Thanos Tsingos and Fahr-el-Nissa Zeid.

like *Untitled* of 1954 [FRAC Bretagne], are based on the application of grattage. Hantaï sporadically covered the canvas with highly saturated colors that often evoke the contemporary work of Judit Reigl. After applying a layer of thinned black paint, he scraped the surface with dynamic movements. The procedure uncovered the underlying colors, created unexpected chromatic and tonal complexities and suggested rolling three-dimensional volumes. While works such as *Absence d'étoiles* [Fournier] connote imaginary landscapes, most of Hantaï's contemporary gestural paintings feature a sensual rhythm of large undulating forms that preserve the pace and the trajectory of his gestures. As Geneviève Bonnefoi noted, these bending and warping curved shapes appear to be gendered, feminine and quasi-sculptural.²⁹ The gestural works were received favorably by his fellow Surrealist, José Pierre, as well as by Estienne, who interpreted them as "terrains struck by lightning" and mental landscapes soaked in "dark poetry."³⁰ Since they featured seemingly nature-based and often sensual imagery and had dramatic scale and colors, the gestural paintings of the period lent themselves rather easily to these readings without being co-opted by them. The works and their readings they engendered both demonstrate what Rosalind Krauss described as "the failure of stylistic concepts derived from the formal, pictorial code (...) to forge any kind of unity from the apparent diversity of surrealist production."³¹

Hantaï's detachment from Surrealism was therefore less prompted by stylistic choices between abstraction and figuration and more by the geopolitical implications of his commitment to a corporeal practice of painting. Hantaï's interest in gestural abstraction was not limited to its French varieties described under the vernaculars of lyrical abstraction, Informel, art autre and tachisme. Hantaï clearly aimed to adopt what the abstract painter Georges Mathieu called "psychic non-figuration," yet what he was most interested in was the abstraction of the New York school and especially of Jackson Pollock.³² Following such early 1950s presentations as the exhibitions *Véhémences confrontées*, *American Vanguard Art for Paris* and Pollock's solo show in March 1952 at the Studio Facchetti, American abstract painting continued to gain visibility in Paris throughout the decade. The transatlantic exchange, fueled by the cultural politics of the Cold War, secured the presence of American art and divided the already over agitated French art scene. New York's stealing of the idea of modern art, as Serge Guilbaut famously put it, deprived Paris from its hegemonic position within the Western art world.³³ Hantaï's awareness of what Clement Greenberg in 1955 called "American-Type Painting" is apparent in his gradual embrace of the corporeal practice of painting as well as in his endeavor to make room for the former within Surrealist automatism in "Une démolition au platane." Breton and Estienne held a quite different position regarding the rising dominance of new American painting. The collaboration between Breton and Estienne, a former advocate of abstraction, started in 1953 and culminated in February 1955 in the exhibition *La Pérennité de l'art gaulois*, and in a series of articles devoted to Gallic coins. Trying to demonstrate that the origins of abstraction are in fact

²⁹ Bonnefoi, 1973, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁰ Charles Estienne, "La peinture et le surréalisme sont d'aujourd'hui comme d'hier", *Combat-Art*, no. 15, 7 mars 1955 in *L'aventure de l'art abstrait*. Charles Estienne, *critique d'art des années 50*. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Brest, du 13 juillet au 7 novembre 2011, p. 84.

José Pierre, «Les prunelles sont mûres», *Médium, communication surréaliste*, no. 4, janvier 1955.

³¹ Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism", *October* 19 (Winter 1981): 17.

³² Georges MATHIEU, *De la révolte à la renaissance, Au-delà du Tachisme*, Paris, Gallimard, (1963) 1972, p. 50.

³³ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

rooted in the ancient Gallic artistic sensibility which was destroyed during the Greco-Roman invasion, they proposed a link between Gallic culture and contemporary French abstract painting, thus hoping to reframe abstraction in a genealogical framework informed by Cold War nationalism. Breton's "Asterix syndrome" professed in an article in the February 7 1955 issue of *Combat* and Hantaï's break with the Surrealist group on March 1 are evidence of the conflicting positions adopted by the French art scene of the mid-1950s in response to the transatlantic shift of modernism.³⁴

Sexe-Prime

"You know the terrible life of the alarm clock" – quoted the brochure of Hantaï's 1956 solo exhibition a droll line from a letter Jacques Vaché wrote to Breton in April 1917.³⁵ If the Vaché citation was to indicate that Hantaï overcame Surrealism backward, skipping its entire history, the paintings of the exhibition suggested a leap forward into the practice of calligraphic abstraction. The painter's second solo exhibition in Paris opened on May 11, 1956, in the newly opened Galerie Kléber, a gallery-cum-bookstore whose director, Jean Fournier, would remain a life-long supporter of his work. Titled *Sexe-Prime: Hommage à Jean-Pierre Brisset*, the exhibition featured a large scale eponymous painting and five additional works, accompanied by the brochure containing the reproduction of the artist's handwritten notes as well as two photographs by Étienne Sved. One of them showed Hantaï squatting in his studio in Paris' Cité des Fleurs surrounded by his paintings, the other, recalling a chronophotographic sequence, showed a series of images featuring his gesticulating hand holding an alarm clock. While Vaché's quote appeared above these pictures in print, a handwritten sentence, "interrogation of an out of use alarm clock", was placed underneath them. Referring to the tool that the painter used in the execution of these as well as some of his earlier paintings, the photographic sequence and the script complemented Hantaï's allusion to Vaché and to the historical avant-gardes before Surrealism. The alarm clock first appeared on the cover of *Anthologie Dada* in May 1919 in the line block reproduction of an ink drawing by Francis Picabia. Representing the parts of an alarm clock scattered in an abstract, diagrammatic fashion, the drawing not only showed the object but also used it to create the drawing by printing the inked parts of the clock directly on the paper. An "automatic masterpiece", Picabia's drawing was a radical document of automatized mark making that sabotaged the expressivity and the fetish of the hand.³⁶

Hantaï's use of the alarm clock, concomitant with his forsaking the brush, did not prompt such radical departures from the practice of painting as an exercise in the expressivity of the gesture. In fact, his paintings continued to exalt this very

³⁴ André Breton, "Le présent des Gaules. De l'art gaulois à l'art modern ou l'histoire d'une résistance", *Combat* (February 7, 1955). For the phrase "Asterix syndrome" see Serge Guilbaut, "1955: The Year When the Gaulois Fought the Cowboy", *Yale French Studies* 98, *The French Fifties* (2000): 167-181.

³⁵ *Sexe-Prime: Hommage à Jean-Pierre Brisset et autres peintures de Simon Hantaï* (Paris: Galerie Kléber, 11 mai – 9 juin 1956). For Vaché's letter see *The Anthology of Black Humor*, ed. by André Breton, trans. by Mark Polizotti (San Francisco: City Lights, 1987), p. 297. For an informative reading of the presented works and of their relation to writing see Sjölin, 2001.

³⁶ For the phrase "automatic masterpiece" see Cf. Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, "Some Memories of Pre-Dada: Picabia and Duchamp", *Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Robert Motherwell (Cambridge and London: Harvard University, Belknap Press, 1981), p. 266.

expressivity, but they did so by relying on the painter's body instead of solely on his hand. After being primed with white, the canvases were painted in small areas by bright colors, and while still wet, they were splashed and poured over with thinned dark oil paint which Hantaï scraped back by large, dynamic movements resulting in interweaving linear shapes and streams of dripping paint. The pours of dark, semi-transparent paint formed heavy streaks and wrinkled coagulations in the un-scraped areas, a field produced by the random interactions and pictorial accidents of the materials as well as by the contingency of the gesticulating body. In an effort to adopt the corporeal dance of Pollock's drip technique, which he misinterpreted as a form of physical automatism, Hantaï painted works featuring calligraphic marks that were most often centered on the canvas and thus respected the edges of the painting.³⁷ Not only did they resist the allover and thus the lack of premeditated composition, but as demonstrated by their downflowing drips Hantaï's canvases also opposed the horizontality of Pollock's work. Yet the Pollockian model did not quite elude Hantaï's practice. While Hantaï's gestural paintings recall the calligraphic abstractions of Degottex and Marcelle Loubchansky as well as the irregularly stained backgrounds of Mathieu's late 1940s works, they deliberately resist the decorative elegance of contemporary French abstraction, and through a rare insight into Pollock's method, refuse to promote the painted mark as a sign of the transcendental or of the chaotic.

While Sved's photographic sequence in the exhibition brochure paralleled the kinetic energy of the paintings and proposed a connection between the scraped surfaces and the photo-chemically produced image as indexical prints, the inclusion of Hantaï's handwriting implied an analogy between the corporeal calligraphy of painting and the autographic gesture of writing. A veritable celebration of the different autographic regimes, the brochure also contained a page filled with Hantaï's scribbles and a two page long text where his hardly legible handwritten notes and remarks were juxtaposed with printed quotes from such figures as Bataille, Breton, Malcolm de Chazal, Giorgio de Chirico, Duchamp, Hegel, R. G. Lecomte, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Stéphane Lupasco, Mathieu, Nietzsche and Benjamin Péret. The prophetic tone and the arcane rhetoric of Hantaï's manifesto-montage, along with the cultural matrix it refers to, appears to be motivated by Surrealism. With the exception of Mathieu and Lupasco — a Franco-Rumanian philosopher whose writings fused quantum physics with epistemology and proposed a trans-consistent logic of reality — the authors Hantaï quoted were either discussed by or associated with the Parisian Surrealist group. The two most prominently placed citations in Hantaï's manifesto-montage are "Explosante-Fixe" and "Souvenir de l'avenir". While the "memory of the future" figures in literary texts by Paul Valéry, Louis Aragon and by Dali, the phrase "fixed-explosive" appears in Breton's *Mad Love* as part of the oft-quoted sentence according to which "convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be."³⁸ Accompanied by Man Ray's blurred photograph showing a tango dancer in motion [where? in H's catalog? this accompanied by is not helpful here], Breton's "fixed-explosive"

³⁷ Pollock's *Number 1 (Number 1A)* was included in the exhibition, *50 ans d'art aux Etats-Unis*, that featured the collection of The Museum of Modern Art in New York and was on view in Paris from April 2 through May 15, 1955. Cf. *50 ans d'art aux Etats-Unis: Collections du Museum of Modern Art* (Paris: Musée national d'art moderne, Press Artistique, 1955).

³⁸ André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 19.

is a “violent arrest of the vital” and thus it relates to Hantaï’s gestural signs which, produced in direct physical contact with the body, function as indices that capture the volatile energy of physical movement³⁹. Evoking a nonlinear concept of time and the notion of the future anterior, the oxymoron of “memory of the future” refers to things that ‘will have been’ and – like Hantaï’s contingent pictorial process – resists the logic of the foreseeable.

Writing the Excess

The exhibition’s largest, over five meter long painting is described by Hantaï on the second page of the brochure as “*Sexe-Prime. Homage to Jean-Pierre Brisset, painting executed during an afternoon of erotic fascinations (unified by the act of love and the act of painting) by orgiastic and arbitrary acts in a magical and erotic climate.*” Hantaï’s junction between painting and love making on the afternoon of September 18, 1955 reiterates the dedication that appears in the title of the painting as well as of the exhibition. The title of the painting refers to Jean-Pierre Brisset’s book, *The Science of God, or the Creation of Man* of 1900. Described by Duchamp in 1946 as “a sort of Douanier Rousseau of philology”, Brisset claimed that mankind’s ancestors were frogs, employing an idiosyncratic combination of comparative grammar and evolutionary theory to support his argument.⁴⁰ Describing the birth of sex in the language of amphibians as a series of homophonies that were also included in Breton’s *Anthology of Black Humor*, the section titled “The Formation of Sex” traced the etymology of the word and by extension, the origin of the practice of sex as follows.

we read: *ai que ce?* [(I) have that this?] with the value of: *ce qu'ai?* [that that (I) have?] or *qu'ai ce? = qu'ai-je?* [that (I) have this? = that have I? This was said on *ce quai* [this dock] which the ancestor occupied. The questions: *ai que ce?* [(I) have that this?] *est que ce?* [is that this?] were expressed *ai* [(I) have] or *est quoi ici* [is what here] and created the names of *sexe* [sex]. Some would pronounce it: *éqce*; others *èqce* according to the generative sentence *ai que ce? est que ce?* [have (I) that this? is it that this?] When the word sex is pronounced either *séqce* or *sèqce*. *Ec*, *éqce* or *ek* is formed from *ai que?* [have (I) that?] is even a first name for sex: *éque-ce* [?-this] equitable with *ce éque*, *ec* or *ek* [this (?)] and became *exe* [ex]. The question was then asked *ce exe, sais que ce?* [this ex, do (you/I) know what this?] = this point do you know what it is? Which became: *sex*. – *Sais que c'est?* [do (you/I) know what this?], *ce exe est* [this ex is], *sexe est* [sex is], *ce excès* [this excess], it’s the sex. – we see that sex was the first excess.⁴¹

Hantaï’s title, *Sexe-Prime*, another homophony which reads as *s’exprime*, suggests that the work expresses and articulates itself through an experience of sex. Following Brisset’s proposition, according to which “sexual energy is the unique creator of human

³⁹ Hal Foster, *Convulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 27.

⁴⁰ Marcel Duchamp, *Salt-Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. by Michel Sanouillet, trans. by Elmer Peterson (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 126.

⁴¹ Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, pp. 186-87. For the French see Jean-Pierre Brisset, *La science de Dieu ou La création de l'homme* (Paris: Chamuel, 1900), p. 21. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k110348r>

speech and as such of all humans,” Hantaï rooted the activity of painting, the formation of corporeal signs, in the libidinal and the mediumistic.⁴² Similar to the speech of frogs, painting functioned as an arbitrary and impulsive language engendered by sex. The dynamic corporeality of gesture painting and of love making pronounced the body of the painter in openly masculine terms and thus, following the example of Pollock, connected the performance of virility with creative production. Hantaï’s understanding of the pictorial process as a limit experience motivated by erotic excess as well as by the overload of flowing paint calls to mind Bataille — one of the authors cited in the painter’s manifesto-montage and Surrealism’s self-described “old enemy within” — who pointed to excess and transgression within the practice of the erotic as an opening to self-abandonment and thus, reframing Freud, also to the experience of death.⁴³ An incarnation of the experience of excess and ecstasy, and a conflation of sex and signs, Hantaï’s *Sexe-Prime* expanded on his long term interest in the mural and turned the canvas into a wall that he fractured by flickering colors and swiftly scraped marks. When entering the Galerie Kléber in May 1956, the critic Geneviève Bonnefoi was overtaken by a shock provoked by Hantaï’s painting.⁴⁴ Created as much by the effect of its scale as by its powerful divergence from the “wise ‘compositions’” of the “abstract craftsman” of contemporary French painting, *Sexe-Prime* initiated a new phase in Hantaï’s practice that expanded the automatic writing of Surrealism through the erotic and the body.

Rituals of the Sacred

It was in *Sexe-Prime*’s manifesto-montage that Hantaï first aligned himself with Georges Mathieu, whose artistic practice remained an important reference for him during 1956 and 1957. As he wrote at the closing section of *Sexe-Prime*, “it is my pleasure to salute Georges Mathieu’s absolute intransigence on the most significant pictorial gesture of the postwar period; his message has the highest sign value [valeur d’indice].”⁴⁵ Informed by Mathieu’s rhetoric that defined painting in semiotic terms, the greeting reinforced Hantaï’s turning away from Surrealism and proclaimed his place in the practice of lyrical abstraction and Informel that was promulgated by the French painter and his friend and collaborator, the critic Michel Tapié.

Hantaï’s short-lived affiliation with Mathieu was marked by two highly polemical public events that occurred between December 1956 and March 1957. The first took place on December 7, 1956 at the Galerie Kléber during the opening of Judit Reigl’s solo exhibition where Hantaï presented a text written for the occasion. Referring to the contemporary era as a “secular period of advanced decadence in which rationalism reduced Knowledge to a utilitarian, anti-hierarchical culture”, he rejected the tenets of secular modernism and thus sided yet again with Bataille whose postwar writings opposed the utilitarianism of

⁴² Cf. “La force sexuelle est seule créatrice de toute la parole humaine, comme elle l’est de tous les humains.” Brisset, p. 140.

⁴³ For Bataille’s reference to himself see Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 49.

⁴⁴ Geneviève Bonnefoi, “L’œuvre hors du commun de Simon Hantaï”, *Les Lettres Nouvelles* 6 (April 8, 1959): 34.

⁴⁵ “Il me plaît de saluer l’intransigence absolue de Georges Mathieu au geste pictural le plus significatif de l’après-guerre, son message a la plus haute valeur d’indice.” Cf. *Sexe-Prime*, 1956.

economic exchange and the hierarchy of scientific knowledge in the name of 'general economy' and 'nonknowledge'.⁴⁶ Hantaï's turn to an overtly anti-modernist stance that not only disregarded but opposed Faustian modernity was manifested a few months later in the *Cérémonies commémoratives de la deuxième condamnation de Siger de Brabant*.

A series of festivities that Mathieu and Hantaï organized to commemorate the second condemnation of the 13th century heretic, Siger de Brabant, at the Galerie Kléber between March 7 and 27 of 1957, *Cérémonies* attempted to retrace the history of Christianity and Western culture from the Edict of Milan in 313 until 1944.⁴⁷ Consisting of various public events and exhibitions that were arranged in four commemorative cycles — sacerdotal (313-1277), royal (1277-1713), bourgeois (1713-1832) and popular (1832-1944) — the series was launched by a mass in the Notre Dame and followed by a carefully structured program. *Cérémonies* included 'commemorated moments' that among others celebrated the condemnation of the French Revolution and the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre; 'daily celebrations' that paid homage to Byzantium as "the perfect realization of a Christian absolute monarchy" (Byzantine day) and to Spanish colonialism (Spanish day); as well as a medley of other topics that honored, for example, feudalism as "a typically French phenomenon and a creator of a new civilization" together with Johann von Neumann's game theory and Mark Tobey's painting. Installations and décors including a large crucifix, the portraits of historical personages and thrones, altars and draperies and a gold-leaf covered room changed day by day in the prescribed order of the ceremonial events. The daily installations were accompanied by lectures relating to a commemorated moment or to the daily themes. An exhibition, or rather a series of exhibitions where, as Bonnefoi wrote, "painting was excluded, and ideology ruled" *Cérémonies* was violently and repeatedly condemned by Breton's Surrealist group and Debord's Situationists alike.⁴⁸

Continuing Mathieu's effort to exemplify the specificities of pre-modern, Western culture and especially his pictorial re-enactments of medieval chivalric history, *Cérémonies* opted for the refusal of the metanarratives of secular modernism, for staging a nostalgic evocation of the hegemony of Christian civilization as a heroic sequence of violent rituals of power.⁴⁹ Not unlike the nationalist reframing of the Gaul heritage proposed by Breton and Estienne two years earlier, *Cérémonies* mobilized and monumentalized the events of national and Western history following the processes of legitimization of the past that characterized 19th century nation-states, yet employed them within the imagined matrix of medieval Christian imperialism.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *Judit Reigl* (Paris: Galerie Kléber, avec le concours de la Galerie Drouin & Cie, December 12, 1956 – January 5, 1957, 1956), n. p. Cf. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. by R. Hurly (Cambridge: Zone Books, 1988); Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. By Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany : SUNY Press, 1988).

⁴⁷ For the program of the exhibition see Georges Mathieu, "Vive Monseigneur Templier!" in Georges Mathieu, *L'Abstraction prophétique*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1984), 317-332.

⁴⁸ Geneviève Bonnefoi, "L'avant-garde réactionnaire' ou quand les peintres se font doctrinaires", *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, no.59 (1958): 586. The Surrealist tract *Coup de Sémonce* was distributed on March 25 of 1957 in front of the Galerie Kléber. Cf. *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives II*, op. cit., 164-169, 373-375. http://melusine.univ-paris3.fr/Tracts_surr_2009/Tracts_2_2009.htm#par_169 (Accessed on November 14, 2011). For the critiques of the Situationists see "Certificats", *Potlatch* 28 (May 22, 1957) in *Potlatch 1954-1957, réimpression des 27 numéros de Potlatch (12 juin 1954 et 5 novembre 1957)*, (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1985), 230-231; *Internationale Situationniste, Bulletin central édité par les sections de l'Internationale Situationniste*, Paris 2 (December 1958), 6-8. For the English translation see "Editorial Notes: Absence and Its Costumers", *October*, vol. 79 (Winter 1997): 98-101.

⁴⁹ On Mathieu's notion and performances of history see Ágnes Berecz, "Grand Slam: Histories of and by Georges Mathieu", *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2008): 39-48.

⁵⁰ For the analysis of the similarities between *Cérémonies* and *Pérennité de l'art gaulois* see Steven Harris, "The Gaulish and the feudal as *lieux de mémoire* in post-war French abstraction", *Journal of European Studies* 35(2): 201-220.

Through their array of works of art, artifacts and various cultural documents, Mathieu and Hantaï created an artistic and ideological bricolage and a space permeated by the estheticization of violence and politics. There is no need to argue that in March 1957 when the French-Algerian and — as Raymond Aron put it — Franco-French war was at its peak, *Cérémonies* could not be considered anything but a menacing political provocation. The passionate criticism provided by the Surrealists and the Situationists does not require explanations either — known for their staunch anti-clericalism they were the most obvious targets of the event series.

While Mathieu's motivation to embark on *Cérémonies* followed from his earlier activities, Hantaï's participation was an act of defiance which helped him sever his association with Surrealism ritually and publicly. As he wrote to Jean-Luc Nancy in the early 2000s, "More had to be done, hence Siger de Brabant. (...) I needed this impossible situation, a dangerous yet unavoidable flight forward [fuite en avant], indefensible, compromising, irremediable, obscene insult, waving of the red flag in front of the Surrealists and the others after the boredom of the life of the group and the naïve and useless effort to change it."⁵¹

Souvenir de l'avenir

After the scandal of *Cérémonies* Hantaï cut off his contacts with Mathieu and replaced the gestural excess of his mid-1950s paintings with a more restrained calligraphy. An achromatic, dominantly black and white palette characterizes *Souvenir de l'avenir* (1957) [AM 1994-62], a work that features scraped and cross-shaped lines and *Painting* of 1958 [AM 1990-201] whose black surface is slit by round, short strokes of grattage. As opposed to the reductive vocabulary of these works, the scuffed, disjointed lines of *Painting* [AM 1990-200] and of *To Gerard Manley Hopkins* appear over white grounds that were scattered with indigo and cadmium colored stains and then covered with black. The floating calligraphic signs of these 1958 paintings preserve the staccato rhythm of Hantaï's moving hand, while the dribbles of color are evidence of the rapidity of execution and of the wet-to-wet application of paint. Grouped under the title *Souvenir de l'avenir* — a phrase that had also been included in the montage-manifesto of *Sexe-Prime* — Hantaï's recent works were shown in March 1958 in his third Parisian solo exhibition at the Galerie Kléber.⁵²

Similar to *Sexe-Prime*, *Souvenir de l'avenir* comprised both paintings and texts. The works' original titles, enumerated in a form that resembles medieval manuscripts, referred to historical characters, events and documents that evoke the histories of Christian theology and mysticism. From *Homage to Joseph de Maistre* and *Commemoration of the Pascendi Encyclical Letter to For the Mystic Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite*, the titles of the paintings acted as dedications, homages and memorials, and re-emphasized Hantaï's counter-modernist stance. His turn to a radical Christian conservatism was also evident in the hand-written text that contained the drafts of *Cérémonies* and in the long printed manifesto titled "Notes confusionnelles

⁵¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Hantaï 1958: 'La peinture se dépouillait...'", *La Part de l'Oeil* 20 (2004-2005): 28.

⁵² *Simon Hantaï, Souvenir de l'avenir, Peintures récentes* (Paris: Galerie Kléber, March 3 —30, 1958).

accélération et autres pour une avant-garde réactionnaire non réductible”.⁵³ As their title states, Hantai’s confusing and hastily written notes claimed a reactionary avant-garde that resists the ahistorical and anti-religious traits of such 20th century trends as Dada and Surrealism. By stating that “art is by its essence religious” Hantai proposed to reflect on the history of painting as a history of spiritual manifestations and by declaring that “the rituals are reduced to their social function” he framed his interest in the sacred as a response to the reordering of the social sphere that occurred in the wake of France’s technological modernization in the late 1950s.

Seen in this context, the oxymoron in the exhibition’s title begins to resonate with Paul Valéry’s notion of the remembrance of the future. Valéry considered the non-linear temporal experience of remembering things yet to come as a form of self-reflection and retreat.⁵⁴ In stark contrast to notions of historical evolution and personal growth, remembering the future for Valéry is a step backward, a lapse that opens up the utopian possibility of reflecting on personal memories through imagining “that which will have been.” As in Jacques Lacan’s concept of the future anterior, the memory of the future appears here as an analytic tool, a symbolic strategy of self-inspection:

What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.⁵⁵

Souvenir de l’avenir and its accompanying texts sought to reverse time and to fuse the past and the present in the recollection of the future. For Hantai, to remember the future entailed a regress in time and history that implied the contemplation of his past as well as the return to the sacred and to the institution of religion. His “Notes...” proposed to imagine the social and communal processes of becoming by overturning time and rejecting the present. An attempt to find a historical matrix that contests the desacralization of everyday life and challenges the emergence of mass-mediatised culture, the texts of *Souvenir de l’avenir* expanded and revised the intellectual preoccupations of Hantai’s Siger de Brabant project and prefigured the yearlong exercise he embarked on in the fall of 1958 when he began the preparations of *Écriture rose*.

The Vocation of Texts

A spiritual exercise and daily labor, the painting of *Écriture rose* was a work of summation and an analytic and therapeutic process. It acknowledged the impossibility to translate one’s life and histories of thought into a synoptic narrative and refused to claim the agency and the power of the subject to construct such a narrative. And so it became a sum of fragments

⁵³ Cf. “Notes préparatoires pour les cérémonies commémoratives de la condamnation de Siger de Brabant et suites correctives non-cérémonielles” and “Notes confusionnelles accélérantes et autres pour une avant-garde réactionnaire non réductible” in *Simon Hantai, Tableaux récentes, Souvenir de l’avenir*, catalogue d’exposition (Paris: Galerie Kléber, 1958). Reprinted in *La Part de l’Oeil* 20 (2004-2005): 36-39. On “Notes ...” see Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’étoilement, Conversation avec Hantai* (Paris: Minuit, 1998); Sjölin, 2001; Nancy, 2004-2005.

⁵⁴ Cf. Paul Valéry, *Cahiers I, 1894-1914*, sous la direction de Nicole Celeyrette-Pietri et Judith Robinson-Valéry (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 190.

⁵⁵ Jacques Lacan, “The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis”, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Tavistock, Routledge, 1989), p. 64.

and overlaps, a wall of inscriptions ruptured by drips of inks and floating clusters of stains. Transposed from the page to the canvas, Hantaï's "insane game of writing", to borrow Mallarmé's phrase, resulted in a palimpsest-like colored script that veils and reveals what is underneath, obscures and exposes the body of writing. As its 16th century model, Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, *Écriture rose* was also written in retreat. Hantaï's yearlong writing and erasing paralleled acts of forgetting and remembering. Like Freud's mystic writing-pad, the illegible archive of *Écriture rose* charts histories of Western thoughts and Christian spiritualism, while also tracing how Hantaï became the painter who writes. Modeling the mnemonic apparatus and picturing processes of becoming, the painting maps how scripts, colors and through the, their maker are constituted.

Hantaï's copying of texts in the mornings of 1958 and 1959 was accompanied by a revision of his earlier paintings that he undertook in the afternoons. He covered his previous canvases by words and phrases, thus overwriting and obscuring their surfaces, and created large-scale paintings such as *Galla Placidia*, whose title evokes his travel to Ravenna in the summer of 1948. Scraped by an alarm clock one small stroke after another for months, the semi-transparent, dark yet luminous surface of *Galla Placidia* attempts "to expel every reminiscence of sculptural illusion by creating the counter illusion of light alone — a counterillusion which consists in the projection of an indeterminate surface of warm and luminous color in front of the actual painted surface." Clement Greenberg's description of the Byzantine character of American abstract painting and of Pollock's practice in particular provides the most fitting account of Hantaï's work prior to the period of the *pliage*. The dark light of *Galla Placidia* and the pink glow of *Écriture rose* stand for "a new kind of modernist picture, like the Byzantine gold and glass mosaic" which, once again in Greenberg's words, "comes forward to fill the space between itself and the spectator with its radiance." Like the Byzantines, Hantaï too "dematerialized firsthand reality by invoking a transcendent one" in his monumental canvases of 1958 and 1959.⁵⁶ Yet he did not merely transcend the materiality of the surface, but by adopting a historical framework and a practice of retreat, made paintings that, corresponding to the essential feature of modernism, also aspired to transcend themselves as art.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Clement Greenberg, "Byzantine Parallels", *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1961] 1989), p. 169.

⁵⁷ Cf. "Modernism constitutes, above all, the feeling that the aesthetic can only fully be realized and embodied where it is something more than the aesthetic. But if you are willing to entertain this idea of an art that in its very inner movement seeks to transcend itself as art (as Adorno thought, and without it being particularly important to determine the direction of that self-transcendence, whether religious or political), then it becomes at least minimally clear that a philosophical aesthetics will always necessarily miss the fundamentals of modernist work or the modernist mode of production." Frederic Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity," *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 101.