

JACKSON POLLOCK'S INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY ART - SIMON HANTAÏ & ROBERT SMITHSON

*“the divine will as present spirit, **unfolding** as the actual shape and organization of the world.”*

Hegel, The Philosophy of Right

Simon Hantaï, in conversation with this writer, has declared that for him Pollock's decisive act was to bring the canvas down onto the floor, evoking a transition from the perpendicular to the horizontal axis, which reverses Freud's schema of transcendence from the state of Nature to cultural life. His response in 1960, four years after Pollock's death, was to invent the painting technique of 'pliage' or 'the folding method', which opened up the prospect of what would later become the 'Process' art movement.

With this technique of folding, the canvas symbolically becomes the topography of the material world. Where Pollock had projected himself onto the canvas, Hantaï, in 'the folding method', enters into it. Henceforth, the artist is, so to speak 'in' the real world, engaged with it at the level of material. The hand that makes the fold, symbolically manipulates reality. The artist is in a state of dynamic interaction with the world. All is destabilization and flux. Hantaï has expressed this involvement in material experience by stating that “our situation is impure”.

Hantaï invented the folding method as a new way of working with the technique of 'automatism' that the Abstract Expressionists had taken from Surrealism as a means of providing access to the unconscious mind. For Hantaï, this interest in automatism and the unconscious represented the possibility of a rupture with traditional cultural values. In the folding method, the will is over-ridden by a sovereign act of negation. The following question presents itself: “How to vanquish the aesthetic privilege of talent and art? How to render the exceptional banal?” The answer, thrown up by the folding method, is 'to paint without seeing’.

Hantai has stated that what particularly interested him in the American painting of the fifties was that it uncovered “what was really at stake in modern art, beyond aesthetic considerations, the non-formalist aspect.” With this interest in American art, we might wonder why he did not move to New York? It was not for reasons of solidarity with the painting then being practiced in Paris, that much is clear. Hantai has always been a solitary figure on the French art scene and has declared that the ‘Ecole de Paris-type’ painting that he found there was of no interest to him. However, Hantai had lived in Budapest through the struggle of the war and moved to Paris as an exile from Communism in 1948. It is tempting to suggest that for Hantai, post-war Europe offered the same scene of entropic breakdown that would shortly inspire a younger American artist, Robert Rauschenberg, to make expeditions around his native New Jersey and later the far western states of America.

Moreover, as Rauschenberg was to emphasize in his turn, Hantai always insisted on the need for an intellectual frame of reference in order to make meaningful art, and Paris remained at the center of the great modern intellectual tradition that totalitarianism had tried, unsuccessfully, to destroy: Artaud, Bataille, Kojève, Lacan, with the towering shadow of the disgraced Heidegger living in distant retirement. This tradition emanated from Hegel and, in defiance of the crass destruction of the twentieth century, founded itself on the role of the negation in modern thought.

With the passage of time, we can begin to understand that Robert Rauschenberg developed, in accord with Hantai’s position, though neither artist would have known of the other, what was perhaps the crucial response to Pollock, by an American artist, through integrating an explicitly philosophical frame of reference into his work. In his writings and interviews, on a number of occasions, Rauschenberg indicated that Pascal’s break with the mechanistic system of Descartes was his point of departure. He then sketched out the terrain of modern thought, from Hegel and Schopenhauer, to Marx and Freud, to more recent figures such as Bataille and Levi-Strauss, in order to explain what his art was about. Rauschenberg espoused a materialist and nominalist philosophical outlook, stating unequivocally that “There’s no order outside the order of the material” and that “Language is as primary as steel”. Combining these two positions in a memorable statement, he evoked, as had Hantai, the notion of ‘*impurity*’. He declared: “My work is impure; it is clogged with

matter. I'm for a weighty, ponderous art. There is no escape from matter. There is no escape from the physical nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are in a constant collision course. You might say that my work is like an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter." Can one conceive of a more eloquent and poignant formulation, in the aftermath of the fatal car crash that took Pollock's life in 1956, and almost in anticipation of his own untimely death in another accident in 1973?

Central to Smithson's thinking, as to that of Hantai, is the realization that a materialist outlook necessarily entailed the concept of negation. Speaking about his Site/Nonsite sculptures he stated that "There is a certain degree of unmaking in the pieces, rather than making; taking apart and reassembling. It is not so much a matter of creating something as de-creating, or denaturalizing, or de-differentiating, decomposing (...) My interest in the site was really a return to the origins of material, sort of a dematerialization of refined matter. Existence becomes a doubtful thing. You are presented with a non-world, or what I call a nonsite."

This sense that the Site/Nonsites have an impact on the viewer's existence leads Smithson to an acceptance of unconscious processes at play in the making of art. Once again, as with Hantai, it involves a confrontation with 'the ground'. "The existence of 'self' is what keeps everybody from confronting their fears about the ground they happen to be standing on. (...) When I get to a site that strikes the kind of timeless chord, I use it. The site selection is by chance. There is no willful choice. A site at zero degree, where the material strikes the mind, where absences become apparent, appeals to me, where the disintegrating of space and time seems very apparent. Sort of an end of selfhood ... the ego vanishes for a while."

Smithson spoke frequently of 'entropy' and he is viewed as one of the leading figures of the New York avant-garde to advocate abandonment of painting in the 1960's. He is cherished as one of the nemeses of 'high' culture. It may come as a surprise to be reminded, then, that he was an advocate of formal 'limits'. As usual, he was quite explicit on the subject. "All legitimate art deals with limits. Fraudulent art feels that it has no limits. The trick is to locate those elusive limits. You are always running against those limits, but somehow they never show themselves." And again, "I don't think you can escape

the primacy of the rectangle. I always see myself thrown back to the rectangle. That's where my things don't offer any kind of freedom in terms of endless vistas or infinite possibilities. There's no exit, no road to utopia, no great beyond in terms of exhibition space. I see it as an inevitability; of going towards the fringes, towards the broken, the entropic. But even that has limits (...) I'm not all that interested in the problems of form and anti-form, but in limits and how these limits destroy themselves and disappear."

Smithson, then, has the concept of the artist, or his ego, as located at a particular point. He sets out from that point towards the periphery, be it a physical periphery, or one of experience. He has the concept of a dialectical play between these two entities, the point and the periphery. As the point reaches the periphery, it becomes disoriented. One has the sense here that Smithson is pursuing the inner experience of Pollock's adventure, stripped down to a confrontation with the 'real'. It is as if he wants to incarnate Pollock's gesture by actually living the vulnerable, mesmerizing freedom of his all-over paint skeins.

Smithson has the concept that his art should invert the point and the periphery. With the Site/Nonsite works, he abandons the idea of placing his sculpture as an object in the landscape and instead brings the landscape into the sculpture. He explained it in the following way, addressing himself to the same experience that Hantaiï encountered in the folding method: "The site, in a sense, is the physical, raw reality – the earth or the ground that we are really not aware of (...) and instead of putting something on the landscape I decided it would be interesting to transfer the land indoors, to the non-site, which is an abstract container." The whole tension of the Site/Nonsites would then be for the viewer to figure out where he or she stands in relationship to both.

Looking back once more to Hantaiï, the artist has expressed his position during the 50's in the following manner: "I felt I had to make a break, on the one hand, between the painting that was being practiced at the time [a reference to the post-war Ecole de Paris] and, on the other, total chaos. In between these two extremes, I found the fold." It will be remarked, at this point, how close Hantaiï and Smithson are in outlook. With the folding method, Hantaiï has symbolically stepped into the real world, as Smithson will do literally in pursuit of the 'site', and his brush, loaded with pigment, explores a ground or terrain of

chaotic fragmentation in the expanse of folded canvas. Identity is disoriented and tends towards dissolution. Art must engage the chaos of the real world, but the two should not be confused. Art is separate from natural value. Once again, it is a question of limits. In a second phase, Hantai's canvas is opened up and the folds are smoothed out. A drastic detachment of form, together with a new kind of direct relationship to color, emerges. The folded canvas, what Smithson would define as the 'site', is returned to the context of the rectangle, by being unfolded and placed on the rigid stretcher, to become an abstract 'nonsite'. A process of dematerialization takes place in the finished painting. The ground, interchangeable in Pollock, experienced as an absence in Smithson, resurges inside the confines of Hantai's painting to become, in his mind, "the true subject of modern art".

© 1999 Paul Rodgers/9W Gallery