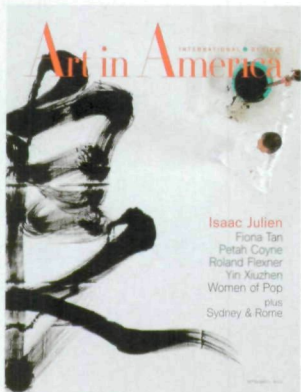


LETTERS TO THE EDITORS



MODERN VS. MODERNIST

To the Editors:

Last spring my colleague Paul Kasmin presented an exhibition of Simon Hantaï [1922-2008], who is rarely shown in New York. Some fine paintings were displayed and garnered enthusiastic reviews. A generally positive review by Saul Ostrow appeared in the September issue of *Art in America*. The exhibition might have gone without further comment, but there is an important story about Hantaï that has not been told in any of the coverage. Yet the account is relevant for the broader context of American and international art since World War II.

Ostrow remarks, correctly, that Hantaï rarely exhibited in the U.S. In his lifetime, he had two New York exhibitions at Pierre Matisse (1970, 1975), and one at André Emmerich (1982). Ostrow then, again accurately, states that Hantaï stubbornly refused subsequent offers to exhibit his work commercially until his death. The author does not explain, however, why Hantaï exhibited so rarely in America, nor what his objections were, post-1982, to all commercial exhibitions.

I can attest, due to my extensive exchanges with Hantaï during this period, that there are clear answers to these questions. The Pierre Matisse and André Emmerich exhibitions were organized, like many such

exhibitions, as business projects between galleries. The artist was not involved. Hantaï was particularly disinclined to ever again exhibit with Pierre Matisse because in conversation with him, the dealer had dismissed the late "Cut Outs" by his father, Henri Matisse. These works happened to be of acute interest to Hantaï. He was the kind of artist with whom, if agreement on fundamental esthetic and intellectual issues was lacking with anyone, no relationship could be possible. Emmerich Gallery specialized in the formalist—"modernist" or "Color Field"—school of abstract painting that Clement Greenberg promoted as the successor to the Abstract Expressionist movement. Hantaï had little regard for this art or for the "modernist" theories on which it was based.

A further problem existed for Hantaï. He was acutely aware that the inspiration and meaning of his work was completely separate from, and, indeed, opposed to, the formal precepts of "modernist" painting. In this regard, he took his stand beside Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. However, in none of his three commercial New York exhibitions was there a significant catalogue to do the job of explaining the difference between Hantaï and "modernism." This predicament was compounded by developments in the international art world of the 1980s. Andy Warhol had earlier declared that business was the best art, and everywhere in the '80s, commercial interests appeared to force esthetic and intellectual concerns into submission. Hantaï understood that the opportunity to introduce such esthetic and intellectual content had passed. Therefore, he tenaciously maintained the view that in the absence of a proper context, he would avoid commercial exhibition of his work. The artist decided to place his faith in posterity. My concern

is that for him, posterity has made a poor beginning.

With this background in mind, we read the closing sentence of Ostrow's *A.i.A.* review, in which he states that the accompanying catalogue of the Kasmin exhibition "does a fine job of integrating Hantaï's work into the context of late modernist painting in both Europe and the U.S." This statement, and, indeed, the catalogue itself, demonstrate a complete misunderstanding of the artist's work. Hantaï was *not* a "modernist" painter. The inspiration for his work was *not* "formalist." Hantaï was a contemporary "modern" painter. His painting maintains a clear distinction between the tradition of "modern" art, vital to the present day, and a circumscribed "modernist" theory and practice of abstract painting, which appeared at midcentury. Yet, 50 years later, modern abstract painting is still routinely misrepresented by "formalist" and "modernist" criticism.

Paul Rodgers
New York

SAUL OSTROW REPLIES:

I do not interpret the discourse of late modernist painting as Paul Rodgers does, or as he proposes Hantaï did. Indeed, I set aside the tendency to equate Greenberg's formalism with the postwar "modernist" enterprise as a whole. My understanding of the modernists lies with their intent to emancipate thought, esthetics and creativity from the bonds of history and taste, and the arbitrary order those structures impose on art and everyday life. Modernist esthetics and formalism can thus be viewed as critical discourses used to articulate the relevant qualities of art and its forms. From this perspective, modernism was not guided by any fixed strategy, but rather was a responsive practice that revised art by a multitude of competing means.

If I'm reading Rodgers cor-

rectly, then Hantaï sought to have his work understood in the context of this latter practice, rather than the standardized ones that emerged in the Cold War period. This is understandable in that Hantaï was part of the pre-WWII generation, and his goals and ambitions were formed in response to Surrealism and l'Informel. Hantaï wished to supersede the ideologies and goals that circumscribed him as an artist emerging in the '40s and '50s. His integration into the story of late modernist painting offers us, in the face of Greenberg's account, an alternative understanding of formalism and the modernist project. Reciprocally, the reemergence of Hantaï's work as part of the contemporary discourse is in keeping with the revisionist views growing among a number of curators, critics and historians, offering a corrective rather than an act by which he and his achievements come to be misrepresented.

CORRECTIONS

Sept. '10, p. 114 "Reconfiguring Pop" incorrectly referred to the art historian Kalliope Minioudaki as an artist, and the artist Letty Eisenhauer as "late" (she is alive and well).

Oct. '10, p. 69 In Robert Storr's "Reading Richter" the date in the title of Gerhard Richter's *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962-1993*, was mistakenly given as "1962-63." The newer book *Gerhard Richter: Writings 1961-2007*, therefore, covers an additional 15 years, not 45.

Oct. '10, p. 216 A photo caption for the cover of *Avalanche 6* ["Artworld"], should have read 1972, not 1977.

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