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**Dictionary of Supports/Surfaces
(1967 – 1972)**

In memory of Jean Hommais

PREFACE

Although the influence of Supports/Surfaces continued into the early 80s, I have deliberately narrowed the scope of this dictionary to the period between 1967 and 1972. These years include the early days of the group, with the decisive meeting of Dezeuze, Saytour and Viallat in 1967, followed by the manifesto exhibition in 1970 in Paris, up to 1972, when Bioulès and Dezeuze resigned, and after which the group, or what was left of it, stopped exhibiting.

In fact, in discussing the period of time during which Supports/Surfaces occupied the center of the French art scene one would have to say that it lasted a decade.

The 80s saw the beginnings of neo-expressionism and “Free figuration,” with a new generation defining itself in opposition to its predecessors, against what it experienced as “domination.”

From then on, the Supports/Surfaces adventure has been buried in the collective unconsciousness until today.

I have only included those artists from this now legendary group who were represented at the major retrospective at the Musée d’art moderne de Saint-Étienne in 1991: André-Pierre Arnal, Vincent Bioulès, Louis Cane, Marc Devade, Daniel Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, Toni Grand, Bernard Pagès, Jean-Pierre Pincemin, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi, and Claude Viallat.

However, I have not chosen to have entries for proper names (from this group or any other), as they would have required biographical notes, which could provide material for a second volume.

The premature decease of my collaborator, Jean Hommais, prevented him from finishing the sections he had chosen with his customary enthusiasm, so I completed the drafts that he did not have time to finish.

From militancy to half-hearted support: how does one evaluate the level of involvement of the different participants in the Supports/Surfaces movement?

I have not answered this question in this short dictionary. However, politico-philosophical questions needed to be treated directly, in that they were, aside from the artists’ personal practices, genuine concerns for some of us. In any case, they crucially reflect this period of time.

Acrylic

For the painters of Supports/Surfaces, acrylic paint was generally used and associated with unstretched canvas. It allowed new pictorial effects because it required no primer and could be applied directly onto the canvas (whereas oil paint needs prior preparation), and because it was used as “dye,” which could bleed through the fabric and produce a colored effect on the reverse side. In this way the canvas could be hung in the center of a room, and the public could see both sides by walking around it.

In Viallat’s case, acrylic paint came in industrial-sized cans rather than tubes. He used the acrylic “base” as a way of sticking various pieces of fabric together. Acrylic also dried quickly and could cover large surfaces. Rather than the method of superimposing pictorial layers commonly used in classical art, juxtaposition of colors was practiced.

Action Committees

During the May '68 events, many were those who went to the occupied Sorbonne to offer their services to the student cause. There were so many that it became materially impossible to share out assignments and volunteer missions. In the cultural field, students who had partly gathered under the leadership of Lapassade asked all the applicants to go back to their neighborhoods to create cultural action committees, which would propagate the good news of the "revolution," or occupy their workplace and devote themselves to "Agitprop," while maintaining their specificity as cultural actors.

Among the establishment, these action committees reawakened the specter of the Soviets, but under a new guise: "cultural Soviets."

Anarchy

The objective of anarchy is the more or less rapid dissolution of the State. From the Marxist point of view, this dissolution is seen as slow, progressive and complex, hence the notion of “decline” of the State, liable to require several stages of revolution. May ‘68 was a political miracle, in that the State virtually disappeared for several days. This explains the incredible freedom of that spring, during which citizens no longer felt the moral and political weight of the State system – hence the joy and pleasure of communicating in the unalloyed present.

Could the Maoist movement be considered anarchist? Inasmuch as the proletarian Left did not rule out Stalin, the answer is no. Among the Maoists at the review *Tel Quel* and in the Supports/Surfaces group, anti-Stalinist criticism was so strong that it might be said that they were pro-anarchist.

During demonstrations in France, the black flags that floated above the small number of historical anarchists also attracted a group of unaffiliated people who wanted to march with the protesters. For example, the March 22nd 1968 movement recruited all these “orphans” and loosely organized small groups around Cohn-Bendit, whom Marchais insultingly branded a “German anarchist” in an editorial for the newspaper *L’Humanité*.

Anthropology

Lévi-Strauss set the tone with his famous “Introduction to Structural Anthropology,” which used Saussure’s linguistics as a method.

His impact on artistic practices was obvious. In the pictorial field, and as early as 1967, the stretcher series (Dezeuze) turned the Duchampian readymade into an anthropological object, redefining new links with different cultures and with the history of art.

The three-dimensional status of the object was in opposition to the flat painting of the formalists in the group, like Devade or Bioulès, who never wished to produce objects, considered by them as avatars, redolent of the sulfurous Duchamp.

But what was left of Duchamp, who only saw the readymade within the context of the museum? Nothing, really, in that the transformation brought about by Supports/Surfaces moved towards assimilating the Duchampian object with an object linked to history painting. This genre, which flourished in the 19th century, resurfaced during the 20th in the unexpected form of an anthropological approach shared by Dezeuze, Saytour and Viallat.

Archaeology

Influenced by the interest taken by the social sciences and the epistemology of the time in the why and how of Western civilization, Supports/Surfaces looked into what makes up the present, perhaps even more than into the present itself. In its opposition to an avant-garde art that thrived on current affairs and sociology, the group turned towards a certain number of traditional practices. Accused of ruralism because it found archaeological elements more easily in the provinces than in large cities, in some cases it started anthropological inventories (see, in particular, Saytour, Viallat, Pagès, and Grand). Dezeuze, having studied pre-Columbian cultures, provided an extra-national reflection and would go so far as a type of history painting in the late 80s – not purely event-driven, as in the 19th century, but “structural” and Dumézilian, while prehistory was a source of inspiration for Viallat, in the wake of the anthropologist, Leroi-Gourhan.

It is no more absurd to take into account the archaeological sediment that art rests on, than to tell the autobiographical narratives prevalent from the 70s on, or to fasten onto new technologies.

Arte Povera

The Italian Arte Povera movement and Supports/Surfaces are artistic twins, except for the fact that Supports/Surfaces was restricted by American formalism, which at once safeguarded and limited it.

Arte Povera's installations and corresponding manipulations of raw materials signaled the death of painting, which Supports/Surfaces never affirmed.

In Arte Povera, the artist became the scenographer of elementary aspects of matter. Hence a certain romanticism and a poetic approach tending toward the baroque.

Avant-garde

The fact that more and more movements (literary, musical, pictorial) proclaimed themselves “avant-garde” was a sign that the notion was wearing out. From 1970 on, avant-gardism was criticized as a dated heritage from the early 20th century (Dezeuze, D., “Studio notes, A Look at “Avant-gardism,” 1969, in *Textes, entretiens, poèmes, 1967-2008*, Beaux-Arts de Paris, p.59). Bataille’s text “La vieille taupe” (published by the review *Tel Quel*) profoundly criticizes romantic avant-gardes. One could say that at a certain point the term was replaced by the word “experimental,” then gradually abandoned, because the historical context was no longer in favor of a dynamics of cultural minorities. The latter cut themselves off from the social body, either because they moved forward too fast, or because the social body had yielded to renewed state order.

Backlash

This term refers to the decline in student protest movements and the end of labor strikes after the spring of 1968.

The most politicized far-left movements remained very active, and the powers that be felt the need to curb them quickly. A large part of the working class also remained unsettled, in spite of the Grenelle agreements. Faced with this backlash, a significant portion of protesters developed a sudden taste for organization to resist the government taking back control.

On a very modest scale, one can be reminded of the organizational obsession that took over revolutionary movements after the failure of the Commune.

BMPT
(Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni)

The importance of this Franco-Swiss group's hygienic "tabula rasa" is now fully recognized. But in considering pictorial space as alienated and non-productive, BMPT conformed to anti-art movements.

Its ephemeral action did not enable it to establish repetition (its fundamental notion) other than through simple negation. Repetitiveness would nonetheless particularly influence Viallat, who was personally acquainted with the members of this group.

Body Art

An artistic practice involving the artist's body, in an often sadomasochistic, or simply sociological, relationship. The French version of the movement avoided the baroque goriness of the Viennese Actionists and used video to record its performances, as well as photography for documentary purposes.

Bricolage

Pejorative definition applied to any work of art that did not fit within the framework of painting or the logic of “Greenbergian” formalism. Several artists (Dezeuze, Saytour, Valensi, Viallat) resisted this intimidation by drawing inspiration from prehistory and anthropology. Lévi-Strauss wrote on the subject of bricolage (cf. *The Savage Mind*, 1962).

Now that Braque and Picasso’s paper cut-outs and assemblages have been accepted as part of the tradition in art, the notion of bricolage has naturally been “integrated” into contemporary pictorial practices.

Cézannian Break

“Supports/Surfaces: We’ll start from Cézanne” – such was the title of the interview that Cane, Dezeuze, and Devade gave to the review *arTitudes* in 1972. Cézanne seemed to be the breaking point between the pictorial past and modern art; evidence of this being his enduring posterity, which led to abstraction – the path chosen by Supports/Surfaces artists.

Cézanne took stock of Impressionism, and described himself as “the primitive of a new art.” Cézanne’s touch is at once sensual, subjective and analytical. It addresses both space and a depiction. This space became an object of pictorial speculation, which formed the arborescence of the avant-gardes that identified with him (Cubism, Post-Cubism, Constructivism, etc.).

China

Although intimately linked, two different orientations must be distinguished: one focuses on ancient China, and the other on modern China. The latter is that of the Cultural Revolution led by Mao from the 1960s on – a revolution that seemed a vital way of renewing hidebound “Brejnevian” Soviet-style communism.

Putting their faith in a Chinese Maoism that was in a state of flux, French militants returned to “basic” class struggle before and after 1968. In intellectual circles, particularly around Sollers, there was a tendency favoring this “red” orient that earned the *Tel Quel* team a trip to Beijing.

But Sollers had been interested in China for a long time. He peppered his texts with ideograms, following the examples of Segalen and Pound, delving deeper into the ancient materialism of this multiseular civilization.

In fact, *Tel Quel*'s Maoist-leaning wing considered it a “package,” in which ancient China and Maoist China were mingled. This was also true for the review *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*, which, as early as its first issues, displayed diligent sinophilia, from the latest avatars of the Cultural Revolution to the paintbrush techniques of the Tang era.

Cane, Devade, and Dezeuze, as visual artists, participated in a kind of aesthetic reverie of timeless China. This dream of China – possible because of distance – intersected with their activism and was a source of original works. The ideogram that means “painting,” identical to that of the “cultivated field,” was used by Devade in a 1968 painting that evoked both a painting by Bishop and a cross-shaped Dezeuze *Châssis [Stretcher]*. Dezeuze would realize his “Chinese dream” in the series *Gazes découpées et peintes [Cut-out and painted gauzes]*, while Cane created the *Sol/Mur [Floor/Wall]* pieces, suggestive of imperial palace doors.

As Devade was on the editorial board of the review *Tel Quel*, he was the Supports/Surfaces member who was the most intensely committed to the Chinese question. Pleyne wrote these few lines in the catalogue of Devade's retrospective:

“This questioning about the history of philosophy led a certain number of French intellectuals to take into very serious consideration a culture that had done without the history of Western metaphysics. Now, only one civilization in the history of the world – and a great civilization for that matter – forewent Western metaphysics, and that one is Chinese. So this profound interest in China focuses on the aspects of Chinese culture that do not partake of the metaphysical rationalism that dominates the West. So it is a way of escaping Platonic determinism, as well as Descartes' French rationalism.”

Color

Supports/Surfaces used color to the point where it made it the axis of its pictorial action. Devade theorized it. Viallat developed an approach to color that enabled him to overcome the question of the repetitive imprint central to his earlier paintings.

The existence of highly diluted acrylic paint enables color to seep through the weave of the canvas. It offers a rich range of tones, and can be used as dye, as a continuation of Dezeuze's work with walnut stain.

The fluidity of dye enables it to soak and penetrate into the medium without the need for protective layers of primer. Devade had a colored India ink period, while others used spray paint (Cane). This use of paint as dye offered a way of avoiding the solid color areas of American "post-painterly painting." Supports/Surfaces' chromatic painting often appears as an act of faith (Devade).

When it comes to sculpture, Pagès fully impregnated his volumes with dye, and reconnected with the technique of the polychromatic "sgraffito."

It is interesting to note that Supports/Surfaces never produced any monochromatic work. Its members saw it as a dead end, despite the international proliferation of monochromes, which were declared to be the ultimate horizon of painting.

Conceptual art

According to Kosuth, one of the founders of this movement, a work of art is a tautology, in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention. The artist declares that such a work of art "is" art, which amounts to saying that it is a "definition of art." Therefore, that it should be art is true *a priori*. What characterizes classical aesthetics is the idea that the conception of a work of art is already in the artist's mind. But this idea is also omnipresent in Duchamp's readymades as a representation of pure intention.

Conceptual art as a movement was defended by the Templon Gallery in Paris, simultaneously with the British movement "Art Language," but it never really took root in France. It might be that typically Anglo-American analytical philosophy – the driving force of conceptual art – had a role in the "continental" artists' relative incomprehension of this movement.

Contradiction

One of the main statements of materialism can be formulated according to the notion of contradiction. “Dialectics in the proper sense is the study of contradiction in the very essence of objects” (Lenin, *Summary of Hegel’s Dialectics*, 1904). “Dialectics is the teaching which shows how opposites can be and how they happen to be (how they become) identical – under which conditions they are identical, transforming themselves into one another –, why the human mind should take these opposites not as dead or rigid, but as living, conditional and mobile, transforming themselves into one another” (ibid.) “Contradiction is universal and absolute; it is present from beginning to end in the process of development of all things and phenomena, and permeates every process from beginning to end.” (Mao Zedong, *On Contradiction*, 1937).

Any “identity” is determined by the concrete conditions of struggle and by the principle that “one divides into two.” Reciprocally, opposites cannot exist separately without one another. In given conditions, there can be an identity of opposites. “The identity of opposites can only be obtained in given conditions, which is why identity is conditional, relative [...] The struggle of opposites exists everywhere without exception, which is why it is unconditional, absolute” (Mao Zedong). Nature and history cannot be reduced to a single and unified principle, which would put an end to contradictions and interrupt its transformation process.

Critical discourse

Taking charge of one's own critical discourse – a distant echo of the slogan “Relying on one's own strengths” – was a necessity for artists. The academic context of art criticism had not yet taken the effects of the “structuralist revolution” into account, thus compelling players of the art scene to speak up for themselves.

Few artists had taken in the full extent of the progress in some areas of human sciences. Only sociology seemed widely accessible and, as a matter of fact, enjoyed significant success, especially through the use of photography.

More specifically, Dezeuze and Devade worked on texts such as those of Lévi-Strauss, Althusser or Lacan, trying to include them in their pictorial work. But the “structuralist corpus” proved extremely complex for young artists, who mostly came from art schools where the humanities were not taught. Supports/Surfaces was the first movement to create a new atmosphere centered on human sciences and the new “toolboxes” they provided.

Cultural front

On Sollers' suggestion, an attempt at a joint front was made in 1971, combining the reviews *Cinéthique*, *Promesses*, and *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* (i.e. cinema, literature and art) in order to take a strategic step away from the cultural bodies of the French Communist Party, particularly the review *La Nouvelle Critique*, which organized ecumenical symposiums.

A debate was held in 1971 around the Supports/Surfaces exhibition at the theater of the Cité universitaire internationale in Paris, in the presence of the three new reviews. However, the unifying project was later abandoned, and the review *Cinéthique* quit the June 1971 movement (See entry "Movement of June 1971").

Cultural Revolution

It was all a matter of power in China, with unexpected twists and turns in the political field. Mao, who owed his 1948 revolution to peasants, wanted to make them the heroes of the future. In terms of territorial planning, this meant that the countryside was not to be deserted in favor of the cities, or suffer a massive rural exodus to coastal regions, as is the case nowadays.

From the perspective of individual freedom, the Cultural Revolution was a disaster. Millions of people were arrested and sent to farm the land. The spheres of private and public life were confused to the detriment of the former, in a state of complete anarchy.

The revolution of mentalities was carried out with inconceivable brutality, and never achieved. How, indeed, can the century-old idea of the Confucian family be uprooted?

Seen from afar, the Chinese Cultural Revolution seemed like an alternative to the ossification of Soviet Marxism. There was very little information. We were not aware of the different stages of the process, which lasted several years and ended in civil war and wide-scale political crimes.

Dandyism

The materialistic dandy of the early 1970s was close to the “radical chic” of the following years. He read Lévi-Strauss and Marx and went to see Godard movies. He had an in-depth knowledge of Freud’s sexual theory, but his practice of it wasn’t always on par. He got up every morning with an “epistemological break” plan for the day – a kind of daily philosophical good deed.

Convinced that the old world was behind him, he was a passionate avant-gardist in every field and sought emancipation from the bourgeois milieu. He made friends with the toughest factions of the proletarian militancy, but he was too soft to enroll on their side because of his deep-rooted dread of violence.

He subscribed to *Tel Quel* and *Change*. He bought *Idiot international* at the newsstand. He wore flares and often had long hair and a beard.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction does not claim to be a permanently closed system, but rather a questioning one. It does not provide a conclusion, but instead opens up possibilities in terms of analytical thought. It is interested in processes as much as finished products, and thereby deals with fundamental patterns: base/surface, essence/accident, top/bottom, horizontal/vertical, back/front. Deconstruction opens up a possible space with other disciplines: philosophy, politics, literature, ethnology, etc. It achieves this not by establishing a domination of one over the other, but rather by emphasizing the specificity of each one, particularly what points to the practices of the artists in the group.

One could say that in 1970 Supports/Surfaces anticipated the triumph of 1980s “deconstructivist” architecture. However, much as the convergence between architects (Tschumi or Eisenman, for instance) and Derrida would prove fertile, it seems that Derrida and Supports/Surfaces did not find a meeting point in 1970.

The destruction of metaphysics, which was the true background for Derridian deconstruction, could have identified with the group’s militant materialism, but it never did.

That being said, Supports/Surfaces is often described, especially in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, as a movement of “deconstruction.”

Denomination

Like any name, Supports/Surfaces was the result of a shortcut, and the source of possible misunderstanding. Bioulès came up with the appellation, which was only approved by a few artists, but would nonetheless go down in history at the A.R.C. exhibition in Paris in September 1970. One must bear in mind that “Pour un programme théorique pictural” [For a Theoretical Program of Painting], written by Dezeuze and Cane, inspired the movement’s name. Published in May 1970, the essay focuses on the question of the medium (“support”) and the surface. Few observers mention that the group’s generic name is based on this article, a name that summarizes and caricatures it. The title became plural: Support-Surface was switched to Supports/Surfaces, with a / separating both terms, at a time when dialectics was heavily influential.

The name was very expressive of the group’s stances, and was easy to remember, although the more complex term of “analytical abstraction,” might have been more fitting. It should be noted that the name Supports/Surfaces was not invented by a critic, as was the case for all prior pictorial movements.

Dialectics

Dialectics is not only a process, but also a means to represent matter. It is not an abstraction per se, an aspect taken from nature, to be considered independently from it. “One of the basic principles of dialectics is that there is no such thing as abstract truth; truth is always concrete.” (Lenin).

The direct opposite of dialectics is metaphysics, which represents definite entities, eternal, self-sufficient and unchangeable objects, and which reflects them as isolated aspects, detached from one another – in other words, abstractions. The metaphysical conception of matter is therefore ahistorical and unilateral. It is a mechanical representation of nature, seen uniquely as an aggregate, an arrangement of parts or independent, inalterable qualities. Belonging to idealism, metaphysical materialism turns nature into an idea.

Drawing

The practice of drawing posed the question of the reason for drawing, which in turn echoed the question of writing and its set of problems, as raised by the philosopher Derrida. The creator's physical involvement both in drawing and writing, the interest in Chinese ideograms (the foundation of classic Chinese painting being calligraphy), the fact that voice and vocal respiration were paramount (according to Derrida's theory) in the history of Western idealism: all of these encompass the question of drawing. "Spiritus" pertained to the spiritual in philosophy, whereas "graphein," on the other hand, applied to materialism. Consequently the practice of drawing seemed fully "materialistic," and could therefore play a modest part in the redefinition of a materialistic conception of the world. This is Dezeuze's position, but it remains isolated.

What is the importance of color? Color was the preferred option of the painters of the group and of its circle of influence. Should it be opposed to drawing, as in the academic debates of the 17th and 18th centuries? Chromatism prevailed overwhelmingly over the question of drawing in the context of the domination of American color-field painting. So the debate was never opened.

Duration

The gestation of the Supports/Surfaces group started in 1966-1967 at the "Impact 1" exhibition at the Musée de Céret, in which many non-Supports/Surfaces artists also participated. However, only in 1967 did Dezeuze, Saytour, and Viallat come together for a definite shared project.

The group itself lasted from 1970 to 1972. Although it disbanded, the briefness of its existence would not dampen the artistic fortune of the movement, the ideas, precepts, and practices of which would dominate the whole 1970s decade, from the foundation of the theory to the appearance of "Free Figuration" in the early 1980s.

The question is to know whether Supports/Surfaces constitutes the last avant-garde painting movement in France. The issue remains unsettled, but it should be noted that the idea of the end of the avant-gardes reached its climax with an artistic reaction prefiguring postmodernism and directed essentially against Supports/Surfaces that appeared in the early 1980s; that is, neo-expressionism and "Free Figuration." It was the end of ideologies, a shift away from practices that critically analyze painting and society to an art devoid of any theoretical discipline, and very often sunk in individualistic pathos.

The second half of the 1960s was dominated by the "death of painting," as demonstrated by the "New Realists," whose works made use of objects salvaged from contemporary industrial production. This "death" was confirmed by the group BMPT: "We are not painters (...) Painting, until proven otherwise, is by nature objectively reactionary." (Paris Biennale, 1967).

One hypothesis is that the end of the Supports/Surfaces movement coincided with the 1980s, which "experienced the conservative revolution, which was not a break with the 'Trente Glorieuses,' but the end of socialist states," as the philosopher Alain Badiou wrote. François Cusset had already expressed himself accurately on this question: "The previous period banked on its riotous youth, resolved as it was to fight the Gaullist state and iniquitous capitalism, and to experience the present as intensely as possible. The 1980s banked on serious grown-up children, swaddled in their blazers, gravely captivated by stock exchange prices (...) The transition was made from revolution to the so-called 'rule of law,' from anti-capitalism to liberalism, from political secession to antiracist morality, and from the avant-gardes of creation to an 'anything goes' cultural kitsch."

Dustbins of history

Being thrown into a dustbin of history was equivalent to medieval excommunication. It was the fate of any deviationist or dissenter in the communist venture. Mimicking the Russian Revolution, Supports/Surfaces artists mutually threatened to throw each other into this kind of existential void. It can be called ideological rivalry: the person who came up with the best analysis of the situation would survive by creating the right line. On the other hand, an incorrect analysis, because it had no connection with reality, was sure to cause the undoing of its promoter.

At one point (1969-1972), it appeared that he who was more “left-wing” than his neighbor had moved further away from “bourgeois” ideological positions. Hence the one-upmanship in the group, which consisted in bypassing all the other artists on the left in order to claim being the sole bearer of truth. This overbidding led the extreme Left of the movement to fall all by itself into these famous “dustbins”, leaving the way for more moderate, social democratic forces.

Exhibition sites 1967-1974

Antibes – the Fortress, Antibes
Aix-la-Chapelle – Neue Galerie, Sammlung Ludwig
Anfo, Italy – outdoor
Aubais – outdoor
Authion (Summit) – outdoor
Bordeaux – Sigma 5, Palais de la Bourse, CAPC
Brussels – Baronian Gallery
Céret – Musée de Céret
Coaraze – outdoor
Contes – outdoor
Chambéry – Musée d’art et d’histoire
Dallas – Museum of Fine Art
Düsseldorf – La Bertesca Gallery
Genoa – La Bertesca Gallery
Le Boulou – outdoor
Le Havre – Musée de la Ville du Havre
Los Angeles – Museum of Fine Arts
Lucerne – Lucerne Kunstmuseum
Lyon – Gallery Guillaumont and Guinochet
Maguelone – outdoor
Milan – F. Lambert Gallery,
 D. Templon Gallery
Montpellier – “100 artistes dans la Ville,” ABC Productions
Nice – Théâtre de Nice
Pasadena – Museum of Art
Paris – 6th and 7th Biennales,
 École spéciale d’architecture,
 Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris,
 Théâtre de la Cité universitaire,
 Grand Palais,
 Gallery du Haut-Pavé,
 Fournier Gallery,
 Givaudan Gallery,
 Lambert Gallery,
 Templon Gallery,
 Piltzer Gallery
Quebec – outside, on the Ottawa River
Rennes – Maison de la Culture
Saint-Étienne – Musée d’art et d’industrie
Saint-Paul-de-Vence – De la Salle Gallery

Fetishism

For Greenberg, the autonomy of a painting stems from the capacity to forget its physical qualities. “Otherwise, he says, [the painting] becomes, at best, sculpture; at worst, a mere object.”

Was it a passionate interest in the Duchampian gesture that led the majority of Supports/Surfaces artists to make objects? In this case, and in the direct lineage of New Realism, they ran the risk of drifting towards fetishism, a symbolical overvaluation of the object.

But contrary to New Realism, Supports/Surfaces painters only made a few forays in this direction, without really committing to it. In fact, their objects were always conceived in relationship with painting, and regulated by intrinsic painting-related issues. The aspiration to make painting an “object of knowledge” draws it as far as possible from “real objects” and from fetishist reification.

For Devade, who stuck to Greenberg’s positions, what tended toward the object was unacceptable in regard to a transcending essence of painting. (See further comments on this division in the entry “pictoriality”). But, in fact, most Supports/Surfaces artists managed to use both approaches without favoring the object, there being a kind of pictorial superego for them, outweighing, so to speak, “fetishist” tendencies.

Folding

The action of folding the canvas was Hantai's inaugural gesture: folding, then painting, and unfolding as the final stage of the process. Random folding was not taken up by the next generation. Parmentier folded along a perfectly horizontal line, painted, then unfolded, leaving a wide, white stripe between the colored sections. Saytour folded tablecloths and made very large accordion pleats, and Arnal followed a strong geometric line in his first folded works.

In any case, folding was a way of retaining white or colored areas, and of developing unexpected surfaces, involving the use of unstretched canvas.

Format

The question of format has been essential since Pollock introduced the oversized “American” format. It is said that he used these large formats to make it more complicated to fit them onto museum walls. Now the situation has changed, and venues designed to exhibit large formats have been built. No artist used the “American” format in France in 1967. However, for practical reasons, unstretched canvas could be painted directly on the floor, and the work folded to be taken out of the studio and transported, thus paving the way for large formats, achievable even in small spaces.

Dezeuze’s 1968-69 *Extensibles* [*Extendables*] are works that effectively contain all possible formats, in that they are like pantographs, stretching out horizontally and contracting vertically. The classic formats, usually codified as Landscape, Portrait and Seascape, are thus treated at the same time.

French Communist Party

Some members of Supports/Surfaces enrolled in the party (Cane, Dezeuze, Devade), but quickly exited it on its left. Indeed, it seemed impossible to transform this “sieve” of a party, which never really took stock of what was happening.

The group Supports/Surfaces was led to take very similar positions to those of the communists. Between its leftist wing and its social-democrat quagmire, collective agreement took place on a crypto-communist platform. This only ensured a short-lived bond within the group, and caused overall bitter dissatisfaction.

Gang of Four

The radicalism of the leaders of the last phase of the Great Cultural Revolution in China, up until its final collapse, undoubtedly influenced French Maoism.

Reviews such as *Tel Quel* and *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* in Paris, followed suit enthusiastically, up to the aborted campaign against Confucius. In China, the initial anti-mandarinism ended up exercising true political police control. The whole of Chinese society rejected this ultra-Leftist drift, which wanted to force it to revolutionize its foundations.

Gaullism

Gaullism was as much an atmosphere as an ideology, in that it permeated French society, unchecked by any strong opposition that might have counterbalanced its domination.

Gaullism is, first and foremost, a great man, surrounded by a core of former members of the resistance, but it drowned in a quagmire of opportunistic wheeler-dealers.

The evolution of social attitudes made no progress whatsoever under the Victorian supervision of “Aunt Yvonne” – the president’s wife’s nickname. The young generations, rock and roll or anti-establishment, wanted to break this glaciation and managed to do so in the spring of 1968, heralding a thaw. But later on and despite themselves, there was a reconstitution of a form of French-style capitalism much more modernistic and technocratic than its predecessor.

Go (board game)

This Sino-Japanese game was in fashion in the 1970s, with the Parisian bookstore L'impensé radical becoming its main promoter. It replaced chess, and its rules were used to try to understand the strategies of Sun Tzu and Mao Zedong.

Green tracts

Green tracts, mimeographed on green paper, criticized the mandarin authorities in the art world, following the example of the “dazibao” of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. They were not posted up, but simply handed out in strategic places – galleries, museums, and various institutions. They were written in a hurry, with as many signatures as possible from Supports/Surfaces artists. But the artists were all over the place and hard to reach – some didn’t even own a telephone.

For non-Parisians, the contents of these tracts would seem imposed, and yet they hit home in times of unusual polemic tension. A dozen different ones would be produced between 1970 and 1972, most of them written by Devade.

Hand

A considerable amount was written about this term. It is true that, opposed to the industrial fabrication of Minimal Art, the emphasis on “the hand” stood out against the dominant trend of the times, and pointed to a sensitivity to both primitive and third worlds.

This was long before the cyber revolution, laying waste to an immense past, where manual intelligence had enabled mankind to shape the world to its measure.

But perhaps it is precisely with the disappearance of “the hand” that its history can be related.

Supports/Surfaces and its circle of influence pondered the eye-hand relationship in the pictorial tradition, not in the sense of its weakening, but rather through its visible accentuation in the practice of each artist. Manipulation, in the strict meaning of the term, would find confirmation in the Greek notion of *Metis*, or technical intelligence – the subject of a book by D tienne and Vernant (1974), and a future point of reference for some of the group’s artists.

I Ching

This divinatory practice uses a superimposition of broken or solid lines (Yin/Yang) to produce a series of figures (64 in total), which show variations in the course of events. It dates back to ancient China, and its commentaries were compiled in the *Book of Changes*. Consulting the I Ching became an increasingly popular trend in the 1970s, well beyond Sinophile circles.

Imprint

It seems that Viallat's idea for imprints might have been inspired by Arman's office stamps on paper. Cane, for his part, had large stamps made, either blank or bearing the message "Louis Cane, Artiste Peintre," which he exhibited several times in Paris. Saytour made subtractive imprints with his solarizations (tiles placed on canvas, then removed after being exposed to the sun).

Pollock's influence is felt in this taste for prints. In order to be painted, the canvas had to be laid out flat on the floor or on a table and pressed, using all the weight of the artist's body, so that the imprint would "set" properly. The pressure responded to the horizontality of the canvas.

Repetition was a key concept. As in the early days of printing, multiple copies of an imprint, once it was inked, could be reproduced.

Horizontality, physical weight, seriality – such were the necessary postulates of 1970s imprints.

In Situ

This term, in use since Roman Antiquity, was advocated by Buren as from 1969-70 to signify that the location of the work of art was more important than the piece itself or, in other words, that the context prevailed over the intrinsic content of the painting.

The content, reduced to its simplest expression (stripes) made way for a contextualization that was increasingly linked to the surrounding architecture.

Duchamp's influence is clear, in that what brings meaning to the readymade is the context of the museum. The urinal can only be differentiated from other urinals through the conditions in which it is shown and of its situation in regards to other works of art. Although the term *in situ* would quickly become fashionable, it would also lead to various excesses, the main ones being spectacular installations and the reactivation of cultural venues.

In situ became a way of embellishing institutions eager to be enhanced by the artists themselves, and appeared as one of the forms of contemporary academism.

Installation

Cane and Dezeuze were interested in the notion of wall/floor, which was a first step in situating painting outside its privileged link with the wall. Dezeuze discussed the specular stage and the mirror position of painting in several texts and continued this analysis through his artistic practice (*Ladders* half-unrolled onto the floor). Other artists (Viallat, Saytour, Grand and Pagès) simply occupied the floor, without taking other architectural elements into consideration.

Exhibitions in theaters (at the Cité universitaire in Paris, then in Nice) meant that works shown on the stage could only be hung from the ceiling (with the works falling vertically towards the floor without any wall support).

Other outdoor exhibitions made different spatial combinations possible. The experiments in Coaraze (1969) and several sites in the south of France ("Summer 1970") brought together artistic works and the topography of their surroundings.

Freeing the canvas from the stretcher enabled it to leave the wall and, at the same time, be confronted with the elements such as beaches (Dezeuze, Saytour, Viallat, Valensi), water or snow (Dolla), but the outdoor installations never fell into the category of Land Art.

The imperatives of the architecture of galleries, which began conforming with the conventions of the "White Cube," forced artists to think up new ways of exhibiting that would circumvent or criticize this type of architecture (cf. Dezeuze's *Gazes découpées et peintes* [*Cut-out and painted gauzes*]).

June '71 Movement

A droll movement of adults indulging in school-boy pranks. The fact remains that its backdrop was the Communist Party, the “big bad wolf,” which was expected to make short work of this handful of Mao-defiant intellectuals. The coalition of the left became the political horizon of the French Communist Party and, consequently, the establishing of alliances which necessitated either integrating or ostracizing naysayers. To escape these alternatives, the review *Tel Quel* went its own way, pulling *Peinture*, *cahiers théoriques*, and other publications, in its wake.

Kinetic art

Kinetic art, a rationalist and technological movement, comprises a great number of artists. It has inherited the optimism of Futurism, but without its prophetic aspect.

Kinetic art takes an interest in the public space and flirts with interior design. It introduces movement and light, and is supported by the Denise René Gallery, as well as national and international public commissions.

Maoism

In those days, in France, there were two different types of Maoism: one followed by “workerist” militants, the other by a certain intelligentsia.

The first type sought contact with the proletariat, which proved complicated because traditional trade unions opposed it. The representatives of this type of Maoism were often found in the street and outside factories, selling the newspaper “*La Cause du Peuple*” and handing out free brochures from the Editions de Pékin. They equally disapproved of the bourgeoisie (which was often their own social background) and French Communist Party revisionists. The figures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao chaired in their pantheon.

The second type of Maoist had understood the motives of the G. P. C. R. (Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution) through Mao’s crucial assertion stating that under certain (rare) conditions “the superstructure can influence the substructure”; that is, artists and intellectuals have an important role to play in certain cases. One can understand the euphoria they drew from this statement, seeing that culture was no longer “a cog and screw of one single great mechanism” (Lenin), but one of its driving forces. The Sartrian “guilty conscience” that never left any intellectual or artist, “bourgeois” or “petit bourgeois,” or those who felt as such, could at last be forgotten.

Market

Contrary to a generally held assumption, the art market and the Supports/Surfaces group did not get along well. There are several reasons for this situation. Most of the protagonists of the movement were readers of Marcuse, Althusser, Lefebvre or Debord, and were consequently critical of mercantile liberalism. Except for Cane and Devade, who would need to enter the world of galleries in order to make a living, most artists were, or would become, teachers. As a result, they were financially independent, and their distance from the market came naturally.

Their absence of zeal on this point impeded their “normal” entry into the international art market.

Marxism

Marxism was the “official” doctrine for some artists and the unofficial one for others.

In the days after May '68, it seemed to be a shield against the muted repression of the Pompidou years, and an answer that could evolve at Althusser's theoretical instigation. It would, in fact, remain a reference point in the understanding of social struggles and specific contradictions in cultural circles.

But the understanding of contradictions quickly became a cult of contradiction, involving irreducible antagonisms.

Part of the movement's artists (Cane, Dezeuze and Devade) took an interest in Chinese communism as a way of delving deeper into classic Marxism.

Materialism

A preliminary remark: What enables us to understand the history of philosophy is the contradiction between two principles (proletariat/bourgeoisie) rather than the struggle between systems and doctrines. The existence of philosophy in the form of systems stems from the ascendancy of the idealistic point of view over its materialistic counterpart. The domination of materialism would probably make philosophy disappear as a system and give it a radically new form.

Second remark: both principles embody (or represent) two points of view, two parties. Ultimately, these are the points of view of two antagonistic social classes. This is what enables the same contradiction to exist in the history of philosophy, throughout the history of class societies, in which one form of class exploitation follows another. The stakes of this struggle – a material struggle rather than a conflict of ideas aimed at the domination of one point of view over the other – excludes the possibility for a “third way”: the contradiction cannot be resolved through the synthesis of the elements that compose it.

Such a synthesis, if it occurs, can only be a disguised version of idealism, and must be denounced as such (thus Dühring is criticized by Engels, and the empirio-criticists by Lenin). The philosophical struggle knows no compromise: it represents, in the theoretical field, a “party position” (Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, 1909).

The Materialist principle appears inseparable from the assertion of the dialectical nature of matter. The essential property of matter is not a substance, or “Nature” as a finished and eternal whole, but a process: “in the last analysis, nature proceeds dialectically and not metaphysically; it does not move in an eternally uniform and constantly repeated circle, but passes through a real history.” (Engels).

Materialism in Supports/Surfaces

This is the ideological and programmatic meaning of the group Supports/Surfaces. Its spectrum is particularly broad, ranging from action on material and a reflection on pictorial matter, to the theoretical horizon of dialectical and historical materialisms.

“Mechanist” materialism (the manipulation of the pictorial and constituent elements of a painting) was not criticized for what it was (it was necessary to any practice), but because it was important to insist on going beyond it.

The fact remains that each Supports/Surfaces participant felt involved in this project, from a simple binary hand-on manipulation of the pictorial elements to a materialistic doctrine that the reading of Marxist classics, as well as Bataille or Artaud, only reinforced, in the wake of *Tel Quel*'s investigations.

There was also the question “Who in the history of painting is the most capable of answering for materialism?” Cézanne or Monet? Pollock, without a doubt, through his emphasis on artist's body. But between Newman and Rothko? And what to make of classical Chinese painting?

In some cases, a certain amount of “materialism” could be retained, making former and present artists “worthy” of the materialism to come.

Between 1967-1972 a new (materialist) “continent” to discover was up for discussion, as well as “epistemological” breakthroughs that would need to be accomplished in order to avoid being stuck in a simple archaeology of the past or being diluted in an event-driven approach. But the materialistic trend concealed the difficulties inherent to an almost Manichean opposition between materialism and idealism.

Indeed, any good dialectician, which an experimented materialist should be, is capable of understanding that one term can very quickly switch to the other; that is, extreme idealism can become a-transcendental materialism, while extreme materialism can become idealism of a metaphysical and religious nature.

May '68

May '68 was born from student unrest and from the occupation of several premises (Sorbonne, École des Beaux-arts, the Odéon Theater, etc.) in the Latin Quarter in Paris. These occupations created a ripple effect and triggered a general strike that spread across the whole country, in all sectors, especially factories. Demonstrations took an insurrectional turn, shaking the very foundations of the State.

Historically speaking, these were a series of events that led from one surprise to the next, in an atmosphere of rarely matched political enthusiasm. The silence of the State, then its vacancy for a few days, liberated minds and gave every citizen a chance to speak out on subjects, hitherto undiscussed, preoccupying French society.

Freedom of thought and speech was regained, in a true spirit of fraternity. Of the future members of Supports/Surfaces, only those who lived in Paris – Dezeuze, Cane, and Devade – physically participated in the events. This experience would leave a trace that would later mark a political watershed between moderate provincials and leftists in the capital.

Minimal art

Minimal art is based on a system of formal repetition. This repetition is modular (Frank Stella's black striped paintings, for example), and constructs the visual system. It is not a reduction of means – an argument often put forward –, but simply an exclusion of anything useless. It is only concerned with what is necessary for the painting, not with expression or sensitivity. It is worth remembering that the idea of the series goes back to the beginning of modernism (Claude Monet's cathedrals and haystacks, for instance).

Stella's famous quote, "What you see is what you see," perfectly symbolizes the aesthetic ideal of minimal art. Didi-Huberman accurately commented on this point: one limits oneself to what is seen and postulates that the rest is nonexistent. This attitude (volume and its formal expression are enough) consists in experiencing vision as an exercise of the tautology "what I see is what I see," and being content with it (challenging the aura of the object and of its temporality, in that the tautological individual keeps to the present moment of his visual experience). This constitutes a non-Freudian attitude.

This vision, shared by other American artists, was formulated by the philosopher Wollheim, who, from the first readymades to Reinhardt's black paintings, diagnosed a general destructive process, which led to an art known as minimalist, possessing a minimum amount of artistry. The art works are tautological objects. Therefore, minimal art consists in:

1. Eliminating any illusion, in order to impose specific objects that require nothing else than to be seen for what they are. For Morris, this would consist in dissatisfaction with the iconographic type derived from the most academic pictorial traditions. For Judd, when there are two colors, one moves forward and the other back. This is Modernism's specific argument (for painting, the illusion of depth is relinquished – the famous *flatness*). So Judd created a three-dimensional spatial object that would produce its own "specific" spatiality, thus going beyond both the iconography of traditional sculpture and the illusionism of painting, even modernist. Ultimately, a Newman painting is by no means simpler than a Cézanne.
2. Eliminating any detail, in order to impose objects as totalities that cannot be broken down, or as non-relational objects (such as two colors). According to Morris, a work of art should appear as a *Gestalt*, an autonomous, specific, immediately perceptible form, hence the praise of simple volumes that create powerful *Gestalt* feelings. Stella was supposed to be the only painter to produce specific paintings (the stripe series painted between 1958 and 1965): "Only what can be seen there *is* there". The tautological object is a visual tautological object.
3. Eliminating any temporality in these objects is the third issue. Their very stability protects them from semantic changes and prevents them from being affected by signs of time, as they are often made from particularly resistant industrial materials.

These objects do not play on meaning, and are therefore unequivocal. There is nothing left to imagine. This art, stripped of any expressionist or psychological connotation, is a criticism of

interiority in the style of Wittgenstein, who reduced the existence of private language to absurdity.

4. Eliminating any anthropomorphism, in order to impose the imperative specificity of the object.

Supports/Surfaces was not insensitive to this geometric Neo-formalism or to the notion of series. But it refused the industrialization of forms, in that it deemed the presence of the artist's body essential and irreplaceable.

Minimal art's aspiration to architectural permanence also went against the notion of a work subjected to chance and to a spatial determinism inspired by nomadism; that is, without architecture.

Ministère des Affaires culturelles
[Ministry of Cultural Affairs]

This was the name of Malraux's ministry. Under Pompidou, it was one of the ministries expected to absorb the May '68 wave through major projects (Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou) and reforms, especially in the teaching of art.

The keystone of change in art teaching was the extraordinary figure of Alexandre Bonnier, poet, painter and friend of artists, who proceeded to recruit new teachers from the artistic avant-garde into art schools, and implemented the 1972 reform.

Museum

Some avant-gardes fought against museums, which they regarded as vast cemeteries. The group Supports/Surfaces was never concerned by this question, in that the number of museums and art centers, etc., was so limited and unreceptive to the young generation that they never even considered “accessing” these institutions, concentrating instead on the production of works rather than on what was to become of them.

However, some Supports/Surfaces protagonists were avid museum-goers because they attached equal importance to knowledge of past and contemporary art. Their range was wide, from prehistory museums, to the MoMA in New York, to Italian museums in particular.

Can one consider that the works produced by Supports/Surfaces and its circle of influence were meant for the context of a museum? On the one hand, by cultivating knowledge and a kind of panoramic vision of cultures, Supports/Surfaces artists conceived their pieces to a great extent as being within a continuity; on the other hand, events such as “Coaraze 69” or “Été 70” were part of a search for non-museum space differing from the rhythm and institutional structures of museums.

Negative

Even those who are the least “dialectically”-minded are perfectly aware that the positive will come out of the negative. They are interested in the negative because of its evident possibilities. But the negative per se is highly distorted by the dominant structure, of which it represents the denied, hidden, concealed part.

It is therefore very difficult to uncover the negative, to bring it out in the open.

The negative takes part in a guerilla mentality. Because the dominant ideology was asserted on many sides, the negative embodied the counter-affirmation of the dominant ideology. It was also interesting to see how different cultures dealt with the negative. Kristeva took an interest in this issue. In that we belong to a civilization that does not know how to deal with its negative, it takes on violent forms: death wish, sadomasochism, abjection, and so on. Perhaps all societies are based on the same principle? But in a time that wanted to be “dialectic,” ready for change, it was believed that the idea of the negative should not only be explored and thoroughly understood, but also seen as full of potential. Like the Freudian unconscious, the negative had been repressed. It is worthwhile looking into what a civilization suppresses, into its taboo areas. This was the task of the structuralists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and to a certain extent of Supports/Surfaces artists.

New Realism

New Realism quickly reached an international level, leading to countless solo and group exhibitions worldwide. In a sense, it was a breath of fresh air after the well-worn School of Paris. New Realism drew its creative energy from the American pop art movement. What is open to debate is whether it took a critical stance in relationship with consumer society, which the French discovered during the post-Algerian War years, and which often seems to be glorified in the works themselves.

But the movement was multi-faceted. Who can say that Tinguely's machines validated emergent technology? Or that the work of the "Affichistes" [Poster artists] was not a healthy reaction to the invasion of advertising in cities? New Realism was a completely urban movement, which coincided with the growth of cities at the time, and drew inspiration from an industrial society of increasing material assets.

Nietzscheism

Bataille studied Nietzsche because he saw in his philosophy the possibility of a transformation of man that would complement the economical changes advocated by Marxism.

Deleuze, who also reactivated the interpretation of Nietzsche from the 1960s on, never accepted dialectical positions, whether Socratic, Hegelian, or Marxist. Nietzsche's thought was fundamentally anti-dialectic, and Deleuze never embraced 1960-70s Marxism, ultimately embodying a very specific type of intellectual anarchism.

(In this instance, one can see why the convergence of Deleuze's viewpoints with those of the review *Tel Quel* and the group Supports/Surfaces was complicated, if not impossible.)

Deleuze's thinking was influential to a certain extent among painters. His *Logique du sens*, Minuit, 1962 [*The Logic of Sense*] inspired some of the propositions in Cane and Deleuze's *Pour un programme théorique pictural* (1971).

Nomadism

The unstretched canvas – which can be rolled and unrolled, or carried around, folded like a tent –, as well as the questioning of painting in its relationship to the wall and to an inevitably sedentary architecture, naturally led the initial group (Dezeuze, Saytour, Viallat) to take an interest in nomadic lifestyles. During the summer of 1970, they organized outdoor exhibitions in a dozen different locations, going so far as to let the installation and dismantling process determine the type of works that would be exposed to the four elements.

Object

The object, under suspicion of becoming a constituent of fetishism, and therefore a major sin in painting, was eventually produced “clandestinely” in the 1970s.

What it needed was to be freed from any moralism, and to be seen as a way of reasoning through tactile means since most of the time it was made without the use of a paintbrush, and could, because of its modest dimensions, be held in one hand. Arnal produced small volumes of tinted and folded canvas. Viallat made knotted ropes, Dezeuze pyrographed wooden tablets, and Valensi created a direct link with psychoanalysis with his “transitional objects.”

At a time in history where the hand had been demeaned to the role of simple button-pusher, the artists’ manual hyperactivity coincided with an awareness of the end of this past multi-secular savoir-faire, and referred back, without nostalgia, to this history.

One might ask if the exploration of the object is not mandatory if one intends to explore fetishism in its primitivistic dimension. The ban on objects in Supports/Surfaces was in fact a puritan ban, which stood in the way of the artist’s curiosity and made malignant use of Hegel’s aesthetic hierarchy. It always expressed the refusal of Duchamp and his successors on the part of the upholders of formalism within the group.

Occupation of premises

The first occupations of premises took place in May '68 in the Latin Quarter, before spreading across the whole country. The Sorbonne (opened by the government) was occupied by students. Dezeuze, among others, was in charge of action committees. At the École des Arts décoratifs, Cane started up a poster workshop like the one at the École des Beaux-arts. Devade and Sollers intervened briefly at the Hôtel de Massa (writers' headquarters).

The Théâtre de l'Odéon, near the Sorbonne, was occupied by students. Jean-Louis Barrault let them take the stage – a complicity that would cost him dearly. All night long the students voiced their opinions on stage, mixing libertarian demands and utopian speeches.

This scenario only concerned the microcosm of the Latin Quarter, whereas in the rest of the country, laborers and employees occupied their workplaces.

Paris Biennale

The 1969 Paris Biennale signaled the beginning of what would become the Supports/Surfaces group, with the exhibition of works by Dezeuze, Saytour and Viallat at the Palais Galliera. The 1971 Biennale at the Parc Floral de Vincennes marked the end of the group, which was reduced to Arnal, Bioulès, Cane, Devade, Dezeuze and Pincemin, and concentrated its activity on the review *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*, for which they set up a stand without showing any artwork.

Peinture, cahiers théoriques

The editorial board of this review was formed at the instigation of Dezeuze, who chose Cane, Bioulès and Devade to complete the first issues. The review's aim was the militant defense of the May '68 movement in the field of visual arts. But it had to extend its vision to other disciplines, such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the orientalism revived by the Chinese Cultural Revolution from the perspective of an old and new materialism.

In the middle of the June '71 turbulence, the patronage of the review *Tel Quel* drew *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* into its orbit when the former violently broke with the French Communist Party.

This over-politicized satellization led to Bioulès and Dezeuze's resignations (May-June 1972), and marked the second phase of the review, now under the sole direction of Cane and Devade.

While it was created in part to defend Supports/Surfaces, *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* would strongly criticize the group, turning against it, but would nevertheless remain an emanation of it.

“Pictoriality”

In their search for an essence of “pictoriality,” the upholders of a specifically pictorial form of painting opposed those who used non-pictorial detours to achieve their goals, tending to widen the notion of painting. The former were in search of an almost intangible essence of painting, while the latter took into consideration the input of anthropology, which stemmed from the notion of the Duchampian object.

On the one hand, there was the cult of painting and the deep-rooted belief that the heart of the question lay within its boundaries; and on the other, the invention of new forms and materials, such as strips of wood, ropes and stones, in a play on tension and looseness, without giving here a full list of these productions. (To be noted are Viallat’s ropes, Dezeuze’s *Ladders*, and Valensi’s “transitional” objects.) The dividing line would shift about, but the “essentialists” called anything that did not fit into the painting category a “curio,” and their opponents answered that these painters were merely formalists, whose dogmatism stood in the way of any visual investigation.

Two conceptions of painting appeared very early on in the group – one that went searching for the Holy Grail of painting, and the other that considered painting as one means amongst others leading to human truth.

Police (a short inventory)

Informers (in plain-clothes)

The youngest pretended to be students. Others infiltrated the health surveillance service that the prefecture of Paris had set up at the Sorbonne.

Many street fights were sometimes due to informers forcing riot squads to charge by deliberately provoking them.

CRS (French riot police)

Inelegant turtles burdened with shields and truncheons, these veterans of the Algerian demonstrations had lost their bearings in the streets of Paris. But their defensive grenades were particularly dangerous, especially if one of them detonated in the hand of a demonstrator trying to throw it back to its sender.

SAC

Ex-Gaullist secret agents formed skid row's imperial guard. They scoured the Latin Quarter after the Sorbonne closed, beating up the last protesters.

Political context

General de Gaulle had been in power since 1959 and, despite his immense repute, there was a calcification of political life, perceived as conservative and fossilized by many French people, especially laborers and intellectuals.

It should not be forgotten that France in the 1960s was entirely different from today's society. The communist party represented almost one third of the French electorate, and was therefore a major political force.

The spirit of the times placed the forces of progress on the left of the political spectrum (in spite of the progressive decadence of communism after the monstrosity of the Stalinist regime was fully exposed).

However, Marxist concepts, such as class struggle, remained. Marxism was still a progressive doctrine for the working class and intellectuals. This is why many artists, whose convictions were progressive – which is usually the case with avant-gardes – embraced these ideas. Among these were artists from the Supports/Surfaces group, at different degrees and depending on their personalities. It is therefore hardly surprising that the group should have referred to historical Marxism and its philosophy: dialectical materialism.

Pompidou exhibition

In 1970, the French president decided to organize an exhibition entitled “60-72, 12 ans d’art contemporain” [60-72, 12 Years of Contemporary Art], heralding the Centre Georges Pompidou, which was to be built on the Beaubourg site. Cane, Dezeuze, and Devade boycotted the exhibition, which was to take place at the Grand Palais in convergence with the FAP (Front des artistes plasticiens), refusing to show their works so as to avoid political recuperation.

The protest against the Grand Palais exhibition led to an unexpected police intervention and consequently the Malassis cooperative took down their large paintings. This spectacular event was reported in the press and led to the failure of the exhibition and the dismissal of its curator.

Popular poster workshops

The best-known poster workshop was at the École des Beaux-arts de Paris in May 1968. The participating students provided savoir-faire in silkscreen printing and poster-based propaganda. Another workshop operated at the École des Arts décoratifs, rue d'Ulm, not to mention the clandestine printing of posters in the Bastille quarter (the Tissinier-Stempfel workshop), which kept going even after the other two were closed down by the police. The posters produced during this period later became the subject of exhibitions, collections, and even financial speculation.

Postminimalism

In 1971, the American art critic Pincus-Witten invented the term “Postminimalism” to describe the work of Eva Hesse. The term would be applied to other artists, particularly Mel Bochner and Richard Tuttle, who insisted on the fleeting nature of their works, on the importance of process rather than the stable result.

The term Process Art was also used – an approach that takes into account the evolution of materials, and emphasizes the artist’s physical involvement in his work. The sensuality of the colors, the manipulation of shapes and the use of limited formats opposed Minimal Art and coincided with the activities of some Supports/Surfaces artists. Dezeuze, with his *Plaquettes de bois pyrogravées* [*Pyrographed wooden tablets*] and, later on, *Triangulations*, shared an interest with post-minimalism in using the wall in the architectural context of the “White Cube” and in studying a new relationship of the part to the whole.

Program

An epistemological break opens up new fields, leading to new programs. Program planning was in at the time. It had no political vocation (like the Common Program of the Left), but dealt with knowledge in general. Cane and Dezeuze wrote “Pour un programme théorique pictural” [“For a Theoretic Pictorial Program”] during the winter of 1971, which was distributed in April of the following year. This materialistic-leaning text owes a lot to Althusser, and, although it might seem surprising, to Deleuze (*Logique du sens* (1969), in which the main themes are depth and surface).

For an artist to develop a program, which implies the long term rather than the instantaneity and immediacy that characterize his art, it is important for the program not to inhibit spontaneity, and for the two approaches to be able to alternate. Color quickly became “a program” to which most Supports/Surfaces painters subscribed.

Some critics and artists considered that showing a canvas separated from its stretcher (and vice versa) was a program in itself. While these two elements were used in basic combinations and various manipulations, they had no programmatic dimension, insofar as Dezeuze and Viallat never established the program for a hypothetical “canvas-stretcher couple,” however often critics might have mentioned it.

Provocation

Avant-garde movements are traditionally provocative. Conventional thinking, the lure of money – from the moderate to the full-blown capitalist – and conformist attitudes have always been regarded as deadening. Artistic avant-gardes broke with this social world, either to assert individualism centered on the ego of the creator, or to take on a working class messianism or another “revolutionary” movement.

For artists who have a connection with the art market, there is a tough contradiction to solve: being anti-bourgeois and yet recognizing that financial survival depends on the bourgeoisie. Supports/Surfaces voluntarily provoked and estranged the establishment for a long time. Provocation was a sport played with all the more vigor as the threat of the bourgeoisie recuperating their work grew.

The famous “green tracts” were provocative sallies adapted on a case by case basis, and directed either at an adverse journal, at a critic who represented the establishment, or at a government-commissioned exhibition, like the “60-72” exhibition, also known as the Pompidou exhibition.

Psychoanalysis

In the context of a new, yet-to-be-explored materialism, psychoanalysis provided a vast field at a time when Freudianism was revived in Lacan's writings and seminars. The impact of linguistics on psychoanalysis advanced the notion of the signifier, and gave a theoretic basis for "signifying" practices, such as painting.

Supports/Surfaces reconnected with drive-powered gestural American painting, especially Pollock's, while also giving itself formal limits. No link with surrealist painting was established, because what was center stage was "not dream images, but the eccentricity of the rhetorical forms that organize them." (Pleynet)

After the critique of the subjectivism of the School of Paris and the exploration of Foucault and Althusser's Subjectless philosophy, the trend was to re-establish the Subject, which psychoanalysis never negated, albeit submerging it in language (Kristeva) and observing its divisions.

Dezeuze took an interest in Lacan's mirror stage in relation with the picture plane and the specular relationship that stems from it. Devade, who followed in Pleynet's steps on the question of orality, would provide an insightful approach to the issue of color.

Readymade

Readymades are questions without answers. Duchamp's "readymade" is an enquiry, but it became an answer for Duchamp's epigones. There have been a lot of answers, whereas for Duchamp the readymade was always followed by a question mark. What is art? What is the art object? It was crucial not to answer in the way so many artists did, in an endless post-Duchampian repetition.

Duchamp's position has been less often studied than his objects. It was the opposite of the Supports/Surfaces approach; it induced idleness, incompatible with the notion of work and the production of artwork. Saytour and Dezeuze were the only ones to venture into Duchamp territory. However, Dezeuze's *Stretchers* could hardly be called readymades. One needed to understand a critical dimension in Duchamp's work allowing for an ideological critique of art. Between Duchampian dandyism and the imitation of the proletariat by Supports/Surfaces, the incompatibility remained absolute.

Recruitment

A constellation of artists would start to gravitate around the Dezeuze-Saytour-Viallat original core. Valensi was integrated in 1969 at Dezeuze's request, after the exhibition reporting on the experiment in Coaraze, where he was only a filmmaker. Then Bioulès and Devade were invited to participate in the 1970 exhibition at the ARC, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Cane would be included a few months later at the request of Devade and Dezeuze. Then came the turns of Dolla, Pincemin, Grand and Arnal.

Supports/Surfaces seemed to have followed the "recruitment" method of the March 22, 1968 movement, which consisted in increasing the number of troops as much as possible, with minimum co-optation. This distinguished Supports/Surfaces from other smaller groups of artists. The idea of a front of visual artists capable of checking the post-1968 backlash had something to do with this approach.

However, this required a minimum of organization (it should be noted that a thirst for organization is the direct consequence of any revolutionary failure). This explains why some of the most politicized artists (Cane, Devade, Dezeuze) felt the need to create a review to give coherence to diverse practices.

Recuperation

In a divided society like France in the aftermath of May '68, intellectuals and artists – a fragile but defiant fringe of society – were worried that they would be swallowed up by the bourgeoisie, who had taken charge of the situation. “Recuperation” meant that the resistance of the individual and his artwork did not guarantee the refusal of a return to order.

But “recuperation” is a vague term. It can be unconscious and become a poisonous gas that spreads through all levels of society without anyone detecting it. The word, which was commonly used in the years after 1968, would fade away with the rise in power of cultural institutions. The most famous one, the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, was seen by some as a machine for crushing protest and illusions.

Revisionism

This was the term the far-left used the most to criticize the French Communist Party.

The relinquishment of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, “parliamentary cretinism” (Lenin), and the doing away with the necessary dictatorship of the proletariat were the general characteristics of revisionism. Chinese Maoists attacked Khrushchev for deviant policies and proclaimed Stalin’s “good” principles.

Some French Maoists were quite embarrassed by this comeback of the “Father of Nations,” and tried to keep him tucked away in a closet.

Tel Quel’s criticism of “dogmatic revisionism” attempted to demonstrate the vicious circle between the two poles (Stalinism and reformism).

In doing so, reviews such as *Tel Quel* and *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* placed themselves outside this vicious circle, therefore leaving all forms of communism behind. In 1972, their members had become pro-Chinese and moved away from Marxism, which would eventually be abandoned in the following years, under the repeated attacks of Solzhenitsyn and the New Philosophers.

“Ruralism”

A strong tendency marked by the use by artists of characteristics and materials specific to the countryside in the South of France.

Viallat took an interest in “empègues,” imprints stenciled on the wall during bullfighting festivals, Pagès in basic masonry (pieces of timber, concrete blocks, iron reinforcements), Dolla in laundry hung out to dry, and Dezeuze in reed fences and split reed partitions used to make arbors.

This tendency led some observers to speak of a form of nostalgia for a rural France endangered by increasing urbanization and industrialization.

But for the most part, it was an ethnographic approach, “artistic” of course, but also operating in the wider context of Lévi-Strauss or Leroi-Gourhan’s research.

Dezeuze, in particular, was familiar with Mexico, and was there at the time of the opening of the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico in 1965.

The new generation that appeared in 1980 drew inspiration from the realities of the neighborhoods in the outskirts of big cities, contrasting with the interests of Supports/Surfaces that were ethnological and ecological in advance of its time.

School of Paris

From the point of view of the artistic context, the floods of painting, be it lyrical, tachist, gestural, calligraphic, abstract landscape, “cloudist,” or a celebration of signs, an Orientalist quest for new horizons and for “openness,” no longer satisfied a generation unconvinced by the superiority of the School of Paris.

Supports/Surfaces artists wanted to distance themselves from the subjectivism into which French abstraction had settled since the end of the war. The School of Paris was seen as truly academic and its mortal remains were the basis for the affirmation of American painting.

Ultimately, it was a failure that encouraged a new generation to rise to the challenge. But this new generation came up against a wall: that of the School of New York and the financial interests that the city crystallized.

Scission

Scissionism is a full-time activity. You are either a resistant or a yes-man. During a lifetime, a person can at different times be one or the other with variations. In the context of the cult of contradictions – which stemmed from an improper interpretation of Marxist dialectics – and of the necessary epistemological break that each individual had to accomplish as an initiation ritual to brighter days, scission was a normal and acclaimed position. The “one divides into two” idea that Mao preached was shared by a few Maoists, and became a principle of exclusion or self-exclusion.

The group Supports/Surfaces experienced a scission in 1971. Saytour, Viallat, Valensi, Dolla and Grand showed their works in a room of the theater at Nice, while Devade, Cane, Dezeuze, Bioulès and Arnal showed them separately, further away – a symbolic sign of the definitive split between the two factions. According to the interpretation of the Niçois critic, Jacques Lepage, this scission represented the dividing line between Paris and provincial France. But it was really a matter of politics. The union of the Left already attracted the artists of the first room toward social democracy, whereas the others, who were on the editorial board of *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*, persevered in their efforts towards radical contestation.

Semiology

As Saussure said: “A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable [...] We shall call it semiology.” What interested the protagonists of Supports/Surfaces was mainly the balance between signifier and signified. But it was an intuitive approach that did not pertain to science.

Barthes was the king of applied semiology. With the framework of his “Elements of Semiology” (*Communications*, No. 4, École pratique des Hautes Études, 1964) and its application in his *Mythologies* (1957), through to *L’Empire des signes* (1970), he managed to create a new literary genre. Schefer’s *Scenography of a painting* (1969) was an attempt at understanding pictorial data using the same tools.

Signature image

Most visual artists construct a signature image through the creation of a very targeted production. This has happened throughout history. But this “signature image,” which normally took a long time to establish, crystallized quickly through the use of repetitive painting. And so Parmentier has his parallel stripes, Viallat his imprint, and Toroni his systematic brushstrokes. Prior to this, in New Realism, were Arman’s *Accumulations*, or Klein’s *Blue Monochrome*.

The simpler the signature image, the wider its reach; on the one hand, because it can be reproduced on the other side of the world by an assistant (Buren, LeWitt), and on the other because it lends itself to quick photographic promotion in the specialized or general press.

There remains the question that any artist worthy of the name and keen to avoid being restricted to a formula must ask himself: how does one break one’s signature image? How does one keep brand image and marketing separate?

“Sociologism”

This term describes any form of art that deals with current events geared to the rhythm of daily news and rendering some of its aspects in visual terms. It is a by-product of militant art, based on its close link with society.

Fluxus used everyday life as subject material, but with very limited communication. Therefore, its very austerity enabled it to stay clear of “sociologism.” This term covers an attempt at treating the present in its immediacy – which has always been a constant factor in art – but without the benefit of distance and of the required tools for really being detached from mass media-controlled information.

One could say that it ousted the formalism defended by Supports/Surfaces as early as the 1970s. Event-driven art prevailed over the analysis of ideologies, and storytelling over a form of synthesis.

Specific object

Judd wrote a text on this subject in 1962 (published in 1965), dealing with the new generation's disappointment with abstract painting. It is an indictment of painting, even against any possible future for painting, where two-dimensionality necessitates a certain degree of illusionism.

And so any new work has to be three-dimensional, and therefore part of real space.

No surface or element is divided by color (it is the characteristic of the enclosed entirety of the unit) so as to avoid the illusion of space (figure/form opposition; that is, pictorial dualism). There is no hierarchical relationship between elements.

According to Catherine Millet, one of the goals of American painting, according to the interview with Judd and Stella, is to be comprehended at a single glance, in absolute immediacy (Stella explains that he tries to make paintings that the spectator is not tempted to "examine").

It is a revival of the old *Gestalt*, which removes detail in favor of the whole, all the more so because detail is considered to come from an artisanal approach to painting.

Minimalists took care to only produce the surface; that is, an unworked surface (and therefore, "artless"), rejecting the impulses of manual work. However, none of these works is artless, although they might seem so at first, at least in the statements. In this quality of "artlessness", the activities of Supports/Surfaces cannot agree with a certain form of minimal art, and even oppose it most of the time through the assertion and visible trace of manipulation in the works produced.

Street fights

Confrontations between demonstrators and the police turned out to be unexpectedly violent for the latter who were surprised by the agility and speed of the young students. Before even receiving orders to react, the CRS [riot squads] had already sustained formidable rounds of various projectiles, and when they were eventually allowed to charge, the volatile demonstrators scattered.

Could they fire on the crowd? Sons and daughters of ministers, senior officials, and notables, were present among the Latin Quarter crowds. (No doubt the prefect Grimaud was overwhelmed with hundreds of calls from concerned parents, pleading not to shoot.)

Running fast was the demonstrator's best weapon. Managing to immobilize the police under a shower of various objects was the guarantee that the "frontline" was paradoxically a safe place. Scattering, on the other hand, presented a higher risk.

Structuralism

The origin of the words “structure” and “structuralism” is linguistic (1929), and Saussure is the precursor of modern structuralism (*Course in General Linguistics*, 1916).

Structural linguistics is by definition the sum of research founded on a hypothesis, according to which it is scientifically legitimate to describe language as an “essentially autonomous entity of internal dependencies,” or, in a word, a “structure.”

“Structure” is synonymous with “system” – a term used to a greater extent today –, which is by definition a sum of entities well defined by intrinsic properties, related by connections – or relationships – that keep the system alive.

There is evidence of the same theoretical functioning of the “structure” within fields of science as seemingly remote as ethnology (Lévi-Strauss), psychology (Lacan), linguistics (Jakobson), and criticism (Roland Barthes).

To define the structure of the “painting system” one must also define its components, and specify the definition of the entities and relationships through the use of properties, which define these elements univocally, and therefore their occurrences. Although some entities are easy to define – color, for example –, others, like a painting, are more complex. It is a signifying space that can be described according to the figures it depicts, which of course only applies to figuration.

The “painting system” is made out of two-dimensional paintings. They belong to a type, an ordinary painting, fresco, etc. Painting can be made of one or several media, themselves made out of a material: stone, wood, cardboard, etc. The medium presents a surface, which is also of a certain type: a canvas, a vertical wall (cave paintings), hard floor, earth or water, for example.

The surface may or may not contain shapes, which are or are not outlined. These shapes come with properties that define them univocally, and the outlines are or are not colored. If they are, then color is another entity, which comes with certain properties that uniquely define an occurrence: the shade, the pigment, the binder, etc.

Furthermore, Kristeva argued the following: “It appears that some structuralists find it necessary to abandon the signified after the referent, and to keep to the field of the signifier alone, because of a need for scientific thoroughness.” This was to become one of the principles of Supports/Surfaces.

Studio

During the Supports/Surfaces years, not only was the studio maintained, but it was posited against the criticism of the “ivory tower” voiced by advocates of street or contextual forms of art. Furthermore, the conceptual wave transformed the studio into a design office where concepts, projects, or programs between design and architecture were developed.

The studio remained a space favored by all Supports/Surfaces protagonists – on the one hand because it was a place where all sorts of chance findings could happen as the result of various manipulations; on the other hand because it ensured distance from current events and the possibility of deep concentration.

Even so, the American “loft” remained an ideal configuration for painters at the time, affording decent conditions for the artist to receive critics and art dealers and to show them his work: a place of sociability, rather than voluntary seclusion.

Supports/Surfaces

The group, which dominated the French art scene during the 1970s, is the central core of the formalist movement in France, in that formalism is characteristically materialistic and by definition opposed to idealism.

The decline of ideologies liberated what had been “repressed” and ego-centered. Formalists, including Supports/Surfaces, had believed that this romantic and expressionist nostalgia was over. Not only did the Supports/Surfaces artists proceed to mechanically dismantle painting, but they also called for a violent break with the tenets of “modern” art.

Supports/Surfaces artists endeavored to take subjectivity out of the relationship between Western society and art by revealing the means of art, and judging its effects. This distancing between artists and their work conveys the notion of objectivity, which was crucial in the 1960s (Klein, BMPT), hence a reflection on all the material elements that constitute the painted work. The archaeology of some works pertains to the project of exploring the history of painting, rather than rejecting it as did non-art and anti-art movements.

The approach of Supports/Surfaces artists was similar to that of Minimal Art. Painting is taken back to its very beginnings. (This desire for deconstruction was also a necessity in the atmosphere of general confusion). For the artists, however, each artwork was above all an object of knowledge; that is, each painting carried within it a system of thought, at once political, philosophical, and ideological.

The artists’ concerns were close to prominent issues of the 1960s, such as human sciences, particularly Marxist (dialectical materialism), structuralist (based on linguistics) and psychoanalytical analyses. Their production was also considerably influenced by the principle of seriality. Their practice needed a theoretical foundation in order to avoid becoming academic.

A few principles used by the group were the following:

The dialectical method and Structuralism (Althusser’s structuralist interpretation of Marx, Lacan on Freud, and Barthes’ influence) helped these artists to take the material into account (and to analyze it), for they attached autonomous value to the components of the artwork. Painting was divided into two basic elements: canvas and stretcher. Viollat, for instance, worked on the canvas, and Dezeuze on the stretcher, hence the rudimentary methods (assemblage of strips of wood, etc.), which reconnected with archaic forms of activity. More generally, these artists carried out a complete dismantling of the speculative mechanisms of artistic creation and of its modes of operation. In this sense, the movement falls within the domain of analytical abstraction.

What made Supports/Surfaces so important was that it privileged the materiality of the work, the signifier, linking it to the repressed (the stretcher is a shameful part of the painting), to the work of the subconscious repressed by the rational idealism of most contemporary art.

Supports/Surfaces critiqued dominant pictorial space, defined as a “specular” space – on the surface of the painted screen the painter projects the images of his “self-consciousness” and of what he chooses from a represented or expressed “reality.” The screen is thus suppressed and becomes a surface. Psychoanalytical “knowledge” also played a part in the rejection of this conception of the “subject” (the “narcissistic” illusion described by Freud).

The history of modern art (Cézanne, Cubism, Matisse, Pollock) is an invitation to critique the medium [“support”] and the surface, which determine subjective projection.

In the same spirit of using the new ideas of psychoanalysis, the repetitions in many of the works refer to compulsions studied by Freud (repeated gestures, traces of shapes in the works of Dezeuze, Dolla and Viallat, for instance).

They also challenged customary knowledge. For example, when looking at some of Dezeuze’s works with a “knowledge” of orthogonal structure, which is a structural element of the pictorial space of Western painting from which they come, they can be perceived as “fragments” (in the case of the triangles) or as deformations of the squares to which they referred (“twisted collimators”). They have something in common with Mangold’s circle anamorphoses or Dibbets’ corrected perspectives. These artists also based some of their research on topology [see entry “Topology”] and time, which does not belong in the Euclidian system, and is independent from physical phenomena (unlike other geometries, such as Riemann’s – the beginning of topology).

Strict obedience to the painting format is a direct consequence of American formalism. (For Greenberg painting is the only path possible.) Anything outside the scope of painting, or appearing as a stand-in for it, stems from two ways of thinking: one originates in the notion of the *specific object*, where the “three-dimensional enhancement of the slightest pictorial intervention” (Lemaire) is emphasized, and the other in the Duchampian object opening onto various manipulations, from “assisted readymades” to anthropological productions inspired by Leroi-Gourhan or Franz Boas. In fact, both systems of painting and non-painting overlap for most Supports/Surfaces artists. The “eccentricity” of their works has been highlighted many times.

Teaching

Most Supports/Surfaces artists were or would become teachers. This sufficed to raise concerns about the proliferation of disciples in French art schools. In fact, students followed trends more than their teachers' lessons, and in fact teachers did not practice proselytism apart from rare exceptions. So there was no risk of cloned disciples, despite what some might have imagined.

Technology

In the strict sense of the term, it means a discourse on techniques. However, nothing indicates that it concerns the most recent techniques. To this extent, Supports/Surfaces chose archaic techniques as its subject, and was therefore naturally linked to anthropology.

It is only in moving from one technological world to the next that one can start establishing the history of the previous world, which will appear in an entirely new form in artistic practices: therefore, the emphasis put on the hand corresponds with a general abandon of manual expertise in our societies. Viallat, Dezeuze and Pagès, to name a few, incorporated artisanal savoir-faire in a wider visual discourse, giving it an unexpected dimension by reactivating it in a pictorial or sculptural context.

An anthropologist like Franz Boas demonstrated the universal vocabulary that spans all primitive societies in terms of “making,” and even aesthetics, without them ever having come into contact.

Tel Quel

This review was founded in Paris, and was a historic meeting point of great writers, poets and philosophers of the 1960s and 70s. It featured texts by Barthes, Ponge, Genet, Derrida, Sollers, Pleynet, Kristeva (co-editors), and many other intellectuals, who gravitated around the soon-to-be prestigious review.

Paris was restless after the revival of human sciences, and *Tel Quel* was able to crystallize the most intense moments of the philosophy of the time. While it said little about painting, the review attached great importance to psychoanalysis, linguistics, politics and, of course, literature.

The review would prove extremely important for the artists of Supports/Surfaces, in that it confirmed their pictorial intuitions. Furthermore, Cane, Dezeuze and Devade (who would later become part of *Tel Quel*'s editorial board) sought its support in launching *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*. *Tel Quel* became a "reservoir" of texts, which the artists on their own could not have managed to write. So it can be said that *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* was greatly indebted to *Tel Quel*, as *Art Press* would be some time later.

“Telquelism”

It is impossible to understand so-called Telquelism without looking at the review's publications, and its way of combining Structuralism, Marxism, and Freudianism, not to mention other questions.

Its troops included both the old guard and young infantrymen (among which, Cane, Dezeuze, Devade, Fargier and Scarpetta).

Telquelism was hated both by the Right and Left. In fact, caught as it was in the post-May '68 backwash, it appeared as an attempt to stay afloat among the debris.

One could see it as heroism “à la française,” a discourse with panache, surfing, in significant terms, over the productions of the time.

The exacerbated strategy of the “secret political committee” (Sollers) was a quintessence of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz applied to the world of Belles Lettres, but it would soon be reduced to a sort of gang-of-four-like agitation, which would lead to the colorful movement of June 1971.

However, while seeing Telquelism as a positive ideology, its central role in the revival of Freudianism, Marxism, and linguistics must be emphasized. Its experimental literary production was wrongly misjudged, and its in-depth study of literature in all its universality remains unparalleled. The extraordinary working capacity of the review's members, led by Sollers, allowed an unprecedented widening of fields of investigation. But in order to really see it for what it was, one needs to go beyond the smokescreen of small and major controversies.

Theoretical studies group

Lectures were given regularly in the post-1968 years by *Tel Quel's* theoretical studies group in a room at the headquarters of the Société d'encouragement pour l'industrie nationale, 4 rue de Rennes in Paris. The Parisian members of Supports/Surfaces and a few other artists attended them, along with many academics who found material for the following day's university lecture.

Theory

Like Monsieur Jourdain, who spoke prose without knowing it, all artists theorize without knowing it, even when they claim to be a-theoretical or anti-theoretical. And anti-theory can be an aspect of the crude anti-intellectualism so common in artistic circles.

During the years that concern us, theory essentially consisted in a reinterpretation of Marx (Althusser) and Freud (Lacan). It seems that the art of the time smoothed the rough edges of these renewals through the use of sociology or the materialism of the material.

But most of all, it was a singular way of “speaking up” for artists who wanted to forgo the intervention of art criticism and rely solely on their “their own strengths.” Only Pleynet was able to construct a coherent and unifying critical discourse, although criticism was not his main concern.

Topology

Topology is the science which studies forms in general and focuses especially on curves and surfaces (cf. the Möbius strip, the topological figure par excellence).

Thanks to Cane a visit was organized en 1971 to a mathematician in the Bourbaki group on the subject of topology. Topology can describe mesh, knots, braids and perhaps extendable panels (simultaneous contraction et extension).

In a non-Euclidian multi-geometric world, is it possible to translate spatial intuitions in visual terms? Can other examples of space be approached through the third dimension? (Now traditional spatial geometry has been added to with spherical or hyperbolic geometry and the eight Thurston geometries.)

United States

The impact of the School of New York's painting on Supports/Surfaces no longer needs to be proven. Painting made in U.S.A. was an alternative to the School of Paris, which often gave the impression of living in a narrow and academic space. For the School of Paris, the notion of the large format remained linked to the idea of gestural expansion, abandoned by Newman, Rothko and Reinhart because of its declamatory self-evidence, the better to focus on color "fields." This type of chromatic painting was only officially shown in France in the late 60s (the Rothko and Newman exhibitions in Paris) and was met with a lukewarm reception. Around that time, Pleynet, on Bishop's advice, went to the U.S.A. to visit the studios of American painters, and contributed several portraits and critical articles, published in *Lettres françaises* (1967). These articles would resonate with the new generation of French painters, who had never seen American painting for themselves, except Dezeuze, who travelled to New York in 1965.

At that time, American painting was purely abstract, and it can be said that Minimal art would eventually continue in this direction.

Abstraction, large formats and the exaltation of color would be its main legacies for some of the members of Supports/Surfaces, although there would never be any exchange between American abstraction and the French group. Only the Fournier Gallery in Paris would exhibit works by Bishop, Francis and Mitchell alongside French painters.

The reception of French artists in America was very bad. It met with a certain chauvinism on the part of New York critics, one of them being Judd, who aggressively countered anything coming from the French scene.

Unstretched canvas

Who “invented” the unstretched canvas? In fact, it was not a sudden invention, but a series of empirical manipulations, which led to the systemization of the practice. Hantai was the first to fold his canvases before stretching them onto a frame. Viallat started showing unstretched canvases in 1966, but his main concern remained the repetition of his shape. The baring of the stretcher reactivated the question of the unstretched canvas, making it a subject matter in its own right.

Later on, painters like Pincemin, Dolla or Valensi also used unstretched canvas, which they painted on the floor most of the time, in imitation of Pollock’s method.

Vietnam

The Vietnam War waged by America was the essential motive for anti-imperialist struggles. “Basic Vietnamese committees” were already active in France. Clashes with far-right groups took place in the Latin Quarter in 1967.

As for the artists, the 18th Salon de la Jeune Peinture organized a painting auction in aid of the Vietnamese people (1967). The “Salle Rouge pour le Vietnam” exhibition, in which Cane participated, was held in early 1969.

Vincennes (University of)

In the wake of May '68, the government decided to open a university in Vincennes, far from the Latin Quarter, where all the most "risky" subjects (human sciences) would be taught. It turned out to be a trap, where students of various political tendencies would self-destruct, caught in their doctrinal contradictions, making teaching almost impossible. A visual arts section was also created, but the prevailing confusion would render it hard to manage. Generally speaking, the orthodox communist tendency would win and take over the university in Saint-Denis (Seine-Saint-Denis).

Work

In French, the term “travail” [work] is derived from the tripalium, the rack, a method of torture hardly reconcilable with the notion of “pleasure” asserted by Supports/Surfaces artists. The term “work” was used excessively, to such an extent that when a painter met another painter, he never asked: “How are you?” but “Are you working?”

The Freudian term “the work of the unconscious” coincided with the artist’s naïve impulse to merge with the working world – the proletariat. It was workerism in words, but also signaled the importance of process over product.

The notion of “work” flourished at the expense of *otium*, not to be confused with idleness. The idleness of the artist has been an integral part of the practice of art since earliest antiquity. But the 1968-1972 period was marked by an *a contrario* form of political activism. Many activists would later go on to rejoin the world of business. One can understand why Duchampian idleness irritated the disciples of paint-work and all the “worker-artists” of the 1970s.

World

The term globalization was not yet used at the time, but the least informed of Marxists was aware of Western capitalism's taste for universal expansion.

Dezeuze, who taught at the same university as McLuhan (Toronto, 1965-1967), closely followed the technological evolution of the "global village" and its tight hold on the planet through mass media. One might say that because *Supports/Surfaces* was influenced both by American painting (and the correlative situation) and China (its ancient painting as well as the latest developments of its society), it connected both ends of a fast-progressing globalization.

Written press (a short inventory)

arTitudes – Pluchart’s magazine
Art vivant (Chronique de l’) – art events magazine edited by Jean Clair
Bulletin du salon de la Jeune Peinture – edited by Biras
Cahiers pour l’analyse – review published by Normal Sup (rue d’Ulm)
Change – Faye’s review
Chorus – Le Boul’ch and Tilman’s review
Cinéthique – cinema review
Digraphe – literary review edited by Ristat
Documents sur – a review published by visual artists, led by Pleynet
Exit – a review on urban expression, directed by Gibbal and Kaepelin
L’Humidité – review edited by Bory
L’idiot international – Edern-Hallier’s journal
Les Lettres françaises – Aragon’s journal, in which Boudaille and Millet ran the Arts section
NDLR – Le Bouil’s review (with a comprehensive mapping of the movements close to Supports/Surfaces)
La Nouvelle critique – review published by orthodox communist intellectuals
Opus International – a review mainly devoted to new figuration
Peinture, cahiers théoriques – an artistic and militant review (see specific section)
Pékin information – free international issue from the People’s Republic of China
Promesses – literature and poetry review
Robho – art events review
Tel Quel – review edited by Sollers
TXT – literature and poetry review, edited by Prigent
VH101 – contemporary art review, edited by Françoise Esselier

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Marxism

Materialism

Materialism in Supports/Surfaces

May '68

Minimal art

Ministère des Affaires culturelles [Ministry of Cultural Affairs]

Museum

N

Negative

New Realism

Nietzscheism

Nomadism

O

Object

Occupation of premises

P

Paris Biennale

Peinture, cahiers théoriques

“Pictoriality”

Police (a short inventory)

Political context

Pompidou exhibition

Popular poster workshops

Postminimalism

Program

Provocation

Psychoanalysis

R

Readymade

Recruitment

Recuperation

Revisionism

“Ruralism”

S

School of Paris

Scission

Semiology

Signature image

“Sociologism”

Specific object

Street fights

Structuralism

Studio

Supports/Surfaces

T

Teaching

Technology

Tel Quel

“Telquelism”

Theoretical studies group

Theory

Topology

U

United States

Unstretched canvas

V

Vietnam

Vincennes (University of)

W

Work

World

Written press (a short inventory)