

## Painting, Discourse

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Since the important *As Painting* exhibition held at the Wexner in 2001, there has been a growing reassessment of various currents of French painting that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Collectives such as Supports/Surfaces and JANAPA have become better understood, as have the formative role of figures such as Simon Hantaï; further to this, well-established artists like Daniel Buren have been rescued from generalizing categories like “conceptual art” and the relevance of his practice as painting has been underscored. Increasingly evident, too, is the conjunctions between these artists and a diverse conglomeration of intellectual positions—Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Blanchot’s writings, Althusserian structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and deconstruction—that became central to French “post-war” culture. Whilst these philosophies and theories conditioned developments in Anglo-American art, criticism, and history, the art practices that first engaged those theories remained obscure outside of the Francophone artworld.

This session understands the interrelations between painting and theory in the French scene as a ferment in which not only do painters respond to theoretical developments but those theories are determined by the practices of painting emergent in the period. Influential writings on art by figures such as Hubert Damisch, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Georges Didi-Huberman arguably cannot be fully understood without reference to those practices. Therefore, the hitherto scanty attention paid to French painting compels readdressing. *Painting, Discourse* thus invites scholars to contribute to overcome this art-historical lacuna. Moreover, it also encourages papers that explore the impact of this theory/painting ferment upon later art practices and theoretical understandings.

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## Speakers & Abstracts

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### Division and Displacement

**Philip Armstrong and Laura Lisbon** (*Ohio State University*)

While the reception of *As Painting* has been shaped over the last twenty years by the exhibition catalogue, published in 2001 by The MIT Press and the Wexner Center for the Arts, the exhibition itself has been largely overlooked. Our presentation addresses some of the critical consequences of this reception, notably in light of the growing reassessment of French painting in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the questions at stake here is how the exhibition itself, rather than the accompanying catalogue, reopens the conjunction of 'painting, discourse' that forms this panel's title. A further question addressed is how the exhibition and catalogue's subtitle—'Division and Displacement'—has also been largely overlooked in the reception of *As Painting*. The presentation not only explores how the practices of 'division' and 'displacement' played a determining role in the exhibition's hanging in the galleries of the Wexner Center but how such terms reopen the very possibility of conjoining 'painting' and 'discourse' in the first place.

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### The Forgetting of Merleau-Ponty in France and in the US.

**Stephen Melville** (*Ohio State University*)

The absence of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in our accounts of the emergence and influence of the body of French thought taken often subsumed under the general term 'theory' is certainly one of its striking features. This paper proposes an overview of some broad institutional determinants of that absence, which takes, I suggest, very different shapes in France and in the US. The costs of this lacuna are high and particularly striking when it comes to treatments of 'the visual', but also reach well beyond that into fundamental questions about objectivity and the claims of 'theory'. The exhibition *As Painting: Division and Displacement* did not itself include any sustained reference to Merleau-Ponty but can in retrospect be seen to depend in part on an occluded presence of his work.

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### Thickness/Flatness + Thinness

**Mick Finch** (*University of the Arts, London*)

Hubert Damisch's *Fenetre jaune cadmium* (1984) was in many ways a riposte to American, Greenbergian formalism which dominated painting's post-war discursive field. Damisch's articulation of painting's thickness as the ground zero of the medium

was the crucial concept which challenged Greenberg and that flatness is the site of the painting's specificity. In *Painting as Model*, Yve-Alain Bois compounded this opposition by discussing the two formalisms, geographically displaced as the USA and Europe, and where thickness and flatness mark the divide as well as collage being fundamental to the European side.

Thickness is a useful concept with which to examine paintings by French artists such as François Rouan where strips of canvas are woven together generating a literal thickness of the surface and also generating an alternance between the visible and the hidden. The quality by which something is obscured is important to Christian Bonnefoi and where collage is firmly installed into the repertoire of painting. In Bonnefoi's work the thickness of the painting surface is problematised, through the use of the translucent material tarlatan. When he paints on both sides of the tarlatan the beholder is brought into the proximity of the surface's thinness; that it is barely there. The quality of the surface is in terms of its thinness. Perhaps even its infra-thinness (to allude to the Duchampian understanding of the term)? Other explorations of the infra-thin can be perceived in the works of Simon Hantaï and Dominique Figarella.

I will discuss Thickness / Flatness + Thinness in these terms and with these references and will hopefully expand upon Duchamp's unwitting presence amidst formalist border skirmishes.

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## **The Thickness of Painting: Hubert Damisch, François Rouan, Christian Bonnefoi**

***Ileana Parvu*** (Geneva University of Art and Design, HES-SO)

I propose to examine the discourse on painting that took place in the Parisian structuralist context, particularly in the review *Macula*, founded by Yve-Alain Bois and Jean Clay in 1976. I will focus my paper more specifically on the debate between the art historian Hubert Damisch and two painters, Christian Bonnefoi and François Rouan, that revolved around the question of the thickness of painting. Damisch opposed image and painting (*tableau*). While he turned away from image—similarly to Guy Debord and the Situationists, he thought that it was flat and depthless—he saw painting as capable of thickness. Beyond its surface, it is its vertical expansion that interested him. The thickness of painting refers to stratigraphy, to an accumulation of layers. Damisch sometimes thought of it as puff pastry.

Damisch developed the notion of thickness in reaction to the work of 20th century painters, including artists who were younger than him, as Bonnefoi and Rouan. In turn, his writings, and the concepts he put forth opened up new possibilities for them. This paper examines in particular how the motif of the braid in Rouan's work is a

figure of the thickness of painting, and how it transforms Simon Hantai's canvas folding from which it stems. This paper will also take into consideration Bonnefoi's works and writings, more specifically by bringing in resonance the multi-layered aspect of his paintings with what he calls "the glue function" (*la fonction-colle*) in Picasso's collages.

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## **Towards a Materialist Theory of Painting**

**Jenevive Nykolak** (*California State University*)

In *Théorie du nuage* (1972), Hubert Damisch concludes that the history of painting 'has yet to be written from a materialist point of view'. This history would contend with the 'annihilation' of painting's substratum under 'the applied layer of preparations, oils, pastes, and varnishes'. If such a history remains unwritten, the materials for its composition can be gleaned from the theory and practice of painting in France in the 1960s and 1970s—and from the obscurities and lacunae of its reception.

This talk sets out the coordinates of this materialist theory and practice of painting, from its roots in postwar art informel to its elaboration by otherwise divergent groups of painters, including 'BMPT', Supports/Surfaces, and ja-na-pa, who theorized painting as masking, concealment, layering, density, and thickness. This story also unfolds across diverse episodes, from a seminar with Louis Althusser and Damisch at the ENS on the 'conditions of the production' of painting to the 1973 'French Programme' at the ICA in London.

Its contours diverge sharply from familiar Greenbergian accounts. This history is embedded, instead, in the political and artistic specificity of postwar France. It takes shape between a materialism attuned to the sensible qualities of the medium and historical materialism proper, conditioned by the singular intellectual predominance of Marxism and the rise of the French New Left. The illegibility of this context within the 'death of painting' discourse that subsequently emerged within the Anglo-American artworld offers a spur to rethink the relationship between painting's materiality and its political heft.

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## **An Aesthetics of Resistance: Accardi, Hafif, Morales and a rethinking of post-war Italian painting.**

**Daniel Sturgis** (*University of the Arts, London*)

This paper focuses on a parallel Italian story to that of the artists associated with Support/Surfaces, the interconnected painting-strategies employed by three women painters working in Rome during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The paper argues that Carla Accardi (1924-2014), Marcia Hafif (1929-2018) and Carmengloria Morales

(\*1942) like the artists of Support/Surfaces saw painting as ‘under erasure’, and developed unique but related methods of painting which refused to be aligned to any of the dominant positions then dividing post-War Italian art. Such as, a Marxist championed form of realism, or a seemingly gendered type of a-priori geometric painting.

Through a close reading of each artist’s paintings, I will examine how they developed an understanding of painting built through tactics such as withdrawal, transparency, and repetition. And how by using these traits, their paintings and more specifically installations connect to ideas associated with the nascent feminist strategies of Carla Lonzi (1931-1982) – a position they would all distance themselves from as Lonzi’s feminist stance strengthened – and Toni Mariani’s (\*1941) championing of northern and southern Mediterranean cultural precedents and what Morad Montazami (\*1981) calls ‘transMediterranean modernism’.

Times	Session / Papers	Speakers
12:30 - 12:55 (Backstage)	Conference Assistant to lead tech run through with hosts followed by first session speakers	<b>Matthew Bowman</b>
12:55 - 14:30	Intro, Paper 1, 2 & 3	Intro by Matthew Bowman (12.55) Laura Lisbon (13.00) Stephen Melville (13.30) Mick Finch (14.00)
14:30 - 15:00	BREAK	
15:00 - 15:15 (Backstage)	Conference Assistant to lead tech run through with hosts and next session speakers	<b>Matthew Bowman</b>
15:15 - 17:00	Papers 4, 5 & 6 and closing comments	Ileana Parvu (15.15) Jenevive Nykolak (15.45) Daniel Sturgis (16.15) Wrapping-up by Matthew Bowman (16.45)
17:00 - 17:30	Breakout Session (optional)	All hosts and speakers

## Speaker Biographies:

**Laura Lisbon** is a painter and Chair of the Department of Art at the Ohio State University. Engaged in rethinking the limits of painting in relation to the limits of other perceptual and social conventions, she makes paintings as well as constructions that she terms “set-ups.” Exhibitions include a large-scale project for “Le paradoxe du diaphane et du mur” in Amilly, France (2010). Her most recent “set-up” was exhibited in “Gray Matters” at the Wexner Center for the Arts in 2017. Lisbon also participated in the third and fourth iterations of the collaborative painting project, “Impermanent Durations: On Painting and Time” (2017, 2019) with Beth Harland (UK), David Thomas (Australia), and Ian Woo (Singapore). With Philip Armstrong and Stephen Melville, she co-curated and co-wrote the catalogue for the exhibition “As Painting: Division and Displacement,” held at the Wexner Center in 2001. She has published essays in *La Part de L’Œil*, *Cahiers de l’Agart*, and *Journal of Contemporary Painting*, as well as most recently an essay on the painter Martin Barré for *Transatlantique* titled, “Before, Since, Still Martin Barré” (2020).

**Stephen Melville** is Professor Emeritus of the History of Art at Ohio State University. With Philip Armstrong and Laura Lisbon, he was co-curator of *As Painting: Division and Displacement* (The Wexner Center for the Arts and the MIT Press, 2001). He is the author of *Philosophy beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context* (Routledge, 1996) and co-author, with Margaret Iversen, of *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (University of Chicago, 2010), and the editor of *The Lure of the Object* (Clark Art Institute, 2003) and, with Bill Readings, of *Vision and Textuality* (Duke University Press, 1995).

**Mick Finch** is an artist, writer and researcher. He was principle investigator for the AHRC funded project, [A Vision for Europe: Academic Responsibility and Action in Times of Crises](#), in collaboration with the Warburg Institute, and the Bilderfahrzeuge research group. Outcomes of this project are an exhibition, *Bilder Auf Wanderschaft* at the Zentralinstitut in Munich, and the publication, *Image Journeys: The Warburg Institute and a British Art History*. He is a co-investigator on the AHRC-GCRF project [Imagining Futures](#) and is part of the team working on [T-Factor](#), an EU Horizon 2020 funded project. His writing includes many articles about the French post war painting context. He has also co-edited editions of the *Journal of Contemporary Painting* on *Simon Hantai* and an edition that revisited Yve-Alain Bois’ *Painting as Model*. He has shown his work extensively and internationally and is currently working on the *Book of Knowledge*, a series of digital collage prints from images appropriated from a 1950s encyclopedia of the same name. Finch is currently Professor in Visual Art Practice at the University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins.

**Ileana Parvu** is an Associate Professor of History and Theory of Art at the Geneva University of Art and Design, Switzerland and a lecturer at the University of Basel. Her PhD examined the three-dimensional objects executed by Picasso in 1914 and was published in 2007 by Peter Lang. Her most recent publications focus on artistic making and techniques after Conceptual Art (I. Parvu (ed.), *Faire, faire, faire, ne pas faire. Entretiens sur la production de l’art contemporain*. Dijon: Presses du réel, 2021) and on the notion of the object in the 1990s (I. Parvu, *La consistance des choses. Peter Fischli, David Weiss et le temps retourné*. Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2021).

**Jenevive Nykolak** is Assistant Professor of modern and contemporary art history at California State University, Los Angeles. Her current book manuscript, *The Ends of the Avant-Garde: Painting and Politics Circa 1968*, examines the politics of collectivity in France in the late 1960s and 1970s, and she has recently published articles in *Art History*, *Art Journal*, and *Selva*. She is an alumna of the Whitney Independent Study Program and the recipient of a Chateaubriand Fellowship in the Humanities and Social Sciences hosted by the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. In 2020, she was a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute Fellow.

### **Daniel Sturgis**

Daniel Sturgis is a British artist and professor of painting at the University of the Arts London. He is represented by at Luca Tommasi gallery in Milan and was artist in residence at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, USA (2016) and Chinati Foundation, Marfa Texas (2007). In 2011 he co-curated the major international exhibition *The Indiscipline of Painting* Tate St Ives and Warwick Art Centre (2011/12). He is a founding associate editor of the *Journal for Contemporary Painting*, a specialist selector and chapter author for Phaidon's painting anthology *Vitamin P3* and he has written for *Tate Papers*, *Burlington Magazine* and *Texte zur Kunst*.