Painting, Writing, Plasticity

For overly long now, the Hungarian painter Simon Hantaï has had a rather subterranean impact upon art history and theory but a more evident influence, thankfully, on a number of painters such as Daniel Buren, Michel Parmentier, the Supports/Surfaces conglomerate, and later figures; he has become a painter's painter, if you will. Hantaï, furthermore, has been important, perhaps even paradigmatic, for a couple of generations (at least) of French philosophers—people such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Georges Didi-Huberman, for example. Despite that centrality, however, there has been little in the way of sustained art-historical examination into Hantaï's work, especially outside of French academic circles. That situation began to change with the ground-breaking Wexner exhibition, *As Painting: Division and Displacement*. Curated by Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon, and Stephen Melville, *As Painting* spotlighted complex parallels between currents in French painting mostly from the 1960s onwards and aspects of minimalist and postminimalist practice in the U.S. Molly Warnock's recently published book *Simon Hantaï and the Reserves of Painting* builds upon the foundations constructed by that exhibition and, through sustained analysis of both Hantaï's canvases and writings, provides the most extensive reading of the artist to date.

Contributions to *The Tank* are often polemical; polemics, though, tend not to be my personal strong suit, especially when I'm in fundamental accord with the discussion in Warnock's book. But there is intellectual merit in—as the Situationists once put it—demanding the impossible. "Impossible" is admittedly an overly strong word here, since it is really a case of reimagining *Hantaï and the Reserves of Painting* as a significantly larger and more convoluted tome—one, on that account, capable of extending its manifold analytical threads into a virtually infinite tapestry. Because of the almost microscopically fine-grained examination undertaken by Warnock, which reaches its apogee in the scholarly empathy through which she phenomenologically conjures Hantaï's corporeality—right down to the specific posture of his hand gripping various implements—as he labors upon the canvas, there

is perhaps a certain value in stepping back to enlarge our purview. That is to say, there is a value as long as "stepping back" is a means for helping us to observe more closely.

As the central node of Warnock's book is an ambitious and painstaking work by Hantaï titled *Ecriture rose* (1958-59), which incorporates writing in an all-over manner upon the canvas. The first three chapters, interlinking the manifesto texts produced by Hantaï in parallel to different circumstances, build up to her analysis of that painting, which is then discussed at length in the fourth chapter. And, in turn, the subsequent four chapters, tackling Hantaï's better-known and more highly regarded *pliage* canvases, work through the consequences.

The fundamental question is where this leaves discourse in correspondence to painting; that is, how do we concretely imagine the transaction between painting and writing? It is worth our while to press that question because of its importance to Warnock's own engagement with Hantaï. But it's also a question that is arguably left under-resolved in her book, despite all the parallels rendered between painting and writing. This is perhaps surprising insofar as there was a widespread reconsideration of writing in French "postwar" intellectual culture that fed into painting that can be drawn upon here. For example, Maurice Blanchot's essays, his deeply philosophical examination of literature—the *space* of literature—that stemmed in part from rethinking Mallarme's legacy, had a major influence upon the emergent poststructuralist scene of the 1960s—especially Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida—that would subsequently feed into the practices of Buren and Parmentier. If Blanchot's thought underpins Barthes's notion of textuality and Derrida's references to *arche-writing* and spacing, then it is noteworthy that Blanchot is mostly absent from Warnock's book. That absence makes it difficult, in some respects, to comprehend more profoundly how writing and painting are intertwined in Hantaï's oeuvre. Yet I'm not going to overcome Blanchot's absence—or the absence of those who directly followed in his wake—but instead step onto a slightly different track by seeking to grapple these matters through the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy (another figure, of course, who has been influenced by Blanchot). The

benefit here is that Nancy, unlike Blanchot, has given considerable time to both painting and writing.

In a couple of essays written on the French artist François Martin—"Catalogue" and "Painting (and) Presence"—Nancy raises several perspectives upon the relationship between painting and writing, all the while trying to avoid the art-theoretical cliches that customarily weigh in upon analyses exploring that relationship. Foremost amongst these is painting and writing's utter and irrevocable separation that has often terminated in the major claim that writing *cannot* bespeak, encapsulate, recreate, or articulate the painting to any genuine degree whatsoever. That is to say, when confronted by the surface of the canvas, the words we proffer are supposedly destined to fall short; painting can only be seen, not discoursed upon. Nancy's interrogation of that claim is, at bottom, reflexive: at stake here is a question of how he, *qua* writer/philosopher, can do justice to Martin's paintings. While that problem is fully generalizable, it possesses extra force in this specific context, it appears, because Martin is a friend and contemporary of Nancy; Martin is in a position to reply to Nancy's texts on his painting in a manner that Caravaggio—for instance—is naturally unable to do so.

But it is not merely a question for Nancy of grounding and legitimating his own writing vis-à-vis Martin's paintings, though that is certainly important to him. Also fundamental here is Martin's own writing in relation to the canvases he paints. At stake, then, isn't so much the exteriority of the writer to the painter in this relationship but rather the degree to which (or whether at all) writing is exterior to painting. Moreover, as one carefully and repeatedly reads though both of Nancy's essays, it gradually dawns upon us (or me, at any rate) that Nancy is comported towards philosophizing writing's correspondence to painting largely because of how Martin's painting is *already* comported in just that way. That is to say, writing is internal rather than exterior to the fact of painting when it comes to Martin. And this is potentially emblematic of painting and writing as such, thereby strategically making Martin's oeuvre an indispensable point of entry into a whole constellation of longstanding questions and debates.

"On Painting (and) Presence" is Nancy's most sustained examination of the relationship between painting and writing vis-à-vis Martin. It is also the text in which his own status as philosopher writing about the work of painting is thoroughly reflected upon. At the heart of the essay is a question regarding to what extent there can be any intertwinement between painting and writing correlated with a repeated worry or suspicion that, ultimately and fundamentally, the two mediums are destined to remain non-isomorphic: "there is an incapacity, an infirmity, in impossibility inherent to writing about painting."[1] But that incapacity, Nancy remarks, is perhaps something that writing is not compelled to account for; rather, writing "is obliged to take into account that it will never account for [this incapacity]."[2] Because this incapacity is deep-rooted, there is no readymade discourse from which writing upon painting can proceed. Instead, it is a matter of beginning anew, seeking to trace the gesture of painting.

If one can envisage any commonality that can bring painting writing and painting together, at least to some degree, it is one premised upon a notion of plasticity. Probably with Jean-François Lyotard's book *Discourse, Figure* in mind, Nancy proposes:

> What has been suggested, what François Martin's *Semainier* suggests, is that figure and discourse, the plastic and language, while cutting into each other, also belong to the same *plasticity*: but how is this plasticity the same, by what spacing of itself, by what distance between painting and discourse, is this very distancing of the plastic to plastify, to figure and/or to speak. That is the question […] the primal given […] Paintings functioning as asignificant signs, with plastified significance, and in the face of them, signs writing "plastic," writing tracing "painting" and plastifying itself in the word …[3] .

Whilst this statement would come under interrogation at several junctures of Nancy's argument—partly because he oscillates between the necessity of writing and its apparent incapacity—it nonetheless provides an anchor for his reflections. The notion of plasticity would recur throughout, and Nancy would, furthermore, explore the possibility that painting

is a form of thinking (a possibility that has underscored discussions of specific artworks being definable as "theoretical objects"). In one way or another, Nancy echoes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's contention that "no thought ever detaches itself completely from a sustaining support"[4] by emphasizing the materiality or plasticity of thinking, a plasticity fully registered in the activity of writing and painting.

In conjoining writing and painting on the basis of a shared foundation in plasticity, Nancy is, quite directly, rearticulating a similar element found in Hegel's writing. Stephen Melville has suggested that Hegel implicitly conjoins sculpture and philosophy—rendering the latter into a reinvention or "replication" of the former at a higher level of the dialectic—insofar as both seek to engender and depend on a certain plasticity.[5] Although sculpture/philosophy is different from painting/writing, it should be noted that, for Hegel, the plasticity he ascribes to philosophy stems from philosophy being written and read, the necessity of words as the medium of philosophic articulation. We can observe that in certain passages such as the following: "it is only the kind of philosophical exposition which rigorously excludes the ordinary relations among the parts of a proposition which would be able to achieve the goal of plasticity."[6] Crucial to understand here is that achieving plasticity does not involve the translation of some nearly uneffable idea into the concreteness of words; rather, at stake here is a sense that ideas, content, can only emerge part and parcel of their plastic form. Again, quoting Hegel: "And it was not as if these ideas and doctrines were already there, in advance of poetry, in an abstract mode of consciousness … and categories of thought, and then later were only clothed in imagery by artists and given an external adornment in poetry; on the contrary, the mode of artistic production was such that what fermented in these poets they could work out only in this form of art and poetry."[7]

This detour has been to mark the conjunction between Nancy and Hegel on the point of plasticity, but their differences need also to be mentioned. After all, Hegel's reference is to classical sculpture, whereas Nancy is speaking of painting. And while Hegel perceives classical sculpture as embodying the perfect balance of form and content in which everything

is present and nothing withheld, thereby suggesting that plasticity is the term selected to designate that condition, Nancy's engagement with painting and writing is characterized by understanding both as evincing a discretion that manifests a reserve constitutive of both. Correspondingly, Nancy construes plasticity in tandem with the reserve it produces and thus also as installing a withheldness *in*, rather than simply behind, presence or coming-to-presence. It is partly due to this that writing is faced with incapacity when it seeks words for painting; but it is also the case because of that that writing can gesture towards painting's essential reserve insofar as it almost seems to help make it cognizable, perhaps even *plastify* that reserve. Writing, it seems, generates dis-course rather than discourse in its aspiration to write—or touch—upon painting.

Nancy has, of course, written on Hantaï as well, and to that degree, my focus upon the texts written on Martin may seem rather eccentric if it were not for their focus upon painting and writing's potential correspondence. But notwithstanding the substantial differences between Martin's and Hantaï's paintings—a complex figuration on the one side and an equally complex abstraction on the other—Nancy's words in many respects equally fit the latter as they do the former. For example, "Catalogue" can practically be read as appertaining to the small but ambitious catalogues Hantaï produced—such as the one accompanying the *Sexe-Prime: Hommage à Jean-Pierre Brisset et autres peintures de Simon Hantaï*, 1955—that are carefully analysed by Warnock in her book. And furthermore, Nancy's attentiveness to the blanks in Martin's works, which nearly serve to indicate a useful parallel the spacing important to Jacques Derrida's concept of arche-writing as well as the blanks of Mallarmé's pages, can similarly be read in light of Hantaï's works of the 1960s and 1970s and their own deployment of unpainted grounds. Indeed, it is perhaps conceivable to propose that if the discretion of Martin's paintings, the cutting of objects and entities from their quotidian environs in order to make them present is what creates reserve and spacing, then it is operation, for Nancy, that suggests or even produces a homology of sorts between painting and writing. That is to say, arche-writing becomes internal to painting in Martin and, by

extension, to Hantaï. Nancy, intriguingly, speaks of an "archi-plasticity," and it is a useful question to ask whether or how this specifically relates to Derrida's arche-writing.

All this, undeniably, is far too schematic and likely does not do sufficient justice to the complexity of Nancy's reflections. But hopefully it provides enough of an overview, thereby allowing a glimpse of how Nancy's syncopated chiasmus—simultaneously conjoining and separating painting and writing, Martin's artworks and Nancy's text, and ultimately Martin and Nancy themselves—can help unfold more exactingly how writing becomes constitutive of Hantaï's practice during and after *Ecriture rose*. And indeed, when one notices that the luminous soft-rose field dominating the canvas is built from innumerable layers of writing, then the shared plasticity of writing and painting becomes utterly unmistakable.

In bringing matters to a close, it strikes me as worth proposing another consequence of Hantaï's bridging of writing and painting. For the present context I will not delve deeply into this matter, but it's notable that the years following that particular moment also witnessed the development of the concept of the "theoretical object" —a key term that would be highly important to French art historians like Hubert Damisch and Louis Marin and subsequently be fully expanded by the Dutch art theorist/filmmaker Mieke Bal. That concept, to be sure, took a number of years to attain the relative clarity that it possesses for contemporary art-historical writing, but its hazy outlines are readily detectable in structuralist writers such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, particularly in their foundational notions of "theoretical practice" and "model." By design, however, these notions largely underlined a tendency to reproduce theory and practice as semi-autonomous domains.

As the 1960s progressed, it became increasingly necessary to recast the theory/practice division by reperceiving theory in materialist terms or at least encourage suspicion against the ideological effects that supported such a division. Phenomenology's complex interweaving with structuralism during this period can arguably by comprehended as one instance whereby a materialist theory became imaginable. Damisch, for instance, drew from both the late writings of Merleau-Ponty and developments in Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology while

also putting them to the test of painters such as Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, and, crucially, Jean Dubuffet.[8] It is through the conjunction of these diverse figures that he would later explore the concept of the theoretical object.

Hantaï, too, could also be said to be a forerunner in the concept of the theoretical object. No doubt more needs to be unpacked here, yet it perhaps moves us quickly enough to the heart of the matter if I propose that the function of the "theoretical object" is to reengineer the art historian's interpretative stance vis-à-vis the artwork insofar as the former tracks the artwork's own capacity to generate theoretical reflection rather than import and marshal a pre-packaged theory into its orbit. Construing theory as always already immanent to the artwork and understanding the art historian's job as to recognize and rearticulate that theory surely involve at bottom understanding writing and painting as intimately woven, as sharing a common plasticity. Hantaï's work, as Warnock's book demonstrates, is indispensable for grasping the later emergence of the theoretical object in art writing.

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[1] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Of Painting (and) Presence," in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes, et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 341.
[2] Nancy, "Of Painting (and) Presence," 342.
[3] Ibid., 345.
[4] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 149.
[5] Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, "Plasticity: The Hegelian Writing of Art," in *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
[6] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 40, paragraph 64.
[7] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 102.
[8] It's worth noting in passing that Dubuffet is a surprisingly absent figure in Warnock's book, only awarded a couple of brief mentions. A fuller discussion comparing Dubuffet and Hantaï in the late 1950s into the 1960s would certainly prove illuminating. Indeed, they may be the two touchstones of contemporary French painting at that time. Arguably there is a kinship there that gets rather lost underneath the categories of *art informel* and *tachisme* that were very much in vogue during that period.