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The intertwining – Damisch, Bois, and *October*'s rethinking of painting

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Abstract

While most of Hubert Damisch's major books have been made available in English since the publication of Yve-Alain Bois' review essay 'Painting as model', it nonetheless remains a shame that *Fenêtre Jaune Cadmium* (Damisch 1984) – the subject of Bois' review – has not been translated. Although best known as a specialist in Renaissance art, the essays of *Fenêtre* show how Damisch's distinct art-theoretical project emerges from his early writings on modernist and post-war painting, phenomenology and structuralism. This paper argues that Damisch's writings and Bois' essay serves as a crux for the *October* journal. *October* was at the forefront of the critique against painting during the early 1980s, but the publication of 'Painting as model' suggests a sea change in the journal. I shall examine how Damisch's entwining of phenomenology and structuralism, as a model for *October* that helped revise its understanding of painting and for rethinking the relationship between art history and art criticism.

Keywords

Hubert Damisch

Yve-Alain Bois

October journal

painting

phenomenology

structuralism

Of all the essays collected in Yve-Alain Bois' *Painting as Model* (Bois 1990b), it is surely the title essay that serves as both a skeleton key to the book's various analyses and plausibly to Bois' scholarly output as a whole. And indeed, the great significance accorded to the essay 'Painting as model' is undoubtedly highlighted by the decision to name the book after it.¹ Yet this potentially obscures the fact that, at least on face value, the essay is a review of another book of essays – namely, Hubert Damisch's *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* (Damisch 1984) – rather than a theoretical statement explicating Bois' approach to art. There is no reason, of course, to assert that no reconciliation is possible between the essay serving as a review of somebody else's work and an explanation of one's own critical procedures. It certainly appears to be the case that 'Painting as model' fulfils this dual function – as well as arguably a few others. This is evident, for instance, when Bois notes that his exceptionally careful analysis earlier in the book of Mondrian's *New York* is indebted to Damisch's own early engagement with the same artist.

Nonetheless, there is a certain value in fastening upon the essay's status as a summation of Damisch's writing and his underlying methodology. While several of Damisch's books have been translated into English in the last two-and-a-half decades,

Fenêtre jaune cadmium itself and most of the essays that comprise it – written over a period stretching from the late 1950s to the early 1980s – disappointingly have not. From an Anglophone standpoint, this is especially unfortunate as it restricts our comprehension of Damisch’s importance to art-theoretical thought and leaves that audience dependent upon Bois’ reconstruction of Damisch’s writings. This is not necessarily disastrous, but Bois’ review does make it clear that in crucial respects Damisch’s interpretative work is conditioned by the utter specificity of the artwork under discussion; the limits imposed by the review essay, however, entails that Bois can largely only engage Damisch in a more generalized fashion by identifying four characteristic models informing the specificity of Damisch’s approach.

Moreover, whilst in the English-speaking world the translation of major books such as *A Theory of /Cloud/*, *The Origin of Perspective* and *The Judgment of Paris* have shown Damisch to be an innovative art historian predominantly re-examining the Renaissance, the limited availability of the essays comprising *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* renders it somewhat difficult to appreciate the extent to which Damisch’s historical focus is significantly indebted to the study of twentieth-century painters such as Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, Jackson Pollock, François Rouan and, especially, Jean Dubuffet. Damisch has remarked upon the high importance he attaches to the study of contemporary art, stating ‘there is no valid art history that doesn’t have its point of departure in the present’ (Damisch and Bann 2005: 167). And because of this, it can be suggested that not only is a fuller apprehension of Damisch’s writings made harder to achieve, but it carries the additional risk of even obfuscating a deep understanding of Bois’ own writing.

My article’s aim, then, is to read Bois and Damisch together so that the positions of both may be explicated without, however, collapsing one into the other.

The route I will take shall be somewhat circuitous as I wish to locate the significance of the review in its intersection between disparate contexts. Bois' review essay 'Painting as model' was published in the summer 1986 issue of the art-critical journal *October*. The fact it was published in *October* is highly noteworthy for several reasons that deserve outlining. Perhaps the most straightforward reason for its notability is that *October* tends not to publish essays reviewing books; in its 40 odd years of existence, 'Painting as model' stands as one of the few occasions where it has actually done so. But there is a further significance that becomes perceptible when we consider *October*'s overall attitude towards painting up to the point when Bois published his review essay.

In 1981, *October* published a special dedicated to a selection of 'art world follies'. Two of the essays, Douglas Crimp's 'The end of painting' and Benjamin Buchloh's 'Figures of authority, ciphers of regression', provided thoroughgoing and largely cogent critiques of recent debates in painting, or, rather, painting under the guise of Neo-expressionism. The beginning of the 1980s witnessed a resurgence in painterly practices defined by gestural brushwork, figuration and energetic self-expressiveness on both sides of the Atlantic. Within the polemical arguments made at the time, this resurgence was viewed as pushing aside the minimalist, post-minimalist and conceptual modes of artistic production that was dominant from the mid 1960s onwards until the end of the 1970s. A typical example here was the 1981 exhibition 'A New Spirit in Painting' at the Royal Academy, in the catalogue for which Christos Joachimides wrote

The overemphasis on the idea of autonomy in art which brought about Minimalism and its extreme appendix conceptual art, was bound to be self-

defeating. Soon the avant-garde of the 1970s, with its narrow puritanical approach devoid of all joy in the senses, lost its creative impetus and began to stagnate. (1981: 15)

Rejecting minimalism, Joachimides stressed the ‘sheer joy of painting’ and exclaims that ‘A New Spirit in Painting’ is an exhibition ‘which conspicuously asserts traditional values, such as individual creativity, accountability, quality [...]. Thus for all its apparent conservatism the art on show here is, in the true sense, progressive’ (1981: 15).

It was this kind of discourse that Crimp and Buchloh set themselves against in their respective essays. Indeed, Buchloh’s essay, amongst other qualities, is a blackly funny compendium of the overblown rhetoric that accompanied Neo-expressionism. While Crimp’s and Buchloh’s essays were undoubtedly heavy-handed in response to the situation, thus resulting in certain simplifications and de-contextualizations that unfortunately thrust disparate practices under a single rubric, it is nonetheless clear from even just a cursory reading that not all forms of painting were equally culpable. For example, Buchloh remarks that

Excited brushwork and heavy impasto paint application, high contrast colours and dark contours are still perceived as ‘painterly’ and ‘expressive’ twenty years after Stella’s, Ryman’s, and Richter’s works demonstrated that the painted sign is not transparent, but is a coded structure which cannot be as unmediated ‘expression’. (1981: 56)

On this score, then, the explicit claims made by or on behalf of Neo-expressionism had already been disproven by painters such as Gerhard Richter and Robert Ryman in the 1960s. And Crimp, for his part, identified Daniel Buren as the exemplar of a critical model of painting utterly distinct from Neo-expressionism. For his own part, Bois maintains this tendency of pitting a critical understanding of painting specifically against Neo-expressionism in his own essay on Ryman's practice (1981).

However, although it was possible to make subtle but important discriminations between different procedures within the field of painting, the overall drift of Buchloh's and Crimp's essays was that painting is a medium to be handled with scepticism. The function of Buren in Crimp's essay should particularly be highlighted in this regard. Rather than claiming that Buren is an example of how one can *continue* to paint and find value in painting, Crimp postulates that the significance of Buren's practice derives from its revealing of painting's intrinsically and irrevocably *moribund* condition. It was not a matter of recovering painting's critical purchase but of pushing the medium to its absolute conclusion. As Crimp writes in the final lines of the essay:

In a climate in which Stella's hysterical constructions can so readily be seen as paintings, it is understandable that Buren's works cannot. It is therefore not surprising that Buren is widely regarded as a Conceptual artist who is unconcerned with the visible (or what Marcel Duchamp called the retinal) aspects of painting. But Buren has insisted specifically on the visibility of his work, the necessity for it to be *seen* [emphasis in original]. For he knows only too well that when his

stripes are seen as painting, painting will be understood to be the ‘pure idiocy’ that it is. At the moment when Buren’s work becomes visible, the code of painting will have been abolished and Buren’s repetitions can stop: the end of painting will have been finally acknowledged. (1981: 85–86)

From our present vantage point, it is hard to agree with Crimp’s premise that Buren would cease his characteristic production once painting’s demise had been accepted. At best, Crimp’s polemical exaggeration has the virtue of suggesting how misconstrued Buren’s work has been – and this specific misconstrual is far from being unique to Crimp. One of the predominant characteristics of that persistent miscomprehension has been to subordinate the specificity of Buren’s painting to the category of Institutional Critique, thereby rendering his procedures as equivalent to those of Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers and Hans Haacke. To identify Buren as an artist engaged in Institutional Critique is not altogether wrong, and indeed there is a dimension to his practice deeply reflexive about conditions of display; but such an identification arguably has more to do with the difficult situation faced by alternative spaces due to the election of Ronald Reagan and his promise to reduce federal funding for non-commercial art galleries. If Crimp could write in 1979 that ‘if we now have to look for aesthetic activities in so-called alternative spaces, outside of the museum, that is because those activities, those *pictures* [emphasis in original], pose questions that are postmodernist’ (Crimp 1979: 88) then two years later such a remark became virtually impossible insofar as it became seemingly necessary, because of the decline of the margins, to relocate criticality within the mainstream. The claims that developed around Institutional Critique in the early to mid-1980s arguably reflect the

need to discover potentially critical or subversive artistic practices *within* the museum and other centres of cultural power rather than *outside* of them.

Whilst the political context of that specific conjuncture manifestly influenced Crimp's reading of Buren's practice as Institutional Critique, he does nonetheless insist upon the status of the French artist's work as painting. That insistence quietly vanishes in subsequent writings on Buren by fellow *October*-associated critics Hal Foster and Craig Owens. Foster speaks of Buren's 'banners and flags' (1985: 101), for example; thereby leaving equivocal how these works are made. And both Foster and Owens (see Owens 1992) concentrate their attention upon the institution that they take to be the target of Buren's analysis. Neither of their essays when discussing Buren mentions the word 'painting', as if either because doing so would hamper the artwork's radicality or because Foster and Owens simply could not perceive Buren's work under that rubric.

What goes missing here is not only the recognition – let alone the acknowledgement – of Buren's 'banners and flags' as paintings, but also any sense of *how* these striped surfaces can perform the operation ascribed to them of spotlighting and interrogating art's institutional framing. Buren's essay 'Critical limits' strongly argues for a theoretical analysis of painting's material elements – its support, defined by a recto and verso that is entwined through the in-out weave of the canvas, and the application of paint or other materials to the support, thereby producing a layering that covers over the support, ultimately hiding it but also drawing attention to the hiddenness (Buren [1970] 1973). As Stephen Melville writes,

['Critical Limits'] explores how painting opens beyond itself by virtue of the limits that define it onto a field it inevitably reveals as both relational

and contingent, exposed to, and so capable of exposing, the institutional and cultural limits within which it claims its presence. (2001: 87)

Buren is mentioned just once in the book *Painting as Model*, and is done so in such a manner that passingly links him with Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine as part of a post-Duchampian critique of authenticity that raises a number of questions about his inclusion. However, there is a certain value in supposing or imagining that Bois would find the way Buren has been discussed by his *October* colleagues during the 1980s, alongside the larger doctrine that the moment of painting had been surpassed, to be deeply problematic. One can point, at the very least, to the extraordinary reconceptualization of painting that happened in France from the late 1950s up until the end of the 1970s. All I can do in such a limited compass is mention names such as Simon Hantaï, Michel Parmentier, François Rouan, Claude Viallat, Martin Barré, Christian Bonnefoi and the Supports-Surfaces conglomerate; hopefully, though, that is enough to mark out the relevant territory for our current purposes (good introductory texts include Millet [1987] 2006; Armstrong et al. 2001). Generally speaking, these artists perceived themselves as inheritors of a highly reflexive model of painting that was initiated by figures such as Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, Henri Matisse and Piet Mondrian.

Spanning and intertwining different artworld contexts, Bois has been only too cognisant of the transatlantic divergent attitudes regarding painting, abstraction, modernism and theory. To be sure, Bois has maintained some distance from the French painting of the 1960s and 1970s. In his review of the Supports-Surface retrospective at the Pompidou, for instance, he admits to being embarrassed by the Maoist tendencies that characterized the group's discourse and self-understanding

(see Bois 1998). But it can be stated that the founding of the short-lived critical journal *Macula* by Bois and Jean Clay in 1976 evinced a stake in painting's continued relevance as a theoretical object.

We have therefore a situation in which, despite the prevalence of French theoretical works appearing in North America through translations, French painting did not quite manage the transatlantic crossing. What makes this situation rather unusual is that those practices in painting were frequently in sustained dialogue with the positions of theorists such as Louis Althusser, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida and others; but perhaps this simply underscores the idea that texts are more readily portable and distributable than artworks. More importantly, this lop-sided transmission of French cultural practices – theory and art – could be construed as the corollary of two myths, surreptitiously dominant in the North American artworld, that emerged successively but were coexistent by the beginning of the 1980s. The first myth being the Donald Judd claim that Paris had been supplanted by New York and that painting had been decisively replaced by the specific object. And the second myth, dependent on the first in numerous respects, held that the resurgence of European culture and art was to be identified with Neo-expressionist painting and its apparent brushing aside of minimalism and conceptualism. Between the Judd myth and the counter-Judd myth (if we may heuristically adopt this as a shorthand categorization), there was little scope for the complex French painting that followed from Hantaï's example.

Bois' review essay of Damisch's book, then, should be seen in light of this sheer mismatch between contexts and as an endeavour to force its recognition. In publishing his review in the *October* journal, and tracking the specificity of Damisch's theoretical analysis of painting, Bois imparts a lesson to an Anglophone

audience whose horizons are delimited by either the Judd myth or counter-Judd myth. Strategically, it performs the same function as his contemporaneous essay 'Painting: The task of mourning', written for the exhibition catalogue of *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, in which a certain reopening of painting becomes necessary. Indeed, the two essays were published in close proximity to one another. 'Painting as model' appeared during the summer of 1986, whereas *Endgame* opened at Boston's Institute for Contemporary Art on 25 September of that year. The necessary line of interrogation we must undertake, in that case, would be to ask what it is about Damisch that allows the stranglehold of the two myths to be loosened, perhaps even broken.

In reading *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*, Bois summarizes four 'models' that identify the fundamental constituents of Damisch's distinct engagement with painting: namely, the perceptive model, the technical model, the symbolic model and the strategic model. The first three models are all characterized by an exceptionally close analysis of specific paintings and practices that permits Damisch to demonstrate how the material qualities of paintings are of theoretical import. And the fourth model, Bois argues, stands 'with respect to the other models in a second, metaphorical position' though Damisch is able to ask questions 'of the pictorial specificity (of invention) and survival of painting, without getting stuck once more in the essentialism to which American formalist criticism has accustomed us' (Bois 1990a: 255, 1986b: 135). This last remark, referring of course to Clement Greenberg, betokens the presumed American audience that Bois has in mind. It also shows Bois demarcating Damisch from Greenberg, thereby signalling that the revaluation of abstract painting does not mean a return to a Greenbergian late-modernist essentialism that so-called postmodernist practices had superseded.

Central to the first three models – the perceptive, technical and symbolic – is the relationship between paint and its support as well as the figure/ground opposition that undergirds acts of perception. Damisch’s 1958 article – the earliest included in the book – on Mondrian displays the perceptual model, while the technical is prevalent in a 1959 essay on Jackson Pollock, and the symbolic is most fully expressed in Bois’ account in a 1983 essay on François Rouan. Although presented in this chronological manner might suggest that these models describe a consecutive development, it is more accurate to say that they are coexistent. Or, perhaps rather, if they do succeed one another, then the act of succession does not replace the previous moment but interweaves with it.

Importantly, Mondrian’s paintings determine the course that Damisch’s art-theoretical concerns would take. At the essay’s heart, as Bois remarks, is its criticism of Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1940 book *The Imaginary*, particularly its closing discussion of painting. Sartre’s thesis is that artworks are defined by their creation of ‘irreality’, meaning that our attention is drawn beyond the material object before us to the imagined reality that the artwork depicts or represents. According to Sartre, in a theory later echoed by E. H. Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* (Gombrich 1960), we cannot perceive the brushstrokes comprising the painting and the picture *simultaneously*. Moreover, to attend to those brushstrokes would be a misperception on our part inasmuch as the imagined object is the proper concern of art: ‘What is real, we must never tire of affirming, are the results of the brushstrokes, the impasting of canvas, its grain, the varnish spread over the colours. But, precisely, all this is not the object of aesthetic appreciation’ (Sartre [1940] 2010: 189). This holds true, Sartre claims, even when it comes to abstract painting, by which he is largely thinking of Cubism:

Certainly, it no longer represents nature. The real object no longer functions as an analogon for a bouquet of flowers or a clearing. But when I ‘contemplate’ it, I am not, for all that, in the realizing attitude. The painting still functions as an *analogon*. It is simply that what is manifested through it is an irreal ensemble of *new things* [emphasis in original], of objects that I have never seen nor will ever see but that are nonetheless irreal objects, objects that do not exist in the painting, nor anywhere in the world, but that are manifested through the canvas and that have seized it by a kind of possession. (Sartre [1940] 2010: 190–91)

Thus, even the most abstract of paintings will nonetheless displace attention away from their material qualities and instead comport it towards a ‘new thing’ that may not exist but can be posited by the imagining consciousness. Against Sartre’s argument, which runs strikingly contrary to the Husserlian dictum of ‘to the things themselves’, Damisch poses a phenomenological counter-argument that will emphasize painting in all its unbridled materiality. Mondrian’s paintings, for instance, ‘hinder the movement whereby an unreal object is constituted from the tangible reality of the painting, the eye being ceaselessly led back to the painting’s constituent elements, line, color, design’ (Damisch [1958] 1984: 69, cited in Bois 1990a: 248, 1986b: 128). However, if for Sartre the work of imagination is demonstrative of its innate freedom, it does not mean that Damisch’s focus upon the real is tantamount to a curtailment of that freedom. Instead, Mondrian’s paintings are said to *awaken* the gaze, foreground the complexity of seeing and this is achieved through their material

qualities. For Damisch, on Sartre's account the artwork's power would be exhausted as soon as the imagining consciousness has run its course; whereas for him the phenomenological complexity of Mondrian's paintings activate

some more secret activity of consciousness, an activity by definition without assignable end, contrary to the imagining activity which exhausts itself in the constitution of the object. Each time perception thinks it can go beyond what is given it to see toward what it would constitute as meaning, it is immediately led back to the first experience, which seems to falter in constituting that white as background and this black as form. (Damisch [1958] 1984: 71, cited in Bois 1990a: 248, 1986b: 128)

There is much that can be taken from those lines, but I want to highlight just two aspects. The first aspect I will hold off from talking about for a while, but it is the description of the imaging conscious as departing from the artwork's materiality towards meaning. For the present it is enough to say that this generates a form/content binary that Damisch finds problematic. And the second aspect is the equivocal status of background and form (or figure) in Mondrian's painting.

Such an equivocation becomes utterly fundamental to Damisch's enterprise, reappearing in numerous writings. It is present in the following year's essay on Jackson Pollock and becomes absolutely central to his extraordinary essay on Jean Dubuffet published in 1962. Indeed, while Bois only briefly refers to that essay, Kent Minturn is surely correct in proposing that Dubuffet virtually constitutes a fifth model that can be superadded to the four Bois enumerates (2015). Damisch returns more

frequently to Dubuffet's paintings, it seems, then any other painter and was the editor of the artist's writings. Particularly impressing upon Damisch is Dubuffet's commitment to the materiality of painting. Once again, though more subtly, rebutting Sartre, Damisch argues that Dubuffet 'was not waiting for images, but, on the contrary, eager to put them to the test of the material [...]' (Damisch [1962] 2014: 304). The results of this testing increasingly leads Dubuffet to concentrate upon the ground of painting to such an extent that the figure virtually disappears. Moreover, Damisch richly exploits the homology between the ground of perception, the ground of painting's surface and the ground beneath our feet by presenting Dubuffet as a kind of disruptive phenomenological geologist. One of its primary effects is to confuse vertical and horizontal orientations, thereby producing a sense of formlessness and an active beholding. As Damisch contends, Dubuffet forces

the gaze to consider the painted surface as a ground seen from above and, at the same time, to establish the ground as a wall which calls for the intervention of man, by way of the line or the imprint. (Damisch [1962] 2014: 310)

Implicitly writing against Alberti's definition of surface as an 'outer limit of a body which is recognized not by depth but by width and length' (2004: 38), Damisch underscores the importance for Dubuffet of surface as embodying a thickness that can be inscribed and incised in such a manner that what resides below the epidermis is brought to the fore. Surface becomes marked by, and hence interwoven with, what is underneath. Just as the landscape viewed from above can reveal archaeological traces of human intervention, Damisch asks 'is it then possible that the consideration of

facies is the point of departure for any geognosy – even for, if we may say so, any science of the ‘depths’, including psychology and sociology?’ ([1962] 2014: 311). Similarly, he adduces, in his book *A Theory of /Cloud/*, that ‘Pictorial writing itself *produces*, either positively or negatively, its own substratum’ ([1972] 2002: 104). To that extent, surface does not *precede* the painting, but rather is produced by it and hence can be pushed in such a manner that it becomes *articulated* by the painting. Similar, in a passage from his 1959 essay on Pollock that strikingly marks the boundary line demarcating himself from Greenberg, Damisch adumbrates how Pollock’s skeins of paint constitute:

Lines that plow the canvas though and through, in a counterpoint that no longer develops in width but in *thickness* [emphasis in original], and each of which has no meaning except in relation to the one that precedes it – each projection of color succeeding another as though to efface it. ([1959] 1984: 80, cited in Bois 1990a: 250, 1986b: 130)

Surface, or rather ground, becomes a ‘materiology’ of thickness from the dripping and pouring of painting. The ridges and furrows from this action of pouring does not become akin to figure and ground, respectively; however, insofar as the thickness of the painterly skeins continuously displaces what comes before and is in turn displaced by what comes next.

By comprehending the intertwining of painting and canvas in such a way that painting becomes the deliberate articulation of surface, Damisch extends the final writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. A few details by way of intellectual biography may prove helpful here. In 1955, Damisch became associated with Merleau-Ponty at

the Sorbonne, where the phenomenologist prodded Damisch in the direction of Ernst Cassirer's concept of symbolic forms and Erwin Panofsky's historico-theoretical essay 'Perspective as "Symbolic Form"'. The formative years of Damisch's development thus coincides with the final period of Merleau-Ponty's career, a period in which he was busy reconfiguring his philosophical approach as exemplified in 1945s *The Phenomenology of Perception* and his essay 'Cézanne's doubt'. At the beginning of 1959 Merleau-Ponty began drafting notes for *The Visible and the Invisible* and wrote the first three chapters of it from March to June of that year. In November 1959, he completed his essay on Edmund Husserl and historicity, 'The philosopher and his shadow'. During February 1960 Merleau-Ponty wrote the first part of the introduction to his collection of his essays titled *Signs* and over the course of July and August he produced his landmark essay 'Eye and mind'. In September he returned to the introduction for *Signs* and added material to it and then in November he also returned to *The Visible and the Invisible*, writing his important chapter 'The intertwining – The Chiasmus'. 'Eye and mind' was published in January 1961 in the inaugural issue of *Art de France*; Merleau-Ponty died in the May of that year. Meanwhile, Damisch was working in 1961 on his major essay concerning Jean Dubuffet's paintings. In November 1961, Damisch wrote to Dubuffet to tell him about the completed essay, and the essay was published in the second issue of *Art de France* in January 1962, which is surely no mere happenstance.

Although it would require another paper altogether to outline all the ramifications, it is tempting to imagine Damisch's writing as a radical interpretation and continuation of Merleau-Ponty's incomplete final works. For example, Merleau-Ponty's working notes for *The Visible and the Invisible* play a recurring and significant role in Damisch's *The Origin of Perspective* and in a footnote Damisch

acknowledges the debt to the lecture course on Husserl's 'The origin of geometry' given by Merleau-Ponty in 1959–60 (Damisch [1987] 1994: 82, also see Merleau-Ponty 2002). There is nothing straightforward, to be sure, about this continuation insofar as Merleau-Ponty's influence and legacy is meshed with other figures such as the structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss and Dubuffet. In lieu of writing a detailed essay solely on the kinship between Merleau-Ponty and Damisch, it is instructive at any rate to highlight two aspects shared by 'Eye and mind' and the essay on Dubuffet. First, in 'Eye and mind' surface does not preclude the experience of depth but is the condition *for* it:

When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the floor, I do not see it *despite* [emphasis in original] the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it *as* it is and where it is – which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place. I cannot say that the water itself – the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element – is *in* space; all this is not somewhere else instead, yet it is not contained there; and if I lift my eyes towards the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections plays, I must recognize that the water visits it as well, or at least sends out to it its active, living essence. This inner animation, this radiation of the visible, what the painter seeks beneath, the words *depth*, *space*, and *color*. (Merleau-Ponty [1961] 1993: 142)

This conjoins with the complex intertwining between exteriority and interiority that serves as the hallmark of Merleau-Ponty's incomplete *The Visible and the Invisible*. And second, near the end of 'Eye and mind', Merleau-Ponty writes 'no thought ever detaches itself completely from a sustaining support' ([1961] 1993: 149) – an insight, of course, repeated in a number of works by Mel Bochner. This is an idea worth dwelling awhile upon insofar as it also shared by Damisch and Bois and conjures different lines of enquiry. First, it arises in the context of an extended discussion of painting and it is easy enough to read the 'sustaining support' thought requires to be directly equivalent to the support – canvas, the wall—that painting needs. On initial glance, though, the equivalence possesses a modicum of disanalogy as we might assume that thought's sustaining support is the immaterial horizon or conditions of possibility whereas painting's support is irreducibly material. The apparent disanalogy need not be overly concerning since the horizon-as-support can assuredly incorporate a manifold of materialist and social practices.

A second line of enquiry would be to press the comparison in another direction by picking up on the 'reversibility' at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's late writings (see Dillon 1997). At stake here is not just an application of a metaphor stemming from painting to thought, but also a claim that painting is a mode of thought, that 'matter thinks'. Here it is not a question of imputing agency to matter, but of grasping how we can think through or *in* matter. Damisch, on this score, is proximate to Claude Lévi-Strauss, especially to the latter's 'The science of the concrete', the opening chapter of *The Savage Mind* [Lévi-Strauss 2004 [1962]]. At the risk of simplification, Damisch's writings can be comprehended as more or less co-equally merging Merleau-Ponty's late phenomenology with Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology. Apropos this issue, Damisch writes:

The concept of a *model* [emphasis in original] seems to provide a particularly apt instrument for bringing about such a reconciliation [between ‘structural ideology’ and ‘phenomenological description’], on the condition that one accepts the basic principal of the structural method – namely, that the notion of structure is related not to empirical reality but to analytical models constructed afterward. This principle, to which phenomenological description can very well adapt, assumes a special significance in architecture insofar as a building that lends itself to structural analysis is also one able to function as a model for thought. ([1964] 2016: 107)

Needless to say, Bois’ approach to art criticism has likewise seen an overcoming of the supposed opposition between phenomenology and structuralism. And naturally, Damisch’s proposal that a building can operate as a model for thought is consistent with the idea that painting can also be a model. As thinking, painting *is* the relationship between the material facts of paint and its support. To assert that there is no painting-thinking without a sustaining support means also to suggest that support also needs acknowledgement and careful examination. However, it should not be assumed that the support exists in advance or prior to the thought; rather, it comes into existence when the thought does as an essential constituent part. Bridging thought and painting, Merleau-Ponty renders the idea that painting, because of its material properties, is construable as a mode of thinking. That is to say, there is a conjunction between depth as physical quality and depth as a function of thought. Damisch

restates this notion when he quotes Dubuffet's 1951 dictum that 'painting can be a subtle machine for conveying philosophy, even, initially, for elaborating it' (cited in [1962] 2014: 303). In the essay on Mondrian, the issue is already of decisive significance for Damisch as shown when he asks 'And, more profoundly, what does it mean for a painter *to think?* [emphasis in original]' (Damisch [1958] 1984: 59).

On this account, then, the paintings and practices examined by Damisch constitute theoretical models. It is not a matter of bringing theory *to* the painting, but of *describing* the theoretical reflection *already* at work within it. This work, therefore, is being done *in* and *as* painting. In a later essay on Hantaï and Rouan, Damisch remarks that technique

cannot be simply reduced to a procedure [*procédure*], but rather sees itself elevated to the rank of the work's generating principle, in its form as much as in its operation (too long obscured in favour of 'content'), and right down to the material. (Damisch [2005] 2015: 231)

That parenthetical comment, challenging the form/content opposition by substituting content with operation, is particularly noteworthy in this context. It interweaves with the statement quoted earlier in which Damisch rejects Sartre's impulse to institute meaning beyond the specificity of painting's material presence that is given to perception. Although Damisch does not explain his scepticism, presumably it stems from a thought that the emphasis upon content, its designation as the other to form, potentially leads one to become inattentive to the theoretical work being carried out by painting. In other words, a discursive factor is substituted for the painting itself. Along these lines, Damisch justifies his deep scepticism towards any

metaphoric notion of ‘reading’ a painting. Paintings are the working of texture, not texts. And therefore the overarching aim of art history is to travel through description and eventually arrive at a *silence* proper to painting (see Bois et al. 1998).

Quite a task, in that case, has been assigned to the beholder; a task in which the beholder is brought to the limits of perception and language. Damisch approvingly cites Dubuffet’s belief that paintings should not ‘be looked at passively, not embraced all at once by an observer’s immediate gaze, but relived in its elaboration, remade by thought and I dare say re-enacted [...]. He feels all the painter’s gestures reproducing themselves in him’ (Damisch [1962] 2014: 311). Balzac’s classic novella *The Unknown Masterpiece*, as Bois notes, has provided Damisch with much food for thought in this regard (see Bois 1990a: 251, 1986b: 131). It tells the story of three painters: the brilliant old master Frenhofer, the establishment figure Porbus and the up-and-coming Poussin. Coming together by chance, they discuss art theory and painting. At one point Frenhofer gives a practical lesson by improving one of Porbus’ works merely by adding one or two more strokes. ‘it’s only the last stroke of the brush that counts. [...] No one will thank us for what’s underneath. Remember that’, Frenhofer informs Porbus and Poussin (Balzac 2001: 19). And yet in an extended monologue he gives an extraordinary account which suggests that whatever is *on* the surface is indebted to what is *underneath*, that he cannot avoid being conscious of, and thus engaged with, the interplay between the numerous layers of paint. At the risk of giving spoilers, its final pages present Porbus and Poussin staring uncomprehendingly at a canvas comprised of a ‘wall of paint’ that has finally been completed, after many delays, by the aging Frenhofer. Confused at first, they are reassured when they believe they see a foot beneath the painting. ‘There’s a woman under there!’ Porbus exclaims, and meaning is hence restored to the painting (Balzac

2001: 41). The search for content, meaning, looks underneath the surface, thereby re-establishing the figure/ground relationship and hence normal perception by firmly disassociating surface from depth. While Bois describes this layering as ‘inaccessible to pure vision’, it is not quite beyond the realm of perception as such. Again, it is the notion that depth is only experienceable, or cognizable, *as* surface. I take it this is what Bois means that the ‘technical model’, which he associates with Damisch’s concern for thickness and fascination with Balzac’s philosophic tale, ‘implies a knowledge and a speculation’ (Bois 1990a: 252, 1986b: 132).

But the re-emergence of normal perception does not, of course, mean that a clear-sighted view of painting has been instantiated. On the contrary, we have the maintenance of blindness, an inability to see and think the painting at all. The art criticism and practice of the 1960s ultimately tended to construe Greenberg’s infamous ‘flatness and the delimitation of flatness’ as an absoluteness of surface, almost devoid of either figure or ground, that posed little trouble to the beholder’s eye. That is to say, whether taken as a degree zero or logical culmination, the flat canvas amounted to a condition of reduction accompanied by its own teleology. As Philip Armstrong and Laura Lisbon remark, what was understood as reduction in North American art, a paring down to essences and literal qualities, was read differently in the French context as the discovery of structures that led to reconsideration of ‘the “ground” of painting’s possibilities to a more dialectical thinking that ties presence to absence, the visible to the invisible, surface to “thickness,” color to its dimension as language, visual to “written” space, form to formlessness’ (Armstrong and Lisbon 2001: 37). Damisch undoubtedly is part of, and helped to delineate, this more structural approach to painting. And it is this approach

that we witness continuing within Bois' book *Painting as Model* and elsewhere in his writings.

The important art-critical writings of Crimp and Owens certainly came close to recognizing these possibilities. Something similar, for example, is audible when Crimp argues that 'underneath each picture is another picture' (1979: 87) or when Owens identifies the palimpsest as being fundamentally allegorical (1980: 69). Meaning is likewise displaced by more open-ended concerns. After all, they were early inheritors and translators of the French structuralism in the American situation; though, they received structuralism in its assumed opposition to phenomenology, and not, as Damisch practiced it, in their intertwining. But ultimately they presumed, perhaps strategically, that abstraction and painting were conjointly exhausted and it was now time to rethink models of representation via the agency of the picture and photograph. Put simply, they agreed with Greenberg's account of modernism and painting – all the better to set it aside for postmodernism. Bois' review of Damisch's *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* demonstrated how misplaced this was, that painting could be treated with the same theoretical vigour as mediums that had arisen to the forefront. Not all painting naturally, since as Bois says apropos Damisch's analysis of Pollock, 'there is technique and technique, or rather there is the epistemological moment of technique, where thought and invention take place, and then there is all the rest [...]' (Bois 1990a: 250, 1986b: 130).

In this article I have sought to bring to the open several moments of intertwining: that between Bois and Damisch; Damisch and Merleau-Ponty; North America and France; phenomenology and structuralism. All the while, it is essential to recognize that intertwinement amounts not only to the collapse of differences but to their continued maintenance. Without those differences, one might presume, there

could be no intertwining. And of course, this list of intertwinements is not simply conjoining of two elements; rather, it involves the complex overlapping – a veritable cat’s cradle – of all the list’s elements. Intertwining can also happen, too, when one or more of its elements reside just below the surface or beyond explicitness. By way of sounding an end note, I will remark – though leave somewhat hanging – that the book *Formless: A User’s Guide* that accompanied the exhibition curated by Bois and Rosalind Krauss at the Centre Pompidou opens with a discussion of Manet’s *Olympia* and viewed through the lens of Georges Bataille (see Bois and Krauss 1997). However, the first artwork the book illustrates is Dubuffet’s *Olympia*. Damisch is mentioned only once in the entire book, yet in this reshuffling of the cards of art history the traces of his fingerprints are completely unmistakable.

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Note

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this issue of *Journal of Contemporary Painting* is dedicated to the book *Painting as Model* and that the *October* version is readily available online, I shall provide page references to both versions by citing the book pages first and the *October* version second.