

Marcelin Pleynet

MANUELE VONTHRON
AND THE RADICAL LOGIC OF
ABSTRACT ART

The critic, and to an even greater extent the art historian, is often troubled when he visits the studio of a contemporary artist for the first time. He must rid himself of all tendency towards habitual judgement and knee-jerk reaction and observe, if I may say so, with an entirely fresh eye. This was unquestionably the case when I saw the works of Manuele Vonthron recently.

Not that I did not already know her paintings. I had had the opportunity to see them at the start of the year during an exhibition in the rue Saint-Florentin, in Paris, for which the preface was written by Marie Darrieussecq. I had noticed there, among others, several extremely large canvases which prompted me to suggest to Manuele Vonthron that I see her new canvases as soon as possible.

As time and then the summer passed, I had to call her to organise a meeting. She had just completed a collection of paintings, which she agreed to show me.

Her studio is very light and the canvases leaning against the wall rest on the floor.

I am at first quite disconcerted, and I am of course immediately inclined to associate what I see with what I know. What can be said? “Tachisme?” But what can that mean beyond a vague recollection? Tachisme is not suitable.

Abstract art, of course. It is within the context of the history of abstract art that I must endeavour to reflect on what Manuele Vonthron’s art shows me, as

she explains that she paints on the floor, positioning herself on each side of the canvas simultaneously.

I recall then that abstract art was born the day that Kandinsky, in his studio, considering one of his paintings presented with the top at the bottom, was surprised by what emerged here in an almost abstract way... And decided to put this surprise to use.

Following another line of perception, one must also mention the drippings which Jackson Pollock paints on the ground (even if Pollock, as his wife Lee Krasner explained, remains obsessed with Picasso).

This history is very rich and were I to cite all that evokes what Manuele Vonthron allows me to see, the list would be never-ending. Her *œuvre* is probably more influenced by the experiments of Marcel Duchamp than by anything else. Even if, on the other hand, these experiments may have collected a rather pitiful following.

Manuele Vonthron talks to me... and attempts to relate what she shows me to an already established modernity. The work of George Baselitz can be considered the most obvious example, as he exhibits his paintings with the top at the bottom by reversing the canvas after it has been painted.

But in the series which Manuele Vonthron shows me, there are no figures, not even the hint of a figure in the abstract image. Black stains on a white background, which cannot even be linked to the figures of the Rorschach test.

The stains here are never truly distinguishable from the background. They establish and maintain a space which is difficult to identify, if not in its constant ambiguity between the white background and the surface.

The majority of Manuele Vonthron's paintings are 195 × 195 cm. And as I ask her where is the top and where the bottom, she replies that this is of little importance to her and that they can be hung with no preference either for the top or the bottom, the right or the left; every side of the painting being equally

capable of playing any of these roles.

This, to the best of my knowledge, in the increasingly vast history of abstract art, no artist has ever dared to do.

I come to the conclusion that, in this collection, if there is a truly troubling originality, it is from this point of view that it must be considered.

Marcel Duchamp, once again, with, for example, his *Rotative Demispheres* or *Rotary Demispheres* (optical devices) of 1925. Yet they are still presented on a base which serves as a pedestal and plugged into the mains. In other words, as for all of his *œuvre*, with a top and a bottom.

Not so here. The paintings, square for the most part, do not themselves automatically rotate. It is the artist who circles around them as she executes them. It is difficult not to be impressed by what this presupposes!

The titles, like the paintings, do not provide the imagination with the merest clue. They even seem bent on discouraging all imaginative contribution. On the back of the reproductions which Manuele Vonthron sends me to write this essay, I read more often than not *Sans Titre (Untitled)* or *Noir (Black)*, even on those which include some blue.

Manuele Vonthron writes to me: “All are oil on polyester canvas (coated eight times). I painted them on the floor from all four sides.”

In conclusion, I find myself before a subtly innovative body of work, vividly intelligent and entirely pictorial, from which we can clearly expect great things and whose originality is already in the process of being firmly established.

Given that it must be perceived for what it is, I detect here an undeniable revolution in our perception of painting, and to an even greater extent in the history of contemporary art.

I imagine an exhibition which would present all eleven paintings four times, resulting in a different exhibition each time, as each time the “top” of the

paintings would be different, thus necessarily rendering the *œuvre* different.

But it would still be necessary for the man or woman who takes charge of such an exhibition to take responsibility for what is fundamentally at stakes in this adventure. And, with all prejudice cast aside, find the means to make it appreciated for what it is: painting which is lively, open and opening the history of painting to its hitherto unexplored potentialities.

Marcelin Pleynet, November 2010

P.S. Manuele Vonthron tells me that she is not an intellectual. I do not believe it, her *œuvre* speaks for her and it speaks pictorially in a magnificent way.