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The Figure-Field Looking at Georges Meurant's paintings

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What matters is not what the painter does but how his paintings function after he has finished with them. They either remain what they are, a mere product, or they trigger their own activity and become works of art.

Such activity is immediately perceived in the paintings of Georges Meurant. They are composed of coloured rectangles of various sizes, all with horizontal or vertical sides which are almost always in alignment and occasionally slightly out of line. Each rectangle differs from the others in texture as well as in colour and geometry. The word geometry indicates the position, outline, direction and surface of the rectangle. The whole work therefore forms a patchwork of coloured rectangles which has a very peculiar property. When looking at different parts of the surface, at a given moment a group of these rectangles will appear to unite, forming a single rectangle, which the next moment desintegrates, while the process repeats itself with another group and then another, each one different. If we look at the painting long enough, the permutations are endless.

The optical effect can be explained: it complies with the laws of Gestalt theory¹. The whole painting acts as a regular and irregular grid, which is both stable and unstable enough to unite into a single form, and then breaks up again. It does so according to contrasts or similarities brought about by the light, colour, texture and grain used by the artist. These factors create junctions and disjunctions, meetings and separations which affect the surfaces and reorganize them, each time differently, into moving groups of rectangles. Even more remarkable is the fact that this takes place before our passive gaze and that there is nothing we can do to prevent it. New boundaries and groupings appear unexpectedly and endlessly, as this self-generated transposition of shapes emerge to give the painting its own character.

The groupings which emerge are impossible to predict or describe, as they are characterized by too many shapes and factors, and too many possible associations between them.

The horizontal and vertical lines of the grid act as axes of development and create channels for movement and therefore the beginnings of *continuities*. But there are also places which function as points of attraction or of setting in motion: these are the rectangles that stand out the most, have the brightest colours or the greatest contrasts, which seem to act against continuity. They grasp our gaze, making the eye jump from one place to the other, thus provoking *discontinuities*. This interchanging between groups of rectangles occurs in no set order. In fact, it never follows a sequence, which is probably the reason why the process seems endless.

The organization of the painting is a metastable one, a state « far from equilibrium », which does not tend to equilibrium, but explores all its possible forms. Successive shapes take centre stage and become momentarily exclusive: the mobility of the shapes makes *simultaneity* impossible – the frontal multiplication of the space destroys the *flatness*. The two essential properties of the plane are therefore brought into question.

The groups of rectangles which appear one after another act not so much against a « *background* » from which they emerge, but rather constantly renew a « *set of possibilities* » through their endless transformations.

The work is a succession of phases and of stochastic, « discrete » and unpredictable articulations. The painter endows macro-structures with properties which are normally typical of micro-structures.

The absorbing of parts of the painting into the whole is always partial and temporary, but it is constantly renewed. This painting is not an end result, but a *process* which has begun and which goes on before us without setting limits to

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the interchanges between its parts.

¹ Gestalt theory tends to explain the automatisms whereby the world is perceived as configurations of shapes.

(Kinetic art had already achieved autonomous production of visual aspects or phases. But it did so with the help of materials, in a space and often by extra-pictorial means, and without eluding the time sequence. Here, on the contrary, the process follows the strictest of painterly traditions, everything takes place through the senses, outside kinetic time).

A painting is time turning into space. Here, however, the way space is structured leads to temporal succession. Simultaneity breeds successiveness. But the resulting time is neither truly cursive, or truly successive : it is a « *space-time* », which is the case of every painting, but is not free of forms. For this very reason, its various phases seem magnified, therefore slowed down and enlarged at the same time.

It has been said that painting was invented to defy time. These paintings come to terms with time. But as they exploit time, they undo simultaneity. This is because the different components used by the painter all operate *at the same time* and thus compete with each other, making the rectangles appear *in succession*. Moreover, the painting modifies its pictorial function, which no longer aims at creating an unified field of tensions but at obtaining groupings of shapes, each one rectangular and different, as are the original shapes. (In this very open-ended process there is perhaps some circularity, some obstinate repetition of these mutations).

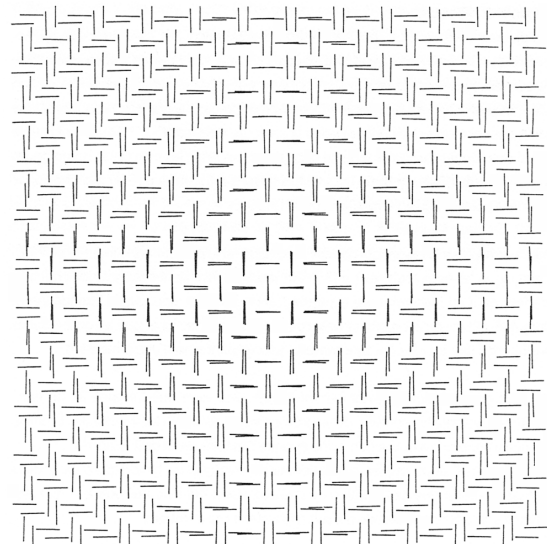
In order to explain how the field emerges, I have devised a model of « spatial curving » which depends entirely on the twisting of the white ground. In this model, the eye must jump from the smallest shape – in this case a pair of segments – to the whole curving ². In these paintings the reverse occurs : the eye cannot rest on a basic rectangle without associating it with the others, nor on the whole work without dissociating itself. The work rests on intermediary structures, and extremes are kept at bay.

« One reading of my painting erases the previous one », says Georges Meurant. However, none of them takes precedence or is the ultimate reading, since we must attempt as many readings as possible, even though we know full well that this is an impossible task.

This rearticulation, which occurs before our very eyes, is perhaps the most active we have ever come across. But though it creates a chain of exclusive moments, it does not abolish the pictorial process. On the contrary, the rearticulation merges with the pictorial process. The painter manages to reconcile the various interchanges of shapes (which call for subdivision) with the emergence of the field (which on the contrary implies continuity).

The painting itself is a plane. This is where the surface is found and where simultaneity and interaction occur ³. However, the plane only sets up interchanges of shapes, which are in sequence, but which do not form a path one can follow because they do not unfold one by one, but simultaneously and in several dimensions. (This is what the painter says when he speaks of a « multidimensional space » : this does not mean that other dimensions are added to the spatial dimensions – which ones and how many ? – but that these dimensions move into each other, making it impossible to dissociate one from the other).

² Plate L1. Convex curvature (Pierre Lison, 1963).



³ A painting is a harmonic structure or field of tension whose internal consistency is greater the closer it gets to resolution. The field is induced by the interactions between the colours and shapes that make it up.

It is not therefore a flat space, nor is it « thick », nor is it deep.

It is an unstable space because it has neither *two* nor *three* dimensions :

- It does not have two dimensions because it is structured indefinitely as figure and ground.
- It does not truly have three dimensions, because its only depth arises from this opposition.

For these reasons, the space is destined to wander.

This space recombines itself again and again, creating the lateral and frontal play required for this purpose. Laterally (on the surface of the plane), this play is ample since it can spread across the whole panel. Frontally (from foreground to background) it is, on the contrary, very limited as it is reduced to the distance-less gap between figure and ground.

Everyone is familiar with unstable figures (particularly the « reversible » figures which has been popularized by Gestalt theory. These are binary figures, on an empty (or undefined) ground, which are made unstable by their symmetries. They create interchanging forms which are quite similar to those found in Meurant's work. But because these figures are only concerned with alternatives (left / right, top / bottom, back / front, full / hollow) and because they only resolve dichotomies, they establish a symmetrical rhythm, or « sinusoidal » beat, between the two aspects. In Georges Meurant's painting, on the contrary, the figures differ all the time and range over the surface, and therefore the sequences of interchanging forms are neither repetitive nor cursory.

The role of colour is not chromatic but spatial. Like all other factors, its only contribution is to make the figures come together or fall apart.

This is one of the very few *œuvres* which are not kept in check with the opposition between figure and ground. Instead, this work succeeds in building upon that opposition a perceptual mechanism that is lost in all other painting.

- Frontally, each part of the painting emerges for a moment and then recedes.
- Laterally, the setting off, the play of sliding and displacing shapes.
- Frontally, there is only one path : from the back to the front (or vice versa), but it is a movement devoid of distance.
- Laterally, two paths : from left to right and up and down (or vice versa) and these paths determine the enlargements or reductions in size of the different surfaces and their configurations; and also their sudden jumps, off trajectory, from one point of the surface to another.

We are therefore dealing with a three-dimensional system, a « spatial » system. However, one of its dimensions (which at the same time does and does not exist) is enough to explain the « splitting open » that is omnipresent in the work and which in fact rules over it. We cannot speak of a « fourth dimension » since the whole thing derives from a « lack » or « gap » that activates one of the three dimensions and gives it potential. We start from the gap (the splitting open) and maintain it. We do not seek to overcome it. The work refuses to overcome anything. If it did so, it would not be what it is.

This painter's work has nothing of the manifesto. It does not claim to be avant-garde and has never sought to be talked about. However, no other painting seems to question so radically our understanding of the act of painting and of the link it creates between time and space or between figure and field. This is because the artist obeys the automatism of perception rather than making esthetic choices.

Period of attrition (negative) and period of emergence (positive). The form establishes or invents an outcome (+), but the paint and the treatment bear the weight of their past (-).

Not being, but becoming. Not permanence but a continuous process of birth, interchange and transformation.

This *œuvre* is not – and does not try to be – « absolute » or « eternal », or anything of that kind, though it does not cease to be painting and does not seek to do away with painting.

The question of « transcendence » is approached differently (or made irrelevant) by these paintings. That they achieve transcendence is indisputable. But this is a transcendence that has nothing of the sacral or teleological and obeys no hierarchical principles. It is a movement without destination that the artist calls « wandering »⁴. This transcendence exists without modification of order. In this respect at least, totality is never attained. This work functions solely with intermediary structures, though these renew themselves endlessly.

⁴ He prefers the term « fascination » to that of « fixity »; and where we might say « shift » or « change », he prefers « wander ». Frontally, everything depends on the contrast between figure and field. But the amount of play between them is not left to chance. From one work to another, and within each work, this distance will differ, and it is these differences that govern the duration of the local « blocks » and hence the time allotted to « fascination » and « wandering », to use the artist's terms.

These paintings accept what modern physics has had to accept: the loss of totality and simultaneity. There is probably the same difference between Mondrian and Meurant as there is between classical physics and quantum physics.

These paintings can be seen to function. The painting *emerges* and goes beyond the original datum. It is not a space (an inert structure) but a *space-time* (an active structure which is perceived as energy). This is what makes it a *work of art*.

The rest is only a matter of particular characteristics, which are remarkably innovative

Hence, though this painting is truly dynamic or « energizing », it is however not :

- A trajectory, nor a beat, nor a curving (nor a continuous flux, an oscillation, or a unified field);
- Nor can it be defined by any mode of pictorial resolution.

It is in fact *something resembling* a « quantum » structure, in the metaphoric sense.

The painting is a « quantum » structure because it is organized in « bundles », or discrete (i.e. discontinuous) subsets, which are incomplete and momentary :

- Like particles, they have a brief life-span;
- Because their different aspects and phases are unpredictable, these subsets appear and disappear beyond our control;
- They appear neither simultaneously nor in strict sequence and cannot therefore be ordered either in space or time;
- They cannot be tied down or added up.

The painting is a « quantum » structure also because it associates incompatible structures, in the following ways :

- The unity of the painting lies in one of the painted rectangles but also, at the same time, in one of the subsets;
- The whole picture is a plane, but there is disjunction as between figure and ground;
- The whole picture acts simultaneously, but we can only grasp one of its aspects or phases at any given time.

Just as time and space collude (since phase and aspect are not different), so do figure and field: the field exists only through the continued emergence of figure.

But there are other reasons for referring to a « quantum » structure.

Like in any other painting the set of the parts constitutes the whole. But to the surfaces actually painted others are added, which *go beyond* the relationship of part to the whole because they renew themselves continually and are impossible to enumerate fully.

The sum of all the painted surfaces forms a finite set. The sum of the shapes that can be induced is indefinite. It is therefore always in excess and cannot be perceived as a whole.

So much so that the following must coexist in this work :

1. The *painted* rectangle, or the actual shape made;
2. The rectangle *perceived* by our sense, or the virtual shape;
3. The whole painting, with its excess of parts – the painted shapes and the induced shapes which renew themselves endlessly.

Links exist simultaneously between 1 and 2, 1 and 3, and 2 and 3. Each link is able to act contrary to the others, and this is what makes this *œuvre* unpredictable and inexhaustible ⁵.

Meurant's stroke of genius – or what he could not help doing – is to give greater importance to the virtual rectangle, and to impose this on us as the most significant.

This rectangle :

- Is an aggregate of painted rectangles.
- Is a subset of the whole work.

It derives :

- From the painted shapes through their unity or integration with each other;
- And from the whole system through its disunity or disintegration.

⁵ The shifts between 1 and 2 are essentially lateral : at a given moment, in a particular part of the painting, a number of squares or rectangles come together as a group. Between 2 and 3, the movement is essentially frontal : the shapes stand out, the picture subdivides only through the figure-field contrast.

The perception of the work thus rests entirely on its paradoxical (or contradictory) pattern, which is transient or evanescent. This pattern is temporal as it is spatial, as much a phase as it is an aspect, and is indeed an « impossible » condition.

Whereas in all other work or painting we can proceed from the part to the whole, in this painting, a pattern which is characterized by *excess* (and which is *transient*) intervenes precisely between the part and the whole. This enriches the system, but in neither case allows it to be exhaustively enumerated.

In the spatial dimensions of this work, we have already been able to spot a « weak » dimension, that of the depth which exists but is *virtually* non existent. Out of the three registers we can find here, the weakest (–) is also the most active (+).

« *All Yin, all Yang, that is the Tao* ». A painting which is all negativity, splitting open and frailty but also – and probably because of this – all emergence, activity and positiveness.

« The work is a space-time » or « the work creates its own activity » are synonymous expressions. They mean that the work attains a state that the painter himself could not actually establish, but that he has simply made possible. Perhaps, therefore, we should not say that there is no change of order. There is none in terms of shapes generating shapes and rectangles generating rectangles, but there is in terms of such generation taking place, where a finite structure gives rise to an indefinite one.

Unless space becomes space-time, there is no work of art. But in this painter's work :

- Space is not space, because it is two dimensional, the third dimension being either incipient or atrophied;
- Time is not time, because it is neither free-running time (vector time) nor rit is a beat (oscillatory time). It is merely a series of phases or aspects of figures, which occur in sequences, but which also move about. They join up and separate, grow smaller or bigger, thus mixing time and space, phase and aspect.

It is because time is « spatialized » here that the various phases seem « weighed down », « slowed down » and « enlarged ». The forces and tensions do not succeed in breaking away from the form to become autonomous, but this process is what makes it possible to read the work, to see it functioning.

We are not dealing here with the fluctuations of reversible figures or with the tension characteristic of field. We are dealing with a structure where the transformations of figure are the very expression of the field.

« The more interiorized a form of live (...) the faster the vibrations » ⁶. Was Mondrian right, or is this true only of a certain type of field ?

Classically, a field is a unified set of forces and tensions. It allows the emergence of a single structure, which is usually invisible. Here, the field is the open, undefined series of local emergences that are perfectly visible.

In a traditional work, forms release forces which may or may not come together (but which can do so) in a field of tensions. Here, forms engender only forms. Tension « works on » the shape, moving and reconstructing it, but does not take on a life of its own. However, the field and the elements which emerge are not affected. On the contrary, here they assert themselves more blatantly than in any other painting.

Instead of diffusing themselves, the forces only produce divisions. They create outlines and close them, like surface tension in a soap bubble.

Meurant never draws outlines. If they do exist, they are simply the boundaries of the surfaces. It is they that give life to the work.

Between the part and the whole, he places a whole series of structures which you could take for a « plenum », yet what appears to fill the space is transient, it breaks down and splits open. It saturates nothing, even with its indefinite phases and significant aspects. It is a plenum of forms, but only of possible forms. It is a plenum of possibilities.

⁶ Mondrian, Piet, Tutti Gli Scritti a Cura de Harry Holtzman, p. 286, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1975.

The work does not keel over completely, nor suddenly, nor piece by piece nor all at once from form to space or from immanence to transcendence, because the artist does not start from his own unity but seeks it and achieves it as he paints :

- « this exercise (...) teaches me continuity between my own phases ».
- « I see painting as Learning to live ».

It is not the whole, but the parts which are transformed, not at once but continually. As if it were necessary to avoid :

- both one
- and two (alternating, oscillatory time)
- to create three, the emergent and evanescent term.

What appears are forms similar to preexisting ones. The emergence is therefore one of a pure functioning.

« As a child I often thought I was a mutant ». The act of painting is for Meurant a means of reviving this wish, or the pleasure of being another self, or the other oneself; the pleasure of observing how identical and other patterns are born and die spontaneously, how life wobbles and breaks, but in this way keeps going.

The desire and pleasure – but also the *angst* – of reaching that limit, which can at any moment mean suffocation (apnoea), breaking apart (crumbling) and termination (death) form the matrix of creation.

Mondrian wrote in 1931 : « *Creative and suppressive actions will become more and more united, so much so that it will become more and more possible to create through suppression.* » And his later letter ends with these words : « In art, we too often forget about the destructive element. »⁷ It is this element that Meurant introduces. Everywhere in his work, as he says : « Deconstruction becomes part of construction. »

When he paints, Meurant appears to be involved in a cultural activity, whereas actually, he says, he is going through his own personal agony. This is indeed the ultimate paradox : we only witness a continuous birth process – he calls it living through a springtime – and we forget that it is obtained through the ceaseless destruction of the forms and colours applied initially.

In his case, bringing a painting to resolution means, in fact, increasing its irresolutions until the viewer can only « fall » from one incomplete resolution to another.

Meurant has said in this respect : « It is the exploitation of disorder caused by the initial gestures » He uses the word « disorder », but « catastrophe » would be more appropriate to describe the initial act of dividing up the panel. With this initial motion, he breaks the unity, and the division that has already begun an only continue. Painting, therefore amounts to « re-establishing the balance between order and disorder », bringing together and tearing apart, junctions and disjunctions, until it is no longer the painter but the work itself that performs this rite of emergence and disappearance, of birth and death, before our eyes : a rite that, I believe, no other painting has let us witness.