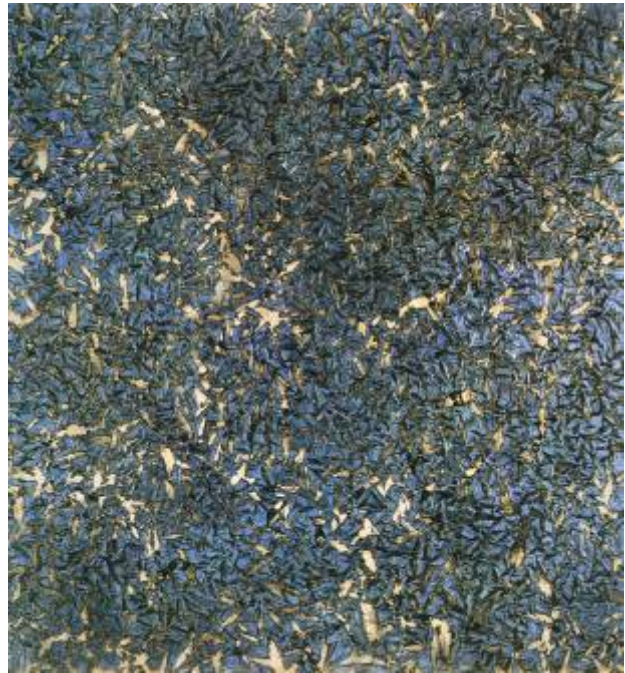


Hantai in America

by Carter Ratcliff

In Europe, Simon Hantai has long been recognized as a major painter. In the United States, he is nearly unknown. This is odd because he is one of the very few artists, European or American, who responded to Jackson Pollock's poured paintings in a genuinely original manner. Pollock invented a new way to paint and Hantai did the same. This was a remarkable achievement, considering that strong responses to Pollock nearly always began with the abandonment of paint and canvas. Exasperated by these materials, the future Minimalists—Donald Judd for example—gave Pollock's dripping a literalist reading and then followed the logic of their literalism into real space, which they occupied with three-dimensional objects. Hantai's works are, first and last, paintings—works of pictorial art. Yet he dispensed with the traditional process of picture-making as thoroughly as did Pollock, who exchanged his brush for a stick from which to drip and pour his pigments. Keeping his brush, Hantai redefined his art by redefining the canvas.

Basic to the idea of painting is the flat, blank, or neutral surface of the canvas. For centuries, this neutrality was unquestionable. Hantai not only questioned it, he banished it with a new way of making a painting called *pliage*, from *plier*, to fold. Before he begins to paint, Hantai folds his canvas in a complex pattern that hides some of its surface and leaves the rest available to his brush. Having applied paint to the exposed areas, he opens up the canvas, and sees, for the first time, exactly what he has done. Hantai's "folding method" is clearly very different from Pollock's "drip method", resembling it only in its originality and in the power of its response to questions raised by Pollock. With his unencumbered gesture, Pollock had redefined figure and ground. He redrew the boundaries of pictorial space. Hantai's folding method completely rethinks the ground, and perhaps the very idea of painting itself, for his imagery—with its play of light and dark, of positive and negative—is in part the upshot of decisions made before any paint is applied. Folding relocates the painter's intention. In the process, vision finds a new relationship to the other senses.



Simon Hantai: *Cloak* (m.a.1), 1960 Oil on canvas, 90 x 77 in., Private Collection

There is more to say about Hantai and Pollock, about Hantai and the history of art in the past half century. That so much needs to be said is surprising. Only rarely does an American writer have the opportunity to survey the achievement of a major European artist for almost the first time in English.¹ Perhaps there was a moment, in the late 1970s or early '80s, when Joseph Beuys needed a comparably detailed introduction to American audiences. It is difficult to think of another example. In any case, we need to set aside the presuppositions that, for decades, have

hidden Hantai from American eyes or permitted him to be seen in the United States, if at all, as a distant and nearly invisible monument.



Jackson Pollock: *One (Number 31, 1950)* 1950. Oil and enamel paint on canvas 106 x 210 in

No one is more acutely aware of this need than the artist himself. In 1998, Hantai refused to allow his work to be included in an exhibition of French painting organized by the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The context, he felt, was unsuitable. At first glance, this objection is hard to understand. Born in Hungary in 1922, Hantai has lived in France since 1949. Not long after his arrival, he was recruited to the Surrealist movement by Andre Breton. By the mid-1950s, he had broken with *Surrealism*, and in 1960 he invented the folding method. Since then, he has been recognized as one of the leading figures to have emerged on the stage of French art in the half-century after the Second World War. Why, then, would he refuse to be included in an exhibition intended to celebrate painters from his time and place? His refusal was all the more puzzling because one sees echoes of Matisse's forms in certain of his paintings. In others, there are recollections of Cézanne's light. Forced to categorize him, one would have to call him a French painter. His contribution to the art of his adopted country permits no other label. Still, for all its accuracy, it obscures a full view of Hantai's achievement. That, I suspect, is why Hantai declined to be included in an exhibition of French painting.

What follows could be seen as a proposal for an exhibition that would place Hantai in another context, quite different from the ones in which he has nearly always found himself. In this virtual setting, some of Hantai's neighbors would be Italian, for there is a rapport between his art and the *arte povera* that emerged in Genoa, Milan and elsewhere during the late 1960s. Some would be from other regions of Europe. However, most of the artists in this imaginary exhibition would be American. I have referred to Pollock, as Hantai himself does. Tracing the development of the folding method and mapping its affinities, I will return to the Minimalists, who used industrial fabrication to replicate the readymade forms of Euclidean geometry. There will be occasion to mention the process and performance art that developed from *Minimalism*; the detached impersonality of Andy Warhol's silkscreen technique, and earthworks, especially those of Robert Smithson, who pushed to extremes the idea that art is material—that is to say, not spiritual, conceptual, expressive, or in any other way immaterial. I don't say that Hantai makes

common cause with Smithson or any other American artist. Yet the full significance of Hantai's achievement cannot be seen until his engagement with the most innovative American art of the 1960's and '70's is taken into account.

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Entering the Art Academy of Budapest in 1942, Hantai studied there, on and off, until 1948. Settling in Paris the following year, he experimented with frottage (rubbing), grattage (scratching), and other techniques discovered through Surrealist experiments, especially those conducted by Max Ernst. Always, he painted, arriving quickly in Paris at a biomorphic style that hovered in the ambiguous zone between figurative and non-figurative imagery. His first solo exhibition, in 1953, was introduced with much fanfare by Breton. Only a few seasons later, Hantai renounced *Surrealism*. From the point of view of Breton and the Surrealist faithful, he had betrayed the promise of revolution through art. Of course, the Surrealist revolution, which was to have put ordinary reality on a new and improved footing, never occurred. From the perspective provided by Hantai's later work, one might say that *Surrealism* turned out, despite its promises, to be fatally conservative—not so much a revolutionary movement as a cluster of academic styles devised to illustrate a yearning for the new. Leaving *Surrealism* behind, Hantai achieved something entirely new. But not immediately.

Between his Surrealist period and his first folded canvases came a gestural interlude and a brief association with the French *tachiste* painter Georges Mathieu. Like Mathieu, Hantai was driven by the example of Jackson Pollock to develop a repertory of slashing, curving, zigzagging brushstrokes. Hantai's improvisations are often more deliberately tangled—more desperate—than Mathieu's. He seems to have understood from the start that there was no real point in coming up with variations on Pollock's gesture. Gesture was somehow the point, and yet, as Hantai understood, it could not be gesture of a painterly kind. It could not be expressive nor could it be representational, not even in the most attenuated manner. No gesture of the hand, no dance in the presence of the canvas, would do. In 1960, Hantai arrived at the solution that has sustained his art since then. He would displace gesture to the canvas itself.

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As it happened, Hantai did not reinvent painting until he had brought his gestural interlude to a grand culmination. In 1958, he set out to cover a very large canvas with texts gathered from a variety of sources: Biblical, theological, metaphysical, poetic, psychoanalytic. After a year of copying these passages in a minute hand, Hantai's inscriptions acquired a thoroughly pictorial texture. His texts were now illegible, and yet he had filled the canvas—now called the *Écriture Rose*—with an aura of significance, a dense cloud of implication. The work later entered the permanent collection of the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, where it occupies a crucial place in the museum's account of twentieth-century art

We can be certain only that the *Écriture rose* has to do with language. Scanning its surface, one thinks of a medieval scribe devoted to an endless task. Nonetheless, Hantai's inscriptions did come to an end. We might see the *Écriture rose* as the grand residue of a long, almost ceremonial meditation on the part that language has played in the development of Western painting. The theorization of the pictorial was launched in ancient Greece. Since then, painting has been caught up in a conceptual apparatus of extreme intricacy. Perhaps Hantai felt that, by writing his way to the end of language, so to speak, he could extricate painting from theory's mechanisms. At any rate, when the *Écriture rose* was finished, he said, "Avaler les mots." ² "Dispense with words."

Having set language aside, Hantai placed his canvas on the floor and subjected it to a series of actions: “folding, knotting, trampling underfoot,” to quote from a list made by Anne Baldassari, curator at the Musée Picasso. ³ This behavior is implied by the word *pliage*, already noted, and yet Baldassari’s account of Hantai’s procedure is helpful because she stresses its repetitiousness. The labor required by *pliage* is onerous and silent, or nearly so. Remarking on the “rustling” of the canvas as it submits to folding and trampling, Baldassari leaves it to us to imagine the matter-of-fact violence Hantai inflicts on the canvas as he flattens it in preparation for the application of paint to those portions that his folding leaves in view. ⁴

The first of the folded canvases are called *Manteaux de la Vierge*. This becomes, in English, *Mantles* or *Cloaks of the Virgin*, a title often shortened to *Cloaks*. They are dense, impacted, encrusted. Some have the look of earth soaked by a heavy rain and then dried and cracked by harsh sunlight. There is a suggestion of “craquelure,” as conservators call it, those networks of fine lines that often appear in the surfaces of old oil paintings. In Hantai’s canvases from 1960 on, the “craquelure” can be severe and, far from obscuring the image, helps to constitute it.

Hantai’s departure from the Surrealist ranks brought his career as a figurative painter to an end, and yet it is easy enough to read subject matter into his later work. After the cracked mud of the more heavily encrusted *Cloaks* come leaf- and petal-shapes of a new series begun in 1967 and entitled *Meun*, after the village in the forest of Fontainebleau to which the artist and his family had moved two years earlier. Like Rorschach blots, Hantai’s paintings invite no end of speculative interpretation. But what, precisely, do they represent? The method that produced them, no doubt. The folding method is a kind of self-portraiture, a way for a painter’s method to make images of itself. Yet these “portraits” are incorrigibly ambiguous, filled as they are with the chance effects that the folding method not only permits but invites. What are we to make of details of form and texture that cannot be seen as fully intended? Where, come to think of it, are we to look for Hantai’s intentions? Marcel Duchamp, the modernist godfather of chance in art, lurks somewhere in the genealogy that Hantai, like all ambitious artists of the period, invented for himself. Chance is a factor, as well, in Pollock’s drip-method, which, as we’ve seen, was essential for Hantai as he looked for a way beyond *Surrealism*.

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The distance from the *Cloaks* to the *Meuns*, 1967-68, is vast, too vast to be traversed in one step. By 1962, texture had given way to rough forms, distinct but not separated from one another. The underlying ground was unable to emerge. Then, in the mid-1960s, the canvas ground began to assert itself more forcefully. By 1967, figure and ground had claimed nearly equal portions of the painting’s surface. The *Meun* series was under way. Over the years, Hantai has now and then repeated a certain phrase: “Toujours et encore les ciseaux et le bâton trempé.” ⁵ “Always and again the scissors and the dripping stick.” The latter refers to Pollock’s drip-method; the “scissors” belong to Henri Matisse, who made some of his late works by cutting and pasting sheets of colored paper. With the flat, quasi-organic shapes of the *Meun* series, Hantai evokes Matissean *decoupage* or *cutouts*—and he reminds us that Pollock was not the only modernist painter to subject his method and thus his medium to drastic revision. For the *cutouts* introduced a new compositional element and yet made no break with painting. With his *cutouts*, Matisse used *decoupage* to extend painting into new territory. For a century or more, expansions like these have kept painting alive and flourishing.

To cut shapes from colored paper is to perform an act no less physical than directly applying paint with a brush. Yet painting longs to transcend the physical—not that the tangibility of paint on canvas was ever denied. Nonetheless, figurative painting can be understood as an



Simon Hantai: *Meun*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 84 x 75 in., Private Collection

attempt to persuade the viewer to look through a painted surface into the depths of imaginary space. With the development of abstract painting, this yearning to escape physicality intensified. Avant-garde painters and their critics talked of pure color, pure gesture, and “pure opticality.” This rhetoric of purity reflects a bias against materiality, against the body and sensory experience—with the exception of the visual, for vision can be assimilated to the immaterial realm of thought. Thus we say, “I see” to signify understanding.

This bias in favor of vision appeared early on. According to the pre-Socratic Heraclitus, “The eyes make better witnesses than the ears.” In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates spins a story of the soul as a charioteer, guiding a pair of horses upward, beyond earthly things, to a glimpse of the eternal Forms of

ultimate Reality. Michelangelo invokes the Platonic glimpse when he says, in one of his sonnets, that the true sculptor is the one who can see the essence of a form in a brute block of marble. Relinquishing the visionary privileges to which he and every other Western artist is heir, Hantai talks of “painting without seeing . . . looking elsewhere.”⁶ “With *pliage*,” he says, “I put out my eyes . . . blind calculation . . . a bet on one’s blindness.” Then: “Do away with the screen.” With these fragmentary utterances, Hantai points obliquely, tactfully, to his accomplishment, which was to place his medium on a new basis. After inventing the folding method, he dispensed with the transcendent—one could almost say, magical—idea of vision that we inherit from Plato and his many successors, who include a surprising number of contemporary art theorists and historians.

The key image in Hantai’s commentary is the screen—not the cinematic screen, not the screen of the television set or the computer, but a screen prior to any of these: the canvas, the surface where the painter’s image is traditionally projected and, in the process, comes to be seen as impalpable, immaterial, ideal. Hantai talks of doing away with “the screen” to suggest that his paintings are not sites where the ideal is revealed. So his canvases need not present themselves as immaterial or, rather, as lengths of fabric only incidentally



Matisse: *Reclining Nude II*, 1952 and *Blue Nude IV*, 1927

material. The folding method insists on something obvious but traditionally overlooked: the canvas is dense and frankly palpable, and this frankness is what distinguishes the paintings of the *Meun* series from the late *cutouts* of Matisse, to which they bear an inescapable resemblance.

Hantaiï does not, however, intend the *Meuns* as “critiques” of Matisse’s cutouts. He did not put out his eyes, figuratively speaking, to protest the vision of Matisse or Michelangelo or Plato. He has never, so far as I know, expressed doubts about the truths delivered by the visionary tradition those figures exemplify. Nonetheless, his invention of the folding method suggests that, as the 1950s ended, he no longer saw painting as a matter of transcendent truth. He no longer saw painting itself—not, at least, as it had been seen for centuries. With the folding method he began to feel his paintings as much as see them. As a work progressed, vision became the partner of touch, not its superior, and one imagines that it was sometimes a decidedly junior partner.

Or all such distinctions were lost in the interplay of the artist’s tactile, conceptual, and, of course, visual intuitions. By demoting vision, Hantaiï merged the senses and undermined the ancient, persistent habit of seeing body and mind as separate and distinct. It is tempting to say that, with the folding method, he found a way to make paintings in a bodily mode. Yet one could just as well call the folding method a conceptual mode, in light of the parts played by the initial idea of a painting, by subsequent revisions, made as the work progresses, and by calculations about chance, which guide the artist from start to finish. At once bodily and conceptual, a physical method and a theory enacted, the folding method requires a unified self, a self in full.

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“What interests me is what approaches the indeterminate, as in Pollock, who abandons easel painting, the frame, and with them all security” Simon Hantaiï, 1998 ⁷

Pollock took exemplary risks, and Hantaiï was not the only artist to respond. During the late 1950s in New York, Pollock’s full-body gesture prompted Alan Kaprow, for example, to invent the *Happening*. Cued by a sketchy scenario, members of the audience would perform a sequence of quasi-improvisational actions. The work was fugitive, vanishing as it appeared. In Paris, Yves Klein found yet another way to insist on the presence of the body. Slathering nude women with paint, he instructed them to press themselves against lengths of canvas unfurled on the floor.

With the imprint of their flesh, they generated the image. These works of *Anthropometrie*, as Klein called them, can be seen as absurdist pranks—jokes prompted by the changes painting was undergoing in the decades after the Second World War. Nonetheless, they are elegant. And their lush traces of flesh are similar to the forms in Hantaiï’s *Meun* series. At the very least, Klein’s response to Pollock alerts us to the figurative aura of the *Meun* canvases. And it shows us how insistently painting’s relation to the body was shifting.



Yves Klein: *Anthropometry Performance*, Paris, March 9th, 1960

Much else was changing during that time—so much that, to provide Hantaiï’s innovations with their context, we must pull back for a wide view of the sprawling, turbulent period known as “the Sixties.” This was a time of agitations, which began to simmer late in the 1950s and boiled over with a vehemence that persisted into the ’70s.

The '60s were a time of confrontations, many of them instigated by the young, who gave youth itself an adversarial aura. Among the novelties of the period were the clothes, long hair, and body paint of the hippy movement, all of which may well look silly in retrospect.



Yves Klein: *Anthropometry, Untitled (Ant 7)* c. 1960

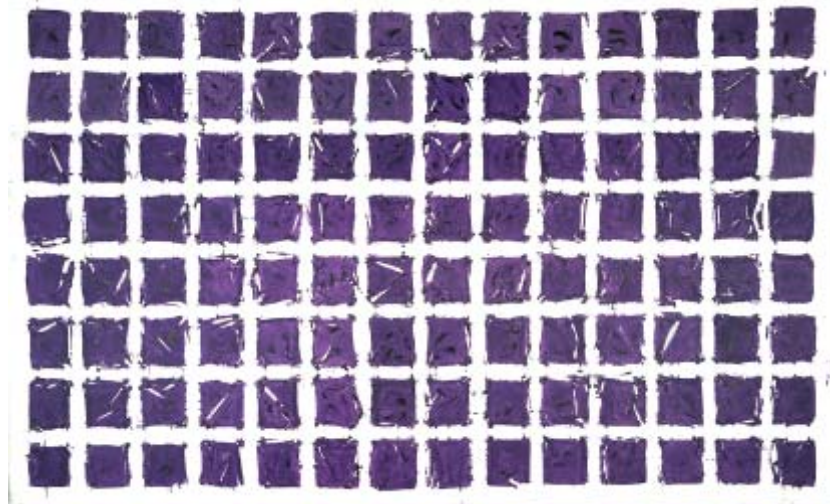
Nonetheless, the hippy look served as a costume for new attitudes toward far from trivial matters—sexuality and the use of mind-altering drugs, for obvious examples. Students are always impatient with the routines and compromised ideals of the academy. During the '60s, that impatience exploded, along with a determination to change the rules of political play. Throughout the Western world, substantial numbers of young people were suddenly demanding that their nominally democratic governments live up to their professed values. Driven by no very clear ideology, these developments were local and, of course, varied. As Hantaiï was painting the *Meun* series, unrest in France culminated in the events of “1968”. In the United States, the restlessness of “youth culture” was more diffuse, though it did find a degree of focus in protests against the war in Viet Nam. At first glance, it is difficult to see what any of this has to do with developments in the art of the '60s, and yet I think there are significant links.

To return for a moment to a matter of fashion—the long hair and sexually ambiguous clothes of “youth culture” were not intended merely to offend stodgy sensibilities. In the offense was a challenge to the old, patriarchal model of society. The use of illegal drugs challenged the law, as did war protest at its most violent. During the '60s hardly any established power went unchallenged, certainly not that of the universities or of politics as usual. Corporate policy was questioned, along with the economic and military role of the West in the developing world. Playful or earnest, these protests were by and large the work of young people with unseasoned sensibilities. On the plane of art, comparable challenges were made. A sharp difference in tone separates the young from the mature, and that may be why it is difficult to detect any connection between, say, student uprisings and the innovations that define the major art of the '60s. The connection is there, nonetheless, and it emerges—it becomes unmistakable—the moment we notice how thoroughly those years were shaped by a shared purpose. On the plane of art, as in the street, the '60s protested authority—particular authorities, the very idea of authority, and the absolute truths to which authority appeals for legitimacy. By extension, elitism in all its manifestations, including the cultural, was questioned. “Youth culture’s” rejection of patriarchy and militarism is obvious. Not so obvious is the rejection that opened the way to the work of Hantaiï and the Minimalists and others, who shared a desire to challenge what passed as the laws of art, in Hantaiï’s case with the invention of the folding method, and in the case of the Minimalists with outright abandonment of painting for a medium that, as Judd correctly noted, did not qualify as sculpture in any traditional sense.

In 1967 Bruce Nauman commissioned a fabricator to write the following words in spiraling neon: “The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths.” Against the backdrop of this artist’s other works, this motto acquires an ironic edge. Toward the end of the '60s, irony of this sort was still new. For nearly two and a half millennia, the highest purpose of art had been to reveal “Mystic Truths” about absolute, other-worldly realities. Moreover, faith in art as a medium

of the absolute persisted well into the twentieth century. Though the avant-garde was nominally secular, its leaders—Wassily Kandinsky, for instance, or Piet Mondrian—were no less spiritually inclined than medieval artists. So it is no surprise that, early on, Pollock’s admirers glimpsed in his webs of dripped and spattered pigment transcendent truths about the modern self, the American experience, the essence of painting, and more. Then came the ’60s and, with them, headstrong doubts about authority and a tendency to reject privilege and elitism in any form.

Theological or metaphysical or aesthetic, transcendent truths have an authority that is—for the faithful—beyond question. In the absence of doubt, one feels secure. Hantai’s attitude in this



Simon Hantai: *Tabula*, 1980, Acrylic on canvas, 110 x 210 in., Private Collection

regard is nuanced. He did not reject that sort of authority as much as decide at a certain point to carry on without it. Pollock had abandoned “all security” and so would he. Going it alone, he would make his way into a future in which everything was up for grabs.

In order to understand an artist of Hantai’s independence, we have to see him as isolated—

not absolutely but, rather, to a degree that disconnects him from all but those artists whose originality is equal to his own. To grasp what Hantai put at stake, it helps to see him in the company of those American artists of the ’60s who marked the period—Donald Judd, Andy Warhol, Robert Smithson, and a few others who, like Hantai, turned to a future with no promise of ultimate truth, absolute purity, or redemption of any kind.

With industrial fabrication, Judd and the other Minimalists distanced themselves from their works and rejected the elitism of “high art”. Hantai achieved a comparable effect with the folding method, which, as he has said, enables one “to expel oneself from the painting.”⁸ The folding method makes certain decisions without consulting the artist. Yet there was a difference between him and his American counterparts among the Minimalists. They were theorists and polemicists. Hantai is not, for all the brilliance of his remarks on painting. Just as he cultivated a certain “blindness,” mixing the clarities of vision with the intuitions of touch, so Hantai has always undermined the false certainties of theory with immediate, ad hoc speculation.

Guided by their doctrines of “the specific object” and the “good gestalt,” Judd and his colleagues took carefully measured steps along clearly blazed paths. This theoretical bent persisted into *Minimalism’s* aftermath, producing a logic of stark reversals: rigidities of Minimalist geometry gave way to the “anti-form” of scatter-pieces and



Donald Judd: *Untitled*, 1969, anodized aluminum, ten elements: 27 x 24 x 6 in. each

the wilder varieties of process art. *Process* led to *performance*, which displaced Minimalist literalism to the body, and to the real-time imagery of video art, with its aesthetic of temporal literalism. *Video* aside, all these distinct and successive developments have equivalents in the evolution of Hantai's folding method, and, astonishingly enough, all of them are present from the outset. For the folding method entails a kind of performance, even as it endows the folded and unfolded canvas with a materiality as dense and immediate as that of the Minimalist object. If there is performance, there is process. And the aleatory, Duchampian effects of the folding method inject an element of anti- or non-form—sheer hazard—into the deliberately shaped patterns of Hantai's imagery.

Like the Minimalists, Andy Warhol borrowed alloverness from Pollock and revamped it in



Andy Warhol: *Self Portrait*, 1966-67,
Acrylic on canvas, 25 x 25 in.

a geometric manner, chiefly by imposing a grid on the pictorial field. In certain ways, Warhol was as much a Minimalist as Judd or Morris. And so he too was of interest to Hantai, even though he filled his grid-patterns with the found images that qualified him as a Pop artist. Labels aside, Warhol's photo-silk-screening is just as mechanical as the fabrication Morris and Judd delegated to factory workers and parallels Hantai's folding method. Exchanging traditional studio practice methods for commercial, hands-off methods of production, these Americans of the '60s dispersed the other-worldly aura of the unique, hand-made object, again as did Hantai's folding method in part. The difference is that Hantai, however, made his paintings by himself in the studio, using the painter's familiar materials. His hands-on

method preserves his connection with Matisse and the entire tradition of Western painting, even as he ceases to feel that tradition's yearning for transcendent, immaterial purity. "L'impureté est la vraie situation," Hantai has said.⁹ "Impurity is the true situation." Or the "real situation"? However we interpret this comment, it seems fair to suppose that Hantai has no interest in transcending the complexity, contingency, and ambiguity of the situations in which he finds himself. These are of his own devising, complicated at his own insistence, and so, while there are many affinities, there is no 'one-on-one' correspondence between his development and that of the American artists who share his interests and attitudes.

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With his folding method, Hantai invited results at least in part unforeseen. Warhol, too, let contingency insinuate itself, welcoming the streaks, blotches, and other glitches generated by his slapdash manner of silk-screening. Moreover, his images themselves feel



Simon Hantai: *Study*, 1969, Oil on canvas, 18 x 15.2 in.

unintended, as if he didn't decide to paint Elvis or Marilyn so much as let himself be drawn into the decision by the yearnings and impulses animating ordinary society—or "consumer culture."

Though Warhol may not have given the accidental and the arbitrary an energetic embrace, he certainly accepted them, and this acceptance released him from the priestly task of unveiling transcendent truths. His truths are nothing if not down-to-earth, and his fictions of glamour are anything but other-worldly. An exemplar of the '60s, Warhol must be credited for contributing to the demystification of art. Yet this achievement came at the price of cultivating an indifference to the distinction between art and popular illustration, which does exist for all that.

Warhol blocked the upward swoop of transcendence with vacuity. Having begun as a commercial artist, he had no qualms about filling the precincts of art with mere decoration or, in his commissioned portraits, sheer flattery. This insouciance puts him in sharp contrast to Hantai, whose renunciation of transcendence has the weight of a resolve not to shirk the burden, literal or metaphorical, of painting's traditional materials. That burden, at its most demanding, is historical, and that is why the full meaning of Hantai's art comes into view only against the backdrop of his medium's long and complex past.

Again, this is the medium—paint on canvas—that Judd and other Minimalists rejected on the way to their version of the anti-transcendence that pervaded the '60s. With that rejection, they severed their connection to the past. Or that is what they thought they did. In fact, Minimalism is haunted by everything that it rejected, all that it cannot acknowledge, unlike the art of Hantai, which is in touch with its origins, whether ancient or recent, and gives us new, down-to-earth ways to understand them—to understand, in other words, earlier stages in the history of painting. Turning from the products of Hantai's folding method, for example, to religious paintings from earlier centuries, is to glimpse, however dimly, the worldly, entirely human impulses that mingle with—indeed, motivate—even the most fervently spiritual art.

To be haunted by the past one denies—this is a heavy price to pay for innovation and yet it is no heavier than the one Warhol paid, not all that reluctantly, by ignoring the border between art and popular illustration. Looking at Minimalism and its aftermath in the light of Hantai's paintings, one sees a great deal of American art clustering in yet another border region. Here life and art meet and negotiate their differences—or, it may be, pretend that there are none.

As process artists, performance artists, video artists, and others extended Minimalist literalism ever further into ordinary life, art was more and more often understood as a kind of “investigation.” Art devolved into the documentation that one so often sees in contemporary galleries and museums. In work of this sort, there is no question of the old-fashioned transcendence that used to supply art with its vocation, for there is no question of art.

At this bleak juncture, one thinks again of Bruce Nauman, not the ironist who mocks “Mystic Truths”, but the melancholy figure who has acknowledged, however glumly, that there are no such truths to be had. In 1967 he cast in greenish wax the portion of his body that stretches from his right hand to his mouth. Entitled, fittingly enough, *From Hand to Mouth*, this literalization turned a body fragment into a

Bruce Nauman:
From Hand to Mouth, 1967



bizarre variation on a Minimalist object. To live from hand to mouth is, of course, to live precariously, on whatever meager morsels can be scrounged up in the unreliable present. By evoking this sort of deprivation, Nauman may well be offering an image of life after the failure of transcendence—a life impoverished by the loss of absolutes, the impossibility of “Mystic Truths.” For his colleague Robert Smithson, that impossibility was invigorating. It opened the way to the real in all its vividness.

Seen from the direction of Hantai’s Europe—a culture no longer in thrall to traditional beliefs about the absolute—Smithson is a sympathetic figure. The two artists share similar attitudes to notions of material immanence and a certain tendency towards the profusion or excess that is to be found in the real world. With earthworks, films, essays, and more, Smithson advanced the idea that everything, even language, is material. Furthermore, he believed that matter will always resist our attempts to impose order. Far from lamenting the world’s inherent, irredeemable disorderliness, Smithson reveled in it. His earthworks are monuments to their own, gradual capitulation to the entropic forces lurking in the very structure of matter. All this is metaphorically present in the folding method and, together with a gleeful



Simon Hantai: *Meun*. 1968, Oil on canvas, 77 x 68 in., Private Collection



Robert Smithson: *Spiral Jetty*, 1970

acceptance of contingency, gives Hantai an affinity with Smithson. However, Smithson is the inventor of a New-World sublime, tinged with science fiction, linguistic theory, geological speculation, anti-utopian skepticism, and a quasi-erotic fascination with decay and death. Ultimately, the American’s indifference to painting—and to the entire history of art—puts the two at a considerable remove from one another. They are separated even further by disparities of scale.

Meaning, Smithson believed, is to be found by attending to particulars. Hantai, one might speculate, would not disagree. However, the two artists had divergent ideas about the particulars worthy of attention. Smithson was obsessed by the intricacies of crystals, the geography of lost continents, quirks in the personalities of Mayan gods, and other matters that send the imagination spinning away in wildly speculative orbits. His art evokes a past that is archaic insofar as it is human and often attains the scale of geology or the interstellar infinite where human measure is annihilated. His futures tend to vanish into his fascination with entropy. So there is a last contrast to be drawn between this artist of the American “Sixties” and the European Hantai, whose sensibility binds him to the densely woven patterns of individual experience.

For the materialist Smithson, the freedom to dispense with transcendence was to launch art on trajectories that leave the immediacies of the familiar far behind. That same freedom brought

Hantai's art into ever-closer, ever more conscious contact with precisely those immediacies. For his art preserves and intensifies the human scale, the scale of the body's actions. The folded paintings awaken us to the present we share with these objects and with one another. As for the future—that it might be livable is suggested by the humane drift of Hantai's meanings, most of which remain to be enunciated.

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Simon Hantai: *Study*, 1969, Oil on canvas, 108 x 173 in., Private Collection

To return to my account of the folding method and its development in Hantai's painting, the *Studies* of 1969 break up form with a multiplicity of folds. The more folding, the more insistent the incursion of blankness into the zones of color. It is here that we can define the fundamental innovation of the folding method when compared with Pollock. For, whereas in Pollock's all-over field the ground is on equal terms with his web of poured and dripped pigment, in Hantai's *Studies* of 1969 the ground becomes dynamic. It is active, not simply the passive recipient of painted form, and begins to dominate the composition. Jagged patches of white canvas become forms in themselves, and the image is a flickering

alternation of light and dark. "It was while working on the *Studies*," Hantai has said, "that I realized what my true subject was: the resurgence of the ground underneath my painting"¹⁰. Form is 'relativized' and the ground resurges to claim its prerogative. This resurgence continued with the *White Paintings* of 1973-74. Blankness is now predominant. To hold their own, the painted areas of the canvas display a wider range of hues. In the *Meuns* and the *Studies*, form was monochrome. Now forms range across the spectrum, as if their diminishment had given them greater mobility in the realm of color. In some of the *White Paintings*, the play of hue is a subtle flickering with the power to recall the palette of Cézanne's later paintings.

The transition from the *White Paintings* to the *Tabulas*, which are begun in 1974, brings another abrupt change in the history of the folding method. All at once, scattered imagery became regular. Hantaiï was now making grids: row upon row of small, squarish patches of color separated by crisscrossed streaks of white. The first of the *Tabulas* brought his imagery closer to that of *Minimalism* than it had ever been. Yet the artist points to a different and far more personal source for these grids of the mid-1970s: a photograph of his mother as a young woman. The apron she wears is gridded—that is, heavily creased in a squared-away pattern produced by the traditionally Hungarian manner of folding garments of this kind. By retrieving this photograph from the past, Hantaiï makes an indispensable point: art is not solely a matter of formal problems and aesthetic issues. It concerns, as well, the artist's sensibility as it is shaped and sustained by his memory. The grid, it seems, has a thoroughly personal meaning for Hantaiï.

Tabulas continued to appear from 1974 until 1976. Then, after an interlude of six years, they reappeared, with the grid unit significantly enlarged. As the second phase of the *Tabulas*, begun in 1980, progresses the forms are once again invaded from the interior ground by flashes of white canvas. The effect of a grid prevails, despite the flowering of big, sprawling forms reminiscent of those in the *Meun* series and the *White Paintings*. Order and disorder in balance, Hantaiï enlarged this resolution to an astounding degree in a subsequent series of *Tabulas*, which went on view at the Capc, Entrepôt Lainé, in Bordeaux soon after its completion. Though the museum's galleries are vast and high-ceilinged, these paintings covered their walls with ease. Having raised alloverness to the scale of monumental architecture, Hantaiï stopped painting. Carrying cessation a step further, in 1994, he destroyed most of the immense *Tabulas* he had shown at Bordeaux.



As Hantaiï cut up the *Tabulas* of 1980-81, he saw that some of their bits and pieces stood up as paintings in their own right. A new series was emerging. Entitled *Laissées—Left Overs*—these canvases have a cousinly resemblance to certain *Studies* and a more distant connection with the *Meuns*. With their slashing passages of white canvas, they recall the *White Paintings*, as well. Finally, though, they are closest to the late *Tabulas*—in a fragmentary way, they are the late *Tabulas*—and they form, as well, a laconic summary of all that preceded them.

With his scissors, Matisse had turned colored paper into a material, into an equivalent of pigment applied with a brush—that is, pigment applied in the hope of producing an image that transcends its own physicality. Hantaiï's scissors insisted that canvas is palpable, a painting is an object, the pictorial is physical. But not solely physical. Nothing is purely one thing or another. The canvases in the *Left Over* series are fragments and wholes. They are accidents of a sort, the results of an afterthought, and yet they also serve as emblems of the artist's ability to rethink his grandest works—the *Tabulas* he exhibited at Bordeaux. Presenting the clarity of final statements and the elusiveness of every other series in Hantaiï's oeuvre, the *Left Overs* are luminous and dark, reassuring and discomfiting. They are elegant and yet elegantly forlorn. They are like orphans whose self-sufficiency induces us to forget that they, too, have a past, even if it is impossible to trace in every detail. That past, of course, is the history of the folding method.

Looking back at the development of this method, one sees how tenuous it must have felt at every stage. With each variation in the process of folding and unfolding, Hantaiï had to brace himself for a surprise. For he could not, of course, know how his latest experiment would turn out. And this surprise persists. Hantaiï's paintings continue to look new, which is, in itself, surprising—and not easy to explain. I think it must be a consequence of the contingency Hantaiï built into his

process. His images are so rich with happenstance that they cannot be memorized and consigned to the past. Even the large forms of the *Meuns*, some of which are as recognizable as figures in a traditional painting, display quirks that make them difficult to pin down. Hantai's imagery is always of the present, and his present is not of the kind sought by earlier art—not a present generated by a transcendent vision. Not the moment of a Platonic revelation. This is an indispensable point, for it sets Hantai apart from 'modernist' art, including *Surrealism*, which ultimately was no less devoted to other-worldly revelation than was the art of the Middle Ages or of ancient times.

Proponents of art as the revelation of ultimate realities, of transcendent truths, often talk of timelessness. 'Platonic' or 'neo-platonic' or 'modernist', they want art to loft them upward, toward a realm of eternal purity. To this yearning, Hantai has replied more than once with a comment we have already heard: "Impurity is the true situation." Indifferent to the ideals of pure form, pure color, pure gesture, his paintings mix the intended and the accidental, the intelligible and the enigmatic. Each of his works requires us to think our way into its past, to the method that produced it, and forward, into a future opened up by its power of metaphorical implication. Infused with the other dimensions of time, Hantai's present is impure, like the one in which we live, and so his paintings have the virtue of making us alive to our real, our true situations in all their contingency. Rather than mirror some timeless Truth, the products of the folding method create the truths that shape the world in their vicinity. And they encourage us to see that we do the same. We create our world as we make sense of it. For the most part we do this unconsciously, though it may well happen that, as we grapple with Hantai's art, we will find ourselves becoming increasingly aware of this power.



Simon Hantai: *Leftover*, 1981-94,
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 116 in., Private Collection

¹ . In recent years there have been two surveys of Hantai's work in American art journals. Tom McDonough, "Hantai's Challenge to Painting," *Art in America*, March 1999, pp. 96-98, 128. Benjamin H. Buchloh, "Hantai, Villeglé, and the Dialectics of Painting's Dispersal," *October* 91, Winter 2000, pp. 25-35,

² . Simon Hantai, quoted in Anne Baldassari, *Simon Hantai*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1992, p. 46

³ . Ibid.

⁴ . Ibid.

⁵ . Hantai, quoted in *Simon Hantai*, exhibition catalog, Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, 1999, p. 66

⁶ . Hantai, quoted in *Simon Hantai*, Münster, p. 67

⁷ . Hantai, quoted in Philippe Dagen, "Les confidences d'un peintre en retrait du monde," *Le Monde*, March 15-16, 1998, p. 26

⁸ . Hantai, quoted in *Simon Hantai*, Münster, p. 72

⁹ . Hantai, quoted in Didi-Huberman, *L'Étoilement: Conversation avec Hantai*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1998, p. 105

¹⁰ . Hantai in conversation with Paul Rodgers, Paris studio, 1994