

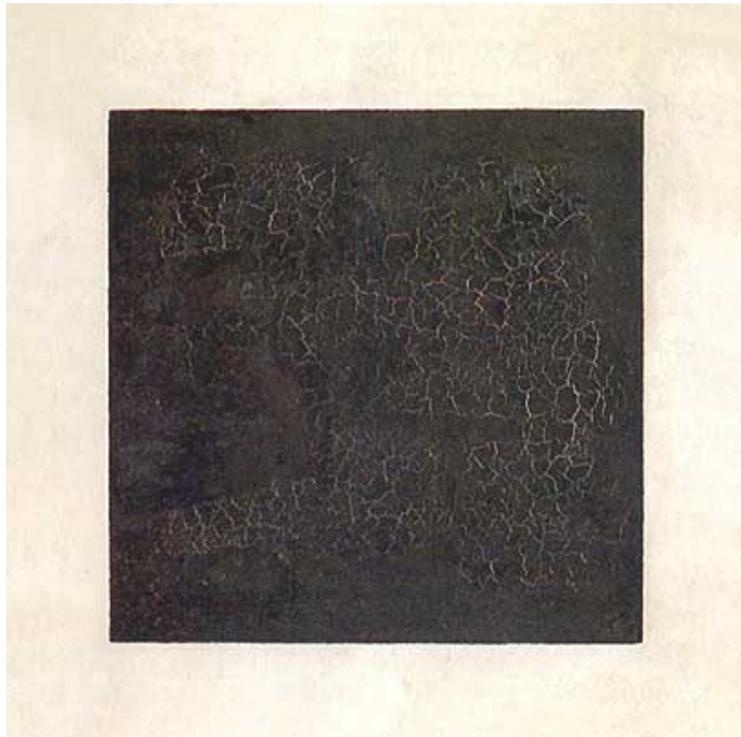
01

(in painting)

54

THE ONLY TRUE DOSSIER ON "THE MERE SURFACE"





Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1923 (pre-dated 1913)  
Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia



## 0 1 / 5 4

Published and unpublished notes on a dossier opened in 1972 by Carmelo Romeo on the subject of the mere surface in painting  
translation by Steven Grieco

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### **Attached issues**

- 22 COMPLEMENTARY TABLES
- KINDLY EXPLAIN  
(notes with Fabio Mauri inside)



*"(...) During my life I have often risked putting forward propositions which I was uncertain about, yet all that I have written here has been in my head for nearly a year and it is too much in my interest not to make a mistake, thereby laying myself open to the suspicion of having expounded theorems which I would be unable to demonstrate in full. I publicly ask Jacobi or Gauss to volunteer their opinion, not regarding the truth, but regarding the importance of the theorems. After this there will, I hope, be someone who will deem it worthwhile to decipher all this muddle..."*

From the last will and testament of Evariste Galois, a mathematical genius who died at 21 years of age fighting a duel over a cocotte

## **1.** **When Painting<sup>1</sup>**

**01** – When painting reaches the edge of non-perceptibility, we have reached the threshold of the opposition between figure and background. The figure's genealogy, its movement from compactness towards dispersion, is now complete.

**02** – After rejecting the fetishism of depiction, painting – be it abstract or concrete – was unable to resolve that same fetishism, and thus achieve freedom.

Indeed, it would first have been necessary to remove the material conditions upon which such fetishism rests to this day. Instead, a gradual shift got underway, whereby the picture itself is the fetish. The next shift would then necessarily posit the artist himself as a fetish. Which is exactly what happened.<sup>2</sup>

**03** – The "oppositional poles" of figure and background, which in the earlier phase were still inside the canvas (bent on defining the figure as "appearance"), experienced a progressive shift, first towards the outside of the figure, and then beyond the picture itself, as though under the effect of a centrifugal force – as though impelled, one might suspect, by a deep-rooted need to move ever nearer to an unequivocal and irreducible tangibility, nearer to a clearly defined reality – an unequivocal foundation for what in any case is and remains painting's *raison d'être*.<sup>3</sup>

**04** – The opposition between figure and background, i.e., the sole and mutual guarantee that both are full-fledged "signs", here begins to falter, heralding the process in which each is lost in the other. But doesn't yet forecast a resolution, but rather a concurrence of all the figures, and of morphology as well.

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<sup>1</sup> From 01 to 33, the first appearance in "Aut. Trib 17139" issue no. 8, Rome 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 26.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with point 21.

And thus, a confusion of genealogy and rank.

It is obvious how this incest also becomes a category and a rule in the context of modern imagination. Thus transgression and the gap, exhibited as secrets typical of an effective (efficient) creativity, now distress and give rise to the broadest and most successful commonplace in terms of execution, practice, and above all art criticism.

**05** – Now that the axis has shifted from the product to the process, painting gathers in the “painting-in-process” area. But it can succeed in seeing itself fully for the first time only when it stops and lingers on the edge of the “non-painting-in-process”.

I.e., the point at which assertion and negation are revealed to painting as the dialectical unity of its practical existence.

I.e., the point at which all is back in question.<sup>1</sup>

**06** – (*Omission*)

**07** – Approaching the area of non-painting, painting progressively deletes from the canvas any traces of pictorial activity (rubbing out the footsteps – is this what the guilty consciences are for?); and, entering into this area, negates such activity tout court, plunging straight towards its centre of gravity. (A victory for the law of gravity or for the rules of hospitality?)

After this journey and headlong plunge, however, the artist is not annihilated, nor is there a return to a naïve awareness: for the journey has been undertaken in the name of painting, and its symbolizing and self-symbolizing ways.

Is it here that painting emancipates itself – or desires to emancipate itself – from what Duchamp calls retinal sensitivity. So is this the final step of ancient Greek thought as it ascends from the visible to the intelligible?

In the contingency of painting – i.e., immediately or to all effects – the compactness of each figure, its very existence and ability to be itself (to remain a figure) is here gravely threatened. Since the threshold between the two areas is an apex (a point), or a crest (a line), it marks the headlong plunge from one condition of painting to its opposite – and also marks a change in the specifics of art within the larger context of aesthetics.

**08** – As the background is the most dispersed of figures, it is the very figure of dispersion.

In this sense, it is the last and the first figure of painting.

This statement betrays a contradiction in terms, were it not true that in language the primacy of matter appears as the primacy of the signifier.<sup>2</sup>

**09** – Having on the undoubtedly non-linear path of its case histories

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 18.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 21.

emancipated itself from any and all internal figures (the shapes of repression), and even from colour, painting is now strongly inclined to find its full resolution in the "mere surface".

Which does not mean yet that it is dissolving – even though it looks very much like that. Instead, in this form, painting finds the figure of its own anxiety and finally grows quiet, lying and relying upon itself.

The fact however that this highly peculiar figure has come about as a result of the (analytical) "dispersion" – i.e., the (symbolic) "unfolding" – of the figures (iconography, iconology) which previously held sway, begs a further question.

In operational terms, does this mean getting the picture's surface ready, and then holding it (or cause it to hold itself) in some kind of suspended animation?

The "mere surface" should not be seen so much as a painting, or a family of paintings, but rather as the paradigmatic form which painting takes on in a given historical phase and under certain specific conditions.

**10** – If we consider painting in its finished form, the "mere surface" can at a first glance appear, in relation to earlier historical forms, as totally simple and unsuitable – as the primordial, hoary presence in painting in all ages, because it is the elementary, technical starting point or condition, and is thus implied, is implicit.

Yet nonetheless, seen in its utter simplicity, and from the point of view of the system of painting, the "surface" is a category which is as modern as are the relationships which produce this simple abstraction.

And these relationships are understandable in general terms on condition that we follow the manner in which the specific development of painting intertwines with the overall development of material production.<sup>1</sup>

**11** – The spin theory. – Omission –

**12** – After the initial separation of the different types of labour (the historical development of the social division of labour), the single activities were subjected to further accelerations and internal separations (technological development and the industrial organization of labour), which in time affected the single phases of the same production process – indeed, the same timeline of production.

– Omission –

Being subjected as well to the growing power of our ideal social and economic "centrifugal spin", painting finally becomes a "surface" entirely purged of the cumbersome figures which prevented it from coming into view.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 34a.

**13** – Even though the “surface” was right from the beginning painting’s *sine qua non* condition, before it could stand on its own – which it could only do through the emancipating action of the natural (material) analysis of the separations<sup>1</sup> and the laws of development (also individually speaking) of all the codes and codifying “ways” – it remained subsumed as a completely natural pre-condition within a paradigm of painting which grouped together a wealth of different pictorial languages, whose autonomous and individual ways of developing (endogenesis) in turn only became clear to us as a result of that same process of separation. This process of separation produced the historical development in which each single act of separation spawned an equal and corresponding number of aesthetic categories. As these in turn grew further apart and separated further thanks to this same separateness, they produced poetic movements and individual styles which although expressing individual subjective solutions, always re-affirmed the unbroken unity of the work of art.<sup>2</sup>

**14** – The “surface” thus to a certain extent puts a limit to these continuous separations and shifts, which right from the early period of Capitalism multiplied and, given the speed, added up to the present situation, in which many styles are seen to coexist. Just as a certain type of physics fixes the atom as its limit, so a certain kind of painting fixes the “surface” as the temporary limit of painting. Indeed, beyond the sky of that “surface” it is the cosmos opening up, with the constellations on the far side, and the back: the cosmos of meanings.<sup>3</sup>

**15** – What appears to be the immediate pre-condition of painting – that initial point from which painting necessarily starts time after time – can now also be seen as the result of a given stage in its development.

But after all this, painting is left with only one form – the surface – although it has in fact reached an entirely new result.

The original, or first, negation of the surface (i.e., the background) through painting (i.e., the figure), is now followed by the second negation: the negation of painting (the figure) through the surface (the background). This double negative brings us back to the first term, which however is now no longer an immediate and natural pre-condition, but the definitive assertion of painting tout court.

Here we observe here a certain dialectic, not to be misunderstood as a mediation and a reconciliation, but rather as the struggle between and resolution of one term and the other.

**16** – Given the trio – “figure”, “background”, “painting” – it follows that:

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with *Imprinting*, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 27.

<sup>3</sup> See “L’occhio verticale” (“The Vertical Eye”). In this publication it appears in *A Temporary Farewell*, pages 53-54.

if before resting on the threshold or apex where we placed it, painting relied on the antinomy between figure and background (between compactness and dispersion, between information and silence), but nevertheless remained a vague abstraction (when not a primitively allegorical depiction), once the first two terms of this antinomy were annulled, it was the third term of the trio that inevitably came forward, using this annulment (the "mere surface") as a means of bodying and making itself visible.

From this point onwards, "painting" is no longer just a conceptual abstraction, but acquires its own strict and sensible morphology. And if indeed only "signifiers" exist, the "background" – i.e., the "mere surface" – now bodying as figure, must be the signifier of the only term of the trio that remains in place. The "mere surface" is now the form, the figure of painting.

**17** – In the "mere surface", all the aspects of painting are tightly grouped together and claim the full spectrum of teleology for this new form which they have acquired.

It is here that we sense the dangerous approach of the tautological banality.

- Tautology reminds me of catechism: in which God was the definition of God, and lazy fathers and mothers give an answer to their children by transforming the children's question into an answer. In both cases, this approach had one merit only: it revealed without a shade of doubt the flimsiness of the theological argument, as well as the Priest's bad breath; and the ill grace, at times even the malevolence, on the part of the parents. I don't feel I can absolve these sadistic torturers of children and their intelligent curiosity, not even for the sake of formal logic.

**18** – In the system of painting, the figures (iconographies, iconologies) which genealogically come before the "mere surface", subsist and persist not so much as the painter's memory and historical wisdom, but now as the necessary conditions supporting the figural evidence of "this" painting; i.e., as "differentials" which allows us not only to recognize but also to place the "mere surface" within the system of painting, acknowledging it as a fair variable of the work of art at a certain stage of its genealogical development.<sup>1</sup>

**19** – If the subject – i.e., the painter himself – while supporting the genealogy of the "figures", developing their vocation to scatter, and fostering their spatial hunger – cannot at the same time grasp as self-evident that the logical break-up of all the old antinomies of painting reintroduces a compactness whereby all the earlier types of figural compactness are in turn shown to rest on a totally subjective platform – if he cannot grasp this fact, then by the same token he won't understand and enjoy the manner in which the "mere surface" and its specific features have in fact developed and provided an

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 24.

integral solution (however temporary it may be) for the morphologies of painting.

Thus, exactly as forecast, we are not yet speaking of a resolution of painting and the *painter* – of painting in the *painter* and the *painter* in painting – but rather of a loss and a despair for both of them, for they are only using the compass of logic – that is, a poor and unwieldy sort of formalism.<sup>1</sup>

**20** – The surface, having come into existence through the dispersion of the figure's peculiar and contingent features, in no way marks only the undisputed triumph of dispersion, in fact it also underlines the triumph of compactness.

Is it, then, that the "mere surface" – i.e., the figure in general terms, or the excellent figure but also the figure's excellent dispersion – is also the definition of itself?

And, in any case, in this way painting appears as a state of sanctity, as a result of which it says: *I beg you, don't pester me with iconography!*

**21** – It is exactly here, where painting seems to have lost all consistency, that we discover instead, and maybe for the first time, its greatest consistency.

Having lost its non-essential specifics on the way, and the prejudices of Naturalism, and the defensive armour of decorativism – painting now carves out its very own space, expressing hostility towards, and derision of, any attempt to give it legitimacy from the outside.

In opposition to the usual commonplace which ascribes spiritual or metaphysical trappings to artistic theories developed independently, it is precisely when painting, and art in general, do not acknowledge meanings other than their own, that all transcendental elements are annulled, while on the other hand immanence is reaffirmed, i.e., its very own intimate, unstoppable material substance with its own *raison d'être*.

Indeed, what characterizes materialistic thought is precisely the fact that matter is outside existence.

The fact that through spiritual conceptions many artists (Kandinsky, Mondrian, or even Malevich) attained the capacity, in spite of themselves, of concretely expressing this materialism in their practical *modus operandi*, only serves to raise additional issues of interpretation and analysis regarding individual artistic solutions and the relationship between the theories and the practice, the "need" for codes and the painter's "resources"<sup>2</sup>.

What some would be idealistically tempted to pass off as living proof of how the idea of painting moves toward self-awareness and thus becomes form – i.e., the self-aware form – only shows us how, quite to the contrary, that idea is moving towards the material essence of painting – how awareness goes or returns to the

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 29.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 42.3.

material foundation upon which it rests. Given that the material essence of all things is unquestionably matter.

**22** – Since matter does not exist as an abstraction, but must always be approached in its specific forms, it is quite obvious that this abstraction appears in painting as a specific form. Thus, in the context of the “mere surface”, the abstract concept of “matter” would seem to be entirely factual and coincidental with the abstract concept of “painting”.

**23** – (Economy) – Painting in its “mere surface” form is painting in its excellent form.

It is painting par excellence, since it is painting’s overall equivalent – the symbolic substitute for all the figure’s peculiar features; in other words, the exchange value for the system of painting in its entirety.

Indeed, in this form it is only now that it can mediate all of painting’s specific possibilities, and even bring back into play its history, the series of its historical specifics and solutions (the “mere surface” as a prop). The mere surface is not only the locus (the space) of painting: it is also the time of painting.

If prior to this specific development of painting, the “background” (space) of painting could still be removed because the figure (time) still remained, now by removing the “mere surface” we remove both space and time, and thus we remove painting itself.

Thus the mere surface becomes, to all effects, the very substance of painting.

**24** – But now it happens that the “mere surface” – this entity so dangerously irrelevant to the eyes and to the senses – can retain its integrity and position within the system of painting – and art – only on condition that we find what is distinctive in it.

But rather than the “mere surface” being a materialized form of an abstract category such as “painting”, there must necessarily be an equally abstract category, such as “non-painting” – i.e., everything else. This mutual evocation is crucial to both, given that both share common edges.

After the “mere surface” has eliminated the antinomy of figure and background, we see a new, mutually contradictory pair appearing and taking root: painting and non-painting.

And again we can forecast for this duo the same fate as for the earlier one: the headlong plunge of painting into non-painting and vice-versa – their confusion, overlap and clash.<sup>1</sup>

**25** – The fate of the figure of the picture, such as we saw it at the beginning of these notes, reappears inside the picture, and inside the figure itself – i.e., inside the “mere surface” – for we are now dealing solely with this form of painting, i.e., with painting per se.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 26.

The shifts which previously affected the figure and the background, the drives that fetishized the object and the subject, the pleasure of making the product and/or the procedure involved, etc., all these now affect the two terms, painting and non-painting, the practice and silence of art.

**26** – The background has now destabilized the figure and, in its “mere surface” form, has become the chief figure of painting. Non-painting destabilizes painting, and lies in wait to topple it from its last vantage point, to scatter it in the vagueness of its primacy over retinal phenomena.

And to keep the “mere surface” (and its analogues) within the confines of the work of art, self-clarifying mystical statements (notarial declarations, sworn testimony, and so on) are needed, and systems of clarifying signs (traditional materials, artist’s signatures, captions, spaces for art, specialized reviews, collections, the market, and so on).

It is obvious how in such a situation only the stigmata, the tonsure and such things, can distinguish the artist from the public,<sup>1</sup> distinguish painting from non-painting, art from nature.

But the marks of genius, like all distinguishing marks, are prone to being falsified: for otherwise, indeed, they would not be distinctive. Thus it happens that genius can be simulated through success (pursuable, of course, but not through certain dictates), i.e., with the gift of a considerable linguistic cunning - i.e., a financial cunning.

This is what the early information regarding the results attained by painting in its strictest and most logical path has led us to.

And thus, whether the circle closes or not, today’s success of simulacra and frauds is taken completely for granted, when it doesn’t turn out to be something even worse.

**27** – Painting’s ardently wished for independence becomes its exact opposite, whereby painting begins to rely on defence and control mechanisms.

Thus we can understand the wish to make a U turn and return to practices which are historically recognized and can be recognized by the common man. For in the end of it all, some like it hot [transavantgarde].

For the time being, we only need to bear in mind that even though single art works may possess a different linguistic “mass” and “weight”, they nevertheless remain distinct units. Which is to say, for example, that both Leonardo and Yves Klein have treated non-segmentable units before and during execution, but the execution in both cases takes place in the same unbroken unit of time.

In other words, if we – applying here Galileo’s experiment – disregarded the resistance of air, and in the same instant of time released both Leonardo’s “Virgin of the Rocks” and a Klein

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 30.

monochrome in a free fall, they would both plunge with the same acceleration towards the centre of the human eye – i.e., they would both reach that centre at the same time and in their unbroken fullness.

And the foregoing is not meant to be a theoretical consideration on a supposed mystical nature of a work of art, but a completely practical consideration which explains, also historically, the real manner in which the art work and the artist have always confronted each other.

Segmenting both the work and the timeline for its execution (drawing, colour, space, etc.), are steps which come later and have to do with problems of attribution. They arise from a need to describe these units and see what distinguishes one unit from the other. They do not, however, reflect the real unfolding of the procedures and processes of such codifying systems, and how they are in keeping with given historical phases. For they all share an identical, albeit specific and unalterable, “unified understanding” which cannot enter into and saturate its own object without first permeating and establishing a paradigm of perception which is common to a whole age. After which this particular system of codifying loses its “sentiment” and thus any chance of manifesting itself (other than as parodies or farces).

(Is a “history of aesthetic enjoyment” possible and indeed desirable?)

And so there is no point in wasting one’s time with pictorial models which have already been defined, when all you can obtain in this way is the imitation of a mass, and certainly not the mass itself – an erudite system of signs, but not the actual, live sign.

**28** – The crowning point of morphological and genealogical studies on painting looks to be pretty much absolute, and almost exclusively cerebral. Deprived of any specific quality, it expresses a purely differential value in expressing the notion of painting.

This is painting as a tangible category, yet still incapable of resolving the tautological impasse, i.e., of pushing past its own limits to break the consoling spell, the tranquility with which critical thought satisfies it after such elegant, historical, painting.

**29** – But the value of the “mere surface” as a definition for painting today, cannot only be a mark of the analytical level reached by painting, or the degree of conscientiousness which the artist has reached, but rather must bring into the field of art, and there give full power to, issues which deal with the way our present world is set up.

What at first may have seemed a biting of one’s own tail, we now see as signalling the beginning of an altogether original phase, the assigning of a task which has yet to be accomplished, which is still at the initial stage.

This is the controversy of a dilemma.

And quite clearly it could appear to be like this, if as well as finding the form of the dispute we also find, outside the dispute, those

materials it requires to reach a solution.  
And so we are dealing with the controversy of a dilemma in a form which is still enigmatic.<sup>1</sup>

**30** – The “mere surface” is painting which suddenly wants to move on to something else, and begins positing the subject in its entirety, and thus also socially speaking.  
This is also how a specific “genre” – the self/portrait – is brought to completion.<sup>2</sup>

**31** – In order to grasp its own conceptual substance, painting has been forced to steer clear of its comforts, risking not only safety but even tangibility.  
And so, exactly like Orpheus with Eurydice, only one moment before losing her can he surprise her with a sudden coup d’oeil.  
For each to be reassured by the other, painting and its opposite first discover the illusion of antinomy, and then with a wail come to a standstill in a *tragic position* (the mere surface as “guest”).  
- The gorgonian quality of obviousness on the direct gaze: Eurydice revealed as being none other than Orpheus, each the other’s stately shadow.  
(As to the surface’s *pathetic position*, bear in mind the notion of “prop”)

**32** – Although painting is constantly trying to force its way out of the tight circle of metaphor, the problem of its specificity nevertheless remains.  
Its conceptual reduction again desires the particular quality of matter, its very own differentiated features and traits.  
This is when the mere surface starts spredeagling into two branches – the “prop” and the “guest” – followed in these two separate directions by pathetic and/or tragic positions.  
“Positions”, because there is no “action” yet, for this would require some kind of foothold, which is always somewhere else in relation to the objects which need to be lifted, shifted or put in motion.  
And thus it is success<sup>3</sup> which is the “lever” that appears in time, triumphantly bearing the work of art on its shoulders: for now it has found the foothold: namely, the nail to hang it on the wall – i.e., behind it, which is where the meanings reside.<sup>4</sup>  
Without insisting on this point too much, nevertheless here again we have the materialistic confirmation – in this case a “lowly” form of it, even though a healthier and brighter one – which leads us to conclude that while painting’s justification is in the making, the picture’s is in the selling.  
But where is the far side of all this?

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 33.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with points 2, 37b.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with point 26.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with point 14.

Here and now the fundamental aporia of art and artist can no longer be linked only to the two spheres of art and aesthetics, but defined by vaster paradigms, calling into play social and gnoseological – i.e., to all effects political – realities.

## 2.

### **A locus comunis<sup>1</sup>**

**34** – It's not difficult to agree with the opinion of a German writer who finds that there is nothing more boring and sterile than phantasizing over a *locus comunis*.

So what is there in painting that is more commonplace than the "surface"?

But maybe there is also nothing more profitable. By definition, in a place like that you can really find all sorts of things.

And so, in order to gather the threads of a discourse oftentimes put aside and then taken up again – but also to give new tone to the thinking muscle – let me re-read a few passages from the *Homologetic Gamble*.<sup>2</sup>

**34.a** – [29] *Money (/sign / surface / ) can exist and historically existed before the existence of capital assets, banks, salaried work, etc. ( / semiotics, linguistics, formal logic, etc. / art, museums, the artist, etc. /).*

*In this sense, we can say that the simplest category can express the predominant relationships in a less developed system, or the subordinate relationships in a more developed system: all of which already existed historically before the system developed into a more concrete category.*

*In this sense, the path of abstract thought, which ascends from the simpler levels to the more complex, reflects the true historical process...*<sup>3</sup>

**34b** – [30] *Thus, although the simpler category (money, / words / etc. ) may have existed historically before the more concrete category, in its fully intensive and extensive development it can only belong to a complex social form, while the more concrete category was already fully developed in a less evolved social form. Work (/ word / line / etc. / ) appears to be an utterly simple category.*

*The portrayal of work (of the word / of the line / ) in general terms – as labour in general ( / word / line etc. / ) – is also very ancient.*

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., having gone back to these notes in 1993 to put some order in them.

<sup>2</sup> This is an off the cuff transcription of several passages from Karl Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*, published by *Imprinting* in September, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> See *Imprinting*, quotation p. 79, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph.

*And yet considered in this simple way, from the economic point of view ( / linguistic / artistic etc. / ) "work" ( / "word" / "line" / ) is a category as modern as are the relationships which give rise to this simple abstraction...<sup>1</sup>*

**34c** – [181] *As long as a given pictorial work represents specific aesthetic values, art is presented only as an ideal form, not yet realized. As long as it possesses a specific pictorial value, that work expresses a totally isolated side of the aesthetics of painting.*

*In the mere surface on the other hand that value becomes real, and its substance is indeed painting, both as the abstraction of its peculiar mode of existing, as well as in its totality.*

*The "value" of two-dimensionality is the substance of painting (given that it qualifies painting in general), while two-dimensionality is the wealth of painting.*

*The mere surface is thus, on the other hand, also the materialized form of the "value" of painting in relation to all the specific substances it consists of.*

*If, on the one hand, the form and content of painting are identical in the surface per se, then on the other hand the surface is, in antithesis to all other types of painting, a general form of painting, given that all these specifics together constitute its substance.*

*If in the first case the mere surface defines painting in general, in the second case it is its universal material representative.*

*In the surface qua surface, this totality exists as an ideal union of all types of painting.<sup>2</sup>*

*Thus the wealth of painting – as an exchange value in both its totality and its abstraction – is different from all other modes of painting in that it exists only as an individualized entity, two-dimensionally, in the execution, as a single tangible sign.*

*The mere surface is, then, the god of painting. (Like that part where you only need to replace surface with money, and painting with goods, to understand who the real muses of contemporary art are. They appear as both the inspiration and the factual objects of all kinds of production – compare – the "mere surface" in contemporary painting as "guest" and "support"; the snake that bites its own tail: the hypothesis of the ideological implications of idiomatic phrases – internalized paradigms)...<sup>3</sup>*

The foregoing easily brings us to the two following thoughts:

1 – to define a category as trivially simple as the "surface", may indeed require a long and involved process of development;

2 – we can now move on.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 79, second paragraph.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 35b.

<sup>3</sup> op. cit., p. 81.

### 3. Misdventures of the Tragic Zone<sup>1</sup>

**35.a** – The mirror the Titans offered to Dionysius to make him forget his bodily unity, was a snare for the God; the fascination for the multicoloured multiplicity of the depictions of the world nail him down and consign him to the pain of dismemberment and to the punishment of death.

Now Painting rests (dismembered<sup>2</sup>) in a (whitened) sepulchre, on whose tomb the shadows of vacuousness seem to inscribe his last prayer in the form of an epitaph: "For God's sake, don't bug me with iconography!"<sup>3</sup>

**35.b** – The artist reaches Painting in the place marked by the fluid threshold which separates it from its own negation<sup>4</sup> and finds it standing before him as the "mere surface".

If the tragedy consists in giving shape to the shapeless, then it is in this area that the tragic unfolds in the form of a meeting with the indefinite.<sup>5</sup>

But Orpheus cannot stay in Hell longer than three days (not even Malevich managed it), and seeks the (Orphic?) way to make Painting rise to the daylight again, thus (rediscovering) its very own (ordinary) figural apparitions.

**35.c** – However, Orpheus was unable to die in person in order to truly follow the object of his love into the unlit cave.

His only worry was to go and recover that object, but also to get out of there alive and kicking – and even satiated by an extreme pictorial motif (*tableau vivant – happening?*)<sup>6</sup>.

He is exhorted not to linger further in that place of death, and at the same time told not to turn around, so that he may not behold the artistic solutions of the past (time).

They had almost come out of the gloom of the netherworld, when the first light of dawn illumined his pallid beloved; whereupon Orpheus turns to her (pathetic movement) and loses her forever.

He only wanted to make sure that it was still Painting following him up the slope, but she does not forgive him for his self-indulgent weakness.<sup>7</sup>

**35.d** – In other versions of the story they are both saved as they gaze at each other not under flashes of sunlight, but under the

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<sup>1</sup> Notes 35a to 37 appeared in *Quaderno 3* in 1999, published by the History Department, Theory of the Arts and New Media, Accademia delle Belle Arti, Aquila, Italy.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 03.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with point 20.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with point 34.

<sup>5</sup> Compare with points 31 and 35g.

<sup>6</sup> Compare with point 26.

<sup>7</sup> Compare with point 37d.

golden flashlight which you stick into your pocket as if it were money.<sup>1</sup>

As Orpheus was unable to die for his beloved, so also he can't live for her either. This is why he too will ultimately be tortured and torn apart by the Thracian women. Sectioned into pieces and sold in the market.<sup>2</sup>

Only his head, nailed to the Lyre (the Lira – or the dollar!) will float on the waters of the Ebrus river, to land finally on the island of Lesbos, where he'll get busy working as an oracle (art as the idea of art? – from Minimalism to Conceptualism?).

Art having died, only the artist is left, having survived like Orpheus and Eurydice.

Then, once the visible quality of things has melted away, only their last lamentations are left; their qualities of sound are left; only word games are left (Echo leaves Narcissus behind, Duchamp leaves Rose behind).

**35.e** – In brief, the sphere of painting morphs into the painter's abject feelings, which reconfigure that sphere as Painting's ambition to recover the origins of its vague memories and comfortably inhabit the fossil footprints of its steps taken in time past.

That's when the pathetic movement of Orpheus turning around transforms the "mere surface" into a "prop".<sup>3</sup>

The "prop" is thus a moment – and a memento – whereby the "mere surface" discovers and offers itself for all time and space in the tension of its natural history: i.e., the history of art. In other words, it is now the Encyclopedia itself, through which it presumes to bring back the mother scenes of its beginnings.<sup>4</sup>

**35.f** – On the inaccessible mountain, removed from the sharp gaze of his people, yet close to God, Abraham does not fulfill the sacrifice which expiates the wickedness of simulacra, but rather dares to risk the *trompe-Dieu*.

Thus, the replacement of the Father's beloved victim with a providential and most luckless male goat, leads to the metaphor's damnation, which in turn opens wide the entrance to the inner cave of the figural appearances and the ceremonial depictions.

Once the simulation has been shifted from the Idol to the Ritual, the possibility of depicting the first term decreases in direct relation to how much the possibility of depicting the second term increases.

Thus on the one hand we come to the Unity which cannot be depicted, while on the other hand the figures which were removed from the first term are so numerous that they no longer have enough space, so they take turns to rest, impelling a game of substitutions which triggers the metaphor's tireless spiral, the hard work of iconology.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with points 23, 35e, 39f10.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 39.f7.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with point 38d.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with point 38g and 39c.

**35.g** – Since Jason seeks another wedding,<sup>1</sup> Medea kills their beloved children in the secret space of home – far from her unfaithful husband’s gaze – and scatters them to the four corners of the tragic family seat. She wants to destroy the very hope that the untruthful couple can ever be reunited.<sup>2</sup>

Already by offering Creon’s daughter’s tunic, Medea acknowledges Jason’s new wife as being both similar and hostile – i.e., as a “Guest”. But this *mariée* goes so far as to clothe herself with that tribute, without realizing that that same offer has also unveiled the entire iconography of an upside-down Deposition: where you could make out a Winding Sheet held up and offered by bodies already on their way to the abattoir.

To use a symbol means to liberate that symbol from metaphorical second thoughts, thus in reality unleashing it against the one who insisted on placing his trust in it. And the conflict is always to the death.

Thus the tunic sent by Medea is revealed, when worn, to be an all-encompassing winding cloth which in the end triumphs over the figures that have been sentenced to death: be they sons or wives, they will disappear without a moan under the white dress of extreme Hospitality.

**35.h** – If Abraham is the father of metaphors, Medea is the one who locks their vicious spiral into a circle, carrying out the metonymical welding with raw blood, and then granting idleness.<sup>3</sup>

But another Father will come, who will sacrifice his only beloved Son to open a new cycle of metaphorical worship and damnation, given that it’s not yet time to consider bread and wine for what they actually are.

**35.i** – The emptying out of the canvas, like a white hole, has caused reality to collapse on the outside; here everything is lighter than light, and nothing blends with it, or enters into it.

The “mere surface” is (also) the iconography of Nought, which appears in order to affirm, confirm, corroborate and strengthen the fact that matter is outside depiction.

To hold the tragic position means resisting in the resting point of perplexities. Indifferent to solutions. Ultimately irresolute.

Here Painting realizes that it is void that creates utilization,<sup>4</sup> the condition to start moving again, without however going – nor staying either.<sup>5</sup>

**35.j** – On the other hand, Painting can in the same way appear as Painting once it has lost all utility, just like the utensil “appears”

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 46.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 38f

<sup>3</sup> Compare with point 38l and 39c.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with point 38h.

<sup>5</sup> Compare with points 28, 39f-1.

when its use is forgotten. Then the image is a Pretence, and Disrepair is its condition. This is why only after the death of art can the image of art finally appear.<sup>1</sup>

And also: because after the loss of the value of utilization, an exchange value comes into being.

In the market, which is the body of the exchange value, the work of art acquires the value of utilization it has today, the only value left to it, the only value still allowed it.

And now it is the auction price that becomes important: we need some criterion, after all, to distinguish one work of art from another.<sup>2</sup>

**35.k** – The Ananke of Painting mirrors itself in the “mere surface”. Only after having celebrated all the mysteries of the Surface, after having united as one the Time of memory and present Necessity, can Painting get the new ceremonies of the immutables underway (for each dismemberment is a premise and a promise of a renascence in unity), initiating to them not only the single man of excellence, but each and every individual – and to hell with the mysteries of Privilege.<sup>3</sup>

**36** – Attempts to reconstruct the genealogy of the mere surface (in the context of painting)

*to enter into your story  
is like a frightened hero  
if with his bare heel he's touched  
some edges of the territory.<sup>4</sup>*

**36.a** – Painting becomes possible through a constraint on external totality, “not allowing it to subsist exactly as it is” (Hegel); i.e., starting off by reducing the three dimensions to a flat surface – without however ignoring spatial depth which, on the other hand, thanks precisely to this reduction, becomes problematic (transforming the golden backdrop of Medieval images into an icon, transforming Renaissance perspective into a symbol, transforming Impressionism into a question of colour, etc.)

This first move towards *reductio*, which marks Painting from its very inception, already contains the whole game it means to play with external totality: maybe there is also the final result (determinism), if not the developments and exactly predicted results (mechanicism).

But then Painting cannot mean, and consist of, extending and perfecting the modes of depiction, or the very language of Painting; nor does it mean making it stricter, as if it were the atonement for that guilty original *reductio*, which needs to be redeemed through

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 39f.4.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 37b.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with point 33.

<sup>4</sup> S. Mallarmé, op. cit.

additional work on optical falsifications.

If anything, we need to say that painting consists exactly of perfecting an absence.

**36.b** – Once painting has been made possible through this limitation, it can only survive if this limitation is reaffirmed every time; and can only move forward, within this limitation of external totality, by shrinking the visual qualities of the world and its objects.

But in what direction does it move?

Or, put differently, where is the limit to these tireless limitations?

What is painting's true limit?

If we concur with Victor Hugo that "the form is the background which returns to the surface", then we can say that when form and background – in a deadly embrace – identify with each other and vanish from sight, only the surface remains to guarantee that Painting is still there; the surface is the only term that doesn't get confused but remains unchangingly true to itself, while both figure and background, in their tussle, move towards invisibility.

If the limit of Painting is invisibility, then to paint means every time to approach the invisible – and this way of going on seems to be confirmed by the direction which one of the most significant branches of modern painting has in fact taken (from the monochrome to the achromatic).

But also: if invisibility is Painting's limit, then the surface is this limit's tangible form – the witness, or historical figure of how Painting moves towards this dis(solution), which however, and in spite of all, remains essentially pictorial in character.<sup>1</sup>

### **36.c** – *LIMIT PASSAGES*<sup>2</sup>

- In mathematical calculations a limit passage, whereby one function is obtained from a previous given function, is called a "derivative".

For the tangent at any plane curve, the value of the derivative at a specific given point is the limit approached by the ratio between the increment of the function of a secant straight line and the increment approaching zero of the independent variable, although it never actually reaches the nought value.

It is understood that we are here talking always of cases in which the limit in question actually exists; if it did not exist we would have to say that in that given point the function has no derivative.

Now, if we – with a daring analogy and model – take Painting to be the continuous function of a straight line intersecting a plane curve (of external totality?), and take one of the two intersecting points as the limit given to make the "mere surface" Painting's actual limit, could we then say that this is truly Painting's definitive limit? To begin with, as a *conditio sine qua non* of Painting,<sup>3</sup> the "mere

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 20, 35a.

<sup>2</sup> See attached Tables.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with point 13.

surface" appears in reality as the least possible condition from the origins of painting. It is thus a point of departure which endures. Secondly, the monochromes of many contemporary painters have given the "mere surface" a practical opportunity to lead a real life in the history of painting. Thus the surface is also a point of arrival.

In the end of it all, we are dealing here with an irreducible and irreplaceable element of Painting's primary and ultimate existence – in fact, we are dealing with its limit and end-point.

Going beyond this limit would mean for a tangent to go back to being a secant of an opposite sector of the curve, and for Painting it would mean to once again insist on figurative depiction in a sector of the external totality which is opposite to the preceding one. The change of status which one would trigger by going past the given point of the tangent demonstrates that the limit exists also historically (as well as conceptually and practically), and thus that the hypothetical function can have a derivative.

Before going on, would we have to demonstrate the validity of this model, even though only in the form of a challenge?

Let me reread 36.a: "Painting becomes possible after having placed a limit on external totality".

If I now express this totality with a plane curve, were a straight line to intersect it at any two points, this would immediately cause a limitation – for example, in relation to the entire concave sector enclosed by the curve, or for example, in relation to all the points of the curve itself, and so on.

Now, we have what we need to state that in the painter's functional calculation (in his "practice") the "mere surface" is posited as the limit and pivot around which painting starts revolving (impelled by the increments approaching the independent variable's nought value – i.e., invisibility), and with the steps of differentiated pictorial infinitesimals, which cause it to follow all the points of the curve, it finally places itself as a tangent at the curve itself, with which it will share only that one common point, because it has abandoned all the other points of the curve (or function) of external totality.

Having in this manner powered it "after placing limitations", we have also represented the extreme *reductio* of Painting, which is now fully given over to the tangent, and almost entirely concentrated in the "mere surface", in whose bosom Painting desires to find rest, though by definition it will never be able to do this.

This is its punishment for having thought only of itself.

It is quite obvious that in this manner, Painting had to increasingly give up wanting to represent reality. So the painter too withdraws from the world, no longer having an understanding of material relationships, until he is alone with a kind of painting which is as bloodless as he is.

And so this movement is also seen to be the way in which the painter retired and "withdrew", until his relationship with Painting became an exclusively personal affair.

Given the inability to comprehend it, external reality has been reduced to an individual sensation.

Painter and Painting are both still holding on to the world thanks to this ultimate end-point, but they hang dangerously in the direction of non-painting, and meanwhile repeat to themselves – without a shred of conviction: *hey, we could even die.*<sup>1</sup>

*A bit of lace is abolished  
while there's a doubt the Supreme Game  
will not reveal the blasphemous act  
but the bed's eternal absence.*<sup>2</sup>

**37.a** – As it cannot be fully reached, the “mere surface” perhaps is nothing but a definition: a definition, however, which is entirely real and necessary.<sup>3</sup>

Painting bereft of its limit and end point would have been unacceptable; it would have been struck dumb by the fluid multiplicity of the world's visible qualities (like Dionysius in front of the mirror<sup>4</sup>).

It would have been confused right from the beginning, in the same way as it is confused in the end. But meanwhile it has walked its own path – like a glorious Achilles who strains to the utmost to catch the turtle (and he might even make it if he used some integral calculus (i.e., “criticism”?).<sup>5</sup>

The infinitesimal increments which have been crossed to the limit passage, are the discreet steps of its own history. They have marked the rhythm impelled by the path of material relationships (and the more Painting remains in denial of these relationships, the more they subjugate her), going so far as to overturn the limit passage – which then becomes a ford.

Having breached this limit, Painting rediscovers the non-limits of external totality; but now it wishes to leave it exactly as it is, so that it can busy itself with wordly things and get entangled in those issues.<sup>6</sup>

**37.b.** – To draw ever nearer to itself and finally fit within its own limits, Painting had to progressively reduce the outside world to a pure sensation.

One step more and the world will vanish into imagination.

Having himself arisen from the curve and from the leap, the Painter is summoned as the ultimate possible limit of the social function.<sup>7</sup>

So then that same way of retiring from the world becomes a “withdrawal”, because it is in any case here that Painting starts coinciding with the Painter; and from here on the future of both will be inextricably interlinked and interwoven, and the painter will be condemned to self-portraits.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with points 14, 35b, 39f-9.

<sup>2</sup> S. Mallarme, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with point 20.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with point 35a.

<sup>5</sup> Compare with point 40.0

<sup>6</sup> Compare with points 29 and 33.

<sup>7</sup> Compare with point 33.

Painting's will to depict now finds only the objects that belong to it, and from now on its theories will only know and recognize itself, and the objects that belong to it.

But if painting has forgotten the world, the world has not forgotten painting, and so leaves it at the mercy of the powers which are in fact controlling it.

Now Painting and Painter find the "market", which in fact subjugates both of them in material terms.

And now we can also list the manufacturing regulations and instructions on how to use Painting. Meanwhile, its function can be ascertained by the outcome of the supreme challenge, which attempts to transform the work of art into hard cash. Whereby Painting starts talking again.<sup>1</sup>

**37.c** – Just as the secant's derivative is the tangent, so the Painting's derivative is Aesthetics (the aesthetics of Painting).

When the function of "painting" (its first degree) passes by its limit, marked by the "mere surface", it is through this sign that Painting now gives itself to the world, exposes itself, surrenders to it.

And there's no doubt that if anyone still wants to enjoy Painting's last show of itself, they'll have to provide themselves with an aesthetic device (and an optical one, too), from which to extract the full enticement of the thing.

Let us add that in painting Aesthetics is not much older than the surface: the only difference being that it has foreseen painting's fate before actually witnessing that its final form.

And Aesthetics, too, was able to develop correctly only after the death of art: i.e., as with any other science, it had to wait until the object of its analysis was sufficiently developed, for it then to be transfixed and lie motionless on the dissecting table.

**37.d** – Having merged the moment when it was possible with the moment when it is still barely possible, Painting has no choice but to develop and find the further moment in which it is possible no more. Is it only a summons to the Painter, held firmly in the Market's fist, that bails Painting out and offers it new possibilities?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with points 26 and 35d.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with 35d.

## 4.

### The mere surface as "guest" or "prop"

*Necessary anguish of the past clutching  
tightly the sepulchre of disavowal  
with its claws.<sup>1</sup>*

**38.a** – The invisible limit reached by the "mere surface", is the emptied-out heart of painting. Which moans to be reached, all the while proclaiming NOLI ME TANGERE.

Because up to that point painting comes into being, but at that same point it takes the shape of its demise.

By disciplining itself to reach the limit, painting reached that point in a state of exhaustion. But when it is a hair's breadth away from the invisible and it sees itself as definitive painting, then the painter smells the danger of this farewell and, in an extreme form of self-respect, painter and painting become – both – irreducible.<sup>2</sup>

It is in this environment, which is much closer to the silence of Painting, that painting can still go on appearing, and manage not to get swallowed up by the perpendicular vertigo which appears out of the plane, towards the world of external totality and non-painting.<sup>3</sup>

Associating with this uncertain threshold, the painter can gain that familiarity which allows him to force silence upon the silence of painting.<sup>4</sup>

**38.b** – On farewell's outer boundary, the "mere surface" per se would remain a simple definition, were it not that, in the frozen stalemate between the tragic perplexity and the pathetic perplexity, the Painter first rids himself of the melancholy of numbers, and then catches hold of that surface by the tail of its twofold epiphanic form of "guest" and "prop", both of which in their turn reveal their double nature with which now they can stage the new sensitiveness of painting.

**38.c** – (guest) – Taking the "mere surface" as "guest", we can list all those works in which the retinal stimulus is predominantly in repose. And it's like a call to take rest – precisely because of the invariability of the pictorial surface, where the pictorial events taking place on the surface are pushed near to the borderline of imperceptibility.<sup>5</sup>

Here it is painting that refers to nothingness.

Here it is painting that refers to the void, inside which you can still barely hear the NOLI ME VIDERE<sup>6</sup> sounding its own limit.

Here the "guest" has to undress to keep the visitor in a state of

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<sup>1</sup> S. Mallarme, op. cit.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with 15, 21 and 28.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with o1, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with 20, 35a.

<sup>5</sup> Compare with 01.

<sup>6</sup> Compare with 39c, 40-0.

seduction.<sup>1</sup>

**38.d** – (prop) – If we take the “mere surface” as the “prop”, we can single out almost all those works which – now, after the limit passage – exhibit a variety (albeit a limited one) of retinal stimuli, indeed enhanced by an extreme discretion. Often the “prop” evokes – and invokes – the iconographies and iconologies which may be elementary, but in which depiction will soon open a passage to clutter the gaze, not only the eyesight.<sup>2</sup> Then it marks the start of a path of hybrids which are literary, too, and can lead to original contributions, but these can hardly be appreciated without the added messy pastries of erudition.

Its direction is determined by a calling up of the past: successive, surrogate, even ulterior, in any case reactive and often retroactive in relation to the place of death, disappearance and thus re-start of the art of painting. And thus it needs to be understood as Orpheus again ascending past an (extreme) point which he had, after all, left behind. But now, having seen the face of the definitive, he retraces his steps, though with the dust of the sepulchre in his eyes.<sup>3</sup>

**38.e** – The guest is forever waiting.<sup>4</sup>

He is forever visited, abandoned and betrayed by the incursions of the figures which neither yield anything to him, nor even give themselves to him. And this forges the cynicism he needs.<sup>5</sup>

The “prop” claims and exhibits the encrustations and traces, the lingering tangible signs of the angel’s visitations and passages. By thus showing the footprints and the tracks, it could even appear to be a higher phase of the “guest”: i.e., a “guest” who has finally been gratified and satisfied, rewarded for his patience, were it not for the fact that these visits are all too easily transformed into the “reason”, thus unmasking him as a wretch with an unseemly greed, ruled by feelings of gratitude for (the history of) painting.

Then the “prop” all too often keeps a “guest” which after three days (a fact which has also been confirmed by the Scriptures) starts smelling like rotten fish.<sup>6</sup>

**38.f** – The “mere surface” wants to crush the very hope that Painting may be reconstituted.<sup>7</sup>

**38.g** – As “prop”, the “mere surface” accomplishes the reduction of pleasures – whereby only desires are left.

This is the reason for its drive to restore the “mother scenes” of painting<sup>8</sup>, with which it busies itself so as to appear as a text on

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with 35g.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with 35e.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with 35c, 36c.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with 35l.

<sup>5</sup> Compare with 39b.

<sup>6</sup> Compare with 35b, 39a.

<sup>7</sup> Compare with 35g.

<sup>8</sup> Compare with 35e.

which a private *prêt-à-porter* dining table can be set, laid out for the sarcophagus flies which soon will be swarming in the reason-motif (even though this motif is resolved in either monochrome or achromatic).<sup>1</sup>

For the successful reduction of pleasures leaves us one single pleasure, constantly attained and constantly junked or sold off, if need be. (Style?)

**38.h** – As “guest”, the mere surface accomplishes the reduction of our desires to fulfillment. Thus, only pleasures remain.

This is the origin of its propensity for immediate satisfaction, enjoyment and quiet. The mere surface is also capable of always carrying with it painting as a possibility, no longer leaving it in the work of art itself; yet the pictorial pregnancy is always inside it, without forgetting to be (and remain) the clean – not the scraped – vagina of Painting.

Through the limit passage the painter comes into the presence of painting.

But he who stands in front of the “mere surface” cannot put it to any use, for he faces a negation. So he can only serve it (either as “prop” or as “guest”).

Painting’s life and works tend to come together as one in the painter. They ramify psychosomatically inside him, without gashes, transforming him into a heavenly body.

The “prop” presumes to be the text, where for the “guest” the text becomes the context of the welcomer.

In the guest, the reduction of desires has only one single desire left, ever taut, ever erect towards the world.

“The “guest” moves from renunciation to indigence and composes a single text. And once again, when we have nothing to lose, we have a whole world to gain. And painting as “guest” follows a hopeless strategy, but nevertheless remains seated on the right (of the world) of Painting.

*(Back to physical reality)* – As in artistic depiction objects generally lose their utility value, so in the depiction of painting (as a double negative of its use) it is the very use of painting that grows volatile. Thus we end up by reconfirming – but now in a higher form – the utility value of worldly objects. In other words, cancelling the actual pictorial nomination (depiction) shifts the attention and the use from the sign to reality, which grows powerful. I.e.: the “mere surface” as “guest” is right there, like a guard, to safeguard reality and painting. And safeguard the reality of painting.

**38.i** – the “mere surface” – a glimmering form of painting now that the latter has reached its limit and end point – makes it resistant to description as well. And you have to climb up it as you climb up a mirror (i.e., defend an untenable opinion).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with 39a.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with 39f-6.

**38.j** – Now painting draws from the bottom as from a well without walls.

And you say: here it is! without seeing the well, without seeing the extreme beauty of its idleness which refreshes itself on the edges. You allow its right to idleness only to change sides: from Paolo Uccello's battles to Duchamp's challenge to a game of chess, which smiles without a moustache because it knows you are weakened by the self-denial of images.

**39.a** – It is enough to apply the *pathetic move* to the "prop" (which in any case claims or invokes it, since it is congenial to it) to rediscover painting as work and a reason to be labourious. (A reason also to seek a motivation that lies outside painting.)<sup>1</sup>

With this reason, painting first approaches the "mere surface", then makes a U turn; i.e., it does not move forward on another new path, but insists on staying at the point where it is, or even retraces its steps.

In the limit passage model, this latter case can be represented with a tangent which goes beyond the limit and, following the sector of the curve opposite to the preceding one, would then morph into a secant. (Is this the diagram with which to reintroduce mother scenes?)

You can always go back again without reneging on anything. But after the sacrifice<sup>2</sup> you only find the ritual.

In any case, the way in which the limit passages have been effected is not at all a secondary matter. Nor is the climb back up. Painting's expressive features now rest on their diversity.<sup>3</sup>

**39.b** – In the same way, by submitting the "guest" to its own most obvious cynical move,<sup>4</sup> we again discover that painting is painting's indispensable idleness: i.e., the (unmotivated) resolution of the work as a "screen".

**39.c** – While the *pathetic perplexity*, placed in front of painting's NOLI ME VIDERE, resolves the "mere surface" into a "prop" and impels it towards the reason (which all too easily yields and submits to a desire to return to painting's mother scenes<sup>5</sup>), the *tragic perplexity* for its part brings out in the "mere surface" a propensity which passes through the "Guest", and is resolved in the "screen" – for the screen is the dismayed paradigm nearest to painting's revelation: its most credible body of pictorial achievements which, taking up the challenge posed by NOLI ME VIDERE, remains motionless and sated: imperturbable. (Painting acquires a musical score of indeterminateness and becomes a spectacle. It is only right, then, that painting should also become a "screen", if society

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with 35c, 37d.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with 35f, 35g.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with 03.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with 38e.

<sup>5</sup> Compare with 04.

has become a Society of the Spectacle.)

**39.d** – The “mere surface” is (has attained) painting’s indispensable point; and the “screen” ’s cynical pace puts painting at the mercy of the World.<sup>1</sup>

But it is the “screen” which has gone beyond the actual use of painting and now puts the world to use, and the world pays the screen back by casting on all painting a light which reveals painting’s full genealogy.

**39.e** – The “mere surface” can express itself only through a past or a future, never with a present, which has plunged deep at the threshold, has been pushed into the “mere surface” like a hub or a motionless hinge round which painting continues swinging.

The (past) “support” and the (future) “guest” are the visible swings of the pendulum, which mark the continuous disappearance of Painting.

**39.f** – (run-offs to be read without batting an eyelid)

.1. The death of art is an extreme possibility, innate in art itself. This death, which refused to be a “demise”, still allows for some activity. It produces a vacuum which permits movement, lends air, breath.

.2. The figure appears only by hiding other figures. Instead: to look and to be in the thing itself, to look at Painting’s empty gaze, and not at the depictions of things and of Painting itself as a thing. Transparency dissolves the figure and no longer conceals anything, because nothing needs to be concealed any longer, i.e., nothing remains to be seen.

.3. After the death of art one can no longer be distracted away from images, but one can on the contrary turned into the thing and intimately bound up with it – turned into Painting and intimately bound up with it – without impatience, no longer busy – especially if the subject we are dealing with is, in fact, a corpse. (Artaud’s Van Gogh?)

.4. The “mere surface” has offered Painting not only the chance to die, but also the coffin in which to lower its body. And Painting was not happy only to die, it also asked the “mere surface” to stay on as a guarantee that it could die.

.5. After the death of art, and of Painting, we can only find the ritual condolence. But often there are no suitable words for such sympathy.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with 05.

.6. Only the death of art could transform art into a commodity. Only it could separate the soul from the body. Just like industrious humanity was separated into "dead work" and "living work", i.e., into Capital and salaried Work.<sup>1</sup>

.7. Finally, everyone is ready to grant you the freedom of (religion, opinion, speech, etc.), but certainly not freedom from (religion, opinion, speech, etc.). The freedom of painting is permissible, but not the freedom from painting. Didn't Duchamp allow himself freedom from painting...? Or did he take liberties with painting?

.8. After the death of art, the artist's suicide, intimately linked to art's death, would still affirm the present, and affirm life. This would mean to claim a sense which seems not to have been granted. A real death on the other hand is when we no longer wish to have wishes, not even the wish to die. Otherwise it would not be a real death, only gratification.

And the "mere surface" is indeed the giving up of all hope of still having wishes.<sup>2</sup>

.9. To stay quiet, not to busy yourself even with suicide. After all, we can say that one has forgotten the manner and procedures of painting; it may even be that one no longer recognizes the places where painting usually appears, and to have forgotten the very aim and reasons of painting. But one can also talk about all this forgetfulness and yet remain at the centre of Painting's pierced heart.

.10. Is run-off 9 my case? Yes, it would seem to be, in the light of point 32, which states: "*a painting makes sense when it can be sold*".

Take Titian's case, who boasted of never having started work on any canvas which had not already been paid, nor ever having painted a canvas for his own enjoyment. (Thus never in vain, i.e., with *vanitas*?)

Another interesting case is Gerhard Richter's: his 1975 monochromes come at the end of a period in which he no longer knew what to paint.

Again, consider point 32, which says: "painting has a sense when we do it". Thus in G. R.'s case, this would show that painting possesses a constraining character – or is it painting that must endure the painter's constraints? Here then we would be talking of an impulse to produce in the absence of any other requirement apart from the need to produce – which in fact means to produce painting qua painting; i.e., a producing in and on, and starting from, *Vanitas*.

Where does such a constraint come from and what does it rest on, if not, ultimately, on the capitalist way of producing volcanically, in narrowness and isolation?

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with 35d.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with 35c and 35g.

.11. That "the sale of the work of art is put to death by precapitalistic aesthetics"<sup>1</sup>, and that "the market of aesthetics presupposes the aesthetics of the market"<sup>2</sup>, means that the gaze is no longer controlled by retinal sensibility, but is freed from the deadweight of the prospectival pyramid in the same manner as the divine eye printed on the pyramid of the dollar, thus acquiring new prerogatives to brighten all the objects of the world with its own light.<sup>3</sup>

**39.g.** – Conditions for a return to physical reality.<sup>4</sup>

## **5.** **The apparitions of the surface**

**40.0** – At this point allow me to ask myself: what the hell am I talking about? In practical terms, I mean.

In practical terms!

Well, now, this a tough little word to crack, when – on a grey day in Combray, enjoying a sip of tea mixed with the crumbs of madeleine biscuits left behind by Seraut and Cezanne, Braque and Mondrian (and why not Duchamp as well) – a pleasure, "isolated" from all causes, suddenly gripped me.

*Surely what throbs so deep down within must be the image, the visual memory which is linked to that flavour and tries to follow it up to me... Will it ever touch the surface of my full consciousness, that memory...? Hard to say. Now I don't feel anything anymore, it's stopped, maybe gone down again; will it ever arise from the darkness again? I have to start over again, bend over it ten times.*<sup>5</sup>

And I bend over that subtle emanation of my sensitivities, to catch a whiff of the inexpressible fragrance of a mixture left on the bottom by Malevich's black,<sup>6</sup> by Rodchenko's red,<sup>7</sup> by Reinhardt's

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<sup>1</sup>Compare with *Abaco delle esortazioni* ("The Abacus of Exhortations"), in Aut. Trib 17139 no. 1, Rome, 1978.

<sup>2</sup>Compare with Aut. Trib no. 1, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup>Compare with 35d, 7 and 27. Reason is defeated by the gamble and Duchamp puts aside his chess pieces and plays in the stock market.

<sup>4</sup>Compare with 38h.

<sup>5</sup>Marcel Proust, *The Road of Swann*.

<sup>6</sup>Kasimir Malevich – from "Black square on white background" to "White square on black background", Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>7</sup>Alexander Rodchenko: "It was a small square canvas painted entirely with a single red colour". This is how Nikolai Tarabukhin in a piece written in 1923 remembered this work of Rodchenko's. Five constructivist artists, each with one work (Rodchenko and Stepanova, Alexandra Ekster, Liubov Popova and Alexander Vesnin) took part in the show "5x5=25", held in Moscow in 1921. On that occasion, Rodchenko displayed "Line", "Cell", and three monochromes dating from 1921: "pure red colour" (Чистый красный

dark.<sup>1</sup>

And that whiff reaches me like a friendly call from painting; not however allowing me to again experience the olfactory and shiny acuteness of the "mere surface", which is the calculated limit of painting – and which for this reason perhaps can never be approached by "derivative" practices, but only by the "integral" calculus produced by its own critique.<sup>2</sup>

And again I bend over that bare whiff of lime which now vehicles also the pungent b.o. of Newman,<sup>3</sup> Rothko<sup>4</sup> and Pollock<sup>5</sup>; and others, as well, while they were all sweating and straining in the dead of midnight, where the image is kept like a belly button at the centre of the pictorial surface.

But all these individuals, yielding neither to fright nor to risk, still grip the pathetic drive towards depiction tightly in their fist.

Loosen the grip just a little and

*like in that game in which the Japanese take a soup bowl full of water and plunge pieces of paper into it which were indistinct, but which spread out the moment they come into contact with water, acquire an outline, colour, distinctness, become flowers, houses, human figures which are firm and recognizable, so now all the flowers of our garden and those of Swann's park, and Vivonne's waterlilies and the good people of the village and their homes and the church and all of Combray and its environs, all that takes on shape and solidity, has come up, cities and gardens, from my cup of tea.*<sup>6</sup>

And so, also the surface – better if accompanied by a good cup of tea and biscuits<sup>7</sup> – recovers from its fright after Painting had proclaimed the NOLI NE VIDERE.

And so how can we now skip the passage for this point of new beginnings without having to endure the pathetic embrace of returning "isms"?

But now *"it is time that I stop, the virtue of the drink seems to be decreasing."*<sup>8</sup>

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цвет), "pure yellow colour" (Чистый желтый цвет), and "pure blue colour" (Чистый синий цвет). Oil on canvas, each panel measuring 62.5 x 52.5 cm.

<sup>1</sup> Ad Reinhardt, "Abstract Painting", 1960-66, oil on canvas, 60x60 cm., Guggenheim Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Compare w/ points 14 e 37a.

<sup>3</sup> Barnett Newman, "The Name II", 1950 - Magma and oil on canvas, 2.642x2.400 mm (104 x 94 1/2 in.) National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Rothko, "1968", acrylic on paper mounted on hardboard panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson Pollock, "Number 1", 1950, National Gallery of Washington DC.

<sup>6</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Road of Swann*.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Morandi, 1964, the last canvas; olio su tela, cm. 25,5x30,5, Morandi Museum, Bologna.

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Road of Swann*.



## **6.** **The apparitions of the *screen***

**41.0** – There is a road clearer than Swann's (the impressionistic one?), which helps painting (which has now reached the extreme limit of the mere surface) to end up as a "screen". It's the road that goes straight ahead, avoiding the move to

identification<sup>1</sup> in order to reach the "screen" directly through the movement of "separation".<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it would reach this point proceeding empirically, i.e., right after the figure and the background have separated from each other, the first becoming a ghost, and the second... yes, a "screen". Ghost and screen, seeking each other and pushing each other away, thus expressing the mutual hostility which makes them both "guests".

Having been reached by the movement of separation, deprived of the rigour of the chiasmic identifying passage, the "screen" now also paves the way for the exercise of the pathetic moves to fix the figure. Thus this type of "screen" is at all times susceptible of being reconverted into a "prop"; and still permits it to push it into the arms of the "reason", thus resolving it into depiction once again.

In the light of the above, it is quite evident how in painting attaining various expressions of the "mere surface" by diverse pathways does make a difference, given that each requires and demands a limit passage.

The various ways and methods to foster the passage are the variable determinants which allow even the "screen" to express the silence of painting in an equally determined manner.

Like the fossil noise of the Big Bang lingers throughout the universe, so the noise of the separations consumed in painting lingers as a smear at the "bottom" of the "mere surface".

It is the highly distinctive manner in which the artist retains this silence of painting which enables it to express itself as the loud silence of a specific work.

(*Gashes*) – the sound of the flute in sufi ceremonies is the symbolic expression of melancholy, of the flute's nostalgia for when it was still an indistinct reed amongst a clump of other reeds: before separation, before election, before its specifics... Then individualism would be a pathology which expresses pain, albeit in highly individualized tones.

**41.1** – It can also happen, that in spite of making a cynical move at the expense of the "reason" or the "prop", we can still reach the "screen".

Take for example Caravaggio's "tabula rasa", as described by Longhi: *"...his (i.e., Caravaggio's) deference to truth at first allowed him to confirm his naive belief that it was the "camera's eye" that was doing the looking for him and telling him how to proceed.. and what surprised him most was when he realized that the human figure is not at all indispensable to the mirror; given that, after the figure has left the field, it continues to reflect the slanting floor, the shadow on the wall, a ribbon lying on the ground. It is not difficult to understand what could result from this resolution on the part of the artist to proceed with a direct mirroring of reality. The result being the tabula rasa of the painterly tradition of those*

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 16.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 13.

*times, which... had wrought a division of what can be depicted."*  
And further on: *"once the Bacchus has come out of the mirror's full space, there still remain there the bowl of fruit, the forgotten ribbon; the musician or the diner having withdrawn from the table, there still remain the instrument of "undeciphered" beauty, or the "last course", left untouched; the half-full pitcher, the sliced water melon and melon, the intact apple and the overripe pear, the flies which jump on their own shadows."*<sup>1</sup>

And thus in Caravaggio the surface had already initiated an independent movement: the mirror had begun to move freely in relation to all the figures that were fixing their gaze on it, moving towards an independence of its own which will ultimately free the gaze from all the objects of the world, including also the gaze which is fixed on painting itself.

(The objects on which we need to apply ourselves are indifferent to the gaze qua gaze...)

We would still need to explain how, in the industrial and capitalist era, that movement away from Caravaggio's mirror was actually effected and accomplished. In other words, what were the actual procedures put into play to complete the separations and render them absolutely factual and possible – i.e., those procedures which, in the final analysis, like internalized paradigms, brought into being, in painting as well, the processes which weaken and finally suppress the bonds that link the aesthetic-pictorial sensitivity to real, immediate and historic life.

**41.2** – Although painting has no fear of open spaces, it cannot push beyond the "screen", the limit of its limit, the pupil and empty gaze over the lands of non-painting.

The "screen" holds painting by the scruff: dangling over an abyss, down which it would be lost in the world and all its objects.

With the "screen", Orpheus' descent has gone too far; and the only pleasure it can still enjoy is to stand right there, on the edge, seeing inside the invisible the fruitful soil of Painting it has left behind.

Moses' will to go was fully dependent on the prohibition to enter Canaan. The full glory of his fate lies in the desert.

– Orpheus staying on quietly as Eurydice's guest – for now at last he knows that to return in any form dangerously exposes him to the boredom of repetitions.

The "screen" is thus the fullest and most complete form of the genealogy of the "mere surface".

But one step is still possible: as long as it is a real step forward, past the threshold of the "mere surface", past the sacrifice, now that Painting can only find its ultimate requirement outside of itself.

Thus, what happens afterwards can happen only outside the "mere surface", outside the frame and also outside the "screen": for it is already painting that offers itself as a prey to the world.

That's when the triple somersault takes place. And the usual

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Longhi, "Il Caravaggio", ed. Martello, Milano 1952.

challenge is to come out of it unharmed, finally in the world of physical, painful reality.

What to say, then? All that was possible has been done for Painting, starting with the limit of external totality.<sup>1</sup>

**41.a** – *Run-offs on the screen*

(Annunciation) – Painting could reach this specific solution (a crucial milestone), only by grabbing it from outside its exhausted and now motionless body.

The annunciation could only come by way of an angelic messenger sent from another place; i.e., the solution as revealed by a new and as of yet innocent ability to represent – an ability to successfully synchronize the different categories shared with Painting: light and colour, image and surface and space, all of them mixed with time, and instantly offered to the eye and to the gaze.

Thus painting finds, in a cinematic flutter, the possibility to throb once again.

(a pathetic move which comes from previous and progressive situations)

**41.b** – The experience of cinema is in itself an experience of the images' continuous conjunctions with and separations from (cleavages?) the plane of projection.<sup>2</sup> Painting derives inspiration from cinema's manner and circumstances, experimental corroboration and procedural legitimacy for the passages which take it to the very edge of the "mere surface". (And here perhaps is where the paradigms of the paraenigmas of "this" text are to be found)

**41.c** – (Reproductions) More and more evidence is gathered in favour of the wild sentiment (but also Poe's and Wilde's sentiment) that the image should pluck the soul out of things which have been reproduced. Now the speeding up of this reproduction can suck the entire soul out of the real world, leaving it empty and flat as a tombstone.

The photographic, cinematic, electronic lens like an impetuous Maelstrom sucks out even the space between things, takes away the air, takes away our breath. It takes away the void, and takes those things out of the void, shutting them up in a photogrammetrical compactness, so that it can then do what it wishes with them.

While the lens, applied to Painting, dries up the image and the figure, leaving a frame under a compressed-air vacuum, which – like in the presence of a bright gas – lights it up with a final, exhausted and exhausting aura of something resembling a work or art.

In other words: just as the mechanical reproduction of the real world removes the void, revealing the object's structure (and so

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 36a.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 38.

depriving it of any meaning), so the mechanical reproduction of Painting takes away the full to make the structure concrete and usable.<sup>1</sup>

#### **41.d**

- ("Cine") - When a film is projected, the beam of light which moves from the projector reveals, like a clarifying diagram, the actual mechanics of the phenomenon as and while it comes into being, keeping the elements in play separate (i.e., apart from one another) and totally concrete (the film text, the projector and other relevant equipment, the screen in the dark cinema hall).

When in a cinema hall the spectator, as sometimes may happen, stands up getting in the way of the beam of light, we are immediately aware of his physical presence, his material and physical substance and existence in a space which is different from cinematic space and cinematic reality, and yet obstructs it. Simply raise your hand and you will be able to test this fact, that you are indeed present here with your shadowy physicality, and that your presence bedevils the luminescent deception taking place on the screen.

- (TV) - In TV, the source of the signal coincides with the screen, which grows luminescent of its own accord. What was distinct (the cinematic experience in the cinema hall) meets in a single point, which consists of text, equipment and screen all in one; it inverts and confounds the cinematic order, which now projects the beam of light (without images, however) on the surrounding reality and leaves its mark on daily life.

And this is its job: to transform physical reality into an image (in that a film and/or a photograph transform the image into another physical reality, i.e., they do not alter the material they treat).

Here the text that runs on the TV screen now begins to light up the reality of those who are experiencing it, in order to control that reality as though it were its own, reserved property. This is what turning the magical lantern upside down has led us to.

The TV set casts light on the spectator from the front in order to blind him, and projects his shadow behind him, beyond the range of his direct gaze.

The shadow, which is proof of the spectator's physical presence, of his gratuitous interference with and fleeting appearance on the film screen, is now beyond his control.

The TV images are never disturbed and can proclaim their primacy over matter, while the viewer's body becomes faint, virtual, negligible. (*Peter Schlemihl's Ordinary History*)

The video's luminous activity spreads to the surrounding daily life, to the works and the days, and becomes numinous activity.

(The film signal comes from behind one's shoulders, like a work accomplished, like the past; the TV signal reaches from the front,

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with points 35g and 37e.

i.e., from the present. And so it is the present state of things: and being always live, it has a direct bearing on experience and on our understanding of everyday life, and thus of the future. It arises several steps ahead of the viewer, and puts him at risk).

**41.e** – The projection of film can indeed be seen as an elementary and metaphorical model of aesthetic experience and production (in the context of the development of Painting).

The terms of this metaphor are, then, the projector, the screen, the beam of light (as a relationship linking the producer of light to its dim physicalized object); the screen is the physicalized field with which we section the relationship (of the projected beam of light) and from which we obtain an image projected on a flat surface.

The film equipment, i.e., the painter's biological apparatus (in which the memory-knowledge is the film, i.e., the private, or better, the proven) is nothing without the screen, which converts his ego(t)ism.

*Threefold partition:* luminous motor machine – Dim, still screen – The equipment's phantasmagorical beam of light .

It's the screen on which the section and projection of the beam of light take place, which enables us to transform all the potential of the entire apparatus into the present time of the visual senses.

The screen is the human (the social), and as such can also start mingling freely with humankind in the form of an offer. And open up like an offer. The screen is the son to be sacrificed in order to reduce or redeem the original sin (the conflict between individual and society – constraints – sufi flute – rebellion against father – the image once again enacts the act of the substitutions, of the scapegoats, of Abraham and his children).

The screen is physicality as opposed to cinema, an emblem both of thought and the thinkable, which however only through the screen can become produced thought, removed from the dark just as the light decreases in speed.

**41.f** – And thus it is through the experience of cinema that painting takes cognizance of the factual possibility of a final divorce between the surface and the image.

To accomplish this separation (this cleavage, this falling apart) it was above all necessary to make the experiment possible, and see the image, the background and the surface as separable entities. Only after having seen this path, was it possible for them to part ways, so that each may seek its own destiny.

Thus, having finally (and factually) understood the mere surface to be a "screen" (guest), said surface now posits itself as the ultimate and primary resource of painting.

From now on the image will also have an independent life. Encysted in the light beam, only accident and chance will reveal it to us.

(In this way even Leon Battista Alberti's definition of painting as an intersection of the visual pyramid seems to get factual, historic and technological corroboration.)

#### 41.g – A RUN-OFF ON FUTURISM AND CUBISM

- That Futurism started out as being a super-Impressionism or a technologized Impressionism is perhaps supported (and confessed) by the following: that it allowed photography to suggest to it how it should depict movement – and let who is more impressionistic than photography cast the first stone.

The *pictorial* solution of movement in painting as offered by futurism is surely not realistic. The image's simultaneity or its repetition are graphic subterfuges which one learns to do only after movement has been represented photographically on the sensitive plate.

Still using pictorial language, the two can also be understood as being derived from the continuous and intertwined ornamental motif. But in practice in modern times this was a secret that futurism snatched from photography (which still today is unable to account for the movement of the subject in space on a single plane of projection).

Cubism, too, posed the problem of movement – that's why we see similarities at the operational level. But in this case it is not a question of depicting things as they move, or the movement of things, but to depict the movement of the experience of things, and finally to accomplish this task with the materials that belong to painting. Thus: since the "thing" of painting is the canvas, the problem is posed as a question that is squarely inside the surface's two-dimensional reality.

This is why cubism has a preference for still life (crystallized, as the futurists would say), round which it can express its visual representational experience. Because that experience must in some way or another finally be expressed in the stillness of the canvas.<sup>1</sup>

Then things make sense.

What was moving – first as the painter's experience which moves in experiential space, then as a spectator – remains what it is, in the same way as that which was still – first as nature, then as motif – and finally going beyond and nothing at all) also remains as it is.

Then you can even grab the cubist apple and eat it, and have the ultimate experience. That apple is not the Nike of speed and exultation, which is forever running ahead of us. Nor is it a mystical fetish surrounded by exalted Veronicas. It's only a pictorial motif which experiences the fate of all other things: death.

From this point of view, futurism betrays a contradiction and a (warrior-like?) conflict with external reality.

In a futuristic work, the mobility of the objects freezes (even though in the graphic insinuation of dynamism), while the painter's frozen

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, painting as it has always been would be nothing more than the depiction of a subject that moves in space in the same direction and at the same speed as the plane of representation, and which for this reason appears to be still although it is moving. In other words, movement has always been peculiar to painting, and the question is thus closed forthwith. This is what the reduction of reality has led to. But the real man does not allow himself to be reduced to the reduction of painting, in immobility he can see the dynamism, and in continuity he can see discontinuity.

stance claims to become dynamized in the viewer who gets projected onto the centre of the canvas.

We can say that while cubism hinges pictorial experience onto the object (the motif) in order to impel the pictorial experience – and thus holds it *firm* to completely and consequently depict it – futurism hinges on the subject (or subjectivity), around which moves the reality of its own personal retinal phenomena.

It is quite obvious that these experiences define the categories of immobility and dynamism. If the two elements – subject and object – were as one thing (both either moving or still, with the same speed and direction), then their appearance would already be solved in the classic forms of painting, i.e., in the depiction of fixed objects and perceptions.

It is however when the two elements don't agree, that painting is back in play.

But if futurism can do no more than allude to movement, then perhaps the pictorial solution had already been supplied by Renaissance (vanishing point) and Baroque (wind on the folds of clothing) painting.

By hinging itself onto the object, cubism for its part can freely shift its pictorial experience of the world; in this way it holds it fast, and so can also represent it precisely in the immobility of painting.

Futurism on the other hand needed to find its pictorial specificity elsewhere, for it was never be able to transfer the dynamic of space onto a two-dimensional surface. If it sought a fulfillment, this would necessarily have to be outside of painting, away from the surface, in the real movement of the world and history: and, even more stringently, in the most dynamic and real shapes, both technological and human, of the world and of history. It found such fulfillment in war, or better, in the aesthetics of war.

The mix of flesh and motors reaches the resolute and resolving form outside the flat metaphor of painting (ever frozen, literary, pictorial or cinematic, as the case may be), in the withering flash of life and death both of men and things. It talks, then, about the world, of cleansing the world, but is in fact concerned about its own health.

Thus in Futurism painting suffers a reverse. Which is just what it was asking for. It exhibits its limitations without any outside help, although soon enough it will be forced to look nature in the eye, confront structure and the laws of the surface: in brief, it will have to come back into the fold of painting, silent and defeated.

If the centre of the canvas is no longer perspectival, i.e., poised towards infinity, but coincides with the centre of the viewer's gaze, then the path towards freedom of the flat surface in front of us has been accomplished.

Certainly, nothing is more dangerous than an aesthetic that seeks to fulfill itself outside of its wonted fields. Nothing is more depressing than a story that seeks to live in real life. And yet...

Now that we've been taken outside the painting, we can choose to stay there and get going in a practical way to change the material conditions of painting as they stand at present.

#### **42.0 - INTERLUDE**

- It seems that we are talking about painting using painting's own voice; as if it possessed its own independent life, away from human life, and in particular from the activities of those human beings who are painters.

We have no wish here to play down the role of the artist, or cancel it outright with an act of mechanical determinism, so as to attribute this to forces that beyond the influence of single individuals. It is simply that by playing down the specifics we often promote the understanding of a phenomenon in a general and fuller way.

On the other hand, the work can reach art only if it walks on its own two feet.

Just like a rebellious Pinocchio, the work is now free to walk the world – probably ending up in the whale's dark belly. Which still is better than ending up in the collector's hairy belly.

**42.1** – But the work can walk if it has been accomplished in a proper manner: and in order for it to develop completely, it needs also to shed the delusions of the artist, who would keep the work for himself.

Thus Kandinsky, for example, described the chain of retentions (of the artist vis-à-vis his work, and of the work vis-à-vis the plane) before the plane surface began to come forward from the background, detaching itself from the artist:

*...during the work, the Plane is still totally linked to the artist and not yet detached from him, in relation to him it must be considered as a sort of image reflected in a mirror... It is clear, then, that I have to stick to the definition I've adopted: The P. will thus not be treated here as part of the finished work, but only as the background upon which the work is to be constructed.<sup>1</sup>*

The fact that the Plane goes free from its subjection to the mirror<sup>2</sup> in order to become a finished work of art, would seem to mean that the gap between the work and the artist is already sufficiently wide.<sup>3</sup>

Is it possible that Kandinsky had foreseen the further steps that painting was destined to take? That phrase, "not yet detached from him", which he wrote in 1923, would lead us to think so. But we can suppose that it was written right after the Plane had become a work in its own right in the Supremacist exhibition of 1915.

Thus the premonition was there already – and K. seems here to acknowledge this fact, without having necessarily to adopt it in his own work.

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<sup>1</sup> Vassily Kandinsky, *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*, Weimar 1923.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 41.1.

<sup>3</sup> "Criticism based on the personality cult is dangerous... Personally, I think that in the work of art there is something more objective, which can be an object of science. History is made of events and not intentions; history of art is the history of the works, not the men." Pierre Francastel, *Peinture et société : naissance et destruction d'un espace plastique de la Renaissance au cubisme*, Paris, Lyon, Audin, 1951.

**42.2** – In this series of mutual emancipations of the work of art – and then of the artist as well (given that by freeing itself from the artist, the work of art frees the artist from art, the painter from painting, returns him to generic man, i.e., puts him back in a germinal state, disconnecting him from the curse of style)... In the series, as I was saying, of mutual emancipations, the literary Text, too (“this” text), frees itself from both criticism and the subject which it treats, thus leading an independent life as a text, as a piece of writing.<sup>1</sup>

And so art criticism (criticism of painting) become the art of criticism (the painting of criticism) – it moves into hermenautic ground.

And so perhaps Painting, like Pinocchio in the whale’s dark belly, may even find the dim light of a new general aesthetic category, the crack that allows it to reach a different sensitivity, one that will allow it to resurface.

Just as the screen has broken away from film equipment, so the screen’s talk also slips away from the screen. How could it be otherwise, given that we’re dealing with a surface that no longer has handles?

If with the first shift, the screen recognizes itself as a screen (like a blind Narcissus), the criticism of the screen (as guest) discovers the “mere surface” (a germinal and wholly material moment of painting).

And since a blind Narcissus is none other than a clairvoyant Tiresias, the “mere surface” – having been reached by criticism along its specific path – is the tragic condition from which to start off again, or then where to stay put. That depends on the painter, who will from this point on require a new definition for painting<sup>2</sup> - no longer the earlier one.

Not even Raphael can find Raphael after Malevich.

**42.3** – Painting follows its path alongside the work of human beings; but on this same path painting forges its innermost nature, with which men have to come to terms, as in a double match.

To reach this point, painting has always allowed every age to think of it what that age could think – whether these were the most ridiculous prejudices or the most unreal ideas.

Painting couldn’t care less if Botticelli used neo-platonic thought, or if Malevich conceived the quadrangle as a result of religious and pataphysical conceptions. These were the only thing they had at hand at that particular moment.

Of course, Suprematism could also not have happened as it did, or not happen at all in painting... But was it missing the black square? Let it then be welcome, whatever the path it has taken to reach us. It is man’s work to open up a path as best he can in the nature of

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 41b.

<sup>2</sup> Surely of a *certain* painting, i.e., of a consistent painting, not an opportunistic one. (Do we still need to shadow the other paths of contemporary painting?)

his things, as also in Nature generally – which, for its own part, is completely indifferent to man's strivings. On the other hand, the appearance of the surface does not find painting unprepared. It was waiting for it: everything had been prepared to receive it when it finally did make its appearance, suddenly perhaps, but not under false pretences. Indeed, painting's further path also passed through a canvas of the third half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

*Gijsbrecht's upside down canvas puts the word end to an age – that age that saw the birth of art as a problem. And this is the reason why the "closure" effected by Gijsbrecht's<sup>1</sup> procedure, far from being "definitive", appears – this is the ultimate paradox – as the final point of an inaugural act. Thanks to that extreme experience, the picture has finally gained full self-awareness – of its being, of its nothingness.<sup>2</sup>*

A tardy comment for this dossier, which started dealing with the surface in 1975. Yet it comes at just the right time to confirm the correctness of several ideas put forward here.

## **7. the surface as guest - i.e., the "screen" (in painting)**

**43.0** – If the works of the painters discussed in 40.0 position themselves in various ways around the limit and end-point of the "mere surface", in order to make it visible to us as a species of "guest", or "support", do we still need to show that what has been put on the "screen" has found in reality a specific pictorial form of its own, so that this whole discussion doesn't fall outside the purview of real artistic practices?

Let us then say right away that it's thanks to some of Fabio Mauri's works that we have the chance to give a tangible sense to the category of the "screen" in the context of painting, but that we have also (in confirmation of the bronze passages prepared for this specific itinerary) some of the further proofs which the "screen" claims and implies. However, if we need to give to Fabio what is rightfully Fabio's, then even more do we need to give the screen that which rightfully belongs to the "screen".<sup>3</sup>

**43** – When what the screen postpones is guessed to be purely random, then every certainty begins to waver and the screen

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts, *Reverse Side of a Painting*, around 1670-75. Oil on canvas 66x86.5 cm. Copenhagen, National Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Victor I. Stoichita, *The Invention of the Painting*, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> A wider treatment of the notes written before 1975 was published in Fabio Mauri's monograph in 1994. (See Appendix)

becomes the only objective reality, unchanging in time, ever true to itself.

On the other hand, if we pose the antinomy, the weakness of one of the terms will strengthen the other.

**44** – Given the cinematic image and the screen, if we explore their random combinations cannot but quickly reach the only other case left to us: that case in which the screen escapes from the numinous flow of images and allows the beam of light to push the images towards infinity and their wasting away.

This escape becomes possible only if right from the beginning the screen and the image are two distinct entities.

Only when their divorce is final does the screen begin to play an exclusive role of its own, and its new encounters with images now fall under the laws of hospitality, no longer those of *conjugatio*.

There remains perhaps the question of what happens if the image does not meet up with the screen?

**45** – The depictability of the dizzying phantasmagoria of images, which was certainly not solved by Futurism,<sup>1</sup> becomes possible only with a blank screen, which with its immaculate presence infers and provokes all images.

**46** – The screen is also the extroflexion of the eye's internal mechanism, the structure of the gaze made factual.

Once the ties with the equipment are loosened, the screen is no longer a generic plane of cinematic projection.

The task now revealed to the screen is no longer that one – which at first had blinded it – of representing the phenomenon of cinema's specific and highly incidental features. Its task now is to realize that it is the tangible condition of the products of thought and what is thinkable. Thus, as a tangible form of thought, unaffected by all contingencies.

The screen is the concrete base in which and upon which image and light find their hard-earned rest. Their specific rest and solution.

It is a dimness of time that can give shape to memory, and finally reveal it to the senses: even though it knows it can only lengthen its duration – the unwilling, at times decisive, moment – by means of the cleptomaniacal reconversion of photography, which inverts the dissolving movement, the unstoppable flow of signs.

**47** – Going free amongst men, the screen is a living provocation. I.e., it demands every answer and some answers. And it is a provocation. I.e., it rejects all answers.

The screen is categorical in its extreme and unlimited availability and unavailability.

It is so subtle that it has devised a sure method to protect itself and

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<sup>1</sup> (See Run-off [point 41g] on Futurism) Futurism wrongly believes that by borrowing graphic and plastic conventions from literary subjects it can depict the multiple aspects of retinal impressions.

stave off any investigation of its activities. It asks questions for which it only can provide the answer. But it answers with enigmas so as to avoid any scrutiny which may affect its health. It offers the enigmas to keep men busy, while its unhealthy thinking fills the air in the room.

It does not come to terms with other signs. But, paradoxically (and perhaps not so paradoxically at all) this stance it adopts against signs is the condition it puts to yield unlimitedly to all unlimited signs.

Its hidden wish (and such is its shyness in showing that wish that it hides it even from itself) is to be possessed completely and forever by all the signs and all the ideological whims, without in fact yielding completely to any single one of them.

Its ambition, which is all-consuming, is polysemia.

Its performance exists under the sign of intemperance: the screen cannot possess any rule, but is mastered by the law of hospitality – but does not possess it: rather, is possessed by it.<sup>1</sup>

Or perhaps it can only possess the rules of gambling, the same rules which the player possesses – i.e., no rules, for which reason the gambler, with ever-fresh ardour, makes up the rules of gamblurdity.

And if all these are the preliminaries leading to death, they are also the preliminaries for an existence freed of existence, removed from chance and subjugated by the necessity of an instant – for this instant defeats chance, because it does not permit (make allowance for) options (substitutions), but only other instants which no longer have anything to do with it.

The screen, indeed, is also a threat, since it is ever ready to make our thoughts tangible to the senses. It's the dirty conscience (of what realizes it is corruptible).

Wanting to yield to all, the screen must necessarily let go of all selective prerogatives. It dotes on no-one, nor does it condemn anyone. Not even the screen dares to cast the first stone. But it wails to be possessed.

Thus its essential depravity makes a virtue of its virginal chastity. This is where its enigmatic form hails from.

**48** – Both screen and guest have a double meaning: they mirror each other, whereby the antagonists are reconciled while the reconciled antagonize each other.

The guest is he who welcomes (receives – concave) and is at the same time he who is welcomed (who offers himself – convex). The guest is the friendly stranger and the hostile friend.

The screen also designates both a plane surface on which a reality placed in front is projected and made visible (receiving – concave); but it also indicates an opaque plane surface for a reality in the back, denied to the eyes (a slippery convexity for the gaze). It is

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 35e.

thus at one and the same time a revealer of images and an obstructor of images. In other words, a bar to deep vision.<sup>1</sup>

**49** – Thus the screen is the guest. And the guest is the visitor, the screen.

The guest is sure of his existence and consistency. He knows who he is.

But knowing himself to be a guest he also knows that he's hinged (like Duchamp's door, which closes as it opens and opens as it closes) on its own axis of symmetry. He is entirely enclosed there, in this place of self-awareness which is a heart valve of the coming and going, of the throbbing flows of his secret heart.<sup>2</sup>

The guest is a guest only if the visitor makes him real by penetrating into his aura of hospitality. Otherwise he is no longer a guest. But then the visitor won't be a visitor either. Which is to say that the guest is no longer a guest.

The guest will not be a guest if the visitor is not a visitor.

Although, analytically speaking, the visitor and the guest (in their roles) introduce each other as two opposing and distinct (thus opposite) units, their existence is complementary, one depends on the other, they resolve into each other and dissolve from each other.

Impassably, the guest must endure the visitor, but the inverse is also true: if, that is, each wishes to remain what he is.

Both of them cannot but confront the meeting towards which their entire existence is mobilized.

Although their mutual hatred grows daily fiercer and more obvious, their damnation rests in perennial reconciliation. Which fact casts a pox on both.

The screen, like the guest, is ready to do anything and invokes the meeting in any case and by all means. For the penalty for doing otherwise is to disappear.

The screen is not a potential field, but a way of bringing all wishes into being.

It is the area in which thought and action are perverted.

It is an infected void; a healthy carrier of all images; automi-immunized against its own seductions. And thus all the more treacherous.

Like an ill-equipped brothel, the screen is however always ready to welcome all the passers-by in the alley. And in its bachelorhood, the screen can even become his own suitor.

In brief, it is St. Anthony's Thebaidic desert.

**50** – The screen, like an incontinent guest, refuses, constitutionally or institutionally, to keep the visitor longer than the fleeting moment of encounter. That is, longer than the moment in which the screen meets its own self, revealed to itself as both guest and visitor.

The screen's desire of absoluteness condemns it to the harsh

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with run-off 39f, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 39e.

solitude of one who consumes his own self in a series of blinding flashes of meeting.

He administers his own dazzling nudity with the caution of the thrifty, and starts fully living his condition (conviction?) of being irreplaceable in all the events which contingency weaves around him. And from those contingencies he goes free at last.

In his initial passivity, he has silently and insistently promoted his own inmost project of redemption.

When the film has gone through to the end, all rolled up in its own spiral of duration, the statement of the END is a resolution never to offer itself again, i.e., a sacred premonition of freedom attained.

The only condition to fulfill it was in slipping away rapidly from the bright flow of images: to be denied as a guest of dubious visits ("My good angel, Mary isn't here. Come again; we'll try to redeem ourselves on our own".)

But now the virginity it has finally gained is a constant provocation.

Its white dress is an irresistible attraction, like a brightly lit window at night, a cloud of moths which are blinded and unashamedly plunge towards the window and crash against the glass pane, dying in that deadly snare.

Its candour (moral perhaps? Calvinist, or, better: Jansenist) is gradually revealed as the subtlest form of sin, made immensely large by masking immaculateness.

This candor exposed to all, wails and wishes to yield.

The screen is not a sign, because it is all signs. Or then it's the sign of all possible signs, their centre of gravity, the eye of the storm and Polyphemus' empty heart.

Which is tantamount to saying that it is the last sign, or then the one that leads them; which in any case is their material foundation in the sense that, though fashioned out of matter, it negates all aspects of their material nature.

The screen has no ideology because it possesses all ideologies.

Which is also an ideology in fact, but an uglier one.

**51** – The painting as a screen, and vice-versa, is not the result of any renunciation (a halting or interruption of the rituals), but exactly the opposite: it is precisely the pictorial solution of an inability to forego any one thing; it is the visible form of an excess, of a measurelessness, the great hunger to immediately depict the whole world in its hunger to be depicted. It is the bulimic void of the world's belly.<sup>1</sup>

**52** – Painting here, now, can even happen.

But there is no certainty of this, even though it moves towards (the end point of) painting.

Like all rights, it does not carry with it the object to which it gives a right (otherwise what kind of a right would it be?); so also the right of the screen to painting does not carry painting with it: it only has

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 9.

the ability to do so.

And thus the screen, as it proclaims its right to the art of painting, confesses its penury. It has to remain without precisely in order to always have this possibility; to continue to have a perennial right over painting, for this to become a right in flesh and blood.<sup>1</sup> The mere surface remains the irreducible painting. It is the work and the prius.

With the screen, painting is no longer a depiction of the world, nor is it the depiction of painting as such: it is the very world (and the way) of the possibility of depicting (again, pictorially?) the outside world.<sup>2</sup>

The material conditions required for all this to happen in actual fact, could have been given by painting only in a specific historical phase, a phase in which all the universal relationships between men and things became objectified in order for them to gain universal freedom from both men and objects.

(Malevich's much-desired world without objects, is then perhaps nothing more than the real world of commodities? A seductive thought.)

**53** – It is not a case here to say anything more concerning what might have been the only social paradigm which could have eased the "mere surface" into the sphere of pictorial production in modern times.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, we do need to say that the screen, once it had emancipated itself from the subalternity which forced it to be a guest, has moved forwards, emancipating also the terms of the projector and ancillary equipment, the beam of light and the film, all of which no longer are interdependent. A memory and a treasure of images, a closed linguistic universe whose sure end is known to everyone.

And these other terms in fact become the heroes of other events of this same story. And in their independent development they confirm what has been said above.

#### **54** – *A TEMPORARY FAREWELL*<sup>4</sup>

01 – All the shifts of contemporary art, due to tensions which external and/or internal forces bring to bear on its living body, still occur inside an elastic phase. Its main feature becomes visible when all easing of tension is always accompanied by the body returning to preceding positions.

This returning isn't always full-fledged and mechanically predictable, for, hooked in a forward movement, towards the plastic phase (where art in its material sense will mould itself without a return under the real forces which have been historically re-established, or

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<sup>1</sup> Compare with point 24 and 25.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with point 36a.

<sup>3</sup> For the sections dealing with the homologies between surface and economic forms, see "L'azzardo omologico", in the extract published in *Imprinting* September, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Published in *Risk*, Milan, December 1992, in "Before the cock crows".

resolved) the ironic intensity can remain active. It will stop the body from discharging itself abruptly, thus preventing it from mutating into paraphrastic fragility.

02 – Painting attained through annulment becomes an easy prey to the coercion of hospitality.

And the laws of hospitality prescribe that it should either follow the line of silence which perpetuates the interruption of the ceremonial of painting, transforming it into the mere surface, or to yield to the molestation of erratic meanings which require it to be a putative support for their literary incontinence.

Its imagination allows painting to say: "Before the yellow cock crows I shall be betrayed many times."

Seized by the horned dilemma between the tragic position of the mere surface and the pathetic position of the prop, painting starts to waver between these two solutions as it seeks the conditions through which again to appear without dragging the whining pest of contrition behind it.

03 – After the Bastille's surrealist storming, exhausted by the obsession of politics, cleansed by a conceptual quarantine, trained by the harsh abstention from gesture and colour, painting can now make a new appearance, and exclaim: "Nothing have I forgotten, nothing can I neglect. This is my green preoccupation!"

Thus it withdraws behind the scenes to study the exhibition which the old reassuring couple, modesty and good taste, perform along the horizontal line of convenience and stylistic saving, between the bashfulness of decorativism and the insinuations of iconography.

04 – Then, although enveloped in the gossipy noises of the tribalism of the real, in the pedantic lullabies of erudition snatched in the course of bibliographic burglaries, painting starts living in the interstices of signs, away from the forced gazes, behind the surface of the canvas, subcutaneously.

05 – The canvas as shield demands the vertical eye as the supreme organ of the psychosomatic activities of art and criticism.

It entrusts it with the ability to surprise that which gets expelled from the corners of the eye, from the corners of the mouth. For the vertical eye is also the lopped-off ear which is left behind in the brothel in Arles. And most happily they exchange places; for they cannot be reduced to vanishing points, to horizon lines, to geometrical planes on which to project and section in flat outlines the heavy consistency of things, and thus convince them to adopt a converging practice of style, where the artist's existence is spent in perfecting mere trifles, correcting shots aimed at nowhere, marking the pavements of aesthetics like pissing dogs when they take a stroll in the lap of private property.

06 – While the erectile look of criticism keeps the high and low poles, the sublime and the vulgar, the exclusive and the horde, gold

and mud, all ordered in columns, the vertical eye sets into motion the epiphanic strategies which push the work of art into the orbit of blasphemies, in the ultimately obscene dimension of the sly trick, the eudonic promiscuity of the interfaces with all terms, excluding none.

07 – The vertical eye is that ribald idea which allows us to familiarize with the thought of the death of art [not with a crash, but with a complaint!].

That eye is the milestone of derision and the last metaphor of when you get to the root of the symbol and you can no longer go on with the pornography of replacements.

When the last next move, which cannot be deferred and may be final, tries the foolhardy exchange of the symbol with the thing symbolized. I.e., an eye for an eye.

Here, in order to complete the job, it is man himself who must act as the stake, not his powerless messengers.

08 – Compelled to step into the psychedelic circle of imagination, reality will certainly not forgive those who don't understand right from the start that in this way we are slipping from the history of metaphor into the history of compulsion.

And in the latter that subjectivism can also deliver itself from the police's intolerance, on condition that it reaches the same altitude as the events; i.e., in the psychedelic circle of a necessity which intertwines the destinies of single people in a single harmonious thread pulled tight as far as the apogee.

And the artistic apogee of a period of time remains as it is until the principal thing is not the imagined, but to imagine: not the symbol's private income, but the manner of symbolizing.

09 – Having reached the summit of the disenchanting mountain, the vertical eye sits down on top of it like a dissatisfied swelling. It knows it is this, and knows this knowledge to be its red conviction; with which it can also now come back, if it so wishes.

And, also – if it so wishes – stay away from the risk of interfacing with those terms that have bad breath, barely tolerated by the ophthalmic respectability of clerical prescribers.

10 – But after all this, how will the vertical eye again agree to set up the shat-upon tables of privilege and order?

With a cerulean realization of cause and effect, it is heard to say in a soft singing voice:

*You guys can't count on me  
that's why, I know, you're gonna  
make me pay for it.*

THE MAN IN BLACK HAS THROWN AWAY HIS BRUSH IN THE PORT OF SODE  
SO THAT THE HIGH WAVES MAY WASH AWAY THE SHAME OF WRITING

Epigraph on a stone slab set up by order of Sangai in front of his hermitage at Kyohakuin, in early summer of the year of the Dragon in the Tenpo Era (1832). Sangai couldn't finish the epigraph on his "inability", because nobody would have taken it seriously.

