

I keep six honest serving-men  
(They taught me what I knew)  
Their names are What and Why and Who  
And How and Where and When.

The Elephant's Child, Ruyard Kipling

I started painting again on Sundays in 1976. The reasons that had stopped me painting for a long time had become pointless. I started a series of small-format paintings that would be very easy to work on in the tiny apartment I then lived in, and in what free time I had. I didn't know what sort of results I would produce, but was convinced by the plan or, at least, I was sufficiently enthusiastic about it to embark on a process which, I anticipated, would require more than a year's work. The precarious means at my disposal determined the basis of the project, and I was happy to stick to it. I felt happier painting in oils: on the one hand, the paint would have time to dry during the week before another layer was applied and, on the other, I needed to identify myself within a pictorial filiation. And yet I wanted these paintings to be the results of labour, that there should be nothing to distinguish what I was doing from a labourer's or craftsman's work. I chose the smallest paintbrush possible, specially designed for tracing fine lines. The surface of these paintings is saturated with incalculable numbers of horizontal and vertical lines, it would be impossible to establish how many different colours there are. There was something ordinary, absolutely everyday and almost absurd about filling the surface with this mesh,

and I wanted to think that someone else would be just as capable of carrying it out (this represented a willingness on my part to share and, as a bare minimum, a way of being like everyone else). Achieving these paintings required a lack of expertise, a demonstration of this self-evident fact, while still allowing for the possibility of elaborating a meaning through these everyday gestures. Feelings and emotions do not belong here. I had established simple rules according to which the vertical lines were in certain colours and the horizontal ones in others. Nothing is described. No composition. The structure is like the surface. No referent apart, perhaps, from being classifiable as painting, and no auto-reference. I found it amusing that the paint accumulated on the edges as if the canvas might grow as I worked. The result turned into a discontinuous grid, almost a texture. When you walk past the painting, the movement backwards and forwards annihilates and reconstitutes the multitude as a vibrant monochrome.

These were my first paintings in which the materials, the technique (however minimal it may have been) and the contents (the “what was thought”) showed solidarity. Displaying my work became part of my activity as a painter, and, as such, I had to take into consideration its implications. My selflessness was matched by my naivety. I lived in the disappearing world of eternal art, where dialogues with dead painters played an important part.

Thirty years later, I recognise my debt to the prescriptions of the day: not saying “I”, minimising the pictorial language, finding a workable means of communication in the paint itself etc. After all, I am the product of history, of the accumulation of beliefs and values that influence my choices. As with everyone else, that is how I live in a coherent model of the world, and communicate a reading of it.

I must come back to what stopped me painting for a very long time.

The beginning of the 1970s was a painful period for me, when I struggled to reconcile what felt to me like a conflict between political ideas (or perhaps only political morals) and individual activity as an artist.

I still see those old images of the modern painter, a thoughtful ant marching off to daily life, in amongst the crowd, his perceptions, shapes and colours saturating the fragments of reality in future painting, crystallising and condensing both the fight and the sense of hope... The black square on a white background hanging at the front of Kasimir Malevitch's hearse, Alexander Mikhaïlovitch Rodtchenko's clowns, or even David Alfaro Siqueiros's experiments using cactus juice as a political way of inscribing his pictorial practices as a continuation of indigenous art... It was too late to believe in all that.

At the time I was supplied with pitiful examples in France, where the reason for painting in the first place was lost, the subjects complacent, and the artists' attitudes towards the authorities indecent (and had been since the collaboration, during the Second World War). On the other side of the Atlantic, Barnett Newman had responded to Harold Rosenberg by saying that if " he and others could read (one of my paintings) properly, it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. (Interview with Dorothy Seckler, *Art In America*, vol. 50, N° 2, summer 1962).

Finding my own position meant politically inhabiting what I was practicing, but before being politically correct, shouldn't a painting be artistically correct. Being conscious of one's inclusion in society can't be sold off cheaply by creating denunciatory images, as so often happens.

I never managed to overcome the problem of reducing the gap between an individual activity and a political commitment, if political genuinely does mean (living) together. I felt cleaved in two; one side immersed in a social activity and the other unhappy not to be shut away in a studio where, in isolation, I would have been a demigod<sup>1</sup> in a world made for my own use. The beginning of the 70s was a time of disenchantment, and the collapse of any hope of emancipation. Of course, this all started well before 1970 for my elders, but I didn't know that.

Today these questions are no longer pertinent. We know how public space has altered. Culture overall and its key players and venues, from newspapers to television shows and fashion, in short all the performance and advertising industries encourage a blending between art and society, and confuse the relationship between art and collective experience. And art is bankrupted when it lends itself to utilitarian and mercenary ends.

Global economics make it extraordinarily difficult to understand the world, and inhibit socially aware responses; social struggles have become corporate struggles. Insignificance is on the increase, as Cornelius Castoriadis wrote, and I will never be able to reverse that.

I am still convinced that art is a pillar to spiritual values and paradigms that offer no contrast to the productions of everyday life. These small paintings from 1976 – with all their weighty baggage – inaugurate the beginnings of my work as a painter. They are the surfaces on which my thoughts were inscribed, and in which I would elaborate my

---

<sup>1</sup> As for exploring my psyche, I could see no point, and still believe no one is interested in this. In some aspects of art history, particularly those concerning painters themselves, there is a good deal of embarrassing commentary portraying artists' commitment as heroic, or even tragic. The artist is always depicted as alone, battling his (or her) fate, prey to doubts and the risk of being destroyed. Unless he aspires to eternal truths and strives for the divine when he finally achieves wisdom and is satiated by the sensory experiences offered by nature and humankind. Nowadays, this always seems to have some influence tainted

contract between the possible and the necessary.

\* \* \*

Everything around us is matter, and everything is also representation. By using or making objects, we constantly swing from one register to another, from the functional to the imaginary. There is the well known example of a piece of wood highly regarded by a carpenter who wants to make it into a table, through to the various metamorphoses of its uses, from the furniture shop to the living room where spiritualists make it spin! On the other hand, people are who they are because they are the incarnation of imaginary significances, those of their society, their family and their era. They are these significances but eating, walking, working versions of them. The questions of what we long to escape from and how to make choices recur on a daily basis.

Being an artist means taking a strange stance: being produced oneself and, simultaneously, incarnating representation in a material. When all is said and done, this situation is like a form of chaos in which we try to find somewhere to stand instead of slinking back to bed. We all have to acknowledge that lying down means being no less on the edge of the abyss and has the added disadvantage of producing nothing tangible. Major and minor anxieties inhabit a body, and it is that body that gets up and goes to work. I can't say it enough, painting is primarily physical work. Chaos, the indistinguishable and the unnamable give creation a chance because it overlays them with orderliness, a search for meaning. So identity is related to the verb to do rather than the verb to be. There are many moments of friction with the world, times when confidence

---

with sentimentality.

collapses, and action is pointless. We need to go back to the reasons for believing and for acting. Chaos and the multiplicity of possibility lie in ambush right next to “what’s the point”, and meaning lies only in the activity of inventing a meaning.

Creation cannot be controlled because it creates discontinuity. It is evidence of a constant adapting of oneself, alone, pressured by outside circumstances and surprised by sensations; the self and the “non self” are endlessly redefined. As with immune systems, the self and foreign bodies are labile definitions, and identity is something that changes over the course of life’s different periods.

\* \* \*

In 1976, I wanted to make paintings which could not be seen as “original inventions”; banal paintings that were not produced by some personal cosmogony. The general context of the paintings revolved around a discussion about monochromes. The principal artists were, of course, Yves Klein, Robert Ryman and Günter Umberg, and I found nothing to add to this exciting historical dialogue. In spite of everything, it engendered countless derivative paintings, sub-products that adhered to details and in which colour was basically the only visible difference. Perhaps influenced by Marshall McLuhan (“The medium is the message”), I had already rejected the idea of painting with only one colour, because I didn’t want my painting to activate a dimension associated with publicity, as Klein was striving to do, along the lines of: colour blue = Yves Klein; this “not choosing” struck me as a less demiurgic view of the work, if I can go that far, or at least a more humble one and, as far as I was concerned, I couldn’t see any other view.

Of course that meant confronting other very complex problems ranging from the psychological values of colours<sup>2</sup> to questions raised by the “decorative<sup>3</sup>” element.

To my mind, some painters attributed a good deal of complacency to appearance whereas I, by contrast, was trying to explore the fundamentals of the experience of painting. The solutions I revealed were given a mitigated, sometimes indifferent, critical reception and even, conversely, offered comfort to some reactionary-minded collectors. Perhaps it is difficult to understand the difference between the motivated and the arbitrary when a painting is viewed too quickly.

Thirty years later, I look at these paintings affectionately, because I realise that several other series that I went on to paint are not fundamentally different. The brushstrokes are wider or longer; in one instance they are replaced by crusts of dried paint cut from pots deliberately left open. I was increasingly conscious that it was important to count, to fill in and add up one thing after another, and I felt a need to do these paintings that did not replace the formula of the 1976 works. They exist with and in spite of me, like reworked screenplays informed by experiments carried out in the interim, and which I will discuss below.

\* \* \*

There are plenty of clichés about artists’ lives that put the emphasis on the linear

---

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting the long process of moral denigration of colour, since the Counter-Reformation (when, for example, “cangiante” was denounced) right up to the nineteenth-century when Gleizes and Metzinger made the distinction between the retina and the brain, a concept re-explored cynically by Marcel Duchamp whose idea of a “retinal shiver” was well received. Of course, colour exists only in the brain. Rothko also always refused to be a colourist; he frequently stated that he had no interest in colour itself or its relationships.

way in which they evolve; which does nothing to explain the process of invention. When I look back, I personally feel that my paintings as a whole are monotonous. But if I look at them chronologically, I notice my digressions and don't always understand the coherence of my trajectory. Movements in what happens to the conscious mind are not always rationally logical. Sometimes inspiration takes the form of a new combination of things that were already there; sometimes it interrupts the process of rearrangement, and redistributes the work into new categories. Surely, controlling the future isn't it the last great fantasy of humankind and ideologists? An artist should protect him or herself from the future, and remain open to the present with no fear of discontinuity, because everything dries up when subjected to habit and control. You have to be in a state that is close to who you are, or almost indeterminate, evolving to the whims of forces within you, waiting for signs from a thought that has no subject, and letting things come but, crucially, without judging or criticising them for fear of losing this openness; allowing the thought to do the constructing and to establish relationships so that things happen all by themselves. You have to set yourself apart from any form of intention and literally pick it apart.

I cannot tell in advance what a painting will be; I might be inundated with bad ideas before I know what it is I want, or I may feel empty. I have to put everything I already know to one side. When I catch sight of a possible lead, I don't know if it's the embryo of something that will be developed or just a flurry of excitement with no follow through. I have no ideas about the end result, I don't follow any self-seeking strategy. I have to leave my thoughts to mature until the urge to move on to realising them becomes

---

<sup>3</sup> This, again, is a familiar discussion between Greenberg and Rosenberg over the 1960s, and later E. H. Gombrich and J. Soulillou.



undeniable. Necessity does not let judgment stand in its way. Everything is ruined in wanting to finish it too quickly. There is, in some ways, an order and a disorder in which things can “take shape”. A time frame which – without articulating the fact – gathers up and condenses the pros of reasons and the cons of formal consequences. And this may well be the form it takes: a simultaneous conjunction of all these moments, of all these thoughts crystallised and fixed with an economic kind of organisation. When thoughts evolve, they adhere to this form and are incarnated in a material. It strikes me that there is a similarity between flow of conscious ideas in my mind and the breath of a painting in the process of being created. The origins of my paintings set the form for a movement in the material.

\* \* \*

I am constantly preoccupied with redefining my work, and I try to make that redefinition as parsimonious as possible. Apart from these paintings from the early days of my work, I did not feel like embarking on long-term projects. The idea of filling a canvas with one long line or a single brushstroke struck me with the force of a major event. The contortions of a paintbrush that allow you to cover as much ground as possible are reminiscent of that paradoxical maximization of the first paintings. At first, I did three paintings that were like friezes (Greek ones) on a black background, then I found a way (being incapable of choosing) of reducing even further the number of possibilities by manipulating it so that the line returned to its point of departure. I used a flat brush, then wider varnishing brushes known as spalters, and I painted them in several colours: seven,

I think. Next, I painted the canvas in one sweep, using this painted brush, without “reloading” it. Painting a brush in order to paint is not some stylistic flourish. It allowed me to paint a multicoloured stripe in one go, like – with other paintings – when I use both hands to hold ten brushes or more, each loaded with their own colour and the colours blend as I work my way across the canvas. If, for example, I paint the twenty-centimetre wide spalter with blue, red, black, green, yellow, mauve and ochre, I feel I have fulfilled my contract – which is not to choose the colours. You could object by saying I have chosen that particular red rather than another. Wouldn’t it come down to the same thing? Swapping one polychromatic scheme for another is a question of taste or management, and has nothing to do with discussions about colour.

Ordinarily, the technique is invisible, except when it is clumsily executed; the materials should be forgettable. The picture takes care of expression, the technique of the material. The word “repaint”, so characteristic of painting techniques, presupposes failure or a poor original concept in the way something is painted. It means that a collection of brushstrokes can be erased and altered, and the fact that the word exists demonstrates the legitimacy of this practice. The alteration is perceived as localised, as something static within the composition. It goes without saying that my work excludes any repainting because no single part of the painting is produced independently of the others, and also because if one area was not technically successful, then the value of the whole would disintegrate. Retouching one area would change the whole temporality of the work. Now, I don’t like changing direction; my work doesn’t imitate anything. My paintings are done in one move (*alla prima*) to inscribe them in a real space and in the place that they themselves define. I do a drawing which is rather like a circuit for the brush to follow; it

snakes over the canvas, covering as much ground possible. It takes only a few minutes to execute the work, while the preparation requires several days. I could adopt as my own Allan Kaprow's phrase that a "happening is a moral activity". He was not, of course, talking about morality but about loyalty that an artistic event should display in its choices and gestures. I conceive a painting as an integral performance. It incorporates this integrity in its form. The "load" of paint is used up on the canvas right up to the point where the trace of loaded paint begins again. What remains is the trace of an act which shows its own end, ready to embark all over again. In it, we see its generation and its corruption, so that the whole is not devoid of any phase, even though its execution was within a limited time. I am struggling to find the words to describe a thought which respects this mobility.

Painting is physical work (a mechanical art), and I strive to make the most of its productive economy. The experimental plans coincide with the resulting image. The forms relate to the distribution of colours, and the concept of all these effects (consequences) is in fact the concept of the picture. I do not even know if there is a picture. There is simply an event which is recorded and all its rules indexed: a painting. The process itself, then, is not the aim and, although I have often said that you only have to look at it to know "how it's done", this is because there is no dressing-up to be seen, but simply an action, the action of revealing the order and the material qualities with which these sensory experiences are made. In this, I have found something implacably rigorous which could be repeated as many times as there are variations that fulfill the same pre-established conditions.

In 1999, I started experimenting with ways of producing paintings with more than

one pair of hands. What I can state about this straight away is how impossible I found it tracing some figures on my own without removing the brush from the canvas, in other words without transforming a continuous brushstroke into an “as if it were possible” gesture. Painting is a solitary activity in its concept but the physical work of it can be delegated. Many artists entrust this work to others and leave the realization of their work to the technically adept. They see the techniques of painting as a constraint serving the content and not as generating the meaning of the visual experience. When I asked other people to come and help me, I wanted my work to be invested with human and social energies. The collective nature of the intellectual and practical activity brings me closer to my preoccupations as a beginner. Paintings completed by several people are like knots or braids where the synchronicity between the contributors has to be regulated as if in a performance. Of course, I decide in advance what goal I am setting for us. Cooperation does not mean a kolkhoze. And yet the requirements are somehow above and beyond me during the creative process, they refer to the whole working community because our strengths and energies are so intricately connected, our gestures so synchronized. I have devised layouts which simply could not come into existence without indispensable contributions from other people. You could compare this necessity to work together with the situation in music or dance, but I am not sure this would be a fruitful comparison. The figures are topological, sometimes mathematical ones. They are not pictures. They are intersections, sequences in which one waits for the other, where a third might intervene before the second but after the first. The brushes never break contact with the canvas until the end of the pattern.

I have always wanted the constraints imposed by the rules to which I adhere to be visible,

and for the way in which they are produced to constitute their exhibition. Painting is not a rebus puzzle, a painting's meaning carries no message. For me it is never about reproducing something on canvas but rather to represent a relationship between a thought and an execution. My paintings are movements that carry with them their own finished form and the way in which they were made. If the paintings only demonstrated a process, then they would have failed in their goal. It would be gratuitous and vain simply to display the process, and would smack of an unfulfilled or even pointless relationship. I do not worry unduly about composition, different areas or the whole. There is nothing left to compose. (Who still wants to organize a world, who still wants a heroic role?) Seen in that light, my efforts to work collectively are an extension of what I started with my paintings of long lines towards a point still further away from myself, and they pave the way for my own obliteration (or final disappearance).

\* \* \*

Tracing back through a process means following the sometimes erased traces of a pathway through individual brushstrokes, their movement, the fields of colour and the surface of the canvas. The pathway is never the aim of the walk but it has to be followed, like an initiation, in order to enjoy the view. Admittedly, a view is not a good example. The feelings afforded by a view are too simple to be compared to those engendered by a painting. Mind you, I do know paintings that present only the fact that they are there, pure aesthetic objects to be seen and in which no material is freighted with an idea. It is not enough to put colours on a canvas and look for tonal harmonies that would make a

sunset blench with envy. If it exudes no sense of intention, if it does not communicate any structured thought to me, if I am confronted with a jumble of colors and objects but do not understand how to use them, then that is not enough for me. The insignificance of a work of art brings me straight back to capitalist acquisitiveness. What remains is a need to understand your actions, to question the reality of what you are making beyond the immediately obvious because that is how you succeed in doing more than merely affirming. Colors and shapes are accountable for a “purpose” that produces them. Without this purpose, what we see is empty of meaning or merely bland decoration, whether it be a figurative or abstract work.

The possibility of investigating the process by which a painting was made means we can get further with the process of understanding it in its entirety (heuristics). This retracing allows you to think through your motivations and marvel at your results. Surely we look at the works of Michelangelo, Goya or a contemporary artist in the same way? I co-produce works of art from the past when I look at them and bring them to life.

\* \* \*

Does a work created in parts have a sense of “self”? With this in view, the different paintings of my work should be orientated towards a goal and should gradually reconstitute the magma of their origins. My failed paintings are as important as the successful ones; they open and close the same pathways. The work takes root in different magmas which evolve with passing time like my understanding of myself, of society, culture etc., which amounts to saying that, by representing the world around me, I am

constructing the meaning I attribute to myself and the one I pass on to my work. This representation achieves a truth that is inexhaustible yet temporarily satisfied, with each successive painting.

Making your ideas communicable means detaching them from yourself. It also means representing (putting your work in a position to communicate with others) to share the pleasure and the amazement produced by painting. I like that sense of being lost for words, when you are lost in your thoughts with a feeling of fulfillment (of grace) and of belonging to something greater than yourself because this is to do with sharing. Art is the paradoxical result derived from the artist's interior thoughts and a presentation of their result in a public place. When someone else looks, this localizes the act of deciphering a thought in the realm of vision, in other words they think for themselves and co-produce the work. A painting is an object hung on a wall waiting for people to come and activate it. It is, by definition, mute. It transfers difficulties of language as often as it remains an enigma. The enjoyment of a painting is addressed to the senses as much as the intelligence. A painting that cannot be looked at several times is disappointing. One that can be looked at several times affords a great deal of pleasure.

Berlin, August 2009