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**Schema, Internal Relation and Painting of  
the Between**

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The most important event in the history of European painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century seems to be so-called “abstract painting”, which represents a real break from traditional painting based on *mimesis*, which since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has continued in its modified forms as symbolism, impressionism, expressionism and also, to a certain degree, as cubism.

There is a common agreement in characterising this kind of painting as being without an object, in so far as the colours and lines gain an independent existence, but this characterisation does not tell the whole truth. Mondrian, perhaps the first and the last abstract painter in the true sense of the word, named his art “neo-plasticism”. He meant by that pure plastic relations, such as those existing between horizontals and verticals, between lines producing rectangles and planes in three fundamental colours (yellow, red, blue) and three tones (black, grey, white). That meant and still means, that true abstract painting is not simply abstract, but essential.

In two articles which I published 1980 and 1984, I pointed out that Mondrian achieved a kind of revolution in painting by reducing the formal element together with its colour values (which are inseparable from it) to its primary and fundamental source of essential, pure relations (oppositions and similarities).<sup>1</sup> I also tried to show how this abstract art responded to the theoretical demands of our age and, moreover, that plastic relations can build up a valid aesthetic criterion for our understanding not only of non-figurative, but also of figurative painting (just according to claims of Mondrian himself).

Indeed, since Mondrian, the plastic relations of painting in his sense have become its *internal relations*, making the painting into a self-determined work of art. Or in other words, from the perspective of space and time, the surface of painting has become analysable according to “simultaneous relations of the constitutive elements” (Jakobson).

Now I want to enlarge on this view at least on one point.

Pure relations not only render the painting objectless and show that an expression – of meaning, harmony, beauty etc. - is possible without the *mimesis* of objects, but also mean that we do not need the subject or anything personal. The metaphysical duality of subject/object, coming from Descartes, was raised to the dominant principle of the Modern Age with Enlightenment. In the eve of the first of two world-wars a shadow of doubt falls upon it, putting into question this duality and showing that the evidence of cogito is not theoretically a certain one and causes moreover a disharmony in the world, when the dominance of subject on the natural object is realised without any limits.

This reservation, which is reflected in the main movements of thought, in structuralism, in the phenomenology of the early Husserl, and in the fundamental ontology of Heidegger, also finds its expression in art. But can art help humanity by paving the way for an understanding of the essential relations of the cosmos, for peace by unifying the spiritual and the material, as was claimed by the forerunners and some of the followers of Mondrian?

Whatever the answer to this question, "abstract art" has gone on to influence the abstract expressionism or the Informal and constructivism. If this art is understood as going back to essences, to relations of the Idea itself, we can say that conceptualism has also followed this pathway in a certain sense: if it has re-integrated the object into art, this was only in order to make possible the predominance of the idea or the "meaning" – under the name "concept" – over the object. In this way it also made the subject kind of out-law in the self-crystallisation of concept.

But how far have we come today with our loss of objects and of our subjective "selves" and to what end? How does this question reflect itself in the art of painting? This question is gaining importance, especially if we take into consideration that this double loss is also implied by current socio-political, cultural and economic circumstances which change, or at least influence, our identities, as they change our environments and our relations to these environments, as in the cases of rapid progress, natural catastrophes, pollutions, emigration waves, political refugees etc.

The subject, who dominated the object and the world up to the point of its destruction, has lost thus his subjectivity.

But before going on, I would like to make a short remark about Turkish painting, which is, I think, pertinent here.

The revolutionary insight of contemporary European painting into essential plastic relations also influenced Turkish arts especially from the beginning of the 60s. But the background was very different from that of Europe due to Turkish-Ottoman tradition, which was based on *naturalisation* and worked with *schemas* (of natural objects) in opposition to the western *idealisation*. This opposition consists in the fact that for idealisation the starting point was the natural object itself, whereas the schema aimed at the naturalisation of a geometrical form as a bird, a flower etc. and contained the rules for doing it. After a half century of confusion which defined itself as a nationalistic synthesis between tradition and the western influences (figurative or non-figurative) the generation of 1968 reinvented and solved this problem (or at least has given certain examples of how to solve it) as the problem of *authenticity* by defining it in the level of the personal, individual *identity* of the artist. Instead of an artificial synthesis, Turkish painting began to become the expression of a profound identity crisis. But this new definition of the old problem, turning it into a new problem is made possible only when Turkish painters discovered (under the influence of western examples) the internal relations of painting, which gave to it its subsistence, its self-dependence as a work of art (beyond nature, but also beyond tradition and beyond political influences). This was, I think, the decisive point which introduced the Turkish artist without limits into the events of our age, going beyond the confusing discussions on imitation of western art and culture. This point has showed itself prominently in exhibitions such as "Sanat 78" ("Art 78") and "Yeni Eğilimler" ("New Tendencies") between 1977-1987.

Turkish painters thus knew that they have the right to perform or to execute their arts by coming into contact with whatever artistic sources, or with whatever tradition in the world (including their own) they wished, so long as they search for themselves in their works. But they know that they can identify themselves with these traditions in terms of their biographies only according to their own interpretation of the age in which they live and create: Schema or figure or abstractionism represents the artistic paradigms which do not delimit, but show the way, if they can. The right to create art is not a speculative notion, but comes from the urgency of the existential situation of the Turkish artist who is confronted with the loss of the object (or rather with the *aura* of objects, of nature) and with his culturally – from many sides – split identity.

But how to create art to-day, if it can still be created?

The essentialism of Mondrian has brought together the Invisible (the net of mathematical, structural relations) and the Visible (of colours and all that is shaped by them) in a perfect synthesis according to a peaceful cosmic harmony. But even the artist himself has shown in his late New York period that the result of the working together of the Invisible and the Visible does not necessarily need to be such a static one.

Is there than a gap *between* the invisible and the visible aspects of painting? Can this gap respond perhaps to the ever changing human situation? The first painter to gain the intuition of an area of interaction between the (invisible) idea and appearances responding to our Being-in-the-World, was certainly Paul Klee. He interpreted this as a kind of insertion of vital powers or existence into the essences, creating thus a certain disorder which refers to order. Only indivisible things represent invisible, essential relations; visible things remain divisible. In his paintings, partial or complete figures (of human beings, of animals, of plants etc.) are elevated plastically to the level of essential relations and matter itself remains amorphous, divisible. They bring out two sides or aspects which are principally reversible, putting them in an easy and quick interchange. As Renato Barilli put it in his essay on Klee: "The step from divisible to the indivisible – from matter to form – is quantitatively short..."<sup>2</sup> If today the steps of the painter become somehow slower, lingering on the way, the reason for this is that he finds himself in a not only quantitative, but also a qualitative *Between*, perhaps in an interrealm of the Invisible and the Visible.

This accounts at the same time probably for our being situated in a world where the invisible part (which is represented now by world-market, high tech, state bureaucracy etc.) dominates our lives and swallows our appearances in this world more than ever and the only possible resistance is keeping up a space between. But art can not be content with a passive resistance. If objects have turned themselves into pure appearances manipulated by an "invisible hand" (Adam Smith) as the degenerated form of the Invisible, the artist (who is not any more a subject) can and must redefine himself or rather his art as this *Between* of the Invisible and the Visible, giving them a new meaning. But this meaning can not be an idealistic one. Because the *Between* can not be understood, as previously, as if there were some Platonic ideas and corresponding appearances which the artist's Eros ties or connects together. It is, however, this *Between*, being more original and primordial than Eros, which first creates the two sides out of itself. If it combines them, this happens only by differentiating and separating them. This means, we must first respect the gap. There is indeed a gap between the Invisible and appearances as the visible part, a gap which remains unfulfilled and perhaps

does not need to be fulfilled, just as, conversely, the painter must learn how to live (visually, artistically) with this gap or rather in that *Between*. Neither are the essential relations abstractions from fluid living matter, nor can this matter be subordinated completely or partly to these relations (as it happens sometimes in Klee), but rather both of them are *parts of a play*, of an *interplay*, which is all that it is a question of here. In this way, the artist as the subject loses his privileged position and finds himself in the middle of the world, between things and Being, which is the essence of all essences.

This theoretical approach has been made possible through my encounters with certain works of art over the last few years. Let me try now to show what I mean through the examples of a French and a Turkish painter. The work of Marc Desgrandchamps (who was born in 1960, and lives in Lyon) has been widely exhibited since 1985, most recently, in what was apparently a great event, in the *Centre Pompidou* between 9th January and 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2006. Catherine Millet writes about his painting:

The geometry of the spaces is elementary, reduced to a few perpendiculars. The limit between earth and water, the horizons and rows of tree trunks are enough [...] to construct the space. But, [...] they do not ensure its permanence.<sup>3</sup>

My analysis of the *Between* can show the profound significance of this indeterminacy. The horizon, as the line at which the earth (or the water) and sky meets, is in his paintings mostly a divided blue. This division has at the same time the function of crossing and dividing the figures themselves. The perpendiculars characteristically form themselves *between* the horizontal line and the spread-out vertical figures of human and other beings. This renders them transparent, porous and fluid. The normally indivisible figure transforms itself into matter, at the moment it lets itself divide, into a matter which is again surprisingly individualised and given a *Gestalt* as a spectre, as a phantom on the horizon.

Here there is no longer the passage of the unformed element to form and conversely the simple insertion of the form into the matter, but the opposed formal (horizontal and vertical) elements are both haunted by a spectral matter. The conjunction reinvents separated elements, namely the invisible relations of geometry on one hand and coloured matter on the other, by way of *interposition* or *interference* or *intervention*. This can happen only on the basis of a gesture of the painter which puts itself in the living *Between* of a picture space, where he can let his creatures free – as a tree trunk, as a movie star, as a horse etc. – only by condensing spatial form and matter. In fact, he effaces them by drawing and he draws them by effacing and thus he makes them visible on the limit of their invisibility: this is the technique which he masterfully uses.

The works of Biles Ocal (who was born in 1953, and lives in Istanbul) have been exhibited in some solo shows since 1984 and most recently at the *Karşı Sanat Gallery* between 7-30 November 2006 in Istanbul. He makes, so to speak, an original combination of abstract expressionism with Rembrandt, as Desgrandchamps combines this expressionism with surrealism. His "Bottles" do not have anything realistic in themselves, they are neither the usual object "bottle", nor do they describe the subjective experience, which the painter can have with them. But the painter sizes them up during his unique act of painting as a part of his action or of his artistic gesture: at that moment they become what they are. Sometimes they present themselves as evanescent appearances just caught by the eyes at the moment of their disappearing; sometimes they simply stand there, closed not only by their taps, but also by their contours, with their

opaque colours. Similarly his cats do not express their instinctive inner being, but rather their inner being is turned towards the outside before any act of expression. That causes them to seem ancestral, with a monstrous shuddering, more real than ever, more fanciful than the most fanciful. His portrayals of pin-ups, taken as models from magazine photos, recreate those faces, those figures in seducing or abnormal poses, transforming them at the same time into sad, shadowy existences. Only this transformation tells the truth about them. They are less than charm-photos, but certainly more than realistic portraits. As we see, the paintings of Biles imply many "neither/nor"s: they are neither realistic nor completely expressionistic, neither internalised nor externalised, neither photographic nor portrait-like. They stand and resist in an uncompromisingly comprising Between, a Between of poetic creation, which is realised at all costs.

The name of the painter, Biles, was given to him by his sculptor father because of its association with Blaise Pascal. The following words of Pascal can also be interpreted in the context of his artistic attitude and work: "we make ourselves ridiculous, when we search for peace in the society of our fellows: They, who are miserable like us, who are powerless like us, will never help us: everybody dies alone." The works of Biles, who continues to produce in his loneliness since the beginning of his career, remind us, that the artistic creation can be realised only, as if in dying, in a complete loneliness.

Desgrandchamps and Biles have their differences, one being the painter of fluid spaces, of transparency, of porosity, the other playing with the opacity of the surfaces of things, with the dark presence of animals, with the coolness of a woman's skin. But from a more existential point of view, they both let their act of painting free to create a certain "matter" in the shape of coloured surfaces searching the dimension of depth. However this "matter" which consists, properly speaking, in brush-traces, is ambiguously, but consciously, also the matter out of which eternal things are made, things which stand in their openness to invisible relations, in a Between which makes for the first time the Invisible invisible and the Visible, what it is.

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<sup>1</sup> Sözer, Önay. "Çağdaş resmin dili ve zaman kavramı." In *Bedrettin Cömert'e Armağan*. Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Beceri Bilimler Dergisi. Özel Sayı. Ankara 1980; "Sanata ilişki mi, biçim mi? Piet Mondrian'ın bir açıklaması üzerine düşünceler." In *Suut Kemal Yetkin'e Armağan*, Ankara: Hacettepe Üniversitesi, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Barilli, Renato. "La poetica di Klee." In *Informale Oggetto Comportamento, I: La ricerca artistica negli anni '50 e '60*. Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006. 25-37, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Millet, Catherine. "Marc Desgrandchamps, the Doubter's Ambition." In *Marc Desgrandchamps*. Paris: Centre Pompidou, livre n. 10, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2006. p. 12-17, 15.