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BACH

**MICHEL
MOUFFE**

**TOUS
LES MATINS
DU MONDE**

**09.06-
23.09.23**

All the mornings of the world

Jeanne Mouffe

“We and the world are moving together towards our depths (...) and the abstraction of modern art is an attempt to tear ourselves away through rhythm from the intellectualization and mechanization of modern man and his universe.”¹

One winter morning in the large oval courtyard of a building, I noticed that the shadow of the construction had drawn, together with the sun, shapes on the lawn. A very clear line distinguished on one side of the yard the frozen grass that the sun's rays never reached, and on the other, the grass that knew the heat and the thaw during the day. One was bright green, while the other remained white day and night. Without knowing why, the sight of this phenomenon, repeated over time, intrigued me deeply.

It wasn't until a few days later that I understood why the experience of that little patch of grass with its sun-dappled colors had made such an impression on me. What had held me back that day, above that little patch of grass, was the same thing that sometimes holds us back in front of a painting. It is as if the work seems to reveal an omen, so we stay and wait in front of the canvas.

¹ Henri Maldiney, “Le faux dilemme de la peinture” in *Regard, Parole, Espace*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 2012, pp. 52.

We scrutinize it. If it's a good painting, our gaze never tires of roaming the same spaces indefinitely, always discovering something new. It doesn't matter how complex the motifs are, or even if they're present. What counts is the foreboding, or rather, the feeling of something to come.

The verbalization of painting is accompanied by several paradoxes: because it is an opening, the painting shows us the invisible. This is a first paradox.

A second paradox consists of the fact that the being within the painting exists only as an escape. You can only be there if you are in motion. Now, movement is modification of being. Thus, to be in painting is to be already absent.

In *Regard, Parole, Espace* (1973), the French philosopher Henri Maldiney wants to undertake the understanding of the work of art from itself, in its donation in space and time. It is a question of considering the work in that it constitutes itself, but not on its own, and no longer in that it would be constructed by our intention of signification in the sense of Husserlian consciousness.

If, according to Maldiney, the artistic moment occurs in a completely elemental reality, it is nonetheless an event: it arises because it is different from the flow of things. And yet, by a certain strangeness, the work seems to have always been there. The masterpiece will be the evidence that overwhelms us. It is in that sense that it has always been. The surprise of new paintings is an astonishment that doesn't make us jump, but draws us into the meanders of its being, which is also what makes it curious. Maldiney places the primacy of the artistic object, its pre-eminence, in its materiality; that is, even before it is an object in its own right, since this requires the objectifying relationship of a subject. He believes that the work of art possesses its own structures that elude and even disarm the intentionality of the subject who observes it.

Mouffe's painting embodies this relationship to being. His paintings materialize a multiplicity contained and united within the canvas. Each thin layer of acrylic blends into the next, so much so that a seemingly mauve canvas is simultaneously green and red. Temporality is essential here: the canvas is not purple then green and red depending on where the eye is looking, it is both uniquely mauve, and both green and red at the same time. Inevitably, the relationship maintained by the volume and the surface of the paintings contributes to the same organic and paradoxical quality. The metal bars attached to the wooden frame and which underlie the canvas are shaped in such a way as to apply sufficient pressure to deform it. The volumes thus created stretch the painting in depth, and the lines of metal that can be guessed behind the canvas transform it into a sculpture as soon as

they touch. The painting then extends to go beyond itself and, in a forward flight, joins the gaze that observes it. In view of this, the monumental painting (Nebel) Cornerposts into the Fog (2021) page 9, from the series of the same title, occupies a special status in Mouffe's painting. In this canvas, the structures of the paint are more visible than in the other series and certain brushstrokes are even explicit. Without totally blending into each other, the shades of blue and ochre stand out. The two volumes permeating the canvas seem to bear witness to this duality which cancels itself out as soon as it appears, because the appearance of these lines does not cause any bursting of the body of the canvas. Although the gaze can identify and distinguish colors, the painting remains one. To understand this, it may be useful to apprehend the understanding of the work as that of a living organism, obeying its own internal laws. The work of art appears as if the internal links of which it is constituted were necessary, and it is the necessity of these links between its parts which makes it an organism. Like the living, the work is an uninterrupted self-generation. Between 1589 and 1591, the Italian philosopher and Renaissance humanist Giordano Bruno wrote a short treatise on links, entitled *De Vinculis in genere*. Burned alive for his contribution to physics and the understanding of an infinite universe, he could also have been part of the "the shootings series" that Mouffe began in 2018 by painting those shot by Franco in Formentera, and which he later extended to other resistance figures such as Khaled al-Assad.

Giordano Bruno makes the notion of the link, which unites and associates things, a principle for understanding the relationships maintained by the things of the world in general and creates by this gesture a true philosophy of the link. He poses in this a surprisingly contemporary gesture, that of thinking the world from the links that unite things, from their relationships, and not only from things understood in isolation. If the worlds are infinite and the universe chaotic, the links are what allow the forms to exist, to distinguish themselves from the undifferentiated flow of things. Thus, the artist is the one who binds through his art, and the singularity of a work emanates from its relationship with what it binds. Much later, in his attempt to highlight the irreducibility of the work in relation to human consciousness, Maldiney does not make a dichotomous opposition between the object and the subject of consciousness. On the contrary, he suspends the polarity between man and the world, because the coexistence of man and the world is inalienable.

To access Mouffe's painting, we need to return to the act of feeling in itself.

This is the gesture made by German neurologist Erwin Straus when he realized the hyletic phenomenology that Husserl had announced. By emphasizing the act of feeling for itself, Straus' contribution was to provide a more fertile access to aesthetic experience. Sensory experience is no longer relegated to the status of an immature stage in the process of knowledge, like one that should be overcome by intellectualization. Straus distances himself from the Husserlian concept of the object, preferring sensing as such, i.e., insofar as it is caught up in a relationship in which subject and object have not yet been distinguished. Just as contemporary philosophy has made consciousness a retrospective construct of our experience, so the object as intentional is relegated to a secondary position. It is not, in its intentionality, a constitutive part of the primary relationship to the world. In other words, the forms of the painting only become object *a posteriori*, not from the outset. To experience Mouffe's painting is to relate to this primordial form of an object not yet constituted as such. What makes it an artistic object is not only the materially determined and conscious thing, but the primary and unspeakable relationship with it, which, in turn, transforms us. By making the sensory experience of Mouffe's paintings, we are witnessing a disarmament of intentional consciousness by the thing itself. In his paintings, an advent of the distant is felt: the deployment of depths is never flattened. The painted space is always real, and reveals itself in appearance because it escapes fixity. In this sense, to try to determine a work by a structure in fixed points is to be, already, late in relation to the origin of seeing. The temporality of the work is never acquired in that the artistic moment acts according to a seeing and not a seen: it is part of a continuity and not frozen in a defined past that one could point the finger at. The notion of time implies the dynamic character of the aesthetic experience, which cannot be fixed. Among the chaos, ambiguity is the only way to regain the unity of painting. This is also what makes it difficult to talk about it because, as Mouffe shows us, the mode of being of aesthetic experience is in fact pre-theoretical and pre-linguistic. A primordial tension irrevocably animates the canvas. Otherwise, the work would be flat, as if faithful to the form and the limits of its materiality. The sole purpose of Mouffe's work is the journey of its own constitution, and this is its very being. In a way, the work is only completed by the artist when it is capable of never reaching completion, understood here in the sense of a fixed end. The painter's work ends when the - in this sense definitive - separation of the brush from the canvas coincides with the birth of the work as a work. If we understand this definition literally, it means that a painter never paints a work of art. The advent of the work excludes the painter, and the true artist is the one who knows when to withdraw to let the work be.

Michel Mouffe: Shares of Nothingness, Shares of Eternity...

Xavier Van den Broeck

Stating the obvious, Michel Mouffe's work is as luminous as it is opaque. Crystal clear though reluctant to immediate comprehension, it dwells at the fringe of our intelligence, static yet mobile, quiet but sometimes traversed by epic breath. Incandescent and silent, unquestionably modern although it secretly shivers with Cinquecento reminiscence, it is inoculated with joy and tainted with a dash of seriousness. A work related to spring, anxious not to forget the winter it was born of and conscious of the autumn it will return to, in a perpetual oxymoron combining contraries that don't molest each other. Mouffe's creations seem to be playing themselves, if not playing with us combining intelligence and wit, making us more silent than talkative, more penetrated than we can penetrate those canvases-sculptures made by a mathematician who'd turned painter or a philosopher who'd swapped pens for brushes. Indeed, the painter's work, at the edge of the abyss, inevitably invites to question the essence of existence. Precisely, his paintings summon us spectators and force us, through their implacable materiality, to be present with them and therefore, with ourselves. Simply put, when confronted with a painting by Michel Mouffe,

it's complicated to pretend it's not there. Because the canvas, although it is made of inanimate matter deprived of eyes and consciousness, seems to be looking at us when we are around. Clearly, the Brussels artist's works don't suddenly open the doors to the supernatural. As a matter of fact, they combine visible and invisible, a skilful articulation of presence and absence, marrying time and timelessness in an intimate symbiosis of colour and space, of matter's inertia and the vibrations that nevertheless animate it.

In a religious analogy, one could say there is a mystique that crops out at the surface of those multiple layers of paint that negate each other as much as they mutually create each other. Moreover, as we approach, appear infinite nuances that inhabit them, light grooves that organise them, abundance on the canvas, saturated yet seemingly unfinished, a world crowded with infra-world, between chaos and erudite organisation. A world that resonates with the presence of an organising power that won't say its name but only give the signs. A psychotherapist might say the tension that sometimes pushes the canvas towards the viewer is to be undoubtedly related to Freud's *id*, the unconscious that relentlessly taunts the subconscious, the human being's impulsive side lying in the outskirts of their conscience. It could as well be seen as the materialisation of Munch's *Scream*... Neither religious nor therapist and nothing more than an art critic, I simply wonder: how on Earth can Michel Mouffe achieve that? How can his creations, blurring the limits between painting and sculpture, penetrate us more than they can be penetrated? How, in a career originating in his teenage years, can he, half a century later, push his research-or shall we say quest-further without stumbling on repetition, on the contrary, deepening a procedure which, although relentlessly renewed, testifies of an extreme coherence?

In an attempt to answer those questions, one can put the emphasis on the perfection of an impeccably skilful artistic gesture, which never fails whatever the numerous tools or materials he uses: pencil, charcoal, pastel, brush, steel, canvas... Before the gesture, there is also the burst he describes as the primary source for each of his creations. Precisely, the canvases sometimes seem to be bursting into the third dimension, erupting like ghastly tablecloth stretching creases to eternity, or unfolding in immobilised time, like a densified and magnified present. There is also an infinite patience, which connects the artist to time, not the time of our clocks but the time of painting, of the painted matter and its intimate rhythms.

A patience he uses as a secret guide when he covers the canvas in multiple layers or plunges them in tanks filled with paint in a profane christening, thus exploring the medium in its deeper limits, respectfully tracking down all its potentials, sometimes seemingly staying away from

the creative process, sometimes adamantly involved. A true investigation, obstinate yet untroubled, tenacious but confident, supported by a profound knowledge of art, which he solidly appropriated. In the background, a guiding thread: when everything has been painted, as some have asserted, one question remains: how do I paint?, instead of what do I paint? A question asked by Rothko, Newman, Brice Marden, Malevich, Yves Klein or, closer to us, the Belgian Marthe Wéry, who wilfully investigated the painting medium's virtuality. Those filiations are no identifications but establish a lineage, a neighbourhood, milestones that help appropriate history of art. It is tempting to add some filmmakers to the list inasmuch as Michel Mouffe's work, as pictorial and sculptural as it is, is nonetheless very cinematographic as well. As spectators, we watch Mouffe's work the same way as Resnais's *Last Year in Marienbad*, a film where temporality and narration seem to vanish to make place for reminiscence, as if, for the French filmmaker, the only reality worthy of being filmed was inside, in the brain, the place of dreams, evasion, memories. Like the French director, Mouffe offers paintings on which one can project dreams, mental narration, get unconsciously immersed, reflect and be reflected... A connection could also be found to early Jean-Luc Godard, when, instead of telling and filming a story, he decided, through innovative editing, to question the essence of filmmaking. Stanley Kubrick could also be mentioned, particularly with *2001 a Space Odyssey*, as it seems there is an aesthetical, philosophical and intellectual relation between Mouffe's paintings and the bedroom where the film ends (known as the *Barmecide Feast*). The artist's work would perfectly fit in such a decor, a place of immaculate whiteness, of emptiness saturated with space, where space and time coincide in a way they appear to both create and nullify each other. A feature that can also be found in Mouffe's art: it's hard to tell whether they are a silent receptacle of time or if they incarnate space itself, as an implacable offering to the viewer's glance.

Pretty much like those film masters, the painter has will and skill to create a visual experience able to evade our intelligence to directly penetrate the unconscious. Therefore, it creates an event *within*, tearing apart an orderly vision of the world. In a fruitless attempt to regain comprehension, we might be tempted to watch from a different angle. Suddenly the impression changes, the work looks different, the event shifts, eager to remain elusive, intangible, which provokes something close to cognitive discordance. As a matter of fact, this can be easily explained: a formalist approach, consisting in trying to apprehend form with the usual artistic lexicon is here extremely complex, if not impossible. How can the protruding tension, almost tearing out the canvas, provoked by the metallic structure behind, be relevantly named form? Which part of the usual art lexicon could serve

as a reference to describe the halo of rust that corrodes the canvas, leading to its apparent destruction and at the same time organising it through the glittering lines at the surface that mingle with colours? Which words could be commissioned to describe the artist's monochromes when you realise they aren't *stricto sensu* monochromic, due to the many different layers of paint they are composed of? How could we name what, though present in the work, can not be seen, i.e. is off-screen? Which language tools could be used – thought, even – when strictly pictorial elements incorporate sculptural ones, when each and every one simultaneously encompass and compete against each other? When the surface hosts grooves and cavities that reveal hidden layers, more amplified than nullified? When the colours that inhabit and animate them refuse to be categorised by a single word – is this blue really blue? When nothing can be said about what the work is supposed to mean, as the purpose is not to question meaning but essence, above all the essence of time and space? This may be, after all, considered the real subject, if not the substance of Mouffe's work. Eluding words, offering signifier without signified, captivating our glance to assert its own self-determination, it only proposes mindfully elaborated pictorial procedures as a narrative, relying on the requirements imposed by paint, canvas or underlying structure. The creations look like large tabernacles that captured time and let it ooze through their opaque surfaces, only to prove their total control. Nevertheless, if we think it over coldly, we may conclude that the paintings would only be part of a series of procedures operated on the medium itself. Precise, meticulous, ingenious, they intertwine, interpenetrate, confront metallic frameworks, produce translucent effects, perfect visual balance, partition surfaces possibly corroded by rust, which, incidentally, is here totally rehabilitated by the artist and its intrinsic beauty finally acknowledged after centuries of apprehension and contempt.

To speak the truth, Mouffe's work provides the spectator with a painting or a series of paintings which, while conversing with each other and the space they occupy, carry all the steps of their own genesis, the layers of their own emergence, the multiple and varied moments that speak their identity, the contingencies and tensions they had to overcome to finally exist and reach us. Surprisingly, being only, as one could say, an addition of tasks and procedures gathered on a surface and perfectly executed, how is it possible for them to have such grace and mortality, joy and gravity, immanence and permanence? Moreover, they almost put the viewer in a state of sideration, absorbed, contemplating, almost drowning as if into a mirror. Answers come in the form of questions: would it be because, carrying their own genesis and origin, they tell about the nothingness they were born from? Or because the rust that slowly consumes some of the paintings

whispers their fatal destiny, right before our eyes? After all, the artist himself declares, as a profession of faith, that "the emptiness within must be confronted to start living again". According to him, nothingness is inside us, we are its vectors, its vehicles somehow. If he estimates, in the same sentence, that we are bound to "start living again", does it mean we are, at least partly, dead? Indeed, the layers of paint, after the treatment imposed by the artist, ostensibly start a new life. As the artist leaves the canvas in some way unfinished, doesn't it, as a result, dutifully proceed on its journey through time? It seems Michel Mouffe paints about the emptiness within us, his works murmur that we are matter but also void, which they mirror as would twin sisters. No despair, though, will be seeping from the canvases, no vision of death, as they celebrate the patient triumph of matter and the victory of colour. Besides, if one has to start living again, as in the artist's own words, won't it mean one defeated death one way or another, or at least a certain idea of death? As temporary this victory could be, couldn't it be regarded as a promise of eternity? Can't the tiny marble shards the artist sometimes spills on the canvas be seen as seeds of eternity? Not the kind of eternity a god or divinity would bargain.

Mouffe's creation is formidably devoid of the divine as much as they're filled with profane purity, and restore to matter, which we are also made of, its intrinsic ability to triumph over time, would it imply transformation and regeneration. Such work, as hermetic as sensually gorgeous, possibly proposes a mystique of nothingness, not in the sense of non-existence but as the condition to the emergence of matter, its primal origin, its feeding matrix, its home port. Nothingness as our life's intimate origin and ultimate sanctuary, rehabilitated as provider of eternity, for it is the cradle in which matter was born.

In that respect – and there are certainly others – Mouffe's work is only that and all that: an oxymoron, as aforementioned, maybe the perfect, ultimate, absolute one which unites nothingness and eternity, tells about our shares of one and the other. It silently whispers, between those apparently irreconcilable tensions, the incredible, absolutely unthinkable event: we exist.

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Texts

Jeanne Mouffe
Xavier Van Den Broeck

Translation

Laurent Willems

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Graphic Design

Bureau Wolewinski

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Rue Veydt, 15—1060
Bruxelles, Belgique
T. +32 (0) 2 533 03 90
contact@prvbgallery.com
www.prvbgallery.com

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Jan Liégeois

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Artworks

p.1 **Trilogy ABC, 2012**
(3x) 226 x 113 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.2 **Trilogy ABC, 2012**
(3x) 226 x 113 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.4 **Untitled, 2017**
226 x 449 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.4 **All the morning of the world, 2015**
(9x) 70 x 43 cm dim. totale : 70 x 495 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.4 **Untitled, 2012**
226 x 449 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.6 **Untitled, 2017**
226 x 366 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.7 **Large detachement (green)
2017-2018**
(2x) 183 x 183 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.8 **Untitled, 2015**
226 x 226 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.8 **Untitled, 2012**
226 x 449 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.9 **(Nebel) Cornerposts
into the Fog, 2021**
226 x 592 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.10 **Untitled, 2016**
226 x 366 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.12 **Untitled, 2015**
226 x 449 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.12 **Untitled, 2017**
226 x 226 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.12 **Untitled, 2017**
226 x 452 cm
Mixed media on canvas

p.13 **Untitled (Autoretrat velat en
pelegri), 2018**
43 x 43 cm and 157 x 2 cm
Acrylic on cotton, wood

p.14-15 **Untitled, 2014**
226 x 366 x 16 cm
Mixed media on canvas

Origin of the world, 2004
226 x 113 cm
Mixed media on canvas

Serie: In Between

(In Between), 2021
140 x 108 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas

(In Between), 2021
140 x 108 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas

(In Between), 2021
140 x 108 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas

(In Between), 2021
140 x 108 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas

(In Between), 2022
140 x 108 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas

Serie: Shots

Jaume Ferrer Ferrer, 2018
70 x 70 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas

José Torres Guash, 2019
70 x 70 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas

Antoni Rosselo Roing, 2018
70 x 70 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas

Enrique Torres Juan, 2019
70 x 70 cm
Acrylic on cotton canvas