

Interview with François Morellet



Hervé Bize: I know that you have always drawn, whether it is in your studio which abounds with sheets of paper spread all over the tables you work on and some of which end up spread over the floor or even the walls, or whether it is when you travel. I remember that many of your projects also sprung from drawings made during your summer stays in the south of France, for example.

How would you define the place drawing occupies in your work, knowing that these pieces have rarely been the object of exhibitions entirely dedicated to them, with the exception - notoriously - of a retrospective exhibition in Grenoble, then Reutlingen and Paris in 1991, or more recently an exhibition in a Parisian gallery in 2011, at the same time as your *Réinstallations* at the Centre Pompidou?

Perhaps another of your reasons for delaying the “deadline” (showing these works on paper), is, as you have confessed to me on many occasions, that their presentation worries you: you don’t like conventions, and those that generally accompany the presentation of drawings bother you ...

François Morellet: I have always greatly enjoyed drawing. That is somewhat fortunate, moreover, because since 1960 I have not created one real work using wood, canvas, paint, steel, neon etc ... leaving these creations to one or two assistants who are far more agile than me.

In doing this, I have followed the basic principles to the letter, as laid out in the manifesto of l’Art Concret that Theo Van Doesburg and a few others had published in 1930 in Paris. Thus between 1950 and today, I have always agreed with the manifesto so that my works “are conceived before being created and that this creation is precise and neutral” and who can be more precise and neutral than me? My assistant, of course.

So that covers my works which are not drawings and which can therefore be exhibited without any protection, other than one which prevents people from touching. But these drawings which I really like doing ... I feel really embarrassed when it comes to exhibiting them.

It is as if I was putting back in prison works which had been freed, not without danger, from frames, cardboard mounts, mouldings, which furthermore have this unbreakable glass.

I remember in the 1950s that I copied Ellsworth Kelly who had stapled the canvas behind the stretcher so well that the painting continued perpendicularly and it seemed as if it continued along the wall.

This is why I have always been rather disappointed by exhibitions of my drawings, especially when the walls are large and high.

In fact, according to the list of the exposed works, two will escape prison, *Pliage à 45° d'une diagonale sur un calque* and *Cinq fragments d'une trame 0° 90° maille 60 cm*. And fortunately minimalist troublemakers like myself are in the minority.

H.B.: Very recently in New York I saw – in a gallery – an exhibition which, for the first time, showed a group of drawings by Brice Marden, from 1962 to 1981. Aside from questions to do with the art market, I wonder why these works by Marden were presented for the first time.

Could it again be to do with this “restraint” which so many artists have had with regards to their work on paper, considering them less important than the paintings that they produce at the same time?

In any case, spatially this exhibition of Marden’s work was quite remarkable spatially and it strengthened my resolve to pursue our upcoming project to exhibit a graphic ensemble by you in Chelsea.

On your side, I completely understand that you no doubt would have preferred not to show these drawings since, with the introduction of systematic art right at the start of the 1950s (let’s not forget that the context was that of the Ecole de Paris), you quickly distanced yourself from things where the trembling of the hand appeared, from questions arising from a form of repentance, in short from a practice where the demiurgic side of the artist, his technical ease would have appeared, didn’t you?

F.M.: Perhaps Brice Marden had previously had the same reserves as myself?
Of course for half a century I have avoided giving the usual picture of the hyper-sensitive creating artist.
I have even done everything I could to give completely the opposite picture.

H.B.: In a text published in the catalogue of the retrospective of your drawings in 1991, you also write that what had held you back was that you wanted to show “a square: square, a straight line: straight” and that in some ways, these elements, which were a little distorted on paper, went against the works which followed these preparatory works ...

F.M.: Of course and what is worse is that the large majority of art lovers prefer a noticeable square, a lousy one, rather than a square square!

H.B.: The oldest drawing presented in the exhibition dates from 1954. During my last visit, you received a telephone call from Almir Mavignier which deeply moved you.

This Brazilian artist has played an important role, enabling you to connect with many others. Going back through the many catalogues, I have just seen a photograph, again from 1954, in which we can see you accompanied by Jack Youngerman, who you had met two years earlier in Paris, thanks to Mavignier, just like another American ... Ellsworth Kelly.

Can you go back over the year of 1954, which was extremely important to you since it is also the time you got to know Max Bill in Zurich?

F.M.: We need to go further back in time. The key was 1950.
That was when, in view of the international tensions, Danielle and I decided to immigrate to Brazil.

In December 1950, I went there first to clear the way, with the idea of either building a children’s car factory, like the one in Cholet, or of opening an art gallery. Either one would have been a complete disaster.

In the small art world of Rio, it quickly became known and I met quite a lot of artists of my age.

The first important thing was that they had all visited the exhibition that Max Bill had given in São Paulo and they were all very taken with Bill and l'Art Concret, they convinced me once and for all, but only thanks to the photos of this exhibition.

Another important factor was that I became a close friend of one of them, Almir Mavignier who then came to Paris in December 1951. He was charming, intelligent, and funny and we found him somewhere to live in Paris.

As for me, my time was taken up five days a week, until 1975, by the family factory. Almir, who was a real charmer, made a lot of friends who we were able to enjoy, firstly in Paris. The most notable were Jack Youngerman, an American painter and his wife, Delphine Seyrig, a great actress, as well as Ellsworth Kelly and his astonishing boyfriend, Alain Naudé.

And then in Germany, in Ulm, at the extraordinary Hochschule für Gestaltung, of which Max Bill was the director and Joseph Albers was one of the teachers. Then in Milan, Gianni Colombo, Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani and many others. In those days, we made a flying visits more often abroad than to Paris. That was during the 1950s and 1960s.

H.B.: There is a shift in your work which begins to take place from the beginning of the 1970s, which is quite noticeable as well in your works on paper. It is useful to remember that the 1960s were not very conducive to drawings, with the exception of the preparatory sketches made for installations you created within the GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel), which explains why there are hardly any works from the 1960s present in our exhibition.

Following the group's break-up in 1968, we can still find works which have the status of studies and transcribe the first steps of the systems you introduced, but there was also the "appearance" of completely autonomous works whose dimensions exceed those of previous works, which were close to those of a page.

There is no doubt a link with the fact that, from this period, space, the wall, become of significant importance in all your works, whether it be for exhibitions that you create in galleries and institutions or creations in public places.

F.M.: Yes, obviously, the 1960s with GRAV were rich in grids, neons, screenprints of 40000 squares, in spherical grids which didn't require any preparatory sketches but instead adhesive transfer grids used as prototypes by architects for grid works. Afterwards, I was again interested in the wall but on a larger scale as it was the beginning of the architectural integrations, the premiere of which was in 1971: the walls of the plateau La Reynie in Paris, which announced the future Centre Pompidou completed in 1977.

H.B.: The exhibition we are preparing will take place then in New York. This is then of course a good opportunity to discuss briefly your relations with America.

In the 1960s there were several exhibitions with the GRAV (as early as 1962) and in 1965, the historical exhibition *The Responsive Eye* at MoMA; in 1978, you took part in *Numerals 1924-1977*, organized by the Leo Castelli Gallery, which was then presented in other towns in the United States, and above all, in 1985, a retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum which had been held just before at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, and which then travelled to the

Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montreal before finishing in Miami at the Center for Fine Arts. When exactly did you discover New York for the first time?

F.M.: In the summer of 1960. Ellsworth Kelly so kindly directed us around the city to discover the interesting sites, museums, and jazz clubs. Later, in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, we used to go there nearly every year, short trips just to enjoy being there, for the artistic interest of the museums and galleries, to exhibit there myself personally and to see friends again.

I exhibited at the Oscarsson-Siegeltuch Gallery in 1986, at the Bruno Facchetti Gallery in 1987, 1988 and 1990, at the French Embassy in 1994 and at the Nicholas Davies & Co Gallery in 1997; I took part in collective exhibitions at the MoMA in 1965, 1980 and 1992, at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1978, at the Neuberger Museum in 1985, at the Dia Art Foundation in 1989, at the Brooklyn Museum in 1993, at the New York School of Interior Design in 1997, at the Guggenheim Museum in 1998 ...

Furthermore, our third son, Florent has lived there since 1978, working in the restaurant business and in 1984 he opened his famous restaurant "Florent" in the Meat Market.

But it is not just New York which attracted us: we crossed this large country by car with our three sons in 1967, from New York to Los Angeles, via the Niagara Falls and Louisiana, Santa Fe, San Francisco. We made several journeys to discover the different and fantastic canyons, the West Coast from Vancouver to Los Angeles, the national parks, but also the East Coast from Montreal to Miami.

Now I am too old to travel so far and haven't been back to New York since 11 September 2001. It is a shame but that's the way it is and I am lucky enough to be alive and active in my domain which is the art of today. I can still make short trips in France and to neighbouring countries for my personal exhibitions.

H.B.: It is impossible not to evoke the fact that your research anticipated a little that of certain American artists: for example, Frank Stella and his line paintings, Sol LeWitt and his grids; or even that they were simultaneous to that of other protagonists from across the Atlantic in the pioneering use of certain mediums at the very beginning of the 1960s, the use of neon at the same time as Dan Flavin, or even that of silkscreens at the same time as Andy Warhol.

F.M.: Ah yes! The same research is international, at the same time, in different countries. Those artists who live in the right place will be better known, richer, more dynamic than the others. You can be sure that Cholet in the 1950s was not New York and even Paris was late in appreciating these kinds of works. The only Parisian gallery which was likely to appreciate my work, Denise René, belittled my grid paintings "all-over", describing them as "painting by the metre".

H.B.: In August 1984, during your afore-mentioned retrospective exhibition in the United States, Robert C. Morgan wrote "In his artistic production process, the application of systems enables Morellet to achieve the most interesting results. Those who are familiar with minimal art from the 1960s and with artists such as Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly or Sol LeWitt will immediately be able to make the connection." [...]

Words which Lynn Zelevansky took up again twenty years later in her text *Beyond geometry*, which appeared in the catalogue of the eponymous exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

F.M.: Well I am pleased.

H.B.: When we are lucky enough to visit your home and studios, it is very interesting to move from what is actually a very intimate place, something like a hiding place at the very top of the house, where you draw and prepare your architectural integrations, to the studios which are adjacent to the house, in which we can discover the projects you decide to keep, still within the framework of systems that you have established previously.

Visiting the pieces hanging in the studios with you, we can easily see the pleasure you take in seeing these systems take on their true spatial dimension and what is quite remarkable is that this seems to occur as if you were not the author, as if, I'm expanding a little, you became the spectator of something that you have allowed to develop.

In this respect, the move from a purely graphic dimension (the drawing or prototype but not in the architectural sense), to a spatial dimension (the relationship of your works in terms of scale, the relation to the wall, the floor etc.) reveals a great deal about your approach.

F.M.: No doubt it is the most classic approach for the majority of artists, don't you think?

H.B.: We can also see through this ensemble that we are going to exhibit, that in your desire to reduce subjective decisions as much as possible, you have preferred to use black and white, and that it is very rare for you to use more than two colours in your works, generally chosen so that their optical mix is the most efficient possible.

F.M.: I have always been disturbed by the choice of colours since my motto is not to choose. But I have nevertheless used colour on several occasions, in particular for the series with the silkscreen of small dots that is exhibited.

For this series of superimpositions I have only used my usual five colours: black, white, blue, yellow, red. The experiment of 1974 measured 32 x 32 cm and the experiments from 1976, 25 x 25 cm. Order in the superimposition series is very important. If we print the blue first and the red afterwards, the effect is different with the red in front of the blue or the yellow etc. ...

They were experiments, just "to see".