

Doris von Drathen

**PAINTING SPACE
FABIENNE VERDIER**

CHARTA

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fig. 1

Peinture du 03 novembre
2008, *Hommage*
au Diptyque du Calvaire
de Rogier Van Der Weyden
2008
Mixed media
on canvas
253 × 100 cm
Bruce Kovner,
New York

POLYPHONY OF GRAVITATION

Doris von Drathen

Prologue

When a bolt of lightning pierces the heavens, there is no time for words. Afterward we describe its brief flash as a trace, as something that we saw. It is almost impossible to seize hold of the event that is the present moment. It occurs, it ushers itself into existence, but that self has neither existence nor duration. It is the border between being and existence; it is a function.¹ Thus the *hic et nunc*, the endeavor to nonetheless grasp the precise instant of absolute present, remains one of the great, recurring challenges for those artists who, comparable to alchemists, search for the very essence of our existence, seek out that moment when sacred terror renders us speechless. For this sliver of time has the power of opening up a fissure onto an immensity lying beyond the bounds of our everyday life.

This breathtaking event of an absolute present, which rushes with all its power into human awareness, is the incantatory energy that casts its spell on the viewer standing before the paintings of Fabienne Verdier. The viewer sees the traces of the brush occurring here and now, as if the acutely immediate coming-to-existence of these pictorial events were occurring right before his eyes.

The radical statements of the individual brushstroke run like a crevice through the endlessly flowing texture of time and space. This trace of the brush is the central focus in the oeuvre of this transgressor of frontiers who, in fact, has created a sculptural painting. The viewer understands intuitively that he is not standing in front of a representational image here, but instead is participating in a painterly event within the dynamic field of the real space in which he himself is situated. Thus the presence of the vehement brushstroke gives rise in the viewer to a heightened sense of “being-in-space.” He becomes instantaneously aware of his own rootedness in the present, his own gravitation and groundedness. It is as if the radical instant of the present were to go hand in hand with the precision of that inalienable, indivisible point that connects us to the very core of the earth.

The brushstrokes can take on the forms in which the universe moves. They can cut through the space as axial planetary paths, can flow in meandering currents or ramify into arboreal structures, can rear up wildly and break away in vigorous sweeps; they can pull away in the vast zigzags of beating wings or mountain ranges, can conglomerate into heavy, rocklike masses—nevertheless these abstract forms, which do not strive for a geometry of appearances but instead for an embodiment of space and its energies, always arise from one broad painterly stroke, from a single movement of the large Chinese brush that, after a period of pause and concentration, rushes with emphatic finality through the space of the canvas.

Like the striking of a gong, which we not only perceive acoustically but also feel with the resonance of our body, so do we experience this pictorial event not only in visual terms, but also through the much more highly differentiated sensorium of corporeal perception. Only a physical being-in-space, receptive to the entire spectrum of sensory impressions, can usher into experience the actual dimension of this painterly occurrence, namely the event of a brushstroke that embodies an energy flow in the space that we share with it. Whoever becomes open to this non-rational sensory perception will be able to feel the forces of gravitation, of adhesion or cohesion, of magnetism; the power of the breath and of flowing emptiness; the energies of sound and of color. For these are the painterly materials of this abstraction, which cannot be classified according to any customary aesthetic categories. The more deeply the viewer comes to resonate with these pictorial spaces and their movement, the more his perception casts off the overlying rhythms of everyday life, and the more the dynamically charged energy field of these spaces transfers itself onto his consciousness and gradually transforms it with new energies.

Perspective does not exist—like the horizon, or like the axial intersection of horizontality and verticality, it numbers among the visual habits to which we are so accustomed that, against our better judgment, we perceive them as given realities. Space knows nothing of our inventions, which serve to reduce its unfathomable immensity. One of these perceptions—disregarding the actual knowledge of physics—is the idea that the life-space through which we move is static. At the same time, we adhere to the age-old conviction that its appearances are bound to the present instant, that space is “actually” nothing other than a stream of permanently self-renewing impulses, in other words “occurrences in time.” Max Raphael designates the interplay of elements that come to appearance in space and through space, and which establish their energy-dialogue in the permanent weaving of a magnetic interdependence, as a “time of dynamic action.”² This is the power of spatial impact,

which we sense in the brushstrokes of Fabienne Verdier. What we experience is our own unmistakable connection to the forces at the core of the earth. What we sense is the manifestation of energies that are alive in space and that influence our life.

1. The Studio as Tool

The brushstrokes of Fabienne Verdier are something like corporeal witnesses for that singular instant of a harmonious encounter between the dynamism of color-material in space and the artist's bodily awareness of the present, that instant when, in the deepest concentration of this awareness—in a radical and exclusive here-and-now—she enters into dialogue with this dynamism and thereby opens the dialogue to the viewer.

Her studio is built above a spring. A site is thereby created where telluric energies are particularly perceptible. The canvasses are spread out on the floor. For Fabienne Verdier, the painterly grounding onto which she steps is space itself.

Mounted onto an iron beam that traverses the twelve-meter-high studio are Chinese brushes, huge and ancient. Some of their shafts are as tall as the painter herself; their bundled hairs can absorb so large an amount of paint that the weight has to be counterbalanced by their being hung up. The large brushes are suspended close together from the ceiling. When disburdened of paint, they begin to sway softly in a pendular dance of telluric energies; they seem to be alive and to resemble a convocation of strange beings.

Ever since Fabienne Verdier returned to Paris at the beginning of the nineties after ten years of study in China, she has constantly reinvented her tools in order to adapt them to her pictorial ideas. In this highly individual empiricism, the artist Fabienne Verdier developed an abstraction of painting that cannot be assigned to any category. The most important tool for her work is in fact the site of her studio. In this energetically charged stillness, which made itself felt in an immediate manner when I stood within this space for the first time, the painterly process develops as an actual dialogue between the paint material and the forces of gravitation, the dynamics of adhesion and cohesion, the electric energies of magnetism, the movements of the earth's rotation—in other words, it is a dialogue that arises each day out of completely different circumstances according to temperature and weather, the position of the sun and the moon, and the constellation of other planetary orbits. For the paint reacts to heat, for instance, with extreme agitation, causing the edges to spray upward and fray; in the case of cold, it is lethargic, adhering more strongly to the canvas. The entire

painterly act in the dialogue between the artist and the brush, the pictorial space, and the nascent form will be defined by the consistency of the paint material in response to the meteorological conditions of the particular day.

If one of the large brushes is soaked with the weight of the mass of ink, it develops in the sweep of its pendular movement such a force that this dialogue becomes an extreme physical challenge for the artist. The more recent, large formats of the canvasses gave rise to a problem that at first seemed insurmountable. How was it possible, while retaining the highly concentrated vehemence of the painterly gesture, which is one of the principles of Fabienne Verdier's painting, to work in what were now much longer transits without setting down the brush and reentering the room with a refilled container of painting material? The maximum ink reservoir of the largest brushes, which bind together thirty-five horse's tails, became the prerequisite. Its being attached to a cable, however, did not in itself sufficiently reduce the weight of this giant among the Chinese brushes.

The artist violated the great taboo of Chinese art: She cut off the shaft of the giant brush and had a sort of bicycle handlebar mounted onto the wooden ferrule of the brush, which was now hung directly from long, flexible cables. This technical achievement opened up new horizons. The new mobility now allowed the artist to move through the space of a large canvas with the same speed that she previously moved through the space of the smaller formats for which, logically, lighter brushes are required. This sacrilege is scarcely comprehensible to an outsider. In spite of such liberation, it is still important for the artist, who in the eighties studied and lived in China for ten years, to point out that, even though externally she has severed the axis of the brush, in no way has she inwardly abandoned the awareness of herself as being the axis between heaven and earth, for this teaching long ago became her ethical foundation and center, her discipline and attitude toward the act of living.³ By her own logic, she has remained true to the Chinese tradition.

This is demonstrated throughout her entire oeuvre, the center of which, or one should actually say heart muscle, is the "single stroke of the brush." Lying concealed here is one of the oldest concepts of Chinese philosophy, namely the wisdom, attainable only with difficulty, of transposing a mental or an observed complexity in a single brushstroke. This was the high art of the venerable masters with whom Fabienne Verdier studied. This was the reason she stayed for so long in China. Her abstract painting that we have before us today is accordingly no reduction but, quite the converse, a compression of all the aspects of an appearance into the very essence of its existence.

This search also constitutes in its unfolding logic the core of this text. Although the oeuvre of Fabienne Verdier, through her early years of training, is marked by Chinese philosophy, I will approach this universe with great freedom from a Western perspective and simply refer here and there to concepts from Chinese thought, above all when striking analogies emerge between the two worlds. Out of a concern, however, to avoid reducing the immense knowledge lying behind every one of these Chinese concepts, I will limit myself to allowing the individual ideas to merely be hinted at, here and there, in order to indicate their vast dimensions. What is more important to me is to demonstrate that it is possible to approach the oeuvre of Fabienne Verdier through Western thought, for that is where the universality of this abstraction is revealed.

2. Painting as a Manifestation of Space

All works are preceded by a long mental process and weeks of reflection; a pictorial concept emerges through hundreds of drawings. Even if the material and the movement in space are important elements in this dialogic painting process, the artist decides about pictorial structure and form. But Fabienne Verdier considers her "will to create art" (*Kunstwollen*)⁴ not as a subjection of the material and its dynamism, but as her individual artistic discipline of accomplishing an act of painting in harmonic unison with spatial forces. In the preparatory phase, her will to create art is directed more toward working on the equilibrium of her awareness. For this reason, one could in fact speak of a sort of polyphony that ultimately arises between diverse but reciprocally resonant elements—the artistic activity, the material, and the space as components of a *time of dynamic action*.

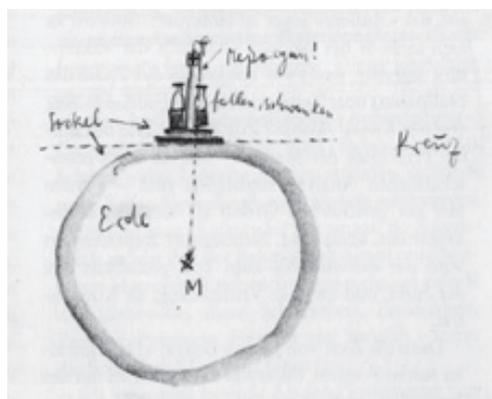
The painting that we have before us does not signify, does not make reference to anything, but instead is a real event in space. The painted traces that we see do not appear because of their form, but instead are real manifestations of spatial energy. And it is precisely here that the oeuvre of Fabienne Verdier differentiates itself from the customary categories of abstract painting. The event of these brushstrokes penetrates the consciousness of the viewer like a sonic depth finder. We physically feel our own groundedness, feel our presentness, our *hic et nunc* in the flowing, actional texture of space and time.

What we experience is more of a physical-sculptural event. This perspective becomes quite evident when, in spite of the formal differences, one considers for the sake of comparison a small work by Joseph Beuys that, at the beginning of the sixties, he called an *Erdding* (Earth-Thing).⁵ This was a wooden construction that he had retained



fig. 2
Kreuzigung, 1962-1963
Joseph Beuys
 Wood, bottles, electrical cables,
 wire, paper, oil, nails,
 thread, needle
 42.5 × 19 × 15 cm
 Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart

fig. 3
*Drawing in order
 to explain Kreuzigung*
Johannes Stüttgen
 Courtesy the artist



when hammering apart the plaster covering of a *Kreuzigung* (Crucifixion) [figs. 2 and 3], an old work from his student days. The title remained as well. Beuys simply attached a thin, tangled wire to the tip of the small, skeleton-like framework. To the wire he tied a thread from which a needle swung freely in space. While the viewer enters into sympathetic contact with this fragile pendulum, he senses deep within himself his own relationship to the magnetism of the earth's core as indicated by the tiny needle. In its radical reality as a system of physical forces, this "Earth-Thing" of Beuys can convey far more about Fabienne Verdier's painting than any comparison with other abstract painting.

For the experience that as individuals we are oriented toward—an innate, indivisible, inalienable gravitation point—is precisely the

liberating power that the viewer senses in the paintings of Fabienne Verdier. To experience oneself with reality firmly underfoot, to sense one's own groundedness, to feel oneself as an independent individual, is to above all and in essence to comprehend one's autonomous position, one's autonomous speech and action in this world.

The fascinating spell and deep mystery of this painting cannot be experienced in purely visual terms. A purely rational and intellectual approach would contradict the empirical logic inherent to the oeuvre of this artist. Moreover, one of the egregious misconceptions of our era is the belief that visual perception is less physical than all the other senses we use to comprehend the world. The senses are not exclusive; they act in concert.⁶ The visual faculty is embedded in the totality of our sensory perception. Sound influences our experience of space. Smells can summon up images of remembrance. Looking at pictures can change our mood. Just as we experience the spatiality of our environment with our entire physical existence, so does the viewer likewise discover the actual dimensions of the visual world of Fabienne Verdier through the complex apparatus of a comprehensive sensory perception. After Kant⁷ and Hegel,⁸ who were the first to attempt to overcome the old Aristotelian gap between the senses and the mind, and who refuted Descartes' ideas of contrasting corporeality and mentality, there is no one more radical than Feuerbach in the formulation of this notion of a reevaluation of physical perceptions when he states: "The secret of direct knowledge is sensory awareness."⁹ Elsewhere he insistently emphasizes: "[...] the mental is nothing without the sensory."¹⁰ He thereby sets up an equation between the sensory and the mental that he characterizes as "essence, as the mind of the senses."¹¹ This reevaluation finds an echo in contemporary French philosophy with the great concept of the *sensible*, which Emmanuel Levinas primarily developed and Jacques Rancière¹² elaborated further. For Levinas, however, the concept of the *sensible* was the point of departure for his philosophy of an ethically based ontology. For it was precisely in sensory cognition, which is able much more than rational cognition to transcend simple experience and to attain a mental-sensory horizon of experience, that Levinas saw the prerequisite for encountering the Other beyond one's own conceptual borders.¹³

But indeed, this is what constitutes the very essence of a work of art—the fact that it is an ontological event that confronts us with the Other. Aby Warburg even speaks of two energetically charged poles—that of the work of art, and that of the viewer. It is between them, in the electrically charged, magnetic field of their energies that the work of art first comes to being—not as an object, but in fact as an ignition, as something unseizable, as a flame.¹⁴ Only after this sensory, emotional event can the *logos* arise, can a commentary begin. Not all artists are capable of creating

presences that induce, shock, and trigger such a comprehensively evocative experience. Fabienne Verdier is one of these select few artists.

One of the exceptional aspects of Fabienne Verdier's painting is the fact that she does not align her work with an aesthetic discourse but instead speaks about her œuvre within the terminology of astrophysics. Verdier has a self-evident awareness of being part of the cosmos, of being made of matter. In actuality, her painterly dialogue means breaking the age-old monopoly of the human being's claim to be the sole artist; instead it recognizes nature as an artistic partner. For her, the dialogic painting process means living in distinct awareness of a correspondence with the universe. The artist conceives of herself as a being who is connected at every moment with the evolutionary process of the cosmos and who, just like matter, resonates with the movements of the earth and the lunar cycles. The painter sees herself as part of the constant ebb and flow, the ceaseless transformation of matter.

3. The Cosmos as Standard of Measurement

In this studio, an art historian must unlearn very much indeed. For instance, my method of working with iconology in contemporary art and, in the wake of Warburg and Panofsky, of inquiring after sense and images, possibly after invisible images of thought, here meets up with its own limitations.¹⁵ But it is possible to think in analogies, for physical processes and geometric forms contain a metaphysical level of understanding that is in turn universal. Here and there it accordingly seemed relevant to reflect the Chinese-influenced thinking of the artist not only in philosophical or literary terms, but also in terms of the natural scientific resources of the West; surprisingly, Leibniz became an important point of reference. Particularly illuminating for connections between painterly and cosmic processes were, for instance, the fractal theories of Benoît B. Mandelbrot, or the thoughts of Edgar Morin, known for his transdisciplinary studies combining philosophy, sociology, and the natural sciences, who begins his essay *L'identité humaine* with the challenging demonstration of his thesis: *Le cosmos nous a créés à son image*. (The cosmos created us in its image.)¹⁶

The facts, however—that this abstraction, which for us is so new and unusual, is based on age-old wisdom; that as a border crosser between East and West, Fabienne Verdier combines the teachings of the ancient Chinese masters with her models from the Italian and Northern Renaissance; that as a painter she works with sculptural and spatial principles—make it almost impossible to compare her œuvre with the works of other contemporary painters.

There are, perhaps, exceptions in the case of artists such as Pat Steir who, for her part, was influenced by sojourns in China and who likewise works with the gravitation of flowing paint, or as she herself says, with the “nature of painting.” But Pat Steir¹⁷ works in front of vertical canvasses and with the clear awareness of creating a pictorial illusion. What is similar, however, is the fact that Pat Steir as well sees her own painting as a touchstone and a teacher for both her art and her life discipline. Her own role model was Agnes Martin; the two were linked in a lifelong friendship. Agnes Martin as well was able to realize complex observations and sentiments with regard to nature in a few bands of color, to create compositions that resemble orchestral scores and certainly have nothing to do with minimalism,¹⁸ but instead with a highly personal search for an essence.

A generation younger, Fabienne Verdier extends this search even further, inasmuch as she radically elevates the unison of her consciousness with the energies of the cosmos into a criterion for her painting. She compares her own breath, which accompanies each of her gestures, with the breath of the space, with its flowing energy. It is crucial for her that these movements harmonize. Every deviation is not only visible for the artist, but palpable. Up to ninety percent of her paintings are filtered out. For Fabienne Verdier, an archaic purification belongs to the painting process: She burns the sorted-out pictures. A special place is set up for this purpose on the grounds of her studio; from her perspective, the failure of an unbalanced brushstroke is negative energy which, in her understanding of the world, could have a disturbing effect on her own further work and on the viewer.

Here, in spite of all formal differences with the world of Fabienne Verdier, a connection seems to be established to Shirazeh Houshiary, who paints from Islamic psalms, which she inscribes onto her canvasses while singing them aloud, and by so doing creates pictorial intensities that are based above all on a contemplatively balanced rhythm of the breath.¹⁹ What is comparable is, on the one hand, the highly developed awareness of the fragility of concentration upon an absolute harmony and the great risk of its disturbance; and on the other hand the belief that the breath flows, not just through the human body, but likewise through the cosmos.

In the worldview of Fabienne Verdier, the essence of all things lies in this flowing breath. The artist has in mind here the breath of matter itself, which in movement and in flight actually renders visible air, space, and emptiness, as if the forms were intended only as a pretext, a stage setting as it were, for these *blancs volants*,²⁰ the flying void that is a vital part of matter and the main theme of this manner of painting. At the same time, however, the artist also makes reference to sound here, often

fig. 5

Sequence, 2006**Richard Serra**

Weatherproof steel

Overall: 3.90 × 12.40 × 19.80 m

Collection of the artist

Installation view during

the exhibition "Richard Serra

Sculpture: Forty Years"

MoMA, New York



fig. 4

Untitled, 1990**Fred Sandback**

Pale pink and maroon

acrylic yarn

Overall dimensions vary

with each installation

Installation view, Galleria

Victoria Miro, Florence, 1990

fig. 6

Promenade, 2008**Richard Serra**

Weatherproof steel

Five parts, each 17 × 4 × 0.13 m

Ministère de la Culture

et de la Communication, Paris

Installation view "Monumenta

2008: Promenade,"

Grand Palais, Paris, 2008



that of her own voice, which imitatively follows great pieces of choral music and accompanies her painting as rhythmic, breathed music.

It is characteristic of only a few artists, most of whom are sculptors, not only to contemplate the correspondence between cosmos and body, but to develop out of this awareness a conception of space that in fact includes the vastness of the heavenly expanses in artistic creation. Were one to select from among these artists, the individuals who actually make telluric energies an element of their work, a small group would emerge which, if one leaves behind the borders of formal categories and instead dares a transversal contemplation of art, has strong similarities with Fabienne Verdier.

To be cited from this perspective, as we have already seen in one example, are the energetic conceptions of Beuys. Fred Sandback's œuvre [fig. 4], with its woolen threads, which are stretched freely in the air and whose intermediate spaces induce in us the experience of immaterial walls, could be revealingly set alongside the painting of Fabienne Verdier. Comparative aspects could emerge in the sculptures of Richard Serra when we become aware of our being-in-space through such works as the *Torqued Ellipses*,²¹ [fig. 5] which he began in 1997, or when, as in the work *Promenade* [fig. 6] from 2008,²² he causes the space within us to resonate with the thin, vertically standing steel panels through which he measures out the rhythmic accents of a specific space. In this quite free correlation of a spatial awareness, analogies may be seen between the extreme presence of the strokes of the brush in the paintings of Fabienne Verdier and *The Lightning Field* [fig. 7a-b] of Walter De Maria, who ushers into experience not only the impossibility of grasping hold of the present, but also the charged energy of space itself. To be mentioned in this context are Rebecca Horn, who gives consideration in her entire œuvre to the flowing energies of the cosmos and its dimensions, or Anish Kapoor, who knows that the high precision of geometrical forms and of physical laws are capable of inducing a contemplative stillness in the viewer, as in the work *At the Hub of Things* [fig. 8] from 1987. The artist Kimsooja causes this precision to be felt when, in her performances, as for instance *A Laundry Woman*, she turns her own body into a seismograph; in channeling these energies she compares herself to a "needle," a vertical axis space [fig. 9]. Max Neuhaus [fig. 10] likewise works with an awareness that his invisible sound sculptures are embedded within a cosmic space and cosmic time. He brought this insight to expression with a work from 2007²³ that makes it possible to experience the contrast of different temporal calculations inside and outside the synagogue, and thereby takes as its actual theme the incomprehensible time between individual divisions of the day. This surrounding field of sculptors seems to me to be far more suitable for finding resonances with the work of Fabienne Verdier than a comparison with other painters.



fig. 7a and 7b
The Lightning Field, 1977
Walter De Maria
 A permanent earth sculpture
 400 stainless-steel poles
 arranged in a grid array
 measuring one mile
 by one kilometer, average
 pole height 6.25 m,
 pole tips form an even plane
 Quemado, New Mexico



fig. 8
At the Hub of Things, 1987
Anish Kapoor
 Fiberglass and pigment
 163 × 150 × 114 cm
 Courtesy the artist



fig. 9
A Laundry Woman – Yamuna River,
India, 2000
Kimsooja
 Single-channel video projection,
 10:30 loop, silent
 Commissioned by ICC Tokyo
 Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio

The logic of my comparison lies beyond the formal perspectives of aesthetics and instead pertains to the consciousness with which the aforementioned artists work—namely the awareness of being directly positioned in the energy field between earthly ground and heavenly dome, and of integrating the viewer into the transcendent expanse of this experience. Precisely this is the event in the painting of Fabienne Verdier. When her corporeal brushstrokes all at once rip apart the dynamic flow of the plexus of space and time, the artist awakens with an abrupt shock our awareness of ourselves as embodying this sort of present, an existence amid constant becoming that changes at every instant, which itself flows and is thus a part of the ceaseless current of cosmic evolution. Like a mighty sound or a blow to the forehead, the painting impacts the viewer, who gradually comes to feel its effect—if he allows himself to.

fig. 10

Time Piece Stommeln, 2007
Max Neuhaus
 Drawing and text
 Colored pencil on paper
 59 × 63 cm; 59 × 32 cm
 Courtesy the artist

Sound work reference:
 Collection:
 City of Pulheim
 Location: Town Square,
 Stommeln-Pulheim, Germany
 Dimensions:
 137 × 54 m



- 1 Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Die Zeit und der Andere*, Felix Meinert Verlag, Hamburg, 1989, p. 27; translation and epilogue by Ludwig Wenzler (original edition: *Le Temps et l'Autre*, Éditions Fata Morgana, Montpellier, 1979).
- 2 Max Raphael, *Raumgestaltungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1989, p. 82.
- 3 Cf. Fabienne Verdier in a studio conversation with Doris von Drathen, September 2010, published in *Künstler Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, Edition 92, Issue 28, 4th quarter 2010, ZEIT Kunstverlag, Munich/Hamburg.
- 4 This term coined by Alois Riegl first appeared in "Spätromische Kunstindustrie," in Otto Pächt, *Methodisches zur kunsthistorischen Praxis*, Prestel, Munich, 1986, Alois Riegl, p. 146 ff.
- 5 Johannes Stüttgen, *Zeitstau: im Kraftfeld des erweiterten Kunstbegriffs von Joseph Beuys (sieben Vorträge im Todesjahre von Joseph Beuys)*, Stuttgart, Urachhaus, 1988, p. 17.
- 6 So explicit a formulation of this insight that the senses are not exclusive is based on a comment made by the architectural theorist Yehuda Safran with regard to my lecture *Space Matters* at Columbia University in November 2011.
- 7 Cf. in this regard Kant's observation "that there are two lines of human awareness, which perhaps arise from a common source unknown to us, namely sensory perception and the faculty of reason; the first presents us with objects, while the second generates the process of thought." *Kant-Lexikon*, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim/New York, 1972, p. 497.
- 8 Cf. Hegel's notion of sensory certitude (*sinnliche Gewißheit*) in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Suhrkamp, 1970, *Werke* 3, p. 82.
- 9 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesamtwerke* 6, p. 100, quoted in "Feuerbachs Begriff der Leiblichkeit und dessen biblischer und lutherischer Hintergrund," Udo Kern (Rostock) in *Feuerbach und der Judentum*, edited by Ursula Reitemeyer, Takayuki Shibata, and Francesco Tomasoni, *Internationale Feuerbach Forschung*, Vol. 4, Waxmann, Münster, 2009, p. 60.
- 10 Feuerbach, *Gesamtwerke* 9, p. 304, quoted in *ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible, esthétique et politique*, La Fabrique, 2000.
- 13 Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et l'Infini*, Kluwer Academic, Paris, 1971, pp. 43, 288.
- 14 Cf. Aby Warburg, *Handelskammer, Notizenbuch (Notebook)*, 1928, p. 44, quoted in Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1986, p. 253.
- 15 Cf. in this regard my book *Vortex of Silence: Proposition for an Art Criticism beyond Aesthetic Categories*, Charta, New York/Milan, 2004.
- 16 Edgar Morin, *l'Identité humaine*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 22.
- 17 Cf. in this regard my essay in *Vortex of Silence*, loc. cit. pp. 283–296.
- 18 Cf. in this regard my essay, *ibid.*, pp. 209–218.
- 19 Cf. in this regard my essay, *ibid.*, pp. 159–170.
- 20 "Flying whites," Fabienne Verdier quoting a Chinese technical term in a studio conversation with Doris von Drathen, September 2010, loc. cit.
- 21 First presented at the Dia foundation, Beacon, New York.
- 22 In the context of the exhibition "Monumenta," Grand Palais, Paris.
- 23 *Synagoge Stommeln*, Cologne, 2007. Max Neuhaus acoustically marks both the customary divisions of hours from midnight to midnight and the calculation according to the Jewish Halacha, which measures out a flexible time of day and night from sunset to sunset.

I. The World in a Single Point



fig. 11

Cercle Blanc I,
from the series
Silencieuse
coïncidence
2007
Mixed media
on canvas
185 × 150 cm
Fondation
H. Looser, Zurich

When Leibniz, who with no little pride considered himself to be a “painting mathematician,”²⁴ was commissioned by his ducal sponsor to design a signet ring, he was confronted with a crucial challenge. What was required was the representation of a cosmogony in a formulaic diagram. His deliberations were accompanied for years by an exchange of ideas through lively discussions and regular letters. The drawing that Leibniz ultimately submitted in the year 1697 as the final version was nothing less than the beginning of the Enlightenment. His diagram [figs. 12a and 12b] showed two concentric circles and a distinctly marked point in the center. In the emptiness between the rings, he had written the sentence *Unum ex nihilo omnia bene fecit* (The One made everything well out of nothing.) By changing one single letter, Leibniz had taken leave of the centuries-old tradition of religious worldviews. Valid up to then in the Europe of the Renaissance, general assent had been granted to the motto: *Unus ex nihilo omnia bene fecit*, namely “One (i.e. a divine creative principle) made everything well out of nothing.” Leibniz, on the other hand, replaced the grammatical subject with *Unum*, the number One, i.e. the rationally experienciable.

In the commentary to his diagram, Leibniz had explained that in his eyes, the void and the point in its middle best expressed One and Zero.²⁵ The cosmogony he proposed was nothing less than a formula for the universe of the dyad, the binary system that even today is the basis for computer programs. With his shifting of *Unus* to *Unum*, however, Leibniz remained circumspect and declared the number One to belong to the “things created by God.”²⁶

The Inquisition was still active; the execution of Giordano Bruno was a little less than a hundred years past. For Leibniz it was dangerous enough to claim that he saw the essence of all things in the numbers One and Zero.²⁷

But with the shift from *Unus* to *Unum*, in other words from a creative principle to something created, to something that could be comprehended by human understanding, which could be considered as a principle of the origin, Leibniz conceived of a connection, astounding even today, between mythic and scientific thought. Implicit in this tiny diagram is a bridge between the religious and the rational world.

But did Leibniz know how closely his diagram is related to the Chinese tradition of the *bi*? These ancient, flat jade discs with a circular hole in the center have possessed, for thousands of years and in a surprisingly comparable manner, the meaning of cosmogonies at whose center are at work forces of change that maintain space and living beings in states of constant transformation.²⁸

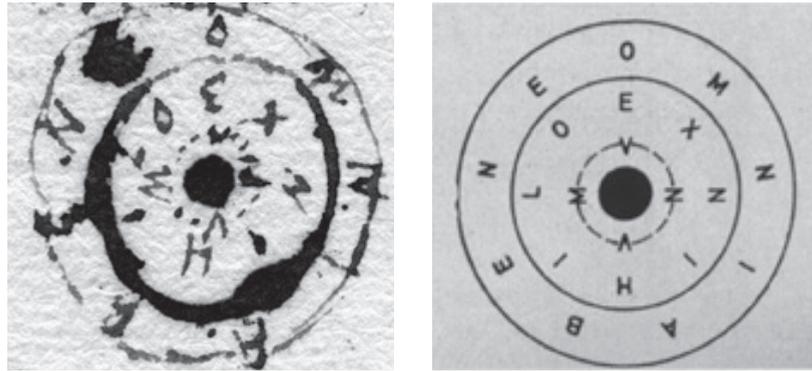


fig. 12a
Sketch for a signet ring
of the dyadic system
January 1697
**Gottfried Wilhelm
Leibniz**
Ink drawing
Niedersächsische
Landesbibliothek
L Br II, 15, Bl. 21
Hannover

fig. 12b
Transformation from
the opposite sketch
**Gottfried Wilhelm
Leibniz**
Sämtliche Schriften
und Briefe
Reihe I, Band 13,
2. Aufl., Berlin 2010,
S. 128 Leibniz-Archiv,
Hannover

1. The Circle as an Open Question

This empty center fascinates the viewer in a long, constantly expanding series of paintings that have long accompanied the oeuvre of Fabienne Verdier. The concentrated space, which is indicated here by the rotation of a brushstroke and is almost but not completely enclosed, is charged with such dynamic energy that all at once every reference to minimalism or classical abstraction is rescinded.

Fabienne Verdier entitles this work from 2007 *Cercle blanc* (White Circle) [fig. 11]. The painting measures 1.85 meters by 1.5 meters. For this format, the artist works with Chinese brushes whose shafts are almost as tall as she is. She stands in the middle of the canvas and executes the rotational movement with the strength of her entire body. The heavy impact of the brush is evident in the thickening of the black ink; spray marks running across the empty center of the circle give clear testimony to the entry of the large, vertical brush into the space of the white canvas. The speed of the sweeping brush is attested to by the tearing away of the painterly gesture, and by the abruptly gaping hatchings modeling the void when the ink could not adhere amid its flight. Like a gust of wind, these *blancs volants* streak through the paint material. These manifestations of space belong to the act of painting in a form-constituting manner. What is more, the void—or in the language of Fabienne Verdier, the breath—is an element of this painting, just as are brush, paint, and the dialogue with the telluric forces.

The openness of the circle, however, allows the void and the space to flow further, as if the question concerning this space had to remain unanswered, as if the mystery of this question could not be permitted to be reduced. Two lengths of the arm constitute the diameter of the trace of ink, which has lost its materiality in the dynamism of its flowing movement, so that the white space comes to define the form more and more. Just as its title says: *Cercle blanc*.

This event of a circle in space could evoke the light sculptures of Anthony McCall when, for instance, he causes a circular line to grow out of a point of light upon a dark projection surface. In contrast to the vehement statement of Fabienne Verdier, Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* [fig. 13] from 1973 grows with extreme slowness. But the emergence of this projected circular line forms a substantial, conic volume that arises out of fog-enriched rays of light and through which the viewer can pass. This light sculpture by Anthony McCall is cited here for comparative purposes, for it allows the visual, even haptic experiencing of the spatiality of a line. The viewer experiences this spatiality in the painting of Fabienne Verdier, when the trace of its flight overcomes the heaviness of its materiality and is only wind, only hovering emptiness and rotation that manifests in the instant of its embodiment in space. Automatically the viewer senses the energy-charged void that is held by this furious, scattering brushstroke. Automatically we sense that here the manifestation of the circular movement ushers the space itself into presentness.

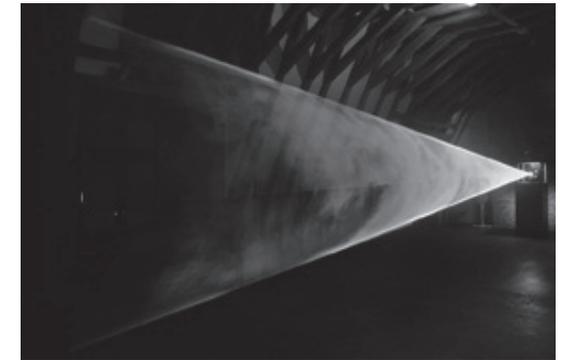


fig. 13a, 13b and 13c
Line Describing a Cone, 1973
Anthony McCall
Solid light installation
16 mm film (30 minutes),
projector, haze machine
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

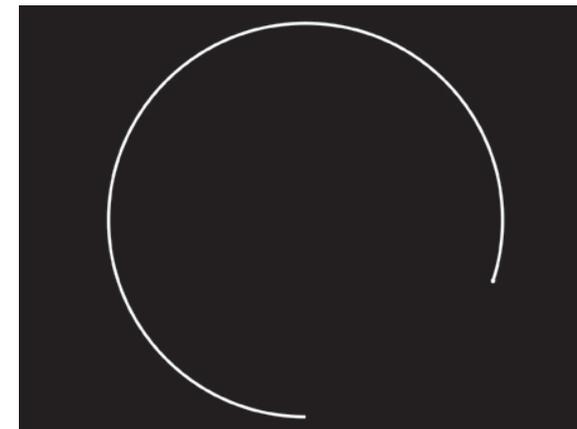




fig. 14
Ascèse du 2 février 2009
 from the series
Silencieuse coïncidence
 2009
 Mixed media on canvas
 233 × 183 cm
 Courtesy Galerie Jaeger Bucher,
 Paris

For Fabienne Verdier, the mystery of this space and its all-encompassing vitality seems to be too profound to be designated with names or images. In contrast to the great tradition of philosophers, scientists, artists, poets, and sages who endeavor to fill this gap, this limit of human understanding, with mystical and religious concepts, she causes the void itself to appear in her painting. The emptiness of *Cercle blanc* could be equivalent to a silence, a non-utterance, possibly a question. In accordance with this logic, it makes sense that a complex of works with the title *Cercle ascèse I–IX* (Asceticism Circles I–IX) is designated by the term *Silencieuse coïncidence* [fig. 14] (Silent Coincidence). The actual reality is omitted. The question as to the vitality, the breath of the space remains open, just like the circling track of the brush itself.

Thus when in the same year Fabienne Verdier actually paints a polyptych that she calls *L'Un* (The One, 2007) [fig. 16], a title that in French does not define the difference between *Unus* and *Unum*, it would contradict her working logic to introduce into the painting that which she explicitly conceals there as *Silencieuse coïncidence*.

In a single stroke, the track of a brush, almost half a meter wide and two-and-a-half meters long, traverses the space vertically. In its radical dynamism, the gesture is reminiscent of Fontana. Here as well, a breach seems to have been made; the constancy of the energetically charged, flowing texture of time and space seems to have been slashed open; a current coming into existence seems to emerge radically as a painful event of piercing through this continuum. But in contrast to the incision with which Fontana [fig. 15] transforms the canvas into three-dimensionality, Fabienne Verdier creates the three-dimensionality of her brushstroke through a sculpturally haptic application of paint whose edges bear witness to the movements of the brush in irregular vitality, whose surface is pervaded by tiny fissures, as if this mode of painting, tantamount to a global landscape, were subject to geological evolution and were continuing to change in constant movement.

The title of this single painted track, which traverses a pictorial space of six canvasses in a 50-by-116-centimeter format, indicates precisely this—the trace of a brush which, as a single stroke, embodies with instantaneous intensity the presence of its emergence.

The weight of this stroke clearly lies at the upper end. The movement of the brushstroke proceeds from this impact of the brush, which initially gathers all the energetic impulses into a moment of rest: first powerfully, then dwindling away. With scarcely a further visual echo when the ink reservoir of the brush is emptied, its cluster of hairs causes the flow of material to be disrupted and to thin into transparent hatchings, and the dynamism of this stroke ultimately fades away in the space.

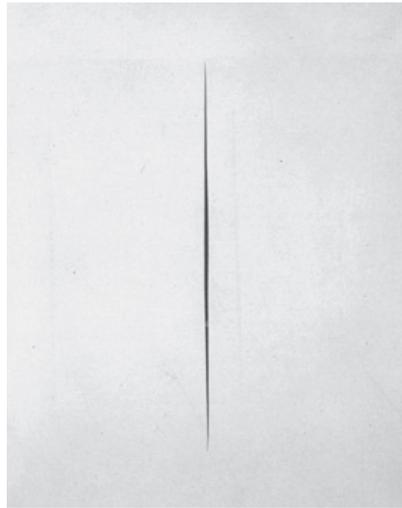


fig. 15
Concetto spaziale, Attese, 1965
Lucio Fontana
 Water paint on canvas
 66 × 53 cm
 Private collection, Milano

The painting *L'Un* was created on the day when the cellist Rostropovich died, on April 27, 2007. As is so often the case, Fabienne Verdier dedicated her painterly act to a certain moment. Observations of nature, contemplations of pictures, words of a philosopher, poet, or scientist that impart joyous or dramatic movement: these can be the inducement for exploring the complexity of an impression or a thought and transferring it as a “tribute” into a single, jubilant stroke of the brush. Thus the individual brushstroke is also a contemporary witness.

The viewer, above whom this polyptych of a single line towers by nearly the height of his own body, automatically raises and lowers his head when he follows the movement of the pictorial trajectory. With his body, he automatically traces out the actual force of this painted track, not only the vertical movement of the spatial axis, but above all a vigorous, liberating exhalation.

Indeed, this movement of the breath, which as a flowing column streams vertically through the human body and thereby through the space, seems to be manifested in this line. This becomes evident upon closer inspection. Two elements refer directly to the process of creation. The segmentation of the canvas points to the intermediate spaces that play just as important a role during the painting process as the corresponding, empty inner space of the large brush. Its interior is shaped so as to create an actual tank, a reservoir that can hold up to one hundred liters of paint material. Important empty spaces are created by the distances between the segments of canvas, which are stretched across reinforced wooden-frame constructions and lie raised somewhat upon the floor, so that excess material can drain away. The geometrical arrangement of the



fig. 16
L'Un (Créé le jour de la mort de Rostropovitch, le 27 Avril 2007, en hommage)
 2007
 Mixed media on canvas
 300 × 116 cm
 Fondation H. Looser, Zurich

canvas segments—which, as measured-out, controlled, and controlling lines, impart a regular rhythm to the freely set brushstrokes, painted traces, and their accompanying flight of drops—accordingly has a purely functional significance.

The radical presentness of this corporeal trace of the brush requires a powerful vehemence in the painterly gesture. The paint material, however, which is transported by a fully soaked horsehair brush, has so massive a weight that the sharpest control could scarcely keep it from spreading spontaneously across the entire surface. Thus the intervening spaces of the canvas segments support the physical resistance of the handling of the brush. For its part, the reinforced wooden structure guarantees that the artist can stand or run upon this painting surface, as well as fight against the dynamism of the massive material with the entire, erect power of her body without bursting apart the canvas. The purpose of this detailed description of the actual painting procedure is not to emphasize the process of creation itself as a theme, but to show the radical pragmatism of a way of thinking.

The second element giving an indication of the developmental process is the airy track of splashes and drops that begins in the lower area of the canvas, disappears behind the brushstroke, reappears on the side describing a parabolic flight, and joins the upper heaviness of the line. The beauty of these merrily dancing splatters is in turn simply an unavoidable inclusion of the process of creation.

2. Sound as Spatial Energy

To be observed in all the paintings is this second track of the dancing drops, which are subject to no order other than that of their own dependency on gravity. The beauty of this playful aleatory pattern stands in stark contrast to the complexity of the individual, compressed trace painted with the highest awareness. In the moment when the artist enters into the space of the canvas with the material-soaked brush and accompanies this act with a concentrated inhalation, the airy track of drops occurs upon the canvas. Her exhalation, on the other hand, accompanies the vigorous assertion when, with the brush, she will guide the mentally prepared trace through the space. Each brushstroke is painted with a single flow of exhaled breath. In the aleatory disposition of drops there is the aspect of an upbeat, comparable to the concentrated inhalation of a cellist. How easy it is, however, in response to the vigor of this gesture, for a strand of horsehair to detach itself, to break ranks, to leap from the cello bow and to fly up freely in space. This chance movement resembles the free flight of the drops. For this reason as well, Fabienne Verdier

dedicated the polyptych *L'Un* to Rostropovitch, because for quite some time she had already seen a deep correspondence between cello bows and her horsehair brushes, between the warm, extended sound that can fill space so physically and the presentness of the painted trace, between the movement of her own breath and that of a cellist. For in close similarity to the manner in which her own rhythmic flow of breath accompanies her brushwork like an unfolding song, so is the breath of the cellist present like a second voice that follows the bow or anticipates its movement, just as if the body of the cello itself were breathing.

In fact, the quality of both instruments is comparable, for cello bow and paintbrush are able to impart form to the instant of concentrated presentness. This spatial vibration of a coming to being, which remains inexplicable in its deepest nature, is the vital source of this painting. Just as the existence of sound is dependent upon our sense of hearing, upon the inner string that sets it in motion, upon body and soul as a “resonance chamber,” so does the existence of the individual brushstroke sounding in space depend upon our inner space, upon our creative perception, upon the wakeful gaze of our presentness. Thus the moment of this *Silencieuse coincidence* is more than simply a pictorial screen; this moment is existence-renewing for the work of art, and thereby also for us.

Accompanying the painting *L'Un* from April 27, 2007, is a counterpart entitled *December 27, 2007*. [fig. 17] A stroke traverses the space horizontally. Here it is possible to trace imaginatively not only the entry of the brush into the space of the canvas, but also its exit. The horizontal movement apparently goes from left to right. Comparable to the impulse of the

fig. 17
L'Un, peinture du 27/12/07
 2007
 Mixed media
 on canvas
 183 × 366 cm
 Courtesy Galerie
 Jaeger Bucher, Paris



impact where the movement begins, this stroke ends in the similarly strong impulse of a definite end, as if the dynamism extended between two equivalent weights. A dwindling away of the material is characterized here as well by translucent fissures in the application of paint, by hatchwork-like thinnings, and by final, flying traces of drops. Their progression, however, is clearly directed backward; the last, flying drops mark the lower middle of the three segments of canvas, and not their outer right edge. The horizontal movement of the brush is clearly thickened at the end on the right by a sudden stop, as if the dynamism of the dwindling away were turned inward and directed backward.

Without knowing what actually happened on the date of December 27, 2007, to which this triptych is dedicated, it seems obvious that this horizontal line marks a painterly gestalt within the borders of a definite beginning and end, as if here a presentness were being summoned into existence within the span between two impulses of being—in a figurative sense, between birth and death. Doubtlessly, what we see here is not a narrative image, but instead a horizontal timeline which, with furious speed, gives rise to three upright, i.e. vertical segments, of canvas. A comparable painting was created in April 2011, likewise entitled *L'Un* [fig. 18]. This was one month after the world-shaking drama of the tsunami in Japan. The idea of limit, end, and death, the expression of which the horizontal line is so firmly anchored in our consciousness that we are scarcely able to free ourselves from this involuntary visual association, seems here at a first glance to be a self-evident given. The dynamic of this horizontal brushstroke, however, which traverses the space of the

fig. 18
L'Un, Avril 2011
2011
Mixed media
on canvas
150 × 312 cm
Courtesy Art Plural
Gallery, Singapore



fig. 19
*The Body of the
Dead Christ in the Tomb*
1521
**Hans Holbein
the Younger**
Oil on wood
30.5 × 200 cm
Museum für
Gegenwartskunst,
Basel

three canvasses in the triptych of Fabienne Verdier, has scarcely anything in common with the static quality of what are for us the customary images of death. Failure is foreordained for comparisons with the picture *Der Tote Christus im Grabe* (The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb) by Hans Holbein [fig. 19], who emphasizes the human nature of the corpse in anti-Christian audaciousness by means of the overlong, frozen horizontal lines, or with the formally similar, long painted bodies of the dead, portraits that are lined up in a series, and whose lying busts Gerhard Richter repeats three times in his terrorist cycle (*Tote*, 1988) [fig. 20] and thereby exaggerates into a similarly overlong horizontal line.²⁹

While the viewer is discovering the dense dynamism of this horizontal line, he is surprised a second time to learn that Fabienne Verdier in fact linked this brushstroke to a notion of death and dedicated it to a Chinese master who had died on December 27, 2007. Once again, a key for understanding Fabienne Verdier's painting of the horizontal *L'Un* is offered, not through comparisons with other paintings, but with an object of Beuys who, like scarcely anyone before him, transfers the concepts of death and the limits of life into a dynamic thought process. In 1953, he calls a small bronze relief *Zwei Wurfkreuze mit Stoppuhren* (Two Crosses for Casting with Stopwatches) [figs. 21a and 21b]. What may in fact be seen are crosses for being thrown, upon which are mounted colorful toy stopwatches. The viewer standing in perplexity in front of the display has recourse to Beuys's explanation.³⁰ It seems the bronze panel is the relic of an action that can be recreated in the imagination: Standing on sandy ground, I take the two crosses into my hands and throw one behind



fig. 20
Tote, 1988
Gerhard Richter
Oil on canvas
35 × 40 cm
Museum of Modern Art
(MoMA), New York
The Sidney and
Harriet Janis Collection



fig. 21a
3 Wurfkreuze mit 2 Spielstopphuhren
1951/1985
Joseph Beuys
Bronze with children's
stopwatches
32 × 29 × 3 cm
Courtesy Pace Gallery

fig. 21b
Drawing in order to explain Wurfkreuze
Johannes Stüttgen
Courtesy the artist

me and one in front of me so that they both stick into the ground; I thereby mark that moment in my past when the death of someone to whom I was particularly close entered into my awareness, and speculatively mark in my future the moment, still unknown to me, of my own death.³¹ So while I stand in the between these two points—so proceeds Beuys's explanation—I feel how time flows through me as a stream of energy; I become aware of moving upon a temporal conveyor belt. For the further I depart from the first point, the nearer I approach the second one.

Certainly, Beuys's idea about a life in an intermediate space is not new. What was new in Beuys's notion, however, was the conception of the death of oneself and of others as electrically charged poles between which time flows as energy. As the first pole, Beuys does not designate birth, which customarily lies outside our conscious existence. It is only against the background of this thinking in terms of energy poles that it becomes possible to describe the scope of Fabienne Verdier's painting: What we have in front of us actually has nothing to do with the static horizontal line of a dead body. Instead, a living brushstroke flows with utter power through the plexus of space and time within the charged span lying between two impulses of energy.

This perspective, thinking in terms of spatial impulses, reveals the intensity of the simultaneously created vertical brushstroke of the same title—*L'Un*. The most important indication, however, may be found in the history of Fabienne Verdier's works themselves. The year 2000 saw the creation of two comparable horizontal brushstrokes. One of them is again

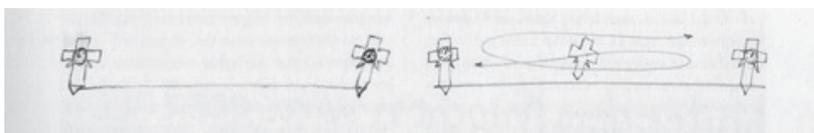


fig. 22
Yi (*L'un*)
2000
Mixed media
55 × 45 cm

entitled *L'Un* [fig. 22]. The other is called *L'Unique trait de pinceau* [fig. 23]. These titles appear in parentheses, however, while the main title for both paintings is indicated by the Chinese concept *Yi*, namely a single stroke of the brush.³² Both have comparable forms, yet their spatial presences are completely different. The work with the explicit title, *L'unique trait de pinceau*, is painted on two upright segments of canvas each measuring 1.1 by 1.7 meters and, in an allusion to ancient Chinese silk picture rolls, has a warm, golden prime coat. A long path of airy drops marks a withdrawing movement of the brush that, similar to the vertical brushstroke, causes the relative height of the canvas and its space to become perceptible. Jubilation echoes in this brushstroke: the freedom of flight, perhaps the intoxicating flight of a cognitive insight. The second horizontal brushstroke from 2000, with the title *L'Un*, is set upon paper and has a 45-by-55-centimeter format. Perceptible here as well is a dynamic flight which, because of the proportions, seems even freer in the space. Only a few drops in the upper pictorial space bear witness to the entry of the brush. Clearly, a smaller brush and a reduced amount of material have come into play here. The movement from the application of the brush to the abrupt termination of the brushstroke seems to have lasted scarcely longer than half a second. The coming into existence of the painterly impulse, quick as a



fig. 23
 Yi (*L'Unique trait de pinceau*)
 2000
 Mixed media on canvas
 170 × 110 cm

flash of lightning, is apparently confirmed by traces of flying paint on the upper back of the corporeal line, hatchwork-like gaps in the material, and intimations of the “flying white” that the artist subsequently comes to thematize more and more. The actual rhythm of the act of painting itself, however, is frequently much slower than the result would have us believe.

In contrast to the two large-format paintings from 2007 and 2011, however, both of these smaller brushstrokes from the year 2000 embody an elongated, horizontal S-form [fig. 23]. This movement of the brush startled me, for the form was strangely familiar to me without my actually knowing its meaning. In fact I had seen this horizontal S-form in front of me for years, namely on the tiny lettering of small wooden figures that support an heirloom bookshelf in my study. During a visit to the artist, we came to speak of this by chance, and after many years I finally learned what the horizontal S-sign means, namely “the One.” A peculiar coincidence. For strangely enough, the sign had reminded me of the small S-line that Leibniz had invented for his often diagram-like calculations, and which indicated nothing other than a “sum.”³³ Leibniz was proud to repeatedly invent new signs, ciphers, and symbols for his theorems and formulas. Was he familiar with Chinese lettering? No one can prove this.

Fabienne Verdier was as surprised as I was to discover a correspondence between her painting and a written character. A trick of the unconscious mind. But at the same time, the event in space is more important for the artist than the sign itself, which serves more to make it possible for the presentness of the space and its energies to be experienced. What Fabienne Verdier seeks is more the absence of the track of ink—in other words, the flying void that reveals itself in material, rather than the materiality of painting itself. The theme is not the vertical or horizontal stroke, not the circle, but instead the void, the breath, which cause the movements of painting to become visible in matter. The theme is the sound of these movements of painting, their wind in space.

The lightning-quick, rotating traces and the vehement brushstroke traversing the canvas like a gash not only share the essential nature of being an impulse in space. In fact, the straight line and the circle may be considered to be identical, as has been proven by the physicist John Archibald Wheeler. For cosmic space is curved. The paths of large masses such as stars or planets can be subject to such strong curvature of space that the shortest distances transform themselves into orbits. According to this law, the moon only revolves around the earth because it follows a straight line within the curvature of space.³⁴

3. The Polyphony of the Number One

When the viewer begins to actually comprehend the space in which the presentness of these movements of the brush occurs and comes into existence as painted traces, he will encounter that unfathomable silence of which the titles speak. Precisely here lies the sacred terror that the viewer experiences, for we immediately understand that this unfathomability is actually the space in which we live.

This is the great mission of this single stroke of the brush, about which the painter and poet Shitao says that it is “the source of all existence, the root of all appearances,” and explains that “its function manifests itself to the mind and lies concealed within the human being.”³⁵

Thus, from a Chinese perspective, the mystery of the individual brushstroke has the power of evoking the ineffable. Shitao’s words sound like they are related to those of Lao Tse, when he says, “The Tao gives rise to One / One gives rise to Two / Two gives rise to Three / Three to the ten thousand beings / The ten thousand beings carry Yin on their backs and Yang in their arms / Blending their breaths, they attain harmony.”³⁶ The Asian literary scholar Anne Cheng explains that this One is the Real, whose unity is manifested in the breath of the primal beginning, in other words in the Tao. The duality inherent in the flowing breaths of Yin and

Yang accordingly experiences its determination in a union that only enlivens itself in emptiness.

The title *L'Un* that Fabienne Verdier gives to the aforementioned paintings might convey to some people the idea that here the artist has actually captured on canvas the ancient idea of the ineffable One, as if she had created a painterly hymn to the One. But with *Un*, Fabienne Verdier designates that the single brushstroke does not represent anything but simply evokes the manifestation of an essence.

Herein lies an essential difference. For in fact it would be a misunderstanding of Fabienne Verdier's manner of working if one were to see in these paintings a reference to the notion of an unfathomable One—in other words to the idea that is extolled both in Chinese philosophy and in the Islamic world. The scale of this notion can initially be measured by directing one's attention, for instance, to the verses of the Persian poet Rumi when, in the thirteenth century, he writes as if drunk with sacred ecstasy: "One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call."³⁷ These verses sound similar to the thoughts of his Christian contemporary in Northern Europe, Meister Eckhart, who writes: "One adds nothing other than the foundation of existence,"³⁸ or when in the legendary Sefer Yetzira of the Jewish tradition of the Sephiroth,³⁹ it is said: "Their appearance is like a flash of lightning, and their goal is without end; His words live in them when they come [from Him] and when they return [...]."⁴⁰

When Fabienne Verdier takes up the idea of the One in her title, then this occurs with an awareness of the search. In its ultimate meaning, namely to be "the source of all existence, the root of all appearances," the single stroke of the brush remains just as unattainable and unseizable as the absolute present itself. In this sense it is instructive to take up the previously quoted definition by Levinas of this absolute present, namely of being "function," of being the action, the power that brings something into existence. The single stroke of the brush has precisely this characteristic, as Shitao states, in an approximately identical formulation—that "its function manifests itself to the mind and lies concealed within the human being." In our conceptional world, this means that these paintings can cause an inner string within our spirit to vibrate, just like the ancient texts when they pronounce the Word, the One, but avoid actually defining, describing, or naming it. In linguistic terms, the One is a blank. This is what is important here. The single brushstroke ushers the space and its energy into manifestation. It renders palpable the mystery of the emptiness of space. From this perspective, the question as to the One reveals itself not as a guidepost, but as the summoning to a search.

In fact, one could take literally the action of evoking and speak of a summoning when, with her painting, Fabienne Verdier ushers into experience not only the energy of the space through which we move, but also

that infinite space that we carry within ourselves, without which we would be unable, as Giordano Bruno says, either to intuit or to desire an infinity.⁴¹ In one of his poems, Rilke conceived of the *Weltinnenraum* (inner space of the world)⁴² and thereby meant the space of the inner imagination of our mind.

The excellence of Fabienne Verdier's painting lies precisely in not losing herself in such ideas, but instead encountering them pragmatically. The practical, physical experience of her own groundedness in gravity within the real space of the canvas spread out across the floor corresponds to the experience of the breath, without which energy her painting would not be conceivable. The rhythm of inhalation and exhalation accompanies the act of painting, connects and guides every gesture, supports the requisite calmness and concentration. Her breath connects itself with that which she calls the "breath of the space," in other words spatial energies.

Strangely enough, with her pragmatism, which is marked by her study in China of techniques of painting and concentration, Fabienne Verdier approaches intuitively the great *pneuma* teaching of ancient Greece. Between the sixth and third centuries, mathematicians and philosophers like Anaximenes, Chrysippos, and Anaxagoras developed such comprehensive cosmological and physio-psychological theories on the basis of the verb *pneío* ("to waft, to blow, to aspirate, to breathe") that one is tempted to see in this concept of the breath a third great philosophical term of reflection that could function on an equal level with the concepts of "space" and "time."

Above all, however, the ancient Greek doctrine of *pneuma* logically includes the mind as well. For this reason, Rilke can write, with reference to the Romantic concept of a "world spirit" (*Weltgeist*), verses such as these: "From almost all things comes a beckoning to feel, wafted here from every formulation."⁴³ This means that he combined with the idea of a world spirit the concept of an all-pervading energy, which he sought to convey in the image of air or of breath.

This complexity "wafts" toward us from Fabienne Verdier's paintings. The breath of the space and of oneself are contained in these brushstrokes. The vitality of the space and of oneself are *one* in these brushstrokes. The paintings of Fabienne Verdier are breath reservoirs that awaken in us precisely this dynamic awareness of an intensive breath that is inscribed in the space. Here as well, there is an encounter between the highly individual and the universal.

The extensive complex of ideas that resonates in the phenomenon of the individual brushstroke, however, resembles an age-old chorale whose melody is sounded again and again over the centuries. Astoundingly, the rational scientist Leibniz uses almost the same words for the title of his dyadic system of rules as did Shitao for the definition of the individual brushstroke: He saw his diagram of a One and a Zero

as the “mirror for the origin of all existence,” and he entitled his fundamental treatise on dyadism *Imago Mundi*.⁴⁴

This energy of constantly searching for a quintessence, of constantly investigating a cosmic enigma, reverberates in Fabienne Verdier’s painterly principle of the individual brushstroke. For this reason, a circular motion or a straight line can grow in equal measure and be essentially identical—as we have seen. In fact, the viewer senses this strength when he stands in front of these paintings. What is directly transferred is an experience that is the direct opposite of abstraction, namely a gathering together of active spatial energies that can be comprehended on the sensory level.

Deleuze used the term *heccéités* for materials that occur, for instance, in uninhabited, immensely open desert areas, in other words unbuilt spaces through which nomadic peoples pass. The word is a mixture of *ecce*⁴⁵ and *haec*.⁴⁶ It refers to present events and actions which, as symptoms or signals, make it possible to experience space, in other words haptic perceptions such as the murmur of the wind, the crunch of shifting sand dunes or, transferred to other geographical areas, the loud crash of colliding sheets of ice in the Antarctic.⁴⁷

The brushstrokes of Fabienne Verdier can be designated in a comparable sense as *heccéités*, as painterly intensities that make it possible to experience immensely open space. Their quality as a flash of lightning is not meant metaphorically here but instead as reality, as a haptic intensity that makes it possible to experience the space in its unfathomably electric and electrifying presence. Therefore Verdier’s painting may best be compared with works that similarly make the event of space their theme, by causing us to fathom with all our senses the enigma of space as “time of dynamic action,”⁴⁸ as may be observed in the spectacular work *The Lightning Field* (1977) by Walter De Maria. Whereas here the viewer becomes the passive witness to the overwhelming natural spectacle of lightning flashes, which have been intensified in size and number, in the case of Fabienne Verdier the viewer is drawn into the spatial occurrence. The fascination lies precisely in the fact that we experience the manifestation of this painting as a reality at eye level, that we participate directly.

The intensity of the *hic et nunc*, which turns the single brushstroke into a symptom of spatial energies, has a direct impact on the individual who observes it. The One that the viewer experiences here is accordingly also his own uniqueness, his own inalienable gravitation point that is universal and individual at once, his own breath with its unmistakable rhythm and lifelong duration. The greatness of this painting resides in its new and pragmatic formulation of the ancient doctrine of the One that contains within itself the multiplicity of existence within the palpable physical laws that determine at every instant the *hic et nunc* of the reality of our existence.

- 24 Horst Bredekamp, *Die Fenster der Monade*, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’ Theater der Natur und Kunst, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 2004, p. 93, commissioned by the Duke of Brunswick and Lüneburg.
- 25 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (edited by the Preußische, later Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin), Berlin 1923 ff, No. 79, p. 128, line 11 ff., quoted in *ibid.*, p. 98.
- 26 There is a correspondence here, strangely enough, with the great mystic Abraham Abulafia who, in the thirteenth century, likewise presented a universe consisting of God-created numbers. Cf. *L’Épître des Sept Voies*, edited by Jean-Christophe Attias, Editions de l’Éclat, Paris, 1985.
- 27 Leibniz, *Essentiae Rerum sunt sicut Numeri* (The Essence of Things is like Numbers), *ibid.*
- 28 Cf. in this regard the essay in my book *Vortex of Silence*, Charta, Milan/New York, 2004, p. 243 ff.
- 29 Cf. in this regard my essay in *Vortex of Silence*, Charta, Milan/New York, p. 243 ff.
- 30 Loc. cit, footnote 17, p. 25 ff.
- 31 Cf. drawing by Johannes Stüttgen, *ibid.*, p. 27.
- 32 Fabienne Verdier, *L’unique Trait de Pinceau*, catalogue, Albin Michel, 2004, p. 89 and p. 111.
- 33 Horst Bredekamp, loc. cit., p. 93.
- 34 Cf. John Archibald Wheeler, “Deformation of Space-Time,” quoted in *Mathematics*, exhib. cat. of the Fondation Cartier Paris, Thames and Hudson, London, 2011.
- 35 Shitao, poet and painter of the Qing Dynasty (1642–1707), known in the West for his treatises on painting and his philosophy with regard to the single brushstroke; cf. in this regard *Shitao, Aufgezeichnete Worte des Mönchs Bittermelone zur Malerei*, Mainz, 2009 [Hay Jonathan, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001; *Shitao: Les propos sur la peinture du Moine Citrouille Amère*, complete translation with commentary by Pierre Ryckmans]. Especially with regard to the single brushstroke: *Shitao - La saveur du monde*, éditions Phébus, 1998, p. 86, quoted in *Fabienne Verdier*, loc. cit, p. 88.
- 36 Lao Tse §42, quoted in Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la Pensée Chinoise*, Paris, Seuil, 1997, p. 195: “Le Dao engendre l’Un / Un engendre Deux / Deux engendre Trois / Trois les dix mille êtres / Les dix mille êtres portent le Yin sur le dos et le Yang dans les bras / Mêlant leurs souffles ils réalisent l’harmonie.”
- 37 R.A. Nicholson, *Divani Shamsi Tabriz*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 125, “Rumi does not recognize himself,” quoted in Mircea Eliade, *Essential Sacred Writings from around the World*, New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1992, p. 527.
- 38 Cf. *Meister Eckhart, Traktate und Predigten*, Zürich, Diogenes, 1979, p. 220: “Eins legt nichts hinzu als den Grund des Seins.”
- 39 In the cabbalistic tree of life, the term *Sephiroth* designates the ten divine emanations.
- 40 “Der Äther ist identisch mit dem Himmel, dem Leeren, dem absoluten Raum, welcher allen Körpern innewohnt und der alle Körper in seiner Unendlichkeit erfaßt.” (“The aether is identical with the heavens, the void, the absolute space that is immanent in all bodies and that contains all bodies in its infinity.”) *De Immenso, Opere Latine*, I, 2, p. 78 [quoted in Jochen Kirchhoff, CB, Frankfurt am Main, 1980, p. 107].
- 41 Gershom Scholem, loc. cit. p. 82.
- 42 Rainer, Maria Rilke, *Gesamtwerte*, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt, 1966, Vol. II, p. 168.
- 43 *Ibid.*, Fünf Gesänge, V, p. 92: “Es winkt zur Fühlung fast aus allen Dingen, aus jeder Wendung weht es her.”
- 44 Horst Bredekamp, loc. cit. p. 94 ff.
- 45 Latin for “here is” or “behold”; cf. the Italian *ecco*.
- 46 Latin neuter plural of *hic*; demonstrative pronoun signifying “this, the present, the actual.”
- 47 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1980, p. 598.
- 48 Cf. footnote 2.