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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.<sup>1</sup> 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 œuvre 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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*)<sup>4</sup> 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.

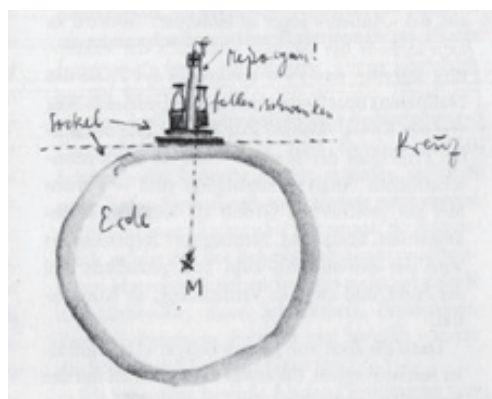
What we experience is more of a physical-sculptural event. This perspective becomes quite evident when, in spite of the formal differences, one considers for the sake of comparison a small work by Joseph Beuys that, at the beginning of the sixties, he called an *Erdding* (Earth-Thing).<sup>5</sup> This 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 œuvre 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 Kant<sup>7</sup> and Hegel,<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere he insistently emphasizes: "[...] the mental is nothing without the sensory."<sup>10</sup> He thereby sets up an equation between the sensory and the mental that he characterizes as "essence, as the mind of the senses."<sup>11</sup> This reevaluation finds an echo in contemporary French philosophy with the great concept of the *sensible*, which Emmanuel Levinas primarily developed and Jacques Rancière<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.)<sup>16</sup>

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 Steir<sup>17</sup> 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,<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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*,<sup>20</sup> 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*,<sup>21</sup> [fig. 5] which he began in 1997, or when, as in the work *Promenade* [fig. 6] from 2008,<sup>22</sup> 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 2007<sup>23</sup> 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,  
 Stommel-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 Stommel*, 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,”<sup>24</sup> 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.

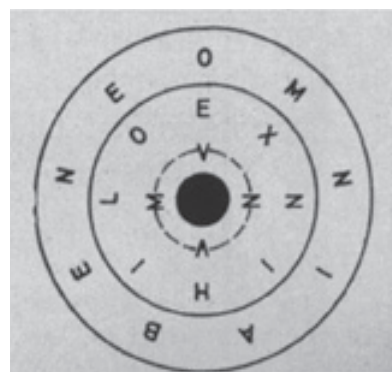
In the commentary to his diagram, Leibniz had explained that in his eyes, the void and the point in its middle best expressed One and Zero.<sup>25</sup> The cosmogony he proposed was nothing less than a formula for the universe of the dyad, the binary system that even today is the basis for computer 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.”<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup>





**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

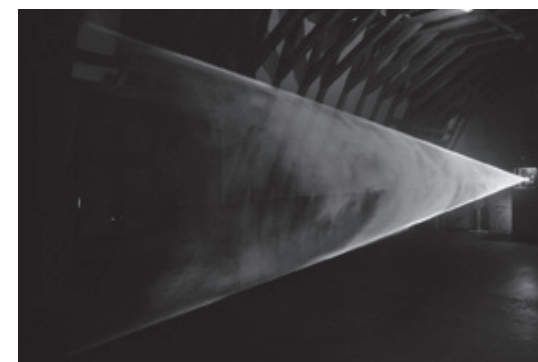
### 1. The Circle as an Open Question

This empty center fascinates the viewer in a long, constantly expanding series of paintings that have long accompanied the œuvre 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.

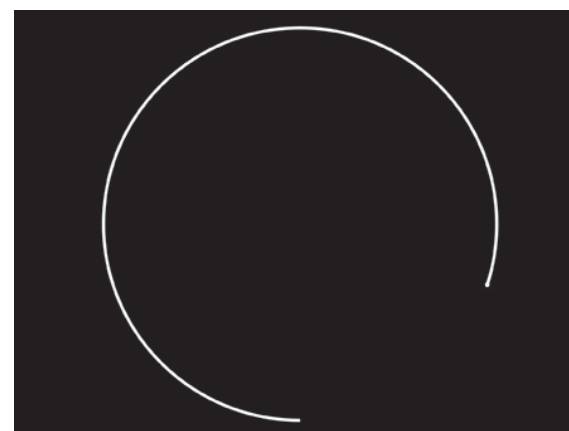
Fabienne Verdier entitles this work from 2007 *Cercle blanc* (White Circle) [fig. 11]. The painting measures 1.85 meters by 1.5 meters. For this format, the artist works with Chinese brushes whose shafts are almost as tall as she is. She stands in the middle of the canvas and executes the rotational 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*.

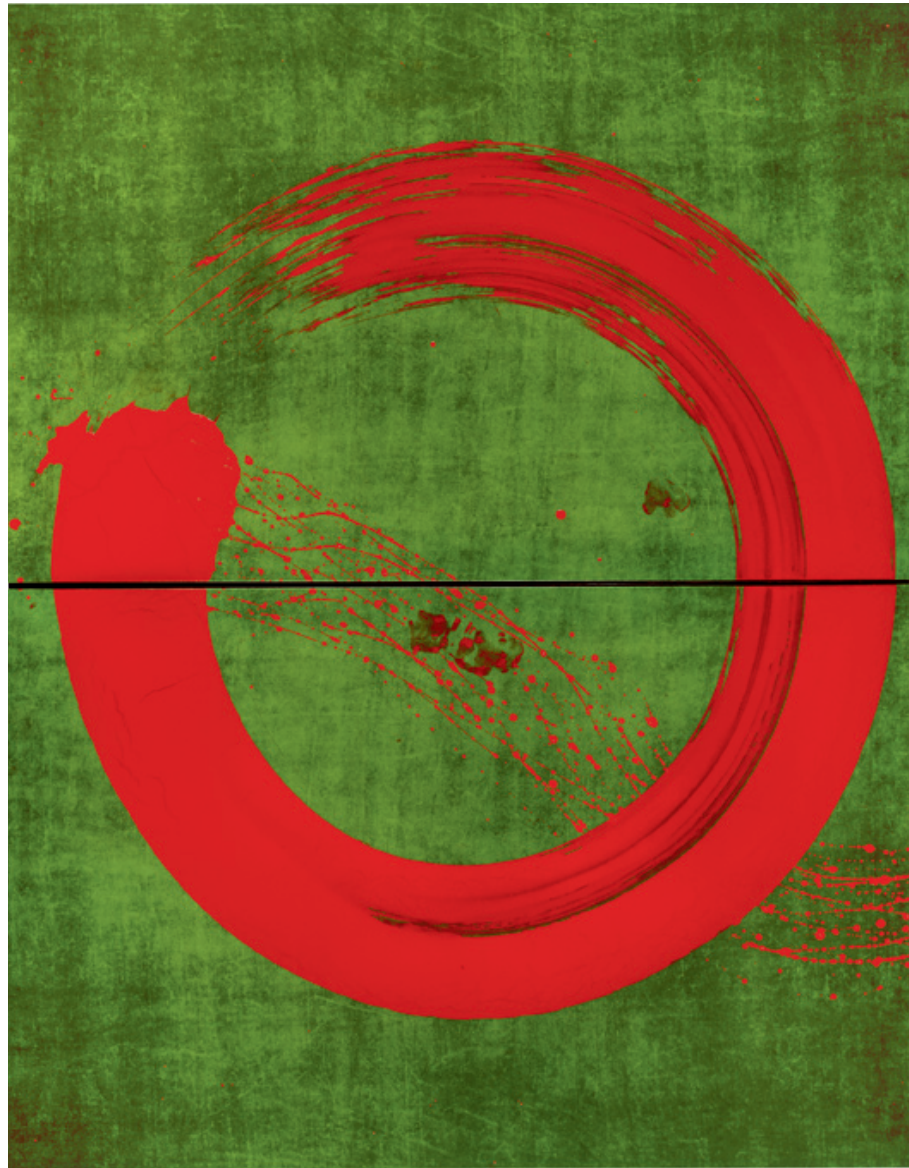
This event of a circle in space could evoke the light sculptures of Anthony McCall when, for instance, he causes a circular line to grow out of a point of light upon a dark projection surface. In contrast to the vehement statement of Fabienne Verdier, Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* [fig. 13] 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

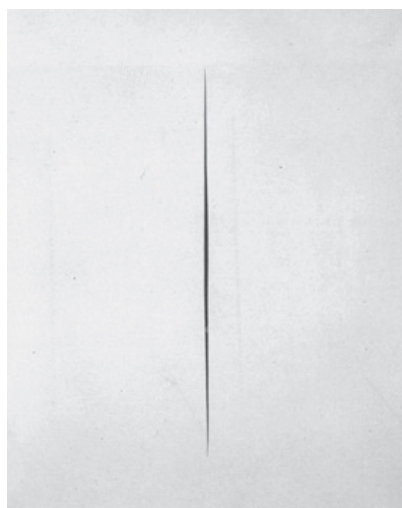
For Fabienne Verdier, the mystery of this space and its all-encompassing vitality seems to be too profound to be designated with names or images. In contrast to the great tradition of philosophers, scientists, artists, poets, and sages who endeavor to fill this gap, this limit of human understanding, 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 coïncidence* 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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup> 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





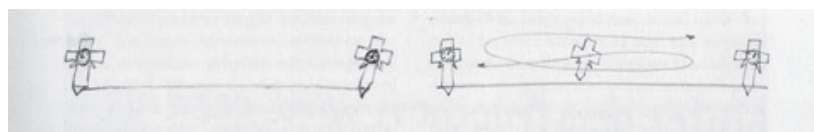
**fig. 21a**  
3 Wurfkreuze mit 2 Spielstopphuhren  
1951/1985  
**Joseph Beuys**  
Bronze with children's  
stopwatches  
32 × 29 × 3 cm  
Courtesy Pace Gallery

**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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

### 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.”<sup>35</sup>

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.”<sup>36</sup> 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."<sup>37</sup> 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,"<sup>38</sup> or when in the legendary Sefer Yetzira of the Jewish tradition of the Sephiroth,<sup>39</sup> 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 [...]"<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup> In one of his poems, Rilke conceived of the *Weltinnenraum* (inner space of the world)<sup>42</sup> 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."<sup>43</sup> 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*.<sup>44</sup>

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 *heccétés* 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*<sup>45</sup> and *haec*.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup>

The brushstrokes of Fabienne Verdier can be designated in a comparable sense as *heccétés*, 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,”<sup>48</sup> 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’éclet, 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, *Gesamtwerke*, 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.

























## **A CONVERSATION IN THREE PARTS**

**Fabienne Verdier  
and Doris von Drathen**

## First Part: Being Lightning

I meet Fabienne Verdier in her refuge, a combination house and studio, a Zen monastery one could say, to the northwest of Paris. Anyone coming here from the city needs time to slow down. Time here is written with a capital T; it is respected, even offered as a gift and celebrated by the hosts, Fabienne and her husband Ghislain. Sitting in large comfortable armchairs, gazing out over an extensive garden in the distance—as the great double doors to the studio remain closed—we talk of ordinary things, subjects of little importance. What does matter is to get into the same rhythm, to begin to breathe at the same pace. When this mutual understanding has been established, the visitor can scarcely restrain an eager curiosity. We exchange looks indicating that I am now ready to enter, to discover her world of painting. Fabienne opens the doors to her studio.

We go down into the studio area that Fabienne calls the “pit,” with its eleven-meter-high ceiling. We are surrounded by gigantic paintbrushes, all made, designed, and reinvented on the Chinese model. They each require the hair from the tails of thirty-five horses; gazing down upon us with an immobile, restful demeanor, they are like theater characters. The smell of paint that comes from them fills my nostrils. And even if only traces of paint can be seen here and there, my eyes still plunge into a gleaming red. Cautiously seeking their way through this inhabited universe so as not to disturb it, my shoes nonetheless adhere in places to the large gray tarpaulins spread over the floor. There is a moment of silence, of hesitation; we are both moved by this first encounter within the very heart of the studio. Then words begin to take shape. *Sotto voce*, they gather speed, begin to flow with enthusiastic dynamism in a dialogue that releases a cascade of questions and explanations. We are standing. We remain on our feet. We forget the “interview” situation, even if at one point, right in the middle of one of her sentences, I ask Fabienne whether I may turn on my tape recorder.

**Doris von Drathen:** You were saying that the main idea of painting for you would be...

**Fabienne Verdier:** It would be to attempt to embody the experience of a Presence on a humble square of linen or cotton canvas. That’s the most difficult thing. How to let that precise moment be “contemplated” or “experienced.” A painting only lives through someone who connects with it. If I were to represent reality figuratively, I would be in the realm of illusion, unembodied and very pretentious. My intuition tells me that everything is movement, everything is impermanence. It seems to me that the essence of life is movement. I move through the space of a canvas with a brush while trying to imbue it with a certain dynamism; this dynamism arises out of a respect for and interplay with the fundamental forces that surround us, that impart life and form to us. Suddenly, this body of vital energy that comes from nothing and gradually inhabits the canvas begins to interact with the person contemplating it, achieves a sort of reconnection with an original dynamism.

**D:** People then are no longer viewers in front of your paintings? They re-experience, re-live a moment that has already been experienced. The well-known German term *nacherleben* comes to mind.

**F:** That is what I dream of: the viewer being enlivened or instinctively revitalized by this dynamism, without even knowing how. You may have noticed that my stroke increasingly is moving beyond the borders of the canvas. For a long while, I behaved like an obedient student doing what traditional painting expected of me, staying within the bounds of the canvas, until the point when my painting became the focus of a sudden, unique instant, the total experience of a “here and now” in the canvas space. I endeavor to inscribe my work within an experimental process. The canvas is much more than a painting; in fact, it is the result of my experiences on the ground. I dare to hope that anyone contemplating it might be swept up in the same original movement. Ever since I’ve actually been situated on the canvas itself, I have shifted beyond the frame. I’m no longer outside the painting trying to “represent” a dynamic beauty. Since I started living on the canvas, I sense a need to go within it and to come back out of it. The canvas is simply the starting point for a journey and a reconnection with the breath of life.

**D:** Anyone who has seen and experienced your paintings will confirm their arresting force. In fact, the viewers move out of a contemplative role and into an existential experience that leads to a recognition of their genuine essence.

dictate form. My mind has an intuition, then suddenly, on that particular day, with the gravity present at that particular moment, the influence of the stars, the humidity in the air, the substance of the environment, a stroke will come into being in one way rather than another. It's a very humbling experience.

**D:** You would go that far?

**F:** Of course. Everything depends on the first impact of the brush and the ink on the canvas, together with the fundamental law of viscosity. According to the degree of humidity in the air, the temperature, when the ink hits the canvas—shlack!—it doesn't react in the same way at all each time. In fact, all I have to do as a painter is to be attuned to the life of the material on that day. When it's cold, as the material dries, it becomes solid in a certain way: the borders are much more crisp and serene than when it's 30°C. My mind plays with the material in different ways, because the way it spreads through space on the canvas is different. When it's hot, the heat gets mixed in, and the material is much more agitated, explosive, vehement. And the borders of the painting are more incisive, more aggressive. Obviously, according to circumstances, the final movement, once dry, is not the same. It's not the same life-breath that goes through space. The force of viscosity accordingly plays a major part.

**D:** So you work with the awareness—maybe later we can come back to this subject and give a rough idea of its cultural context—that your painting is part of the physical forces that constitute it. These are obviously selected and guided by your knowledge and experience of painting, but also by what you term your “attitude,” which, if I understand correctly, involves an immense amount of inner work.

**F:** Yes, we might talk about this in great detail, but for the moment, let's just say the following: There is a dialogue between the fundamental forces that create shape, and my mind that plays with them. It was for this reason that I wanted to replace small formats with larger ones. This is a major challenge. Faced with a canvas seven meters long, my mental vision of what I want to do must be very clear. When I release one hundred liters of ink at one time, I have to react immediately. There's no going back—there's just an immense splodge, and it's all over. For thirty years, I worked on relatively small formats. When I went over to large formats, I had to devise a new way of working. How could I catch up with the material, run with it, hold it back? How could I sculpt it so as to conserve its initial energy?

There is a whole intrinsic life, an experience shared between me and the material. It's halfway between painting and sculpting, inasmuch as the material is so dense and substantial. I have devised a whole system that is halfway between doing and not doing, keeping up and holding back, letting things happen and acting directly. It is a real ritual indeed.

**D:** When you say you connect with the movement in all things, with the dynamism of fundamental forces, when you place yourself within the circulation of energy that most of us are oblivious to in order to seize the moment between “not yet” and “no longer,” an instant that usually escapes our observation, aren't you in fact trying to catch hold of something that is ultimately elusive, to get round the boundaries of the impossible?

**F:** Why not? At any rate, that is the moment I try to capture. In life, everything is spontaneous; the great mystery of living things is their spontaneity. The capability of reacting immediately, in the fragment of a second, can be so decisive. It seems to me that, in seizing immediacy, I am touching upon a truth.

**D:** You laugh as you say that, almost as if such a great moment required great delicacy. But isn't it this fissure of elusiveness that conveys an idea of the breath of life?

**F:** Yes, and at the same time the material moves on. I'm beginning to know how to influence this material in some places so that it will carry on extending, forming inner landscapes, aerial cartographies, great winding rivers. I can hold the flow back for an instant, so that the canvas is barely touched, and the energy from the stroke creates torn forms that look like rocky coastlines, imaginary geographies. While the painting dries, I remain attuned to it in order to follow the dynamism of my initial movement. But what the material itself is able to paint during the drying process, when it cracks and splits apart—that is quite beyond me.

**D:** One word keeps coming back in what you're saying. It's “play,” a far-ranging notion. It was Schiller, I believe, who saw a type of ideal action in play whereby people are inscribed in a cosmic harmony, in an action that goes beyond opposing forces, in a time that is duration.

**F:** Yes, this attitude is a question of survival for me: to move, with all the fibers of my being, towards an activity that goes beyond all value judgment but that gives me joy, makes me jubilant. Like a bird that



sings in the morning... whatever for? That capability is truly our most wonderful gift.

**D:** Leaving struggle behind and achieving a state of ideal equilibrium.

**F:** Yes, dynamic contemplation is my life choice. It's a paradox: to emerge from the idea of internal struggle and then to do battle with the material, to go along with it, to be inside the movement of the fundamental forces that I play with. For some people, this means that I perhaps become a little inhuman... Because I would like to be free of all feelings, of what the ego in our consciousness wishes to judge or to divide into good and bad; I would like to be free of all the boundaries that mankind has managed to invent. Because I would like to go back to a raw, primeval state of nature. Philosophers say that to achieve such wisdom, our hearts would need to turn to ash. [hearty laughter] It also reminds me of those lovely stories about a wise man who was no longer visible in nature because he had completely fused with it. He became the tree, the rock. I would like to experience the whole phenomenology of life without making any value judgment. I hope that, one day, people will understand. Now and then, I hear certain people say that my painting is extraordinarily violent, and they suspect me of having a black view of life because I use black paint. To them I say: If you see a waterfall crashing down a mountainside, it seems extremely violent... But it's not up to us to say whether it is violent or not; it just is. Lightning in the sky—that's how it is, a physical reality. And when you're right in the middle of all these forces, these elements, all these energies, it's bound to make you feel dizzy—that's part and parcel of life.

**D:** That's a nice coincidence: When I was preparing for our conversation, I wrote down "event in space."

**F:** That's exactly what it is.

### Canvas-Space

**D:** So first you create a space, and then you cause movement to happen. And if you explore Giotto's blue, as you did in your large frescoes, we are not in pictorial space, but in the reality of space.

**F:** It was practically as a tribute to Giotto that I chose his blue, because he spent so long reflecting on this relationship to the sky. I spent months imparting that sort of structure to nothingness.

The sky is an incommensurable substance! Doesn't the soul prefer what it can't embrace? For the large frescoes in the Palazzo Torlonia in Rome, I therefore tried to invent a sky that had an aspect of infinity—I think that such distance is favorable to humanity. It was Gaston Bachelard, I think, who said: "First there is nothingness; then deep nothingness; then blue depth." My research for these frescoes involved finding out how I could make our inner immensity vibrate in an utter effusion of blue pigment.

**D:** A space for which our words again fail...

**F:** The artist seeks to seize the intrinsic beauty of the whole of the mystery of life. And how can you grasp hold of the mystery of life if not in the heart of chaos? You have to plunge into the primordial creation. You have to throw yourself into it, into the alchemical soup, and then see what happens.

**D:** And this is why, when you seize this instant, this fault line between one moment and another, your shapes are so often like flashes of lightning—atmospheric events for which language always comes too late. One is accustomed to saying, "I saw a lightning flash," never, "I see a lightning flash."

**F:** Yes, that's true. But for me it's once again quite different, because I am not engaged in external contemplation. I take my brush and attempt to "flash" the form into life. At that precise instant, I could almost say: "I am lightning."

**D:** You and the event are equated, in an eclipse between subject and object?

**F:** That's what is so wonderful: to be able to move outside the being that I think I am. Because we are everything: We are water, we are rushing stream, we are wind, we are stars... And we have the freedom and the joy, according to our fancy of the moment, to transform ourselves whenever and wherever we wish, to teleport ourselves through a breath of energy-matter—and it would be sublime to dare to think that this will also transport anyone who connects with this material.

**D:** The major preparatory work then lies in the difficult task, as Martin Buber said with the same insight as the Oriental philosophers, of acting with a unified soul, of leaving behind all severance, all hesitation, all comings and goings, and of acting like an arrow, of being movement.

**F:** Indeed, and what a terrifying task this is in today's world. Especially when I recognize that it is out of severance itself that new forms emerge! And that there is even beauty in that act. Between the intense moments when I paint, there are other times for thinking, reading, and studying. These periods that I love so intensely are also moments of deep silence. But when I'm painting, I must once again forget such forms of intellectual thought in order to make way for original thinking, for thinking without having to think about it. [laughter] What name might it be given?

**D:** Well, you've found a definition; maybe it could be called "thinking before thinking," or perhaps "movement," since every thought is preceded by a movement.

**F:** Yes, and before movement, there is desire. I believe it was Aristotle who said that all desire is movement. The desire we have is like a plant moving towards light in its thrust for life—that is the inspiration. In fact, it sounds ridiculous to say that I paint or that I'm a painter; all I do is to live out what is within me. And if someone were to ask me why I paint, I would have the urge to throw out this Latin word: *quia*, *quia*—"because, because." There's no reply; roses have no reason why.

**D:** So you aren't looking for a world formula, a *Weltformel*, a universal principle that would be the key to everything. You are simply inside it.

**F:** Yes, I simply threw myself into the alchemical soup, and I'm exploring it.

**D:** You are lightning; you are an event in space.

**F:** My friend Thuan, the astrophysicist, said something to me that moved me profoundly. According to him, we are beings of light. The spirit makes itself manifest through light, and we emit a light that apparently can be measured.

**D:** That seems totally logical, because we inhale light and exhale darkness. Maybe we should even think of light and darkness as a single entity?

**F:** That's right. There's no difference! Let's leave such categories behind. How long has it taken us to establish such borderlines? And how much longer to get beyond them...

## Painting-Discipline

**D:** The speed you spoke of also seems to be inscribed in one of your main tools—horsehair. It's like a haiku for me, imagining you crossing space while being transported by thirty-five horsetails. Why this choice?

**F:** Horsehair is the most spirited and vigorous. But I finish my paintings with the whiskers of a cat. [heartly laughter] Look, I only have to put my hand near this whisker for it to start vibrating. Cat's whiskers are extremely sensitive. They have a lot of springiness, they're strong and full of life, very expressive. That's important for transmitting energy.

There are all sorts of paintbrushes—all the way to tiger whiskers. I've worked with brushes of boar's bristle that also have this force of expression. But to achieve a stroke of those dimensions, you need the length of a horse tail. That's why I chose it for the large formats.

**D:** All that has been said about your force as a painter—becoming "one" with the fundamental forces, grasping the instant of a breath of life—all this goes beyond the traditional knowledge of Chinese painting that characterized you at the beginning of your artistic path and that is, at the same time, apparently a starting point, perhaps a basis from which to move elsewhere.

**F:** To begin with, my Chinese studies taught me discipline. It's an apprenticeship that cannot be passed over. As you say, it was the basis for my initial thinking. The most important thing I learned is the discipline, the preparation of my inner being before taking up the paintbrush: creating a void within oneself, seeking one's unity. But above all, what the old masters taught me, thirty years ago now, is to connect with the universal dynamism that can be found in curves, in the spontaneous expression of nature, in the sudden intuition of a stroke that must have the same dynamism, the same essence as a river or a gust of wind; the lesson is to understand that, in painting, the stroke should transport the spirit of life. And it is to comprehend this in abstract terms. That's the main thing the masters taught me: an abstract form of reading nature in order to perceive this universal dynamism. For instance, I used to work on an ideogram that is written using twenty-four strokes, and that could be thought of as a mathematical formula. It's a real construction in space. The problem was to know how to suggest the meaning and the complexity of the form through just one stroke—because here we are involved with the art of suggestion. It's a long process. Because the complex structure of twenty-four strokes is no less than an ideogram that encompasses a philosophical idea. The strokes are written

in space from right to left and from top to bottom. It is a matter of knowing how the philosophical idea and the structure in space may be summed up. How can the mind travel along this path and suggest a complex ideogram with a single brushstroke? This is a subtle game whereby the spirit seeks out a pattern while inclining toward pure essence, toward the most minimal expression conceivable, so that well-read persons intuitively understand the abstract interpretation of the philosophical idea that is sketched out and hinted at by the brush in the empty space of the paper. This is a process that I've been practicing in my own way for thirty years now, but that I studied in China for ten years.

**D:** So your Chinese studies were a tool, a bridge for you to invent a form of painting that goes beyond abstraction, toward the essence.

**F:** Writing signs is secondary for a calligrapher; the main thing is the spiritual attitude that emerges from the stroke. I remember once I was in Greece in the mountains, after those ten years studying in China. I was gazing at the petrified trees, the rocks, the storms, the waves—all these living elements—and I realized what I had learned. It came almost as a shock. I actually could perceive the essential dynamism that gives everything life. It was very liberating for me, because I told myself that I don't need to look for great philosophical ideas—I just have to transcribe this essence.

**D:** Understanding that everything is “one,” that it is all linked, right down to the brush that has the same shape as a flower bud?

**F:** Yes, that's about it. [much laughter]

**D:** It's fascinating to note that when one begins to get close to the essence of things, philosophers from all cultures reach the same conclusions. Isaac Luria, for instance, the great sixteenth-century Jewish mystic, said he didn't want to write anything down. Where could he start from? Everything is interconnected.

**F:** Yes, you could lose your mind from it, what a mystery! Every day I discover and note a little more of this in my painting. It's so wonderful and intensely moving.



<sup>1</sup> "Peinture," solo exhibition, Galerie Jaeger Bucher, autumn 2009.



## Second Part: The Finite in the Infinite

For several months Fabienne Verdier has been preparing a large cycle of new pieces in resonance with ten or so paintings by Flemish Primitives in the Groeninge Museum in Bruges. Leaving the pit in her studio, we go up to the first floor, where works by Hugo van der Goes, Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, and others are reproduced to scale. Fabienne Verdier observes the reproductions through a magnifying glass in order to seize their complexity and to prepare herself to summarize it in a single line. In this part of the studio, there are also new paintings in which Fabienne Verdier has dared to do what she had never undertaken before.

**D:** So one could say that through your vital force, your attitude, and your discipline, you are the central axis of these energies. The inner preparation required to reach this stage—being focused, and attuned to the fundamental energies—is enormous. But we know that tracking these energies comes naturally to you, even though you have to re-attune yourself constantly, even though this inner process is never completed. It is also evident that there is an inherent logic in the process of passing from cosmic movement to your painting. By contemplating your paintings, by connecting as we said with their dynamism, a similar movement can be detected. How did you arrive at the Flemish Primitives?

**F:** This dialogue with masterpieces by early Flemish masters, this interaction with pieces from the collection in the museum in Bruges means that I am moving into a much more complex context than previously. This task is much more demanding, and the discipline I learned in China will be no more than a memory, inasmuch as it is no longer a question of encapsulating the complexity of a movement in space into a single line, but rather of understanding the universe of a multi-faceted reality—the spiritual, religious, metaphysical aspect, but also the emotion as, for example, in Hugo van der Goes's *Death of the Virgin*, with all its compassion for the Virgin, who is dying and will ascend to heaven. There is a collective presence, all these hands seeking to carry her, an extraordinary composition



between real and metaphysical space. Do you see that blue? It's what I will have to work on—a lapis lazuli that is unimaginably difficult to achieve. There is also a play between a "presence here and there" and a suprapresence. I'm going to study the form and the content, and attempt to transcribe this suprapresence into space. With my stroke, I will endeavor to evoke the way in which the levitating Virgin inhabits the space in this painting, and to seize the spirit of life that is expressed there. It also undoubtedly means I will be thinking about the religious sentiment, and I find that fascinating as well.

**D:** You use the term "suprapresence." So it seems we are still talking about energy here.

**F:** Yes, quite right. I want to carry on exploring the themes that the Flemish painters used, working in a minimalist vein with the idea of contemplative intimacy that one could be tempted to think is just concerned with narrative. I will attempt to attune myself to what is beyond the narrative and the religious emotion in order to capture that other energy and to try and transcribe it through a breath of the spirit.

**D:** I can imagine that it isn't just a matter of being attuned but of responding to these paintings, of reliving what is depicted, this fragment of a mystical history, in today's terms.

**F:** Perhaps, but of reliving the picture through the Flemish painters' direct experience. Even before the invention of the telescope and the discovery of perspective, these painters, as representatives of the human spirit, had meditated spiritually on the coexistence in one and the same space of the infinitely large and the infinitely small. There is a correspondence between abstraction, the seizing of the immediacy of the instant through the ink technique I use, and the hyperrealism of these Flemish masters, because they as well are in the fragmentation of a moment, the almost impossible capturing of an eternal present. If you look at the *Madonna with Canon van der Paele* by Jan van Eyck, you'll see details that exactly reflect an immediate seizing of the instant. Van Eyck even painted a drop of sweat on Saint Donatian's forehead. On Canon van der Paele's temples, his veins are represented as if the blood were really flowing through them, as if they were trying to find their way above the skin; these too are a fractal representation of reality. Whereas I discover the veins in a natural manner—because in my work they are engendered essentially by the forces of gravity as my ink dries, and by other forces that fundamental laws impose upon the material, through an

abstract value—the Flemish painters felt this truth and expressed it in hyperrealistic terms. But they pushed the limits of the study of detail to such an extreme that they achieved a quality of timelessness. Looking at this painting, for example, we cannot make out where the light is coming from, for all the characters are evenly lit. They have entered into the eternity of an instant. It has become sacred.

**D:** And facing it, a huge contrast: us, the viewers. The Flemish masters opened up space, didn't they? As if the light were coming from behind us, as if our space were part of the painting, a counterweight.

**F:** Very true. And the play with space can be pushed even further: The viewer's space corresponds to the opening in the painting, the window that opens onto the landscape; we can escape through there.

**D:** There is a series of contrasts between sacred and non-sacred, something that obviously strengthens the impression of difference—maybe that is what the essence of sacredness is.

**F:** Yes. You know, accepting this commission is an amazing piece of luck and an invaluable experience; my spirit is being nourished by the study of a multitude of details. With a magnifying glass, I think it would be possible to identify the different species of plants the painters used, for instance here in Hans Memling's *Moreel Triptych*. I'll have to work with a botanist.

Look at the virgins from the convent, with their black-and-white clothing. Today, you see inscribed there Malevich's black square on white. Far be it from me to want to apply this type of observation to all art history; that would be very presumptuous on my part. But the Flemish painters imparted to us a range of silent, meditative contemplation that is surprising in its approach to reality, and in its daring to go beyond it. And then there is the characters' fervor. Look at the virgins from the convent, all praying, all somewhere else, gazing inwardly. All this research leads me to reflect endlessly on life, matter, reality, space, time, light, and humanity that desires, suffers, aspires to a realm beyond, that needs to believe, that has a capacity for spirituality.

**D:** How are you going to respond to the colors themselves? For years your backgrounds have been worked with dazzling reds, greens, and golds, all of which resonate with the Flemish painters' palette.

**F:** And yet the dazzling aspect is not what I seek. What attracts me more is the phenomenon of energy. The vibratory strength of the pigments

fascinates me; in the mystery of energy, the point where the physical and the metaphysical meet. I recently learned that when a new color is invented, the atomic cluster is unique in the world; maybe even nature itself never invented it. Color is a mixture of atoms of matter. Light meeting these atoms refracts in the cluster; it's the atoms that make us perceive green, red, and light. I'd never thought of painting in terms of atoms! It broadened my thinking about fundamental forces. I'd always felt colors with passion, but being aware of their physical and energetic vibratory forces, which directly impact on us, has opened up another area of understanding.

Now, close your eyes, wait a moment, forget the world of Flemish Primitives and turn slowly round. I'm going to show you some new paintings.

**D:** [turns, opens her eyes] That is a brushstroke that we only saw partially up to now, isn't that so? The radical energy of an unfinished stroke... and now it has become a whole stroke that dares to be almost nothing...

**F:** Wrestling the paint away, you mean? Yes, that has always been a central theme in my work. The old Chinese masters talked of "flying whites" for these vigorous energy flows. The principle is known as *fei bai*. This means that the most important thing for a stroke to be alive is that it remain unfinished. As if the energy went straight into the spirit of the viewers who contemplate it intensively. Jankélévitch said that life resides in the unfinished. And it is true; it is in this wrestling of material, what I call "structures of flying whites," that we suddenly see things that look like lakes, reefs, rocky creeks, rugged cliffs, or branches of trees, all organized by reality with a profound vitality.

**D:** Still the finite in the infinite?

**F:** I knew that I didn't have to say it explicitly.

**D:** But isn't it the case with these new works that the phenomenon of wrestling becomes a constitutive formal element?

**F:** Yes, I'm taking it as far as it will go—because I would like to dare to do something new. I drain the paintbrush more and more in order to move toward a white line, but by way of black.

**D:** It makes me think of contemporary music, of certain young composers—I'm thinking specifically of the New Zealander Hayden

Chisholm—who reverse sounds; rather than blowing into a saxophone, they suck their breath in order to produce a mute sound. There's also a moment in Bartok's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* when, just before the opening of the final door, the orchestra creates a silence by breathing in air.

**F:** That's a beautiful comparison. But in painting, it's an extremely precarious stroke. I'd been dreaming about doing it for a long while, but hadn't dared to up to that point. You have to be so detached, so self-confident to dare to go where there's practically nothing. I didn't want to use white pigment, but rather to create a veritable silence in painting. In fact, as I often do, I promised myself that I'd do it as a tribute to someone who is important to me. It can be someone like Rostropovitch or John Cage, or a philosopher, a Chinese master. I keep it in the back of my mind, and sometimes the tribute appears in the title, sometimes it remains a secret. This time I was thinking about Mark Tobey and his white writing. But this didn't mean I wanted to use a stroke of white, rather the opposite: showing the white in a stroke as a real pause in the material, working with the void itself. For the last five weeks, I've been destroying the work I've done. I explained to my gallerist, Véronique Jaeger, that I'd been trying to follow the maxim "to be neglectful so that life would have a chance to settle," and I encountered a dark, exultant clarity in the heart of chaos... And now here are the first two paintings that I actually want to look at.<sup>2</sup> I'm as happy as a child, thrilled to be traveling through these complementary forms, discovering this other world of unpredictable reality that has settled in without my knowing. It's incredible the way that, when there's practically nothing left, our imagination seeks out these elements to cling to. Imagination is certainly there, in the ultrapresence I'm seeking.

**D:** Wasn't the virtual nothingness in this wrested brushstroke, weren't the dynamic whites within the black already there in your backgrounds when the gold shone through like an extreme shadow?

**F:** I hadn't thought of that comparison. But, yes, in the gold backgrounds, there is a virtual nothingness of light that I call a dull light. I basically work with light that is stripped away. I started with light, and then I made it disappear as if it were shrouded in autumn mists. I wanted the light to be grasped without it's being there, to have a distant, dull presence. As I apply the different coats of glaze, this sets up a multiple vibration. The light vibrates but remains in the shadows, rendering the brushstroke more present.



**D:** Let's go back to the universal, almost cosmic landscapes, the *Weltlandschaften* that can be discovered in the complementary shapes of a wrested brushstroke. Why does this fascinate you so much?

**F:** What would we do without a dream world? That is where we live! Isn't it an immense illusion to think that we can leave it? So in these complementary forms, I see the infinitely small and the infinitely large as being equivalent. The entity of life and of matter is so concrete that when the material is torn away, reality becomes hyperreality for us. These are moments that partake of the same madness, the same breathing of an elusive presence, as do the veins on the forehead of Jan van Eyck's canon.

**D:** These observations have nothing to do with a discourse that says, "This looks like..."?

**F:** Exactly. That is what I would like to get across: Our brain connects, travels, collects and finds elements of reality where even nature, or the nature of painting, hasn't necessarily envisioned anything. Our inner worlds allow us to see a thousand things in the cross-section of a stalk of rhubarb—from a branch on a tree to the infinite spaces of rivers, mountain torrents, or the colors of darkness. In my painting, viewers are free to travel as they like in the material: connect with it or not, it's up to them.

**D:** The idea is then to connect to two realities—that of the painting and the one that is around us.

**F:** I'd go even further: there's no difference. The material of the painting is very concrete. The movements and energies are concrete. Our manner of establishing borderlines, of constructing an aesthetic discourse is very recent, if you come to think about it. I don't see that the material of painting is so different from magma creating coastlines and mountains.

**D:** And what about swallows?

**F:** [much laughter] What made you think of that? Have I talked to you about my work with reference to their flight?

**D:** I was referring more to the impetus of a swallow's wing that skims the surface of water for an instant. The concentric circles the movement sets off don't correspond to the initial impulse.

That's how I'd like to think of the impetus in your wrested strokes: an act, an instant seized, and the result is an entity of forms and voids that encompass cosmic landscapes.

**F:** It's strange that you should talk about that... I've always dreamed about identifying with a swallow, with its flight and its cry.

**D:** Being a swallow, like being lightning?

**F:** Exactly so. Roaming free, exulting in space, letting yourself be carried up on a rising current of air, capturing energies and playing in the wind.

<sup>2</sup> These are from a series of seven works in homage to Mark Tobey, two of which Fabienne Verdier has kept in her studio.



## Third Part: In Rhythm with the Breathing of the World

**T**ea awaits us on a table that occupies space as if it were a house within the house. On the table, piles of notebooks and drawings are spread out. We sit opposite each other before finally broaching the subject we have so far refrained from mentioning: Fabienne's experiences and observations of nature on her trip to Norway. This third part slows down the pace of our conversation. We pause for thought, reflect on a detail, consider moments specific to this painting. Fabienne Verdier has infinite patience for finding the right word, moving at a snail's pace into the heart of her work while gazing towards future prospects, new horizons.

**D:** Your experience of painting must have changed dramatically on your trip to Norway, when the situation was reversed and you found yourself observing a coastline from a boat.

**F:** It was a shock. Especially as, ever since China, I'd broken with the Western tradition of working outside, of sketching a subject, of painting from nature. The Chinese masters' idea, and one that I had embraced, is to let yourself be permeated by the spirit of a place and later to transcribe the emotion felt at the time. In Norway I was on board a coaster for over ten days. It was no longer about contemplating one single site. The boat sailed right up the entire coast of Norway. The fact of moving incessantly, of having a moving structure in front of me that constantly reveals yet other peaks and outlines in the distance, is a far more profound perception revealing a far more intensely complex boundary to reality. Normally, between contemplation and the pared-back expression of a search for composition in a painting, many long stages have to be accomplished. But in this case, the maturation occurred in an instant, and, as the boat continued its course, the vision was already there in my mind, and I spontaneously transcribed it onto my white pages as lines of essential forces. A moving geography came into being with great clarity on each blank page of my notebook despite the wind and the sea spray.

**F:** In my eyes, that is quite plausible. The vibrations of light, the vibrations given off by the atoms of color that we were talking about, the electromagnetic vibrations that matter emits, all this makes up a huge system of waves in which we are caught up and to which we contribute through our physical movements, as well as by our mental movements—because a thought is nothing other than a physical movement, an impetus. Yes, such ideas are a basis for understanding the interdependence of everything. That is what I deeply believe.

**D:** Is it necessary to believe that? Isn't it simply an experience, the very one that you share through your painting?

**F:** I try to. It would be wonderful if I could really share this experience. Otherwise my painting wouldn't exist, given its suchness—that means that when something comes into being, it is such as it is. Practicing this means accepting destiny such as it is, respecting matter-energy, concrete and spontaneous reality. I find this fascinating because existence comes into being when wrested from matter.

**D:** Would you say your wrested brushstrokes are the equivalent of this "existence being wrested from matter," as you term it?

**F:** I'm groping along, putting forward suggestions, grasping blindly. My painting is a "tentative quest for..." But what I suggest is an embodiment of existence, an act of embodiment on a scrap of canvas that's almost nothing, a square of canvas and a few bits of wood.

**D:** But the piece of canvas is your space, isn't it?

**F:** Yes, the space and place of a living experience. I think that a painting has to be a living body, obviously in the metaphysical sense of the term. A painting should have bone structure, flesh, a spirit; it should impart something, it should live and breathe.

**D:** My research into the role of space in contemporary art has led me to make a rudimentary division between artists who work with space that exists, and others who don't believe in an existing space and generate it themselves. Your stance seems to be self-evident, maybe too much so, which is why I'd like to ask you whether you work with the idea of an existing space.

**F:** It seems obvious to me that space is there, everywhere; a void makes itself manifest in many ways. You have to listen to it. [silence]

But even though space does exist for me as a full entity, and all I have to do is to be centered within it, attuned, receptive in order to be able to convey—given that this energy has to transmit—I still have to confront matter. When the canvas arrives, blank and not yet embodied, I have to create the space. And this space is behind you.

**D:** [turning to discover a large empty canvas on the wall] Ah! The canvas with the ground emitting a dull luminosity, the one we spoke about?

**F:** Exactly. So I'd say I'm not in one camp or the other, but in both at the same time. And I can't capture energy waves without first having an empty-full space on the canvas. It's on my canvas that an emptiness full of vibrations has to come to life. Canvas in its raw state conveys nothing; it's crude, unembodied, uninhabited, and has to transform itself from vacuousness to full emptiness. It has to become a fragment of space. And it's from this fragment of space that my vision of space can begin seeking its way. To create this fragment of space, layer upon layer is needed of the microorganisms of pigment and paint, glazes of material. I work with very fine brushes, doubtlessly like the Flemish masters. I start with light and then I create veils; I try to paint a veil of reality, a veil of spatial emptiness, which for me is full of thousands of vibrations and energies that are coming into being, becoming and dying. And that, in itself, is a meditation on silent coincidences. When light is refracted onto these spatial voids, hopefully something immaterial will begin to arise out of this spatial void. And it's only by meditating on these fragments of the universe—which for me are now embodied, living—that I can finally load my brushes with ink and pursue my voyage through the universe of forms.

**D:** It's the details that help one understand, isn't it? But I'd like to take it a step further. You make a painting fulgurate into being within the prepared space, but space is still being created, now in a flash. Isn't it rather this impetus that becomes substance, this suchness, as you call it, that concretely embodies your space?

**F:** Of course—it's fractal, I go further and further into space. But no one moment of incarnation is stronger than any other, before or after. Each moment has its own weight, there is no hierarchy between the various stages. It's a continual process that I hope will be perpetuated before and by the viewer's gaze.

**D:** So the moment of the genesis of your painting is not limited to the moment when you seize that single brushstroke?



**F:** Genesis is everywhere. We all undergo it! We forget that we all are subject to fundamental laws every second. We live within them, with them. We are all, at all times, cosmogonic, inscribed in the laws that form the universe. It's a reality that we find hard to take in. The great physicists have come to acknowledge it. We're particles of the universe in movement. There's nothing that can be done, it's our destiny.

**D:** This sounds incredible to me. I would have made a distinction between the commencement and the evolutionary process.

**F:** The great ancient Chinese philosophers and physicists today are in agreement on this point: our constitution is cosmic and is subject to the laws of cosmogony, the laws of a constant genesis. All the rest—the instant, time—these are the boundaries, the limits we have invented to restrict the space we belong to.

**D:** What place does the creation of a painting have in this universal system?

**F:** We are a cluster of atoms, constantly shifting, attracting, continuing, flowing, transforming. We may put creams on our faces in the evening, but when we wake up in the morning, we are landscapes once again. Our skin creates valleys, peaks, exactly like my paintings. When I paint, it's nothing different: a cluster of atoms that all obey the same laws. Everything is made up of the same matter and is undoubtedly subject to constant genesis.

### Painting-Attitude

**D:** If I understand correctly, when you talk about matter, you are in fact thinking of a complex pattern that encompasses energy, the spirit, the breath of life, and—let's say it—the mystery of life?

**F:** Yes, perhaps. We've talked about an impetus that becomes substance. A line can become all kinds of substance. Energy-matter can manifest itself in myriad ways. Sometimes it scares me to see to what extent everything is "one" with the cosmos—in a physical sense. I recently found this intuitive observation in a work by Jean Tauler (a French fourteenth-century French monk): "In this flow and ebb all things are distinct, and yet they are connected in a kind of unity... Knowing the One in everything and everything in the One."

It's my experience of painting that has given me such radical awareness of the phenomenon. I felt it intuitively without daring to broach this vast reality in full consciousness.

**D:** Does this conception of matter include an ethical idea?

**F:** Willem de Kooning put it admirably: "The subject in the abstract is space. The artist fills it with an attitude." I equally think it's evident that aesthetics have to stem from ethics. The "attitude," in this sense, is the basis of my painting.

**D:** It's interesting to juxtapose aesthetics and ethics, one conditioning the other. I always like to find correspondences between different cultures, so I'd like to mention Aby Warburg, who included ethics in his theory of iconology, albeit indirectly. He postulated that, just as ethics governs our emotional chaos, aesthetics is used to govern the chaos of artistic creation in order to achieve a tectonic form. Like you, he saw an analogy between ethics and aesthetics. Obviously, in his analysis he puts aesthetics back into its proper place, saying it serves form and image, and is not the purpose of a work.

**F:** I'll seek out this text and read it more carefully. But I'd go as far as to say that in his intention, there is no real capacity to create an aesthetic form that can have a true presence, which can cause the natural impetus for life that we spoke of to be felt. In painting, I think you can only achieve this breath if you're true to yourself, in a state of stark detachment. With respect to a certain ethical attitude, when you begin to play with the material, then things are revealed all by themselves, within the space experienced on the canvas.

**D:** Does that mean that this attitude would be contained as a suprapresence? I'm trying to use your words...

**F:** And you've given me a key word: "contained." This aesthetics-ethics is a kind of hidden reservoir for the work. It's not the same form of expression, more a process of creativity, the opposite of a world governed by the artistic ego. There are artists who build creations out of egocentricity and heroism—some artists you meet in the Western art world are like that, don't you think? And then there's the completely crazy experience, which I think is much more interesting, whereby you accept that there's not that much to us, and in that instant of self-oblivion, that act of self-effacement, you find yourself

almost in a sort of trance where, suddenly, in a state of apparent non-being, the essential being transforms itself and finds expression. The being beyond the being. Strangely, what remains on the canvas is the being that we are without our even knowing it. It's hard. But perhaps it's the only way we have a chance to live—can we say—a kind of ecstasy?

**D:** But that's when things happen!

**F:** It's true, at that instant of wonderment things happen—all our substances exulting as they melt into this matter-universe, a spark that we don't know how to communicate... fortunately! A mystery that goes beyond us and that I try to experience as I stand upon the canvas. That's what it's all about. If I don't see that experience embodied, then I burn the canvas. I destroy eighty percent of my work.

**D:** Why use fire?

**F:** I practice a ritual in my garden, a kind of purification. Fire is important to remove anything that hasn't managed to come into being on the canvas, if the flow was hampered or disturbed, eluding natural fluidity. I decide to burn them in order to erase something that I would term vulgar. It's by dint of practice that you know. Like a musician who hears when the sound made by his instrument has become unbearable.

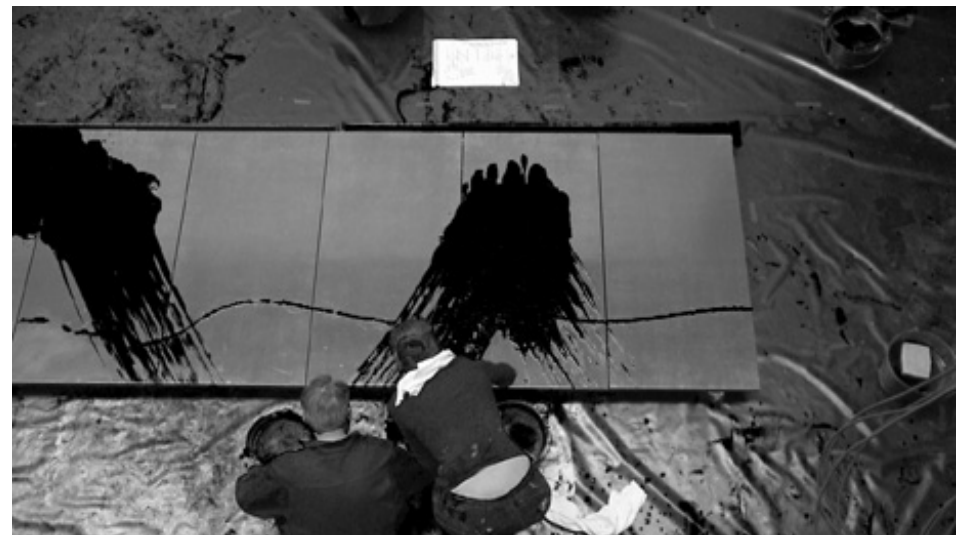
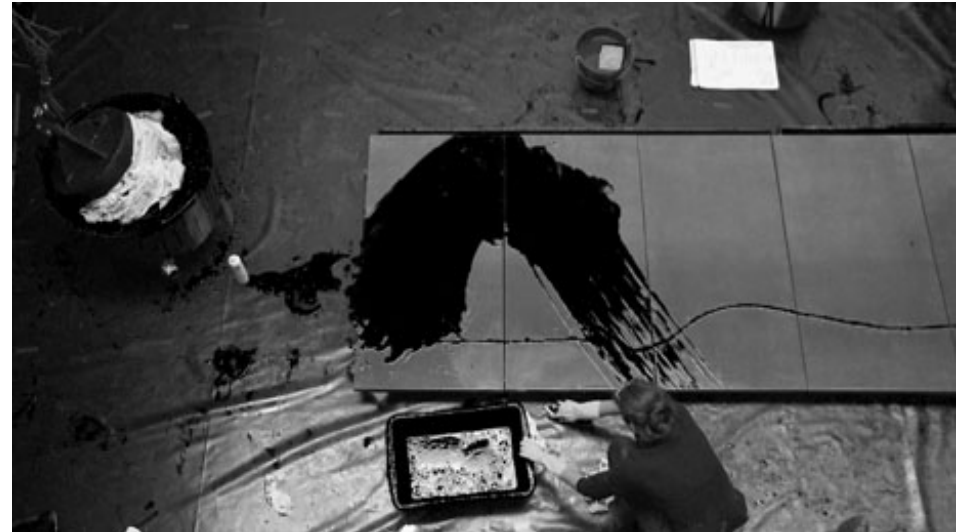
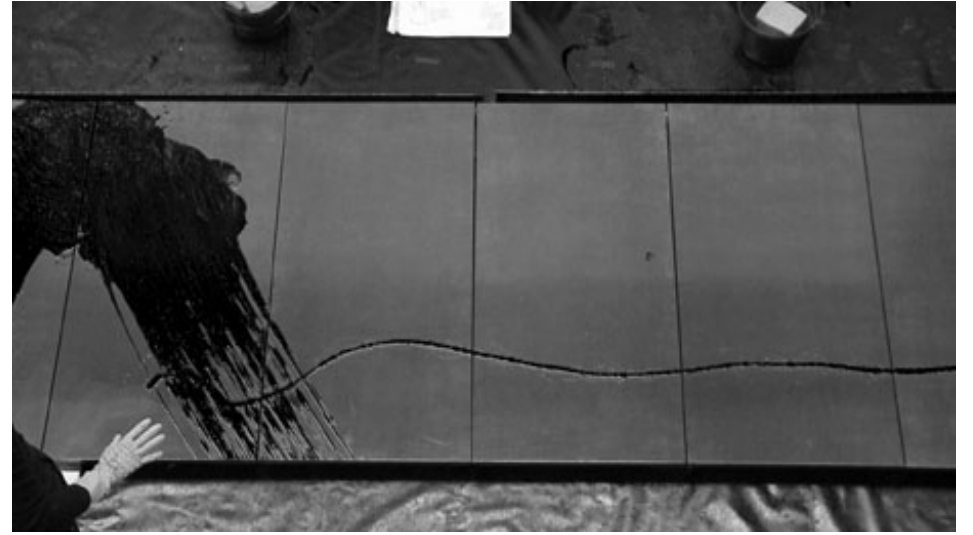
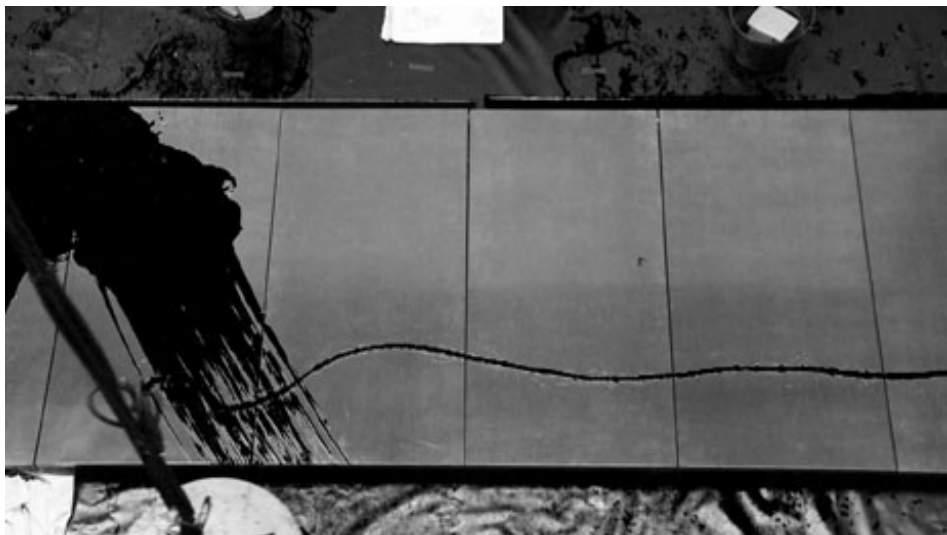
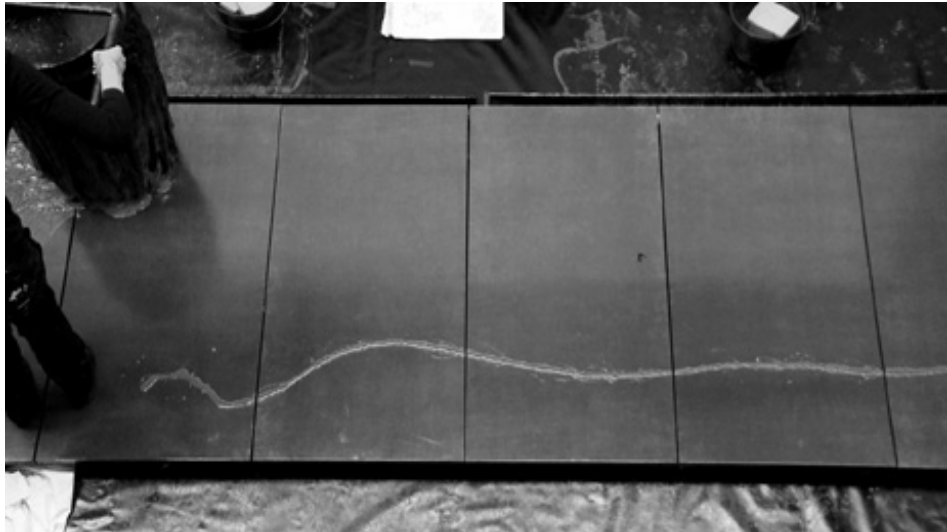
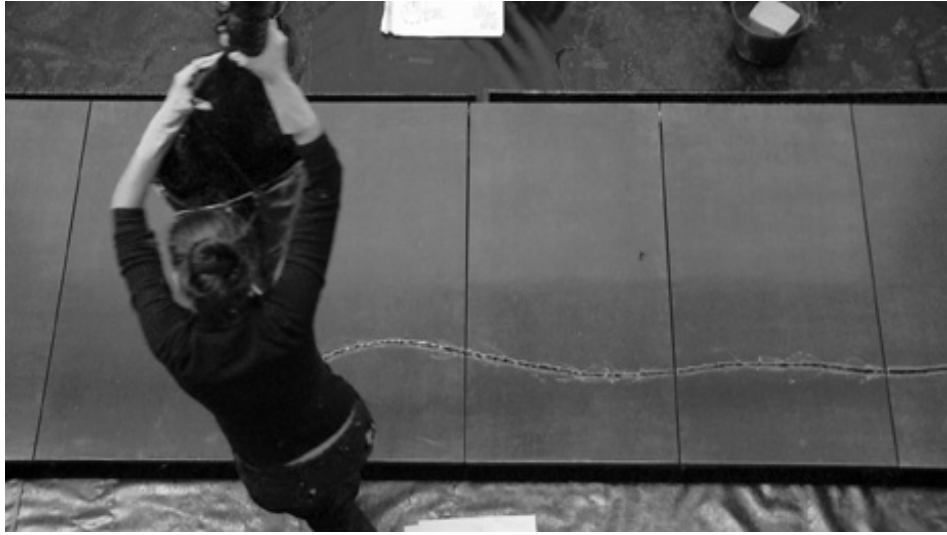
**D:** I understand your selection criteria—but why burn them?

**F:** On the one hand, I like to create rituals, I almost need them; and on the other hand, it's purifying. Sometimes the fire even gives me answers; in the flames I see shapes that I'd never dared to think of.

**D:** So these ritual, radical pauses that you make, dictated by fire—are they directly connected to your painting?

**F:** Intuitively, you've touched on another inmost aspect of my work—pausing, holding the material back with the brush. I am going to tell you this with a quotation that impressed me. I jotted it down in one of my notebooks; it describes my experience on the canvas precisely: "The cosmic resistance to the breath of life that vitalizes it, without this resistance life could not come into being, this resistance is life and what allows life to produce the prodigiously varied forms of its manifestation." This is exactly what I experience in my painting.

I realize that impetuous movement will not give life to form, to this movement. In fact, if I hold the material back with my brush, a fraction of a second, half a fraction of a second, or a quarter of a fraction of a second, the material does not express itself in the same way. It's in this holding back that the material suddenly has time to follow the terrestrial attraction, to settle upon the canvas and become embodied. The sacred texts are right. I used to call that instant in my work "being within the holding back." But it's more accurate to speak of "cosmic resistance," since this force of attraction is cosmic. So, it's by resisting, as if I held my breath, that suddenly the material settles. Then—I paint... the material settles... I paint again. And it's only in this rhythm along with the breaks in it that I can give life to the complementary forms that open up—the glaciers, the coastline structures, the creeks, and the cliffs. Because the instant I place my brush, a form is in the process of coming into being as the ink flows out because of this holding back, this resistance. Movement doesn't come into being through movement; it's not movement alone that gives life to form, but a certain resistance, a certain immobility. It's in this state of immobility that we are able to listen to all the fundamental forces that cause form to emerge. It is not through force of will that form is created. The genuine wisdom is to let it come of itself.





Selected biography

**1962** Born in Paris.

**1983** Graduated from Ecole des Beaux-arts de Toulouse.

**1984** Awarded a post-graduate scholarship at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, China.

**1984–1993** Studied painting, aesthetics, and philosophy at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, China, with some of the last great traditional masters.

**2003** Publication of *Passagère du silence, dix ans d’initiation en Chine* (Passenger of Silence: Ten Years of Initiation in China), Albin Michel, Paris; A memoir of her years of studies with Master Huang Yuan. Entered permanent collection of Musée Cernuschi, Paris.

**2005** Solo exhibition at Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland.

**2007** Publication of monograph *Between Heaven and Earth*, texts by Charles Juliet and Fabienne Verdier, photography by Dolores Marat and Naoya Hatakeyama (Albin Michel, Paris). Four large works commissioned by H. Looser Foundation: Dialogue with selected American abstract and minimalist artists from the collection (John Chamberlain, Donald Judd, Willem de Kooning, Ellsworth Kelly, and Cy Twombly). Entered permanent collection of Musée National d’Art Moderne Centre Pompidou, Paris.

**2008** Group exhibition, “Expansion Résonance,” Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.

**2009** Group exhibition, “Elles@Centre Pompidou,” Musée National d’Art Moderne Centre Pompidou, Paris. Solo exhibition, “Peinture,” Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.

**2010** Commission of two monumental works for the Palazzo Torlonia, Rome. Documentary film by Philippe Chancel: *Fabienne Verdier: Flux*, on the creation of these works. Publication of *Fabienne Verdier Palazzo Torlonia*, text by Corinna Thierolf, Chief Curator of Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (Editions Xavier Barral, Paris).

**2011** Group exhibition, “Art of Deceleration from Caspar David Friedrich to Ai Wei Wei,” Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany.

**2012** Group exhibition, “My Private Passion – Foundation Hubert Looser,” Kunstforum, Wien, Austria. Group exhibition at Waddington Custot Gallery, London. Publication of monograph by Doris von Drathen, *Fabienne Verdier–Painting Space*, Charta, Milano/New York.

In progress:

**2013** Solo exhibition “Fabienne Verdier, L’esprit de la peinture, hommage aux Primitifs Flamands” (The Spirit of Painting: A Tribute to the Flemish Renaissance) at Groeninge Museum, Bruges, curated by Daniel Abadie and Till Borchert (opening March 2013). Solo exhibition “Works on Paper” at Erasmus Museum, Bruxelles, curated by Alexandre Vanautgaerden (opening April 2013). Collaboration with architect Jean Nouvel for the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) project in Beijing. Solo exhibition at Art Plural Gallery, Singapore. Solo exhibition at Patrick Derom Gallery, Bruxelles. Solo exhibition at Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.

Solo Exhibitions  
(selected)

**1983** Palais des Beaux-arts, Toulouse, France.

**1989** Fine Arts Museum, Chongqing, China.

**1991** French Cultural Center, Beijing.

**1992** Maison de la Chine, Paris.

**1993** Hong Kong Contemporary Art Center.

**1995** Galerie Joyce Ma, Palais Royal, Paris.

**1996** Galerie Joyce Ma, Palais Royal, Paris.

**1997** Pacific Cultural Foundation, Taipei.

**2001** Chapelle des Beaux-arts, Paris.

**2003** Galerie Ariane Dandois, Paris.

**2004** Abbaye de Silvacane, Provence, France

**2005** Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland.

**2007** Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland.

**2009** Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.

**2012** Art Plural Gallery, Singapore (upcoming).

Group Exhibitions  
(selected)

**1990** “Contemporary Brushstrokes,” Beijing Fine Art Museum, China.

**2006** Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland (since exhibited at Art Basel).

**2008** “Expansion Résonnances,” Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.

**2009** “Elles@Centre Pompidou,” Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris.

**2011** “Un souffle venue d’Asie, regards croisés” (A Fresh Breeze from Asia, Crossing Gazes), Contemporary Art Center, Abbaye de Beaulieu-en Rouergue, France.

“Not for Sale,” Art Center Passage de Retz, Paris.

“Art of Deceleration from Caspar David Friedrich to Ai Wei Wei,” Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany.

**2012** “My Private Passion – Foundation Hubert Looser,” Kunstforum, Wien, Austria. Waddington Custot Gallery, London.

Private Collections  
(selected)

Collection Monique Barbier-Mueller  
Collection Stephane Custot  
Collection Ariane Dandois  
Collection Bruce Kovner  
Collection Hubert Looser  
Collection Elie de Rothschild  
Collection Uli Sigg  
Collection Olimpia Torlonia

Public Collections

Musée National d’Art Moderne  
Centre Pompidou, Paris.  
Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris  
(Commission by the Festival d’Avignon).  
Ministère de l’Équipement (Direction de l’Architecture), Paris.  
Honda Group, Tokyo.  
Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris.  
Chinese Ministry of Culture, Beijing.  
Musée Cernuschi, Paris.  
Palais de l’Assemblée Nationale, Paris.  
Foundation H. Looser, Zurich.  
Foundation François Pinault, Paris, Venice.



**Doris von Drathen** was born in Hamburg and has lived in Paris since 1990. As an independent art historian she specializes in contemporary art. She has held teaching positions at the École des Beaux-Arts and the Ecole des hautes études in Paris; the Architectural Association in London; the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam; Cornell University in Ithaca, New York; and Columbia University, New York City. Since 2007 she has taught at the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris.

Doris von Drathen is known for developing a theory of art that she terms “ethical iconology.” She presented this method in a landmark book, *Vortex of Silence: Proposition for an Art Criticism beyond Aesthetic Categories*, published by Charta in 2004, which demonstrated her approach through a series of essays on twenty-four contemporary artists, including Marina Abramovic, Christian Boltanski, Louise Bourgeois, Jochen Gerz, Shirazeh Houshiary, Mona Hatoum, Rebecca Horn, Anish Kapoor, Jannis Kounellis, Agnes Martin, Giulio Paolino, Giuseppe Penone, Pedro Cabrita Reis, Gerhard Richter, Julião Sarmento, Tony Smith, Pat Steir, and Niele Toroni. This book was followed by several monographs: *Rebecca Horn: Sculptures* (Cantz 2004); *Rebecca Horn: Drawings* (Cantz, 2005); *Pat Steir: Installations and Pat Steir: Paintings* (Charta, 2007); *Rui Chafes* (Charta, 2008); *Rebecca Horn: Cosmic Maps* (Charta, 2008); *Manuela Filiaci* (Charta, 2009); *Aigües tortes: Rebecca Horn & Jannis Kounellis* (Peleires, 2009); *Nalini Malani* (Cantz, 2010); and *Painting Space: Fabienne Verdier* (Charta, 2012).

Monographs on Kimsooja and Jannis Kounellis are forthcoming. Her most recent project is a book that will present her research on conceptions of space—what she calls the “ethical impact of gravity”—in contemporary art.



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