

Painting a « perpetuum mobile »

Georges Meurant¹

Every painting exploits our perceptual reflex functions, mine shows their mechanisms

I am painting for the individual person.¹ Worked out without emotion, empty of any intent, open to all projections, my painting offers a space for occurrences. It also shows how language is structured, and invites articulation. Painting relieves me from the noise of meaning: at work I am like a wildcat, all senses alert. Then I try to optimize the result of my purely instinctive action. I want neither to explain myself nor to explain my work in an excess of consciousness that can only harm it. I am curious to hear comments on my work. I am rarely surprised by what is said about it, though I measure the complexity of what I do and the difficulty of expressing it.

Consciously or not, the painter tries to control his perceptual reflex functions by phases of action and reflection. My work is not the implementation of a view of the mind; it expresses a lived experience. It consists of an experimentation of colour, of which I never tire. I am constantly on the look-out for the right place within contrasts. I am searching for the point of inversion between action and reaction. My painting exploits this particular moment without making it final, by including it in the game of switching by the propagation and substitution of its forms. To do this it combines all three types of contrasts or similarities helped by factors that characterize colour (hue, saturation and brightness), but also those within the materiality of colour (texture, shred) or how to put the paint (thickness, lacquers). These variables determine the associations and dissociations, junctions and disjunctions of shapes that establish the permutations of sets of figures. (Qui reminder: the figure is a shape defined by its outlines).

My art attempts to institute a permanent transmutation of its forms. The *figure induction* multiplies forms by reallocation of their outlines. Even though I am the creator of such a process, its definition belongs to Jean Guiraud, a scientific aesthetician who analyzed it for some twenty years. His study remains incomplete but is essentially correct despite the approximations of some metaphors. Our friendship and exchange reflect an existential contribution from the artist to the scientist and a cultural contribution from the researcher to the painter.²

My art would show, more than any other according to Guiraud, the reflex mechanisms through which we perceive the world. Despite the economy of its means – contiguous coloured rectangles – my painting presents an open cosmology. All of its elements contribute to its activity, yet never all at once as would be required by the classical unified field of tensions described by Guiraud according to Gestalt theory principles. The artwork implies an overtaking and operates a transcendental change of order. In the case of my artwork, the change of order occurs in its immanence. This forced Guiraud to broaden his definitions of the artwork and of the field of tension.

How the *figure induction* works

My painting identifies the colour with the shape. The entire surface is covered by monochrome quadrilaterals orthogonally arranged. I work from the colour to the resulting grid. This grid itself has no colour, nor thickness or width, nor depth. It totalizes the outlines of the contiguously adjoined shapes. The borders of the shapes are nothing other than the termination of a colour and the start of another. Chromatic tensions on the outlines give the grid a sufficient autonomy so that it can be divided into subsets according to various contrasts or similarities that are the associations of figures induced by translations and amplifications. The dissociations are caused by inequalities in the grid and/or calls to new insights.

Guiraud said from 1986 that all the variables which contribute to shapes and colours are independent. My painting supports his theory by showing that the outline is one of the four independent variables whose shape is formed. The outline has a semantic function of pattern recognition. It can also have an energetic function. By disconnecting the outline of the particular form, my painting splits the concept of outline. To the limit that belongs to the form, I oppose a "free" outline that captures and separates any subset of shapes. Mobile and unpredictable, this outline is then independent from the form, to which it does not belong. The gap between these two aspects of the outline mark the difference between ordinary perception where space and time are cut off from each other, and that which characterizes an accomplished artwork, where space and time are not separable. Such is the heart of my contribution to painting, according to Guiraud.³

I have watched from the very beginning of my experiment that the grid by which the outlines can move and reallocate never suggests the intertwining of vertical and horizontal successions of forms: a pattern that would implement a final status of prior or background. I must break the suggestion of crossings within a necessarily orthogonal structure to implement the functions that put into action the most intractable reflexes, over which the intellect or the brain have no control at all. All the figures must aggregate and fall apart, go back and forth, emerge

¹ This text was written by Georges Meurant in 2012 for the „Georges Meurant Page“ of the Society for Gestalt Theory (GTA). English redaction: Lillah Grace Canevaro. © Georges Meurant 2012.

and sink. All must ideally fall from a configuration to another in perpetual change. The grid that structures my painting is uneven but rhythmic, algorithmic.^{Lefévre 2006 160-161} Local algorithms articulate surfaces according to a set of regularities (rhythmic gaps) and irregularities (abolition of subdivisions or additions in the grid). Therefore the gaze perpetually jumps from one algorithm to another.

Each shape can be attached or detached from neighbouring forms. Each shape or group of shapes can be form or background, coming above or below. Emergences and disappearances are in no way the repetitive binary beat caused by the kinetic commutation. Changes feed on an unstable, shifting, erratic space. It is a ternary space, one of whose dimensions is always in excess or deficient with respect to the coupling of the two others. That is the reason why the strongest aggregates will disappear in favour of new associations to which the gaze gives for a moment as strong a pregnancy until their extinction in favour of other combinations ... I disrupted the gestaltisation process: I slowed it down, amplified and deployed it until it became permanent. I destroy the succession, I destroy the order, so that the apparitions are random, undecidable. My combinatory art, made of appearances and disappearances, is infinite in that it continues as long as the attention to it. The induced field of tensions seems endless because it is not unitary but stochastic or discontinuous.⁴ Guiraud tries to show how I manage to slow down perceptual reflexes studied by Gestalt theory - to make permanent or to extend a perceptual process in a space-time. It is the originality of my painting, or what I am introducing in painting. It is very difficult to admit to anyone that something could be new, particularly in an area of activity that is observed according to disciplines as diverse as perceptual psychology, mathematics, aesthetics and art history.

Guiraud's aesthetics

The primitive arts world, to which I belong,⁵ ordinarily uses the terms « power », « energy » and « force » to distinguish empirically the artwork from the mere artefact. Guiraud's theory did the same. From the first paragraph of his first article on space in the field of aesthetics, Guiraud shows an evolution in our art from the representation of space to the induction of a space, in the dual context of their own evolution and the discovery of primitive arts or the recognition of artworks among these artefacts: *The problem of space will have been for a long time for the West than the representation of space. And the confusion continues for most of the theoreticians. However, civilizations that even have no word for the three-dimensional environment where the objects are disposed in order, show an amazing feeling of space in a sense that the West is being rediscovering from them, moreover to which his own evolution was driving.*^{Guiraud 1968} It was as if it had been written for me!

Le problème de l'espace n'aura été longtemps pour l'Occident que celui de la représentation de l'espace. Et la confusion perdure chez plus d'un théoricien. Or, des civilisations qui parfois même ne disposent d'aucun mot pour désigner le milieu à trois dimensions où s'ordonnent les objets font preuve d'un sens étonnant de l'espace selon une acception que l'Occident, à leur contact, est en voie de redécouvrir, vers laquelle, du reste, le conduisait sa propre évolution.

Guiraud's aesthetics are based on the analysis of the artwork. He uses diagrams, constraining models, artworks either constraining (like mine) or not, artists' writings and interviews. The experimental study is possible in very rare cases. Mathematical analysis then intersects the data of perception. The aesthetic analysis has a function of verification. Guiraud is not interested in theorizing beauty or criticizing, but in studying *the phenomenon of triggering or activation, of induction or generation allowing the artwork to escape the inertia by converting entropic or dissipative time (one's lifetime) into a "reversible", infinite or indefinite time.* His analysis distinguishes the interactions and integrations of the elements that make up the artwork, *which induce the energy or the spatio-temporal field that defines and sheds light on the meaning of art. The art does not belong to material order but to phenomenal order. It is carried out in the process and not in performance, in what happens and not in what is done, in the potential and not in the present.*^{Guiraud notes 2003} So all arts are progressing from an inscription to an induction, from concrete structures to phenomenal structures. Art consists of dematerializing and abstracting, not for conceptualizing purposes but to decouple the factors or variables of which it is composed (of a colour or of a surface, for example). These variables can operate freely because they are independent each from the others.

Guiraud observes how the artwork proceeds by oppositions, paradoxes or contrasts. *The logic of the sensoriality [would be] the dual mechanism, the dual automatism (action / reaction, stimulus / response) exerted in us but without us, without our consent, those of the interaction and integration.* According to Guiraud,^{Guiraud 2006} appreciating any artwork is immediate, instinctive, unconscious and physiological, not intellectual or cultural.⁶ The aesthetics just try to see the materialities and to show the interactions and the integrations that induce the action of the artwork (amplification, condensation, tension or energy). The scale of aesthetic values does not respond to any cultural hierarchy. At all times, in every culture, the artefact remains inert while the artwork induces more or less important activity. In the case of a masterpiece everyone perceives such an energy. The aesthetics of the forces or energy can therefore lay claim to universality. *Whether, in the West, of an anticipation or a project, or perpetuation and evocation by the Primitive, the problem is to expand the spatio-temporal limits, to amplify the sound box. There appears to be the same necessity, the same urgent desire to generate the trance or to form the field of tension.*^{Guiraud in Meurant 2007}

Our classical aesthetic considered the artwork in two registers: content or meaning, and the means or form. Guiraud adds a third: the register of Forces or of the energy by which the artwork activates our sensoriality by an overall seizure of our physical integrity that affects the feeling we have of ourselves. The induced tension is related to the antagonisms, the contradictions or the paradoxes that the artist does not resolve but that he amplifies and radicalizes.

The action of the work is thus part of a psychobiological stimulation. The impact or the activation (biological) and the feeling or emotion (psychological) are the two terms of the tension. According to Henri Van Lier, an anthropologist who expresses the activation of the artwork by the terms « aesthetic culmination » ... *This phenomenon of perceptual ubiquity experienced by artists and art lovers ... is a totalizing and immediatrive experience (Schelling), the appearance of the sensitive connection to the Everything (Hegel), a depth cut into the face of the world (Weischedel), the happy first moment before the things (Alain), a reactivation of the topological space (Francastel), the outcrop of an origin (Heidegger), a thematic return to the original conditions of perception (Merleau-Ponty).*^{Van Lier 1968-1972}

Guiraud specifies the register of the « means » as that of the « forms » (not of the form). He relies on Cezanne to demonstrate the need of a register of the factors, of the integrations and of the forces. The register of the forms is the only one materialized or done by the painter. It is the only one to be concrete. The other two are induced.^{Guiraud 2006} My painting is compelled to find that the register of the forms can also be induced. Shapes automatically induce shapes. According to Guiraud, the register of the signification of an abstract painting is necessarily empty. If mine does not intend to express, it is often seen as supporting various projections in that it works in the resurgence of forgotten emotions. Performing the work of art is also in itself a key message, quite different from that with which the mere artefact can be invested by cultural communication. *There seems to be no aesthetic culmination without aesthetic information.*^{Van Lier 1968-1972} By accomplishing the three inductions of meaning, of forces and of forms, my painting doubles integrally for the very first time (in the West at least) what is posed by what is induced.

Conclusions

Because our classical aesthetic has not been able to understand the very mutations of the Western artistic creation or our meeting of the primitive arts in the twentieth century, the discourse on contemporary art is mainly controlled by semiologists or sociologists. Contemporary art is almost exclusively devoted to communication. It is the art of a purely consumerist society. No wonder that the painting of the interiority that I am doing, which is silent, has been studied by an aesthetic freed from the idea – ubiquitous nowadays – that signification would be the very purpose of art. The aesthetic of Jean Guiraud observes through the major works of all cultures and all times the efficiency of the forces concept in which are merged time and space. In the dichotomy between space and time, how could we be affected by artwork whose impact precisely causes the commutation of space in time and of time in space? The accomplishment of this phenomenon is now the standard of an artwork.

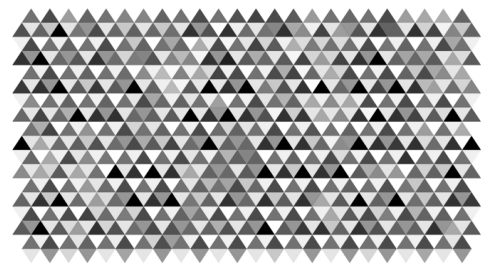
Many artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries found in the science of perception some support for their lonely efforts. But the scientific approach to art is focused on visual brain activity. If it comes to a point where we need to formulate theories about aesthetics, it is absolutely necessary to distinguish the artwork from the mere artefact. The artefact fulfils a cultural function. The artwork works on our cenesthesia – our body responds. Our brain translates this overall sensation that we have of ourselves into emotional terms, whether positive or negative. Within or beyond its instrumentalization by the signification, the art is a game in which we can discover and perhaps control our core functions. There are games where we necessarily fail, others where we fail very often but sometimes we succeed. In the artwork the action to which our body responds by automatism persists indefinitely. Our body operates its regulations, maybe even its regeneration, through such mechanisms. *Art cannot be anything other than medicine, perhaps we will end up with knowledge.*^{Le Clezio 1971} Burdened with a speech or under the mask of a representation or free from any restraint, support or railing, the artwork acts in this sense.

As an expression of our animal condition of always becoming, different from any other in its ability to achieve a very new reality, art was a radical innovation in the survivability of Man. The activity of the artwork was perceived as in strong contrast with the inertia of the dead body. We understand that it contributed to the emergence of a symbolic or magical thinking. However, the magical-religious sentiment requires no imaging support. Meaningful combinations of natural fragments (minerals, vegetables, animals) are sufficient in some primitive societies which produce artworks.^{Meurant 2007} But the feeling of sacredness is often attached to the artwork itself, whose activity reveals us to ourselves in our integrity. The primary function of the artwork is ultimately to expose this inexhaustible phenomenon beyond the constant change of cultural conditions.

Notes

¹ I paint with oil on wood. Sizes are from 20cm to 240cm square. All works can be presented in four directions (diamond-shape excluded). I encourage anybody who has integrated my work into his living space to change the orientation of the painting from time to time. The smaller sizes can be taken in hand. The greatest sizes offer the feeling of immersion in the colour that I feel myself at work. Since 2010 my art has been integrated into architectural spaces in monumental compositions. People will be immersed in colour. In 2014 the East and West frontages of a tower will be adorned by a painting of mine. It will stand 72m by 18m on an island in the China Sea, in front of the city of Zhoushan, at the entrance of the Lujiazui Cultural Creativity Garden. I created the interior design of the New Headquarters of the Council of the European Union which will be inaugurated in Brussels the same year. My work consists of three large mural compositions in the entrance hall, 7550m² of ceilings and an equivalent area of carpets for conference rooms, 2.500m² of compositions photographically reproduced on glass for the hoppers of elevators, several hundred doors.

- ² Jean Guiraud (Castres 1929 - Brussels 2009) has examined the tensions and perceptual interactions (colour, light and space) in the laboratory of experimental aesthetics from the University of Louvain, Belgium (1969-1994). Guiraud discovered my painting in 1988, we met in 1990. He was intrigued by a spatial tension which he did not know yet. He undertook an analysis. Seven texts were published (1990-2009).
- ³ At least one model of perceptual psychology presents a figure induction. Akiyoshi Kitaoka from Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, answering Dr. Gerhard Stemmerger, has been trying to "ascertain the factors regulating the beauty of the Meurant paintings": « I think that what Guiraud focused on in the art of Georges Meurant has something to do with a well-known Gestalt psychological phenomenon shown below. » One monochrome model and another polychrome both consist of a grid of equilateral or isosceles triangles. We observe not only triangles of various sizes, but also triangles (and lozenges) in **progressive growth in both vertical axes** (all black or dark triangles ascending and all white or light descending – not both at the same time) as well as **in lateral slips**. We can remove the colour information of the model without losing a figure induction also observed in the monochrome model: the phenomenon is due only to the dark / light contrast. It is a field of tension based on the reallocation of segments of the outlines, similar to those induced in my paintings within a vertical/horizontal orthogonal grid. Here the oblique grid consisting entirely of triangles is grafted onto a partially visible orthogonal grid. The induced and the inscribed triangles are isosceles or equilateral ones ordered by their bases and tops. An orthogonal structure produced by the bases of the triangles – a very visible axis along which performs the lateral growth – and by the alignments of their tops in a discrete vertical axis – by which all growth and downgrades are performed, is added at the grid produced by the oblique sides. The growth and permutations observed are very fast. The model is very efficient from this point of view. If it were a work of art, no one would look at it for a long time, or return to it, because visual information is immediately understood and leaves no space for personal projection. My painting tries to slow similar perceptual reflexes. It needs the widest possible field of tensions because I try the perception as long, as changing, as unpredictable as possible. The orthogonality allows one to exploit contrasts and assimilation of **brightness, saturation and colour**. Such complex information is useless in Kitaoka's coloured model, because the salience of oblique structure will always be much stronger than all other dynamic elements. That is why I gave up the oblique very early in my experimentation.



- ⁴ In a letter to Dr. Gerhard Stemmerger, Prof. Alberto Argenton disputes the contention by Guiraud of the inexhaustibility of permutations in my painting. We could count them in the case of compositions reduced to a few areas but the more the number of rectangles increases, the less the counting will be possible. Even more than their abundance, the unpredictability of the emergences seems to me to justify Guiraud's point of view.
- ⁵ I have exhibited paintings, prints and drawings from the age of eighteen (1966). I painted my first combinatorial binding in 1986. Meanwhile I was initiated to the ontology by the philosopher Georges Miedzianagora with whom I imaged six publications. My painting carries the trace of these debates. I have also been interested in the area of Eastern philosophies. No wonder that Guiraud glimpsed the Tao in the Figure-Field (1994). But it is the contrast between the weakness of my figurative art and the potent activity of geometric designs from Equatorial Africa, which I discovered in 1977, which allowed me at forty to fully adhere to myself and to detach myself from a necessarily nostalgic representation. My studies of such drawings or paintings have been widely distributed.
- ⁶ The « aesthesis » is a feeling ... it implies that what has been experienced is of energy order, and that perception does not concern the form already modalized or already "built", but the force-factors operating freely. Only those factors or these degrees of strength can totalize or aggregate when they are as different in nature as those which form shapes and colours for example. If it combines classes of factors, "plans" or "registers" both multiple and heterogeneous, art forces us to react as a whole, beyond the specialized senses, to make active our cenesthesia (this is already what unifies us), not to invest analytically and sequentially in different directions, but to receive all and integrate everything in terms of salience or impact or forces. Jean Guiraud, notes for *L'œuvre active*, 2003.

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