



Bonnefoi and Cardoso on *The Other Side and In Between*



Ana Cardoso *Ex-Clamant*, 2013. Acrylic on linen, wool, and cotton 120 x 75 in. Image courtesy of Longhouse Projects.

Coinciding with their current two-person exhibition at Longhouse Projects, NYC, *The Other Side and In Between*, Christian Bonnefoi and Ana Cardoso had a conversation on painting.

Christian Bonnefoi: The title proposed by the exhibition, *The Other Side and In Between*, names a divergence and modification of the rules of painting to the extent that the work's realization is accomplished by and through the pictorial medium, having as its sole common denominator what we call the "tableau".

The Other Side is not a metaphysical or mysterious beyond but the obverse of painting in the material sense of the term, the back of the support; this reversal is not done in ignorance of its "face" (the surface and frontality):

- 1) The reversal preserves its specificity because, in the last account, it finishes with the arrival of the surface.
- 2) It adds another dimension or depth as its own proper space or, more precisely, as its "place."
- 3) Its location is not only a gap, i.e. a fragment of space, but also a spacing to the extent that it is a product of a movement (reversal), that is to say, of a duration.

Therefore, the production of a place is the necessary condition for painting to remove itself from the conditions of space and to settle in those of temporality.

In Between represents the containment of this space that doesn't have, strictly speaking, figures but instead their possibility, both as: storage (quantitative) and in motion (qualitative). It's a bit like memory: where stored layers of memories are reactivated. Painting has its own mode of activation or reactivation, which is technique associated with experiences.

In general, for your work and for mine, it is about enlarging the pictorial field by giving it means that are apparently external. These means are outside of its field (place). That is to say: "in space". This requires a further step that consists, after the spatial detour, of integrating this external input into the specific place that I call "tableau". I call this operation of 'condensation' the conversion of spatiality into temporality.

For my part, and for a long time, I have opposed the idea of the end of painting. The many dimensions of the "tableau" exceed the conception of painting imagined as simple material deposition on a surface.

That is why I use the phrase 'what makes the tableau' [*ce qui fait tableau*] rather than the single word "tableau", giving painting a greater extent than in its traditional sense.

I find in your work comparable positions and I would like to ask you what is the path that led you to use painting as you do – as means [*moyen*] more than form?

Ana Cardoso: I also think, starting with the idea of *In Between*, it implies the possibility of space (the exhibition space in this case) as temporary container, context, or score where the idea of a figure becomes the active counterpoint to painting. The "figure" is anyone; the body roams the space between the objects and triggers their potential connections. I look at painting this way: in a timeline, an action with a history and a lineage. For me each painting is an element in an infinite proposition ($1+1+1 \dots \mu=1$), making the process of painting continuous. Therefore, the installation is an open source and the paintings, objects in between, exist for the meandering "figure." This presentation structure allows me to work from alternating positions.

Moyen in French could be translated into medium, but painting now, this broad field, is post-medium. As you have also indicated, it is a way of working through which gestures emerge and submerge.

Painting and abstraction are so inclusive and formative that they exist in contemporary practices which seek to avert them; they are a language based on assumption, now. My project is self-reflexive and heterogenic, with some circuits and knots between these categories.

I like the concept you use, 'condensation,' to explain the event of painting. I think of it as 'compression.' Your work divides the surface back and forth between its temporal and physical interstices – up to a point. In my process, a multitude remains outside that surface and is literally linked as I compress materials of different shapes, planes, or origins. I enjoy the complexity resulting from the unexpected collage of objects and signifiers. I think of this as an effect or expansion on the discoveries of Cubism.

For instance, I use the signifier of the chain-link fence to interlock the corner paintings to the concrete slabs filled with studio debris and then back to the modular panel paintings. The traced silhouette figure that appears in the fence painting is my template for the body, which I think of as an enabler (it could be myself, the painter). The fence becomes the vernacular of this installation, the stitch between each work.

Painting happens between the surface and the body. That space contains an activity. I'm interested in the totality of painting, the whole suite of historical and unconscious connections that drive you through the potentiality of the visible. I link material surplus to signifiers that are anchored in the history of painting itself. Painting is inclusive and generative, and as a woman painter, I'm interested in looking for anchor points in a predominantly male-centered, modern history. So, painting's structure allows me to work from within my own unstable and displaced position, where syntax or style can be subjectively privileged over semantics, so to speak.

Another space that I find generative in this exhibition is the gap that lies between our two bodies of work and our different positions. Historically, you, Christian, have a specific place within the history of abstraction and material painting. Also, you formulate fluently on your process. For you, painting is a practice where technique holds meaning, not as medium specific but as a specific becoming. I know that you have very precise thoughts on the event of painting, its process, and its emergence.



Christian Bonnefoi, Installation view, *The Other Side and In Between*, 2013. Image courtesy of Longhouse Projects.

Christian Bonnefoi: For my approach to technique I use Ezra Pound's definition: "the technique is a way of fixing impression on the thing." In other words, it is the conveyance of a sensation onto an object; it is, itself, the movement of sensitive material onto the material support and its inscription. As displacement, it embodies the process in its duration and gives it the time to extend. In this duration, the process, in turn, gives the technique – by way of the unpredictable events that it generates – the resulting amount of information that updates the project. Technique must then

recompose itself to continue the development, which means that, if at first it is a condition for the production of form, it is also what the form transforms, at least giving it new directions.

The consequences are that painting acts in *two* directions. One is the exhibition of forms produced by technique and process: the work (so to speak), the visible, the subjective. The other strengthens the methods of exhibition: the invisible part, the objective. In my work, I often use objects or structures which I call “machines.” These are the manifestation of that kind of objectivity that has no place in the work itself but that I show on the side: transitional objects, like devices. This goes into the history of ‘the machines of seeing’—the first model being without a doubt: “Brunelleschi’s experiment.”

I give the technique an exhibition space of its own.

It is the spacing that is never reduced (never disappears) in one or the other of its terms; thus, Cubist collage, which is without a doubt the most decisive ‘the machine of seeing’ of the twentieth century, is, on one side, the proper condition to the Cubist form, and on the other, it is a mode of transformation of reality in general and is seen across all the successive styles (Suprematism , Constructivism , ...) up to Matisse’s cutouts.

I’ve introduced elsewhere (see the interview with J. Clay and Y. A. Bois in *Macula*) the difference between the mode of production (the technique) and the mode of exhibition (the form) in a very compartmentalized way, with the terms remaining strictly on their own. This was a critique of ‘process art’ where it seemed to me that these two dimensions merged during production to the point of reaching a tautological quality of the final image that is not unrelated to the ready-made. Observing Ryman’s paintings helped me understand that, to even take the counterpoint by inserting in the process a certain heterogeneity, by various means: introducing tension, a rhythm, and a polysemy that is the reality of technique in the sense that I understand it.*

The result was, as opposed to installation, a re-elaboration of the concept of the “tableau” as a place that presents a form sufficient for itself, cut from space while maintaining in its material thickness the conditions of its own transformation.

Now, I’m more interested in what I called the “after-tableau;” it is the movement of the process and its course, which constitutes the “tableau” as the most important of its steps, but which does not stop there and is all that pours into the visible. It has to do with the ‘mark’ and the ‘word’ Benjamin examines in his article *On Painting, or: Sign and Mark*. This is the sense of my wall compositions of collages.

What is your point of view in relation to this distinction, collaboration, and conflict between the process and the completed form?

Ana Cardoso: I used to imagine the relation of craft to painting as one that privileged labor over all, and I thought that was empowering. But, the process, as I see it, is a suite of experiments, mistakes, and events enabled by the drive to find connections. *Techne*, for me, is the very inclusive process of painting that encompasses the transitional installation phase—a necessary cut in the activity. My paintings are always suspended and unformed—I work around the “figure.” I incorporate transversal studio objects such as painting leftovers into the process itself; I like the process to be autophagic.

So, form, and it does happen in the process, is another sort of cut or imposition in the ongoing investigation. It is the vertical axis versus the horizontal. When the paintings occur, at some point they leave the horizontal plane of production to become visible, “vertical,” placed on the wall. I sometimes like to stack them, to ‘pause’ them. This is again a moment of compression or maybe what you call condensation.

Still about form, when I recently decided to work in the modular mode, I was conscious of the project’s utopian premises and interested in its web of connections, both symptomatic and indexed. I wanted to understand repetitive forms and thought of tiled surfaces, globalization, distribution, and the neo-concretist work of Lygia Pape. The modular paintings are viral, rhizomatous, harmonized, and efficient, and they shatter formality through their pattern tendencies and incompleteness as well as their excessive and infinite compositions.

The project’s rule is: each square module is made of two sewn pieces of found fabric centered on the stretcher. On top of this structure, two triangles are painted along the seam, drawn from the sub-division of the square canvas into four triangles. Each module can rotate and assume any spatial position to match the adjacent module, or not. Soon after, I added the triangular subdivision as a shaped triangular canvas and enhanced the tensions of figure/ground. These are the ‘same’ triangles stacked in the corner of the exhibition at Longhouse. The lozenges are derived from the negative space between four triangles.

I think of Blinky Palermo and Ellsworth Kelly. Palermo’s formalism was mismatching, disarming, and followed an anti-monumental logic, one that was performative and portable. I read, in a recent exhibition of the complete Chatham Series by Ellsworth Kelly at MoMA, that Kelly worked with the principle of $1+1=1$, which I mentioned earlier. It was the moment when he started joining two panels to make one painting.

As a way to summarize our conversation, I was hoping you could end with telling me a bit more about your book, *The Treatise on Painting*. How do you approach this long history up to the present? Can you reveal some of it?

Christian Bonnefoi: No problem. In fact, it deals with some of the things we have been discussing.

I begin by focusing on a new definition of the “tableau,” considered as a place independent of space. “The place is something that the soul produces to gather images” (Albert Le Grand). It will be a question of memory: the ability of the “tableau” to store images of facts and events as well as methods and techniques which allow the stock to unfold again and re-emerge on the surface.

I devote a section to technique and how, as a process, it changes over time. Through examples of specific works, I discuss how technique can change nature, become form, and return to its primary function. I also build on what I call “functions” and how artists have developed modes of intervention to reach a greater objectivity.

Finally, I address something I announced in a 1976 interview in *Macula* that was left suspended, namely the “after-tableau.” This is most critical to the book. I see this as the consideration of affect itself, what reaches us, the spectators, beyond the material and the color. As for here “place, there is not” (St. Augustine). Much attention will be paid to the writings of Jean-Louis Schefer and his perspective of the continuous thread that runs from image to word.

The exhibition will continue to be on view until February 28th, 2014.