

## YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE

### THE SELECTIVE EYE

In 1970 Marcia Hafif recorded vibrations as she heard them on a Pacific Ocean beach, and presented this acoustic sample in the antiseptic space of a gallery at an exhibition: E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) at the University of Southern California. Extracting the sound from its context – the real images (of the landscape) to which it belongs – and presenting (exhibiting) its intrinsic qualities, out of place. This sound work would not be repeated, but its principle seems to have guided Marcia Hafif's pictorial development since 1972. To isolate, then to point out, color which is usually drowned by the flow of images and signs. To draw the attention of the viewer to one color, one detail.

### AT THIS POINT

1970. In Europe (where she lived from 1961 to 1969) as in the United States the history of painting nears its end. The Zero Group gives up the brush, Support(s) Surface(s) the stretcher, Manzoni the paint, B.M.P.T. the signature, and Frank Stella tries to keep the paint as good as it was in the can. (1),

Returning to the United States Marcia Hafif ceases painting for the moment to explore different mediums, particularly photography and film. Even so, certain work still comes close to painting. White sheets are used as supports for a grid made of ecru embroidery thread: a grid made of the same thread and applied directly to the wall repeats the structure of the floor tiles; repetitive forms are painted with an air brush on a grid drawn in pencil on hemmed but unstretched canvases – canvases sometimes fastened (on a slant) between the floor and the wall by means of cords, sometimes fixed horizontally (framed) at the center of wooden structures of which only the lack of a hard top surface prevented them from recalling a table or a bed. Let us say some undertakings close to those of certain artists of the French group Support(s) Surface(s) such as Claude Viallat or Noel Dolla. Painting is living its last hours of deconstruction. The criteria of originality, of difference or of progress in relation to preceding steps of modernism become void. Originality and rupture are succeeded by series and sameness (the monochrome, the grid . . .). An exit from history that leads to the repetition of the same.

Instead of re-producing a painting of disappearance (the virgin canvas or the black canvas) or a painting of indifference Marcia Hafif engages herself in a meticulous inventory of certain types of paints and supports used throughout the history of painting. The slow elaboration of what she calls the "footnotes" of painting. An inventory of fifteen major series: Pencil on Paper, Acrylic Paintings, An Extended Gray Scale, Oil Studies/Mass Tone, Watercolor, Egg Tempera on Wood, Ink Drawings, Wall Paintings, Neutral Mix Paintings, Broken Color Paintings, Black Paintings, Transparent Paintings, Roman Paintings, French Paintings, and Enamel on Wood. To pass in review some aspects of the history of painting and its modernity before withdrawing. An exhaustive inventory within the limits that define the series, marked by a certain nostalgia for color and its spiritual dimension, for the skin of the body and its painting.

To find a way beyond Modernism. To take up painting again there where it began – at the moment when the brush deposits color on the support. To choose a sheet of paper and a pencil. To cover the sheet in the direction dictated by the hand (that which writes). A succession of short regular marks proceeding from left to right. To stay with the first steps. To concentrate on the tools and materials that are basic to traditional painting and begin again. To remain outside of all formal elaboration, all imagery. To paint at the edge of possibilities which have already been explored and exhausted. As early as 1972 Marcia Hafif opts for monochrome. A monochrome without discrimination bringing together all the colors. It was never a question of summing up, of absorbing all colors in one single color (one single enterprise). Her painting would not be totally gray, white or black. She would not be the “last.” In that Marcia Hafif seems more interested in the single color than in modernist painting. To try to set out a new space for painting while using the formal characteristics of the medium. Thus in the first series of Oil Studies in 1973, she takes the traditional formats used for landscape and portrait (respectively horizontal and vertical canvases) and goes through the colors to which they correspond (greens and blues for landscape, warm and flesh colors for portrait). To fully show the qualities of the medium she uses. One color to a support (surface) applied in a regular manner from top to bottom. But the color which is presented to us is not that which was in the can, it is not valid except on and for the support. That is what Marcia Hafif seems to signify when she lets the quality of the support appear through the layer of color. The support is integrated in a composition “in depth.” To test the quality of relationships between the canvas (the paper or the wood) and the paint. But differently from Robert Ryman who brings the support to the same level of composition as the paint, Marcia Hafif maintains its function as surface presenting color.

#### THE COLORS ALONE

To draw the attention of the viewer to the colors alone. To grind the pigments with oil and to apply the paint in a regular manner to the surface. To let the pigment act. No longer turning away from its intrinsic qualities to become merely the medium of color: Table of Pigments (1992). To let a color like Prussian Blue express itself, reveal its multiple nuances – its violet shades, green and copper . . . The nature of the pigments and their drying times determine the image. The Table is a series derived from the Oil Studies of the early seventies. At that time the direction was resolutely analytic: “It was to understand how oil paint is made. I bought pigments, linseed oil and tools for grinding pigments into oil. Each color I could find was ground separately into oil and painted on a separate canvas. Commercial paint in tubes is adjusted with additives to make it behave properly, but I let each pigment go its own way. Some were flat, others grainy, some dried fast, and the surfaces varied with these differences.’ (2)

Is this not a question of the last avatar of the Modernist program (program of an expected death)? The materials used certainly remain traditional, but the attention brought to the properties of the pigment is extreme, literal. The paintings are often given the name of the pigment used. Yves Klein injected a meaning (a poetic) into the pure pigment (Monochrome IKB). Marcia Hafif does not make the pigment her own but paints where the pigment goes. She does not build a lexicon, but uses one which already

exists. She does not wish like Jef Verheyen “to discover the exact value of a color.”(3) To apply the pigment such as it is. Not to search for a color, not for composition. To work with (within) the pigments. But this literalness that can be seen as an excess of formalist zeal should not be misunderstood. It is a matter or nothing but a basic vocabulary, not an end.

#### NO LONGER ALONE

Each painting is inscribed in a series of the Inventory. Heir of Minimal Art, Marcia Hafif intervenes in the space of a series with the most common materials. With the repetition involved from one object to the next she runs through the possibilities of the color/support. But her series no longer have the once necessary relation to a socio-economic context. Retreat is de rigueur. It is no longer a question of substituting gratuity for the utility of industrial production. In addition to the impossibility of the Inventory inscribing itself in a modernist logic, the times seem less propitious for production than for the management of stock. The series of the Inventory come in part from a logic of reproduction. But our post-modern art no longer produces new painted images, it is now a question of managing surplus (worn out) signs to “get by.” To get by with the colors produced and used, to search in the space of the Inventory for their own anchorage.

One painting will be but one value (in the linguistic sense), it will be visible only in relation (the difference) to other values of the Inventory. The most significant example is without doubt the Extended Gray Scale (1972-1973) that Marcia Hafif presents in these terms: “Each gray would be painted on a separate small canvas. Each painting would be of the same size and manufacture, differences being only in the shade of gray and in unavoidable variations in the paint and its application. Each shade would be barely distinguishable from the next. The number of paintings would be unknown until all the possibilities were exhausted. The project would end when distinguishing another intermediate shade became impossible.”(4) The entire scale is composed of one hundred five canvases. Each series has its own economy – and economy of values (in this case of tones.) This principle which consists in seeing a single canvas in the logic of its series is true for all the series of the Inventory. However, a painting can also be perceived alone. It is then another way of seeing that comes into play, a view which re-contextualizes what it sees through everything it knows about painting, about color. The work alone, isolated (abstracted) from any space (from all reality, all knowledge preceding the experience of the painting) does not exist. Thus, a painting (a color) is nothing but the sum of the distance which distinguishes it from other close colors.

In the same way, a painting isolated and abstracted from all real space does not exist. It was this that Marcia Hafif was aware of when she tried to get rid of the composition created between paintings exhibited in the gallery space. Here the affiliation with Ellsworth Kelly is distinct. He made clear that the “joined panels constituted a form, and the ground was thus transferred from the surface of the canvas to the wall. That created a painting in which the interest lay not only in itself but in its rapport with its surroundings.” (5) The relation between the paintings was inevitable. From 1974, with the Mass Tone Paintings or later with the Neutral Mix Paintings, Marcia Hafif works on

the problems posed in the hanging of disparate paintings in groups necessitated by their being collected in museums. In 1975, in an exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery in New York, she tried to suppress the effects of composition through the presentation of two mural paintings: Yellow Ochre (casein on wall surface, 305 x 1080 cm), Grayed Cobalt Blue (oil on canvas, 3 parts each 196 x 484 cm). The first used the wall as a support in covering it totally. The wall thus lost its quality as ground. The second – composed of three panels – touched the two closest walls. The composition was thus definitively transferred from the wall to the architecture. This work did not exclude, however, attention paid to pigments as each of the paintings (or groups of paintings) exhibited showed different materials and techniques: a monochrome constituted of square wooden panels, Vermilion (encaustic on wood panels, 305 x 305 cm); four variations of yellow on four vertical surfaces: Cadmium Yellow Deep, Strontium Yellow Chromate, Hansa Yellow, Indian Yellow) egg tempera on wood, 106.5 x 69 cm) to which corresponded a vertical panel going from floor to ceiling: Terre Verte Glaze on Naples Yellow (oil on canvas, 293 x 196 cm). A few months later in the Galerie Sonnabend in Paris, the integration of architectural qualities in the composition is more radical. The presence of stairs hiding the lower part of the left wall leads Marcia Hafif to use the height of those stairs in determining the base of the areas that will cover two walls of the room. The unpainted part of the wall is negative space. The effect of symmetry that resulted allowed the accent to be put not only on the differences of color and material (Red Ochre, casein on wall, Strontium Yellow Chromate, oil on stretched canvas), but equally on the support as value (sign) in the totality of the composition. Red Ochre painted directly on the wall drew attention to the fact that the painting that echoed it was on a stretcher. This kind of registry in the architecture and the interactions between the paintings comes close to the direction of Robert Ryman or Gunter Umberg even though they have renounced color (colors). In play, an esthetic of articulation, of linking the paintings with the space.

#### TAKING A SAMPLE AND PRESENTING

That esthetic of articulation seems to be redoubled by that which could be called an esthetic of presentation. To take samples of significant colors (signs) from the cultural or geographic space in which the artist works, the time of an exhibition, and to displace them, to show them outside of their original context – without their original support. To draw the attention of the viewer to certain colors, certain details that he/she no longer has the habit of seeing. 1991. The Parisian sky, that gray veil filtering the light, and the roofs which it echoes deciding the color of enamels shown at Gilbert Brownstone et Cie.: Bleu Parisien. Satin enamel applied to a surface of plywood with the care one uses to paint a table or shutters. Not deviating the paint from its industrial, utilitarian properties. A year earlier Marcia Hafif being struck by the large number of red cars in the region of Dusseldorf then decides to use that color (its variations) in an exhibition at Galerie Conrads in Neuss. To learn to see certain qualities of red (drowned in a massive production of utilitarian vehicles) separated from their car bodies. Then six red enamels, applied – presented – on plywood plaques and boxes of different sizes, contrasting with several grays and beiges. Spaced away from the wall, the enamel is an object extracted from a reality outside of painting (art) now displaced and exhibited

where it is newly possible to see it. The logic of taking a sample and presenting the Enamels on Wood differs very little from that of recording the sounds of the Pacific Ocean for the University of Southern California, even if it is not a question here of taking a sample from a natural space but rather from a cultural, industrial one. This logic recalls the light boxes of Jeff Wall where the banal is re-presented for us to see. Other works, farther from the question of representation permit perhaps a re-reading of this series of Marcia Hafif. Her presentation of enamels is not without affinities with that of Hoover by Jeff Koons. The multiple, the surplus of images and objects produced (the stock to administer), cannot but drown the eye. The objects, the images and their colors can no longer stir up desire. It is in the “selective eye” and its isolation of an image that resides the logic of presentation. An ironic presentation oscillating between formalist rigor and an incipient referent. A way to reinject meaning in to the colors without really believing in it. A poesy of locale and of production that comes near that of the supermarket when in 1991, without available satisfactory supports Marcia Hafif applies enamel to its usual support – the shutter. Here it is no longer a question of presenting the color alone, but the object alone – more visible in a gallery than hung on the wall of a house in the south of France or installed on a shelf in a supermarket.

#### WITHOUT FORGETTING THE ARTIST

But this sort of ironic inscription in a public space does not exclude the affirmation of a more intimate space, especially in the French Paintings and the Roman Paintings. In these two series painted entirely with rose-colored paint obtained through the mixing of white, yellow, red and blue – Marcia Hafif affirms the presence of the body. A presence signified at a referential level (the color is used here as a reminder of that which was used in traditional painting to represent skin) and a formal one (a slanted application of separate, calm, regular brush strokes). The touch is visible because the painting is made by hand – its erasure would correspond to an erasure of Painting. The touch becomes a sign by the same authority as does the canvas, the color or the format. There is here a relationship of necessity. What are the elements which determine the number of layers to apply? When is the painting finished? Perhaps when all form internal to the painted square – all motif (pattern) – which could distract attention from the color has disappeared from the painting. It is at the moment when the color prevails that the painting is finished. However, the color cannot remain “as it was in the can.” Between the can and the support there is the discreet presence of a calm hand, controlled, responding to the qualities of the paint, as well as to inspiration. “I want the visual experience of the painting to reflect the state of mind I was in when I made the painting.” To that Marcia Hafif adds a meditative dimension: “The repetitive method I developed for making drawings – vertical pencil marks starting in the upper left corner of the surface and continuing in a systematic manner toward the bottom finishing at the lower right – meant that the act of drawing became a meditation.”(7) The gaze falling on the painting admits no sign which would disturb the experience of the painting. What happens there comes from a meditative experience close to that of Agnes Martin when she abstracts her vision (the lines) from the landscape. To slow down the eye, to isolate it from the public space and to allow (to paint) thought of another kind, thought which

absorbs our entire vision (spirit) in a linking of rhythmic colors through the regularity of the brush stroke and the disposition of the paintings in a white space.

### THE WHOLE IN THREE POINTS

One would then be confronted with painting presenting three spaces (ways of seeing): the first “formalist,” the second “public,” the third “intimate.” Three spaces which seem to correspond to the dominant directions that Marcia Hafif distinguishes in her inventory: the Oil Studies, The Enamel on Wood and the “pink paintings” (a name she uses to speak of the French Paintings and the Roman Paintings). Still, the borders between these three directions are not closed. The Oil Studies seem to be developed essentially in a formalist space, while the public space (if the history of painting is considered to be a public space) and the intimate are present. The series of enamels is inscribed as much in the rigorous space of the Inventory (formalist) as in the public space. Perhaps it is in the “pink” series that the passage from one space to another is most open.

Contrary to the Oil Studies, the “pink” paintings involve a mixture of colors motivated by reasons exterior to the intrinsic qualities of the pigments. However, the brush stroke still corresponds to a formal need (it presents itself as a primary constitutive element that precedes the composition) as well as to an intimate need. The application (the intimate) is written in the pink, the color of skin (generic color, public color). Marcia Hafif describes the Roman Paintings: “The original reference was to Rome, then to flesh, and then as another viewer responded to the work, to heart. The paintings were created by the action of my body, together with the mental process involved in making them, one which is very close to meditation.” (8) Thus the synthesis of three directions often judged contradictory by Modernism.

The Inventory would be then a tentative bringing together of two poles. A literal pole (that which titles a painting by the name of the pigment from which it is made) and an imaginary pole (that of meditation). Between the two a symbolic lexicon (skin, cars, the Paris sky...). Seen from that point of view the Inventory of Marcia Hafif brings us to the wager that Yves-Alain Bois made in *Painting: The Task of Mourning*: “my bet is that the potential for painting will emerge in the conjunctive deconstruction of the three instances that modernist painting has dissociated (the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic). (9) There we see where a few footnotes can lead.

**Jean-Charles Massera** in *Marcia Hafif, From the Inventory*, catalog for the exhibition in 1994 at the Kunsthall Barmen in Wuppertal-Barmen, pp. 53-59

1. Frank Stella, quoted in Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” 1966, in: G. Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art*, New York 1968
2. “Painting in the Usual Way,” interview with Marcia Hafif by Helga Weckop-Conrads, in catalogue *Marcia Hafif Red Paintings*, Galerie Conrads, 1990
3. Jef Verheyen, “Pour une Peinture non plastique,” 1959, in: Jef Verheyen, *Kreislauf der Farben*, Kunstmuseum Dusseldorf, 1973, p. 20

4. Cf. Marcia Hafif, Notes on the Inventory
5. Ellsworth Kelly: Painted Aluminum Wall Sculpture/Weathering Steel wall sculpture, Margo Leavin, Los Angeles, Leo Castelli, 1984
6. Catalogue La couleur seule, l'expérience monochrome, Ville de Lyon, avec la collaboration des Musees de France et de Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Lyon, 1988
7. "Painting in the Usual Way," op.cit.
8. Cf. Marcia Hafif, Notes on the Inventory
9. Painting as Model, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990, p. 243