

MARCIA HAFIF IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNE SCHLOEN FOR MOFF, Cologne, 2012

MOFF: So you are from California?

Marcia Hafif: Yes, I grew up there, went to school there, began painting and at a certain time enrolled in graduate studies in art history toward a degree. I returned to painting, but in my studies I had been required to take classes in Far Eastern Art and the Italian Renaissance both of which changed my life. The Far East because its esthetic became mine and the Renaissance in that a year later I planned to see what I had been studying, to go to Italy, where I would stay one year in Florence with time to see everything. I went to Italy but passing through Rome I was so taken by that city that I returned to Rome where I lived for nearly eight years working and painting there. That started my orientation toward Europe as I traveled in Italy and Spain, went to Paris and Zurich, found that Europe was bigger than it appeared on a map and that I could not go everywhere. In 1969 I returned to California studying for an MFA degree at the University of California, and finishing there I moved directly to New York to begin a long term project with "monochrome" painting. It was that work which took me back to Europe. In New York I was meeting with a group of artists who made more or less monochrome paintings some of whom were showing in Europe or were from Europe. One was Swedish and it was he who introduced me to the gallery of Claes Nordenhake, so my first show back in Europe was in 1983 in Malmo. On my way to Rome after the show I stopped in Cologne to visit James Reineking and in Munich to meet Rupert Walser, names that had been given me by Phil Sims.

M: Then it was the art world that brought you to other countries. Was it your intention to see other cultures or was it to see other colors and another light? I mean in Italy the light is completely different. Was the light in Italy important for you? Did your work change when you were in Italy in the 60s?

MH: More than the light in Rome it was that the colors and shapes used in advertising and traffic signs were different from those in California. Too I visited churches and cathedrals admiring mosaics in patterns that soon appeared in my work. As I was in Rome a long time I was surely influenced by the beauty of the city and the light, the color. In New York in 1985 I made a series I called Roman Paintings referring to the color of the light and the architecture of Rome. In the 1990s I noticed a big change in light working in June in Munich, then July in Neuss, and returning to Munich in August it seemed quite a southern city. My choices of colors, however, were more objective than felt. In each city I bought enamel colors in paint shops finding colors different from what I would have in New York. In Germany, in Europe, colors are precisely defined with a numbering system each assigned an RAL number. Every one of the reds is described by its number. I used a lot of red in Germany as a result of seeing so many red cars. In New York you rarely see a red car, even in California they are rare. I looked out the window in Monchengladbach one day when every car in sight was red.

M: Incredible

MH: Yes, and then they became silver. That was the next popular color. I was very aware of colors in everything from advertising signs to people and their clothing, the shops, the markets...

M: Do you still travel in Europe? Do you miss Europe?

MH: I do not go to Europe so often now, though I could. I would like to do it more. It is hard to travel, it upsets ones relation to the day, to time. I would say I feel quite European due to my travel. I have lived, if briefly, in many cities in Europe from Rome to Paris, London, various German cities, also in Austria, Belgium and Sweden; I feel at home in Europe. I have friends all over Europe and it would be so much easier to see them if I lived there. I would get on a train and go to some place, to Geneva perhaps or to Zurich. And so, yes, it is a little sad not to travel as much as I did in the past. This year I am staying here in New York and not even painting for the moment. I am putting things in order, all the catalogues, the correspondence, the books and papers, and I really need to focus my attention on that, so that is what I am doing. It is a moment for organization, then perhaps I will travel to some foreign place again to find new inspiration and to paint.

M: How about Cologne? Have you been often in Cologne? Have you friends in Cologne?

MH: I have warm and vivid mental images of Cologne. I often visited there, going to the art fair or to see gallery exhibitions, I stopped in museums and visited friends sometimes staying longer as when I did a show with Christiane Dinges at the Artothek. I enjoyed working with her very much and living at the Chelsea Hotel walking through the city back and forth getting to know the form of it, the roundness. In the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum I discovered a little portrait from the Middle Ages, an engraving or a drawing, a picture of Marcia, a painter in Greece just before the time of Christ, and I thought, "That's so amazing, she has my name." (laughing)

M: Did you meet other artists in Cologne?

MH: In 1984 Gunter Umberg invited me to show two paintings in his "Raum für Malerai." I was there for that, the first time I really visited Cologne, also meeting Raimund Girke. Slowly I got to know many artists from Cologne and was in contact with them regularly. Some were working with monochrome or painting in that direction. I visited studios of Girke, Umberg, Ulrich Wellman, Ingo Meller, Ines Hoch and Christiane Fuchs photographing paintings, the work space and the artist.

M: Then it was important for your work, the discussions and the dialogue with other artists?

MH: Well, yes, yes and I could also say no. Soon after I came to New York in 1971 I developed my reasoning for work examining the methods and materials of painting with the goal of finding not the end of painting but a new way of painting. I showed this work at Sonnabend Gallery in 1974, and wrote about it, publishing *Beginning Again* in *Artforum* in 1978. When I saw other artists also using the monochrome form I was curious, what was their rationale? I helped form the group in New York with Olivier Mosset, meeting to talk about our paintings often joined by one or another from Europe: Umberg, Girke, Wellman, Carmen Gloria Morales. We began to show together at times, but when we talked about our work we found that we did not agree even on the term "monochrome" or any basis for using it. In the long run we all had very different reasons.

M: Interesting.

MH: After the exhibition in 1984, *Radical Painting*, organized by Thomas Krens at Williams College in Massachusetts we disbanded the group since it was clear that we did not have much in common. One work might resemble another but we had different reasons for doing what we were doing so everyone went their own way. Joseph Marioni and Gunter Umberg published a small book, "*Outside the Cartouche*" and some organized further group exhibitions, but I was no longer interested in that. I did care about and did become friends with even others of these artists and there was always a good reason to go again to Europe, also to Cologne, as I showed with galleries in Munich, Neuss, Dusseldorf, Stuttgart, Frankfurt. I worked in London one spring, April and May, a sunny and beautiful time. I did an exhibition in Paris planning colors related to my memories of the city. At BHV, the big department store in the middle of the city, I chose colors from my memory of Paris, the pink and mauve of the buildings, gray slate roof colors. It was true that in each city where I worked, the paint I chose had some relation to the city itself.

M: Interesting. I wanted to ask you if there is a special color for New York.

MH: No, in my studio in New York I looked at my collection of pigments, I had bought every pigment I could find grinding each into oil to make paint of the pigment color not necessarily related to the sky or the buildings. Most often a painting was titled by the pigment color: Cadmium Red or Ultramarine Blue or one of the many others. Surely though New York influenced me in some ways even when I am not aware of them. I do recall using a series of very bright enamels that I thought of as New York Colors.