

François Morellet

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Dear Europeans, [Max] Bill has struck again! I can't believe it! After his visit and mine (1950), Brazil has become the great Switzerland.

—François Morellet

The treasure I discovered was Swiss, it was Max Bill, and of course with him Concrete Art. I didn't visit Bill's exhibition in São Paulo, because it took place before I arrived. I only saw some bad reproductions. But I did meet some young artists who were completely convinced by Bill's exhibition.

—François Morellet

François Morellet's Concrete Art of the 1950s

Alexander Alberro

When François Morellet abandoned figurative painting, sometime between 1949 and 1950, he was faced with the problem of what to design, what to render, and what to make. He also began to ask what might transpire as he left mimesis behind. For many other young painters in France who gathered at the Salon des réalités nouvelles in Paris in the late 1940s and early 1950s, all that remained once they had renounced representation was a spontaneous form of self-expression, and they alternately turned to the tragic pathos of Art Informel or its particular strain of lyrical abstraction in Tachisme. Evidently these responses were insufficient for Morellet. The thoroughgoing emphasis that gestural painting or sculpture placed on the subjectivity of production was too narrative and romantic.

Morellet quickly discovered that when one rejects traditional modes of representation, one does not thereby jettison form, structure, and content. Many of his early nonfigurative paintings were not any more or less expressive than others in art history's vast repertoire, but they were more abstract, or concrete, in that they were a-semiotic; that is, without the support of marks that can more or less easily be taken to be as either a deformation of something in the world (as in Cubism) or a visual language or code that by convention represents or intervenes in the world (as in Surrealism, German Expressionism, and the like). The paintings Morellet began to produce in the 1950s required a mutation in the structure of vision. It was no longer possible to ask what these particular depictions looked like, since depiction-less art looks like itself. How radical, outrageous, and even disturbing this was can be felt now, more than two thirds of a century later.

Once depiction secedes and nonrepresentational art reigns, especially when human gesture is avoided, the artist must confront a slew of timeless questions: How and where does one start once representation

is rendered obsolete? How and when does one stop? What size or scale, pigments, materials, and supports does one work in? Does one fill the entire surface or area and how dense should the pictorial space be? How and with what to apply the pigment or to sculpt or shape the material? How much should one intervene in the production process? Does one extend the composition beyond the conventional virtual space or temporal framework determined by tradition?

Perhaps the most pressing question regarding Morellet's new method concerned the relationship the artwork should establish with its public. To put it another way, what model of subject-object relations should be developed? Before the early twentieth-century crisis of representation, no visual artist would have been overly concerned with the issue: when something was depicted, the viewer's role was much more clearly defined and indeed had been fine-tuned since the fifteenth century. But once the picture space, the space of figuration, seemingly became contentless, the question of spectatorship took on a different complexion.

Addressing Morellet's turn to abstraction, scholars have often noted the artist's discovery of Melanesian *tapa* (bark cloths, fig. 23) in the Musée de l'Homme in

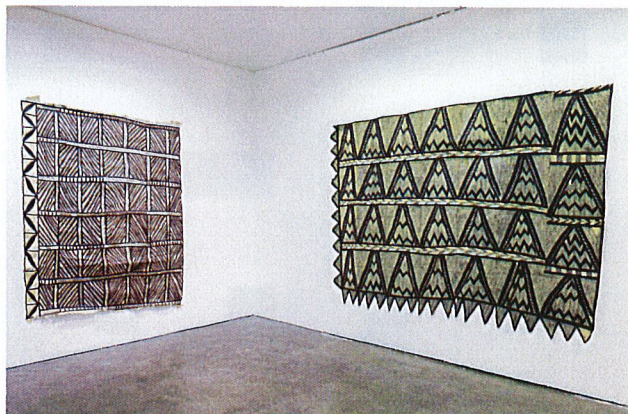


fig. 23 Installation view, *Tapa-Barkcloth from the Pacific*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, U.K., May 1–July 14, 2013

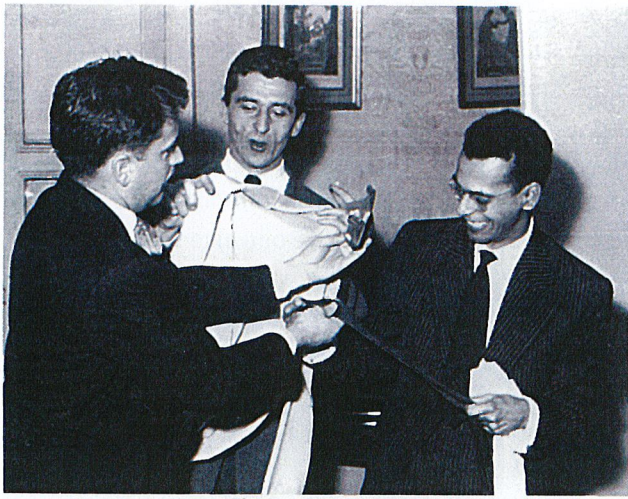


fig. 24 Left to right: François Morellet, Joël Stein, and Almir Mavignier, Morellet's home, Clisson, France, December 1954

Paris in the late 1940s and his encounter with the decorations of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain (figs. 31, 33), in 1952—associations Morellet himself encouraged.¹ There has also been a lot of discussion about his interactions with American artists Ellsworth Kelly and Jack Youngerman during these years.² Yet, his early trips to Brazil, mentioned only in passing in the literature, seem to have been equally if not more consequential on the development of his practice. When Morellet first traveled to Rio de Janeiro in 1950, a location that he was considering making his new home, he was quickly caught up in the fascination with Concrete art that had recently gripped the country's artists and critics. Swiss artist Max Bill's highly touted retrospective at the Museu de arte, São Paulo, was soon to open when Morellet arrived in, Brazil, and many local artists were raving about Bill's geometric vocabulary and the clarity and order his art made evident.³ Concrete art would predominate Brazilian art in the 1950s (figs. 25, 26).⁴

The Rio-based artist Almir Mavignier, whom Morellet seems to have befriended in Brazil and would remain an important interlocutor for many years to come (fig. 24), was at the time developing work that took up those aspects of Bill's production that concern perceptual investigation.⁵ They are related to the Gestalt tendencies, in particular the ability of human sensory perception (and especially vision) to transform external stimuli into a coherent formal structure or whole, that Mavignier and his associates such as artists Geraldo de Barros, Abraham Palatnik, and Ivan Serpa as well as critic Mário Pedrosa, who had written a dissertation on Gestalt, saw in Bill's Concrete art: the image on the plastic form is fully anticipated, a proto-image above, or at least outside of, the realm of sense experience.⁶ Art, from this perspective, was a means of communicating knowledge that, though plainly visible, had hitherto been inaccessible.

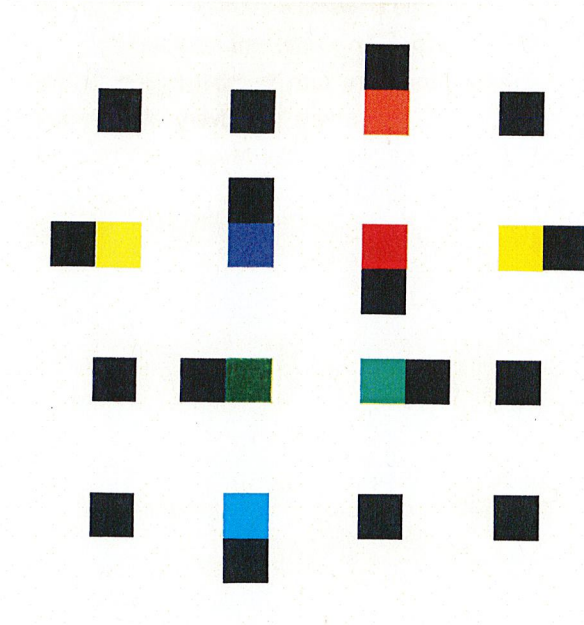


fig. 25 Max Bill, *Bunte Akzente (Colorful Accents)*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (50 x 50 cm). Chantal and Jakob Bill Collection

¹ François Morellet has repeatedly emphasized the importance of both the Melanesian tapas he first saw at the Musée de l'Homme and of the systemic, all-over geometric intricacy of the Moorish art he saw at the Alhambra. See Stéphanie Jamet, "Chronology," in *Morellet* (Künzelsau, Germany: Museum Würth; Swiridoff Verlag, 2002), pp. 245, 247. ² See, for instance, Kristine Stiles, "Art and Technology," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 387. ³ Morellet seems to misremember the dates of the exhibition, which has led to considerable confusion in the literature. Compare François Morellet, "Unpublished Response to a Questionnaire" (1970), in "Viewer to Viewer, or The Art of Unpacking One's Own Picnic' and Other Essays," ed. Yve-Alain Bois, *October*, no. 157 (Summer 2016), p. 140, and "Questions from Hans Ulrich Obrist to François Morellet, December 2015," in *François Morellet: Les règles du jeu* (London: Mayor Gallery, 2016), p. 21. See also Adele Nelson, "Monumental and Ephemeral: The Early São Paulo Bienais," in *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s-50s*, ed. Mary Kate O'Hare (Newark: Newark Museum, 2010), p. 139n8. ⁴ For the importance of Concrete art in Brazil in the 1950s, see María Amalia García, *El arte abstracto: intercambios culturales entre Argentina y Brasil* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores; MALBA, Fundación Costantini, 2011), pp. 133-36; and Pedro R. Erber, *Breaching the*

Although it denied all forms of naturalism, Bill's Concrete art had a central task, that is, to elucidate natural phenomena. This endeavor led directly to an interest in mathematics and physics as the basis for how art stipulates the human senses. This stipulation could be measured as quantities, and that quantification forms the basis for perception. Yet, what is perceived is conditioned by a whole layer of what itself seems to escape perception: the rationalism that codified the cultural techniques involved in the production of the artwork.⁷

Morellet remained in Brazil until mid-December 1950, but, revealingly, he returned the following summer and continued his conversation with Mavignier, who, incidentally, was also the person who would introduce him to Kelly and Youngerman in the early 1950s.⁸ By the end of 1951, Morellet was painting geometric works with simple, pared-down forms. Concrete art, or at least the dominant mid-twentieth-century variant in Brazil, maintained that both expression and figuration were obsolete and that only by streamlining form and arriving at an art of clarity, stability, and order could current artistic problems including the obsolescence of expression and figuration be resolved.⁹ Paintings on canvas and other surfaces had to be understood as planes or defined spaces only, and compositions as experiments of interdependencies. Parallel to Mavignier and other Concrete artists he met in Brazil at the time, Morellet adopted these concerns and adhered to them quite methodically. His process over the next few years began to follow general a priori axioms: all traces of the artist's subjective intervention were purged, and the support surfaces functioned as a means of conceptually deducible knowledge (fig. 27). Rejecting all varieties and hybrids of naturalism, let alone any form of hedonistic non-figuration employed for the mere excitement of pleasure and displeasure, Morellet's paintings now functioned as a means of knowledge deducible

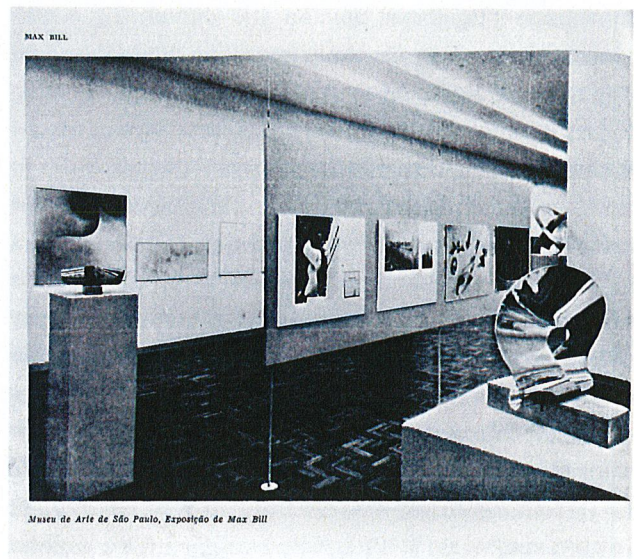


fig. 26 Installation view, *Exposição de Max Bill*, Museu de arte, São Paulo, 1951. From Max Bill, "Beleza provinda da função e beleza como função," *Habitat* (São Paulo), no. 2 (1951), p. 62

Frame: *The Rise of Contemporary Art in Brazil and Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), pp. 39–50. ⁵ The question of when exactly Morellet met Mavignier is a curious one. See, for instance, Domitille d'Orgeval, "François Morellet: Les années 1950," in *François Morellet: Réinstallations*, ed. Serge Lemoine and Alfred Pacquement (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2011), p. 131; and Jamet, "Chronologie," p. 148. However, in a recently translated text, Morellet writes, "After the trip to Brazil, I came across Almir Mavignier, one of those Brazilian artists living as émigrés in Paris." Morellet, "Unpublished Response to a Questionnaire," p. 140. Diary entries of his wife, Danielle Morellet, indicate that she and François met with Mavignier in Rio soon after their arrival in July 1951 and many times during their stay that year. Danielle Morellet, personal papers (1951), Archives Morellet, Cholet, France. ⁶ See Mário Pedrosa, "Da natureza afetiva da forma na obra de arte," reproduced in *Mário Pedrosa: Forma e percepção estética*, ed. Otilia Beatriz Fiori Arantes (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1996), pp. 107–77. ⁷ On Max Bill, see Tomás Maldonado, *Max Bill* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nueva Visión, 1955). ⁸ See D'Orgeval, "Les années 1950," p. 132. ⁹ On Concrete art in Brazil, see Grupo Ruptura, "Manifesto Ruptura" (1952), in *Geometric Abstraction: Latin American Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001), p. 152.

from concepts, above opinion and demanding a previous epistemology for their review (p. 109). They limited the role of the viewer to that of rationally analyzing the properties of the fully determinate artwork, thereby desubjectivizing one's personal perspective in order to arrive at a completely detached, unambiguous understanding of the proposition.

The underlying logic of Morellet's new painting was homologous with Bill's aesthetic program—and not by chance; Morellet adopted the Swiss artist's mechanistic methods, geometric vocabulary, and empiricist conception of the interaction between the artwork and the spectator. Morellet traveled with Mavignier to the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, West Germany, to meet with Bill first in 1954 and again in 1956.¹⁰ By assuming Bill's method of Concrete art production, Morellet came to understand art as a type of instrument, a functional guide for the exploration of perception. Painting for him evolved into a purely intellectual, abstract procedure, with clear organizing principles. Objectivity, verifiability, and predictability became crucial components of his practice as he searched for fixed values of spatial form.

The earliest of Morellet's nonrepresentational canvases worked with the repetition of simple geometric forms, or elements, in black and white on a flat surface (p. 107). Constructed through a meticulous coordination of pictorial elements across the surface plane, the paintings are generated in a pragmatic, intellectual, quasi-scientific manner from within the elements themselves. The spatial relationship between the component parts is therefore primary and methodically structures the overall work. Each element is functionally equivalent to the others and organized systematically into a unified, logically transparent structure.

The artist became preoccupied with deriving the greatest possible variety of forms through the most reduced

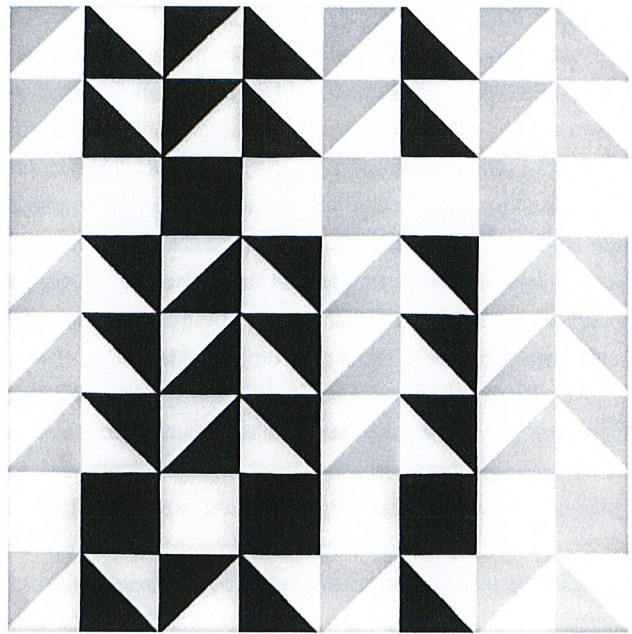


fig. 27 **16 carrés 96 triangles (16 Squares 96 Triangles)**, 1952.
Glycerophthalic gloss paint on wood, 27½ x 27½ inches (70 x 70 cm).
Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

means and began to systematize and serialize his pictorial vocabulary accordingly. In his paintings he used elements solely to realize an abstract world of pure relations, which has a different existence from the world of things. Visual components were condensed into individual units devoid of representational meaning, and the works were built on the repetition of those units unfolding in dynamic, predetermined progressions. Color, too, was systematized in terms of hue, intensity, and saturation. Concrete reality, in other words, was codified into grids, systems, and serial progressions, rather than presented, and was considered inaccessible without some form of mediation.

Morellet also discovered that orders such as the grid not only obliterated centered compositions but

¹⁰ See Jamet, "Chronologie," pp. 150–51. Bill was a founder, along with Inge Aicher-Scholl and Otto "Otl" Aicher, of the Bauhaus-inspired school in Ulm in 1953 as well as the first rector. Mavignier studied there in the mid-1950s, and Argentine Concrete artist Tomás Maldonado became rector in 1956. For a thorough overview of the school's history, see René Spitz, *Hfg Ulm: The View behind the Foreground; The Political History of the Ulm School of Design, 1953–1968* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 2002).

also introduced progressions of pictorial density—an idea that he took to its culmination in canvases such as *Violet, bleu, vert, jaune, orange, rouge* (*Purple, Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red*, 1953, p. 101); *Bleu, vert, jaune, orange* (*Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange*, 1954, fig. 28); and *Hexagones à côtés bleus et verts* (*Hexagons with Blue and Green Sides*, 1953), in which the identical modular square, circular, or hexagonal units are repeated across the picture plane with an interplay of blues of high luminosity; yellows or reds; and greens, purples, and oranges of low luminosity. The juxtaposition of colors creates a powerful dynamism that elevates the artist's nonrepresentational art to another register. Likewise, the pictorial elements of *Interférence de 3 trames différentes* (*Interference of 3 Different Grids*, 1955) and *Tirets jaunes, roses, bleus, verts sur blancs* (*Yellow, Pink, Blue, Green Dashes on Whites*, 1956) are

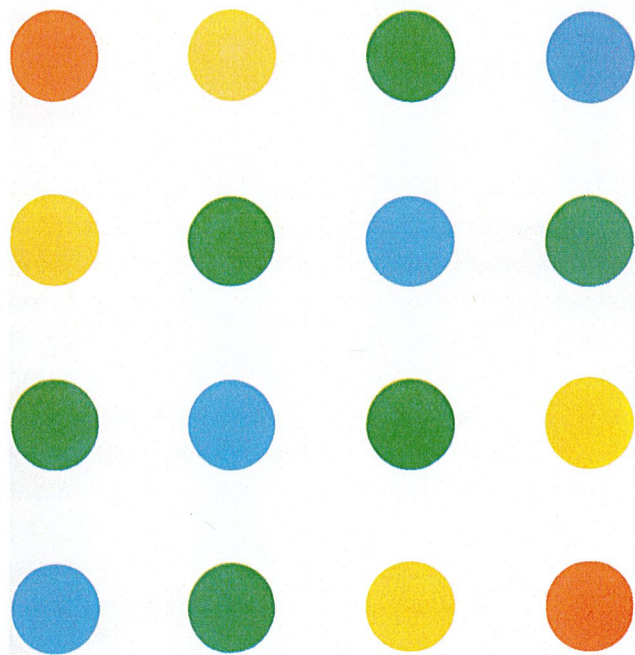


fig. 28 *Bleu, vert, jaune, orange* (*Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange*), 1954. Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (100 × 100 cm). Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Switzerland

distributed across the canvas in a highly calculated manner with no alteration in density between the center and the edges of the rectangular area. By systematically repeating the same units on the painted planes, Morellet at once visually destroyed the surface and interfered with the integrity of the individual elements. The latter are serialized in so smooth a gradation that it becomes difficult for the eye to discern a stable pattern; the dynamic tension between the individual elements and the pattern as a whole disturbs any attempt to focus. The paintings inevitably culminate in an optical dazzle, real to the eye but with no material existence. Both morphologically and functionally, paintings such as *Interférence de 3 Different Grids*; *Yellow, Pink, Blue, Green Dashes on Whites*; and *4 doubles trames 0°, 22°5, 45, 67°5* (*4 Double Grids 0°, 22.5°, 45°, 67.5°*, 1958, p. 117) follow highly developed and articulated structures whose internal logics generate series of unique but related arrangements, kinds of scaffolding whose appearance, though omnipresent, borders on imperceptibility.

These complex experiments and Morellet's unrelenting interrogation of the possibilities of composition led the artist to mine more deeply the logic of systematic variation. Evidently, he sensed that through systems he could find a different way to handle pictorial elements that would respond better to his concept of abstraction. He soon discovered that systems of non-composition such as modular all-over grids, serial progressions, and repeated, predetermined patterns, all of which refuse the meanings of parts and divisions, allow for the production of paintings without the back and forth of compositional arrangements. As with Concrete art, subjectivity, let alone the intuition or expressiveness of the artist, plays no part in this process. Once the code was set, the elements did not need to be balanced or adjusted. Moreover, in terms of reception, this mode

of pictorial production entails a dispersion of subject positions within the aesthetic field. Grids, serial progressions, and predetermined patterns do not establish a single point of view but instead juxtapose an array of intersecting perspectives. They dismantle the totality of the work into its variable units, releasing them to a performative function of distribution. For Morellet, this culminated in a number of fully abstract pictures that began to take on a dynamism of their own.

Artworks such as *Peinture (Painting)* of 1952, 1953, and 1954 (fig. 29, pp. 95, 97) imbue geometric patterns with a virtual dynamism. Yet, the rational clarity of the compositional process, with the tableau broken down into a calculable ensemble of formal elements creating

a closed, quasi-mathematical system, de-emphasizes the subjectivity of the artist and foregrounds instead the analytical dimension of spectatorship. The gradation between intense illusion and the literal plane establishes the structural logic of the picture. Although the actual and the illusory are never entirely reconciled, the viewer nevertheless can test the possibilities of alternate involvement and detachment.

But the repetitive patterns of these canvases also create a reiterative kinetic, optical oscillation that would resonate with Morellet's growing interest in virtual dynamism and his attempts to exceed two-dimensionality and lead the eye to the space beyond the frame. Not only are some paintings free of the traditional top-bottom or

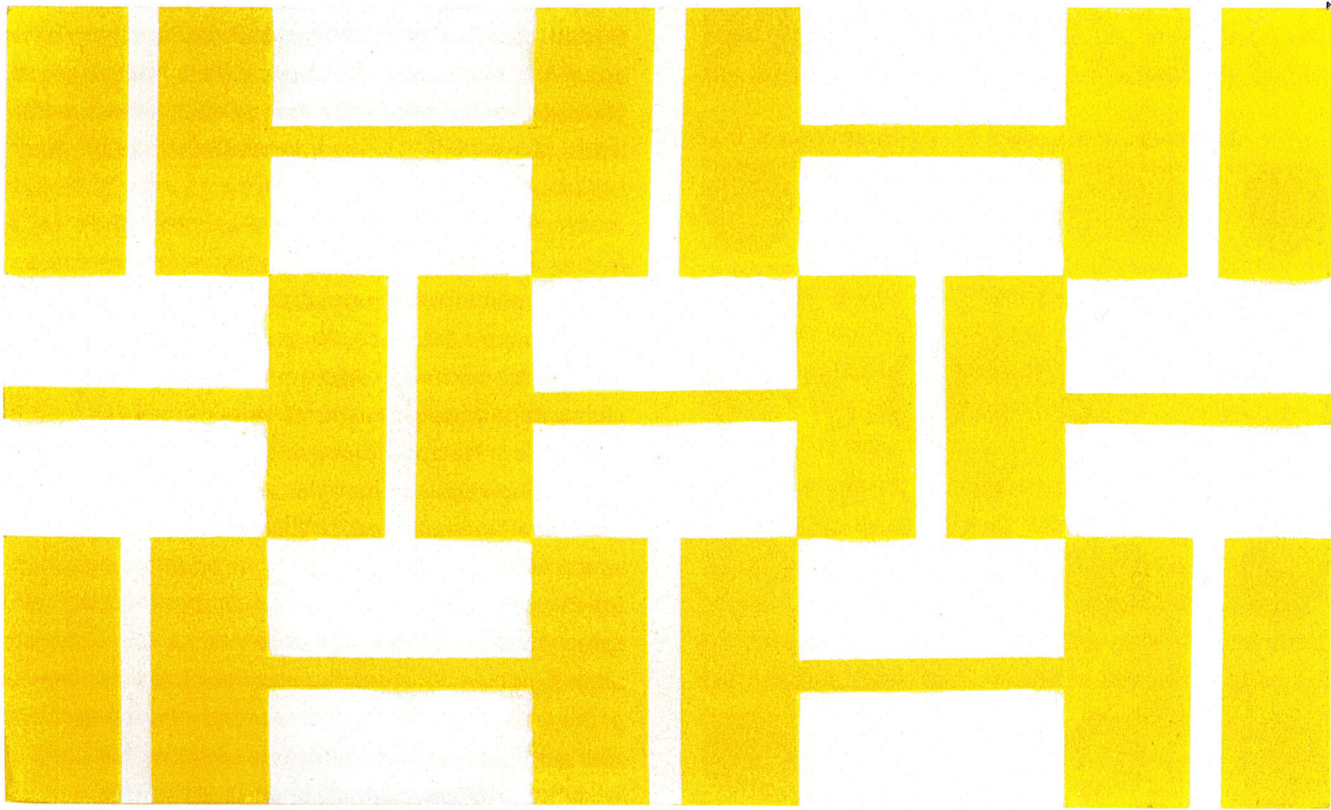


fig. 29 *Peinture (Painting)*, 1952. Oil-based gloss paint on wood, 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (60 x 100 cm). Musée de Grenoble, France

horizontal-vertical orientation, but theoretically, their pictorial structure, with their geometrical standard unit or pattern, could be endlessly extended in all directions due to the lack of a center of gravity. With no fixed boundaries and no central position of focus available to the viewer, the concept of composition ceases to exist in these paintings as they each now follow an order that can be repeated ad infinitum, where every segment is equal to the whole. The designs are thus just the fragments of an infinite reality. The pictures could be wholly constructed by juggling the simple geometric patterns of rectangles and squares; that is, without really composing at all. The combination of absolute clarity and unity evident in paintings such as *32 rectangles* (1953, p. 109); *Bleu, jaune, rouge* (*Blue, Yellow, Red*, 1956, p. 103); or *Peinture* (*Painting*, 1957), and the remarkable openness of the conceptual order from which those internal relations are derived, that is, its repetition, generates tension. The works are open, insofar as the series can be extended to infinity, and yet closed, insofar as each picture is entirely arranged into an overall grid. Differentiation and de-differentiation are coupled in each work.

Morellet's painterly works made of structural coordinates prompted him to search for other activities that might satisfy his evolving notion of abstraction. As the 1950s progressed, he began to experiment with elements of chance, which led him directly to the legacy of Marcel Duchamp. At the same time, and especially once he met psychologist François Molnàr and artist Vera Molnàr, with whom he would go on to cofound the Centre de Recherche d'Art Visuel (CRAV, later the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel) in 1960 (fig. 30), Morellet became increasingly interested in the operation of the human eye, particularly in the effects of light on the eye.¹¹ These investigations led him to focus on and explore visual stimuli. The Gestalt theory that he had picked up from

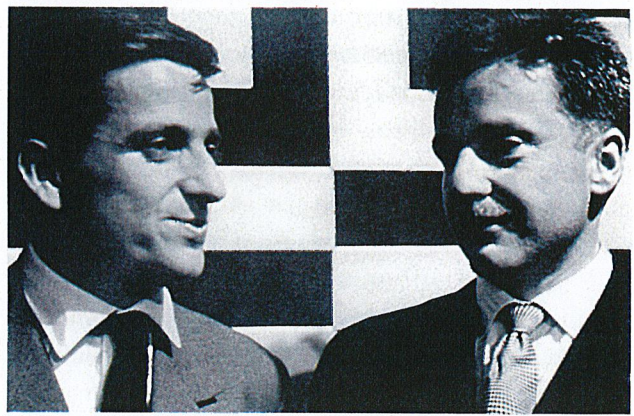


fig. 30 François Molnàr and François Morellet, Galerie Colette Allendy, Paris, 1958

Mavignier, Barros, and ultimately Bill had emphasized the ability of human sensory perception (especially vision, though vision mediated through a conceptual process) to transform external stimuli into a coherent formal structure or whole. But for Morellet by the end of the 1950s, the mind's organization of visual data, the smooth and rapid transformation of perception into conception that underpinned the form of Concrete art mediated by Gestalt, had become suspect—as suspect as ideology's organization of social and material events. Instead he came to understand perception as a direct activity: innate rather than acquired and not necessarily linked to conception. The role of the system of vision was neither to decode inputs nor to construct percepts, but to extract the visual information that registered on the retina. The emphasis was thus solidly on vision, which Morellet regarded as a wholly unmediated physiological process. The eye was in turn theorized as an extended technology, a receiving machine. With this, Morellet's artwork and indeed research would now begin to engage in an entirely new set of problems.

¹¹ In 1957 Morellet met François and Vera Molnàr, with whom he would establish a deep, long-lasting friendship. See Morellet, "Unpublished Response to a Questionnaire," p. 140. As Morellet recalled in 1998, "My friends, François and Vera Molnàr, and I, thought that we could find an even better [theoretical approach] in 'information theory,' which was then brand-new. So we set out to create experimental works that would advance a new science of art. In any case, our new art form, which, among other things, trusted in reason, in process, and defied individualism, seemed to us (with all due respect to [Andrei] Zhdanov) to be in accord with and meet the wishes of true Marxists." François Morellet, "Resister à Descartes" (1996), in *Mais comment taire mes commentaires* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 1999), p. 226. Andrei Zhdanov was a Soviet Communist Party leader and cultural ideologue who oversaw the international Soviet propaganda arm, the Communist Information Bureau, in the late 1940s. On the relationship between Morellet and the Molnàrs as well as the history of the CRAV, see Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 129–40.