

## YVE-ALAIN BOIS

In a lecture delivered in Berlin in September 1963, Theodor W. Adorno revisited his *In Search of Wagner* published some ten years prior. Written while he was living in exile in London, between the fall of 1937 and the spring of 1938, this small, mordant book was branded by the experience of fascism. Adorno was not concerned with the use of Wagner's music in Nazi propaganda, but, in line with the work he was completing at the time with his colleagues from the Institut für Sozialforschung, he was intent on showing how this music, which rose out of the ruins of a bourgeois culture in full crisis, shed light on the slow birth of fascism, revealing its muted genealogy in the most exemplary fashion.<sup>1</sup> Although Adorno denies it, his 1963 text is a form of self-criticism or, at the very least, a qualifying statement. He notes that, with regard to Wagner's work, one cannot, and certainly not at that time, "ignore the political aspect," but the situation in which it was received had changed. On one hand, "we have gained distance over the past thirty years. Wagner no longer represents, as he did in my youth, the world of one's parents, but that of one's grandparents instead. . . . We have gained much freedom toward Wagner as an object of consideration: the affective tie to him has loosened."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it so happens that "aesthetic anti-Wagnerism rode the tide of the so-called neo-classical movement, [which is] politically not at all progressive."<sup>3</sup> (Adorno's bias in favor of Schönberg and the Viennese School, and against Stravinsky, is well known.)

The most salient point of Adorno's argument is found in the following lines:

But what has changed about Wagner . . . is not merely his impact on

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005). Four chapters of the book were published in 1939, but the volume, titled *Versuch über Wagner*, was only published in 1952.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 584–85.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 586. Later on Adorno characterizes the anti-Wagnerian movement as "the first large-scale incidence of *ressentiment* against modern art in Germany" (p. 587).

others, but his work itself, in itself. This is what forms the basis of his relevance; not some posthumous second triumph or the well-justified defeat of the neo-baroque. As spiritual entities, works of art are not complete in themselves. They create a magnetic field of all possible intentions and forces, of inner tendencies and countervailing ones, of successful and necessarily unsuccessful elements. Objectively, new layers are constantly detaching themselves, emerging from within; others grow irrelevant and die off. One relates to a work of art not merely, as is often said, by adapting it to fit a new situation, but rather by deciphering within it things to which one has a historically different reaction. The position of consciousness toward Wagner that I experience as my own whenever I encounter him, and which is not only mine, is even more deserving of the appellation “ambivalent” than the earlier position—an oscillation between attraction and repulsion.<sup>4</sup>

What follows is a definition of ambivalence: it is “a relation toward something one has not mastered; one behaves ambivalently toward a thing with which one has not come to terms.” Adorno adds, “In response to this, the first task at hand would be, quite simply, to experience the Wagnerian work fully—something that to this day, despite all the external successes, has not been accomplished.”<sup>5</sup>

I would say that facing Yves Klein today, we are in the same situation as Adorno facing Wagner more than forty years ago. Of course, the parallel is strengthened by the fact that the two oeuvres have a lot in common, as we shall see. But what is important to note here is that Klein today is not the same as Klein in the 1960s. This certainly does not mean—contrary to what Pierre Restany already wanted to believe more than twenty years ago—that this new Klein, no more than Adorno’s new Wagner, can be cleansed of all the suspicions surrounding his past self or the identity he had coined for himself (often using Restany as a spokesman, moreover).

Restany in 1982:

When I think that in 1969, at the time of the first Yves Klein retrospective in a Paris museum, Christiane Duparc could still write: “What’s irritating about Yves Klein is the symbolic sauce, the Christ-like residue, Saint Rita, the Rosicrucians . . . , Nostradamus, mystical judo, the Order of Saint Sebastian. . . . He waded about in a kind of

4. Ibid., pp. 586–87.

5. Ibid., pp. 587–88. In 1963, according to Adorno, Wagner was known more for certain touting pieces from *The Valkyrie* (1856) than for the complex architecture of *Siegfried* (1871). His work, in short, was reduced to a few clichés: “The works of Wagner that have failed to win the appreciation of the public are precisely the most modern ones, those the most boldly progressive in technique and therefore the farthest removed from convention” (p. 588).

exasperating religiosity,” and when I compare the mindset of the Paris media in 1982 to this, I can hardly believe my eyes.<sup>6</sup>

Loyal to his role as official advocate, Restany seemed to believe that Klein's spiritualist tricks were already no longer a problem at the time of the artist's retrospective in 1983 at the Musée National d'Art Moderne (in the catalog of which these lines were published). Quite to the contrary, one of the main factors in the change that had occurred in Klein's legacy was the critical analysis of the artist's "sauce"—especially the meticulous study of Klein's Rosicrucianism conducted by Thomas McEvelley, in the very catalog of this same exhibition, to Restany's great displeasure! (McEvelley discusses the numerous borrowings Klein made from Rosicrucian philosophy before the artist realized that calling upon the authority of Gaston Bachelard was more respectable than drawing on Max Heindel.)<sup>7</sup> To be even harsher about Restany—but he deserves it, even posthumously, for the contempt he showed his successors—we know much more about Klein today now that the quasi-exclusive monopoly that this art critic had over the artist's work has ceased. If it weren't for the archival studies conducted—by McEvelley (not only with regard to the Rosicrucianism, but also in a longer and more ambitious essay about Klein's biography and pathology published in the 1983 catalog as well),<sup>8</sup> Nan Rosenthal (see the fundamental study, in the same catalog, on what I would call Klein's ostentatious frauds—the present essay draws heavily on that text),<sup>9</sup> Sidra Stich (who in her 1994 monograph/catalog supports the hypotheses of her two predecessors with massive documentation),<sup>10</sup> and finally Denys Riout (who in his remarkable and very recent *Yves Klein: Manifestes l'immatériel* finally offers us a minute description of the parergonal apparatus that Klein summoned for his public interventions and exhibitions, turning each of them into a kind of grandiose *Gesamtkunstwerk*)<sup>11</sup>—if it weren't for the persistent work of these four musketeers of research (we must also include the excellent edition of Klein writings by Marie-Anne

6. Pierre Restany, "Vingt ans après," in *Yves Klein*, exhibition catalog for the retrospective at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1983, p. 70. The text goes on to viciously attack McEvelley as one of the representatives of "the persnickety and meticulous frame of mind" of American art criticism and art history, to which Restany most demagogically opposes the generous testimonies offered by artists. The catalog is cited hereafter as MNAM.

7. Thomas McEvelley's and Nan Rosenthal's essays were originally published in the catalog of the American venues of Klein's retrospective (at Rice University, Houston; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York), which preceded the Centre Pompidou one. See "Yves Klein and Rosicrucianism," in *Yves Klein* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982), pp. 238–54. This catalog is cited hereafter as Houston.

8. Thomas McEvelley, "Yves Klein, Conquistador of the Void," in Houston, pp. 19–87.

9. Nan Rosenthal, "Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein," in Houston, pp. 89–136.

10. Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein* (Stuttgart: Cantz, 1994). This monograph functioned as an exhibition catalog for the Klein traveling retrospective, organized by Stich, at the Museum Ludwig (Cologne), the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Düsseldorf), the Hayward Gallery (London), and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Madrid).

11. Denys Riout, *Yves Klein: Manifestes l'immatériel* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

Sichère and Didier Semin),<sup>12</sup> we would continue to be wading today, to adopt once again Christiane Duparc's peremptory metaphor, in the same sauce.

Let us turn back to Wagner or rather to Adorno's Wagners. For this theorist (who we must not forget was also a pianist and a composer himself, in the tradition of his teacher Alban Berg), Wagner is the artist who marked the beginning of the reign of what he calls the culture industry: in Wagner's music, budding modernism is what stands against this poison like an antibody, but demagoguery and authoritarianism are what bring on its occurrence. Wagner represents a historic shift: the moment when, becoming pure spectacle, art is henceforth nothing but merchandise, the viewer a passive consumer who must be seduced and absorbed.

On reading Adorno's book, we find ourselves asking what he really could have said differently about Klein: for example, when he speaks of Wagner's "social character" (the rebel who becomes a beggar, the spoiled child who identifies with the established order he is nevertheless persuaded to fight); of his "dilettantism" (which, according to Thomas Mann, is the mark of his lack of formal education and the foundation of the very idea of a "synthesis of the arts"); of Wagner's poetic need for hyperbole; of how labor is eclipsed in his theatrical productions (essential to what Adorno calls the phantasmagorical aspect of theater in his operas, the goal of such eclipsing is to engender "the illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal"<sup>13</sup>); of the fascination with the prank possibilities of technology and the skilled tricks involving theater stunts as magic; of the often sadistic manipulation of his audience<sup>14</sup> that combines with his allegiance to it (the most poignant symptom being perhaps the quest for success at any price); of his ascetic ideal (the self-immolation necessary for any martyrology); of the constant reference to myth (myth of a return to a prehistoric past paradoxically seen as an eternal present and thereby as an abrogation of the future);<sup>15</sup> of the dream, finally, of a frozen time that is nevertheless forever restless.

Adorno's indictment, which I had gradually and imperceptibly transferred to Klein, not only helped me understand the knot of my own resistance to certain aspects of his work and even more to its complex showcasing (Restany included), but also the much stronger resistance of my very Adornian and very dear friend, Benjamin Buchloh. For him, Klein is indeed the artist par excellence of advanced

12. Yves Klein, *Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art et autres écrits*, ed. Marie-Anne Sichère and Didier Semin (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2003). This book is cited hereafter as DEP.

13. Adorno quoting musicologist Paul Bekker, in *In Search of Wagner*, p. 79. This "fantasmagoric" aspect of Klein's production is nowhere more striking than in his architectural projects, notably the entire series of "urbanistic" drawings made for him by Claude Parent, in which the huge machinery he envisioned for his "air architecture" and his fire fountains is hidden underground.

14. Klein's sadistic side reaches its peak in his theatrical projects; see, for example, the one titled "Pure Sensibility" and published in *Dimanche*, "the single-day newspaper," for which he imagined gagging and chaining down every spectator to his or her seat for the length of the show. See DEP, p. 182.

15. Eden before the Fall (where everyone lives naked) is the utopian place to which Klein refers constantly in his writings.

capitalism, he completes the apotheosis of the culture industry of which Wagner was only the prophetic start. In a Europe devastated by war, more than anyone, Klein demonstrated that “the attempt to redeem spirituality by artistic means at the moment of the rise of a universal control of mass culture would inevitably clad the spiritual in a sordid (involuntary) travesty.” “By making his work manifestly dependent on all of the previously hidden *dispositifs* (e.g., the spaces of advertisement and the devices of promotion),” Buchloh continues, Klein “would become the . . . postwar European artist to initiate not only an aesthetic of total institutional and discursive contingency, but also one of total spectacularization.”<sup>16</sup>

However, if the book that Adorno wrote in exile had brought me to the threshold of my reservations about Klein’s work (ergon) and its elaborate packaging (parerga), it was the 1963 lecture that gave me the key, allowing me to break through the barrier and cross this threshold. There are many reasons for this, but I will only discuss the two most important ones here. The first consists in the following remark concerning the fraudulent in Wagner: Adorno notes that, in Wagner’s work, “what is magnificent . . . cannot be cleanly divided from what is questionable. One can scarcely be had without the other; his truth content and those elements that legitimate criticism has found questionable are mutually interdependent . . . ; there is no way around this interweaving of the true and the false in his work.”<sup>17</sup> The second, which is moreover partly related to the first, is provided by the analysis Adorno offers on the role of myth in Wagner’s oeuvre (he speaks more specifically about violent myths, but this applies to the rest as well, notably to all the references to “nature”). Because this role is never concealed, because it is raw, “the work, despite its mythologizing tendency, is an indictment of myth, willingly or not.”<sup>18</sup>

\*

From the start, Yves Klein touches on the theme of the fraudulent—in what could be called his christening act. Nan Rosenthal was the first to draw attention to two small “books” that Klein “published” in Madrid before definitively choosing an artistic career, *Yves Peintures* and its ironic counterpart *Haguenault Peintures* (“book” is clearly an exaggeration, which Klein often used later when referring to these leaflets of some fifteen small pages; “publication” is even incorrect: far from the 150 numbered copies announced in the colophon, there were only a few and it is very likely that most were made only posthumously from the materials Klein brought back from Spain).

16. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Plenty or Nothing: From Yves Klein’s *Le Vide* to Arman’s *Le Plein*,” in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), p. 269. See also, from the same author, “The Primary Colors for the Second Time,” *October* 38 (Summer 1986), pp. 41–52, and “Klein and Poses,” *Artforum* 33, no. 10 (Summer 1995), pp. 93–97, 130, and 136.

17. Adorno, “Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” p. 596.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 589.

*Yves Peintures* is a notebook of color reproductions embellished with a preface, in line with the well-established model for the catalog of an exhibition in a chic commercial gallery (color plates, heavyweight paper, a preface: all this connotes luxury). The first surprising element can be found in the “preface”: between its generic title (“Preface”) and the name of the “author” (Claude Pascal, a childhood friend of Klein’s and a poet who agreed to lend his name to this ritual of symbolic deletion), the “text” consists only of horizontal stripes imitating the typographical layout of an essay (indented lines, paragraphs), very similar to the *Poème optique* published by Man Ray in 1924, which mimics in Morse code the configuration of a sonnet.<sup>19</sup> The second surprise, of course (it was an important one at the time), is that the color “reproductions” are monochromatic rectangles (the fact that these bits of colored paper are hand-glued onto the white pages was not necessarily an oddity; on the contrary, imitating Skira’s practice, then considered the highest standard in art-book publishing, this accentuated the connotation of luxury). The third unusual feature concerns the “captions” placed beneath the paper cutouts (with this last term I am deliberately referring to Matisse, who must have been on Klein’s radar).<sup>20</sup> These captions are all of the same mold: to the left, the name Yves; to the right, the name of a place, followed by a date and the dimension of the “work” in parentheses. For example, “Yves / in London, 1950 (195 x 97)” or “Yves / in Tokyo, 1953 (100 x 65).”

As Rosenthal has clearly established, the “works” supposedly reproduced in *Yves Peintures* did not yet exist, and would in fact never exist, unless—and this is most likely the interpretation that Klein would have gone by if someone had pressed him on that point—we were to consider their simple *conception* a necessary and sufficient condition for their existence (the date range, from 1950 to 1954, essentially meant to affirm that the “artist” had the *idea* of monochromatic paintings as early as 1950, well before he even considered himself an artist, which several documents and accounts do indeed confirm). But as Rosenthal also notes, and although Klein referred to this work as a “selection of reproductions of his works” (removing the quotation marks he originally used around “reproduction of” in the draft of a letter describing the small volume),<sup>21</sup> several hints teasingly steer us toward suspecting some trickery: the mute lines signed Claude Pascal clearly mock the belles lettres

19. See Man Ray, *Poème optique*, published in *391* (the journal edited by Francis Picabia), no. 17 (June 1924), p. 3. It is entirely possible that Klein was familiar with the Man Ray poem though François Dufrène, a friend of many years, who was then a Lettrist poet. On Klein and Lettrism, see Stich, pp. 31–34 and 48–49.

20. On Klein and Matisse, see Rosenthal, in Houston, note 51, p. 132. In particular, we learn here that in December 1953, Klein’s mother, Marie Raymond, had published an article on Matisse in which “the cutouts are discussed at length and are reproduced.”

21. See Rosenthal, in Houston, p. 98. As Rosenthal notes, in the final version of a letter sent to Jacques Tournier on August 5, 1955, Klein sought to substantiate the myth that he was a young painter with a body of work, collectors, and projects for which he worked with architects. *Yves Peintures*, he writes, is “out of print for the moment but the publisher has, I believe, a few individual copies.” Letter published in DEP, p. 329.

tradition that was popular in the Paris (and now New York) art world (the preface of the exhibition catalog is a necessary exercise for any self-respecting man of letters, as is such support for any emerging artist); the monochromatic nature of the “works” said to be reproduced is an all-out attack against, and an ironic hoax about, the amphigoric pathos of *art informel* that was then dominating this scene (I’ll come back to this point); the absurd repetition of the word “Yves” in each caption (a first name, therefore a generic term, here stammered as a leitmotif, as if endless repetition—a Wagnerian process if there is one—were the only method of affirming any identity); the strange geographic notations (in Paris, in London, in Madrid, in Tokyo, in Nice: all the cities where Klein lived and “worked”);<sup>22</sup> and finally, the dimensions.

As Rosenthal writes, “the dimensions of height and width in each caption are dimensions which convention, in the absence of the abbreviation ‘cm’ or the word ‘centimeters,’ decrees, in the case of paintings, to mean centimeters, but Klein’s dimensions turn out to describe not what is purportedly being miniaturized by reproduction but exactly what is *there*, the height and width in millimeters of the colored papers.”<sup>23</sup> This exact correspondence between the real dimensions of the rectangles of colored paper and the symbolic dimensions (without indication of scale) of the virtual paintings is essential to the mirror play in which Klein

22. The most logical interpretation of these geographic indications (but the least conventional one for an exhibition catalog) is that they refer to the place where the “reproduced works” were made. This interpretation is enhanced by the fact that in *Haguenaull Peintures*, these geographic notations are duly complemented by information on the “provenance” of the “works”—clearly fictitious information, but this time offered in accordance with the convention: “Haguenaull/Paris, 1951 (162 x 97), collection Raymond Hains,” for example.

23. Rosenthal, in Houston, p. 99. These remarks are based on the copy Rosenthal studied in Klein’s archives (reproduced in Houston, but not in MNAM), as well as on another copy that would have been sent by Klein to his mother, fresh off the small press belonging to his printer friend from Madrid (conversation with the author, June 15, 2006). The other copies reproduced and exhibited since Klein’s death, in which the dimensions provided in the captions in no way correspond to the real dimensions of the rectangles of the paper glued, are, according to Rosenthal, incorrect and posthumous. See Rosenthal, in Houston, note 43, p. 231, and by the same author, “Comic Relief,” *Artforum* 33, no. 10 (Summer 1995), pp. 93–97, 130, and 136. The latter article, considering the exhibition organized by Stich, criticizes this author for having exhibited one of the incorrect copies and for refusing to believe that the millimeter/centimeter correspondence was an important aspect of Klein’s concept, justifying by that very fact the careless production of the posthumous copies. In the copy exhibited recently in Frankfurt and reproduced in the catalog (Olivier Berggruen, Max Hollein, and Ingrid Pfeiffer, *Yves Klein* [Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004], pp. 12–13), not only is this correspondence of dimensions not observed in the captions, but two of the rectangles are “signed” at right (signature printed in italics called “English”). One of these signed rectangles, an orange one, seems to foreshadow *Expansion of the Color Orange* from 1955 (the only monochrome that is “signed,” or rather stamped with an inscription, also in italics, “K. mai. 55”). None of the plates are signed on the “first” copy reproduced by Rosenthal, but this author saw several color rectangles in Klein’s archives, the same kind used in the book, on which a “signature” was printed. This seems to indicate that, at a certain moment while making this book, the artist thought about skewing yet another mark of institutional authenticity. Rosenthal notes that “had Klein trimmed these ‘signed’ colored papers to the varying sizes of the plates in the correct version, it would have produced the appearance of varying sizes of signature” (in Houston, note 46, p. 131). Surely, but that would have perhaps too quickly signaled the fictitious character of these signatures.

submerges us here—essential both to the “interweaving of the true and the false” and to the “indictment of myth” of which Adorno speaks with regard to Wagner.

Perhaps we should stress the fact that Klein’s beginnings were furious. He was contemptuous of his parents, both artists (the father figurative, the mother rather well known among the abstract group), for having neglected him in favor of their careers (he often lived with his loving Aunt Rose, who financed his whims until the end); he witnessed the bohemian avant-garde milieu to which his mother belonged and was quickly sickened by the salon discussions she led on her “Mondays.” It was with the blasé cynicism of a teenager that, like a very fine ethnologist, he observed the workings of the art world, the pomp of the critics, the promotional stints; he also learned art history as if by osmosis. Most of all, he quickly became disgusted with “abstract art,” with the post-Cubist geometric tendencies to which his mother adhered (she showed at Denise René), as well as with *art informel* (he very perceptively and precociously grouped both tendencies together). Georges Mathieu attracted his attention very early on: he would become the archetype to discredit but also to mimic (and, in so doing, surpass).<sup>24</sup> It is only later that he would learn to formulate his contempt for *art informel*, which was also vexation: “I despise artists who empty themselves out onto their paintings, as is often the case today. How morbid! Instead of thinking about the beautiful, the good, the true, they vomit, they ejaculate, they spit out all their horrible, rotten, infectious complexity onto their painting as if to relieve themselves and weigh down ‘the others,’ ‘the viewers’ of the work, with all the burden of their remorseful bitterness and failure.”<sup>25</sup> It is only after the fact, after having chosen an identity as an artist (but, from that point on, everything would happen very quickly, and quicker and quicker until his premature death) that Klein would be able to understand exactly what it was in the culture in which he had been immersed that he hated.

Despite what he said later, his first monochromes were above all parenticidal gestures, and not at all conceived as works of art. In one of his many autobiographical accounts (which serve to bolster his legitimacy like *Yves Peintures*), Klein mentions the monochromatic surfaces he painted in 1946 (at the age of eighteen), at the same time he did things like “horses in the countryside” and “beach scenes” or “form and color compositions,” under the influence of his father and mother, respectively. It was, he says, “to see, to see with my own eyes, what was visible in the absolute. I did not consider these endeavors as a pictorial possibility at

24. On Klein and Mathieu, see in particular McEvelley, in Houston, p. 67; Rosenthal, in Houston, pp. 94 and 124; and Stich, pp. 175, 189–90, and 223. Klein wrote a short, rather ambiguous text on Mathieu, not published during his lifetime, in which a certain admiration transpires (in DEP, p. 343). In his lecture at the Sorbonne, however, although he doesn’t name him (but no one at the time could have misunderstood), Mathieu is a choice target (see Yves Klein, “Conférence à la Sorbonne,” in DEP, pp. 144–45, the whole passage on the imitators of Japanese calligraphy and fanatics of speed in painting).

25. Yves Klein, “L’aventure monochrome,” in DEP, pp. 240–41. There are other, less violent versions (published earlier) of this passage.



the time, until the day, about a year later, when I said, 'Why not.' . . . I did not, however, show anything to the world right away. I waited."<sup>26</sup> Skeptics will point to the embellishment of hindsight—and it seems that Klein pre-dates his metaphysical "why not" by several years, this moment "in the life of a man that decides everything," the "sign for the budding artist that indicates that the archetype of a new state of things is ready, that it has ripened, that it can appear in the world"<sup>27</sup>—but among other early monochromatic attempts, this one seems to me to corroborate the myth: in London in 1950, when he was working at a framer's (from whom he learned, among other things, the art of gilding and the mounting technique he would draw upon later), he declared the following when showing small pastel monochromes to his friend Claude Pascal: "I found what I want to do." A eureka that was both uncertain and aggressive since, having pinned his pastels to the wall of the apartment he shared with Pascal, he invited their English teacher to come and laugh at his joke.<sup>28</sup> "I found it": I found the way to get the better of them all (parents, their painter and critic friends, high culture), the way to obliterate them by obliterating their work. Four years later, *Yves Peintures* continued to serve this adolescent logic, as would his deliberately provocative sending of *Expression de l'univers de la couleur mine orange* (the first large format monochrome, ostensibly color-washed with a roller) to the 1955 Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (his mother's annual forum). Even more than the 1954 small volume, it was this eruption onto the public scene, intentionally scandalous, that was to later become his true "why not" (the painting was not admitted into the Salon, as expected, and Klein caused an uproar so that his "rejected" status—like Manet!—would duly enter the annals of history).

\*

Klein's carpers have often introduced him as a pathetic ham actor, a kind of protofascist bad clown, and it is true that the more he was accused of bad faith, the more he overstated his character and its antics. But in his discussion of Wagner, Adorno warns us both about the trap Klein sets (and by which he tests us) and about the denunciations that his discourse and his every activity paradoxically and very shrewdly entailed. For what Klein was touching upon, with all the avant-garde savoir-faire amassed since Wagner, is one of the essential conditions of modern art, at least since Courbet and Manet (since the crisis of representation that presided over their work). It is the awareness that the risk of fraudulence, the risk of being laughed at and being called an emperor with no clothes, has become a necessary risk, but also that every work of art must confront this risk—it must even solicit it, challenge it—if it is to be at all authentic. More than any other

26. Yves Klein, "Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art," in DEP, pp. 80–81.

27. Ibid.

28. See McEvelly, in Houston, p. 30; Rosenthal, in Houston, p. 96; and Stich, p. 23.

artist from the immediate postwar years, Klein experienced this condition as if haunted by it (only Beuys comes close; Warhol is too cool). Hence, for example, his numerous fantasies about a new world economic order freed from the “fixative medium” that is money (the economy being the domain of value par excellence); his brilliant tale about the series of same-size blue monochromes at his Milan exhibition in 1957 (the story caught on: many today are convinced that these paintings were all offered at different prices, even though the idea only came to Klein later); his paranoid obsession with copyright and with chronology.

Klein’s mythomania is notorious. His fabrications are many—those noted by historians began very early on, perhaps because he failed his baccalaureate, as McEvelley suggests: he says that he attended the Merchant Marine Academy, that he played with Claude Luther in jazz clubs, that he bred horses in Ireland, etc. The following anecdote—one among thousands—typifies the tone of his numerous stories:

To proudly come back from Japan, where he spent a year and a half perfecting his Judo practice, he needed to obtain the title “4th dan of Kokodan” (“without that I could not return, I would have lost everything,” he wrote to his overly generous Aunt Rose). But Japanese nationalism was a mighty obstacle (his examiners “have decided not to give promotion to a foreigner without his having won at least ten times or their being tempted by money”). Although he was usually not ashamed to beg for money from his auntie, he despised the idea of buying his title (“I have been too sincere in judo up till now; I do not want any trafficking in money to buy my rank”). However, he had no qualms about inventing a new subterfuge (“But there is a way, that is to impress them, to make them understand that on my return I am going to be a very powerful figure in France, and that it will be to their advantage to keep me on their side by doing me this special favor, of giving me the 4th dan before I leave”). He therefore solicited the complicity of his innocent family fairy, summoned to write to Japan’s big boss of Judo: “Write quickly, tantine, but construct your letter well. . . .”<sup>29</sup> The letter must have been “well constructed” for it worked, in extremis—albeit for naught, since the French Federation of Judo would refuse in the end to ratify the rank awarded by the Kokodan. But what is important to notice here is this parcel of truth (of “sincerity”) that Klein was keen on retaining even within the most devious manipulation. You can lie all you want, tell all kinds of stories, as long as the alleged facts describe reality as it should be (when “truth becomes reality”)<sup>30</sup>—but pure and simple venality is a venom capable of corrupting even myth.

29. McEvelley, in Houston, pp. 36–37. This letter is published in its entirety by Stich on several occasions; Klein shows no difficulty in characterizing the letter he asks his aunt to write as a *bluff* (the word even appears in capital letters). Stich, pp. 35–36.

30. The titles of the first part of “L’aventure monochrome,” a collection of texts on which Klein worked sporadically but that was not published in full until recently, was “Le vrai devient réalité ou pourquoi pas!”

Regarding the sale of “immaterial paintings” “during” the *Void* exhibition at Iris Clert in 1958 (one more antedating), Klein would state in 1959: “Believe me, you get your money’s worth when you buy such paintings. I’m the one who’s swindled because I’m accepting money.”<sup>31</sup> Pure gold, the symbol of inalterability since time immemorial, all the more when it is tossed into the waters of the Seine during a supreme potlatch ceremony (the ritual in which all purchasers of “immaterial zones of pictorial sensibility” would have to participate), gold was what would erase the scar of monetary corruption (the text just quoted goes on about a group exhibition in Anvers, in March 1959, in which gold appeared for the first time in Klein’s panoply: he set the price for his virtual work—existing only through the presence and bombastic gesture of the artist—at a gold ingot of one kilogram).<sup>32</sup> But during his visit to New York, he would almost admit that the fiduciary transfiguration of pure nothing into pure gold (which in the meantime he had perfected with his “zones of sensibility”) was charlatanism and that his efficient alchemy resulted only from the credulity of his audience (or rather of a few enthusiasts). “Incredible as it may seem, I have actually sold a number of these pictorial immaterial states.”<sup>33</sup>

This interlacing of true and false is nowhere more striking than in Klein’s texts about his “epoca blu” exhibition (the show for which he decided after the fact to set a different price for each painting, each the same size, and each painted in International Klein Blue). With regard to this, he explicitly makes reference to the “real” value of the work (that is, a value that is “invisible” to the eye, but to which a price can nevertheless be assigned) and to the generic problem of the false in art:

So I am in search of the real value of the picture, that is, suppose two paintings rigorously identical in all visible and legible effects, such as lines, colors, drawing, forms, format, paint thickness, and technique in general, but the one is painted by a “painter” and the other by a skilled “technician,” an “artisan,” albeit both officially recognized as “painters” by the public; this invisible real value means that one of these two objects is a “picture” and the other is not.<sup>34</sup>

On one of the manuscripts of this text, Klein added, at the end of the passage and in parentheses, the names of Vermeer and of the famous forger Han van Meegeren, who had amazingly succeeded in fooling experts until his spectacular

31. Klein, “Le dépassement de la problématique dans l’art,” in DEP, p. 94.

32. Klein, “Conférence à la Sorbonne,” in DEP, p. 121. See on this point Riout’s very fine analysis, pp. 88–89.

33. Yves Klein, “Chelsea Hotel Manifesto,” originally written in English with the collaboration of Neil Levine and John Archambault, in DEP, p. 298. The most precise account of the “immaterial zones of pictorial sensibility,” and their most rigorous analysis, can be found in Riout’s book (pp. 96–116).

34. Klein, “L’aventure monochrome,” in DEP, p. 235. I am quoting Rosenthal’s translation, in Houston, p. 105.

trial after the war.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps Klein had given up alluding to van Meegeren, in the final version of “L’aventure monochrome,” because the imitations produced by the latter proved to be too dissimilar to their model (marking a visible difference there—although unnoticed by art historians, all blind, of course—and not the kind he sought to specify). In any case, the true-false dance is essential to Klein’s position: it is what allowed him to simultaneously lament the disillusionment of the world, and to ironically draw substance and subsistence from it (recollecting his youthful escapades with Arman and Martial Raysse, he declared to have exclaimed at the time “that kitsch, the state of bad taste, is a new notion in art: ‘great beauty isn’t really beautiful unless it contains bad taste, a self-conscious element of the artificial with a touch of dishonesty’”<sup>36</sup>). As Rosenthal has superbly analyzed,

There are at least three tones of voice for the same set of words about the problem of discerning the “real value” of painting [in the passage cited above]: the tone of a critic who laments the situation that art historians have questionable motives for making attributions and that abstract painters may be perpetrating frauds; the tone of an impostor, who suggests that he may share in the activity he is criticizing; and the tone of a real artist, who by breaking the artists’ taboo and allowing the imputation, even about himself, that some artists may be hypocrites shows how sincere *he* is.<sup>37</sup>

In short, in a world in which everything has become myth and spectacle, only the spectacularization of myth and spectacle can contain a parcel of truth: as their indictment. And here we come back to Adorno and Wagner.

\*

But my detour by way of Wagner was not only motivated by this question of the devolution of art into spectacle. If this were the case, a more direct theoretical model than the one offered by Adorno would have been Guy Debord, with whom Klein had (for a time) an excellent relationship—he even offered him a monochrome—until the head of the Situationist International insulted him in his journal. (They used the same peremptory rhetoric, by the way—and I believe it is wrong to denigrate Klein’s writing skills while praising Debord’s.)<sup>38</sup> The obsessive

35. This parenthesis appears only as an endnote in the edition of writings. It is found in the publication of the same text in MNAM, p. 173. On the van Meegeren scandal, see Rosenthal, in Houston, note 90, pp. 133–34.

36. “Klein, Raysse, Arman: des Nouveaux Réalistes,” debate moderated by Sacha Sosnowsky, 1960, published in MNAM, p. 263.

37. Rosenthal, in Houston, p. 109.

38. See Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord* (Paris: Plon, 1999), pp. 109–12. It was Debord who chose a small painting (to Klein’s great surprise): “Because I can put [it] in the pocket of my duffle coat.” Bourseiller offers a great amount of information confirming the friendship between

quest for truth, for what Klein called “the mark of the immediate,” also touches on another legacy of Wagnerian thought, which was of considerable importance within French culture at the end of the nineteenth century—that is, Symbolism (the members of this movement considered Wagner one of their greatest heroes). Reading Klein’s texts, one can only be but struck by their extreme similarity to those written by, for example, Georges-Albert Aurier, Gustave Moreau, Charles Morice, and even by Gauguin. Klein was most likely not familiar with the writings of these poets and painters,<sup>39</sup> but Max Heindel’s zany *Cosmogonie des Rose-Croix*, in which he was so deeply immersed for such a long time, indirectly gave him access (in a most ill-digested fashion, but that is of little consequence) to what was their common ground, a diffuse ideology tinged by Neo-Platonism and Schopenhauer.<sup>40</sup> When he writes that “the mind does not nourish itself, it doesn’t absorb anything, and doesn’t give anything either, it doesn’t reject, it understands all things, vibrates with life, ‘is,’”<sup>41</sup> Klein is paraphrasing (without knowing it) Plotinus on the One. Similarly, when he speaks of emanation, of enveloping atmosphere, of invisible radiance, of enthusiasm, of ecstasy, of the abolition of movement, of the vaporization of the self, of that which is beyond thought, of absolute unity, it is Neo-Platonic vocabulary exactly copied from the Symbolists. Even his after-the-fact habits (the a posteriori rationalization), which he soon mastered, seem to illustrate Plotinus’s doctrine (according to the latter, in artistic creation, “nothing comes from logical consequence, from reflection; everything happens before consequences can be drawn, before one reflects; because all these operations come after, as well as reasoning, demonstration and proof”<sup>42</sup>). The very idea of an “intelligible vision,” which is so dear to Neo-Platonic philosophy, is rather close to that to which Klein aspired (even if he would have probably considered the expression an oxymoron): something like “the sensible vision from which one would have precisely removed everything that is sensible and representative, that is, all the obstacles, the divisions, the traces of opacity,” a vision that removes “the distance

---

Klein and the group of future Situationists (notably, “in 1956, he painted a four-hand piece with [Asger] Jorn, Ralph Rummy, and Wallace Ting”). In 1952, Klein attended the screening of *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952), Debord’s first film (the screen remains totally white during the dialogue and totally black during for long intervals of silence). When their friendship ended, Debord would accuse Klein of plagiarism. But the surprising affinities between Klein and certain productions by the Situationist International go well beyond anecdote, especially with regard to Klein’s architectural and urban utopias, which amazingly resemble those by Constant.

39. He read very little: comic strips (Tintin and Mandrake the Magician); then Heindel’s *Cosmogonie des Rose-Croix*, to which he referred relentlessly over ten years (between 1946 and 1956); then Delacroix’s journal, which he liked more than his paintings; and finally, starting in 1958, a few chapters in several of Bachelard’s books.

40. For the pages that follow, I am infinitely grateful to the book by Pierre-Henry Frangne, *La négation à l’œuvre: La philosophie symboliste de l’art (1860–1905)* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005).

41. DEP, p. 325.

42. Cited in Frangne, pp. 81–82.

separating objects from sensible vision” and that “simultaneously abolishes the distance that separates the seeing subject from the object seen.”<sup>43</sup>

One could smile, call this idealist old fluff, and ask how Klein’s (unconscious) debt to an ancient philosophy resuscitated more than a century ago by the Symbolists could have the slightest interest for the interpretation of his work, but this question could be asked as well with regard to the Symbolists themselves—save for perhaps Mallarmé, who opted for Hegel (Klein cites the poet, but without being familiar with him, finding his quotes in Bachelard). The question in fact is not about any debt, but about how it is used. As Pierre-Henry Frangne notes, “in Neo-Platonism, Symbolism found the philosophical means of simultaneously maintaining and reducing the exigency of transcendence and immanence, as well as of dualism and monism (of the one and the multiple, of subject and object, of seeing and seen, of soul and body, idea and sensation). And all this within a philosophy that seeks to develop ‘simplicity of seeing’ through a process of subtraction and unjamming since the divine, being invisible, cannot give way to predication or determination, but only to negations.”<sup>44</sup> If you replace “the divine” with “the immaterial,” you basically come to Klein’s program. On the “transcendence” side of the ledger, one finds the search for the absolute, blue infinity, “sublimation” (one of Klein’s favorite words, according to Arman),<sup>45</sup> the obsession with death, and many other characteristics as well. On the “immanence” side: the constant call to “presence,” the challenge of every mediation, the infatuation with the ephemeral, the preference for fire burning the work and man over the measly remains of ashes. Between the two, or rather dialectically entangling both, you have the concept of the work of art as the material imprint of a vital force too powerful to be seized, but also too diffuse to be represented or intellectually grasped. In terms of dualism, you have the entire, extremely complex organization of Klein exhibitions, so well described by Riout, each conceived as the triumph of the immaterial over a material context that acts as a foil, each staging something like the incarnation before the ascension (or at least the levitation). In terms of monism and “simplicity of seeing,” finally, you have all of Klein’s statements against composition, the most lucid of their time (after those made by Wladyslaw Strzeminski and shortly before those made by Frank Stella and Donald Judd).

In sum, although the syncretic potpourri of Klein texts is not very appetizing, it is coherent. But this consistency (which I think is due to the Neo-Platonic bent in his way of thinking, unconsciously by way of Heindel) would hold no interest if it had not allowed him to develop, despite all shortcomings, an impressive oeuvre. On the one hand, this oeuvre pushed to the limit a proposition that had attracted painters at least since Malevich (the *parousia* of pure color). On the other hand, on the French (and European) art scene, it represented an unprecedented

43. Frangne, p. 83.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

45. Cited in McEvelley, in Houston, p. 51.

and irreversible stripping. I would like to end by taking a moment to look at these two last points (pure color and stripping).

\*

We know how proudly and how jealously Klein guarded his invention of IKB, International Klein Blue. He even patented it. Critics and historians (save for Restany, of course) tend to use the term *invention* gingerly, between quotation marks, under the pretext, as Carol Mancusi-Ungaro confirmed twenty-five years ago, that the chemical formula of IKB was not developed by Klein himself but by a Rhône-Poulenc employee: the synthetic resin that allowed him to bind the granules of pure pigment without losing saturation was provided, upon his request, by an astute hardware and paint dealer who had taken an interest in his experiments (it is also thanks to him that Klein stumbled over the sponge).<sup>46</sup> But it is the “upon his request” that is important here: there are many artists before Klein who were upset that the more a medium (or binder) is fixative (and, unfortunately, in reverse proportion to its fragility), the more it will dim the intensity of the pigment it is fixing (pastel is almost without medium, it is almost pure pigment—it is extremely fragile but its colors are very saturated; on the other end of the spectrum, there is oil paint, which is robust but whose colors are tarnished by the binding oil). With his infantile inability to accept a negative response to any of his desires, to accept that material obstacles can exist (a utopian mind-set shared by all inventors), Klein refused the “saturation-fragility/loss of intensity-stability” dilemma. Wide-eyed before buckets of pure pigment (powder) at the shop of the paint dealer, he quickly asked if technical means had not yet been discovered to retain the vivacity of pure color (“the raw material of sensibility”) forever. Hence the IKB formula (that moreover didn’t stop Klein from exhibiting a tray filled with blue pigment powder, without binder, at Colette Allendy’s in 1957, as if paying homage to his epiphany before the buckets of pigment).

The result of his tenacity is memorable: no painter before him had succeeded in obtaining such richness, such depth of color without resorting to contrast; no artist had found the means (yet they needed only ask) of maintaining the maximum saturation of a single color so strongly and on increasingly larger surfaces (remember the murals at the Gelsenkirchen theater, some measuring twenty by sixty feet). He is far from having invented the monochrome, but no one before him had managed in such a seductively simple way, with only one single saturated color, “to stir the sensual depths in men.”<sup>47</sup>

46. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, “A Technical Note on IKB,” in Houston, pp. 258–59.

47. Henri Matisse, “Statements to Teriade: *On the Purity of the Means*,” in *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 122. Was Klein familiar with Matisse’s expression, “one square centimeter of blue is not as blue as a square meter of the same blue”? (Matisse, quoted in Louis Aragon, *Henri Matisse: A Novel*, vol. 2, trans. Jean Stewart [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972], p. 308.) His oceanic (Wagnerian) murals at Gelsenkirchen, in any case, prove the old master to be right with regard to color and surface expanse.

I purposefully borrow these words uttered by Matisse, for in a certain way Klein fulfilled his predecessor's dream. Let this memory recounted by Gino Severini guide our judgment:

Matisse showed me a sketch one day that he had made "from life" on a street in Tangiers. In the foreground, a wall painted blue. This blue influenced everything else, and Matisse had lent it the most importance he could without compromising the objective construction of the landscape. Despite this, he had to acknowledge that he had not captured a fraction of the "intensity" of the blue, that is, the "sensorial intensity" that this blue produced in him. . . . He told me that in order to off-load this blue sensation which predominated over all others, he would have had to paint the entire painting in blue, like a wall painter; but if he had resorted to this knee-jerk reaction, which would have been important only at the moment of the sensation, he would not have achieved the work of art.<sup>48</sup>

This dream could not have come true to Matisse both because of the demands of representation and the need to transpose (without which he believed there was no art). But herein lies the paradox: Klein reached this dream of having the color alone, without mediation, at maximum intensity—so that it could be experienced in the moment only, in the inarticulate moment of the sensation—through a mystical logic that seemed to be in complete opposition to this affirmation of color. For color was, among all the nonmimetic elements of pictorial practices, the element that had been most condemned by idealistic aesthetics (in favor of drawing, of course) as material and base. This paradox, this shift from the most extreme idealism to its most naked opposite, is not new; it is even one of the most amazing characteristics of Symbolism—as Frangne brilliantly demonstrated with regard to Gauguin and color, and as Jean Clay did, beyond color, with regard to all the non-mimetic manipulations and the importance of the material and corporeal even for the Symbolist painters most smitten with the ineffable (the catholic Maurice Denis, for example).<sup>49</sup> The paradox is not new, but it was exacerbated by Klein with sustained anxiety (notably about the texture of his monochromatic surfaces, about which he became maniacal). I believe that this shift (from ideal to matter) governs Klein's entire oeuvre. On the one hand, when he deals with painting only, it is what leads him to some of his most stupefying inventions (the very slim format of some of his first monochromes in the 1956 exhibition at Colette Allendy, for example, measuring 50 cm in height, and 2.5 cm in width, a proportion that had

48. Gino Severini, "La peinture d'avant-garde," *Mercure de France* (June 1917), reprinted in Severini, *Témoignages: 50 ans de réflexion* (Rome: Éditions Art Moderne, 1963), p. 63.

49. Frangne, pp. 115–18; Jean Clay "Gauguin, Nietzsche, Aurier: Notes sur le renversement matériel du Symbolisme," in *L'éclatement de l'Impressionnisme* (Saint-Germain-en-Laye: Musée Départemental du Prieuré, 1982), pp. 19–28.



no precedents in the history of art save for some of Barnett Newman's 1950 paintings, with which Klein could absolutely not have been familiar). On the other hand, as soon as he began to explore any new field of artistic activity (he had no qualms about his ability to undertake any endeavor), it is what led him almost automatically to go beyond anything that practitioners of this field had ever envisioned.

Music is perhaps the most remarkable case: in stripping the sound "of its attack and its ending" in his *Symphonie monoton*, in thus depriving music of its usual properties (rhythm, even melody—for what is a melody without a beginning or conclusion?), attributes that still provided music with a figurative or narrative function, Klein declared sound as is, in its very materiality, removed from its temporal connections (this "creates a vertiginous feeling," he very justly noted).<sup>50</sup> It is even here where, the first perhaps with Cage, he breaks with Wagner, for whom, on the contrary, the attack, the stroke of the bow (or of the blow), was, according to Adorno, the demagogic process on which the authority with which he charmed audiences was based.<sup>51</sup>

The *monoton* is a brilliant equivalent to the monochrome: the only permitted chord consists in the harmonic echoes that the isolated sound produced on its own, just as no color can vibrate without eliciting the natural (physiological) echo of its simultaneous contrast. What is key is the abolition of formal contrast, of the compositional articulation (polyphonic, polychromic, polyformal) that always relates to a Cartesian concept of the artists as subjective agent and to the arbitrary nature of taste (both the artist's and the viewer's). It is because Klein was so sharp in this respect that he was in a position to undertake the stripping process I mentioned above. Let us note first how he put his finger on the question—after the fact, as usual. The story is important and Klein repeated it several times with a few variations:

Why have I arrived at this blue period? Because, before this, in 1956 at Collette Allendy's and in 1955, [at the Club des Solitaires] at Colette Allendy's, I showed some twenty monochrome surfaces, each a different color, green, red, yellow, purple, blue, orange. . . . I was aiming to show "color" and I realized at the opening that the viewers were remaining prisoners of their conditioned way of seeing: in front of all these surfaces of different colors presented on the wall, they kept reconstituting the elements as polychromatic decoration. They could not enter into the contemplation of the color of a single painting at a time, and it was very disappointing to me, for precisely I categorically refuse to have even two colors play on a single surface. In my opinion, two contrasting

50. Klein, "Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art," in DEP, p. 82.

51. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, chap. 2, entitled "Gesture," pp. 18–32. See in contrast Klein's handwritten note on the sheet music of his *Symphonie monoton*: "no attack should be perceptible—the bow strokes should not be heard," in DEP, note 3, p. 346.

colors on a single canvas force the viewer not to enter into the sensibility, into the dominant, into the pictorial intention, but rather force him to see the spectacle of the struggle between the two colors, or their perfect harmony. It's a psychological situation, a sentimental and emotional one, which perpetuates a kind of reign of cruelty.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, this position is practically identical to Strzeminski's, which was formulated some thirty years earlier (in texts that again Klein could not have been familiar with, even if he had seen several paintings by the Polish artist)—with one key difference, however. Strzeminski's endeavors were materialist at base, "realist" even (he wanted to abolish all transcendence, any reference to an a priori anterior and exterior to the *hic et nunc*, physical existence of the painting).<sup>53</sup> But, on the one hand, the striking similarity between the theory of Unism and that of Yves-le-monochrome suggests just how much Strzeminski's phenomenology was far from eluding metaphysics (we have learned from Derrida that there is nothing more metaphysical than "presence"); on the other hand, in the context of painting in postwar France, tame despite the existentialist uproar, Klein's maximalist exigencies had a catalyzing effect. (In France then, like everywhere else in Europe, it seemed that no one could remember the ebullient work of the 1920s and '30s avant-gardes, and that, on the contrary, aside from the death throes of Surrealism and the towering shadows of the big totems from the beginning of the century—the "late style" of Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Léger et al.—polite compositional, Post-Cubist academicism characterized the work of the "young school" of abstract artists, in both the geometric and the informal genre.) In one fell swoop, Klein's work rendered useless all the fainthearted art, the salon art he loathed at his mother's, and young painters had to choose their camp. A few abstract painters who weren't outraged and who heard his lesson were immediately put in the stocks by belletristic critics (I am thinking of Marin Barré, for example).<sup>54</sup> But it is these artists who were to have the final word.

\*

One can turn one's nose up at Klein's clownish theater, look the other way (toward the sublime) and believe that by doing so one can avoid dealing with his boasting, but I believe this to be a major mistake. For his stunts were populist means—a bit repugnant, yes, but he might not have had many others at his

52. Klein, "Conférence à la Sorbonne," in DEP, pp. 134–35.

53. I take the liberty of referring to my essay, "Strzeminski and Kobra: In Search of Motivation," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 123–55.

54. On Martin Barré's admiration for Klein's work at the end of the 1950s, the immediate effect that this interest had on his pictorial practice, and the way he was accused of betrayal by critics who, until then, supported him, see my monograph on this artist, *Martin Barré* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), pp. 5–8.

disposal—by which he was able to fight against the equally pompous but even more hollow spectacle of the high bourgeois culture of his time (more hollow because it was leveled out by the culture industry while pretending to ignore it). Anyone who refuses to see a radical denunciation of *art informel* in the photographs depicting him executing his “fire paintings” with a blowtorch at the Centre d’Essais de Gaz de France has missed the boat. Yet, this act is virulent because, to a large degree, it is fake: the fireman that Klein had stand by his side, who was supposed to intervene in case of fire, was not a real fireman, but a friend thrilled to play the part. Herein lies Klein’s relevance today: he shows us how to deflate the spectacle of the culture industry by staging an even greater hoax.