

Unfolded: A Comparison of Folded Paintings by Simon Hantaï and André-Pierre Arnal

By Liselott Johnsson

With Hantaï, foldings hide from the painter's sight what, once unfolded, they give up to the spectator's eye. In any case, and in all of these states, painting is thought: vision is thought, and the eye thinks, even more than it listens. (Deleuze and Guattari 195)

As an artist, I was intrigued by the idea of using my paintings to show something real and something hidden simultaneously. I started to think about what would happen if I took a piece of canvas and wrapped it around an object and only painted the exposed parts. When unfolded, it would become a portrait of the object fragmented into pieces; the actual folds would appear as white space. "Aha, that must be a unique idea," I thought! Before delving into a new method of work, I decided to learn more about the history of the fold as a method of painting. I turned to French painters Simon Hantaï and André-Pierre Arnal, who, since the sixties, have used the fold as a process in their paintings. In this essay, I will compare two paintings by these artists: *Etude*, by Simon Hantaï in 1968 (Figure 1), and *Dans la vague* by André-Pierre Arnal, painted in the same year (Figure 2). At first, these two paintings seem very similar; they share the color blue and folded patterns. However, after giving a close look at the personal backgrounds, the historical contexts, and the intents of the two artists, it is possible to discern very clear difference's.

With *Etude*, Hantaï introduced his new folding painting technique, consisting in the use of all-over folds that resulted in an all-over pattern of white leaf-like shapes defined by an even blue ground. As the artist covered exposed surfaces with oil-based paint, the folds hid sections

of the canvas. Afterwards, as he unfolded the painting, white marks were revealed in the reserved folded areas. In *Etude*, all folds are remarkably even and the borders of the painted areas are crisp and clear. The canvas is large and almost square, and it dominates the viewer. For Hantaï, the fold and the resulting white had spiritual connotations; they were symbols of something immaterial. In a video from 1981, Hantaï explains that “the color gives the contour of the white,” and that the white is a representation of light—a spiritual opening on eternity (Desfons).

Simon Hantaï (1922-2008) was born in Hungary, studied art at the Budapest Academy from 1941 to 1944, and moved to Paris in 1949. In 1953, Andre Breton wrote the foreword to one of his early exhibits of surreal shapes and figures. Obviously influenced by both Automatism and by Jackson Pollock, Hantaï soon invented a new method of pouring paint all over the canvas and then subsequently removing it, creating calligraphic snake-like patterns (Centre 66).

Hantaï was never completely convinced by the political and metaphysical aspects of the Surrealist movement. In 1956, the civilian Hungarian Revolution took place. This traumatic event made Hantaï turn away completely from Marxism and the Surrealists. Instead, he focused on the religious, esthetic, and poetic aspects of his art. During one year, from the end of 1958 until 1959, he copied religious texts word for word onto a large canvas. He saw himself performing a task similar to that of ancient monks.

In the early 1960s, Hantaï started to use the fold as a painting technique (Centre 11). By gathering the canvas and folding and tying it, he exposed only parts of the canvas to be painted. Initially, Hantaï employed several colors but later ended up painting his canvases in solid colors with the exception of the folds, which remained white. It is possible that he was influenced by the American Color Field and Minimalist painters of the time (Bonney 30).

Paradoxically, in 1963, it was the BMPT group of young revolutionary Marxist artists (Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni) who discovered Hantaï and invited him to participate in shows, and soon he achieved wide recognition. During a group show in the south of France in 1968, Hantaï went to see the chapel decorated by Matisse in Vence and saw a relationship between his own paintings and the light filtered through the stained glass windows. This revelation resulted in the development of the *Etude* series. The pattern of *Etude* became one of Hantaï's signature motifs repeated through his career (Centre 65).

Hantaï's intent is directly opposed to that of Andre-Pierre Arnal, who belonged to the movement Supports/Surfaces. The Supports/Surfaces artists embraced Materialist and Marxist ideas, proposing a reinvention of the art of painting by focusing on the materiality of its components (Hultén 25). Arnal's painting, *Dans la vague*, belongs to the series, *Crushings*. This series launched a long career of explorations into different indirect methods of painting, such as creasing, crushing, rubbing, and tearing (Devlin 10). Arnal mentions Hantaï among his major influences, but it is not known whether Arnal saw Hantaï's *Etudes* before he undertook his own *Crushings* series. *Dans la vague* is softer and less graphic than *Etude*; it appears that the cloth was allowed to flow and fold freely rather than being forced into a specific pattern. The variation in color intensity indicates that the color was allowed to seek its own pattern without the aid of a brush and that only one layer of paint was applied. The vertical painting, *Dans la vague*, is half the size of *Etude* and is closely related to the scale of the human body. The title *Dans la vague* translates to *In the Wave*, so it could almost be understood to refer to reflections on the blue surface of the Mediterranean Sea. Arnal works around the repetitive character of the method or gesture and each time ends up with a unique and unexpected result. The consistency in Arnal's work is his ability to change and introduce new complex inquiries into his art, relentlessly

questioning the status quo. Most of his work relates to the scale of the human body; in contrast, Hantaï worked on immense canvases that completely dominated the viewer by their size.

André-Pierre Arnal (1939-) was born in Nîmes, in the south of France, and went to study art and the French language at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Montpellier. Initially a landscape painter, Arnal started to paint abstract works in 1964. In 1968, he participated in a group exhibit in Montpellier that included work by Vincent Bioules, Daniel Dezeuze, and Claude Viallat among others (Devlin 7). This group of artists was inspired by Materialist and Marxist ideas and strived to continue the act of painting through a reexamination and reevaluation of the materials and methods involved. In 1970, the group Supports/Surfaces was officially named in a manifesto that the founders wrote, but only two years later, the group broke apart because of internal disagreements regarding its political involvement (Bonney 167). Since then, Arnal continued his investigations into the nature of painting and its materials; however, the Marxist rhetoric vanished from his discourse. Arnal has produced several books with paintings and poetry; an example of this is *Le Champs Traverse* from 1996, which contains poems regarding his process of painting and observations of nature (10)

A large student protest took place in Paris in 1968. This revolutionary vibe also imbued the world of art. Artists took an active role in the demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the status quo, and they produced art with political content. It was the time when the validity of painting as an art form came into question both in France and in the U.S. Where would painting go after Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism? In 1969, the exhibit *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* took place at the Whitney Museum of Art in NY. It was an exhibit that moved away from the illusion of the painted surface and focused on the material qualities and the act of the creative process (Monte 4).

In contrast, the artists of Supports/Surfaces in France never renounced painting; rather, they tried to find new ways to paint and use the materials involved in painting, such as the support and the surface (Bonney 25). Even though Hantaï's purpose for using the folding technique was spiritual, he served as a major influence on two subsequent tendencies of radical artists, initially the BMPT group and later the Supports/Surfaces group (153)

The two paintings compared in this essay are similar in method, pattern, and coloration, but they differ dramatically in terms of their intent. Hantaï's pattern in *Etude* evokes spirituality and an ideal form that could be repeated in eternity. Arnal's *Dans la vague* was just one out of many explorations of the canvas surface and nature of paint. Where Hantaï looked for a totalitarian system, Arnal looked for the possibility of chance to create diversity. Both Hantaï and Arnal wanted to remove themselves from the subjective creative process. Hantaï did this by performing a repetitive blind gesture of folding, which is closely related to the Surrealist concept of automatism. Arnal, on the other hand, introduced chance by using chance operations, a concept closely related to Dadaist thinking. Despite their desire to distance themselves from the creative process, I think that both artists are very much in control of the final outcome of their oeuvre.

These artists' works are proof that the use of the fold in painting is viable. Is a fold just a fold and a process for painting, or can it evoke something about our reality that goes beyond the purely material? The philosopher Gilles Deleuze argued in his 1984 book, *The Fold*, that it constitutes the basic unit of existence, "The unit of the matter, the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold." (6). I believe that the enigma of the fold is still not resolved. In the right artist's hand, the fold may still have the power to make one question the illusion of the stretched painted canvas, and maybe even the illusion of one's own existence.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Simon Hantai, *Etude*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 262 cm x 228 cm.  
Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York.



Fig. 2. André-Pierre Arnal, *Dans la vague*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 210x100 cm. Artist's Collection.

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