

CONVERSATION

Bernard Marcadé & Niele Toroni

Paris, June 26, 1997

Bernard Marcadé: *Ever since 1967, you have repeatedly declared that your work/painting is an event (a thing) that is to be seen, and that all that can be said about it, other than the methodical statement you always make (to wit, “imprints of a n°50 brush repeated at regular distances of 30 centimetres”), is nothing more than peripheral. Having said this, I would still like you to explain your notion of work/painting.*

Niele Toroni: It's not out of “workerism” that I bracket the two terms together, but to bring home the fact that my painting does not exist without the work involved in making it. On this point, I differ totally from conceptual artists. It would be inconceivable for me not to do the painting myself. It requires my physical presence; I have to be available to climb up the scaffolding or a ladder when the work is situated above ground, and to move my arm freely when it's on the floor.

BM: *Work traditionally refers to a painstaking activity. Your work/painting can hardly be said to participate in a form of alienation.*

NT: It is not alienated work, but the physical difficulties involved are not to be overlooked. It's a matter of honesty. I sometimes find myself in the position of a plumber who has to finish his installation. This dimension of my work is something that I wholeheartedly assume, as against the illusory notion of artistic freedom that conceives of artists as working only under the inspiration of who knows what. I don't believe in such notions of freedom and the sublime which, in my opinion, are highly bourgeois conceptions. That is why I employ a much more “down-to-earth” term. Painting is also the outcome of work.

BM: *You never delegate your work/painting to someone else?*

NT: Not when it comes to the pictorial part per se. I have an assistant who helps me mark the walls because, as I have often said, I don't have the 30 centimetres in my arms or in my head. But when it comes to the imprints, which is what is seen as painting, I am the one who gives them to be seen by applying the no. 50 brush. Because of this and this alone it can be called a Toroni. In any case, doing this work is not like singing in the church choir.

BM: *Have you, for that matter, eliminated all notion of pleasure from your work?*

NT: I could hardly say that I suffer! Obviously, there is pleasure in seeing the first imprints appear on a wall and watching the space change.

BM: *Is it the kind of pleasure one gets from a job well done rather than the kind I'd describe as an exacerbated expression of subjectivity?*

NT: No doubt. But it is also a relatively gratuitous pleasure. I simply like working with colour, I like taking a brush in my hand. And it's in this sense that I feel more like a painter than an artist. As far as my subjectivity is concerned, as I have already said, it has to stay subjective.

BM: *You distinguish the painter from the artist?*

NT: Perhaps I'm an artist when I gamble in a casino, play cards or horse around in a pub. When

I came to this country, I was struck by an expression often used in French bistrots when speaking of people with marginal attitudes. "Here comes the artist!" they'd say and at first I thought that they were talking about "real artists". In fact the "artist" is a funny bloke, an oddball or the kind who can drink two dozen pastis in a row. The bistrot artist is someone whose behaviour falls outside middle-class norms. He can be a tight-rope walker, a fire eater, a painter or a musician. In any case, the notion is not necessarily related to painting.

BM: So you might be an artist occasionally, but it is not a concern at the heart of your work/painting.

NT: To be an artist often involves wanting to impress people, and looking for novelty at all costs. I have never been particularly bothered by the question, "What should I do?" (so as to outdo the next-door neighbour or to attract attention to myself). The real question for me is, "What's the point?". If I were eighteen today (and needless to say, the demonstration is absurd!) I'm not at all sure that I would want to have any part in what is called the art world.

BM: Is it then a necessity for you to be or not to be an artist?

NT: It is indeed. For me and in relation to the world today.

BM: Did painting have a sense for you when you were eighteen?

NT: When I was in teacher training college, museums bored me. On the other hand, whenever I saw a Piero della Francesca or an Uccello battle, I'd be as happy as a lark.

BM: Apparently, you have always preferred painting in its own setting. You often talk about the Arena Chapel in Padua with its frescoes by Giotto or some of the humble churches in Tuscany decorated by Piero della Francesca.

NT: In the chapels of the Tessin region where I was born, there are a great number of medieval dances macabres that are not necessarily very well done but which have an enormous emotional impact on me, all the more so because these frescoes, combining the comic and the tragic, were painted in a particularly rough geographical and architectural context. (Think of Pavese: "Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi ...") The paintings I see these days, produced under the Expressionist banner, are far from having the forceful impact that those representations have. Photography seems more apt today to convey a message with a moral thrust.

BM: You seem irritated by all the public attention given recently to painters whose work is "expressive", not to say "Expressionist".

NT: I'm glad that the Georges Pompidou Centre is doing a Fernand Léger show now. On the other hand I am deeply appalled to see three major Parisian museums (the Pompidou Centre, the Grand Palais and The Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris) all exhibiting Bacon, Picasso's portraits and Baselitz in a period of six months. I have nothing against these painters and I don't mean to judge the quality of their work, but this was the kind of painting presented for consumption in the most prestigious institutions in the French capital! And the conjunction of the three shows seemed particularly regrettable and even depressing.

BM: In the sense that Paris was presenting a dated conception of painting?

NT: In tune at any rate with the "return to order" whose disastrous effects are apparent in just about every aspect of our society. It seemed like some kind of manifesto, with the second millennium just around the bend!

BM: You'd readily accept being placed in the pictorial tradition of Mondrian, Léger, Pollock or, closer to us, Kelly. Where do you stand in relation to Ryman?

NT: Ryman is a painter of my generation whom I appreciate and whom I've met several times. In my opinion, Ryman can be said in a certain way to bring Impressionism to a close. And I don't mean anything pejorative by that. If I were an exhibition curator, I'd display Monet's *Waterlilies* beside Ryman's large paintings. Then we could physically verify how Ryman takes the Impressionist tradition to its conclusion, in a very interesting and beautiful way.

BM: Your own painting has often been described in terms of closure, as the finishing stroke. A few years ago I suggested the idea that the very paradox of your art is that it can be understood either as the ultimate pictorial act possible or as its radical beginning endlessly commencing over and over again. Which only shows how hard it is to distinguish a before and an after in your painting, for your art eludes all notions of temporality.

NT: In the final analysis, what I find interesting these days, at a time when technology is sovereign (which, by the way, is not something that displeases me), has to do with a form of gambling or play. Take poker, for instance. The rules are very basic, very simple: there are five cards and these five cards can yield a great number of combinations. Similarly, with a brush and a few colours – the most basic elements conceivable – it might be possible to do something that is always new. This simplicity of means is what affords me a form of freedom, not my intention or invention which – due to my method – are always the same. All I need is a brush and some colours in my bag and I can get to work.

BM: So you regard painting as something extremely simple?

NT: I'd like it to be. And not only painting. Living could be easier than we think. Singing is simple when it's well done. When Callas sings, it's simple! Obviously she has worked to be able to control her voice as she does, but when you listen to *Casta Diva* it sounds simple and magnificent! Perhaps simplicity is a way of approaching life. For instance, I don't have a fax machine, and there's no foppery in my refusal to have one. It's just that every time I hear a fax machine ring it reminds me of army officers hurling at draftees, *garde-à-vous fixe!* (Attention! 'shun!), and the soldiers immediately stand stiff as drum sticks holding their rifles perfectly straight. Today, I get the feeling we're living in a period of *garde-à-vous fax!*

BM: For you, this simplicity serves as a guarantee of freedom. Your approach to painting enables you to avoid having to deal with all sorts of peripheral problems.

NT: Our lives are bogged down enough as it is by all sorts of stupidities. I think we ought to do ourselves the treat of avoiding them in areas that we have deliberately chosen. The reason I generally come to the exhibition site myself to do what needs to be done is to avoid having to make all kinds of arrangements that have nothing to do with painting (transport, insurance, bans, etc.). We ought to save the energy we have left for areas that deserve our attention and not let ourselves get ensnared by technical or material limits. If I had taken it into my head thirty-five years ago to produce imprints in diamond powder on a platinum plate, I'd still be waiting to do my first piece!

BM: This way of proceeding revives a form of nomadism. The very lightness of the means you employ opens up a space of freedom so that you and your work gain in autonomy. You are not burdened by cumbersome, heavy objects that need to be moved from place to place. I keep coming back to the idea of a short-circuit between the first and final stroke of painting. Notwithstanding the humility of your gesture, it remains a radical act because it is situated at the outer limits of the pictorial. I've got an idiotic question that I'm dying to ask you: Is it still possible to

paint after you, with you, at the same time as you?

NT: This notion of a “first” or “final” stroke is very nice, but it’s cumbersome and it’s a real heavy load to bear. Think of someone who produces a fantastic wine. It might even be the best in the region, and hard to surpass. But there will always be someone who can do better. Obviously the very idea of “better” is relative, in painting even more so than in wine-making. But it would be a real pity if we were to refuse to measure the wine’s quality against others, start making a new batch on a so-called novel basis and end up producing a vinegary brew (unfortunately, a common approach in art). And then what usually happens is that everybody goes wild about the new brew! It would be better to start out trying to do equally well, and then if possible do better still. Personally I think there is still a lot left to be done in painting.

BM: In this respect, ours is a quite regressive period.

NT: And not only in terms of art! Unfortunately, the regression is general. This is what the artworks reflect. (By the way, I have always considered that works should reflect themselves before reflecting anything else) And after doing everything possible to impose the American model on us, suddenly they’ve turned around, discovered it’s not ideal and are lamenting all its flaws. Yet God knows all we’ve done to please Uncle Sam, in art as in everything else! Getting back to the famous “finishing strake”. It’s an absurd idea. As ridiculous as saying that no one can sing Casta Diva after Callas! There will always be a singer capable of interpreting with enormous simplicity and expressiveness lyrics that, incidentally, everyone agrees are stupid anyway. I repeat that the question for me is not “What should I do?” but “What’s the point?” Everybody keeps making a fuss about the “death of painting” but what they give us instead are videos that in the best of cases are not even up to par with Godard’s worst film. Maybe what’s important is that things get done, but don’t expect me to find them interesting, no less share in them.

BM: What are the things that you consider to be of vital importance these days?

NT: Living. Otherwise, recently I’ve been reading Pasolini again and I must say that the questions he raised thirty years ago are just as relevant today. The full implications of his thinking were not understood at the time. In France, it was the period of the “new philosophers” who are now scorned by one and all. You know how little concerned I feel by the art world, be it my strength or my folly! I have certainly been made to pay for this attitude. But I don’t mind; after all, it’s fair play! In poker, you choose the table where you play, and there are tables where you’ll never find me sitting. It’s the same thing with the art world, and when it comes down to it, there are not an infinite number of tables to choose from. I have never believed in the “great family” of artists, in fact I don’t believe in families at all. Getting back to your question, doing my work/painting seems of vital importance to me.

BM: You believe neither in the existence of an “art world” nor in that highly abstract entity known as “contemporary art”?

NT: It ends up existing with its cliques, chapels, and pilgrimages to Basel, Venice, Kassel, Munster and so on. Every one comes back, of course, saying there was nothing to see and off they all go again to do another pilgrimage in two years time! I’ve never been on one of these pilgrimages, but then again I’ve never been to Lourdes! Don’t get me wrong, I have nothing against the people who go to Lourdes. They rather make me laugh.

BM: The Operation involves establishing an artificial homogeneity amongst people who have nothing in common, artistically speaking.

NT: Even so, I must admit that I have even less to do with plumber or zinc-worker circles, and

that my work has afforded me the possibility of meeting some wonderful people. For the most part, though, I have been careful to choose my friends outside art circles. They have much to teach me and especially they have a different way of looking at things, so that whether I share their views or not, I don't keep going round in circles. But this is hardly a theoretical decision; it's just the way I am.

BM: Marcel Broodthaers; whose work doesn't seem to have anything in common with yours, has had a great impact on you, hasn't he?

NT: Marcel and I were good friends, precisely because our work was very different. We spent nights fighting pleasantly. There were no power games between us and no jealousy. On the other hand we were in complete agreement when it came to politics, for instance, Or antipsychiatry. Neither of us was known at the time. Occasionally we were invited to parties where there were celebrities, such as the early American conceptual artists, who already had their place in Europe! But we knew that we were smarter than they were! Broodthaers was first and foremost a writer. I loved his films; he always showed them to me before screening them in public. His genius was in his way of staging words and objects, but also in his generosity. In this respect, he was stronger than all the artists who have tried since to pursue the same path.

BM: As regards Broodthaers, could we speak of a form of naiveté?

NT: Broodthaers was not naive. He was someone who cast doubt on everything and who had a strong, argumentative mind. He'd begin the evening asserting that a table was black and by the end of the night he'd maintain that the same table was red, when in fact it was mostly in wood and had a tinge of yellow to it! He had managed to come to terms with the art world, in an ironic and implacable way. I remember one day he told me: "Don't worry, Niele, when the time comes and things work for us, then they'll really do us over." Implicitly what he meant to say was that the bourgeois dominated art world would get the better of us. In a way with Décors he was beating them to it by putting the spectators back into their context of palm trees and red carpeting. Most of the people who came to see these exhibitions probably didn't realise that their parents had actually lived in such settings! With Giulio Paolini, it's the same thing: our work is very different and yet we have much in common.

BM: Friendship is clearly more vital to you than so-called professional relationships.

NT: I have of course known people whose work I found interesting but whom I couldn't stand as human beings! On the other hand, if I feel a great friendship for Ulrich Rückriem, it is because I appreciate the person as much as his work. Here is an artist who puts life before work, and that; in my opinion, is what accounts for the remarkable quality of his artistic output.

BM: You consider of utmost importance to put one's life before one's work. Yet, you refuse any confusion between art and life.

NT: The notion of "living as an artist" has always made me laugh. It reminds me of all the people who are so "sick of life", they go to the doctor every other day to make sure they will stay alive and "lifesick" as long as possible. On the other hand, I've known people who were not artists, who never said anything about being sick of life and who simply killed themselves. The chance of artists is to be able to slip past all of life's flaws. I often think of Freud's answer to Pastor Pfister, who had invited him to see an exhibition by two artists whose names I've forgotten. "Keep in mind that I have no indulgence whatsoever for artists and madmen," Freud wrote and then went on to explain that whereas the latter had attenuating circumstances the same could hardly be said of the former who, by acting mad, brought on the condescension of their solid bourgeois environment. It is true that whenever I meet an artist, I look at his work first but if I

see that he is not a very interesting person, it doesn't help matters. I don't understand the nature of this artistic "aura" that they make such a fuss about. Does it come from the gut? Maybe that is its source: after all guts produce shit and so do these artists.

BM: Your painting couldn't really be said to establish a connection with shit!

NT: I appreciate shit as shit.

BM: But not as a metaphor for painting! Your art draws us out of the mire by its very lightness!

NT: The "lightness of being" is often even heavier to bear!

BM: It is true that lightness is not generally seen as a value!

NT: A heavy work of art is not necessarily interesting, nor a light one uninteresting. As a matter of fact, it's usually just the opposite.

BM: In describing your work as light what I mean is that it never owes anything to the space where it appears, it is always generous with the places that welcome it, and it never imposes itself on them. In addition, your imprints are not garrulous, they never constitute a commentary on the space. They are there purely for their own sake, with nothing to gain.

NT: I have often said that if my problem had been space, I would have been an architect. The last exhibition I did at the Yvon Lambert gallery was entitled Homage to Swallows, simply because the imprints were applied in the upper corners of the gallery's many beams, and swallows build their nests in such spots. For once, the spectators were released from a major Parisian preoccupation, namely, keeping their eyes on their feet to avoid walking in dog shit (being that, these days we have flown so low, we've touched lower than rock bottom: we've hit shit bottom). Here, if only for a few minutes, they can look up. There are places that are designed for works of art and places that are designated as blind spots. Why not do something with them? In group shows, I'm often the last one to show up at the exhibition site. I apply my imprints in the corridor, the stairwell or behind a door. And then they accuse me of taking the best spot! Finding a spot is never a problem for me. But then again I come from a country where people emigrated as plasterers, building painters and masons. The most outstanding among them gave us Borromini, Maderno or Rossi to whom we owe many buildings in Saint Petersburg.

BM: Many artworks rely on the setting to command attention to themselves. I recall the way you managed at Villa Arson in Nice, which is not exactly an appealing space – it's neither a castle nor a chapel – to give an excellent demonstration of all that can be done with painting.

NT: It is a question of both sensitivity and experience. My work is subject only to such purely material conditions as whether the texture of the wall is suitable or not. Never to architectural considerations. It is also true that I accept the place as it is and have almost never had a wall or an alcove built to present my work. On the other hand, a place always has a certain atmosphere to it. (Bordeaux is not Zurich or Nuremberg!) No doubt, the freedom I have is related to minimalism. One thing I've often thought of doing which I've never carried out because it would give rise to too much controversy, is to apply white imprints on another artwork. I'm convinced that it wouldn't prevent us from seeing the other work. Certain paintings may even be, all the better for it! (laughter)

BM: One of the main qualities of your work is its capacity to make the place where it is applied seem airy. It lets space breathe and the spectator too. People always talk about your imprints, but rarely about the spaces between them.

NT: It's the relationship between the painted and the non-painted, each reflects the other. Much attention has been given to the thirty centimetres between imprints. Its source is really quite simple. I made my first imprints in a happy-go-lucky way, and threw out ninety percent of it because I found it too lyrical. But when it worked, the imprints were always between twenty-eight and thirty-two centimetres apart. This was simply the tight distance for the painted and the non-painted to respect each other. Simple and banal.

BM: You often speak of your work in terms of banality. Mightn't we add the word neutrality in respect to your determination not to be expressive or lyrical?

NT: I employ the term banality in relation to the fear I have that people regard what I do as part of a well-developed plan or strategy. I never do in-depth studies or preliminary drawings to see where it will work best. I simply try to respect the places I'm offered.

BM: A return to the idea of the "natural" as it was understood in the 17th century?

NT: Art has a silly, arrogant way of blowing things up to make them seem important. Beckett had one of his characters state that the best way to talk of nothing is to talk of it as if it were something. Art reviews have adopted this principle as their creed. Personally I'm not afraid that people will say that my painting "is nothing".

BM: Do you mean to say that you deal directly with nothingness and needn't resort to discourses to make it exist.

NT: I'm not scared of such terms as banality, simplicity and even normality. Nothing is more banal and normal than repetition. Nothing more self-evident to us than the repetition of our hearts beating, whether we are asleep or awake. Without repetition, we are dead! Fear of nothingness has disastrous consequences. There are times in school, for instance, when it would be better to tell the students that we have nothing to tell them. Let each person think. We can not fill emptiness at all costs, with the radio, the television or idle talk. This is what I try to avoid doing.

BM: "Nothing", as it so happens, does not mean that "anything goes".

NT: I would say that it's the "all" these days that's equivalent to "anything goes".

BM: You are against the notion that "anything" can be art, a wide-spread idea nowadays, which stems from a misreading of Duchamp.

NT: There is something truly demagogic about this conception of things. Getting people to believe that they are artists and that all they have to do is move an object from its content to produce art, is not constructive. I'd even say that it is very dangerous to make people believe that everything is possible. It is the free enterprise outlook of liberalism, and it gives a fallacious idea of freedom. Personally, though, it's okay by me if everything is art.

BM: In that case there would simply be no more art! Those who declare that anything and everything can be art are biting the hand that feeds them.

NT: Except that they usually manage to be the only ones who are allowed to say it! I've noticed that such demagogic practices mainly concern the visual arts. Who claims that anyone can write a book or compose a musical score? For some years now, we have been subjected to repeated onslaughts by advocates of therapeutic and sociological art. These are realities, of course, and taken in their context, they have a sense. (Releasing pent-up emotions on a piece of paper causes less pain than beating up or killing an innocent bystander!) But that's not reason enough for me

to be interested in the so-called “artistic” result. The funniest thing about it, is that advocates of these theories think of themselves as being part of a protest movement. As if all it takes to qualify as a rebel is to say you are. It’s through acts that one is a rebel or not. You can’t be one simply by wanting to be.

BM: Revolt. That’s something that has gone out of fashion!

NT: On the other hand, today people are rediscovering that art is political. And this revival is taking place in a quite naive way. It suffices to take three pictures of poor people in a desperate situation, naturally devoid of artistic interest, and they are immediately labelled political works. Thanks to this label, the price of the photos goes up, and the number of poor people do too!

BM: It’s the good old subject alibi. It doesn’t matter how it’s painted, what matters is what is painted. But the best intentions often conceal the worst artistic mediocraties.

NT: It hasn’t changed in thirty years. We end up with the same absurdities as at the time when Che Guevara was depicted as Christ. It wasn’t Che’s ideas that were being spread, but those of the Catholic Church. The proof is that Che was assassinated, Cuba will soon disappear – we’re only waiting for the old guy to kick off –, and the Church is thriving. The question remains whether the language of one class can serve to “speak” on behalf of another class. Can images with strong overtones and laden with meaning, serve to subvert that very meaning? As a painter, I cannot help but ask myself this question. With a tool as familiar as the brush, what can I do to avoid such mishaps? Right or wrong, I say to myself: once the brush has left its trace, maybe then it signals something to us, maybe it shows us that there could be something in the realm of what is not already a given. By sticking as close as possible to the tool’s own language, I no longer use it to repeat an existing, exterior language and, at the same time, I make painting visible. This is not a subversive act on the primary level, but it becomes so in relation to what is usually called painting. The artist’s moral stance must be distinguished from the works he produces which should have nothing to do with propaganda. If you have a political statement to make, write a slogan on a placard. You certainly won’t find me marching with three imprints on a sign, and declaring that I’m defending the homeless!

BM: What is the relationship between your painting that says nothing more than what it shows, and your political convictions, which I know to be very strong.

NT: I sustain that my work is political through and through. Anyone who can, at a given point in time, accept this work, that is to say, see what there is to see, will also be able, as an after-effect, to perceive the illusory reality that surrounds him. He’ll be able to judge the politician by his acts and not his words, and know the TV anchorman for what he is and not for what he pretends to be. Painting, as I conceive it, is a training in vision. This is why I say that our generation was so obsessed by doublespeak that it can no longer see straight [TN.: literally “was so obsessed by ‘wooden language’ that it ended up falling into the trap of the ‘plaster eye’.”] It reminds me of the exchange I had with some friends on their return from a walk in the woods. I asked them if they had seen a beautiful tree and to describe it to me, and all they could say was, “They’re all alike!”. Such people will visit an exhibition; and may even be regarded as connoisseurs, but they will never see anything that their eyes have not already digested. This inability to see straight, what I term a “plaster eye”, is a very serious defect. Horrors slip by as if they were nothing, precisely because they are not seen. Today, public accountability has supposedly ousted officialese, but all you have to do is watch these professional speakers speak to know they’re lying.

BM: Art as a gaze on the world not as its mirror.

NT: In 1977 I headed a text with a quotation by Paul Nizan that is just as pertinent today: “Our

bourgeois society has not need of art that does anything but produce objects in keeping with the vogues and propaganda of its rule.” I’m not the twenty-two-year-old kid I was when I came to Paris. That was thirty-eight years ago. I’m sixty today. But what are thirty-eight years? They count for my old knees and for my rheumatism. But in terms of painting, they amount to nothing at all. It’s exactly the same for the length of time that a work is exhibited. It may be on view for three days, three years, thirty years or even vanish altogether. What matters is that it was there and someone saw it. What happens after – the fetishising, the conservation problems and so on – are of no importance to me. In thirty-eight years, there have been quite a number of art vogues. Have they produced any real changes? I think not. The outside packaging changes, but inside it’s the same old junk.

BM: I’d like to return to that fear of the void and of nothingness that we were talking about earlier. Your painting is the exemplification of the fact that repeating the self-same gesture based on the self-same method and producing works that are different each time is not a contradiction.

NT: I did not set out to illustrate anything whatsoever. It’s something that came in the doing. But the question is one I had considered from the opposite angle, in thinking about a number of artists who didn’t particularly interest me and who tended to change the subject of their work every other year. They trumpeted this difference but ultimately did the same thing again and again, because they always had their egos to impose. I find equally absurd the way that many people, who don’t particularly appreciate my work, end up finding some interest in it precisely because they are impressed by the supposed madness or folly that drives me to always do the same thing! The reasoning goes something like this: “Toroni always does the same thing, but since he’s been doing it for thirty years, it must be interesting!” That’s why I don’t like getting into discussions of this kind.

BM: It could be said that your work/painting has a way of ramming the point home. If you persist in sticking to your formulation of work, it is also to denounce what you call the “plaster eye”.

NT: There’s a didactic side to what you’re suggesting that bothers me. After all, you can have the position I have without working too much. In art schools I often find myself telling students, a bit aggressively: “If I do what I do, it’s because I’ve spent a lot of time playing tarot in bistros!” It is obvious that at ten in the morning you’ve got to be daring to ask yourself: “Am I going to the studio or to play cards?” Should I consider myself to be invested with some sort of mission that obliges me to produce masterpieces at given hours?

BM: At bottom, you’re not afraid of wasting your time?

NT: I’m not scared of being called lazy, It’s part of an old Christian moral code that doesn’t interest me. Just look around you. How much time gets wasted in work!

BM: You’re advocating the right to idleness?

NT: I don’t have a guilty conscience about spending a part of my life in bistros. Gambling in casinos, standing hours in front of a slot machine, has an incredible way of cleansing me inside, and it suits me better than racing through museums just to say that I’ve visited them. It’s a matter of life style and choices.

Bordeaux, July 5, 1997

BM: I’d like to turn to your use of colour. Picasso once said, “When I don’t have blue, I use red.” I get the feeling that you have the same arbitrary approach to colour.

NT: I have every right to choose the colours I like to buy shirts, socks, underwear, handkerchiefs or flowers. I also have the right to use a specific colour in my painting for contextual reasons, such as Bordeaux reds at the cape. And I'm not talking about the colours of Bordeaux wines. Colour is not wine! I will be playing on, ten shades of Bordeaux red pigment available on the market. In Berne, I was asked to work in the lobby of a bank built in 1900. The question of colour, why use one shade rather than another, came up, of course, right away. Eventually, I opted for the colours of the Berne flag which has a black bear inside a yellow band surrounded by red. At the Grenoble museum, I did a sort of homage to Stendhal with a red and black composition! While I agree wholeheartedly with Picasso's statement, I can maintain such an attitude only before I begin a work/painting (since I always continue in the same colour, I can never have the same "artistic" off-handedness as Picasso). I've taken the colour game further with collectors who've invited me to produce something specifically for their homes, by applying blue imprints between two windows, for instance, as a reminder of the sky, or red ones at a spot where we had sampled some excellent red wines! The best solution is to ask the people who commission the works what colour they want. Often they reply, "You're the artist!" But what's the point of fooling ourselves: most collectors buy works for decorative purposes, to match the curtains or wallpaper, for example. There's nothing to be ashamed of, and no reason to ignore such real factors.

BM: It seems to me that you have a preference for primary colours.

NT: More and more so. I like the brutality of primary colours. I did many of my first paintings with red lead paint. Obviously there was a polemical thrust in bringing to the fore a pigment that widely serves as an undercoat, but the orange-red tone has a fire to it that colours designed for artists lack. In general, with a few rare exceptions, I do not mix my colours. At Lucerne, I started with a popular song ("Um weiss gegen rot dazu tralali lao ...") and all of a sudden I went from white to red, in a homage to Switzerland this time and not to wine. I like playing around with colour symbols. Tessin's flag is red and blue because Napoleon gave us independence. The flag of Paris, the city where I've been living for thirty-eight years and which suits me just fine, has the very same colours. I don't think much of Napoleon, but this colour agreement amuses me, because in a manner of speaking I've never left home! The only problem is that as someone with a minority background, I wouldn't like to become a Frenchman from Paris; on the other hand, I wouldn't mind becoming a Frenchman from Corsica!

Mouscardès, July 6, 1997

BM: Once again, the question of colour clearly conveys the distinction between the linguistic terms for a pigment which are always the same and its perceived reality which is always different.

NT: Colour exists only if it is seen. It's something relative. White is a sign of virginity in the West; in the East it's a sign of mourning. I've done shows where I've confronted white imprints on white paper, pinned to a white wall, next to dressed linen canvases and a white wax-cloth, all the same size. The only common denominator was the colour of the imprints. Otherwise there were four wholly distinct whites: the wall white, the paper white, the linen white and the wax-cloth white. The abstract notion of black or white can lead to bad habits that are not merely artistic. "Blacks" is a catch-all term. Personally I've never seen anyone "black". Nor have I ever seen any one "white". Just darker or lighter shades of pinkish, yellowish, greenish, and so on. Painting eludes linguistic terms. If we could render the plane of colour and painting in language, there'd be no point to painting. When it comes to alcohol, I like the ones that are nearly colourless. Their intensity arises from their flavour, density and fragrance. I've always loved the "black" painters like Goya, Daumier, Manet or Courbet. And closer to our times, Pollock, of course.

BM: And Reinhardt?

NT: Of course. Reinhardt is a great painter. But I've always considered his painting as a final attempt to get away from monochrome. There are literary aspects to his painting, as if it were implicitly telling us: If you stand in this position, the black will be blue, from there it will be red, and so on. Reinhardt did however develop his thinking quite far.

BM: Monochrome does not figure as a reference in your work/ painting?

NT: Monochrome is very important historically. These days the work of Malevitch, Rodchenko and Tatlin is being shelved by people who are rewriting history with an eye to convincing us that everything leading up to the Russian revolution was awful, and that only the human figure counts.

BM: What is your position in respect to the recent attacks on contemporary art?

NT: Such debates interest me without interesting me. It's true that nothing much is produced these days that I find exciting. But to say that it was better before or better somewhere else is not really what I would call a position!

BM: Do you think that "contemporary art", like "white", doesn't really exist? That it too is a catch-all term?

NT: All the more so since all kinds of outdated things are being done under the cover of contemporary art. That's my point of view: whether it is right or wrong is beside the point. In this respect, I feel like paraphrasing Marcel Broodthaers quip, "I am the only one who can say that Toroni is an artist," and saying, "I am the only one who can tell what is good or not these days!" It's clear to me. To others, that's another story! I am not teaching anybody anything. I have no desire whatever to be a professor. I think that each person has to go through his own experiences, and see for himself, but without overlooking what has happened in the past. This revival today of "freedom of art" sounds pretty enough but if it's to deliver us a series of pseudo-messages of the smugly conformist, backward and reactionary type, I say no! I refuse to use my painting to deliver messages. I repeat, if I feel the need to make a statement about society or the world, I will use the appropriate channels. Otherwise, the question still stands: "What's the point of doing an exhibition?"

Translated from French by Gila Walker