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## Egan Frantz: Switched-On Painting

By Daniel Sherer, Mousse Magazine, 2019

Egan Frantz's latest work reinforces the widespread impression of painting's full-throated return. With his most recent set of works, exhibited in September 2019 in a solo show at Team Gallery in New York, he enters into uncharted territory. More precisely, one may situate not only his approach, but his entire recent body of work, as a manifestation of a new attitude toward the medium that one might call "switched-on painting."

Frantz produces large canvases that are ambitious in scope and packed with incident. One also notes a dialectic of participation and distance, which goes hand in hand with his strong interest in perceptual and conceptual ambiguity. In his most recent work, a wide-ranging, polycentric energy extending from scale to format to the widest expanses and major divisions of the visual field manifests itself with remarkable lucidity, or—more simply—with a certain brightness of form. Color is the structural means of this achieved unity.

Across Frantz's paintings, passages of vivid color stand out sharply against measured visual fields, punctuating the overall flow. The fields themselves are inflected by subtle shifts, visible fault lines, and palpable displacements that make the pictorial surface vibrate as they alternate between the stability of linear contours and the disruption effected by localized chromatic intrusions. Everything in Frantz's approach—despite the appearance of seamlessness that marks many of his paintings—militates against the idea of closure (perceptual, hermeneutic, or otherwise). Hence the fault lines: fractures that, like seismic movements emerging from beneath the surface, make their presence inescapably felt in the shifting pictorial terrain.

Even the most cursory examination of *Night Drive* (2019), where pinks jostle against other pinks in extra-subtle fashion, pitting sameness against slightly different non-sameness, reveals a preference for a certain dialectical subtlety. This technique comes to the fore in this work more than anywhere else in his output, except possibly *Köln → NY Connection* (2019). Here, too, pink becomes a sign for not only a reactivation of Pop chromatic memory but also its determinate negation, which leads to something like a miniature sublimity.

Yet for all of its brightness and charm, Frantz's approach can abruptly modulate to produce passages that are no less ghostly, no less bizarre, than any other of the more or less outlandish moments of contemporary art. They find their nonlinear equivalent (at least as far as a certain strangeness of detail is concerned) in the putative head, more abstract than anything else and only quite remotely mimetic, of Thomas Aquinas himself, dubbed Doctor Angelicus in the Middle Ages for his expertise in angelology. Comprised of a triple core of exposed brain-like shapes of different colors, this head seems somehow fecal, somehow structural, not decoratively scatological, but deeply inscribed into the pictorial texture despite the evident surface appeal of *The Angelic Doctor* (2019).

Such oddities are attractive and profound, despite their somewhat baleful medievalizing presence, here reduced to an enigmatic, almost heraldic blotch. They raise as many questions as they answer, if only for their unexpected, slightly offbeat quality, transmitted all the more effectively because they are so deadpan, as are the diversely colored crosses hovering in some flattened ether to the right of the saint, like levitating angelic presences of pure, abstract color.

Frantz is alert to the fact that color—both pictorial and extra-pictorial—has the power to elicit more responses than might appear possible at first glance, and just as many associations situated at the crossroads of several meanings. This polysemy at the heart of color is central to the complex game of thrust and parry with his canvases that Frantz is playing. At times, this aspect of his approach produces chromatic harmonies that give some of his pictures a relatively more tranquil—or at least a comfortable—feel. More often, however, one is compelled to notice the way he emphasizes linear oppositions of the chromatic and the non-chromatic in stripes, with all of the power of surface vibrancy and all the potential to induce the indeterminacy that is generated when placing the observer in a visual space that is unresolved, and between categories, that this implies. For since this device gives rise to a condition of uncertainty as to the apportioning of foreground and background, striping—even more so when one is dealing with his "broken" stripe, a kind of stripe raised to a higher power of ambivalence—induces a certain type of anxiety.

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In Frantz's pictorial universe the categorical imperative of the dynamization of form reigns supreme, to the point of achieving a completely activated visuality, an evocation of optical movement through the mobilization of specific pictorial techniques. This is what is meant by "switched-on painting," the artist's own apt designation for what he is doing with his preferred medium. Indeed, when we look at his canvases a switch is seemingly thrown, casting a flood of light onto both the work's inherent chromatic structure and its geometric outlines. These are illuminated by a kind of synesthetic equivalent of the Moog synthesizer's electrified sound produced by Walter/Wendy Carlos in his epochal album *Switched-On Bach* (1968)—a significant fold within the centuries-old Bach reception that reads, if not as a conscious corrective to Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* of the same year, an almost pious filmic reconstruction marked by a certain lyrical, black-and-white austerity, then as an unconscious alternative tied to the "Baroque" side of the 1960s (now chiefly remembered in the absurd travesty of Austin Powers's lacy outfits).

Actually the last reference is the most revealing, as one finds in Frantz's production as well a unique fusion of high abstraction and dry wit. This is evident in *Wendy Carlos* (2019), which teeters over the edge of seriousness into modes of complex irony. This picture constitutes a kind of abstract portrait marked by equal parts celebration and mirth, visible above all in the placement of a doily-like object on the "head" of Wendy/Walter Carlos at the painting's center, as if to honor the protagonist represented through an evocation of the powdered wig and lacy cravat the composer sported on the iconic cover of the album *Switched-On Bach*.

Here the observer is confronted by a double transposition: one that moves without missing a beat from a chromatic evocation of the electronic translation of Bach's polyphonic richness to an achromatic allusion to the effective transcendence of the gender binary attained by the synth pioneer herself, Wendy Carlos (still Walter when the album cover image was printed), one of the earliest on the contemporary music scene to switch gender. (Needless to say, "switching" here acquires, or rather discloses, more than one level of meaning.) This milestone is deftly recoded by the complex shift from one color key to another that becomes apparent as one reads the painting from side to side, from top to bottom, and ultimately in the short cut between the two readings articulated along the diagonal, emphasizing a frilly whiteness that alludes simultaneously to the cravat and the wig itself, and ultimately to the gender-bending potentials inherent in Baroque drag. Ultimately this itinerary leaves the viewer in a state of productive uncertainty as to whether the white area represents a wig, a doily, the head of the figure, or all three at once. A less subtle artist might have played up the camp side of this subject, yet the potential for exaggeration that is clearly present here is cleverly counteracted, nipped in the bud by the work's high degree of abstraction and fairly muted palette. The resultant ambiguity sets up a series of tensions that contribute to the construction of a potent visual metaphor conveying the layered complexity and revolutionary role of the protagonist of the portrait.

Focusing on the decidedly less purist side of this 1960s vision of the Baroque, as compared to the claims implicitly put forward by the cinema of Straub and Huillet, Frantz invites us to reconsider the transgressive jolt Wendy/Walter Carlos administered to the staid sensorium of the classical music world at the time as a contemporary template through which one can read his own pictorial approach: the chromatic vividness and drama of separation and reunion, the forms laid down and superimposed on the canvas at different angles, the dislocations and reverberations enacted by distinct tonal fields, the exiting and re-entrant lines, and the modulated and variable striping can all be interpreted as compelling evidence of this.

This modality also justifies a reading of his work as synthetic—a description that applies in equal measure to its abstract/figurative dynamic and its genealogical aspect. A case in point is the way in which the pictures evoke the neat compartmentalization of hard-edge Modernism only to violate this aesthetic at key points, undermining any notion of fixed composition while embodying a certain freedom that ends up being identified with the ultimate purposes of painting as such.

Frantz's approach is therefore the opposite of what John Ruskin called "fatal newness." In this respect Frantz is happy to paint in Ruskin's shadow, as his newness is utterly genuine, never put-on, and almost disconcertingly confident in the powers that the medium has placed at his disposal. Yet he never crosses the line into sheer identification with the mental object of pure abstraction or any of its antitheses.

Certain of the pictures, for instance *Morning After* (Kolbe) (2019), seem to embody a straightforward dialectic of illusionism and formal distortion, untouched by any secondary concerns or overlaid narratives. Even the main point

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of reference to an emblematic instance of modern sculpture in its familiar Barcelona Pavilion setting is handled so directly and so elegantly that it does not upstage or distract from the visual directness of the pictorial statement.

And even when an unequivocal architectonic reference is put forward, as in Köln → NY Connection, in which the graphic/gestural modality of the calligraphic flourish seems to be emancipated from any conventional signification, not only is the shadow of the spires of Cologne Cathedral visible beneath the sinuous, gestural line, but a salutary tension between abstraction and figuration is retained and even reinforced, precisely because of the evocation of this shadow. Architecture, which could under other circumstances threaten to overwhelm the pictorial field by subsuming its visuality under a constructive reference, is here made to augment an ambivalence specific to painting.

What is at stake when two antithetical systems collide, the first measured and open to infinite extension, the second chromatically saturated and discrete, finite in its mode of visual enunciation? One plausible response is contained in *Lady in the Radiator* (2019), which carries with it a complex semiotic function implicit in the cinematic dimension of referentiality—the title refers to a ghostly, cloying figure in David Lynch's 1977 film *Eraserhead*—to fuse with, or become inseparable from, its musical/aural parallelisms and the synesthetic dimension that implies. For this picture is inspired by one of the weirdest moments in David Lynch's incomparably bizarre film, and more precisely by the sounds associated with the film a whole. It is endowed with a disconcerting industrial soundtrack, like a nonstop grinding of rusty gears, with shrill aftereffects, here transposed into brighter, yet no less potent visual terms.

This most ambitious, and by far Frantz's largest, painting exhibited to date, *Lady in the Radiator*—as much a haunted allegory of domestic space with cult cinema overtones as a musical score whose constituent signs are subject to a conspicuous process of disruption—initially appears arbitrary but reveals itself to be a radical rewriting of an entire notational system. It seems at first as if the notational condition is given to our vision as the simple ground for the figures of the musical signs of the notes, forming harmony and melody. But further scrutiny reveals that in connection with the painting-notation dialectic the artist ends up following a more oblique and discontinuous path.

Whether analogous to a musical score or not, the most evident manifestation of the idea of the collision of antithetical notational systems is found in the fact that not only are the chromatic elements intimately bound up with an uneven white and black set of lines, but that there is a symmetrical order of concepts, if not entirely of visuality, at work here. The large colored patch that dominates the visual field is divided into two vertically articulated regions endowed with equal visual weight—black at the top, teal at the bottom—and it is the color-negating top half that sends out more or less horizontal lines of black and blue that disturb the vertical lines of the striping around it. If one had to envision a kind of electrified pictorial energy, this is would be one way to do it: both lines snake continuously across the field, animated from within by black or licorice-gray smaller lines that form an equally sinuous core. White paint drips in an interpolated, partly determined, partly arbitrary pattern, giving rise to the paradox, extremely rare in the history of modern art, of a white shadow effect—not unknown, perhaps, in certain passages of Francis Bacon, yet here much flatter, much franker, and in some way more innocent to the eye, than when they limn a screaming Baroque pope.

These lines are in turn distinguished by a visible difference of facture: the left one drips white from its underside, exceeding its physical as well as its self-imposed conventional limits, exemplifying the effect of gravity on painting in the most unavoidably physical terms, while the other is a clean line in which color stays neatly within its boundaries. In passages such as these Frantz succeeds in actualizing the potentials of color-as-line, or linearized color, in uniquely heightened fashion.

In this way as well a local semiotics of color yields important clues about how to read the pictorial field, framing its re-formalization and resignification not only of its own set of conventions but of the histories of painting that are implicit in it. Frantz is acutely aware that it is necessary to show these relationships at work in their specific linear, chromatic, and referential/semiotic domains—to expose their modes of operation and interchange by drawing in the eye through the simultaneous exposure of such modes.

One might even say that this exposure is the actual subject of his painting, at least in its most recent iterations. That does not mean forestalling or in any way undercutting illusion, even and especially within an overall context of abstraction (with hints of mimetic reference to be sure, as in the vertical element in *Morning After* (Kolbe), which

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complicates the matter further in that it is an instance of art not as a nonartistic referent, but as a paradigmatic work of modern architecture: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's and Lilly Reich's aforementioned Barcelona Pavilion of 1929.)

Quite the opposite: a sense of illusion ends up being reinforced by the entry of a second-order evocation of a famous work of art and its original site in an even more conspicuous emblem of modern architecture, utilized as inner framing device, whose presence is only hinted at and that compensates in a sense for the lack of any actual frame around the image. Here we confront an instance of the thematization of the material support that is inherited from the expanded field condition, making its presence felt through a dialogue with architecture—an art that has no frame or paragon in the pictorial sense—which serves as sort of internal frame for his artistic enterprise because it is pressed into the service of the pictorial medium. This move is part of the very deliberate aesthetic of Frantz's painting, which leaves the observer in a state of curiosity about its facture—a curiosity that can only be partly satisfied by scrutiny of the raw sides of the canvas itself.

In this respect as in others, Frantz's is an art not of either—or but of both—and. His fundamentally synthetic approach makes ample use of analytic modes even as it probes the spaces between previously airtight categories. It is significant that Frantz's new pictorial discoveries are occurring at the precise moment when the tide of the expanded field has to some extent receded, revealing islands of medium specificity that are not only changing the map of contemporary art but also proving to be sites of unexpectedly lush growths of artistic vitality. Like all new terrains, this one invites extensive exploration; yet like very few, the trip is well worth it.

Arguably further insight into the inner logic of the work can be gained by varying the metaphor—for even more aptly than this last figure of a journey into painting's interiority, or the artist's own idea of “switched-on” painting, perhaps there is no better way to sum up what Frantz has achieved so far than to recall a famous quip by Barnett Newman that still resonates as the ultimate put-down to those who, being overly theory-obsessed, end up reversing the priorities of theory and practice: “Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds.”<sup>1</sup> It is in this sense, without subscribing to any preformed aesthetic, searching and finding as he moves forward, that Frantz has taken flight. Yet unlike, say, Percy Bysshe Shelley's skylark, which rises from some exalted point into an even higher imperceptible ether, he pursues a trajectory that draws our attention by more tangible means, challenging but also enabling us to trace the rapid arc of his development from the ground of his painting up to and including its furthest limit.

1. John P. O'Neill, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 25.

Daniel Sherer (b. 1963) teaches the history and theory of architecture at Princeton School of Architecture. He has taught at the Yale School of Architecture (2008 to 2017) and Columbia GSAPP (1998 to 2017). He received his PhD from the Harvard University Department of the History of Art and Architecture in 2000. His areas of research include modern receptions of humanist architecture, Italian modernism with reference to the interaction of architecture, art, and design, Italian Renaissance and Baroque architecture, contemporary architecture, historiography and theory, and contemporary art, frequently in relation to architecture. He has lectured internationally on architectural and artistic topics and has published widely in European and American journals including *Artforum*, *AA Files*, *Perspecta*, *Zodiac*, *Assemblage*, *Domus*, *The Journal of Architecture*, *Design Book Review*, *Giornale dell'Architettura* and *Potlatch*. His translation of Manfredo Tafuri's *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects*, published by Yale University Press in 2006, won the Sir Nikolaus Pevsner Book Award in that year. Most recently he has curated the exhibition *Aldo Rossi: The Architecture and Art of the Analogous City*, at Princeton SOA (2018).