



RENCONTRE AVEC JOE FYFE

mardi 24 avril 2012 dans son atelier à Brooklyn

Participaient à cette rencontre:

Anne-Sophie Convers, Camille Cros, Quentin Montagne, Marylise Navaro, Antoine, étudiants de l'EESAB de Rennes ainsi que Cyril Behncke, Laura Pardini, Varda Schneider, Rémi Vernet, étudiants de l'ESAD Valence

Dominique Abensour., critique d'art, commissaire d'exposition,
professeur à l'EESAB

Olivier Gourvil., peintre, professeur à l'ESAD Grenoble Valence

Joe Fyfe. – I think the thing that has happened with the work more recently is this idea that you can find something and then improvise with it. When I started working, I made paintings on jute and then I started using different kinds of coloured fabrics, instead of any paint-- it was enjoyable to work that way because the materials themselves were very stimulating. So the paintings actually wouldn't take very long. I kind of, you know, found the fabrics that I liked and time would pass, I would return to them without a plan. I would throw them out (on the floor) and move them around a little bit. So ok, then that's the painting, you know, it would be great. And after a while, if you're just staring at the same stuff all the time, the same materials, at least for me, it becomes not so interesting anymore, but if you have new things in your studio, the freshness of them alone is enough reason to work. So these new things (materials), you just kind of steal them. This was on that fence around the corner over there (showing the street out-side the studio)...

O.G. – And did you store a lot of things without knowing what to do with it?



Comme le pays, 2012, Found vinyl signage, canvas, gauze, cord, 91 3/4 x 26 1/2 in., 233 x 67 cm.

time when the American flag is used it's to make some kind of political statement and I just wanted to use it as abstraction. So even though, yes it's an American flag, I don't think the work addresses the rhetoric of the American flag.

C.B. – How did you come up with the composition? Did you think about what you would do, so it kind of has the rhetoric of the American flag or did you just come up like this and it worked, just like that?

J.F. – Yes, exactly. Back there you can see all my fabrics (showing a part of the studio) from years of collecting. So I'm finding more things to try and work with. And I started doing these when I discovered that I can look at materials with text on them and could see them as abstraction. It's not about what it says it's just about what it looks like. **O.G.** – It says something in a way, it's not pure abstraction. It's not only forms and colours.

J.F. – Is that question what pure abstraction is?

O.G. – Well... I think there is no pure abstraction. But, what did you mean when you said "It's not about what it says, it's about what it looks like"?

J.F. – It's not about what it says.

O.G. – What do you mean?

J.F. – Well let me give you another example. (getting an American flag abstract painting and hanging it) [Picture 2] I thought that would be interesting to make a painting out of the American flag because I thought that I could mostly treat it as an abstraction. Most of the



From left to right

Untitled, 2011, Nylon flag, cotton, gauze 59 x 35 3/4 in., 150 x 91 cm.

Comme le pays, 2012, Found vinyl signage, canvas, gauze, cord 91 3/4 x 26 1/2 in., 233 x 67 cm.

Untitled acrylic and ink on masonite 46 x 31 cm.

J.F. – Yeah, I had it on the floor and I did bring some pieces on it and I liked the way it looked. So I left it there for about two weeks and I decided “ok, this looks good”. I try not to push until something demands that I push. If the first thought is good I try and keep the first thought. It’s almost like, even though the text has meaning, the text is so banal. I mean, who cares? You can read it, it’s not going to make your life any. But I think you’re right, I think it’s not pure abstraction, but I’m not particularly interested in that anymore. Recently I see that everything is sort of impure. Photography is impure, painting is impure, sculpture is impure... It’s too hard to try and make something pure.

A Kind of Trinity

C.B. – May I go back to this one?

J.F. – Sure, sure.

C.B. – I asked you about painting, because it’s on a stretcher and you show us many works that you call painting, but none is on stretcher. So, how do you consider the stretcher? Is it something that makes this piece a painting or is it just a sculptural element?

J.F. – Well, the personal reason why I liked this, after I made it, was that it reminded me of a hut, you know, something that is very primitively constructed. And I liked the fact that this [the felt over the wooden frame] was like a kind of door. So I saw it as much as architecture than as painting. It’s more a matter trying to

accept it. There is only one thing that has been consistent in my work for past twelve years or so. As I mentioned, I'm very much admirer of Blinky Palermo, though I am more consciously aware of French abstract painting. (I did this show with Barré and Poliakoff, Piffaretti...) But I also like Carl Andre, because, after I started working abstractly, I began to understand that Carl Andre has this lack of hierarchy, were it seems that the material and the artist and the viewer are on the same plane. That none is above the other. There seems to be a kind of trinity. And I think that what is the same with my work now as before is that there's only a portion of me in the work. And then there's a portion that remains the material.



Remsen School, 2011, felt, wood, latex paint, wooden stretcher 38 1/2 x 64 in., 98 x 163 cm

This is why I said “if the first thought is good I want to save it”. Work does not appeal to me when the artist is all over it all the time. And you see all the artists, making this decision and that decision and doing this and doing that. I think the world is constantly making you look at things and forcing various personalities onto you. I sort of like to just bring enough along, but I try to keep myself at a distance. That's very important. That's more important to me than the subject matter. That's why even though it's not pure abstraction anymore, to me it has that same trinity.

Q.M. – You say that you find something in the street and that this thing is special. Are these things ‘ready-mades’?

J.F. – I'm used to being a painter. There are choices involved in combining as opposed to just the choice of the choice. Although I don't collaborate. I don't bring it outside with me. I'm not trying to create a social situation beyond what I mentioned. They're still my choices. They're still very personal. But there isn't the activity of my body all over the thing all the time, like a lot of painters, a lot of artists.

C.B. – According to what you said, would you consider yourself, rather than the artist, the maker, as just a spectator of what you're doing ?

J.F. – A spectator?

C.B. – Yeah. When you were talking about the trinity, you said “the work is making you look at things”. I understand that as: there's no hierarchy, you're just looking at things. When you say that you do something and look at it, and if you don't hate it you keep it. This choice, would you consider that it makes you more of a spectator of what you produce?

J.F. – That is an excellent observation. I think, in the end, what I'm talking about is just what they call 'poetic'. This means that I make these choices until I get to the point where this thing makes suggestions, the way poetry make suggestions without telling you or giving you a story. Making you see it. I think it's no mistake that Carl Andre has written about poetry. So I think that's probably the best way to describe it. It's just that I do enough so that it suggests things that are interesting. I think a lot about Joseph Cornell, you know the American assemblagist, is interesting.

Teachers (to the students) – Les boîtes de Cornell, Joseph Cornell.

O.G. (to Joe) - Why do you mention Cornell?

J.F. – Just because he assembles found objects that are very suggestive. I think he is a particularly underrated still American artist. I think he is very important. And he doesn't fit in any category much. Did you see the Biennial, the Whitney? There's a selection of Forrest Bess, who is, until very recently, very unheard of and moderately known among other artists. But he's the same generation as Joan Mitchell. He showed at Betty Parsons, made small strange paintings, some of them are combination of figurative and abstract and they're a very good example of “poetic abstraction figuration”. Not exactly to my taste but he is about to become canonical.

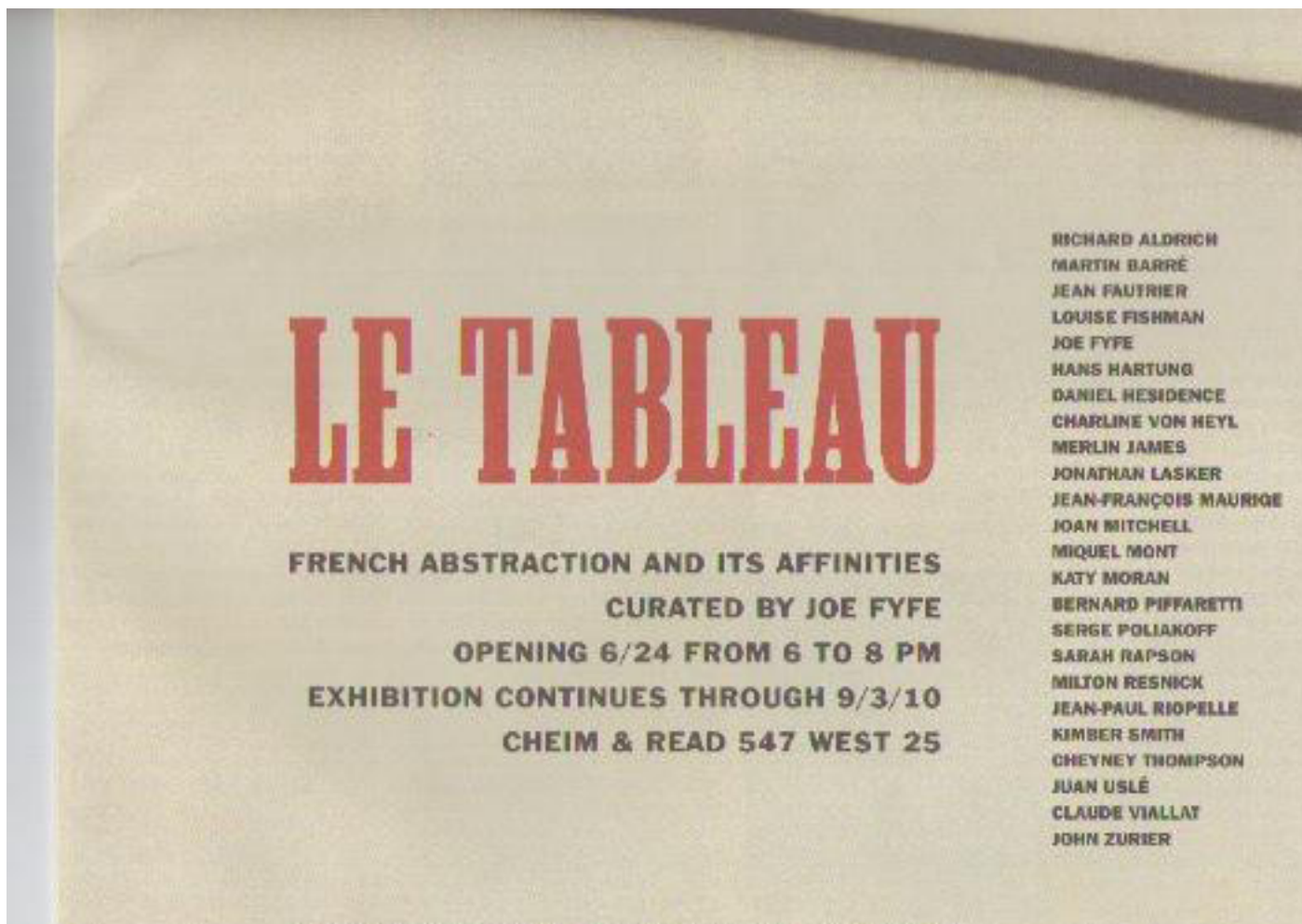
“Le Tableau” (1)

D.A. – What about your practice as a curator? How have you started this?

J.F. – There was a new curatorial space, about 1995, called Apexart. There was someone sitting at the desk and I was looking at the show and I was talking about the work in the show. The guy at the desk said: “Why don't you submit a proposal for a show to curate?” So I had to think about what to do and then I sort of came up with an idea for a show that was an interesting show about manufactured commercial objects that were made by hand. So there was a Robert Gober, this was before he was so famous, a Robert Gober's “Cat Litter Bag”, and probably a number of artist that you have heard of. Somebody had a drawing of a crushed Coca-Cola can, things like that. And it was called “Try a little tenderness”, after the song. And then I started doing yoga, so I started noticing people's work that seemed to be influenced by Buddhism. So then I did a show called “Om”. And then, you know, I get an idea and then find some place to do it. But I have been going to Paris for years, and really liked French painting and a long time ago I was trying to do a French show, like in 2003-2004. Finally I convinced John Cheim to do a French show because we always talked about French painting. He showed Viallat. He showed Piffaretti. I went to his house he had the Poliakoff's “Catalogue Raisonné” on his table. I didn't even know anybody knew Poliakoff. So gradually I convinced him to do this show. And then I did a lot of writing for magazines but, you know, I did these things because there wasn't anybody that was saying “look at this” about things that I want to say “look at this” about.

O.G. – Was this the starting point for writing? Did you write before?

J.F. – Around the same time I started curating. I was only an artist until I was 40 or so. You can feel very passive if you're just waiting around for things to happen through your work, so I just decided to do everything. And it was kind of a strategy. Because you can go to galleries and say “I've got a show that I want to curate and here are these artists”. Then it's a way of talking to people about things other than you and your work.



Brochure de l'exposition chez Cheim and Read

So it's just a way to... network. And I wanted to learn to write better. I was interested in writing. Now I'm tired of writing. I'm not writing at the moment. I just want to work, it's much more interesting. But I wrote all the time for twelve years. And I curated eight or nine shows.

D.A. – This show was the last one you made as a curator?

J.F. – I am actually working on a show that I think will be in a gallery in New York in the spring. And it's Gabriella Chiari, Nadine De Koenigswarter, Marie Claude Bugeaud and Pierrette Bloch. And the thing is that all the work is equal part mark, paper support and the wall. So they have this thing in common. And they're mostly abstract, I mean, Bugeaud is kind of in-between. I wanted to do this show for, like, ten years. The Drawing Center kept saying "Interesting, interesting, interesting" and then they finally said no. So now I'm going to a gallery. But that one is an old one that I've been trying for a long time.

In French Abstraction, there is Still Fish

D.A. – And "Le Tableau". How did you get this idea of "Le Tableau"? And also, do you think that the subject has interest for people here?

J.F. – Well, I think it's becoming interesting to younger painters. Because the argument for the show is basically that... There's an American expression called: "Fished out".

D.A. – "Fished out"?

J.F. – Yeah. It means that, you go to a place to catch fish and if everybody catches all the fish, there's no more fish. (audience laughter) It's fished out. Well the argument for this show is that all the ideas in American

painting, you know like Pollock and De Kooning and Warhol, it's all fished out. (more laughter) But maybe in France, in French abstraction, from Poliakoff, Viallat, to the present, there is still fish. So we should go and look at French painting. That's the main idea. And I think it's true. I think French painting is very very interesting, because the conception of space, that the two dimensions of the canvas are actually a space, we don't have that here. The way I understood it was, the way you look at buildings in Paris: there's this kind of break up of how you enter. Even though it's a facade, it seems to be more transitional. When you look at buildings here, there's the front and there's the street. But there seems to be something porous in French space, in French painting space and French architecture space that's different. This is just very intuitive.

R.M. – Is that why you work with straight lines, because you're a New Yorker ? Because buildings are all straight?

J.F. – Well actually, I'm trying to make French painting. (laughter) The idea that the painting can be very cerebral but although very physical is something that is very French and not American. It seems that way to me. This is from all these trips to Paris. I now know enough French painters to know that everybody goes to "Beaux Arts" and there's all this theory, behind all this painting. And I don't know any of it. I don't know what they're talking about. But if there's enough interest, there'll probably be more things translated, there'll be more seminars like the "Tableau" Seminar from Mick (2) and there will be more of a conversation about painting. There's a very interesting painter here showing who is in "Tableau". My final essay was on Charline Von Heyl. She's very much involved with Aby Warburg's theories. She is very smart .

This is the Surface in America

C.B. – Why do you say that there is no space in American painting?

J.F. – Because they have this things about flatness. They think that the painting, that the surface of the painting is flat. Between Greenberg and abstract expressionism. Even though, there is space. There is space in Rothko, there's illusionism space...

C.B. – Do you mean space as in three dimensions? Because two dimensions are already a space.

J.F. – Well, you don't [...] [end of tape side A] [...] that it really was a thing, a physical thing. (knocking on a surface) This is the surface in America. It's not quite that in French painting. It's more articulated, more porous.

O.G. – You say porous. It's through layers? Through the background?

J.F. – I mean, it's not that it doesn't exist here, but it's not a concern here. It's not really that much of a conversation, what actually a painting is about. From my point of view it's just very French to think about what painting is. Nobody talks about what a painting is here. Nobody says: "What is Cinema?" in the United States the way Jean-Pierre Melville has. "Well, you know, I think Cinema..." Nobody says that here. Nobody talks about what the medium is.

C.B. – Isn't it an idea that Greenberg put in place? That whatever the medium is, it's about itself. That painting is just a painting about painting, for example.

J.F. – Isn't it an idea that Greenberg put in place? That whatever the medium is, it's about itself. That painting is just a painting about painting, for example.

J.F. – But he started to find what the medium was. But as far as I can continue my conversation about what the medium of painting is, into the present, you don't really hear about that. You would hear about all these kind of agendas that people brought to painting from somewhere else, like John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage.

I think they decided: “I’m going to make paintings that are like David Lynch’s films”. The reason I kept going to Paris is because, at one point, I decided that if I was going to make a painting, somebody was going to have to give me a little bit of time. I wasn’t going to be able to seduce people with painting. They would all have to take their time, or that was just not my audience. I decided this. And then I went to Paris and there seems to be a lot work that was about that same idea. It wasn’t about spectacle. It’s about this thing you get engaged with. Now there are lots and lots of younger painters that are involved in different ways. And I don’t know where it goes. But, to me, if you go to Orchard street, it looks like the “rue Charlot” ten years ago. It’s very strange. But you know they’re also American painters that influenced “Support/Surface”, like James Bishop. I was very responsible for bringing a Kimber Smith show to New York, in my gallery. And when he did this interview in ArtPress, that I had translated, he talked about how the painting was already there and he just, sort of try to reveal the structure somehow. And that is something that is not American. I think that in America they see the bare canvas as exactly that. It’s almost like you arrive at the canvas the way the pilgrims arrived on the “Mayflower”. This virgin country. And you can do whatever you want. And what I understood about French painting, the only thing I understood about the “Tableau”, is that the painting already exists, and then you decide the kind of choices you’re going to make with this thing that already exists. And I thought that was very interesting.

Virgin Land is a Myth

D.A. – For a long time I got this thinking that, for French people, there’s this heavy history of art, history of painting and all the painting made before, and also old painting and also discussions. And that, now, can produce something very shy. There’s a lot of difficulty to find some freedom. And on the contrary I thought that American didn’t deal with all this heavy history. And so, just like you said, it’s a virgin area and they are doing something, even if a lot of people have done this before: “never mind, I will do it in my way”. I think they are more free. I really think they are more free than the French.

J.F. – But personally I think that abstract expressionism, as far as just painting in America goes, I think that abstract expressionism and pop art are absolutely incredible movements; nothing compares to them. As Agnes Martin once observed, Pollock, Newman, Still, etc. the Abstract Expressionists, were like Schubert, Beethoven Schumann, Brahms. But after that, I think we kind of fell off. I would think that American painting is particularly interesting now. Personally I think that Piffaretti is more interesting than most American painters my age. Charline Von Heyl is actually German/French, even though she lives here. But the United States doesn’t have the cultural history that France does. They had a history, but the idea that it is a virgin land is a myth. It wasn’t true. They were people here. We killed them. It’s not like this place was virginal. So the idea that you can begin anew is an American idea that does not appeal to me, for reasons that are actually political but it is a fact that they act about the art that way. At the same time there is an imperative paint culture in France, it’s obvious in a lot of French painting that it work with and it becomes the problem, which is really interesting. It’s an interesting problem. It’s not a problem that can’t be imported. This is something as just natural to Europeans. It isn’t like culture in America where you don’t have a painting culture; you don’t have a consciousness of art. I think it’s just an isolated place and it shows up a lot of the art.

Q.M. – So, when you’re talking about painting, what are you talking about? (laughter) What is painting? I mean, in France, talking about painting we talk about the object, the representation, the painting... the medium painting... there is a lot of things. What are you talking about when you talk about painting in your work?

J.F. – Well, even though I sort of drifted from the more conventional looking painting, everything I’m doing is being pretty much involved in these painting issues that are interrogating painting and things like that. Talking about genuinely what the painting is. Are you looking for a particular category of painting?

Q.M. – How could you define the painting? What’s painting? It’s a vast question.

J.F. – I think basically there is a kind of cluster of issues that surrounds painting that are a little bit different, even though they all overlap with everything else, there’s a cluster of painting issues. And I’m talking about:

to differentiate from a cluster of issues that you see more towards sculpture or more toward forms. That's all I'm saying. Just a kind of general grouping of concerns, more than anything more specifically. And that's interesting about the Chamberlain show, if you haven't been on it's really worth seeing. You can see where he sort of makes painting and then moves back to sculpture, constantly making choices about where to get. The work never gets pictorial, but sort of moves in that area and then moves back. And then you realise you're not exactly dealing with sculpture but it kind of does all a bit, in a very very intelligent conscious way. I think it's more interesting about the choices you make within these areas.

This Place where the Content didn't Take over Entirely

Q.M. – You can say the difference between a painting and a sculpture is the painting is hung on the wall.

J.F. – Well for me, when I was still making a lot of painting that were stretched with fabric I sort of liked the way that paint is dealing with some physical aspects. It's painting/sculpture/architecture at the same time, it wasn't just sculpture. It was like the façade aspect of it. But I think what I was in reaction against was a concern with the image. I thought that the world was constantly barraging you with images and even though I was working with painting I wanted to be almost the place where you could get away from the images. Where you would still look at something the way you look at pictures but you didn't bring your image looking with it. You brought other things. There is a little quick quote from Fautrier: "In front of painting that we like completely, there's a physical need as well as its fulfilment." So, in some way he's saying that a good painting fulfils you, it fulfils your body. You know, physically, this idea that you can make a painting and address the body, and address the sense of touch through the visual, as opposed to just addressing the visual.

Q.M. – But some Fautrier's painting are not just abstract. It's more than only the painting; it's although all the history around the painting.

J.F. – Well, he's not just an abstract painter. I wasn't really divorcing. What you're talking about is the opposite of pure abstraction. You remember we were talking about pure abstraction? Like I was saying, this isn't about all the connotations of the American flag, I was trying to use it in such a way that it wasn't prominent. The history of the American flag is there, it isn't like it's not without content, but I try and meet into this place where the content didn't take over entirely.

C.B. – And what are your concerns when you're doing sculpture? What are the things that interest you?
[Sculpture made of pieces of wood]

J.F. – I don't think it's terribly different from the paintings, where it's this place where there's a certain kind of content that is suggested. If it didn't suggest something to me it wouldn't work, you know. That the free standing sculpture, I think formally it was interesting because some how the bottom half seemed to be continuous with the top part. I didn't know how I did that, it just seemed to happen, but in another way, it is a kind of image. But, beyond what it suggests, in every case here, I think that it's kind of like you know that you're suggesting but it's like a kind of threshold. If it goes beyond a certain threshold of suggestion it becomes something in particular that is too much.

C.B. – You kind of negotiate.

J.F. – Negotiate. I used to tell people that; I don't usually say but I would whisper; that my concept was "Support/Surface Wabi Sabi". It's this Japanese idea about the beautiful of everyday worn out old things.

Q.M. – It's funny that you're talking about Support/Surface like painting very generous and that you can use again. In France it is impossible to think about that because it's Old fashioned.

J.F. – Well, you know that guy who started the Consortium in Dijon? I heard that his one rule was "no Support/Surface". That's what he said. And there is this younger American painter that just opened there, who is

a really really good painter. She doesn't do painting though. It's like constructions with nets and mirrors and photographs and things. She is called Valerie Snowbeck. Really really good artist. She'll be there all summer. I know her and even though it's like frame with net over it and different things that, you would probably think of as some updated version of Support/Surface, she went through a program out of the university of Chicago, which is very theoretical and when she talks about her work it comes from very different places.

But my interpretation of Support/Surface has to do with how I was impressed with the way that Viallat seemed to be able to reference other cultures through his work and that's another thing that I didn't think was going on with painting here. The idea that painting could point to the fact that there's the rest of the world out there, there's developing countries and things like that. So there were issues, in that work, that seems to be still available, that haven't been addressed yet. There's this guy here, he's dead now, Alan Shields, that tie-dyed fabric and so, did all up and stuff and it was just like a kind of hippie painting. And in a way I suppose Viallat looks like an old hippie.

Q.M. – No, no, no. Not at all.

J.F. – No?

Q.M. – It's a classic. And in France he is exhibited with old painters and old artists. He is now part of History

J.F. – So he's fished out over there.

(laughter)

C.B. – To us it's a foundation. There is a foundation of what painting is. It's what we are been told as what have been done. We are encouraged to do something new, because it's French painting, in a way it was in France so it's our culture. It's not the same way here because, as you say, you don't have the same concepts here. And the way it points out to other cultures might be relevant, might still need to be done here; whereas it has already be done back in France. It's done. If you do it now in France it wont be, kind of fresh.

Q.M. – In France, in an exhibition, when I see a Viallat I say to myself: "One more Viallat". But when I see an Ellsworth Kelly...

J.F. – Oh right, right. Ellsworth Kelly, that's a very French painter (laughter). For the American, you know.

[End of Tape]

Notes

1- "Le Tableau" curated by Joe Fyfe

2- The Tableau Project is a series of events at Tate Modern in 2011 that broadly addresses questions about the structuring of pictorial representation and forms. Keynote presentations from Philip Armstrong, Fulvia Carnevale, Jean François Chevrier and Michael Fried. Project organisers: Mick Finch and Jane Lee, The School of Art, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.

Joe Fyfe was born in 1952 in New York City, where he currently resides. He attended the University of Arts in Philadelphia (B.F.A., 1976). He has had recent (2007) solo shows of his paintings at JG Contemporary and of his drawings at Cynthia Broan in New York City, at Galerie Pitch in Paris, and in Ho Chi Minh City and in Hanoi, Vietnam. He has been in recent group exhibitions at Tracy Williams Ltd. and Cheim and Read in New York City. He has taught at Parsons, Virginia Commonwealth University, Tyler School of Art, and at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and currently teaches at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He has received a Bessie Award for stage design (1986) and grants the Pollock-Krasner and Gottlieb Foundations (2:2003, 2008) and recently spent six months as a Fulbright research fellow in Vietnam and Cambodia (2006-07) and the summer (2007) as artist in residence at Sitterwerk Zentrum für Kunst und Kulturwirtschaft in St. Gallen, Switzerland. He writes about art for Art in America and Artnet. He is also a contributing editor at ArtCritical.com & Bomb magazine. He has also curated six exhibitions at venues including Apex art and Dorsky projects.

Transcription de l'enregistrement: Cyril Behncke