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Été 70: The Plein-Air Exhibitions of Supports-Surfaces

Abstract

In the summer of 1970, artists of the collective Supports-Surfaces installed ephemeral works across the French Mediterranean coastline, a prelude to their first Paris exhibition as a named group. Curated by Claude Viallat and Jacques Lepage, and entitled Intérieur/Extérieur, artworks were situated on beaches, hill towns, riverbeds and landscapes in the lower Alps. This article examines how this peripatetic exhibition, and its subsequent re-installation in Travaux de l'Été 70 (1971) at the Jean Fournier Gallery, interrogated the conventional practice of painting by dismantling its material components, challenging its social and political ideology, and sanctioning artistic autonomy.

Keywords

Supports-Surfaces
Intérieur/Extérieur
Travaux de l'Été 70
plein-air exhibitions
Jacques Lepage
Claude Viallat

From June through August 1970, artists soon to be affiliated with the collective Supports-Surfaces embarked on an ambitious program of twelve installations titled *Intérieur/Extérieur* (Interior/Exterior). Staged along the Mediterranean from the beaches and hill towns on the French Riviera to the Eastern Pyrénées on the Spanish border, this region is historically associated with Occitan culture.¹ Antagonistic to uniformity and control, the artists in Claude Viallat's circle aimed to dismantle painting as a visual paradigm and to produce new spaces of artistic practice capable of addressing the cultural dissent of the time. Their works were conceived as nomadic, aleatory arrangements that were installed, disassembled and re-installed for brief durations by the artists as they moved from site to site. In an effort to break from the conventional painting format that prioritized the visible side with markings or images, they aimed to expose

1. Occitan is identified by a distinct Latinized language with a diversity of dialects in an area encompassing southern France, eastern Spain and northwestern Italy.

2. Also see the manifesto, 'INTERVENTION "A"' signed by Viallat, Saytour and Dolla issued two years later in Nice (Viallat [1968] 1980). They critique cultural decentralization initiatives, advocate for arts produced within the local milieu, and object to systemic obstacles impeding the dissemination of their work to the public (Noël Dolla 1980: 53).

the inherent qualities of materials and structure, and to open-up the possibilities of disseminating their works beyond the insularity of cultural institutions. These artists imagined a parallel system based on interventions into the everyday where the works created their own spaces (Lepage 1974: 4), and were propositional, transitory and geared to open-ended experiences for the artists and spectators alike.

These installations, organized by Viallat with critic/curator Jacques Lepage, were a culmination of a series of exhibitions that they began organizing in 1966 with *Impact 1* at the Musée de Céret, which featured a diverse group of Mediterranean, Parisian and Catalan artists, among them Daniel Buren, Arman and Ben (Vautier). For Lepage, these artists recognized the significance of the historical moment, voiced a shared protest against the consequences of modernity, and maintained an anti-institutional stance.² During the intervening four years, Viallat and Lepage organized several exhibitions on similar themes, which built the foundation for the *plein-air* installations of *Intérieur/Extérieur*. This show was pivotal, for it constituted the prelude to the first presentation of the group Supports-Surfaces organized by Pierre Gaudibert and Viallat for ARC 1 in 1970, sponsored by the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and its initiative to engage with contemporary debate, research and confrontation in the arts.

The summer 1970 installations were ephemeral, rolling out over a course of two months from east to west in heterogeneous sites within which the artists designated spaces, delineated routes and embedded works in remote locales and small towns. Artists Daniel Dezeuze, Bernard Pagès, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi and Viallat considered these sites as 'neutral', that is, spaces beyond the control of cultural institutions and critical mediation. De-coupled surfaces and supports were situated in a process of geographic inscription whereby the valorization of one site over another was left to the subjectivity of the spectator (Valensi [1971] 1983: 67). Given their brevity, the interventions were contingent upon the character of the individual spaces to produce varied effects: a forested area on the outskirts of Nice, a beachside in the small tourist and fishing village of Villefranche-sur-Mer, a verdant meadow and dried riverbed in the perched Alpes-Maritimes villages of Levens and Cantaron, an abandoned quarry in Aubais, the 'Rose Coast' where the Tancade creek entered the sea in Banyuls-sur-Mer, an isolated beach in Maguelone, as well as public spaces such as streets, squares and a small bookstore in the Pyrénées-Orientales communities of Le Boulou, Céret and Perpignan. The network of installations was based on a 'relay' system that configured the works discretely or as an ensemble for a period of one to four days, triggering a changing *mise-en-scène* in which the 'materialization of process' affirmed the priority of the existence of the work itself (Lepage 1974: 4; Viallat 1971). The construction and dismantling of the installations mediated the normal sense of time present in the diverse natural and social spaces. Though not altering these spaces, the works left behind an echo of encounter and disappearance, which in some cases resulted in their being rebuilt by individuals who had come across them earlier.

Adopting a practice/theory approach, the Supports-Surfaces artists focused on analyzing painting's fundamental elements in order to

liberate it from merely serving as a carrier of representations, a paradigm that signaled for them the closure of painting as a generative practice. Viallat refuted the object focus of Nouveau Réalisme and representational imagery of Pop Art that held sway through the mid-1960s, recognizing that abstract painting had been deserted before it could be more systematically examined in relation to the structures imposed upon it historically. He re-positioned abstract painting as an 'unfinished project'. Just months before *Intérieur/Extérieur*, artist Dezeuze in collaboration with Louis Cane published 'Pour un programme théorique pictural' ('In the Direction of a Theoretical Pictorial Program') in which they established a schema to rationalize painting as a 'science of surfaces'. By taking into account the effects of support, medium, gesture and tools, the production of a surface became the subject of the painting, opening up the work as something autonomous but *within* a geographic context. Limiting the surface image to a repetitive graphic, this surface 'intensification' focused on process and material spatial arrangements rather than expressive painting effects, thus providing the works with a contradictory sense of autonomy from and dependence upon the context of their display (Dezeuze and Cane 2010: 283–86).

The *plein-air* installations were pioneering experiments in how artworks interact with natural or social sites, and how these environments condition the works and the viewer's experience, especially without fore-knowledge of artistic intentions or the mediation of critics and advertising (Saytour [1970a] 1998). Following Julia Kristeva's argument that challenging the inertia of language habits through analysis of literary process enables 'the unique opportunity to study the *becoming* of the signification of signs' ([1968] 1998: 28, emphasis in original), these types of site-specific installations questioned how painting functioned within diverse spaces.

The exhibition *Rencontres de Coaraze* (Coaraze Encounter) organized by Viallat and Lepage in July 1969 was precedent-setting for *Intérieur/Extérieur*. Lepage maintained that this was the first *plein-air* exhibition of Supports-Surfaces – 'the village was entirely occupied by the works' (quoted in *Chroniques Niçoises* 1991: 392).³ Dezeuze, Pagès, Saytour and Viallat staged their works throughout this provincial hamlet, one of thirteen sites along the 'Route of Perched Villages' on the outskirts of Nice, demonstrating how these presentations of their research on materials, forms, colour and use of visual repetition produced sites of artistic and social exchange in relation to temporality and history. With references spanning heraldry, festivals and even cobblestones and hanging laundry, they challenged notions of artistic progress as evolutionary and linear through the use of repetitive surface markings and structural reversions that manifest diverse pictorial enunciations (Dezeuze [1969] 1983: 44). Paralleling Kristeva's challenge to the conventional Marxist notion that the arts are not inherently productive, the ensemble installation in Coaraze demonstrated the generative potential of painting when activating a trans-historical interplay. Photographs and a film by Valensi (*Permutations*, 1969) documented the 'encounter' between distinct modes and results of their analyses of painting surfaces and supports, signaling re-arrangements of material codes, visual order, and combinations through the ensemble format. According to Dezeuze, the collective

3. This exhibition was preceded by two others that seeded the idea of an informal group: *Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture* in Paris (1969), which included Marcel Alocco, Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, Bernard Pagès, Jean-Pierre Pincemin, Saytour and Viallat; and *La Peinture en Question* at the Musée du Havre (1969) that included works by Dezeuze, Saytour, Viallat and Cane.



100 Artistes dans la Ville (1970), installation view of works by Vincent Bioulès, Daniel Dezeuze, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi and Claude Viallat, Musée du Travail, Montpellier. Photo: courtesy of Claude Viallat.

site-specific exhibition provided an opportunity to present works outside the commercial art system ([1969] 1983: 43), while for Saytour it afforded a sense of 'maneuverability' in space ([1970b] 1996: 58).

Other exhibitions in the spring and summer of 1970 that critically analyzed a static model of painting included *De L'Unité à la Détérioration* (1970) organized by Ben with this same circle of artists and BMPT (Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, Niele Toroni) in Nice. In May, the city of Montpellier hosted *100 Artistes dans la Ville*, an exhibition that aimed 'to signal the city itself as a work of total art' (quoted in Dampérat 1996: 133). The venues of this exhibition were connected by a line made by Ben dripping whitewash paint from a bucket during his performance, *Faire une trace dans la ville* (To Make a Trace in the City) (1970), which linked all



Noël Dolla, *Restructuration n. 4* at Mont Authion (1970), *installation view*. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

of the sites, including interior spaces where Viallat's and Valensi's works were placed. Afterwards, they would be re-installed in *Intérieur/Extérieur*.

The aim to probe correlations between abstract painting and vast geographic space was evidenced in a series of works rendered *in situ* by Viallat's former student Noël Dolla. In June, Dolla executed his third installation on Mont Authion in eight months in the lower Alps in the hinterland of Nice. *Restructuration no. 4* (1970) interrogated relations between abstract painting as a model (not a product), and its transformation within large-scale geographic spaces. Dolla summarized the intention behind these projects with the instruction to 'Use SPACE as a MATERIAL OF CREATION highlighting rapports between determined SPACES (supports) and rapports between indeterminate SPACES (nature)' (Noël Dolla 1980: 63). Perpignan staged *Vision 70* in June as well, with 80 artists from eight French cities along the Mediterranean, along with Paris, including Viallat and artists from Nice. ABC Productions, a group from Montpellier led by Vincent Bioulès, was presented in *Rencontres de Coaraze*, where it installed 'brushstrokes in space' (Bioulès quoted in Aupetitallot 1991b: 27), an installation of 125 painted poles leaning against the town's medieval walls, where the stability of the whole appeared to rely on that of the single unit. While this was an exceptional period of activity for artists from the southern provinces, it was also one that spanned the



Rencontres de Coaraze (1969), installation view of works by Claude Viallat, Daniel Dezeuze and Patrick Saytour. Photo: Jacques Lepage, courtesy of the Archives de Jacques Lepage.

entire coastal expanse as a site of contemporary art, extending beyond city and institutional sponsorship.

In 'Extrait du catalogue "l'été 70"', Dezeuze described how these exhibitions stripped painting of its symbolic function and allowed for analysis within a new set of relations, not as a return to nature, but through the 'reiterated deconstruction of an old relationship: the eye converging in front of a fixed world' ([1971a] 1983: 60–61). Dezeuze focused his research on paintings' support in 1967 when he covered stretcher bars with clear transparent plastic, thus exposing the recto side generally hidden behind the canvas. His installations of grid-based structures without a closed border suggested that the geometric structure captured only a fragment of geographic space, but it also opened up to a broader space beyond. Saytour articulated their position as one that challenged set notions of structural and spatial configurations:

No confrontation with the landscape was desirable nor possible, the annihilation of concept of format – which we had already worked on with expandable surfaces and canvases with a reserve areas not presented – was possible, thanks to the use of repetitive works realized in different scales.

([1971a] 1983)

Challenging the systemic codification of space by means of 'appropriating the world', the artists of Support-Surfaces established a collision between the formal limits of the works and that which exists beyond its parameters (Dezeuze [1971a] 1983: 60–61).

Intérieur/Extérieur analyzed how works adapt to specific surroundings without relinquishing material independence, and how varied settings inform the process of installation. Photographs of Viallat's *Red Elastic Net with Blue Knots* (1969), installed on the narrow secluded beach in Maguelone, in the Languedoc-Roussillon region, ground this work in relation to the sea and its history as a fishing village, while placement of the same work in a town square in Céret animated it in the context of children's play. The draping of Viallat's free-hanging painting behind his elastic net, stamped repeatedly with a single 'meaningless' form dispersed the attention from the plane of the wall and into the immediate surroundings (Pleynet 1968a: 137). Likewise, in Aubais, a grain milling town where the artist was raised, Viallat's unfurled canvas hung down the side of a quarry and broke the horizontal stone patterns, while the repetition of the shape established a convergence within the landscape. Viallat defined his process of painting deconstruction as one that was a systemic appraisal and reconsideration of painting's inherent material variables: 'This demands initially to taking a complete inventory of diverse fundamentals, to interrogate them directly, to envision them and distribute them otherwise' (1970: 50). Valensi's painted corrugated cardboard forms, strung together with rope at gait-length intervals, were installed to create a compact sculptural form in the Montpellier version of the exhibition, then expanded tendril-like across open terrains delineating a passage through space. On the beachside in the fishing and tourist village of Villefranche-sur-Mer, the abstract forms specified a border between spaces, while in the Paillon riverbed along the small Alpes-Maritime village of Cantaron the shapes interplayed with the textured ground of the dry bed. Valensi's varying installations demonstrated how the works could be site-specific and responsive to the sites' terrain, yet without compromising the artwork's autonomy ([1971] 1983: 67).

The manifestations of *Intérieur/Extérieur* intended to occupy the Mediterranean ground in advance of and during the run of the exhibition *L'Art Vivant aux États-Unis* (Current Art in the United States, 1970) on view during the summer and early fall at the Maeght Foundation in Saint-Paul de Vence. The focus of this exhibition was American art from 1969 to 1970, featuring 150 works by artists of several generations and intending to 'show that American Art was not limited to action painting' (*L'Art Americain à Saint-Paul* 1970: 20). Dore Ashton's introduction to the catalogue emphasized a cross-generational aim to abandon the 'comfortable dimensions' of painting and to escape the standards of private collections and museums (1970: 11), even while paintings by Ellsworth Kelly, stained canvases by Sam Francis, and free-hanging fiberglass panels by Eva Hesse were experienced in those very spaces. This show followed just a year and a half after the Grand Palais exhibition, *L'Art du Réel USA, 1948–1968* (The Art of the Real, 1948–1968), an exhibition organized by Eugene Goosen with the Museum of Modern Art. Goosen wrote that artists from Kelly to Robert Smithson interrogated what 'real' meant,



Claude Viallat, Intérieur/Extérieur (1970), installation in Céret (above), installation at Aubais (below). Photos: courtesy of the artist.

and he discerned identifiable commonalities: 'application of simple and regularized patterns and systems: the grid, the modular, and the radial as well as close-packing, stacking, etc.' (1968: 9). The relationship with Minimal Art, in particular, was recognized by Vierrat and his circle, but they distinguished their works from the 'cold' works of the Americans by emphasizing intimacy with materials and marking in which fluid pigments interpenetrated surfaces through stamping, folding or creasing, or with structural relations in real space. Their concern with the 'specifically pictorial [...] in relation to the history of art' (quoted in Girard 1982: 116) raised questions not only about abstract paintings' functionality in the present, but also about its agency to negotiate a given history of art reimagined from the periphery.

While the concerns of the Supports-Surfaces artists related to the socio-geographical, there were broader trends in the arts characterized by a focus on process, abstraction and locations or environments emerging internationally by the mid-1960s.⁴ Most notably in relation to Vierrat's circle was the groundbreaking 1969 exhibition, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* curated by Harald Szeemann for the Berne Kunsthalle. This exhibition excluded the French artists by design, with a few exceptions (Celant 2011: 21).⁵ Yet Supports-Surfaces clearly participated in the array of international trends exemplified by Szeemann's exhibition, and their marginalization from this international exhibition may have fostered alignment as an identifiable group. The following year, in 1970, Celant published *Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art* in conjunction with an exhibition he curated for the Galleria Museo Civica d'Arte Moderne in Turin. In addition to these European exhibitions, the New York Cultural Center, among other New York venues, presented *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (1970). The diversity of artistic practices evident in these exhibitions as well as works of land artists Richard Long, Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim parallel, and at times, conceptually intersected with the artists' ensemble working together on *Été 70*, especially in the use of site as readymade, the link between installation and performance, the engagement/lack of engagement with spectators, the use of photographic documentation, and a critical questioning of the relationships between culture, technology and nature. The Supports-Surfaces artists were not interested in nature, per se, despite the pastoral quality of their installations, and they distinguished their work from the concern with the sublimity they detected in Arte Povera (Dezeuze 1991: 16). They were also highly critical of the dehumanizing effects of technology, focusing instead on the 'analytic confrontation of the means of production of painting with the environment (geographic and socio-historical) in a rapport where the old opposition of culture and nature is deconstructed' ('Plein air et autre culture' 1968). This methodology wed together the ideological and pedagogical in a *mise-en-situation*, where a systematic yet multiplying production of individual and ensemble material effects were shaped within each diverse site. Such effects were theoretically unlimited (Saytour [1970a] 1998: 58).

Marcelin Pleyntet, editorial director of the vanguard Paris journal *Tel Quel*, affirmed the significance of the surface as critical to an understanding of abstraction. In discussing Vierrat's method of stamping canvases with a

4. In this regard, there are several key exhibitions: *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (Whitney Museum of Art, 1969), *9 in a Warehouse* (Leo Castelli Gallery, 1968) organized by Robert Morris, *Konzeption - Conception: Documentation of Today's Art Tendencies* (1969) organized by the Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen; and *Prospect 69* (1969) organized by Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf.
5. The exceptions were Sarkis, Alain Jacquet and Yves Klein. Szeemann and Germano Celant aimed to create a 'south to north axis' with artists mainly from Italy, Germany, Holland and Belgium, as well as artists associated with Post-Minimalism, Land Art and Conceptual Art in the United States (Celant 2011).

6. Devade was the only member of Supports/Surfaces who did not attend an Ecole des Beaux Arts and his texts written for *Tel Quel* demonstrate his theoretical rigour, research on painting, and reflections on modernity (see Mathieu 2008: 1). An examination of his library positions him as 'intellectual revolutionary' who wedded theory, politics and the visual arts (Mokhtari 2008).

pre-determined form soaked in pigment, he pointed out how the repetition of a single form on free-hanging, creased canvases disturbed the flat plane emphasizing the works presence in real space. And by means of repetition, the eye drifted beyond the boundaries of the canvas in what he called a multiplying effect precipitating the 'disappearance of painting itself' (Pleynet 1968a: 137). Pleynet further argued that Viallat disrupted the notion of painting as a unified perceptual experience, thus opening up theoretical questions about whether his approach constituted a recovery of painting or its radical transformation with attendant implications in relation to a history of material/forms generated within social reality and its didactic potential in relation to the generation of knowledge (Pleynet 1968b: 48).

The installations of *Été 70* (Summer 70) raised questions that paralleled some of Pleynet's earlier reflections on Viallat's work. Specifically, these mobile ensembles tested the implications of systemic repetition and permutation, showing how disturbance of the picture plane effected installation spaces, and how the transformation of painting's conventional structure enabled it to function as a generative sign in relation to other social signs and actions. Saytour confirmed the interrelatedness of the art and its context: 'Given the scale of the sites and choice of materials, the works did not create a set spatial rapport but were a product of material co-existence without privileging one over the other resulting in "absences of the works"' ([1971a] 1983: 64–65). For Viallat (1970), the transparency of the work process prompted a re-thinking of what constituted the 'real' in painting, remarking that the 'real' is the product of a coherent system enabling the viewer to see that the 'presentation of the work makes evident how it was made'. Further, he proposed that through mutable presentations of the same work it escapes codification as an isolated work of art and operates dynamically within real spaces. In his 'Notes de Travail', Viallat explained that the placement of work in a landscape did not render the work simply a motif; through 'structuring', it created an intervention within the geographic holding the potential of multiple readings (1971b: 117). Photographs documenting the artists' use of repetition and system *with* mutability and mobility show how the works gathered meanings over the duration of the whole series. Viallat's paintings folded up, making the works themselves 'nomadic', aptly described as 'paintings in a trunk' (Michaud 1987: 63). Action-based photographs of Saytour and Viallat located the artists as actors in the sequential rendering of the works, while Saytour and Valensi's photo-collages situated the abstract works within the construction of real space as abstraction in which the artist (both author and actor) became a contingent reader of the material elements of the work (Devade [1970] 1998: 187).

Viallat had initially proposed a Paris exhibition to Gaudibert for ARC after the Coaraze installations in 1969. When the exhibition was finally scheduled in September 1970, just weeks after the conclusion of the summer installations, it was Bioulès who suggested the title of the exhibition, *Support-Surface*, which then came to define this group from the Mediterranean region and invited artists Bioulès and Parisian Marc Devade, who had just published 'D'une Peinture Chromatique' in *Tel Quel* and joined the journal's editorial board.⁶ Viallat was responsible for



Patrick Saytour, Intérieur/Extérieur (1970), page from the catalogue maquette. Photo: courtesy of Claude Viallat.

the roster of artists and he oversaw the installation of the works. His aim was to install the works in the spirit of *Été 70*, that is, to push the limits of the institution by installing works outside and across the thresholds of exterior and interior space, suspending works from the ceiling, and using floor space to disrupt the spectators' circulation patterns.⁷ Beginning with the first of three Supports-Surfaces exhibitions, the correlation between practice and theory, or the independence of theory as practice, emerged as a point of contention. The coherence of the artists as a group was questioned at the opening of the exhibition. Cane, for instance, distributed a statement signed by Devade and Dezeuze stating that the exhibition did not reflect the work of a coherent group at all.

The flurry of articles by the artists in the aftermath of ARC makes clear the importance of analytic writing as a component of making and documenting, but also the collective need to clarify the diverse ways of approaching painting as both a system and process. The Belgium journal *VH 101* was an important vehicle for Supports-Surfaces' ideas and half

7. For an account of the discussions and disagreements among participating artists in advance of the exhibition, see Jamet-Chavigny (2006: 115–16).

of the spring 1971 issue was devoted to the writings of the artists. In 'La Situation et travail du groupe Supports/Surfaces', Dezeuze looked broadly at postwar art in which he posited that American art had fallen into folklore with the success of Pop Art, and with a growing diversity of avant-garde tendencies that followed (anti-art, conceptual art, engaged art), artists failed to recognize the contradictions in aligning a critical artistic practice with an institutional/market system. Dezeuze situated Supports-Surfaces methods within the field of political theory as a significant pictorial practice of knowledge on par with the social sciences, especially the social and political ideas of Marxism and Maoism. Not only did he describe their works as a productive practice but he also considered Supports-Surfaces' critical return to a history of painting as the opening up of an empirical and theoretical space of knowledge, citing Lenin's advocacy of the analysis of habitual practices in order to understand the rapport that exists with broader societal structure. Dezeuze elaborated on this point by suggesting that the historical conventions of painting repressed other material approaches and thus supported mono-centric surface treatments and presentations. By contrast, Supports-Surface critiqued this pictorial-political model by turning to practices associated with nomadic cultures (mobility, folding, dis-assembling), indigenous material culture (staining, patterning), and alternate conceptions of space and display. Identifying the *plein-air* exhibitions of 1970 as exemplifying their materialist approach in which the western nature/culture paradigm was obliterated, he located their means of producing paintings as one in relation to their specific environment – 'the geographical and socio-historical' (Dezeuze 1971b: 91–92).

Bioulès further posited that the work of Supports-Surfaces was not 'anti-art' and did not seek to revive the idea of an avant-garde. Rather, he sought to present the collective's work in a context of a Marxist critique of capitalist consumption in the arts (1971: 100). In recognition of the fractures between September 1970 and April 1971 within the group, Saytour proposed an annual review of each artist's works and theories in an effort to evaluate shared objectives and methods of analysis (1971b: 103–05). There was no set language at the beginning of the Supports-Surfaces enterprise, but simply a concordance around questioning the conventional order of painting and the affirmation of its material reality (Aupetitallot 1991a: 10). As a consequence, the two concurrent exhibitions held in April 1971, *Travaux de l'Été* at Galerie Jean Fournier and the second exhibition of the group Supports-Surfaces at the theatre of the *Cité Universitaire* in Paris, manifest a division between artists who prioritized pictorial practice as the generator of theory (those in Viallat's circle) and those who ordered their work in relation to the political and social theories associated with the journal *Tel Quel*.

Travaux de l'Été 70 (Works of Summer 70) followed Viallat's second solo exhibition at Galerie Jean Fournier, and ran concurrent with the second exhibition of Supports-Surfaces in Paris. The Fournier exhibition did not mention the association with Supports-Surfaces, focusing entirely on the presenting the works from the previous summer complemented by a photographic summary of each artist's works. The installation of the works, however, differed from the documentation and their



Support-Surface (1970), installation view of works by Daniel Dezeuze, Vincent Bioulès and André Valensi, ARC, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Photo: courtesy of Claude Viallat.

earlier outdoor incarnations (Dampérat 2000: 154). Dezeuze suggested that the gallery installation, where the works were confined within a managed space, contrasted with the liberation of the works and changing experiences of them in the *plein-air* exhibitions: 'Supports from now on move and play a topo-logical role where precedent has ceded to the geo-graphical, to a survey without measurement, where the subject (juridical) has been banished' (1971b] 1983). Within the closed space of the gallery, the interplay of the works within an ensemble took precedent over diverse encounters and readings of the work as experienced in the *plein-air* installations. The viewer was already conditioned to perceive the materials as artworks, and one could more readily observe how these artists inventoried the possibilities of painting processes such as staining, folding, stacking, leaning, knotting and suspending. The complexity and technical difficulty of installing these works, given scale and variables, led to theorizing the ensemble arrangements in relation to the debates that initially generated their turn to abstraction (Ceysson 1991: 23). Where the *plein-air* installations aimed to construct new experiences of diverse spaces and to release the encounter of painting from a discrete cultural framework, the installation of the same works within gallery spaces posed a different set of challenges in relation to individual processes and the complex rapports established visually and technically.

8. See *Le Groupe Supports/Surface* ([1971] 1991). Invited artists included André-Pierre Arnal, Cane, Dolla and Jean-Pierre Pincemin.

By contrast, the photo documentation of, and writing about, the *plein-air* exhibitions reinforced the ways in which the artists constructed spaces outside of an art context where occupation, liberation and materials were systematically produced and situated, experimenting with working methods and contexts. Saytour described the experience as one where the work retained autonomy despite the change in venue, existing as a 'signifier itself' within a broad field of contingencies. He listed the following incidents to attest to how the meanings of the works expanded when not specifically identified as art, but when they were experienced as a component of the visual texture of different places:

Children were disappointed when we removed works because it disrupted the game they created with them.

A film technician was convinced that we were preparing to shoot film sequences.

A father and son recuperated the remains of works we forgot – they used it as an obstacle course.

A wife declared herself satisfied after having gotten from her husband the assurance that everything was just signals to be seen by airplanes.

A group of archeologists dismantled the materials and used the canvases for excavations that they believed were markers from a cross-country motorcycle trail.

Volleyball players were using the net strung between two trees; the canvases were used as coverings, tents, rugs.

A family installed themselves on one of the works waiting for what would happen next.

(Saytour [1971a] 1983: 64–65)

Whether these instances were documented testimonies or anecdotal hearsay, Saytour's listing of them testifies to the artists' aim to imagine how their installations could function within broader contexts, and to their ambitions for new concepts and practices within expansive geographic spaces.

Été 70 established the core artists of Supports-Surfaces as Mediterranean, but by their second exhibition in the theatre of the *Cité Universitaire* in Paris, the roster of invited artists expanded and they published a joint communiqué, 'Position du Groupe Supports-Surfaces'.⁸ Reiterating common points such as their aim to situate art as an object of knowledge, the subject of painting as a visual testimony of a working process, the importance of 'significant surfaces', and the disequilibrium of post-Mai '68, they turned to Marxism and Maoism in an effort to jam-up cultural ideology by locating painting as an 'anchor' through which to address the instability of the historical moment. Despite the brief cohesion of these artists as a group, they succeeded in foregrounding painting as a vital practice with historical importance, one that had not yet been challenged before it was sidelined by a turn towards the readymade,

conceptual and performance directions emerging in the 1960s. By recognizing painting as a political and social paradigm, as well as a cultural production, their emergent material discourse aimed to realize how painting could be understood as a complex material structure. Its undoing thus resonated within the context of social and political unrest. The *plein-air* exhibitions initially succeeded in demonstrating how altering a given paradigm enabled painting to inscribe itself into diverse geographic and social spaces without losing independent features, even when installed within ensemble configurations. The exhibition at ARC 1 challenged directly the installation conventions of the institution by disrupting a focus on individual paintings and locating the experience as an interplay of diverse practices, which expanded across divisions of inside/outside and positioned the viewers within the spatial configurations of the installation.

But with the subsequent publication of *Peinture: cahiers théoriques*, in May 1971, Devade, Cane and Dezeuze more closely aligned themselves with *Tel Quel*, prioritizing political and linguistic theory over the practice-based approach advocated by Viallat. They insisted on the need for fundamental political and economic change as the necessary precondition for real changes in the production of art. Afterwards, the Supports-Surfaces group splintered along geographic lines, leading Lepage (1971) to write that 'Telquelian terrorism', by which he meant the radical theoretical challenges that characterized the Parisian-based journal, dealt a severe blow to the priorities of artists working in the provinces. The group formally broke apart at the final exhibition of Supports-Surfaces in June 1971 at the Théâtre National d'Art Dramatique in Nice. The split was evident in the installations, with the Parisian artists' work located in the foyer, separated from the group of Mediterranean-based artists whose works were installed within the theatre itself. The artists determined the arrangement of the exhibition, and the installation visually reflected the underlying division among the group. Though Lepage (1971) credited Viallat with staging a coherent ensemble of works that 'called into question [...] habits of thought', he considered the paintings by those in the Parisian circle to be too similar to American formalist art from 1955–1965, and thereby too conventional. By contrast, Viallat and his circle more effectively critiqued formalism and the medium of painting by focusing on material analyses, processes and environmental effects, influenced by the topographical specificity and open spaces of their Mediterranean locale. Artists in Viallat's circle did sustain a kinship with their Paris cohort for a few subsequent exhibitions in recognition of their complementary aims, but continued locating their work in the collaborative and experimental atmosphere of France's southern coast as the 'Occitan' side of Supports-Surfaces.

The *plein-air* exhibitions of summer 1970 were innovative in re-conceiving abstract painting from within its own structure by disrupting its static orientation and expanding its given elements materially and spatially. Posing a challenge to painting as it was traditionally understood, yet working within its historical discourse, the artists' experimentation with mobile, ephemeral installations deployed painting in landscapes and villages as an intervention that was open-ended yet also allowed for empirical analysis of the effects of painting through direct observation



Supports/Surfaces (1971), installation view of works by Claude Viallat, Noël Dolla, Toni Grand, André Valensi and Patrick Saytour, Théâtre National d'Art Dramatique, Nice. Photo: courtesy of Claude Viallat.

and photographic documentation. Supports-Surfaces retrieved painting from its peripheral status in the late 1960s by dismantling its format and exposing its instability and mutability in sync with the precariousness of the moment's political activism, regional struggles for autonomy, and broadly held discontents with modernity. With a shared anti-institutional posture, they defied the gate-keeping mechanism and mediation of cultural organizations, even while participating in them. While the *plein-air* exhibitions of *Été 70* operated freely beyond any controls aside from the curatorial decisions of the artists, the first exhibition of Supports-Surfaces at ARC 1 revealed the inherent contradiction of maneuvering within an institutional framework. The subsequent exhibitions of Supports-Surfaces were characterized by an emphasis on institutional critique and honing of artistic theory to align artistic practices with political models associated with *Tel Quel*.

In the aftermath of the scission, Vierrat and Dolla participated in *La VII Biennale de Paris* (1971) as individually invited artists, as did the group 'Supports-Surfaces: Peinture, cahiers théoriques', which was identified as Bioulès, Cane, Devade, Dezeuze and Pincemin, who had taken legal title to the name. In April 1972, two exhibitions of *Supports-Surfaces: Peinture, cahiers théoriques* were held in Strasbourg and in Montpellier. Bioulès and Dezeuze left the group by June 1972 (see Toma and Semin 1998: 164). The 1974 exhibition organized by Bernard Ceysson, *Nouvelle Peinture en France pratiques/théories* for the Musée d'Art et d' Industrie in Saint-Étienne, ended any remaining collective affiliations (Devade and Cane refused to participate).⁹

The *plein-air* exhibitions of *Été 70* established an interventionist model of display with a resonance of social and political commitment. The mobility of the exhibitions and the mutability of the works manifested freedom from institutional screening allowing for greater agency in the construction of artistic practices through geographic engagements. The works presented in ensemble format or individually defied the conventions of painting with the deployment of the installations in varied Mediterranean locales generating fluid occurrences and encounters. It is precisely this spirit of artistic liberation *and* cultural dissension that formed a distinctive foundation for subsequent exhibitions of Supports-Surfaces.

The *plein-air* exhibitions of summer 1970 established the identity of the group in relation to the southern zone of France. But with the formalization of Supports-Surfaces at ARC 1 shortly thereafter, the ephemeral and nomadic quality of the works became more systematized in complex ensemble installations within an institutional context. Yet it was the experimental *plein-air* installations on the Mediterranean that initially succeeded in formulating a working method. In tandem with installation strategies that exemplified in material terms the spirit of liberation and resistance permeating the late 1960s, the Mediterranean circle showed how a rigorous dismantling of an inherited artistic model could manifest the discontents and instability of an historical moment in visual and exhibitionary forms.

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