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# Painting on the Edge:
# Geometric Abstraction in Montreal, the 1950s

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

December 2001

**Abstract**

Painting on the Edge:
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This thesis traces the development of geometric abstract painting in Montreal during the 1950s within the constructs defined by the 'avant-garde.' Two groups of painters concerned with the calculated visual language of abstract geometry are discussed. The first group, the Plasticiens, was active between 1954 and 1956 and was comprised of Louis Belzile (b.1929), Jean-Paul Jérôme (b.1928), Fernand Toupin (b.1930) and Jauran (1926-1959) – the pseudonym of art critic Rodolphe de Repentigny. The second group, Espace dynamique, undertook a more rigorous and systematic investigation of the reductivist formal program initially developed by the Plasticiens. Espace dynamique was active from about 1956 and included Denis Juneau (b.1925), Guido Molinari (b.1933), Claude Tousignant (b.1932) and Jean Goguen (1928-1989), who was later replaced by Luigi Perciballi.

Through an analysis of the artists' own writings, the manifestos they produced, the formal program demonstrated in their paintings, and the critical response their work received within its historical milieu, this thesis examines the ideological differences and shifts in emphases that arose between the Plasticiens and Espace dynamique. Evolving definitions of 'avant-gardism' are assessed by attending to issues such as the varying interpretations of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, the shift that occurred in the turn from Paris to New York as the centre of international 'avant-garde' art, and the change in terminology from "non-figuration" to "abstraction."

**Acknowledgements**

First and foremost I would like to sincerely thank my thesis supervisor Professor Sandra Paikowsky. Her kindness and enthusiasm, not to mention her wisdom, wit and expertise, have been invaluable in the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank my readers, Dr. Brian Foss and Dr. Olivier Asselin, for their much appreciated suggestions and input. In addition, I am indebted to Dr. Foss for his ongoing support of my endeavours and his generosity throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. I am also grateful to the Department of Art History at Concordia University for providing such a warm and receptive environment in which to work, and I would like to extend my thanks to Dr. Catherine MacKenzie for her assistance and counsel over the years.

The writing of this thesis simply would not have been possible without the faith and unwavering encouragement of two very special people, Barry Allikas and Janice Anderson. To each of you I owe an enormous debt of love and gratitude. And finally, thank-you to my mother, Carolyn Kwasek, for showing me the importance of courage and tenacity.

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*Masterpieces of the past are good for the past:*
*they are not good for us.*

Antonin Artaud (1938)[1]

## Introduction

It is the intent of this thesis to analyze the emergence of geometric abstraction in Montreal during the 1950s according to the constructs of the avant-garde. During this period, the development and definition of geometric abstraction, a process rife with conflict and controversy, was precipitated through the efforts of two vanguard movements – the Plasticiens and Espace dynamique. The Automatistes were the first avant-garde faction to forge a place for non-figurative painting within the city's modern art community. The Plasticiens and Espace dynamique then took up a battle to overturn what were perceived as the moribund conventions of the prevailing aesthetic strictures, wanting to free painting from the ballast of representation. Setting themselves in opposition to the surrealist-inspired objectives of their avant-garde antecedents, the Plasticiens and Espace dynamique introduced a visual vocabulary that embraced a neo-plasticist deployment of abstract geometry.

Within the scope of this thesis I am suggesting that the advent of aesthetic "modernity" in Quebec began in the 1940s following the establishment of the Contemporary Arts Society, the return of Alfred Pellan from Paris and the formation of the Automatistes. However, this should not eclipse the fact that, depending upon how

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[1] Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and its Double (1938), trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 74.

one chooses to define aesthetic "modernity," its roots in Quebec art may be seen to stretch back several decades. My delineation of "modernity" is intended to provide a backdrop for the emergence of the Plasticiens and Espace dynamique and the shift from gestural to geometric abstraction. As a result, I have located the advent of the "modern" art community, and the subsequent emergence of avant-gardism within that community, with the beginning of non-figurative art.[2]

Premised upon the notion that avant-gardism is a cultural phenomenon that arises from the exigencies of specific social, political and ideological conditions, it is the objective of this thesis to examine the aesthetic and theoretical trajectories that characterized the emergence of geometric abstraction in Montreal, and to critically analyze the artistic endeavors of its avant-gardist initiators within their historical milieu. However, an understanding of how geometric abstraction constituted a vanguard practice must first be prefaced with a discussion of the historical usages and shifting definitions of the term "avant-garde."

The concept of avant-gardism, with its "fierce insistence on the present and the future to the detriment of the past," expresses a transition from the old to the new; it is premised upon an opposition between established conventions and the radical forms and ideologies that dislodge those conventions. [3] In an attempt to overcome the restraints of

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[2] For a broader, more inclusive discussion of aesthetic modernism in Quebec art see: Jean-René Ostiguy, Les Esthétiques modernes au Québec de 1916 à 1946 (Ottawa: Galerie nationale du Canada, 1982); Esther Trépanier, "L'Émergence d'un discours de la modernité dans la critique d'art (Montréal 1918-1938)," L'Avènement de la modernité culturelle au Québec, eds. Yvan Lamonde et Esther Trépanier (Québec: Institut Québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1986) 69-112; or Esther Trépanier "Les paramètres épistemologiques et idéologiques d'un premier discours sur la modernité," Des lieux de mémoire: Identité et culture modernes au Québec, 1930-1960, ed. Marie Carani (Ottawa: Université d'Ottawa, 1995) 29-41.

[3] John Weightman, The Concept of the Avant-Garde: Explorations in Modernism (London: Alcove Press: 1973) 15.

the existing cultural order, the avant-garde seeks social, artistic and intellectual emancipation through a denunciation of the status quo. As Jürgen Habermas has suggested, "the avant-garde understands itself as invading unknown territory, exposing itself to the dangers of sudden, shocking encounters, conquering an as yet unoccupied future."[4] Engaging in courageous precursory action and exploring the uncharted frontiers of aesthetic innovation, "the avant-garde must find a direction in a landscape into which no one seems to have yet ventured."[5]

Renato Poggioli, whose The Theory of the Avant-Garde (1968) constitutes an exhaustive account of various vanguard manifestations and doctrines, states that the term "avant-garde" was first used in a cultural context to describe self-consciously "advanced" and revolutionary political movements in France during the first half of the nineteenth century.[6] A military expression employed by the French army since the Middle Ages to refer to its reconnaissance missions, the phrase gained a wider degree of cultural relevance during the latter half of the nineteenth century through its metaphorical application to radical or progressive activities in literary and artistic realms. As Linda Nochlin asserts, Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles of 1825 by the French Utopian Socialist Henri de Saint-Simon prophetically used the term to designate artists as members of the elite leadership of the new social order:

> It is we artists who will serve you as avant-garde... the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among

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[4] Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity – An Incomplete Project," trans. Seyla Ben-Habib, The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983) 5.

[5] Habermas 5.

[6] Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968) 9.

> men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas.... What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all the intellectual faculties.[7]

Nochlin suggests that, once the term had been extended to apply to "advanced" developments within the sphere of art, its aesthetic meaning continued to be subtended by political connotations and the label was accompanied by a host of revolutionary implications.[8] The priority of these implications, and the relations between the term's aesthetic and political meanings, are rendered emphatically clear by the Fourierist art critic and theorist Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant in his obscure pamphlet De la mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes of 1845:

> Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies; it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore to know whether art worthily fulfills it proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is....[9]

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[7] Henri de Saint-Simon as cited in Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France, 1830-80," Art News Annual 34 (1968): 12. While Poggioli and Nochlin assert that the term "avant-garde" was first applied to cultural phenomenon during the first half of the ninteenth century, Matei Calinescu contends that, according to the Trésor de la langue français (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1974, vol. 3: 1056-1057), the avant-garde metaphor had been applied to poetry almost three centuries earlier by the French humanist lawyer and historian Etienne Pasquier, who wrote in his Recherches de la France of 1581: "A glorious war was then being waged against ignorance, a war in which, I would say, Scève, Bèze, and Pelletier constitued the avant-garde; or if your prefer, they were the fore-runners of the other poets." Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 97-98. Furthermore, Calinescu points out that while Nochlin, following Donald D. Egbert in his "The Idea of 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics," The American Historical Review 73.2 (December 1967): 343, attributes this passage from Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles to Saint-Simon, it is known that this unsigned volume was the result of a collaboration between Saint-Simon and his disciples. Calinescu thus suggests that, while the passage was perhaps inspired by Saint-Simon, it was, in fact, written by one of his followers, Olinde Rodrigues. Calinescu 101-102.

[8] Nochlin 12.

[9] Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant as cited in Poggioli 9.

Laverdant's characterization of vanguard art, like Saint-Simon's, stresses the idea of the interdependence of artistic and social spheres and alludes to the fact that the phenomenon of aesthetic avant-gardism was linked to the exigencies of a particular cultural context. Poggioli has written that its application within the artistic milieu coincided with the advent of a new generation of artists who were attempting to come to terms with the tensions of the "bourgeois, capitalistic and technological society" that had begun to emerge.[10] In particular, the breakdown of traditional sources of financial support from the church, the state and the aristocratic elite following the 1848 Revolution served as a crucial factor in the development of vanguard attitudes and practices.[11]

The triumph of the European middle classes and the emerging capitalist art market enabled newly independent artists to experiment with the content and appearance of their artworks. The term "art for art's sake," which had been coined early in the nineteenth century, was soon widely used to describe artworks that needed no social or religious justification for their existence.[12] However, while artists had ostensibly entered a new era of freedom and experimentation, their artworks were subject to the conservative predilections of bourgeois taste. Clement Greenberg has thus suggested that the historical avant-garde arose in response to a "threat" and a

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[10] Poggioli 107.

[11] The old style of patronage had mandated artworks that glorified the institutions or individuals who commissioned them and, as Robert Hughes asserts, "where the taste of religious or secular courts determined patronage, 'subversive' innovation was not esteemed as a sign of artistic quality." Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) 372.

[12] Robert Atkins, Artspeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements and Buzzwords (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990) 102.

"challenge." [13] According to Greenberg, the threat lay in the fact that art was being exposed to the attrition of a market no longer governed by the tastes of a cultivated elite; the challenge was to find new and innovative ways of maintaining art's previous standards. [14] Setting itself in opposition to the reigning tastes of the day, the avant-garde thus committed itself to aesthetic innovation and liberal political views. Where once artists had served the interests of established power, the vanguard now positioned itself as adversarial to those interests.

Attending to the artistic movements and cultural formations that composed the history of the avant-garde during the nineteenth century, Raymond Williams has distinguished three main phases of development:

> Initially, there were innovative groups, which sought to protect their practices within the growing dominance of the art market and against the indifference of the formal academies. These developed into alternative, more radically innovative groupings seeking to provide their own facilities of production, distribution and publicity; and finally into fully oppositional formations, determined not only to promote their own work but to attack its enemies in the cultural establishments, and beyond these, the whole social order in which these enemies had gained and now exercised and reproduced their power.[15]

Within these groups, "the defense of a particular kind of art became...an attack in the name of this art on a whole social and cultural order."[16] As a result, the military metaphor of the vanguard, which had been filtered through the vocabulary of

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[13] Clement Greenberg, "Where is the Avant-Garde?" (1967), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, ed. John O'Brian, vol.4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1993) 259.

[14] Greenberg 259-260.

[15] Raymond Williams, "Introduction: The Politics of the Avant-Garde," Visions and Blueprints: Avant-Garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Europe, ed. Edward Timms and Peter Collier (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 2-3.

[16] Williams 3.

revolutionary politics, was now directly applicable to these newly militant art movements.

Since its initial application to cultural and artistic activities in the nineteenth century, the concept of the avant-garde has been subject to a variety of diverse and sometimes contradictory definitions. Eugène Ionesco, in his Notes and Counter-Notes (1964), described the term as follows:

> I prefer to define the avant-garde in terms of opposition and rupture. While most writers, artists, and thinkers believe they belong to their time, the revolutionary [artist] feels he is running counter to his time.... An avant-garde man is like an enemy inside a city he is bent on destroying, against which he rebels; for like any system of government, an established form of expression is also a form of oppression. The avant-garde man is the opponent of an existing system.[17]

While most critics would agree with Ionesco's portrayal of the avant-garde as a cultural phenomenon underpinned by "opposition" and "rupture," it is the avant-garde's relationship to modernism that has garnered the most debate. Insofar as the idea of modernity, like that of the avant-garde, implies a radical criticism of tradition and an unyielding commitment to formal innovation, the concepts might be interpreted as being interchangeable. However, although (in Matei Calinescu's words) the avant-garde "would have been hardly conceivable in the absence of a distinct and fully developed consciousness of modernity," there has been a considerable amount of theoretical effort dedicated to establishing the distinctions and interdependencies operating between the two.[18]

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[17] Eugène Ionecso, Notes and Counter-Notes, trans. Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964) 40-41.

[18] Calinescu 97.

In contrast to a number of writers, such as Poggioli and Nochlin, who equate the avant-garde with modernism, Peter Bürger denies the validity of such an equation, suggesting that it tends to falsely subsume the increasingly ideological and revolutionary character of the avant-garde within the more aestheticist modern movement.[19] In his influential Theory of the Avant-Garde (1974), Bürger sets himself the task of producing a definition of the avant-garde that will distinguish it from the contemporary phenomenon of the modernist period. Culling his descriptions and analyses from the early twentieth century, he contends that the theoretical emphases and social roles of avant-garde artists were markedly different from those of the modernists. Specifically, he argues that movements such as Constructivism, Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism questioned the autonomous, self-referential status of art and, in doing so, incited a rupture with the overarching formal concerns of the moderns: "a common feature of all these movements is that they do not reject individual artistic techniques and procedures of earlier art but reject that art in its entirety, thus bringing about a radical break with tradition."[20] He claims that the term "avant-garde" should be reserved for artistic movements that were committed not only to progressive aesthetic innovation, but to attacking "art as an institution such as it has developed in bourgeois society."[21] According to Bürger's theory, this attack was launched on the grounds that

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[19] Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Foreward: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde" in Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xiv. This translation of Bürger's Theory of the Avant-garde is based on the second edition of Theorie der Avantgarde (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974).

[20] Bürger 109.

[21] Bürger 109.

modernist art, as a result of its formalist preoccupations, had ceased to comment on its social environment.

Hal Foster has responded to Bürger's theory with the following criticisms: "His description is often inexact, and his definition overly selective.... Moreover, his very premise – that *one* theory can comprehend *the* avant-garde, that all its activities can be subsumed under the project to destroy the false autonomy of bourgeois art – is problematic."[22] Richard Murphy also asserts that the avant-garde is a "much more ambiguous and heterogeneous phenomenon" than Bürger's narrow theoretical formulation allows. [23] In contradistinction to Bürger's clear-cut differentiation between modernism and the avant-garde, Murphy suggests that a dialectical relationship exists between the two phenomenon, such that "the avant-garde questions the blind spots and unreflected presuppositions of modernism."[24]

Offering yet another perspective, in his Five Faces of Modernity (1987) Calinescu argues that while "there is probably no single trait of the avant-garde in any of its historical metamorphoses that is not implied or even prefigured in the broader scope of modernity," there are "significant differences between the two movements."[25] Although the avant-garde "borrows practically all its elements from the modern tradition...at the same time [it] blows them up, exaggerates them, and places them in

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[22] Hal Foster, The Return of the Real (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) 8.

[23] Richard Murphy, Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 3.

[24] Murphy 3.

[25] Calinescu 96.

the most unexpected contexts, often making them almost completely unrecognizable."[26] Calinescu states that despite the fact that the general thrust of avant-garde trends and attitudes is directly indebted to the progressive, nonconformist consciousness of modernity, the avant-garde has dramatized these constitutive elements and made them into cornerstones of a more intransigent and fervent "revolutionary ethos."[27] Calinescu thus defines the avant-garde as a later, more radical form of modernism that, through its overtly political orientation and its use of "subversive or openly disruptive artistic techniques," can be distinguished from the more formal, less polemical and less self-assertive character of mainstream modernism.[28]

Whether one chooses to characterize avant-gardism as a concept that is mutually exclusive with modernism, or as one with which it overlaps, it is obvious that vanguard movements differ in the ways and degrees that they challenge established aesthetic and social conventions. The avant-garde has thus embodied a variety of separate, yet intertwined, developments since its inception. It has encompassed shifts in the role of the academy, in the artist's position in society and, especially, in the artist's attitude toward art's means and issues - toward subject matter, colour, pictorial space and the problem of the nature and purpose of the artwork itself. From Greenberg's perspective, where modernism and the avant-garde are rendered synonymous, the project of the avant-garde over the course of the twentieth century has been to develop art along lines defined by its inner logic. In the case of painting, Greenberg has defined "a progressive

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[26] Calinescu 96.

[27] Calinescu 95.

[28] Calinescu 96.

surrender to the resistance of its medium" through a "destruction of realistic pictorial space, and with it...the object."[29] Beginning with pioneering artists such as Kandinsky and Malevich, a revolutionary movement in painting was initiated in which external, objective reality was replaced with internal, subjective invention. As Jürgen Habermas has suggested, lines, shapes and colours, no longer perceived as tools with which to tell a story or replicate natural appearances, ceased primarily to serve the cause of mimetic representation.[30] With an ever-increasing stress on purity, and a trend toward greater autonomy of the artwork itself, the emergence of abstraction heralded an era in which, as Habermas states, "the media of expression and the techniques of production themselves became the aesthetic object."[31]

Aligned with the modernist belief in historical "progress," the perennial shifts in avant-garde attitudes and practices, including the shift from figuration to abstraction, are understood to unfold according to a definitive teleology. Within this framework, a direct line of influence running from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism and on to Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, etc. characterizes avant-garde activity. Furthermore, this turbulent succession of vanguard movements is also tied to the notion of originality, to new beginnings achieved through a rejection or dissolution of the past.

Whether glorifying speed, violence and warfare as did the Futurists, or celebrating the irrational world of dreams and the unconscious as the Surrealists

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[29] Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism vol.1 34.

[30] Habermas 10.

[31] Habermas 10.

prescribed, the avant-garde artist has, as Rosalind Krauss asserts, "worn many guises over the first hundred years of his existence: revolutionary, dandy, anarchist, aesthete, technologist, mystic," and he has also "preached a variety of creeds."[32] Yet as successive vanguard movements launch attacks on the preceding traditions, avant-gardism, regardless of its momentary guise, continues to be underpinned by a desire for artistic innovation and an impulse to resist the constraints and conventions of the status quo.

While the concept of avant-gardism has been challenged by the postmodern critical enterprise, with notions such as "originality" and "progress" being categorized as "myths," avant-gardism as a social and aesthetic phenomenon provides a felicitous framework for assessing the development of geometric abstraction in Montreal during the 1950s.[33] Whatever currency postmodern theoretical positions have gained in recent decades, the concept of the avant-garde as a revolutionary and oppositional movement was one that shaped artistic practices and discourses throughout the modern period. Although art critics such as Hilton Kramer now contend that "the Age of the Avant-Garde has definitely passed," the fundamental conventions and assumptions that informed the development of geometric abstraction in Montreal were nonetheless premised upon avant-gardism.[34] The Plasticiens and Espace dynamique painters regarded their work as progressive, original and revolutionary, and thus as profoundly avant-garde.

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[32] Rosalind E. Krauss, The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986) 157.

[33] See for example Krauss, as cited above.

[34] Hilton Kramer, The Age of the Avant-Garde: An Art Chronicle of 1956-1972 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973) ix.

## Chapter One:
## The 1940s – An Overview

The avant-garde concept of a fusion between radical art and radical politics, where art is "an instrument for social action and reform," [1] did not arise in Quebec until the 1940s. Early in the decade, an unprecedented era of reassessment and revolt began to unfold. Reflecting Matei Calinescu's characterization of the ideology that has defined the international avant-garde, the idea took shape that there was "a bitter struggle to be fought against an enemy symbolizing the forces of stagnation, the tyranny of the past [and] the old forms and ways of thinking."[2] For many liberal-minded artists and intellectuals, the climate in the province had become intolerable. Not only was culture regulated by the unabashedly conservative policies of Maurice Duplessis' autocratic government, whose Union Nationale party held power from 1936 to 1939 and then again from 1944 to 1960, but the education system was controlled by a clergy fearful of anti-Catholic influences. [3] In particular, the Church wielded significant influence over the public expression of thought and ideas through its catalogue of proscribed writings. As the French Surrealist André Breton remarked during his brief stay in Quebec in 1944:

> The Catholic Church, true to its obscurantist methods, makes use here of its all-powerful influence to prevent the dissemination of any literature which is not edifying (classical theater has practically been reduced to *Esther* and *Polyeucte*,

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[1] Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968) 9.

[2] Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 121-122.

[3] For an overview of the period see: Paul-André Linteau et al., "The Duplessis Era 1945-1960," Quebec Since 1930, trans. Robert Chodos and Ellen Garmaise (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1991) 145-306.

> which are available in huge stacks in Quebec bookstores, the eighteenth century seems never to have taken place, Hugo is nowhere to be found).[4]

Convinced of the dangers of assimilation and anxious to avoid what were perceived as nefarious incursions from the outside world, the reigning paternalistic regime attempted to preserve the traditional values of Quebec's rural past.

Despite attempts by the Church and State to stem the process of cultural modernization, the 1940s were characterized by revolutionary artistic activity and effervescent change. Artists rejected the forms and ideologies associated with traditionalist conservatism and, expressing their avant-garde impulses, they took a stand against the aesthetic and intellectual atrophy that plagued the province, particularly as manifested within the infrastructure for the arts. In an effort to transgress the boundaries of the repressive socio-political atmosphere and emancipate themselves from the stagnant backwater of conformity, they challenged the doctrines of academicism fostered in art schools and institutions by the ruling political and clerical elites. In particular, they condemned the ultra-conservative policies and practices adhered to at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal. Although there had been earlier, less intense conflicts between members of the "advanced" art community and Charles Maillard, the Director of the École des beaux-arts and one of the staunchest advocates of academic art, the running battle came to a head in the 1940s.[5]

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[4] Breton as quoted in François-Marc Gagnon, "Remembering *Refus global* : Manifesto of the Canadian Automatists" in François-Marc Gagnon and René Viau, *Refus global* (1948): Le Manifeste du mouvement automatiste/Manifesto of the Automatist Movement, trans. Lucy McNair (Paris: Services culturels de l'Ambassade du Canada, 1998) 104.

[5] For a discussion of earlier condemnations of the conservatism at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal and the battle against Maillard see: Gagnon, Paul-Émile Borduas: Biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre, (Montréal: Éditions Fides, 1978) 28-31; 91-92; 108-110.

The movement toward aesthetic modernity in Montreal during the 1940s, and the subsequent emergence of non-figurative painting as an avant-garde form of artistic expression, was inextricably linked to a constellation of events: the establishment of the Contemporary Arts Society in 1939, the return of Alfred Pellan from Paris in 1940, and the formation of the Automatistes early in the decade. Prior to these developments painting in Quebec was, as Christopher Varley contends, "still extremely provincial in outlook."[6] Canvases filled with sentimental, literary or anecdotal content proliferated, while developments in modern European art, both aesthetic and theoretical, were either ignored or disparaged.[7] Following the founding of the Contemporary Arts Society in 1939, however, a revolt began to gain momentum.

The establishment of the C.A.S. was initiated by John Lyman (1886-1967). In his aesthetic philosophy and approach to painting Lyman was a modernist and a supporter of the values of the School of Paris. He espoused a new attitude toward the content of painting in which "the manner of rendering a subject takes precedence over the choice of subject."[8] Breaking with the so-called 'objective' vision of reality that underpinned the academic tradition, he stressed the importance of an emotive, subjective mode of painting that was aligned with the European-initiated privileging of form and colour.

Lyman was an important precursor to the development of avant-gardism in Montreal. With himself as President and Paul-Émile Borduas (1905-1960) as Vice-

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[6] Christopher Varley, The Contemporary Arts Society, Montreal, 1939-1948 (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1980) 8.

[7] Varley 8.

[8] Louise Dompierre, John Lyman, 1886-1967 (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, 1986) 19.

President, the C.A.S was organized to respond to the needs of a group of artists who were interested in moving beyond the established conventions of academic art. [9] The group was open to a variety of stylistic tendencies, figurative and non-figurative alike. According to Lyman, the Society "took exactly the position of an anti-academy, putting emphasis on the living quality of art – on imagination, sensitivity, intuition and spontaneity as opposed to conventional proficiency, regarding membership in an academy as merely a consolation for having died during one's own lifetime."[10]

Renato Poggioli has suggested that the formation of avant-garde coalitions is "an argument of self-assertion or self-defense used by a society in the strict sense against society in the larger sense."[11] However, while the C.A.S.'s impetus to band together as a means of counteracting the conservative tyranny of the Montreal art establishment serves as an early example of the kind of group solidarity and reformist mentality that would later characterize vanguard initiatives in the city, the Society functioned primarily as a vehicle for organizing exhibitions. Through its series of annual group shows the C.A.S. provided a forum in which members could exhibit their works, and thereby bring new trends and techniques in painting to public attention. As Lyman asserted: "[Although] 'living' art managed to rear its head in infrequent shows,

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[9] Following the initial establishment of the C.A.S. in January, short announcements appeared in Le Jour and The Standard on 11 February 1939 inviting all professional artists interested in modern art movements to attend the group's first public meeting. According to Varley, the following artists, in addition to Lyman and Borduas, attended the meeting and decided to join: Jack Beder, Alexander Bercovitch, Sam Borenstein, Fritz Brandtner, Stanley Cosgrove, Henry Eveleigh, Charles Fainmel, Louise Gadbois, Eric Goldberg, Eldon Grier, Allan Harrison, Prudence Heward, Jack Humphrey, Bernard Mayman, Louis Muhlstock, Jean Palardy, Marguerite Paquette, Goodridge Roberts, Anne Savage, Marian Scott, Regina Seiden, Jori Smith, Philip Surrey and Campbell Tinning. Varley 12. (The list of members is found in Appendix B).

[10] Lyman, "Borduas and the Contemporary Arts Society" in Evan H. Turner, Paul-Émile Borduas, 1905-1960 (Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts, 1962) 40.

[11] Poggioli 4.

it still had pitifully few supporters and got scant consideration from the academic juries that controlled the regular exhibitions."[12]

Yet while the Society lacked a coherent formal program, an element that differentiates it from subsequent avant-garde initiatives, Lyman's efforts as its spokesperson helped the group to present a unified public front against academic rule, with its openness to aesthetic diversity ensuring the artists' freedom to engage in stylistic experimentation. The C.A.S.'s ability to present a unified front was soon compromised, however, with Alfred Pellan's (1906-1988) return from France in June of 1940. According to Borduas, who would soon enter into a bitter rivalry with Pellan, his arrival incited "une brusque divison des forces."[13]

While in Paris Pellan had assimilated a variety of artistic styles, including those of the Fauves, the Cubists, and the Surrealists, and he provided a dazzlingly eclectic alternative to the traditional interests of the Quebec art community. As Germain Lefebvre has commented, the vast repertory of works he displayed upon his return "undoubtedly constituted the broadest, most coherent and most consistent survey of contemporary art born of the School of Paris that had ever been assembled until then."[14] Following Pellan's arrival in Montreal he was welcomed into the C.A.S. with "open arms."[15] However, tensions quickly began to arise. Pellan's celebrated reputation soon

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[12] Lyman, "Borduas and the Contemporary Arts Society" 40.

[13] Paul-Émile Borduas, "Projections libérantes," Paul-Émile Borduas: Écrits/Writings, 1942-1958, ed. François-Marc Gagnon, trans. François-Marc Gagnon and Dennis Young (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1978) 93. Originally published as Projections libérantes (Montréal: Mithra-Mythe, 1947).

[14] Germain Lefebvre, Pellan (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973) 51.

[15] Dr. Paul Dumas in conversation with Christopher Varley as quoted in Varley 20.

threw Lyman and Borduas into the shadows and his notoriety, "so easily won after his successes in Europe," seemed to pose "as much a threat as an incentive" for Borduas.[16] Reflecting on the effect Pellan's work had had on him in 1940, Borduas later scornfully recalled in his *Projections libérantes* (1947): "Le travail que ce peintre nous apporte de Paris est vigoureusement parfumé du lieu propice entre tous où il a pris forme. C'est en somme un fruit parisien qui vient à nous."[17]

Although Pellan and Borduas were both intent upon mobilizing opposition to the chronic apathy and entrenched conservatism of the Montreal milieu, they had differing opinions on how this could best be achieved. As the tone of debate surrounding the C.A.S.'s activities became increasingly ideological, Borduas began to emerge as a powerful polemicist and radical thinker. Furthermore, although Borduas had been elected Vice-President of the Society, the membership of the group was predominantly anglophone. This imbalance brought serious differences into the C.A.S., differences that became critical as a group of young French artists began to look to Borduas for leadership.

Poggioli has stated that in addition to artistic experimentation and the liquidation of tradition, avant-garde movements have been historically defined by their intellectual radicalism and their coincidence with the advent of a new, unified generation.[18] Such a movement began to take shape in Montreal during the early years of the 1940s, as a new generation of artists with progressive intellectual interests gathered around Borduas,

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[16] Varley 20.

[17] Borduas, "Projections libérantes" 93.

[18] Poggioli 6.

who was then a professor at the École du meuble.[19] These artists were drawn from among Borduas' students, such as Marcel Barbeau, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Roger Fauteux, and from students at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal, including Fernand Leduc, Pierre Gauvreau, Claude Gauvreau and Françoise Sullivan.[20] The group began meeting informally at Borduas' studio to show their works and discuss such things as idealistic social theories, psychoanalysis and Surrealism – all subjects denounced by the Church.[21] It was during these meetings that Borduas introduced the group to the writings of André Breton, such as those found in Minotaure, a review to which Borduas had access at the library of the École du meuble.[22] Borduas had discovered in Surrealism, particularly in the writings of Breton, a conceptual basis for artistic and spiritual freedom.

Throughout the early 1940s, Borduas led the group of young artists to investigate the creative course advocated by Breton. They began to experiment with "psychic automatism," which Breton defined in the Manifesto of Surrealism (1924) as a "pure state" in which one "proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought...in the absence of any control exercised by reason, [and] exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern."[23] This liberating process, unfettered by self-conscious intention,

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[19] For a complete history of the Automatiste movement see: Gagnon, Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécoise, 1941-1954 (Outremont, QC: Lanctôt Éditeur, 1998).

[20] It should be noted that, while the Automatistes were a multi-disciplinary group that included writers, designers, chorcographers and performers among its members, it is not within the scope of this thesis to address those aspects of the movement.

[21] One should keep in mind that authors such as Freud and Breton were proscribed by the Church, locked up in libraries, and unavailable at bookstores following the infamous Padlock Law of 1937.

[22] Gagnon, Paul-Émile Borduas: Biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre 95.

[23] André Breton, Manifesto of Surrealism (1924), trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972) 26.

provided a method for releasing the full resources of the individual. Perhaps more importantly, Surrealism also forged a link between the realization of personal freedom and a fundamental recasting of social values through access to a collective sensibility. This collective sensibility, in turn, could then be used as a vehicle to achieve social and intellectual emancipation within Quebec's oppressive cultural atmosphere. According to Leduc, the theorist of the Automatistes,[24] Surrealism could be used "to explore the vast field of humanity and to realize its fundamental ambition of reconciling the creation of a collective myth with a movement of human liberation."[25]

However, as Jean-Pierre Duquette asserts, the Automatistes' acceptance of surrealist theories was never absolute or without nuance, and they maintained a certain 'critical' distance from the pontifical paternalism of Breton.[26] Unlike the mainstream Surrealists, the Automatistes were pursuing a form of expression that was increasingly non-representational. They were more concerned with the formal results of the 'automatic' process than with narrative or literary associations and, intent on maintaining the independence of the Montreal group, they were only interested in borrowing from Surrealism what would best serve their aspirations within the specific context of their local environment.

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[24] A discussion of Leduc's role as the "theoretician" of the Automatistes may be found in: Bernard Teyssèdre, "Fernand Leduc: peintre et théoricien du surréalisme à Montréal (1941-1947)," Le Barre du jour [Special edition on "Les automatistes"] 17-20 (1969): 224-270.

[25] Leduc as quoted in Ray Ellenwood, Égrégore: A History of the Montreal Automatist Movement (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1980) 176. Leduc's writings on art, many of which formed the theoretical basis for the Montreal Automatiste movement, are compiled in Vers les îles de lumière. Écrits (1942-1980), ed. André Beaudet (LaSalle, QC: Hurtubise HMH, 1981).

[26] Jean-Pierre Duquette, Fernand Leduc (LaSalle, QC: Hurtubise HMH, 1980) 29-30. For a detailed discussion of the (often hotly-debated) relations between the Automatistes and the Surrealists see: Gagnon, Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécoise, 1941-1954 101-107; 161-165; 193-195; 317-328; 357-373; 439-448.

By the mid-1940s the Automatistes were disillusioned with the C.A.S., believing that the older, founding members of the Society were becoming too conservative in their outlook and were reacting in much the same way as the academicians toward their newer, more experimental works.[27] Furthermore, Lyman had no "native sympathy" for non-figuration and, as Borduas later contended, he seemed to "fear that the resulting victories [of the C.A.S.'s efforts] might go too far."[28] While Lyman and the other members of the C.A.S. sought to bring Quebec art firmly into the twentieth century, the Automatistes embraced a more radical and revolutionary outlook. Although they were all striving for a more modern, "living" form of artistic expression, the Automatistes' common concern was becoming more clearly social. They viewed the C.A.S. as a potential platform for cultural reform, rather than as merely a vehicle for organizing exhibitions. Their ideas were not based only on aesthetic liberty and stylistic innovation, but also on an ideology that would be responsive to the current conditions of Quebec society, a society they recognized as politically, spiritually and intellectually repressed.[29] The Automatistes thus saw their artistic project as one that was fundamentally tied to a critique of outmoded cultural values: one that could facilitate a genuine intervention in the socio-political arena. As Charles Russell states in relation to vanguard initiatives, "the avant-garde wants to be more than a merely modernist art, one

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[27] On conflicts and disagreements within the C.A.S. see: Claude Gauvreau, "Révolution à la Société d'Art Contemporain," Le Quartier Latin 3 décembre 1946: 4-5; Gauvreau, "L'épopée automatiste vue par un cyclope," La Barre du jour 17-20 (1969): 48-96; Lise Perreault, "La Société d'Art Contemporain," Master's thesis, Université de Montréal, 1975.

[28] Borduas, "Projections libérantes" 91.

[29] David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff, Contemporary Canadian Art (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1983) 16.

that reflects its contemporary society; rather it intends to be a vanguard art, in advance of, and the cause of, significant social change."[30]

As a result Leduc, one of the Automatistes' most vociferous spokespersons, began to push for his fledgling group's withdrawal from the Society. He envisioned the formation of a new, more radical collective that would counteract the myopic mediocrity of the current scene, and he expressed his intentions in a letter to Guy Viau:

> The time has come... to get together and take a firm stand, clarify our position. We must form a group at all costs, a small, intransigent group that will respect what is essential in a work of art and will exhibit together.... Borduas thinks it's the only possible attitude, given the present situation. Obviously, we'd drop the C.A.S. since it's not doing a thing for us, and we'd take over all the young energy, leaving the old greybeards to die of exhaustion.[31]

Leduc's idea to form a more unified group gained favor as the Automatistes increasingly saw themselves as a separate entity within the artistic community. As had been the case with international vanguard groups before them, they were committed to jettisoning the conservative values of the past, which they felt were "like fetters [that kept them] from moving forward."[32] With Borduas as their leader, the Automatistes' goals were aligned with what Douglas Cooper defines as the "creative avant-garde": "The function of this avant-garde is to stretch the human mind and spirit, to pull man in new and unsuspected directions, thereby obliging him to overcome an innate tendency

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[30] Charles Russell, Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde From Rimbaud Through Postmodernism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 16.

[31] Leduc as quoted in Ellenwood 53.

[32] Calinescu 122.

to lethargy and stagnation and to make himself free to rise to the supreme achievements of which he is capable."[33]

In the spring of 1946 what is often considered to be the Automatistes' first concrete manifestation was held from April 20 to 29 in an office on Amherst Street in Montreal.[34] Borduas exhibited *9.46* or *L'écossais redécouvrant l'Amérique* (1946) [fig.1], a canvas in which radiant, feathery forms hover in a dream-like space. Like the other Automatiste works included in the show, such as Leduc's turbulent *La dernière campagne de Napoléon* (1946) [fig.2], the surrealist mood of Borduas' painting was structured through a cubist-inspired treatment of space. Although most Automatiste paintings of this period were non-representational in the sense that they did not seek to replicate recognizable objects, they did incorporate certain compositional conventions reminiscent of the figurative tradition: the forms are generally oriented toward the centre of the canvas and the overlapping planes of colour create figure/ground relations that maintain illusions of depth. Their paintings are thus like "abstract figurations" that present to the viewer a mutated version of three-dimensional reality.

As Borduas and the Automatistes formed a cohesive alliance devoted to revolutionary artistic activity, tensions within the C.A.S. mounted and, by 1948, the Society was deeply split. Not only was the leadership of the C.A.S. being taken out of the hands of the founding members but, following Pellan's controversial appointment to

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[33] Douglas Cooper, "Establishment and Avant-Garde," Times Literary Supplement 3 September 1964: 823.

[34] In fact, several of the Automatistes, including Borduas, Leduc, Pierre Gauvreau, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Jean-Paul Mousseau, had already exhibited their works together three months earlier. François Sullivan, one the Automatistes, was studying dance in New York with Franciska Boas and she had organized a show for the group in Boas' studio. Gagnon, Paul-Émile Borduas: Biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre 184.

a teaching post at the ultra-conservative École des beaux-arts de Montréal in 1943 (an appointment that Borduas denounced as "an act of treason"), an unbridgeable gap had opened up between the two men, causing the younger members of the Society to divide into opposing camps around them.[35]

The internal factionalism that now characterized the C.A.S. was further entrenched when Pellan brought together a number of artists in the short-lived Prisme d'Yeux group.[36] Pellan could no longer tolerate Borduas' progressive rejection of aesthetic propositions that diverged from those of automatism, or his increasing influence and control over his students. For Pellan, the struggle initially undertaken by the C.A.S. to secure a forum for artistic experimentation was being compromised by Borduas. As a result, Prisme d'Yeux could be seen as an instrument to counter Borduas' manifest authority within the Society, and to offer an alternative to his paternalistic tendencies. The group's manifesto, written by Jacques de Tonnancour, served as means of both expressing and legitimizing their oppositional position.[37] Pellan and some of his followers subsequently withdrew from the Society, prompting the Automatistes to make

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[35] Varley 36.

[36] The founding members of Prisme d'Yeux were: Louis Archambault, Paul Beaulieu, Léon Bellefleur, Jean Benoît, Albert Dumouchel, Gabriel Filion, Pierre Garneau, Arthur Gladu, Lucien Morin, Mimi Parent, Alfred Pellan, Jeanne Rhéaume, Goodridge Roberts, Roland Truchon, Jacques de Tonnancour and Gordon Webber. The group was not a cohesive one and a year and a half after its inception, after mounting only two exhibitions, Prisme d'Yeux vanished.

[37] The manifesto was launched 4 February 1948 on the occasion of the group's inaugural exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and its point was explicit: "Prisme d'Yeux s'ouvre à toute peinture.... Nous cherchons une peinture libérée de toute contingence de temps et de lieu, d'idéologie restrictive et conçue en dehors de toute ingérence littéraire, politique, philosophique ou autre qui pourrait adultérer l'expression et compromettre sa pureté." Jacques de Tonnancour, "Manifeste de Prisme d'Yeux" in Robert 49.

their final break with the group shortly thereafter.[38] Borduas wrote his letter of resignation on 13 February 1948 and the C.A.S. was dissolved later that year.[39] As Lyman noted, "aesthetic liberty...[had] become an instrument of sectarian contention."[40]

According to Judith Ince, until the late 1960s the discord between the Prisme d'Yeux and Automatiste sectors of the C.A.S. was essentially explained as a "personality clash" between Pellan and Borduas.[41] However, François-Marc Gagnon offers a different interpretation of the "legendary conflict" which suggests that the controversy between the "two forefathers of modern art in Quebec" stemmed from opposing ideological outlooks.[42] According to Gagnon, Pellan adhered to "the ideology of rattrapage"; he believed in 'catching up' with international developments in art before attempting to offer an original, authentic statement from one's own ground.[43] In

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[38] It should also be noted that in addition to the dispute between Borduas and Pellan, Borduas deeply resented Lyman's negative reaction to a draft of the Automatistes' forthcoming manifesto *Refus global*, which Borduas had forwarded to Lyman prior to its publication later that year. Gagnon, Paul-Émile Borduas: Biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre 235.

[39] Borduas wrote letters announcing his resignation to Marion Scott, Maurice Gagnon and Lyman; they are reprinted in: Gagnon, Paul-Émile Borduas: Biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre 235.

[40] Lyman, "Borduas and the Contemporary Arts Society" 41.

[41] Judith Ince, "The Vocabulary of Freedom in 1948: The Politics of the Montreal Avant-Garde," The Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien 6.1 (1982): 36. According to Ince, the origins of this interpretation stem not only from the very personal tone of much of the debate within the C.A.S., but also from explanations of the conflict forwarded by Lyman in: "Borduas and the Contemporary Arts Society," Paul-Émile Borduas 1905-1960 (Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts, 1962); and by Robert in: Pellan: Sa vie et son oeuvre.

[42] Gagnon, "Pellan, Borduas and the Automatistes: Men and Ideas in Québec," artscanada (December/January 1972/1973): 48. Other commentators who have contested the interpretation that locates the personalities of Pellan and Borduas at the centre of the C.A.S. conflict include: Claude Gauvreau, "L'épopée automatiste vue par un cyclope," La Barre du jour 17-20 (1969): 48-96; and Marcel Fournier and Robert Laplante, "Borduas et l'automatisme" in Borduas, Refus global : Projections libérantes (Montréal: Éditions du Parti Pris, 1977).

[43] Gagnon, "Pellan, Borduas and the Automatistes: Men and Ideas in Québec" 48.

contradistinction to Pellan, Borduas held a "critical attitude... towards the ideology of rattrapage," subscribing instead to a more confrontational approach which Gagnon has labelled the ideology of "contestation."[44] It is precisely this ideology of "contestation," this unyielding antagonism toward what has gone before, that lent the Automatistes their avant-garde edge. As Poggioli asserts, vanguard movements are "formed in part or in whole to agitate *against* something or someone."[45] Resistance and opposition are thus the motivating forces that underlie vanguard actions and ideas: "However, and whenever, this spirit of hostility and opposition appears, it reveals a permanent tendency that is characteristic of the avant-garde movement."[46]

This collision between the ideologies of "rattrapage" and "contestation" was also underpinned by clashing definitions of "authentic" artistic freedom. Like the C.A.S., which only censured academicism, Prisme d'Yeux supported pluralism in the modern art community. As the group stated in its manifesto, it welcomed "toutes les voies, souvent opposées mais également possibles et vraies comme le jour et la nuit, le feu et l'eau."[47] Although the members embraced non-figurative painting, they also wanted to ensure that modernist approaches to figuration would be welcomed as an equally valid form of expression. Unlike Borduas and the Automatistes, who adopted a single set of artistic precepts that were almost entirely oriented toward non-figuration, Prisme d'Yeux insisted that toleration of aesthetic diversity and stylistic eclecticism ensured artistic liberty.

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[44] Gagnon, "Pellan, Borduas and the Automatistes: Men and Ideas in Québec" 51.

[45] Poggioli 25.

[46] Poggioli 26.

[47] De Tonnancour 49.

The Automatistes, however, held a more radical and engaged view of artistic freedom. They adhered to the avant-garde belief in "the interdependence of art and society," and they felt that the liberty of the artist was directly connected to the more widespread achievement of social, intellectual and political emancipation.[48] Echoing one of the French Surrealists, Alexandrian Sarane, who decreed that "art [is] not an end in itself, but a method of creating an awareness of all that is most precious, most secret and most surprising in life," they called for a more inclusive, and antagonistic, rupture with the past that was premised upon a wholesale denunciation of all culturally conservative values.[49] Fomenting both social and artistic revolution, the Automatistes perceived the defense of freedom as an ineluctable imperative that was simultaneously aesthetic and political. As David Burnett has commented: "The truly radical character of automatism...recognized that the fullness of individual expression was not a matter of adapting trends from the outside to local circumstances but of asserting the freedom *out of which* individual expression was possible."[50]

In concordance with Matei Calinescu's more recent characterization of avant-gardism as "a radicalized and strongly utopianized version of modernity," the polarization of the Prisme d'Yeux and Automatiste groups within the C.A.S. marked the emergence of the Automatistes as a vanguard faction within the broader modern art movement in Quebec.[51] While Pellan and Lyman were committed to forging a path for

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[48] Poggioli 9.

[49] Alexandrian Sarane, Surrealist Art, trans. Gordon Clough (New York: Praeger, 1970) 8.

[50] David Burnett, Les Automatistes: Montreal Painting of the 1940s and 1950s (Toronto: Drabinsky Gallery, 1990) 6.

[51] Calinescu 95.

"living" art in the province, "the avant-garde," as Calinescu suggests in relation to its historical formulations, "is in every respect more radical than modernity. Less flexible and less tolerant of nuances."[52] As Raymond Williams has concluded, whereas the adherents of modernism "proposed a new kind of art for a new kind of social and perceptual world... the avant-garde, aggressive from the beginning, saw itself as the breakthrough to the future: its members were not the bearers of a progress already repetitiously defined, but the militants of a creativity which would revive and liberate humanity."[53]

Following the fragmentation and collapse of the C.A.S. there was a growing conviction among the Automatistes that some sort of decisive action needed to be taken in order to assert their independent position and express their need for emancipation from the oppression of the prevailing regime.[54] Within the history of the avant-garde the formation of cohesive groups has served as an antidote to the artists' feelings of alienation from the larger community. In turn, this tendency to form a united front is often accompanied by the group's need to publicly express its dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and introduce its new aesthetic precepts. Striking out in a radical new direction and offering a revolutionary alternative to the reigning values of the day, the avant-garde thus commonly announces its "advanced" position through the issuing of a manifesto.

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[52] Calinescu 96.

[53] Raymond Williams, "Introduction: The Politics of the Avant-Garde," Visions and Blueprints: Avant-Garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Europe, ed. Edward Timms and Peter Collier (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 3.

[54] The issue of cultural oppression and the "backwardness and narrow-mindedness" of the Quebec art establishment had previously been brought to public attention by Louis Muhlstock in "An Excess of Prudery," Canadian Art 5.2 (1947): 75-79.

Reflecting Borduas' adherence to the ideology of "contestation" and constituting an avant-garde tactic of self-definition, the Automatistes subsequently published their *Refus global*.[55] According to Borduas' title essay, liberation must be sought from Quebec's stifling cultural atmosphere through a series of "refusals:"

> Refus d'être sciemment au-dessous de nos possibilités psychiques et physiques. Refus de fermer les yeux sur les vices, les duperies perpétrées sous le couvert du savoir, du service rendu, de la reconnaissance due. Refus d'un cantonnement dans la seule bourgade plastique, place fortifiée mais trop facile d'évitement. Refus de se taire – faites de nous ce qu'il vous plaira mais vous devez nous entendre – refus de la gloire, des honneurs (le premier consenti): stigmates de la nuisance, de l'inconscience, de la servilité. Refus de servir, d'être utilisables pour de telles fins. Refus de toute *intention*, arme néfaste de la *raison*. À bas toutes deux, au second rang![56]

According to Poggioli, the issuing of a manifesto is an avant-garde strategy for shocking the public from its torpor and for "announcing the foundation of a new movement, explicating and elaborating its doctrine, categorically and polemically."[57] And indeed, *Refus global* was a highly polemical publication that, far from simply stating an aesthetic position, launched a direct and vitriolic attack on what was, according to Borduas, an insular society ruled by fear and false pride.[58] Furthermore,

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[55] The fifteen signatories of "Refus global" were: Madeleine Arbour, Marcel Barbeau, Bruno Cormier, Marcelle Ferron, Claude Gaureau, Pierre Gauvreau, Muriel Guilbault, Fernand Leduc, Thérèse Renaud, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Maurice Perron, Louise Renaud, Françoise Riopelle, Jean-Paul Riopelle and Françoise Sullivan. Selling for one dollar each, four hundred copies of the manifesto were placed on sale 9 August 1948 at the Librairie Tranquille.

[56] Borduas, "Refus global," Paul-Émile Borduas: Écrits/Writings, 1942-1958 50-51. The text was originally published in Borduas et al., Refus global (Montreal: Editions Mithra-Mythe, 1948). Borduas' text was accompanied by contributions from Françoise Sullivan, Bruno Cormier, Claude Gauvreau and Fernand Leduc.

[57] Poggioli 22.

[58] As is well-known, the most vehement opposition to the manifesto and its subversive ideas came from politicians and the clergy. The most complete bibliography of contemporary reactions to the publication of "Refus global" is "Réactions de Presse," Études Françaises 8.3 (août 1972): 331-338. There has been

the publication of *Refus global*, a document that Lyman later described as "that mixture of aesthetic and moral notions and emotions which exploded in the face of those who for too long had successfully suppressed any insubordination," consolidated the Automatistes' status as the first avant-garde art movement in Quebec.[59] Demonstrating both their internal cohesiveness and their oppositional stance, their manifesto, like their painting, was volatile and iconoclastic. It called for a revolutionary overhauling of the existing state of affairs and was premised upon personal liberation, an unfettering of subconscious impulses and, characteristic of vanguard movements, a complete rejection of the practices and principles of traditionalist conservatism.

Building on the legacy of Lyman and the C.A.S., in particular Lyman's belief in the importance of the internal, subjective vision of the artist, the Automatistes undermined the dominance of realist doctrines and representational art in Montreal. Rehearsing the deeds and gestures of earlier European vanguard movements, such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism, they set themselves in firm opposition to tradition and took a public stand by issuing manifestos and exhibiting together under a common banner. Working primarily with surrealist-inspired ideas and imagery and using what Ann Davis has called a "quasi-cubist space," they produced dynamic, gestural paintings

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much written on "Refus global;" the most recent publications include: Jules Arbec, Éternel présent: 50 ans après *Refus global* (Mont-Saint-Hilaire, QC: Musée d'art de Mont-Saint-Hilaire, 1998); André-G. Bourassa and Gilles Lapointe, *Refus global* et ses environs: 1948-1988 (Montréal: Éditions de l'Hexagone, 1988); François-Marc Gagnon and René Viau, *Refus global* (1948): Le Manifeste du mouvement automatiste/Manifesto of the Automatist Movement, trans. Lucy McNair (Paris: Services culturels de l'Ambassade du Canada, 1998); and Patricia Smart, *Refus global*: genese et metamorphoses d'un mythe fondateur [Conference proceedings] (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1998).

[59] Lyman, "Borduas and the Contemporary Arts Society" 40.

that were based on spontaneous and associative expressions of the subconscious.[60] From the mid-1940s onward, their canvases showed not only the progressive elimination of transparent, mimetic forms, but also of illusionistic references to pictorial depth.

As David Burnett has stated, while others before the Automatistes, such as Lyman and Pellan, had cleared new aesthetic ground and expanded the horizons of modern art in Montreal, "none had become so closely linked to the avant-garde of their day, nor found that the pursuit of their aims reflected the radical desire for social and cultural change within their own milieu."[61] Confronting the forces of cultural inertia with revolutionary zeal, the Automatistes ushered in a new era of social, artistic and intellectual liberty in Montreal. Within the history of modern art in Quebec they catalyzed a series of profound artistic and ideological upheavals premised upon the notion of "l'anarchie resplendissante."[62] Like Douglas Cooper's "creative avant-garde," they were "a few adventurous spirits who, breaking through all of the confines, [flew] on ahead of the mass of their contemporaries to reconnoitre and conquer new terrain," terrain from which new formal and ideological advances would soon be made.[63]

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[60] Ann Davis, Frontiers of Our Dreams: Quebec Painting in the 1940s and 1950s (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1979) 10.

[61] Burnett 3.

[62] Borduas "Refus global" 54.

[63] Cooper 283.

## Chapter Two:
## The Plasticiens

Avant-gardism is as much a socio-political phenomenon as it is an aesthetic one. It is underpinned by an incessant desire for revolutionary cultural change and a radical commitment to formal innovation. The concept of avant-gardism, however, is also underpinned by the notion of "progress." Fervently pursuing novelty and newness in an urgent struggle for futurity, the avant-garde relies upon a linear concept of history; as a consequence, its battle to suppress the past and the stifling influence of tradition is obsessive and unrelenting. George Rochberg has thus described avant-gardism in terms of the "irreversible arrow of time."[1] According to Rochberg's analogical description, "the avant-garde either sits on the point of [the] arrow, penetrating to the next unfolding moment of time, or perhaps even occupies the whole of the arrowhead itself, sharp cutting edges ending in the point which will tear into the fabric of the future."[2]

Nevertheless the avant-garde's urgent need to engage in "advanced," precursory activity in the conquest of new forms and ideas leads to a condition of perpetual self-negation, thereby creating a seemingly insoluble paradox. As Eugène Ionesco asserts, "By the very force of circumstances any system, the moment it is established, is already outworn. As soon as a form of expression becomes recognized, it is already out of date."[3] In other words, the systematic non-conformism endemic to the avant-garde mentality serves to generate a new type of conformity, however iconoclastic, such that

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[1] George Rochberg, "The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival," New Literary History 3.1 (1971): 71.

[2] Rochberg 71.

[3] Eugène Ionecso, Notes and Counter-Notes, trans. Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964) 41.

in order to remain in "advance" of their time one vanguard movement must necessarily replace another in a stream of radical ruptures and revolutionary new beginnings.

As a result the avant-garde is a polymorphous, manifold and endlessly mutating phenomenon that cannot be aligned with any particular formal or ideological program for long; rather, its historical development is characterized by progressive, yet oppositional, artistic activity that is always subject to the exigencies of the existing cultural order. As Matei Calinescu contends, "the avant-garde does not announce one style or another; it is in itself a style, or better, an anti-style."[4] Taking all of this in turn, it becomes apparent that while the artistic and ideological revolution initiated by Borduas and the Automatistes during the 1940s had fostered a vigorous, and at times volatile, creative climate in Montreal, automatism would soon and necessarily be jettisoned from its position at the leading edge of the avant-garde as a condition of its vanguard status. In his historical discussion of the avant-garde in terms of an "aesthetics of survival," Rochberg contends that "everything 'new' must make way for everything 'newer.'"[5]

In retrospect the publication of *Refus global* in 1948 marked the apogee of the Automatiste movement. In the years that followed it became increasingly evident that the brand of automatism practiced since the early 1940s was no longer subscribed to by some of the group's leading members, particularly those who became more concerned with geometric rather than gestural non-figuration.[6] Furthermore, with important

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[4] Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 111.

[5] Rochberg 73.

[6] For example, following the publication of "Refus global," Fernand Leduc significantly revised his perspective vis-à-vis the movement in a long and very critical letter to Borduas on 13 December 1948.

members such as Fernand Leduc and Jean-Paul Riopelle having left Montreal to pursue their careers in France, the collective dynamism of the group was dissipating and the dominance of automatism within the Montreal art milieu had begun to wane. In a text written in April 1950, in which hints of conflict between members of the group are evident, Borduas' question to his colleagues "Jusqu'où peut nous entraîner la fièvre de la bataille?" effectively signalled the end of the Automatistes' revolutionary zeal.[7]

Within the larger scope of the modernist movement in Montreal the 1950s witnessed a consolidation of the ground gained during the previous decade. However, following the inauguration of non-figurative painting and the dominance of automatism during the 1940s, a growing pluralism, marked by an interest in European styles and trends, characterized the Montreal art community early in the 1950s. The new openness to various tendencies within modern painting that artists such as Lyman and Pellan had helped to foster ushered in what Sandra Paikowsky has described as a "complex period of re-evaluation and repudiation, of heterogeneity and factionalism, of collectivism and self-sufficiency."[8] Within the history of the avant-garde such periods of re-evaluation and heterogeneity often follow radical upheavals. As John Weightman asserts, a

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This letter is reprinted in Vers les îles de lumière. Écrits (1942-1980), ed. André Beaudet (LaSalle, QC: Hurtubise HMH, 1981) 95-104.

[7] Paul-Émile Borduas, "Communication intime à mes chers amis," Paul-Émile Borduas: Écrits/Writings, 1942-1958, ed. François-Marc Gagnon, trans. François-Marc Gagnon and Dennis Young (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1978) 120.

[8] Sandra Paikowsky, "Vivre dans la cité: Quebec Abstract Painting" in Robert MsKaskell et al., Achieving the Modern: Canadian Abstract Painting and Design in the 1950s (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1992) 39.

vanguard movement offers only a "temporary absolute" that mutates and metamorphosizes as it is assimilated and diffused within the larger culture.[9]

Furthermore, the anguished cry for cultural liberty that was the essence of *Refus global* was not realized and the Automatistes' demand for the artist's right to personal expression ran up against continued opposition from a traditional elite determined to resist the processes of modernization. However, despite attempts on the part of the reigning political and clerical regime to ensure that Quebec remained "a church-ridden, agricultural society outside the mainstream of the urban-industrial North American way of life," the 1950s witnessed a period of dramatic change in the province.[10] Denise Leclerc suggests that significant economic and political developments fused in Quebec during the decade to fuel the more comprehensive cultural movement towards modernization.[11] The economy underwent a postwar boom, and although it experienced a brief slowdown in 1954 due to the economic situation in the United States following the Korean War and the recession of 1957, it generated a new prosperity that led to the emergence of a strong middle-class.[12] Along with economic expansion Quebec also experienced rapid demographic growth, with the population increasing from four to five

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[9] John Weightman, The Concept of the Avant-Garde: Explorations in Modernism (London: Alcove Press, 1973) 15.

[10] Michael D. Behiels, Prelude to Quebec's Quiet Revolution (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985) 3.

[11] Denise Leclerc, "Montreal," The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: the 1950s (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992) 47.

[12] It is important to keep in mind that, while Quebec experienced a period of prosperity during the 1950s, the benefits of increased affluence do not seem to have extended to artists at the time. As Louis Belzile recalls, "La...chose qui me frappe encore aujourd'hui, c'était l'absence d'argent. Tous les gens qu'on rencontrait étaient pauvres. C'était une caractéristique que je tiens à signaler aujourd'hui: il n'y avait pas d'argent." Louis Belzile, Interview with Roland Bourneuf, 25 novembre 1980, L'Atelier no.13 (Montréal: Maison de Radio-Canada, Service des transcriptions et dérivés de la radio) 4.

million between 1951 and 1961.[13] At the same time immigration, which had come to a halt during the War, showed renewed vigor; more than 400,000 immigrants arrived in Quebec between 1946 and 1960,[14] lending the province a "more cosmopolitan flavor," although this new cosmopolitanism was not privileged within the Duplessis government's ideology.[15]

It was also during the 1950s that many Quebec residents shifted from a rural, agrarian lifestyle to an urban, industrial one. As the exodus to the city sped up, the Quebec countryside, where there was little growth in income, emptied out; during the decade the agricultural sector of the population declined from twenty to eleven percent.[16] As one might expect, the rapid socio-economic expansion experienced during the 1950s demanded that the government invest heavily in modernizing its infrastructure. In particular, the province's education, health and social service institutions were in dire need of updating. However, any such modernization was delayed by Duplessis' deeply conservative policies: "He opposed the welfare state and increasing government intervention and defended the established order... labelling anyone who worked for social change a 'communist.' Relying on the traditional elites and the clergy to keep the population in line, he sang the praises of the old values and rural life in his speeches."[17]

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[13] Paul-André Linteau et al., "The Duplessis Era 1945-1960," Quebec Since 1930, trans. Robert Chodos and Ellen Garmaise (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1991) 146.

[14] Linteau et al. 146.

[15] Leclerc 47.

[16] Linteau et al. 146.

[17] Linteau et al. 149.

Despite the stranglehold Duplessis' paternalistic regime attempted to maintain on modernization, opposition to the insularity and conservatism of such anachronistic attitudes was effectively mobilized within the cultural arena. The development of modern communications media, particularly the introduction of television in 1952, helped to introduce contemporary ideas from the outside world and convey new values. While Duplessis deeply resented the interventionist stance of the federal government within the cultural sphere, "federal agencies – especially the CBC French network [Radio-Canada] and the National Film Board – provided a platform and a place to learn over which the traditional elites had relatively little influence."[18] The changes were even more striking in the universities, where a new generation of young professors was challenging the authority of the Church and embracing more liberal ideologies.[19] As a result, previously proscribed poetry and literature with "inflammatory" content was slowly becoming more accessible, and more progressive directions in theatre and music were also being explored. Building upon the cultural backlash initiated during the previous decade, "the climate of the 'great darkness' ( '*grande noirceur* ') in Quebec was beginning to be challenged by reform politicians, intellectuals, the creative community and the liberal clergy."[20]

Within the artistic milieu, *Refus global*'s legacy was demonstrated by the artists' decision to seek recognition and forge a place for themselves on their own terms. They continued to feel isolated in an art community where representational art retained its

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[18] Linteau et al. 218.

[19] Linteau et al. 217.

[20] Paikowsky 40.

support from the most influential patron, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. This could have been the prime motivation for the substantial number of group shows that took place during the decade.[21] As Paikowsky has commented, the Museum had given only "limited support" to local non-figuration through small two-person exhibitions in Gallery XII and its annual Spring Exhibitions continued to "take few risks."[22] Although the dealer Agnès Lefort, who had opened her gallery early in 1950, offered the first commercial venue for "avant-garde" art in the city, the majority of exhibitions of non-figurative painting were organized by the artists themselves and installed in such unexpected locales as bars, shops, restaurants and studios.[23]

The decade opened with *Les Rebelles*. Organized by Jean-Paul Mousseau and Marcelle Ferron in March of 1950, the exhibition was intended to protest the conservative policies of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the inaccessibility of its annual spring show. According to the artists, it was a "campagne d'assainnissement contre l'arrivisme bourgeois infestant le jury de l'Art Association" and it set the tone for future quarrels between the supporters of "living" art and those in charge of established

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[21] For a detailed discussion of the museums, galleries and exhibition spaces that existed in Montreal during the 1950s and a listing of the shows they presented see: Hélène Sicotte, "Un État de la diffusion des arts visuels à Montréal. Les années cinqante: lieux et chronologie," The Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien 16.1 (1994): 64-95; and "Un État de la diffusion des arts visuels à Montréal. Les années cinqante: lieux et chronologie. Deuxième partie: 1955 à 1961," The Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien 16.2 (1994): 41-76.

[22] Paikowsky, The Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal/L'Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal (Montréal: Sir George Williams Art Galleries, Concordia University, 1983) 8.

[23] Guy Robert describes the Galerie Agnès Lefort as "the first gallery of avant-garde art" in Montreal in École de Montréal: Situations et tendances/Situations and Trends, trans. George Lach (Montréal: Éditions du Centre de psychologie et de pédagogie, 1964) 4. For a discussion of Lefort's role in supporting contemporary art in Quebec see: Hélène Sicotte, La galerie Agnès Lefort, 1950-1961: les années fondatrices (Montréal: Published by the author, 1996); and La galerie Agnès Lefort: Montréal 1950-1961 (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, 1996).

art institutions and societies.[24] While *Les Rebelles* included some of the Automatistes, such as Borduas, Marcel Barbeau, Jean-Paul Mousseau and Marcelle Ferron, the other artists in the show bore only a loose connection to the original group.[25] The 'automatic' method, through its diffusion within the larger artistic community, was undergoing changes and modifications. The inevitable ebbing of the Automatistes' cohesive revolutionary force and the increasing heterogeneity of the modern art community, while indicated at *Les Rebelles*, became indisputable in May of 1953 with *La Place des artistes*. Constituting another public polemic conducted in the name of "living" art, the exhibition was a non-juried art fair that involved more than eighty artists and included some 350 works.[26] The event presented every tendency then being practiced in Montreal, figurative and non-figurative alike, and the pluralism it signified continued to characterize painting in the city for much of the decade.

The following year the exhibition *La Matière chante* constituted the last group manifestation of the Automatistes. Organized by Claude Gauvreau, it was installed at the Galerie Antoine from 20 April to 4 May 1954. Borduas, who had left Montreal in 1953 for the United States, returned from his self-imposed exile in New York to select the paintings for show. Including ninety-seven works by twenty-four artists, it was an attempt to keep Automatiste painting alive by encouraging the work of second-generation artists who worked in a new "cosmic" phase of automatism conceived under

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[24] *Les Rebelles'* mission statement as quoted in Guy Robert, L'Art au Québec depuis 1940 (Montréal: Les Éditions La Presse, 1973) 102.

[25] These artists included: Maciej Babinski, Suzanne Barbeau, Robert Blair, Alan Cole, Hans Eckers, Paterson Ewen, Helen Jones, Frantz Laforest, Le Febure (Jean Lefebvre), Forrest McCarthy, Robert Roussil, Claude Vermette, Paquerette Villeneuve, and Andrew Zadorozny.

[26] The event was held in a studio at the corner of Bleury and Ste. Catherine Streets.

the sign of the "accident."[27] In retrospect, however, *La Matière chante* was the swan-song of the first vanguard faction within the Montreal art community. As Paikowsky asserts, "the hegemony of Automatiste painting within the abstract art movement came to a virtual end with...*La Matière chante*."[28]

However, as the history of the avant-garde illustrates, when one vanguard movement reaches its culminating point and then, having exhausted the initially revolutionary character of its resources, gradually dies away, a new wave of avant-garde activity emerges quickly thereafter. As Miklós Szabolcsi states, the avant-garde's "feverish quest for the new" and its "hatred for everything that is outdated" ensures a perpetual regeneration of the vanguard spirit.[29] Often manifesting a total change in formal codes and ideological conceptions, each successive avant-garde finds new ways and means to catalyze a radical reform in art and, if necessary, in society itself.

Following in the wake of the Automatistes, the spirit of the avant-garde assumed clearer contours in the work and aesthetic philosophy of the Plasticiens. According to Szabolcsi, most vanguard trends in art tend to emerge in "violent reaction" to those that preceded them and, in a rejection of the surrealist leanings of Borduas and his followers, the Plasticiens repudiated intuitive, 'automatic' activities in favor of rational, objective geometry.[30] Inspired by Parisian geometric abstraction and the tenets of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, the Plasticiens initiated a second pictorial revolution in Montreal. They

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[27] Gauvreau published a public invitation for *La Matière chante*, placing emphasis on the words "cosmic" and "accident" in L'Autorité on 10 April 1954.

[28] Paikowsky 42.

[29] Miklós Szabolcsi, "Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions," New Literary History 3.1 (1971): 57.

[30] Szabolcsi 53-54.

introduced new artistic theories into Quebec's visual discourse and pursued a set of formal goals.

The historical foundations for geometric abstraction as an avant-garde movement in Montreal were laid through a series of exhibitions at the Librairie Tranquille beginning in the spring of 1954. Henri Tranquille, an active supporter of modern art in the city, had decided that, due to the lack of institutional support for "new" art, he would put the walls of his bookstore at the disposal of young artists who were unable to find other venues to exhibit their works. Referring to his shop as "the antechamber to fame," he commenced organizing innovative group exhibitions and it was through a show held from 26 April to 24 May 1954 that the paintings of the future Plasticiens were brought together for the first time.[31]

The group was comprised of Rodolphe de Repentigny (1926-1959), an art critic who wrote weekly columns for the Montreal newspapers La Presse and L'Autorité and who painted under the pseudonym Jauran; Louis Belzile (b.1929), a graduate of the Ontario College of Art who had recently returned from France after working under André Lhote; and Jean-Paul Jérôme (b.1928) and Fernand Toupin (b.1930), both of whom had studied at the École des beaux-arts de Montréal and under Stanley Cosgrove. In his review of the show de Repentigny, who, of course, was one of the participants in the exhibition, commented favourably on the group's shared concern for "form" and "harmony."[32] It was, however, Tranquille's *Petit Salon d'été* in July of that year, an

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[31] Henri Tranquille as quoted in Leclerc 49. Tranquille became a bookseller in 1937, originally setting up shop on Ontario Street and offering books from his own collection, many of which were banned in Quebec at the time. In 1948 he moved to 67 Ste-Catherine Street West, where he was the exclusive distributor of the *Refus global*. Tranquille continued selling books until 1975.

[32] Rodolphe de Repentigny, "Un groupe de toiles met l'accent sur la forme et l'harmonie," La Presse 3 mai 1954. In addition to writing weekly columns for La Presse (October 1952-July 1959), de Repentigny

exhibition which again brought together the works of Belzile, Jérôme and Toupin, that prompted de Repentigny to comment that the simple geometric forms employed by the painters created an "espace pictural autonome" and served as a testament to "l'extrême honnêteté du travail du peintre, une chose que l'on peut sentir simplement en voyant ces formes parfaitement nécessaire, les couleurs et les textures nées les unes des autres."[33] Such descriptions of the ambitions of geometric painters lie in direct opposition to the aggressive rhetoric of the Automatistes.[34]

The impetus for the painters to form a more cohesive union came from de Repentigny. According to Toupin, de Repentigny was "plus mûr que nous, un peu plus vieux et plus mûr intellectuellement.... Il nous a réunis, il faisait ressortir les points communs que nous avions ensemble."[35] The group subsequently began meeting at each other's studios every Friday evening and, under de Repentigny's guidance, their aesthetic and ideological goals began to take on a more resolved character.[36] Several months later, in October 1954, another exhibition at the Librairie Tranquille constituted the group's first manifestation as the "Plasticiens," a name given to the group by de

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also contributed to L'Autorité (February 1953-June 1955) under the pseudonym "François Bourgogne" and he wrote exhibition reviews for Quebec's Vie des arts magazine following its advent in January 1956. An excellent discussion of de Repentigny's writings on art and his invaluable contribution to the Montreal art community is available in: Marie Carani, L'oeil de la critique: Rodolphe de Repentigny, écrits sur l'art et théorie esthétique 1952-1959 (Sillery, QC: Septentrion, 1990). L'oeil de la critique is a condensed version of: Marie Carani, "L'oeuvre critique et plastique de Rodolphe de Repentigny," Master's thesis, Université de Québec à Montréal, 1982.

[33] De Repentigny,"Des révélations au Petit Salon d'Été," La Presse 10 juillet 1954.

[34] The aggressive rhetoric often used by the Automatistes is best seen in the writings of Claude Gauvreau, see: Claude Gauvreau and Jean-Claude Dussault, Écrits sur l'art, ed. Gilles Lapointe (Montréal: Éditions de l'Hexagone, 1996).

[35] Fernand Toupin, Interview with Marcel Bélanger, 9 décembre 1980, L'Atelier no.15 (Montréal: Maison de Radio-Canada, Service des transcriptions et dérivés de la radio) 5.

[36] Carani 217-218.

Repentigny. In his review in L'Autorité, strategically entitled "Après les automatistes et les romantiques du surréalime: Les Plasticiens," he not only saluted the event but, emphasizing the avant-garde notion that "l'art n'est jamais stable, jamais statique," he asserted that their considered geometric works offered a compelling alternative to the ungoverned spontaneity of automatism:

> Ces peintres, entre eux, se qualifient de 'plasticiens,' c'est donc dire qu'ils mettent l'accent sur l'aspect 'plastique' de la peinture, sur son autonomie formelle. Pour eux, toute peinture doit avoir sa forme propre, en faisant une chose totale, résistante, non assimilable par une ambiance, et où chaque partie dépende du tout et inversement. En ce sens, il n'est point 'd'accident' pour eux, dans l'oeuvre achevée, à moins que dans certains cas l'on considère l'oeuvre entière comme un accident. Ce qui serait assez vrai, étant donné que la forme initiale est née du peintre lui-même, dans un effort pour constituer une totalité.[37]

As de Repentigny's article suggests, without ever actually naming any of the older artists, the Plasticiens offered a new conception of painting whose orderly sobriety was directly opposed to the Automatistes' exuberant impulses and artistic "accidents."

In attempting to provide an alternative to the subjective surrealist dramas of the Automatistes, the Plasticiens were drawing upon an earlier vanguard example set by the Parisian group Cercle et Carré. Founded in 1929 by Michel Seuphor and Joaquin Torrès-Garcia, Cercle et Carré proposed a geometric art of rational sensibility in response to the psychically-charged dream imagery of the Surrealists.[38] According to Seuphor, the circle and the square "formed a kind of rudimentary alphabet by means of

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[37] François Bourgogne (de Repentigny), "Après les automatistes et les romantiques du surréalisme: Les Plasticiens," L'Autorité 6 novembre 1954. De Repentigny also noted the emergence of this "nouvelle tendance" in: "Les Plasticiens et deux femmes peintres," La Presse 9 novembre 1954. It was in these two articles that the term "Plasticiens" was first used to designate the group.

[38] For a history of Cercle et Carré see: Michel Seuphor, "To Set the Compass," Geometric Abstraction: 1926-1942, trans. Maurice G. Elton (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1972).

which everything could be expressed with the most limited means."[39] Adhering to a rigorous aesthetic philosophy manifested through highly structured non-figurative works, the group welcomed followers of Constructivism and de Stijl and its membership included artists such as Mondrian, Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Antoine Pevsner and Georges Vantongerloo. Eager to defend their belief in the construction of a new, more harmonious world order through an adherence to plastic values, Cercle et Carré began publishing a journal of the same name in 1930.[40] Although the initiative was short-lived, with only three issues of the journal appearing before the group ceased to exist, it was Cercle et Carré that began to undermine the dominance of Surrealism and who for the first time "opened up a breach in Paris for geometric non-objective art."[41]

Cercle et Carré had blazed a trail for geometric abstraction in Paris, seeking to bring the new movement into public focus, and the Plasticiens were intent upon doing

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[39] Seuphor, Abstract Painting: 50 Years of Accomplishment, from Kandinsky to the Present, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964) 98.

[40] The journals have been compiled and reprinted in: Seuphor, ed., Cercle et Carré (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1971).

[41] Willy Rotzler, Constructive Concepts: A History of Constructive Art from Cubism to the Present (New York: Rizzoli, 1977) 118. Cercle et Carré published three issue of its journal in March, April and June of 1930 and mounted one exhibition in April/May 1930 before Seuphor fell ill and had to leave Paris; the group subsequently disintegrated in the absence of its leader. Following Cercle et Carré's dissolution, however, Abstraction-Création was organized by Vantongerloo and Auguste Herbin during Seuphor's convalescence. The new union, broader in scope and impact, absorbed the membership of the earlier group in addition to a range of non-figurative artists, geometric and non-geometric alike, from France, Switzerland, America, Holland, Germany, Italy, Poland and Great Britain. Founded in 1931, Abstraction-Création lasted until 1936 and gave its members a sense of international solidarity by creating a worldwide union for the exponents of geometric art. The group's main activity was the publication of an annual yearbook entitled "Abstraction-Création, Art non-figuratif" which, beginning in 1932, served as a vehicle for popularizing geometric abstraction during the next five years. For a history of the international development of geometric abstraction see, in addition to the source cited above: Magdalena Dabrowski, Contrasts of Form: Geometric Abstract Art, 1910-1980 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985); George Rickey, Constructivism: Origins and Evolution, revised ed. (New York: George Braziller, 1995); or Willy Rotzler, Constructivism and the Geometric Tradition (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1979).

the same in Montreal. They shared Cercle et Carré's faith in the revolutionary power of plastic values and, as rationally-ordered geometric canvases such as Belzile's *Sans titre* (1954-1955) [fig.3] attest, their reductivist formal system served as a radical alternative to automatism. Anxious to define their aesthetic orientation and take their place as Montreal's latest vanguard movement, the group brought the new geometric tendency to fruition with the publication of the *Manifeste des Plasticiens*.[42] Written by de Repentigny, who had quickly emerged as the group's theorist and whose weekly newspaper columns displayed an informed sensibility toward the major theoretical writings of modern art, the manifesto was launched on 10 February 1955 in conjunction with an exhibition at l'Échourie.[43]

As Judith Ince contends, the manifestoes produced by avant-garde movements, as theoretical justifications for their existence, provide one of the most salient routes of access to each group's ideology.[44] This ideology, in turn, constituting the set of intellectual presuppositions shared by the group, serves as the primary force motivating the group's collective action and, by extension, their artistic praxis. Emphasizing the formative role played by ideology in relation to avant-garde activity, Harold Rosenberg asserts that "No matter how radical its effects, an action is not avant-garde without an

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[42] The "Manifeste des Plasticiens" was originally published in L'Autorité on 19 March 1955. It is reprinted in Alain Parent, Jauran et les premiers Plasticiens (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1977) np.

[43] Beginning on 2 October 1954, the restaurant l'Échourie, located at 45 Pine Avenue West, offered artists a rent-free gallery space from noon until late afternoon, when the space converted back to a restaurant. Guido Molinari was put in charge of the two-week exhibition schedule.

[44] Judith Ince, "The Vocabulary of Freedom in 1948: The Politics of the Montreal Avant-Garde," The Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien 6.1 (1982): 55.

ideology to characterize it.... More unequivocally avant-garde than actions retrospectively labelled advanced is the action that *arises out of* the ideology. "[45]

As is the case with most twentieth-century avant-gardes where, as Rosenberg states, "the ideology comes first and shapes the action," the Plasticiens were united by a common set of social, artistic and intellectual beliefs.[46] In addition to coming together through shared formal and ideological goals, the Plasticiens also coalesced for practical reasons. Within the conventional context of the Montreal art milieu the organization of group manifestations was, according to Belzile, a necessary way of showing one's work and establishing some form of interaction with the public.[47] As Belzile recalls, "tous les endroits publics, tous les endroits officiels, comme les musées, les galeries, tout ce qui était art, tout ce qui était associé aux arts nous était fermé. Alors...on avait tendance à se réunir...on avait tendance à se regrouper."[48] The subsequent publication of their manifesto clarified the nature of the group's union: "Les Plasticiens sont des peintres qui se sont réunis quand ils ont constaté que la similitude d'apparence de leurs peintures relevait d'une concordance dans leur conduite de peintre, dans leur démarche picturale et dans leurs attitudes envers la peinture, *per se* et dans la société humaine."[49]

In contradistinction to their Automatiste antecedents, however, whose manifesto had insistently combined a particular mode of artistic expression with a vehement political platform, the Plasticiens' manifesto developed an avant-garde discourse that

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[45] Harold Rosenberg, "Collective, Ideological, Combative," Art News Annual 34 (1968): 75.

[46] Rosenberg 75.

[47] Belzile, Interview with Roland Bourneuf, 5.

[48] Belzile, Interview with Roland Bourneuf, 4-5.

[49] "Manifeste des Plasticiens" np.

was primarily defined in relation to the formal codes of painting. Devoid of *Refus global's* anguished cries for social revolt, the *Manifeste des Plasticiens* made no overtly political statements, nor did it seem to offer radical prescriptions for cultural renewal. While it did mention "la liberté isolée du peintre dans le monde contemporain," words not taken lightly in the context of the Duplessis era, the manifesto seemed more concerned with enunciating a new aesthetic position than with clearly elucidating how that position was linked to broader notions of social transformation. While the *Manifeste des Plasticiens* was a typical vanguard policy statement in the sense that it was a public declaration that posed a challenge to the artistic status quo, its position on the relation of art to the public sphere departs from the more incendiary statements issued by their avant-garde predecessors, such as the Futurists who, exalting "aggressive action... the punch and the slap," threatened to "destroy the museums, libraries, [and] academies of every kind."[50] Rather than seeking to prompt public shock or outrage, the Plasticiens merely sought to "engendrer un climat d'inquiétude vis-à-vis des arts de la part du public."[51]

Dissatisfied with the Automatistes' psychically-charged lyricism, the Plasticiens called for strict adherence to the "faits plastiques" of painting: "ton, texture, formes, lignes, unité finale qu'est le tableau, et les rapports entre ces éléments. Éléments assumés comme fins."[52] Eschewing all arbitrary, subjective or spontaneous elements in their work, yet foregrounding the importance of "intuition," they created their paintings

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[50] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Founding Manifesto of Futurism" (1909) in Richard Humphreys, Futurism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 11.

[51] "Manifeste des Plasticiens" np.

[52] "Manifeste des Plasticiens" np.

according to a rigorous structural logic. Often drawing upon mathematical constructs, such as Pythagoras' "golden section," they sought to achieve a relational balance of formal elements. As Jérôme's *Sans titre* (1955) [fig.4] or Jauran's *No. 197* (c.1955) [fig.5] demonstrate, this was accomplished through the juxtaposition or superimposition of simple geometric forms within a non-mimetic pictorial space. Like most Plasticien paintings, *Sans titre* and *No. 197* are comprised of interlocking, sometimes overlapping, networks of irregular polygons that are deployed in dark, somber colours. Despite the Plasticiens' desire to rid their works of all vestiges of a naturalistic spatial structure by maintaining the properly two-dimensional character of the canvas, the tonal contrasts of the overlapping shapes and the often textured application of paint continue to create a space defined by shallow layers of depth.

As their formal preoccupations suggest, the Plasticiens felt that the significance of their work lay in the ongoing purification of plastic elements through an ideal ordering of the painter's pictorial language. However, while they did not want their paintings to be construed as illustrations of any political or ideological theory, their search for "formes parfaites dans un ordre parfait" resonated with a certain utopian idealism. [53] They seemed to be suggesting that, through this ideal ordering of formal elements, a new reality could be constructed based on "unity" and "equilibrium." Similarly, although they did not claim that they had discovered some objective "truth," their reductivist visual vocabulary seemed to imply that an art pared down to its essential components would reveal some set of "universal" qualities that extended well beyond the purely perceptual realm.

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[53] "Manifeste des Plasticiens" np.

The implicit utopian concerns of the *Manifeste des Plasticiens* indicates that the group's aesthetic and ideological position was deeply indebted to Mondrian and his Neo-Plasticism. The document makes only one direct reference to Mondrian, suggesting that it was he "[qui] a permis de réduire l'ultime aliénation de l'oeuvre peinte, l'extériorisation de la concentration sur soi-même." However, the group's allusions to the achievement of "unity" and "order" through a relational balance of plastic elements, and their adhesion to a "pure art" that would symbolize a new social and aesthetic reality, attests to the importance of Mondrian's theories.[54] As Mondrian stated in his "General Principles of Neo-Plasticism" (1926):

> Neo-Plasticism demonstrates *exact order*. It demonstrates equity, for equivalence of the plastic means in the composition indicates that, furthering man's evolution, art has demonstrated rights possessing the same value despite their differences. Equilibrium through contrary and neutralizing opposition annihilates individuals as particular personalities, and creates a future society as *true unity*.[55]

Within the stifling spiritual and cultural context of Duplessis' Quebec, it is not surprising that the Plasticiens found Mondrian's neo-plasticist principles appealing.

Although the Plasticiens' shift to rational, orderly precepts could be interpreted as a signifier of conservatism, and thus as antithetical to avant-gardism, such a transition is in fact a hallmark of the historical vanguard. Since the avant-garde's inception, the "new" has successively embodied opposing tendencies within Clement Greenberg's dichotomy of Dionysian and Apollonian artistic modes. These modes,

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[54] "Manifeste des Plasticiens" np.

[55] Piet Mondrian, "General Principles of Neo-Plasticism" (1926), The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1986) 214-215.

earlier defined by Nietzsche, contrast Dionysian passion, sensuality and decadence with Apollonian order, balance and asecticism. According to Greenberg, who is referring to the avant-garde alternation between these two modes, when "we have had enough of the wild artist.... We need men of the world not too much amazed by experience... not at all overpowered by their own feelings."[56]

The Plasticiens' familiarity with the rational, orderly goals of Mondrian's neo-plasticist theories was due in large part to de Repentigny. During the 1950s de Repentigny was interested in European trends toward geometric abstraction, especially as expressed in the ideology of the Parisian Group Espace. A multidisciplinary collective of writers, artists and architects including Michel Seuphor, Léon Degand, Roger Bordier and André Bloc, the group's motto was "Plastique d'abord" and their paragon was Mondrian. Like the earlier Cercle et Carré group, Groupe Espace was committed to geometric art created according to constructivist and neo-plasticist principles. The group was united around a journal entitled L'Art d'aujourd'hui which regularly discussed Mondrian's theories and printed extracts of his writings.[57] De Repentigny was an avid reader of the L'Art d'aujourd'hui, and his aesthetic views and formal concepts were deeply inscribed within this heritage.[58]

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[56] Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture" (1947), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism ed. John O'Brian, vol.2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 168.

[57] L'Art d'aujourd'hui was published in France by André Bloc and Léon Degand from July 1949 to December 1954, when it became Aujourd'hui: Art et architecture. The "Manifeste" of Groupe Espace was published in the October 1951 issue of the journal.

[58] For a more detailed discussion of how de Repentigny was influenced by Groupe Espace see: Carani 119-129. Also, de Repentigny discusses several European art magazines, including Aujourd'hui: Art et architecture, in "Agents de l'art international," La Presse 6 juillet 1957.

The influence of Groupe Espace was also apparent in the formal development of the Plasticiens. Drawing upon the ideas set forth in Mondrian's "Home-Street-City" (1926),[59] the Parisian group stressed the need for a synthesis of art and architecture in the urban environment through a more harmonious integration of "plastic" production.[60] As early as 1955 such an integration was accomplished by Belzile and Toupin through the use of the shaped canvas, an unprecedented formal invention within the Montreal milieu.[61] As Toupin's *Aire avec rouge directeur* (1956) [fig.6] demonstrates, these "tableaux-objets," as de Repentigny referred to them, lend the canvas an architectonic quality and redefine the painting's relationship to the wall.[62] As Victor Vasarely, a member of Groupe Espace, observed in relation to the "tableau-objet": "Dès le début, l'abstraction dépouille et agrandit ses éléments de compostion. Bientôt, la forme-couleur envahit toute la surface bidimensionelle, le tableau-objet s'offre à cette métamorphose qui le conduit, par les voies de l'architecture, à l'univers spatial."[63]

That the Plasticiens' aesthetic and ideological underpinnings showed a strong affinity for those of Cercle et Carré and Groupe Espace demonstrates the continuing predominance of French influences on Montreal non-figuration. Just as the

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[59] Extracts from Mondrian's "Home-Street-City" had been printed in L'Art d'aujourd'hui in December 1949. This essay originally appeared in the first number of i 10 (January 1927) under the title "Neo-Plasticisme: De woning-de straat-de stad" (The Dwelling–the Street-the City). The French version appeared soon afterward in Vouloir 25 (1927), there entitled "Le Home-la rue-la cité."

[60] See for example Edgar Pillet, "Pour le Groupe Espace," L'Art d'aujourd'hui 4.8 (décembre 1953): np.

[61] Belzile and Toupin first exhibited their shaped canvases at Galerie l'Actuelle from February 8 to 21, 1956.

[62] De Repentiny expressed his enthusiasm for Toupin and Belzile's use of the shaped canvas, labelling their paintings "tableaux-objets," in: "Toupin, Belzile et Bowles," La Presse 11 février 1956.

[63] Victor Vasarely, "Notes pour une manifeste," Aujourd'hui: Art et architecture 2.1 (mars/avril 1955): 10.

Automatistes had looked to France for inspiration, so too did the Plasticiens. In fact, the "Aphorismes Plasticiens" that accompanied the group's manifesto, which stressed notions of "intuiton," "intégrité" and "verité" in relation to the authentic creative experience, were directly inspired by Seuphor's "Aphorismes sur la notion d'ordre," published in 1921.[64] De Repentigny's use of the term "non-figurative" to describe Plasticien painting, as opposed to other terms used to designate abstraction, further attests to this allegiance. Frequently used by Groupe Espace in their publications, the designation "non-figurative" was the preferred term for non-objective painting in France.[65]

As geometric abstraction's leading apologist in Quebec, de Repentigny attempted to provide a relevant and fully articulated context for the emergence and development of this type of painting in Montreal. In his weekly newspaper columns he wrote explanatory articles on European pioneers such as Mondrian and Kandinsky and he discussed contemporary French geometric painters such as Deyrolle, Magnelli and Vasarely.[66] In spite of de Repentigny's poignant insights and his well-informed

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[64] Michel Seuphor's "Aphorismes sur la notion d'ordre" was first published in Het Overzicht, no.1 (15 June 1921); it is reprinted in Michel Seuphor, L'Art abstrait, vol. 2 (Saint-Paul, France: Maeght Éditeur, 1972) 122. Belzile has stated that the writings of Seuphor and Mondrian were the "bible" of the group. Belzile, Interview with author, 8 August 2001.

[65] Although the label "abstract," which would only regain a significant place in Montreal art discourse toward the end of the 1950s, had been applied to the work of Pellan in the 1940s, it had not been embraced by the Automatistes. Borduas, always seeking to differentiate his efforts from those of his rival, referred to his canvases as "non-figurative" and the term had been maintained within the critical milieu. For a discussion of the use and meaning of the term "abstract" in the Montreal art community during the 1940s see: Gagnon, "Le Sens du mot 'abstraction' dans la critique d'art et le déclarations de peintres des années quarante au Québec," L'Avènement de la modernité culturelle au Québec, ed. Yvan Lamonde et Esther Trépanier (Québec: Institut Québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1986) 113-138.

[66] See for example: "Deux grands maîtres de notre temps," La Presse 31 juillet 1954; and "Trois peintres non-figuratifs," La Presse 28 septembre 1954.

aesthetic theories, however, the new geometric tendency had its detractors.[67] As Belzile recalls, while the Plasticiens' opening at l'Échourie and the launching of their manifesto was well-attended, their paintings were greeted with apprehension and misunderstanding. [68] According to Belzile, with the exception of the "intelligentsia," the public failed to grasp the revolutionary character of the group's aesthetic and philosophical undertakings, viewing their canvases as overly simplistic and merely decorative – like "floor tiles."[69]

Within the critical community, reactions were mixed. Paul Gladu, an art critic at Le Petit Journal, was generally supportive of the Plasticiens' efforts, preferring their predilection for order to what he perceived as the vagaries of Automatiste "disorder."[70] Writing for Le Devoir, Jean-René Ostiguy described their paintings as "objects exaltant la beauté des structures." [71] Ostiguy, however, had misgivings about what he perceived as the group's overarching orientation toward the organization of "autonomous" surface elements and he expressed opposition to their manifesto, characterizing it as "une

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[67] It is interesting to note that de Repentigny's aesthetic theories were culled from a variety of sources. During his stay in Europe, from 1949 to 1952, he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and had become acquainted with the writings of Bergson, Camus, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. As a result, his critical opinions drew largely on contemporary existentialist thought. For an analysis of de Repentigny's philosophical leanings see: Marie Carani "Peinture Existentialiste: Rodolphe de Repentigny," Vanguard 14.1 (1985): 16-19; or Raymond Montpetit, "L'esthétique de Rodolphe de Repentigny et la phénoménologie," Philosophiques 5.2 (1978): 211-228.

[68] Belzile, Interview with author, 8 August 2001.

[69] Belzile, Interview with author, 8 August 2001. The issue of geometric abstraction being characterized as "decorative" is later taken up by Noël Lajoie in: "Peinture ou décoration?" Le Devoir 11 février 1956.

[70] Paul Gladu, "La jeune peinture fuit la réalité," Le Petit Journal 13 février 1955. Gladu had previously commented favorably on the Plasticiens in: "Les Plasticiens partent en guerre," Le Petit Journal 2 janvier 1955.

[71] Jean-René Ostiguy, "La semaine de l'abstrait," Le Devoir 15 février 1955.

affirmation monstreuse de la théorie."[72] In contrast to these relatively sympathetic reactions Noël Lajoie, an Automatiste painter who also wrote for Le Devoir, was deeply suspicious of the Plasticiens' endeavours. He found their adherence to Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism anachronistic and their manifesto illogical and unclear.[73]

That the new trend toward abstract geometry was somewhat contentious became resoundingly clear with *Espace 55*, an exhibition that opened concurrently with the launching of the Plasticiens' manifesto.[74] Organized by Gilles Corbeil for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts from 11 to 28 February 1955, *Espace 55* included sixty-six works by eleven "post-automatist" painters.[75] According to Corbeil's catalogue introduction, the exhibition was intended to present the range of preoccupations developing in Montreal non-figuration.[76] Formally speaking, the exhibition revealed a shift away from automatism toward a more geometric structuring of space, albeit in a more lyrical and less rigorous style than that of the Plasticiens. At the invitation of Corbeil, Borduas returned from New York to view *Espace 55*. However, his negative comments regarding the new directions now being pursued by many of those same painters he

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[72] Ostiguy, "Le manifeste des Plasticiens," Le Devoir 8 février 1955.

[73] A heated debate between Lajoie and de Repentigny subsequently unfolded in the pages of their rival newspapers; see: Noël Lajoie "Une expérience décevante," Le Devoir 15 novembre 1955; de Repentigny "Gare aux néo-académismes," La Presse 19 novembre 1955; and Lajoie "Fonction de la critique," Le Devoir 26 novembre 1955.

[74] Other reviews of the Plasticiens' exhibition and manifesto include: Robert Ayre "Young and Old Masters, An Art Museum Has Room for both," The Montreal Star 12 February 1955; François Bourgogne (de Repentigny), "Manifeste des Plasticiens par Belzile-Jérôme-Toupin-Jauran," L'Autorité 19 mars 1955; Jean Denéchaud, "Nouveaux sentiers de l'art abstrait," La Presse 12 février 1955. For a more in-depth analysis of each art critic's respective position vis-à-vis plasticism see: Carani 21-46.

[75] The participants were: Ulysse Comtois, Robert Dupras, Philippe Emond, Paterson Ewen, Pierre Gauvreau, Noël Lajoie, Fernand Leduc, Rita Letendre, Jean McEwen, Guido Molinari and Jean-Paul Mousseau. None of the Plasticien painters were included in the exhibition.

[76] Gilles Corbeil, Espace 55 (Montréal: Musée des beaux-arts, 1955) np.

himself had selected a year earlier for *La Matière chante* spawned a considerable amount of controversy.

Since his move to New York Borduas had become familiar with contemporary American painting and he had begun to incorporate the lessons of the Abstract Expressionists into his own work.[77] As a result, his disparaging remarks regarding *Espace 55*, made during a Radio-Canada interview with Corbeil a week after the show opened, were focused on the emergence of a more ordered, geometric form of expression that he believed represented a return to "archaic" European experiments. According to Borduas, "toute peinture qui se définit en termes de couleur-lumière est dépassée, donc archaïque. La peinture d'aujourd'hui se définit par l'espace qui est l'éclatement de la tache projetée dans l'infini du tableau. L'étape prochaine la plus immédiate à franchir consiste à charger de sens la tache projetée."[78]

Fernand Leduc was a participant in *Espace 55* and, despite being one of the founding members of the Automatistes, was a recent convert to plasticism. In fact, his shift from automatism to plasticism, a transition later undergone by several painters in the Montreal art milieu, such as Marcel Barbeau and Rita Letendre, serves as an excellent example of the shift from Dionysian to Apollonian principles within a single artist's oeuvre. Viewed in relation to the concept of the avant-garde and its associations with progressive change, this phenomenon is interesting in that it represents a repudiation of one's *own* past, rather than that of the previous generation. Given

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[77] These lessons would include the merging of foreground and background and an "all-over" compositional style that did not privilege any single point of interest on the canvas.

[78] Although neither a tape nor a transcript of the original interview have been preserved, Borduas' comments were reported by Leduc in: "Leduc vs Borduas," L'Autorité 5 mars 1955. The article, with its original title, "Borduas plaide pour un art international-le sien," is reprinted in: Vers les îles de lumière. Écrits (1942-1980), ed. André Beaudet (LaSalle, QC: Hurtubise HMH, 1981) 153

Leduc's new orientation he quickly came to the defense of the more geometric work. He rejected the verdict that had been pronounced against the artists' burgeoning interest in a more rationally-order treatment of space and firmly denounced Borduas' negative evaluation of their canvases in relation to American painting. Responding to his former mentor's criticisms in a caustic rebuttal published in L'Autorité, Leduc's point was made resoundingly clear in the title he gave his article: "Borduas plaide pour un art international - le sien."

Given de Repentigny's allegiances to plasticism he, like Leduc, also saw the more geometric orientation of the works in *Espace 55* as a positive evolution from the earlier tendencies of automatism. Because he had not had a close association with the Automatistes, he did not suffer the same sense of abandonment by Borduas that so deeply affected Leduc. His review of the exhibition applauded the shift "à la rigeur plastique et à l'équilibre de bon nombre des tableaux," especially as evidenced in the canvases presented by former Automatiste painters such Leduc and Mousseau.[79] Furthermore, de Repentigny shared Leduc's abiding admiration for French art, showing little interest in American developments. His commitment to Parisian geometric abstraction, along with his local loyalties, perhaps prejudiced his attitude and led him to conclude in 1954 that New York painting suffered from a lack of cohesiveness and, devoid of "true spirit," had allowed "technique" to become the element of prime importance.[80] However, there had only been one exhibition in the city that included examples of New York painting, at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in January 1950,

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[79] De Repentigny, "De grandes et belles aventures," La Presse 12 février 1955.

[80] Bourgogne (De Repentigny), "Chez Borduas, à New York," L'Autorité 6 février 1954.

and de Repentigny's appreciation for American art may have been hampered by his lack of first-hand exposure to the work itself.[81] Thus, as François-Marc Gagnon has commented, throughout the 1940s and early 1950s "Paris remained for everybody... the only centre of modern art."[82]

Borduas' comments on *Espace 55*, however, served to bring the issue of contemporary American painting into the sphere of Montreal art discourse, and the theoretical debate surrounding the value of the Abstract Expressionists' pictorial researches did not end with the closing of the exhibition. [83] Immediately following his return to New York Borduas enunciated his "international" position in "Objectivation ultime ou délirante," an essay that served to further clarify his esteem for Abstract Expressionism. [84] Specifically, he situated Jackson Pollock in a progressive evolution of art developed by Cézanne and Mondrian, lauding Pollock for having taken "le risque magnifique" of relying entirely upon "l'accident, qu'il multiplie à l'infini."[85] In response to Borduas' belief in the radical achievement of Pollock, a young artist named

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[81] The exhibition, entitled *Contemporary Paintings*, was organized by the Art Gallery of Toronto and was comprised of work from Britain, France and the United States. The show included members of the New York School such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning.

[82] Gagnon, "New York as Seen from Montreal by Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatists, 1943-1953," Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal, 1945-1964, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) 130.

[83] Borduas had previously incited controversy in the Montreal art milieu when he made a link between local automatism and New York Abstract Expressionism during the *La matière chante* exhibition in April 1954. For a discussion of the affair see: Gagnon, Paul-Émile Borduas: Biographie critique et analyse de l'oeuvre, (Montréal: Éditions Fides, 1978) 349-352. At this time, however, Borduas had only been in the United States since April 1953 and his knowledge of American painting was somewhat limited, as is evident in his interview with de Repentigny several months earlier: Bourgogne (De Repentigny), "Chez Borduas, à New York," L'Autorité 6 février 1954..

[84] Borduas, "Objectivation ultime ou délirante," Paul-Émile Borduas: Écrits/Writings, 1942-1958 139-140.

[85] Borduas, "Objectivation ultime ou délirante" 139.

Guido Molinari (b.1933) entered the fray with the publication of "L'Espace tachiste ou Situation de l'automatisme," an article that re-defined the ambitions of vanguard painters in the city. [86]

Assuming what was then a novel stance among Montreal artists, Molinari basically agreed with Borduas' assessment of *Espace55* and his Cézanne-Mondrian-Pollock lineage.[87] His agreement with Borduas' lineage, however, was characterized by what would prove to be a precocious difference in emphasis. While Borduas stressed Pollock's risk in working with the "accident" *per se*, Molinari was more concerned with how the "accident" transformed the structure of pictorial space as defined by Mondrian: "Ce n'est pas l'accident en tant que tel, ou même la multiplicité de ses relations possibles, qui font de l'experience de Pollock une peinture neuve. C'est plutôt la qualité particulière qu'acquiert cette tache lorsqu'elle est utilisée dans *l'espace dynamique* permis par l'evolution produite par Mondrian dans la structure spatiale"[88] (italics mine). According to Molinari, Mondrian had transcended the three-dimensional space maintained by Cubism through "la destruction progressive du volume et du plan dans l'espace du tableau" and the introduction of "le plan dynamique où la couleur retrouve

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[86] Guido Molinari, "L'Espace tachiste ou Situation de l'automatisme," L'Autorité 2 avril 1955. This article is reprinted in Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art, ed. Pierre Théberge (Ottawa: Galerie Nationale du Canada, 1976) 15-17. Molinari's own English translation of the text appears in Guido Molinari, 1951-1961: The Black and White Paintings (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989) 40-41.

[87] Molinari had been introduced to the work of Pollock through an article published in Life magazine on 8 August 1949 entitled "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Painter in the United States?" Molinari, Interview with author, 18 June 2001.

[88] Molinari 16.

toutes ses possibilités énergétiques."[89] Emphasizing his point, Molinari quotes the following passage from Mondrian:

> The intention of Cubism – in any case at the beginning – was to express volume. The three-dimensional space (natural) remained thus established. It shows that Cubism, *au fond*, remains natural and was only an abstraction, but not ABSTRACT. This was opposed to my conception of abstraction which is that THIS SPACE JUST HAS TO BE DESTROYED. In consequence I came to destroy volume by using the plane. And the problem was to destroy the plane also. This I did by means of lines cutting planes. But still the plane remained too much intact. So I came only to lines and brought the color into them.[90]

For Molinari then, following Mondrian's destruction of volume and the plane, the innovative quality of Pollock's painting lay with the "couleur-énergie" of the "taches," whose "relations réciproques créent un espace énergétique non-euclidien dont les possibilités sont infinies."[91]

As François-Marc Gagnon contends, Borduas' notion that there was a progressive development in painting from Cézanne to Pollock and Molinari's subsequent extension of this idea in terms of an evolution in the definition of pictorial structure constituted a radical "turning point" in Montreal painting: "it was during [this] time that Quebec artists first met the challenge offered by American painting."[92] Furthermore, despite the differences in their painting styles, Borduas and Molinari both

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[89] Molinari 17.

[90] Mondrian as quoted in Molinari 16-17. Molinari's quotation of this passage was derived from: James Johnson Sweeney, "Mondrian, the Dutch and De Stijl," Art News 50.4 (June-August 1951) 24-25; 62-64. According to Molinari, Sweeney's article was a revelation as it served to introduce him to Mondrian's ideas. Molinari, Interview with author, 11 June 2001. For a full analysis of this article and its implications for Molinari see: Robert Welsh, "Molinari and the Science of Colour and Line," RACAR 5.1 (1978):5-6.

[91] Molinari, "L'Espace tachiste ou Situation de l'automatisme," Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art 17.

[92] Gagnon, "Québec Painting 1953-56 – A Turning Point," artscanada (February/March 1973) 50.

emphasized the historical biography of vanguard art in order to situate their endeavours within an international lineage. Rather than rejecting the past or repudiating its achievements, they legitimized their own visions of the "new" by positioning them as progressive steps within a more comprehensive formal trajectory. This kind of historical contextualization thus supports Greenberg's contention that "nothing could be further from the authentic art of our time than the idea of a rupture of continuity. Art *is* – among other things – continuity, and unthinkable without it."[93] Through a recognition of the accomplishments of his predecessors, particularly those of the Abstract Expressionists, Molinari's new emphasis on the dynamism of the plane and the energetic potentialities of colour would yet again transform the aesthetic and ideological aims of the Montreal avant-garde.

[93] Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol.1 93.

## Chapter Three:
## Espace dynamique

While the Plasticiens succeeded in introducing geometric abstraction as the latest vanguard approach in Montreal painting, the city's modern art community remained open to a variety of stylistic tendencies during the 1950s. By mid-decade, although the Plasticiens' approach to non-figuration had begun to take root, the milieu was marked by a growing pluralism and a diversity of other forms of non-figurative painting were being pursued concurrently. Despite the aesthetic and ideological ground that had been gained through the vitality and tenacity of their efforts, non-figurative painters continued to feel a sense of isolation and alienation within the established art community. As Pierre Théberge asserts, non-figuration remained "a culturally progressive force" that, as a vanguard movement in and of itself, "served as a manifesto against oppressive traditions."[1] As a result of this ongoing struggle the Plasticiens' impact as a vanguard movement was soon diminished through their involvement within the broader fight to forge a place for non-figurative art of various tendencies within the cultural life of the city.

Regardless of whether they worked with a gestural or geometric vocabulary, the overarching problem for non-figurative artists in Montreal remained the need for a greater awareness and acknowledgement of their activities. During the mid-1950s both the general public and the official art establishment remained largely unsupportive of non-figuration and artists were in need of improved exhibiting conditions and greater exposure for their works. The opening of Galerie l'Actuelle in May 1955 temporarily

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[1] Pierre Théberge, Guido Molinari (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976) 18.

provided a solution to the artists' demands for a venue in which to exhibit their works.[2] Founded by Guido Molinari and Fernande Saint-Martin in order to "lutter contre tout nouvel académisme tyrannique et pour donner à toute aventure plastique nouvelle l'issue dont elle a besoin," the gallery was the first space in Canada exclusively dedicated to showcasing non-figurative art. [3] The inaugural exhibition brought together the works of nineteen artists, Plasticiens, Automatistes and "post"-Automatistes alike, attesting to the heterogeneity of non-figurative styles then being pursued in the city.[4] De Repentigny, an avid supporter of initiatives aimed at fostering a greater social integration of the arts, immediately recognized the gallery's significance:

> L'ouverture d'une nouvelle galerie à Montréal, c'est un événement, au même titre, pour ceux qui s'intéressent de près ou de loin à la peinture.... Et quand cette galerie est fondée par un jeune peintre annonçant qu'il consacrera sa galerie uniquement à des expositions de ce qui passe pour être la peinture 'd'avant-garde,' cela est bouleversant."[5]

Following the establishment of Galerie l'Actuelle, which also served as a gathering place for artists, members of the non-figurative art community began meeting informally to discuss the need to band together and create some kind of concrete union that would add strength to their movement, bring it into public focus, and overcome the

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[2] The gallery was located at 278 St. Catherine Street West and remained in operation until May 1957.

[3] Fernande Saint-Martin, "L'Actuelle une galerie pour la jeune peinture," La Presse 28 mai 1955.

[4] Galerie l'Actuelle's exhibition schedule further attests to the pluralism of Montreal's non-figurative art community. A list of the group and solo exhibitions mounted at the gallery is available in: Théberge (note 19) 23-25.

[5] Rodolphe de Repentigny, "En attendant des murs à peindre," La Presse 11 juin 1955.

general apathy that greeted their artistic endeavours. These objectives were soon realized through the formation of the Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal.[6]

The N.F.A.A.M. was publicly launched on 17 February 1956 at Galerie l'Actuelle with an executive that included Fernand Leduc as President, de Repentigny as Secretary and Molinari as treasurer. It was a pluralistic collective of Plasticiens, two generations of Automatistes and independents who believed that non-figurative art should be a vital force in the Montreal art milieu. Stylistically, the Association represented a group as diverse as the ranks of Abstraction-Création, the Parisian alliance supporting non-figurative art that was established in 1931 in the wake of the earlier Cercle et Carré's demise. Like Abstraction-Création, the N.F.A.A.M. provided a common ground for exchange between varying positions within non-figurative camps and membership was open to active non-figurative artists with either minimal or extensive experience in the practice.[7] Intended as a vehicle for organizing exhibitions and ensuring the validation of all non-figurative art within the city, the Association was, as Leduc asserted, a way "to unite artists who would impose on society a form of art that it rejected, who would oblige the museums to open their doors, who would force public officials to recognize the group."[8]

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[6] For a history of the N.F.A.A.M. and its activities see: Sandra Paikowsky, The Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal/L'Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal (Montréal: Sir George Williams Art Galleries, Concordia University, 1983).

[7] Furthermore, the N.F.A.A.M. provided an important alliance for women artists within the milieu. Unlike previous initiatives, such as the Automatistes or the all male Plasticiens, in which women had little to no prominence in group exhibitions, the Association welcomed women members and they actively participated in all facets of the group's activities. A history of women's participation in the Automatiste movement is available in: Patricia Smart, Les Femmes du *Refus global*, (Montréal: Boréal, 1998).

[8] Leduc as quoted in Paikowsky, The Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal/L'Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal 6.

The N.F.A.A.M.'s first exhibition, which included fifty-two works by thirty-one artists, was held at the Restaurant Hélène-de-Champlain on Île Ste- Hélène from 27 February to 3 April 1956. The show received an enthusiastic critical response and, reminiscent of earlier exhibitions mounted by the Contemporary Arts Society, its most salient feature was its heterogeneity.[9] Although the geometric wing of the Association was represented by Jauran, Jérôme, Belzile and Toupin, the exhibition marked the final appearance of the Plasticiens; that spring Jauran ceased to paint, due to claims of a conflict of interest with his critical practice, and Jérôme left for Paris.[10]

The disbanding of the Plasticiens did not, however, lead to a waning of the geometric tradition that had been forged in Montreal non-figuration; rather, a new avant-garde movement followed immediately on its heels, led by Molinari and Claude Tousignant (b.1932). The previous year Molinari had offered a sharply perceptive interpretation of historical developments in plastic art in "L'Espace tachiste ou Situation de l'automatisme" (1955).[11] In this article, a crucial document in many respects, the self-styled "théoricien du molinarisme" articulated a new approach to painting in which

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[9] De Repentigny's personal preference for Plasticiens painting did not influence his support of the heterogeneous styles explored within the N.F.A.A.M. Positive reviews of N.F.A.A.M.'s inaugural exhibition include: De Repentigny, "L'union a des avantages en art aussi," La Presse 18 février 1956; "Un premier salon non-figuratif," La Presse 3 mars 1956; Noël Lajoie, "L'exposition de l'A.A.N.F.M.," Le Devoir 10 mars 1956; Robert Ayre, "All the Isms of the Abstract at St. Helen's Island Exhibition," The Montreal Star 10 March 1956. Only Paul Gladu had reservations about the works in the exhibition, which he illustrated in his review with a large question mark and the sarcastic comment: "...voici le tableau non figuratif idéal: il n'y a pas de titre, pas de sujet, pas de couleur...et pas d'auteur. Il se résume à une question et n'offre pas de réponse." Gladu, "Peintres intéressantes et insignifiantes," Le Petit Journal 4 mars 1956.

[10] Jérôme left for Paris in 1956 and upon his return to Montreal in 1958 his work was oriented in a much more lyrical direction. Furthermore, while in France, he destroyed all but one of the paintings from his Plasticiens period.

[11] Guido Molinari, "L'Espace tachiste ou Situation de l'automatisme," L'Autorité 2 avril 1955. This article is reprinted in Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art, ed. Pierre Théberge (Ottawa: Galerie Nationale du

he openly expressed his admiration for certain contemporary American pictorial innovations, originally established by Mondrian and radically advanced by the Abstract Expressionists. [12] Stressing that a painting's true value lay in the spatial structure it creates, the solution for current painting, as he saw it, was to be found in the construction of a non-Euclidean space through the use of a dynamic plane energized by colour. [13]

As Robert Welsh suggests, Molinari's intellectual convictions were not only informed by notions derived from modern art history and theory; they were also formatively influenced by wide-ranging readings in philosophy, science, linguistics and psychology. [14] In addition to his interest in Gestalt theories and the genetic epistemology of Jean Piaget, Molinari was particularly intrigued with the structuralist thinking of the semanticist Alfred Korzybski, whose principle work Science and Sanity (1933), deals with non-Aristotelian languages in relation to notions of space, time, matter, mathematics and higher order abstractions. [15] Korzybski's emphasis on structural processes and the mechanisms of abstraction provided Molinari with a powerful stimulus for developing his own concepts concerning the structuring of space.

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Canada, 1976) 15-17. Molinari's own English translation of the text appears in Guido Molinari, 1951-1961: The Black and White Paintings (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989) 40-41.

[12] Molinari referred to himself as the "théoricien du molinarisme" in a telegram he sent to Le Petit Journal on 5 September 1954. The telegram was sent in reaction to the newspaper's recent description of him as "un des théoriciens de l'automatisme à Montréal" on 29 August 1954.

[13] Molinari, "L'Espace tachiste ou Situation de l'automatisme," Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art 17.

[14] Robert Welsh, "Molinari and the Science of Colour and Line," RACAR 5.1 (1978): 16. Welsh's article provides an excellent discussion of the sources from which Molinari drew inspiration for both his painting practice and his theoretical position.

[15] Alfred Korzybski, Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics (Lancaster, PA: The Science Press Printing Co., 1938).

According to Welsh, he was introduced to the theories of Korzybski, among others, by Saint-Martin, who at the time was completing work on her Master's thesis at McGill University. Her thesis was later published under the title La littérature et le non-verbal (1958) and draws upon structuralist thought in relation to contemporary literary expression.[16] Saint-Martin was also interested in Structuralism's import vis-à-vis non-figurative art and, in a comment that presaged the subsequent development of pure geometric abstraction in Montreal, she asserted that "le souci des peintres non figuratifs est de découvrir les nouveaux 'objets' de la perception et les relations nouvelles qui'ils établissent entre eux."[17]

Molinari's exhibition at Galerie l'Actuelle from 30 April to 14 May 1956 effectively put theory to practice. Comprised of a series of "hard-edge" paintings executed entirely in black and white, the show was a landmark in "advanced" art in Quebec.[18] Following a series of black and white ink drawings the artist had produced either in the dark or blindfolded during the early 1950s, canvases such as *Blanc totalisant* (1956) [fig.7] emphasize the equal importance of the black and white areas of colour in creating a dynamic optical tension. [19] Constituting an exploration of the "reversibility" of the figure/ground relationship, Molinari's achievement in terms of

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[16] Saint-Martin, La littérature et le non-verbal (Montréal: Éditions d'Orphée, 1958); this is the published version of Saint-Martin's Master's thesis, McGill Univeristy, 1952.

[17] Saint-Martin, La littérature et le non-verbal 87. Saint-Martin would later develop her ideas on art, attempting to situate Quebec plasticism within her overall structuralist interpretation of twentieth-century abstraction, in: Structures de l'espace pictural (Montréal: Éditions HMH, 1968).

[18] According to Willy Rotzler, the expression "hard-edge," a term that has become a staple in describing geometric abstraction, was coined by California art critic Jules Langsner in 1958 during the preparations for Four Abstract Classicists, an exhibition that was held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1959. Willy Rotzler, Constructive Concepts (New York: Rizzoli, 1977) 242.

[19] For a complete formal and theoretical analysis of the black and white paintings see: Guido Molinari, 1951-1961: The Black and White Paintings (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989).

spatial reciprocity has been described by Théberge as follows: "The shiny black, far from giving the effect of being a hole in the middle of the white surface, asserts itself as a colour and is just as much a part of the surface of the painting as the white. Molinari set up a spatial equivalence between black and white, creating for himself the dynamic surface equilibrium which Mondrian had discovered."[20]

Through the black and white paintings Molinari came to realize the spatial character of colours, the ways in which they act and react with each other depending upon their relative positions and juxtapositions within the painting. Despite the rational, objective formal structure inherent in these paintings, the subjective character of the work lies in the spectator's experience of the tonal contrasts and their interrelationships. Moreover, these paintings demand an active involvement in the perceptual experience of colour and space; the viewer not only confronts these canvases, but participates in the construction of their spatial dynamics. Rejecting the traditional easel painting format maintained by the Plasticiens these works, with their substantial increase in scale, redefine the art object's relationship to the wall and monopolize the viewer's field of vision. They thus seem to reflect Clement Greenberg's observation that the internal logic of the avant-garde's development has been defined by, among other things, an effort to "expand the expressive resources of the medium, not in order to express ideas and notions, but to express with greater immediacy sensations, the irreducible elements of experience."[21]

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[20] Théberge 21.

[21] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, ed. John O'Brian, vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 30.

Not surprisingly, de Repentigny immediately registered the impact of Molinari's exhibition at Galerie l'Actuelle, observing that the paintings marked "une transformation radicale dans le travail de nos peintres 'd'avant-garde.'"[22] This review is one of the few occasions where de Repentigny actually employs the term "avant-garde," and then he only does so within quotation marks.[23] One could speculate that although de Repentigny may have viewed the earlier endeavours of the Plasticiens as "avant-garde" *per se*, the term's "anti-social" and alienating associations may have run counter to his Mondrian-inspired goals, which were ultimately founded upon creating a greater social *integration* of the arts. Furthermore, by describing Molinari's black and white canvases as manifesting "une transformation radicale," de Repentigny was suggesting that, unlike Molinari, he did not view the "new" geometric abstraction as a progressive continuation of Plasticiens principles and, by extension, Mondrian's theories; rather, he seemed to interpret Molinari's paintings as constituting a rupture with Neo-Plasticism.

From 31 May to 14 June 1956 Tousignant followed Molinari's pivotal exhibition at Galerie l'Actuelle with another group of rigorously simplified "hard-edge" canvases. Again rendering colour inseparable from space, the paintings clearly shared stylistic affinities with those just exhibited by Molinari. With their radical simplicity, economical formal vocabulary and the uncompromising frontality of their planes, they are characterized by a vigor and clarity that far surpassed the earlier efforts of the Plasticiens. Moreover, canvases such as *Les Affirmations* (1956) [fig.8], with its three

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[22] De Repentigny, "Les peintures en noir et blanc de Molinari," La Presse 15 mai 1956.

[23] De Repentigny had previously used the term "avant-garde," again within quotation marks, in his article on the opening of Galerie l'Actuelle: "En attendant des murs à peindre," La Presse 11 juin 1955. I suspect that the quotations marks signify that he was making direct reference to Saint-Martin's press release for the opening of the gallery, which used the term to describe its mandate to support "avant-garde" art: "L'Actuelle une galerie pour la jeune peinture," La Presse 28 mai 1955.

horizontal bands of red, black and yellow, decidedly attested to the fact that the new aspiration of geometric abstraction in Montreal was, as Tousignant declared, "to say as much as possible with as few elements as possible"[24] While this ambition to reduce painting to its most essential qualities may be seen as a re-appraisal of the search for "purity" within earlier Plasticien painting, it also coincides with what Greenberg defines as the most salient goal of the avant-garde: "the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself."[25] According to Greenberg:

> It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered 'pure," and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.[26]

Following the path being forged by the international vanguard, Molinari and Tousignant were ridding their canvases of all extraneous elements that were not essential to the medium in order to enable painting to define itself *as painting.*

The "hard-edge" paintings that Molinari and Tousignant exhibited at Galerie l'Actuelle were also marked by an avant-garde experimentation with the methods and materials of production. The making of vanguard art has always been an exploratory process and the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a number of innovative techniques, among them the use of assemblage, photomontage and collage. As well,

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[24] Tousignant as quoted in Danielle Corbeil, Claude Tousignant (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1973) 14.

[25] Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol.1 85.

[26] Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" 86.

avant-garde artists such as the Cubists and the Abstract Expressionists pushed the boundaries of traditional painting practice through experimentation with new methods and means; they added unexpected materials such as sand to their paint, incorporated found objects onto the canvas or, circumventing the need for a brush, dripped house paint straight from the can. Molinari and Tousignant were also open to unconventional painting strategies and, prior to the availability of acrylic paint in Montreal, they began experimenting with industrial and retail trade products such as automobile lacquer.[27] Readily available at local hardware stores, lacquers such as Cilux and Duco offered a lustrous, hard surface, high chromatic saturation and rapid drying time. Unlike oil paint, which had been used by the Plasticiens, automobile lacquer could be applied in thin, transparent layers, enabling the artists to completely rid their canvases of textured surface modulations. Furthermore, the hazy outlines that demarcated the Plasticiens' overlapping shapes were replaced with sharp, clearly defined "hard edges" achieved through the use of masking tape. As a smooth, uniform surface was created by applying the paint with a roller, brushstrokes vanished, as did traditional signs of the artist's "hand," leaving only a self-reflexive, seemingly autonomous object.

Taken together, Molinari and Tousignant's exhibitions at Galerie l'Actuelle were a watershed in non-figurative painting. Presenting works that were utterly unprecedented in Quebec, both formally and technically, they showcased canvases that were as intense as they were austere. On a formal level, they served to introduce the

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[27] According to Marion H. Barclay, during the 1930s the Mexican muralists, seeking permanence for their outdoor paintings, were among the first artists to experiment with and utilize the new industrial and retail trade products. A decade later Jackson Pollock was one of the first American artists to switch from traditional artists' quality paints to industrial paints. For a discussion of the new materials being explored by Canadian painters during the 1950s see: Barclay, "Materials Used in Certain Canadian Abstract Paintings of the 1950s"in Denise Leclerc, The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992) 205-231.

artists' recasting of Mondrian's "fundamental law of dynamic equilibrium" which, demanding "the *destruction* of particular form and the *construction* of a rhythm of mutual relations," signalled a revolutionary direction in non-figuration.[28] As Tousignant would later unabashedly assert, he and Molinari's inauguration of "hard-edge" painting at Galerie l'Actuelle in 1956 constituted "one of the most revolutionary gestures in international painting."[29]

As the leading proponents of a new direction within geometric abstraction, Molinari and Tousignant subsequently set in motion the formation of a new vanguard movement in Montreal. The group was named Espace dynamique, a phrase culled from Molinari's 1955 article "L'Espace tachiste ou Situation de l'automatisme," and it included Molinari, Tousignant, Denis Juneau (b.1925) and Jean Goguen (1928-1989).[30] Together they undertook a more rigorous and systematic investigation of the reductivist formal program initially developed by the Plasticiens.[31] Although they too premised their pictorial researches on the ascetic strictures of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, the Espace dynamique painters' aesthetic position was far more stringent than that of the Plasticiens. Eclipsing the efforts of their predecessors, they sought to eliminate any remnants of the fundamentally cubist spatial organization that had continued to

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[28] Piet Mondrian, "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art" (1937), The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1986) 294.

[29] Tousignant as quoted in James Campbell, After Geometry: The Abstract Art of Claude Tousignant Toronto: ECW Press, 1995) 56.

[30] Guido Molinari, "L'Espace tachiste ou Situation de l'automatisme." L'Autorité 2 avril 1955. Within the Espace dynamique group, Jean Goguen would later be replaced by Luigi Perciballi.

[31] Depending upon the source, the members of Espace dynamique are alternatively referred to as the "second" or "nouveaux" Plasticiens. Throughout this thesis, however, I will consistently employ the label "Espace dynamique" in order to clearly distinguish this group from its antecedent.

characterize the paintings of the Plasticiens. They conceived of the surface of the canvas as a dynamic optical field and, through their use of pure, unmodulated colours and strict planarity, they sought to create autonomous plastic objects that were, in the words of James Campbell, "wholly self-present and self-sustaining."[32]

Espace dynamique's conception of the painting as a thing in its own right, rather than as a representation of something outside itself, can be traced back to Mondrian. As Tousignant later reflected:

> Mondrian turned the painting – which up until that point had been an object of representation, expression or decoration – into an object of perception or, more precisely, a perceptible mechanism. With him, the painting became an object which, when apprehended, offered first-level perceptual information; it became an autonomous structure, with its own internal organization and dynamic interplay that had nothing to do with the expression of nature through painting. The picture became, at last, the painting.[33]

In addition to Mondrian, however, the group's formal and theoretical orientation was indebted to the suprematist works and writings of Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935). Suprematism, considered to be "the first systematic school of abstract painting in the modern movement," was founded by Malevich in Russia during the early part of the twentieth century.[34] Developed within the context of the Russian Revolution, it was premised upon utopian ideals and called for an ongoing process of reduction and purification in painting such that all superfluous elements would be eliminated. In his seminal text The Non-Objective World (1927), Malevich defined Suprematism as "the

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[32] James Campbell, Claude Tousignant: Espaces-Tensions/Charged Spaces, 1955-1998 (Montréal: Galerie de Bellefeuille, 1999) 9.

[33] Tousignant as quoted in Normand Thériault, Claude Tousignant (New York: 49th Parallel, 1987): 19.

[34] Camilla Gray, The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922, revised and enlarged by Marian Burleigh-Motley (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986) 141.

supremacy of pure feeling in creative art" and his canvases were comprised of ascetic geometric forms set in a planar space devoid of volume, depth and perspective.[35] But perhaps of most significance for Espace dynamique was Malevich's contention that "the new art of Suprematism, which has produced new forms and form relationships by giving external expression to pictorial feeling, will become a new architecture: it will transfer these forms from the surface of canvas to space."[36]

Assimilating the lessons of Malevich's Suprematism, the constructivist principles of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism and the "all-over" spatial structure suggested by Pollock's brand of Abstract Expressionism, Espace dynamique artists created their own pictorial language that was based on a dynamic synthesis of space and colour. The group's acquaintance with both European and American trends in modern art may be partially attributed to the artists' early training at the School of Art and Design of the Art Association of Montreal. Molinari, Tousignant and Goguen all attended the school, studying under instructors such as Marion Scott and Gordon Webber, and both Molinari and Tousignant have commented on the "internationalist" attitude toward art fostered at the institution.[37] In particular, they have singled out Webber as the source from which they derived much of their knowledge of contemporary developments in non-figuration. Webber, a former student of László Moholy Nagy at the Chicago Institute of Design,

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[35] Kasimir Malevich as quoted in Herschel B. Chipp. Theories of Modern Art (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968) 341. Malevich's The Non-Objective World was originally published by the Bauhaus in 1927; it has subsequently been translated by Howard Dearstyne and republished by Paul Theobald, Chicago, 1959.

[36] Malevich as quoted in Chipp 346.

[37] Molinari, Interview with author, 18 June 2001; Tousignant, Interview with author, 11 September 2001. Paikowsky has also commented on Webber's "sophisticated" knowledge of international art in: "Vivre dans la cité: Quebec Abstract Painting" in Robert McKaskell et al., Achieving the Modern: Canadian Abstract Painting and Design in the 1950s (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1992) 43.

was familiar with modern developments in American abstraction and, while studying with Moholy Nagy, had become well-versed in the constructivist principles of the Bauhaus and de Stijl. Through his painting and design courses in Montreal, Webber was able to introduce his students to a wide range of contemporary approaches to modern art. Similarly, Juneau's training at the Centro Studi Arte Industria in Italy provided him with a knowledge of international art that was not available to other non-figurative artists in Montreal, most of whom had studied at the more traditional École des beaux-arts.

In what would prove to be perhaps the most contentious yet auspicious shift initiated by Espace dynamique, members of the group no longer looked to France for artistic inspiration. While the Plasticiens had retained the Automatistes' allegiance to the School of Paris, the new avant-garde in Montreal changed its model; for this second group of geometric painters, the international vanguard was exemplified by American, not European, art. For example, although Tousignant had gone to Paris in October 1952, a trip considered a rite of passage among Quebec artists, he returned to Montreal the following May utterly disheartened with the experience.[38] According to Danielle Corbeil, however, his disappointment with the current directions being pursued by the School of Paris "was soon erased by the discovery of a thriving artistic community in Montreal more in keeping with his own sensibilities."[39] These sensibilities, which were based on an exploration of the structure of the painted work itself, were in many ways parallel to "advanced" artistic practices and preoccupations in New York.

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[38] Tousignant, Interview with author, 11 September 2001.

[39] Corbeil 13.

While Tousignant would not make his first trip to New York until 1962, Molinari began making regular visits to the city in January 1955.[40] His first-hand experience of American painting, not to mention his actual contact with the works of Mondrian and Malevich, paintings previously known only through reproductions in Art News and Art d'aujourd'hui, had a galvanizing effect on his art and activities.[41] Directly reflecting his interest in the New York art scene, Molinari, in his role as a leader and organizer in the Montreal milieu, included the works of Sam Francis in a group show held at Galerie l'Actuelle in January 1956. In the autumn of that year he and Paterson Ewen also organized an exchange show with New York's Parma Gallery entitled *Duo Exhibition: Modern Canadian Painters*, which included the paintings of some fifteen Montreal artists.[42] So while, as Sandra Paikowsky remarks, "New York did not loom large in the consciousness of most Montreal artists" during the 1950s, a new avant-garde movement was taking shape that would readily embrace the challenges posed by American innovations in painting.[43]

Within the broader context of avant-garde developments in Canadian painting the influence of the New York School could also be witnessed in the directions being

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[40] Molinari's first trip to Europe was not made until 1968.

[41] Molinari, Interview with author, 11 June 2001.

[42] The group exhibition at Galerie l'Actuelle that included the work of Sam Francis was on display from 24 January to 7 February 1956. Later that year, the Parma Gallery show, which included, among others, the work of Molinari, Tousignant, Leduc and Toupin, was held in New York from 21 September to 12 October 1956; the exchange show, which included thirteen members of the Parma stable, was mounted at l'Actuelle from 22 September to 14 October 1956. Paterson Ewen was the Montreal art milieu's link with the Parma Gallery.

[43] Paikowsky, "Vivre dans la cité: Quebec Abstract Painting" 43.

pursued by Toronto's Painters Eleven.[44] Founded in 1953, the group developed a type of abstraction that shared certain stylistic affinities with Abstract Expressionism.[45] Beginning in 1956 members of Painters Eleven began exhibiting their paintings in New York and in June 1957 they arranged for Greenberg to visit several of their studios. It is not surprising that when Painters Eleven mounted their first exhibition in Montreal, at the École des beaux-arts in May 1958, de Repentigny took issue with the group's expressionistic New York orientation. While he did characterize the show as "spectaculaire," he criticized the group's failure to develop their pictorial language in accordance with plastic values.[46]

Similarly, at the end of the 1950s the Regina Five, a vanguard group of artists working on the Prairies, began to develop an orientation toward a type of modern American painting.[47] "Post Painterly Abstraction," as this new tendency was referred to by Greenberg, was a more considered and controlled brand of colour abstraction that emerged in opposition to the increasingly mannered "action painting" of the Abstract Expressionists.[48] Initially developed in New York, this mode of abstraction was

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[44] The members of Painters Eleven were Jack Bush, Oscar Cahén, Hortense Gordon, Tom Hodgson, Alexandra Luke, Jock Macdonald, Ray Mead, Kazuo Nakaura, William Ronald, Harold Town, and Walter Yarwood.

[45] Prior to the formation of the group, three of its future members, Hortense Gordon, Alexandra Luke and Jock Macdonald, had studied with Hans Hoffman. For a history of Painters Eleven see: Painters Eleven in Retrospect (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1979).

[46] De Repentigny, "Enfin, les 'Onze' à leur meilleur," La Presse 3 mai 1958.

[47] The members of the Regina Five were Ronald Bloore, Ted Godwin, Kenneth Lochhead, Arthur McKay and Douglas Morton. See: Five Painters from Regina (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1961).

[48] Greenberg was the driving force behind the development and definition of "Post Painterly Abstraction" and he fully codified his views on the new style in an exhibition held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from April to June 1964. It is interesting to note that Greenberg included three Canadian artists in this exhibition: Jack Bush, from Painters Eleven, and Kenneth Lochhead and Arthur MacKay from the Regina Five. The essay that accompanied the exhibition is reprinted in: Clement Greenberg, "Post Painterly Abstraction" (1964), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol.4 192-197.

catalyzed on the Prairies through the Emma Lake Artists' Workshops which, established in 1955, hosted Barnett Newman in 1959, Greenberg in 1962, Kenneth Noland in 1963 and Jules Olitski in 1964.[49] Thus, like the artists of Espace dynamique, members of Painters Eleven and the Regina Five drew inspiration from American models. Despite the differences in their individual approaches, these artists took cues from New York abstraction to develop their own aesthetic sensibilities, albeit within vastly different cultural milieus.

Espace dynamique's turn to New York as the lodestar of modern artistic activity not only signalled a change within the Montreal vanguard, but also reflected a fundamental shift within the international art scene. Following the closing of the Bauhaus in 1933 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, many European artists emigrated to America. As a result of the exodus, in combination with the innovative directions being pursued by the New York School, Paris was soon replaced by New York as the focal point of vanguard artistic developments. Furthermore, with artists such as Mondrian, Joseph Albers and Fritz Glarner working in America, the most advanced explorations in geometric abstraction were being undertaken on this side of the Atlantic.

On the level of artistic discourse Espace dynamique initiated a shift in terminology that served to align their practices with those of the New York School. The group no longer referred to their paintings as "non-figurative," which, as previously discussed, was the preferred term for non-objective painting in France. Rather, they

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[49] For a history of the Emma Lake artists' workshops and a discussion of their influence on painting in the Prairies see: John O'Brian, ed., The Flat Side of the Landscape: The Emma Lake Artists' Workshops (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1989).

described their canvases as "abstract," a term that not only distinguished their paintings from those of their predecessors, but also alluded to the group's rigorous mandate to completely eliminate any chromatic or spatial vestiges of representation. The influence of New York could also be detected in the size of Espace dynamique paintings. While de Repentigny had encouraged the relatively small proportions of Plasticien paintings, asserting that a reduced format enabled a more harmonious control of plastic elements, the canvases of Espace dynamique were characterized by a considerable increase in size.[50] Creating paintings that were now of human scale, they began to explore the phenomenological possibilities that only a large format could offer.

Given the formal parallels between Canadian and American geometric abstraction that began to emerge in the latter half of the 1950s, specifically the development of an increasingly self-referential aesthetic, the question of "originality," that emblem of avant-garde artistic production, eventually arose in relation to the Canadian contribution. For example, François-Marc Gagnon's initial impulse was to characterize Espace dynamique's leaning toward American developments in painting, especially as evidenced in the canvases of Molinari and Tousignant, as merely a Canadian offshoot of the New York School and thus an example of cultural "mimétisme."[51] The fact that such a question never came to the fore with earlier forms

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[50] De Repentigny's advocacy of a small or medium format for painting (most Plasticiens works measure approximately 50 x 60 cm), was clearly expressed in "Figures, formes et graphismes," La Presse 11 décembre 1954, where he states that through a reduction in scale "l'espace est enfin libéré de la contrainte des grandes compositions."

[51] Gagnon's analysis of Quebec geometric abstraction as derivative of American developments, however, incited a critical rebuttal from Molinari, which forced Gagnon to recant. See: Gagnon, "Mimétisme en peinture contemporaine au Québec;" and Molinari, "Réflexions sur la notion d'objet et de série;" in Peinture canadienne-française (débats) Conférence J. A. de Sève 11-12 (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1971) 37-60; 61-80.

of non-figuration, despite their obvious connections to the Parisian avant-garde, suggests that it had deeper roots, ostensibly tied to issues of cultural/national identity that existed in terms of Canada's relation to the United States. However, despite certain surface similarities in the paintings of Montreal and New York artists, such as a two-dimensional treatment of space and a desire to eliminate the conflict between object and ground, the "hard-edge" works of painters such as Molinari and Tousignant are marked by a conceptual difference in emphasis – namely a fundamental concern with the energetic qualities of colour and its ability to create a new type of dynamic space.[52] Rather than mere imports or elaborations of formal strategies being pursued by American artists such as Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman or Ellsworth Kelly, the innovative goals of Canadian geometric abstraction were later defined by Molinari as follows:

> L'originalité de la problématique canadienne fut de donner à la couleur une nouvelle fonction et une nouvelle dimension, puis de définir de nouvelles structures spatiales, non à partir d'éléments hétérogènes d'opposition comme la forme et le fond, mais à partir de systèmes sériels et interrelationnels qui seuls permettent de découpler la fonction dynamique et expressive de la couleur.[53]

The new directions being investigated in Montreal geometric abstraction were consolidated in the *Art Abstrait* exhibition, held at the École des beaux-arts from 12 to 27 January 1959. The show included Belzile, Leduc and Toupin from the first wave of plasticism, and Goguen, Juneau, Molinari, and Tousignant from the second.

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[52] For a history of geometric abstraction in America see: Michael Auping, Abstraction-Geometry-Painting: Selected Geometric Abstract Painting in America Since 1945 (New York/Buffalo: Harry N. Abrams/Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1989).

[53] Molinari, "Réflexions sur la notion d'objet et de série," Guido Molinari: Écrits sur l'art 80.

Dedicated to the pioneers of geometric abstraction both here and abroad - namely Malevich, Taeuber-Arp, Mondrian, Van Doesburg, and the Montreal Plasticiens of 1955 - the exhibition presented the unified aesthetic position of a new generation of geometric painters. The inclusion of the earlier Plasticien artists and the citing of both local and international precursors reinforced the historical context and aesthetic lineage of Espace dynamique. The artists thus seemed to suggest that, as Greenberg has stated, "tradition is not dismantled by the avant-garde for sheer revolutionary effect, but in order to maintain the level and vitality of art under the steadily changing circumstances of the last hundred years – and that the dismantling has its own continuity and tradition."[54]

Attending to the evolutionary pattern of changes that characterizes avant-gardism, Greenberg has concluded that after the phenomenon's inception in the nineteenth century "it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to 'experiment,' but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving*."[55] In line with Greenberg's definition of vanguard progress, Molinari's *Red diagonal* (1959) [fig.9], with its series of red, black, orange and white bands, and Tousignant's monumental *Verticales jaunes* (1958) [fig.10] mark the artists' desire to push Mondrian's spatial structure further; both canvases emphasize strictly vertical elements and thereby abrogate the horizontal/vertical duality that continued to characterize Mondrian's late work. Each painting is also marked by an elimination not

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[54] Greenberg, "American-Type Painting" (1955), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol.3 217.

[55] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism vol.1 8.

only of the object, but of the space-object polarity that defines relations between form and background. Similarly, an interest in defining a two-dimensional pictorial space through the optical energy of colour characterizes Goguen's refined *Pulsation dynamique* (1958) [fig.11], a painting executed in black and white that exploits the rhythmic resources of the diamond-shaped canvas. As well, Juneau's stark, yet potent, deployment of orange, black and yellow geometric shapes in works such as *Rond noir* (1958) [fig.12] manipulates the relationship between colour and form to turn the surface of the canvas into a fully energized plane.

However, while most of the works on view at *Art Abstrait* were large canvases that achieved a dynamic surface equilibrium through intense chromatic relationships, the paintings of Belzile and Toupin retained their more European-oriented treatment of space and colour, and their small scale. The exhibition also revealed that, unlike the earlier generation of Plasticien painters, members of Espace dynamique no longer employed fragmented, overlapping shapes. Formally, their paintings had shifted from a relational structure to an overall balance of elements; the composition had become more holistic and, as the surface of the canvas was now treated as a single unit, the entire pictorial field became a tense, frontal plane. Yet regardless of certain stylistic variations in each artist's engagement with abstract geometry, all the participants in the show were resolutely dedicated to the pursuit of what Leduc referred to as the "vitalité absolue de la couleur et de la forme!"[56]

In retrospect the catalogue that accompanied *Art Abstrait* can be interpreted as the manifesto of Espace dynamique. Comprised of artists' statements and a preface by

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[56] Fernand Leduc, "Vivre c'est changer," Art Abstrait (Montréal: École des beaux-arts, 1959) np.

Saint-Martin entitled "Révélations de l'Art Abstrait," the catalogue outlined each artist's formal preoccupations. While the artists' statements revealed individual differences in the interpretation of the "new" geometry, the most salient goals of the group were clearly encapsulated in the words of Tousignant: "C'est objectiver la peinture, l'amener à sa source, là où il ne reste que la peinture, vidée de toute chose qui lui est étrangère, là où la peinture n'est que sensation."[57] On an ideological level, the various declarations of the participants were less politically-charged or polemical than those enunciated in previous manifestoes, such as *Refus global*. Undoubtedly reflecting the increasingly self-reflexive turn manifested in their paintings, their texts were predominantly concerned with articulating the formal, aesthetic aims of their art. As well, the fact that the catalogue was comprised of personal statements reveals much about the changing character of the artistic avant-garde in the city. Unlike previous publications issued by Montreal artists, such as the manifesto of Prisme d'Yeux or the *Manifeste des Plasticiens*, the *Art abstrait* catalogue placed a new emphasis on individual rather than collective identity. This foregrounding of individuality reflects the burgeoning sense of self-confidence that was beginning to be felt within non-figurative circles, and it suggests that the goal of the Non-Figurative Artists' Association, that "the artist will live in the city," was finally being realized.[58]

The *Art Abstrait* manifesto was not entirely devoid of socially-motivated content. As Susan Rubin Suleiman contends, "the hallmark of an avant-garde practice

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[57] Tousignant, "Pour une peinture évidentielle," Art Abstrait np.

[58] In the press release for the first N.F.A.A.M. exhibition, dated 27 Febrarury 1956, Leduc stated: "Finally the time will come when departure will no longer mean expatriation; the artist will live in the city." Cited in Paikowsky, "Vivre dans la cité: Quebec Abstract Painting" 57.

or project... is the attempt to effect radical change and innovation *both* in the symbolic field (including what has been called the aesthetic realm) *and* in the social and political field of everyday life."[59] With comments such as Goguen's "Il est plus urgent de solliciter la participation collective dans le but de construire un monde viable,"[60] or Molinari's affirmation that the primary function of abstraction was its ability to provide a means of understanding "la structure [du] réel, à partir d'une expérience concrète et émotive de l'homme projetée dans une élaboration constante de ses rapports avec l'univers,"[61] the artists were implying that their pictorial researches could serve as a metaphor for a new social reality. The concluding sentence of Saint-Martin's preface, which was essentially a defense against what were perceived as the dehumanizing aspects of abstraction, reveals optimistic implications for the new geometric tendency which, as Théberge asserts, may not have been unjustified on the eve of the Quiet Revolution.[62] According to Saint-Martin,"la peinture actuelle... révèlera dans les cadres d'une nouvelle logique, d'une nouvelle psychologie et d'une nouvelle géométrie, les dimensions les plus profondes de l'homme nouveau."[63]

Taken together, both the paintings and the pronouncements presented at *Art Abstrait* reflected the more assertive and cohesively structured objectives of the new vanguard in Montreal. The critical response to the show was, however, somewhat

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[59] Susan Rubin Suleiman, Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) xv.

[60] Jean Goguen, "Auto-Projection," Art Abstrait np.

[61] Molinari, "Le langage de l'art abstrait," Art Abstrait np.

[62] Théberge 27.

[63] Saint-Martin, "Révèlations de l'Art Abstrait," Art Abstrait np.

uneven. Critics such as René Chicoine, who was never a supporter of geometric abstraction, denounced the paintings for their "coldness."[64] Robert Ayre enthusiastically referred to the group as "the purest of the pure," suggesting that as "the opposite of the Automatists and their emotions, they are intellectual workers in the field of geometry, the disciplined and precise calculators of proportions, the seekers of perfect equilibrium."[65] Yet he also found their pursuit of purity "isolationist," a quality he characterized as both their greatest "charm" and their most obvious "limitation."[66] As might be expected, de Repentigny saluted the show for "l'importance des tableaux, l'homogénéité de l'ensemble, la présentation généreuse... et, ce qui est peut-être le plus remarquable, l'affluence du public."[67] However, he had certain reservations concerning the catalogue, which he felt was not a true manifesto "au sens de provocation."[68] For him, the artists' texts lacked the revolutionary spirit that traditionally characterized a manifesto, seeming instead to be more concerned with performing a type of auto-explication. This privileging of formal self-analysis, however, was in direct concordance with Greenberg's assertion that for the artistic avant-garde, "the purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count. Emphasize

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[64] René Chicoine, "Les jeunes hommes en quelle ère," Le Devoir 24 janvier 1959.

[65] Robert Ayre, "Abstractions by the Purest of the Pure," The Montreal Star 17 January 1959.

[66] Ayre, "Abstractions by the Purest of the Pure."

[67] De Repentigny, "Une exposition rutilante," La Presse 17 janvier 1959.

[68] De Repentigny, "7 peintres s'adressent au public," La Presse 10 janvier 1959.

the medium and its difficulties, and at once the purely plastic, the proper, values of visual art come to the fore."[69]

Despite *Art Abstrait's* detractors the exhibition was a landmark for advanced art in the city. Positioned within the context of Montreal non-figuration, the show not only announced the presence of the city's latest avant-garde movement, it could also be seen as an affirmation of the vitality of abstract art in the wake of what has become known as the "Steegman Affair." Following the N.F.A.A.M.'s third annual exhibition, held from 1 to 23 August 1958 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum's Director, John Steegman, drew national attention to the show as a result of his pejorative remarks.[70] In a television interview with art historian Guy Viau two days after the exhibition closed Steegman accused the artists of being guilty of "the sin of fashionable banality," complaining that they had "succumbed to the tyranny of abstraction" and claiming that the Museum only gave the N.F.A.A.M. an occasional exhibition "out of a sense of duty."[71] The members of the Association were outraged; Molinari immediately called for Steegman's resignation and Leduc angrily attacked him for his continued philistinism in relation to the city's abstract art community.[72] Following the controversy

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[69] Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940), Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism vol.1 34.

[70] In addition to his role as the Director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Steegman was also a watercolour painter of landscapes and an art historian; his books include Victorian Taste: A Study of the Arts and Architecture from 1830 to 1870 (London: Nelson, 1970).

[71] Steegman as quoted in Paikowsky, The Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal/L'Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal 11. A transcript of Steegman's remarks was published in La Presse 26 août 1958, under the title "Le directeur du Musée: 'Des jeunes artistes tombent dans la banalité conventionelle."

[72] Molinari publicly demanded Steegman's resignation in: "L'affaire du Musée: G. Molinari demande la démission de M. Steegman," Le Devoir 29 août 1958. This was followed by Leduc's attack on Steegman in: "L'affaire du Musée: Fernand Leduc répond aussi à M. Steegman," Le Devoir 4 septembre 1958.

generated by the "Steegman Affair," the *Art Abstrait* show could thus be seen as, in Paikowsky words, a "sophisticated reply" to Steegman's unabashed criticism of non-figuration, with the freshness and originality of their canvases flying in the face of Steegman's charge of banality.[73]

The coherence and assertiveness of the Espace dynamique exhibition and its accompanying manifesto also served as a harbinger of future developments within Montreal's modern art community. In his review of *Art Abstrait*, de Repentigny presciently commented on the "homogeneity" of the show and, indeed, it symbolized the end of the pluralism that had characterized non-figurative painting during the 1950s. The exhibition proclaimed the dominance of geometric abstraction, and following *Art Abstrait*, the Espace dynamique group would pursue a rigorous, uncompromising and innovative form of 'hard-edge' painting that definitively announced their entry into the international mainstream of contemporary art. Only a decade after the publication of *Refus global*, due entirely to the unflagging efforts of avant-garde artists, Montreal non-figuration had finally come of age.

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Steegman offered his resignation on 9 October 1958, but it was not accepted; he remained Director of the Museum until April 1959.

[73] Paikowsky, "Vivre dans la cité: Quebec Abstract Painting" 54.

## Conclusion

Since the dawn of the "modern" artistic era, there have been, as Charles Russell asserts, numerous avant-garde movements and many artists who have called themselves, or have been called, avant-garde.[1] Their works and aesthetic programs may appear at first glance to have little in common, with their differing historical contexts and the degree of their artistic accomplishment and influence varying. Yet common to all vanguard artists and movements are certain assumptions about their times, their culture and their artistic agenda. According to Russell, the avant-garde adopts a self-consciously critical attitude toward, and asserts its distance from, the dominant values of its culture, which it perceives to be in need of change.[2] Each vanguard movement thus reflects the artists' desire that their art may find or create a new role within society to effect the necessary transformations. But most essentially, as Russell concludes, "the avant-garde explores through aesthetic disruption and innovation the possibilities of creating new art forms and languages which will bring forth new modes of perceiving, expressing, and acting," modes which ultimately serve to proclaim avant-garde artists as "prophets" and "revolutionaries."[3]

Such "prophets" and "revolutionaries" first appeared in Quebec with the formation of the Automatistes in the 1940s. Seeking freedom of artistic expression in a province trapped in a political and social backwater, they began undermining the

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[1] Charles Russell, Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 4.

[2] Russell 4.

[3] Russell 4.

aesthetic and cultural values of a traditionalist elite. Building on the legacy of the Automatistes, the Plasticiens emerged in the 1950s as the next vanguard movement in the province. Although they shared the Automatistes' desire to create a place for non-figurative art in the city and reformulate the artist's role in society, they did so by initiating new artistic practices and theories. Embracing Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism and emphasizing the "plastic facts" of painting, they rejected spontaneous, "automatic" activities in favor of rational, objective geometry. The Plasticiens' avant-garde impact, however, was short-lived, and their efforts were soon absorbed within the Non-Figurative Artists' Association, a larger and more broadly-based coalition dedicated to fostering the social integration of non-figurative painting. From the N.F.A.A.M., however, emerged Espace dynamique, a second group of painters concerned with abstract geometry. Synthesizing Malevich's Suprematism and Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism with the dynamic, "all-over" spatial structure developed by the Abstract Expressionists, they explored the energetic potentialities of colour within a formalist framework that was aesthetically and theoretically unprecedented in Canada.

Following the *Art Abstrait* exhibition, where Espace dynamique brought the fruits of their pictorial researches into public focus, the group took its place at the leading edge of the avant-garde in Montreal. However, the cultural climate in which the group had emerged was undergoing significant social, political and ideological change. Within the artistic community the N.F.A.A.M, which had been established as a "stop-gap measure" to support non-figurative art until a more consolidated position was reached, could no longer sustain the type of pluralism it had initially advocated.[4]

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[4] Sandra Paikowsky, The Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal/L'Association des artistes non-figuratifs de Montréal (Montréal: Sir George Williams Art Galleries, Concordia University, 1983) 13.

The group had banded together to bring the issue of modern art to public attention, but it had done so without any clearly defined formal position. As a result, members of Espace dynamique, who were committed to a rigorous geometric visual vocabulary, were no longer content with Association's lack of a clear aesthetic stance and by 1959 internal tensions between the gestural and geometric factions caused the Association's collective spirit to waver. [5] Moreover, many of the members of the group had now established independent reputations and the need for an exhibiting society was no longer as urgent. As well, Fernand Leduc, who had been the N.F.A.A.M.'s President and one of the non-figurative art community's most ardent spokespersons returned to France in June 1959. But the most tragic blow the group suffered, one that would affect the entire Montreal art community, was the accidental death of de Repentigny a month later during a mountaineering expedition in the Rockies. Without de Repentigny's fervent idealism and lucid vision, the Association had lost its sense of social and artistic mission.

Although the N.F.A.A.M. continued to function as an exhibiting society until 1961, at which point it simply ceased to exist, commercial galleries were becoming increasingly supportive of non-figuration. The opening of new venues, such as the Galerie Denyse Delrue (established in October 1957) and the Galerie Artek (established in October 1958), suggested that abstraction was developing both an audience and a potential market. Perhaps more importantly, the young American curator Evan Turner had recently been appointed Director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and through

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[5] Paikowsky 13.

his ardent commitment to modern art, the institution that had so long remained a bastion of conservatism now became one of non-figuration's strongest defenders.[6]

Within the larger cultural and ideological context, attitudes toward contemporary art in the province were in a state of profound transformation. Maurice Duplessis, the ultra-conservative leader of Quebec's Union Nationale party, died in September 1959 and with the election of Liberal premier John Lesage in June 1960 the Quiet Revolution began to gain momentum.[7] As the era of the *grande noirceur* came to a close, a series of cultural reforms were rapidly put into effect that would radically change Quebec's institutions, image and self-concept. In a singular effort to respond to artists' insistence on being recognized as a contributing force in society, the Ministère des Affaires culturelles was created by Lesage's Liberal Party in 1961. The province thus began to align cultural production with social change, thereby embracing the visual arts as a key building block in the creation of a new and vital identity. One of the most significant results of the government's new cultural policy was the creation of the Musée d'art contemporain in 1964, an institution that would build Quebec's first official collection of contemporary art as the heritage of future generations.[8] As well, the support, promotion and dissemination of artistic practices and ideas in Quebec were fostered by Vie des arts, a contemporary art magazine that published its first issue in

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[6] For example, Turner gave Borduas his first solo exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1960.

[7] For a history of the Quiet Revolution see: Kenneth McRoberts and Dale Postgate, "The 'Quiet Revolution': The New Ideology of the Quebec State," Quebec: Social Change and Political Crisis, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980) 94-123.

[8] For a discusiion of the new relationship forged between "art" and the "state" during the 1960s see: Francine Couture, "Les années soixante: La reconnaissance publique de la modernité artistique," Les Arts visuels au Québec dans les années soixante: La reconnaissance de la modernité, ed. Francine Couture (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 1993) 7-22.

January 1956, and Situations, an avant-garde monthly periodical founded by Molinari and Saint-Martin in 1959.[9]

Although critics such as René Chicoine and Noël Lajoie continued to express their reticence toward geometric abstraction, often describing it as "cold" or merely "decorative," pivotal events in the 1960s served to unequivocally legitimate this vanguard art form, not only in Quebec but also within national and international contexts. No longer subject to the isolationist rhetoric of the Duplessis regime, members of Espace dynamique soon took their place within the international art world. Following a group show at the Galerie Denyse Delrue in the autumn of 1960, which officially brought Molinari, Tousignant, Juneau and Luigi Perciballi (who replaced Goguen) together under the banner "Espace dynamique," the group began to achieve an unparalleled level of recognition and exposure. For example, in addition to the numerous group and solo shows members of Espace dynamique took part in across Canada, Goguen, Juneau, Molinari and Perciballi participated in *Geometric Abstraction in Canada*, an exhibition held in the spring of 1962 at the Camino Gallery in New York.[10] Later that year, Goguen, Juneau, Molinari and Tousignant, among other Quebec abstract painters, were included in the Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto, Italy. In 1965 Molinari and Tousignant were invited to participate in *The Responsive Eye*, the influential exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and three years later they were included in the *Canada: Art d'aujourd'hui* exhibition, which originated

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[9] For a discussion of Vie des arts' first decade of publication see: Louise Moreau, "Making Art Modern: The First Decade of Vie des arts Magazine and its Contribution to the Discourse On the Visual Arts in Quebec During the 1950s and 1960s," Master's Thesis, Concordia University, 1997.

[10] The *Geometric Abstraction in Canada* exhibition at the Camino Gallery was held in conjunction with *Geometric Abstraction in America* at the Whitney Museum.

in Paris at the Musée national d'art moderne and then travelled to Rome, Lausanne and Brussels. In the summer of 1968 Molinari also participated in the Venice Biennale.

By the mid-1960s vanguard initiatives in the city had succeeded in projecting Montreal non-figuration into the mainstream of international aesthetics. Stretching the existing definitions of art in the province and breaking with staid conventions in order to pursue their own visions, each avant-garde group undertook an overhaul of artistic practices and ideologies, premising their activities upon notions of rupture and renewal. Working in an atmosphere of indifference, and often antipathy, toward the "new," both the Plasticiens and Espace dynamique challenged outmoded forms of artistic expression and social sensibilities to produce a geometric visual language that, whether explicitly or implicitly, reformulated the artists' relationship to society.

In examining the emergence and development of geometric abstraction in Montreal, it should be kept in mind that while the paintings produced by the Plasticiens were not necessarily "new" or "revolutionary" in relation to contemporary formal experiments being undertaken in artistic centres outside of Quebec, their production was profoundly avant-garde within the context of their local milieu. Considered in relation to the gestural paintings and surrealist preoccupations of their Automatiste antecedents and the bourgeois atavism that plagued Montreal's art institutions, geometric abstraction offered a novel, and controversial, alternative to the status quo. Situated within the history of artistic avant-gardism in the city, Espace dynamique then established itself as the first movement within the modern art community that was truly innovative, rather than being an adaptation of artistic developments initiated elsewhere.

Avant-gardism designates a phenomenon that involves both a critique of existing socio-cultural relations and a novel, often oppositional artistic orientation. Looking back at the efforts of Montreal's avant-garde initiators, one can see a transformation not only in stylistic approach, namely the shift from gesture to geometry, but also in the degree to which artists addressed issues within the larger cultural milieu. Over the course of the 1950s the ambitions of the artistic vanguard became increasingly aesthetic, with the focus being placed primarily upon formal and technical innovation. Furthermore, the new autonomy demonstrated in the self-directed visual vocabulary of the Plasticiens and Espace dynamique reflected both the changing character of avant-gardism in the city and the more widespread cultural renaissance that was unfolding in the province. This new freedom to meet aesthetic challenges in the absence of paralyzing social and institutional constraints attests to the fact that, by the end of the decade, the avant-garde had achieved the artistic liberty it was seeking. As Paikowsky has concluded, "Quebec and its art community would never be the same."[11]

[11] Paikowsky, "Vivre dans la cité: Quebec Abstract Painitng" 55.

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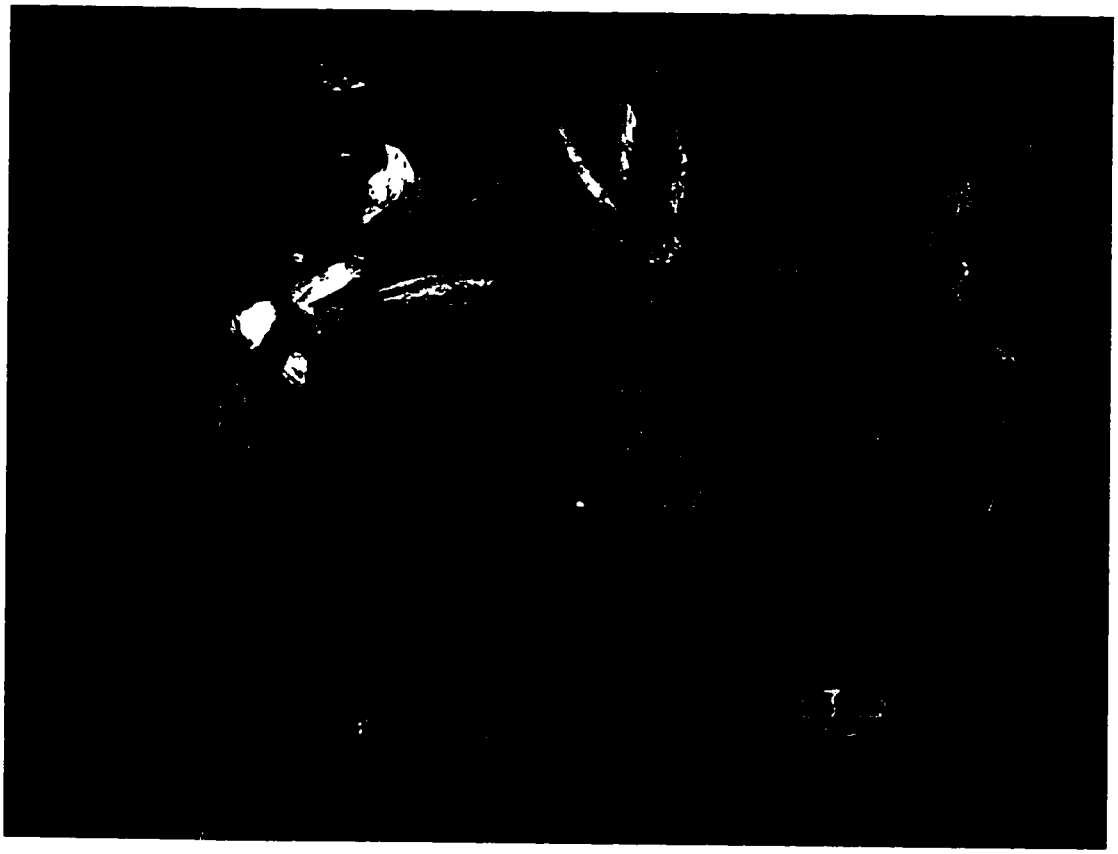

Fig.1 Paul-Émile Borduas. *9.46 or L'écossais redécouvrant l'Amérique*. 1946. Oil on canvas. 97 x 120 cm.

Fig.2 Fernand Leduc. *La dernière campagne de Napoléon.* 1946.
Oil on isorel. 51 x 65 cm.

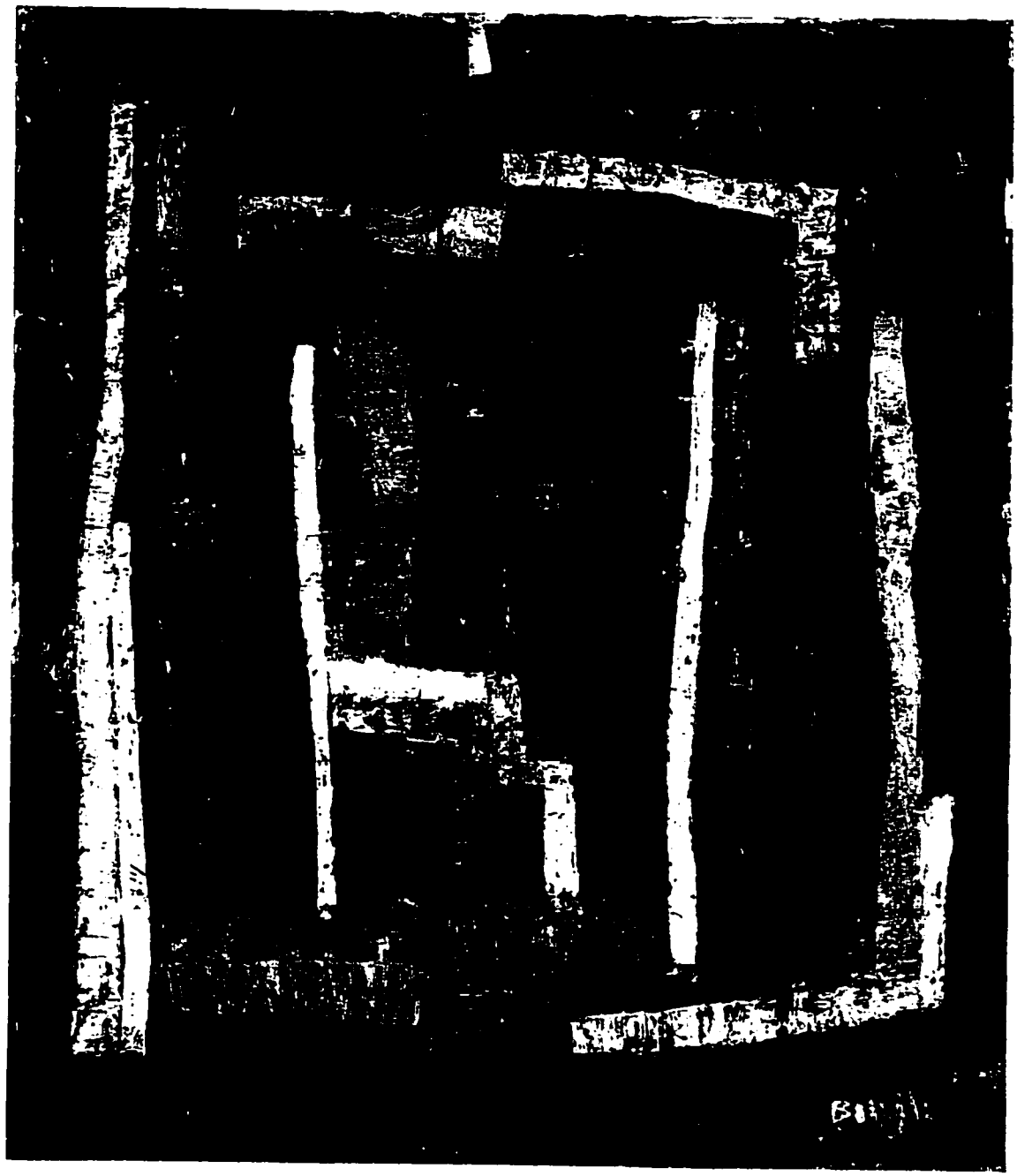

Fig.3 Louis Belzile. *Sans titre*. 1954-1955. Oil on cardboard. 51 x 40.5 cm.

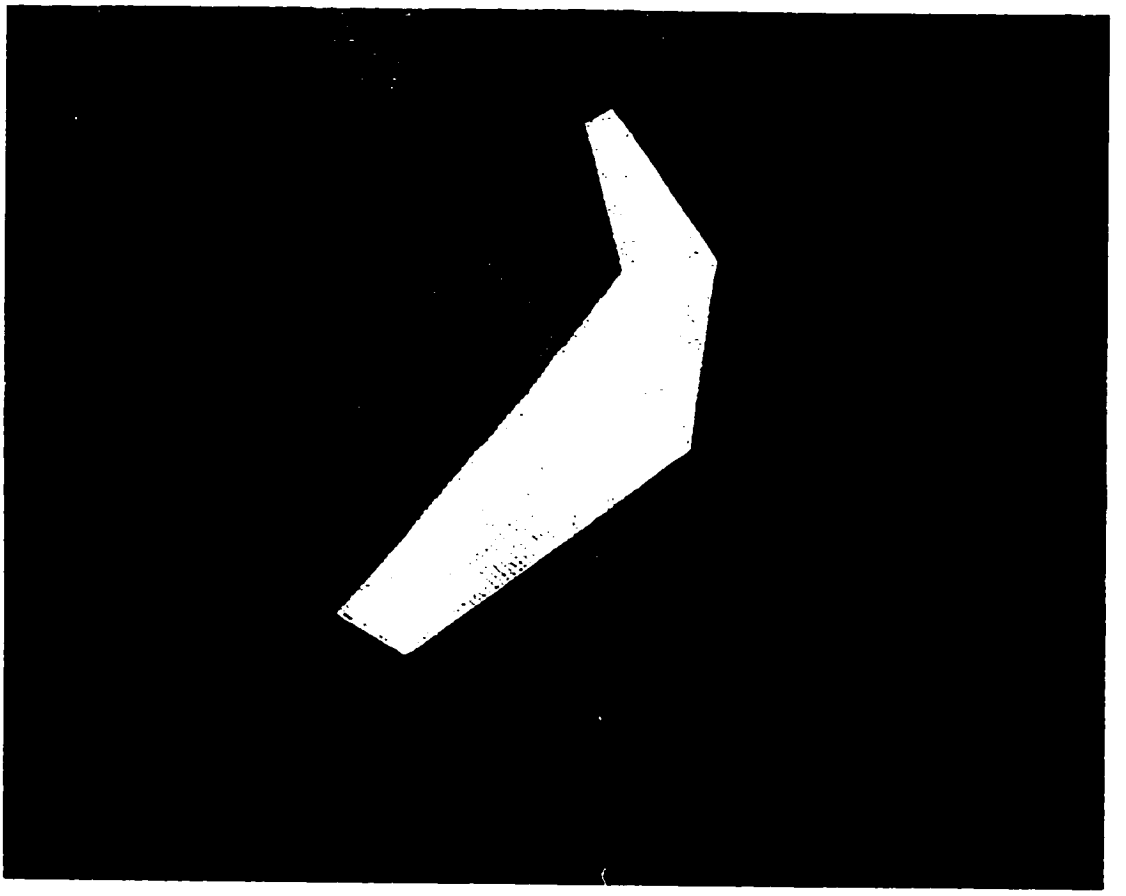

Fig.4 Jean-Paul Jérôme. *Sans titre*. 1955. Oil on canvas. 76.5 x 91.8 cm.

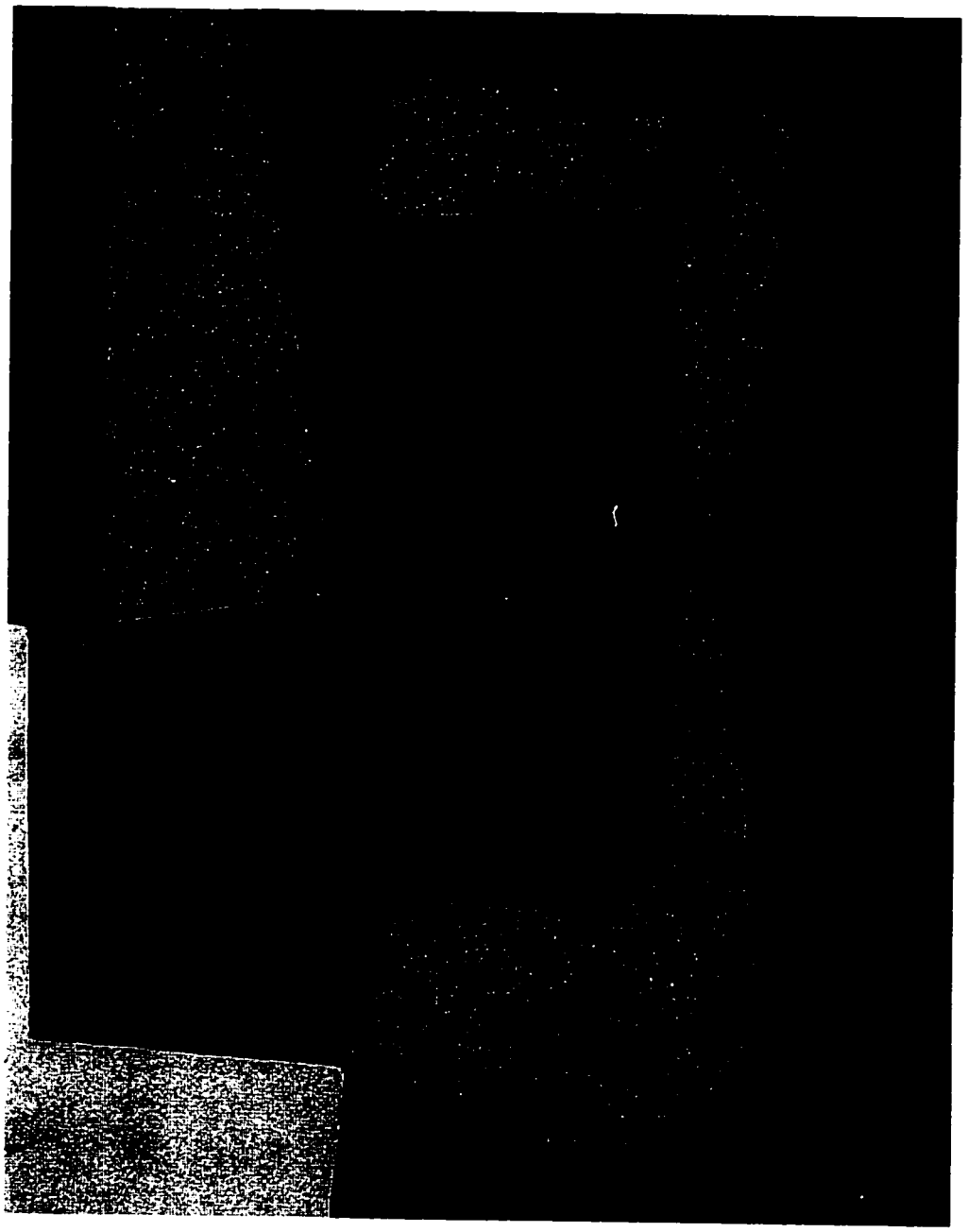

Fig.5 Jauran. *No.197.* c.1955. Oil on masonite. 58.3 x 44.5 cm.

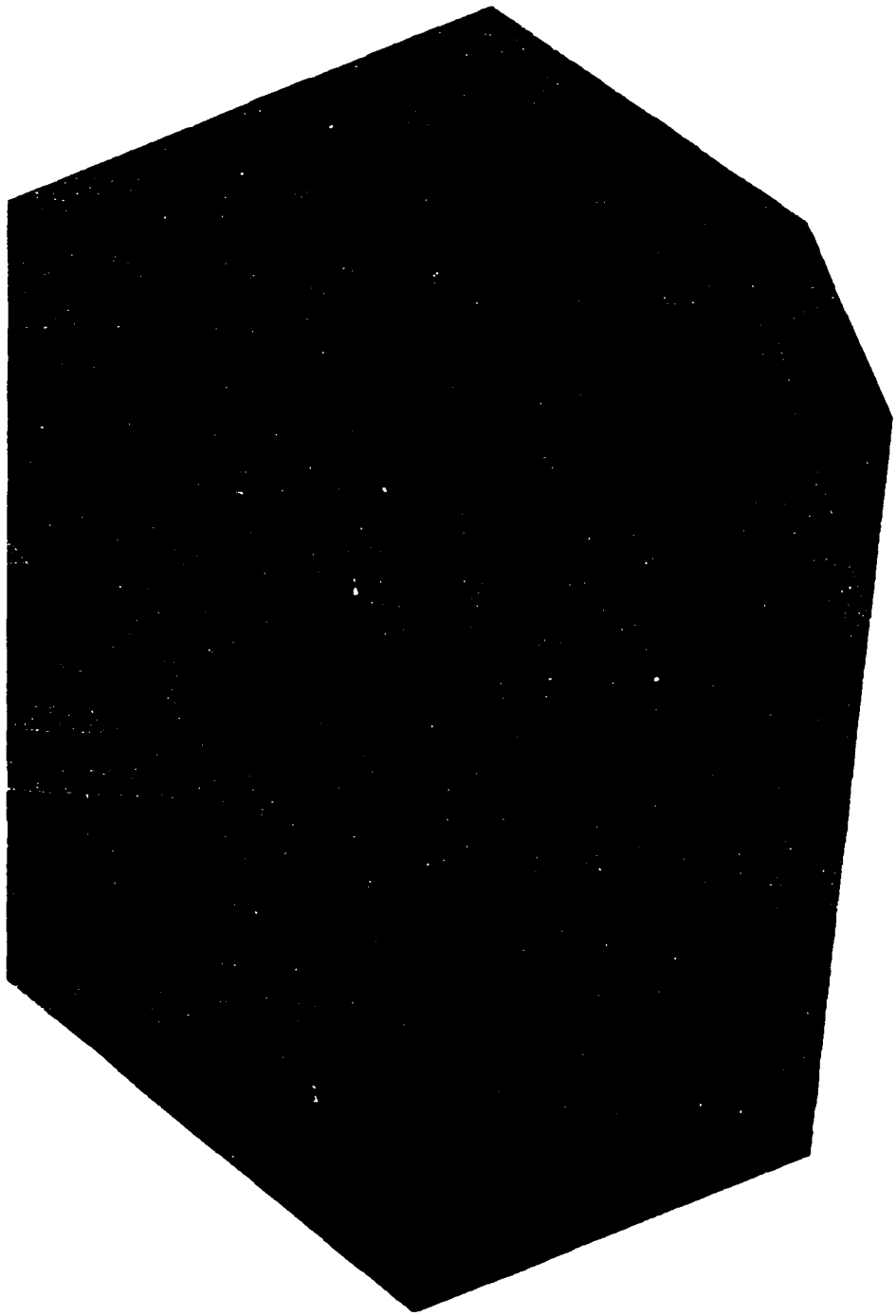

Fig.6 Fernand Toupin. *Aire avec rouge directeur*. 1956.
Oil on masonite. 105.8 x 68.6 cm.

Fig.7 Guido Molinari. *Blanc totalisant*. 1956. Duco on canvas. 127 x 115 cm.

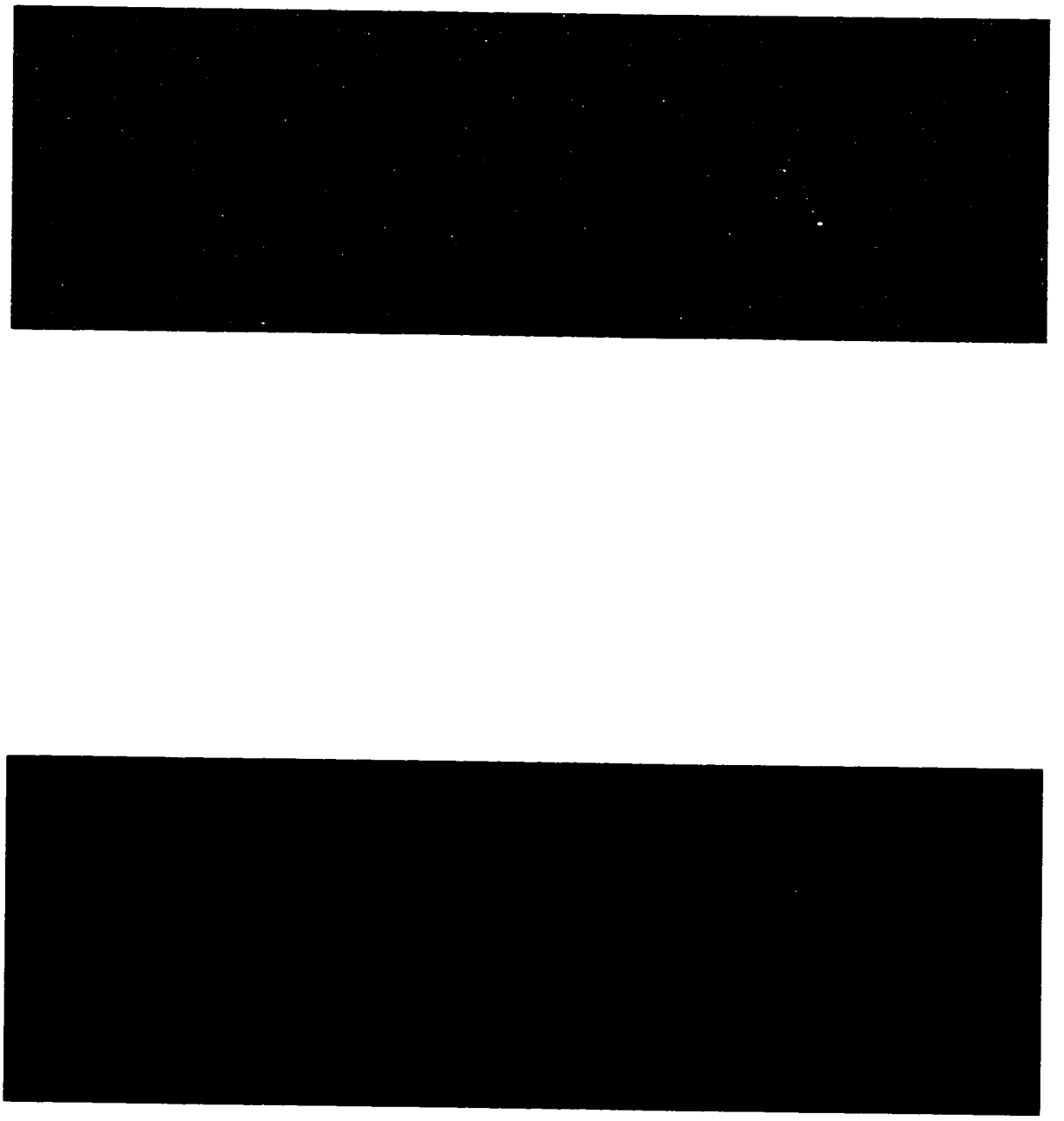

Fig.8 Claude Tousignant. *Les Affirmations*. 1956. Acrylic on canvas. 129 x 117 cm.

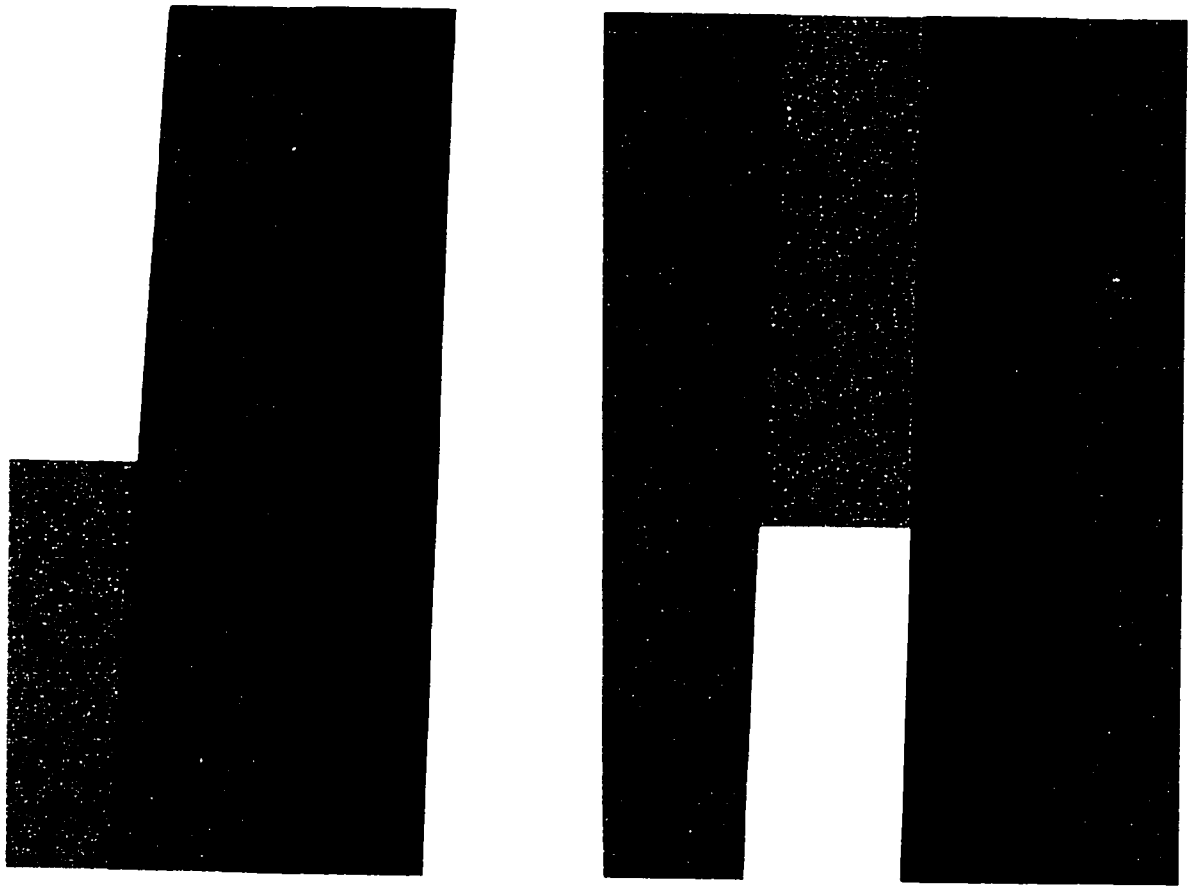

Fig.9 Guido Molinari. *Diagonale rouge*. 1959. Oil on canvas. 91.4 x 116.8 cm.

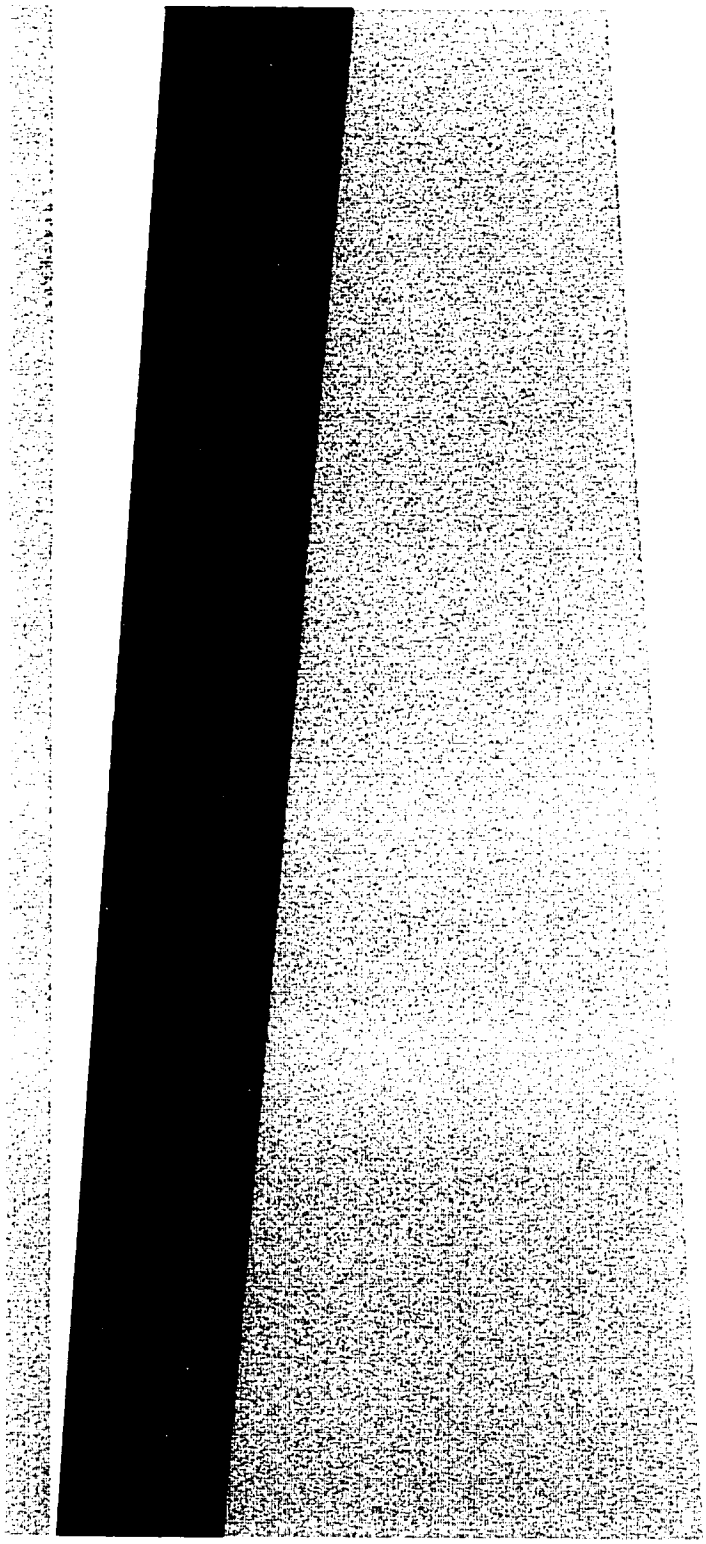

Fig.10 Claude Tousignant. *Verticales jaunes*. 1958.
Acrylic on canvas. 238.8 x 121.9 cm.

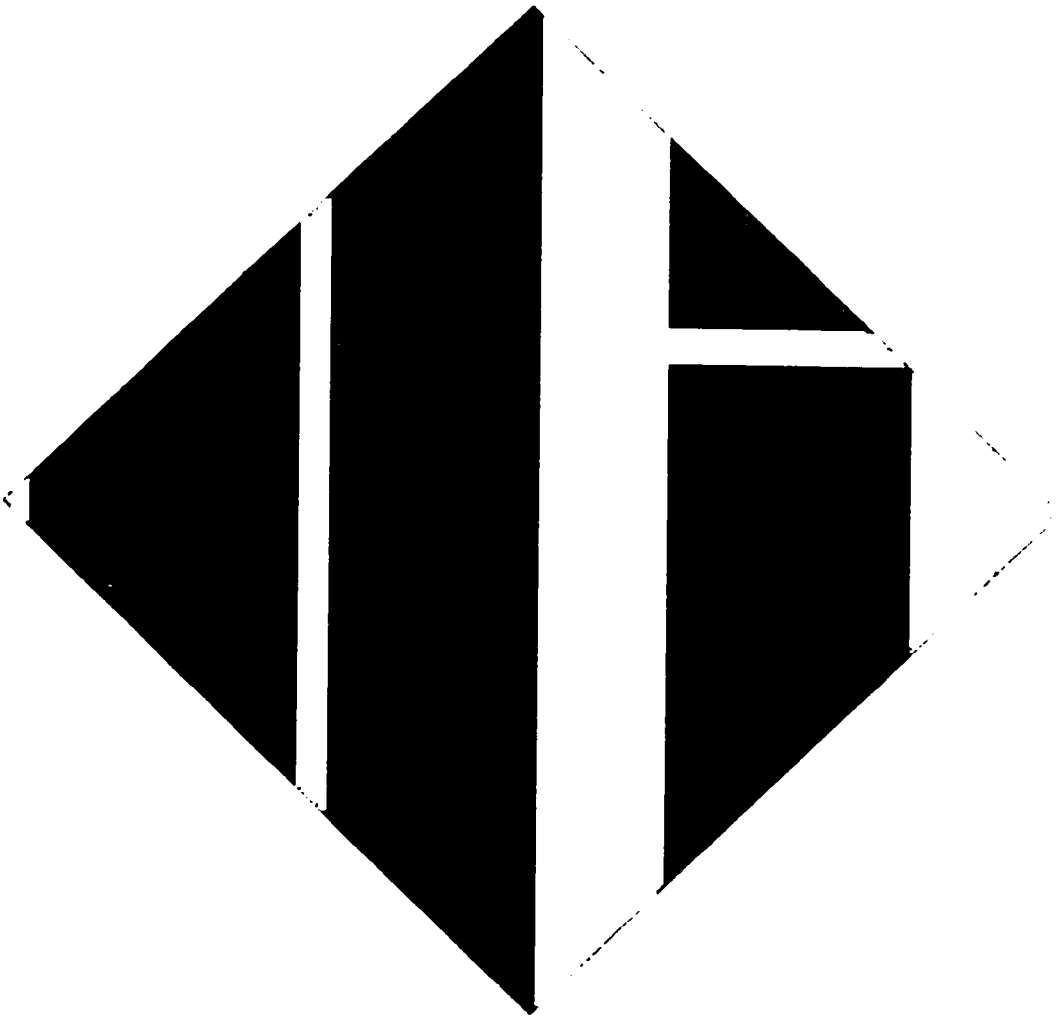

Fig.11 Jean Goguen. *Pulsation dynamique*. 1958.
Acrylic on masonite. 122 x 122 cm.

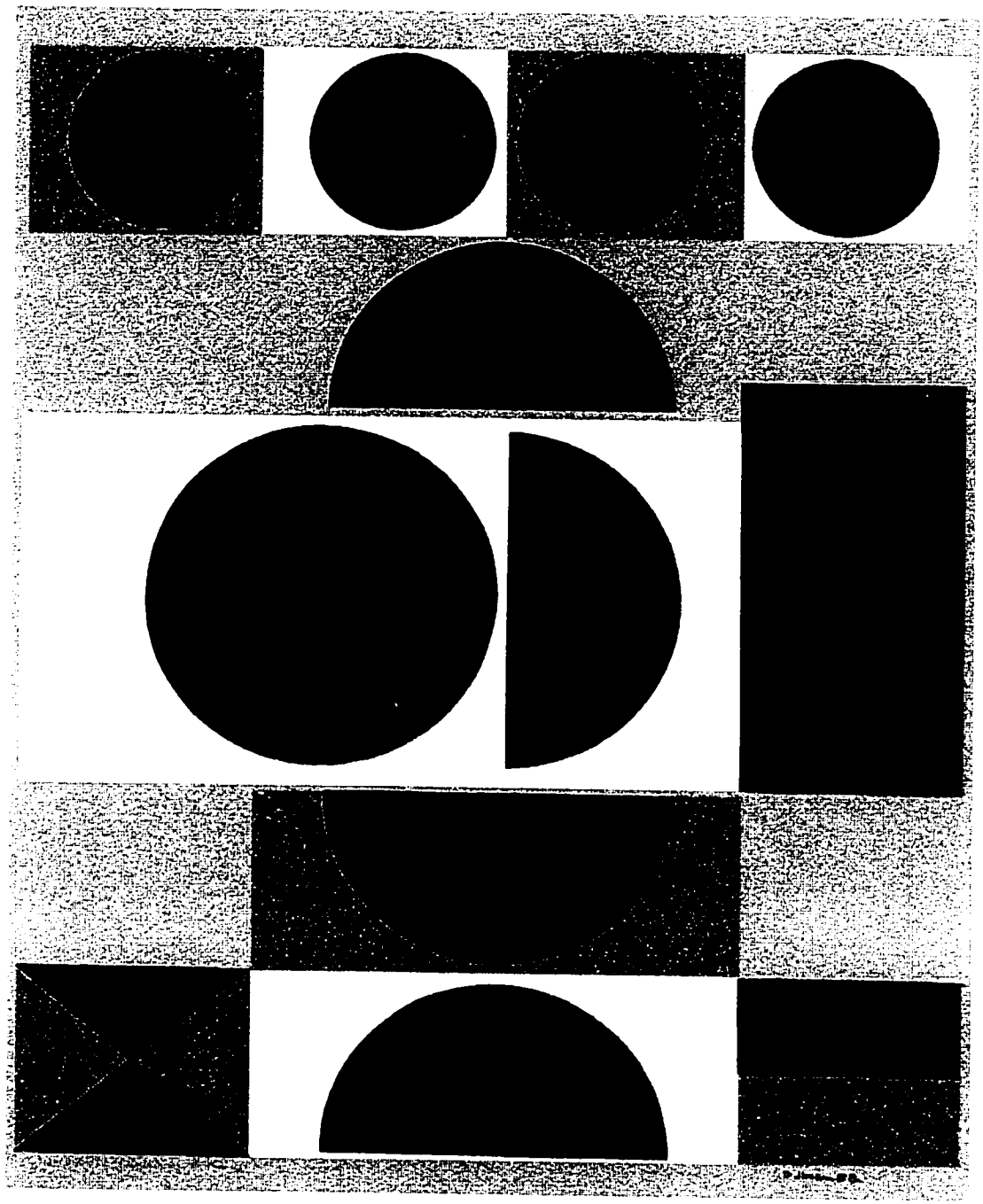

Fig.12 Denis Juneau. *Rond noir*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 91.5 x 76.2 cm.