

## **François Morellet: Two Works from the van der Marck Collection**

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On the face of it his pictures look austere: the black stripes on a square (acrylique sur toile sur bois, 1987) or the crooked square with the vertical neon line (un tableau et un fil électrique inclinés à 15°, un tube néon et un fil électrique vertical, 1982) by the French artist François Morellet (1926-2016) – if one does not take into account his sophisticated sense of humor! When he spoke, he liked to shrug his shoulders, like someone who doesn't take himself all too seriously, and who wants the world – including his art – to be viewed with some skepticism. The language of his pictures was also full of humor. But humor has its foundations in serious matters, especially when it introduces a new type of imagery. In the two works mentioned above, these foundations are in direct relationship to his use of chance (the aleatory) and light in art, to the concept of play in perception, and to the difficulty in describing these works.

These relationships are also crucial to the pictures' reception over the years:

Both works come from the collection of the visual artist Marc van der Marck from Amsterdam, who translated the De Stijl tradition into new images and worked in abstractly composed architectural photography. He was given both Morellet works by his brother Jan van der Marck (1929-2010) shortly before Jan's death in the US. The line to Morellet is direct: Jan was not only a particularly daring and controversial exhibition organizer in many US museums, including galleries in Detroit and Chicago, he had also written a catalog text for his friend François Morellet's traveling solo exhibition "François Morellet: Systems" (Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1984/1985, pp. 9-15: François Morellet or the Problem of Taking Art Seriously). In his "Black Stripes," Morellet hid a special tribute to his friend Jan: since the concept of the work was to create the stripes on the square using random numbers in a coordinate system, for this particular exhibition he used Jan's birthday (8191929), the date of his wedding (4271961), his social security number (53442967), his American Express Card number (371425474191004), and his naturalization certificate number (1087551 69/2174245). The stripes run from the coordinate system on the left edge of the work, nearly invisible to the viewer, to the opposite side, resulting in a field of lines that surrounds the white area beneath it like a protective shield. The work can thus be interpreted spatially. Or is the object of interpretation only the filled area, with its strange, nearly unfathomable random positioning?

A conversation with Morellet in 1982 gave me a clue. To my surprise, François told me of his enthusiasm in his youth for the philosophical-religious doctrine of the "Fourth Way" of the Armenian George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866-1949) and his pupil, the author PD Ouspensky (1878-1977). The two men had founded an institute at Prieuré des Basses Logés-Fontainebleau near Paris, which attracted international intellectuals in the 1950s, including Morellet. His friend Arnal Mitrienko who, like Morellet, was then a member of the L'Echelle group of half-abstract, divisionist artists, and with whom he had long conversations about Buddhism, introduced him to Ouspensky's writings. Morellet visited the institute regularly from 1948 until 1958.

At the time of the conversation (see Festschrift for Hans Jaffé: "Met eigen ogen," 1984), this detail about Morellet's younger years seemed to me to be a possible key to understanding his drawings. But the Stripes work from the van der Marck collection offers another key: As one can read in Ouspensky's famous book *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of Unknown Teaching* (1949), both cult leaders believed that they could arouse dormant, occult states of consciousness as part of an inner alchemy. For example, with the help of an enneagram, they developed a way to visualize a human's character. The enneagram was a circle inscribed with nine (Greek: *ennea*) lines, forming a *gram* (pattern) which signified the character of a person. They were drawn diagrams. This must have electrified a young artist like Morellet. But apparently he did not really believe in this possibility, but rather made a "portrait" of Jan van der Marck using only with lines on a square, which were based on purely random numbers from his life. Still, there are ten stripes!

The fact that Morellet withdrew from the influence of Ouspensky in 1958 could not be a coincidence. Henceforth it was coincidence that captured his artistic fascination. After first painting non-hierarchical patterns in the style of Indonesian tapas, then, in 1950, turning to 'Concrete Art' (Almir Mavignier had directed his attention to the Swiss artists Max Bill and Richard Paul Lohse and their ideas), he stepped boldly into the art of random designs. It was thus only natural that he left the L'Echelle group and founded a new community of like-minded people, the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) (1960-1966), who in turn participated in the many international exhibitions of the group Nouvelle Tendance, which included around 50 artists from 1961-1965. Anyone who felt at home there and paid homage to chance, like Morellet, must intrinsically oppose any kind of mystification and the glorification of genius. This makes his portrait of Jan van der Marck all the more humorous. It is a decisive statement against Ouspensky's enneagrams, using his own instruments. He remained faithful to him in another respect as well: Gurdjieff and his disciple Ouspensky were interested in verifiable, factual arguments, mathematical and principal systems, and in the role of the viewer as the one who interprets a work of art as he wants. This is the sense in which Morellet's amusing comparison is to be understood: the work of art is a kind of spiritual picnic, from which anyone can take what he chooses.

In the course of his development, he also subjected his Stripes to many metamorphoses, all of them with plenty of irony. Sometimes they were made of metal rods, such as the implements used for baby carriages, whose production he supervised as director in his father's factory in Cholet. They could be twigs, or neon lights, the Pop Art standard which Dan Flavin was using at the same time in the US. For his tribute to Jan van der Marck, Morellet drew ten variants asked Jan to choose one, even though he preferred No. 8. And that's how it happened, of course.

As a light, this line did not actually exist as a substance, but as an object and light carrier. In the work from the van der Marck collection, the white area underneath has sunk to the left. It thus shows its gravity as an object. The light bearer, on the other hand, is shaped so that it passes around the edges at the top and bottom as the axis of the picture, as if it were preventing the square from dropping and just barely holding it up. (In the first iteration from 1974, there was only a single neon tube without the curve around the edges of the picture.) The Lightline of 1982 seems to act. By doing so it seems to give the work an 'inner necessity' and thus to be an argument for its existence, even though light actually does not 'bear' anything and only embodies 'power' in another sense. Once again Morellet is showing his humor: the 'inner necessity' of all parts and motifs of an image was one of Wassily Kandinsky's central tenets in his 1912 manifesto on abstract art, *Concerning the spiritual in art*. Morellet expanded it to include light and its support. The picture should both shine its light and enlighten the viewer, in the spiritual sense - half in earnest, half in fun. AvG, 2018