



# The Taming of the Demiurge

A CONVERSATION WITH BERNARD FRIZE

BERNARD FRIZE, *SIMPLETON*, 2002, acrylic and resin on canvas, 28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 23<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" / SIMPEL, Acryl und Kunstharz auf Leinwand, 73 x 60 cm.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

Hans Ulrich Obrist: You mentioned, with regard to these paintings, the model of the urban network.

Bernard Frize: Yes, because the paradigm of the network is of course the city. The starting point of these paintings was a typology of city maps created by a couple of British architects whose name escapes me, and we used those patterns as grids for the surface. Take traffic, for example: cars move in all directions, but they stop at the same red lights and sometimes take the same thoroughfares; they pair up with other cars for some of the way, leave each other, then find each other again. Using these drawings as a support, the different people I work with make paintbrushes glide over the canvas and transport colors that corrupt each other on contact, as they criss-cross, meet or separate. All these traces merge together with no beginning or end, and thus the painting is completed.

Several things interest me here. First, there is a relationship to economy, to necessity and contingency in these paintings, but I also find it interesting to remain in touch with

the idea of the image. It precludes any abstract formalism and engages the viewer's vision in an entirely different way. H U O: This "many-hands-crafted" work, if you will, how did it begin?

B F: I started with simple images, like a shape similar to a fish bone. I thought I would be able to complete this series on my own, but I quickly realized that I didn't have enough "hands." (*Laughter.*) In this series, the brushes, each loaded with a different color, come from one side of the canvas, merge into a common trunk, and escape to the opposite side. There are three of us: one of us brings the brushes in, another one draws a more or less vertical line into which the brushes converge, and the third takes the brushes one after the other, carrying them out of the canvas. The colors are thoroughly mixed. I got help carrying these colors into and out of the canvas. The work manifests generation and corruption. It also shows how a mechanism is put into place. That's what I found interesting: setting up a movement and then arranging for this movement to occur on its own. I have always questioned this relationship to the painter's authority, to his demiurgic aspect. The assistants, the "machine," are strategies to find another role. For the

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BERNARD FRIZE, *ILLUSTRATION*,  
1998, acrylic and resin on canvas,  
59 x 78<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" / Acryl und Kunstharz  
auf Leinwand, 150 x 200 cm.



last paintings, which look a little like curtains, I used a similar principle: as always, it is a question of mixing the colors on the canvas and here the result is a mottled color. I do not make a particular choice in the beginning: for example, these paintings were made with the same colors and the result is completely different. I am quite negligent with regard to the skill of painting in general. I use very ordinary procedures, without any *savoir faire*. As a matter of fact, the collaborators who help me are not painters at all.

H U O: They are not even artists?

B F: They are. But in general, they aren't painters, with the exception of Adam Adach, with whom I work less now, as he has started exhibiting more regularly... They work with video, installations. Marie Denis, for example, or Agnès Goffray, Gloria Saffont-Tria, etc.—these are artists who would never paint if I didn't ask them to.

H U O: In this studio, then, though it is more or less empty today, there are usually a lot of people.

B F: Before starting a painting, you have to prepare the canvas, stretch it, etc., and that is something I like to do myself. I do not use collaborators for the humble tasks. When I ask them to come over, I may have prepared a drawing for

a certain number of people or I may feel like seeing some people who then invite a kind of drawing. It varies from two to four people. I have rarely used more people because that would imply a very different setting, which I haven't thought about yet. But I also make a lot of paintings on my own.

H U O: So what we're talking about is not, properly speaking, a "factory"?

B F: No. What would perhaps be comparable is the great quantity of paintings we produce, sometimes even in five minutes. But of course, a lot of them are failures. The same procedures, the same colors—because we prepare the colors once for the entire week, or for several meetings—offer a lot of variety and allow us to think about how both a failure and a success can result from the same combinations.

H U O: So you sort out the results after each method, you "edit" them?

B F: Exactly. I would like to show you a small painting. Last week, I met Katy Siegel and Paul Mattick and, to illustrate for them the banality of what I do, I told them that the procedures I use are as trivial as spreading butter on bread in the morning. Here it's the same thing. The finger traces mix all the colors together in this irritated gesture, and



produce a movement which generates the painting.

H U O : What is the date of this painting?

B F : 1989. It remained irrelevant for a very long time until the moment when I knew how to reintroduce it in my work.

H U O : Does it have a title?

B F : It is called SIMPLETON. Like a simple person, an idiot. The starting point of this painting came from a moment when I was watching my friend putting makeup on. Guerlain has this makeup powder made of many triangles of different colors: blue, bright pink, a few greens and browns. And when you mix the powders with a blush brush, it creates a nice flesh color. I liked the fact that such a simple gesture could produce something so unexpected. Another, earlier painting was made using the model of the *Mille-feuilles* pastry. Others borrowed from the decorations on clay pots. To use these day-to-day nothings gives me access to an activity in which I am not a different person once I step into the studio. As for the paintings themselves, they acquire a certain familiarity: their formal aspect is rejected and they become more accessible. Very simply put, my work oscillates between presentation and representation. Therefore, I have been looking for all those moments that become images. Each time my assistants and I meet, I try to suggest different ideas, so we have some fun. The methods are extremely reduced. In the end, it is always about registering the movement of a paintbrush from hand to hand without the brush leaving the surface of the canvas.

H U O : So there is a method, or some fixed rules of the game that you modulate with your assistants according to some practical ideas or new images?

B F : Usually there are three of us working on a painting. I have an assistant, who is very tall, and another one who is—unfortunately for the painting—short, and me, a little taller. (*Laughter.*) The reason I am saying this is because the canvas is very large—it's almost 9 feet—and since we work on a flat canvas on the floor, it is difficult to go all the way to the end of it. We paint with very large brushes (16 inches) and with five colors. We do a first run of these five colors on about 16 or 19 inches, then we move each color to the left, creating a staircase pattern. Once we have crossed the entire surface, we start again with the same brushes, without dipping them again in paint, moving each brush one step to the left. And over again, shifting rows each time. Black comes over yellow, yellow over green, etc. We start over until each color is no longer recognizable, the surface is mottled, and all the colors are combined.

And that is the reason why two paintings made with exactly the same colors produce such different results. What I am looking for, through these permutations or these sequences, is a type of indifference to what happens, but not to the way it happened. In the case of these particular paintings, I felt there was something too rigid; it didn't really turn into an "image." In the beginning, we used to paint with brushes that weren't that large, and the paintings used to look like library shelves with multicolored book spines. I wanted to find yet another way to apprehend these movements, to be closer, in a sense, to discovering what happens when one passes several times over the same place.

This led me to the "curtains." We used the same principle, passing across the entire surface of the canvas and, in the last passage, evacuating all the brushes together on the side, or sometimes four, or two at a time, so the preceding moments are left uncovered. I don't know how long I will continue to find procedures that require several people. I think I will keep finding new ones as long as these exchanges produce images.

H U O : However, in parallel, you continue to work on your own?

B F : Yes. Let me show you another painting. I made it on my own. I made it with a brush that is, in a sense, too large for the painting. It is nearly 16 inches wide, which is almost half the size of the canvas. I am trying to fill in the surface with this brush, after having worked in about forty colors on the canvas. The brush drags the color with it, quite literally, and leaves a trace of its passage. Since the beginning of my work, I have been trying to avoid a demiurgic attitude, whose ambition would be to create a world in painting. On the contrary, I am trying to find the right attitude, and reducing the amount of decisions has seemed to me the most humble way of going about it. Hence my decision not to choose any color, or to choose too many of them so none of them stands out, or to let the trace of the brush be apparent so it is possible to reconstitute what happened, among other examples.

H U O : Is this painting one of its kind or is it part of a series?

B F : It is part of a series, because another aspect of this non-demiurgic attitude is the notion of labor. The work becomes visible if the paintings are related to each other. The idea of a series is also about emerging out of the series, i.e. exhausting it, carrying it out. I sometimes make a single painting and return to it later because I found where it fits

and where it concludes a series. In fact, there are a few reduced possibilities, a very small number of possibilities, and that's what I enjoy: to explore every possibility to the end. There are series that I started in 1986, and that I still haven't completed, in the sense that I haven't explored all their possibilities yet. I feel that the paintings work together like that, informing each other.

H U O: This non-demiurgic attitude was common in the sixties. It seems to me that you situate yourself in an in-between: one couldn't talk about your work in terms of a definition that is given and then consistently applied, but neither could one invoke a, let's say, "Picabian" attitude, with about-faces and changes of direction at every turn.

B F: What distinguishes my work from the artists who have used a systematic approach is that I rely a lot on chance. Hans Arp's chance cutouts have always been both a mystery and a spell for me. To invoke chance in one's work, and even to invoke it in a systematic way, is so paradoxical. That's what makes me different from Sol LeWitt or other artists who put a principle in place and stuck to it. Besides, I make my own paintings myself: to entirely delegate fabrication of the work doesn't seem to me to change anything other than the relationship of art to commerce. That is what allows me to constantly renew my painting strategies. I would add as well that I find ideas in industrial paint stores rather than

within the field of art. This might be the only aspect that brings me closer to Picabia. As it happens, I am interested in mathematical reviews.

H U O: I didn't know that. Do you subscribe to any of them?

B F: No, but I often go to that excellent bookstore near the Pantheon.

H U O: And do you read René Thom's work, or are you interested in chaos theory?

B F: I'm interested above all in the idea of the game. There are very simple mathematical problems, such as: is it possible to cover every square of the chessboard with the knight? If so, what type of drawing does that produce? It is interesting because, in this case, I am delegating to a problem what I should be doing myself, i.e. creating the drawing.

Using these procedures structures the action and also allows me to distance myself. Similarly, each time I paint, I try to be further and further away from the painting. The same thing happens when I use collaborators: I remain at a distance, which reinforces the non-demiurgic aspect. The fact that my images and paintings are constantly changing is essentially a way of avoiding the trademark. An artist like Robert Ryman was very important for me when I started, but what I didn't like was that his idea of the ostensibly simple reduction to white became a trademark.

H U O: That's what Raymond Hains calls a "personified abstraction."

*BERNARD FRIZE, CONDUCTEUR B, 2001,  
acrylic and resin on canvas, 35 x 45 1/2" / Acryl  
und Kunstharz auf Leinwand, 89 x 115,5 cm.*





BF: Absolutely. So at the outset I told myself: "Let's use every color, every possibility, so no single one of them is recognizable. Obviously, as the work progresses, I will eventually feel like the traces of paint I am leaving are starting to look like trademarks, unless they reflect spent time. Then it is time to find other strategies to avoid becoming visible. It is a question of hiding behind procedures so as to prevent the "personification of abstraction." That's a very nice way of putting it.

The other thing I am interested in is the way a viewer activates a painting. There are some paintings you first look at from the side and then head on, there are others that are very different, once you get closer to them, from what they seemed viewed from a distance. Here too, I have used strategies, some of which, no doubt, have been used before. For example the idea of immersing a viewer in color, as with Barnett Newman, whose big paintings must be seen from up close, etc. This is why I want my traces to allow viewers to reconstitute what happened.

When I exhibit my works, I try to hang the paintings so their juxtaposition tells a story or a fiction that also invests a public space. A painting must address an audience, even though it is conceived in an individual world.

H U O: In this sense, is the exhibition a medium for you?

BF: Absolutely. And that's why I feel so frustrated with those museum exhibitions, where it's just a question of moving things I'm already familiar with from one place to another. Patricia (Falguières) recently told me a lot about Paolo Virno's book, *Grammaire de la multitude*. There are many similarities with what I think about production, about economy, about multitude and singularity.

H U O: Has the computer changed the way you work?

BF: Yes. It happened in two ways: when I started working with a computer, I first entered all my work with the images and their references. At the same time, I had started to catalogue the definitions and procedures I was using. Thanks to that list, which was not much longer than a page, I was able to create very different painting combinations.

H U O: How many paintings have you entered?

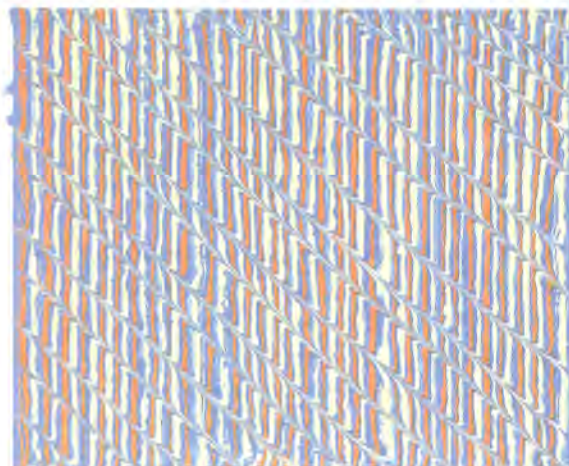
BF: More than 800.

H U O: A kind of imaginary museum?

BF: Or rather something a little "Warburgian." (Laughter.)

H U O: I also asked the question about your use of the computer because of the objects you showed at Micheline Szwajcer's gallery.

BF: There was one object I find absolutely fascinating; I



BERNARD FRIZE, XXX, 1995, acrylic and resin on canvas,  $15\frac{3}{4} \times 23\frac{5}{8}$ " / Acryl und Kunstharz auf Leinwand, 40 x 60 cm.

first saw it when I was a kid at the *Palais de la Découverte*. It's a "map," painted over a volume, whose particularity is that each color shares a common border with all the others. There are eight colors and they are all connected to each other. About ten years ago, a mathematician named Szilassi found a simpler, much more geometric way to create this map. And whereas Heawood, in the nineteenth century, created his map empirically, Szilassi, in my opinion, probably used a computer. Look at this book, it is the *Récréations Mathématiques de la librairie technique Albert Blanchard*. There are several volumes, presenting different mathematical problems. For example, the problem of the bridges of Königsberg, where one must walk around the city without crossing the same bridge twice. Or the logic of family relationships. I use these things in my work all the time. I often make diagrams to make sure I don't use the same colors twice, or on the contrary to provoke repetitions of color. So I use a logical basis to find solutions.

H U O: Is logic to you a little like what Poincaré was for Duchamp?

BF: Yes, thanks. Most people approach my work from an

aestheticizing angle, but I am completely negligent with regard to the aesthetic result. I just try to make sure the blue is different from the green or the yellow, and that when I use two reds, it is clear that these two reds are very different. It is very important to me that procedures can be named and re-visited. The procedure isn't the object of the work, but it is its support, it informs it, just as the image is the shareable dimension of a sensorial experience.

H U O: Could you develop this readymade aspect a little?

B F: I think it is linked to the economy I put in place in my work: to avoid as much as possible working in a complicated or artistic manner, in a manner that requires a particular knowledge or skill. Another aspect is the use of chance. When I made these paintings I was preoccupied by the relationships between color and drawing. And in reality, I was looking for something entirely different; I only saw it because I was being negligent. One morning, I came to the studio and all the paint containers I had forgotten to seal the night before had dried up, so I cut them out. I had nowhere to put them so I put them on a canvas and all this was done without giving it much thought. The first time I showed it was in Lucien Durand's gallery—which no longer exists—and César's agent said something like: "What's the use of sticking plastic circles on a canvas?" I thought it was a mean but interesting comment, because the point was then to find a much better way to define these circles of color, to characterize their provenance, to try to show that paint drips and that these circles were not made of plastic. This happened at the beginning of my work and it really helped me later. Another aspect of the readymade is of course to distance and evacuate—ostensibly at least—the person from the act of making. But for a long time I didn't really like these paintings, because I thought they were too closely related to accumulation and the "New Realists." I preferred the Fluxus aspect. I always remember that image of Robert Filliou wiping up dust from a painting at the Louvre. That directness was interesting to me, that absence of mediation. At last, here was a possible relationship to language and memory, through images.

To return to the topic of chance, it's the idea of not choosing that pushed me to use these *Récréations Mathématiques*. And even with chance, the challenge is to find the freest, but at the same time of course the most determined manner of provoking chance. It is a question of eliminating all the parameters that could prevent a chance event from oc-

curing. I spend all my time conceiving strategies that enable me to not intervene and to paint as lazily as possible.

H U O: There are many series you began and then put aside for a time, and to which you return sometimes years later. I was wondering if there were series you thought about but never realized?

B F: There are a lot of ideas for which I haven't found possibilities yet. But I might find them, most probably when a painting from the past resurfaces. This, by the way, is often the role of exhibitions: when two paintings are confronted, suddenly a third one becomes important, or possible. But it's not that I work on my own work either. An idea can come from a meeting with someone, from anything whatsoever. For example, I had the idea of making grids from noticing how you cross the edges of a cardboard box with tape or string to close it. And this "changing" moment, for example, is something I discovered in Italy, about mannerism, and about how the idea of representing a garment with a changing color was invented and then fought against during the Counter-Reformation because it was dangerous, inasmuch as it staked out the autonomy of painting. One is often confronted with ideas that are very simple on the level of fabrication, for example, but that are in fact of great relevance to an ideology or politics, as in this example of the Counter-Reformation.

H U O: So dialogues with art historians are crucial for understanding these matters?

B F: Yes. When I was at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts*, I read a lot of Russell, Wittgenstein, Austin, and later Quine, Cavell and other logicians or specialists in the philosophy of language. My understanding of them was above all a poetic one, they stimulated my imagination. We also encounter similar topics as we go about our daily business. For example, I was perplexed by the Mesdag Panorama in The Hague. It is fascinating on many levels, as a form of spectacle anticipating the cinema, but at the same time it remains an example of functional painting. In England there were a lot of moving paintings, painted on glass panels by well-known artists, that showed battle scenes, or you would move the panels to make a volcano erupt, for example. All these fields are still active today and seem to beg to be explored. Not to mention my interest in hearing these art historians discuss the art of today, because I do think, although one is not supposed to say it too loud, that art criticism here is rather impoverished. (*Laughter.*)

(Translated from the French by Anthony Allen)