

The Tableau of Pierre Dunoyer Mathieu Kessler

Towards the middle of the 1970s, when the iconoclastic staging of all kinds of objects reigned supreme, Pierre Dunoyer chose to "paint as though in a tableau"¹. His place in history derives from a form of painting that refuses the deconstruction of the pictorial space and allows the advent of the tableau.

It is not an issue of inventing new images nor a new manner nor style; these are merely expressive innovations. A tableau does not evoke image, subject or genius nor does it produce "a new feeling but rather a recognizable one,"² says Dunoyer. In other words, everything is already present in the advent of the tableau. The tableau is not dead; only the pictorial is rejected.

"There are no tableaux at the Louvre"³: such is Dunoyer's radical thesis. He states that the present event aims not "to produce culture but to appropriate the site"⁴. History has recorded innumerable desertions within the tableau. It is, indeed, as if the tableau had never been acknowledged even by those who infer, deconstruct or color it. The tableau is that vast common background, forgotten by the pictorial and buried beneath representation. The discovery of the tableau inaugurates an authentic relation with what cannot be conceptualized, described or narrated.

According to Pierre Dunoyer, an analogy exists between Being and the tableau: just as Being is no single instance of being, so the tableau must be nothing determinate above and beyond its presence. In respect to Being, the tableau is a pure indeterminate presence, "a privileged beingness which... articulates being as different from the totality of all being"⁵.

We are surrounded by objects – as if subjected by them. But the tableau is no such object; it neither evokes nor resembles anything in the system of representation and images. Take, for example, a glass: we might say that a vis-à-vis pairs the designer with its conception, and its function and status with its maker, user and owner. A glass also represents all the glasses that we identify as such and thereby belongs to a category, a genus and a species.

Its reason is given and its existence justified; it is, as it were, well-founded. At the same time, a glass is fragile. It is maintained only because of its utility. If the glass is chipped, we will throw it away. It disappears the moment its relationship to humanity becomes weary and degraded, so that it no longer represents anything but itself. And that is why it is ephemeral. It suffers from the consequence of the inauthentic in contact with pure self.

The glass cannot be what it is; it is not really present to itself. Its being consists precisely in this reminder of the alienation to the Other. What prevails in a glass is not the object but the image – and with the image the multitude of relationships and representations that constitute the system of its relevance and use. The being of the glass – its inauthentic relation to itself – is summed up in its utility. It exists through others, for others, but never resides in and of itself. Representation and image predominate in this kind of object. Thus, according to Pierre Dunoyer, since the glass is not an object, "the veritable object has yet to be produced".

"The tableau is the only object that can be identified and named without risk of committing an error or a subjectivization"⁶. The tableau, with its flat, rigid, independent structure, holds itself in itself with no other reference than its self-maintenance in an enormous present. The tableau is not immense, since it does not exceed the resources of our thought. But it is presence and enormity in the way that it maintains, within the containment of the three-dimensional, clear limits that are defined and affirmed in their distinction from space as a whole.

The tableau denies space. Space is the perpetually undefined domain of references and definitions in their shifting play of appearance and disappearance; and of the value or oblivion of all that hides or manifests itself in incomplete and unlimited perspectives. How revealing it is that the Greeks always had a negative conception of the infinite. If infinity is incompleteness – a non-being, a non-place – this makes space also a non-place. Fresco is also a non-place, since its integration with the building means that we no longer know where it begins and ends.

The tableau proclaims place in the sense of taking-place. It is therefore *Ereignis*, at once event and appropriation; it is pure presence, literality encompassing the conquest of a place. In this act, the painter of tableaux differentiates himself from the philosopher. The painter does not contemplate but installs a presence that has "no other aim than being there"⁷. Thus the painter becomes the attorney of Being before the rest of humanity.

The legal metaphor is useful here because of the role Dunoyer assigns to the painter, whose mission is not "present... life as in a picture"⁸ or to paint himself, but to free the presence that holds itself inaccessible when Being is forgotten. In this sense, Dunoyer is not an artist either; he is no industrious virtuosic maker of art and artifice (an *artifex*), nor a creator of idols or simulacra. He endows the tableau with all common, legal and judicial rights.

The tableau cannot be alienated either from its author (since it is not his medium of expression) nor from any level of causality (since it is not a simple empirical effect) nor from any ideology (since it is not the instrument of any ideology), nor from any recognized model (since it does not represent one). It is "significant sovereignty"⁹. It shows without demonstrating, presents

without representation, constructs without deconstructing, structures without destructuring; its figuration neither imitates nor abstracts. It is a figurative event that spotlights neither "color, nor gesture, neither matter nor representation – nor even abstraction"¹¹. Instead it structures the unique and original aspect of form, color and matter within clearly contained three dimensions. In this way, the *tableau* is perfect and "nothing is missing, particularly not the definitive absence of mimesis"¹¹.

Dunoyer's project is truly ambitious. He sets out to breach the Cartesian interdict specified in the *First Meditation*, which fixes the limits of abstract painting: "For indeed painters, even when they skillfully attempt to represent sirens and satyrs by strange and extraordinary shapes, they cannot give them entirely new forms and natures, but only mix and the limbs of various animals; or if perhaps their imagination is extravagant enough to invent something we have never seen the likes of before, their work will then present something purely fictitious and absolutely false, but at least the colors used are real"¹².

At this point, five objections to the *tableau* arise.

First and foremost, the stretcher and canvas make up the *tableau's* support, and they, like the glass cited above, refer back to the system of objects: to issues of causality, reflection, mirror and image.

Secondly, the colors used to compose the *tableau* exist outside the moment of it.

The same can be said of the material of the *tableau*: a simple, commercially available paste.

Then it can be said that abstract forms are never wholly undetermined. For someone with a lively imagination, the forms evoke and as it were represent (for example) chromosomes or any other ectoplasmic forms.

Finally, it is hard to see how, even if it is fundamentally involuntary, that the gesture of the painter on the canvas can avoid all nuance of expressivity.

But these five objections quickly give reason to five rules that make the *tableau* possible. Let us look at this in terms of the fabrication of Dunoyer's *tableaux*.

The issue of the empirical support – the canvas and stretcher – immediately disappears beneath the uniform reach of the monochrome field that establishes the *tableau*.

The affective neutrality of the paste used by Dunoyer to affirm the topology of the *tableau* considerably limits the communication of expressivity, given the absence of any truly visible or tangible object.

The singular determination of this paste then disappears beneath the colors that cover it.

The colors avoid creating an affective tonality suggestive of mirror-play, figure or memory. Hence the failure of the monochrome to evoke or represent a previously felt emotion. The *tableau*, by contrast, combines the self-evidence of its presence with an independence from color; this comes from a system of vivid but balanced tones which lack any relationship with each other or with the background.

The *tableau* does not lack presence nor does it specifically cite any given color. Each color distinguishes itself topologically, not chromatically, by taking and representing its place, and thereby creating a singular vibration. As Pierre Dunoyer notes, "the purpose of color is to stand out topologically, not chromatically"¹³. The contradiction between colored sensation and singular representation is thus overcome.

Finally, the forms are original and abstract enough not to recall the splashes of a Pollock nor the geometry of a Mondrian, two well-known frontiers of abstraction (subjectivity or figuration tending toward representation). Finally the figure, its aspect or overall relation of the forms within the *tableau* remains wholly unprecedented. This singularity establishes a place that has never existed and will never take place again in the same way.

These five principles eliminate the danger of an esthetical tendency toward metaphor and comparison, which the advent of the authentic must avoid at all costs.

To obtain a *tableau*, there must be neither deconstruction of the picture-plane (Support-Surface), nor "subjectivation" (forms of Expressionism) nor chromaticism (Impressionism) nor "materialism" (Dubuffet, for example), nor representation (from Lascaux to Mondrian!)

These "neither nor" constructions should not blind us to the positive impact of Dunoyer's *tableaux* in the bright interval of Being. Martin Heidegger has written that: "Alone of all being, man experiences, summoned by the voice of Being, that wonder of wonders: that the being is"¹⁴. Should these *tableaux* elicit an emotion in us, that is not their only surprise. In a *tableau*, we encounter a presence that is simply thus and not otherwise.

This pause, this perspective, our "stepping back" before the *tableau* testifies to an authentic relationship with the world. Nevertheless Dunoyer questions whether humans are well fitted to communal experience of this gift of presence.

The "immense foreground" of these *tableaux* should bring to an end the history of the pictorial and inaugurate an era of painting that neither speaks nor hides anything but rather shows, addresses and beckons.

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The French word *tableau* is intentionally retained in contradistinction with the usual translation 'picture'. *Tableaux* is its plural.

1. Pierre Dunoyer, "Edouard Manet", *Artistes*, May 1983.
2. Interview Pierre Dunoyer/Alain Pomarède, *Art Présent*, no. 9, 1981, 8.
3. Interview Pierre Dunoyer/Alain Cueff, *Pierre Dunoyer, Tableaux*, exh. cat. (tr. Gila Walker), 1991, Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 47.
4. Dunoyer/Pomarède (see note 2), 6.
5. Dunoyer/Cueff (see note 3), 47.
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. *Ibid.*, 46.
8. René Descartes, "Discourse on Method", 1, in *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, tr. FE. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 28.
9. Dunoyer/Cueff (see note 3), 47.
10. Dunoyer/Pomarède (see note 2), 12.
11. Dunoyer/Cueff (see note 3), 49.
12. René Descartes, "First Meditation" (see note 9), 97.
13. Dunoyer/Cueff (see note 3), 49.
14. Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics", 1943 (Postface to the 1929 Inaugural Lecture at Freiburg).