



Amsterdam, 1.11.83

Mon cher Stéphane,

I very much enjoyed the few days you stayed with me. It seems incredible, that, after a lapse of some 25 years, the way of communication between us has remained unchanged. In that post-Cobra period, during which you and I simultaneously ventured a jump into the field of construction, - I think because we both wanted to get rid of a growing COBRA-formalism -à la mode-, you used already to consider every work of art from the exclusive point of view that you called "sensibilité".

That is the word that first comes to my mind when I think of you.

At present we seem to be diametrically opposed to each other in the artistic practice.

Mais ce n'est qu'une apparence qui trompe! Also this time I have heard the term "sensibilité" from your mouth, as many times as ever before.

I must confess that I was astonished to hear it also in front of my own recent paintings in my studio, where you immediately saw the abstraction behind the figuration. I should have expected that! (seen the relativity of aesthetics).

It also was a pleasure to visit with you the Stedelijk Museum to rediscover the quality of the supprematist paintings by Malevitch that distinguishes them in such a striking way from the american "hard edge" paintings where every sensibility has been banned.

In the Rijksmuseum you gave me a fresh look on a painting I believed to know completely well: Rembrandts "Jewish bride" that you approached as a piece of sculpture. I think, you and I, Stéphane, we have arrived at an age that doesn't care much for fashions and "new" conceptions of art.

Toi, tu as persévéré dans la recherche spatiale, quant à moi, je n'ai jamais pu oublier le pictural, mais le goût de la sensibilité, soit-il dans la forme, dans la matière ou dans la couleur, nous lie toujours ensemble. Et c'est un goût qui est rare de nos jours.

I am convinced that "sensibilité" is the only motive for artistic renewal. All the rest is ephemeral fashion.

I think it is ridiculous to put some 500 years of painting and sculpture together in a museum of ancient art and 50 more years in a museum of "modern art". Museums should be composed by good works from the past and the present, to show what creative sensibility is, instead of opposing the present to the past. For I am sure, that within a man's lifetime the art of this period will get an image, very much unlike the presentation by our "modern" museums.

I hope the day will come that the real works of art of our time, and of the future, will be presented side by side with those of former periods.

And I am sure that your work and mine will harmonize, in spite of all formal differences. But in fact, it does already!

Très amicalement,

Constant

P.S.

J'ai trouvé bien drôle de constater que tu aimes Turner, dont je rejète la peinture pour sa manque de construction!



Paris, 4th Dec. 1983

My dear Constant,

Thank you for the few days I stayed with you, and also for being able to see Amsterdam with you again. That you should find I still make the same remarks before works of art astonishes me - though it is true that I have come round to some of my first points of view. All the same, I do not think that for you or me, sensibility has ever been in question. Sensibility in what one creates, is, in the finished thing, sometimes very easy to see, and sometimes not immediately apparent. I think it is never absent in a valid work. In fact, to say a work lacks sensibility is to condemn it - and it might simply be lack of judgement on the part of the observer, since there are many forms of sensibility, and new ones too, which are difficult to detect.

I remember, too, the strong desire that you had, from 1950, to find in architecture and formal art, an abstract structure which, up to then, had not been apparent, though perhaps latent, in your earlier work; and, finding myself in the same position, how we were able, for several years, to develop in a similar way. These considerations led us away from Cobra (spectral imagery of a troubled time - which I see, even now, in works by Karel Appel at the Templon Gallery).

At the time, you and I, and others too, long before 1968, questioned the value of painting; that is, the contribution of the plastic arts in their historic form, to the needs of the present society. I do not feel quite the same now; the history of the social structure is different from the history of the plastic arts. However, conceptual art became important, more important for you, I think, than for me; and situationism, which anticipated the outburst of 1968. The implication still exists in your painting, though it has taken a more classic form in the application of paint to canvas. My evolution has been different in many ways.

I enclose two photos of recent work, for you have still to see what I have done in recent years. You will not see in them the preoccupations of the 1950's, when we were putting colour into space - the space-frames, in fact, the concept of spaciality as a primary element of plastic creation you may even see some resemblance to what you are doing at present.

However, you will not have forgotten working with metal: how different it is from painting, where you are in contact throughout with the final expression, and can feel at once the more or less good result of the different passages of paint and colour which make up the whole. The uncertainty of painting also where much depends on happy accidents in the guidance of the hand. One can lose and find again what is intended, almost instantaneously.

I have to forego this spontaneity, and work from drawings and models, constructing from a preconceived idea, in a material which does not yield easily. You will remember this from the open structures you made in the 50's. Technically, these are difficult enough to realise - but a constructed closed sculpture is much more demanding: I find it impossible to work quickly, and for weeks, even months, have to retain in my mind the idea of a whole, as it was first thought out.

The immediacy you have in painting is not possible: the sensibility also is held in check, for one cannot work on the surfaces as with stone. There are also certain limitations, in the curving of metal plates. The structure is necessarily formal, and in producing an informal work on this framework, it is difficult for the artist to arrive at the statement he requires. I think that the sensibility comes from trying to inspire life into inert matter. However, there is a satisfaction in overcoming this resistance. With regards to Turner: in the paintings with boats, I see apparent structure. He

followed an evolution, as I hope every artist should, and, in the end, came to a revelation - the effect of light and space constructed non-objectively, which opened up a new vision in plastic creation. It was in fact a new perception, a break-through, as they say, which, at the time, could not have been appreciated for what it was. One has seen since the evolution in the plastic arts of which he was the initiator. For these later works, where the structure is evanescent, are very significant, since this leads to the impressionist theory of the fractionning and structuration of light as predominant pictural composition, and, eventually, through many developments, to where we are. Of course you know all this and I hope you don't mind my repeating it.

Bien à toi

Stephen



Paris, 9th December 1983

My dear Constant,

It occurred to me that you might wonder how I came to the position I have taken in sculpture, which in some respects could be compared to what you are doing at present. Of course, there are the obvious differences. - You make a painting which is part of the 'real' world - that is, not apparently abstract. Since the period of Cobra - that is after 1950 - I have remained abstract.

However, for many years now I have searched exclusively, I must say, for this quality of sensibility, in the way it appertains for me to constructed closed-in sculpture in metal.

In the early '50's we were both making structures of metal bars to hold painted plates of colour in space. You were led to extend your research to urbanism, for which you chose a theme-New Babylon. For some years you elaborated an imaginative architectonic complex around this idea of an ideal future living space, on the scale of a city; theoretical work: conferences: and eventual classification. Perhaps a link between the plastic research you made then, and the pictorial, is your concern with human problems, which I think is evident in every phase of your work.

For me the evolution was more restricted. These first space-frames were for the purpose of putting flat stretches of colour, to which my painting had evolved, into real three dimensions; which seemed to produce, as a miracle, an extended spaciality. I soon started to curve the flat planes of colour, and, at the same time, felt that a space-frame, a frame at all, was an interference. So I inverted the process, and made an interior frame, closer to natural growth - trees, shrubs, etc: I no longer coloured the plates, and, in fact, turned the constructions into structures. However, for me this was a phase where I had unwittingly joined a well-beaten path, which for this reason, as much as any other, I soon wished to leave. I determined to use the sometimes complex armature as the skeleton of the object I had in mind, and completely clothe this framework with a skin of metal. The space-structure became an object, and this proposition has interested me ever since. Subsequently I eliminated the internal structure as much as possible, welding the plates together in the last works - but the principle is that of a sculptured object, with relationships within its own forms, without theoretical extension to surrounding space: which is indeed putting theory on one side, to developo significant objective forms.

It is difficult to see sometimes how an artist gets from one point to another. I feel sure that I must have sometimes been inaccurate in imagining, as I have, some parts of your own evolution. I hope you will write and correct everything I have said which would seem to you untrue, even if it approaches the truth, but was really not what you had in mind.

Best wishes, bien à toi

Stephen

Paris, 10th December 1983

My dear Constant,

Although I have not yet received a reply to my last two letters, I am writing again because I feel intrigued by the last phrases of your letter. But please do not think of answering till you have finished the preparation of your own exhibition. After the 15th I shall have less time to reflect, and that is why I am writing a lot now.

Referring to these passages of your letter - it is true that the art we produce now, must compare one day with the art of all periods, and be worthy of integrating the history of art, which is separate from just history: sometimes very close, and sometimes remote and abstract. It is true also that, in spite of everything, the art productions of the different parts of the world still remain remarkably distinct. But the big movements of change seem universal, and, in the last hundred years, have taken place at an accelerated pace, corresponding to great scientific progress, and the resulting re-organisations of society. For me, when I was younger, it did not seem possible for us, who are subject to this pressure, to say 'art is timeless, plastic values have always been the same', and ignore a quickening of the pulse, because it might alter ones attitude to art, and art itself, perhaps for the worse. I felt compelled to investigate alternative means of expression.

But it would seem to me now, that, to produce a work of human qualities, the classic means of expression are enough, and that one should add to them with infinite precaution. The great changes in art are not in material inventiveness, but in vision, and the capacity to reproduce that vision, authentically and with feeling.

Bien à toi

Stephen



Amsterdam, X-mas '83

Mon cher Stéphane,

Patience is the quality of an advanced age, like spontaneity was the quality of the youth of COBRA. You are right, when you say that sensibility is a *conditio sine qua non* for any work of art. But unfortunately very few people are able to perceive it. As you state it, it links all we do or have done in whatever style or manner. Abstract art does not really exist! A structure is not abstract, but the representation of a construction - that is why you can compare your structures to natural growth, like trees and so on.

As to me, I can paint an execution or a trial, but during the time I work, I am principally involved with the structure of the paint, so much that I very often forget the subject. This subject is important to me as a source of inspiration, and also to arouse the attention of a spectator. But it is not essential for the value of the pictorial phenomenon.

So we could also say: all art is abstract, the subject is very relative. If I paint now the torture of a political prisoner, the painting may have an impact on the people who look at it, because they will identify themselves with the figures. The torture of Jesus Christ will leave everybody indifferent for the same reason.

And cannot we be intrigued by the appearance of some african sculpture or by some chinese painting, without knowing or understanding its meaning? Perhaps even better because of that! I assume this is what you mean when you find an affinity of your structures and my recent paintings.

Cher Stéphane, I am looking forward to your exhibition to see how true this is. I am glad we have met again.

Yours,

Constant

P.S. Turner may have been a forerunner or an impressionist 'avant la lettre' but I have the same objection against the impressionists. Cézanne was aware of this, since his aim was to structuralize impressionism ("faire de l'impressionnisme quelque chose de solide et de durable, comme l'art des musées").

# STEPHEN GILBERT

beelden en tekeningen  
25 februari - 18 maart 1984  
open dinsdag t/m zaterdag 11-18 uur

opening 25 februari van 15-18 uur  
in aanwezigheid van de kunstenaar

galerie  
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**spectra**

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