

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.

—Walter Benjamin in "Thesis on the Philosophy of History"

The Reconstitution of Time Past

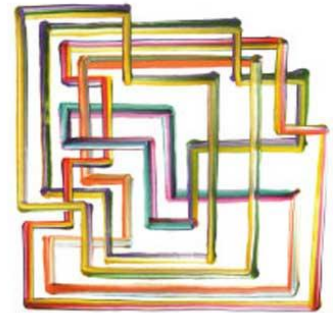
JORDAN KANTOR



In a recent interview in these pages, French painter Bernard Frize reiterated a point he has made throughout the course of his career—a point that has been almost ritually repeated in the critical treatment of his oeuvre. Describing an aspect of the viewing experience he hopes his paintings occasion, Frize stated, "I want my traces to allow viewers to reconstitute what happened."¹ This idea that the artist's "traces"—those material records of painterly process—allow their viewers to unravel the history of the work's making, seems fairly straightforward. In many paintings, Frize isolates, even exaggerates, his painterly means to foreground the process of the images' production. This is evidenced in a painting like the aptly titled *MADE* (1986), where one can easily follow the methodical itinerary of pigment-loaded brushes, envisioning the way they once traveled through the artist's favored ultra-glossy acrylic resin in sweeping horizontal bands.

(The brushes start in the upper left corner, descend and traverse the canvas [left to right], only to change both direction and orientation in the lower right corner, and double back across in broad horizontal strokes.) While many of Frize's commentators have attended to ways in which his paintings reveal their own materiality, less focus has been trained on another equally important dimension of his process-oriented practice: its temporality.² Indeed, as much as Frize's paintings matter-of-factly assert the material means by which they are made, they also, specially, and specifically, register the time of such making.

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Bernard Frize

Time has been a central and defining concern of Frize's art since at least the eighties, when the artist devised a series of operations whose effects became inscribed directly within the materiality of his paintings. He executed a large body of work that incorporated the thin "skins" which form on the surface when containers of wet paint are exposed to air for long periods. SUITE SECOND STRN30F100 (1980) was among the first of such works; it is made up of small discs of dried color the artist lifted from open cans of paint and collaged, wet-side-down, onto the canvas. Playfully riffing off classic modernist modes of self-revealing painterly materialism (like Pollock's drips), Frize uses these bright circles of pastel solids to construct a self-conscious image of the time it takes for paint to dry. As simplistic as this idea might initially seem, the artist's attempts to depict paint in the process of drying have proven surprisingly fruitful. SUITE N-B (1991), a series of six canvases from 1991, captures the effects of time on paint with similar means, but to very different pictorial ends. To make this work, Frize first poured black and white paint into a rectangular tray roughly the size of the eighteen by fifteen inch canvases. Leaving the mixture uncovered, the artist waited for a skin to form before peeling it from the tray and affixing it to the canvas. With the layer that had sealed the mixture having been removed, a new skin began to coagulate atop the remaining wet paint only to be itself peeled away, once solidified enough to cover the next canvas. Not only do the six works that comprise SUITE N-B reveal the considerable time required for this sequential operation; the lightening tonal progression in the cycle registers the slow, downward separation of the denser white pigments from the less dense black ones. That is, in addition to representing the time required for each new skin to dry (as the discs in SUITE SECOND STRN30F100 also did), SUITE N-B's marbledized surfaces bear witness to the slow procession of the heavy metals typically used to make white paint—titanium, zinc, and lead—as they settle to the bottom of the tray.

In a very different way, the nubby surfaces of SPUGNA (1993) and MARGARITA (1991) also present gravity's tug on thick, wet paint. Like stalactites, the bumps that define the surfaces of these paintings formed when Frize suspended the wet canvases, allowing them to dry in positions horizontal, face-down, and parallel to the floor.³¹



BERNARD FRIZE, SUITE N-B, 1991, alkyd urethane lacquer on canvas 6 x (18 1/4 x 13") /
Alkydurethan Lack auf Leinwand, 6 x (46 x 38 cm).



Other of the works, instead of indexing the effects of time on paint, highlight the duration of the artist's physical exertion in arriving at the image. As in *MADE* (described above), Frize typically creates the perception that little time (and hence little work) is required to fabricate these paintings. Indeed, the blithe, gestural images for which he is best known usually seem to have been executed in a few short seconds, an appearance underscored in the titles of works paradigmatic in this regard: *DASH* (1995), *RUSH* (1995), *HURRY* (1995), and *SPEED* (1995). While the artist has acknowledged that this quickness of execution is sometimes feigned (in fact, some have been painted more than ten times), the opposition of this type of work to the "slower" skin paintings demonstrates the methodical nature of Frize's sustained commitment to investigating the various "times" of painting.⁴⁾ That such paintings appear not to require much time, work, or special fabrication skills to be made, reveals the democratic impulse that runs through Frize's practice. The artist has repeatedly stated that he wants his paintings to appear quick, easy, and part of the everyday world; he strives to make the painterly process appear as quotidian as spreading butter on a piece of toast, or as simple as putting tulips in a vase.⁵⁾ This demystification of the act of painting, what Hans Ulrich Obrist has called the artist's "taming of the demiurge," is part of Frize's larger artistic ambition to explore the liberating possibilities of art made manifest, in part, through the durational act of viewing.

Perhaps the most novel and important aspect of Frize's art is the temporality implied for the viewer's encounter with his individual works. Frize believes that his "traces" not only record past actions that have "happened," but that they wait, pregnant, for future times to come—ready at any moment to trigger a durational "reconstitution" in the viewer's mind. This two-pronged temporality—in which the artist's time spent making is registered as a means to choreograph future time spent looking—is singular to Frize's work. So too is his investigation of art's durational aspects through painting, a medium conventionally understood to be still (at least compared to film and video).⁶⁾ Frize's paintings are compelling not only because they register the time and work of the artist, but because they do so in ways that engineer a specifically durational viewing. For certain, all works of art—paintings included—



require time to behold. But the deliberate, yet diverse manners in which Frize transparently embeds in his works the processes of their making, engineer a kind of durational untangling that is central to the artist's program.

This untangling in real time, the "reconstitution" that Frize's paintings occasion, demands a certain active "presentness" of its viewers that has deep political implications.⁷¹ By entreating their viewers to look, to investigate the "history" of their manufacture, Frize's works create a heightened viewer consciousness that parallels the literalist materialism of the artist's painterly means. That is, if Frize's matter-of-fact materialism reflects an agenda to disenchant painting (which I believe it does), this finds a perfect compliment in the literalist experience of real-time triggered by looking at one of these works. While it could be considered ironic to argue that such choreographed looking is liberating, the openness which the works propose creates an experience more dialogical than proscriptive. This kind of viewing encounter is entirely subjective, and fairly difficult to describe—a point Frize has himself conceded:

There is no equivalence between painting and language, otherwise it would have been verbalized. It's about a whole bundle of things that are conveyed in the actual experience of the painting. A painting is an incredible object: it's flat, facing you, you stand facing it—I mean, it's an incredible moment which catalyses emotions, unusual sensations. Whether one is looking at a monochrome canvas or a Rubens, one is always standing facing it, confronting it, activating one's emotions and one's intelligence. One is always in a dialogue with this object.⁸⁾

The dialogue Frize seeks between his paintings and their viewers is a direct consequence of the specific ways in which he conducts a dialogue with his own materials; it is a product of his materialism. So while the artist might imagine his pictures as "simply the outcome" of a "series of operations," they are altogether more than just that in practice.⁹⁾ Frize's paintings are taut springs of potential: waiting to discharge their energy through a productive, dialectical encounter with their viewers, even if that be at some future time.

1) Hans Ulrich Obrist, "The Taming of the Demiurge. A Conversation with Bernard Frize," *Parkett* 68 (2003), p. 138. For an interesting treatment of Frize's work, which analyzes a similar statement by the artist, see Barry Schwabsky, "One Percent Frize" in: *Bernard Frize. Hands On* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2003), pp. 6–10.

2) This is not to say that time is a wholly ignored aspect of this work. For two critical appraisals of the temporal aspects of Frize's production, see Yves Aupetitallot, "Bernard Frize," (Paris: Galerie Crousel-Robelin Bama, 1990), n.p., and Camille Morineau, "Bernard Frize. Fragments d'un discours amoureux" in: *Art Press* 248 (July–August 1999), esp. p. 37.

3) The artist clearly describes the processes involved in making many of his paintings in: Bernard Frize, *Bernard Frize: Size Matters* (Arles: Actes Sud, c. 1999), pp. 42.

4) For Frize's statement about making the paintings look as if they "came together at once," see *Size Matters*, p. 97.

5) Bernard Frize in "Malen ist wie Blumen in eine Vase stellen. Ein Gespräch mit Amine Haase" in: *Kunstforum* 152 (Oktober–Dezember 2000), pp. 287–291.

6) Interestingly, a related effect has been noted in the sculptures of Richard Serra, see Yves-Alain Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll Around *Clava-Clava*" (trans. John Shepley) in: *October* 29 (Summer 1984), pp. 33–62.

7) For the now canonical, though still controversial, thesis regarding literalism and presentness in post-war abstract art, see Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in: *Artforum* 5:10 (Summer 1967), pp. 12–23.

8) Bernard Frize, *Aplat. Bernard Frize. Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris*, 06.06–28.09.2003 (Paris: Paris Musées, 2003), pp. 203–204.

9) Frize: "I'm trying, rather, to set up an operation or a series of operations, of which the picture is simply the outcome or by-product." See "Rule and Branch. Jean-Pierre Criqui Visits Bernard Frize" in: *Artforum* 32:2 (October 1993), p. 81.