

# Painting as Theoretical Practice: Althusser and Supports/Surfaces

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1.

In June 1969, Louis Cane, Daniel Dezeuze, Patrick Saytour, and Claude Viallat participated in an exhibition titled “La Peinture en Question” at the Musée du Havre. Along with Vincent Bioulès, Marc Devade, Noël Dolla, Jean-Pierre Pincemin, Bernard Pagès, and André Valensi, the artists co-authored a catalog text that stated their principal aesthetic position: “The object of painting is painting itself, and the works displayed here only refer to themselves. They make no appeal to an ‘elsewhere’ (for example, the artist’s personality, his biography, the History of Art).”<sup>1</sup>

The artists offered their works as a materialist dissection of the medium of painting. Colored wooden stretchers by Dezeuze were juxtaposed with Viallat’s unstretched canvas painted with a repetitive Matissean pattern. Saytour also used unstretched canvas, which he had folded and soaked with red paint. Louis Cane’s name and the words “*Artiste Peintre*” were repeatedly stamped in a grid format on a linen sheet. In all these works, the constitutive elements of painting—support, surface, color, process—were laid bare in order to “prevent mental projections or oneiric wanderings.”<sup>2</sup> The artists insisted on the “neutrality of the works presented, their absence of lyricism and expressive depth.”<sup>3</sup>

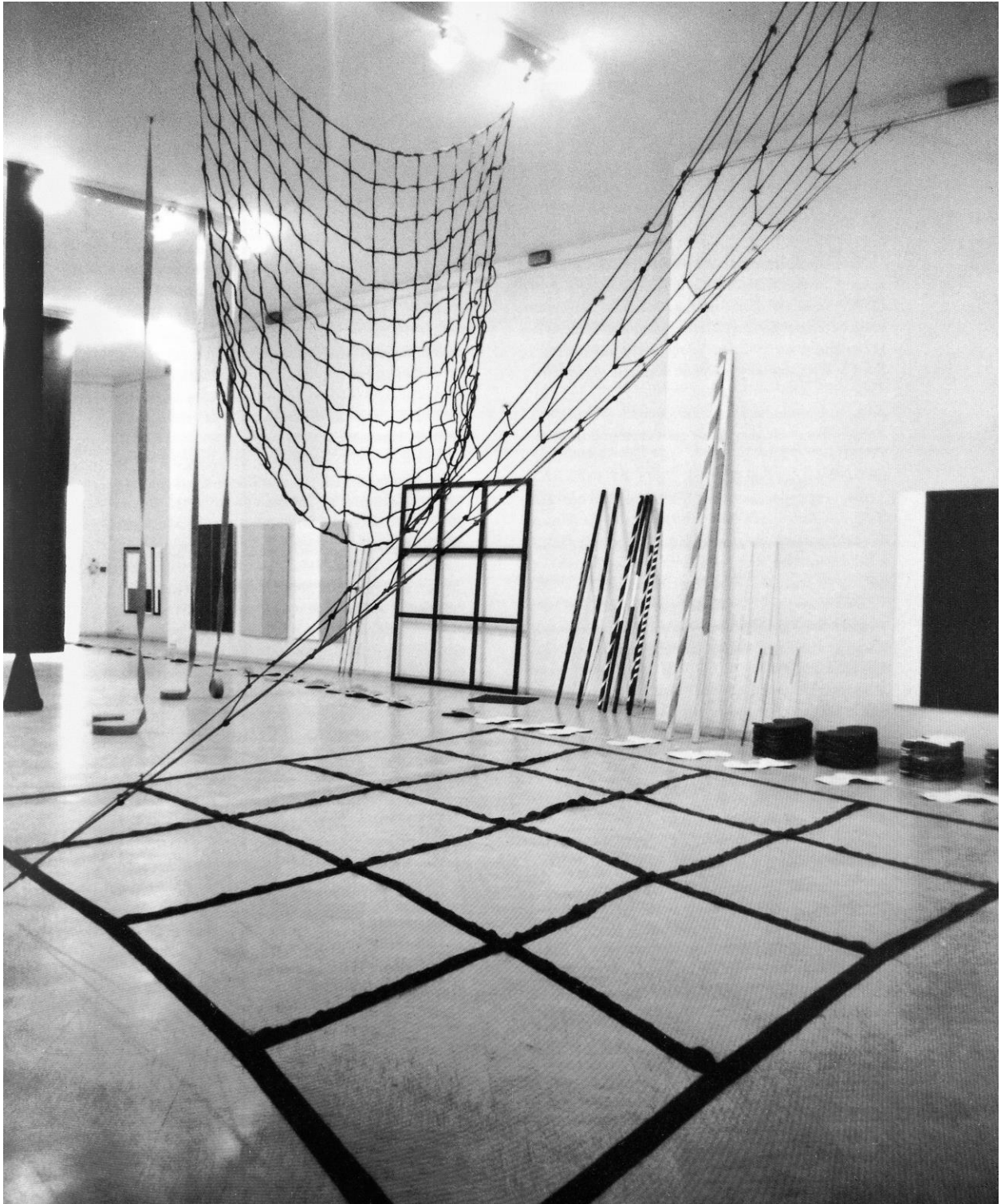
Though the rejection of individual subjectivity and expressivity asserted in the statement was a goal shared by some of the most prominent tendencies in 1960s European and American art, including Minimalism, Pop art, and Conceptual art, a markedly different dimension quickly emerged in the work of these French artists. In September 1970, now calling their group Support-Surface, Bioulès, Devade, Dezeuze, Saytour, Valensi, and Viallat again exhibited an array of cutout and stained canvases, stretchers, wooden poles, and fiber grids at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris’ newly instituted ARC (Animation –

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<sup>1</sup> *La peinture en question*, Musée du Havre (June-July 1969). Translations are the author’s own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> “La peinture en question.”

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



1. "Support-Surface," exhibition, ARC (Animation – Recherche – Confrontation), Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, September 23-October 15, 1970.

Recherche – Confrontation) section (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> This time, Cane, Devade, and Dezeuze authored a tract in which they insisted on the Marxist-Leninist political significance of their deconstructive approach to painting.<sup>5</sup> Less than a year later, however, the group would split and essentially dissolve under the tensions created by that very insistence.

The resurgence of interest in the work of Supports/Surfaces over the past decade has prompted a reassessment of their strident yet opaque political claims.<sup>6</sup> Previously, the tendency had been to ascribe these expressions of militancy to the general atmosphere of revolt that characterized the late 1960s and early 1970s in France and many other parts of the world.<sup>7</sup> While superficially true, this *zeitgeist* reading is ultimately ahistorical in its abdication of a deeper investigation of the mediations between the political and the aesthetic at this particular juncture. Other recent analyses have attempted to assess the relationship between the “practice” and “theory” of the group by, for example, reading the forms of Supports-Surfaces works as demonstrations of Marxist dialectics.<sup>8</sup> While such

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<sup>4</sup> “Support-Surface,” organized by ARC director Pierre Gaudibert, was on view from September 23 – October 15, 1970. The name “Supports/Surfaces,” sometimes (as here) written in the singular, was created by Bioulès for this first official exhibition of the group. Only a handful of exhibitions can be attributed to the group before 1969 and their effective dissolution in June 1971, though many members continued similar experiments into the later 1970s.

<sup>5</sup> Tract written by Louis Cane (who did not appear in the exhibition), Marc Devade, and Daniel Dezeuze, dated September 23, 1970. Though parallels have been drawn between the work of Supports/Surfaces and deconstruction, particularly in American evaluations (see, for example: Raphael Rubinstein, “Theory and Matter,” *Art in America* [September 2014]), the group’s engagement with the writings of Jacques Derrida was relatively limited. Indeed Supports/Surfaces’ involvement with the *Tel Quel* group began just as Derrida severed his connections with this journal, largely over its increasingly Maoist orientation.

<sup>6</sup> A sampling of recent exhibitions includes “Supports/Surfaces is Alive and Well,” Cherry and Martin Gallery (Los Angeles, January 18–March 1, 2014), “Supports/Surfaces,” CANADA (New York, June 4–July 20, 2014), “Supports/Surfaces,” 356 Mission (Los Angeles, November 16–December 21, 2014), “Unlimited: Painting in France in the 1960s & 1970s,” Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia, July 5 – October 17, 2017), “The Surface of the East Coast,” Le 109 (Nice, June 23 – October 14, 2017), “Supports/Surfaces: The Beginnings, 1966–1970,” Carré d’Art (Nîmes, October 13, 2017 – January 7, 2018), “Jacques Lepage: Dossier Supports/Surfaces,” Ceysson & Bénétière (Paris, December 19, 2018 – January 26, 2019), “Unfurled: Supports/Surfaces, 1966–1976” Museum of Contemporary Art (Detroit, February 1–April 21, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Raphael Rubenstein, “The Painting Undone,” *artcritical*, February 2004, <http://www.artcritical.com/2004/02/01/the-painting-undone-supportssurfaces/>; Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, “Les artistes et la révolution,” in *Les Années 68, Le temps de la contestation*, eds. G. Dreyfus-Armand, R. Frank, M.-F. Lévy, M. Zancarini-Fournel (Brussels: Complexe, 2000), 225–237. Catherine Millet associates these practices with a pervasive and politicized attack on the integrity of the art object during this period. See: Catherine Millet, *L’Art Contemporain en France* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 20–29.

<sup>8</sup> Allison Myers, “Materialist Translations of Maoism in the Work of Supports/Surfaces,” *Maoism, Art, and the New Chinese World Order*, eds. Noemi de Haro Garcia, Jacopo Galimberti, and Victoria H.F. Scott (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

approaches move beyond the narrow and depoliticized formalist interpretations by actually taking the artist's theoretical investments seriously, this essay will attempt to explain why a reformulated Marxism, one focusing on questions of ideology with extreme theoretical rigor, appealed to abstract painters in France in the aftermath of the events of May-June 1968.

Though frequently associated with "Maoism," Supports/Surfaces' political and theoretical investments, like those of many French leftists who felt the "wind from the East," were prompted by their encounter with the writings of philosopher Louis Althusser.<sup>9</sup> From the early 1960s, Althusser's groundbreaking readings of Marx were avidly followed by a new generation of intellectuals, activists, and artists yearning for more rigorous analyses than those offered by the then-prevailing mixture of existentialism, late Surrealism, and philosophical Marxism. While Althusser's influence in the intellectual field has been well surveyed, his impact on artistic practice of the 1960s and 1970s remains underappreciated. His limited and infrequent writings on art further deflect attention away from the broader effects his more theoretical works had on artistic practices with which he was not directly involved.<sup>10</sup>

Supports/Surfaces grappled with Althusser's writings, finding in them a justification for painting as a critical praxis at a moment when painting's aesthetic and social *raison d'être* had appeared to many commentators as exhausted. At the same time, this act of translation from the theoretical to the visual demanded a supplementary textual production by the artists that became at least as important as the production of actual paintings. The terms of this endeavor were set forth on the occasion of the ARC exhibition of September 1970 in the so-called "Green Tract" issued by Cane, Devade, and Dezeuze, which insisted that painting must base itself on "theoretical practice, [...] itself articulated in social practice: the class struggle."<sup>11</sup> Evoking Althusser's notion of semi-autonomous levels of class struggle, the text argued that "a coherent group linked to the national and international struggle for people's liberation can, at the level of this specific practice that is painting, exist only by the systematic elimination of any subjective practice." This was followed by a calculation of the price of each artist's painting based on materials, manual labor, intellectual labor, and tax, a strategy to signal the imbrication of painting within a capitalist economy and demystify its

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<sup>9</sup> See: Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton University Press, 2010) for a neoliberal recuperation of the French Maoist movement. He addresses the influence of Althusser on the emergence of French Maoism on pp. 118-128.

<sup>10</sup> This is the case with Sarah Wilson's *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations* (New Haven: Yale, 2012), the only extended art historical study of Althusser's engagement with contemporaneous artistic practice. Althusser's impact on film theory is examined in: D.N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 67-110.

<sup>11</sup> "Tract Vert," Sept. 23, 1970, reproduced in *Le Moment Supports/Surfaces* (Paris: IAC Éditions d'Art, 2010), 292. Supports/Surfaces issued a number of short polemical statements mimeographed on light green paper starting in 1970. Most were written by Devade.

value.<sup>12</sup> However, unlike the contemporaneous work of many Conceptual artists, the texts or statistical information produced by artists associated with Supports/Surfaces were not themselves treated as artworks. This distinction was key to Supports/Surfaces' Althusserian definition of painting as an "object of knowledge," that is, as a theoretical practice distinct from the material or technical practice of painting as a "real object."<sup>13</sup> An artistic practice could be a "theoretical practice" in Althusser's sense if it produced knowledge about its own ideological status.<sup>14</sup> The artists of Supports/Surfaces resolved to meet this challenge. In addition to catalog essays, tracts, and open letters accompanying the few official Supports/Surfaces exhibitions, the primary venue for such writings was the journal *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*, established in 1970 by Vincent Bioulès, Marc Devade, Louis Cane, and Daniel Dezeuze, who together made up the Paris-based faction of the group.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond acknowledging the role Althusser's writings played in Supports/Surfaces' approach to painting, his appeal for abstract painters attests to the ways in which the breakdown of both artistic modernism and the French left became entwined circa 1970. The political claims made for these aesthetic practices, so crucial to the artists at the time, remain opaque without a deeper historical understanding of this dynamic and the complex debates regarding the relationships between theory and practice, politics and philosophy, and ideology and science that Althusser formulated for his followers. Above all, what appealed to those members of Supports/Surfaces drawn to Althusser was the philosopher's rigorous anti-humanism. Though Althusser subjected many of his most rigorous positions to self-criticism by the late 1960s, the artists of Supports/Surfaces selected what they needed from his corpus that would help them distance painting from a humanist ideology of art. This mode of engagement would at times pit competing interpretations or facets of Althusser's theory against one another within the group.

## 2.

1956 was a watershed year for the French left. The acknowledgment of Stalin's atrocities at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, the USSR's suppression of the Hungarian Uprising later that year, and the French Communist Party's (PCF) lackluster support for Algerian independence prompted the defection of scores of intellectuals and increased calls

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<sup>12</sup> The cold objectivity of this approach to painting was in some respects foreshadowed in literature by the Nouveau Roman, which *Tel Quel* championed in the early '60s, as well as by the "rapport financier" in the 1965 *Bulletin d'Information du Salon de la Jeune Peinture*, a publication of the artists' association Jeune Peinture.

<sup>13</sup> The distinction between the "object of knowledge" and the "real object" is most fully articulated in: Louis Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015), 40-43. First published as *Lire le Capital* (Paris: Maspero, 1965).

<sup>14</sup> Althusser suggests this specifically for domains such as art in: "On the Materialist Dialectic," in *For Marx*, trans. Benjamin Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 169-170. First published as: Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1965).

<sup>15</sup> Published until 1985, the journal long outlasted Supports/Surfaces, as well as the founding editors' Maoist politics.

for reforms within the Party. The fallout also triggered the search for non-Communist models of leftism amongst French radicals. The Sino-Soviet split of 1961, when diverging national interests and doctrinal disputes prompted the Chinese Communist Party to sever relations with the Soviet Union, exacerbated tensions within the French left that would ultimately climax in 1968.<sup>16</sup>

Against the calls to reform the PCF through more humanistic and liberal interpretations of Marx, Althusser insisted that the only way to free both Marxism and the Party from the legacy of Stalin was through an extreme insistence on the scientific validity of Marx's late writings. In the essay "On the Young Marx," which appeared in the March-April 1961 issue of *La Pensée*, Althusser criticized the recent tendency of Marxist philosophers to recuperate the early writings of Marx as essentially a philosophy of man and his liberation.<sup>17</sup> Althusser argued that an "epistemological break" existed between Marx's early works, which he regarded as still saturated with bourgeois ideology, and his later works, starting with *The German Ideology* and developed further with *Capital*.<sup>18</sup> These "mature" works, he argued, detached themselves from ideology and established a new scientific discipline capable of objectively describing the structure of historical development without recourse to a human subject positioned as its engine or telos.<sup>19</sup> At this stage, Althusser conceived of ideology in terms of a "problematic"—a certain unity governing the questions that can be posed in any field of knowledge, giving it an apparent consistency. The structure of this unity however, "is not conscious of itself" and it is this lack of consciousness that constitutes ideology.<sup>20</sup>

Althusser refined this argument in a series of essays included in the 1965 collection *For Marx*. Notably, in these essays Althusser enlarged the scope of the concept of ideology from an epistemological problematic to a phenomenon that encapsulated the "imaginary relation between men and their real conditions of existence."<sup>21</sup> In particular, the essay "Marxism and Humanism" attacked the conception of personal freedom as an ideology obscuring the scientific understanding of history and society offered by Marx's "*theoretical*

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<sup>16</sup> There had already been stirrings of such projects prior to 1956, most prominently in the case of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, founded in 1948 by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. See: Marcel van der Linden, "Socialisme ou Barbarie: A French Revolutionary Group (1949 – 65)," *Left History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1997), 7-37.

<sup>17</sup> This tendency would be further spurred by the first full translation and publication of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* in French in *La Pensée*, February 1963.

<sup>18</sup> Althusser discusses Marx's break with German idealist philosophy, specifically Hegel and Feuerbach, in "On the Young Marx," in: *For Marx*, 51-86.

<sup>19</sup> "...we can see that [Marx] founded a new scientific discipline and that this *emergence* itself was analogous to all the great *scientific discoveries* of history." (Ibid. 85) Here and in all subsequent quotations, emphasis in original. Althusser would later distance himself from the scientism of his claims in *For Marx*. See: Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliott, trans. Warren Montag (London: Verso, 1990), 77-81.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 66-69.

<sup>21</sup> *For Marx*, 233-234.

*anti-humanism*.”<sup>22</sup> By introducing categories of analysis such as “social formation, productive forces, relations of production, superstructure, ideologies, determination in the last instance by the economy, specific determination of the other levels, etc.,” Althusser claimed that Marx moved beyond his earlier philosophical preoccupation with discovering and realizing the essence of man.<sup>23</sup> According to Althusser, “it is impossible to *know* anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes.”<sup>24</sup> It was precisely this attack on the “myth of man” that would captivate a number of French artists dissatisfied with the increasingly stale gestures of post-Cubist modernist painting.

### 3.

Throughout the 1950s, the French government and the art market promoted expressive, gestural styles often grouped under the umbrella category of *art informel*.<sup>25</sup> While some of this work was figurative, it prioritized the spontaneous painterly touch in ways similar to American Abstract Expressionism. The apotheosis of the newly established Fifth Republic’s endorsement of a humanist ideology of art was the first Paris Biennial, organized by the recently appointed Minister of Culture, André Malraux, in October 1959. Held at the Musée d’Art Moderne and limited to artists under the age of thirty-five, the French contribution was dominated by the various forms of abstract painting practiced at the time as well as a selection of works by masters of the École de Paris produced before they reached age thirty-five, including Bonnard, Derain, Matisse, Braque, Picasso, Modigliani and Soutine. Malraux proclaimed at the opening: “Now we have the proof here that painting is what painters make of it. Freedom has henceforth been attained in the domain of art.”<sup>26</sup> The operation performed by Malraux and the Biennial was therefore twofold. One was to establish the preeminence of the École de Paris within the postwar debates between abstraction and figuration that characterized French art. The other was to associate painterly abstraction with “freedom” and the aesthetic autonomy of modern art.

This cultural campaign by the French state occurred during the bloody peak of the Algerian War for Independence, which officially lasted from 1954–1962 and caused the collapse of the Fourth Republic in 1958. Hannah Feldman has argued that Malraux’s promotion of *art informel* under the supposedly autonomous and universal category of “style” worked to silence history in a manner directly analogous to the French state’s silencing of war crimes committed during the Algerian War.<sup>27</sup> More immediately however,

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<sup>22</sup> Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” in *For Marx*, 229.

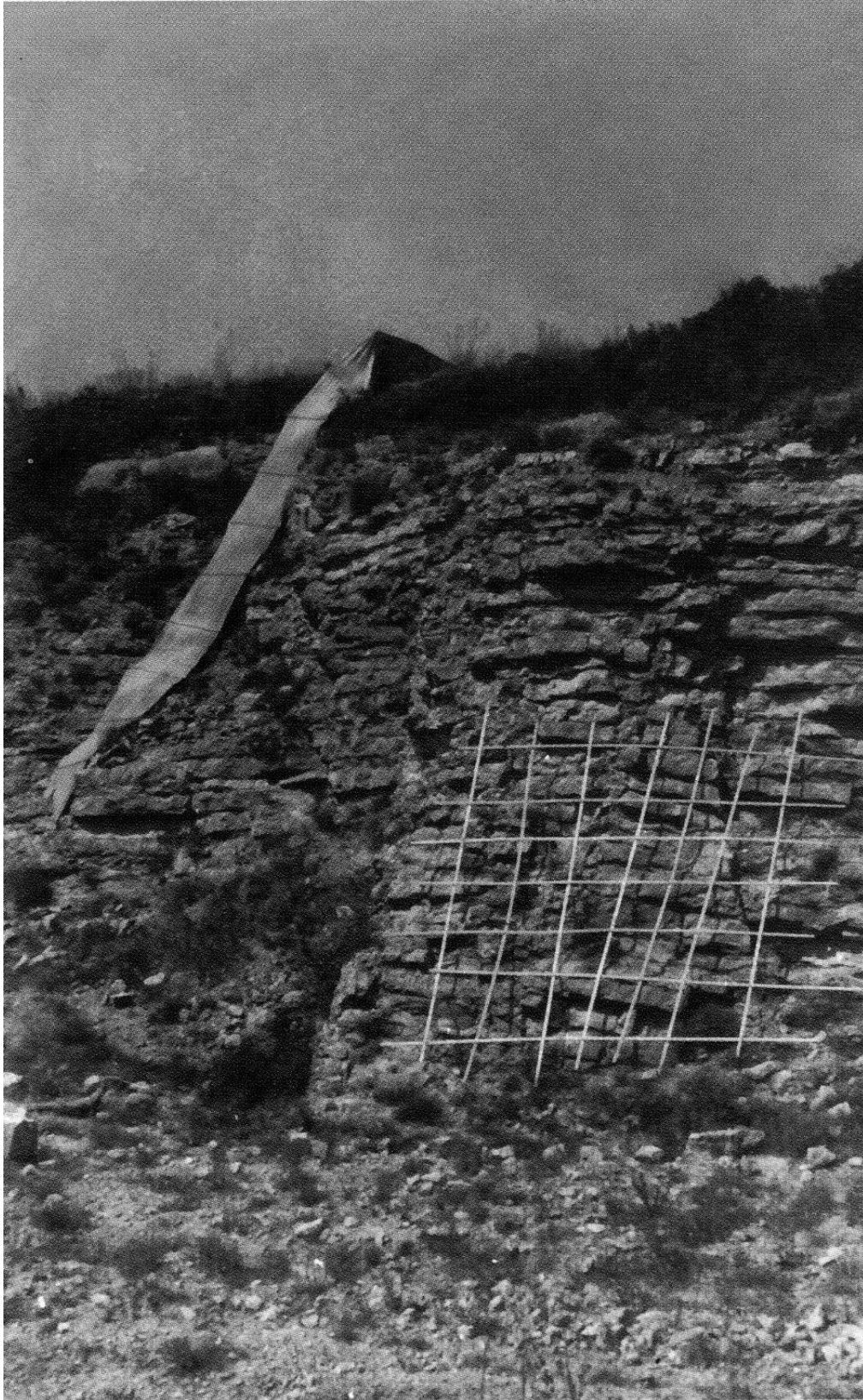
<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 227.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 229.

<sup>25</sup> The term is associated with the critic Michel Tapié and his 1952 book *Un Art autre* (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud et fils, 1952).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in “La machine à faire de la peinture abstraite a intéressé M. Malraux,” *France-Soir*, October 3, 1959.

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 28–36.



2. Works by Patrick Saytour (left) and Daniel Dezeuze (right). Installation view, "Intérieur/Extérieur," Mediterranean coast of France, summer 1970.



the association of *informel* painting with the École de Paris, and therefore with an implicitly national legacy of modernism at a time when the definition of the nation was being deeply contested, prompted many leftist artists to reject if not directly criticize that legacy and its ideology of individual expression.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the conflict, the PCF had supported Algerian independence in word but not in deed. During the Fourth Republic's final years, the PCF made it clear that they prioritized national political standing over anticolonial opposition through actions such as their 1956 approval of special war powers to the Guy Mollet government. As the war ground on into the Fifth Republic, and as reports of torture and extreme right-wing terrorism split the nation, the PCF became more outspoken proponents of full independence. However, for many on the left, particularly students, intellectuals, and artists, it was too little, too late. In their eyes the PCF was little better than the Gaullist state of which it sought to become an official part.

This critique extended to cultural matters as well. Though the PCF had maintained an official policy of Socialist Realism, it welcomed and benefitted from the membership of modern artists such as Picasso, Léger, and Paul Rebeyrolle. When the pressure to de-Stalinize mounted in 1956, the party held up these artists as evidence of its tolerance and liberalism. These theoretical and cultural attempts by “reformers” to humanize the Communist Party started to appear congruous with the Gaullist state's own promotion of cultural values at the beginning of the 1960s. This convergence is key to understanding the role Althusser would come to play for a new generation of artists committed to recovering a revolutionary potential for art.

1965 was a particularly significant year for Althusser: both *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* were published, causing an immediate sensation in intellectual circles in France.<sup>29</sup> In *For Marx*, Althusser denounced humanist freedom as an ideology lived and manifested through a “system of mass representations.”<sup>30</sup> Althusser's suggestion that the system of representations sustaining the ideology of freedom included “images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case” appealed to artists who were critical of *art informels* compatibility with a bourgeois conception of freedom.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, Althusser's insistence that ideology was an inescapable component of social life sanctioned those same artists' adherence to and interrogation of an artistic medium associated with bourgeois culture. Particularly at a time when a Euro-American neo-avant-garde was reviving the

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<sup>28</sup> See: Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *L'ordre sauvage: Violence, dépense et sacré dans l'art des années 1950–1960* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 186–211.

<sup>29</sup> *Reading Capital* was a collaborative effort between Althusser and his students, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière. The original English translation included only Althusser and Balibar's contributions (Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970). An unabridged translation was published by Verso in 2015 (Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (London: Verso, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> *For Marx*, 233–234.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 231.

project of merging art with everyday life through strategies of appropriation, dematerialization, and performance, Supports/Surfaces' steadfast rejection of such approaches found reinforcement in Althusser's claim that:

only an ideological world outlook could have imagined societies *without ideology* and accepted the utopian idea of a world in which ideology (not just one of its historical forms) would disappear without a trace, to be replaced by *science*. For example, this utopia is the principle behind the idea [...] that *art* could merge with knowledge or become 'everyday life'.<sup>32</sup>

Supports/Surfaces' use of quotidian materials and exploration of exhibitionary possibilities outside institutional contexts, such as their outdoor installations in the Southern French countryside (fig. 2), courted the false sublation Althusser attributed to ideology, namely the merging of art with everyday life. However, their almost agonizingly relentless textual accompaniment to that visual production operated as much to prevent the appearance of such a naïve faith as it did to help explicate the work.

Furthermore, several of the members of Supports/Surfaces had fought in the Algerian War, while for others the war had marked the awakening of their political consciousness. Curator Bernard Ceysson, an early supporter and collector of Supports/Surfaces, has argued that the experience of the war fueled the artists' polemical and contentious approach to painting.<sup>33</sup> Instead of rejecting abstract painting completely in favor of either figuration or readymade strategies, however, as a number of politically inclined artists in France began to do during the 1960s, the artists of Supports/Surfaces dug deep into the material components of painting—breaking them down, disassembling them, serializing them, in order to “take a position against an individualistic conception of Art” associated with *informel* painting.<sup>34</sup> This could be done in an ironic vein, as with Cane stamping “Louis Cane, Artiste Peintre” across a linen sheet, thereby bringing together the repetition of radically simplified visual motifs (associated, for example, with the artists of the group BMPT) with a kind of industrial branding technique.<sup>35</sup> It could also be accomplished through various materializations of the grid—in fiber (Viallat, Valensi), wood (Dezeuze, Grand), or on stained or folded canvas (Arnal, Devade). Some adhered to the format of the stretched canvas but sought to avoid compositional and formal decisions by, in the case of Bioulès, for example, applying masking tape to the surface of the painting parallel to the edges and removing it after applying color to the entire surface (fig. 3). Deconstructive strategies were also explored by situating everyday materials in simple forms in the outdoor environment or landscape, such as

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 232.

<sup>33</sup> “Interview: Bernard Ceysson/Rachel Stella,” in *Supports/Surfaces: A Moment/A Movement* (Saint-Étienne: Ceysson Éditions, 2014), 14.

<sup>34</sup> “Positions du groupe Supports/Surfaces,” collective statement, April 1971, reprinted in: Marie-Hélène Grinfeder, *Les Années Supports Surfaces* (Paris: Herscher, 1991), 56.

<sup>35</sup> On the work of BMPT, see: Benjamin Buchloh, “The Group That Was (Not) One,” *Artforum*, vol. 46, no. 9 (May 2008), 310-313; and Sami Siegelbaum, “The Riddle of May '68: Collectivity and Protest in the Salon de la Jeune Peinture,” *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 35, no. 1 (March 2012), 53-73.

Bioulès resting a series of painted wooden poles against the walls of buildings in the Provençal village of Coaraze in the summer of 1970.

Most fundamental, however, to the rejection of artistic individualism was the formation of a group identity. This is perhaps the most important function of the texts produced by Supports/Surfaces. Since each work that was exhibited was still associated with individual artists, each of whom had their signature materials and methods, the corresponding statements, generally either anonymous or attributed to the group, served to collectivize authorship under a common theoretical program. They opened their most programmatic text, "*Positions du groupe Supports/Surfaces*," written for an exhibition at the Cité Universitaire in Paris in May 1971, by asserting that "the work presented on the occasion of this second Supports/Surfaces exhibition is the result of theoretical research and collective work."<sup>36</sup>

Artists' groups and collectives proliferated in Western Europe during the 1960s as an antidote to what was seen as an ideologically suspect if not politically complicit cult of individuality in postwar art.<sup>37</sup> Supports/Surfaces' definition of the collective endeavor as not simply collaboration in the making and exhibiting of objects but also on "theoretical research" echoed the rhetoric of many 1960s and '70s European groups, such as the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), the N Group, the Salon de la Jeune Peinture, and the Collectif d'art sociologique, though what precisely constituted "theory" and "research" varied significantly from group to group. In the post-May '68 period in France, the formation of artist groups paralleled and sometimes intersected with the search for alternative models of political collectivity on the extreme left in the form of so-called *groupuscules* organized around particular theoretical orientations or specific issues.<sup>38</sup> The formation of such groups was accelerated by what many on the left perceived as the conservatism of the PCF during the May '68 uprising. And yet, one of the apparent ironies of the political trajectory of Supports/Surfaces was that its members who were politically and geographically closest to the May events (Cane, Devade, Dezeuze) actually drew closer to the PCF in its immediate aftermath. For despite the supposedly counter-revolutionary role played by the communists in the events of May '68, there was a surge in attempts by activists and intellectuals to renew the party's revolutionary mission during these years.<sup>39</sup> For many of these partisans, Althusser was crucial insofar as he represented a heterodox current within the PCF, taking it to task for perceived deviations from the class struggle. Daniel Dezeuze later attributed the

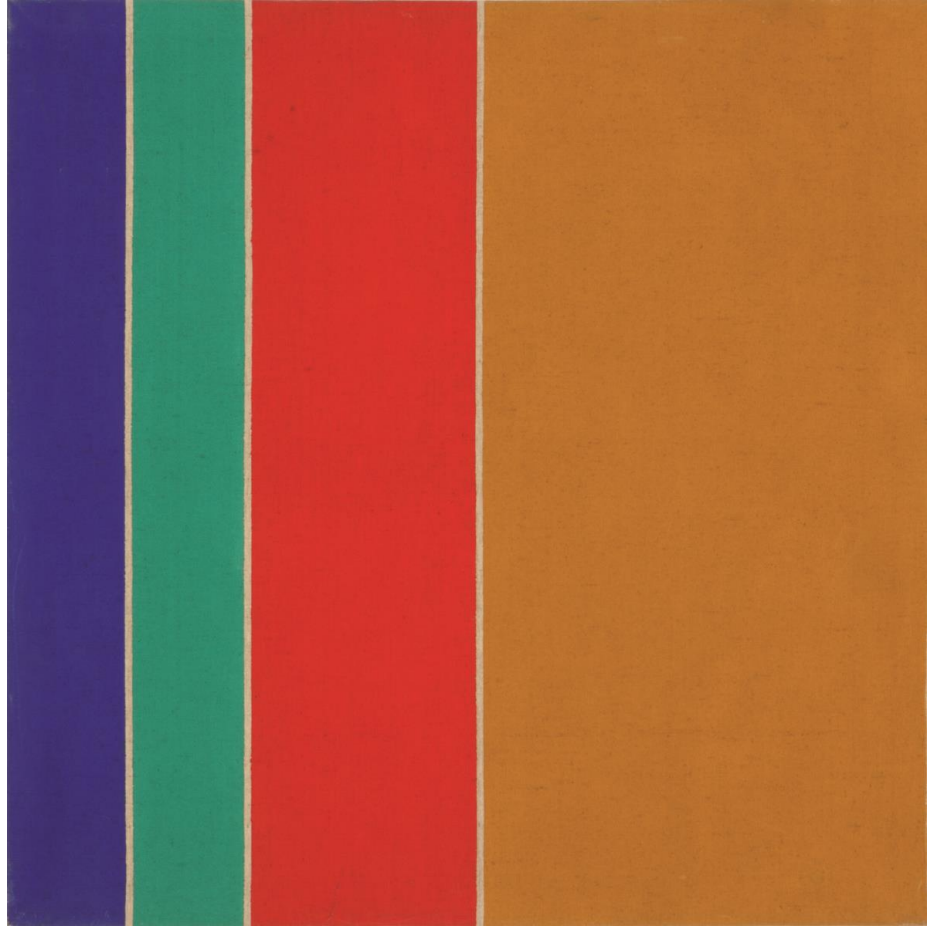
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<sup>36</sup> "Positions du groupe Supports/Surfaces," in Grinfeder, *Les Années Supports Surfaces*, 56. The degree of collaboration on this exhibition is questionable considering the geographical and ideological distances between the participants. Indeed, Viallat submitted his demission from the group in response to the text. Dezeuze noted that collaboration was essentially limited to the choice of works and their installation (Daniel Dezeuze, email to the author, January 8, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> See: Jacopo Galimberti, *Individuals Against Individualism: Art Collectives in Western Europe (1956-1969)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> See: Christophe Bourseiller, *L'Histoire générale de l'ultra-gauche* (Paris: Denoël, 2003), 379-500.

<sup>39</sup> See: Jean Vigreux and Emmanuel Ranc, "La direction et les députés du PCF à l'épreuve de Mai-Juin 68," *Parlement[s]*, vol. 1, no. 9 (2008), 80-95.



3. Vincent Bioulès, *No. 5*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas. 100 x 100 cm.

radicalization of his faction's more direct experience of the political ferment of the May events for the schism in the group between the "moderate provincials and leftists in the capital."<sup>40</sup>

This tension was exacerbated by the collective texts. A letter dated June 14, 1971 and signed by members associated with the provincial faction—Noël Dolla, Toni Grand, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi, and Claude Viallat—announced the "disintegration" of Supports/Surfaces as a result of the Paris group's "arbitrary use of theory separated from practice."<sup>41</sup> The authors of the letter adopt a distinctly Althusserian critique by citing the failure of the other members to consider the "complex unity" of "ideological practice, political practice, and theoretical practice."<sup>42</sup> A letter signed by Arnal, Bioulès, Cane, Devade, and Dezeuze dated June 15, 1971 accuses the rival faction of playing their "little provincial

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Dezeuze, *Dictionnaire de Supports/Surfaces (1967–1972)* (Saint-Étienne: Ceysson Editions d'Art, 2011), 87.

<sup>41</sup> Noël Dolla, Toni Grand, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi, and Claude Viallat, "Supports/Surfaces" (June 14, 1971), reproduced in: Grinfeder, *Les Années Supports Surfaces*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

games” far from the ideological struggle occurring in Paris. They counter with their own Althusserian assertion that historical materialism and dialectical materialism are not merely political watchwords but “determine at the level of signifying practice a work on history and a work on painting as an object of knowledge (not a real object, material, or gadget).”<sup>43</sup> The crucial distinction between painting as an “object of knowledge” and painting as a “real object” was, as noted above, based on Althusser’s definition of “theoretical practice” as a “*specific form of practice*” that “works on raw material (representations, concepts, facts) which it is given by other practices, whether ‘empirical’, ‘technical’, or ‘ideological’.”<sup>44</sup> Theoretical practice transforms such raw material into the product “knowledge.” Thus, to treat painting as an “object of knowledge” meant stepping away from any notion of “expression” premised on the spontaneous engagement with materials, techniques, and objects, instead confronting painting as an ideology. By defending the use of dialectical materialism, the Paris-based group was following Althusser’s justification of precisely what the others had criticized as the separation of theory from practice. According to Althusser, dialectical materialism was the “theory of theoretical practice”—that is, an explanation of the structure and development of any practice that produces knowledge. He specifically noted its necessity to disciplines such as art because it offered the “sole method that can anticipate their theoretical practice by drawing up its formal conditions.”<sup>45</sup>

Almost 50 years later, these back and forth letters between the Parisian and provincial members of Supports/Surfaces read like a parody of the factionalism within extreme leftist groups of the period. However, closer attention to the specificity of the political context in France after 1968 helps illuminate the reasons for a spat between artists over the proper interpretation of Althusserian theory, and helps explain the group’s trajectory through the Communist Party.

#### 4.

The PCF’s overriding goal over the course of the 1960s had been to form a coalition of leftist parties in order to secure electoral dominance. This meant forging an alliance with the socialists, a venture that ultimately came to fruition with the 1972 formation of the Union de la Gauche. Althusser was deeply critical of the reformist maneuvers the PCF took to achieve the Union, such as the abandonment of a commitment to the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the affirmation of a democratic path to socialism.<sup>46</sup> Althusser’s disapproval of the party’s

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<sup>43</sup> “Matérialisme conséquent et inconséquence d’une scission,” signed by Arnal, Bioulès, Cane, Devade, and Dezeuze, dated June 15, 1971, reprinted in Grinfeder, *Les Années Supports Surfaces*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” in *For Marx*, 166–167.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 169–170. Althusser later modified this definition of dialectical materialism as the “class struggle in theory.” (Althusser, “Reply to John Lewis,” trans. Graham Locke, in *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 37.

<sup>46</sup> Though the PCF did not officially take these measures until 1976, Althusser foresaw the drift to humanist reformism involved in the alliance with the Socialist Party as early as the 1966 Central Committee meeting in Argenteuil, referring to it as “a lure, and a ‘paper’ lure at that.” Letter to Etienne Balibar (July 19, 1973\_ quoted in: G.H. Goshgarian, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Louis

abandonment of what he deemed a properly revolutionary orientation had already triggered his theoretical break with official party orthodoxy prior to 1968 and dragged many intellectuals with him towards a left anti-Stalinism that would, for some, lead to Maoism.<sup>47</sup> Thus, rather than the events of May '68 (or anything happening internationally) prompting leftist defection from communism, it was the Union de la Gauche and its Common Program that ultimately convinced many French leftists of the incorrigibility of the PCF. This may partly account for the seeming irony of artists such as Cane, Devade, and Dezeuze joining the PCF after May and proclaiming their fidelity before, in the words of Dezeuze “quickly exiting it on its left” once it appeared “impossible to transform this ‘sieve’ of a party.”<sup>48</sup> The “left” exit referred to here is the Maoist one that prompted the breakup of Supports/Surfaces in 1971-72. As Dezeuze would later note, what was typically attributed to the geographical divide between Paris and the provinces was in fact a political schism between those artists who were seduced by the social democratic platform of the Union de la Gauche and those, associated with *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*, who “persevered in their efforts towards radical contestation.”<sup>49</sup> It is not inaccurate, therefore, to see the disagreements over the applicability of Marxist-Leninist theories to the practice of painting as a proxy for debates occurring within the political sphere on the left at the time in France. However, such disputes were understood to have material consequences for the capacity of painting to operate as an “object of knowledge.”

Supports/Surfaces' reading of Althusser mandated an art which acknowledged and confronted its nature as ideology within bourgeois society, rather than purporting to transcend that nature through practices of provocative or affirmative identity with non-art objects, practices, or spaces. Occasionally this involved drawing on Althusser to question the group's attempts to evade institutional settings. In his critical contribution to the catalog for *Été 70*, an exhibition in which the group installed works in various outdoor locations along the Mediterranean coast, Patrick Saytour noted that the relocation to non-art sites vacated the works' specificity and thus their intelligibility. He included the following quotation from Althusser's introduction to *Reading Capital*: “...our age threatens to one day appear in the history of human culture as marked by the most dramatic and difficult trial of all, the discovery and training in the meaning of the ‘simplest’ acts of existence—seeing, listening, speaking, reading—the acts which relate men to their works [*oeuvres*] and to those works

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Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978–1987*, trans. G.H. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), xix.

<sup>47</sup> This is of course one of the ironies of French Maoism. The Sino-Soviet split was largely prompted by Mao's denunciation of Khrushchev's “revisionism” following the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of 1956. The PRC thus affirmed the orthodoxy attributed to the previous Stalinist era. However, in France, many leftists understood “Stalinism” as a subservience to party and trade union hierarchy, which was contrasted to the “workerism” and “relative autonomy” of the cultural superstructure associated with Maoism.

<sup>48</sup> Dezeuze, *Dictionnaire de Supports/Surfaces*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Dezeuze, *Dictionnaire de Supports/Surfaces*, 137.

thrown in their faces, their ‘absences of works’.<sup>50</sup> Saytour concludes that with the *plein air* display of their works, this operation was “not perceived,” recounting the ways their installations were mistaken by the public variously for a film set, an obstacle course, airplane signals, or a volleyball net.

Saytour’s recourse to Althusser in the context of identifying what he sees as the defects of attempting to free art from established institutional spaces is particularly telling. One of the characteristic challenges posed by protesters during and after the events of May ’68 was to the autonomy and separation of different sites. Whether it was the distance between the factory and the university, or between the museum and the street, or between the First and Third World, rebellious students, workers, artists, and other militants sought to transcend the divisions inscribed in modern French social space.<sup>51</sup> This put many of Althusser’s own followers at odds with the philosopher’s continued adherence to the Communist Party and university apparatus. Althusser, who had been hospitalized for a depressive episode during the May events, grappled with their aftermath but defended the specificity of theory and the distinction between different disciplines.<sup>52</sup> He insisted that it was only by maintaining a rigorous adherence to the “theoretical base” of a discipline that its particular contribution to the class struggle could be realized.<sup>53</sup> A reader, particularly an American one, might here detect a whiff of Clement Greenberg. At least in Greenberg’s early critical writings, the insistence on formalist self-reflexivity was linked to a Marxist class politics, an alignment that T.J. Clark would later famously formulate as “Eliotic Trotskyism.”<sup>54</sup> Many of the Supports/Surfaces artists, particularly Marc Devade and Daniel Dezeuze, were the most avid readers of Greenberg amongst French artists of the time, and one might be tempted to characterize their reception of the American critic as resulting in a kind of “Greenbergian Althusserianism.” All the quintessential Greenbergian precepts make their appearance in the work of Supports/Surfaces—scrutiny of the medium, autonomy of the aesthetic, avant-garde teleology—but they do so in remarkably unheroic forms, such as Noël Dolla’s polka-dotted linen dishcloths hanging limply on the wall, or Daniel Dezeuze’s fiberglass ladders that lie crumpled on the ground (figs. 4, 5). As if to compensate for the enervated state of their objects, Supports/Surfaces turned to the most stridently rigorous theoretical discourse on offer at that moment—one that moreover seemed to justify the political value of such a practice.

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<sup>50</sup> Patrick Saytour, “Extrait du catalogue *Été 70*,” in Jean-Marc Poinot (ed.), *Supports-Surfaces*, (Paris: Limage 2, 1983), 64-65.

<sup>51</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 65-113.

<sup>52</sup> See in particular: *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, 97; and Louis Althusser, “Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon,” *New Left Review* 64 (November-December 1970), 3-11.

<sup>53</sup> Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, 96-97.

<sup>54</sup> T.J. Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 1 (September 1982), 148.



4. Daniel Dezeuze, outdoor installation, Cité des Arts, Paris, 1972.

Supports/Surfaces' combination of self-reflexive formalism and extreme leftist politics found its literary parallel in the journal *Tel Quel*, with which it maintained an affiliation.<sup>55</sup> Marcelin Pleyne, the managing editor of *Tel Quel*, was the group's primary critical advocate and pushed a Marxist reading of their operations. The journal's editors and key contributors such as Pleyne, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida (who however broke with the group around 1971), and Roland Barthes, were opposed to the postwar model of the *engagé* intellectual personified by Jean-Paul Sartre, instead insisting on the specificity of language and writing. Like Supports/Surfaces, in the early 1970s *Tel Quel* looked to Althusser to provide the link between modernist formalism and Maoist politics.<sup>56</sup> The association with *Tel Quel* helps further explain Althusser's appeal for a group of abstract

<sup>55</sup> Supports/Supports member Marc Devade was a frequent contributor to *Tel Quel* and served on the journal's editorial board from 1971 until its dissolution in 1982.

<sup>56</sup> Danielle Marx-Scouras, *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1996), 21, 106. *Tel Quel* followed a very similar political trajectory to Supports/Surfaces in the post-1968 period, initially embracing the Communist Party, then rejecting the PCF in favor of Maoism in 1971 before abandoning Marxism altogether by the mid-1970s.



artists. For if Althusser represented anything in the heady intellectual and cultural climate of this period, it was a Marxism of mandarin seriousness—a kind of extreme formalist Marxism. This also helps to explain why the members of Supports/Surfaces most interested in escaping the confines of the art institution and market (Pagès, Saytour, Valensi, Viallat) were in fact the least willing to adopt Marxist-Leninist positions.<sup>57</sup>

## 5.

Supports/Surfaces found inspiration in Althusser's insistence, following Lenin, that theory is indispensable to revolutionary practice—indeed that theory itself is a form of practice that gives rise to other, new practices.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, several of the Supports/Surfaces artists saw in it a justification for the continuation of painting as a “theoretical practice” analogous to the continuation of philosophy following Marx's epistemological break with the idealism that, according to Althusser, overdetermined his pre-1848 texts. Althusser's repeated critique of empiricism for mistaking “objects of knowledge” for “real objects”—that is, for conflating theoretical practice with the reality it sought to explicate—is applied to artistic practice in Supports/Surfaces' texts, such as the collectively written statement for their May 1971 exhibition at the Cité Universitaire in Paris:

In order to combat the traditional and bourgeois—that is, neurotic and religious—conception of Art, painting is here presented as means and object of knowledge, inscribed in a process of production of writing-reading [*écriture-lecture*] in perpetual transformation—and not as the production of “real objects” or of attitudes around these objects for use on the market—it is not given here only to be visible [*à voir*].<sup>59</sup>

The description of painting as a “process of production” in “perpetual transformation” is unmistakably based on Althusser's definition of “practice” as “any process of *transformation* of a determinate given raw material into a determinate *product*.”<sup>60</sup> In the Supports/Surfaces statement, this practice is counterposed to an ideology of expressive objects that evokes critic Pierre Restany's famous characterization of *Nouveau réalisme* as “making visible [*nous donnent à voir*] the real in the aspects of its expressive totality.”<sup>61</sup> Rather than the presentation of “raw material” as expressive objects, Supports/Surfaces repeatedly insisted on painting as an “object of knowledge (and not a real object, material, ‘gadget’).”<sup>62</sup> Supports/Surfaces repeatedly attacked the gamut of 1960s neo-avant-garde practices for

<sup>57</sup> These artists, along with Daniel Dezeuze, exhibited works outdoors in the French Mediterranean landscape in 1970. See: Rosemary O'Neill, “Été 70: The Plein-Air Exhibitions of Supports-Surfaces,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (December 2012), 349-368.

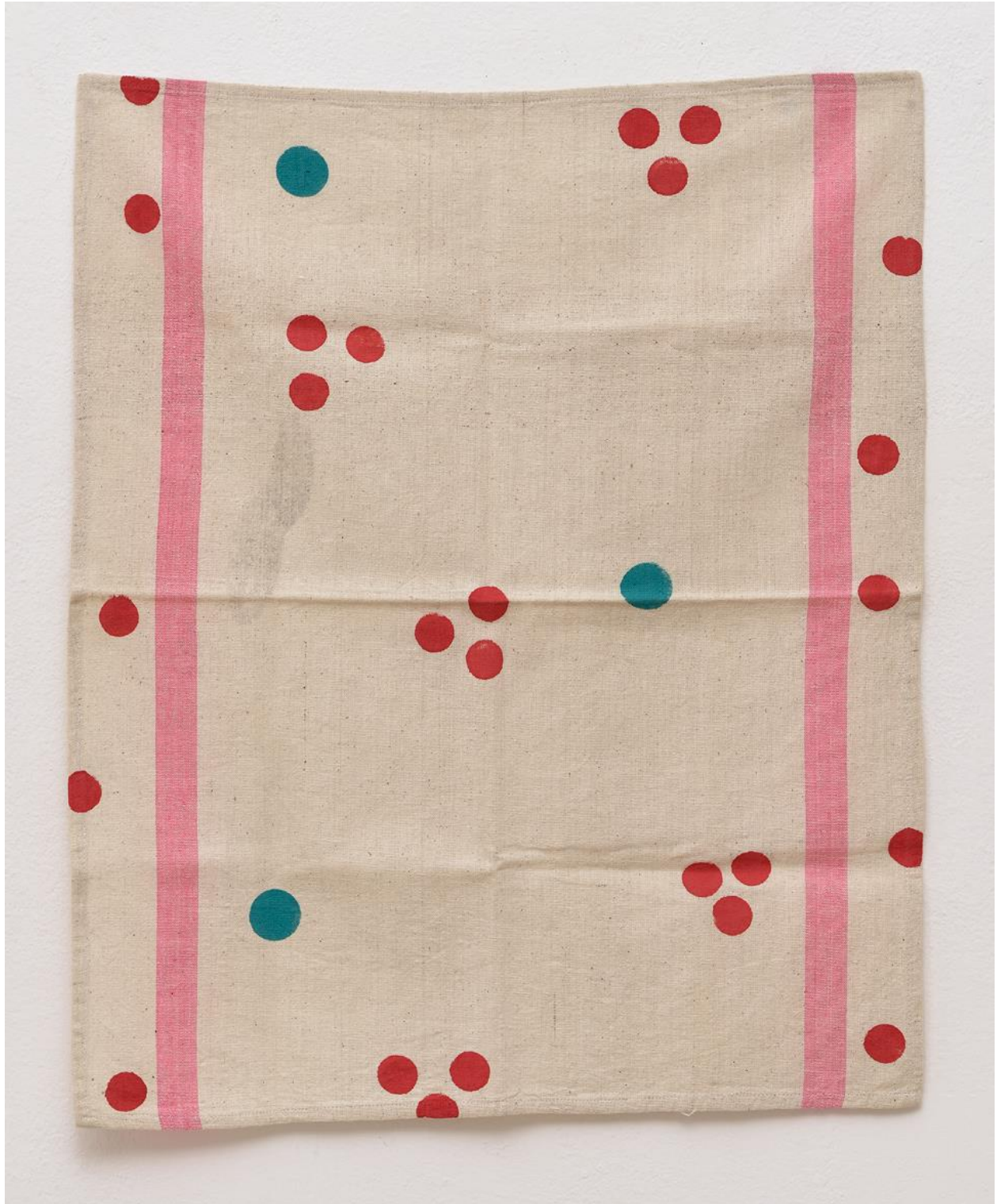
<sup>58</sup> Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” 166.

<sup>59</sup> “Positions du groupe Supports/Surfaces,” in Grinfeder, *Les Années Supports Surfaces*, 56.

<sup>60</sup> Althusser, “On the Materialist Dialectic,” in *For Marx*, 166.

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Restany, “À 40° au-dessus de Dada,” invitation card, Galerie J (May-June 1961). For Althusser's critique of the Hegelian notion of “expressive totality,” see: *Reading Capital*, 240-244; and *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 182-184.

<sup>62</sup> “Matérialisme conséquent et inconséquence d'une scission,” in Grinfeder, *Les Années Supports Surfaces*, 59.



5. Noël Dolla, *Torchon*, 1971. Acrylic on cloth. 70 x 55 cm.

their false solutions to the idealism of traditional pictorialism. In an essay co-written by Cane and Dezeuze titled "For a Pictorial Theoretical Program," in the first issue of *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*, the artists listed the various ways that Conceptual Art, Land Art, Pop Art, Minimalism, and assemblage had all failed to fully contend with the material specificity of their practices.<sup>63</sup>

Here we can grasp a further dimension of the appeal of theoretical anti-humanism, as well as the political stakes for artists who struggled to conceive of art itself as theoretical practice. For Althusser, the attempts to reform the PCF following the upheavals of 1956 threatened to water it down with bourgeois ideology. Theoretical rigor was the necessary antidote. Likewise, for painters who sought to escape from the entrenched categories of expression, spontaneity, and idealism in modernist painting, yet who also scorned neo-avant-garde strategies as mystification, theory offered a way to be both materialists and partisans.

## 6.

Rather than prompting a critical evaluation of imperialism, the neo-avant-garde, or the exhibition context, Supports/Surfaces turned its focus inward, upon the object and its mode of display. Supports/Surfaces sought to reveal the material bases of a superstructural "signifying practice" that "anchored" the dominant ideology.<sup>64</sup>

That this effect could not be achieved or perceived without an equally robust textual production is emblematic not only of the particular impasse that painting confronted after 1968, but also of a French left attempting to counter charges of Stalinism without being co-opted by the Gaullist state. Both Althusser and his followers in Supports/Surfaces advocated "a return to the authentic objects which are (logically and historically) prior to the ideology which has reflected them and hemmed them in."<sup>65</sup> For Althusser, this meant abandoning any reference to man and returning to Marx's later works, with their analyses of structural formations and relations. Althusser's claim dovetails with Supports/Surfaces' attempt to abandon expressive or referential signs in painting, and its focus on the medium's constituent elements. If an unstretched canvas or a bare stretcher did not read as class struggle, this was because, as Althusser insisted, the "reality of theoretical practice in its concrete life" was of a separate order from the "reality of the practice of revolutionary struggle in its concrete life." While the former was tasked with "*drawing a dividing line* between true and false ideas," the latter's mission was '*to draw a dividing line*' between two antagonistic classes."<sup>66</sup> The artists of Supports/Surfaces, like their literary counterparts at *Tel Quel*, seized upon such distinctions as a justification for a continued formalist interrogation of the signifiers internal to their particular discipline. To mimic the forms taken by the

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<sup>63</sup> Louis Cane and Daniel Dezeuze, "Pour un programme théorique pictural," *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* 1 (1971), 73-75.

<sup>64</sup> "Positions du Groupe Supports/Surfaces."

<sup>65</sup> Althusser, *For Marx*, 76-77.

<sup>66</sup> Althusser, "Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon," first published in *L'Unità* (February 1968) and translated in *New Left Review* 64 (November-December 1970).

workers' movement in painting would have been the height of the empiricist ideology criticized by Althusser that seeks an unmediated correspondence between historical reality and its "expression."<sup>67</sup>

That historical reality had been deeply complicated by the events of May 1968. Though the greatest proportion of striking workers in May-June 1968 belonged to industrial sectors traditionally identified as working class, they were accompanied by a significant proportion of white collar workers in fields such as media, publishing, and education, in addition to the student revolt and occupations.<sup>68</sup> Though much of the rhetoric of the movement was Marxist and stridently workerist, the actual attempts by students, artists, and other activists to ally or merge with workers were, on the whole, limited and of dubious success. Moreover, the apparently non-revolutionary posture of the PCF and main trade unions and the almost total, albeit grudging, return to work by the rank and file following the Gaullist victory in the June legislative elections left many in France speculating about the recomposition of the traditional working class.<sup>69</sup> The effect within the artistic field was a general skepticism towards traditional models of political art—particularly those associated with the PCF or the Soviet Union—premised on addressing a largely imaginary working class viewer.<sup>70</sup>

This skepticism was reflected in the ways Supports/Surfaces framed the relationship between their work and its audience. The catalog essay, likely written primarily by Devade, for the April 1971 exhibition at the Cité Universitaire in Paris stated that although historical and dialectical materialism formed the basis of Supports/Surfaces' theory and practice, it was not "art for the people." Instead, it was a "theoretical and ideological weapon for the petit bourgeois intelligentsia" who would later join or ally with the working class.<sup>71</sup> This thesis introduced the Maoist emphasis on the re-education of intellectuals into the sphere of French painting, while also acknowledging the limitations of a propagandistic figurative art.

The same argument precipitated the effective collapse of Supports/Surfaces. In response to the essay, the primarily Nice-based members (Dolla, Saytour, Valensi, Viallat) issued a statement announcing their scission from the group due to the Parisian faction's dogmatic political claims. Unshaken by the mutiny, for the remaining Paris members of the

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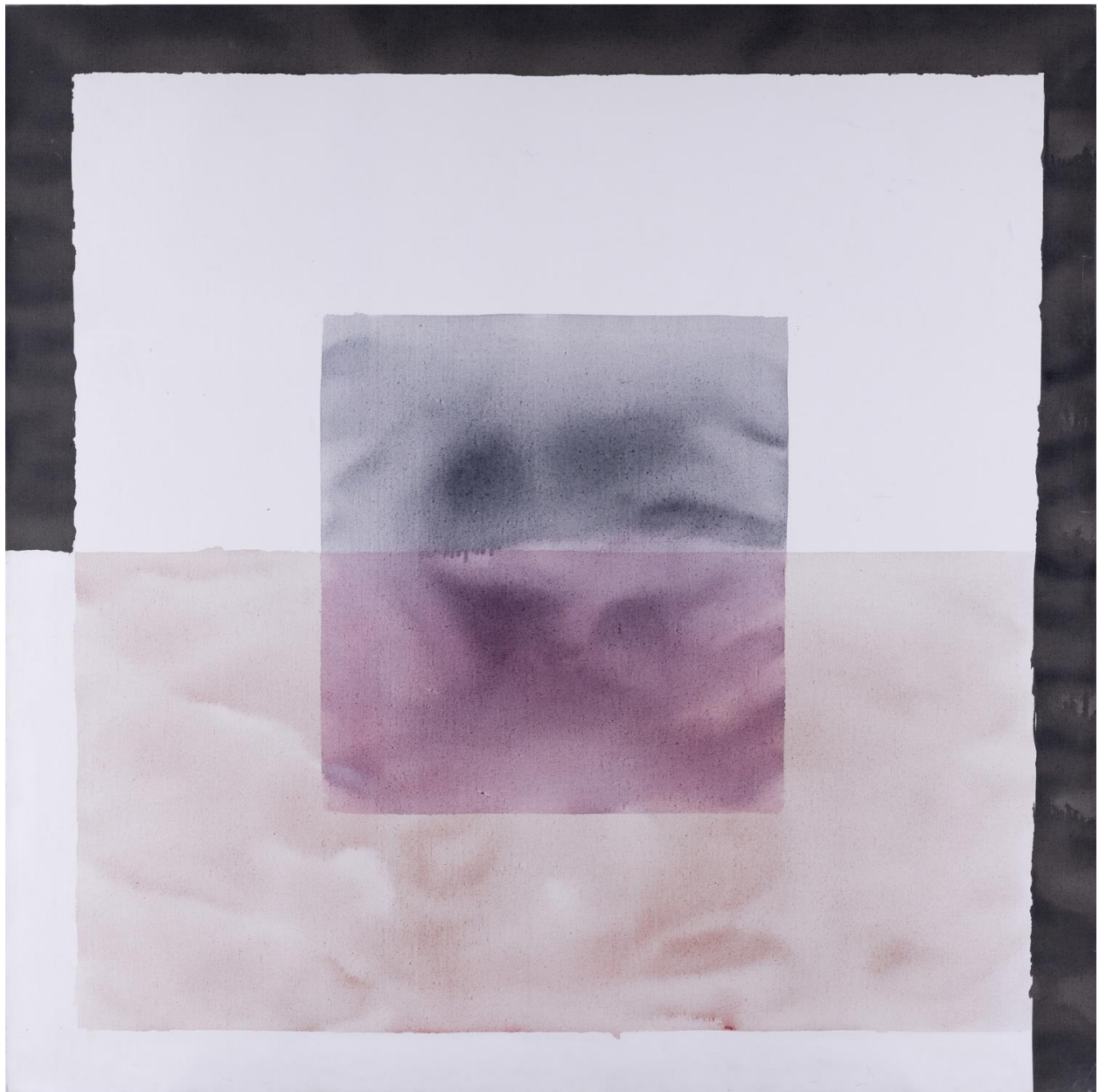
<sup>67</sup> "An object cannot be defined by its immediately visible or sensuous appearance, it is necessary to make a detour via its concept in order to grasp it." Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 339.

<sup>68</sup> Gérard Adam, "Étude statistique des grèves de mai-juin 1968," *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1970), 105-109.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example: Alain Touraine, *La société postindustrielle: Naissance d'une société* (Paris: Denoël, 1969).

<sup>70</sup> See: Sami Siegelbaum, "Reimagining Communism After 1968: The Case of Grapus," in *France and the Visual Arts Since 1945*, ed. Catherine Dossin (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 191-208. The critique of presumptions about the working class was also at the heart of Jacques Rancière's post-1968 break with Althusser, his former mentor. See: Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), originally published as *La leçon d'Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

<sup>71</sup> "Positions du Groupe Supports/Surfaces" (1971).



6. Marc Devade, *Sans titre*, 1971. Ink on canvas. 150 x 150 cm.

group, particularly Devade, Maoism became even more of a guiding force. In 1971 he shifted from using acrylic to ink, staining sections of canvas with a single color by pouring it onto an area bordered by a ruler (fig. 6). This was motivated by the importance of ink in Chinese art—both in classical painting and in the hand-painted propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution—but, as Devade explained, transposed into the frame of Western painting.<sup>72</sup> This transposition was also theoretically enacted in *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*, which read the forms of Chinese painting through Marxist but also Freudian categories.<sup>73</sup> Thus, just as theory had mediated between political and artistic practice for Supports/Surfaces, it now served as a means of translation between East and West. Within this operation, it was crucial to retain the fundamental Althusserian position that only theory could “disclose the particular structure of an ideological vehicle” and its position within “the field of other social practices.”<sup>74</sup> If, as Althusser insisted, theory was linked to class struggle, and painting was a theoretical practice, then painting was also a mediated form of class struggle—even if this was not immediately apparent. For this to occur, though, textual mediation was needed to make the connection intelligible.

The terms of this mediation were laid out most succinctly in the first issue of *Peinture, cahiers théoriques*. The committee (Bioulès, Cane, Devade, Dezeuze) ended the opening editorial with a series of five position statements, the first of which read:

1 – The dominant bourgeois ideology dialectically reflects the world crisis of the capitalist mode of production, declining imperialism. This crisis, as principal contradiction between capitalism and socialism, can be seized at its secondary ideological level within the very interior of a specific mode of signification such as painting.<sup>75</sup>

Althusser had significantly reformulated his conception of ideology after 1968, extending it beyond a structure of semi-autonomous “levels” and insisting on its material existence grounded in the practices and discourses of various institutions or “apparatuses” (e.g. the law, school, the family, media, etc.) which ensure the reproduction of the relations of production.<sup>76</sup> Supports/Surfaces seems, however, to have remained committed to the base-superstructure model in which painting belongs to the “secondary” level of ideology erected upon and determined by the relations and forces of production, yet also capable of exerting its own reciprocal “specific effectivity” upon the economic base.<sup>77</sup> This was premised on the

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<sup>72</sup> “Marc Devade” interview with Camille Saint-Jacques, in Grinfeder, *Les Années Supports Surfaces*, 156-157.

<sup>73</sup> See: Marc Devade, “Peinture et matérialisme I,” *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* 1 (August 1971); and Devade, “Comment voir la Chine en peinture,” *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* 2/3 (January 1972).

<sup>74</sup> “Positions du Groupe Supports/Surfaces” (1971).

<sup>75</sup> Editorial statement, *Peinture, cahiers théoriques* 1 (August 1971), 11.

<sup>76</sup> Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85-125.

<sup>77</sup> Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” in *For Marx*, 111-113.

principle of “relative autonomy”—the notion that art, as a component of ideology, had its own “*essence and effectivity*,” its own “specific roles to play” within the social whole.<sup>78</sup> According to Althusser, writing in 1962, levels of the superstructure were only determined “in the last instance” by the (economic) mode of production and its class relations. Taking the relative nature of that autonomy to an almost extreme degree, Althusser asserted that “from the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes.”<sup>79</sup>

In his analysis of the historical juncture known as the “Sixties,” Fredric Jameson argued that it was precisely Althusser’s notion of relative (or semi-) autonomy that encapsulated and often authorized the particular cultural politics of the period by offering a means by which to criticize older totalizing narratives (e.g. modernism, humanism, economic determinism) on both left and right while retaining a thread of connection to some notion of structural unity anchored in “the last instance.” Jameson historicizes this move as a breakdown of the Sign as it first proclaims autonomy by rejecting the referent—for example, in art, by negating an external reality or social functionality in the various forms of high modernist abstraction (“The object of painting is painting itself, and the works displayed here only refer to themselves...”). In this scenario, the very refusal of external reference guarantees the sign’s connection to the social world which it must retain “as the ghostly reminder of its own outside or exterior, since this allows it closure, self-definition and an essential boundary line.”<sup>80</sup>

The second moment arrives when the rejection of the referent—some external “reality” to which the work refers—causes another convulsion within the sign in which its material signifiers become the only real thing, as any and all signification is expelled as ideological. For Jameson this is the moment of incipient postmodernism, but we could equally locate Supports/Surfaces at this threshold. The artists confronted modernist painting’s autonomy as ideological precisely in the ways it offered the art object as a site for “mental projections or oneiric wanderings.” Their work was intended to “prevent” that possibility through a variety of tactics that both deconstructed and manifested the signifiers of painting—first and foremost by separating stretcher and canvas, but also by subjecting both of those components to further disassembly or iterative processes. This can be seen for example in Louis Cane’s cut canvases, in which different rectangular sections either hang loose from the wall or lie flat on the ground (fig. 7), or in the exposed wooden stretchers of Deuzeze that literally lay the physical support of painting bare: a tactic that led to further manipulations of the material, such as the creation of flexible wooden and fiberglass ladders and grids.

This was the form that painting took when its signifiers were “liberated” from both external reference and ideological signification.<sup>81</sup> The threat, as Jameson saw it, was that this

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>80</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” *Social Text* 9/10 (spring/summer 1984), 197.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 200.



7. Louis Cane, *Sol/Mur*, 1973. Pigment on canvas. 213 x 241 x 236 cm.

liberation entailed the total dissolution of signs into an endless mass of “free floating” signifiers characteristic of postmodern culture, which is mirrored at the political “level” by the social dissolution of individuals into reified identity categories seemingly divorced from the relations of production.<sup>82</sup> For both Jameson and, as I have been arguing, *Supports/Surfaces*, Althusser offered a kind of last link between reified signifiers and a social totality—between an increasingly “overdetermined” superstructure and base. For *Supports/Surfaces*, this was accomplished by treating painting as an “object of knowledge”—that is, a way of producing knowledge about painting’s “specific effectivity” at the ideological level within the structural whole.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-190, 200-201.



7.

In many ways, May '68 had been the event that rendered the earlier form of modernist autonomy impossible—compelling artists to confront art's role in class struggle at the level of ideology. Even as May '68 appeared to offer the political manifestation of the experiments in radical theory that had flowered in the mid-1960s, it also presented a crisis. This was particularly the case for Althusserianism, which had staked its epistemological value on an extreme insistence on scientific rigor—that is, on its separation from political practice. The May movement erupted as much from the mounting reaction against Stalinism as it did from hostility to capitalism or the French state.<sup>83</sup> The attack on hierarchy, jubilant celebration of bodily presence, and humanistic emphasis on desire that characterized many forms of expression in 1968 were antithetical to the dogmas of intellectuals or political organizations and vastly expanded the arena of what was considered “political practice.”

The consequences of the post-May crisis of Althusserianism were widespread. Supports/Surfaces' embrace of Maoism was also a response to this crisis at the level of theory. Althusser himself abandoned some of his most “structuralist” premises after 1968 by questioning his earlier distinctions between ideology and science and developing his highly influential theory of “Ideological State Apparatuses,” before a series of mental breakdowns culminated in him tragically murdering his wife in 1980.<sup>84</sup> However, his anti-humanist counterassault on the de-Stalinization of the PCF in the wake of 1956 sustained a far-reaching investment in theory that spread beyond philosophy, penetrating the field of cultural production. Supports/Surfaces' insistence on the material bases of painting hidden behind the ideology of individual expression was one such manifestation.

Though in retrospect, the events of May 1968 seem to have heralded the eventual decline of the Communist Party, in their immediate aftermath the lesson appeared to be almost the opposite for many observers.<sup>85</sup> Only an organization as powerful as the PCF was capable of unleashing or halting the mass of workers, determining whether they would produce what Althusser termed the “*ruptural unity*” of circumstances necessary for overthrowing the ruling class of the nation.<sup>86</sup> For many intellectuals and artists on the left, the project of renewing communism opened up by May '68 involved a “return to Marx,” a project for which Althusser was the philosophical torchbearer. However, the window for

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<sup>83</sup> See, for example: Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Le gauchisme, remède à la maladie sénile du communisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968); Alain Touraine, *Le Mouvement de mai ou le communisme utopique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), 18; Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Génération 1: Les années de rêve* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987); Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 in Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 2007), 26-27.

<sup>84</sup> Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” and *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Graham Locke (London: New Left Books, 1974), 105-131. For Althusser's reflections on his mental illness, see his autobiography: *The Future Lasts Forever*, trans. Richard Veasey (New York: New Press, 1992).

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Daniel Singer, *Prelude to a Revolution: France in May 1968* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970).

<sup>86</sup> Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” in *For Marx*, 99.

this possibility seemed to shut around 1972 with the formation of the Union de la Gauche and the PCF's embrace of a Common Program that abandoned core Marxist tenets. Supports/Surfaces effectively dissolved and its artists, like many former French Maoists, turned fully away from Marxism and towards new philosophical offerings that emerged over the course of the decade. Dezeuze, reflecting on the interval between 1968 and 1972 from the vantage of the early 2000s (at a nadir of Marxism's intellectual appeal) explained Supports/Surfaces' politics thus:

Marxism was still a progressive doctrine for the working class and intellectuals. This is why many artists, whose convictions were progressive—which is usually the case with avant-gardes—embraced these ideas. Among these were artists from the Supports/Surfaces group, at different degrees and depending on their personalities. It is therefore hardly surprising that the group should have referred to historical Marxism and its philosophy: dialectical materialism.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Dezeuze, *Dictionnaire de Supports/Surfaces*, 40.