

## François Morellet at S.M.A.K.

### PLENTY OF AFTER-IMAGES

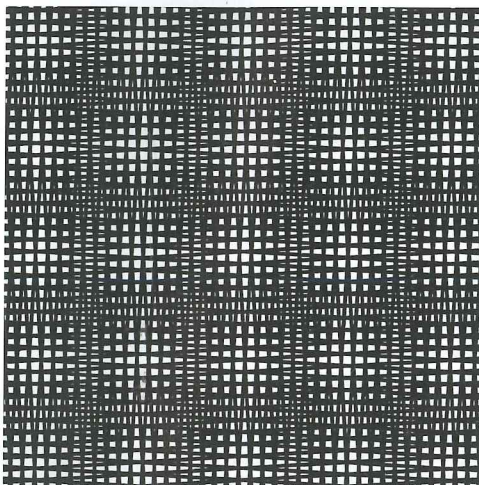
If you visit, bring your protractor! Until I saw so many François Morellet paintings whose titles describe the actual 00-180° angles used to make them, I had never really considered the relationship between this French painter and Cartesian coordinates (the French philosopher Descartes' mathematical legacy). There are at least ten such paintings here. Several paintings have titles that include 'Trames' in it, which the artworld casually translates into English as screen, though its actual translation is weft. I mention this because the actual connotes fabric, while the casual conveys windows, in particular mashrabiya, those wooden windows whose carved geometric patterns allow for one-way viewing. I long found a connection between his geometric paintings and the geometric imagery employed in Islamic motifs or architecture like the Alhambra Palace in Granada. As it turns out, he considers his first visit to the Alhambra in 1952 a defining moment of his life.

I was initially surprised to read the late art historian Thomas McEvelley's catalog essay lamenting Morellet's absence from art history books focused on conceptual art (he cites five published between 1998 and 1999). My initial reaction was "Huh?" Having perused the catalog before entering the exhibition, I was particularly inspired to explore his works in light of the question: "Do his works really qualify as conceptual art?" Of course, there is nothing particularly verbal, let alone propositional, about his particularly mathematical art, but they certainly are logical. His painting titled '2 trames inégales avec 10 interférences' (1973) presents a series of unequally-spaced twin wefts, whose diversions produce ten white gaps that suggest the kind of electromagnetic interferen-

ce that once plagued black and white television screens. What became clear as I thought about his work in light of this polemic is the fact that his titles double as instructions.

#### STRATEGY

One could argue that titles that indicate what will happen qualify as conceptual art, while those that describe what has happened are simply titles. Anyone who saw his 2011 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou realizes that many of his large-scale installations originated as paintings. For example, a variation of S.M.A.K.'s painting 'Interférences de 25 tirets 00 et 25 tirets 90°' (1975) was rein-



François Morellet, '4 trames 3°-87°-93°-177°', 1971, zeefdruk op hout

stalled as a wall work at the Pompidou. He first exhibited 'désintégrations architecturales', or temporary installations, in 1970, just as the string of famous exhibitions focused on in situ artworks was winding down. Still, Morellet's strategy is closely aligned with American conceptual artists like Robert Barry, Mel Bochner, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, or Fluxus artist Yoko Ono. This crew routinely reworks one era's

ideas for creating art to produce art for years to come. So, Morellet's paintings are propositions of a sort, though they are more like the graphs of algebraic equations than the outcome of verbalized ideas.

Although Morellet's paintings were excluded from the early conceptual art exhibitions, he was certainly not overlooked by op-art's proponents. Perhaps the biggest 'problem' for conceptual art proponents is that Morellet's paintings appear primarily retinal. His paintings produce zipper and moiré patterns that pulse and flutter, and leave plenty of after-images all over the walls. All of this occurs at the level of the imagination, not the eye, but that era's anti-retinal fanatics couldn't tell the difference. Moreover, the variation is incredible. Consider the painting 'Grands tirets 0°-90°' (1971), whose 36 tic-tac toe-like or window-like grids are all different. The thick lines used to create 'Tirets 00-450 900-1350' surprisingly evoke swirling flowers, pulsating pinwheels and orbiting objects.

It's difficult to imagine Morellet, or anyone for that matter, gridding 40,000 squares on a small canvas, and then listening to someone read 40,000 numbers from the telephone book, so that he could mark each square as odd or even, to be later painted this color or that. S.M.A.K. luckily owns three such 'monumental' achievements. This 1961 stunt alone should have qualified his work as conceptual in the vein of the British walking-conceptualists like Richard Long or Hamish Fulton. 'Bouche-trou' (Stop-gap) (1996), a metal wallwork made from two intersecting right angles, is as mysterious as it is elegant. I thus imagine that the only reason conceptual-art anthologies excluded Morellet was because too few, save McEvelley, have appreciated the way Morellet keeps old ideas in play.

Sue SPAID

'Henri Choteau Legacy: François Morellet' until 11 January 2015 at S.M.A.K., Citadelpark, Ghent. Open Tue-Sun from 10am-6pm. [www.smak.be](http://www.smak.be)