

STAEL: SPACE-TIME FOR COLOURS
AND FORCES BATTLEFIELD'S PLASTICITY
(*STILL LIFE AS STAELIAN ORIGINALITY*)

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Photo Source: *STAËL* by Daniel Dobbels, Paris Hazzan, 2009.
"Le milieu du temps - Avant-propos"

"Here we are learning to see the colours.
Constantly I work and I tend to think rather the flame
is daily growing than disappearing, hope so before dying."

"On apprend à voir les couleurs ici.
Je travaille sans cesse et je crois plutôt que la flamme augmente
chaque jour et j'espère bien mourir avant qu'elle ne baisse."

Nicolas de Staël

Painter *vision(s)*, *neither views nor sights* : here are the following Staelian topics of the one who weirdly got a voluntary death, the one whose *past* was likely lacking ; he seemed to seek an unrecovered past who he both searched and embodied by painting against anxiety despite a free and helpless goodness (charming, courteous and smart he was) : a very lonesome artist (wonder if he ever admired someone and quote whoever he reads or knows). Are then interesting his epistolary exchanges with poets like René Char as well as other painters and writers some may call 'minor' but also with major ones (he was a reader, of Baudelaire for example).

De Staël: a man as Gilles Deleuze described for whom being an artist and especially a painter is being *visionary*, the opposite of a watcher or a viewer who is satisfied with copying, reproducing, duplicating a supposed inspiring nature, and then would have really nothing to tell, to say, neither purpose nor thought to deliver. Never old Stael there has been: look rather at the photo above (my liminary one) of a pretty young man, have a look first to it than at his successive works he still thought like a consistent *whole* like a *block* (if we speak a Deleuzian lexicon); look at his nude face before looking at his wondering watch : a *juvenile* man he remained until the end, like someone anew but quite lost because stuck into either a dazzle or blind beginning. *Starting* :a Staelian theme despite a *work in progress* (Stael originality is that each work follows the former one, like a writing of a same text within each one would be

like a piece or fragment, why not a patch), a *significant* theme as if a *titanic* challenge was obsessive about a beginner he always was despite himself : the topic of the one who could have not overcome a wound as a *native*, the one whose exile from Russia led him to French Riviera where grabbing and giving flesh to colours : striking task, and such a remarkable ambition partly regarding his matchless STILL LIFES, a *genre* in Art History he subverted by adapting it to his purpose or by taking it over. I personally love them ont the contrary of the ancient ones, so sad and almost repulsive wher death reigns; into a Staelian still life, objects are attractive, and workshops are seductive like all views are like appeals for coming).

I would like to talk about the man, Nicolas de Staël (an utter melting of him into his art and especially as endless paintings, maybe a deadly fusion before his intentional end), so proposing the photo above rather than a painting of his you will see only at the end, of course a still life; this is my choice and voluntary bias by which revealing his own work and maybe in his case an explanation of an art (his) so vivid, paradoxically so bright when we know the end of him or his definitive night which is also the end of any dream.

De Stael – *STAEL*, as the name reference choice of the biographer from which the photo is picked up, Dobbels the author as painter and choreographer too – was belonging to a noble well educated family which chose France and particularly he Nicolas himself elected South France ; actually he was loving South (Italy, Spain, Morocco, Pompei and so on) to catch The *Midi light*, which would give him the condition of expressing his very deep feeling or need ; in that sense, his *suicide* is a failure of its sensitive art (impressive one, expressive too) by contrast to his own life which is a quiet simple one without any excess : still a – mysterious - stop to his life as well as to an artistic failure like victory of darkness upon *luminosity* he was so fond of. Why was it so difficult to succeed with however so much talent? Impossibility of

finishing a work? Even his death was intentional (nothing of compulsive, said a commentator), Stael said he was painful to put an end to a painting, to his work because he never knew when indeed he was ending a work.

De Stael was the *explorer* of a painting as a *whole* (a *wall*, as we'll see or understand : just mind the sounding names) which has to still stand, as if being stronger than an *X* (unknown); indeed *force* is a topic which insists as project into a space where composition is each time a challenge, each time to resist to *chaos* (or *collapse*) that is to destructive or negative forces ; yes he was the *experimenter* of this whole as forces battlefield within colours play like protection against emptiness (fulfilling for making sense); nothing in his painting is subject to distancing : it deals with a *touch*, a call to reach, an appeal to *concrete* into a living material world : *matter* as *density* as well as *plasticity* regarding the *colour function*.

COLOURS or LIFE as *happening, proving*: He significantly declared there is *no still* landscape, there is *no still* life which is the timeless model since Renaissance representing somehow poverty or poorness, indigence (I personally disregard Still lifes, so conventional and the contrary of move we can feel in Staelian paintings); maybe that's why you can find among Staelian themes *Music* (no music without life) as well as *Poetry* (see his letters to poets and to critics) and *Dance*. So, when you watch the Staelian painting especially with regard to the traditional still life, you feel as being in front of life (the English name, on the opposite of the French one : *nature morte*, is very interesting regarding Stael's choice of living in France), as for grabbing what you see there (objects in a room, on a table and so on) : those *living things* give you the idea and even the desire to be near them : no surprise *presence* is another theme and an obsessive one, obsessive not according to a negative sense but synonymous with the *ritournelle* which is a Deleuze-Guattari's concept for *feeling at home* : a kind of *refrain* or *tropism* as animals show). Stael painting is a very alive painting. Intensity

(deep feeling) each time commands the canvas, an inner project which is shaping itself little by little: as if he was painting the *Now* and only the *Now*. Maybe a Philosophy as life experimentation with a style as his mysterious mark.

Stael as a *visionary artist* (of not pleonastic) in accordance with the definition of Deleuze (*What is Philosophy*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1994). It also seems that this painter mind was penetrated by the impression or intuition (seizing the one as all) of flows mechanism (*op. cit.*, p. 182): "From the depths of time there comes to us what Worringer called the abstract and infinite northern line, [...] rising to the intuition of mechanical forces, constituting a powerful nonorganic life." De Stael, the man from a North Country painted forces and he did it with such a *NORTH – Septentrional* - Line on the contrary of a South - or by contrast (the way but not the aim) - where he wrongly believed to find what he was looking for like light for enlightening (Antibes; Agrigente on a few canvas, and so on), for enlightenment or his profound need or design : dawn, light as birth (at last).

Furthermore, it is also noticeable that the French Modern Philosopher talked about such a painter about his "red conflagration" (*op. cit.*, p. 205); *red* is likely the more powerful colour, the *blood* one, the passion one, the poignant one, the heartfelt one like an inner fire: *the flame* (see the quotation above). De Stael's colours are remarkably thick and plenty of *relief* like his paintings convey something plastically *massive*: much content, or high grade. (The) *STAELEFFECT*, and a recomposition of what we see from outside (like strangers) without any *investment* – energy of pure mere *imminence* (inside only but human forces of life, life drives); and for this reason, we deal with an atheist painting (no transcendence; no Bible). Stael digs, makes visible as embodiment of the watcher (as and like the painter himself); by the stroke of such a *builder*, we can decipher the sign for an expressive *integrity* : painting as coming up with a daily time never synonymous with trivial but rather with a kind of immobilized

time where, or when *nothing* as *nothingness* does exist because *nothing* in a way does not exist in *De Stael's world as mute language* (painting world) : everything matters as a piece of a whole it would be great to make feeling by a sort of empathy (painter success if effect there is).

Writing on a painter from one photo of his, relaxed, a cigarette in hand, a bit lost or else dreaming awake and pretty tired, a photo black and white by contrast with his painting (here is another topic) where *colour* like *breathe* (an important chapter in Dobbels on "the very breath" or "breath itself", referring to positions and spots inside a canvas) occupies, organizes, covers every canvas: breath according to the ancient Greek or pagan term for *psuche* (as *pneuma*) : *soul*. One could understand Staelian colour as *embodiment of soul* for colour is body, flesh; Staelian colours are thick and there is no vain space. Regarding to *body*, we have the feeling that it deals with *inhabiting* the painting as (saturated) space: a human being onbe and a full one, an incorporated one until forgetting oneself : that's the reason Stael's painting aims to fight against *chaos forces* (dissolution, dislocation) by a *vital primal* (like a cry) or *violence* if we mean by such a term something synonymous with the Greek *Zoe* (*life*); painting like defying both *opposite* and *opponent forces* : *I*, the self (unreflected) rather than myself (needless to talk about a ridiculous *ego*), is actually fighting into a shape or canvas whose goal is to stand still, like *consistency* in logic (given contradiction belongs to destruction or tends to, as a logical fault but also like something unsustainable) : the One (a *whole*, or *All* : another *resonance*) doesn't need to appear, actively involved into the painting gesture; comparing to an ethical meaning, it amounts also to preserve or protect integrity as *unity*.

Noticeable too into Staelian Work is there are not individuals, no beings, no persons: only some portraits (a little few) of his daughter Ann (1953, for example). He painted wholes or "totalities" under different aspects or (impersonal) forms:

landscapes, views : some wholes like cities, among them many times : Agrigente, some wholes or themes (general but own sights) like Danse, Orchestra (two canvas titles), football ground... : "I intend each canvas, each drawing is like a tree, like a forest. We must come through a line, a subtle stroke, to a point, to a spot... like from a twig to a trunk. But all has to be one, a very same indissociable whole, each piece into its own place" (*Je veux que mon tableau, mon dessin, soit comme un arbre, comme une forêt. On passe d'une ligne, d'un trait fin, à un point, à une tache ... comme on passe d'une brindille à un tronc. Mais il faut que tout se tienne, que tout soit en place*).

We can now make a difference between *Life* or *instinct[s]* and *existence* according to the Latin *ek-sistere*: ability to go out, capability to externalize. De Stael declared he could not really make a difference between *instincts* or subconscious perfection on one hand and drives (pulses) or the unperfect unconsciousness on the other hand when he was painting (*Letter to Jean Adrian, 1945*). For sure painting is making appear, surely making sense along the same line by which *Truth* is emerging like Light: still according to the ancient Greek term of *Aletheia* : *revealing, appearing*. Nicolas the Pagan, a Staelian paganism is clear in such a work into which insists the inspiring character of *EMPEDOCLUS* as well as Nature as standard or model, feature of an *ante-Socratic* philosopher before any political interests or philosophy upon cities, governments and citizen duties, so a painting where forms or plasticity with help of colours are like a tribute to *Apollon* God, that is to limits or shapes (the opposite of *Dionysus*, or hubris and mainly in cities or theatres and into religion sacrifices and processions). In daily urban life, De Stael was indeed known as a courteous visitor and discrete host, renowned for his good company. What he painted is pretty paradoxical, for example Agrigente more than one time painted; but in order to use and define four basic colours like there are four elements: *white, black, red, yellow*. Here is still the very example of a man from the North who tried to be inspired,

in his research of light by the contrary of where he came from (his mistake?)

Regarding his research of day (light, natural one), we are told Nicolas de Stael was a *nocturnal painter* according to Georges Kimbour (writer and poet too) who told we see it when we watch his paintings; and Stael was usually painting in the middle of the night when he waked up in order to achieve a canvas until the morning, as someone who could not truly sleep and who was working until he was satisfied. So paradoxically or even weirdly, he went to South by which he was appealed concerning both light and sights among others some cities having belonged to the "Big Greece" during Ancient Times (a quest of sources, origins: but of what?): Empedoclus of *Agrigente* would have committed suicide by throwing himself into a volcano crater because he was likely become mad. But how understand a possible comparison or such example (not only didactic)? Warm seeking? Escaping to cold inside? Maybe it would an answer, the same one for the Russian Painter: too much coldness for a lost artist like Nicolas De Stael.

Anyway, we are *the* vision of the artist (this one) if we are like him (like an union : an understanding consent): agree with him or sharing a feeling which regards deepness and its expression, ready for his journey into human life which was born from Chaos like *blackhole* (wandering lines from chaos negative forces) for birth or cosmos birth : in Greek tongue again, *cosmos* is synonymous with *finery*, maybe even jewels for saying the sacred beauty as another Staelian topic. Starting, Beginning: Working as *Gestation* (the *ovum* topic, or the *matrix* one). De Stael would have been talking to himself as alone with his mother: 'look at my work mum' and so on, reports his French biographer Dobbels). We can then regard the birth like joy and joy as unpredictable (maybe like freedom). The painter declared in 1955 to Douglas Cooper (British Art historian): "because I believe in accident, I cannot advance step by step like each accident after another one" (*parce que je crois à l'accident, je ne peux*

avancer que d'accident en accident). Still (*ib.*): "Yes I believe into Chance" (*Je crois au hasard exactement*).

The notion of *contingency* or of *event* – "*accident*" (*happening* according to the Greek meaning) – is talkative for such an artistic mind; and the same regards the topic of *explosion* as mute one (freedom like opening a window, he wrote to Jacques Dubourg on 1955 February 17th), like the *out of control* is one more topic of him. Georges Bataille (*The Guilty [Le Coupable]*) insisted that *Chance is an arachnean and poignant idea*; 'Arachne', or the mythical spider and her web: logic or mathematic (anyway) sometimes defines chance as meeting of necessity series (think to the French Cournot). Given such a meaning or definition, we can understand the Staelian unhelpful for anybody as well as its correlative *unexpectable* as a good *surprise* synonymous with *joy* as *success*: any artist seeks *The Effect* (if not or in the case of unachievement [no effect], he faces a bad work, or his failure as non-satisfaction is synonymous with non-esteem of oneself). So, the painter goes on each day, like a worker with his own (secret, inside, trouble) task. Was there a mission into De Stael's painting like an inner *legacy* (as knowledge, maybe as recognition to obtain or recover), a legacy to convey like a gift to share but to take care on which unrelentless putting and keeping an eye was a pledge? So, a *heavy task*, maybe a deep promise, a serious stake.

Let's quote René Char about Nicolas de Stael (a way of saying the journey is a pleasant one): He "gave us, made us the gift of the *Unexpectable* which is not at all the *Hope*" (*[Nicolas de Stael] nous a dotés, nous, de l'inespéré, qui ne doit rien à l'espoir*). In a colours tongue, *out of blue* is the joyful mark of a man whose end is very sad, like an utter failure (which it could have been avoid but which happened); the *un-hoped for* is in that sense something only and only one the painter can afford, by the view he conveys : it is *unhoped for us*, because we didn't see it before him or

without him (a feeling from another one). The Staelian loneliness is clear. Himself even hinted to an almost unsaved disarmed *goodness* (*bonté presque sans recours*; still to Dubourg, same year on March 16th) which by contrast is the opposite of *offence* against which you have to protect; in 1946, he declared he haven't got any imagination, unable to live with memories and that consequently he has always to ward off. Let's call it *fragility*, a prolific one or desperate one, and a word we can find into his work (feeling and reading because he wrote on such a fragility or upon one of its aspects).

Limit (deadline) is a warning of fragility : be careful, he seemed to tell from his inside silence of painter, as much important as inside *full* demanding (which does not mean *complete*) to express itself despite obstacles ; still to Jacques Dubourg (1954, on November 23th), French Art trader, De Stael wrote : "Concerning painting as growing things like works in progress and always expressing further until limit, up to a non-return point, if I know that meaning amateurs call so, maybe I do it and maybe too I can bawl them out ; but it is Time which does so with paintings" (*Pour les tableaux poussés, si je savais ce que les amateurs appellent pousser, il se peut que je le fasse et il se peut que je les engueule, mais c'est le temps qui pousse les tableaux*).

There are no frames into De Stael's Work but shaping occupies his project with colours as layers and even as strata (or tones with shades: see the comparison ahead) within a space they make appear with themselves: space is never done before, it is to make up or to line up, and to express. Colours are applied, affixed. A very *physique* (physical) painting is compounded by bars, both horizontal and vertical (even some oblique), to put together for achieving the Staelian Whole; and then the mason (the wall maker) analogy is fitted to signify De Stael constant strain or his endless efforts (force as strength) in order to produce intensely as much as possible, to create something right (an tough), something very consistent (like, as much as truth), some

content (no void or absurd, no nothing), something which can be held or stayed up by itself. *Blind time* (time under pressure, or massive space for making it silently coming off its hinges) : perhaps make something springing into a space as a *distance* (a term in masonry or building, stonework, does exist which refers to a space made of plaster between two joists or posts: *entrevous* in French) of which - freely - conquering it : the painting as art of space by make emerging time.

Does it correspond to music as like art of time? It seems not; a quotation of Arthur Schnitzler is given: "Impatience is to time what vertigo is to space" (*l'impatience est au temps ce que le vertige est à l'espace*). Feeling, intensity or depth of feelings, with the idea of speed ; here is the aim to link with what we know also of De Stael : he loved the time *beating*, such an *immediate* moment for making visible (like equilibrium in to stand) : painting as gesture (no acting painting), as moves and movements (dynamic matters), that which sounds like expressionism (as the opposite of impressionism as painting of memories or remembrance).

Let's pay attention to two theorists and artists, painters, who studied colours (matters) as effects, dynamics, function and so on, in order to understand (and better watch) De Stael's work. Vassily Kandinsky (a countryman of his, older than him) told that *grey* was the hidden hope colour, the unknown expectancy. In his *Spiritualism into Art and particularly in painting*, he explains how colours act upon us as souls, like changing qualities from light from which they cannot be explored, according to a mysticist and philosophic tradition since Boehme. What about of *grey* which belongs to what he called 'the second contrast' from white and black (and not from yellow and blue, the first one)? Such a colour is an unmoving colour (like green, and the opposite of red); but grey, like any colour, gets tones along a balance of feelings (negative, positive ones). So, this colour tends to dark (black), despair is produced and of course on the contrary of grey tending to bright (white) which produces breath and so

a possibility of hoping, a kind of hidden hope. Noticeable is that grey is a central colour (like a centre synonymous with *core*) which is the *rest* one: interesting for appreciating more Stael's choice and his use of colours. For sure, such a colour (with dark or unshine colours) is remarkable regarding still lives and is an useful one regarding that *genre* in accordance to an Old and Post-Medieval as well as a Renaissance one: Modern De Stael.

Paul Klee, as for him, wrote a *Theory of Modern Art* (1956), along a Goethe Tradition upon colours analysis which also can help us to solve such a Staelian *enigma* under the sign of an old ancient Egyptian, big or expanded Greece until a Far East. His originality, his definition of art as *function* and not as *form* (formalism, and so on), and then his study of grey, more accurately *grey point* (cf chapter 6, his "Remarks") is very interesting. What is it about? A colour which amounts (he does not say it) to neuter: *neither white nor black, beyond binarity* of white and black and so on, which of course does not exist into rainbow, which always is a neutralization of matching 'primary colours' (for example, red + green). And grey, he says, is a *centre*: a kind of focus aftermath or during a journey of colours. Grey is produced, it is not beginning.

Here is one definition: "fateful point between becoming and being" (*point fatidique entre ce qui devient et ce qui meurt*). Let's sum up or propose a synthesis: *grey* is a *between*. And such a between means a creation as *Life* (a natural conception of art but not as imitation of Nature) or *Birth*. The talented Philosopher Hannah Arendt (an exile) defined into her Doctoral Thesis *Life as Birth* and so as *Love*; interesting it is after all comparing to Deleuzian and Guattarian vision which differs politically from her (think to totalitarianism, German and Russian ones). Art is thus *Cosmogensis*, according to the German theoretical painter; by itself, it is then reproductive union or sexual one: *matrix* (home into De Stael) or *ovum* (Klee: *l'oeuf*) and *sperm* (Klee), like production + determination. What deducing? That as watchers

and lovers of De Stael paintings, we deal with a kind of *Chora* (in Greek) into injecting or transmitting Matter like Colours, and like two tenets (male and female ones). To conclude, we can state that there is no art without spirituality, the feeling and the need of *Absolute*, (still according to Ancient meaning by polytheism, a term also synonymous with being complete: a shape, a perfect one). It seems that Nicolas De Staël asked himself at which condition ending for good a work, a painting, a canvas (sceptical man).

So, *beginning* as a Staelian topic, for explaining elements of life as organic one: first of all, of course, water (both spring and source). Mind the eye one too, like tears for emotion into a keen watch like a sharpened knife ; some commentators talked about his radical acuteness : and a basic trend or a bottom which could at any time be expressed.... , and Nicolas De Stael to Char : "I sharpen my eyes by the *Midi* flint" (*J'aiguisse mes yeux au silex du midi*); light is depicted then as powerful, maybe regarding deadfall Sun but like a South French blade, *under pressure* for painting as much right as possible but painful. Something to make visible, better as it would be without touch like having (keeping) an eye to *Sacred*; the Staelian topic of *purity* as *Unchanging* as well as timely, steadfast despite Time runaway line (*inaltérable*).

If sacred is a real insistent topic along Stael life, it means by itself its impossibility of altering it and even into failure because, in such a case, something is saved and then managed... Another topic which can add another light on an unbearing or convening origin: making leaps (cutting in space, like a knife, don't know he was painting), a dangerous art when painting would be the same as *doing acrobatics* (he talked about it to Char). Mysterious Painter, like his photo above which exposes an estranged face.

"I intimately know what my work is, what my painting is under its appearances (regarding its surface area), its violence, its endlessly spaces within forces work; it is a frail thing according to a sense of Good, of sublime, it is as much frail as love..." (*Ma peinture, je sais ce qu'elle est sous ses apparences, sa violence, ses perpétuels jeux de force ; c'est une chose fragile dans le sens du bon, du sublime, c'est fragile comme l'amour...*). Painting, loving, colouring, like a desire of seizing, making own to myself, like a gift, an offering without sacrifice (overcoming tears toward a sight or vision producing).

So, just after this final quotation, have a look to the following still life: so vivid, as if we could take one of those objects (respectively the handle of them), each within a whole with warm colours: Stael's signature, while colours of still lives are mournful and fade ones but not at all lively as living. And then have a look to Cézanne's one, from whom he could have been inspired for subverting a deadly boring genre (*The Provençal Painter*).



Nicolas de Staël, *Nature morte au poêlon blanc*. Nicolas de Staël. (1955)



Nature morte aux fruits et pot de gingembre. Paul Cézanne (1890-1893).