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‘Des matières, non des images’: Bernard Noël’s creative art criticism

Over the last fifty years, Bernard Noël has become admired as a writer of poetry, novels, essays and art criticism. He has not adhered to literary movements and has avoided speaking publicly about his work or personal life. He is not a solitary writer, however, since he is inspired by, and has worked with, a number of visual artists. As well as producing book-length studies of artists, Noël has been a prolific writer of prefaces and essays for books and catalogues of artists’ work, and he particularly wishes to respond to, and promote, art by his contemporaries. For instance, he has written about the work of Olivier Debré, Vieira da Silva and Henri Michaux.¹ He edits a series, ‘Rencontre’, which publishes works by a single artist that are produced for the series and introduced by creative writers rather than art historians. One of these volumes presents a series of ink drawings made by the Franco-Chinese artist Zao Wou-Ki, and the accompanying essay is by Noël himself.² I shall focus on that essay as exemplifying Noël’s approach to art writing in texts that can be considered to be creative works in their own right rather than explanatory introductions.

Noël’s earlier catalogue prefaces, extracts from which have been collected in the award-winning *Journal du regard*, do not offer explanations or assessments as might be expected from an exhibition catalogue or introductory guide.³ In *Zao Wou-Ki* the artist’s name does not appear until the fifth page, no biographical information is given, and the text shifts between prose and verse. The dimensions of the drawings are not stated; indeed, Noël does not even refer to specific pieces. Therefore Noël cannot easily be described as practising ekphrasis. He does not produce verbal representations of particular works of art, nor does he represent scenes as if they were works of art, as proposed in a broader definition of ekphrasis.⁴

¹ *Olivier Debré* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984); *Vers Henri Michaux* (Draguignan: Unes, 1998); *Vieira da Silva* (Creil: Dumerchez, 1994).

² *Zao Wou-Ki* ([Mont-de-Marsan]: L’Atelier des brisants, 2001). *Vieira da Silva* belongs to the same series, despite the change in publishing house. An exhibition of Zao Wou-Ki’s prints and illustrations for *livres d’artistes* was held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 2008.

³ *Journal du regard* (Paris: P.O.L., 1988).

⁴ Murray Krieger, ‘The Problem of Ekphrasis: Image and Words, Space and Time – and the Literary Work’, in *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis*, ed. by Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), pp. 3-20 (p. 4).

Valérie Robillard suggests that ekphrasis, as well as referring to texts in which the work of art is named, can also encompass writing that attempts to produce a verbal equivalent of an artist's style without making explicit reference to that artist.⁵ This understanding of ekphrasis might appear more appropriate for texts that respond to artworks that are not clearly figurative. But Noël does not attempt to produce an equivalent of Zao Wou-Ki's work, even when this is deemed to operate on the level of style rather than content. Instead, he contests the very notion of evoking the visual in words. It is not that he considers the gap between the visual and verbal to be insuperable, that the former is a way of showing while the latter depends on abstract signs. Nor does he engage in the debate surrounding the supposed incommensurability of art, as a spatial medium, and writing, with its status as temporal, that has guided discussion of ekphrasis since Lessing's *Laocoon*.⁶

In fact, Noël disputes the premise that visual art is one means of representing the world, while the written word is another. He rethinks what abstraction means, refusing to attribute it either to visual images or to language. He sees both art and writing as emerging from matter, that is, from the natural world and the body. He refuses to separate body and mind, and insists that the eyes are as much parts of the body as they are vehicles for transmitting images to the brain. Art is at work not simply in the mind of the painter, writer, viewer or reader, but in the space of the page and the canvas, which comes to resemble a mental space and acts as a meeting place for creator and recipient.

The suggestion that art is 'at work' is crucial because, for Noël, art is not an expression of a feeling or an idea that is available subsequently for viewing. Rather, it is constantly emerging; it is an event, not a completed image. In this article, I shall discuss Noël's art writing through the concept of the figure. The term 'figure' can be applied both to the visible forms on an artist's canvas and to the image that is thought to be intrinsic to poetic writing, or indeed any use of language. In art, figuration is

⁵ Valerie Robillard, 'In Pursuit of Ekphrasis (an intertextual approach)' in Robillard and Jongeneel, pp. 53-72.

⁶ See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 47-149. He considers work by Nelson Goodman, Gombrich, Lessing and Edmund Burke on the difference between poetry and painting. Mitchell argues that Lessing himself only sees the distinction between space and time as operating on the level of representation. Once the signifieds of poetry and painting become signifiers, he suggests, the distinction dissolves (p. 101). However, Lessing wishes to maintain these differences for political reasons; he is concerned to observe the 'borders' between the arts because, once they are threatened, he fears the blurring of other political and social distinctions. (pp. 105-112).

normally the opposite of abstraction. The drawings that Noël presents and discusses in *Zao Wou-Ki* appear to hover between the figurative and the abstract, but we shall see that these are classifications that he refuses. His text, meanwhile, is poetic while insisting on the material rather than the metaphorical. In order to show how the term ‘figure’ might be applied to Noël’s work while being complicated by it, I shall refer to Jean-François Lyotard’s *Discours, figure*.⁷

Zao Wou-Ki is not known primarily for black and white ink drawings such as those he produced for the volume considered here. His colourful oil paintings are deliberately different from the Chinese practice of calligraphy, which he has taught, engaging instead with Western artistic traditions. But the works collected in Noël’s *Zao Wou-Ki* are all black ink drawings, and their forms suggest calligraphy. This might appear to be an ideal choice for works of art to be distributed in book form, accompanied by a self-consciously literary essay. Zao Wou-Ki’s drawings are not representative, but they nevertheless appear to invite interpretation. They resemble Rorschach ink blots, shown to patients with the aim of eliciting interpretations that reveal their states of mind. They are suggestive of language, signs or codes, arbitrary signifiers rather than figurative ones. Zao-Wou-ki might be thought to be commenting on writing just as Noël could be expected to offer a commentary on art in his text. However, the images as Noël responds to them, and his text, both serve to complicate that view.

Noël writes:

Non pas de signes, ou alors un seul, un vaste idéogramme en expansion et semblable au signe que nous fait le monde quand il occupe entièrement la vue. (*Zao Wou-Ki*, p. 15)

He refers to the ideograms of Chinese script, but argues that, instead of offering us images to read, the ink drawings present themselves as the world around us does; they fill our field of vision rather than pointing to something in particular. The term ‘en expansion’ is one example of a range of expressions that Noël uses throughout his text to designate movement and process. The images are not a record of what has been seen; rather, they emerge in the present of viewing. The paragraph concludes: ‘perpétuelle montée de ce qui monte pareillement dans le papier...’ (p. 15). Noël

⁷ *Discours, figure*, 5th edn (Paris: Klincksieck, 2002).

repeatedly insists on the movement of the works by his choice of terms, ‘perpétuelle’ and ‘montée’, and, performatively, by the repetition and variation produced by pairing ‘montée’ and ‘monte’. Such a response is typical of Noël’s text, which consistently refuses to consider what, in the outside world or the mind of the artist, the images might be thought to represent.

Not only does Noël avoid treating the works as signs to be interpreted, he must also, in order to do justice to them, try to avoid using his own words merely as signs. Of course, the text can never occupy the same status as the ink drawings because he has a referent; his essay is about particular works of art, and is intended to be reproduced alongside them, while Zao Wou-Ki has no obvious single inspiration. But the means by which Noël conveys what they do, if it is to be equal to them, needs also to *do* rather than show. He achieves this in two ways: First, he focuses on the matter that goes into producing the works, both the artist’s materials and his body, and allies this with the involvement of the viewer’s body in seeing them. Second, he ensures that his text enacts rather than recounts. It is as much poetry as art criticism.

Noël does not describe the shapes in Zao Wou-Ki’s work, so his text is not ekphrastic. Instead, he reminds us of the materials from which they are made. For example, in one of the many sets of parentheses that he employs to separate prose sections from verse, he writes:

(L’encre de Chine est faite avec de la fumée de bois de pin et du khôl... La main unit l’encre et l’eau... Le pinceau unit au papier cette union, et dans le vide du papier il fait se lever des fumées...) (*Zao Wou-Ki*, p. 9)

Noël names wood, kohl and water. The artist is not present via his imagination or creative powers, but as a hand that makes ink with water. This is less a metonym than a placing centre stage of the artist’s body, and, in particular, the part of him that carries out a gesture. He stresses the linking of physical things by the repetition of ‘unit’, ‘unit’ and ‘union’, and the passage produces circularity by opening with the smoke made from wood and closing with the misty forms that appear to rise up from the paper. By employing the reflexive ‘se lever’, Noël suggests that the matter of page and ink takes on life, instead of the artist giving life to his ideas.

In other passages he watches the artist at work and chooses to evoke the movements of Zao Wou-Ki’s body rather than the images that appear on the paper. As

well as the hand and wrist, which, he writes, appear along with the brush to be detached from the painter, he also draws attention to the movements of the whole body as the artist kneels, gets up, moves back and bends over (p. 16). Noël is often drawn to artists who involve their body in the act of painting. In a volume of essays on artists, *Onze romans d'œil*, his evocations of their work can make it appear a primarily physical activity, at times even choreographed.⁸

In turn, the viewer is not called upon to engage his or her imagination or interpretative powers, but to 'préparer ses yeux' (*Zao Wou-Ki*, p. 8). Noël insists that the viewer's eyes come into contact with those of the artist via the work, and that a state of receptivity is vital. Instead of judging the art dispassionately, or even attempting to understand it, it is necessary to be open to its emergence, as if it had not existed before it was seen:

silence et arrêt créent la pleine réceptivité
en elle un commencement
une origine [...]

then, later,

regarder une encre c'est se préparer à son apparition (*Zao Wou-Ki*, p. 9).

The beginning of the process of creation is, therefore, not the artist's idea or mental picture, but a state of waiting, on the part of the viewer as much as the artist, from which the physical form of the work of art can emerge. In a text published two years previously, Noël had written:

le seul mystère est là, dans le fait que les œuvres existent à travers les gens qui les font exister de telle sorte que leur création est continue.⁹

⁸ *Onze romans d'œil* (Paris: P.O.L., 1988). His concentration on watching artists at work in these essays does not result in a fascination with the artist as individual creator that might take over from the study of his or her work, but rather serves to remind readers of the physical, gestural basis of the art that most interests Noël.

⁹ *La Bataille navale*, with Patrick Brunie (Paris: L'Esprit des Péninsules, 1999), cited in Laurence Perrigault, 'Un art de l'intermédiaire: Guy Hersant et Bernard Noël', in *L'Art français et francophone depuis 1980, Contemporary French and Francophone Art*, ed. by Michael Bishop and Christopher Elson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 93-101 (p. 97).

In *Zao Wou-Ki*, Noël employs a variety of means to produce a piece of writing that has an analogous power to emerge as the reader engages with it. Most prominent is the choice of verse for the majority of the text, interspersed with prose sections in parentheses. The double-page spread is thereby transformed into an object whose form is noticed before its words are read. It is impossible to begin reading at the top left-hand corner without having first taken in the mixture of dense prose and sparse, vertical verse that provides the visual shape of each page.

Resistant to the unbroken horizontal line of prose, Noël also refuses any line of argument in this text. His themes and emphases gradually emerge, through repetition and refinement of ideas and suggestions rather than by logical sequence. Each sentence of prose is separated from the others only by suspension marks, which link them together, rejecting hierarchy and logical progression, and implying that they emerge from one another and fade away. In the verse sections, his characteristic elimination of all punctuation means that the lines flow, even accelerate, introducing pauses but never permitting completion, while enjambement allows the poet to emphasise particular terms. Although he does not employ recognisable rhyme schemes or regular metre, he does use repetition and assonance to create internal unity and drive the text onwards. For instance, the following verse section closes the text:

traits ou taches
pâleur et noirceur
jamais ne sont définitivement
tels quels

dans leur épaisseur
ça vibre
ça respire
à moins que cette épaisseur ne renvoie
le souffle reçu
ne le souffle à son tour
mêlant à la vue
l'air du papier

ce qu'a projeté
Zao Wou-Ki

en ne dessinant pas
mais en non-agissant la double action
de l'encre et du vide
cela
les yeux le touchent là
comme ils en sont touchés
par un retournement
une communication
élémentaire

ainsi
en chacune des encres

pas de c'est-moi pas de faire faiseur
une pure présence
construisant le vide
et soufflant

soufflant
cette chair aérienne et pensive qui
dans la vue
et par elle
retrouve forme
mouvement
vitalité

travail lucide
travail de grand silence
travail des forces des élans des porosités
des matières
non des images

lever en tête
lever du clair de la pensée (*Zao Wou-Ki*, pp. 22-25).

Noël refuses to attribute imaginative creativity to the artist here; he writes that there is no ‘c’est-moi’ in these drawings.¹⁰ Instead, Zao Wou-Ki’s artistic power is described as projection, and by reversing the usual subject-object position in the lines ‘ce qu’a projeté / Zao Wou-Ki’, he emphasises the matter that has been projected. He uses the impersonal ‘ça vibre’, ‘ça respire’, which transfers the agency to the marks on the paper while leaving them deliberately unidentified. They cannot be fixed in language because they are constantly changing, ‘jamais ne sont définitivement / tels quels’. It is they who engage the viewer’s gaze to take on form and movement. He repeats ‘travail’ three times, but rather than the hard work of the artist, it is ‘des forces des élans des porosités’ who are at work; these are the forces of matter, not of images. The text itself appears to be driven onwards by an internal energy. The lines are mostly short, often consisting of a single word or noun with its article, but those that are longer, such as ‘pas de c’est-moi pas de faire faiseur’ seem to be so because there has not even been sufficient time to take a breath, or introduce enjambement.

With his emphasis on flesh, breathing, force and movement, Noël, it might seem, is entirely materialistic. But it would be wrong to suggest that he simply wants to replace signification and interpretation with the body and the material. He does not set up an opposition between mind and body. Indeed, much of his work in poetry and prose aims at undoing that dualism.

Noël insists that thought is rooted in the body, and in the body’s own rootedness in its physical environment. Andrew Rothwell explains:

One of Bernard Noël’s aims as an art writer is to trace the physical process underlying the production of pictures, and responses to them. This is part of a wider enterprise, begun in *Extraits du corps* of 1958, to construct a materialist poetics able to counteract the mentalistic slant of Surrealism, Existentialism and the Western intellectual tradition as a whole, giving priority to the body as the locus of production of thought, emotion and other mental attributes: hence Noël’s close attention to the gestures of painters, prior to any reference to intention.¹¹

¹⁰ The fact that Zao Wou-Ki signed the works calls into question the extent to which he would see art in the same terms.

¹¹ ‘Bernard Noël: Espace, regard, sens’, in Martin Heusser et al. (eds), *Text and Visuality: Word and Image Interactions 3* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 57-64 (p. 57).

Noël's phrase in the extract cited above, 'cette chair aérienne et pensive', links the physical and the mental. Air, in this text present in the form of breath and images of being airborne, has been vital to Noël's poetry since his earliest publications. It relates the body to language, being the form by which words leave the body; it links the body to its surroundings via the act of breathing; and it forms the invisible stuff of the world around the human being, meaning that space is never empty.¹² Here, flesh is airborne and thoughtful; the body is actively taking part in what surrounds it, and thought exists in the projection of the self into the world.

Throughout this text Noël sees the emergence of thought as made possible by the space of the page, which is the site of a process of calling and receptivity. The ink forms reach out to the viewer's gaze, which is drawn into the page. Thought is produced by this interaction, where the page is a physical space linking artist and viewer, rather than a collection of ideas that is transmitted from one to the other. What results is invoked in the following lines:

infiniment communicative et communicante et
spacieuse
née de l'accueil du vide
une chair mentale (*Zao Wou-Ki*, p. 11).

Adjectives in the feminine appear before the noun itself, heralding its arrival just as mental flesh, or thought given bodily form, is the result and not the basis of the work of art.

The creative power that Noël attributes to the ink drawings is one that he also seeks for his own text. He does not want to transmit thoughts to the reader, but seeks to produce a mental space on the page in which, via the involvement of the reader, thought takes shape. Therefore he does not need to overcome the ostensible problem of the difference in medium between language and the visual. He considers that artworks and writing both have the capacity to engage the receptive viewer or reader and to transform the page into a mental and physical space.¹³

¹² I discuss the image of air in Noël's work, and the collection *La Rumeur de l'air* in particular, in *Provisionality and the Poem: Transitions in the Work of du Bouchet, Jaccottet and Noël* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006). *La Rumeur de l'air* is reprinted in *La Chute des temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 167-214.

¹³ For more detail, see Noël's discussion of the space of the page in the interviews given to Dominique Sampiero in *L'Espace du poème* (Paris: P.O.L., 1998). For instance, he says that a poem only works if

A clear point of reference for poetry that explores the double-page spread of the page is Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard*, and Lyotard discusses this in *Discours, figure*.¹⁴ He writes that the space of *Un coup de dés* is simultaneously logical, because words are written on it, sensory, because the white space between the words is as important as what they mean, and imaginative, because the words make visible what is imaginary. Geoffrey Bennington, in his analysis of *Discours, figure*, writes that Lyotard insists that this text depends on the 'visual, gestural experience of the body in space'.¹⁵ Similarly, Noël emphasises the involvement of the body of the reader as much as that of the viewer of a painting, because the plasticity of the written page provokes a response in the reader in the same way that a visual work of art engages the senses. In Lyotard's terms, Mallarmé's poem is an example of discourse worked on by the figure. I would argue that this applies to Noël's text also.

According to Lyotard, a work of art is figural when it goes beyond descriptions of it or theories about it, and becomes an event in which matter and feeling are associated. The images included in his work *Discours, figure*, are 'figures', in that illustrations in a book are often classified using that term, but they are also *figures*, because they are intended to transform what they refer to. A painting is neither an objective figure nor a figurative work; it is the process between the two. It follows that Lyotard's book cannot only be a theoretical one; it is also an event. He writes:

La position de l'art est un démenti à la position du discours. [...] Elle indique que la transcendance du symbole est la figure, c'est-à-dire une manifestation spatiale que l'espace linguistique ne peut pas incorporer sans être ébranlé, une extériorité qu'il ne peut pas intérioriser en *signification* [Lyotard's italics].¹⁶

Although Lyotard rejects the notion that language can effectively encompass the things it refers to, he does not suggest that any correlation between words and their objects is impossible. There is, instead, an active connection between the two, and

the reader allows him- or herself to be penetrated by its space (p. 109). Similarly, he describes painting in terms of a surface that produces volume which enters into the viewer's eye (p. 159).

¹⁴ *Discours, figure*, pp. 64-72.

¹⁵ *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 67.

¹⁶ *Discours, figure*, p. 13.

discourse expresses rather than describes. That is the task of Lyotard's own writing in *Discours, figure*. He does not set up a clear opposition between discourse and figure, but both explains and demonstrates the transformation of discourse by the figure.

Noël does not, to my knowledge, discuss Lyotard's work, but two important aspects of the theory and practice of *Discours, figure* echo his own understanding of art writing. First, Lyotard suggests that the figural manifests itself spatially, producing depth in the otherwise 'flat' surface of referentiality. It would not be sufficient simply to correlate the figural to the visual, intruding as perception into the plane of language, because the figure can operate in an equally disruptive fashion within visual art.¹⁷ Nor does Noël set up an opposition between language and the visual; he suggests that the space of the writer's page or artist's paper is the ongoing product of the forms and words painted and written on it. Neither words nor visual images can be reduced to what they signify.

Second, according to Lyotard, the language that searches for the figure is bound to be upset by it, and this makes his text into an event as well; it is part of the figure, rather than discussing it. Noël also refuses to claim to account for the artworks objectively. His text manifests itself, inviting the reader to participate in the emergence of fluid forms and matter.

For example, Noël uses the process of ink drying to show how space is created in Zao Wou-Ki's works. He writes that it is swollen up with air so that the forms take on volume and insinuate themselves into the eyes of the viewer, in a reversal of the rules of perspective:

(En séchant, le noir se veloute de gris et le gris de lumière... Noir et gris deviennent ainsi spacieux... gonflés chacun de souffle... cet air de l'encre met là, en face, une perspective qui ne fuit pas... qui, tout au contraire, s'enfonce dans les yeux... En somme, dis-je, dès que tu l'encres, le papier n'est plus du papier... Pour toute réponse, Wou-Ki éclate de rire... Et l'espace monte, monte de la feuille...) (*Zao Wou-Ki*, p. 21)

Noël adds that in the Western artistic tradition, paintings operate as a window, whereas Eastern art is understood as a void. 'Le vide' does not mean nothingness for

¹⁷ The second part of *Discours, figure*, however, moves away from the phenomenological terminology that characterised the first part, and works instead with psychoanalytic terms and concepts.

Noël. He is drawn to it because, instead of offering perspective and representation, it allows things to take shape. He writes:

les encres de Zao Wou-Ki sont fondées sur
leur propre substance et
le vide
pas de projet directeur pas de schéma de dessin
rien que le désir
ou plus exactement la pensée de peindre

préparation mentale
cela aussi est mise en mouvement
d'une substance élémentaire
communicante

pas de représentation
l'acte seul
l'acte substantiel

l'encre délie le pinceau
il devient conducteur de mentalité

faire le vide en soi soulève alors le souffle
soulève en face dans le vide papier
l'appel du souffle (*Zao Wou-Ki*, pp. 17-18).

Although Noël's text appears to take art away from the personal, refusing the 'projet directeur' and insisting on the substances used in art, the last lines of this section show that human agency is vital. Both the artist and the viewer must engage in mental preparation, which requires not an expression of ideas or feelings, but rather the emptying out of preconceptions. The viewer, he goes on to write, resembles a void that 'a reçu la décharge mentale et, par elle, fut changé en un état de la pensée du peintre' (p. 18). Rather than being a reduction of the self to nothing, this void is what allows breath to rise up, or, in other words, allows a life-force to emerge. Instead of

standing back and objectively appraising what she sees, the viewer is drawn into becoming an essential part of the process of artistic creation.

Life-force motivates Noël's work as a whole. The term 'élan' recurs in much of his poetry, designating desire, energy, and the rhythms that power the body, such as the breathing that brings in oxygen and carries out speech, or blood pumped through the body by the heart.¹⁸ It is also conveyed performatively, as his verse poetry consists principally of short lines that are motivated by a sense of acceleration.¹⁹ Although, in this extract, he emphasises the importance of mental preparation, the overwhelming impression left by his essay is of the continuing emergence of visual forms that results from the viewer's engagement with what he sees. For instance, Noël invokes desire, setting in motion, communication, the act of untying, conductivity and the rising up of breath. In the second part of *Discours, figure*, Lyotard stresses the importance of desire, imagining the figure as a transgressive force that has to be negotiated in relation to the repression of discourse. In a well known passage, he writes:

Il y a un autre espace, figural. Il faut le supposer enfoui, il ne se donne pas à voir, ni à penser, il s'indique de façon latérale, fugitive au sein des discours et des perceptions, comme ce qui les trouble. (*Discours, figure*, p. 135)

In *Zao Wou-Ki* and other writings on art by Noël, the fact that his subject is visual is not, in itself, enough to prevent his text from being descriptive or analytical. Instead, he values art, and writing, in which the viewer or reader is involved in the production of the desiring life-force that disrupts linear progression, creates space and drives the work upwards and forwards.

More than other works of art to which Noël has responded, the ink drawings in *Zao Wou-Ki* could be thought to operate as writing does: as signs to be interpreted. But when Noël emphasises that the artist is working with the materials of the writer, ink and paper, this is not to make connections between the drawings and the abstract forms of written language. Instead, it is to show how art and writing can operate as events in the same way: neither is abstract. Noël has aimed at producing a text that is an aesthetic event in itself, in the manner of Lyotard's figure, because that is how he

¹⁸ This is explored most extensively in *Extraits du corps*, reprinted in *Poèmes I* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), pp. 29-73.

¹⁹ See, in particular, *La Chute des temps*, translated by Andrew Rothwell as *Time-Fall* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: VVV Editions, 2006).

can best do justice to artworks that come into being as they are viewed, rather than being fixed representative objects or objects to be represented. It could be argued, therefore, that Noël's essay is a subject in and for itself.

However, it cannot exist independently of the art that inspired it. The text and Zao Wou-Ki's images are involved in a reciprocal process. The works resist being appropriated in words, according to Noël, because they are constantly changing. Noël's text is disturbed by the drawings he discusses because, acting as figures, they oblige him to make himself receptive to them and to the space they create together. It is impossible to stand back and appraise them. Moreover, the text, as a figure in itself, transforms its subject. The drawings are not commented on and left intact; the effect of Noël's text is that, instead of being read as signs, they appear as emanations of the physical and of movement. By insisting on, and working with, this reciprocal disturbance, Noël avoids the tendency of ekphrastic writing to attempt to dominate its visual inspiration.²⁰ He refuses the opposition between words and images, and insists that both emanate from the material and produce volume that challenges the viewer and reader. In this way, Noël ensures that no fixed hierarchy can be established between them.

Noël's art writing, as exemplified in the essay discussed here, is creative rather than descriptive, performative instead of analytical. Thought emerges on the page, through the interaction of artist or writer and viewer or reader. Just as the art that he values rises up from the page and insinuates itself into the eyes of the viewer, so must his text have depth and volume, taking place as it unfolds. The critical text, in Noël's hands, does not judge from an objective distance. It acknowledges that it is bound to alter its subject because it affects the reader's response as viewer of the art. In turn, it will be altered by the works of art as the visual images require the writer, as viewer, to open himself to their emerging force. Noël's art writing does not propose an argument; it calls for an answering gesture from the receptive reader.

²⁰ In his discussion of Lessing's *Laocoon*, Mitchell maintains that 'the apparent argument for the mutual respect of borders turns out to be an imperialist design for absorption by the more dominant, expansive art', which is poetry (*Iconology*, p. 107). In addition, Mitchell suggests that the history of culture is a struggle for dominance between linguistic and pictorial signs (p. 43).

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