

# **Excerpts from Conversations**

November 13, 1999 Paris

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marylène negro, klaus scherübel

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## **Specifications:**

- Paint from maps of cities in the desert.
- One page, one painting, no reframing.
- Choose maps in which the information is rare and essential.
- Remove the language, the street names and other text.
- Retain the postal zip codes.
- Retain the representational codes of the area and the specific cartographic symbols: the grid, the directional points and the numbers.
- Enlarge the map.
- Maintain the similarity to the page.
- Use a painting format close to human height.
- Saturate the proposed colors.
- Maintain the inter-relationships of the colors.
- Paint with a roller, smooth over with a paintbrush, conceal things with masking tape.
- Title each work after the name of the zone concerned.

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## The map paintings

M.D. - Why do you say that you refer to city maps, when these maps show practically no signs of urbanization?

A.M.J. - We chose to position ourselves on the periphery of cities; since we're dealing with cities in the American desert (Tucson, Arizona and Las Vegas, Nevada), information there is rare, strange, indeed nonexistent. We were particularly interested in the large number of cul-de-sacs and of dead-end roads there.

A.C. - The most extraordinary thing for us was to realize that some of these maps showed nothing but emptiness. In fact, these maps were made with the intention of helping people to find their bearings in the town; they are not geographical maps intended to give geological, geopolitical or botanical information about the area. Still, the question remains: what motivated the authors of these maps to print these areas of nothing-ness that are totally inaccessible, lacking a street, a highway or a path?

M.D. - Perhaps one should interpret that as a particular idea of emptiness; that of an emptiness that could be appropriated one day, rather than an emptiness in which nothing could ever transpire.

Rem Koolhaas, when discussing the problem of the urbanization of New York City, recounts that in order to determine the height of the buildings, the administration first established a coefficient of density. This coefficient describes the relationship between the "built-up" and the "non-built-up" and defines an average height. The differential in relation to this average height can be transferred from a smaller building onto a larger building, in such a way that the global density always remains the same.

Here, the desert is probably considered as a zone to be defined, waiting to be urbanized.

A.M.J. - That is precisely what I find interesting in the American city; the possible areas... the areas of possibility, these no-man's lands, untouched, waiting to be put under construction. It is the active state of being under construction which interests me; after the construction is finished, it simply becomes part of the past.

A.C. - In Paris, we live in that kind of peripheral area, that is perpetually in transformation, where we are surprised to see new streets suddenly appear.

M.N. - Why did you remove the street names when you reproduced these maps? Is that all that you removed?

A.M.J. - In fact, the only thing we removed were the street names; that is, ultimately, only the language component. On the other hand, we left the postal codes when they were marked.

M.D. - Why remove the words?

A.C. - I think for several reasons: on the one hand, we were undoubtedly leery of making "Words in painting"; on the other hand, since we had already produced a body of work about language, we wanted to avoid any ambiguity.

A.M.J. - Also, we particularly wanted to emphasize the stripped-down nature of the maps, by trying to avoid any anecdotal or narrative reference. Remaining within the framework of language would have meant entering into the poetics of words. Instead, it seemed essential to us to access directly the very structure of the region. Here, our intervention was towards a greater clarity.

M.D. - That means that you position yourselves on the global level, and no longer on the local level; you stay on the level of the network. By eliminating the street names, in a way, you delocalize the map, you make it enigmatic.

A.M.J. - Clearly, in removing the words, we also deny any possibility of getting one's bearings within the map; we take away all of its functionality. On the other hand, we do title the work after the name of the site that is represented.

M.N. - Are these places important for you? Do your paintings refer to your actual experiences?

A.C. - This work does concern cities we have stayed in – which in no way means that we actually visited the precise locations represented in our paintings. If one can detect our actual experiences, their interest lies elsewhere. We never tried to produce an autobiographical work. However, it is true that we acquired our first map in an entirely utilitarian way, in a supermarket in Tucson; we were going to dinner at Elizabeth Cherry and Olivier Mosset's house. At that time, this map made an impression on us; we found it strange and exotic, without ever dreaming of doing anything with it. Then, we took it back to Paris with us where it stayed in a studio corner for a long time. It wasn't until later that we thought of using it, without knowing exactly how at first.

M.D. - From that moment on, why did you choose to produce an object which required you to make it by hand? Why reproduce the maps yourselves? You could have given them to a printer.

A.C. - At first, we thought of processing the maps digitally so we could reproduce them on tarpaulins. Very quickly though, we found that to be an appropriationistic attitude, purely esthetic or esthetisizing. Later, we intuitively understood that what interested us in these maps had something to do with painting. The questions of the rejection of

painting and of the delegation of work both seemed to us linked to a sort of new academism.

A.M.J. - Everything developed in stages. We began by making two paintings which we showed to Marylène Negro and Klaus Scherübel; then, we began a third painting which remained in progress for more than a year. After that, we decided to make a series of 15 paintings, devoting however much time was necessary to them, still without knowing where we were going. It was only in the midst of working on them that we understood what was truly at stake in these paintings.

K.S. - Does that mean that the time you spent creating the works is one of the subjects of your paintings?

A.C. - For us, it was more of a time to clarify our ideas, a period of reflection; another good reason not to delegate our work to a printer.

K.S. - Do you mean that your reflection remains private and does not concern the public?

A.C. - Of course it concerns the spectator, but not in terms of any physical evidence. We did not try for any effect of texture or of surface treatment, despite the fact that both of them are inevitably present in any work produced by hand, or indeed mechanically. For us, it is the work itself – and not some particular part of it – which reflects its theoretical foundations.

M.D. - What sort of reflection was this, insofar as you neither added nor subtracted anything (or almost anything) to what you were reproducing?

A.C. - The question was for us to enter into a pictorial discussion while avoiding talking about the materiality of the painting. At first, even the dimension of our canvases – their height (1.77m and 1.90 m) – had been spontaneously imposed on us. In this way, we understood that the scale of the works was related to the human body, that our work was situated somewhere between the map and the territory.

M.D. - One has the impression that you peeled away each map, as if it were made of a series of superimposed layers of tracing paper. One could imagine that you successively lifted up each of these thin layers; the background layer of flat colored expanses, the one containing the network of streets, the one of the grid that cross-rules the surface...

A.C. - The grids as well as the directional sighting points, which indicate the map's orientation in relation to the cardinal points, led us to think that the iconic field was no longer demarcated by its physical limits, but rather, that it was generated by the act of entering under the sighting points and under the grid, somewhat like the way information appears on a computer screen.

M.N. - Each of your paintings represents an area off-canvas. It seems that one is no longer located within a nominative reference point, but rather within a kind of off-site area, a zone of strangeness.

M.D. - That means that it is hiding something. Usually, a map is made to show everything, to hide nothing; consequently, if it does hide something, it can only be for cultural, social or even political reasons.

A.C. - For our part, there is nothing hidden...

M.D. - ... If there is an enigma somewhere here, it lies more in the reasons why a culture would produce such a mysterious object.

A.C. - Why does that speak to us of painting?

M.D. - If that speaks to us of painting, it is questioning Brunelleschi. These maps are not European; the cities they represent are not cities with urban centers, and do not partake of the perspective spatiality of the Renaissance which founded the European city. It speaks more of Alberti, of painting, and of the origin of painting.

K.S. - I think that it speaks rather of the great paradox of Anglo-Saxon pragmatism.

M.D. - What I would like to know is how the maps of the Israeli territories in Palestine are established. It seems to me that, in this particular case, one remains within the unsaid subtext of an interaction between politics and economics, regarding the territory and housing developments. I think that if one wanted to confront these two things, it would be on those terms.

## The landscape neons

M.N. - Klaus and I were wondering what the relationship was between the neons and the paintings.

A.M.J. - We thought it would be interesting to show them together, to have them confront each other because they were made more or less at the same time, resulted from the same trip, and from the same region (Arizona and Nevada). Nevertheless, it involves two totally different kinds of representation. I think that the paintings and the neons will never again be exhibited together. This exhibition is a little like a point of departure and arises from a desire to express everything, to hide nothing.

We crossed Monument Valley in winter, when there were no tourists. Then, we decided to return to the same place the next day. I saw it as a kind of attempt at exhausting a place, a place that is too well-known.

Monument Valley is the most contemporary landscape I know. A surface plane on which objects are posed. A contemporary art exhibition on the scale of the landscape. Objects which look ready-made, already-done, already-seen, a background for film images, for westerns. Monuments positioned on the ground – here, the sweeping vastness –, the land crossed by a long straight line, the road.

M.D. - The most contemporary landscape because it is associated with movies which are the very expression of modernity.

A.M.J. - In the same way, in comparison, when I am in the French region of the Auvergne, I feel as if I am in an extremely old site, where time is revealed in the shape of the mountains. Whereas in Monument Valley, I feel like I am in the presence of objects that are simply placed on the ground.

A.C. - I must say that I experienced it differently from Anne Marie. I was more attuned to the humorous aspect of our situation, like a kind of anti-Hamish Fulton or anti-Richard Long – even though in fact I have the utmost respect for their work. There we were, one foot on the accelerator, making a video, taking photographs with abandon, making a large number of drawings, all this almost compulsively, and practically without getting out of the car.

In fact, I think that these drawings add to the derisive aspect, in the sense that they are reduced to the contours of things (monuments and silhouettes). In terms of representation, contour is the infancy of drawing.

A.M.J. - Back in Paris, I found that Alain's drawings needed to remain on the same scale, while still changing some physical characteristics. Moving to neon is to move into the realm of the signal, of the sign.

M.D. - However, you exhibit neither your sketchbooks, nor the map pages, nothing of what was made or found on the actual site. Nothing direct.

As to the relationship of the neons to the paintings, it is almost as if there were two inverse positions on the same territory. In the paintings, you began with an object in order to make something by hand, whereas in the drawings you began with something made by hand in order to make an object. In fact the neon is a drawing by hand turned into a neon.

**November 20, 1999**

## About working together

M.N. - One of the questions which interests me the most in your work and which we did not address last time is: how do you work together?

A.M.J. - It is a work of proposing ideas, of listening, of exchanging reactions, of a dialogue.

A.C. - I think that we often have the same reactions to certain things. However, we do differ if only in terms of our respective careers and training. When we began working together, Anne Marie was developing the work we all know; for my part, I was writing and had worked on some photographs. I was writing very short fictions – fragments – which Anne Marie began to arrange. From there was born a certain exchange; we began to share our reflections on language and wording. From that moment on, we wanted to make a film – although the film never saw the light of day. Then, Marylène Negro requested some works for her exhibition in Milan.

M.N. - Donnez-moi une photo de vous.

A.C. - The question was to know whether it involved a photo which represented us or a photo taken by us. Also we chose to stage ourselves in it. This image was the first in a series of photographs ("of us by us") entitled: *Les Extravagants*, in which we placed ourselves in situations that are more or less shocking. These photos are taken from a distance by means of a pneumatic system that is set into motion by a pear-shaped remote control. As the series progresses, the "pear" becomes a significant element within the image.

A.M.J. - This first image led us to reflect on the necessity of presenting ourselves as a couple, to proclaim ourselves as a new artist inhabiting two bodies.

In general, these photographs convey a certain jubilation. We hope to show the energy that that gives off.

M.N. - Images of happiness.

A.M.J. - These images do not necessarily show very much of our personal, intimate life. I would say rather that they engage us, that they implicate us... that they announce us. At the same time as working on the photographs, we immediately began a work about reflecting on language, with entirely new ideas compared to what I was doing before. In my previous works, the question of "est" ["is"] from the verb "être" ["to be"], is extremely important. It was asked in various ways in works such as: Est-ce cela se perdre ?, Y être, Être là, ... or it involved the presence of a being, a solitary individual.

Today, the question of “et” [“and”] is coming to the fore. The “et” [“and”] is not exclusive, it is the repetition, the dialectic – working by surging forward, and by broadening one’s scope. Working together is openness and listening; it is creating “entre” [“between”], another space, a skin, a lead-line, it is introducing the Other. The first neon which we made together: ...Et Cie [...and Company] emphasizes the “et” [“and”] in the middle of the title, like in our signature: Anne Marie Jugnet et Alain Clairet. This neon, by announcing our association, refers more to the professional image. It implies a future of growth. In our common work, the nature of words also changes.

M.N. - As do the way you turn a phrase. You did not play with words when you were working alone.

A.C. - We began by questioning grammatical structures by looking for certain aberrant forms, such as in: Combien y a t-il d’hommes le plus riche du monde ? [How many men are the richest man in the world?] A curious sentence in which the subject is both singular and plural. In: Qui plus est ? [what is more?], it is simply an interrogative turn which changes the meaning of the sentence, where one goes from an ordinary expression to an entirely new content.

M.N. - For you, is working together a pretext for spending time together?

A.M.J. - Yes, it is a way of life, “being together,” living and working together, is a project of creating works together. It is also a risk-taking in terms of what we share, what we accept, what we commit to, what we sign. For me, art’s place is a place of risk-taking. Our two paths, Alain’s as a collector and historian, and mine as an artist, constitute both our strength and a risk in terms of the art world. I think that in general the couple is disturbing, one quickly feels excluded; one may envy them or not, one compares one’s own couple to theirs, one protects oneself from them. For the artist couple, it is time shared, a complicity at work. That also challenges the idea of the solitary artist, the myth of the artist: the outcast or the star and/or both.

K.S. - I think that if one works as a couple or as a trio, the result is always an intersection, a crossroads of interests. Recently, one sees more and more artists working together.

A.C. - Artists who are not necessarily couples, in fact.

A.M.J. - Having a professional image or an image as a couple are two different things. The professional image is public, the image as a couple is private. We are interested in both.

M.N. - Given the positions that you assume in your photos, it certainly does involve an image of a couple!

A.M.J. - They are images of a couple, but it is not a work about the couple, nor is it an autobiographical work. It's about showing ourselves physically as a couple of artists, shaping an identity and translating the energy that that liberates. I have never found autobiographical works interesting, even though what one creates always comes from inside oneself. A personal life is not enough for an artist. What he has that is personal is his vitality, his energy; the rest, one must confront it, build it up, put it to work, put it under construction.

The series of The Extravagants is a work which implicates us more than explains us.

M.N. - Exactly how do you work together?

A.C. - Our way of working has become so natural for us that we no longer know who does what; I think there is not a single decision that we don't make together.

M.N. - Do you also travel a lot together?

A.M.J. - Yes, and it is a precious time for us. When we are traveling, our exchanges are very productive, especially when in a car, on the highway, crossing desertic landscapes or high plateaus.

K.S. - How did you decide to paint? It's an embarrassing question, because it always appears so obvious.

A.C. - We discussed it; for us, in the end, talking about art always comes back to talking about painting.

A.M.J. - I think it's really about an encounter between a desire to talk about painting and these maps of cities in the desert. Working is also knowing how to be captivated, how to seize onto things like that.

M.N. - How do you position yourselves compared to an artist such as Peter Halley, whose painting encompasses an entire socio-political discourse under the appearance of neo-geo? Does your painting carry a message?

A.C. - I think that our place is more on the side of a relative autonomy of painting, rather than on its possible heteronomy.

A.M.J. - Today, one can utilize anything, any material; one can investigate everything... Since everything is possible, why not reinvest the field of painting, re-examine it; not to pick up where we last left off – that is, with regard to its materiality – but rather to look elsewhere and in another way. What can painting produce that's new compared to other mediums, other artistic tools?

In creating our paintings, we became aware of a certain number of things relating to the grid or to the screen. Perhaps it's more about a painting-screen, which is no longer a window "behind which," nor a frame "within which," but rather a table "on which," or a grid "under which" slide images, elements or data about the region. The grid is an

“on-top,” a layer of readability. What happens under the grid becomes the territory of painting.

M.N. - During an earlier conversation, I evoked the autobiographical dimension of your paintings. I found it curious that they reproduced portions of maps of cities in the desert; when in fact, you are always on the lookout for a suitable place to live.

A.C. - It is true that we are always on the lookout for a livable area, a suitable place for us to settle – which does not necessarily mean that we will actually settle there one day. We still have this fantasy of living and working in a desertic place, preferably one with a lunar landscape, whether it's in Arizona, New Mexico or in the French region of the Larzac. In any case, I think that our paintings' interest lies mostly in their ability to transform events into reflection. I believe that what constitutes a work of art is its capacity to reveal something universal.

That said, I would like to know how you, Marylène and Klaus, work as a couple?

K.S. - The first work we did together was for an exhibition whose subject was about the idea of exchange. In our case, it worked well...

M.N. - It was an announcement.

K.S. - Yes, we publicly announced our meeting by thanking the organizers.

A.C. - But, afterwards, you developed an important concept: Artists at work. You produced many photos which were not taken by you, but which were staged by you and ordered from a photographer.

M.N. - These photos show us together in life, whether we're on a café terrace or sprawled amidst other groups of people on a park lawn. In fact, our work remains invisible in these images, we appear more disinterested, idle. These images question the limits between production and non-production, working time and free time. For us, life is not art, but art allows us to show life as we imagine it.

K.S. - When one works in terms of a specific situation, the work takes its direction from that given context. Artists at work shows what is possible beyond that.

A.M.J. - A kind of autonomy...

K.S. - An autonomy that is probably not desired, but with which one is confronted as an artist. I think that any activity depends on a subject. This subject is given by a situation to which you react. In the absence of this constraint, you must define the subject yourself. This choice is subjective and probably incomprehensible for others.

A.M.J. - Do you think it involves a pretext?

K.S. - Yes, probably.

M.N. - And you, are your maps a pretext for painting?

A.M.J. - Above all, to ask questions about representation.

K.S. - Representation is also always something which is related to the interpretation of what one sees. This representation necessarily is filtered through a specific and subjective perception of things. Here, I have more the impression that we are dealing with a tracing over, a straight reporting of information, even though you do intervene in the density of colors and the choice of scale.

A.M.J. - About the question of the real, I think that we tend more and more to read reality and less to see it. What seems interesting to me in our paintings, is that one leaves one mode of iconic representation for another system of codification which is closer to that of language.

M.N. - For your paintings, given their scale, it's more about a physical experience.

A.M.J. - Rendering something physical is to find its proper scale. If the paintings were smaller, the grid would disappear into the familiar way we use a map. If the paintings were larger, the grid would tend to disappear from our field of vision; its constituent lines would be spaced too far apart.

For us, the grid is the last element of the map – but for the spectator, it is the first, the one which acts as an overall screen, the uppermost layer. On the same level, in terms of the succession of pictorial layers, the directional sighting points and the numbers orient and quantify the area, and offer a broader, enlarged viewpoint that provides access to the area.

M.N. - Are you thinking of a follow-up?

A.C. - Our next series of paintings will treat the question of what a landscape painting could be today. As is often the case with us, a word or a phrase which impresses us sets it in motion: here, “la zone de partage du ciel” [“the zone dividing the sky”]. We will show the sky, a cloudless sky, as we like them, very blue, painted with a glaze. Each sky will have a different depth: a narrow white vertical line will divide it in two. The wide borders of the canvas will be painted with ochres and Siennas, signifying the earth. The stretchers will be even thicker than those we use now. There will be all kinds of earth colors, more or less red, more or less ochre, skies with more or less depth, more or less blue. The limit between the earth and the sky will be changeable. That is, the earth, painted on the edges of the canvas, will also be able to invade the surface. In landscape painting, one positions the horizon line slightly higher or slightly lower; here, the horizon will be peripheral.

M.N. - Contrary to the previous ones, will these future paintings be entirely products of your imaginations?

A.M.J. - We have imagined them. The Map Paintings are representations of territory with a precise codification and procedure involving tracing paper, and superimposed layers. In these new paintings, there will only be two layers: the sky and the earth, on the same surface plane. There will be images of pure sky, "total sky," "sky divisions," with one or two skies. The question of representing a territory will be addressed in a different way. It will be another way of signifying it.

A.C. - It will be a peripheral vision of the landscape... both central and peripheral at the same time.

M.N. - How do you go from reproducing a map to making a painting that you completely invent?

A.C. - The new paintings will also address the problem of the referent. We have no desire whatsoever to invent a new kind of "open air" painting. We are not going to plant our easel at a particular place, facing a particular landscape and sky. If one insists on preserving the established painting categories, I would say that we tend more towards the "vedute," the imaginary landscape. This involves more of a mental landscape.

A.M.J. - We will choose the ochres, the reds, specific blues, colors which refer to unique areas or at least to how we conceive of them.

Since our last conversation, we have been imagining the exhibition in its entirety. We will show the Map Paintings and the Landscape Neons – Monument Valley: landscapes and silhouettes – on both floors. The exhibition will be entitled *Séries américaines*. Rather than being presented at the entrance, the title will be written on a wall inside the exhibition, in the midst of the paintings. Outside the building, we will hang a sky-blue tarpaulin in the middle of which will be printed in white letters: *Un endroit idéal* [an ideal place].

M.N. - What's that, an ideal place?

A.M.J. - It is a work in itself which, within the public space, belongs to the realm of ideas and reveals a mental landscape, a region, a deep blue background.

*Translated by Jane McDonald*