

Dia:Chelsea 545 West 22nd Street New York City Dia:Beacon, Riggio Galleries 3 Beekman Street Beacon New York www.diaart.org

François Morellet

A prolific self-taught painter, sculptor, and installation artist, François Morellet developed a decisive approach to geometric abstraction during an artistic career that spanned more than sixty years. Morellet began his mature production in 1952, when he decided to adopt a "programmed experimental form of painting," where each of his works would be fully conceived prior to execution. From then on, the artist remained focused on preestablished systems using a restricted formal vocabulary, opting for self-generating variations of radical simplicity. Working mostly with lines and basic forms (such as circles, squares, and triangles), Morellet used a large variety of mediums (including adhesive tape, iron, neon tubes, paint, steel, wire mesh, and wood) to explore methodologies of rigorous objectivity and personal detachment. He followed predetermined rules of play, which allowed him to disregard the conventional notions of composition and inspiration. Mathematical formulas preside over the organization of the artist's geometric, nonhierarchical structures, rendering complex visual results. Morellet's titles communicate the key to his mental processes, ensuring the clarity of his systems; however, they do not deliver messages or meanings beyond their selfdescribed content.

Despite aiming for artistic neutrality, Morellet steadily infused his systematic explorations with playfulness and levity. In the late 1950s, the artist adopted chance as an organizing factor to disturb his well-tempered grids, distancing himself from the Concrete art movement with which he had identified earlier in the decade. Morellet chose to use the decimals of the irrational number pi (π) or the digits listed in his phone directory as impersonal factors of chance. Visitor engagement with his interactive installations also assured that randomness was a part of the work. As one of the founding members of Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), an experimental artist collaborative that was active in France in the 1960s, Morellet investigated the creative potential of kinetic and optical effects. GRAV created dynamic situations that emulated scientific procedures by moving away from static objects. Each situation was designed to challenge the perception of the spectators, who would often become active participants. While created by individual members, the works emanating from the group were originally presented anonymously for the sake of their declared mission: to demystify the romantic figure of the inspired genius and the artistic values commonly associated with it.

Morellet classified his early works under several conceptual categories: "juxtaposition; superimposition; fragmentation; interference; randomization; and destabilization." The

artist's production remained diverse throughout his career, as he carried out multiple disruptions in his geometric systems without upending his core principles. Morellet's new developments led to innovative bodies of work that proved to be both systematic and eccentric: from his studies into "the outside of painting"—what he understood as the medium's materiality and apparatus in relation to the exhibition space and its apprehension by the visitor; to his late "Baroque Minimalist" pieces that often facetiously deconstruct primary shapes. Furthermore, the artist increasingly inflected his rigorous abstract combinations with a witty sense of humor, as the tongue-in-cheek puns and other play of words in many of his titles testify, such as the palindrome *No End Neon* or the portmanteau *Géométree*. Morellet relentlessly questioned the definition of art and status of the artist with both audacity and humor, never giving in to the pitfalls of self-righteous didacticism or austere pretension.

Presented at Dia Art Foundation's exhibition spaces in New York City and Beacon, François Morellet offers a focused exploration of the artist's wide-ranging practice. At Dia:Chelsea, a large selection of Morellet's early abstract geometric paintings are exhibited with key examples from his later series and neon works. Additionally, Morellet's first architectural integration, Trames 3°, 87°, 93°, 183° (Grids 3°, 87°, 93°, 183°, 1971/2017), is installed on the facade of Dia's six-story building on West 22nd Street in New York City. In a lower-level gallery at Dia:Beacon, Dia features a site-specific installation by the artist titled No End Neon (1990/2017). The expansive neon work was reconfigured for Dia's upstate venue in close collaboration with the Morellet Estate in Cholet, France. This presentation allows visitors to encounter Morellet's oeuvre alongside major installations of work by his American and European peers who are represented in Dia's permanent collection.

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checklist

1. **16 carrés (16 Squares)**, 1953

Oil on wood

Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany

2. 2 trames de lignes perpendiculaires (2 Grids of Perpendicular Lines), 1952

Glycerophtalic lacquer on wood

Collection Pierre Moraillon, Paris

3. Violet, bleu, vert, jaune, orange, rouge (Purple, Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red),

1953

Oil on wood

Centre Pompidou, Paris/Musée national d'art moderne/Centre de création industrielle

4. Bleu, jaune, rouge (Blue, Yellow, Red), 1956

Oil on wood

Private collection, Switzerland

5. **32** rectangles, 1953

Oil on wood

Private collection

6. Peinture (Painting), 1952

Oil on wood

Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin

7. **Peinture (Painting)**, 1954

Oil on wood

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

8. Angles droits concentriques (Concentric Right Angles), 1956

Oil on wood

Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, Germany

9. Parallèles jaunes et noires (Yellow and Black Parallels), 1952

Oil on wood

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

In 1952, two years after embracing geometric abstraction, Morellet started to develop objective and neutral methods to create his work based on predetermined rules of play. In reaction to the lyrical abstraction of the École de Paris, the artistic school dominant in France at the time, he strived to avoid subjective decisions and personal taste in his programmed productions, putting himself on the path to create fully systematic art.

In the early oil paintings *Parallèles jaunes et noires* (*Yellow and Black Parallels*, 1952), *Peinture* (*Painting*, 1952 and 1954), and *Angles droits concentriques* (*Concentric Right Angles*, 1956), the meticulous repetition of parallel, straight lines laid in vertical, horizontal, and diagonal directions offers a nonhierarchical treatment of the pictorial field. Playing against the traditional notion of composition, Morellet conferred the same importance to each component of his serial structures. Uniformly drawn and covering the entire surface of the work, the rectilinear pattern seems to imply a virtually infinite extension beyond the borders of the picture, as in an all-encompassing geometric continuum. Morellet's predilection for all-over painting was solidified by a powerful aesthetic revelation upon his first visit in 1952 to the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain. The anonymous beauty and rigorous precision of this remarkable example of Islamic decorative art made a decisive and long-lasting impression on the young artist.

Morellet's 16 carrés (16 Squares, 1953) features three equidistant horizontal lines that intersect three equidistant vertical lines, forming a regular grid of sixteen squares. Though pared down, the piece still required eleven arbitrary decisions, as the artist often wittingly noted in his writings, to determine its format (shape and size), content (figure, relative horizontal and vertical position, width, and number), distribution, color (black or white), and material.

The subsequent subdivision of each square by a horizontal or vertical line led to an intricate combination of 32 rectangles (1953), an early demonstration of how seemingly rudimentary systems, developed logically through the modification or multiplication of simple parameters, can generate a vast range of complex variations. Significantly enough, Morellet's seminal 16 Squares was at one point alternatively titled Trames 0°, 90°, the orthogonal shape soon to become the matrix of his oeuvre.

checklist

 Répartition aléatoire de triangles suivant les chiffres pairs et impairs d'un annuaire de téléphone et détails (Random Distribution of Triangles Using the Even and Odd Numbers of a Telephone Directory and Details), 1958

Oil on wood

Musée de Grenoble, France

 4 répartitions aléatoires de 2 carrés suivant les chiffres 31-41-59-26-53-58-97-93 (4 Random Distributions of 2 Squares Using the Numbers 31-41-59-26-53-58-97-93), 1958

6

7

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Oil on wood

Collection Manfred Wandel, Reutlingen, Germany

 Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés suivant les chiffres pairs et impairs d'un annuaire de téléphone, 50% orange, 50% violet (Random Distribution of 40,000 Squares Using the Even and Odd Numbers of a Telephone Directory, 50% Orange, 50% Purple). 1962

Silkscreen on wood

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

 Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés suivant les chiffres pairs et impairs d'un annuaire de téléphone, 50% blanc, 50% jaune (Random Distribution of 40,000 Squares Using the Even and Odd Numbers of a Telephone Directory, 50% White, 50% Yellow), 1961

Silkscreen on wood

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés suivant les chiffres pairs et impairs d'un annuaire de téléphone, 50% bleu nuit, 50% noir (Random Distribution of 40,000 Squares Using the Even and Odd Numbers of a Telephone Directory, 50% Night Blue, 50% Black), 1961

Silkscreen on wood

Collection Galerie Hervé Bize, Nancy, France

4 trames de points rouges 0°, 22°5, 45°, 67°5, 4 trames de points bleus 11°25, 33°75, 56°25, 78°75 (4 Grids of Red Dots 0°, 22.5°, 45°, 67.5°, 4 Grids of Blue Dots 11.25°, 33.75°, 56.25°, 78.75°), 1979

Silkscreen on wood

Collection Billarant, Paris

7. Du jaune au violet (From Yellow to Purple), 1956

Oil on wood

Centre Pompidou, Paris/Musée national d'art moderne/Centre de création industrielle

8. 3 doubles trames 0°, 30°, 60° (3 Double Grids 0°, 30°, 60°), 1965

Oil on wood

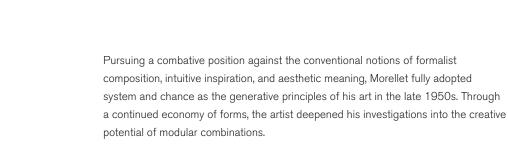
Collection Clarissa and Edgar Bronfman, Jr., New York

4 doubles trames 0°, 22°5, 45°, 67°5 (4 Double Grids 0°, 22.5°, 45°, 67.5°), 1958
Oil on wood

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

10. 2 trames de grillage 12°, 79° (2 Wire Mesh Grids 12°, 79°), 1959

Wire on painted wood panel Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

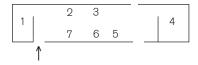


Morellet revisited and further developed the basic structure of his seminal 16 Squares, superimposing his series of trames (grids) at various angles. Through a meticulous process of addition and rotation, he unfolded precise combinations of dense interlacing networks of straight lines, producing circular and star-shaped motifs. Running homogeneously over the entire picture plane, the grids were painted in black and white, gray, or color by hand with an industrial drawing pen. Soon thereafter, the paintings were made using silkscreens or wire mesh, as in 2 trames de grillage 12°, 79° (2 Wire Mesh Grids 12°, 79°, 1959).

Starting in 1957, Morellet employed chance as another organizing criterion in his geometric constructions. While guaranteeing the objectivity of the artist's systems, the neutral and programmable random factor introduced a certain sense of disorder. He decided to leave it to the decimals of the irrational number π or to the digits found in his local phone directory to determine the position of his chosen forms, be they lines, squares, or triangles.

In the series Répartitions aléatoires de 40 000 carrés (Random Distributions of 40,000 Squares), a square painting is evenly divided vertically and horizontally by two sets of two hundred lines, forming a grid of forty-thousand smaller squares. Morellet checked off the squares for each even digit of the phone numbers, leaving a blank for each odd digit. The five-millimeter squares were then painted (or silkscreened starting in 1961), using two contrasting colors for full optical effect.

In Lignes au hasard (Random Lines), a series initiated in the late 1960s and visible in the next gallery, the random numbers from the same phone directory provided coordinates for the location of lines. On a square subdivided this time into one hundred equal parts, numbered "00" to "99," two digits indicate the starting point of a line, the next two its ending point.



checklist

 Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur (Reflections in Water Distorted by the Spectator), 1964/2017

Neon on wood and metal, wood and aluminum pools, water, and mechanical system Exhibition copy courtesy Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

MAC/VAL, musée d'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Vitry-sur-Seine, France

2. 2 trames de tirets interférents (2 Grids of Interfering Dashes), 1974

Oil on canvas

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

 Trame inclinée à 5° placée horizontalement (5° Tilted Grid Placed Horizontally), 1975

Oil on canvas

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

4. Néon 0°, 45°, 90°, 135° avec 4 rythmes interférents (Neon 0°, 45°, 90°, 135° with 4 Interfering Rhythms), 1963

Neon on wood and metal

Courtesy kamel mennour, Paris/London

5. 20 lignes au hasard (20 Random Lines), 1971

Oil on canvas

Collection Manfred Wandel, Reutlingen, Germany

6. 10 lignes au hasard (10 Random Lines), 1971

Oil on canvas

Collection Cees Dam, Aerdenhout, Netherlands

7. Tirets 0°, 90° (Dashes 0°, 90°), 1960

Oil on canvas

Musée de Grenoble, France

During the 1960s, Morellet's production became associated with Kinetic and Op art. A founding member of Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV)—alongside fellow artists Horacio Garcia-Rossi, Julio Le Parc, Francisco Sobrino, Joël Stein, and Jean-Pierre Yvaral—Morellet gave his experiments a more radical turn, focusing on demystifying the commonly accepted notions of artistic values and interpretation.

Through sculptures and installation works (Morellet almost gave up painting at the time), he furthered some of his previous explorations with renewed means and scale. Begun in 1962, a series of so-called "sphère-trames" embodied the artist's eighty-by-eighty-centimeter painted grids in three dimensions, an example of which is on view in gallery six. Fabricated in metal, the works eventually ranged in size from sixty centimeters to almost five meters.

Morellet also returned to his 16 Squares for Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur (Reflections in Water Distorted by the Spectator). The interactive work invites a visitor to operate a handle, which blurs the reflection of a ceiling-mounted orthogonal neon grid that appears on a liquid surface on the floor. The playful visual experiment was conceived for GRAV's second labyrinthe—a maze-like interactive environment made out of seven immersive cells exhibited at Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1964. Some forty years later, the installation led to a sculptural series, Après réflexion (After Reflection), where the artist transposed into wall-mounted neon works the distorted reflections as documented in archival photographs of the original installation.

Néon 0°, 45°, 90°, 135° avec 4 rythmes interférents (Neons 0°, 45°, 90°, 135° with 4 Interfering Rhythms, 1963), Morellet's first neon and installation work, was included in GRAV's inaugural labyrinthe, shown at the Paris Biennial in 1963. The quick succession of flashing consecutive images reveals and conceals the straight neon lines, which are positioned in four regular directions. Somewhat provocatively, the artist aimed at destabilizing the viewer's perception, rather than offering an object of soft contemplation. More interested in the relationship to time, rather than space or movement, Morellet has compared his approach to serial music compositions.

checklist

Papier 5°, 95°, trou (carré) 0°, 90°
(Paper 5°, 95°, Hole [Square] 0°, 90°), 1981

Card stock

Collection Clarissa Alcock Bronfman, New York

 Ligne continue sur 4 plans inclinés à 0°, 30°, 60°, 90° (Continuous Line over 4 Tilted Planes by 0°, 30°, 60°, 90°), 1978

Acrylic on canvas

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

3. Steel life n°58, 1992

Acrylic on canvas on wood with iron Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

 Sur un carré 0°, 90° et un carré 15°, 105°, indication d'une médiane et du prolongement de la médiane de l'autre carré (On a 0°, 90° Square and a 15°, 105° Square Indication of a Median and the Prolongation of the Other Square's Median), 1976

Acrylic on canvas

Brooklyn Museum of Art; Gift of Owain Hughes

5. Angle droit (fer plat) et sa bissectrice (miroir) (Right Angle [Flat Iron] and Its Bisector [Mirror]), 1982

Mirror and iron

Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin

6. Arc de cercle brisé en 4 (Arc of Circle Broken in 4), 1954

Oil on wood

Collection Manfred Wandel, Reutlingen, Germany

7. Arcs de cercle complémentaires n° 3 (Géométree n° 5C) (Complementary Arcs of Circle n. 3 [Geometree n. 5C]), 1983

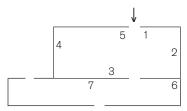
Wood and crayon

Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, Netherlands

After GRAV disbanded in 1968, Morellet fully returned to painting. During the 1970s, the artist became more and more interested in what he called "the outside of painting," in other words, what happens around rather than inside the pictorial plane. In the early precedent *Arc de cercle brisé en 4 (Arc of Circle Broken in 4*, 1954), Morellet considered painting as an object in space whose constraints of display, starting with the conventional floor-wall relationship, should be challenged. From then on, he playfully created works relying on unusual positioning or orientation in space, his blank canvases becoming the mere markers of verticality and horizontality. Maintaining his commitment to systematic geometry, the artist continued to use patterns such as uniformly dispersed parallel lines, and also introduced an instrumental factor—the tilted angle. Provoking conceptual collisions between the logic of presentation and the logic of representation, Morellet created another artistic category for himself: destabilization.

In the early 1980s, Morellet began a series of reliefs incorporating trimmed branches or twigs combined with a white canvas or the surface of the wall, as in *Arcs de cercle complémentaires n° 3 (Géométree n° 5C)* (*Complementary Arcs of Circle n. 3 [Geometree n. 5C]*, 1983). The irregular forms are used as points of departure for geometric exercises where the artist set out to follow or complete the pseudo lines, squares, or arcs found in nature. Morellet, who was a keen gardener, used vegetal components to disrupt his otherwise neat, regular set of mathematical rules. With the portmanteau *Géométree* as title (a mutual perversion of nature and geometry), this body of work continues to translate the artist's unflinching sense of humor and derision. In the 1980s, Morellet developed a similarly spirited series, Steel Life, combining wall-hung monochromes with metal framing structures. Deconstructing the expectations of painting, the open steel angles playfully interact with their canvases as if becoming alive.

Galleries 5 and 6



checklist

1. Cercles et demi-cercles (Circles and Semi-Circles), 1952

Oil on wood

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Charles W. Goodyear and Edmund Hayes Funds, 1981

2. Relâche n° 2 blanc. 1992

Acrylic and oil on canvas, painted aluminum, neon, and fabric tape Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

3. 5° au-dessus de 0° (5° Above 0°), 1991/2017

Adhesive tape on wall

Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, France

4. Lamentable, 2006

Neon and nylon cord

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

5. 52 x 4 n° 3: cercles et demi-cercles (Quand j'étais petit, je ne faisais pas grand) (52 x 4 n. 3: Circles and Semi-Circles [When I Was Little, I Didn't Do Big]), 2006

Acrylic on canvas on wood

Collection Olivier Varenne, Geneva

6. Sphère-trames (Grid-Sphere), ca. 1962

Stainless steel

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

7. π rococo n° 24, 1 = 10°, 2011/2017

Neon

Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

In the 1990s, Morellet introduced new formal and spatial developments to his programmed experimental art that he would continue to explore for the rest of his career. A self-generating system first adopted in 1997, the series π rococo allowed Morellet's taste for unpredictable developments within well-defined frameworks to blossom. Neon quarters of circles following decimals of the irrational number π form vast curved assemblages reminiscent of the arabesques and volutes of the Baroque tradition. With these installations, Morellet created pseudo-rococo versions of his binary chance-based systems of Random Distributions.

Started in 1992, the mixed-media series Relâche offers systematic combinations of materials that Morellet had adopted up to that point in his career (oil and acrylic paint, adhesive tape, flat iron, and neon). Behind the seemingly chaotic arrangements lies his familiar organizing principle sourced in random sequences of phone numbers. Meaning literally in French a rest, or a loosening (perhaps of his rigorously minimal processes), Morellet's title serves also as an homage to Francis Picabia's Dadaist ballet with its provocative title (the term "Relâche" in French theaters was used to indicate that a show was canceled).

Bearing a deprecating title, the series Lamentable facetiously deconstructs the harmonious shape of a perfect circle. Instead of the intact primary form, which the spectator can only visualize mentally, threads of neon arcs clumsily dangle from the ceiling, while the other extremities spread as if accidentally on the floor.

Feeling he had somewhat underestimated the question of scale as a young painter (especially when compared with his American peers), Morellet decided to replicate a selection of works from his pivotal year of 1952, blowing up their size by four. According to Morellet, the 2006 series 52 x 4 (Quand j'étais petit, je ne faisais pas grand) (52 x 4 [When I Was Little, I Didn't Do Big]) manages to more obviously achieve the intended impression of immersive infinity hinted by his early all-over paintings. The radical series also constitutes the most provocative demonstration of the artist's predilection for repetition and anti-composition, here pushed to the absurd.

Dia:Chelsea, west facade of 535 West 22nd Street, New York City

Trames 3°, 87°, 93°, 183° (Grids 3°, 87°, 93°, 183°), 1971/2017 Sign paint on stucco Morellet Estate, Cholet, France

Originally situated at the plateau la Reynie across from plateau Beaubourg, *Trames 3°*, 87°, 93°, 183° (*Grids 3°*, 87°, 93°, 183°) was commissioned in 1971 by the City of Paris and the Centre national d'art contemporain to herald the future location of the Centre Pompidou, which opened in 1977. This major public commission propelled Morellet's career forward and marked the expansion of his practice to include large-scale architectural integrations (or "désintégrations architecturales" as he playfully referred to them). Despite the irregular and varied surface available, the grids expand to occupy the space in a uniform manner, twice rotating an orthogonal structure by three degrees. Dia's presentation on the facade of 535 West 22nd Street is the first time that this monumental work has been re-sited since its original display more than forty years ago.

Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York

No End Neon, 1990/2017

Neon and wire

Dia Art Foundation; Gift of the Morellet Family and Blain|Southern, London and Berlin

Initially experimenting with neon during his affiliation with GRAV, Morellet returned to the medium in the late 1970s as he was simultaneously foraying into architectural integration. He then began to utilize neon on a much larger scale and often in site-specific ways. In 1990 Morellet created 30 néons et 1 point du vue for the Abbey of Saint Philibert in Tournus, France. He later expanded this work to become No End Neon, an immersive version of the original installation in which the viewer can walk through the space. As with all his systematic works, Morellet developed responsive guidelines that continue to be followed, adapting the work to each new location. Seen at Dia:Beacon, No End Neon is the most expansive installation of this system to date with a total of sixty-one tubes.

François Morellet was born in Cholet, France, in 1926. Following his literature studies in Paris, Morellet returned to Cholet in 1948 and ran a family-owned toy factory until 1975. Critically this position allowed him to finance his early artistic career, and brought him into dialogue with fabricators and material production, which helped to innovate his practice. In 1950 he visited Brazil, where he first learned about the work of Max Bill and Concrete art. Following his return to France in 1951, he shifted to painting in a geometric manner. As a founding member of the French artist collaborative Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), Morellet began working with a neon fabricator in 1963 to create high-voltage neon tubes that could be turned on and off rapidly. The artist's later practice expanded from small-scale paintings and installations created with GRAV to larger neon installations and architectural integrations.

Morellet's work has been included in several important international group exhibitions including *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1965), Documenta in Kassel, Germany (1964 [with GRAV], 1968, and 1977), and the Venice Biennale (1970 and 1990). In 1971 his first solo museum exhibition originated at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, and traveled throughout Europe. His work was the subject of an American retrospective in 1984–85, traveling to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal, Brooklyn Museum, and Center for the Fine Arts in Miami. Other major retrospectives of Morellet's work have been held at the Centre Pompidou (1986 and 2011) and Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume (2000–01) in Paris. Morellet died in Cholet in 2016.

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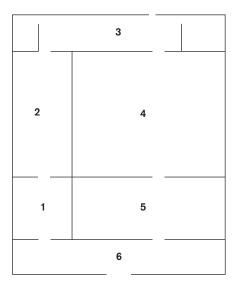
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site map



related programs at Dia:Chelsea

DiaTalks

Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh with Béatrice Gross on François Morellet Saturday, February 3, 2018, 2:30 pm

Symposium

Alexander Alberro, John Armleder, Daniel Levin Becker, Béatrice Gross, and Valerie Hillings Saturday, March 3, 2018, 11 am

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Cover: François Morellet, *Du jaune au violet (From Yellow to Purple)*, 1956. Centre Pompidou, Paris/Musée national d'art moderne/Centre de création industrielle. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Morellet Estate, Cholet, France