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# Pierre Soulages's Ultrablack Paintings: The Matter of Presence

ANANDA SHANKAR CHAKRABARTY, OCAD UNIVERSITY

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## Résumé

Pour la philosophe française Éliane Escoubas, l'« outrenoir » que l'artiste français Pierre Soulages a créé depuis 1979 démontre la « présence de la peinture en peinture. » Si la peinture outrenoire résulte d'un processus illustrant parfaitement la matérialité qui a fortement marqué une grande partie de l'art européen d'après-guerre, l'élément le plus remarquable des travaux outrenoirs de Soulages réside dans le spectacle de la tension lumineuse induite par les stries inscrites dans le pigment épais de ces peintures. S'appuyant sur une lecture approfondie des tableaux outrenoirs de Soulages, ainsi que sur plusieurs commentaires critiques d'historiens de l'art, cet article avance l'idée que le regardeur, tour à tour confronté aux effacements et aux dévoilements de la matière pigmentaire sur la surface de la peinture outrenoire, vit ici une expérience sensorielle. En rendant présent ce qui est détenu dans les plis, le spectacle de la peinture outrenoire offre la présence de la matière en tant que voir.

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In a study of the “outrenoir” or ultrablack paintings that the French artist Pierre Soulages has created since early 1979,<sup>1</sup> the French philosopher Éliane Escoubas wrote, “Space where the variation of the visible (or the visible as variable) is implemented, the ‘black on black’ painting by Soulages paints *nothing*, offers *nothing* to see: it offers ‘seeing.’”<sup>2</sup> Escoubas’s remark might appear perplexing, to say the least. The paintings in question, prominently displayed since 1979 in several exhibitions in France and elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> and also on view in the recent exhibition *Soulages* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris,<sup>4</sup> exist as most paintings do and, therefore, would be expected to offer something to see. Yet, most viewers—in France or elsewhere—have little understanding of what or how to see in works that purportedly offer “*nothing* to see.” In this essay I want to take a closer look at the exuberant topography of Soulages’s ultrablack paintings with their “hyper-sensitive—ultra-sensuous—surface,”<sup>5</sup> as Donald Kuspit put it. As I argue below, the spectacular textural presence of the ultrablack paintings induces the beholder to engage with a spectacle that remains framed by what is visible, or not, to the beholder

The first section of this essay begins with a brief introduction to Soulages’s works before the ultrablack period and then addresses the processual parameters of the ultrablack paintings. In the next section, I contend that Soulages’s post-1979 pictorial praxis exemplifies the emphasis on materiality that has decisively marked much of post-war European art in remarkably varied forms. The most striking element of Soulages’s ultrablack paintings, however, resides principally in the spectacle of luminous tension induced by the intervallic striae in the paintings. In the final section of this essay, I suggest that the intervals and folds on the surface of the ultrablack paintings emerge from the archival economy of erasures and disclosures of the painterly matter: in the tension between the visible and the invisible, Soulages’s ultrablack painting offers the matter of presence *qua* seeing.

## Specificity of Soulages's ultrablack paintings

The professional career of Pierre Soulages commenced in 1947 when he showed three paintings in the *Salon des surindépendants* (Parc des Expositions, Paris), but his work did not gain recognition until the following year when he showed five oil paintings and eight works on paper in the *Grosse Ausstellung Französischer Abstrakter Malerei*, the first post-war exhibition of abstract art in Germany (1948–49).<sup>6</sup> His *Brou de noix, 1947–48, 65 x 50 cm*, a walnut-stain painting on paper, was featured on the poster of this exhibition and thus ensured significant visibility for his work. In 1948 James Johnson Sweeney, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, visited Soulages’s Parisian studio, bought one painting, and began to introduce the painter’s work to American artists and critics when he returned to the United States.<sup>7</sup> The international and domestic recognition that immediately followed the German exhibition and Sweeney’s visit continued without respite between 1948 and 1978. During these thirty years, Soulages produced works in different media,<sup>8</sup> which were shown in fifty-six solo exhibitions and in over four hundred group shows in France and elsewhere. And then, one night in January 1979, things changed.<sup>9</sup>

While Soulages’s earlier works already emphasized the use of black ink or paint, in January 1979 he began to completely cover his canvases with textured black paint. Between January 1979 and March 1992, he created three hundred and ninety-four paintings utilizing the technique of textured surface that is typical of the ultrablack paintings. More than two hundred and fifty were completely black textured canvases; the rest were multi-chromatic (textured black with blue, reddish brown, white, ochre, or matte non-textured black). He paused between March 1992 and February 1994 for the installation of one hundred and fourteen windows at the Abbey of Sainte-Foy in Conques (I discuss Soulages’s windows specifically in the third section), and in March 1994 he returned to his ultrablack paintings.

Soulages’s ultrablack works had their first public exposure in an exhibition curated by Alfred Pacquement at the Musée national d’art moderne (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris) in



Figure 1. Pierre Soulages, *Peinture 162 x 310 cm, 14 août 1979*. Oil on canvas, 162 x 310 cm. (Photo credit : Musée Picasso Antibes. FRAC Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Dépôt au Musée Picasso, Antibes depuis 1996.)

the fall of 1979,<sup>10</sup> which featured eight paintings from that year and fifteen paintings done between 1969 and 1978. The difference between the last work from 1978, *Peinture 114 x 162 cm, 17 octobre 1978* (no. 775),<sup>11</sup> and the first work from 1979, *Peinture 162 x 114 cm, 27 février 1979* (no. 781), was immediately visible. In the 1978 work Soulages played on the contrast between two tonal values of dark colour by superimposing large marks in opaque black on a ground entirely covered by a thin coating of lighter black. The 1979 painting, the first existing work in the series of ultrablack paintings, contained three non-textured black rectilinear bands variably posed on a black textured ground. The organization of striated and non-striated areas was still hesitant, and the pictorial surface contained some unpainted areas on the upper right, lower left, and right corners. But, the heavily striated, black on black configuration already revealed the advent of a new technique of making a painting by repeated applications of pigment combined with subsequent erasures and disclosures of the ground, the marks, and the traces of those marks. The juxtaposition of scored and smooth areas first appeared distinctly in *Peinture 162 x 127 cm, 11 avril 1979* (no. 785), and, three days later, *Peinture 162 x 127 cm, 14 avril 1979* (no. 786) revealed the full potency of an ultrablack painting. In the latter work the textured skin of black

pigment entirely covered the pictorial surface: striated sections were strategically configured around what Pierre Encrevé calls “smooth, non-striated areas in which the paint acquires the appearance of a living skin, with thousands of pores made upon it by exploding bubbles of air.”<sup>12</sup>

Some clearly identifiable, though periodic, instances from Soulages's previous paintings foreshadow the technical processes used in the post-1979 works. A number of works from the mid-1950s onward show textural striations of variable intensity on a few sections of the painted surface, derived from the passage of hard brush fibres through wet impasto paint—a technique the artist used consistently in the ultrablack paintings. This can be seen, for example, in *Peinture 81 x 60 cm, 20 novembre 1954* (no. 161) or *Peinture 129 x 88,6 cm, 22 mai 1959* (no. 365): in both paintings, small areas of the canvas reflect the painter's desire to activate a textural emphasis. Striated areas occasionally appear also in some of Soulages's pre-1979 prints:<sup>13</sup> textural strategy is at work in his etchings such as *Eau-forte X a* and *b, 1957* (pr. cat. nos. 10 and 11) and *Eau-forte XXVI, 1974* (pr. cat. no. 28), and more prominently in two lithographs from 1974, *Lithographie n° 33* (pr. cat. no. 82), and *Lithographie n° 34* (pr. cat. no. 83). While the mark-making aspect in these earlier works never attains the depth or intensity of the post-

1979 paintings, it does suggest a latent presence of the textural strategy manifest in the later works.

While Soulages's ultrablack paintings vary to some extent in the organization of the striated and smooth segments inside the pictorial space, a certain operational homogeneity remains central to the works. In *Peinture 162 x 310 cm, 14. 08. 1979* (no. 793) (fig. 1), for example, the canvas is divided into three distinct vertical segments. The left vertical segment is covered by a thick coat of black paint and shows no textural marks. The rest of the canvas bears textural marks in the form of diagonal striations made with an improvised scraper. The right vertical segment reveals primarily horizontal striated incisions. In contrast, the central segment consists of three different directions of striae. The suture-like fold at the intersection of the right and central segments reappears with more tension on the other side of the canvas, separating the left and central segments. This increased tension at the intersection of the center and left segments derives not only from the variation in directional marks across the thick skin of the painting, but also from the significant difference in appearance between these two parts, one being heavily textured, and the other untextured. The repetitive parallelism of the striae, or furrows of different widths and depths, in the superposed layers of viscous paint generates rhythms of different frequencies, and at the same time creates a rupture between successive segments. The manipulation of the paint by Soulages produces a kind of black that could be visible or not depending on the variations of ambient light and on the angle of view. The same plan of action is present in most of the ultrablack paintings where textural marking remains fundamentally important.

A close study of the ultrablack paintings reveals several successive operations. For all the paintings of this category, Soulages worked standing on a low wooden platform that formed a bridge over the stretched canvas placed horizontally on the floor. In order to ensure the required viscosity of paint and the uniform drying of the paint layers, he mixed black pigment with oil, resin binder, and a lead-based siccative. Wide flat strips of wood, fixed to long wooden handles, were used for the application of thick paint. Flat scrapers, constructed out of hard rubber, plastic, or metal, and joined to broomsticks, served to scrape, flatten, and smooth selected areas of the surface of the canvas. The artist added a dentate working edge to an industrial broom with a wide working surface in order to score the surface and produce the striations. Housepainters' brushes with very stiff fibres created the textures on the raised ridges of paint. These operations were repeated in variable sequences until the result satisfied the painter.<sup>14</sup>

The above description provides a general idea of Soulages's working methods at the same time as it draws attention to his choice of and adherence to particular types of tools and media. While some critics have commented on the tools and tech-

niques used in the ultrablack paintings, the reasons behind these choices made by the artist do not find a similar resonance. Serge Guilbaut has observed that Soulages's use of walnut stain in the early period (1947–78) “allied with [his use of] housepainter’s brushes, signals that painting... had to return to the roots of the trade without forgetting the specificity of the social conditions at the base of its productions.”<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, the use of walnut stain—a deep brown aqueous stain extracted from the walnut husk and traditionally utilized by furniture-makers and woodworkers for its deep staining properties—as a pigment in the post-war artistic context has no documented precedent before Soulages's use of it, and his choice to paint with walnut stain on paper indicates a definite predilection on his part for the use of this artisanal medium. On the other hand, Soulages's utilization of “housepainter’s brushes” must be seen as the extension of some early modernist artistic practices that relied on “the *métier* of the artisan, of the housepainter,” which, as critics such as Guillaume Apollinaire had already exhorted in 1913, “should be for the artist the most vigorous material expression of painting.”<sup>16</sup>

Soulages's choices of materials and tools thus suggest an engagement on his part with the practices of the *artisan* as opposed to the enterprise of the *artist*. The engagement itself remains related to his early acquaintance with the artisanal world.<sup>17</sup> As a child, Soulages spent a lot of time in the artisanal complex around his house. This complex included workshops of hardware dealers, blacksmiths, tailors, cobblers, book-binders, masons, saddlers, wine merchants, printers, and cabinet makers. As Encrevé has pointed out, that acquaintance with various kinds of artisans was “responsible for his extraordinary knowledge of these trades and their tools, a good number of which have found its way in his studios.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Soulages himself said regarding his exploration of artisanal tools and materials such as walnut stain, “I did not want to be influenced by the only tools available at the time. In the same way, I learned to grind my own paints and to use walnut stain.”<sup>19</sup>

I contend that Guilbaut's comments concerning Soulages's earlier paintings remain equally pertinent for the ultrablack paintings. The technical execution of the ultrablack paintings, as I have described above, relies on the painter's informed decision to utilize artisanal and improvised tools. This decision corresponds to what Soulages has called a “rejection of an established order, a philosophy or an ideology.”<sup>20</sup> That rejection, acknowledged by critical support for his work from the French communist journal *Clarté* in 1962<sup>21</sup> and from the Parisian leftist newspaper *Libération* in 1986,<sup>22</sup> has never been absent from his artistic practice despite significant formal differences between his paintings done before 1979 and the ultrablack works.

Explaining the technical execution of the ultrablack paintings, Soulages has said, “If one thinks of the practice, ... I began by *leaving traces*, then in the same way, I added more paint,

scraped and scored the surface.”<sup>23</sup> Critics have often commented on Soulages’s proclivity for traces. Claude Bouyeure, for example, refers to Soulages as a “painter of the trace, and not of gesture,” and writes, “the painter investigates the trace and the ground on which the trace is inscribed.”<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that Bouyeure writes about the *inscription* of the trace when he comments on the artist’s specific manner of making a mark: *inscription* signifies both writing and carving words or marks, and that is precisely what Soulages does in his ultrablack paintings. The painter’s explication as well as critical commentaries point to three distinct formal procedural elements in the construction of the ultrablack paintings: a) a build-up of the pictorial matrix, in itself a stratified process since it includes partial and selective removal of the thick coating of pigment by scraping some areas as well as addition of more pigment; b) scoring or incising parts of the surface with specific improvised tools in order to produce the striations or furrows separated by intervals; and c) further texturing on the raised ridges of the striae by making notches and marks. The repetition of this process entails operations of erasure of earlier marks or “traces,” as well as those of disclosure of these previously inscribed marks. “Leaving traces” points to Soulages’s technique of making marks in order to generate a textural play on some areas of the pictorial surface, as well as on the glyphic structural components deployed in and along the striations.

Two statements by Soulages underscore the critical roles that texture and light play in enhancing the optical possibilities of the paintings. In 1979, the year he began to create the ultrablack paintings, Soulages explained the technical specificity of these works as follows: “In the totally black expanse of these black paintings, it is the difference of texture, smooth, fibrous, calm, tense or agitated, which produces greyish or darker blacks by *absorbing or refusing light*.”<sup>25</sup> In another interview from the same year, he again emphasized the importance of the texture regarding the visibility of the pictorial surface:

My recent paintings [from 1979 onward] are painted with the same black substance, the same pigment without any mixture.... Here, it is the texture of the surface, striated or smooth, that *changes the light* and gives rise to different values, the texture which makes [the surface] stable and calm at places, or renders it dynamic and creates tensions.<sup>26</sup>

The painter’s repeated evocations of texture and luminous tension underscore his intentional generation of intra-pictorial factors affecting the visibility of his paintings. Pierre Daix, among others, sees Soulages’s work in the ultrablack paintings as the “painting of texture in its purest form.”<sup>27</sup> Daix has described the chromaticity of these paintings in terms of a “mobile black, but unlike magma, a black as structured as a living tissue, vibrating with knots and bursts or breaks in the undulating stria-

tions, which, by reacting to light, would unfold at times in a very fine range of grays that would change and return to black under our gaze.”<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, Soulages’s practice points to his desire to imbue his paintings with the structural quality of a bas-relief through a petrification of the painterly matter, the *enduit*,<sup>29</sup> by admixing rigidifying elements such as resin binder with the pigment(s) in use. This process enables him to build up the layered ground of the painting and implement repetitive incisions in the matter. On the other hand, there is the painter’s consideration of the spectatorial observation. As I explain later, the movement of the luminous traces in these paintings goes beyond the mere spatial frame of the painting and draws the spectator into the space of the paintings.

Since the deployment of a black on black strategy constitutes a more or less central issue in these paintings, it is tempting to think of these works as monochromatic. However, a careful consideration of this strategy enables a demarcation of Soulages’s endeavour from the context of a well-documented practice of monochrome painting, in black or in another colour, by several modern and contemporary artists.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the term “monochrome” itself has at times encountered resistance from painters whose works indicate a strong monochromatic tendency. This is the case, for example, of Piero Manzoni, loosely associated with the German post-war group Zero (active 1957–67),<sup>31</sup> who painted a series of quasi-monochromatic paintings with kaolin, plaster, and occasionally other materials such as pebbles or ropes between 1957 and 1960. In these works, sutured folds in the unpainted canvas constituted horizontal or vertical separations within the canvas. In his attempt to signify his distance from earlier monochrome painters such as Kazimir Malevich and, as Michael Newman has argued, to emphasize the authorial status of the art object, Manzoni utilized the generic term “Achrome” (without colour) for his works of this type.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the American painter Robert Ryman, who has produced several white paintings from the 1960s onward with or without textured surfaces, has unambiguously declared that his work “is really not monochrome painting at all.”<sup>33</sup> Soulages himself has emphatically rejected “monochrome” as a descriptive term for his ultrablack paintings. In a 1987 interview, he asserted, “[T]he paintings that I have been doing since 1979 are not monochromatic, they are monochromatic only for a conventional gaze.”<sup>34</sup> More recently, responding to my question about the term “outrenoir,” Soulages reiterated his opposition to “monochrome” with regard to the ultrablack works:

I call them “outrenoir” because of a specific reason. As you know, the catalogue of the 1996 exhibition referred to the paintings as “noir-lumière” [black light]. That term does not bother me because it allows people to understand my paintings. In that sense, the term “noir-lumière” is not wrong. How-

ever, it brings the paintings back to the phenomena of optical physics. That is not what I wanted to do. When I invented the word “outrenoir,” I was trying to describe a mental space that is quite different from the space of the monochrome.<sup>35</sup>

The artist's remark does seem to contradict the unremitting presence of black in the majority of his ultrablack paintings. The inclusion of two ultrablack paintings in a 1981 Düsseldorf exhibition, *Schwarz*, and of one ultrablack painting in a 1988 Lyon exhibition, *La couleur seule...*, underscores that contradiction. At the same time, the tonal variations of the surface in Soulages's ultrablack paintings substantiate his claim regarding the non-monochromatic status of the works. While Pierre Encrevé's description of Soulages's post-1979 works as “mono-pigmentary paintings with chromatic polyvalence” (*toiles monopigmentaires à polyvalence chromatique*) offers more precision than the term monochromatic,<sup>36</sup> a focus on the chromatic status does not allow a proper understanding of the technical specificity of the paintings. In the post-1979 paintings there is a controlled manipulation of the thick skin of pigment covering the canvas bearing dense rhythmic striations: the facture frames and remains framed by fractures. The persistent presence—“an ecstatic presence,”<sup>37</sup> as Kuspit puts it—of texture and tactility in the ultrablack paintings puts Soulages's haptic work in opposition to the more optical status of other instances of black paintings, such as Barnett Newman's *Abraham* (1949), Robert Rauschenberg's “white paintings” and “black paintings” (ca. 1951–52), and Ad Reinhardt's *Ultimate Paintings* (ca. 1955–60).

If some of Soulages's earlier works, for example those from the 1948–60 period, often engendered comparisons with a few paintings by Franz Kline,<sup>38</sup> his post-1979 paintings are mostly compared to Reinhardt's *Ultimate Paintings*,<sup>39</sup> and there is ground for such comparison. Soulages's singleness of purpose exceeds similar endeavours by other contemporaneous painters mentioned above except for Reinhardt, whose own persistent, although briefer, exploration of the black on black possibility predates Soulages's works. Several critics have underscored the obvious formal contiguity residing in the exclusive use of black by the two artists, while noting the equally obvious formal difference in the pictorial techniques. There is no possibility of ignoring the authorial signature of each painter as it appears in their different treatments of the surface. The “hyper-sensitive—ultra-sensuous—surface” of Soulages's recent paintings differs significantly from the exaggerated flatness of Reinhardt's late work. The “unabashedly aesthetic” surfaces of Soulages's paintings “architect their own containment...without sacrificing their sensitivity,” according to Kuspit.<sup>40</sup> The chromatic austerity of the paintings collides with the tremendous movement of marks on the surface. Soulages's textural strategy in the ultrablack paintings generates a simultaneously sensory

and sensuous tactility, and it is useful to demarcate the mark-making and corporeal stratification in the ultrablack paintings from works by some other artists who have employed analogous structuring and texturing processes.

### Structure and texture in context

Writing on the construction of the surface in the ultrablack paintings, Gilbert Dupuis asserts that Soulages's “painting is that of a builder, architect or mason.”<sup>41</sup> An observation of the architectonic construction in these paintings reveals some remarkable differences as well as a few similarities with regard to similar endeavours by certain other artists. The structural layering of material in Soulages's works relies on the pigment itself that remains unchanged in appearance after application: the addition of a resin binder simply provides a greater viscosity to the paint so that it may be structured. This technique differs significantly from the working methods of artists such as Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Antoni Tàpies, and Alberto Burri, who often emphasized the material quality of their works. While works by these four artists relate in different ways to Soulages's ultrablack experience, only those of Burri from the late 1970s onward possess the kind of glyphic intensity noticed in Soulages's post-1979 paintings.

In Jean Fautrier's “haute pâte” works from 1943 onward, for example, material accretion depended on a non-pigmentary paste made up of plaster mixed with glue.<sup>42</sup> Fautrier's technique, relying heavily on textural structuring and layering of substance on the support, seems analogous to Soulages's operations. Yet, the fragile nature of Fautrier's markings, barely incised in the opaque substance, puts his work at a distant remove from Soulages's paintings, where incisive mark-making in the body of the matter matters significantly. In a different way, Jean Dubuffet added traditionally non-pictorial material such as sand, gravel, plaster, cement, or tar to pigments in several works from 1946 through 1961. Dubuffet's studio notes provide detailed descriptions of his manipulations of and experiments with different kinds of material, and he wrote extensively about finding “unexpected references” in and immense satisfaction with the indecisive and “ambiguous” quality of the resulting pictorial surfaces.<sup>43</sup> A number of works from this period reveal both his fascination with what he called “triturations of materials”<sup>44</sup> and a desire to see the uncommon in the common. Between 1957 and 1960, in successive series of works entitled *Topographies*, *Texturologies*, and *Matériologies*, Dubuffet explored the multiple qualities and possibilities of specific materials as well as different kinds of inscriptive strategies. However, the very characteristics informing the spectator of Dubuffet's authorial mark—improvised lines, “triturations of materials,” expectation of unforeseen effects—are precisely those that serve to demarcate his work



Figure 2. Pierre Soulages, *Peinture 324 x 362 cm, 1986* (polyptych G). Oil on canvas, 324 x 362 cm; four panels, each panel, 81 x 362 cm. (Photo credit: Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris.)

from Soulages's ultrablack paintings. While Soulages remains open to textural accidents in his works, the precision of his incised marks in the black pigment underscores the formal rigour of a method that refuses the aleatoric instances emerging in Dubuffet's work. Moreover, the exactitude of the measures of pigment and resin binder ensures a chromatic and viscous conformity in Soulages's paintings, a conformity that runs counter to Dubuffet's textural innovations and experiments.

Soulages's reliance on nothing other than paint and canvas for building up the surface of his post-1979 works differs also from the practice of the Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies. In several works, initially from 1945 but almost entirely from 1953 onward, Tàpies has extensively used a thick paste made by mixing paint with marble dust and plaster to which he has often added various other materials such as sand, wood, ceramic objects, newspaper, and straw.<sup>45</sup> In his works from the late 1950s, the surface of the canvas often resembles a dilapidated wall scratched with various marks, numbers, or even imaginary hieroglyph-like characters, as in *Graphismes* (1958–60). Tàpies's continuous exploration of new techniques and non-traditional materials gained amplitude in the following decades, when he utilized overlapping layers on a canvas or wood support, as in *Palla i fusta* (1969), *Matèria en forma de nou* (1967), or *Matèria blanca* (1982).<sup>46</sup> On the one hand, the persistence of a stratification of the matrix cannot be doubted in Tàpies's practice. On the other, his adherence to accidental marks and graffiti and the frequent presence or allusion to such in his works constitute a clear

demarcation between his works and Soulages's ultrablack paintings with their extremely formalized markings and complete absence of references within the pictorial space or in the titles.

Finally, Soulages's technique remains different from that of the Italian artist Alberto Burri. From the mid-1970s onward, the surface and the ground of Burri's paintings moved distinctly toward the kind of effect one would soon notice in Soulages's ultrablack paintings. Burri's *Cretti* series of works (from 1973 onward, kaolin, resin, pigment and polyvinyl acetate on cellotex) depend entirely on the use of random "cretti" or cracks on the pictorial surface resulting from the uncontrollability of the drying process of successive layers of paint.<sup>47</sup> The randomness of the cracks in Burri's *Cretti* contrasts strongly with the controlled incision with which Soulages sculpts striae in thick pigment. With the quasi-monochrome and lightly textured surfaces of the *Annotarsi* (ca. 1987–88, acrylic and pumice-stone on cellotex) and *Neri* (1988–89, acrylic on cellotex) series, Burri's works came closer to the ultrablack paintings, but at the same time they kept a formal distance. In the *Annotarsi* and the *Neri*, as Giuliano Serafini describes it, "intervention, where it exists, is barely perceptible: delicate grooves...graze the surface of the paintings."<sup>48</sup> However, the rough surfaces of the painted, or sometimes unpainted, cellotex panels do not possess the smooth/textured opposition of striae that Soulages's paintings offer, and Burri's "barely perceptible" interventions do not produce the same tactile impression as the deeply scored surface of the ultrablack paintings.

As I have briefly indicated above, the quasi three-dimensional construction of the pictorial surface with differential marking is not Soulages's invention. This technique already had a significant—although highly varied—past in works by various European artists from mid-twentieth century onward. However, Soulages's method of utilizing light as a material in its own right over the built-up surface differs from the way in which these other artists have worked with light. As Georges Duby has pointed out, the ultrablack paintings "are brought into being by the mobility of light,"<sup>49</sup> and the consequences of such a mobilization require careful consideration.

#### Intervals and the luminous tension

The glyphic configuration of the marks in the stratified pictorial matrix of the ultrablack paintings causes the viewer to move between shifting optical possibilities in the fragile luminous tension between the visible and the invisible. A close visual consideration of an ultrablack painting such as *Peinture 324 x 362 cm, 1986* (polyptych G, no. 897) (fig. 2) reveals how the striae on the surface convey light in different directions within the painting. From any particular angle of vision, the crests or the raised ridges of the striae will reflect the ambient light and

become visible, whereas the furrows or the indented parts of the surface will absorb light and remain invisible. Depending on where the spectator is standing with regard to the canvas, she can perceive only certain segments or sections—striated or not—of the painting. The slightest movement of the spectator, however, will affect the order of the visible and invisible, because what was previously visible will become invisible from the new angle of vision. The invisible (because non-textural and light-absorbing) segments induce a rupture within the visible (because textural and light-reflecting) sections: this generates a radical transformation and interchangeability of visible sections into invisible ones in the frontal and lateral views of these works.

The same strategy remains central in all the ultrablack paintings with textural marking, including those created since 2004, when Soulages began to work mostly with acrylic paint on canvas. In recent works such as *Peinture 117 x 165 cm, 13 mars 2008*,<sup>50</sup> the density of the acrylic pigment enables an even more pronounced materiality. Concerning these late works, Pierre Encrevé comments on “the fragmentation of the deep incisions” and writes,

[O]n the surface covered with black acrylic, Soulages marks with a blade discontinuous traces, separated by the reliefs of the impressed marks.... [C]oncave and horizontal in *Peinture 117 x 165 cm, 13 mars 2008*, [the traces] present a formally unified but luminously disconnected surface that disrupts once again the perception of the ultrablack as well as the viewer's emotion.<sup>51</sup>

The directional shift of light emerging from the fragmentation of the closely grouped incisions in these later works, as well as the interstices between the multiple panels of the polyptychs, produces a sense of rhythmic movement on the surface. The luminous and notched edges of the ridges (the crests of the furrows) contrast with singularly evident lanes of darkness, since light hardly enters the furrows. The fragmentation in question emerges equally from spatial interruption, from reiterated discontinuity of ridges and furrows. The invisible areas (the troughs of the furrows) function as reserves or blind points from which the painting appears as painting because of the immediately appearing visible ridges (the crest of the furrows). The supplementation of the visible trace, as it becomes repeatedly present in vision, emphasizes the continuously changing visible presence of the work.

A recent declaration by Soulages—“the way I utilize it, light is a medium”<sup>52</sup>—suggests that he is painting with light in the way other painters paint with different colours. In an extremely paradoxical manner, Soulages is using light to generate what Tanizaki Jun'ichirō has described elsewhere as a “stratification of countless layers of obscurity.”<sup>53</sup> Since different areas on the surface reflect or absorb light depending on the textural play at work, an ultrablack painting with its impressed striae produces the im-

pression that the spectator is facing something quasi-obscure and yet glowing and palpitating in the ambient light because of the rhythm generated by the striae. Light appears to come out of the painting and to create a space in front of the canvas, and, as Soulages states, “[T]he space of the painting is no longer on the painting but in front of it, and [the viewer] who [is] watching, [is] drawn into that space, [is] in the space of the painting.”<sup>54</sup>

As Kuspit has suggested in his 1996 essay,<sup>55</sup> the luminous tension in Soulages's paintings echoes the luminosity inside the Abbey of Sainte-Foy at Conques, where the one hundred and fourteen windows created by Soulages and installed in February 1994 transform the variable natural light from the outside into a translucent light inside the Abbey.<sup>56</sup> The work at Conques emerged during a period when the technique of the ultrablack paintings was already operational. The variable translucence of the glass, specially created for these windows, modulates and imbues the light entering inside with the same kind of interchangeability as the luminous trace inscribed in the striae of his paintings. Moreover, the intervallic structure of the paintings remains echoed in the windows, where comes to traverse the translucent plates of glass in the same way that the intervallic juxtaposition of visible and invisible sections divide the pictorial space in his paintings. Similarly, the horizontal separators between the panels of glass resemble the separation of two or more canvas panels in the post-1984 polyptychs.<sup>57</sup>

In the ultrablack paintings, the repetitive parallelism of the striae in the superposed layers of viscous paint generates rhythms of different frequencies, and at the same time creates a rupture between successive segments. The grooves or furrows marked in the pigment constitute intervals that simultaneously link and separate the raised ridges as well as different intra-pictorial spaces. The incised intervals may themselves be separated by intervals of smooth sections, as in *Peinture 162 x 724 cm, mars 1986*. The intervals may cover the whole surface in unidirectional or multi-directional combinations of closely assembled striated segments, as in *Peinture 222 x 628 cm, avril 1985* (polyptych, no. 878) (fig. 3). Moreover, the polyptych configuration itself offers multiple possibilities of organizing the intervallic structures, as in *Peinture 324 x 362 cm, 1986* (polyptych G, no. 897), where broad horizontal bands of diagonal striae institute the flow and rupture of smooth and striated spaces. The intervallic configuration produces blank spaces around which the work gathers itself before confronting the spectator's gaze and interrogation. At the same time, the intervals separating the constantly changing, but distinctly present, visible and invisible, textured and non-textured spaces frame the striae by emphasizing the tactile and non-tactile parts present in the pictorial scheme. The intervallic spatiality of Soulages's paintings, however, differs from the intervallic structures used by two contemporary artists, Claude Viallat and Simon Hantaï.



Figure 3. Pierre Soulages, *Peinture* 222 x 628 cm, avril 1985. Oil on canvas, 222 x 628 cm; four panels, each panel: 222 x 157 cm. (Photo credit: Photographie © Musée de Grenoble.)

In summer 1966, Viallat, a former founding member of the French group Supports-Surfaces (ca. 1969–72),<sup>58</sup> began to work with a unique repeated form on his unstretched canvases. As he described to various critics, the “form” owed its genesis to his adaptation of a traditional Mediterranean artisanal practice of whitewashing the walls of kitchens by dipping a sponge in a bucket of whitewash tinted with blue pigment and systematically applying the sponge on the walls.<sup>59</sup> Viallat cut a block of polyurethane foam in the approximate shape of a palette, dipped the resulting form in liquid pigment, and applied pigment on canvas with the colour-soaked form. The systematic use of this practice in his work was functional by July 1967, with the “almost severe repetition of the form reproduced *at regular intervals* on a white ground.”<sup>60</sup> Viallat has continued this formal practice since then in successive series of works using single sheets of unstretched canvas as well as multiple sheets of canvas or military surplus tent material folded or stitched together. That is the case, for example, in works such as *Échelle de Venise* (1976), *Hommage à Matisse* (1992), and *La Vague: Hommage à Matisse* (2003). In these works, the same basic form appears in different chromatic variations. The “form” has become synonymous with the artist: “[T]he form serves as a sign of immediate recognition,” Christian Skimao notes, and “it also serves as an unmistakable signature.”<sup>61</sup> However, while this system relies exclusively on a kind of intervallic structure, the regularity of Viallat’s inter-form intervals puts his work on a path different from the spatial fragmentation in Soulages’s paintings, where the intervallic dynamics remain infinitely variable.

The Hungarian-born painter Simon Hantaï began to work from 1960 onward with a determined emphasis on the most basic pictorial materials such as the unprepared and un-stretched canvas and simple, extremely liquid, colours. Geneviève Bonnefoi states that Hantaï went back to “an idea implemented in a

small 1951 painting that evoked the baroque folds one sees on the gowns of the Virgin in German or Flemish paintings from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, [the idea] of a folded rag soaked in paint that one could either apply on a canvas, or simply unfold for all the ensuing accidents of the surface to appear.”<sup>62</sup> Hantaï rapidly produced an abundant corpus of works where he relied exclusively on the technique of what has since been called “folding as method” (*le pliage comme méthode*), attempting through this “anti-natural, anti-spontaneous” practice “to give rise to the unknown.”<sup>63</sup> The process involved making folds on a piece of unprepared canvas, whose visible places were then painted by the artist. At times, Hantaï soaked the whole piece of folded canvas in a vat of pigment. The places occluded by the predetermined folds resisted the mark of the pigment and produced a surface with a scheme of marked and unmarked places on the canvas. Marcelin Pleynet observes that Hantaï’s critical propositions from around 1960 proclaimed his desire to “depersonalize his painting ... to overcome the aesthetic privilege of talent, of art ... to make the exceptional commonplace ... to become exceptionally banal ... to paint with eyes closed.”<sup>64</sup> This is precisely the time when “after having pleated an unprepared canvas, [Hantaï] painted the exterior of the massive surface that, once unfolded and unpleated, revealed in brilliant colours the opening and the accidental constitution of an infinite multitude of lacerated forms.”<sup>65</sup> Pleynet notes that such a practice “leads not to an excess of subjectivity (automatic writing, gestural automatism, etc.)...but to a demonstration of the accidental character and the absence of a self-contained finality of the universe of forms and phenomena.”<sup>66</sup>

Hantaï’s post-1960 serial works such as the *Mariales* (1960–62), the *Catamurons* (1963–64), the *Meuns* (1966–68), the *Études* (“for Pierre Reverdy,” 1968–69), the *Blancs* (1973–74), and the



*Tabulas* (from 1974 onward) demonstrate his use of an intervallic scheme. His method in these and, from 1990 onward, in the *Laissés* series of paintings entails “both repeatedly revising [the artist’s] own understanding of what it is to make a painting of what is unpainted in them and moving into further material understandings of the operations of folding and unfolding—as for example, their implications in such other practices as knotting and cutting.”<sup>67</sup> Hantaï’s signature technique continued until his death in 2008, with a particularly remarkable series of works done between 1999 and 2000, based on his epistolary interaction with the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy.<sup>68</sup> However, if the intention to generate an intervallic structure remains present in Hantaï’s work, his desire to depersonalize painting and the denial of artistic subjectivity stand in contradiction to the technical manipulations and decisions that he makes in his works. The very fact of selecting one chromatic scheme and not another, or one format (for example, rectangular) and not another, constitutes a manifestation of subjective imprint against which he assumes such a strong stand. A Hantaï painting is clearly recognizable as such, and this authorial recognition undermines his negation of the personal in what can only be personal. In Soulages’s paintings, on the other hand, deliberate textural manipulations indicate his desire to personalize his work. Moreover, Hantaï’s intervallic structure relies on the resistance of unpainted or unstained areas on the canvas to pigment. Therefore, Hantaï’s method stands in clear opposition to Soulages’s intervallic strategy, where the excrescence of matter constitutes the interval between the extremes of visible and the invisible.

The intervallic scheme in Soulages’s ultrablack paintings generates a rupture of the visual experience of these works, with that experience itself being situated in the simultaneous relation and opposition of mark-making and its erasure. Soulages’s technique enables an ultrablack painting to function as an archive of the process of its making: in the visual confrontation with a painting, the viewer is drawn by its tactile surface into the archival structure that is already in a form of mnemonic sedimentation. Moreover, the rhythmic marks and intervals on the painted surface generate an internal spatial tension: what reappears after each interval is never in the same space as the one before. At the same time, what reappears on the other side of the interval—on the next raised (visible) crest of a ridge or in the next sunken (invisible) trough of a groove—can never appear at the same time as the previously appearing interval and, therefore, belongs to another temporal sequence. In the ultrablack paintings, the act of the painter is time-factored.<sup>69</sup> Time acts here as a factor in the double verbal sense of the word: it simultaneously divides and acts as an essential, constituting element. Both division and constitution take place through the rhythm of intervallic structure. Rhythm obligates the perception of syncopated tension to a specific syntax of space and time. The figuration of rhythm by the striations inscribed in the pictorial

space of the ultrablack painting reinforces this temporal configuration, not only within the pictorial space but also in the meta-pictorial space opening up through the luminous tension at work within the work. Indeed, in a recent interview, Soulages emphasized again the importance of intertwined concepts of time and space in an ultrablack painting: “[The ultrablack] is a different mental space than that of the black. That ‘other’ space, in front of the very canvas, creates a different relation to space. And a different relation to time. And gives an intense presence to the work.”<sup>70</sup> That “‘other’ space, in front of the very canvas” is the meta-pictorial space that he had already evoked in 2002 when he said, “[T]he space of the painting is no longer on the painting but in front of it, and [the viewer] who [is] watching, [is] drawn into that space, [is] in the space of the painting.”<sup>71</sup> The time-factoring of an ultrablack painting generates the “intense presence” of the work in the space where time reveals what the painting holds in its folds at the very moment of beholding.

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>72</sup> the multi-directional incisions in an ultrablack painting generate not so much the continuity of a discourse as an indefinitely interrupted discourse, woven along the breaches, the intervals of furrows and ridges, in the pictorial space. An ultrablack painting constitutes itself around a system of ruptures and silences that Soulages has put in place to diffuse all possibility of pictorial centering. The meta-pictorial space that opens up in front of the painting, as Soulages himself suggests, draws the viewer into the painting, into the textured medium containing the intervallic intersection of the visible and the invisible. In a sense, the intervals originate in the space in front of the painting because this space is itself an interval that both separates and links the viewer and the work.

Repeated applications of pigment in the ultrablack paintings entail an erasure of earlier glyphic marks, and, at the same time, the operations of scraping and scoring the pigment disclose dissimulated areas and marks, the origin of successive marks and traces, and the origin of other visible moments in the painting. The deployment of marks and traces serves to affirm the painter’s intention to institute an intra-pictorial de-centering. In the visual experience of an ultrablack painting, what is represented remains in suspended parataxis with regard to what the painting represents. The variability of presence and absence, of the visible and the invisible, points to multiple origins and traces of aesthetic intervention archived in the paintings. Trace points to the remembrance of the marks intentionally left, erased, and supplemented by the artist. Trace points also to a visual experience of what the painting expresses. The erased marks, traces, and pentimenti show up as palimpsestic residues, and Soulages’s practice of working in and through the visually apprehensible traces denotes a fascination for archival agency. Memory remains archived in the very matter of these paintings implicating a concatenation of commemoration and perception of traces.

## Conclusion

Soulages's work in the ultrablack paintings underscores a mode of putting to work or a *mise en oeuvre* of the work itself: the moment of inscription relates simultaneously to remembrance of a stage before the work and to anticipation of a stage after the work. On the one hand, the artist's praxis illuminates the past(s) of the work preserved in the work, as in a palimpsest or in a ruin. This is a retrospective operation in an archival order. On the other hand, the same praxis offers a condition of possibility for a meta-pictorial discourse on whatever the work might suggest to the beholder through layers of matter accumulated over time, the ruins of successive artistic interventions archived in the dermal excrecence of the paintings. Those ruins, both retrospective and prospective, interrupt the historical constitution of an ultrablack painting; the interruptions are exposed in a *mise en abyme* in the painting, whose history is, and has never been anything other than, a history of ruins.

Soulages's interrogation of the extent to which a pictorial surface can elicit some sensorial response from the beholder continues, as recent exhibitions of these works reveal. The surface of the ultrablack painting holds the prescience of continued spectatorial response in its rhythmic folds and, as Éliane Escoubas points out, "In the *fold* of the 'black on black' the presence of the presently present is put to work."<sup>73</sup> The *presence* that Escoubas affirms here had already drawn the attention of Clément Rosset who wrote in 1986, "There is no other presence in Soulages's paintings than that of the paintings themselves."<sup>74</sup> The "ultra-sensuous" surface of the ultrablack painting situates the beholder in presence of the sensuous and the notion of presence, what Escoubas calls "the presence of painting in painting,"<sup>75</sup> decisively frames Soulages's own vision of the works in question. Commenting on his current conception of the ultrablack painting, Soulages unambiguously states, "The notion of *presence* is capital in art....A painting must be present at the moment when one looks at it. What I like is the force of its presence."<sup>76</sup> The task of art, as Maurice Blanchot has observed, is to "render *present*" (*rendre présent*).<sup>77</sup> In rendering present what it holds in the folds of its pictorial and meta-pictorial spaces, the spectacle of Soulages's ultrablack painting offers the matter of presence *qua* seeing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French into English are mine.  
 "Outrenoir" (literally "beyond black") is a French neologism coined by Soulages. See Pierre Encrevé, "Le noir et l'outrenoir," in Jean-Louis Andral et al., *Soulages: Noir lumière*, exh. cat., Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Paris, 1996), 43, n. 10. I have translated the word as ultrablack following the use of ultramarine

as the English term for the French word *outremer*.

- <sup>2</sup> Éliane Escoubas, "Enduire-induire ou la 'physionomie' de la peinture: les peintures noir-sur-noir de Soulages," *L'espace pictural* (Fougères, 1995), 175. Emphasis in the original.
- <sup>3</sup> The first exhibition of the ultrablack paintings took place in 1979. See Alfred Pacquement et al., *Soulages: peintures récentes*, exh. cat., Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1979). See also Andral et al., *Soulages: Noir lumière*. More recently, fifteen ultrablack paintings were shown in the exhibition *Outrenoir: Recent Paintings*, held at the Robert Miller Gallery (5 May–11 June 2005) in New York. The continuity of ultrablack paintings was equally evident at the exhibition *Pierre Soulages, Painting the Light*, with eight ultrablack paintings, at Sammlung Essl, Klosterneuburg, Vienna, Austria (29 June–3 September 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> On this exhibition (14 October 2009–8 March 2010), which included fifty-five ultrablack paintings, see Alfred Pacquement and Pierre Encrevé, eds., *Soulages*, exh. cat., Paris, Musée national d'art moderne (Paris, 2009).
- <sup>5</sup> Donald Kuspit, "une identité sublime," trans. Jeanne Bouniort, in Andral et al., *Soulages: Noir lumière*, 64. Hereafter, references to Kuspit's essay will be to the English version, reprinted as "Negatively Sublime Identity: Pierre Soulages's Abstract Paintings," in Donald Kuspit, *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2000), 80–90.
- <sup>6</sup> This exhibition travelled through seven German cities. See the catalogue raisonné of Soulages's paintings on canvas, Pierre Encrevé, *Soulages: l'oeuvre complet, Peintures* (Paris, 1994–98), I, 79.
- <sup>7</sup> Sweeney organized the exhibition *Younger European Painters* in December 1953 at the Guggenheim Museum, where some Soulages paintings were shown. Sweeney also curated the Soulages exhibition in 1966 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where the artist showed forty-eight oil paintings (done between 1950 and 1965), sixteen works on paper, and fourteen prints.
- <sup>8</sup> These include approximately seven hundred and sixty-two oil paintings on canvas, thirty-six etchings, forty-six lithographs, nine silk-screen paintings, two tapestries, four theatre decors, one ceramic wall, one painting on Plexiglas for open-air installation, and three bronze bas-relief works.
- <sup>9</sup> For Soulages's accounts of the first instance of this new technique, see Encrevé, *Soulages: l'oeuvre complet*, III, 24–25; and Pierre Daix and James Johnson Sweeney, *Soulages* (Neuchâtel, 1991), 13.
- <sup>10</sup> See Pacquement et al., *Soulages: peintures récentes* (1979).
- <sup>11</sup> The numbers in parenthesis beginning with "no." refer to the numbers in Encrevé, *Soulages: l'oeuvre complet*.
- <sup>12</sup> Pierre Encrevé, "Soulages à Lyon," in *Pierre Soulages: œuvres*, exh. cat., Lyon, Le Musée (Lyon, 1987), 66.
- <sup>13</sup> For Soulages's prints, see Pierre Encrevé and Marie-Cécile Miessner, eds., *Soulages: l'oeuvre imprimé*, exh. cat., Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris, 2003). Hereafter, all parenthetical indications

- with “pr. cat. no.” followed by Arabic numerals refer to this catalogue.
- 14 For a detailed description of Soulages's technique in the ultrablack paintings, see Dan MacEnroe, “Les outils et le matériel dans la peinture de Soulages,” MA thesis, Université Paris IV, 1991.
  - 15 Serge Guilbaut, “Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (1990; repr. Cambridge, 1991), 54.
  - 16 Guillaume Apollinaire, *Méditations esthétiques, les peintres cubistes*, V, ed. L. C. Breunig and J. Cl. Chevalier (Paris, 1965), 70. Apollinaire was writing on Georges Braque.
  - 17 See Encrevé, *Soulages: l'oeuvre complet*, I, 16–17.
  - 18 Encrevé, *Soulages: l'oeuvre complet*, I, 16–17.
  - 19 Pierre Soulages, in Bernard Ceysson, *Soulages* (Paris, 1979), 89.
  - 20 Pierre Soulages, in Ceysson, *Soulages*, 89.
  - 21 In 1962, the French communist journal *Clarté* organized a purported “Procès à Soulages” (Trial of Soulages) in order to mobilize support for the painter and his paintings. See the articles by Pierre Buraglio, Herbert Juin, and Jean Cassou in “Procès à Soulages,” *Clarté* 43 (1962): 27–32. The reproduction of one of Soulages's paintings (ink on paper) on the cover without any mention of a “trial,” as well as a large colour reproduction of *Peinture, 8 juin 1961, 202 x 143 cm* inside, demonstrates, according to Pierre Encrevé, the journal's engagement with Soulages's artistic project. See Encrevé, *Soulages: l'oeuvre complet*, II, 27–28.
  - 22 See “Dossier: Soulages, Noir,” *Libération*, 22–23 November 1986, 26–28. Serge July, then the editor of this newspaper, was among Soulages's supporters who had organized the “trial” of *Clarté* mentioned above.
  - 23 Pierre Soulages, in Jean-Louis Andral, “Peinture chose concrète,” *Connaissance des Arts* 527 (April 1996): 72. Emphasis added.
  - 24 Claude Bouyeure, “Soulages au centre de l'aube,” in “Dossier Soulages,” *Opus International* 57 (October 1975): 25.
  - 25 Pierre Soulages, in Pacquement et al., *Soulages: peintures récentes*, n.p. Emphasis added.
  - 26 Pierre Soulages, in Ceysson, *Soulages*, 91. Emphasis added.
  - 27 Pierre Daix, *Pierre Soulages* (Neuchâtel, 2003), 81.
  - 28 Daix, *Pierre Soulages*, 41.
  - 29 The French word “enduit” is the nominal form of the verb *enduire*, which means to cover a surface with a paste or a semi-fluid substance (plaster, gesso, etc.) in order to prepare the ground for further application of paint or other material. In art-historical literature, *enduit* is often translated as coating, undercoating, plastering, or coat of plaster.
  - 30 This is the case with artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, and Yves Klein, among several others. There is a vast literature on monochrome painting in the twentieth century. See among others, Yve-Alain Bois, “Malévitch, le carré, le degré zéro,” *Macula* I (1978): 28–49; “On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman,” *October* 108 (Spring 2004): 3–27; and “The Limit of Almost,” *Ad Reinhardt*, exh. cat., New York, The Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1991), 11–33. On Klein, see Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein* (Stuttgart, 1995). On Malevich and Klein, see Mark A. Cheetham, “Matting the Monochrome: Malevich, Klein, and Now,” *Art Journal* 64, 4 (Winter 2005): 94–109. On the various instances of monochrome painting in the twentieth century, see *La couleur seule: l'expérience du monochrome*, exh. cat., Ville de Lyon, Musées de France, and Centre National des Arts Plastiques (Lyon, 1988); and *Schwarz*, exh. cat., Düsseldorf, Städtischen Kunsthalle (Düsseldorf, 1981). While several artists have explored the possibilities of monochrome painting from the early years of the twentieth century, I indicate here only a few of them since the core of my essay on Soulages's ultrablack paintings addresses not this factor but that of tactility.
  - 31 On the Zero group, see Ursula Perucchi-Petri, “Zéro: Images d'une avant-garde européenne autour de 1960,” in *La couleur seule...*, 83–89. See also Hervé Gauville, *L'art depuis 1945, groupes et mouvements* (Paris, 1999), 110–12, and *Zero, Bildvorstellungen einer europäischen Avantgarde 1958–1964*, exh. cat., Zürich, Kunstmuseum (Zürich, 1979).
  - 32 Michael Newman, “The material turn in the art of Western Europe and North America in the 1960s,” in *Beyond Preconceptions: the Sixties Experiment*, exh. cat., New York Independent Curators International (New York, 2000), 82–83.
  - 33 Robert Ryman, in Phyllis Tuchman, “An interview with Robert Ryman,” *Artforum* 7 (May 1971): 46. On Ryman's white paintings, see also “Peinture abstraite: début, milieu ou fin,” *Art Press*, hors série 16 (1995), 183–85.
  - 34 Pierre Soulages, in Françoise-Claire Prodhon, “Entretien avec Pierre Soulages,” *Flash Art* 133 (April 1987): 109.
  - 35 Pierre Soulages, interview with the author, 23 December 2002, Paris.
  - 36 Encrevé, “Le Noir et l'outrenoir,” 37.
  - 37 Kuspit, “Negatively Sublime Identity,” 81.
  - 38 The Kline/Soulages opposition was prevalent at the exhibition *Young Painters in the US and France*, organized by Leo Castelli at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1950. See Encrevé, *Soulages: l'oeuvre complet*, I, 82. For the first published comparison of the two artists, see the review by Sam Hunter, “Pierre Soulages,” *Art Digest* (1 May 1954): 19. Another comparative essay appeared in Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (1978; repr. Oxford, 1972), 479–80. See also Robert Motherwell, “The International World of Modernist Art: 1945–1960,” *Art Journal* 39, 4 (Summer 1980): 270–71.
  - 39 For such comparisons, see for example Jean-Louis Andral, “Voyage au pays du réel,” in *Soulages: Noir lumière*, 16–23; Encrevé, “Le Noir et l'outrenoir”; and Kuspit, “Negatively Sublime Identity.”
  - 40 Kuspit, “Negatively Sublime Identity,” 85.
  - 41 Gilbert Dupuis, “Une particularité physionomique,” in *Une Oeuvre de Pierre Soulages*, collection Iconotexte (Marseille, 1998), 26.
  - 42 For a description of Fautrier's technique, see Curtis L. Carter, “Fautrier's Fortunes: A Paradox of Success,” in Carter and Karen Butler, eds., *Jean Fautrier 1898–1964*, exh. cat. (New Haven,

- 2002), 20; and Jean-Paul Ledeur, "Fautrier: la chair de l'émotion," in *Fautrier 1898–1964*, exh. cat., Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Paris, 1989), 42–45.
- 43 See the notes of Jean Dubuffet, in Hubert Damisch, ed., *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, II (Paris, 1967), 65, 77–79, 88–89, 129–30.
- 44 Dubuffet, *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, 65.
- 45 See Vera Linhartová, *Tàpies* (New York, 1972).
- 46 On the material explorations by Tàpies, see especially John Yau, "A New Context for the 'Matter Paintings' of Antoni Tàpies," in *Tàpies: in perspective*, exh. cat., Barcelona, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (Barcelona, 2004), 263–75.
- 47 On Burri, see especially Giuliano Serafini, *Burri, La misura e il fenomeno* (Milan, 1999).
- 48 Serafini, *Burri, La misura e il fenomeno*, 216.
- 49 Georges Duby, "Soulages, le temps, l'espace, la mémoire," in *Pierre Soulages: œuvres* (1987), 50. Duby's engagement with Soulages's work emerges in some of his other writings. See, for example, "Gravure," in *Soulages: eaux-fortes, lithographies, 1952–1973* (Paris, 1974), 9–16; "Soulages," *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no. 3 (January–March 1980), 26–35; and "Soulages," in M. Desbiolles et al., eds., *Une Oeuvre de Pierre Soulages* (Marseille, 1998), 93–113.
- 50 For this work, see Pacquement and Encrevé, *Soulages*, cat. no. 99.
- 51 Encrevé, in Pacquement and Encrevé, *Soulages*, 30.
- 52 Pierre Soulages, "La lumière comme matière," *Rue Descartes* 38: *Le matériau, voir et entendre* (December 2002): 114.
- 53 Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *Éloge de l'Ombre* (In'ei-raison, 1933), trans. René Sieffert (Paris, 1977), 42.
- 54 Soulages, "La lumière comme matière," 115.
- 55 Kuspit, "Negatively Sublime Identity," 86.
- 56 For Soulages's windows at the Abbey of Ste.-Foy at Conques, see Christian Heck, Pierre Soulages, Georges Duby, and Jean-Dominique Fleury, *Conques: les vitraux de Soulages* (Paris, 1994). For an evocation of these windows within the context of a curatorial strategy, see Marcia Brennan, "Illuminating the Void, Displaying the Vision: The Romanesque Church, the Modern Museum, and Pierre Soulages's Abstract Art," in *Res: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52 (Autumn 2007): 117–27.
- 57 For a more detailed comparison of Soulages's windows with the ultrablack paintings, see Ananda Shankar Chakrabarty, "Soulages's Paintings and Kuspit's Criticism," in *Dialectical Conversions: Donald Kuspit's Art Criticism*, ed. David Craven and Brian Winkeweder (Liverpool, 2011), 173–89.
- 58 On the French group Support-Surfaces, see Marie-Hélène Grinfeder, *Les années Supports-Surfaces: 1965–1990* (Paris, 1991).
- 59 Claude Viallat, in Christian Skimao, *Claude Viallat* (Nice, 1995), 7–8. See also Viallat's interview with Philippe Piguët, "Viallat, la peinture, l'espace," in *La Croix, l'événement* 32871 (15 avril 1991): 13–14. The description also appears in Claude Minière, *Claude Viallat* (Paris, 1999), 65. On the "form," see also Pierre Wat, ed., *Claude Viallat: œuvres, écrits, entretiens* (Paris, 2006).
- 60 Skimao, *Claude Viallat*, 11. Emphasis added.
- 61 Skimao, *Claude Viallat*, 8.
- 62 Geneviève Bonnefoi, *Hantaï*, exh. cat., Ginals, Centre d'art contemporain de l'Abbaye de Beaulieu (Ginals, 1973), 14. See also Anne Baldassari, *Simon Hantaï*, exh. cat., Paris, Musée national d'art moderne (Paris, 1992); and Catherine Millet, "Hantaï, tableaux récents," *Art Press*, hors série 16 (1995): 154–56.
- 63 Bonnefoi, *Hantaï*, 14.
- 64 Marcelin Pleyne, "Simon Hantaï aujourd'hui là où c'était," in *Simon Hantaï 1960–1976*, exh. cat., Centre d'Arts Plastiques Contemporains de Bordeaux, Entrepôt Lainé (Bordeaux, 1981), 17. Ellipses in the original.
- 65 Pleyne, "Simon Hantaï aujourd'hui," 19.
- 66 Pleyne, "Simon Hantaï aujourd'hui," 19.
- 67 Stephen Melville, "What was Postminimalism," in *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (UK, 2003), 170. On Hantaï's *Laissées* series of works, see also Tom McDonough, "Hantaï's Challenge to Painting," *Art in America* 87, 3 (March 1999): 96–99. On Hantaï's technique in terms of Roland Barthes's notion regarding the death of the author, see Béatrice Parent, "La Peinture 'réinventée,'" in *La Peinture après l'abstraction: Martin Barré, Jean Degottex, Raymond Hains, Simon Hantaï, Jacques Villeglé*, exh. cat., Paris-Musées (Paris, 1999), 43–52.
- 68 See Simon Hantaï, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida, *La connaissance des textes: Lecture d'un manuscrit illisible (Correspondances)* (Paris, 2001). This volume contains the text of the epistolary correspondence that took place between Hantaï and Nancy, photographic reproduction of the letters, colour plates of Hantaï's "unreadable manuscripts," and a letter by Derrida addressed to both Nancy and Hantaï. See also Julie Candler Hayes, "The Body of the Letter: Epistolary Acts of Simon Hantaï, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida," in *Postmodern Culture* (JHU Press) 13, 3 (May 2003); accessible online via Project Muse: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/toc/pmc13.3.html>.
- 69 For a different use of the term "time-factored" within the context of the markings on Palaeolithic bone implements, see Alexander Marshack, *The Roots of Civilization: The Cognitive Beginnings of Man's First Art, Symbol, and Notation* (New York, 1972).
- 70 Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Entretien avec Pierre Soulages," in Pacquement and Encrevé, *Soulages*, 123.
- 71 See Soulages, "La lumière comme matière," 115.
- 72 See Chakrabarty, "Soulages's Paintings and Kuspit's Criticism," 182–83.
- 73 Escoubas, "Enduire-induire," 177. Emphasis in the original.
- 74 Clément Rosset, "L'objet pictural," in *Pierre Soulages: œuvres*, 94–95.
- 75 Escoubas, "Enduire-induire," 177.
- 76 Obrist, "Entretien," 123. Emphasis in the original.
- 77 Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (1st ed., 1955; Paris, 1988), 44.