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| The French term, ‘informel,’ was used in 1951 by the critic Michel Tapié in order to describe a new trend in postwar abstract art that had been put on display at two exhibitions in Paris that year. The first, held in March at Galerie Nina Dausset, brought together works by artists such as Hans Hartung, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Georges Mathieu, Camille Bryen, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Wols under the theme of ‘extreme tendencies in non-figurative painting.’ In his preface to the catalogue of the exhibition, Tapié connected the informel, or unformed, with the raw material anarchy of the real. The second exhibition, entitled ‘Signs of the Unformed,’ was organized by Tapié in November at Studio Fracchetti and included works by Jean Fautrier, Henri Michaux, Jean Dubuffet, Iaroslav Serpan, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Georges Mathieu. The concept of the informel was theorised at length the following year in Tapié’s book *Un Art Autre*, which is usually but not unproblematically translated as *Art of Another Kind*. In this book, Tapié argued that art is ‘other’ to the extent that it opens itself up to the unformed real in a way that radically breaks with the trajectory of modernist abstraction in terms of motivation, technique, and style.  ArtInformel\_WolsBird.jpg  Resonating with the somber mood of the postwar period—under the conditions of which, according to Theodore Adorno, it was increasingly difficult to create works of art—Tapié wrote that the artist must now face the abyss of the real in an almost mystical pursuit. Invoking both Friedrich Nietzsche and St. John of the Cross, Tapié argued that the postwar artist must create not beautiful or pleasurable objects, but must first of all plunge the depths of himself and of the world without the aid of any philosophical or religious supports. That is, borrowing from the title of the March 1951 exhibition, the informel artist must ‘confront vehemence.’ Tapié’s view of the postwar artist had many similarities to Jean-Paul Sartre’s writings on art and existentialism, which were published just a few years earlier, particularly in Tapié’s suggestion that there were no aesthetic values that could be determined a priori. Rather, such values, if any, could only arise in the act of creating a work. Tapié strongly preferred the term ‘art autre’ over ‘art informel’ since, for him, the unformed referred primarily to the anarchic depth of the real rather than the abstract workings on a canvas. He even claimed that ‘art informel’ was an absurd formulation and that there could never be, properly speaking, an art informel. Both terms remained inadequately defined, both aesthetically and stylistically, and thus there was a lot of ambiguity surrounding them. Even by the time Jean Paulhan published his book *L’Art Informel* in 1962, art autre and art informel became largely indistinguishable. Art informel, being more linguistically flexible, ultimately became the preferred term of critics. It is worth nothing that many of the artists associated with either of these terms, including Fautrier, Michaux, and Dubuffet, found both of them—along with Tapié’s desire to herd together such deeply individualistic and diverse artists—highly deplorable.  Despite Tapié’s own particular differentiation between the appellations art autre and art informel, and despite their subsequent conflation by some, the terms have also come to loosely describe two overlapping aspects of postwar European art. Other critics have used the name ‘art informel’ as a subset of art autre, which in this sense is a broader term that includes both figurative artworks (such as those of Dubuffet) and abstract or calligraphic ones (like those of Mathieu and Michaux). Making matters more convoluted, the abstract tendency has been referred to not only as art informel, but also as ‘tachism’ and ‘lyrical abstraction.’ In such cases, art informel should not be understood as radically formless, but rather as expressing a gestural, spontaneous, and anti-geometrical type of abstraction that conveys a coming-to form. In this sense, it has been uncritically described as the weak European counterpart of abstract expressionism, albeit on a more intimate scale by comparison, even though it is widely acknowledged that the two groups of artists seem to have developed more or less independently out of surrealist automatism. However, the comparison is partly justified cosidering Mathieu’s delicately gestural works were often performed before an audience by squeezing or dripping paint directly from the tube, and Fautrier’s heavily impastoed and more somber works were often produced flat on the floor.  ArtInformel\_HeadOfAHostageNo.14.jpg  Ultimately, whether we talk about art autre or art informel, the artists Tapié brought together in 1951 are united by their postwar existential angst and disgust, which manifests itself stylistically in the vehement refusal to engage with beautiful forms. Instead, half-formed images appear in their very emergence within a web of gestures, or within a thick accumulation of matter, as if capturing the moment of the artist’s encounter with what Tapié called ‘the abyss of the real’ and ‘the space of the canvas.’ Art informel, while not a coherent movement, is significant because it undercuts a normative and unidirectional view of art history that transports us directly from Paris to New York following the Second World War. From 1960, for example, Tapié helped to foster art informel, as well as its associated groups such as spatialism and nuclearism, in Italy by co-founding the International Centre of Aesthetic Research in Turin. Tapié also had significant impact on the development of the Gutai artists in Japan during his visits to the country in 1957 and 1958. The Gutai artists would, in turn, have an effect on other important contemporary tendencies like Fluxus and Happenings.  ArtInformel\_MathieuPainting.jpg |
| Further reading:  Carter, Curtis and Karen Butler, eds., Jean Fautrier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)  Haftmann, Werner, ed., Wols (New York: Harry Abrams, 1965)  Marter, Joan, ed., Abstract Expressionism: The International Context (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007)  Morris, Frances, ed., Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945-55 (London: Tate, 1994)  Schimmel, Paul, ed., Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949-1962 (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012)  Tapié, Michel, ‘A New Beyond’ in Herschel Chipp, ed., Theories of Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 603-605  Tapié, Michel, The Significant Message of Georges Mathieu (New York: Stable Gallery, 1952) |