



Insolite Palimpsest on Azure Ground, 1961. 81 x 100 cm. (All illustrations by courtesy of the Artist and the Pace Gallery, New York)

THE MAD LOGIC OF GEORGES NOËL

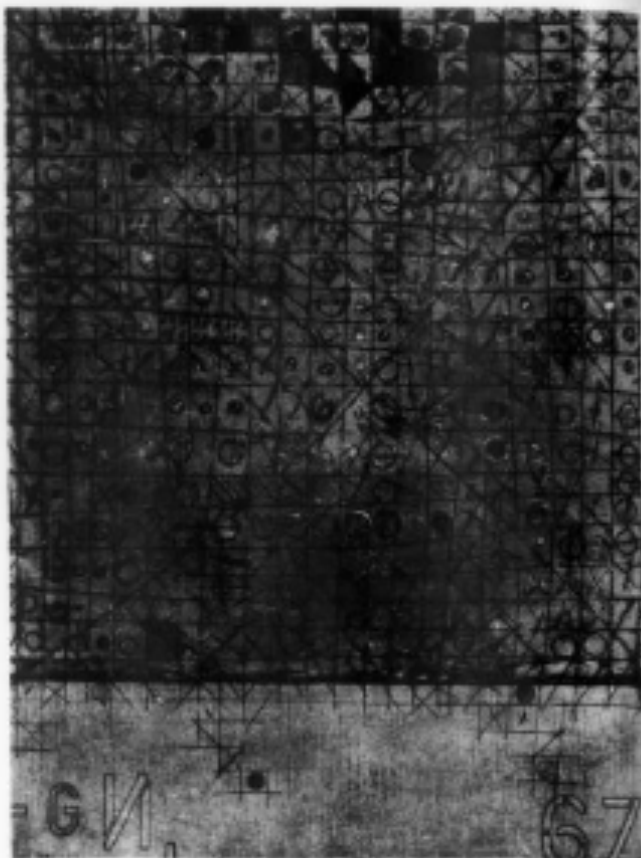
APRIL KINGSLEY

In 1954 Georges Noël saw the first European exhibition of Jackson Pollock's paintings and all of his previous esthetic conceptions were shattered. He felt immediately that painting had transcended its own traditions and smashed through to a whole new space. Noël, who says he was probably the first European artist to understand Pollock, was completely radicalized; somehow he had to find his way to a method equal to Pollock's. Sitting on a beach in Southern France some time later watching children making sand castles he realized that what he had to do was to make a painting all at once as automatically, as naive, and as perfectly complete as the shape left after the removal of an overturned pailful of sand. That process, like Pollock's drip, was simultaneously planning and accident, cause and effect, process and result.

Noël, then thirty years old, wiped the slate of his career clean and returned to the direct approach to art he had had when he began painting at the age of ten in Beziers, France. He terminated his employment as a designer of turbo-jet engines in Pau and devoted himself full-time to painting from then on. His esthetic position became a tabula rasa. But, like the erased stone tablets used and reused by Egyptian scribes on which previously carved messages often re-emerged to visibility despite the best efforts of the scrapers, palimpsests of Noël's former geometries slowly began to come once again into view. In fact this ancient manifestation became the inspiration for his new esthetic. At first, though, there was only the act of making a mark on a surface and the manipulation of matter in a completely automatic, mindlessly simple and direct way.

The sand that stimulated Noël's new approach became the medium in which to manifest it. He mixed the sand, first with glues, later with clear polymer binders, and dusted in dry pigments to color it. Once it was spread over the canvas surface he could draw in it with tools or fingers for a long while before it hardened. This gave him a totally flexible graphic medium with an ease of erasure and adaptability to alteration equal to that of sand at the beach. Line, color and form were one with the painting surface. At first this surface was dense and linear elements shimmered in a dark murky ambiance. It was like writing with light as fast as the human hand could move. The result was a flickering, agitated, all-over surface not unlike those achieved by Mark Tobey and the Jackson Pollock of *Sounds in the Grass: Shimmering Substance* in appearance. Noël's paintings, however, had a kind of airiness which made it seem as if the myriad writhing forms inhabiting them were alive and pulsating in a real space. In some canvases irregular massings of matter and pigment across the surface produced heavily expressionistic abstractions that resembled details from a Soutine landscape where no specific images are recognizable.

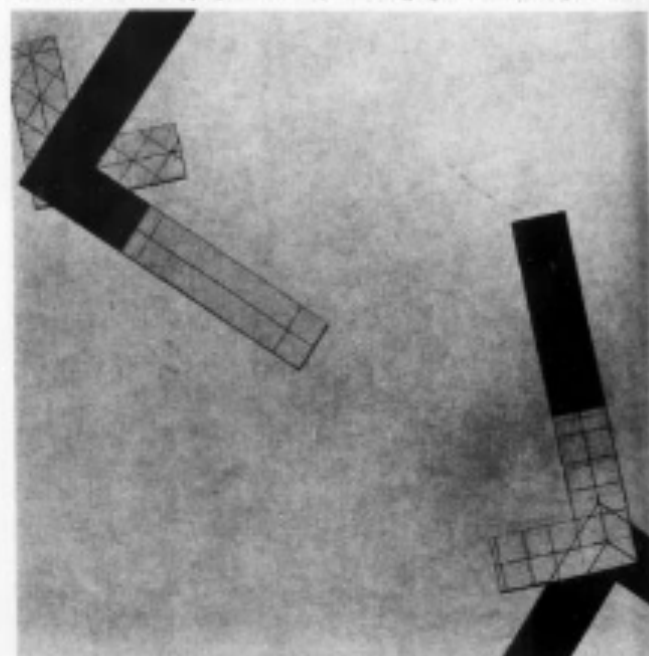
Slowly over the course of the fifties Noël's instinct for the geometrical began to reassert itself. This development went hand in hand with an increasing tendency to vary the width



Aerial Battle No. 7, 1967. 89 x 115 cm

and character of his gouged lines. In addition, he began to manipulate his surfaces in a way that enabled him to draw in either light or dark strokes at will, crossing thin dark scratches over wider white swaths, and vice versa. The resultant configuration resembled an open webbed network suspended in front of a vague, cloudy picture plane. Rectangular planes began to coalesce within the maze of strokes and jostle one another for position within the picture's rectangle, which they reiterated. Circular elements occasionally emerged as well. These larger forms read clearly against the nervous scribbles dispersed more or less evenly across the canvas. Natural or "uncomposed" structuring devices were thus admitted carrying the weight of an underlying grid without its formality. The

Untitled, 1972. Sand, polymer binder, ink and graphite on canvas, 60' x 60'



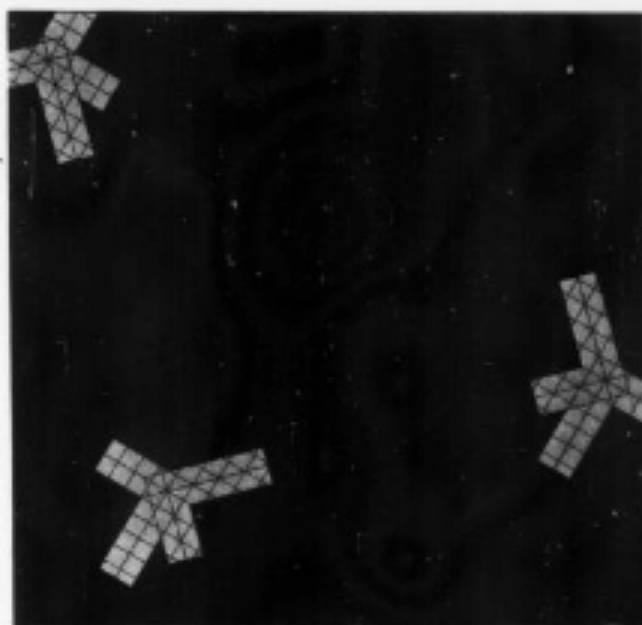
"dumb" simplicity of his structures was as flat and primitive-seeming as a child's drawing. His surfaces hardened considerably during this period and drawing in them became a matter of incising or scratching rather than of pushing or dragging pigmented matter with the fingers.

By 1961 numerals, letters, window-like shapes, and an occasional stick figure began to appear in the paintings as if without the conscious intervention of the artist. The scratches were like graffiti within which swooping check shapes, "V", "X" and "L" forms, right angles and squares provided stability. Both Klee and Mondrian could be discerned lurking behind his calligraphic mazes. Around this time too Noel's implicit rectilinearity was being explicitly manifested in some canvases which were partitioned into rectangles of various dimensions, each containing a different kind of texture, color, or drawing.

Most of the paintings Noel executed between 1955 and 1965 were entitled *Palimpsests* and in them the graphic image was technically a form of intaglio and formally loose and calligraphic. Wols, Dubuffet, Torres Garcia and Tàpies all shared something with Noel's interest in texture and the rhythm of automatist writing. Between 1965 and his emigration to the United States in 1968 Noel went into a period of transition in which an overriding compositional framework controlled his graphic activity with increasing firmness. Reflecting this trend his paintings were entitled *Patchworks*, *Computers*, *Batailles Navales* (the game of "Battleships" in English), *The Tac Toes*, *Targets* and *Sevens*, according to their configurations.

In many of the paintings from this period large areas of raw canvas were reserved for oil paint minus Noel's ubiquitous and, and very bright color was sometimes introduced. Dots and circles often obtained equal prominence with rectilinear elements, as did triangles. The implications of systemization in these paintings invested them with a kind of logic and clarity which was in turn belied by their overall lack of precision in handling. The space in them was more like the additive, overlapped, ambiguous space of Cubist collage than the reverse drawing, negative space of his *Palimpsests*, despite his continued use of incised drawing. Large "X"s extended across the surfaces of many of these pictures as if to cross out their message and to say that it must end.

Ever since his discovery in 1954 of a new, non-Cubist space in the work of Jackson Pollock he saw European, Cubist space as a concentration of energy in the pictorial center as if it were recoiling in fear from the picture's edges. In the new space of Abstract Expressionism the activity within the picture frame was uncontrolled by it. Marks made in the void of the picture's surface could proliferate additively without the need for conscious relationships with the framing edges which were thus set free to act as cropping devices that terminated the streams of energy flying out from the center in all directions. Noel felt that the new space he had discovered was inherently



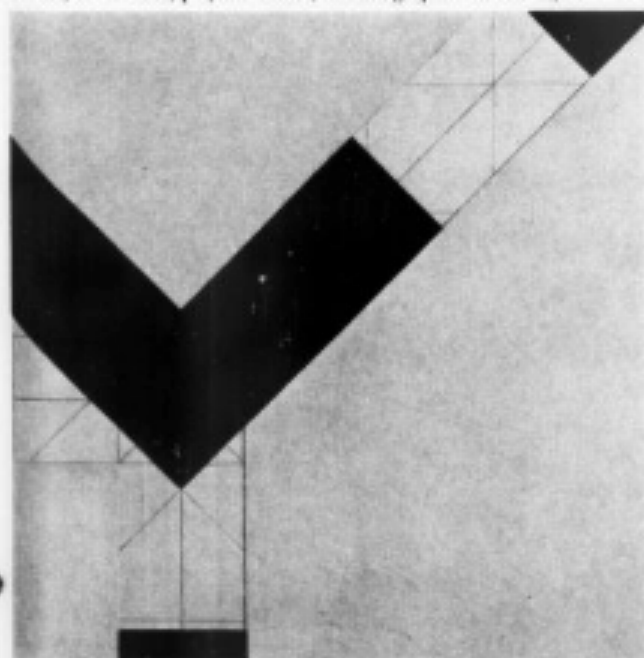
Untitled, 1973. Sand, polymer binder, ink and graphite on canvas, 60" x 60"

American in its breadth and scope, and he wanted to experience it personally. A post as artist-in-residence at Minneapolis finally brought him to the United States in 1968. He produced over 120 paintings during his first year here, all but a dozen or so of which he destroyed. His career once again became a tabula rasa on which to inscribe a whole new esthetic approach that might be in harmony with his new environment. The sense in his work of layer upon layer of civilization conveyed by the superimposition of graffiti-like marks on stratified canvases was an accurate metaphor for the long historical evolution of Europe. The paintings looked like the time worn walls of typical European streets where re-surfacing is an ongoing substitute for rebuilding. In the United States we tear the old down to make room for the new, and do not want to remember the past too perfectly. We lack that European sense of layered time. What we have is a sense of speeded up time, of rushes of air through open spaces, of energy and of clean, new, sharply defined surfaces.

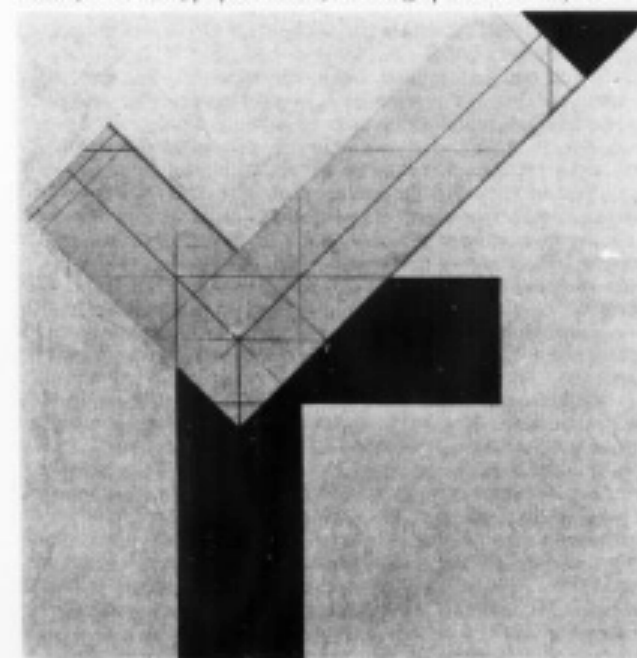
Noel salvaged only the stretchers from this period of trying to deal pictorially with America. These stretchers hung one in front of another in his studio and their different overlapped structures formed an eccentric geometry of

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Untitled, 1973. Sand, polymer binder, ink and graphite on canvas, 34" x 34"



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superimposed grid systems that provided Noël with the idea for a new style of painting. From then on he has been painting square canvases, in series, each with two or more right-angle cut-outs made in their sandy monochrome surfaces. These cut-outs reveal grids drawn in graphite on raw canvas literally located behind a roughly applied coating of sand and pigment in a polymer binder. Despite their tightly controlled appearance, his new paintings are essentially as arbitrary as his first automatic drawings in sand were in 1954. In a typical work the first "L" he places on the field determines the axes of the second "L". If there are four "L"s each pair shares parallel

axes of its grid or grids with the other pair. Although the first mark he makes on the field, then, is completely arbitrary, it generates subsequent systems automatically. (The major difference between Noël and Mondrian on this point is that Mondrian makes his first mark according to a set of ground rules and adjusts each subsequent mark in relation to it by instinct, unsystematically.)

Noël steps up the complexity of his paintings like a mathematician raising a digit to a higher power. Grids, by their nature imply all-overness, continuity, orderliness and
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logic, but Noël manipulates them almost playfully to achieve subtle disturbing effects. He coats sections of some of the "L"s with a second tone of sand material blocking out their grids partially and establishing yet another system of relationships. Because of the physical thickness of the pigmented skin the viewer feels as if he is looking through "L" shaped windows at a series of transparent linear networks, but he is then surprised by their inconsistency. Within a context of regularity, Noël feels free to block some of the expected material and to vary the density of lines in a given territory.

Noël creates a fine balance between what is arbitrary and unexpected and what is controlled by closed logical systems. His color, for example, is conceived in terms of light and dark, yet it is never black and white. Midnight blues, dark muddy browns, eggshell whites and tawney beiges surprise the viewer with their warmth. His color operates in terms of temperature and one is never conscious of it as paint qua paint, that is, from a tube. Incongruously, inside Noël's rigorously non-

referential world of pure abstraction, one thinks of his color in terms of earth and sky, beach and sunlit walls.

The space in Noël's paintings since he came to America has completely opened up. The "L"s seem to fly through his field buffeted by air rushing around them. The framing edge operates in a quasi-photographic manner to crop images cutting them off arbitrarily. Most of the "L"s lock into at least one canvas edge so that their continuation outside the pictorial confines is clearly implied. The "L"s that seem like corners of a larger square whose center is located outside the field create a gravitational pull which is felt kinesthetically by the viewer. There is a powerful tension between the various weights of these implied squares and a sense of tenuously achieved balance. It is that precariousness, the sense of risks taken, and the willingness to allow chance and the forces of irrationality to control his imagery (more than his freely applied surfaces, draftsmanly orientation, or his beautiful non-color) which allies Noël with the New American Painting he so much admired in 1954.