

Hunting in the snow.

Artistic research as parrhesia.

Transvaluation Symposium in Göteborg

21-22 May 2015.

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Abstract

Our paper takes Bruegel's *Hunters in the snow* (c. 1565) as a starting point. We will not present a traditional art historical analysis, but approach it as an 'environment of thinking'. Anachronistically, Bruegel's painting helps us to understand the problems and possibilities of a Nietzschean 'transvaluation' *in and by* artistic research. Bruegel's painting is more than an allegory: we will link it – *and* the knowledge that can be gained by artistic research – to Michel Foucault's revaluation of the classical notion of *parrhesia*, a kind of truth-speaking that is not grounded in an external framework of scientific protocols and methods, but in a personal, bodily *ascesis*, in an ethical praxis. We want to argue that the artistic research can operate as a modern form of *parrhesia* in academic discourse, a *parrhesia* based on the visual and sensual qualities of a work of art.

Keywords: artistic research, cynical *parrhesia*, image-sensation, Bruegel

The *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*: a cynical transvaluation

Hunters in the Snow (1565) belongs to a series of six paintings, each depicting two months of the year, commissioned by the Antwerp merchant and banker Nicolaas Jonghelinck. *Hunters in the Snow* – now part of the collection of the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in Vienna – shows us the darkest and coldest days of the year, the months of December and January. In this paper, we will not present a traditional art historical analysis: we will approach this painting as a material artefact 'to think with', an 'environment of thinking'. Anachronistically, Bruegel's painting helps us to understand the problems and possibilities of a Nietzschean 'transvaluation' *in and by* artistic research. We want to consider artistic research as a form of what Nietzsche called the *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, the 'joyous science'. Nietzsche borrowed this notion from the 'gay saber' of the medieval courtly love poetry, where knowledge was intimately connected with the passions of a body in love. The *Fröhliche Wissenschaft* focuses on the body, this amalgam of emotions, thoughts, experiences, affects and perceptions, but also of cultural codes and conventions that structure and give meaning to our reality. It demands an existential density and commitment as touchstone to determine the relevance and the value of this knowledge. To what extent do certain

insights, certain concepts, certain sensations help us to escape a way of life that makes us weak, bitter, tired? To what extent do they offer us new ways of thinking and perceiving, new modes of existence? Nietzsche was looking for a transvaluation of values, an *Umwertung aller Werte*, based on the needs of the body, as he states in *Ecce Homo* (1888): “these petty concerns - nutrition, location, climate, recuperation, the whole casuistry of selfishness - are far more important than all the concepts people have considered important so far. This is exactly where people have to start re-educating themselves. The things that humanity used to think seriously about are not even realities, just figments of the imagination or, to put it more strongly, lies from the bad instincts of sick natures who were harmful in the deepest sense”. (Nietzsche 2005: 98) This passage clearly illustrates Nietzsche’s debt to the cynical tradition, from which he borrowed the notion of transvaluation, the need to ‘change the value of currency’ (‘parakharatein to nomisma’).

In his last lecture course at the Collège de France, *Le courage de la vérité* (1983-4), Foucault extensively discussed this cynical transvaluation: “the alteration of the currency, the change of its value, which is constantly associated with Cynicism, no doubt means something like: the forms and habits which usually stamp existence and give it its features must be replaced by the effigy of the principles traditionally accepted by philosophy. But by the very fact of applying these principles to life itself, rather than merely maintaining them in the element of the *logos*, by the fact that they give a form to life, just as the coin’s effigy gives a form to the metal on which it is stamped, one thereby reveals other lives, the lives of others, to be no more than counterfeit, coin with no value.” (Foucault 2011: 244) Whoever wants to change the values and thus reveal other possible modes of existence, should in the first place take care of one’s own life and have the courage to testify, to speak out. For Foucault, modern art is an important heir to this cynical tradition: “art itself, whether it is literature, painting, or music, must establish a relation to reality which is no longer one of ornamentation, or imitation, but one of laying bare, exposure, stripping, excavation, and violent reduction of existence to its basics.” (188) Now that art and design education in Europa, due to the Bologna Process, has been given a new home within the university, one could argue that artistic research should have a similar cynical task of transvaluation, hence that an artistic researcher should have the courage to speak out, just like the cynics did in the agora of the Greek polis. This is what was called *parrhesia* in antiquity, ‘freespokenness’: telling the truth, with an authority that is not derived from some external discourse, but is grounded in a personal *ascesis*, a continuous exercise to give form to one’s own life. The knowledge of the parrhesiast is based on the care of oneself and of others. The only touchstone is the same as in Nietzsche’s *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*: the correspondence with the body, with the actual existence of the speaker. What the artistic researcher brings to academia, as a new kind of Diogenes, is this connection between truth and existence, which, according to Foucault, has been neglected in modern science: “If scientific practice, scientific institutions, and integration within the scientific consensus are by themselves sufficient to assure access to the truth, then it is clear that the problem of the true life as the necessary basis for the practice of truth-telling disappears.” (235)

Is this the lesson we can learn from Bruegel’s *Hunters*? When we look at the painting as a complex allegory, the hunters could be seen as artistic researchers, suddenly entering a cold landscape that is obviously not holding a homecoming party for them – everyone continues with their activities, from extinguishing fire to skating on the ice. The quarry the hunters bring back with them is also not very impressive: a skinny fox, perhaps some fowl hidden in a bag. And yet they seem to be very determined, marching into the landscape from the margins of the painting. We can only guess what has happened outside the frame. Who knows if – as could well have happened in Bruegel’s days – they have met some revolutionary preachers holding a clandestine hedge sermon in some remote part of the forest. Perhaps they have been making preparations to

fight Catholicism. Nowadays, we could argue that the new dominant religion is ‘technocracy’: the priest, so despised by Nietzsche, is replaced by the figure of the ‘manager’, and his loathsome little nephew in each of us: the ‘self-manager’. Should we be expecting a new rebellion in academia, a new *Beeldenstorm*, an Iconocastic Fury that will tear down the idols of profit, efficiency, and quantification? Are artistic researchers perhaps the new *Geuzen*, the new ‘Beggars’ of science?

This does not seem very likely: the returning hunters on the painting look tired, exhausted. Or more correctly: in their bent posture, their downcast face, we recognize our own fatigue, our own weariness. The same unbearable lightness that filled our metanarratives with helium and which made them fly away, has made us inert and heavy. There is no longer a viable ideal left that could enrapture, move or motivate us. The changing of the value of currency seems to have failed in advance: we lack a bank of ideas that could guarantee the value of our coins with actual bars of gold. Art seems to be as detached from reality as financial speculation is from the real economy. And very often, artistic researchers can but borrow the vocabulary of the only dominant terminology left, that of meritocratic capitalism, and talk about productivity, output, innovation, growth, interventions, challenges.

But precisely this overstimulation, this need to produce and consume ever more texts and art works exhausts us, even if they are presented as a form of critique, of resistance. In his ‘Erfahrung und Armut’ (1933) (Experience and Poverty), Walter Benjamin already described this cultural fatigue, and more recently Byung-Chul Han coined the notion of the ‘Müdigkeitsgesellschaft’ (2010) (Fatigue Society). As in Bruegel’s landscape, there is always something to do: everybody is busy and pre-occupied with work or play. More than a century ago, Nietzsche already warned us for the dangers of such an overstimulation, and of the permanent loss of energy involved in constantly having to say no to things: “Warding things off, not letting them come to you, these are expenditures – make no mistake about it –, energy *wasted* on negative goals. In the constant need to ward things off, you can become so weak that you are unable to protect yourself any more.” (Nietzsche 2005: 95 – italics in original)

In his trilogy on ‘being a human being’, the Swedish director Roy Andersson has acutely captured this contemporary exhaustion. In the first film, *Songs from the second floor* (2000), a verse by César Vallejo – ‘Beloved are they who sit down’ – is repeated as a mantra throughout the film, illustrating the inertia, the sadness of the characters. On different levels, Andersson’s films make clear how urgently a transvaluation is needed: spaces have lost their proper measures: they are either too small or too big for comfort, and every possible enchantment is gone. In a certain scene, for example, the disillusionment of a magician painfully demonstrates that magic is totally lost on him. Despite all the acceleration made possible by technology, we have become immobile: cars are caught in an endless traffic jam and sportcars break down; pushing them forward seems to be the only option. Patient and psychiatrist prove to be indistinguishable. Religion offers no solace: crucifixes are thrown in bulk on a pile. National history, for ages a generator and guarantee for a civil identity and shared values, has lost its appeal. In the final film of the trilogy, *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014), the army of Charles XII, who ruled Sweden in the beginning of the 18th century, suddenly appears in a modern café. The wounded and exhausted King, unheroically defeated in the battle of Poltava by tsar Peter the Great, needs to use the toilet, which is already occupied by someone else. The flummoxed witnesses of this sad scene are modern-day hunters in the snow: two travelling salesmen, dragging around a suitcase of entertainment articles, fake vampire fangs and laughing pillows no one wants to buy. Their desperate hunt for buyers is just an excuse for the search for human warmth and consolation. The grey and grim universe of Andersson is a modern interpretation of Bruegel’s winter landscape – the title of the last film even explicitly refers to the birds in this painting, observing the human activities below them (see Andersson 2015).

Walking in the image, being-towards-death

With their ankles deep in the snow, immersed in the *weatherscape* that surrounds them, the hunters on the painting reveal not only an allegorical, but also an existential and affective space. This implies another way of approaching a work of art: not decoding it as an allegorical rebus, but traversing it as a mental and sensual space: watching becomes a kind of walking. With other words, we want to try to look at images the same way as the hunters enter the frame: thoughtful, attentive, sinking deeply in the matter. We belong to the scene. Such a way of image-thinking implies an unexpected but necessary return to existentialism. A kind of existentialism that has made a long journey through the dark woods of poststructuralism, losing its faith in concepts like authenticity, humanism, and all the logo-, fallo- and anthropocentrism that used to stick to it. But there is one thing it could not leave behind: the notion of mortality, the finitude of one's personal existential project: Heidegger's *Sein zum Tode*. This is what any practitioner of the fine art of walking experiences: surfing on the web, reflecting in a comfortable chair in an air-conditioned room, travelling in a car or a train, I can image myself as a mind without a body, a part of a network of actors, a set of signifiers in a discursive field. But when walking extensively, I am at the mercy of my own body, which confronts me with my own transitory life: this is the main theme of Frédéric Gros' *Marcher, une philosophie* (2011). Not surprisingly, Gros is also the editor of Foucault's lectures at the *Collège de France*. Walking is the cynical act *par excellence*. The ethical angle of our proposed analysis implies the confrontation with our own body, and requires the 'subjectification' of a work of art as an element to construct a specific mode of existence, a confrontation that questions the validity of our life practices. That someone like Foucault becomes an ally in such a subjective transvaluation, does not come as a surprise. Or as Deleuze summarized Foucault's remarkable and unexpected return to the subject in his later work: "That's what subjectification is about: bringing a curve into the line, making it turn back on itself, or making force impinge on itself. So we get ways of living with what would otherwise be unendurable. What Foucault says is that we can only avoid death and madness if we make existing into a 'way', an 'art.'" (Deleuze 1995: 113) It is precisely the confrontation with the borders of our existential project, the madness, the destruction and death that is to be found on the other side, that gives the right kind of tension to this fragile project. It was in this sense that Foucault referred to a dictum of Epictetus: "And you, in the midst of what occupation do you want to be taken?" (Epictetus, quoted in Foucault 1997: 105) Bruegel's painting seems to work as a similar *memento mori*: the evening falls over the scene, and it is winter. Both the time of the year and the day carry associations with death, but also with the looming threat of small catastrophes: the signboard that only hangs on one hinge, the chimney fire in the distance, possible holes in the ice. If we look carefully, we see that death and suffering are omnipresent in this landscape that offers its inhabitants only a precarious kind of security, and ultimately remains indifferent to them. W.H. Auden beautifully described this indifference in his famous poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* (1938), inspired by Bruegel's paintings: "About suffering they were never wrong,/The Old Masters; how well, they understood/Its human position; how it takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." But such a *memento mori* is more than just a philosophical statement: it is also a transformative force. Death too needs a transvaluation - it should be seen as a way to stimulate a change in our mode of existence. On how many occasions do we feel that we are wasting our time, situations that could be avoided if we would more often consider Epictetus' warning: is this really the kind of thing you would like to do when death comes and takes us? Is this the cynical 'parrhesia' of this painting? A transvaluation of death, a confrontation with our being human, an encouragement to take care of our life, even in a world in which we are totally insignificant? Is the appeal of this painting the same kind of appeal Sartre presents us in his *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (1948): "Thus, aesthetic joy proceeds to this level of the

consciousness which I take of recovering and internalizing that which is non-ego par excellence, since I transform the given into an imperative and the fact into a value. The world is *my task*.” (Sartre 2001, 44, italics in original) From an historical perspective, such a presupposition may even be not that far-fetched: Bruegel aligned himself with a group of humanist scholars that were strongly influenced by the modern devotion and the protestant focus on spiritual self-care. This concern would also become, through the work of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, the basic tenor of existentialism. But such an ethical ‘appeal’ is only one aspect of Bruegel’s painting, a lesson in morality that could equally well be found in a philosophical discourse. Bruegel’s work is more than an untimely mirror for our contemporary human condition. When we look carefully, we notice that even the work of those old masters is already a presentation of another way of experiencing reality, or more precisely, a more careful, a more intense and nuanced experience of this reality. Bruegel is obviously realistic (we ‘recognize’ the dogs, the fire, the snow, the church), but ‘beyond’ this recognition, this configuration, something appears what we would like to call an image-sensation. Something in this painting resists a simply decoding. And this resistance opens up a space for contemplation, an environment of thinking.

The *parrhesia* of the image-sensation

Bruegel evokes a world that does not only appeal to our intellect, but also to our body. And as Mark Johnson remarks in his *The meaning of the body: aesthetics of human understanding* (2007), these bodily experiences also generate meaning: “meaning is not just a matter of concepts and propositions, but also reaches down into the images, sensorimotor schemas, feelings, qualities, and emotions that constitute our meaningful encounter with our world”. (Johnson 2007:xi) Art has this great advantage: that it communicates not only with concepts and propositions, but also with experiences, sensations, emotions. This is an important aspect, because all too often the critical value of art is reduced to the conceptual basis of the work, the historical context or the discourse of the artist and his critics. What we want to demonstrate is that a *parrhesia* is also possible based on the visual and sensual qualities of a work of art. Qualities that could obviously connect with a conceptual framework, but which cannot be reduced to it. Such a *parrhesia* is not grounded in an ‘authentic’ position of the author (artist and/or critic), but in the embodied interaction between the work and the wayfarers that virtually traverse it. This embodiment implies that we should not only focus on the ‘human figure’, the stories, the activities in which we can mirror ourselves: we could also take into account ‘impersonal’ affects and sensations that affect our body, like the sensations of gravity, light, quantity.

If we go ‘beyond’ the stories depicted in the painting, we notice that the landscape of Bruegel is in fact standing on its head, as if a radical transvaluation of values has already happened. The normally dark and heavy earth has been given the light and bright features of the sky, and vice versa. Since Egyptian art, especially the mural paintings, humans are almost always depicted with their feet firmly on the ground, subjected to the laws of gravity. An image starts with a firm, heavy ground on which a lighter element is placed, that in turn becomes the ground for an even lighter element. According to Sloterdijk, the first transvaluation of values was based on a challenge to this seemingly inescapable gravity. Long before the cynics, the Jews were the first to radically transform values. Their exodus out of Egypt was only possible by changing the medium of religious expression from heavy statues to book scrolls, which are obviously far easier to transport. (Sloterdijk 2007: 52) But even if iconoclastic monotheism was the first attempt at transvaluating gravity, the visual arts in Europe for a long time have rarely questioned it. Only around the time when Nietzsche declared the death of God, we see how in the visual arts the connection with a solid base is lost and everything starts floating, like in the work of Malevich or Chagall. Bruegel already seems to anticipate this transvaluation of gravity. Lightness becomes

the sediment, with a sky as heavy as lead. It is as if the trees are rooted in the dark sky, their trunks running down like tears from a cheek into the snow. This unexpected turning upside down only enforces the downward visual force on the shoulders of our hunters, weighed down by the dark trees, the gloomy sky. And yet despite this heavy visual burden, their feet stand on an abysmal, nihilistic white nothingness. That is the brilliant paradox of this *mundus inversus*: despite the lightness they seem to traverse, they are sinking into the snow. That is also our condition: apparently freed from all metaphysical ballast, no longer burdened by original sin or by unattainable and thus frustrating ideals, we still do not float, even if we no longer know what supports us. It is important to notice these are not just rhetorical, gratuitous metaphors for the human condition in late capitalism. Watching Bruegel's painting, we actually sense our own discomfort of feeling weighed down without a solid ground to stand on. The 'unbearable lightness' is not only an intellectual oxymoron: our body experiences it on a very sensible level, even if it is not tangible.

In relation to this feeling of 'weight without ground', we experience another bodily sensation: the greyish white of the snow makes us shiver, according to the synaesthetical principle we find in the expression 'cold colours'. With Bruegel, we have not only a compositorial negativity (he 'stacks' his visual elements on an absent foundation), but also an exceptional chromatic negativity. Most part of the colour schemes use warm colours. Almost all of the historical masters of colour (from Rubens to Matisse, from Giorgione to Bonnard) base their coloration on warm colours, with colder hues that function as subtle and welcome nuances, like a breeze on a hot day. It does not matter if they went to Collioure, Tunis or Arles, these painters were always looking for warm light. The reason for this is as natural and self-evident as the fact that the heavy visual elements are usually to be found at the bottom of a painting: colour is an effect of light, and natural light is, just like our body temperature, usually warm. Cold colours can only be mined in the shadows. But perhaps art needs a transvaluation of cold colours. The sensation of cold confronts me unpleasantly with my own body, but without being totally absorbed by this sensation, which is the case with heavy pain, which overrules every other sensorial input. With the experience of cold, there is still a connection with the world. I feel cold, and so does the world in which I find myself. Only a few artists have already transvaluated light in their work, to begin with Bruegel in his *Hunters*. His harsh depiction of the cold affects us and confronts us with all the associations we have with coldness: a sense of fear, despair, and loneliness. But by honestly showing this existential cold, the painting paradoxically comforts us: we are not the only ones who are lonely and afraid. From this perspective, works of Rubens and Matisse, however beautiful, feel like an act of suppression, denial, forgery, Disneyfication: as if their warm colours are just the tactful make-up of a corpse.

Another artist who can be regarded as a lover of cold colours is Karl Hofer. He catches with his negative colour schemes the kind of misty and clouded German light that drove Nietzsche to desperation and exile. In the best of his works, a lot of them still lifes, not a single warm hue appears. When they do occur, they only seem to deepen the already present sense of cold. Hofer is able to arrange his areas of colour in such a way that they interact with each other, which is far from evident. From an artist's perspective, the use of colours demands coherence between the visual elements. Within an image, warmth has the same function as gravity: a structuring force that is present, active. It allows the different elements to interact with each other. But all too easily, this force gets distorted and we are left with the kind of colourful kitsch that denies corporeality. These works are unable to help us to deal with the cold colours of our exhausted landscape. Their promise of colourful warmth is not truthful, let alone credible. It does not come as a surprise that Andersson not only refers to Bruegel, but also to Hofer as an important source of inspiration (Andersson 2015). Andersson has very well understood that we live in the age of cold light. Figuratively, by the cold light of reason, whose utilitarian logic has pervaded almost

all human interactions, but also literally, by the new sources of artificial light. In Andersson, the sunbed is a powerful symbol of this new regime, but we could also think of the cold blue light of a computer screen. These new light sources have also led to the disappearance of darkness, of the night. Just like the cold winter landscape, the night evokes uncanny feelings of fear and discomfort, but this evocation allows them to be shared, to be confronted, and thus offers consolation. But now the night has lost the healing capacity that comes from its rupture with daily life. The nightly darkness is denied to us: screens and leds provide us with an artificial midnight sun.

This is what makes Bruegel's *Hunters* such a timely work of art: in his landscape the cold dominates. The warm clay colour of the houses, the fire that burns at the inn and the fire that destroys the chimney, the coat of the dogs, the yellowish glow of the sea in the distance: they are but small islands of warmth in a polar sea. And the twilight makes the treat of an approaching darkness almost tangible: a cold, inhospitable night is about to fall. But does the transvaluation of this cold, this darkness not suggest that we could perhaps benefit from it? Are we not, with all our discontent, in need of a glorious winter? As the gardener knows, one has to prune in winter, at a moment when the climate most resembles our current neoliberal economical model, which has also invaded academia. Pruning has indeed become a neoliberal value: cutting down government spending, trimming wages and welfare payment, getting rid of redundant employees. Doing more with less... but only to be able to become more profitable, more productive, more competitive. The act of pruning thus needs a radical cynical transvaluation as well, focusing on those 'bare essentials' a body really needs. Winter forces us to pay careful attention to these bodily needs: one's breathing (filling of the lungs, the creation of space), one's heartbeat (the creation of rhythm). Just like art in Foucault's definition, winter is the "violent reduction of existence to its basics" (Foucault 2011: 188): only the essential remains, just like the bare branches of a tree in winter. This cynical pruning is aimed at our obsession with quantity that has to compensate the lack of quality. An evident symptom of this is the notion of the 'quantified self', the body as a set of carefully managed data, as the counterpart of this loss of value: the 'qualified self' that the cynics, Nietzsche and the existentialists were looking for.

Bruegel's winter teaches our body, wandering through this imaginary landscape and overcome by the cold, one of the most important legacies of the middle ages, in a strange way comparable to the emptiness in Meister Eckhart's negative theology: the need for fallow fields, according to the famous 'three-field system'. Giving ideas some rest is in the end more fruitful than exhausting them. Such a moment of rest, of inactivity will almost organically stimulate a transvaluation of values. Leave things alone, create open, empty space. This is what Bruegel does. The profundity of his observations matches those of Van Eyck, an artist to which Bruegel resembles in both the representation of human activities and the rendering of physical decay. Just like Van Eyck, he is full of compassion for the human nature, carefully registering the earthly, the bodily, the all-too-human, the multitude of things and events. But more than Van Eyck, Bruegel understands that the attention becomes deepened, more qualitative, when the field of view has been left empty in the middle. His main characters are no more than a small company: three hunters, that's it.

This perhaps is also what Morandi has in common with Bruegel. He too understood the power of a tightened up, yet empty and negative space. A landscape of his, painted in 1942, strongly resembles Bruegel's composition. Morandi achieves the tension present in Bruegel's composition with different means, by a strange juxtaposition of rest and agitation. This is also expressed by the measures of the painting: a square with the aspirations of a landscape. The whole composition adjusts itself to this paradox. The 'bay' is more tightened up than in Bruegel's painting, the slope on the right is like a wave that is about the break on this negative space. The same longing for limitation can be found in Morandi's famous still lifes: they restrict themselves to just a few stimuli: a small number of little pots and vases, and their mutual relations. Of course our daily

lives can never be as composed as one of Morandi's still lives. Heidegger could still dream of a reactionary return to the quiet and simple peasant life in his little cabin in the Black Forest, but we know very well that we have to return to the busy omnipolis of the 21st century after our imaginary Bruegelian hunting party.

Could we do anything else but to try and turn our fatigue into a force? Is this not a paradox? Not necessary: our fatigue compels us to listen to our body, demands a transvaluation. All of a sudden, we feel the need for things that we thought we had overcome: we still feel the 'obscenity of the anachronistic', to paraphrase Roland Barthes (Barthes 2001: 177), and we feel somewhat ashamed to have returned from our intellectual hunting party with the dead fox of existentialism, with an outmoded painter as Bruegel. But frankly, we are too tired and too numb with cold to care – and we feel the need to use all these suspect words, like 'self', 'body', 'happiness', 'consolation', 'patience', 'attention', despite all their woolly, even naïve connotations. The evening of this winter landscape forces us, as a Nietzschean twilight of the idols, to take leave of our former beliefs, including the academic ideal of dispassioned detachment. And some part of us feels elated about this necessary transvaluation. That is why we suspect that there is a joyous grin on the turned-away faces of the hunters.

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Pieter Bruegel, *Hunters in the snow*, c. 1565



Roy Andersson, *Songs from the second floor*, 2000



Karl Hofer, *Young women playing cards*, 1939



Roy Andersson, *Songs from the second floor*, 2000



Morandi, *Landscape*, 1942