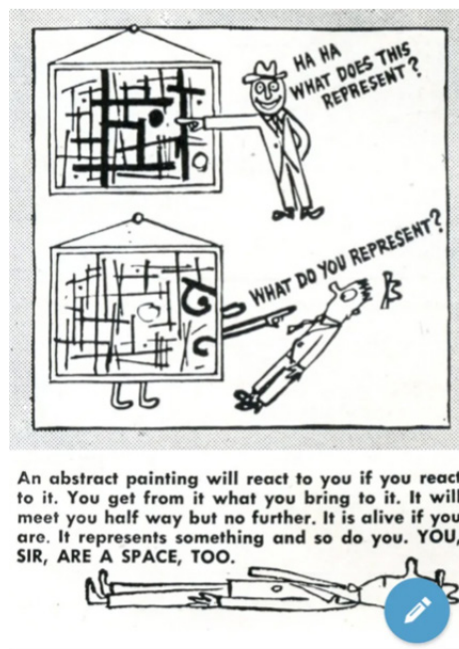


MARIANE IBRAHIM

In 1946, Ad Reinhardt drew a famous cartoon in which a viewer points at an abstract painting and asks mockingly, “Ha ha! What does this represent?” The painting, which has reconfigured itself to have a face, immediately responds while pointing back at him: “What do you represent?” The cartoon encapsulates one of the major shifts introduced by abstraction: painting ceases to be an object waiting to be explained and becomes an interlocutor. The accompanying text develops the same intuition:

“An abstract painting will react to you if you react to it. You get from it what you bring to it. It will meet you halfway, but no further. It is alive if you are. It represents something, and so do you. YOU, SIR, ARE A SPACE, TOO.”



Elsa-Louise Manceaux’s radio-paintings no longer simply respond: they speak. In them, the surface brightens and darkens; images become words, words become voice, and voice invites us into a conversation: how do you paint oxygen? How do you represent an atmosphere? What is the right distance from which to understand the world? What makes a question a good question?

At what point do we stop seeing pigment, light, or words and enter into conversation with a surface?

This question runs throughout *Surfaces of Exchange*, an exhibition in which Manceaux explores painting simultaneously as receptacle and transmitter: a surface capable of receiving signs, images, words, and affects, but also of putting them back into circulation. “Surfaces of desire or surfaces of knowledge?” the artist asks at one point in the radio-painting. The question might be addressed to every work in the exhibition and, indeed, to any painting. What do we deposit onto a surface, and what do we expect to receive from it? Whose desire and knowledge does it contain: the artist’s or the viewer’s?

The very materiality of the paintings raises these questions. Manceaux brings together on

a single surface techniques belonging to very different moments in the history of art: egg tempera, which predates oil painting; silverpoint, used for drawing centuries before the advent of graphite; gesso worked in low relief; acrylic paint; pouring medium; video projection; and mapping.

The surfaces alternate between areas of raw canvas and relief, opacity and sheen, materials that absorb light and others that reflect it. Even the preparation of the canvases begins partly in front of a computer, where Manceaux composes backgrounds and reliefs that are subsequently transferred physically onto the canvas. The history of painting thus appears as an accumulation of technologies of vision that can be reactivated in the present.

This coexistence of temporalities also extends to language. For more than a decade, Manceaux has investigated the relationships between painting and screen, between the online and the offline, between information and affect. The radio-paintings emerged, according to the artist, from a need to make more room for language within her paintings without necessarily fixing it onto them. Words therefore enter through other channels: orality, conversation, song, translation, subtitles, typography, and animation. Language appears and disappears. It is heard, read, transformed into light, and dissolves once again across the surface.

Le Code a changé (2026), Manceaux's third radio-painting after *Le Pouvoir du Fragile* (2024) and *Voice Notes* (2025), takes this investigation into a new phase. Two large-format paintings serve as supports for a projection lasting just over thirty minutes and a four-channel sound installation. Its production also entails a chain of translations: a conversation is recorded, the sound is transcribed, the transcription is translated, the text acquires a graphic form, that form is animated, and finally it is projected onto a painting made simultaneously. Each transformation preserves something of the previous one while altering something else.

Perhaps this gesture is not so different from the one underlying any fiction. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called this pact the suspension of disbelief: the moment when we stop observing the artifice and accept the rules of the world a work proposes to us. In *Le Code a changé*, Manceaux speaks with Xavier de La Porte, journalist and creator of the eponymous podcast he has hosted on France Inter since 2020, in which, through conversations with guests from a wide range of disciplines, he explores how digital technologies transform our everyday lives. Manceaux regularly listens to him while working in her studio in Mexico City. Rather than appropriating one of his episodes, she decided to reverse their usual relationship: the listener contacted the professional interviewer and began asking him questions.

The choice of the podcast is not incidental. Unlike radio or television, media historically associated with audiences gathered simultaneously around the same broadcast, the podcast belongs to a fragmented cultural landscape: individually chosen voices, listened to at different times and in different geographies, often while we are doing something else. For Manceaux, listening to podcasts in French while painting is also a way of inhabiting distance. After more than a decade living in Mexico, the language and conversations coming from France enter the studio without displacing the sounds of the place in which she finds herself.

Le Code a changé makes this superimposition explicit. What would normally constitute the active sonic background of the studio moves into the foreground of the work. De La Porte's voice coexists with those of Mexican artists Alonso Robles, AKA 1444, and Daniela de la Torre; with songs Manceaux improvises as she works; and with conversations, noises, and different sonic atmospheres. The artist describes the process as a way of treating sound pictorially: working in layers, varying intensities, allowing a voice to move forward or recede as a form or color might within a composition. Mexico and France therefore appear not as two stable poles between which one must choose, but as simultaneous presences capable of overlapping within the same surface.

The conversation with De La Porte also reveals an unexpected parallel between painting and producing a podcast: both only work when the labor that constructs them ceases to occupy

the foreground. The point is not to conceal the artifice, but to make it secondary. When we stop thinking about the montage, editing, mixing, or each of the decisions that sustain a work, we can enter the space it opens before us.

The radio-painting introduces another difficulty: temporality. We are accustomed to deciding how long our encounter with a painting lasts. We can pause for a few seconds or remain before it for half an hour; conventionally, the painting does not determine that duration. *Le Code a changé*, by contrast, lasts 31 minutes and 15 seconds. By incorporating a temporality of its own into painting, Manceaux partially reverses that relationship and asks how much time we are willing to grant a surface of exchange. At a cultural moment when much of our visual experience is mediated by screens, continuous scrolling, and images competing for our attention, a thirty-minute painting introduces a strange friction: it draws on some of those same digital sensibilities to demand a radically different form of attention.

Not all the paintings in *Surfaces of Exchange* speak. Around *Le Code a changé*, Manceaux presents what she calls her silent paintings. In them, the conversation takes place entirely within the surface. In *Surface d'échanges / Upload changes*, for instance, organic forms coexist with motifs that seem to belong to a digital vocabulary: signs, fragments, or a kind of typography that cannot be read. Different textures and degrees of sheen make the materials appear to respond to one another. In *La nueva distancia para entender al mundo*, these same qualities reappear around a question Manceaux originally encountered in the title of a radio broadcast: "What is the right distance from which to understand the world?" The phrase eventually became one of the songs she created in her studio and, from there, the title of a painting.

A painting constantly requires us to adjust our position: to move closer in order to observe a texture, to step back in order to grasp a composition. Distance can be physical—the more than nine thousand kilometers separating Mexico City from Paris—but also perceptual: too close, and we lose sight of the whole; too far away, and the detail disappears. The question of the right distance from which to understand a painting inevitably becomes a broader question: from where can we understand the world?

At the beginning of the exhibition, *Femme Caniche / Charges communes* introduces this question in a different register. The figure, recurrent in Manceaux's work since 2024, remains seated, absorbed in thoughts to which we are never granted access. They might concern the state of the world, climate change, children, the administration of the building, or simply her hair. The ambiguity is important: faced with an exhibition traversed by information, voices, and questions, Manceaux begins with a woman whose thoughts remain inaccessible. Her scale is deceptive; if she were to stand, she would be gigantic. And from the entrance, her presence establishes an unexpected connection with the monumental female figures of Hilda Palafox occupying the gallery's upper floor.

Some relationships can be transmitted; others remain opaque. A voice can become text, a text can become image, and an image can become light, but no translation is absolute. Between transmission and reception there is always an interval: a distance that allows something to change along the way.

And then the painting begins to speak. Or, more precisely, we understand that it was never silent. The question no longer travels in a single direction: it moves back and forth between the work and the person looking at it, transforming itself in the exchange. *Échange* and *changement* (exchange and change) even draw close to one another in the words that give the exhibition and its radio-painting their titles: *Surfaces d'échange*, *Le Code a changé*.

In *Surfaces d'échange*, painting is no longer merely a surface onto which images, words, or light are deposited, but a place where all of them circulate and transform. Nor does the viewer remain outside this movement. As Reinhardt's cartoon declared nearly eighty years ago: YOU, SIR, ARE

A SPACE, TOO!

Credits:

Featuring the voices of (in order of appearance):

Elsa-Louise Manceaux, Xavier de la Porte, Alonso Robles (aka 1444), Daniela de la Torre.

Sound production and design: Enrique Arriaga

Sound mixing and mastering: Rodrigo Esquivel / Estudio Madre de Dios

Animation design: Andrés Villalobos / Estudio mascaramas

Production and animation assistance: Camila López Cuspinera

Translation: Hellène Aligant

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