

## **FOR PHILIP GUSTON**

### **On the broken friendship between Morton Feldman and Philip Guston**

*During February and March 2011, Ton van Os showed, among other paintings inspired by Morton Feldman, his diptych A BROKEN PAINTING at the Ketelfactory gallery in Schiedam, the Netherlands. On March 13, the Ives Ensemble played in the gallery Feldman's For Philip Guston. For the exhibition, Ton van Os wrote the following essay.*

Around 1967 the abstract expressionist painter Philip Guston underwent an artistic and personal crisis. It was the era of Richard Nixon, of Watergate, race riots, a visibly active Ku Klux Klan, Vietnam, massive anti-war demonstrations, student uprisings at virtually every university, and a strong underground movement that was changing society from within.

Increasingly, Guston wondered, "what kind of man am I".

No longer could he bring himself to "go to his studio and adjust a red to a blue". He wanted "to be complete again" and recalled with longing the start of his career when, as a politically aware figurative painter, he could use his work to respond to what he thought and felt.

Partly influenced by underground strip cartoonists, from 1967 onwards Guston started to develop a different, more expressive style of drawing and painting. He first exhibited his new figurative paintings in 1970 at the Marlborough Gallery in New York.

Among the public that attended the preview was his greatest friend, the composer Morton Feldman. When Guston asked Feldman what he thought of his new work, the latter was lost for words. In Feldman's version of the story that moment of silence between the artist and the composer abruptly ended a 20 year friendship. They never saw each other again.

In 1986, six years after Guston's death, on writing about this minute of silence in his essay "For Philip Guston", Feldman explained that he greatly regretted this dramatic rift in their friendship and that it was caused by the change in Guston's work. He writes, "I was in Europe for a year and he went to the Academy of Rome for a year, then I came back and he had a big show. I went down and I was just confronted with a completely

new type of work. [...] I was looking at a picture, he comes over and says, "What do you think?" And I said, "Well, let me look at it for another minute." And with that, our friendship was over."

Feldman states that abstract painting and abstract music had always been the cornerstone of the intense artistic and personal connection between himself and Guston. That Guston started to work in a different style changed the lives of both artists forever.

I think that something else happened as well during this much discussed and enigmatic speechless moment between the two men. The intensity of their friendship and the sense that their fates were connected was not just because both were active in artistic fields. They also shared a common background. Growing up as children of Jewish parents who had emigrated from Russia, they tried to make their way in the New World and in the worlds of art and music.

Their friendship began in 1950 when composer John Cage took Feldman along to Guston's studio. Until Guston moved from New York to Woodstock in 1967, both men kept in close – often daily – contact. Guston went to every first performance of Feldman's music in studios, galleries, and lofts. Conversely, Feldman saw and commented on every exhibition and painting by Guston.

If Feldman and Guston met up at all during the period 1967-1970 apparently the painter never told the composer about his new style of working. One thing is certain, Guston never again admitted Feldman to his studio.

Perhaps Guston wanted to develop his new-found visual language in private. Did he fear Feldman's critique, which would likely have been merciless? Another possibility is that Guston's work was influenced by his budding friendship with the writer Philip Roth who wrote about American society and who also lived in Woodstock. In addition, Guston must have become estranged to Feldman's uncompromising abstract sound universe.

When the two men came face to face in 1970 in the Marlborough Gallery, Feldman realized that his friendship with Guston had been over for years. Guston had excluded

Feldman from his life. No longer was the composer privileged to be the first to see Guston's works.

Feldman was hyper intelligent, hypersensitive, and vulnerable. As he stood between the art public during the preview he suddenly understood that he was no longer important to his fellow artist (who was 14 years his senior) and that he was cast aside.

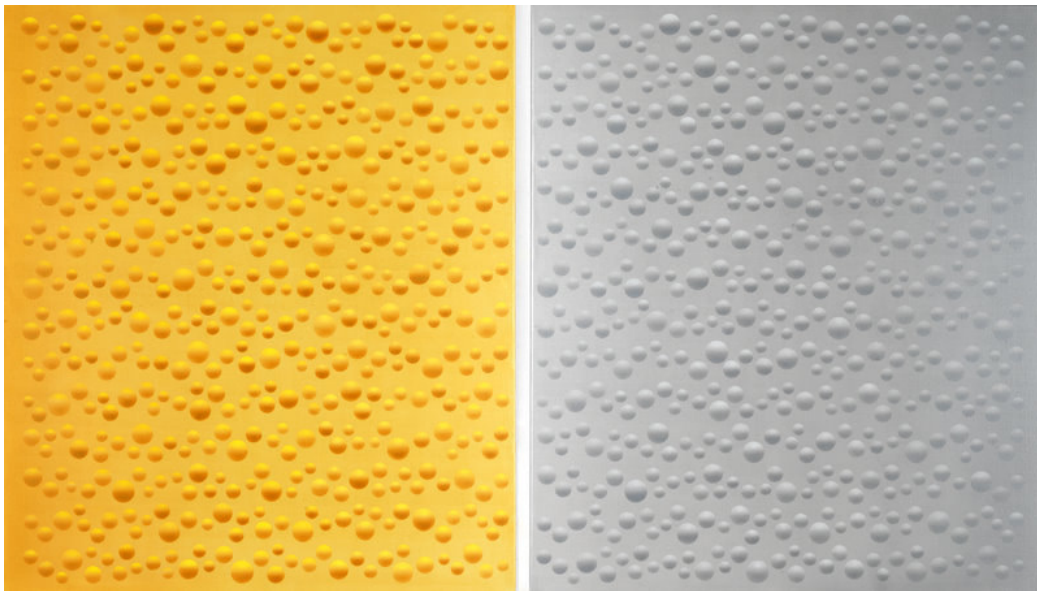
I believe that this traumatic realization – not Guston's changed attitude towards the visual arts – was the real reason why all contact ceased between the two men. Feldman found it impossible to discuss this with his former friend.

Philip Guston died in 1980. Two years later Feldman composed *Three Voices* in memory of both the poet Frank O'Hara and Philip Guston. In 1984, Feldman created *For Philip Guston*, an elegy in sound expressing his sadness over things past. *For Philip Guston* laments a lost friendship, a lost love.

My diptych A BROKEN PAINTING commemorates Morton Feldman as well as Philip Guston.

Ton van Os

13.3.2011



Ton van OS: A BROKEN PAINTING MF/PHG LXVIII 2006 diptych (2x) 131x151 cm