

FRANÇOIS MORELLET

AT FRIEZE MASTERS

kamel mennour  LÉVY GORVY

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A major representative of post-war geometric abstraction, François Morellet (1926–2016) was one of the pioneers of minimal and conceptual art. As early as his first mature works in 1952, the then 26-year-old artist established a process based on a will towards systematicity, neutrality, and formal economy, along with a predilection for seriality, the “all-over,” and anti-composition. As an irreverent heir to concrete art, which he discovered in the early 1950s, Morellet momentarily identified with the optic and kinetic art of the 1960s and was above all a precursor of the “conceptual attitude” generally attributed to artists on the other side of the Atlantic. Together with Joël Stein, Julio le Parc, Francisco Sobrino, Horacio Garcia Rossi and Jean-Pierre Yvaral (son of Vasarely), Morellet was a founding member of the legendary artist collaborative Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV), active in France from 1960 to 1968. At the time, Morellet developed a practice of “programmed experimental painting,” in which each work, before being produced, is fully and systematically conceived. His ambitious undertaking, aiming at demystifying the function of the artist and the very nature of art, involved reducing as much as possible the number of arbitrary decisions needed for the creation of his systems—autonomous, mathematical systems with no other meaning than that of their own logic, “systems,” as he said himself, “as rigorous as they are absurd.”

The self-taught artist, whose curiosity was only equalled by his audacity, explained that his education was made up of “one love to the next,” his painting “of one influence to the next.” He was quick to recall the various geographical, cultural, and historical origins of his diverse sources and points of reference: Russian Suprematism, Dutch Neoplasticism, French Dada, as well as Arab-Muslim decorative traditions and Indigenous tapa clothes from the Pacific Islands. Apart from a few periods of intense artistic exchange (during regular stays in Paris and frequent far-flung journeys), Morellet was relatively isolated in his early years. He lived and worked his entire life in Cholet, a town in the region of Maine-et-Loire where he was born. For the first 25 years of his career, he was, as he liked to say, “a Sunday painter.” First of all, he had assumed responsibility in the family business at Morellet-Guerineau—a large factory for tricycles, small cars, and other children’s toys—where he remained a full-time industrialist until 1975, able to dedicate only evenings and weekends to his artistic practice. At the time, this professional activity protected him from the contingencies of making money as an artist, and by extension, from any possible pressure from the art market. Morellet retained the creative freedom gained during this period, unhesitatingly pursuing “all-the-way” explorations of “almost nothing.”

Paradoxically, this “almost nothing” is expressed through exceptional versatility. From a pared-down artistic vocabulary, Morellet’s geometry of constraints takes on multiple forms. His painting practice soon widened to include sculpture and installation art, and his materials diversified: to oil, acrylic, screen-printing ink, metal and, from 1963 onwards, neon lights. While the young Morellet preferred a modest 80 by 80 centimetre square pictorial format, his works progressively unfolded into the surrounding space to properly architectural proportions. This began in 1971, from which point he multiplied his integrations of the exhibition space, facetiously renamed “disintegrations” by the artist, a great lover of puns. Morellet’s versatility is

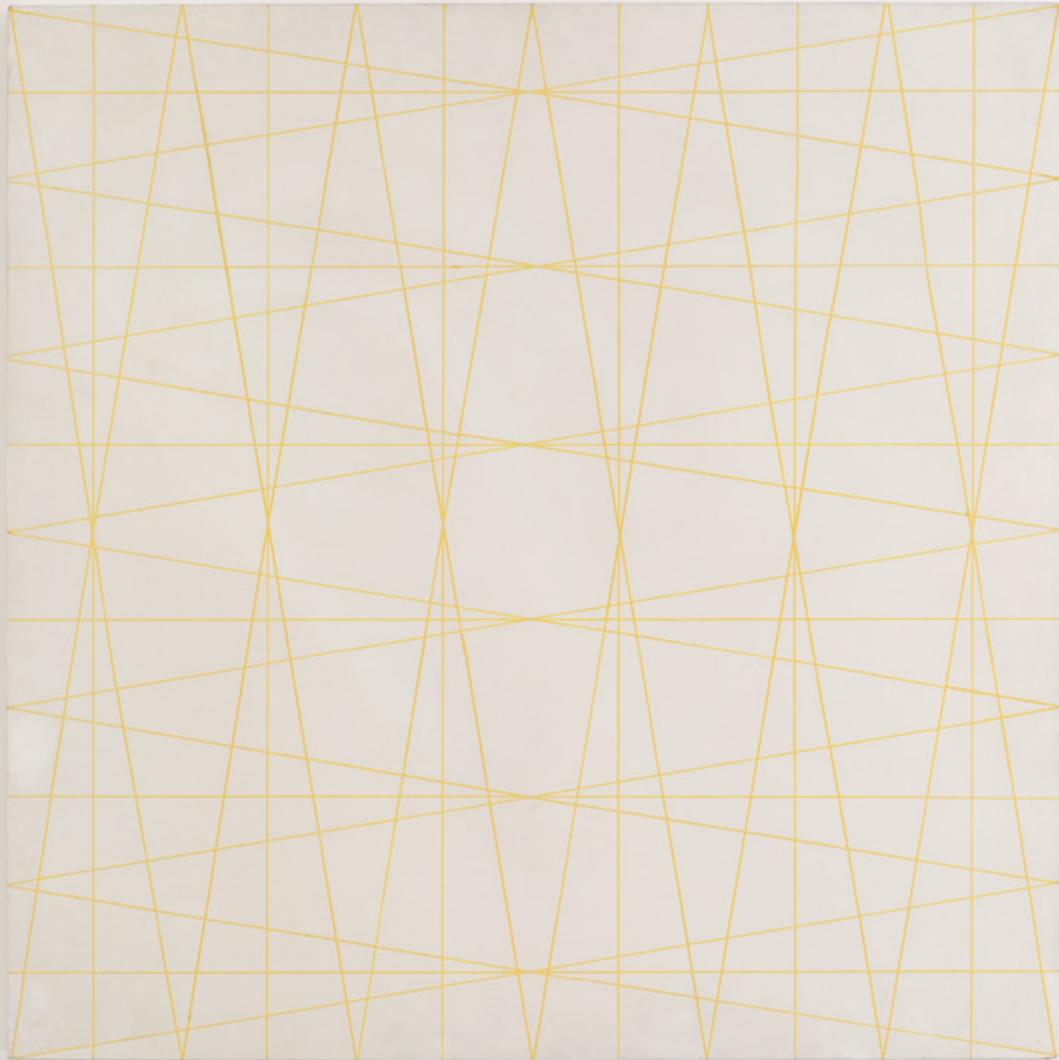
finally to be situated in the immense variety of possible combinations generated by his modular and aleatory constructions. The decisive appearance in 1953 of the orthogonal grid, or double *trame* (weft) in Morellet's terminology, was soon to give birth to an apparently infinite series of variations through superposition and rotation. These networks of secant straight lines placed uniformly at different angles across the pictorial surface became increasingly dense, producing disorienting optical effects in black, white, grey and colour. The first large series of Morellet's grids, begun in 1958, offers up an equally disorienting set of analogies with the series entitled *Arcs, Circles, and Grids* (ACG) begun by Sol LeWitt in 1971 with the publication of an artist's book. Thus arises the delicate question of an anteriority on the part of the French artist, a question that was in fact raised in 1973 in a highly public and combative way. But would it not be more accurate to see in these undoubtedly troubling similarities an instance of pseudo-morphism, as Yve-Alain Bois describes it, where however much they resemble one another, each artist's process maintains its own singularity? Nonetheless, another coincidence, little documented until now, adds to the surprising situation. The same year that LeWitt decided to include variations from his ACG series in his corpus of wall drawings, Morellet also projected one of the works from his grid series in the exhibition space, which was at the heart of the controversy. In 1972 in Grenoble, Morellet hung his inaugural *4 doubles trames 0°, 22°5, 45°, 67°5* [4 double wefts 0°, 22°5, 45°, 67°5] (1958) on a wall covered with wallpaper printed in its motif, fully playing with effects of layering and scale. This variation, which was probably an echo of the installation of his blue and red 40,000 square wallpaper which that he had presented about ten years earlier as part of the first *Labyrinthe* organized by GRAV, here became a truly pictorial and ironic apparatus. The wallpaper—the outcome of a doubly appropriative gesture—was initially produced without the artist's authorization by a decorating company. He re-appropriated it the following year in order to present it together with its original source, calling the whole combination, "Morellet sur papier-peint d'après Morellet" ["Morellet on wallpaper, after Morellet"].

Morellet's grids would also be embodied in other ways due to his access to materials and industrial equipment, as well as the qualified labour force available to him at the family factory, and local artisans. For the first time at the end of the 1950s, the grid appeared as wire mesh on wooden panels like an openwork veil projecting shadows. Beginning in 1962, the grids were freed from flat surface and square format and began to fully inhabit the third dimension with the *sphère-trames* or grid-spheres (these sculptures, made in steel or aluminium, vary from 36 centimetres to almost 5 metres in diameter). For *Néons 0°, 45°, 90°, 135° avec 4 rythmes interférents* [Neons 0°, 45°, 90°, 135° with 4 interfering rhythms] in 1963, Morellet adopted the technology of neon light for the first time, chosen in particular for its precision, its intensity, and its rapid illumination. The consecutive or residual images mixing with the reflections between the light panels cause superimposed grids to appear, causing the spectators to lose their bearings in space and time. The retinal disturbance caused by these interferences, here in movement, is elsewhere transposed into the pictorial domain, with for instance *2 trames de tirets 0°, 30°* [2 wefts of dashes 0°, 30°] (1971), or the staggered distribution of rows of squares in *Tous les 4, tous les 9* [Every 4, every 9] (1974).

Humorously pursuing his radical questioning of the traditional conventions of creation, Morellet, the iconoclast, not only rejects but makes fun of notions of composition and artistic choice. At the end of the 1950s, he played with perverting his ordered structures by inserting the controlled element of chance, coming either from the irrational number Pi, or from random number selections from the phone book. The series *Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés suivant les chiffres pairs et impairs d'un annuaire de téléphone* [Random distribution of 40, 000 squares using the even and odd numbers of a phone directory] (1961) follows a binary logic evoking digital technology well before it's time. The series *Lignes au hasard* [Random lines] follows the principle of the old naval battle game. Eager to clarify the exact method of construction, Morellet

provided for each of these *10 lignes au hasard*, which were published together in 1975, a photocopy of the preparatory drawing as well as of the page from the phonebook with the numbers that had provided the coordinates of the position of each line. The mysterious intercrossing is made available to be read as well as viewed, revealing a system as simple as it is playful.

With the series *Quand j'étais petit, je ne faisais pas grand* [When I was little, I didn't look big] (2006), Morellet put the finishing touches on mocking composition and having fun with repetition. Pushing provocation to its limits, he here created monumental copies of his own works. Conscious of having underestimated the question of scale in the early years of his career, he decided to multiply the dimensions of 11 works from 1952 by 4 (11 precisely because the number is a palindrome, a word that can be read backwards or forwards). Thus, the original *Parallèles jaunes et noires* [Yellow and black parallels] (1952) measures 16 by 69 centimetres, while *52 x 4 n°2 Quand j'étais petit, je ne faisais pas grand*, made after *Parallèles jaunes et noires*, measures 64 by 276 centimetres. Throughout his career, this Dadaist-inclined artist (Morellet declared himself to be "the freak child of Mondrian and Picabia") breathed into his rigorous and precise systems an indestructible taste for the infinite and the void, absurdity and lightness.

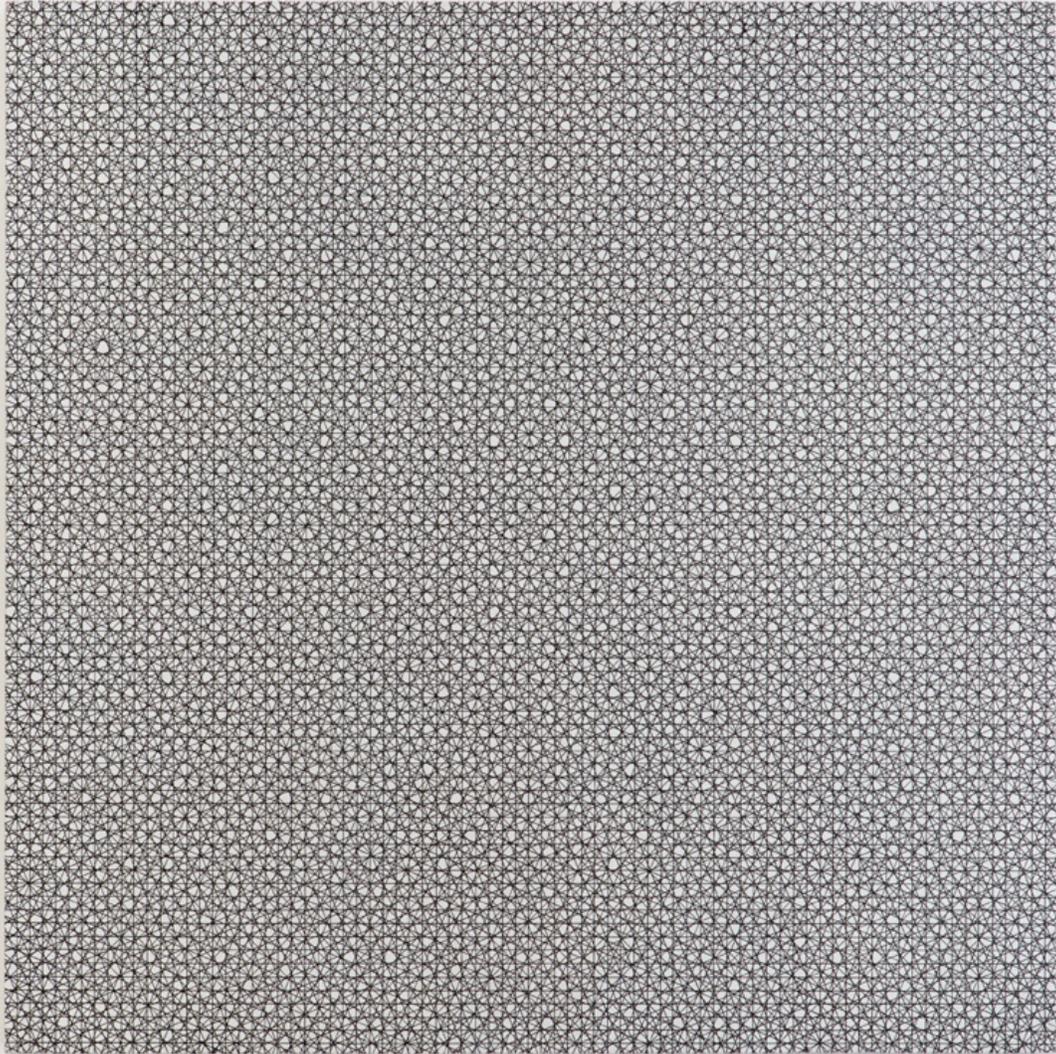


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

6 trames, 1954

Peinture huile sur bois / Oil painting on wood

80 × 80 cm (31.5 × 31.5 in.)

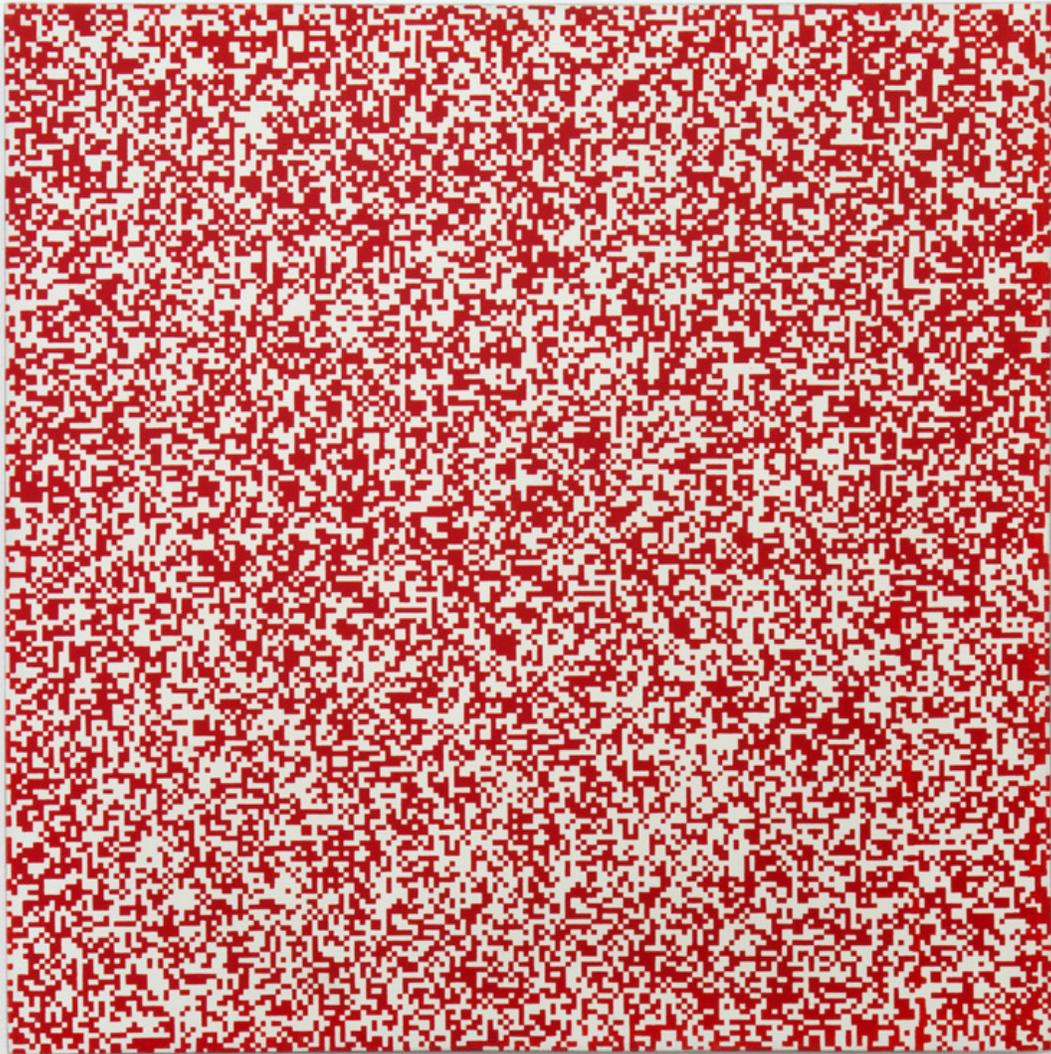


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

4 doubles trames 0°, 22°5, 45°, 67°5, 1958

Huile sur bois / Oil on wood

80 × 80 cm (31.5 × 31.5 in.)

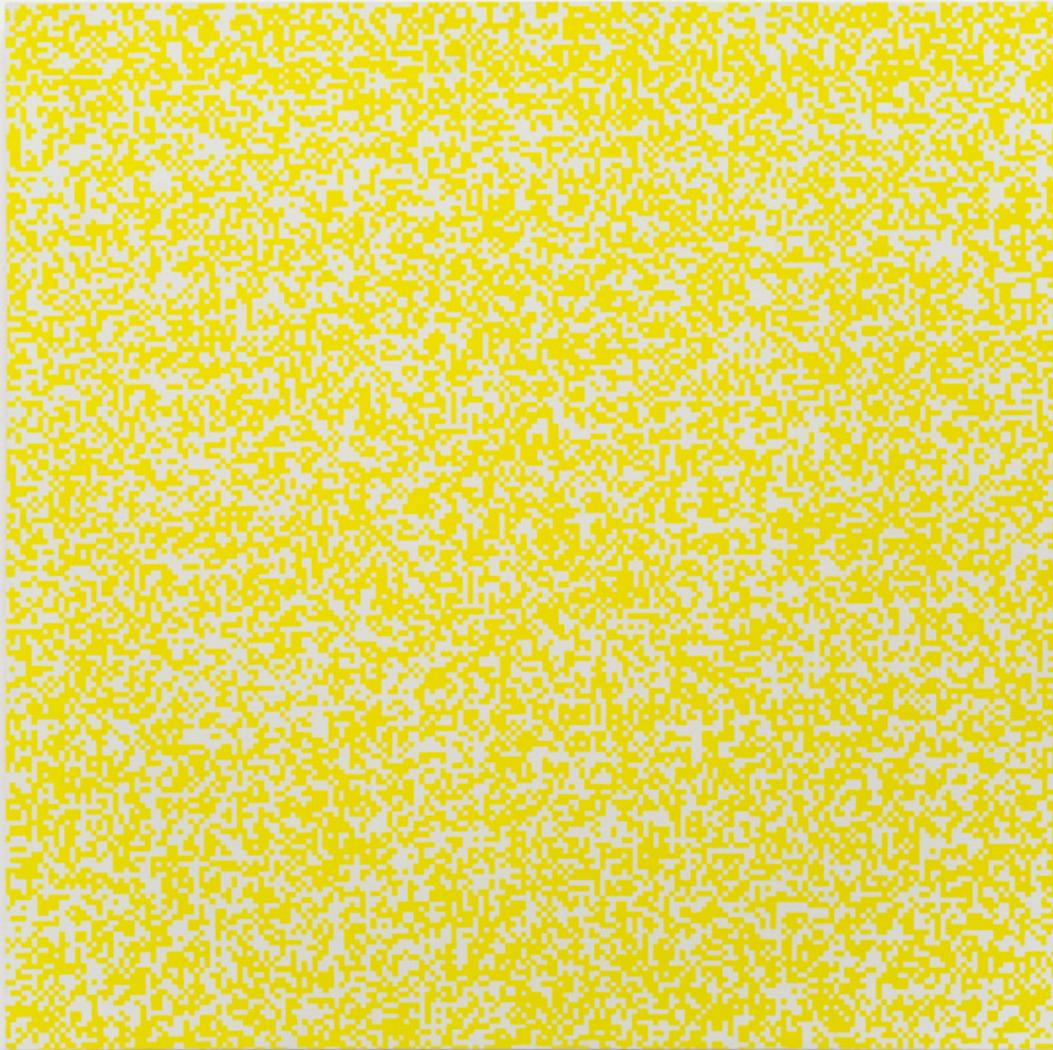


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés rouges, 1961

Impression sérigraphique sur bois / Serigraphic paint on wood

80 × 80 cm (31,5 × 31,5 in.)

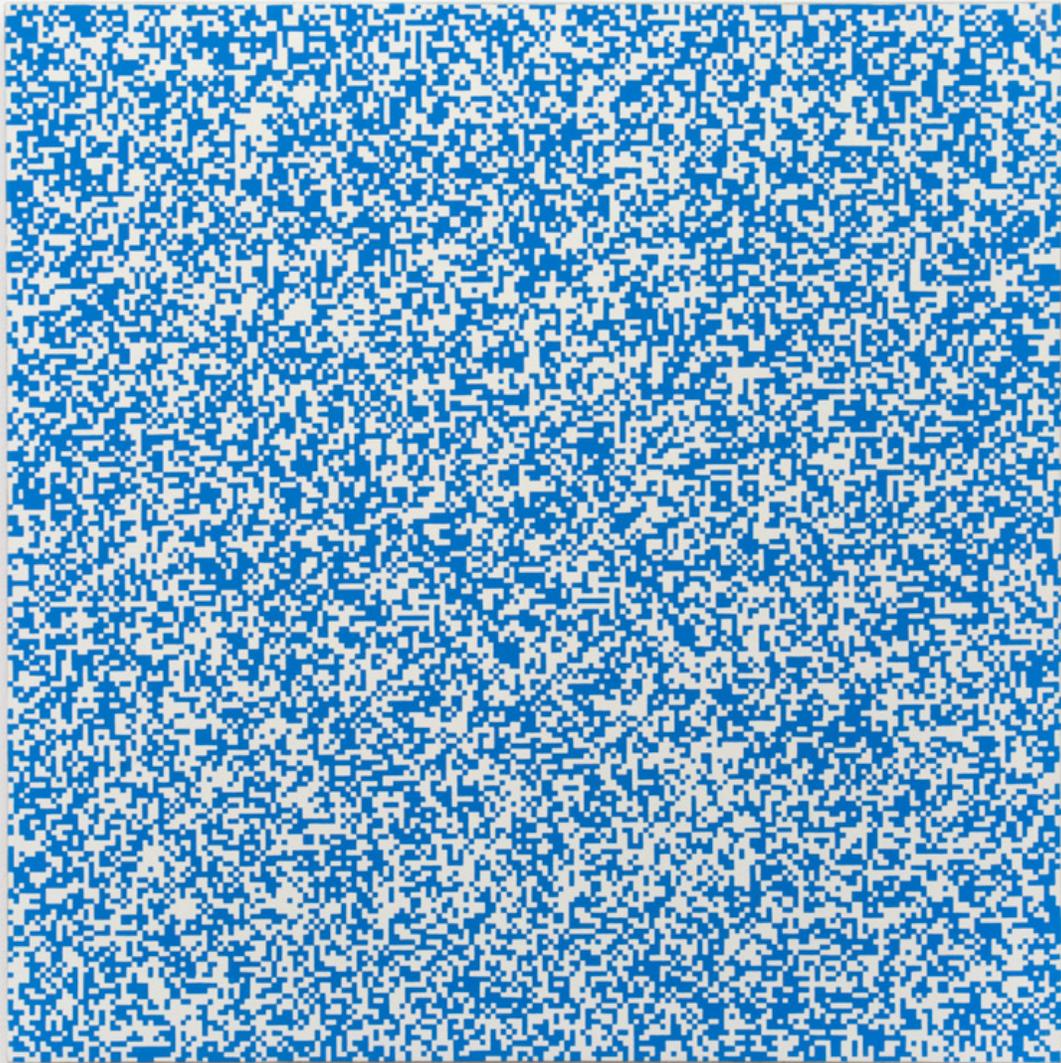


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés jaunes, 1961

Impression sérigraphique sur bois / Serigraphic paint on wood

80 × 80 cm (31,5 × 31,5 in.)

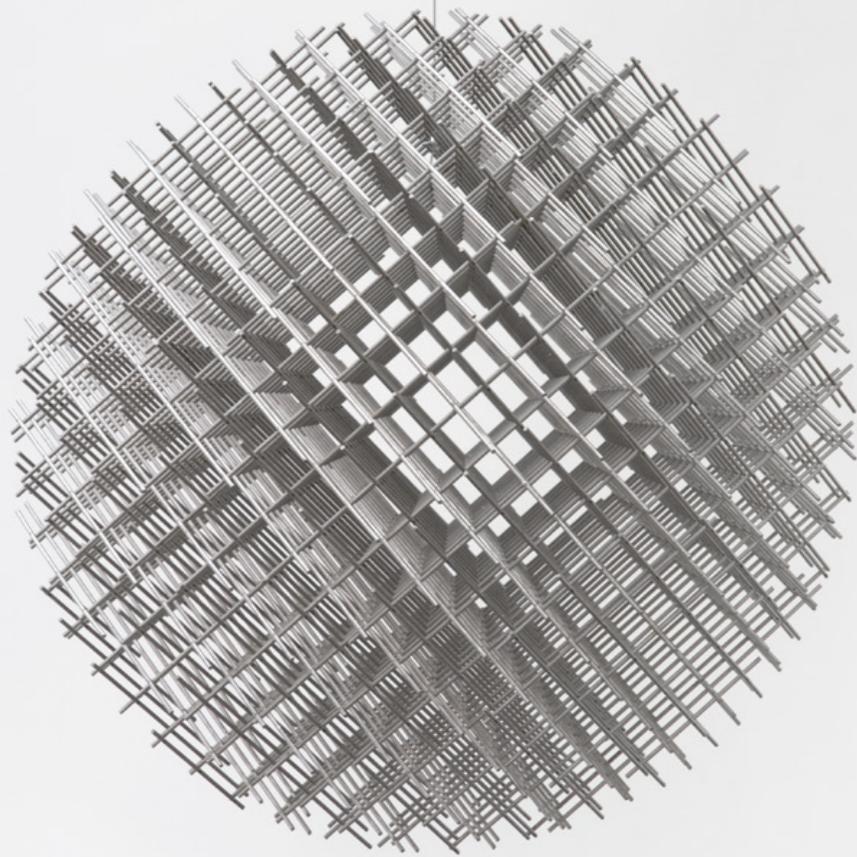


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Répartition aléatoire de 40 000 carrés bleus, 1961

Impression sérigraphique sur bois / Serigraphic paint on wood

80 × 80 cm (31,5 × 31,5 in.)

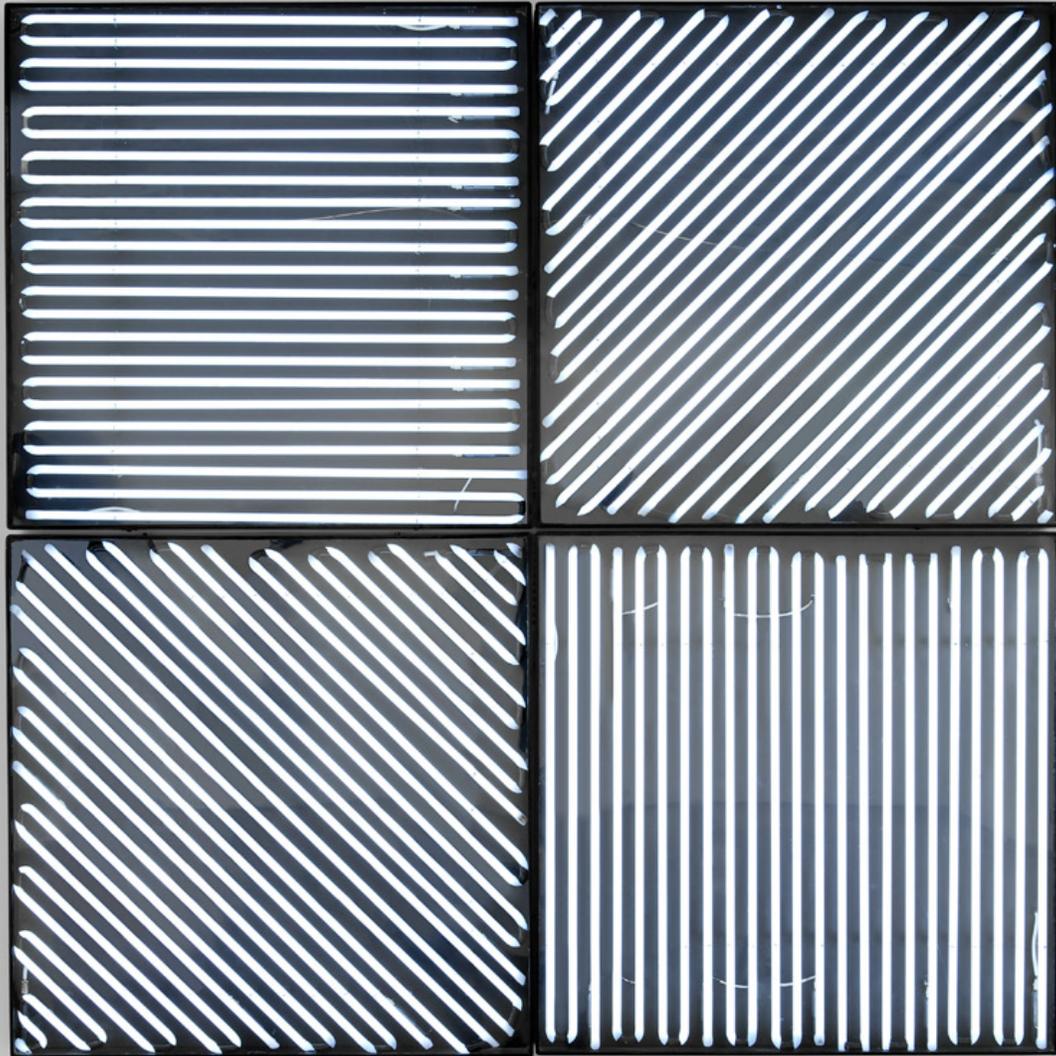


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Sphère-trames, 1962

Tiges en acier inoxydable / Stainless steel

Ø 60 cm Edition of 50



FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Néon 0°, 45°, 90°, 135° avec 4 rythmes interférents, 1963

Tubes argon blanc sur support métallique / Argon white neon tubings on metal panel

80 × 80 cm (chaque) 31.5 × 31.5 in. (each)

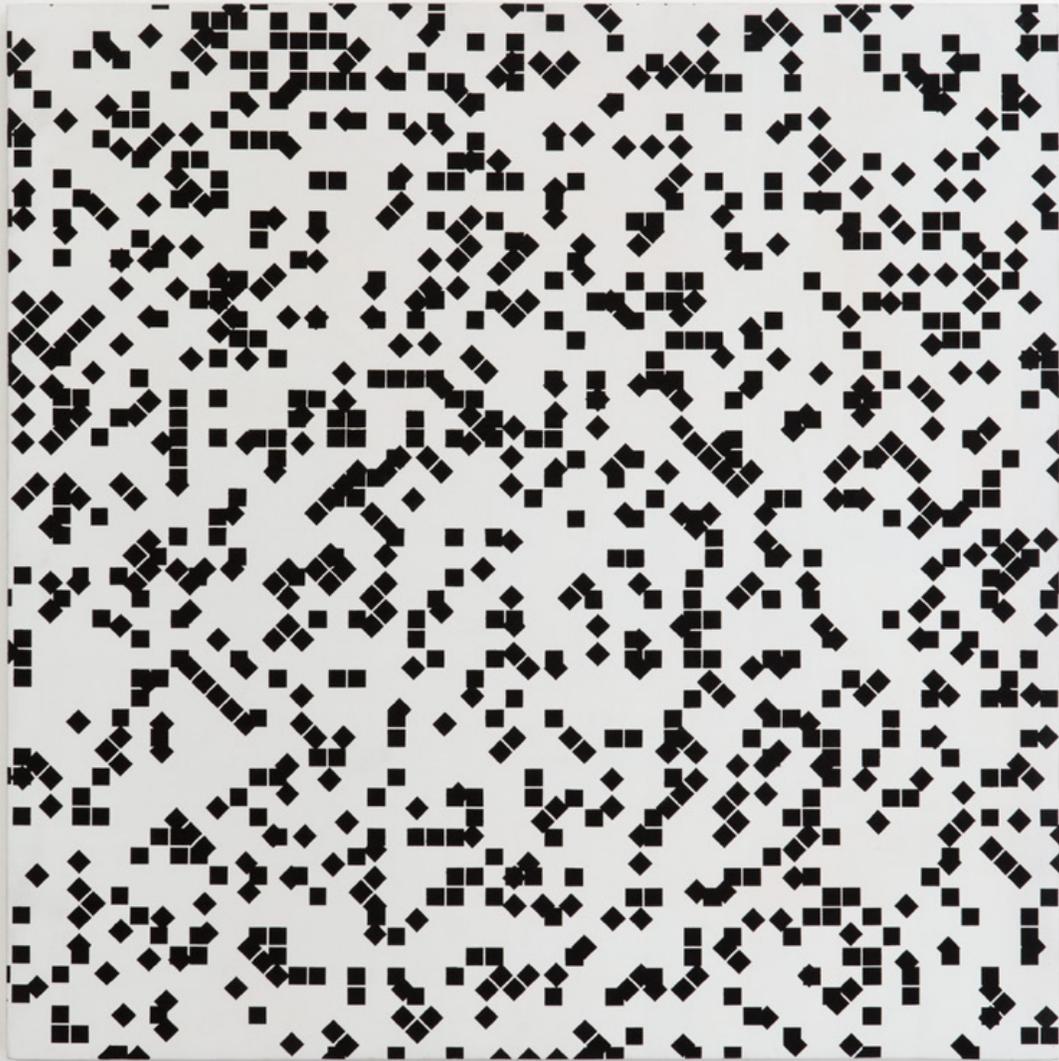


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

6 doubles trames 0°, 15°, 30°, 45°, 60°, 75°, 1969

Peinture sérigraphique sur bois

80 × 80 cm (31.5 × 31.5 in.)

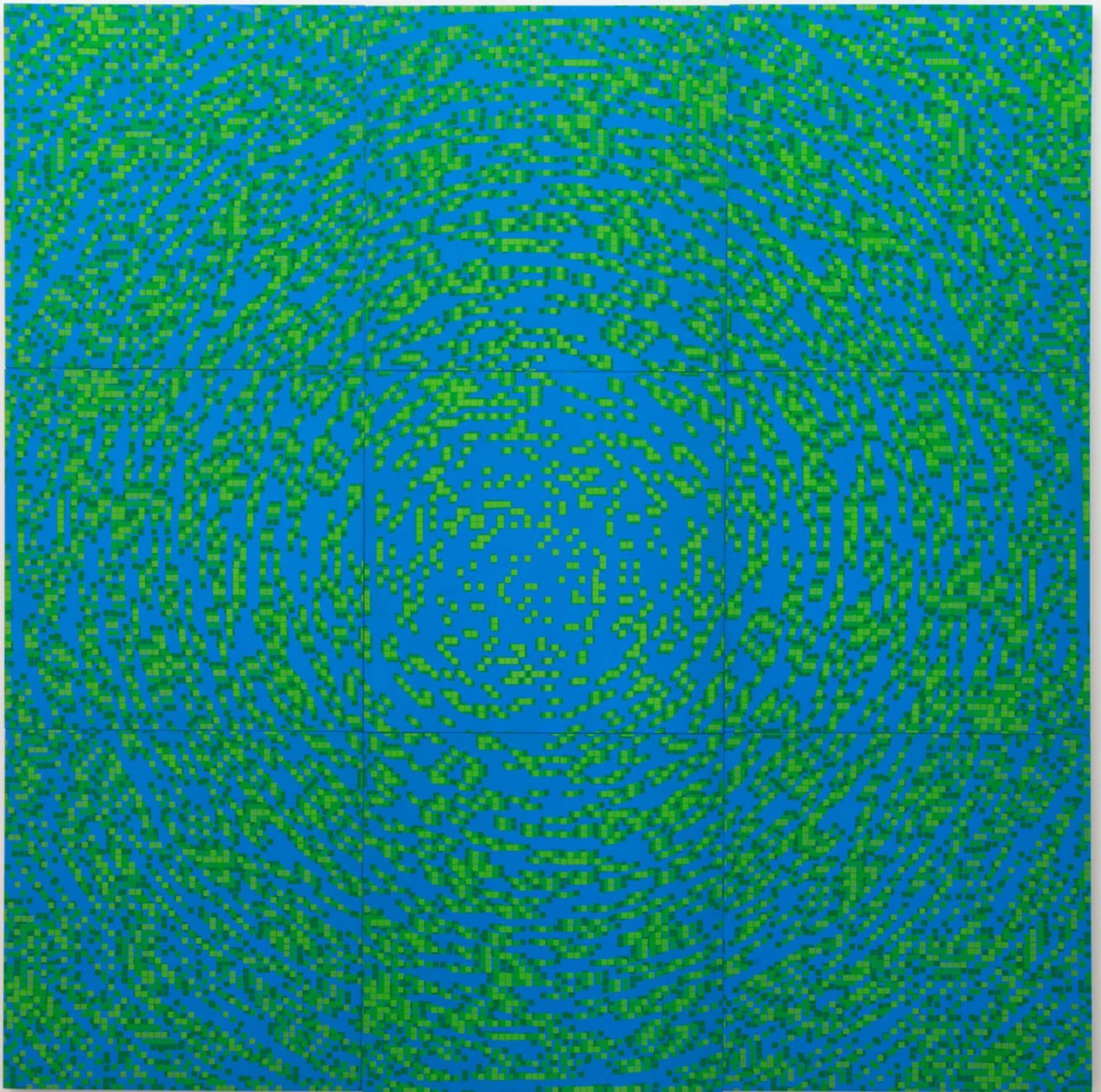


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Répartition aléatoire de 20% de carrés, 2 fois : 0°, 45°, 1969

Peinture sérigraphique sur bois / Silkscreen paint on wood

80 × 80 cm (31.5 × 31.5 in.)



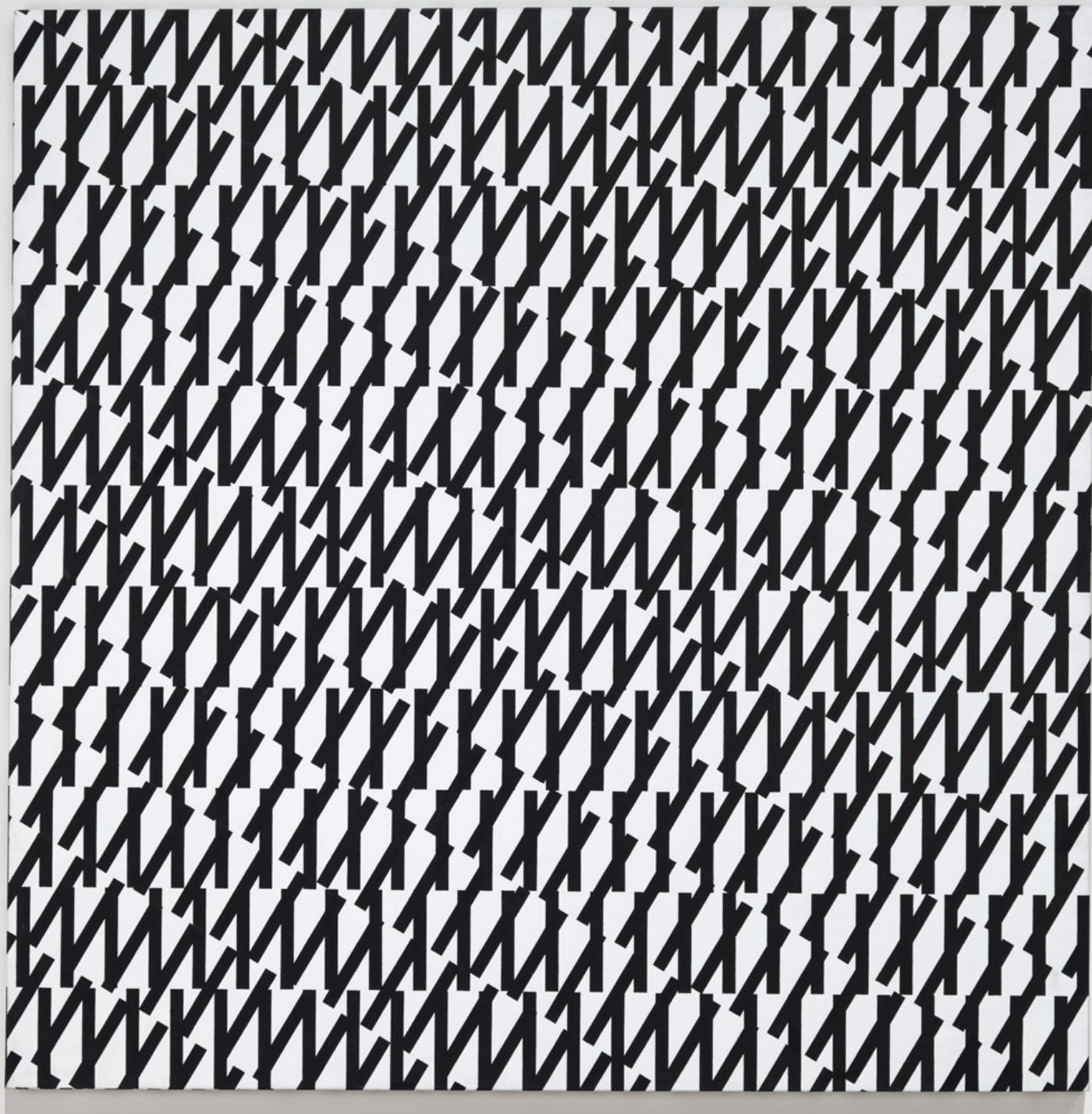
FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Répartition aléatoire de 20% de carrés, 1970

Peinture sérigraphique sur bois / Serigraphic paint on wood

9 panneaux / 9 panels

80 × 80 cm (31,5 × 31,5 in.) Overall 240 × 240 cm (94,49 × 94,49 in.)



FRANÇOIS MORELLET

2 trames de tirets 0°, 30°, 1971

Peinture sérigraphique sur toile / Serigraphic paint on canvas

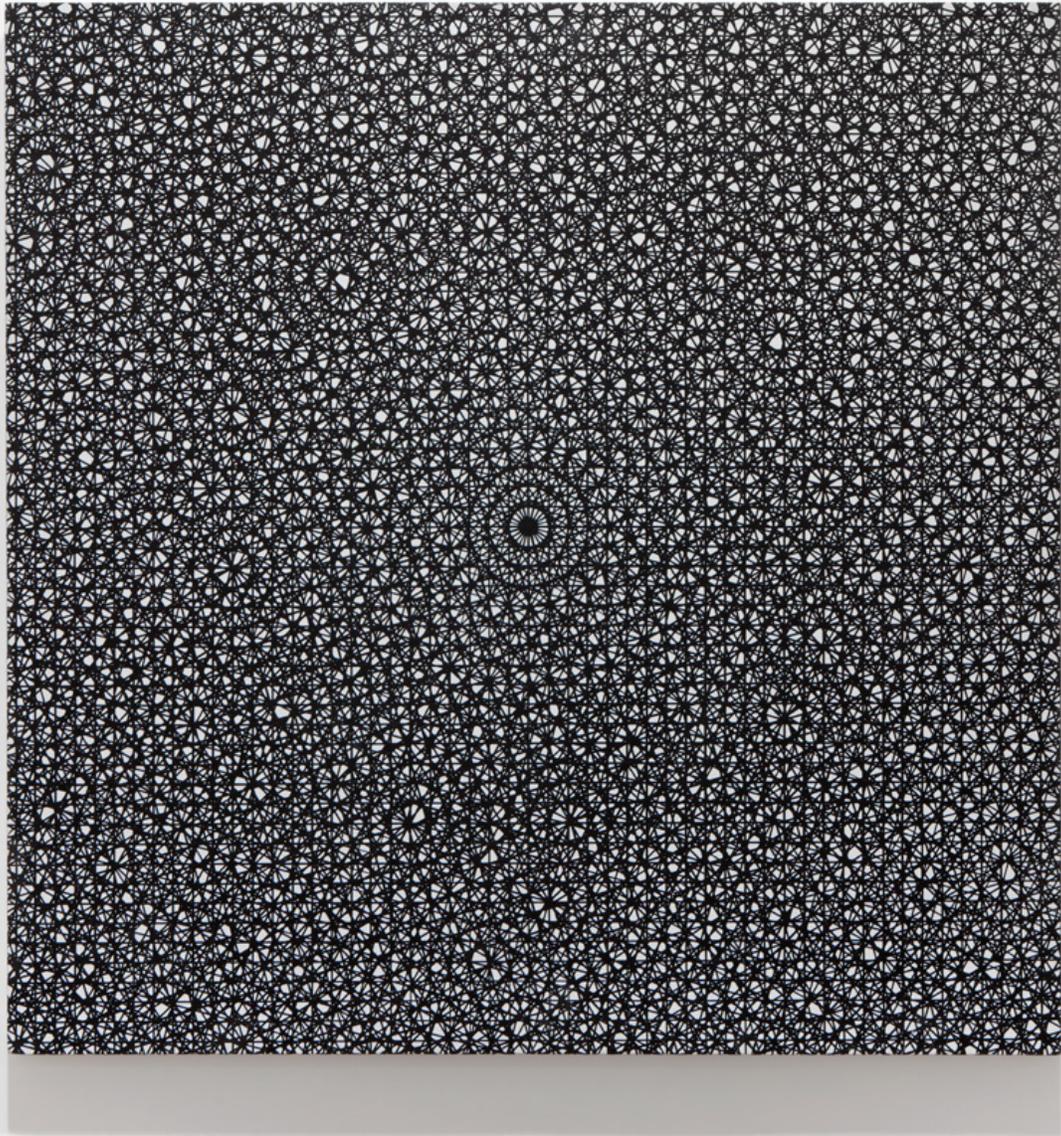
140 × 140 cm (55,12 × 55,12 in.)



FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Trames, 1972

Papier-peint / Wallpaper



FRANÇOIS MORELLET

6 doubles trames 0°, 15°, 30°, 45°, 60°, 75°, 1973

Peinture sérigraphique sur bois / Serigraphic paint on wood

80 × 80 cm (31,5 × 31,5 in.)

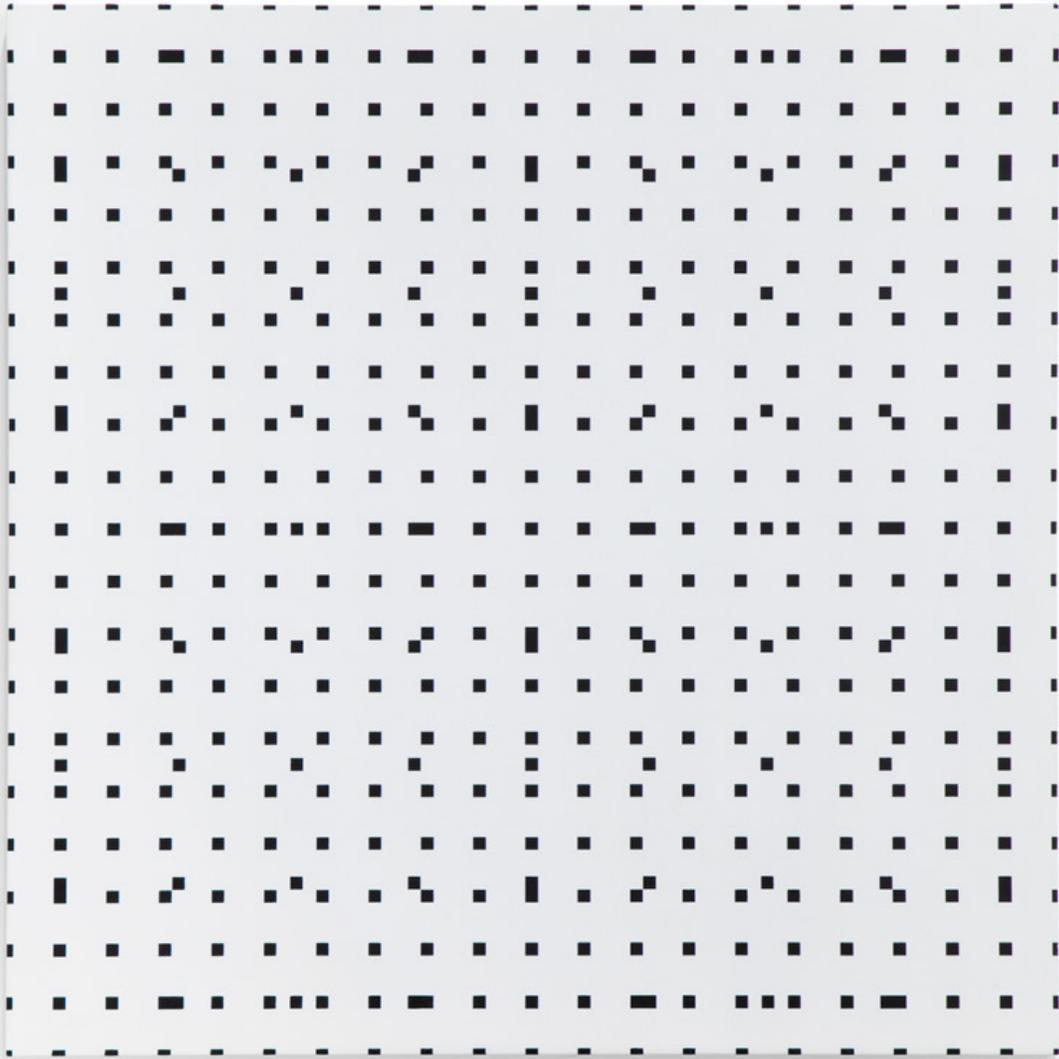


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

5 double trames de grillage 0°, 18°, 36°, 54°, 72°, 1974

Grillage sur bois peint / Fence on painted wood

80 × 80 cm (31,5 × 31,5 in.)



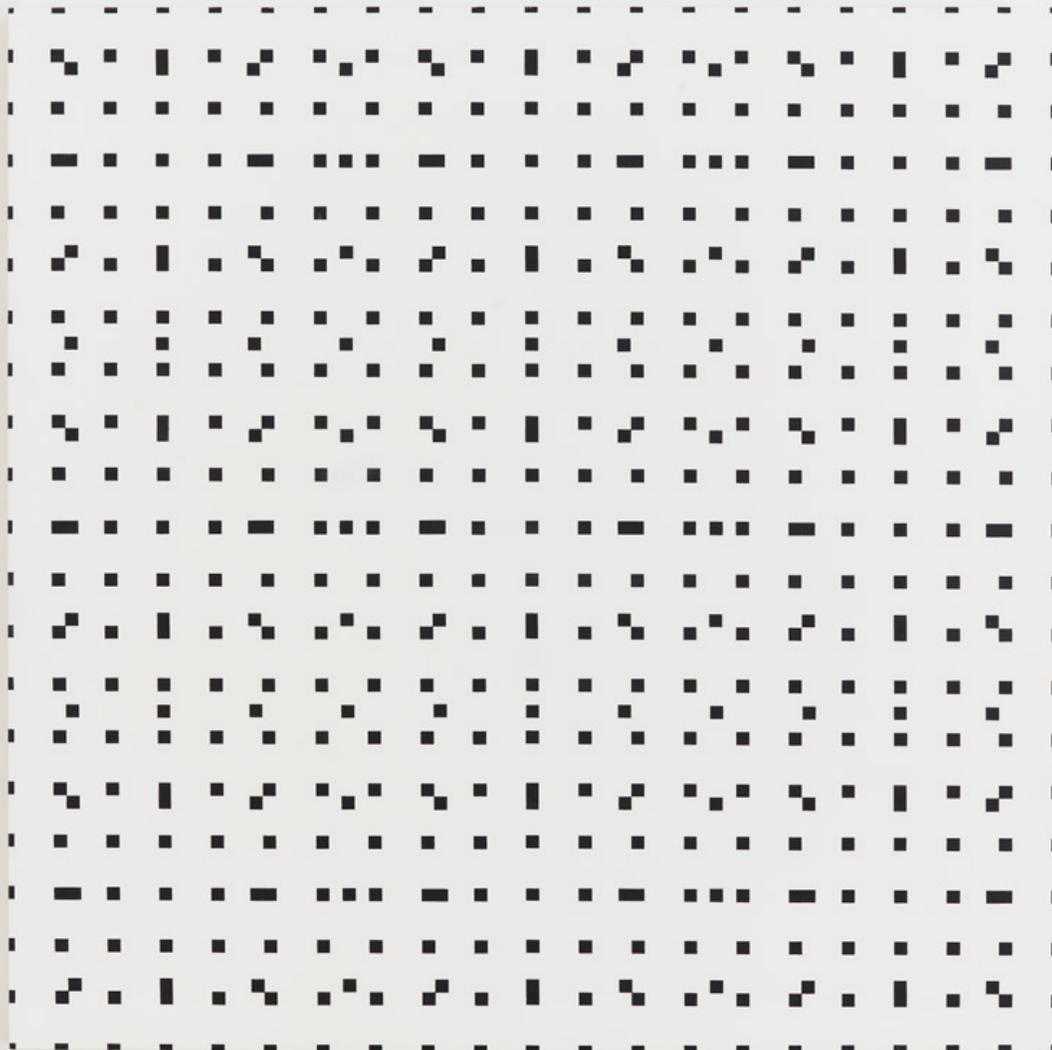
FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Tous les 4 tous les 9, 1974

Peinture sérigraphique sur bois / Silkscreen paint on wood

80 × 80 cm (31.5 × 31.5 in.)

Edition 2 of 3



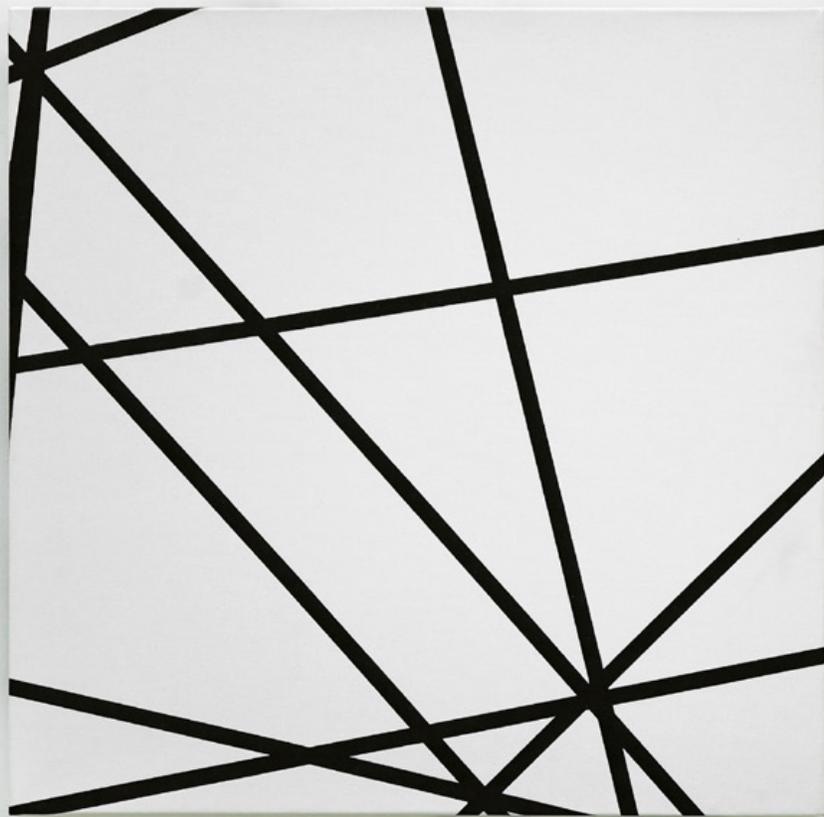
FRANÇOIS MORELLET

Tous les 4, tous les 7, 1974

Peinture sérigraphique sur bois / Serigraphic paint on wood

80 × 80 cm (31,5 × 31,5 in.)

Edition 1 of 3



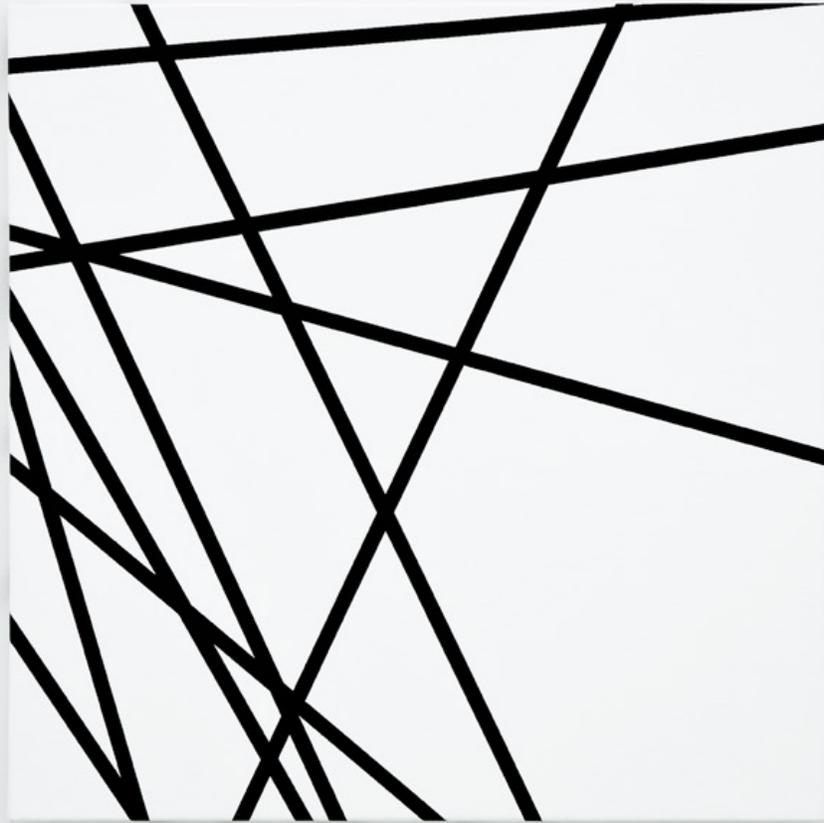
FRANÇOIS MORELLET

10 lignes au hasard, 1975

Acrylique sur toile / Acrylic paint on canvas

60 × 60 cm (23.62 × 23.62 in)

Edition 7 of 10



FRANÇOIS MORELLET

10 lignes au hasard, 1975

Acrylique sur toile / Acrylic paint on canvas

60 × 60 cm (23.62 × 23.62 in)

Edition 7 of 10



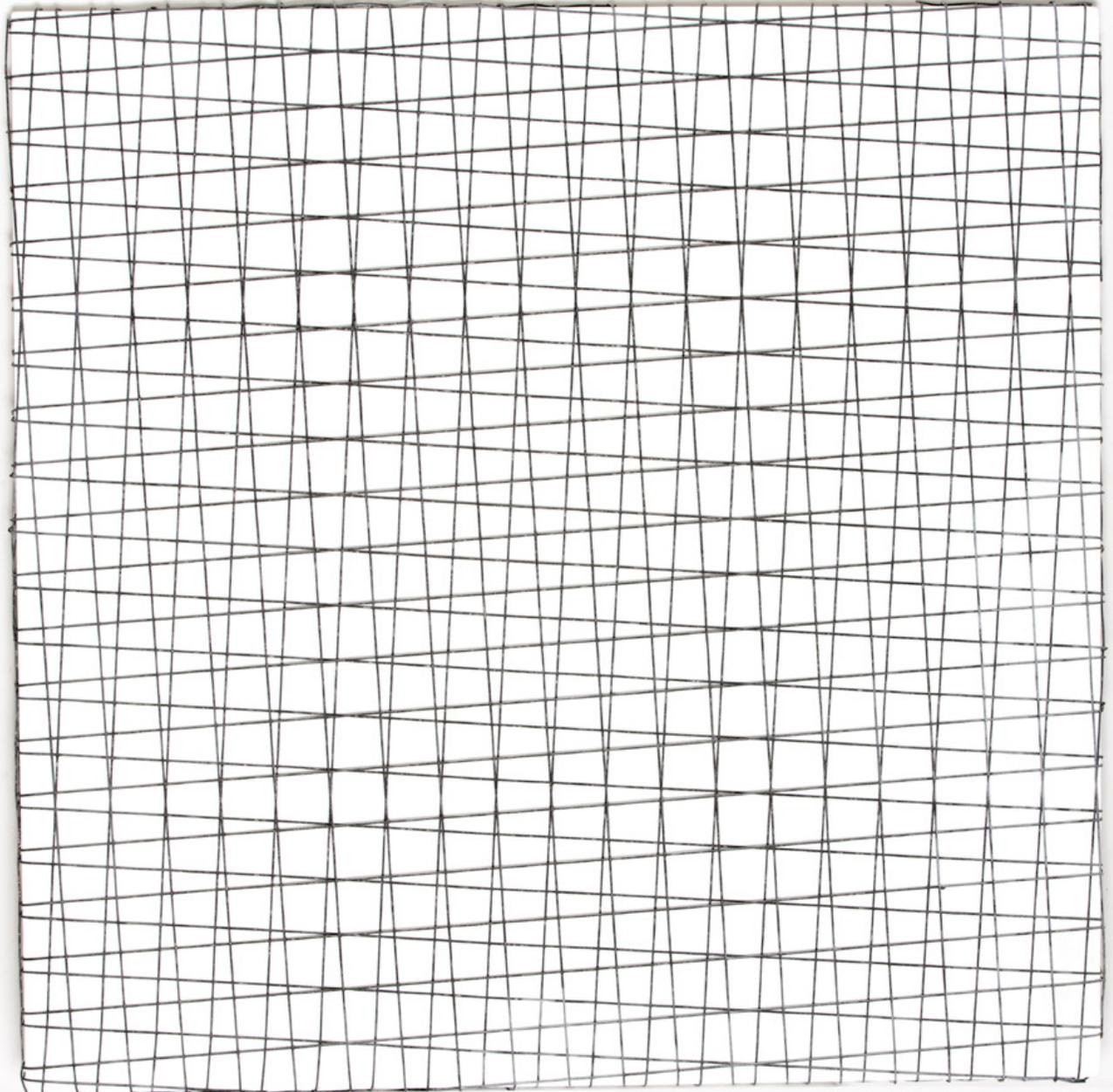
FRANÇOIS MORELLET

10 lignes au hasard, 1975

Acrylique sur toile / Acrylic paint on canvas

60 × 60 cm (23.62 × 23.62 in)

Edition 1 of 10

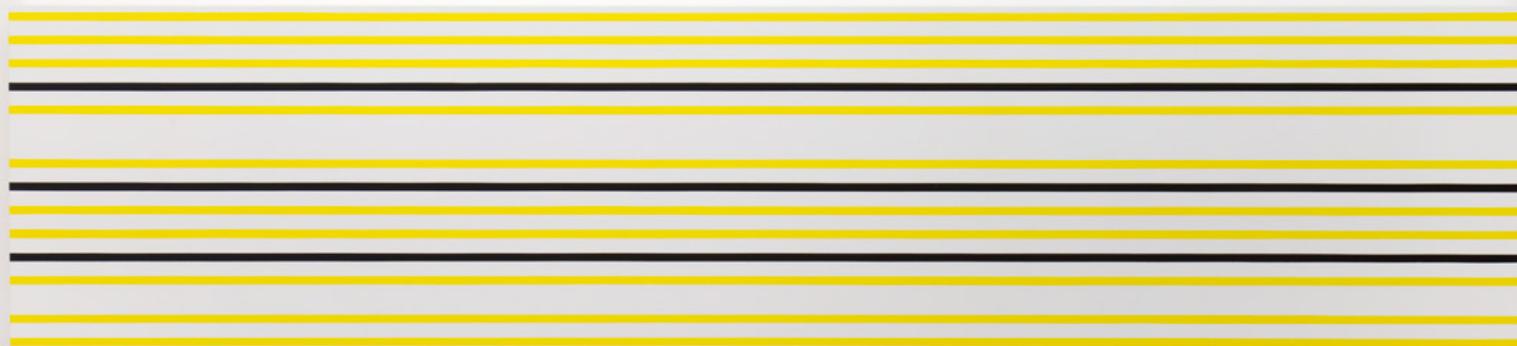


FRANÇOIS MORELLET

2 trames de grillage - 4°, + 4°, 1978

Grillage sur bois peint / Wire mesh on painted wood

100 × 100 cm (39,37 × 39,37 in.)



FRANÇOIS MORELLET

52 × 4 n°2 *Quand j'étais petit, je ne faisais pas grand*
(d'après *Parallèles jaunes et noires*, 1952), 2006
Acrylique sur toile sur bois / Acrylic on canvas on wood
64 × 276 cm (25,2 × 108,66 in.)



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