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The Paintress's Studio

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth

"Why must feminist art practice perform 'otherness' in an 'other' medium? Why not in painting?"[1]

The painter, stark naked, a palette in one hand, a brush in the other, stands in a gallery in front of a large canvas (fig. 12). Pointing to it, she addresses herself to a male viewer seated immobile on a gallery bench, but she is also addressing us, presenting the whole situation as her own creation. Conflating the scene of art making with that of its reception, Koether's *Bond Freud National Gallery* (2016) is a deliberately incongruous vision. While the artist inhabited the standing figure of a naked painter in Lucian Freud's 1993 self-portrait to represent herself (fig. 11), her viewer derives from a scene in a James Bond movie *Skyfall* in which Bond, played by Daniel Craig, sits in front of a J. M. W. Turner painting at the National Gallery in London. Koether replaced the Turner by her own work featuring a race-car driver, a self-referential figure she has also used elsewhere.[2] Another self-reference is the chessboard, a frequent motif in Koether's work, supporting the bench.[3]

Overtly citational and self-reflexive, *Bond Freud National Gallery* represents a painter's studio in an era of network, a condition of artistic practice marked by the perpetual transit of images, objects, information and capital generated by the processes of globalization and the internet.[4] The mishmash quality of Koether's studio – painting, mass culture and museum rolled into one – signals the random inclusivity of the network, while its circulatory logic is accentuated by the painting's mobile execution and even by the absence of commas in its title. But what position does the artist occupy in this portable and transitive vision of the studio? More generally, what role does the conception of painting-as-network assign to the painter? Is she the object of the perpetual movement of things and signs or its agent? And what are we to make of her at once prominent and idiosyncratic staging of gender – her masculinized body accompanied by the hypermasculine icons (Bond, race-car driver) being presented under a sign of femininity, a giant blue bow?[5]

Bond Freud National Gallery epitomizes both the centrality of gender in Koether's work and her original treatment of it. Rather than ignoring her

status as a "woman painter" to let her talent speak for her as a painter *tout court*, Koether has chosen to embrace and push against the limits of this fraught position. Her project situates itself in the tradition of women artists' critical engagement with the cultural construction of their identity, in particular the feminist aesthetic practices of the 1980s, the moment of Koether's emergence as an artist. Yet, while her feminist predecessors – e.g. Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine – adopted strategies of appropriation and simulation based on the readymade image, Koether has elected what may in comparison appear to be an "obsolete" medium of painting. While she has always aligned her work with feminism, she questioned tying aesthetic critique to any particular medium: "Why must feminist art practice perform 'otherness' in an 'other' medium? Why not in painting?"[6]

In what way then, we may ask, can painting serve as a critical instrument of the "other"? How can it be (re)defined as a woman's activity without confining or essentializing her position? What, in sum, is "feminist painting"?

Koether's experiments are deeply rooted in the materiality of painting, but she also treats the medium as a discursive domain – one that has been persistently coded as masculine. By making visible the imbrication of the material process in painting's discursive conventions, Koether's work *re-materializes* the medium and thus re-inscribes it as her own. This is not, to be sure, merely an attempt to situate herself within the existing pictorial tradition, as any ambitious painter, male or female, would be expected to do, but a performative engagement with painting that seeks to "other" its historically gendered parameters. There is, moreover, a kind of love that informs Koether's critical project. She operates less through aggressive takeover than through a passionate incorporation – often sly and witty – of gendered pictorial tropes, thus simultaneously preserving and transforming them. Hers is what one may call an enchanted critique of painting.

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Koether's frequent engagement with the iconography of the studio – whether direct, as in *Bond Freud National Gallery*, or indirect, as in *Cézanne, Courbet, Manet, Van Gogh, Ich* (1990, fig. 15) – is central to her reclamation of painting as a feminist practice. For it is in the studio, understood as an actual space of making and a metaphoric site of creation, that the

masculinist ethos of painting originates. This ethos first emerged in Romanticism, when the collective model of pictorial practice involving students working under the master's direction gave way to a concept of making as primarily a solitary endeavour. The homosocial space of exclusively male interactions – epitomized by David's studio (fig. 16) – became an enclave of individualized and personalized creation based in the relation between the artist and his model.[7] The early nineteenth-century rise of the female model led to a sexualized conception of pictorial practice manifest in the circulation of anecdotes about the studio as a site of sexual conquests and in a growing pictorial interest in the love affairs of the old masters, exemplified by Ingres's portrayal of Raphael.[8] The most explicit illustration of the sexual logic behind the Romantic conception of the studio is Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus.* (fig. 17) Inspired by Byron's poem, this thinly veiled self-representation features an Assyrian ruler who, besieged by his enemies, orders the destruction of all his possessions, including his female slaves, before immolating himself.

A sublimated image of creation, *Death of Sardanapalus* articulates *in extremis* the conception of the studio as a space of practice predicated on the male painter's objectifying, eroticized and violent relation to the female body.[9] Although the painting was almost unanimously panned by the critics when it was first exhibited – Théophile Gautier described it as having been painted with a "drunken broom"[10] – it has since entered the art historical canon as the epitome of artistic self-conception in Romanticism. The gendered logic underwriting this conception was echoed – if in more attenuated forms – in the pictorial production of ambitious male artists throughout the modern period. From Manet's *Olympia* to Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the female nude served as the privileged territory of artistic experimentation involving a varying degree of aesthetic violence. It also continued to perform a central function – whether real or allegorical – in the iconography of the painter's studio (e.g. in Courbet). Although the later nineteenth-century painters, enabled by the portability of their materials, often worked outdoors, the studio remained the privileged site of artistic self-conception. As Henri Fantin-Latour's depiction of Manet surrounded by his colleagues attests, it also remained an imaginary enclave of masculinity, even if a number of women artists – including Berthe Morisot, Manet's sister-in law – were exhibiting together with their male counterparts.[11] Regardless of aesthetic shifts, this imaginary model of the studio has persisted throughout the twentieth and into this century.

Abb./fig. 16 Jean-Henri Cless, *Das Atelier von Jacques Louis David / The Studio of David*, 1804, Pinsel und Tusche / brush and ink wash, 46,5 × 58,3 cm, Musée Carnavalet, Paris

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It is this exclusionary place of male practice and sociability that Jutta Koether inhabits and rearticulates. Rummaging through men's oeuvres as if they were a vast open studio, Koether constructs her own creative space by planting difference in the realm of masculine creation. While in *Bond Freud National Gallery* she assumes the posture of a male painter, her naked body evokes a female nude as both a studio model and an object of male aesthetic ambition. The result is a self-representation *à rebours* wherein the gender roles associated with these figures are turned inside-out, at once stated and undermined. Such double-edged reversal is typical of Koether's approach. She operates not by imposition of her own codes as much as redirection, or *détournement* of the existing ones.[12] Hijacking figures, motifs and discourses that define the artist's studio, she inverts, transposes or reroutes these elements towards her own pictorial goals. While material, her procedures also address the virtual conditions of the studio. The frequent motif of pixelation signals the presence of the digital stream of images and ideas traversing her practice. Also digitally inspired are the strategies of recoding, reformatting and conversion she deploys to re-gender the studio.

Consider how Koether treats the paradigmatic studio figure – the nude. In a number of canvases executed between 2014 and 2016 – among them *Lucian, David and Eli* (fig. 13), *More Naked than Naked #1* and *Freud Broodthaers #1* – reclining figures evoke models posing in a studio.

Koether, however, is not painting from a live model but from another painter's representation of it. In *Lucian David and Eli*, her source is Freud's 2003–04 canvas representing his studio assistant, David Dawson, spread out like an odalisque on a bed in the company of Freud's whippet, Eli. (fig. 14) The conspicuous presence of corner brackets "frames" Koether's canvas as a re-enactment of someone else's work. In taking up Freud's nude Koether performs what may be called a "secondary revision" in the sense of it being a revision of a revision (i.e. of Freud's male model posing as a female nude), but also in a sense of how Freud's grandfather, Sigmund, understood this term, that is, as the operation of the unconscious, notably the unconscious fantasy of the body experienced outside of language.[13] By reformatting, that is, reorienting (both spatially and sexually) her predecessor's male nude, Koether brings up what one may say is its unconscious dimension, questioning the certainty of gender distinctions associated with traditional pictorial language.

Compressing the original canvas in width, Koether pulls Freud's figure upwards and verticalizes it, so that, rather than reclining on a bed, it appears as if floating in space. This effect of physical suspension is reinforced by the nude's sexual ambiguity. Koether revises its anatomy by endowing the figure with breasts and by moving its male genitals to the side, a chaos of lines that replaces them hinting at the presence of the female organs. The hermaphroditic figure's identity is further destabilized by the fact that, due to repositioning, its head appears truncated and its features are obscured by the smears of blood-red pigment – it is as if the head were actually mutilated by its visual truncation and bleeding. Koether thus resurrects the idea of violence inherent in the masculinist conception of artistic creation – witnessed in its most explicit version in Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* – reappropriating it for her own process. At the same time, her revision destabilizes the nude as the terra firma of heterosexual investment. By transgendering, fragmenting or inscribing the body with incongruous motifs (e.g. a cascade of balls and a bow in *More Naked Than Naked #2*), the libidinal investment in the nude is rerouted or deflected. The monochrome rendering, making the flesh fluid and de-realized, enhances this effect.

This brings us to the role of colour and handling in the artist's "secondary process". Under Koether's brush, Freud's painterliness – his pasty handling, dense modelling and encrustations of pigment – undergoes textural and chromatic conversion. Enlisting the fluid style of Cézanne's

watercolours, her deliberately sketchy technique liquifies Freud's touch.[14] Like the preparatory drawing visible under the thin layers of watercolour in Cézanne, her spidery lines emerge from underneath the thicker strokes of pigment to suggest an internal doubling of the medium, the othering presence of drawing within painting (even if "drawing" is here actually enacted in oil or acrylic). Given their gendered connotations – drawing having been traditionally gendered male; colour, as the defining aspect of painting, associated with femininity – this unresolved combination of both media reinforces the effect of sexual uncertainty in Koether's revision.

Abb./ fig. 17 Eugène Delacroix, *Der Tod des Sardanapal / The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, Öl auf Leinwand / oil on canvas, 392 × 496 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

The artist's embrace of red monochrome – or almost monochrome, as her palette actually includes a range of red, pink and purple tones – may also be seen as a means of challenging the gendered conventions of painting.[15] The painter herself on one occasion called her red soft strokes "fleshy, vaginal", though she also offers other readings.[16] To my mind, in both their chroma and their morphology, Koether's brushstrokes resemble lipstick traces, aligning her pictorial execution with the operations of make-up. The analogy between painting and make-up harks back to a long discursive tradition of devaluating colour as a means of artistic expression by associating it with deception, cosmetics and women. As the philosopher Jacqueline Lichtenstein noted, in the early modern theoretical discourse on painting, colour was seen to pose a "risk of femininity".[17]

Despite historical distance, Koether's adoption of the monochrome may also be described in terms of risk. Combined with her mode of painting – at once assertive and provisional – the monochrome speaks of femininity as a contingent and potentially hazardous position, whether because of its instability, or because of entrapment it may imply. Koether seems nonetheless willing to take this risk. If her use of the monochrome conjures up make-up, it is as a tool of self-construction linked to the performative idea of the self. Through its association with adornment, painting in Koether's hands is staged as a body that can always be repainted, altered – feminized or de-feminized.

Abb. / fig. 18 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Louise Bourgeois*, 1982, Silbergelatineabzug / gelatin silver print, 37,5 × 37,4 cm, Tate Gallery, London

Where, then, does this multifarious *détournement* of painting situate Koether as a painter? The artist's own view of her position within the medium and discourse of painting is most succinctly – and cleverly – expressed in *Cézanne, Courbet, Manet, Van Gogh, Ich.* (fig. 15)[18] In this pictorial manifesto, male modernist masters are evoked by their written-out proper names to indicate their status as figures of discourse, rather than merely makers of images. By adding herself to the list not as a proper name but as the personal pronoun "ICH" (I/me), Koether – not without some irony – spells out both her belonging to this master group and her difference from it. In doing so, she assumes the role of a supplement that, by its sheer grammatical oddity – the dissonance of the personal pronoun from proper names – disrupts the male pictorial tradition rather than

merely appending it. The sea of swirling red strokes – the painter's signature touch à la Van Gogh, whose work she re-enacted more than once – epitomizes the displacing effect of her brush on the discourse. For if this mobile pictorial field sustains the masters' names, it also submerges them, rendering them unintelligible.

As an indirect representation of Koether's studio, the painting invokes modernist pictorial tradition not in a limited sense of a repertory of images, but as a symbolic realm of language and meaning wherein every subject must articulate her position in order to become visible. Rather than a site of her professional rivalry with these past painters, the studio is here a symbolic space wherein Koether performs and forms herself anew. It may thus be called a *paintress's* studio – not in order to essentialize the identity of its occupant, but to evoke her repossession of this traditionally male enclave.

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Koether's 2013 representation of the male penis provocatively titled *Isabelle* (fig. 19) speaks most directly of the artist's ambition to reclaim the Symbolic as the domain of feminine self-definition. The key modern precedent for the use of the male organ by a woman artist is Louise Bourgeois's sculpture *Fillette* (1968). Recognizing its subversive potential as a self-defining attribute, Bourgeois gleefully posed with this work for her 1982 portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe.[19] (fig. 18) Perhaps inspired by Bourgeois, Koether took up the motif for her own subversive purposes. Executed in gouache on paper, *Isabelle* is both an image and an object, its sculptural dimension emphasized by its shaped frame and its display, suspended from the ceiling. The work's title refers to Koether's friend, art critic Isabelle Graw, but unlike *Fillette*, it does not represent an individual.

Rather, *Isabelle* is a token of symbolic exchange between women. The penis is featured here parodically as a "master signifier" of sexual difference that defines man and woman's positions within the Symbolic order. In psychoanalysis, these distinct positions have been defined in terms of "having the phallus" (in reference to men) or "being it" (to describe the status of woman as an object of other's desire).[20] The phallus is thus also a sign of symbolic competence legislating men and women's uneven access to desire and meaning. As a male organ, it puts women at a disad-

Abb./ fig. 19 Jutta Koether, *Isabelle*, 2013,
Gouache auf Papier / gouache on paper, 69 × 98 cm, Thomas Borgmann Berlin

vantage, setting an anatomic limit on their capacity to operate in the sphere of meaning. Koether takes over and reorients this "master signifier" for the purpose of intra-feminine communication between herself and Graw. At stake here is not mere reversal of male vs. female positions within the Symbolic order, but rather an usurpation of *both* positions for women. The phallus, as the title of the work indicates, *is* Isabelle, but it is also Jutta, insofar as it is her own work. Moreover, both women *have* it: the object was made by Koether as a symbolic gift for Graw. At once staging and mocking the idea of masculinity's privileged position in the sphere of language and meaning, Koether turns the male organ into a sign of difference and dialogue between women. This usurpation of the phallus may be seen as a witty act of "structural disobedience" of patriarchal models of art making once evoked by the artist.[21] But it is also a sexually explicit symptom of a kind of love that informs her aesthetic project. Reclaiming the studio as an arena of a woman artist's play and pleasure, Koether's practice redefines not only the ethos but also the eros of creation. We are far away from the sexual dynamics of the Romantic studio. *Isabelle* calls forth a space of art making as a realm of desire disengaged from the hierarchies of gender.

* An earlier version of this essay was presented as a lecture in April 2019 at Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean on the occasion of the *Jutta Koether. Tour de Madame* exhibition. I thank Mudam director Suzanne Cotter for her invitation.

1 Koether in Benjamin Buchloh, "A Conversation with Jutta Koether", *October* 157 (summer 2016): 17.

2 For example, her 2012 *Seasons* series featured a German Formula One world champion, Sebastian Vettel.

3 See the series *Bruised Grids* (2014).

4 David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself", *October* 139 (autumn 2009): 125–34.

5 It was, however, lifted from a seventeenth-century male Flemish painter, Daniel Seghers.

6 Buchloh, "A Conversation with Jutta Koether". Koether explained her choice of painting in the 1980s: on the one hand, "I felt the desire [...] to make something happen within a medium that enjoyed art-historical recognition," and, on the other, "I felt unable to agree with the notion that a woman in the art world who wanted to act in "avant-gardist" or "progressive" ways ... had to avail herself of a different medium, a medium external to painting." "Painting Abuse: A Conversation between Isabelle Graw and Jutta Koether", in *Jutta Koether: The Thirst*, ed. Iris Müller-Westermann, Moderna Museet (London: Koenig Books, 2011), 33.

7 See my *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1999). See also Susan Waller, *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830–1870* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

8 On the Romantic studio as a "profoundly eroticized environment", see Marc Gotlieb, "Creation and Death in the Romantic Studio", in *Inventions of the Studio: Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Michael Cole and Mary Pardo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 150. On Ingres's painting, see Sarah Betzer, "Artist as Lover: Rereading Ingres's *Raphael and the Fornarina*", *Oxford Art Journal* (2015): 1–29.

9 For *Sardanapalus* as an image of the studio, see Jack J. Spector, *Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus* (London: Allen Lane, 1974) and Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Orients and Colonies: Delacroix's Algerian Harem", in *The Cambridge Companion to Delacroix*, ed. Beth S. Wright (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 69–87.

10 Cited in Sébastien Allard and Côme Fabre (eds.), *Delacroix* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 50.

11 For Fantin-Latour, see Bridget Alsdorf, *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013). Morisot showed in most of the Impressionist exhibitions. See Sylvie Patrie (ed.), *Berthe Morisot: Woman Impressionist* (New York: Rizzoli, 2018).

12 I am borrowing the Situationists' term. Gil Wolman's 1956 manifesto "Directions for Use of Détournement" encouraged its users to feel free to "alter the meaning of [textual] fragments and doctor, in whatever way is deemed best, what idiots insist on calling 'quotations'". Quoted in Tom McDonough, "Guy Debord, or The Revolutionary without a Halo", *October* 115 (winter 2006): 41.

13 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. IV–V, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), esp. chap. 7.

14 For the connection to Cézanne, see Benjamin Buchloh, "Jutta Koether: Enlisting Cézanne", in Suzanne Cotter, Achim Hochdörfer and Tonio Kröner (eds.), *Tour de Madame: Jutta Koether* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2018), 297–302.

15 Koether has also produced green and black monochromes.

16 Cited by Martha Schwendener, "Jutta Koether: 'Champrovent'", *The New York Times*, May 22, 2014. On another occasion, Koether declared, "Red paintings don't show flesh, don't resemble flesh. Rather they resemble little army units, cells; if anything, bloody money rather than bloody flesh." Koether, *f*, 1997, 29, cited in Cotter, Hochdörfer and Kröner (eds.), *Tour de Madame*, 273.

17 Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. Emily McVarish (Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, CA and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993).

18 On another version of this painting, see Isabelle Graw, "Classics of Modernism: On Jutta Koether's Treatment of Canonic Painters", in *Jutta Koether: Kölnischer Kunstverein* (Cologne: DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, 2006).

19 For the discussion of this photograph, and of *Fillette*, see Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2005), esp. 71–78.

20 Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus", in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 281–91.

21 Koether spoke about developing "a kind of structural sense of disobedience for avoiding the ruts of the patriarchal models" dominant in German art schools at the time of her artistic formation. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Jutta Koether", 16.

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Hochdörfer, Achim: "Through Sun, Moon, and Stars. Jutta Koether in the 1990s", in: "Jutta Koether: Tour de Madame", Museum Brandhorst, Munich/Mudam Luxembourg Museée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg City, 2018, pp. 152-163 (exhibition catalogue)

THROUGH SUN, MOON, AND STARS
JUTTA KOETHER IN THE 1990s

Achim Hochdörfer

Jutta Koether, *There is simply no substitute for frequent meetings of individuals with similar ideas (Otto Fenichel)* 1999.
Acrylic on canvas, twenty-three parts, each: 5 inches (12.5 cm) diam.

A hundred years after its creation, the dramatically swirling celestial turbulence of Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889) seems to have frozen into a cliché. The visual excesses that Georges Bataille once saw in the spinning suns of van Gogh's late work have paled. Forgotten is the inner turmoil that Antonin Artaud saw not only in the artist's paintings, but also in his mental anguish and suicide, a desperate railing against the capitalist social order.[1] The expressionist view of van Gogh is that he was an artist who unmasked a false "respect for power and magnitude" in paintings that "rage with the storm of all those emotions in the experience of which the individual of van Gogh's epoch for the first time registered the historical catastrophe."[2] These "pathos formulas" were banished to an irretrievable past when the death of painting was declared in the 1980s. Yet their creation is nevertheless inextricably linked with van Gogh's posthumous ascent to the status of a veritable pop star of modern art. Reproduced en masse, his *The Starry Night* encapsulates the tension between inner protest and capitalist commercialization, between inner sensibility and cosmological kitsch. It is as though the arabesques in the sky represent the irreconcilable struggle in which the authentic is sought amid the inauthentic.

64 In her 1988 appropriation *Starry Night I*, Koether adopts two key aspects of van Gogh's painting: the swirling sky and the cypress tree. The picturesque village with its sharp church spire is replaced by a kind of inner landscape with amorphous figures that exist like organs in a body. On the lower right-hand edge of the painting, a crusty giant with a bulbous nose seems to be wearing the hilltop as a hat. His gaze is directed toward an embryo that has nestled into the inner earth. From its amniotic sac emerges one of the round, knobbly forms that have been a feature of Koether's work since 1983, and which might variously be interpreted, depending on context, as an apple, a breast, a head, an eye, or even a cell. It joins a throng of similar forms teeming down the hillside, like van Gogh's cosmic mists, right into the base of a smoldering cypress. There, dramatic scenes unfold. We see figures with bowed heads, their hands raised up, as though they were burning in the fires of hell or cheering at a pop concert. "I spent twenty minutes in hell" is the refrain in Koether's 1989 artist book *20 Minuten* of the same time.[3] In an idiosyncratic cross between a Patti Smith pose and Camille Claudel's late-nineteenth-century *L'Implorante*, the path continues upward through a glowing chasm through which the knobbly spheres are catapulted into the bright-red night sky, where they are transformed into the moon and stars. The smoldering cypress forms a compositional link, breaking through the horizon line and overcoming the separation between above and below, earth and sky, inside and outside. The last offshoot of the rippling celestial wave unites—in contrast to van Gogh—with one of the sparkling stars.

65 In a second version, *Starry Night II* (1988), Koether ramps up the expressionist ductus. The lurid contrast of yellow and red sets the surface in motion and also tips the visual elements into hysteria.[4] The embryo is transformed into a shapeless entity with a trunk bending downward, spewing yellow and orange brushstrokes. Its rump, which echoes the oscillations of the celestial wave, churns out the cells that are about to be catapulted skyward. What was a nocturnal scene now appears as bright as day—the stars have turned into glowing, turning suns that stare out of the picture as though from red-rimmed eye sockets. One year later, in her 1989 painting *Subject is the absolute Unrest of Becoming*, these sun wheels finally come into their own. They take over the entire picture plane, so that the distinction between above and below, inside and outside, is completely abrogated. Even the arabesques of the celestial waves have been set in motion. From the lower right-hand edge, they rise upward in two streams to embrace a radiant head, like the arms of a dancing figure. Alternating playfully between the abstract and the figurative, these streams take on the form of a womb that delivers the sun wheels into the picture plane through its meandering ovaries—as forms whose significance remains unclear, as nascent embodiments of stars, suns, stroboscopes, noteheads, probes, magnetic fields. At once passive and active, they absorb information from all directions and transform it into visual energy, which they cast back like lightning flashes.[5] 66

Koether's appropriation of van Gogh in no way fits the prevalent definition of appropriation art. For her *Starry Night* is not a detached or ideologically driven critical analysis aimed at revealing the corruption of the original. On the contrary: as an artist, Koether immersed herself in van Gogh's compositional logic and in the history of the reception of his work, while at the same time implanting her work into the body of the painting—like an antibody—in order to release its encapsulated intensity, which Meyer Shapiro has described, in reference to *The Starry Night*, as an "apocalyptic fantasy."[6] In reworking the masterpieces of the modern age, Koether, as she puts it, seeks to "rework painting … artificially authentic with oilpaint, with red color as surface (horizontally expanding) penetration, burning up itself, kind of grotesque, as eclecticism becomes a physical necessity, at the origin of the world, at death, in hell, with starry nights.… FemTrash cultivates intense relations with masterpieces."[7]

Seeing Stars

The incisiveness of Koether's exploration of van Gogh's *The Starry Night* is particularly evident when viewed against the backdrop of the polemical debate that raged in the 1980s over the survival or death of painting. The categorizations deployed by art critics—advanced photography versus outmoded painting, critical appropriation art versus reactionary neo-expressionism—had become entrenched, leading to a situation so polarized that every nuance risked being regarded as a false compromise. By the mid-1980s, the furor of Neue Wilde painting was waning, and the "death of painting" seemed to be an incontrovertible historical fact. Many of the artists close to Koether—notably Albert Oehlen and Rosemarie Trockel—experienced a crisis, or turned away from painting and abandoned their neo-expressionist roots. Koether swam against the tide, clinging to an expressionist

Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 × 36 inches (73.7 × 92.1 cm)

painterly idiom, which would directly impact her career as an artist. She gained recognition first and foremost as a pop journalist and art critic. Between 1987 and 1991, she had only one solo exhibition as an artist. Her increasing frustration with this situation went hand in hand with her growing affinity for the New York art scene. She made friends with artists John Miller, Mike Kelley, and Mary Heilmann, and came into contact with gallerists Pat Hearn and Colin de Land. Koether describes her 1991 move to New York, in retrospect, as a "self-displacement" that involved distancing herself consciously from the Cologne scene in order to position herself anew in a different context.[8]

Koether had her first public appearance in New York in January 1991 with *Kissing the Canvas*. It is a term used in sport: "The artist as painter in the image of the boxer, almost on the floor, near the canvas. Not quite beaten K.O. by the rest surrounding him."[9] As part of a weekly lecture-performance series, Koether presented a text with the same title and interacted with her paintings. Speaking and seeing, painting and action, were interlinked. Based on the image of the boxer in the arena of spectacle, reeling and being counted out, with defeat in sight and exposed to the gaze and jeering of the audience, Koether developed and asserted her own historic and aesthetic position. The kiss marks the moment in which action and image, outside and inside, the low point and the plenitude of painting collide in ecstasy and exhaustion. What is remarkable is not only the decisiveness with which Koether rejects the postmodern assertion of the death of painting, but also the way she argues for an expansion of both modernism *and* pop. It is about a return to the pathos formulas of modernism and, at the same time, about engaging with the "comical, sarcastic, arrogant, cool and full-on filth" of the culture industry.[10] It is along these lines that Koether weaves her moving network of "deliberate ambiguities," which mutually energize, destroy, and refashion one another.

67 In her diptych *Kissing the Canvas* (1990), the sweeping lines and knobbly spheres of *Starry Night* morph into a carnivalesque scene. They transform into conglomerations of human heads, flashing lights, and rhythmic beats. A champagne glass pushes into the plane of the right-hand panel, pouring bubbles into the image space. Spirals unfurl like ticker tape among the visual elements, creating links and crossings-out (e.g., Koether's signature), setting markers (e.g., the *S* of "KISS"), encircling and enfolding. Across the edges of the paintings, they bridge the gap between the two panels, which also separates the work title and Koether's signature. In the midst of the tumult, directly beneath "KISSING," a white hole gapes like a wound, a crater, a vulva—or at any rate, an opening through which visual elements spill onto the picture plane. It is as though we are looking down on the open cypress abyss of the *Starry Night* paintings; into the fomenting hell of the interior, just before an eruption illuminates the nocturnal sky. The fallen boxer rises from the floor, seeing stars before his eyes.

Koether presented new groups of work in two programmatic solo exhibitions, held in 1991 and 1992 respectively: *koether: massen – malerei und versammlung* at the Generali Foundation, Vienna, and *100% Malerei. Niemand ist eine Frau* at Galerie Sophia Ungers in Cologne. Large-format tableaux now began to take the place of her predominantly small-scale canvases of the 1980s. In works such as *ganz* and *völlig* (both 1991), the arabesque lines with their exuberant brushstrokes, wavy lines, spirals, shell-like rocailles, tick marks, and hatching develop a very transformational dynamic, interspersed with figurative motifs such as flowers, eggs, apples, and various mutations of the knobbly sphere. These converge into groups, withdraw into hidden nests, hatch new ideas, and teem like garlands and streamers through the image space. They seem to swarm outward across the edges of the paintings as though seeking contact with the outside world, while loading up with art historical references. In this, the arabesques act as channels of energy that guide the gaze effortlessly between figuration and abstraction, high art and decoration, the grotesque and the exquisite, text and image, order and chaos. As a stylistic means of transition, and as a figure of inversion, the arabesque is able to tip any given position into its opposite at any moment.[11] On the one hand, the composition triggers an expansive movement that dissolves the autonomy of the image into ornament. On the other hand, the arabesques can be read as an inward-moving impulse that allows a kind of *Weltinnenraum* ("world's inner space") to take shape.

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The female face at the center of *ganz* can be traced back to a 1989 drawing in which a head is projected onto a globe. In this regard, Koether demonstratively revisits the central theme of history painting: the overlap between subject and world, between existential emotion and historical experience. Written in large letters right across the forehead is the word *halal*—the term denoting what is permissible according to Islamic law—in reference to the increasing multiculturalism in the wake of the globalization following the fall of the Berlin Wall.[12] The face presents itself as a container of fragmented cultural information, as a processing machine with a lipsticked mouth, white teeth, and gleaming eyes,

absorbing all manner of moods and affects, and churning them out again: loss, devotion, mourning, joy, rage, desire, hysteria, fear. These are affects that permeate all the stages of the depiction—from seemingly naive self-portrait to the history painting's assertive claim of representing a global subjectivity.[13]

With pictures such as *ganz*, Koether prods some highly sensitive nerves in the development of modern painting. Her arabesque harbors and prefigures the tension between ornamental adornment and autonomously expressive figure, between architectural wall decor and the artistic space of the work itself. Even in its beginnings, the arabesque already bore within it the seeds of the conflict that shaped the consolidation of the autonomous image in modernism. This conflict peaked dramatically in Abstract Expressionism: at the watershed of its development, modernist painting was heading inexorably toward its own dissolution. With that, decentralized and polyphonic allover compositions began to approximate their most implacable enemies—namely, decorative and commercially produced designs of "the kind seen in wallpaper patterns that can be repeated indefinitely."[14] In her exploration of the history of modern painting, Koether begins at this historic moment—not in order to parody it or even to overcome it, but rather to mobilize all its existential and historic dynamism.

Many Little Karoi

In the early 1990s, Koether began to explore the painterly tradition of Abstract Expressionism, systematically unraveling its formal and historiographical implications in a series of exhibitions. At the heart of these projects lay *Inside Job* (1992). Conceived as a performative installation in Koether's Manhattan studio, it consisted of three components that framed the relationship between image, subjective interior space, and external context. A large-format canvas spread out on the floor defined the central space. An adjacent storage space had been transformed into a small cabinet of curiosities containing objects that offered insight into her private life and thoughts: books, photographs, letters, all manner of notes [ill. p. 71]. Between them hung small-format pictures, many with erotic motifs.[15] An imaginary museum, a religious shrine, a storage cupboard, and a toilet—the space played with all of these ideas and ultimately transitioned into a separate third room, where a table and chairs invited conversation. Koether engaged the people visiting her exhibition in a dialogue that she documented in handwritten notes and made available in a visitors' book on the writing desk of the cabinet of curiosities.[16] A cross between sociological study and psychoanalytic session, *Inside Job* let Koether conjure a subtly differentiated, she conjured a subtly differentiated mood board of aesthetic viewpoints. In this way, not only the artist but also the visitors took on an active role in the "arena in which to act."[17]

71 Koether had already started work on the composition of *The one One* (1992) before the exhibition opened, then went on to alter and complement that image in direct response to the social dynamics of the project.[18] The dual-arch structure of the window frame in the room appears in the upper and lower areas of the image. In the swirling allover, there are multiple references to Koether's physical work on the ground: knees, thighs, elbows, underarms can all be seen scattered across the canvas in different positions and from different angles.[19] Ghostly faces push into the image from all sides, their speaking mouths and silent gazes commenting on what is happening. In between, there are erotic scenes derived from the forms and contents of the cabinet images, whose orgiastic atmosphere Koether describes as a series of "explosions, that amount of desire exploding, expressed in there, squeezed in that closet and then pouring out."[20] The struggle for position, the tensions and the urban hustle and bustle of New York, as well as desire and horror, fill the image space.

At the center of the image, along the vertical axis, is a schematic anthropomorphic figure, around and into which Koether has painted during the process of creating the work. At one early stage the figure appears as a dancer flitting across the picture plane like a flash of light. The leap stands for the vibrant exchange between image, artist, and social context.[21] In the final version, the dancer has disappeared; only her right foot, with which she has touched the canvas, remains visible just below the center. Otherwise, all that remains is a pale outline, like the ghostly emptiness of a subject whose kneeling legs and underarms have left some trace recalling the painterly process.[22] Ready to be hung vertically on the wall, it seems to vanish upward through the round arch of the window. At the same time, it is as though a monstrous embryo in profile, with a blue eye and a mouth gaping in a scream, can be discerned. It is a spectacle of death and resurrection, of dissolution and ecstatic reassembling of the image, "making the first and last paintings simultaneously, making conversations, enter the social fabric there. Get caught into the web. Entangle, Dis-Entangle. Observe and get involved."[23]

The pictorial concept established by Koether in the early 1990s reached its initial apex in her solo exhibition *Affective Import* at the Pat Hearn Gallery in 1993. The exhibition consisted of five large-format works, the so-called *Antibodies* (1993), which 78 addressed the emerging technoculture of the early 1990s, as well as German reunification and global finance. Here, Koether takes up the metaphor of the visual figure on the ground, as in *The one One,* whose lines run like cables or infusion tubes suffusing the body from the outside with emotional affects and social input. Even at first glance, the *Antibodies* seem to be mistreated and overwhelmed by the flood of information. The broken lines are redolent of scars, as though the entire picture plane had been ripped up and sewn back together again.

The colors and some of the motifs in *Antibody I (First Moment After Noon Night)* (1993) are derived from flyers for techno parties, with lettering that spells out "hard trance" running right across the painting and setting the beat and the rhythm. Beams lighting up all over the picture plane like small explosions create an electric, pulsating effervescence.[24] Hovering above the scene is a disco ball, a kabbalah tree, whose upper circle represents the *kether*—the brightest light of the universe—while at the same time referencing Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*.[25]

Next to that, on the right, are a female face and an egg-shaped Humpty Dumpty head reading a book together. The collisions of these visual elements discharge in little clicks, in temporal ecstasies, which Koether, alluding to the ancient Greek god Kairos (or Caerus), and the concept of *kairos*—the spontaneous and opportune moment—describes as "many little *kairoi*."[26] These small, spontaneous moments draw their intensity from various different directions and spheres of value, exploding at unpredictable points amid the "absolute unrest of Becoming."[27] In this respect, Koether's *kairos* differs fundamentally from the late-modernist concept of the emphatic moment—as expressed in Michael Fried's "presentness" or Karl Heinz Bohrer's "suddenness"—which constitutes an isolated moment of pure presence within a detachment from the social sphere.[28] Koether's *kairos*, by contrast, speaks "in many voices."[29] It insists on its own highly charged heterogeneity, rooted in solidarity with the "comical, sarcastic, arrogant, cool and full-on filth"[30] from which these voices have sprung.

Koether takes her involvement with the external and her engagement with the context of her immediate surroundings one step further in her second exhibition at Pat Hearn's gallery. Hearn was one of the first gallerists to move from SoHo to Chelsea, a vanguard of the mass exodus that would soon take place as many galleries relocated to the new hub of the booming art market. Following the success of *Affective Import*, which was acclaimed by critics and the public alike—every artwork in the exhibition sold—Koether opened the new venue in February 1995 with her solo exhibition *Frontage*. In her new works, she responded to the spatial and contextual situation of the gallery. The title alludes to the lines on the pavement whose length and visibility determine the value of a respective property. Parallel to the window, Koether created a wall in the gallery on which she mounted the main picture of the exhibition. The dimensions of the painting *Frontage (Well, show me Nothing)* echo the proportions of the window and demonstrate the commodity character of the artwork (an exchange of money is taking place in the upper right). Moreover, the window itself is a motif, rendered visible by a stone thrown so that it leaves the outline of a star in the broken glass. It identifies what Koether describes as "activist viewing" ("*tätliche Anschauung*")—that moment of breaking through the barrier where imagination and reality, image and act, inside and outside converge: *Kissing the Canvas*.[31] In this respect, Koether resists the simplistic contrast between painting and contextual art that defined advanced art criticism in the early 1990s. Her exhibition reclaims the right of painting to participate.[32]

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Rotten Suns

In the first half of the 1990s, Koether's painting took on an exuberant new dynamic. On the basis of her red paintings, she established an arabesque approach to painting, through which, step by step, she integrated social issues and historiographical traditions into her tableaux, ranging from the global sound of her *100% Malerei* and *Massen* pictures to her exploration of Abstract Expressionism in *Inside Job* to her technoid surfaces in *Affective Import* and site-specific contextualization of painting in *Frontage*. Unlike in Cologne, Koether was recognized in New York as a painter. Roberta Smith described her as "one of several women helping to breathe new life into painting."[33] This conceptual change sweeping though Cologne and other European cities at the time altered the pulse and pace of exhibitions held there. At first this seemed to coincide with a wave of commercial success for the artists involved. Yet their high hopes were soon to be dashed. Of all the works shown in the *Frontage* exhibition, not one single piece was sold. As a result, by the mid-1990s, Koether could no longer afford to rent a permanent studio.

This was one of the reasons why Koether concentrated, in her next exhibition at Pat Hearn in 1996, on a selection of the small-format drawings she had been creating in New York since 1990. The title of the exhibition was *after shows*, indicating a pause, a retrospective gaze, and, as such, a hiatus that would introduce an important shift in Koether's own visual approach. In comparison with the teeming compositions of her *Antibodies*, the images in Koether's subsequent 1997 exhibition, *songs of new york &c*, are more straightforward and clearly illuminated. The emptiness of the primed canvas is given its own space, on which the lines run almost weightlessly between expressive painting, drawing, and writing. Thematically, too, the images enter new territory. There are portrayals of the deserted cosmos and postapocalyptic landscapes, all far from the urban hustle and bustle of *Antibodies*. In this exhibition, Koether stages a meeting of three WBs—William Blake, Walter Benjamin, and William S. Burroughs—and takes the encounter as an opportunity to redefine the relationship between text and image. That begins with the facture of the pictures themselves. For *WB IV (Walter Benjamin)* (1997) she uses a black-primed canvas as a blackboard. She then processes this dark layer with gold and silver rollerball pens, of the kind that only became widely available in the mid-1990s. The hard point of the pen acts like a needle, engraving the finest and most delicate of lines onto the picture plane, glistening in metallic hues. Exquisitely drawn loops, waves, and hatching converge in a diagram of dynamic energy lines bundled into a kind of raveled knot at the upper midpoint of the picture. The lines radiating outward from this heteronomous center form countless little kairoi, coincidences, and chance occurrences. Koether subtly alternates between the visual worlds of scientific diagrams and cartoon drawings, between *dessin automatique* and the imaginings of some *outer space*. These layers, in turn, are suffused with spiraling and wave-like structures redolent of images depicting the magnetic fields of solar eruptions. Between the lines there lies the inkling of a text, in the form of fragments, dissected into elementary parts, of a sentence from Walter Benjamin's treatise on Surrealism: "[Life seemed worth living only where] the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away"[34] The syntactic disorganization of the sentence within the image is akin to the organization of a

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dream that seems fully convincing to the dreamer, even though it may subsequently appear to be completely inconsistent. It was in this discrepancy—or rather, in its dissolution at the moment of waking—that Benjamin pinpointed the concept of "profane illumination," which states that the purportedly darker layers of consciousness—dream, intoxication, subconscious—are potentially liberating, rather than a "withdrawal into the self."

The sun quite literally took center stage in Koether's last exhibition at Pat Hearn: *sun//ny* (1999). Three large paintings dominated the room in a vibrant chord of black, red, and yellow, while the expressive impact of *August Aloud*, *Must be*, and *Foolish Fire* (all 1999) resulted to a large extent from the performative spontaneity of the painterly act. With a broad brush, the thick, oozing acrylic paint was swept across the canvas and further processed with spray cans and chalk. Into this formlessness Koether weaves a web of references ranging from Bataille to the baroque philosopher Robert Fludd; from the musician Sun Ra to the journalist Kodwo Eshun. In doing so, she conjures stances that evoke various forms of ecstasy as boundary-breaking forces. In this schema oneness can be achieved only via the destabilizing state of being outside the self. *August Aloud*, for instance, shows a rupturing sun-head in profile, from which two hearts are catapulted.[35] The fissure opens into a scream, the jagged lines radiate hysterically in all directions. On the upper edge are the phrases "the brain is a population" and "more brilliant than the sun": it is the depth of the blackness that illuminates the image.[36] The radiant darkness of *August Aloud* finds its counterpoint in the putrid yellow explosion of *Foolish Fire*. Here, a very different sun shines. Neither black nor almost invisible, it is a face morphed into a monumental double loop, from the center of which the paint gushes over the canvas and—much in the spirit of Bataille's concept of formlessness—permeates all form and order with its excretory abjection. It is this lurid contrast between illumination and defilement, ecstasy and lament, that Koehler has expressed in two drawings: on the right, the radiance of the sun, and on the left a self-portrait of the artist, whose sulphurous yellow excretion pours onto the earth.[37]

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Hearn, who was already very ill by the time the *sun//ny* exhibition opened, died in August 2000. With that, Koether lost not only a close friend but also her gallerist. At the turn of the decade she thus returned to what she would later describe as a "ground zero situation." There is a hint of this in the loosely hung canvases in the *sun//ny* exhibition. The canvases were no longer spanned on stretchers and could therefore be rolled up and transported anytime, becoming placeless. This in itself points toward the coming years, in which Koether would go on to focus increasingly on performative, collaborative projects. Against this backdrop, *sun//ny* can be seen as a kind of finale, or as a passing revue of the entire dynamics of the 1990s. The exploding sun of *August Aloud* recalls the facial globe of *ganz* and the shattered glass pane of *Frontage*, whose star also gazes at us like a face. And *Foolish Fire* spans an arc that takes us back to the *Starry Night* paintings, in which Koether's forms are blasted from some hellish inner space into the cosmos. From outer space the gaze returns to *Starry Night*, as though we were observing the volcano of the cypress trees at the moment of eruption. On one wall of the gallery, there was a row of small round pictures that Koether dedicated to people who were important to her: Tom Verlaine, Kim Gordon, Daniel Buchholz, Bennett Simpson, Pat Hearn, Colin de Land, and others [ill. p. 152]. The path to these pictures from the *Starry Nights* of the late 1980s is not a long one, yet the round, organic forms are no longer projectiles fired from hell. They have become unique stars, changing constellations, and fields of energy.

NOTES

1. Georges Bataille, "Rotten Sun," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939,* trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 57–58; "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," in *Visions of Excess*, 61–72. Antonin Artaud, "Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society," trans. Mary Beach and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in *The Antonin Artaud Anthology*, ed. Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965), 135–163.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 204.
3. Jutta Koether, *20 Minuten: Aufzeichnung / Recording* (Cologne: Galerie Monika Sprüth, 1989). Cf. Jutta Koehter, "Hölle," in *Eau de Cologne 3* (Cologne" Galerie Monika Sprüth, 1989), 56–61.
4. In her 1987 book *f.*, Koether writes, "I make light in the space and as I do so I operate and become hysterical. Lots of people often say I am hysterical and pathetic, which would distort the gaze, but I know the circumstances in which hysteria is necessary." Jutta Koether, *f.* (Graz: Edition Bleich-Rossi, 1987), 12–13.
5. The title of this work is a reference to Hegel's formulation of the "absolute unrest of Becoming" ("*absolute Unruhe des Werdens*") in his 1812–16 work *Wissenschaft der Logik* (*Science of Logic*). See G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 545.
6. In a remarkable analogy to Koether's *Starry Night*, Meyer Schapiro discerns, in the dramatic constellation of the celestial wave and stars, "a possible unconscious reminiscence of the apocalyptic theme of the woman in pain of birth, girded with the sun and the moon and crowned with the stars." Meyer Schapiro, "On a Painting of van Gogh: Crows in the Wheatfield" (1950) in Schapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 87–99, this quote 97.
7. Cf. Jutta Koether, "3rd-Generation-Women Fem-Trash-Manifest" in *Eau de Cologne 3*, 57.
8. In conversation with Jutta Koether, summer 2017.
9. Cf. Jutta Koether, "Kissing The Canvas," *Texte zur Kunst*, Autumn 1990, 41–44. Translated here from the German. The text of the lecture-performance constitutes a further version of this painterly manifesto.
10. Jutta Koether, "Kissing The Canvas," 42. Particularly against the backdrop of her activity as a pop critic, Koether clearly states that she does not want her involvement with pop to be misconstrued as populism in the sense of "affably reaching out" between high and low art. What Koether demands is a deliberate ambiguity that can be understood as a method reminiscent of the pop analysis by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: i.e., a discourse that resists the prevailing language but does not provide an alternative—feminist or subcultural—anticanon to the existing and prevailing canon, which would merely shift the signifiers of the existing order and swap them between center and periphery. Instead, she seeks to "transpose the majority language into a minority-Becoming of all its dimensions and elements," as outlined in

Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1987), 106. See also Tom Holert, "'Dispell them'. Anti-Pop und Pop-Philosophie: Ist eine andere Politik des Populären möglich?" ('Dispell them'. Anti-Pop and Pop-Philosophy: Is a Different Politics of the Popular possible?) In *Deleuze und die Künste*, ed. Peter Gente and Peter Weibel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 168–89.

11. Regarding the compositional figure of the arabesque, see Günter Oesterle, "Arabeske," in Ästhetische Grundbegriffe, vol. 1, ed. Karlheinz Barck et al. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2000), 49–103.

12. In the CD project *The Halal File*, conceived as a commentary on her painting, Koether explored the "global sound" of urban life in New York and Paris. Cf. Jutta Koether, "Halal," in *Jutta Koether. The Halal File*, CD insert, n.p. (Hans Nieswandt, "The Halal File," in *Jutta Koether. The Halal File*, cover text).

13. The concept of the image as the refuse bin of cultural waste has parallels in Martin Kippenberger's installation *Heavy Burschi* (1989–90), which he created for an exhibition in the Kölnischer Kunstverein. He got his assistant Merlin Carpenter to produce paintings featuring Kippenberger's own motifs, which were then kicked and stamped on and thrown into a wooden container.

14. Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" (1948) in Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 154–63.

15. Visitors found themselves in the awkward position of being voyeurs or even spies by peering into the private sphere of the artist. In an entry dated May 2–4, 1992, Koether wrote of the "situation of actually sneaking in in somebody's private life ... that double-meaning of privacy, the possibility of being a real intruder, not just a voyeur, is all laid out there." *J.K.: The Inside Job*, (Graz: Edition Bleich-Rossi, 1993)

16. Cf. ibid.

17. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" in Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 23–39; this quote

25. Originally published in *Art News*, New York, December 11, 1952, 22ff.

18. The exhibition took place from April 4 to May 26, 1992. *The one One* was later renamed *The Inside Job.*

19. In an entry dated May 4–5, 1992, Koether writes, "I really should have made my kneeling visible, kneeling while working on the painting, kneeling while reading." And on May 22 she writes, "We had a whole thing going on about how it is to paint on the floor all that blending and stretching and uncomfortableness of the position. He tried it too. And do not mind that old Pollock has done it, he said, he had it form the sand-painting-techniques of the Indians. So talking about appropriation of method." Koether, *J.K.: The Inside Job*, n.p.

20. Entry dated May 17, 1992. Koether, *J.K.: The Inside Job*, n.p. The kneeling female nude is adopted from a motif by Pierre Klossowski, which also appears in the painting *völlig* (1991) in the exhibition *100% Malerei. Niemand ist eine Frau.*

21. The dancer is also a reference to Jackson Pollock's performative approach to painting documented in photographs by Hans Namuth. In some of Koether's early 1990s works, there are also motif allusions to Pollock, as in *Untitled* (1992), in which Pollock's hand and paintbrush can be seen jutting into the painting while painting a Madonna portrait. However, Koether deliberately eschewed the drip technique, holding instead to a slow and detailed process of painting more akin to that of Lee Krasner or Joan Mitchell.

22. In the final entry of her notes, written on May 21, 1992, Koether recalls her conversation with a visitor who asked whether she had ever thought of lying down to sleep on the painting: "It's funny, I had thought of that sometimes, but it had not been dry enough to do so ... might try to rest on it the day before I will take it out here." Koether, *J.K.: The Inside Job*, n.p.

23. Jutta Koether, "Introduction," Koether, *J.K.: The Inside Job*, n.p. The title *The one One* references Slavoj Žižek's book *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), in which Žižek reflects on Hegelian dialectics and the concept of oneness, concerning the relationship of the One and the Other. As Žižek writes on page 52, "The correlate of the One cannot be the Other, cannot be something else, because the One is already the unity, reflected in itself with its other–it is the thing itself as its own other, for which the thing is, is itself–as a One ... its ideal unity." Koether made copies of this chapter and distributed them to visitors to take away with them.

24. In her text "Deliratio III – So frei," published in *SPEX* magazine in 1995, Koether writes, "It fueled all the more a desire to concentrate on the multipart, the undone, the unconceptual, the unplannable. Manoeuvres of rupture and degeneration, the kick, the unexpected gift of the non-spectacle. Define, then destabilize. Dream of it at the very moment when it is far too bright, on going to sleep. Let uncontrollable everyday things happen in spates." ("Um so mehr schürte es den Wunsch, die Konzentration auf Vielteiliges, Ungetanes, Unkonzeptuelles, Unplanbares zu legen. Zerplatzungs- und Überbordungsmanöver, der Kick, das Überraschungsgeschenk des De-spektakels. Definieren, dann destabilisieren. Gerade dann davon träumen, wenn es viel zu hell ist, beim Schlafengehen. Unkontrollierbare alltägliche Dinge zu Hauf geschehen lassen.") She goes on to say, "And all around, time and again, a thousand times, techno. Oil on canvas as sound on sound. Application of painting. Boomboomboom ... trip-hopping until the green rainbow would appear there. I believed in that magic." ("Und drumherum immer wieder und tausendmal Techno. Öl auf Leinwand als Sound auf Sound. Anwendung von Malerei. Bumbumbum ... triphopping, bis daß der grüne Regenbogen erschien. Ich glaubte auch an diesen Zauber.") Jutta Koether, "Deliratio III – So frei," *SPEX*, October 1995, 61.

25. This is a reference to Jack Burnham's essay "Duchamp's Bride Stripped Bare," *Arts Magazine*, March 1972, 28–32, April 1972, 41–45, and May 1972, 58–61.

26. Jutta Koether, "Vorwort" (Foreword) in Jutta Koether, *Kairos. Texte zu Kunst und Musik* (Berlin and Amsterdam: Edition ID-Archiv, 1996), 8.

27. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 545.

28. Modernist painting, according to Michael Fried, "has no duration–not because one in fact experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.... A single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it." Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998), 167. See also Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. Ruth Crowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

29. Jutta Koether, "Vorwort," in *Kairos*, 9.

30. Koether, "Kissing The Canvas," 42.

31. "How does viewing become what I call 'activist viewing'?" (translated here from the German: "Wie wird aus Anschauung das, was ich ‚tätliche Anschauung' nenne?") This would have to be "heightened, along with socially intensive means created that go beyond discursivity." ("gesteigert werden, als auch sozial intensive Mittel hergestellt werden, die über Diskursivität hinausgehen.") Jutta Koether, "'You're just a piece of action'. Im Interesse der Unsicherheit" (1993), in Koether, *Kairos*, 38.

32. Koether has countered the formation of opposition to critical interventionist praxis and painting with her program of "social painting," which is directed against the perception of her purported autonomy. "It exists in a thoroughly complicit relationship with both its counterparts, in an imagined matrix of discursivity and sociality, which painting usually meets with silence and solitariness, as long as it is merely being produced ... I have endeavored in various projects to trace the existential conditions of this game" (translated here from the German: "Sie existiert in einem geradezu absurden Komplizenverhältnis zu ihren beiden Gegenübers in einer gedachten Matrix: Diskursivität und Sozialität, denen die Malerei normalerweise Schweigen und Einsamkeit entgegensetzt, solange sie nur hergestellt wird.

[...] In verschiedenen Projekten habe ich versucht dieser Existenzbedingung des Spiel nachzuspüren"). Koether, "Weiterspielen: Ein Symposium führt zum nächsten Symposium" (Keeping the Game Going: One Symposium Leads to the Next Symposium), in *Spielverderber*, ed. Elisabeth Fiedler (Graz: Forum Stadtpark, 1994), 242.

33. Roberta Smith, "Art in Review," *New York Times*, February 24, 1995, http://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/24/arts/art-in-review-516695.html.

34. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" in Michael W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 207–221; this quote 208. German original: "Das Leben schien nur lebenswert, wo die Schwelle, die zwischen Wachen und Schlaf ist, in jedem ausgetreten war ...," in Walter Benjamin, "Der Sürrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz," in ed. Benjamin, *Aufsätze. Essays. Vorträge. Gesammelte Schriften, Band II, 1*, 295–310, this quote 296.

35. The motif of the sun with two hearts in *August Aloud* references an engraving from Robert Fludd's book *Philosophia sacra et vere Christiana, seu meteorologia cosmica*, published in Frankfurt in 1626.

36. *More Brilliant Than the Sun* is the title of a book by Kodwo Eshun, published in 1998, charting the history of Afro-futuristic music from Sun Ra and Alice Coltrane through to current emerging trends in hip-hop and techno. Cf. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998). Eshun uses the phrase "The brain is a population" as a subheader in his book (page 53), which is in fact a quote from Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 64.

37. In his contribution "Informe" (Formless), published in the "critical dictionary" section of the journal *Documents* in December 1929, Bataille writes, "On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit." Georges Bataille, "Formless," trans. Allan Stoekl, in *Visions of Excess*, 31 ("Par contre affirmer que l'univers ne ressemble à rien et n'est qu'informe revient à dire que l'univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat"). Georges Bataille, "Informe" *Documents* 7, December 1929, 382. In his contribution "Spittle" ("L'eau à la bouche") in the same publication, Michel Leiris adds: "Spit, because it is runny, shapeless, of no precise colour, and wet, is finally the very symbol of the formless, the unverifiable, the unhierarchical," in a translation by Dominic Faccini in *October*, no. 30, Spring 1992, 30 ("Le crachat est enfin, par son inconsistance, ses contours indéfinis, l'imprécision relative de sa couleur, son humidité, le symbole même de l'informe, de l'invérifiable, du non-hiérarchisé").

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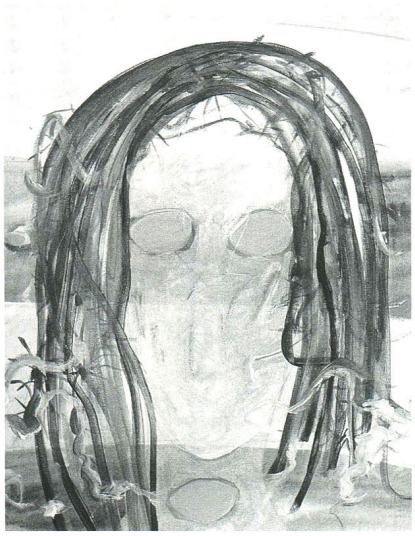
Groetz, Thomas: "Unfinished Sympathies: On Jutta Koether's art", in: Afterall, July 2003, pp. 52-55

JUTTA KOETHER

Thomas Groetz

Unfinished Sympathies: On Jutta Koether's art



Total Need, acrylic on canvas, 51cm x 41cm, 2000

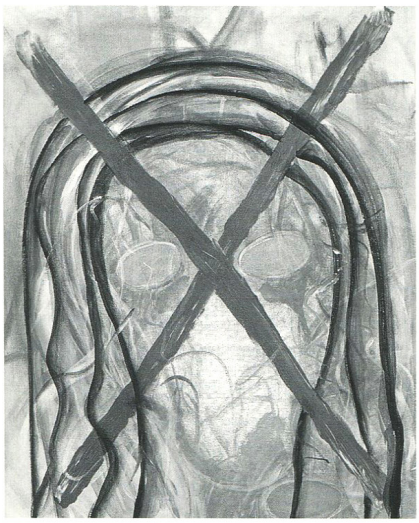
I could never have imagined how I first came across Jutta Koether. In 2002 Maschenmode (Galerie Guido W Baudach) showed the work of Helena Huneke in Berlin. One work consisted of a series of overlapping pieces of fabrics that, when drawn back, revealed the photograph of a woman. Looking more closely, I noticed a firm, penetrating gaze behind which appeared a certain vulnerability. It may be this vulnerable quality, fearlessly exposed in the photo of her, that makes Jutta Koether such a significant point of reference for the younger generation of artists. The fact that it is possible to take vulnerability seriously as a statement, without simply discrediting it as insecurity, is a very contemporary phenomenon. It is only today that fragility can be seen as an effective weapon, or at least as a defiant attitude, against the seemingly inviolable, perfect surfaces that dominate advertising, media, public life and art itself.

The perception of vulnerability as a quality only became possible once the 1980s fashion for 'wild painting' subsided. In 1985, when Jutta Koether had her first solo exhibition, the German art world was still dominated by fierce, intense and predominantly male artists. They each represented different trends: the intense, colourful outbursts by the Berlin Moritzplatz painters Salome, Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf and others; the absurd word-plays turned large, spontaneous paintings by Walter Dahn and Jiri George Dokupil; the less wild, rough and calculated statements of the Büttner/Kippenberger/Oehlen trio. In particular, the latter three painters tried to challenge the self-satisfied comfort zone that the welfare state of 70s and 80s had seemingly become. Their use of gritty, abandoned subject matter, anarchistic gestures and deliberate political incorrectness was always intended as a provocation. While their positions became untenable once the welfare state rapidly disintegrated into more outspoken forms of nationalism and sexism, the disturbing degree of understanding they received requires stronger opposition than the homeopathic remedies on offer today. For contemporary art, the response to their posturing does not have to be a retreat into interior concerns divorced from the outside world. Instead, it may be more important to shift the focus onto fundamental questions. For instance, what is the role of the subject today, especially an artistic subject, and which sensual or analytical organs might relate to artistic activities in general?

Such questions have been fundamental for Jutta Koether since the early 1980s. Although her painting comes out of the context of 80s 'bad painting', the urgency of her paintings is embedded in individuality and a

sense of its possibilities as well as the cultural context as a whole. These strategies were not always understood in the 1980s.

Koether began by writing about other people's work before pursuing her own production. Initially she wrote about music, only later adding visual art to her repertoire. Ultimately she developed a constantly shifting, cut-and-mix style moving between painting, language/poetry and her own music in a practice that still includes reflections on other people's work. Her contribution to the Frankfurt Kunstverein's recent group show 'deutschemalereizweitausenddrei' reveals the purpose of all these interweaving activities as a way for her to encompass the idea of the subject more broadly. One of the exhibited paintings, *Unvollendete Symphatie* (2002), functions like a prototype for the artist's complete oeuvre. The title alone signals both the characteristic interweaving of artistic media and the self as always related to something or someone else. The title is a translated reference to the 1991 song 'Unfinished Sympathy' from the first Massive Attack album. This source opens up the contextual framework of the painting to music, and to a specific song that speaks about a future in the process of becoming: 'You're the book that I have opened, and now I got to know much more.' Linguistically, the words are a modification of the term 'unfinished symphony', related to romanticism's critique of rationalism, as seen in, for instance, Franz Schubert's 'Unvollendete' from 1822. It stands for an artistic position that favours the fragmentary, incomplete and direct recording of an immediate intuition above a definitive conclusion.



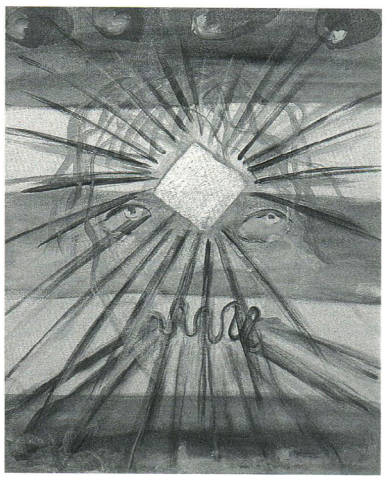
Living Desire, acrylic on canvas, 61cm x 51cm, 2000

This 'unfinished sympathy' hints at a process that is not yet complete, and indeed the creatures depicted on Koether's canvas do look quite unfinished, though perhaps not quite so sympathetic. On the white ground of the canvas we see a row of slightly squashed heads that have become 'something' because of the circular brush movements in red and blue. The background is made up of face-like shapes that are even less resolved. The balloon-shaped heads are reminiscent of the formulaic images of the symbolist artist Odilon Redon, where they sometimes refer to situations bordering on psychosis (see, for instance, the drawing *Der Wahnsinn*, 1883). The similar balloon- or bubble-heads in Koether's work come across as stupid, larva-like beings. They stare at the spectator from their tiny, aged eye sockets, the rings around them emphasising their emptiness. Here,

Self-Alienated Spirit, acrylic on canvas,
51cm x 41cm, 2000

existence appears as unconscious sleep with open eyes. The figures are without substance – not grounded on anything and unrelated to any space. Their jelly-like existence is presented in its infantile senescence and seems to signify the norm in civilised society. This image poses a question: how can the ego gain substance and escape from its impotent lethargy?

The question if and how the individual can develop substance also appeared in a different shape in Jutta Koether's exhibition 'Zur grünen Schenke – fünf Uhr nachmittags' in the Galerie Grand Funk Freund, Vienna, in 2000. This time the title was taken from a poem by Arthur Rimbaud, where a tired rambler enjoys the simple pleasure of a drink at a welcoming inn. In this exhibition, a row of thirteen imaginary portraits were hung in a zigzag along a wall. Alluding to the self portrait and taking the face as a starting point, Koether systematically explores her subject. The consistent reference is to the mental state of hysteria and the instability of the subject. In the paintings, explosive rays shoot out, often covering the face itself and displacing its function as the traditional location of human character and soul. Similarly, the blank, stereotyped countenance, whose very existence is questioned by a large, green, cross shape, refers to related themes of surplus, being outside of oneself and the complete extinction of the self. This threat of complete emptiness also relates to art itself. Representation, especially painting, seems to only make sense here if it reflects and plays with its own impossibility.



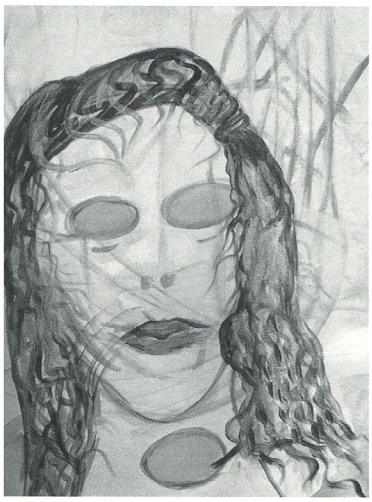
The One is Not, acrylic on canvas,
51cm x 41cm, 2002

Jutta Koether's technique could be seen to relate remotely to Sigmar Polke's. With her conscious, self-ridiculing clumsiness, her paintings contain something of Polke's distanced laconic gesture, which sets his work apart both from grand painterly authenticity and the self justification of personal expression. Her attempt to use painting to question both the artistic self and the medium itself also engages with the work of Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen. Kippenberger is invoked through his own, supposed self portraits and his obsession with the dialectical role of the artist. He was an absurd but serious poseur, involved in a process of bringing sense to the world through grotesque gestures of self-empowerment while still trying to maintain some dignity. Less related to the artistic individual than to the formal painting process, Albert Oehlen addresses the question of how to use negation in painting, constructing an unstable stack of different handwritten characteristics to achieve cathartic collapse and consequently a fresh, untouched beauty. Less drastic than

Kippenberger and using less brute force than Albert Oehlen, Koether is nevertheless involved in negotiating both overload (for instance, in paintings that seem to consist of a tangle of lines) and reduction as a dialectic model for questioning art.

Koether's 2002 exhibition 'Extremes Europa' at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne touched on the subject of artistic self-reassurance in a deliberately modest way. She demonstrated the basic artistic activity of manipulating colour and form. Using coloured pencils and a ready-made template, Koether created a new composition every day. The 512 drawings made on 512 days were shown stacked in a box while each drawing was individually filmed. The 68-minute sequence of images transforms the drawings through the introduction of a new medium and creates a distance to the handicraft inherent in the exercise. Art is therefore discussed as a mechanical, almost naive process, divorced from 'professional expertise' or its traditional aura of mystery; furthermore it is fabricated in a medium we are more familiar seeing in the hands of children. This distinguishes Koether's drawings from similar colour-form templates familiar from the European artists such as Gerhard Richter. The sheer size of his paintings, the perfection of his colour fields and the concise clarity of his artistic decisions are contrasted in Koether's drawings where the lines are irregular and imprecise, and the grid often coloured in with apparent carelessness.

Jutta Koether consciously exposes her own vulnerability. She cultivates a considered insecurity that breaches the norms of artistic practice in order to question its powerfully staged authority. She uses such insecurity strategically and puts it together with a claim to fragility as a way to answer the stubborn pair of questions 'am I here?' and 'is the picture there?' Jutta Koether's message infringes on the borders of disciplines in order to destabilise firmly established systems. The infringement does not only appear within a specific medium like painting or drawing but in the interpenetration of her many artistic productions. In her work, a series of paintings or drawings can become the basis for slide shows, films or performances. Everything potentially seems to connect to everything else and one can no longer be certain if the individual elements and distinctions still matter. Ultimately, this romantic, even bohemian incantation of unity creates a surprising and unlikely sincerity.



I Loved You Once, acrylic on canvas,
51cm x 41cm, 2000

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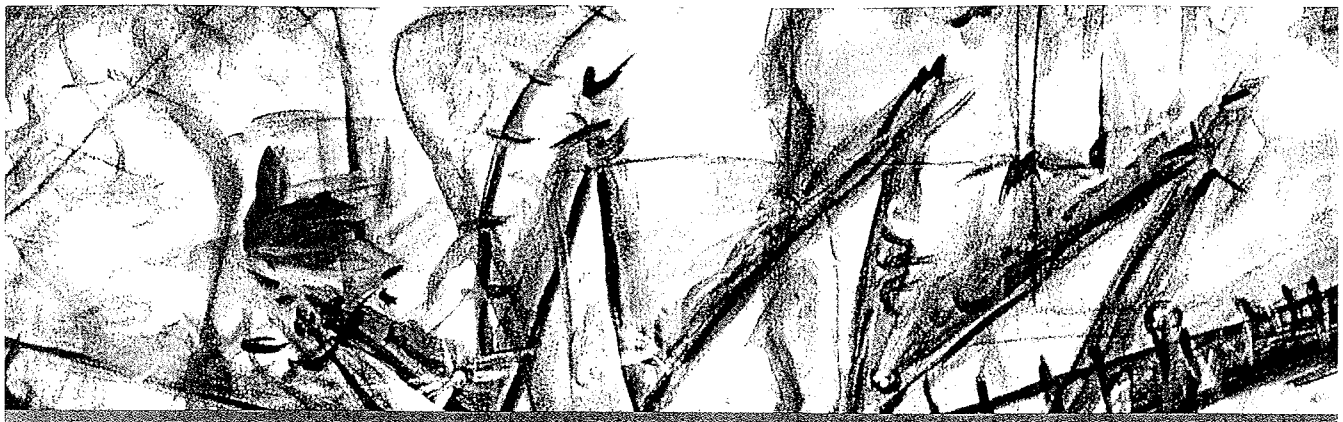
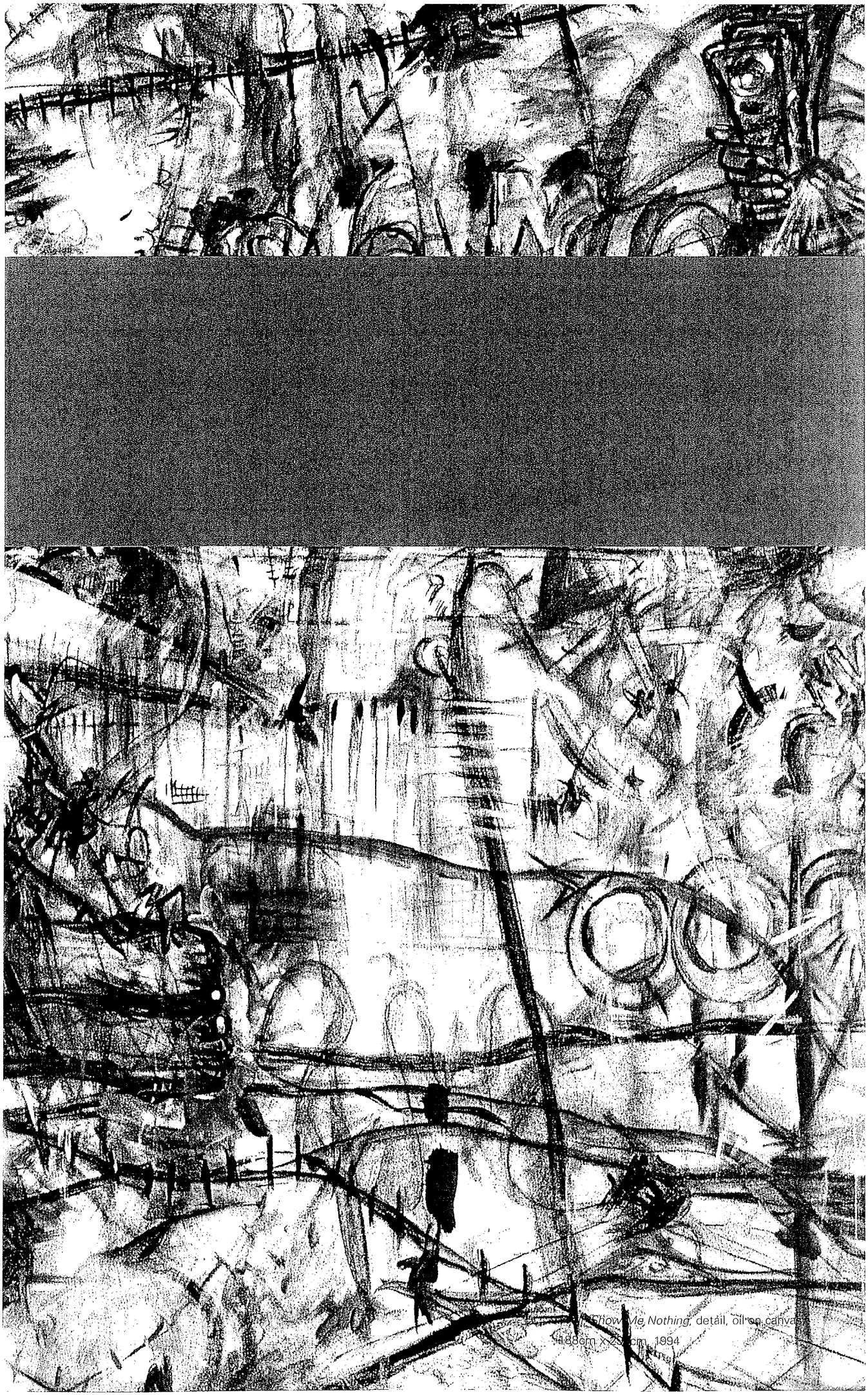


JUTTA KOETHER



Show Me Nothing, detail, oil on canvas
418cm x 253cm, 1994

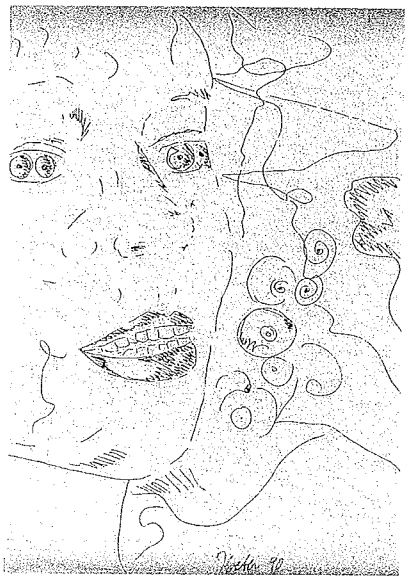
JUTTA KOETHER

Bob Nickas

How To Write About ... Jutta Koether

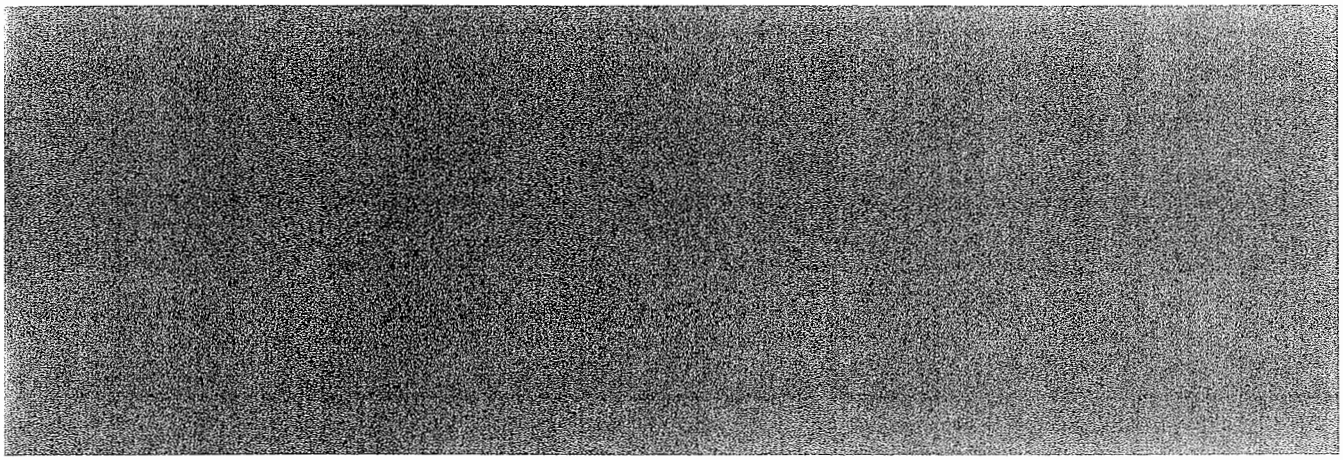
1. Choose the time of day and prepare the room accordingly. Place the desk by the window to catch the soft morning light. Set out a cup of green tea and a ruled notebook. Writing longhand is advised. Select a rolling-ball pen and watch the words glide across the page. That's the pen, in your very own hand. Or write while sitting on a park bench to screams of delight from kids as they swing back and forth. Writing as a playground? Painting as a playground? 'Higher, higher!' They demand to be pushed higher. Or write on the subway, rocked by the low rushing rumble and drone. New York City writing. 'Stand clear of the closing doors...'

2. Take an approach. The straight, critical appreciation to join the others? Add another respectable line to the bibliography. Or post-post-feminist theory – female first, painter second? For this the Americans are entirely to blame. Separating the men from the boys. All those barroom brawls, crashing cars. And what do you get for turning your back on painting from life? Pollock never painted another tree until he painted one with his own blood (an artist not known for red, or blue for that matter). It was Arthur Danto who once said that, at their very best, a room full of Morris Louis paintings was like drifting through the lingerie department at Bendel's. How utterly feminine! And yet painting remains on so many levels within the realm of men; a realm understood in the old-world sense. The painting kingdom is a realm of men, still to this day, and even effeminate men. (Or is it all *Art Brut*?) For Koether's exhibition at Galerie Sophia Ungers in Cologne in 1991, an accordion foldout with colour reproductions was published. The title, *100% Malerei*, held the top of the cover while below was the phrase, '*NIEMAND IST EINE FRAU*'. Translation: '100% Painting. NOBODY IS A WOMAN'.



Punishment leaves, ink on yellow paper, 29cm x 20cm, 1990

3. Personal recollection can be helpful, though not always reliable. My first encounter with Jutta Koether was in the park near my house in the fall of 1992. Neither of us can fix the date with any certainty, but I still remember, more than ten years later, all the pictures she showed me. Vividly. This may have something to do with the vividness and intensity of the paintings themselves, even seen in snapshot or slide form. Bright-red paintings, blood red, vibrant, alive, aglow. Having



Morning air, paint on vellum, 22cm x 29cm, 1994–95

become well known for a show I had organised in which every work in the gallery was red, I had for years been contacted by artists who had made red paintings they thought I couldn't wait to see. Koether's red paintings are the only ones I was happy to discover and can now recall. She made red paintings for years, most concentrated in the late 80s and early 90s.

John Miller has linked Koether's red paintings to the work of Louise Bourgeois and, more closely, to Yayoi Kusama, for whom a 'proliferation of forms, production and reproduction (which, in biological terms, remains of course unique to women) overwhelms the identity of the producer. These accumulations negate identity the same way in Koether's paintings. Ironically, this negation opposes the identity ordinarily achieved through process – expressionism.'[1] Koether's 'body-operating' is related to Kusama's in other ways, to her presence in public forums, the lecture-performances, and to the live-music situations that are part and parcel of her willingness to collaborate with other artists – most recently with Steven Parrino appearing as Electrophilia, previously with Rita Ackermann and Kim Gordon, and in duets with the guitarists Thurston Moore and Tom Verlaine. The interaction of art and music is an integral part of Koether's strategy, and she herself has commented on the 'transfers of musical methods to painting and vice versa: improvisation in the drawing books and in the "sun/ny" show; techno in the *Antibodies* series; free jazz in "Songs of New York & c."; rock in the series of red paintings.'[2]

4. Choose some music to write by. Sun Ra's *Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy*. Truly the music of the spheres, performed by the Sun King and his Myth-Science Arkestra. In his own words: 'Art is the foundation of any living culture ... A nation without art is a nation without a lifeline. Art is the lifeline because art is the airy concept of greater living. It is the airy foundation of the airy kingdom of the future. Tomorrow Beyond Tomorrow is the greater kingdom. THE KINGDOM OF THE SPACE AGE.'[3] Painting as a way of reaching and describing other worlds, this one as well? Koether's *Sun Paintings* present us with an image from life best regarded with a squint of the eye. Even wearing shades, it is possible to stare too long. And so she

1 John Miller, 'Jutta Koether', *Texte Zur Kunst*, no.29, March 1998, p.121–123.

2 In an email dated 02/23/03.

3 Sun Ra, 'The Space Age Cannot be Avoided', liner notes for the album *SUPER-SONIC JAZZ*, recorded in 1956 and released on the El Saturn label; reprinted for the CD reissue *Evidence*, 1991.

Well, Show Me Nothing, oil on canvas, 188cm x 290cm, 1994

also paints a midnight sun, a black sun, the sun eclipsed, sunspots ... these, of course, relate to intense magnetic fields. Another Sun Ra title comes to mind: *Portrait of the Living Sky*.

Now choose another record. *Snuffbox Immanence* by Ghost, recorded in the Ghost House just outside Tokyo. This is 'heavy chamber folk' and organic psychedelics; layers of marimba, vibes, cello, a celtic harp, harpsichord, tubular bells; a version of the Rolling Stones's 'Live With Me'. Masaki Batoh sings: 'I've got nasty habits ... I take tea at three'. He doesn't mean green tea, and for me it's 3AM ... perpetually.

5. You can always try and write it as if the artist herself had painted it. Only trouble with the artist in question is that Koether's painting is always, in a sense, a form of writing itself. Fragments of songs, poems, coded messages, voices heard ...

6. Imagine that Walter Benjamin, in the middle of a lecture on William Blake, is heckled by William Burroughs. Or that Karl Lagerfeld and Karl Marx are in a heated argument over Lagerfeld's intention to base an entire line of sleeveless silk tops on paintings by Arthur Dove. Burroughs came by and offered to blow Lagerfeld's head clean off. Through delicate negotiation it was agreed that only a very limited line of silk scarves would be offered for sale in boutiques in Paris and Berlin. Calm prevailed. Anyway, as Bill later noticed, the gun wasn't actually loaded. Still, he was surprised at how easily two intelligent men could go off the deep end like that. Voices and fists had been raised.

Neil Young, acrylic on canvas, 50.8cm x 40.5cm, 2002

The series of paintings titled *Male Hysterics* began with an abstract portrait in 2001 and unfolded in the following year with figures both recognisable and utterly transformed – two versions of the young Fassbinder and a nightmarish Neil Young most prominently. Portraiture is often quite easily (and lazily) read as 'psychologically charged', but Koether's provocation, referring to men as hysterics, is rendered complex by her handling of each subject. She trades off a sort of magic-realism in one and a pop-inflected lightness in another; an agitated primitivism played against radiant symbolism. And yet this series, which has yet to be shown, is entirely within Koether's own identifiable 'style'.

Music I, book of drawings, mixed media, 29.7cm x 21cm, 1993

7. Look to her titles for clues. *Well, Show Me Nothing* (oil on canvas, 1994) is a riotous landscape/map, 74 by 114 inches (188 x 290cm), packed with pure, delirious energy. The brain/eye can barely decide where to look first and where to dart next. Imagine being five and wanting to go on every ride at the carnival at the same time. Tilt-a-whirl, roller coaster, ferris wheel – this painting seems to show everything, and all at once. And yet when you go back for another look there's always something you hadn't noticed before. Shouldn't art do that, or is this asking too much? Koether's is an art for those who actively look and who read, who spend time inside the painting. Perhaps this accounts for her quote/unquote 'marginal status'? Could this title be spoken by the painting to the viewer? The artist comes to the rescue and identifies the quote. In response to a fan who had been hesitant to show him her hometown – insisting that 'it's nothing' – Elvis Presley said, 'Well, show me nothing'.[4]

I Choose Everything (acrylic on linen, 1997) is a soft and fuzzy grid of near-pastel heads. What it represents, however, may have less to do with its imagery than with its statement of fact. Koether is someone who, faced with a choice, will take all. It's all for the taking. But make no mistake; this is an artist whose sense of freedom and openness is tempered with discipline, internal rules, deliberation. In December 2000, for example, she embarked on a project to create a drawing each day for an entire year. The resulting 'calendar/diary', in the form of hundreds of gridded sheets filled in with coloured pencil, is a portrait of time and emotion, shifts of mood both personal and collective. Koether's project ultimately went beyond the one-year mark and was recorded on a 68-minute DVD, *December 10th, 2000–May 6th, 2002*. She describes it as 'modelled after a Straub/Huilliet educational film on Cezanne'.[5] The original drawings were shown spread out on the floor of her small apartment, and Koether invited friends, acquaintances and any interested parties, as she often does. Koether is very often without a studio, working at home, asking people over.

In New York in Spring 1992, Koether rented two little rooms in a spooky old townhouse on West 9th Street in Greenwich Village. There she worked on a large unstretched canvas that could only be viewed as it had been painted – on the floor. A painting carpet. It took up almost the entire room, one had to stand in the doorway for the view. People were invited, preferably by appointment and one at a time, although there were inevitable couples and others who came by unannounced. There was a tiny closet in the corner in which Koether had set up a writing and drawing desk. This was a sort of cabinet for the curious and visitors were encouraged to have a look. She kept a detailed notebook over a period of seven weeks, using a small portable typewriter to record her activities and her interactions with 'art world' visitors, heavy on the artist front and, not surprisingly, rather spare on the collector/dealer side. The book that was later published, *J.K. The Inside Job*, contains all her notes, letters and related material, including the original announcement. Its cryptic/comic tag line, 'Enjoyment as a Political Factor', would be revealed in a grainy, full-page xerox: the cover of 'Uncorrected page proofs' for Slavoj Zizek's book, *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. In the pages that follow, Koether's hand increasingly amends the typescript, making corrections, additions and deletions. The book comes to represent her own proofs as evidence of a community engagement; this was, after all, part of a larger project to which she had been invited: 'The Real Thing'. As she later wrote, 'I will be seeing you and you will be seeing me, that is the making of a local fabric...'. The book is as intimate and revealing a portrait of the New York scene as has ever been captured. Add to Koether's repertoire the *roman à clef*, but with none of the names changed.

4 In a xerox flier that Koether produced for her show at Pat Hearn Gallery in New York in 1995.

5 In an email dated 02/26/03.

8. Admit defeat. Some artists are harder to write about than others. For someone like Koether, who avoids easy categorisation, who moves freely within her own practise and takes on different positions – painter, writer, critic, musician, lady dandy – and whose work is presented in many venues, not all of them perfect shop windows with the word 'gallery' etched in glass, the text is not already written. Imagine an artist as either free, on parole or in prison. To write about the work of Peter Halley, for example, is merely to retrieve and download something already put into words, often by the artist himself. Ventriloquism. If for years and years now every successive painting of Halley's can be read as the slightest variation on one already owned by so many unknowing collectors, so too can every text. When writing about the work of Koether, forget about guarding any accepted critical reading, even your own.

9. Your worst moment with an artist's work can often yield something of value. In 1993, for a show in Vienna called 'Live In Your Head', I hung a painting by Koether, *Völlig* (oil on canvas, 1991), on a wall adjacent to a fluorescent 'cell and conduit' painting by Peter Halley. *Völlig* is entirely red and green, a lush jungle in which two figures are immersed, one seemingly astride the other. It is unclear whether we are witnessing a sexual or a violent encounter; the figures occupy a vertiginous space. In this particular instance – being shown in the city of Vienna and having been painted by a woman – the image could easily be interpreted as nearly 'hysterical'.[6] Next to the seemingly rational, reasoned and cool geometry of the Halley, it took on an even stranger, stronger presence. Two paintings that normally would not be hung side by side (whatever normal means in a gallery installation) each maintained their own particular identity. Thaddaeus Ropac, whose gallery represents Halley, was livid. The usually demure and diplomatic Ropac, a man who is loath to drop his mask of regal poise, was quite simply outraged by the pairing of the paintings and laced into me in the middle of the opening. Do you know what it's like to be reprimanded in your own show? The lesson learned, or at least a reminder of something already known: that sometimes you have to 'do the wrong thing'. This, not surprisingly, is an approach Koether herself has taken from time to time.

Young RW Fassbinder, acrylic on canvas, 50.8cm x 40.5cm, 2002

10. For 'I Love New York', a large group show in 1998 at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, Koether's hometown, she collaborated on paintings with Rita Ackermann and Kim Gordon, for a project they titled *freetime*. All of the works were painted without brushes, using hands and feet to ensure a more equal authorship, to delimit the hand of the artist and a recognisable signature-style contribution. One of the paintings, *free face* (oil on canvas, 1998), is of a giant green head with closed blue eyelids. The head sits upside down on the canvas, an obvious reference to Georg Baselitz who has painted upside down since the late 60s. The painting was, of course, a mini-scandal, savaged in the press and unappreciated by German critics and curators. 'Well, show me nothing.'

11. Sometimes, though not often, it can help to read a review of an artist who is not easy to write about, if only as a way of seeing how much trouble someone else got into. Then again, you can always pick up some clever phrasing, wait a few years until the art critic statute of limitations has gone by, and appropriate it as your own. Here then is the *New York Times* blurb for Koether's last show at Pat Hearn Gallery, 'sun/ny', as written by Ken Johnson, and dated Friday, May 29 1999:

> *. Ms Koether, a German painter who lives in New York, works between abstraction and image-making with a messy insouciance that calls to mind Sigmar Polke. Her big*

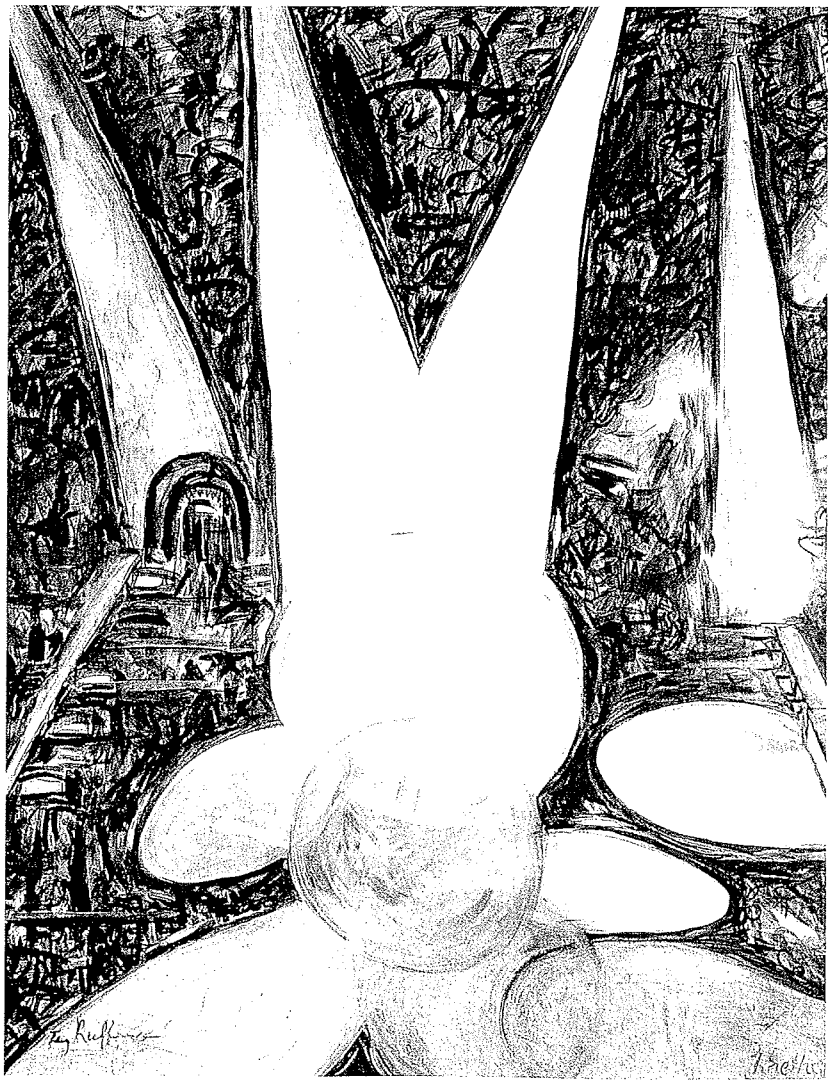
6 According to Koether, *Völlig*, which can be translated as 'entire', 'complete' or 'dead', is 'a kind of self-portrait modelled after a drawing by Klossowski, an image of a female narcissus gone awry ... you can't really tell whether it is a mirror image of the person, or if it just popped out of the woman's womb, or if it is a chopped off head . . the whole thing is quite a balancing act . . also of big strokes, bright colour effects and tiny ornaments . . me coming out of Gustave Moreau studies . . as well as Klossowski . . Klossowski and Axel Rose were my favourite "hysteric men" of 1990 . '

expressionistic essays on raw, unstretched canvas, some smudgy grey, others festively garish, are supposed to be about the sun and other visionary themes. Full of distracted incohate gestural energy, they're too impatient to achieve a satisfying resolution.

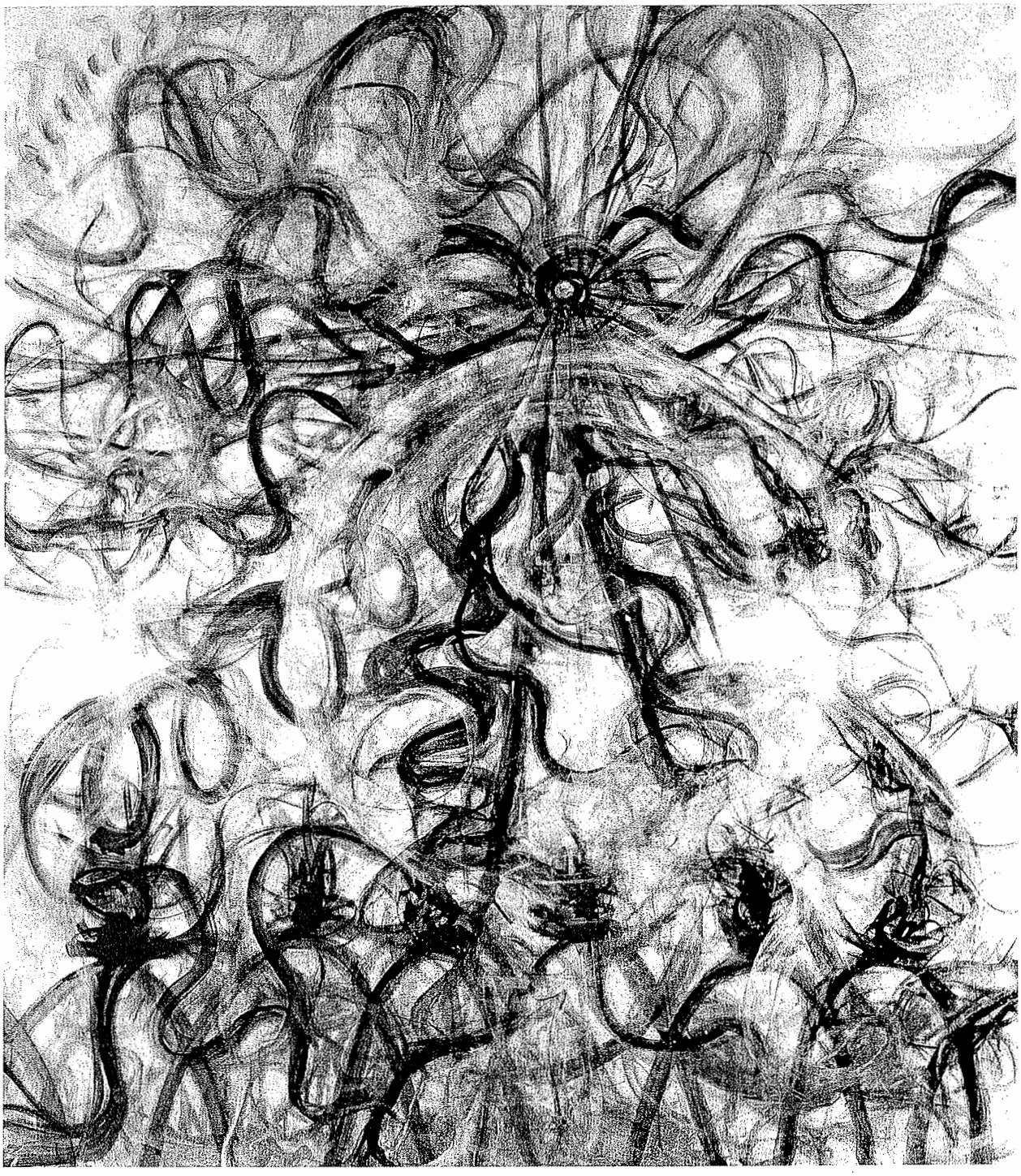
'A messy insouciance.' (Insouciant: blithely unconcerned, nonchalant. From the French *in*: not, and *soucier*: to trouble; from the Latin, *sollicitaire*: to vex.) 'Distracted incohate gestural energy.' (Incohate … well, maybe look it up for yourself.) But in art, you may be wondering, what's so satisfying about resolution?

12. If you're lucky, the artist herself will show you the way out. In an email from a few days ago, Koether wrote the following:

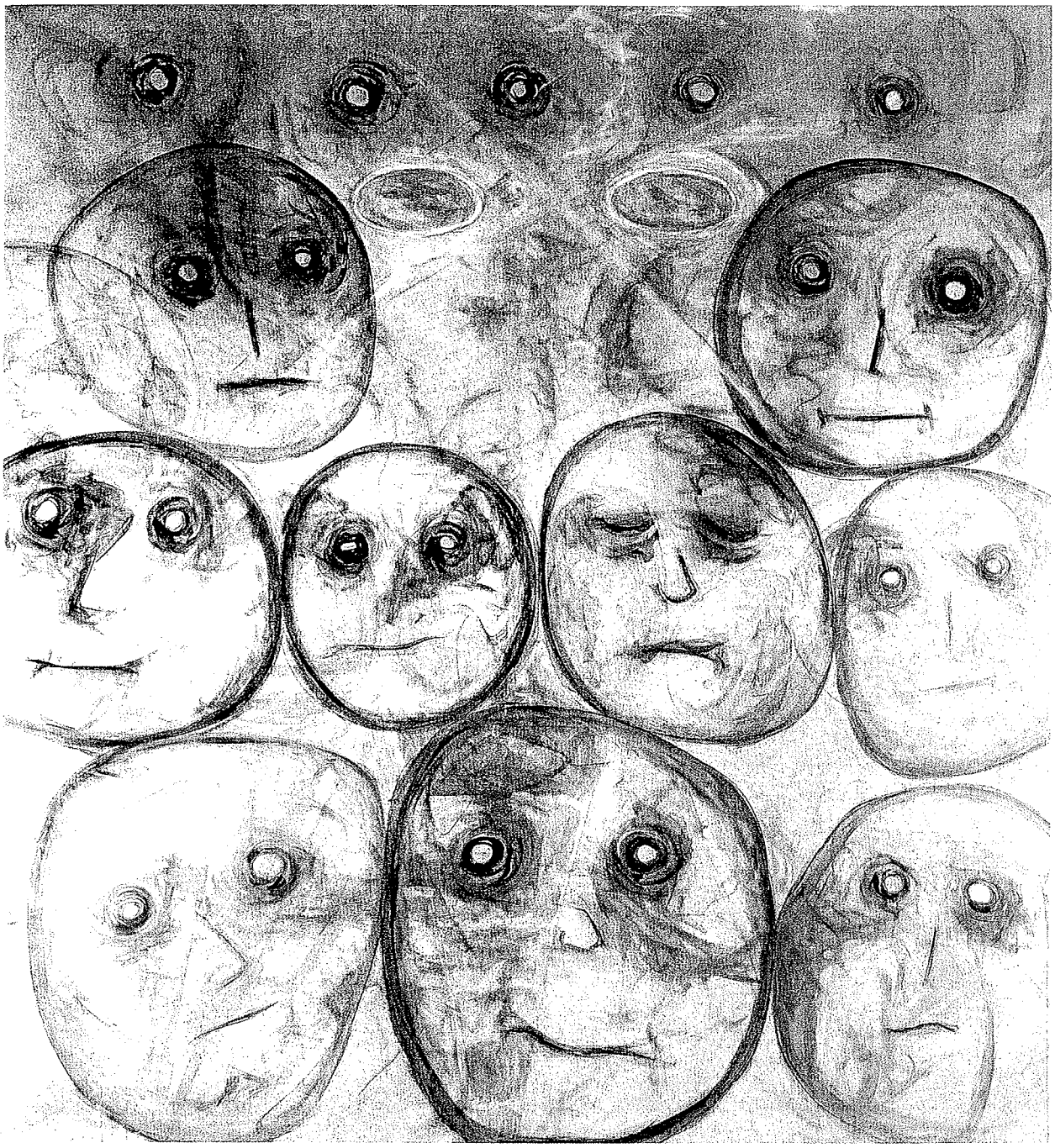
Yesterday I went to see the Agnes Martin show at Pace before its closing and it was so very beautiful and reminded me of the hidden blueprint of my art … as a teenager I went to Amsterdam and saw a show with her work and it was an extreme eye-opener and my real introduction to abstract painting (vis-a-vis Pollock's) … all wired, I made the following name-line in my notebook: Agnes Martin Martin Kippenberger … two opposites melting together, both very much related to the ways I feel and think about painting …



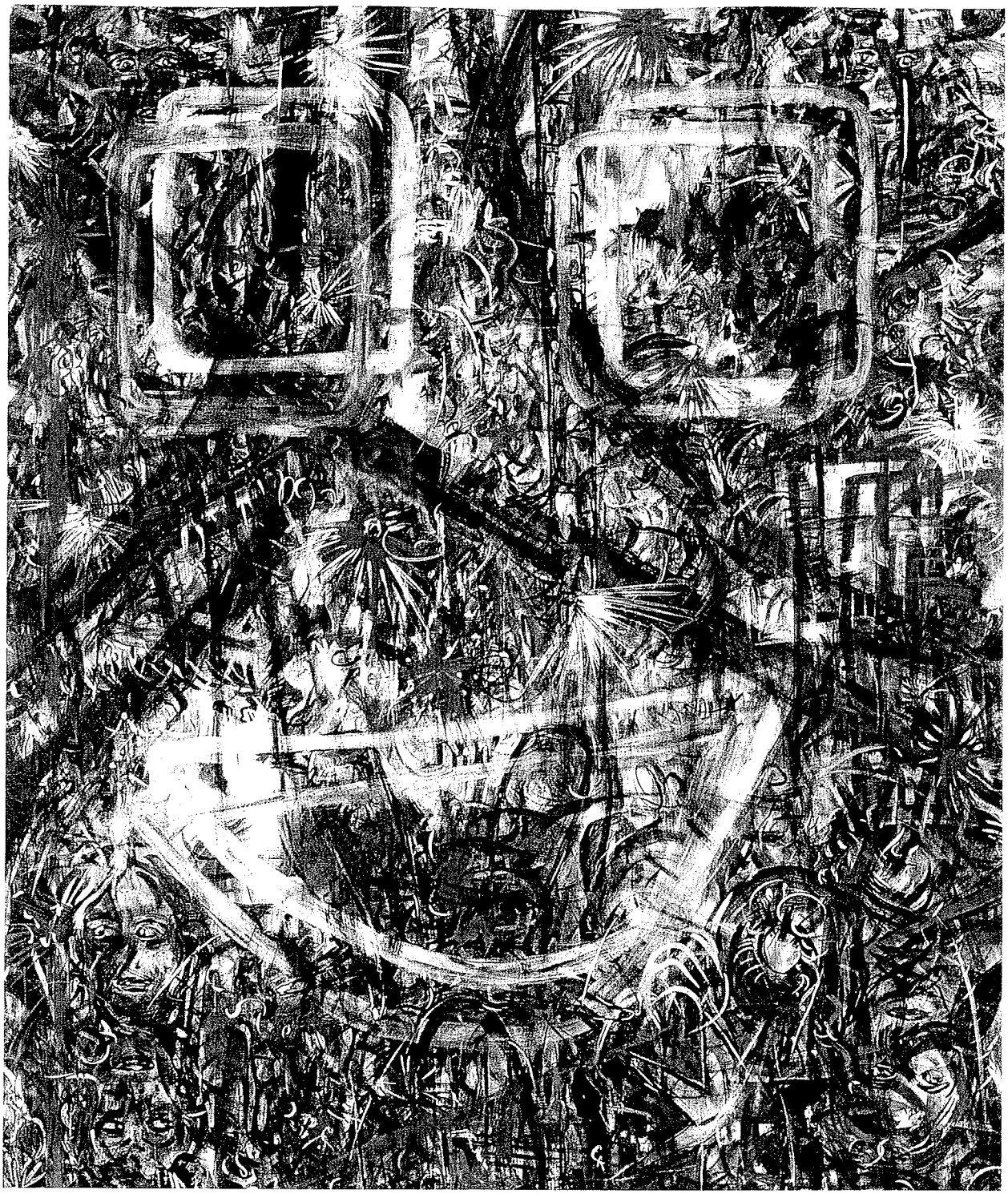
Dance at Madison Square Garden I,
oil on canvas, 213cm x 162.5cm, 1995



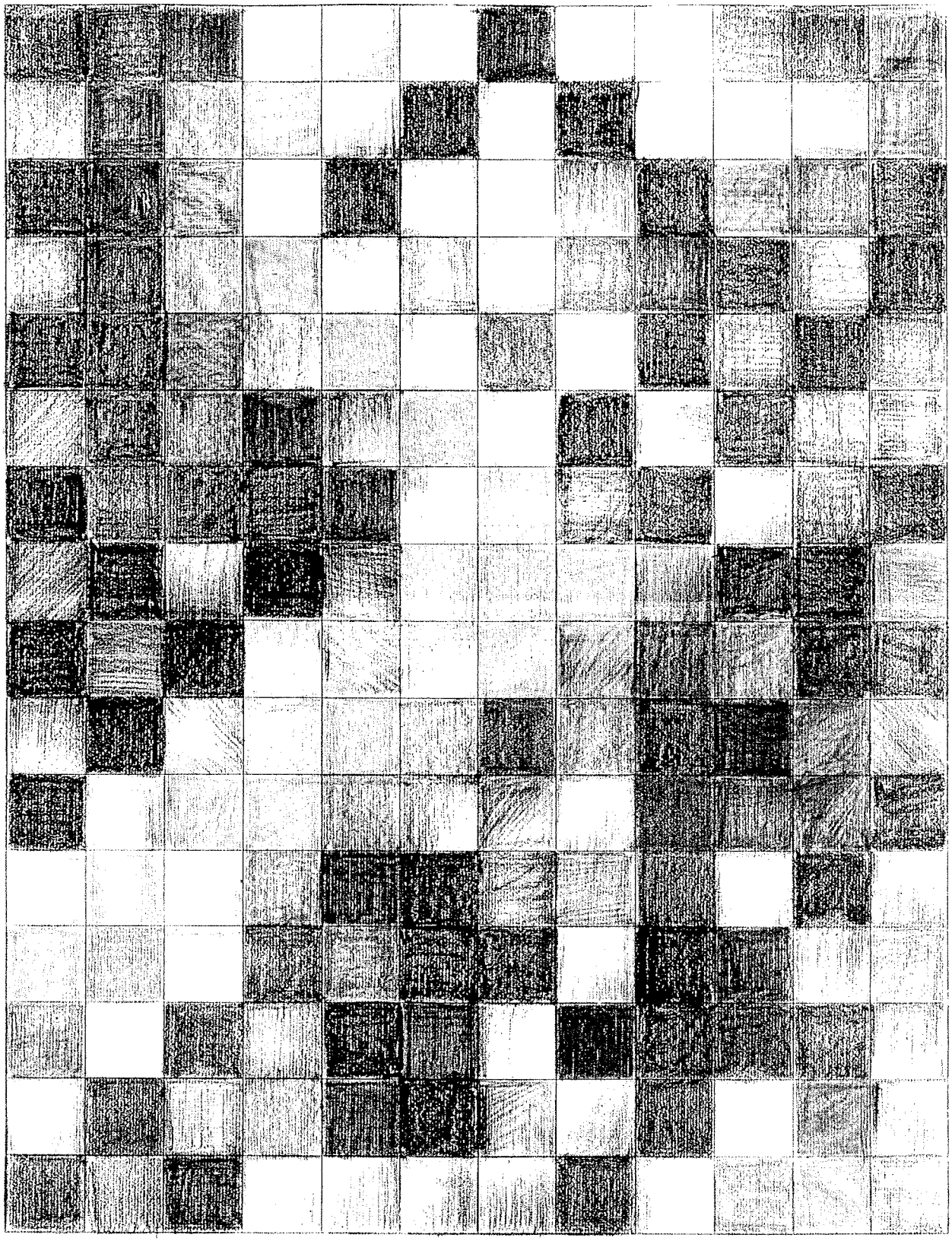
Shirley (Gewirr), oil on canvas,
230cm x 200cm, 2002



Unvollendete Sympathie, acrylic on canvas,
220cm x 200cm, 2002



Antibody V (semi-popular painting), oil on canvas, 241cm x 188cm, 1993



10. Dezember 2000–6. Mai 2002, detail,
520 coloured pencil drawings in a box,
each 44.5cm x 33.5cm, 2002

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Buchloh, Benjamin: "A Conversation with Jutta Koether", in: October, Summer 2016, pp. 15-33

A Conversation with Jutta Koether

Benjamin Buchloh: I've seen you enact your work in public a few times, in performances at Harvard (April 2013) and in Berlin (November 2010), and the events have led me to wonder how you link painting and performance. The public performance of the act of painting had previously acquired importance only in the misguided European reception of the work of Jackson Pollock, as in the spectacularization of painting by Georges Mathieu or Yves Klein. Prior to that, painting had been blissfully protected: The very genre of easel painting, and the act of its making, had protected it from being dislodged from its place in the studio, from the canvas support, and from its surfaces.[1] And I think it was only under the impact of spectacularization, which shifts painting into an ostentatious visibility and bodily activity, that it suddenly approached the category of performativity. I see your work as posing some of these questions.

Jutta Koether: I think you're right to see it in those terms, although I would say my endeavor is not entirely that. When you do something that's both performance and painting, your undertaking cannot be an entirely critical one. Because the way you involve yourself—after all, it is a bodily experience—will always throw into doubt the dimension of criticality in and of art itself. Walking that line, so to speak, has led me into a somewhat problematic terrain; but only in that problematic terrain is it even possible to deal with the historical baggage and trajectories that painting and performance share. When I started to get involved with art-making, my primary focus was painting. I tried to find operations to pull painting into a problematized terrain where it could perform a change on its own terms, where it could develop into something that was not merely rehashed or pastiched but actively dealt with its own fucked-up history, its pleasures and pains, and formulating my own *Meditation on the Passion*.

Buchloh: That seems for me to be precisely one of the provocations of your work: When artists in the late 1960s—for example, Bruce Nauman or Vito Acconci—made a shift from sculpture to performance, they moved as far

1. For a characteristically excellent discussion of Koether's painting, among other topics, see David Joselit's "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 125–34.

OCTOBER 157, Summer 2016, pp. 15–33.

away from the tradition of the medium as possible. Nauman began with very complex sculptures, but once he got into the performativity of the process of making and viewing, sculpture for him was no longer an issue. And in a way, Acconci was even more radical in his departure from traditional genres and traditional mediums—of writing, for example; after all, he started out as a poet. And very rarely, as in Nauman's series *Art Make-Up* (1967), do they even start with painting. . . . Instead, they might deal with things that are part objects or transitional objects. Whereas, thirty years later, paradoxically, you maintain or reconstruct a bond to painting, the traditional genre that is the obverse of performance. Why do you try to resuscitate painting with those means when others are available? Why not accept painting's obsolescence or historical conclusion?

Koether: Again, the answer cannot be one-layered, because it has expanded or has been altered over time throughout my artistic practice. When I realized that making art was what I wanted to do, I discovered that everybody started through performance—that of a self becoming whatever. When I started to study in Cologne in early 1977, painting was, for many different reasons, inaccessible. I was part of a philosophically oriented seminar with a pedagogue named Peter Rech who had studied with Joseph Beuys and then had gone to Paris and studied with Jacques Lacan. I had to deal with the artists you mentioned and other performance practices, especially in the feminist arena. The experience was an eye-opener, and it helped me to see beyond the teaching itself, to see the horizon of painting precisely because of the detour.

Buchloh: Thus the teaching of Beuys was crucial, and Beuys was more important than Nauman?

Koether: Absolutely. And for a while I completely clung to the Beuys model. At the time it "saved" me.

Buchloh: I have often wondered whether one of the problems with the reception of performance art in Germany—even if they were explicitly feminist practices, like that of Ulrike Rosenbach, for example—was that it completely misunderstood what American artists were doing. There was something deeply troubling about the reception because it did not reflect at all on where the practice came from. It was just an adaptation of something that had nothing to do with the experience of that particular history.

Koether: I've always been interested in the potentials of misunderstandings. Sure, as a young artist I looked at Rosenbach's work, as well as at the feminist bookshop and its School for Creative Feminism and related activities in Cologne at that moment, but they were really not an option for me generationally. Only a few years separated us, but it was a significant difference, so I had to leave all that behind to find my coordinates as an artist on my own. I totally "abandoned" the German cultural sphere and developed a kind of structural sense of disobedience for avoiding the ruts of the patriarchal models still dominant in schools, in the art world, even in activism. Or at least I considered them as

not enough, as already stifled. . . . I kept asking, Why must feminist art practice perform "otherness" in an "other" medium? Why not in painting? Painting stayed on my mind and eventually led me to the US, where I turned toward other interests and other models, shifting from Beuys to Warhol in the very late 1970s, early '80s. At some point in the '80s, with the arrival of my first red paintings, I realized, *My mind is painted* (this process can be traced in my books *20 minutes* and *f*, republished with Sternberg Press in 2015). All this happened before I left for New York.

Buchloh: When did you go to the United States for the first time?

Koether: In 1987, much later than most of my peers, because I was not interested in *being* there. That is, it wasn't about having that experience. I kept a distance from my own desire to "escape," or to do adventure trips, but I also developed a practice of strategic distancing toward the ground where I came from. In order also to learn how to position and reposition myself in unexpected terrain and in unexpected ways. I was in this weird other mental place and was trying to find new coordinates.

Buchloh: But at the same time, I could ask the question: Why not from Beuys to Richter or Polke? If you were so deeply devoted to painting, wouldn't that have been a much more obvious choice than Warhol?

Koether: Well, despite their highly intelligent and influential critical strategies, Richter and Polke still represented the continuation of an old order and therefore had no attraction for the subject formation of a female painter. But also because while I was still at university, I thought about doing a Ph.D. The subject I had in mind was Antonin Artaud, and I got really interested in his work and then also in the work of Wols and Fautrier. And all the French, existentialist-oriented modes of painting. Self-tortures indeed! Fragmented creatures who chose painting to perform their existence with/on. My thinking was rerouted through that.

Buchloh: How can one make the jump from Artaud to Warhol?

Koether: I think it has something to do with the urge to open up worlds . . . and a certain playfulness. I skipped Richter because he didn't have, for me, the humor, nor the anger, nor the madness. Ultimately, I did get interested in Polke. But what was most important in all my choices is that the models I preferred to look at shared the idea that a painting *is* the world for an artist. I was looking for a way to reconfigure the terms of understanding how to participate in that while being interested in all the motions of the mind that feed into that world-building. And Polke had attempted quite a bit of exploring in that field.

Buchloh: There was not much room for feminist thinking in his attitude.

Koether: That's what I mean. Not only in his attitude but also the whole entourage. . . . Later I encountered similar things with Kippenberger, but then I could take it or counteract it or deal with it much better because it was somehow more porous. The humor is not as biting and humiliating. Also, by

that time I had a position that was not solely rooted in art but that was rooted in my activity at *Spex,* which made it more difficult for me to enter the art world, but on the other hand I was not being judged, being pushed around, in any way. I could always return to that other place and say "fuck you" to those in the art scene.

Buchloh: So one of the many challenges you faced at that time was finding a way to avoid direct confrontation with the art world, which led you to identify with the newly emerging sphere of New Wave and punk culture?

Koether: Yes. I was already involved in that scene before I began as an artist. In 1977, when it all started in England, I went there all the time to see the shows. My friends and I did translations, published zines, and distributed little proto-punk collages, DIY style. We were learning to stretch and flex and imagine, to wander and improvise, to become an artist outside the academic system. Then I imported that experience to painting, literally to the canvas.

Buchloh: Which, of course, is simultaneously slightly tragic and comical because it is yet another version of a cultural importation, isn't it? It is one of the conflicts that different German generations had to contend with again and again. So you go from Joseph Beuys to the Sex Pistols. To solve a problem that cannot be solved that way.

Koether: True. But there is a little bit of progress, if we can talk about progress in this at all. First of all, because punk rock almost instantaneously became a German thing (or at least a version of that occurred in Neue Deutsche Welle). It was Germans' first encounter with the onset of global culture. But it also introduced something ludic . . . and opened up space to format something like Poussin's "Arcadian ways," a certain lightness of the mind. And there was an American aspect that tied it back to the Warholian sphere. The other element that was critical for my formation was the anarchist motto of punk culture: Do it yourself. Whatever it is that you do, you are in charge, you are a member of a community—and equally. Men, women—they all looked the same for a certain moment. I don't want to idealize, but at the emergence of punk, men and women were equally active.

Buchloh: The Sex Pistols were not exactly very feminist.

Koether: No, but there were the X-Ray Spex, the Slits, Julie Burchill. . . . There were all kinds of (feminist) models who intelligently embraced contradictions, malfunctions, past and future ideas of empowerment, of freedom.

Buchloh: Even the Velvet Underground was a manifestly mixed group.

Koether: Yes, that's what I mean. Warhol and the Warholian sphere served as a blueprint of sorts. But at the same time I knew I was way too late for that. I was born in 1958, so I could not live in that world, only recognize its patina. But it was interesting to learn from this and participate in building a small platform for myself through it.

Buchloh: When did *Spex* magazine begin? And when did you join?

Koether: It was founded in late 1980, and I joined in January 1981. My first proper longer piece was about Nico.

Buchloh: Who was also from Cologne.

Koether: She was a *huge* hero of mine. When I did this interview with her, it provided an important lesson. Because she was so fucked up. It was the first time I experienced how an artistic mind had been destroyed by drugs and fame, and I realized it's fascinating but exactly what to avoid. I knew I wanted to do something like that, I wanted to have all of *this*, but not at that price. It taught me I would have to find a method that made me stronger in other ways, so I could do this. I kept thinking, Man, this is so sobering. It stuck with me for months. And then I saw her again a few years later in London after a concert, and she was even worse. It was so sad. I tried to follow what she was doing, but she was sinking tragically. The interactions—this whole notion of a woman alone who put everything on the line to be so radical—were also influential in terms of my performance.

Buchloh: But why did you cathect on Nico, and not on Simone Forti, or Yvonne Rainer, for example?

Koether: Well, I guess it had to be Nico because she was connected to music and from Germany, so she had that tragic cultural background; she was closer to me in that sense. Also, I didn't know anybody who would have told me about Forti or Rainer.

Buchloh: These are the two tracks that seem to pose rather complex challenges for the postwar generations in Germany: One of them is the fascination with American avant-garde and mass cultural practices from Warhol to the Velvet Underground, and the increasing identification with all that they could stand for, particularly when pretending to offer oppositional, radical forms. The other track confronts German history and its artistic legacies, like those of Beuys and Polke. In a way, these two tracks have nothing, or very little, to do with each other, so how can you reconcile them? I think your generation might have brought the tracks closer together than the previous one, but the question of how to reconcile them remains interesting, and the answers could probably explain some of the contradictions in your work, such as the puzzling simultaneity of painting and performance.

Koether: I think it has to do with the German legacy in particular. You cannot avoid recognizing at some point that you cannot escape that history and that the notion of reconciliation isn't really an option. I tried to escape and at first I refused to deal with any of it. But when I was finally in America—I visited New York first in 1987, but I started living there only in 1991—I became more and more aware of how important it was for me to deal with this. I made a point out of entering *with painting*.

Buchloh: Nineteen ninety-one was the end of Neo-Expressionism, wasn't it? Or the end of the return to painting?

Koether: Totally. That's why it felt like a good moment to step in and really fight for it. I was making use of it and also *attending* to it. It was not meant as a heroic act in any way, but there was a slightly exhilarating energy that emerged from the feeling of starting something from scratch.

Buchloh: Why? If you were so against it, were you also a kind of anti-painter?

Koether: Yes, but painting was part of my history. It's how I was educated. It's what I looked at. Deep down, that's how you start.

Buchloh: Did you learn the skills of painting? And then the de-skilling of painting?

Koether: I had studied to become an art teacher, so I had to have a certain amount of skill. I also had some skill from my mother's teachings, and I was close friends with some of the painters in Cologne, I got some information about techniques and so on from them. . . . I used that moment in Cologne in the mid- to late '70s to redefine what I could and wanted to do. Not much interest in painting there. So I thought, Why not use that neglect in a positive way? I also started looking at American painters who had tried to enter the history of painting from the "outside," painters like Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Martin, Man Ray . . .

Buchloh: But your response to painting was not necessarily to resurrect it. Was there no attempt to redeem painting?

Koether: Yes and no. Redeeming was certainly not on my agenda. I never looked at painting as some masterful thing one would want to reinstall, but instead as a platform, a potential, an island, a lifeboat, a discipline to negotiate life . . . a performance. An attempt at something impossible, a reinvention of painting through painting. I wanted to make it a temporary site, which I took literally. There was this large painting I made in 1992 called *Inside Job*. It was a work that I made in New York before I showed in a gallery. I placed the painting in an apartment on the floor and invited people to view it. It was part of a show that Eric Oppenheim had organized and it was called *The Real Thing*. It was a group show but it happened in the artists' studios, and Oppenheim was supposed to bring people by. Which he never did. But I used it as a frame for experimenting with my own thing and inviting guests/visitors myself. I had these small rooms: one with a painting on the floor, the other with a desk. I asked people one-on-one to come and look at the painting in progress, and then to sit with me and speak about the experience of seeing the painting. With the painting came a book—a "manual," I called it—that had all the drawings and visual trajectories of what I was involved in. It was also an emerging social sketchbook, which meant I made reports of each session every night.

Buchloh: You selected the people you invited? Or you did it with whoever came?

Koether: It was a mixed group. You had to make an appointment, like a doctor's office.

Buchloh: I was about to say it was like an analyst's appointment. Even though it's not clear who was the patient and who was the analyst.

Koether: Yes. I didn't record it because I didn't know most of the people well enough. I made occasional handwritten notes, aide-mémoire, shorthand. . . . After the departure of the visitor I typed a report into an electric typewriter, and the report sheet entered the public manual so that the people who came the next day could read it.

Buchloh: Were the people identified in the report sheet: This person said *this*, this person said *that*...?

Koether: Yes. I later published the typewritten book as *J.K.: The Inside Job* [1993].

Buchloh: Does the book still exist?

Koether: The book has been digitized. The complete project, titled *The Bigger Splash*, was just shown as part of the *Painting and Performance* exhibition at Tate Modern; it attempted to trace a history of painting and performance positions. They digitized the book and all the drawings, and they were all shown with an installation of the actual painting presented on a very large pane of glass.

Buchloh: Would you say this was the first time that your painting and performance came together?

Koether: It was the first time the combination was a conscious artwork. I wanted to expose my idea of painting to people without just dragging them to my studio. I wanted to try another way, to involve them in a performance that I had set up.

Buchloh: Your description of *Inside Job* helped me just now to understand an additional aspect of your work, namely, that looking at a painting becomes a manifestly dialogic relationship, almost like an analytical session. And you bring this dialogic relationship between spectator and author and space and institution much more into focus by turning the painting into a performance. Still the question remains: Why does painting persist even in that situation? You mentioned earlier that you had been thinking about German Dada, which of course is crucial for another set of questions. Because nobody in the immediate postwar moment reflected on that history, right? And if they did reflect on pre-Fascist history, it was Expressionism, not German Dadaism. That came much later, in the 1960s.

Koether: Right, it was later, with someone like Polke, who opened up that possibility of reflecting-on-while-painting. But with that there was also a return to the bohemian/anarchist/negotiator/life-experimenter model of the artist.

Buchloh: Up to the moment when you referenced punk culture, I could have made the case that you should have become an artist in the lineage of John Cage and moved on into Fluxus, because that's exactly what you just described. The lineage you constructed clearly leads from object-making to performative operations, a lineage that is strongly related to the historical trajectory from Cage to George Brecht and from Fluxus to Robert Filliou, for example. Yet that seems to be completely absent from your work. From the logic of your arguments and what you say about music, however, it would have been perfectly plausible to go there.

Koether: Yeah, but I wasn't born like John Cage and did not attend Black Mountain College!

Buchloh: But you were living in Cologne, where George Brecht worked, for example. There was a very strong presence of Fluxus in Düsseldorf and Cologne.

Koether: Sure, but punk rock didn't want "fathers" . . . perhaps only strange/multiple ones like the Situationists.

Buchloh: For some reason your attraction to mass cultural and subcultural formations caused you to bypass the Dada legacy, which is fascinating. It is as if you said, "I cannot identify with this type of high-cultural subversion because it's the generation of the fathers that was done by Stockhausen in Cologne."

Koether: I know, but what I think you don't understand is that my generation—or maybe I should only speak for myself—*lost,* or rather *refused,* this kind of connection to thinking in a linear trajectory. We—I—experienced it as the second-order culture, as having been or always being the one behind, always the "born too late," always the inheritor *of* . . .

Buchloh: Due to what? Being German? Being of your generation? Or being a woman?

Koether: All of those things. I always felt strongly that I could only understand it through reflection with others in the same situation, which at the time for me was *Spex*, people like Diedrich Diederichsen. In order to articulate your own subjectivity, you didn't find a method but constructed it yourself. All the other trajectories—like that of the Expressionist painter-performer—were already being clogged by other guys with other attitudes. I knew all those people, but for me they represented just another impasse as structurally they followed an Oedipal schematic. Just another lineage to be stuck in. Only this pseudo-global, new thing—punk rock—provided at the time the attitude that you could do things you weren't supposed to do, to allow anger, playful display, and enactments of provocative harshness. Communicate. Speak up. Become active. DIY aesthetics and their inevitable fate of becoming marketable lifestyles were a rather interesting firsthand experience of how to have and lose beliefs, life dialectics! . . . It also helped to step outside of oneself, to identify things that I had inherited, to be able to analyze them, as well as really find other locations for/of cultural activity outside of the given social structures (school, academy, art scene). Punk-rock culture also encouraged language. The act of finding one's voice of refusal, resistance *and* enjoyment. A kind of ersatz Dada.

Buchloh: Your own terrain in terms of history, in terms of technique, in terms of medium, in terms of praxis?

Koether: I'm not sure how to describe it. At the time, I thought of painting as an abandoned building.

Buchloh: When you say it was like an abandoned building already in 1991, was it a space in which certain mnemonic capacities were preserved, in which a dimension of cultural memory attracted you? It seems for me an incredibly important aspect.

Koether: It was and it wasn't. It was an intuitive thing, semiconscious. I said, If the building is abandoned, I'm still here tinkering away. Like a weird squatter. And I thought that type of tinkering could open up a thinking space that has

a certain freedom. It allows you to reach out to those dimensions that are otherwise barred. There are certain components, certain elements, that return. Sometimes they're symbols, sometimes colors. At one point, for example, I learned everything about red; I had paintings with twenty different reds. There is an inner necessity for me that means some things keep returning. But I always do what I think is necessary for each project: making felt that psychic site that a painting constitutes.

Buchloh: Let's go back to another context question: The anti-aesthetic impulse in painting—which obviously has a very long and complicated history, from Picabia to Polke to Kippenberger—is part of your horizon in many differentiated ways. Would there not be an important difference between an anti-pictorial, anti-aesthetic operation by a woman and an anti-pictorial operation by a man?

Koether: I think there is a difference between Kippenberger and others insofar as Kippenberger provided one of those rare moments in the culture of male German artists when an artist was actually willing and able to say what the problem is. I appreciated that. Despite his performances of very bad jokes at times, Kippenberger was not a cynic. I would not have been willing to listen to him if I had felt that, because the specific type of anti-aesthetic painting that I'm interested in is not a negative one. Perhaps there is a difference between an anti-pictorial operation by a woman and one by a man, and I think it has something to do with socialization and, for me, the conditions under which I learned painting and what my points of orientation were. The way I explored painting had much more to do with *content*, with what these paintings represented. So I delved into queer painting and into women painters—

Buchloh: What did you consider queer painting?

Koether: Marsden Hartley, Pavel Tchelitchew, Georgia O'Keeffe: really "forbidden" stuff at the time. In Germany in the early '80s, if you mentioned one of those artists, it was dismissed as kitsch. Their works fell between all categories. Also Bacon, Freud, Balthus, Klossowski. Those latter ones have been constant companions in thinking through painting, learning fearlessness through their application of anachronisms. In the late '80s in New York I met more people and learned a lot. John Miller, for instance, introduced me really early on to artists like Jack Goldstein. I thought his position was sort of weird—I mean, his wasn't "queer painting," but nobody could really *read* his work. It fell between kitsch and . . . I'm not sure. I knew John Miller because we were both writers for *Artscribe*. He was the only other writer for *Artscribe* who described himself as "artist and writer." I always got dissed for being an artist and writer in Germany, so I wrote him a letter. We were pen pals, and he was the first artist I met in New York in 1987. And that led back to performance positions, of course. You start with Florine Stettheimer and you end up somewhere with Jack Smith and Mike Kelley.

Buchloh: It is very interesting for me to understand the eccentricity of your interest in Stettheimer and Smith, rather than, say, Eva Hesse. I say this with the greatest respect, so please don't misunderstand me.

Koether: Of course I knew about Hesse too. I knew about her before I moved to New York. I remember on my first trip I brought back a big stack of books from the Strand. Georgia O'Keeffe, the Lucy Lippard book on Eva Hesse, and the *Eccentric Abstraction* catalogue. I thought, Wow, that's a great title. Let's see what it is about.

Buchloh: Stettheimer, O'Keeffe, and Hesse don't go very easily together, do they?

Koether: Depends on what you mean by "going together." They did for me! It's funny, because the connection was thematized many years later in a book by Anne Wagner . . .

Buchloh: Right, *Three Artists Three Women.*

Koether: . . . where she discussed Eva Hesse, Lee Krasner, and Georgia O'Keeffe. I think part of the attraction for me was looking for a female model. Not that I wanted to identify entirely with that. But I could clearly see parallels in the ways they had the same urge to take their own bodies and put themselves out there and pose with their work. To be, in a way, female . . . entities. They had an odd relation to their paintings and how they presented their lives to a public. I found that kind of irritating, confusing, and also interesting.

Buchloh: What about Agnes Martin?

Koether: Agnes Martin was of the greatest importance for me. I discovered her when I was only sixteen or seventeen. On my own. I saw a show in Holland, and I was blown away. I had traveled to Amsterdam wanting to see as many Van Goghs as possible, and I saw Agnes Martin! Well, I saw both. There you see my formation, how things can coexist and interact in all kinds of ways. I also saw the Pollock that they have at the Stedelijk. Those trips were *really* important, when I was young with the desire to find things, and all of a sudden you find things that are incredible.

Buchloh: Do you have a problem reconciling all these disparate elements? Or do you see them as continuing to be operative in your life and in your work, and while being detached from each other, don't they simultaneously define what you do and how you do it?

Koether: It's like other things in life, you know? I mean, they are there, some of them have been constitutive elements and others are sort of . . . . It's like in a study gallery where you have the important parts—the masterpieces—and then you have these other elements that are as crucial as the rest in order to let the whole thing live. I feel it is the same for what I call my coordinates or my points of reference. I don't need to reconcile them. They are there . . . just like my "Bruised Grids." It's just that some come to the forefront sometimes more strongly. Or others have been in the background forever and will probably stay there forever. It has to do with the way you conceive of your own body of work, or what it is that you actually want to do or what you want to leave behind. One other term that I wanted to propose is what you at one point called "eccentric"—this kind of travel through very dissimilar figures that one cannot reconcile, or that for you can't be reconciled. Like when you said: In my world, Duchamp and Georgia O'Keeffe can't operate together,

it's impossible . . . I answered in a funny way, as though I retreated again when I said: "Oh, it's organic," or whatever. And it is organic, partially, but it was also done very much by design. It was both a necessity and a decision to create something that is really, in a way, about dissonance. The project is not just to encounter dissonance but also to enjoy it and upload it positively.

Buchloh: This is the first time you have used the concept of dissonance, and it seems strikingly central to your work at large . . .

Koether: Because we were also talking about this pain factor. That there is something painful about dissonance. And despite all the dialectics, there is something in one's desire that wants to be reconciled and wants to be put into a logic or find some kind of closure. It's either a sentimental closure or it's a logical closure. From the very beginning, I have always understood my project as being an alternative to all that enjoyment of dissonance.

Buchloh: Is that also because it is a feminist project?

Koether: Yes, because it is a feminist project, and because I arrived historically at a time when there was no fixed or stable or clear situation—there was nothing that could really pose as a credible authority or a fixed path. Just this kind of thirst. Like, to always let go and think and read and learn more. I feel that art, for me, is whatever medium you use—that's what it's about. Even if there is nothing for a year. Or if one doesn't create masterpieces or something like that. I feel that is not important. An aesthetic openness *is* important. So I try to do things that allow me to present these thoughts directly, in multilayered ways.

Buchloh: The performance you did at Harvard was incredibly important for me in many ways. But it had a distinctly tragic quality about it, and I'm not sure whether or not that was intended. Because you were making grand claims. . . . I mean, it's not exactly a very probable step for an artist of your generation to establish a relationship with Poussin. Secondly, it's not exactly a probable phenomenon—certainly not in the United States—for an artist to step onstage and explain to us the seven sacraments. And thirdly, for the artist then to channel this through a very complicated and elaborate-looking computer-aided mediation. Those three elements—and there were many others, of course—already generated a very complex situation which I experienced almost as painful, as tragic. It was like this tragic struggle to figure out how one can possibly think about these things simultaneously. Is that somewhat accurate as a description?

Koether: Yes, absolutely.

Buchloh: And, again, the work compelled the question, What is it that you're trying to rescue, if anything at all, when you know very well that you cannot rescue it? Or, what is it that you're trying to reestablish as a mnemonic dimension in your work when you point us to Poussin? Or when you point us ethically to the seven sacraments? These fundamentally strong gestures are so potentially dangerous as gestures of restoration of a kind of experience that is long lost,

never to be restored, and even though you know this, you make them anyway—because otherwise it would be unbearable. So the tragic dimension of the performance was very striking. But do you see it in those terms, as a melancholic resuscitation?

Koether: Oh, yes, very much so. Yet there is also an internal challenge to put oneself in a kind of "danger," being *very* exposed, that is. Laying out the entire mind-sketch in a raw, vulnerable manner. These are modes of undoing, notating, transcribing, thinning, and so on—historical baggage, layers of interpretations. In that sense, both performance gestures (dance moves, citations, music) as well as painting and drawing gestures. And also to make it clear that this particular condition is constitutive. There is simultaneously loss and gain. And I feel that past works, like those of Poussin, enable me to open a window, a stage, for that moment and invite me on a non-immersive cruise into the past.

Buchloh: At the same time you present it with a grotesque comical introduction.

Koether: Yes! Of course. I use every possible thing in the effects box to enhance this notion. (Here I'd like to mention T. J. Clark, because I learned a certain humor and daring from him. . . . Look at his Poussin book, subtitled "An Experiment in Writing.") That's also why I developed a structure for the performance where I sort of introduce it with this other voice. It's almost like a ventriloquist moment. Do you remember the music element? At one point the rendering of the image crashed and I just blasted music for a very short while. The music is from Scott Walker, an American musician living in the UK—he was part of the Walker Brothers—that I do not necessarily identify with, but his presentation of music has a similar experimental comic/grotesque/melancholic dimension. At the end of the day I always try to incorporate a little bit of this other lineage: my becoming an artist through music culture. It's important not to leave those things outside just because I'm, say, at Harvard at a painting conference.

Buchloh: Was the piece conceived specifically for Harvard as a performance? Would you repeat it?

Koether: Not in that form. It was an "experiment in a (lecture) performance" custom-made for the occasion.

Buchloh: But you would talk about Poussin and the seven sacraments again in a different setting?

Koether: Yes, but the Harvard event, that particular stage and that environment, was unique; I *wouldn't* want to do that somewhere else. It was very good. You cannot repeat that. But I did do something related within the setting of my show at Dundee Contemporary Arts in Scotland titled *Seasons and Sacraments*.

Buchloh: Let's talk about the *Seasons* paintings a bit more. . . . There is this prismatic duality in your work of keeping painting in the game, so to speak, when in fact you are perpetually dismantling it. At the same time, you buttress it even more by reconnecting painting to its most heroic moments in history. How

can an artist like you—at this moment and within your generation—position herself in relation to Poussin? In a way, you seem to be asking how historical memory can be articulated in the present with the means that are at your disposal. And the means at your disposal seem to be largely annihilated or criticized by yourself. Because you're not a *painter*-painter, in a sense.

Koether: I think what you're describing is precisely—and maybe it's my fantasy—where I find the figure of Poussin. Because he is at the pinnacle of so-called classical painting and at the same time he made a certain kind of painting impossible. Maybe it's only my projection, but I find it fascinating how his practice can be so clear and so firm but at the same time it can undermine his own project as a whole. I like Poussin's displacement, his identity as a French classical painter who nonetheless lives in Rome most of his artistic life. There's also the coexistence of passion and concepts of freedom of "learning by doing" as well as of introducing vehement changes in the way one works. As for the *Seasons,* I did three versions. The first one is the "original," and that is the set that is closest to Poussin's. It follows the proportions, the dimensions, the color schemes, and the compositional devices of Poussin's actual paintings. The second set is tweaked to the needs of the gallery. The format is a bit smaller; the color is a bit different in order to match the whole space. I have a Florentine red that I used very heavily in those. The paintings have all kinds of colors, but that specific red color of the ground I also used in the paintings themselves. Mussini Florentine Red! It almost looked like the paintings had been sprayed with red gravel, as if they had soaked it up and were weirdly "illuminated" through the ground, since they had this strange red underpainting. They looked inflamed. The third set of *Seasons* came as a small version, painted on wood panels, with elements of assemblage relating to the themes of the seasons and coated with "liquid glass," a kind of clear resin. The entire thing was hung on a piece of glass that was stuck in a concrete base and presented as an art-fair booth. It was shown with Reena Spaulings in 2012 at the first Frieze Art Fair in New York. The concrete footing was a self-made version of Lina Bo Bardi's painting stands or glass easels. Bo Bardi was an Italian Brutalist architect who moved to Brazil. She had invented these display stands for the museum in São Paulo, and in her most notorious, claim-to-fame exhibition, she put the entire collection of the Brazilian Art Museum on glass panels with concrete feet to hold the glass. And the people in São Paulo couldn't deal with it! They dismantled the whole thing after a couple of years. Of course now, over the past ten years, she has become a cult figure among artists. I really like her ideas and the way she dealt with art and architecture being intertwined in this specific way. I also like the way she used glass and concrete and cheap, common building materials like gravel and wood. (In the meantime there is a new director at the museum in São Paulo who actually REINSTALLED Bo Bardi's glass easels!)

Buchloh: Returning to Poussin, do you know why you chose him as your historical reference figure? I mean, among the many equally important figures from the history of painting that one could have chosen, why him? Isn't that unusual for a painter of your generation?

Koether: No, it's not unusual, not if a painter is interested in space and time travel, as we talked about before. It comes from a kind of mental traveling, an ongoing search, because you don't have a fixed historical vision. So you try to find your own genealogy. I basically put myself on the same path as other partially self-taught artists. And the Poussin idea was there long before I read the T. J. Clark book. Of course, it goes through Cézanne, Balthus . . . and deep down there is always Piero della Francesca. And before that Egyptian art. And so on.

Buchloh: I was just about to say that it is like Jasper Johns returning to Cézanne in the 1950s. But you go two, three hundred years back. Why are you going so much further back than others in modernism or contemporary art have dared?

Koether: Because it's a *freer* place.

Buchloh: Duchamp went as far back as celebrating Seurat; that was his historical span. He never spoke much about Manet, for example. And certainly not about Poussin. It's an interesting question: Why does a painter of your generation open up the historical horizon that far? Rather than talking about a high-modernist artist from the late nineteenth century or from the 1920s? That would seem to be more plausible. You could have chosen Sophie Taeuber-Arp, for example.

Koether: But it is one's own paintings that have to take the lead. It cannot be a purely conceptual connection but has to come from something that feels like one's own logic. I did learn about the history of female artists, for example, and yes, a lot of reevaluations and discoveries have been made in the past thirty years or so. But I have been there already. I mean, I have been traveling for so many years, in so many places. And I also have been kind of dissatisfied—as if it's too easy. "Too easy" means that there have been too many people who have already installed their readings and their projections and their legitimations there. . . . It's sort of polluted, in a way.

Buchloh: Are you saying that historical memory itself is polluted? In the context of modernism, at least, and what people have done with it? Are you saying that artistic references within the twentieth century—or artistic references in the history of modernism—have been overused in a way that is no longer productive or relevant? Is this one of the reasons you went all the way back to Poussin?

Koether: Well, I don't trust "historical memories," although they can be stimulating . . . so that's one reason. Another was that I got interested in traversing a realm that was so layered in the scholarship, and I gave myself the task of plowing through that scholarship because I really wanted to *learn* something. I wanted the learning process to be very intense. I didn't want it to be journalistic, with a reference picked up here and there. I wanted to investigate something very deeply, as an exercise for myself. That was one attraction. I

think the other element (and it comes up in Clark's book, and Anthony Blunt writes a lot about it, too) is the idea that in Poussin there is a coexistence of rigidity, almost like an architectonic structure, and another kind of material—emotional inserts—that you can't account for. Whether they happen through specific figures or through the narrative of the story, they are a certain rendering: for example, this extremely weird rendering of the leaves and nature or the so-called natural world. On the one hand, Poussin has structure, but it's so tiny it's almost pointillism, and it nearly falls apart, so there's a contradictory dissonance produced. A sensation. A space for thinking and feeling.

Buchloh: What's on the other side of that extraordinary adventure into the history of painting is neoclassical painting of the grandest ambition. But your execution is a very different type of painting. Your practice of painting is difficult to grasp for people who are not totally familiar with you and your history and your understanding of it, right?

Koether: I guess so. But isn't that the case with every painter? When in doubt, I return to the Poussin self-portrait in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and look him in the eye. It's like going to see a doctor. Besides, to be "understood" all the time is not my primary goal. I think I would rather continue my own "Koether: An experiment in painting."

Buchloh: There's an anti-aesthetic operation in your painting that is very violent. It's *as* violent as Frank Stella's *Black Paintings* were in 1958. It doesn't look like anything we've known. It doesn't establish any connection with recent painterly culture as we know it. In your case, for example, one would imagine, since you are coming from Germany, you must have *some* background in German painting of the 1960s. Polke and Richter, for example. But when one looks at the painting, it looks like neither. It doesn't even look as though you knew of them.

Koether: Ah, that's good. I wanted to perform that: a kind of willful forgetting. An act of disobedience to that pre-scripted trajectory, maybe, so that I can be free to reengage it on my terms, which I have started to do in the past few years—in my shows at Bortolami in 2012 and Reena Spaulings in 2013, for example—but simultaneously with a reengagement with the idea of the figuration in Balthus, Bacon, and most of all Lucian Freud. But I can see what you're saying. There is potentially the violence of strangeness and inconsistency.

Buchloh: There is a certain radicality in your painterly execution that interests me. Your work is unlike Kippenberger's, for example: His attempts at dislodging Richter are very easy to follow, his dialogue with Polke is easy to follow, in his work there is always a jocular dialogue, in many ways, in many structures, in many textures. One can almost always say, Oh, now he's looking at *this* and he's coming out of *this* and he's trying to deal with *this*—successfully or not is another question. There's a contextual fabric that you can read. Whether or not that's the most important aspect is another matter, but you can read the

work in these terms. When I see work of yours, however, I don't see any of this, and I find that much more challenging.

Koether: My work isn't readable in that way. I always feel connected not to this or that painter but to a certain idea of painting. And to a shared search for a certain intensity or a certain . . . language. Whatever helps me to find that language and articulate it, I grab. I call it "multi-morbid painting" sometimes.

Buchloh: That is so striking, because you don't seem to have a specific context; there's neither a local nor a regional nor a national context. You seem to have completely disavowed such a thing. Yet on the other hand, you construct this *huge* historical context for yourself, saying, in effect, *I'm going all the way to the seventeenth century*. That is a very strange gesture and a very strange move, isn't it?

Koether: Yes, that's true. Strangeness is good. Very good. Strangeness and beauty.

Buchloh: Perhaps a figure I can compare it to is Broodthaers? I'm not sure if that's helpful, but he did something very similar by being completely anti-aesthetic in his operations and completely allegorical in annihilating the credibility of painting. All while insisting on the necessity of continuing to paint. And insisting, moreover, on the necessity of recognizing what painting once had been and what it had stood for and what it represented. He went beyond the nineteenth century as well. He didn't go as far as Poussin, but he certainly went to Ingres and into the late eighteenth century. And in a similarly constructed, contradictory manner, insofar as what he was actually doing looked, at many moments, like the most inept approach to painting that you could possibly practice. Or it was technically mediated so it was printed. Yet the historical references were always to painting, which is a strange structure, one that hasn't been understood in Broodthaers at all, at least from what I know in the literature. The structure, as I keep saying, is mnemonic, asking: What is the legacy, what is the impact, what is the accessibility, for me as a painter in the present moment? If I look at this, how do I have access to this? But then it becomes a more general question, which makes it aesthetically relevant: How does *anyone* have access to that history at this moment? That's what I find interesting about your work.

Koether: One has to experiment with one's own methods. I draw, and redraw, red lines, red threads, through something. Red horizons reaching into the seventeenth century or other time zones. I would like to think Marcel Broodthaers and Lucian Freud in one space. To not lose that ability to transfer yourself imaginatively, to rehearse imagination, to notate, stimulate, activate. With those plays of lines and color suggesting the motions of the mind celebrating with garlands the fact that we still do not know where *Bewusstsein*, or consciousness, occurs in the human brain.

Buchloh: It has become clear in the course of our conversation that there is something vastly and fundamentally different in your approach from that of other artists, which is that you do not accept what almost everybody in Germany in

the previous generations has accepted—and what almost everyone in America that I can think of has accepted—namely, a relatively circumscribed set of references. When I see your paintings—*The Seasons*, for example—I say: What is her painterly gesture? What is her facture? Where does this come from? What type of drawing is this? But the painting never registers or resolves itself in such a way where I could answer the question with something like, "This is an inversion of Sol LeWitt." It sometimes looks as though random processes are very important to you, but the work isn't automatist, it isn't determined by chance operations, but it's also not excessively controlled. Or is it?

Koether: *The Seasons* are actually fairly controlled. I studied the original paintings at the Louvre very carefully. The compositional field is pretty much built in the same way, down to the centimeter. Only I tried to reverse the ratio, so that instead of having, say, 90 percent pictorial structure combined with these minor emotional inserts making up only 5 percent, almost like particles, it was the other way around. So there you have a fixed structure. And then there are these other additional, ridiculous structures, pseudo-structures that *I* invented . . . so the composition is set. The figures in the paintings were kept, but I made them much bigger in scale, and so on. The color scheme is the same as in the originals, but amplified. For instance, Poussin's *Winter* has darkened enormously. It was always dark—winter is not depicted as a happy, snowy landscape but as a deluge, the apocalyptic dark night of the storm—and I rendered it with this weird black wheel in the middle of the painting, spilling out from or cracking the surface of the painting.

Buchloh: What about *The Sacraments*?

Koether: *The Sacraments* were more than actual paintings. The only two paintings in the group were related to the sacrament of marriage, which I rendered as a double painting (two panels hung one above the other, which became the central piece in the "*parcours*"). The rest of the piece was installation and sculpture, and I found that to be much easier for people to deal with. Of course, this question came up too: Why Poussin? Why something like the sacraments? Why do that now, and who cares for Christianity? There was one very direct link: The second (and complete) set of *The Sacraments* is on view at the National Gallery in Edinburgh. Another reason to choose the sacraments as a topic was that they were done twice. There was also the potential for something else, starting from Poussin's famous remark that he wanted to redo the sacraments in a profane version in which seven stories on the "fortunes of man" would replace the episodes of Christianity (which Poussin already had transposed into the "fictional" setting of ancient Roman times. I would like to point out an odd lineage here between the letter *E* showcased on the column in the sacrament of ordination and Broodthaers's *E* painting!)

Buchloh: What happened when you did the performance at Dundee Contemporary Arts in Bristol?

Koether: The exhibition was a performance of objects and paintings reflecting on different ways of paintings becoming, so the performance for the exhibition was a performance about the becoming of a performance becoming painting: a meta-performance. (Those stories/histories are the "models" for my painting; instead of having an actual sitter, I have those procedures, readings, searches as sitters!) First there was an introductory speech. And I had a print at the beginning of the show that I thought of as an opening act, so to speak. It was a multilayered print of a photo of a queen on her horse, kind of perforated so that it looked damaged but also stately at the same time. That led into the tour of *The Sacraments*. I performed different things. One performance was like a show-and-tell; another was more like a staged walk-through, the way a proper tour guide would do it. There was a melancholic, mute performance in which I stood in front of the piece with this light, and one where I played music for "Penance."

Buchloh: Recorded music?

Koether: No, I played my own sounds and melodic fragments on a small synthesizer. Throughout the performance I had five people helping the audience, reshuffling them, like crowd control. They held black planks, which came from the sculpture of the seventh sacrament, "Last Rites," and while I was performing they took the sculpture apart and placed all the planks throughout the space, kind of remapping the space of the sacraments. Finally, they put it back together in the shape of a 7. I wanted the artworks to do the job; instead of animating them, I wanted them to be self-explanatory . . . and outside of myself.

Buchloh: As you were describing that, I was reminded of the performance at Harvard, in which the performance was similarly structured for an audience that, it is presumed, is thinking very much along the lines of what you're doing and thinking about. It's not a confrontational approach. At first I thought, What is she doing? But once I let that go, I felt that this is exactly the kind of question one has to ask right now. There are many questions, obviously, posed by your work, but one important one is: What kind of access do I have to the historical dimension of painting? How can it be mediated—if at all? How can it be perceived—if at all? And what can you do as a painter to establish that dialogue? I'm not sure how you would want to phrase it or if you would accept that as a description.

Koether: Oh, indeed!

Buchloh: You're not constructing an imaginary relationship to Poussin as a moment of redemption of painting's crisis in the present—

Koether: No, no. It's not that. I've posed that question to myself, too: Why am I drawn to this? What is it that makes me want to look *there,* and how can I in a way reconcile it with living here right now? But I find that everything presented as a culture of memory—or "memory schemes," as I call them—is so

> dissatisfying. Dissatisfying in every way, not only intellectually but *visually.* The whole redoing, rehashing, reenacting, and retrospectivizing thing. . . . So every painting is an act to undo those schemes, reclaim one's own sketch of life, a mapping of emotions . . . to figure a sensibility that runs all five senses as if wired up first in drawing then in paint. The canvas, my *centre de recherche,* my *Champrovent,* my *Maquis,* my *Fortune,* is the residence of painting itself. . . . What I can offer is the time of my painting—making this time possible, making it felt, sharing it—so that other people can be drawn in, affected. I want to say, *Come on . . . don't you also want to be in this project somehow?*

Buchloh: The Harvard performance triggered exactly what you're describing.

Koether: And now I would love to visit the Gemäldegalerie to see Poussin's *Phaeton and Helios* and the Metropolitan Museum to visit Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion,* so there can be yet another "from this moment on"! After that, every day in the studio is a "Harvard performance."

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Classics of Modernism: On Jutta Koether's Treatment of Canonic Painters

Isabelle Graw

It is part of the myth of the classical artist that he works off others. It may be that he closely studies the pictures of painters that he admires, or copies originals to mark a difference at some point in the course of the transfer, which is then celebrated by art history as "pioneering". What does it mean though, when an artist like Jutta Koether takes up a number of canonized pictures, such as by Courbet, Manet, Cézanne or van Gogh, and transposes them into her painting vocabulary in the 80s and 90s of the twentieth century? It means, first of all, that she makes herself vulnerable by reactivating clichéd notions of art and art history. Accordingly, artistic production might primarily be understood as a martialist struggle with an original or as "influence anxiety" (Harold Bloom), which in turn allows art history to safely insist on the question of influence, as though this were the overarching explanation for everything. By taking recourse to various "masterpieces" Koether actually does risk working for a hopelessly old-fashioned concept of art. On the other hand, especially her explicit paraphrases—"Origin of the World" (1990) after Courbet or "Starry Night" after van Gogh—recall the insight suspended in influencing thinking that one never re-invents the wheel—especially as a painter. Like other aesthetic semantics as well, painting is a super-individual language that precedes the single painter. Although he can discard this provision, pretend to start from scratch, even with this tabula rasa gesture he will inevitably find himself in historically over-determined terrain again. In addition, every painterly practice finds itself confronted with problems that have appeared before and have been dealt with in different ways. One perennial theme, for example, is the question of whether and how social constraints, which are also present to a certain extent in painting, can be negotiated at all with oil or acrylic. At the same time, what a picture achieves is never given, but has to be reformulated again and again and that from a contemporary perspective. This formulating work is where Koether starts, as though to convey to us that there is a potential inherent to even the seemingly most overly determined and most art-historically sanctioned method and this potential is worth developing. Nevertheless, an Oedipal trait is naturally inscribed in every recourse to canonized pictures, and there have been numerous cases in art history—from Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning" all the way to Kippenberger's instrumentalizing use of a picture by Gerhard Richter—in which the primary intention was to literally erase (Rauschenberg) or depose (Kippenberger) the original and sometimes to assert the claim of being determined to sur-

pass it. In Koether's case, however, we find a fundamentally different mode of processing the canon, which does not aim to criticize the canon, much less to destroy it. Let us take "Cézanne, Courbet, Manet, van Gogh, me"—in this respect virtually a programmatic picture from 1990, showing the gestically painted color surface of black-red color that was typical of Koether at that time, supplemented by a few "smeared" yellow and white brush traces. Yet, this color zone is also text at the same time, to the extent that the names Cézanne, Courbet, Manet, van Gogh are written one above the other, as though Koether has literally incorporated them in her painting process. On the one hand, Koether vehemently inscribes herself in the canon to claim for herself a place at the end of the series of famous painters. This is not done without irony. Instead of using her name, "Koether", there is the word "me", which seems just as conceited as it does a little disheartened. It actually sounds as though someone is emphatically stamping their foot and saying "me", except that this presumptuous "me" significantly takes up much less space than the names of the male heroes, which imbues the presumptuousness with something paltry. Presumptuousness and disheartenment thus go hand in hand. It is important to know here that at that time—1990—Koether did not yet have a status in the art world that would necessarily make a comparison with the male heroes of art history obvious. It was all the more urgent to stake a claim for belonging to a system that was constantly consigning one to the margins.

It would be a misunderstanding, however, to want to read this picture as a criticism of the excluding character of every canon formation. Rather, Koether claims the right to operate at the same level with these painters by deriving something from their methods that was useful for her. The point is thus, neither to doubt the historical significance of purportedly given achievements, nor to become paralyzed in reverence before the mythical names of art history. Yet, every confrontation with role models is also motivated by identification. One looks for situations and problems that are comparable with one's own. Consequently, Koether systematically chose artists who, according to legend, were long deprived of institutional recognition. Just as her own manner of painting was rejected in the 80s and 90s as crude and immature, Courbet and van Gogh were also criticized at first for their rough or intemperate methods, which were negatively coded characteristics at the time. The way in which these artists remained attached to the respectively dominant aesthetic conventions, only to surrender

themselves to a method that catapulted them out of consensus, also calls to mind the points of contact between Koether's intended dilettantism and the formation "Bad Painting". Although Koether took "badness" literally and took it to an extreme in painting, her pictures were still not considered part of the approved badness of "Bad Painting". Did Koether thus stylize herself as an unrecognized artist genius by invoking a comparison with artist legends like van Gogh? The very process of creating legends is undoubtedly taken into hand here, yet in the picture itself there is also an awareness of how grotesquely exaggerated this comparison is. The methods updated by Koether all have one thing in common: they are marked by external coercions and also negotiate them. Courbet's "Origin of the World" (1866), for example, was commissioned by a rich patron and intended for private enjoyment, so the picture was long withheld from a broader audience. It was denounced as pornographic and was last owned by none less than Jacques Lacan, who kept it hidden in his country house behind a protective device especially made for it by André Masson. Koether's adaptation of this picture ("Origin of the World", 1990) has also led a more sheltered existence so far—hardly anyone has seen it in the original. Whereas with Courbet the female genitals are spread before one like a jewel with a strongly textured carnality that seems close enough to touch, Koether introduces distance and portrays the female abdomen sketch-like with seemingly loose lines. The only reminiscence of carnality is Koether's signature at that time—the red-black color. Otherwise, corporeality mutates here into two-dimensionality, perhaps with the exception of the pubic hair and thighs, where there is the hint of an explicitly awkward texturing with yellow paint. This seemingly cursory transfer could also be described as a "structural analysis". Indeed, what counts is not so much the execution itself as the way in which Courbet poses and glorifies the female body as the ultimate object and pure commodity. Of course, it makes a difference when it is a female artist who continues this glorification and objectification for her part. In this way Koether provokes two contrary reproaches: that of reducing woman to her sex again along with Courbet—a reproach that was to be expected from the feminist side; or that she reproduces a typical example of the worst clichés of women's art—a sexist reproach that always had to be expected in the late 80s. This was additionally aggravated by the fact that Duchamp had already referred to this Courbet motif in "Etant Données". From an art historical perspective as well, Koether had entered a mine-field.

Naturally, this applies even more so to an artist figure like van Gogh, whose "Starry Night" (1888) Koether used a hundred years later like a license to arrange the picture surface comparatively loosely and airily, yet all the more turbulently and rhythmically in the end. Van Gogh seems to have provided her with a welcome opportunity to excessively practice the swirling movements and circular forms typical for her painting. Apart from the dynamic radiated by this picture and its uninhibited pathos, her choice certainly also has something to do with the way that van Gogh associated a kind of personal allegory with it. It is said that he associated with the stars the hope that life (on a different planet) could also be different, less marked by contempt and humiliating experiences.

Along with painters such as Courbet or van Gogh, of whom it could be said that they conceptualized dramatization and pathos, Koether was also occupied with the potential of so-called "flat painters" (Meier-Graefe) such as Manet or Cézanne. In Koether's work, however, their systematic, analytic method is reconciled with what constantly figures in art history as a counter-pole—the expressively overflowing gesture. The fact that Koether toyed specifically with Manet's "A Bunch of Asparagus" (1880) may perhaps be explained with the external conditions that extend into this picture. According to an anecdote, Manet gave the purchaser of the picture another picture directly thereafter—the picture of a single asparagus—as a bonus for what Manet regarded as overpayment. Koether robs the bunch of asparagus of the alabaster-like materiality that it has with Manet, eliminates the soup greens and reduces the double twine to a thin band that appears to pathetically hold the bunch together, which now appears entirely flattened. What is emphasized instead is what forms the real value of the asparagus: its tips. Painted white spots make them glow. In Cézanne's case, it was the "Orchard in Pointoise" (around 1877) that was chosen, a choice that could be considered "site-specific" to the extent that Koether produced her Cézanne adaptation ("Orchard", New York, Channeling Pointoise, 2005) for a group exhibition of the collectively operated New York project space also called "Orchard". Cézanne had already painted this picture during a period of lively exchange with his friend Pissarro—both had chosen this motif. As is so often the case, the real difference became increasingly apparent in the course of this collaboration. In comparison with Pissarro, who painted in a more pointillist way in small sections, Cézanne was already developing his block-like system. Koether, for

her part, reinforces this constructive moment, utilizes trees massively as vertical structures, and confronts this construction at the same time with loose gestures that seem to fleetingly stretch across the picture surface. The system "Cézanne" is transposed, so to speak, into her own register: systematic picture constructions combined with cultivating a remnant of expression. It is an offer that is well suited to "Orchard", since the people who run it claim to continue the models of "institutional critique" and "concept art". This space is thus confronted with what it phobically excludes—the gestural—and simultaneously affirmed in its preferences.

Does Koether simply usurp names like Cézanne, Courbet or van Gogh as allies to reinforce her own concerns in the end? In part, this is certainly the case. Yet, someone who refers so explicitly to the classics of modernism must be prepared to find that the kitsch-trap snaps shut mercilessly. In fact it is a fine line to be moving on here, especially since complex paraphrases are capable of tipping over into emphatic hobbies at any time. Nevertheless, the problems that Koether uncovers are by no means resolved. The questions of: how one can leave the aesthetic consensus and still remain attached to it at the same time, and the search for an artistic method drawing together a conception, and a remainder of expression, are just as topical as the challenge of creating a reference to the world, in which the constraints of the market are reflected without completely surrendering to them. These questions still drive us today, and every attempt to artistically negotiate them must necessarily remain provisional and insufficient. It is an insufficiency, however, that is far preferable, I think, to sidestepping these issues.

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Great Expectations

Jutta Koether in conversation with
Sam Lewitt and Eileen Quinlan

Sam Lewitt What were the conditions of your move from Germany to New York in the 90s? How did the parameters of your practice shift?

Jutta Koether New York was for me a new beginning. To do, explore and process painting at the same time. Connecting it and running it thru a "ground", to all those cultural discussions and conditions that influenced me at the time ... making visible possible links of painting to the rest or open and even force impossible ones. So painting could become flyer, theatrical prop, site for theoretical detritus, music/painterly scores, a door, an amplifier for an emotion, a site for word play ... or just a carrier for thought and emotion and bodily matter, while being aware that it was bringing a certain baggage/cultural import, that of the "German Painter", but coming in already slightly distorted ... not really part of the gang, as a woman, at a moment when painting was not a viable currency in New York. My participation in the ISP Whitney program, the projects "Halal", "The Inside Job", and my first solo show "Affective Imports" where first conceptualizations of the state of painting ... then there was "Frontage" and "Songs of New York & ...". In the late nineties, an interest to let painting run into and/or make it part of a collective practice and thru that alterthe practice as well as re-set form. To various degrees that happened in "freetime", "Black Bonds", "need change unseen nightlong interior Construction of the mediality of a painting on the the 19th", "Fresh Aufhebung", and being part of the artistic units Reena Spaulings and Lee Williams and "Grand Openings", a meta-performance project in which residue of the painting processes can be found as well ... All that has been always feeding back into painting, causing a social contamination of painting as well as unexpected re-applications of historical functions, modes, surfaces ..., adjustments all the time. The question of WHAT one can do and HOW one can do it, never stops. New York keeps you certainly up and on your toes. That is why I was drawn to the theme of fantasy. In the Lacanian/Žižekian definition ... Fantasy is intersubjective. It is only produced by the interaction between subjects ... however specific a fantasy itself is, it is always a product of an intersubjective situation. It is also what fills out the void of the question "WHAT do you want?" or "WHAT you want from ME?"

The structure of fantasy can be felt in New York. And in another sense ... that corresponds with "fantasia" the musical form ... that allowed for elements of surprise and deception, mingling in a free, improvisatory, yet intricate and contrapuntal style.

SL I'm curious about the role of representational limits that run throughout your work. Those limits that you are constantly trying to submit to representation. I think that the "Hysterics" are an example of this, even though they appear long after you move to New York. They often inhabit the place of subject rather than structural, or formal conditions (something which becomes even more complicated in your work, which involved doing drawings every day, the grids, that numbered in the 500's). Your inclusion of the structure of the discourse of the "Hysterics" poses an interesting problem for the subject of painting: that "pictorialization" becomes synonymous with "subjectification", which is then performatively split. The problem that you seem to deal with on a certain level is that the limits that are posed as subject often explicitly are those that resist and undermine representation as such let alone a pictorial articulation. This pictorial subject who resists representation is obviously a guiding contradiction. Can you unfold that contradiction a little bit? Is it a dialectic of failure, a performance of resistance, or is it something else?

JK I see it more as finding oneself in a place where you can't but produce glitches even if you would love to have it differently.
I have been through phases where I really wanted to find a place, since I do love certain traditions so much, but it is impossible. I can't have it because of what I am and the time that I live. It's just not possible.
But, at the same time I do reject the idea that its about constant failure only. It is embracing non-possibility, or what cannot happen, instead of just covering up. It's an act of fully stepping into the impossibility.
But, I think that in my practice, I have a need and interest to nevertheless run through various sorts of visualizations of that conflict that relates to a catalogue or index of something that can refer in some way to these traditions that I desire to be connected to.

SL You've said elsewhere that you often don't understand jokes (laughter) and that sentiment, albeit comical, seems to me to be consciously reflected in particular instances within your work which we've been talking about. There is a particular humour at play in your work. Maybe a humour embodied in the impossible act, or even disembodied in the subject becoming impossible (like in Beckett). I don't want this to be taken as an assertion of mere absurdity. It's not strictly an existential issue, but an impossibility reflected in a mode of representation embodied by anomic culture. So, I wonder if we can talk about this

in terms of concrete cultural formations that might bear a determinate relationship to available subjective speech acts and modes of self-representation? This brings us back to utterances like "the impossible dream", which reminds me a little bit of a version of American dream romanticism.

JK Yes it is very much related to this American phenomenon, the almost comic, the existential comic, spanning from Buster Keaton to Warhol: creatures who build up clownish personas that retain aesthetic manifestations. It is totally based in repetition, which is funny but equally sad. You know, the thing about not understanding jokes is a little bit tongue in cheek. It is true in terms of language and idiom, and in German there are not that many jokes (laughter). It's not about understanding the joke, and this is something I was attracted to in Kippenberger, it's about being entangled in it and not understanding it, which might open-up an engagement with its conditions. One of my ideas is even to derail the joke, because within culture the joke is as standardized as any other object, like gestures and movements in entertainment. These things undergo the same conditions as everything else. To rip open things made in the same fabric is of definite interest to me. It's like thinking "What can a derailed painting and a derailed joke do together?"

Eileen Quinlan Once you get the punch line of a joke, you might be satisfied enough not to act. So jokes can be just about validation.

JK Yes, definitely.

SL Who were the artists that you were looking at early on?

JK I had a very intense crash course in painting and discussions around painting (partially with the German artist Walter Dahn) in the very early eighties. He was one of the neo-expressionists you might say, but had studied with Beuys, and he was quite knowledgeable about painting too. He introduced me to a lot of works of art: I heard about Guston from him first, and we had this discussion about Artaud. He showed me early Baselitz, and actually really taking an interest in both the energy of things, but also looking at how they were actually done. In my own world, I had been very much into van Gogh, but one of my thesis papers in art-school later was Yves Klein. The

antithesis was Agnes Martin. At the time I took this trip to Amsterdam, actually to see van Gogh and I ended up seeing a beautiful Agnes Martin show and I remember being stunned and blown away by this possibility! After I discovered Martin I was really interested in American arts as quite an erratic self-education. I remember thinking maybe there are models in American art that are free from the models that existed in Europe and I got deeply interested in the eccentrics of American Modernism specifically Marsden Hartley, who would decide one year he was in love with Goya and another that he was in love with Manet. He, for example, was interesting for me as someone who really didn't have an artistic identity, or if there is one it's just a weird bundle, that keeps constructing itself.

SL It is interesting that you embraced this side of 20th Century American Art: the weird mannerism that was part of the reception of mostly late nineteenth century French painting. Is it that someone like Hartley makes sense in the context of your specific development of a largely citational practice of painting, one that seems to be largely a process of interiorizing and transposing elements, as opposed to the cut of montage?

JK Other people went there too, Picabia of course. Then Polke and Kippenberger. I was searching for something from which I could develop my own vocabulary in painting which was not tied in with Pop art or the stuff that had been done in the two generations before me. I didn't fit into any father/son pattern anyway. What you say about mannerism, I was deliberately searching for sort-of mannerist moments which inevitably lead me back into European history when painting was still innovative. You know, you could have a figure like Moreau with this extremely conservative, yet highly dandyish resistance. I was always interested in figuring out what happened in these moments.

EQ Extending the operation of citation, I noticed that you put your influences in the foreground, the things that you've read, seen or whatever. I'm interested in the degrees of transparency in your work.

JK I felt that it is part of the process. It is not about recreating the mystery of the artist, but the fact of the artist as a result of the discourses and operations that inform him. Choice operates to both

delimit and define the subjectivity of the artist in this way. When I was younger it had more to do with figuring out how to work. You know, I didn't have the master figure reference; I couldn't walk around and say that I studied with Gerhard Richter, nor did I want to. It was a matter of saying "these are the forces I bring to the discussion" and sometimes they have names, and sometimes they are stories.

EQ What's your perspective on the status of painting? In the art world today, it is taken seriously, and consumed vigorously, in a way that it hadn't been for some time, the "Triumph of Painting", the re-emergence of painting. Was there a time when you felt defensive, in terms of being a painter? Is it easier for you, doing the "unfashionable" thing, painting, or is it easier to work in a climate where painting is accepted? Or does it even matter?

JK I don't think it matters to me. It's a choice you make, you get married, the intention is there only as something you want to do: You figure out how you do it. You figure out the practice of every step on the way and that becomes your experience. Of course, there can be things that could happen that might make it impossible for me to paint or I all of a sudden start making movies, who knows, but that should be an option. It's not like I'm born with that gene, that's not what I'm saying. I see art-making as a commitment to something and to a project, and I think you mentioned that earlier. I feel that some part of what I find interesting is the sustain, something that in a way is the only form of resistance. Something that is continuous, that is as continuous as your body is continuous. There is this weird thing that runs with you. That may be romantic, but I feel like that's what I want to do and that's how I go along. I try to do it to the fullest. So I don't care and I care a lot at the same time. I address the situation, but I can't really say that painting is getting any easier. I have always found a way to negotiate my practice in the world where I live and see what it can do. So, it doesn't matter, but it's also a potential that you have when the odds are against you.

The conversation was initiated by Jutta Koether on the dates of Nov. 21st and Dec. 5th 2005. It is a series of excerpts from a transcript of the conversation, which took place in New York.