

The background is an abstract composition of thick, textured brushstrokes in three primary colors: green, yellow, and red. The green strokes are on the left side, the yellow strokes are on the top right, and the red strokes are at the bottom. The strokes are layered and overlap, creating a sense of depth and movement. The text 'Golden Age' is written in white, cursive script in the upper right quadrant, overlapping the yellow and green areas.

Golden
Age

Golden Age

Perspectives on abstract painting today



EJ Hauser, *You (five)*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 33" x 29".

Edited by
Marco Antonini and Christopher K. Ho

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Foreword

The return of abstract painting in contemporary art practice was well under way when I started my tenure at NURTUREart more than three years ago. The ubiquity of fairly traditional (if not art-historically situated, with or without a wink) abstraction was especially conspicuous in the underground or slightly-below-ground art worlds of New York's outer boroughs. This spontaneous revival had been catching my attention well before then.

I moved to Brooklyn circa eleven years ago. Before that, the only un-ironic abstract paintings I had seen were in museums and art history books. What I saw everywhere in Brooklyn, where I lived and worked, wasn't *any* kind of abstraction. Rather, it was *all* of it: a uber-current that swept across decades of art history and practice. Hastily made and joyfully tactile works mingled with the slower pace and rigor of formalist geometry. From bona-fide pluralistic, insouciantly retro salon-style displays came process art spiked with conceptualism that flirted with craft proper. This new age of abstraction probably never saw itself coming (or leaving) but its masterpieces looked and felt as earnest and as self-assured as anything; they invariably looked like "Art." I saw it everywhere and kept thinking: "Why?"

Bushwick was a physical and mental space I increasingly considered my own, and this work, this "new" abstract painting some had already tried to label Humble, Provisional, Modest, D.I.Y., etc., really was everywhere. But only a handful of artists and curators were talking about what it *meant*, and *why*. New Yorkers (actual or adopted) excel at de-contextualizing their work and themselves, acting as if in the proverbial bubble; I for one wanted to bring the conversation on.

There was already some great critical material out: written words and smartly curated exhibitions (many of them mentioned in the essays and conversations collected in this book.) My attention was particularly piqued by Christopher K. Ho's 2012 essay "The Clinton Crew: Privileged White Art," way more than Raphael Rubenstein's 2009 "Provisional Painting" and/or Sharon Butler's 2011 "The New Casualists" which were, in their own ways, trail-blazing. No artist I knew particularly liked to be labeled "provisional" or "casual," catchwords that whiffed of labelism and/or crypto-institutionalism. In that context, Chris' bluntly confrontational (self-confrontational, even) "privileged" tag was a total shock, and I mean that in the best possible way. Absolutely nobody wanted to be called "privileged," (or "white" for that matter), but the essay's arguments were so strong and relevant that artists, art lovers and critics alike simply couldn't ignore them. A conversation between me and Chris started, and we both heard more and more voices coming in the fold. Then David Geers' "Neo-Modern" came out and the idea of editing and printing the book you hold in your hands gained speed.

"Neo-Modern" appeared on the smooth, finely printed pages of *October*, that Bible of art criticism. From the Brooklyn perspective, the essay clearly took a stab at "our" context, referencing work that (although questionably exemplified in the essay) we all knew was exactly "that" kind of abstraction. Who was this David Geers, and why had that little abrasive essay not been written 10 years before? She or he was writing under a pseudonym (that we quickly understood, and it didn't take a PhD in Google, either). How about that? Questions, questions.

I called Chris and we both figured out David Geers' identity by placing a Wanted sign on our social networks. We met David and got him on board *Golden Age*, titling the project after the closing line of his essay. We reached out to Lane Relyea and Gregory Sholette, too. They both had published outstanding essays that Chris and I agreed were not nearly as part of the conversation as they should be. Finally, and in keeping with NURTUREart's mission to create opportunities for emerging artists and curators, we contacted a substantial group of abstract painters, some of them doubling as writers, critics and curators, and most of whom used

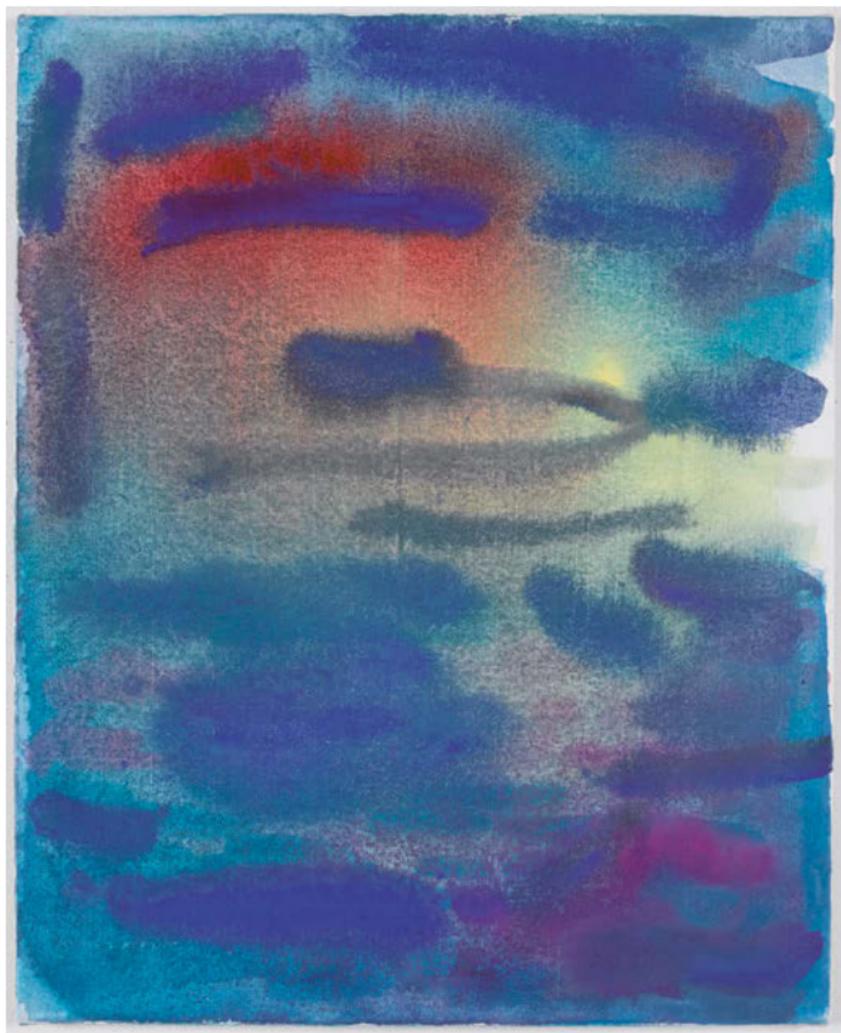
a variety of other media and approaches to art-making. We used the book as an opportunity for Chris, David and Lane to update their own individual takes on abstraction, and for Jonathan Allmaier, David Xu Borgonjon, Vince Contarino, Ariel Dill, Keenan Jay, Lauren Martin, Lauren Portada, Nathalie Provosty, Stephen Truax, and Keith J. Varadi to voice their opinions on the same topics directly, in lengthy and relatively unfiltered conversations that we set up both as actual gatherings and/or email exchanges. The conversations were loosely moderated around topics that appear and reappear in both the republished essays and their postscripts. The result is in your hands.

Golden Age is an important experiment for NURTUREart and it follows in the steps of our 2012 paperback collection of interviews *...Is This Free?* (published concomitantly to the eponymous summer 2012 exhibition series). The idea is to expand NURTUREart's mission beyond creating exhibition, educational and professional opportunities for emerging artists and curators by producing publications that aspire to function as both critical tools and outlets for their ideas and opinions. We hope that *Golden Age* accomplishes all of this and more. The book is as much an attempt to summarize an existing conversation as it is an incitement to deepen discussion about what contemporary art practices (above and beyond specific styles, trends or topics) *mean*, and how we can further their impact, agency and relevance.

We thank all involved for their time and generosity. This book was partially made possible by a grant from the Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation, to which we renew our gratitude.

Marco Antonini

Executive Director and Curator
NURTUREart



Stephen Truax, *Untitled (Sunday Painter)*, 2013.
Gouache and acrylic on canvas, 20" x 16".

Conversation: Ariel Dill, Lauren Portada, Stephen Truax, Marco Antonini

- LP: I'm thinking about some of the shows I've seen around Bushwick recently. There are back-to-back abstract art shows, even in the same space. I'm wondering: does that somehow negate some of the social effect of what abstraction can or can't do if everybody is showing it and making it, or does it amplify its effects?
- MA: Lauren, you used to work in 1717 Troutman in Ridgewood, Queens, which was and still is ground zero in that sense.
- LP: It wasn't three years ago. It was mostly manufacturing or other businesses. The Brooklyn Salsa guys were in there.
- MA: So you think that all of this exposure is a more recent thing?
- LP: Yes. It seems like it's exponentially increasing every year, from one Bushwick Open Studios [BOS] to the next.
- MA: Is it a Bushwick thing? Is there a point in having a conversation about new forms of abstraction here in the neighborhood?
- AD: I had a studio in Bushwick from 2006 to 2011, after I left grad school, and galleries were just starting to open. BOS was happening, but I never participated.
- ST: What about the galleries?
- AD: Bushwick is perfect for artist-run spaces. The artists who run them are often painters, and they are going to show work that they respond to. It happened more and more after the recession.
- MA: It seems like you are suggesting that artist-run spaces closely reflect the realities of art-making, and the reality of art-making is that there are more painters.
- AD: Probably those artists showed their friends and were friends with painters.
- MA: I think this is the kind of group dynamic that can actually lead to a recognizable scene.
- AD: I don't want to generalize. I honestly haven't been to a lot

- of shows in Bushwick recently. I think there are probably more handmade, less slick paintings.
- MA: And that might be a major thing, politically speaking.
- AD: I think that artists who are just getting out of grad school, who don't have any money, just tend to make their own work.
- MA: Yeah, but they also don't go to the supermarket to buy a pound of butter and put it on a pedestal. That's cheap too.
- AD: I've seen plenty of that in Bushwick.
- ST: I think there has been a strong emphasis on abstraction, particularly in Bushwick, but I've been looking at it from a much wider scope, in New York and around the world. It's just been massive. Every art fair I've been to, every international art exhibition I've been to, shows a ton of painting, sculpture looking at painting, photography looking at painting, and more painting.
- MA: But that has something to do with the logic of art fairs too.
- ST: Well not just art fairs; biennials too. There's been a real strong push. I feel like a theory has been coming along. There's been a lot of writing done about it and a lot of thought put into it. Basically every major art magazine has done their own exposé on what they think this "new abstraction" means and why. I think the guy who kicked it off was Raphael Rubenstein ["Provisional Painting," *Art in America*, May, 2009].
- MA: That was 2009, I think.
- LP: I would say Lane Relyea, who was already writing about new abstraction in the early- to mid-2000s. He wrote an article titled "All Over and At Once" published in *X-tra* in 2003, I believe. It addressed the idea of a cyclical return to abstraction. For me, that article was congruent in tipping off an abstract movement in specifically painting that addressed something beyond itself. Later trends then veered away from abstract painting toward sculpture and video. Then—I agree with all of you—two years ago all of a sudden abstraction, specifically geometric abstraction, in painting, returned.
- MA: I don't know if it was only two years ago.
- LP: Well yes, I mean in terms of proliferation where it's ...
- ST: ...exponential.
- MA: It's also because the participants started getting more

shows. Probably it had been happening for a long time but artists were in their studios just trying it. Then you all got older and had better shows and more exposure. It's like a coming of age.

LP: But I agree with what Ariel said. I don't feel like I'm a part of a movement. It doesn't feel cohesive and it doesn't feel in tandem with the writing. There isn't a dialogue between artist and critics.

AD: I tend to be more critical of abstract work, because I make it. As artists it feels uncomfortable to be grouped together.

ST: Additionally, we're not necessarily married to our current style or even medium (painting). Ariel, Lauren and I have all changed our work drastically, even within the last 5 years.

MA: That's very honest of you. The impression from the outside, from someone who doesn't make art, is that artists are very protective about their originality. But you all understand that there can be a way of talking about art without dealing with the particularities of one's own work, of discussing more general aspects. For example, I think that a very important thing about the handmade aspect of much contemporary abstraction is the humbleness of the resulting work.

AD: By handmade do you mean the approach to the actual making?

MA: The general approach, yes. And I also think, the whole philosophy that can be seen beyond that. People who live in the same world have similar experiences. I mean, everyone is different but...

LP: When Regina Rex started in 2010 it was to a large degree a reaction to what was happening in Bushwick. It was a super-clean white cube with a pared down, minimal sensibility, and a program that intentionally moved away from a D.I.Y. aesthetic.

MA: So Regina Rex actually acknowledged the existence of a D.I.Y. aesthetic, given that you did something that reacted or commented on it?

LP: Absolutely.

ST: I was writing for a local blog in 2010, *BushwickBK*, as their art editor and I stumbled into the 1717 Troutman space, walked into this white cube and immediately saw how transformative that space was and how it changed the neighborhood [see Stephen Truax, "The Curatorial Knife," *Bush-*

- wickBK, July 20, 2010]. It wasn't even up for debate. They brought it to this whole different place.
- LP: What is it, after all, that makes either a show or a particular piece stand out when you see one abstraction show after the other? I think that abstract work should have a social aspect to it, and also show the daily rigor of personal practice.
- MA: The idea that there is a social aspect to this way of working, to this new abstraction, is very interesting.
- LP: It's like participating in a dialogue: exchanging studio visits, showing, or being in conversation with artists or collaborating or defining a sort of practice that may exist outside of just the making of work.
- ST: It is about participating in an active community, being aware of what is going on around you.
- LP: Yes, for sure, but that brings us back to the question: Are we a cohesive community or aren't we a cohesive community? Because this is the first time I'm meeting Ariel though I'm aware of her work, in the same way I'm aware of Stephen's work.
- MA: And you live close by.
- LP: Right.
- ST: We chose that. It wasn't like, "Whoops, we ended up living blocks from each other." We chose to live in Bushwick.
- MA: And why was that?
- ST: I moved here because I wanted to be around other artists. I thought it was just me and my other RISD friends bringing out and moving to Bushwick. I didn't realize that everyone on planet Earth had moved here to make his or her life as a painter. [All laugh.]
- MA: So is this return to abstraction representative of a certain generation?
- AD: The *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975* show was really important to a lot of people of our generation [National Academy Museum, New York, February 2007]. I was excited by the way those artists followed a personal vision. Our approach is maybe even more embracing of the historical than those artists' approaches were. We are more... well, it's just allowed.
- MA: What is allowed, who allows it, and why?
- AD: I felt it was kind of transgressive to pull directly from Picas-

so. Now it's not, because you see so much of it. I remember seeing a Nicole Eisenman show and thinking "She's just going for Kirchner and Picasso. This looks amazing and fresh." I think a lot of artists saw that as exciting. Art is made from looking at other art and reading it; it doesn't come out of nowhere.

MA: It doesn't seem fresh to me. It's actually cyclical too, because this kind of return was already there for example in early postmodernism. It was what Julian Schnabel and company did years ago, what you see in the artists of Achille Bonito Oliva's *Transavanguardia*....

ST: I don't know if I agree with that. We're nothing like the Neo-Expressionists. I would say that '80s painting was a sort of last gasp of Modernism—generally figurative painting without any sense of irony, remove or skepticism.

MA: But it took something from the past, from tradition.

AD: Everything takes something from the past! [Laughs.]

MA: Certain artists and movements do it a lot less.

ST: I would really differentiate those '80s painters, East Village painters, and what's happening now.

LP: Many people of that generation would probably say: "This reminds me so much of what happened in the East Village."

ST: Of course there is a relationship.

AD: Sure, people coming together and making work.

LP: Right. And being a little bit of trailblazers.

AD: Or like '70s SoHo.

ST: When I look back at '70s SoHo, I look at Richard Serra's works and Robert Morris' scatter pieces and all the crazy stuff that was happening at 111 Greene Street, where it was like "I'm just going to install an I-beam and that will be the whole show." We don't do that. We are actively trying to make something. I feel that constant hyper-invention leads to exhaustion. For example, there was a moment when we went through the ontological crisis of the artist. Who am I? What should I make? What is critically and socially responsible to make in my present moment? And we were just like, "No. I am a painter."

AD: Conceptual gestures were becoming one-liners, and we were sick of one-liners.

MA: So what was the Pictures Generation going back to?



Ariel Dill, *Spell*, 2013. Oil on linen, 20" x 16".

- AD: I'm saying they went somewhere else because the previous mode was tired.
- MA: There's a difference between going and going back. I meet so many people who mention Arthur Dove and Charles Burchfield as their sources of inspiration...
- AD: Why does every source of inspiration have to be current?
- MA: I like them both, especially Dove. I just want to understand the meaning of looking so far back.
- ST: Dove and Burchfield are trying to give you a mystical, transcendental experience. Think about Dove's *Fog Horns*, 1929. He's really trying to depict sound...
- AD: There's an idea of spirituality...
- LP: ...and also something that makes you wish *you* had that experience.
- ST: That's why Robert Gober curated that Burchfield show at the Whitney [*Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield*, 2010]. Same with Forest Bess at the Whitney Biennial 2012, a great painter who was completely overlooked and was completely sincere about his project.
- AD: And they're not making work as a clean Modernist idea of pure color and form. It's relating to a personal experience. It's...
- ST: ...overlaid.
- AD: It's overlaid with their life. That's what a lot of painters look for now. I look at Hilma af Klint. She is someone that a lot of painters are rediscovering. She was not part of the Modernist canon.
- ST: And she was at the Venice Biennale this year [*Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* (The Encyclopedic Palace), curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Giardini/Arsenale, the 53rd Biennale di Venezia, 2013].
- AD: That kind of approach to abstraction is what we find interesting. It's more like a research-based way of looking at work, historical work, and seeing how it can relate to our time now.
- ST: It's pastiche.
- MA: Pastiche is something quite specific to me. It's not just respectful quotation. It implies hierarchy in the sense of an elevated historical standpoint, which in turn implies...
- ST: Why would it imply a hierarchy?

- MA: Because that's what allows pastiche. You can only pastiche things when they are far and removed from you, so well known that you have no issue taking from and reshuffling them. In the present that would not feel the same.
- AD: You call it pastiche but I say they are just influences. If you directly took an exact shape from a Hilma af Klint painting and put it into your work, that'd be pastiche. It's almost like a distance. But using af Klint as an example again, she was very spiritual and interested in theosophy. I'm going to look at her work and I'm going to play with those concepts but I have a critical distance from them. I am drawing from the imagery and the ideas. I am attracted to the spectacular images and the ideas generating her work.
- MA: To what extent? I mean, to what end?
- AD: To generate imagery and to generate a narrative: to make work.
- MA: How did we get here from the earlier generational question?
- LP: I don't know, but I think it does tie back to the generational question because we are talking about distancing, and we're also talking about appropriation versus pastiche. It's about creating your own kind of dialogue from these elements and moving on...
- ST: ...from history. I think what we are doing here is defining contextualized differences between our historical source material, what we're painting, and why we're painting it.
- MA: I would also like to hear about *why* you are painting or what the social standing of your artistic practice is. How does it touch or impress people? Do you think that it is something that only belongs to you? I am thinking about the way Hilla Rebay wrote about abstraction, almost like a utopia, which just seems quaint at this point, but that kind of desire...
- LP: Why does it have to be quaint?
- MA: Because that desire for an improvement of life through spirituality and art seems to have failed.
- LP: If that's the case, the question remains: How can you make paintings that are subtle and wonderful? To make this kind of work is really difficult, but I still think it's important. Part of being a *conscientious* painter is to be concerned with finding new qualities in the work. I think when you are making private, poetic work, you are still making something connected to the world. Even if it is abstract, it is also realis-

tic because its concerns are real. Now, is this some sort of dream, a utopian one that has ended abruptly?

MA: By what?

ST: The monochrome. I do want to make a clarification about what defines good abstraction to me. One of the very first steps for me, in making that distinction between what is really working and what isn't, is a critical distance from the practice of painting. The painter has to be able to...

LP: ...be self-aware?

ST: Yeah, but also look at the painting as a symbol. I've written a lot of criticism about painters who seem to approach painting in a very un-self-critical manner. I feel like that is a huge tipping point. You need to see an art object for what it means, for what it symbolizes. There are a lot of painters active today who are working in this way: Allison Katz, Charlene von Heyl, E.J. Hauser, Joe Bradley, Joshua Abelow, Laura Owens, and Thomas Schiebitz, to name a few.

LP: I think this is interesting, the "painting as a symbol." Content is a part of form and form is part of content.

MA: Do you think it's the same symbol for all artists?

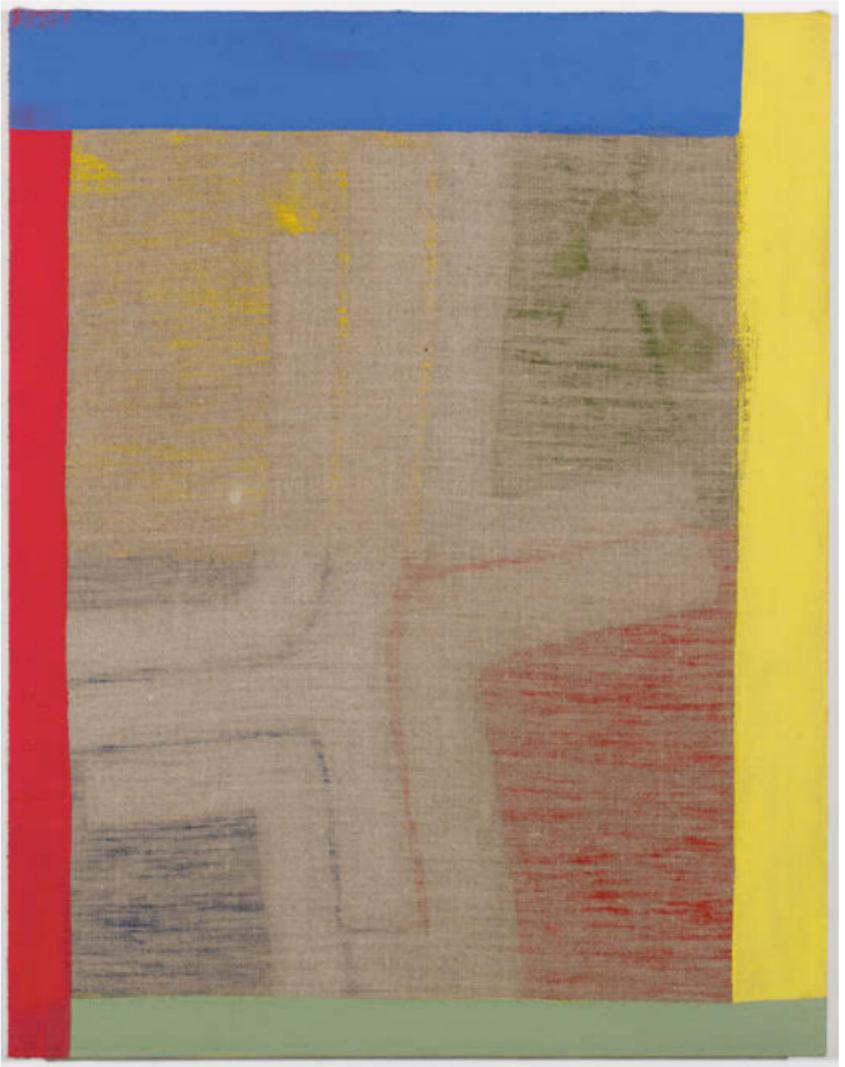
ST: Obviously I can't speak for all artists, but for me, I see it as a very specific artistic gesture to create a painting in 2013 and to have it be small, beautiful, and made by hand.

MA: You say there's something specific about this kind of painting or art-making. What is it?

ST: There is the refusal of two things. One is the huge commercial gallery work that is happening right now: Gagosian's eleven galleries, the Hirsts and Murakamis, etc. Then there is also the refusal of creating conceptual one-liners. I look at that stuff and I really like it but I also see a big flaw there. Conceptual gestures don't work anymore for me. I have to *make* something.

AD: There are other parts of you than just your brain. [Laughs.] A lot of us are using a more physical, sensual approach to material. When people say it's about their process, they're really talking about their physical relationship to making work.

LP: I'm interested in how this kind of abstraction relates to commodity culture, because a lot of people would argue that to make something small and abstract would be per-



Lauren Portada, *Untitled (Simon)*, 2013. Acrylic on linen, 22" x 17".

fectly fitting for the market, while I think about small, abstract work as a sort of subversive act.

MA: An abstract painting is certainly market-ready, but the artists' intentions are not always opportunistic. Small, humble works produced in higher numbers do not allow for the same surplus value of large, expensive, and/or scarce ones. Regarding what we were saying before about inheritance and assimilation versus disruption and critique, your generation tends to lean towards inheritance, right? Did that start in art school?

LP: I always looked at other artists or other work and that never felt like something specific to my generation. In order to understand not only what is happening next but what is happening now, I had to look at what happened before.

AD: Your professors would come and say, "Look at this."

LP: Sure or I would say, "I'm looking at this." I was in undergrad with a bunch of high Modernists and I was taught by a bunch of high Modernists and everybody was obsessed with the turning point of Cézanne and all I did was look at that goddamn table that shifted ever so slightly. [All laugh.] In grad school the program was conceptually-driven and we talked about what it meant to have an artistic practice as well as a social practice.

MA: Where do you draw the line between artistic practice and social practice? Do you see a social component in your own artistic practice, as abstract painters?

LP: Yes, and they can actually be one and the same. I don't think that going into my studio, where I am alone, is an isolated or isolating thing.

MA: What I'm trying to understand is whether or not the way you work and socialize shows a potential to change the art world and its dynamics.

LP: Absolutely, which brings to mind Christopher K. Ho's "Privileged White Art" [*WOW HUH*, Spring 2012]. The artists are mentioned as being a part of a privileged class. A socializing, "privileged class" responding to their environment both in the work they are making and the context they work in. Is that their only choice, or are they responding to something? Are we making the work that *needs* to be made? How is what needs to be made determined? Or, are

we making work we *want* to make?

ST: Which brings us back to the ontological crisis of the artist.

MA: What would be more desirable to the three of you? Knowing that you are doing what needs to be done or feeling confident that you're doing what you want to do?

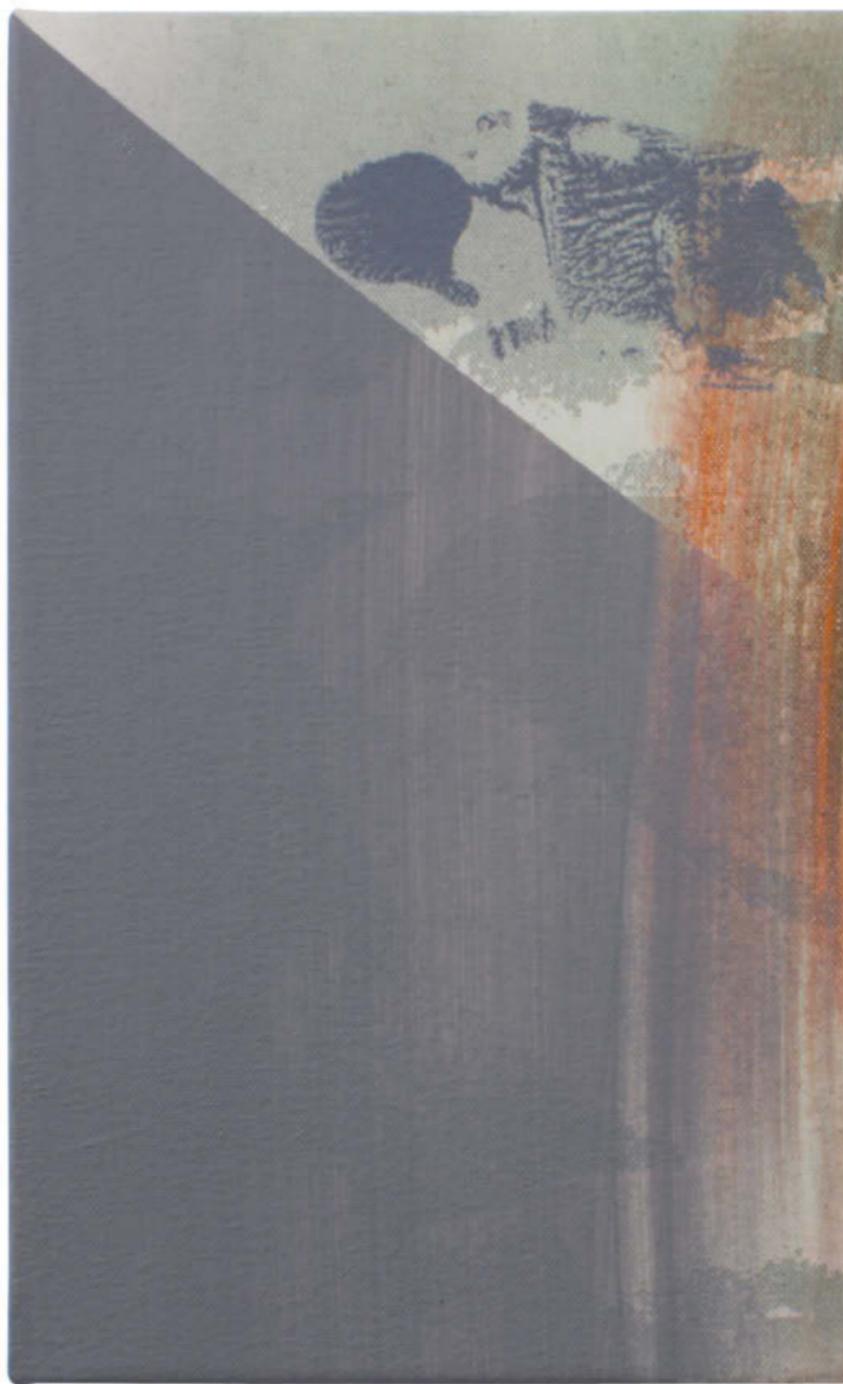
ST: I see myself as a project-based artist. I don't just make paintings; I also work with photography, printmaking, and sculpture; I organize exhibitions; I write about art. I try to be very intentional about what I'm doing. I would want my work to express a combination of need and want. If it's not both, than what are you working for? It's either navel-gazing or trend-forecasting.

LP: Ultimately I don't see them as being opposed. By doing what needs to be done, wouldn't one be confident doing it as well? My work is made out of both want and need, determined by my relationship to society. It is important to me that my work reflects, as well as projects within a social and cultural context.

AD: The exterior and the interior are both present in my work. I make my work out of a desire to enter into a relationship with materiality, which allows me to get out of myself.

MA: You can definitely take a political stance by using really personal subject matter.

ST: I think the word we choose to use is "culture" rather than politics. Being the kind of artist currently under discussion, you are a cultural contributor, not a political activist.





Vince Contarino, *NT/NF/10*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 11" x 14".

Neo-Modern

To any practitioner or critic informed by the critique of modernism, its recent revival in artistic practice offers a bewildering puzzle. Repealing established taboos and turning back the clock, the last few years have seen a renewed interest in abstraction, materiality, and process in ways that, on the surface, recall the formal strategies of modernist art and its Minimalist offshoots. In the United States alone, the New Museum's *Unmonumental* (2008), the Kitchen's *Besides, With, Against, and Yet: Abstraction and the Ready-Made Gesture* (2009–10), the Sculpture Center's *Knight's Move* (2010), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964–1977* (2010), the Museum of Modern Art's *Abstract Expressionist New York* (2010–11), and a host of gallery shows have all registered this seachange, showcasing a resurgent concern with abstraction from a variety of perspectives.

While many of these artistic practices and curatorial projects demonstrate complex and critical relationships to modernism, abstraction, and autonomy, there is nevertheless a slow gravitational pull, in both production and reception, toward a less reflexive and more nostalgic attitude. Indeed, any visit to Chelsea, the Lower East Side or an MFA program will yield a peppering of objects that mimic the formal moves of some modernist art. Why now? My conjecture is that this revival is a return to foundations not unlike similar returns during periods of great anxiety and upheaval. But whereas the *rappel à l'ordre* of the 1920s, for instance, gazed toward an antique figurative tradition, the current turn to the classical grasps at more recent bedrock.

A perfect storm of timing and influence, this embrace of modernist styles is a convergence of several developments. It is, in equal parts, a generational fatigue with theory; a growing split

between hand-made artistic production and social practice; and a legitimate and thrifty attempt to “keep it real” in the face of an ever-expansive image culture and the slick “commodity art” of Koons, Murakami, and others. But, it also represents a nostalgic retrenchment on the part of an art world threatened by technological transformation and economic uncertainty that now undermine its hierarchies and claims of cultural precedence. At the same time, today’s appropriation of modernist abstraction is far too eclectic to be associated with the medium-specific, teleological formalism of Clement Greenberg. Neo-formalism can draw on a range of influences spanning Constructivism to *Arte Povera*, but it most closely resembles Action Painting in its emphasis on performative production (read process) and abstract form. Inoculated with a dose of the everyday, however, neo-formalism traffics in hybridized materials that afford it a referential base and so insulate it against charges of pure abstraction. Its décor, too, often carries a payload of gritty materialism that deflects any accusation of strictly aesthetic claims. Thus a work by Josh Smith, Daniel Hesidence, Alex Hubbard, Thomas Hasego, Richard Aldrich, or Gedi Sibony, just to name a few, might juxtapose a modernist look with a material process, counterbalancing aesthetic delectation with ascetic denial.

Negating pictorial depth with surface, and conventional representation with materiality, such practices attempt to circumvent a fundamentally unreliable and theoretically foreclosed image-world. But if this resurrected interest in material experimentation and anti-pictorial opacity is admirable as a resistance to a perfected illusionism, it also turns a blind eye to its own conservative tendencies. Incorporating the received values of materialism and context-sensitivity, today’s neo-formalism nevertheless pursues an art of intuitive, aesthetic arrangement that satisfies the need for formal continuities and simple answers during a particularly complex time.

While it propounds a discourse of quotidian modesty—“an alchemy of the everyday”—neo-formalism in fact nullifies the specificity and discursive potential of its own materials and subsumes them in a familiar modernist idiom.¹ Unlike the critical appropriation art of the 1980s, it advances a reverential manual

re-crafting of modernism that filters its sources through the individual sensibility of the artist. Less simulation than emulation, neo-formalism is in fact a restorative project that may “test the limits of your faith in art,” but only in order to “renew it” more resolutely.² Acting like a modern-day Arcimboldo, the artist shapes the ordinary matter of today into the formal echoes of yesterday, thus validating the modern “visual tradition as an intrinsic and enduring value.”³ In so doing, neo-formalism retreats to a solipsism that, while guaranteeing improvisatory freedom, also shelters the artist and the collector alike in an echo chamber of art-historical reference and formal free-play. At once shielded and entombed, neo-formalism remains a pictorially but not operationally resistant gesture that is characterized by aesthetic withdrawal and ratified by an all-too-willing market.

Rhetorically supported as a shift to concreteness and aided by current theory’s frayed relation to practice, neo-formalism also reanimates well-worn tropes of emotive expression and cathartic gesture. One sees this especially in the return of Expressionist painting, replete with a discourse of ineffable and unfettered “creation” and an equally transcendental subject who “does not rely on nostalgia [or] visual culture” but forms “an elusive space that takes the viewer beyond a definable language.”⁴ Here the artist once more assumes the mantle of an emancipated creator (and we that of emancipated spectators), allowing us to relive a myth of a “wild,” unmediated subjectivity welded inextricably to the primal medium of paint—an image that is perhaps comforting but also nostalgic and mystified.

From a structural perspective, this shift in focus from discourse to subjectivity and from representation to thing counters more dematerialized practices such as conceptual and media-based work. Often evoking the modesty of everyday materials, neo-formalism appeals to the simplicities of artistic labor, a last bastion of humanity’s endangered (yet “enduring”) tactile engagement with matter. At the same time, neo-formalism constitutes a complement to the reinvigorated focus on performance; indeed, it is one part of a dyad in which the never-extinguished need for anthropomorphism and figuration finds its transitory place on the gallery and museum stage in performance art (witness the

fanfare around Marina Abramovic's recent retrospective *The Artist Is Present*). Such populist anthropomorphism thus offers up the body for voyeuristic scrutiny, while the commercial object is stripped down to a vague, formal vehicle, conventional enough to appeal to an equally broad audience.

To be fair, in this time of economic crisis and political uncertainty, modernism may offer the closest thing we have to a solid foundation—to a classical as well as a critical past. Yet, if today's run to the Rothkos imitates modernism's dialectical nature (its tactical call-and-response of one style to another) in order to contest the dominance of conceptual and image-based works, it also discards modernism's oppositional aspects. Instead, it plunders modernism's formal attributes for whatever charge they might still hold, trafficking equally in the shockingly outré and the canonically familiar.

A painting by Josh Smith, for instance, coyly plays with Expressionist tropes smuggled in under the rubric of reproducibility; each mark functions as both authentic gesture and copy, at once full of hyperbolic display and empty of sentiment. Yet, posed against no hegemonic realism and consumed for its aesthetic appeal, such work simply traffics in familiar clichés of artistic innocence. Such innocence, supported by Smith's own prosaic articulation of his practice, has long been the stuff of modernism's embrace of the primitive, the infantile, and the savage. Small wonder, then, that his abstractions and paintings of fish, leaves, and his own endlessly and decorously rearranged name would find such a market in an era marked by anxious retrospection.

Such a project represents a cynical model for a contemporary practice that now searches for loopholes and blind spots in a constant hedging of bets. In effect, it allows the artist and the collector to have it both ways—the luxury of aesthetic pleasure and its simultaneous disavowal. Younger artists exploit this ambiguous terrain, too, acting as unwitting champions in today's version of “the return to the craft.”⁵ A process-based resin painting by Alex Hubbard, for instance, can echo de Kooning, Rothko, or Tapiès, all of whom are aggrandized in a youthful update. Meanwhile, a silver-dipped painting by Jacob Kassay

reinvents the Constructivist and Minimalist monochrome as a product of the (now antiquated) photographic process, but also recasts it as a sumptuary wall hanging that vainly mirrors the likeness of its possessor.

In this way, neo-formalism exhumes and recombines formerly revolutionary models—Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Arte Povera, Minimalism, etc.—but in so doing fails to grasp new social and cultural configurations that call for different strategies altogether. In stark contrast, developments in technology, the Internet, and social media have helped to mobilize actual revolutions like the Arab Spring and now the Occupy Wall Street movement, while the art world is still trying to connect an emancipatory rhetoric to an economy of luxury goods. To obviate such impasses and vulgar concerns, neo-formalism retreats to the aura of the object and to its hallowed resting place in modernist abstraction.

However, unlike modernism's former champions, today's artists, critics, and salespeople often struggle for a language to discuss such practices. Instead they fall back on the old mantra of "process"—not because the work arrests language or transcends positivist conceptions, as is often claimed, but because, in the absence of the lofty (yet critical) discourse that fueled much of modernism, there is so little to discuss except process. This unmoored rhetoric finds itself reflected in art schools as well. A visit to an MFA program today will reveal a plethora of "slacker abstractions" that channel anyone and everyone from Richard Tuttle to Michael Krebber. When queried about the critical stakes or guiding principles of such a practice, the student repeats the language of the press releases: "Well, it's really intuitive, just thinking about materials and process." Such myopia, born of theoretical foreclosures and a general sense of defeatism (one student recently remarked, "How do you compete with *Avatar*?"), also signals a withdrawal, a back-to-basics mentality. In this retreat, modernism offers a proud, long-unclaimed history that can now be surfed, collaged, and artfully arranged into quasi-uncanny objects, critical in form yet complacent in spirit. The danger here is less that this art promotes an illusory autonomy or cynically concedes to the market than that it reveals the

discourse of art as now consisting of nothing but the market.

Needless to say, the collecting class, largely unexposed to the critique of modernism and still driven by humanistic myths of creation, celebrates any return to the promise of an autonomous, self-possessed maker yielding highly aestheticized products through mostly intuitive means. For this generally older demographic, the return to modernism is perceived as combining the street cred of a younger generation with a vetted inoffensiveness that closely echoes the classics of the past century. So a Thomas Houseago sculpture may invoke the primitivist heroics of Picasso, while a “face painting” by Mark Grotjann can echo Klee or Poussette-Dart.

Lest one believe that a work’s implicit criticality were sufficient to undo, convert, or contest this mentality, any visit to a collection will reveal the naiveté of such thinking. Still motivated by aesthetic appeal, market value, and the decorative place of a work in the home, most collectors in fact seem unmoved or impervious to a work’s critical gestures, while artists are often torn between personal politics and commercial pressure. The two parties thus engage in an uneasy courtship around unspoken divisions and unacknowledged aspirations, where each seeks the perceived (and performed) freedoms of the other. Even when purchased for institutions, the work can still be vetted through a private home en route to a public forum. It is only logical that this circuit of exchange privileges a particular type of work, a particular type of practice, a particular type of discourse.

Understanding this implicitly, neo-formalism tacitly reveals an epistemic shift, a historical transformation, whereby, with the avant-garde now jettisoned as a naive fiction, the contemporary artwork is regarded as little more than an exclusive (exclusionary) objet d’art. If we consider the formal veneer of the works in question, the structure of today’s art market, and the ornate passivity of its championed products, we see a return to a pre-modern condition, in which the artwork is limited largely to a propagandistic, affirmative, or decorative role, as was the case with eighteenth-century painting. Indeed, one only has to look at Nattier, Fragonard, and Boucher to see the operational ho-

rizon and destiny of much of today's production. Comparing these two epochs, defined by gross economic asymmetry and the alienation of its "enlightened" aristocratic class from an impoverished and flawed infrastructure, we see the logic of today's political and economic divisiveness, the "mobs" rioting in the streets, as well as the courtly properties of today's art.

Taken broadly, this shift is tied to the art world's becoming a peculiar form of niche industry, equal parts Hollywood and exotic market (Gagosian Gallery, for instance, now sells speedboats designed by Marc Newson). Witness, too, the ever-growing number of art fairs that scour the globe for new collectors, the heightened fascination with celebrity (i.e., James Franco's newfound legitimacy as an artist), and the Oscar-inspired Art Awards that started as a gag by Rob Pruitt but have now been transformed into a legitimate award ceremony.

The neo-formalism crowding today's MFA programs, galleries, museums, and art fairs is both the ostensible antagonist of this development and its reaction formation. It may appear to deny a perfected spectacle, but it is tethered to it as by an umbilical cord.⁶ Lest one mistake it for the autonomous art once championed by Adorno, this work seldom aspires to address the generalized alienation that would result in a gesture of refusal, nor is it refused by a literalist audience in search of simpler things. Rather, it greets a pre-primed spectator, already indoctrinated into the codes and mythologies of the modern, who happily welcomes it as a return to old certainties—an echo of a lost golden age.

David Geers

Footnotes:

- 1 "An alchemist of the everyday, Sibony makes stripped-down sculptures that may test the limits of your faith in art, but they'll also renew it." "Gedi Sibony," *The New Yorker* (May 26, 2008), p. 16.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 See Saatchi Gallery's artists profile for Gedi Sibony, n. p.: "In *That's Tall's Tale*, Sibony configures a 'painting' from plastic sheeting and pack-

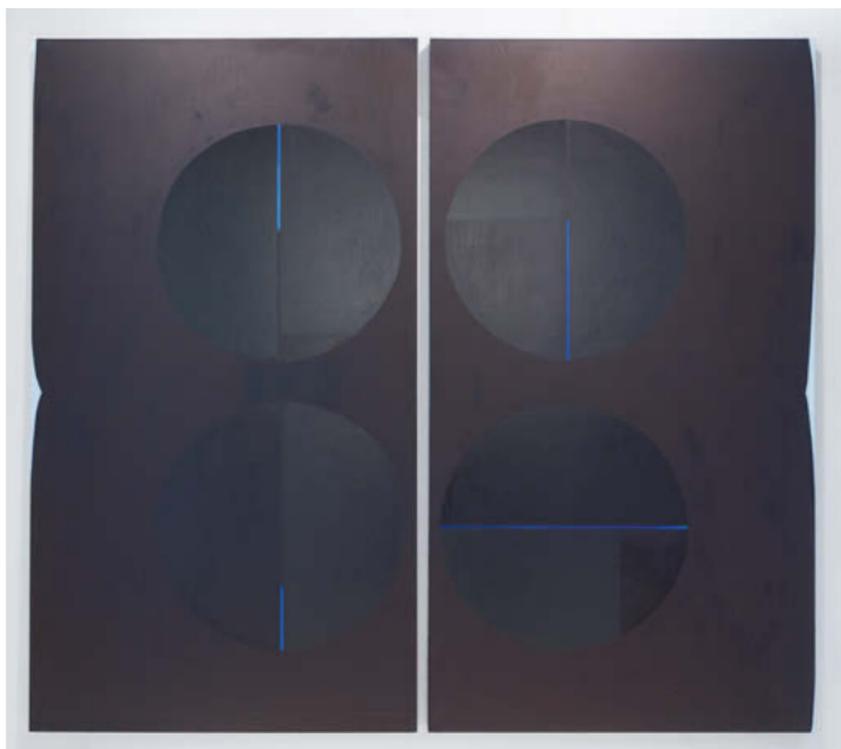
ing tape, with the irregular shape of the ‘canvas’ drawing reference to artists such as Ellsworth Kelley and Frank Stella. By exposing exactly how the work was made, Sibony instigates a performative role for the artistic process, focusing attention on the subtle tensions within the composition and its very considered and sophisticated balance of form, materiality, and space. Through this intense scrutiny, Sibony affirms the authenticity of artistic integrity, positing a refined connoisseurship of, and heightened sensitivity to, visual tradition as an intrinsic and enduring value” (saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/gedi_sibony.htm?section_name=shape_of_things, accessed January 16, 2012).

- 4 Press release for Daniel Hesidence’s *American Buffalo*, D’Amelio Terras Gallery, 2010, n. p.: “Hesidence’s work does not rely on nostalgia, visual culture, nor pay ironic tribute to artists of admiration. Rather, Hesidence locates information through a concentrated process of creation, forming an elusive space that takes the viewer beyond a definable language. Like the highly improvisational and gestural European ‘Art Informel,’ his paintings are uncompromising, wild, and aggressive. Often evocative of moods both dark and elated in the same canvas, they are past description, unutterable in their fluidity and intricate logic. For both painter and viewer, these works embody a vitality that unabashedly consumes the senses.”
- 5 In “The Return to the Craft” (1920), Giorgio de Chirico urges a return to classical tradition after a state of avant-garde “hysteria”: “With the sunset of hysteria more than one painter will return to the craft, and those who have already done so can work with freer hands, and their work will be more adequately recognized and recompensed.” See Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–1990* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 234–37. It is also interesting to note that de Chirico’s emphasis on the reception by “freer hands” of commensurate compensation is echoed in today’s emphasis on labor and process as an index of aesthetic (and perhaps monetary) value. Both returns mobilize the rhetoric of craft as essential to tradition. Today’s coupling of process and abstraction is thus a literal “re-crafting” of the modernist past.
- 6 As Clement Greenberg famously wrote, “No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold.” See “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), in *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, p. 533.

Postscript to "Neo-Modern"

A lot has changed since *Neo-Modern* was first drafted in August of 2011 in a moment of relative quietism. Who could have predicted that a mere month later, this nation would witness one of the biggest protest movements in its recent history. Reflecting on this writing in hindsight, and through the prism of these events, it becomes clear that the aesthetic trends outlined in the article have only continued, while the conditions inspiring them have also intensified. The increasing economic polarization fueling the art market, its global spread in an exhibition biennial-art-fair complex, and the art world's growing fascination with celebrity continue to bear this out. Yet, given the exacerbation of these patterns, it is also necessary to consider what I described as *neo-formalism* within a broader context that delineates not only the operational limits of the hand-made artwork, but also a kind of compromise position imposed on its maker. This position often rends the artist between contradictory demands: between a vestigial discourse of criticality and market pressures, between nostalgia for a lost object and a blunted political consciousness trapped in a loop of superficial negation. Located within these tensions, and denied the utopianism of the past that it both spoofs and valorizes, neo-formalism can thus be re-framed along two related logics: those of the ruin and the joke.

Much has been written on the ruin lust that has seized contemporary art in the last decade. For Brian Dillon, the archeology of artistic and architectural modernism that has so preoccupied artists of late is manifestly "a discourse on ruins in a Romantic mode."¹ "At first glance," he writes, "the assertion that 'modernity is our antiquity' (as one of the guiding rubrics of Documenta 12 had it) allows for a potentially endless poring over the rubble, and the discovery time and again of our melancholy



Nathalie Provosty, *Valence Violence Violets*, 2013.
Oil on linen, two panels, each 84" x 46".

distance from the formal ambition or political charge of the modern.”² Much of the rhetoric surrounding today’s fetish for modernism, Dillon admits, is careful to avoid an attitude of mourning and instead calls for “a re-animation (or maybe occult conjuring) of the corpse of Modernism.”³ Yet for Dillon, as for others, this raises some taxing problems as well, since, such a fixation on the ruin and reanimation of its latent energies was itself a quintessentially modern problem. “At every turn” he writes, “[...] the contemporary ruin gaze is seemingly mired in a revivalist nostalgia.”⁴

Turning our own gaze to “Neo-Modern,” it is easy to see how this logic of the ruin plays out in much of the work discussed. For as a Picasso may be a ruin of an Ingres or a Manet, so today a Thomas Housego sculpture is a ruin of a Picasso, both deconstructing and preserving its object for a tradition-hungry clientele. Indeed, as the works described in “Neo-Modern” and similar ones tow the line between demolition and reverential exhumation, they conjure up the ghost of modernism uncannily revived today as “our antiquity.” Seen through the optic of the *rappel à l’ordre*, this logic syncs neatly with a general sense of political and economic anxiety that fuels our current retrospection. We scour the past, it seems, looking for constants and guarantees. Yet, whether posed as melancholic mourning or celebratory citation, it is neo-formalism’s timing and marketability that are particularly conspicuous. In this light, the citational nature of much contemporary art has been equated by Melanie Gilligan to finance capital that, no longer investing in productive forces, instead generates money out of money through increasingly complex side-bets and financial instruments.⁵ For Gilligan, the recycled, self-cannibalizing nature of art in this latest stage of capitalism offers an uncanny parallel to the financial sphere that also traffics in the looting of past resources and yields profits from “derivatives.”

At the same time, today’s erosion and exhumation of the modernist object may not be solely fueled by mercantile concerns. Informed by a modern-day Ruskinism that privileges the tactile and the hand-made, this recent “return to craft” is born of a healthy skepticism of technology and consumer culture to

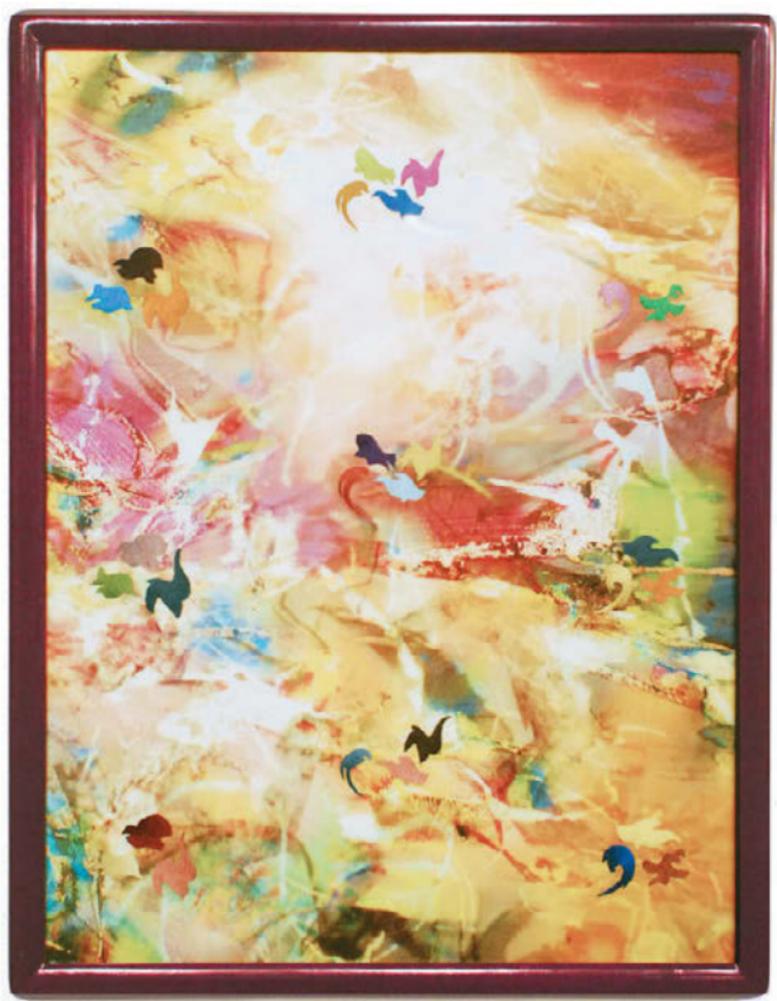
which the hand-wrought object offers an earthy panacea.⁶ As we witness transformations in every sphere of production and consumption, the experience of the seamless web in our homes and on our phones, and as we consider a future transformed by social media and 3D printing, we come to increasingly fetishize the slow process of an inimitable “genuine” object that embodies the values of a receding world. For Andreas Huyssen, such drive towards authenticity comprised the essential matrix of modernist thought that continues to this day. “The desire for the auratic and the authentic,” he writes, “has always reflected the fear of inauthenticity, the lack of existential meaning, and the absence of individual originality. The more we learn to understand all images, words, and sounds as always already mediated, the more, it seems, we desire the authentic and the immediate...”⁷ For Huyssen, echoing Walter Benjamin, such longing for the authentic represents “the media and commodity culture’s romantic longing for its other.”⁸ Most central to this logic, however, is also a longing for stable origins that today, even in negative form—that is, in modernism as ruin—grant neo-formalism its authenticity and authority as marketable guarantee.

Yet, if neo-formalism partakes in the logic of the ruin that preserves an uncanny, deformed modernism, it also manifests an ambiguity that aligns it closely with irony, puns, and verbal humor; indeed, its quirky innocence is one of the many foils used to sidestep the critical burdens that stultified some art of the eighties and nineties. However, while many neo-formalist works may rely on the joke to obviate more political demands, they also mobilize a particular form of humor for their operations—a pun less indebted to social commentary than to abject self-deprecation. A brief foray into humor theory might illuminate this mechanism. For example, in the Semantic Script-Based Theory of Humor (SSTH) elaborated by humor researcher Victor Raskin, a word or a phrase with a double meaning in the common joke is described as a *script switch trigger* and allows the shift from one semantic script to another. Similarly, Salvatore Attardo’s Isotopy Disjunction Model (IDM) posits an analogous mechanism where a *connector* overlapping two opposing isotopies (or readings, for lack of a better term) is followed by a *disjuncter*, or punchline, that disambiguates them and gives the

joke resolution.⁹ While in verbal jokes, this polysemous connector forces the receiver to follow the dominant script until the punchline shifts him to the opposing one, in the neo-formalist work, it is often the formal image drawn from the modernist cannon that acts like such a connector while a formal negation via process, materials or context acts as the disjunctive. Thus overlapping two opposing isotopies (image and object, singular work and serial production, etc.) such a mechanism might indeed enable the neo-formalist work to seem reflexive, or “critical” and celebratory at the same time. But what does such abnegation ultimately accomplish?

While the structure of overlapping opposing scripts is not exclusive to humor or to neo-formalism, more urgent is the question of why extreme positional equivocality pervades so many contemporary artworks. Humor, as we know, is often conditioned by aggression, but also by powerlessness and duress. Today, such pressure to camouflage a counter-text may point to the oppressive influence of the contemporary art market and the structural envelope of what Suhail Malik has described as our ubiquitous “post-negational art.”¹⁰ For Malik, it is precisely contemporary art’s absorption of its own antithesis, by aspiring to a notional real (as in *real* politics, *real* materials, *real* social relations), that propels art’s internal indeterminacy yet leaves its highly determinate, often unjust institutions intact. While trapping us in a post-Duchampian loop where the moment one negates art with non-art (via the readymade, Relational Aesthetics, etc.) one simply produces more “contemporary art,” this structure prevents us from engaging art’s institutions as they actually are.¹¹ And, while humor poses its semantic antitheses and transgressions within prescribed limits, rituals, and spaces, contemporary art’s internal self-negations also serve to legitimate its wider institutional system.

In neo-formalism, such auto-negation can be seen in the many nods to context and appeals to gross materiality (e.g., the incorporation of low materials, studio detritus, raw canvas, etc.) that may “humble” and deconstruct the work formally but only to reassert the authority of its institutional frame. Moreover, such versions of deconstructive “passing” also reveal the contradic-



David Xu Borgonjon, *While the Reds Get Rich*, 2013.
Hand-embroidered printed silk in mahogany frame, 27" x 15".

tory demands imposed on the artist today who might rhetorically side with an avant-garde legacy of negation while negotiating exhibition avenues increasingly dominated by commerce. As deconstruction in this sphere is reduced solely to formal maneuvers, so, too, political gestures become limited to historical citation rather than changes wrought more caustically in the distribution and property structures of the work.

Thus confined to the world of private patronage, limited editions, and collectibles (as Amazon Fine Art bluntly puts it), artists and other industry professionals are forced to refine their rhetoric in increasingly narrow ways. It is here that we encounter the renewed emphasis on “process” as a mana term that conveniently screens out these contradictions. However, as promotional literature and artist statements continue to extoll materiality as spirit (or performativity as *élan*), such myopic focus on material presence only fetishizes a *surface materialism* that allows the greater economic asymmetries subtending the art industry to remain unchallenged. Indeed, for many of us, a more transformative spirit is being modeled outside the mainstream art world altogether.¹² Not long ago, this improvisatory (but collective spirit) flowered in the hand-scrawled protest signs of the Occupy movement, and we can see this spirit still in the many Web-based or socially engaged projects that point to models of sharing and authorship outside the familiar art as luxury goods-cultural tourism paradigm.¹³

As these hand-rendered signs and other attempts at authenticity prove, we still need the object more than ever. We need this object that, frequently culled from the garbage heap, is repurposed to grander ambitions. Yet, we need this object not as a shrine to the past, but as a platform for reforming the present and prefiguring the future. To be fair, the neo-formalist artwork privileges a kind of repurposing as well. But too often its deconstructions and reanimations dwell solely on the ruin of the exploded work and in so doing, entreat the viewer to a process of mourning, or else, to an ecstatic negativity—not to an imagination of what follows. And, while mourning may be preferable to manic celebration over the corpse of modernism, today, such mourning may foreclose alternative models and scenarios offered from all

sides.¹⁴ These models reside in what is inclusive, communitarian and even, perhaps, free. They may also be represented not by demolition, but by an exit from the loop of self-negation altogether—by affirming a new positive and letting go of the object of loss. Thus could we begin transcending our regress of ruins (of deconstructing Minimalism, say, or Ab-Ex), and start posing, however awkwardly, the illegible script whose meaning we've yet to decipher. Granted such utopianism may seem naïve to us now, and certainly, past artistic experiments were always informed by historical memory. But since we have foresworn all new beginnings and demystified our *tabula rasas*, we now roam from ruin to *redux*, desperate for the good object that won't let us down.

Coming to art in search of this good object, we are often torn between the freely shareable and immaterial one of the Web, the relational one legitimated by the institution, and the material, highly exclusive one clad in the tattered or ironized garments of the classics. The opportunity offered to object-makers today is one that moves beyond mere historical mining—beyond our derivatives—and rethinks the object through formal inventiveness, a future-directed imagination, and new, more equitable property relations.¹⁵ It is here that I extend the call, already latent in “Neo-Modern” and followed in subsequent writings, to imagine what kind of work such rethinking would yield. What would be its means of display, distribution, and the formal language evolved from these concerns? How would this artwork visualize its politics and begin to test these politics through their effects and even, perhaps, through their censure? And, if in identifying our need for the hand-made object, our anxiety about its eclipse, and our fear of what's to come, we still insist on a culture of unique things: how can we make these things available to those outside of our cloistered showcases, and make them ciphers of a more just future rather than memorials to a glorious, but nevertheless concluded past?

David Geers

Footnotes:

- 1 Brian Dillon, "Decline and Fall," http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/decline_and_fall/
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See Melanie Gilligan, "Derivative Art," *It's the Political Economy, Stupid*, Gregory Sholette, Oliver Ressler eds. (Pluto Press, 2013).
- 6 In "The Return to the Craft" Giorgio De Chirico famously extolled a return to craft and tradition as a counter to modernization and avant-garde decadence. See Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–1990* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp. 234–37.
- 7 See Andreas Huyysen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," *Grey Room*, Spring 2006, No. 23, 6-21.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 See Salvatore Attardo's *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Mouton de Gruyter (February 1, 1994) p.195-227. Though such bisociation or "contrast" theories are complex in humor research and do not necessarily entail just two scripts at play but also other factors like the role of context, timing, delivery mechanism, priming of the audience, etc., the parallel to art is best illustrated by a word with a double meaning in the often cited W.C. Fields joke: "A: Do you believe in clubs for young people? B: Only when kindness fails." Here, the double meaning of 'clubs' acts as the connector, while B's line is the disjunctive that forces the receiver to reread the joke and switch from the first faulty semantic script to the opposing, more logical one connoting physical punishment. Such a mechanism is widespread in jokes and puns but also forms the structure of much art where the same formal element allows for divergent, contradictory readings. Although, for the sake of brevity, I cannot address here the larger implications of humor and visual art as *non-bona-fide* modes of communication (i.e., communication deviating from the cooperative, direct and economical transmission of information), I plan to develop these ideas further in another paper on art and humor.
- 10 See Suhail Malik, "On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art": <http://artistspace.org/programs/on-the-necessity-of-arts-exit-from-contemporary-art/>
- 11 Such a critique of institutions, their role in supporting a culture of economic asymmetry, debt and growing corporate control, is under-

taken currently by activist groups like Arts&Labor, Gulf Labor, Occupy Museums, and W.A.G.E., among others.

- 12 Sharon L. Butler in “Abstract Painting: The New Casualists” invokes Malevich in defense of the new “casualism” in painting, writing that “Malevich believed that pure feeling was to be found in non-objective painting, and that materialism could lead to ‘spiritual freedom.’ Both Malevich and the new casualists, who approach their work intuitively, are unfazed by ill-defined parameters or truncated lines of thought.” However what Butler and some artists associated with this “casualist” approach miss is that much of the abstraction of the modernist moment—and the Russian Avant Garde in particular—was tied to a revolutionary social project. This distinction is one of the key chasms separating neo-modernism from its twentieth-century antecedents. For more on “casualism” see Sharon L. Butler, “Abstract Painting: The New Casualists,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 3rd 2011, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/06/artseen/abstract-painting-the-new-casualists>
- 13 See my “Open Call: Art, Democracy, and the Culture of Consensus,” *Fillip* #17, Winter, 2012. Also for some of these alternative models and socially engaged projects, see ExchangeWorks, Art Commons, OurGoods, and Dose Projects that, respectively, experiment with barter, art-sharing, and alternative charity-funding models.
- 14 See Yves-Alain Bois, “Painting the Task of Mourning,” *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).
- 15 In the frame of Malik’s critique: How can we stop disavowing art’s inauthenticity through some recourse to a *real* or so many internal negotiations, and instead, accepting art’s artificiality, start reforming and negating its unjust systems? As Malik puts it: “Justice is itself artificial; it is made now.” Suhail Malik, “On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art”: <http://artistspace.org/programs/on-the-necessity-of-arts-exit-from-contemporary-art/>

Conversation: Jonathan Allmaier, Vince Contarino, Marco Antonini

MA: So this apparently modest and unassuming abstract work we are circling around has been going on for a while. I've been in New York for ten years now, and it was already around when I arrived, whereas it was extremely infrequent where I came from.

JA: What was it like in Italy? What kind of work was there?

MA: It's still going in the same direction as when I left. It stems from conceptual art, developing on that with a little bit of social concern and relational gestures for good measure. More recently, and generally speaking, there also has been a return to "pure" materials, a rediscovery of tradition, local history, and lore. Here in the U.S. you have David Geers describing the local painting scene as "[l]ess reflective and more nostalgic," which both sound like negatives to me. The fact that NURTUREart is located here in Bushwick was part of the reason we wanted to do this book. From our standpoint, it seems like abstraction has been particularly happening here. What is it, and why here?

VC: I've been in New York for almost 16 years. It is interesting to see all this abstraction—particularly the kind you are talking about, this kind of "provisional" work. When I moved here there wasn't any abstract painting happening amongst my peers. At the time I was trying to figure out what kind of art I wanted to make and I didn't really identify with what was being exhibited or talked about in the art world.

MA: We were still in the long tail of the '90s then.

VC: I wasn't aware of anyone even close to my age that was making abstract painting. I wanted to be a painter but I wasn't quite sure where I fit in, especially given the fact that I was surrounded by a lot of conceptual/identity-based art that dominated what was being shown and written about at the

time. Like most people, I knew about the New York School, but didn't really know too much about the *High Times*, *Hard Times* artists, the '70s stuff. It took me maybe 6 or 7 years after moving here to get exposed to that. This group of artists inspired radically different thinking in regards to painting and materials. I live in Fort Greene, my studio is in Clinton Hill, so I'm not in the center of the Bushwick art scene, but I've shown here and come to see exhibitions. I visit a lot of friends that have studios here, so I'm curious about how it must feel for younger artists, arriving in this center where there seems to be an over-saturation of abstraction being made, specifically the kind of work we are talking about. How do you separate yourself from the pack? Many articles have tried to force a label on this return to abstraction, which doesn't make much sense to me.

MA: It is very hard and probably useless to label and name things. When I talk about this book with people I often find myself just saying "*that* kind of work." But I do feel that there is *something* there, something that a lot of people feel, a series of traits that unify contemporary abstraction now.

JA: I think I know what you mean, but it seems that this is a discussion about style, and I wonder whether style is actually very interesting. I do recognize that there is a lot of a certain kind of work—*that* kind of work as you say—but what you are talking about is the way the work *looks*. For me, the way the work looks is not the issue, unless the work itself has made its looks the issue. But if we'd like to say, for instance, that this is a good painting or that is a lousy painting, or that this is a good time or a bad time for painting, I don't think that style is that interesting. Style is just style.

MA: Let's assume we're only talking about the good paintings.

JA: What makes a painting good is not its stylistic concern. In fact if I see a painting only concerned with style, with how it is going to be perceived or how it is going to fit in within a certain kind of category, or into some idea of a particular historical moment... something like that makes a painting much less specific. If style becomes the most important concern, then there's no painting to talk about: all you can talk about is style. I think that's true whether you're embracing style or avoiding style. Either way it's dull.

- MA: Works that are stylistically similar often present some sort of shared background in their conceptual aspects.
- JA: Not necessarily.
- MA: Well, one of the first prompts I wrote down for this interview was, “Is it possible to talk about style at this time and place?” Is style something real, or do you think it’s something we inherited from art history?
- VC: I don’t see why not. People use words to describe a certain way of working. There is style and there is attitude, and the two of them get confused sometimes. There’s what we, as painters, see in the studio, when we are looking at the work, and then that same work goes out into the world and it is received and perceived differently. I think that maybe that’s what Jonathan is referring to. This idea of “style” is, no pun intended, sort of painted with a very big brush. What people think about painting has a life of its own, it has to do with remembering, and with them not being directly involved with art making. When you mention the ‘70s, all of a sudden people think of disco, but there was all kinds of shit happening in the ‘70s. In *Reinventing Abstraction*, the show that Raphael Rubenstein put together at Cheim & Read [2013], he was sort of talking about how people remember the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. Beyond that collective memory, there also was ground-breaking painting and thinking, happening at the same time and sort of forgotten, which became the subject of his exhibition. I think that show connects the dots to what is happening now.
- MA: Do you see a backwards movement in art and pop culture at large, a desire to go back...?
- JA: Do you want to know why so many paintings seem formally similar?
- MA: Well, no. But I think that artwork often gets radically re-evaluated through the lens of time and nostalgia, something we can see in fashion, music, all culture.
- JA: JA: It’s like what Vince said about disco, and his considerations about Rubenstein’s Cheim & Read show.
- MA: Did you like it?
- JA: I did like it. When you’ve seen an artist’s work from a certain time period, it’s very interesting to see things from a different time period too. Disco or fashion or all that nostalgic

stuff are things that you think about when you think about a certain period. They are things that you hold in your mind. How specific are they? It's hard to say, because they don't really exist outside your knowledge and memories and conversations. But if you're talking about a painting that was made then, that painting also exists now. We can go and look at it and see what it is.

MA: You could say the same about disco.

JA: True, listening to disco is in some ways the same thing. But only if we are listening to a particular song—the comparison's better with live music—those particular notes and beats, as opposed to talking about disco-in-general or using "disco" as a shorthand signifier for all sorts of things.

MA: I agree with you that there are concepts that surround music, fashion, art, etc. that only exist and propagate in our minds, as ideas and communication. But we also have Vivienne Westwood T-shirts from the '70s; these still exist. A song by the Bee Gees can still be played and danced to.

JA: The question is how we treat the T-shirt or song. Are they real—and maybe we can even learn something from them—or are they just extensions of our notions? We don't have to add mentality or ideas to objects. They are already there; they're not separate from the object. When I see a painting from the '70s I don't think about the time in which it was created in a generalized way. It exists now, in my looking at it. When I'm looking at a Rembrandt, that's a contemporary painting because I'm looking at it now. Looking at the painting, I can learn all kinds of things about it: its circumstances, culture, time period, geography, economics, politics, etc. But I learn these things in ways that are not separable from the object itself. They are that painting's painting-circumstances; they're not abstracted or generalized circumstances.

MA: This is an interesting attitude. I think it's happening a lot. It's a form of respectful co-optation. Artists feel that these examples are still valid and alive today, so they include them in their work without resorting to actual quotation. But I also want to talk about the way a lot of abstract painting is being written about. I don't mean the critical essays that we've all been reading; more like the press releases of the

shows, their introductions. I noticed some interesting coincidences: press releases are often substituted by poetic or otherwise creative texts; the artworks are framed in somewhat dismissive, neutral or vague terms; there are references to various ideas of community; and a general sense of anti-intellectualism pervades. Another thing I noticed is how the reality of the social context in which the artists live reflects the way their work is displayed.

VC: I've put together a couple of shows, one about abstraction, and it was up in the Bronx River Arts Center. It was a 32-artist exhibition called called *The Working Title* and it opened in March 2011. I co-organized the show with Kris Chatterton who is also an abstract painter. At the time Kris and I were doing our own blogs and we started *Progress Report*, which presented collected texts and images about the conversations we were having during studio visits. It was through our work on *Progress Report* that we were approached by Jose Ruiz, the director of BRAC, who was thinking about putting together an abstraction show himself, but decided that he was more interested in seeing it from the artist's perspective. It was the kind of thing that had a lot to do with timing, that coincided with a lot of commercial galleries closing down. This led to a lot of people being pro-active in organizing pop-up shows in unused real estate, and that kind of thing.

MA: That was what I was trying to get to by mentioning a "social" aspect.

VC: We called it *The Working Title* because we were really excited about what was happening amongst our peers with abstraction. We could see a lot of varied connections but couldn't really put a finger on it ourselves—kind of like an undefined moment. At the same time, all of the work had a specific and clearly-defined voice.

MA: So you gave it a title that expressed...

VC: ...open-endedness. It wasn't just a painting show. It was a show dealing with abstraction and what that can do, trying to extend the conversation in and out of the moment. We had two contributors for our catalog. One was painter Shirley Kaneda, a central figure in publishing writings on abstraction from the previous generation, who wrote a



Vince Contarino, *NT/NF/5*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 17" x 14".

more historical essay. The other was independent curator Jon Lutz, who had a list of 6 questions, 2 of which he submitted to each artist.

MA: Do you remember what the questions were?

VC: “Does teaching outside of the studio affect what you make?” “Do you think about your work in a contemporary, historical context?” “What does progress mean to you?” He was sort of trying to get to the bottom of what you are saying. The list of people writing about abstraction is short. We like to think the work can best articulate itself, and I think that is a lot of the reason you are seeing the press releases in the way you described. Abstraction is hard to make and hard to write about. Putting those questions forward actually allowed for what we’re in now, a much more fluid conversation.

MA: Jonathan, I saw you nodding when Vince said that writing about abstraction is difficult.

JA: Definitely.

MA: You actually write about your work. There are some really interesting texts on your website.

JA: Well, if I get interested in something in a way that suggests communication, I’ll try to write about it. If I’d like to communicate this idea or that idea, then writing to me is the right form for that.

MA: Do you think it’s possible to express one form (art) through the other (writing)? Is it a possibility you find stimulating?

JA: Yeah, I guess it could be stimulating, but what I like about painting is that it is very hard to understand. There’s a sense in which you actually *can’t* understand it, a sense that you can’t completely wrap your head around it, no matter what you do. You can encounter it and manipulate it, or touch it and walk away; it would still be there. Whereas writing or talking can be understood completely, especially if the writing is good and clear. But at any rate the *form* of writing is a form of understanding. You can hold the whole argument in your mind and tell someone else about it. An art object doesn’t allow that.

MA: It has its own thing going on.

JA: Yeah, it’s not entirely available to us.

MA: And is there any difference about writing about abstract art

versus other kinds of art?

JA: No, I don't think so. I'm curious about what you have in mind when you say "abstract art."

MA: I think something that is abstract is something that doesn't represent anything you would...

VC: No people or trees. [Laughs.]

MA: Yeah. Nothing in the artistic text, a sculpture, an installation, a photograph, you name it.

JA: What if it reminds you of a tree? [Laughs.]

MA: If it reminds you about it very closely, it's not abstraction to me.

JA: What if it reminds you a little bit less? [Laughs.]

MA: There's a line that is very subjective, and I guess you can consider this or that abstraction based on that. But as a general concept I would say it starts wherever an image cannot be related to the real world. I know... it's vague.

JA: To me an abstraction is just an idea that's been separated from an object. I don't think a painting can ever be really abstract because it's not an un-instantiated idea. It's always here or there; it's this or that. A painting is not like words. Words really are abstract.

MA: Is it the painting's objecthood, its physicality, that makes it impossible for it to ever be abstract?

JA: That's right: abstraction means you've separated meaning from object. That's what language does; that's how it operates. A lot of people think paintings can do that but, really, a painting is still a painting. It's still there!

VC: There's a valid argument against defining abstraction at all. I feel like if there's any kind of painting, really good painting, you almost forget what you're looking at. Abstraction has been around for 100 years now but every generation is exposed to a quantity of different things. Take social media: that is a convenience, but also a burden that we have to deal with, that can distract and affect what we make. In terms of describing what is abstract or not, I think everyone has their own definition. When it comes to informing my own work, I'm not only thinking about other painters—Christian Marclay's *Guitar Drag*, for example, is one of the pieces I think about the most, both in terms of mark-making and for its use of sound. It's like having a radio in your head that is

constantly changing stations, adjusting what you're listening to. But at the same time, it's a very specific action he's taking to create that response.

MA: Going back to Jon Lutz's questions: What is *your* idea of progress?

VC: The artists that got asked that question gave the most heated responses, like, "What do you mean, 'What is progress?'" But it is an interesting question, because painting is challenging. It's essentially applying colored mud to a flat surface and trying to make something out of it. I guess that's what I'm attracted to about painting in general—challenging the limitations of this way of working, at once very economical and self-contained, yet something that can carry a unique power within itself and its relational context to other things.

MA: What about you, Jonathan? What is your idea of progress?

JA: Progress is a word that presupposes a context. You have to identify what the context is and then you can talk about progress within that context. The question would be: What's the context and how do you identify it? In painting, oftentimes the context for progress is still construed in terms of style, making for a very old-fashioned idea of progress. Originality is itself a very modernist idea. That's something I noticed about David Geers' "Neo-Modern." The essay finds fault with a lot of contemporary art for being too modernistic—which I think is a very interesting idea! But the criticism itself has a modernist point of view. All the art-historical categorization, also the persistent idea of a somehow linear progression in art and technology—to me that's an issue—I think those kinds of ideas of progress really come from a particular idea of the self, from a modernist idea of the self.

MA: What is this idea of self that you're thinking about?

JA: Just this idea of free, unattached, powerful...

MA: ...man?

JA: It's just the self, but yes, the modernists usually mean a man who is able to just decide or decree what's to be done based on some abstracted notion of history, as though the self were not itself historically contingent, as though the self were somehow outside its circumstances. It doesn't seem like an accurate description of what a person, what an artist



Jonathan Allmaier, p14. *Untitled (Green Blue Point)*, 2012.
Oil on canvas, 23 5/8" x 22".

- is. No one is isolated from a particular set of circumstances.
- MA: What about the isolation of the studio?
- JA: You have the paint there and the stretcher and canvas and everything, not to mention the room.
- MA: You are with objects then.
- JA: You are, and also you have all the paintings in there.
- MA: It seemed like you are talking about social isolation, individualism, not objects.
- JA: I guess I don't make a distinction. People also are objects. Objects are not the same as human beings, but they do have a subjectivity, a point of view, which you can recognize. That is an interesting thing about a painting: you can certainly recognize a painting's own point of view. Is it the same as the person who made it? Who knows, maybe that person is dead. [Laughs.]
- MA: Wait, I disagree. Do you think a painting is or not?
- JA: The same as the person who made it? No, it's not.
- MA: So a painting has a life of its own. But that's probably captured in your personal artistic practice, isn't it?
- JA: Well, I follow the materials in relation to each other—that's a kind of culture. I'm curious, so I try to learn from the paintings, too. I observe them and try to describe what their relationships are, and that might generate another painting. The only way to describe it, for instance, might be with another painting. It's all coming from the paintings, and they are coming from the materials and their properties—those are things, but they are ideas too—they're just not abstract ideas. But to me the really complex ideas are the instantiated ideas.
- VC: In my own practice, I think about specific questions like: "Is a painting a thing or is it an action?" "Is it process or do you have a preconceived image in mind?" I do make conscious decisions in the work, but lately have been allowing the process to do most of the heavy lifting as I look for road signs along the way. What does it mean when you have two things next to each other, and what can that do within itself, in the simplest terms possible? Ideas can come from anywhere. I hear something or watch something, or respond to another artwork. I try to take what I'm attracted to or have a real sensory response to, and bring it into the

- painting. More than anything else I feel like I just try and ask a lot of questions.
- MA: It's quite a traditional approach...
- VC: Maybe. The word "traditional" can be seen as negative but we are all coming from tradition in one way or another.
- MA: I think that we have been in the zone where tradition is not seen as a negative thing for quite a while now.
- VC: I feel that in some of the articles in this book and beyond, mentioning tradition is an attack. For example, there's this article that was in the *New Yorker* a few months ago called "What Makes an Artwork Seem Dated?" [Tom Vanderbilt, June 27, 2013]. It's something that I've been thinking about since I've been in New York. What's this thing going to look like in 10, 30 years? The writer was posing a question that I'm at the same time fascinated and intimidated by. The best comparison he made was about science fiction, arguing that films about the future can somehow feel like the most dated genre of all.
- MA: It's certainly hard to try to imagine the future. You're taking a huge risk.
- VC: When I talk about tradition and painting, I think there are certain things that you can move forward with but then there are others that border with the nostalgia you mentioned before; I'd rather not call them that but they resemble dead-ends. I try to stay as far away from that as possible. I'm interested in paintings that appear to be traditional but are actually quite radical—Al Held's alphabet paintings for example. Big, massive acrylic paintings on fucked up panels made in the 1960s remain as radical today—maybe even more so—then when they were made. They say a lot about what I'm attracted to in painting: efficiency, and what a painting can or cannot do.
- MA: Going back to David Geers' "Neo-Modern" for a moment, what do you think of his use of the word "formalism" or "neo-formalism" when talking about a certain kind of abstract work?
- JA: You could say there's a lot of aestheticized work and a lot of the work isn't very good. In that case calling it "formalism" may be a way of saying it isn't very good.
- MA: Yes, one of the issues I have with his essay is that Geers

always seems to assume we're talking about bad work!

JA: That's right.

VC: The essay is kind of a downer and cynical in that way. On the other hand, I read Chris Ho's "Privileged White Art" essay a couple of times and loved it [*WOW HUH*, Spring 2012]. I think all work, not just abstract painting is challenged by the issues he brings up.

MA: He used his own, "generational," approach in it.

VC: I feel like he's got a very singular angle. He assumes a lot about the personal backgrounds of the artists he discusses. I kind of have a problem with that. What I do like about Chris' article is that he remains generally curious and evidently attracted to abstract painting and sculpture. There seems to be a genuine investment there in finding out more, which never strikes me as cynical. But he still challenges this kind of work and folds it into his own practice as an artist. The references to Occupy Wall Street in Geers' "Neo-Modern" are timely but then there are a lot of other things happening at this time in history, and I don't know if anyone should make artwork that's specific to that or any other movement. If you do then it's going to be attached to it forever. I love conceptual work and I love works that deal with identity and politics but I wouldn't want any of that to be a prerequisite for making strong work. It either happens or not. What Geers is saying somewhere around the end of the essay is that the Internet and social media are what we should be using to express the spirit of our times, that working on objects is ultimately a "vulgar concern," and do we really need more "things" in the world?

Well, I had to laugh when I read that paragraph about the

JA: Internet and social media and Occupy Wall Street, because when I think of Occupy Wall Street and the technology that facilitated it, I think about the human mic. [All laugh.]

MA: Right, they weren't allowed to have bullhorns, so speeches had to be repeated with call and response. That really is the technology associated with the protests—a truly iconic example of analog exchange.

JA: I don't know whether the human mic is new or not, but it is definitely technology, and any kind of technology, new or old, implies some kind of politics, not to mention power. Who controls the human mic?



Keith J. Varadi, *Bernie*, 2013. Oil and canvas, 9" x 12".

D.I.Y. Abstraction

A recent spat of articles and museum shows have drawn attention to the state of abstract painting today and especially its underlying material conditions of possibility. “There is a fascination with industrial techniques and printing technology,” writes Jeffrey Deitch in the catalogue for his recent show *The Painting Factory* at L.A. MoCA. “Painting with this tough, Pop, minimalist, factory-like aesthetic looks so relevant right now and is inspiring so many emerging painters.”¹ Missing from the discussion, though, is any mention of the crucial importance to painting, as to society at large, of individual-scale D.I.Y. or freelance production. Abstract painting, as a typically modernist phenomenon, has always been inspired on some level by ideas about technology—about new paints and other innovative materials and procedures of the studio, about the leading role in a secular, democratic world of free and mindful laboring in general, of large-scale production in the overall organization of modern society, even of the utopia that developments in such production might eventually deliver society into. In what follows I seek to update this history for a present era dominated by entrepreneurs, home offices and desktop printers.

A common assumption about today’s proliferating electronic technology and digital media is that it turns the world increasingly sublime in scale and immaterial in nature. But this loses sight of another trend, just as important, which is the current emphasis placed on individual human capital and its embodied, improvised performances. As the economy shifts from commodity production and exchange toward information-oriented services and short-term contracts, participating parties are drawn into more intricate social collaboration, and subjectivity itself gets inducted more completely within productive and economic processes. Pitted against the mechanical, quantitative tasks of Ford-



Jeffrey Scott Mathews, *Untitled (1982)*, 2012.
Bi83 and acrylic on canvas, 11" x 14".

ism, post-Fordism boasts decision-making, information filtering and the management of affect—not passive workers, shoppers or entertainment audiences but prosumers, information managers, DJs and the like, all of whom adopt a supposedly active relation toward pliant databases. Instead of being suppressed for the sake of getting work done, now the communicating and performing of subjectivity is itself put to work.

It's under such conditions that individual-scale D.I.Y. or freelance production has come to the fore. D.I.Y. is not a counter-cultural movement but the very name of what's most official and canonized in today's culture. The topic is often broached in music criticism, about how (to quote the website *Pitchfork*) what's long been categorized as indie rock “has metastasized toward the mainstream, a process that's been abetted by placement in movie and TV soundtracks of bands from Bon Iver to Broken Social Scene to Iron & Wine.” New post-Fordist work arrangements have encouraged this merging of mainstream and indie, industrial and hand-crafted, high and low tech. Common among today's cultural industries has been a turn away from an earlier factory model of rank-and-file labor armies manning assembly-line production to smaller, more intimate work teams stationed at individual-scale hardware like laptops and other peripherals routinely found in many of today's households. This has led some commentators to hail a dawning “revival of certain ‘pre-modern’ craft-influenced work arrangements ... the new economy reveals itself as a return to the situated, interpersonal and skill-centered forms of production associated with pre-modern (craft-rich) economies.”² Like the Ben and Jerry's ice cream we eat or the small-batch, home-brewed beer we drink, we imagine that more and more of our cultural products are authentically handcrafted, churned out not by gigantic corporations but by small groups of ambitious tinkers futzing in small downtown lofts or neighborhood backyards and basements.

Indeed, neoliberalism in general has largely sold itself as an “artistic” revolution, promising an end to Fordist conformity and standardization via a more fulfilling life of individual autonomy, personal initiative, creative spontaneity and self-realization. This is supposedly the upside of the neoliberal crusade to shift risk

onto individuals and privatize social life through aggressive assaults on unions and state assistance programs. Confusing euphemisms of “the creative life” with neo-entrepreneurial theories of “creative destruction” is a way of providing ideological cover for the makeover in labor conditions to more chronically intermittent employment with longer work hours and no benefits. Artists and designers are made into role models for the highly motivated, underpaid, short-term and subcontracted creative types who politicians and robber barons imagine will staff their fantasy of a fully freelance economy—what ex-Al Gore speechwriter Daniel Pink has titled “Free Agent Nation” and the Tony Blair government pithily christened “The Talent Economy.”

And so it goes for the artists making D.I.Y. paintings. In their application of steady, routinized, repetitive labor and use of personal-scale, low-budget materials, and with their resulting work’s overall sense of precariousness and impermanence, these artists don’t defy the mainstream but express its most characteristic trends. These are “the conditions under which the true reality of our age is experienced,” to borrow a line from Clement Greenberg in the late ‘40s about the sense of isolation and alienation that confronted New York School painters at the time. “The experience of this true reality is indispensable to any ambitious art.”³ Ditto for D.I.Y. today.

The work I’m calling D.I.Y. abstraction—made by such artists as Cheryl Donegan, Adam Henry and Jeffrey Scott Mathews, to name a few—shares close quarters with what Sharon Butler and Raphael Rubinstein have recently pointed to as an emerging trend, what Butler calls “The New Casualism” and Rubinstein calls “Provisional Painting.” According to Rubinstein, the hallmark of such provisional canvases is that they “risk inconsequence or collapse ... they embrace the amateurish and fucked-up ... they look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling.”⁴ But with many of the examples in Rubinstein’s list, whatever an individual work might suffer from such things as hesitancy, belaboredness and lack of mastery is more than compensated for by the foregrounded presence of the painter her or himself—the painter’s worrying and indecision, the compelling drama of the artist’s perpetual questioning and doubt. On the contrary, the

D.I.Y. abstraction I'm talking about, despite employing a personal scale, otherwise avoids signs of personalism and instead favors a quasi-classicist aesthetic of mostly unmixed color, unbroken line and closed form. To paraphrase Greenberg again, against the hand-writing and gesturalism of much '50s painterly abstraction (think de Kooning and Kline), these artists favor a relatively anonymous execution. In other words, their works are post-painterly despite their provisionality. While small in size and obviously hand-wrought, their abstraction tends toward impersonality.

For example, in Mathews's work, the handmade quality means the work carries some of the elegant lyricism of drawing, and yet Mathews avoids any of the carving and chiseling into space that usually results from a strenuously drawn line. Instead, the bleed caused by his use of straight-out-of-the-package sharpies and other kinds of ink markers softens and fattens the line, resulting in effects that are closer to watercolor than drawing, as if the color itself were thickening into a specific width that it arrives at on its own. Furthermore, by working into canvas that is either unprimed or has its fabric-quality somehow exacerbated, the all-over weave creates an evenness across the entire surface that emphasizes the lateral diffusion of color rather than the inward digging of wrist-led drawing and the illusionist effects of value contrast. In several of her paintings from 2007, Donegan does literally the opposite, clawing away patches of their metallic-taped surfaces to reveal the underlying layers of cheap cardboard support beneath. But like with Mathews's fabric weave, the glittering effects of the tape, made all the more fireball-like by Donegan's knife slashes, as well as the abused mushiness of the exposed cardboard, also keeps the paintings' surfaces from hardening, and it's this softer field that stops them from rigidifying into true geometric abstraction, keeping them closer to, say, Kenneth Noland's concentric circles than Piet Mondrian's squares or Robert Ryman's process-oriented tutorials.

But all this doesn't mean that such surfaces truly breathe. The paintings I'm describing tend to be relatively small and insistently dense and concrete. Their smallness necessitates that they'll be experienced as material objects, never as fields outright. So too, the diminutive size disengages the work entirely from the sur-

rounding architecture, thus imbuing it with a sense of on-the-go mobility and transience. Adam Henry shows the role that size plays in this; as his canvases get bigger, emphasis on repetitive making turns into optical patterning, and priority shifts from the artist's hand to the viewer's eye. Mathews often goes in the opposite direction. At least when he spatters heated metal (a substance called bismuth) onto his canvases, as in *Untitled* (1982), 2010, scale is reversed; the paintings take the example of Jackson Pollock in the opposite direction that Richard Serra followed with his throws of molten lead, not toward an expanded arena of physical space but toward miniaturization. The glittering bismuth appears to both pre- and post-date industrial notions of materiality, recalling at once medieval alchemy as well as microchip minerals like silicon, coltan and cassiterite.

Neither do the canvases of Mathews, Henry and Donegan employ much compositional juggling and arranging of distinct forms, which would privilege the framing edge as demarcating the visual "whole" against which such relational balancing is judged. Rather than insisting on each painting as an isolated instance of visual deliberation, as representing a unique set of formal decisions that frame and enliven the viewer's line of sight, priority is instead given to the lateral production of works, one canvas after another. Such paintings are more about behaviors of making than looking. And this could stand, paradoxically enough, as an indication of the extent to which even painting today at its most abstract and colorist and post-painterly has been effected by the rise of information. After all, what distinguishes information is how it privileges performance and operation, what messages do rather than mean; information asks to be handled, processed and circulated (search, filter, point, click, link, reply, save, forward, etc.), not looked at from a distance and experienced optically, like '60s abstract painting, or even read and deciphered like so much '80s art with its reliance on semiotics and theories of the sign.

Indeed, it may be that what most recommends this kind of painting to a place of centrality in our D.I.Y. age is its superior associations with the studio, that artisanal site of making and doing, rather than in the power of painting to induce certain modes of reception like immersion or opticality or semiotic critique. This is

especially true of such conspicuously made or crafted paintings, paintings worked on by a single pair of hands, with a plasticity both hard and yet malleable enough to withstand being heavily manipulated while still yielding form. Furthermore, what so enables such work to convey pure doing, to straddle both D.I.Y. and anonymity, to suggest an artisanal performing of subjectivity albeit in an impersonal mode, is precisely that they are paintings, rather than belonging to some other category of art. That is, rather than a special preserve of unique individuality, here painting stands as close as one can get to just doing stuff, purely making things. As Barry Schwabsky writes in the introduction to the recent Phaidon catalog *Vitamin P2*, “The ordinariness of painting has become one of its most important characteristics. Painting is so familiar, so well-known that it’s become the default mode of art-making. The ordinary art made by the ordinary artist is likely to be painting.”⁵

And yet if painting does present itself today as the best means to simply make and do, as if with no other objective or end in sight, nothing other than the daily practice of painting, to borrow Gerhard Richter’s now famous line, then it’s also probably true that the studio and the making of paintings no longer guarantees as it once did a determinant frame of reference for an artist’s activity, a set of imposed meanings or metaphors that approximate or link the specific, contingent artistic act to the general, to something like tradition or history or community, something that transcends or feels more enduring than the moment to moment of simply doing. Under the conditions of D.I.Y. labor, in which the D.I.Y. artist is whatever she or he is doing at any given moment, a basic cog in the post-Fordist logic of just-in-time production, the studio and the paintings made there become nothing more than an endless string of those isolated moments, stretching out as if in an empty and indeterminate temporal span, one thing after another. Making paintings suddenly becomes just like how Bruce Nauman described the making of his more Duchampian art, an art that supposedly comes after painting: to paraphrase Nauman, painting today is just what an artist does, just filling time while sitting around the studio.

Perhaps this is what makes D.I.Y. abstraction so compelling now.



Cheryl Donegan, *Luxury Dust (Silver)*, 2007.
Silver metallic tape and water-based oil paint
on archival cardboard, 18" x 24".

The post-painterly approach in the work highlighted here, in which D.I.Y. is treated as part of the common material giving undergirding production today, not as a foregrounding of personal gifts and one's unique endowments, is crucial to how these canvases uniquely manifest contemporary feeling—not despite their impersonality and anonymity but because of it. The painterly personalism in too much of Rubinstein's "Provisional Painting" portrays our D.I.Y. neoliberal world in an overly enchanting light. Being a D.I.Y. artist in the Rubinstein mode, too unique and uncategorizable and ever-changing to be pinned down by a single, definitive visual statement, can often result in a romantic art, its template is the romantic hero's transcendent quest of leaving behind common social definitions and roles in search of unique paths and triumphs, fuller truths and a more authentic and rich existence. And yet today the association between authenticity and the uniquely handmade has become a primary sales pitch used by business to add exchange value to everyday retail objects. Indeed, with official policy advancing risk, flexibility and short-term speculation over the social contract's promises of long-term security, it's hard to see how the values promoted in our D.I.Y. age can be taken as challenges to the system when these are the very attributes today's dominant system so loudly promotes. On the contrary, today's claims of romantic defiance and personalism too often look past the fact that our sense of expanded individual agency has been purchased largely through an aggressive shattering and collapse of the larger social structure. Falling progressively into ruin, this is a scene that belongs not to romance but to tragedy.

And D.I.Y. has become something like the campaign slogan for this historical development, on the one hand a puff-chested manifesto about the democratization of authenticity and uniqueness beyond the formerly exclusive preserve of artists, and on the other hand a sad resignation that artists now share the same exploited fate as new-economy working stiffs across the board. The result is that the popular solidarity once promised by modern labor is now misrecognized as a dispersion of individual flex-timers each expressing her or his different, unique sensibility. The D.I.Y. abstraction of Mathews et al. thus updates the current state of painting by focusing on the sense of short-term, freelance pre-

cariousness and insecurity that today pervades the base-line experience of labor, including that performed in the artist's studio. In a world increasingly restricted to just tools and techniques and their on-demand performance, contemporary painters continue to produce work, from one moment of doing to the next, one after another, despite the increasing ordinariness, aimlessness and disenchantment of their situation, without any promise of their output eventually resulting in some enduring social and historical meaning, or of its landing a place for itself within a redemptive, time-honored tradition, or of its being received by a robust, discerning and coherent discourse. The only option they have is to act out in their daily material practice the society's reigning, terrifying belief in the short-term, the temporary, the moment to moment, the always on call, the get-it-while-you-can and enjoy-it-while-it-lasts. Here artistic labor becomes nearly indistinguishable from flex-time wage labor—anonymous, abstract, interchangeable and disposable. Painting as just doing stuff, like a hamster on its treadmill, as if in a perpetual feedback loop, over and over, with no other further objective in sight.

Lane Relyea

Footnotes

- 1 Jeffrey Deitch et al., "The Painting Factory: A Roundtable Discussion," *The Painting Factory* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 9. A similarly themed exhibition, *Phantom Limb: Approaches to Painting Today*, was mounted this summer at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. In the press release curator Michael Darling writes, "The artist's hand—the central protagonist in modern gestural painting—has become a primary reference point for many artists intent on rethinking painting. This ambivalence toward the hand inspired the title of this exhibition, *Phantom Limb*.... As in the medical sense of the term, a phantom limb may no longer be in evidence, but its owner still feels its presence, is haunted by it, and struggles with instinctive urges to use it."
- 2 Mark Banks, "Craft Labour and Creative Industries," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 16, no. 3 (August 2010): 309.
- 3 Clement Greenberg, "The Situation at the Moment" (1948) in *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 193.

- 4 Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," *Art in America* 97, no. 5 (May 2009): 123.
- 5 Barry Schwabsky, "Everyday Painting," *Vitamin P2: New Perspectives in Painting* (London: Phaidon Press, 2011), 15. Paralleling Schwabsky's description of painting, the ordinary and everyday have also been used to characterize contemporary craft. According to Glenn Adamson, editor of *The Craft Reader* (Oxford; New York: Berg Publishers, 2010), "the main appeal of craft is its connection to the rhythms and realities of what has been called the 'everyday' (p. 457)."



Lauren Martin, *Trompe L'oeufs*, 2013.
Gesso, oil, enamel, and plastic, 12" x 18".

Postscript to "D.I.Y. Abstraction"

Nobody asks what I think about recent art anymore. That's okay, because it's not a very interesting question (I'll explain why later). Still, if I were asked I'd probably mention two things. Both are related to labor. Number one: it used to be assumed that, with artistic as well as other types of labor practices, a much more one-to-one relation existed between skill and task—that is, between what an artist or other worker has the capacity to do and what their doing actually produces. A pipe fitter fits pipes, a painter makes paintings. Today, this skill-task correspondence has begun to unravel. In our on-demand, just-in-time world, employees of all stripes are assigned tasks that are myriad and that change moment to moment, context to context. Often approaches and solutions will be improvised well beyond the expectations of training and expertise. Paolo Virno has described this as a newly democratized form of virtuosity, defined less by mastery of one particular, rarified skill than by a general willingness to try one's hand at all sorts of specialized tasks, whether one is qualified or not.¹

This kind of virtuosity—or ambitiously dispersed amateurism—characterizes a lot of current post-studio practices, whereby artists abandon the studio, with its stable routines for perfecting technique, and instead search scavenger-like for ever-new sites and contingencies, “moving between roles” as they “swap one social or project-related setting for the next.”² There's a short-term precariousness and insecurity, not to mention something like perpetual job training, that closely aligns such practices with today's service-economy labor in general. But that doesn't mean that, back in the studio, painters and sculptors remain immune. The conditions underlying labor's shifting valuation extend to them as well. That is, they too feel the pressure to become virtuosic; they can't just make and exhibit objects but must also produce parties,

magazines, clothing, dinners, performances, graphic design, music, etc. The same goes for studio artists as for everyone else; your CV will look thin if you only list shows. Shows aren't enough; now you have to attend residencies and publish blogs and curate others into shows. The more diverse the categories, the better.

So what I said before about painters making paintings was wrong. Perhaps they once did. For a while what they produced instead were shows—that is, at least since the '60s exhibitions replaced the single work as the primary unit of meaning in art³ (“I’m working on my show” is what painters, like all other artists, would say.) But no longer are shows primary. Today artists, painters included, work on something larger and more amorphous. They orbit and sometimes even create worlds, some of which are art worlds. They hop between revolving scenes, juggle various professional identities, seek out and improvise ever-new situations and contexts for staging what can be recognized and evaluated by their peers as art, all squeezed into schedules already full of myriad non-art activity. If this is true of those lucky few who have Chelsea galleries, it’s even more true of the countless rest. In Brooklyn (but also in Chicago, Philadelphia, Kansas City, San Antonio, San Francisco and beyond) artists band into groups, ad-lib galleries, cobble together crowdsourced support for occasions where colleagues meet and stay informed, all to achieve the level of coherence necessary for internally reproducing things like professional status and recognition—that is, for running art worlds.⁴ Such artists, painters included, have to devote as much attention to organizing as to object making. This is why I think it’s uninteresting to talk about art today. A much more compelling topic is all the social labor poured into creating and managing the many moments and contexts that make up today’s various art worlds and their entanglements with other worlds.

When the single artwork was primary, its context was often described diachronically—as moving from previous work toward future work, the resulting narrative gaining value by mirroring or internalizing the supposedly autonomous progression of art in general. When focus turned toward exhibitions, art’s context became more synchronic; exhibitions were related to overlapping institutions, to an art system. But today both art’s time, its

traditions, and its spaces, its institutions, have dispersed. This is my second point. Connectivity and circulation have perforated institutional enclosures like museums; here again exhibitions are superseded, made into mere excuses for all the newly prioritized social events and educational programming. And so it goes with art's temporality. Today the moments of art pass by unbound and disarticulated, like pdfs previously sequenced as essays into magazines or mp3s that float free of their original albums. For example, when I want to look at what's new in painting I'll often search blogs, where entries are stacked with the most recent gallery or studio visit on top. A new canvas appears only to immediately get pushed down by the next entry and so on. Such blogs help filter out from the expanding ocean of artworld output a simple, manageable selection of high-value hits. And like search filters, they displace the need for criticism—there's no point in assailing something for its shortcomings since not making it onto the blog already means being condemned to invisibility. But after a few weeks, perhaps only a few days, the same fate befalls the blog's chosen few; with each new post they too will sink further and further into the cold, dark depths of obscurity.

All this has relevance for the studio and the labor undertaken there. I've remarked on this elsewhere, when addressing the recent amateurish (or virtuosic?) trend in painting, what's been labeled "Provisional Painting" by Raphael Rubenstein, "The New Casualism" by Sharon Butler and "Neo Modern" by David Geers.⁵ My contribution to this debate was meant to nudge it toward labor concerns and away from questions about painting's relation to subjectivity or history or criticality or the market, all of which I feel are increasingly beside the point. "What most recommends this kind of painting to a place of centrality," I countered,

Is its superior associations with the studio, that artisanal site of making and doing, rather than in the power of painting to induce certain modes of reception like immersion or opticality or critique.... [Painting] presents itself today as the best means to just simply make and do, as if with no other objective or end in sight, nothing other than the daily practice of painting, to borrow Gerhard Richter's now famous line.

But there's more. Laboring as if with no further end in sight sig-

nificantly alters the experience of time in the studio. “The studio and the making of paintings,” I continued,

No longer guarantees as it once did a determinant frame for an artist’s activity, a set of imposed meanings or metaphors that approximate or link the specific artistic act to the general, to something like tradition or history ... something that transcends or feels more enduring than the moment to moment of simply doing... The studio and the paintings made there become nothing more than an endless string of those moments, stretching out as if in an empty and indeterminant temporal span, one thing after another. Making paintings suddenly becomes just like how Bruce Nauman described the making of his more Duchampian art, an art that supposedly comes after painting: to paraphrase Nauman, painting today is just what an artist does, just filling time while sitting around the studio.⁶

But here again I was wrong. Or at least I should have added this important caveat: because the studio, too, has been perforated, and the time of art dispersed, what fills time in the studio now is not just an artist making art but myriad identities and activities. Art must take a backseat to the more crucial task of creating its various conditions of existence, its contexts, visibilities and relations. Thus art today, painting included, may indeed be just what an artist does to fill the day, again following Nauman, but only when she or he can find spare time to actually make art and perform the role of the artist, rather than having to attend to the million other things that need to get done.

Lane Relyea

Footnotes

- 1 Paolo Virno, “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, eds. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 189-209. See also Shannon Jackson, “Just-In-Time: Performance and the Aesthetics of Precarity,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 10-31.
- 2 James Meyer, “The Functional Site,” *Documents* 7 (Fall 1996): 24; James Meyer, “Das Schicksal der Avantgarde (The Fate of the Avant-Garde),” in Christian Kravagna, ed., *Agenda: Perspektiven kritischer Kunst* (Vienna: Folio, 2000), 82-84.

- 3 “The object has not become less important,” Robert Morris wrote in 1966. “It has merely become less self-important.” See his “Notes on Sculpture,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 231. Thierry de Duve sets the date earlier with the 1959 debut of Frank Stella’s all-black paintings at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, which he says granted permission for artists “to think of work in terms of a ‘show’ and not of individual objects.” In Benjamin Buchloh et al., “Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp,” *October 70* (Autumn 1994): 129.
- 4 These are not necessarily art worlds centered around objects and the series of white cubes—studio, gallery, museum—dictating conformity in their production, distribution and reception. Rather, they are more likely part of an institutional art system that regulates and organizes the production and circulation of artists themselves and their discourse—that is, a system centered around MFA programs and their graduating of art subjects. See Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). It could be argued that the dealer-critic system that supplanted the art academies at the end of the 19th century is now itself in the midst of being superceded, which would force a reconsideration of what counts as the institution of art and who’s included in it. Indeed, a group of near 30 small to mid-sized artist organizations and organizers from around the U.S. have acted on their sense of mutual identification and shared purpose to take the lead in forming a new national organization called Common Field (information is at <http://handlingloveconference.tumblr.com>).
- 5 Raphael Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” *Art in America* 97, no. 5 (May 2009): 122-135; Sharon Butler, “The New Casualists,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (June 2011); David Geers, “Neo-Modern,” *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 9–14. This trend shouldn’t be confused with the slightly different, more recent investor-friendly genre christened “Zombie Formalism” (Walter Robinson, *Artspace*, April 2014), “Crapstraction” (Jarrett Earnest, *SEAQ*, Summer 2014) and “The New Opportunism” (Christian Viveros-Fauné, *Village Voice*, June 2014).
- 6 Lane Relyea, “D.I.Y. Abstraction,” *WOW HUH* (Fall 2012): <http://wowhuh.com>.



Lauren Portada, *Untitled* (Silence Series), 2013.
Acrylic on linen, 22" x 17".

Conversations: Nathalie Provosty, Keith J. Varadi, Christopher K. Ho

In August 2013, Christopher K. Ho invited artists Keith J. Varadi and Nathalie Provosty to talk about their work, with specific focus on their thoughts about the generation who came of age in the '90s, conservatism, and abstract painting. Ho sat down with Varadi and Provosty separately. What follows is a parallel conversation.

CKH: I've been trying to get into the minds of 26-year-olds. One disturbing observation is that desires seem immediately verbalized, if not quite externalized as demands. There is little discretion, less self-discipline. The old avant-garde pursuit of the *new* transforms into gratification *now*.

KJV: Well, another thing that's happening with my generation is that more people are going to graduate school than ever before. They are receiving knowledge and information and education, and everything is becoming more streamlined and classified. And institutions like the New Museum or the Hammer Museum want

CKH: I've been trying to get into the minds of 26-year-olds. One of the most disturbing things is the desire for immediate gratification. There's no distance. Ten years ago, irony pervaded art. When did we lose if not specifically ironic distance then self-conscious distance from what we do?

NP: I had a discussion with Daniel Baird, a writer, about a year ago [Summer 2012], and I asked him what he thought about irony in a painting. He said, "Well, I think about it like irony in a person. I can meet someone who is ironic, but I don't feel like I really want to get to know them because you feel like they're pushing you

to break the “next big thing.” They want to do so at rapid rates that mimic how the rest of the world operates. If you wait too long, you’ll end up looking like a crusty fart, asking: “The past two years have been dominated by painting; what’s that all about?”

CKH: Are you calling me a crusty fart?

KJV: No, but art historians often have a skewed take on art-making. I don’t think you do because you hang out with artists and you make art. Lane Relyea doesn’t either. He is an incredibly smart guy who has a strong background in academia, but also hangs out with a lot of artists. I think art historians often seek mile markers; it’s all about theses. You and Relyea and many of your peers were educated with all of these perpetuated ideas rooted in semiotics, commodification, etc. Now you are trying to make artists of my generation into commodities.

CKH: That’s terrible!

KJV: But that’s what you guys are doing. For all of the accusations about my generation being conservative, it is the people writing about us who

away.” If you have a real relationship with someone it’s not going to be ironic. I mean, who knows what real is, but in this case I think it’s connected to a broader desire for intimacy. Another characteristic of our culture—which seems very much connected and possibly proportionate to technological development—is rampant depression. And with it a longing to feel connected, hence all the “technology as relationship,” the social media.

CKH: I certainly see intimacy in so-called relational work, but if there’s a new sense of intimacy in painting, where is it happening?

NP: I think it’s happening in the realm of desire. I don’t know if it’s happening but I think it’s being sought after. Think of the idea of absorption versus vacuousness. Both are spaces of lost time. When you come out of absorption you feel connected, more filled, more alive. When you come out of vacuousness, from watching a bad TV show or something, you feel depressed, bad, or blank. I think they are very closely tied; they share the same image but different content. Yet, technology is just a tool. The variable is experience.

are really conservative. “These are the Provisional Painters; these are the Post-Internet artists; these are the this; these are the that...” But maybe we’re not the things they say we are. Having said that, I have absolutely no real issue with art writing or cultural criticism. I obviously think it’s essential. I am routinely publishing essays and reviews myself. I just want writers to hold themselves to the same standards to which they claim to hold those who they write about. And of course you need to coin some sort of term or catchphrase in order to prove your point. But why do so many of the ones that gain traction seem so regressive or stifling, you know?

CKH: But surely it can’t be a sprawling mess, or worse, a bunch of individuals pursuing their own personal projects.

KJV: Right, it can’t be. You once referred to my personal projects as idiosyncratic. I do all of these idiosyncratic projects, as you say, as an individual artist, and then I do further idiosyncratic projects with two co-collaborators as Picture Menu, a group of artists comprised of myself, my girlfriend Rachel LaBine, and my best friend Michael Kennedy Costa.

CKH: How do you distinguish the desire for intimacy from mere desire and gratification?

NP: As with the difference between the post-experiences of absorption versus vacuousness, maybe you only know afterwards.

CKH: I’m really glad you are participating because your work doesn’t fit into any of the three models described by Lane Reylea, David Geers, or Gregory Sholette, or the unspoken model, provisional painting. Plus you’re not quite of the generation I’m discussing. Would you describe perception as an underlining guideline of your work?

NP: Well, I have read other artists’ comments about what they do. In “Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees” by Lawrence Weschler, Robert Irwin states perception as his main preoccupation. For him it is primarily about looking very carefully. Beuys also used the word perception, as a way to democratize his idea of social sculpture. So, the word means totally different things to them. Perception, yes I resonate, as a form of awareness.

CKH: Attentiveness?

Michael and I first met in graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University. We put together a group show called *Exit Light* at Reference Gallery down in Richmond. Once we settled into New York in 2011, we put together a couple of more shows, and then Rachel came on board.

All three of us have worked for artists or galleries and have been able to see the most recent market boom from various perspectives. Additionally, we started seeing a lot of things presenting themselves as D.I.Y. Part of my problem was that these guises of D.I.Y. were conformist by default—something that Relyea establishes in “D.I.Y. Abstraction.” I began to take note of a number of signifiers of D.I.Y. practices in general, whether they pertained to art spaces that almost exclusively showed their friends, artists making “scrap-py” objects, or poetry presses that were putting out chapbooks. But a lot of these operations were using what seemed like manipulative moves of going beyond their immediate peer group, attempting to work with certain artists or writers, with the hopes or expectations of the favor being returned—a *quid-pro-quo* model

NP: Attentiveness is rooted in attention, and I relate attention with “to be given attention” or “to attend to.” So that carries a residue of wanting and getting from the world, which is a very predatory, capitalistic mentality. Participating in the world—even on a social or political level—is innate on some level, and could be vivid if you choose it, but this is a different topic. I’m concerned with having the work hold a space of hopefully initiating experience rather than wanting or getting, rather than it making demands.

CKH: There’s this great essay by Thierry de Duve about the ethics of modern art. He talks about modern works proposing, “This is Art” and allowing the viewer to accept or reject the proposition. What you’re saying resonates with that argument. I bring this up because often the complaint about abstract painting today is that it seems so foreign to someone of my generation or my background, where we’re steeped in a desire to see art engage in something that is, if not outright political, at least polemical. I wonder if you see your paintings proposing an alternative term to politics, like ethics?

that made me wary. There was no progress; there was just this stagnant pond.

CKH: A lack of ambition... Being happy with showing your friends...

KJV: Like being a popular local band and never going on tour. In contrast, when I ask somebody to be in a show, I try to make it clear that I want to put together a show that I want to see. I want other people to see work that I think ought to be seen, and I want to have a discourse with people whose work and ideas I admire. I would rather have a challenging show or a super sexy, weird show that makes you actually think rather than have everything “just be okay.”

Things are more complicated than the narrow definition of D.I.Y. that young artists have come to understand these days—having your own studio, stretching your own canvas, gessoing the surfaces yourself, and applying the paint yourself. Personally, I don't really feel so comfortable with the idea of doing it yourself. I like teamwork. I like collaboration. I'd just prefer not to do anything where there are considerable strings attached, which by de-

NP: To me, the term has to create its own terms depending on what the work needs, which is part of the process of an artist creating what he does. In the case of morality I prescribe to Chris Burden's ideas on the topic, that art-making is essentially amoral. Of course ethics are different than morality because they grapple with society, with the question of impinging on other people's freedom (or what we currently recognize as freedom) and the consequences of doing so. As far as my work, I recognize that subtlety is slow but potentially more memorable than a kind of descriptive, overt representation. Immediate results are a bias of our time. The possibility of changing a viewer's perception of a work of art, or his or her life over a long span, is a potential of painting, or any other form that is carried out convincingly.

CKH: That idea of slowness extends to your process. Your show *Violets Violence Silence* [Gallery Diet, Miami, June 2013] felt incredibly, deeply researched.

NP: Up until a few months before *Book of Hours* [1:1, New York, November 2012] and on to that show, I had been work-



Nathalie Provosty, *Subject Without a Skin*, 2013. Oil on linen, 84" x 96".

fault, often leads me to do things myself.

Though, if I think of my participation in Picture Menu—this notion of a D.I.Y. mentality is interesting because we're really not doing anything ourselves. We're doing it with each other, we're doing it with other artists, and we're doing it at other spaces. We're inviting other artists to participate with us, and not approaching a show as us picking three or four artists and putting some objects in a space. We're approaching it as a strange, malleable collaboration between a physical space and us, the artists involved, as well as the public.

CKH: Right, I get it. But isn't Relyea's thesis precisely that capitalism in its recent "third spirit" instrumentalizes individualism and the artistic, authentic subject?

KJV: If you see someone's resume, it's expected that they went to this undergraduate program, then this graduate program, and then showed at this type of gallery. These expectations hinder an artist's ability to foster individualism. I truly do believe in trying to cultivate your own character. Relyea mentions craft breweries

ing with what paint itself does and how it reflects and interacts with changing lighting conditions. To stretch time in directions beyond the present and future, the work needed to address history. I researched hundreds, thousands of images. The process became about finding visual resonances between historically or culturally distant images, and about discovering relationships between structure and content. For example, in Jean de Beaumetz's *Christ on the Cross with a Carthusian Monk*, the three Marys in mourning formed an amazing curve, indicating simultaneously one Mary in the process of mourning. Though the formal manifestation would be the circle in this case, the translation of source image to painting image is not literal, but a mind process. You can create connections about how rhythms and melodies work. A rhythm is very modern. It's regularized, a heart beat, very gut, and related to Paleolithic and indigenous aesthetics. Melody is more lyrical, less predictable. I've made paintings that are either rhythmic or melodic, and have been working to combine the two because there's a contradiction, complication, making it even more alluring to pursue.

and all of this other shit happening where I live in Brooklyn, where some dude with a sheep is making his own wool sweaters on Wythe. That's not true individualism or autonomy. It's a bullshit cop-out, and an example of the neo-liberalism Relyea talks about. That neo-liberalism is actually pushing us back into conformity. It's like what happened with neo-conservatism, where political thinking went so far to the left that it came around to extreme right-wing politics. The same thing is happening with this notion of D.I.Y.

CKH: Let's talk about the Internet, which Relyea's "D.I.Y. Abstraction" doesn't fully address.

KJV: I have a problem with the watered-down idea of how the Internet and smart phones and so forth "rot the brains of the youth." First, I would argue that this isn't just a problem with my generation—I see people who are my aunt's age focusing on their iPhone instead of focusing on the coffee they are supposed to be getting from the barista, you know? Second, it is much more complex than "technology is dark, technology is a distraction." Some artists actually benefit from the fact that there is so

CKH: If the rhythm is, I don't know, the gridding or some structure that underlies, what would be the melody?

NP: The color vibrations. They subvert the monumentality of the drawing. Another thing I looked at is, how do people think about chance? I've been seeing a lot of work lately that is really reliant on all kinds of chance factors—as Lane Relyea describes in his essay "D.I.Y. Abstraction"—that are not conscious, not chosen in a deliberate fashion. I love when Mallarmé writes: "The inner structures of a book of verse must be inborn; in this way, chance will be totally eliminated and the poet will be absent." Bruce Nauman also used chance to create distance within the structure of a very strong method. Cage too, but these artists were inventing a form through control of the context. Of all the dirty tarp painting I've seen lately, maybe there was a first discovery, but the multitude and similarity I see now reflects a monotone engagement with thinking.

CKH: Is there anything old fashioned about the consciousness you mention?

much stuff going on all the time. Older generations of artists might open new windows; artists of my generation are opening new tabs, and going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, between those tabs. You may ask, “Why not just open a new window and not a new tab, focus on the article on *Gawker* or on whatever website, read that article, and then go to the next article?” I would respond: “Well, here’s the thing, Chris: what that article on *Gawker* was talking about is really related to what this article on *Salon* is talking about, which is related to this article on *Grantland*. And if I’m trying to make a connection between *Grantland* and *Salon*, I may need *Gawker* in between.”

CKH: That’s very frustrating for me because it bespeaks a lack of discipline as well as a lack of focus. And it does not explain the contemporaneousness of D.I.Y. abstraction, as well as other kinds of abstract painting, and the Internet.

KJV: I would argue that the focus has merely shifted, and thus, so have the methodologies of seeking and sharing. But painting has always been and will always be of the time. People who keep thinking that

NP: The word “consciousness” hasn’t been fully understood because it historically has religious or modern implications of unity and inwardness. But the word also means “mind in the broadest possible sense.” I’ve been thinking about complexity, disharmony, contradiction. A friend Chloé Rossetti recently shared with me her having read that in our current age, beginning with the Enlightenment, then the Industrial Revolution, and now this technological revolution, minds are explicitly, physically different than they were in the Medieval Period. I am interested in the participation of making new mind, recognizing that our speeds are different, our computing, computational skills are innately different.

CKH: So you’re taking consciousness, jettisoning its enlightenment roots, and thinking of its present iteration. Is this a way of countering the presumed conservatism of the medium of painting?

NP: Words have different inflections depending on the context within which they’re used. Jettisoning roots is impossible. When I think about what conservatism means, it indicates a unified and often

painting has died or is going to die soon—I feel like that’s a personal issue that a lot of artists or other art world people need to deal with on their own. Let’s be honest, painting is never going to die. It’s a matter of fact at this point. You know, people still play the piano...

CKH: True, but the past 15 years has witnessed a real renaissance of abstract painting, and it is difficult to reconcile that commitment to, or narrow focus on, a medium with the context of simultaneously open tabs. Painting just seems so not of our time, so conservative.

KJV: First, if you have recently moved to New York and are struggling to pay rent, and if you’re making delicate, dandyish small paintings in a 200-square-foot studio by yourself, that’s totally understandable. It doesn’t mean it’s necessarily thoughtful, rigorous, or interesting. But I think it’s important to remember that young artists are trying to balance all of their own issues, and they often feel like they can’t be bothered with all of these other depressing things. When I see a group show of a dozen or so paintings, hung salon-style, and I can’t differ-

dogmatic vision of how other people should be that is reactionary, reacting instead of acting. It’s anti-change, pro-status-quo. You want other people to think how you think, or you think what’s been thought already, without realizing it, a kind of neglect of history and other potentials that could keep things moving fluidly. Perhaps what you mean when you say conservative is you mean known. A known thing. Paint has this really ancient history and certain techniques are known. Maybe what you mean by not conservative is unknown. So then the question is by putting a medium into the category of “known” it negates the possibility of the “unknown” within it. Which is why I would say probably in most cases painting is conservative, or uninformed; but there are—and this would be because of one’s temperament or draw in the world—things you feel you must do, and without delusion. There is potential and it’s a risk, particularly in a medium that is known historically, and not metal and glass and flash. I think quality, of good painting, is defying of characterization on some level. It rises while ever-eluding.

CKH: Relyea doesn’t really discuss technology, speed, and

entiate who made what, it often screams: “Holy shit! I have to pay rent!” I empathize with these artists. But I am more interested in the artists who try to work through these issues, rather than those who seem to be satisfied with drinking PBR’s and patting their peers on their backs.

I think that is what separates an individual like Richard Aldrich from the pack. He is a painter who lives and works in Brooklyn like these other artists you’ve brought up. But the first time I saw his work, I could sense a serious level of ambition. It was a different kind of ambition, that’s for sure. But I could tell he wasn’t satisfied with simply being in fun shows with his buddies. His paintings are super quirky and personal, but also critical and confounding. Sure, there are examples of potential precedents such as Raoul de Keyser or Michael Krebber, who are often cited in making the case for lumping artists of our generation together to create some sort of trend or movement. However, I think it would be far wiser to look to the artist who Aldrich often cites himself, Daan van Golden, as a stronger precedent for him. Aldrich regularly quotes

media. Can you speak about the contemporariness of painting in the world you just described, populated with post-industrial, faster-paced minds?

NP: Yes, I’ve thought, what would the relationship of my work and technology be if there is one? In painting we see technology manifest in: First, the process of making the painting, although it may not be visible at the end. Plenty of people, like Peter Halley or much younger artists, design his or her paintings on the computer. In fact, David Reed has said that he makes a mark with paint, then puts it in the computer and manipulates it, then ends up painting the new mark, which looks more real than the original. Second, someone uses technology as a subject matter, which is visible in the painting, but it’s not a part of the process. The use of technology in this context becomes part of both subject and content. Now, what would be the third role of technology? And this is the part that is murky because inevitably with the speed and functioning of technology you have to have a dialectic, the inversion (and subversion). So I ask, what works against the speed



Keith J. Varadi, *Born Dead*, 2013.
Oil and canvas, 18'' x 24''.

him and not de Keyser or Kriebber for a reason. I think there is something much more conflicted in Aldrich's work than in de Keyser's, and something much more wrought than in Kriebber's. Like van Golden, there is an intuitive intellectualism present in his work. Unlike some have claimed, I don't think Aldrich's work is at all about failure, erasure, or any of these exhausted recent themes. It's not about being casual as Sharon Butler claims or provisional as Raphael Rubinstein does. Rather, I think it's more about flaunting awkwardness and the beautiful contradictions that can result from the surprising confidence it takes to do so. Furthermore, there is something about his practice that places the work somewhere between being literal and being literary. I really appreciate his approach to making art.

I wonder why more people don't talk about Daan van Golden. I guess it's probably because he is more difficult to pin down than most other artists. His work isn't so easily digestible upon first viewing (or second or third, maybe). He doesn't try to wow the viewer with imagery like many two-dimensional artists often try

and the image of technological experience? That's partially why, for example, I and probably many other painters make paintings, because the explicit non-reproducible qualities of them, I feel, are extremely important right now. Because they work against the prevailing trend.

In other words, just to surrender to what visual technology has to offer seems to me too literal, less complicated, and therefore less interesting ultimately. Technology has become a prosthetic. Think about people who have a prosthetic leg; it looks like a leg, but this model is really much less effective than one of those prosthetics that looks like a sword. [Laughs.] That's what the runners use. It's a super non-human, foreign-looking object, which catapults us into the difference between what looks like but is not and what does not look like but is. And this isn't even taking into account the amputated leg that still causes pain. These actual experiences of the body are metaphors or microcosms of human relationships with technology. And potentially painting.

CKH: Relyea's essay also implies

to do, nor does he lay things out for the viewer the way that conceptual artists have historically done. Aldrich wrote a really good piece on him in *Artforum* a while back. You should check it out if you haven't read it yet.

CKH: So what may seem like a lack of risk is in fact pragmatics?

KJV: I think people of your generation, Chris, were concerned with pragmatics. I think people of my generation are often unfortunately consumed by pragmatism. That is a major difference to keep in mind. Despite the constant accusations about my generation being entitled, I would argue that people of your generation tend to be entitled more so than many of those who are coming out of art school today. I know many New York artists of your generation who own an entire floor of a studio building and drive a sick Volvo. Young Brooklyn artists of my generation might be making paintings or drawings in their Bed-Stuy bedroom and drinking \$7 pints of beer they can't afford. And yet, people of your generation are often saying, "What happened to conceptual art?"

that capitalism, in its embrace of do-it-yourself or freelancing, instrumentalizes subjectivity and individualism.

NP: I remember the essay describing a kind of impoverishment of the very hard working, motivated, and underpaid person; the new ideal. In most cases that's disturbing and a factor. I understand broadly the necessity of critique and that the whole history of labor, labor laws, and unions sort of hold that criticism up. A natural casualty of socio-political assessment is the exception, in other words, the possibility of an individual's impact.

CKH: Yes, critiques of capitalism often lack confidence in humanity to be humane. When in fact even in the most ridged of systems—penal colonies or the military—moments of humanity disrupt. Also, the way you're looking at perception—in terms of subtlety—contours slowness more complex than the fastest of computers. I've noticed a lot of young, abstract painting not only is fast and looks fast, but also pleases in a quick way. It's this provisionality that attracts many, but that to me lacks complexity and difficulty.

26-year-olds who just graduated from Pratt or SVA might be working three jobs to pay their rent. That doesn't necessarily leave much time to think about pragmatics. And if they are fortunate enough to make some cash from their art or get some hype or press, can you blame them for feeling validated to some degree?

CKH: The only thing that catches my mind in a negative way is that it's often still about you finding your voice.

KJV: Yes. But I am okay with that. I'm okay with it because I think that, again, that's what making art of any kind is really about. It perhaps reverses your generation's approach. I feel like we all need to ask: How do I understand the global scene, in order to understand myself? How do I understand myself so that I can maybe try to understand everybody else? And if I can't understand myself well enough to be critical of myself, how can I understand anybody else or anything else very well? From having a conversation with you or reading *Al Jazeera*, I learn about myself. If I don't have anything solid in terms of my own values, if I can't find my own

NP: Maybe that's the distance you mentioned when you brought up irony or self-consciousness.

CKH: Exactly.

NP: Although self-consciousness is different from self-reflection, and also different from self-entitlement—which has nothing to do with intimacy. When I say the word intimate I think of a mother and her child, this sort of care. The problem with entitlement is that it is selfish rather than self-conscious.

CKH: Which is why I miss self-consciousness so much. In place of self-consciousness is selfishness.

NP: Right, but then again self-conscious may not be generous, or even other-aware.

CKH: Well, a third term that is neither self-conscious nor selfish could be generous, or perhaps conscientious. My concern is that a lack of explicated politics enables an artist to do what he or she wants without a guidepost that is external to one's own desires, or wants, or what gratifies you. Without something external, whether an ideology, or a political or

voice, how can I even contribute anything worthwhile at all?

Postscript: Varadi lives in Los Angeles as of October 2013.

socially transformative agenda, work becomes deeply personal, and possibly self-indulgent.

NP: That's a danger. And it has to do with not knowing how to spend your time. Yet it presumes that politics is the only possibility for external engagement, and that guideposts have to be visible to those whom the post is not for. There is a reason, even back in the early 18th century, the poet Edward Young asked, "Born original, how comes it to pass that we die copies?" It's worth asking every day, rather than fall into the hole of anonymous, impotent individualism, in lieu of the longer road towards an actual impact as an individual.

After OWS: Social Practice Art, Abstraction, and the Limits of the Social

In the third chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the novel's protagonist, Ishmael, enters the Spouter Inn in search of passage onto a whaling ship. He soon encounters an age-darkened oil painting in the entranceway and becomes perplexed. The canvas is so covered in scratches and smoky residue that it's all but impossible to make sense of. Throwing open a window to gain more light, Ishmael attempts to describe what he sees:

What most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the center of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted.¹

Ishmael renders the painting virtually abstract, or non-objective, as his act of interpretation comes to an impasse. But his comprehension of the image is not merely blocked by the marred, smoky surface. The materiality, or “thingness,” of the work simultaneously frustrates and fascinates him by denying him access to its meaning. I think of this truculent, besmoked painting often, especially when contemplating the growing allure of socially engaged art among younger artists, including those students who, by dint of previous training, lean toward craft-based object making. Anyone who teaches visual art is familiar with the following problem. Two seemingly opposite pedagogical poles appear to be collapsing. On one side is the singularity of artistic vision expressed as a commitment to a particular material or medium. On the other is an ever-increasing pressure on students to work collaboratively through social and participatory formats, often in a public context outside the white cube. One of the most common catchall terms for the latter tendency is social practice art. Currently, there are about half a dozen college-level programs pro-



Doug Ashford, *Six Moments in 1967 #5*, 2010-2011.
Tempera on wood and photograph, 12" x 12".
Courtesy Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam.

moting its study. However, if you include the many instructors who regularly engage their students in political, interventionist, or participatory art projects, the tilt toward socially engaged art begins to look more like a full-blown pedagogical shift, at least in the United States.

The studio art classroom, as opposed to the lecture hall or seminar space, is where these contradictions are most apparent, and often most disarming. Any given cohort of entry-level students (graduate or undergraduate) includes both object makers and social practitioners. Similarly, the faculty at non-specialized art schools, and universities tend to express a range of aesthetic interests with varying degrees of engagement in art's material production. But most significantly, the studio classroom is where art's institutional socialization begins, and where the student encounters a very contemporary problem—let's call it the ontological crisis of artistic *subjecthood*—the infinite regress of self-definitions and anti-definitions that have plagued every nascent artist since Marcel Duchamp and Moholy Nagy's rejection of the "magic of the hand."² If one can purchase plumbing equipment and successfully display it in a museum, or have an abstract artwork made to order over the telephone, then what exactly defines the artist today, at least in a professional sense? The assembly line studio practices of artists like Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons serve to exacerbate this crisis. Uncertain about the fundamentals of their profession, instructors (like me) perform a kind of ontological triage on identity-punctured art novices. (I will confess that this surgery is often also an act of self-healing.)

Stephen Wright may not be the first cultural theorist to link contemporary art's object-anxiety with the definitional crisis of the contemporary artist herself, but Wright is distinguished by his view of this ontological precariousness as a potentially liberating moment, rather than as a problem to solve. He writes, "Envisaging an art without artwork, without authorship, and without spectatorship has an immediate consequence: art ceases to be visible as such."³ Without a visible "work," *sans* artistic reception, there would appear to be no way in which Wright's militantly discreet cultural labor could be framed as art, not even by the "art police." Adopting philosopher Jacques Rancière's definition of the

aesthetics of politics, Wright rejects the manner in which critics, curators, and art historians delineate the category of art and amplify one cultural discourse over the noise of others.⁴ By embracing, rather than avoiding invisibility, everyday occurrences, and noise, Wright elaborates a way for artists to leap out of prescribed aesthetic frames, past the policing of artistic borders, and move directly into a cultural “usership” within non-art social relations, including political activism.

Initially, this program would appear to fulfill a certain early-twentieth-century avant-garde injunction that art must dissolve into life, while aligning itself with certain 1960s conceptual artists who sought to become autodidacts in collaboration with “citizen’s initiatives, amateur scientists’ projects, and so on.”⁵ Except that both of those efforts landed art back in private and museum collections. But let’s say that Wright’s un-framed usership is conceivably already taking place; just think of the explosion of informal, noisy cultural activity associated with Occupy Wall Street.

In an unexpected move, OWS has not embraced invisibility or rejected an audience. Rather the movement instead has claimed its own cultural terrain, and has done so in full public view. OWS confronts the police, both literally as well as figuratively, interweaving both short-term tactics and longer-range strategies for returning privatized space to common use. It’s as though something long held back was streaming forth, suddenly animated, but bringing along with it a shadowy archive of other histories, and other attempts at self-realization, like a surge of long-silent dark matter spilling irrepressibly into the light. This emergent swarm-archive insists that the hazy, smoky residue of time become noisily present for all to see.⁶ In a rapidly gentrifying city like New York the materialization of the past is always a challenge. Meanwhile, Zuccotti Park and other OWS encampments revealed a mix of high-tech digital media and handmade signs, a mix of the archaic and the new as if beneath the internet there is cardboard.

All this complicates the classroom context. After all, instructors can hardly follow Wright’s prescription simply by refusing to engage with art’s institutional frame, at least not until before that glorious moment when all delimiting social divisions are swept

away in the ecstasy of revolution.⁷ Prior to that day of liberation, any failure to reproduce one's own academic field simply amounts to professional suicide. On the other hand, dissolving art into a corrupt world appears equally dishonest, and merely adds fuel to a neoliberal agenda that seeks to eliminate all economically "useless" areas of study as philosophy, poetry, classical languages, and all other non-commercial forms of "culture."⁸

I teach at a school where a significant number of undergraduate and graduate students make paintings, sometimes in a traditional way, which is to say, in a realistically representational mode, and other times they produce a variation of post-war abstraction. I do not claim that this necessarily excludes the realm of "the social" as a concrete presence, especially as it manifests itself nowadays in the omnipresence of portable electronic devices linked together through the Internet. Digital images turn up as source material for student drawings and paintings; while working from photographic sources is hardly new, it seems that portraits of friends, family, pets, and self are more captivating when rendered in low resolution with acidic smart phone colors. Fast-paced paging through crowd-sourced databases such as Flickr or Google has also become second nature when researching new project ideas. But more to the point, a certain compulsory "connectivity" infects student art assignments, even those rooted in traditional media. One young student of mine made oil paintings of strangers she had image-grabbed from live video chat room encounters. At her final critique, she opened a laptop and an assortment of random online voyeurs dropped in to watch us. First, a duo of giggly women appeared, followed by a young man who stared blankly at us from the other side of a webcam, apparently masturbating just out of frame. Naturally, issues of privacy emerged (our privacy, as well as that of the online strangers), and this provided an opening for us to explore broader issues of what constitutes artistic subject matter nowadays. Nevertheless, until the laptop was at last snapped shut, the intrusion of "the social" into the classroom oscillated between diversion and disruption as the specificity of the student's paintings faded further into the background of our discussion.

Granted, this example is somewhat superficial and represents

only the outward collision between older, skill-based art traditions and portable electronics/social networks. Far more difficult to nail down is the place of “archaic” media such as drawing, painting, and sculpture in the sphere of social practice and performance art. No doubt some of you will think of street art, protest props, or papier-mâché puppets. Or perhaps what comes to mind are those climate-controlled layers of lard and honey and felt that once accompanied lectures by iconoclast Joseph Beuys, and that nowadays sit in some swanky kunsthalle, art center, or museum. Once again, to go beyond shallow assumptions of social media’s invasion of traditional art practices, let me put the question differently: Where does abstraction and the non-representational intersect with the social? Or, put the other way around: *What is the limit of the social within the social itself?* I wish to propose that one way to approach this question is through Jane Bennett’s concept of the agency of “thinghood,” the “material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts.”⁹

Bennett, a political scientist by training, wants to articulate a non-human materiality in much the same way that Michel Foucault explored culture as an objectified force of human affect and desire, most famously including institutional discipline. Bennett, however, introduces us to a world of *vibrant matter*, in which concrete forces sometimes appear as obstacles to overcome, and sometimes as obstacles that overcome us (consider Hurricane Katrina in 2005, or the massive Japanese tsunami of several months ago). Ultimately, these extra-societal agencies must be understood as forces to be reckoned with, as well as engaged with,¹⁰ though always in a critical manner.¹¹

The recognition of a resistant thingness at work within the social, including those human-originated technologies that have gone on to operate virtually independent of us, may in fact mark a point of conceptual convergence for those contrary artistic poles discussed above: the immaterial, social practitioner and the studio-based artist. Note how artist, activist, and teacher Doug Ashford, who worked with the socially engaged artists’ collective Group Material for over fifteen years, grapples with the role of the abstract object in a series of paintings he has worked on over the past few years:

I'm wondering what it means these days to employ abstract images as a participant in social organizing efforts. For many years I was a collaborator in Group Material, an artistic process determined by the idea that social liberation could be created through the displacement of art into the world, and the world into the spaces of art.¹²

Ashford seems to suggest that his current interest in abstract art and object making was foreshadowed by Group Material's collaborative installation practice. In 1990, he and other members of the collective organized the *Democracy* exhibition for the Dia Art Foundation's short-lived exhibition space on Mercer Street in Manhattan. They transformed Dia's gallery into a classroom, complete with rows of desks and chalkboards. Around the "classroom" hung a selection of artwork arranged "salon-style" overlapping against bright red walls, an anti-white cube gesture similar to a Group Material design "signature." With *Democracy*, as with many of their installation projects, the collective sought to generate a different kind of space within the art gallery, a social arena in which learning could take place directly or indirectly through an art whose form and/or content focused on questions of inclusivity and participation:

Today I'm interested in how our exhibition designs assigned democracy's unpredictability and inclusivity to an imaginable shape, a shape you could feel, a shape that is always irregular and fluctuating: an abstraction.¹³

Ashford takes his hunch a bit further, in the form of a challenge: "Is abstract painting a clue to the irregular shape I experienced at Group Material shows and our modeling of democracy?" Can something so abstract even be visualized? Or is the question really about the intersection of a certain aesthetic vocabulary with everyday social routines? After all, Group Material's project is but one attempt by artists to make something ineffably abstract into a concrete force or agency, or to attempt the opposite by dematerializing the well-worn world of the social into an aesthetically informed spectacle through the strange agency of abstraction.

Grainy images of large, suprematist shapes in the streets of 1920s Belarus flash up in my mind as I write this last sentence. Aimed at inspiring new ways of thinking and new forms of organizing dur-



Doug Ashford, *Six Moments in 1967 #3*, 2010-2011.
Tempera on wood and photograph, 12" x 12".
Courtesy Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam.

ing the early years of the revolution, these startling plastic forms were generated by Soviet Commissar of Art Kasimir Malevich and his colleagues at the Vitebsk School of Art. Suprematist pedagogy also took place inside the classroom. Students not only constructed three-dimensional geometric forms in a radical break with realist traditions, they also understood abstraction to be central to the realization of a new “creative collectivity.”¹⁴ This mental recollection is replaced by another black-and-white photograph, this time on the cover of *The Los Angeles Times*. It depicts Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz’s discerning 1977 media event *In Mourning and in Rage*, which was staged before news cameras on the steps of Los Angeles City Hall to call attention to the victims of the brutal Hillside Strangler. The performance begins with a troupe of preternaturally tall, veiled figures slowly emerging from a funeral hearse to silently protest a culture they believe promotes female victimhood.¹⁵ The concise geometry of the forms and staging is a quintessential Western artistic trope morphed into public spectacle in pursuit of social justice. But there is a reciprocal way to examine the agency of thingness and social practice, one that is less about abstract forms intervening in social content, and more about the social itself as a kind of abstraction, or perhaps more accurately, as a merging of biological agency with mechanical and mnemonic forces.

Operating the “people’s microphone,” or “human microphone,” is simple enough. Made famous by OWS as a response to a New York City ban on amplified sound at Zuccotti Park, a group of listeners broadcasts a speaker’s words by loudly repeated them in unison. For larger gatherings, a second wave of repetition is sometimes necessary. On one level, this cultural innovation appears to be a “flesh and blood” substitute for an electronic technology that large public meetings have come to depend upon. On another level, the people’s mic introduces mechanization directly into human-to-human interaction by alternating segments of speech with interruptions to generate gain, a series of discontinuous procedures that send physical ripples through a congregation transformed, one could say, into a temporary, self-regulating cybernetic community, an undulating cyberorganism. Likewise, the entire OWS panoply of hand-drawn or pirated imagery—made with thin-point or chisel-tipped markers, bits of torn masking

tape, clipped newspaper, collaged laser prints, spray paint stencils, as well as charcoal and acrylic, and limitless pieces of recycled beige cardboard—exhibited the unmistakable qualities of an archive even before the encampment was power-scrubbed into history. Here I am approaching the idea of the archive not as a precise collection of thematic documents that uphold this or that school or historical interpretation, but instead envision it as a site of conceptual “objects,” as well as an unbounded material accumulation capable of becoming a force of spirited intervention in the present. In this sense, Zuccotti Park, along with all other OWS encampments, embodies an archive *avant la lettre*, that is to say, a collection of materials, biopolitical practices, and everyday concrete documents waiting to be recognized as an interpretable text. Sadly, in New York City, the moment of this “reading” began at 1 a.m. on November 15 when the NYPD began to clear the park.

Embracing Bennett’s material vibrancy within social practice means recognizing not only the role of extra-human technologies and abstract concepts like democracy, but also the corporeal presence of “nature,” not in some sugary, universal form, but as a negation that radically confronts human culture with alterity. This line of thinking might, for instance, nudge a project focused on the interaction of human and natural ecologies within a downtown waterfront or inner-city park—to cite a couple of examples I am familiar with—into a reflection about what the river might demand from society, as opposed to what it offers city residents.¹⁶ Likewise, if we think of putting “art” to work explaining or engaging participants in an abstract notion like democracy, as Group Material sought to do, we could, with more effort, turn this procedure around and consider how an abstraction like democracy might manifest itself in physical, even aesthetic forms. At the same time that art’s previously hidden sociality materialized within OWS, or the Internet, or via the steady stream of collective practices that have blossomed over the past fifteen years, there is a danger that a range of techniques, non-discursive ways of thinking, and material forces will be rendered obsolete, regressive, or invisible. Such an approach might also help terminate endless debates about artistic deskilling whose concrete art-world manifestations have less to do with theoretical niceties like imma-

terial labor than they do with the unspoken hierarchy between a class of idea-artists and a lower class whose skills are called upon to fabricate projects.

Returning to the darkness of the Spouter Inn, Ishmael eventually believes he can recognize what the obscure mass at the center of the half-lit painting represents. In a reading foreshadowing the impending drama, he offers:

A final theory of my own, partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom I conversed upon the subject. The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-foundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads.

Perhaps, rather than thinking of social practice art as a strategy for unlikely survival against the forces of neoliberal enterprise culture and its strip-mining of creativity, we could inscribe this still-emerging narrative with a stubborn sense of materiality and a vibrance that if nothing else would challenge unspoken hierarchies and divisions of labor, because a critical, social practice should above all acknowledge the limits of the social within the social itself.

Gregory Sholette

Footnotes

- 1 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: or, the Whale* (Waking Lion Press, 2009)
- 2 See the interview with Marcel Duchamp following his “retirement” from making art.
- 3 Stephen Wright, “Users and Usership of Art: Challenging Expert Culture” (2007), *transform*.
- 4 Rancière’s definition of the police is cited by Wright, *ibid*.
- 5 Wright’s text does not focus as much on the artist’s troubled identity as on artistic reception; I have therefore taken some liberties in applying his thinking to the question of practice itself.
- 6 For more about OWS and the concept of the archive, see my forthcoming text “Occupology, Swarmology, Whateverology: the city of (dis)order versus the people’s archive” in the online version of *Art Journal*. And about the concept of art’s missing mass, see my book *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (Pluto Press, 2011).
- 7 I am referring here to Karl Marx’s oft-quoted remark from *The German Ideology* that “in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.”
- 8 For an excellent reference to this process of corporatized education, see *Edufactory Journal*.
- 9 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press Books, 2009), xiii; 1.
- 10 *Ibid*, 4.
- 11 Jane Bennett is not the first thinker to take materiality and its affect on art, science, or politics seriously. Certainly Theodor Adorno’s concept of negative dialectics grapples with the category of nonidentity, applying it not only to the realm of ontology, but also to aesthetics, and in ways that exceed in their critical force such currently fashionable writers as Jacques Rancière. But Bennett explicitly distances herself from this approach, arguing that Adorno still holds out hope of reconciling the unspeakable otherness of things with human knowledge (*ibid*, 14), and that Rancière admits only those who can engage in human discourse into the realm of political participation, thus leaving aside other beings, forces, animals, and things (*ibid*, 106). By contrast, Bennett’s

vibrant matter acknowledges the full-on agency of the non-human in itself, without need for human definition, acceptance, instrumentality, or intervention. Still, I suspect that despite her resistance to Marxism, Bennett's ideas are strangely closer to those of Walter Benjamin, perhaps more so than she might acknowledge. I am thinking here of Benjamin's positive appraisal of surrealist photography in which everyday things dulled by familiarity reassert themselves through uncanny estrangement, but also of his interest in the politics of dreaming and fantasy—lets call this the vibrancy of the historical unconscious, or of the archive *from below*.

- 12 All quotes are from Doug Ashford and Angelo Bellfatto, "Sometimes We Say Dreams When We Want to Say Hopes, or Wishes, or Aspirations" in *Interiors* (Bard CCS and Sternberg Press), originally presented as a conversation at The New Museum, April 29–30, 2011.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Aleksandra S. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art* (Yale University Press, 2007), 137.
- 15 See <http://blogs.getty.edu/pacificstandardtime/explore-the-era/workssofar/in-mourning-and-in-rage-media-performance-at-los-angeles-city-hall/>.
- 16 Nicholas Mirzoeff writes about an attempt to "occupy" the recent UN Climate Change Convention in Durban, South Africa by indigenous people who call for the "decolonization of the atmo sphere," a tacit recognition of the planet's rights, in "Occupy Climate Change," *Occupy! Gazette* 3 (December 15, 2011): 32, 34.



Jonathan Allmaier, cp13. *Untitled (Plastic Points 2)*, 2012.
Oil on canvas, 92'' x 63 1/8''.

Conversation:

Keenan Jay, Lauren Martin,

David Xu Borgonjon,

Christopher K. Ho

KJ: I started oil painting again after two years. It feels good to allow intuition to play a larger part in studio.

LM: It's like listening to an audiobook.

DXB: I find oil painting obsessively cerebral. Analysis is much more intuitive.

CKH: In "After OWS: Social Practice Art, Abstraction, and the Limits of the Social" Gregory Sholette approaches the social as a kind of abstraction, and reciprocally abstract painting as having "concrete force or agency." Can abstract painting and political, participatory art meet?

KJ: I am highly skeptical—highly. More compelling is David Geers' proposal in "Neo-Modern" that modernist forms and aesthetics are coming back as a style dissociated from the ideology that they emerged from. I've always felt a sense of political impotence. I didn't even see OWS firsthand. Many of my peers have relatively privileged upbringings, which gives us a fair amount of distance from the issues at hand.

LM: Sholette describes two student groups: object makers and social practitioners. There were definitely object makers at RISD, but not many political activists. Political art was almost frowned upon. Various teachers warned me that my art wouldn't reach a lot of people, and suggested that I focused on the few that it would. Artists, at least young artists, don't have much pull in the world—hence the lack of political engagement.

CKH: Is that the reason that you two, respectively, are investigating "genuineness" and "happiness"—terms that are positive and can be characterized as pre-political?



Keenan Jay, *My War*, 2013.
Griptape, acrylic, sticker, plastic rails on panel, 8"x10".

- KJ: Genuineness is an important political issue, insofar as it must underpin any political action that is to be taken seriously.
- LM: And happiness is democratic or at least relatable to by many, which gives it political potential. But anything I do concerning political topics or social issues will be observational and descriptive, rather than motivational. As Keenan said, art students are insulated, and arguably the least equipped and informed to address politics. My grandmother warned me not to go near Occupy Providence, because there were drug addicts and hobos!
- DXB: Still, Occupy Providence was great because after everyone left, it consisted of homeless people, and it became a powerful homeless lobby that effected legislative change. In contrast, other Occupy sites such as OWS stressed the process of protest over its aims. If the goal is just to create a public space, all you can do is perpetuate that public space. It is important to have coherent political goals—reducing income inequality, promoting diversity, whatever. So rather than debate what is or isn't political about art we might ask what our politics are, and then make art.
- LM: What are your political goals, David?
- DXB: To have political goals. What are yours?
- LM: Well, what do you do when you don't have any?
- KJ: There are base goals like egalitarianism.
- DXB: Wouldn't the first step of figuring out political goals be to decide our relationship to the market, because the market is our context?
- CKH: Surely there are connections between art and life other than the market, if not precisely in the way that artistic avant-gardes once sought.
- KJ: Art and trend is one scary connection.
- DXB: Scary and strong. The positive spin would be thinking about fashion as self-expression.
- LM: Yes, we have been taught from a young age to think about art as a way of expressing our inner being and emotions. Approaching art as personal, rather than social, transformation unburdens artists from having to represent and change society, and connects art with life on an *individual* level. If we are better-expressed people, we are happier people, and if

we are happier people, we are better citizens.

DXB: The power of that argument is that as we self-fulfill, society becomes better. What looks like a self-indulgent practice of studio-based abstract painting in fact has indirect social ramifications.

CKH: Yet it cancels art's revolutionary and subversive aspects. Artists use art to center themselves rather than themselves contribute to the field of art. And your scenario presumes society to be open, and citizenship a given—which could explain why contemporary modest abstract painting is largely an American phenomenon.

DXB: Well, not just American. It has found very fertile ground in, for example, Belgium—think de Keyser and Tuymans. But there's certainly a deep affinity between post-war institutional liberalism and abstract painting. And that's the context where the distinction between self-centering and contribution to a field doesn't hold up. I think that within the utopian project of M.A.P. they are the same. It's like in kung fu movies. You develop killer moves not by being power-hungry and outwardly oriented, but by having sweet inner peace.

KJ: Well, self-fulfillment isn't necessarily about begetting better citizens. It can be living in a fulfilling way. I read an interview with the Chinese artist Lily Yeh, who spoke about her training in traditional Chinese painting before she came to America. In that culture, artists generally share their work with only a few intimate friends. Art was not for public consumption, much less socially transformative.

DXB: Doesn't this lead to the position that painting is about modesty, humility, and not thinking art can do anything? Doesn't this lead to the annoying contention that withdrawal is the most radical act, like when John Kelsey speaks of artists striking in "Escape from Discussion Island"?

LM: No. George W. Bush, Sunday painter, is better than George W. Bush, President. Perhaps doing no harm is the extent of painting's politics. I don't want to be the advocate for not caring for others, but I think of painting as a string of small things, with the goal of staying two steps ahead. You're just trying to stay sane. I can only control what I do and what happens to me, and I can't do much about how anyone else

reacts. The analogy is when you're on an airplane, and you have to put on your own mask before putting on someone else's.

CKH: That analogy is dire. It also intimates a second step: If centering yourself through the activity of painting in studio is putting on your own mask, what does the subsequent act of putting on your seatmate's mask look like?

KJ: Being critically engaged. Having a better understanding of one's self is necessary for having a better sense of one's relationship to their surroundings and other people. After moving to America, Yeh's practice became much more relational. Perhaps this is because her training in classic Chinese art provided a different understanding of what constituted success as an artist. Besides, what's wrong with modesty and humility?

DXB: Online communities inspire me. I think that there is a small circle of people that you can take care of. I can't imagine abstract painting doing anything on its own, and suggesting there is a mode of making that would have direct political impact seems misguided. Though I can imagine a society in which everyone is a committed modest abstract painter six hours a day, and devotes another four to local politics. I guess it's really the question of defining the communities one holds oneself accountable to. For example, do you work across groups within a geographic area (neighborhood) or do you work within a group across geographic areas (sub-cultures)?

CKH: Tell me more about self-fulfillment as a goal. It has been five years since Raphael Rubinstein published "Provisional Painting," which means abstract painting has been prominent for at least that long. Have those painters self-fulfilled and are they better citizens? Will you come to me in several years and say, "I've done it. I've self-fulfilled."

KJ: Self-fulfillment is not a goal and that demand for progress is questionable. You're doing it every moment you are doing it. It would mean having a painting practice compelled by something like the meditative or contemplative rather than by trends or markets. The thing about self-fulfillment is that there isn't a specific end to achieve. There is no progress because it is an end in itself.



Lauren Martin, *Sad Pretzel*, 2014.
Oil, acrylic, aerosol, and transfer on canvas, 12" x 18".

- CKH: But there must be markers, criteria, of some sort, no? You're defining a specific, prevalent type of contemporary painting that harkens back to modernist abstraction through the term "self-fulfillment." This suggests to me that by approaching the activity of painting as staying centered and being content, you transfer modernist art's timelessness onto the self-actualized or constantly self-actualizing subject. But life—aging, parenthood—will intervene, punctuate, and puncture studio activity, just as real politics punctured modernist painting's supposed autonomy.
- DXB: Do you at least concede that painting is about subject formation, if not self-fulfillment and better citizenship?
- CKH: Maybe from ages 4 through 14, but not beyond. Prolonged adolescence—this continuous self-actualization—is impractical and unhealthy. Within the field of art, much less society, we need more people who sacrifice their own practices—in the form of, say, sitting behind the gallery desk or art handling, of, to use Lauren's analogy, giving up your oxygen mask entirely. Sacrifice, as much as self-fulfillment, underpins good citizenship.
- DXB: That's part of the appeal of craft and technique. Like, damn, he spent twenty years getting that medium consistency just the right amount of tacky. But contrasting self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice seems a little off to me. Sacrifice, if willing, as the word implies, is always a bit fulfilling. So the difference between you and Lauren plus Keenan is not that they believe in selves and you believe in causes but that your self suffers and theirs satisfies.
- LM: Maybe things are getting lost here. I don't think fulfillment comes from the act of painting. It comes from being *recognized* as an artist—the desire for which is fueled by insecurity.
- DXB: I'm with Lauren. We should have more publicly available rankings that we can vocally disagree with. Not in the sense of "rankings are dumb," but of "rank me higher!"
- LM: Well, sort of, but no. Abstract painting is an available means for people to identify and commune with a peer group who then provides validation. It is not in contrast to participatory art, but rather is community-based. I don't want to self-fulfill in a studio, alone.



EJ Hauser, *Good News*, 2012. Oil on canvas, 63" x 60".

Postscript

1. One pressing task for contemporary abstract painters is to identify procedures that genuinely aid *self-actualization*, and to distinguish them from merely *self-indulgent* ones. Insofar as David Xu Borgonjon, Keenan Jay, and Lauren Martin recast modernist self-reflexivity as self-fulfillment (see interview, p. 104), each painter (formerly artwork) progresses towards actualization (formerly the essence) of him- or herself (formerly the medium). Here, compositional awkwardness and hesitant brushwork indicate nebulous subject formation rather than function as anti-academic gestures (Sharon Butler), symptomatize painting's attenuated authority (Raphael Rubinstein), or reflect contemporary labor conditions (see Lane Relyea essay, p. 56). A corollary challenge: the viewer must judge the maker's character, and his and her evolution towards it, rather than qualities in the work itself. Such might be an update to what Stephen Truax and Gregory Sholette refer to as the "ontological crisis of (artistic) subjecthood" (see interview, p. 14 and essay, p. 92).

2. A second task for contemporary abstract painters is to differentiate *virtuosity* (here used differently than in Reylea's postscript see p. 58) from *facility*. Sholette points to the recent contradiction between material and medium specific object makers and social practitioners (see essay, p. 90). The latter further splits into (older) activist art that effects change, and (newer) relational and/or antagonist art that reflects the structure of democracy and/or sustained conflict. A third option: art that fosters better-expressed people, who in turn constitute a better—more virtuous—citizenry (see Borgonjon et al. interview, p. 104). In art, to achieve virtuosity, one practices daily and hones through exercises; this might explain the large volume and small scale of abstract painting in Bushwick and elsewhere (see Ariel Dill, Lauren Portada, and Stephen Truax

interview, p. 10). Becoming-expert also requires self-discipline, the opposite of indulgence. In this regard Vince Contarino's material and gestural economy, and Jonathan Allmaier's systematic explorations are exemplary (see images, p. 22-23, 47 and p. 51, 103).

3. A third task for contemporary abstract painters: to approach pragmatics as the basis for *political realism* rather than as a *coping mechanism*. Keith J. Varadi comments, "if you have recently moved to New York and are struggling to pay rent, and if you're making delicate, dandyish small paintings in a 200-square-foot studio by yourself, that's totally understandable" (see interview, p. 83). Here, the danger is not so much that Bushwick abstraction misconstrues the petit-bourgeois fantasy of consumption as realm of personal autonomy (a mirror of and correlate to the pitfalls Relyea describes for D.I.Y. production [see essay, p. 56]), but that it excuses disengagement. Constructive and timely would be if pragmatism begets a politics different than that of '68 and its current rejoinder, the Tea Party, i.e., a politics absent revolutionary and/or ideological pitch. To take cue from President Obama on healthcare: "It makes sense to build on what works and fix what doesn't, rather than try to build an entirely new system from scratch."

4. A fourth task for contemporary abstract painters is to make *conscientious* art instead of, or in addition to, that which alters the *sensible*, to use Jacques Rancière's now ubiquitous term (see Dill et al. interview, p. 17). Conscientious art—art mindful of and responsible to others—tempers modernism's self-reflexivity and the current generation's admixture of willful solipsism and unselfconscious (un-ironic, authentic, unmediated) technique. Previous golden ages have produced creative flourish. They also often heralded the birth and strengthening of civic institutions. In contrast, modern and market art alike overlook and underestimate the middle, privileging various outliers: visionaries, revolutionaries, and art stars. As the wealth gap widens in the United States, and as demagoguery erodes centrist American politics, might it be incumbent on artists to align with the middle, to embrace moderation? At worst contemporary abstract painting signals a *rappel à l'ordre* (see David Geers essay, p. 32); at best it is civic minded.

Christopher K. Ho

Bios

Jonathan Allmaier lives and works in Brooklyn. He earned a BA in Visual Art (Honors) and Philosophy from Brown University and an MFA from the Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia. His work is represented in New York by James Fuentes.

Marco Antonini is Executive Director and Curator at NURTUREart Non Profit Inc., as well as an active independent curator and writer.

David Xu Borgonjon is the current curatorial fellow at Wave Hill, NY. He studied Painting and English in Providence, RI, but only improved in one of the two disciplines. As a curator, he hopes to contribute to the current reappraisal of the art of socialism across the world. Additionally, he's interested in technique as a kind of community; in his next life, David would like to be a full-time Go player.

Vince Contarino received his BFA from Ringling College of Art + Design in Sarasota, FL. Recent exhibition venues include Stephan Stoyanov Gallery in New York; TSA in New York; Laroche/Joncas Galerie in Montreal; and The Essl Museum in Vienna. He co-founded the artist-run initiative Progress Report. His work has been discussed in *Abstract Critical*, *Hyperallergic*, *New American Paintings*, the *New York Times*, and *SFAQ*.

Born in Los Angeles, **Ariel Dill** received an MFA from Hunter College. She has exhibited nationally in solo and group exhibitions. Her work has been reviewed in the *New Yorker*, *Time Out New York*, *Modern Painters*, the *New York*

Observer and the *Huffington Post*. She lives and works in Queens, NY.

David Geers is a freelance writer based in New York who also has a separate and longstanding practice as an artist. His critical writings have appeared in *October*, *Fillip*, *The Third Rail*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Bomb* and *Frieze*. He is currently working on expanding some of the ideas that he first developed for this publication.

Keenan Jay was born in New York and grew up in Portland, Oregon, and Tokyo. He received his BFA from the RISD Painting Department. He currently lives in Portland Oregon.

Christopher K. Ho is an artist who investigates the often-invisible social forces that implicate and impact contemporary production. An interest in approaching art as a civic practice and institution guides his work on NURTUREart's Board of Trustees and other nonprofits. He received his BFA and BS from Cornell University and his MPhil from Columbia University.

Lane Relyea teaches in the Department of Art Theory & Practice at Northwestern University and is the editor in chief of *Art Journal*. He has written widely on contemporary art since 1983, and his book *Your Everyday Art World*, on the effects of communication networks on artistic practice and its contexts, was published in 2013 by MIT Press.

Lauren Portada lives and works in New York City. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Her work has been in one-person and group exhibitions in New York, Chicago, New Delhi and Bangalore, India. She is one of thirteen artist-directors of the Regina Rex collective.

Nathlie Provosty is a visual artist based in New York. She was the recipient of an American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Prize, a Marie Walsh Sharpe Space Program

studio residency, and a Fulbright Fellowship to India in painting. Provosty has exhibited nationally and internationally.

Stephen Truax is an artist and writer living in New York and Berlin. His work has been exhibited in New York at the Dorsky Foundation, NURTUREart, and Storefront Ten Eyck, and has been discussed in the *Brooklyn Rail*, the *New Criterion*, and *ArtInfo*. He organized *LOVE*, an exhibition of eleven Brooklyn-based painters, with ART BLOG ART BLOG. His writing has appeared in *Apollo*, *Hyperallergic*, *Art-Pulse*, *Adult*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, and *BOMB*.

Gregory Sholette is a New York-based artist and writer. He is co founder of the artists' collectives Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D), and REPOhistory. His publications include *It's The Political Economy, Stupid*, co-edited with Oliver Ressler (Pluto Press, 2013) and *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture* (Pluto Press, 2011). He teaches art and social practice at Queens College, City University of New York and is associate faculty at Home WorkSpace, Beirut, as well as the Art, Design and the Public Domain program of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.

Keith J. Varadi is a Los Angeles-based artist, writer, and curator. He received his MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and his BFA from Rutgers University. He has exhibited his work and the work of others at various international venues, performed mainly on the East Coast, and published most of his writing primarily on the Internet.

Credits

David Geers: “Neo-Modern”

Originally published in *October* #139, MIT Press, Winter 2012.

Lane Relyea: “DIY Abstraction”

Originally published on *wowhuh.com*, Fall 2012.

Gregory Sholette: “After OWS: Social Practice Art,
Abstraction, and the Limits of the Social”

Originally published on *e-flux journal* #31, January 2012.

Idea, project management and editing:

Marco Antonini and Christopher K. Ho.

Book design: Marco Antonini and Ido Michaeli.

Transcriptions: Sarah Corpron, Cody Rae Knue, Jacqueline Kuper

Thanks to: Chris Fernald, Emma Laramie, Tabitha Pisen

Cover illustration: Carys Shepard

Printed by Radix Media, Brooklyn, NY.

<http://radixmedia.org>

1st edition. Copy # ___ of 250. October 2014.



Stephen Truax, *Untitled (Sunday Painter)*, 2013.
Gouache and acrylic on canvas, 20" x 16".

NURTUREart

NURTUREart Non-Profit, Inc is a 501(c)3 New York State licensed federally tax-exempt charitable organization founded in 1997 by George J. Robinson.

NURTUREart receives support from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, including member item funding from City Council Members Stephen Levin and Antonio Reynoso, the New York City Department of Education, and the New York State Council on the Arts.

NURTUREart is also supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, British Council of Northern Ireland, Harold and Colene Brown Foundation, Con Edison, Czech Center New York, Edelman, the Francis Greenburger Charitable Fund of the Jewish Communal Fund, the Golden Rule Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, the Walentas Family Foundation, and the Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation.

We receive in-kind support from Lagunitas, Societe Perrier, Tekserve, and Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts.

NURTUREart is grateful for significant past support from the Liebovitz Foundation and the Greenwall Foundation, and to the many generous individuals and businesses whose contributions have supported us throughout our history. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the artists who have contributed works of art to past benefits—our continued success would be impossible without your generosity.



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Gregory Sholette
Stephen Truax
Keith J. Varadi

Comprising three ground-breaking essays about abstract painting plus newly published postscripts by the authors, and interspersed with the voices of the painters themselves, *Golden Age* is required reading for those looking to understand—and to probe—the recent return and rise of abstract painting in the US; the nascent Bushwick art scene; and the conflicting positions of its key participants.

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ISBN-10: 0980198542
ISBN-13: 978-0-9801985-4-6