

Painting Beside Itself

DAVID JOSELIT

With a characteristic flourish of perversity linking painting to pasta, Martin Kippenberger identified the most important problem to be addressed on canvas since Warhol in an interview of 1990–91: “Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it’s art is dreadful. The whole network is important! Even spaghetti When you say art, then everything possible belongs to it. In a gallery that is also the floor, the architecture, the color of the walls.”¹ If we take Kippenberger at his word, a significant question arises: *How does painting belong to a network?* This late twentieth-century problem, whose relevance has only increased with the ubiquity of digital networks, joins a sequence of modernist questions: How does painting *signify* in the semiotic aporias of Cubism or the non-objective utopias of the historical avant-gardes? *How can the status of painting as matter be made explicit* (i.e., through the incorporation of readymades, and the rise of the monochrome and seriality as well as the gestural techniques of dripping, pouring, and staining)? And *How might painting meet the challenge of mechanical reproduction* (as in strategies of appropriation spanning Pop’s silk screens of the 1960s and the Pictures generation’s return to painting in the 1980s)? None of these problems exists in isolation or ever disappears; instead, there are shifts in emphasis in which earlier questions are reformulated through newer ones.

Certainly, painting has always belonged to networks of distribution and exhibition, but Kippenberger claims something more: that, by the early 1990s, an individual painting should explicitly *visualize* such networks. And indeed, Kippenberger’s studio assistants and close associates (some might call them collaborators)—such as Michael Krebber, Merlin Carpenter, and his interviewer of 1990–91, Jutta Koether—have developed practices in which painting sutures a virtual world of images onto an actual network composed of human actors, allowing neither aspect to eclipse the other. In Koether’s 2009 exhibition *Lux Interior* at

1. “One Has to Be Able to Take It!” excerpts from an interview with Martin Kippenberger by Jutta Koether, November 1990–May 1991, in *Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective*, ed., Ann Goldstein, (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p. 316.



*Jutta Koether. Hot Rod (after Poussin). 2009.
Courtesy of Reena Spaulings Fine Art. Photograph
by Farzad Owrang.*

Reena Spaulings Gallery in New York, for instance, painting functioned as a cynosure of performance, installation, and painted canvas. The exhibition centered on a single work mounted on an angled floating wall—much like a screen—which, as Koether put it, had one foot on and one foot off the raised platform that delineates the gallery’s exhibition area, as though caught in the act of stepping onstage.² This effect was enhanced by a vintage scoop light trained on the painting that had been salvaged from *The Saint*, a famous gay nightclub that officially closed in 1988 largely as a consequence of the AIDS crisis. The canvas itself, *Hot Rod (after Poussin)* (2009), is a nearly monochromatic reworking of Poussin’s *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (1651), representing a Roman myth centered on the extinction of love—and life—caused by the misreading of visual cues (Pyramus sees Thisbe’s ruined veil and assumes she has been murdered by a lioness, leading to his suicide, and then, upon finding him dead, Thisbe’s own). The painting is predominantly red—the color of blood and anger (and by extension AIDS)—and it centers on a scaled-up motif—a giant bolt of lightning that

2. The exhibition’s press release describes the painting as “installed on its own wall, with one foot on the stage and one foot off . . . ”



Koether. Lux Interior. 2009. Installation view, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, 2009. Photograph by Farzad Owrang.

had played a much less prominent role in Poussin's canvas. This jagged form divides the composition like a scar, around which brushstrokes coagulate. The marks are by turns tentative and assertive, something like a caress before a slap. Indeed, inspired by T. J. Clark's extended reading of Poussin in *The Sight of Death* (2006), Koether develops a gesture that is deeply ambivalent: equally composed of self-assertion and interpretation, her strokes are depleted of expressive urgency by marking the elapsed time between Poussin's 1651 and her 2009.³ Three lecture performances accompanied the exhibition in which Koether moved around and even under the wall that supported her canvas—her body and the bright anger of her recitation of collaged text furnished a frame for the canvas. The painting's own presence as a personage—or interlocutor—was further enhanced by strobe lights flashing onto it in different configurations during these live events as if painting and painter had encountered one another in a club.⁴

Lux Interior offered a sophisticated response to the question with which I began: *How does painting belong to a network?* It's worth pausing to consider how difficult it is to

3. See T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

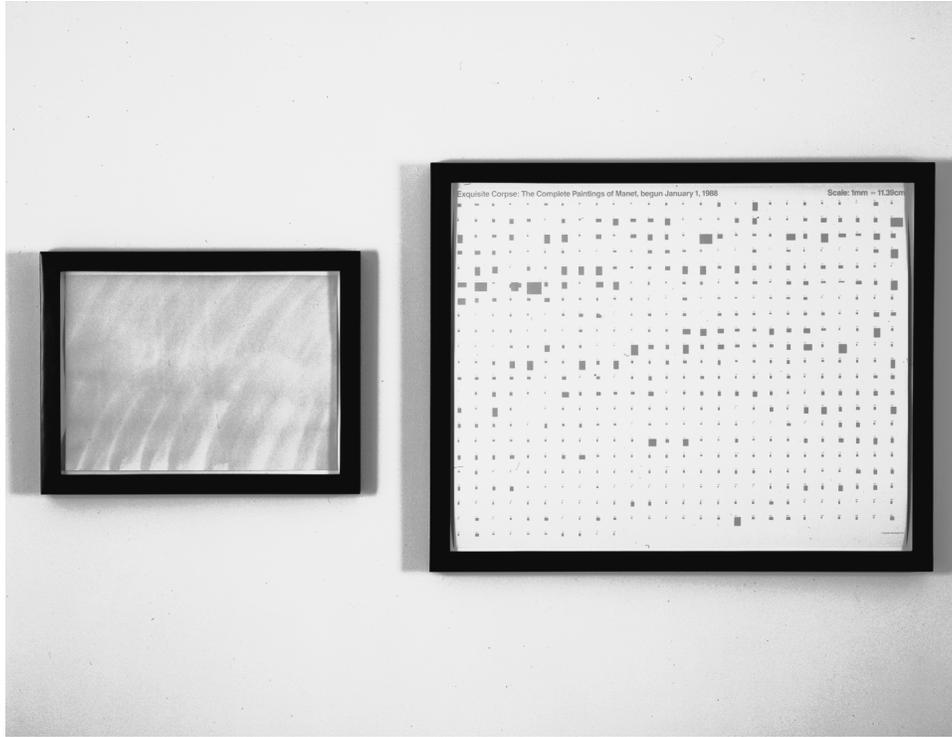
4. Music is a fundamental dimension of Koether's practice as an artist. *Lux Interior*, for instance is named after the front man of the punk band The Cramps, whose lyrics are featured in the archive compiled by Koether of various "source materials" that accompanied the exhibition.



*Koether. Lux Interior. 2009.
Installation view, Reena
Spaulings Fine Art, 2009.
Photograph by Farzad Owrang.*

visualize networks, which, in their incomprehensible scale, ranging from the impossibly small microchip to the impossibly vast global Internet, truly embody the contemporary sublime. One need only Google “Internet maps” to turn up Star Trek–inspired images of interconnected solar systems that do little to enhance one’s understanding of the traffic in information but do much to tie digital worlds to ancient traditions of stargazing. Koether approaches the problem in a different way. Instead of attempting to visualize the overall contours of a network, she actualizes the *behavior of objects within networks* by demonstrating what I would like to call their transitivity. The Oxford English Dictionary gives one definition of “transitive” as “expressing an action which passes over to an object.” I can think of no better term to capture the status of objects within networks—which are defined by their circulation from place to place and their subsequent translation into new contexts—than this notion of *passage*.⁵ In *Lux Interior*, Koether established such transitivity along two axes. First, each brushstroke of her reenactment of Poussin’s *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* embodies the passage of time. This diachronic axis of painting-as-medium is joined to a second synchronic kind of passage which moves out from painting-as-cultural artifact to the social networks surrounding it, as indicated both by *Hot Rod*’s behavior as a personage (it “steps” on stage, is lighted by disco lamps, etc.) as well as the artist’s performance as the painting’s discursive and bodily interlocutor in her three lecture events.

5. Given Marcel Duchamp’s fascination with passage within painting, not only in works such as *Passage from Virgin to Bride* (1912) but in *The Large Glass* (1915–23) and even through the peregrinations of the readymades over their “lives” this seems a good moment to acknowledge the importance of Dada painting to the contemporary development I am sketching out. Whether the influence is direct or not, and I’m somewhat doubtful it is, both Dada and so-called neo-Dada artists were exploring how painting might embrace networks beyond itself. For example, see George Baker, *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), especially chapter 2, “The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Dada Painting”; and Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003). Thierry de Duve has of course written importantly on the relationship between Duchamp’s painting and the readymade. These ideas are collected in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996). In my own *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910–1941* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998) I address the question of Duchamp’s painting in different ways.



Stephen Prina. *Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet*, 206 of 556, *Mme. Edouard Manet et Paysage à Berck-sur-Mer* (Manet's Wife and Landscape at Berck-sur-Mer) 1873. 2004.

What defines transitive painting, of which Koether represents only one “mood,” is its capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it. In this regard, painting since the 1990s has folded into itself so-called “institutional critique” without falling into the modernist trap of negation, where works on canvas are repeatedly reduced to degree zero while remaining unique objects of contemplation and market speculation. From this cooler perspective, Stephen Prina stands in a position analogous to Kippenberger vis-a-vis younger artists such as Cheyney Thompson, Wade Guyton, and R. H. Quaytman. In 1988, Prina initiated an ongoing project titled *Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet*, in which an offset lithograph representing a visual index of Édouard Manet's corpus of 556 works (arranged to scale in a grid of “blanks” based on the contour and dimensions of each painting or drawing) was exhibited next to a sequence of monochrome sepia ink drawings made by Prina to the exact size and format of corresponding works in Manet's oeuvre. While these

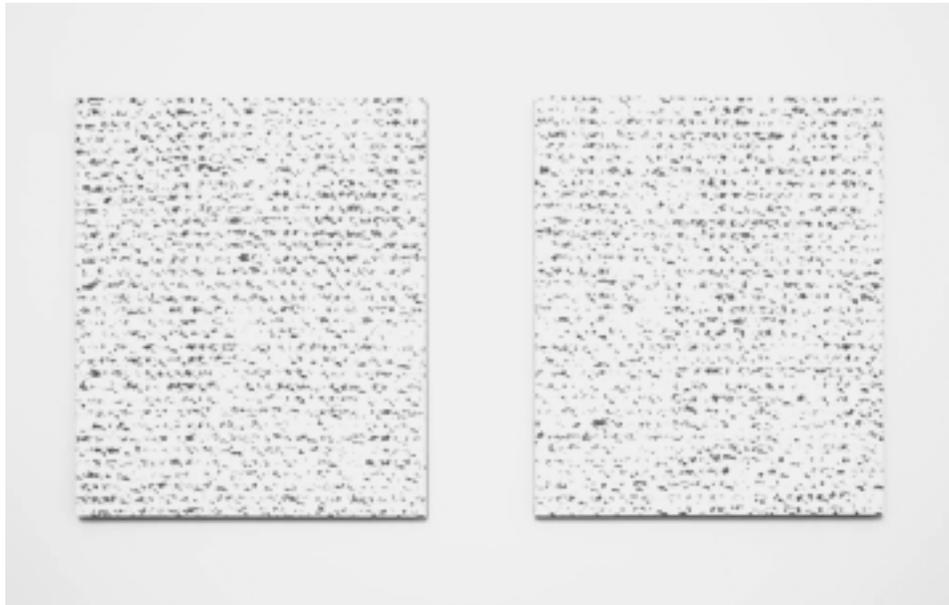
drawings might appear empty on casual examination, Prina rightly insists on their positive visual affect:

They may be the lowest common denominator of expressivity. The surfaces are sponged with a diluted sepia ink wash. Some people see them as being vacant or empty images. They are subtle, but they aren't empty. In some ways they're as full as they could be. There's pigment edge to edge. Every square inch has been mapped out, plotted and occupied. They are quite clearly hand-made . . .⁶

If, for Koether, “painting” functions as the nodal point of performance, installation, and a figurative style of gestural reenactment on canvas, for Prina “painting” marks the intersection of the artist’s oeuvre (as inventory or body of work), the object’s format (its size and contour), and a non-objective style of reenactment on paper.⁷ The flavor of *Exquisite Corpse* is thus dramatically different from *Lux Interior*, but they share the same project: to visualize the transitive passage of action from a painting out to a social network (or body), and from this network

6. Elisabeth Sussman and David Joselit, “Stephen Prina” in David A. Ross and Jürgen Harten, *The BiNational: American Art of the Late '80s* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art and Museum of Fine Arts; Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 1988), p. 158.

7. Prina made a related project in 1988–89 titled *Monochrome Painting* that included his own “reenactments” of the formats of monochromes drawn from various significant twentieth-century artists, arranged as stations of the cross (in homage to Barnett Newman).



Cheyney Thompson. Chromachrome 8 (5BG/5R) dip-tch. 2009. Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.



Wade Guyton.
Installation view,
Friedrich Petzel
Gallery, 2007.

back onto painting. As Prina declares, “I entitled the Manet project *The Exquisite Corpse* because it seemed necessary to see a complete body of work, in relation to his body and to my body . . .”⁸

As a few examples of recent exhibitions suggest, transitive painting is rich and varied. In his 2009 show *Robert Macaire Chromachromes*, at Andrew Kreps Gallery, Cheyney Thompson presented an inventory of painting’s formats (i.e., the diptych, the edge [zip], or the tondo) each of which delineated an optically charged all-over field composed of an enlarged pattern of the linen weave on which it was painted, executed by hand in complementary color pairs. In Wade Guyton’s 2007 exhibition at Friedrich Petzel a readymade computer format—namely, a rectangle drawn and filled in using Photoshop—served as the source for a series of black monochrome paintings generated by ink-jet printer. Guyton installed a temporary black floor in the gallery whose oddly provisional quality gave the viewer a bodily hint of the DIY digital aesthetic, rising up through her feet as though experiencing a latter day Carl Andre floor piece.⁹ And as R. H. Quaytman’s contribution to a collaborative 2008 exhibition with Rhea Anastas and Amy Sillman, *From One O to the Other*, at Orchard, she exhibited paintings whose motifs were drawn from photographs of the gallery’s Lower East side space, overlain by silk screens of optically assertive patterns that made it difficult to concentrate on the submerged motifs. Quaytman’s paintings were organized as a “chapter” and archived in a storage unit available for visitors to browse.¹⁰ In each

8. Sussman and Joselit, “Stephen Prina,” p. 157.

9. For an excellent account of Guyton’s work, see Johanna Burton, “Rites of Silence: On the Art of Wade Guyton,” *Artforum* XLVI, no. 10 (Summer 2008), pp. 364–73, 464.

10. I give a fuller discussion of Quaytman’s piece in my “Institutional Responsibility: The Short Life of Orchard,” *Grey Room* 35 (Spring 2009), pp. 108–15.

of these three exhibitions, the rhetoric of modern painting (the all-over field, the monochrome and Op) served to suture spectators to extra-perceptual social networks rather than merely situating them in a phenomenological relationship of individual perception, as orthodox modernist criticism would have it. With Thompson, optical sensation was linked to the history of painting's conventional formats; for Guyton, it was tied to the mutability of digital information; and for Quaytman, it alluded to the ethically charged legacy of gentrification by artists and galleries on the Lower East Side of New York.

These transitive practices have gained currency because they offer a way out of a particularly enduring critical dead end: the reification trap. As the most collectible type of art, which combines maximum prestige with maximum convenience of display (both for private and institutional collectors), painting is the medium most frequently condemned for its intimate relation to commodification. Needless to say, this is an accurate diagnosis, but it is equally true that paying an artist (or an art historian for that matter) a fee in exchange for services rendered such as a lecture, performance, or temporary installation is no less a transaction leading to commodification than the sale of a painting—even if less money changes hands. The problem with the term “reification” is that it connotes the permanent arrest of an object's circulation within a network: it is halted, paid for, put on a wall, or sent to storage, therefore permanently crystallizing a particular social relation. Transitive painting, on the other hand, invents forms and structures whose purpose is to demonstrate that once an object enters a network, it can never be fully stilled, but only subjected to different material states and speeds of circulation ranging from the geologically slow (cold storage) to the infinitely fast. A Poussin might land in the hands of Jutta Koether, or Stephen Prina might seize the entire oeuvre of Manet.

I have argued elsewhere that Dada's diagrammatic drawings, particularly those of Francis Picabia, disrupt the representation of stable objects, and by extension, the stasis of reification.¹¹ Indeed, if we recall the definition of transitivity I introduced above—“expressing an action which passes over to an object”—a close relationship between the transitive and the diagrammatic might be anticipated, since diagrams are entirely devoted to accommodating *passages* from one element to another. Indeed, recent practices of transitive painting are complemented by a contemporaneous engagement with the diagram. In paintings by Amy Sillman and Thomas Eggerer, to name only two of many possible examples, a figurative element (in Sillman's case this is usually a drawing by her own hand and in Eggerer's, a photographic motif taken from a magazine or book) is submerged in a field of gestural vectors. Whether in a ludic, or a despairing mood, figuration

11. See my “Dada's Diagrams,” in *The Dada Seminars*, ed. Leah Dickerman, with Matthew S. Witkovsky (Washington: The National Gallery of Art; New York: D.A.P., 2005), pp. 221–39. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh develops a more disciplinary understanding of the diagrammatic in his “Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram,” in *Eva Hesse Drawing*, ed., Catherine de Zegher (New York: The Drawing Center; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 117–50.



Above: R. H. Quaytman. Chapter 10: Ark. 2008. Installation view, Orchard, 2008.



Right: Amy Sillman. untitled (finger). 2009. Courtesy carlier|gebauer, Berlin, and Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York.



Thomas Eggerer. Untitled. 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Daniel Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin.

is partially digested into pure passage. A fragment obtrudes here and there, just to remind us of the enormity of those procedures of abstraction that also characterize the digital network's translation of cultural artifacts into code. Transitivity is a form of translation: when it enters into networks, the body of painting is submitted to infinite dislocations, fragmentations, and degradations. As Kippenberger suggested nearly twenty years ago, these framing conditions cannot be quarantined. Painting is beside itself.