THE LOVE OF PAINTING

ISABELLE GRAW

GENEALOGY OF A SUCCESS MEDIUM

Sternberg Press

The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium, Isabelle Graw, Cover, 2018

Chapter V

BEYOND NETWORK PAINTING

The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium, Isabelle Graw, Page No.261, 2018
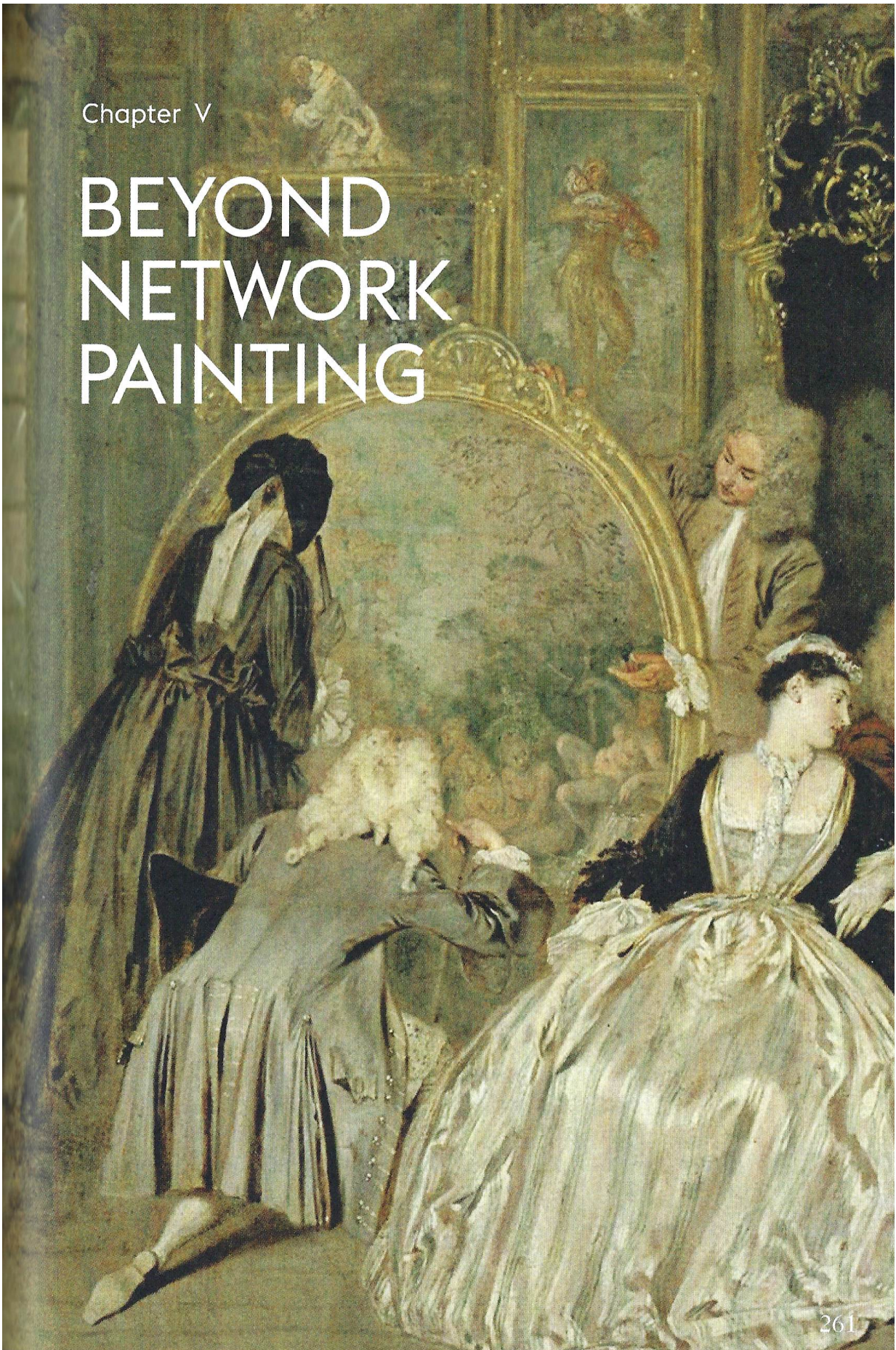
Frozen References to Life in Avery Singer's Paintings

Painting = Problem?

Avery Singer's art is distinguished by its considerable capacity for communicating with those rituals and convictions that currently govern a specific social universe known as the "art world." Her shrewd handling of those rituals is readily apparent in her "Press Release Me" project (since 2013) in which she writes mock press releases to satirize the language used in press texts to counter the kind of explanations readers expect. In one she quotes a passage from the young artist's (no doubt fictitious) last will, while another characterizes that same artist's paintings as a platform to express feelings of self-abasement. Elsewhere, she jokingly refers to herself as a "Cologne painter," inserting herself into the history of a scene that was notorious for its exclusion, with few exceptions, of women artists. Her public statement also displays an awareness of the present cultural moment where painting has shaken the reputation it once had of being a dubious enterprise or even obsolete, since it doesn't try to defend painting either.

In the 1970s and '80s, by contrast, Conceptual artists like Mel Ramsden or John Baldessari had sought to strip painting of its intellectual prestige, to bury or demystify it. Ramsden's *Secret Painting* (1967–68), for example, poked fun at the mystical aura that surrounded monochrome paintings in the manner of Kazimir Malevich. The diptych combines a black panel and a text painting in a slightly smaller format, the proposition subverting what might be taken to be the essence of the painted panel: "The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist." The paratext accompanying the picture appears to make it speak but then announces that its message will not be disclosed to the viewer. The textual dimension breaks up the hermetically sealed surface of the monochrome panel, as though to undercut its metaphysical claim, yet although it makes a mockery of the notion that the picture harbors a secret, it doesn't reveal that secret in the end.

Where Ramsden's critique of painting remained within the format of the painted canvas, Baldessari, in *The Cremation Project* (1970),

opted for its actual destruction: he literally made it go up in smoke. In a ritual act he had all of his paintings created between 1953 and 1966 incinerated in a crematorium. Yet he also meticulously documented the various steps of this obliteration and preserved the remaining ashes in labeled cardboard boxes. The iconoclastic act had a twofold effect: comparable to the Nazis' autos-da-fé, which effectively affirmed the significance of the books in question, Baldessari's act erased *and* acknowledged the historical significance of painting. Like Ramsden, Baldessari carried painting with its aspirations to its grave while enshrining the traces of it that remained.

Network Painting and Biopower

Since the late 1990s, however, the media-aesthetic insight has become widely accepted that no artistic medium, not even painting, is problematic in and of itself. What can be questionable is the way it is used.[1] The enormous posthumous popularity of Martin Kippenberger's oeuvre played a crucial role in improving the reputation of painting, which came to be seen as compatible not just with conceptual approaches but also with procedures of institutional critique.[2] The new millennium then witnessed the advent of "network painting," a catchphrase that, however loosely defined, gave another boost to the medium's legitimacy.[3] Its rise was fueled by the omnipresence of the term "network" in the social sciences, where the concept has been increasingly in vogue, in no small measure thanks to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory.[4] Against the fixation in sociological theory on social forces, this theory advocated greater attention to objects, a recommendation that, not surprisingly, was eagerly welcomed in the art world. Those objects were now said to be initiators of actions in their own right and involved in the "course of action."[5] Yet while making room in sociology for objects—however contentious the attribution of agency to them remains—can close a major gap, the network strikes me as an altogether unsuitable metaphor when it comes to describing the social world. It tends to overemphasize frictionless connectivity and to underestimate the significance of social hierarchies, relations of power, and inequalities.

In other words, the talk of the network suggests that all actors in it enjoy the same opportunities, and in a critical perspective on social reality, it fails to recognize the persistence of factual disparities. The art historian David Joselit's seminal and widely read essay "Painting beside Itself," published in 2009, drew the connection between art, more specifically painting, and the network idea. In the course of the reception of this text the label "network painting" came to be applied to a wide variety of works. Joselit singled out pictures by Martin Kippenberger, Amy Sillman, Thomas Eggerer, Jutta Koether, and others, suggesting that they "visualized" their respective social networks. Moreover, he argued that the circulation of a work in its particular social sphere informed its materiality and helped constitute meaning. Yet Joselit's focus on contemporary tendencies led him to overlook the fact that such an entry of the social world— and more particularly, of the artist's circle of friends—into painting is hardly a novel phenomenon, as pictures like Francis Picabia's *L'oeil cacodylate* (*The Cacodylic Eye*, 1921), Max Ernst's *Das Rendezvous der Freunde* (1922), and Florine Stettheimer's *Studio Party, or Soirée* (1917–19) illustrate. All these works bear witness to the importance of friendships, social contacts, and peer groups in visual art, be it by depicting a salon the artist frequented (Stettheimer), memorializing the exchange of ideas within an (exclusively male) circle of artist friends (Ernst), or transposing the friends' signatures into the materiality of the picture (Picabia). Yet the current discussion of the conjunction of network and painting disregards such historic painterly reflections on how artists are embedded in networks. In fact, the concept of the network seems to encourage a peculiar fixation on the present that ignores its historical genesis.[6]

Still, I believe that the fusion of the terms "network" and "painting" has a positive side effect: it does away once and for all with the modernist ideal of a clearly delimitable sphere of *pure* painting. Under the aegis of the network, painting is conceived as—in Joselit's term—"transitive,"[7] which is to say, as overflowing into its environment, and so the boundary between its inside and what's outside it has become—perhaps we should say, has always been—fundamentally unstable. Historically speaking, what's now widely discussed

as network painting has taken the diverse efforts in pre- and postwar painting to open up the canvas to the frameworks in which it appears one step further, by insisting that the social (and digital) universe in which the artist operates is no more extrinsic to the painting than those other outsides.

So although network painting makes a definite break with modernism's restrictive conception of painting, it opens the door to new problems, especially in today's economy, in which social relationships, including those cultivated via social media, are regarded as symbolically and economically valuable. By adopting the web of social relations in which the artist is embedded, his or her interconnectedness, as its material, such painting has its basis in those contacts. It might be argued that it stores and purveys the very kind of communal existence that our new global economy of the twenty-first century—an escalated version of the technology of power Michel Foucault has termed "biopower"—avidly absorbs. Biopower for Foucault is a form of regularization that takes aim at the way we live, a reticulate and non-disciplining technology that, as he aptly put it, "is centered [...] upon life."[8] Life is regarded by this technology as a valuable resource amenable to economic extraction. The advent of novel communication systems since the 1970s—now most saliently, of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—has considerably amplified this absorptive tendency of biopower, and we all are (though usually voluntarily) subject to such extraction, as when we post so-called life events on Facebook. The historic avant-gardes thought of such an opening-up toward life as a desirable, even progressive shift, but by now the parameters have changed.[9] Obviously, the old avant-gardistic aspiration to transform art into a "praxis of life," as Peter Bürger has put it, becomes questionable at a time when that life is reframed as a highly coveted economic resource.[10]

Petrified Life References

Singer's paintings, I would argue, address this nexus between biopower, the artist's networked existence, and the historic avant-garde's

emphatic embrace of life in an extraordinarily productive and astute manner. They confront us with black-and-white scenarios that revolve around the conventional topic of the "artist's life," but they don't actually divulge much about this artist's life and social relationships. Rather, paintings such as *The Studio Visit* and *Jewish Artist with Patron* (both 2012) present overdrawn and schematic versions of the artist's lifeworld. The pictorial stages on which these theatrical scenes are produced leave no doubt that the studio visits, meetings with collectors, performances, and live gigs the titles evoke are stereotypical fantasies of what it's like to be an artist. *The Studio Visit*, for example, is distinguished by markedly rigid visual imagery. A robotic figure is seated at the table with a male visitor, with clichéd sample pieces of modern art in the background. The conspicuous stiffness of the characters makes clear that this is not an anecdote from Singer's own life but an abstract experimental setup that, although there is some overlap with reality, is ultimately far removed from the artist's everyday life. Other paintings, including *Happening* and *The Happening* (both 2014), speak of a certain wistful nostalgia for the actions, happenings, and performances of the avant-garde of the 1960s, formats that have recently had a renaissance, especially in the New York–Berlin transatlantic artistic circuit. I'm thinking, for example, of Berlin's New Theater, a community-run playhouse that staged plays about the networked lives of the actors, most of them Berlin-based expats; each new production was announced online. Similarly, Singer harnesses the potential of social media, for example by sharing the various stages of the genesis of her drawings with her Facebook friends. This practice allows a selected audience to feel like they're invited to an exclusive preview, and by clicking Like, they can even become directly involved in the artist's production of visual material, effectively putting their stamp of approval on a draft. Singer also doesn't seem to have a problem with the fact that this transmutes her paintings into "cellularized and abstracted [...] screen content" that has shed its materiality.[11] On the contrary, she prepares and accoutres her art with a view to the requirements of digital dissemination by, for example, working in black-and-white throughout, which reproduces better online—black-and-white makes

for a more graphic look than color, which never comes out exactly as intended on digital devices.

Yet Singer's paintings also attest to her keen interest in the visual idioms and emphatic embrace of life of the historic avant-gardes. She brings back the formal aesthetics of movements including Constructivism, Futurism, and Vorticism. I've already mentioned her use of grisaille, a technique that yields a somber palette. Twentieth-century painters resorted to the technique whenever things turned "serious," as when they addressed momentous political subjects; prominent examples include Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Richter's *18. Oktober 1977* (1988). So is it Singer's intention to revive the dead avant-garde and its political ambitions? Quite the contrary, I think—her work demonstrates the futility of such an undertaking. Consider the several pictures in which Naum Gabo's relief *Head of a Woman* (1917–20) circulates as a motif: *Resident's Reprieve* (2014), where it replaces the head of a kneeling figure; *Exhibitionist* (2013),
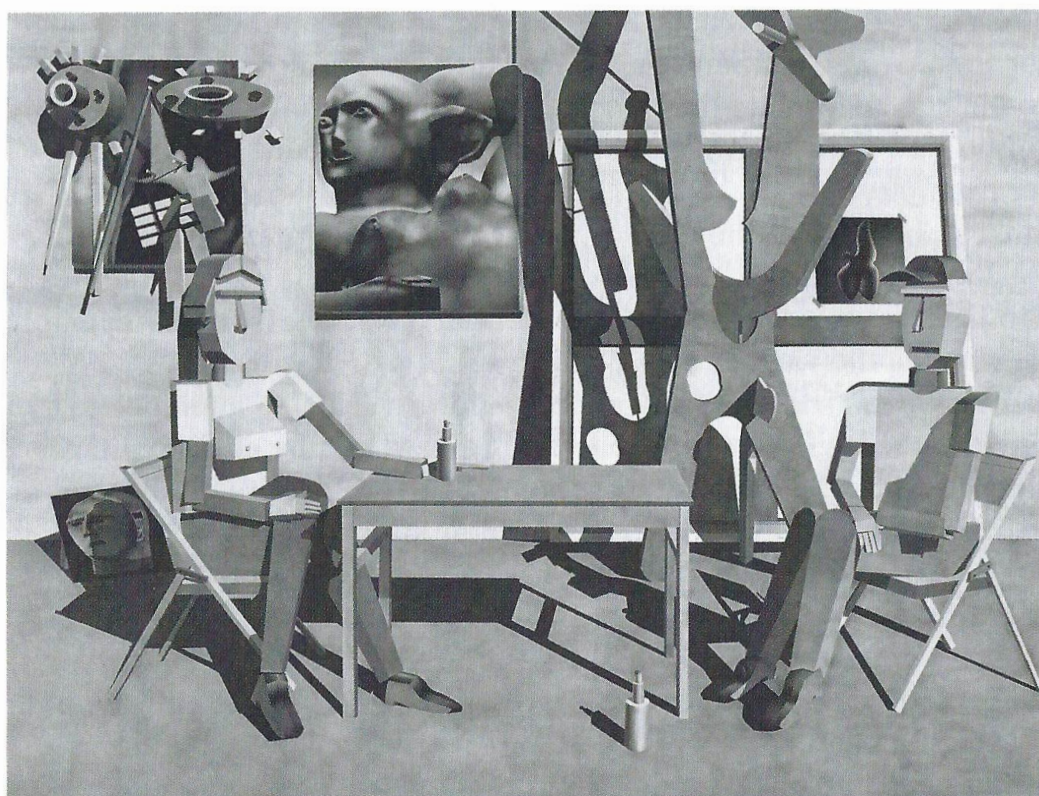

Avery Singer, *The Studio Visit*, 2012

where it plays the part of a female figure dropping her gaze in embarrassment; and *The Great Muses* (also 2013), where it stands on a stage next to an assemblage that recalls Isa Genzken's more recent sculptures. Such repetitive reuse transforms Gabo's stereometric object into a free-floating set piece, flat where Gabo's original literally projected into space to proclaim its metaphorical openness to the reality of life. Singer's pictures drain the relief of this emphasis on life, or more precisely, they freeze its lifelikeness. The three-dimensional relief in space has turned into a two-dimensional visual element slotted into the various painted scenes like an arbitrarily chosen prop. Not much is left of its original intention of metaphorically breaking down the barrier between art and life.

Fantasies of Bohemia and Phantasmatic Projections

So instead of forcing an opening of art toward life in the manner of the historic avant-gardes, Singer's works nurture fantasies about the lives of artists working today. Her first exhibition at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler in Berlin in 2013 was titled "The Artists," as though the gallery hosted a screening of a reality TV show or the first season of a new series. *The Studio Visit*, discussed above, shows two robotic figures that look like coarse wood carvings: the artist (the long hair is Singer's, while the face is blank except for a nose and eyebrows) and a male visitor wearing a baseball hat. They sit at a table before a wall adorned with stereotypical pieces of modern art. We can make out a figurative painting reminiscent of Picasso's *retour à l'ordre* period and, next to it, a depiction of a machine painting with dangling cogwheels and piston rods. A canvas on a stretcher frame has been turned toward the wall; before it, towering above the scene, stands a vaguely anthropomorphic modernist sculpture. The artist figure holds a bottle in her hand, codified already by Henri Murger's novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851) as the hallmark of the extravagant and dissolute lifestyle traditionally associated with artists. Singer picks up on clichés projected onto the contemporary artist while paraphrasing and satirizing the characteristic

morphologies of modernism. The event she depicts, the studio visit, is
even more momentous now than it was in the nineteenth century—
given their economic circumstances, many artists are compelled to
play nice and open their studios' doors to the agents of the market.
And this theme of the artist's precarious as well as transgressive-
bohemian life is all over Singer's oeuvre. *Saturday Night* (2011),
for example, shows a realistically painted bottle on a bar counter next
to a slumped figure executed in Cubist-style fragmentation who
is having a literal meltdown, the breach of his or her personal bound-
aries signaled by the softening blocks and blurry contours. But
unlike other pictures that explore the mental states induced by the
drugs many artists take to stimulate their creative energies, and
especially the many variations on the theme of the inebriated artist—
Kippenberger made a series of self-portraits under the title
"Alkoholfolter" ("Alcohol Torture," 1981)—Singer's painting dram-
atizes the *phantasmic* image of the artist-boozer. The stereotypical
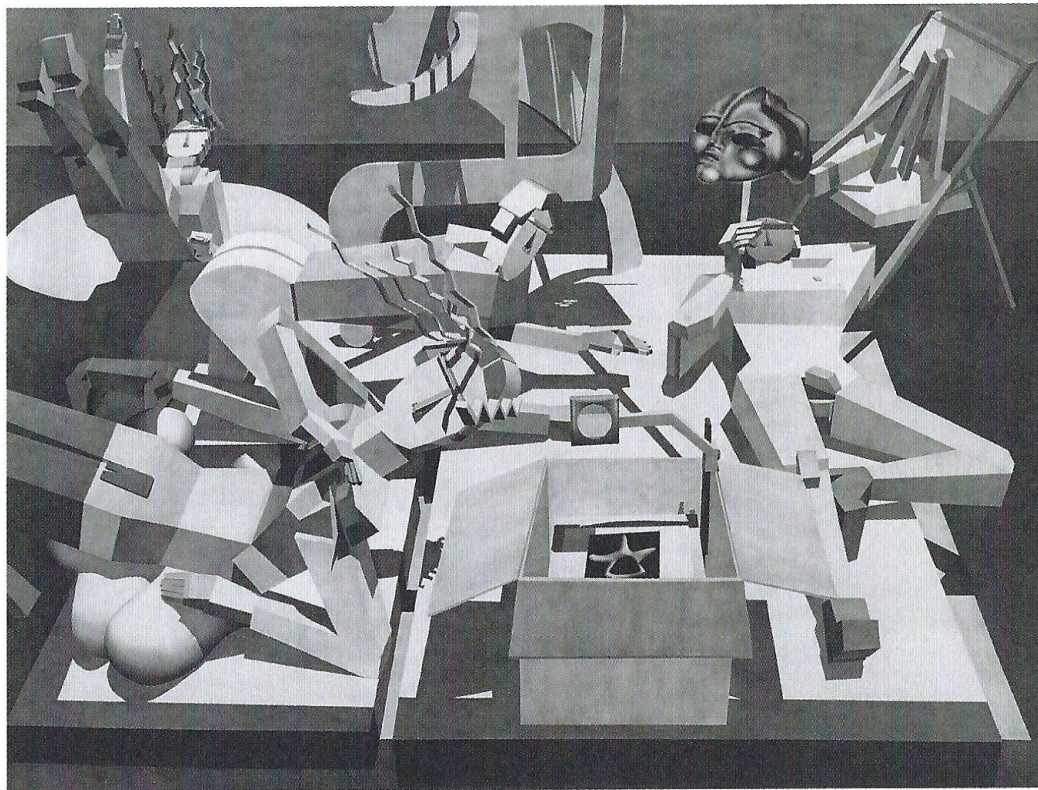
Avery Singer, *Performance Artists*, 2013

nature of this fantasy is evident in the motif of the artist's beret planted on the amorphous head. Jacques Lacan wrote that the agent of the phantasm "congeals in the rigidity of the object."[12] Put differently, there is no phantasm without an object, and, we might add, the more rigid the object, the better for the phantasm. Moreover, according to Lacan, the latter is distinguished by the fact that it inserts itself *before* the real, shielding it, but also making it more difficult to access. Phantasms, in other words, are bound up with the real, yet they always also conceal it. So Singer's pictures arguably do reflect the particulars of the artist's life, but, in their rigid and phantasmic quality, simultaneously render that life inaccessible, hampering the attempt to grasp a reality the digital economy seeks to extract and capitalize on. It might be objected that those particular life conditions are never truly accessible, and that network painting is not unusual in that regard. But I think it's worth noting that whereas, say, Kippenberger's or Amy Sillman's physically charged network paintings promise to communicate something like an authentically lived corporeal life, Singer's art leaves no doubt that the artist's embodied life is a phantasmatic projection.

To amplify this trait of her work, Singer employs a number of artistic procedures that are also used in advertising, architecture, and graphic design. One such tool is SketchUp, a 3-D modeling software popular with architects and engineers, in which she builds her digital motifs and compositions before projecting them onto a canvas. Using an airbrush to execute them in a monochrome grisaille, she produces surfaces with a peculiar graphic appeal that seem more dead than alive. The exaggerated spatial-depth effect of the SketchUp prototype is further heightened by the excessive modeling of light and shadow in the grisaille, making her sceneries look as though illuminated by floodlights or glazed with projections traversing the surface in slanted gray and white bands. Digital technology allows Singer to implement these Lacanian fantasies as material projections. In some works, the theatrical aspect of her approach is even more overt; see the old-fashioned overhead projector in a box in *Performance Artists* (2013) or the shadow of a lattice window that falls across the entire scenery in *Dancers around an Effigy to*

Modernism (2013). Such painterly emphasis on the staged quality of her scenes constantly reminds the viewer of their dramatic overstatement.

The Return of Illusionism

But what sense are we to make of Singer's stubborn insistence on representational-figurative painting and highly illusionistic tableaus? In his essay "The End of Painting" (1981), the critic Douglas Crimp went so far as to accuse painting of inherent illusionism, as though deceiving the eye was an essential trait of the medium.[13] Since the traditional alliance between painting and illusionism broke apart, many artists and especially female painters—most prominently, Lucy McKenzie—have worked with techniques of illusionism such as the trompe-l'oeil effect, which proved to be a useful alternative to gestural painting especially for women in the arts, foregrounding gender-neutral skills and discouraging attempts to discern subjective expression and reductive notions about hallmarks of "femininity." Using the trompe-l'oeil effect is a way of preventing reductivist assumptions about the female or male artist's gender. In other words: by leading the focus away from the artist's gender this technique prevents the artwork from getting reduced to it. Singer's illusionism is no doubt motivated in part by this anti-essentialist potential, but its primary source of energy is the illusionism of digital culture. The computer-generated motifs as well as the use of projector and airbrush result in a loss of materiality and subjective indexicality. Because her approach has roots in digital culture, many critics have classified her work as "post-internet art," a label that strikes me as misleading in that it would seem to give primacy to the technological dimension and make the art secondary, as though technology were all-important and not just one aspect among many. If anything, I would argue that Singer's availing herself of elements of digital culture and applied art underscores the heterogeneous nature of her work. Her painting is heterogeneous insofar as it absorbs techniques, such as airbrushing, which is conventionally used in the car industry or for the increasingly popular airbrush body painting.

Through the integration of practices not usually associated with fine art, Singer's pictures achieve what Joselit has recently called "the externalization of the medium":[14] it transcends its own boundaries while conversely allowing extrinsic elements to enter into it. In Singer's case, the resulting paintings seem to bear no trace of artistic workmanship and yet they evince an unmistakable signature style: grisaille, digitally generated shapes, illusionistic depth, and the recourse to an avant-gardistic formal idiom. Perhaps there's a connection between the forceful impact of digital culture on painting and the return of illusionistic figuration Singer's art heralds? It might be that deliberately opting for a figurative-illusionistic language is a way of compensating the disembodiment and dematerialization effected by digital technology.

Bohemia Today

Many of Singer's paintings show memorable scenes from the lives of today's artist-bohemians—in the studio, at the bar, during a performance. Works like *Performance Artists* (2013) can come across as formally cluttered, especially since the various figures, striking different poses of rest and accoutred with props and masks, are arranged in a highly theatrical setting—on a platform, a motif that is a fixture of the artist's work. And the moment something takes place on a stage, we're warned to view the "reality" of what we see with skepticism—what we see is staged. Artists, too, now increasingly perform themselves in everyday life—to paraphrase the sociologist Erving Goffman, there's something "theatrical" about their existence—and that is reflected in Singer's compositions. They register group dynamics and how it assigns different performative roles, as in *Flute Soloist* or the ocular panoptics of *Director* (both 2014), which zooms in on the flutist from the former picture. Robotically rigid figures also quote the motif of the articulated mannequin, a symbol of alienation that was already a staple of the historic avant-gardes, as in the Surrealist paintings of Giorgio de Chirico. In Singer, however, it has evolved into a kind of robot, hinting at the more profound alienation represented by the simulated life of the digital era's avatar.

Singer's paintings send out many signs that indicate they belong to an expanded notion of painting: from the exposition of the conditions in which today's bohemians live to its roots in digital culture. One could say that the distinctive features of so-called network painting are present in it, which make it appear slightly strategic. However, with their cool visual idiom and printed look, her paintings also make clear that there is no reason today to glorify the creative-bohemian lifestyle. Bohemia may once have been regarded as a milieu in which no one cared for anyone's background and pecuniary circumstances, but the neo-bohemian scenes in the metropolitan centers of today's art world are increasingly populated by independently wealthy trust-fund kids who are ever more adept at self-promotion and self-branding. The bohemian lifestyle, in other words, is now the privilege of those who can afford it because they're financially secure—for everyone else, slacking poses risks they can't afford. Yet Singer's pictures are not so much snapshots from the everyday lives of today's bohemians than dramatizations of those lives as a fantasy—an art-market, art-world, and art-historical fantasy. On the other hand, the expressionless characters in her paintings seem to be aware that the only reason they're latching on to the "bohemian" social set is that ideally it'll turn out to have been the shortest routes to the VIP lounge. That doesn't mean, however, that Singer's scenarios present a thoroughly demystified portrait of artist communities. The many paintings showing happenings and performances at various alternative project spaces and galleries indicate that this is about more than the projection of fantasies framed by those stages. Singer's art also gestures toward a potential obscured by those projections of a desirable life and sealed off from the outside world. It's precisely because such venues nurture collective fantasies while still being ruled by economic objectives that they can simultaneously function as scenes of residual artistic freedom—as in Singer's paintings, where they actually become platforms for a sophisticated practice.