Institut für Kunstkritik
Frankfurt am Main
Isabelle Graw
Daniel Birnbaum
Nikolaus Hirsch

Thinking through Painting

Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas

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Preface

Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, Nikolaus Hirsch

There is no painting as such: delimiting its realm is indeed impossible since painting expanded in the 1960s (even more radically than it had during Cubism), when it embraced ready-made objects, linguistic propositions, and performative elements in its pictorial sphere. But despite losing its specificity in a way typical for the often-invoked post-medium condition, painting still appears to be notorious and omnipresent, thereby resembling Niklas Luhmann's concept of a "success medium"[1]—symbolically generated, it functions like an institution and produces value. Its tenacity also derives from the structural advantages of its format (ease of transporting the picture on canvas, low production costs, etc.). Furthermore, painting benefits from the intellectual charge it was first given in the Renaissance. Think only of Alberti: he claimed that the painter struggles with "more difficult things" than the sculptor[2]—an argument that reaches into our present when considering how many art lovers still secretly believe that painting is the one real art. The high prices fetched by paintings at auctions further illustrate their assumed symbolic worth.

As much as it occupies the highest rank in the commercial sphere, many artists and critics in the 1960s and '70s were opposed to painting—its proximity to the commodity form rendered it especially suspicious. Even those artists who opted for so-called bad painting in the late 1970s and early '80s encountered a lot of resistance and felt obliged to legitimize

1 See Niklas Luhmann, *The Theory of Society*, vol. 1, trans. Rhodes Barret (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), ch. 1–1.3.

2 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 66.

their practice. But this pressure around painting seems to have ceased nowadays. The posthumous reception of Martin Kippenberger's work contributed to the genre's improved reputation—for many critics, his work manages to reconcile the insights of institutional critique with seemingly expressive gestures. More recently, the argument was put forward that Kippenberger's work visualizes its networks of exhibition and distribution.[3] Indeed, David Joselit's brilliant plea for a painting that is "beside itself" triggered the current emergence of "network painting" in cities like New York or Berlin—painting that demonstrates that it belongs to certain social networks. What, then, does it mean to think through painting under these conditions?

"Thinking through Painting" was the title and aim of a small event initiated by the Institut für Kunstkritik and hosted by abc – art berlin contemporary, whose 2011 theme was "about painting." We are very thankful to Alexander Schröder for making this cooperation possible. Our gratitude also goes to the participants: André Rottmann, who presented a paper on painting's persistence, and Peter Geimer, who investigated how Luc Tuymans's work suggests the ability to reflect historical conditions. The two lectures by Geimer and Isabelle Graw were followed by a discussion among the participants. We decided to print a longer and edited version of the dialogue between Geimer and Graw in this volume because it allows for their propositions to be elaborated. The aim of these lectures was obviously not to deflect criticism; rather, it was to stimulate discussion. We would therefore like to thank our audience as well—it was a pleasure to think through painting with you!

3 David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 125.



Introduction
Remarks on Contemporary Painting's Perseverance

André Rottmann

For the longest time, the theory and practice of painting has been organized, contained, and propelled by a series of closely related antagonisms—color and contour, transparency and opacity, gesture and facture, illusion and flatness, semblance and objecthood, chroma and contrast, chance and composition, mark making and the monochrome, ostentatious virtuosity and anonymous execution, figuration and abstraction—to name just a few.[1] Faced with the contemporary plethora of pictorial operations associated with this complex legacy, it has become increasingly problematic, if not outright impossible, to still define painting and the "self-aware images" (Victor I. Stoichita) produced and exhibited under this rubric vis-à-vis these once-structural paradigms. In the advanced discourses on painting, they appear as mere specters, only to be resuscitated, maybe even resurrected, to mourn an allegedly lost wealth of heretofore available models to probe and elicit visual experience; or as figments to repeatedly haunt contemporary practices in the historicist guises of naive quietism, travesty, or farce. By way of the incessant expansion and critique that have put painting under duress—from Cubism's assault on the space of pictorial representation to Pop art's conflation of mass-media imagery and painterly traditionalism and the various strategies of pastiche after 1970—in tandem with the advent of media such as photography, film, and computer technology, the once venerable medium, it would seem, has ultimately become exhausted.[2]

1 Most notably, these paradigms have been explored, criticized, and sublated in the painterly practices of Gerhard Richter, as continuously analyzed in seminal writings by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. See, for instance, his recent essay, "The Chance Ornament: Aphorisms on Gerhard Richter's Abstractions," *Artforum International* 50, no. 6 (February 2012): 168–79.

Though undoubtedly having lost its former integrity (just like sculpture and, more recently, analog photography) as it exceeds canvas, paint, and stretcher frames to encompass the use of readymade objects, printed matter, technical images, writing, and performative elements, painting has however demonstrated remarkable perseverance. Even leaving considerations of its resilient market value aside, it still must be conceded that the medium incessantly belies all claims for its irrelevance in today's expanded field of contemporary art and the surrounding ecology of media images. Paradoxically, the medium, in the process, appears to have dispelled its own once-uncontested material basis: at the cost of its survival, in other words, it ultimately has become bereft of its former substance. No longer synonymous only with a flat picture plane hung on the wall, today, painting tends to emphasize the apparatus of its appearance and the conduits of its circulation. Today's dominant display devices emerge as the integral parts of painterly works that increasingly address the architectural site or the larger context of an exhibition or institution. By the same token, novel modes of distribution take precedence over the painted picture as a discrete object—namely, the proliferation of images through media of publicity and reproduction, the very circuits and trajectories of dissemination and validation. Following this tentative and admittedly schematic account of the medium's most recent reconfigurations (or reanimations), it could be concluded that painting is moving beyond the limitations of its once-traditional material support, without abolishing its ancestral discursive and institutional scaffolding altogether. The paradigms that once provided the very basis of

2 On the irreversible exhaustion of the mediums of painting and sculpture and the concomitant critique of the modernist understanding of specificity in the 1970s in terms of a physical substance, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 18ff.

painterly articulations have not been annihilated, but are disseminated across an expanded array of practices, materials, media, and sites.[3]

Art historian David Joselit has made an attempt to summarize this state of affairs in a single, much-quoted sentence: "Painting is beside itself."[4] For Joselit, contemporary painting is marked by a notion of constant transition rather than stasis. Instead of constituting self-contained entities, painterly works explicitly establish relations to the broader social, technological, and economical networks within which they come into existence and circulate. In other words, we witness yet another instance in the shift from self-referentiality to self-reflexivity pertinent to the history of art after 1970 as a whole. If it was once the essence of the medium's material characteristics that demanded to be recursively explored, painterly practices today engage their varying contexts in order to hold in suspension, in Joselit's words, "the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it."[5] This argument seems reminiscent of Michel Foucault's analysis of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that inform (in both the literal and figurative senses of the term) the paintings of Édouard Manet. Foucault, in his 1971 Tunis lecture on the French artist, located both the effects of modern power and the aesthetic modes to challenge them within the material and compositional properties of the canvas—for instance, within the framework of the "picture-object" created through

3 Following Hal Foster, the claim of Pop artists such as Richard Hamilton, Ed Ruscha, and Roy Lichtenstein to capture postwar modern life in figurations based on contemporary media images and signage systems may be regarded as the historical threshold between painting as a delineated area of competence and the dissolution of boundaries in Minimalism and most importantly Conceptual art. See Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

4 David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 134.

5 Ibid., 129.

Manet's treatment of the illusionist space of classical representation, lighting, and the gaze. Whereas the question of how far contemporary practices contest, or rather coalesce with, our current regime of control and its grasp on subjectivity cannot but depart from the diagnosis of painting's lack of medium-specificity.[6]

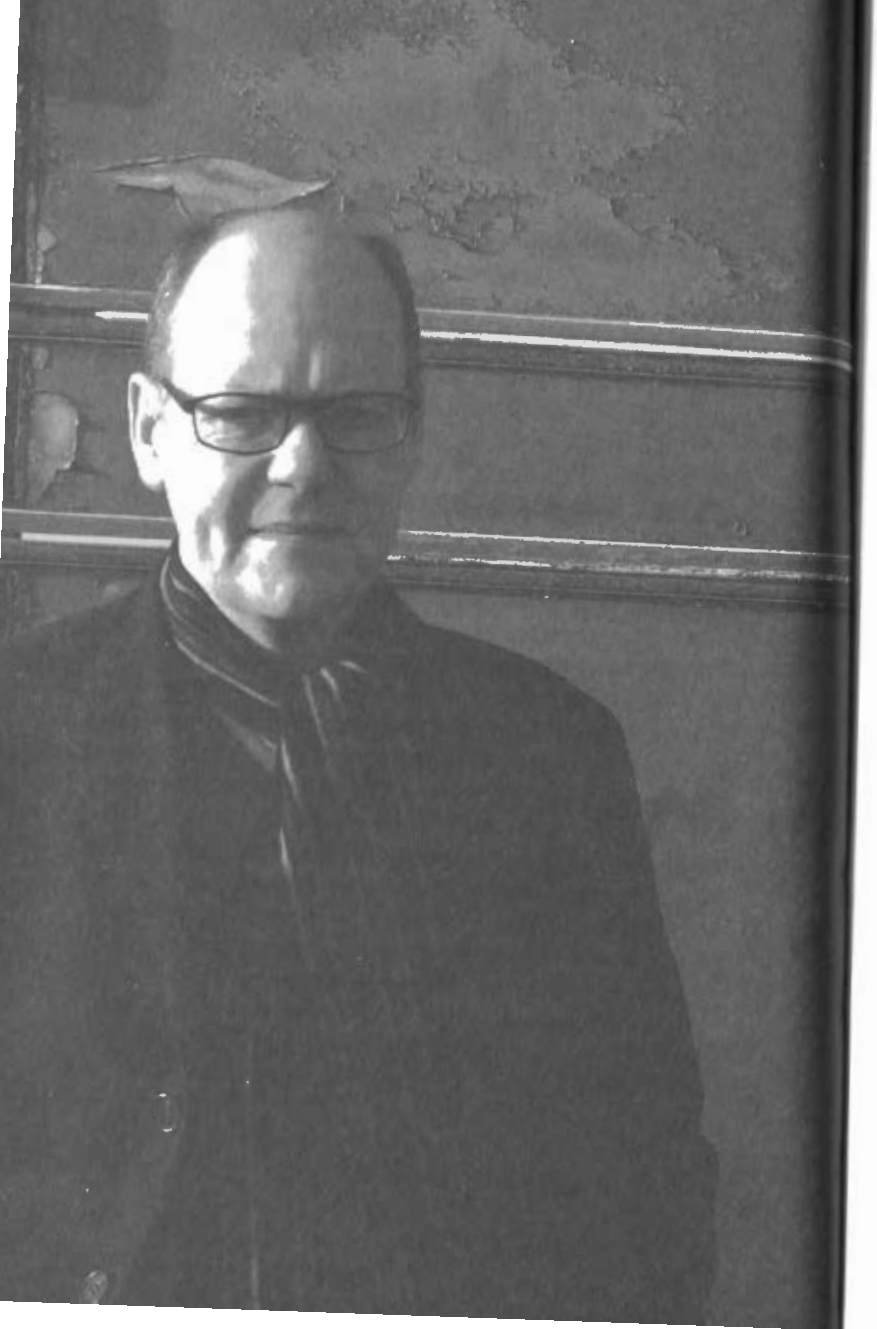
Assessing modern painting's intimate rapport with technical media by recourse to the history of history painting, Peter Geimer, in his essay in the present volume, addresses both the formal particularities and discursive framing of the paintings of Wilhelm Sasnal and Luc Tuymans. Casting a closer look at painterly tropes of ambiguity, vagueness, and obliteration of details, as well as the concomitant attempts of art critics, historians, and curators to advocate aesthetic strategies of imprecision, ambivalence, and withdrawal, Geimer's expansive case study especially challenges the approach of Tuymans and his commentators to twentieth-century history—mainly the representation (or its calculated failure) of events and sites related to the Holocaust and the Second World War—and atrocious contemporary media imagery. Meticulously analyzing the chasm emerging between the painterly rendition of archival or press photographs and the highly charged subject matter strategically deployed by Tuymans, Geimer advances to question the epistemological claims commonly made for contemporary painting's supposedly superior reflexivity and conceptual thrust, which are based on the distance it is said to take from everyday experiences of immersion.

Isabelle Graw, in her contribution, seeks to ground painting's residual specificity in the semiotic activity of "mark making"

6 See Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting*, trans. Matthew Barr (London: Tate Publishing, 2011).

rather than in the material properties heretofore allegedly exclusive to the medium. Departing from the fact that painting has traditionally epitomized aesthetic subjectivity as such—correlating the gestalt of the beholder with the field of vision delineated by the limits of a picture plane—Graw discusses the sociopolitical horizon of indexical signs within and beyond the realm of painting proper. Engaging a panoply of practices from Francis Picabia through Andy Warhol to Charline von Heyl and Albert Oehlen, all which defy the notion of an essence of the medium, and through close readings of the discourses surrounding them, Graw demonstrates that painting's perseverance is grounded in its potential to evoke not only corporeal likeness, but more fundamentally in the suggestion that artworks could attain the status of "quasi-persons." They appear as avatars capable of acting and thinking on their genuine terms—and producing a surplus value of reflexivity in high demand within the bio-economical regime of the contemporary art market and our post-Fordist economy at large.

"Thinking through Painting," the title of the small-scale conference documented in this book, took place in the context of the 2011 abc – art berlin contemporary art fair entitled "about painting." It is a double entendre as such: both Graw and Geimer reflect on the ways in which artistic practices and art-historical discourses bring notions of self-reflexivity to bear on painting, be it beside itself or utterly self-complacent, and thereby attribute value—critical, economic, symbolic, epistemic—to the aesthetic articulations of our present.



Painting and Atrocity: The Tuymans Strategy

Peter Geimer

1 *Gaddafi*, Oil on Canvas

Documentation of Muammar Gaddafi's death on October 20, 2011, is not only found in well-known amateur videos and press photographs, but also in two oil paintings by the Polish painter Wilhelm Sasnal. Unlike the authors of the press photographs, Sasnal was not present at the event—the times of illustrators and painters being sent to actual scenes of world events (during the Crimean War of 1863, for example) are long gone. Sasnal did not approach the event as an eyewitness of the occurrence on October 20, but as a recipient of the imagery that was circulated worldwide shortly following Gaddafi's death, like the rest of us newspaper readers and Internet users. Sasnal shows two views of the body of the deceased as it had been laid on the floor of a supermarket's refrigeration room. In one of the paintings, *Gaddafi 3* (2011, fig. 1), the corpse is viewed from a low vantage point. The legs stretch toward the viewer, the torso is thrashed into an amorphous mass, the face is obscured. In *Gaddafi* (2011, fig. 2), Sasnal pushes the unrecognizable state further. The mattress and corpse now lie in an empty room, and the body is replaced by an abstract entity of color, making any further deciphering of upper from lower body impossible. Here, the canvas looks like a battlefield onto which the artist clearly applied the paint straight from the tube in broad paths and swirls of poisonous green, red, and blue. The pastose relief of pure paint lifts itself from the canvas on the dark rectangle of the mattress, where Gaddafi's dead body would have been visible.

Sasnal has often used existing images as examples for his paintings—for instance, in his work *Bathers at Asnières* (2010),



Fig. 1. Wilhelm Sasnal, *Gaddafi* 3, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2. Wilhelm Sasnal, *Gaddafi*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

the Geoges Seurat painting of the same name. However, the *Gaddafi* paintings differ from the work about Seurat on two decisive points. Firstly, their model is not a painting, but a photograph. This connects a transfer from one medium to another, which did not occur casually or "innocently"; it calls for a perception and thematization of its own. Secondly, in its iconographic adaptation, it does not deal with a historical motif of European high art, but with a news image that, for a few days in October 2011, was at the center of international attention. The painterly adaptation of news imagery consciously superimposes an anachronism, both in terms of medium and iconography. A contemporary, media-transmitted experience appears dressed in the garb of a traditional art genre. To the same degree, because of the fact that attention is directed toward the choice of motif, there will therefore always be an additional accompanying discourse thematizing the topic of painting—and an artist once again dedicating himself or herself to representing a historical event with oil on canvas, or perhaps it should be stressed that the artist *still* employs oil on canvas for this representation. This is especially valid for *Gaddafi*, upon which the body of the deceased is transformed into "pure" painting—a thick ball of oil paint in an impasto application. Recently, Sasnal also rhetorically supported the political entitlement of his painting: "Definitely, an artist must be aware of the world and the society which he or she is part of. [...] Painting is not a game, not something you do just for fun; it comes with a responsibility that I take very seriously."[1]

Processes of painterly adaptation have been familiar at least since Gerhard Richter's paintings of photographs. According to Stefan Germer, the goal is "pictures about picture making,

1 Achim Borchardt-Hume and Wilhelm Sasnal, "A Conversation about Painting," in *Wilhelm Sasnal*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), 6.

about the relationship between painting and photography, about the procedure and social status of the painter."[2] Photography's comeback as painting denies it the right to an immediate access to history, and its subject places the medial transmission within the picture at the same time. If Richter refers to historical experiences, like in his cycle *October 18, 1977* (1988), he adheres to the old responsibility of painting to address political themes while modifying it at the same time—because clearly, in the twentieth century, this responsibility could only be asserted by works of the new medium of photography. Germer writes, "The ambivalent character of Richter's works is stirring in that they are history paintings that show the problematic nature of representing the historical."[3] In her review of the recent Sasnal exhibition at Haus der Kunst in Munich, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* critic Catrin Lorch also presented Sasnal's work in this context: "One of the greatest achievements of painters like Gerhard Richter or Luc Tuymans is that they still continue to paint, despite the availability of faster, more contemporary media like photography or video, despite the mass of imagery that cuts up each day into a kaleidoscope of images, and despite art history having identified abstraction as the end of painting."[4]

The article, titled "Historienmalerei 2.0" (History Painting 2.0), also expresses that we are dealing with a revival of an old genre already declared dead, and that this genre, however, has been deep cleaned by the media-critical reflection of Richter, Tuymans, and Sasnal. The realization "that they still continued to paint

2 Stefan Germer, "Die Wiederkehr des Verdrängten: Zum Umgang mit deutscher Geschichte bei Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorf und Gerhard Richter," in *Germeriana: Unveröffentlichte oder übersetzte Schriften von Stefan Germer zur zeitgenössischen und modernen Kunst*, ed. Julia Bernard (Cologne: Oktagon, 1999), 44. [Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from non-English titles have been translated by Emilie Florenkowsky.]

3 Stefan Germer, "Ungebetene Erinnerung," in *Gerhard Richter, 18. Oktober 1977* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1989), 51.

4 Catrin Lorch, "Historienmalerei 2.0," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 3, 2012.

despite [it all]" is not meant to hint at a stubborn persistence of repeated forms of representation—on the contrary, it counts as an expression of critical behavior. It is not actually a copying of historical events—rather, it is a reflection of the conditions of the possibility or impossibility for such copying.

The three painters mentioned belong to different generations, which begs the question of whether the potential for painting developed by Richter can last in the long run. Is a painting that transmits a photograph from the Internet into oil on canvas automatically political, reflexive, or media critical? As I am not only concerned with the new "history painting" but also with the rhetorical flanking it has received from critics and art historians, in the following I won't further cover Sasnal's *Gaddafi* images, about which hardly anything has been published. Instead, I will concentrate on the reception of Tuymans's paintings.[5]

II Tuymans Exegesis

"In an age when painting was said to be dead, Tuymans experimented with film. [...] Tuymans now works in his studio everyday, perusing books to research his subjects. Nearly all his

5 However, it is not difficult to guess what sort of commentary Sasnal's *Gaddafi* paintings would generate. It would likely follow in the vein of the reception of Richter's and Tuymans's work: extolment of the reflexive potential of paintings that take on actual political themes, while at the same time questioning their representability and exposing a naive faith in images (which one usually accuses others of having). The first samples of this have already been made available. From a review of the Munich exhibition with the subheading, "The work of Polish artist Wilhelm Sasnal reflects the possibilities of painting in the age of photography," published in the newspaper *Der Freitag*: "Wilhelm Sasnal erases visibility in his works in order to expose them as representations, as the effects of media. [...] In the painting *Gaddafi*, which cites a news photograph, Sasnal repaints the dictator's dead body in thickly applied pigment to denote the superimposition of reality through its likenesses. In this way, the medium itself becomes the object." Katrin Schuster, "Farbklumpengewicht," *Der Freitag*, February 11, 2012, http://www.freitag.de/datenbank/freitag/2012/06/ein-klumpen-farbew-chst-in-den-raum. Similarly stated in the Haus der Kunst's exhibition brochure: "The artist highlights the problematic excess of a perverted medialization of reality that increasingly manipulates our perception."

paintings are based on preexisting material such as drawings, Polaroids, illustrations, and film stills. Tuymans nearly always focuses on specific meanings reaching beyond what is shown, often deriving his subject matter from historical facts."[6] Several statements are combined into these few lines of commentary by Belgian gallerist Rose Van Doninck—a typical type of remark about Tuymans. The following assertions are primarily touched upon: (1) When Tuymans began working, painting was considered dead. Though today, Tuymans enters his studio "everyday" to paint, thus finding a means of enabling painting to survive its alleged end. (2) Tuymans is not only a painter. He also carries out a sort of research, uses his studio for an intense study of books, and through this intellectual exploration often relates the themes of his pictures to "historical facts." Tuymans's paintings have a meaning that goes beyond the visible and that cannot be deciphered through mere observation. We have to search for it somewhere outside of the picture.

These stances are found in a similar form in almost all commentaries on Tuymans. On the occasion of his retrospective at Tate Modern in 2004, Emma Dexter wrote, "His painting betrays an awareness of the discourse of the endgame of painting."[7] Here, an attest is made for the reflexive potential of Tuymans's paintings. They are not simply paintings—they communicate an understanding about the idea that they are paintings, despite the claims made for the end of the medium, or perhaps even *because* of just this fact. One variation on this reading states that, precisely by painting, Tuymans has transcended the discourse

6 Rose Van Doninck, "Biography," in *Luc Tuymans: I Don't Get It*, ed. Gerrit Vermeiren (Ghent: Ludion Press, 2007), 197.

7 Emma Dexter, "The Interconnectedness of All Things: Between History, Still Life and the Uncanny," in *Luc Tuymans*, ed. Emma Dexter and Julian Heynen (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 16.

on the end of painting. "Tuymans's works are all, without any question, paintings," remarks Ulrich Loock under the chapter heading "A Historical Challenge to Painting."[8] He follows with the argument that Tuymans has overcome the modernist notion of progress in painting by consciously employing a seemingly outmoded and unprofessional style: "With the appearance of belatedness and painterly clumsiness in his painting, Tuymans apparently frees his work from any modernist commitment to the category of the new and the problems of the medium itself."[9] Helen Molesworth drives the nail in even further: it is not only modernism that Tuymans has surmounted but postmodernism as well, in that

> Tuymans broke from his postmodern predecessors' engagement with representational painting, a body of work characterized by the powerful neo-Kantian conception that the primary task of modernist painting was "precisely the working through the end of painting." These artists (such as Richter, Polke, Anselm Kiefer, Peter Halley, David Salle, or Ross Bleckner) typically produced paintings with the affective registers of irony, sentimentality, belatedness, or mourning.[10]

Tuymans, according to Molesworth, left all these registers behind. "He does not merely paint from photographs or in relation to them (he does not, for instance, project photographs onto the canvas like either Warhol or Richter); instead his paintings work against the spatial logics of both systems

8 Ulrich Loock, "On Layers of Sign-Relations, in the Light of Mechanically Reproduced Pictures, from Ten Years of Exhibition," in *Luc Tuymans* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 34.

9 Ibid., 36.

10 Helen Molesworth, "Luc Tuymans: Painting the Banality of Evil," in *Luc Tuymans*, ed. Madeleine Grynsztejn and Helen Molesworth (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 19.

of representation."[11] Appearing thoroughly tautological, Loock's insight ("Tuyman's works are all, without any question, paintings") would thus not be quite as obvious as it seems—following Molesworth, Tuymans's art moves within a sphere where even merely hinting at medial differences has long been obsolete. In this case, the author pleads for a "semantic shift" anyhow: to "replace the word painter (with all its equally magnanimous and defiled connotations) with our century's most expansive nomenclature—artist."[12]

Ultimately, nothing specific can be said about Tuymans's reference to photography and film anymore, because all artistic media have entered into a phase of transcendence anyway. In the end, it would be irrelevant whether the paintings process historical photographs or any other arbitrary resource. What can be gained from such an extermination of medial differences is concededly unclear. It makes a decisive difference if an artist who takes existing photographs or films as models remains within the respective medium—thus becoming films about film or photographs about photography—or whether he or she changes registers, translating the technically created image into an oil painting. And one cannot understand why Molesworth continuously returns to the painting-specific aspects of Tuymans's work, despite her semantic shift from painter to artist.

Despite their individual differences, all of these authors imply that the simple fact Tuymans paints is not self-evident, but that it calls for genealogical justification. In addition to this, the allusion to the ambiguity and elusiveness of his painting also belongs to the constants of the Tuymans exegesis: "Luc Tuymans paints figuratively and yet his pictures deny a palpable

11 Ibid., 21.
12 Ibid., 17.

legibility"[13]; his pictures "change between perceptability and retreat to the undefinable"[14]; and "every one of Tuymans's works is basically a balancing act between the promise and the total denial of visual satisfaction."[15] The paintings are striking in their "emotional impenetrability, [...] they possess and produce a kind of silence, a demonstrable lack of legibility, even a difficulty that outstrips their subject matter per se."[16] This praise of impenetrability is sometimes programmatically declared directly in articles' titles. Montserrat Albores Gleason titled her observations of Tuymans "I Still Don't Get It," leading one to believe that even after thorough examination of the paintings, their meaning still cannot be pinpointed.[17] It is clear that this position should not be understood as self-doubt on the part of the interpreter, but as praise of the works' hermeneutic inexhaustibility—they are loaded with far more meaning than can be expressed with mere words.

Here, it should naturally be brought into account that comments of this kind belong to the stereotypes of contemporary-art discourse and, in this respect, represent no particularities of the writings on Tuymans.[18] Such statements follow a simple drama-

13 Exhibition text for "Luc Tuymans: When Springtime Is Coming" at Haus der Kunst, Munich, March 2–May 12, 2008, http://www.hausderkunst.de/index.php?id=667&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=72&L=1.
14 Eugen Blume, "Zwischen den Bildern," in *Luc Tuymans: Signal* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2001), 18.
15 Stephan Berg, "Twilight of the Images," in *Luc Tuymans: The Arena*, ed. Stephan Berg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 15–17.
16 Molesworth, "Luc Tuymans," 21.
17 Montserrat Albores Gleason, "I Still Don't Get It," in *Luc Tuymans: I Don't Get It*, 169–75.
18 A few lines taken at random from current art reviews, exhibition catalogs, and museum wall texts: "[A's] paintings are superficially enticing, with the charm of their good form. But, a closer look shows that their pictures deny a clear analysis"; "[B's] paintings are shorn of their unconscious perceptibility while simultaneously using their iconography to question the suspicions of the mainstream"; "[C's] work is extremely difficult to grasp. It is difficult to describe, and one is unaware of whether we are now dealing with sculptures, installations, or environments. They are consciously unconventional"; "[D's] interested in the gray zones and the gaps, which evade clear classification"; etc.

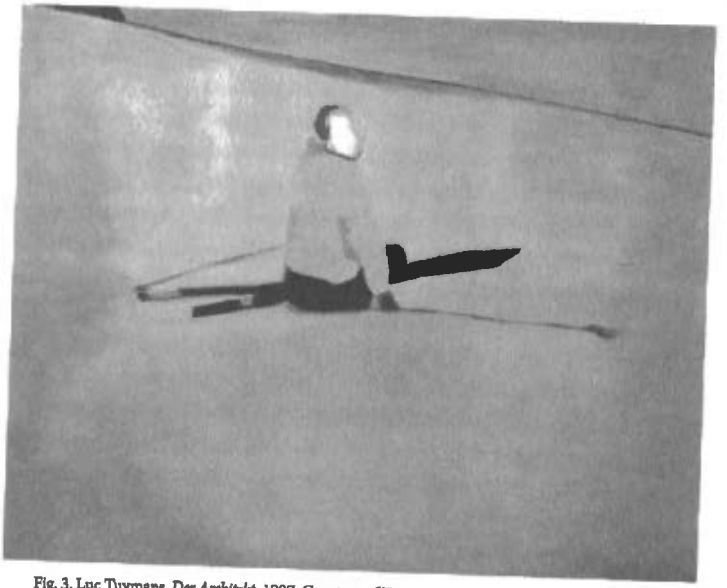


Fig. 3. Luc Tuymans, *Der Architekt*, 1997. Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp. Photo: Felix Tirry.

turgy. First, they construct a very unlikely gestalt: the backward, pedantic art observer who feels personally threatened by ambiguity, who wants to be able to neatly label all works, demands irrevocable truths from artworks, and certainly does not want any surprises from a museum. Through the power of its subversive potential, the artwork stands out against the backdrop of such fatuousness. At the end, all contours disappear in the dark drawer of subversion. It is interesting that the praise of impenetrability—and of reflexive painting in the case of Tuymans—pertains to an art that is based upon highly political themes at the same time: colonialism, the Holocaust, 9/11. In Tuymans's case (and in Sasnal's as well), it is less about the general question of meaning and the function of painting, despite—or due to—its proclaimed end; it is about the much more concrete question of painting's competence in light of themes of contemporary history. The question is therefore so imposing because the images of today (and of the last 150 years), which are meant to represent daily events, are precisely not circulated as oil on canvas. There is no need for justifying artists' transposition of this reservoir of media imagery through an old technique, but it also does not go without saying that this is an artistic approach. In the case of Tuymans, there is obviously a direct connection between the extremely reduced, wan, emptied appearance of his paintings and the discursive force of the historical subjects they engage. The functioning of this idiosyncratic antagonism between an "indefinable" painting and its hermeneutic superstructure is best shown through concrete examples.

III Sipping at the Real

Take *Der Architekt* (1997, fig. 3). This pale, dominantly white-blue painting centers on a figure fallen to the ground. A diagonal horizon line indicates the end of a sloping area—a monotone,

empty space enclosing the figure. With body slightly rotated, the fallen person turns back toward the viewer. Instead of our gaze being met by a human face, a roughly painted white spot gapes back, as if to render the architect's physiognomy forever unrecognizable. It is well known that Tuymans took the motif from an amateur 8 mm film that showed Hitler's architect and minister of armaments, Albert Speer, while on winter holiday. Tuymans isolated one still image from the film sequence, in which Speer, having fallen to the ground, squats in the snow with skis and poles.

In 2001, *Der Architekt* was exhibited at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. The exhibition catalog is noteworthy for its design, conceived by the artist, that mimics the Nazi propaganda magazine *Signal*, thus dealing with a publication of the Wehrmacht that was translated into the languages of the occupied countries, or the "allies abroad," in order to spread the political mission of national socialism. The format and design of the Berlin catalog were adapted to those of the magazine, and it was titled *Numero 7 1944*. The cover bears the red *Signal* logo and a blurred image: the negative of a historical, industrial-era villa, zoomed in onto an unspecific detail of its exterior—a typical Tuymans layout of deprivation. The detail came from a color photograph taken by the artist near the house where the Wannsee Conference took place. With this graphic mimicry of the Nazi periodical, both artist and museum decided for a form of assimilation that links these reproductions of Tuymans's paintings with historical documents. Furthermore, the director of the memorial site for the House of the Wannsee Conference, only marginally involved with Tuymans, made a contribution to the catalog that primarily serves as a concise account of the historical background, lending the catalog the feeling of an informational brochure of civic history. In addition, six historical photographs of "German farmers" are reproduced in the catalog, along with old advertisements from the Deutsche Bank and the companies Siemens and Auto Union, a full-page portrait of SS officer Reinhard Heydrich, and a copy of a typewritten protocol of the Wannsee Conference with the file number K210407:

> In the course of the practical execution of the final solution, Europe will be combed through from west to east. Germany proper, including the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, will have to be handled first due to the housing problem and additional social and political necessities. The evacuated Jews will first be sent, group by group, to so-called transit ghettos, from which they will be transported to the east. SS-Obergruppenführer Heydrich went on to say that an important prerequisite for the evacuation as such is the exact definition of the persons involved.[19]

In proximity to these documents, Tuymans's oil paintings gain an aura of political volatility. The artist states in the catalog that it was his original plan to show the paintings himself at the location of the Wannsee Conference instead of in a museum; it is not made clear in the catalog as to why this never transpired. Tuymans gives the impression that, in the end, deciding against it was a gesture of modesty and humility. On the other hand, the memorial's director wrote that their premises are logistically not suitable and that an exhibition would thus be out of the question. Without a doubt, the emphatic charge of the paintings would have doubtlessly increased if they were presented at the historical location as intended by Tuymans. At the scene of this event, their exchange with the historical aura would have

19 *Luc Tuymans: Signal*, n.p.

been more dynamic than that experienced from within the magazine based on the Nazi journal. They would have become effortlessly enmeshed in the spell of world history.

But why, at the end of the twentieth century, does an artist paint a film still of the architect and minister of armaments, Albert Speer, on canvas? What is the aesthetic, intellectual, or political value of this image? And to what, exactly, can this image's provocation or agitation be attributed? Unfortunately, the Tuymans exegesis has the tendency to replicate the indefinability for which the work is praised. As a rule, the notion of where the paintings' reflexive or aesthetic potential should lie cannot be grasped. The Berlin exhibition's curator writes about *Der Architekt*,

> That the fall of the elegant skier—the steep, frozen slope, the reckless momentum, and, finally, the crouching in the snow with pointed planks—could be held as a metaphor for his life could not have been anticipated by anyone at the moment of the incident. It was the history for which he stands that first enabled this banal event to be translated into a metaphor—one no longer decipherable via the mode of language. It was the picture—arrested between the film image and the painted image as the image of history—that first presented the artist with this possibility of interpretation. Now, one could ask whether the film image alone, along with its caption, doesn't suffice in communicating that we are dealing with the Reich's main architect and minister of wartime production—with someone at the mercy of the homophilic attractions of male bonding, a power-conscious megalomaniac. Would the film image not be enough to inform us that we are dealing with the man who found atonement following the Nuremberg Trials in Spandau—Albert Speer? Even after another inspection of the film image in the context of this newly gained insight, it still remains disappointingly banal. It will not become art, regardless of how much more we know of its history. Tuymans's painting, which doesn't deny its historical contexts, is very openly committed to tradition: stretched canvas, use of brushes and paint. It vibrates with the resonance of a panel painting.[20]

Here, the commitment to painting is once again highlighted as a particular quality of Tuymans's work. But what is meant by "very openly committed to tradition"? How should one imagine a painting that actively denies this tradition and suppresses canvas, brush, and paint? Above all, one has still not learned where the aesthetic or intellectual surplus value lies in the painterly adaptation of historical amateur films. Most likely, the following find is indeed worth considering: "The architect fallen in the snow appears to us to be a well-chosen metaphor for a person whose reality is not unlocked by historical documents or testimonials. However, the poetry of the painted image suddenly and strangely allows it to become all-encompassingly understandable."[21] So, the quality of painting would exist in how the protagonist of the Third Reich "suddenly and strangely" becomes poeticized? The following statement is equally dubious: "It is of course absurd to want to explain the source of Tuymans's image to the viewer. The photographic excerpt's materiality becomes totally nullified in painting. It surpasses its banality, so to speak, and becomes exalted in painting, a medium whose images arise from the hand. They are channeled by both body and mind and not only by intellect."[22]

20 Blume, "Zwischen den Bildern," 17.
21 Ibid., 18.
22 Ibid.

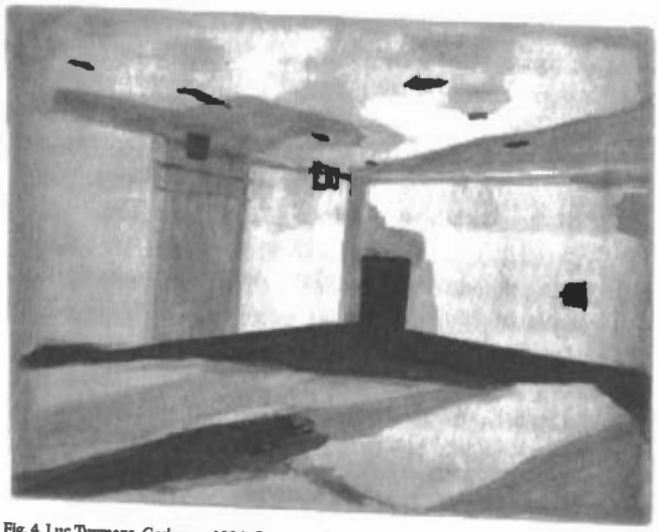


Fig. 4. Luc Tuymans, *Gaskamer*, 1986. Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp. Photo: Ronald Stoops.

Why is it "absurd to want to explain the source of Tuymans's image to the viewer"? This allusion to the source material's irrelevance is found only a few lines after the author's own description of the source material. Part of the mythologization of this painting is the claim that it transcends its underlying photographs and film, leaving them behind—the claim that the film image is "totally nullified in painting." But it is the opposite case: film and photography must be continuously called up and kept alive as energetic models, as it is only through these that painting can obtain its sensory effects. The model images provide a reservoir of the real, and it is from here that Tuymans attempts to borrow the explosiveness of his own pictures. Moreover, there is a questionable differentiation of high and low art underlying the quoted comments. In order to exalt the painting, the film on which it is based must be debased at the same time. Only when the film image of the fallen Speer has been made to appear as "disappointingly banal" is it possible for the hand of the painter to elevate it to the status of art. But there is nothing justifying this seemingly obvious hierarchy. In fact, it is questionable whether Tuymans's version in oil boasts a higher complexity than that of the historical film.

There is another strategy underlying the painting *Gaskamer* (Gas Chamber, 1986, fig. 4). A watercolor drawing, made by the artist at the former Dachau concentration camp, was the basis for this picture. Constrained in warm, brown tones, the painting roughly indicates the interior of an empty room. As soon as one has noticed the title of the work, the dark markings on the ceiling and the hint of a drain cover on the floor can be decoded as components of a gas chamber. Unlike *Der Architekt, Die Zeit (4/4)* (1988; the adaptation of an historical portrait photograph of the SS member Reinard Heydrich), or *Our New*

Quarters (1986; after a historical photograph of Theresienstadt), *Gaskamer* is not based upon a certain photograph. One could claim the opposite, as this time the painting draws its meaning from the discourse on the inability to represent the Holocaust, which, in the mid-1980s, had experienced a renewed topicality, largely due to Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah* (1985). In his filmic montage of interviews with extermination-camp survivors, Lanzmann made a conscious decision to abstain from using historical imagery—the witnesses and their spoken accounts were to be the focal points. Any accompanying images, in addition to those of the protagonists, primarily showed the emptiness of the historical settings.

Over time, Lanzmann's renouncement of historical image material expanded into a real ban on representation. In an interview, he stated that there is no image of the Holocaust. And if he were to find filmed recordings made inside the gas chambers, he would destroy them straightaway.[23] Behind this stance, there is an obvious conviction that there are incidences that, by nature, evade representation (and others that do not)—a picture that purports to show them would thus be an impossibility. Based on four photographs taken in secrecy by Jewish prisoners in the summer of 1944 at Auschwitz, George Didi-Huberman's response to this concept is that, on the contrary, it is *only* possible to represent Auschwitz. This obviously did not mean that there is a conceivable form of representation that could adequately reconstruct the reality of the camp. Nevertheless, the attempt to visualize—as imprecise, fragmentary, and futile it may necessarily turn out—still represents a legitimate possibility for debate, should one wish to abandon the invocation of the unrepresentable.[24] In addition to Didi-Huberman, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière also have criticized the discourse on the Holocaust's unrepresentability. Nancy hinted that this dictum remains diffuse in the end: should this mean that one cannot represent the Holocaust? But to what exactly can this inability be attributed? And, must one then separate history into representable and unrepresentable events? Where would the reasonable borders be drawn? Or does this mean, rather, that one *may* not represent an event like the Holocaust? In this case, a representation would be possible yet objectionable and, as a consequence, forbidden. In order to justify a moral proscription of this kind, there would need to be a tenet or a principle responsible for enacting such a ban. This binding principle cannot be identified, however.[25] Therefore, Rancière also criticized the inflationary use of the term "unrepresentability" and warned to avoid phenomena that have an "aura of the holy horror." Being unrepresentable is not a trait of certain incidences. No event demands to be represented or not to be represented. There should always be a possibility for choice.[26]

23 Claude Lanzmann, "Holocauste, la représentation impossible," *Le Monde*, March 3, 1994.
24 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

It is astonishing that the Tuymans exegesis seems, thus far, to have been passed over by thoughts like these. In the words of the artist, his gas chamber in oil is an attempt "to approach the really terrible thing that cannot be depicted."[27] Commentators have repeated this phrase in various versions. According to Molesworth, Tuymans's paintings "attempt to represent historical atrocities that are putatively unrepresentable."[28] With

25 See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
26 See Jacques Rancière, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," in *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007).
27 Luc Tuymans, "Artist's Writings," in *Luc Tuymans*, 130.
28 Molesworth, "Luc Tuymans," 18.
29 Dexter, "Interconnectedness of All Things," 24.

Dexter we read, "So painting as reproduction fails continually in his work, and this failure, this disguise, allows him to depict the unrepresentable, for example, the Holocaust."[29] In a new publication Ulrich Wilmes states, "The representability of the in-fact-unrepresentable is a challenge that perhaps only paint can equal. That is to say, in Tuymans's work the representation of horror is a circumspect exploration of the representability of horror."[30] Finally, Loock: "*Gas Chamber* [...] fails irreversibly in its task of providing any kind of accurate picture of its object, as this object itself is deprived of any possibility of representation. It is the formulation of this failure which [...] is stressed by the production of an aesthetic appearance. The disguise is impenetrable, allowing a painting such as *Gas Chamber* to preserve the image of the gas chamber."[31]

What exactly is meant by these comments is unclear. How does the unrepresentable allow itself to be represented? Either it is not unrepresentable at all and can thus be represented, albeit with inevitable incompleteness, or it in fact evades any form of visual representation, in which case the painting ultimately does not show a gas chamber. It was obviously intended that Tuymans's *Gaskamer* represent this failure itself. To his interpreters, it is an image that flaunts its own failure. Here, we are once again encountered with a variety of discourse on the reflexivity of painting. As to how *Gaskamer* exactly engages in showing something while simultaneously showing that the thing shown is unable to be shown—this remains a mystery. Moreover, the painting actually only presents an empty room. When taking the title into consideration, it becomes readable as the representation of a gas chamber. But above and beyond

30 Ulrich Wilmes, "Painting History," in Borchardt-Hume, *Wilhelm Sasnal*, 90.
31 Loock, "On Layers of Sign-Relations," 51.

this, reaching the work's superstructure is not done via the image or its meaning. Dexter's praise of indifference is also disconcerting:

> Herein lies a clue to this methodology. Tuymans has flattened out the hierarchy of the genres of painting that exist within his own practice. He paints a cardboard box with as much care and attention as he paints a gas chamber. This treatment hints a wider political and iconographic significance, but also suggests how Tuymans has developed his own method for representing the uncanny and the repressed.[32]

Why the equating of a crematorium to a cardboard box, of all things, should entail "a wider political and iconographic significance" remains the author's secret.

Unlike Neo Rauch, who stages scenes of semantic overkill with his overpopulated pictures, Tuymans draws up the very opposite with pale colors, empty spaces, white space, and removal. Whereas with Rauch it is overabundance, with Tuymans it is meaningful emptiness that sets the hermeneutic machine in motion. A formidable posse has already been summoned in the explanation of Tuymans's paintings: Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, W. G. Sebald, Benedict de Spinoza, Sigmund Freud, Immanuel Kant, Jacques Lacan, Theodor W. Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Jorge Luis Borges, Charles S. Peirce, and many others. Berg writes, "Tuymans derives the material for his painting from a repository of images that refer to reality but no longer stand directly in contact with it."[33] This is quite an exact description

32 Dexter, "Interconnectedness of All Things," 16.
33 Berg, "Twilight of the Images," 11.

of the reservoir from which this painting is nourished. It sips at the real, at the atrocity of the gas chamber and the banality of evil, while at the same time managing to remain in the preserve of autonomous art.

Questions for Peter Geimer
Isabelle Graw

I have two questions, or remarks rather, about your excellent talk. Namely, I agree with you that art criticism has made it too easy by conjuring up the aesthetic topos of an openness of meaning, and the Tuymans exegetes especially abet his work with this manner of mystification. All the same, I wonder whether your argument doesn't ultimately lead to a break with the aesthetic topos of the irreducibility of art. Would this not be hasty in light of artworks that are of interest to us precisely because they do not erupt with evident meaning and cannot be immediately explained away? How do I differentiate this "good" aesthetic topos of an openness of meaning from the questionable obfuscation at work in Tuymans?

My second question revolves around the motif of reflection. In the first instance, I share your skepticism regarding the common formula of a painting itself reflecting the condition of its possibility or its impossibility. It is too seldom demonstrated what such reflection actually looks like and where it takes place in the work. The moment we say that an artwork reflects something, we also simultaneously attribute subjective-like faculties to it. They should have the capacity for thought processes, which would elevate them to a sort of quasi-subject. This tendency to model artworks after subjects has a long tradition in aesthetics, one that reaches from Hegel to Benjamin and on to Adorno. Here, the artwork is conceived in analogy to a living subject. There is a questionable, anthropomorphic projection at work here as well as the wish to elevate artworks to the status of a better person. But to abandon this projection altogether would mean that we no longer grant artworks what most expect from them—agency. Giving up on agency seems

problematic as well—why then should we be interested in artworks when they cannot do anything, not even reflect? Against this backdrop, I wonder if you are you pleading for giving up on the motif of reflection altogether or whether you argue for a more precise application of this assumption? And what would it look like if we rooted our claim that artworks are able to reflect in their own materiality?

Response to Isabelle Graw

Peter Geimer

You are absolutely right. The problem of such a strong critique of Tuymans and the Tuymans exegesis is related to the difficult differentiation between positive openness and obfuscation. It would be a nonsensical demand to expect a similar form of stringency from an artwork as from a political stance or from the argumentative conclusion of a thesis. So, the point is not to demand a clearly understandable message from the artists or to insist upon a position that does not suit their means of working. Tuymans and his exegesis seem to me to be a good example of the aesthetic topos of an openness of meaning in art having taken on a sort of life of its own on an inflated scale—and this, in fact, after needing to historically assert itself first over the regulated system of genre hierarchies, attribution of functions, etc. Tuymans is therefore a good example, because his paintings' extremely reduced and consciously emptied and paled appearance corresponds to an excessive attribution of meaning in their reception. The stronger the removal of meaning is visually evident, the more emphatic the search for profundity becomes. What I describe as the "Tuymans strategy" is intended as a process that, on one hand, utilizes the blessing of an "autonomous" art, obliged only to itself. But the process also grasps for the greatest possible—and most politically charged—themes at the same time, in order to settle them within the realm of the canvas in the form of rich particles of reality. A political dimension of painting is partially cited while remaining so unbinding and free of risk that one could say everything and nothing about it. Beyond just Tuymans, I wonder much more about many of his commentators, who attest a special explosiveness and reflexivity to this apolitical art. In short, there is no plausible case against ambiguity. But ambiguity is

not a characteristic that just approaches artworks. It is not available or given; instead, it must be produced. How well this works, if at all, depends on individual cases.

Your second question follows well here because, just like with its openness of meaning, art's reflexivity also seems to me to be a category whose rise is not self-evident. In fact, I believe that a historical and systematic survey of the term "reflexivity"—or also often "self-reflexivity"—would be useful and necessary. (I find "self-reflexivity" to be a more problematic term. In the philosophical sense, reflexivity in itself would probably have sufficed, as the referentiality of a thought is already addressed therein. The supplement "self" works here merely as an emphasis, as Niklas Luhmann once observed with the supplement "radical" in radical constructivism. It would deal with a rhetorical enhancement, like one would also encounter in an organic grocery store where food would be pitched as "naturally pure.") Works like Viktor I. Stoichita's *L'instauration du tableau* (1993; the English translation, strangely, is titled *The Self-Aware Image*) bind the theme of painterly self-referentiality or "meta painting" to concrete, historical situations. In the case of Stoichita, this is somehow the development since the fourteenth century from altarpiece to mobile panel painting. My impression is that beyond such historical specifications, reflexivity/self-reflexivity has meanwhile become a type of discursive wild card, an aesthetic seal of quality, which can be attributed to the works of all eras and genres. According to this, complex and reflexive pictures are those that not only show "something" but also thematize the conditions of this showing at the same time. Sub-complex pictures are those that only show "something" and become absorbed in this heteronomous referentiality. In my opinion, this difference seems to be extremely questionable. Here, old hierarchies of "high" and "low"

or "strong" and "weak" pictures are repeated—or in terms of the painting of the nineteenth century, modern and salon painting.

But mainly, the underlying criteria appear unclear to me. How does one recognize reflexivity? How can reflexive and nonreflexive pictures be differentiated from one another? What even stirs the will and the need for determining such differences? What distinguishes self-reflexivity from mere self-reference? And foremost, who or what is actually the subject or the actor of this reflexivity? Is it the artist, who materializes his thoughts and actions, so to speak, and stores them in his work? Or is it the work "itself"? Can paintings, sculptures, or installations "think"? Generally, I can follow the idea that not only human subjects but also works or things can act—"actants" in the sense of Bruno Latour. In this case, another alternative notion of "acting" is needed. As with Latour's "symmetrical anthropology," if something like a broken electric door opener that disables me from entering a building "acts" and, in this respect, is part of society, then it does so without mandating any intention or will toward the object of such action. The things act, but they do not mean anything; they have an effect on us without articulating an autonomous will in doing so. In the discussions on the reflexivity of art, I do not see such a differentiated concept. If W. J. T. Mitchell, for example, speaks about pictures "wanting" something from us or that they have "desires" and so forth,[1] it seems to me to be just a one-to-one transfer of intentionality and subjectivity from people to artifacts. Either one actually believes that paintings—like the aliens in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)—think, act, observe

1 See W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28.

us, and want to make contact with us, or one uses these expressions in another improper or ironic sense, which would then need to be made more precise. It also seems to me that in the current application of the term "reflexivity," many different traditions blend indistinguishably, to a certain extent. A very different variation than Mitchell's talk on the life of paintings is, for example, Clement Greenberg's teleological program of systematically clearing away all external references until the artwork finally arrives at its media-appropriate self. This also houses an idea of the actual "self" of an artwork that ponders itself as well. Yet another variation comes from the diverse reception of Aby Warburg's ideas on the energetic potential of paintings. It seems that all of these traditions and figures of thought culminate here today in an unclear concept of "self-reflexivity." I read recently in a piece on Manet that painting questions itself. Such sentences are often seen, and presented with a great deal of self-evidence. In my view, it would be a worthwhile task to question the genealogy of such statements and to specify the understanding of self-referentiality that informs them.



The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons

Isabelle Graw

1 Introduction

In the following I will first try to develop a medium-unspecific notion of painting that is nevertheless able to capture its residual distinctness even under the conditions that led to its diffuse boundaries. These conditions—often referred to as a "post-medium condition" (Rosalind E. Krauss)—will be addressed in view of their implications for painting. If painting has expanded and tends to be everywhere, as I will argue, then it seems to make little sense to delimit its realm. Yet this is what numerous painting exhibitions, from "Der zerbrochene Spiegel" (Deichtorhallen Hamburg and Kunsthalle Wien, 1993) to "Painting on the Move" (Kunsthalle Basel, 2002), or the notorious publications produced by Phaidon (*Painting Today*, 2009) keep doing: they treat painting as if it was a clearly circumscribed entity. However, painting has long since left its ancestral home—that is, the picture on the canvas—and is now omnipresent, as it were, and at work in other art forms as well.

We therefore cannot be sure what we are referring to when we talk "about painting."[1] Do we mean painting in the sense of a medium, a technique, a genre, a procedure, or an institution? As a way out of these semantic quandaries I will propose a less substantialist notion of painting: a form of production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized. This understanding of painting as a highly personalized *semiotic* activity has several advantages—it is less restrictive, allowing us to see how painting

1 "About painting" was the title of the 2011 art fair/exhibition abc – art berlin contemporary.

is at work in other art forms as well, and it is able to capture what is specific about painting's codes, gestures, and materiality. In addition to this, the focus on painting's indexicality enables us to grasp the particularly strong bond that we encounter between the person and the product. This bond has been of particular relevance for anthropology, which tends to regard artworks as equivalents of people.[2] While this view underestimates the fact that the two groups function differently in many respects, I nevertheless find Alfred Gell's definition of artworks as "indexes of agency" very useful.[3] Painting takes this aspect of artworks—that they are perceived as social indexes—to the very extreme. In order to argue painting's particular ability to suggest social agency, I will investigate the highly personalized nature of this particular sign production and relate it to the way it obtains value.

There are many indications of painting's lasting popularity: it keeps fetching the highest prices on the art market and it survived the manifold historical attempts to declare it finished, dead, obsolete, etc. I will conclude by offering one possible explanation for its tenacity. Granted, there are other, more pragmatic reasons for its lasting popularity that I won't elaborate on here (such as the easy transport and circulation of pictures on canvas). Moreover paintings are usually based on comparatively low production costs, which also contributes to their attraction. But I am more interested here in the powerful suggestion that painting is able to produce as an art form: I will argue that it is particularly disposed to support the expectation—widespread in the art world—that acquiring a work of art means getting a hold on the artist's labor capacity

2 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.
3 Ibid., 17.

and therefore owning a slice of her life. Buying artworks indeed comes close to buying people—and this is especially true for painting.

II For an Expanded Notion of Painting

I have already hinted at the problems of defining painting. When most artistic practices, not only painterly ones, have undergone massive differentiation and expansion, it becomes rather difficult to pin down painting. How do we determine an "unresolved category"?[4] I would like to suggest that we work with an expanded notion of painting that breaks with the modernist understanding of it as a clearly delineated practice characterized by given norms and conventions. Since the borders between the different art forms have become permeable, at least since the 1960s, we have found ourselves in a situation where different media relate to, refashion, and remodel each other. This process has been termed "re-mediatization,"[5] and occurs when the features that have been ascribed to one medium—for instance, flatness or representational strategies in painting—are addressed by another medium—for instance, large-scale photography.[6] And sure enough, artists from Jeff Wall to Wolfgang Tillmans have tirelessly demonstrated to us that photography can take up the representational and narrative strategies of painting; that it can aim at creating surfaces that suggest the materiality of abstract painting.

The crucial point remains here that the modernist idea of an

4 Quoted from the press release of the exhibition "Nikolas Gambaroff, Michael Krebber, R. H. Quaytman, Blake Rayne" at Bergen Kunsthall, November 5–December 22, 2010.
5 See Ilka Becker, "The Image as Revenant: Retroactivity and Remediation in the Works of T. J. Wilcox," trans. Michael Lattek, *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 79 (December 2009): 126–31.
6 Michael Fried has written a whole book about how the former themes that he detected in eighteenth-century painting—absorption, theatricality—are now taken up by contemporary photographers. Michael Fried, "Introduction," in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 1–4.

art that is defined by the "essence of its medium" has clearly lost its relevance. Once the medium can no longer be delimited, then no qualities can be inherent to it. Its character, rather, depends on how the artist will proceed with it.

III Good-Bye to Medium-Specificity?

Clement Greenberg was the leading champion of the idea that modernist painting in particular is not only characterized by "essential norms and conventions" such as the flatness of its surface, but that each painting has to ideally criticize these limitations "from the inside."[7] It is interesting to note how the descriptive and the normative levels merged in his notion of the medium. Not only did he essentialize painting, ignoring the fact that it actually shares its supposedly essential condition—the flat surface—with writing, he moreover expected the artist to defend the imaginary purity of her medium by criticizing it from within.

Now, this privilege that Greenberg had accorded to the medium became historically untenable once painting lost its purity and expanded into life, as in the Combine paintings of Robert Rauschenberg. Greenberg's position became even more questionable when those Conceptual art practices emerged in the late 1960s that strongly relied on different technologies, such as film photography or diagrams. This was an art that was more generic than medium specific, as André Rottmann has rightly pointed out.[8] One might add to this that the rejection of the privileged status of painting has a much longer history, and regularly occured in painterly practices as well. As an example

7 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1960*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 89, 85.

8 André Rottmann, "Networks, Techniques, Institutions: Art History in Open Circuits," *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 81 (March 2011): 142–44.

of a painting that says good-bye to the tradition of "pure painting," I would refer to Francis Picabia's *Nature Morte* (1920). The painting contaminates the alleged purity of its medium by drawing on different formats: the readymade (in the form of the stuffed animal attached to the surface that "stubbornly clings to the domain of painting," as George Baker so adequately put it)[9] and text (the written names of "great" male artists like Cézanne, Rembrandt, and Renoir, whose portraits we are meant to see and who turn out to be nothing but a dead animal, *natures mortes*). Cézanne, for one, whose work was always considered to be the epitome of pure painting, is declared to be as dead as the stuffed ape. The status of painting as a higher art form and the correlating belief in its purity and essence are doubly threatened here: not only by the incorporation of a readymade that enforces the external logic of the commodity and productive labor into the painting, but also by the textual elements, which equally threaten to bury painting's alleged essence.

Are we then obliged to deduce from this that there is nothing medium specific about painting anymore? I believe that we have to concede at this point that some artists, and painters in particular, do indeed encounter problems in their practice that they ascribe to the specificity of their respective medium. But it is one thing to acknowledge a certain degree of medium-specificity at this level of artistic production, and another to derive a highly questionable general norm of medium-specificity from it.

IV Painting and Indexicality

So, how to define painting once it has merged with other procedures—from the readymade and linguistic propositions to

9 George Baker, "The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Dada Painting," in *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 101.

the insights of institutional critique? How to determine a practice that renders impossible the rigorous distinction between what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic to it? I want to propose that we conceive of painting not as a medium, but as a production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized. By focusing on painting's specific indexicality, we will be able to grasp one of its main characteristics: it is able to suggest a strong bond between the product and the (absent) person of its maker. This is due to the way indexical signs actually operate: According to Charles S. Peirce, an index shows something about a thing because of its *physical connection* to it.[10] Since he mentioned photography as an example for this "class of signs," art historians tend to mainly treat photography as the indexical art form par excellence.[11] But I would argue that painting suggests such a physical connection even more strongly. Someone has left her marks.

Frank Stella's observation that painting is a sort of handwriting was actually quite to the point.[12] Its signs are indexical insofar as they can be read as traces of the producing person. Now even if we opt for a deconstructionist approach, insisting how the trace equally addresses "the formal conditions of separation, division, and deferral,"[13] we are still dealing with the ghost of a presence. This is also true for those paintings that avoid handwriting by using a technical device, as in Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings produced with a squeegee. By moving the

10 Charles S. Peirce, "What Is a Sign?," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, *1893–1913*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 9.

11 See Rosalind E. Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 68–81.

12 Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 157.

13 Jacques Derrida, quoted in Rosalind E. Krauss, "Six," in *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 260.

squeegee up and down the painting in a particular way, Richter inscribes his own body movement into the painting. In other words, attempts to eliminate the subjectivity of the artist from the painting usually lead to a reentering of subjectivity into painting.[14] And the more negation there is of handwriting, the more this negation will be considered to be the handwriting of the artist.[15]

Yet linking indexicality to painting does not imply that we ignore the split that occurs between the artwork and the authentic self. What we encounter in painting is not so much the authentically revealed self of the painter, but rather signs that insinuate that this absent self is somewhat present in it. As a highly mediated idiom, painting provides a number of techniques, methods, and artifices that allow for the fabriciation of the impression of the author's quasi-presence *as an effect*.

For this indexical effect to occur, the artist does not need to have literally set her hand on the picture, or to have brandished a brush, or to have thrown paint on it. A mechanically produced silkscreen by Andy Warhol, who often delegated his work to his assistants, or a printed black painting by Wade Guyton, is no less capable of conveying the sense of a latent presence of the artist—by virtue, for instance, of imperfections deliberately left uncorrected, selected combinations of colors, or subsequent improvements. Painting, then, would have to be understood as the art form that is particularly favorable to the belief—widespread in the visual arts more generally—that by

14 See Isabelle Graw, "The Knowledge of Painting: Notes on Thinking Images, and the Person in the Product," trans. Gerrit Jackson, *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 82 (June 2011): 114–25.

15 "Noch [kann] die Wahl eines Mediums, das Handschriftlichkeit ausdrücklich negiert, Ausdruck (oder 'Medium') eben der Handschrift eines Künstlers sein." Michael Lüthy and Christoph Menke, "Einleitung," in *Subjekt und Medium in der Kunst der Moderne*, ed. Michael Lüthy and Christoph Menke (Zurich: diaphanes, 2005), 9.

approaching or purchasing a work of art, it is possible to get a more immediate access to what is assumed to be the person of the artist and her life.

v Painting as a Thinking Subject

There is one feature of the indexical sign that I have not yet mentioned: according to Peirce, the indexical sign is able to capture our attention because it is affected by the power of its object.[16] Now, in the case of painting's indexicality, this object is a subject—the person of the artist. This is why painting can be potentially experienced as being intriguing in a way that only an intriguing person could be. You might object that sculpture is able to do exactly the same thing. Isn't sculpture marked by a similar kind of indexicality and it therefore also suggest that it is a quasi-person?[17]

Yes, it does, but to a lesser degree. Only painting has many historical arguments pointing to its subject-like power—arguments that I believe do reach into our present. The very first systematic treatise on painting produced in the modern era, for instance, Leon Battista Alberti's *Della pittura* (1453), already aimed to raise the reputation of painters in order to advance their emancipation from the larger class of craftsmen. Indicatively enough, Alberti based his preference for the painter over the sculptor on his view that the former worked "with more difficult things,"[18] thereby implying that painting possesses a challenging materiality and that to paint is an intrinsically intellectually demanding activity.

16 "An *Index* is a thing which having been forcibly affected by its object, forcibly affects its interpretant and causes that interpretant to be forcibly affected by the object, and to affect its interpretant in turn; and which, further, so far as it is a sign, becomes a sign in this way." Charles S. Peirce, 1902, The Papers of Charles S. Peirce, R 599, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

17 The term quasi-person evokes Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory and his understanding of things as "quasi-objects" or "actants." Latour famously proposed that objects are to be recognized as taking part in actions. They do not act as such—they have their role to play in the course of an action. While I find his call for considering objects decisive for an action interesting, I am less sure of his overall project that attacks critical sociology. By replacing the concept of "society" with a more progressive-sounding "collective" that includes nonliving objects as well, the different action potentials of subjects and objects are underestimated as much as the power relations and hierarchies between subjects are left out of sight. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Once painting was declared to be intellectually challenging, it was only a matter of time before it would be claimed to have the intellectual powers of a subject. Hegel defined painting as a mode of artistic representation into which the "principle of finite and inherently infinite subjectivity" had forced its way.[19] Everything that is fundamentally part of a subject accordingly urges towards painting's surface. Subjectivity, however, is here not that of the artist but a universal faculty—"the principle of our own being and life."[20] According to Hegel, we see in the artifacts of painting what is "at work and operative within ourselves."[21] And it is precisely because we believe we recognize in it a familiar potential that we at once feel "at home" in it. In other words, painting, in Hegel's view, moves us also because it stages principles that strike us as familiar and that constitute us. The decisive point of this argument is that Hegel aligns painting with the subject by ascribing a capacity for it—the capacity of subjectivity—which is, properly speaking, the exclusive privilege of subjects. Only subjects possess the ability to evolve an independent mental life. By according a subject-like power to painting, Hegel laid the ground for what I would describe as the central trope around painting in the twentieth

18 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 66.

19 G. W. F. Hegel, "The Romantic Arts," in *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 797.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

century—namely, the assumption that there is thought in painting, that painting itself is able to think. French painting theorists like Louis Marin or Hubert Damisch in particular have put forward this argument—that painting is a sort of discourse producer that arrives at its own insights. Once it is declared to be able to think it becomes subject-like.

VI Painting as a Highly Valuable Quasi-Person

But how does painting's capacity to evoke the sense of a subject-like force—its power to suggest that it actually operates like a person—relate to the value that is attributed to it?[22]

For an artwork to be considered valuable, it first of all has to be attributable to an author—one could say that it thereby gets loaded with intentionality. This process gets intensified in the case of the indexical signs of paintings. Here, someone has left her traces (even if mechanically produced, this suggestion of a handwriting persists) and this enhances the impression of an intentional artwork, of an artwork that itself has agency. While all artworks have to function as an index of the one who brought them into existence in order for value to be attributed to them, painting seems to go further by suggesting that it is a quasi-person. Or to put this slightly differently: painting is particularly well equipped to satisfy the longing for substance in value. It indeed seems to demonstrate how value is founded in something concrete—the living labor of the artist.

Let's recall how Karl Marx conceptualized value. While it is certainly true that his reflections on value were bound to the

22 I'm not distinguishing between symbolic and economic value here on purpose. I am referring to value in the sense of the place where social relevance is attributed to an artwork. All the claims that have been made for painting constitute its symbolic value. While symbolic value does not automatically get translated into economic value, it is never the precondition for economic value to occur.

commodity and that he did not consider artworks commodities of a special kind, his notion of value has two undeniable advantages: it does not confound value and price, and therefore it prevents us from equating the value of an artwork with its market value.[23] Even more importantly, Marx insisted on the relational, metonymic quality of value, thereby reminding us that value has no substance and is always elsewhere.

Indeed, Marx on the one hand emphasized that no commodity is valuable in itself, that value is a "purely social" phenomenon.[24] This is also true for artworks: No artwork is valuable per se—its value is the result of an ongoing and never-ending social negotiation. If the symbolic value of Damien Hirst's work, for instance, is considered questionable because of his general strategic attitude towards the market, then his overall project will start to lack credibility and its price will eventually fall. But the worth of his practice is never fixed and is always open for reconsideration.

On the other hand, Marx pointed to how value represents "the expenditure of human labor in general."[25] This would mean that value eclipses concrete labor and turns it into its opposite—abstract human labor.[26] Now, painting seems to be one of the

23 Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic value" allows us to theorize this non-equation. There can be symbolic value without market value.

24 "Turn and examine a single commodity, by itself, as we will, yet insofar as it remains an object of value, it seems impossible to grasp it. If, however we bear in mind that the value of commodities has a purely social reality, and that they acquire this reality only insofar as they are expressions or embodiments of one identical social substance, viz., human labour, it follows as a matter of course, that value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, *Part I: The Process of Capitalist Production*, ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Ernest Untermann (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 55.

25 "But the value of a commodity represents human labour in the abstract, the expenditure of human labour in general." Ibid., 51.

26 "Hence, the second peculiarity of the equivalent form is, that concrete labour becomes the form under which its opposite, abstract human labour, manifests itself." Ibid., 67.

last places where the desire for a concrete foundation of value *seemingly* gets fullfilled. Not only does it generate the illusionary impression that it is possible to grasp a fiber of the lived labor that was mobilized for it, but it moreover promises the existence of an imaginary place where labor actually remains private and concrete, detectable in the concrete materiality of its surface and the gestures that it displays. The process of labor is not hidden but seemingly exposed, as if the lived labor of its author was something we could hold onto, as if it had not been transformed into "objectified labor" (*vergegenständlichte Arbeit*, Marx) during the process of exchange. Painting's capacity to appear particulary saturated with the lifetime of its author makes it the ideal candidate for value production.

It is important to note that this search for value within lived labor gets even more pronounced in the current context of ongoing devalorization. One of the effects of the 2008 financial crisis is that more and more desperate searches for value take place. The belief in the "personality" of the artwork and painting in particular is of course not a solution to the crisis, it is rather a way of both delaying and extending it.

Let me conclude by saying that the topos of painting as a quasi-person has historically turned up in many different guises—starting from painters themselves, who have either seriously (like Francis Bacon or Charline von Heyl) or ironically (Albert Oehlen) referred to the idea that painting tells them what to do.[27] The belief in the self-activity of painting is one of its central myths, a myth that is of course closely interwoven with the experience of production. I have mentioned already how several French art historians like Marin or Damisch have made a slightly different claim for a metapictorial "thinking" of paintings, demonstrating how it is able to produce its own

discourse.[28] While I wouldn't deny the possibility that a painting can occasionally deliver its own interpretation, I find it nevertheless important to realize that by claiming agency for painting (or for artworks in general), by treating them as quasi-persons, as I have aimed to show here that we tend to do, we become somewhat implicated in the process of value attribution, a process that has in any case already been fired up by our propositions regarding the nature of the artwork.

27 Francis Bacon: "I find that if I am on my own I can allow the paint to dictate to me." David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 194. Charline von Heyl: "For me, what makes a painting is a mixture of authority and freedom, where it really just wants to be itself, where there is no justification, or explanation, or anything like that. Where it's just what it is for whatever reason." Claire Barliant and Christopher Turner, "Painting Paradox," *Modern Painter* (Summer 2009): 45. Albert Oehlen: "When I step into the room, I face them—which is extremely unpleasant. Each one shoots me a dirty look, as if to say, you idiot, you loser, you'll never make it." Albert Oehlen, interview by Eva Karcher, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 9–10, 2010; trans. my own. In Corinna Belz's documentary *Gerhard Richter Painting* (2011), Richter jokingly says that his paintings do want they want.

28 See Louis Marin on Nicolas Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepards*: "The painting in the Louvre is a representation of the process of narrative representation associated with history." Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. Mette Hjort (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 26.

Questions for Isabelle Graw

Peter Geimer

What I find interesting about your thesis is that you do not work with the term "indexicality" in its widely understood sense, but, instead, you mobilize it to mean the exact opposite. In the theory of photography, index, trace, and reprint count as modes by which an object registers itself physically. These do not necessarily require the presence of an author, and it is precisely through this quality that they open up an empty space of subjectivity and intentionality (somewhat like André Bazin's statements about photography being the first of the arts to derive an advantage from man's absence).[1] Your understanding of indexicality—transferred to painting—implies just the opposite: the promise of value being awarded by the visible or imagined presence of an author. You use the definition of painting as a "form of production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized" in place of the modernist and substantialist concept, and suggest this as an alternative trait of painting.

Here, I begin my two questions: Firstly, in this transfer, what happened to the condition, central to the Peircean definition, of physical contact between sign and signified? If mechanical means, printing, and the involvement of third parties have been employed in painting production for quite some time now (as in your examples of Andy Warhol and Wade Guyton), then Peirce's central motif of direct physical contact has simply been canceled. Peirce also understood indexicality as more than mere construct or pure attribution, convention, or suggestion, but instead as a real existent physical connection (in

1 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1960): 4–9.

his example, something like that between the path of the sun and the analog shadow cast on the sundial, or between the wind's direction and the analog movement of the weather vane). What exactly do you gain in this argument by taking on Peirce's concept of indexicality, though in doing so varying one of his central conditions?

I also ask myself whether indexicality in your understanding is in fact specific to the contemporary discourse on painting. Why wouldn't this also be valid for a film or a video, where the camera work or editing can count as visible marks of the producer? (And, as Rosalind E. Krauss showed so well in her essay "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," there have been many art historians who were anxious to establish a conceptualization of authorship and personal style, which is rooted in painting, within the medium of photography as well.) [2] The will to trace subjectivity in art seems to me to be effective in a medium-encompassing way, and not specific to painting.

Secondly, can painting's function of reifying an artist's efforts—as shown in the exhibitions you mentioned—in fact serve to comprehensively explain the lasting painting boom? "Buying artworks indeed comes close to buying people"—however, most of the players do not approach painting from the perspective of potential buyers, but as gallery and museum visitors, curators, critics, or art historians. Would you say that their experiences with art—and even our conversation here—are also effects of economic structures? (Wouldn't that, in turn, be a quite determinist point of view, similar to the essentialist view of the media-specificity of art?)

2 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 311–19.

Response to Peter Geimer

Isabelle Graw

It is true that at first glance it may be surprising that I make a claim for Peirce's definition of the index, and this even in light of those forms of painting based on mechanical processes like silk screen—and thereby contradict his central point about physical connection. Although, the mechanical process need not necessarily exclude a moment of physical contact, as seen with Warhol, who cultivated mistakes in his silk screens, or made improvements, or painted over the surface after the fact. All the same, I should likely have stressed the point that I am not adopting the Peircean model one-to-one, but modifying it. Whereas Peirce places the accent on the factual, physical connectedness of the index to its object, I highlight the index's faculty for evoking this physical connection. In other words, photography—basically the recording of lighting conditions via a chemical process—evokes, or even better, suggests that it is the trace or the reprint of a real object. It is not this print, but much more—it suggests the presence of such a physical connection.

I attribute a comparable potential for suggestion to the indexical signs in painting, except that here, a physical connection with the artist-subject as its author is evoked. I also consider this valid for every painterly practice that undermines the authority of the author by different means (for example, through non-subjective methods like the readymade, aleatoric procedures, or the delegation of the painterly process to someone else). Here, the avoidance of signature becomes the artist's signature.

What do I gain, though, by adopting and modifying Peirce's concept of indexicality? First of all, a more exact understanding

of the nature of such a bond between product and person, which is especially tight in painting. But unpainterly practices also lend themselves to being read as traces of the producer. You were right in referring to this with the editing of film. However in painting, this bond between product and person is especially unbreakable, as its signs refer to the producer consistently and not only selectively, like in film.

The recourse to a semiotic approach presents the additional advantage of allowing for a media-unspecific understanding of painting. Because, as soon as I understand painting as a form of sign production, I can also pursue the presence of painterly signs in nonpainterly practices or consider expanded forms of painting that go beyond painting and have burst open the narrow confines of the canvas long ago. My model takes this despecification into account and also acknowledges the specific codes of painting.

Moreover, the focus on its specific indexicality allows me to better understand the attraction of a painterly practice that deals with images interceded by photographic media, like the early work of Gerhard Richter. I believe that the reason for the lasting fascination with this painting form, which numerous artists have taken on, lies in its coordination of the indexicalities of two media: painting and photography.

As paintings of photographs, these images evoke the indexicality characteristic of photography: a reference to life. They are loaded with a sense of the real (*Lebenswirklichkeit*) as photography, so to speak. However, this is accompanied by an explicit painterly act through Richter's often-invoked blur technique, which not only abstracts the motif, but even further incorporates the painter's person, and this even despite the mechanical look

and feel of this painterly blurring. In this way, the photographic element provides the image with a reference to life, which, nonetheless, will be molded by the painter's signature at the end. With Richter, you get both: the reference to reality and the suggestion of the presence of the painter.

Now, it is certainly true that not only painting but art in general is marked by the desire for traces of subjectivity. All artworks can be described as "indexes of agency" (Alfred Gell), though only in painting are aesthetics and subjectivity strongly interconnected. In this context, one need only recall Hegel's "principle of finite and inherently infinite subjectivity," which would be groundbreaking for painting and allow us to feel more at home and somewhat familiar there (*einheimischer*). Painting's orientation towards subjectivity—subjectivity in the sense of a general capacity—leads to a problematic, anthropomorphic projection. Despite this, it is still important to maintain that it is painting (and not sculpture) that Hegel used as an example here; that it was painting, after all, which provided him with an occasion and reason for such projection. In my opinion, the unique dynamic developed by paint on a surface already provides the groundwork for the understanding that, here, we are also dealing with a model of subjectivity in the sense of an independent, mental life.

Coming to your last point—of course, not everyone approaches painting as a potential buyer. But, if we understand painting as a specific form of sign production, perhaps it has an especially intense way of misleading its receivers to read its products as synonyms of their producers? There are certainly other historical explanations for its rise to a "success medium" (Niklas Luhmann), which I have cited, like the mobility of the work on canvas or the comparably low production costs, for

example. Painting seems to lend itself especially well to being fetishized and effectively possessed. This also explains its lasting attraction from the viewpoint of artists.

We have both thought about painting today, no doubt, as a consequence of the most recent economic and symbolic painting boom. In fact, painting started to be considered (seemingly) unproblematic since the late 1990s at least. There is no longer any pressure for justification. You could say that this situation was (involuntarily) prepared in the early 1980s by artists like Albert Oehlen or Martin Kippenberger. At that time, it was absolutely necessary to attack painting, even by means of its own tools, in order to grasp and drain the medium as a questionable belief system. Today, many artists consider this "painting against painting" that followed modernism's belief in painting's essence to be finished and resolved. Instead, in many exhibitions and in the statements of young painters, the mythical belief in Painting is revitalized, also in the sense of a self-acting entity.

I have of course contributed to this rehabilitation of painting in my own work, when for instance relating Kippenberger's paintings to institutional critique or when interpreting his seemingly expressive gestures as a form of conceptual expression. Instead of not having any more problems with painting, I want to keep discussing it as a "constellation of problems" (*Problemzusammenhang*, Theodor W. Adorno) in my examination of the medium's specific indexicality, and, consequently, as something that is—like other art forms—problematic and markedly questionable per se. This is, not least of all, due to painting's inherent personalization.

Contributors

Peter Geimer
is a professor of art history at Freie Universität Berlin. Recent publications include "'Self-Generated' Images," in *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media* (Stanford University Press, 2011); *Bilder aus Versehen: Eine Geschichte fotografischer Erscheinungen* (Philo Fine Arts, 2010); *Theorien der Fotografie* (Junius, 2009); and "Image as Trace: Speculations about an Undead Paradigm," in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* (Spring 2007).

Isabelle Graw
is a professor of art history at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Frankfurt am Main, where she cofounded the Institut für Kunstkritik. She is an art critic, editor, cofounder of the Sternberg Press Institut für Kunstkritik series and *Texte zur Kunst*, and author of several books, including *Texte zur Kunst: Essays, Rezensionen, Gespräche* (Philo Fine Arts, 2010), *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (Sternberg Press, 2010), and *Die bessere Hälfte: Künstlerinnen im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert* (DuMont, 2003).

André Rottmann
is an art historian and critic based in Berlin. A fellow of the research group BildEvidenz. Geschichte und Ästhetik in the art history department at Freie Universität Berlin, he currently is at work on a comprehensive monograph of the artist John Knight. He is a frequent contributor to *Artforum* and an advisory board member of *Texte zur Kunst*.

Thinking through Painting
Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas
Editors: Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, Nikolaus Hirsch, Institut für Kunstkritik, Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main
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Painting has demonstrated remarkable perseverance in the expanding field of contemporary art and the surrounding ecology of media images. However, it appears to have dispelled its own once-uncontested material basis: no longer synonymous only with a flat picture plane hung on the wall, today, painting tends to emphasize the apparatus of its appearance and the conduits of its circulation. With contributions by Peter Geimer, Isabelle Graw, and André Rottmann, *Thinking through Painting* investigates painting's traits and reception in cultural and socioeconomic discourse.

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