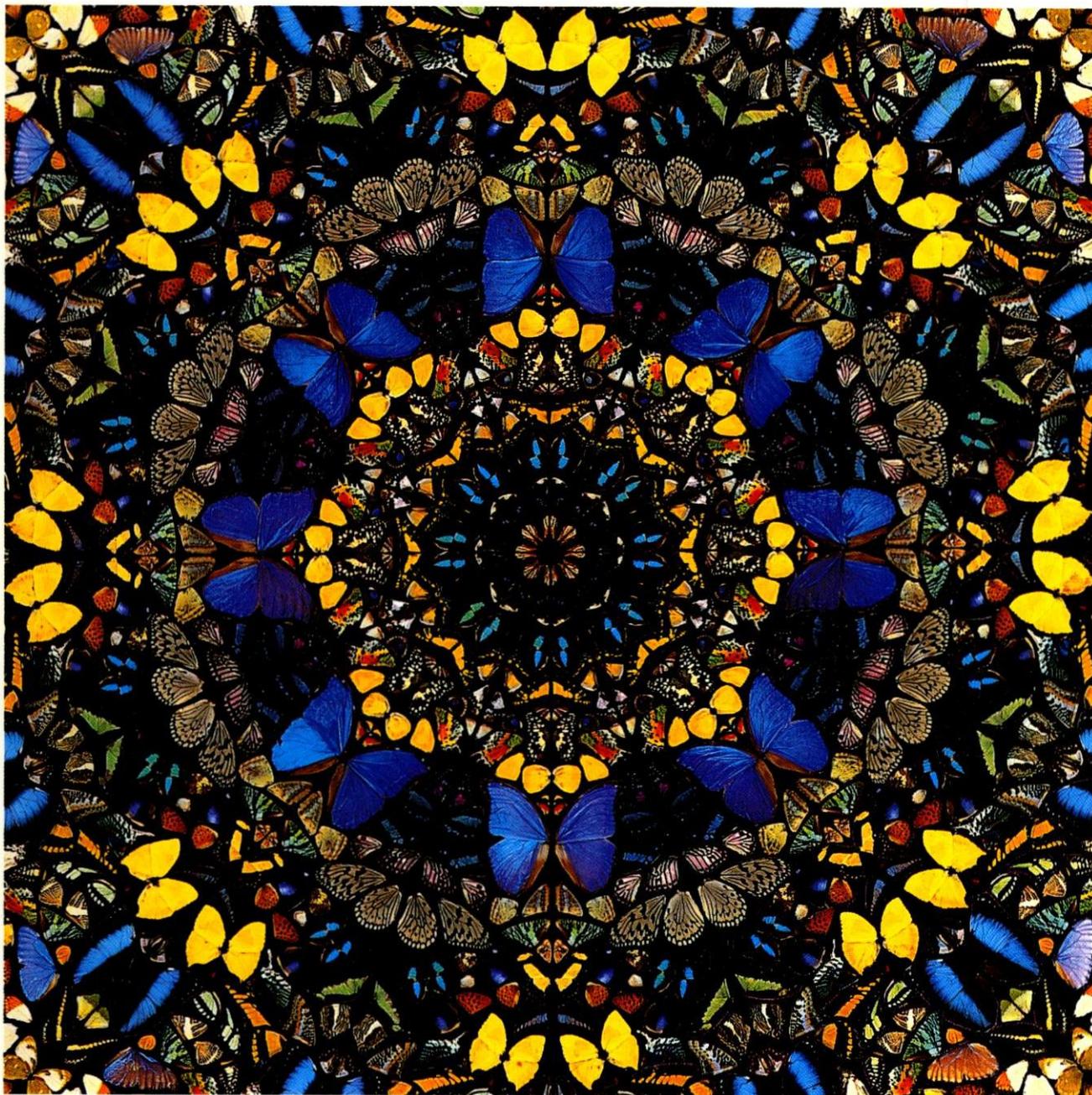


The World's Leading Art Magazine Vol. XXXVII No. 239 November-December 2004 US \$7 € 7,00 **International**

# Flash Art



**Damien Hirst**  
**"Devotion"**

*Butterfly wings and gloss paint on canvas*



The World's Leading Art Magazine

# Flash Art

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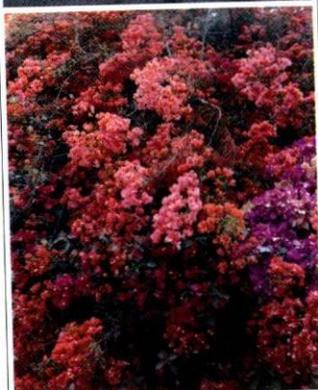
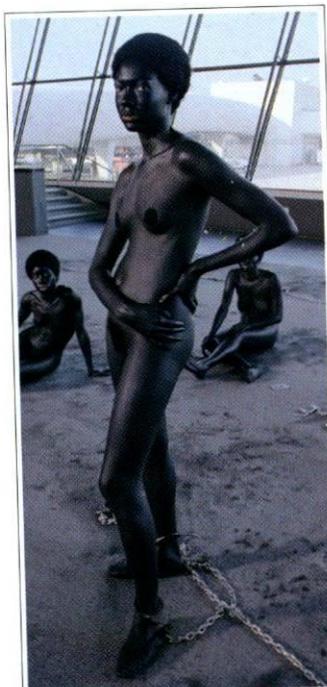
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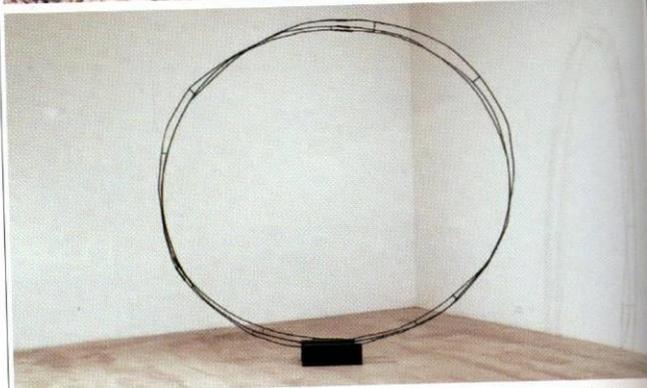
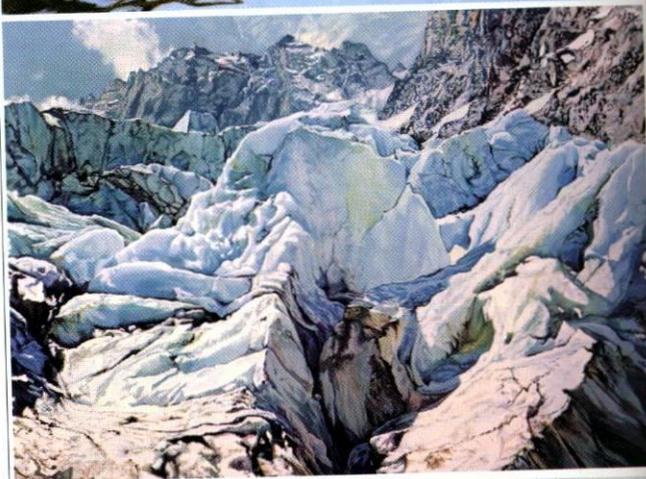
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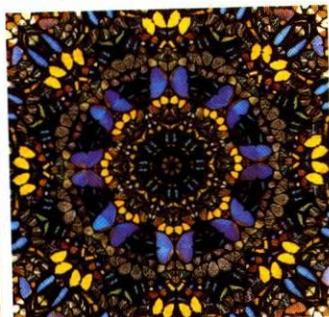
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Matthias Weischer, *Untitled*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 cm. Courtesy Anthony Wilkinson Gallery, London, and Eigen + Art, Berlin/Leipzig. Right: Damien Hirst, *Devotion* (detail), 2003. Butterfly wings and gloss paint on canvas, 244 x 153 cm (oval). Courtesy White Cube/Jay Jopling, London. Covers of *Flash Art International*, November-December 2004.

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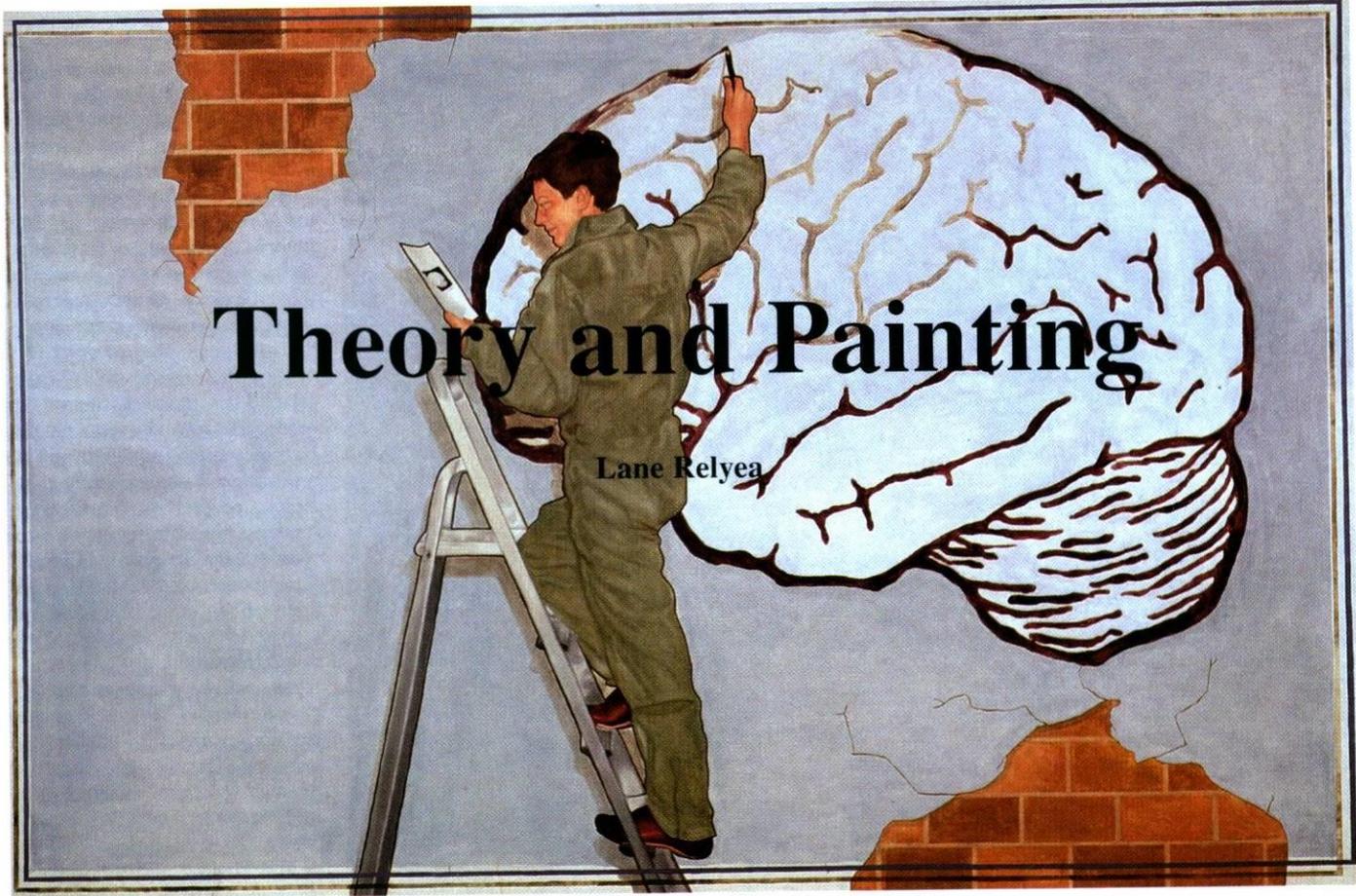
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LUCY MCKENZIE, *Untitled*, 2002. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Courtesy of Cabinet Gallery, London.

IN RECENT YEARS the word ‘theory’ has been badly abused. It now signifies little more than the sound of the art world beating its head against a wall. Last autumn the tempo of that beat quickened, as critic Jerry Saltz journeyed to Chicago to deliver a talk at the School of the Art Institute, where at the time my wife and I were co-teaching a graduate seminar on painting.<sup>1</sup> As he’s so prone to do in print, Saltz exhorted the assembled fledgling artists to stay true to their calling by *resisting theory*. The response was surprising. The vast majority of students harrumphed in agreement. What makes this surprising is that theory’s been dead for almost a decade now. Take a peek inside academia: since the mid ’90s the hot books in the student store sport titles like *The Theory Mess*, *After Theory* and *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy*. Symposia and conferences have been convened to assess the matter. Even mainstream outlets have reported on it, with *The New York Times* breaking the story last year

that “The Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn’t Matter.” Why does the art press pretend not to notice any of this? For starters: our hang-up over theory actually has nothing to do with theory itself. Saltz, for instance, might occasionally shake a fist at “the pleasure police at *October*,” but otherwise he never offers specific names of authors or intellectual movements in his diatribes. He instead phrases the problem abstractly. “We all have two conversations about art,” Saltz writes in a recent article about painting, “the public one about stratagems, and the private one about necessities. The former is about authority; the later, experimentation.” Theory here stands as the diametric opposite of practice, and its evil doesn’t even need actual books or arguments to substantiate itself. It’s been instituted not as a content but as a form, the dark half of a binary structure. In this twisted caricature, theory has become the code word for art as a profession, a matter of talking the talk so as to advance a career

and impress the boss, while practice represents what artists do when they turn away from that profession, shut themselves up in the lonely studio, and devote their attention to object-making solely for its own sake. Such a bias draws on a long history, extending perhaps as far back as Duchamp’s “dumb as a painter” epithet. When ’60s artists like Allan Kaprow and Dan Flavin broke decisively with painting, they also ridiculed studio-bound practice in general. Painting’s comeback in the ’80s did nothing to ease the tension. Craig Owens warned of a “widespread backlash against the ’60s counterculture” manifested in the “massive retreat to the studio... where the artist, screened from public view, produces work in intense privacy.” Recently Libby Lumpkin has taken a more Saltzian view, applauding how “by the late ’80s works asserting their materiality had trickled into galleries on the coasts, and now, everywhere you look, there are objects that come in substances, colors, shapes, and sizes that matter. The near 30-year

hegemony of art constructed solely as a liberal art — as an art of the mind — has come to an end.”<sup>2</sup> What’s telling about this short history is that all these arguments — Flavin’s in the ’60s, Owens’ in the ’80s, Lumpkin’s in the ’90s — target not painting and the studio so much as art schools. Indeed, where else do you find such a clean splitting apart of the private studio and public discussion? As Howard Singerman has argued, the mission of art schools is founded on a contradiction: while university instruction and learning depend upon the verbalization of knowledge, no professor would ever so defile art by proposing that it can be reduced to a set of teachable formulas.<sup>3</sup> The art curriculum is thus cleaved between group interaction and the production of language on the one hand — the public position-taking of critiques, visiting-artist talks, and seminars, all of which accord well with the school’s institutional authority — and private, individual studio time on the other, during which students



turn away from the group to face, instead, their work.

During the '70s it was perhaps alternative media and sites that helped spread art practice beyond the studio and its traditional materials. By the '80s the larger context into which practice was integrated was an expanded field of critical methodologies, discourses, and histories — that is, the critical theory of the university humanities departments. Through all this, the studio has been penetrated and dispersed, and yet today, with theory as seemingly moribund as the notion of medium-specificity, the critique class suddenly feels just as impoverished.

Without the aid of either theory or medium, artists are all the more

thrown back on themselves. Little wonder that so much artwork over the past decade — whether paintings, video projections, color photographs, or installations — is made large, as if scaled to the art world's infrastructure of kunsthallen and impersonal showrooms, and yet at the same time tries to draw attention away from the monumental whole and toward the little idiosyncratic tick or obsessive detail, the indiscretion or doodle in the corner, things that feel random, fugitive, and intimate. Even titles such as 'artist' or 'painter' are avoided, as individuals simultaneously fulfill the roles of artist, curator, collector, designer, critic, etc., without overly identifying with any one. Perhaps art schools have also

contributed to this trend — graduation day makes the adoption of the title 'artist' absurdly punctual and legalistic. Modernism had offered many narratives about claiming the identity of the artist: whether T.S. Eliot's individual and tradition, or Harold Rosenberg's actor and act, or Michael Fried's painter and painting, the story was always about a dramatic and existential conversion of the mere individual into a more archetypal identity and role. The bestowal of the art degree recasts that conversion as utterly ironic, with the title 'artist' now turned into a ready-made.

Perhaps it's time to question the almost 40 years of total agreement that the studio and painting should be defined in opposition to theory.

What this obscures are alternative ways that theory and practice have been related in the past, and may again be related in the future. Rosenberg treated the theory-practice problem from the viewpoint of Marxist debates over whether to entrust revolution in the top-down dictating of party theorists or in the bottom-up fervor spontaneously aroused in the proletariat. Other modernists viewed the problem on the level of the individual; they warned of a "dissociation of sensibility" exacerbated in modern society by professionalism and over-specialization, which rendered people incapable of amalgamating experience, of feeling thoughts and thinking through feelings. Such worries certainly plagued Clement Greenberg: "Instead of completing yourself by work," he sighed as early as 1942, "you mutilate yourself."

It may well be a utopian idea, and very modernist, but it still weighs heavily on artists — the idea of bringing theory and practice together. Modern society grudgingly cedes to artists the privilege of working in as humane a manner as this society will allow. What privileges artists is not some innate gift with which they were born. The work done by artists is privileged and humane because artists retain a larger degree of responsibility in the decision making (for which the downside is usually zero monetary compensation and thus subhuman living conditions). The artist is better able to work as a whole person, rather than as a specialized cog in a machine, working under a boss and for the bottom line.

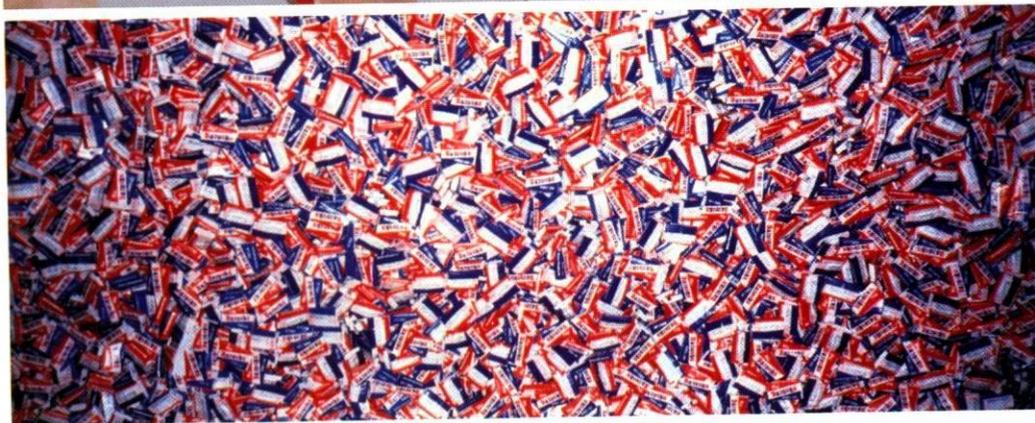
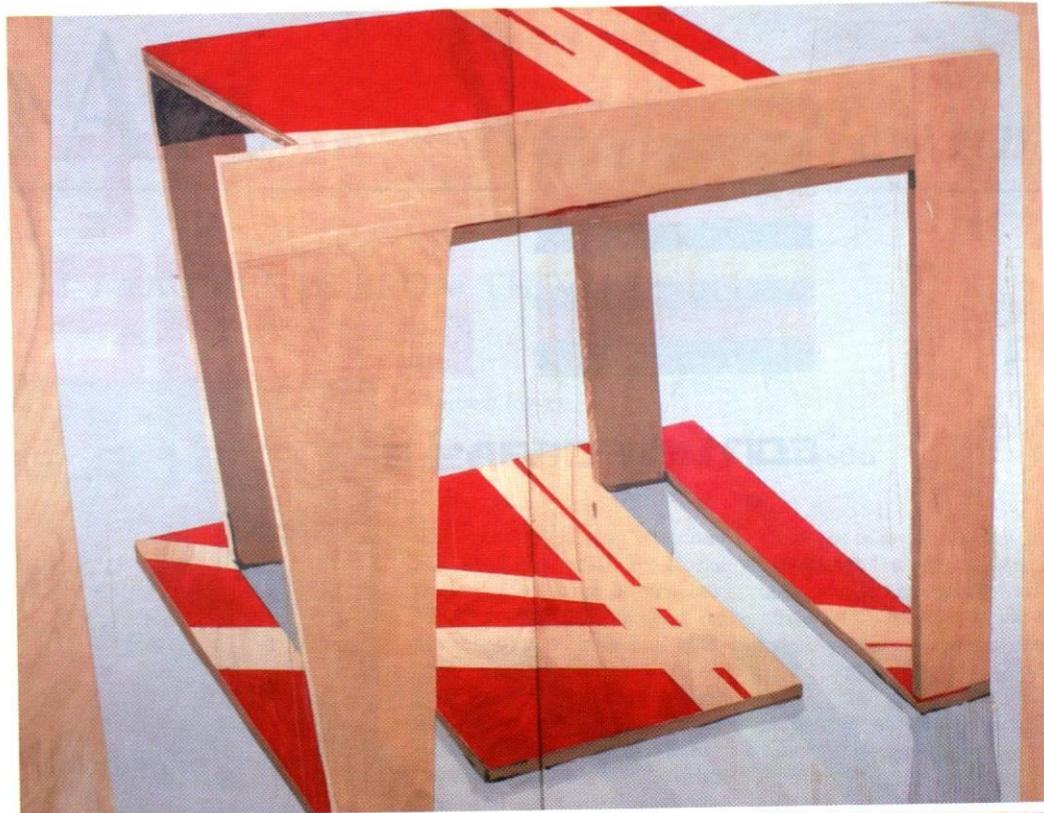
Nothing makes painters in their studios inherently less capable of working in this way. The problem for studio painters lies in not allowing their form of labor to become mystified, to appear separated off by divine dispensation. But how many interesting painters today really do forswear post-studio considerations? Doesn't Laura Owens, for example, make almost all her paintings with the specific conditions of their exhibition in mind? Indeed, Owens's work places so much emphasis on the specifics of exhibition space — walls, doorways, windows, and other architectural thresholds — that it's hard not to compare her work to that of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an exemplary post-studio artist.

Moreover, in other recent capaciously sizes disparate results lo schizophre It's equally artists wh convivial a audience. L Gonzalez-T possesses o example — and poster practice in with painti such a discu sible today Gonzalez-T antithetical conversely, about Laura idiosyncrati a measure entrenched these division Today's the largely a pro alism, of Saltz's hol theory make as artworld he aggrandi dating label just other co who happen critics for ge papers but a sors. For p professors w they can't advance in unless they e that makes u of art histo writing is looking, p historical pre makes it som the future-or — what Sal "experimenta nates artistic criticism writ is far more fl to art school leaves the natural ally, privilege ma pledging to f than turn his All this b theory and p uates the sy 'studio' art ality, say, sensate cra precisely a s erates and

Moreover, it's hard to name two other recent artists whose work so capaciously takes in and synthesizes disparate historical precedents, yet does so without the results looking fragmented, schizophrenic, 'postmodern.' It's equally hard to suggest two artists whose work is so convivial and soliciting of an audience. Doesn't the fact that Gonzalez-Torres's work possesses only a front side, for example — even his candy piles and poster stacks — align his practice in an important way with painting? The fact that such a discussion seems impossible today — that the work of Gonzalez-Torres is considered antithetical to painting or, conversely, that it's better to talk about Laura Owens in terms of idiosyncratic doodling — this is a measure of how deeply entrenched and dysfunctional these divisions have become.

Today's theory-practice split is largely a problem of professionalism, of over-specialization. Saltz's holy crusade against theory makes more sense if seen as artworld office politics; what he aggrandizes with the intimidating label 'theory' is really just other competing art writers who happen to work not as beat critics for general interest newspapers but as art history professors. For professional reasons, professors write academically; they can't survive let alone advance in their departments unless they extend the discourse that makes up the official canon of art history. This kind of writing is largely backward-looking, preoccupied with historical precedents; that's what makes it somewhat at odds with the future-oriented speculations — what Saltz rightly calls the "experimentation" — that dominates artistic practice. And yet criticism written by art historians is far more flattering than Saltz's to art school seminars. That then leaves the studio as Saltz's natural ally, where he too will privilege making over talking, pledging to face the work rather than turn his back on it.

All this bickering between theory and practice only perpetuates the system. An apparent 'studio' art — an art of materiality, say, of mute, purely sensate craft objects — is precisely a schooled art. It reiterates and entrenches the art



MANU MUNIATEGIANDIKOETXEA, I.Z. por de trás, 2003. Acrylic on wood, 310 x 366 cm. Courtesy of Sala Rekalde, Bilbao; FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, *Untitled (Welcome Back Heroes)*, 1991. Approximately 400 pounds of Bazoooka bubble gum, dimensions variable. Opposite: LAURA OWENS, *Untitled*, 2004. Oil and acrylic on linen, 335 x 282 cm. Courtesy of Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

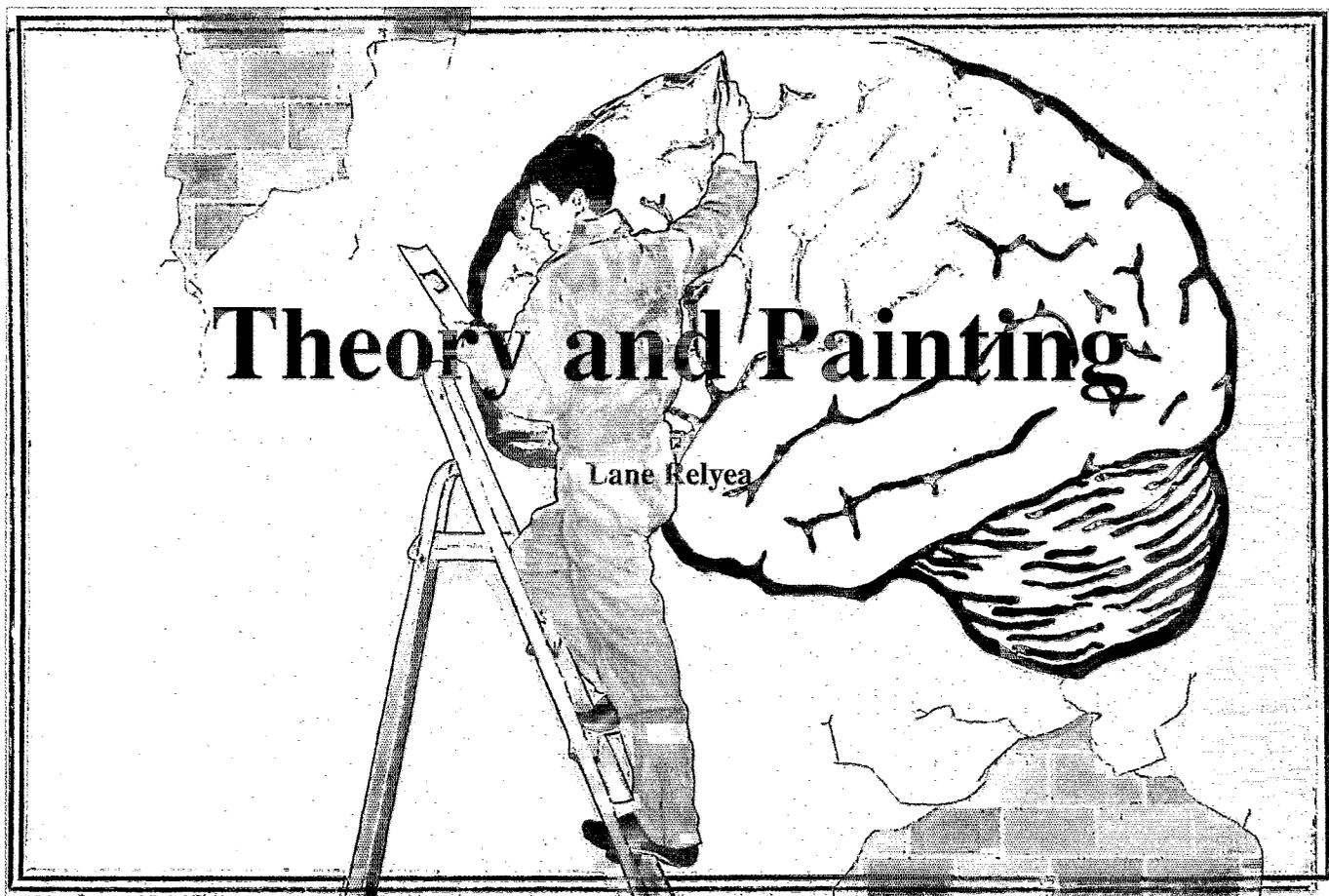
school's divisions between making and talking. The same goes for an art of personal idiosyncrasy. Just look at the recent Phaidon book on painting, *Vitamin P*. No generalizations or theories rain on its parade; each artist is instead represented as absolutely unique, an irreducible talent who just so happens to use paint. The result: a phone book of names in alphabetical order, as mechanical and flavorless as the graduation-day processional. The next theory to come along, whatever it is, will hopefully matter to artists less because of its prior adoption by

academia than by its validation within practice, whether that practice is studio or post-studio. Only by bringing together theory and practice can artists even hope to change such a system, to break from its routines. In fact, by possessing both, art can set its sights on things beyond the art system; it can return its ambitions to proper heights. Namely, it again might take aim at changing the world. ■

*Lane Relyea is a professor of Art Theory & Practice at Northwestern University in Chicago.*

#### Notes

1. I'm indebted to Annika Marie, my co-teacher, who provided many of the themes and ideas for this essay.
2. Jerry Saltz, "Painting à la Mode," *Village Voice* (December 4 - 10, 2002).
3. Craig Owens, "Back to the Studio," *Art in America* 70, no. 1 (January 1982): 100-01; Libby Lumpkin, *Deep Design* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press), 111.
4. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
5. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 1*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 117.



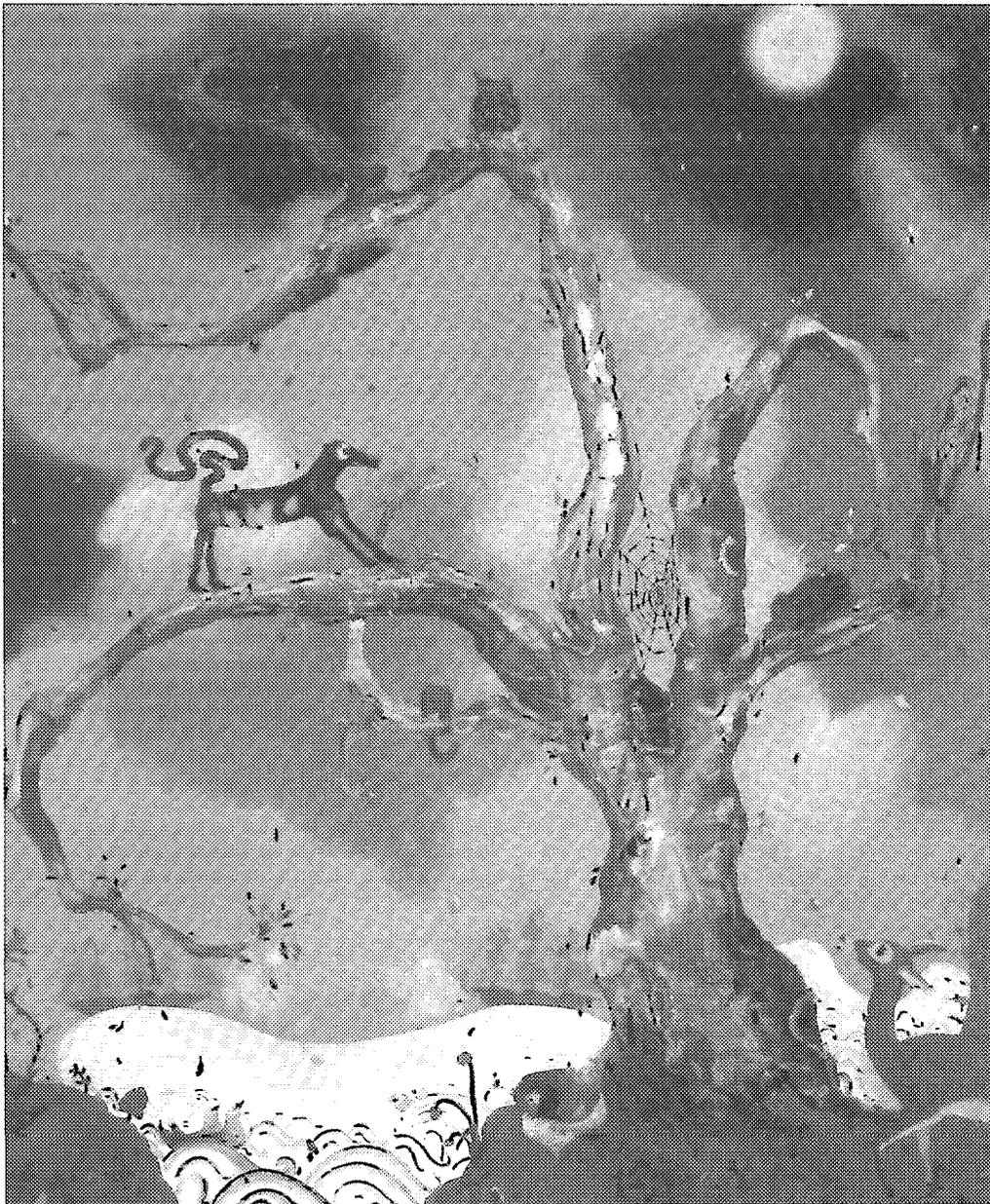
LUCY MCKENZIE, *Untitled*, 2002. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Courtesy of Cabinet Gallery, London.

IN RECENT YEARS the word 'theory' has been badly abused. It now signifies little more than the sound of the art world beating its head against a wall. Last autumn the tempo of that beat quickened, as critic Jerry Saltz journeyed to Chicago to deliver a talk at the School of the Art Institute, where at the time my wife and I were co-teaching a graduate seminar on painting.<sup>1</sup> As he's so prone to do in print, Saltz exhorted the assembled fledgling artists to stay true to their calling by *resisting theory*. The response was surprising. The vast majority of students harrumphed in agreement. What makes this surprising is that theory's been dead for almost a decade now. Take a peek inside academia: since the mid '90s the hot books in the student store sport titles like *The Theory Mess*, *After Theory* and *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy*. Symposia and conferences have been convened to assess the matter. Even mainstream outlets have reported on it, with *The New York Times* breaking the story last year

that "The Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn't Matter." Why does the art press pretend not to notice any of this? For starters: our hang-up over theory actually has nothing to do with theory itself. Saltz, for instance, might occasionally shake a fist at "the pleasure police at *October*," but otherwise he never offers specific names of authors or intellectual movements in his diatribes. He instead phrases the problem abstractly. "We all have two conversations about art," Saltz writes in a recent article about painting, "the public one about stratagems, and the private one about necessities. The former is about authority; the later, experimentation."<sup>2</sup> Theory here stands as the diametric opposite of practice, and its evil doesn't even need actual books or arguments to substantiate itself. It's been instituted not as a content but as a form, the dark half of a binary structure. In this twisted caricature, theory has become the code word for art as a profession, a matter of talking the talk so as to advance a career

and impress the boss, while practice represents what artists do when they turn away from that profession, shut themselves up in the lonely studio, and devote their attention to object-making solely for its own sake. Such a bias draws on a long history, extending perhaps as far back as Duchamp's "dumb as a painter" epithet. When '60s artists like Allan Kaprow and Dan Flavin broke decisively with painting, they also ridiculed studio-bound practice in general. Painting's comeback in the '80s did nothing to ease the tension. Craig Owens warned of a "widespread backlash against the '60s counterculture" manifested in the "massive retreat to the studio... where the artist, screened from public view, produces work in intense privacy." Recently Libby Lumpkin has taken a more Saltzian view, applauding how "by the late '80s works asserting their materiality had trickled into galleries on the coasts, and now, everywhere you look, there are objects that come in substances, colors, shapes, and sizes that matter. The near 30-year

hegemony of art constructed solely as a liberal art — as an art of the mind — has come to an end."<sup>3</sup> What's telling about this short history is that all these arguments — Flavin's in the '60s, Owens' in the '80s, Lumpkin's in the '90s — target not painting and the studio so much as art schools. Indeed, where else do you find such a clean splitting apart of the private studio and public discussion? As Howard Singerman has argued, the mission of art schools is founded on a contradiction: while university instruction and learning depend upon the verbalization of knowledge, no professor would ever so defile art by proposing that it can be reduced to a set of teachable formulas.<sup>4</sup> The art curriculum is thus cleaved between group interaction and the production of language on the one hand — the public position-taking of critiques, visiting-artist talks, and seminars, all of which accord well with the school's institutional authority — and private, individual studio time on the other, during which students



turn away from the group to face, instead, their work. During the '70s it was perhaps alternative media and sites that helped spread art practice beyond the studio and its traditional materials. By the '80s the larger context into which practice was integrated was an expanded field of critical methodologies, discourses, and histories — that is, the critical theory of the university humanities departments. Through all this, the studio has been penetrated and dispersed, and yet today, with theory as seemingly moribund as the notion of medium-specificity, the critique class suddenly feels just as impoverished. Without the aid of either theory or medium, artists are all the more

thrown back on themselves. Little wonder that so much artwork over the past decade — whether paintings, video projections, color photographs, or installations — is made large, as if scaled to the art world's infrastructure of kunsthallen and impersonal showrooms, and yet at the same time tries to draw attention away from the monumental whole and toward the little idiosyncratic tick or obsessive detail, the indiscretion or doodle in the corner, things that feel random, fugitive, and intimate. Even titles such as 'artist' or 'painter' are avoided, as individuals simultaneously fulfill the roles of artist, curator, collector, designer, critic, etc., without overly identifying with any one. Perhaps art schools have also

contributed to this trend — graduation day makes the adoption of the title 'artist' absurdly punctual and legalistic. Modernism had offered many narratives about claiming the identity of the artist; whether T.S. Eliot's individual and tradition, or Harold Rosenberg's actor and act, or Michael Fried's painter and painting, the story was always about a dramatic and existential conversion of the mere individual into a more archetypal identity and role. The bestowal of the art degree recasts that conversion as utterly ironic, with the title 'artist' now turned into a ready-made. Perhaps it's time to question the almost 40 years of total agreement that the studio and painting should be defined in opposition to theory.

What this obscures are alternative ways that theory and practice have been related in the past, and may again be related in the future. Rosenberg treated the theory-practice problem from the viewpoint of Marxist debates over whether to entrust revolution in the top-down dictating of party theorists or in the bottom-up fervor spontaneously aroused in the proletariat. Other modernists viewed the problem on the level of the individual; they warned of a "dissociation of sensibility" exacerbated in modern society by professionalism and over-specialization, which rendered people incapable of amalgamating experience, of feeling thoughts and thinking through feelings. Such worries certainly plagued Clement Greenberg: "Instead of completing yourself by work," he sighed as early as 1942, "you mutilate yourself."<sup>5</sup>

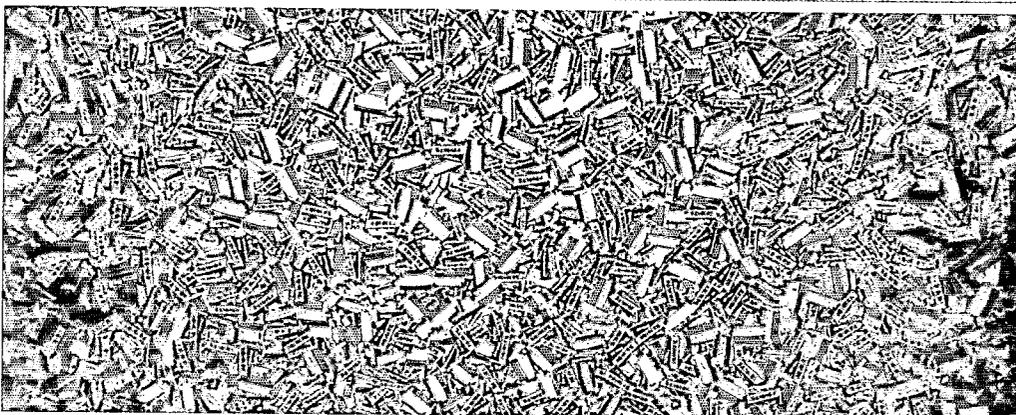
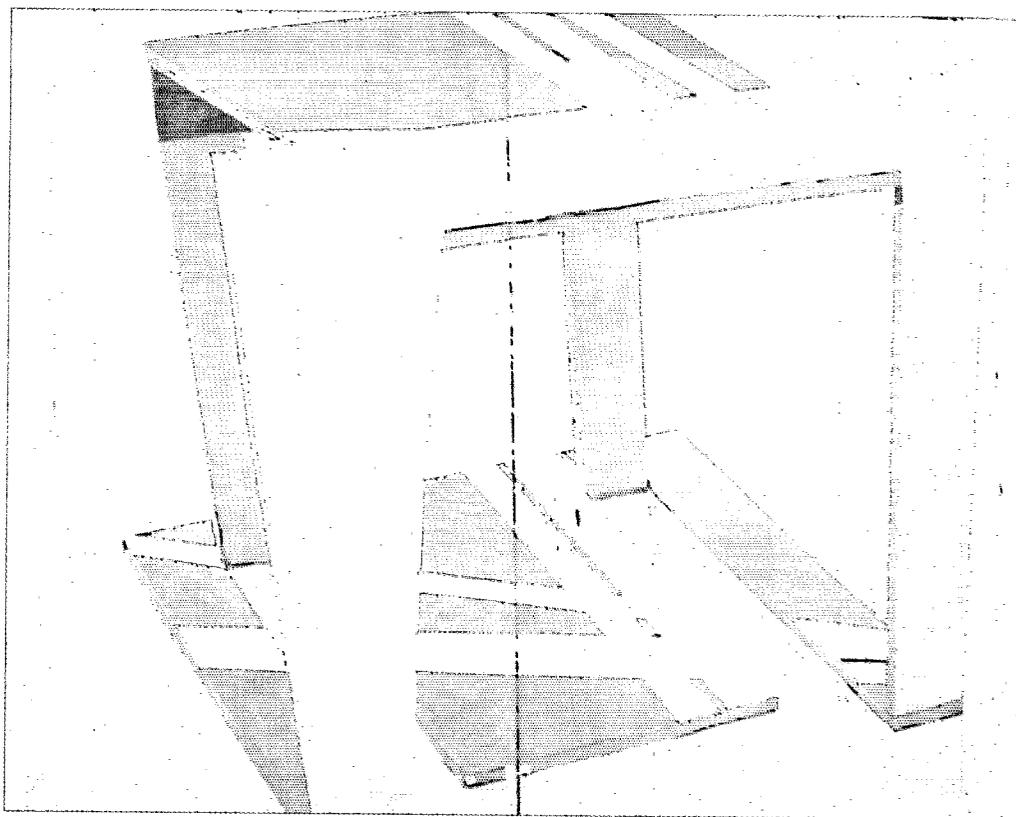
It may well be a utopian idea, and very modernist, but it still weighs heavily on artists — the idea of bringing theory and practice together. Modern society grudgingly cedes to artists the privilege of working in as humane a manner as this society will allow. What privileges artists is not some innate gift with which they were born. The work done by artists is privileged and humane because artists retain a larger degree of responsibility in the decision making (for which the downside is usually zero monetary compensation and thus subhuman living conditions). The artist is better able to work as a whole person, rather than as a specialized cog in a machine, working under a boss and for the bottom line.

Nothing makes painters in their studios inherently less capable of working in this way. The problem for studio painters lies in not allowing their form of labor to become mystified, to appear separated off by divine dispensation. But how many interesting painters today really do forswear post-studio considerations? Doesn't Laura Owens, for example, make almost all her paintings with the specific conditions of their exhibition in mind? Indeed, Owens's work places so much emphasis on the specifics of exhibition space — walls, doorways, windows, and other architectural thresholds — that it's hard not to compare her work to that of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an exemplary post-studio artist.

Moreover, it's hard to name two other recent artists whose work so capaciously takes in and synthesizes disparate historical precedents, yet does so without the results looking fragmented, schizophrenic, 'postmodern.' It's equally hard to suggest two artists whose work is so convivial and soliciting of an audience. Doesn't the fact that Gonzalez-Torres's work possesses only a front side, for example — even his candy piles and poster stacks — align his practice in an important way with painting? The fact that such a discussion seems impossible today — that the work of Gonzalez-Torres is considered antithetical to painting or, conversely, that it's better to talk about Laura Owens in terms of idiosyncratic doodling — this is a measure of how deeply entrenched and dysfunctional these divisions have become.

Today's theory-practice split is largely a problem of professionalism, of over-specialization. Saltz's holy crusade against theory makes more sense if seen as artworld office politics; what he aggrandizes with the intimidating label 'theory' is really just other competing art writers who happen to work not as beat critics for general interest newspapers but as art history professors. For professional reasons, professors write academically; they can't survive let alone advance in their departments unless they extend the discourse that makes up the official canon of art history. This kind of writing is largely backward-looking, preoccupied with historical precedents; that's what makes it somewhat at odds with the future-oriented speculations — what Saltz rightly calls the "experimentation" — that dominates artistic practice. And yet criticism written by art historians is far more flattering than Saltz's to art school seminars. That then leaves the studio as Saltz's natural ally, where he too will privilege making over talking, pledging to face the work rather than turn his back on it.

All this bickering between theory and practice only perpetuates the system. An apparent 'studio' art — an art of materiality, say, of mute, purely sensate craft objects — is precisely a schooled art. It reiterates and entrenches the art



MANU MUNIATEGIANDIKOETXEA, I.Z. por de trás, 2003. Acrylic on wood, 310 x 366 cm. Courtesy of Sala Rekalde, Bilbao; FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES, Untitled (Welcome Back Heroes), 1991. Approximately 400 pounds of Bazooka bubble gum, dimensions variable. Opposite: LAURA OWENS, Untitled, 2004. Oil and acrylic on linen, 335 x 282 cm. Courtesy of Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

school's divisions between making and talking. The same goes for an art of personal idiosyncrasy. Just look at the recent Phaidon book on painting, *Vitamin P*. No generalizations or theories rain on its parade; each artist is instead represented as absolutely unique, an irreducible talent who just so happens to use paint. The result: a phone book of names in alphabetical order, as mechanical and flavorless as the graduation-day procession. The next theory to come along, whatever it is, will hopefully matter to artists less because of its prior adoption by

academia than by its validation within practice, whether that practice is studio or post-studio. Only by bringing together theory and practice can artists even hope to change such a system, to break from its routines. In fact, by possessing both, art can set its sights on things beyond the art system; it can return its ambitions to proper heights. Namely, it again might take aim at changing the world. ■

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#### Notes

1. I'm indebted to Annika Marie, my co-teacher, who provided many of the themes and ideas for this essay.
2. Jerry Saltz, "Painting à la Mode," *Village Voice* (December 4 - 10, 2002).
3. Craig Owens, "Back to the Studio," *Art in America* 70, no. 1 (January 1982): 100-01; Libby Lumpkin, *Deep Design* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press), 111.
4. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
5. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 1*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 117.

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