

ARTFORUM



View of "Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age," 2015–16. Foreground, from left: Kerry James Marshall, *Buy Black*, 2012; Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 2011; Wade Guyton, *Untitled*, 2007. Background, from left: Christopher Wool, *Kidnapped*, 1994; works by Josh Smith, 2007–13. Photo: Stephan Wyckoff.

"Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age"

MUSEUM BRANDHORST

NOT SO LONG AGO, lots of perfectly intelligent folks believed that the art of painting was vanishing before our eyes, its last allegiants locked in a death dance with the specifics of the medium. Today, the art form seems very much alive. Painting remains the coin of the realm of art (this much seems inarguable), though whether this empirical truth guarantees its vitality is a separate matter. So how, then, does painting live on in the culture of the proliferating image, and what in the World Wide Web does it all mean?

Enter "Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age." The title refers to Web 2.0, that popular catchphrase for the rapid rise of dynamic content and social media in the Internet of the early 2000s, and offers a few clues as to how the exhibition approaches its subject: as a rejiggered version of its former self, equal to today's data overload. If the mandate of the project as a whole, to quote the jointly authored catalogue introduction, is "to locate the challenges to painting posed by what Guy Debord called the society of the spectacle," and, by implication, to enumerate and display the painterly responses to these challenges from the 1960s on, the

question, we quickly see, is one not just of painting's fate, or of the mutations that have allowed it to survive in the present, but of our own: How are we to understand the "expressive" brushstroke when our subjectivities inevitably inhere in a thousand daily touches of the screen?

The survey—curated by Achim Hochdörfer, director of the Museum Brandhorst; Manuela Ammer, curator at the Museum Moderna Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien in Vienna (where the exhibition opens June 4); and scholar and critic David Joselit—comprises three primary constellations of artworks, each roughly occupying its own floor: "Gesture and Spectacle," "Eccentric Figuration," and "Social Networks." But there are lesser asterisms as well: "Mediated Gestures," "Expression as Pose," "Affective Gestures," "Prosthetic Bodies," "Questionable Subjects," "Figures of Sentimentality," "Capitalist Realism," "Fantasy of Cologne" (I love this last one!). The list goes on; indeed, roaming through this ambitious, at times unhinged, but decidedly tonic attempt to come to terms with painting in our current moment, I will admit to feeling a bit like a child staring up at the sky on a clear summer night. So incommensurable in number and kind are the prospects on painting today that one falls backward into the grass with a sigh, defeated of ever making sense of it all.

I am being disingenuous. With a little squinting, the contours of a map emerge. "Painting 2.0" (a "palimpsest," its organizers warn us) is a great deal more than one of those casual, dime-a-dozen afterlife-of-painting affairs the marketplace cyclically (and cynically) stages to reassure itself that the cash cow of the fine arts industry is still alive and making milk. If anything, "Painting 2.0" is three (no, better, a dozen!) shows in one, each a sizable cut above the usual gruel. Indeed, I found myself alternately damning the curators for a lack of nerve in choosing from among the steaming plates and applauding them for insisting on the complexity of the field: The exhibition is a necessary, indeed courageous attempt to chart the considerable terrain to which it lays claim; at times it is a dire one. "Painting 2.0" all but insists it be taken as a definitive statement, as *the* contemporary painting survey of record.

So where to begin? "Painting 2.0" aims not only to celebrate painting's relevance in our networked present but to retell the story of the art since the 1960s; the supposition is that painting's current condition was already incipient in the immediate aftermath of Abstract Expressionism, a period synonymous with the postwar burgeoning of consumer culture and the accompanying rise of new technologies. Each of the three curators has a go at the dual mandate in a catalogue essay keyed to one of the show's main sections, while a half dozen shorter pieces flesh out the show's themes. Hochdörfer sets the genealogy in motion. His long-standing interest in the "transition period" between Abstract Expressionism, Pop, and Minimalism (Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and their European cognates) is his point of departure. Ammer, riffing on Lucy R. Lippard's 1966 exhibition "Eccentric Abstraction," admits the human figure into the general recounting. Finally, Joselit, yoking these twin tributaries, proposes a taxonomy of painting approaches undergirding a paradigm he develops with respect to the art of the present. Guest contributions include Wolfram Pichler's look at the art history of the term *expression* (which figures in the exhibition's subtitle) and the uses and abuses of that designation. His motive, we are told, is to reclaim the notion typically demonized in progressive contemporary contexts such as this one: that there is nothing wrong with the idea of expressionism, just with our parochial abuses of the term! In the sleeper contribution to the catalogue, Kerstin Stakemeier proclaims that "painting under the aegis of the network exhibits a kind of economic medium specificity" (I like this!), while John Kelsey, subtly subversive as ever, offers "The Sext Life of Painting." Writing of apps like Instagram, he asks: "Isn't it just at such points of collapse and confusion where art most wants to get busy?"—a reminder (at least to this reader) that the mega painting survey is inevitably a self-fulfilling prophecy when it comes to art's location today. If I pay this much attention to the catalogue, it is not just because it is a serious effort and deserves to be read, but because this show of nearly three hundred works by more than one hundred artists does not really fly without it.

The "2.0" frame, suffice to say, is capacious: Here, painting's relationship to information is (sensibly) *not* restricted to art that is directly shaped by new technologies at the level of making, or even to work that internalizes the social ramifications of our technologization—Andy Warhol is the prime example of the latter, and he is an inevitable linchpin in the account. Rather, the frame is widened to include painting that purportedly resists said conditions by the mere fact of its being painting. The body, the human hand, the material mark—in short, the *prima materia* of painting in this age or any other—are understood here not only as implicit rebuttals to today's culture of the networked image but as privileged vehicles by which to figure it. With a frame this pliable, anything can be made to fit, and indeed everything has been made to—well, *almost* everything.

So what is in? Or, better, given the range on offer here, what is not? In terms of the larger historical arc beginning in the '60s, Minimalism is out. Three sets of busy revisionist hands on deck, and Minimalism remains a monolith, Brice Marden's handmade paintings and Donald Judd's hands-off objects interchangeable. The real foe here is medium specificity, a monster that looms rather scarier in the groves of academia than in the admittedly no less unreal world of art. There is an Oedipal struggle (if a polite one) being waged, and the father figure is Yve-Alain Bois, one of the catalogue's most footnoted authorities. I am remembering his call for painting to kill itself again—and again (but better!)—if it is to live on.

Absent, too, are the big guns of Pop—save for Warhol, of course. This is a radical edit of the '60s, if one that will make sense by the time we've made it through the exhibition. But as we begin our long journey under Hochdörfer's lead rubric for his catalogue essay, "How the World Came In," a riff on Leo Steinberg's famous comment about Rauschenberg, the omission is tougher to parse. I suppose the Pop masters are neither "gestural" nor "eccentric" (to subject them to the exhibition's simultaneous grids), but then what happened to Martial Raysse, a Pop eccentric to the core?

Well, this quickly gets niggling. The show is full of great art and suggestive genealogies. The proceedings open with Martin Kippenberger's *Heavy Burschi* (Heavy Guy), 1989/1990, in which a makeshift dumpster brimming with destroyed canvases sits just beyond a salon-style hang of photographic doubles of the vandalized artworks. Kippenberger may be the artist who, second only to Warhol's impossible example, best illustrates the show's intertwined mandates. As we enter the first gallery, we discover in *Heavy Burschi* a version of the painterly gesture that is decidedly on the move, routed here through a network of human relationships and mechanical mediations. (Kippenberger's then assistant Merlin Carpenter created the trashed paintings in his mentor's style.) Of course, Kippenberger's "expressionistically inspired analysis of the social dynamics of creative processes" (the words are Hochdörfer's) was picked up by a posse of disciples: not just Carpenter but Stephan Dilleuth, Cosima von Bonin, Heimo Zobernig, Stephen Prina, and, last but not least, the mercurial antipainter Michael Krebber (all but Dilleuth show up in this exhibition). From there, we jump back a quarter century with a sampling of work from the postwar transition period. Work from this side of the pond, in which the painterly gesture still persisted, though in manifest tension with an onslaught of mass-mediated imagery, is coupled with that of Mario Schifano in the room following Kippenberger. Fast on their heels comes the Nouveau Réaliste *décollage* of Mimmo Rotella, Raymond Hains, and Jacques Villeglé, while the likes of Niki de Saint Phalle, Yves Klein, and Piero Manzoni put the "commodified picture" through its performative paces. From there, painting, by now fully instrumentalized, makes a political detour: "Protest Painting" brings together Daniel Buren, Günter Brus, Jörg Immendorff, Adrian Piper (I was happy to remember her WET PAINT placard), Joseph Beuys (with his 1972 protest sign reading DÜRER, ICH FÜHRE PERSÖNLICH BAADER + MEINHOF DURCH DIE DOKUMENTA V [Dürer, I Will Personally Guide Baader + Meinhof Through Documenta V]), Glenn Ligon (*Untitled [I Am a Man]*, 1988), and Jacqueline Humphries, with her impossibly cynical, impossibly chic suite of painterly protest signs (all *Untitled*, 2008). Louise Fishman's series of "Angry Women" paintings from 1973 (*Angry Joan*, *Angry Lynne*, etc.) is the recherché trump card here, in a show that, incidentally, specializes in them. Then it's on to "Expression as Pose" (there is a missing footnote to Alison Gingeras for her work on this theme!): Ashley Bickerton (a logo self-portrait), Albert Oehlen (from his neo-expressionist or, better, mock neo-expressionist phase), Keith Haring (a subway drawing), and John Miller (a mannequin in a shit suit), plus Jean-Michel Basquiat, Martin Wong, Mike Kelley, and finally Christopher Wool, Cady Noland, and Steven Parrino, who, with Wool, Humphries, and Michel Majerus, share what is surely the most visually dramatic room in the show, all black-and-white and rather punk. "Gesture and Spectacle" concludes with a constellation titled "Hacking the Code," which corrals Oehlen (now of the wholly technologized gesture), Majerus, Charline von Heyl, Kerry James Marshall, Monika Baer, Isa Genzken, Josh Smith, Laura Owens—plus Zobernig's T-shirted mannequin (I mean painting!) emblazoned with the word SALE. If Kelley Walker's toothpaste tour de force kicks off the proceedings, a Wade Guyton "X" from 2007 rounds them out, its evocation of a hard-won battle with an ink-jet printer making a more startling statement about the human agent and how it lives under the technologized image than an army of loaded brushes. I'm exhausted just typing the names.

But on to the "Social Networks" section, where the taxonomy of painterly types is more abstract but also more compelling. With medium specificity again the foil, we learn in the catalogue's introduction that one way in which twenty-first century painting "has grown interactive" is by incorporating "a broad range of 'alien' objects, such as readymades, advertisement, film, video, and performance, into its procedures." At the same time,

“artists began to recuperate and reformat—often through mechanical means—modernist forms.” “Using the history of art as a fully available archive,” the argument continues, “has emerged as a mode of generating ‘user-based content.’” Finally, “interactivity”—and this gets us to social networks—“has also emerged as an embrace of performance, in and around the objects and discourse of painting.”

The word *performance* flies by too quickly here. This suggestive line of thinking was first taken up by Joselit in his 2009 essay “Painting Beside Itself.” The nifty pun of a title, suggesting that the painting at issue is at once undone, hysterical, and next to itself in a spatial sense (metaphorically—and sometimes literally), makes the point that painting today, fully conscious of itself with respect to modernist convention, can be seen to “perform” (or in some other sense overtly materialize) its place in the larger social and economic networks in which all images necessarily circulate. Warhol’s example remains ground zero here. The model the Pop artist elaborated—a complex social and economic network, encompassing downtown demimondes, uptown café society, print, television, and publishing, the whole revolving around the hub of his painting factory—remains the most vivid embodiment of Joselit’s schema. The paintings (and this is, of course, central here) punctuate the network and ensure the status of the larger machine as art.

In his catalogue essay, “Reassembling Painting,” Joselit elaborates and extends the “Painting Beside Itself” model, upping the stakes by situating observations initially grounded in the work of a handful of current artists in a larger art-historical scenario. His ruminations amount to a retelling of the whole modern art narrative, collaring the currents that flow through the two previous sections and filling out the backstory for the “Social Networks” paradigm. Take, for instance, his discussion of the painterly brushstroke—he refers to it as the “subjectobject”—which dialogues suggestively with the “Gesture and Spectacle” floor and Hochdörfer’s commentary on it in his catalogue essay. In Joselit’s taxonomy, the subjectobject is elevated to a modernist master trope on equal footing with the readymade, collage, and monochrome, with these four poles shown to demarcate the field of possibility for painting in the present moment. The mapping gets a bit fastidious here, with numbers and letters assigned to cross-pollinating tendencies in an algebra that puts Rosalind Krauss to shame. (Rauschenberg is a P.1/P.2/T.1/T.2, in case you were wondering, which means, to cut to the chase, that he rules!) The subjectobject—the “transitive,” pure painterly urge that would reach its apogee, as per standard-issue art history, in the drips of Jackson Pollock—is understood to have reemerged in the decades this survey charts with renewed vitality. I don’t doubt the prevalence of such artistic *cris de corps* in our own time. One can well understand the drive to move paint around, and even appreciate that the mere act of doing so might, in its bodily immediacy, count as a self-affirming activity in our virtual present. But I wonder how often this recipe in its uninflected version gives rise to artmaking equal to our networked condition. It bears noting that, more often than not, when the subjectobject appears in these proceedings, it appears precisely “beside itself,” as both a painterly gesture and a cipher of the same. It’s instructive to discover the processed gorgeousness of David Reed’s idealized, ossified stroke behind Wool or Krebber or Owens, or, for that matter, Walker’s toothpaste swirls, but Joan Snyder’s presence in this prehistory is, to my mind, something of a stretch, as is Joan Mitchell’s or, to cite a sainted figure safely above the fray, Eva Hesse’s. To include Hesse’s early paintings, which I never thought especially good, seems a betrayal of her achievement, if a predictable (indeed entirely fashionable) one. Only Mary Heilmann, in this stretch of the story (as told by Hochdörfer in his text and by Ammer in the hang of her “Eccentric Figuration” section), has put enough distance between her art and the twin peaks of those earlier movements to work for me here without special pleading. Is Mitchell an artistic godmother to Jutta Koether? It seems a bit apples and oranges. Might the absent Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein—one of his reified brushstrokes—have, in the end, built a better bridge to the meta-expressive category Pichler wishes to add to his inventory of the term’s historical uses?

But back to the “Social Networks” section, the pay dirt where this show is concerned. The schema works beautifully for the Capitalist Realists, in a room following the first capsule, “Warhol’s Factory,” and equally well in “Fantasy of Cologne” (after the painting by Carpenter), a room in which painting, persona, and social mystique are shown to fold back into the art itself. The protagonists of this “scene” are well known, and the usual suspects feature, but I was happy to see Krebber and Koether appearing here for a second time. While my sense of the utility of Warhol’s “social network” as a point of access for a broad range of subsequent artmaking is remarkably close to Joselit’s, I was slow to understand the import of Koether’s good bad paintings vis-a-vis this model. Here, I was made to remember a studio visit of twenty-plus years ago, at which I recall being nonplussed by what looked to be a German Expressionist canvas spread out on the floor before me, not realizing that the art was precisely everywhere else in the room (including in the dynamics of a studio visit with a newly anointed art-

world dignitary—me!). “Appropriation and Image Circulation” also hangs together as a section, corralling conceptual dissections of the institution of painting by the likes of Prina and [Sherrie Levine](#) and showing that they are not such distant kin to Guyton\Walker, whose *Untitled*, 2009, a sprightly, IKEA-clean dispersion of pure product, steals the show in the main gallery, or to [Reena Spaulings](#), whose racks of art postcards positioned on the stairwell landing feature portraits of a cast of recognizable art dealers. Spaulings is at once an actual gallery and a performative conceit, a shape-shifting network of fictions and persons that throws the art machine—its dependencies, mystifications, reciprocal validations, and affiliations—into strange-making relief.

Matters start to get murky for me only when the social network is extended to include artistic collectives in the normative sense. The problem is not with politically motivated social collectivity per se, or with such initiatives in the vicinity of art. The question here has to do with whether the network becomes part and parcel of the art itself, rather than a separate vehicle, however effective (and laudable), in enabling the circulation of objects ostensibly artistically conventional in their self-understanding. This would be the case with the room titled “A.I.R.—A Feminist Network,” wherein the offerings consist of art objects in a more or less normative array of styles of the '70s, presided over by a large portrait of the group by [Sylvia Sleigh](#). This is art that is perfectly worthy on its own terms, but not constitutive of the new artistic model teased out in this section. I worry that my distinction will come off as stingy (if not downright sexist), but I just don't feel that, in this case, the social network was the *art*; it was, rather, an effective vehicle for combating the system and getting the art out into the world. I was tantalized when I happened on the A.I.R. cell in this unexpected context, but I cannot help but feel that the curators outsmarted themselves, compromising a model with enormous traction in the present with a well-intended art-historical red herring.

But where, I wanted to know, was [John Armleder](#), in a show of networkers with room enough for a hundred-plus artists? He not only annually presides over a demi-booth at Art Basel, an art-fair booth “beside itself,” if you will, but typically displays his paintings—of generic polka dots or Poonsesque drips—as found objects in combination with other found objects (say, a piece of upholstered midcentury furniture). And what happened to [Richard Prince](#), to my mind a next-to-perfect match with the “Social Network” paradigm? I know I'm not going to make many friends by mounting a defense of Prince just now, the artist having visited a triple whammy on himself several years back with a distracting gallery move, a museum retrospective in which he pointedly mainstreamed himself, and a body of work—or several—that gave “getting away with it” (a favored trope of the artist) a bad name precisely by failing to do so. But Prince's relationship to painting within a managed network that features not only blue-chip galleries but off-site actions, including shops both public and less so, a remote house museum with a down-market spin, and a tireless publication machine epitomizes the contemporary condition of artist-networker as diagnosed by Joselit. And let's not forget those come-hither “Nurse” paintings, which are about as beside themselves as paintings get, or, for that matter, his recent Instagram paintings. And what, too, of [Jeff Koons](#), and also [Takashi Murakami](#), of the networked art-life universes punctuated by paintings? Both would seem a tidy match, especially where Warhol is the presiding paterfamilias. I'm not suggesting that simply because the work of a given artist fits the model under examination that it must be included. But some decisions here feel capricious, particularly in a show inclusive enough to suggest the encyclopedic. Admittedly, I make room in my scheme of things for art that is close to the symptom, that is rub-your-nose-in-it down and dirty, but I wonder whether, my own enthusiasms aside, I am not picking up a whiff of academic politesse here behind discriminations that I fear chip away at this exhibition's considerable authority as a period statement.

Between the bookends of the first and final sections comes a third and equally compendious effort, “Eccentric Figuration.” Recalling Lippard's aforementioned landmark “Eccentric Abstraction,” an effort the curators understand as having been at once prescient and inhibited, still too much under the sway of then dominant abstraction to fully admit the figurative impulse, this section returns Lippard's conceit to the drawing board. The curators' mandate—to admit the full weight of the bodily repressed in both its abstract and figurative incarnations—yields vivid results, and yet, in the final analysis, I might have sacrificed the added dimension this chapter supplies for a more streamlined whole. What interests me most about the models in play throughout “Painting 2.0” are their ramifications for contemporary artmaking. So while Ammer's impulse to, in her own words, bring “together various aesthetic manifestations of what might characterize the bodily in painting under the influence of media and spectacle” yields dividends for the work of artists I esteem and who otherwise might not have made the cut (say, [Carroll Dunham](#) and [Nicole Eisenman](#)), the issue here for me becomes one of warring paradigms rather than mutually enriching ones. For instance, I would have preferred to discover [David](#)

Hammons's draped tarpaulin (*Untitled*, 2012) in the "Social Networks" section, where its status as a node in the social and economic circulation performed by his practice might have taken center stage, as opposed to through the lens of "Eccentric Figuration," where, as a painterly embodiment, the work comes off as somewhat anemic. I have the same reservation when it comes to Kai Althoff's positioning. At least as significant as this mercurial artist's production of exquisitely wrought easel-size paintings is the fact that he persists in exhibiting them within more or less elaborate mise-en-scènes. Althoff wants to keep his paintings moving, to experience them within the vertiginous operations (musical, theatrical, collaborative) he seems to feel are indivisible from the pictures' magic—and its contemporaneity. I'm making this up, but one can all but hear the late-night curatorial bartering: *If "Gesture and Spectacle" gets Kippenberger, then "Social Networks" must have Warhol!*

Is "2.0" an exhibition or a book, a compendium or a show? One hesitates to look a gift horse in the mouth, given the composite worth of the proceedings. Still, while I'm glad I saw Ammer's show within a show, I can't help but fantasize a "Painting 2.0" that might have done less but done it more indelibly. How about this? Roll section one into section three, cherry-pick the relevant highlights from section two, and call the pruned results "Painting Beside Itself"! Might the outcome have made for a more resounding statement, a bolder bid at locating a painting not only of our time but equal to it?