

11th Inter-Youth International Painting Exhibition. *Topic Experiment • Painting—*
Report from the Artists' Studio

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Lines & blossoming flowers. Experiment & painting

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Lines turn into evil spirited mountains¹
And elegant voracious hyenas
Circumscribe gardens full of blossoming flowers
Divide forests from shallow ponds
Structure open vast planes
And brake through even skies.

In recent years I have been engaged in many collaborative and performative painting experiments with colleagues and students. Often, we covered a whole space with water and tear-resistant paper, filled baskets and little pots with colour, used brooms, brushes, and wooden sticks to paint and enact whatever experimental ideas we came up with. Even though different intentions underlay these various painting sessions, they also always served as space for *thinking* with lines and colours, space to open up one's mind from pre-conceived narrations and ways of working — creating playful, experimental thinking spaces.

When invited to write a text on experiment and painting, I initially intended to reflect on how these kind of painterly approaches interlink with research processes similar to laboratory work in the fields of science. But my thoughts took a different turn when I sat

¹ In: Dominique Lämmli (2004). The carpet of life. In: How drawing change the world, edited by Gordon Shrigley. London

down to write. In the past few years I have been researching art in global contexts, looking into how practitioners of various traditional traits are positioning themselves within the ongoing paradigmatic shifts of how art is understood, practised, and discussed. The initial reason to engage in these collaborative and practice-based research activities was rooted in my painting experiences and my dissatisfaction with existing discourses on painting. Addressing the topic in a more general way, I was studying the dynamics pressurizing existing art notions, of which painting is a subsection. This brought me to reflecting on what we, in our FOA-FLUX research,² call Art in Action and *artists working reality*.

Embarking with writing this text about experiment and painting with that backpack on me, I became aware that one of the central aspects I enjoy most about painting is being able to think with or in painting. This is what I tried to provide and strengthen within the mentioned collaborative painting sessions. Therefore, I decided to focus on that topic — on *painting as thinking*. What follows is more a loose collection of thoughts and references. It is far from being a concise exposition. Rather it is laying several “ropes,” sometimes woven together, sometimes loosely overlapping. I see it as a starting point for further discussion and a testing ground for ideas.

WHAT DO WE SEE?

A painting or a drawing is easily recognised as such. But what do we see? Even though there might be no question whether or not it is a painting, what viewers see and understand may differ considerably based on their particular experiences and knowledge contexts. Complexity increases when one takes into account the various viewer, historical, or practitioner perspectives, so on and so forth. The latter, the painters or drafts*wo*men exchanging their practice-based work is probably one of the most underexposed areas of artistic discussion — at least in my European contemporary art context. The reason is not that painters do not know what to say, or have no intentions to articulate their interests, thoughts, and motivations. It is rather the highly regulated discussion dynamics, organised credibility, legitimacy, and the right to speak and be heard that have led to the neglect of practice-based discussions. Nevertheless, today we have strong reasons to believe that these already problematised dynamics will

² foa-flux.net

change in due course. I have written elsewhere about the state of current art discourses.³ Let me briefly reiterate some central aspects: The paradigmatic shift in art discourse and the rapidly expanding range of art practice is understood as an effect of the ongoing accelerated globalisation processes. We are currently witnessing profound shifts in how art is understood, discussed, and practised. The effects of these shifts create an antagonistic image when art practice and art discourse are considered. Whereas art discourse has been driven into a state of disarray, art practice has rapidly expanded its importance, capacity, and possibilities. For example, art practice does now co-inhabit an increasing number of other disciplinary and social domains. Accordingly, art may have reached a rarely seen significance (Khan 2009). On the other hand, the much-lamented fuzziness and imprecision of art discourse is closely linked with the problematisation of the underlying notions of art (October 2009; Field Notes 01, 2012).

NO CONTEXTLESS ART

Practice-based considerations will add to these many newly established thought contexts. Examining the discursive space on painting we witness a multitude of intentions, motivations, work styles, thought and practice traditions that are becoming apparent. As a result, it seems predestined and inescapable for misunderstandings to arise when talking about painting. More often than not, it tends to get forgotten that there is “no contextless art and there are no concepts without preliminary assumptions.” This may be neglected when working within a closed peer group setting where „prevailing ideas meet general approval or mirror seemingly undisputed power relations.“ (Lämmli 2012)

CANONICAL ART NOTIONS

Today we are aware of many coexisting canonical art notions and traditions and hybridisation tendencies. This awareness puts existing canons under the pressure to change. In “Coda: Canons and Contemporaneity,” the art historian Terry Smith discusses these paradigmatic changes in relation to the so-called Classical art history of Euro-American traits. Smith describes the crisis of art history as a result of a particular

³ Dominique Lämmli (2014) Art in Action. Make people Think! Reflections on Current Developments in Art. Foa-flux.net/texts

³ Ibid.

“Modernist Canon”: a string of modernist masters who were “nominated by Greenberg and earlier formalists such as Roger Fry,” who in turn “became canonical” themselves. Crucially, this narrative “explicitly rejected many other justly celebrated artists, and it excluded entirely most of the major and persistent tendencies of twentieth-century art, especially those that turned on personal, social, or political engagement of some sort” (Smith 2007: 316). This canonical usage, and the universal claim of a particular thought tradition, have both been problematised.⁴ Therefore, the multiple talking, the many discourses on art and painting, grounded in various thought traditions, is a fact that we have to cope with and which is pressuring us to re-think our preliminary assumptions.

AESTHETIC REACTIONS

Moreover, it will be interesting to follow the further discussions on aesthetic reactions, especially on how they interlink with our understanding of art. This text started with drawing attention to the fact that a painting or a drawing is easily recognised as such. But, this doesn’t mean that we all see and understand the same way. Even though there might be no question whether or not it is a painting — let me restate this thought — what viewers see and understand may differ considerably, based on particular experiences and knowledge contexts. Neuroscientific literature seems to suggest that “across historical times aesthetic reactions appear remarkably stable.” (2011: 47) Even though we are looking at art of “cultures speaking languages and adhering to customs” different from our own — and we should add here: follow different art canons —, it nevertheless can “trigger {our} aesthetic reactions” (Zaidel 2011: 47). This takes place albeit “context is a critical clue to understanding the nature of art” (47). What is suggested here is that while aesthetic reactions could have a context-free, culture-free neuronal foundation”, context is always critical for the understanding of art. (Zaidel 2011).

THINKING AND COMMUNICATING

In other words, scientific data interpretation suggests that we can have aesthetical reactions regardless of how we understand what we look at. While this contextual-based complexity is taken for granted, we still have to acknowledge that little attention is paid to the variety of criteria clusters inspiring the painterly work itself. Teaching at a

⁴ Ibid.

European art university and exchanging with colleagues and students on painting drew my attention to the multitudinous and fundamentally different views on painting capabilities, even within a seemingly coherent art tradition. In the context of this text on experiment and painting, I would like to mention two of these different views. Let us summarise these views under the headings of *painting as thinking* and *painting as communication*. Whereas some painters are using the painting process as a way of relational thinking, others understand painting as producing visual statements, statements which make particular ideas and insights immediately accessible. Thinking is “the action of using one's mind to produce thoughts”⁵, while communication is “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols.”⁶ While both approaches, thinking and communicating, are interrelated in many ways, their focus fall on different “goal spaces.” “Goal spaces” is a term used by Stempfle and Badke-Schaub (2002: 475) when discussing the thinking processes of designers. What is my main aim or goal when painting? I have always been using my painterly practice as a thinking process, which I experience as being quite similar to my philosophical working processes, albeit the materials and methodologies are different. Thinking is what I do, the activity I engage in. The material and methodologies is what I use to carry out this activity. In painting, it is the colour, lines, shapes, paint, light, balloons, digital programmes and so on. In philosophy, it is the words, sentences, arguments, references and so on.

Neuroscientific research so far — according to Zaidel (2011) — discussed art as something that is produced principally for display to others, and has been focusing on the mutually receptive interaction between the producer and the viewer. This is understood as being grounded in emanating from an earlier biological level, rather than the symbolic and abstract. Another point of view links art “principally to a simultaneous development of sophisticated grammatical language, with the latter leading the way.” “This view implies that the hallmark of symbolic cognition in humans was triggered first and foremost by language development.” In this view, “according to the language-symbol argument, the primary brain alteration was linguistic cognition with art being secondary or a byproduct.” (50) This view could shed new light on how painting could also be understood as a way of thinking. This would challenge the dominant paradigm

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/thinking>

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communication>

that autonomy and aesthetics should be the key reference points of art production as formulated by Classical art history scholars.⁷ Whether the painting process has been focusing on thinking process or shaping communication, both approaches result in painterly products that provide the viewers visual stimulations immediately perceived as meaningful patterns. And both are open again for relational thinking: “it is through relational thinking that the onslaught of perceptions becomes recognizable or consciously accessible as some discernible object or idea (i.e., concepts)” (Alexandre 2016).

COMPLEXITY

The complexity of thinking in/through drawing, painting, and substances is underestimated in the so-called Classical art history. The well-known American art historian, critic, and former painter James Elkins is right to point out that few scholars have tried to answer the question “What is thinking in painting, as opposed to thinking about painting.” (1999: 3, 4) One of the rare exceptions is his comparative analysis of painting and alchemy. Other writings in Classical art history about painting mostly focus on “what paint represents (that is, the stories and subjects, and the artists and their patrons).” (3) Elkins chose to compare thinking in painting with alchemy, because he values alchemy as “the most developed language for thinking *in* substances and processes.” (4) The alchemists, -whose major epoch was found in Medieval times, worked with a complex spiritual worldview. At that time when scientific knowledge was yet to be developed, there was neither lists of chemical elements nor the concept of atoms and molecules. Alchemists believed that “everything around us contains a sort of universal spirit.”⁸ Stones for example were seen as the transitional state of a “development or refinement on their way to spiritual perfection.” Alchemy was understood as an art built upon experimentation, involving magic. How to transform one substance to another?

Among the similarities between alchemy and thinking in painting, according to Elkins, is that “one plus one is not necessarily two” (40), or in other words, the whole includes or presents more than the sum of all its elements. Both alchemy and painting depend on intuitional, candid, and unbiased approaches, the creative potential of which will be

⁷ See for example Georg W. Bertram (2005) *Kunst. Eine philosophische Einführung*, Stuttgart.

⁸ <http://www.livescience.com/39314-alchemy.html>

limited and “ruined by secure knowledge” (40). And importantly, “at the moment of making, the act is everything.” (73) Spending time and gaining experience through studio experimentation is the only way to reach an understanding of the potentials and “of the meanings of substances.” (101) Thus, Elkins understands the thinking in painting as taking place “outside of science and any sure and exact knowledge.” (193) In this sense, painting is used as a formative device in its own right. A device providing thinking scapes⁹ that generates another kind of knowledge, one that differs from what Elkins calls “sure and exact knowledge.”

Being a painter and a philosopher, I would even go as far as to say, based on my experience in both disciplines, that thinking goes beyond a mental activity but involves interaction with substances and process, such as the lines and colours in drawings and painting, the words and sentences in prose and poetry. At its best, philosophical and painterly thinking is informed by experience, knowledge, knowhow, and intuitive insights, and shaped into meaningful forms through working with the materials at hand.

The thinking in the painting process described by James Elkins corresponds with my art experience and tradition. It informs my individual and collaborative work, as well as my practice-based research and teaching. Working in and through substances might build on manifold motivations, assumptions, purposes, and aims. Mai-Mai Sze described painting as a universal language with many dialects, each one being “one among several ways.” (1959: 3) Comparative analysis of these different dialects, the different ways of thinking in painting will be challenging and highly insightful. Or maybe we should rather look at it as a way of thinking in various languages?

TALKING MUTIPLE

“Talking Multiple” is the title of a co-authored text with Annemarie Bucher and Sonam Choki. We wrote it in the context of our collaborative artists’ book production in 2015. Annemarie Bucher is my colleague with whom I co-run the research venture FOA-FLUX.¹⁰ We focus on art in global contexts, raise methodological questions and test alternative frameworks to talk about art in a practice-relevant manner. Sonam Choki is the head of Choki Traditional Art School, located in the outskirts of Thimphu, the capital

⁹ See Arjun Appadurai’s notion of scapes

¹⁰ foa-flux.net

of Bhutan. The painting training at CTAS has its philosophy based on Vajrayana Buddhism. The syllabus focuses on the importance of technique, training and discipline, on knowing by heart the correct representations, to train memory. Choki and I met for the first time during her visit to Switzerland in 2010. With her CTAS team, she demonstrated Buddhist painterly skill at the Rietberg Museum in Zurich during a Himalayan art exhibition. What brought us together was our mutual interest in locating and understanding our practices in the context of our respective art notions and ways of painting, informed by contemporary European art and Bhutanese Buddhist art traditions.¹¹ Since then our trans-traditional, practicebased, and experimental exchange on painting took place in collaborative co-productions. We explored our different notions, our common zones, and our different values, informed by contemporary and traditional art. Among other activities, in 2013 we experimented with collaborative wall-painting in Thimphu, and in 2015 we co-produced two artists' catalogues: *LUCKY SIGNS* and *4FRIENDS*, including paintings, collages, digital- and hand prints, and lithography. In these collaborative exchanges, our experimental paintings mapped our contemporary and traditional art thinking, and their respective enriching or hindering aspects.

COLLABORATIVE PAINTING

I have been using experimental collaborative painting for mapping, negotiating and as a research and teaching¹² tool in various other contexts. It is again deployed as a research tool for exchanging experiences and attitudes about collaborative processes in a two-week collaborative painting session with artist, performer, and community builder Him Lo in Connecting Spaces Hong Kong, entitled "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." This exchange was part of our research on the potential of art activating possibilities and art as agency in neighbourhood contexts.¹³

MULTIPLE REALITIES

Elsewhere, I have already been highlighting how unseen realities might be tapped through collaborative and experimental approaches. But unlike what Elkins described, I

¹¹ A detailed account of our co-productions is forthcoming in "Alternative Art and Anthropology," edited by Arnd Schneider, published by Bloomsbury: Annemarie Bucher, Sonam Choki, Dominique Lämml: *Tiger and Splashes. An action-oriented art and art education exchange between Bhutan and Switzerland.*

¹² For example at the Zurich University of the Arts, and at Srishti, Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore, India

¹³ "Activating Possibilities" edited by Dominique Lämml and Him Lo.

don't see a threat lurking from what he called "exact knowledge," but rather to understand it in a more integral way. Let me reiterate what I already articulated in the co-authored text with Him Lo: Most of us are aware of multiple realities, different viewpoints, experiences, living conditions, and power constellations. If we acknowledge this multiple-perception-frames, consequently, we should also acknowledge that we are surrounded by "unseen realities" that rule our lives" as Hal Zina Bennett (1993:4) put it. He pointed this out when talking about Zuni fetish and our different approaches to external and internal reality through scientific, spiritual, and religious methods. It is the way we approach, the way we see things, that brings about their meanings. My collaborative working experiences over the last years made me believe that collaborative art production provides a suitable way to tap these unseen, or fragmentary realities. Collaborative work opens up experiential spaces that hold conscious and unconscious information about and for everyone involved. Current neuro-scientific research shows that human senses take in a lot more data than what our conscious mind is capable of processing. Excess information is stored in the unconscious. Instantaneous insight and understanding of certain things or constellation are nurtured by conscious and unconscious information.

IMAGINARY VISIONS

Different viewpoints can be productive as well as challenging at times. We deal with them on an everyday bases. I have always had an active, direct, and problem-solving attitude towards life. This goes along with the awareness that our actions always take place on the grounds of preconceptions, assumptions, and stored knowledge, the last of which is the focus of my visual poetic works in my studio practice: establishing, building, reshaping grounds of stored knowledge. We are in need of such grounds on which we could later act upon. Sometimes they could be located by formulating imaginary visions. That is where my concerns lie in my visual poetic, transmedial image production. Throw a stone or a fishhook as far as possible towards the ideal scape, lift one's arm, try to figure out — by working with lines and colours — what that ideal scape could look like. At least, this is what I tried to when working on the series "In love with planets — thrown over the edge" from the mid 90's up to 2007. Those images had been produced through a continuous re-working and layering of hand-made and digital elements before the data was finally exposed on to Lambda chrome sheets.

IN LOVE WITH PLANETS — THROWN OVER THE EDGE

I started working on “In love with planets ...” with a simple question in mind: How to bring together seemingly incompatible elements? The question reflected what I experienced in everyday life. But instead of focusing on empiric constellations, I was drawn to find solutions and experiment on an abstract level, freed from clichés and prejudicial assumptions. It was at the time in Europe when home computers made their way to becoming a commodity, allowing me to integrate drawn, painted, photographed, digitally produced images into a painterly context as “substances” to work in, providing me with the thinking space I had been looking for. And at the time, we were far from being habituated to such integrative approaches.

WALK-IN PAINTING

Also in the 90's I experimented drawing with masking tapes, doubled up with additional coloured lines, placing them in space. I set up walk-in-paintings by tying three hundred balloons to the ground of an urban wasteland, used as an art space. With the effect of wind and rain, the balloons conglomerated into bunchy objects, slowly descending through the three-week period of the exhibition, finally marking the ground with their strings and round shapes. From the very beginning of my formative years as an artist, I have been using transmedia approaches to think and work on the issues I have in mind.

INSPIRATIONS

My reference points, the work I studied to develop my own artistic practice, were not part of one but several traditions. Among them were woodcut prints of the Ukiyo-e, the Japanese woodblock prints of the Edo period and the new sculptor movement¹⁴ in New York in the 60's and 70' (Richard Tuttle, Eva Hesse, Barry LeVa, Linda Benglis, etc.). I studied films and documentaries on how staged scenes influenced meaning (films by Harmony Korine, Ken Feingold, etc.). What seems far-fetched for some and miles away from painting, is not, if you have problem dispositions and you are looking for clues on how to solve them. Anything that offers corresponding insights should be welcomed. I studied how they were dealing with visuals, space, and meaning. How figurative and abstract approaches were brought together, how narration was used to manipulate readings, and how a transmedia approach could be used for drawing and painting.

¹⁴ Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, ed. (1990) *The New Sculpture 1965-75*. Whitney Museum of American Art New York

STEPPING STONES

Even though back then I had always considered my artistic work as a form of basic research, and somewhat not communicable within the given discursive art contexts, I nevertheless pay attention to the way it takes shape as an easily accessible, sometimes fairy-tale-like imagery narration. The role I have in mind for the final outcomes, to be appreciated by spectators and contemplators, is as follows:

Like stepping stones laid in moss in a Japanese garden, that slow the spectator's pace and satisfy the need for calmness, drawn stories invite us to emotionally relax and be mentally active. We can contemplate on what we see, leaving the rigid social hierarchies of the everyday world behind us. In our imagination, we can play out different possibilities that the narrative could take. We are offered an intensive world that lies open for discovery and rethinking of one's own experiences, that can alter one's position towards it and lead to new outlooks.

THINKING IN PAINTING

The speechlessness when talking about "thinking in painting" instead of thinking about painting, the seemingly aplenty and diverse reference points of an art practice, the challenges a transmedial approach to drawing and painting pose to painting discourse, are mirrored in publication and exhibition titles such as "Painting beyond itself. The Medium in the Post-medium Condition," "Medim at Large," "Painting without Painting," "Painting 2.0" and such. The ongoing recategorisation and re-thinking processes of how we might understand painting and art is an enriching and not yet foreseeable journey.

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