A Conversation with Jutta Koether

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Benjamin Buchloh: I've seen you enact your work in public a few times, in performances at Harvard (April 2013) and in Berlin (November 2010), and the events have led me to wonder how you link painting and performance. The public performance of the act of painting had previously acquired importance only in the misguided European reception of the work of Jackson Pollock, as in the spectacularization of painting by Georges Mathieu or Yves Klein. Prior to that, painting had been blissfully protected: The very genre of easel painting, and the act of its making, had protected it from being dislodged from its place in the studio, from the canvas support, and from its surfaces.[1] And I think it was only under the impact of spectacularization, which shifts painting into an ostentatious visibility and bodily activity, that it suddenly approached the category of performativity. I see your work as posing some of these questions.

Jutta Koether: I think you're right to see it in those terms, although I would say my endeavor is not entirely that. When you do something that's both performance and painting, your undertaking cannot be an entirely critical one. Because the way you involve yourself—after all, it is a bodily experience—will always throw into doubt the dimension of criticality in and of art itself. Walking that line, so to speak, has led me into a somewhat problematic terrain; but only in that problematic terrain is it even possible to deal with the historical baggage and trajectories that painting and performance share. When I started to get involved with art-making, my primary focus was painting. I tried to find operations to pull painting into a problematized terrain where it could perform a change on its own terms, where it could develop into something that was not merely rehashed or pastiched but actively dealt with its own fucked-up history, its pleasures and pains, and formulating my own *Meditation on the Passion*.

Buchloh: That seems for me to be precisely one of the provocations of your work: When artists in the late 1960s—for example, Bruce Nauman or Vito Acconci—made a shift from sculpture to performance, they moved as far

1. For a characteristically excellent discussion of Koether's painting, among other topics, see David Joselit's "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 125–34.

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away from the tradition of the medium as possible. Nauman began with very complex sculptures, but once he got into the performativity of the process of making and viewing, sculpture for him was no longer an issue. And in a way, Acconci was even more radical in his departure from traditional genres and traditional mediums—of writing, for example; after all, he started out as a poet. And very rarely, as in Nauman's series *Art Make-Up* (1967), do they even start with painting. . . . Instead, they might deal with things that are part objects or transitional objects. Whereas, thirty years later, paradoxically, you maintain or reconstruct a bond to painting, the traditional genre that is the obverse of performance. Why do you try to resuscitate painting with those means when others are available? Why not accept painting's obsolescence or historical conclusion?

Koether: Again, the answer cannot be one-layered, because it has expanded or has been altered over time throughout my artistic practice. When I realized that making art was what I wanted to do, I discovered that everybody started through performance—that of a self becoming whatever. When I started to study in Cologne in early 1977, painting was, for many different reasons, inaccessible. I was part of a philosophically oriented seminar with a pedagogue named Peter Rech who had studied with Joseph Beuys and then had gone to Paris and studied with Jacques Lacan. I had to deal with the artists you mentioned and other performance practices, especially in the feminist arena. The experience was an eye-opener, and it helped me to see beyond the teaching itself, to see the horizon of painting precisely because of the detour.

Buchloh: Thus the teaching of Beuys was crucial, and Beuys was more important than Nauman?

Koether: Absolutely. And for a while I completely clung to the Beuys model. At the time it "saved" me.

Buchloh: I have often wondered whether one of the problems with the reception of performance art in Germany—even if they were explicitly feminist practices, like that of Ulrike Rosenbach, for example—was that it completely misunderstood what American artists were doing. There was something deeply troubling about the reception because it did not reflect at all on where the practice came from. It was just an adaptation of something that had nothing to do with the experience of that particular history.

Koether: I've always been interested in the potentials of misunderstandings. Sure, as a young artist I looked at Rosenbach's work, as well as at the feminist bookshop and its School for Creative Feminism and related activities in Cologne at that moment, but they were really not an option for me generationally. Only a few years separated us, but it was a significant difference, so I had to leave all that behind to find my coordinates as an artist on my own. I totally "abandoned" the German cultural sphere and developed a kind of structural sense of disobedience for avoiding the ruts of the patriarchal models still dominant in schools, in the art world, even in activism. Or at least I considered them as

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not enough, as already stifled. . . . I kept asking, Why must feminist art practice perform "otherness" in an "other" medium? Why not in painting? Painting stayed on my mind and eventually led me to the US, where I turned toward other interests and other models, shifting from Beuys to Warhol in the very late 1970s, early '80s. At some point in the '80s, with the arrival of my first red paintings, I realized, *My mind is painted* (this process can be traced in my books *20 minutes* and *f,* republished with Sternberg Press in 2015). All this happened before I left for New York.

Buchloh: When did you go to the United States for the first time?

Koether: In 1987, much later than most of my peers, because I was not interested in *being* there. That is, it wasn't about having that experience. I kept a distance from my own desire to "escape," or to do adventure trips, but I also developed a practice of strategic distancing toward the ground where I came from. In order also to learn how to position and reposition myself in unexpected terrain and in unexpected ways. I was in this weird other mental place and was trying to find new coordinates.

Buchloh: But at the same time, I could ask the question: Why not from Beuys to Richter or Polke? If you were so deeply devoted to painting, wouldn't that have been a much more obvious choice than Warhol?

Koether: Well, despite their highly intelligent and influential critical strategies, Richter and Polke still represented the continuation of an old order and therefore had no attraction for the subject formation of a female painter. But also because while I was still at university, I thought about doing a Ph.D. The subject I had in mind was Antonin Artaud, and I got really interested in his work and then also in the work of Wols and Fautrier. And all the French, existentialist-oriented modes of painting. Self-tortures indeed! Fragmented creatures who chose painting to perform their existence with/on. My thinking was rerouted through that.

Buchloh: How can one make the jump from Artaud to Warhol?

Koether: I think it has something to do with the urge to open up worlds . . . and a certain playfulness. I skipped Richter because he didn't have, for me, the humor, nor the anger, nor the madness. Ultimately, I did get interested in Polke. But what was most important in all my choices is that the models I preferred to look at shared the idea that a painting *is* the world for an artist. I was looking for a way to reconfigure the terms of understanding how to participate in that while being interested in all the motions of the mind that feed into that world-building. And Polke had attempted quite a bit of exploring in that field.

Buchloh: There was not much room for feminist thinking in his attitude.

Koether: That's what I mean. Not only in his attitude but also the whole entourage. . . . Later I encountered similar things with Kippenberger, but then I could take it or counteract it or deal with it much better because it was somehow more porous. The humor is not as biting and humiliating. Also, by

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that time I had a position that was not solely rooted in art but that was rooted in my activity at *Spex,* which made it more difficult for me to enter the art world, but on the other hand I was not being judged, being pushed around, in any way. I could always return to that other place and say "fuck you" to those in the art scene.

Buchloh: So one of the many challenges you faced at that time was finding a way to avoid direct confrontation with the art world, which led you to identify with the newly emerging sphere of New Wave and punk culture?

Koether: Yes. I was already involved in that scene before I began as an artist. In 1977, when it all started in England, I went there all the time to see the shows. My friends and I did translations, published zines, and distributed little proto-punk collages, DIY style. We were learning to stretch and flex and imagine, to wander and improvise, to become an artist outside the academic system. Then I imported that experience to painting, literally to the canvas.

Buchloh: Which, of course, is simultaneously slightly tragic and comical because it is yet another version of a cultural importation, isn't it? It is one of the conflicts that different German generations had to contend with again and again. So you go from Joseph Beuys to the Sex Pistols. To solve a problem that cannot be solved that way.

Koether: True. But there is a little bit of progress, if we can talk about progress in this at all. First of all, because punk rock almost instantaneously became a German thing (or at least a version of that occurred in Neue Deutsche Welle). It was Germans' first encounter with the onset of global culture. But it also introduced something ludic . . . and opened up space to format something like Poussin's "Arcadian ways," a certain lightness of the mind. And there was an American aspect that tied it back to the Warholian sphere. The other element that was critical for my formation was the anarchist motto of punk culture: Do it yourself. Whatever it is that you do, you are in charge, you are a member of a community—and equally. Men, women—they all looked the same for a certain moment. I don't want to idealize, but at the emergence of punk, men and women were equally active.

Buchloh: The Sex Pistols were not exactly very feminist.

Koether: No, but there were the X-Ray Spex, the Slits, Julie Burchill. . . . There were all kinds of (feminist) models who intelligently embraced contradictions, malfunctions, past and future ideas of empowerment, of freedom.

Buchloh: Even the Velvet Underground was a manifestly mixed group.

Koether: Yes, that's what I mean. Warhol and the Warholian sphere served as a blueprint of sorts. But at the same time I knew I was way too late for that. I was born in 1958, so I could not live in that world, only recognize its patina. But it was interesting to learn from this and participate in building a small platform for myself through it.

Buchloh: When did *Spex* magazine begin? And when did you join?

Koether: It was founded in late 1980, and I joined in January 1981. My first proper longer piece was about Nico.

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Buchloh: Who was also from Cologne.

Koether: She was a *huge* hero of mine. When I did this interview with her, it provided an important lesson. Because she was so fucked up. It was the first time I experienced how an artistic mind had been destroyed by drugs and fame, and I realized it's fascinating but exactly what to avoid. I knew I wanted to do something like that, I wanted to have all of *this,* but not at that price. It taught me I would have to find a method that made me stronger in other ways, so I could do this. I kept thinking, Man, this is so sobering. It stuck with me for months. And then I saw her again a few years later in London after a concert, and she was even worse. It was so sad. I tried to follow what she was doing, but she was sinking tragically. The interactions—this whole notion of a woman alone who put everything on the line to be so radical—were also influential in terms of my performance.

Buchloh: But why did you cathect on Nico, and not on Simone Forti, or Yvonne Rainer, for example?

Koether: Well, I guess it had to be Nico because she was connected to music and from Germany, so she had that tragic cultural background; she was closer to me in that sense. Also, I didn't know anybody who would have told me about Forti or Rainer.

Buchloh: These are the two tracks that seem to pose rather complex challenges for the postwar generations in Germany: One of them is the fascination with American avant-garde and mass cultural practices from Warhol to the Velvet Underground, and the increasing identification with all that they could stand for, particularly when pretending to offer oppositional, radical forms. The other track confronts German history and its artistic legacies, like those of Beuys and Polke. In a way, these two tracks have nothing, or very little, to do with each other, so how can you reconcile them? I think your generation might have brought the tracks closer together than the previous one, but the question of how to reconcile them remains interesting, and the answers could probably explain some of the contradictions in your work, such as the puzzling simultaneity of painting and performance.

Koether: I think it has to do with the German legacy in particular. You cannot avoid recognizing at some point that you cannot escape that history and that the notion of reconciliation isn't really an option. I tried to escape and at first I refused to deal with any of it. But when I was finally in America—I visited New York first in 1987, but I started living there only in 1991—I became more and more aware of how important it was for me to deal with this. I made a point out of entering *with painting*.

Buchloh: Nineteen ninety-one was the end of Neo-Expressionism, wasn't it? Or the end of the return to painting?

Koether: Totally. That's why it felt like a good moment to step in and really fight for it. I was making use of it and also *attending* to it. It was not meant as a heroic act in any way, but there was a slightly exhilarating energy that emerged from the feeling of starting something from scratch.

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Buchloh: Why? If you were so against it, were you also a kind of anti-painter?

Koether: Yes, but painting was part of my history. It's how I was educated. It's what I looked at. Deep down, that's how you start.

Buchloh: Did you learn the skills of painting? And then the de-skilling of painting?

Koether: I had studied to become an art teacher, so I had to have a certain amount of skill. I also had some skill from my mother's teachings, and I was close friends with some of the painters in Cologne, I got some information about techniques and so on from them. . . . I used that moment in Cologne in the mid- to late '70s to redefine what I could and wanted to do. Not much interest in painting there. So I thought, Why not use that neglect in a positive way? I also started looking at American painters who had tried to enter the history of painting from the "outside," painters like Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Martin, Man Ray . . .

Buchloh: But your response to painting was not necessarily to resurrect it. Was there no attempt to redeem painting?

Koether: Yes and no. Redeeming was certainly not on my agenda. I never looked at painting as some masterful thing one would want to reinstall, but instead as a platform, a potential, an island, a lifeboat, a discipline to negotiate life . . . a performance. An attempt at something impossible, a reinvention of painting through painting. I wanted to make it a temporary site, which I took literally. There was this large painting I made in 1992 called *Inside Job*. It was a work that I made in New York before I showed in a gallery. I placed the painting in an apartment on the floor and invited people to view it. It was part of a show that Eric Oppenheim had organized and it was called *The Real Thing*. It was a group show but it happened in the artists' studios, and Oppenheim was supposed to bring people by. Which he never did. But I used it as a frame for experimenting with my own thing and inviting guests/visitors myself. I had these small rooms: one with a painting on the floor, the other with a desk. I asked people one-on-one to come and look at the painting in progress, and then to sit with me and speak about the experience of seeing the painting. With the painting came a book—a "manual," I called it—that had all the drawings and visual trajectories of what I was involved in. It was also an emerging social sketchbook, which meant I made reports of each session every night.

Buchloh: You selected the people you invited? Or you did it with whoever came?

Koether: It was a mixed group. You had to make an appointment, like a doctor's office.

Buchloh: I was about to say it was like an analyst's appointment. Even though it's not clear who was the patient and who was the analyst.

Koether: Yes. I didn't record it because I didn't know most of the people well enough. I made occasional handwritten notes, aide-mémoire, shorthand. . . . After the departure of the visitor I typed a report into an electric typewriter, and the report sheet entered the public manual so that the people who came the next day could read it.

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Buchloh: Were the people identified in the report sheet: This person said *this*, this person said *that* . . . ?

Koether: Yes. I later published the typewritten book as *J.K.: The Inside Job* [1993].

Buchloh: Does the book still exist?

Koether: The book has been digitized. The complete project, titled *The Bigger Splash*, was just shown as part of the *Painting and Performance* exhibition at Tate Modern; it attempted to trace a history of painting and performance positions. They digitized the book and all the drawings, and they were all shown with an installation of the actual painting presented on a very large pane of glass.

Buchloh: Would you say this was the first time that your painting and performance came together?

Koether: It was the first time the combination was a conscious artwork. I wanted to expose my idea of painting to people without just dragging them to my studio. I wanted to try another way, to involve them in a performance that I had set up.

Buchloh: Your description of *Inside Job* helped me just now to understand an additional aspect of your work, namely, that looking at a painting becomes a manifestly dialogic relationship, almost like an analytical session. And you bring this dialogic relationship between spectator and author and space and institution much more into focus by turning the painting into a performance. Still the question remains: Why does painting persist even in that situation? You mentioned earlier that you had been thinking about German Dada, which of course is crucial for another set of questions. Because nobody in the immediate postwar moment reflected on that history, right? And if they did reflect on pre-Fascist history, it was Expressionism, not German Dadaism. That came much later, in the 1960s.

Koether: Right, it was later, with someone like Polke, who opened up that possibility of reflecting-on-while-painting. But with that there was also a return to the bohemian/anarchist/negotiator/life-experimenter model of the artist.

Buchloh: Up to the moment when you referenced punk culture, I could have made the case that you should have become an artist in the lineage of John Cage and moved on into Fluxus, because that's exactly what you just described. The lineage you constructed clearly leads from object-making to performative operations, a lineage that is strongly related to the historical trajectory from Cage to George Brecht and from Fluxus to Robert Filliou, for example. Yet that seems to be completely absent from your work. From the logic of your arguments and what you say about music, however, it would have been perfectly plausible to go there.

Koether: Yeah, but I wasn't born like John Cage and did not attend Black Mountain College!

Buchloh: But you were living in Cologne, where George Brecht worked, for example. There was a very strong presence of Fluxus in Düsseldorf and Cologne.

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Koether: Sure, but punk rock didn't want "fathers" . . . perhaps only strange/multiple ones like the Situationists.

Buchloh: For some reason your attraction to mass cultural and subcultural formations caused you to bypass the Dada legacy, which is fascinating. It is as if you said, "I cannot identify with this type of high-cultural subversion because it's the generation of the fathers that was done by Stockhausen in Cologne."

Koether: I know, but what I think you don't understand is that my generation—or maybe I should only speak for myself—*lost,* or rather *refused,* this kind of connection to thinking in a linear trajectory. We—I—experienced it as the second-order culture, as having been or always being the one behind, always the "born too late," always the inheritor *of* . . .

Buchloh: Due to what? Being German? Being of your generation? Or being a woman?

Koether: All of those things. I always felt strongly that I could only understand it through reflection with others in the same situation, which at the time for me was *Spex*, people like Diedrich Diederichsen. In order to articulate your own subjectivity, you didn't find a method but constructed it yourself. All the other trajectories—like that of the Expressionist painter-performer—were already being clogged by other guys with other attitudes. I knew all those people, but for me they represented just another impasse as structurally they followed an Oedipal schematic. Just another lineage to be stuck in. Only this pseudo-global, new thing—punk rock—provided at the time the attitude that you could do things you weren't supposed to do, to allow anger, playful display, and enactments of provocative harshness. Communicate. Speak up. Become active. DIY aesthetics and their inevitable fate of becoming marketable lifestyles were a rather interesting firsthand experience of how to have and lose beliefs, life dialectics! . . . It also helped to step outside of oneself, to identify things that I had inherited, to be able to analyze them, as well as really find other locations for/of cultural activity outside of the given social structures (school, academy, art scene). Punk-rock culture also encouraged language. The act of finding one's voice of refusal, resistance *and* enjoyment. A kind of ersatz Dada.

Buchloh: Your own terrain in terms of history, in terms of technique, in terms of medium, in terms of praxis?

Koether: I'm not sure how to describe it. At the time, I thought of painting as an abandoned building.

Buchloh: When you say it was like an abandoned building already in 1991, was it a space in which certain mnemonic capacities were preserved, in which a dimension of cultural memory attracted you? It seems for me an incredibly important aspect.

Koether: It was and it wasn't. It was an intuitive thing, semiconscious. I said, If the building is abandoned, I'm still here tinkering away. Like a weird squatter. And I thought that type of tinkering could open up a thinking space that has

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a certain freedom. It allows you to reach out to those dimensions that are otherwise barred. There are certain components, certain elements, that return. Sometimes they're symbols, sometimes colors. At one point, for example, I learned everything about red; I had paintings with twenty different reds. There is an inner necessity for me that means some things keep returning. But I always do what I think is necessary for each project: making felt that psychic site that a painting constitutes.

Buchloh: Let's go back to another context question: The anti-aesthetic impulse in painting—which obviously has a very long and complicated history, from Picabia to Polke to Kippenberger—is part of your horizon in many differentiated ways. Would there not be an important difference between an anti-pictorial, anti-aesthetic operation by a woman and an anti-pictorial operation by a man?

Koether: I think there is a difference between Kippenberger and others insofar as Kippenberger provided one of those rare moments in the culture of male German artists when an artist was actually willing and able to say what the problem is. I appreciated that. Despite his performances of very bad jokes at times, Kippenberger was not a cynic. I would not have been willing to listen to him if I had felt that, because the specific type of anti-aesthetic painting that I'm interested in is not a negative one. Perhaps there is a difference between an anti-pictorial operation by a woman and one by a man, and I think it has something to do with socialization and, for me, the conditions under which I learned painting and what my points of orientation were. The way I explored painting had much more to do with *content*, with what these paintings represented. So I delved into queer painting and into women painters—

Buchloh: What did you consider queer painting?

Koether: Marsden Hartley, Pavel Tchelitchew, Georgia O'Keeffe: really "forbidden" stuff at the time. In Germany in the early '80s, if you mentioned one of those artists, it was dismissed as kitsch. Their works fell between all categories. Also Bacon, Freud, Balthus, Klossowski. Those latter ones have been constant companions in thinking through painting, learning fearlessness through their application of anachronisms. In the late '80s in New York I met more people and learned a lot. John Miller, for instance, introduced me really early on to artists like Jack Goldstein. I thought his position was sort of weird—I mean, his wasn't "queer painting," but nobody could really *read* his work. It fell between kitsch and . . . I'm not sure. I knew John Miller because we were both writers for *Artscribe*. He was the only other writer for *Artscribe* who described himself as "artist and writer." I always got dissed for being an artist and writer in Germany, so I wrote him a letter. We were pen pals, and he was the first artist I met in New York in 1987. And that led back to performance positions, of course. You start with Florine Stettheimer and you end up somewhere with Jack Smith and Mike Kelley.

Buchloh: It is very interesting for me to understand the eccentricity of your interest in Stettheimer and Smith, rather than, say, Eva Hesse. I say this with the greatest respect, so please don't misunderstand me.

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Koether: Of course I knew about Hesse too. I knew about her before I moved to New York. I remember on my first trip I brought back a big stack of books from the Strand. Georgia O'Keeffe, the Lucy Lippard book on Eva Hesse, and the *Eccentric Abstraction* catalogue. I thought, Wow, that's a great title. Let's see what it is about.

Buchloh: Stettheimer, O'Keeffe, and Hesse don't go very easily together, do they?

Koether: Depends on what you mean by "going together." They did for me! It's funny, because the connection was thematized many years later in a book by Anne Wagner . . .

Buchloh: Right, *Three Artists Three Women*.

Koether: . . . where she discussed Eva Hesse, Lee Krasner, and Georgia O'Keeffe. I think part of the attraction for me was looking for a female model. Not that I wanted to identify entirely with that. But I could clearly see parallels in the ways they had the same urge to take their own bodies and put themselves out there and pose with their work. To be, in a way, female . . . entities. They had an odd relation to their paintings and how they presented their lives to a public. I found that kind of irritating, confusing, and also interesting.

Buchloh: What about Agnes Martin?

Koether: Agnes Martin was of the greatest importance for me. I discovered her when I was only sixteen or seventeen. On my own. I saw a show in Holland, and I was blown away. I had traveled to Amsterdam wanting to see as many Van Goghs as possible, and I saw Agnes Martin! Well, I saw both. There you see my formation, how things can coexist and interact in all kinds of ways. I also saw the Pollock that they have at the Stedelijk. Those trips were *really* important, when I was young with the desire to find things, and all of a sudden you find things that are incredible.

Buchloh: Do you have a problem reconciling all these disparate elements? Or do you see them as continuing to be operative in your life and in your work, and while being detached from each other, don't they simultaneously define what you do and how you do it?

Koether: It's like other things in life, you know? I mean, they are there, some of them have been constitutive elements and others are sort of . . . . It's like in a study gallery where you have the important parts—the masterpieces—and then you have these other elements that are as crucial as the rest in order to let the whole thing live. I feel it is the same for what I call my coordinates or my points of reference. I don't need to reconcile them. They are there . . . just like my "Bruised Grids." It's just that some come to the forefront sometimes more strongly. Or others have been in the background forever and will probably stay there forever. It has to do with the way you conceive of your own body of work, or what it is that you actually want to do or what you want to leave behind. One other term that I wanted to propose is what you at one point called "eccentric"—this kind of travel through very dissimilar figures that one cannot reconcile, or that for you can't be reconciled. Like when you said: In my world, Duchamp and Georgia O'Keeffe can't operate together,

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it's impossible . . . I answered in a funny way, as though I retreated again when I said: "Oh, it's organic," or whatever. And it is organic, partially, but it was also done very much by design. It was both a necessity and a decision to create something that is really, in a way, about dissonance. The project is not just to encounter dissonance but also to enjoy it and upload it positively.

Buchloh: This is the first time you have used the concept of dissonance, and it seems strikingly central to your work at large . . .

Koether: Because we were also talking about this pain factor. That there is something painful about dissonance. And despite all the dialectics, there is something in one's desire that wants to be reconciled and wants to be put into a logic or find some kind of closure. It's either a sentimental closure or it's a logical closure. From the very beginning, I have always understood my project as being an alternative to all that enjoyment of dissonance.

Buchloh: Is that also because it is a feminist project?

Koether: Yes, because it is a feminist project, and because I arrived historically at a time when there was no fixed or stable or clear situation—there was nothing that could really pose as a credible authority or a fixed path. Just this kind of thirst. Like, to always let go and think and read and learn more. I feel that art, for me, is whatever medium you use—that's what it's about. Even if there is nothing for a year. Or if one doesn't create masterpieces or something like that. I feel that is not important. An aesthetic openness *is* important. So I try to do things that allow me to present these thoughts directly, in multilayered ways.

Buchloh: The performance you did at Harvard was incredibly important for me in many ways. But it had a distinctly tragic quality about it, and I'm not sure whether or not that was intended. Because you were making grand claims. . . . I mean, it's not exactly a very probable step for an artist of your generation to establish a relationship with Poussin. Secondly, it's not exactly a probable phenomenon—certainly not in the United States—for an artist to step onstage and explain to us the seven sacraments. And thirdly, for the artist then to channel this through a very complicated and elaborate-looking computer-aided mediation. Those three elements—and there were many others, of course—already generated a very complex situation which I experienced almost as painful, as tragic. It was like this tragic struggle to figure out how one can possibly think about these things simultaneously. Is that somewhat accurate as a description?

Koether: Yes, absolutely.

Buchloh: And, again, the work compelled the question, What is it that you're trying to rescue, if anything at all, when you know very well that you cannot rescue it? Or, what is it that you're trying to reestablish as a mnemonic dimension in your work when you point us to Poussin? Or when you point us ethically to the seven sacraments? These fundamentally strong gestures are so potentially dangerous as gestures of restoration of a kind of experience that is long lost,

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never to be restored, and even though you know this, you make them anyway—because otherwise it would be unbearable. So the tragic dimension of the performance was very striking. But do you see it in those terms, as a melancholic resuscitation?

Koether: Oh, yes, very much so. Yet there is also an internal challenge to put oneself in a kind of "danger," being *very* exposed, that is. Laying out the entire mind-sketch in a raw, vulnerable manner. These are modes of undoing, notating, transcribing, thinning, and so on—historical baggage, layers of interpretations. In that sense, both performance gestures (dance moves, citations, music) as well as painting and drawing gestures. And also to make it clear that this particular condition is constitutive. There is simultaneously loss and gain. And I feel that past works, like those of Poussin, enable me to open a window, a stage, for that moment and invite me on a non-immersive cruise into the past.

Buchloh: At the same time you present it with a grotesque comical introduction.

Koether: Yes! Of course. I use every possible thing in the effects box to enhance this notion. (Here I'd like to mention T. J. Clark, because I learned a certain humor and daring from him. . . . Look at his Poussin book, subtitled "An Experiment in Writing.") That's also why I developed a structure for the performance where I sort of introduce it with this other voice. It's almost like a ventriloquist moment. Do you remember the music element? At one point the rendering of the image crashed and I just blasted music for a very short while. The music is from Scott Walker, an American musician living in the UK—he was part of the Walker Brothers—that I do not necessarily identify with, but his presentation of music has a similar experimental comic/grotesque/melancholic dimension. At the end of the day I always try to incorporate a little bit of this other lineage: my becoming an artist through music culture. It's important not to leave those things outside just because I'm, say, at Harvard at a painting conference.

Buchloh: Was the piece conceived specifically for Harvard as a performance? Would you repeat it?

Koether: Not in that form. It was an "experiment in a (lecture) performance" custom-made for the occasion.

Buchloh: But you would talk about Poussin and the seven sacraments again in a different setting?

Koether: Yes, but the Harvard event, that particular stage and that environment, was unique; I *wouldn't* want to do that somewhere else. It was very good. You cannot repeat that. But I did do something related within the setting of my show at Dundee Contemporary Arts in Scotland titled *Seasons and Sacraments*.

Buchloh: Let's talk about the *Seasons* paintings a bit more. . . . There is this prismatic duality in your work of keeping painting in the game, so to speak, when in fact you are perpetually dismantling it. At the same time, you buttress it even more by reconnecting painting to its most heroic moments in history. How

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can an artist like you—at this moment and within your generation—position herself in relation to Poussin? In a way, you seem to be asking how historical memory can be articulated in the present with the means that are at your disposal. And the means at your disposal seem to be largely annihilated or criticized by yourself. Because you're not a *painter*-painter, in a sense.

Koether: I think what you're describing is precisely—and maybe it's my fantasy—where I find the figure of Poussin. Because he is at the pinnacle of so-called classical painting and at the same time he made a certain kind of painting impossible. Maybe it's only my projection, but I find it fascinating how his practice can be so clear and so firm but at the same time it can undermine his own project as a whole. I like Poussin's displacement, his identity as a French classical painter who nonetheless lives in Rome most of his artistic life. There's also the coexistence of passion and concepts of freedom of "learning by doing" as well as of introducing vehement changes in the way one works. As for the *Seasons,* I did three versions. The first one is the "original," and that is the set that is closest to Poussin's. It follows the proportions, the dimensions, the color schemes, and the compositional devices of Poussin's actual paintings. The second set is tweaked to the needs of the gallery. The format is a bit smaller; the color is a bit different in order to match the whole space. I have a Florentine red that I used very heavily in those. The paintings have all kinds of colors, but that specific red color of the ground I also used in the paintings themselves. Mussini Florentine Red! It almost looked like the paintings had been sprayed with red gravel, as if they had soaked it up and were weirdly "illuminated" through the ground, since they had this strange red underpainting. They looked inflamed. The third set of *Seasons* came as a small version, painted on wood panels, with elements of assemblage relating to the themes of the seasons and coated with "liquid glass," a kind of clear resin. The entire thing was hung on a piece of glass that was stuck in a concrete base and presented as an art-fair booth. It was shown with Reena Spaulings in 2012 at the first Frieze Art Fair in New York. The concrete footing was a self-made version of Lina Bo Bardi's painting stands or glass easels. Bo Bardi was an Italian Brutalist architect who moved to Brazil. She had invented these display stands for the museum in São Paulo, and in her most notorious, claim-to-fame exhibition, she put the entire collection of the Brazilian Art Museum on glass panels with concrete feet to hold the glass. And the people in São Paulo couldn't deal with it! They dismantled the whole thing after a couple of years. Of course now, over the past ten years, she has become a cult figure among artists. I really like her ideas and the way she dealt with art and architecture being intertwined in this specific way. I also like the way she used glass and concrete and cheap, common building materials like gravel and wood. (In the meantime there is a new director at the museum in São Paulo who actually REINSTALLED Bo Bardi's glass easels!)

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Buchloh: Returning to Poussin, do you know why you chose him as your historical reference figure? I mean, among the many equally important figures from the history of painting that one could have chosen, why him? Isn't that unusual for a painter of your generation?

Koether: No, it's not unusual, not if a painter is interested in space and time travel, as we talked about before. It comes from a kind of mental traveling, an ongoing search, because you don't have a fixed historical vision. So you try to find your own genealogy. I basically put myself on the same path as other partially self-taught artists. And the Poussin idea was there long before I read the T. J. Clark book. Of course, it goes through Cézanne, Balthus . . . and deep down there is always Piero della Francesca. And before that Egyptian art. And so on.

Buchloh: I was just about to say that it is like Jasper Johns returning to Cézanne in the 1950s. But you go two, three hundred years back. Why are you going so much further back than others in modernism or contemporary art have dared?

Koether: Because it's a *freer* place.

Buchloh: Duchamp went as far back as celebrating Seurat; that was his historical span. He never spoke much about Manet, for example. And certainly not about Poussin. It's an interesting question: Why does a painter of your generation open up the historical horizon that far? Rather than talking about a high-modernist artist from the late nineteenth century or from the 1920s? That would seem to be more plausible. You could have chosen Sophie Taeuber-Arp, for example.

Koether: But it is one's own paintings that have to take the lead. It cannot be a purely conceptual connection but has to come from something that feels like one's own logic. I did learn about the history of female artists, for example, and yes, a lot of reevaluations and discoveries have been made in the past thirty years or so. But I have been there already. I mean, I have been traveling for so many years, in so many places. And I also have been kind of dissatisfied—as if it's too easy. "Too easy" means that there have been too many people who have already installed their readings and their projections and their legitimations there. . . . It's sort of polluted, in a way.

Buchloh: Are you saying that historical memory itself is polluted? In the context of modernism, at least, and what people have done with it? Are you saying that artistic references within the twentieth century—or artistic references in the history of modernism—have been overused in a way that is no longer productive or relevant? Is this one of the reasons you went all the way back to Poussin?

Koether: Well, I don't trust "historical memories," although they can be stimulating . . . so that's one reason. Another was that I got interested in traversing a realm that was so layered in the scholarship, and I gave myself the task of plowing through that scholarship because I really wanted to *learn* something. I wanted the learning process to be very intense. I didn't want it to be journalistic, with a reference picked up here and there. I wanted to investigate something very deeply, as an exercise for myself. That was one attraction. I

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think the other element (and it comes up in Clark's book, and Anthony Blunt writes a lot about it, too) is the idea that in Poussin there is a coexistence of rigidity, almost like an architectonic structure, and another kind of material—emotional inserts—that you can't account for. Whether they happen through specific figures or through the narrative of the story, they are a certain rendering: for example, this extremely weird rendering of the leaves and nature or the so-called natural world. On the one hand, Poussin has structure, but it's so tiny it's almost pointillism, and it nearly falls apart, so there's a contradictory dissonance produced. A sensation. A space for thinking and feeling.

Buchloh: What's on the other side of that extraordinary adventure into the history of painting is neoclassical painting of the grandest ambition. But your execution is a very different type of painting. Your practice of painting is difficult to grasp for people who are not totally familiar with you and your history and your understanding of it, right?

Koether: I guess so. But isn't that the case with every painter? When in doubt, I return to the Poussin self-portrait in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and look him in the eye. It's like going to see a doctor. Besides, to be "understood" all the time is not my primary goal. I think I would rather continue my own "Koether: An experiment in painting."

Buchloh: There's an anti-aesthetic operation in your painting that is very violent. It's *as* violent as Frank Stella's *Black Paintings* were in 1958. It doesn't look like anything we've known. It doesn't establish any connection with recent painterly culture as we know it. In your case, for example, one would imagine, since you are coming from Germany, you must have *some* background in German painting of the 1960s. Polke and Richter, for example. But when one looks at the painting, it looks like neither. It doesn't even look as though you knew of them.

Koether: Ah, that's good. I wanted to perform that: a kind of willful forgetting. An act of disobedience to that pre-scripted trajectory, maybe, so that I can be free to reengage it on my terms, which I have started to do in the past few years—in my shows at Bortolami in 2012 and Reena Spaulings in 2013, for example—but simultaneously with a reengagement with the idea of the figuration in Balthus, Bacon, and most of all Lucian Freud. But I can see what you're saying. There is potentially the violence of strangeness and inconsistency.

Buchloh: There is a certain radicality in your painterly execution that interests me. Your work is unlike Kippenberger's, for example: His attempts at dislodging Richter are very easy to follow, his dialogue with Polke is easy to follow, in his work there is always a jocular dialogue, in many ways, in many structures, in many textures. One can almost always say, Oh, now he's looking at *this* and he's coming out of *this* and he's trying to deal with *this*—successfully or not is another question. There's a contextual fabric that you can read. Whether or not that's the most important aspect is another matter, but you can read the

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work in these terms. When I see work of yours, however, I don't see any of this, and I find that much more challenging.

Koether: My work isn't readable in that way. I always feel connected not to this or that painter but to a certain idea of painting. And to a shared search for a certain intensity or a certain . . . language. Whatever helps me to find that language and articulate it, I grab. I call it "multi-morbid painting" sometimes.

Buchloh: That is so striking, because you don't seem to have a specific context; there's neither a local nor a regional nor a national context. You seem to have completely disavowed such a thing. Yet on the other hand, you construct this *huge* historical context for yourself, saying, in effect, *I'm going all the way to the seventeenth century*. That is a very strange gesture and a very strange move, isn't it?

Koether: Yes, that's true. Strangeness is good. Very good. Strangeness and beauty.

Buchloh: Perhaps a figure I can compare it to is Broodthaers? I'm not sure if that's helpful, but he did something very similar by being completely anti-aesthetic in his operations and completely allegorical in annihilating the credibility of painting. All while insisting on the necessity of continuing to paint. And insisting, moreover, on the necessity of recognizing what painting once had been and what it had stood for and what it represented. He went beyond the nineteenth century as well. He didn't go as far as Poussin, but he certainly went to Ingres and into the late eighteenth century. And in a similarly constructed, contradictory manner, insofar as what he was actually doing looked, at many moments, like the most inept approach to painting that you could possibly practice. Or it was technically mediated so it was printed. Yet the historical references were always to painting, which is a strange structure, one that hasn't been understood in Broodthaers at all, at least from what I know in the literature. The structure, as I keep saying, is mnemonic, asking: What is the legacy, what is the impact, what is the accessibility, for me as a painter in the present moment? If I look at this, how do I have access to this? But then it becomes a more general question, which makes it aesthetically relevant: How does *anyone* have access to that history at this moment? That's what I find interesting about your work.

Koether: One has to experiment with one's own methods. I draw, and redraw, red lines, red threads, through something. Red horizons reaching into the seventeenth century or other time zones. I would like to think Marcel Broodthaers and Lucian Freud in one space. To not lose that ability to transfer yourself imaginatively, to rehearse imagination, to notate, stimulate, activate. With those plays of lines and color suggesting the motions of the mind celebrating with garlands the fact that we still do not know where *Bewusstsein*, or consciousness, occurs in the human brain.

Buchloh: It has become clear in the course of our conversation that there is something vastly and fundamentally different in your approach from that of other artists, which is that you do not accept what almost everybody in Germany in

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the previous generations has accepted—and what almost everyone in America that I can think of has accepted—namely, a relatively circumscribed set of references. When I see your paintings—*The Seasons*, for example—I say: What is her painterly gesture? What is her facture? Where does this come from? What type of drawing is this? But the painting never registers or resolves itself in such a way where I could answer the question with something like, "This is an inversion of Sol LeWitt." It sometimes looks as though random processes are very important to you, but the work isn't automatist, it isn't determined by chance operations, but it's also not excessively controlled. Or is it?

Koether: *The Seasons* are actually fairly controlled. I studied the original paintings at the Louvre very carefully. The compositional field is pretty much built in the same way, down to the centimeter. Only I tried to reverse the ratio, so that instead of having, say, 90 percent pictorial structure combined with these minor emotional inserts making up only 5 percent, almost like particles, it was the other way around. So there you have a fixed structure. And then there are these other additional, ridiculous structures, pseudo-structures that *I* invented . . . so the composition is set. The figures in the paintings were kept, but I made them much bigger in scale, and so on. The color scheme is the same as in the originals, but amplified. For instance, Poussin's *Winter* has darkened enormously. It was always dark—winter is not depicted as a happy, snowy landscape but as a deluge, the apocalyptic dark night of the storm—and I rendered it with this weird black wheel in the middle of the painting, spilling out from or cracking the surface of the painting.

Buchloh: What about *The Sacraments*?

Koether: *The Sacraments* were more than actual paintings. The only two paintings in the group were related to the sacrament of marriage, which I rendered as a double painting (two panels hung one above the other, which became the central piece in the "*parcours*"). The rest of the piece was installation and sculpture, and I found that to be much easier for people to deal with. Of course, this question came up too: Why Poussin? Why something like the sacraments? Why do that now, and who cares for Christianity? There was one very direct link: The second (and complete) set of *The Sacraments* is on view at the National Gallery in Edinburgh. Another reason to choose the sacraments as a topic was that they were done twice. There was also the potential for something else, starting from Poussin's famous remark that he wanted to redo the sacraments in a profane version in which seven stories on the "fortunes of man" would replace the episodes of Christianity (which Poussin already had transposed into the "fictional" setting of ancient Roman times. I would like to point out an odd lineage here between the letter *E* showcased on the column in the sacrament of ordination and Broodthaers's *E* painting!)

Buchloh: What happened when you did the performance at Dundee Contemporary Arts in Bristol?

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Koether: The exhibition was a performance of objects and paintings reflecting on different ways of paintings becoming, so the performance for the exhibition was a performance about the becoming of a performance becoming painting: a meta-performance. (Those stories/histories are the "models" for my painting; instead of having an actual sitter, I have those procedures, readings, searches as sitters!) First there was an introductory speech. And I had a print at the beginning of the show that I thought of as an opening act, so to speak. It was a multilayered print of a photo of a queen on her horse, kind of perforated so that it looked damaged but also stately at the same time. That led into the tour of *The Sacraments*. I performed different things. One performance was like a show-and-tell; another was more like a staged walk-through, the way a proper tour guide would do it. There was a melancholic, mute performance in which I stood in front of the piece with this light, and one where I played music for "Penance."

Buchloh: Recorded music?

Koether: No, I played my own sounds and melodic fragments on a small synthesizer. Throughout the performance I had five people helping the audience, reshuffling them, like crowd control. They held black planks, which came from the sculpture of the seventh sacrament, "Last Rites," and while I was performing they took the sculpture apart and placed all the planks throughout the space, kind of remapping the space of the sacraments. Finally, they put it back together in the shape of a 7. I wanted the artworks to do the job; instead of animating them, I wanted them to be self-explanatory . . . and outside of myself.

Buchloh: As you were describing that, I was reminded of the performance at Harvard, in which the performance was similarly structured for an audience that, it is presumed, is thinking very much along the lines of what you're doing and thinking about. It's not a confrontational approach. At first I thought, What is she doing? But once I let that go, I felt that this is exactly the kind of question one has to ask right now. There are many questions, obviously, posed by your work, but one important one is: What kind of access do I have to the historical dimension of painting? How can it be mediated—if at all? How can it be perceived—if at all? And what can you do as a painter to establish that dialogue? I'm not sure how you would want to phrase it or if you would accept that as a description.

Koether: Oh, indeed!

Buchloh: You're not constructing an imaginary relationship to Poussin as a moment of redemption of painting's crisis in the present—

Koether: No, no. It's not that. I've posed that question to myself, too: Why am I drawn to this? What is it that makes me want to look *there,* and how can I in a way reconcile it with living here right now? But I find that everything presented as a culture of memory—or "memory schemes," as I call them—is so

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dissatisfying. Dissatisfying in every way, not only intellectually but *visually*. The whole redoing, rehashing, reenacting, and retrospectivizing thing. . . . So every painting is an act to undo those schemes, reclaim one's own sketch of life, a mapping of emotions . . . to figure a sensibility that runs all five senses as if wired up first in drawing then in paint. The canvas, my *centre de recherche,* my *Champrovent*, my *Maquis*, my *Fortune*, is the residence of painting itself. . . . What I can offer is the time of my painting—making this time possible, making it felt, sharing it—so that other people can be drawn in, affected. I want to say, *Come on . . . don't you also want to be in this project somehow?*

Buchloh: The Harvard performance triggered exactly what you're describing.

Koether: And now I would love to visit the Gemäldegalerie to see Poussin's *Phaeton and Helios* and the Metropolitan Museum to visit Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*, so there can be yet another "from this moment on"! After that, every day in the studio is a "Harvard performance."

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