

The Discursive Array: Towards a Politics of Painting as Time-space Production by John Chilver

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Abstract:

Modernist articulations of time in painting – based on phenomenological approaches – are not viable today. The adequate recipient of today's accelerated information flows is more machinic than human: human perception is no longer adequate to technological temporalities. Painting ought now to approach time in registers other than the perceptual. Rejecting the terms of MoMA's 'The Forever Now' exhibition, the argument turns to Buren's notion of the in situ as a valuable attempt to re-think painting as time-space production. But Buren's position is based on flaws in his 'Function of the studio' essay and ends up supplying architectural decoration for urban redevelopment that is a far cry from his youthful ambitions. The text then considers confluences of in situ with discursive production in Gillick and Bourriaud. After a critical reading of Joselit's 'Painting beside itself' essay, artworks by Merlin Carpenter, Jutta Koether and Lucy McKenzie are examined. McKenzie's recent work devises fruitful tactics for interweaving affective opacities and discursive frames. McKenzie is able to play with rhetorics of in situ production without succumbing to reductive understandings of site and authenticity, and without conflating time-space production with discursive production. Such a discursive array can elaborate the dissonances between the discursive and the affective.

It's a cliché to observe that we are now plunging through a phase transition in the social experience of time. This is of course a profound and continuing transformation. Those born into the twenty-first century need not toil to rehearse familiarity with the dos and don'ts of the so-called attention economy, in which the component items of an unrelenting tsunami of digital data compete with each other for our valuable attention. Under these conditions any subjective act of focused concentration comes with an awareness of the ongoing flow of signals, announcements, notifications and messages that must be cognitively staunched and actively ignored to enable concentration. Today any sustained mental focus can be secured only by holding at bay a heightened clamour of constant distractions. As technology unfolds these trajectories, their political, psychosocial and aesthetic consequences provoke a thorough rethinking of the potentialities of older arts such as painting. Yet, as conventionally practised today, painting remains loosely but broadly faithful to the visual norms of high and late modernism. In other words it remains largely beholden to the styles, formats, formal devices and modes of address that were fashioned under a very different social experience of time.

The importance for high modernist painting of visual resources such as assertive frontality, indexical mark-making and the play of pictorial devices freed from conventionally depictive responsibilities, served a preoccupation with the flow of consciousness and the kind of subjectivity it staged. Painting could plausibly be seen to have shared that preoccupation with high modernist literature, as canonically presented in the writings of Proust, Woolf and Joyce. In relation to this central strain in high modernism, painting tended to present time as the time of subjective consciousness, whether that be optical perception in Monet and Seurat or the restless kinaesthetic consciousness implied by Picasso and Braque's cubism, or the ecstatic 'slipping glimpses' of de Kooning's 1950s abstracted urban pastoral style, or the cosmically scaled unconscious of Pollock's drip paintings. That construct of consciousness in painting of course required spatializations of time, as is necessary for any temporal effect or index in painting. Time in painting is always and necessarily time-space in a strong sense that testifies to a constant and equiprimordial binding together of the two. Time in painting is always registered as or in or via spacing.

The first point to stress here is that the social construction of time that birthed the trope of the flow of consciousness belonged to industrial modernity: that was the time (in both the historical and phenomenological senses) of emergent Fordist production lines, of newly mechanised transportation, the telegram, the sepia photograph, radio, hegemonic newsprint media and embryonic silent film. But today's dominant temporal constructions are radically unlike those of a century ago. If there is something akin to a consciousness that is even partially adequate to the rapidity and rhythm of digital communication technologies of the now, then it is very clear that such a consciousness or processing capacity would have to be cybernetic or artificial rather than human. Indeed, it is fitting in this regard that when we navigate goods and services online we now frequently have to scrutinize and decipher a distorted script in order to prove that we are human at all. As Jonathan Crary writes, "a 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living".¹ What is characteristic of the non-social temporality of this regime is "a collection of surveillance and data-analysis resources that 'sees' unblinkingly 24/7, indifferent to day, night or weather".² In short, the rhythms of current techno-capitalism bear little or no resemblance to the poetics of the modernists' flow of consciousness, and instead imply a consciousness or data processor that is machinic, artificial and posthuman. It follows then that there is no reason to expect the aesthetics of pictorial modernism to be adequate to addressing the temporal conditions of now. But equally it would be a mistake to set painting the task of fashioning new pictorial equivalents for an accelerated virtual-digital domain that is increasingly addressed to a liminally human subject. Even if such a task were viable it is unlikely to yield anything other than a stylized play of data fragments that at best promise an aesthetic sublimation as a kind of cognitive therapy. That perhaps is not nothing. But it hardly seems sufficient for critically ambitious painting. Instead, the realization that the only perceptual subject adequate to the accelerated flow of data is a non-human subject (or, at least, a place-holder for that notional subject-position) surely implies that painting must approach these new temporal conditions in ways that exceed the visual and perceptual – if such a thing is conceivable.

Instead of trying to invent pictorial equivalents to the internet, painting can approach newly emerging temporalities in other ways. Before outlining what I regard as credible approaches, I will pause to consider approaches that are, I argue, not critically viable. Prominent among these has been the position set out in the Museum of Modern Art, New York's 2014-15 exhibition 'The Forever Now'.³ Curator Laura Hoptman's catalogue essay approaches the data glut of the internet not so much in terms of a social or cognitive phenomenology, but rather in terms of a stylistics of painting. According to this account the infinite plenty and placeless simultaneity of the internet qua online image archive has created

an unsettling and wholly unique phenomenon ... that was first identified by the science fiction writer William Gibson, who in 2003 used the word *atemporality* to describe a strange state of the world in which, courtesy of the Internet, all eras seem to exist at once.⁴

Hoptman identifies this with the widespread "inability – or perhaps refusal – of a great many of our cultural artefacts to define the times in which we live".⁵ The core argument of the catalogue essay and, by extension, of the MoMA exhibition itself, is that painting as a "cultural product of our time that paradoxically does not represent ... the time from which it comes",⁶ responds to this new situation by vociferously and guiltlessly riffing through the ghosts of the style archive, and that this response – at its best – presents us with a hybrid pictorial energy that is to be celebrated.

I will refer to this position as the Forever Now or FN doctrine. In essence the FN doctrine holds that contemporary painting plays out a delirious game of cross-referencing its own stylistic histories. What is necessary though not spoken here is an assumption that the

histories of painting's devices, subjects, processes, protocols and refusals are graspable as styles and looks, heedless of the broader debates, commitments, lives and struggles that nourished them. The obvious question is how the FN doctrine is any different from old postmodernism, with appropriation as its method of choice. Hoptman rises to the challenge: "[u]nlike past periods of revivalism, such as the appropriationist eighties, this super-charged art historicism is neither critical nor ironic. It is closest to a *connoisseurship* of boundless information...."⁷ Her closing epithet here is indeed wonderfully apt as descriptor of who we in general have become insofar as our contemporary sociality is increasingly interpellated as the solicitation of informational appetites. But as a horizon for painting today – through a declaration of the figure of the connoisseur – it is entirely inadequate both in its analytic resources and in its prognostic reach.

If the FN doctrine appears thin on analytic resources, so the show itself feels overly satisfied with its conventional understandings of painting's self-bounded constitution as object, as 'style scene' and as settled mode of time-space production. This complacency is registered in the show's multiple blind spots, such as the complete absence of the problematic yet productive discourse of painting's immanent dialogue with its architectural frames, as associated – in different ways – with Robert Ryman and Blinky Palermo. The dialogic architectural engagement I associate with those names cannot fully make sense of in terms of style, and by the same token cannot be subsumed into a hybridizing pictorial minestrone of stylistic registers – or, at least, not without becoming largely unrecognisable. My point is not that the MoMA show should have included other varieties of painting, post-minimal or otherwise. It is rather that certain painting positions, processes and apparatuses will not make sense as style or stylistic resource. Or in more theoretical terms: the specificities of certain art practices and methods are not transmissible as (decontextualized) quotable style without the loss of that very specificity. Hence what is entirely absent from 'The Forever Now' is any productive dialogue between painting and its outside, or other. The only other that is posited is the internet, which however it only conceives as an other rendered not-other, as a hall of historical mirrors for painting portrayed as a narcissistically self-relating sleepwalk. Instead, the issue, as David Joselit writes suggestively, has become one of how painting projects itself in relation to its own outside, in the sense that the "externalization of painting (that) leads to ... a kind of scoring in space".⁸

As implied in the reference to Palermo and Ryman, the most basic instantiation of an outside of painting that is always equally a material necessity for painting, is architecture. Painting is always a mode of time-space production that has to take account – tacitly or explicitly – of its architectural conditions. Therefore I propose to turn to a historically inflected discussion of the temporal economies of painting's shifting relationship with architecture. Of course for a fundamentally spatial art like painting, time is figured and scored spatially: painting constructs or confabulates time in a spatialising register. Moreover any adequate account already has to face the complication of thinking the time-space of painting's production – in both its social, economic, and psychic registers – as well as the time-space of the work's reception.

While treading carefully to avoid replaying a hackneyed painting-as-corrupted-commodity complaint, it is nonetheless necessary to consider the actuality of painting's past and current political economy in terms of time-space. Let me first spin the yarn of a long historical perspective. During the renaissance, the transition in European painting, from Italian *trecento* fresco cycles set within their architectural and interior ensembles, to the portable oil paintings on discrete wooden and then canvas panels in the Low Countries in the 1400s and 1500s was of course a shift from ecclesiastical to secular patronage. To the extent that secular patronage uncoupled painting from Roman Catholic doctrine and authority, this transition was emancipatory and co-productive of new modes of subjectivity.

Today we seem to experience a reversal of this emancipatory logic. Painting now would seem to be something relatively cheap, technology-free and easy to make. Yet today it is often far cheaper to shoot and edit a video than to paint a long-deliberated oil painting on canvas. Anyone who cares to factor in the costs of metropolitan studio rents, along with canvas, pigments, labour hours and so on, soon reaches the inevitable conclusion that the overheads of making a painting are frequently much higher than those of making a performance, video, photographic-, instruction- or text-based artwork. Painting is a costly time-space production. So, by extension, the only self-sustaining economy for a painting practice requires entering the art market to exchange paintings as luxury commodities. Therefore the real social fate of any painter who is successful in the marketplace is to service those whom we've come to call the 1%. The time-space of painting's currently conventionalized market economy thus yokes it inevitably to the time-space of the 1%. The portability of the panel painting means that it is in principle indifferent to site, remotely storable, exportable and re-saleable. It lends itself to the globe-roving speculative temporality and secluded, private personal time-space of the 1% for whom painting supplies aesthetic succour, distinction, and investment futures and it provides for, in David Joselit's words, "the acquisition of artworks as a hedge against the future".⁹

While this is a statement of the empirically obvious, the obvious has not yet been taken seriously enough as a constitutive condition of the temporal register of contemporary painting. The point here is not simply the old and tedious chestnut about how awful the commodity form is, and how corrupt the fetish-object of painting is.¹⁰

The point is rather that artworks are at their most forceful, joyous and brutal where they melt and cast aesthetic inventions in the heat of an emancipatory flame; and conversely, where emancipatory velocities are molten into aesthetic flows. To return then to the historical comparison with the transition from architecturally contained painting in the trecento to the rise of the discrete, secular and autonomous panel painting: I claim that the European Reformation's secularizing separation of painting from the ecclesiastical architectural ensemble had an emancipatory force commensurate with the contemporaneous vernacular translations of the bible. Under the differently fraught circumstances of the present, the ready absorption of most of today's painting into the rootless, speculative, future-accumulation-oriented temporality of the elite property rights of the 1% deprives painting of the site for any tractable aesthetic-emancipatory assemblage. The aesthetic interiorities of painting today are in themselves simply not weighty enough, not complex or substantial enough and not socially pliable enough to supply the ballast needed for painting to brace itself against the consequences of possession by the 1%. For, by virtue of being acquired, a work "is halted, paid for, put on a wall, or sent to storage, therefore permanently crystallizing a particular social relation".¹¹

As argued above, the historical transition to panel-based painting in the European Reformation entailed a counter-architectural move away from the architectural ensembles of the renaissance. By the same logic, the obvious response to the contemporary predicament would be to reverse the counter-architectural move: it would be to return painting to some determinate architectural setting. Though he did not describe things in anything like these historical terms, that was indeed Daniel Buren's strategy when, in 1971, he bemoaned "the unspeakable compromise of the portable work of art".¹² Buren self-consciously resisted the counter-architectural logic of the portable panel. His *in situ* approach asserted the primacy of the sites that preceded his striped interventions. This made his best works, such as the wonderful *affichages sauvages* Paris metro billboard series of March-June 1970, inherently iterative, untransportable, exteriorizing and centrifugal in their effects and in the kind of dispersed and locale-attuned attention they invited. In the first (March 1970) phase of this work, Buren pasted uniform vertically white-and-blue striped sheets on the upper right-hand corner of each chosen subway billboard. Then in the second (June) phase similar white-and-orange striped sheets were passed onto the bottom left-hand corners of billboards. As his

statements make clear, the work is conceived precisely in terms of its qualities, distribution and production *in and as time-space*:

(t)he pasting up, which covered over 130 metro stations and was visible during the last week of March 1970, was done on the occasion of the 18 Paris IV 70 exhibition, but was outside its spatial and temporal limits....(E)ach individual [billboard intervention is] unique but always considered as a fragment of the entire work simultaneously carried out. Every new presentation of the work in its different time and place, erases the previous one.¹³

Daniel Buren rendered the vital service of thinking how and what painting might be other than in the guise of the portable work of art and its “unspeakable compromise”. The *in situ* work is not the same as the uncommodifiable work, since it can be bought, sold and possessed as intellectual property. But by working through his problematic of the (non-)portable painting, Buren constructed a temporarily credible position for a new kind of painting that actively and reflexively thinks its outside. At the point where today in 2016, Buren has succumbed to an invitation to decorate the rebuilt Tottenham Court Road station in central London in a prettied and confected version of his signature vocabulary, – it is at this point that the *in situ* painting mode has undeniably become mere high-end wrapping for urban redevelopment, in the context of a new train line aimed to accelerate connections between Heathrow airport and the financial districts to the east of London. Here in a very literal sense we rub up against the limits to any claims for an inherent critical value to site-specificity.

We seem to arrive at a double bind. On the one, hand Buren’s critique of the portable panel painting is commensurate with the observation that it services the needs of the 1%; moreover it effectively has to service the 1% both to cover its production and distribution costs and to also secure its own privileges within the attention economy. On the other hand, the site-specific practice is liable to end up covering its production costs by servicing urban redevelopment projects or gentrification.

What then has this notional impasse in art-politics to do with time in painting? Throughout the above I’ve stressed the dual articulation of time and space in painting in general. But more precisely, it is worth reflecting briefly here on the *temporal conditions of place as such*. Place is never a naturalized spatial given that is sustainable irrespective of the behaviours, rituals and lived practices of people in and across time. A space affects us as a place only on condition that it acquires a relatively stabilized identity across times, and against which we can measure, compare, locate, repeat, rehearse, plan and remember our own experiences and encounters. This is what Peter Osborne has called “the anthropological sense of place as a space that generates identity-forming meanings out of the permanence (that is, generational continuity) of the physical contiguity of its boundaries”.¹⁴ Place therefore is never a purely spatial construct. Rather it is necessarily a time-space effect that produces a locale within a locale through processes of relative permanence and continuity. The longer histories of painting practices from pre-historic cultures ever onward testify to the role painting has played in marking ritual spaces as places; and, conversely, in marking and tracing ritual events, routines and calendars in space. Place-making in and of itself is nothing much to sing about. It is among the most basic and banal of cultural practices. But if we are to think the *temporal* politics of contemporary painting critically, we have to think painting’s orientation to space and place, especially in the light of Buren’s intervention, as motivated by the critique of the portable painted object. The most direct way to focus the issue here is to ask the simple and literal question: What is the spatial destination of painting today? Or more emotively, what is the home of painting? To what *place* – or non-place – does it belong? The studio? The museum, the white cube gallery, the collector’s house, the storeroom or the artfair booth? For the *trecento* the answer was of course the ritual space of the church. Any answer will depend on whether we want the destination to be a space of

reception or one of production, or one that unites the two. For Buren the answer was the provisional surfaces of metropolitan public space. But for us now arguably none of the listed options look at all satisfactory.

Clement Greenberg had pondered much the same problem in 1948, in one of his most perceptive and prescient observations, noting that:

while the painter's relation to his [sic] art has become more private than ever... the architectural and, presumably, social location for which he destines his product has become, in inverse ratio, more public.... Perhaps the contradiction between the architectural destination of abstract art and the very, very private atmosphere in which it is produced will kill ambitious painting in the end. As it is, this contradiction, whose ultimate cause lies outside the autonomy of art, defines specifically the crisis in which painting now finds itself.¹⁵

In essence Greenberg's analysis of a crisis reflected in the contradiction between private time-space of production and a public time-space of reception is precisely the same as Buren's analysis in his 1971¹⁶ essay 'The Function of the Studio' in which he tells of a youthful research project spent travelling to visit artists in their studios. Buren describes the emotional gulf between the joy of the studio visits – where works could be viewed in what he regarded as their rightful context – and the subsequent disappointment of encountering the same artists' works in galleries. "This sense", he writes,

that the main point of the work is lost somewhere between its place of production and its place of consumption forced me to consider the problem and the significance of the work's place. What I later came to realize was that it was the reality of the work, its 'truth', its relation to its creator and place of creation, that was irretrievably lost in this transfer.¹⁷

What strikes the mind as disconcerting here is that an artist as intelligent as Buren can base his argument on an almost pre-critical authenticity claim or, put in Derridean terms, on a claim for presence, where the presence of the artist as producer guarantees the work's proper context and proper appearance.

The demand to unite the time and space of production and reception of an artwork, which has sometimes been identified with performative and participatory work, is always likely to be difficult for painting understood under its most basic description as a ritualized presentation of chromatic surfaces that endure in time. To demand the same unity of production and reception in, for example, a work of literature would be akin to collapsing what Roland Barthes called the difference between enunciation and enunciated, as if one were to confuse the narrator of novel that is written in the first person with the persona of the author.¹⁸

At this point in the argument Buren's position unexpectedly makes contact with painting's discourse of indexicality. Indexicality – whether in the guise of Pollock's drips, Cézanne's *passages* or Frankenthaler's stains and pours – is one of the privileged tropes of temporality in painting. The connection lies in reading the indexical mark as the viewer's point of contact with the time of the painting's production. In other words the trope of indexicality is proposed to mediate between the time of production and the time of reception. While that notion of course can sometimes apply, it is no less true that any artist who employs indexicality quickly learns to play with temporal simulation and artifice. Anyone who has watched the films of Willem de Kooning at work in his Long Island studio can see how long he takes to delicately rehearse and place a gesture that will end up looking instantaneous and reckless. Thus 'authentically' indexical painting is unnecessary. Indeed it may be a lot less open than 'artificially' indexical painting. The same argument goes for the authenticity of painting's site

of production. Presenting a display of artworks as a site of production then has nothing to do with authenticity, contra Buren. More realistically, for painting, it has to do with a conscious and tactical engagement with the discursive determination of artworks, which also entails placing paintings as moments of opacity and condensation that complicate and short-circuit the temporalities of discourse.

Returning to the question of what is painting's spatial destination, we arrive at multiple but fertile complications. Is the destination of painting a place at all, or is it rather a non-place? Drawing on the writings of the sociologist Manuel Castells, we can describe contemporary space as existing in three modes: the space of place, the space of non-place and the space of flows.¹⁹ The temporal-spatial dialectic of the constitution of space as place was already sketched out above. Non-place, as the term is elaborated by Marc Augé,²⁰ refers to the generic and substitutable spaces of the airport departure lounge, hotel lobby, hospital waiting room, shopping mall and white cube gallery. What characterizes these as non-places is that they lack any necessary or discernible relation to their surrounding locale or to times of day and night (they tend to be temporally constant under artificial light) or seasonal change. Castells' concept of the space of flows, refers to the nodes, corridors, channels, dynamics and synchronicities of the transportation and transmission of people, things and information.

Within this three-termed schema the white cube gallery appears as a kind of non-place. The metropolitan art museum typically combines elements of non-place (its internal white cube spaces) and place (the museum qua landmark edifice, or the Tate Turbine Hall or Palais de Tokyo type of spectacular spatial production).

Whatever bargain is struck between the production and reception of painting today, it will be the outcome of a negotiation that has to reckon with painting as spatial production, which is to say painting qua production in and of space and place/ non-place. This is the contemporary resonance of the Greenberg passage cited above. The reception of painting today demands a rhetorically public mode of address both in terms of its styles and visual vocabularies (with their invitations to conceive the painting in relation to and in excess of the wall it hangs on, and therefore both within and beyond its own physical frame), and in terms of its discursively shared reception (whereby painting offers itself as intervention and provocation in discursive space).

Painting is a special kind of spatial marking that can both affirm spatial singularity, or place, and contradict it by projecting a virtual elsewhere. Colour is an especially potent resource for this simultaneous assertion and erasure of space as place, in that colour as such projects its own virtual spaces. But agitating against such considerations is the tendency to regard all artistic productions as matters of purely social and discursive assemblage.

There is a consensus that art now is produced in its discourses. Therefore, so the argument goes, the distinction between production and reception no longer holds in the way that it once did for a studio and craft-oriented production of an artefact that would be made, then displayed, then finally seen by an audience and interpreted. This consensus is a formalization of Marcel Duchamp's insistence on the "coefficient of art", which recognised the importance of the viewer in completing the artwork. Yet in the contemporary formalization of Duchamp's art coefficient the audience's completion of the work is conceived reductively as purely a matter of linguistic exchanges (putting aside the obvious problem that these exchanges are often mere imaginings in the minds of artists, commentators and interpreters). This consensus position has also been reflected in the recent proliferation of formats like the performance-lecture, or the artwork as curatorial Russian doll of other artworks, in which modes of address previously associated with art's reception (the art-history or theory lecture; the curator's process of selection) are re-purposed as figures of its production. Though this point is rarely made explicit, the

consensus carries with it the strong implication that the time proper to art's production-cum-reception is a temporality of discourse, which, taken literally, indicates a temporality of utterances, of exchanges of speech. The works of Liam Gillick, such as his *Discussion Island* series begun in 1996, are among the most lucid in rendering this implication explicit and literal in their proposed or imagined (though not necessarily realized) discursive outcomes.

One might complain that the position I am characterizing is a straw man. But I argue that, on the one hand, this is a tacit and largely unexamined corollary of the discursive consensus view. On the other hand, it is occasionally made more or less explicit by theorists, as notably by Nicolas Bourriaud, who has written that "because art is made of the same materials as ...social exchanges.... [it] has a quality that sets it apart from other things produced by human activities.... [which] is its (relative) social transparency".²¹ Aside from Bourriaud's flawed premise and the equally dubious claim for an exceptional status for art (why is an artwork any more 'socially transparent' than a swimming pool or a frying pan?), it would seem to me that precisely the opposite holds for art: its operation depends upon intruding into and interrupting zones of social transparency. As he continues, "once introduced into the [social] exchange circuit, any kind of production takes on a social form which no longer has anything to do with its original usefulness".²² On this account everything is dissoluble without remainder in the medium of social exchange. Bourriaud's critical project is based on a category error that conflates art's affective provocation with the discursive exchanges it provokes and ends up mistakenly taking them to be one and the same thing. If, like Bourriaud, one believes that nothing is opaque to discursive exchange and that discursive production necessarily trumps the sensuously convened affective event, then the temporality of the artwork is identical to the temporality of discourse. If the temporality of art is thereby identical to the temporality of speech acts, then it is fundamentally linear in character even if its linearity is deemed plural, intermittent, interrupted, multi-layered or polyphonic. This in itself should give us pause to retain suspicion regarding the terms of the discursive consensus.

Against the reductive account of discursive production-cum-reception we should insist on the validity of studio-based (and even craft-based) moments of production not at all as sources of authenticity but rather as rehearsals for affective protrusions into discursively adumbrated aesthetic sites. Studio time in this scenario is nothing like the afternoon of the exceptional soul floating in the *durée* of a contemplative epiphany; it is simply the unaccountable time-space of material thought, rehearsal and play that must be both reckless and ruthlessly pragmatic, both aimless and targeted, and which, in the context of a science lab, would be called research.

In relation to the fate of conventional painting as tradable property, the advantage of performative and discursively constituted artworks is not that they cannot be traded and owned (clearly they can be) but that they can perform time-space disjunctures that conventional paintings cannot; and that these can both critically parallel such operations by capital and hold out the promise for their non-instrumental and non-rational construction. Or to use the argot of the stock trader, painting in a sense needs to *leverage* its discursive destinations. Whether it can plausibly do so without sacrificing its own gift, which is the gift, in Kantian terms, of a "sensuous particularity" bestowed by colour and surface, is perhaps the central problem facing ambitious painting today. A version of the baby-with-the-bathwater problem. But that figure of speech couches the issue purely in terms of a safeguarding against loss. We need instead to think the issue as one of leveraging painting's gift in relation to an external discursive construct, assemblage or sequence, such that the painting is not a mere prop or pretext for or instrument of discourse, but rather an aesthetic-discursive node and catalyst.

David Joselit's 2009 essay 'Painting Beside Itself' made a comparable argument, and one to which I am sympathetic. There Joselit argued that the new task of painting was to insert itself into networks and thereby evade the reificatory capture of the museum or the collector's home, understood as destinations that cause "the permanent arrest of an object's circulation within a network" whereby "it is halted, paid for, put on a wall, or sent to storage, therefore permanently crystallizing a particular social relation".²³ The weakness of Joselit's essay, with its proposal for so-called "transitive painting", however, lies in its innocent faith in the "capacity [of transitive painting] to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it."²⁴ To sustain this faith Joselit has to overlook the aridity of Stephen Prina's work *Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet*, based on Manet's *catalogue raisonné*, and must fail to notice that Jutta Koether's extended painting installation-performances provide the discursive alibi and cloak for a nostalgic and forgettable painting practice. In short, the flaw in Joselit's position is that it is much too theoretical. It presumes that a painting practice can hold "in suspension" its internal and external domains, and the boundaries between them, by an act of fiat, as if like Duchamp nominating a new readymade. At this point Joselit's argument threatens to cancel itself in two ways. First, its hope of evading a reification instituted by property relations can end instead with a different reification at another level, produced by discourse. Second, if the navigation and negotiation between painting's interiority and exteriority were as cerebral and frictionless as Joselit's account implies, then the historically material and extra-discursive dimensions of painting practices would be of no consequence. That would replay another version of the medium-specificity problem: 'painting beside itself' would then mean nothing different to 'art beside itself' or 'semiotic gunk beside itself'. So while Joselit has helped re-frame the debate, he fails to reflect on the condition of painting's residual interiorities after it has 'besided' itself and, relatedly, their potential disharmony with the discursive iterations attendant on the expanded painting event.

If we are to impute the discursive construct reductively, though perhaps also idealistically (in the spirit of Hannah Arendt) as exchanges of speech, then clearly painting can appear in this construct as a moment of flawed translation, not in the sense of an ineffable presence that forever defies language, but rather in the sense of a temporal disjuncture that can only intersect partially and insufficiently with speech, as the latter adopts the guises of metaphor, representation, or redundant and tautological ostensive indication. In other words, all the long familiar temporal modalities of painting – such as the instantaneousness of the striking image, often associated with modernisms²⁵ – or the equation of physical permanence that the still life asserts between the constituents of its image and its own condition as a painted object – these can become moments of heightened disjunction within a discursive sequence or what I will call a discursive array.

There are many emerging positions that actively attempt to insert painting into a discursive array. These could include Merlin Carpenter, Lucy McKenzie, Claude Rutault and Jutta Koether. It is worth looking at some of these in more detail.

Jutta Koether's work – on the evidence so far – does not exceed the performative halo of its ephemeral origins. As such, when it appears in a museum or gallery 'after the event' of the performance, it tends only to stake an authority that is claimed anecdotally by the testimony of witnesses. In this scenario the paintings themselves come to function as anecdotally contextualized props, and props that on their own, deprived of past testimonies, are far from compelling. The fatal temporal flaw here – and this is also what Joselit fails to think in 'Painting Beside Itself' – is that the works then only possess a past and not a present.

Merlin Carpenter's performative equation is much more crude. His 2007-2009 exhibition series titled *The Opening*²⁶ chimes oddly and dissonantly with Buren's discussion of the time-space destination of painting. In this sequence of commercial gallery exhibitions Carpenter placed blank white canvases on the walls. During the exhibition openings he

would then paint rapidly on the canvases with black paint in front of expectant crowds. The black markings were usually in the guise of short texts (such as “Die collector scum” or “I like Chris Wool”) that referred directly to other art or the art market. The link with Buren lies of course in the assertion of the gallery as the site of production, though the similarities end there. One could argue endlessly about the stakes of paintings, like Carpenter’s, that claim a critique of the art market and which are then enthusiastically bought by the very people they pretend to insult. Clearly none of this troubles the art market. In fact the contrary is true: these openings perform a localized version of spectacle that anchors the value of the paintings. But perhaps what can be applauded about Carpenter’s resultant paintings, with their ultra-abbreviated black flickers on blank white grounds, and their curious blend of authorial *hauteur* and paranoid artworld savvy, is that they offer themselves first as documentation of a transient event, and perhaps only second, if at all, as paintings in any enduring sense. Hence the paintings perhaps work best where they offer the least to the gaze of posterity. If we can look beyond its overt cynicism, *The Opening* series bluntly poses the problem of the exhibition preview itself as the privileged social site of production and asks what painting could do at this temporal-spatial site. While the paintings are largely devoid of imagery and consist mostly of scrawled words and meagre gestures, the performances themselves tend to supply strong images, as especially with the ‘drive-by’ works, arguably the best event of the series, in which Carpenter wielded a loaded brush while being driven in a Mercedes alongside several blank canvases. Here, the photo document supplies the strong image, while the paintings have the Bartleby-like feel of reduced *refusenik* place-holders for gestural abstraction, very much in vein of Carpenter’s fellow ex-Kippenberger assistant, Michael Krebber. But in the end the problem with the paintings from *The Opening* is not that they are cynical, but that they are not cynical enough, since they fail to arrive at the negativity that would allow them to indicate the social outside of the gallery/market/discourse nexus.

Lucy McKenzie’s recent exhibition ‘Inspired by an Atlas of Leprosy’ at Daniel Buchholz in Berlin²⁷ was a hugely impressive attempt both to assert and critically to displace the exhibition as site of production. What raises the stakes so powerfully in this show is the way that every moment of ostensible display-as-production is equally a figuring or conscious rhetoric of production. We are not at all in a scene of *in situ* authentic production in the sense that Buren imagined. What’s more, McKenzie reaps the harvest of her own carefully assembled apparatus, or what, for want of a better phrase, one might call her arsenal of reflexive protocols. By which I mean the plethora of painting or para-painting procedures she has developed over several years, and which succeed, against the odds, in both celebrating painting as a kind of idiosyncratic craft-based anarchism, and simultaneously confronting painting with its redundancy and anachronism in the face of all that remains external to it.

One of these reflexive protocols originated in McKenzie’s choice to study traditional decorative painting techniques (such as imitation marbling) at the Van Der Kelen school in Brussels in 2007-08. This decision was astutely emblematic of the modern conundrum of painting’s craft. For the training is of course rule-governed and therefore ostensibly the polar opposite of an art school education. Its techniques bespeak nostalgia, conservatism, older archaic stylings of power and the value of labour. Yet precisely by taking up these techniques McKenzie is able to occupy a position of critical autonomy²⁸ at the point where she declares the overt conservatism and anachronism of these craft tropes. This is an astute move indeed. It is as close as anyone currently gets to having your cake and eating it as regards operating a sphere of autonomy for painting while simultaneously critiquing it.

As a key feature of this approach, McKenzie’s growing facility for *trompe l’oeil* allows her to move adeptly in a realm of her own, somewhere between Duchampian nomination of a pictorial readymade and appropriation, but voiced through a notionally hyper-conservative craft technique. This makes for a strange but brilliant cocktail of affect and discourse. In this

show McKenzie deploys this trick to hop from pictorial re-makes of office noticeboards, to bedroom posters, hoarded photocopies, letters to inland revenue and so on.

As if that were not enough, McKenzie built up further layers of reflexive complexity in figuring the whole space of the Berlin gallery (set over two storeys of a grand *Jugendstil* townhouse) as a living house that is at once private domicile, creative work space, office and boutique. Upon entering the gallery one sees a cute foamboard scaled model of the entire interior. As one then moves around the show, one inhabits the model room by room. McKenzie seems to succeed cannily in courting overt literalness, whilst simultaneously holding it at bay. And it is usually the act of painting that holds it at bay, but only just. For instance, when we enter the boudoir of the home, we notice that the mattresses of the bed are in fact an assemblage of flat canvases adroitly painted with illusionistic fabric patterning.

In among all this, painting is placed at the operational centre of the practice yet is constantly displaced. It is tasked with much that is well below the dignity of its medium specificity, and so much so that it is frequently almost invisible as painting. But McKenzie is smart enough to make sure that the roles keep shifting and the terms of address are constantly altered. Painting here is mostly 'dumb' imitation. But not only that. There are also oddly stilted abstract paintings that act out roles of half-forgotten autonomy and fantasized spirituality, and which are posed here to stand for the refined taste of the fictional creative who occupies the house. There are also other paintings – part diagram, part architect's impression, part cross-sections through walls – that depict entire rooms in the house; and beyond that still others that combine elegant, laconic figure paintings with colonial maps. Throughout the show the conceit of a collaborative design practice for sport-fashion garments is enacted 'for real', both through *trompe l'oeil* paintings of related business correspondence, and the provision of a boutique, complete with priced garments on hanging rails, and changing rooms for customers.

Lucy McKenzie, perhaps more than any other artist working today, has concocted a *modus operandi* for opening painting up across a discursive site in such a way that it constantly others itself and oversteps its formal, stylistic and discursive boundaries. But it accomplishes this without quite relinquishing the force of its interiorities or of its pictorial enchantments. 'Inspired By a Map of Leprosy' did many other things and told other stories that cannot be related here. But if a painting exhibition is at all capable of weaving a discursive array, then McKenzie has created the most complete and compelling blueprint for how it might be done, and has given the most fully rehearsed demonstration of the intelligence, tact, deftness and sheer commitment it requires.

Conclusion

I've argued above that new temporalities stemming from the internet and emergent communication technologies do not lend themselves to artistic synthesis at the level of perception, since they have been accelerated beyond human perceptual grasp. Instead painting has to address itself reflexively as time-space production. This is urgent for two main reasons: first, because only by that path can painting reclaim an aesthetic-
emancipatory trajectory beyond the foreclosures of its market exchange value; and second, only by consciously staging itself as site of time-space production can painting address the problematic of labour and production as such, especially in the light of the technologically mandated impetus to conflate all forms of labour with immaterial labour or to view the latter as transcendent or privileged. The art-theoretical version of this conflation is the discursive consensus that views art as strictly the product of its discourses. Within this mapping, Daniel Buren's position is formative and instructive but flawed. Yet Buren was probably the first to think a consistent alternative for painting to the traditional alignments of studio/production and gallery/reception. The virtue of a practice like Lucy McKenzie's is then to juggle nearly

all the terms of this debate without letting any balls fall – or without letting them fall where we would expect. For ‘Inspired by an Atlas...’ performs, scores and narrates multiple cases and scales of spatial production: gallery as home and home as gallery; home as workplace and office; home as design ensemble; putting up posters to make a non-place into a place of intimate belonging; colonialist mapping and trading and so on.

All of these are indexed and projected too as temporal operations at several levels: the narrated and enacted processes of the workplace and home; the architectural *enfilade* of the succession of rooms in the scale model and life-size interior, inviting the gallery visitor to circulate and to anticipate, observe and recall successive spaces; the indexical qualities of the painted surfaces; the absorptive or exteriorizing qualities of the paintings as images and objects. McKenzie indicates how we can summon painting within the time-space of discursive production and conversely how we can summon a discursive array at the site of painting without either mastering the other, or transcending the scene of their non-identity.

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NOTES

¹ Jonathan Crary *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London and New York, Verso, 2013, p9.

² Crary *ibid.* p32.

³ *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 14 December 2014 – 5 April 2015; works by: Richard Aldrich, Joe Bradley, Kerstin Brätsch, Matt Connors, Michaela Eichwald, Nicole Eisenman, Mark Grotjahn, Charline von Heyl, Rashid Johnson, Julie Mehretu, Dianna Molzan, Oscar Murillo, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, Josh Smith, Mary Weatherford, Michael Williams.

⁴ Laura Hoptman *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2014, p13.

⁵ *Op. cit.*

⁶ *Ibid* p14.

⁷ Ibid p14.

⁸ David Joselit *Marking, Storing, Scoring and Speculating (Time)*, in Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (eds.) 'Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition'. Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2016, p17.

⁹ Ibid p11-12.

¹⁰ Painting in its European heritage has always been deeply corrupt since long before Caravaggio's reputation shielded him from a murder charge. What matters is that the corruption of its context is both inscribed in and exceeded by Caravaggio's painting.

¹¹ David Joselit *Painting Beside Itself*. October 130, Fall 2009, p132.

¹² Daniel Buren *The Function of the Studio*. October 10. 1979.

¹³ Daniel Buren *Legend*. (Two volumes) London, Warehouse Publications, 1973, vol 1, p1.

¹⁴ Peter Osborne *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London, Verso, 2013, p.137.

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg *The Situation at the Moment*. Partisan Review, January 1948. Reprinted in Greenberg 'The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949', edited by John O'Brian, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p195.

¹⁶ Written in 1971; first publication and English translation 1979. Daniel Buren *The Function of the Studio*. October 10, 1979, p54.

¹⁷ Daniel Buren *The Function of the Studio*. October 10, 1979, p56.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes *To Write: A Transitive Verb*. In Barthes 'The Rustle of Language'. Translated by Richard Howard. New York, Hill and Wang, 1987.

¹⁹ Manuel Castells *The Rise of the Network Society*. London, Blackwell, 1996.

²⁰ Marc Augé *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe. London, Verso, 1995.

²¹ Nicolas Bourriaud *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Michael Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland. Dijon, Les Presses du réel, 2002, p41.

²² Bourriaud ibid p 42.

²³ David Joselit *Painting Beside Itself*. October 130, Fall 2009, p.132.

²⁴ Joselit ibid p129.

²⁵ Manet's paintings were already being described in these terms in the 1860s, as examined by Michael Fried. See Fried *Manet's Modernism, or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p301.

²⁶ Merlin Carpenter: *The Opening* exhibition series; opening performances included: Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, 23/09/2007; Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles, 10/02/2008; Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin, 03/05/2008; Galerie Mitterand & Sanz, Zurich, 30/05/2008; Simon Lee Gallery, London, 31/03/2009; dépendance, Brussels, 20/06/2009.

²⁷ 20th November 2015 – 23rd January 2016.

²⁸ I use the term 'critical autonomy' in the sense of a relative autonomy that is asserted precisely at the point where aesthetic autonomy is consciously disavowed through a declaration of heteronomy. In this spirit see Osborne *ibid.* p156: "it became a ... requirement of the good faith of the artwork that it confront the bad faith of its own autonomy". Understood in this spirit, critical autonomy is the dialectical fruit of a reflection upon the failure of aesthetic autonomy.