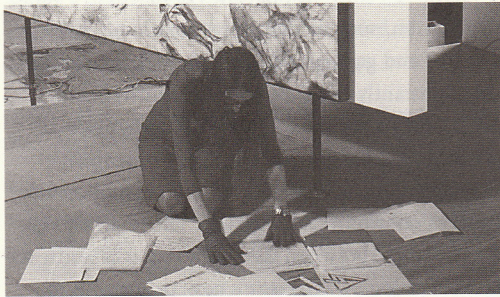


REVIEWS

PYRRHIC VICTORIES

Sam Lewitt on Jutta Koether at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York



"Lux Interior", Jutta Koether's most recent exhibition at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, confronted viewers with a spare, awkwardly arranged display. As its sole element one encountered a single painting, hung on an independent, slightly off-center wall. The wall, swiveled at an oblique angle, extends off from the edge of the gallery's stage-like viewing space: anthropomorphically caught between entering and exiting. The wall and canvas' spatial arrangement are at once unceremonious—the canvas is too large for its supporting wall, haphazardly jutting above it—and self-consciously sparse—one cannot see the canvas from the gallery's entryway, but rather must walk around it to get a view, creating the immediate impression upon entry of an architectural irregularity framed by an empty gallery. The painting itself, titled "Hot Rod (After Poussin)", presents an anemic to-scale remake of Nicolas Poussin's "Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe" (1651).

Koether's painting extends her endeavor to displace the disreputable history of neo-expressionism. She directs the gestural/figurative tropes of neo-expressionism's retrograde semblance of interiority toward the status of an overripe surface. Poussin's mythological subject is thinned and dehydrated here, his academicism submitted to an incongruous gesturality that falls short of the assumptions of painterly authority or pathos

that a reactionary expressionism would want to keep intact. Koether's marshaling of Poussin is imbued with both identification and aggression toward an extended history of painterly mastery. The academic subject of the painting is vitiated rather than vivified by Koether's brusque marks, which delineate neither the dubious unified subject of expressionism, nor the compositional unity of classicism. The historical figures of painterly authority that appear in "Lux Interior" are summoned with extreme ambivalence.¹ Their labors are recoded by marks of an agitated paintbrush, at once trepidatious and overly grandiose. If we dismiss this as the facile irony of parodic citation on the one hand, or as the all too earnest work of an adoring supplicant—merely courting the perversion which lands squarely on the desire for perversion—then we would miss the intensified form of ambiguity which Koether holds on to as the work's most complex stake: What sort of subject position can this work possibly be rehearsing?

What drives Koether's exhibition is neither its central painting, nor its mode of display per se, but both of these elements' participation in a series of three "acts", executed as performance-lectures and staged in front of and around "Hot Rod (after Poussin)" throughout the show's duration. The confrontation between painting and performer adds another layer of reference to Koether's exhibition. T. J. Clark's 2006 book "The Sight of Death" is submitted to a re-staging in "Lux Interior". Clark's book, subtitled "An Experiment in Art Writing", consists of a series of diary entries, written during a research stint at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. The book focuses his considerable energies on two paintings by Poussin in the museum's collection, which happened to be hanging in the same gallery at the time of his tenure.

Koether plunders this brooding textual scene, re-constructing an impoverished version of Clark's contemplative museum interior: installing a harsh spotlight glaring at her "Poussin", in reference to Clark's repeated observations on the delicacies of interplay between tungsten light-

ing and the California morning sun. Clark seeks to claim a position of autonomy for a prolonged visual engagement in the service of art historical cogitation, his daily jottings serving as an embodied argument for a disappearing form of optical experience. In her "acts" Koether re-stages this scene, yet supplants its documentation of optical competence with an unmoored constitution in language; one which is pocked with moments of blind, uncontrolled vituperation in her recitation of a prepared script. The art historian's careful discussion of what he *sees* is transferred to the artist's at times acquiescent, at times belligerent pro- ducing herself to a viewing audience.

Koether's acts operate between stage-directed theater and spontaneous bodily disorder. Her uncomfortable manner of reading the prepared text of these monologues, scrawled in red marker across translucent pieces of paper and punctuated with sudden unruliness – stomping, shaking, pacing – in turn lash-out and entreat recognition from viewers. An unstable delivery of inconsistent modes of address reigns here, oscillating between rage-filled regurgitation of lyrics from songs by The Cramps² and the mandarin authority of academic pictorial analyses. If this performance strategy smacks of the antagonizing *Selbstdarsteller*, it would seem historically apt in light of Koether's formation within the milieu revolving around the canonical nihilism of certain masculinist painters in 1980s–90s Cologne. However, the self-asserting domination of audiences witness to the endless Kippenberger joke only bears upon Koether's performances insofar as the former's hyperbolic, publicly aggrandizing posture is inverted by the latter into a thematic fixation on self-immolation.

During Koether's acts it became apparent to spectators unfamiliar with her work that these outbursts would not result in delineating an identifiable contradiction between cultural forms of linguistic representation that could compete for cultural authority, let alone an analytically derived judgment about those forms. The comportment of official forms of speech and the compulsive, rhythmical recitations of punk rock strategies of

cultural debasement and annihilation are collapsed here: both are subsumed as the chatter of an artistic subjectivity at once evacuated and energized by a performed anxiety regarding the artist's capacity to publicly position herself. Koether undermines conventional sites of discursive value production, such as the artist's statement, press release³ and gallery talk by deploying a language that constantly loses its thread of self-reflection. She instead attempts to locate the dimension of (an at times self-destructive) force in language that operates regardless of the consensual conditions of communicative action. The tenor of her acts fluctuate between the ingratiating of audience consideration – "This is my new painting" – to self-laceration – as in her recurrent enunciation "blow up my mind. Lightning bolt my brain"⁴; a transfer that is distanced from an ironic cue to audience complicity by Koether's awkward delivery.

Yet something contrived undoubtedly subsists in this characterization of language of which Koether seems aware. Koether's rants find themselves directed toward the presentation of an artist reduced to a sequence of postures imbued with the force of a singularly perturbed soma; one that seems to find recourse to articulated intent only by culminating in iterable, readymade utterances. She stages the fall from a self-definitional language of description by placing herself in the chasm between her optically *ersatz* rendition of a subject of classicist order and a targeted explosion of that subject in a chaotic, regurgitated script.

A grave consequence of all this might be that Koether's authoritative speech and energetic prattle results in a definitively negative evaluation of the linguistic resources available for an attempt at self-constitution. Yet the coherence of this negative judgment itself seems to be doubted by Koether's uncomfortable acts. It appears as if Koether would like nothing more than to pull the rug out from under the audience's firm footing in the work, whether optical or linguistic, at the very same time that she finds her own sure ground withdrawn. Whatever remains after

this assault on an assumed access to subjectivity inscribed into works of art, it allows for the perception that Koether's destruction of a descriptive access to self-experience is no less unsavory than a discourse – such as this review – which by its very form would seek to occupy a transcendent position over an at times crippled, at times demonic force of unhinged language.

Jutta Koether, "Lux Interior", Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, April 26 – May 24, 2009.

Notes

- 1 In addition to "Hot Rod (after Poussin)", the only other work of Koether's hanging in the gallery was a paint-by-numbers Cezanne, derived from an amateur painting kit and colored in by Koether, which sat in the gallery's open office throughout the exhibition.
- 2 The exhibition title derives from the name of that band's now deceased lead singer.
- 3 Next to the gallery issued statement, Koether had on view a dossier of "research materials", which included portions of the writing that went into her acts.
- 4 A citation from The Cramps' song "Blow Up Your Mind".

LIAM'S (NOT) HOME

On Liam Gillick at the German Pavilion of the Venice Biennial 2009



Ever since curator Nicolaus Schafhausen announced to invite British artist Liam Gillick to exhibit at the German pavilion during this year's Venice Biennale, this decision sparked an ongoing controversy. At the opening in June, Gillick surprised with an installation which equally disappointed those expecting the artist's familiar forms and colours as well as those anticipating explicit references to the history of the exhibition building designed by Albert Speer.

A closer look at the highly referential work of Gillick, however, unearths a critical dimension articulated in the monologue of a talking cat. Listening to it one could learn about the historical utopia of community a modernist kitchenette could hold against its own initial aspirations.

It would appear to have become a widespread assumption in recent years that any truly ambitious work occupying the space of the German Pavilion in Venice's Giardini will somehow have to address the troubled history of the building itself. The expectations accordingly were high when, in early summer 2008, curator Nicolaus Schafhausen announced his choice of British artist Liam Gillick to represent Germany at the 53rd Venice Biennale. Schafhausen's selection angered conservatives, eliciting protests from Walter Bornsen, culture spokesperson for the Christian Democratic Union – who condemned the decision to have a non-German artist, and one moreover with few significant ties to the country, in the national pavilion – and from the Bundesverband Bildender Künstlerinnen und Künstler (National Federation