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## How to Write About... Jutta Koether

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Jutta Koether, *Antibody V* (semi-popular painting), 1993, oil on canvas, 241 x 188 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin.

1. Choose the time of day and prepare the room accordingly. Place the desk by the window to catch the soft morning light. Set out a cup of green tea and a ruled notebook. Writing longhand is advised. Select a rolling-ball pen and watch the words glide across the page. That's the pen, in your very own hand. Or write while sitting on a park bench to screams of delight from kids as they swing back and forth. Writing as a playground? Painting as a playground? 'Higher, higher!' They demand to be pushed higher. Or write on the subway, rocked by the low rushing rumble and drone. New York City writing. 'Stand clear of the closing doors...'

2. Take an approach. The straight, critical appreciation to join the others? Add another respectable line to the bibliography. Or post-post-feminist theory - female first, painter second? For this the Americans are entirely to blame. Separating the men from the boys. All those barroom brawls, crashing cars. And what do you get for turning your back on painting from life? Pollock never painted another tree until he painted one with his own blood (an artist not known for red, or blue for that matter). It was Arthur Danto who once said that, at their very best, a room full of Morris Louis paintings was like drifting through the lingerie department at Bendel's. How utterly feminine! And yet painting remains on so many levels within the realm of men; a realm understood in the old-world sense. The painting kingdom is a realm of men, still to this day, and even effeminate men. (Or is it all *Art Brut*?) For Koether's exhibition at Galerie Sophia Ungers in Cologne in 1991, an accordion foldout with colour reproductions was published. The title, *100% Malerei*, held the top of the cover while below was the phrase, '*NIEMAND IST EINE FRAU*'. Translation: '*100% Painting. NOBODY IS A WOMAN*'.

3. Personal recollection can be helpful, though not always reliable. My first encounter with

Jutta Koether was in the park near my house in the fall of 1992. Neither of us can fix the date with any certainty, but I still remember, more than ten years later, all the pictures she showed me. Vividly. This may have something to do with the vividness and intensity of the paintings themselves, even seen in snapshot or slide form. Bright-red paintings, blood red, vibrant, alive, aglow. Having become well known for a show I had organised in which every work in the gallery was red, I had for years been contacted by artists who had made red paintings they thought I couldn't wait to see. Koether's red paintings are the only ones I was happy to discover and can now recall. She made red paintings for years, most concentrated in the late 1980s and early 90s.

John Miller has linked Koether's red paintings to the work of Louise Bourgeois and, more closely, to Yayoi Kusama, for whom a 'proliferation of forms, production and reproduction (which, in biological terms, remains of course unique to women) overwhelms the identity of the producer. These accumulations negate identity the same way in Koether's paintings. Ironically, this negation opposes the identity ordinarily achieved through process - expressionism.<sup>1</sup> Koether's 'body-operating' is related to Kusama's in other ways, to her presence in public forums, the lecture-performances, and to the live-music situations that are part and parcel of her willingness to collaborate with other artists - most recently with Steven Parrino appearing as Electrophilia, previously with Rita Ackermann and Kim Gordon, and in duets with the guitarists Thurston Moore and Tom Verlaine. The interaction of art and music is an integral part of Koether's strategy, and she herself has commented on the 'transfers of musical methods to painting and vice versa: improvisation in the drawing books and in the "sun/ny" show; techno in the *Antibodies* series; free jazz in "Songs of New York & c."; rock in the series of red paintings.<sup>2</sup>

4. Choose some music to write by. Sun Ra's *Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy*. Truly the music of the spheres, performed by the Sun King and his Myth-Science Arkestra. In his own words: 'Art is the foundation of any living culture ... A nation without art is a nation without a lifeline. Art is the lifeline because art is the airy concept of greater living. It is the airy foundation of the airy kingdom of the future. Tomorrow Beyond Tomorrow is the greater kingdom. THE KINGDOM OF THE SPACE AGE.'<sup>3</sup> Painting as a way of reaching and describing other worlds, this one as well? Koether's *Sun Paintings* present us with an image from life best regarded with a squint of the eye. Even wearing shades, it is possible to stare too long. And so she also paints a midnight sun, a black sun, the sun eclipsed, sunspots ... these, of course, relate to intense magnetic fields. Another Sun Ra title comes to mind: *Portrait of the Living Sky*.

Now choose another record. *Snuffbox Immanence* by Ghost, recorded in the Ghost House just outside Tokyo. This is 'heavy chamber folk' and organic psychedelics; layers of marimba, vibes, cello, a celtic harp, harpsichord, tubular bells; a version of the Rolling Stones's 'Live With Me'. Masaki Batoh sings: 'I've got nasty habits ... I take tea at three'. He doesn't mean green tea, and for me it's 3AM ... perpetually.

5. You can always try and write it as if the artist herself had painted it. Only trouble with the artist in question is that Koether's painting is always, in a sense, a form of writing itself. Fragments of songs, poems, coded messages, voices heard ...

6. Imagine that Walter Benjamin, in the middle of a lecture on William Blake, is heckled by William Burroughs. Or that Karl Lagerfeld and Karl Marx are in a heated argument over Lagerfeld's intention to base an entire line of sleeveless silk tops on paintings by Arthur Dove. Burroughs came by and offered to blow Lagerfeld's head clean off. Through delicate negotiation it was agreed that only a very limited line of silk scarves would be offered for sale in boutiques in Paris and Berlin. Calm prevailed. Anyway, as Bill later noticed, the gun wasn't actually loaded. Still, he was surprised at how easily two intelligent men could go off the deep end like that. Voices and fists had been raised.

The series of paintings titled *Male Hysterics* began with an abstract portrait in 2001 and unfolded in the following year with figures both recognisable and utterly transformed - two versions of the young Fassbinder and a nightmarish Neil Young most prominently. Portraiture is often quite easily (and lazily) read as 'psychologically charged', but Koether's provocation, referring to men as hysterics, is rendered complex by her handling of each subject. She trades off a sort of magic-realism in one and a pop-inflected lightness in another; an agitated primitivism played against radiant symbolism. And yet this series,

which has yet to be shown, is entirely within Koether's own identifiable 'style'.

7. Look to her titles for clues. *Well, Show Me Nothing* (oil on canvas, 1994) is a riotous landscape/map, 74 by 114 inches (188 x 290cm), packed with pure, delirious energy. The brain/eye can barely decide where to look first and where to dart next. Imagine being five and wanting to go on every ride at the carnival at the same time. Tilt-a-whirl, roller coaster, ferris wheel - this painting seems to show everything, and all at once. And yet when you go back for another look there's always something you hadn't noticed before. Shouldn't art do that, or is this asking too much? Koether's is an art for those who actively look and who read, who spend time inside the painting. Perhaps this accounts for her quote/unquote 'marginal status'? Could this title be spoken by the painting to the viewer? The artist comes to the rescue and identifies the quote. In response to a fan who had been hesitant to show him her hometown - insisting that 'it's nothing' - Elvis Presley said, 'Well, show me nothing'.<sup>4</sup>

*I Choose Everything* (acrylic on linen, 1997) is a soft and fuzzy grid of near-pastel heads. What it represents, however, may have less to do with its imagery than with its statement of fact. Koether is someone who, faced with a choice, will take all. It's all for the taking. But make no mistake; this is an artist whose sense of freedom and openness is tempered with discipline, internal rules, deliberation. In December 2000, for example, she embarked on a project to create a drawing each day for an entire year. The resulting 'calendar/diary', in the form of hundreds of gridded sheets filled in with coloured pencil, is a portrait of time and emotion, shifts of mood both personal and collective. Koether's project ultimately went beyond the one-year mark and was recorded on a 68-minute DVD, *December 10th, 2000-May 6th, 2002*. She describes it as 'modelled after a Straub/Huilliet educational film on Cézanne'.<sup>5</sup> The original drawings were shown spread out on the floor of her small apartment, and Koether invited friends, acquaintances and any interested parties, as she often does. Koether is very often without a studio, working at home, asking people over.

In New York in Spring 1992, Koether rented two little rooms in a spooky old townhouse on West 9th Street in Greenwich Village. There she worked on a large unstretched canvas that could only be viewed as it had been painted - on the floor. A painting carpet. It took up almost the entire room, one had to stand in the doorway for the view. People were invited, preferably by appointment and one at a time, although there were inevitable couples and others who came by unannounced. There was a tiny closet in the corner in which Koether had set up a writing and drawing desk. This was a sort of cabinet for the curious and visitors were encouraged to have a look. She kept a detailed notebook over a period of seven weeks, using a small portable typewriter to record her activities and her interactions with 'art world' visitors, heavy on the artist front and, not surprisingly, rather spare on the collector/dealer side. The book that was later published, *J.K. The Inside Job*, contains all her notes, letters and related material, including the original announcement. Its cryptic/comic tag line, 'Enjoyment as a Political Factor', would be revealed in a grainy, full-page xerox: the cover of 'Uncorrected page proofs' for Slavoj Žižek's book, *For They Know not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. In the pages that follow, Koether's hand increasingly amends the typescript, making corrections, additions and deletions. The book comes to represent her own proofs as evidence of a community engagement; this was, after all, part of a larger project to which she had been invited: 'The Real Thing'. As she later wrote, 'I will be seeing you and you will be seeing me, that is the making of a local fabric...'. The book is as intimate and revealing a portrait of the New York scene as has ever been captured. Add to Koether's repertoire the *roman à clef*, but with none of the names changed.

8. Admit defeat. Some artists are harder to write about than others. For someone like Koether, who avoids easy categorisation, who moves freely within her own practise and takes on different positions - painter, writer, critic, musician, lady dandy - and whose work is presented in many venues, not all of them perfect shop windows with the word 'gallery' etched in glass, the text is not already written. Imagine an artist as either free, on parole or in prison. To write about the work of Peter Halley, for example, is merely to retrieve and download something already put into words, often by the artist himself. Ventriloquism. If for years and years now every successive painting of Halley's can be read as the slightest variation on one already owned by so many unknowing collectors, so too can every text. When writing about the work of Koether, forget about guarding any accepted critical reading, even your own.

9. Your worst moment with an artist's work can often yield something of value. In 1993, for a show in Vienna called 'Live In Your Head', I hung a painting by Koether, *Völlig* (oil on canvas, 1991), on a wall adjacent to a fluorescent 'cell and conduit' painting by Peter Halley. *Völlig* is entirely red and green, a lush jungle in which two figures are immersed, one seemingly astride the other. It is unclear whether we are witnessing a sexual or a violent encounter; the figures occupy a vertiginous space. In this particular instance - being shown in the city of Vienna and having been painted by a woman - the image could easily be interpreted as nearly 'hysterical'.<sup>6</sup> Next to the seemingly rational, reasoned and cool geometry of the Halley, it took on an even stranger, stronger presence. Two paintings that normally would not be hung side by side (whatever normal means in a gallery installation) each maintained their own particular identity. Thaddaeus Ropac, whose gallery represents Halley, was livid. The usually demure and diplomatic Ropac, a man who is loath to drop his mask of regal poise, was quite simply outraged by the pairing of the paintings and laced into me in the middle of the opening. Do you know what it's like to be reprimanded in your own show? The lesson learned, or at least a reminder of something already known: that sometimes you have to 'do the wrong thing'. This, not surprisingly, is an approach Koether herself has taken from time to time.

10. For 'I Love New York', a large group show in 1998 at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, Koether's hometown, she collaborated on paintings with Rita Ackermann and Kim Gordon, for a project they titled *freetime*. All of the works were painted without brushes, using hands and feet to ensure a more equal authorship, to delimit the hand of the artist and a recognisable signature-style contribution. One of the paintings, *free face* (oil on canvas, 1998), is of a giant green head with closed blue eyelids. The head sits upside down on the canvas, an obvious reference to Georg Baselitz who has painted upside down since the late 1960s. The painting was, of course, a mini-scandal, savaged in the press and unappreciated by German critics and curators. 'Well, show me nothing.'

11. Sometimes, though not often, it can help to read a review of an artist who is not easy to write about, if only as a way of seeing how much trouble someone else got into. Then again, you can always pick up some clever phrasing, wait a few years until the art critic statute of limitations has gone by, and appropriate it as your own. Here then is *The New York Times* blurb for Koether's last show at Pat Hearn Gallery, 'sun/ny', as written by Ken Johnson, and dated Friday, 29 May 1999:

*Ms. Koether, a German painter who lives in New York, works between abstraction and image-making with a messy insouciance that calls to mind Sigmar Polke. Her big expressionistic essays on raw, unstretched canvas, some smudgy grey, others festively garish, are supposed to be about the sun and other visionary themes. Full of distracted incoherent gestural energy, they're too impatient to achieve a satisfying resolution.*

'A messy insouciance.' (Insouciant: blithely unconcerned, nonchalant. From the French in: not, and soucier: to trouble; from the Latin *sollicitaire*, to vex.) 'Distracted incoherent gestural energy.' (Incoherent ... well, maybe look it up for yourself.) But in art, you may be wondering, what's so satisfying about resolution?

12. If you're lucky, the artist herself will show you the way out. In an email from a few days ago, Koether wrote the following:

*Yesterday I went to see the Agnes Martin show at Pace before its closing and it was so very beautiful and reminded me of the hidden blueprint of my art ... as a teenager I went to Amsterdam and saw a show with her work and it was an extreme eye-opener and my real introduction to abstract painting (vis-à-vis Pollock's) ... all wired, I made the following name-line in my notebook: Agnes Martin Martin Kippenberger ... two opposites melting together, both very much related to the ways I feel and think about painting...*

- Bob Nickas

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#### Footnotes

1. John Miller, 'Jutta Koether', in *Texte Zur Kunst*, no.29, March 1998, p.121-23↑
2. In an email dated 23 February 2003↑

3. Sun Ra, 'The Space Age Cannot be Avoided', liner notes for the album SUPER-SONIC JAZZ, recorded in 1956 and released on the El Saturn label; reprinted for the CD reissue Evidence, 1991.↑
4. In a Xerox flier that Koether produced for her show at Pat Hearn Gallery in New York in 1995.↑
5. In an email dated 26 February 2003↑
6. According to Koether, Völlig, which can be translated as 'entire', 'complete' or 'dead', is 'a kind of self-portrait modelled after a drawing by Klossowski, an image of a female narcissus gone awry ... you can't really tell whether it is a mirror image of the person, or if it just popped out of the woman's womb, or if it is a chopped off head ... the whole thing is quite a balancing act ... also of big strokes, bright colour effects and tiny ornaments ... me coming out of Gustave Moreau studies ... as well as Klossowski ... Klossowski and Axel Rose were my favourite "hysterical men" of 1990...'↑