

~~Katharina Grosse~~ Edited by Ulrich Looock,  
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Uncontrollable Generosity ~~Out Out Bloody Spot~~  
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Ulrich Loock

# The Painting of Katharina Grosse

*And then there was my meeting with Félix Guattari, the way we understood  
and complemented, depersonalized, and singularized – in short, loved –  
one another.* Gilles Deleuze

## Parameters

### DIFFERENCE

KG does something with her painting that cannot be done in any other way. It is not about painting as such, not about the historical definition of painting. It is rather about doing something in a particular and unique way by introducing new fault lines in a manifold topography of contemporary visual production. Differences result from the proximity and distance of her work to other painted and not-painted images, contemporary and historical, by both others and her own. KG pursues a painting that is painting insofar as it is different from painting. **Her work is painting in a differential – not an essential – sense.**

KG's painting produces fleeting and flexible relationships to parallel forms of contemporary visibility, from which it is distinguished in each case: architectural realization, illegal tattooing of public spaces, theatrical staging, electronic simulacrum, phantasmic spectacle, iconoclastic obfuscation, and documentary recording as well as forms of expressive abstraction, of totalizing installation, or of biopolitical intervention in the field of art. That is to say that KG locates her work in the middle of an expanded, diversely varied cultural space that is permeated and saturated with esthetic sensations. But if esthetic experiences can be had in all the fields of consumerism from shopping to leisure time, the question arises whether a practice of painting like KG's can claim its own esthetic sphere at all.<sup>1</sup>

This in turn raises the question of the specificity that distinguishes KG's painting and causes it to stand out in the differential field of contemporary visual production. This question is unavoidable if one is unwilling to allow the institutional context alone to decide whether something should be considered painting or something else and, on the other hand, is unwilling to accept the dissolution of artistic practice into a comprehensive esthetic ambience. This demand of specificity has been

Gilles Deleuze, "Letter to a Harsh Critic," in: Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1995, p. 7.

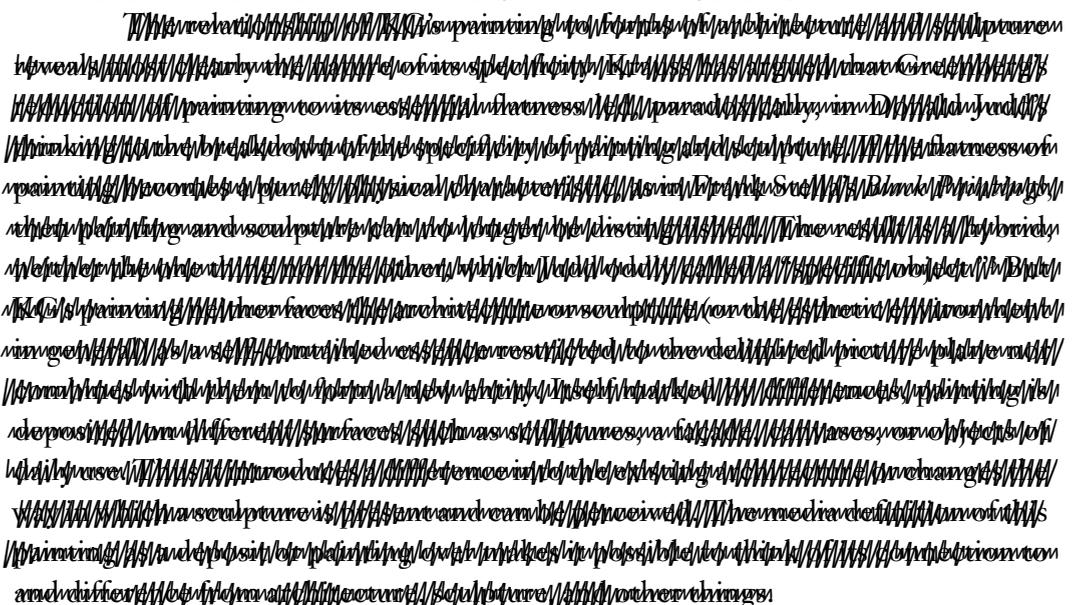
<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rosalind Krauss's discussions of what Frederic Jameson calls "a new life of postmodern sensation," in: Rosalind E. Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000, p. 56.

stigmatized, however, since Clement Greenberg's concept of modern specificity to a medium has been subjected to fundamental criticism and leading authors, like Rosalind Krauss, have banished traditional media such as painting and sculpture. Krauss trusted only artists like James Coleman and William Kentridge, who employ film "to reinvent or rearticulate"<sup>2</sup> their medium, that is, to convert it into a "post-medium condition." But that is precisely what KG is pursuing: a new, post-medium articulation in the field of painting.

KG's painting achieves its specificity not by making one feature of the medium absolute – as Greenberg for whom the "flatness" of painting was the ultimate essential feature would have wanted. Instead, she emphasizes one primary prerequisite that has receded into the background with the technical and even more so digital production of images to the point of vanishing: namely, that painting is the covering of a given surface with a colored material, a painting over, and hence never a unitary thing, never a whole, but rather a relational thing. From the fact that she understands painting from the outset as painting over, that is, as a context between the application of paint and the ground, it follows for KG that it should be exposed as a constellation of differential moments that belong to the medium of painting itself and have been worked out separately over the course of the history of painting. Unlike in earlier views of painting, differential aspects are not compositional units that come together into a coherent image, but rather they are employed to expose the difference itself. They are decoupled and superimposed, linked and contrasted swaths of color and lines, planes, splashes, particles and figures, positive and negative forms, slices of clouds, and finally differences in terms of how the painting is connected to architectural forms, to easel painting or sculpture as well as to objects of daily use, the mobile and immobile, planar or folded, small- or large-format planes available for the depositing of paint. **Being itself defined as a context of differences, her painting enters into a relationship with its surrounding esthetic configurations.**

2 Ibid.

3 *ibid.*









appropriate for a new society. An alternative model to painting's architectural ambition is found in Barnett Newman's work, which aims to completely envelope the viewer in front of the painting in a unique atmosphere of color in that it seems impossible to survey the canvas in one gaze. The ambition of such painting is to put itself in architecture's place, to drive it out, and to establish through overcoming architecture zones of pure color sensation that are meant to be spiritual. Modifications of these contradictory models, the first of which was developed in a revolutionary historical moment and the second under conditions of the appropriation of all artistic production by the culture industry, shaped approaches in the 1960s ranging from Carl Andre to Blinky Palermo. It neither made sense anymore to insist on the revolutionary transfer from painting to architecture, nor could the autonomy of works be trusted that mask everything around them: all alternative models run the risk of being appropriated as paradigms for institutional design.

These are the essential artistic premises of KG's effort to approach the architectonic dimension in her painting. Whereas painting's ambition to turn into architectonic construction, and likewise the ambition to resist the architectonic pressure of the factual with zones of spirituality, appear not to open up any practicable possibilities, KG lays claim to the desired dimension by adapting her painting incongruently to the existing architecture. Daniel Buren's work pointed the way to abandoning the claim that painting could be replaced by architecture or conversely architecture by painting. Buren shifted his painting – unwaveringly applied stripes – to a divergent relationship to the convention of the architectonic given. His expression for the effect of this practice is “*élargissement du champ de vision*,” enlargement of the field of vision.

In contrast to the Constructivist references named above, KG's references are to an esthetic of formlessness. She refers to models exposing the dissolution of the boundaries of the object that she originally derived from Gotthard Graubner, her teacher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, but which have a much wider ranging genealogy in which women such as Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Lygia Pape, and Mira Schendel feature prominently. Models from the street supplement artistic models of that sort: painting that covers the available surfaces regardless of architectonic differences.

## ILLUSION

The gullibility of Don Quixote, who does not doubt the news that the room with his chivalrous romances has been spirited away, was noted by Ludwig Tieck in 1839: “It is certainly annoying that so few people are blessed with as much fantasy as the great Don Quixote. When his library had been built up and he was told that a magician had gone off not only with the room but also all its contents, he understood the whole affair without having any doubts on the matter. **He was not so prosaic as**

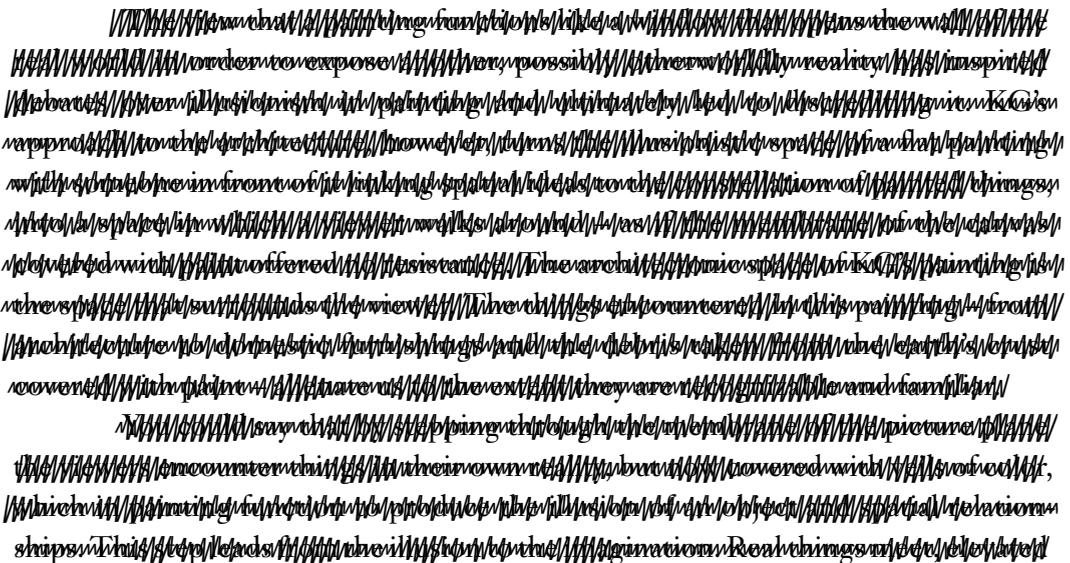
to inquire what had happened to so abstract a thing as the room. What is room? An absolute, a nothing, a form of perception.”<sup>6</sup>

As if it wanted to simulate Don Quixote’s incredible ability to believe something to be something else, Ludwig Tieck’s irony makes a breathtaking transition from one meaning of the word “room” to another: “room” as a certain part of a dwelling and “room” as a transcendental condition of experience. The room that has been spirited away is the room in which Don Quixote kept his romances and to which he withdrew to read in order to disappear into another world that he could also find outside his library. This room is an architectonic construction, part of present reality that the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance will not acknowledge is ultimately binding. He sees in it something he knows from his romances: the foundlings on the road are crouching princesses, herds of sheep running at one another are the enemy armies of knights in shining armor, and it is a matter of honor for Don Quixote that he is prepared to join their battle regardless of the consequences. Something transitions into something else under the condition of similarity,<sup>7</sup> but something can therefore also be removed from the real – nothing but concreteness. The knight-errant has no interest in the abstract conditions of his perception. For her part, KG links her artistic practice to the fact of real and existing rooms in order to resist the dictate of their actuality.

Surprisingly, she associates her own work with a concept that would only occur to the consternated attendants of the man who tilted at windmills, not to the man himself: the concept of illusion. Just as it would never occur to him to deceive anyone, it is unthinkable for him to be deceived. Things are undoubtedly just as he sees them in the light of his romances. But KG’s painterly intervention transfers a segment of preexisting reality – for example, a room closed off like the knight’s library – into an undefined other that will neither allow us to recognize the initial situation clearly nor to overlook it completely. The intervention of color and material can neither be separated from the given architecture nor does it harmonize with it.

6 Ludwig Tieck, “Life’s Luxuries,” in: E. N. Bennett (ed./trans.), *German Short Stories*, H. Milford, Oxford Univ. Press, London, 1934, pp. 45–111, esp. p. 96.

7 Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1971.







Profane transcendence  
 is that which is not  
 in the world of things  
 but in the world of  
 the mind. It is the  
 veil of deception  
 which covers the eyes  
 of mortals, and causes  
 them to see a world  
 of which one cannot  
 say either that it is  
 or that it is not; for  
 it is like a dream,  
 like the sunshine on  
 the sand which the  
 traveller from a  
 distance takes to be  
 water, or like the  
 piece of rope on the  
 ground which he  
 regards as a snake.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of his explanation of the relativity of everything “that proceeds from causes or motives” and hence belongs to “representation,” Arthur Schopenhauer also quotes the following “ancient wisdom of the Indians” from an unnamed author: “It is Mâyâ, the veil of deception, which covers the eyes of mortals, and causes them to see a world of which one cannot say either that it is or that it is not; for it is like a dream, like the sunshine on the sand which the traveller from a distance takes to be water, or like the piece of rope on the ground which he regards as a snake.”<sup>8</sup>

**Making the entire room the site of painting, KG dissolves the dialectic of illusion and facticity that has settled into its place in modern consciousness with the metaphor of the window.** She turns against both the enchantment of the present and the insistent faith in reality. The reality of painting is far from seeing through the skin of things, but neither is it certain of the facts on the ground. On the occasion of her exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, KG said in 2011: “Rather than choosing between painting being a window and painting being flat, I view everything as a window: You’re a window, the window is a window, the car is a window. For me, everything is an illusionistic surface, and painting is a mode of thought – a way to link these illusionistic elements together.”<sup>9</sup> She could also have said nothing is a window when the profane transcendence of things is comprehensive. With painting she enters a marginal area, an oscillating zone that metaphorically marks the window itself.

## THE APPLICATION OF PAINT

From the time of her first spray-painted work, on a wall in the Kunsthalle Bern in 1998, KG’s painting is fundamentally painting over: the covering of different surfaces available for deposits with the differential elements of painting. Color has thus become a material element, applied with the help of a device that keeps the artist from coming into direct contact with the support. The process of spraying results in zones of drops of paint of varying density. It is difficult to produce opaque areas of paint without paint running down. In addition to the soft edges of the spray-painted forms and figures, which become swamps of color and can be interrupted by sharp trails of dripping, the artist’s physical action is crucial to their particularity. Whereas

8 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne, Dover, New York, 1969), pp. 7–8.

9 Katharina Grosse, quoted in Anthony Byrt, “Katharina Grosse: Two Younger Women Come In and Pull Out a Table,” in: *Quarterly Bulletin*, vol 18, no. 1 (February 2013), De Pont museum for contemporary art, Tilburg, n.p.

in conventional painting it is said that the painter guides the brush, here it is more the case that KG is attached to the device that sprays the paint under pressure and therefore has to conform to its conditions. As long as the machine is running, any reduction in the speed of movement, ultimately its interruption, results in a greater intensity of the deposit of paint. Conversely, the painter is constantly forced to control by her body movement the coverage of the paint and hence the extent and orientation of the figures. A slight movement with the spray gun leads to crucial changes in the form. Movement is thus the second fundamental condition of KG's painting.

There is an affinity between the esthetic of formlessness in her painting and the use of compressor and spray gun; the use of a device leads to the return of a kind of painting that once stood for the unmistakable and unique expression of an individual. We can distinguish among extensive elements of color, elongated features, staccato-like hatching, stripes, and strokes, cloudlike, fog-shaped elements but also more precisely defined ones, large and small, curved, drawn out, repeated and projecting, covering the surfaces of rooms and objects and reaching out in different directions. While painting, KG is often unable to survey the entire area. This lack of an overview is translated into an incongruence of the different elements of the painting and into an incoherence of painting over in general.

KG establishes relationships between units of color that give the overall constellation its own expression, offer visual points of reference, and give direction to the viewer's movements through the room. The painterly configuration obtains a rhythm as a result but it is more stirred up than calm or balanced. This impression of restlessness is reinforced by the use of a limited number of unmixed industrial colors. KG usually employs the entire set of available shades. Color is used in such a way that the elements of the painting collide; an immediacy of color replaces coloristic complexity. At the same time, the colors employed produce a similarity that connects the various works, as great as the differences between them might be in other respects.

The painting, spread across structured planes such as walls, windows, ceilings, floors, and façades, stacked items of furniture and paintings, sculptural volumes, accumulated materials and construction rubble, is itself organized in a way to expose a particular visual context. The willfulness of painting is linked to different manifestations in each case, which each time move the centrifugal placements of paint and the compositional relations against each other. Thus every painting establishes its own tone, a mood, an atmosphere, a legibly differentiated field of relationships of color and form. The pictorial character of painting is particularly clear in works on less complex surfaces, such as the public billboard in Auckland (2001). The dominant color is a stark red that covers much of the billboard in ragged horizontal strokes, vexed and interrupted by insertions, over- and underpainting in orange, yellow, blue, and other colors and set off by large zones in bluish-violet and greenish-yellow on the right-hand side. It is a visual construct that is spectacular enough to assert its place against the commercial sensations of its urban surroundings, pushing itself into the visual field and replacing what is there with a configuration of colors that is different

from everything else and cannot be subsumed by the environment. The unique quality of KG's painting consists in the superimposition of an organized context of objects by a context of colors that is also organized and is connected to the former by an incongruent formal affinity.

But the painterly construct that is superimposed on an existing relief – be it an architectonic structure, an assembly of furniture and other objects, a deposit of materials, the shaped surface of a sculpture, the flat volume of an easel painting – is never a complete and autonomous picture. The picture lacks what it obtains from settling on a particular surface. The only thing that is complete is the picture's connection to what it is not. The visible picture reveals itself to be an indicator of an ineradicable invisibility.

Whereas spray-painting tends to dissolve the boundaries between painted elements and the edges of the support itself, the brushstrokes in the early works follow the horizontal and vertical demarcations of the support, which also correspond to the elementary directions of space. In a logical violation of this rule, they are later joined by diagonal and round paths of color, which can, ultimately, be broken down and reorganized in directions other than the primary geometrical ones. With their initial geometric orientation, these paintings correspond to the delimited surface of a wall for which they were conceived and into which they are inserted, whereby a few contrasting colors fill the architecture with a unique palette in each case.

Finally, in works KG produced while still a student she divided the uniform crust of material-intensive painting into a sculptural support and a thin layer of paint. Lumps of clay functioned as a relief over which plastic film was vacuum formed, which the artist subsequently painted. She was already separating the ground from the applied paint, but in a way that they harmonized with each other. **If one wanted an extremely concise summary of the evolution of KG's painting, it could be said that it has moved from adapting the paint to the material support to painting which is incongruent with the different shaped and folded surfaces it sits on.**





**The same question:  
How does the paint sit on the canvas?  
Where am I in space?**



# Anarchitecture

## INTERVENTION

The space that exists before KG's work begins and in which her painting settles is prosaic architecture, that is, defined, impenetrable reality: a wall, a corner of a room, a bedroom, an exhibition space in a museum or gallery, a factory, an office façade, a shed, a billboard. Her work is both things at once: a confirmation of this raw reality and an application that touches and transforms the given. Her work links painting to architecture in order to dissolve it and, with one and the same gesture, discharges a practice that is no longer painting. **The painterly intervention links acknowledging and rebelling, approaching and turning away.**

The painting works by touching, as a marking and confirmation of the architecture with which it is linked, and conversely it is permeated and marked by the architecture. The artist's effort consists of making the architecture recognizable as the reason and precondition that painting needs to manifest itself and which simultaneously and irrevocably changes it. At the same time, the painterly intervention separates, muddies, underscores, covers, tinges, outshines, sums up in different ways, bundles in paradoxical fashion, and seemingly sets into faster or slower motion the elements of architecture existing in an established, linguistically stabilized constellation. Thus painting is not only just a reference that, like various forms of representation, appears to leave untouched that which it reproduces but is also a transformative intrusion.

Nevertheless, like representation, KG's painterly intervention is dependent on the preexisting objects. Both pictorial modes reject abstraction's claim that it has no preconditions – "abstraction" is understood here to mean an autonomous design, not diminished reproduction. On the other hand, like abstraction this painting differs from all mimetic forms of representation. **Linked to a prerequisite not symbolically, as a depiction or visual effect, but materially and phenomenally, architectonic painting is a third thing alongside abstraction and pictorial representation and shares something with both.**

The painterly intervention has an immediately visible effect on architecture: As a result of the painting, it is no longer seen as it was before or even seen for the first time. What was there before could only escape the painting again by means of a violent act of analytical reconstruction. The architecture is the premise, the subject of painting in the sense of it being a factor orienting the intervention. The latter consists of a transgression: eradicating the original planar forms, violating the architectural boundaries, ruthlessness toward differences between objects, displacement of space, limitations of the freedom to move, insofar as volumes also become a means of painting. The intensity of colors and the movement of gestural traces translate the displacing effect of KG's intervention. The point is to distribute colors and deposit various materials, including three-dimensional forms, in order to do something to the spaces that disturbs and reorganizes the lines that define them.





spaces for insular sojourns. In KG's work, however, there is no modernist ambition to transform the architectonic space into another space, since the realization of that goal simply replaces one power with a different one. The encroachment of painting is precisely what links the work to architecture through acknowledging and rebelling; it combines explicating it with dissolving it. Painting crossbreeds with architecture but without producing a new being in which the two are assimilated. KG's architectonic painting is a creature that never pretends to absorb or eradicate the constitutive elements of its origin.

In each case, the existing building is crossed out and yet remains effective and noticeable like the original text in a corrected manuscript. The relationship between architecture and KG's interventions can be described with geological metaphors: sedimentation, stratification, and residual deposits – topography. There is no sympathy; every connection to a specific example of architecture is a separation from it; no space remains what it was. In every possible situation, an intervention is vandalism and contamination. If it is neither of these things, then it is decoration and therefore insignificant.

# Painting Over

## EXPANSION

The expansion of artistic means, the transition from brushstrokes on paper or canvas to color organized pictorially and sprayed over architecture and furniture and even the occupation of space with additional masses and things located between paint and furnishings, which for their part are covered with paint, and ultimately the production of sculptural objects and wall-sized architectural set pieces that are cut out and painted over – this expanding dynamic of the work aims to go beyond the established definitions. Earlier works prior to the sprayed paintings – works that underscore the requirements of the architecture and adapt to them – confirm the premise that there should be no far-reaching invasion of the architectonic fabric of the building of the sort performed by artists ranging from Michael Asher, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Robert Smithson to Gregor Schneider. So no burrowing into the body of the architecture, no destruction, no constructive or destructive overpowering of what is already there, no additions and extensions, no beating out and boarding up – no acceptance whatsoever that the architecture is a body, only a variegate, a folded surface that passes through different forms and materialities, walls, windows, debris, construction waste, spheres, balloons, furniture, sculptures, paintings, and so on.

At the same time, the corporeality of volumes – deliberately increased in some installations and its presence heightened – detracts from the staging of surfaces by means of painting in color. When KG occupies a space with objects and materials, they remain distinct from the architecture proper, even when the color crosses all the boundaries between objects. They are additional elements that join up with the architectonic relief, expanding and shifting it. Like the architecture, they come to be covered in paint, but like the paint they are an addition to the original architectonic design. Linked to architecture and to painting in various ways, they lie between the two.

The paint applied is a veil that is spread over the things. Just as this veil finds its place in the room, linked with the folded topography of the surfaces for painting, and causes the dissolution of architecture and the deformation of painting, we can also speculate about its removal from the room. KG works with such removals whose negative images persist when she takes spray-painted objects away from their original place and puts them elsewhere. These displaced units are the shadows of the voids free of painting they leave behind; freed of color, the figures that remain can be sprayed again.

In some works, however, KG goes beyond shifting architecture by means of painting and added volumes and triggers the notion of a space that has been completely inverted. Examples include her works with painted spheres – more precisely, balloons – that rise from the floor and seem to turn the laws of gravity upside down.

## TRANSGRESSION

Painting as addition and transgression that, linked to the existing architecture, vandalizes it. But also painting as an inscription of the floating, shimmering, and unbounded body of the paint that causes its movement in space to come to a standstill. KG employs materials and objects in order to transform the topography of deposit and sedimentation into a physical landscape that occupies the existing architecture, can be entered, and displaces space. “Landscape” refers here to a constellation organized horizontally that addresses more than one sense organ and transforms the primarily visual quality of topographic depiction. A landscape is innumerable things placed next to, behind, above, and below one another that form a common place despite their differences. They are linked to one another by a kind of atmosphere, mist of color, the deposit of a chromatic spray, and by the overarching context of the visual constellation, which obeys its own logic. A landscape is the absence of a dominant vanishing point and the invitation to adopt a multiple perspective, undirected spread and instability of place in contrast with a monumental puncturing of the space. Beyond the structural and metaphorical landscape, the pieces and piles that occupy the space emphasize mimetic aspects of a region with mountains and cliffs.



Haunting is a **phenomenon for which we do not have an inner model.** There is **a signal** in neurology that is referred to as **P300**. It is **triggered** when something happens that is not **expected**. Katharina Grosse's **paintings are tremendously P300-active**, because something like that just cannot be. It is not possible for everything **to suddenly be** covered with paint like that. Haunting can also be considered a kind of macro-synchronicity **in which everything** appears simultaneously in one large scene. Haunting in fact does not have an aggressive **but rather** a protective function. It is something like a psychosomatic reaction, which does however, **not take place** in one's own body. Walter von Lucadou

Painting over relates to architecture in a differential correspondence; it cozies up to it, takes it up, and carries it farther, even when the fixed traces of the action of painting thwart the exploration of landscape, the planes and lines of the architecture and the neighboring volumes. Painting over is not just a layered inscription through which elements of lower levels penetrate; rather, painting also attaches itself to the architecture and continues it, disturbed, elsewhere, in another form. The painting should not be viewed without the architecture but rather in such a way that it leaves it behind while settling on it. This primary, violent distinction continues into all the unfoldings of the work, which in turn cause the original collision of the architecture and the painterly intervention to echo in all the relationships of visual formulations, gestural markings, colors, objects, and materials – and hence also, supported and mediated by the accumulation of materials and objects in space, pull the forms of architecture themselves into the differential context of the painting. Distances and contacts between the various units, which involve the gaze in a dynamic of attraction and repulsion, identification and loss of objectivity, take up the movement of drops of paint in the atmosphere. To put it another way, the emergence of the sensory mobility of the work penetrates the topographic inscription of the bodies of color – that which is unleashed is due to rigidity. In KG’s work, this course of action does not belong, as elsewhere, to the assumed and ignored conditions of a work; rather, her entire œuvre consists of producing relationships between the mobile and the fixed. She uses sequences of spheres of varying dimensions – e.g., balloons that rise and then after some time lose air and shrivel up again – to return to the physically moving mist of paint, while on the other hand transferring the relationships to the stability of painting. A work of ramified and circular transpositions.

## MANIFESTATION

Applying the term “deposit” to KG’s painting does not just mean that the paint sprayed into the air settles on the existing or subsequently created planes of a landscape relief. It implies, conversely, ~~that the different surfaces manifest images that already exist before they can be seen;~~ just as photosensitive paper and a developer bath are necessary to reveal a photographic image. In that sense, the mist of color whirling through the air, settling in the form of color images oscillating between organization and disorganization, can be understood as a metaphor for an artistic concept that attributes to the artist the role of a medium and thus liberates her from the burden of original production. In a conversation in 2009, KG said: “I use spray paint because it is a painting that takes place in space and lands on a surface. I do not physically apply it to the surface, but it is firstly disposable and is allocated on a surface by means of my direction and dynamics, but also by means of the quality of its nascent form. No picture becomes visible if there is no surface. Of course it is potentially there and it also existed there once. The invisible is an inherent quality of the visible,



# Where Exactly Til

Dust//Humps, Or I Do Not

Meta//Sick Wipe//Out//Wun

Big//Pictures It Could Lan

Can You Spell Mixing Pie

p. 164  
*Final Cuts*, 2003  
Union Gallery, London  
Acrylic on wall  
ca. 315 × 562 × 336  $\frac{5}{8}$  in.

p. 165  
*Untitled*, 1973  
Felt pen on blown-out egg  
2  $\frac{3}{8}$  × 1  $\frac{7}{8}$  in.

pp. 166–169  
*Cincy*, 2006  
Contemporary Arts Center,  
Cincinnati, OH  
Acrylic on wall, floor, glass,  
styrofoam, and soil  
ca. 334  $\frac{5}{8}$  × 291  $\frac{5}{8}$  × 464  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.

ts The Möbius Strip

Want To Live In Rooms

to look Small Pictures

Anywhere

See Slip, Eel Lips



**There is no resistance when I am painting  
The inside and the outside coexist**

**And then all of  
a sudden  
I no longer knew what  
intimacy is**

The excessive visibility of KG's painting is understood as an indication of an invisibility that is produced by visibility but is not its mystical or metaphysical origin. Hence the visible image lacks verifiable reference; in principle, it is unfinished forever. In this perspective, one condition of KG's work that might otherwise be regarded as a necessity due to circumstances turns out to be particularly important. When an exhibition ends, the painting that clings to parts of the architecture is painted over or removed; only the mobile elements covered with paint can be preserved and then, if desired, employed again in the context of a new work. Their future invisibility is inscribed in the painting from the outset, and every such work is an ephemeral manifestation that can be replaced by another one. KG's oeuvre lacks the original; there is no way for a later viewer to form or test ideas before the initial work.

In a finished work, however, the relationship of the visible to the invisible is permeated by the relationship of the painting to what it is not. The vandalism of a painter concerns a reality to which painting is linked by means of differences. Accordingly, the relationship between painting and architecture, which is marked by confirmation and rejection, can be understood as a relationship of translation, with vandalism as its extreme form. As painting in the differential sense, KG's work includes painting, architecture, accumulations of materials, objects of furniture, sculptures, and puts the visible and invisible into relationships of translation. The differential bond of the various elements appears to be the expression of a recursive structure: In the one we find what was already shown in the other. This clarifies why it makes sense to conceive of painting as a differential reality: it is an expansion of the contexts of the real that are accessible to perception.

KG is familiar with a variety of approaches to invisibility. The visible and the invisible are located in the space of presence when, after being painted over, one pictorial element is removed from its larger context and moved to another place: The relationship of the visible and the invisible emerges in the relationship of the positive and the negative. By contrast, painting over already painted works concentrates the visible and invisible image in one place. To the extent painting over is an essential part of KG's artistic practice, this sort of relationship of visibility and invisibility runs through her entire oeuvre to a greater or lesser extent. Other works evoke the invisible in the space of absence. These are works conceived as a fragment, remnant, or

KG's work is a differential reality, an expansion of the contexts of the real that are accessible to perception. The relationship between painting and architecture is marked by confirmation and rejection, with vandalism as its extreme form. KG's work includes painting, architecture, accumulations of materials, objects of furniture, sculptures, and puts the visible and invisible into relationships of translation. The differential bond of the various elements appears to be the expression of a recursive structure: In the one we find what was already shown in the other. This clarifies why it makes sense to conceive of painting as a differential reality: it is an expansion of the contexts of the real that are accessible to perception.

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# The Breakdown of Concepts

## VANDALISM

Vandalism, ruthless destruction, is the extreme form of painting over that shifts painting into a difference from what it is not. Vandalistic overpainting eliminates the differences that articulate in each case from what the painting is distinguished. Painting withdraws to the marginal position of the differential relationship where the eradication of the existing and familiar is staged. The totality of the self confronts the totality of the other. One flagrant act of KG's vandalism is painting over her own bedroom, which she will later restage in the context of the painting's differential relationships to architecture, objects of furniture, and materials. This singular act is flagrant not because of the esthetic quality of painting, which is not essentially different from other works, but because the artist is thus placing in reality the occupation of her own bed with colored material in lieu of the possibility of withdrawing to this bed. In this case, painting over results in a real-world uselessness that affects the author of this painting herself. In this extreme, it represents KG's self-exile. Jean-Charles Vergne has pointed out that the original self-exile is echoed in the nomadic lifestyle of an artist who has realized a large number of her works in situ in changing locations.<sup>12</sup>

The painter's vandalism of her bedroom is repeated when a heap of soil is sprayed with paint and hence contaminated, and it is repeated on a symbolic level when the pile of earth and the layered concrete elements evoke an architecture of ruins or when items of clothing become sticky rags. It can, however, also be recognized more generally insofar as the act of painting itself produces a toxic atmosphere that KG is

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Vergne, "Crass Beauty" (fn. 5), pp. 102–3. Vergne's text on the toxic character of KG's painting is also interesting.

forced to escape by wearing a protective suit when painting. Even the ordinary production of painting results in polluting the air and exiling the painter. **The incorporation of painting into a context of differential relationships that are produced by the nature of this painting itself includes an antagonistic factor that threatens the differences themselves and can go as far as destruction.** The author of the painting is herself affected by this antagonism, to the point of potentially losing the possibility of existing.

## EROTICISM

KG mentions that she is uncertain about the clear separation of painting from other aspects of life: “Sometimes I cannot even separate, whether I am just wanting to sleep with my girlfriend or I want to paint.”<sup>13</sup> One might think that desire is the common denominator. Nevertheless, the uncertainty expressed is disconcerting, since when painting – or at least when applying paint with a spray gun – KG makes her body insensitive by wearing a closed suit to protect her from her toxic surroundings, but that protection is lacking during sex. The body having sex is interlocked with the body of the other without any distance, but the painting body touches the surfaces on which the paint is deposited only from afar. As if reacting to the strange restraint of deciding on the object of desire, and hence choosing between near and far, skin and gaze, the dissolution of things in the mist of paint or the assimilation with another’s body, Walter von Lucadou speaks of the haunting: “When I first saw your paintings they really took my breath away. I thought that is how you would have to depict a haunting incidence.”<sup>14</sup> He explicitly mentions the artist’s own bed, which was painted over as well as the entire corner of the room, the stacked cartons, and the personal items that were lying around in a work from 2004, making the site of the body the site of the paint. Lucadou explains that the haunting is “something like a psychosomatic reaction, but [one] which does not take place in your own body.” Following this model, painting can be understood as a practice of externalization: dissolving in another’s body during sex and dissolving categorical differences between things in painting appear to be linked in the form of a shifting of symptoms: touching from close up or from afar, exposure and immunization, the tactile and the visual become sliding transitions. In her final words in the conversation about the haunting, KG identifies the challenge of non-exclusiveness of different localities of desire:

**“It is difficult to bear the simultaneous occurrence of two spatial concepts.”**<sup>15</sup>

## CONCEPTUAL DESTABILIZATION

**Painting, the combination of colors in different constellations with a building, surfaces, and objects tends to integrate incongruent areas of volumetric formulation into a process that smoothes out, confuses, dissolves, and reorients**

13 Katharina Grosse in conversation with Bernard Frize, Berlin, May 18, 2009, unpublished.

14 Walter von Lucadou, Katharina Grosse, “Haunting & Haunting,” in: *Barbara und Katharina Grosse*, exh. cat. Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg, Verlag für moderne Kunst, Nuremberg, 2010, pp. 43–45, esp. p. 44.

15 Ibid.

the dividing lines of their differences, to the point where categorical distinctions are corroded and the differences are inscribed into new maps. Painting, sculpture, and architecture emerge as functional elements that, related to one another, acquire their significance in a practice of conceptual destabilization. Their primary positions are visibility / tactility, two-dimensionality / three-dimensionality, contemplation / use, surface / body, and production / premise. Entering into conditions, processes, and results of a controlled and staged erosion of polarities is the challenge of the artist's work. Paradoxically, that means that the theatricality of this work, which is expressed in claiming a space in which a visitor performs and where the participants are activated not only through the traces of expressive gestures and esthetic transgression but also through the integration of items of domestic furnishings that the application of paint irrevocably removes from use, that this theatricality is subjected to a neutralization. The spectator is always also standing in front of the picture inside which he or she is moving around. The neutralized theatricality of painting corresponds to a contemplative attitude of perception.

## TRANSPORTABLE ARCHITECTURE

Architecture is a process of creating a space in which a visitor performs and where the participants are activated not only through the traces of expressive gestures and esthetic transgression but also through the integration of items of domestic furnishings that the application of paint irrevocably removes from use, that this theatricality is subjected to a neutralization. The spectator is always also standing in front of the picture inside which he or she is moving around. The neutralized theatricality of painting corresponds to a contemplative attitude of perception.

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## IN THE END, THE ARCHITECTURE IS THE ARCHITECTURE

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*In Seven Days Time* is the name of KG's work. It is a large, flat panel, fastened to an outside wall of the Kunstmuseum Bonn, three times as long as it is high, extending across around 140 square meters, curved slightly convex along the horizontal, irregularly delimited on its sides, cut in gentle, long arches (a form pressing its way outward, in contrast to the remnant in the *Rudolf Steiner* exhibition). The paint has clearly been applied as overlapping traces; the painting is revealed as an explicit result of an action, even if it cannot immediately be established what specific practice results in the markings. The reception of this powerful work is also performative. Even marginal details contribute to setting viewers in motion: the anchoring of the picture panel on the floor and wall of the museum is visible and the structural relationships can be understood. The front is clearly separated from the back, and elements of the supporting construction are exposed in the back. This work, *In Seven Days Time*, is the result of painting presented as work.

“Rosenzweig expresses this heterogeneous contiguity between the Sabbath and creation when he writes that it is at once both the feast of creation and the feast of redemption or, more precisely, that in the Sabbath we celebrate a creation that was destined for redemption (that is, for inoperativity) from the very beginning. [...] If one eats, it is not done for the sake of being fed; if one gets dressed, it is not done for the sake of being covered up or taking shelter from the cold; if one wakes up, it is not done for the sake of working; if one walks, it is not done for the sake of going some place; if one speaks, it is not done for the sake of communicating information; if one exchanges objects, it is not done for the sake of selling or buying.”<sup>17</sup>

It would only be possible to tell with extreme effort, foreign to simpler perception, which color is on top of which, from where to where the painting proceeds. In the immanent, undirected temporality of the work, however, the narrative sequence erodes: *In Seven Days Time* consists of swaths of paint that inextricably cover one another, seen in passing or with sweeping movements of the eyes. Viewers do not survey the work without effort, but neither do they feel enveloped by the painting – as Barnett Newman, for one, would have wanted – thanks in part to the convex curvature of the surface. It is seen in transitions or leaps that transform the time of the application of paint into a visual oscillation that can be translated as an immeasurable depth that nonetheless remains bound to the extended surface. Traces of paint have run up and down, working the surface of the painting in opposite directions results in an effect that plays with the idea of gravity having been suspended. The traces of the sunken paint have mixed with the trajectories of sprayed paint. Sunspots, the luster of reflections from the surroundings, join the colored markings, seemingly continuing beyond the edges of the shield or shard. An incessant gazing remains tangled up in the painting spread out here, until someone turns away or walks on. But the gazing is neither limited to the painting nor delimited by it – this gazing is the assessment of all the differences between swaths of paint, material effects, and related phenomena. **The work captures the gaze and takes it to movements beyond the painting.**

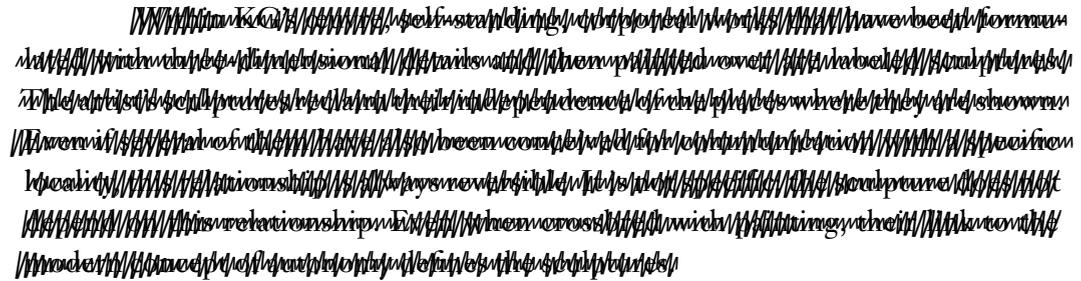
17 Ibid., pp. 110–11.

Everything about the work is actual, but nothing is exhausted in its facticity. Covered by colorful painting, the curved panel sets a membrane into the atmosphere and in front of the building's wall. The panel of the painting is the plane where clouds of sprayed paint, "volumes without surface,"<sup>18</sup> settle and in which the outer skin of an architecture-like volume dissolves. This plane virtually penetrates the body of the building on which it leans, extending into the surroundings, moved by the unstable differences inscribed in it, and itself an ephemeral difference in the existing environment. Nothing but that, the implementation of that which is of no use. **If one looks, it is not to grasp the thing and start something with it, not even to get insight into something other than this thing itself.**

On the Web site of the Kunstmuseum Bonn, the work is assessed as follows: "With *In Seven Days Time*, the Kunstmuseum Bonn is getting a visually overwhelming outdoor sculpture but also a central signature that articulates powerfully outward the inner identity of the institution as a place of heightened reflection on the tasks and possibilities of painting today."<sup>19</sup>

This commentary overlooks the celebration of something, which is celebrated for its own sake at the site of the work, and attributes a utility to the work that leads away from it toward something that has institutional significance. The endless deferment of instrumentalization. **There is a profound difference between the evocation of what the work is not and its employment for something else.**

## SCULPTURE



## WILHELM DRIBBOWSKI, SCULPTURE IN STAMMBO, 2013



18 Hubert Damisch, "Die Geschichte und die Geometrie," in: Lorenz Engell, Bernhard Siegert, Joseph Vogel (eds.), *Wolken*, Archiv für Medien-geschichte 5, Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität, Weimar, 2005, pp. 11–25, esp. p. 24, quoted in: Uta Degner, "Dichtende Wolken," in: Katharina Grosse, *Shadowbox*, exh. cat. Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2009, pp. 69–72, esp. p. 71.

19 "Katharina Grosse: In Seven Days Time," website Kunstmuseum Bonn, <http://www.kunstmuseum-bonn.de/extras/katharina-grosse> (accessed 5/29/2011).



Identifying it as female was more difficult to understand. It marks a contrast to the clumsy, bloated form of two other elements of the sculpture, one on top of the other, while the “airplane” part itself does not have any characteristics that immediately suggest the female. The second association was Niki de Saint Phalle.

The first expression points to at least three different qualities of this complicated, unusually large work, which is predominantly horizontal in orientation and hence not easily surveyed:

*Wunderblock* reveals formal characteristics that are part of the vocabulary of modern sculpture and can be organized into pairs of antitheses, such as concave and convex, full and empty, overarching form and diversity of individual parts. “Henry Moore on LSD.” **For everything about this work that is indebted to the craft was driven to extremes for which there is no obvious parallel in the history of sculpture or the history of painting.** Overextending known models of form and driving them to the breaking point represents an alternative both to the model of the modern tabula rasa and media specificity and to the model of post-medium hybridization and the ousting of painting and sculpture by photography and video installation. In KG’s work, sculptural form and the spray paint covering it are coupled and interfere with one another; they resolve one another and shift each other. Yet they do not merge.

The work invites us to associate it with known objects. Other visitors would have certainly had additional associations to offer, even if “female airplane” is especially convincing. This sort of association is anathema to the modern discourse on abstract sculpture. On the other hand, it could be considered proof of the dissolution of boundaries between media, in this case of a mix of sculpture and painting with a literary dimension. But when titling her works, KG usually makes sure that she forms expressions that obey a logic independent of the logic of the work. Her titles belong to the sedimentary layers that overlap one another unstably in the construction of the work. Tatjana Doll’s remark is not part of the strata of the work itself but rather marks one of its possibilities of reception. Attributing a literary dimension to *Wunderblock* violates the code of behavior that applies to a modernist work, and it derives its legitimacy from the eccentric character of KG’s work. An eccentric character that includes something that otherwise bears the stigma of the vulgar. Even the association with another object has something vulgar about it.

The work rejects gender-neutral discourse. Its “female” characteristic was connected to the hallucinatory excess of an artistic model that can be identified with the name of a male artist, Henry Moore, whose sculptural vocabulary is essentially derived from a contemporaneous conception of the female

body. But in the expression quoted, the “female” does not come into play as a trait of the work but rather as an antithesis of the phallic part of the same work. That is a warning not to understand an excess of the male-connoted model of modernism as hysterical.

The painting applied after the physical object was completed maintains a precarious balance between the confirmation and blurring of sculptural forms. The veils of color are juxtaposed to each other and overlap one another, underscoring separations that result from the relief of the sculpture or covering up the ridges and summing up several individual parts. The soft edges of the sprayed color oppose the sharp edges of the *Wunderblock*. Like camouflage painting, the color forms its own rhythm, determined both by colorful zones of roughly the same size placed without regard to the chromatic system and by relationships of light and dark. **A painterly system resulting in illusion and continuity overlaps the actual spatial system of the sculpture presented hesitantly and in sections. Moving traces of painterly gesture cover the frozen gesture of the object. Of overriding importance, however, is the impression produced by the *Wunderblock* that something has been left behind, a remnant. In its totality, the sculpture turns out to be itself subdivided in many ways and constructed in contradiction with itself, as a fragment: the glaring materialization of an in-between space between things of an imagined reality that has to be even more extreme as anything that can be seen.**

The specific possibilities for cutting the Styrofoam used for the sculptural body influence the form of KG’s sculpture and contribute to its coherence. But individual features are varied to such an extent and summed up into such diverse and unexpected constellations, and the sculpture is so large that it is very difficult, if not entirely impossible, to form a detailed picture of the work as a whole. The feeling of having failed with respect to the sculpture’s claim to be perceived is reinforced by its planned installation at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas.<sup>20</sup> There the main part of the sculpture runs along a wall, so that the side facing the wall cannot be seen, and both the flow of the sculptural body and the viewer’s movement along it are interrupted by a glass wall that separates the interior of the museum from its surroundings.

The sculpture determines the perception of a subject it pulls and drives further step by step without promising an end in the sense of a result from this participatory observation. In the process, the viewer is flooded with a torrent of new moments of perception that follow and replace one another as if in a film; they are separated from one another by furrows and cuts that articulate the sculpture. On the other hand, the eccentric and highly detailed form is permeated by a moment of repetition that can be traced back to KG’s methodological restriction to a set of industrially produced colors, their application with a spray gun, and the parameters set by the possibilities for processing Styrofoam.

Following KG’s title, let’s read Sigmund Freud’s description in “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’” of 1924: “Now some time ago there came upon the

20 Katharina Grosse, *WUNDERBLOCK*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, TX (06.01.–09.01.2013)

market, under the name of the ‘Mystic Writing Pad,’ a small contrivance that promises to perform more than the sheet of paper or the slate. It claims to be nothing more than a writing tablet from which notes can be erased by an easy movement of the hand. But if it is examined more closely it will be found that its construction shows a remarkable agreement with my hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus and that it can in fact provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it.”<sup>21</sup> This perspective shows the sculpture as an object of perception that by distinguishing an element resistant to change from a large number of details reflects the structure of the apparatus of human consciousness as reconstructed by Freud.

The unique intertwining of repetition and difference is translated into a feeling of disorientation on viewing the work. Despite crazy excrescences, the cinematographic sequence of details does not provide a narrative context. But the loss of orientation stands in contradiction to the striking appearance of the sculpture, which in its planned site is not only fundamentally oriented but also presumably stands out from everything else, not only the open terrain surrounding the Nasher Sculpture Center and its self-contained exhibition space but also the other works of art nearby. The orientation of the work of art toward the viewer and the manipulation of the viewer’s being in space by the object being observed has been called “theatrical” by Michael Fried and rejected in favor of the alternative of becoming immersed in the work like the audience behind the fourth wall of a theater and achieving the “good infinity” of an observation the object of which is unrestrictedly “present.”<sup>22</sup>

**The “not present” aspect of sculpture belongs to something like a backdrop that determines the stage on which individuals appear, perceiving their surrounds fleetingly and in parts and which are at the same time observed by other individuals who have a view of the totality of the scene while the details recede.** It is easy to imagine visitors to the exhibition in Dallas posing for photographs in front of an especially striking detail of the *Wunderblock* and thus reproducing the staging of the media spectacles that television shows have caused us to become accustomed to. One of the particular and especially daring qualities of KG’s work is its proximity to such a phantasm. But we miss the point of the sculpture if we neglect to ask whether all of its details should really be seen and whether they should not better be overlooked, for example, the relief of the surface that is caused by the structure of laminated fiberglass mats, or the strips of material applied as reinforcement that vex the dynamics of the form. On the other hand, it is necessary to move close up and observe precisely in order to distinguish the delicacies of the painting, which in turn makes it impossible to assess the form as a whole. The proper perspective on the sculpture is refused bit by bit; it is as if it was necessary to be on the stage and in the audience at the same time. In contrast to the way Michael Fried saw it in his critique of theatricality, KG’s work does not require from the individual an incessant effort to perceive but instead stages all of the elements that determine the sculpture while contradicting each other and thereby **making this incessancy itself the object of observation.**

21 Sigmund Freud, “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’” (1924), in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans./ ed. James Strachey, *The Ego and the Id and Other Works, 1923–1925*, Hogarth, London, 1961, pp. 225–32, esp. p. 228.

22 See Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in: Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, E.P. Dutton, New York, 1968, pp. 116–47, and idem, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1980.

## EASEL PAINTING

When KG returns to her painting studio after periods of absence during which she worked on sculptures or architectonic painting in situ, it should be understood as the radicalization of the claim of differential painting. The post-medium condition of painting does not result, as is occasionally asserted based on an imprecise and opportunistic reading of the relevant text by Rosalind Krauss, in preference for the “installation” as a superior form of work.<sup>23</sup> Rather, the post-medium condition refers to a new articulation of painting, both in terms of its internal coherence and its relationship to what it is not, from the immediate surface on which it is deposited to the adjacent pictorial forms. It would indicate a lack of rigor to exclude the easel painting from the effort of a new articulation.

One specific challenge is transferring the incongruent superimposition of painting and the three-dimensional surface on which it settles – that is, architecture, sculpture, or items of furniture – to the apparatus of the surface, since the picture plane does not have at its disposal the heterogeneity of three-dimensional things and painting in color. In order to produce a corresponding heterogeneity and to address the question of the differences in painting under divergent conditions, it is necessary to invent particular pictorial constellations. A role is played by the desire for works the permanence of which produces a history that can be tested in a way other than photographs and reports. Finally, painting on manageable, albeit often large formats, makes it possible to develop approaches that can also be applied to works implemented in different contexts.

## DIFFERENT PAINTINGS

After KG began in 1998 to spray-paint easel paintings as well, sometimes painting over an earlier work produced with a brush, her next important innovation was the use of stencils. Negative forms were cut out to be fastened to the canvas – whether or not it already had painted markings – so that some of what had already existed was protected from the new paint, whereas in the exposed section paint was applied that was sharply separated from what was covered and at the same time adjacent. Hence KG causes the lack of manageability, for which there were technical reasons in the case of her architectonic paintings, to produce a distinction that is sharp in several respects. The sharpness of the cut is important for her to that extent that the stenciled figure appears in several paintings as an elongated and frayed lesion: polysemically, the cut is a metaphor for the figure and for its delimitation – but employed in reality to produce the stencil itself.

Sometimes the stencil establishes largely regular, extended forms, formless ponds, and in other cases an extreme of eccentricity. It is also left to the painter whether she paints as if she did not recognize the course of the stencil’s form at all or

<sup>23</sup> See Krauss, “*A Voyage on the North Sea*” (fn. 2).

whether she harmonizes her painting with that form – in some cases, in such a way that it suggests the appearance of a three-dimensional object. Seen with respect to the entire painting, there are at least two overlapping systems of apparent spatiality: that of the superimposed and interpenetrating layers of the painting itself and that of the stenciled zones. This relatively simple dispositif opens up for KG possibilities for incongruent parts of painting to collide and disturb one another, thereby creating illusions that make it extraordinarily difficult, on the one hand, to see the entire painting as a coherent constellation of spatial relationships and, on the other hand, to trace the temporal course of the production of the painting. This results in a confusing mix of the real spatiality of time-bound layering and the illusory spatiality of superimposed elements. At the same time, the fact that the various elements are often approximately the same size and that the same color key is used for the heterogeneous units produce a deceptive appearance of the unity of a painting that embraces multiple contradictions.

In fact, KG does not employ spectacular spatial effects of opposed and interlinked pieces of a layered painting that is in itself incoherent and multilayered as her way of producing spectacularly perplexed perception. On the contrary, the elaborate and multiply fractured painting is directed more at a surgical gaze than promising visual excitement. Any analysis of a painting by KG should concentrate on registering the means employed to produce incoherence in the context of a visual totality. As important as the individual parts of the painting and their interferences are the “holes,” as KG herself has called them.<sup>24</sup> They are not necessarily untreated, white areas of the canvas but rather interruptions within the fabric of differences, blackouts, ignored or incommensurable spots. They are signs of a difference that evades the “play of differences.” An unpainted part of the support, the undetermined surface, can be a hole, but the paint applied can also be a hole, or the entire painting can be a hole. **The element of difference that both intrudes in and evades all differences cannot be localized.** Implementing and confirming that is the mission of increasing the layers of painted sediment.

24 Katharina Grosse in conversation with the author, Berlin, February 2, 2013.



...the transition from the direct application of paint using brushes or rollers on diverse supports that are then attached to the wall to the use of paint that is sprayed with air pressure made available to KG streams and clouds of tiny drops of paint that can be directed, although they are also subject to gravity and other influences; they are a physical material that fills the air and offers almost as little resistance as the latter. Various forms of spray differ in the sharpness of the boundaries and change their form to differing degrees as long as they are still suspended in the air.

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# Deposit

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A look at the painting of the early Frank Stella helps us to understand the particular nature of KG's use of paint. For Stella, painting consists in applying a more or less compact layer of color to the canvas in simple forms. This layer is both contrasted with and at the same time adapted to the ground, homogeneously; the paint is understood as a self-identical material. In 1968 he said: "I didn't want to make variations; I didn't want to record a path. I wanted to get the paint out of the can and onto the canvas. [...] I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can. [...] My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there. It really is an object. [...] I lose sight of the fact that my paintings are on canvas, even though I know I'm painting on canvas, and I just see my paintings."<sup>25</sup> The concern about the original consistency of the paint is directly connected to the obsession of Stella's generation with the "whole thing" and its uniform surface the physicality of which is emphasized, and to the rejection of the relationships of individual pictorial elements that is called composition as well as the resulting effects of painterly illusion. In order to preclude any spatial division and hence the appearance of depth in painting, Stella claimed, in his famous conversation with Bruce Glaser and Donald Judd, a visibility of the paint applied that did not consider the presence of exposed areas of canvas that are always there in reality. He asserted to ignore the contradiction between the tangible physicality of the paint and the pure visuality of its appearance, to which only the painter lays claim.

By contrast, KG's use of paint presumes that it is pressed through a nozzle and is atomized in fine drops, losing its dampness almost completely by being reduced to minuscule particles and distributed in the atmosphere. The paint expands like a dust cloud giving up its density and opacity. It settles like a digital veil, with no regard to differences between objects, sculptural disparities, or varieties in materials, on the surfaces in the space and all the volumes that obstruct the wall, floor, or ceiling. Already for her first, still quite simple spray painting in 1998, KG disregarded the decisive spatial boundaries and thus broke with her own previous painting, which conformed to the architecture. By transgressing interruptions, edges, and profiles of the surfaces, she made a decision in favor of the unrepeatable and indeterminate over the serialism of architectonic details.

Drops of paint fill the air, the invisible and intangible body into which everything is embedded, a shell so unmanageably large that it appears formless and unbounded. Like the atmosphere itself, the concentration and swirling of countless particles supported by and crisscrossing the air form a moving, flying shape without clear boundaries or contours, with the status of an unstable thing, difficult to define, between an object and a non-object. In the phenomenon of the mist of paint, color and matter merge. The mist of paint is in turbulent motion, glimmering, expanding, changing color in consequence of changes in the incidence of light and the angle of viewing, oscillating between visibility and invisibility, intangible, distinguished from a phenomenon of pure visuality only by the delicate surfaces the tension of which separates tiny quantities of paint from the surrounding atmosphere.

25 Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in: Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art* (fn. 23), esp. pp. 157–58.

With the deposit of sprayed clouds that settle on everything, which is more stable than the vulnerable bubbles, the color and the material separate: the moving drops are converted into a rigid layer of paint; the changing phenomenon is registered and fixed; paint covers a hard and impenetrable surface that features the specific tactility of a matte or glossy coating. The color that affects the sensors of the retina to the point of outshining or darkening and eradicating the perception of the material substrate is distinct from the integration of paint into the world of colorful objects. It is also distinct from the organization of colors into visual configurations. Without the deposit of paint and the resulting separation from color, the existing architecture remains untouched. The point is to touch architecture with something that evades it, namely, the cloud that Filippo Brunelleschi could not integrate into his perspective drawing of the architecture in his famous demonstration in front of the Baptistery in Florence. The point is to distinguish the architecture (and hence the cloud) from itself.

Complementary to the inscription of the paint dispersing onto the surfaces of the architecture and in order to compensate for the deposit of colored turbulences that settle as traces of paint and colored zones, as a revision of the fixing, leveling out and immortalizing of the cloud, KG has, ever since painting over her bedroom, occupied spaces with things and materials. These objects reestablish elsewhere, shifted, in varying form and consistency, the physical, space-occupying dimension of the cloud and reconstruct with material resistance something of its intangibility.

Crumbs of piled soil and various globes, some solid, some unstable, subject to change, are equally related to the molecules of air and the drops of paint in the spray as they are to the spheres that extend into outer space. They correspond to gradations of concentric bodies according to a scale that ranges from the overly large to the microscopically small: from one degree of invisibility to another. Starting out from them, KG has expanded the inventory and also incorporated piles and rubble into the genealogical relationship to changing cloudy forms. They are their enlargement and reformation, solidification and transformation, replica and variation: “atoms outside eggs.”<sup>26</sup>

Drops of paint from a spray gun, trickling of piled-up soil, gravel, sand, and cement, consolidated into seemingly homogeneous construction parts, volumes of polystyrene foam sticking together, clusters of accumulated balloons, spheres and eggs distributed in space, air molecules and even smaller units, on the one hand; the globe and its surrounding spheres, on the other, are introduced in an iterative relationship, and mutual relations can be linked to relationships of self-similarity of the sort that characterize fractal geometry, not strict self-similarity, but rather a stochastically transformed variety. **The things and materials employed by KG give the impression they emerged from one another and together form a multiply mirrored complex that is subject to unpredictable changes, the cohesion of which is fragile and the units of measure of which correspond not to the order of natural numbers but instead grow, diminish, and deviate from one another in chaotic leaps.** But insofar

26 The title of a Katharina Grosse exhibition at the Museu de Serralves, Porto, in 2007.

as the faded color, its misty and fleeting concentration with blurry contours and indefinite extension never take on a self-identical form, the binding standard for comparison for their derivations is lacking. Fractally differentiated units produce a more profound similarity than do repetitions of the same.

By means of voluminous elements, it is possible to regain the space that had been emptied by the centrifugal dynamic of the sprayed paint. They oust space and counter its emptiness with a set of obstacles. These things belong to the one and to the other, to the amorphous mist of paint and to the crystalline architecture, and yet belong neither completely to the one nor the other. At the same time, they do not embody any medium that conveys between the architecture and the mist of paint but rather shift the architectonic planes in the direction of a cloud without surfaces and move this cloud in the direction of planes that delimit space. They are deviant elements of the transformation of the mist of paint and the architecture, elements of a return conceivable in either direction, starting with one and with the other, similar to neither, turning away from repetition, beyond it, and elsewhere.

# Playing the Game

## THE BODY AND THE SPATIAL DISPOSITION

When we walk through a city, we are always aware of the space around us. We are aware of the buildings, the streets, the squares, the parks, the trees, the people. We are aware of the way the space is organized, the way it is divided into different areas. We are aware of the way the space is used, the way it is lived in. We are aware of the way the space is transformed, the way it is changed. We are aware of the way the space is created, the way it is made. We are aware of the way the space is destroyed, the way it is broken. We are aware of the way the space is reborn, the way it is renewed. We are aware of the way the space is always and never the same.

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dissolved, and at the same time accessible. In light of the taste for dissolution and fractal transformation, marked by the interpolation of antitheses such as “intact” and “broken” or “fort” [gone] and “da” [there] – and one of whose ignored premises was the emergence of that which was unrecognized but visible – the gaze falls again on the protected, solitary figure in the contaminated atmosphere of her painting environment. **While shifting the gaze to that which has always been seen, albeit in an unfocused way, she causes its astonishing emergence. The repercussion of the unveiling, destructive attack on the unrecognized premises of a traditional cultural practice is the exclusion of the person pursuing it.**

## GRAVITY, SEXUALITY, GAZE

The sprayed paint, which flies through the air in all directions as the spray gun is turned, embodies an effect that is almost like the overcoming of gravity. On the other hand, the obvious and programmatic claim on gravitation is responsible for the drops and splashes of Pollock’s enamel paints landing on the horizontally laid out canvas and leaving behind puddles and lines implemented by the movements of his body. Spread out on the floor, the canvas is the painter’s field of action, his “arena,” in front of which he stands, around which he walks, at which he looks, from which he is physically excluded, the boundaries of which he occasionally oversteps in order to reach a distant spot, as Hans Namuth’s photographs reveal. The horizontality of the painted surface and the gravity that is expressly brought into play contrast with the upright canvas attached vertically to the wall to which colors only cling when they have dried.

KG’s text *AbEx: The Clusterfuck* refers to Pollock’s practice of painting and combines the praise of indecency and exposure with a proviso against explicit sexuality: “With household paint and the by-product of decent painting – the drip – Pollock forced the act of making into a razor-sharp nakedness. And yet I cannot overlook a demonstrative sexual presence.”<sup>28</sup> Rosalind Krauss combined the difference between the horizontality and verticality of the pictorial field with the transition to the dominance of the gaze: “Sight alone displaces excited humanoid attention away from its partner’s genitals and onto ‘the shape of the body as a whole.’” “Sublimation” was Sigmund Freud’s term for the movement from the sexual to the visual.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, Pollock’s act of painting would be determined by desublimation, the penchant for a precultural, precivilized state, the impulse to return to atavistic and instinctive practices. That is what the literature on Pollock refers to when it makes an analogy between dripping and pissing and recalls Sigmund Freud’s remark in *Society and Its Discontents* of 1930, which comments on a supposed primal human impulse to extinguish fire with a stream of urine. Because he sees the flames as a phallic symbol, Freud recognizes in exposed male pissing an act of homosexual competition. The curbing of this urge that corresponds to the preservation and use of fire is a fundamental cultural achievement.

28 Katharina Grosse, “AbEx: The Clusterfuck,” *Artforum*, vol. 49, no. 10 (Summer 2011), p. 342.

29 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993, p. 247.

The motor-driven flight of the streams and clouds of paint that KG sets in motion is not free of psychosexual metaphors, but has a different, less regressive orientation. In the fourth edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* of 1914, Sigmund Freud mentions the dream-linked airship, the zeppelin, as testimony to the connection of fantasies of flying and male sexuality. The hydrogen-filled balloon is an ideal participant in KG's proliferation of spherical bodies in both directions of magnitude. It is revealing that the phallic zeppelin is brought into play, "for the remarkable phenomenon of erection, around which the human imagination has constantly played, cannot fail to be impressive, involving as it does an apparent suspension of the laws of gravity. (Cf. in this connection the winged phalli of the ancients.)"<sup>30</sup> Sabine Höhler, a historian of aviation, writes: "From then on, drive and buoyancy explicitly belonged together."<sup>31</sup> **In KG's painting, the "drip," driven by anti-gravitational pressure, is elevated into the air as a stream or cloud of paint, if not to disprove then at least to modify Peter Sloterdijk's ironic diagnosis that in the project of the phallic insurrections it is ultimately gravity that has the last word.**<sup>32</sup> The modification consists of replacing the gravity-bound use of the horizontal "arena," within the limits determined in part by the preconditions for the production of the canvas, with the potential occupation of all the surfaces of a room, whether beneath one's feet or above one's head, turned to the body or folded into one another in complex ways and layered on top of one another. And above all, it consists of the ruthless transgression in every possible direction of the edges of the sprayed things and forms. Under the onslaught of myriads of airborne droplets, the surface for deposits of Pollock's splashes and drips, which is unaccommodating to the gaze, abandons its fundamental solidarity with the surface of the earth in favor of an unstable localization in every possible spatial dimension – which suggests the idea that it is not just that painting lays claim to all the dimensions of space without distinctions, but physical space and its occupants, represented by the temporary visitors to an exhibition, are freed from their bonds to earth in order to float and rotate in weightlessness. Achieving such a state is not a matter of phallic competition, which finds its abrupt end in Pollock's painting when the canvas is stretched and hung vertically, but rather a matter of breaking with the natural, earth-bound privilege of direction in favor of a comprehensive unbridling of sprayed paint that ignores gravity and spatial boundaries.

Nevertheless, a question persists: How do KG's levitation and dispersion of Pollock's rivulets and swamps of color relate to the gaze-supported sublimation that Pollock refused by means of the process of producing paintings and to which he ultimately succumbed with the subsequent manipulation of the canvas? KG herself related the abandonment of organic contact with the surface of the painting – e.g., with a brush or, we might add, with gravity – to the reevaluation of the gaze: "My immediate physical relationship to the space is considerably reduced, which allows my visual perception of the special situation to develop its full potential. In this process, I am both the viewer and the cause of the painting action. [...] Spraying permits actions that come directly from seeing, whereas the movement of the body influences

30 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans./ ed. James Strachey, vol. 5, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Hogarth, London, 1953, p. 394.

31 Sabine Höhler, *Luftfahrtforschung und Luftfahrtmythos: Wissenschaftliche Ballonfahrt in Deutschland, 1880–1900*, Campus, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, p. 99.

32 Sloterdijk, *Sphären III: Schäume* (fn. 28), p. 721.

33 Katharina Grosse, in: Lothar Frangenberg, "Diskurs: Ein Interview mit Katharina Grosse zu raumbezogenen Sprayarbeiten ihrer letzten Ausstellungen," Dusseldorf, October 5, 2004, <http://www.kunstaspekte.de/kuenstlerin.php?k=3075> (accessed 09/22/2011).

painting lines with the brush heavily. The movement of the eye is much more closely connected to the movement of the spray gun. You move away from the system of measurements based on the body.”<sup>33</sup> By coupling the dissolution of the spatial tie to the enhancement of visual possibilities, KG points to the crucial difference from other forms of producing paintings in which the gaze takes control at the moment when the act of painting is interrupted or ended – the notorious withdrawal of the painter from his or her work; the use of mirrors to increase the distance virtually, in Pollock’s case the displacing of the canvas from the horizontal to the vertical. There is not a lot lacking in KG’s commentary to identify her gaze with the discharge of colors – as if colors were being projected by the eye, without further intervention of the body, the hand, or the painting tool, to their destination on the given surface, even where it cannot be reached by the body itself. One confirmation of this reading is found in an impressive story from KG’s youth: **“Until I was around twenty, whenever I was falling asleep or waking up I always saw an imaginary brush on the ceiling or a wall that painted away the shadows and forms (e.g., shelves, curtains, wardrobes), or more precisely, tried to paint them away. The movement of painting was always very ordered; it followed the form. Naturally, the action was never successful; everything remained, as it was, more or less static. Nevertheless, until I had painted the wall away, I couldn’t leave the bed; my imaginary brush kept me in my bed until the wall was expunged. I was captivated by my own gaze.”**<sup>34</sup>

Not unrelated to a hallucination, this is the idea of a gaze that, separated from things, does not have to bridge distances in order to adopt that which lies ahead of it, at a greater or lesser distance, but rather achieves material effects from a distance by leaving behind traces on things at which it is directed. The colored deposit is then evidence that the gaze touches things, and touching things is a matter for the gaze: Seeing and touching, the visible and the touchable merge. Looking at a finished work leads to a heightened perception by the viewer of his or her own body, caused by spatial obstacles and the painterly occupation of parts of a room that exceed the familiar field of vision. This regularly goes hand in hand with an effort to reconstruct the process of producing the painting. However, the gaze-friendly discharge of the spray gun is cloud-shaped, so that Pollock’s “polyfocal all-over”<sup>35</sup> is replaced by an unfocused, unburdened deposit on all surfaces in every direction in the room.

In short, KG combines the staging of the gaze with the libidinous engagement of painting in an atmosphere in which all of the surfaces of a room can be occupied free from gravitational bounds in a nonhierarchical way. The elevated gaze turned in every possible direction, embodied and spatialized through painting, liberates itself from the stipulations of sublimation and at the same time, starting out from the body enveloped in a special climate and protected from the contaminated atmosphere of the paint, refrains from touching the surfaces where the paint settles. In this unique context of gaze and desublimation, distance and touch, we find the conditions for the transition from the theatrical staging to a situation of relaxed and devoted observation.

34 Information from Annika Reich, January 16, 2013, unpublished.

35 Cf. Walter Kambartel, *Jackson Pollock, Number 32, 1950*, Philipp Reclam Jun., Stuttgart, 1970.