

Jutta Koether
Seasons and Sacraments

Exhibition Guide

4 May – 7 July 2013

Seasons and Sacraments presents a selection of new and recent works by Jutta Koether, who is among the most influential contemporary painters. The artist is known for the crossover in her work between painting and performance, music and text, and collaborations with musicians, and collaborative projects such as *Grand Openings* and *Reena Spaulings*. Koether often uses unusual materials in her work, such as silver foil and clear liquid acrylic, and she presents her works in carefully considered installations, with canvases mounted on large sheets of glass or used as props in live performances. Influenced by popular culture, literature and music, she has significantly expanded the understanding of what painting means today. The art historian David Joselit coined the term 'network painting' to describe the way in which Koether, together with other contemporary artists, considers paintings in relation to all aspects of their presentation and discussion, and not just as a canvas on the wall (see the text by David Joselit in this guide).

The tradition of painting has played a decisive role in Koether's work throughout her career, and she frequently deals with the work of artists from previous generations; in direct references to Paul Cezanne or Vincent van Gogh, for example, or more implicitly with Philip Guston and Paul Thek. More than influences, Koether is interested in the conceptual approach of specific painters, their reception, and the historical consequences of their work. Her works acknowledge and emphasise the act of reading and re-interpreting, an important aspect of painting throughout its history. This exhibition at Arnolfini presents a series of works that respond directly to paintings by the French artist Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), including a reinterpretation of *The Seven Sacraments* (1637–1640), re-imagined as a series of installations, and *The Seasons* (2012), a response to *The Four Seasons* (1660–1664). There is a strong connection to these earlier works, but she also deviates and radicalises, using a gestural visual language and leaving traces of her working process. She also deliberately resists conventional hanging methods, works are installed at unusual angles, relating to other works in the exhibition and the architecture of the gallery.

Incorporating the traditional, such as the theme of the seasons or the formal composition and format of *The Seven Sacraments*, Koether's practice is based on 'working through' the layers of history and combining them with other ideas and influences connected to the artists' own background. This includes an engagement and re-interpretation of a history of art dominated by men from the perspective of a female painter and examining concepts which seem relevant for contemporary discussion, as well as her interest in theory, music and improvisation. With a critical distance, Koether insists on painting as a contemporary medium for artistic expression, not despite the tradition, but precisely because it links the contemporary world of images with a history of imagination.

The works shown in the exhibition have a stunning material quality. The canvases are painted with oil and iridescent paint, which gives a sparkling effect. Other works include objects with a silvery surface, similar to items found in souvenir stores or boutiques, and use liquid acrylic, capturing a frozen moment as if fossilised in amber. In the context of painting, these materials can be seen as contaminating a traditional understanding of

painting, they link traditional ideas with the contemporary world of everyday culture and its signs and symbols. While this idea of 'contamination' has been identified as a significant perspective in painting since the 1980s (for example in the idea of 'bad painting' – an explicit act of rejecting notions of quality to expand the possibilities of painting and its potential to deal with contemporary questions), it is also a quality of many works from history that deal not only with questions of painting and its genres, but with things outside of painting, such as the social reality of the time and philosophical ideas.

Jutta Koether was born in 1958 in Cologne, Germany, and works as a painter, performance artist, musician, critic and writer. Based in Berlin and New York, Koether is also a professor at the Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg. As a musician, she has worked with artists such as Tony Conrad, John Miller, Tom Verlaine, Kim Gordon and the late Steven Parrino (as Electrophilia). Recent exhibitions include the Whitney Biennial and Sao Paulo Biennial, both 2012, and solo exhibitions at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2011), and the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2009). Her work was recently included in the Tate Modern exhibition *A Bigger Splash: Painting after Performance*.

Jutta Koether: Seasons and Sacraments has been organised in collaboration with Dundee Contemporary Arts with support from the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen. A publication is in preparation and will be released during the exhibition.

FOYER

The first work in the exhibition is a projection of a painting, which is part of *The Seven Sacraments: Baptism*, the first sacrament, represented by an image of the German racing car driver Sebastian Vettel as a contemporary depiction of idolatry. The work is deliberately placed in the foyer, the most public space in the building, functioning both as a work and a sign or starting point for the exhibition.

GALLERY 1

The ground floor gallery centres around a sculpture, an upright figure or totem constructed from found materials and souvenirs from Bristol, with a projection of drawings and photographs, and a series of paintings titled *Embrace* (2012). The paintings were initially produced for the 30th São Paulo Biennial and shown at the MASP, the São Paulo Museum of Art designed by the Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi. The works were presented in front of the large canvas *Hymenaios Disguised as a Woman During an Offering to Priapus* (1634–1638), attributed to Nicolas Poussin, which is part of the museum collection and recently underwent an extensive restoration process. The work depicts the Greek god of marriage ceremonies, dressed as a woman and dancing around a statue of Priapus, a rustic fertility god, whose phallus had been uncovered during the restoration. Koether's three canvases together are the same size as Poussin's *Hymenaios*, they present three different perspectives on the original work with different sections of the image represented. Koether uses a variety of surface treatments in each painting, such as stripes based on the X-ray images used in restoration, or the removal of varnish. She has described the works as "laying bare and weaving through desire and interest in restoration processes", connecting technology with traditions of depicting male and female bodies. The canvases on each side of the central work include images that recollect a drawing by Matisse and a painting of nudes by Picasso, titled *Étreinte* (1972). Koether wrote of the work: "to stage paintings' mere and proud materiality ... painting as: fabric ... twisted ... love ... glowing garlands ... filter ... crisis embrace ... yours yours yours anyhow." The paintings are shown on large sheets of toughened glass, which exposes the back of the works and confronts the viewer with their materiality – a display technique used by Lina Bo Bardi in the 1950s in Brazil. On the wall behind the glass sheets, there is an untitled unique print by Jutta Koether, which shows an image of Queen Elizabeth in front of Balmoral castle in Scotland, pointing to something we can't see. The image was taken from an advertisement in a lifestyle magazine and reworked

through layers of different printing techniques – all the different techniques in fact that the renowned printing studio of Dundee Contemporary Arts can execute, including digital laser-cutting. Interestingly, a boat with the name Balmoral is moored in the harbour outside Arnolfini.

The projection shows drawings and photographs of *Embrace* (2012) installed in São Paulo, and a video excerpt of a performance Jutta Koether made in Dundee. For the last weekend of the exhibition the space will be transformed for social activities, with concerts and a performance by the artist.

GALLERY 3 & 4

The exhibition spaces on the first floor show two series of works, *The Seasons* and *The Seven Sacraments*. The two series respond to important works by Nicolas Poussin, and engage in prominent subjects in art's history. The four canvases of *The Seasons* are based on Poussin's *The Four Seasons* (1660–1664), which is part of the historic collection of the Louvre in Paris. These were the last works that the artist completed, and there is a sense of an artist in old age looking back through his life. Whilst recognising his own mortality, he looks at renewal in relation to the seasons: "Benign in Spring, rich in Summer, sombre yet fruitful in Autumn and cruel in Winter" (Anthony Blunt: Nicholas Poussin, 1967). Koether's works of the same subject – which are painted with a frame, represented by brackets, alluding to the material background of painting – use the seasons as a genre, but connect them with contemporary references from advertising or other popular image sources (we see for example stock market graphs running through all four canvases). As Jay Sanders has noted in a text about the work, "Koether re-insists on the seasons as still-relevant demarcations to contemporary life – aesthetic, fashion, economic and otherwise." *The Seasons* was first shown at the 2012 Whitney Biennial in New York, where it was installed on large sheets of glass. The work has been transformed for the exhibition in Bristol, and here the four seasons are seen in a row, high above our heads, adapted to the architecture like a frieze.

The Seven Sacraments are less traditional than *The Seasons*. Koether's restless, iconoclastic and interdisciplinary approach to painting includes here sculptural elements, particularly striking in her innovative use of clear liquid acrylic. Her version of *The Seven Sacraments* – another representation of life and the relationship between subjects and order – proposes seven different approaches to image making, reflecting different aspects, such as the

relationship of images to mass media or institutional constraints. The sacraments of the Catholic Church are Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, Penance, Ordination and Extreme Unction. Poussin painted two versions of the *Seven Sacraments*, the second one was made in Rome (1644–1648) and is considered “richer, grander and more complex than the first” (Blunt, Poussin: *The Seven Sacraments*, 1968). After finishing the second series, Poussin wrote a remarkable sentence which Swiss art historian Oskar Bätschmann quotes in his monograph on Poussin as a “call for a reversal of method, for the antidote to order and the rule of chance: ‘If it were possible, I wish that these Seven Sacraments were converted into seven other stories that vividly represent the strangest tricks that fortune has ever played on men, and particularly on those who mocked her efforts.’” (Oskar Bätschmann, *Nicolas Poussin: Dialectics of Painting*, 1990). It is this second version to which Koether responded, re-imagining the topics of the paintings as dynamic installations.

Extreme Unction, the last sacrament, presented in the doorway of the gallery, marking the threshold into the space, is comprised of planks of wood laid out in the form of a number seven. The artist has previously utilised planks as elements in performances, most recently in a series of events organised by the performance collective Grand Openings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2011. In this installation, the planks are inscribed with objects and texts relating to a tradition of ‘eccentric’ readings of art and literature, with quotes from Quentin Meillassoux’s *The Number and the Siren* (2012), T.J. Clark’s *The Sight of Death* (2006) (for which the American writer kept a diary of daily visits to two Poussin works in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles), and Scott Walker’s album *Bish Bosch* (2012) as key examples.

Confirmation is presented as the central piece in the gallery: three large sheets of glass with objects encased in clear liquid acrylic, identical in size and shape to the glass panes in Gallery 1, but used here as the background of the work itself. Attached to the glass are strips of canvas which echo aspects of the original Poussin painting – such as the white in the left panel, blue and yellow in the central panel, and orange in the right panel, which allude to the robes worn by the figures in the painting. Each composition contains entry passes – symbolising keys – used by Koether as she travels for her work, referring to the social hierarchies surrounding art production and the ‘confirmation’ of artists’ careers through institutions. The three works are meant to be seen from both sides, having two surfaces and open views through

the glass to the other works in the exhibition. Behind the glass works we see *Marriage*: a pair of paintings spot-lit with theatre lights to reveal the metallic paint within the composition. Koether’s treatment of the material is more colourful than Poussin’s formal approach and reflects the act of reproducing a painting or topic by repeating it twice. (The act of doubling is referred to by Jacques Derrida in the text *The Double Session*, in which he describes the idea of the mime: “mime does not imitate or copy some prior phenomena, idea, or figure, but constitutes – some might say performatively – the phantasm of the original in and through the mime.”)

On the opposite side of the gallery, a monitor shows looped photographs of Poussin’s original paintings. Koether presents these as *Eucharist* (also known as Holy Communion or Sacrament of the Altar), the widescreen monitor mirroring the format of the second set of Poussin paintings. The representation of images ‘as they are’ can be seen in the tradition of receiving the Eucharist ‘as’ the body of Christ (and not a symbol), a blurring between representation and presence.

Through *Ordination*, individuals are consecrated to perform religious rites and ceremonies. Jutta Koether’s work with this title consists of canvas planks, hung as a strip with the same distance between the elements, similar to decorative architectural lintels. These works are presented in relation to the architecture of the space, measuring and demarcating the formal frame. Some of the canvases are inscribed with messages used by the Occupy Movement, an international protest movement against social and economic inequality.

Penance utilises an Essey Grand Illusion table – a contemporary Danish designed piece of furniture in clear perspex that resembles Koether’s liquid acrylic material and Poussin’s depiction of drapery. The objects included in the work encapsulate details from the artist’s practice and elements from Poussin’s paintings. They also serve as a votive or offering for the whole project, and include a marriage certificate holder, a Swarovski paperweight and an inscribed racing car money box.

Through the door to the adjacent Gallery 4, which is otherwise left empty, there is a view to the painting representing *Baptism*, which is also shown on the projection in the Foyer at the entrance to the building. In a cycle of reflections on image and representation, original and version, the work from the Foyer has a double on canvas.

FURTHER READING

Painting Beside Itself (Excerpt)

David Joselit

With a characteristic flourish of perversity linking painting to pasta, Martin Kippenberger identified the most important problem to be addressed on canvas since Warhol in an interview of 1990–91: “Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say that it’s art is dreadful. The whole network is important! Even spaghetti When you say art, then everything possible belongs to it. In a gallery that is also the floor, the architecture, the color of the walls.” If we take Kippenberger at his word, a significant question arises: *How does painting belong to a network?* This late twentieth-century problem, whose relevance has only increased with the ubiquity of digital networks, joins a sequence of modernist questions: How does painting signify in the semiotic aporias of Cubism or the non-objective utopias of the historical avant-gardes? *How can the status of painting as matter be made explicit* (i.e., through the incorporation of readymades, and the rise of the monochrome and seriality as well as the gestural techniques of dripping, pouring, and staining)? And *How might painting meet the challenge of mechanical reproduction* (as in strategies of appropriation spanning Pop’s silk screens of the 1960s and the Pictures generation’s return to painting in the 1980s)? None of these problems exists in isolation or ever disappears; instead, there are shifts in emphasis in which earlier questions are reformulated through newer ones.

Certainly, painting has always belonged to networks of distribution and exhibition, but Kippenberger claims something more: that, by the early 1990s, an individual painting should explicitly *visualize* such networks. And indeed, Kippenberger’s studio assistants and close associates (some might call them collaborators) — such as Michael Krebber, Merlin Carpenter, and his interviewer of 1990–91, Jutta Koether—have developed practices in which painting sutures a virtual world of images onto an actual network composed of human actors, allowing neither aspect to eclipse the other. In Koether’s 2009 exhibition *Lux Interior* at Reena Spaulings Gallery in New York, for instance, painting functioned as a cynosure of performance, installation, and painted canvas. The exhibition centered on a single work mounted on an angled floating wall—much like a screen—which, as Koether put it, had one foot on and one foot off the raised platform that delineates the gallery’s exhibition area, as though caught in the act of stepping onstage. This effect was enhanced by a vintage scoop light trained on the painting that had been salvaged from The Saint, a famous gay nightclub that officially closed in 1988 largely as a consequence of the AIDS crisis. The canvas itself, *Hot Rod (after Poussin)* (2009), is a nearly monochromatic reworking of Poussin’s *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (1651), representing a Roman myth centered on the extinction of love—and life—caused by the misreading of visual cues (Pyramus sees Thisbe’s ruined veil and assumes she has been murdered by a lioness, leading to his suicide, and then, upon finding him dead, Thisbe’s own). The painting is predominantly red—the color of blood and anger (and by extension AIDS)—and it centers on a scaled-up motif—a giant bolt of lightning that had played a much less prominent role in Poussin’s canvas. This jagged form divides the composition like a scar, around which brushstrokes coagulate. The marks are by turns tentative and assertive, something like a caress before a slap. Indeed, inspired by T. J. Clark’s extended reading of Poussin in *The Sight of Death* (2006), Koether develops a gesture that is deeply ambivalent: equally composed of self-assertion and interpretation, her strokes are depleted of expressive urgency by marking the elapsed time between Poussin’s 1651 and her 2009. Three lecture performances accompanied the exhibition in which Koether moved around and even under the wall that supported her canvas—her body

and the bright anger of her recitation of collaged text furnished a frame for the canvas. The painting's own presence as a personage—or interlocutor—was further enhanced by strobe lights flashing onto it in different configurations during these live events as if painting and painter had encountered one another in a club.

Lux Interior offered a sophisticated response to the question with which I began: *How does painting belong to a network?* It's worth pausing to consider how difficult it is to visualize networks, which, in their incomprehensible scale, ranging from the impossibly small microchip to the impossibly vast global Internet, truly embody the contemporary sublime. One need only Google "Internet maps" to turn up Star Trek-inspired images of interconnected solar systems that do little to enhance one's understanding of the traffic in information but do much to tie digital worlds to ancient traditions of stargazing. Koether approaches the problem in a different way. Instead of attempting to visualize the overall contours of a network, she actualizes the *behavior of objects within networks* by demonstrating what I would like to call their transitivity. The Oxford English Dictionary gives one definition of "transitive" as "expressing an action which passes over to an object." I can think of no better term to capture the status of objects within networks—which are defined by their circulation from place to place and their subsequent translation into new contexts—than this notion of passage. In *Lux Interior*, Koether established such transitivity along two axes. First, each brushstroke of her reenactment of Poussin's *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* embodies the passage of time. This diachronic axis of painting-as-medium is joined to a second synchronic kind of passage which moves out from painting-as-cultural artifact to the social networks surrounding it, as indicated both by *Hot Rod's* behavior as a personage (it "steps" on stage, is lighted by disco lamps, etc.) as well as the artist's performance as the painting's discursive and bodily interlocutor in her three lecture events.

What defines transitive painting, of which Koether represents only one "mood," is its capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it. In this regard, painting since the 1990s has folded into itself so-called "institutional critique" without falling into the modernist trap of negation, where works on canvas are repeatedly reduced to degree zero while remaining unique objects of contemplation and market speculation. From this cooler perspective, Stephen Prina stands in a position analogous to Kippenberger vis-a-vis younger artists such as Cheyney Thompson, Wade Guyton, and R. H. Quaytman. In 1988, Prina initiated an ongoing project titled *Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet*, in which an offset lithograph representing a visual index of Édouard Manet's corpus of 556 works (arranged to scale in a grid of "blanks" based on the contour and dimensions of each painting or drawing) was exhibited next to a sequence of monochrome sepia ink drawings made by Prina to the exact size and format of corresponding works in Manet's oeuvre. While these drawings might appear empty on casual examination, Prina rightly insists on their positive visual affect. [...]

If, for Koether, "painting" functions as the nodal point of performance, installation, and a figurative style of gestural reenactment on canvas, for Prina "painting" marks the intersection of the artist's oeuvre (as inventory or body of work), the object's format (its size and contour), and a non-objective style of reenactment on paper. The flavor of *Exquisite Corpse* is thus dramatically different from *Lux Interior*, but they share the same project: to visualize the transitive passage of action from a painting out to a social network (or body), and from this network back onto painting. As Prina declares, "I entitled the Manet project *The Exquisite Corpse* because it seemed necessary to see a complete body of work, in relation to his body and to my body ... "

EVENTS

Artist Talk

Saturday 4 May, 2pm, free

Jutta Koether, Graham Domke (Exhibitions Curator, DCA) and Axel Wieder (Curator of Exhibitions, Arnolfini).

Concert / Performances

Saturday 6 July, 11am – 6pm, free

A continual programme of concerts, dj sets and performances will transform the ground floor of Jutta Koether's exhibition into a space for gathering.

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