

**CHRONONAUTS in CHROMOTOPIA:
Queer Art movements through Space, Time and Matter**
Abstract of dissertation project

Describing Katharina Grosse's show "One Floor Up More Highly" at MASS MoCA in 2012 - a spatial painting consisting of vibrant colors sprayed over heaps of soil and giant styrofoam formations akin to the glowing surface of a science fiction planet - curator Susan Cross conceives of the work as an "alternative space defined by pure color" tempting viewers to "jump into what looked like a liquid pool of paint". In 1970, Lynda Benglis submerges her "pours", heaps of pigmented latex, in an outside pool in Fort Worth, Texas, for a study. Saturated with Day-Glo hues, her voluminous painting-entities float next to the springboard. Despite their seemingly heightened materiality they do not sink, sharing a bath, perhaps, with swimmers yet to jump in. While Susan Cross describes a fantasy of being immersed inside fluid paint-color, Benglis' art works are themselves immersed in water, the very element that forms the metaphorical base for immersion in the German term "Eintauchen" (dipping into, or going under water).

Intrigued by painting's potential to enable immersive experiences and by the notions of exuberance, excess and out-of-this-world sensations associated with vibrant color choices, my dissertation project "Chrononauts in Chromotopia: Queer Art movements through Space, Time and Matter" considers four contemporary artists working in the expanded field of abstract painting, namely Lynda Benglis, Katrin Plavčak, Julie Mehretu and Katharina Grosse. The desire to enter the pictorial surface, to merge with the color-space and to form an intimate relationship with the materiality of paint-color, is met by the painterly strategies of these artists in various ways. Their works often result in a perceived dissolution, or suspension, of the boundaries between viewers and art works: Viewers physically move inside the painting field by walking across pigmented heaps of soil or amongst floors and ceilings sprayed over with layers of primary colors (Grosse), they become mobile in relation to materialized color spills on the floor or cascading off the walls (Benglis), they activate their peripheral vision vis-à-vis larger-than human scale canvases (Mehretu) and encounter pictorial surfaces that share the field of vision with sculpture (Plavčak).

In search for a language that attends to the particular role of vivid color sensation in the painting events described above as well as to the immersive relations between viewers and art works, and in turn between art works and their surroundings, the project looks to the queer history of color in art, to the growing field of queer abstraction and to theories of queer relationality.

In recent years, queer theorists have emphasized that the subject matter of queer theory reaches beyond the deconstruction of sex, gender and sexuality as neatly aligned pillars of desire. Consequently, in art history, the term “queer abstraction” is gaining traction for describing artistic strategies that aim at expanding the notion of queer art beyond figurative representation i. e. LGBTIQ portraiture or the depiction of queer figures and characters. From this vantage point, queer-theoretical work does not hinge on bodies or queer subjectivities, but becomes a mode of interrogating relations, materialities and multi-directional events. Indeed, queerness as a lens for exploring multi-faceted desires and ‘unusual’ human/nonhuman relations, offers a productive theoretical framework for the intense immersive pull of “seductive paintings” and agential images.

Writings on the affective role of color in art and the many attempts to tame it, suggest that registering the sensory pleasures of color often results in a perceived loss of self. If a painting can unsettle the spectator to the core, as Jeanette Winterson once declared, we might re-consider the constitution of the artist-subject or audience-subject in relation to the materiality of artworks. Judith Butler posits that we are “undone by each other”. Even though we might strive for autonomy in the interest of self-determination, we are ultimately interconnected with one another. “Modes of being dispossessed” constitute subjectivity not as a kind of self-possession, but as a deeply relational state.

The term queer relationality thus aims at describing relations and constellations of desire that are not posited on definite types and structures, or a human/object split, but on multiple, mobile, vague and intangible relations. “Queering” our readings of immersive art encounters can enable us to consider the “intersubjectivity” that unfolds between pictorial spaces and their viewers. The ways in which spatial arrangements foster immersive encounters, factor in my analysis, as much as the theme of outer-space travel as image-content. As James Rosenquist suggested, images of space can “represent something incomprehensible - like the future”. The works of Benglis, Plavčak, Mehretu and Grosse suggest that agential qualities can be ascribed not just to paintings, but to the medium of paint-color itself. This dissertation project then is an attempt at coming closer to the incomprehensible pull of their paintings.

Chapter 1: Off the Wall: Lynda Benglis

Experimenting with industrial painting materials such as latex-colors in the late 1960s, Lynda Benglis (*1941) moved painting “off the wall” by pouring paint directly on the floor. Interested in “where painting could go”, Benglis interrogated the relationship between painting and its appearance in space independent of a two-dimensional flat carrier. Wielding large buckets of her own mixtures of pigmented latex-paint, she created strata of ultra-violent DayGlo hues flowing into one another. Freed from a traditional carrier, paint-color seemingly appeared in space autonomously, existing as an independent presence in the room. Interested in how materials could behave in relation to the parameters of exhibition spaces, Benglis gradually increased the volume of her pours through the use of foam and polyurethane. Ultimately, her hybrid paintings moved off the floor and into the air, arcing off the walls and cascading into the exhibition space, sometimes infused with fluorescent pigments so that they would appear as glowing slushes of flying color in the dark.

Benglis techniques challenge what a painting can look like, begging the question whether it is paint or the use of a specific carrier that makes a painting. As David Reisman stated in response to her voluminous pours at a 2011 retrospective at the New Museum: “there’s a science-fiction quality to the blob as art – blobs have lives of their own, and our awareness of the artist’s hand is secondary to experiencing their weird, essential otherness.” While the vibrant matter in the form of blobs and spills invite the mind to wander into outer space, they also require viewers to physically move around them in order to see them from all sides. At the same time, Benglis’ pouring technique creates a sense of movement within the works: Although her paintings are hardened heaps of paint color, they appear as if in movement. The artist has discussed this effect as enabling proprioception in the viewer who unconsciously perceives the past movement within the body and in a sense re-experiences the state of the material in liquid form. Based in New York, Santa Fe and Ahmedabad, Benglis today produces hydraulic fountains out of pigmented polyurethane, often immersed in basins. As their forms repeat in bronze shapes that in the early 1970s arced off the walls as painterly pours, Benglis genre defying oeuvre lets us consider immersion not just from the perspective of the viewer, but from the perspective of the art work immersed in its surroundings.

Chapter 2: The Great Escape into Space: Katrin Plavčak

Queer figures, such as lip-stick wearing meteorites and pink-haired object-animal hybrids, traverse the Science Fiction inspired oil paintings of Berlin based artist Katrin Plavčak (*1970). She describes her painting technique as “Bad Painting”, a fast, sometimes cartoon-like means for visualizing “weird people and strange sceneries, political stuff and half abstract tryouts”. Plavčak’s protagonists transcend geopolitical restrictions and cross different times zones, so that Afrofuturism-icon Sun Ra finds himself next to 90s popculture TV’s character ALF, the cat-eating alien and a one-eyed floating head with pink hair.

The mix of characters and object-animal hybrids in Plavčak’s montages at times give way to abstracting techniques when tape is applied in parallel layers during the painting process and later removed, leaving only fragments of the formerly intact sceneries to see. Plavčak often combines her paintings with papier-mâché sculptures and videos in order to “broaden the scape of the painting”. Meteorites made out of paper look rock-heavy, but are light in weight. For Plavčak, this playful juxtaposition makes it appear “as if gravity has no power over painting.” As she repeats elements from her canvases in three-dimensional form, Plavčak expands the image space into the exhibition space. Jutta Koether has described these expanded image fields as showing “obstinately amorphous materials, defying shaping in their own idiosyncratic way”. Presented with this complex, multi-temporal universe that unsettles any immediate sense of context, she asks, “what if not only paintings and objects, but the whole space gazes, stares at you?”.

Chapter 3: In the Interest of Time: Julie Mehretu

New York based painter Julie Mehretu (*1970) creates large-scale abstract paintings (up to 27 feet high and 32 feet wide) and prints containing oil, ink and pencil that reveal traces of architectural structures underneath layers of criss-crossing lines, cloud-like paint dust and small geometrical shapes scattered across the canvas. Mehretu's works offer historical snapshots of dispersed locations and time periods in one singular painting. This approach invites a reflection on the changing character and transformational moments of particular sites and the overlapping themes of various points in time. In her paintings, Mehretu includes slashes of geometrical color-shapes, marks in the form of triangles and squares that represent "characters" or "agents", as she calls them.

Recent works have moved toward wave-like brush gestures and ink imprints that convey a sense of free-flowing movements across the canvas, dark colors curving and swirling organically across the surface. In Mehretu's canvas paintings spatial expansion does not happen by extending the image field into three-dimensional architectural space. Instead, her works activate an acute awareness of peripheral vision due to their scale. Her layering techniques and vast gestural movements create an intense immersive pull into the illusory space of the picture plane, an effect that is heightened by her paintings' dimensional demand for bodily movement along the pictorial surface.

Chapter 4: The Sexuality of Painting: Katharina Grosse

Katharina Grosse's multi-dimensional, heterochronic pictorial fields enable paint-color to literally travel anywhere and has been described as the "triumph of autonomous painting". With the help of a paint gun, her works often abandon the traditional painting field of the canvas, letting bright primary colors travel over interior architectural structures such as walls, windows and floors, or her own bedroom. Other times, paint moves onto the streets, over the front of buildings and into their immediate surroundings. At times Grosse (*1961), who works out of Berlin, creates sculptural objects or adds alternate painting surfaces in the form of trees or soil the viewer can walk upon. Moving through these three-dimensional painting fields, the viewer comes to witness a form of ephemeral borderless painting. Space and time become malleable and mobile entities: it is not clear anymore where a painting ends and where it begins, what moments in the painting process are present underneath the many-layered surfaces and what will remain once a painting is painted over to restore an exhibition space. The simultaneity of visible and invisible layers has led Grosse to describe her works as displaying "residues of existence".

Grosses bright glowing painting-installations have been compared to night clubs and out-of-this world planetary surfaces, and described as exuding excessiveness and toxicity. Grosse's statement, "there is not a sexual message in my work, it is pure sexuality that I live when I paint," suggests that the sensual intensity experience by the viewer is mirrored in the moments the artist is in close proximity to her flying paint. Letting paint appear where it does not belong, Grosse's works provoke a reconsideration of how paint can move and when and where it can be present. In her protective gear, Grosse is likened by art critics to a "shape-shifter, a space traveller, an alien, a cyborg, half-woman, half-machine". These science fiction tropes indicate, that here, too, temporality, or more specifically futurity, becomes a metaphor for alternative modes of perception. By walking "inside" Grosses paintings, classic boundaries, between a painting and its environment, and between the spectator and a work of art, are rendered obsolete. By painting over them, Grosse makes the stabilizing markers of our perception visible precisely in the moment they eclipse us. Her painting fields thus represent alternate utopian spaces traversed by ever-moving paint colors, or what I call "Chromotopia".

Chrononauts in Chromotopia

The desire for immersion into color and the unsettling, yet exciting experiences of overlapping and crossing temporal and spatial coordinates emerge as connecting factors between the works of Benglis, Plavčak, Mehretu and Grosse. Excessive color saturation, painting appearing where it traditionally 'does not belong', mobile pictorial surfaces and proprioceptive responses all culminate in immersive travels through chromotopian spaces. The notion of "chrononauts", or time-travelers, suggests that these artists allow us to experience time as multi-dimensional. In fact, the artists themselves become cyborgs, shape-shifters, time-travelers and space jumpers in their works, defying the laws of gravity and linear time. They invite viewers to take part in these temporal and spatial pleasures, enabling them to experience re-configurations of movement, time and space on a multi-sensorial level. From a queer perspective on the abstract painterly strategies of Lynda Benglis, Katrin Plavčak, Julie Mehretu and Katharina Grosse and the immersive encounters they enable, this dissertation project takes seriously the power of art works to 'handle' us as much as we 'handle' them.

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