

Roleplaying: A conversation with Jutta Koether

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AG: We were wondering how you conceive your own position as an artist: you paint, you write texts, you do all kinds of collaborations... How do these different activities operate, how do they interact? Regarding music – since it is the reason why you came here – would you consider that you perform music *as an artist*, as something different from doing it as a professional musician? And does this difference really matter anyway?

JK: Let's put it that way: I regard art as a sort of a platform on which communication takes place – not just for communication's sake – but to carry out certain agendas or ideas. In order to be as open as possible, I just decided to use the means that were available for me in relation to my upbringing, my cultural education, my social talents, etc. In that sense, my educational development – or the way I was brought up – led me to choose a range of tools to make art with. And I try to never do a hierarchical sort of order. I have always studied painting but I never went to an academy. I studied it in relation to philosophy or to pedagogy or in relation to my activity as a music journalist. And then, I was also playing music as a kid – I mean that I have been trained to play the piano – and then abandoned it. I wasn't doing it professionally and yet, it's the basis for my interest in music, I would say. I mean in music as music; not only music as a cultural sort of manifestation, not just as a "pop" theory but actually as a means of expression. So it's the same for painting: painting is a means of expression. Music uses other words or attitudes or appearances, and all of those things build, in a way, that what we call "artist" – this entity that operates on a cultural field. For me it never has been this sort of either/or. I regarded these things always to be there for me. And then, how much people appreciate them, through circumstances or through the way these things are received, is another matter. I started my very first conscious public thing when I was 17, with my boyfriend making these zines. The zines contained both of our desires. You know, he was a poet, so there were texts, and I had drawings; there were photos and there were, for example, translations of punk rock songs. We made totally absurd things like translating Siouxsie and the Banshees. We were then putting all these things into one object and selling these objects just for very little money. That is how *Spex* happened, for instance. This activity and the fact of being out on the streets, and being on concerts, and being in this fairly open – at the time – cultural environment, led me to meet like-minded people. That became the foundation for *Spex*, the music magazine I worked in. Within *Spex*, I also became the person who installed art. I had a monthly column for years that I called "Mrs. Benway". Mrs. Benway was the fictitious wife of Dr. Benway, who is the alter ego of William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch*. Dr. Benway was this mean weird operator, the evil genius who operates language and uses language as a tool for analysing the world, cutting off the world, causing this kind of subversions. Anyway, I installed "Mrs. Benway" and it became a free form of open column that I ran for five and a half years, in which art topics were appearing within the field of music. It was not only the "usual suspects" form ... I did the first piece in Europe about Raymond Pettibon because I knew his album covers for Black Flag from the beginning. But at the same time, I had also a very straight portrait of Robert Mapplethorpe - he lied at the time - and of his involvement with underground art and music scene in New York. Again I was trying to destabilize the typical relationships between: "If we are a music magazine, then our art has to be comics. We don't understand art. We're punk rock, we don't really wanna have anything to do with fine arts". At the time, in the early 80's, there were still these weird categories. Today it's different. Anyway - just to answer this question - that's where the foundation lies for the way I'm using these different elements. I have to say that I always return to painting, which is the steadiest component, but yet I never went to an academy. So, in a way, when it comes to painting, I'm almost like a dilettante, a self-learned person, and this sometimes also causes destabilization and trouble. People just say "Oh yeah, you're doing interesting things but you can't paint". I have heard that basically also since 1981. I have suffered for a time, since it's not a very easy position. Sometimes it is weird and lonely, or also hard, because you don't get anywhere. I mean it seems that way at certain times, just because people can't make sense of you, because there's no instant gratification. But then, at the same, I feel that it's how I do things, so what can I do?

AG: Maybe it's close to the way fanzines work. Self-taught, self-organized, building on very clear and pragmatic constraints, but not restraining its content. You don't want to limit yourself and then people take it as they want, as they can, it's a secondary matter. It's a kind of resistance strategy, not to orientate a work toward its reception... Still, we can ask ourselves if it doesn't have a place and function in a larger context, operating another kind of role – like *the-undeground-artist-doing-zines* – which can become restraining too at some point.

JK: Yeah, it's true. But these structures have only become clear in retrospective. It's just that this question has come up a lot in the last five, six years. After I had a minor career in America, when I made a number of shows with a cool gallery, the Pat Hearn gallery, things seemed to click into that what you would call "the more well-established artist"...

AG: You started to feel other expectations?

JK: I approached a certain kind of status but didn't get there. It went that way and then, through circumstances – when Pat Hearn died – the whole gallery environment wasn't stable enough to carry on with me. It sort of crashed, for me. I had to somehow rewind or rethink what I really wanted. And that's how the collaboration with Steven Parrino really started; and other collaborative things emerged and somehow substituted that dependence on the gallery, on that career-oriented thing. In a way, these structures are similar to the fanzine's ones. They are open collaborations with people, because you can't rely on the big sponsors or other specific markets. And that becomes the way you are, the way you work, the field you work in. That's the thing that interests me, more than any other in the art world. We just are really paradoxical because when you are in New York, in a funny way, you're confronted with the extremes of both sides. You're confronted with the extremes of the market place, but with those of the emergences and failures of so-called collectors as well – because there's one popping up everyday. That has also a sort of inflationary, a kind of productionism, too. It is not like the model of the zine or the other is not corrupted; it's not that, like, "oh that's the good thing per se". For me, it's a choice to be more there than in the other place. But it's definitely related to everything else. And in New York, you feel that even more. Maybe here, in Switzerland, or maybe in Germany, *Spex* could be this kind of universe of its own, at least for that time. But that would never happen in New York, where you're almost corrupted the moment you open your mouth. I got involved with the Reena Spauling's group because they were friends of mine. And then with John Kelsey, I participated in Bernadette Corporation in writing the novel and it floated into Reena Spauling's gallery project. I was part of that construction. And at the same time, you're fully aware of the way it gets so hyped up and really twisted, right away, because of that. It was true; it was not a fake. It was very meant, sincerely, but it also became the perfect product for a certain market that was hungry for one gallery young team of artists/gallerists to perform that role. And then you perfectly fit into that. It's a condition that I have to always consider to insert myself in different scenes, or part of that ongoing scenario. It's an interesting exercise for me to not get stuck into, in a way, performing a clown for, whatever, that group of collectors... Because there has been this dispute, for example, in *Kunstvision*, another journal I'm contributing to. Isabelle Graw wrote about a piece on the indie group called *Scorched Earth* in which she accused them to have not disclosed who they were sponsored by. Because they were three radical dudes doing really interesting projects, all about drawing. The whole thing was about performing the radical, the "new", and they're very smart at it. I like them all, I did performances in their space, too. But Isabelle wrote this piece in which she wanted to talk about exactly that problem: these performances that perform radicality or something that is the next new product, while at the same time you sit there in the most conventional stupid way at the collectors' diner, and you get pampered, and you take their money. It's all sponsored. They pay their rent, and so it becomes weird. These artists were so upset that she wrote about that. They didn't want it to be written and published, although it is sort of public, certainly not a secret. To write about it, as the material conditions of art production today, was not accusatory, it was more about giving a range of examples of how we are tied in these conditions and what they really are, being very frank, and direct about it. And it became a big dispute. That's an example of how I find myself within all that. Living in New York, you probably are more – whether rejected or not – aware of it. You can't get around it, you cannot just pretend it's not there. You see things, you hear things. This is how it works. So you have to figure out some kind of position to that. I am somehow – at least for the time being, and maybe that also will change again – a curious observer, as well as interacting with certain people at certain moments.

AG: Is this switching between scenes, between scenarios, a way to avoid the heroic story of the underground, either bound to become mainstream or doomed to stay in the margins? An "alternative vs mainstream" dialectic which might not be operative anymore...

JK: No, I mean it's a certain construction that you invent, that you always have to figure out. You have to keep the question to what ends you invent your own construction open. It's not like there are so many going on but it's about where do you want to go, what is the part you're playing, how you go about that. At least, in the past, I've tried to maybe stop that a little bit early. I also teach a lot and when you teach – at least the way I teach – you're occupied with testing, installing and trying out what is left of any kind of

critical discourse. Are you able to articulate it, are you able to hand it over to another generation? You basically are challenged all the time; you cannot stand still. And I cannot teach art like “Beliefs in Pop Art”. It’s something that is so time-sensitive, that changes all the time. You are on your toes all the time. There are certain texts that I like; I try to make people read them because I believe that they are certain standards. But generally it’s more about making people aware of what arguments are, or what criticality is. What is a picture? How do I perceive? And why do I perceive? And because I’m so busy raising these kinds of questions in schools, it definitely affects my work. The restlessness or the fact of never having a complete answer and somehow living with that, are part of what I am. I cannot separate my activity there as a teacher from my practice as an artist. It has manifested itself in the last years mostly in the way that I install paintings and install drawings that contain texts. I use boards to put things on, which can be moved around; then the arguments inside them can be reconfigured in another version. They are like thoughts: once they’re there, you keep shaping them up, combining them with others, and that process is laid open in an “installational” way, I hope. That’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot. That’s why for instance in the last shows I did, each unit had a different installational move.

AG: There are several layers of text in your work: within the paintings, in the titles, and then the installations have a kind of textuality. Is it some sort of obsession with text, both for the concepts it carries and for its formal quality?

JK: It’s more related to the fact that I have to keep updating, improving and being aware of what is being discussed in art theory. I’m driven to keep myself involved and updated on that. First of all, because I consider myself “somewhere” an intellectual also, and then because I want to articulate certain thoughts. I want to stay in some discourse meaning. I want to keep writing. I want to keep teaching. I have to pick up new ideas or I have to see how new ideas match up with what I was thinking. That means that there is an ongoing process of research, reading and decision making. And all that also affects whatever I’m doing in the visual work, because it is not something you just do like this, it’s something which takes time, which affects you. It creeps. Sometimes it is only there in the more indirect way, in the decisions I make about something or for a special idea. Sometimes it goes very directly, for instance in a note. I have a simple example, which is this big show I participated in at the ZKM in Karlsruhe. It was a show called “between two deaths”, which is based on the Lacanian concept of what is creativity as it happens between two ideas of deaths. In relation to that, I have been re-reading a lot of books and amongst my findings was the one of Georges Didi-Hübermann writing about Boticelli. And his thesis about Boticelli is the idea of beauty being basically coming out of extreme violence, and that because the first idea of beauty is this emergence from the foam that is the left over of the cut-off genital of god. The basis is this crazy, weird, eccentric psychoanalytical re-reading of this idea of beauty and how it is tied in by violence. I made a remake of one of the Boticelli’s paintings – not the Venus – one from the book *Decameron*, with the four scenes. There’s one basically where a woman gets killed, stabbed by a knight. And the woman is very beautiful; she’s almost like one of the Venus figures. And then you see her being resurrected on the back of the painting. So it’s this weird kind of psycho: she’s been killed and she’s also been the reason for the painting and for the whole story to emerge. And then she keeps being resurrected and being killed again and again. In short, what I made was a remake of this painting and some smaller works, drawings and studies. And there were also other things that were related to the painting and to the texts that were excerpts from the book or from my notes while reading and studying this book. In that sense, it became a little appropriation of a theoretical proposal. And then, I have been trying to turn it back into an installation that would focus on that one painting and open up a field of thoughts from that same painting. That’s one example of how these interrelations, interactions work.

EB: I’m very interested about your position as a teacher. We were talking about this idea of giving the students an awareness. This is of course the role of a teacher, but at the same I have more and more the impression nowadays that the students are a bit falling in this trap. Indeed, you accessed this point after having made a path, starting from your own stuff, and then reading, reading. You could develop your own position with text. I have often the feeling that students are getting all the tools to easily make art without actually asking themselves a lot of questions...

JK: Yeah, that’s why the teacher has to *torture* them!

EB: All right! Torture is the solution!

JK: No. I mean, you’re right. That’s definitely a proper observation. It’s not about delivering theory to them. That’s what I meant: even the ways of teaching cannot be fixed. That’s why I have to stay on my

toes to be able to figure out how to install that criticality, because I cannot just give them soundbites or something. Then nothing happens, if I just say “you must read this and this and this”. It’s doesn’t do anything. Any critical thinking, in my opinion, is always tied in with everything you learn; it’s absolutely tied in with emotions. As a teacher, I have to create a certain desire to be involved, and the involvement can take different forms. One generation of kids, let’s say, five years ago were involved in certain fashionable texts. They really wanted to be part of one thing. And then few years went by, and it’s all about learning how to do stuff, learning how to be professional, and then the next... As a teacher you’ve to recognize these desires, the needs and where they come from. Then you figure out how to make them aware of oaths that they can follow through. They can run with their desires and at the same time, criticise them, take them apart. I’ve developed certain methods where I know “ok, now it’s Plan B”, or this is the group I have to force to do something. They have to do a show together, from A to Z, or they have really severe restrictions, or they are very good at discussion and they have to discuss for hours. But then it might not work for a certain group and will work a year later, or for another school. It’s a weird ongoing tuning. In a way, it’s like improvising, not in a sense that you throw stuff out but in a sense that you learn yourself and from what you do. By that, you learn methods. It’s hard to put it in words... But I try to figure out a way to do this to their satisfaction on the intellectual level, and so that they also really poke into people, that they make people feel something. They have to become aware of themselves, especially in the undergraduate department. They’re still more open and yet more confused. They’re more on an intuitive level. You can still reach them. It’s a different story on the graduate level; then, it’s much more argumentative.

FB: Could one draw a parallel between the way you conceive teaching and performing, in terms of discourse adjustment – like when interacting with a virtual John Miller encapsulated within Karin Schneider’s installation piece – and addressing an audience?

JK: Yeah, I think it is very similar. It’s both this oscillation between a monological approach and a dialogical approach. And it’s the same when you are a teacher: no matter how much group work you do, you are there as the authority. In a setting like this [at Forde], I’m the person with the instrument, the person who pushes the buttons. That is a very monological, authoritarian position, just by the way it’s set up. Within that though, I try to let other things occur. I do what I do, but I’ve to somehow relate to the other person, or to the fictitious presence of this other person; and that also alters the relation to the audience. In teaching, I could step back or even say “Now you guys must do something”. I provide the drone, so to speak. But the actual negotiations happen in a much more fragmented way. It’s not like I tell you what to do. I sometimes get also into trouble because of that, certain students happen to say: “Well, Jutta, tell me what to do!” or “Is it good now or bad?” And I say: “Well, you know, it’s not necessarily always about this judgment”.

AG: You said you were an autodidact in painting, and maybe on a lot of different levels you had to search yourself for the tools you needed. I see the importance of a certain position of independence amongst artists, not as a self-sustaining kind of utopia, but rather as a possibility of defining your own role, of grasping artistic as well as theoretical material for your own means. Maybe the possibility of shifting – from a role to another, a scenario to another – allows you to have a more independent posture.

JK: It’s maybe independence but for me it’s also about testing the validity of your own material. For instance, I started out doing one performance with a series of paintings, all portraits, that was done only for the performance. It was a series of hysterics. I called them “The Hysterics” and they had the visual insignias of symptoms of hysteria -what is generally diagnosed as that. So they had certain borrowing of speech, certain crazy expressionistic facial distortions and certain colour manipulations, etc. I made this whole series and they were small, very conventionally formatted paintings with these fictitious all women. They were shown in one place eventually together but I made them and didn’t really want to show them in a commercial gallery or anything like that. Each one had a very specific title and they became the chapters for certain texts, or short texts that were like songs or manifestos. And they became a performance piece. They weren’t painted as illustrations, they were really painted with the idea that each one had to be a painting in its own right. But at the same time, I refused to give them the place of the proper individual painting; they had to perform in that other role as this structure for the performance that occurred. So it’s more about the independence of painting than my personal one. It’s an autistic questioning: “is it possible to send them in the desert or send them off into the public space that only exists in the moment of performance?”. These kinds of experimentation are important for me.

AG: Some of your works seem to be like characters; being linked together, they form groups with internal relations. Do they sometimes tend to overtake their status, opening up from the structure in which they were conceived?

JK: Sometimes they also go further and further in a more extreme way. For instance, this whole series of pieces I started doing with the liquid glass, with this resin; they came out of performance pieces as well. At least originally, I made a number of pieces that were made for performance purposes. Because I hung them in the space and they had to be robust because they were kicked around as part of the performance. They were almost like instruments. They were like these crashing objects, which didn't crash because they were covered with this liquid glass which is very hard. That kind of invention, or the fact of finding that material and using it, came out of a very specific purpose. The performance of the painting led me to a certain thing and I developed from there: "How could I use this material further, not just for performance reason?". So to put it on drawings and then the drawings again perform on their panel. When I look back at what I've been doing, each move came out of a very particular need. And they most often have to do with the performative purpose of the painting. For instance, I've always been interested in transparency and using oil paint; first out of my dilettantism. Because if you don't have academic training, you try to invent something, you teach yourself. You arrive at things that might not be "correct" but that are somehow interesting. I had a phase in the late 80's, early 90's, where I made very big paintings that looked like watercolours but which were all with oil. I used oil paint but in a very thinly layered way, in a very deceptive way. People thought "oh". And then also using a novelty like metallic colours and so on. But for this show last year, I retrieved some of that knowledge, or that method, because I wanted to play with these different ideas of transparency. I made this painting installation with a transparent wall. I made a zig-zag glass wall in which the paintings were mirroring. It became almost a labyrinthine thing. And the paintings started to disturb each other but within the paintings. The paintings were also in themselves very transparent. The main idea behind the installation was to make people almost have the weird feeling that you can walk through it, but you can't.-It all becomes one weird walkthrough environment. And because of that, I picked up this whole idea of transparency and metallic shine. So that created a whole new body of work, and now I am rethinking that and wondering whether I want to continue some of this or maybe not. A long way to go from there. So it's always like that. From the outside, my book looks funny, sometimes, I guess, funky and organic, but within my own logic, it's very tight, very clear.