

Transgressing the Rules for Transgression

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Art, and this is almost a platitude, can be centrally defined, at least over the last forty years, by various forms of the transgression of its traditional domains – by the dissolution and shifting of formal and subjective matter regularities. Picture and sculpture; space and art object; verbal musical and visual expression are only some of the former constraints that have been called into question by artistic practices in recent decades. In all of these processes it has been and still is only superficially a matter of creating free spaces in the sense of “anything goes” deteriorates almost immediately into a constitutive narrative itself, thus becoming one of the norms of art to further define it as a domain. On the other hand, a transgression is also always a one-way street, since it is always a matter of bringing something into art, which is not the same as leaving something in art. Looking at the relationship between the second generation of concept art, in the nineties, and the knowledge systems that it makes use of, it is evident that the structure of history, sociology, natural and other sciences is not shaken, but only probed in terms of how these systems could also find their place in art. The claim that what is taken into art is thus changed, that “theory” or any other extra-artistic practice is also impelled outside the realm of the art discourse, can hardly be maintained. In most cases, what was previously outside of art is merely affirmed; in the best case it is shifted into a critical perspective through art. From this view, in many cases transgressive art practices only pretend to unleash boundaries, where it is actually merely a matter of appropriating something for the purpose of padding one’s own field. In this sense, all of the so-called expanded practices in art have followed certain rule since the crisis of modernism, of which the immutably fixed point seems to be that transgressing an old rule always only seems to be permissible from an institutionally completely secured inner-artistic position. (This can be illustrated by the fact that the interest in truly extra-artistic positions in the sense of “outsider art” dwindled after modernism to the same extent that concepts of expansion as autonomous artistic practice became more important.) Indeed, the actual transference of concepts and practices to the margins of art presupposes partially avoiding this fundamental imbalance in favor of art, not taking a certain role, in order to be able to take positions on both sides of the boundary. From the beginning of her career, Jutta Koether has attempted to make expansion in this sense her program. For this reason, it has always been important not to assume unequivocal role as an artist, but always to work from multiple positions. Music critic, musician, writer, theorist, and art critic are all part of her self-image as well as her artistic activity. “Just the act of taking a position somewhere and saying something is a statement,” she says at one point. In this way, she already triggered fundamental uncertainties in the eighties, at the start of her career, when gallerists and other members of the art scene stood before her pictures, which seemed at first glance not to represent any kind of radical deviance from conventional art forms, and wondered whether it was permissible to paint and write and still compose critical texts about all of it at the same time. Even then, she made it clear with relatively conventional means of expression to what

extent the understanding of art is based on the concordance that someone must first be unequivocally identified as an artist. Everything, even expression or crossover, must first start from a position. Koether's approach is a fundamentally different one. When she says, "I have made what doesn't belong together compatible," then the point is specifically not the expansion of a discourse, but rather the merging and adaptation of different discourses from a third position that is difficult to determine. To make this point clear, she does not need to expand her field in a media sense, instead she is initially satisfied with the old medium of painting to carry out her measurements, making things compatible. At the same time, it is already evident that she does not enter into in a reactionary sense, not in the sense of a painter simply continuing the myth of the panel picture, as the pictures are always placed in an installative context (which is perhaps no longer so unusual today, but it certainly was twenty years ago.) What is much more important, however, are the forms and subject matter of pictures themselves; this is never just a matter of the old questions of painting, of genres like the portrait or the question of abstraction and figuration. Both the aesthetic and the content aspects of pictures refer to things outside of painting: to literature, music, pop culture, or to small sections of all these things and to such a degree that the figure of reference completely dissolves and quotations are no longer even possible. Looking at the pictures, one arrives at no point where it would be meaningful to talk about a further development of the medium, because that is not the issue. Although paint is applied to canvas, it is a medium that emerges and leaves behind the boundaries of a fine art in a thoroughly fundamental sense. Indeed, is it not clever references from outside that are pulled into the canvas here, but rather the attempt to see from different positions the results of an experimental arrangement, in which there is not something transported, but found. This finding takes place neither only in art, nor is there an attempt to transport it there. What is surprising, irritating and new results more from a flowing dynamic, behind which there is always more than an artistic position. This may make it difficult to grasp the aesthetic program as a search for certain characteristics, but in return an openness becomes possible that no longer considers any boundaries or overcoming them.