

WHAT HAS HAPPENED? *
2005, Laura J. Padgett

Laura J. Padgett lives and works in Frankfurt/Main. She is an artist and writer on art.

At a dinner recently, talk turned to artists from the seventies working today. One dinner guest laterally dismissed those artists still grappling with the same questions that they had been dealing with thirty years earlier. Other guests claimed that if an artist had received acclaim for a certain style, he / she would be feign to change it.¹ No one seemed to want to consider the possibility that just perhaps these artists had found new variations on their themes or felt they had not yet concluded their investigations.

What does it truly mean to repeat one's self anyway? How many true topics does an artist deal with in his or her life and how are they expressed? I thought about these things as I was preparing to write this text about Joanna Jones' painting. Just over ten years ago, I wrote a short piece about her work. And now, before sitting down to write this, I've returned to that text again.² I wanted to see if what I had written is still valid and to consider what I had written in terms of what Joanna Jones is doing now and whether or not I could regard her work to be the same as ten years' previous. Perhaps I can, she is still painting and she is still practicing the same technique she began with around 1984. However, when I look at her paintings since 1994 there have been numerous changes. I had to ask myself what angle I would discuss these changes from, especially considering the background of the dinner conversation, in addition to the difficulty of positioning artwork into a theory, a space, or interpretation.

Sitting here now looking at Joanna Jones's paintings, I see things. First and foremost there is colour. I am reminded of how Joanna determines her palette precisely before she begins painting. Her selection of colour before venturing onto the canvas has to do with her method. She often works with three or four colours, but has also reduced her palette to just two colours or created monochrome pieces. Initially she grounds the canvas with a particular base pigment and then constructs the painting layer by layer. She sets herself initial limits, so that her work can unfold within a structure. Yet her paintings do not look structured. I realise that this is an important point if one wants to contemplate Joanna Jones' work. She limits herself at the beginning, so that the work's development is not arbitrary. She also gets rid of finished pieces she is not happy with, sorting out her results. The fact that this stringency is not apparent when viewing her paintings is essential. For, although her paintings are very much involved in process, it is the end result that interests her. Her paintings are visual objects, the strategy, the limitations she sets herself are not evident in the work itself. This convinces me that it is the finished object we should consider when we view her work.³ Her work transcends the idea behind its making. This is one of the basic definitions of good artwork and not many artists can achieve this.

Since Arthur C. Danto's salient remark that, "you can't define artworks in terms of some particular visual properties they may have."⁴, art has been freed from its attachment to art history as a visual history. Danto is very clear in what he is referring to: it is above all the departure from painting produced in the mid twentieth century - painting that had been regarded as something to be observed, as purely visual and that belonged to a master art historical narrative⁵ - to artwork that deals with other forms of perception. In keeping with this line of reasoning, after Andy Warhol's "Brillo Box" "one could not any

longer understand the difference between art and reality in purely visual terms...⁶, Danto goes on to maintain that when considering contemporary art “visuality drops away...⁷. A straightforward explanation of this claim is that art began to be about something else than something to be looked at. Art left its master narrative, breaking away from traditional art history. “The history of art, structured narratively, had come to an end.”⁸

Within this ahistorical environment, artists began to produce in terms of ideas and concepts outside art history, reflecting, for example, the commonplace, politics and / or cultural identity. In the meantime the notion “Everything is possible. Anything can be art.”⁹ has been absorbed into the mainstream of art production. This has its advantages, with its openness towards production.¹⁰ Nonetheless, there are hierarchies. When I think about current tendencies in art, there are two basic categories that are critically considered in the art press: on the one hand, artists whose main production is the creation of maps, cook books, alternative routing systems, studies in demographics, politics, or sex analysis. This is considered good, avant-garde, important. On the other, there is the celebration of the figure¹¹ in painting. Within that very same art critical context, representational canvases are considered to be good, avant-garde, important. So what is it we are currently “looking” for in an artwork?

In terms of the process-oriented work I just mentioned, art production currently tends to replace certain needs that were formerly compensated for in the public sphere¹² This outlet in no way replaces true political involvement, yet it seems to give, at least to some of its viewers in a gallery / museum context, a sense of release, that one is a better person and more politically aware for having visited such and such an exhibition. Figurative painting tends to complement this in allowing the viewer to relax again before something familiar, for the simple reason of its being identifiable. We see societal analysis, allowing us to feel involved in the “real world”, coupled with representational painting, each informing the other, each helping the other out.

How does a viewer then free him or herself from the desire to recognize something in an art work, when, on the one hand, in terms of contemporary 21st c. art, there is the prerequisite obvious claim, statement, or position while, on the other the aforementioned need for familiarity, i.e. in this case a need to recognize an object, a figure – at least *something* - be this in painting, sculpture or installation work. This creates unsure footing. For even in the case of mistaking an every day object for a work of art, say, confusing a vacuum cleaner with a Koons piece, one can laugh it off and be smarter next time.¹³

In reference to Danto’s argument, one cannot understand Joanna Jones’s work merely by considering its visual properties. Nevertheless her approach stems from a completely different understanding towards an artwork than what Danto is claiming. We could say she works from the inside out. She does not allow the viewer to hold onto anything, her paintings are in flux. It is more or less phenomena. It has to do with touch, surface, depth and volume, as most good painting does. With Jones’ work the viewer must let the eye carry one into the phenomena she has created. One needs to let go of conventions. Although her paintings have been non-figurative for many years, the figure plays an essential role in the painting process. As a point of fact her painting technique grew out of her work in performance during the seventies. Jones uses her figure to create abstraction, going beyond the self and the body while using it as an instrument to create a non-figurative image with the body. A dichotomy? Regarding the thoroughness of her preparation, I would say it is more like problem solving. Jones’s use of the body as a tool

is dynamic, it does not serve to make an imprint.¹⁴ It is movement held in check by the canvas edge.

In the eighties Jones' work dealt in part with the creation of space by means of complex intertwining swirls of transparency and opacity. The term baroque was often used to describe them. I live with a painting from 1996/97¹⁵. It is long and thin. Obviously, it changes, yet remarkably so, with the time of day and the seasons. It is painted primarily in three colours; blue, yellow and green, you could almost call the green the middle mix of the blue and the yellow.¹⁶ Sometimes it glows. Other times, when the room where the painting hangs is not bright, the blue turns to indigo of a profound depth creating a sense of material density. The energy of the painting fuses its parts, but is not electric. I cannot say I know the painting. It has a familiarity when I enter the room it hangs in, but I am often surprised upon viewing it, upon seeing a new element, movement or surface structure. It is almost like living with a sentient being. Jones's work produced a year or two later, during 1998-99, is of a different palette, it is much lighter, with white becoming a dominant colour. Yet in terms of the space created they speak a similar language. They are images that waver before us, not giving us anything identifiable to see but the pigment on the canvas. But this is quite enough.

The transparencies Joanna Jones began creating in 2000 were of a yielding translucency. Her colouring became paler, the subject of simultaneous contrast or torque and tension became less pronounced. In 2001 she produced a painting made of 25 layers. She worked and reworked the image, creating a composition perhaps more reminiscent of a painting by Mark Tobey than Jackson Pollock or Lee Krasner. Here the transparency is so fine, the build-up so subtle, it is as if the painting were veiling and revealing itself at one and the same time. She has told me that she sees this painting as the last of a cycle.

Surveying her work from the year 2003, I could say that Joanna Jones' paintings at that time became plainer.¹⁷ When I look at the bands of colour overlapping and circumventing each other from her work of that year, they had released themselves from a certain kind of voluptuousness that can be seen in her earlier work. In the work of this short period there is no longer the interweaving and rapid breakthrough of colour, but a new kind of pliant depth. These pieces are painted loosely in bands of colour that partly overlap, partly lay next to each other, creating a visual cohesiveness. The compositions draw one into the subtlety of the images by their outward simplicity. The eye does not rush into the paintings' rapid effervescent movement, as in many of Jones's earlier works, but moves from one band to another at a slower pace, at times fusing the bands and at times seeing them separately again. As a consequence the viewer becomes more absorbed in the paintings' permutation of colour, overlap and topography.

Viewing work done in 2005, a pulsating intensity has moved in, one colour is often sheathed in a transparent viscous skin of another that rolls across the canvas, leaving dilated forms in its wake. This is especially palpable in the two vertical paintings, "There's always more I & II". An entire swathe of colour is sometimes actually blotted out as a new layer is applied or there is a surge of paint that presses across the canvas. This is a new energy and I feel confronted by it.¹⁸

Consequently, when thinking about Joanna Jones' painting and my response to it, I realize how much it depends on what I am aware of when perceiving it. This necessarily reminds me of how I began to think about writing this piece. The enquiry an artist undertakes when working can carry on for some time. It has a lot to do with how we

approach an artwork as to whether we discover changes, development, or innovation. Joanna Jones offers us that option, an openness of perception. What she creates in her paintings is a sense or an atmosphere, drawing from a wealth of art history, we could say taken from the debunked master narrative, they are neither about blatant ideas nor do they depict *anything*. Jones, whose performance work in the seventies was very much about breaking with tradition, returned to the canvas, thereby bringing her experience, both physical and reflective with her.

Perhaps this is what I meant earlier on in the text with my comment about problem solving. As Joanna Jones does not see what she is painting during the process, she must first move away from the canvas in order to take in what she has created and decide how to continue. Each new colour or layer she adds is an experiment, adding up to a solution, this solution being something that is a sum she can only anticipate through experience, but not know in advance. It has nothing to do with formulas and plans. This is how we should approach her work, it is a question of experiencing her painting as a process of discovery.

I think about a piece by Penone "To Breathe the Shadow" from 2000¹⁹. A room is covered in bay leaves that have been encased in boxes of chicken wire and attached to the gallery walls like large tiles. The entire exhibition space is enfolded in leaves. The scent the leaves exude is subtle, yet overwhelming when one spends time in the room. Sound is softened, as if in a forest. One is encompassed by the colour. This can happen when experiencing Joanna Jones' painting.

¹ In this case the conversation turned to work by Brice Marden, Robert Mangold and Dorothea Rockburne

² "Approaching a work: Positioning the Painting of Joanna Jones" in *Andere Körper / Different Bodies*, Passagen Verlag, Vienna, 1994.

³ I mention this, because many people who have written about Joanna Jones' painting have often got caught up with her process and made it the essential part of her painting, making the painting itself almost secondary.

⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Art after the End of Art*, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 16

⁵ Danto is taking up an argument with the extremely influential art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), who was the champion of abstract expressionism and who situated this painting within a master narrative. See his seminal text "Towards a New Laocoon" in: Greenberg, Clement, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 23-38

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *Art after the End of Art*, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 125

⁷ *ibid.* p. 16

⁸ *ibid.* p. 126

⁹ *ibid.* p. 114

¹⁰ In this reference I am reminded of the difficulties Philip Guston experienced when he chose to paint figuratively in the late fifties after having become a recognized abstract painter. It took years before the art world would forgive and accept him.

¹¹ I am referring here to such painters as Lucien Freud, Neo Rauch, Daniel Richter, Erich Fischl and Rosa Loy.

¹² This tendency is reminiscent of a new form of genre painting. Although painting is no longer the medium, I see very little difference between the 17th c. painted images of debauchery and drunkenness, operations gone bad, the underdog getting his own back, or worse getting a bashing and installation work of say, artists like Mike Kelley, Tony Oursler, Tracey Emin or Sarah Lucas, to mention not even a handful.

¹³ In recent reviews I find that art critics often begin by making a joke about museum and gallery visitors mistaking an ordinary object or architectural element for a work of art. The critic then goes on to explain how Duchamp was revolutionary by placing a urinal in an exhibition space and giving it a title and how difficult it is for the museum visitor to identify a work of art.

¹⁴ As, for example, in Yves Klein's blue women paintings or potato prints. See also endnote 3.

¹⁵ Entitled "Keep me hidden on the open horizon".

¹⁶ I suddenly become conscious of Hans Albers' square paintings dealing with the concept of the middle mix.

¹⁷ It was at this time that she began working in egg tempera. As the egg tempera dries more slowly, it allows the painted layers to affect each other. The tempera binder Joanna Jones had been working with until that time dried more quickly, keeping each layer more separate.

¹⁸ Yet my sense of confrontation is countered by the recognition that this density is a result of movement doubling back on itself, centring itself within the canvas, leaving resolute marks and a sense of recovering or reclaiming space.

¹⁹ Penone Retrospective, April 21st – August 23rd 2004, Centre Pompidou, Paris

** Published in Joanna Jones, 1995, Pharos Trust publications ISBN:9963-9199-1-X*