THICK AND THIN

As the 1970s gave way to the '80s, the slogan “return to painting” was as often heard in the discussion around contemporary art as the counter-mantra, the “death of painting.” In the last issue of Artforum, a group comprising mostly critics and art historians opened our two-part examination of painting in the '80s and beyond with a look back at the death-of-painting debate that raged at the beginning of the decade. For this month’s pendant discussion introduced by ROBERT STORR, we assembled a second panel, largely made up of painters and curators—and asked them to tell us where painting has taken us in the last two decades, and to limit the multifarious pressures and impulses that motivate the practice today.

We do not want for paintings. There are plenty out there to choose from and argue over. Nor do we want for first-rate painters. There are enough to make us wonder why the words “painting is dead” fail so easily from the lips of those who more or less openly acknowledge the importance of—or secretly harbor a liking for—artists as different as Robert Ryman and Gerhard Richter, Leon Golub and Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin and Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein and Vija Celmins, Lucian Freud and Jasper Johns. And that is only to name a few of the still active—and still debated—members of the generation that got started between the early 1950s and early 1960s. Add ten years and the list encompasses an even larger cohort that remains hard at work. Twenty years, of course, obituaries were regularly being written for the medium by neo-avant-garde theorists, some of whom are now furiously backpedaling with the hope that no one will recall how their “historically mandated” predictions failed to come true.

Still, beating the reaper is not the same thing as feeling on top of the world. For all its signs of life—good, “bad,” and banal—painting is hardly the king of the hill it was for most of the twentieth century. Nor is it ever likely to be so again, though competitive “new” forms of artmaking aren’t quite so sure of their hegemonic claims as they were ten, twenty, or thirty years ago, before they began to feel the drag of their own accumulating histories.

In fact, painting is in a muddle. Even as art schools field fresh contenders, galleries restock, and collectors make room on walls still crowded with large-format photographs, text panels, and screens of various kinds, painters struggle to map the incompletely redrawn and highly congested territory they currently occupy. The words haven’t come easy. No handy monikers dominate conversation as “neo-expressionism” and “neo-geo” once did. (“Post-recent art” is still my favorite coinage of the label-fatigued last decade of the last century.) And compared with their counterparts in the Conceptual, installational, and technological scenes, painters seem to lack a “discourse,” which—though it may
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reflect a certain realistic gun-shyness on the part of artists who too vividly remember the preposterous claims of restoration painting in the '80s, and the dogmas of criticism-driven painting in the '80s—puts their discipline at a disadvantage in the "marketplace of ideas." (And the constituent elements of that last term should be read with all their built-in discomfort, especially by those who think they’re in a quadrangle when they’re in Times Square.)

Except in monographic articles that lead outward from their immediate subject, critics on the whole haven’t fared much better in characterizing what’s going on. When the task has been assumed by curators, the results have hardly dissipated the confusion. Starting in 1999 with "Examining Pictures" at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, and "Trouble Spot Painting" at the NICC and MUKHA in Antwerp, followed by "Painting at the Edge of the World" at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (2001), "Cher Peintre" at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (2002), and "Painting on the Move" at the Kunstmuseum, Kunsthalle, and Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel (2002), a number of exhibitions have attempted to straighten things up; but in various degrees they turned out to be lively exercises in showing how big and oddly configured the house of painting was, rather than putting that house in order. For the present, that often seems the best anyone can hope for. But as the following dialogue, convened as a pendant to last month’s roundtable addressing the "death of painting" debate in the '80s, suggests, there is plenty to do just keeping track of the twists and turns of all the strands of painting emanating from the pluralist post-'80s era.

From within painting’s chambered quarters one can hear rumblings and murmurings down the hall; voices over the transom; arguments on the fire escapes; sighs and groans behind the walls—and sometimes the noises of pleasure. We can also assume that the silence that otherwise prevails—and the quiet that interrupts the contributions of some of the participants to this online symposium—is the sound of painters in the studio going about their generally solitary business. This roundtable may be less like an electronic panel discussion and closer to eavesdropping on a series of private exchanges in a once grand but still livable hotel. Listen in. —ROBERT STORR

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TIM GRIFFIN: It might seem strange to ask a group made up mostly of painters to consider the idea of “the death of painting,” which posited a historical position on the medium, but now also has a history behind it. The compelling related question would pertain to the way in which painting moved beyond or outside of this particular issue. Has there been a shadow or ghost of it in practices? Or did it in fact never really register among the painters you found most interesting? What were some of your initial thoughts when you came across the idea, in general and in terms of your own work? What do you find the most productive modes to bypass or enfold the issue?

JONATHAN LASKER: My earliest encounters with the critique of painting occurred at CalArts in the mid-70s. The students were primarily poststudio artists, and the dominant faculty members were Conceptual artists like John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, Michael Asher. It was a very antagonistic environment, but it was a very good place to begin to rationalize why I was painting. For me, the issue was whether one could still make a new painting. The artists to beat were the Minimalist painters, who, as far as I was concerned, had completed Ad Reinhardt’s project of attempting to make the last possible painting through reductive means. The challenge as I saw it: How do you bring back metaphor and the constituent elements of picture-making into the practice of painting?

LISA YUSKAVAGE: Fortunately, the education that I got in the ‘80s was with formalists of various stripes: Stephen Greene, Margo Margolis, William Bailey, Andrew Forge, Jake Berthot, and Mel Bochner. None of them ever brought up the death of anything. By the time I encountered the “death of painting,” I was already a formed artist living in New York.
CARROLL DUNHAM: Douglas Crimp’s ideas on the death of painting helped clarify the discussion of some very interesting work made in the early ’80s, but none of it was painting. Looking back, I think his hypothesis about painting seems much less necessary to understanding the work of the artists he supported. On the other hand, Thomas Lawson’s article “Last Exit: Painting” has always intrigued me, and I’ve read it several times. It is a kind of Trojan horse, a viral theory of how objects can disseminate memes.

The distrust of painting by “smart people” made painting more attractive to me as I thought about the implications. However, it soon became clear to me that many interesting artists had come to a similar conclusion, so the rationalization that one was being peripherally advanced seemed less useful. Now it just seems like painting goes through narrower and wider historical openings, and this idea of its “death” is a rhetorical device to create false controversy. (I myself have experienced three such deaths.) The historical imperatives that seem to drive the various endgame strategies of modernism look more and more like psychological or emotional states from this perspective. Positioning a “last painting” is a weird thing for a painter to want and bespeaks a particular psychology (can we still talk about Thanatos?). The “deaths” always happen when something new gets people excited, but paintings just keep getting made.

MONIQUE PRIETO: When I was at CalArts, declaring painting off-limits seemed like a privileged decree sent down from above. In the most crass terms, I felt that “white” people (no offense!), to whom art had belonged, got to end the narrative before anyone else could get their foot in the door. A few of us made light of the vehement anti-painting sentiment: We had to address the gravity of the resistance to our practice with a sort of giddiness, like when you fall for the wrong person. I only realized that the daily critical barrage I had been subjected to had real value when, at Skowhegan the summer after graduation [1994], I came across peers who, spookily enough, had not yet considered painting from a critical viewpoint. They were blithely painting as though none of these turning points for painting—the ’60s, Pop art, postmodernism—had changed the stakes. It was embarrassing—heartbreaking—to see painting treated like a child whose parents think Junior is so adorable that they send him into the world still speaking baby talk. Rather than just bypassing the critical texts or letting them stop me dead in my tracks, I tried to take them in and glean any elements that might allow a poor fool like myself to carry on.

LANE RELEYEA: Discussion of the death of painting can seem a bit pointless, since paintings still get made, but I agree that there has been some shifting of the ground. I think it’s safe to say that, sometime between the ’80s and the ’80s, discourse replaced painting as the dominant medium in the art world. Previously, painting definitely had its own discourse, but no one is going to write “Tradition and the Individual Talent” anymore, and not only because the idea of tradition is so difficult to make relevant now. The idea of medium is also too problematic—and it’s for a medium, is it not, that the individual shows a talent in the first place. Today’s individual artist is talented at what? You could be cynical and say “the system, the art game, institutionality, bureaucracy.” But is it that different from saying that today’s artist is trained in and needs to show talent for discourse itself? Isn’t this the point behind the ubiquity in MFA programs of the group crit and artist’s talk, as well as the now standard practice for students to produce a written thesis in order to graduate?
One reason painting has been looked at with more interest during the past ten years is because the same skepticism that was once focused on painting has since been applied to critique: Now we don’t believe in discourse. As Laura Owens said in these pages a few years back, “Who wants to be with an artwork that’s constantly telling you everything it knows?” We don’t read theory anymore, and we don’t critique institutions; what we do is hang out, and make artworks with which it would be nice to hang out. We eat pad thai and chitchat in a Jorge Pardo bar.

JUTTA KOETHER: I encountered the “death of painting” discourse and its consequences when participating in the Whitney Independent Study Program in the early ’90s, a moment of multicultural debates, identity politics, and post-Conceptual practices. (Before then I was living in Cologne, where the whole debate seemed imported.) I found that I had to renegotiate my relationship to my medium, to weave myself into the social fabric of the art world and find the ground where connection and debate could happen. It was like playing a game, taking the role of the overdetermined “other,” trying to fight back while also curious about interacting with full-blown Conceptual art. So I tried to create a situation in which painting could happen: I dealt with the experience of looking at a painting. I staged the studio and the becoming of an audience, underscoring the visitor’s role as a participating actor—and as partial “auteur,” since all those comments and reactions became raw material for my painting. This was also a literal test of the significance of the painting’s physical reality. Visitors were asked to make that leap, to feel and smell it all; to get as close as they could to the painting, to step on it, to caress, violate, and add to its reality. (I called one work Kissing the Canvas [1991], after the boxing term for a knockout.) It was a kind of controlled yet over-the-top expressionism, with feeling made visible in all its patheticness. As a painter, I guess I was not even considered an entertainer, but rather a zombie, a ghost from some other time. And I made that ghost speak out a bit.

Today that dismissive context has changed massively. Painting accommodated the new economy of the late ’90s with little resistance. If anything, there should be a renewal of crisis for painting right now.
ROBERT STORR: There seem to have been two bases for making the statement that painting is dead or dying. The first is that the developed conventions of modernism were producing diminishing returns—increasingly academic or rarefied versions of once fresh ideas. The other is that painting as a medium, once central, is now increasingly marginal in relation to other technological means—the obvious historical ones like photography and film, plus all manner of printing technologies, and the newer ones like video and the medium we are using in this roundtable, the Internet. In fact, it’s kind of weird to go from painters hanging out in bars arguing over their discipline to a virtual bull session in the smoke-free, ethanol-unscented, digital ozone.

To answer Lane, I think it’s true that artists and many other people with a part to play in the “culture industry” (by the way, Baudelaire beat Adomo to the punch in 1855 and called it a factory) are fed up with “discourse,” if by that one means a certain competitively academic type of theoretical thought. But the issues of 1980–90 haven’t gone away. Institutional critique is not ‘over’ or pointless, since the institutions have a powerful effect on everything that everyone does, painters included. True, the one institution that has been exempt from such critique is the university. In fact, it’s time to take the power mechanisms of the academy more fully into account, since its influence on creating one canon—and on consigning disfavored art into critical oblivion—is as powerful as that of the museum and the marketplace. Many scholars and curators are disinclined to talk about current painting even though they are drawn to it, because painting as a subject has been disallowed by those who preside over their training and have a hold on their futures. In such circumstances, it behooves painters to set the direction of the discussion of their work as best they can, as the Minimalist, post-Minimalist, Conceptualist, and other practitioner-writers did—Lisa mentioned Bochner—and raise the level of conversation. What are the issues facing painters? What are the stakes? I am a pluralist by nature and conviction, but a situation with no flash points can’t possibly thrive.

HELMUT FEDERLE: Robert, I am part of a generation for which skepticism, refusal, and failure have been great ideals. And in such a context, painting seems to be absolutely perfect. But to consider again the starting point for our discussion, I encountered the first polemic on the “death of painting” at the end of the ’60s. Every few years, the same discussion comes up. I would rather discuss the death of art.
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JONATHAN LASKER: To a certain extent, the mediums that have partially replaced painting in art, many of which are photo- and film-based, have brought us to the condition that Helmut mentions—namely, the death of art. Very little of what is currently represented as art depicts an object that is specific in nature, as opposed to an image that readily connects to the endless loop that is contemporary media culture. This is not to say that photography and film are “artless” media, but that they are easily connected to the media industry, and that much of photography and film in art seeks that connection.

I’m not so interested in painting modeling itself after, say, digital technology, although it is true that painting has always shown a remarkable capacity to expand in response to challenges from new technologies. When the camera was invented, painting became more abstract. But painting should not be falling over itself to keep up. We should not be struggling to regain the lost power of depicting the world. Painting should be other because it naturally is. Depicting our own minds should be enough. I think that painting can best address itself to its own properties and seek a tactile, imaginative response to the condition of man in the natural world.

TIM GRIFFIN: I’ll agree about the odd sensation of moving out of the bar and into the digital ozone for discussion, although I’ve thought that the two spheres are not diametrically opposed. To take up painting amid other recent media, I rather think it’s useful to consider digital technology’s effect in terms of a compression algorithm: JPEGs, TIFFs, those digital filters that lose as much of an image’s “information” as possible, just reaching that edge at which a veil of realism is maintained to the naked eye. When the world passes through the “filter” of a new technology, what things are lost and what things gained? (In one vein, it goes back to Judd’s idea that “new materials determine depictions of space.” Or, perhaps more significantly, the perception of it.) Painting as an intimate physical and optical—and historical—medium is in a unique position to register such shifts. And we see that: The proliferation of architectural motifs in painting coincides with an impulse to revisit depictions of space as our experience of it changes. More subtly, varying degrees of translucency are being used in applications. The subjects have changed too, with artists addressing the kinds of spaces that appear in this cultural context. To mention just one, I’m continually stunned by Dike Blair, who often takes up “branded” environments like airports and casinos—but also something so simple as rain on a window—as contemporary manifestations of the “floating world” aesthetic, and represents them with a sedated quietude.

TERRY WINTERS: I’ve never been interested in endgame strategies. Reductivist and self-referential thinking was tiresome even in the early ’80s. The rhetoric around painting created a negative theology about what wasn’t permissible: no image, no space, no story. The issue for me has always been about how to open things up, not shut things down—how to connect to subjects and methods that allow painting to be an experimental and investigative tool with which to address contemporary experience. In a way, it makes perfect sense that painters would be exchanging ideas digitally. The challenge is not to protect painting inside a nostalgic bubble of barroom exchanges, but rather to engage the abstract contemporary forces that we’re all surrounded by. Painting’s relationship to postindustrial information devices is not so different from its former relationship to photography and the movies.
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Part of what’s exciting about painting’s engagement with the digital is its access to so much new imagery, most of it “abstract.” Coupled with people’s willingness to read this information as something “real,” that opens up useful possibilities. Painting’s low-tech, shape-shifting capabilities and extremely wide “bandwidth” provide access to spaces and meanings that aren’t available through mathematically plotted coordinates.

LANE RELYE: A few years ago, the New Yorker ran a movie review in which the critic complained about the recent loss of faith in the single static shot. I think this connects to what Jonathan says about painting’s relation to other media. I was once involved in a similar online discussion with Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, and Laura Owens, and they complained when I brought up the sentiments of the movie reviewer. They said that good paintings are never still but rather constantly evolve in perception, dynamic, tense, open to endless interpretation, all of which betrays precisely a strong belief in the powers of the single static image—of painting as it’s able to reward focused, prolonged looking. A picture that holds its frame the way a singer stands at a microphone or a political figure stands at a podium: This has become rare, almost anachronistic.
CARROLL DUNHAM: It has to be of some interest in the context of present technology that painting comes about through rather primitive means, involving a strong physical component. However much digital or photographic systems function as tools, a particular kind of object is involved. This has deep historical and wide cultural use and is a primary aspect of what sets painting apart. The corollary to this is probably that there is a separate discourse appropriate to painting, which is nested within but not entirely part of the larger conversation in contemporary art. The "stakes" then seem to be a weird mixture of the personal and the general. Painting is a particular way to find one's self and uniqueness, while the historical syntax, and a sense of location in a larger matrix of thought, connect the specific practice to a much larger field of meaning.

For me, abstraction versus representation is really interesting to think about because the historical, deterministic arguments for abstraction (which I, at one time, completely embraced) no longer function meaningfully, while the possibilities put forth by abstraction have changed forever what we could mean by "representation." A kind of pictorial art can now occur that orbits more around questions of the nameable and the unnameable, embodied in particular physical ways.

ROBERT STORR: One question I see confronting painting is the degree to which it has become a reflection of other image-based media, and thus the degree to which it is increasingly graphic. I don't propose a return to 1960s formalism, but I do think medium-specificity matters, and that painting's future lies in doing those things that cannot be done in equivalent fashion by existing technologies. In sum, painting should go with its medium-based particularities, its strengths and nuances—or, as Carroll says, its primitive physical realities.

JONATHAN LASKER: However much I appreciate the freedoms offered by the pluralistic moment within which we find ourselves, I am concerned that painting has fallen into a situation of a multitude of tiny factions. There are very good painters emerging, but I think it is hard to generate a condition of cultural significance if no one or two issues begin to take center stage.

LANE RELAYA: We live in a pluralist moment. There's no discourse today. Instead there are lists. Just flip through Artforum. The art world looks more and more like the curator's Rolodex. Many of those recent painting survey shows presented neither ideas about nor feelings for painting, but rather cavalcades of individual celebrity artists, each of whom just happens to paint. Without that modernist sense of historical necessity or theory's succession of ideas, "personal choice" factors much more into painting today. To refer back again to that Owens interview, there are a lot of paintings that ask to be appreciated for their personality, that want to be liked. John Currin, for example. At the same time, something about his paintings reminds me of Jim Shaw's thrift-store art—which is to say painting as readymade, an acknowledgment of the shadow of institutionality. I agree with Carroll about the need for both personal investment and an awareness of the matrix or field one's work occupies. Someone like Felix Gonzalez-Torres gets this just right, which is perhaps why he's still such a huge inspiration for younger artists.

LISA YUSKAVAGE: Flipping through the recent book on new painting, Vitamin P [2002], what jumps out is not the diminishing returns of modernism, but the diminishing returns of copying photographs and the overdependence on other media to make painting "vital." What are the tasks of painting? As a figurative artist, I have found the answers in early-modern and premodern works. Their power is in the visual invention, the meaning coming through the form. Good, old-fashioned stuff like that is always newer and better than apologetic, illustrational, never fully baked stuff. Embracing the great-grandparents and the grandparents is the greatest freedom: from theory, and from meaning that precedes the object and its colors, lines, and edges.

TIM GRIFFIN: I do share the feeling that we live in a time of lists. But we're also at a moment when more people seem to be pointing that out. Lately I find that people are less satisfied with that situation,
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are starved for content, and are asking, What happened? As if the ’90s were a decade of amnesia. (Or, possibly, a time when criticism and the culture got separated.) All the time I’m hearing about younger artists and critics seeking to create new meeting points, purely for discussion’s sake. At a certain point, there might have been a rejection of theory or discourse that is now being revisited.

LANE RELYE: You’re absolutely right; much art and many artists still gesture toward an ideal of discourse. Just look at all the images of intimate conversation paraded in the work of Pardo, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Dave Muller, Tobias Rehberger, et al. The main actor starring in such works is still the institutional art world, but now it’s an art world folded or fetishized into the image of a community, a hip and intimate scene. And yet what remains suspicious about such scenes is how they appear at once so open and inviting (again, they’re hip) and yet so tightly, even defensively bound (they’re also intimate). The supposedly meaningful conversations that knit them together are always pictured as so privately whispered as to not be public at all; it is “not heard but overheard,” to borrow John Stuart Mill’s famous distinction between rhetoric and poetics. Conversation is here reduced not only to a picture but to a silent picture. Discourse is thus idealized, made into an inscrutable, contemplative poetic object. And it’s also thus debased, made all the more into a commodity. Talk about nostalgia: It’s precisely with the withering away of criticism as a meaningful dialogue on art that we get an art in which meaningful conversation is sentimentalized in frozen tableaux.
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HELMUT FEDERLE: When talking about the death of painting, we should first analyze how painting got sick. The autonomous energy of painting and the attention it earns are inseparable. They are different sides of the same coin, so we have to deal with the prevalence of the attention. We have to consider the political power structure of the thumbs-up or thumbs-down faction. The propagandists of some heavily overrated artists in the ‘80s are still in the saddle and creating promotional hype with the same ignorance and lack of responsibility. The galleries move to new locations, the art magazines move to another sympathetic focus, the curators create the new darlings of the art world, so the old-boy connections remain intact, maintaining the incestuous self-referentiality of the system. The price is paid by the artist. Still, it is the artist who lets it happen. He refrains, for reasons of opportunism, from controlling the impact of his vision and cedes control to the market.

Most important in my teaching in Düsseldorf is the analysis of the art system. We investigate the cultural power structure deployed by gallery scenes, art critics, curators, and heavy-duty collectors like Charles Saatchi or Friedrich Flick. As an example, we describe a package deal between collector (money, politics), gallery (money), art critics, curators, art magazines (information, attention), and artist (material). I observe that the material, the work itself, is the last and least important link in a chain of information, economic attention, and multiple distribution. In short, success is not dependent upon significance, but it is success from which significance is derived. Success is primary, productivity is secondary. This is why I do not want to talk about the death of painting, but rather of the death of art. We have to realize that even the discourse itself is burnt out.

These days I have to confess my own ignorance. My work is not intended to contribute to momentary hypos, so I do not participate in their formation. I think our hidden life is the most worthwhile thing we have, so it is very important for me these days to keep a low profile.

ROBERT STORR: As I said before, I’m a pluralist, but I’m also concerned about artists setting out to be “minor.” There has got to be more energy in reserve and more urgency than that. One of the most interesting aspects of recent painting is that artists have staked “tradition” in the face and said, “That’s for me, but only my way.” I have Lisa in mind, but also Carroll, Helmut, and Jonathan. It’s a matter of accepting the fact that one is working with a set of conventions; the point is to get the maximum out of those conventions. Rather than trying to predict or outrun history, and rather than pastiching or “critiquing” history, such work takes historical precedents and techniques more or less in stride and uses them to a particular purpose. What’s “over” in this respect is a certain self-consciousness. And what replaces it is a certain candor that allows—or demands—a similar candor on the part of the viewer. In the encounter that a picture sets up, it’s as if the artist and viewer meet and said, “Here we are speaking painting. You grew up speaking it, I learned it at Berlitz; so what do we have to say in that language? And now that we really know it, how much can we play with it for the sake of pleasure, and...
for the sake of breaking free from the rote formulas according to which it is usually used?”

Lisa’s version of the studio-model composition, or painterly realism, is weird and wonderful—and represents one of the stranger intergenerational dialogues. It’s at once a demonstration of the mannerly figuration that Yale taught so many artists, a biting send-up of that very aesthetic, and a redeployment of what was learned in the interest of a serious, funny, and very disconcerting view of women, which we have never seen before. It’s ambitious, and it works as painting. As glossy pictures alone, the images would be unbearable.

**TERRY WINTERS:** The opposition of abstraction and figuration seems less critical today than the degree to which both of these approaches are being used simultaneously. Anything’s possible and everything’s available. What’s interesting is that these mixtures aren’t just the product of surrealist dreamscapes but seem to engage the real world. There’s a lot of sampling going on. As Burroughs said, “Raid the reality studio.” Painting’s position as a “minor” art gives it new efficacy and an increased ability to say something radical. I’m glad Jim Shaw’s “Thrift Store Paintings” show [Metro Pictures, 1991] was mentioned. Completely free of hierarchy, that exhibition demonstrated painting’s position as a folk art. Everybody understands painting, even “abstract” painting. It’s inside this accessible condition that painters are given the greatest freedom. In a way, the “80s” began with Guston, and that was always Guston’s issue—how to obtain higher degrees of freedom. And Rob, no artist sets out to be minor. But it’s often the “minor” artist—hidden, marginalized, and modest—who makes the most ambitious statements. Kupka and Darger are examples.
CARROLL DUNHAM: I suspect that our pluralistic moment may itself be the central issue. Attempts to map culture using a few important artists as axes are part of modernist history and may not serve this moment. There are just too many people working. Even if one creates a hierarchy of importance or quality, it is still based more on context and interrelationships (”discourse”) than may have been true in the past. I would prefer to think of this as liberating rather than get bogged down worrying about whether I’m living in a period of “minor artists.”

JUTTA KOETHER: I’m opposed to Lisa’s notion that it is always helpful to return to “good old stuff.” Approaching, and appropriating, historical material is much more complicated than that. Steven Parrino’s essay “Return of the Creature” is in tune with my own thoughts: “When I started making painting the word on painting was ‘Painting Is Dead.’ I saw this as an interesting place for painting. Death can be refreshing, so I start engaging in necrophilia. . . . Approaching history in the same way that Dr. Frankenstein approaches body parts. . . . my contemporaries were ‘No Wave’ . . . ‘Black Flag-ers’ . . . and this death painting thing, led to a sex and death painting thing . . . that became an existence thing that became a ‘Cease to Exist’ thing . . . a kind of Post Punk Existentialism. I am still concerned with ’art about art,’ but I also am aware that ’art about art’ still reflects the time in which it was made.”

CARROLL DUNHAM: I too want to go on record as being against nostalgia. Painting’s ubiquity and longevity should not be an excuse to behave in a reassuring manner. Rather they provide a framework, not unlike the rules of a language, which creates opportunities for new kinds of images and reflections. To return to the ’80s context: That was when our collective imagination about painting broke open. We in New York learned new things about European developments, which changed totally our reading of recent history. Everything since the ’80s is an elaboration or a critique of that cultural moment. All of the significant contributors of that time are young by historical standards and still elaborating their positions. I am very leery of summary judgments of any of those projects.

MONIQUE PRIETO: One would be selling painting short to imagine that its specificity is in the paint looking a particular way—i.e., detectable layers of paint, traces of brushwork, or a repertoire of recognizable techniques from the past. (The nonreproducible aspect of paintings is also, as Carroll said, suggested by their physicality, like sculpture. Consider Ellsworth Kelly.) I mean, it’s fabric stretched over a box on a wall with some paint on it; the image on the box doesn’t have to depict the gooeyness of paint for it to be a painting. But Rob, to limit painting to “a set of conventions” seems stingy to me, like layers of painterly avoidance. I mean relying on (or worse, reinforcing) the viewer’s received ideas about painting rather than, say, trying to imagine new ways to meet the viewer. Doesn’t the viewer deserve more credit? Sure, the viewer has their Berlitz in hand, and we can have a polite exchange about food, hotels, and sights of interest, but what if we want to talk about politics, love, the state of the world now? The Berlitz falls short when you really want to connect. You have to become fluent in universal communication, Esperanto on the fly, gestures and eye contact. Look, painting is
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neither dead nor just a set of conventions to tinker with, nor just an elaboration and critique of the moment that “we in New York” became aware of “European developments.”

CARROLL DUNHAM: I don’t like invocations of the viewer. I seem to be the only “viewer” whose reaction I can access or predict. As much as one participates in the system of exhibitions, criticism, or other art-market activity, painting remains an essentially private interchange between the poles of self and material. Cultural contextualization can’t be predicted by the maker.

But, by referring to New York—or to any regional frame of reference—I meant to imply that we are all in a “both/and” condition. I think that wherever painting is lively, there is both a connection to an international scene and also a (somewhat unexamined) set of assumptions regarding particular taste and history. New York is perhaps the most “regional” spot of all. This is something that has become much clearer as the fallout from the ’80s explosion of the art scene has settled.

LANE RELYEA: It seems to me that the current painting revival pays scant attention to painting’s last return in the ’80s that Carroll claims we all must reckon with. Instead, attention has hopscotched over the ’80s, or at least the main stars. There is no Salle, Schnabel, Fischli, Vaisman. Rather, focus has been trained on that which many in the ’80s labored hard to have us forget—namely, the ’60s and its “diminishing returns.” It’s an image of the ’60s far beyond Manhattan, to be sure. That’s another thing: the nostalgia for New York as the place where “real” art gets made, just when the internationalism of all these painting exhibitions is making it clear that artists in New York now face the same problem as artists anywhere. Showing only in town is no longer enough; one needs to always show elsewhere. Mobility is power now, and the hierarchy that exists is not between New York and others. It’s between those who can leave town—those who can travel—and those who can’t.
TIM GRIFFIN: Certainly New York has been dealing with decentralization. I think the rancor surrounding the latest Whitney Biennial had something to do with the museum’s attempt—realized or not—to look beyond the city’s borders. But I also can’t help but think that something along these lines is taking place in many spheres, when it comes to regionalism (both in the US and around the globe) and a renegotiation of identity and cultural politics, and a renewed interest in medium-specificity. (It’s a significant turn, given much recent discussion about globalization, and a kind of dematerialization of the medium into a technique applied across media.) There is some reassertion of difference taking place. It’s reasonable to bring up Okwui Enwezor’s use of the term credity in this vein of mixed specificity and context.

To go back a bit: Lane, I hadn’t really meant the kind of intimate conversation you described, but rather the critical public sphere. Regarding the Laura Owens quote about a painting not telling you what it knows, I couldn’t help but think of Japanese Noh drama, in which every line is somehow an evocation of previous literature, unspoken but recognized by the audience. The discussion is embedded in the artistic object, but the object is hardly “about” theory. That would have felt absurd. Speaking of the place of theory today, I can’t help but wonder what reward for clarity there might be for the “avant-garde” in a time of a “war without borders.” Ideas might become less about orthodoxy and more like strategic tools, or lenses through which to view things in specific instances; the critic then may become as fluid, or as in motion, as the painting presented. This might tie in to Rob’s opening suggestion that critics have lately succeeded only when allowing their observations to unfold from monographic treatments of specific artists.

LANE RELYEA: The pervasive sense that artworks are a subspecies of discourse, that they depend for their legibility, their legitimacy, on discourse—that they are most fully revealed in books and magazines, in dual-slide-projector lectures and artists’ talks, in informed discussions among art-world professionals—did much to erode conviction in the single static image. Photographs and the readymade were made to exemplify this; Meaning in art is contingent, it comes after the fact and from outside, in the form of a caption, a framing language, or a framing institution and ideology. It’s in this context that perhaps it makes some sense to say that paintings “look better in reproduction.”
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But that has nothing to do with whether paintings employ a relatively graphic imagery. That complaint is merely reactionary. Like those complaints in the ’60s that the use of acrylics spelled the death of painting—it removed “the smell of blood” from studios. Paintings I’d go to the wall for as shouldering the future of genuine culture (Monique’s, Chris Wool’s, Chris Ofili’s) are often accused of being too graphic, and yet they too always get butchered in reproduction—the colors, surface quality, scale, presence, etc. We shouldn’t smugly take it as a given that the experience of any good painting unfolds in the here and now of mutual address and connection. Rather, something that now concerns and worries us is the idea that paintings overly “need explanatory texts,” that “paintings are made for reproduction.” It’s perhaps that concern which defines painting’s historical condition at the moment. We’re concerned that paintings—or indeed all works of art—are being too completely absorbed by the various contexts they’re threaded through, the magazines, coffee-table books, discourses, Vogue lifestyle layouts, historical slide comparisons, mega-Biennial group shows: these chains that, like TV programming, just flow by, a parade we’re detached from and can only contemplate. Stopping a work, having it hold itself before us and reward our connection with it—I’d argue this is no longer a given for painting but a stake that needs to be declared, fought for, pushed, risked, secured.

JONATHAN LASKER: Picking up on Lane’s thread, I’d like to point out that painting has a unique capacity to present the viewer simultaneously with both a depicted (or mediated) experience and an actual one. Therefore painting is particularly suited to examining the process of mediation and also to countering it with the actuality of a physical medium, which insists on actual presence to complete its experience.

TERRY WINTERS: Information is lost, but there’s also information gained. What is it that occurs between those two points? There’s something to be learned or gained from translation. The painting exists as an autonomous object, but the information it contains is transformed by other media. There’s possibility for further illumination, not just loss. Painting at this time is part of graphic language. Graphic design has made our entire culture more visual. Why would anyone not want to be part of that transformation, to utilize and shape it in some way through painting?

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THICK AND THIN

LANE RELYEA: Terry, my point is that visceral presence is too often smugly assumed by painters, like it’s their object’s birthright, and any such easy assumption is unhealthy for painting on the whole. For “visceral,” read: “sclerotic.”

ROBERT STORR: Regarding Lane’s suggestion that worrying about the graphicness of painting leads straight to sniffing stand oil: The point is not pining for something in the past but hungering for something that, if not necessarily entirely “new,” is an immediate visual experience rich in the details of its own language rather than a faute de mieux version of something else. Although seldom painterly, Pop showed the possibilities for painting inherent in making signs using smooth flat pigments. Inka Essenhigh, Lisa Ruyter, and Gary Humen are keeping that kind of eye-popping picture-making alive. But a good deal of what’s out there seems to be made by people who are chronically impatient with, or uninterested in, the material aspects of painting. That is no worse than being fetishistic about them, but just as disappointing: Nothing much happens to the senses in the first instance, while nothing much happens to the brain in the latter. By citing graphicness as a problem, I mean an un-dynamic laying down or laying out of images and forms that stops when the basics are there.

LISA YUSKAVAGE: I am always searching for that art experience that will not “fit” with my beliefs but that I cannot get out of my mind. I found that in Mike Kelley ten years ago; it surprised me and the work changed me. I guess that is part of why ideologies are difficult for me, as they seem to shut one off to things that don’t jibe.

ROBERT STORR: I want to pick up on that. Kelley is a prime example when it came to work that was disconcerting and puzzling, and also in his relation to “discourse,” when he decided to be the hexagonal peg in a round—or at best square—hole. He absorbed and transformed the discourse to suit his own purposes. In effect, he co-opted orderly Conceptualism for the sake of dynamic messiness, feminism for the sake of a general gender skepticism (which Raymond Pettibon, another imagemaker and wordmonger, also nailed), and found a way to break into the closed conversation of academic late modernism.

What troubles me about much in this exchange we’re having is the idea that painting is personal, hard to talk about. All art is hard to talk about, even when it says it isn’t (ask Ad Reinhardt). But all art can be talked about, as long as you know you’ve only scratched the surface. Yet if painting is to deal with its weird current position—one that is not so much based in what painting currently is, but in what it is said to be—then it is time that painting pushed back, not defensively or modestly but outward and immodestly. Painting can’t compete for attention or whammy with other media; however, it can compete with articulateness. Precision in language and a certain bravado without bullshit is what we need. Painting needs to defy expectations rather than satisfy taste or fulfill programs; but when it comes to talking about it, sympathetic critics, artist-critics, and just plain artists need to dance like a butterfly and sting like a bee. Which is what Reinhardt did without gloves on.

LANE RELYEA: A final remark in response to Carroll about the “viewer.” When I’m talking about painting’s frontal address, I’m not thinking of specific viewers, or even general viewers, which really brings up ethical problems (but that itself reveals what’s at stake, and also casts a more interesting light on our pluralist situation). I’m talking about viewing as such, and therefore something that is not
external but immanent to painting. It’s a question of degree, not either/or. The question is whether it’s actively acknowledged (to use a ‘60s word) or not; whether it’s worked up, put under pressure, figured, and how. This is not new. It undergirds painting’s recent history, as in Harold Rosenberg having the act of painting eclipse its “viewed-ness” where painting gets misappropriated, commodified, perverted; or the similar iconoclasmsthat inform process art and the October group’s “ilinforme”; or Louis’s non-composition and the ‘50s “big canvas”; or presence versus presentness, theatricality, “to-be-looked-at-ness,” the gaze, even Dave Hickey’s idea of beauty. All are grapplings with how painting opens or discloses itself to viewing, and arguments over how to get address as such “right,” thought of as both political (or at least ethical), as well as formal and aesthetic.

Painting can, at best, only stand semi-autonomously between a “before” and “after,” a “back” and “front”: a world of input, inspiration, and influence feeding into it and a scene of display, response, and appropriation unfolding from it. To the degree that a certain conventionality exists at every level of painting, those conventions are, as Thierry de Duve likes to insist, social pacts. (This, says de Duve, goes equally for Manet’s bar, Duchamp’s fountain, and Stella’s black stripes—that’s how he links them, sets readymade and painting in dialogue rather than in opposition; and it’s this dialogue that is continued, clarified, and deepened by the very addressed work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and to a degree reveals its greatness.) This, I think, is a much more productive way of approaching painting than making either/or oppositions between the private studio and the art industry, or between sovereign individuals and social “responsibility.” It puts painting in productive relation to its ever-increasing publicity (using that word, as is custom today, in its Habermasian sense).

To put a sharper point on it, this attitude is more productive than self-congratulation over how the “negative” ’60s (when the momentum of publicity in all arenas really blew out the privacy and interiority of the lone artist and the studio-as-sanctum) were vanquished once and for all by the “explosive” ’80s (which, it has to be said, to a large degree marked a retreat to and retrenchment of painting’s “inner mysteries”). To return to Tim’s question way back at the beginning: The interiority, privacy, and “self” that were recaptured in the ’80s did not come back whole and unchanged. Yes, there is a “shadow” over these things as they appear in painting. The best work, then as now, in some way acknowledges it.