

JOANNE GREENBAUM

Subject is Object is Subject

Writing about an artistic oeuvre may be dangerous. But realizing an exhibition requires mediation. In the case of an oeuvre that so far has been commented upon very little, and on which not a single exhibition catalogue exists, the risk must now be taken. Why then may writing be dangerous? Because it threatens to establish unambiguousness and fixed meanings, and provide reasons, rationales and contexts that might create the impression of being exhaustive. And because, finally, such a text might encroach upon the perception of these works, pre-empting further scrutiny by the viewers. In this case, writing may be compared to gallery labels and exhibition commentaries that entice viewers to read, but drown the eye. Which is already a part-explanation not only of the title but also of the relativity of the corresponding text: Subject is both object and subject.

1.

I discovered my subject, Joanne Greenbaum's paintings, in the course of an Internet search for American artist Cady Noland, who has long disappeared from public view. Painter Mary Heilmann wrote in 2000 that Cady Noland had suggested a visit to Joanne Greenbaum's studio: "I first visited Joanne Greenbaum's studio around ten years ago because Cady Noland told me that I might like her work."¹

As I was equally interested in Mary Heilmann's abstract position, it became all the more fascinating to investigate the unknown "third party," whose work had actually found Heilmann's approval: "I saw a link there. Cady and Joanne were picturing my reality. And this was long before this type of material—the pretty and decorative, or the grim abject imaging—was used to signal the spirit of a moment in time. Now, ten years later, it's everywhere. I had not seen anyone sampling color-field painting before Joanne. I put these two women's practices (Cady's use of detritus, and Joanne's playful baroque) together in my mind, conflated them with my own, and got the idea of 'style as content.' And that was a big minute. An awakening. The great bugaboo of originality lost its pre-eminence as a major value in art. I loved that. It was radical for Joanne to be doing deconstructed self-critical colorfield painting in 1989, and because of what happened next, you would have thought that people from L.A. to Houston to Amsterdam to Berlin, even as far away as South Asia were seeing her work."²

Is Joanne Greenbaum's painting Color Field Painting? I would never have used this term. But it imposes itself from Mary Heilmann's perspective. As for the "big minute" she saw in Greenbaum's work, it was crucial.

2.

Currently, various painterly positions resemble Joanne Greenbaum's. Abstract paintings sprawling into associative imagery; nested compositions morphing into architectural, urban, sculptural or figurative forms; drawings and huge canvases dominated by fragments of modern stylistic idioms, sampled, remembered, hovering, located in obsolete utopias, or

¹ Mary Heilmann, "Joanne Greenbaum," in: BOMB Issue 71, Spring 2000, Artists on Artists; the translator accessed the online version: <http://bombsite.com/issues/71/articles/2300> (accessed January 23, 2008).

² Ibid.

psychedelic dream worlds. A direct comparison may benefit from now well-established terms that characteristically bridge the gap between Joanne Greenbaum and Franz Ackermann's much better-known position: when asked about meaning, Ackermann mentions a "mental map," while Greenbaum talks about "brain mapping." Perhaps there really is an historical analogy to their works, even if it does underscore differences: Franz Ackermann's "mental maps" are explorations of the real, outside world; they are mental maps of the postmodern present—originating in Hong Kong's urban canyons.³ Joanne Greenbaum's "brain mapping," on the other hand, originated in the very core of modern painting, far removed from current discourses, in an almost isolated and seemingly claustrophobic situation, in which the cause of drawing and painting seemed hopelessly lost: the New York of the late nineteen-eighties / early nineties, so very chic and cool, was populated by artists, gallery owners and critics of her own generation. Pretending to be quick-witted and clever, they relegated modernity to the past. Conventional art studios did not stand the slightest chance with them. Joanne Greenbaum was an outsider, enclosed by this scene as by a cocoon. She drew and painted to survive, fully aware of the arbitrariness and irrelevance of her occupation that, ultimately, was pure solipsism; she worked without publicity, aimlessly, motivated by nothing but an arts degree and a studio of her own.

Greenbaum's paintings encapsulate an autistic period from which—after many years—a certain form emerges. Years and years of drawing have transformed into an embracing gesture that endlessly reaches forward, referring to and sweeping along all the moments from the past. One might also call this a salvation, for Greenbaum after all those years has managed to instil an existential motivation into her futile, superfluous, aimless will to draw and paint. She needs to be shy and secretive about it no longer but can blow it up to the size we see today—the size of large canvases that afford an almost microscopic, zooming view of her own processes. Greenbaum's early paintings plainly demonstrate that she has discovered enlargement. As though extracted from her sketchbook, individual shapes appear on vast white planes. Different size brushes and unevenly applied paint appear to simulate ballpoint or felt-tip pens, while her vivid colors push vague forms towards image, vibrant visual presences, almost automatically creating a dramatic tension, a high and low that make her circles, squares and lines appear as awkward and arbitrary as those familiar, commonplace doodles in phone books. And so, these initially abstract but increasingly figurative forms should be interpreted symptomatically rather than thematically. Greenbaum's strategy resembles an *écriture automatique* whose efficiency has been increased by painterly zoom. Two and three-dimensional images reveal themselves to the viewer's eye—ornaments, architectures, topographies, urban or biological structures. But it is evident that decoding activities are prompted; they occur spontaneously and unsystematically, without direction or discernible purpose.

3.

If we wish to look beyond the familiarity we perceive when viewing Greenbaum's paintings today, if we wish to understand her radicalness, we are thrown back to painting as such. Here is a breach with the obvious, with everything that is self-evident to this medium; a reformulation of abstract painting occurs on the waste dumps of modernity. Despite the proliferation and complex charges of Greenbaum's most recent paintings, the fragmentary shapes on a white plane remain drawings on white planes. Greenbaum's small-scale

³ Franz Ackermann, however, explained the origins of his painting by a strangeness and isolation surprisingly similar to that which I am going to outline with regard to Joanne Greenbaum: the early nineteen-nineties were dominated by Concept and Context Art, while painting was considered academic and only became part of the discourse by a detour via caricatures, cartoons and other "minor" genres.

In this context, see also, among others: *Team Compendium. Selbstorganisation im Bereich Kunst*, edited by Rita Beukrowitz and Karin Günther in cooperation with Gunter Reski, Stephan Dilleuth and Thaddäus Hüppi (for the project *Sei dabei! Hamburger Woche der bildenden Kunst 1994*, Hamburg 1994).

gestures are miniatures and bricolage, counterpieces to the allover of Color Field Painting and its metaphorico-psychological claim of having successfully conquered the canvas. Against this background, the psychology of Greenbaum's approach emerges to lead to an almost automatic receptive mechanism of non-conquest; the rudimentary, sketchy shapes are transformed into a prominent gesture, the composition into an open-ended question; creative action is revealed and displayed to voyeuristic observation. Inevitably, certain associations to Primitivism and Art Brut are evoked; loss of control in the face of the delusional and manic existence of forms that Greenbaum seemingly allows to emerge unchecked.

Transforming the value of observation, Greenbaum talks about being released from a claustrophobic situation in Abstract Painting.⁴ When she began to paint, she perceived painting to be in a state of claustrophobia, lacking air and space; disconnected by its desire for abstraction and autonomy, but having failed to acknowledge the fact. Small-scale, shapeless sketches seemed to be capable of bursting from this claustrophobia, setting abstraction in motion and evoking relationships that concern not just thought, but also the perception of abstract forms. Ultimately, a mastery might arise that would connect the example of her continuous action with a higher insight, an accord with the observer not to view formal abstraction as mere forms, but as protuberances of thinking; as partly decipherable, partly undecipherable visual constructs.

4.

Greenbaum's painting is a performance whose action may be explained in the sense of Performance and Process Art. From a distance, it might even evoke Action Painting, but has none of its martial show of brute force and brazen egocentricity. Rather, the very dematerialization of art that occurred around nineteen-seventy in Performance and Process Art arrived with a slight delay. Ignoring the outcome, Greenbaum pursues a painting process that dissolves into gradual series of forms. Her approach resembles an experiment: as she embarks on a painting, she has no idea where it will take her. She seems to add the quotation marks of self-experiment when she talks about the "territories of the unknown" that she encounters. Or, as she told Bob Nickas in their interview, of evidence disproving the claim that everything has already been painted.⁵ The initial isolation and solipsism of her work is a biographical ingredient of these statements. Both of them toy with the exposure of Greenbaum's works, in this constellation perhaps demonstrating an insight that has only just now entered into our view of painting: in our current perception no kind of art, not even painting, can be viewed to the exclusion of the act of performance, i. e. the rhetoric of the medium being performed, and of its performing author.

Greenbaum's series of abstract forms are performances in a much more specific sense also. They are imbued with an excess of shapes and motion that results in diagrammatic and ornamental associations as well as special constructs and figuration. Around the year 2000, references between lines and planes change; stratifications grow more complex and "heavier," often "sculptural" elements emerge. These formations hover between two and three-dimensionality, creating an illusion of Constructivist sculptures that have been released into a surreal space. They even constitute an ironic commentary when this two-dimensionality provides a stage to the impossible and to a replay of avant-gardistic Utopia. Several smaller vertical formats, in particular Untitled (*Yellow Numbers*) of 2004 (ill. page 22), take these associations one step further as their almost ballet-like rhythmical formations suggest movement. In fact, the yellow ground in the piece of 2004 imposes a direct comparison with Marcel Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier*, in English *Nude Descending a Staircase* of 1912.

⁴ See Bob Nickas' interview in this catalogue.

⁵ Ibid.

The sculptural associations of many of Greenbaum's more recent paintings and the striking presence of plinths and pedestals grounding the apparently directionless formations of expansive planes demonstrate a strong three-dimensionality that contrasts with earlier ideals of the "flat picture plane." Greenbaum's painting is spatially and physically directed, anticipating a physical confrontation that begins as contemplation sets in. This becomes all the more evident when looking at Greenbaum's drawings and gouaches as well as the ceramic sculptures beginning to appear in 2003, representing detailed sculptural varieties. A closer inspection of the three-dimensional in Greenbaum's work shows a much closer kinship with Philip Guston or Jean-Michel Basquiat⁶ than other Color Field Painters.⁷ Fellow artists from a previous generation, Yayoi Kusama or Eva Hesse, for example, also come to mind, whose treatments of form had dissolved the dividing line between abstraction and three-dimensionality, and between object and subject-related associations.

5.

The physical and performative associations of Greenbaum's abstract webs of shapes are heightened even more if one considers her painting's basic compositional structure: "brain mapping" produces a physical representation of a brain. The point of departure of almost all of Greenbaum's paintings is at the centre-point of the canvas; that is whence they expand. A center-point is discernible even in her early paintings. Almost always a circular structure forms around this point—an expansion, ramification, or cell formation whose image Greenbaum amplifies by mysteriously derived numbers. In later pieces, she adds an ambient color, which sometimes appears as the background, but more often as an enclosing circle and border. Frequently, these elements complement each other to achieve mere suggestions of clear outlines of a human head, or the interior views of a brain.

It is this diagrammatic yet visually concrete association with a brain that might be tantamount to Joanne Greenbaum's discovery—an unexpected visual analogy that emerges from apparently unintentional and uncontrolled acts in the idioms of abstraction and Greenbaum's gestural "performance." When I recently showed someone one of Greenbaum's paintings and alluded to this analogy, the answers reached back as far as Michelangelo, who in *The Creation of Adam* infiltrated an abstract picture of spirit and brain into his creation: God's finger reaches out from a corona of angels that do not represent the celestial sphere but the human brain. To see their abstract outline one has to disregard the actual image, but that act clearly reveals this very human core.

This situation illustrates yet another aspect of Greenbaum's paintings. At the polar opposite we can find numerous associations with and references to the present: a potential psychogram of abstract forms; an interpretation of visualizations of modern detritus and the baroque that ultimately point in the same direction. In Greenbaum's circling around formal abstraction lies a painterly contagiousness akin to a circling around significant objects. The subject is painting, which is the object—but this time the perspective is that of a subjective and claustrophobically solipsistic imagination.

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⁶ In Bob Nickas' interview, Greenbaum mentions that both Basquiat and Fontana are her favorite fellow artists.

⁷ Bob Nickas seems to perceive her as being closer to them and mentions Dan Walsh as a representative of the younger generation. In an earlier text for *Tema Celeste* magazine that he refers to in his interview, he mentions Yayoi Kusama or Eva Hesse instead, whom I would also like to note here as making for decidedly more fascinating comparisons.