

Olga Lewicka

I Paint on Large-Scale Formats

– as a Female Artist, and as a Human Actor in the Society of Control

On Painting as a Force Field
in my Multimedia Constellations

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Part I

Introduction

The theoretical journeys that I have undertaken have a constant point of reference. They are tested against political questions and priorities: why is it important to carry out this activity, paint this painting, construct this work, undertake this research, [...] this book, in terms of the present configuration of power?

Griselda Pollock¹

PROCESSUALITY. General remarks on the way I work

The processuality of the way I work results from the understanding and treatment of art as a tool with which to think, feel and act. For me, art forms part of the process of living, imagining and working, which becomes defined in real time, as it occurs. I understand my approach as conceptual; yet, I conceptualise at different moments, different stages and levels of work: I perform an act and only later I observe how it exists in the world and what happens to it. Part of my conceptual work also involves a conscious decision not to subordinate my artistic work to any selected idea.

I hereby outline multimedia constellations in my practice to date through which I articulated my latest project “Cloudility”, submitted in the present application. These will be constellations of painterly and photographic images, collages, theories, drawings, installations, text excerpts. At the same time, I present my painting as the central *force field* of these constellations: as a dynamic inspiration, movement of thoughts, gestures and materials.²

My creative activities are founded on observation and the need to understand the social, political, cultural orders and constructs in which I am entangled. I am interested in finding my own place within these orders. To seek my own place in the existing structures of knowledge and power means for me to pose questions about the role of meanings, names and functions that are culturally and socially ascribed to me, including that of a human actor,³ a living being, a woman, a teacher and an artist, or more specifically, a visual artist. Therefore, though my art, I also ask about the political function of image and imaging. In this regard, I consciously rely on painting. Painting is one of the oldest media of visual communication and, as such, I believe it lends itself very well to rethinking historical problems and modern-day problems that result from them. For me, painting is a tool with which to analyse and integrate history, materiality and analogue thinking into our post-humanistic, neoliberal and digital thinking.

At the same time, my activities consist in attempts to INDICATE THE INCALCULABLE – albeit not to illustrate it. And although in my case the final outcome – offered to the viewers – are usually paintings, they result from experimentation with various media. I engage in performative activities, draw, write, install, discuss, paint, quote, check, document, cut, compose collages. And again, I paint. I believe that artistic theory and practice are inextricably

¹ Griselda Pollock, “The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories,” in: *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts. Feminist Readings*, (ed. Griselda Pollock), London/New York 1996, 12. The words without italics have been added by me, OL.

² I use the term “force field” following Adorno in “The Essay as Form”, *New German Critique*, No. 32. (Spring-Summer 1984), 161.

³ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005.

intertwined. The Berlin based curator Susanne Prinz defines one of the overriding goals of this process as follows:

“Ultimately, each of Lewicka’s image and text collages marks an attempt to liberate gaze from the shackles of rules of its exegesis, rooted in the 19th century, and to reach the notion of reality and art that conforms to the spirit of the times”.⁴

The process of analysis: self-abolishment in the globalised and postcolonial society of control

History provides me with a key source of inspiration, both at the level of constructing knowledge, imagination and memory, including the sources of evidence of contingency of all constructs, and at the level of a genetic or epigenetic record, which means the material, conscious and (as yet) unconscious memory of the body. Following Walter Benjamin, I would say that the future does not interest me because it is an empty time and its constructions are free-form and favour the formation of ideologies.⁵ A true memory is not the one that is freely constructed, but the material memory stored in what exists and what is available here and now. I seek to use my practice to animate this memory. In my opinion, any critical vision of the future will always pertain only to the active, historically conscious presence in the present. Painting offers me the possibility to subjectively, materially split the existing reality, penetrate it with imagination and inscribe in it the traces of one’s own living and incalculable stream of images. I am interested in using painting to reach the forgotten and repressed spheres of reality, culture, existence. The trace of expression, the trace of the never-entirely-calculable physical working process of the hand and the entire body, interests me to the same extent as generating the possibilities of a rational grasp of this working process, stream of imagination, the process in which alternative reality manifests itself: by virtue of the fact of being a painting which one faces but outside which one remains, the painting always remains a sign and introduces an abstract distance to perception as well as creates a metaphorical, not a literal, order. This is what fascinates me.

My work consists in an attempt to capture the impact of the imaginary⁶ of the globalised and postcolonial society of control; to understand its spectacular commercial areas, its popular culture, its euphoric visions – to the same degree as those darkest and most cruel ones. “Salon disputes and brawls as processes of painting – or the reverse – are the departure point for Olga Lewicka’s moving abstract painting worlds”, as Gunter Reski wrote about my paintings⁷ in his curatorial text⁸ to a group exhibition at the *Kienzle Art Foundation* in Berlin in 2008:

⁴ Susanne Prinz, curatorial text for my exhibition „Cloud Studies – Mapping a Prospective All-Embracing Structure #2“, at L40 – Verein zur Förderung von Kunst und Kultur am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. Berlin, 2012, <http://www.rosa-luxemburg-platz.net/olga-lewicka-cloud-studies/> (accessed October 22, 2018).

⁵ See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, in: *Selected Writings, 4, 1938-1940*, Cambridge (Mass.) / London 2006, 389-400 (especially fragment XII).

⁶ I use the term “imaginary” following Lacan, see Jacques Lacan, “Kant with Sade“, *October* Vol. 51 (Winter, 1989), 70f.

⁷ See: work group no. 3 in the photographic documentation of my work attached to the present application („Dokumentacja pozostałych dzieł o międzynarodowym lub krajowym zasięgu z lat 2003-2016“).

⁸ Gunter Reski, “Nackt- und abgasfarben“, curatorial text for the exhibition under the same title, Kienzle Art Foundation, Berlin, 2018, <https://www.kienzleartfoundation.de/nackt-abgasfarben/> (accessed: July 10, 2018).

“Acceleration, complex organisation of the painting, its heterogeneous polymorphousness, illusive keyboards of good and bad brushstrokes, which mutually overlap in bold ways. Following the traces of Bad Painting, albeit in new shoes, Lewicka’s paintings make”, Reski goes on, “Kandinsky himself appear slightly faded and barefoot. Liberated essential abstract painterly elements as an explosion”⁹

I observe my dreams, illusions, hallucinations and afterimages. As phenomena that escape the order of naming and (digital) control, they provide me – to follow Baudrillard¹⁰ – with a departure point for the possibility of a radical critique of the existing structures. For that matter, I take interest in the manners of existence and mutual permeation of various forms of formation of signs and meanings, including domination and authority: from visible practices of control and staging of authority, to its structures that act anonymously, in hiding or in dispersal, to barely perceptible practices of individual self-control.

I thus search for a space for my own subjectiveness, for activities that are intuitive by principle, without a pre-meditated goal and reacting vividly to limitations, requirements and potential of the surroundings in neoliberal times, when cybernetics begins to effectively replace politics and digital control of global communication hampers reflection on one’s own material singularity and identity – and I understand this search as thoroughly political. I understand such investigations in terms of mounting material resistance to the expectations of being calculable and predictable in the current information society, a reaction to the requirements of flexibility and to the proclaimed ongoing necessity of assuming responsibility for oneself. Art serves me as a tool to manifest material resistance, while at the same time it is an attempt to find alternative ways of participating and looking in the world: based on the use of sensual cognition with a simultaneous conscious and ongoing analysis of the surroundings and self-analysis – and, as a consequence, a “self-abolishment”¹¹, which means challenging all constructs of subjects through which I am forced or I want to make myself manifest in different social contexts. The most important attempt in this context – the one which inaugurated all my further research – was my installation-performance, which emerged victorious from the 7th edition of the Geppert Competition¹². As Anda Rottenberg stated:

“Lewicka talks about the idea of the image. [...] We therefore have a mirror, we also have a costume which indicates the traditional idea of the portrait. Portrait of a lady. We enter an aesthetic and philosophical discourse interwoven with personal problems. Lewicka – an artist and a woman faces the mirror in a costume that veils her today’s identity and confronts her with the classics of the genre, in which the woman is an object, and not a subject, of creative activities. The artist also enters the discourse on the manner of art’s functioning in the world. Hence the significance of the papers lying on the floor, pinned down with specific objects. She deconstructs not only the notion of the painting surface, but also the status of the artist, especially the woman as an artist.”¹³

⁹ Gunter Reski, *ibid.*. The original version of Reski’s text relies on metaphors that are impossible to translate equivalently. It reads as follows: “Die Saalschlacht als Malprozess oder andersrum ist ein Ausgangspunkt der bewegten abstrakten Bildwelten von Olga Lewicka. Beschleunigung, komplexe Bildorganisation, disparate Vieltelligkeit, die vermeintliche Klaviatur guter und schlechter Pinselattitüden werden beherzt aufeinander losgelassen. In den Fußstapfen eines konzertierten Bad Painting, aber mit neuem Schuhwerk, wird auch Kandinsky locker geschultert, vielleicht auch barfuss. Die substantiellen, also abstrakten Malerei-Elemente im freien Knall ...“

¹⁰ See Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, London 2013, 23f.

¹¹ I use this term as defined by Marina Vishmidt, see: “ACTIVATED NEGATIVITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARINA VISHMIDT,” *Makhzin*, Issue 2 „FEMINISMS“, April 1st, 2016, <http://www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/activated-negativity> (accessed: July 01, 2018).

¹² See: works no. 10-12 in the photographic documentation of my work attached to the present application („Dokumentacja pozostałych dzieł o międzynarodowym lub krajowym zasięgu z lat 2003-2016“).

¹³ Anda Rottenberg, “‘Obraz jako image.’ Rozmowa z Andą Rottenberg, przewodniczącą komisji 7. Konkursu im. Eugeniusza Gepperta,” *format*, no. 4 (48) 2005, 12.

The process of critique: subversion of neoliberalism by means of neoliberal techniques

I seek to make a critical use of media, which means taking into account their social functions and the history of their formation in each case. I use them partly against the grain of current tendencies in the art circulation, tapping into their popular culture forces and their tradition. In my latest project “Cloudility”, I worked primarily with artistic book and painting.

Painting as a modern medium began to form with the advent of the capitalist system in the Renaissance. One could say that painting is a medium of the capitalist system: it is in painting that capitalism looks at itself as if in a mirror, and it is on painting that it has been leaving its imprints right from the very beginning. Similarly, the book medium accompanied the early days of globalised capitalism. Artistic book, in turn, is a neoliberal medium in the strict sense of the term: since the late 1990s, with the growing popularity of computer programming and software that provides designers with the possibility to instantly create attractive designs, artistic publications have become very desirable among artists for their ability to quickly and effectively popularise their work and function as a perfect tool of rivalry.

We live in radically accelerated times. Times which split the subject into ever more minute parts. Complex reflection does not come easy. “There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons”, as Gilles Deleuze wrote in his precise and already classic analysis “Postscript on the Societies of Control”,¹⁴ which has not yet gained a sufficient presence in the art circulation, however.

Where to look for such weapons? If anywhere then by carefully scanning and sensing our own selves. Today, in an era of neoliberal governmentality,¹⁵ strictly regulated by market mechanisms, citizens are no longer governed by others, but govern their own selves. They control themselves. One of the main technologies of the self is responsabilisation, which compels everyone to assume full responsibility for oneself and endlessly pursue the optimisation of oneself, which means becoming ever more effective, flexible, creative and resistant to failure. The Internet provides unlimited and, at first sight, cheap, quick and universal access to all necessary information, thus making “perpetual training”¹⁶ possible, as Deleuze wrote, while at the same time challenging the profitability and effectiveness of independent thinking, thus transforming the society into a global enterprise, which “presents the brashest rivalry as a healthy form of emulation, an excellent motivational force that opposes individuals against one another and runs through each, dividing each within”.¹⁷ As it is easy to imagine in a society so penetrated by control and in a society of endlessly measured and divided individuals, any critique of the system will always form part of the system by definition.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, *October*, Vol. 59 (Winter, 1992), 4.

¹⁵ I use the term “neoliberal governmentality” in the way Michel Foucault developed it in his readings at Collège de France in the 1970s, first published in 2004 under the title *Naissance de la biopolitique*, see M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, New York 2008.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, 7.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, 5.

This alleged impossibility of going beyond the capitalist system¹⁸ resembles the eternal problem of metaphysics, which was originally formulated by Kant: a thing cognised by means of the mind is a construct of the mind. This context provides the possibility to imagine neoliberal governmentality as a certain way of thinking, which is not only difficult to resign from, but which also constantly evolves and is potentially able to integrate everything that is foreign into its structures and make it its own. Exits are currently actively sought within the principles of new realism and new materialism, as well as posthumanism, which are motivated by the pursuit of experiencing the world from beyond human structures. Yet, in my projects to date, including “Cloudility”, I was reflecting primarily on the possibilities of subversive critique within the system. On other ways of thinking. Passionately seeking to leave the society of control, one all-too-often forgets about today’s problem of a general definition of borders of social control, since its “numerical language”¹⁹ constantly shifts them. Through “Cloudility” I was looking for such a mode of subversion – which means reversing meanings and qualities (e.g. quantifiable data clouds, notions describing the states of matter represented by clouds and tools to gauge their chemical composition) – that would lead to raising awareness of the hidden structures of social control and opening them up to cultural meanings that destabilise them and, as a consequence, to a sensual and radically aesthetic experience.

The process of abstraction: activity with inner images

My processual approach to creative work borrows inspiration from the programmes of the early avant-garde from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, particularly Mondrian, Kandinsky and af Klint – and their links with Far Eastern and Buddhist influences, hitherto excluded from art history, in which a key role was played by merging the artwork with life instead of isolating it by means of an externally imposed idea. I believe that those influences would currently require both a theoretical and an artistic revision within the pursuits to catch up with postcolonial critique. I partly see my current work as a continuation of the abandoned (by official historiography and later by the capitalist art circulation) avant-garde avenues of reflection on the artist’s and the artwork’s autonomy, seeking a link between them (which means an analysis of the so-called aesthetics of production, and not of reception²⁰). Neoliberal culture nowadays is permeated by countless Far Eastern motifs and techniques (almost every corporation offers its employees yoga classes, autogenic training, mindfulness training, etc.) and I think it is high time to critically reflect on these influences and put them into a conscious analytical use also in art. At the beginning of the 20th century, many abstract artist borrowed inspiration from Far Eastern philosophy and religion, documented them and used them in their paintings. Yet, the majority of meditation techniques and impulses were not thought-through and implemented in the creative process, but appeared merely as an illustration.²¹ In a nutshell, Kandinsky, af Klint, Arp documented

¹⁸ Cf. Luc Boltanski, Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London/New York 2007, 57ff.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, 5.

²⁰ In the current context of imaging, these notions were defined convincingly by Georges Didi-Huberman in the interview “Refusing Prestige,” *Texte zur Kunst* 3/2014, 120f.

²¹ Cf. comparative analysis of the meditation strategies of Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky in Maurice Tuchman (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York 1986), 231ff.

above all what one can see during meditation. In my paintings, I am not interested in illustrating what one sees or what one can see during the meditation process, but rather in the work itself and indirect (not direct) activity with inner images – as well as the experience of these images leading me somewhere. Paintings from my latest cycle “Cloudility” partly provide a record of the meditation process²².

²² See works no. 9 & no. 31 in the photographic documentation of my work attached to the present application („Dokumentacji dzieł wchodzących w skład osiągnięcia artystycznego, o którym mowa w art. 16 ust. 2 ustawy“).