

BRANDON TAYLOR

Southampton University and Ruskin School of Art, Oxford

‘Something is said ...’: A conversation with Maria Chevska

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Abstract

In this conversation, the painter Maria Chevska and the author discuss the notion of commitment in painting as presented in Sartre’s writings of the 1940s, in Chevska’s current practice and in her exhibition at the Vane Gallery, Newcastle, England, in 2014, and in the wider world of contemporary painting today. They range over questions of attitude, manner, materials, source material and a recent article by David Joselit on ‘transitivity’ in painting as a way of achieving contact with the register of contemporary events.

The question of how painting can intermingle with events and phenomena beyond the studio is our focus here. One answer was supplied in Adorno’s well-known enthusiasm for a principled distance between the artwork and the street – a separation he regarded as a condition of artwork’s power to do, or be, anything significant at all. Autonomous art, he wrote, ‘by crystallising in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful” ... criticises society by merely existing’. ‘Content that becomes eloquent through the work’s formal



Figure 1: Maria Chevska (2015), Every angel is terrifying [iii], oil on linen and wood structure, 163 x 200 cm, courtesy of the artist.

structures' – he is talking about Kafka. (Adorno [1970] 1997: 225–26, 230). Yet undoubtedly Adorno remained remote from the subtler motivations of painting as a practice and as a medium, and his reflections have come to be regarded as historically determined responses to the claims of their absolute contrary, the artistic demands of totalitarianism. Those demands were already in well-deserved historical decline by the time *Aesthetic Theory* was published in 1970. By that date also, too many innovations had been tried by artists remote from the struggles of eastern bloc politics to render his prescriptions generally useful. Consider, for example, Robert Rauschenberg's dictum that his 'combine' paintings of the 1950s belonged neither to the studio nor to the street, that he liked to work in the interval between art and life: as he put it, 'neither can be made: I try to act in the gap between the two' (1959). For him and for others of his generation, it was a gap characterized by a commitment to receptiveness, to the experience of happenstance in any of its forms, above all to a certain critical bemusement at what the image-world *is* rather than what it should be. For more recent generations that posture has itself proved not quite enough – not enough, at least, to effect an engagement with a world of hyper-fast communication, the replacement of goods by information, and the sensation of the collapse of linear time. It is in this context that a proposal has been offered by the American critic David Joselit, who suggests the term 'transitivity' be applied to the readiness of some art to visualize connections between the sensorium of the work and social constructions lying outside or beyond it – the artwork 'expressing an action which passes over to an object', as Joselit puts it, or which 'invents forms and structures whose purpose is to demonstrate that once an object enters a network, it can never be fully stilled': a network moreover 'composed of human actors' at one end of the scale and 'the impossibly vast global Internet' at the other (2009: 132, 125, 126).

These were among the emphases of a conversation between myself and the painter Maria Chevska. As with other recorded conversations, the reader will find jumps and discontinuities. We started from a group of works in Maria's studio, together with the layout and appearance of her exhibition at the Vane Gallery, Newcastle, in 2014. In that exhibition paintings were presented in groups with varied spatial intervals between them – that seemed to defy the canonized understanding of paintings as singular things, each with a character and mission of its own. Furthermore groups of paintings were positioned alongside collage objects as if to imply that 'painting' as the name of a practice was being widened, reframed, regarded differently in its modes of being made and beheld. In discussing the idea of commitment, we touched quite early upon another text, Sartre's essay *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* of [1948] 2001, which in attempting to find a definition of artistic commitment appropriate to the time post-Second World War period anticipates Adorno's position in also pouring scorn on those who paint battlefields, or the unemployed, yet exceeds Adorno's reach by locating a certain efficacy in those elements of a painting that work poetically, whatever social or political avowals might have been undertaken in the work. 'And that masterpiece *Guernica*', as Sartre puts it, 'does anyone think that it won over a single heart to the Spanish cause? And yet *something is*

said that can never quite be heard and that would take an infinity of words to express' (Sartre [1948] 2001: 4). In that passage it seemed to us clear that Sartre was pointing to a hidden surplus in the commitment of a successful act of painting to the world – one that was relevant to Chevska's work and to the wider situation of painting's commitments today. At the same time, Sartre warns us that any such surplus would always, and necessarily, exceed whatever the writer or the conversationalist might find to say about it. The implications of that cautioning will be evident in what follows.

Taylor: Let's begin with Rauschenberg. 'A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric', as he put it in 1959. Looking back over your work, I see that you have developed a mode of practice that sits between things: between writing and the pictorial; between furniture and wall-space; between singular paintings and paintings presented in groups, or which are very close to one another. Yet the practice seems incontrovertibly to be one of painting. Can you comment on this in-between-ness? And can we really call it that?

Chevska: It is such an apt quote from Rauschenberg and it underpins where we are now. The in-between-ness counts because, as you say, my practice is painting, yet primarily I see all the elements existing in space, myself as a quasi-viewer included. In earlier works of the 1990s and 2000s, when I was evolving this walk-through and choreography of parts, I came to treat the paintings as surfaces – each of a particular material physical substance, usually found in my immediate environment, such as ticking, padding, fake satin, sheep's wool, and kaolin on canvas, often with words written into them. '*Phrase-chose*' (phrase-thing) was the evocative description given by Hélène Cixous which conveys well my approach to the use of words as concrete object, one that opens a tension or dialogue between the imaginary inner and the external real space (with objects and so on). I would like the viewer to flip-flop between them because it mirrors our actual perceptual experiences in the world, from the virtual to the material. My objects/sculptures, or furniture pieces, were (and still are) made of everyday stuff – I like to think of them as aids: prostheses acting to ground the abstraction of thinking through painting. In a painting, or a hand-made object, I try to present a part-thing, a synecdoche, something removed from its usual surroundings. This fragmenting process I still think of as escaping the artifice of a single frame, ditching the pictorial in favour of literalness. I found it mentally liberating – all sorts of connections or networks became possible, a multi-layered proposition – and an acceptance of the provisional or conversational nature of the works' relationships within different spatial and therefore social contexts. Painting was again relevant to me, in spite of its near invisibility in most of the biennales at the time.

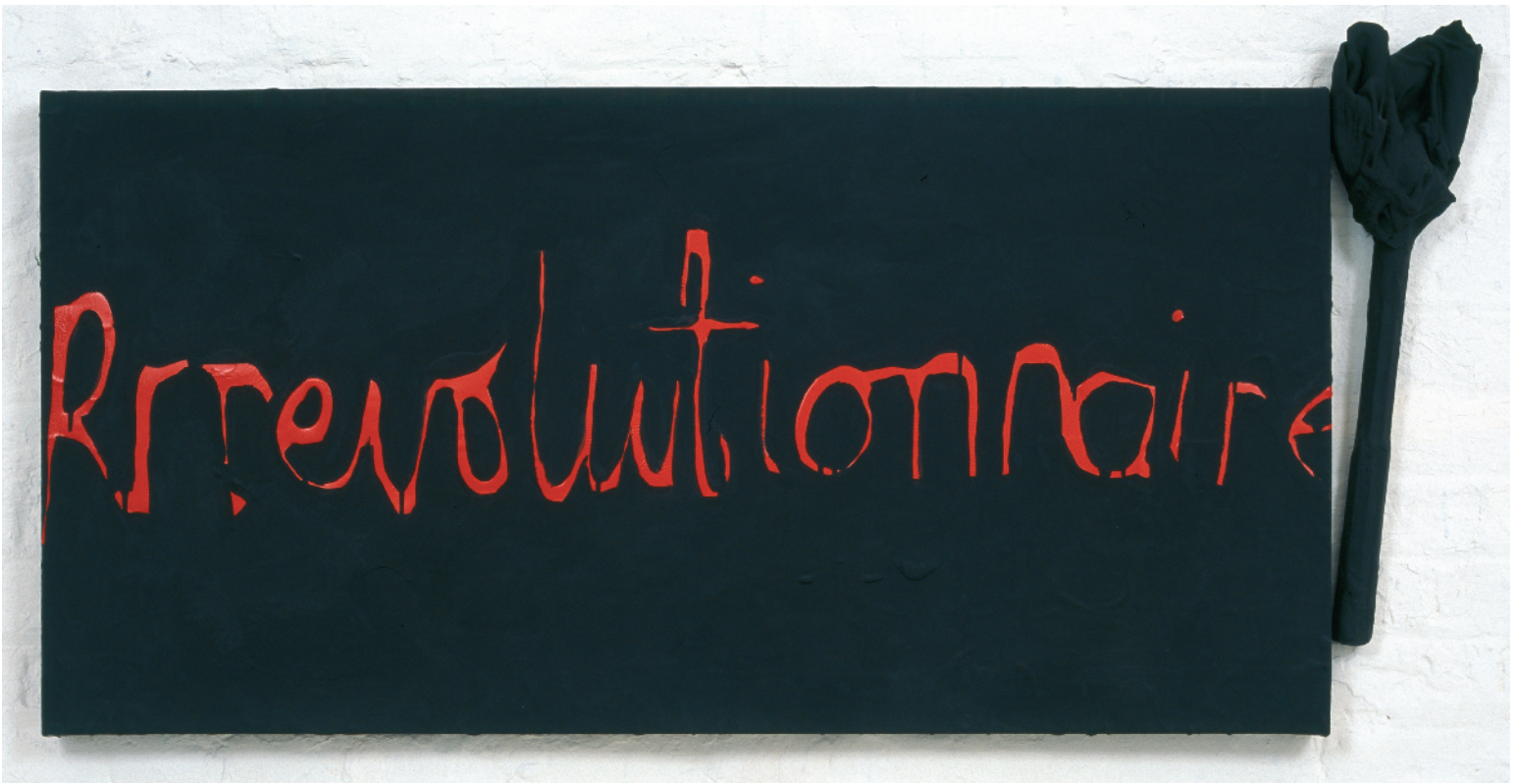


Figure 2: Maria Chevska (2004), Rrrevolutionnaire, oil on canvas, wood, kaolin on cloth, 61 x 145 cm, courtesy of the artist and MOCA London.

Taylor: Oddly enough – or not – ‘*phrase-chose*’ is the term Sartre used in that passage at the beginning of *Qu’est ce que la Littérature?* ([1948] 2001) where he is describing the poet’s method. The poet’s joining of words, he says,

is like that of painters when they assemble their colours on the canvas. One might think that he is composing a sentence, but this is only what it appears to be. He is creating an object. The words-things are grouped by magical associations of fitness and incongruity, like colours and sounds ... [where] their association composes the veritable poetic unity which is the phrase-thing.

(Sartre [1948] 2001: 7)

Yet in fact, in manufacturing ‘*phrases-choses*’ rather literally in your earlier work you were stepping away from painting in its Sartrean sense and getting it to make steps in the direction of the world beyond the painting – the world of speech, perhaps. Could you say that this technique was committing the painting to a role external to itself?

Chevsky: Words first entered my paintings in 1990, consciously to move out of the frame of the painting and into the world. At that time, for an exhibition titled ‘Visibility’ I presented several large panels, made with blackboard paint onto moiré satinated fabric into which I sewed a white vertical line of words: *Lemonade Everything was so Infinite*. I wrote this phrase in the three languages of its provenance: initially Franz Kafka’s scribbled late note in German, Hélène Cixous wrote a short book in French musing on what is said, and I received it in English. My intention was that these five words that came from outside were an utterance, and they carried a compacted sense of the world – microcosm and macrocosm – into this time and place of my painting.

Taylor: The place of the ‘*phrase-chose*’ in your work has changed recently. You now modulate freely between a conventional eye-level hang of works and a hang done in terms of wall clusters, or columns, or whatever. This seems to import a new kind of in-between-ness, if I can still use the term, since the implication is that the viewer can rearrange them at will – either actually or in the imagination. We can see that, if we look at how it was done in your exhibition at Vane in Newcastle in 2014.

Chevsky: Well, it’s true that for the last five years or so I have, on the one hand, reinvested in the physicality of the paint-drawn mark, and developed the internal spaces of paintings, yet I am interested too in their potential to be installed in different spatial contexts and consider the place of the viewer by allowing, at least, for rearrangement and permutation in the way they are seen. The Vane Gallery is comprised of two

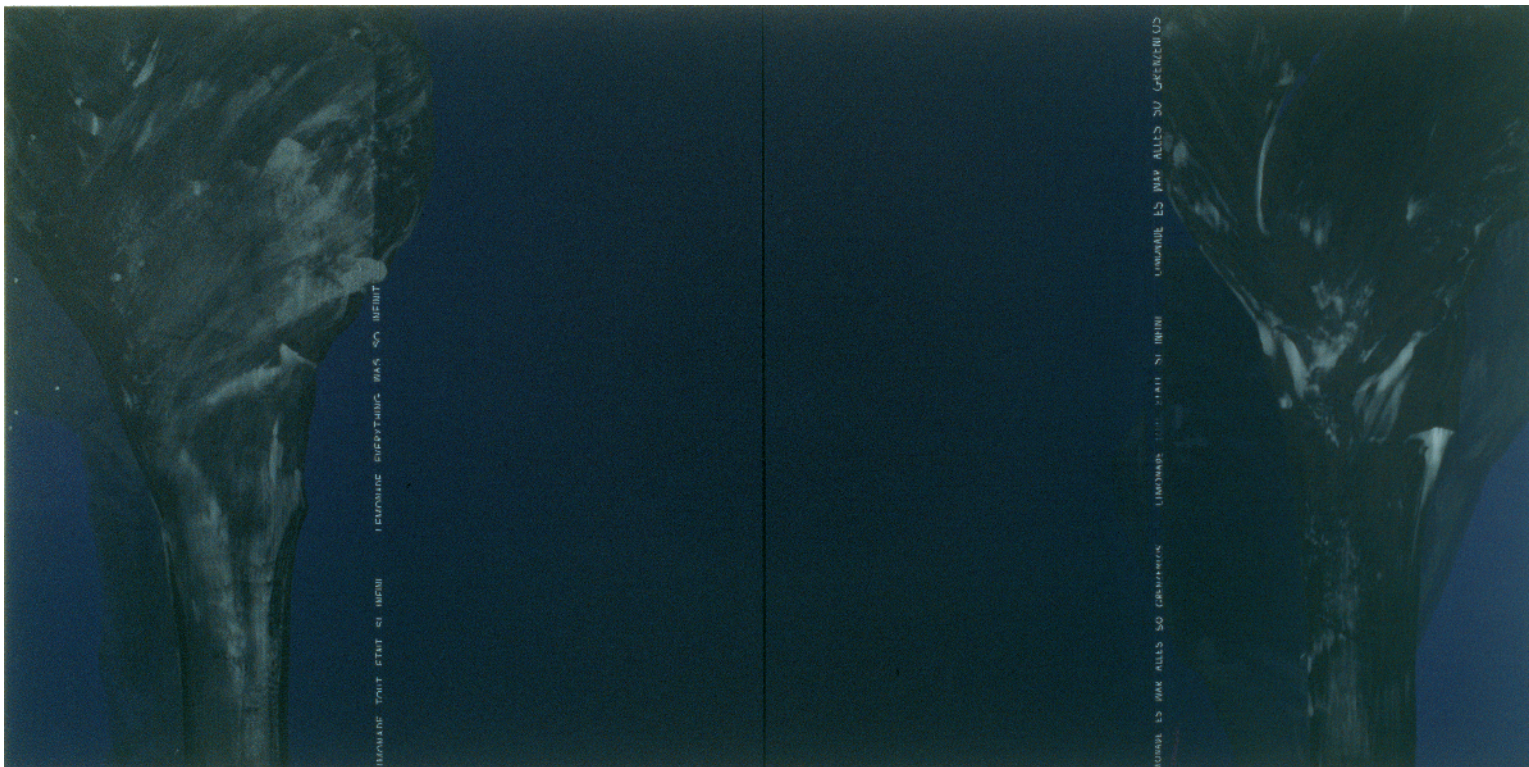


Figure 3: Maria Chevska (1991), *Visibility*, blackboard paint on satin, white cotton thread, 168 x 336 cm, courtesy of the artist and Anderson O'Day London.

adjoining rooms – in a former 1960s' office block in the centre of Newcastle. The larger space became my installation of paintings *From the Diary of a Fly*, while in the smaller room there was a double line of plinths for *Muniments*. I decided to cluster the paintings of various sizes and to radiate out from a corner – forming visual rhythms and repetitions, with an abutting of black and white paintings and colour ones that wrapped around the gallery space. It encouraged the viewer to walk the walls and to read the paintings.

Taylor: We should interrupt ourselves here and talk about that title. *The Diary of a Fly* is the name of a short piece for piano by Béla Bartók, composed in the later 1920s, which is a delicate display of just such 'rhythms and repetitions', organized to evoke the flight of a very small creature in and around a given space, and capable – to put it in visual terms – of observing things from either close to or further off, in that case paying attention to small details in a world much too large to comprehend as a totality. Is that a reasonable summary?

Chevska: Certainly, and it evokes the vertigo induced by moving repeatedly across two- and three-dimensional spaces. In earlier works I had appropriated texts from diaries, letters, dialogue, all utterances in the first person. Here in the *From the Diary of a Fly* series of paintings I cast myself (artist) and the viewer as the fly. A generally shunned creature, the fly's small scale changes normal perception, it being unable to recognize accepted mores or iconic/ideological images, whose intended agency has become lost. The visual image created by Bartók's score, when played on the piano, is one in which the fly is at first entrapped, yet it survives to continue its uncharted journeys.

Taylor: Then let me ask about a single work in Vane, the *Jesus Hair Picture*, and ask you to comment on the nature of the marks in that work as well as the titular reference. In the marks themselves you have developed a sort of shorthand for painting which takes the form not of representation but of a sort of gestural substitute for, or reference to, representation. My sense is that you're playing with the viewer's limits of tolerance for a style of representation that – perhaps for viewers other than oneself – is likely to provoke disquiet. Disappointment even, it's a reaction that is being very carefully crafted, of course, to keep us aware, perhaps, that success or failure in representation can itself be a potent subject in art. Could you comment?

Chevska: *Jesus Hair* is really my own memory prompt for one painting within the *Diary of a Fly* series. Collectively they draw reference from and relate the imagery of icons and propaganda posters. My marks have abstracted, for example, the ritualized gestures



Figure 4: Maria Chevska (2014), *From the Diary of a Fly* (installation shot), Vane Gallery Newcastle, oil on linen, various dimensions, parts in collection of the artist, photo credit: David Tolley.

and the repeated visual signs of power invested in each: haloes, feet, wings, the pointing hand, and Jesus's hair. In this particular painting the image becomes a back-of-head with halo that edges into the lower right-hand corner; the paint is applied in tangible thick black strokes standing out against light marks – it is a fragment depicted within the materiality and processes of painting. In starting a painting I have no pre-ordained solutions. Initially it can be a riot of marks and matter, and yet articulateness is desired, and therefore I have to trust that I can move the painting to something quite simple. Working fast, almost carelessly, seems to bestow a particular temporality on a painting, leading finally towards a level of completeness, even if it means incompleteness, beyond which one descends into pure redundancy. For me, representation is a translation; it is what happens in-between states that I wish to explore. The best is to make a new thing, to surprise myself; perhaps it is the closeness of perceived success and failure that is the philosophical position of current painting.

Taylor: Let me press you on that remark about working 'almost carelessly' to get a sense of temporal completeness. How much do you revise, or re-paint, or reject what has been done quickly? Where is the dividing line between a good result achieved casually and trying hard to achieve the 'look' of carelessness as a sleight of hand? What values are in play here?

Chevska: To work quickly in oil paint simply means to paint wet-in-wet; it becomes an intuitive relationship between the applying of the paint marks and colour mixing that happens on the surface. It is not a new method, of course. Paintings that I very much admire, like the later Phillip Gustons, were painted in a single sitting – however long the sitting took. At the point where the painting is full, or I recognize an interesting tension between the intention and the material, I stop, then leave it around the studio for a while until I feel sure. Most, in fact, are revisited and re-painted; in which case what is underneath stays partially visible. It is not really an option to work in this manner casually – it is actually closer to tightrope walking, as an analogy: a balancing of competing demands, a synchronization of idea, reference, and making. But I say 'careless' to imply the part of the equation that is not foreseen, that embraces the element of chance. Finally it could be a question of either accepting the painting, or rejecting it – occasionally accepting an uncomfortable work that one simply wants to put out there. Embodiment as opposed to depiction is the value I aim for; and I think this does come about through the temporal duration of making a painting.

Taylor: I notice in your studio piles of copies of old Soviet revolutionary posters, Bolshevik paraphernalia, and other bits of teacherly propaganda from the years around

1917 – as well as some slightly bleached-out copies of once-colourful icons. What is going on when you incorporate a small fragment of propaganda material in your painting, or evoke it some other way?

Chevskaja: Recently, from around 2011, I have embedded words into fewer paintings, or they may take a role beside the paintings. The use of collage along with paint, and the evolving role of my objects have also faced the painting outwards to the world. The circumstances were that I saw a collection of icon paintings and Soviet Revolutionary material in St Petersburg. The similarities of their signs was striking, aside from their different aesthetic forms and dogmas. Incorporating fragments taken from this dual material evokes their didactic influences (with parallels too to the present media), but the translations possible through painting, including methods such as slippage within the frame, voids and sometimes actual holes in the picture plane thoroughly destabilize the original's intended moral authority. This is a commitment to the painting process, and in the belief also that 'something is said'.

Taylor: The phrases that occur in your earlier works are fragments found in the writings of Rilke, Kafka, Mayakovsky, Rosa Luxembourg, Anna Akhmatova and others of their generation – we have mentioned Bartók already. You are very clearly attracted to the writers and musicians of that period; suggesting that the social and political upheavals of their period are still those that inform our culture now.

Chevskaja: Yes. The new writing and music that emerged at that time speaks to me of a turbulence, a seismic upheaval in European culture and society that still resonates in our – albeit smoother – technological lives now. Each of those writers, with others, were such individual thinkers and creators, and there is a kind of inimitable reckless courage in their lives and works, towards social change. Where I have invoked their words in pieces of my work it is a virtual ventriloquism in the present – because it seems so relevant. 'Painting as Séance' was the title of an essay by Tony Godfrey for my Black Dog monograph *Vera's Room* of 2005. It was a way of putting it that initially took me by surprise, but I began to really like the notion of evoking the presence of others in discussing the consciousness – and perhaps the conscience – of painting now.

Taylor: Recently humour has played a role in your work too?

Chevskaja: To give you a small example from my recent work. *Muniments* is a series of made objects that I showed on various plinths at Vane. It is more of a wry smile than a laugh-out-loud that is provoked by them, I think, largely due to the unlikelihood of their viability as sculptures. Each was a small construction: card assemblages of

collage and found objects. The moulded photographic elements were mostly vertiginous views of concrete apartment blocks (East European style) with tiny figures on streets seen from above, juxtaposed with some local patterning. Their frailty as structures was challenged by the literal and balancing weight of some everyday items: spectacles, slippers, a note-book, wire devices and so on. Their playfulness and quiet absurdity has affected my paintings too.

Taylor: The French critic Ann Hindry made a provocative comment about what she saw as a persistent kind of understatement in your work. You might agree that colour is usually understated – but what else? And are you conscious of this posture, or does it come without thinking?

Chevskaja: Colour has baffled me since I was a student – it could run away with itself, untethered to any purpose except the decorative. I have over time formed my own rules – it is primarily tonal, and I consider a painting as an object in light. It is internally structured through tonal gradations, into which I may introduce a flash of fully intense pigment colour. In past works I sometimes thought of the symbolic value of a monochromatic colour, or I have repeatedly referenced the individual palettes of painters whose colour was their unique material (e.g. Newman, Morandi, Manet). When I incorporate imagery from ideological posters and icons, it is photographic colour information that I use. Yet this link to the source is made quite faithfully, and is the anchor for colour in these recent paintings. Perhaps too the comment about ‘understated’ returns us to the synecdoche idea that I favour, since once more it means that I do not visualize a linear narrative. I believe that the viewer can and sometimes does insert narrative, or find the work useful to thinking on things, or at least participate in the works’ materials and their potential for meaning.

Taylor: For his argument about ‘transitivity’ David Joselit claims the virtue of reconnecting – or keeping connected – painting and the world beyond the studio. His main exemplars, which are works by Jutta Koether and Steven Prina, are said to illustrate transitivity’s ambitions by ‘seizing’ other works of art, or even whole *oeuvres* – those by Poussin and Manet, for example – or even whole cultures. It is fair to say that in doing so such works do succeed in visualizing relations of classification, interpretation, valuation, exhibition and historical status from within, so to speak. But his other cases are very different, I think. A painting by Amy Sillman may submerge itself in a field of doodling or graphic experiment; and in Thomas Eggerer we find photographic fragments located among loose painterly gestures which point, according to

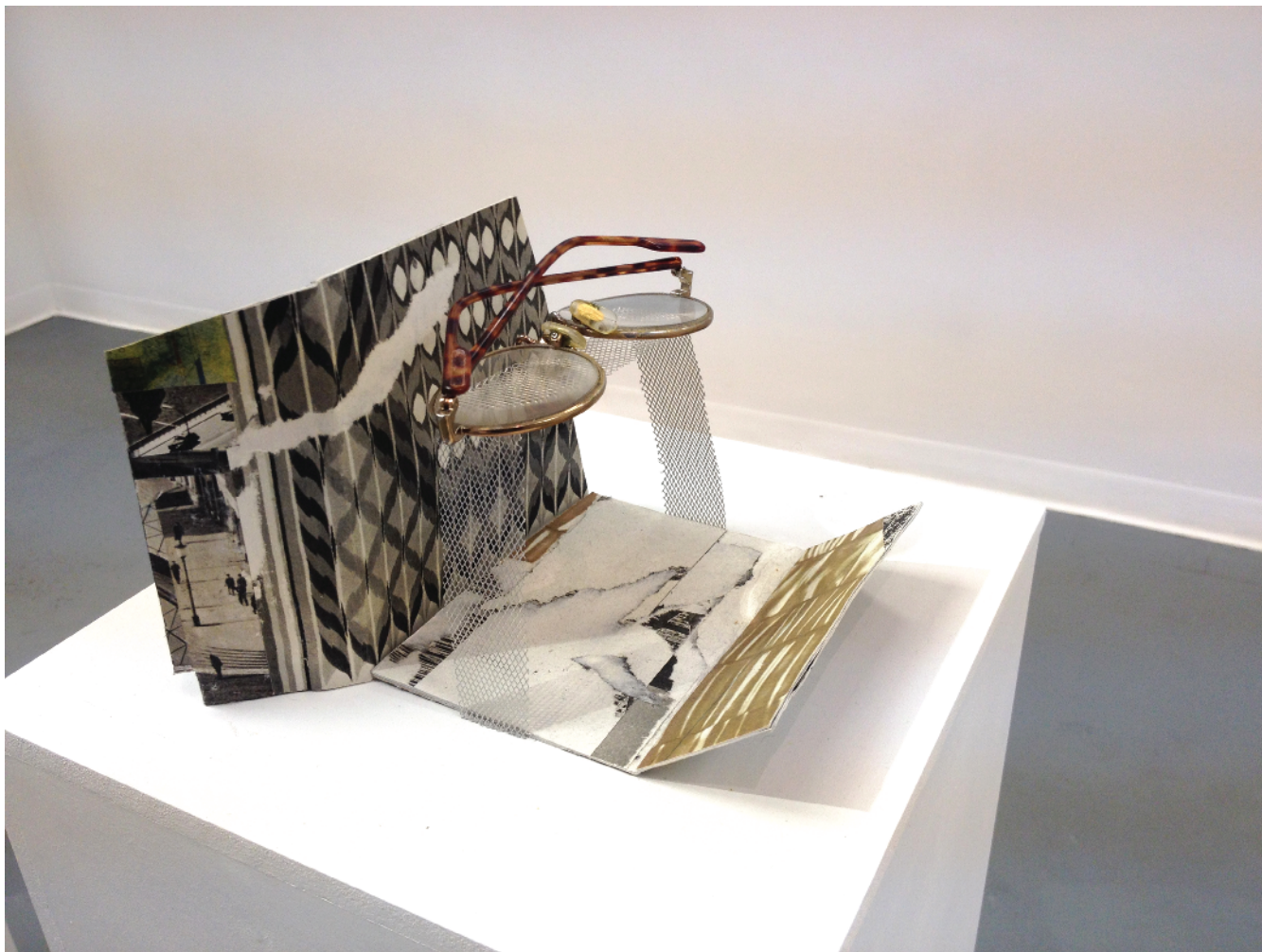


Figure 5: Maria Chevska (2014), Muniments (19), collage, card, cloth, tape, wire, spectacles, plinth, courtesy of the artist.

this view, to elements of a culture beyond the primary evidence of the work. Yet an issue for me is whether transitivity in such examples amounts to much more than an image-quality, even a quality to be conceptually understood; implying that the organization and the madeness qualities of the work scarcely require any comment at all. At any rate it is clear that facingness for Joselit is not a primary value in painting any more. Yet many painters do want the medium and its modes of handling to lie in the forefront of attention – to live in the viewer's mind directly, and to do that as part of the effect of spending time with it, regarding it closely and at some length. I notice too that Joselit regards transitivity as a modelling of the abstract processes of permutation, diagramming, data-translation, networks and the Internet, the ultimate goal, perhaps, of what he thinks of as committed painting today. But that again is a different proposition – not far, as I read it, from Adorno's nightmare of 'a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined' ([1970] 1997: 226). How do you respond to this question?

Chevska:

Well, it's true that I am more inclined to make diagrammatic spaces within the paintings now, working the painterly language of brush marks, line, gesture, gaps, and some collage – so I think I am alert to the very pervasive yet perplexing nature of the diagram as a mode of visualization, and hence the translatability, if you will, of spaces compacted into shapes and vice versa that seems to be going on all around in the digital world. I think the Joselit article is one of the more interesting angles into seeing recent painting; yet I would not be happy to describe my own practice in words like data-translation, or even directly to reference the computer, which just does now play a subliminal role in all image-making. I relate more specifically to Kippenberger's comment – which he gives us, that 'when you say art, then everything possible belongs to it'. I also like the surrounding dramas of certain works by Jutta Koether, and in this sense I would like to think that networks in my work are highly considered. But my intention is not to play down their material realness, and so agree with your statement that a painting needs 'inspecting at some length' while also wanting it to be tied to a kind of transitive commitment to the world. How to do this in practice was one root of Adorno's thinking, of course. Yet I like to hang on to Sartre's insistence that, in the face of everything that might be said, good paintings easily exceed the conscious strategies that start them.

Taylor:

I'd like to know about your sense of where contemporary painting is right now. One has the impression of a vigorous level of dialogue taking place in the catalogues and journals – and the Internet too – especially in the USA, but also that curators remain

nervous about group shows that are in some strong sense related to the time we inhabit. Is it a failure of nerve, or just the usual difficulty of being coherent about contemporaneity as such?

Chevskaja: The most dynamic and significant contemporary paintings seem to me to still come from Germany, Austria (perhaps I should include Belgium) and the United States – probably because the amount and level of critical engagement with painting continues to be meaningful there. In particular right now we read about serious thematic painting shows in New York – which seems surprising to us on this side of the Atlantic where we are in deprivation – many of the strongest painters exhibited there are female, certainly breaking the mould in all respects with an open agenda for future painting. It's a personal opinion but I believe that in the UK we are missing out – lack of courage, lack of intellectual engagement, sheep-like curating, perhaps? I've heard painting called an old medium – a massively feeble riposte, surely, yet it retains integrity as a thoughtful or philosophical form of resistance to many things, the potential to not trivialize global politics, for example, or make false claims. I also rate the potential for audiences to read paintings affectively without feeling preached at. I think here of Sartre's 'free' writer, and 'free' reader, implying the social and political freedom to choose one's own commitment.

Taylor: I should like to ask a slightly journalistic question, finally. We seem to be surrounded by painting-images from all cultures, times and places. What is the single work that you'd like to have as a companion in your studio, right here, today?

Chevskaja: It is not hard for me to say, although of course there are a multitude of paintings I would like to spend time with, so, to cut to the chase, I will say Manet's *The Dead Toreador* (1864, National Gallery of Art, Washington). To return to my earlier idea of simplicity, this is modelled with a limited colour range of blacks, whites and a pink. It shows only a prone body at a slight diagonal angle to the viewer, on a horizontal ground (mixed greys) that appears tipped up to meet, I would say startle, the viewer. Daunting to have in my studio, but also a painting of questions, which makes answers irrelevant and would keep things real.

Taylor: It's an interesting answer. In fact the painting is itself a kind of fragment, cut from a larger painting of a bullfight which shows other features of the bullring behind the figure lying in the foreground. X-rays seem to confirm that Manet reacted to negative comment on the total painting – or saw its point – and cut the toreador out, then repainted the background to ensure his isolation from the narrative whole. The



Figure 6: Edouard Manet (1864), *The Dead Toreador*, oil on canvas, 75.9 x 53.3 cm, Widener Collection.

bullring figures remain in a painting of their own, now in the Frick. *The Dead Toreador* is in that sense a fragment of the kind you were describing. The very proximity of the figure, whose life-in-death can only be read upside down, tells us everything about the paradox of the space inside the painting, including the viewer's difficulty in reaching it – as well as the cruelty, heroism and honour of the world on this side of the picture plane.

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Contributor details

Brandon Taylor is Professor Emeritus of History of Art at Southampton University and visiting Tutor in history and theory of art, Ruskin School of Art, Oxford University. His most recent books are *After Constructivism* (Yale University Press, 2014) and *St Ives and British Modernism* (Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 2015).

Contact: Ruskin School of Art, 74 High Street, Oxford OX1 4BG, UK.

E-mail: bt1@soton.ac.uk; brandon.taylor@rsa.ox.ac.uk

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Editors

Daniel Rubinstein
London South Bank University
rubinsd@lsbu.ac.uk

Andrew Fisher
Goldsmith College
a.t.fisher@gold.ac.uk

Tim Stephens
London South Bank University
stephet3@lsbu.ac.uk

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