Painting as a Cover Story

A Conversation with Merlin Carpenter

Isabelle Graw: Let's try and clarify first what we mean when we say "painting." Do we speak of an aesthetic and social formation that occurred in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries following the invention of the picture on canvas? Or do we simply refer to colored marks on a flat surface? Do we restrict painting to the picture on canvas and variations of this format or do we assume an expanded notion of painting?

Merlin Carpenter: Painting is whatever current theoretical structure exists around it in the art world, for example, the exhibition "Painting 2.0" in Munich (2015/16). Apart from that it is an artwork that is to be sold. Paintings look like commodities, feel like commodities, can be moved around, and have an object-like status. Many of them are just made of cloth but there is something about the way the cloth is stretched tightly over the frame that gives them a bizarre solidity, like skin on a face, shiny metal on a car, which echoes the illusions that other commodities generate.

I.G. Yes, the picture on canvas is similar to commodities insofar as it also puts a veil over its social conditions of production. Its history demonstrates how it can't be separated from economic considerations. Painting was mainly invented because it allowed for a higher degree of mobility and easy transport. One could say that economic ideas such as transaction or exchange are contained within it. Its commodity status is therefore more pronounced than in, say, large, heavy sculptures.

M.C. I think that this developed over time, because originally paintings were produced for specific places, even if those places were domestic. I think they are objects to be sold first of all, but they are also whatever theories are being bandied around painting at a particular time.

I.G. When we say that painting is whatever the painting discussion is at a particular time, and if we take the exhibition "Painting 2.0" as an example as you suggest, we need to consider the assemblages by Isa Genzken or Rachel Harrison as painting as well since they were included in this exhibition. We need to assume an expanded notion of painting.

M.C. Yes, these works still orbit around the same commodity and the same discourse.

I.G. If it is true that paintings are commodities in a more obvious or evident way, is this the reason why you and many other artists continuously hold on to this format? I mean, you've worked in many other formats as well, but the occupation with painting runs through your work. I'm not saying that you define yourself as a painter, even though that you once actually called yourself a painter in a tongue-in-cheek way in the show at the Vienna Secession (2000) which was titled "As a Painter I Call Myself the Estate Of."

M.C. I actually call myself an artist and a painter.

I.G. I didn't know that. But why hold on to painting? Is it the vast amount of intellectual prestige that it has gained over centuries, its historically overdetermined status, or its highly compromised commodified nature?

M.C. It's to get money.

I.G. You mean that painting is, as Warhol pointed out in his work, like printing a dollar bill?

M.C. The way I see it is that if you want to retain your intellectual freedom, you're going to have to do something to make money—apart from teaching, or curating, or running a design studio. So, it's actually about having freedom to think. To produce a product that brings in cash, which then allows for a separate intellectual process to take place. But I do think that this painting product has become a bit dated over the time I've been involved. Its reinvention in the eighties still had a degree of freshness, and even still in the nineties. I think it is a bit more flat now.

I.G. It seems to me that the pressure to legitimize one's painterly practice has disappeared, or decreased, since, say, the mid- to late nineties. In the eighties and nineties, artists who resorted to painting still felt compelled to somewhat justify their decision. Painting has become naturalized since, as if it were the given medium of the day.

M.C. Although a segment of the art world actually still exists without paintings. The 2016 Berlin Biennale didn't have many paintings in it. The documentas and the new Tate extension don't have many paintings.

I.G. The Berlin Biennale even proudly mentioned the fact that they showed only one oil painting, but when you looked more closely at the exhibition, there was a lot painterly rhetoric (the tableau format, framed pictures on the wall, painterly surfaces) thrown around.

M.C. Agreed, it is not as if painting utterly dominates the art world. But sometimes it seems like it does. And sometimes this priority for painting appears to function unquestioned—in both the world of David Joselit and at auction sales.

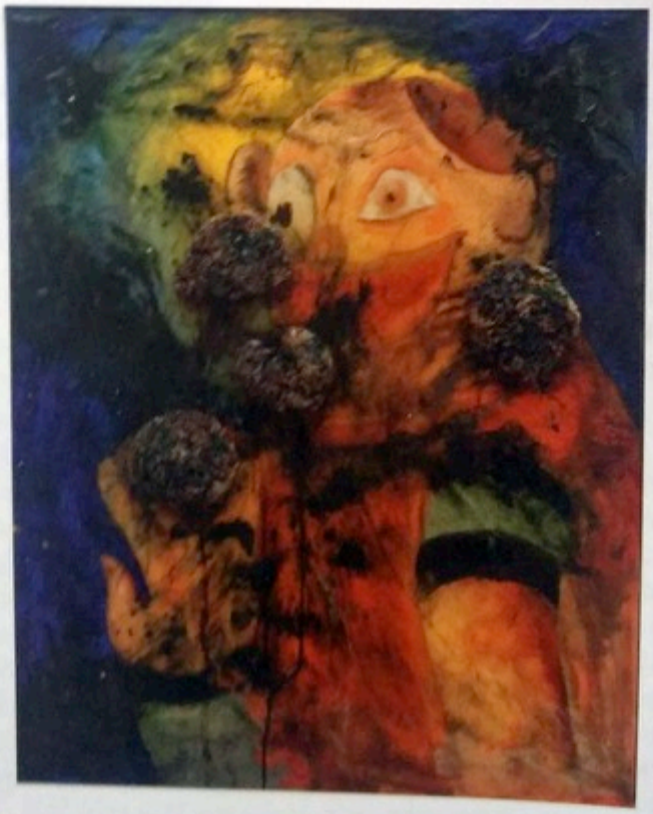
I.G. Its specific historicity and the fact that it actually poses a problem get overlooked.

M.C. Yes, it still does. But I think that when people say, "Painting has always existed," it actually means "painting has always existed like it is now since the eighties or nineties." I think that this naturalization exists in a quite recent time frame. Only this much more recent painting has done its Post-Conceptual work on itself. It is to some extent the first painting.

I.G. What do you mean by first painting? Do you mean that it has incorporated the lessons of Conceptual art and institutional critique and therefore became painting, in a new sense that it was being reborn or appearing for the first time? Once it was proved by people like you or me that painting, as in the case of Kippenberger, can also perform institutional critique, that it can address social networks, and that it integrated the lessons of Conceptual art and the readymade, it seemed to be taken for granted and was de-problematized.

M.C. Yes, by the first painting I mean a painting that is fully turned against itself has achieved self-reflexive circularity within a wider critical debate. In the early twentieth century, Malevich and others in the former Soviet Union turned nonrepresentational bourgeois art in a political direction. But after Conceptual art was formalized, I am wondering if there was a finishing touch applied, which you could call a beginning? In a way, you can go quite far into this history to find the source of this rejigging of painting into a mode of critique, to the seventies at least, back to artists like Jennifer Bartlett or Gerhard Richter. So Stephen Prina or Martin Kippenberger or I are just links on a chain of it somehow being made to seem serious

again, which maybe it hadn't really been since the mediated shlock of Pollock or Yves Klein. It's a continuum of rehabilitation, and the market obviously has had a strong voice in this. But you might as well start with the recent and work back, as start from the past and work forward. So, starting from the first half of this decade, it seems to me that that there is a reason why a post-Columbia Krebber student, year-2010 artist can use painting in a very free way, like Mathieu Malouf, Nic Ceccaldi, or Michaela Eichwald. This group (that I am inventing for the sake of argument) can just go crazy on the canvas, because they don't think that painting has anything to do with art anymore. For them the art world has come to a halt, leaving this space for painting. There was a generational shift where younger artists suddenly found it possible to paint in a hippie way that I, or someone of my generation, wouldn't have allowed. What you are actually saying when painting this way is: "Fuck the art world." It's against the legitimation strategies of the art world. Painting has here been freed to perform what is still a wider critical role, but it doesn't need to have any self-critique as painting at this point.



Mathieu Malouf, *The Looming Return of G.B. (in C.B./on F.B.)*, 2013

I.G. True. These practices reject a conventionalized and by now institutionalized "conceptual" version of painting. But they also open the door for painting's false naturalization since their criticism of the existing legitimation strategies seems too implicit. Michaela Eichwald's work in particular is also usually associated with the history of a certain social universe (Cologne) and seems to be loaded with context as well. It satisfies the longing for this specific history while in fact promoting a romantic hippie-esque I-can-do-whatever-I-like attitude, which feeds right into the desire for a bohemian and truly self-determined young artist in the art world.

M.C. Well, she's not a young artist, she's my age, and you are right. But she has also grasped a much more recent shift, maybe via feedback to her blog or whatever. If you see painting's self-critique through the seventies, eighties, and nineties as being similar to institutional critique, in terms of people and players and discourse and the intellectual politics around it, then it's that notion of critique, and the complacency of it, that's again under attack by this "what-the-fuck" painting. That doesn't mean that this "free" painting being done as if nothing had happened before is not any less conservative; it certainly doesn't make it any less art world. But it has a specific relationship to previous generations in the art world and tries to negate our failed self-critique, using this kind of painting precisely because it's an unacceptable weapon of critique. In that way it's just like eighties painting, but less one-sided. It has absorbed the fact that painting has been legitimated. It's not a wild flirt with conservatism, like in 1981, so it's not about feeling guilty; it's an actuality now, an available tool. But it's also more flat.

I.G. But likewise I have always considered your practice from the early nineties to be "painting against painting" since it can be perceived as being offensive by those who expect a specific aesthetic experience from it. Your early works also don't allow for meaning production, which can be experienced as irritating or disappointing. But considering a painting from "The Opening" series (2007–9), say the one that has only the word "skinny jeans" written on it (*The Opening: The Corner: 5*, 2008), one can't look at it without taking into account how you painted it in public during the opening, how each exhibition was carefully conceptualized according to the location, and how your performing body is somewhat contained in it. Maybe it is for this reason that there is a kind of virtuosic quality to this work—painting lovers can enjoy these paintings aesthetically as well.

M.C. So you are interviewing me about my work now? Er ... okay. The painting against painting period is over for me. In the work of the later period you mentioned—"The Opening" (New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, Zurich, London, Brussels, 2007–9) and "Solo Show" (Miami, 2010)—I was in fact thinking very seriously about painting and what it could be today. One answer was to just stretch some preexisting fabric, à la Blinky Palermo; another was to do a silly painting-performance in a seemingly casual way with no time to think. Similarly Wade Guyton maybe believes that black ink printed by a machine is the truly traditional painting nowadays. The idea being that the only virtuosic painting you could possibly make in these times is a contextual, knowledgeable, politicized work operating with a Post-Conceptual language. And simultaneously a reflexive commodity. Right there is the virtuousity, the "painting." You won't find it elsewhere. If you want to get away from that, you'd have to start painting more like what looks virtuoso, but that would be a kind of Daniel Richter fail.

L.G. But what if one of your paintings from "The Opening" series landed somewhere without this whole contextual information about the performance in the gallery space and was also disconnected from the whole thought procedure that went into it? If someone didn't know what is at stake in your work, would he or she still get a sense of it being saturated with these propositions?

M.C. Well, you only have to Google my name and you'll find all the main facts. And you can't separate your own experience from knowledge anyway.

Michaela Eichwald, *Freiheit*, 2011

I.G. I agree with you, it is difficult to ignore the contextual-conceptual dimension of your work. But as a commodity, painting also tends to eclipse its conditions of production and mystifies them. As a commodity it doesn't reveal its background conditions.

M.C. Yes, the collector has to forget some of that stuff, but not necessarily the audience. I am perhaps in some cases trying to fool the collector by saying that a painting is more traditional than it actually is.

I.G. You have often juxtaposed paintings with readymades such as boats or bicycles in your exhibitions.

M.C. You are still interviewing me about my work … I consider the paintings themselves to be readymades. If a painting is inherently a commodity because of its form and its history then what's the difference between them?

I.G. I always thought your work also emphasized the differences between, say, a speedboat and a painting, by juxtaposing them.

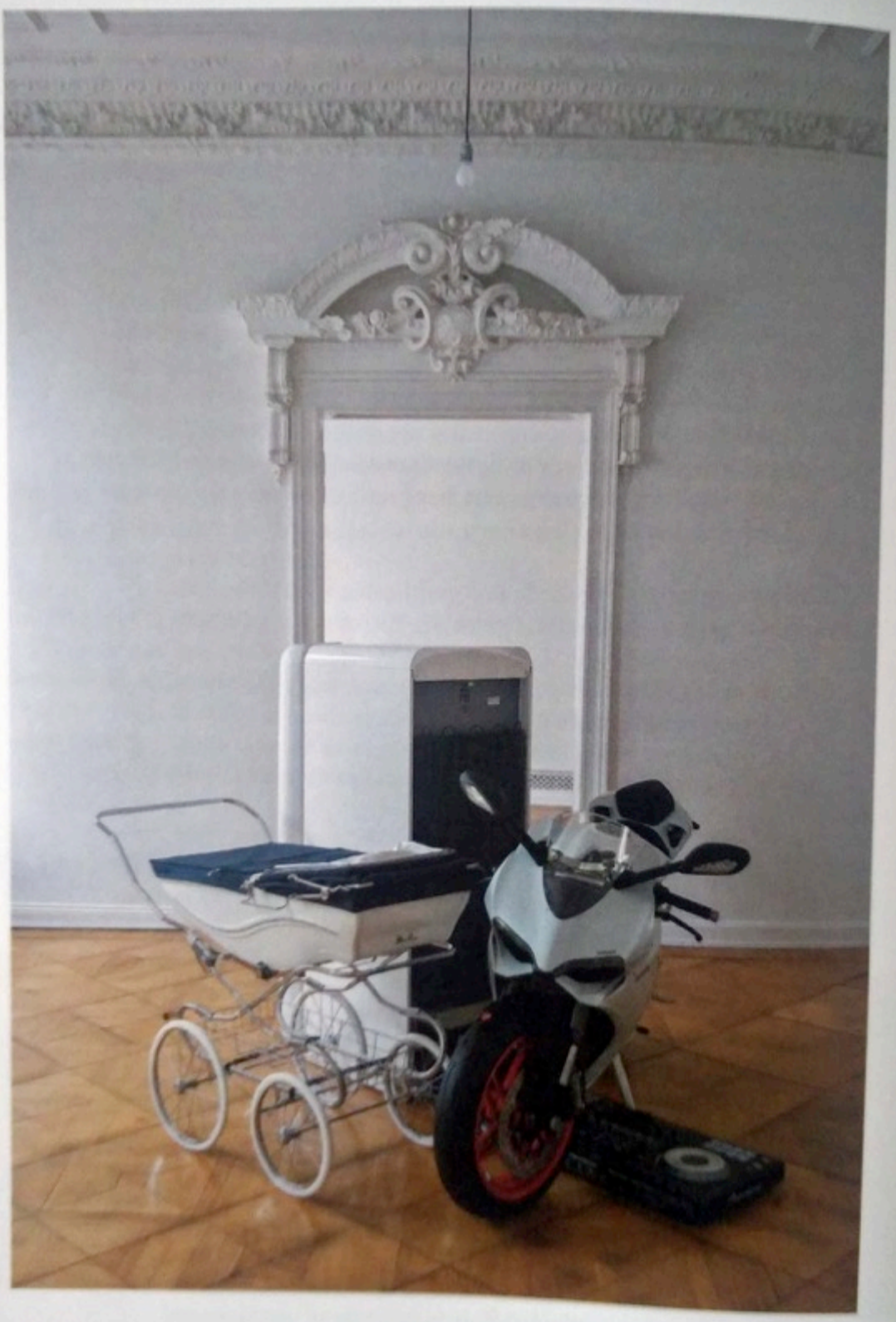
M.C. No. That's why the paintings have such clichéd subjects, because they are also readymades.

I.G. But isn't there a difference between *you* making the paintings and a company producing the speedboat?

M.C. No, I'm a readymade.

I.G. But readymades contain social labor, while paintings suggest a close nexus to their author, the artist, and they also live off the mythological dimension of this identity and the social privileges attached to it.

M.C. Okay sure, I'm not just a readymade, but the starting position is artist as a readymade. The person, or the ambitious artist, the subjectivity, which would produce a painting like that, is a cliché, which I am prepared to inhabit. But I do exist in a context, which changes over time, and I am a person who exists within a discursive space and can move within that space, to some extent. But yes, what I'm saying with "I'm also a readymade" is that it's not just that I'm painting a familiar subject, it's also that I'm acting in a familiar fashion to create a whole effect of completed obviousness.



Merlin Carpenter, "Poor Leatherette," MD72, Berlin, 2015, installation view

I.G. I would agree but only up to a point. You have painted clichés, such as models, yes, but you can't prevent these paintings from nourishing the fantasy that they somehow contain your life and labor time. Paintings are perceived as consisting of traces of their maker even if they have been produced by a machine. And I think that you and many other artists have nourished and mocked this fantasy simultaneously as when deliberately producing drips for instance.

M.C. But drips are readymades.

I.G. Exactly. They are regarded as a totally mannerist device since they have been used by second-generation Abstract Expressionists.

M.C. When you see drips, brushy handwriting, or stylistic haptic events in my work, they are incidental traps for collectors. To have a career I needed to allow for this incidental reading of the accidents of picture making, as if they were in fact the yearnings of a romantic. It is part of the cliché and it was necessary to get money. And it's like this other more conventional person standing alongside me. But I don't identify with this person.

I.G. So these are lols for art lovers?

M.C. Yes, for people that hardly even exist, actually. And I kind of reject this idea anyway. I'm not interested in it anymore. I have rejected quite a lot of my old strategies. I feel that I only really started to get a clear handle on what I was doing last year, having made art since 1991! For sure an illusion too, but generally I have had a slow personal development. However at the same time I have left behind a highly baroque series of traces, some of which are pointing toward an institutional critical and supposedly serious subject matter, others are saturated with incidental virtuosity. But none of the specifics of the incidental virtuosity are of interest to me. They're actually compromises, in fact, to make money. I'm not blaming people if they now criticize me for those commercial decisions. My own experience of it is different; I think if you took any five-year segment of my work, you would see that I was involved in slightly different ideas, the content of these changing ideas being the institutional-critical element as I grasped it at that time, and painting as a cover story. Even today.

I.G. What do you mean by "painting as a cover story"?

M.C. Well, the paintings don't exactly look like the thing that they're embodying. And part of the reason is that they are commodities.

I.G. I would like to know more about this "other person-painter" you created but didn't identify with. I remember that for your show at Friedrich Petzel in 1996 you produced a poster that showed you in a rowing boat on the Thames.

M.C. Yes, I was trying to create a whole fake life at that time as a weekend bourgeois painter in the suburbs. From which fake reality the bourgeois paintings would emerge unforced. But at the same time I was also doing the opposite kind of work in central London. I'm running through an endless series of unfunny jokes. Actually, there's something serious behind each joke, but that is also a failure. But what is not immediately visible is that behind all this is that there is a fairly worthy project, which is simpler: more like how to do art today. I see myself as a John Miller–type, proceeding with an idea until it gets boring, continuing with another; sometimes these ideas cancel each other out, or make me look stupid. What I mean more specifically is that there has been a series of breaks that have happened over the years between different ways of using art or painting in a political context. These were one-way changes of mind, inflection points between the current methodology and another that possibly contradicted it. These changes were reflected both in the look of the works (pseudo-virtuosity) and their inner structure (critique). So that now I look back and think I can't really agree with most of what I did before. This is what I mean about being an earnest student. But there is a risk that by explaining this underlying logic, for instance, here in this conversation, my position becomes even more earnest ... but I will try to talk about it in another way: I like the painting itself, the result, and I feel attached to it and I think it is not without merit. So in that sense I've done an okay job of making this object, which somehow touches upon my thought process as well as a lot of lying. There's this element of having achieved a stripped-down commentary. There it is; I'm proud of the object, but I'm not sure to what extent that makes it a unique painting in the traditional sense. I see it as a crafted critique.

I.G. It is a crafted critique of what—painting?

M.C. No. Anti-painting is now conservative. It's a crafted comment, we'll put it that way: a crafted explication of a position. But it's not all that critical. Let's move on to more general questions, because I don't really want to publish this if it's just an interview about my work. I really think you should move off the script.

I.G. But am I allowed to refer to concrete examples from your work?

M.C. No. Let me ask you instead about your ideas of the vitality that a painting has. What are you actually talking about when you're talking about painting's value? Are you talking about yourself as an art critic analyzing the art world or are you talking about the capitalist circulation of commodities? And how does this relate to the projection of vitalism that is produced by painting? And what does this mean for me? Because in a way, I've been saying that such a projection is a bit of a false trail, because I only had to create this image of vitality to get money.

I.G. I guess I am talking about the capitalist circulation of paintings as commodities from the point of view of a critic who tries to analyze it. Let's start by assuming that paintings are, as you underlined, commodities. I would add and specify here that they are actually commodities of a special kind. While resembling the commodity fetish as Marx describes it in many ways (by also mystifying the origins of their value), paintings also differ from commodities insofar as they actually nourish the vitalist fantasy that they are actually enriched with the labor- and lifetime that was expended on them. This is a total fantasy of course—it is actually bullshit—but it has a strong appeal.

M.C. It's visible that it is a fantasy, yes.

I.G. It is visible as a fantasy in the language of painting, in the physical, bodily materiality of its signs. Owing to their material substance, these signs suggest presence and point to absence at the same time. There are artists who have deliberately fed this vitalist fantasy and others, like you, who also visibly spoil it. But it often seems to me in retrospect that artists (like Richter or Polke) who have tried to prevent vitalist projections by opting for mechanic devices

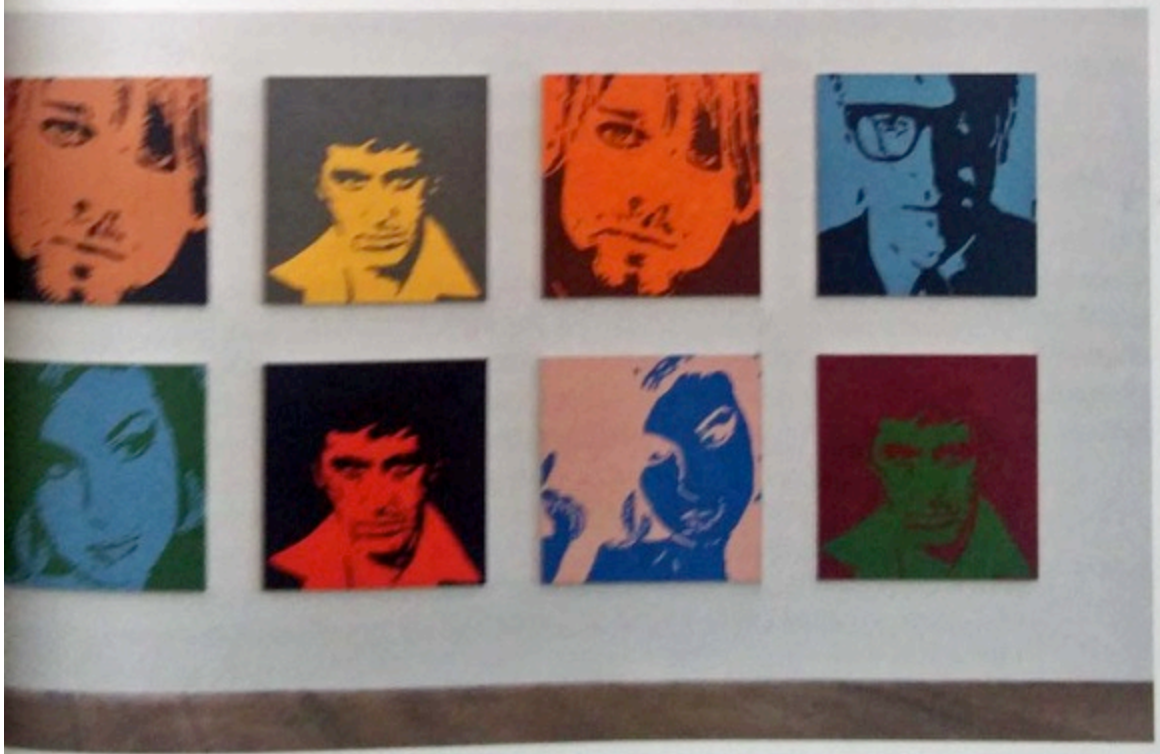
or readymade strategies have often ended up producing paintings that seemed even more alive and self-active. I have observed that attempts to make paintings appear "dead" or "empty" do not succeed ... For instance, in your series "DECADES" (2013–14) I think it's actually the colors especially, sorry to say, that are able to produce vitalist fantasies. I think of course there is a difference between a work that deliberately tries to spoil that fantasy and a work that just caters to it. But I believe that it is because of the rhetoric of painting and its particular history that it can't completely step out of this production of vitalist fantasies, which are so crucial for capitalism. It is painting that triggers these fantasies that are equally projected upon it. They result from a dynamic between the object and viewer.

M.C. But isn't that particular art-lover-type person dying away, or becoming anyone with an iPhone? There is a lot of vitalism in every Instagram post since it started. The comprehension of these aesthetics is pretty spread out. In the case of "DECADES," those colors are chosen because they're straight from the can, using the paint amateur artists use to make that kind of painting.

Merlin Carpenter, "DECADES," Overduin & Co., Los Angeles, 2014, installation view

J.G. I agree there is vitalism in every Instagram post, but paintings have a more substantial appeal and also evoke a material, seemingly self-determined work process that is fascinating and desirable especially in a digital economy where it is most incongruous. You used acrylic for "DECADES," which supposedly is more lifeless then say oil paint.

M.C. There's a certain kind of acrylic used to make the exact kind of pictures that I was copying. The colors are specific to the subject, and the subject of this work is interiors from the precise time in which such pictures were made (the nineties). I had restricted the aesthetic choices. The "DECADES" project was quite tight and the pictures were well received; they sold well and they generated these fantasies. The earlier works, which deliberately allowed for some more arty decisions, had not in fact always sold quite so well, or in fact they often had done, but to a more idiotic audience, and they weren't hyped by the real tastemakers. It all did not function quite as successfully as when I removed all fake haptic content and I played it straight. Then, suddenly, a big Instagram-related ideological pile of money arrived, because the colors were *not* random;



they were "on topic" and so fairly hip. And then of course you get a conversation with the adviser and the curator—because they feel involved exactly because I was staying on message. But nevertheless I am still secretly introducing to them the fake-bourgeois ready-made painting, but with their collaboration. Both kind of painting are readymades; it's that just one readymade is a little more ...

I.G. It's harder?

M.C. Yes, it's a harder readymade, but that makes it much softer.

I.G. Who determines these nuances? Who decides the painting is a readymade? Even if the artist is not a wage laborer someone still must have actually worked to initiate an experimental setup that actually produces these readymade effects?

M.C. Not really. In fact it's an ongoing discourse, a continuation of Conceptual art.

I.G. But someone needs to have prepared the ground for a certain conceptual-experimental setup to happen, and it will be credited to him or her as in Duchamp's case?

M.C. Isn't it constantly revisited and re-grounded? A new generation's use as an inherent given what the previous one struggled for could be an example of this.

I.G. Do you think that such an understanding of the artist, as someone who must effect constant paradigm shifts through ready-made or other strategies, is symptomatic for the way work has changed in general in a new economy where entrepreneurial competences are expected from all workers? Aren't artists therefore just an embodiment of how work has changed in general?

M.C. If the employee has to do all this extra entrepreneurial competency work, that is just more work. That's still labor power, just in a more extreme way including their intellectual labor as well. But the artist working there by herself is definitely not like a laborer—she is more like a manager.

I.G. But didn't you argue in your 2015 essay "The Outside Can't Go Outside" that there is no labor power in art?

M.C. There's plenty of labor in it, but it's not productive labor or labor power as Marx defines it. But just to come to another point, which is maybe more in agreement with what you're saying. This comes from a recent conversation with Sam Lewitt. You've got the productive sphere and the unproductive sphere of the economy, and you've got the whole of production and you've got the entirety of circulation. But both the productive and the unproductive, and production and circulation, are working together, enmeshed with each other. So once you look more with a broader view, both of these two things closely resemble each other when seen on the fetishized surface of capitalist relationships. Work in the circulation sector becomes ultra-similar, in terms of how it conforms to economic norms, to what happens in the production side. And the same thing happens with productive and unproductive labor. The unproductive laborer is exploited the exact same way as the productive laborer. Just because I've tried to delve into the notion of productive labor to clarify that I don't see any surplus value in art, that does not mean that I fail to see that unproductive elements of capital, like luxury-good production by artists, are still bound by the same logic of productive labor and exploitation. Except that the artist herself is a kind of bourgeois manager and actually has a social advantage (and also a fundamental limitation) through that reactionary class affiliation. Artists are exemplary figures who represent capitalist organization to itself. Perhaps the artist's managerial role appears as if it is labor, which gives it a certain vitalism. But the luxury product she makes is actually more like a guiding hand. For example, it is able to ground the readymade effect we mentioned before.

L.G. Artworks are structurally very similar to luxury goods, I agree, but they also have acquired an intellectual prestige since the eighteenth century that luxury items only can dream of having. The sociologists Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre recently demonstrated how luxury production has been increasingly responsible for the economy's growth at least in France. They also pointed to how luxury goods take the unique artwork as their model by producing limited editions and so on. So maybe luxury production—like art production—plays the role of an ideal type of model economy that other economical agents try to imitate, and in that sense it creates surplus value?

M.C. If this luxury production were producing a new model for the generation of labor, then we wouldn't be living in mass austerity and with worsening conditions for our children. The success of the luxury-goods sector follows the money. It's just inequality. The 1 percent are the only ones who have spending power, and they buy the luxury goods. Of course, companies that produce these goods are creating jobs and pay real money to their employees and the wages of the luxury-good employee are actually the same as the "essential commodity" employee; no lower or higher. But still these wages in the luxury sector are not increasing the wealth of capitalist society, so no surplus value. It might be worth mentioning here that this is all not quite so simple. In contrast to Michael Heinrich's strict reiteration of Marx's law, which insists that wages are set by what is necessary to keep the worker alive, thirty years earlier Ernest Mandel spoke about a kind of sliding scale or ratchet effect between needs and luxury goods. To a very limited extent, yesterday's luxuries become today's essentials—smartphones being a good example—and wages must then reflect the need for workers to purchase them.

I.G. Cool, but this is not ultimately what I was saying. I was not saying that the luxury sector was increasing wealth; I was saying that it is playing a more dominant role and that art is closely intertwined with it. And don't artists structurally belong to this luxury VIP zone? And why would this mean that they are outside of value production?

M.C. Artists are managers of value production; they assign roles for productive and nonproductive production. According to my logic, they are drones that assign and allocate value without knowing what they're doing and without knowing who or what for, irrespective of the content of their work. I agree they recreate existing value, but only in a symbolic and organizational sense. They do have this VIP position right at the top of the cultural sector. Obviously most artists do not make much money but a surprising number make a fortune. Their class affiliation makes it structurally unlikely for them to affect change, and a painting is a good example of that. But this could lead back toward a reflexive critical potential of painting. For me, both the painter and the socially engaged artist (and the latter to the extent to which they're inhabiting the role of a cultural producer, not

to the extent that they are an individual offering help to others) are actually functioning as default managers for ruling-class power. And the sad painter putting the painting front and center is putting their class position front and center rather than denying it.