

The Sext Life of Painting

John Kelsey

Seeing how painting has colonized social media lately, it's hard not to feel that there's a sort of leaking away of the medium at the very moment it's taking on a weird and happy new life. Cellularized and abstracted as screen content via apps like Instagram, painting instantly sheds the material skeleton that has always given it body and scale while also escaping the social and institutional contexts that once positioned and grounded it in the world. Picking up speed within digital networks, it becomes virulently retinal again, shamelessly Op no matter what its genre or style. Often in circulation before it's even finished, socialized and speculated on before it's been physically transported or exhibited outside the studio, the work, once posted, is already ahead of itself and other than itself, which probably explains painting's recent good mood: it travels much more lightly now as light.

Historical masterworks and contemporary art alike alight in the breezy, gossipy time of the selfie and the tweet, where the average life span of an image is around ten hours. As the event of the posting rapidly fades into oblivion with each refreshing of the interface, the painting sinks further back in the feed: the fresher the screen, the more obsolete the gram. Which is why painting, as it picks up speed to stay in rhythm with the parallel and simultaneous activity of gramming, can only ever be experienced as *refreshment*. At this point, it begins to operate within an ever-shrinking present tense, seeming to mimic a strange, pulsing repetition (on the screen and in the brain) that automatically brings difference with each new post. Novelty has never experienced such a mosquito-like life span (in the

marketplace too, with the rapid cycling of painters though the columns of ArtRank). And this also explains the happy (and anxious) sext life of recent painting: within the interface it no longer worries about anything beyond the right now of this stripped-down temporality; it has never felt so fresh in its exposure. Always already updating itself, with no regret for the moment before, painting doesn't look back and neither does it front ambitions toward any future. In fact, the present moment is the only reality where it gains traction, or the only one it can cash in. This temporal spin cycle almost becomes an enforced and ready-made experimental condition, where even the most boring stuff can't help being news—a fresh screen at the hot center of a ground zero in time, wherever and whenever it appears.

While this harsh exposure to the interface is shared by all aesthetic media that become mediated in turn as screen content, painting seems particularly and curiously alive here, experiencing the most visible mutations, possibly because something that has always been specific to the temporality of painting is especially unsettled and provoked within the feedback loops of social media. Painting is now mostly on and for screens, as if this new speed were just what it had been missing. Once it was Conceptual art that moved the fastest, exploiting the reproducibility of text and photography while miming the efficiency of *Madmen*—era advertising strategies. But with Instagram and other algorithmic tools, painting is actually faster than ideas. Getting into many heads more quickly now and with no more need for the legitimizing mediation of discourse and minimal institutional control, painting becomes an unstoppable, merrily postcritical, retinal leak whose consequences for art are still difficult to predict. Plus, on Instagram, painting already *is* an advertising campaign or at least loses any clear distinction from the latter. With the guerrilla branding powers that every artist now wields at the end of her thumb, painting becomes actively productive of a sort of alien temporality whereby the very conditions that once defined it as a medium are simultaneously enhanced and abandoned. As soon as it is gramming, as soon as its space is expanded or multiplied, painting is happening in no time.

Philosopher Bernard Stiegler might say that painting “short-circuits” in its adaptation to the “proletarianizing” automaticity of digital networks, as it loses access to the longer circuits that have always given it depth of meaning across generations. Also that it loses its capacity for historical thought and forgets its own potential to produce images that resist the present, etc. That—always getting ahead of itself—its new happiness is a feeling it can't even experience directly, something like nostalgia (or FOMO). This sounds right, but at the same time we can't help noticing how painting that operates in league with such accelerationist energies gains a power to radically reconstellate itself in relation to other kinds of information, other experiences, and other bodies. It trends. No longer controlled by

the old "dealer-critic system," it bum-rushes the city and life. It parties, it is popular, it is Capitalist Realist. The temporality of social networks sometimes seems to anticipate a new image, a Cubism for right now that finally abandons the bohemian-bourgeois interior, exchanging it for a sort of bottomless hyperinterior—a fractal, smooth, speedy, multi-windowed space of giddy hyperconnectivity and spastic, allover referentiality—which no longer requires any relation to an outside.

Following various museum curators on Instagram, one wonders to what extent institutional policy mandates their social-media campaigning or if they simply desire to hang out on the same platforms as young artists. Whichever the case may be (probably both), the result is a proliferation of feeds where the promotion and documentation of museum shows mix freely with business tourism, studio visits, and sometimes a bit of what looks like personal life. Such activity makes explicit an unmistakably libidinal layer of curatorial practice, which was probably there all along but is now much more out in the open: curating is cruising. Meanwhile, artists gramming from the studio, and from gallery openings and bars, are not just sharing their works and lives because they're feeling gregarious: art is clearly caught up in other communicative agendas now, extending professional and media networks while snatching the opportunity to rethink and unsettle its own conditions, both social and aesthetic. Apps like Instagram are at the front lines of an ever-eroding boundary between business and leisure that, in the end, makes them the ultimate business tools. And isn't it just at such points of collapse or confusion where art most wants to get busy? Because this is also a freshly frackable borderland between art and nonart. Operating on that border, painting is able to experiment with the loss of distinction between mark making and promotion, branding and sharing, hanging out and selling, seeing and speculating. How could this not affect the way painters imagine their practices or the painting that happens next? Imagine a social networking or financial algorithm feeding back in real time with something like a smart canvas . . . Few artists would refuse this.

Meanwhile, even the most dandyish gestures come off a bit halfhearted under the current regime of likes. There is no black or blank or bad painting on Instagram because all there is is content, and even a quasi refusal to communicate communicates, at the end of the day. Some contemporary art wants to be as bad or worse than Instagram but most tries to be as good as Instagram, using it as the most entertaining, most efficient means of communicating a practice. We get the feeling there's no right way for art to critique or escape the ever-affirmative Facebook system, only various possible ways of adopting it, some of which remain to be elaborated.

In a gram from ten minutes ago, an emerging artist posted the work of his emerging painter friend. A lazy angle crops the painting in half to make room for other

objects, such as a half-eaten plate of food and a heart-shaped balloon hovering nearby in the bedroom. A filter intentionally skews the palette of the work, which also comes captioned with snarky comments and emojis that seem to contradict the balloon's "I Love You." In another gram from two minutes ago, a celebrity artist has posted a view of his tasteful home where a lesser-known artist's painting hangs between a marble nude and a vintage modernist chair. And in yet another, an installation view of a group show becomes a backdrop as the gallery director shows off a pair of new, neon-bright running shoes, along with comments about sisterhooding. In all such examples, painting is liked and at the same time cast into situations where it must immediately contend with other information, involved in a sort of rebus of likes and lifestyle signifiers, adrift in a situation that immediately complicates the work's meaning, value, and place. Names of painters, late-night banter by painters, social events involving painting, and paintings themselves are circulating all at once and in a much less controlled way than they would in any art-history journal. Works by Courbet and Picasso, too, assume a strangely effective, vibrant flimsiness when they come back as grams. Here, painting is "pro-faned," in Agamben's sense of being brought down to the level of everyday uses, where it now fights for its life in a shrunken but customizable Capitalist Realist present tense . . . and, of course, likes this.

Shedding its bohemian-bourgeois identity like a dead weight in order to gain traction within social media, contemporary painting knows it's busy building, decorating, and financing a sort of virtual café on the scale of the global metropolis, where all art is now café painting. The overexposed emo-spaces of artists' studios and bedrooms are experienced in the garbage time of posed, throwaway moments, always in hyperproximity to other posts and pages, other bodies, and other news. The network is a kind of temporal Pastebin where such moments and paintings pile up and forget themselves. Here, every instance of so-called Zombie formalism is also a provisional portrait of abstraction, a selfie in paint for right now. In this way, painting becomes its own content, not just in the reflexive, medium-specific sense but in the sense of gossip or news, reporting its own adventures under new media conditions, painting its own news. It comes with emojis of clapping hands, eyeballs, and fireworks, moving and signifying in a way that compresses affects into icons while outstripping critical discourse.

Repeating and reposting itself, painting now gets around in a meme-like way, in the mix with other compressed and mutating urban stuff. While art has always engaged the rhythms and technologies of metropolitan life, in the modernist past it needed a clear sense of its own place (studio, gallery) and its own specific surface in order to reflect from a certain distance. It also worked within a measured, seasonal temporality of exhibitions, fairs, and

biennials: studio time, then exhibition time, and eventually the history books. But now that the work and time of painting have become so immersed within the 24-7 temporality of digital networks, it can only operate in an immanent and immediately participatory way, without the luxury of any clearly demarcated temporal or spatial gap between the proper time and place of its own work and the no-time and nonplace of info networks that seem to abolish these. So it involves itself in boundary confusion, haunting and stalking itself, happily confusing itself with its selfie.

While art seems more and more captured within the narcissistic magical thinking that flourishes around the multiplication and displacement of its own image and substance, the plugged-in "body" of painting remains defensive of its power to suspend and capture a moment, a perception, or an affect, even within the sleepless flow of information. Hasn't painting always involved the capturing of other bodies: models, objects, viewers, the artists themselves? If these bodies can no longer be pinned to painting in the usual way or dug up in the old places we may still be expecting to find them, this is probably because the body itself is doing most of the work of mediation now, becoming channel-like in the use of social media and other digital tools. While this work seems more and more adapted to the extension of a gentrified café zone without end, it's only here, between the thumb and the eye, that attention, perception, and momentary strikes can be organized. This is where painting must resurrect its own body too.