

Painting: alive and live

Sarah Kate Wilson

Octopuses, namely their ability to change skin colour, was the focus of my very first conversation with Bruce McLean, who taught me painting at the Slade. Octopuses were relevant then, and they are relevant now, here. Like octopuses, painting is similarly mutable. The medium continues to undergo change and evolves. It is alive!

Like the quick-thinking cephalopod who blends into its surroundings to avoid falling prey to a predator, painting has found a way to survive and 'think' its way out of dangerous situations. For example, as Terry R Myers states, 'painting, since the late 1970s version of its 'end', has not only survived but also thrived because of its embrace of the coalitional!'¹

Importantly, painting is not a capricious medium, it does not seek coalitions to retain power at all costs, as political coalitions might. Rather, painting is polyamorous. The medium has coupled up with numerous partners: performance, installation and moving image, which has led to the medium's expansion. This move, commonly known as the 'expanded field of painting', has been famously adapted from Rosalind Krauss's 1979 text 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field'. There, Krauss declared that 'rather surprising things' came to be 'called sculpture' and her essay maps out the medium of sculpture becoming 'infinitely malleable.'²

Likewise, surprising things have come to be called painting, and since the 1950s the medium of painting has demonstrated itself to be just as infinitely malleable. Like a sponge, painting has soaked up the characteristics of the mediums it has forged relationships with and as a result, in my opinion, has become a time-based and 'live' medium.

Artists now produce what I call, 'durational paintings', paintings that destabilise the traditional idea of painting as a static object, hung on a wall.³ Artists Polly Apfelbaum, Daniel Buren, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Natasha Kidd, Bruce McLean, Lisa Milroy, Yoko Ono and Richard Wright, amongst others, produce durational paintings. Durational paintings cannot be 'seen' all at once and like time-based media works, they 'unfold to the viewer over time',⁴ 'defy stasis [...], depend on technology and have duration as a dimension'.⁵

¹ Terry R. Myers, 'Introduction: What has already been said about painting is still not enough', in *Painting: Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by Terry R. Myers (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2011), pp. 12–27 (p. 18).

² Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', October 8 (Spring 1979), 30–44 (p. 30).

³ For a more in-depth discussion read Sarah Kate Wilson, 'Durational Painting: gifting, grafting, hosting, collaborating', 2017.

⁴ <<https://www.guggenheim.org/conservation/time-based-media>> [accessed 10 February 2015].

⁵ <<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/conservation/time-based-media>> [accessed 10 February 2015].

Michael Fried would refer to durational paintings as theatrical: for him these works, like theatre, have a 'sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, *simultaneously approaching and receding*, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective'.⁶

Now that painting is time-based, we cannot easily say when a painting is 'wholly manifest', their liveness means they cannot be experienced instantaneously.⁷ As a result, viewing a painting is akin to how we experience performance.

[U]nlike those visual media that store time explicitly, such as film, video, and performance [...], in painting the marking and storage or accumulation of time are simultaneous and ongoing. Painting, somewhat paradoxically, is live: a live medium. It is now "On the Air".⁸

David Joselit similarly believes painting to be 'a live medium'.⁹ For Joselit, paintings mark, store and accumulate time on their surfaces, through their making. Marks are laid down by the artist over time, but when viewed these marks are 'always simultaneously available to vision'.¹⁰ These time batteries (paintings) 'stockpile [...] affect and visual stimuli', which the viewer upon meeting the work cannot consume 'all at once'.¹¹ To remedy this, audiences now capture paintings as pictures on their smart phones and therefore defer this consumption for a future date.¹² In doing this, visitors are drawn into a process of 'accumulating accumulation',¹³ meaning 'the marking and storage [...] of time' in making and consuming painting 'are simultaneous and ongoing'.¹⁴ This is not the same as my promotion of painting as a time based and live medium. We certainly cannot consume a painting all at once, but this does not make the medium a live one.

For me, 'durational paintings' are closer aligned to how Michael Fried describes 'literalist' work (his term for Minimal Art); 'essentially a presentment of endless, or indefinite, *duration*',¹⁵ unlike a film, which has a finite duration, that can be played and looped over and over again. Durational paintings exist in a state of flux, and are live, with each version of the work. Peggy Phelan's affirmation that 'performance's only life is in the present',¹⁶ is equally applicable to (durational) painting: 'painting's only life is in the present'.

⁶ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), pp. 116–147 (p. 145).

⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 145–6.

⁸ David Joselit, 'Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (on Time)', in *Painting Beyond Itself*, eds. Graw and Lajer-Burcharth, pp. 11–20 (p. 12).

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 14.

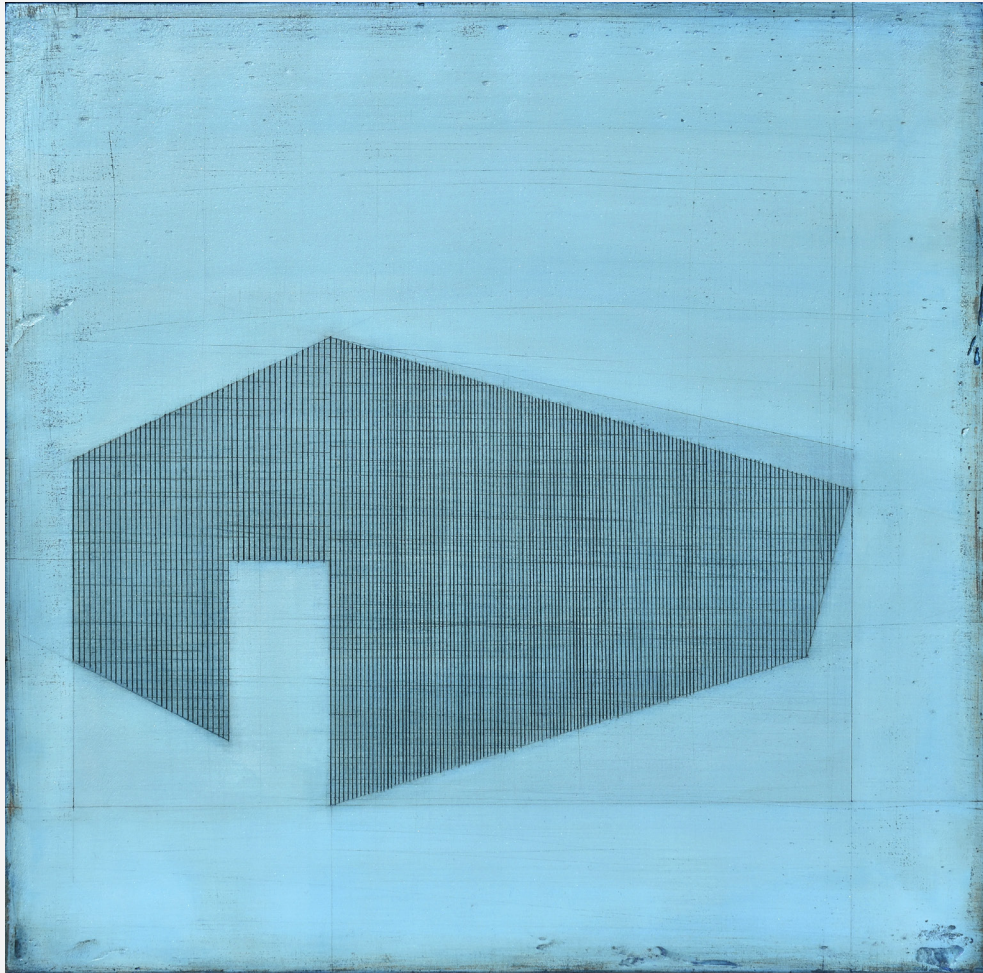
¹² *ibid.*, pp. 11–15.

¹³ Joselit, 'Marking, Scoring ...', p. 15.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Fried, p. 144.

¹⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.



Enclosure V
Susan Laughton, 2019
acrylic and plaster on plywood
40 x 40cm

Lisa Milroy embraces these ideas in the paintings she groups together under the heading, *Performance Paintings*. In *Off the Rails* (2011–15), instructions displayed on the wall offer spectators the option to rearrange the 'object paintings' into new 'combinations'.¹⁷ With fifty painting objects that each depict a different dress on each side there are seemingly limitless configurations, so that audiences meet and leave her *Performance Paintings* anew each and every time. Milroy allows you to take on the role of artist and collaborator, composing the work as you see fit.

Paintings can also more overtly evolve in the hands of others; this is certainly true of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's portrait series. These paintings offer words and dates as portraits instead of images of his sitters. The portraits are executed as a running line of text that includes dates, which are painted directly onto the wall just underneath where it meets the ceiling. Curiously, the owner of a Gonzalez-Torres portrait is legally allowed to edit the work, by adding or subtracting events and dates that relate to the sitter. It is important to note that, in his early thirties, Gonzalez-Torres was diagnosed as HIV-positive. Cognisant of his fast-approaching death (because the drugs available now, were not available then), he began writing instructions for the future owners of his works into each work's certificate of authenticity. Certificates of authenticity are legal documents, that unlike a signature, confirm the authenticity of an artwork.¹⁸

Using the certificates of authenticity as Miwon Kwon observes, Gonzalez-Torres extended his 'control over the work far beyond the point of sale'.¹⁹ This transaction she continues 'results in an extraordinary transposition of roles: the artist [...] puts the buyers at his service now, granting them the right to not only claim the work as their property but also to absorb, the ethical and financial responsibilities of making and / or maintaining the work exclusively on the artist's terms'.²⁰

Gonzalez-Torres might have 'relinquished' the making of his work to others, but he does this as a way of ensuring its ongoing duration, as a way of keeping it 'alive'. Similarly, Natasha Kidd's paintings are made in gallery spaces, 'live', through collaboration between people, machine and painting object.

Her painting *Overfill*, 2015 was made using a peristaltic pump and an arterial system of piping. A series of small canvases all connected in the system to each other were 'fed' with white household emulsion paint. Kidd stretched the canvases in such a way that a pouch was created on the surface of the painting; this pouch was then filled to the brim with paint. Once these marsupial-like paintings were full, push lock valves controlled the flow of paint to each individual painting. Each painting had to be 'nurtured' by the gallery staff in charge of the exhibition.

¹⁷ Accompanying Wall text for *Off the Rails* (2011–15), as displayed in *Painting in Time: Part Two*, 2016, Sullivan Galleries, School of the Arts Institute Chicago, Chicago, curated by Sarah Kate Wilson and organised by artist Claire Ashley.

¹⁸ Collectors will usually only purchase an artwork if it is accompanied by its paperwork. Interestingly, collectors will purchase an artwork even if the only material manifestation of the artwork is the certificate of authenticity. This may seem bizarre, but is in fact common practice.

¹⁹ Miwon Kwon, 'The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal. A Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce', in Felix Gonzalez-Torres, ed. by Julie Ault (New York and Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), p. 298.

²⁰ Kwon, p. 298.

Kidd refers to the people who care for her paintings as 'attendants': the paintings 'call out for attention'.²¹ Attendants must open each valve to each painting ever so slightly to allow a single drip of paint to overflow the pouch. The drip flows over the inflated belly of the painting and onto the floor below. The attendants must remain attentive, returning to the paintings often to see if said drip, which has left its residual escape route behind has dried. Once dry the valve must be opened again. This process continues for the duration of the exhibition with each secretion pooling and drying on the gallery floor below, meaning the physical body of the painting altered throughout the exhibition and crept out into space.

Painting, like the octopus is an evolutionary star, intelligent and many limbed, it exists in a perpetual state of change. Individual paintings have shown themselves, like the medium of painting, to be mutable.

Painting is 'alive', 'live' and most definitely fully awake.



²¹ This term is used repeatedly by Kidd when discussing her work.

Dr Sarah Kate Wilson is an artist who lives and works in London. She received her MFA from the Slade School of Fine Art (2010) and PhD from the University of Leeds (2017).

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She has staged painting performances at the Royal Academy of Arts, London (2018) and Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2017). She has had a solo exhibitions at BALTIC 39, Newcastle (2016) and the Armory Centre for the Arts, Pasadena, California (2015).

She curated 'Painting in Time', Tetley, Leeds (2015), which toured to the Sullivan Galleries, School of the Arts Institute Chicago (2016). She is a Lecturer, at Camberwell College of Arts, teaching within BA (Hons) Fine Art Painting.

Winter Light (Essex)

Tim Stoner, 2018

oil on paper

25.2 x 29.2 cm

Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London. Copyright the Artist.



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Rivoli Rose
Mali Morris, 2017
acrylic on canvas
45 x 60cm

Fully Awake 5:6
Curated by
Ian Hartshorne and Sean Kaye
for Teaching Painting
06/09/2019 - 03/11/2019

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