(REPERTOIRE)

James Krone
Emergency of Pattern
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Interview

Hendrike Nagel (REPERTOIRE) is a nomadic curatorial framework that focuses on exploring anti-authoritarian forms of exhibition making and sustainable institution building. Accordingly, it is very much about rethinking and reimagining forms of organization and collaboration. We actually know each other through another collaborative exhibition project: Dawn Kasper's exhibition The Wolf and The Head on Fire at PORTIKUS in 2019. You were invited to be part of the elaborate performance program accompanying Dawn's exhibition. Since then, we became close friends and you have taught me a great deal about painting. A recurring theme in our conversations is the difference between the representation of politics and the politics of representation. Your work is very much concerned with this difference/dialectic? Since representation is the condition for every form of institution, this is the reason—or one of the reasons—that I invited you to do the very first exhibition at (REPERTOIRE). So maybe you could expand on this idea of representation as it relates to your practice?

James Krone I'm much more interested in the politics of representation than the inverse. Painting is interesting to me because it has almost zero authority as a transmitter of information. There may be an image but the object points back to the terms of its making. All mediums do something like this to varying degrees, but painting is the worst at covering its tracks. So one is always contending with its removes. The images that emerge in painting always feel very ghostly to me. But that's an ancient concern of art. The desire to represent that which is impossible to represent.

Working with this reflexivity is what I'd consider formalism to be. It isn't the decorative balancing of material effects or indifference to subject that I think it's often taken to be, but the problem of inscribing content into form. Art that's dependent upon illustration often comes off to me as condescending or naive or both. I don't think that meaning and information are equivalent. But true ambiguity is restlessly anti-categorical, so it's unfashionable in conservative times.

HN I was hoping you'd make the connection to formalism. In the art historian canon, formalism is registered—in its modernist understanding—as a response to (post)impressionism, and as the artistic position that placed emphasis on the purely material aspects of the work of art. Aesthetic pleasure was no longer to be found in its subject—its narrative content or its relationship to the visible world—but in the painting itself. Formalism accordingly becomes a theory of art entirely determined by its form, as "art for art's sake", and as some kind of objective truth. Born out of skepticism and a suspicion of reason, Post-

modernism directly opposed these formalist modernist believes. It explicitly challenged the notion that there are universal certainties and truths or any kind of objective reality by inscribing or even prioritizing the subject and its relationship to the visible world again (leading to the representation of politics). Following this dictionary logic, we encounter another (or actually the same) categorical divide: between the form and its objectivity and the subject and its subjectivity. As you explained, your understanding of formalism and your artistic practice incorporates these seemingly oppositional beliefs, hinting, in my understanding, to the impossibility/inadequacy of the representation of either subjectivity or objectivity. Would you agree? In relation to that, I would be also interested in talking further about your artistic – formalist(?) – strategies: like repetition and the way you utilize references like Matisse for example.

_JK_ The impressionists thought it was important to stand outside and paint directly from their observations of natural light. The priority being a one to one transfer of experience into material. But Francis Picabia was making impressionist(ic) paintings from photographs and postcards of landscapes, and possibly of other impressionist paintings in 1905. I don't know if he thought they were subversive or if he was actually trying to be a late impressionist, or if the ambiguity simply didn't bother him assuming it occurred to him. They're obviously very different from the paintings Ull Hohn made while watching Bob Ross shows eighty some years later, yet, I relate these Picabia landscapes more to a tradition with Hohn than I would to Monet. So I don't think I know what modern means.

Some artists use references to draw their work closer to other traditions. I'm more interested in using these types of associations as a kind of displacement. Making these works that come from Matisse paintings probably has something to do with my discomfort with categorical logic but also from thinking about Matisse and what his paintings have to do with representation. I see him as a very stark, philosophical painter. I don't think he believed that the subjects he painted belonged to him or were his to give and this thought intrigues me the most.

Initially, I simply had this vaguely dumb idea to make a black and white Matisse painting because I'd been thinking a lot about his work and wanted to think about it through painting. The first thing anyone talks about when they discuss Matisse is usually color so it seemed like the most necessary amputation to avoid instinctive mimicry. I oftenfind that ideas that sound really good in description often lead to weak art. If one believes so much in their capacity to transfer a subject the idea gets objectified by the action and born mummified. I remember a friend of mine whose opinions I respect coming by the studio at the beginning and telling me it seemed hopeless. I thought this was a good sign.

I tried to make a couple of these paintings in 2015 and they were awful. Far too literal. They were on their way to becoming mediocre, ersatz Gerhard Richter paintings. Little mummies. I put them away but then the thought came back a few years ago in relation to other work I was making about the opacity of mimicry and this opened a direction for them. Part of this was pressing one painting I was making, surface to surface, against another. It interrupts whatever my vanity or my unconscious might have been up to and makes design unlikely. It also forces me to respond to this without pointing in any apparent direction to go. After a certain point they ceased to function for me as a reference and became more of a ground.

I've tried to talk about subjectivity as an inevitable subject and people often make the mistake of thinking that this carries with it an intention to glorify that in some kind of sentimental pseudo expressionist way. But subjectivity is an objective limit. These works have something to do with trying to locate and push against that limit. Subjectivity is a kind of formal device within us and its interference or confusion with the subject outside itself is what creates what I see as the core problem of representation. This is that in order for a subject to represent another subject they can't help but abstract it.

HN Since the sujet—or subject—of your painting is a Matisse painting, you already disregard (part of) your subjectivity in the primary step. In a Picabia kind of way, but now the template is not a landscape but a painting. And you are not only „copying“ or making a version of Matisse's painting, you are also making versions of that version. So the repetition, as you mentioned, becomes a second layer of reference. You even go further and use the paintings themselves to produce some kind of imprints. It's somehow like a performance of objectivity as well; having the same problem though: the problem of having a me—in like any kind of subject(ivity).

JK I want to flatten the priority of putting the perceived differences between these subjects into any kind of a hierarchy. The initial subject of my painting is about likeness and the uncertainty surrounding any meaning that's derived from likeness. Mattises' relationship to representation had to do with painting away from an imagistic likeness. For me the paintings (his) are like entrances into thinking about this. As completed statements, his paintings would always resist portrayal. They're intrinsically unavailable so I don't have to worry about copying them. And because this is given then this system puts my work in a position that depends upon me doing something that I could never have planned, in order to make the painting anything at all. It's a way for me to attempt to eliminate whatever assumptions I might bring with me, at least, as much as possible. My paintings have to develop into something that surpasses an analytical description of their course or else they'd also just be illustrations. Either way, even negatively, I'm not trying to create a likeness between me and Matisse.

I can understand how the way I work as an artist could appear to be about repetition because there is often a procedural seriality to it. But even though the works start from another work and I make several or many of them, there's never really a true repetition. There might be a likeness to repetition there, but I think of it more as a single thing in parts or maybe as fractal. I fumble through these procedures I make for myself until something begins to accrete and this seems to be the only way I'm capable of understanding my own work. A part of me would prefer it to be more elegant and succinct but I always seem to require an excess of material. Even in my answers here.

HN It is therefore more of a repetitive act than an actual repetition. How does this process relate to the other works in the exhibition: the *Pigeon*[2] photographs and the *Anti Mnemonics*[3]? They obviously have seriality and the prismatic in common, but their connections are certainly even more intricate.

JK The *Pigeon*[2] photographs were something I started working on at the same time that I'd gone back to working on the *Matisse Dissociative*[1] again. I wanted to document the patterns on their backs because they look like rorschach tests and because people often have so much spite towards them. These things seem related to me. I'm kind of a novice

when it comes to photography from a technical standpoint so I was a bit surprised at how many formal decisions were required to get to a photo that was convincing to me. And pigeons are living subjects and they move around a lot and are, rightly, suspicious of people. It takes forever to get them to stop looking over their shoulders at me so I look like a freak when I'm trying to photograph them. Making art outside always becomes slightly performative. It's embarrassing in the way that being on the train with stretcher bars is embarrassing. Anyhow, some of my earlier attempts at these photos were in my studio and they resembled the Matisse dissociatives, black and white, abstractions over subjects etc. I like when seemingly unlike things I've pulled into my studio have a surprising, superficial resemblance and I often start to work from that. It's unpredictable. I like having a very thin logic to begin with.

And even though it's an associative exercise for psychologists to play the rorschach game, when you look at the pattern on the pigeon as an abstraction it's somewhat dissociative as an objectification of the bird. I would never try to make portraits of pigeons or attempt to claim them. The way I photograph them they are entirely turned away from me. Not even their bulging eyes are visible which means I really had to wait around taking slow little steps in order to get that picture. It's not a portrait of a pigeon but an image of my gaze. It's a vehicle of abstraction even if I sympathize with the animal. This is also similar to my relation to the work that comes from Matisse. I know just as little about what either are thinking.

HN The *Anti Mnemonic*[3] paintings obviously stand out in this context as they do utilize color: quite a neon green actually. This green refers to the chroma key backgrounds used in photo or video productions as a placeholder to later fill in digital imagery. Through this, the color itself becomes a bridge between the analog and the digital world; two spheres which function quite differently. What is considered neutral in one appears quite radiant in the other. I very much appreciate that your work considers representation on all these— very contemporaneous—levels. This „play" with neutrality as well as patterns connects them to the other two series again. But there is also something resistant to them, isn't it?

JK With the *Anti Mnemonics*[3] I was thinking about the moment that one realizes they're beginning to perceive a pattern and then also realizing that the pattern can't be confirmed. It conflates my interest with this color, chroma key green (which can be mixed in various tones or hues) which is interesting to me because it signals a space that will be eventually rendered invisible. Kind of like an anxious sign for neutrality (as you mentioned) or nothingness. A neo liberal substitute for what a middle gray monochrome might have suggested to someone fifty years ago. But of course the people who use it professionally don't view it as being nihilistic so much as a work material. It's also close to a color I grew up hating because I come from Chicago and on St Patrick's Day the city dyes the river this bright toxic green.

I like that in the thin verticality of it that's indexed to various dimensions of human anatomy it's hard to hold the image in one's eye. It's like an up-down looking and there are these recognizable patterns but they can't really be observed well enough to know if they could continue.

HN All your series of paintings have this assumption of patterned behavior and at the same time they all negate exactly that. The title of the exhibition here at (REPERTOIRE), *Emer-*

gency of Pattern, is highlighting this emergence as an emergency, as something like an unified cultural gaze? The collective problem of not(!) having a me?!

JK Yeah, I'm not sure why it has to be like that. I don't really like the idea of invention or telling stories that would just come from my moods or my taste. Something like that sounds like a dead end for me, personally. I wouldn't really know why to continue. It sounds to me like taking my interiority for granted. I had this problem ages ago in school and thought that I should possibly move more thoroughly towards video or writing but then the problem I was having with it only began to fascinate me more. My instructors were pushing me to construct a way of working that would stand in for me as a subjective double even when I told them that this felt completely impersonal to me. They wanted to change my reception of what was personal! Totally insane. I remember making these quick kind of expressionistic paintings on paper and then randomly tearing them up, making collages of them and then I'd make fairly realistic paintings of these. My teachers hated them.

General ideas of art are awful. I get why people don't want to lean into this fantasy of the artist as a special person because it's nauseating. But overidentifying with the reverse, that conveying ostensibly interesting data makes the messenger interesting as well, also goes nowhere. I really don't know. Nothing could ever come from these totalized ideas. They're caricatures. People feel like they have to qualify and that's not only depressing but dangerous. Contemporaneity qualifies nothing. Anything that a living person is concerned with is contemporary.

My work risks appearing opaque and I think that comes from my issues with using selfhood as a readymade mixed with a desire not to make assumptions about what (an)other thinks. I try to make work that follows and formalizes these considerations. When I switch courses the results often appear to parallel what I've done before. I think that pattern is the visibility of a limitation.

List of works

(1)
Subject at a Piano (Matisse Dissociative), 2023
oil on canvas
75 x 60 cm

(2)
Pigeon, 2023-2024
archival pigment print in artists frame
36 x 28 cm

(3)
Anti-Mnemonic, 2023
oil on linen
dimensions vary