



Joan Waltemath: 'One does not negate the other'

MARCH 5, 2015

Art in Review

By MARTHA
SCHWENDENER

Painting and architecture used to be much closer, such that at least during the Renaissance artists sometimes practiced both. [Joan Waltemath](#) is a painter, although she taught at the architecture school at Cooper Union for many years, but her works are planned and constructed almost like buildings.

Ms. Waltemath's paintings [here](#), which feature grid-based compositions, are measured and squared off, and you can see pencil lines on the sides of the wood panels. Some of the titles include orientations ("East" or "West") or references to architectural elements like arches and thresholds. Several took longer to execute than most buildings — in one case, the serene "Oaxaca Blue/darkness too (East 4 1,2,3,5,8 ...)" (2007-2015), over seven years. (The gallery release also mentions, as a precedent to Ms. Waltemath's paintings, the works of [El Lissitzky](#), the Russian avant-garde artist whose two-dimensional "Prouns" were conceived as "interchange stations between architecture and painting.")

More important for Ms. Waltemath is the relationship between architecture and the human body, and how that is echoed in painting. The pieces in the "Torso/Roots" series at Hionas are vertical and narrow and emphasize the phenomenological — conscious, sensory and perceptual — experience of standing before a painting. Also significant are Ms. Waltemath's use of unusual materials like graphite and luminescent phosphorous and fluorescent pigments, and the fact that the gallery feels like a crypt where you'd encounter a religious icon or a fresco embedded in a wall. The total effect is pleasing, surprising and structurally very sound.

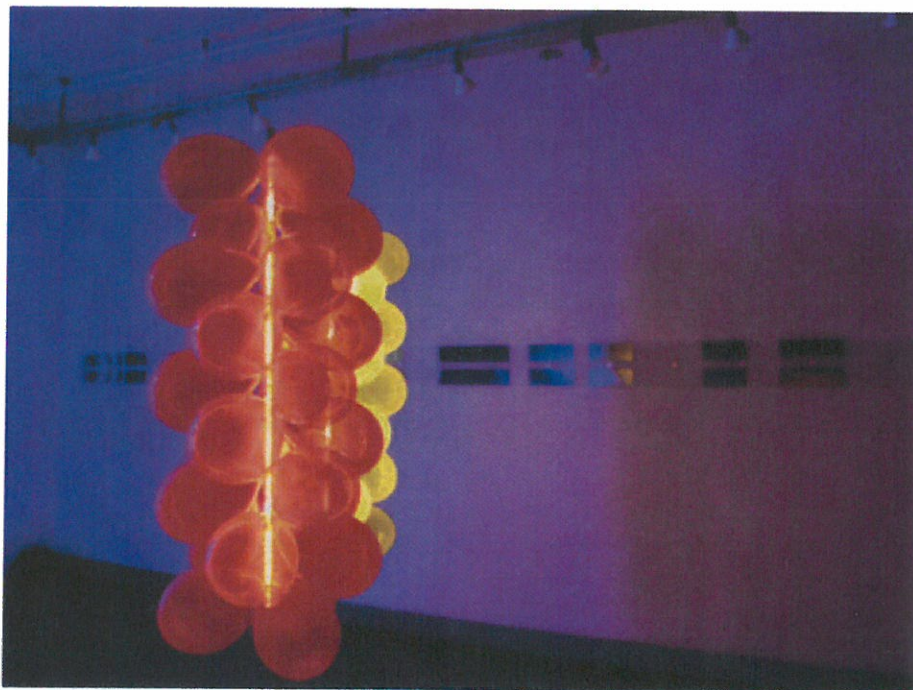


"Oaxaca Blue/darkness too (East 4 1,2,3,5,8 ...)" (2007- 2015), in oil, graphite, bronze, and fluorescent and phosphorescent pigment, by Joan Waltemath. The work correlates architecture and painting.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HIONAS GALLERY

Art in America

March 2003



"this isn't Kansas..." with Jim Clarke Sideshow, Brooklyn, NY 3.17-4.8 2002
graphite on xeroxed mylar print

James Clark and Joan Waltemath at Sideshow

Robert Morris's 1966 statement that "the better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision" is pertinent to last season's collaborative installation by the painter Joan Waltemath and the sculptor James Clark. Although it had none of the reductive purity that characterizes the work of Morris's generation, the installation explored another Minimalist theme, the impulse to immobilize theatricality. It was titled "This isn't Kansas anymore, Toto!" Clark, who chose the title, said that he and Waltemath "just wanted to take you someplace else." And they did.

Clark's contribution, in the center of the gallery, consisted of three vertical neon lights mounted on square plastic bases and encased in Plexiglas tubes. Attached to each unit were columns of tightly stacked balloons that began a foot or so off the floor and rose to a height of 8 feet. Apart from some weak light coming through the front door, the neon glow filtering through the balloon columns (one red, one yellow and one blue) provided the only illumination in the space, bathing the gallery in a neutral half-light.

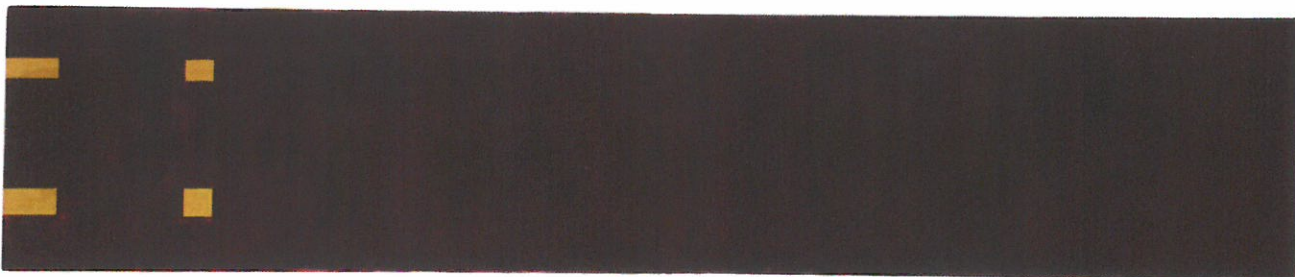
Waltemath's piece involved narrow waxy sheets of Mylar that were mounted horizontally along three walls at eye level. The Mylar was held about an inch off the wall by square aluminum clamps. On the surface,

pairs of precisely delineated rectangles in dense graphite. The proportions of the rectangles were based on Fibonacci numbers, and the shapes resembled equal signs that truncated as they stretched across the expanse of the unconventional support.

The colored light from Clark's columns was reflected in the graphite surfaces so that the viewer found it impossible to look at Waltemath's drawings without being reminded of the balloons behind. The Clark piece was more autonomous. Peering through the sequence of regular gaps where the tapering balloons met the columns, the eye would meet color from the other balloon columns, or would wander farther inward, past the Plexiglas tubes to the neon lights themselves.

Clark and Waltemath seemed to be engaged in the fundamentally serious project of dismantling the viewer's gaze, but they chose to stage the operation as a kind of cerebral fun house. Overall, the pleasurable sensation of being both distracted and mesmerized was the chief effect here.

—Joe Fyfe



Joan Waltemath, *American*, born 1953. *Untitled*, 1991. Oil on canvas, 32 x 156 cm. Fogg Art Museum. Louise Haskell Daly Fund, 1992.9

Contemporary Art and the Department of Paintings & Sculpture

Ivan Gaskell, Margaret S. Winthrop
Curator of Paintings

The newly constituted Paintings and Sculpture Department of the Fogg Art Museum is responsible for European and American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts, principally of the centuries prior to our own. How is it to respond to the art of our time? In the belief that dividing twentieth-century or contemporary art from earlier art serves nothing other than an obfuscatory purpose, I, like my colleagues in the Fogg's Departments of Prints and Drawings, have sought fully to engage my department in twentieth-century and contemporary affairs, all the while respecting the director's reservation of interest in this field.

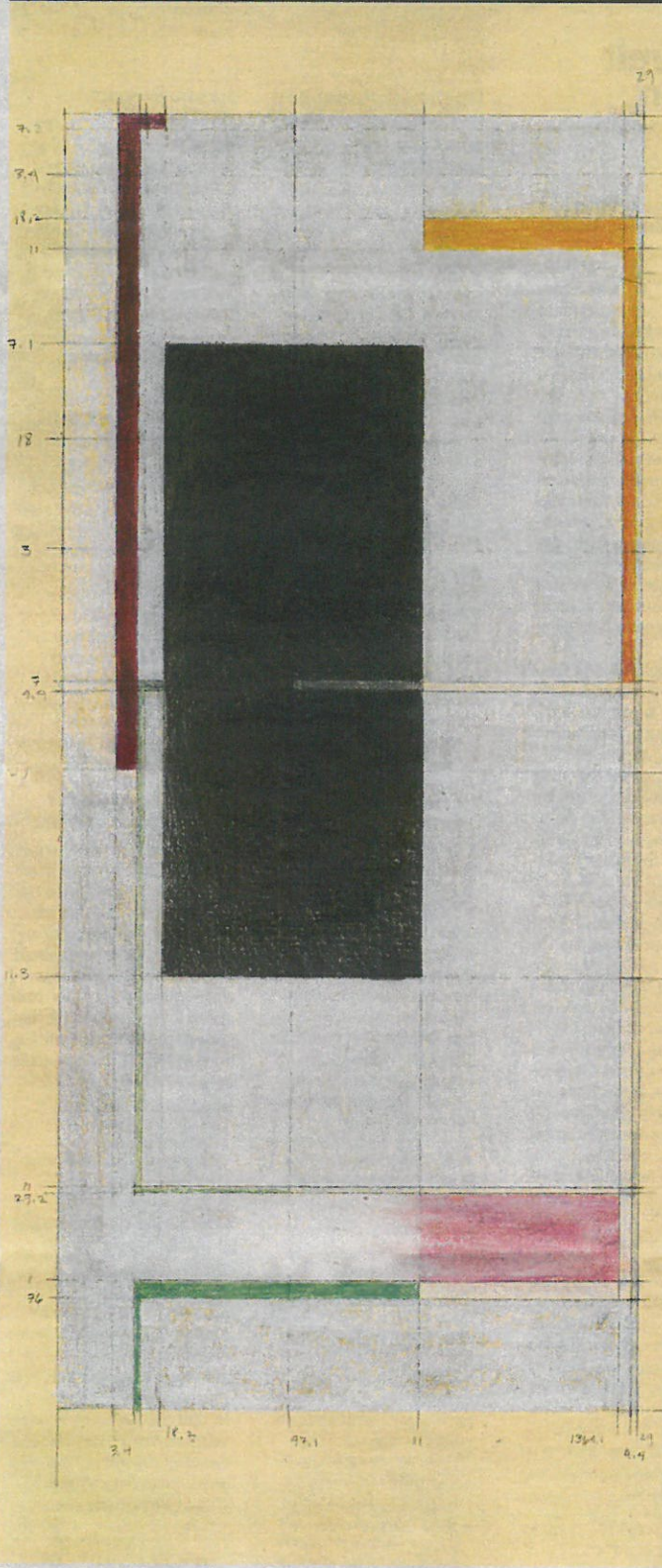
The very first acquisition that I proposed after my arrival was an untitled painting of 1991 by an emerging New York artist, Joan Waltemath. The generosity of Sarah-Ann and Werner Kramarsky allowed the Museums simultaneously to acquire the drawing on which it, and others in the same series, was based. An institution such as the Harvard University Art Museums cannot hope to be encyclopedic in its acquisition of contemporary art, so arguably should therefore choose to develop a particular specialization or theme in which it can excel. The constant factor in our unwritten policy to date has been the exploration of the relationship between contemporary art and the art of the past. This is

exemplified by the Waltemaths. Although her work is apparently modernist abstraction, the artist in fact engages with tradition both physically, by employing age-old techniques (she even grinds her own pigments), and by deriving her interest in the mathematical progressive series that informs the works from Byzantine liturgical vestments represented in medieval Russian icons and from Islamic architectural decorative motifs. By exhibiting her painting and drawing with a fifteenth-century Novgorod icon and a seventeenth-century Moroccan ceiling panel (Arthur M. Sackler Museum, May 4–June 21, 1992), I attempted to demonstrate that art is a continuum in a very particular sense: a sense that this institution is ideally placed to explore, given its resources and responsibilities.

Furthermore, this choice of theme—tradition (in an untraditional sense)—accords exactly with the epistemic shift that has taken us beyond modernism. The postmodern condition entails a number of urgent consequences for the formulation of future museum practice. First, the art of the past is released from its burden of history to become the art of the present. From this point of view contemporary art comprises all human-made or designated visual material that is physically (or conceptually) available to us, regardless of when it was made. There is no essential distinction between the art of the past and the art of the present. The necessary complement to this perception within our new epistemic space is the notion that all art is subject to the pull of the past, even the art that we think of as contempo-

rary and reference-free. Our task is to develop new, appropriate modes of articulating the relationship between these two dialectically related, basic perceptual terms, respectively the ahistorical and the historical—modes that free us fully from distinctively modernist notions of tradition and contemporaneity. Tradition no longer means looking backwards, but rather the subsumption of practice, past and present, for current examination.

In conclusion, an important part of our responsibility as a university art museum is to explore issues of art museum scholarship and practice in depth and detail in the light of continuing theoretical developments. Therefore the systematic consideration of the structures of curatorship is properly on our agenda. In teaching future curators, should we not educate them within a museum structure that encourages them to emulate those scholars who do not confine themselves to single periods of the history of art, but who, like Hans Belting, Herbert Read, Meyer Shapiro, and Leo Steinberg, deal confidently with the art of their own times as well as the past? To suggest by precept or example, or both, that the art of today and the very recent past is different in kind from older art, and can therefore only be dealt with in isolation, would be to mislead our constituency of students, faculty, and visitors. Differences certainly exist, but they require radical, critical discussion, rather than acceptance at face value, if we are to fulfill our academic responsibilities. ▢



Rechteckformationen. «Mexico dark portal» von Joan Waltemath.

Rechteckig verschlüsselt

Joan Waltemath bei von Bartha

TADEUS PFEIFER

► In den abstrakten Arbeiten der amerikanischen Künstlerin ist überall eine Kreuzidee auszumachen.

Das Werk der heute etwa 50-jährigen Amerikanerin Joan Waltemath ist trotz seines klipp und klaren Aufbaus, trotz luzider Flexibilität, trotz seines immer wiederkehrenden Elements Rechteck ein verschlüsseltes, das heisst schwer zugängliches. Man hätte gerne eine Erklärung für einzelne Bilder, von der aus man ausgehen könnte und den Sinn errahnen. Man würde gerne eine Beziehung herstellen zwischen Titel und Zeichnung, zwischen den gezeichneten Artefakten und zumindest dem Ausstellungstitel «Torso/Roots».

Aber es ist wie im Konzert. Wie soll ein Zuhörer, der nicht Noten lesen kann, das Zusammenspiel des Orchesters begreifen und beurteilen – die Raffinesse des Solisten und des Dirigenten? Und trotzdem wird er sagen können, es war ausgezeichnet oder langweilig. Der Galeristin Margareta von Bartha ging es zumindest so. Auf detaillierte Fragen mochte sie gar nicht eingehen, sie, die in dieser Welt lebt und unendlich viel davon versteht. «Ich habe Joan Waltemath überhaupt nichts gefragt», meinte sie, «und die Bilder als solche genommen.» Es sei die Frage nach der Erfahrung und nicht der Kunstkritik.

Und man muss ihr recht geben. Das System, dem eine abstrakte Zeichnung folgt und aus dem sie gemacht ist, braucht überhaupt nicht bekannt zu sein, um ihre ästhetische Wirkung voll zu entfalten. Voraussetzung ist nur, dass die einzelnen Schritte den geheimen «roots» (Wurzeln) folgen.

UNLESERLICH. «Torso/Roots» ist ein Anagramm. Beide Wörter haben dieselben Buchstaben. Sowohl das Wort «Torso» als auch das Wort «Roots» geben ihrer dialektischen Bedeutung das Feld frei für Interpretatio-

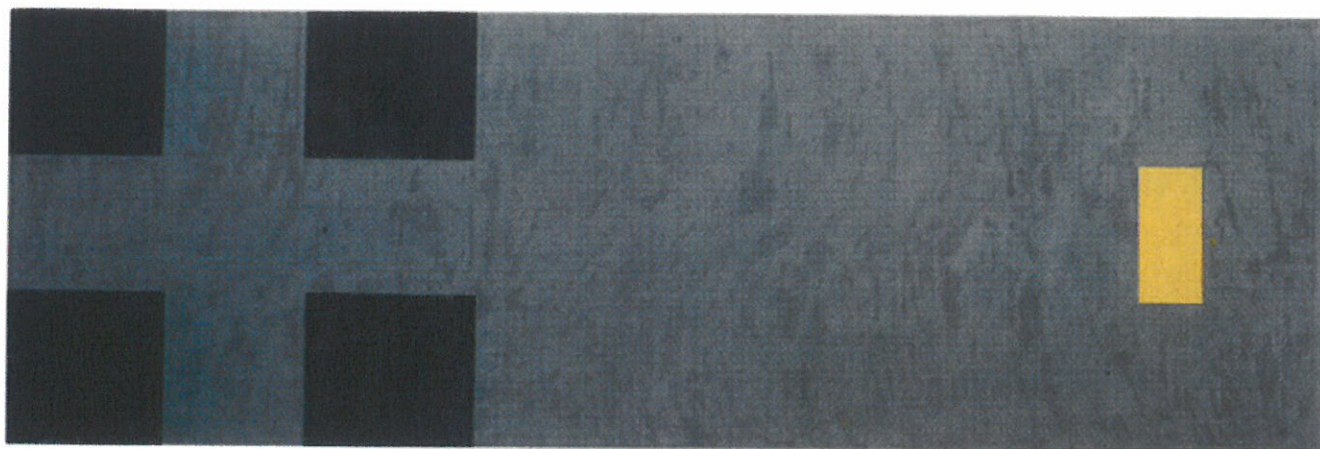
nen, die zwar unendlich, aber in sich geschlossen bleiben. Es ist wie ein Computerprogramm. Man kommt zwar nicht über das Programm selber hinaus, aber in das Programm hinein via das Auge, das einem total verwirrende Kombinationen zur Verfügung stellt.

Es bleibt dabei egal, wo und wie man den eigenen Einstieg vollzieht. Jeder bedeutet eine subjektive Entscheidung. Einzelne Zeichnungen verfügen über Zahlen, die am Rande beigefügt sind; man trifft sie an akkuraten Stellen an. Sie sind – in Computerschrift – auf den Kopf gestellt und rückwärts gedruckt. Sie machen – bildnerisch – «Sinn». Aber weshalb? Joan Waltemath nennt sie «the computers own language». Sie gibt ihnen einen Namen, «ghost in the machine». Und versteht sie kaum.

UNAUFÖSBAR. Was eindrucksvoll zu erkennen ist an dieser Ausstellung, ist die niemals limitierte künstlerische Begabung anhand des Computers. Die Zeichnungen, die gleichzeitig ein «unendliches» Wissen darstellen und dessen Nichtwissen, sie bestehen aus äusserst fein dargestellten «Architektur»-Zeichnungen in kleinen Rechteckformationen, es ist überall eine Kreuzidee auszumachen. Es sind «Mylar drawings», wie Waltemath das nennt, die das, was wir «grid» (Gitter) nennen, als formelle Erkenntnisshilfen beiziehen. Die Sache wird nicht ganz so kompliziert, wie sie sich darstellt. Wenn man sich an die «grids» gewöhnt und sie als formale Übersetzung akzeptiert hat, werden dünne Bleistiftstrukturen genauso «verständlich» wie Grafit und Ölbemalung.

Worauf wir wieder am Anfang wären: der unaufösbaren Dialektik zwischen Computerlogik und individuellem Sein.

► **Galerie von Bartha, Basel,** Schertlingasse 16. Bis 28. Februar, Mo bis Fr 14–18 Uhr, www.galerievonbartha.com



Joan Waltemath, *Untitled*, 1992, oil on canvas, 30¹/₂x90 in. Stark Gallery, New York.

Tema Celeste

CONTEMPORARY ART REVIEW

WINTER 1993 No. 39

Joan Waltemath

Gender... gender... gender... a a a a a. I never escape the feeling that this word takes the sex out of sexuality, out of the eternal war between the sexes. That upsets me. Isn't that the best part of it all? I could say that I love being a woman, but then I've never been anything else. I love well-cut clothes and high-heeled shoes, fine cosmetics, feeling beautiful, acting sexy when I feel that way, and seeing other women who embrace their own sexuality. What I see

around me is that most of the people I find conscious, together and in control of their lives are women. But here the danger starts; to speak about "women" is to speak in general terms. I work with mathematical ratios because the precision involved really excites me, generalities don't.

Obviously, there are diverse factors that contribute to the formation of a point of view from which any one of us makes their work, and being a woman is one of them. What I want to acknowledge here is my indebtedness to those women who have struggled in their lives

and through their work to transform the feminine from what has been perceived as an obstacle to a source of illumination. □

Art in America

July 1992

Joan Waltemath at Stark

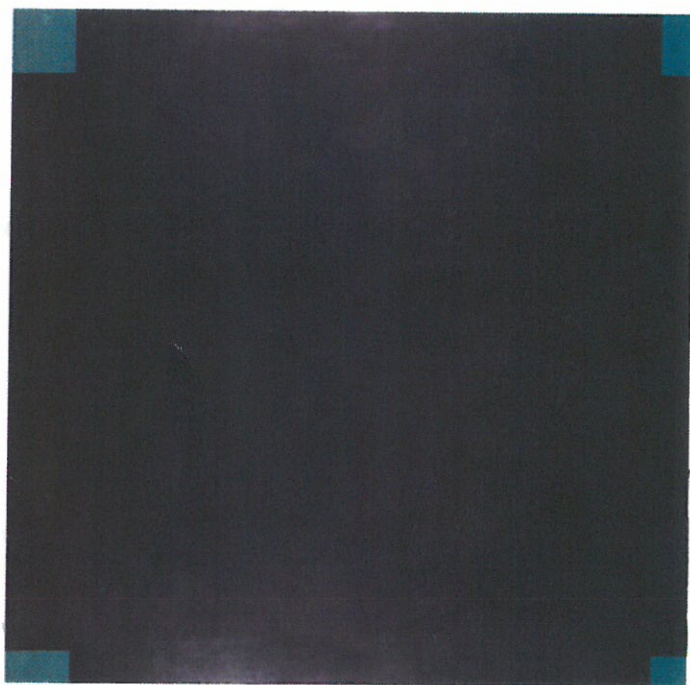
The drawing behind the desk at Stark was a stunning work by an artist possessed by the process of mapping out a personal geometry. Joan Waltemath makes large, amazingly dense drawings of variable grids in which the expanding and contracting intervals between the horizontal and vertical lines are sequenced according to mathematical progressions.

But Waltemath considers her drawings to be preparatory works for her paintings, which exert a much cooler and more restrained presence. In her paintings she works with a set of four rectangles, which she lines up in such a way that they can be seen as locating the corners of a large square; the resulting image is a chunky cross of the sort that appeared in the work of Malevich and the Constructivists. In some cases this cross-in-a-square constellates as a small figure floating

on a larger painted field. In other works, the cross-in-a-square figure fills the picture plane. The apparent simplicity of these paintings yields, upon contemplation, an engagingly elaborate machinery of perceptual "doubling." At a primary level of perception each painting makes a distinction between two surfaces—sanded polish and raised icing. A fundamental color differentiation is made between solid color and hazy, more generalized hue. Waltemath's color sensibility is bracing and complex, but these are basically two-color paintings. Finally, there is the dualism of inside and outside—in relation to both the field and the figure. For the cruciform defined by the ostensibly negative space of the field can, like an optical illusion, suddenly seem to be a positive figure.

Waltemath's paintings are rigorous and elegant, and they reward sustained looking. It was the glimpse of the drawing behind the desk that left me wanting something more from them. The paintings move to a purity of conception and process through a relatively programmatic method. Where intuition comes into play (scale of the work, quality of color), it remains hemmed in by the program. The drawing, on the other hand, reveals the exciting arbitrariness of the program itself.

—Stephen Westfall



Joan Waltemath: *Untitled*, 1991, oil on canvas, 57 by 57 inches; at Stark.