

KATE MACGARRY

BOMB

Florian Meisenberg by Peter Rostovsky

I first met Florian Meisenberg in 2015, when I had the occasion to write about his work and situate it within some rather heated debates surrounding abstract painting. Back then, and still today, what's so intriguing about his practice is the ability to crosslink seemingly opposite categories: painting and online media, the corporeal body and its digital avatars, dark humor and a latent utopianism. Meisenberg's work has received its due accolades, having been exhibited at many institutional venues and private galleries in the United States and abroad. With signature playfulness, he continues to mutate the work into ever more adventurous forms—ambitious installations, video performances, and online experiments—all while reasserting the gritty complexities of painting. Our conversation took place as he made his first road trip across the US.



Hey Florian. How's the road?

The road is hot and dry, suspended above the swamp of Mississippi—but endlessly straight!

Well, since you're on the road (and hopefully not driving at this very moment), I thought we should conduct this conversation in an appropriate medium. Hence the texting and whatever else comes in handy. This also seems fitting since your work is always about being in between places—between analog and virtual space, VR sets and painterly drips, screen-based encounters and what happens within gallery architecture. Is there something that draws you to interstitial spaces?

I'm actually driving 🚗 and have been for fourteen days, every day, so it becomes a kind of meditative state. There were weird little fires on the freeway just now. The smoke got so strong I had to stop for a short time.



Wow. Apocalyptic foreshadowing. Are you listening to the news?

Not today! What's going on?

Eh, kind of a lot. The circle around Trump is closing and he's lashing out (again) and openly talking about firing Robert Mueller. Paul Ryan is retiring to abandon the Republican sinking ship while the US is preparing to strike Syria. The smoke seems an apt metaphor.

It's interesting that all this goes on while I pass through "Trump's America." Being on a road trip detaches one from the news and much more—it's like an arrow/vector catapulting you into another mode where movement becomes everything. It's also a fascinating VR simulator: all the absurdly different vegetation and landscape passing by in such a short time. Beyond that, it makes one actually realize the INCREDIBLE vastness and (very important) emptiness of America. This endless open space cannot be owned by anyone.

I've had this same thought while traveling—that there's so much space appearing as a free reserve. But then, of course, it always belongs to someone. There's some irony in the fact that you're taking this road trip while the country seems on the verge of dissolution, as if it's a farewell tour or an attempt to capture the US before it falls off the edge.

It's a weird and maybe nostalgic moment to do this, I agree. Going west to east, I finally realized that the sadness and nostalgia in all the country and cowboy songs are distantly informed by the trauma of leaving Europe for the West.

So maybe that's why you're drawn to this itinerant posture. You're a European trying to become part of a country that's in some sense disappearing, or at least changing dramatically. Likewise, you want the viewer engaging with your work to always be dislocated and caught between worlds. Maybe it's an ambivalence in regard to painting as a symbol of the Old World and the New World inaugurated by digital technologies.

Installation view of *Being blonde with insufficient funds (transpirations of a virgin)* at Mendes Wood DM, Sao Paulo, 2014. Images courtesy of the artist.

I'm not writing sad songs yet, but I like your idea. It's also true that leaving Europe, Germany, Angela Merkel, and the Kunstakademie Duesseldorf behind was propelled by a personal longing for this vast openness and suspension. It pulled me in.

The art historian David Joselit has this handy term—transitivity—which describes a state or movement that's never static but always circulating within a network. Your work also seems to be about circulation and flow: all these attempts to dislodge or displace the work and viewer. It's like you're always telling them what they're seeing is only one part of the system, never the whole. Each work is just a node. Of course, when it comes to the Internet, its totality is ungraspable, too, which echoes this vastness of the US.

I like the word *node* for a single work—referring and linking to a large invisible "coding" system hidden underneath, like religion, capitalism, communism, Apple, America, the Internet, etc. I think of this as a matrix beneath my work—a larger unknown entity that's not directly present but influences, provides, and dictates the parameters of the space and atmosphere of a show. So this discontinuous continuum—or maybe it's actually continuous discontinuum—is something I acknowledge and elaborate within my work. It might be understood as a suggested mode of operation or manual.

Wait, can you clarify that? What do you mean by manual?

Like a manual for a choreography with footnotes but embedded as a sort of braille or subvocalization inside and between the works and how they're arranged.

So you're trying to activate a kind of relay, right? One is always en route to the next station or node through the entire evolving oeuvre.

Yes, especially in the sphere of my paintings, where not only each work but even each symbol or signifier represents a node hyperlinking or referring to the next, ultimately activating a longing for that flux state. This also privileges negative space—the blank canvas and blank choreographed space in the installations.

PR You studied with Peter Doig at the Kunstakademie Duesseldorf. Is your approach to painting informed by that early experience—broadly speaking, but also in terms of technique and use of stains and impastos?

FM Yes. The German Kunstakademie system is really open, fully free, without limitations or any sort of structure. It gave me an important experience and absolutely rare artistic freedom. Further, Peter is a very sensitive, generous, and supportive teacher. He mostly observed things that came out of me with great curiosity, then helped me reflect on them. On the other hand, the academy could be very old-fashioned and centered around the main idols/pillars of high art: painting and sculpture that celebrate and cultivate the concept of genius.

So my fascination and love for the medium, combined with an aversion for that old-fashioned brand of painting, and the incestuous patriarchal master-slave class system committed to "producing" genius, drove me to explore more open fields. I felt it my responsibility to attempt *freeing* the medium out of its dry, dull, overly conceptual shell—like in order to release it, to purify it into the air. So that led me to a sequence of experiments, personal revolutions, failures, and surprising discoveries. I used all the materials I could find around at that school. I painted on everything: Italian flags fished out of the garbage, other students' trashed paintings, Styropor, shirts, glass, stone, smartphones. And I painted not only with oil and acrylics but also varnish, rabbit-skin glue, tar, dirt, blood, ejaculate, tin-roof paint, or simply water.

PR It seems you then took aspects of this omnivorous approach and expanded them into the installation format. So the exhibition space is treated in the same "painterly" fashion, organized in terms of flows and movements. Instead of the eye, it's the viewer who travels these spaces as if they were paintings.

FM Yes, I want to uncover that flux state inside the medium, which naturally deals with movement. So choreography comes into it as the architecture of the space leads me to understand the exhibition experience almost like a series of processions.

I like to distinguish four major axes of movement and flow in regard to the experience and reading of a painting. I imagine a three-dimensional diagram with the X, Y, and Z axes connecting at a painting's center. The obvious or classical axis is X, with the normal flow of information and energy moving from the work to the viewer. The painting produces images, emotions, and stories that are conveyed to the viewer—such as the case with most figurative or narrative works. But this flow is almost reversed in the case of abstraction (think of Rothko), where the image is obstinate and resists being easily identified or classified, so much so that it creates a gravity or suction like a black hole.

Then there are the Y and Z axes, which might seem less important for the image-viewer relation but are crucial for me. They're about the relation and flow of information and energy between the work and the space surrounding it. Naturally a painting has a definite size, which I like to call objective size. But then there's something of a subjective size, too, which leaps beyond the edge of the canvas and starts a dialogue with outside elements. This forces and simultaneously releases energy into the work's environment. For me, these tensions and spasms along the Y and Z axes are where painting is able to attain a more emancipated quality. With the tension toward its borders and outside heightened, I want my works to constantly exfoliate, unfold, throw up, or bleed out into empty space.

Coming back to the X axis, the same concept and strategies could be applied to the painting as a membrane, dividing its front and back or outer and inner space. For instance, oil and stains can point to the back of the canvas by seeping through this membrane. So it becomes an index of this transgression—like a blueprint, not of a building before construction but one recorded during the process of construction itself. The two-dimensional plane of the painting can unhinge itself and start acting and performing inside its three-dimensional space.

PR But if you see paintings as somehow analogous to nodes in a network and creating a virtual relay, how do you parse the two registers? How are they similar in terms of the virtual spaces they create, and how are they radically different?

FM They're both similar in what they do: they create networks to transpond and relay energy—psychological, emotional, intellectual energy. In coding, it's possible to create, simply out of the right order of nodes, a network that simulates artificial intelligence, including decision-making and learning abilities. I think one can easily imagine that in painting too.

Still, the main difference lies in their materiality: organic and digital. And it's also interesting that the process of painting is usually a solitary one; only

The object acts like a reality check, a reformatting, which is also what I connect to in painting—its bodily presence, the oil and pigments, stains and substance of paint, its smell, and the morbid charm of materials that resemble and emulate the body exposed to time.





70 Installation view of *The New World Hotel* at Kasseler Kunstverein, Fridericianum, Kassel, 2014.

the final result has the potential to convey (such as all good painting does) the process and its endless decision-making and celebration of failures. For me, painting is a condensed diary—a kind of seismographic diagram of the psychological and emotional activities during the creation process. It's also a map into the mind of the artist—a virtual relay found in the intestine of the medium.

PR In terms of this negotiation of analog and digital, what I find interesting is that you're constantly counterposing the digital in the form of VR and open-source platforms with references to the body, its indexical traces, spasmodic movements, and ejecta. How do you conceive the relationship of the virtual to the bodily?

FM For the abyss of the virtual, the body acts as a diving bell, providing shelter, oxygen, and gravity. But it ultimately prevents us from becoming one with and transitioning into another form of existence—perhaps completely within the virtual. I was reading about different experiences of drowning recently, and there's something called the "breath-hold break point." That's when one can't hold one's breath anymore and the force of the water is stronger than the will to survive and resist. It occurs statistically after about eighty-seven seconds. I see the same pull in the virtual, as if one can transition into another, transcendent form of existence beyond gender, age, race, time, space, knowledge, ego...

PR To me, this recalls the more idealistic visions of the digital sphere. But, as invested as your practice is in new technology, you're still clearly committed to painting and to asking the perennial question: Why? Why paint at all, and especially now?

FM For me, both painting and the digital have the potential to simulate and test-drive future states and conditions. I like to think of painting as an organic prosthesis or avatar—an extension into the human realm, enabling us to feel, touch, and sense within a human scale. But evolutionarily speaking, painting is also a ridiculous atavism, like a little toe used to aid in climbing trees or some second stomach for processing grass. Painting is a little toe, but one to which we assign huge importance.

I also consider painting the ultimate lucid dreaming machine, which is precisely what virtual reality is all about. And to understand and master lucid dreaming is to gain access to the most powerful hardware and most intuitive human-computer relation possible. It's interesting that today's industries (consider the popular book *Ready Player One*) seem to totally ignore human potential and instead expand into the

development and progress of hardware (of course, for revenue and profit). Meanwhile we ignore the limitless capacities and faculties our brain already provides. Painting is the ultimate form of virtual reality, where content is constantly created and altered while being experienced. Furthermore, painting, for me, is an equivalent of the human body and, as such, it's also overdue to expire, ready to be finally overcome and transcended. I already feel a deep nostalgia imagining the future's phantom pain when painting disappears, but also a huge privilege in still being able to operate in both spheres.

PR And this body isn't featured only in your paintings—which sometimes index your own body parts—but also in your videos. It appears in your hilarious video of dogs licking their owners. What draws you to the more abstract aspects of this body?

FM As far as that video is concerned, I filmed it in super-slow-motion in absolutely random situations and sort of casual, intimate moments of dog owners with their loved ones. Intense staring, licking, kissing—mostly tender and genuine gestures of mutual warmth, love, and care.

It's obvious there's a human tendency and intuitive urge to seek out the unquestioned support a dog can provide. And it's interesting that human-dog relationships seem in many ways less awkward, more intimate, open, and honest than most human-to-human relationships. This may have to do with the fact that a dog cannot speak in our terms or argue, nor create a critical discourse or become an equally autonomous entity when tied to its owner. The domesticated dog serves a concrete purpose: to protect, provide entertainment, and combat loneliness.

Given these intimate relationships and their mode of communication, power structures, and implicit parent/child character, it seems dogs become whatever we project onto them—a kind of psychogram, an extension of their owners, a fully dependent but still singular entity emerging from the host as an accumulation of his or her psychological substance. When I reflect on the relationships we have with our dogs, I see that they include various ticks, traumas, and complexes. Ultimately this imposing (uploading) of the self and the often preposterous time we spend on our pets can lead to a sort of incestuous narcissism. And this is what relates it to the screen and to our online and virtual activities—down to the slobber-like grease we swipe left and right on our smartphone screens.

This is where the abject, as [philosopher] Julia Kristeva defines it, comes in. "There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being," she wrote. For me, the screen acts as this border. In the video, the alien-like tongues of the dogs explore the facial

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features of their owners. They lick this thin layer of skin as if swiping and tapping to reorder and structure our emotional modules. The face acts like an organic interface and input device infiltrated by the abject tongue. In this sense, the abject acts like a reality check, a reformatting, which is also what I connect to in painting—its bodily presence, the oil and pigments, stains and substance of paint, its smell, and the morbid charm of materials that resemble and emulate the body exposed to time. I see this body in a state of eternal decomposition, resisting our attempts to mummify it.

PR If the body is so important for you and your work, then what does it mean to treat the exhibition space as a body, an organism—something that grows, consumes, and excretes? This was, for instance, your strategy in a recent show at François Ghebaly Gallery, which was organized around a hiccup. How does the hiccup act as a metaphor here?

FM A lot of this attitude derives from an irritation with and resistance to the white cube. You can look at it as a time and space gateway. When you're inside, you can never tell where you are or what time it is—similar to a Starbucks or IKEA experience. In that show, *The Taste of Metal in Water* (2018), the sounds of hiccups travel through three aluminum pipes, which appear to be rails or guidelines defining and dividing the gallery, but which also act as speakers.

So the hiccup becomes the source and echo—the mantra or meta-rhythm for the exhibition. It turns the entire architecture of the gallery into a living being, activated by these constant spasms and small seizures. I think about how in Dostoyevsky's novels all the main characters are constantly riddled by seizures, which represent their sensitivity to higher powers or divine states. But in the show, the hiccup acts as a sort of muscle memory, throwing up and projecting forgotten and unwanted imagery into focus, while the paintings on the wall turn into a slideshow of animated GIFs. It's as if we are flipping the pages of a secret notebook or diary to the spasmodic rhythm of the hiccup.

The figures occupying the paintings appear somewhat crude and nervous by nature, mere graphic lines (another form of vector) squeezed out of their tubes directly onto the canvas. They appear to be some kind of official representation: a veto of, but also marker for, the potential of human life, a delegation of avatars observing the prisms of the shadows of their own historical ornaments.

PR And how about the garden?

FM It lives inside a 1:1 scaled-down metal model of the gallery with the show in miniature inside it. Considering



that the plants are hosted and fed by a UV grow-light and a water leak from the ceiling, it becomes something of an alternate space or a mind-space, representing a dream state of the show—a past or future version of it. While the plants slowly overgrow the model and avatars inhabiting it, the water constantly drips into the model's hippocampus.

PR These organic metaphors conjure a lot of things for me, as does your earlier thought about the discontinuous continuum. For Kristeva, whom you mentioned earlier, the innate rhythm of the body was also what erupted in modern and avant-garde poetry. It seems that in your work—and in the hiccup—there's a similar eruption. However, in certain projects like your exhibition at Wentrup Gallery, this eruption takes the form of the online user who intervenes and disrupts the organization of the show via a constant flow of jpegs, tweets, and poems, which rain down on the installation from a cloud printer. It isn't the corporeal body that erupts so much as a social body: a multitude. Why is it important to focus on this body and its excesses now, and what might be the political stakes of such a move?

FM Capitalism as a global concept is operating at peak performance, but with limited resources it seems a dying cause. There might be hope of escape through technology and toward the singularity. For me, this is a kind of utopian activism that leads to collaboration, to the forms and possibilities of—as you so beautifully put it—the social body as a multitude. And what is the World Wide Web if not social sculpture?

For quite some time a few coder friends and I contemplated the idea of reinventing and reclaiming the Internet as a simple visual, transparent, and truly open platform dedicated to creative exchange. In our few attempts to develop it, the partners and institutions interested in supporting the project backed off right at the point of facing copyright infringement and ownership issues. Today, every mediocre app or software is bought by one of the gigantic corporations—they're patenting mouse and swipe gestures, dividing and exploiting the Internet for profit, turning it into a gigantic, surveilled shopping mall. The recent debate about net neutrality is a scary reminder of where we are and what happens in such a short time to marvelous inventions. There's a human tendency to infuse every new territory with our own gravity—our logics, profit, ego, and accepted wisdom. But the natural state of these territories might be gravity-free. People aren't really known for using tools in the "best" or most efficient ways, so I feel the virtual might suggest, and even demand, that we transcend into another form.

Unterhaltung mit Peter Rostovsky
Sonntag, 15. April 2018 um 17:44 EDT

I'm not entirely certain how I feel about the prospect of singularity, but what I do share is your interest in openness, transparency, and collaboration. Most of your work incorporates some aspect of it. I'm thinking here about your show at Simone Subal that opened the exhibition space to an open network where images and models are constantly uploaded and shared. So it seems you're making the membrane that separates aesthetic experience and authorship porous, or at least testing it. And you're clearly still fairly utopian about the Internet and its potential to be a massive collaborative platform. But, to swerve back to where we began—Trump's America—given the political crisis plaguing the US, the influence of Russian meddling in our election, as well as the revelations surrounding Cambridge Analytica and Facebook's data sharing, do you still retain this utopian attitude?

Sonntag, 15. April 2018 um 19:56 EDT

I'm still a total utopian, though I'm not sure how far or how much the Internet can still serve as a utopian platform or tool—not sure whether it's a flute or a drum kit. It feels too corrupted and controlled. But it's still such an incredible invention, and we're able to have our dialogue on top of Mt. Zuckerberg—in German, sugar mountain. So does the initial potential of the idea prevail over its misuse and our ignorance? Do I want to pull the plug? Or do I want to create my own little island somewhere in the middle dedicated to speaking owls and dancing snakes—or a golden harp! I'm a helpless optimist, so I would never withdraw from a creative ground or platform as long as I can think and be uncompromised using it. It's also about the right perspective and activism to reclaim it.

Sonntag, 15. April 2018 um 20:19 EDT

I agree. I also feel this is a kind of historical threshold, and despite recent events, I still feel optimistic. That said, we're communicating on a seemingly dying platform—FB messenger—just as you're traveling a country going through either its death throes as a democracy, or hopefully, (and I still believe this) a transformation into something better. So what's the major takeaway from this trip through America, and do you think it will lend any insights to your work?

Sonntag, 15. April 2018 um 20:45 EDT

If the road trip taught me something, it's that the beauty and vastness of nature (and the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 😊 😊) doesn't need anybody or anything. I didn't even feel it was America I was crossing. It actually and honestly didn't matter. I visited 3000-year-old Sequoia trees, which not only have been around before the Europeans came and killed or pushed away all Native Americans, Hitler tried to conquer the world, Saddam Hussein was executed, and Trump became President, but even before the invention of Apple or Jesus Christ. Some interesting facts about them: Since the last century, scientists in Sequoia National Park have been trying to care for and protect these trees. Obviously one of the biggest fears was fire. So over the last fifty years, there was a strict no-fire policy. But the trees started showing signs of weakness and illness, until finally, in their despair, the scientists discovered that Sequoias actually crave fire! They LOVE it and need it! Not only does fire conveniently kill all the other trees competing for resources around them, but Sequoias only release their seeds after a fire! Now the scientists create and orchestrate fires at regular intervals.

Sonntag, 15. April 2018 um 20:53 EDT

So is the lesson here—and one that you apply to your work—that all things need a little creative destruction?

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Maybe. I'm reading a great book called *The Black Death* by Philip Ziegler at the moment. What fascinates me is that during the time of the first occurrences and much later—until the discovery of the *Yersinia pestis* and its host, the flea—absolutely no one knew what caused the plague. Obviously, it must have been the wrath of god eradicating all of us sinners. People thought the sick were infected by bad air or even eye contact. It's also interesting that the actual virus sometimes acts as a pandemic or sometimes "sleeps," hiding somewhere on a village rat until it spreads and becomes active again. (Back to networks, nodes, and relays.) Since the plague killed almost 60% of Europe's population (like 200 million lives) the book also claims it was only possible because in the preceding years, the region grew and flourished beyond any reasonable logic and economical restraint. So as with that period, maybe we're in a similar moment now. But to look seventy years back or seventy years forward—one regular human life span—that scares me more.

On another note, all around Marfa and the minimalist Mecca of Judd lives a gigantic population of rabbits and hares. Like the plague, I'd say it's also a pandemic.

PR That's perfect actually—a sign of optimism and vigilance, of nature reclaiming things. So maybe on this note we should talk about the many moments of absurdism, humor, but also melancholy in your work. How does humor play into your practice and what kind of humor is it?

FM I think humor is a necessary tool and strategy for living, so it naturally must be a part of art too. For me, humor validates itself if there's a radical, transgressive substance within, meaning that it's used to disarm or derail in a way that speaks the truth with a smile—and in order to empower rather than disempower.

To make another organic analogy, humor is the equivalent of water in our bodies. It's common knowledge we are made out of 60 to 80 percent water. But it's still interesting to look at where that water actually is and, more importantly, from where it disappears when we're dehydrated. It disappears from our blood, the intercellular space, our muscles, cartilage, and spinal discs, causing high cholesterol, brittle bones, reduced metabolism, accelerated aging, and dry mouth. In the same way, humor has the capacity to recycle the putrefied sediments of emotional clichés into new energy to eventually break the loop. It's also deeply related to improvisation, which is another key element of art for me. It means reacting intuitively in response to our environment, so we can mix, diffuse, suspend, and overcome habitual modes of behavior.

Ultimately, humor acts as a filter between us and our surroundings. It helps us to process and accept the absurd and uncontrollable situations of life and make living close to the abyss not only bearable but rewarding.

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