Jutta Koether

Demons for Ladies, Gentlemen and Children

Tramway station Südtiroler Platz, sales booth Hauptplatz

David Joselit

Truculent Monuments

Hey You!

Ever since European easel painting was liberated from the altarpiece, works on canvas have acquired the special mobility of commodities. They can go anywhere the market carries them, and so, like utopias but unlike monuments, whose power is rooted to their site, they exist nowhere in particular.

Jutta Koether is one of a handful of artists to confront the paradox embedded in this exhibition’s title — to challenge its contradictory association of utopia and monument. Unlike modernist painting, which is devoted to representing utopias, her works are site-specific, behaving more like failed or humiliated monuments. But these monuments are not passive — Koether’s canvases are lively interlocutors who perform flamboyantly for specific audiences.

We are accustomed to believing that paintings either address a general “public” (if their ambition is art-historical or political) and/or an individual “subject” (if their ambition is phenomenological), but these classes of spectator are completely generic: they describe what used to be called “mankind” [sic] or the “humanist subject.” The fact that many more precise identity positions have subdivided these generic categories over the past forty years hardly changes the deep structure of a persistent model of spectatorship that, in the end, is addressed to no one in particular, and to anyone and everyone who passes by. Koether on the other hand has specific receivers in mind. Demons for Ladies, Gentlemen and Children is really meant for Graz — for those “consumers” on Main Street whose demons, Koether avers, arise both from the legacy of the Third Reich and the city’s current, all-consuming cultural enthusiasms. Ladies, Gentlemen and Children of Graz, these demons are for you!

Privatization of public space occurs when a certain group of citizens substitutes its specific interests for those of a “general public” (with the corollary effect of extinguishing the agonistic exchange of opinion, which is the foundation of a genuine public sphere). Utopian (modernist) painting
is thus the perfect expression of such a privatized public sphere: the “universal” subject is discovered in personal consumption of visual stimulus. As a private person, when I regard a beautiful painting, as Kant might instruct, I gain access to shared “public” virtues. But Koether’s paintings are singular in their address — like the infamous policeman of Louis Althusser’s classic demonstration of interpellation, they cry out, “Hey You!” And indeed, this singular form of address, which might appear to be private because it is directed toward individuals, is in fact precisely the ground of a genuine public which is founded on the agonistic exchange of individual opinions, not on a mild and placid form of consumer affirmation.

Koether’s painting in Graz “waits” for a tram alongside its human companions: it will be mounted on the glass side wall of an actual tram shelter, inviting a sidelong glance — a kind of cruising — from those who sit there. But a second enclosed bench — one of two that the city has in reserve for times of construction when temporary stops are needed — will be placed, like a blockade on the sidewalk at a 90-degree angle adjacent to the existing shelter. Here, passersby may sit down and view the painting head on as though they were attending a performance. And yet, by doing so they will obstruct the passage of other pedestrians; they will be misbehaving on the street, attending a demon as though becoming officiants at a black sabbath.

In correspondence with me regarding her project for *Utopia and Monument*, Koether stated something fundamental: “I think the painting should also function as a sign. Something that does not necessarily disrupt traffic but more re-route it to something.” (A monument, after all, typically disrupts traffic, triggering memories as it provokes circumnavigation). I’ll be blunt: I think re-routing is a better term for describing the task of art than representing or critiquing. Koether isn’t representing the demons she feels haunting Graz; she is calling them into existence in public space and staging an encounter between them and the Damen, Herren und Kinder who pass by. How these demons are handled is up to them.

**Glass**

Painting is an art of surfaces, and surfaces stage a paradox: they bring the material and the virtual together on the same plane. (Can this be the source of painting’s renewed relevance in a digital era?) It is very possible, as Edouard Manet (or Rembrandt, or Velasquez, or Delacroix) taught us, to see a brushstroke and a negligee at once. Each quantum of paint is simultaneously matter and illusion. Only the literalness of the stupidest followers — or critics — of Clement Greenberg contends that matter can be extracted from an image or that an image may be extracted from matter.

Marcel Duchamp invented a strategy to address this paradox at the outset of twentieth century abstraction, the ingeniousness of which has never been exhausted and the potential of which Koether realizes better than anyone I know of: exchanging painting with glass. Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (1915–23) was both a window and a screen of projection: like a lenticular lens it could look opaque from one direction and transparent from another — it can be looked at as well as looked through. Koether embeds materials — often, cheap, Chinese-made products acquired in a place, like Graz, far from China itself —