

Landscape Painting

Rewriting Painting in the Postmedium Condition

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Abstract

Is landscape painting still relevant today? To answer this question the article examines the work of the contemporary artist Yehudit Sasportas. Sasportas offers a unique kind of written-drawn landscape painting that moves between the manual and the mechanical. The theoretical perspectives from which it is approached are taken, among others, from Plato, Heidegger and Derrida on the issue of writing. Sasportas painting, which may be characterized as "painting under erasure" or "Landscape Painting", serves as a key to understanding the status of painting as a relevant medium, not because it defines medium according to the modernist Greenbergian formula, but because it enables an understanding of painting as a *field* that exists in a variety of media. Painting as a field, in Sasportas's art, works and lives within various techniques and materials, even when it includes within itself a melancholic mark indicating doubt about its own relevance.

Contents

Introduction

Writing Landscape

Painting between Logic and Sensation

Landscape Painting

Re-Painting the Medium

Introduction

[1] In his report on the book *Landscape Theory* James Elkins classifies landscape painting as obsolete: "A 'serious' historical and critical consideration has to count landscape painting [...] as among the passé or recherché genres, if only because the issue now, or at least after minimalism, is whether or not painting itself is dead."¹ Elkin's comment continues the funeral procession in the art discourse that gained momentum in the 1980s and continues to this day. The present article sets out to examine the question of whether we can indeed talk about a relevant landscape painting today. I do not want to suppress death from the story of painting; as Yve-Alain Bois showed, the story of modern painting is a tale of the work of mourning, and death is contained within the infrastructure of modern painting.² Rather, I wish to trace a painting that preserves the question of painting as a question related to its material conditions, the conditions of its appearance and the way it works. This means tracing a painting that examines the

¹ See James Elkins and Rachael DeLue, *Landscape Theory*, New York 2008. For the report see James Elkins, "Report on the book *Landscape Theory*," 7, http://saic.academia.edu/JElkins/Papers/71313/On_the_Book_Landscape_Theory_English (accessed 16 Feb 2011).

² Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: the Task of Mourning," in: *Endgame. Reference and simulation in recent painting and sculpture*, exh. cat. Boston, ed. Thomas Crow, Boston 1986, 29-49. Repr. Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in: *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, MA, 1990, 229-244.

medium specificity that the postmodern period has suppressed, a painting that examines the painterly expression, a painting that is also a field, and as such, is always already a landscape, a painting that cannot be reduced to a single value ideology.³ Even if my analysis of the works with which I engage here does not sanctify the medium according to the modernist conceptualization of Clement Greenberg (i.e. according to the concept that preserves the sanctity of pure medium), my subject is nonetheless the investigation of the material and conceptual boundaries of the medium as revealed in these works.

[2] These questions may seem to be outmoded in this postmedium era, and indeed I accept the perception that the kind of works of art that I wish to explore are attached to an early tradition; however, this repetition or return to early works does not mean postmodern, pastiche retro-avantgarde, but a post-avantgarde that under the terms of the death of art, or in our case the death of painting, attempts to resuscitate painting, to portray its specific conditions while melancholically testifying to its death through investigating the paintings' signs and not by repressing them.⁴ Using a particular corpus of works of art, I shall examine the field of painting through an artistic inquiry that ranges among different types of art objects, employing an investigation of painting as a field that exists on canvas or paper, inside and on architecture, in drawing, video and installation works.

[3] The corpus of contemporary art that I discuss here was created between 2000 and 2010 by the international artist Yehudit Sasportas, who divides her time between Israel and Germany, and persistently paints landscapes. Her paintings consist primarily of drawings in black on a range of white or colored linen. They have the appearance of the type of expansive drawing that covers formal installations, often representing visual panoramas tied to literary names, paintings that encompass and construct architectural components and structures, paintings that extend into the space of the video.⁵ This painting does not seek a simple resuscitation of traditional painting and does not offer a "romantic" two-dimensional renaissance; but, as aforementioned, it seeks to map painting while at the same time mourning its death.

[<top>](#)

³ On the radical dependency of landscape discourse in the ideological perspective see: "The Art Seminar," in: *Landscape Theory*, 118-150.

⁴ The question of the medium and the postmedium condition is discussed by Rosalind E. Krauss in various texts. I will discuss her theoretical suggestions in the last part of this article, see notes 31, 32 below, and see also Rosalind E. Krauss, *'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London 2000.

⁵ I mention here briefly only some of her latest exhibitions: *Cosmic Rifts*, Sommer Gallery, Tel Aviv (2009); *The Clearing of the Unseen*, DA2 Domus Artium 2002, Salamanca (2009); *The Laboratory*, KUNSTVEREIN Braunschweig (2008), Galerie EIGEN+ART, Frieze Art Fair, London (2008); *The Guardians of the Threshold*, The 52nd International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale (2007); *The Cave Light*, Leonhardi Museum, Dresden (2005); *The Pomegranate Orchard*, Galerie EIGEN+ART, Berlin (2005).

Writing Landscape

[4] Sasportas's painted landscapes convey a sense of uncertainty. Her exhibition *The Laboratory* shows how nature looks after a catastrophe: treacherous swamps, paralyzed mountain ranges, frozen landscapes crusted over by death.⁶ The paintings discussed here all present nature; we can describe them as sketchy-techno-drawings. The linear elements that fill the composition, as in the case of *Where is the Deadwood* (fig. 1), *Corefire and Laughter* (fig. 2), *Birgit's Dream* (fig. 3), or *Mechanical Rain, Ants Movements* (fig. 4) suggest associations with writing: on the one hand with the writing of the seismograph that registers the vibrations of the ground, and on the other hand with the scratchings of the polygraph, the "truth machine" that measures and records a person's involuntary responses.



1 Yehudit Sasportas, *Where is the Deadwood*, 2002, ink on paper, 109,5 x 139 cm. Private collection, Bonn. Photograph: Uwe Walter⁷

[5] The written sign appearing on the painting's surface is a formal depiction of what is not supposed to appear in itself, the thing that seeks to avoid form: that is, within the morphology of the paintings, the sketchy writing of traces, lies the seed of what opposes writing (much as the person attached to the polygraph machine opposes the invasion by the machine to his world). The way Sasportas's painting emphasizes the drawn or written sign, creates a sense that the act of drawing has not been subjected to representing reality or to a defined world. The image of the painting is constructed of enigmatic marks of writing that are not subordinated to any clear transcendental signified that is independent of the painting itself. The landscape that appears in the painting is a writing or a script, the stain in the painting becomes a sign, a letter; the drawn repeated lines

⁶ KUNSTVEREIN Braunschweig 2008. See *Yehudit Sasportas: The Laboratory*, exh. cat. Braunschweig, Berlin/Munich 2008.

⁷ Copyright for all works of art and photographs in this article is held by Yehudit Sasportas.

weave chains of signifiers that determine the path of the landscape. The visible landscapes are artificial sights of nature, they project alienation, nature in ruins, images of catastrophe in black and white. Writing is used here as a tool to describe the futility of art. The written landscapes bear no fruit apart from images of life and places frozen after the disaster created by the black toxic-ink. The written paintings depict the face of destruction.



2 Yehudit Sasportas, *Corefire and Laughter*, 2008, ink on paper foiled on MDF, circle engraving, 200 x 300 cm. Private collection. Photograph: Uwe Walter



3 Yehudit Sasportas, *Birgit's Dream*, 2005, ink on paper, 200 x 150 cm. Private collection. Photograph: Uwe Walter



4 Yehudit Sasportas, *Mechanical Rain, Ants Movement*, 2005, drawing, ink marker on paper, 200 x 158 cm. Private collection, France. Photograph: Uwe Walter

[6] The infertility of writing that produces poisoned fruit alludes to the philosophical discourse that condemns writing. Writing was one of the major objects of criticism by Plato, who wrote, paradoxically, that only the naive would believe in writing and its letters: "Writing is unfortunately like painting."⁸ In Plato's *Phaedrus*, writing is compared to decoration, to an entertainment celebrated for the glory of the festivities of Adonis. Writing as the making of signs is obscene, explains Socrates: "Then he [husbandman] will not seriously incline to 'write' his thoughts 'in water' with pen and ink, sowing words which can neither speak for themselves nor teach the truth adequately to others?"⁹ Sign-making, therefore, discussed in the dialogue in terms of writing, is the evidence of the distancing from the dialectical seeds of speech that are planted in the mind. If Plato offers the key to reading our images, then Sasportas's writing is a dangerous act of concealment, of decoration that covers the path to truth.

[7] Derrida indicates the connection between text and fabric when he writes about "the dissimulation of the woven texture"; he formulates an analogy between the line of the letter, the thread of thought and the sewn sheet in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy".¹⁰ He explains that it is impossible to investigate "all the threads at once," and that it is

⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*, in: Benjamin Jowett, ed. and trans., *The Dialogues of Plato*, New York 1937, vol. 1, 275.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁰ And see Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in: *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago 1981, 61-84.

necessary to see the connection between writing, reading and touch. Writing and reading are similar to the seamstress's operations, in that they will always reach a state of "getting a few fingers caught" as a result of the discovery of "the addition of some new thread." Derrida does not talk of embroidery work incidentally, but introduces it as "the ability to follow the given thread. That is [...] the hidden thread."¹¹

[8] The written-painted space of Sasportas thus echoes the danger not only of the written text but also of the products of the sewing hand. In 2000 Sasportas created an installation called *The Carpenter and the Seamstress* at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (fig. 5), and in the following year at the Deitch Projects in New York (fig. 6).



5 a / b Yehudit Sasportas, *The Carpenter and the Seamstress*, 2000, acrylic and ink on MDF, dimensions variable, installation at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Collection of the artist and Sommer Gallery, Tel Aviv. Photograph: Igal Pardo



6 a / b Yehudit Sasportas, *The Carpenter and the Seamstress*, 2001, acrylic and ink on MDF panels, dimensions variable, installation view at the Deitch Projects, Nr. 200, New York. Collection of the artist and Sommer Gallery, Tel Aviv. Photograph: Tom Powell

[9] This installation consists in MDF slabs painted with decorative patterns. We are invited to look at the walls and floor and see the linear patterns, drawn sewing lines that merge in the work of the carpenter. The surfaces of the painting map the installation; they present a graphical-digital drawing within which are planted distant and inaccessible plants and landscapes. The seamstress's act of spinning and sewing becomes here an act

¹¹ Ibid., 63.

of producing drawing marks, operations of writing in the world. The metaphor of writing as sewing emphasizes how the operation of writing/drawing is an act of inscribing material in the world, touching being, while in this writing there is also a sense of discovery by wandering.

[10] The needles painted or positioned in the space of *The Laboratory* exhibition, for example, are evidence of the tools that are used to discover matter (fig. 7).¹² The handicraft signified in Sasportas's linear images reveals the sewer and that for which we produce something, whether it is called *Dasein*, the world, environment or nature.¹³ It can be argued that the action of the hand that drives the process of writing and painting returns the concept of truth to the painted work of art. The painting hand obtains a visible sign. The manual operation that paints, writes and spins the surfaces, creates a place for appearance.



7 Yehudit Sasportas, *Disconnected Land*, ink on 35 panels in different size, foil-cladded MDF on Canvas, 260 x 475 cm. Collection of the artist and Sommer Gallery, Tel Aviv. Photograph: Uwe Walter

[11] The painterly operation of writing is not one of observation. Only the activation of the hand in painting, performing the contact between the hand and the surfaces, leads to the drawing of the image. The hand that composes the space of exhibition from the various paintings to the painterly field of the installation, suggests the emergence and appearance of things; the movement of the hand enables the breakthrough of the image as a thing.

¹² The elongated rods that can resonate writing tools or embroidery needles appear as images in some of Sasportas's works and as three-dimensional props next to the paintings as part of the installation. See also the installation view of *How Long Is Now*, 2008, ink on 35 panels of different sizes foil-cladded on canvas, 260 × 475 cm, in: *Yehudit Sasportas: The Laboratory*, 49.

¹³ Dror Pimentel, *The Dream of Purity, Heidegger with Derrida*, Jerusalem 2009 (Hebrew), 153.

[12] The hand can be described as a conductor, the leader of the human, it draws the space for the appearance of being. As Heidegger writes: "Through the *hand* occur both prayer and *murder*, greeting and thanks, oath and signal, and also the 'work' of the *hand*, the '*hand-work*,' and the tool. The handshake seals the covenant."¹⁴ Derrida interprets the action of the hand as the spatial exposure of the word and he quotes Heidegger: "The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes – and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hand of the other. The hand keeps. The hand carries. The hand designs and signs, presumably because man is a (monstrous) sign."¹⁵ For Heidegger the hand is grouped with the word as the hallmark of human, the hand reveals the hidden by pointing and signifying, it formulates signs. The word and the hand unite into one composed entity by the operation of manual writing. Writing grants the hidden its shape. The writing, drawing and painting hand give the pictorial things their shapes. Forms, therefore, appear in the space of the being of the hand, they take their shape from the hand and inscribe in the painting, in the space of the hand.



8 Yehudit Sasportas in her Studio, Berlin 2008. Screen shot from the film *Electric Table Model* (working process documentary) by Katja Anzelewsky

[13] The operation of the hand allegedly indicates an indexical relation between the artist and the sign appearing on the painting's surface (fig. 8). The "pure" sign supposedly maintains the status of painting as evidence of presence. The manual dimension of painting lies apparently in maintaining it within the framework of the metaphysics of presence. In Sasportas's written paintings, however, the repetitive lines and marks, which look as if they were created by a mechanical process, neutralize the proximity between the artist and the sign. Sasportas offers manual writing that is an hybrid act, a mechanized writing.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz, Bloomington 1992, 80.

¹⁵ Quoted in Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand," in: *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., Chicago/London 1987, 168.

[14] While the writing of the hand is perceived as if it brings the sign and truth closer, as if it rejects representation and offers instead the presentation of presence and of the signified, mechanized writing is associated with print, seemingly distant from the source, a secondary transcription of the initial writing, a mechanical alternative inferior ontologically and chronologically in comparison to the manual original writing. Mechanized writing, as Heidegger sees it, turns writing into a communication tool, it hides the specific traces of the writer. The mechanized writing seemingly distances Sasportas's images from contact with the external presence, turning the signs into a distant representation of a distant present. Heidegger writes: "The word-signs become type, and the writing stroke disappears. The type is 'set,' the set becomes 'pressed.' This mechanism of setting and pressing and "printing" is the preliminary form of the typewriter. In the typewriter we find the irruption of the mechanism in the realm of the word. The typewriter leads again to the typesetting machine. The press becomes the rotary press. In rotation, the triumph of the machine comes to the fore."¹⁶ These words indicate Heidegger's perception of a presence that preserves a hierarchic model of separation between the "truth" at present and its pale appearances. The mechanical writing reduces the specific signs of the hand to a type, it mechanizes the hand and leads to a loss of presence.

[15] This loss is alluded to in those works of Sasportas that push the field of painting to its logical edge, in which the field of painting is in danger of turning into a drawing, an absolute writing, an architectonic structure-installation, a mechanical sign that gives the drawings-paintings a repetitive structure. The mechanization of the paintings threatens the possibility of an indexical reading of the painted sign, it suppresses the main actor in the expressionist play, the identified artist. Hilke Wagner, who studied the works presented at *The Laboratory* exhibition by Sasportas, offers an instrumental perception of the sense of anxiety and death in the works: "For only in consideration of the certainty of death is the existence of being made certain; it is assured of its own being in the world."¹⁷ Wagner also uses the writings of Karl Jaspers to argue that in the end the negative experience of failure facing the landscape will lead to a positive birth of the self. We experience ourselves according to this approach only when we encounter a nullity of being; when we experience life in the presence of death. Thus the danger that Plato identified of writing covering the truth, was translated by Heidegger to a fear of mechanization done to the sign and to writing, and this is translated in artistic terms by Sasportas, following Wagner's theoretical offer, to a painting that echoes the dyadic pair of life and death. Thus the images as writing reflect the painterly position of Sasportas in respect to the task undertaken by modernist painting, "the task of mourning."

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Parmenides*, 85.

¹⁷ Hilke Wagner, "Yehudit Sasportas. The Laboratory," in: *Yehudit Sasportas: The Laboratory*, 31.

Painting between Logic and Sensation

[16] Jay M. Bernstein refers to life and death as a central axis in his theoretical attempt to understand beauty in modern art, and especially in modernist painting. Bernstein characterizes the modernist painting of Henri Matisse as a kind of life form. Matisse's painting shows breath, life.¹⁸ We can find in his paintings, he suggests, what might be called "vegetable" consciousness. This suggests that true modernist painting defeats representation in order to be life-giving. Proper painting produces a sense of tangible, sensual, complete experience, like the growth of a plant. This analogy between plant and painting conduces to an ethical discussion of painting and life. True painting defeats the mimetic representational mode or, better, defeats representation and enlivens an experience of life that is opposed to death.

[17] Bernstein describes a historical-philosophical picture in the spirit of Theodor Adorno: modern forces (technology, rationalization, capitalism) led to a situation in which the sensory experience was completely repressed.¹⁹ Our experience of reality is subjected to cognitive conceptualizations. The obvious examples here are the philosophy of Kant and modern sociology. Modern art, by this narrative, enters exile; with the role of art being to offer an alternative experience to the rational-cognitive sentencing of experience to oblivion.

[18] Modern art, according to Bernstein, includes a moment of violence and destruction. This moment leads the beholder to an enlivening experience. The death latent in the works guides the viewer's understanding of elusive life.²⁰ Thus Yehudit Sasportas claimed: "I expect a good work of art to remind me of my own alienation from the things around me; that I'm not more than a guest in this life."²¹ Bernstein explains that one of the goals of modern art is actually to bring about an encounter with beauty, one that will shake the viewer out of his dogmatic sleep, and cause him a sensual awakening that will lead to a reflection on life. He argues that the basic behavior of the subject, at least according to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, is as if he is immortal. Death is always the death of the other, and representation of death is the means to make death itself an-other. Direct contemplation of death, experiencing our own mortality, gives a heightened life experience and intensifies the sensuality of life.²² Bernstein's approach is based on how it interprets the concept of beauty. The roots of the concept of beauty are found in the experience of death and in the sense of the transience of life. The

¹⁸ Jay M. Bernstein, "In praise of pure violence (Matisse's war)," in: *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon, Ithaca 2008, 37-63.

¹⁹ Jay M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting*, Stanford 2006.

²⁰ Bernstein, "In praise of pure violence," 41-42.

²¹ Wagner, "Yehudit Sasportas. The Laboratory," 25.

²² Bernstein, "In praise of pure violence," 39-40.

beauty inherent in the art of painting has an enlivening quality precisely because it conceals the seeds of the death of the represented world.²³ In order to quicken life the work should break (violently) with "good taste"; proper painting should reject the academic order, bringing to the fore the decorative efforts, the power of painting as painting. Therefore, according to Bernstein's equation, beauty promotes the sensuality of the material painting at the expense of representation. The painting that emphasizes its components, the line, the spot, i.e. the painting's materials as a body, at the expense of representation, is the proper painting.

[19] I shall briefly read the following paintings by Sasportas in light of the interpretation offered by Bernstein to Matisse's painting as an illustration of a worthy art. Examination of Sasportas's installation *The Carpenter and the Seamstress* (figs 5, 6) will reveal that the painting's field comprises a dual ratio of form and formlessness. The work offers a linear drawing system that produces a decorative structure. This painting allegedly operates a system of violence against the formation of figurative images. It is a violence that could be called painting's immanent violence, violence directed against illusory representation of purpose in order to elicit a true sensation. The drawn lines in Sasportas' paintings do not function for descriptive purposes, nor as a means for designing representative space or the formulation of objects in that space, but as a means dismissed from any representative role. The field of painting releases the eye of the viewer from the need to identify and locate a formulated structure of an entire organism; the viewer is neither bound nor invited to control all the components of the aesthetic space that stretch before him. In front of an image of this sort a sensory encounter is performed. The nature of painting, based on these decorative elements, would seem to be the elements of painting themselves, line itself and not what it represents because it presents itself. Lines function as images, as non-figurative figures; they are indicators undermining pictorialism in favor of non-figurative painting. The uniformity of all the elements in the visual field, as painterly elements that are not subject to figurative logic, offers a tool for liberating the painting; such painting allegedly operates violence against representational painting. Thus too the non-representational color in the works of Sasportas can be considered as deforming the image, the field or the painting in its totality, allegedly attacking the integrity of the visual.

[20] The problem with this reading lies in its disregarding the fact that Sasportas's paintings are, in the end, representational. Although they are disrupted or garbled spatially, proportionally and formally, they still maintain representativeness. While her work on the one hand seeks to revive sensitivity to the line, the stain and the colorful and monochromatic surface, as elements that are not subjected to the world of representation, i.e. as sensory conductors, they are still irremediably representational!

²³ Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon, Introduction to *The Life and Death of Images*, 21.

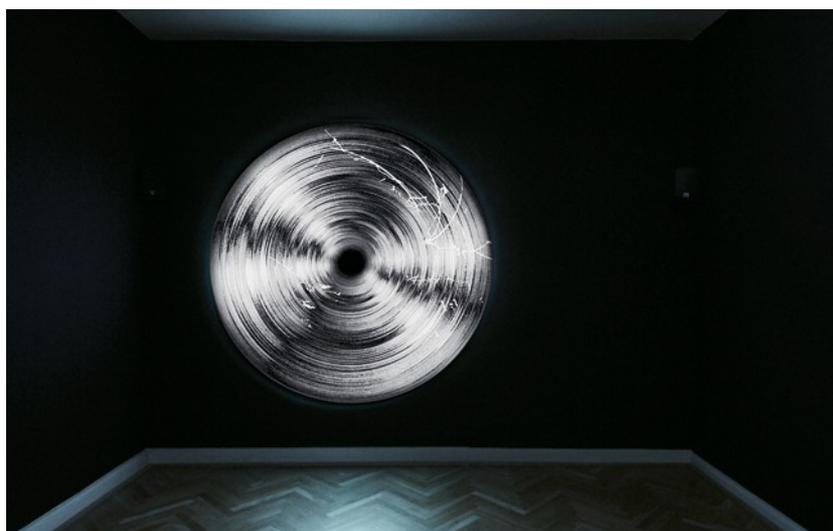
Bernstein, however, argues that representationality echoes classical conservative perception. Representational art is poor because: "It composes one of those conventional responses to death and, hence, to life that make both death and life virtually impossible to feel."²⁴ For him, representationality is the oblivion of death, a death-creating situation in which painting kills sensuality; representationality prevents an effective immediate impact on the senses, on the nervous system, that awakens when we encounter a painting. I believe that the point of division between Bernstein's thesis and the work of Sasportas is located in the understanding that, in her techno-graphical painting, Sasportas never decided upon or chose the sensual side rather than the conceptual and the discursive one, which Bernstein would reject as an oppressive tool of modernity's rationalization.

[21] This is the basis for the legitimacy or freedom that the artist takes when she paints and investigates painting. As we shall see, she creates video works combining seductive music and sensual dimensions, but which are still dependent on their referent, in a dual level of representationality and conceptualization. Investigation of the painting as a pictorial field is interpreted in Sasportas's work beyond the anachronistic dichotomy of figurative versus abstract. There is no clear starting point for her painting in the sense of sight/vista, which is completely outside the act of painting, an "external" territory that is responsible for the visibility or the final composition of the field of painting. On the other hand, there is no absolute separation between the field of painting and the natural topography; it may be a forest near Hamburg or a swamp. The written paintings of Sasportas, like those of other artists of her generation, abandon the thinking or perception of the source, in favor of a split perception of a variety of confluences between the painting's field and the world of art. Out of this concession was born a new platform for painting - video/painting – that synthesizes the various fragments painted by hand and the mechanized temporality of the video that enables the appearance and disappearance of the image.

[22] When Sasportas led her written-drawn images into the medium of video, she created a hybrid that is incomprehensible in modernist terms. In her exhibition *Cosmic Rifts* (2009), she exhibited two video installations that integrate painting and video. The installation *The Magnetic Hearts* (fig. 9) was a diptych composed of two black circles onto which was projected what appeared to be still-life fragments that dissolved into one another during the projection; the emergence and disappearance of the images looked as if the video was trying to "catch" the still-life drawings that had escaped the movement of the virtual radar.

²⁴ As described by Judith Butler in her "Response To JM Bernstein," in: *The Life and Death of Images*, 58.

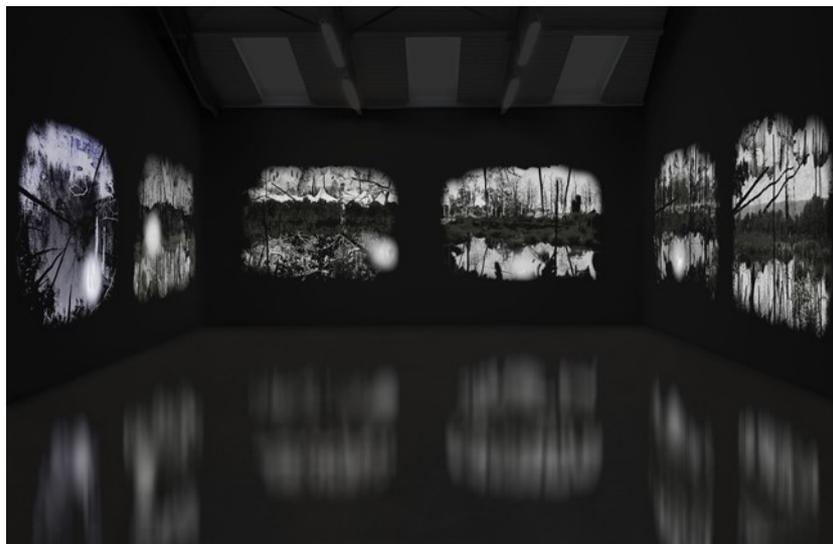
[23] Duchamp's *Rotary Demisphere (Precision optics)* (1925), which could be implied from this work, was in constant motion between the two- and three-dimensional, creating a mechanism whose illusory movement deceives and destabilizes the immobility and stillness of painting. Where Duchamp mutilated the painting, Sasportas returns the painting to the machine; her image is produced as the effect of a mechanical disruption of the dull mechanical repetitiveness, or the hypnotic illusion of the video or the early Duchampian machine. The potential of the painting's expansion, whose seeds are found in the parodical illusory mechanism of Duchamp, is stretched back to the still-life of the field of painting.



9 Yehudit Sasportas, *The Magnetic Hearts*, 2008, film installation, video with sound, format CD-Rom, two film collages projected on discs, 2 m diameter, facing each other across a distance of 16,5 m, 6 min looped. Collection of the artist. Here installation view from *The Laboratory*, KUNSTVEREIN Braunschweig. Photograph: Uwe Walter

[24] The second video installation in the exhibition was *GHARDY Local Voices* (fig. 10), a dark room with six screens displaying panoramas of landscape paintings by the artist. The projected images pierced the walls of darkness in six-minute videos. The viewer entered the "black box" of the gallery without possessing the keys to read the codes within. The six screens showed painted landscapes linked into a progressive narrative through the music that filled the space. The observers walking around the "box" participated in the work; the music moved their body slowly, tracking their way in space; their viewing experience became a dynamic and proceeded as a response to the visual and the audible. In her video work Sasportas leads the written-drawn painting into the medium of cinema. While film is defined as a medium often leaning significantly on its reference, Sasportas leads it to the drawn painting; the video shows the landscape paintings that the artist had painted: that is, the film's references are the artist's

handmade paintings; the cinematic elements, its automatic mechanism, its temporary development and its projection used to expose Sasportas's drawn-paintings.²⁵



10 Yehudit Sasportas, *GHARDY Local voices*, 2009, six films installation, EIGEN+ART Gallery, Leipzig. Collection of the artist and EIGEN+ART Gallery, Leipzig. Photograph: Uwe Walter

[<top>](#)

Landscape Painting

[25] Sasportas's video works map and present monochromatic condensed paintings. Their field is perceived as a black and white cinematic relic; as painting positioned in the early cinematic world, a kind of early silent film set, inducing a sense of technological genesis. At the same time, the space of installation becomes a dark field in which the "windows" of paintings are used as openings to another world. Thus the cinematic field of painting unfolds within two-dimensional landscapes that were recorded in what seems to be an ironic documentary work; one that expands throughout the space of the room (the gallery) in which the viewer moves. These various technical and conceptual supports eventually assemble into the field of painting in which "painting" is a lost object moving between the subconscious or cinematic memory and the concrete space of the gallery installation.

[26] The projected and concrete landscape paintings displayed in Sasportas's exhibitions turn to traditional painting, but at the same time they also erase the identity between them and the early painting. Her contemporary painting borrows its linguistic, syntactical and lexical resources from early landscape painting in order to rethink its language. The question is whether this move produces a pictorial alternative or duplicates an existing territory. Sasportas's paintings, even if based on "traditional" painting, nonetheless require another apparatus in order to examine questions of visual

²⁵ For a discussion of the film properties as crossing the dependency on the referent see Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition, Cambridge 1979.

representation, while at the same time embodying the impossibility of escaping from the metaphysics of painting. The repetitive drawn lines in these paintings, as much as they outline-write an image on the surface, they also mechanize and unify themselves into what resembles a digital bar-code attached to the painting; they mark and erase the painting, they form and deform the painting. The making of a painting that was subjected to a conventional surface – a painting whose production was based on the easel or the symbolic space of the canvas, into a painting that functions as a field, undermines the constituent dialectic of painting as an image on the ground. We thus come to the question of how to characterize a painting that tries to cross painting out? We cannot do so, however, because the language is still the language of painting. In the absence of another word to describe the mechanism of representation or to describe the painting that tries to cross out painting, I would say that Sasportas creates a painting under erasure.²⁶ Sasportas's painting, as mechanical-hand writing, produces a sense of impersonality, ironing out the stylistic features, the signature style and individual expressiveness of early landscapes in favor of a bar-code uniformity. These drawings draw us along and into their lines and withdraw us from presence. As McNeill writes: "What withdraws, therefore, is nothing determinate. It is nothing, no thing. It is the withdrawing itself. This withdrawing is not other than the sign, it is *of* the sign. The sign itself remains without interpretation because all interpretation would already be drawn in a particular direction."²⁷ This kind of writing is writing under erasure.

[27] Considering painting as ~~painting~~, that is as painting under erasure, recognizes the relevance of painting but also challenges the accepted use of it. Sasportas puts painting under erasure. She opens the way to thinking of painting not as essence or transcendental totality, as stable signified, but as practice, historical material engendered, contaminated and full of doubts. She is nonetheless working in this very zone in which the concept of painting is still a necessity; she writes or draws the painting and at the same time crosses it out. A painting that neutralizes painting, or a painting that doubts the illusion of painting, brings us back to the issue of violence and how the painting threatens itself, lived through the exposure of its potential death. Sasportas's works are encoded through the beauty of semblance; at least some of them gain their strength through the visibility of the romantic forest, showing nature and revealing themselves as naked beauty; this is the deceptive presentation of painting. The view is apparently of an image that preserves life, the pulse of Eros in the veins that web the paintings. Sasportas, however, as we have already seen, subverts this appearance, the

²⁶ In the context of the romantic painting's "glossary," landscape painting is perceived as committed to concrete topography, to representation; thus the metaphysical framework understood painting as obligated to the concept of presence.

²⁷ Will McNeill, "Spirit's Living Hand," in: David Wood, ed., *Of Derrida, Heidegger and Spirit*, Evanston, Ill., 1993, 113; cf. Adam Roberts, "Is SF handwritten?," in: *Writing Technologies 2.2* (2009), 68, n. 12, http://www.ntu.ac.uk/writing_technologies/current_journal/86049.pdf (accessed 16 Feb 2011).

landscape turns into a still life, with the painting using a violent approach, destabilizing itself, and thereby approaching the "truth in painting."²⁸

[28] The darkness of the paintings created by Sasportas works against the sweetness and the availability of beauty in the landscapes: the overshadowing of landscape or the cooling of space, the attempt to freeze and petrify beauty, to threaten the landscape itself. The blacking out or the freezing are measures of dissociation of landscape from life. The loss of a transparent relationship between the image of art and life, the undermining of the perception of the work as an expression of a female artist, framed by a celebratory identity of a female subject, the attempt to subvert temptation, to debase the beauty of the work as if beauty is the purpose of art, reveal Sasportas's landscape painting project anew: to discover beauty in order to blacken it, to make art in order to destroy its semblance. As Butler writes: "When a work of art no longer works as semblance, it becomes paralyzed as a kind of 'truth' distinct from beauty and its life. Indeed, the expressionless is a curious sign of this truth, one that works against the seductive claims of beauty and life."²⁹

[<top>](#)

Re-Painting the Medium

[29] The paintings attack semblance, taking us back to the beginning of our discussion and the question of the relevance of painting. If Sasportas offers us a new relevant painting, then it should be understood as a field that deals with conventions and schemas from the history of painting in order to reveal the possibility of its own survival. Painting as a field brings together material properties, technical strategies, design configurations that do not hold together "naturally" as paintings. The traditional linguistic lexicon of painting (line, color, stain, surface, texture, value, light and shadow, volume, and shape) continues to exist alongside its expansion to other media such as installation, sculpture, architecture, video and TV. The attempt to understand painting as a field examines it in accordance with its neighboring relations with other media, rather than identifying the ultimate physical condition that will enable its examination; instead identifying its materiality as part of a general alignment that confers upon painting broad and new operations (not independent of political, social and historical settings).

[30] Painting exists in a constant dialectical relation between its present situation and its past heritage; moreover, it allows us to review a new variety of ways by which to deal with the past. Its interaction with new media in the present provides new keys for re-reading anew the history of painting. Thus for example, the written painting in

²⁸ Sasportas's action can be called an act of violence, a painter's action that turns against painting. The purpose of this violent process can be read as an attempt to be ethical. The ethical dimensions of this stand will be discussed in another framework.

²⁹ Judith Butler, "Beyond seduction and morality: Benjamin's early aesthetics," in: *The Life and Death of Images*, 71.

Sasportas's video installation positions the field of painting inside the spatio-temporal expansion of the video installation, which polarizes the time of the video with the spatiality of the installation. The specificity of each of these media is not deleted but polluted by the other media. The architectural wall echoes the movie screen that echoes the painting's surface; the installation conditions allow the expansion of painting into the field, and enable a new painting that traditional painting could not imagine. The pictorial field offers an alternative to the postmedium condition. The melancholy inherent in the pictorial field that I have been trying to map, suggests the existence of painting that allows discussion of specific qualities within an intermedial and not a postmedium framework.

[31] Rosalind Krauss discusses the new appearance of the medium; she talks about reinvention of the medium in relation to the "outmoded" concept of Walter Benjamin. This concept allows her to argue that the medium itself became outmoded, acquiring redemptive qualities only after it had lost its popularity and autonomy. The reinvented mediumality is art's key resistance to becoming just another piece of industrial product in the world of technology.³⁰ The problem lies in that Krauss states categorically that painting, sculpture, drawing and architecture are traditional media that the "age of mechanical reproduction" have assimilated and made non-functional; they have become forms of merchandise. In their place she offers a new definition of the relevance of medium in the postmedium age: "medium as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support, conventions out of which to develop a form of expressiveness that can be both projective and mnemonic."³¹

[32] Painting's limitation is found in its commodity status in the cultural economy, and as such it has lost its ability to take a critical reflexive stand against culture, in the sense that it cannot look at society critically. I argue, nonetheless, for the specific relevance of the painting discussed here, not because it has escaped its functionality in the commodity or global economy, but because it functions as a reflexive field, a hybrid of field-painting, a space of possibilities that relocates the question of painting's death, the loss of its relevance, its anachronism, the signs of its rejection, to its existential place of "origin."

[33] Kraus offers the idea of "technical support" as an alternative or supplement to the concept of medium; precisely because medium is strongly tied to the exhausted world of painting and sculpture, "technical support" is supposed to bind us more to a technological world.³² Examples of such support are television, cars, the "synch sound" and so forth. The logic of Krauss's inquiry which seeks a renewed alliance between the works of contemporary art and modernism, cannot imagine a similar alliance between painting as

³⁰ And see Ji-Hoon Kim, "The post-medium condition and the explosion of cinema," in: *Screen* 50 (2009), 117.

³¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," in: *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999), 296.

³² Rosalind Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition," in: *October* 116 (2006), 58.

a field and the medium of modernism, and this is puzzling. Kraus chooses to use the term "technical support" to avoid what she defines as: "positivism of the term 'medium' which, in most readers' minds, refers to the specific material support for a traditional aesthetic genre, reducing the idea of medium to [...] 'literalism'."³³

[34] Painting as a field that does not devote itself exclusively to such early concepts of painting as the subjectivity of the artist, signature style, self-sufficiency, purity, etc., opens a new path by which to examine a variety of relationships between contemporary art and modern tradition.³⁴ Painting has been perceived in modernist tradition as the canonical medium of the arts; it was related to such firm rules as flatness, optical priority, anti-narrative, etc., while any other media were repressed. However, when a painting is defined as a field, one that spreads across the walls of the gallery, and to the medium of installation and video, print materials, etc., it becomes "aware" or inseparable from the institutions that produce and show it (the museum establishment); it indicates the discursive fields that produce it and how agents design its forms and contents. Painting as a field is affected by institutional activity and by consumption, their meanings and values. The main importance in defining painting as a field lies in the avoidance of a phenomenological reduction to matter; that is, unlike the painting hanging on the wall as an object framed by specific proportions, painting as a field avoids the opposition between interior and exterior and crosses the fixed borders of painting as a two-dimensional medium. The field is fashioned and designed in respect to the viewer who gazes at and participates in the painting's field, sensually and conceptually. The field of painting is not structured according to the structuralist opposition, as suggested by Rosalind Krauss in "Sculpture in the Expanded Field",³⁵ but takes place within the cultural codes and conditions of display with which it is lived.

[<top>](#)

³³ Kraus herself indicates the importance of the ratio between eras as evidence of the importance of the medium or technical support. See *ibid.*, 55-56.

³⁴ For a critical discussion on the implications of Krauss's analysis of cinema as a medium that is in the end self-contained, and on her "aversion" to installation, as symptoms of her rigid opposition between the modern and the postmodern, see Kim, "The post-medium condition and the explosion of cinema," 119.

³⁵ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in: *October* 8 (1979).