

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Mary Heilmann & David Reed with Alex Bacon

July 13, 2015

Alex Bacon met with David Reed and Mary Heilmann at their exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin to discuss their friendship, the process of putting together a two-person show based on that relationship, and what they've learned from doing it. The exhibition is on view until October 11, 2015.

Alex Bacon (Rail): Why don't you start by talking about how you met.

Mary Heilmann: I think I first met David when we were teaching together at the School of Visual Arts.

David Reed: Ah, yes that's right.

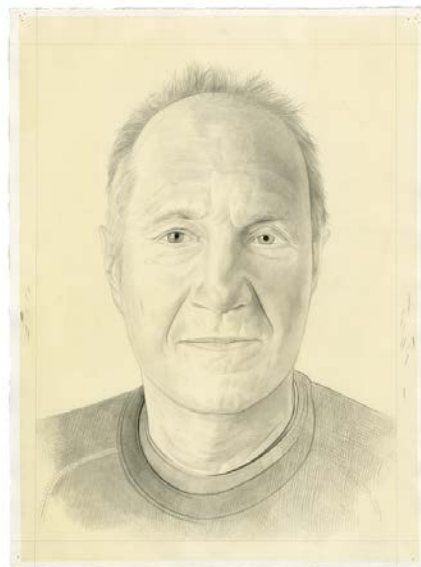
Heilmann: And that would have been in the '80s I guess.

Reed: Yeah. Then we started being in some group shows together.

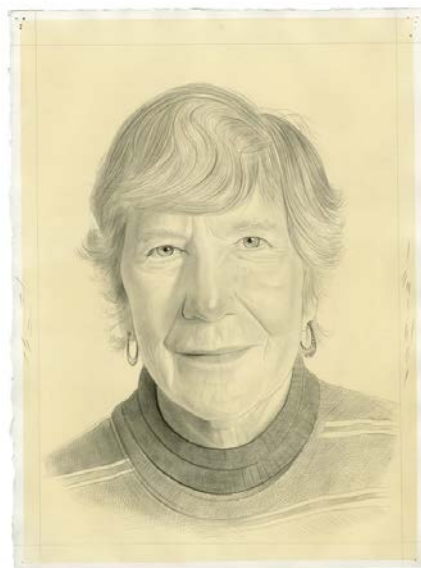
Heilmann: Right, right.

Reed: We were in a show at the Corcoran in Washington, D.C., in which about a dozen abstract painters each had a room to themselves. A few days ago I confessed to Mary that I didn't like her room. She showed only paintings of the red, yellow, and blue type and I didn't get them. I thought, "No, you can't do that. You can't use Mondrian's colors in painterly paintings." I was so stupid. [*Laughs.*] Later, I finally got it.

Heilmann: Yes, it was all the Mondrian-ish paintings: red,



Portrait of David Reed. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



Portrait of Mary Heilmann. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui

yellows, and blues, and black, and white.

Reed: Mary, now that I see that these colors have as much to do with Wonder Bread as Mondrian, I get the paintings.

Rail: Did you have to see other examples of Mary's work before you understood and appreciated those red, yellow, and blue paintings?

Reed: I had liked and followed Mary's work since the 1970s, and had seen other paintings I liked. One of the great strengths of Mary's work is the way she uses social color.

Rail: So, in a way when you first saw it, you couldn't see it outside of a formal conversation.

Reed: That's right, I misunderstood the paintings because I was looking in the wrong way.

Rail: You're probably not the only one!

Reed: I bet I'm not! [*Laughs.*] And I bet a lot of the others might not want to admit it now.

Rail: So then your friendship developed despite you not feeling the strongest formal similarities between your works, is that true?

Reed: I've learned to look harder and harder at Mary's work. She's very sly and deceptive. Her work looks casual and direct, but I realized early on that I had better pay careful attention. Mary had a show in London, at the Camden Arts Centre, and we made a plan to meet. [*To Mary*] And you were a half an hour late, so I was stuck looking at the paintings. I'm so glad that happened, because I kept finding and noticing new things. I think that's the day I totally fell in love with your work. I discovered that if I looked at the sides of the paintings, I could get clues to understanding what was happening on the front. Some of the big early paintings were in that show, with colors scraped off on the front and I could see that the sides were one color and the scraping sometimes went through to that same color. Seeing the sides, I could understand the process used to make the paintings, and your thinking.

Rail: And, Mary, what was your initial experience with David's work?

Heilmann: Now, let's think about that. I saw that work early too, and I guess I reacted the same way then as I do now. I always try to figure out how he does it. And I still can't. [*Laughs.*] Because the way he crafts the paintings is so unique. Nobody else works like this. There's one around here that really reminds me of Jasper Johns. I look at them to see how the process of painting goes for David, and I was just asking

him a question about it, about layering. The work is quite different and quite similar at the same time, our painting.

Rail: In a way, that's what you were talking about as well, David, in terms of looking at Mary's paintings, then and now, about how they were made. It seems like maybe it was only later that this understanding of her use of social color, as you called it, emerged.

Reed: People now don't realize how forbidden such uses of color were at the time. Mary had a show that included paintings and dresses by a young designer and another show that included ceramics, lamps, and fabrics. These were really radical shows when she did them. By that time I was totally behind her work. I kept learning about how color can have the kinds of relations and meanings that had been denied to painting for so long, and I wanted to use such meanings too. I took a different direction that involved the connotations. Mary's use of social color gave me encouragement to do that. Hitchcocks' *Vertigo* was a film that especially affected me and suggested ways to use color.

Rail: Did you think of it that way when you started to do it?

Reed: In the early 1980s the transparent color in my paintings started looking like movies or photographs. It took me a while to understand what was happening, and how I could use those transparent colors. I'm a slow painter. It often takes me a while to understand what I've done. Mary as what she calls her "remixes": new versions of an older painting. Her work has given me permission to do that as well, to learn from an older painting and use that discovery again in newer paintings. She made me realize that what I had learned so slowly is mine, and if it's mine, then I can use it again.



David Reed in collaboration with Pamela Reed, *In Our Solitude*, 2014. Digital projection, 9 min. Photo: Reed studio.

Heilmann: You can copy yourself.

Reed: Yes!

Heilmann: And that was considered really "bad" too. In fact, it's still kind of an issue that I think we have to pay attention to, but maybe not so much anymore. This work that we're seeing here, we haven't seen in a long time, because it's come mostly from private German collections. And it was made a while ago, much of it. So that's fun, to see things you haven't seen in a while. I was just thinking about that painting [points], "That's pretty good, I should do another one of those."

Rail: This is an interesting aspect of the show, right? That it's about your relationship, but you didn't sit down and pick out the works yourselves.

Heilmann and Reed: [*Simultaneously*] Right.

Rail: Maybe you can talk a bit more about how the show came about.

Reed: Udo Kittelmann, the curator, and I walked through the show the other day and I said that it's all his idea. He got mad, but it's true, it is.

Heilmann: Yeah, he's been a big part, certainly of the curating of it, and then the vision and that is another kind of new concept, and I've been complimenting him by saying that he makes art out of other people's art because his curatorial moves are really things that we wouldn't have thought of. At first, I was not so crazy about some of them, and then I figured out that he's really brilliant and it has been wonderful to work with him. When he wanted to do something, I'd say, "I don't think so." But he would figure out how to make it happen. And of course we were able to make some changes to disagree with him too.

Reed: Mary and I each made choices of a bunch of paintings that would be available for the show and then Udo made choices from those two groups of paintings. At Mary's opening at the New Museum, I complimented her on some pairs of paintings she had hung together. Mary, knowing that this show was coming, said, "Oh, David, we can do more in Berlin. We can have our paintings kissing."

Heilmann: [*Laughs.*]

Reed: So from Mary's comment, I had this idea that, when shown in Berlin, our paintings could be physically touching. That became part of the mix. We all worked on the show together and throughout our talks I kept insisting that the paintings actually touch. I don't think that has ever been done before, and I just loved the idea, In fact, it would have been confusing to do this with our paintings because we each sometimes use multiple canvases. But I wanted to insist that the work stay very close together, to force a confrontation between the similarities and differences in our work.

Rail: I think it's a really interesting way to hang paintings. It's almost a taboo to hang paintings so closely to one another. Maybe they're not touching, but they're close enough that it creates a sense of intimacy.

Heilmann: Maybe winking. [*Winks.*] I really have been seeing this as a theatrical situation. You can almost feel some kind of a narrative going on. The scale and the light and the whole sense of the place feels theatrical to me.

Rail: That actually makes, a lot of sense, now that I think about it, because at first I was struck by the fact that, of course, it's not a linear progression. But, rather, you know, oftentimes the paintings are from different years, and the styles are sometimes more or less similar, but nonetheless, there is this sense of somehow moving from one proposition to another.

Heilmann: Right, connections, a different way of making connections. And you know, I always look for the narrative, within the painting and then, when I'm reading about something, or looking at a show, I go over to find the name: the title. [*Laughs.*] But with David there's no title, just a number!

Reed: [*Laughs.*] I'm a big disappointment, I know, Mary.

Heilmann: And that's interesting psychologically, because it kind of makes it a secret, what it's about. And that's part of his make-up, I think.

Reed: You're right, Mary, I'm afraid it is. [*Laughs.*]

Heilmann: Yeah, well, that's bad and good at the same time. Provocative.

Rail: I really want to jump into this idea of a painting's personality and its relation to the maker's personality, but first I was wondering, Mary, you were talking about theatrical presentation. Have you felt this about your paintings before, or of it being an interesting thing for painting?

Heilmann: Yes, I have. When I did my survey show in different venues in 2007/2008 the sense of the architecture became a really important consideration. So that the story that was told in each of the four museums was quite different.

Rail: And is that something you often think about when you are making paintings? Where they'll be seen or displayed?

Heilmann: No, not so much, when I'm making them, it's inside the frame pretty much.

Rail: Is that true for you as well, David?

Reed: Yes, I'd say it's basically true, but I do think about how the paintings will be shown. I enjoy the process of installation and organizing shows. It's my chance to collaborate and be part of a larger discourse. When paintings go out in the world it's a big chance, a big opportunity to interact with other people.

Rail: I'm realizing, as you say these things, that, in a way, that's part of how this show is able to work, in that both of you are painting these contained works that happen inside the frame, as you said, and so that allows them to speak to one another, because it's like two people coming together, in a way. We navigate the world, but we're not, somehow, just subsumed in it. So I think that if the paintings were architectural, they would be talking outward to space, and it would be very hard for them to talk to one another.

Heilmann: Yes, I need to think of it that way.

Exhibition visitor: [*Approaching*] I'm sorry, may I ask you a question?



Installation view: Mary Heilmann and David Reed, "Two by Two," Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, 2015. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie. Photo: Thomas Bruns, Berlin.

Heilmann: Yes.

Exhibition visitor: Are you more interested in literature or in music?

Heilmann: Music. [*Laughs.*] But, that's a quick answer. You could say either. They're both important. Storytelling is an overarching interest of mine I'd also say.

Reed: I think I might make the other choice. I don't have as good a perception of sound and music as Mary does. She's made music part of her work for a long time.

Heilmann: One cool thing about me and music is that I like the way music can have a narrative without words, and the narrative is just with different feelings, and you can switch from feeling to feeling quickly, and that can happen in the painting too, and in the show with a lot of paintings together.

Rail: Maybe that's why we would say that you're an abstract painter, rather than a figurative one, because it allows you to deal with the sensations generated by music, rather than just illustrating them.

Heilmann: Yes, that's right. Oh, we're talking Kandinsky.

Rail: Well, exactly.

Heilmann: Hello! A hundred years later.

Rail: There we are. We're back to the beginning. [*Laughs.*]

Heilmann: Yeah.

Reed: Installing work this way, it becomes emotional; it's not just abstract painting in a white space, it's about feelings and approaching the paintings in an emotional context.

Rail: The scale of the space is quite good for that, because the ceilings aren't super tall. So, in a way, I feel like the architecture focuses you on the paintings. It gives them space, but it also feels like a focusing. If it was, say, in the big hall out there, it would be a very different experience to have these paintings in there. They would probably feel quite small and you would maybe wonder if they were two parts of the same thing or something like that. That would be the conversation dictated by the architecture.

Heilmann: I love this space and I like the big fat columns. [*All laugh.*] How you look over there, and that guy standing there cuts the big blue painting in half, and it creates a big space between these two paintings. I like how that looks. It's a beautiful room.

Reed: When we were installing, I was upset that this first long, white painting of mine (#475) at the end of the wall, was cut by that dividing wall. Udo said, “No, don’t worry, it’ll be good.” And he was right. I would not have done that. I would have used a smaller painting.

Rail: It’s interesting because I was in Bonn before I came to Berlin and I saw another painting of yours, David, even larger, with a lot of white space hanging in the Kunstmuseum Bonn, so it was, of course, quite interesting to then see this one squeezed in. I feel like there is something quite nice about painting as a medium in a way that it has this capability to change a lot built into it.

Reed: I love that about painting. It changes so much in different environments. Painting is really good at absorbing the world around it. This used to be thought of as a weakness and people thought that painting had to be purified and become just itself. Such a stupid idea. It’s good that painting absorbs everything around itself. It makes painting alive, part of the world that it’s in. Painting especially loves other media. It’s great that painting can absorb other media. Paintings have this intense symbiotic relationship with film and digital media and photography. I mean, they used to think photography would destroy painting. But instead it’s as if photography is the vampire that has bitten painting. The vampire’s kiss of photography, instead of killing painting, has made it another vampire, immortal.

Rail: Well, then of course this suggests another connection between both of your work, the openness of painting to other media. I mean, in a way, we could say that, perhaps architecture was the original media that painting opened up onto and, in a way, it was kind of birthed as a means by which to add something to architecture.

Heilmann: In the caves, yeah.

Rail: Right, a way to engage architecture, not just have it be this neutral space, I guess, so maybe, in a way, painting has always been, maybe not a vampire, but it’s always been, somehow...

Reed: Corrupted and easily corruptible. Does any of this have a resonance for you Mary? Do you think of other media as corrupting painting? Maybe that’s not a kind of terminology you would use?

Heilmann: No I wouldn’t. It would never be negative, maybe the corrupting might even be a positive thing. One thing I keep thinking is that I get so much inspiration from digital media, from ads and stuff like film trailers; how the whole movie is cut to make a two-minute trailer, and I think, “Ok, good, I don’t have to go to that movie, ugh.” So you get this big image of two hours of linear time in two minutes.



Installation view: Mary Heilmann and David Reed, “Two by Two,” Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, 2015 Left: Mary Heilmann, Wavey, 2013. Right: David Reed, #574, 2005–2007. Courtesy the artists. Photo: Thomas Bruns, Berlin.

Rail: And then that movie could itself be a year, or five years, more even, of linear time collapsed.

Heilmann: That's right. And I like to think of the subject matter and the image in a painted picture in the same way, and I'm getting a lot of my ideas and inspirations from commercials. They're so brilliant, how they're made and how they're timed. So I don't think it's dead, painting; I don't think film and TV are going to kill it. Because the kind of work you go through in making paintings, like ruminating and thinking, and actually using your hands, that's a big difference from other mediums. A lot of it's social, and then something happens in your brain, you start, like, tripping. *[Laughs.]* Then that's part of it, and it ends up in a still image.

Reed: It's been great to work on the show together, because we can talk about these issues that are really important to both of us, in glancing and practical ways, and use our hands. We each had models built of the space. And we each made two sets of small-scale models of all the paintings in the show so we could both arrange them in the architectural models. At one point, in my studio, I had given up in despair, unable to come up with a good plan. I just threw the models of both of our paintings into a pile on the floor of the architectural model. I thought, "Oh my god, how are we going to do this, it's impossible." Mary came by the studio and noticed what I had done and said, "Oh, that looks great. We should just do it that way."

Heilmann: So it's good to have a practical way of working through things, with our hands. George Condo did a big salon wall, "Mental State" (2011), at the New Museum, and I never thought much of George Condo before but now I love him, after seeing him displayed that way, because it told a psychological story. Then as I was thinking about that, I thought of this installation here of our works as a linear salon style.

Reed: Oh, Mary, "linear salon style," that's a nice phrase. Now I see the show in a new way.

Heilmann: Yes. The medium is the message, you see? Oh, and that's what happens in conversation when you start going off and doing your James Joyce on it.

Reed: I think we've both come up with new ways of dealing with issues of painting in the present world and I think a lot of other people can come up with other new ways, as well.

Rail: Would you agree with that, Mary?

Heilmann: Yeah, I can't wait to steal their ideas.*[Laughs.]*

Rail: Have you always thought of it that way, in terms of appropriation—even of yourself?

Heilmann: Well, it wasn't until the idea of appropriation became so mainstream that I realized that that was how I worked, getting ideas. And then to be original, you had to reconfigure ideas to make them yours. So that discourse has always been part of it, yes. And when you see them still like this in a place and all together—and then you have a place to sit down—it's perfect for that. That's why the chairs are a big part of my practice. It used to be that when you went to galleries, you would have a whole video and you have to stand up to watch it—in museums

sometimes there's a bench—but the idea of making chairs part of the actual exhibition was really, I think, pretty original. And then integrating social relationships as part of the art practice is really exciting to me.

Rail: Is this chair piece we're sitting on related to that one, or are they two separate pieces?

Heilmann: This came way after, although it may have been inspired by my favorite colors again. The exciting thing about this one is that it's twelve chairs long. I'm dying to do one about twice or three times as long.

Reed: I love that it's single chairs put together into longer benches. That gives you enough room to lie down and take a nap. It has all kinds of California connotations, for me: sleeping in a park or at the beach.

Heilmann: It started as garden furniture.

Rail: So you do put them outside sometimes, as well?

Heilmann: I've put them outside. It just started last summer. It's cool having these bright non-nature type of colors in the midst of a green lawn—so it gets to being architecture and also landscape architecture. This is just the beginning of something. And it also says hello to Donald Judd because when he did furniture and chairs, I loved that, way, way back when I was still in school. He made things that I thought looked like bookcases and stuff, before he actually was doing furniture.

Rail: Yeah, well that's a fun reading, because of course I don't think he would be very pleased with it.

Heilmann: I wouldn't say that in front of him—even about the furniture. I mean, he was so conceptual and serious about his practice, and I respect that, too. But I like to analyze Donald Judd—and everybody—psychologically, but not when they're around. *[Laughs.]*

Rail: You were even doing it a bit with David earlier.

Heilmann: Yes, how he doesn't have titles.

Rail: In a way, with this installation you start to sense that the paintings each have a personality. I mean, that's one thing that I find comes out of the pairings, is that the paintings start to feel like they have personalities because of their sense of intimacy. This in turn raises the question of the connection, if any, between the personality of the painting and that of its maker. Not that somehow we can decode your psychology or something.



Installation view: Mary Heilmann and David Reed, "Two by Two," Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, 2015 Left: David Reed, #52, 1974. Right: Mary Heilmann, M, 1985. Courtesy the artists. Photo: Thomas Bruns, Berlin.

Reed: As you can imagine, that idea makes me a little uncomfortable. I'm fidgeting a bit in my chair. But I'm afraid you're right. It's one of the remarkable things about painting. It absorbs the person who made it in such a way that it's unique, and that's a revealing thing in this world—no one else can do anything like that particular painting. And it's not because you're a genius—it's just because you're human. I often think of this uniqueness in terms of humor. I love art that's funny, and humor is always unique—it's never the same for two people. But you still get the joke.

Rail: I realize one thing we didn't talk about was the two works in the beginning, the two video animations, *Her Life* and *In Our Solitude*, which I understand, Mary, you made this piece first and then David responded to it.

Heilmann: Yes.

Reed: Since we're both from California, I thought I'd use this as a chance to do a project I've been thinking about for a long time. My sister, Pamela, and I grew up in a beautiful modernist house in Point Loma, San Diego. The architect was my uncle, John August Reed. As my parents got older, we knew that the house might not stay in the family, so for about ten years, we took photographs. For the show, Pamela and I collaborated to make an animation of our images sliding by and set to my father's favorite music. Sometimes I think that the best qualities in my paintings come from the experience of growing up in that house. In the animation I took courage from Mary's example to be more directly personal than I usually am. So I'm very happy to show it with your piece, Mary.

Heilmann: It looks great. Beautiful, really beautiful.

Reed: Thank you.

Rail: And what's the idea behind your piece, Mary?

Heilmann: It is kind of biography, in an abstract way. Images from my life, photographic images, and then put together in pairs with paintings. It began as the way I would give a talk about myself. I would show this piece, which is about thirteen minutes long—or a version of it—and it would be quiet just with the music and the visuals, and then I would talk about my individual works after, try to get the images of the paintings to say stuff first.

Rail: So, in a way, to put those first is to kind of frame the show in this conversation between the personal, the biographical, and also the formal.

Heilmann: Yeah, it's cool that way. Again, a new thing for showing abstract painting. And, in fact, I'm surprised we haven't heard any negative criticism about this sort of thing. I'm pretty sure that will come up—maybe it already has.

Rail: What do you expect?

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Heilmann: Well I would think people would say, “Oh no, you can’t do that.” So we’ll see. One friend said, “Wait a minute, they look like diptychs” and the tone was “you can’t do that.” But to be continued.