

Julia Lia Walter in conversation with Katharina Wendler

Studio Lia Walter, Berlin, February 2019

Continued conversation in person and via email, until June 2022.

KW: Before we start talking about your work, I would like to tell the readers a little bit about the background of our project. I think I can say that it is the most extraordinary exhibition project I have ever done. The pandemic has shaken everything up. We have been in contact for more than three years, planned and prepared the exhibition in detail four times, and had to postpone it again and again. In the meantime, the exhibition venue and all the criteria associated with it have changed, and so has the exhibition itself. I would like to start our conversation by asking you whether and how your work has changed in the past few years – needless to say, this time has left its mark on all of us.

LW: The pandemic has indeed changed a lot for me. Unfortunately, our project was not the only one that had to be postponed at first and then canceled at some point. However, I can also take something good from this phase. I had a lot of time to rethink many things and to look at them from a different perspective. That was good for me, and I really see it as an opportunity. Nevertheless, it was of course also painful to have to give up and let go of so many projects. That's why I'm especially happy that our project can finally be realized.

My work has also changed. I've experimented a lot more in the digital realm and made new works that still mix analog with digital imagery but are once again conceived from a different perspective. The reason for this change is probably also that I need much more time and patience for digital work, and this was now simply more available.

KW: The exhibition is titled 'Slightly Slightly' and for a long time still had the subtitle 'slightly bitter, slightly better, slightly moving, slightly different, slightly bent, slightly mad, slightly touching, slightly off'. The random juxtaposition came from a Google search on the term SLIGHTLY and reflected the most common associations with it. At the same time, I found the adjectives insanely good in combination because I can find almost a little bit of everything in your work. They always manage to elude you despite their enormous presence in the space, are on the threshold between rigid and mobile, analog and digital, appearance and being.

How are you preparing now – after all that has happened and changes of location – for our exhibition?

LW: For this exhibition I have developed a new installation called "Diamond Drop." The pictorial elements are of analogue origin, but were further digitally processed, arranged, and finally printed on fabric panels. On top of them lies a projection that shows the same picture elements digitally, thus leading to further overlays. The result is a tight mesh of transparencies that are reminiscent of the former location, a glass factory, and yet take on a life all their own.

KW: Do you make sketches or visualizations for your site-specific works? Or do you create the installations directly on site?

LW: I make sketches first and try to prepare the installations as best I can in the studio. The works are always a combination of painting or printing on foil or fabric and digital painting. I use analog material from drawings or paintings, which I photograph and process digitally. Mostly it is even the

installation itself, which I photograph and edit, often animated, as a projected image over the actual hanging. So the painting happens in any case in the studio, then I work with sketches and models of the exhibition space. Models become important especially for the preparation of larger works, such as in the installation "Liquid Prism", which I showed at the Künstlerhaus Göttingen in 2019 and which used a 2-channel projection. However, my models are very "sloppy," as my grandma would say, and most architects would probably throw their hands up in horror – but for my purposes, they'll do just fine. The better I can imagine an installation, the better it works.

For the videos, I make a test hanging in the studio, which I photograph and edit. The editing is then also done in the studio, but often I have to re-cut or re-edit after the installation in the exhibition space. It's not an exact video mapping, because I rarely work with mapping programs, but I always have to fine-tune the image on site.

KW: So the projection is an exact image of the work it is projected onto?

LW: Yes and no. I'm interested in what happens when a digital image mixes with an analog image. I would love to show you better images of that, but it's very hard to document these works because you can't, or you can't very well, capture the merging of the two image planes in one photograph. But when you look at it, that's exactly what happens: you look at the work and you can't really tell what you're looking at, which picture elements belong to which level, where you still see painting or already projection or the other way around. Many people don't even notice that they are actually looking at a painting, because they are distracted by the projection of the moving image.

KW: In the case of the moving image, wouldn't one even speak of film or video art?

LW: That's a good question, because I usually animate the digital images so that they become moving images. But there are also several works in which I use overhead projectors. On the one hand, I find it interesting when the pixels become visible in the digital image, which is the case with most projectors – no matter how high-resolution the image quality is. I like the fusion between the actual color layer and the colored light that is projected. On the other hand, I also like the idea of working with a light projection that is completely analog and at the same time a still image but can nevertheless contain a form of the digital.

KW: In addition to the movement in the image, there is always movement in the space; not only the movement of the viewers who walk around the installation, but also a movement within the work, which is only suspended from the wall or ceiling by a few thin threads.

LW: Exactly, the foils or fabric panels also move slightly in the breeze, of course, and are anything but static.

KW: So, your work always mixes static and dynamic elements, still and moving images, light, shadow, fixed and flexible forms, digital and analog. Would you describe your work as digital painting?

LW: Yes, I use the term a lot. Although I have my origins in classical painting, there are also many digital tools that I use to "paint" in Photoshop or on the Ipad, such as brushes, scissors, erasers, and so on. The methods – drawing, cutting, masking – are the same in analog and digital. But I ask myself every time how much digital I want to bring into the analog work. I enjoy balancing that out. It's important to me that the projection goes beyond a mere "illumination," the mere source of light, but I

also have to say that I've always understood my work as analog painting first and foremost. In the installations, I try to bring about a rapprochement between the analog and the digital, in the best case, they merge with each other. That's why I work, for example, with very slow movements that are often not visible at first glance and that only become apparent when you look at them for a while. One must look for a long time to notice what is happening in the work and that it is moving at all; a way of looking that is apparently very unfamiliar to many – which honestly surprised me quite a bit. It then became more and more important to me that one has to take exactly this time to engage with the work. It is not fast-living and not easily consumed. This irritation that lies in the mixing of digital and analog is definitely exciting for me.

KW: The irritation probably lies precisely in the fact that we're used to things moving quickly from videos and digital images. Of course, for decades there has also been the countermovement of those who have deliberately slowed down moving images, whether technically or in terms of content, to deliberately disrupt temporal sequences that we are used to seeing in films. But still, I think that through our daily use of digital images and videos, we are accustomed to a certain speed, and this creates an expectation that can then become a challenge when viewing a supposedly digital work. Which is a good thing! It basically shows that your work goes far beyond painting, but also far beyond a spatial installation.

LW: Absolutely. The next challenge then, as I said, is to document the work.... I've been trying to do video documentation for some time, but despite everything, you have to see it live in the space.

KW: What materials are the works made of? Some seem translucent, others not, and the paint, is that acrylic?

LW: I work both on canvas, fabric, foils, and acrylic. With my material, for example, with the foils, I pay very close attention to where it comes from, that it does not contain toxic plasticizers, and is made in Germany. This was not so easy at first, but in the meantime I have found a dealer who guarantees this.

The paint I use to paint on the foils and acrylics is a mixture of pigment and binders and varnish, a kind of secret recipe. It was a challenge for me to develop this mixture and use it to make the paint so durable and hard-wearing that it doesn't flake off even when the foils are bent and rolled.

KW: Have you ever considered working with films and foils from lighting or theater technology?

LW: Usually the foils I use are between one and three millimeters thick. It's important to me that they are firm and have their own elasticity. Lighting foils are too wrinkled and fragile for me and very unsuitable for projections because every bend reflects light and it's very difficult to control it yourself. Nevertheless, it is important to me that the foils retain a certain lightness, but also bring along their own tension, a little will of their own. For me, the question with every installation is how and in which directions I can bend the material and how it behaves in the hanging. The thicker the film, the heavier the overall installation. With very large, heavy works, this has sometimes pushed me to my limits during installation.

KW: What about the works that don't require projection? Do they come closer to classical painting?

- LW: In these works, it becomes particularly clear what actually interests me in painting, namely how spatial perspective is simulated. It's always about two levels: The works are two-dimensional, but they pretend to be three-dimensional, and sometimes they really tip over into three-dimensionality.
- KW: *When you paint, do you already consider how you will later hang and fold the transparencies? Or to what extent does chance also play a role here?*
- LW: Yes, I think about it beforehand, but of course chance always plays a role, I can't control it one hundred percent because of the material properties. But most of the time I just take the "finished" works off the wall again and rework them, hang them up again, look, keep painting. It's always a process. It's never happened to me that I painted a slide, hung it on the wall, and it was finished. Before that, I make sketches and folding plans out of paper or foil, sometimes models. What can already be planned is which areas will be painted and which not. What exactly happens in the painted areas are decisions that are made during the working process. Important here are the forms and directions and brush structures because they determine the direction, the perspective. Thinking two-dimensionally, I use the brushstrokes to define the form of the color in an illusionistic space.
- KW: *It's already clear that the brushstrokes are also primarily responsible for the dynamics within the works.*
- LW: That's true, but it's not always entirely logical. I like to work with breaks and to provoke it so that the impression of a supposed order suddenly no longer makes sense. Foils are so interesting to me because they are so easy to move from two-dimensionality, from the surface, to the spatial. Do you understand what I mean?
- KW: *I think so. If you bend the painted surface, the direction in the picture changes immediately, the spatial location. Of course, you could also do that with paper – but I also understand your interest in a certain self-will and also in the longevity, the robustness of the material. Do you work exclusively with brushes or also with squeegees and other tools? How do you create these incredibly precise edges?*
- LW: I only work with brushes, but I use stencils and tape to create clear lines and edges. It's important to me that the brushstroke can sometimes run asynchronously to the edge. The works get, especially in the smaller formats, almost something collage-like, as if cut up and puzzled together again.
- KW: *The clear structures and precision again create the impression of the digital; they are reminiscent of digital printing processes and cutting. By using a transparent carrier material, there is then also a front and a back, both of which become equally visible and thus equally important, and sometimes can hardly be distinguished from one another.*
- LW: Yes, that's true, sometimes they overlap, sometimes not. And on top of that, shadows arise, within the work as well as on the wall, which also become part of the work.
- KW: *How comfortable are you with the small formats? Do you see them more as studies or sketches? When do you go into scale, into space?*
- LW: I like the small formats a lot. They're not really studies, but they are a little bit. They are like a training ground for me, but still have the same value as the larger works. That's why I often show

smaller works in exhibitions alongside the large installations, because they are also very important to me.

KW: I find it interesting how different the shapes and formats of the Plexiglas panes are that you use. Some are strictly rectangular, others fragmentary, like ice floes. Do you consciously deviate from classic canvas formats?

LW: Partly they are remnants, partly I have them specially cut to size. Sometimes I go even more sculptural with these works. For example, I've made a series of works out of painted and then bent Plexiglas, inserted into each other, that stand freely. A kind of continuation of the small wall works. With these works, of course, it's great that you can walk around them and that there are so many different views of the individual levels; colored areas in the back, colored areas in the front, reflections, and so on.

KW: These little sculptures look as if you've put a kind of colorful silk veil over the work, or made something soft and fluid solidify. Whereas that's relative - even the sculptures still look very dynamic, as if movement is inherent in them. This effect is enhanced by the color gradients....

LW: ...because they support perspective, because a source of light is suggested and thus a location in space. I have an immediate access, a direction, if you will, to every surface that I have in front of me and that I look at in isolation.

KW: I don't want to cling too tightly to a conservative concept of painting or even categorize your work, but have you ever considered your art against the background of light art? Reflection and the appearance of light seem to be of importance in almost all of your works.

LW: As I said, I feel more at home in classical painting. But all the points you mention definitely play an important role. For example, I once experimented with matte acrylic glass, but I didn't find it that interesting. It didn't work so well with the projections because the beauty of the shiny surfaces is that they work in the installation like their own light source. Sometimes I even paint the surfaces to make them extra shiny. For me, transparency is important, but also distance, surface, front, back, and the in-between merge into a sometimes-impenetrable overall illusion.

KW: What about works on paper in this context?

LW: That's where it all began. During my painting studies – first in Mainz and then later with Pia Fries at the UdK – and shortly thereafter, I worked exclusively on paper, mainly with watercolors and on very small formats. At some point, the formats became larger, and then I combined the watercolors with projection. I still do the small drawings today; they always run parallel to my more sculptural work.

KW: What are your next projects?

LW: I'm just starting a completely new project that I'm going to implement together with a scientist and for which I've fortunately received funding from the program Neustart Kultur – Innovative Kunstprojekte 2022. It's about combining art and science, and I'll be working purely digitally, which is why I'm currently familiarizing myself with new digital editing programs. However, I don't want

to say too much about this project yet, because we are still very much at the beginning. But we have very ambitious plans, I can promise you that.

Julia Lia Walter combines analog and digital painting. She is particularly interested in the junctures of digital and analog spatial illusion and the transition of the temporal structures of the two media. Lia's installations explore and develop painting within and beyond the border of analogue space. Lia studied Fine Arts at the Academy of Arts in Mainz and later at the University of the Arts in Berlin with Pia Fries. Her works have been on view in numerous exhibitions at museums and galleries in Europe, North America and East Asia and she has received several awards and scholarships such as the DAAD postgraduate Scholarship Tokyo and the Emy-Roeder Preis 2017. She lives and works in Berlin.

Katharina Wendler studied Cultural Studies and Business Psychology (BA) at Leuphana University Lüneburg and Art History (MA) at Humboldt University Berlin and the University of Iceland. After assistant positions at Daniel Marzona, Berlin, Konrad Fischer Galerie Berlin, i8 Gallery Reykjavik, and Contemporary Arts Museum Tampa, Florida, among others, she directed the exhibition space SAFN Berlin in 2013-2017 and Karin Sander's studio in 2016-2018. Currently, as a research assistant at the Faculty of Art and Design, she is responsible for the curatorial direction of the University Gallery at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar and works as a freelance curator and writer. In early 2018, she initiated the dialogue-based exhibition series in conversation with.

in conversation with is an exhibition format that aims to bring people into conversation with each other and subsequently into collaboration. Artists are invited to enter into dialogue with curators, writers, other artists, art historians, journalists or scientists and to develop an exhibition from this. The conversations will be written down and serve as text material for the exhibition. They enable visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the artists' working methods and their artworks. in conversation with is based on the basic assumption that artists themselves can best provide information about their works, their working methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply has to ask. The project was initiated by Katharina Wendler in Berlin in early 2018 and is hosted in various (project) spaces.

Exhibition

Julia Lia Walter

SLIGHTLY SLIGHTLY

June 17–19, 2022

Opening: Friday, June 17, 2022, 7–10 pm

Gerichtstr. 45, backyard, 13347 Berlin