

I am both an insider and an outsider, and there is nothing more dangerous.

Ein Gespräch zwischen Jo Baer und Ines Doujak, geführt in J. B.'s Studio in Amsterdam im Februar 2008

Ines: Let's start with a significant story you told me the other day about this Belgian, a professor of philosophy, who was looking at your pictures, complaining: Jo, what have you done to us?

Jo: She could not forgive me for leaving the minimal work to work with images. She said: Oh, we so loved your work, we could stand in front of it and not have to think about anything!

Ines: Why would you bother to make such a change? And why is it perceived as a disruption in your professional career, when you label it as a coherent development and transition?

Jo: People seem to have problems with the difference between abstraction and images. But they seem to forget that even artists like Pollock would go from one to another. Abstract art was always there, you know, really always. But artists do what they want to do: sometimes images are important, and sometimes symbols or abstraction are important. And you don't have to be a devotee or a purist. I grew up with Picasso and the other Cubists, and wouldn't dream of touching a portrait or picture of anything. I still feel that way in the sense that I am not an illustrator. I haven't been telling stories with pictures; I have been making paintings that have images or parts of images, transparencies, all kinds of things of this sort, that are more like essays. You put them together and they are visual texts, as all good paintings are, abstract or otherwise. A critic from Amsterdam kept going on about: "How could you stop abstract work and go on to figuration?" (I won't use the word 'figuration', if I can help it) I answered something like: 'Listen, it doesn't matter! I could work with triangles and circles, or pigs, bears, or birds ... it's all the same thing to me, except for what I wish to convey.'

Ines: Do you get strong reactions from the public?

Jo: Actually, yes. I have one friend, a woman, an old hippie, who was one of the first people I knew here. She saw one of these paintings, it was called "The Old Lie" and it had a picture of the Vietnamese girl on fire, running ... And she came up to me and said: "If you were still married, your husband would not let you do this!" And, "I had no idea, you were so depressed."

I could never speak to her again. "If your husband ...!? If you were still married ...!? Your husband would not allow you to do this!?" Can you believe it? And this is a woman from the 60s!

Ines: ..who grew up with feminism, and women's liberation ...

Jo: Yes! So, apparently, there is something in my work that reaches people. Even if it's offending. That's why I know the work is good. It speaks. It's one of the first things you ask of art, that it speaks to audiences. The problem is, people don't quite know how to handle it, and they don't let it speak very often: don't show it or buy it,-sell it or send it around. And I was thinking nowadays they really should, because there is

certainly a very big market for painting. Even though most of it is very bad painting, they should at least try mine out, and allow me in.

Ines: What are people afraid of?

Jo: I don't know. You're asking the wrong person. I do what I do and it all seems absolutely proper and easy. Well, not easy, but correct. It's hard work to get it right. This is not production line stuff. Like, with minimal art, I could hire people to do the work, and I did. You know, I mix the colors, and hand them to art students and I go out and do my shopping or whatever. But this, of course, I have to do myself. So I don't know the answer, honestly. Maybe genuine art is no longer useful.

Ines: You once said in an interview: 'You have to be rude, otherwise, you don't get anywhere in this art world.'

Jo: How do you get a mule to do anything? You take a two-by-four piece of wood, and soak it in machine oil until it gets very hard. And then you take this stick of wood and you come out and you hit the mule on the head. (laughs) and then you have his attention. This is what I mean by rude: You really have to hit them on the head first to get their attention. So once you have it, you have a bit more leeway I think. But every now and then, you should get the old two-by-four out ... Again, this is a queer thing, it isn't a personality thing. Being good isn't enough. Being talented is not enough. There is a point where you simply have to deal with getting work into the world and must get their attention.

Ines: Yes, you have to establish a need for your work.

Jo: You have to play with your image. I have a nice tough image in that art world that doesn't know me personally, and it all goes to hell when they do get to know me. (laughs) I was in a Whitney annual with a painting like the minimal diptych that will be in the Secession. My students couldn't believe I did that. They could not put together the person they knew from teaching, — the person you are speaking to right now, being capable of doing that work which was very formal, very tough and very strong.

Ines: The other day you mentioned that minimal art was expected to be hard and then you talked about the softness ...

Jo: Well, can you think of any minimal art that was not hard-edged or hard? Most minimal art was sculpture anyway. So that's always harder. Now you have things like process art, where artists like Anish Kapoor and Eva Hesse made things from soft materials or did piles of powdered colors. But they bothered to distinguish themselves from Minimalism as a reaction against it. So they went soft. But in terms of painting, the idea of doing soft work was anathema. If you had suggested to my fifteen - or twenty-year-old self to do such a thing, I would absolutely refuse with some contempt. It was a no-no. Soft (tonal painting) was 'feminine,' and bad manners on top of everything else. So of course I did it. It was a revelation to me. I didn't persist with it very long, because it's a lot of trouble to take the edge away. It requires a certain kind of touch in doing it that's not really in my being. But it was nice and useful to know, that soft is all right, too.

Ines: When I was preparing for the interview, a lot of antipode pairs caught my eye. You have these very dark paintings and these very light ones, your works are very gentle and subtle, and at the same time hard and bold. I found all these dichotomies and contradictions.

Jo: Yes, obviously it's in my nature. I am an extreme person. The middle often baffles me and I have trouble getting from one place to another since I am quite intense wherever I am. It's a structure that I was born with. There's nothing wrong with that, if you can manage it. But to be extreme actually calls for a classical art. My work is about balance. Always. And that's classical art in the true and full meaning of the word. I am not a romantic artist. (The problem is I am sometimes a romantic person.)

A: Do you ever imagine your viewer, the one who looks at your pictures?

Jo: I always understood who my audience was. When I did the low-hanging paintings and the ones that went around the sides, it was to make the viewer walk around, to move. I don't like the idea of the contemplative viewer, the one who sits in one place. To me this is a kind of person whom I really do not wish to appeal to. So it was my great pleasure, to say: If you don't get off your ass and move around, you don't get it. I actually operated deliberately against a certain kind of audience. But that audience, looking back historically, can't believe I would do anything so truly simple-minded. This all sounds like I am very anti-bourgeois. I am not in the long run — only in feeling but not in true fact because I know they are the only people that keep us from the savages. And in that I am on their side. Please let them stay, and their collections and their money come my way, etc. That's my art world political position. I take great pleasure when these people come into the studio in being quite formal and distant. They are afraid of me. And I like reinforcing that. They should be. I am both an insider and an outsider, and there is nothing more dangerous.

Ines: You just said, you like to reinforce the fear in a certain kind of audience. How do the galleries react on the significant provocations/changes in your career?

Jo: Well, they have barely shown the image work in the US until this year. I was invited to participate in the Paula Cooper Gallery 20th anniversary show in 1988 (since I was in the first show of her gallery), so I sent her one of the image paintings, and although it was shown it was sent back, no comment. I also did a show in 1983 with the very first of the Irish paintings, at my son's gallery, a public space, (112 Green Street, which became White Columns). I got a little review in the New York Times, because I was a name. And they said: Well, these are from the caves ...

Ines: The caves?

Jo: The paintings were made from images of artifacts or drawings on the walls that I played with. And no one knew what to do with such works or what to say about them. They had no idea. So, I was very out-of-step: painting that was going on at that time was Lüpertz and Baselitz—revisionary expressionists—or early Schnabels, (which I think were as good as anything. He understood the right thing to do). But of them all, I only really liked the work of Anselm Kiefer.

Ines: Do you relate to other artists?

Jo: Very little. What would I relate to? I did notice a few years ago that a Jeff Wall giant kodachrome thing was trying to do the same thing that I can do easily in paint. He used a number of disparate images but it doesn't work in photography. You can't get from one place or image to another, except by dissolving or something.

Ines: You said once, you don't consider most photography as art, because it's ...

Jo: I can't say that. And of course, if somebody says it's art, then it's art. I am not going to argue with that. I just don't think it's very good art. I mean, there is good art, and then there is bad art, and then there is some art nobody cares about, or I don't. I feel that way about photography, and I feel that way about performance. I wonder why they are not doing it in the theatres or showing in the art galleries. But that doesn't matter. Who am I to say what is art?

Ines: But could you define good art?

Jo: No. I know it only when I see it. I would say, though, that it's elite. Out of necessity. Art deals with values. And an art work is a record of decisions and choices made, where the value of this is greater than the value of that. This is built in and necessary. As for me, I end up, I would say, pretty high up, I would call mine a high art - not necessarily avant-garde, but certainly high - and that-is elitist. But it's like saying: Look, mathematicians and cashiers, both work with numbers, and I am a 'mathematician', working at the highly conceptual end of things. I don't apologize for it. Other artists can see my work, other people can see it, and they can take ideas and feelings from it, just as many people take ideas and useful info from mathematics (only money comes from cashiers). In other words, there are levels of generalizations, and I belong to a high level. I can't even do the low stuff.

Ines: Do you think that pictures communicate with other pictures?

Jo: Yes. I would say paintings, if you don't mind. This is what Rudi Fuchs was a genius at. I have never seen a show like the one he did at the Castello de Rivoli ("Ouverture/Arte contemporanea", 1985, Torino). All the work spoke to the other work. All was in dialogue, it was absolutely extraordinary. Well, he stopped doing that, after a while, but it's a pity. He showed what he loved and what he understood and could play with it.

Ines: Do you think it's important to be recognized as an artist?

Jo: Oh, I love it when people understand my work, but that's rare. The problem I am having even with galleries is that they don't understand the work at all, they don't understand the paintings. Sometimes I have to name all the images and things, something which does NOT lead to any real understanding. Work is about its internal structure such as the manner, modes and vehicles of the images in their spaces, as well as their relations to one another in their surrounds and contexts.

Ines: Can say something about the choice you made for the show in the Secession?

Jo: I chose these two big diptychs, because they are museum quality works. And I chose two works because I was asked to choose one favorite: as I have done two very distinct and rather different bodies of work, I don't see myself choosing between

them. I know these two pairs work well together, and assuming the space was right, they would make a beautiful show. That's all.

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