THE POET ROBERT CREELEY once recalled how, during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, "you could go to de Kooning's studio and find the work of all the active young poets. Philip Guston, for example, had read me long before I'd read him, so to speak, or seen his work. He knew my poems very well, not just as a form of flattery, but really knew them."¹ It's hard to say how many people in today's art world are regular readers of contemporary poetry—considerably fewer, I suspect, than during the period Creeley was evoking—but quite a few poets writing today pay close attention to contemporary art. Proof of this can be found in the pages that follow, which offer a selection of poems composed in response to contemporary artworks. I use “in response to” rather than the more concise but not nearly as accurate “about” to alert readers to the fact that crafting poetic descriptions or verbal equivalencies is not the sole concern of these poets, though they can and do precisely describe what they see. All of these poems may have been born from encounters with artworks, but none of them are dependent on those works; the poems are autonomous.

Interpreting “contemporary” somewhat loosely, I have included poems engaged with the work of artists long deceased (Hélio Oiticica, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Joan Mitchell) and, in one case, art from the 1970s (a fabric sculpture by Dorothea Tanning). Although not strictly contemporary (a term in any case whose meaning is always slippery), this work still seems to me to be of our moment. All the poets but one are living, and all are U.S.-based and write primarily in English. While it is unusual to find poetry, and so much of it, in an art magazine, Art in America has a history of inviting poets into its pages: a poetry and art portfolio in the October–November 1965 issue included poems by Frank O'Hara, Barbara Guest, Robert Lowell and 17 others, each paired with a work by a visual artist. In January–February 1975, the magazine published the entire text of John Ashbery's “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” I'm thrilled to be reviving this tradition in the 21st century. There are certainly artists' studios today where you would be likely to find books by “the active young poets” (as well as the active older ones). My hope is that this portfolio, which is only a small sampling of poetry inspired by contemporary art, may open more studio doors to poetry. There is also a message here for those who write about art—critics and historians alike. It's been some 50 years since Marcel Broodthaers abandoned poetry for that “something insincere” which eventually morphed into institutional critique. It's also been some 50 years since the violent turn against “poetic criticism” as embodied by O'Hara. If the long reign of what Charles Bernstein has called “orthodoxical criticism” (from Greenbergian formalism to postmodernist theory and beyond) is coming to an end, maybe it's a good moment to seek new energy from other directions, to once again listen to what poets may have to tell us about the art of our time.

KEVIN YOUNG'S CONTRIBUTION is drawn from To Repel Ghosts, his book of poems, first published in 2001, that meticulously charts the life and work of Jean-Michel Basquiat. I've long felt that To Repel Ghosts contains the most perceptive writing that exists on Basquiat. One reason for its success is
Amy Sillman: *Duplexities*, 2011, iPhone drawing, from a collaboration with poet Charles Bernstein.
Young's daring decision to incorporate into his poems many of the words, lists and phrases that Basquiat inscribed onto his paintings. Although Basquiat was not a Conceptual artist, he drew on the legacy of Conceptualism. The linguistic turn of art in the 1960s strained the traditional dialogue between painting and poetry; now that art was being made with the artists' own language, where was there room for the poet's words? Young inventively rebuilds that broken bridge, as well as recounting the tragedy and spectacle of an artist's fate. (In Young's poems, all words taken from Basquiat's paintings are printed in small caps.)

In 1999, Norma Cole saw the exhibition "The Experimental Exercise of Freedom" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which included work by the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica. Later she looked at a 1969 catalogue of a show from London, where she found texts by the artist, fragments of which made their way into this poem. One of the Oiticica works alluded to in Cole's poem is about a Brazilian outlaw hero named Cara de Cavalo, who was also a friend of Oiticica's. Cole compares this work with John Milton's poem "Lycidas," an elegy for a young man drowned at sea and one of the great poems in English literature. Cole doesn't fully describe any one of Oiticica's artworks; rather, it's as if she has poured into her poem aspects of many of his works. The poem, in fact, resembles one of Oiticica's "bólides," containers that can be made of painted wood or glass and filled with all manner of materials. About the title, "ESTAR for Hélio Oiticica": in Portuguese, as in Spanish, there are two forms of the verb "to be": ser and estar. Ser is for permanent states of being, estar for temporary ones or ongoing actions. Art and poetry, Cole reminds us, are ongoing actions, especially with an artist like Oiticica. When I asked her about this poem, Cole wrote to me that she was also thinking of how "death is ongoing action."

Jim Brodey (1942-1993) composed hundreds of what he called "name poems," mostly about musicians, fellow writers or artists. He doesn't identify any specific Joan Mitchell painting in the poem included here (one of several he wrote titled "Joan Mitchell"), nor does he tell us anything about the circumstances of Mitchell's life or what relation, if any, he might have had with her—a big contrast to how Mitchell figures in O'Hara's poetry. When I asked her about this poem, Cole wrote to me that she was thinking of how "death is ongoing action."

Clayton Eshleman is another poet who has placed visual art at the core of his work. The temporal range of his subjects is impressive, from the cave paintings of Lascaux and Chauvet to modern masters (Munch, Soutine, Ernst) to more recent figures (Lee Bontecou, Takesada Matsutani, Nancy Spero). "Blue Sphinx" is one of several poems he has written about Leon Golub's work (the two were close friends for many years). Golub's painting is a large unstretched, much-abraded canvas dominated by a sinewy creature with a lion's body and the deathly head of a man. Recalling past poets who have been entranced by the Egyptian monument (Baudelaire, Rilke), Eshleman also evokes the vicious "mercs" (mercenary soldiers) who populate so many of Golub's politically charged 1980s paintings. The poem finally zeroes in on the AIDS crisis (Golub said that he intended the white head of the sphinx to signify victims of the epidemic), starkly juxtaposing scenes of 1960s counterculture with the grim apparition of the Hindu goddess Kali Ma, who is usually depicted with blue skin.

In "On Eroticism and Cutting Fabric," Mónica de la Torre conflates her memory of seeing Dorothea Tanning's fabric sculpture Rainy Day Canapé (1970) with recollections of a close friend who died prematurely. (Interestingly, at least two other poets in this mini-anthology have written poems about Tanning: namely, Bang and Eshleman.) Taking a playful approach to what is at heart a tragic tale, de la Torre discovers odd correspondences between Tanning's sculpture and her dead friend: Tanning used tweed, her friend wore tweed jackets; Tanning titled her work Rainy Day Canapé, her sophisticated friend "was the type you'd think ate
Maybe it’s a good moment to seek new energy from other directions, to once again listen to what poets may have to tell us about the art of our time.

canapés.” Introducing a further layer of correspondence, the poem belongs to a series in which de la Torre seeks to update Flaubert’s Dictionary of Accepted Ideas, a witty compendium of clichéd phrases. Here, the cliché concerns the social image of the artist. In the last stanza, de la Torre offers a hyper-compact piece of comparative art criticism when she juxtaposes Tanning’s sexually suggestive tweed sculptures from the 1970s with Matthew Barney’s more recent “self-lubricating frames.”

Marjorie Welish is able to write poems that compellingly chart the visual-mental map of someone looking at a painting. I’m thinking, for instance, of her “About the Length of an Arc,” which delves brilliantly into the work of Cy Twombly. The fact that Welish herself is an accomplished painter, and a thoughtful art critic, certainly informs her poetry. The poem I’ve chosen for this project addresses the work of art at the moment and in the place of its making: the artist’s studio. In this case, Welish can write with unique authority because the studio is her own. Her paintings are diagrammatic abstractions; rigorously constructed, obliquely beautiful canvases in which every element is at once a painterly mark and the sign of such a mark. Her poem “Studio: 1994” (from a suite of eight poems titled “In the Name of Studio”) pursues this project by other means. Wresting a stripped-down lyricism from her own semiotic analysis, Welish targets the inescapable binaries of her own practice, tracking the tension between, as John Ashbery once put it, “colors and the names of colors.”

Vincent Katz’s poem—the first in a series about John Moore’s realist canvases—carefully catalogues details in a painting titled Dye House, like the poem, as if to guide or simply accompany the viewer on a specular stroll through the former Philadelphia textile plant that is now Moore’s studio. The poem is economical, even terse, an effect created in part by the absence of articles. Perhaps the poet wanted to emulate the painter’s tight control of his medium, and also to respond to the functional geometry of the building. In fact, Katz, composing in phrases rather than in sentences, is writing under a self-imposed constraint, trying to keep as close as possible in each line to the total number of characters and spaces in the first line: 48. As Katz explained to me in an e-mail: “I wanted the poems to, in some way, ‘look’ like the paintings. The paintings are composed of many small, intricate parts with the utmost planning by the artist, so that, even though there is so much detail, he manages to achieve balance… I wanted the poems to have an architecture likewise based on structure and hopefully with a similar sense of balance.”

Christopher Stackhouse’s “Description” also forgoes standard syntax in favor of short phrases and single words strung together by commas. With each new lexical unit, readers have to reorient themselves as they look for a connecting thread. In line 6, however, a theme announces itself with the phrase “Af-am contribution to Abstraction.” As artists are named (some African-American, some not), the poem seems to develop into an argument about painting, representation and competing artistic strategies. Like certain other of Stackhouse’s poems, “Description” seems to be assembled from notes on a theoretical text or lecture. It also contains, as so many works of Conceptual art, a gesture of self-description in the phrase “Any number of any particular series or random singular selection.” As someone whose activities encompass art-making and art criticism as well as poetry, Stackhouse has a very personal stake in being able, as he says, “to write as one draws.”

“I am spending my 39th year practicing uncreativity. On Friday, September 1, 2000, I began retyping the day’s New York Times, word for word, letter for letter, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner, page by page.” The resulting 836-page book, Day, was published in 2003. In the 10 years since, Kenneth Goldsmith, who was recently named the inaugural poet laureate of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, has become the most visible protagonist of conceptual writing, a movement that seeks to unsettle contemporary literature, poetry especially, with the kind of radical approaches that have long marked visual art. Day, for instance, draws on the legacy of endurance-based performance art and appropriation art. In the extract included here, Goldsmith transcribes an ad from Eyestorm, an early online art marketer, for a Damien Hirst print. Shorn of its graphic elements, the ad copy reads like a shopping-channel pitch. Is it a poem? Goldsmith says it is, and as Rauschenberg told us long ago (“This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so”), that’s all it takes. Plus, this little 13-year-old time capsule seems like the most appropriate response that any poet could make to Hirst’s hard-sell, assembly-line art.

Charles Bernstein’s poem was written as part of his 2011-12 collaborative project with painter Amy Sillman. Titled “Duplexities,” it consists of some 100 drawings Sillman executed on her iPhone using only one of her little fingers (a related animation is titled Pinky’s Rule) and the poems Bernstein wrote in response. A frequent collaborator with visual artists (Richard Tuttle and Susan Bee among them), Bernstein writes in many different registers, often within a single poem. He is equally at home with deconstructive appropriation and rhyming verse that verges on slapstick comedy. Such stylistic flexibility is a plus in collaborations, allowing him to respond to whatever his artist partner does. Here, he employs traditional meter and rhyme to pen a short lyric defining and celebrating the relations between poetry and painting. Declining—as too romantic?—the notion of a perfect fusion of art forms, he instead urges artists and poets to accept their differences, and do so not in the name of some timeless esthetic ideal but within specific historical and material conditions.


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Shrine outside
Basquiat’s Studio,
September 1988
by Kevin Young

Back on Great
Jones
his face
against the façade
fronting the carriage
house rented
from Warhol—
inside, his suits
stiffen from starch,
spilt paint.
He’s bought
the farm whole,
enchilada
& all—August
& the heat
covering everything,
needle-sharp,
asleep. No more
feeding
his habit, art—
he’s gone
& done it
this time, taken
his last dive.
Exit, stage right.
A broken
record—his black

skin thick,
needed
into song—
a swan’s. Upon
graffitied brick—
*insidious menace*
*Landlord
Tenant—*
folks pile
candles flowers
photos notes
to God & lace—
anything *to repel*
ghosts, keep
his going at bay
before memory comes
eyearly, snarling
& sweeps him
into the mouth
of euphemism—
sanitation worker, waste
management engineer,
garbage man, dumpster
diver, trash
heap, heaven.

Kevin Young
is professor of
creative writing and
English at Emory
University. His most
recent collection of
poetry is *Ardency:*
*A Chronicle of the*
*Amistad Rebels*
(Knopf, 2011).
“Shrine outside
Basquiat’s Studio,
September 1988”
comes from his
book *To Repel Ghosts*
(Knopf, 2005; first
published by Zoland
ESTAR for Hélio Oiticica
by Norma Cole

They wore strips of fire along their limbs for that death dance, fabric striped like roof tiles, a cabin in Eden, small stars in the shape of proverbs

Checks and balances her thoughts myself, organdy or tulle crumpled and bunched around a rolled core of burlap upon a reflective cylindrical horizontal base

The shorn wrapped woman opens the glass bólide. Rose pigment. Floral pattern on the one hand, cape on the other. Overlay

He wanted to emphasize the other box too. In order to do this, he needed Milton. His friend died in the sea

He needed to celebrate the bandit, Lycidas. The top of the box held between two hands, diagonal slash a lighter gray across the lid

The open box above, small abstractions piled inside. Another lighter smaller object to the right and on the following page

Space relief underneath, the slanted opaque illusionary planes on metal stands. On glass. Two round objects seen from the side, urn-like, from above, sphincter-like, pebbled

At least four kinds of cloth from white to dark, a striped one with a sheen to it. Held, smiling above the gravel and the shadowed grass of Eden.
Joan Mitchell
by Jim Brodey

Blue is an eternal color
It means infinite bliss
When it turns to black

I turn my back and go away
To blue the eternal color
When it turns to red I pray

We can move slower blue eternal color
The highway moves on vapor I am lost
In white ether the world is soft is

High is white is blue eternal color
When the colors change for the better
I am flashing golden ivory specks

Diamond dust splashed with blue specks
Golden flashes through the wheat skyblue
Make that purple gathers inside of

As the eternal eyes of Jesus calmly knew blue
The eternal color of the heart beating
Alone for love's radiance when blue

Mounts the sky's zenith and our hearts
Are the handball courts of the future
An ocean filled with sky and flesh

We pray at a painter's hand for blue
That eternal color ready with knowledge
Turning the night from its wreckage

Into sidewalks of cloud that lead
To the Sky Church nestled in tofu
These eternal parking tickets have

All blown away through blue eternal color
Radiance given to heart-mind throbbing blue
Sentences soaked with rain and good futures

Jim Brodey was a New York poet.
I Love Artists
by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

3

Bruce leaving for the night makes space for his cat to enter.

Mouse (left) exits door and returns.

Moth and mouse on sculpture exit (left) noise.

It’s an exterior relation, like a conducting wire, light fragment by fragment.

I realize my seeing is influenced by him, for example, when we change form and become light reaching into corners of the room.

Even now, we’re slipping into shadows of possessions that day by day absorb our energy.

I left my camera on to map unfinished work with shimmering paths of my cat (now disappeared), mice and moths (now dead).

There’s space in a cat walking across the room, like pages in a flip-book.

The gaps create a reservoir in which I diffuse my embarrassment at emotion for animals.

I posted frames each week, then packed them into suitcases, the white cat and her shadow, a black cat.

I named her Watteau, who imbues with the transitory friendship we saw as enduring space in a forest.

4

A level of meaning can be the same as a place.

Then you move to your destination or person along that plane.

Arriving doesn’t occur from one point to the next.

It’s the difference in potential, a throw of dice, which necessarily wins, since charm as of her handcrafted gift affirms chance.

I laugh when things coming together by chance seem planned.

You move to abandon time brackets, water you slip into, what could bring a sliding sound of the perimeter of a stone?

You retain “early” and “walking” as him in space.

When a man becomes an animal, with no resemblance between them, it feels tender.

When a story is disrupted by analyzing too much, elements can be used by a witch’s need for disharmony.

My advice to you is, don’t get lost too deep in need, unless you want to join the witches.

Creation is endless.

Your need would be as if you were a white animal pulling yourself into a tree in winter, and your tears draw a line on the snow.
Now they suture
the shoes in place behind vellum.
Time silent as a marble
boxed body. There's the where
and there's the coffin.
From one to the other
is a flat line and a surgical thread
mark to indicate this
I do not want to be a ghost.
The beauty of it all is it's over.
Follow this, the line says and then
comes to an end. It's as easy
to ignore as hanging mist
in damp trees. Or the photograph
of a woman cut in two. The saw.
The seen. In her card stock
backing beige silk. Her red leather
shoes with an eyelet edge. Now
they suture the shoes
in place behind vellum.
The missing letters caught
in the absent text. A net.
A set question: Where am I?
Her shoes were found by the side of a river.

Now they suture the shoes in place
behind vellum. The sharp stab.
Creation is moving
past fast. Part the scared
feverish shivery gawking
at absence. Absence as
ice in a winter white river. Achoo.
A shoe. Oral echolalia.
Here. Hear. A multipurpose
needle just having been pushed
past the border of skin. A cry.
Eyes in a state of perpetual
wondering until the slow crawl
comes to a halt at the edge
of the fact contraption collapse.
Blue Sphinx
[after Leon Golub]
by Clayton Eshleman

Shed of eternity—the riddled self
poised, tripodic.
What have you done,
man, with the animal powers
by which you entered time?

New Junk Yard dog
now on the street
an American merc
on dog alert, in defense of what?
The right front leg-arm, as long as that of a Caravaggio
executioner—is that this guy's Las Vegas push, his gambled stability?

Glassy street-dark blue. An East River serum glint.
Baudelaire in a crew-cut. The merc who bombed natives
here stuck with the logos of his wrath.

Rilke once slept all night between the Sphinx's paws.
Imagine him awaking to this neon-gangrene-faced merc,
the freak animality of his radiance.

Condomplatz, where the AIDS-infected pass,
"ghosts by day accost the passer by"
life on the street, no longer post-Romantic Ginsberg mudra
or OM-intoning "saint"
or even Manson tarantualizing runaways on filthy rugs.
The oil and fumes of Kali-Ma glint through
the hoop of self
ringed with Shiva fire.
On Eroticism and Cutting Fabric
by Mónica de la Torre

When we say canapé we mean something else, an edible thing to hold you up until the next meal. Hers meant a sofa with extensions shaped as body parts sewn to it, all upholstered in tweed.

A friend from Mexico wore tweed jackets and vests even in the warmest months. Take March, for instance. If it wasn’t tweed it looked like it. He wrote about memory and died last May, at forty. In 1999 we sat on a sofa and listened to music. An Ennio Morricone soundtrack cracked us up. He was the type you’d think are canapés. He drank more than he ate, and ended up crawling back into the walls; his form of delirium tremens.

Tweed as his surrogate self. The sofa was the bread, we the meats on top. Might have chewed on each other. Swallowed by time, he was the more edible one.

You can do whatever you want, I was told by a dealer with a crook’s reputation. What if I don’t know. You always do, said another man.

Artists: Express surprise that they dress like everyone else.

The artist knows what her tweed figures—anachronisms in the age of self-lubricating vaseline frames—are doing.
Studio: 1994
[from “In the Name of Studio”]
by Marjorie Welish

Cadmium Yellow Lemon
Cadmium Yellow Light,
and the eye of a blackbird.

Paper halved to indicate
that Cadmium Yellow Light
is not Cadmium Yellow Lemon.

Throughout atrium
Cadmium Yellow Light
acquiring ground and air.

Left and right brilliant
if unintelligible yellow and yellow—
inconsequential likeness.

Pigment formatted
through light through
lamp through chemical
philanthropy litmus
paper enlargement
“digitally enhanced . . .”

Of yellow ordinarily
optical now chemical
incompatibilities.
Dye House
by Vinece Katz

Segments, broken into pieces, long view is still
Central spot, perspective lines, you feel walking
Through, skylit room, doors distant, in corner,
Purple cloth, green wall, all smells dusty, distant
Memory through, endless chambers, where we
Once resided, not lived, thought, in friendship,
Could return, endless receding, but heart exists,
How things are built, structures, materials, again
Walk into spaces, abrupt from consideration,
All old, but work space, allows re-entry vision

Vincent Katz
is editor of and
contributor to Black
Mountain College:
Experiment in Art
(2003), which was
recently released
in a paperback
edition by MIT
Press. “Dye House”
was published in
John Moore: Portals,
the catalogue of
Moore’s 2013
show at Hirschl &
Adler Modern,
New York.
**Description**
by Christopher Stackhouse

Uniformity, radicality, fundamental tools of
Communication, language, argument, parameter
Balance, composition, status quo, modesty
Economical, economy, gravity and its opposite
Re-orienting, the historicity of human narrative
Af-am contribution to Abstraction, variation
Pattern making, smallness versus the typified
‘Grand gesture’, to write as one draws, geometric
lines, subsets confined and confirmed by points
Beauford Delaney, Edward Bannister, Gerhard Richter
Ellsworth Kelly’s yellow square, infinities of touch
Direction, dimension, germinal, caterwauling
Subjunctive, possible as a pair of shoes, vernacular
Viewing conditions, talent as an elitist construction
If you believe that, some sense of struggle, the pleasure
Of making things, disporting orders, a balustrade of indices
Any number of any particular series or random singular
Selection, an out of place pubic hair, centipede scurrying
On the wall, wind, sirens, a shadow cast in many directions
Some preoccupation with, falling, startled, a commensurate wish
Looking hard enough, or not looking at all, but through will
Paling contrast, tempting the dark, a phenomenal asterisk

**Eyestorm**
by Kenneth Goldsmith

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Two Hearts in One
[from “Duplexities”]
by Charles Bernstein

two hearts as one
become confused
I rather we figured
two as two
confused, enmeshed
we forge our clime
a picture is
a dance in time


Amy Sillman: Duplexities, 2011, iPhone drawing.