

DANNIELLE TEGEDER with Sarah Goffstein



Installation view: *Infrastructure*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Dannielle Tegeder is a painter whose work extends across media into conceptual artist books, sculpture, installation, animation, and sound. She emerged in 2002 with tightly composed diagrammatic abstract paintings that utilized a hermetic lexicon of iconography to evoke urban systems. Based in New York City, she now travels frequently, which has made geography of central importance. The conversations for the interview coincided with her trip to, and from, Mexico City, with the idea that geography could play a collaborative and poetic role in mediating a discussion of her work. The resulting transcript, in addition to its linear portrayal here, will be utilized for a conceptual writing project.

JOHANNES VOGT

Tegeder's installation, *Infrastructure*, is currently installed at the Montclair Art Museum through June 30, 2017. While viewing the exhibition in Montclair, Sarah Goffstein initially spoke with Tegeder who at that moment was in Cuernavaca enjoying a favorite abstract mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros. Married to the Mexican conceptual artist, Pablo Helguera, Tegeder described how she first began traveling to Mexico thirteen years ago. While initially visiting for personal reasons, she soon found that the interdisciplinary and political nature of the work by the artists she met there started to change how she thought about her own creative practice. Tegeder now makes regular trips to Mexico City for projects and a shift in perspective.

The conversation below took place in Tegeder's studio at the Elizabeth Foundation in New York after she returned from her trip. At the time, she was preparing two concurrent shows at Johannes Vogt Gallery in New York (*Blind Hierarchies*, November 17–December 23) and Gregory Lind Gallery in San Francisco (*The Geography of Artificial Life*, November 3–December 23).

Sarah Goffstein (Rail): As we were trying to connect while you were taking a cab from the airport to Cuernavaca, you sent me the following quote by Alain de Botton. How are you thinking about it in terms of your work and travels?

One wants never to give up this crystalline perspective. One wants to keep counterpositioning home with what one knows of alternative realities, as they exist in Tunis or Hyderabad. One wants never to forget that nothing here is normal, that the streets are different in Wiesbaden, and Louyang, that this is just one of many possible worlds.

Dannielle Tegeder: What was a little bit different about this trip is that I'm usually not in Cuernavaca. Mexico City has in some ways become like a second home to me. Consciousness shifts when you're moving in an unfamiliar place and I think that in some ways it awakens you to who you are and where you're from. I also feel that there is a utopian impulse in that.

Rail: Your new artist book is about in-between spaces where you wait while traveling: like airports, bus stops, and intersections. You mentioned that in your work, utopia is that space in-between. I was wondering if you would be willing to unpack that a bit more?

JOHANNES VOGT

Tegeder: Whew! I'm going to try. One thing about my work is that it is completely devoid of people. Here is a question that reoccurs: "Is this before something happens or after something happens?" I'm not sure which one. We can never know exactly what that utopian space is, because it's ephemeral. It's always fleeting. Going back to Cuernavaca, this was unfamiliar territory. When you move in that space, it awakens you, but then that experience is gone already.

Rail: In this case, utopia is less socio-political and more of a mindset?

Tegeder: Well, I like the idea of it being both, and I think this connects to an earlier conversation about the work deliberately referencing Constructivism, and maybe Modernism or Bauhaus. It's a really interesting question as to whether abstract painting can still have that political impulse and impact. Even though my work embodies ephemeral spaces, I think it also talks about borders and countries that are dissolving. There have been these horrific images of Aleppo coming out all week and then I was traveling through our highly politicized border between Mexico and the US. You know, I'm married to a Mexican citizen. I'm also aware of what moving between those two spaces means.



Dannielle Tegeder, *Lessons in the Consolidation of Inhuman Factors*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: You mentioned the Mexican border and Aleppo. I was wondering if you could walk us through the way you are thinking about borders and how they relate to the abstract motifs within your paintings?

JOHANNES VOGT

Tegeder: The work has become a lot less like a literal plan than in the earlier paintings. Those were about creating a very literal fictional underground city. This evolved after making sculptures, sounds pieces, and installation. There are layers of space and many times they descend from the top down. In some ways these become like different borders. They are joined by tunnels, which I call “Escape Routes.” Now I think you need an “Escape Route” more than ever. The work has definitely fragmented. There are also spills in it. I would say that there's usually one organic element that is unpredictable. It's like a bomb, catastrophe, or a flood. I don't know how it's going to transform the whole city.

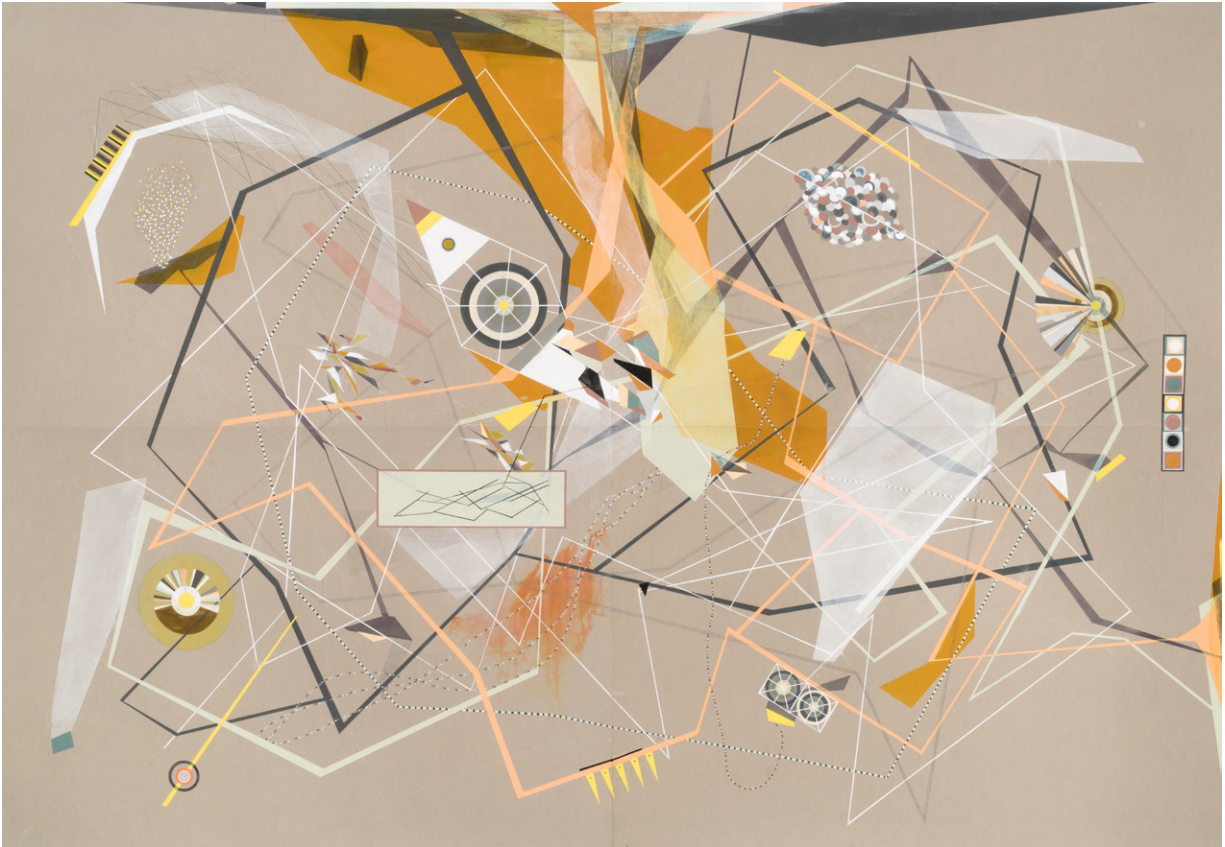
Rail: How long have spills been integrated into your work?

Tegeder: There have always been spills and I think of them as expulsion or waste areas. In the earlier work they were a little bit more controlled, but now sometimes they take over.

Rail: I'm curious to know more about the game you invented for titling your paintings in which you cut up the names of real cities and reassemble them. In the resulting titles, do the parts that make up the whole end up influencing how the painting is finished?

Tegeder: Usually I would say that I title them after they are finished. They are not literal. Sometimes they are weirdly poetic in how they come together. I do like the idea of regions becoming rearranged.

JOHANNES VOGT



Dannielle Tegeder, *Linear Momentum and Collisions*, 2016. Gouach, ink, colored pencil, graphite, pastel on Fabriano Murillo paper, 55 × 79 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: When you travel to places like Mexico City on a regular basis, it makes me wonder if you intend to reference specific cities in your paintings or do you want them to read universally on some level?

Tegeder: I like that on some level they read universally. I've done a lot of traveling over the last two years to Asia, Europe, and certain parts of Latin America. In some ways those places are not as important to me as the experience of traveling to them and out of them. I think that's another reason why I am also working on this text about transitory spaces. In an airport there's the promise of the city behind it – almost like a utopian station before you step into a city.

JOHANNES VOGT

Rail: That makes sense. I'd like to briefly jump back to your early paintings. As you know, I saw your first New York show at De Chiara Gallery in 2002. The paintings you exhibited changed how I thought about painting. They took Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43), to the next level as almost perfect diagrammatic abstractions of city systems. Seemingly simple forms referenced buildings, blueprints, city plans, diagrams of industrial production or distribution, and even something as minute in scale as a microchip. Because of these myriad references, the paintings spoke volumes about the urban world in which they were created. I think of this as a rare quality for abstraction.

When I was reading your Wellin catalog again, Tracy Adler mentioned titles such as "*Disaster Averter*" and "*Love Dot Boilers*." Those are only parts of much longer titles. To me they suggest devices. Does abstraction, and by extension painting, have the potential in your work to serve as an apparatus? Here I'm thinking of painting that goes well beyond a static relationship with the space it occupies.

Tegeder: Right after 9/11, I had to go back into the studio and actually make the work for my first show at De Chiara. There was a lot of literal talk going on about safe underground cities and a resurgence in that kind of architecture. In my paintings there were elements, like the "Love Dot Boiler," that function to provide love to an underground humanless machine that you would go and live in. That is humorous in some ways, but also very devastating to consider.

Rail: When I was thinking of an apparatus, I was also thinking about paintings that can intervene.

Tegeder: They work on a lot of levels, but my third show in New York was called *Arrangements to Ward Off Accidents*. Again, there were devices that ward off destruction. We live in New York and it's very uncertain. I have a studio in Time Square, which is obviously bizarre. It also becomes a poetic metaphor of arrangements that set space where things are warded off.

Rail: How did your iconography develop and evolve? Here I'm thinking about an early Matthew Ritchie project in which he created a grid with characters and properties kind of like an atomic table. Each of those characters was assigned a gesture and his paintings came to life through the interaction of these elements.

JOHANNES VOGT

Tegeder: I know exactly the chart you are talking about by Matthew Ritchie. At one point my iconography became so developed that my gallery made me write down all of these elements. There were about 300 elements that were just in my head. I'd like to put that information out as a legend, but it's an abstract legend, because even though I am listing the symbols, you have to figure out what the symbols are. I am at a point where maybe I'm just sick of practicality. I wanted page-long titles for my show in San Francisco.

Rail: Did you do that?

Tegeder: I did and it's still under discussion. I'm not so sure it's going to go through. The thing that I say to my students is: art is not about practicality. The titles don't fit neatly inside a press release. For me, that excessive list is what the work is about, because it becomes abstracted.

Rail: In your earlier paintings there were more perpendicular lines and an underlying Cartesian grid was palpable. Recent work seems deconstructed and feels so much more about the movement of forces within– and between cities. Do you want to speak to this change in form?

Tegeder: The early work was very literally like an architectural plan or mechanical drawing. This came out of my childhood growing up with steamfitters. I learned how to make mechanical drawings and design steam fitting plants. That obviously involved literal flat space. There are a few things that happened after that. I was teaching at Cornell in the Art and Architecture program and learned model making at a certain point. This led to a piece



Installation view: *Death Rock City*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

JOHANNES VOGT

called *Dead Rock City* (2004), which was a long sculpture with very non-traditional models sitting on a mirror. In a way, they were the physical manifestation of the drawings. After making the sculpture, I think the work changed drastically, because I went from a completely flat fictional space to making three-dimensional space. There was also the influence of being in Mexico City, an urban space that is almost never ending.

Rail: I've heard you speak to the benefits of working in an interdisciplinary manner. Were there any negative consequences that you experienced when you shifted from a very successful career as just a painter?

Tegeder: Yeah, I think there was. I remember that show where I shifted my work. An editor from a major art magazine came in and looked completely horrified. It's humorous now, but wasn't at the time. I feel like you should always be in the place of discomfort with your work. That kind of reaching is really important. I think people and the market want to neatly categorize you as an artist. When you stay with one kind of work and medium it's a much cleaner conversation than when you cross disciplines. I'm interested in a conversation that cannot be easily categorized.

Rail: It occurs to me that when you produce work, which cannot be perceived in a continuous gallery experience, that invisibility becomes an issue. In fact, one of your artist books is entitled, *The Index for the Invisible* (2007). How do you think of invisibility within the broader context of your work? This actually goes back to what we were talking about with iconography, for instance.

Tegeder: When you are working in these ephemeral ways, some of that information becomes invisible or less known. I find it very interesting even though it also bothers me, but I like that it disrupts a commercial system of showing my work. I feel like it's an artist's job to disrupt that sometimes and maybe even circle back and enable the work to be experienced in a different manner.

JOHANNES VOGT

Rail: There are some pieces, especially the conceptual writings that are so different from your paintings in terms of how they directly engage people who may not necessarily intend to be viewers, but participate in your conceptual projects nonetheless. Here I am thinking of the *Taxi Conference* (2010). I would be interested in hearing you speak about what for me seem like polar impulses between creating insular utopian worlds within your studio and conceptual projects engaging social practice to quite literally map the city.

Tegeder: I'm not so sure it's social practice, but I do think your observation is spot on in that the paintings and drawings in the studio are uninhabited closed worlds and remain utopian, whereas the artist books directly engage with people. Perhaps a better way of thinking about it is that one represents a fictional, utopic map and the other a more real, dystopic map.

For this book in particular, I thought a lot about an article that covered a study on London taxi drivers and the cognitive maps they developed. *Taxi Conference*, was a pocket-size artist book that contained interviews conducted with numerous taxi drivers about different routes taken from Manhattan's 14th Street to various locations around the city. The books were then scattered on the back seats of 100 taxicabs for riders



Taxi Conference, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

to discover. The prose of each driver's distinctive route was transcribed into poems that addressed the relationship between urban planning and architecture—highlighting the idiosyncrasies of the individual cabbies.

JOHANNES VOGT

Rail: I am also curious to ask you about Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. As we've been speaking, it occurs to me that you have traveled extensively, although you are based in both New York and Mexico City. This makes me think of Marco Polo telling Kublai Khan fantastic stories about cities he has seen. Like utopias they are descriptions of places that do not really exist, although they were all inspired by Venice. I actually get the sense that your paintings are rooted in your own geography. I'm wondering about how each invented city is really another version of the cities you know so well.

Tegeder: Of course, I love that book. The fantastic images of cities, paired with the titles Calvino used, is a big inspiration. I even show excerpts of *Invisible Cities* when I give my artist talks. I also would connect to Voltaire, because I love this idea of exploration from city to city. This is related to the time I spent in the Peace Corps in West Africa as well as when I traveled in India for a year.

Rail: Whenever we speak about utopias, you mention failure. You spend a lot of time in cities that were built partially on utopian impulses. I would like to hear more of the details of what failure means to you.

Tegeder: I think that painting is about failure. You continue making paintings, because you are failing, or at least I do. You're constantly reaching for something more. I think that's a similar evolution that you see in cities. Perhaps Mexico City interests me, because there is such a utopian impulse in the architecture, but it is city where things are constantly failing. I had a hilarious day in Cuernavaca. I was going to make an artist book, but every hour there was another failure. I couldn't get food because the restaurant was not open and then the copy place was going to be closed at 4:30 instead of 6:00. Even reaching another part of the city can be an exercise in complete futility.

Now, New York is a place that is utopian and failing in a different way. The Empire State Building was among other buildings that were a beacon of development, but of course those buildings have now been completely surpassed in other countries.

Rail: It sounds like when you're thinking of failed utopias, you are focusing on failed infrastructures.

JOHANNES VOGT

Teheder: There's definitely a failure of a more invisible infrastructure here. Although it may seem intact, there is a dissolving of economic structures into homelessness: poverty and a bigger gap between high and low classes. These things are perhaps most reflected in Mexico City, which has eruptions, disruptions, and interruptions that exist within the infrastructure. What fascinates me is that it continues to function as a vibrant city.

Rail: When reading your artist books, I was surprised by your interest in random acts of violence and loss. What role does chance play in your work?

Teheder: If you look at *Falling Apart NYC* (2008), it is about things that have fallen in the city. I'm right near the New York Times building and don't even walk by it anymore, because so many things have fallen off of it. Each time there must be a huge convergence of connecting events. Who were the builders? Was there a small vibration involved? What were the events that led up to the moment in which an individual walked by? That completely invisible system runs through our lives and causes us to end up in an exact spot at a certain moment. For instance, I love these weird stories about all the people who missed 9/11 by one minute. Perhaps there's no reason for it—just the convergence of all these systems. Maybe the conceptual writings are like these specific moments that peek out from behind invisible systems.

Rail: I think there is a special relationship between your paintings and your conceptual work—the paintings seem like macro infrastructure and connective tissue; the conceptual projects are the micro phenomena where you go into specifics. Now I am considering how your work is positioned in the art world. With notable exceptions such as Rashid Johnson and Mark Bradford, formalist tendencies in abstraction have been celebrated in recent years, whereas conceptual abstraction has been less dominant. Why do you think that is?



Dannielle Teheder, *Lightness as it Behaves in Turbulence*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 48 × 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

JOHANNES VOGT

Tegeder: There's a very pessimistic answer to that. In the market it's easier to deal with a formal painting than with a painting that has connections to conceptual and political subject matter. In some ways I feel that conceptual abstraction is still very prominent. It depends on where you stand and what you're looking at.

Rail: ...and where you decide to draw the borders around conceptual abstraction.

Tegeder: Another slippery border.

Rail: I thought it was relevant considering your recent timeline of shows outside of New York.

Tegeder: This connects to our larger conversation about geography. On a completely personal note, after 9/11 I had a horrible phobia of flying. I actually did not get on a plane for at least seven years, so I consistently showed in New York. After being hypnotized around four years ago, that completely went away, which has shifted my geography again. Now I'm in Mexico every two or three months. However, I still feel like it's important to show in New York, because I'm really a New Yorker. My roots are here, but I also feel like this is not the only place where I want to show my work.

Rail: There is a funny sense of irony that you became even more rooted in New York precisely because of 9/11.

Tegeder: It sounds so ridiculous to actually talk about 9/11. Or maybe not. Maybe it's become okay to talk about it again. I never would have said that 9/11 formed who I am and my work, but now over a decade has passed. Yes, it positioned me in the place where it happened—and in a very weird way. Of course looking back at the beginnings of the work, it was all about being in a safe city.

Rail: It makes sense that you wouldn't want to be overly associated with 9/11. Your next show is about to open here. Do you want to talk about *Blind Hierarchies* and how your work currently relates to New York?

Tegeder: New York is still probably the most significant place for me as an artist. Compared to how it was fifteen years ago, we have been experiencing a dramatic shift in our connection with the rest of the world. There are a number of uncertainties: not only the threat of terrorism, but the instability caused by the elections and other unforeseen factors.

JOHANNES VOGT

I think of my work as exposing these invisible systems. *Blind Hierarchies* is about that. The show at Johannes Vogt intersects with this political process, so it has some abstract connection to the election among many other systems.

CONTRIBUTOR

Sarah Goffstein