

**T**he oldest question of the world, surely, is *what is to be done?* It lies at the root of all of our decisions—political, technological, pedagogical, artistic, ethical—and governs individuals as well as entire civilizations, informing the choices made not just by artists, but by a child at play or by a nation at war. In a series of recent lectures, the German art critic Jan Verwoert describes the art-making process as one of making decisions, as artists consider what is to be done: what is the right thing to do, what is the right mark to make, what is the right angle to shoot, what is the right color to add?

The worst (and easiest) way for artists to answer the question, he tells us, is to turn to the options made available by a pre-existing system of legitimation. Situating themselves within this set of cultural terms or system of laws, they could choose to obey or to disobey the rules, pursuing the fantasy of being the good son or the bad son. In this scenario, the territory is set, the boundaries are defined, and art-making becomes a game where players compete to make the right moves. The winners are the smart artists who make smart art. The problem, of course, is that no one is truly threatening the rules of the game itself.

To artists working today, Verwoert says: reject the very idea of legitimacy, don't be tempted by the law, and face the reality of your own desires—*tell me what you want, what you really really want*. Can artists pursue an impulsive process that is more affective than effective, where provocative gestures can also be evocative gestures, and where art-making isn't so goddamn *melodramatic*?

As far as painters are concerned, he points to Mary Heilmann, Elizabeth McIntosh, and Tomma Abts, who insist on the continuation of painting, reject the laws that govern the chessboard of conceptual art, and invent their own set of available options. Rather than the board shaping the configuration of their moves, their moves shape the configuration of the board.

Jan's lecture, *Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It's a Good Idea*, screens on March 13th, 2011.