

# I LIKE USING STAGE DIRECTIONS AS NAMES ... THEY SUGGEST SOMETHING COULD HAPPEN

KATHARINA GROSSE

Recognised as one of the most influential visual artists working today — she has exhibited everywhere from Moscow and Massachusetts to Paris, Toronto and New York — Grosse is also a respected academic. Her teaching posts include a decade at the Berlin Weissensee art academy; since 2010 she has been a professor of painting at the art academy in Dusseldorf, 560km from Berlin, where she keeps another studio and where she was once a student.

Spotting the rising stars isn't easy, she says. "You never know who is going to make it. It could be someone you don't think is terribly exciting, someone under the radar, and then lo and behold." A smile: "I was one of those."



The middle child of an artist mother and a father who taught linguistics, Grosse grew up in the Ruhr Valley, Germany's former coal-producing region, an industrial hub with a rural, chicken-keeping vibe and a reputation for fiery temperaments. Her earliest memories are artistic ones: her mother's etchings, seeing Shakespeare in the local theatre and dance pieces by Pina Bausch's Wuppertal company, based nearby. She previously has told of a childhood obsession for mentally painting over the shadows in her bedroom with an invisible paintbrush.

Grosse studied in a faculty led by a clutch of uber-cool professors, including video artist Nam June Paik and painter Gerhard Richter (then teaching photography). But despite the presence of such mavericks the conservatism of art academies, which offered few different and successful role models for female artists and even fewer for female painters, came as a shock.

"When these role models aren't there for women artists it becomes especially difficult to cultivate independent thinking within institutionalised power structures," says Grosse.

Her dream art show, as featured last year in Claudia Muller's short film *Women Artists*, would include the likes of Austrian multimedia artist Valie Export, previously overlooked Victorian abstract painter and spiritualist Georgiana Houghton and Emily Kame Kngwarreye, the indigenous Australian artist from the Utopia community in the Northern Territory, whose work and methods impressed Grosse on sight. ("I have a picture of her sitting under a tree on the canvas and working along, so full of freedom.")

Fired by the different ideas cruising around the school, Grosse dabbled in film and video but, after going back and forth, decided to become a painter. "In painting I can compress movement in a different way to video, which uses movement sequentially, or to photography, where there's a before and after, or to music, where there's a beginning and end. In painting I can see that the yellow was before the blue and green but I see it all at the time."

To view past, present and future simultaneously — that is, to fuse sequences — is to occupy a paradox: "To see something that must have happened earlier, that is going to happen later, all at the same time makes me understand a lot of paradoxical situations."



Grosse draws painterly inspiration from a range of sources including cave painting, fresco painting, the European tradition of handpainted textiles and even indigenous Australian art. ("I went to Kakadu and was very attracted to how I think Aboriginal painting relates to land, location, geography and memory.")



From top, Grosse's installation in Moscow's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Yes No Why Later (2015); an untitled work from the Rockaway! series (2016); Wunderblock (2013), at Nasher Sculpture Centre in Dallas

Colour, however, is what has always bound her work together. But rarely, she says, is anything profound or fundamental written about its use. Art critics tend to expound on ideologies, concepts, what they can see.

Historically — as in, say, the 17th-century French Academy of Art — the use of colour in painting was considered feminine, less stable, less interesting. And where 19th-century and early 20th-century art movements including the fauve painters (Henri Matisse, Andre Derain) and the pointillists (Georges Seurat and his followers) were more into colour than concept, they concerned themselves with how one colour works in relation to another, or examined the depth of a colour itself — none of which remotely interests Grosse.

Instead, she takes this heritage and twists it, giving us colour as raw and aggressive as it is captivating and compelling, using her different acrylic paints to distinguish between the movements she creates; to explore the anarchic potential of colour; to harness — or to unleash — its energy. Hers is a pre-verbal, even primal, aesthetic, in which it is impossible to describe what you are seeing, though Grosse has likened the impact of her work to the sensations experienced on her annual bodysurfing holidays to

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New Zealand: "It's an amazing feeling to swim through swirling underwater sandstorms while the water shapes the land."

Visceral reactions, then, are what counts. "I want the work to be coming very close, as if you're listening to a sound or something you can't escape from," says Grosse, who does small paintings in the privacy of her studio. "I want to know how the painted image can live with us today. Can it be made a part of our world? How can it show what noise doesn't? How can you give painting a quality that will get you?"

But isn't all art subjective, in an I-know-what-I-like kind of way? When she went off-frame in 1998, spraying that splodge of green in a gallery corner and, for her own amazement, spray painting over her bedroom — bed, books, clothes and all — in her flat in Berlin ("I wanted to do my own environment"), weren't there those who got it and those who didn't?

What, too, of her recent controversy, *Asphalt Hair and Air*, a pink-and-white reworking of waterfront parkland in Aarhus, Denmark, in June — part of a Triennale exhibition and an artistic response to climate change — that saw a concerned local dob her in to authorities for vandalising public property?

"I can't influence how people will react, which is why art should always be unfinished," she says. "There are endless possibilities to be docked on."

"Last year I did a big piece in an old military barracks in the Rockaways [on Long Island, New York] where I transformed a house that was in the process of transformation, half-disappearing into sand. It was interesting to mark where it was at that moment, and at a location where water and land meets, an interesting border that gave it a very specific relationship to painting. Anyway," she shrugs, "it was my most widely shared work on social media."

With our time running out, and with Grosse due at a private view at the nearby Johann Koenig Galerie, one of several international galleries (including the Gagosian in New York) that represent her work, we venture upstairs to a cavernous space flooded with artificial light. Towering white walls edged with jagged lines of colour speak volumes about what is no longer there: "The work I've been doing for Prague is very crisp and crystalline, the opposite end of the spectrum from Sydney, where the folds are very loose and fluid," says Grosse, leading me over to where a model of the Carriageworks project sits on a table.

Everywhere inside the tiny building, bulging under its tiny wrought-iron roof, crammed inside its tiny arched windows, draped and tied, hiding and folding space, is fabric, all of it arranged in knots festooned with numbers marking areas that require rigging, indicating where the spotlights should go.

"It will look beautiful at night," says Grosse. "In the day time it has all the light it needs."

Outside, it is darker, even more mizzling, than when I arrived. Grosse offers to drop me at the Hauptbahnhof in her endearingly ancient cream Volkswagen. After a bit we get stuck in a jam at a red light and I offer to get out and walk.

I'm still walking when the lights change and Grosse zooms past, her hands at 10 and two, her eyes on the road, her tail lights burning amber.

It's not exactly "Exit, pursued by a bear", but it still feels like a hinge between activities, a suggestion that something — something big — is about to happen.

**The Horse Trotted Another Couple of Metres, Then It Stopped** is at Sydney's Carriageworks from January 6 to April 8.