

**CYNTHIA HAWKINS**

**IN CONVERSATION WITH**

**JANET OLIVIA HENRY**

**MODERATED BY RACHEL VALINSKY**

**Rachel Valinsky** I wanted to start by talking about *Art Notes*, *Art*, and the origins of this book, *Cynthia*, which you originally kept as a journal from 1979 to 1981. It is divided into three sections, the last of which is dedicated to your solo exhibition at Just Above Midtown in January of 1981, and also includes a foreword and afterword, which you wrote in the editorial process leading up to the publication. How did *Art Notes* reemerge for you in the past years, and what was it like to revisit this journal?

**Cynthia Hawkins** Well, because my solo exhibition was coming up at Just Above Midtown [JAM], and at that time I had already transitioned away from painting into sculpture, I was trying to find a way to combine both painting and the relief of sculpture. I thought that I would keep track of what I was thinking and of the structure of the work I was making through the little diagrams. And because I had already begun reading about cosmology and black holes and all kinds of things going on in the universe, and its structures and location, I thought that I should keep track of it.

At the beginning, I was thinking that this was something that should be published somehow. But it turned out to be a document of a whole life experience, because I did also write about and include people I was interacting with around my work, which was our group, the Ten Women, as we called ourselves. We came together in the mid-70s. I was in college and with my friend Irene Wheeler, who was older than me – she was a ceramic sculptor and I was painting – we wanted someone to talk to about our work outside of school. Eventually, we gathered five other women who were in the programme at Queens College. We came together and we would meet I think twice a month and talk about what we were doing. It was a women artists group, but it was about holding each other accountable for production and working. Because when it was your turn to have the group over and you didn't have anything to show, you felt pretty bad. People would call me and say, 'Cynthia, I can't make it...' [*laughs*]. I didn't chastise anybody – I don't think anybody really did. But in order to stay in it, you had to, you know, work. If members began to stop working, then they just removed themselves from the group, because that's kind of embarrassing [*laughs*].

My goal was to keep track of myself and what I was doing. I do have this proclivity to think about writing things down, and I have since I was about

eleven. I love notebooks. I would buy a notebook, use twenty pages, and then get another notebook because the notebook itself drew me in. So, I have several of these things around [from that period] and I would keep track and date it [the entries]. I usually included notes about my work and some writing. But I did always want to publish this [*Art Notes, Art*]. And I found documents that attest to that. I wrote a couple of letters to publishers trying to find out how much it would cost. Of course, I had no money to do that, especially the way publishing was back in the '80s. But recently, after thinking about my PhD dissertation as a recovery project for late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century artists of colour, my manuscript showed up again, and I suddenly realised it was my own recovery project. So then I had new impetus to follow through with the goal – I was going to publish it, whether I did it myself or I got somebody else. And that's when my daughter suggested Ananth Shashtri to edit this for me and they did a wonderful job. Just before Rachel [Valinsky] and CARA came into the picture, I had hired my friend Victor [Davson]'s wife, who designed the catalogues for the former Aljira Center for Contemporary Art, to design the book and find a printer for it. Because, you know, when I make up my mind [*laughs*]... I've been carrying this book around since 1981.

**RV** One of the major things that happened in this editing process was that you wrote a foreword, which brings us to the moment of starting the journal. And then you also take us back up to the present in the afterword.

**CH** Yes, and I have to credit Ananth with that. There was a life before the journal and a life after. The life before really tells the beginning of my career, my practice from 1973 or so on, and what I did from then to 1979, and then afterwards, till not so long ago. I think 2021 is the latest piece in there. The book allows you to see this period of time, but also that this practice of mine continues, instead of leaving readers guessing what happened before and after.

**RV** From this slice, 1979 to 1981, we really get a snapshot of the texture of everyday life as well as your process and the works you were developing leading up to your first solo exhibition. And another thing that was very important in the *a posteriori* treatment of the journal, to get into book form, was going back and

looking at all the references to other artists and people you were in community and dialogue with. We conducted a sort of mini-oral history with you around all those people, which appears in the footnotes, in the form of mini-biographies that detail when you first encountered an artist, the exhibition in which you might have seen their work, or how you met.

So, I wanted to ask you both about how you met and also what those years were like, the kind of artistic environment you were both moving through at the time. Janet, when we had a conversation to prepare for this talk, you said that the environment you were in – I think you were talking about spaces like JAM – ‘insulated you from the rest of the art world because we could do what we wanted, use anything.’ I’m curious to hear you both talk about your origin story, how you met, and also about those years of experimentation. In the book, we really see the formal experimentation, development, and collaboration that was happening at that time.

**Janet Olivia Henry**      The formal aspect of making art... I never really thought about it until someone referred to my work as formal even though I use toys and dolls. Reading Cynthia’s book, there’s a vocabulary and lexicon of art that exists, and you can choose to use it or not. And we chose to use it, except that our work is completely different. But the underpinning is this understanding of what art is or what it consists of, and the way it manifests is really what JAM let us do, or didn’t interfere with. We could do whatever we wanted. So, in looking at Cynthia’s preoccupation or interest in the Fibonacci sequence, I got fascinated with it too. When I was teaching kids, I had to come up with projects for them to teach it [the Fibonacci sequence], to examine that and address composition, form, and shape, moving in those boxes and how they’re exponentially larger. I thought, ‘Wow, that’s great.’ It’s great to have that as an underpinning because when you start making art, it may be literal or it may just be the foundation, but it’s in your head, so you can use it at will. And that’s what I saw in Cynthia’s work. Mine is actually about how I teach line, shape, form, composition, juxtaposition, you know, the whole thing. But what I use to do that is whatever I feel like [*laughs*].

**CH** My memory tells me that we met at JAM when it was downtown.

**JOH** If you attended one of the Business of Being an Artist series, I was there, and I did the flyers. It was downtown.

**CH** Or, uptown [*laughs*]. We're old [*laughs*]. I know we did meet uptown.

**JOH** For the Hollybush Gardens exhibition, I'm recreating our meeting with interlocking plastic bricks, also known as Legos. And I got some Barbie dolls to represent us. I used to go apoplectic when people said I used Barbie dolls because I was basically using mannequins that are called action figures, but they had portraits of actors from TV shows and movies. Anyway, they were like armatures, and you could, you know, turn everything around. Barbie dolls did not move. You got this [*strikes a pose*] or that [*strikes a pose*] or whatever it was. And I just knew I was not using Barbie dolls. But the accessories [of Barbies] were really good. Now it's flipped – the dolls are really malleable. They want them to do yoga, so you do have to have joints in the knees and things. The clothes are farkakteh, except if you buy the thematic things, which cost a lot of money. So. It's reversed. But all of that is to say that I got us some Barbie dolls and we are going to be able to sit, stand, and do whatever we want in this little diorama. And Linda [Goode-Bryant] and Steven [Chaiken] are represented by these clear plastic dolls that come with the organs and things inside. I got some of those, but I'm not using the organs. So, Linda and Steven are going to be represented by these clear plastic dolls, I guess, just because they were there, and I didn't want to do something that wasn't accurate.

**CH** Well, I believe you [*laughs*]. In my memory, what stands out to me is that you were working on *Black Currant*, which was a newsletter.

**JOH** Yeah, it was an artist publication. I asked Linda if JAM

could do it, and she said, ‘Well, let’s write a proposal.’ We wrote so many proposals that didn’t get funded; we didn’t expect to get one, but we did eventually, and we printed four of them. But I get focused on devices. So the first issue had twelve boxes on the cover, and one single artist occupied each space. As you went through it, that artist occupied the same space on each page, and it was up to them to do whatever they wanted. David Hammons had me go out looking for the ads on the back of *Ebony Magazine* – his was the only one that I had to produce. But everybody else made their own [laughs].

**CH** I had a sort of epiphany when you were doing this publication. And, I still have a couple of them. It was a real eye-opener for me, for somebody who’s occasionally interested in writing and writes for myself or just to document things. But *Black Currant* meant something to me. And you can see in the book; suddenly I’m having all these ideas about books and newsletters and journals.

**RV** You had a real plan for publishing!

**CH** *Black Currant* had a major influence on that aspect of my practice.

**JOH** It’s like seeing a version or some aspect of what you’re thinking in the flesh, tangibly. It makes it not so impossible.

**CH** And you hear that from people all the time; they see representations of themselves, or somebody they know, doing something, even if it’s not related to gender or race. And, you think, ‘I can do that too!’ I’m very much a person who wants to reinvent the wheel. I’ll do it the hard way just to get it done. And I ended up doing all the prep work for Dia Art Foundation, they wanted to produce a newsletter at one point, and I did the research for it and the design and possible layouts and all that stuff, and then they decided not to do it.

**JOH** Do you still have that material?

**CH** I probably do. [*laughs*] I mean, I keep everything. I have a sense that this may be useful. Even recently, I thought, I'm going to do a journal. I love short stories – I'll publish people's short stories in this journal. I'd only publish it once a year so I don't have to spend a lot of time on it. It always seems to me like a really valuable thing to put out in the world, and also help other artists reach some kind of public.

**RV** In 1979 you talked about wanting to make an art journal with the title *Art Verve*, or *Art Write* (but with the W—there is an art journal that already existed with an R [*Art Rite*]), or *Writing About Art* (*WAA*). And it would be Xerox-printed and quarterly, with a \$10 subscription.

**CH** I love titles. For a long time, I didn't make titles for my work because I didn't want to reveal too much about the work, that viewers would not spend enough time with the paintings. But in actuality, I do like titles. The way I use them, they allude to a broad range of possibilities, rather than to a single one.

**JOH** That takes some thought. It takes a lot of thought.

I'm also thinking that your journal... For me, it's not so much a journal, it's a sketchbook. Ever since I was in high school, first thing they tell you is keep a sketchbook – for ideas or just going around and drawing. And what captured me with this book is Cynthia gives us the ideas, the thinking, the language behind what you present. It's really interesting to see. And it doesn't take away the mystery. It shows how this is built on this, this is built on that, and it's interesting to see how it works. And again, when I saw that, I thought, 'I want to do that, I want to try that.' Or if I was still teaching, 'Y'all are going to do that.'

**RV** I'm interested to talk more about the role of writing in both of your works. In *Art Notes*, there is writing as record-keeping, observing process, and reflecting on works as they're being made, if they felt successful or not successful, or working through materials, how they're functioning, trying new things out. Janet, you said something really beautiful the other day about writing or this kind of record keeping as a way of identifying things for yourself. I'd love to hear you both talk more about the ambient, prominent, or even disavowed role of writing in your work, which is always there but not always the most immediately visible form your work takes. Although in your exhibition [*Six Decades*, at Gordon Robichaux, New York, 2024], Janet, there's writing everywhere, really. It's everywhere from the titles of your works to forms of journaling, to the scripts that undergird longer narratives in your practices...

**CH** I don't think of myself as a writer. I say that I like writing. It's such a good way to see yourself, see what you think you know, and that's mostly what I used it for. But now, since I got this dissertation done – and I do like history and research and writing about historicism... I will write an essay but I won't write it according to word count. I wrote an essay for an exhibition, and they asked me to write about Black abstraction in the '60s and '70s. They gave me the word count and I said, 'Well, I can't do that.' They said, 'But we're not going to pay you more if it's longer.' And I was like, 'That's okay.' Because it is too limiting. You don't know what you're going to find when you do the reading and research. You don't know what you're going to have to say that you didn't know before. You think you know, and then while you're doing it, things change, things happen, there's spontaneity, especially if you're working every day. Things happen the way you move your brush, the way you see the colour. You say, 'I don't use white, I don't use that.' And then two weeks later, 'Oh!' [*laughs*]. I mean, I think they're really different [writing and art making]. They use different parts of your brain, but they actually require the same kind of flexibility.

I think writing is harder. I like it because it's harder than what I already know. It's like learning to play guitar – when I don't do enough work, I think about playing an instrument. In order for me to play well, I will have



to have played it as long as I can, but I don't have that kind of time. So then I make sure I do my work right. I can see myself walking down the road with a guitar and I like it [*laughs*]. But he'll tell you [*gestures to her husband*], I got a guitar for myself. Have I used it? No. I just feel that between writing and painting, there's a relationship, continuity, and while they may require similar energies, they are really different.

**JOH** My writing comes out of storytelling. And I never really looked at what I do to analyse where it came from or what I'm doing, I just do it. I've never taken writing courses. When I start editing things, I keep on adding to them. It gets longer, it gets more convoluted. And when I really buckle down and try, with the intention of making it work, by the time I scrape things away, it's not interesting anymore. I have stacks and stacks of writing. Also, National Yenta – I have opinions about everything, so I start writing about things. Though actually I guess I have gotten better, because a friend of mine lost his job a couple of months ago and I know the organisation and I know the circumstances and I know the history and the things that generated the firing and how it wasn't going to stay the same, so I did a screed or a rant and I wrote through it and I was happy with it, because for once I did get to emulate Hanif Kureishi. I really admire the way he writes. He grabs you and drags you through it. And I, for some reason, want to do that.

The things I write are anecdotes, little snippets of things that are put together. And it's also like my work. I can't paint. I mean, no, I shouldn't say it that way. When I was teaching, I'd come home and not make art because I'd beam out, but I had holidays and vacations to do work. Years ago, I realised that to be a painter you have to have sustained amounts of time, because if you don't have that when you come back to what you worked on, you could get like fifteen, sixteen ideas on one canvas and never be able to pull it together. So, I learned to make components and then I could put them together when I needed to write or make something. The writing follows that mentality.

What happens for you, Cynthia? You're talking about painting and

writing being different. The outcome is different, but the process we use to address it is kind of the same. In a journal are discrete things that happened over a period of time, and you put them together and people reading later or you reading it again say, 'This is how things transpired or how things developed.' It's nice. It's good to see. I was really happy to see what you did.

**CH** I wrote when each entry had just occurred. I didn't ever go back and edit it... it's just a piece. But there was a kind of momentum to keep things rolling forward. There are only a few pages with actual dates on them. They're really numbered entries. In the beginning, when I was going to have somebody edit it, they wanted to know how many pages there were. I thought, 150 pages, right? And then I actually looked at it and realised they're not real pages, like three hundred words to a page. It's not like that at all. So, the word count in it is very small compared to a book of say, 150 pages. You do things, and especially if they were a long time ago, and you really haven't looked at them for some time, eventually you realise this is one project – the object was not what I thought it was.

**RV** I'm also curious to talk more about writing in a kind of expanded sense. Janet, the narrative texts you write, which are also extended characterisations and, as you mentioned, forms of storytelling, with characters that iterate across the narrative texts and scripts, which you've referred to as examinations of archetypes. And Cynthia, in some of the works that predate the book – even by just a year or two – you talk about signs and symbols, calligraphic marks and hieroglyphs and geometric symbols. A lot of what you're writing about is a geometric understanding of bodies and space, and how depth and colour function across different materials and forms. I think, in both of your practices, there is a kind of drilling down to the archetypal, the hieroglyphic, the signs and symbols – a vocabulary, in short – and how its assembly produces a grammar and meaning, which are associated with how language iterates.

**JOH** And how it builds out too. One of the things that I'm invested in and pay attention to is building an image or drawing of a human face, let's say, from the inside out. And as far as I'm

concerned, if I don't do that, it doesn't ring true. It's not effective. You said the facial aspect of it – I think of it as surface. From going to FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology], of all places, I learned anatomy. We had to learn anatomy because in order to make clothes lie on a figure properly... If you're going to do anything you should know it inside out, so that whatever you choose describes it. That Leonardo da Vinci thing that's on PBS now [film by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon], one of the people narrating it said something along the lines of, 'He makes you see things that aren't there.' And that's kind of what we do. In jazz they talk about notes you don't play, but you know them, you can hear them in your head, you can put the thing together. And that's the kind of charge I picked up on. I think you have too [*referring to Cynthia*].

Yours is a lot more complicated [*laughs*]. But effective. You really achieved what you chose to do. And I really like the idea of building paintings based on geometric shapes and stuff. The paintings have no geometric shapes in them at all, but they're built on that. The way I did that while teaching – I made shape sheets, and I found twenty-six shapes. Then I realised after fifteen years or so of teaching the students needed to see non-right angle shapes. So I looked for all kinds of things. But the idea of a vocabulary, starting with that... I produced it for children. It was still my thinking.

**CH** You can't teach kids things you don't know. Even in regards to the process of building a body of work, I mean, what is this, eight years later? I'm at the Studio Museum, at a residency, and the last two paintings I made during the residency are the beginning of a new body of work. Because I realised that I was painting in a really expressionistic way, and I needed more structure. So then I re-read Suzanne Langer's book, *Logic of Signs and Symbols*. And there are several chapters about recognising an image, or partial representation of some object. So, the first two paintings are really using her idea of seeing a cat's tail from under a couch. I mean, you don't have to see the whole cat to know that it's the cat. And then I did more research, going back to antiquity to ask, 'What does a circle mean? What did it mean then? What is it now?' Squares, triangles, numbers... And then you acquire all of this and you reuse it. You reinterpret it,

reevaluate it. And it comes out not on its own; you use it to tell another story, and it approximates language. I also looked at Gregg shorthand for a writing process to use with numbers, signs, and symbols, in a case where people could actually read something. This approximation of language... I really enjoy that aspect of it. It was very spontaneous. I had these things in my head and then it was time for them to be used on each painting. It's spontaneous, how they got used and married with the abstract expressionism that I did love for its brushwork and colour. So, we go through these evolutionary periods where we leave an idea, do something else, and return or restart the process. So I always say that all of these things that I used from the '70s are still at play and can be called upon, and they are usually always used in a different way.

**JOH** I have a question that's kind of a tangent. Are you concerned about surface? You're talking about brushstrokes. I know painters are careful, thoughtful, about the surface of the work. It's just as important as the content and as anything else.

**CH** Surface as in texture?

**JOH** Texture, yeah.

**CH** I don't think I'm interested in texture so much, because I'm not willing to put stuff in my paintings. That's not my motivation.

**JOH** Okay, not texture, but surface. Like, how is this thing going to look, period.

**CH** Well, I care how it looks. I'm not interested in a perfect surface. I am not interested in the perfect edge or square. I gave that up a long time ago, because it just didn't matter. I let it go. It doesn't bother me if it's a little off. But what I do find wonderful is the way the paint goes onto the surface, on the canvas. When I work every day, after a while, I'll start to use

the brush differently to get the paint on the surface this way instead of that. It's really because I can't do the same thing endlessly. Repetition, doing things the same way, is against my needs.

But, you know, with my new work and the maps, the final element is the map on the surface. I'm using an oil bar to put the map on because it seems more like a drawn line and not a painted line, and it breaks up as you move it, and it's like a pencil. I think it's really important for the surface.

**JOH** And that's texture.

**CH** Yes. You're talking about the painting?

**JOH** Yeah, the surface of the painting. When you look at it, literally, the surface. When you look at a painting, the surface has a quality. Maybe it can have texture, but still, whatever is going on works. Whatever's going on in that surface, it comes together, it works and there's no question about like, why is that there? Or how come I can see through to the bare canvas? It's created. I guess I'm talking about craftsmanship. I'm curious – there are so many painters in the world, like you mentioned in the book – how you approach it. How you approach it, I think differentiates somebody who's just painting, doing the physical activity, from somebody who, like you said, is thinking about what's going into the work, what underpins it.

**CH** I don't know, really. You asked about texture. I mean, there are some people who put sand in the paint...

**JOH** But again, that putting sand in the paint, putting anything in the paint, if it's done, if it's a gratuitous exercise, so what? I guess what I'm saying is the choices you make for your paintings are about making the thing work.

**CH** Yes. So, what happens with the oil bar, though, is that its texture is like a pencil on sandpaper. It breaks up the surface. There's breaks in the mark, and so that mark is really in opposition to the rest of the painting, which is basically smooth. You can see the way the paint is applied, whether it's brushy or circular or this thing or that thing. But the oil bar is in opposition to the overall surface, because it is more felt like a drawing, and it is textural. And that's why I need that, you know, because in the new paintings with the map lies within the background – and that's in the book – it ends up being obscured.

**RV** Is there a way that this question about surface appears in your work, Janet, or gets reconfigured in your work?

**JOH** Yeah. I mean. I'm just using Legos. I resisted using them because of them damn dots. And LEGO is really invested in their dots [*laughs*]. And so, when I started finding things like windows and doors and finishing bricks, I started to make things. The first thing I made was some really loud medieval town. It lasted for maybe ten years, and then I gave it a really hard look and took it apart. And then I build a tower. But the surface of things, the monotony of surfaces or the being careless about the surface of what you're doing, is upsetting at times. I mean, to see work and think, 'Oh that's a good idea,' and then... womp.

**RV** And you also have the inherited surfaces of found material.

**JOH** Well, yeah. One of the things about working with beads... it's a given. Whatever you have there is what you have to work with. There's no changing the tint or the shade of it. I found these really nice annular cones, but the blue wasn't right – it wasn't green enough. It just sat there, and I couldn't use it with anything. I ended up using it kind of by itself. I think actually it is one of the things that prompted me to make this series I'm doing called

*TWOS*. I put two disparate elements together with beads and hang them off of this thing. And that's where I got them to work, by themselves, not with anything. With painting, of course, you can change it. But there are some things where it is what it is. And if you're going to use it, it has to work for what you want to do.

**RV** I'm very interested in the tension in both of your works around the impulse for invention, the rejection of repetition and monotony, and the ways in which you are reconfiguring and rethinking language, objects, and materials. I want to share some really beautiful quotes that I gathered from reading both of you – two really great oral histories that you both did separately for *BOMB*. Cynthia, you talked about abstraction being about possibilities and the potential of the real to become something other. And you say, 'Abstraction offers me opportunities to remake the real.'<sup>1</sup> And Janet, you talk about having a firm belief that, 'We can all make our own magic.'<sup>2</sup> What I see in this pervasive interest in colour and design, and also in the dioramas and in your work, are the ways in which you reconfigure elements from reality, from your own histories, from stories. How do the forms you work with offer possibilities for producing the real, for remaking it?

**CH** I have been using natural elements for a while as a starting point for my work. And these shapes are basically... a circular thing, something that can be a blur but still circular, and shadows falling, and pebbles, and things that are really part of the earth, but that can become much more than they are depending on how they're put together. And I don't just grab them. I make lots of ink drawings. I'll use a pint of grape tomatoes for instance and throw them on the floor. It's about the relationship between things as much as it is the shape of the thing. I love boulders, big rocks, things like that. And I'll use aspects of them, not the whole form. The shape is just one part of the beginning, and then it's what you do with the colour. It's how things overlap, creating space within the painting that defies the flatness of the canvas. I think that lately, in the last couple of years, the space has gotten deeper, and greater movement into it. Part of

1 Cynthia Hawkins, 'An Oral History Excerpt with Cynthia Hawkins,' interview by Julia Trotta, *BOMB*, March 14, 2024, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2024/03/15/cynthia-hawkins-julia-trotta/>.

2 Janet Olivia Henry, 'An Oral History with Janet Henry & Sana Musasama,' *BOMB*, September 18, 2019, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2019/09/18/janet-olivia-henry-and-sana-musasama-ohp/>.

the issue with the maps is that the map is supposed to, and will become one of the objects that provides deeper entry into the painting. That's how the real comes.

**JOH** 'You make your own magic' came out of the juju boxes, and the juju boxes came out of... I wanted to give someone a present and I didn't have any money, but I collect a lot of little things. When JAM was on Franklin Street, I'd go across town with \$10 and bring back all kinds of stuff. I got a basket and put in things that were just nice things, and also things that reflected the person getting the present, and that mushroomed into the *Juju Boxes* – generic juju boxes that actually people bought at one point! One woman purchased one, and she said she gave it to her little nephew and she didn't hear from him for the rest of the day [*laughs*], he kept on playing with it. In my mind, these objects give you ideas. You could refer to things from them, but also they related to each other. And I thought – I don't know if it's true or not – but as you pick things out of the containers, they all relate to each other, so each succeeding thing related to the previous one, and could create a story, and the magic part was coming up with whatever you chose. That's the other thing, too. A dealer told me once, I was talking about people interpreting my work, and they said, 'You can have very specific reasons for what you make, but when people see them, they bring their own ideas and experiences and thoughts to it.' I didn't object; that made perfect sense. You can't control how people interpret your work. In fact, someone was complaining about having to read a narrative to one of my pieces. And I said, 'Keep quiet.' You don't have to read it all, but I have to have it all there.

This transcript is edited from a conversation between artists Cynthia Hawkins and Janet Olivia Henry, and CARA's Director of Publications Rachel Valinsky, which took place on 12 December 2024, on the occasion of the launch of Hawkins' new book, *Art Notes, Art*.