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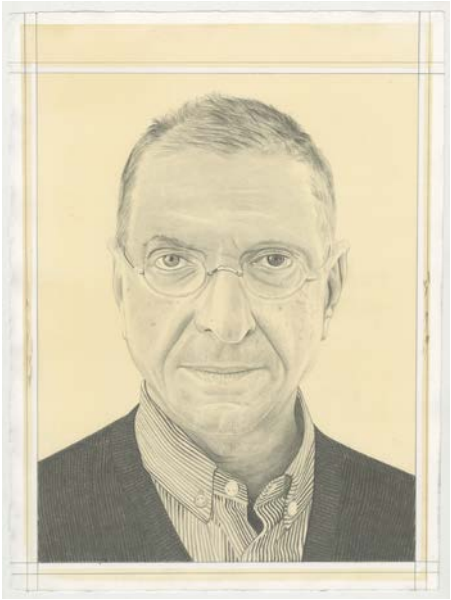
Y.Z. KAMI with Francesca Pietropaolo

"The surface is the main thing and I believe that a painter has to invent their own surface."

Francesca Pietropaolo



Y.Z. Kami. Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

On the occasion of the opening of his first solo exhibition in Italy, Y.Z. Kami sat down with art historian and curator Francesca Pietropaolo on a quiet Sunday morning at the Gagosian gallery in Rome to discuss—among other things—painting, poetry, music, alchemical transformation, and the spiritual.

Francesca Pietropaolo (Rail): You made a new series of paintings, titled "Night Paintings," realized from 2017 to 2019—most of them are from 2019. You are showing them for the first time here in Rome at Gagosian. These new, compelling paintings take a step further your longtime exploration of abstraction and representation, the tension between visibility and invisibility, the quest for the spiritual in your work, as well as a sense of transformation, almost an alchemical transformation. To begin our conversation, maybe you could talk about the genesis of these new works. How did they come about?

Y.Z. Kami: I started the very first painting of this series towards the end of 2017, so this whole body of work that you have seen in the show is from 2018–2019. It's been basically two years of

concentration on these paintings. Like everything else I experienced in painting, the coming about of the work is quite accidental. It comes from sketching and drawing, and a sort of abandoning of figuration in terms of the phenomenal world—you know, faces and objects around us. As you mentioned, abstraction has always been part of my work, part of the journey of painting. It's been as if abstraction in the past was more connected to a sort of geometry, a geometry coming out of architecture. So it's in that spirit that I did [starting in the mid-2000s] the different series of "Dome" paintings which are more or less circular mandalas referring to ceilings in architecture, in general, and sacred architecture in particular. I also made circular forms, again geometric forms using texts of poetry and prayers from different traditions—Persian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Sanskrit prayers. Anyhow, this new series, to my surprise, took me somewhere else which was not figuration and not precise geometry, but just this movement captured as though it is happening at night. That's why I called them "Night Paintings," meaning things that you feel and see and also things that you don't see, that you just feel. To me the paintings refer to that state of presence that is not concretely visible but it's there. And you feel it through your emotions, through your intuitions and the movement. There is this endless movement around us in dreams, in the sleep and when we are awaken.

Installation view: Y.Z. Kami: Night Paintings*, Gagosian, Rome, 2020. Artwork © Y.Z Kami. Courtesy Gagosian.*

Rail: Compared to your work characterized by a "geometry of light"—the semi-architectural abstractions that you were just talking about and, particularly, the "Dome" paintings evoking the passage from darkness into light—what strikes me in experiencing these new works is precisely that there you had this concentric, circular composition and a center that was about light, while here in the "Night Paintings" one is put off-center, in a wonderful way, because there are things happening throughout the surface, and the center is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It's that sense of movement that you just described.

Kami: Yes, that sense of movement is very important. You know, the human face has always been the main focus of my work. And I think that here the portraits are present but in a different way, as if they have become just some illusions, feelings. I don't want to use the word "decomposed" to describe them, because they are not decomposed. There is still a very subtle allusion to human presence.

Rail: Definitely.

Kami: A presence which is not at all concrete.

Rail: It's a presence that materializes under our eyes but at the same time is evanescent, almost ghostly.

Kami: Yes, it's a presence that doesn't manifest itself through anything material, but it is somehow present.

Rail: To me it's almost as though in these paintings you have freed the inner world of those visages you have been capturing through figuration, evoking their thoughts and feelings. And at the same time it is about the cosmos: some of those shapes make you think of life underwater or relate to elements of air; in fact they allude to a flux of changing states. Would you say that that is an accurate description?

Y.Z. Kami, White Dome IV*, 2012-2013. Dye and acrylic on linen, 54 x 63 inches. © Y.Z. Kami. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian. Photo: Robert McKeever.*

Kami: Yes, what you're describing is accurate, without me going after that, as these paintings happen through the process. As I said, they came out of sketches and drawings as a base, and then with the brush and oil they became these forms that dissolve in each other. They move into this dark surface, and they create light. They are light, in certain ways.

Rail: The sketches and drawings you mention, are they abstract?

Kami: Yes, completely abstract. But, you know, they just consisted of some indications. In a way I made a plan, a road map on the surface of the canvas, but the journey takes place through the brushwork and the paint.

Rail: One of the works in this ensemble that seems to anchor the show is the painting of Ramakrishna, *The Great Swan*, (2018) because in it you have this very powerful tension between the obliteration in the upper part of the painting—this beautiful area painted in expansive brushworks—and then what remains of the image of the photograph that you used as source material. Could you talk about that work? I feel that there we see you fully stepping into a new territory.

Kami: That is very true. A new territory. There is this picture of Ramakrishna that I came across years ago. It shows Ramakrishna standing, surrounded by his devotees, and he is in what in Sanskrit is called *samadhi*, that is ecstasy. I was always fascinated by this photograph of a holy man who is in ecstasy and by the fact that a photograph of that moment exists. These are things you read or hear about in different traditions, but here you actually have a photograph from the

end of the 19th century where the saint is in ecstasy. This image has always been with me in my thoughts, for a long, long time. And I always wanted to do a painting somehow connected to it. This was not the first painting I did in these series of "Night Paintings," but among the first. It was 2018 and, after a few experiences, I moved on to this painting. The composition on the canvas gradually changed. As I was painting, Ramakrishna's face and upper body went into this mist of indigo. Dark, dark indigo blue. And the painting became like this without me having any intention of… I didn't have any strategy to start with. It just happened by itself.

Rail: In the process.

Y.Z. Kami, The Great Swan, *2018. Oil on linen, 132 x 108 x 1 3/4 inches. © Y.Z. Kami. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian. Photo: Robert McKeever.*

Kami: Yes, in the process. And I thought, "That's it!" And it's not something that could be painted. The face of the saint disappeared.

Rail: In ecstasy.

Kami: And maybe it conveys a feeling of rapture.

Rail: There is a wonderful detail, among many, in the painting where you see, on the right side, a face, almost completely blurred, of one of the devotees, and it is in half light; and further down from it, there is another face of one of the individuals in the group which is all black, in full darkness. There is this striking contrast between light and darkness. But maybe it also alludes to reality as a beginning, a point of departure and it conveys the suggestion of another dimension beyond the phenomenal. I was fascinated by that detail as it connects to your long-time search on the expression of a face and shows how that has changed in your new work. It also made me think of Emmanuel Lévinas. I know that in the second half of the 1970s you moved to Paris from your native Tehran. You were interested in philosophy—among your other interests—and at the Sorbonne you attended some lectures by Lévinas, who is such an interesting philosopher. To me, that detail resonated with Lévinas's reflection on the visage—I think of his 1961 book *Totality and Infinity* and also of his earlier article "Reality and its Shadow" (1948). There is the notion of the face as something central, but at the same time as something that can't ever be fully grasped. It is ineffable, in a way. To what degree has that aspect of Lévinas's thought, part of your formative experience, been important to your own thinking?

Kami: Ever since I remember, the human face has been my main interest in painting. I started to paint in order to be able to paint the face. That was really the reason why I became a painter, in order to paint the face, starting very early on, as a child. My mother was a painter, although she doesn't paint anymore. She was sort of a very academic painter of portraits, landscapes, and still-lifes. She worked in a Beaux-Arts style of academic painting, and her work was very well done. Through her I was able to start painting portraits early on, using oil paint and having the sitters in front of me. But then, when I finished high school and went to Paris, I didn't want to become a painter. I mean, I never stopped totally painting, but I stopped my search for painting and that was kind of transferred into humanities and studying philosophy. That sort of thing. But at the same time, in Paris, as a young student, I was the opportunity to go regularly to the Louvre and look at the old masters—portrait was my main interest, of course—and that's where I discovered the Roman-Egyptian funerary portraits of Fayum. I got very drawn to them. These very stylized faces, with their wide-open eyes staring at you, painted with encaustic, which is why they survived for 2,000 years—the height of Fayum portraiture was the second century A.D. Anyhow, as you mentioned, in philosophy one of the professors that I was very fascinated by was Lévinas. Another one was Henry Corbin who was at the École des Hautes Études. As you said, Lévinas wrote a lot about the face and the infinity of the face, and at the same time of the fact that you never capture it. So there was an element of connection for me.

Y.Z. Kami, Gilles Sleeping*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 22 x 27 inches. © Y.Z. Kami. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.*

Rail: From the beginning, as you pointed out, you were interested in working with oil paint. I have in mind, in particular, a beautiful oil painting you made in 1985, *Gilles Sleeping*, where there is a very interesting relationship between the figure, absorbed in the moment of sleeping, and the whiteness of the canvas that is left "undone."

Kami: Yes.

Rail: In my mind, that visual tension hints already at an interest in reality and description and, at the same time, in something else, something mysteriously evoked, but not apparent. An interest in the immaterial, feelings and thoughts.

Kami: That's very true.

Rail: Then from there you go on to use oil paint in a way that results in matte surfaces and has a solidity to it—reflecting also your strong interest in the Fayum portraits. How would you

describe the development in your painting practice, in the handling of paint, from your early work of the mid-1980s to your use of the sfumato technique, and then the new achievements we see, within that sfumato technique, in these new paintings where there's a sensuousness of touch, a physicality even more tactile than that of your earlier sfumato head portraits? I think, for instance, of one of the head portraits you showed at the 2007 Venice Biennale, organized by Robert Storr, where you had a room in the Arsenale: a compelling portrait of a woman with her eyes closed, *Untitled (Woman in a Green Sweater)* (2006). Could you talk about how things have developed in the process of painting?

Y.Z. Kami, Untitled (Woman in a Green Sweater), *2006. Oil on canvas, 132 x 74 inches. © Y.Z. Kami. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian. Collection Thomas Gibson, London. Photo: Robert McKeever.*

Kami: I started to use oil paint very early on. The problem I had with oil—although I love it—was the shiny quality, the sheen, as in *Gilles Sleeping*. So I spent a long time experimenting to finally get to my own mixture, you could say my own recipe, because I wanted to get to something like wall painting. I was always fascinated by frescoes, the frescoes that I've seen in Byzantine churches and later on those of the Renaissance. In particular, I love those Giotto frescoes in Padua. The materiality that you mentioned, which is in the Fayum portraits, also fascinated me, but I didn't want to do encaustic, as in the Fayums, which is a mixture of wax and pigment. Finally, I got to the surface that corresponded to the feeling I wanted for the surface of the canvas. You know, ultimately a painting is the surface of the painting. This is why a painting is lost in photographic reproduction: because the surface is not there. The surface is the main thing and I believe that a painter has to invent their own surface. That is where he or she exists. If you look at modern art, Jackson Pollock invented his own surface—it doesn't look like anyone else's—and so did [Henri] Matisse. It's all about achieving the kind of surface that corresponds to your journey. Anyhow, for me this came about over a period of time through my experience with different materials. The way the "Night Paintings" are painted is the same as the portraits shown in Venice that you mentioned.

Rail: But something happens in the brushwork in these recent paintings. That sense of movement that you were evoking earlier comes through, not just in the composition and in the play of light and darkness, but through the gesture that seems to be freer. The physicality of the brushwork is accented in an idiosyncratic way.

Kami: Yes, there's the physicality of the brushwork. You're absolutely right.

Rail: Your complex, subtle play with color and pigment, and the brushwork is seemingly effortless, as though it couldn't have been done differently. But you can see the complexity behind it, to achieve that.

Kami: You know, this is something that has to happen by itself. I wanted to get to a place where you don't see the craft behind the result, as though it just happened, as if it has happened so easily, like a breath. So that you don't see all the endurance and the process. I think that in some of these new works, especially, I've got some of that.

Rail: Absolutely. I'd like to turn to the scale of your work. These paintings are mostly large format, except for a few such as the smaller, intimate *Night Painting IV*. Walking through the show—which is beautifully installed, by the way—I thought it was really important to have that different experience: while in the case of the larger paintings the beholder relates to them with the measure of their entire body, in front of a smaller work what happens is that within the utmost concentration of that intimacy an infinity opens up under the viewer's eye. How do you toy with that? What kind of choices do you make about the scale of a painting?

Kami: In this new group of works I have been "exploring" how to convey that intensity with a more restrained, limited size of canvas. In the case of a large painting, the viewer can enter the canvas and the connection to the feeling of the painting is probably more open. But I wanted to really concentrate and get the same kind of rapport on a much smaller surface. I think that in some paintings this has started to happen.

Rail: Another underlying interest in your work is the dialogue between art and poetry.

Kami: Yes.

Rail: You talked about Persian poetry earlier. There is an exquisite example of your "Endless Prayers" series which is a collage in the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection, one of your semi-architectural abstractions. In it, you inserted excerpts from a poem by Rumi—scanned and printed on paper—and used paper fragments to create a concentric composition. There you have poetry—the spoken word—but also a reference, through composition, to the rhythm of Sufi celestial dance. Moreover, at the entrance to this show, Rilke's 1924 poem, "Night (o You Whose Countenance)" printed on the wall, welcomes viewers. It's a wonderful choice. The poem's first lines read: *Night. O you whose countenance, dissolved / in deepness, hovers above my face. / You who are the heaviest counterweight / to my astounding contemplation*.

Furthermore, two of the paintings in the exhibition are dedicated in their respective titles, to William Blake. Can you talk about your love for poetry and who your favorite poets are?

Kami: I've been reading poetry since I was very young, a teenager. At that time it was mostly Persian poets—they still are among what I like to read the most—and gradually I discovered

poetry in other languages. Two of the poets I always read are Rumi and Hafiz. I adore Walt Whitman and Cavafy, and William Blake, as you mentioned. There are so many great poets that one doesn't have enough time to read! As it happens, when I started this group of paintings, I was re-reading a lot of Blake who is an extraordinary poet in terms of language and vision. So I was thinking a lot about his poetry, more so than his painting although he made some really fascinating watercolors. Poetry has always had a central place in my life.

Rail: And what about music? Do you ever listen to music while you work?

Kami: I do listen to music, and sometimes while I am working—mostly classical European music which is my main interest. But I also love Indian music, songs in Persian, and other languages. And sometimes I listen to contemporary composers, especially Olivier Messiaen. I should say, though, that my favorite musician of all time is Bach. I listen to him more than anyone else.

Rail: What is very interesting about your work is also the bridges you create between Western and Persian cultures. It relates, of course, to your own experience, your life growing up in Iran and subsequently moving to France, and then to New York in 1984. What prompted you to choose to live in New York? And also, more broadly, in relation to the notion of exile, being a person with a richness of different cultures within yourself, what is your sense of the world that you belong to, the community you belong to?

Kami: It's an eclectic world! [*Laughter*] As you said, I was born and raised in Iran; however, I was exposed to Western culture from early on, by my family, through traveling. I visited European countries as a child; I went to New York for the very first time with my parents when I was 11 years old. Before that I had visited different European cities with my parents. As I mentioned, my mother was a painter so we would visit museums together. I would read Persian literature at the same time that I was reading Western literature. I also remember reading as a teenager a lot of Russian writers: Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov etc, like many teenagers throughout the world. Then there was the experience of Paris. After my university years, I went back to painting while I was still in Paris. I started to paint all the time. I wasn't exhibiting, but I was painting.

Rail: Were they mostly portraits then?

Kami: They were portraits; and also, for instance, a painting that was in my first show in New York in 1984 at L.T.M. Gallery, which I had made in Paris, *Nane and Kami in front of Picasso's Parade* (1982–83). In it, you see the back of a woman standing next to a young boy. They are looking at Picasso's theater curtain.

Rail: Did you have a studio in Paris?

Kami: I painted in my small apartment. It was a one-bedroom apartment and the living room was my studio. Then, at Christmas time in 1983 I went to New York to visit for the first time as an adult, and I absolutely fell in love with New York—at first sight!

Rail: I know that feeling! [*Laughter*]

Kami: How could one live anywhere else! The energy was so extraordinary. As you know, the center of the gallery world and exhibitions at that time was Soho. Chelsea had not been invented yet. There were the uptown galleries, but Soho was where the pulse was. I said to myself, "This is the place where I want to be for the rest of my life!"

Rail: So you soon moved there.

Kami: I stayed there. I just never left! [Laughter] That was it!

Rail: Who were your fellow artists back then, when you entered the scene, who was of interest to you?

Kami: In the 1980s, there was all of a sudden this revival of figuration. There were a number of interesting American artists; among them the most interesting for me was Jean-Michel Basquiat. There were also the Italian Transavanguardia artists. However, the artist who fascinated me the most was a German artist whose work has mesmerized me ever since I saw it: Sigmar Polke. For me he was a magician, an alchemist. He transformed everything. He was my favorite artist from that era—obviously he started to paint much earlier, in the 1960s, but in New York you hadn't seen much of his work before the 1980s, at least in my experience. I first saw his work in the mid-1980s.

Rail: I think Polke's first solo show in New York was in 1982, at Holly Solomon Gallery in Soho, and after that in the 1980s he showed at Mary Boone/Michael Werner.

Kami: I remember seeing a large show of his at the Brooklyn Museum in 1991 and found it absolutely fascinating.

Rail: How interesting. It's his alchemy of painting that intrigues you, right?

Kami: Yes, he's a magician. It's the freedom with which he transforms different materials that fascinates me. He is very unique.

Rail: To shift gears a little, I'm curious about the reception of your work in Iran. You have exhibited there recently. Do you have a sense of how your work is received there?

Kami: I did have an exhibition in Iran two years ago—that was the first time ever that I showed there. During the opening of my show at Gagosian in London [2015], the director of a gallery in Tehran, Ab-Anbar Gallery, asked me to do a show. At first I wasn't sure, but he pursued the idea and finally I thought it might be nice to go ahead. It gave the possibility to show some examples of my work there from different periods. It was a very nice experience.

Rail: Are you connected to Iranian artists living there or in touch with Iranian artists living in the United States?

Kami: You know, Daniele [my partner] and I have a very quiet life. [*Laughter*] If you didn't know any better and you saw us here in Rome socializing in relation to the exhibition and seeing some of our friends you would imagine that was not so. However, if you came to New York, you'd say, "These two are hermits!" [*Laughter*] When we are in Garrison [upstate New York]—usually for four days a week (three days a week we spend in Manhattan)—we feel that we are in

the middle of nowhere. There is only nature around us since the village is a drive away. And, you know, painting—the kind of painting I do—needs lots of time, for me it is a meditative process. Cities are noisy and you get distracted all the time. So, that is our life in the country. But, actually in New York it's not much different either! [*laughter*]. Sometimes there are social activities connected to our work, but other than that we tend to be very quiet!

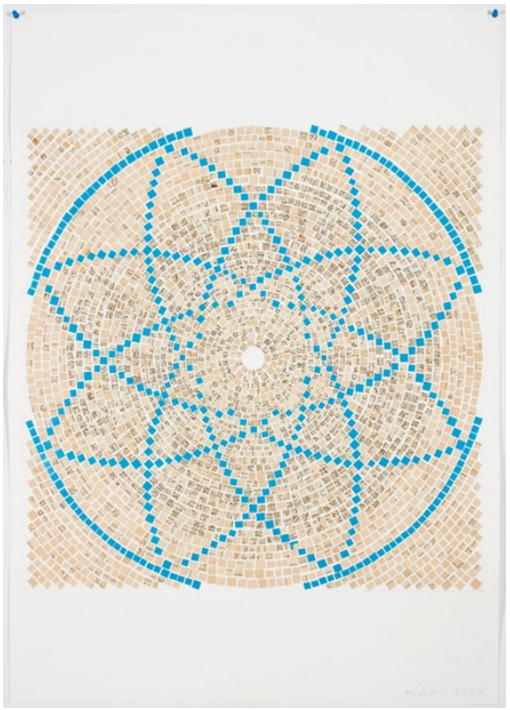
Rail: Going back to your new work, what are your thoughts about the role of painting today in relation to the times we are living in? In a world that is in such turmoil politically, at an international level, the connection to darkness and the presence of these elements of light in your "Night Paintings" evokes imagery that springs together with wonderment a question about what the experience of painting can give us—when, as unique individuals, we stand in the presence of a unique work of art, in a specific space and moment in time. Not to attach to painting a meaning from the outside, or necessarily an ethical dimension, but these new paintings conjure a search in human consciousness at some level, as though inviting us to ask ourselves, "Where are we in the world and within ourselves?" Maybe it's not intentional, but the "Night Paintings" seem to elicit that connection.

Kami: That's very true. Painting is a means of expression, through the brush, the drips, or whatever material the painter uses. It has existed since the beginning of history, from cave painting to today. A painter is an individual in society and gets affected by things that happen in the world. Someone mentioned to me that the "Night Paintings" could refer to the darkness of our current times. I believe paintings can have many different interpretations and everybody reads different things. It's not my conscious expression, but the work can also be interpreted that way; that reading is also legitimate. I really think that art can have and has always had a healing power.

Rail: Yes.

Kami: And in that sense, painting is an expression that is necessary, or better said, essential.

Rail: I'd like to ask about the spiritual elements in your art. In modern art there is a tradition of abstraction with a link to the spiritual—as in Kandinsky, Mondrian, and so on—but it seems that in contemporary art that is a dimension that is not so easily addressed. Could you talk about the importance of the spiritual for you? It is obviously outside the territory of formal religions. I think, in particular, of that wonderful five-panel painting you made, *In Jerusalem* (2005-06), shown at the 2007 Venice Biennale, which is this critique of clerics from different religions—a Sunni imam, a Catholic cardinal, an Eastern Orthodox cleric, and an Ashkenazi rabbi—coming together in Jerusalem, despite all their conflicts, to ban a gay pride march through the city. So you are very conscious of the limitations imposed by religion on freedom. Could you touch on that?



*Y.Z. Kami, En*dless Prayers XXVIII, *2009. Mixed media on paper, 42 x 30 inches, © Y.Z. Kami. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian. Photo: Robert McKeever.*

Kami: I do have an aversion to organized religion, in general, regardless. An aversion to the intolerance that we have witnessed. That is one part of it; the other part is that, ever since I can remember, I have been very interested in comparative religion and different mystical traditions so I have always read a lot of mystical poetry. I think that that has affected my work a lot.

Rail: To conclude, I'd like to ask you about the beautiful monographic book that just came out in 2019 [*Y.Z. Kami: Works 1985-2018*, Skira/Gagosian], which is akin to a retrospective in printed format, unfolding through the pages. You talked earlier about the gap, which can't ever be filled, between the reproduction of a work of art and the work itself through direct experience. That is especially true for your painting—even though in this lavishly illustrated book they did a great job trying to approximate that experience as much as possible. Has this retrospective look at your work, from the beginnings up to some of the 2017–18 paintings in the new series on view, had an impact on you in terms of reconsidering your work in its entirety, so far, while working on the new paintings?

Kami: Yes. Actually my painting was in the process of changing at the same time the book was being produced. New paths began to show themselves. So, it is a nice coincidence that this new stuff came out as a chapter was being completed. An uncharted territory has opened up. It's a beginning. After all, painting is a journey.

Contributor
Francesca Pietropaolo

is an Italian-born art historian, curator, and critic based in Venice. Her research interests focus on post-war European and American art, and on international contemporary art. She has held curatorial positions at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, Venice; and the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris. During her time at MoMA, she worked on Roth Time. A Dieter Roth Retrospective (2004), Plane Image. A Brice Marden Retrospective (2006) and exhibitions drawing from the museum's collection of works on paper. She was on the curatorial team of Greater New York 2005 at MoMA P.S. 1, New York. At the Fondation Luis Vuitton she was in charge of artist commissions,

notably a site-specific installation by Ellsworth Kelly for the Auditorium as well as works by Cerith Wyn Evans, Adrian Villar Rojas, and Taryn Simon. Her projects as independent curator include exhibitions such as North by New York: New Nordic Art (American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York, 2011), and Wrinkles in Time (IVAM, Valencia, 2009). In 2015 she co-curated the international film festival Fireflies in the Night at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC), Athens as well as its second edition Fireflies in the Night Take Wing (2016). In 2017 she co-curated Only Connect!, an international program of performances, at the SNFCC, Athens presenting performances by Kim Jones, Mieskuoro Huutajat (Screaming Men's Choir), and Tania Bruguera, among others. is the editor of Ellsworth Kelly, first issue of Les Cahiers de la Fondation (Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, 2014), realized in collaboration with the artist. She is the author of numerous essays in publications for, among others, MoMA, the Walker Art Center, Tate, Fondation Pinault, Venice, and the Estorick Collection, London. She is the editor of Interviews on Art, the first collection of interviews with artists conducted by Robert Storr (Heni, London, 2017), and of its Italian edition Interviste sull'arte (Il Saggiatore, Milan, 2019). As critic, she has contributed to Flash Art International, ARTnews, Art in America, the Brooklyn Rail, Art Press, and Arte e Critica.