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THE RIGHT LANGUAGE

1. When invited to write about Melissa Gordon's 2024 exhibition *Portals* in Brussels, my initial excitement was soon tempered by an unbidden question: Do I have the right language? The sense of linguistic inadequacy I often experience when faced with painting has historically been one of the problems driving discourse on the relationship between image and text—tangled and wrangling like the Laocoön group.¹ What would the right language be, anyway? The artist's material-oriented shoptalk, which Amy Sillman evocatively compared to butchers talking about 'how to cut up slabs of beef'?² Or the art historian's discourse, forcing its subject through the phoneme-shaped die of the linguistic extruder, to be later sorted under a specific discipline, tendency, or style?

Gordon, whose practice consistently evades such economy of taxonomies, asks a similar question: 'What language describes what I do when so much of what I do doesn't come into clear contact with histories of painting because it is multiple, unstructured, and gooey?'³ Multiplicity, structurelessness, and gooeyness she invokes fit into the lexicon of historically feminine-coded formal qualities, which had long been disparaged as 'irrational', 'seductive', and even 'dangerous'—that is, 'bad'—and later redeployed by difference feminism. 'So, what happens when we speak badly in painting? What happens when we try to speak badly and it is seen as embarrassing, when we try to speak intelligently and it is seen as trying too hard?' Gordon inquires in her essay *On Monsters*.⁴

For a while now, I've been actively working on rendering my writing more 'bad'. In that pursuit, I found kinship with Shelley Jackson, author of the cult hypertext-fiction novel *Patchwork Girl* and of the visceral manifesto *Stitch Bitch*, who writes: 'Good writing is direct, effective, clean as a bleached bone... Bad writing is all flesh, and dirty flesh at that: clogged with a build-up of clutter and crud, knick-knacks and fripperies encrusted on every surface, a kind of gluey scum gathering in the chinks.'⁵ Bad writing doesn't go down smoothly; it is laboured, excessive, and self-aware. It also is intrinsically licentious and polyvocal; *Stitch Bitch* is, emblematically, narrated in tandem by the writer and by the monster protagonist of *Patchwork Girl*.

While Gordon's work 'delves into the mystery of a missing body in contemporary abstraction,'⁶ bad writers pursue that same mystery in literature, remedying disembodiment of text and smudging the 'clear pane of glass' it is often purported to be.⁷ Speaking badly—in painting, in writing—offers models of 'being-in-a-medium'⁸ which have the potential to render 'form/body present through its absence.'⁹

Further in *On Monsters*, Gordon recalls how, in the mid-aughts, she experienced being relegated to the 'fenced-off territory' of feminist-themed art and told that was 'the only space where [her] voice belonged'. The urge to go out of bounds led her to formulate a more nuanced distinction between feminism as 'content' and as 'position'—two modes of engagement that she still tends to pivot between, 'sometimes in the same exhibition'.¹⁰ Gordon's recollection speaks to the risks of equating one's personal-political experience with the content of their work—risks already acknowledged by Trinh T. Minh-ha in an interview from 1983. According to Minh-ha, 'in such a highly individualistic society as the one we belong to here, it is very comforting for a reader to *consume difference as a commodity* by starting with the personal difference in culture or background, which is the best way to escape the issues of power, knowledge and subjectivity raised.' Minh-ha points out how that bias disproportionately affects women, whose work tends to be 'explained (or brought to closure) through [their] personality and particular attributes.'¹¹ I recognise that concern; it has been one of the reasons why, until recently, I was apprehensive about including autobiographical elements in my work. It is telling that women practicing over the last forty years still grapple with the same problem: wanting recognition without having their identities co-opted. It is also heartening to see them resist, refusing to speak with a single voice and make their work readily legible.

In that same interview, Minh-ha distinguished between two contrasting modes of relationality (in filmmaking—which, however, may apply to any creative approach to the subject-object relationship): 'speaking about' and 'speaking nearby.' It's a distinction I often fall back on when addressing how I aspire to write, and one that, at the risk of stretching my argument, I think resonates with Gordon's clever distinction between feminism as content and as position. Speaking nearby, writes Minh-ha, 'does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place.'¹² It 'reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.' In contrast with speaking about, speaking nearby is direct and mutable, coming close, closer, yet resisting closure, leaving a 'non-occupied gap',¹³ a gap in which something may assume presence—a 'form/body'?

Two questions Gordon asks in her 2023 book *Vital Signs* address the issue at the core of the identity-legibility-power junction and situate it in the context of painting: ‘The inverse of abstraction is *literalness*, or making sense?’¹⁴ and ‘Who gets to be abstract?’¹⁵

2. Melissa Gordon’s recent exhibition in Brussels¹⁶ samples her polyvocal practice through four bodies of new work, staking divergent positions along the axes of imprint and stroke, image and word, and figuration and abstraction (although, as she argues, that last distinction is not particularly productive). They are: three paintings from *The View from the Inside* series, two drawings from the *Idioms* series, a frottage piece installed around the perimeter of the space, and a text written by the artist.

I first encounter the works at Gordon’s studio on the ground floor of her house. Mellow, late summer light seeps in through a large window looking out onto the garden. The three paintings are lined up on the wall covered in errant paint marks—residual gestures, proof-of-work that couldn’t have gone unnoticed and had become the subject of Gordon’s earlier body of work, *Material Evidence*. *The View from the Inside* painting series is also intimately linked to the sphere of artistic work. In it, Gordon departs from a collection of photographs taken by her artists-friends of their studio windows. She then combines printmaking with painting to attain a multilayered image, where the familiar frames the unfamiliar. Rendered in desaturated greys and blues, the phantom window frames contrast starkly with the surface within, where colour winds and hails.

Other architectural phantoms lie stretched out on the studio floor: Gordon’s characteristic rubbings, which turn out to be reproductions of the floor tiles in the salon and vestibule of her house. Installed later at the gallery, they would introduce a domestic, characteristically Brussels-esque motif—yet another kind of portal to another kind of social space.

Architectural spectres manifest throughout Gordon’s practice as frames and superstructures, as evidenced by frottage-transferred surfaces, grid and fence motifs in her paintings, and full-scale interior reproductions in her installations, where stud walls act as backdrops for other, two-dimensional works. Whenever she stages an institutional show, Gordon tells me, she likes to gesture towards one of the spaces of particular significance to her—studios of artists such as Agnes Martin, Janet Sobel, and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, those of her friends, as well as her own. This gesture serves to situate Gordon’s within a specific relational and discursive, rather than purely architectural, context.

It's not easy for me to decouple the reading of Gordon's visual work from my previous encounters with other areas of her practice. 'When I make work, I make it with a crowd of voices in my head,' says Beatrice Gibson in the opening sentence of her short, epistolary film.¹⁷ I, too, entered Gordon's studio with the many voices populating her latest book, *Vital Signs*, still resonating in my head: archetypal and real characters, all sharing her determination to follow the liquid track of gesture—misattributed, appropriated, lost.

Women's careers are often perceived through the prism of vicissitudes they had to overcome and structured through narratives of perseverance rewarded by individual success.¹⁸ Those who manage to maintain a presence within the institutional circuit are assigned overt (or covert) labels: emerging, rediscovery, feminist, (promising, forgotten, parity). Counter to these reductive categories, *Vital Signs* introduces a cast of alternative, elusive archetypes: 'drop-out', 'female genius', and 'con'. Narrated in several voices—each given a distinctive typographic identity by designer Sara De Bondt—the book compiles images, essays, and performance scripts, which trace out the web of influences and dependencies underlying Gordon's practice.

I glance at the list of questions I compiled while reading *Vital Signs*, tucked inside my copy of the book, and spot the word 'authorship' written in all caps and encircled. What *about* authorship? I suppose I've come up against a degree of contradiction between the strategies that challenge the authorial figure—like intertextuality or appropriation—and the politics of representation and reattribution by feminist art history. While the idea of authorship coupled with proprietorship has originated in patriarchal order, there is no denying the importance of correct attribution, of showing how ideas travel and giving credit where credit is due—right?

'Painting is... an openly "intentional" movement, pointing from the present into the future', where every mark follows in relationship to another painter.'¹⁹ This inherent relationality of painting accounts for the lineage obsession it has long fuelled. Modern histories of painting have always been concerned, on the surface, with genealogies and, underneath, with myths. In that myth-making process, many lineages have been left untraced, prompting the question: 'How to read gestures that have not been animated by history?'²⁰

In her work, Gordon frequently refers to and cites others—and herself.²¹ Revisiting the same bodies of work and thought is a way of maintaining a practice that acknowledges the underlying authorial entanglements. 'Entanglements are not unities,' Karen Barad makes a crucial distinction.

‘They do not erase differences; on the contrary, entanglings entail differentiatings, differentiatings entail entanglings. One move—cutting together-apart.’²²

It’s so much more than ‘patching up the holes’; it’s changing how the relational scrim is woven, extending existing networks of kinship and forging new ones. It’s about learning to mythologise differently, to dismantle the narratives of mastery that laid the groundwork for the booming business of attribution and appraisal. If, as Ursula Le Guin called for, we were to stop centring narratives on singular heroes, how could new stories be constructed? Erika Balsom points out one necessary condition: ‘Any feminism worthy of its name cannot be grounded in an ideology of individual achievement.’²³

As we move to the garden, the conversation shifts to the most recent iteration of *A Living Archive*, Gordon’s research project, which took place earlier that year in Brussels.²⁴ Through texts, recordings, and ephemera, the archive documents over a decade of feminist activities, starting in early 2000s and ranging from candid insights on the art industry to discussing each other’s work and its discursive framing. Beyond its role as a record, the archive facilitates new conversations and helps sustain a network of artists and writers who engage with feminism as a position and not necessarily as content.²⁵

The two days of conversations I followed in Brussels—characterised by just the right blend of focus and unstructuredness—led me to consider archiving as another form of myth-making and social practices like friendship as playing a role in this process, offering an alternative to institutional models. If you don’t take time to situate your practice, someone might just do it for you. We (not I)²⁶ must resist being reduced to a single voice. This refusal is work, and that work can be shared. Under the onslaught of trends toward cultural entrepreneurship and individualism in art policy and education, we need to keep acknowledging each other’s indispensability.²⁷ ‘These truths need to be restated again and again, since the corpse of the “romantic concept of the self”... tends today to be artificially reanimated.’²⁸ And so, artistic work always evolves in entanglement with others’ practices and with the contingencies of daily life—‘domesticated, interrupted... and all the more vital for it.’²⁹

Before I leave the studio, Gordon shows me the still-unfinished drawings from her new series titled *Idioms*, in which she employs pictorial typography of a kind, with each image visually representing the proposition articulated by its title. Owing to their style and unassuming materiality, the drawings appear light, humorous even (it’s hard to take a silly font too seriously).

She hesitates over which of them should be included in the show. Later, I would find out that she selected two works: *It's a mess*—where the words slump into a gooey, dripping mass—and *Unravelling*—where the letters perform as a rope, well, unravelling. There exists an implied iconic relationship between the words' shapes and their meanings, but it's never unambiguous, and, with curiosity, I observe how gesture fills the gap between the sign and the signifier, with *Unraveling's* wispy lines and chaotic hatchings in *It's a mess*.

3. The following day, I receive an e-mail from Gordon:

Maybe it's interesting to clarify:

So I think authorship in art in terms of 'ownership' has been constructed historically through capitalist processes—whether the bourgeoisie system of Dutch still-life paintings, the Paris Salon, and galleries—and now museums etc. And so, when I have made paintings about stolen gestures—I'm interested that the 'crime' is actually authorship itself. Like, Duchamp never should have claimed authorship of the fountain, it should have remained anonymous.

4. On Thursday afternoon, outside the opening hours, I meet Gordon at the gallery. What immediately strikes me is how the three paintings—two facing each other, flanking the window in the first room, and the third positioned alongside the drawings in the second, smaller room—open up the space, much like mirrors do (mirrors and windows are, in fact, non-identical twins).³⁰ This time around, I focus on minute details that had evaded my attention during the first visit and were impossible to discern later, in the digital images I scrutinised at full zoom, despite my laptop screen boasting pixel density so high as to be indistinguishable to the human eye.

Each painting is distinct, speaking different yet mutually intelligible gestures: a thicket of parallel, angled jabs and choppy daubs densely filling Eva's window; sinuous swabs, soft washes, and splotches in Hana's; and in the centre of Maaike's frame, airy streaks, scrapes, and smudges densifying into a diagonal volume, whose mass appears to be drawing everything inward. Layers upon layers upon layers of blues, purples, violets, greens, and greys, with an occasional splash of ochre, taped and overpainted many times over; an interplay of muddy, nearly opaque areas and vibrant riso-like transparencies—transformations of energy, which the diaphanous frames struggle to contain.

The photographs on which the series is based have been manipulated to convey precisely the degree of detail desired. Desaturated and rasterised, retinal

information has been reduced to the elementary visual unit—a dot. This is why, even though this time Gordon opted for digital reproduction, the image still resembles a screen print—a sleight of hand, a delightful contradiction in matter.

Digital printing substitutes pixels for pores and disambiguation or the silk screen's proneness to deviation. In *The View from the Inside* series, the medium's divine precision is offset by the rough handling of the prints during painting: taped over nearly-neatly along the mullions and the outlines of objects on the window sills, with margins still faintly overpainted. The process in Gordon's work is always on view yet obscured by the interplay of its many layers—non-linear. The eye, ever attracted by flaws and irregularities, by the taboo and the erotic,³¹ is drawn to the interstices between various layers, the gashes revealing raw gesso, disillusioned painterly *stuff*.

I realise that so far, I haven't said much about colours, which makes it seem as though I haven't said much about the paintings at all. Colours are tricky—their reputation long tainted. There is a longstanding tradition, inherited from classical philosophy, that framed colours as seductive and thus a dangerous force. The seventeenth-century *disegno vs colore* debate associated colour with 'the feminine body and positioned [it] as a moral and aesthetic threat to masculine line, which was associated with an opposite set of values—language, reason, perfection and thus truth.'³² Colours are relational, always interacting with other colours, and with the beholder. Besides the layer of chemical composition, there exists a less gaugeable layer of perception, of idiosyncrasy resulting from how colours are mediated through our bodies. We can never know if two people are perceiving the same colour, and language cannot serve as a yardstick here.³³ This has made me think of Virginia Woolf comparing a body to a pane of glass that filters all perception. The glass is never clear; it can be smudged or rosy, changing with time and circumstances: mood, weather, or health.³⁴

Colours enter language through allusions to other things in the world, through parallels, metonymies, and idioms. In *On Colour*, Sillman describes sophisticated adjectives luring painters from the shelves of art supply stores: 'You don't say "pink," you say "dianthus" pink, "hematite" purple, "flake" white, "turkey" umber, "Hooker's" green, "Egyptian" violet, "cinnabar" green, etc.'³⁵ All of the names involve an external referent in botany, geology, or history, which serves as a vehicle to the colour's tenor.³⁶ But to those who have never seen a dianthus or don't know who William Hooker was, they may well be dead metaphors. During each encounter with Gordon's paintings—at the studio, in the gallery, on the screen—I seem to discover new colours, which appear highly circumstantial,

and which I try to circumscribe with equally circumstantial metaphors. I see K's kitchen: chicory, beetroot, and ash-glazed stoneware; tiny echeverias crowding T and J's mantelpiece; E's soles muddied from a walk through the moors, heath blossoms caught in the grooves; his marbled cardboard portfolio resting on the train seat; an old Barolo stain on my yellowed tablecloth; a maple leaf decomposing on a windshield; petals and glitter pressed into the pavement after a Corpus Christi parade; and loose feathers of a sparrow that the cat dragged in.

5. That same evening, I attend a crowded talk by Gordon and R.H. Quaytman, who also works extensively across painting and printmaking. Sitting on the gallery floor and listening to both artists indulge in a brief sputter of shop talk about gesso and marble dust, I observe the dreamlike iridescence of the nearest *View from the Inside*. Seen from so up-close, the painting's texture reveals different materials imprinted or transferred onto the surface: warped meshes and grids and bits of organic and inorganic matter: confetti, leaves, and twigs, as if the paintings have been hung to dry in the garden, like a pair of garments (as I'd find out later, they were in fact painted on the ground outside). It's easy to think of those imprints as material proof, physical traces of 'real' stuff; it might be less evident to realise that so, too, are the paint strokes.

Gordon frequently reaches for techniques that rely on various types of direct contact and transfer, starting with the most literal, frottage, which—between the surrealist and the forensic—is always what it is: evidence of a surface, reproduced with fidelity corresponding to the ratio of surface grain to the tip of a pigment stick. Many of her works incorporate objects and tools: brushes, chains, undergarments, either through contact printing techniques or fastening them directly to the work's surface. For instance, in the *Female Readymades* series, the grid returns—except now, as a phototransferred chain-link fence. And the painterly gestures in the monumental screenprint *Make a mess clean it up* turn out to be a reproduction of marks left behind during floor mopping.

In these formal inquiries, Gordon repeatedly probes the relationship between the imprint and the stroke—or, in Flusser's terms, between 'symptoms' and 'symbols'³⁷—playing them against one another. This raises questions about the hierarchy between the two, which, despite their common ancestry in cave 'paintings', developed distinct material, technical, and economic dimensions—one major dividing line being the idea of the inimitable gesture, which forms the basis for the accretion of value.

The talk ends, and I linger for a while, feeling the blood flow back into my limbs as I get up from a good hour of shuffling on the floor. Before I leave, I catch

Gordon and share my impressions of the show, noting how different contexts, windows, and interfaces I've encountered so far have invariably altered my perception of the work. We chat briefly about our art education, and how we were taught to look. For both of us, studying greyscale reproductions in art history compendia was one of the first forms of engagement with art. No evidence of texture or colour, except in the accompanying descriptions. Is this why I now fall short of words when faced with an outspoken surface?³⁸

6. The windows in Gordon's paintings look 'out' onto something that, after reading the text she wrote for *Portals*, I figure is not productive to consider in terms of the binary of figuration versus abstraction, but rather, of the familiar and the unfamiliar—the 'weird'. It is in relation to this notion, and its particular interpretation by Mark Fisher, that Gordon positions her work in the text I'm reading on the train back home. From the image printed on the text's verso, a weathered bust of a woman, mouth gaping, projects an unheard voice.

What is the weird? '[It] involves a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist or, at least, it should not exist here,' explains Fisher. 'Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate.'³⁹ That last sentence points to the speculative and disruptive potential of the weird. Distinctively, Fisher claims there to be no inherent link between the weird and the supernatural; natural phenomena beyond our comprehension may be *weirder* than fantastical monsters conjured up from familiar constituents. This distinction is analogous, in a way, to the distinction between metaphors and idioms, where the meaning of the former can be inferred from individual parts, while the latter cannot be understood without initiation into a given cultural context. The weird is that foreign idiom certain paintings speak, which language does not understand. Language can only respond in metaphors and approximations: in jabs, daubs, dianthuses, washes, blots, beetroots, and barolos.

I risk suggesting that there is an implicit link between the window and the weird. In painting, windows have always served as spaces for epoch-specific transgressions. Leone Battista Alberti's treatise *On Painting*, the publication of which in 1435 had a tectonic impact on the development of linear perspective, contains the oft-cited analogy of painting as an 'open window'—often taken as the realist paradigm par excellence. Crucially, the realism that Alberti and other Renaissance artists espoused was not concerned with naturalism as such, but rather, with an idealised notion of reality, where geometrical principles

abstracted from the natural world would inform works of art that would *surpass* nature. And isn't mathematics the chief form of abstraction? (If so, how should we describe Perugino's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel—the mastery of their calculated composition making the process clearly legible and segmentable?)

Alberti is widely credited with the invention of the *reticolato* technique, in which a gridded window was used as an optical instrument for transferring image, segment by segment, onto a correspondingly gridded picture plane⁴⁰—transposing an unstable, subjective *sight* into an orderly, idealised *vista*. Those instruments and techniques have always had an inherently ideological dimension. With their purported objectivity, they lend themselves to the work of calculation, navigation, and other abstraction-based operations, and have become part of the 'toolkit for enabling Western dominance, and the dominance of its concepts.'⁴¹

I find the etching *Draughtsman Drawing a Nude*, by Albrecht Dürer, to be a quintessential illustration of the ideology of conquest through taxonomic gaze. We see a draughtsman with his pen suspended in focus above a sheet of graph paper. He faces a perspective machine that divides him from a reclining woman, her feet pointed toward him, her hand reaching for the edge of the fabric that tentatively covers her genitals.

The window often served as a pictorial premise for representing something out of place, not quite fitting the canon of the time. For instance, it established a space in which painters could experiment with landscape painting before it achieved independence as a pictorial genre in the sixteenth century. Conversely, windows were sometimes used as an excuse to warrant iconographic forays into forbidden territories—as in Pieter Aertsen's paintings, where windows and portals in the background frame biblical scenes and parables, introducing a religious narrative into otherwise secular scenes or still lifes, which occupied the lowest tier of the genre hierarchy at the time.

There are more examples of the window's exceptional stance in painting. David Friedrich's austere series depicting the view from his atelier window⁴² is a rare occurrence of his landscapes represented without the intermediation of *Rückenfigur*. Matisse's views of Collioure in *Open Window* represents a daring step towards abstraction. Pitch black, impenetrable backgrounds in the Juan Sanchez Cotan's *bodegons*, the leather-upholstered window panes in Duchamp's *Fresh Widow*, and Dona Nelson's stretchers—all draw attention to the opaque, the surface. 'Windows-in-painting are and will always be the portal to the flat-ness, non-illusion of painting,' Gordon concludes.⁴³

A painting. A window. A portal. Whether literal or fantastical, the portal always connotes passage—a hyperlink! In science fiction, portals collapse unimaginable distances in space and time into a single surface. Proverbially, the portal often leads ‘to the unknown’, the weird, which may be an uneasy idea. It implies movement through, and by extension, the existence of the front and back, or the inside and the outside. But the portal itself is an oscillating surface, belonging to both and neither of those categories at once. Where the vista simulates depth and instills a sense of contentment in gazing from afar, the portal’s in-betweenness produces an active push-and-pull relationship with the viewer, much like how the eye shifts focus between foreground and background, frame and image, but can never focus on both at the same time.

7. Two hours later, I exit the train, hurriedly dictating voice notes. Back at home, I settle at the desk facing a dark window—no streetlights on that side of the house—and begin to type.

* Does the speculative potential of the ‘weird’ make it a more productive, politically agential category through which to think about painting than ‘abstraction’?⁴⁵ At the very least, it enables us to think of painting differently, outside the dichotomy of figuration and abstraction. Where abstraction sought to escape figuration’s narrative and representational qualities, the weird sidesteps both by asking ‘how do we recognise the as-yet-unknown when it appears to us?’ The weird is simply that: the not readily legible. Crucially, the weird is not a category suspended in some hypothetical vacuum; it always enters daily life. In Lovecraft’s fiction, the unknown forces its way into our world, displacing our familiar order. In Gordon’s paintings, the weird is seen outside the studio window rather than being suspended in the blankness of the canvas—the space supposedly outside of time and context, where gesture ought to spring up from immaculate emptiness. The weird might appear transcendental, but at its core it is concerned with materialist politics. And so, the unfamiliar is the weirder the more it is framed by the familiar.

‘Lovecraft needs the human world, for much the same reason that a painter of a vast edifice might insert a standard human figure standing before it: to provide a sense of scale,’ writes Fisher. That, of course, resonates with representational strategies meant to convey the Sublime in Romantic painting (consider, for example, the enslaved people drowning in Turner’s foreground).⁴⁶ The sublime conceived nature as the ultimate force, outside human control—is the weird the new kind of Sublime cut for our contemporary Anthropocene-turning-posthuman age? A new mutation in the Romanticism-Abstract-Expressionism lineage?⁴⁷ There no longer is a struggle between nature and nurture. The (rational) subject is revealed as not self-contained and cannot serve as a yardstick of truth. We know that, in some respects, algorithmic machines know us better than we know ourselves—if knowledge can be measured by the capacity for prediction (and induction) of desire. The weird is part of the entanglement far greater than we can picture, and it comes from without but also from within.

Artistic strategies that produce the weird may at times feel alienating, or even threatening, but they also carry a possibility of transformation. The weird unsettles existing cognitive categories, forcing us to face what we cannot name, making ground for the ‘redistribution of the sensible’.⁴⁸ This is why aesthetics is always political; it reframes what is visible and thinkable. When faced with the weird, we stand, as Rancière puts it, ‘together apart’—unified not by shared understanding but by shared encounter with something that resists legibility. This shared estrangement and incomprehension, may in fact be the most honest form of collective aesthetic experience available to us now.

1. I allude here to the longstanding debate comparing the merits of painting and poetry, first expressed in Horace’s dictum *ut pictura poesis* in *Ars Poetica* and continued during the Renaissance in the paradigm of *paragone* (the competition between the arts). The discourse on interart relations, often framed in terms of the ‘Sister Arts’, recurred throughout subsequent periods, most notably in Neoclassicism and Romanticism. Several seminal art-theoretical texts advocating for medium specificity make reference to the Hellenistic sculpture *Laocoön Group* in their titles. These include Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), Irving Babbitt’s *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910), and Clement Greenberg’s *Towards a Newer Laocoön* (1940).
2. Amy Sillman, ‘On Colour’, in *Faux Pas. Selected Writings and Drawings*, 2022.
3. Melissa Gordon, ‘Liquid Gestures: the Gesture of That Land’ in *Vital Signs*, 2023.
4. Melissa Gordon, ‘On Monsters’ in *Vital Signs*, 2023.
5. Shelley Jackson’s *Stitch Bitch* was delivered as a presentation at the *Transformations of the Book Conference* held at MIT in 1998. *Patchwork Girl* was published by Eastgate Systems in 1995.
6. Eva Kenny, *Behind Painting Itself*, 2016.
7. The window-pane-writing metaphor has been widely attributed to George Orwell. The smudging echoes Virginia Woolf, who, in *On Being Ill* (1926), described the (sick) body as a smudged pane of glass through which all experience is filtered.
8. Giorgio Agamben, *Notes on Gesture*, quoted in Melissa Gordon’s *Vital Signs*, 2023.
9. Melissa Gordon, *Portals*, 2024.
10. Melissa Gordon, ‘On Monsters’... .
11. Nancy Chen, “‘Speaking Nearby’: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha”, *Visual Anthropology Review* 8(1), 1992.
12. Nancy Chen, “‘Speaking Nearby’...’.
13. ‘From the publication Trinh T. Minh-ha: *Traveling in the Dark: Phantom Images on the Move*’, *Mousse Magazine* (online), 2023.
14. Melissa Gordon, ‘Female Genius: Vital Signs’ in *Vital Signs*, 2023.
15. Melissa Gordon, ‘The Embarrassment of SUCKCESS’ in *Vital Signs*, 2023.
16. The initial impulse for writing this text was Melissa Gordon’s exhibition *Portals* at BEIGE, in Brussels (12.09-26.10.2024).
17. Gibson’s *Dear Barbara, Bette, Nina* (2021) has been resonating in my head since the viewing.
18. ‘Perseverance makes me sad,’ writes Gordon in ‘The Embarrassment of SUCKCESS’ (2023). ‘I refuse persistence. I refuse the valorisation of waiting your turn.’

19. Villém Flusser, *Gestures*, translated by Nancy Ann Roth, 2014.
20. Melissa Gordon, *Vital Signs*, 2023.
21. I think here, for instance, of the recurrent incorporation of Gordon's gargantuan silkscreen *Make a mess, clean it up* into her exhibitions, often as a backdrop for other works.
22. Karen Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart', *Parallax* 20(3), 2014.
23. Erika Balsom, 'Far from Paradise: Nina Menkes' Queen of Diamonds', in *Cinema Scope* 81, 2020, quoted in Beatrice Gibson's film *Dear Barbara, Bette, Nina*, 2021.
24. At celador, a project space I to co-run with a group of curators.
25. Gordon underscores the influence of her friend and collaborator Marina Vishmidt's work on labour and collectivity has had on this project.
26. *WE (Not I)* was the title of a programme on the role of 'we' in contemporary art practices, organised by Gordon and Vishmidt in 2015.
27. See, for instance, Jue Yang, *Stop calling artists entrepreneurs*, published online by Platform BK, 2022.
28. Zbigniew Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 2000.
29. Beatrice Gibson, *Dear Barbara, Bette, Nina*, 2021.
30. '[I]f glass transmits, it also reflects. And so the window is experienced by the symbolist as a mirror as well', Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *October* 9, 1979.
31. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1973.
32. The *Disegno e Colore* debate emerged in the 16th century as an extension of the *paragone* paradigm, focusing on the rivalry of drawing and painting. See Elissa Auther, "'Abstraction and Decoration" in Pompeii 1959 by Hans Hofmann', *Tate Research Publication*, 2018.
33. Consider the ongoing debates on linguistic relativity in colour perception. To what extent, if at all, does linguistic difference shape cognitive difference? Does language merely reflect the cognitive faculties of its speakers, or can it influence perception itself?
34. Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill*, 1926; echoed by Rosalind Kraus in *Grids*: 'the physiological screen through which light passes to the human brain is not transparent, like a window pane; it is, like a filter, involved in a set of specific distortions. For us, as human perceivers, there is an unbreachable gulf between "real" color and "seen" color.'
35. Amy Sillman, 'On Colour'... .
36. 'Vehicle' and 'tenor' constitute two components of a metaphor.
37. Vilém Flusser, 'Our Images', *Flusser Studies* 15, 2013.
38. In a comment to this text, Gordon remarks: 'somehow this makes me think of the difference between viewing art as a reference versus an experience'—and it is exactly that.
39. Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 2016.
40. Barry Smith, 'True Grid', in *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, 2001.
41. Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective', *E-flux Journal* 24, 2011.
42. A reference to this body of work, appears in one of the paintings in *The View from the Inside* series.
43. Melissa Gordon, *Portals*, 2024.
- * Meanwhile, a year has passed since the first draft of this text, and new reflections—or perhaps a tentative conclusion—have emerged during the editing process.
44. Abstraction has historically been presented as 'apolitical,' despite being emphatically so—if not in content, then certainly in position(ing), through economic and institutional framing. I do not intend to argue that we should forego either the critical historicisation of abstraction or its reclamation by contemporary artists. The question of who may allow themselves to be abstract remains as pertinent as ever.
45. Thanks to Gavin Burrows for highlighting this connection on his blog *Lucid Frenzy Junior*, in a post from 18 August 2018 titled *Mark Fisher's 'The Weird & The Eerie'*.
46. In the 1960s, Robert Rosenblum coined the term 'Abstract Sublime' to refer to aesthetic qualities of vastness and imperviousness present in the works of leading artists from the AbEx stable. The term reflected the influence Rosenblum saw of the tradition of Romantic landscape painting on Abstract Expressionism. See: Robert Rosenblum, 'Abstract Sublime', *Art News*, 1961
47. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 2004.