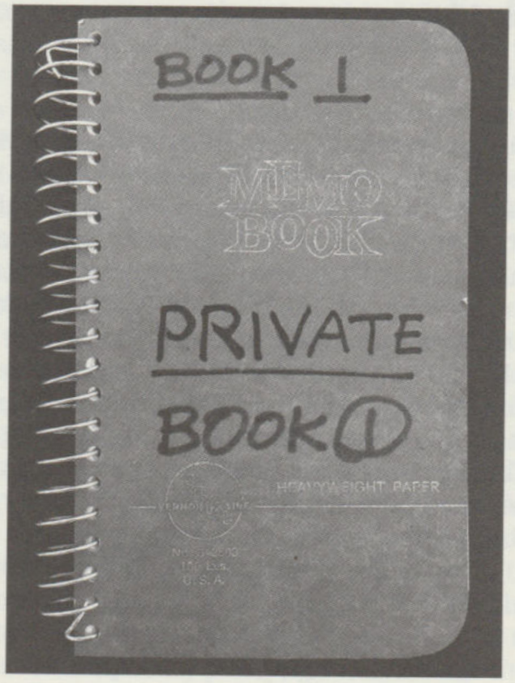
FULL FRONTAL:
Body and Site in Painting
Melissa Gordon

Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm going to get started and try to stick to time.

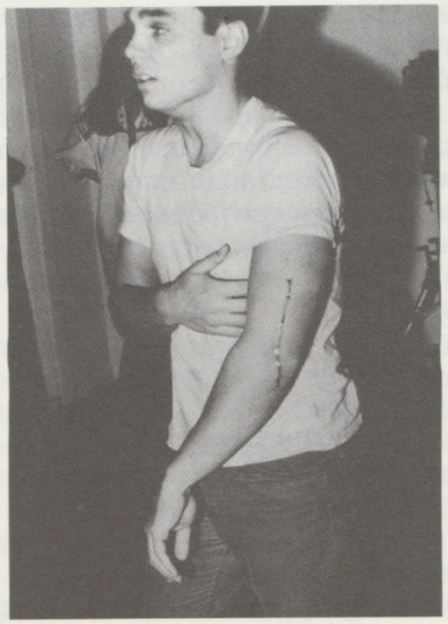


Lee Lozano, *Book 1*. Facsimile published by Hauser and Wirth.

In the run-up to her eviction from her Grand Street loft, possibly in 1972, the artist Lee Lozano began writing a large number of 'pieces' in her small private notebooks. This included *No Parties Piece*, *No Eating Out Piece*, and more famously her *General Strike Piece* and *Boycott Women Piece*. There is no formal write up of *Dropout Piece*, rather, at the tail end of the notebooks, which she worked in from 1967

to 1970, Lozano acknowledges that the 'action' is already underway when she writes: '*Dropout Piece* is the hardest work I have ever done.'[1]

In 'Lee Lozano, 68, Conceptual Artist Who Boycotted Women for Years', art critic Roberta Smith's 1999 obituary for Lozano in *The New York Times*, Smith describes the edge that Lozano walked off in the production of her work: 'In the mid-1960s she also began to execute a series of life-related actions (she didn't like the word performance) that tested, among other things, her stamina, her friends' patience and the conduct of everyday life'.[2]



Chris Burden, *Shoot*, Performance, 1971. Courtesy the artist.

An instruction is a basic component of conceptual practices, and one that nominally involves a command to an 'other': a friend, a machine, a worker, an intern. The body in much conceptual work is present, for example in Chris Burden's

1. Applin, J. 'Hard Work: Lee Lozano's Dropouts', *October* 156, 2016, p. 77.

2. Smith, R. 'Lee Lozano, 68, Conceptual Artist Who Boycotted Women for Years', *The New York Times*, 18 October 1999.

artwork *Shoot* (1971), as the person who dares to do something. Lozano, though, inverted this: she instructed herself in actions, and dared everyone else to put up with it.

In the writer Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer's wonderfully researched book *Dropout Piece* (2014), she notes this entry to Lozano's notebook just before her eviction:

'LYING ON BED SMOKING, EMPTYING MIND, LISTENING TO RACHMANINOV IN DIM (CITYPOOR) LIGHTBULB A FEELING OF PEACE COMES OVER ME, OF JOYOUS FREEDOM, OF I'M DOING WHAT I WANT, OF I DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING UNTIL I FEEL LIKE IT (...) DROP OUT FROM WORLD, NO CALLS NO WORK NO OBLIGATIONS NO GUILT NO DESIRES, JUST MY MIND WANDERING LAZILY OFF ITS LEASH. THIS EVIDENTLY IS THE ONLY WAY TO TAKE A REST.'[3]

Lozano's note feels especially pertinent in this contemporary moment, especially in terms of the question: how can I rest in and amongst what is now called 'work' as an artist?, and: how can I do so when I'm expected to be 'on' all of the time, even in 'relaxation mode', with the expectation that an artist shouldn't work *too* hard?

When Lozano is evicted, she begins *Dropout Piece*, and this is an entry into her diary:

I HAVE NO IDENTITY.
I HAVE AN APPROXIMATE MATHEMATICAL IDENTITY. (BIRTHCHART.)
I HAVE SEVERAL NAMES.
I WILL GIVE UP MY SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AS A DEADEND INVESTIGATION.
I WILL MAKE MYSELF EMPTY TO RECEIVE COSMIC INFO.
I WILL RENOUCE THE ARTIST'S EGO, THE SUPREME TEST WITHOUT WHICH BATTLE A HUMAN COULD NOT BECOME 'OF KNOWLEDGE'.
I WILL BE HUMAN FIRST, ARTIST SECOND.
I WILL NOT SEEK FAME, PUBLICITY, OR SUCCESS.
IDENTITY CHANGES CONTINUOUSLY AS MULTIPLIED BY TIME. (IDENTITY AS VECTOR.)[4]

3. Leher-Graiwer, S. *Dropout Piece*, Afterall Publishing, London, 2014, p. 74.

4. Ibid, p. 76.

In an essay I wrote titled 'Presence and Absence' (2015), I say: 'Increasingly as an artist, I have begun to feel my own voice becoming disembodied from myself. Who is it that is "speaking"? It is strange to envision oneself as a construct, a concept, outside of your own body, but that is exactly what is perceived by others: an accumulation of objects, made by a non-entity with a vague persona, skewed and squared by gestures and contexts.'[5]

In this essay, I speak about four female artists: Cady Noland, Lozano, Charlotte Posenenske and Laurie Parsons. I describe them as literally walking off the edge of the art world: revealing the edges of the playing field that they were confined to at the time. I am not interested in the obscurity or curiosity of Lozano, Posenenske or Parsons. I do not believe the myths that they were 'not able to hack it' or 'hung the apron up'. Perhaps they were smart enough to 'wash their hands' of the situation they found themselves in, but regardless, each of their gestures expanded the role of authorship because their actions existed outside of the playing field of art. The act of dropping out was simply the natural conclusion to their work: they took their practice to the extremes of authorship, then followed through.

Dropping out is a gesture of walking out. A strike. A Human Strike.[6] Dropouts walk out off the edge of the world in which they exist at the time: off the map, off the grid. As a character for others to see, the dropout acts outside the bounds of the playing field of contemporary art, and by doing so, reveals the shape-form of the container: when the boundaries that hold these gestures become immaterial.

What is this shape-form, container, of gesture? It takes a shift in perception to consider dropping out as an act or a gesture instead of a circumstance. To do this requires the removal of an artist's biography from the understanding of their work. This is often hard when many women artists, especially those that have 'exited' the art world they were living in, go into exile and are shrouded in mystique (Agnes Martin, Sonya Delaunay, Jo Baer, Joan Mitchell).

5. The paper 'Presence and Absence' was delivered at Artists Space, New York in 2015 and published in *May Revue* Issue 16, October 2016.

6. Claire Fontaine, 'The Human Strike Has Already Begun', *Mute*, 2013.

Photo of Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler and Grace Hartigan in 1957.

Let's be clear: dropping out was so fucking unfashionable for all these women. Terms like 'failure', 'disturbed', 'forgotten', 'sad', 'drug-addict' were used. Post-partum, I feel it in my stomach, the dark hole that has always been there. It makes me so sad I can't tell you. Let's not ignore the moment in time in which we live, in relationship to this: Forgotten or undervalued female artists can encourage a sense of 'discovery', a cat and mouse play: the finding of hidden histories as gems that we, in the art world, are trying to uncover like truffle pigs. If however, we consider that historically the condition of dropout was common and expected for female artists, the conundrum of presence and absence becomes a bit more fraught, especially in a re-evaluation of these women 'rarities.'[7]

Why this sudden valuation of that which must be FOUND? Female artists – come out from under there! Stop hiding under your chairs! Curators and gallerists can't find you down there!!!

In the heart-wrenching article, 'The Canvas Ceiling', a review by the writer Claudia Roth Pierpont in the October 8th 2018 issue of *The New Yorker*, with the cover showing a silencing red hand over the mouth of a female face, exactly one year after the Harvey Weinstein scandal 'broke', there

7. Gordon, M. 'Presence and Absence', *May Revue* Issue 16, October, 2016.

is a description of the group of female painters, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, Mitchell, Elaine de Kooning and Krasner, who were present in and partners of the New York School group of painters, together at the opening of an exhibition of De Kooning's *Woman* paintings: '...In 1953 – in a fancy midtown gallery that did not show women painters – [they] blithely offered their own observations: "That one's you. That one's me..."'[8]

Lynda Benglis painting the floor with forty gallons of pigmented latex at the University of Rhode Island, 1969. Photograph: Henry Groskinsky. Courtesy the artist.

In the process of writing, I've recently been imagining gestures as liquids that evade a neat stacking, like so many Amazon boxes in underpaid unionised warehouses. Gestures as liquids moving between things. I begin to imagine what would happen when these gestures become TOO MUCH, when they start pushing out, forcing things around.

8. Roth Pierpont, C. 'The Canvas Ceiling', *The New Yorker*, 8 October 2018.

Originally, the term 'embarrassment' implied an excess, overabundance, and was linked to the emotion of shame, which evolved to contain the fear of such leaking. To 'embarrass' the gesture. To block or obstruct the movement of something on the move. But what is this force, when pressure, stress, weight, and velocity come into play? In Mina Loy's poetry, in Lynda Benglis' sculptures, in Josephine Pryde's photographs, sex, fluids and movement take precedence. An ejaculatory joy of fluidity, critical in its excess. Slap the floor with something rubbery, slap my legs? 'A mark / in paint / registers / the passage / of force / through mat/ter.'[9] David Joselit, 'Reassembling Painting', *Painting 2.0*. (My breaks.) And perhaps through time?

Let's go back to the moment I saw Mary Heilmann's paintings for the first time. They shot me down like a bolt to the head, which was followed closely by an acute sense of sadness. That night, one of the last that I lived in Berlin in 2008, I sat down and wrote: 'Perseverance makes me sad'.

In a June, 2016 article in *The Guardian* the journalist Jason Farago wrote about Heilmann: 'In case it's not evident, Heilmann knows a lot of people in the art world. But after years of underexposure for her own work, the US artist is finally enjoying a welcome career surge in her eighth decade... this attention is belated validation of Heilmann's talents. Spend time in her light-filled studio in New York, however, and you'll soon discover she was never out of the picture.'[10] Mary Heilmann has been around, yes, but that doesn't mean she hasn't been subjected to the 'endless low-level harassment' as one female painter once described it to me, as shown in this interview with Ross Bleckner:

RB: 'Yeah. You were showing at Holly Solomon Gallery. And what was funny about your paintings is that they were simple – squares within squares, kind of quasi-minimalist, brightly colored – everything was slightly off register, even the shape of the canvas itself, right? The square would be lopsided.'

9. Joselit, D. 'Reassembling Painting', *Painting 2.0*, Delmonico, Munich, 2016.

10. Farago, J. 'Interview: Artist Mary Heilmann: the Californian Surfer Still Making Waves in her 70s', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2016.

MH: 'I don't think so, not on purpose anyway. The interior square...'

RB: 'Well maybe the interior square set up a perception that made me think of it as being slightly... goofy.'[11]

Melissa Gordon, Instagram post, 2019. Courtesy the artist.

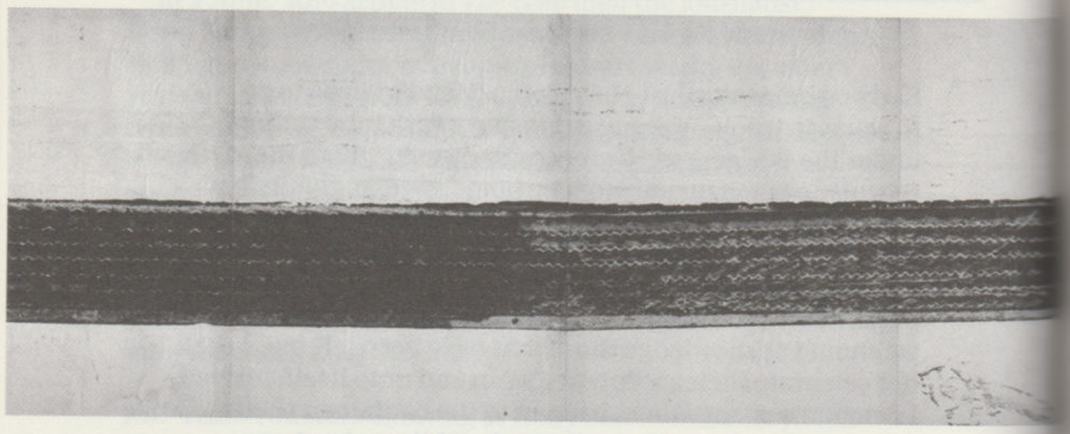
Early one morning last May, I left a friend's house to go to work, to teach. Walking to Finsbury Park tube station, under the bridge past the fences that stood where the recently evicted, mainly female homeless community had been, I saw a large poster for Pina Bausch with the words 'SHE PERSISTED'. No, I thought, NO. I refuse persistence. I refuse the valorisation of waiting your turn. We should appreciate older female artists for their brilliant practices and lives, we should acknowledge those that have been left out. I shall not celebrate their acceptance as an end unto itself. Instead, I demand a change must happen to the container; their gestures must burst the walls, as the philosopher Luce Irigaray says, 'spread to infinity'.[12]

Okay, I'll come back to the rest of the embarrassment stuff after speaking a bit about notions of gesture and site in painting. The theorist Giorgio Agamben begins his essay

11. Bleckner, R. and Heilmann, M. 'Mary Heilmann by Ross Bleckner', *BOMB Magazine*, 1 April 1999.

12. Irigaray, L. *The Sex Which is Not One*, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 106.

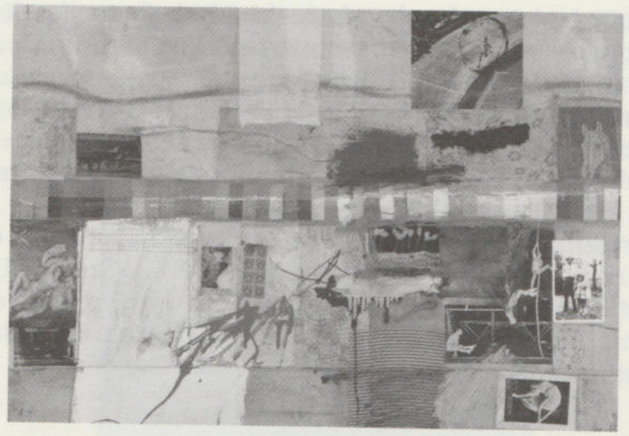
'Notes on Gesture' by describing how in 1886 the scientist Giles de la Tourette 'prophesised' cinematography in his experiment to try to materially visualise a human gait: 'Only an eye gifted with such a vision could have perfected that footprint method of which Gilles de la Tourette was, with good reason, so proud. An approximately seven- or eight-meter long and fifty-centimeter wide roll of white wallpaper was nailed to the ground and then divided in half lengthwise by a pencil-drawn line. The soles of the experiment's subject were then smeared with iron sesquioxide powder, which stained them with a nice red rust color. The footprints that the patient left while walking along the dividing line allowed a perfect measurement of the gait according to various parameters (length of the step, lateral swerve, angle of inclination, etc.).'[13] When I first read this quote, a work by Robert Rauschenberg was brought to mind: *Automobile Tire Print* from 1953, in which he famously asked John Cage to drive his Model A Ford over some ink and paper.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Automobile Tire Print* (detail), Paint on twenty sheets of paper mounted on fabric, 41.9 × 726.4 cm, 1953. Courtesy SFMOMA.

The question of the visualisation in cinematography of the human gesture that Agamben speaks about is the starting point of my enquiry into gesture as a painter and a writer.

13. Agamben, G. *Infancy and History; On the Destruction of Experience*, Verso Press, 1993, p. 135.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Small Rebus*, Oil, graphite, paint swatches, paper, newspaper, magazine clippings, black and white photograph, United States map fragment, fabric, and three-cent stamps on canvas, 97.47 × 120.02 × 4.45 cm, 1956. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

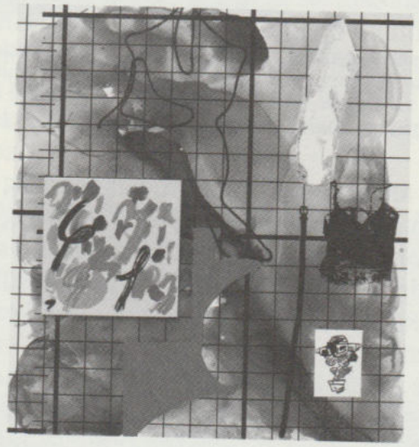
Coincidentally, around the same time as reading the essay by Agamben, I had been to see the Rauschenberg exhibition at Tate in London in 2016. I went obligingly with a friend, more as a backdrop to a conversation. I soon realised that the practice of Rauschenberg, something I had embarrassingly put to the side after my youth in what I guess you might call the subcultures of hardcore and DIY – a subculture I did a lot of silkscreening for at an early age, and through the enthusiasm of my friend who wrote a book called *Performing Objects* (Isobel Harbison) – that the works of Rauschenberg touch concretely upon ideas of the PLACE and SITUATION of gesture. Even if they are embarrassing pictures.

I find the following quote pertinent, and I will come back throughout this talk to the idea of the 'site' of a painting that Craig Owens raises in *Beyond Recognition*. Leo Steinberg described Rauschenberg's typical picture surface as 'dump, reservoir, switching center'.[14] Rosalind Krauss also characterises Rauschenberg's art in terms of place: discussing the 'equal density', which disparate images acquire in *Small Rebus*, she is 'struck by the fact that the surface of this

14. Owens, C. (Kruger, B. ed), *Beyond Recognition, Representation, Power, and Culture*, UCU Press, 1994, p. 76.

painting is a place, a locale, where this kind of equalization can happen.'[15] Implicit in this understanding of the 'locale' of a painting is the idea of a venue, a place where something happens, so the question becomes, what do gestures enact in this space, and importantly, how does the understanding of these 'enactments' historically form into an art historical shape?

Interestingly, I wrote this paper before the re-opening of MoMA and Amy's show there, which she spoke about earlier. The notion of shape and site is currently at the forefront of our thinking, and for some people here it's important in relation to painting. This image shows a recent painting of mine.



Melissa Gordon, *Une Femme Pendue (A Female Readymade: Rope, Atties drawing, lingerie, painting, belt, wood off-cut)*, Acrylic, marble dust, silkscreen, flasche, painting on cotton fabric (50 × 50 cm), 180 × 200 cm, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Cösar HMT, Dusseldorf.

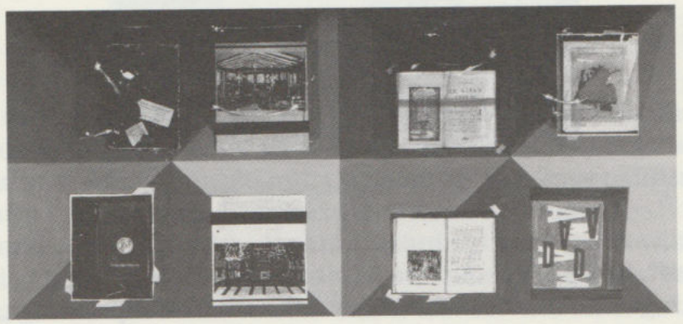
I'm going to get onto this, but will start by going back in time. I'm actually going to talk about work I made a long time ago, because it relates quite clearly to how I arrived at newer work, in terms of thinking about site and staging. This is a work titled *The Satisfaction of Knowing* from 2007. At the time, my practice, just after leaving De Ateliers in Amsterdam, was focused on making investigations into certain subjects:

15. Owens, C. (Kruger, B. ed), *Beyond Recognition, Representation, Power, and Culture*, UCU Press, 1994, p. 76.

a female spree killer, notions of monstrosity in female figures. Here was a collection of images taken from feminist magazines such as *Heresies*, re-painted on my imaginary rendering of Judy Chicago's red lacquered bathroom wall at Womanhouse, the feminist art installation and performance space from the 1970s.

Melissa Gordon, *The Satisfaction of Knowing*, Acrylic on canvas, 140 × 140 cm, 2007. Courtesy the artist and Museum of Modern Art Arnhem, NL.

In these older works made in 2007 or so, I was interested in the site of painting as a space in which assemblage takes place: real documents come together, they sit on an imaginary surface, which resembles a crime board; in this image, the surface has an upper and lower 'pool' that references a subliminal id-like area under water.



Melissa Gordon, *I'm too structured to scream*, Acrylic on canvas, 80 × 160 cm, 2007. Courtesy the artist.

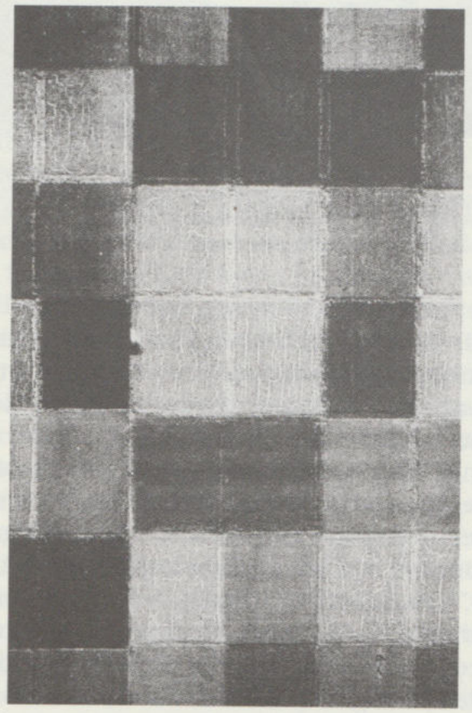
I return to these works out of an interest in the implicitness that, within the idea of a locale is a body – a participant perhaps – but also a body on which things happen, a body as locale, or intertwined with locale. I gave birth to twins a few years ago, and as I get older, my entire understanding of my body has changed. It is not just an agent of transformation, but also a site or place of activity: other people's needs, the fact of time, an increasing awareness of gravity, an accumulation of knowledge and fat. This understanding of a site has historically been understood in feminist art. Gestures are not just enacted upon a site, there is also a supportive system at play between gesture and place.

In 2013 I began a series of paintings titled *Material Evidence*, which took as their subject matter the surfaces of the studio, and the unconscious marks made as the by-product of a painterly practice: spills, wipes, drips were photographed, cropped, and turned back into tongue in cheek 'abstract' paintings.

Melissa Gordon, *Material Evidence*,
Acrylic on canvas, 50 × 50 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

In short, these came out of a number of years of turning painting 'onto itself'. I worked into the surface of paintings, such as this series, which I'll briefly touch upon, titled *Blow Up Modernists*. I would take extremely detailed, cropped

photographs of damaged or cracked Modernist paintings in catalogues, and blow them up very large, to the point where the image is obscured by the raster or rosette of the printed page as well as the deterioration of the surface. I wanted these to be dead-as-a-doorknob kind of works, perhaps to the point of being ridiculous, but where they were also read as very serious.



Melissa Gordon, *Blow Up Modernists (Mondrian)*,
Silkscreen on canvas, 110 × 160 cm, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

This way of looking, this photographic impulse to catalogue, or look through the camera as a tool that can flatten but also reveal something, turned into the *Material Evidence* paintings.

Early in this series, I worked with the writer Marina Vishmidt, and she came up with a beautiful analogy, in which she described the idea of moving from index to icon and back again. This takes an 'indexical' mark, turns it into an 'icon' or an image with meaning, which is then turned back into an indexical sign for abstraction in the painting.

Left: Melissa Gordon, *Material Evidence (Zoom out Table)*,
Acrylic on canvas, 85 × 90 cm, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Deweer Gallery, Otegem.
Right: Melissa Gordon, *Material Evidence (Zoom in Table)*,
Acrylic on canvas, 85 × 90 cm, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Deweer Gallery, Otegem.

Marina wrote: 'The work offers some pictorial and productive frames for thinking through seeing and history, representation and re-presentation, the whole array an anatomy-theatre of Modernism's afterlives. Core to these demonstrations is the movement, both light and rather schematic, from index to icon: In the paintings *Material Evidence*, paint splotches on studio surfaces inject the old punchline of the abject un-meaning of the abstract expressionist canvas with a homely, gendered wit. It is the performance of an interior, but not a performance of interiority. A blunter play with the index to icon transit can be observed here: the mark of paint (index) is turned into a painting (icon), compressing in that transfer a whole history of canvas as index of gesture which becomes the icon of artistic genius'.[16] What of the site of production? What of the site of exhibition? Looking back on these works, I wonder if my impulse was in fact to turn the canvases into Readymades, to turn the attention to the actions and places of painting, rather than the 'quality' or the 'message', as these concerns are for me more wrapped up in advertising than in painting. In thinking about gesture, I became increasingly interested in the space between the paintings. As the paintings developed, I realised that it was the jump or gap between the paintings that was in fact more interesting than what was being 'depicted'.

16. Vishmidt, M. and Gordon, M. *Material Evidence*, Sternberg Press, 2014, p. 39.

In the essay 'Notes on Gesture', which I previously quoted, Agamben tells us that 'cinema leads images back to the homeland of gesture'. 'What is a gesture?' asks Agamben. It is something that is 'inscribed' into the sphere of action, but is neither acting or making, it is neither production nor performance. Not the mark or the act that makes the mark.

'A remark of Varra contains a valuable indication. He inscribes the gesture into the sphere of action, but he clearly sets it apart from acting (*agere*) and from making (*jacere*).'[17] Here Agamben makes the distinction between the Latin *facere*, or making something, and *agere*, which is acting. He then points to the verb *gerere*, which is to carry on, or to support. He uses the example that a poet 'makes' a play but does not act it, that the actor acts but does not make it. These distinctions point to an understanding that gesture in fact arises in the transition between these two actions.

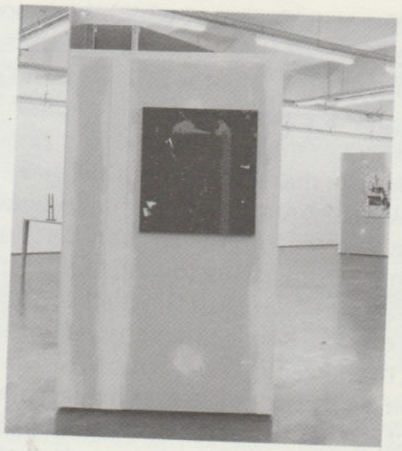
So, in reading Agamben, I began to understand gesture as the flickering of firelight animating a cave painting of jumping animals, the stills of film juddering together to make movement. I am understanding gesture as the imaginative jump in our heads, which believes in the action that created the physical trace of the event.

This 'jump' is cinematic and bodily, which Esther Leslie talks about so well in her book *Liquid Crystals* when she says that the human eye does not pan smoothly, but rather jumps from one frame to another. And more and more, I've come to understand that a body carries this understanding of a gesture, a body ignites gesture.

'It is as if a silent invocation calling for the liberation of the image into gesture arose from the entire history of art. This is what in ancient Greece was expressed by the legends in which statues break the ties holding them and begin to move'.[18] The environment in which we encounter paintings is also a conductor. I've seen some great bad surfaces on my travels: half-built walls, with a gestural 'fixing'. First, in 2014 at WIELS, I built free-floating architecture.

17. Agamben, G. *Means Without End, Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, 1990, p. 56.

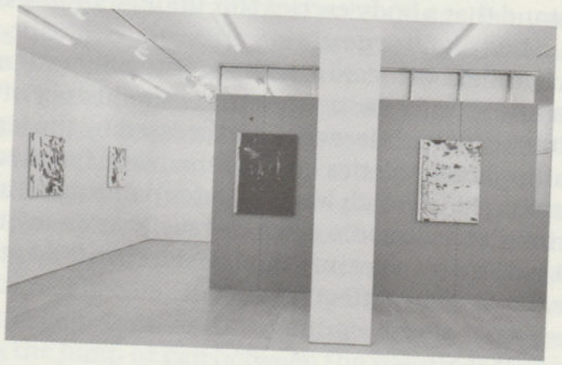
18. Ibid, p. 56.



Melissa Gordon, *Material Evidence* in 'During the Exhibition the Studio Will Be Close', 14 June to 17 August 2014, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, Acrylic on canvas on unfinished plasterboard, 60 × 60 cm, 2014. Photo: Kristien Daem. Courtesy the artist.

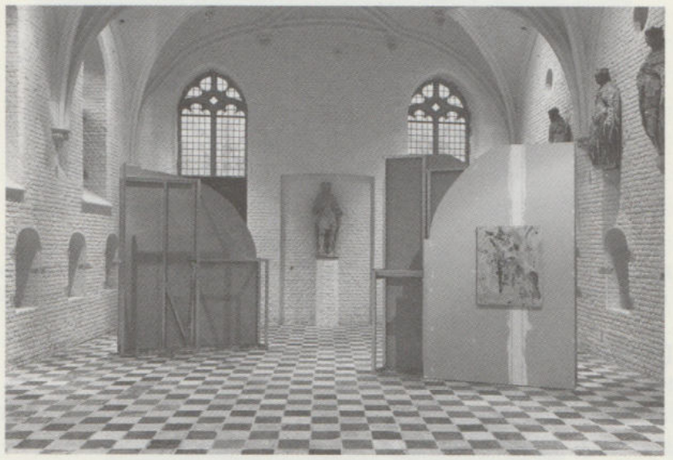
The idea is that the shapes are cut out of the architecture, like off-cuts, similar to how the paintings are off-cuts of a studio surface.

Around the same time I also made a show in New York that was only going to be up for three weeks: why finish the walls? Shows go up, shows come down. I wanted that careless, fast economy to somehow be present in the show.



Melissa Gordon, *Material Evidence (Floor)* and *Material Evidence (Table)* in 'Mimetic Pleasures', 10 October to 9 November 2014, Marianne Boesky Gallery, both Acrylic on canvas on unfinished plasterboard, 70 × 90 cm each, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

I also began wanting to include a linear movement between the works, and started making pairs and groupings of paintings that had cinematic relationships: pans across surfaces, zooms, crops, turns, time-lapses. Thinking about gesture as the space between the works, the jump-cut in your head between images.



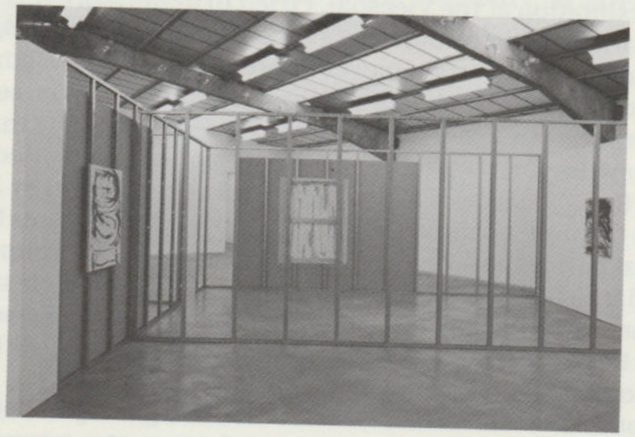
Melissa Gordon, *Material Evidence (Floor)*, in 'Routine Pleasures', 10 April to 19 June 2016, Vleeshal, Acrylic on canvas on unfinished plasterboard, 80 × 100 cm, 2014. Courtesy the artist.

In an exhibition at the Vleeshal, I tried to underscore this cinematic interest by building a set design for the paintings that would enact certain moves between the works: walking around a wall and seeing the same painting in rotation, seeing a painting accumulate marks on a surface as if walking through the show, seeing a long wall with a long pan across. I titled the show 'Routine Pleasures', which is in homage to a film by Jean Pierre Gorin, a movie about a painting of studio surfaces by the Marxist painter and film critic Manny Farber and a group of model train enthusiasts cleaning and maintaining their studio. I became increasingly interested in how the notion of gesture could be levelled between different actions, how very different 'acts' might have similar gestural intentions.

Around this time, I had an exhibition at a gallery in Belgium. I decided to import the architecture of my apartment and studio, tiny spaces in London, overlap them and build metal stud-architecture that was unfinished.

Melissa Gordon, *Material Evidence (Table Pan)* in 'The Gesture is a Joke', 1 June to 3 July 2016, Deweer Gallery, Otegem, each Acrylic on canvas on unfinished plasterboard, 75 × 90 cm, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Deweer Gallery, Otegem.

As I previously mentioned, I had recently had twins, and I was at home cleaning almost constantly, wiping surfaces. When I went to my studio, I was also cleaning and reproducing mess as artworks, and I started thinking: 'If gesture is the embodiment of something that is being supported, what happens when someone's gestures are not supported? What are gestures that exist away from a support?'



Melissa Gordon, *Joke Gestures* in 'The Gesture is a Joke', 1 June to 3 July 2016, Deweer Gallery, Otegem, each Silkscreen on canvas on unfinished plasterboard, 70 × 90 cm, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Deweer Gallery, Otegem.

'How can I show gestures going off the support, not just talk about dropouts, for example'. Increasingly, I became interested in enacting a liquidity in paint; in the works, in the moves between the works, in the hanging of the works.

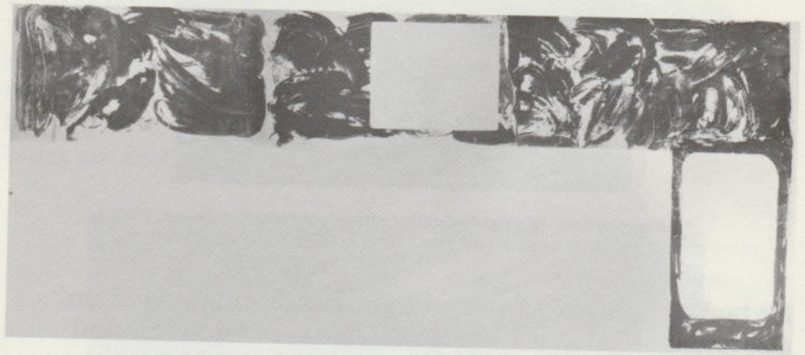
Melissa Gordon, *Joke Gesture*, Silkscreen on canvas, 70 × 90 cm, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Deweer Gallery, Otegem.

My body is a furnace for oxygen and organic material. I am also an ocean, in that systems of liquids are forced around the container of my limbs and skin. It's barely held together. I am pushing out of myself at all moments. Gravity plays a part in my function.

In *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997), Yve-Alain Bois states: 'Even if one no longer speaks of painting as a "window opened onto the world" the modernist picture is still conceived as a vertical section that presupposes the viewer having forgotten that his or her feet are in the dirt. Art, according to this view, is a sublimatory activity that separates the perceiver from his or her body'. What if you're stuck in the mud? My interest in enacting liquidity is to upset the hierarchy of gestures that might be considered 'above all that' daily shit.

Bodies are funny. They are full of comedic failures, especially as you get older and less insecure. It is these embarrassing episodes with fluids and gases that make us human to others: as Amy describes in her essay 'Shit Happens' from 2015: 'this laughable casement that is the body below, as ankles swell, farts are emitted, rolls of fat jut out, the penis does its own thing. Shit happens and then you die'.

The gesture is liquid. It IS a liquid, adjective and noun. Lately I've been thinking that a painting happens all over the fucking place. And what if a canvas is just in the way? Americans call it the support. But nothing is goddamn solid anymore. EVERYTHING a liquid touches is a CONTAINER. The form is defined by what it touches, pushes up against, presses. Liquids are hot or cold, sticky or slick, and they are pushed around by objects, walls, pipes: repressed by the architecture of form. Shored up. Harnessed, but ready to burst through at any time. In this way, surfaces are also containers.



Melissa Gordon, *Make a mess and clean it up*, Silkscreen on raw canvas, 120 × 350 cm, 2017. Courtesy the artist.

Okay, back to the body, back to the locale. In this exhibition, where my flat and studio overlapped inside this massive gallery space, I started producing a body of work, which I called *Joke Gestures*. I developed a technique in my studio, where I have professional silkscreen equipment, to try to capture a sense of cleaning. So I laid down plastic, poured on thick oil floor paint, and cleaned the surface with a sponge or a broom or a mop. I then exposed this directly onto silkscreen, with the light pushing through the paint to reveal gestures.

I began cleaning specific surfaces, like my kitchen counter, my bathroom floor. Then I cleaned a room in an exhibition of Rita McBride's at WIELS, hung this back up as a part of the architecture, and let her work and the work of others be hung in front and around it.

'Something Stronger Than Me', Installation view, 15 September 2017 to 7 January 2018, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. Melissa Gordon, *Make a mess and clean it up (Rita's exhibition)*, Silkscreen on raw canvas, 300 × 1200 cm, 2017, with works by Rita McBride. Courtesy the artist and WIELS Contemporary Art Centre.

Some notes on liquids: liquids are abstract un-forms, rushing to fill space, existing not specifically here or there, but homogenously across any expanse. They spread out, slide down, drip, seep, feel WET. They push uncontrollably outwards, are messy and immeasurable; liquids are materials that *behave*. They can be measured through their speed, conductibility and viscosity as much as by volume. Their meaning is to move. What is this flow?

'It is already getting around, at what rate? In what contexts? In spite of what resistances?' Irigaray, in her chapter 'The Mechanics of Fluids', in the book *The Sex Which is Not One*, outlines the idea of the female as a liquid as 'women diffuse themselves according to modalities scarcely compatible with the framework of the ruling symbolics'.[19] Irigaray speaks

19. Irigaray, L. *The Sex Which is Not One*, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 106.

of the 'precedence' given to solids, and also to the potential of liquids to 'jam' the works of the theoretical machine, an infection or 'affectation' of the surface that it finds itself walled up against. I am talking about FORM here. I mean, like what, specifically? Irigaray says: 'It allows itself to be easily traversed by flow by virtue of its conductivity to currents coming from other fluids or exerting pressure through the walls of a solid; that it mixes with bodies of a like state, sometimes dilutes itself in them in an almost homogeneous manner, which makes the distinction between the one and the other problematical; and furthermore that it is already diffuse "in itself" which disconcerts any attempt at static identification...'[20]

So liquids and gesture are formless and plural. Formless and excessive. 'Pleasure' – is to quote Irigaray one last time – 'the black-out of meaning'.[21] Paint is also obviously a liquid, but it's often thought of as a surface that is applied and fixed onto a 'picture'. How to maintain the liquid-ness of a liquid in a painting? Is this an act of maintenance? At this point I usually quote Mierle Laderman Ukeles, which I will do: 'Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time. The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay. Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby's diaper, finish the report, correct the typos, mend the fence, keep the customer happy, throw out the stinking garbage, watch out don't put things in your nose, what shall I wear, I have no sox, pay your bills, don't litter, save string, wash your hair, change the sheets, go to the store, I'm out of perfume, say it again – he doesn't understand, seal it again – it leaks, go to work, this art is dusty, clear the table, call him again, flush the toilet, stay young.'[22]

Last summer, I organised a show at a gallery in New York. I wanted to make an exhibition that showcased female abstraction.

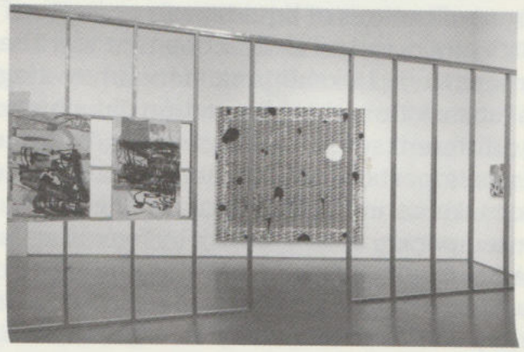
20. Irigaray, L. *The Sex Which is Not One*, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 111.

21. Ibid, p. 114.

22. Laderman Ukeles, M. *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*, Four typewritten pages, each 21.6 × 27.9 cm, 1969.

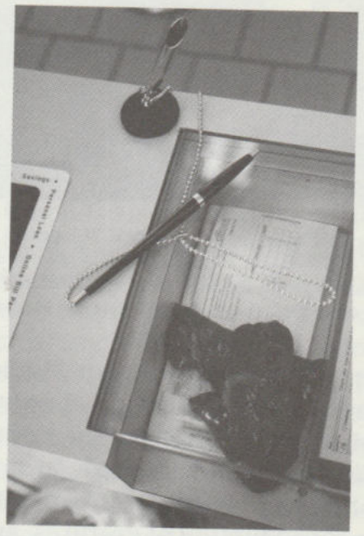
'The Mechanics of Fluids', Installation view, 21 June to 3 August 2018, Marianne Boesky Gallery. Back: Melissa Gordon, *Make a mess and clean it up*, Silkscreen on canvas, 300 × 1300 cm, 2018. Front: Charlotte Posenenske, *Series D*, Aluminum, 1967/2018. Courtesy the artists and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

What became interesting was the way in which the abstractions included in the exhibition dissolved, and how hierarchies of gesture in the different mediums were upset. Photographs by Eileen Quinlan are made in a painterly manner, Jacqueline Humphries and Laura Owens' paintings use digital and photographic reproduction of gestures, and Charlotte Posenenske's huge sculptures are mutable and ongoing. I wanted to make a structure of displaced architecture to display the works on, in order to make a mess and clean it up.



'The Mechanics of Fluids', Installation view, 21 June to 3 August 2018, Marianne Boesky Gallery. Back: Jaqueline Humphries, *Earthbound*, Oil on linen, 279.4 × 281.9 cm, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Front: Amy Sillman, *SK59* (on the left), *SK60* (on the right), Ink, acrylic and silkscreen on paper, each work: 66.04 × 101.6 cm tall, both 2018. Courtesy the artists and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

The exhibition also contained a photograph by Josephine Pryde from 2006 titled *I may have the weak and feeble body of a woman but I have the liver of an ox.*



Josephine Pryde, *I may have the weak and feeble body of a woman but I have the liver of an ox*, Photograph, 61 × 47 cm framed, 2006. Courtesy the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York.

I wanted the exhibition to be a document of female abstraction at the forefront of notions of liquidity, an example of how women artists pioneered an abstraction that was ahead of its time. Perhaps there is something more interesting than the canon of abstraction, that abstraction has a historical multiplicity, different sensitivities, gestures. This multiplicity of gesture is an important development in painting, while also being a continuation of the language of gesture.

Much contemporary abstract work by female artists is spoken about in terms of fakery, unknowability and questions of the real and unreal. I'll come back to this, but initially I was trying to point to an instability of surface, medium and architecture, and communicate this with existing gestures. This is also something that I was working on in my own paintings at the time.

I'm moving onto the final part of this talk now, getting to more recent work!

Research image: Marcel Duchamp's studio with *Fountain* suspended, 1917. Courtesy the artist.

I found this image at MoMA's library during my ongoing research into Duchamp's urinal *Fountain*, which was submitted to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917. I am interested in the widely speculated idea that the original work was actually by the German Dada artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. I was trying to assemble a timeline of *Fountain*, like in a crime scene, and I found this image, which proves nothing except that Duchamp took *Fountain* back to his studio apartment and hung it up in his doorway, along with his other Readymades *In Advance of the Broken Arm* and *Bottle Rack*.

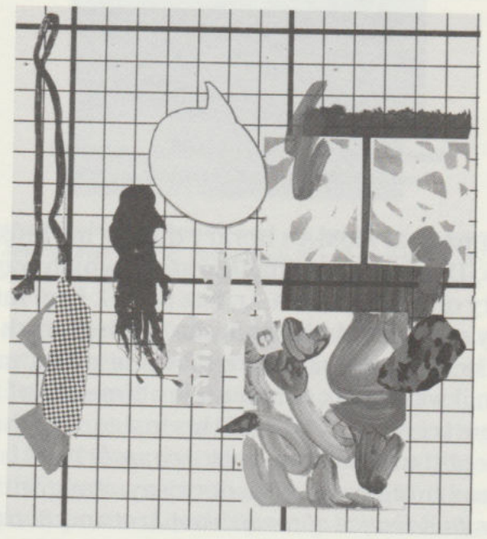
Interestingly, in the book that contains this picture, Duchamp refers to the hanging urinal as *une femme pendue*: a hung woman. He also called it 'a hanging female thing'. Hanging things are like a lucky charms, especially in doorways, which denote a passage to somewhere or something else. For example, a bride is carried over a doorway to connate ownership. There is also Duchamp's character Rrose Selavy, and the fact that he and the Baroness were both cross-dressers and friends. In fact, the fountain is consistently credited to Rrose Selavy in Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*.

All of the paintings in my series of works, which deal explicitly with the Readymade are titled *A Female Readymade (Une Femme Pendue)*.

They arise from a process of live modelling, which of course references a specific kind of art historic investigation, which finds its history in Aby Warburg, one that finds itself looking at the notion of gesture in the first place.

In the studio, I physically assemble documents or shadows of real surfaces, such as a grid, a fence, a stud wall, or the holes in a metal perforated sheet (which is used in the UK to clad abandoned property).

These elements are then exposed directly onto a silkscreen and printed like photograms on the surfaces of paintings.



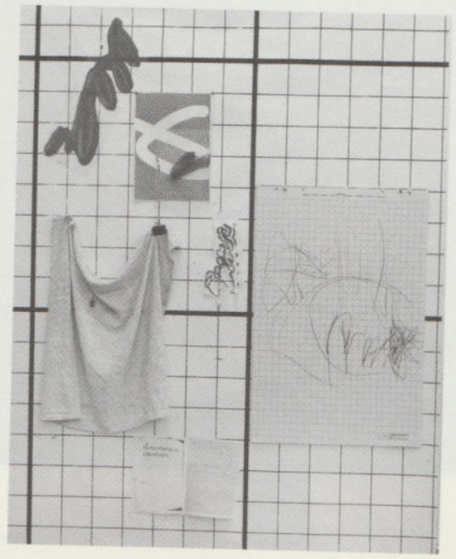
Melissa Gordon and Daniel Rother, Double page spread from the catalogue *A Gesture is a Liquid*, Anagram Books, 2019. Courtesy the artist.

I started working on an artist's book with the designer Daniel Rother. He approached me in 2017 and it became a very productive collaboration, in which I started making models of paintings. Trials and scans of paint. This is how I work, in an experimental manner in which I try many things out. Things sit for long periods of time before I figure out how to congeal them into art. I started modelling paintings for the book with Daniel

and I realised that the way forward was to talk about painting as a LOCALE. As a place that is performative (actions are rehearsed, collected, investigated) that also plays with gesture as something real and projective.

In my most recent body of work, I was thinking about the idea of a surface of a painting as a hanging device. In previous work, the notion of hanging was present as a locale that interacted with paintings, temporary structures, and surfaces that showed a clear artifice of 'hanging' in the exhibition of the paintings. I then started to think about how to bring that INTO the paintings themselves.

I wanted to bring this sense of hanging onto the canvas, the notion that gestures are 'hung on' a painting. I also wanted to convey a sense of gravity, and a scale that showed a human space or site, in which this activity of 'hanging' was taking place.



Melissa Gordon, *Une Femme Pendue (A Female Readymade: scarves, speech bubble, erasures, exhaust price)*, Acrylic, marble dust, silkscreen, flasche on canvas, 180 × 200 cm, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Cosar HMT.

Things oscillate between a real and a represented gravity. Purple suspenders, dry eraser boards and fake barf are real. A hole is cut out and a sleeve hangs through, bags, saws and

scarves are exposed directly onto canvas via silkscreen, again, like photograms, and printed life-size. Paintings are hung on paintings; paintings are made on paintings. Cuttings of financial terms that relate to the body – exhaust prices, burn rates – are hung with digital drawings of intestines and thick paint.

Who gets to be abstract? What support do I have to engender myself as an artist? What if I keep on and no one cares? To me *Une Femme Pendue* is violent and coy. The gestures of women in Modernism were accumulated by men: the Readymade, the 'overall' drip of Pollock, and many other gestures considered 'original', which are in fact copies of others, others who were not supported.

Melissa Gordon, *Female Readymade (Painting with handle, bra, intestinal cut out, perforated metal)*, Acrylic, marble dust, silkscreen, flasche, canvas (50 × 50 cm), and plastic handle on canvas, 180 × 200 cm, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Cosar HMT.

Cutting into intestinal paintings, creating holes and ways of seeing through the screen of the surface of painting.

BACK TO EMBARRASSMENT.

The notion of woman as a 'leaky vessel' is addressed in the final essay in the writer Anne Carson's book of poetry *Glass, Irony and God* (1995). This text focuses on the role of women's voices in the polis in Ancient Greek writing, and it is full of wonderful examples of the fear and loneliness that female voices produce for men. She describes these sounds in the context of madness and witchery as well as bestiality, which are conditions commonly associated with the use of the female voice in public. There is the heart chilling groan of the Gorgon, which is 'a guttural animal howl that issues a great wind from the back of the throat through a hugely distended mouth'.[23] Note the large quantities used in this description.

'The Furies... high-pitched and horrendous voices... the deadly voice of the Sirens and the dangerous ventriloquism of Helene... the incredible babbling of Kassandra... and the fearsome hullabaloo of Artemis as she charges through the woods... the seductive discourse of Aphrodite which is so concrete an aspect of her power that she can wear it on her belt as a physical object or lend it to other women... Iambe who shrieks obscenities and throws her skirt up over her head to expose her genitalia... the nymph Echo... described by Sophokles as "the girl with no door on her mouth".'[24]

23. Carson, A. *Glass, Irony and God*, New Directions Paperbook, New York, 1995, p. 120.

24. Ibid, p. 121

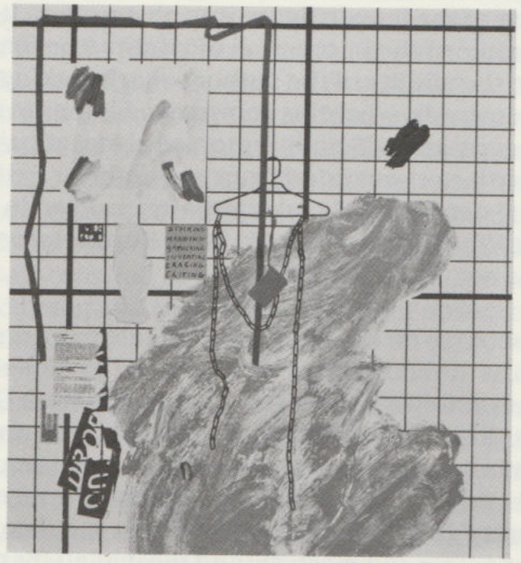
Ambe or Baubo, Greek sculpture of goddess.

Carson talks of the upper and lower mouth ascribed to women. At one point she describes how psychologist Josef Breuer withheld a publication on his case studies on hysteria and 'the talking cure' when his famous patient Anna O., through transference, contorts in the imagined pain of childbirth (with his child) upon opening the door to commence their final meeting. Carson says: 'It is confusing and embarrassing to have two mouths. Genuine kakophony is the sound produced by them'.[25] It is this history of voice that I keep in mind when I think about the question 'who is speaking' in relationship to

25. Ibid, p. 135

painting and gesture. Most especially, the sense of 'two mouths' connected to the projection of 'the author' onto a painting.

In much of Isabelle Graw's recent writing, she examines the phenomenon of painting as 'lively', in so far as it projects life and thus speech, or speech and thus life. In Graw's essay 'The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy' (2016), she asserts that subjectivity is transmitted through a brushstroke, which reveals 'traces of an activity to the eye'.[26] It is the 'signs' of a painting that 'evoke the ghostlike presence of the absent author.'[27] Painting becomes 'a discursive subject that speaks to us and therefore appears to be alive'.[28] Speech, in this instance, is associated with the body of the painting, a replacement for an absent author whose body is not an issue.



Melissa Gordon, *Female Readymade (Dropouts: erased painting, list of gestures, sleeve, medicine, Lee Lozano's notebook, chain, ratchet, letter to Dr.Brunn, dollar bill (in homage to Laurie Parsons))*, Acrylic, marble dust, silkscreen and flasche on canvas, 180 × 200 cm, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Cosar HMT.

26. Graw, I. 'The Liveliness of Painting', *Painting Beyond Itself*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2016, p. 81.

27. Ibid, p. 81.

28. Ibid, p. 86

In art historian Helen Molesworth's essay 'How to Install Art as a Feminist' from 2010, she describes the complicated relationships at play in female artistic practices. 'Genealogies for art made by women aren't so clear, largely because they are structured by a shadowy absence'.[29]

Is this a different way to disappear behind the canvas?

Dear Eva,
Your title 'Painting BEHIND Itself'[30] is about an absent author who remains physically present, though hidden. As I remember, it began when you told me about a piece of writing you had started about what is considered the first abstract painting in history. This work, *Mme Kupka Amongst Verticals*,[31] consists of marks painted on top of, and obscuring, a female figure. The painting, you say, literalises the disappearing of the female figure into abstraction. It is the perfect example of the impression of vitality (the female figure) turning into the vitality of the author's mark-making. To quote you: 'In other words, what this comparison hopes to show is that in this early and officially endorsed abstract painting, the female figure is not separated from and anterior to the abstract marks on the canvas, but is substantially involved in their production. What it means for Madame Kupka, however, is that she is not really there at all'.[32]

In much discourse on contemporary female painters' terms, such as 'unknowability' (a term used by Molesworth) and 'unquantifiability' (a term used by writer Mark Godfrey) prevail. This lineage raises the question of whether we can locate a feminist position in this approach to abstraction. Molesworth, for one, has already pushed for the term 'unknowability' in a 2013 essay on Amy: 'For me, feminism is a critique of power and mastery, and most of all it's a warning about how the combination of mastery and power has,

29. Molesworth, H. 'How to Install Art as a Feminist', *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010, p. 504.

30. Kenny, E. *Painting Behind Itself*, Revolver Publishing, 2016.

31. *Mme Kupka Amongst Verticals* (1910–11) is a painting by Frantisek Kupka held in the MoMA collection. It is said to be one of the first completely non-figurative paintings.

32. Kenny, E. *Painting Behind Itself*, Revolver Publishing, 2016.

historically, led to violence. One result of this questioning of power is that unknowability emerges as a kind of virtue'.[33]

Who gets to be abstract? As in, who gets to be off-point, random, bad-tempered? Who gets to not-give-a-fuck, lie, have a 'you-don't-have-a-clue anyway' attitude: I was just joking, until I'm not, then it's not funny at all: duh? I am a female painter. I have two mouths, so I must speak twice about the same thing and my speech is confusing. A recent interview I did with Amy for the magazine *Girls Like Us* included the following exchange:

MG: I guess I've been wondering if there is a language of female or feminist abstraction and how it deals with 'bodily' questions. I curated the show 'The Mechanics of Fluids'[34] and included your work, alongside work that had the feeling of movement and transition at the forefront of abstract practices by women artists. But I've been reading about the question of what female abstraction is, or what abstraction made by female painters is, texts by people such as Helen Molesworth and Mark Godfrey, and it seems that so much of the discourse on female painters is about absence, or unknowability, or unquantifiability... a kind of 'refusal to language' or a refusal to know, or to know too much.[35] I'm curious to know what you think about this because I feel you've actually created so much positive language around making and being an artist that is not about absence or unknowability.

AS: I understand your resistance to the idea of 'unknowability' – it's definitely super problematic. It re-inscribes the female gender as some kind of darkness, or 'inscrutable' – in other words, the 'other'. But what I'm interested in is knowing differently, articulating the act of perceiving as a way of knowing. That's what Simone de Beauvoir wrote about too. She insisted on the subject's position. I take my cues from that.

33. Molesworth, H. 'Amy Sillman: Look, Touch, Embrace' in *Amy Sillman: One Lump or Two*, Prestel, 2013.

34. 'The Mechanics of Fluids', Marianne Boesky Gallery, Summer 2018.

35. Godfrey, G. 'Statement of Intent', *Artforum*, April 2014.

To end, I'd like to say that when you're an artist, you put your body on the line. Whatever body you have, you make something from this position, and since I'm sensitive to language, articulating this point has been an important challenge. Embodied knowing is a part of consciousness, rather than being exclusively connected to quantifying information and building new legalistic proposals.

What is this new shape-form of painting? For me it is a container within which things are put. The shape-form of the artwork, or art world generally, is a container through which we view gestures, while embarrassment is the pressure of the physical amount. Simply put: the idea of an exhibition is a container, a book, a gallery show, a painting's surface, a photograph, a career, a biography, a headshot, an interview, a magazine spread in *Vogue* that you will never get (as my gallerist told me), your shitty website and the fucking awful things that arise when one Googles anyone and anything. A city, a scene, a collective, your studio: these are all containers and they are NOT solid. We can witness these changes happening now in real time.