

Staging Gestures

Melissa Gordon

“...The gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language; it is always a gag in the proper meaning of the term...”
(Agamben, 59)

In 2016, I staged a play written in 1916 by the early modernist poet Mina Loy, titled *Collision*, as a live enactment of an exhibition installation. *Collision* is an impossible play to perform, because it describes, in short, a complete dismantling of a stage set: the “incursive planes and angles of walls and ceiling interchange kaleidoscopically...” (Loy, 1915). It is a poem and stage instruction, manifesto and script for a play all at once.

Mina Loy was a poet, active in the early years of modernism with sexually frank poetry and artworks that shocked the ‘modern’ world. When

Loy wrote *Collision* in 1915 she was living in Italy, and purportedly romantically involved with the futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. In 1916 Loy changed her allegiance from 'futurist' to 'modernist' and *Collision* (which, to my knowledge, had never been performed before) is, in my reading, a protest against singular authorship and the masculine image of the author. Perhaps Loy envisioned a mechanical stage, or, as I have always imagined: the birth of a new form of exhibition space. A space that transformed into a set, an exhibition, and an artwork: the live staging of the mediality of an exhibition.

I decided to use corporeal mime as a tool to work through questions of gesture in the play. Mime, as a wordless language which was/is intended to communicate the effort of the body and to be the language of modernism, seemed appropriate to engage with in a play with almost no dialogue. The staging of this exhibition was a gesture of re-inscription (into history) and re-activation (to bring something silent to life). The (silent) language of corporeal mime, which is focused on the machinery of the body and the un-languaged, faceless communication of gesture through the body spoke to my interest: how can gesture be *enacted* through form, when voice or authorship is denied or silenced?

In "Notes on Gesture" (2000) the theorist Giorgio Agamben, begins by outlining the relationship between movement and gesture. He describes the visual study by Gilles de la Tourette in 1886 of the human gait, in which a person, with the soles of their feet covered

in red oxide powder, walks on paper, staining it with red footprints. This visualization is closely related in time and intention to Edward Muybridge's studies of movement. Agamben wants us to understand through these early scientific visualizations of movement that "the element of cinema is gesture and not image", and he goes on:

Gilles Deleuze has argued that cinema erases the fallacious psychological distinction between image as psychic reality and movement as physical reality. Cinematographic images are neither *poses éternelles* (such as the forms of the classical age) nor *coupes immobiles* of movement, but rather *coupes mobiles*, images themselves in movement, that Deleuze calls movement-images. (Agamben 2000, 55)

In unpacking this understanding of how gesture finds itself between the state of a cinematic unfolding and a timeless form, it is useful to consider the difference between a gesture and a trace. A trace is the left-over mark of an action, a spilled wine on a shirt, a tire track screeching to a side of the road. A gesture is different. It implies that something has changed or moved. As Deleuze describes his 'movement-images', a gesture reveals or shows us the movement (of material, of bodies, of ideas), it brings the image of the change to us, it *stages* this change.

Material Evidence

Material Evidence is a body of paintings I began in 2013 which are sourced from a photographic archive of my studio surfaces. I repeatedly photographed my own unconscious gestures in the studio, and

this formed an archive of thousands of images. These details, such as paint wiped on walls, paint spilled on the floor, paint mixed on table surfaces and buckets etc. are reproduced or re-enacted in paint on canvas. The paintings are not copies so much as mimicries of gesture in which other kinds of surfaces and gestures and paint accumulation take place: they are not 'realistic' paintings as much as real paint applied in the representation of gesture. These paintings of gestures act as tongue-in-cheek abstract paintings, a 'picturing' of gesture, or a re-inscription of gesture from one site of the studio (an architectural surface, the mess of a floor) to another (the painting face).

Early in the series, I worked with the writer Marina Vishmidt, and she developed a beautiful analogy in which she described that the body of work envisioned the transition of moving from an icon to an index and back again. It helped me to think about how we might understand that gesture has a *behavior* that is evidenced in different scenarios.

In Marina's writing, she describes the back-and-forth movement between cataloguing a gesture and reproducing it as a painting itself:

In the two paintings "Material Evidence (Table)" and "Material Evidence (Wall)", 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. But, asks this image, what about the contingencies of housekeeping in the studio? Is a paint drip on some kinds of studio surface—canvas—any more expressive than dripping on others (wall, table)? What is this material evidence of? We could say it is nothing more than process, but that creates a tautology that eclipses the impact of the move, or, what makes it funny. Gordon calls the pieces “intentionally ridiculous,” their mixing-up of horizontals and verticals jinxing the immanence of the picture plane to its historically- certified content. If the expressive splotch was part of an *expressive causality* (it embodied the spirit of its time—the irreducible subject that was its maker), the “Material Evidence” pair articulates a *structural causality*: it is produced by the woman artist, in her studio, dutifully, as an artwork – as proof of her right to be there. Detached from its generic premise of authenticity, like a bad translation in a service script, it labors to bring us nothing but joy. (Vishmidt 2014, 39–40)

I began to think that in the pleasure of putting paintings together, in the process of exhibition-making, a ‘movement-image’ or *coupe mobile* could function like the frames of an animation assembling into an image of liveliness. What could the implication for painting be if liveliness, or the notion of vitality, something being literally about to come to life, can be located in a *recognition* and a cinematic *putting together* of gesture, between paintings?

I started hanging my paintings in cinematic relationships- in diptychs and triptychs or more that showed cropping, panning, rotation, zooming. The viewer's eye jumps between the paintings, the in-between space becomes animated, and acts like a cinematic frame cut that a brain constructed to show how the move from one image went to the next, but kept the in-between present.

This process has led to a gradual understanding of gesture not as the mark (brushstroke), or the act that makes the mark (performance), but rather as the perception of a transition that has happened between these two states, or two 'pictures' or 'frames' of a film.

Routine Pleasures

Agamben describes gesture as means in an end. It serves no purpose, other to reproduce itself, its materiality, and to do this through the medium of the human body as a vehicle.

"The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such. It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings..." (Agamben 2000, 58)

For an exhibition in 2016 at the Vleeshal, I developed an installation scenario that would explicitly address the notion of a movement of gesture, to visualize a cinematic behavior of gesture. To do this I thought about the relationships between the paintings and the scenography that brought them together, and in doing so, I recalled and

took as a starting point a movie on gesture by Jean-Pierre Gorin: *Routine Pleasures* (1986). The movie, shot by Babette Mangold, documents Gorin's move from Paris to San Diego. It follows a crew of model train enthusiasts 'maintaining' their clubhouse and train world, and it switches between this and pans of an in process painting by the painter-critic Manny Farber, maintaining a picture.

For the exhibition, which was also called *Routine Pleasures*, the built interior of the Vleeshal, a medieval meat market, was left unfinished like a skeleton of an exhibition. At the entrance was a frontal wall and walking through, a long V-shaped wall approached you, making a small, impossible space to walk down on the right. I then arranged a number of free-standing walls that were cut-outs of the medieval architecture in the space: curves and vaulted arches which stood around as half-finished hanging devices.

The entire *Routine Pleasures* exhibition was a hanging device, and I began to play in this exhibition with the relationships between the paintings to develop a language around how gesture can be viewed both within each work as an 'image' of itself, but also between each work as a 'move' from one place to another. I left the metal stud walls of the exhibition open in many parts, loosely plastered, and the backs and sides of the free-standing walls left open, like a Hollywood or theatre stage set. I wanted, through the hanging of groups of paintings on this 'staged' environment, to develop the notion that these paintings were to be encountered in a state of change: to underscore



the changes happening *between* paintings, and for there to be a staged awareness to this encounter.

For example, in walking around a pink arched free-standing wall, one would see a painting of a grey floor with paint spilled on it. Walking to the back side, the viewer sees a duplicate image: the same wall shape, and the same painting of a grey floor, except the marks on the floor are rotated 45 degrees. Camera work, building work, assemblage: all of these gestures were locatable, and in direct correspondence with the title *Routine Pleasures*, as an homage to the film of the same name.

Make a Mess, Clean it Up

I gave birth to identical twins in mid 2015, and my life in 2016 was a series of never-ending gestures: in the morning I would clean the house of all the messy spots of food and gunk, then go to studio and paint mess, clean up, then come home and clean up some more. I began to be curious about when gestures are levelled. As Vishmidt asked in her description of the *Material Evidence* paintings, when is one gesture more ‘expressive’ than another? Surely when we move our bodies there is an expression involved? I wanted to ‘freeze’ the material of paint in its liquid state to show this expressiveness.

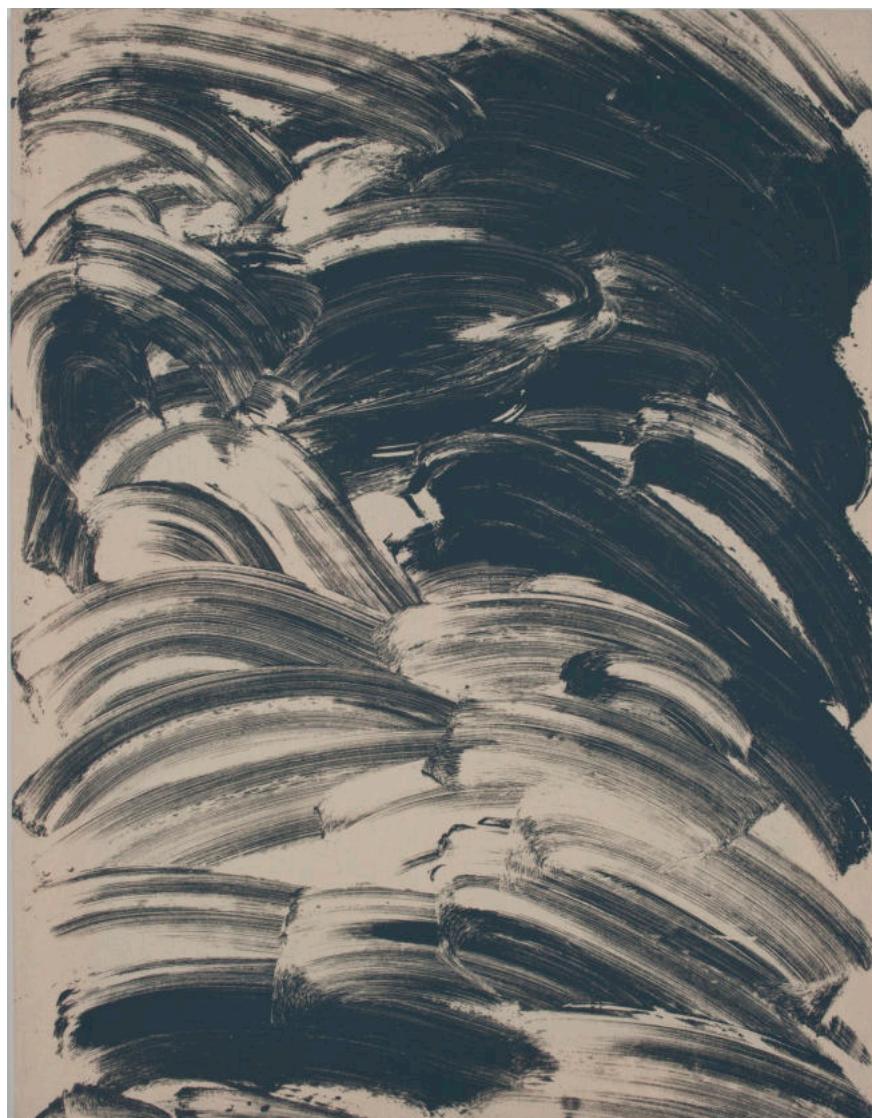
This body of work, now titled *Make a Mess, Clean it Up*, asked: how can I stage the liquid nature of paint in a painting? I began by ‘cleaning’ small surfaces, moving paint around on a piece of plastic the size

of an A0 silkscreen, to be exposed directly and printed on muslin. I then made several pieces in which I ‘mopped’ real spaces – my bathroom floor, my kitchen counter – and ‘cleaned’ these surfaces (put plastic down, poured paint, and moved the paint around with mops), then exposed them to silkscreen and assembled them into prints that showed the life-size silhouette of each space. There are holes for where the sink and stovetop were, a shape where the toilet and sink touch the floor. I wanted to portray a liquid seeping everywhere, flowing until it hit the walls and forms that stopped it.

I then expanded the work to cleaning entire rooms and hallways. In the exhibition *Something Stronger Than Me** (2017) at WIELS in Brussels, on the invitation of Rita McBride, I ‘cleaned’ an entire room of her exhibition, then hung the image of this back up as a piece of architecture, with which her guide-rail fences and other collaborative works. Later, in New York I mopped the ‘backstage’ space of a gallery, and recently, my kitchen with an 80 cm wide mop.

The development of this body of work came out of months of trial and error: to simply throw paint around does not ‘show’ or reveal or stage the qualities of it that I wanted to capture. I developed a process whereby the light of a commercial silkscreen unit pushes through a plastic sheet that has been ‘cleaned’— thus revealing and exposing the movement in minute detail. It is not an image but an impression, it is not the gesture but an enactment of the gesture to show, to put on display, a particular quality of material.





In addressing this problem of how to ‘show’ the process of how these very different forms of expression, coming from the same performative body, I turned to the essay “The Problem with ‘Performative’” (2015) by Andrea Fraser.

When the term performative jumped from linguistics into literary theory, it promised to break down the boundary between doing, on one hand, and say, writing or representing on the other. When it developed in feminist and queer theory to describe the often compulsory and normative character of gender performance, it promised to break down the boundary separating self-conscious and specialised cultural performance from the often unconscious and overdetermined social and psychological aspects of gender performance. (Fraser 2015, 123)

The text by Fraser breaks down the term ‘performativity’ into three clear categories: enactment, which itself has a relationship to psychology and ‘acting out’ problems; straight performance which is involved in a mediality as such (dance being a movement of the body); and finally performativity, which delineates compulsory ‘performances’ or ‘enactments’ of cultural or gendered positions (which are inherited, learned and often more difficult to separate from habit).

Fraser’s distinctions are useful in understanding that both the making of gesture in painting is an enactment of gesture (not a performance, and not a performative action but rather an ‘acting out’ of a set of expectations), and that the staging of work adds another layer of enactment. That an exhibition itself is gestural.

Female Readymades

But an exhibition, a painting, is also a site, a place on which something happens. It is a venue.

What, then, do gestures enact in this space or place, and how also, importantly, do *bodies who are themselves seen as ‘sites’* enact something in these venues? In his essay “Notes on Gesture” (2000), Agamben tells us: “Cinema leads images back to the homeland of gesture.” (Agamben 2000, 56)

Upon first reading this, I thought of the work “Automobile Tire Print” (1953) by Robert Rauschenberg, in which Rauschenberg famously asked his friend John Cage to drive his Model T Ford through a tray of ink and then along a long piece of paper. Here, the operation of the *flatbed*, the turning of the window-like picture of painting into an operation of material on a horizontal surface, meets the cinematography of gesture: an unfolding of an event as an image that carries on – carries on going, carries on in time, carries on unfolding (presumably until the ink runs out, like when a film runs out of stock)

Flatbed painting and work which uses the operation of the *informe* shift the emphasis of the axis of the viewing of the picture plane: a flattening, turning, a feeling of falling down or laying down, an acknowledgment that there is gravity, and touch. But also, that there is a body who makes this touch, who also deals with gravity, who is imperfect:

Just having a body is a daily comedy. From the control tower of the head, one gazes downward, always downward, upon this ‘loose baggy monster’ that we find ourselves in, 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. (Sillman 2015: ?)

In my new body of paintings titled *Female Readymades*, which I began developing in 2018, I use the notion of flatbed painting to understand how a painting surface could have and *display* gravity. I have been attempting to enact or stage a painting environment and lexicon which implies that a body is present in the creation of gestures, but also that the canvas itself is a site or a situation upon which things happen. For me, this staging of multiple forms of gesture on one surface of a painting are a crux point at understanding how voice (and female ‘bad’ voice) meets a space where a body (a painter) enacts something.

During the process of developing the body of paintings, I began to model paintings on the walls of my studio. This modeling started by printing a large-scale motif of silkscreened surfaces that could be imagined to be hanging structures. Then I hang objects (including painterly gestures) on this structure and began to imagine a context in which one would encounter this set of gathered materials. This staged modelling has been turned into a body of large-scale paintings.

Each painting is modeled in real life by assembling groups of objects and materials pertaining to questions around gesture, around bodily



movement of form, as well as accessories of bodies, cut-outs and negative shapes of gestures. The materials are assembled on large surfaces hung on the wall of my studio which have been silkscreened with a fences, grids, steel sheets and barriers. I hang objects on these surfaces, demonstrating gravity. These live, staged hangings become models for paintings, in which layers are blocked, paint is applied both behind and in front of the 'boundary' of the grid. Real objects are exposed to silkscreen and printed to life scale (belts, chains, texts) – printing 'real' things on the paintings show a real scale. What is being enacted on these paintings is the modeling of gesture and the assemblage of information around gesture and the body that is making it.

Many of the gestures that are made on the paintings are rehearsed on either plastic sheets that are hung on the model paintings, or on small test paintings before being painted on the large works. These test paintings are also then mimicked or themselves hung on top of the canvases. Real objects are hanging through the canvases or glued on top, such as electric cigarettes and purple suspenders. Shapes that reference digital erasures repeat throughout the series. How could I paint these digital gestures as being as real as the real gestures, but also being digital and not being painterly or representing a representation of an object? What is the difference between a real object or a ready-made surface and a representation of that object?

The *Female Readymade* paintings gather information about bodies that are hidden and present it without showing the bodies themselves.

They exhibit information about female painters who were present and perhaps the 'original' authors of some of the most 'seminal' gestures in art history: the readymade, the drip, the monochromatic neo-plastic surface.¹ Smoking guns, and chains. Gestures that have multiple voices, sizes, and material qualities. Flaps, intestines, holes. Texts and letters between friends and about the concerns of authorship. Spills, splotches, pools of paint. Fences, barriers, screens, weeds, bras and ratchets, door handles, hooks, clips.

Who gets to speak?

In my most recent work, the boundaries of authorship are beginning to blur, and this is dependent on the process of the stage being evident within a painting. For one painting in the show 'Liquid Gestures', the film *Liquid Crystals* by Jean Painlevé is screened on an LCD screen, installed *on* a painting. In the collaborative work 'Net Dimension' with Alice Channer at the show 'Transitive Objects (Coral What)', I made a large silkscreened wallpaper, printed with exposed 'real' objects (plants, scarves, off-cuts of elastic bands, bags), which formed the background for the installation of her sculptures and my paintings. This has been enacted recently also with the photographs of Eileen Quinlan at Manifold Books in Amsterdam. In all these examples, what is being staged is not only a supportive system, but a conversation between artists.

¹ To emphasize my point I will put these artists in a note, which is inappropriate: Elsa von Freitag Loringhoven (the potential original author of *Fountain*), Janet Sobel (whom was making 'drip' paintings before Jackson Pollock, and showed these at Peggy Guggenheim's 'Art of This Century' Gallery in New York in 1944, and Marlow Moss, a close friend of Piet Mondrian, whose work deals with dimensionality in Neo-Plasticism.



But what is being staged by a female painter, now, and how does that staging sound? At the end of Agamben's essay "Notes on Gesture," he writes:

(B)ecause being-in-language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language; it is always a *gag* in the proper meaning of the term, indicating first of all something that could be put in your mouth to hinder speech, as well as in the sense of the actor's improvisation meant to compensate a loss of memory or an inability to speak. (Agamben, 2000, 59).

Who does get to speak? And specifically, who gets to speak in the venue or public space of painting?

According to the poet, essayist and translator of Greek Anne Carson, silencing women's voices historically is seen as keeping order. If women speak too much, it releases disorder, it creates commotion and distraction. Women's voices (which come from both their bodies and their mouths) communicate emotion, communicate outside of normal avenues.

Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death. (Carson 1995, 120)

The notion of '*Kakophony*' that Carson speaks about in her essay 'The Gender of Sound' translates literally as: bad sound. In the history of

gestures, in painting, being bad has never been a problem, it has been more a question of who is *heard* being bad, and who gets to be bad and who gets punished. So perhaps we can approach this quote from Carson in a way to unpack what could be a positive and exciting potential of disruption: *kakophony* as the basis for a disruption of a codified speech, and to be able to use confusion and perhaps even embarrassment as positive tools. Kakophony as a means to *embody*, or to stage or perform a *gag*, the mediality-as-such:

"It is confusing and embarrassing to have two mouths. Genuine *kakophony* is the sound produced by them." (Carson 1995, 134)

If Abstraction is a gag, who gets to be abstract?

Who *does* get to be abstract? As in who gets to be off-point, random, bad-tempered, who gets to be not-giving-a-fuck, lying, you-don't-have-a-clue anyway, 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, I guess, and so I must speak twice about the same things and my speech is confusing.

Images

30 Melissa Gordon
Female Readymade (Two holes, tights, vase, Baubo, Hermaphrodite Aphrodite, Siren, Cassandra, Furies, notes from Anne Carson, still from 'Not I', broken fence, measuring tape), 2021
 Acrylic, flache, silkscreen on canvas
 180 x 200 cm

35 Melissa Gordon
Material Evidence (Table Pan), 2016
 Acrylic on linen
 95 x 115 cm

36 Melissa Gordon
Material Evidence (Wall), 2013
 Acrylic on linen
 50 x 50 cm

40-41 Melissa Gordon
Material Evidence (Wall Pan)
 Installation view, the Bluecoat, Liverpool, 2016
 Acrylic on linen
 Each 75 x 90 cm

44 From Left to right
 Melissa Gordon
Female Readymade (Large Spill, rope, belt, lingerie, Attie's drawing, wood shape, intestine off-cut, trial painting), 2019
 Acrylic, silkscreen, flache and painting on raw fabric (50 x 50 cm) on canvas
 180 x 200 cm

45 Melissa Gordon
Female Readymade (Summer weeds, jeans leg with cut pocket, my brush, tangled netting, Mabel's painting), 2021
 Acrylic, pigment, silkscreen, jeans, metal fasteners on raw canvas
 95 x 115 cm

46 Melissa Gordon
Joke Gesture, 2015
 Silkscreen on muslin
 90 x 110 cm

50 Melissa Gordon
Female Readymade Pt.I (Human Capital, burning car, barricade, Hydrofeminist texts, Opel Tometi's hands, dancing, steeringwheel, chain, intestines, tape, rearview mirror), 2020
 Acrylic, silkscreen, marble dust, flache on canvas
 180 x 200 cm

51 Melissa Gordon
Female Readymade Pt.II (Intestines, belt, tape, rope, Elephant and hole, voting booth fabric and sign), 2020
 Acrylic, silkscreen, marble dust, flache on canvas
 180 x 200 cm

54-55 Melissa Gordon
 Installation view "Liquid Gestures", Towner Gallery, UK, 2021-22
 From left to right
Female Readymade (Intestine cut-outs, bra, painting with handle), 2020
 Acrylic, flache, silkscreen on canvas
 180 x 200 cm
Female Readymade (Target, Attie's painting, theatre rope, holes, erasures, scarf, Fall Girls), 2020
 Acrylic, silkscreen, flache, marble dust on canvas
 180 x 200 cm
 Background: Detail of *Make a Mess, Clean it Up*, 2018
 Silkscreen on raw canvas
 330 cm x 1150 cm

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