Structural and Expressive

How can a relationship to modernism be actual today? In an era when attempts to establish that relationship occur ever more frequently in exhibitions and discourse, it's not an outlandish question. First, there has to be a structure for viewing: an instrument for measuring both the distance between one period and another, and the interferences that arise in taking up different positions with respect to this structure.

Index→Icon, and Again

What may first strike us about the exhibition **Material Evidence** is the strict conceptual scheme on display in the various spaces. Each of the four series exhibited offers some pictorial and productive frames for thinking through seeing and history, representation and re-presentation – the whole array an anatomy theater of modernism's afterlives. Core to these demonstrations is the movement, both light and rather schematic, from index to icon: the enlarged reproductions of sections of modernist paintings (icon) register both the painting and the cracks in the surface of the painting (index). Gordon prints the cropped section (new index) and this image, showing

the artifacts of both printing processes, takes its place on the wall as a new icon (the **Blow Up Modernists** series). Here, the sacralities of the modernist canon, whether in the key of the absolute (Mondrian, Malevich) or the existential (Pollock)[1] are both reduced and enlarged: they are reduced in visual information, in color and texture, their aura sequestered, reduced to documentation, to information **in general**, to the printed medium: to the industrial civilization they were hoping to refract or transcend. At the same time, they are enlarged and multiplied, engendering a plethora of possible croppings that can become new works, like little clones off the production line of a cell. Of course, it was always the fate of absolute painting to be reproduced in the wilderness of commodity forms. Through their conversion to a printed material, here the terminal icons of Malevich are made to evoke transience and disposability. The dot-matrix look of a newspaper or comic book inevitably summons Pop art's mixing of media – specifically Lichtenstein – colliding the temporal logic of art history, the disparities in affect, and the unevenness of the object-relations involved.

Meanwhile, **The Daily News RIP** series, in color but cleansed of any graphic element but layout, resemble nothing so much as a pack of Mondrians.

The insistence on structural elements echoes Mondrian's own insistence on the reality of the picture. The fundamental imperative of nonrepresentational painting – to eliminate any dimension of semblance from the picture, that is to say, any relations but those immanent to its structural elements. The set of structural elements here has been extended to include reproduction, mediation, dissemination: printing. The interference between production and reproduction contorts what is often appropriated as a stylistic legacy, or at least a stylish one. As Douglas Crimp noted in his 1979 essay "Pictures," the topographical explorations of modern art – seeking the elements of its surface – have been supplanted by a stratigraphic impulse which includes the former scheme amongst its layers, and which renders up that looking in a material gesture.[2] And insofar as these layers are also layers of mediation, they speak of the labor of reproduction and of study and its injunction to fidelity – the revealed cracks are also the inherent vice of a heroic male canon whose layers Gordon picks at in a materialist feminist historiography, as if peeling paint.

In the two paintings **Material Evidence (Table)** and **Material Evidence (Wall)**,[fig.6] 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.

Theatrical

There are two variations on staging going on in **Material Evidence**. One can be called phenomenological, and it grapples with that inheritance – so indelibly limned in Friedian argot – namely, how the object scripts the viewer's movement in space, entraining the emancipated spectator. The other is a conceptual staging that figures appropriation as production.

The presence of a pulley-system that suspends and animates the double structure of the two **Structures for Viewing** (both 2013) ushers in the literal armature of theater. These are elements insofar as Gordon underlines their participation in an installation, rather than a coinciding of discrete instances in the same space. Gordon and Jessica Wiesner – the artist and theater designer who designed the pulley-system – have collaborated on several occasions, testing out the mutability of spatial relationships by means of Mina Loy's Dada-Futurist play **Collision** and in partnership with a troupe of mimes.[fig.7] This interplay between viewer, object, and look is rehearsed here by means of interferences. The moiré patterns that result from the cross-diagonals between the screen prints on the wall and the screens that interpose themselves between these and the viewer induce her to constantly move around the work to find how each angle holds a different perspective. Just as the gridded weave of silk fabric behaves like a filter for paint – ensuring the screenprints behave both as prints and as paintings (here, again, staging an oscillation, like a moiré, between act and representation, index and icon) – the string-bound wooden frames hanging some meters away from them are filters for vision: depending on where you stand, they push more or less of the gaze through. The experience of looking through them generates patterns in the prints behind them on the wall, but interferences and overlays likewise occur within the graphic surface of the wall-based print. The buzz of vision comes to a halt from a side-on position. Standing thus, the slightly uneven spacing of the yarn changes into a solid block of color, recalling the yarn "paintings" of Rosemarie Trockel, with their sullying of the decorous monochrome by handicraft. Moreover, it is a **black** monochrome, recalling the blown-up, but deflated, Malevich in the other space of the exhibition.

This patient knitting of, and into, a void can appear as a feminist sampling or restaging: not only of arche-modernism, but of a later moment when textiles signaled a women's art insurrection in the wide, white spaces of the art institution.[3] But is the embarrassment that attends the rear-view of this moment – now both superseded and repeated by a new generation of "eccentric abstraction"[4] – precisely a "screen memory," as the **Structures** would have it, blocking the vision of an insurrection that was put down by the very conditions of visibility? The reversal from literal to conceptual staging happens, here, when the conditions of vision are historicized: when mediation – the conditions of looking – is revealed as the subject, and the subject who looks is an outcome of a production process. This production should be understood as the deliberate restaging of intuition, and the theater of mediations takes on a Kantian virtuality. Intuition restaged as production is the condition of art making, just as it is also the condition of art viewing: aesthetic judgement, in fact. Intuition starts to accumulate at the margins dividing what the artist does from the "curatorial." Gordon curates an ongoing series of exhibitions she calls **Specific Collisions**, the title a play on Judd's "specific objects", which evokes a relational, thus multiple, concept of specificity. The idea of "collision" calls up the Loy play and a Dadaist scenography where the interaction between objects is a knockabout skit as much as it is a careful framing or a thesis. Theater, or play, then, becomes the structure for viewing that precedes all others.

There is no presentation without a reading, without a labor of repro-duction: this is the humility and the gamble of the "curatorial." In Crimp's terms, representation need not be conceived as the "re-presentation of that which is prior, but as the unavoidable condition of intelligibility of even that which is present."[5]

Can we think of this theater also as a treatment, as in the alternative term for "screenplay"? In the other half of Spike Island from Material Evidence, in the concurrent group exhibition put together by the artist James Richards, Paul Wong's Unit 60: Bruise (1976) portrays a piece of tender, lightly-medicalized brutality, in which two young men become "blood brothers" when one injects his own blood into the back of the other. The registration of the bruise on the expanse of the flesh, and the deliberate infliction, recall Gordon's exposure of the cracks and stains in the paintings – registered by the images in books and subsequently printed as autonomous artworks. Here, as there, it's a case of intimacy wrought through or by damage.

Abstract Imprint; or, Screen-Play

Taking into account the modernist axiom that a surface is a surface (and thus, pace the criticism of minimalism, always a stage) Gordon has been using that painted surface to elaborate its cultural and historical conditions, as in the Blow-Up Modernists and The Daily News RIP series – a consistent line in a practice that conjoins mass-media ephemera to singular gestures through their common reliance on reproduction and dissemination. The screen print on the canvas enacts this with tech-nique: here the grid is no longer a metaphor, an article of faith or even a principle of organization, but the means of production of the image.

Earlier works produced by Gordon in this manner were also called "struc-tures," as in Structure IV (The New York Times, Sunday, June 27th, 1971) (2011);[fig.8] while others came in a viewing apparatus of two discrete components, like the colored rectan-gular blocks positioned in front of the printed canvases from an earlier incar-nation of the Blow Up Modernists, the "Composition" […] in Time and Space series (all 2011),[fig.9] enlarged Mondrian sections leached of all color. These, and other works, were shown in

an exhibition titled Structures for Viewing at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York in early 2012.[fig.10] The Structures for Viewing included in Material Evidence, however, are the first time the screen has detached from the print to become an object in its own right, rather than its presupposition. There is the wall-mounted print which has been manufactured by pushing paint through a screenprinting grid, and there is a screen we can use to view that print. A sharp material humor enters the frame, as well as a confusion about the industrial premises of modernist abstraction (the screens are made with yarn, just as textiles were a substantial part of historical modernism). The screen is the machine that makes the work, that makes it visible: but visible as an array of interferences; optical but also patently conceptual.

Yet there is also a suggestion of the relationship between pictorial abstrac-tion and social abstraction, one that is only partially covered by the address of the Blow Up Modernists series to mass reproduction as the material basis of heroic originality. The independence of the grid that materializes as an independent object in Structures for Viewing fleshes out another of the dialectics running through Gordon's show: that between the abstract and the concrete in non-figurative painting. Abstract painting was seen to be abstracting from reality – a reduction in information – while its advocates saw it as utterly concrete, concerned with the elements of a picture as structural and optical agents, rather than as shadows of a reality elsewhere. Yet, abstraction

can also be seen as setting the concrete parameters of modern experience if we think of that experience as one of "real abstraction" – the exchange-value which homogenizes and reduces (abstracts) all entities to commodities. The interplay of concrete elements on the surface of the picture then starts to look like an allegory of the social relations that make certain forms of "autonomous" practice (art, philosophy, science) conceivable in their separation from, and power over, everyday life – precisely to the extent that the link between the abstract and concrete is not seen as a mutually constitutive and conflicted dialectic, but as mutually exclusive options. The art market is often aligned with the financial market, as both transact self-breeding values – money making money – without first passing through production (labor or any other useful commodity). This is, finally, what the "vulgar" critique of social abstraction boils down to: the occult tendencies of money to increase, and exert control over, the "real" without a tangible imprint in experience. Gordon's attention to the newspaper "grid" as a "face to the world" – our interface to

information beyond our immediate experience (increasingly obsolete a medium though it may be) – is also an impulse to render these abstractions tangible, and so open them up.

The abstract project in art also engages a materiality which resists reduction to the homogenizing side of abstract exchange – even if historical abstraction continues to form the cornerstone of the art market. This resistance may take the overt form of reified individual expression, but these are hardly more than brands with a catalog. What is more interesting for Gordon is how this eclipsed history of modernist non-identity is precisely played out at the level of production, construction, and finally as reproductive labor (memory, appropriation, dismantling). Gordon's way of showcasing and contesting the smooth domination of capital values is to turn the conditions of representation into representations themselves, and then to cancel out the representation with a material, mechanical process that throws us back into the social and human infrastructures of this object, and the cosmology of (art) objects in which it sits.

Recursion also seems like a salient dynamic, even at times the principal one. A classic image of recursion occurs in Walter Benjamin's 1938 diaries, where he narrates a dream in which he finds himself in a barren landscape which turns out to be constructed out of giant letters, and furthermore turns out to be inside his ear.[6] Recursion has the power of hollowing-out scale and causality, collapsing the narrative metonymically into one of its aspects. This structural device is familiar to us mainly from cinema (Chris Marker's **La Jetée**, 1962) and literature (Adolfo Bioy Casares's **The Invention of Morel**), but its blurring of exiguous and integral, backdrop and foreground, has a distinctive role in Gordon's œuvre. It allows her to switch focus between

the image and its conditions so quickly that the process becomes a Gaussian blur, like the visual effects of the two **Structures**. The nested frames of the structure-for-making as a structure-for-viewing have already been noted with the matrix of the print doing double duty as the structure of the image. The **Blow Up** pieces are crops of sections in book reproductions of paintings, but they also illustrate their process: zooming in to find evidence, and finding evidence of the zoom. Gordon has cited Antonioni's **Blow-Up** (1966) as a key reference. The protagonist, a fashion photographer, thinks he's spotted the shadow of a murderer in some photographs he casually shot in the park. [fig.11] He keeps enlarging the image, but it only loses resolution: it only reveals its structure as a photograph and nothing more, feeding his obsession. A reflexive or hysterical looking: evidence of absence may not be absence of evidence, but what it evidences might not be the object of inquiry. And the subject isn't there. **Structures for Viewing** underpin Gordon's strategies of "pictorial thought," but they are structures that expose their own structures in the field of vision.[7] Pictorial thought manifests here as praxis which couldn't be satisfied either with "showing the device," nor with plunging into new technical affordances as the gamut of ambitious painting today. Pictorial, but also sculptural, kinetic, thought: it all depends on the form of the question.

Notes
1 As well as the less-renowned American abstractionist Burgoyne A. Diller, as in **Burgoyne Diller Blow Up** (2013). Other artists Gordon has brought into the **Blow Up Modernists** series, in other contexts, include Frank Stella and Ad Reinhardt.
2 Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," **October** 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88.
3 "In all my work, the subject is the thing that isn't there." Gordon, personal communication.
4 See Lucy R. Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," **Art International**, 10:9 (November 1966): 28, 34–40.
5 Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," 75–88.
6 Walter Benjamin, "Diary Entries, 1938," in **Selected Writings, Vol. 3 (1935–1938)**, trans. Gerhard Richter and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
7 See Yve-Alain Bois, **Painting as Model** (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).