

Afterword

Vital Signs is a compendium of texts produced by Melissa Gordon over a period spanning almost a decade. Writing is not an adjunct to, but is an integral facet of Gordon's work as an artist; the formal and technical properties of paint and screen-printing shape her use of language. Analogous strategies of reproduction, repetition and bricolage are central throughout her work. In texts and paintings alike, Gordon fuses subjective expressions with extant found signs extracted from a multitude of sources. And as the details from her *Female Readymade* series presented in the preceding pages demonstrate, representational details are married with gestural abstraction. Correspondingly, Gordon's writing possesses a dense intertextual quality; personal prose is punctuated by specific passages selected for their capacity to antagonise.

Gordon's paintings and installations can be assessed on their own terms, but viewing them in conjunction with these writings is illuminating and clarifies her position on the visual vocabulary she has cultivated. Consider, for example, how print – which is central to Gordon's output – has historically been a medium inextricably linked to dissent and the dissemination of disputatious ideas. Screen-printing – such an essential component of Gordon's work – also carries a specific set of connotations. Originally used for commercial purposes, it was embraced by a generation of artists who contributed to the deposition of Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s. These writings make clear the lineage of discourse informing Gordon's work and underscore the continued potency of some of the ideas that underpinned second-wave feminism.¹

The nine pieces of writing in this publication introduce us to a pantheon of polestars that galvanise Gordon's position as an artist. Some of these figures are friends and collaborators; others have become familiar indirectly via their cultural contribution or posthumous legacy. Of particular importance to Gordon's worldview are Cady Noland, Lee Lozano, Charlotte Posenenske and Laurie Parsons. Although dissimilar in their oeuvres, these artists are united by their withdrawal from the artworld and rejection of an apparatus that conflates artist and celebrity. Gordon reflects upon some of the disruptive qualities inherent in these artists' work and also exposes how the historicisation and institutionalisation of an artist often results in (or necessitates) the neutralisation of polemical aspects of their work.

Attention is persistently drawn to structural sexism and Gordon sheds light on some of the barriers, obstacles and hierarchies that shape our cultural landscape whilst also showing how they are built upon increasingly shaky ground. A contention that recurs throughout this book is that the narrative of modernism as we know it is essentially a succession of monolithic creation myths that rely upon the notions of individual (and predominantly male) genius. Gordon shares the observation articulated by Helen Molewesorth that "Genealogies for art made by women aren't so clear, largely because they are structured by a shadowy absence."²

Predecessors such as Janet Sobel and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, whose legacies were unjustly eclipsed or wilfully obscured, are acknowledged in these writings. This particular facet of Gordon's writing chimes with the broader contemporary field of scholarship and curating that seeks to recuperate overlooked talent, particularly that of women who participated in episodes of art-historical significance. While this tendency towards rediscovery undoubtedly has a positive angle, it frequently results in reductive readings of a given artist's legacy. Their marginal status is fetishised and they become known purely for the fact that they were overlooked, while the very aspects of their work that may have made them relevant in the first place are glossed over. Gordon points to this quandary, calling for something greater than mere "acceptance as an end unto itself" and demands that "a change must happen ... their gestures must burst the walls, and as Luce Irigaray implies, go everywhere."

Seven of the nine texts were written specifically to be presented – or in the case of the more recent pieces, performed – live in front of audiences. As a result, they include stage directions and alternating dialogue and therefore read somewhat like a playscript. Although no longer enlivened by those vital ingredients of tone, pitch or gesticulation, their colour presentation here permits differentiation and underscores the polyphonic quality of Gordon's writing. In addition to quotes

¹ Some of the issues addressed in these writings resonate with Linda Nochlin's watershed 1971 essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, particularly those pertaining to notions of greatness and genius.

from various artists and writers, several of these pieces contain the artist's own disharmonious, occasionally contradictory voices. We hear the author "talking to herself"; an omniscient voice that reports the author's excessively critical (and self-deprecating) self.

While humour runs throughout, it is always tempered by a palpable sense of defiance. Gordon expresses exasperation with an increasingly standardised and conservative cultural landscape in which self-marketing and consistency of product are promulgated. In these pieces, personal experiences, moments with a diaristic quality, converge with something that occasionally resembles reportage. Gordon's most recent writing – like her recent painting – is imbued with details that locate her work specifically in the recent past and present. There are oblique references to the consequences of the 2020 United States presidential election; to Brexit and the toughening of fortress Europe, and to the unclear but undoubtedly long-term repercussions of pandemia.

The increasingly professionalised and neoliberal tenor of contemporary culture encourages artists to cast themselves as individualised agents in competition with one another. Inevitably, this not only results in alienation but also undermines possibilities for solidarity. Gordon's work is of a staunchly idealistic bent and, as the short introductions accompanying each text highlight, she is invested in the social milieux that emerge around art. There is an interest in promoting collegiality; in bringing people together in informal environments; an aspiration to extend beyond the canvas or printed page into the circuitry of human relations. A desire for restitution runs through these writings, some of which occasionally approach a rallying cry, urging us to organise and overthrow hierarchy culture. Ultimately, this book is a testament to the fact that it is incumbent upon all of us to try and create the sort of art world that we want to be part of. To conclude with the words of Lee Lozano, "There are more & more freedoms to be invented by mankind ... we have to invent new freedoms."³

Pádraic E. Moore, Autumn 2023

- 2 Helen Molesworth, "How to Install Art as a Feminist", *Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 504.
- 3 Lee Lozano, private notebook (unpublished), no. 7, 120.