

Liquid Gestures: The Language of That Land

(Originally delivered as a talk at the symposium *No Rules* at Camberwell School of Art, London, on 26 March 2022. The symposium was organised to explore the exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty*, a survey of the American artist's woodcuts at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.)

We can locate at the basis of many “seminal” painterly moments a literal primitive accumulation, a “reaping” of the value of another's gestures, and often the appropriation of elements of a female artist's practice by their male peers. It appears that critic Clement Greenberg was in fact the conductor of two such moments in high modernist painting history. It is worth beginning this essay with both instances, presented as short anecdotes, as an introduction to how we might begin to address aesthetic language in relationship to a painter such as Helen Frankenthaler, on which so little official painting terminology has been focused.

Here's the first smoking gun, which describes how Greenberg and his protégé artist Jackson Pollock saw the “drips” of the artist Janet Sobel a year before Pollock began his “breakthrough” gestures in late summer 1946: on page 218 of “American Type Painting” in *Partisan Review*, 1955, Clement Greenberg writes:

Back in 1944, however, he [Pollock] had noticed one or two curious paintings shown at Peggy Guggenheim's [Art of this Century Gallery] by a “primitive” painter, Janet Sobel (who was and still is, a housewife living in Brooklyn). Pollock (and I myself) admired these pictures rather furtively: they showed schematic little drawings of faces almost lost in a dense tracery of thin black lines lying over and under a mottled field of predominantly warm and translucent color. The effect – and it was the first really “all-over” one that I had ever seen ... was strangely pleasing. Later on, Pollock admitted that these pictures had made an impression on him.¹

In another account, the same Greenberg took painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland into Frankenthaler's studio on West 23rd Street in New York in April 1953 to show them her new “soak stain” painting technique, in which Frankenthaler used the spread of thinned paint on raw canvas:

The night of April 4, Clem invited a group of people to his Bank Street apartment for drinks. Several artists [...] among them a former student of Clem's at Black Mountain, Kenneth Noland, and his painter friend Morris Louis. He asked the group if they would like to see something new. He noted in his appointment book that day: “At 6pm Louis & Noland, along with Chas, Egan, George McNeil, Franz Kline, Leon and Ida Berkowitz & Margaret Brown and I visited Helen Frankenthaler's studio, where some of us stayed until 11.” Helen wasn't there. Clem chose that moment to introduce his guests to her painting Mountains and Sea.²

Greenberg then encouraged both Louis and Noland's practices, where they each developed “poured” colour-field techniques, writing about and promoting them, leaving Frankenthaler largely out of the narrative until the exhibition *Post Painterly Abstraction* held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1964.

What can a 2023 reader make of these anecdotes, with all our hindsight of the funding of exhibitions of abstraction by the American national security

¹ Clement Greenberg [1955], “American-Type Painting”, in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 218.

² Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women*, 478.

apparatus,³ the corporate legacy of the collecting of modern art, and the contemporary re-hanging of large art collections such as MoMA and Tate Britain to reflect practices coming from outside the centre of this high modern canon? Why does looking at the theft or “borrowing” of female artists’ gestures as central to the main development of painting history matter now?

We can add these two revised “creation” stories of the drip and colour field to the ongoing debate and discussion around the authorship of the 1917 *Fountain* submitted to the Society of Independent Artists. As is discussed on the Tate website, Baroness Elsa von Freitag-Loringhoven, a German-born contemporary of Marcel Duchamp, may perhaps have submitted the urinal as a political protest against the entering of America into WWI.⁴ I conclude from these stories that the “reaped” gestures (the Baroness’ readymade, Sobel’s drips, Frankenthaler’s soak-stain colour fields) were considered in and of themselves *so important*, and distinct from their authors, that a narrative had to be created in order to present them (the gestures) with some form of “reputational” push.

My first encounter with one of Frankenthaler’s woodcuts, which were the focus of the exhibition *Helen Frankenthaler: Radical Beauty* at Dulwich Picture Gallery in London in 2021, was whilst I was organising a group exhibition entitled *The Mechanics of Fluids* at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York in 2018. In *The Mechanics of Fluids*, I was attempting to unfold an alternative history of how to view abstract gesture in painting through a more liquid, moveable understanding of the motivations of abstraction. I had secured works by almost all the historic and contemporary artists I had chosen. These were assembled to place women artists’ practices at the forefront of the notion of liquidity in the history of abstraction, so it was necessary to have a work by Frankenthaler in the exhibition. In searching with the gallery, we discovered that Frank Stella, one of the artists represented by the gallery, had a woodcut edition in his collection: *Radius*, from 1993 (which was later included in the Frankenthaler exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery in two versions). Upon first viewing *Radius*, I realised that it would be key to my exhibition.

The Mechanics of Fluids (2018) included artists who give priority to the visualisation of material *on the move*. In fact, in putting the exhibition together, what became evident was not only an interest throughout many of the artists’ practices in the motifs or imagery of liquidity, but that this liquidity was embodied in many of the practices and histories of the artists shown: a refusal to become solid in one medium, in one style, in one place.

In the hanging, I realised that the liquid nature of the works did not lie simply in the physical medium of the artist: the colour pours of Lynda Benglis, the bubbling surfaces of Josephine Pryde’s photographs, the modular sculptures of Charlotte Posenenske: yes, these works enact a liquidity, but, like in the Frankenthaler print, it was the *movement* between the act (pouring, layering, assembling) and the material *translation* of each artist’s gestures where the real “liquid” nature of their work was enacted. The liquid nature of a Lynda Benglis pour piece is not the fact that it was poured, or that it looks liquid: the liquid nature of a Lynda Benglis pour piece is that, as shown in the photographs of her making the work in 1969 (which were taken in the same year as the portraits of Frankenthaler by Ernst Haas), the work exists in the *transition between* a performance moment and a sculptural “document”. The means make the ends, because all material transformation is a performance in this world of an abstraction where your body cannot be ignored.

In my broader research into liquidity and gesture, I have found a number of female artists’ first-person writing describing themselves, their gestures and themselves as “in between”; and I have followed this logic as a beacon to explore what this desire to be “between” is about.

- 3 “The CIA not only helped finance MoMA’s international exhibitions, it made cultural forays across Europe. In 1950, the Agency created the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), headquartered in Paris. Though it appeared to be an “autonomous association of artists, musicians and writers,” it was in fact a CIA funded project to “propagate the virtues of western democratic culture”, <https://daily.jstor.org/was-modern-art-really-a-cia-psy-op/>.
- 4 America declared war on Germany three days before the submission day of the Society’s open call in 1917.

Laura Owens: And most importantly FOR ME at this moment and in my thinking, it is BETWEEN these spaces, the physical spaces, the object and the space of discourse.

BOTH

BETWEEN.⁵

Charlene von Heyl: I build up the shape by destroying it and by laying another shape over it. By building the painting in overlapping layers I would get shapes that I could never have invented. That's what I wanted. There was an early desire to create an alternative mind-space in a painting. It turned out to be something that was nicely situated between the worlds.⁶

Amy Sillman: All I'm really interested in is this quivering moment where something changes into something else in the studio. Changing things completely. I'm looking for a painting that expresses the before and after of itself all in the same frame. I guess it's almost like something that cubists or futurists were trying for. A kind of shattered expression of time and existence? I always think about motion and worry about endings.⁷

In this history of “not one or the other-ness” in women’s abstraction, I think it is interesting to point out how Frankenthaler is a strong reference point. She was always central, but between. She was between the group of New York School Expressionist painters such as Lee Krasner and Grace Hartigan and post-painterly colour-field artists. She was between generations of women artists, between the socialist activism of many of her peers who were active members of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, and later feminist strategies of the mid-1960s onwards such as those of Carolee Schneemann whose performances emerged from a reaction to “action painting”.⁸

I want to discuss abstraction made by women artists in terms of criteria, decisions and rules – rules that perhaps have to be broken or ignored in order to create a new language in painting. What are the criteria to which the “in-between” abstract painters (Frankenthaler, Mary Heilmann, Jo Baer and others) have been subject, what rules have they broken, and what decisions have been made to keep their gestures marginal?

For many women painters, notions of authorship confound the language through which we approach medium as speech. Because there are no embodied tropes (sad, tragic or angry “dude”, romantic “intellectual”, funny “comedian”, cultured “dandy”, mad “sage” or “shaman”) through which to view our gestures, they are often read as silent or floating alone. Until recently, in much discourse on contemporary women painters, terms such as “unknowability” (Helen Molesworth) and “unquantifiability” (curator and 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 ... “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, historically, led to violence. One result of this questioning of power is that unknowability emerges as a kind of virtue.”⁹

As a painter, I imagine gesture as something that is liquid and has agency unto itself. At the basis of my interest in this is the question of how to read gestures that have not been animated by history.

5 Laura Owens, ‘Picabia’, in *Laura Owens*, 626 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 626.

6 Charlene von Heyl interviewed by Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh 2014: <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/too-little-and-too-much-all-the-time>. Last accessed 14 July 2023.

7 Interview with Melissa Gordon in *Girls Like Us*, Issue #12, Biography, 2019: 113.

8 “Schneemann developed her approach to making art in dialogue with action painting, a technique pioneered by Jackson Pollock, in which he flung, dripped, and poured paint onto the canvas in dramatic, expressive physical gestures. Fed by feminist thinking of the 1960s and 1970s, she highlighted her own physical experience and point of view in her art”, <https://www.moma.org/artists/7712>.

9 Godfrey, “Statement of Intent”, 299.

The theorist Giorgio Agamben begins his essay “Notes on Gesture” (1992) by describing how, in 1886, the scientist Giles de la Tourette “prophesised” or imagined cinematography in his experiment to try to materially visualise a human gait:

*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.*¹⁰

When I first read this quote, it brought to mind Robert Rauschenberg’s Automobile Tire Print from 1953, in which he famously asked John Cage to drive his Model A Ford over some ink and then sheets of A4 paper laid on the ground.

This question of the *visualisation* in cinematography of the human gesture that Agamben speaks about is the starting point of my enquiry into gesture, as something that behaves within a space or context, of not just painting, but a visual field. What is the “field” of painting?

*[Leo] Steinberg described Rauschenberg’s typical picture surface as “dump, reservoir, switching center”. Kraus also characterises Rauschenberg’s art in terms of place: discussing the “equal density” which disparate images acquire in [the painting] Small Rebus, she is “struck by the fact that the surface of this painting is a place, a locale, where this kind of equalisation can happen.”*¹¹

Implicit in this understanding of the “locale” of a painting is the idea of a venue, a place where something happens: what do gestures enact in this space, and how also, importantly, does the understanding of these “enactments” historically form into a kind of art-historical shape?

The implications of the soak-stain method of painting that Frankenthaler initiated in the early 1950s are particularly interesting because I would argue that her work is the first to intentionally visualise the context of making as an extension of a performance – and in doing so, lays the ground for both “flatbed” works that endeavour to keep the painting surface in the understood realm of the floor or table (to not imagine composition as a driving force) and the “formless” (informe) process that is described by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss as a place where someone has enacted a process of transformation visualised on a painting surface:

“The informe would thus specify a certain power that forms have to deform themselves constantly, to pass quickly from the like to the unlike.”
*Didi-Huberman writes.*¹²

To make a distinction, I think of the story of how Pollock, the first to employ the ground as a “field” of action in painting, was psychologically broken by the “performance” that he enacted for the film of Hans Namuth, pretending to make a painting on a sheet of glass as Namuth filmed underneath. Exploding in anger at the end of filming on Thanksgiving Day of 1950, Pollock broke his supposedly two-year sober period, and some might argue descended towards his self-destructive and untimely death. The performance “killed” him because he did not intend the audience to see the shaman like-quality that he describes in the making of his work, or even be aware of his body. The transformative action in his painting was in communion with the surface, whereas I think Frankenthaler was aware of her actions and performance as part of the

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture”, in *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, [1992] 2000), 2.

¹¹ Craig Owen, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2”, in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, eds. S. Bryson, B. Kruger, L. Tillman and J. Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1980] 1994), 70–87.

¹² Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless, A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 80.

understanding of the gestures of her paintings. It was a body (and maybe a character, or a negative space of a character?) that set the material and formed into motion in her work.

In my own large-scale paintings with many layers, and the painterly installation designs that I employ to hang them on, I am aware of this sense of the animation of space by an active participant arranging, dropping, cutting. I do think of it as distinct from authored gestures, in that, like in Frankenthaler's works, there is an acknowledgment of a performance that has happened "behind" the painting.

What is the language of liquid gestures that so clearly has its genesis in Frankenthaler's work?

I look to notions of the "flat plane", which is described so well in the following extract from a letter written by painter Jo Baer to artist Bob Morris in 1967 in response to a piece of Morris' writing:

Marks on a flat surface are exactly that: marks on a flat surface ... Space illusions are from the Renaissance, where their painted distances carried subliminal teleology ... A painting is an object which has an emphatic frontal surface ... [In my paintings every] part is painted and contiguous to its neighbor: no part is above or below any other part ... There is no illusion. There is no space or interval (time).¹³

Frankenthaler famously said about her first encounter with Pollock's paintings (and technique) in 1950:

"It was as if I suddenly went to a foreign country but didn't know the language, but had read enough and had a passionate interest, and was eager to live there. I wanted to live in this land; I had to live there, and master the language."¹⁴

She walked into that world, that painting space, and turned it into a field (without illusion).

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In my own body of ongoing paintings titled *Female Readymades*, which were shown in the solo exhibition *Liquid Gestures* at Towner Gallery, Eastbourne, in 2021-22, amongst other spaces since 2018, I want to bring a sense of hanging onto the canvas, and the notion that gestures are "hung on" a painting. I also want to convey a sense of gravity, and a scale that shows a human space or site at which this activity of hanging is taking place. I'm turning the axis of the field of Frankenthaler, but there's still a lot of spilling taking place.

Things in my paintings oscillate between a real and a represented gravity: ropes, LCD screens, scans of paint on photo paper on aluminium, hooks and handles are all real. A hole is cut out and a sleeve hangs through it. Bags, saws, scarves, rope and chains are exposed directly to silkscreen, like photograms, and printed life size. Paintings are hung on paintings. Paintings are made on paintings. Cut-outs of financial terms that relate to the body – exhaust price, burn rate – are hung with digital drawings of intestines and thick paint.

¹³ Jo Baer, "Letter to Robert Morris, 1967", in *Broadsides & Belles Lettres, Selected Writings and Interviews 1965–2010*, ed. R. Arkesteijn (Amsterdam: Roma Publications, [1967], 2010), 41.

¹⁴ Barbara Rose, *Frankenthaler* (New York: Abrams, 1972), 29.

I paint in a continuous stream of thought. I am working in the liminal space where fields of information and the imaginary field of painting gestures merge.

Who gets to be abstract? What support do I have to engender as an artist, for myself, in order to do this? What language describes what I do when so much of what I do doesn't come into clear contact with histories of painting, because it is multiple, unstructured and gooey?

There are two images of the original *Fountain*. The first was photographed by artist Alfred Steiglitz, on a plinth, in front of a painting in a back room of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917. The second image is a photograph taken on a time-release by Marcel Duchamp, of himself, in his studio, sitting cross legged, under a doorway where he has hung *Fountain*. He has also hung *In Advance of a Broken Arm* and *Bottlerack*. The image is dated 1917. In the book where I found this image, it states that Duchamp spoke of *Fountain* as “Une Femelle Pendue”.¹⁵ A hung female form. Gravity suspending something that cannot be abstract.

Une femelle pendue to me is violent, and coy. The gestures of women in early modernism were accumulated by men: the readymade, the “all over” drip gesture of Pollock, many other gestures considered “original” are in fact copies of others – others who were not supported, in the sense of not being elevated by language: it's our job to make sure they aren't hung out to dry.

¹⁵ William A. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp, Fountain* (Houston: The Menil Collection / Houston Fine Art Press, 1989), 23.