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In Conversation: Melissa Gordon & Marie-Anne McQuay

Marie-Anne McQuay The exhibition **Material Evidence** features new works in a number of ongoing series. Some draw from new research whilst others push habitual production methods, such as screen printing, to the very limits of bodily scale.

One such series, **Structures for Viewing**, continues your interest in extending the pictorial into three dimensions through the use of hanging screens and an invitation to the viewer to orientate themselves both in front of and

traveling through the work. You've described these works as "events," can you expand on their construction and the way in which they operate temporally as well as spatially?

Melissa Gordon In the process of making work I often ask myself what is being "staged" – for me this includes things such as action, gesture, subtext, and potential. I've been engaged for a while with the questions of if and how

an exhibition is an analogous experience to theater-in-the-round, and how I can explicate that in my work: in that you see action from a variety of angles, and each angle gives a different "picture" (although I think that this word starts to take on a different connotation when it's related to a viewing that is "in the round" as opposed to proscenium). I am influenced by how Douglas Crimp talks about the staging of images in his essay "Pictures" (1979): he argues that "the way [...] pictures are presented, *staged*, [...] is a function of their structure."[1] The idea of artwork "acting out" its structure resonates for me with the role of "action" throughout the history of American painting: the sense of a painting surface being an event where an experience has happened or change has occurred. So, yes, I do think of the **Structures for Viewing** installations [fig.1] as events – not only because physically the pulley system is kinetic and one's experience of moving through the lines in space created by the works is optically affecting, but because the thing that is represented, the screen, is performing itself: the lines are an "image" of the screen that make them, like an image brought to its most basic form. Each large-format panel is constructed by repeatedly screen printing one large-format image of lines over and over. The lines are then mimicked by screens of rope suspended in front of the panels, creating massive visual interference. In total, the installation shows a non-image staging a non-representation (and is this then abstract?). It is important for me that the screen is acting in both two and three-dimensional planes, so as to emphasize the explication of what a painting basically 'does': represent space with flat dimensions and color. But I think this use of the screen, and the sense of a record of an event are present in all the works exhibited in **Material Evidence**.

MMc Throughout the exhibition, and in your wider practice, there's a tension between the reception of information and its mediation through processes such as printing or painting. Several moments in the history of representation are brought to mind: those of modernist abstraction, the analog printing press, and the digital glitch. What kind of information is held within the moiré patterns of **Structures for Viewing**? How does this connect to the rendering of the images in your **Blow Up Modernists** series? [fig.2]

MG I like the fact that a moiré is a "bad" print; it is when the printer hasn't put the screen at the correct angles and a secondary pattern is produced. The moiré, the glitch, is a reminder that all images project themselves (in print and digital formats, in books, magazines, newspapers etc.,) through a pattern. But the moiré, when blown up, has a visual effect that starts blocking or upsetting vision, and this frustrated viewing is very frontal in the **Blow Up Modernist** works as well as in **Structures for Viewing**. Something is in the way of seeing things clearly. In **Structures for Viewing**, the disruption is caused by the visual interference of optical phenomena. But in **Blow Up Modernists**, this blockage is doubled: the age of the painting, as well as the surface of the reproduction, is literally "getting in the way." So rephotographing these cracked paintings, for me, points to the cyclical relationship between abstraction and representation: the dots on the printed page are representing a flat plane of space in a painting; it is coming apart both physically and through the matrix of representation. Is the gesture of the photograph a "representation" of an abstraction (the painting as an abstraction), or is the printed page an abstraction of a real object (the painting as a surface)? What is an abstraction of an abstraction? What is an abstract surface?

In the exhibition I wanted to show a progression of the two kinds of disintegration at play, so I photographed the same Malevich Suprematist painting from three different catalogs. One photograph was from quite soon after it was painted, but the reproduction was small and poorly printed so the dots are quite large to "hold" the information. Another image was from much later, and the work itself had deteriorated. So I am tracking images,

following art as living objects. Paintings get old, get fixed, become important (get reproduced more), get lost or hidden (as happened in Malevich's case). **Blow Up Modernists** mimic this search. I think of them as blind encounters: they try to get closer and closer to an image that just falls apart upon examination. A lot of my work uses the gesture of a zoom lens, and this becomes apparent as your eye and body encounter the various scales at play. So each **Structure for Viewing** becomes more clear as an image, but at the same time optically repels a viewer as they get closer; and the **Blow Up Modernists** both reveal themselves and become more abstract as one walks towards them.

MMc What is your relationship – as a female artist negotiating the art world in the twenty-first century – to the iconic male painters who provide the starting point for **Blow Up Modernists**? How do you deal with their legacies, their engendering of certain styles of painting?

MG I've written down the phrase "A Woman Underneath (???)" a lot in my notebooks, and when I finally looked it up, of course, it means "hidden meaning!" (laughs) I still can't tell if the connotation is that a woman is hiding underneath or submerged in an intention, but for me the phrase entails something sneaky, subversive, as well as ingrained. As a mantle or role to play, as a female painter, it is a bit flippant and critical at the same time. I started photographing the cracks in Mondrian paintings as a meditation on their (mediated) surface – as an empathetic gesture but an alienated one, too. I feel like a lot of my work spills over the edges of photography: I spend a lot of time taking photos in the studio. Having a lens between me and something helps me make sense of it. I am shocked and seduced by modernist surfaces – the visceral qualities of Mondrian, Malevich, and Moholy-Nagy's "flat" planes – so I started zooming in on them, to get closer (which is actually impossible in a book format). But I am not interested in homage. My focus is on the structures of representation, in how representation very much feeds into art history as something that is "alive," moving, shifting.

My favorite story told in Yve-Alain Bois' **Painting as Model** is about Naum Gabo going to Mondrian's studio. Gabo tells Mondrian that he'll never achieve what he wants – the annihilation of space – by continuously painting white over white.[2] The fact is that many of the white surfaces in Mondrian's paintings have cracked over time, and this is because of their density, which is a consequence of using material as thought.

I think of **Blow Up Modernists** as an alternative, fallible art history. I've "got" shots of deteriorating works by artists of early European modernism: Van Doesberg, Huazar, Mondrian, Lizzitsky, Malevich, Burgoyne Diller (the lesser known American in the school of De Stijl), and the later Americans (émigrés, or sons of émigrés), Reinhardt, Pollock, Johns, and Stella. It is a collection of male artists dealing with the legacy of the grid or the plane of painting in modernism, and it is important for me that the reproductions of the paintings are

interferences, interruptions of the intent in the objecthood of the originals. The ageing or damage signifies time passed, but the act of seeking this out through the surface of documentation (the printed page, in black and white, like an X-ray) underlines or counteracts our inheritance of the painter's intent. It started as a compulsive act of curiosity, and I think I remain quite present as a voyeur in the work – albeit, of course, a hidden one.

MMc Another dynamic reference point for **Structures for Viewing** is the "impossible" play **Collision** (1915) by Futurist writer and artist Mina Loy [p.12]. When did you first come across this text and how have you reflected both its form and intent in **Structures for Viewing?**

MG As a play that has never, to my knowledge, been staged, I think of Loy's **Collision** as a succinct demonstration of the twentieth century's transformation of the interior space of the salon in to the modernist space of "exhibition." The walls and pictures (windows) collapse, the author (the man caught in a storm), with his gesture (pushing a button), basically transforms/destroys and recreates a space, endlessly. The many opportunities for an experience that Loy talks about are exhilarating. Paradoxically, the fact that the play is impossible to "actualize" creates endless possibilities for thinking about the staging of an exhibition.

I found the play while looking for Loy's feminist-futurist manifesto, and its themes – interruption, planar breaking of space, transformation of a viewing experience – speak to my engagement with in-the-round viewing. But Loy's play also holds evidence for me in the fact


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