Interview with Amy Sillman

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Fabian Schöneich: Amy, I'd like to ask you about painting and diagrams. In 2014 at Campoli Presti in Paris, you presented abstract paintings together with a charcoal diagram, hand-drawn directly on the wall. What interests you about diagrams, which might be described as attempts to simplify complicated circumstances through combining graphic and textual elements? And can you elaborate on this pairing?

Amy Sillman: I started drawing these satiric table-seating diagrams in 2009 in Berlin as a joke, to amuse the other residents at a fancy residency where I was staying. To continue the joke, I showed the diagrams with the paintings to see what would happen, and it worked: diagrams have a seductive and flexible form; they are "polymorphous" in representing multiple vectors, such as time and space, or in my case humor *and* something else. What I really love about diagrams, though, is how they try and fail. They're optimistic but ultimately hopeless attempts at representation. A diagram can never *really* explain anything about emotions, art process, or thinking—nothing about one's inner life can really be boiled down to this visual theorem—even though we always want to *try*. This tragicomic situation is totally my sense of humor. To thwart things.

In Paris, I was again making an absurd proposition: I drew the diagram on the wall across from a row of abstract paintings. I called it *Key*, because it *seemed* like it was explaining the meaning of the paintings. But any seeming explanation was thwarted, since it was impossible to see the diagram at the same time as the paintings, and it was a joke to try. I was trying to create a completely impossible situation in which the viewer was stuck in the middle, sort of pivoting back and forth, trying to remember what each wall looked like.

FS: Was this about the idea of "reading" an abstract painting?

AS: Yes, people are always asking what paintings *mean*—I responded by staging a joke. I don't really think you can understand a painting by reading about it.

FS: OK, so what does "understanding a painting" even mean?

AS: Ha ha! Good question. People who don't make paintings, no matter how sophisticated they are, often say, in a kind of desperation, "I don't know how to talk about abstract painting—can you *teach me*?" But painters don't need this kind of explanation. Painters appreciate paintings probably the way car mechanics look at cars: you sort of marvel at someone else's ability to put something across and you look at how it's built, how it works, its compression system, its layers, its light, or something like that. You

only really learn this over time by appreciating how hard painting is all the time, even as a kind of antique construction. In a way, I think you only understand it by trying to make a painting yourself—or living with someone who paints. It's almost impossible.

FS: So understanding a painting is not about "reading" something, which it seems you're saying is against the nature of abstraction and simply doesn't work. Would you say that painting is physically "doing" something, while language is more about "thinking"?

AS: No—I'd say it's both. And that each half sort of vexes the other. Half of my painting process is accident/chance/mistake/erasure/discovery (i.e., body!), and this is balanced by about 50 percent decisions/analysis/editing/conceptualizing/etc. (i.e., mind!). And this is where the "mood" of painting really appeals to me, this crazy slippage between what we do and what we think . . . And language, or utterance, is a state *in between* the physical and the mental, which is *precisely* why I love it so much—that intermediary space of not *really* knowing exactly what will happen next.

FS: Maybe it is human nature to try to explain things linguistically. It's interesting to think in the context of trying to "understand" a painting that some of your titles tell us what we might see, for example *3-Legged (Blue)* (2015–16) and *Untitled (Table)* (2014), which bring the language of representation to abstraction. This makes me curious about what tradition of painting you feel most part of.

AS: I guess I feel closest to the ideas of process art in the 1970s. That's where I entered the picture as a student, in New York City. It was this totally body-oriented understanding of making art, not unrelated to the Judson Dance Theater scene or an understanding of radical poetics, the idea of the *field* as a space of action. One way New York painting has historically worked is through the idea of an archaeological surface: developing work, digging for it, through process, not just through preconceived ideas or images. By making, unmaking, remaking, scraping off, destroying, and rebuilding—learning the outcome while you're questioning it. It involves a kind of conceptualized body—not just a set of accidents or coincidences. Even Warhol was a kind of process-based artist, setting a system in motion and then watching to see what happens. I just think process-based work is totally different from the idea of production-based art, where you are making something conceived in advance. Also, painting has regional dialects: each city has its own. In New York, surfaces are sort of dirtier and more beat up than the ones in Los Angeles, for example. In LA, they make paintings that look good from the highway!

FS: If the "language" of painting has regional inflections, how does this play out for you as a painter primarily based in New York but who spends a lot of time teaching in Frankfurt?

AS: In Frankfurt, I try to pass this idea of process on to my students.

FS: I'm curious then about how you developed the printed-painted panels for Campoli Presti, which led to the panels you showed at Portikus. They are in between the handmade and the mechanically produced.

AS: Yes, totally. I'm always working on the project of the in-between. With the printed panels, I wanted to respond to the common practice nowadays of painting on inkjet-printed canvases, but I wanted to make this form *more* complicated. So I made a bunch of ink drawings, which were photographed and inkjet printed onto canvas. I then subjected the prints to an intensely physical process: staining, pouring, adapting, repeating, and turning them upside down, purposefully making it hard for the viewer to know what was handmade and what wasn't. I wanted to force intra-action, not to reinforce any binary of handmade versus machine.

FS: The paintings at Portikus were quite different from your other paintings, where you use only oil on canvas. Still, there are a lot of things they have in common. The aspect of layering is especially important, I think. You have delivered lectures where you present a series of images, showing all the different stages of a single painting, how it changes as you work over the course of an entire year.

AS: Really big oil paintings can take up to a year for me to finish—between a month and a year—because I just keep working on them again and again. I cover them, ruin them, paint them over, scrape them out, turn them upside down, etc. I guess I need all that time and change to understand what the whole thing can be or will mean, or what it will look like. It is through material change that I think my way into the future.

FS: By contrast, I know that you produced the twenty-four canvases for Portikus quickly.

AS: When I made the paintings for Portikus, I conceived of each one as a single layer of a painting but spread out sideways. So each "layer" could be fast. (This logic is what I learned by working digitally, which bled back into painting for me.)

FS: You presented these painted and printed panels aligned along the walls of the gallery to create a large-scale painting experience. Can you talk about how the space was configured to create a kind of spiraling architecture?

AS: I first made enough paintings to simply line the walls of Portikus—twenty panels—but when I began to plan the installation, I felt that we needed to build a kind of wrap-around environment, to give the impression of being inside something. So you and I worked out an entry wall that cut across the doorway, so that once the viewer got inside, they would really be in an interior space, not a thruway. Also the front, exterior wall of that space could double as a wall for the projection of an animation.

FS: I was fascinated by not only how the exhibition looked in its final stage but also how visitors perceived the show, how they walked along the walls to see the paintings in succession. They entered, saw the short animation *Kick the Bucket (Loop for Portikus)* (2016), and then started their walk through the show to see one painting after another, following the spiral and ending at the point where they entered. Not only is the idea of a loop interesting but so is how the animation is put together in relation to the paintings. When and how did you begin thinking about and making animations?

AS: Early on, in the 1990s, I started to use the architecture of the rooms I showed in, which included big galleries like so many in New York's Chelsea neighborhood. I hung long horizontal sequences of drawings around a room, and I was specifically thinking about animation but in reverse: how when you watch a movie you sit still and the *thing* moves, but in a big gallery *you* move around past the work. I thought of that as a kind of animation, where the work sort of develops as you go along. But without a camera. I had never used a camera in my work, so I just didn't make movies. But eventually I got an iPhone and started to string together images that I made on it.

The animation I made for Portikus had to be short, only a minute, just to set a tone before you walk into the painting room. At first, I didn't know what to make it about—until my class and I went on a terrible, ill-fated trip to Switzerland, which was so bad it was funny. Afterward, I realized, "OK, great! Now I at least have my story!" So the animation is about a series of misfortunes: an animal gets run over, a man has his leg stolen off his body, a bucket of piss falls on a skeleton. All of them are drawn like childish stick figures.

FS: One of the images from the animation reappeared in the painting room as a figurine that the viewer encountered sitting at the end of a long table. Can you say a few words about this little figure and its role in the show?

AS: I wanted to make not only a spiral of paintings but a bigger loop, connecting the animation at the front door to the back window of the space. I felt like I needed a narrative through-line. So I made a ceramic coin bank in