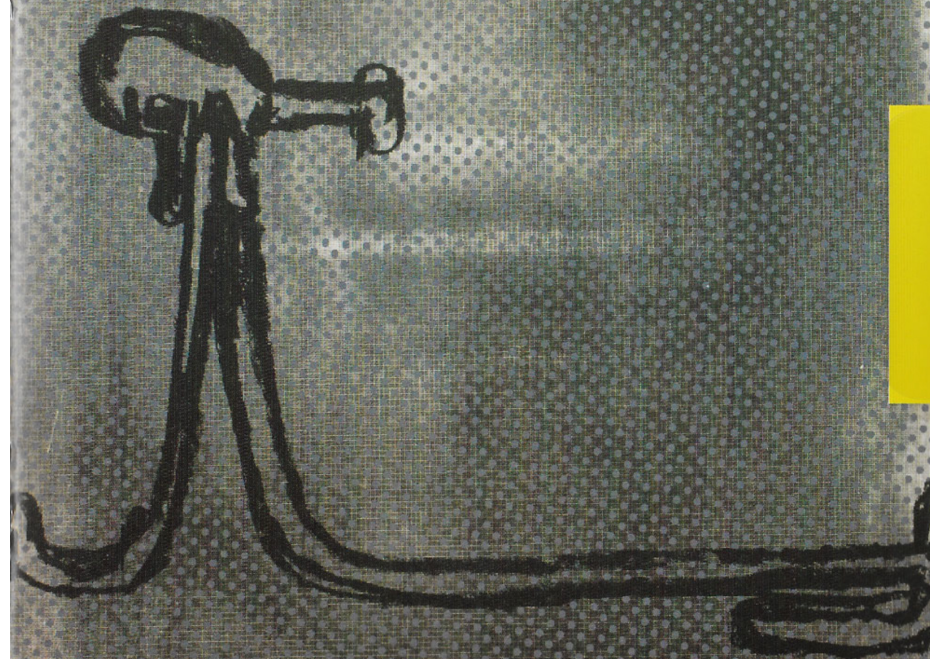


# Amy Sillman



Camden Arts Centre: File Note #121  
Amy Sillman *Landline*: September 2018 – January 2019



Martin Clark

# Figure and Ground

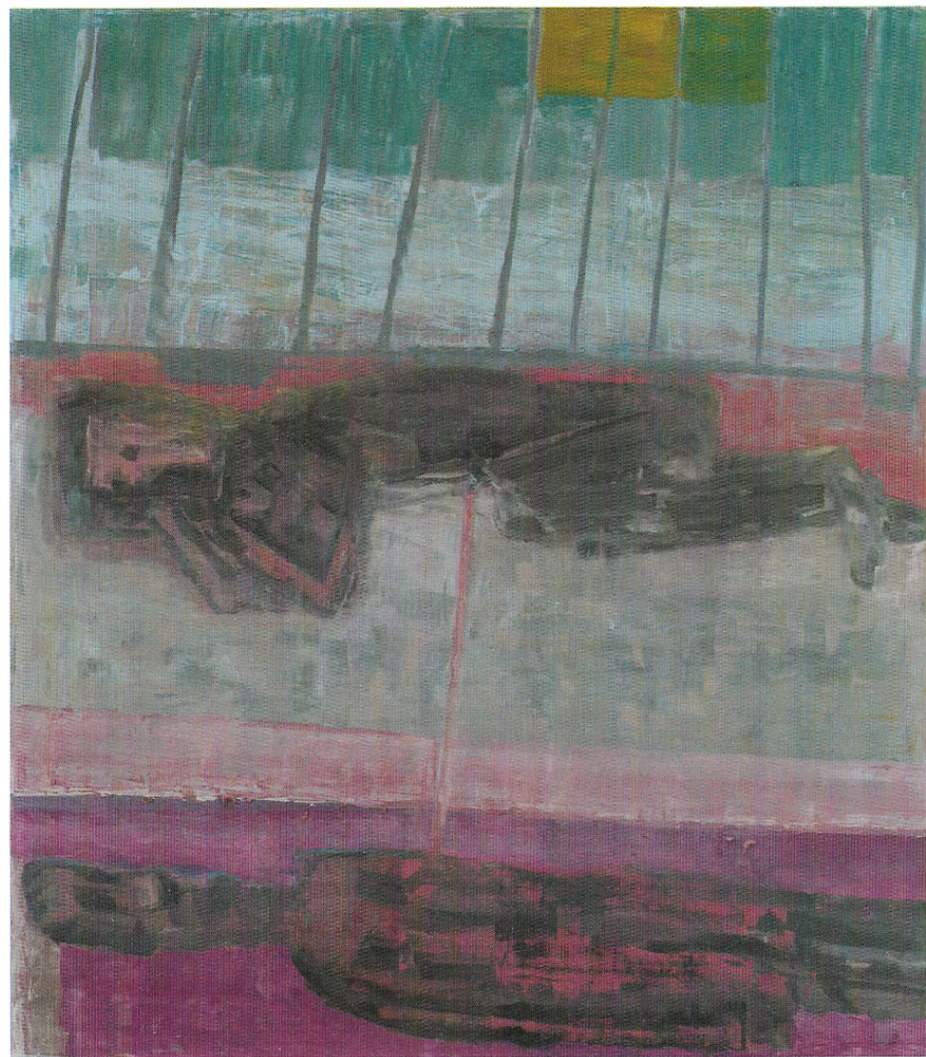
*We need people who hate painting, because then the painting lovers are more like, "Why do I like it?". It's terrible, it's boring, it's market-driven. It does all the things that the critique says it does. It goes on rich people's walls, it's too expensive. It does all this stuff, but then at the same time you look at some paintings and you're like, "Come on! Is that a commodity? It's so fucking weird".*

Amy Sillman, Interview Magazine, 2018

*I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms.*  
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 8AD

In 2015 Amy Sillman made a series of drawings she casually refers to as 'the mopers'. Crudely sketched figures, rendered in a cartoon shorthand, they are little graphic expressions of listlessness and lethargy – lying on the ground, lazing in bed, sprawled on a bench or couch. For someone so engaged with painting and its legacies they represent another side of Sillman's practice: the personal, the comic, the neurotic, the quick; a different kind of speed and weight – they're funny and clumsy and ugly and brief.

A few years later Sillman was working on a new group of paintings. Big paintings, slow paintings. She'd been thinking for a while about stripes and lines – systems and sequences that produce rhythmic linearities, lateral languages: pictographs, hieroglyphs, musical scores, a kind of abstract 'all-over-ness'. And then, amidst the thick grounds of paint, the dirty pinks and muddy browns, figures began to emerge. They were lying on, or hanging off, the taut horizontals; trapped or petrified in the lumps and chunks of painted space. She recognised them immediately as 'the mopers', back some three years later, awkward avatars of apathy and angst. It was a return, of sorts, a revenant. But these were not phantoms or apparitions, they looked like they had been unearthed, exhumed. Reappearing here in this other place they were transformed through the various processes and pressures that had been brought to bear: all that time, and the accumulated weight of all of that paint – no longer figures now but bodies, and no longer a ground but a grave.



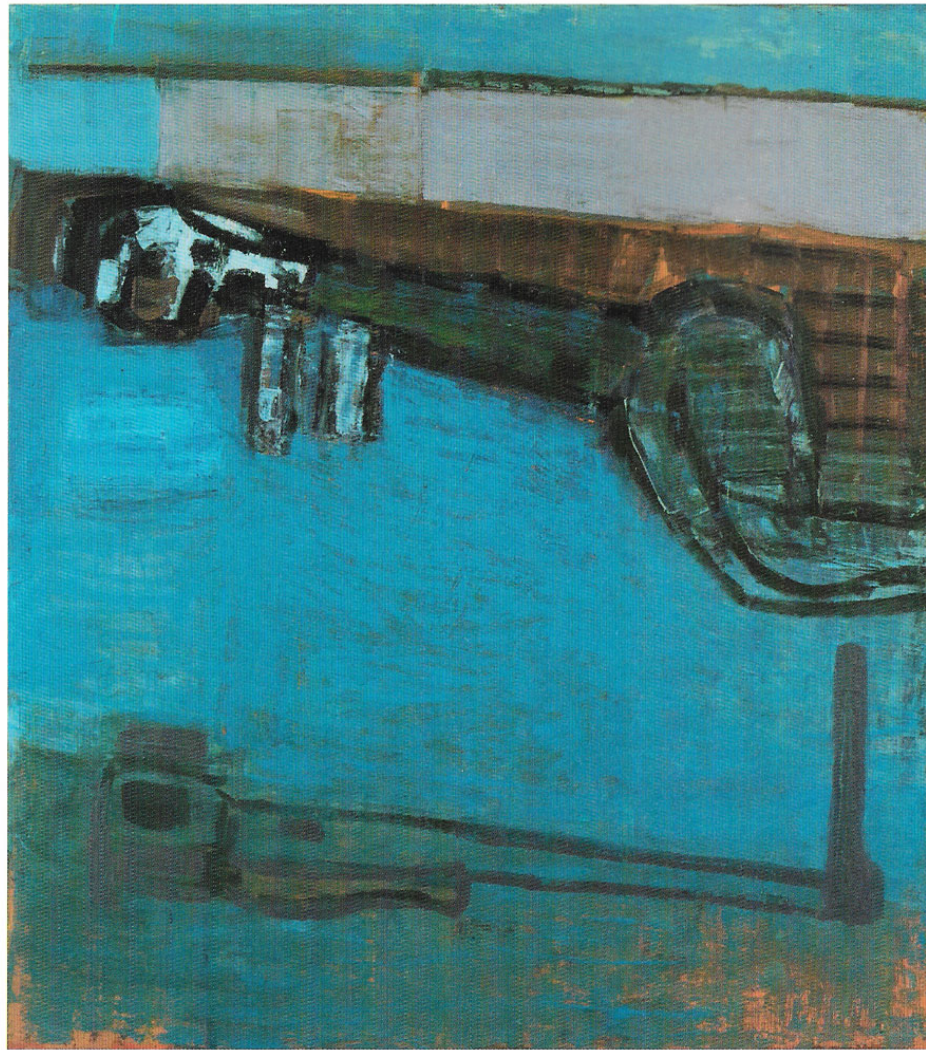
Cover image: *Dub Stamp (2A back)*, 2018

One from a multi-part series of double-sided acrylic, ink, and silkscreen works on paper, 152.5 × 101.5 cm each

Above: *In Illinois*, 2017–18

Oil on canvas, 190.5 × 167.5 cm





*TV in Bed*, 2017-18  
Oil on canvas, 190.5 × 167.5 cm

- 1 Pablo Picasso, 'Conversation', *Cahiers d'Art*, Paris, X, 1935
- 2 Graham Harman, 'Physical Nature and the Paradox of Qualities' 2006, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, Winchester, 2010
- 3 Ibid.

To speak of them like this feels entirely appropriate, for in all of Sillman's canvases there is not just a sense, but more accurately a process, of archaeology. All of her paintings are long and often arduous exercises in accumulation and excavation, aggregation and erasure, coalescence and collapse. Over many weeks and months, surfaces are worked and reworked, abandoned and returned to, scraped back and covered over. The final painting is invariably, to borrow Picasso's phrase (which Amy might rightly hate for its declamatory, patriarchal pomposity), 'the sum of its destructions'<sup>1</sup>, with numerous earlier paintings – or perhaps better to say images, forms, shapes, fragments – buried or lost beneath the surface. And whilst these moments are variously submerged, obscured or obliterated, traces remain. There is still a presence, a memory of each of these events and objects hidden behind the image, beneath the ground. Like a sediment, a past, an unconscious perhaps – still active, still agent.

It's an operation that produces a very particular kind of time in the work. A stacked, stratified, accreted time that builds up in layers. The philosopher Graham Harman talks about the way that objects seep and pulse with accumulated time. If relations between objects produce space then, for him, objects themselves produce time: "space is the mutual externality of partially linked objects, while time is the interior of objects themselves... their inner molten core"<sup>2</sup>. And time is essentially change, movement, its condition is transformation and flux. For Harman, all objects are encrusted with qualities which are constantly shifting and changing, surface-effects that describe their essence without forming part of it. What we see and know things by are nothing more than caricatures, simulacra, eidetic accidents obscuring the hidden nature of the real object – shadowy and withdrawn, "labouring silently in invisible depths"<sup>3</sup>.

Figures are not the same as bodies.

Figures are about line and edges; bodies are about form and weight.

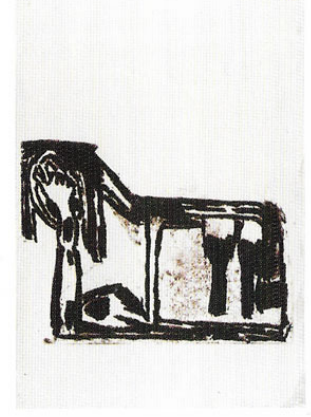
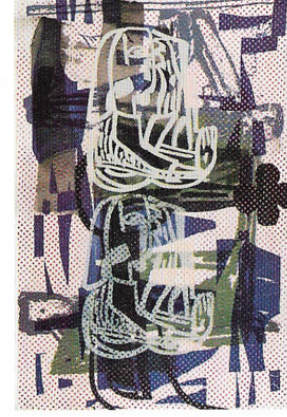
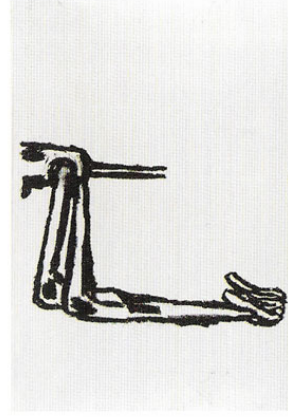
Figures are about outsides, bodies are about insides.

Figures are indexes, bodies are bulk.

Figures are quick, bodies are dead, belonging to the ground.

A few months before she began work on the paintings Sillman made another suite of drawings, but these had a more antagonistic inception. Draughted in the days after Donald Trump's election and channelling the sense of shock and horror that much of America was still reeling from, these figures weren't moping they were silently screaming. Deformed, monstrous, arched in spasms of disgust and despair, their tortured anatomies were like diagrams of distress, twisted into ever more contorted





states of repulsion and abjectivity, consuming themselves, spewing up body parts, turning inside out. She deployed them almost immediately, reproducing them page by page in a zine she made for an exhibition at The Drawing Center in New York, an ugly printed alphabet of agonies. It was January 2017 and she was showing a new animation she'd made based on Ovid's 1st century poem, *Metamorphoses*. In the intro she writes:

We were on the same wavelength as Ovid in at least one big sense: total fascination with a structure of endless change. Meanwhile this work is being shown on the literal eve of an inauguration and we face a global rise of neo-fascism. Changes have to be made – but how to refuse and resist now as artists, citizens, educators, people? ... Can we keep making something abstract – or just weird – under these conditions? Our answer, in part: keep making whatever awkward, slow, funny, un-aesthetic, not-product, sceptical, passionate, complicated thing you want to make with all your heart and anger. Don't be silenced.<sup>4</sup>

On the cover was a picture of a figure vomiting up a leg and the caption: #currentmood. In retrospect, it was the starting point for her newest group of works which bring together these furious, feral 'election drawings' with her equally restless works on paper: an ongoing archive she's been making for years of the 'weird... awkward... un-aesthetic... not-product' – that 'complicated thing you want to make with all your heart and all your anger'.

If Sillman's paintings hold and secrete time in ever slower, denser concentrations and layers, then her works on paper have an entirely

Left to right: *Dub Stamp* (9A); (9A back); (8C); (5B back); (4B); (4B back), 2018  
From a multi-part series of double-sided acrylic, ink, and silkscreen works on paper, 152.5 x 101.5 cm each

4 Amy Sillman, *The OG #11, Metamorphoses*, 2017  
5 David Lichtenstein, 'Fictions of Origin', Amy Sillman, *Sailors and Strangers*, Art Museum of the University of Houston, 2007

different quality. They are more like a kind of automatic production. They trace time, mark time, but in quick, urgent, flickering fragments. When she talks about them, she talks of the play and confusion of figure and ground; a baroque complexity that pushes things to the point of collapse before trying to recover them somehow; making something fast without thinking about taste, or value, or whether or not it's 'good' or finished?

Working in series, Sillman has created countless drawings like this in gouache and acrylic – forms and shapes that don't quite coalesce, that emerge quickly and are then fixed or arrested before any kind of resolution or settle. Like Rorschach blots or exquisite corpses they have a loose but insistent intensity, a visceral and emotional quality – complex and simple, intellectual and physical, psychological and corporeal. In an essay by her friend, the psychoanalyst David Lichtenstein, he talks about them being held in a process of constant becoming, caught between abstraction and figuration, sense and nonsense: "For Sillman it is the thing arising that is of interest, and thus she paints its before, its coming to be, its transparent and fragile being, and even its disappearance. It is the thing appearing, not the thing in itself, that matters"<sup>5</sup>.

Sometimes Sillman arranges them in grids or lines, trying to build a picture from these ambiguous fragments, assembling them into typologies of form and colour: the red drawings, the yellow drawings, the blue ones. Pinned-up and displayed like this they look like butterflies, X-rays or pages from a picture-book. They are nothing now if not 'a structure of endless change'. And in all of these works there is also a sense of layering – of washing off, scraping back, painting over, building up – but in the shallower, harder space of the sheet of paper. It's a tighter, quicker surface for these forms to slip around on, there's less depth and give than the





6 Amy Sillman, from an email interview with the author, June 2018

*Dub Stamp (11A)*, 2018  
One from a multi-part series of double-sided  
acrylic, ink, and silkscreen works on paper,  
152.5 x 101.5 cm each

canvas. At a certain moment Sillman began to think about printing on them, making silk-screens of sections and combining them with the painted passages: overworking them, overloading them, driving them to a kind of crisis of excess. And then she went back to those 'election drawings' again.

I think for me painting-viewing is deeply connected to the idea of film or choreography. What I care about is motion. I don't think I really think like a painter. I don't think in terms of resolving pictures within a rectangle.<sup>6</sup>

The *Dub Stamps* (all 2018), combine screen-printing, painting and drawing in an entirely new format for Sillman. Working on huge, five-foot sheets of paper, she begins by simply scaling-up her coarse, angry figures and printing them against the flat white sheet, stamping them down like rude emblems of refusal and resistance. But then she turns the paper over and starts working on the back. It might not seem like much but it's a pretty radical move. It's usually outsider artists, amateurs or cranks who work on the back of paintings. It creates an oddly unsettling feeling of proximity and unease, disrupting and undermining the illusory integrity of the picture plane with an abrupt, schizophrenic transgression. There's no longer any clear sense of front or back, *recto* or *verso*, right side or wrong side, as they flip-flop between these distinct and binary identities – one face a stark and stylised figuration, the other a more unrestrained abstraction.

Employing a similar process to the smaller works on paper, Sillman again overlays paint and print, and print and paint, loading the picture-plane then washing it clean, rotating and realigning it, deploying her, by now, familiar lexicon of harpies and harridans like logos or signs, complicating the surface with form and shape and colour and content. Perhaps inevitably, the urgency of address, as well as the silk-screen technique, brings to mind the banners and posters that were thrown together for the anti-Trump demo's, the #metoo campaigns and Women's Marches. A seething, makeshift graphic language of defiance and disobedience. But if her paintings play with the idea of figure and ground, invariably settling on ground as their predominant condition, then something else is going on here, for these works have no ground to speak of, built only from arrangements and patterns of figure. The lines and forms and signs and shapes are floating in a different kind of pictorial space – shallow, opaque, mercurial, slippery. And whilst the process of making them employs literal screens – dragging thick, wet pigment across a drum-tight membrane to print these even fields of colour and form – the works themselves also feel closer to the hard, seductive surface of the digital



display, with its backlit palette of pixelated colours and endlessly overlapping information, held together and organised in the infra-thin space of the screen.

The works' installation in the gallery only emphasises these qualities, with each of the sheets hanging in series from a line stretched diagonally through the space. Again, there is the reference to the banner or billboard – and the whole thing has the sculptural physicality of a kind of screen or hoarding – but as you walk along and move around it, any sense of pictorial depth disappears as you broach the edge and open up the second plane behind – the back, or is it the front, or maybe it's both? It somehow reinforces the flat-bed, cartoon space of the screen, whilst simultaneously disrupting it; a nagging psychological play of what lies behind or beneath, the revealed and concealed. And it produces not just a different kind of space for Sillman, but also a different kind of time: not the deep, lumpen, object-time that throbs from the paintings, but quick, sharp, linear time – stretched out and sequenced, not packed into the picture plane – produced and experienced by the movement of the viewer through the room.

It's a perfect structure to activate the play of contradictions and dualities that are at the heart of Sillman's work – from her paintings on canvas to her works on paper, her comics, drawings, animations and zines, as well as her writing and teaching. It's a practise that is always about transformation and change – at once ungainly and elegant, complex and blunt, difficult and endearing, beautiful and ugly, but always shifting, always moving, always engaged. And despite its sustained, serious, and at times self-deprecating investment in apparently outmoded and obsolete forms (a fact not lost on Amy when she called the show *Landline!*), it finds a way to speak very directly to the world – to take responsibility and get involved, enacting both a politics and aesthetics of transgression, difference, multiplicity and doubt:

We're committed to something scrappy but good, earnest but smart, ironic and not cynical, – a strange FORM!... We haven't figured it out but we love art that offers *change above all*: insistent, unremitting change that won't resolve into finality or finesse. We want to know what happened *before* and *after*. We can't stand the *knowingness*, the *smugness*, of a goddamn good painting. Plowshares? We need to sharpen our senses of humour into swords. We need to know what we love and what to toss out. We need not to normalize. We need to stick together. We have no answers. We have questions. We send these questions out with love to the people we're walking home with. We refuse to be stripped of our complications.<sup>7</sup>

Martin Clark is Director of Camden Arts Centre.

**Amy Sillman** (born 1955, Detroit) lives and works in New York City (NYC). Recent solo exhibitions include: the *All-Over*, Portikus Frankfurt (2016); Amy Sillman: Yes & No, Kunsthau Bregenz (2015); Amy Sillman: One Lump or Two, ICA Boston (2013-2014), Aspen Art Museum, Colorado and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, NYC (both 2014). Since 2015 Sillman has held the position of Professor at the Städelschule in Frankfurt/Main.

## 25 enthusiasms of summer 2018

### ART:

1. Adrian Piper, *A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965–2016*, MoMA, NYC
2. Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo
3. Jack Smith, *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*, Artists Space, NYC
4. Jutta Koether, *Tour de Madame*, Brandhorst Museum, Munich
5. Matt Mullican, *The Feeling of Things*, Hangar Bicocca, Milan
6. *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum: Art Life Politics, Italia 1918–1943*, Prada Foundation, Milan
7. Chaim Soutine, *Flesh*, Jewish Museum, NYC
8. Paul Bloodgood, *White Columns*, NYC
9. The paintings of Prunella Clough
10. The paintings of Marlow Moss
11. The paintings of Charline von Heyl
12. Finding out about the films of painter Marcia Hafif from Matthias Mühling at Lenbachhaus

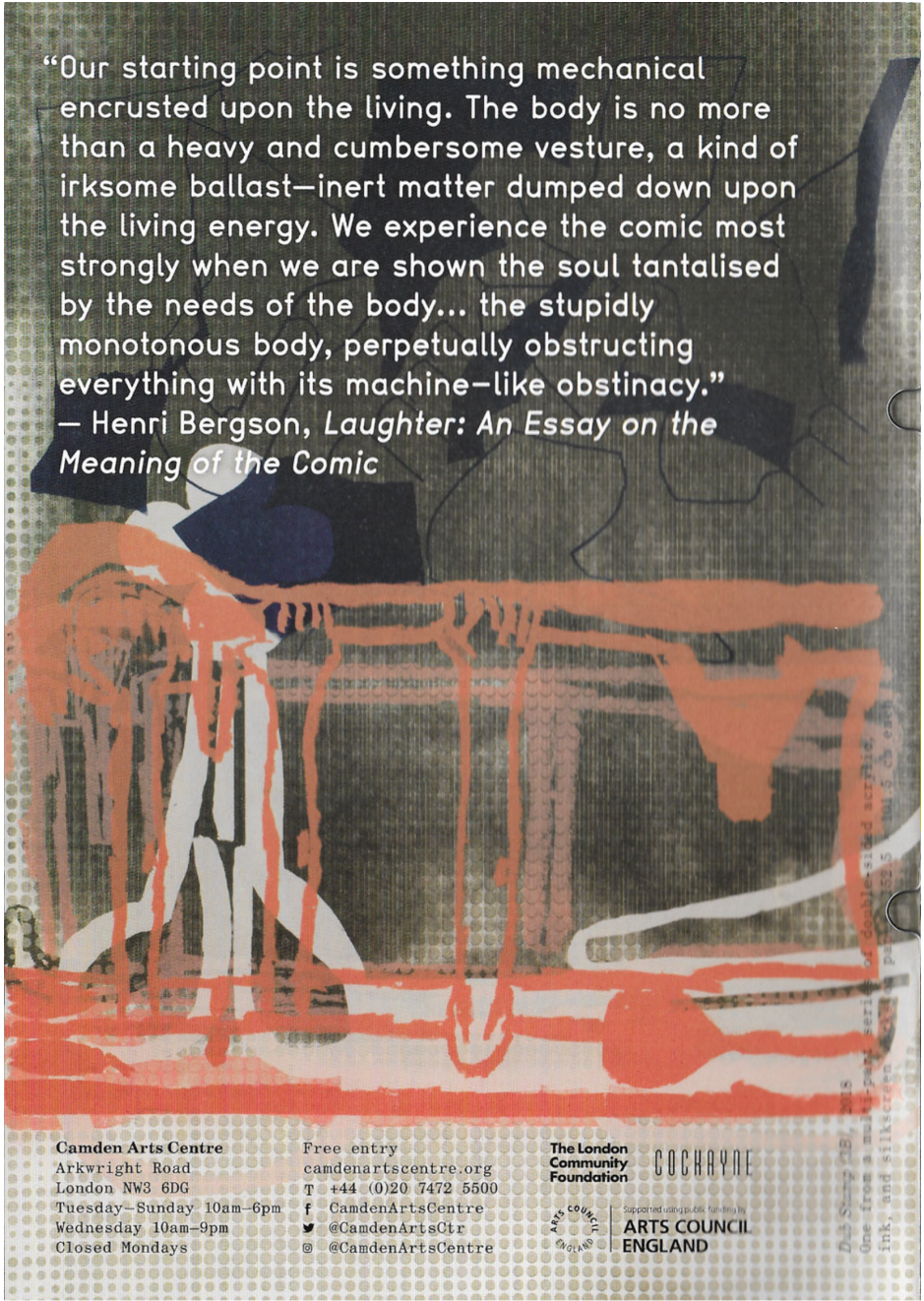
### SCREEN:

13. Spike Lee, *BlackKlansman*, 2018
  14. Alec Berg and Bill Hader, *BARRY* (TV series), 2018
- ### WRITING:
15. Jack Whitten, *Notes from the Woodshed*, 2018
  16. Sigrid Nunez, *The Friend*, 2018
  17. Lynne Tillman, *Men and Apparitions*, 2018
  18. Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 1990
  19. Patrick Heron, *Painter as Critic*, 1995
  20. Karen Barad, lectures and interviews
  21. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 1962
  22. Nathaniel Mackey, *Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol*, 1987
  23. Fred Moten, *Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)*, 2013
  24. George Orwell, *The Lion and The Unicorn*, 1941
  25. Anselm Franke and Tom Holert (ed.), *Neolithic Childhood* (cat.), 2018

Published on the occasion of the exhibition Amy Sillman: *Landline* at Camden Arts Centre, 28 September 2018 – 6 January 2019  
All images courtesy the artist. Photos: John Berens

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“Our starting point is something mechanical  
encrusted upon the living. The body is no more  
than a heavy and cumbersome vesture, a kind of  
irksome ballast—inert matter dumped down upon  
the living energy. We experience the comic most  
strongly when we are shown the soul tantalised  
by the needs of the body... the stupidly  
monotonous body, perpetually obstructing  
everything with its machine-like obstinacy.”  
— Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the  
Meaning of the Comic*

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David Sanyal, 2016  
One from a multi-part series of double-sided acrylic  
ink, and silk-screened on paper