

# FLASH ART

Judy Chicago, *Immolation* from *Women and Smoke*, 1972. Fireworks performance.

Photography courtesy of Through the Flower Archives. Performed in the California Desert, 1972.

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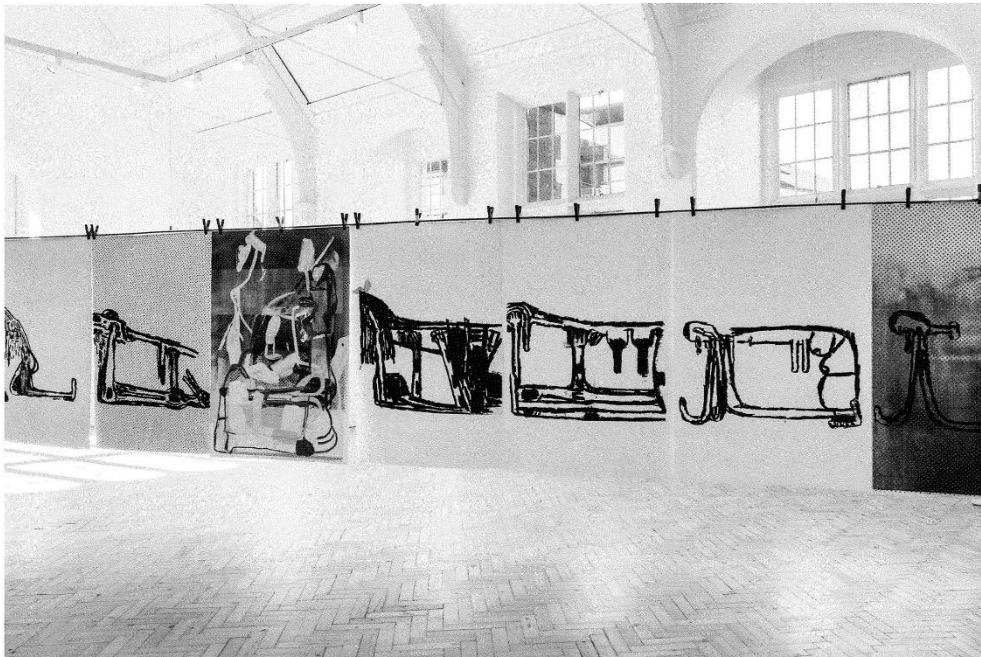


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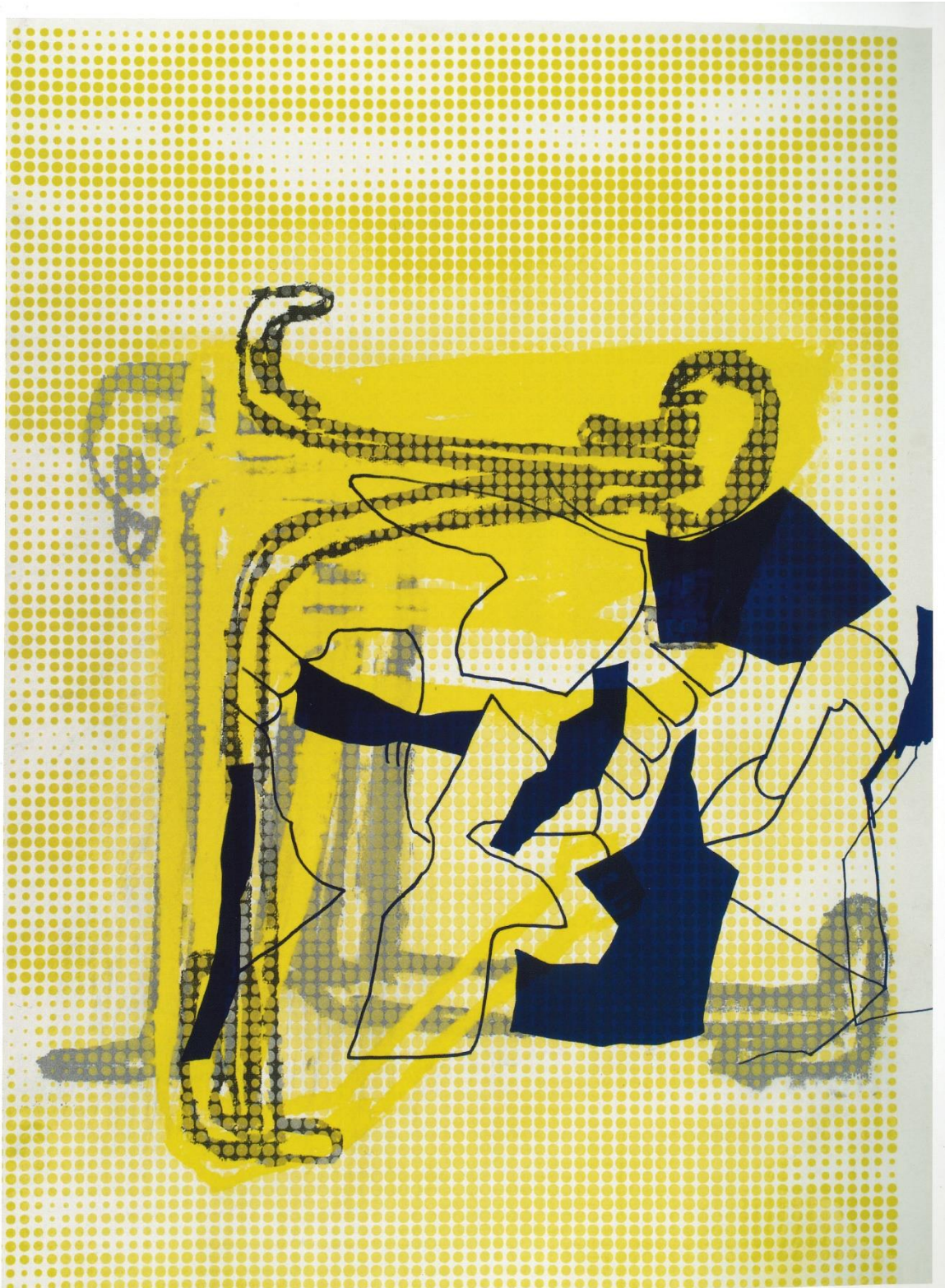
*An Impossible Language*

Kerstin Stakemeier on Amy Sillman's New Paintings

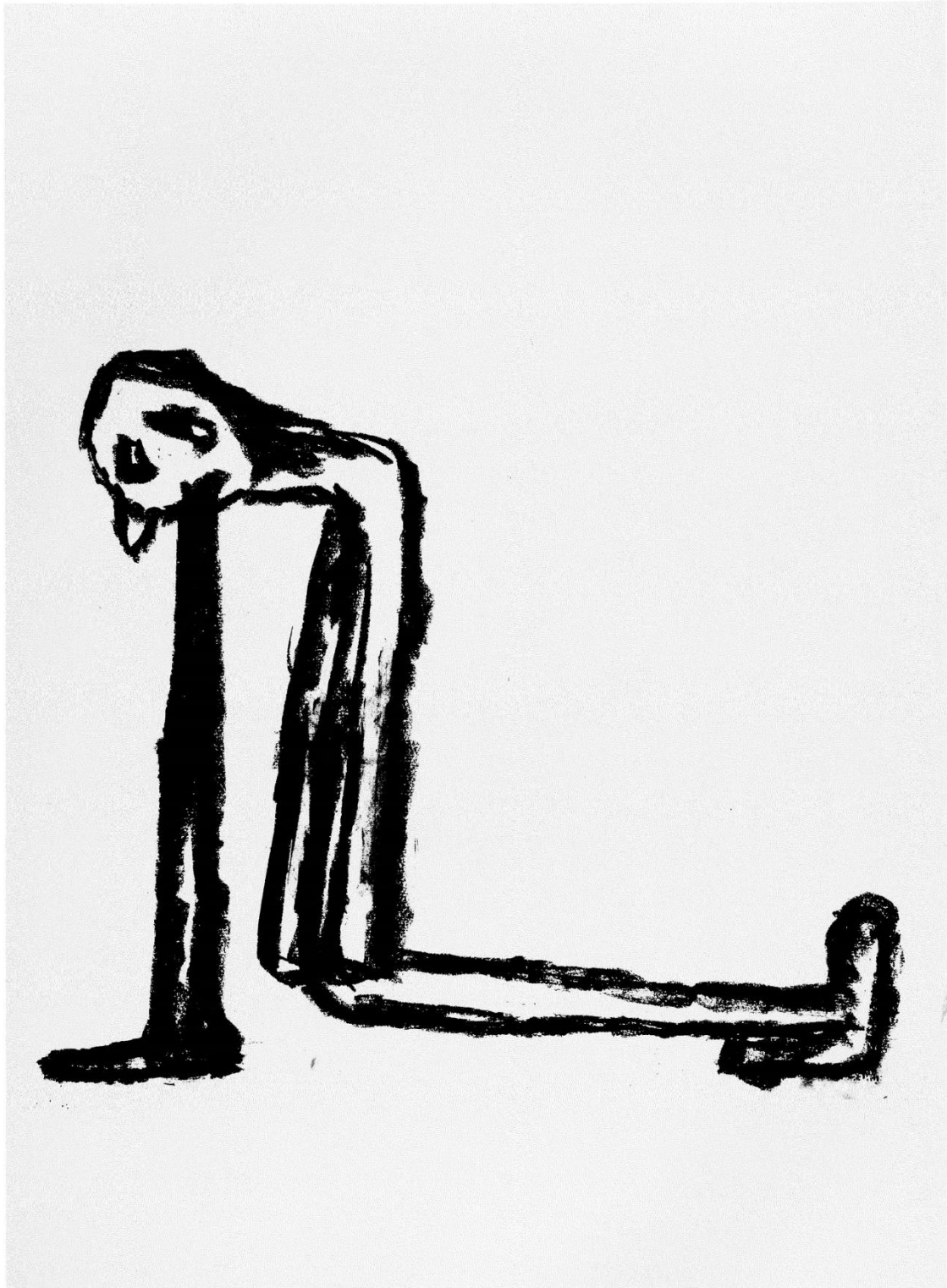


“Landline.” Installation view at Camden Art Centre, London, 2018. Photography by Damian Griffiths. Courtesy and © Amy Sillman.





*Dub Stamp (1A)*, 2018. Acrylic, ink, and silkscreen on paper. 31 double-sided drawings. 60×40in. each. Photography by John Berens. Courtesy and © Amy Sillman.



*Dub Stamp (1A back)*, 2018. Acrylic, ink, and silkscreen on paper. 31 double-sided drawings. 60 × 40 in. each. Photography by John Berens. Courtesy and © Amy Sillman.



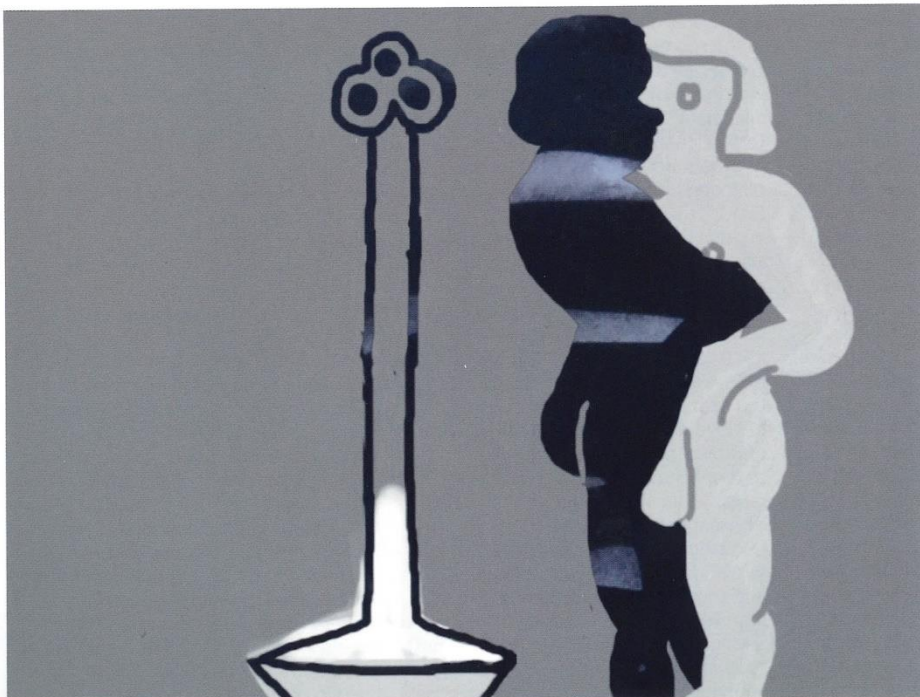
The modern history of painting is framed by narratives of artists struggling to undercut its representational character as art's most paradigmatic medium; attempts to either expose painting as a mere aftereffect of political and economic rule, or to rebrand it as a conceptual tool to (again) expose that very rule, are countless. But in "Landline," Amy Sillman's large-scale solo show at the Camden Arts Centre in London – the artist's first institutional exhibition in the UK – we are met with what seems like a focused inversion of this vindicating history. Instead of scourging the political and artistic affirmationism of painterly representation, Sillman seems to radically challenge its contemporary aesthetic possibility. Representation here returns as a space of impossible fulfillment: the eruption of its historical role as a realm of aesthetic, but also political, relatability becomes formative for any receptive experience of the present. Representation as art's historical, institutionalized function in modern society – which much contemporary art prides itself as having overcome – in "Landline" appears as a treacherous revenant, introducing the painterly impossibility of consistently staging visual affirmations of the present. The political situation we inhabit, and in the case of "Landline" more specifically the political situation that Sillman as a US citizen inhabits, appears to be unrepresentable as art: a political landscape of mere catastrophism. But Sillman willfully resists locating herself within such externalizations of power. Instead she works her media in search of visual representations beyond denunciation and self-exemption. What she finds are representational breakdowns, panoramas of what is staged as a genuinely painterly urgency. In Camden's spacious enfilade of five rooms, the artist has assembled over twenty works of diverging character: two videos; a wall-high grid of charcoal, ink, and acrylic drawings; thirteen large-scale oil and/or acrylic paintings on canvas; different forms of silkscreen prints; and, in the show's final room, an expansive installation titled *Dub Stamp* (2018): twelve human-size paper sheets on which Sillman painted, drew, and printed, processed recto verso and hung at eye level with metal clips on a slim, darkly coated steel pole cutting diagonally across the whole width of the space. The introduction of such changes in receptive gears is highly characteristic of Sillman's approach to painting. She perpetually invents new formats within her praxis, be it the iPhone-animated films she started producing in the early 2010s – digital mobilizations of her drawn and painted shapes – or, as in this

case, a realignment of the viewer's body in relation to the canvas. The installation forces us into a sequential reading, an enhanced temporality of painting as a form of notation, a claim that permeates the whole show. But in "Landline" it seems that each of Sillman's media is rearticulated by means of its representational properties, and *Dub Stamp* intensifies this process in the formation of a new support. And while the vast majority of the works are from 2017–18, a couple of earlier works seem to be brought in to demarcate their difference to the current status quo. Sillman's work has always been characterized by an involvement with her medium as a form of personal, or personalized, praxis. Speaking and writing about her work and that of others, Sillman has offered re-readings of AbEx as one of painting's current modes of address: actualized engagements that divest the latter of its heroism and isolated virility, and replace them with no less vigorous but much more open-ended and metamorphic figurations of the work and its maker. Sillman "socializes" painting's postwar expressionisms, but within a largely antisocial contemporaneity that opens up a formal abyss. "Landline" measures this abyss, and thus early works, like the first work in the show's first room, the video *Kick the Bucket (Loop for Portikus)* (2016), featuring one of the iPhone-drawn fairies, comes to feel like a personal dream state. In the rooms of the show that follow, Sillman initiates the irreversible disruption of that dream state. A wall-size installation of her "Pink Drawings," forty-eight medium-sized sheets of charcoal, acrylic, and ink on paper, in pink and black, produced in 2015 and 2016, demonstrate the figurations of an impossible alphabet, a disintegration of visual grammar. What one attempts to read, to decipher, is a series of elements without a body, confrontational shapes of disidentification that are neither abstract nor figurative. Here, as in other works Sillman completed after the American presidential election of November 2016, one is reminded of radical phenomenologies like that of Ernst Mach, a physicist and philosopher who at the end of the nineteenth century attempted a revolutionary empiricism that refused to distinguish between psychological and physiological experience. In his *The Analysis of Sensations* (1887) Mach argued that it's "not bodies [that] produce sensations, but complexes of sensations (complexes of elements) [that] compose bodies."<sup>1</sup> According to Mach, the human shape itself, its physiological and psychological naturalization as the modern subject, has to come into limbo to allow for the possibility of living emancipation.

Sillman unleashes precisely this phenomenological limbo in her "Pink Drawings," and its consequences seem to have guided her painterly investments ever since. In the context of painting, another of Mach's realizations, probably his best known, that "the I is unsalvageable,"<sup>2</sup> gains an intensified meaning. The representational function of the image space is compromised because the representational function of the modern political and aesthetic subject today is constantly challenged by legislative, economic, and social destabilization. The figure of the "socialized" painter, which Sillman has been so generously proposing in her work, is in limbo because its sociability crumbles. This poses a very specific challenge to painting as a medium, not least because it lacks drawing's volatile sense of notation. Where such a notation returns as painting, it becomes gestural and thus stabilizes the medium's conventional appearance as the representation of an enhanced subjectivity. Think for example of Albert Oehlen's masterful large-scale canvases, on which shapes and gestural forms are nothing but representations of a self-assured painterly subjectivity. In the works assembled in "Landline," such self-assurance is very materially undercut, and so not only do the paintings presented here deviate largely from the drawings, but the paintings deviate largely from each other, with the very same format of canvas bearing both acrylic paint and oil paint, signifying as a distinguishable register within Sillman's representations under duress. A large acrylic painting, titled *The Innie* (2017), is hung right between the video monitor and the wall of drawings. It feels like one of the drawings was blown up, the resulting massacre of shapes a painterly attempt to contain visual devastation via a broken visual language. The painting also feels related to the earlier drawings because of its coloring – light rosé at its center and dark pink that suffuses some elements outlined in dark gray, one of which resembles the head of a comic figure tilting its head to emit a cry. But an intense green that runs across almost the entire periphery of the painting, and that localizes the rosé expanse, renders the scenery void of openings. The fact that acrylic paint dries up within minutes forces the painterly hand into drawing, and here, on this large canvas, into a tableaux of negative shapes, an aerial view is inscribed. On other canvases in the show, on which acrylic paint is used in combination with much slower-drying oil paint, the function of the acrylic alters: it appears to offer inserts, openings, spurs of elements that do not settle in but appear as sensations. In works like *The Dark Space of Speech and Edge of Day* (both 2018), hung in



*The Lie Down*, 2018. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 75×66in.  
Photography by John Berens. Courtesy and ©Amy Sillman.



*After Metamorphosis*, 2015–2016. Video still. Digital animation (iPad and ink drawings). 5'. Courtesy and ©Amy Sillman.



the show's second room, and painted in intense bright and light colors and dark outlines on white backgrounds, the shapes are figure-like, body-size, and vertically erect vis-à-vis the viewer. But its elements, to put it in Mach's terms, seem unable to cohere enough sensations to (yet) stabilize a body. And whether one perceives a not-yet or a not-anymore within these constellations might rest solemnly on one's own purview of the present. Standing in front of these canvases with an American friend, where she saw a passed figuration, I (still) saw one of becoming. Sillman's oil paintings at Camden, however, have clearly painted off any sense of becoming. The more figurative ones dominate the third gallery. Their thickly coated surfaces are intensely colored with deep oranges, cyans, violets, and greens, and drawn on them are two bodies. These full bodies with limbs, heads, and eyes are not erect, however; quite the contrary, they're horizontally crouched, lying in repose on the canvases' lower third. These humans are directed toward each other, fixated on one another, the lower one lying on its back, the upper one crouching, facing it. We do not exist in their strictly horizontal space. It is as if we are looking onto a geological cross section, a compressed life below the surface. This constellation of two horizontal figures also appears in one other painting in the show, *TV in Bed* (2017–18). It is surrounded by works that display more open variations of its compositional elements. In *The Lie Down* (2018), for instance, painted in oil and acrylic, we see only one lying figure, and it lies before a background of vertical and horizontal expanses of color, looking up at two other more ambiguous, ghostly bodies. In two canvases hung with these scenes of abiosis, the geometrical abstractions partitioning their horizontal composition is foregrounded. As we enter the third room, *In Illinois and Lift & Separate* (both 2017–18) give the viewer no chance to escape these variations of metamorphic arrest. The paintings face each other directly with viewers being caught in between them. Both are heavily worked and pastose but the paint remains broken up. No color is monochrome or unbroken here; all appear sullied, congealed; the oil paint seems to have been moved across the canvas in a body, obscuring all sense of fore-, middle-, or background. These figures appear as if tilting toward us, and the geometrical abstraction dividing these canvases into strata emits no sense of graphical layout but rather a layout of

material compression, of claustrophobia, of a life fossilized alive.

To get from here to the show's final gallery, the viewer must pass by Sillman's 2015/16 animation *After Metamorphosis*, whose projection fills a whole wall. A collaboration with Berlin-based musician Wibke Tiarks, the video is composed of drawings portraying all the figures of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, one after the other, morphing from one drawing into another, elements assembling bodies out of often brutalizing sensations, as if no body remains integrated here, no life can remain consistent. This playfully metamorphic sense of figuration in "Landline" exposes its violence: the metamorphosis can no longer be completed, or is, as in the oil paintings, fossilized. In the show's last room, *Dub Stamp*, Sillman's most recent work, layers drawing, painting, and print into a serialized account of metamorphic shapes forming and unforming a humanized body in relentless distress. On one side of the twelve large sheets of paper are variations of a figure that has increasingly become a stock image of Sillman's repertoire since early 2017, appearing in her fanzines, drawings, and paintings. In *Dub Stamp* this figure has first been drawn in charcoal and then printed on paper: we see a long and meager human figure in a constant state of disgorging its components. Its long limbs line the floor, unable, it seems, to resist gravity, but not yet fossilized. Only its upper body is half erected in an unending, vicious cycle of ruminating, of jumbling its body parts into this inescapable position, coughing up one after the next. To return to Mach's disruptive realization once more, it seems that "the I is unsalvageable." In some of these drawings what is spluttered out no longer has an identifiable form: here and there a series of breasts are huddled in the figure's crotch, while in other versions too many hands grip the half-erect upper body from below, as if stabilizing it while strangulating it. Representation is clearly in limbo here — the sensations, the feelings, the receptive registers, the social ties that compose a body that devours and abjects itself. But in *Dub Stamp* this figure is not isolated; it is reintroduced as a resistant aspect of life, however distressed, and the colorful abstractions, the silkscreened elements Sillman imports, complement it, frame it, naturalize it, make it viable beyond desperation. Entering the room, one's view is blocked by the series of devouring figures, interspersed and layered over almost exclusively by the

gray raster of the silkscreen frame. But walking around it, one sees the beautiful, brightly colored versos of these prints, in which the figure returns, but supported by nets of yellow, green, blue, and red print forms, drawings by templates of yet unbound sensations. Ultimately, while representation might be in limbo in Sillman's "Landline," the lives, figures, and sensations that appear affirmatively unable to represent are here far removed from defeatism.

KERSTIN STAKEMEIER is a writer based in Berlin. She works as a professor of art theory and mediation at the Academy of Fine Arts Nuremberg and collaborates with Manuela Ammer, Eva Birkenstock, Jenny Nachtigall, and Stephanie Weber on the long-time magazine/exhibition/discussion format "Klassensprachen / Class Languages." She is the author of *Entgrenzter Formalismus. Verfahren einer antimodernen Ästhetik* (b\_books, Berlin, 2017).

Amy Sillman's "Landline" is on view at the Camden Arts Centre, London, through January 6, 2019.

- 1 Quoted in the introduction to Alexander Bogdanov, *The Philosophy of Living Experience: Popular Outlines*, edited by David G. Rowley (London: Brill, 2016), p. XV.
- 2 Ernst Mach, *Die Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältnis des Physischen zum Psychischen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991 [1886]), p. 20 (translation by Kerstin Stakemeier).