# Shape: A Conversation

*David Joselit:* Amy, in the introductory panel for your Artist's Choice exhibition at MoMA, *The Shape of Shape*, you write, "I wonder if, in fact, shape got left behind when modern art turned to systems, series, grids, and all things calculable in the 20th century."[1] This is a provocative proposal about modern historiography. Could you elaborate on what *shape* means to you as a framework for looking at painting?

*Amy Sillman:* It fundamentally started with wanting to investigate the mechanisms by which some art or topics are just left out. For a long time now, I've wondered why shape is so little talked or written about. This shape idea crystallized last year when I did some research into postwar English abstraction, a real zone of outliers, and arrived at the painter Prunella Clough, who was pretty well established in her lifetime but posthumously drifted out of sight. Clough was a very interesting, quietly experimental painter (and, by the way, the niece of architect and designer Eileen Gray. Her early paintings were classic leftist-approved images of factories and workers, but later she moved to more abstract fields with references to electronics, lighting, plastics, found objects, and all kinds of synthetic modern surfaces. Her work also had a kind of non sequitur language about it and surfaces that were both flat and deep. In other words, a really cool artist, but one who worked totally outside of any particular claim to radicality. Far from challenging easel painting, she just carried on with it, but doing eccentric work. And it was shape-based. So I ended up thinking, *Wow, there isn't much language around her, nor around shapes.* And I started wondering if people who work with shape are in some ways always doing the wrong thing, in avant-garde terms—for whatever those terms are worth, which I'm not sure about.

*Joselit:* Right.

*Michelle Kuo:* And then you and I were in London at the same time last year and saw some of Clough's work there.

*Sillman:* Yes, and I wondered aloud in a conversation last year with some of the MoMA curators why don't *they* show more eccentric stuff like Prunella's. I asked why they don't routinely drag more people like her out of their store-

1. *Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape*, which opened on October 21, 2019, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, was organized by Amy Sillman with Michelle Kuo and Jenny Harris.

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house; why there is such a gulf between stuff that painters love and what you see and read about all the time in art history? And why do we lump all outliers into something noble but forgettable called "artists' artists"? When we were talking, I didn't realize that MoMA was undertaking this huge rehang of the whole museum in this vein of openness and reinvestigation. But it turned out that my questions fit with the curators' mission, and I guess they had already been wanting to ask me to do an Artist's Choice show, where an artist gets to pick works from the collection. So we decided to do this as part of the reopening of the new MoMA.

My first criterion was shape alone, just looking through the catalogue at all things that were made of shapes alone: no images, no bodies, no systems, nothing nameable. I ended up with a list of eight hundred works with shape, but then it lacked much in the way of point of view. No tension, no skin in the game, literally. I wanted the room to feel anxious and alive . . . and I had to cut it down to under a hundred somehow. That's when I hit on the idea of shadow as the criterion instead of shape.

*Joselit:* How did the idea come to you?

*Sillman:* I thought of it from walking the dog, noticing his shadow and how you can't get rid of your shadow, how it's always pinned to your body. And I thought, *Hah, it's like subjectivity.* I wanted the room to feel uncomfortable, full of "wrong" things. That meant composition, and subjectivity, and feelings. The whole show was in a sense purposefully meant to be pro-subjectivity. Shape and subjectivity align in a funny way. As do affect and subject position.

*Kuo:* The key thing is that the shadow is never stable: It doesn't conjure a static, coherent subject but instead points to how the subject is always dissolving and morphing and exists *in time.*

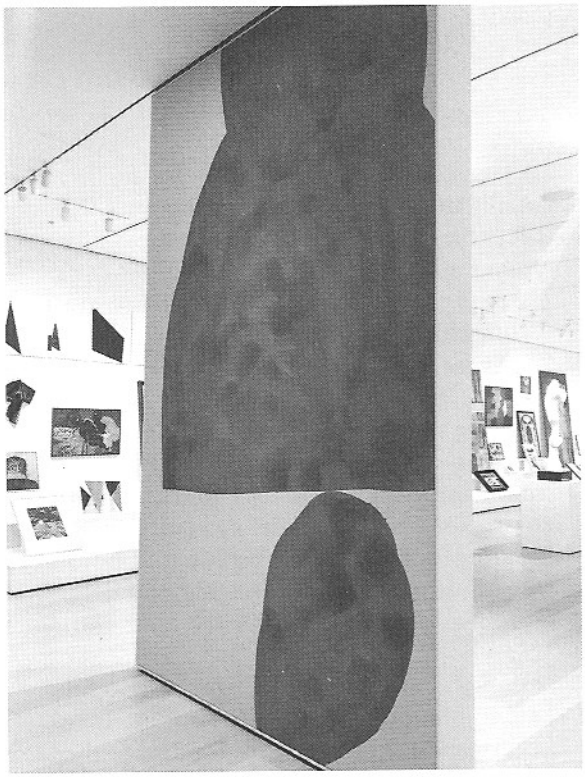
*Sillman:* Right, and once I moved the criterion from shape to shadow, I could include time, position, specific people, flesh, skin tones, and desire, night, anxiety, etc. Therefore, a kind of emotional political awareness. But it was still about flatness, as in modern art.

*Joselit:* So is shadow "the shape of shape"?

*Sillman:* Well, I had already intuitively chosen the Kirchner woodblock *Schlemihl Meets His Shadow* (1915–16), which was amazing because, I mean—"schlemiel"?? (He's Jewish?)—and read *A Short History of the Shadow* by Viktor Stoichita, which got me thinking about it. But realizing that shadow could be *the* criterion for making cuts to the list was a kind of eureka moment in doing this room.

*Kuo:* And Amy, you yourself made a shape for the show—an enormous red shape on the tablet wall that introduces the entire gallery—and then we painted the shadow of that shape on the opposite side of the wall.

The shadow is not a mirror, not a doubling of *you,* but a strange index or extension that is always changing. In that sense, the shadow is the oppo-



Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape. *2019. Installation view.*

site of system. Shadow is literally subjective—and so it goes against the grain of what we consider high modernism and how, throughout the twentieth century, in very different moments and places and for very different reasons, artists rejected subjective choice or gesture. They thought it was either too romantic or whimsical, or too heroic and too mythic. They cut subjective choice out of the picture and instead used overarching systems—rules, grids, series. They mounted a critique of the individual (white, male) subject exercising his choice.

But *The Shape of Shape* identifies an interesting strain of artists who chose to stay with whimsical gestures, with subjective choice. These artists, in very different times and places, *reclaimed* composition—or shape—for other subjects and other bodies. Some of these bodies had been marginalized, or overlooked, or repressed. It's a critique of the critique—a double turn of the screw, as you've said. But it's not a simple return. What I find so moving about the show is that it doesn't try to recuperate some kind of transcendental, whole subject. You confront the critique of subjectivity, the death of the author, but you don't just return to some older notion of an ideal, whole, heroic and typically male

subject. You open onto a fantastically kaleidoscopic, splitting, shifting subjectivity, one that's riven with doubt and fear, but also joy.

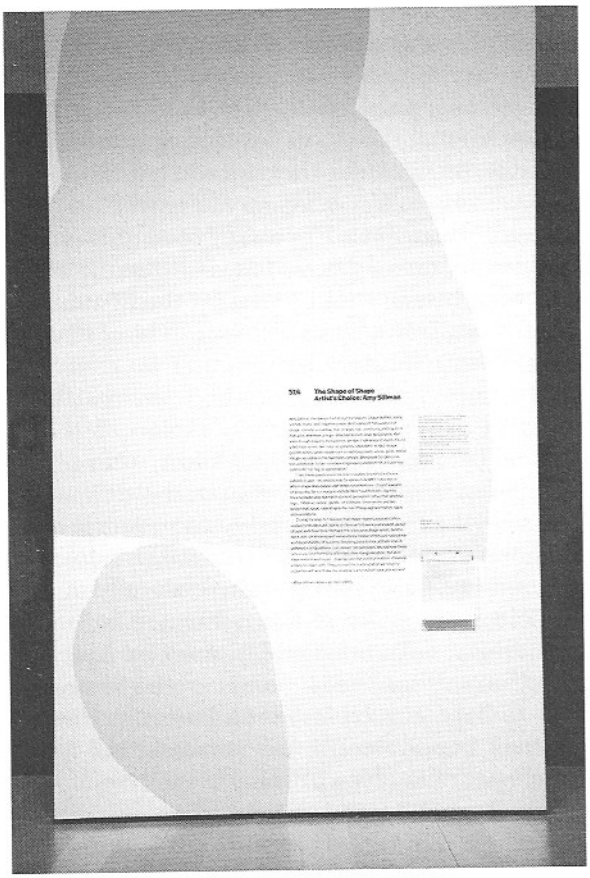
*Joselit:* I think this is also relevant to how various practices of figuration that are at the forefront of debates in contemporary painting right now seem not to have an art-historical genealogy that recognizes them as part of modernism. One of the reasons why I think our conversation makes sense in *October* is because the journal has traditionally theorized painting in the ways that you are describing as avant-garde. I feel that your exhibition persuasively demonstrates that there are other traditions and practices that are left out of canonical accounts, and that attending to them might allow us to expand our definition of modern painting. From this perspective, I want to hear from Michelle with regard to how *The Shape of Shape* figures in the new expanded MoMA's efforts to rethink the modern canon.

*Kuo:* I think one reason that people have responded so enthusiastically to the show is that it takes the spirit of the new rehang to the limit. It's a wild, exuberant, highly personal manifestation of how we might examine a museum collection—one that is often seen as defining, embodying, the modern canon itself—and find new genealogies both within and beyond it. By diversifying the collection, giving it more space, and digging deep into this vast, constantly changing archive of objects, maybe we can construct different modernisms.

Amy's take is both deeply thought and deeply felt, and visitors feel her joy looking at these works. It's a kind of hidden visual history of the twentieth century, and I admit that I have struggled with how and whether to theorize it as such. Part of what I realized is that if there's not an explicit theoretical framework, there is a historical one, which resonates with Aby Warburg's notion of the *Pathosformel.* It traces a history of gesture, or of affective form. And so you're going to feel all of these very strange resonances across very different places and times. Ultimately you feel that there's some kind of deep structure to these works that's not just about a history of physical bodies but also of affect, emotions, or psychological intensities. And that affective charge comes through when you see how Vincent Fecteau renders a lavender swoop in America in 2007, and then suddenly you see a similar form in the Thomas Mukarobgwa painting from Zimbabwe in 1962. You see artists confronted with a blank field and having to decide, "What will I do? What kind of mark will I make, and how?" There is a latent history of these decisions. And maybe that doesn't really accord with other kinds of theoretical formulations or chronological histories.

*Joselit:* Could you describe the installation?

*Sillman:* I wanted to cram as much art in the room as possible, and not just on the wall as in a salon hanging. I wanted viewers to enter, not just pass by. I thought of putting the art on bleachers that went around the room as a way




Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape. *2019. Installation view.*

to flip the position of the viewers: They would be in a kind of arena with anthropomorphized artworks surrounding them, "looking back" at them. But also, the viewers have to look from the ground up, there's a link from their feet up the wall, instead of from the authoritative neutrality of the wall. This feet-first view causes ungainliness. You have to bend over, crouch down, start from the floor. My show is physical and confusing—there are no labels, but rather a separate map for each wall. All of that was purposeful.

*Kuo:* The Artist's Choice is a long-running series at MoMA, and it felt very important to include one in the reopening in order to represent a perspective like Amy's. Amy is showing how artists are always looking at other artists, and so it's a reception history—and a different history from the kinds that curators or art historians might tell. You've even referred to the show as a kind of vintage store.

*Sillman:* Yeah, the only strong criticism I've been given directly from anyone was on a group tour I did there the other day with some patrons. One woman came up and said, "Some of my friends don't like this room because they think it looks like a thrift store." (Haha, yes, MoMA as the best vintage store in the world.) But I thought, now that all the stores are closing, maybe people get excited by looking at things the same way they did when they used to go to shoe stores or yard sales.

*Kuo:* But I think it's important, too, to bring up this question of "outsiders" or "outliers" and how those categories get defined nowadays. Many of the artists in the show are not well known, and their work is on view for the first time at the museum. We were looking for artworks that defied overarching systems, unlike many of the echt-modernist works in the collection.

*Sillman:* But I do want to point out that most artists my age, who know the 1970s, know a lot of these artists very well.

*Kuo:* Absolutely—and they had already been recognized by MoMA, after all, by virtue of being in the collection. So in some way they've been there all along, in the same way that there are so many more artworks—and so much more data—available to us now in the overwhelming saturation of image culture.

*Joselit:* We're focusing on what's left out, but I also feel that there are all kinds of painting practices that aren't being left out at all but rather are becoming very prominent, without much critical acknowledgment. A lot of figurative painting, some by African-American artists, some by women, some by straight white guys, too, doesn't seem to have any critical foundation in how we understand modernism. Such work is prevalent in the art world but hasn't been addressed in critical genealogies of modern painting.

*Sillman:* But my show really is rooted in abstraction, and my love of it.

*Joselit:* True, but I think there's a parallel here with regard to blind spots in the canon.

*Sillman:* It is about something that's supposed to be modernism but it's . . . sort of the back side. I love this phrase that Clement Greenberg once used about color-field paintings: that they are "open from the back." I think what he meant by this was that those stained, poured, open fields make you think about the painting differently from Ab Ex paintings, which are always addressed to the front of the canvas, even with someone like Pollock working with gravity. In color-field paintings you optically fall into these big gaps between the forms, which sort of pulls you toward the idea that there's a back of the canvas, which you can't see but you sense. So, in that vein, *The Shape of Shape* is "open from the back." The whole show tries to make unseen things in that flat modern art history visible. I think my aim is also not unlike Katy Siegel's *Hard Times, High Times* show, which demonstrated that artists of all colors and genders were actively *doing* things during a time (the 1970s) when critical art histories declared that they were finished and weren't being done anymore. Precisely the opposite: All these great people like Jack Whitten and Ed Clark and Nancy Spero and Ida Applebroog and Mary

Heilmann (etc., etc.) were making paintings anyway, many of them polychromatic, tactile, narrative-based, action-driven, craftsy, personal, drawing-based, or whatever else goes against the grain of what you're supposed to do. They were all *aware* of painting's problems but were doing it anyway—not that "doing it anyway" is *always* political, but I think all these artists were conscious of connecting to different histories than the one being taught as "critical." What was taught as critical was simply too narrow.

*Kuo:* You've also described the show as a diagram.

*Sillman:* Yeah. I think that my insistence on not putting individual labels next to the works makes you look without precise identification in a kind of hyperlink, or diagram of visual associations, going sideways from one thing to the next, as in a train of thought that is visually coherent but without a grand narrative of history.

*Kuo:* It also allows you to connect a work from 1895 to one from 1975, or an iconic picture to a totally unknown relic.

*Sillman:* Well, I guess flatness is still the principle, the vector. It is an abstraction show and personally I love flatness. Everything in the show is so flat that I realized later it all looks like deli meat, like every shape was made by a deli slicer.

*Kuo:* But you've converted the two-dimensional paintings into objects because they're tilted, they're leaning on a shelf, you can see over them, you can see around them. They are turned into things. (Sandwiches?!) And conversely, strangely, some of the sculptures in the round become more frontal. The show upends dimensionality altogether.

*Joselit:* The resistance to instant identification that you've built into the show underlines the fact that the art history of modern and contemporary art has become more deductive than inductive, if I'm using those terms correctly. In fields such as ancient art where there are many fewer named artists and primary sources, traditionally interpretations have been induced from an archive of artifacts rather than a plethora of supporting documents. Now, obviously, that's difficult to do with contemporary art because there's too much information, but also because contemporary art history depends upon well-documented individuals. From this perspective, I see this project, in part, as an invitation to broaden our archives and be bolder about moving beyond what is already well known, and also to revisit how formal analysis is not just an arbitrary projection but a means of gathering visual evidence.

*Sillman:* I was recently thinking about Achim Hochdörfer's 2009 article in *Artforum*, "A Hidden Reserve: Painting from 1958 to 1965," where he argued too that a whole strain of activity in painting was suppressed during a certain period. I understood Achim's article as a structural argument in support of the gestural, but a kind of gesture that turns inside out the way it is usually slotted into art history. I think he saw gesture as a kind of dropped thread and tried to recuperate it in a way that is similar to my attitude toward shape.

Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape.
*2019. Installation view. Photograph by Heidi Bohnenkamp.*

*Kuo:* Achim identified this strange historical moment when gestural abstraction was being discredited, but when some artists still believed in certain of its devices and effects. I actually had the pleasure of editing the piece, and I remember being struck by all the images we used to illustrate the text—they formed their own litany of shapes, from Joan Mitchell's little quasi-script-like marks to Simon Hantaï's folds to Joan Snyder's welts of pigment. These artists save gesture, but they no longer treat it as an expressionist trace—they weren't aiming for some naive, immediate transmission of emotion. Their works defied binaries of literalism and illusion, materiality and transcendence. Many of the works in *The Shape of Shape* do, too.

Sometimes artists' curation is seen as simply instinctive and therefore ahistorical. But it strikes me that there's often a false opposition between something that's intuitive and something that's rigorous. Your thinking about these artworks and these (hidden) histories is in fact a very intellectual engagement with a very specific archive.

*Sillman:* Well, this is what I teach. I keep on teaching sincere and intelligent painting and lots of drawing, even when it is a no-go.

*Kuo:* Yeah. [*Laughter.*]

*Sillman:* I feel like I found a way to frame this as critical activity, but not in the terms of critical theory. O maybe just in a more Brechtian way: partial failure or defeat as a part of the struggle.

*Kuo:* In fact, in making the checklist we worked both inductively and deductively. We would see things in storage, and it might catch our eye—and that's how, for instance, the work by the Peruvian artist Jorge Eielson, *White Quipus* (1964), made its way into the show. The work just happened to be on the rack as we were walking through, en route to looking at something else.

*Sillman:* That was one of the few things I'd never heard of.

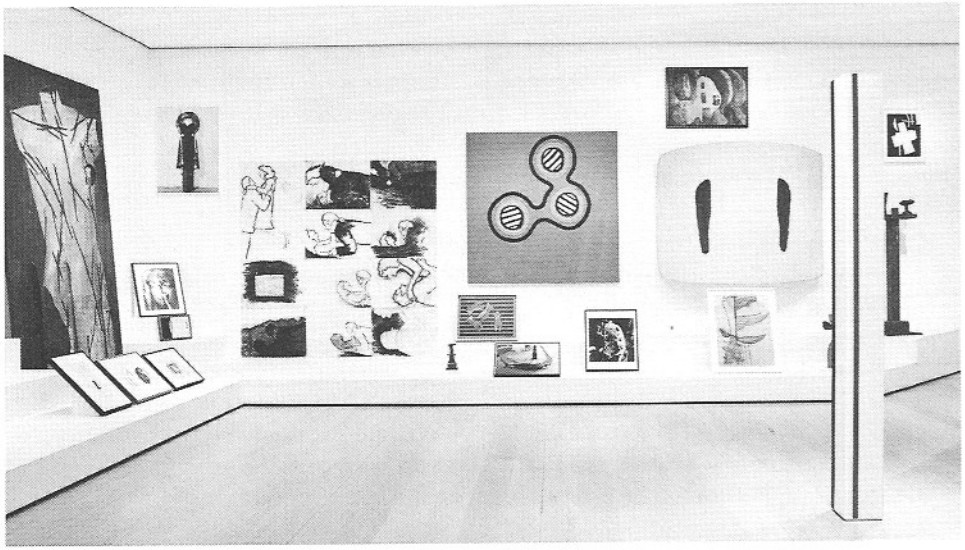
*Kuo:* The work is Eielson's riff on quipus, or "talking knots," the Incan system for recording information. So it represents a practice, whether figurative or abstract or in-between, that has a very strong set of genealogies but may not have been exhibited as widely as it is now.

*Sillman:* And isn't there a system besides inductive and deductive? Devin Fore was telling me the other day about Charles Peirce's term "abductive," in which the logic moves from the particular to the particular rather than up or down to the general. I think my methodology, if there is one, is in the particulars, and in looking for what animates work that I feel was not accounted for properly before.

*Kuo:* Returning.

*Sillman:* Looking back to find out what was wrong with the first interpretation.

*Joselit:* When I was visiting the show again the other day, I was wondering how you might define a *shape* versus, for instance, a *form*. And what I concluded is that a shape is a kind of intermediate thing somewhere between a body and a geometric figure. It's something in-between that can't be called a circle, for



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instance, but nor could it be securely labeled a head. I wonder if you have a working definition of shape. I feel like there is something specific here that is significant—for instance, Pollock didn't really make shapes; Barnett Newman didn't make shapes either.

*Sillman:* Agnes Martin didn't after her early biomorphic paintings.

*Joselit:* No.

*Kuo:* Well, it goes back to the issue of composition. Shape seems to be somewhere between composition and anti-composition, form and formlessness, between good gestalt and raw matter.

*Sillman:* Yeah, the show was supposed to be about people who persist with composition. Shape is the fruit of a certain kind of compositional labor and attention. There were definitely taste and sensibility guidelines, but I tried to choose artworks with shapes that seemed to lie productively and compellingly and absolutely *between*—you said between body and figure, but I thought of something between linguistic structures and random outlines.

*Joselit:* That's a great definition.

*Sillman:* And to paraphrase what we said earlier: Shadow is a shape that lies between body and figure. I think you could actually substitute the idea of

"drawing" for "shape" and get a similar show. People involved in a certain kind of drawing are always doing something essentially compositional: It's kind of fussy, you have to keep making adjustments, moving things around, erasing, rebuilding, keep making decisions. It happens in the moment. It's a weird activity that literally changes your consciousness, it's so tender and it lies between the body and the mind. Very personal. I feel like that's not what people are trained to do anymore, but it accounts for a lot of the weeds of artmaking, actually.

*Kuo:* Funnily enough, even though all of the works are ardently compositional, the exhibition's display establishes a kind of allover effect. In this sense the exhibition as a whole is non-compositional, because it's about destabilizing hierarchies.

*Sillman:* My interest has always been partly about where worlds collide: where linguistic and visual structures meet. I feel like that's where composition is interesting to me, where it's the most difficult kind of balance. I think that's what improv is.

*Kuo:* And shape is, after all, about boundaries: drawing them and dissolving them, mediating between a thing and its environment, or between a frame and what lies within. One thing that jumps out in the show is the porous boundary

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between humans and machines. There are lots of body parts that seem more like prosthetics. Or entities that seem both organic and inorganic.

David, I am curious how you think the issues raised in Amy's show fit in with your recent work.

*Joselit:* I'm very interested in thinking of shape as an intermediate zone between form and body, between subject and object. I recently finished a long project on globalization where in order to adequately address art from other places, I had to rethink my own judgments of taste, based on my training in European modernism. There are modernisms that aren't Western modernisms that are just as modern but look different. So I feel it's very important and exciting to revise the archives we work from and our means of evaluating their importance or their status as knowledge, both beyond the Western canon and within it.

*Sillman:* I don't know how knowledge is made, but I feel like I've learned as a painter that what are to me better paintings get into places of trouble during their making and then work their way out of that trouble, and back around again to a kind of ending without a foregone conclusion. Surprise is different from "new." I think that's a principle of improvisation, a form that asks something unforeseen to be built into the very moment of its composition. I see that as how drawing works. Every drawer I know does that in some way. I think art is kind of boring when it doesn't do that.

*Joselit:* Your account makes me think of Donna Haraway's recent book, *Staying with the Trouble,* as a different model of political or critical praxis. I think that we do need to redefine how we understand politics and art. So I like your definition of "staying with the trouble." Interesting art can do that well.

*Kuo:* A lot of the work in the show is about commitment, which is a form of politics.

*Sillman:* I got wonderful responses from very political artists and writers who loved the show. And I felt like, *Oh wow, those are the exact people I want to feel love there.* I was happy that artists and nonartists reported that same feeling of pleasurable surprise from the show. I think there are many different ways to register protest.