



**Amy Sillman
in Conversation with
Eva Birkenstock
and Kathleen Bühler**

**Cut, Ruin,
Continue, Reverse**

Eva Birkenstock: Let's start with the title of the exhibition, *Oh, Clock!* The idea of time is continuously negotiated in your work in one way or the other. Can we first talk about how and why you think about time in your painterly process?

Amy Sillman: I've been thinking for a long time about how both the time and the space of painting can play a role in releasing meaning in the room of an exhibition. Time is packed into the paintings, the time of their making, which is largely covered to the viewer. I like to reveal the underlayers to think about how time is packed in there, so that's one thing.

When we started talking about this exhibition collaboration, I was working on my piece for the Venice Biennale in 2022. The curator, Cecilia Alemani, gave me a big oval room, where I could work on a big piece that went all the way around the room, which I called *Frieze for Venice*. It was a very complex piece that functioned like a score, or a kind of calendar, or clock—a whole choreography of works going around the room in a sequence that included pauses and overlays. It was made partly of silk-screened works. After the Biennale, I made two more gallery shows called *Temporary Object*, one in Naples and one in São Paulo, in which—alongside paintings—there was also a printed work, this time on metal plates, made of images I unearthed by looking at photos of one painting while it was in progress, which I made visible and laid out as a sequence of digital diagrams on metal to show what had happened over the months of the painting's making. So generally printmaking has helped me think about the unpacking of time that usually lies inside a painting surface. And then I also think about how to display this kind of thing in the room that is the container for works of art—a temporal and spatial container.

Kathleen Bühler: The frieze is like a cartoon from antiquity. It has a narrativity or at least a temporality; something is developing from one side to the other spatially. But what I think is brilliant in your work is that you don't know where it starts and where it ends. It's a circle and a temporality at the same time.

AS Yes, I have always been drawn to that kind of comic strip format. There is also the fact that I was reading ancient texts around that time and thinking about antiquity and how time is circular in earlier civilizations. It is based on, for example, the seasons, and so it goes around and around and around, and it repeats and repeats. And obviously, there is also this kind of filmic sense of a projector and how its mechanism goes around. Experimental film and video traditions from the 1960s/1970s were always crucial to me—so was Sieneese painting, for example, the predella panels. And comic books. And studying the tradition of nonlinear narrative in experimental film and video, which was edited in part for its rhythm, its

cuts, its sense of disruption, not its continuity. So, I'm both interested in the sense of continuity and the sense of cutting that makes up all these forms. I work like an editor.

EB Like condensing, but in a transparent way . . .

AS Yes, there is some joy to me in whatever I make revealing something about the sort of irrational system of construction that lies beneath.

EB When I met you around 2010, you were using iPads for visualizing those processes of editing and analyzing single layers of a painting. Was this mode of dissecting the process initiated with your iPad drawings, or was it always part of your painting practice, just with other tools and strategies?

AS I always did this. The iPad was just a useful tool to record that. I have never *not* made paintings in this way. I always cut, ruin, dub over, erase, add, scrape, bring back, continue, reverse. The digital just gave me a useful tool in being able to go both forward and backward in time . . . not just accumulatively forward as in a painted surface.

KB This compression of the dense experience of time also reflects time as a cultural mechanism, because it has its regularity, like a score. But you also leave room for experimentation and for a process of change—you don't know what will come. Is there some connection there for you?

AS I think what you're pointing to in a way is related to the process of improvisation. And maybe it's about the theory of improv.

I walked into painting in the 1970s while there was a very strong critical discourse going on around me against painting. Painting was attacked for just representing triumph or glory or some terrible commodity funded by the CIA. But I noticed that all my friends who had turned to music or film were involved in a similar "freestyle" method of working, but just not ending up as painting. So I thought, if you just imagine painting as drawing instead—something that usually doesn't get criticized as severely as painting—it would somehow allow me to slip through the cracks. Drawing was related to poetry and dance and to jazz, which

all seemed great. And also, I studied with women in the 1970s who just were not going to throw the baby out with the bathwater, critically speaking, so the critique against painting took a different turn—towards a kind of "we'll do it anyway" critique of the critique. It was noticeable that the "right critical people" were usually white European/American males. But I'm not even boiling it down to identity, because I wasn't just thinking about identity. I was thinking about what lies in ruins and whether it can be reclaimed by new or "wrong" people. I found a kind of work that felt real, passionate, urgent, important, and beautiful. And I realized, as I've written about, that the people who kept on painting were often "others"—like, for example, Gutai painters from Japan or other painters making aggressively corporeal work that in fact *did* reflect a kind of critique in its own way—people in studios who weren't necessarily even showing, people doing something impossible that falls apart but comes back together. Or hybrid artists, like Ida Applebroog or Elizabeth Murray, who were my early teachers, or Nancy Spero and Etel Adnan, working primarily on paper, or people like Ken Jacobs and Robert Breer who did film *and* painting, those are some of my heroes. Or like Carolee Schneemann, or Yayoi Kusama in the old days, or Paul Thek. Some of my favorite artists were inventing new kinds of surfaces and painting spaces and methods, like Jack Whitten, Ed Clark, or even someone like Robert Rauschenberg, whom I still love. There was this whole engagement with the world being done *by hand*, in all its vulgarity and crisis, and I think all those critical questions were seeding the ground in a very important way. And some gestural painting—not all—came out of those questions.

KB It seems you were always interested in how to make a space for the things that happen. New energies allow things to happen beyond your control. It is not only performative but also transformative. When you made this connection to process art, what were you thinking of specifically?

AS These were not thoughts, these were desires. You see a kind of work that has energy, and then you take energy from it. Robert Morris was alive when I was going to school. He had written a book about the phenomenology of making, and it was something talked about. I responded to things, or I was aware of painting histories, like Philip Guston, that were perhaps not the forefront of critical theory but were the forefront of painting. The history of art is told very differently from the point of view of painters than it is from the point of view of art historians. We literally learned different fields. Mine allowed for painting. But those are not "thoughts" I had as a young person, that's just the culture that I was lucky enough to be situated in.

EB When do you know a painting is finished, when do you know when to stop painting?

AS You don't know. That's the point of it. You stop when you feel the thing evolved into a different level, and there's always a terrifying question: "Shall I risk it?" Because if I go to the next level, at some point the layers sort of obliterate the painting. Sometimes I'll go through a period where as soon as I feel a kind of click of recognition or joy, I leave it. Other times there's a mood somewhere between pure frustration and just anger. It's emotional.

KB Is that the vulnerability that you offer?

AS Yes.

EB And this process of thinking continues in the exhibition space. This seems to be such a crucial part of your work, that it often becomes site specific. Beyond the limitations of the canvas, you engage with the architecture and the specific context you are showing in, by implementing colors, or walls, or other display strategies.

KB Totally, it is so fascinating to observe how you address display spatially and how time transforms into a spatial choreography in your exhibition spaces. In some ways you are much more of an installation artist than a painter or a drawer.

AS Yes! That's why I said in the very beginning that I need a month to hang the show.

KB I experienced you as someone very critical of being satisfied too fast or being too self-congratulatory too early.

AS Well, that is the challenge for all artists—especially for artists who have careers or marketplaces. It is incredible to me that some people don't actually hang their own shows. That's partly how you lay out the meaning that is held otherwise inside the works. They're all made in terms of relations: to their own parts and layers, and to the outer containers that stage them. When I went to live in Germany, for example, I was making these really big action-y kind of paintings, but I didn't want the work to be read as some kind of American post-Abstract Expressionism—at all. So, it was then that I thought I'll make a zine to go with the paintings, and pose questions and problems out loud that I felt the work depended upon. My aesthetic is not about grandeur, and I don't like grandeur. The paintings were big and tough, but I wanted them to pose questions also. I like cutting into the story of the work, on every level. I think the idea of the cut is important, not only formally, but including formally.

EB Another aspect that interests me is your use of language. In your most recent drawing series, also on view in Bern and Aachen, you explicitly implemented language or more precisely expressions of language.

AS I gave this series the name *UGH for 2023*. That is how you spell it, that sound that you make of exasperation and disgust.

KB This is the first sound that visually confronts you.

EB A sound that probably refers to present times, and the impossibility to fully comprehend or digest what is going on, an expression of being overwhelmed.

AS Yeah, it's made up of not words but expressions, the literal sound, of negative emotion.

EB How would you describe the role of language in the series in general?

AS The first two hundred drawings weren't about language. They were torsos. I made them to reverse the terms of the work *Temporary Object*, in which I worked backward to reveal the sequential steps in making a painting. This time I wanted to move forward instead of backward and to examine how I could go into the future, so with each drawing I asked myself what would come next. After two hundred "torsos" or bodies, I just started to make sounds and words and syllables. I wouldn't write full words, just the first syllable or utterance of a word.

KB The drawings seem to mirror the moment where an emotional effect becomes language, in this moment of going through the body and coming out uncontrollably. The way painting/drawing becomes a language and comes into a form or maybe into a figuration, maybe not. Since also it's about language, I think this is yet another affect and emotion. If I look at it as a current expression of what is happening now and our helplessness to find the right words, I think this is about art as much as about politics.

AS What I was just thinking when you were saying that now is the word *threshold*. It is like using yourself as a threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness, but more about what lies inside the boundaries of your own body. And then what comes out of you as it passes the threshold and the subjective becomes objective. I'm trying to hold on to that moment where it is not yet objective. And I think that is what you could call *abjective*. There is of course a sort of horror, pride, and also disgust at all the expressive body functions: crying, puking, shitting, giving birth, farting. Everything you do that comes out of your body is kind of marked by a particular sort of discomfort—and is not coherently formed into a picture or language, exactly, but is a kind of utterance.

KB This for me is where performativity lies. It seems to me that even though we could say there is a composition in some of your paintings, even these parts of composition keep each other at bay, not in a balance

but in a movement toward and against something. This is also what I think holds the idea of freedom or liberty in your work premise, and what was likeable to you about the beginning of Abstract Expressionism. This kind of forcing a new space and a new thought and a way out in the end, right?

AS Yes, because at that time, the whole world was literally turned inside out in disgust and rage. And the culture that results is marked by a kind of abjection and objection.

EB Beside *UGH for 2023*, we also decided to include your *Election Drawings*. Both seem to be related in the way the viewer is confronted with exhausted bodies, and physical reactions of objection and resistance.

AS I made them the days after Donald Trump's election in 2016. I was gutted; everyone was. I came into my studio and just drew somebody who was puking and crawling along. The basic question was the same for me: what do I do next? The drawings looked like dirty fields with this figure that was creeping along, not standing, bent over, with bodies that are pierced, punctured or breaking into fragments, or having a big hairy head or the wrong sex organs. Even their legs were skeletal. They were just about dysfunction.

Or another kind of emotional example, is my video based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I made it after living in Rome and rereading Ovid. The poem begins with the line, "I sing of the body changed." That made me think of all my trans friends who had in fact literally changed their bodies. So, I made that video to show at the Drawing Center in New York City, but the show coincidentally opened in January 2017, the month when Trump was inaugurated. So, I made a zine to go with that show with those Trump election drawings in it. They actually eventually led to my piece at Camden Arts Centre, where the drawings were made into a series of enlarged silkscreen drawings hanging in a line in the middle of a room, near a video, and then that ultimately became the basis for the drawings I showed at Gladstone Gallery in a show in 2020 during COVID, also a time of "body transformation." In other words, all my work leads to the next project, and keeps changing.

KB It shows beautifully how you connect the structure of the architecture—which is always ideology in stone—with what is going on in the current moment. You react to it when you describe it; the subjective has not yet become objective. The way you merge that is a metaphor for what is happening in this space as compared to what's happening in your artistic practice.

AS I do think about politics that way. If you're listening and you're paying attention and you're reading the newspaper and you're engaged with all your heart in painting and in the world, then your work is infused with a kind of metabolic response.

EB The same seems to be true with your *Score* drawings. You establish principles but accept that they can change.

AS The principles have to change.

KB This has to do with contingency and ambivalence. I think it's important to not always look for simple black-and-white solutions but to create a space that always takes you—as a viewer—to where you can see that everything there could be something else. I think the way that you explicitly create this space and invite a viewer into the space is political. This creates tension between perception and cognition in a kind of interplay.

AS I think that the idea of playfulness is sort of interesting because it means something is available. Play is not a game, but it's also not the law. It's a realm of experimenting or exploring, and I'm definitely interested in the clumsiness that exists before you absolutely know how everything is supposed to work and get it right. Partly what political means is being dissatisfied with the norm. To use a musical metaphor, to perform with your gut. I was just imagining, when you guys were talking just now: What if something crazy and really unexpected happened before we install this show? What if we can't send the work? What if there's nothing? Then I could still literally come to the museum, paint two colors, paint blocks of colors where the paintings would be, and just have a huge zine that says, "The work isn't here. Enjoy these rehearsals."

The conversation took place in New York City on January 4, 2024.