



A Conversation between Amy Sillman and Michelle Kuo

Amy Sillman: Can I pick your brain about something that sounds a bit academic? Flatness in art. I don't mean as a dogma like Clement Greenberg. But a few years ago, I was diagnosed with a condition called "lack of convergence," which apparently means that I can't perceive space, and I have never actually seen depth. It jolted me into realizing that my way of working is partly about trying to punch space out of this flat vision and create a sense of jiggling figure/ground, a kind of ambivalent back-and-forth in space that I cannot see but feel. You made this great observation about my work in relation to this desire for space.

Michelle Kuo: I think your experience is the paradoxical inverse of many modernist painters, who wanted to destroy figure-ground relations. But since they could see three-dimensionally, they were trying to destroy what their own perception was showing them.

AS Is that destruction, or is it just a kind of complication?

Ham Radio



MK Both. Take Piet Mondrian, for example. He's trying to make a space in which you're never quite sure what is in front or what is behind, and it becomes this very dense kind of weaving of the surface, even though it is a painted surface. He is specifically messing with figure-ground relations by creating slightly different thicknesses and depths of the paint itself and building up what seems like the negative space between lines, which may actually be protruding physically in front of the lines. All these disruptions are a way of essentially destroying what was thought to be the illusion of figure and ground, which was, for modernists, a fundamentally representational relationship. Right? Because once you articulate a figure against a ground, that distinction is creating a pictorial image.

But in your case, you are trying to *articulate* a figure-ground relation, rather than undermine or deny it. So, on the one hand, you're making a very dynamic space, but on the other hand, because you are seeing flatly, your articulation of figure-ground becomes very strange, not a traditional figure-ground relation by any means. It's almost like you're

trying to extrude volume in painting while seeing flatly. You are trying to reinstate a condition that you can't see but feel, which is a kind of marvelous destabilization or struggle.

AS Yes, a kind of spatial indeterminacy is exactly why Analytic Cubism feels logical to me. I want to make space oscillate as a palpable sensation, not just an optical or formal one. And I want to record a feeling of motion in space. The more I do my work, the more I realize it's really about trying to make manifest something that I can't see and maybe you wouldn't otherwise see.

MK And that oscillation is exactly, I think, what your work achieves. But you're coming at things from the opposite direction.

AS Yeah. In 2021 I made a painting called *Radiator*, a canvas with all kinds of complicated layers, a real mishmash that I couldn't solve. Finally, in frustration, I drew a series of green vertical lines over the whole thing, a formal move reasserting the picture plane and flattening the whole thing down, like starting over. But this series of verticals looked good to me, so I added some blocks of opaque color, and the result was a painting with a strip of horizontal slats—or slits—through which you could intermittently see back into the “background.” It reminded me of those plywood walls they build around construction sites, with holes cut in so pedestrians can peep in and see what's being built inside. The whole painting was like a peep show, with parts you could enter visually and other parts that were occluded spatially. That's my kind of composition! Can't there be a composition system without perspective or conventional drawing?

MK I think it's possible. You've been searching for that, it seems, through your work your entire career. I love this idea of a slit, or what you just called “enterability.” That also relates to weaving, not totally unrelated to Mondrian's kind of weaving, this idea that you could achieve a kind of unknowable but teetering ability to go in and then come back out from a surface. And if there are figures in your new works, or even hands or feet or body parts, it's as if they are also woven into a forest of planes or verticals. I even saw it just now in the painting that's closest to the door in your studio, where you have an almost trompe-l'œil basket-like weaving passage.

AS Yeah. And some of my new work is like stringed musical instruments, like harps or tension structures. I have been thinking more about sound and music lately, chords and scores, signal-to-noise ratios. I think that's all part of how I relate to ideas that in fact are about composition. I always tell you that I don't really believe in what's called “noncomposition.”

MK I do think that true noncomposition is impossible. In your case, I think you're embracing some of the strange routes, or formal devices, to composition that are not about some simple authorial expression.

AS Maybe the device itself, without the formal. Like ham radio.

MK Exactly: ham painting. *[Both laugh.]*

AS Maybe my work is a kind of ham subject, or ham subjectivity.

MK Yeah. The ham as entering into something that it is not, parasitically. It's not supposed to be there. You're not supposed to be there. Tuning in to things that you're not supposed to have access to.

AS Yes, I'm really into do-it-yourself-ism. That's why I make zines.

MK But of course you do know what you're doing also! This reminds me of a quote: I think it's John Cage talking to Morton Feldman, and he says, “Oh, Morty, don't you see? We are surrounded by waves, everywhere all the time, surrounded by sound. You just have to tune in to hear them.” I love that idea that we are bathed in radio waves, ham radio waves, even if we don't know it, but you just have to tune in.

AS Who are the other people that you think are really interesting from twentieth-century art history who are kind of “ham”? I mean, obviously one of them is Bob [Robert] Rauschenberg, who worked with radio sound a lot, and about whom you've written extensively . . .

MK Yes, I think his piece *Oracle* was a form of pirate radio, and I've written about how it was this mode of anti-commercial, illicit “ham” radio that Adorno was interested in too. And then I definitely think Jack Whitten is one of the next ham radio people. Plus, he had a real sense of humor, so he also occupied the other sense of the word *ham*. But he was searching for a way to use quasi-technological means or procedures, even though they were all basically by hand, and to develop (and that's the word he used) pictures or works that somehow elicited forms that were already out there in the world.

AS Like the way a Polaroid manifests light. Not exactly by pictorializing it.

MK Exactly. He said of himself, “I am a camera.” And he also said, “I am a scanner,” which I think is so interesting, this idea that he wouldn't know exactly what was going to emerge when he worked. For example, in the 1970s, he would create these slabs of acrylic paint, really thick slabs on the ground, and then rake across them. These slabs were already layered

in many ways, so they had different drying times or levels of finish, and when he pulled a tool across it, he could basically reveal strata—or he didn't know exactly what would be revealed. And he would do things to these surfaces to prepare them, put little strings or rocks or little bits under the slab or the canvas so that when you raked across it, you would get a kind of frottage. He called these elements “disruptors.” They literally disrupt the signal that you would get as you're “developing.”

AS And then he would leave it alone like that, right?

MK Yes.

AS A decisive reveal.

MK Yes. And that's it. It's done. It's one stroke.

AS A one-shot, like a live album.

MK Yeah. Totally.

AS That's just great. Who are some other members of the ham-handed society?

MK The ham hand. [*Laughs.*] Well, I think an earlier example is Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, with his atavistic kind of drawing. This is a different kind of “ham” than you may be talking about, but, for example, Kirchner's wild color shows a Weimar Berlin with these strange new sources of light—gas lamps and even electricity—and suddenly new shadows and colors and reflections are shining forth that didn't really exist before. It's the same principle of eliciting forms and sensations and waves that would not have been apparent before the advent of these new conditions of seeing.

AS And then, obviously there must be so many people in your MoMA show about the development of video.

MK Oh, yes. Pretty much everyone there is a ham hand. Early video is all about making something that doesn't exist, with the weirdest materials—

AS And hacking into systems—

MK Yes, all of it feels akin to the spirit of “let's make what we can with what we got” and with the idea of new forms of light, new color, new transmission systems, and new questions about how to hijack these transmissions . . .

AS Yeah, when I was writing about Abstract Expressionism, it was about squatting—but squatters are very different from hijackers, they're just trying to find a place to live, while hijackers are taking over the plane! I guess the ham community includes everyone from hobos to pirate radio stations to train-jumpers to the Unabomber.¹ It's all counterculture—though an old-fashioned person like me still loves to go to the art museum and look at paintings on walls, but it's because I am still interested in seeing art in physical space with my body—this old ham organ.

MK Well, Russian revolutionary formalists and Constructivists would say that if you shatter your norms of perception, your habits of perception, you will awaken as a political subject, that you will be shocked out of your bourgeois stupor. And form was at the crux of that. There was no revolution without a revolution in form. I think what I see in your practice and way of seeing is definitely still about trying to destabilize norms of perception, with the understanding that it's an ongoing process. You have humility, and that's what the ham has. And you have a sense of humor, which was all too often dismissed in twentieth-century modernism . . .

AS . . . though I think humor is essential. Humor destabilizes and reveals something about how things fall apart, which is partly a prequel to things changing. Maybe change is not always achieved with humor, but I'm thinking of the tragicomic tradition in modernism, its alienation, sad sacks, cranks, bricoleurs, and hams . . .

MK And the kind of tragicomedy you create is, I think, inherently modest: not a grand conceit like completely reorganizing figure-ground, but a kind of funny-sadness that is offered with humility. And in some ways, humility is a harder and braver thing to do because it means suppressing yourself without withdrawing entirely, which takes a lot of courage, and is very rare.

AS Well, I hope making art is like releasing a vibration into the atmosphere, and that may what we're doing.

¹ Theodore John Kaczynski (1942–2023), known as the Unabomber, was an American terrorist, author, supporter of nature-centered anarchism, and assistant professor of mathematics. Between 1978 and 1995, he sent sixteen package bombs to various people in the United States, killing three people and injuring twenty-three others.