

Shape, Unceasing: Notes on Process in Amy Sillman's Recent Work

Jenny Nachtigall

Body
Sweats
Mind
Rags
Agony
Unceasing—
...
Figure
to
Flee—

Shape
Unceasing

—Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven¹

Let me address the elephant in the room first: I agreed to write about time, not shape. This was meant to be a short essay on painterly duration in Amy Sillman's recent work and on how it presses, rubs, pours, and beats the hell (the metaphysics) out Henri Bergson's philosophical notion of an infinite temporal flow. Large, vexing, impossible-to-quickly-answer questions started to creep in very soon though. How to move past the monumental standoff between Lived Experience and History, that binary affliction that besets even the best writing on art and time? What is the time of painting anyway, and how does it relate to other timescales? A cursory glance at how some of Sillman's peers engage questions of time and history might help: take R. H. Quaytman's chapter series, Jacqueline Humphries's remediations of gesture and affect, or even Jutta Koether's performative metabolisms of painting's history. While these artists' paintings do not look anything alike, their process seems to share some

common ground in that they all operate with systems of borrowed gestures, historical genres, formats, or techniques. Sillman's painting, it seems to me, is not driven by system in the strong sense. How are time and history registered, presented, or mediated in her work then? Wherever I searched for time, shapes kept persistently appearing. It might have been obvious all along, but I am going to spell it out nonetheless: shape cannot be divorced from time.²

Consider the series *Temporary Object* (2023) that was at the core of Sillman's eponymous exhibition at Thomas Dane Gallery in Naples. Installed on a long, narrow table display in the style of Alexander Rodchenko's *Workers' Club* design, *Temporary Object* shows us the different stages of one painting. Like early silent animation, the work is in gray scale. Printed-on aluminum panels record the process of the painting's formation and deformation (the difference is moot) at varying speeds. Fragments, layers, patterns, and lines gesture toward objects—screens, grids, breasts—that emerge in and out of the image without assuming definite form. In *Temporary Object*, the finished painting itself is expressively not there. It exists only as negative body: a hole/lack/shape in time. Sillman reminds us that painting is an unwieldy object, both thing and process, that extends in various directions, into the past and into the future. *Temporary Object* dramatizes this status of painting as archive and blueprint.³ Shape is the unrivaled protagonist in this motion picture about this elusive, “temporary object.”

Another set of drawings in colored pencil, ink, and acrylic first shown in Naples includes *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Next Monday* (all 2023). Initially, I thought about these as a diary of sorts, a pictorial journal (“a day in the life of . . . painting”?). In *Monday* a blood-red vertical line separates three shapes. On the left is a black outline that looks as if trying to heave a black jug over the barrier toward a disheveled-looking, light-brown shape on the left. These elements seem oriented toward one another, but the line actively, almost violently impedes relation. There is effort on the left and anticipation on the right, but things do not come together. *Monday* is tragicomic. By *Wednesday* stuff is happening. Yellow, brown, and dark-gray get into formation. *Sunday* is bleak. *Next Monday* arrives in another chromatic space altogether. A shape in hues of teal with sand-colored zones and patches of black, layered, patterned, dense, and full of sinuous energy emerges out of a pale, baby-blue ground like a phoenix from the ashes. The series records relations of proximity and separation, conviction, conviviality, doubt—a kind of mood board—through color, line, gesture, and of course—shapes. While summoning a historical grammar of shape (such as Jean Arp, Paul Klee, Francis Picabia, Lee Krasner), the series refracts it through a corporeality and errant poetic energy that arguably is more akin to the wayward Dada of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven than to the smooth Duchampian kind. Freytag-Loringhoven made aggregate structures, held together precariously by fission and fusion. Her poems are like laundry lists of awkward feelings and unseemly bodily states, driven by the mercurial moods of desire—carnal, not marvelous—and by perpetual transformation. She, like Sillman, is a poetess of shapes.

In the introductory text to *The Shape of Shape*, her Artist's Choice exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Sillman wrote that "Shape got left behind when modern art turned to systems, series, grids, and all things calculable in the twentieth century. Was shape too personal, too subjective, to be considered rigorously modern?"⁴ What Sillman calls shape, I think, moves in an entirely different register than the psychological category of Gestalt that was popular with postwar formalists of a certain ilk. It is important to clarify that shape is also distinct from what Western philosophers and generations of art historians parasitic on their ideas understood as form. Shape cuts across the division between form and matter that since Aristotle has been understood along gendered and racialized lines of male activity (*eidos*) versus female passivity (*hyle*).⁵ Shape is form minus the metaphysics. It is the distant, slightly embarrassing relative of form. Form is the alpha concept on top of the pecking order. It rules the family hierarchy of aesthetic concepts. In its most influential formulations in modern aesthetics and art history, form confounds what is basically a visual metaphor or morphological category with transhistorical and metaphysical meaning, turning art into a gateway that leads straight to the Absolute. Shape, by contrast, brings things back to the ground. It describes the material existence of form as being subject to the force of time in the way that a body is (feeling, aching, aging).

Like shape that sits between being form and being nothing, Sillman's work often occupies the liminal space between words and images, abstraction and expression, meaning and feeling.⁶ An art history still under the spell of poststructuralism's moratorium on "the subject" seems reluctant or ill-equipped to navigate these intermediary zones. The cheap thrill of immediacy that denies its own status as a language certainly still exits as sales pitch, but it seems to me that "expressive fallacy" is not our main problem today.⁷ Attachment to expression as bad object sidelines its genealogies outside of white, bourgeois subjectivity, and it flattens the complexity of how painting negotiates the intermediary zones between the different "objects" through which we relate to each other, the world, ourselves.⁸ Sillman's painting and writing parses a key distinction, namely that critique of expression as outpouring of some suffering soul does not need amount to stripping gesture or line from bodily relation. This bodily relation is not grounded in the interiority of the subject but in its porosity.⁹ It belongs to a genealogy of women in abstraction who like Hilma af Klint or Emma Kunz understood themselves as mediums, recording devices, or world receivers porous to their surroundings, transcribing messages that lie outside the channels of standard communication or that are illegible within them. Sillman is attuned to this minor history of expression not in terms of how her work looks or in relation to some kind of higher meanings ascribed to mediumistic painting (by the artist or the art historian) but in terms of how she makes it—through her working process.¹⁰

In 2023, which as we all know was a total disaster, the artist made a series of new drawings. In the summer of that year, Sillman began working on what are now about two hundred torso-like fragments of the painterly body. The earliest drawings consist of a few pink brushstrokes, marking the zero degree of an image. As the series continues, the images accrue in density, texture, color—then dissolve again. Shapes emerge and collapse (a wheel, a fruit, a cup, an arm, a pattern). Greens, gray, black and white, some yellow and blue are present, but different shades of pink dominate the scene. They run the gamut from diaphanous to opaque, from bright to dirty to deep blood-red. Sometimes painterly remnants are scattered on the page like body parts or flower petals or pieces of broken machinery. As is often the case with Sillman's work, these shapes conjure memories of feelings and forms, which do not come together as coherent wholes. Representation slides and slips. This process appears violent as well as comical in the way that early animated cartoons often do. Mickey Mouse and Company are all morphology, rhythm, and shapes under duress, by turns funny and cruel. It is worth recalling that these films were concerned with an affective address of the viewer rather than with narration and that it is this body politic of the image that made them so attractive to artists and writers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Walter Benjamin. Working with animation for more than a decade, Sillman has temporalized a medium traditionally understood as static and instantaneous. Yet what her latest drawings make all the more palpable is that the complex affective space that early animation formally established, matters at least as much. It is bitter to now think back to how shortly before the outbreak of World War II, Benjamin claimed that the brutal and hilarious fates bestowed upon Disney's figures could preempt and heal mass psychosis by inducing collective laughter.¹¹ Such hopes are utterly deflated since long, but the sense that contradictory affects can and do share the same body feels urgent and real. Sillman's shapes seem to be charged with this jarring feeling that is both personal and political, individual and collective.

At the end of 2023, the artist continued her series of shapes through another set of drawings that are about expressions not fully formed into words. They include among others the following syllables and phonemes:

Uhng
Gdp
Ohg
Uqh
Ug
Umm
Bakq
Ikrep
Gog hyd ouc irr
Gikmfk

Sillman told me that the entire series of drawings was provisionally titled *UGH for 2023*, and having not seen any of the work yet, I first thought of Ed Ruscha's word paintings, such as *Oof* (1962). Then my thoughts wandered back to 2023, and all the events constituting that dismal unit of time, which now bleeds into the present. What to say?

Ugh is pronounced almost like *Oof*. Yet the actual paintings that Sillman made don't look or sound anything like Ruscha's crisp, almost Photorealistic paintings. This part of the series consists of about two hundred sheets on handmade Indian paper on which the artist has painted letters and shapes in black ink and white acrylic. The acrylic is lightly applied, sometimes barely there, translucently hovering above, next, under, or in between the black ink letters. On some sheets the relation between black letters and white shapes reverses into white letters on top of black shapes, creating an asynchronic rhythm that might be familiar from the kind of shapes that often are on the ground of Sillman's paintings—their beginning, so to speak. This restless movement sets the work apart from, for instance, Ellsworth Kelly's late 1960s work of large black letters on newspaper (*Untitled*, 1968) that may have some visual resemblance on first sight. But this likeness is only pictorial. It does not account for the sheer scale and size of *UGH for 2023*. There is something more excessive, jarring, and tactile about Sillman's paintings. They conjure Japanese calligraphy alongside the entirely provisional, makeshift sense of text written quickly on cardboard—stuff that you would see on the street or at a march. The untreated brown paper feels naked and raw. Frayed edges, drips, and splashes of paint on the surface undo pictorial semblance, turning the image into a material thing. And then there is the sound, the work's onomatopoeic register that is invoked, even if not necessarily always realized—unless, of course, *Gog hyd ouc irr* describes a new expression that befits a world, in which *ugh* and *argh* alone just don't cut it any longer. Is that the kind of signal (or noise) that the painter-as-world-receiver can pick up in 2023?

In Bern and Aachen, *UGH for 2023* is presented as an enormous grid of about two hundred sheets pinned to the wall. In the same space, the video *Spring: abstraction as ruin* (2024) with sound composed by Marina Rosenfeld rolls by, compressing and expanding the time of painting and looking. Importantly, neither of these viewing modes allows you to take in the whole set of images at once. They are too many, and too fast. Sillman places the viewer in the uncomfortable space that dislocates the habitual templates of reading the writing of the world; it makes tangible the precariousness of things. Her painting is a porous body that channels and holds relations that do not belong to the artist alone. Although emphatically of this world, it places the viewer in a time zone that does not fully overlap with an everyday event horizon where we are sold the shape of things as the form of truth—and when it happened. It's not that painting, Sillman's or any other for that matter, can "do something" about where the lines of demarcation run and how reality is manufactured. But it can, if you allow for it, offer a broader sensorium to experience the present and the past and the contingency of the structures that organize it.

- 1 The epigraph is from Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, "Body Sweats" [1924–25], in *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*, ed. Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 236.
- 2 See, for instance, Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* [1934] (New York: Zone Books, 1992). For a helpful critique on the opposition between Experience against History, see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991), 773–97.
- 3 This strikes me as the exact opposite of George Kubler's "shapes of time." Sillman's concern, if anything, is rather with the time of shapes. Kubler's time was not calendrical either, but its scale was transhistorical and outside of lived experience, oriented at systems rather than humans. Sillman's shapes are close to the body. See George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* [1962] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 4 In a longer essay, it would be interesting to discuss the recent work in relation to how Sillman has engaged with the temporal logic of shape in previous series including *13 Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting* (2012), the series *A Shape That Stands Up and Listens* (2012), as well as her earlier work with animation, such as *Triscuits* (2010).
- 5 Wall text for *Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 21, 2019–October 4, 2020. For an expanded essay on shape, see Amy Sillman, "Further Notes on Shape," in *Amy Sillman, Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings* (Paris: After 8 Books, 2022), 93–110.
- 6 See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1–27, and Hortense J. Spillers, "Papa's Baby, Mama's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 67–68. In art history this division is replicated in the hierarchy between color and line or what in the Renaissance vocabulary is called *colore* and *disegno*.
- 7 On the moot point between abstraction and figuration in Sillman's painting, see Helen Molesworth, "Amy Sillman: Look, Touch, Embrace," in *Amy Sillman: One Lump or Two*, ed. Helen Molesworth (Munich: DelMonico, 2013), 45–53.
- 8 See Hal Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy," *Art in America* (January 1983): 80–83.
- 9 It is telling, that in the absence of a narrative that does justice to this history, the artist has written it herself. See Amy Sillman, "Ab-Ex and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II," *Artforum* 49, no. 10 (Summer 2021), reprinted in *Sillman 2022* (see note 5), 129–40. For a critique on the death of subject discourse from the view of critical race studies, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), XX [= 20] ff.
- 10 For a different approach to reading interiority, publicness, and shape in Sillman's painting, see Rachel Haidu, *Each One Another: The Self in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), esp. 57–86; on interiority, see Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "The Inner Life of Painting," in Molesworth 2013 (see note 7), 83–92.
- 11 See Briony Fer for the emphasis on making over (esoteric) meaning in af Klint. Briony Fer, "Hilma af Klint, Diagrammer," in *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018), 164–69.
- 12 See Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility. Second Version," in *The Work of Art in of Its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 19–55, here 38.