



Rehearsing Daily Painting

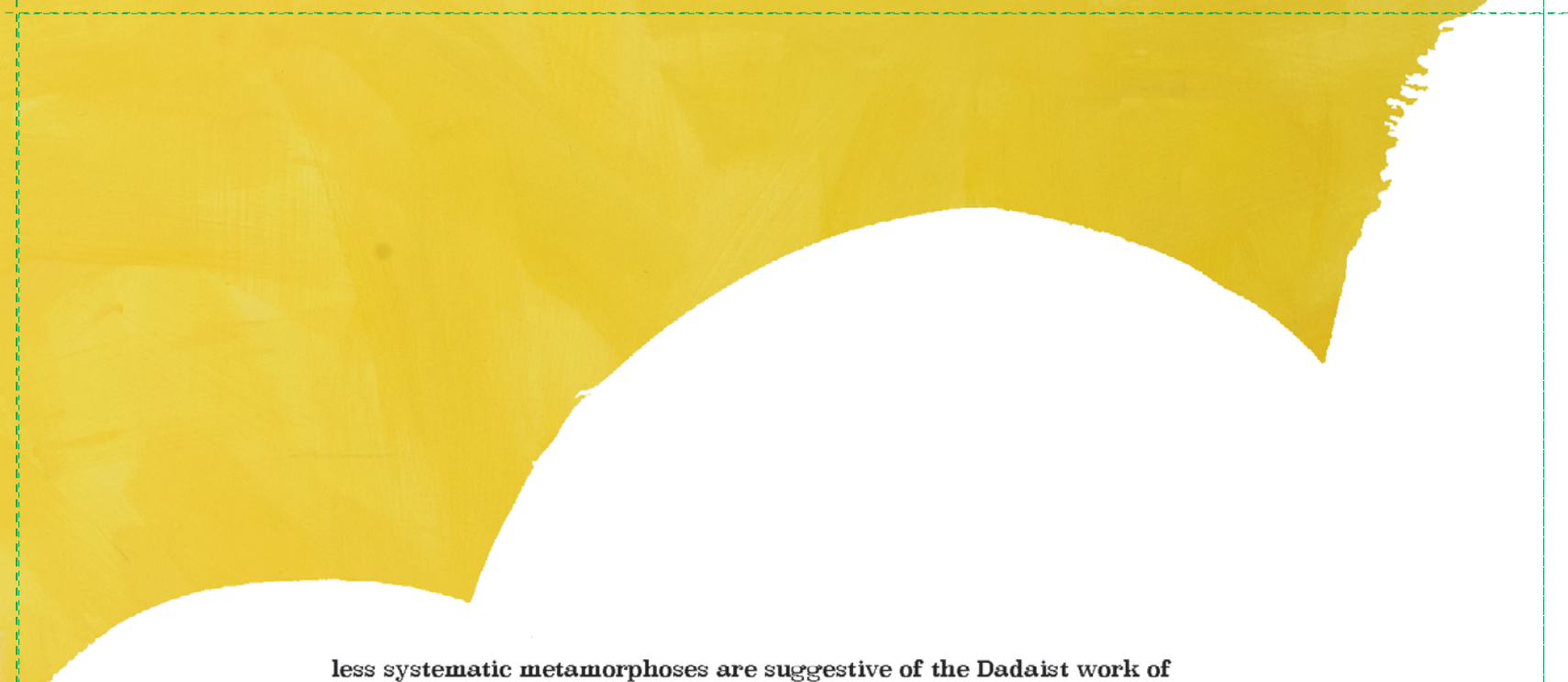
Sabeth Buchmann

Interaction of Color, published in 1963 by German artist and art pedagogue Josef Albers, comes across as a collection of experiments on materials and perception—as if there were a specific exercise for producing any painting.¹ According to T'ai Smith's relevant study *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design*, however, Albers modeled the curriculum for painting at Black Mountain College in North Carolina on theater rehearsals. Albers's students were to experiment in a certain way, and his method encouraged them to view colors and forms as actors in an ensemble, each of whose roles was to be developed with regard to their overall interaction in the process of rehearsing.²

The interdisciplinary use of the metaphor of the theater rehearsal opens a series of perspectives that inform a reading of Amy Sillman's 2022 series *May (score)*; although the series is aesthetically not comparable to Albers's geometric, abstract style of painting, the idea of a working principle that is like a rehearsal can in my opinion be transferred to Sillman's scores. The mere fact that there are nineteen studies created in close succession over nearly the entire month of May 2022—as the dating indicates—suggests that her daily work capacity and its timing have a certain relationship to the character, organization, and positioning of the elements of color and form. Moreover, the synchronic juxtaposition and diachronic sequence of the *scores* serve to sensitize our gaze to the question of *what* exactly the disparate elements of color and form are doing with each other. According to the artist, this implies—in the sense of a rehearsal as trial and error—the idea of “abductive logic” that goes from detail to detail without ever coming to the “main principle.” This makes Sillman's approach the opposite of deductive or inductive logic, which extrapolates either from the overall to the details or from the details to the overall.

In other words, her approach is related to the aesthetics of both production and reception that touch on Albers's reflections on the psychological effects of different combinations of color tones.


The span of dates ranging from May 1 to 22, 2022, suggest that scores can be read as a manifestation of self-imposed daily exercises reflecting the artist's interaction with the painting material, an interaction that is equally based on rules and dependent on situations—that is, spontaneous. The dual meaning of “rehearsal” and “repetition” that resonates in the French word *répétition* evokes serial processes. In contrast to Albers's characteristic preference for structural compositions and industrial techniques, Sillman's scores reveal an unpredictable and subjectivistic performer whose registers of expression and visualization do not seem to result from an expected essence of the colors, but from their ability to do something else and become something else: the alternating compact and crosshatched elements of color and form that allow viewers to look both into and through the images, enabling us to sometimes think of fibers and textures, sometimes of technoid devices and organic branches, and other times reminding us of vestiges of peeled or alienated tree bark or punctuation marks. These more or



less systematic metamorphoses are suggestive of the Dadaist work of Joan Miró, whose paintings feature an interaction with color and form that is simultaneously free and organized.

The impression of the provisional and transitory is further emphasized by the use of watercolors. While the black bands add structure to the foreground of *May (score) 9* and *May (score) 19*, they are fragmented in *May (score) 6*, *7*, and *8*, and disappear behind surface elements that have been applied in washes in *May (score) 19*. Although they suggest minimalistic echoes of anthropomorphic abstraction in *May (score) 3* or *5*, the corresponding elements in *May (score) 4* and *9* could be associated with Asian characters. In several sheets the black bands seem to have the purpose of both contouring and bisecting the amorphous and figurative color fields, yet they renounce their structure-forming function that is simultaneously structure-undermining in *May (score) 18*. Even when the interaction between elements of color and form is equal, we observe—similar to Albers's *Interaction of Color*—changes of role and position between “leading actors” and “supporting actors” in Sillman's scores. Similar to the way that actors never present the characters they embody in the same way yet are always dependent on the action on the stage and in the audience, I read Sillman's scores as interactive, (inter-) subjective variations of tried and tested registers of expression and visualization—a moment that to a great extent refers to the circumstances of the production.

The painted sheets, which are torn along the edges, are mounted on heavy builder's paper that is often pieced together with masking tape, with the web address of Ram Board and the recycling symbol peeking out here and there. This suggests an interaction not only between the colors but also between the production materials. The Indian paper, handmade from wood pulp, is quite rough and enables the artist to paint on the floor. To do so, she adopts a bent-over position that requires a completely different physical effort, one that is practically “gymnastic,” evoking Hans Namuth's pictures of Jackson Pollock's dancing movements while painting that document the performative character of an artist's work in the studio, which tends to be isolated.



Accordingly, in addition to being read as manifestations of transitory color forms, the scores can be seen as addressing their own material “infrastructure”—especially since the individual sheets have damaged, softened, and ragged edges that are smeared with traces of paint and brushwork, conveying once again the impression of a material sample. At the same time, these traces of work give us an impression of the continuities, interruptions, and new beginnings of the painting process. By drawing our gaze to their ostensibly insignificant edges, they raise the question of whether they might have anything to do with remains of the working process that disappear in the final product, or with the random elements of the compositions that provide clues about the nature of the colors and painting methods. The latter is significantly characteristic of the so-called modernist painters, including Edgar Degas, who exploited the subject of the ballet rehearsal to open the image structure to embrace a decentralized, dynamic, and self-reflective view. The topos of the rehearsal is revealed in Degas’s *répétitions* as a montage of poses and perspectives that successively unfold before our very eyes, always organized along the edges of the picture—as if we were witnessing the genesis of moving pictures whose empty centers expose painting as a place of imagination and projection. Within this context, Sillman’s score series also proves to be a visually animated (self-)investigation of its own medium.

The reference to the process inherent in scores also supports this interpretation. After all, the notation evoked by the term score requires that a set of rules for the media be defined: the term score generally refers to the musical or choreographic documentation or anticipation of a principle of production that has already been tried out or has yet to be put to the test. While “scores” based on rehearsals are comparable to “instructions” that make variable implementations possible, they do not have to be implemented to become a valid work of art. Accordingly, this raises the question with regard to *May (score)* of whether it is the “actual” work, a preliminary model, or even the documentation of its making. Just like Albers’s method of interaction, the distribution of color

forms seems subject to provisional role-play that requires the viewer to adopt a systemic way of seeing. In this respect, the structure of repetition and difference that presents itself implies a sort of seeing on a trial basis, creating—as was the case with Degas—a consciousness for the nonidentical, transitory, and consequently precarious character of the medium of painting.

This ultimately brings us to Sillman's decision to conceive her work as a series of scores and to consecutively number the individual pictures—a means that is reminiscent of the musical and choreographic notation used by people such as Henry Flynt and Anna Halprin. Halprin in particular stands for the blurring of the border between rehearsals and performances, such as within the framework of her famous dance workshops, which serve to open dance to spontaneous actions and social movements and not limit it to artistically perfect productions. With regard to *RSVP Cycles* (Resources, Score, Valuation, Performance), the notation system that she developed with her husband, landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, the American choreographer was interested in collecting physical, material, and social resources that were to be interactively developed and evaluated.

Within this context, I recognize in Sillman's working method a symbolization of temporal processes that appear in post-avant-garde practices of scoring. Accordingly, *May (scores)* opens the view to composing gestures, decisions, and rules that create pictures using colors and forms that—depending on their ability to interact with the viewer and the social environment—must be reviewed again and again.

This brings timing into play—relevant for experimental forms of working that have repetition as their subject. Who or what decides that the production process has been completed and something has attained the status of a “work”? Is it ever ready? Or is the category of “completed artwork” a question of its inherent or limited possibilities? Or it is simply a question of the due date or the next opening? It is conceivable that the work does not even begin until then, although the outcome is not necessarily always good. Edgar Degas regularly asked collectors to return his paintings because he was plagued by the fear that they were not good enough. His relentless urge to improve them often led to their ruination.

Sillman's *May (scores)* series raises such questions by giving insight into an artist's daily processes and decisions, allowing us to engage in the aesthetic self-evaluation of her work, which is palpably in constant interaction with her and with us.

1 Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

2 T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 154ff.