

# AMY







FROM JULIE BOUKOBZA'S PICK.



AMY SILLMAN BY GRAHAM HAMILTON  
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Amy Sillman and I met in 2017 in a coffee shop in New York City. I wanted to talk with her about the German art school where she was teaching at the time. Over a four-hour coffee we went to the Strand bookstore and bought a pile of Henry James books to read together (which we haven't—yet) and she invited me to come study with her in Frankfurt. This invitation changed my life and is probably the reason I'm sitting here in Paris writing out this introduction.

Sillman is an extremely energetic teacher (and writer and painter). Her signature critique style is derived from a method of studying the talmud, adapted to art. Its program is specific to Sillman, it must be administered by her and consists of three steps: observe, expound, prescribe. This big enthusiasm for study through lively conversational attention is what Sillman brings to friendship as well as art. Her book and zines elaborate the context around her abstract paintings humorously, works demonstratively about change which is maybe her mantra. Everything changes, especially the body, and its many states and happenings are what make up our tragicomic epic lives. Sillman animates this struggle with a kind of old-school courage that mirrors her crit process: to look, try to understand and imagine what else could be.

Graham Hamilton: We said we would start this conversation by asking each other what we have been doing the last two weeks. What have you been up to?

Amy Sillman: This month I'm getting back to painting on canvas in the

studio after a year of doing other things. First, I was writing a lot this year; I wrote a really long essay about Robert Rauschenberg called "Bob as Medium" for the catalog the Rauschenberg Foundation is publishing around his 100th birthday. This summer I'm writing about Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock; and then also over the past year I installed 3 big shows: first at Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland, then at the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany, and finally at DIA Bridgehampton on Long Island. In all three places I painted the museum walls by hand, and in Bern and Aachen I installed my curation of each museum's collection on my own painted walls. All so much work!

G.H: So much work! I have been thinking—because in the last two weeks I did 5 shows—how much work is too much? How do we know or find our limits, and also importantly the limits of the people we work with, so we don't all end up physically and financially broken (my shoulder is totally pinched right now).

A.S: Yeah—so hard. Well, I think each person lives with limits that they feel intuitively. I think you probably know your own limits? Maybe just through your body and mind being totally wrecked. For me after DIA I was just physically exhausted. Saying NO to further stuff was a necessary situation, I had to get my juice back. I'm only gonna do one thing this year, a 3-person show in May, at Chantal Crousel in Paris. What was your work process for all these shows? Were they organized the same way or each totally differently?

G.H: Two of the shows were installations in Paris and Geneva,

organized around the launch of a book of poetry I wrote. Another was a large sculpture of cabinets and table tops in an artist-run gallery in Bologna, and the other two were group shows to which I could not travel. All of the shows involved the construction of sculptures or installations that lasted a very short time. For the ones I could make myself, there was a lot of very fast improvisation, and for the shows I could attend myself, I wrote elaborate recipes for works to be made on site. I had to dialogue a lot with and trust the curators, which felt kind of like a writing process. After all this effort, I feel I have real post-show blues for the first time. Do you ever get post-show blues?

A.S: Nah. I get really bad pre-show anxiety—I'm a bucket of dread. Afterwards I'm like, ok the train has left the station, and I'm okay. I think I'm more of a fear and anxiety person than a depression person, more scared than sad.

G.H: Last time we saw each other in Paris, you seemed bummed about your DIA Bridgehampton show.

A.S: Well, I felt like in Aachen I absolutely NAILED it and was just really satisfied after it opened. But at DIA I made a room that is essentially like a puzzle. It's a bunch of questions posed in a room about improv and repetition, how to hang things, how to work across the space: on the walls, over the windows etc. I think what I achieved was to create a room of problems where you can feel me THINKING. But I didn't answer the questions; I more just put them out there. What you see is a person deeply THINKING, and that's



so embarrassing, to be SEEN, like in your underwear. So I felt shame. Like underwear feelings.

G.H: That vulnerability is a gift, to see work where the artist is on the verge of failure. I felt like out of the three it was your best show. Is it inappropriate to tell someone something is their best work, like an intrusion?

A.S: Oh jeez, well when a friend, Matilde Guidelli-Guidi, one of the curators at DIA, said she liked it (or loved it? I dunno) it made me feel totally great. So it's okay that you say that! But the thing is, one has to allow that not all shows NAIL it. It's a process. And there's tremendous humility required when you show your process. In theory I believe in failure but OOF, I worry a lot. Failure can also hurt.

G.H: Worry has come up twice—not to pin you down on it—but is painting cathartic for the worrying part of you? I know your painting practice is deeply physical: what part of that is therapeutic?

A.S: Therapeutic is the feeling that you DID IT. You turned the corner and made something awful into something good. It's really a process of alchemy when change occurs. Even when you change your MIND! It's a great thing. And I like to rescue a damsel in distress, a shitty painting, or a shitty painting WEEK can turn a corner and make me absolutely euphoric.

G.H: Is art necessarily about extremes?

A.S: No... I don't think so. I love a lot of art that's kind of moderate; it can still be wildly ambitious.

G.H: Humor is very important in your work. Maybe it is the salt that livens the perceived elitism of abstraction—ironic because abstraction is in some ways really immediate—we know this from cartoons.

A.S: I think a sense of humor is absolutely required for being a Mensch. I'd rather be with a neurotic Mensch than a mean dictatorial genius! You know how it is, when you're dating people you make these lists of what you want; I always said I was looking for funny first, then smart, then cute, in that order, and then maybe melancholy. There's no such thing as "hot" to me without "funny." Humor is like a rare perfume; it's not that easy to come by!

G.H: What's a painting Mensch? or a mensch who paints, an artist Mensch?

A.S: A Mensch is a good person, a real human. A person who acts from their heart and soul. So I think an art Mensch is a person who feels for their fellow artists, and doesn't act like an asshole to the people around them. That's one thing. And then I think there's Menschy work, I guess... which is not just about the acquisition of power. That's why I said above, I think that work can be private, poetic, moderate in ways, humble, simple, straightforward, not extreme, not flashy, deeply frail or faulty or open or human. All Mensch stuff.

G.H: Your writing is very humorous. You warned me the other week that writing can eat an artist's work; how do you separate the two? Do you protect your painting from your writing?

A.S: For me it's nearly impossible to paint and write at the same time.

I mean like for a month or two, I would only write an essay and not paint. They're like different brains, don't you think? Can you make art AND write??

G.H: For me, writing about other artists' work, or for other artists, is a way to get my analytical side away from my art making. Sometimes that self-critical/analytical part of my brain can devour my creative agency, asking: "Why, why, why" over and over again before I have really made the thing. I liked writing these recipes or instructions for the recent work in Chicago and Guadalajara because they were like short fictions that created real works somewhere else. In one, the finished piece was almost exactly the same as I intended. For the other, it was very differently interpreted.

A.S: Writing for me is almost indistinguishable to painting in process. I'm super slow and editorially finicky with writing just like I am with painting. I just comb through it over and over. I like to stew and simmer over an edit until I really hear it in my head or feel it in my bones. I think the absolute DEATH of writing is AI writing... the fact that people won't be able to have the feeling of the boiling and simmering inside themselves, waiting for just the right word to POP out of thin air. That time of gestation for me is the absolutely magic, delicious, sexy slow time of production—when you rub words together and that generates a new word that you hear in your head. It's like the production of tears, sweat, cum, shit, babies, or whatever else. It can't be dictated by a machine or a boss... at least I work that way, from the body and staying close to the body. I UNDERSTAND that people have



babies by other wombs or that people come to orgasm with the aid of devices. I get it, but I'm just saying that this thing—thinking—that emerges from your insides is very very precious to me. I'm obsessed with what thinking feels like.

G.H: I feel like it's possible we are at the end of a very long arch. Our specific iconographic Catholic-derived European tradition of Art is rooted in so many types of soft power and nation building. Contemporary art (and Abstract Expressionism specifically) played a big role in the post-World War 2 organization of Europe, especially between American and post-war Germany. The art story between these two places is something you and I both have invested in and been educated or contextualized by; it also seems to be falling apart. How do we go forward making this specific type of "contemporary art" in a political world order or system that is failing / failing us?

A.S: OMG this plagues me every day in every way. I do not know. I don't have an "answer." I don't know how we're going to get out of this. We're obviously in a whole lot of trouble. I too am thinking that yeah, we're at the end of an arc, and this involves a huge amount of GRIEF for a person my age. I would imagine there's a different grief on the part of someone your age who has supposedly a whole life ahead of you, but I've spent 50 years living in NYC, developing a relationship with a world through art, and it is completely under attack now so I feel protective of what could be lost, including the COUNTER-traditions, the critical thinking and struggle, that I find beautiful and important. It would be very hard for me to have this all burn down to ash

and be destroyed along with the stuff we want to see ending... I mean: Beckett and ZAUM and Artaud and Bell Hooks and Gertrude Stein and even Matisse and Picasso and Picabia and Flaubert and Guston and Fanon and Kristeva and Wittig and Morrison and Jordan and, and, and... We're all muddling forward as best we can. I think we should all DO OUR BEST to keep being open to change and to keep the intimacy that came to us with the things we've LEARNED from in our life. But I do not believe in ANY artistic absolutes, and I think that's the fallacy of "progress" that there is "a" better way.

G.H: You wrote this great op-ed for The Washington Post with a similar frankness (which was accompanied by a cartoon GIF, accessible from a QR code). I find it difficult that everyone is expected—especially artists—to editorialize constantly, yet I started my art career believing that artists are moral actors with responsibilities—to be really human, really questioning. Where does the sanctity (weird word) of the practice of art-making and its ambivalent or multivalent relationship to meaning meet morality or ethics?

A.S: I think that if you make a mandate for yourself, you are using morals which means you're already asking a question morally or ethically. My mandate is that I do not and will not EVER ask (or pay for) anyone to make my work FOR me. It is my moral code. I have to make my work myself and it has to be from scratch. I have to be alone, probably lonely, and sad and emotional and open and clear to make my work, and I only want to make what I can produce by myself in that state. I don't want to pay anyone because I can't KNOW in

advance what I'm going to do next. This principle already limits me to one show a year or so, which is already kind of limited and I believe in this limit. Not that I think this solves any problems—and I don't begrudge anyone a different way of making or producing—fine if you're Warhol and have a factory, but that's not for me. But it's also practical because I'm mostly erasing and negating, and painting out and editing and altering what I do; so I can't tell anyone what to do in advance. Also my work is not about an image I don't "believe" in images or even like images particularly. I just believe in change. So I have to make everything myself and to me that's a moral code: work that requires doubt and wrestling with doubt, I believe in that.



Amy Sillman, artist, photographed by Bruno Staub, New York.





FRANÇOIS CHAIGNAUD PAR AISLING HALLEMAN & FABRICE PAINEAU  
ENTRETIEN, PARIS, 2025.

*Animal on est mal* est le titre d'une chanson de Gérard Manset, qui pourrait aisément convenir à François Chaignaud - chorégraphe à la crinière impressionnante et créature savante - également reconnu, dans son travail, pour une certaine animalité assumée, propice à de nombreux contrastes. Lors de l'entretien, dans un rade de la place des Fêtes, il tient à porter son animal totem - son chien, Francis - dans un sac à main. Why not ? La puissance du mineur et de l'hybridation est devenue le marqueur indélébile de sa marche, de sa danse et de son chant, que prodigue cette saison l'invité spécial du « Portrait » au Festival d'Automne.

Double : *Tu réalises un portrait en neuf parties avec le Festival d'Automne François Chaignaud* : Chaque année, le Festival revisite avec un artiste plusieurs aspects de son travail. Cette année, on présente neuf spectacles donc neuf collaborations. Je trouvais beau de saisir cette occasion de visibilité et de la disséminer, de la consteller. Hier soir je faisais un duo avec le beatboxer Aymeric Hainaux à la Librairie 7L. On s'était fixé deux règles : on bouge et on fait du son tous les deux ; et on se met en situation d'incompétence. Donc on a affronté l'inconnu ensemble pour que quelque chose qui nous est propre surgisse. Je mélange danse irlandaise, folklore argentin, flamenco et mon propre folklore. Pendant des siècles, le folklore était la seule manière de danser.

Double : *Ce spectacle résonne d'une animalité très précise.* F.C : Il y a quelque chose de très viscéral dans cette pièce : on se lâche, on saute, on éructe, on crache. Mais en même temps, c'est très précis parce que tout est compté. Quand tu frappes, tu sais toujours où. Donc le corps qui lâche, qui surgit coexiste avec un corps très alerte. Cette précision est un point d'accès pour le public aussi.

Double : *Tu fais beaucoup de collaborations.* F.C : Je suis très perméable et j'ai parfois du mal à travailler seul, parce qu'on dépend d'un écosystème. Pour qu'un geste surgisse, il faut que quelqu'un le regarde. Pour qu'une idée existe, il faut que quelqu'un l'incarne. Par ailleurs, je n'ai aucune nostalgie. J'ai un mode de vie qui bouge tout le temps.

Double : *Tu prends la direction du Centre Chorégraphique National de Caen.* F.C : Chaque pièce est l'occasion pour moi d'une chose qui se transforme, souvent par le biais d'une rencontre. Mais depuis quelque temps, je n'en peux plus de supplier pour avoir un studio. Je rêve d'un endroit où la pratique peut avoir droit de cité, où déposer mes costumes, des accessoires, et où la création peut aussi s'émanciper différemment des contextes de production qui nous formatent. Je sens que j'arrive à un moment où le temps des collaborations est un peu révolu. J'étais devenu l'artiste des duos. Et j'ai horreur de me sentir piégé dans un système.

Double : *Tu parles beaucoup de la répétition.* F.C : Souvent, je sens du mépris chez mes interlocuteurs. Ils pensent qu'il y a une hiérarchie : d'un côté des artistes très puissants qui ont des idées, de l'autre les danseurs, les ouvriers du geste. Donc je mets un point d'honneur à valoriser les répétitions et les transformations inestimables qu'elle permet.