

What Thinking Looks Like



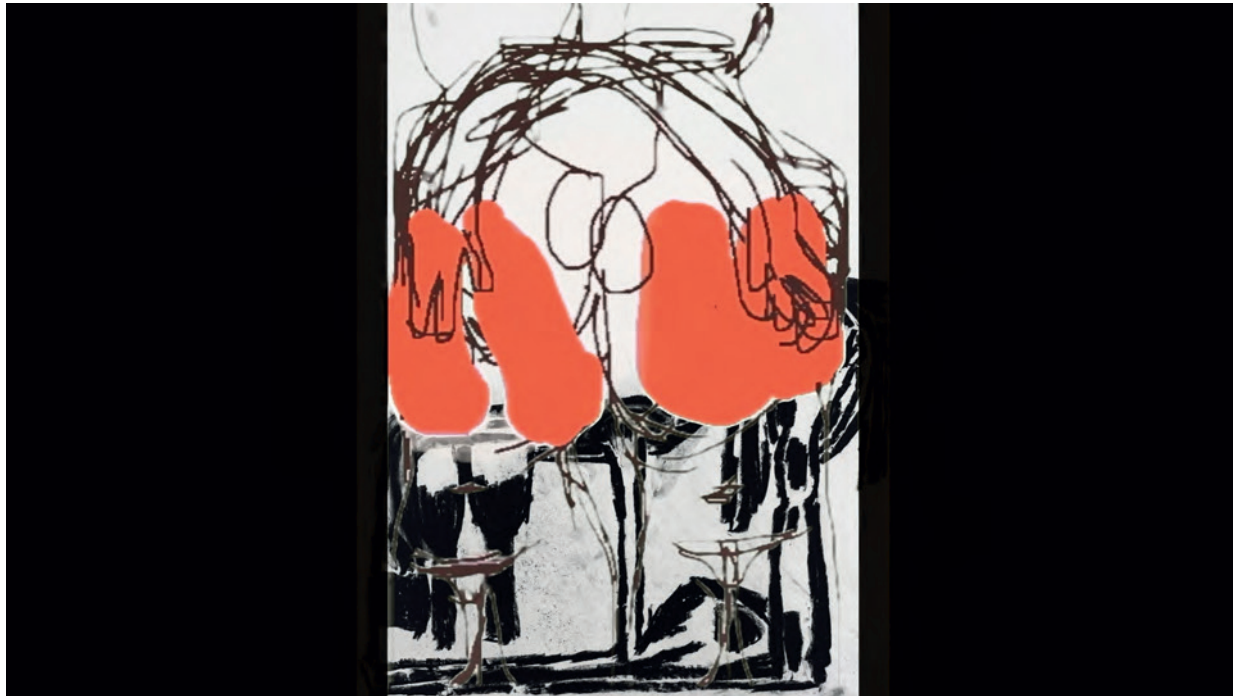
1



2

An Interview with Amy Sillman

by Robert Enright
Introduction by Meeka Walsh



3



4

What is it to make a painting, a drawing? It's a battle, a contretemps. Amy Sillman's painting *Things Fall Apart* is thoroughly satisfying to look at—wait, maybe not entirely so—that substantial mauve bladder, the centre-to-outside diagonal dislocated tibia, the rethinking obliterating putty-coloured centre/bottom series of brush strokes, the unsupported white spaces through which an eye falls (no safety net). Things do fall apart but hold long enough for as much visual pleasure as you want to take.

I read *Faux Pas*, Amy Sillman's *Selected Writings and Drawings* (expanded edition, After 8 Books, 2022), and chortled, guffawed, was awed, took notes and read it again. What she picks out in her essay "Delacroix: The Sullied Enlightenment of the Body" reiterates what she says in the interview that follows. Argumentative maybe but certainly consistent. She wrote that she doesn't admire Delacroix's longing to seize women and territory, but "I do love how he seized the surface of painting itself, and then twisted it into something alienated." And she goes on to write that Delacroix is subscribing to the Romantic notion that the artist's gesture is a mark of intelligence, "but in his hands, the very idea of knowing becomes something unhinged, discomfiting, on the verge of falling apart," and we have her glorious *Things Fall Apart*, from 2011. Do they, or is it the latent possibility that interests her?

Sillman describes her work and process as agonistic, saying that if you are looking to understand the argument in art—what you believe, what's at stake, "what I've called the edge, where the thing breaks," where there is contradiction—then you're always looking for a problem. Like she wrote about Delacroix, "He painted in furious antagonism: against mechanization, boredom, mediocrity, gaps of memory," and that his world is one of "jarring transitions and negative dialectics" and, as she says further—no middle ground.

In 2024 *The Washington Post* invited Amy Sillman to produce a commentary focusing on the four seasons for publication in that journal. Sillman's writing is smart and compelling, and she has a lot to say, with firm, subjective opinions, but she indicated being surprised: "I'm an abstract painter, not an opinion writer." The result was four one-minute videos: *Spring: Abstraction as ruin*, 2024; *Summer: Abstraction as apprehension*, 2024; *Fall: Abstraction as X-ray*, 2024; and *Winter: Abstraction as insomnia*, 2025. Reflections on her own state of mind, the nation's as it was or should be, on morality and humour and the way things are, or maybe not. Manic, alarming, hilarious, Chaplinesque, lovely and made in rapid sequence animation from her legion of selected drawings. The brilliant score by

composer Marina Rosenfeld guides and cues your response and then you have to do it all again because you just can't be sure.

Amy Sillman tells it best in her essay on Delacroix, as though he had produced his own series, and she wrote, too, that his paintings were haunted with gaps, "holes, little black wounds, sudden flatnesses, looming shadows of doorways and cabinets, reversals, scumbles into incoherence. Wherever these gaps occur, a kind of momentary breakdown is suggested, a confusion, a memory gone frighteningly blank, the mind's eye punctured. These little moments of aporia are choreographed by Delacroix as calculated lapses in the palpability of narrative."

And that's exactly the perspective from which Amy Sillman approaches her work. Interruptions, cycling back, questioning, revisiting, assembly and debate but not landing and settling with any door-slamming finality.

In 2024 Amy Sillman had two solo exhibitions titled "Oh, Clock!" mounted first at Ludwig Forum Aachen and then at Kunstmuseum Bern. Having worked with the Museum of Modern Art's collection for its reopening in 2019 with "The Shape of Shape," Sillman suggested she work with the galleries in Aachen and Bern to curate a Collection Show in each, producing what she described as a curatorial project alongside a solo show. In each what interested her was the collection's own character, what it had looked at closely and could be described as an argument. Her particular perceptions and sensibilities produced compositions that startled the eye and made everything new and electric. Aha, the eye said, this is Andy Warhol chumming with Kenneth Noland on the same painted wall. Will you look at that? Colleagues together joined by the chroma and intelligent exuberance of a wall Amy Sillman painted. That would have been art at its assertive best—right in your eye and hammering in your head. Look and look again at all of it. Sillman's pairings and drawings and the good works already acquired by the museums reinstalled with and by Amy Sillman on what were literally her own grounds. Her painting the walls of the gallery transformed the space itself into a painting.

And she did it again with "Alternate Side (Permutations #1–32)" at Dia Bridgehampton in 2025–26 and "The Harlequin's Dog" at Galerie Chantal Crousel in 2026 and most recently with "Betty Parsons: An Expanded World" at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard Collage, Hessel Museum of Art.

In the interview that follows Sillman elaborates on what she means when she says she cleaves or readily lists to drawing over painting. Consistent with her readiness to question everything, she answers that it really is about figuring out how to draw—in every



Pages 32–33

1. Amy Sillman, *Spring: Abstraction as ruin*, 2024, animated drawing, single channel, colour, sound, 1:01 minutes. Sound by Marina Rosenfeld. Courtesy the artist.

2. *Summer: Abstraction as apprehension*, 2024, animated drawing, single channel, colour, sound, 1:04 minutes. Sound by Marina Rosenfeld. Courtesy the artist.

3. *Fall: Abstraction as X-ray*, 2024, animated drawing, single channel, colour, sound, 1:00 minute. Sound by Marina Rosenfeld. Courtesy the artist.

4. *Winter: Abstraction as insomnia*, 2025, animated drawing, single channel, colour, sound, 1:21 minutes. Sound by Marina Rosenfeld. Courtesy the artist.

Page 35

Things Fall Apart, 2011, oil on canvas, 231.1 × 213.4 centimetres. Courtesy the artist.

sense—“to draw out, extract, expand and to transfer into the next thing.” She concluded her essay on Delacroix and his exhibition at the Met with “it lays bare drawing itself on a granular level as essentially a synthetic act of touching-thinking-feeling all at the same time, working from not-knowing, almost like groping in the dark. It’s a very modern feeling.”

The following interview was conducted by phone in two parts from Guelph to the artist’s studio on March 11, 2026, and from Winnipeg to New York on June 14, 2026.

BORDER CROSSINGS: There’s an honoured tradition of artists rendering the theme of the “Four Seasons”: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Nicolas Poussin, François Boucher, Jasper Johns and Jennifer Bartlett all did their versions. But you decide to look at the “Four Seasons” through the lens of abstraction.

AMY SILLMAN: For the first video in that series,

I began with a set of 300 drawings I had done, roughly a drawing a day over the year. I wondered what it would look like if I strung them together. It was a pink torso shape, and it changed over the year and eventually became a second series of what I called word drawings. They were failed words that never arrived at any legibility. So I had off-words and then torsos that were not really torsos. I put them next to one another in the order in which they were made and I ended up with a kind of abstract language. And I figured everybody can bear to watch something for one minute, so I thought, okay, a Minute Cinema. Then I sent these clips to my friend, the composer/musician Marina Rosenfeld, and we collaborated on the score and timing for all four. So the series wasn’t an idea that I illustrated; it was more like I was working on something that grew into a form. And by the time the form became what it was, it was essentially abstract.



1

Is 300 the number of drawings you used for each of the seasons? Did a numerical pattern emerge? No. For each of the seasons, I was taking apart and re-editing and recutting sequences of drawings that I had made in previous works and for different purposes. It was about mining pre-existing sequences that had other prior purposes.

With *Spring: Abstraction as ruin* you talk about things “teetering on the edge of recognition.” So this quasi-torso mixes it up with a bunch of garbled calligraphy. The feeling I get from it is a kind of confusion and un-wordness.

That’s why I called it *Abstraction as ruin*. We were confronting a political situation where Biden was running and Trump got the nomination and from where I stood then, things were clearly coming apart at the seams. It seemed like Trump could win again, which was unthinkable. It was a very contentious moment in which I was using this kind of slapstick to express the thing that’s been ruined. The drawings themselves were put down with a brush and then washed off, so they were made by negating.

I sense that the images in *Spring* want to shape themselves into a body and then transform to no shape or to a confluence of lines. That process continues throughout the “Minute Cinemas.”

I’ve never thought about it so thoroughly, so your take on it is right to me. But that’s always what I’ve been doing. Everything I’ve ever done is a proposal that’s been dismantled, or altered, or taken apart, or destabilized, or questioned in some way.



2

1–4. Installation view, “Amy Sillman: Alternate Side (Permutations #1–32),” 2025–26, Dia Bridgehampton, New York. Photo: Don Stahl.
© Amy Sillman and David Zwirner. Courtesy the artist and Dia Art Foundation, New York.



3



4

In the impassioned essay on *Spring* that you wrote for *The Washington Post*, you make clear the connection between abstraction and representation through your continual attraction to the body. You write about “the bandaging together of critical thinking and not quite knowing the intimate labour form that stays close to the body.” You articulate a way in which you literally embody abstraction.

That’s what I wrote, but the idea itself rarely leads me. It’s the thing itself. I was thinking about it objectively because I had to write this essay. I was looking at a body of work that I had made over that year, and I was in a situation where I could see what I’d done in changing it into a different form. What I saw was this leaning and listing torso that’s getting pierced or crumpled. I don’t know that it was my body. I think it’s the body of my work and it’s the body politic.

You say that ruin is the idea in *Spring*. By the time you get to *Summer: Abstraction as apprehension*, the tone shifts again. It’s a constant minute of anxiety-producing change and transformation. The figure keeps getting covered over by moving shapes, and you use the flashlight as an important object. Did you make a conscious decision to alternate between obscurity and light in that season?

In that work I was also just drawing stuff that was in my studio. I had this one group of drawings of just THINGS—a speaker, a bucket, a pail, a pencil, a flashlight. Eventually the flashlight became a tool to point into yourself. It’s what kids do on a camping trip when they put the flashlight in

their mouth, a spooky attempt to illuminate your insides—and, by extension, your psyche. That’s what the work coalesced into. But I also used another sequence of images from the MoMA collection that I’d looked at for the show I curated there, “The Shape of Shape.” I chose 800 images from their online archive as my first cut for that show, and I made a crazy edit of those images sequenced as a morphological study, going from a circle to a line by way of a mass. If you call it thinking, this is what I do. (LOL) Anyway, each of these seasons was built from different series of things I just had hanging around in my files. By the fourth season, the connection with *The Washington Post* had ended and I organized the four videos into a single-channel piece for a gallery show at Capitain Petzel in Berlin, where all four “Minute Cinemas” were shown in order.

You call *Fall: Abstraction as X-ray* a season on excruciating edge where nervous systems are running on fumes of disasters, accusations, and knots and bumps. The tone of the seasons gets progressively darker.

Fall was made right after Biden dropped out and Kamala Harris was the candidate. By *Winter*, the fourth season, the whole thing was about the aftermath of the election. In the very last scene, there are cloudy fumes or smoke and when it clears you see ICE agents pushing a female protestor to the ground. At that point I knew I had to end it with something overtly political.

There are two undercurrents in *Winter: Abstraction as insomnia*. There are images of penetration where things are constantly going into other things and there’s a concentration on the walking wounded. A booted figure walks with a cane; another is on crutches. The whole thing looks like a William Kentridge

procession. A street cleaner comes along and what he leaves behind are the cleaning implements operating on their own. The whole minute is a wonderful parade of the damaged.

That was all drawn from a video I made years earlier called *Test Strips*. Again, I took it apart and remade it. Specifically, it comes from remembering watching Bullwinkle and Rocky cartoons when I was little, and at the end there was always this animation of a parade and finally a janitor who cleans up afterwards. I always thought that janitor was really funny and touching.

Part four is one of the clearest of the videos because the opening sequence presents an insomniac. Through thought balloons you get to see what keeps her awake: worries about her dog, what’s coming in the mail, train crossings, and there’s even a bedbug.

I remember once lying in a bed in London at an Airbnb, memorably the worst night’s sleep I’ve ever had in the worst room I’ve ever stayed in, lying in that bed thinking, there must be a bedbug in this bed.

I love the fact that the bedbug appears in the video like a gentleman caller out of an Emily Dickinson poem. On the way through he tips his hat. That’s the best touch an insomniac could imagine: a bedbug who’s a 19th-century gentleman. Exactly. A polite one. “I don’t want to bite you, but I’m going to.”

These are dark times you’re recording in the “Minute Cinemas,” but there is also a humorous undercurrent. I think that’s the nature of your being. You’re a funny person.

I am a funny person. Two things I’m always interested in are what is thinking and what is funny.



1



2



3

1. Installation view, "Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape," 2019–20, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Heidi Bohnenkamp. Digital image © 2021 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy the artist.

2. & 3. Installation view, "Betty Parsons: An Expanded World," 2026, CCS Bard Galleries, New York. Photo: Carter Seddon. Courtesy the artists, Centre for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York, and Hessel Museum of Art, New York.

The opening epigraph for your zine on "The Shape of Shape" is from Frantz Fanon: "Oh, my body, make of me a person who always questions." That's an invocation that could just as easily be applied to you.

I hope so. I think that a question mark is a comical thing in itself. I mean, an exclamation point is emphatic, but a question mark is about doubt. Real thinking is always peppered with comedy because you just never really can depend upon "knowing." Everyone is thinking all the time, but nobody

really knows exactly what that means. It's a bunch of disorganized stuff that you're trying to parse through. It's basically like going to a jumble sale.

I know that you habitually cut and ruin and erase and scrape and dub over—those are your own words—and that you're contemporary art's most articulate devotee of qualities of awkwardness, the ungainly and even the embarrassing. But here's the problem. The work never ends up looking like that. I went back to a painting of



1

1. *Olga*, 2026, oil and acrylic on canvas, 190.5 × 167.6 centimetres. Photo: Jiayun Deng. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

2. *the Sienese shield*, 2026, oil and acrylic on linen, 149.9 × 139.7 centimetres. Photo: Jiayun Deng. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.



2

3. Amy Sillman, Clément Rodzielski, Étienne-Martin, installation view, "The Harlequin's Dog," 2026, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Jiayun Deng. © Clément Rodzielski, Étienne-Martin/ADAGP, Paris (2026). Courtesy the artists and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

4. Installation view, "Oh, Clock!," 2024–25, Kunstmuseum, Bern. Photo: Annik Wetter. Courtesy the artist.

5. Installation view, "Amy Sillman. Oh, Clock!," 2025, Ludwig Forum Aachen. Photo: Annik Wetter. Courtesy the artist and Ludwig Forum Aachen.



3



4



5

yours from 2011 called *Things Fall Apart*. I know you named it after the William Butler Yeats poem, but the things don't fall apart. The centre holds in your work all the time. How do you account for the discrepancy between the intention of the ungainly and the awkward and the achievement of making a work hold together in ways that are so convincing?

I guess that's what I try to do. I work on stuff for a long time, and the thing that I'm really doing is trying to clarify a structure. I'm not satisfied with just the blurt, the spill. I always want to find out how the thing becomes the next thing. So there has to be a kind of structural logic to how you alter it. You can't only erase; you have to also build. Whether it's back and forth or purposeful, I'm trying to realize a logic. I recently read something Terry Winters said about painting being a meeting of construction and catastrophe, or something like that ... Many paintings just go their own way; you don't know how to save them and they look weird. Right now, I'm in this very pragmatic period, making iterative work and drawing from paintings instead of the other way around. You know that closet-cleaning system where you ask yourself what in your closet sparks joy, in order to decide what to throw out? Well, I was working in iterative sequences last year based on analysis and careful drawing from form, but sometimes I'd arrive at particular drawings that just ... sparked joy. And those are the ones that I'd build from.

You've just answered one of the most vexing questions about your work. You've explained what you mean when you say you're more a drawer than a painter.

Yes, it really is about trying to figure out how to draw. I mean draw out, to draw, to extract, to expand, to transfer into the next thing.

I want to move to *After Metamorphoses*, another of your animations. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has some 250 myths inside it and your video incorporates a number of them: I can see Daphne transformed into a tree; Io as a white heifer and Arachne, the spider, turn up; and Actaeon gets staged and devoured by his own hunting dogs. You get to tell your own visual version of Ovid.

Yes. The problem I had was how to deal with these ancient patriarchal stories, many of which had rape and violence in them. When I was in Rome during a residency, I did make one decision that allowed me to move forward. I was asking scholars about the stories, and, after listening to them, I decided to take the plot away. I took away all the reason and all the plot points and all the storylines. I was making a form of abstraction. I



1

wrote out a long list of what turns into what. And I threw the book away and used that as my script.

The opening line of *Book 1* is, "I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms." It's like he wrote the line for you.

Exactly. I could not believe my eyes when I read it. I didn't know that was the first line. In fact, really, I remember sending that line to a trans friend because I felt the line was made for HIM! For trans people who came 2,000 years after Ovid but had also taken the trouble to change their bodies into new forms! But when I arrived in fall 2014 at this residency in Rome, I really had no idea what I was going to do. Then almost instinctively I realized that I could work with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a form of animation and even a kind of nod to a modern construct like transgender. It led to such an incredibly rich time of discovery and learning.

Ovid asked for inspiration so that he can "spin out a continuous thread of words." I want to further extend the metaphor and say that you spin out a continuous weave of images. You're an Ovidian.

Yes. I realized after interviewing all these people, reading the book carefully, and studying and doing

1. Amy Sillman, *Afternoon*, 2024, acrylic and oil on linen, 190.5 × 167.6 centimetres. Courtesy the artist.

2. Installation view, "Amy Sillman. Oh, Clock!," 2025, Ludwig Forum Aachen. Photo: Mareike Tocha. Courtesy the artist and Ludwig Forum Aachen.

all this distilling, that Ovid was a weird guy even in his own time. He was making something that had a quality I would call animated, but it wasn't a form people were using. Nobody was making work like that. He made it up. I was stunned. I realized that I don't really care about images, that I'm not interested in the arrival or the image, but I'm looking for the way they change. I don't even really like or trust images. I regard them as more interesting when they're made unstable. Someone recently told me that means I have aphantasia. Whether I do or not, understanding that I'm not after the "picture" helped me understand how I think: I don't think thinking looks like a picture of something. I have been fascinated by this ever since I moved to New York City, at age 19. I would go to museums and be overwhelmed, and I remember looking at people sitting on benches at MoMA, and thinking, what are they doing? I still wonder about that.

I want to talk about another aspect of your art life and that is curating. Your inclination is to combine exhibitions of your work with exhibitions from the collections of the museums where you are exhibiting your own work. We might as well start where you're currently involved because it opens in late June. The Betty Parsons exhibition at the Hessel Museum at Bard is called "An Expanded World." How did you get involved in it in the first place?

I started thinking about Betty Parsons because she had a studio and house in the North Fork of Long Island not too far from my studio there. I ran into Kelly Taxter, a curator friend of mine, and sort of randomly said, "Hey, why not do a Betty Parsons show!?" And Kelly, it turned out, had already spent a lot of time thinking about Betty because she had been the Barnett and Annalee

Newman Curator of Contemporary Art at the Jewish Museum, so she was the perfect person to run into with this thought. We cooked up this plan for a show but for a long time with no venue, until Kelly ran into Tom Eccles, the executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard, and pitched it to him. And then it fell into place.

Did you know Parsons as the artist up the street or as the distinguished curator who changed American art because of the artists she represented, including Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still? Which of the Betty Parsons did you know best?

I knew her as a gallerist primarily. I had known her gallery as a place to look at art when I was first in New York in the '70s because it became Jack Tilton Gallery. It was a gallery I was interested in because it showed people whom I knew. In "An Expanded World" we are showing her artwork, and representing Betty the gallerist in the form of two short, commissioned documentary films about her life and work projected in the space. Given budget and space considerations, we chose to focus the exhibition on her own artwork.

It's clear that Parsons is looking at everyone. I can see echoes of Kandinsky, of Cézanne's palette and sense of structure, and of the jagged edges and colour of Clyfford Still. You put 80-some works in the exhibition. As you got into curating, did you recognize whom she might have been looking at to make her own work?

Yes. We're not saying, "Look, it's just like Forrest Bess," but we are aware of Betty's deep engagement with the art she is curating. She studied to be a sculptor, not a painter, so her eye is very



sculptural. She had an eccentric, immediate and direct way of going into the world and carefully looking at and using things that came her way. I don't want to make it into a nationalist thing, but Betty aligns with certain tendencies in modern American (or New York) painting. For one thing, she is rather anti-academic. She's very casual, fast, kind of plainspoken in this understated way and works within an economy of means. It was clear to us that she was also shaping her work to fit her life, which was a busy and workaday world.

The first exhibition at her gallery in 1946 was curated by Barnett Newman and it featured Northwest Coast Indigenous art. When you look at Betty Parsons's work, you see that Indigenous influence stays with her.

She was deeply interested in Indigenous forms. It's something that we take a specific look at in the show, and obviously she was not alone in that. What particularly intrigued me in curating this show was coming to understand how many artists, plus a few gallerists and a handful of art historians, in the first half of the 20th century were passionately interested in other cultures, other places and other aesthetic practices, and how often you can understand this "otherness" as being about making stuff by hand, about tactility, surface, body, various embodied ways of thinking, making, in craft, improvisation, dance and art. But classical art history did not follow this line, it seems. Until mid-century, I think, art history was more about questions of opticality, visuality, what can be seen and how you see it. So this kind of profound mind/body split occurs between art and art history in the first half of the 20th century. I don't know if this is right, but it's the way I experience a very real gap between what my artist friends think about and what my art historian friends are doing.

I want to shift and talk about your practice as a curator. Does your fascination with it get supercharged because of the experience you had with "The Shape of Shape" at MoMA?

Before MoMA I had been thinking about the same kind of stuff I'm always thinking about, some of which I have described above, and I'd curated shows, too, along those lines, but I never had as big a stage to do it on. After I'd worked at MoMA, I had a bit of legitimacy, I guess. So when I was talking to the curators at the Bern Museum about a show, I think I seemed legit enough to make the suggestion that we could also include a curatorial project alongside a solo show. It was an amazing, incredible opportunity at MoMA to work with one of the finest collections of art in the world but also to be able to argue with or challenge or think with

and against that collection, because it is one that also has a point of view. It was important that I was working with a place that had an argument to make about art.

MoMA has a particular argument about the development of modern art, and what you do is purposely get the modernist lineage wrong in your installation. You seem to do that in all your curatorial projects. In the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, you disrupt the installation by hanging the works on movable walls that you've introduced in the gallery space.

I think that is consistent with my way of approaching anything. I think that I didn't quite get this when I was younger or didn't know how to articulate it. As a grad student, I went to Bard College's MFA program, and that whole program is based on talking—on crits of all sizes, from individual crits to crits of five, or 20, or 100 people all looking at one person's work. All that public talking about what you are experiencing, in real time, makes you bolder to speak freely, I think. But it is clear to me also that I like to read as much as I can about a subject I am working with but then look for the cracks where I don't think I really agree with the thesis and try to see if I can contradict or poke at it or something.

You say that you use a collection to make a living artwork out of artworks. So when you go to Aachen and Bern—you do it for "Alternate Side (Permutations #1–32)" at Bridgehampton as well—you choose existing works and put them in vital and surprising relationships. You mix Georg Baselitz and Mel Bochner and Andy Warhol.

Well, I'm allowed to do something that is different from what a curator usually does. If you're allowed to envision a room the way an artist does, you probably think about walls as empty pages—you could touch or fill or embellish or even put a shelf in them. Maybe thinking for an artist includes doing something physical. We get to touch things; a curator is maybe scared to do that. Or just working more like a brain and an eye.

One of the things that characterize your approach to curating is a kind of nimbleness. You go to Kunstmuseum Bern and decide on the first day that you're going to paint the walls.

It was probably just a dumb impulse. Sometimes you have to NOT think but listen. I knew beforehand that there were going to be some walls that were painted, but I didn't think I was going to go ham and freestyle the whole thing. But there was a ladder and there was paint and there was a white wall, and I went up the ladder with a sponge. Thinking

and not thinking. Or thinking that resulted in movement.

You made a large painting in Frankfurt that you brought back for “The Shape of Shape” at MoMA. But nobody knew it was by Amy Sillman because you didn’t label it.

I asked if I could make something that goes into the show and they said, “Yes, but we can’t call it an artwork because we don’t have proper insurance.” And I said, “Oh, well, I’ll just make a shape on a wall, and no name.” And in fact, I made a giant painting and sent it in a tube from Frankfurt to NYC and they stretched it over a wall, and it had no signature. I’ve since taken it back, then loaned it to someone for a year, then taken it back again, rolled it up, cut it into pieces and painted over it.

In “Oh, Clock!” in Bern, you foreground women artists and the way you do it is very tasty. There is a section where you paint the gallery wall green and yellow and pink, and you put a blue Sophie Taeuber-Arp dramatically on the yellow part of the wall. You put a thin, unusual Lee Krasner transitioning from one colour to the next colour. And then you tuck an incredible Etel Adnan painting, which has the tones of yellow and pink that you use in your wall painting, between two rectangular sections of the painted wall. That’s not simply hanging three works on a wall. That’s installation as composition.

That’s exactly right. It’s what you get to do if you paint the wall and hang something on it. It’s just doing the thing that you do all day, every day, which is move shapes and colours and objects and forms around. Just before this I also did something in Paris, again a little different: for a three-person show at Chantal Crousel called “The Harlequin’s Dog,” I painted platforms for the work to sit on and staged the works in the show on these painted horizontal platforms and one mesh that I painted on a back wall. Now I’m doing the Betty Parsons show and I spent a week painting a wall on which we’re going to put her stuff.

So you mix fun and fear in all the installations you do?

Yes, it’s scary, but if it’s not scary, it means you might know too much.

What did you find when you curated from the Aachen museum collection?

Let me explain something in case it’s confusing: “Oh, Clock!” was the name of a solo show of my work that travelled from Kunstmuseum Bern to Aachen Ludwig Forum; the Bern show and the Aachen show were linked to my solo show, but each

venue was accompanied by a different collection show for each place, so there were different mandates. In Bern, I was dealing with this huge museum collection that went back centuries, and to chop it down to 80 things, I decided to first look at all the women in the collection from the 20th century, along with any artists who were not European. That became what I called the filter, because the first way to look at the Bern Museum was to see who they collected and who they didn’t. But in Aachen Ludwig Forum, a modern collection, there was a different “filter.”

In Aachen you have a lot of fun with male artists. You put together Mel Bochner and Raymond Pettibon, William Wegman and Jasper Johns. But the wildest combination is Warhol and Kenneth Noland. Is that mischief as much as museology?

My filter in the Ludwig Forum was more about the former East, because a lot of the collection was from Eastern Bloc countries before unification, and though I knew most of the people from the West in the collection, I’d never heard of almost any of the people from the East. I had seen a show in Berlin in 2021 called “The Cool and the Cold: Painting in the USA and the USSR, 1960–1990,” so I had some familiarity—but I still didn’t know who most of these artists were. So in Aachen I decided to apply my own aesthetic questions to make my first choices, and I picked out works that, for example, were based on colour, or pattern, or quasi-figuration, or ways of emptying. Those are four things that I do all the time in my paintings. Looked at this way, the Noland was in the pattern category, and the Warhol was probably in the emptying/voiding category. It was all very specific and practical.

You quote Howard Hodgkin’s observation that “painting is sheer hell.” So when you describe your work and process as agonistic, is that a reflection of it always being a struggle and a conflict for you?

I guess that’s just my default setting. I don’t know whether it’s a good or a bad thing. It’s neither and both. But yes, I think if you’re looking to understand the argument in art, what’s at stake, what you believe, what you think about it, for what I’ve called the edge, where the thing breaks in a way, where the argument and the thinking break, where the thing contradicts itself or contradicts what you think is good, then you’re always looking for a problem. And when you’re always looking for a problem, you’ll always have a problem. ■