

YES

&

NO

# Note

I like negation. So I asked myself: what would happen if my paintings are missing from the show?

What if, instead, I present everything *except* the paintings: a diagram to "explain" the abstraction, a platform for presentation, a book with an interview, even a color scheme, but no paintings.

When no paintings are present, then what is produced?

Longing, misunderstanding, frustration, relief, comedy?

If the paintings are gone, are the objects missing?

Are the paintings the "objects" and is the diagram the "subject" —or vice versa?

And what position, then, does the viewer occupy?

Does the lack of paintings result in a hole, or an increase in desire?

Is this a joke?

Answer: Yes and no.



# Questions and Answers



Amy Sillman: I wanted to take up some questions about the essay you wrote about my work back in 2007. The title was "Fictions of Origin." First, what is *fiction*?

David Lichtenstein: A fiction is something made or invented. It is not given in the world. The root of the word fiction is the Latin verb figere. It means to fashion something: a fiction is a fashioning. When I wrote this essay, I was thinking about your paintings as fictions, and their subject being the process of appearance itself.

AS: Ok, then what about the idea of *fiction of origin*? Some things *do* seem to originate—what about birth, the Big Bang, an idea, an insight, a sight, love at first sight—i.e., is there really no explosive moment where things just happen?

DL: I don't think in terms of absolute beginnings—I think of origins as breaks that are retroactively named as beginnings. The break is a kind of beginning, but it is also a transformation. I don't think we know it is a beginning until later when we look back.

AS: Is naming the only conceivable beginning? What about the un-nameable? And what is marking? In art, the word seems very differently used...

DL: By naming, I mean marking a beginning. Transformations occur all the time, but by calling something a point of origin, we mark a significant transformation. By naming, I mean marking something new as a point of departure—origins as such.

AS: Sight as site?

DL: The sight/site of the beginning. I am interested in what you have in mind when you begin an artwork. I presume it must have something to do with both memory and desire... do you start from nothing and then reply to the first mark, as some artists have described it?

AS: Half and half. The mark is like an origin point, a blind gesture which comes on top of a surface. But then, of course, this surface is something reasoned—a gesso'ed canvas is a logical surface, not an act of impulse. But the blank surface is a confrontation with emptiness: the unknown *in* the known. So I guess I go back and forth between thought and gesture, like an engine or something.

DL: What are marks on the canvas before they are a painting? (Who calls it a painting and when does that happen?) When are you wiping your brush, and when are you making a mark? This is the signifying cut when an image, a name, and the thing in itself are linked in a new event that can be called original.

AS: ...and what about the moment of first sight? Is that a cut? I'm confused about the part of this that has to do with pure *sight*.

DL: Does seeing provoke you? What is the source of that provocation? Does seeing cause you to want something, or to fear something, or to look for something?

AS: Seeing soothes me because it reinforces this feeling of "ergo sum" that seems to accompany the feeling of being alive and looking out from one's eyes, working out from one's skin to the thing one can touch. I fear absence of sight *intensely*. I also feel I am *there*. Maybe this is part of why I am resistant to too much emphasis on "absence." It doesn't really feel like how it feels to exist as a body, to me.

DL: I wonder what you think about memory and desire at the beginning and throughout your work? What interests me in psychoanalysis, and in your art, is how memory and desire together seem to point to past experiences, but can lead to a wholly new thing—an "origin" can be found in your work, which is both inspired by and exists in spite of both memory and desire.



AS: I like that you describe it as such. It is such a tolerant response to ambivalence. What do I think about memory and desire in my work... Well, I feel like for me it breaks into sight vs. touch: memory is the visual part, to me. Desire is the tactile part. Is desire more connected to naming? Or to seeing? or probably both? Ambivalent?

DL: I think that may be very personal to you. Some people speak about the reverse: tactile memory and desire as located in the gaze. I wonder if ambivalence is related to the function of the mirror and the act of reflection.

Your paintings are particular: they are not so much about appearing as much as they are appearing. They fashion a moment of appearance—and as such they are fictions of origin. It seems that the question of absence/presence, of something both present and missing, is intimately tied to the question of origins and the possibility of beginning.

AS: It's funny though: I find beginning very easy and ending very hard. But ending is also euphoric because you've resolved something, or at least declared it over. You've decided something.

By the way, what *about* the sense of sight, or uncertain boundaries between *seeing* and *saying* and *marking*? For example, mumbling, vague sensations, flickering sight... or a language of ambivalence?

DL: The corporeal and the material, insofar as they are outside of representation or at the border of representation, keep representation from becoming a purely formal endeavor. In this way the boundaries of representation work continuously to subvert the act. Another way to think about these boundaries is in terms of absence and presence. For example, in this show, your paintings are absent. You withheld them.

AS: I know. When I thought about this arrangement, I wondered about where the "subject" might lie if I refused to supply the "object" per se... would it be *between* subject and object, and is that the *object*? Or would the spectator be the object? Or...?

DL: By their absence, something else is present, which could not be present except by their absence. This is a paradoxical binary, since an absence can bring a representation into being. The object brings into play that which is outside of the formal structure of subject and object: the underlying gap and the limits of representation.

(AS thinks)

Shit! Why do I keep refusing this notion of absence while I seem to be provoking it!?

(Out loud)

You quoted Lacan as saying that the missing object, the cause of desire... "is the object that does not exist except as absent." I don't really understand absence so well... I feel I am there?

DL: The paradox is how you can represent that which is missing. You say that you experience yourself as fully present, fully "there," yet you want to do something, you make something, and in that making you seek to bring something about that was not yet there, but is somehow present in its effects on your desire. That is the missing object. What you make may then represent it, but it is always again missing to cause you to start again.

(AS thinks)

Yikes! Desire.

(Out loud)

Random questions: What if I *have* no desire? What if there is only negation? What else mediates desire? How does rage fit in here, for example? Or any other emotions: fear, loneliness, bitterness, boredom, etc.

(DL thinks)

The moment of a little panic is always a signal that something about desire and the missing object is in play, but in play how? What does it mean at this moment? Lack of desire is perhaps the greatest threat. One then disappears as a subject.

(Out loud)

Is the object that does not yet exist an absent object? Or is absence always already a product of memory?

AS: I don't know! I don't understand the binary at hand. What about a doubtful or unreliable narrative? I think that painters depend on this: doubtful sights, or the sight of doubt.

DL: Lacan said that for the discourse of psychoanalysis to occur, the analyst should occupy the place of the missing object, and that the only desire of the analyst is the desire for difference.

(AS wonders)

Difference of what?

(DL thinks)

This sacred concept of difference from post-structuralist French theory. What does it really mean?

(Out loud)

The seeing, the encounter, the naming: this is the work of psychoanalysis. Perhaps they are different "beats" in the rhythm. The encounter, a stop, a gap, the work to continue, a naming.

AS: I always think more about the sense of sight and the sense of language as different, as different modalities. Do you? Artists work *towards* an appearance: so we *expect* an origin, at least of appearance. Maybe I wanted to force this show to contain absence instead of presence, in order to provoke different ends. I think the show is more punk and more aggressive than I first realized. How would the word "evoking" sit within your idea of the "missing" or "absent"?

DL: Evoking is indeed a word for what we are discussing. Its root of course is the voice (vox), something that comes from the voice, from naming. I wonder if it isn't also true that when we evoke something we also know that we cannot evoke it entirely, we represent it and something escapes, something of what is evoked is beyond the evocation.

AS: Could it be that evoking (like appearing) is itself the moment of the *break*?

How do you map evocation onto the idea of "the break"?

DL: What we mean by a break is, a break in the knowable. The real is what we encounter when we encounter a gap that is as yet unknowable. The work of psychoanalysis is to encounter the breaks in the knowable, and then to go on in the spirit of naming this encounter. In this sense the opposite of fiction is the real, but it is also the source or cause for fiction to occur.

AS: Do we take comfort in the fiction of the new? Is the comfort a fiction too? Is comfort "real"? I know Lacan says that anxiety is the affect that never lies. I'm interested in the concept of the uncertain or untrue in relationship to all of this.

DL: Perhaps anxiety is a collapse of the difference between fiction and the real. A moment that is "too true" to be bearable.

AS: Truth...?

DL: Truth is always incomplete. All it does is represent a particular hole in time and space. It is not for all time and everywhere. Death is the hole in time and space that cannot be filled and is in that sense eternal and absolute. We say "eternal truth" but I think it is more of the moment. There is an inherent irresolvable contradiction between truth and death.

(AS thinks)

But death seems all *too* true to me... how is it in contradiction to truth?



(DL thinks)

How can I say these things about Truth and Death with such assurance?

(Out loud)

Fiction does rest on a kind of seeing however, because somewhere in the making, the maker sees a new truth and the hole that it is filling.

(AS spaces out)

I once made an animation all about holes. Funny that I am so resistant to the concept like absence, and yet I purposely enact it, provoke it.

DL: How does the desire for difference rest upon the experience of the past?

(AS thinks)

Omg, what a good question! Is chronology really a concept that one can depend on? Especially in psychoanalysis?

(DL thinks)

I am asking too many questions. This is too theoretical.

(Out loud)

I agree with you that there is a temporal paradox at work. What is present evokes the word, which then in turn evokes the thing. This is what I take to be the gap as real and as unknowable, the gap that is the place of the missing object.

(AS ponders)

Is it possible that I have neither a good memory nor enough desire?

(DL thinks)

Doubt itself can be the encounter with desire. Something is not what I want it to be. Or maybe I am not good enough.

(Out loud)

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion once said that the analyst must begin each session with neither memory nor desire. Freud wrote that ideally the analyst should start each treatment as though it is the first one.

(AS wonders)

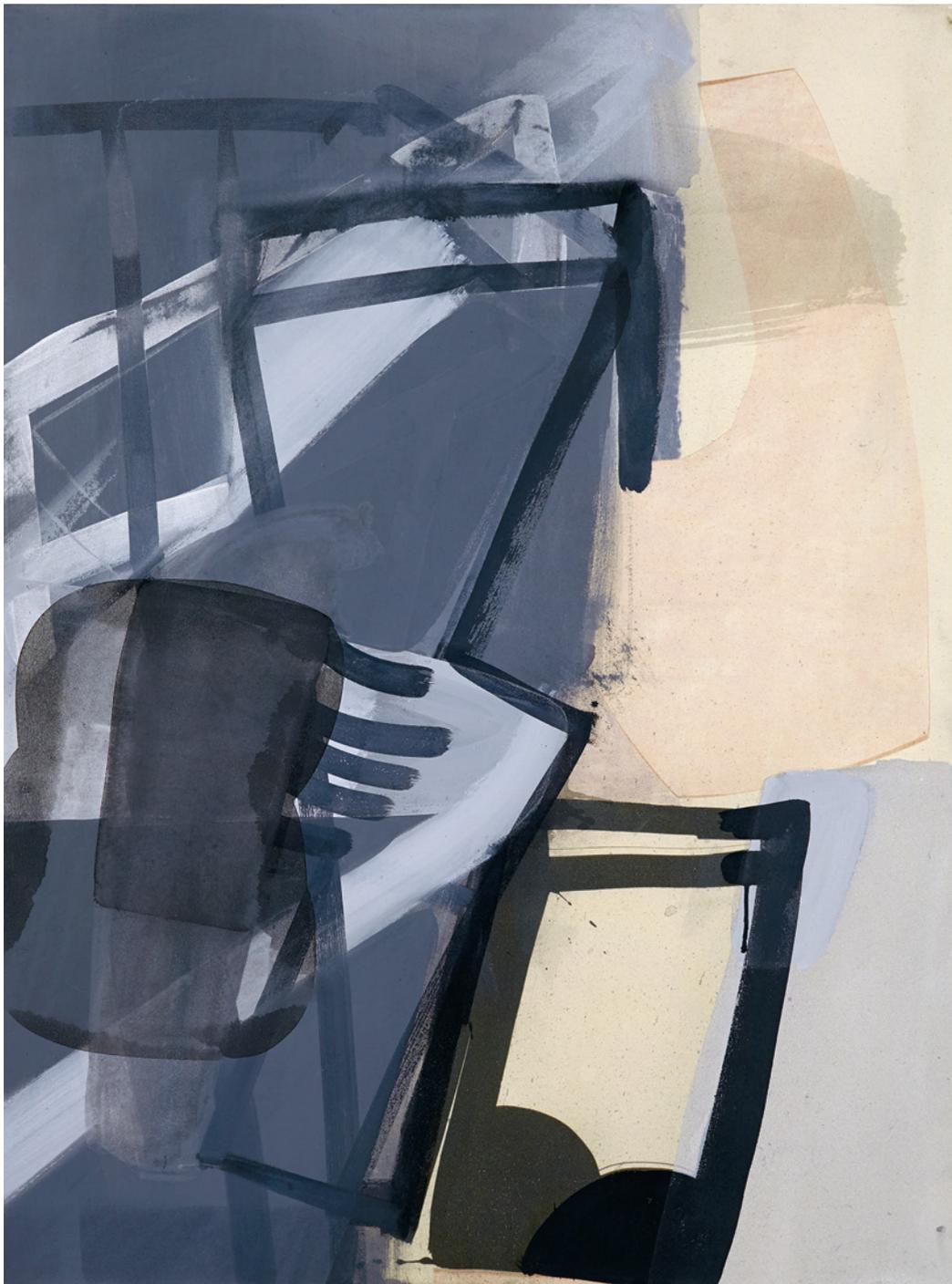
Could this be the first psychoanalytic treatment for my paintings?











# FICTIONS OF ORIGIN FIKTIONEN EINES URSPRUNGS

by / von  
DAVID LICHTENSTEIN, Ph.D.

Excerpted from the full essay, "Fictions of Origin," first published in the exhibition catalog *Amy Sillman: Suitors & Strangers*, Blaffer Gallery at the Art Museum of the University of Houston, 2007. Reprinted with permission of the author and the Blaffer Gallery.

Auszug aus dem Aufsatz „Fictions of Origin“, erstveröffentlicht im Ausstellungskatalog *Amy Sillman, Suitors & Strangers*, Blaffer Gallery im Art Museum of the University of Houston, 2007. Wiederabdruck mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Autors und der Blaffer Gallery.

All origins are fiction. Things in the world do not actually begin at some distinct point in time. They do not arise from nothing or out of nowhere but rather mutate from other things. [...] We say that a thing has begun, and that declaration becomes its point of origin; it is in our saying so that a beginning takes place. Its transformation out of other matter, however, has been ongoing. Out of the stuff of constant change, we invent these beginnings. There would be no origins without the human intervention of naming them.

Yet we do name, and thus mark, new things as though having a distinct point of origin is in their true nature. Our desire is for things to have a clear beginning, and our invention makes it so—so much so that we come to believe in the fiction as true and necessary. This belief orients our perception of the world. We see it as comprised of things that come into being, and thus we stop the world's flux with signs of discrete meaning. In fact, orient and origin share the same Latin root, *orire*, meaning "to arise." To be oriented is to face what arises: the origins. Thus to be oriented is to live in a fiction of beginnings—we might say the fiction of originality. As with Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, it is disorienting when origins are put in doubt. The human mind sees truth in the fiction of the new. It is through the act of representation, whether verbal, visual, or otherwise, that the fiction of origin comes about. [...]

For the psychoanalyst, the question of origin arises with the object of desire. The objects of the world that are of interest to psychoanalysis are those that structure the subject's desire. As such, it is those objects what are experienced as both missing and longed for. Jacques Lacan refers to the longer for missing object as the cause of desire.<sup>1</sup> It is the object that does not exist except as absent.

In psychoanalysis, the origin of desire, without which there is no human life as we know it, is at stake when we speak of the origin of the object. Sigmund Freud addresses this notion in his well-known maxim: "The finding of an object is always a re-finding."<sup>2</sup> All objects of desire are lost objects, even those at the very beginning. Paradoxically, a new object of desire represents an object found before and lost again. The origin of

desire is therefore the search for the lost original object. However—and this is the distinctively psychoanalytic take on subjectivity—it is an object we never had until we experienced it as missing. We only know it for the first time as a representation of something absent. The object as a cause of desire does not exist on its own. It is evoked by its initial representation as something once had and now lost. From this perspective, all creative acts are re-creations of a lost object with no independent being outside of that re-creation. This is the radical story of representation, and of origin, at the heart of psychoanalysis. The object of desire originates only in its absence. The paradox is that we experience as lost something that we never had. [...]

Critics often write about Amy Sillman's work in terms of psychology and psychoanalysis. The dream-like aspect of certain images and the often ambiguous state of her figures, which have the capacity to appear, disappear, and morph into each other in way that threaten the boundary of representation, evoke a surreal universe that invites psychoanalysis along for the march down the "royal road to the unconscious."<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the two fundamental Freudian drives (sex and death) celebrated by surrealism's avatars are often evident in Sillman's work. [...] However, I would like to consider Sillman's relation to questions of origin and orientation/disorientation. [...]

The fragile emergence of figures along the boundaries of representation is the most powerful characteristic of Sillman's work. In both its method and its result, her work is the study of origin (*orire*), of arising, or orientation and disorientation. The interplay of abstraction and figuration, and the ambiguous status of the figures (almost there, almost absent), is an expression of her using origin itself as the object. For Sillman, it is the thing arising that is of interest, and thus she paints its before, its coming to be, its transparent and fragile being, and even its disappearance. It is the thing appearing, not the thing in itself, that matters.

The boundary of interest to psychoanalysis is the one that exists between the conscious and the unconscious, and her work suggests this boundary. [...] Sillman, like an effective psychoanalyst, directs attention to the emergence of the represented object, whatever it may be. [...] Her best work elicits that state of attention in the viewer. We hover between sense and nonsense, finding them both compelling, but especially finding the play between them of real interest. Our gaze is drawn across the boundary of representation into the application of paint and then back into the field of figures in a way that successfully represents the impossible moment when something comes to be. This impossible moment that can never be, yet without which there is no being, is the subject of Sillman's work.

In psychoanalytic thought and in psychoanalytic work, this moment of the object's emergence is marked by anxiety ("the affect that never lies,"

according to Lacan).<sup>4</sup> Desire is structured around the object, and thus its emergence (its origin) both arouses and puts into question the status of desire and with it the subject's very being. Sillman's strongest work likewise triggers a certain anxiety precisely because of how it operates at the moment of origin, and how it explores the elusive status of the emerging object. [...] An arm, a sack, a sphere, a trunk-like figure: they all somehow evoke the emergence of things. Her figures are poised both in pictorial space and in the space between representation and abstraction. It is in this contrast and juxtaposition that the moment of arising, of origin, is suggested. [...] Whether it is done in an almost entirely abstract language or whether identifiable figures are brought in, the effect of origin is the same. Sillman paints time at the beginning, a fiction of the new.

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).
2. Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in J. Strachy, ed. and transl, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7 (1905; reprint, London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 125–243.
3. Ibid.
4. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, p. 41.



Aller Ursprung ist Fiktion. In Wirklichkeit beginnen die Dinge, die in dieser Welt sind, nicht zu einem bestimmten Zeitpunkt. Weder entstehen sie aus dem Nichts, noch kommen sie von Nirgendwo, denn sie mutieren aus anderen Dingen. [...] Wir sagen, etwas habe angefangen und diese Aussage kreierte den Ursprungsmoment: Erst dadurch, dass wir einen Anfang benennen, entsteht er. Doch seine Transformation aus etwas Anderem ist fortlaufend. Aus dem Material kontinuierlicher Veränderung erfinden wir diese Anfänge. Es gäbe keine Ursprünge, ohne den menschlichen Eingriff ihres Benennens.

Dennoch benennen wir und markieren damit neue Dinge, als läge ein bestimmter Ursprungsmoment in ihrer Natur. Wir begehren einen klaren Anfang der Dinge und unsere Erfindungskraft schafft ihn – so überzeugend, dass wir die Fiktion als wahr und notwendig empfinden. An diesem Glauben orientiert sich unsere Wahrnehmung der Welt. Wir sehen sie aus Dingen geformt, die einen Ursprung haben, und halten damit, durch Zeichen mit differenzierten Bedeutungen, den Fluss der Welt an. Orientierung und *origin* [das Englische Wort für Ursprung] stammen von der gemeinsamen lateinischen Wurzel *orire*, „entstehen“, ab. Sich zu orientieren bedeutet, dem, was entsteht, entgegenzutreten: dem Ursprung [*origin*]. Orientierung zu haben bedeutet also, in einer Fiktion der Anfänge zu leben – man könnte sagen in einer Fiktion der Originalität. Wie bei Bill Murray in dem Film *Groundhog Day* führt es zu Desorientierung, wenn Ursprünge in Zweifel gezogen werden. Der menschliche Geist sieht Wahrheit in der Fiktion des Neuen. Durch den Akt der Repräsentation, ob verbal, visuell oder auf andere Weise, wird der Ursprung erfunden.

[...] Für den Psychoanalytiker kommt die Frage nach der Entstehung mit dem Objekt des Begehrens auf. Die Psychoanalyse interessiert sich für diejenigen Dinge, die das Begehren des Subjekts strukturieren. Diese Objekte werden an sich stets als abwesend und begehrt zugleich empfunden. Jacques Lacan beschreibt die Sehnsucht nach einem abwesenden Objekt als den Ursprung des Begehrens.<sup>1</sup> Das Objekt existiert nur in seiner Abwesenheit.

In der Psychoanalyse steht der Ursprung des Begehrens, ohne das es das Leben, wie wir es kennen, nicht gäbe, auf dem Spiel, wenn wir über den Ursprung des Objekts sprechen. Sigmund Freuds bekannter Ausspruch „Das Finden des Objekts ist immer ein Wiederfinden“<sup>2</sup> verweist auf diese Idee. Alle Objekte des Begehrens sind verlorene Objekte, selbst jene, die ganz am Anfang stehen. Paradoxerweise stellt ein neues Objekt des Begehrens ein Objekt dar, das zuvor gefunden und wieder verloren wurde. Der Ursprung des Begehrens ist daher eine Suche nach dem verlorenen Original. Aber – und das ist eine ausgesprochen psychoanalytische Sicht auf Subjektivität – es handelt sich um ein Objekt, das wir niemals hatten, bis wir es als abwesend erlebten. Wir erkennen das Objekt zum ersten Mal als die Repräsentation eines Abwesenden. Das Objekt als Auslöser des Begehrens existiert nicht an sich. Es wird durch seine erste Repräsentation von etwas früher Besessenem, das jetzt verloren ist, zum Leben erweckt. Aus dieser Perspektive sind alle kreativen Schaffensprozesse Wiederherstellungen verlorener Objekte, ohne unabhängige Präsenz außerhalb dieser Re-Kreation. Das ist die radikale Geschichte der Repräsentation und des Ursprungs, die im Herzen der Psychoanalyse liegt. Das Objekt des Begehrens entsteht erst aus seiner Abwesenheit. Das Paradoxe ist, dass wir etwas als verloren erleben, das wir niemals hatten.

[...] Die Kunstkritik beschreibt Amy Sillmans Arbeiten oft im Kontext von Psychoanalyse und Psychologie. Die traumartigen Aspekte bestimmter Bilder und die oft mehrdeutigen Formen ihrer Figuren, die so erscheinen, verschwinden und ineinander übergehen können, dass sie die Grenzen der Repräsentation bedrohen, erwecken ein surreales Universum. Die Psychoanalyse wird hier zu einem Spaziergang auf dem „Königsweg des Unterbewussten“<sup>3</sup> eingeladen. Die zwei fundamentalen Freudschen Triebe – Sexualität und Tod – die im Surrealismus gefeiert werden, zeigen sich ebenfalls oft in Sillmans Arbeiten. [...] Ich allerdings möchte Sillmans Beziehung zu Fragen des Ursprungs [*origin*] und Orientierung/Desorientierung nachgehen.

[...] Das behutsame Erscheinen von Figuren entlang der Grenzen der Repräsentation könnte die kraftvollste Eigenheit von Sillmans Arbeiten sein. In Methode und Resultat untersuchen ihre Arbeiten den Ursprung (*origin* oder *origine*) bzw. Orientierung und Desorientierung. Das Spiel von Abstraktion und Figuration und der mehrdeutige Status der Figuren (fast anwesend, beinahe abwesend) zeigen, dass sie den Ursprung selbst zum Thema macht. Sillmans Interesse gilt dem Ding in Entstehung und so malt sie es vorher, in seinem Entstehen selbst, und damit sein durchsichtiges, empfindliches Sein und selbst sein Verschwinden. Es ist das Erscheinen des Objektes, nicht das Ding an sich, worauf es ihr ankommt.

Mit der Psychoanalyse teilt Sillman ein Interesse an der Grenze von Bewusstem und Unbewusstem und ihre Arbeiten berufen sich auf diese

Grenze. [...] Wie ein effektiver Psychoanalytiker richtet Sillman ihre Aufmerksamkeit auf das Erscheinen des repräsentierten Objekts, unabhängig von seinem Inhalt. [...] Ihre besten Arbeiten erwecken diesen Zustand der erhöhten Aufmerksamkeit auch im Zuschauer. Wir schweben zwischen Sinn und Unsinn, finden beides überzeugend, aber besonders das Spiel zwischen beiden ist für uns von echtem Interesse. Wenn unser Blick über die Grenzen der Repräsentation zum Auftrag der Farben und dann zurück in den Bereich des figürlichen gezogen wird, vollzieht er erfolgreich den unmöglichen Moment nach, in dem etwas entsteht. Dieser unmögliche Moment, der niemals sein kann, ohne den aber auch Nichts sein kann, ist das Thema von Sillmans Arbeit.

Im psychoanalytischen Denken und in der psychoanalytischen Arbeit ist dieser Moment des Erscheinens des Objekts von Angst gekennzeichnet (nach Lacan „Der Affekt, der niemals lügt“).<sup>4</sup> Begehren ist um das Objekt organisiert und damit weckt sein Erscheinen (sein Ursprung [*origin*]) Begehren, während es den Status des Begehrens gleichzeitig in Frage stellt und mit ihm das Subjekt selbst. Sillmans stärkste Arbeiten erwecken auch ein Gefühl der Angst, insofern sie an genau diesem Moment des Entstehens ansetzen und dem flüchtigen Status des im Erscheinen begriffenen Moments nachgehen. [...] Ein Arm, ein Sack, eine Kugel, eine truhentartige Figur: sie alle erwecken auf ihre Weise das Entstehen der Dinge. Ihre Figuren balancieren sowohl im Bildraum sowie zwischen Repräsentation und Abstraktion. Es ist genau jener Kontrast und diese Nebeneinanderstellung in dem der Moment des Entstehens und damit des Ursprungs, erzeugt wird. [...] Egal, ob das in völliger Abstraktion vollzogen wird, oder ob identifizierbare Figuren hinzukommen, der Effekt des Ursprungs bleibt der Gleiche. Sillman mal Zeit in ihrer Entstehung.

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).
2. Übersetzt nach Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Hrsg. und übersetzt von James Strachey, Bd. 7 (1905; Wiederabdruck, London: Hogarth Press, 1953), S. 125–243.
3. Übersetzt nach Ebd.
4. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, S. 41.



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# Amy Sisson

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