# lump or two

# Amy Sillman

Edited by Helen Molesworth

*Fatso*, 2009, oil on canvas, 90 ½ x 84 ½ inches

# FACE EFFECTS

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In November 2009 Amy Sillman confessed to a change of heart in a post on *BOMB Magazine*'s blog:

> I guess you didn't know this but me and Abstraction broke up!!!!! Last summer!!!! Well, I mean, I've been feeling like kind of confused for a long time, like years. . . . I kicked A out of my studio this summer, and afterwards I felt really good. I had this amazing fling, don't tell anyone, but I had this fling with this face, and I don't know, that was the straw that tipped the iceberg and I just went with it.[1]

The face in question belongs to the protagonist of her painting *Fatso*, 2009 (p. 118), and what a mug it is. Garnished with a single egg-sized eye, the fatso is a lopsided Cyclops, its potato-shaped face grimacing uncomfortably—a "get-me-outta-here" kind of look, frantically avoiding the viewer's stare. Though cartoonish, *Fatso* is by no means simplistic or lampooning: I read its monocular eye as a meditation on the limits of interiority, with vision straining without success to escape the sight of the body. Faces provide a passage from the interior to the world at large, *Fatso* suggests, but what departs is only the gaze, or a wandering imagination; the self stays behind, stuck with whatever body it was dealt.

All of which is to say that in Sillman's hands, the face is less an object or entity than an *effect*, a method of depositing subjectivity *in* the picture, meeting the viewer's gaze with a gaze in return. Yet as legions of bathroom graffiti writers can attest, one need have acquired no great mastery of the arts of pen or brush to enjoy the conjuration of presence with a few quick marks. Why, then, should we ascribe such importance to her discovery of the face? One answer would be to observe that faces play a crucial role in Sillman's rehashing/commingling of abstraction and figuration (one of this exhibition's major themes), intervening *between* the figurative and the abstract—that is, between the illusion of presence and the materiality of painterly mark making. In the case of *Fatso*, notice how much of the picture is given over to the grammar of abstract painting—particularly on the left side, with its overlapping planes of gray and white interrupted only by a wishbone-shaped tree branch (or is it a pictogram for upturned butt cheeks?) and surreptitious black bar jutting out from behind the backdrop (telescope? rifle?). Notice, too, the schematization of bodily form at center and lower right: aside from the three rolls of bona-fide green-white flesh at center, the contours of the fatso's body resist serving as clear-cut volumetric containers—see, for example, the gelatinous arm and semitransparent leg. In this universe of incommensurable signifying systems, the face serves as a readymade go-between, a power converter, putting the painterly in touch with the personal and translating gestures into feelings (compactness, off-centeredness, vulnerability, nudity), as if to say, "This is what it feels like to have a body," and also, "This is what it feels like to be a painting."

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To locate the origins of Sillman's face epiphany, we might look to her work of the previous year, beginning with a series of black-and-white portraits of participants in the artist-run gallery Orchard. Comprising some thirty-two drawings in total, the series depicts the gallery's dozen co-founders, plus

From *Portraits from Orchard (an Ongoing Project)*, 2008, ink, gouache, and charcoal on paper, 32 drawings, each 15 1/4 x 11 1/2 inches

a cohort of collectors, critics, and frequent visitors. Sillman had been invited to contribute cartoons to Orchard's penultimate exhibition, *From One O to the Other*, alongside contributions from painter R. H. Quaytman and art historian Rhea Anastas (both co-founders of the gallery), but in the end she decided to make portraits, arranging sittings with each member of the Orchard community—a process that spanned several months, beginning in February 2008 (pp. 113–15, 120–21). Exhibited in a show titled *Representation* (a tongue-in-cheek reference to Sillman's reputation as an *abstract* painter), these works sat unpretentiously on a table in the middle of the gallery, unframed and unorganized, free to be leafed through by curious visitors.[2]

Founded on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 2005, Orchard was the site of a lively, and sometimes fractious, collaboration among a dozen artists and critics, who intended the gallery as a short-lived experiment. By the final stretch of its three-year existence, Orchard's commitment to the legacy of institutional critique and self-critical exhibition practice had set it at odds with the art market establishment in Chelsea, offshoots of which had begun to take root in and around the Lower East Side. Against this backdrop, *From One O to the Other* was intended to take stock of Orchard's history and archives, toeing the line between institutional transparency and opacity. For instance, Anastas's contribution, *Pull Quotes*, which consisted of press clippings written *about* Orchard exhibitions,

portrayed the institution in a sort of Rashomon-style evocation of its public identity. Quaytman's contribution included several screen-printed photographs of Orchard's storefront prior to its tenancy, along with the voluminous *Orchard Spreadsheet*, an endless document detailing the complete history of the gallery's financial transactions. Though these were not the only works on view in *From One O to the Other*, they set the tone for the exhibition's institutional self-examination, gesturing toward the possibility of complete transparency, but also, simultaneously, admitting that such gestures rarely hit their mark.

Sillman's drawings offered a more direct take on the theme of transparency, mobilizing the traditional scene of portraiture in a subtle challenge to the institutional subordination of face to name, title, and rank. To better understand the stakes of this maneuver, it might be useful to dwell for a moment on the origins of portraiture, a genre seldom associated with cutting-edge art, except by way of parody or subversion (as in the case of Cindy Sherman). If there remains a tactical potential latent in portraiture, as Sillman's Orchard drawings suggest, perhaps this has less to do with clarity of vision or accuracy of resemblance than the implicitly tactile relationship of artist and sitter. The verb "portray" derives from the Latin *pro* and *trahere*, literally, "to draw forth/forward." At the etymological level, portraiture and transparency have much in common: whereas the former denotes the artist's reaching for or toward the sitter, the latter

indicates the reverse movement, the sitter "appearing *through*" the device of the portrait (from the Latin *trans* and *parere*). Although the buyers of portraits are often quick to treat this double movement as a single act of self-transportation, with the sitter's image preserved in the picture as in a portable vessel, it might be more accurate (or at least equally valid) to designate this *pas de deux* as an example of *transference*, in the Freudian sense of the term, with portraitist and sitter engaging in a back-and-forth at the level of the unconscious. There is no equivalent in portraiture of a one-way mirror: the process demands mutual exposure. In the context of the Orchard portraits, transparency denotes a more literal "drawing forth" as well: instead of dredging the institution's archives, Sillman offers viewers intimate access to the faces of its founders and supporters, presenting each figure frontally, face-to-face, with no identification to distinguish one sitter from another other than a name and date scrawled on the reverse. Encountering the drawings in this format must have been a disarming experience, particularly for the sitters themselves, whose visages lacked the usual armature of protection from the eyes and hands of spectators (recall that visitors to the exhibition were free to handle the drawings as much as they liked). This is the burden of transparency, a trial that tests artist and sitter alike: to be drawn into the realm of appearance, with nowhere else to turn but forward.

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The Orchard portraits were not the only series of face-oriented drawings Sillman made in 2008. In August, following a sudden barrage of personal and family emergencies, she found herself in the studio churning out a spate of faces in one drawing after another, each bending the rough-hewn morphology of gestural abstraction to conjure a sort of zero-degree of faciality.[3] This bout of cathartic experimentation yielded some thirty-two gouaches, collectively titled *After Chip* (fig. 11), which trade on the face's plasticity, evoking humanoid physiognomies in a kaleidoscopic palette of rich greens and reds. In some of these works, the head looms like an icon, a pure amalgamation of ovals and circles, but mostly the features of the face teeter at the edge of unrecognizability, recalling the malleable facial traits of Picasso's protean series of "heads," ca. 1913, which reduce the face to a minimal grammar of line and plane. Unlike her Cubist predecessor, however, Sillman here confabulates the face from a stock of body parts, mostly fingers and arms, but occasionally torsos as well, which combine to evoke the head and eyes by other means—ultrathin fingers clasping to create the shape of a jaw, a wayward hand standing in for a nose, two jabbing fingers taking the place of eyes, their outsize fingernails approximating droopy eyelids.

In *After Chip*, we encounter a markedly different face effect than that in the Orchard portraits: it extends a field of relations tautly across the picture

fig. 11. From *After Chip*, 2008, gouache, charcoal, and pencil on paper, 32 drawings, each 15 x 11 inches. Private collection

plane, approximating what Sillman might call a *diagram*. In a short essay published in the first issue of her first 'zine, *The O-G, vol. 1*, 2009 (p. 131), Sillman defines the diagram as a motif that links irreconcilable objects and fields: "The very polyvalence of a diagram can render obsolete such simplistic oppositions [as] abstract and figurative, by showing their functions in relation to each other, not in spite of each other."[4] Diagrams help us map correspondences between things of completely different orders; they can also be employed to *undo* established fields and networks, loosening logical bonds to permit data to escape along tangential vectors. For a painter committed to abstraction *and* figuration, the diagram is one way of thinking these terms in tandem, following the rule of both/and rather than either/or—a point Sillman illustrates with numerous examples of diagrams in/as art, including Francis Picabia's pseudo-mechanical poem-drawings, such as *Colonel*, 1918, a heavily amended version of Alfred Barr's 1936 *Cubism and Abstract Art* chart (including new categories like "Black Mountain College," "American Transcendentalism," and "WOMEN"), and a selection of cartoons by Ad Reinhardt. Though each of these cases organizes information differently, they are all diagrammatic at base, translating disparate strains of data into a field of absurd hypotheticals and bizarre admixtures.

According to the terms of Sillman's definition, the face could also be likened to a diagram, or even an ur-diagram: comprising only a few distinguishing traits (lines) and apertures (holes), the face arguably sets the standard for all other diagrammatic structures—mediating between interior and exterior, thought and expression, self and other, distinctions that can never be entirely collapsed, but which are drawn into co-presence at the site of the human countenance. *After Chip* highlights the proximity of face and diagram, stretching the field of facial traits and apertures to the maximum, sometimes to the breaking point; in a handful of drawings, the face's symmetry and centrality cedes to a more asymmetrical field of diagrammatic relations, which no longer reads as a face per se. In other drawings, the motif of the face coordinates overlapping planes and layers, yoking together the diachronic plane of mark making (meaning the succession of one mark after/atop another) and the synchronic plane of figuration—the appearance of a body or persona *in* the picture.

Though they claim the mantle of abstraction rather than figuration, the drawings that comprise *After Chip* are not so different in format from the Orchard portraits. We have departed from the scene of portraiture—there being no physical model for Sillman's diagrammatic faces—but we remain well within its logic. Rather than figure the relationship between painter and sitter, *After Chip* mediates between painter and *body*, proposing faces that correspond to, and communicate on behalf of, the legs, the chest, the arms, and the rest. We may read this shift in terms of self-portraiture—the artist communing with her other faces, so to speak—but also as the image of a radically de-centered subject, for whom every body part is endowed with subjectivity. This latter perspective is consistent with Sillman's politics, which take aim at the hegemony of mental over material life. Along these lines, Sillman's 'zine quotes from the writing of art historian Henri Focillon, who saw signs of life everywhere in the world, even in the homely

appendages of the body: "Hands are almost living beings. Eyeless and voiceless faces that nonetheless see and speak. The hand means action: it grasps, it creates, at times it would seem even to think. Above all the hand touches the world itself, feels it, lays hold of it and transforms it."[5]

Focillon's thesis implies a radical addendum to the theory of portraiture, attributing the act of portrayal to the hand, which sees and behaves on its own authority, mobilizing the organs of the face (eyes or mouth) as *its* appendages, not the other way around. In *The O-G, vol. 3* (p. 130), Sillman encapsulates this reversal of mind/hand in a brilliant cartoon self-portrait, part of a short graphic essay on the relationship between conceptual art and painting (among other matters), in which her head has migrated from neck to loins, to be replaced by an outstretched hand sprouting between her shoulders. The essay ends with two slogans, both relevant to her mobilization of face effects: "Long live the radical merging of mind and body!" and "Think & feel! Speak & act!"[6]

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In the past year, Sillman has extended her engagement with the face-hand dyad in a group of digital animations, beginning with *Pinky's Rule*, 2011 (fig. 12), a collaboration with poet Charles Bernstein. Using a drawing application on her iPhone, she created this seven-minute-long animation frame by frame, starting with the image of a face, the features of which immediately metamorphose into a host of other forms (a pony, an icebox, a paddy-wagon), only to recombine as a crude assemblage of eyes, nose, and mouth. These metamorphoses track the flow

of Bernstein's poem (written specially for this project), which ruminates in a freewheeling way on the vagaries of proper names, rehearsing a history of mismatch, as when "a/lemon calls out your/name in the dark,/only it's saying 'Alice'/and your name is/John, or then it's/saying 'Paulo'/but you hear/it as hollow." Though much of the imagery of *Pinky's Rule* is culled directly from the poem, Sillman often veers off-script, exploring tropes of facial tactility, and even penetration. As accompaniment to the passage quoted above, for example, two bug-eyed heads slot their tongues into and out of each other's mouth, a gesture that recalls certain of Bruce Nauman's tit-for-tat neon signs, such as *Double Poke in the Eye II*, 1985, but in the name of pleasure rather than torture. For Sillman, sex is about confusing the boundaries of the self, throwing into doubt whose hand, breast, or leg belongs to whom. This is true even of the face: only during sex (and occasionally, portraiture) do our faces reveal themselves to the organs of touch—fingers, genitals, tongue. Promiscuity is the key word here, not ecstasy: until we name them, bodies are multifarious, never private.

Images of face–body breakdown recur throughout the video, with faces disintegrating and coagulating in rapid succession, never disappearing entirely. In one particularly striking scene, we see a looming mask penetrated through the nostrils by the chameleon-length tongues of two smaller heads at the bottom of the frame; this assemblage morphs, with the two mini-heads becoming the mask's disemboweled eyeballs, and then morphs again, the entire group becoming a pair of nude torsos with arms lovingly interlaced. Such inversions of body and face strike me as deeply ambiguous: on one hand, they speak

fig. 12. Stills from *Pinky's Rule*, 2011 (made to a poem of the same name by Charles Bernstein), animated drawing made on an iPad with a drawing app, with sound, 7:00 minutes
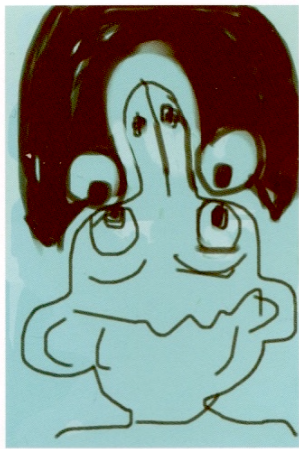
to a fundamental instability of the self, with the face undermined by the body time and again; on the other hand, this body (or bodies) never achieves complete independence, splitting and recombining in ways that mirror the face's physiognomy and symmetry. Here, we could recall Sillman's slogans from *The O-G, vol. 3*, the point of which is not that we should feel without thinking or act without speaking, but that we should speak and think as an *embodied* subject, bringing body and head into precarious correspondence, even (and especially) at the risk of self-exposure.

Sillman explores these ambiguities further in a second animation, titled *Draft of a Voice-Over for Split-Screen Video Loop*, 2012 (p. 93). Scored to a poem by Lisa Robertson, *Draft of a Voice-Over* might strike viewers as a psychodrama of sorts, geared to the rhetoric and rhythms of feminist theory. The narrator (as in *Pinky's Rule*, the voice is Sillman's) describes a woman, known only by the pronoun "she," in short, clinical declaratives: "She thinks she undoes her femininity to give herself pleasure. . . . What the political is to her cannot yet be quantified. . . . So what if she is thick and stupid behind her life. It is not private." However, these lines soon become a refrain, their repetition undermining the speaker's authoritative tone. Once again, the self is in the crosshairs, with the speaker and the object of her proclamations, the elusive "she," merging and dissociating with each new pulse of the poem. Gender comes under fire, too, prompting us to ask whether these proclamations are voiced from the perspective of the female subject or are rather mobilized against her from a clinical remove, valid only negatively, as a portrait of all that she is not. Following the lead of

Robertson's narrator, who refers repeatedly to a fragmentary subject ("part of her wanted nothing . . . she writes against herself . . . the information of her fear is her most serious and fragile part"), we might interpret *Draft of a Voice-Over* as an attempt at speaking *between* body and face, or body and voice, opening a relay between desire to utterance without subordinating the former to the latter. Once again, the face intervenes in this interstitial space: almost every scene begins with a pair of eyes blinking from behind the surface-plane of the screen, sometimes blooming into a fully-fledged portrait, at other times remaining merely a latent presence.

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How does the medium of the iPhone touchscreen figure in our account of Sillman's digital animations? For some readers, the very notion of screen-based portraiture will inevitably call up arguments about the decline of face-to-face interaction in the era of screen-based media. "There is no 'faciality' with the computer," claims media theorist Alexander R. Galloway, who notes that "we do not cry at websites like we cry at the movies."[7] Along these lines, we might be tempted to propose *Pinky's Rule* and *Draft of a Voice-Over* as examples of the impossibility of portraiture in the era of digital personhood, the embodied self having become a mere appendage to the online avatar or profile. Taken to the extreme, this brave new paradigm of figuration would leave us without any need for portraiture, since the digital self is always already a self-representation, the product of a relentless flow of updates, outbursts, and emoticons—a face

that is not our own, but which we grudgingly accept.

However, the distinction between pre- and post-digital portraiture falls apart when we consider the face not in terms of immediacy or limpidity, as an open window to the soul, but as inherently diagrammatic, performing exactly the same function that Galloway ascribes to digital interfaces: "The interface is this state of 'being on the boundary.' It is that moment where one significant material is understood as distinct from another significant material. In other words, an interface is not a thing, an interface is always an effect. It is always a process of translation."[8]

The face, too, translates between "significant materials," the only difference being that its materials resist easy disaggregation. Who can truly say what message our thoughts communicate, or what information is encoded in a glance out my apartment window? As we have seen in each of the above case studies, far from transmitting and receiving signals immediately or with pellucid clarity, the face is a highly provisional organ of translation and mediation. That we have been dealing with the face in pictures rather than "in life" does nothing to invalidate the claim that faces behave diagrammatically, or that transparency always entails a two-step between incommensurate partners and positions. Any site of self-representation, whether an iPhone or a drawing pad, inevitably throws us back to the boundary between interior and exterior, self and other, body and mind. That boundary is the face, and so long as it exists, we will have need of portraitists in our midst. ♦

NOTES

1. Jackie Saccoccio, "What State Abstraction: Dan Walsh & Amy Sillman," *BOMBLOG*, November 20, 2009, accessed online.

2. The portraits that comprised *Representation* were subsequently exhibited at the biennial *Prospect.1* in New Orleans, from November 2008 to January 2009, under the title *Portraits from Orchard (An Ongoing Project)*. However, both projects—Orchard and the portrait series—had been completed prior to this date, suggesting that the open-endedness of the drawings was more an aesthetic condition than a question of temporal continuity. In other words, we can read the portraits as extending the duration of Orchard beyond its three-year lifespan, keeping its group of participants intact, or in correspondence, in the absence of the institution itself.

3. When asked about this moment in her practice, Sillman has insisted that these drawings were not memorials, recalling that the shock of loss pushed her to engage the "material present," i.e., the immediacy of bodily experience rather than the absent past. See "In Conversation: Amy Sillman with Phong Bui," *Brooklyn Rail* (April 2006), accessed online. I borrow the term "faciality" from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

4. Amy Sillman, "notes on the diagram," *The O-G*, vol. 1 (2009), n.p. Sillman cites works by art historian David Joselit and philosopher Gilles Deleuze as formative in her understanding of the diagram. See David Joselit, "Dada's Diagrams," in Leah Dickerman, ed., with Matthew S. Witkovsky, *The Dada Seminars* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New York: D.A.P., 2005): 221–39; and Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981), trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003).

5. Henri Focillon, "In Praise of Hands" (1934), reprinted in *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler (New York: George Wittenborn, 1948), 65. Quoted in Amy Sillman, *The O-G*, vol. 5 (April 2012): n.p.

6. Sillman, *The O-G*, vol. 3 (April 2010): n.p.

7. Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2012), 12.

8. Ibid., 33.