

ACTING OUT

THE AB-EX EFFECT



THE WORLD WAS SUPPOSED TO END this past May, but we're still here. No Rapture, no Apocalypse. The same could be said of Abstract Expressionism: That dripping, demonstrative, unabashedly tactile practice has met its maker many times over. Yet its effects are everywhere apparent. AbEx is there, of course, in works that dramatize the false promises and ignominious delinquency of the genre, pushing gestural abstraction to its stained, ripped, debased, and de-skilled limits (witness David Hammons's recent suite of literally trash-bagged pictures). It is there when artists make one more cool, laid-back critical feint in the supposed endgame of painting. But it is also newly and forcefully present as a growing number of artists rediscover its profligate processes and materials,

across disparate media and in unexpected hands. After all, in its day AbEx migrated to film, fashion rags, cold-war embassies, and TV, from *Mad Men* America to postwar Japan. So we shouldn't be surprised at its relevance for artists now—not so much in terms of its redemption or its ripeness for mockery, but for the promiscuous results its redeployment might yield.

This coming fall, major retrospectives of Willem de Kooning and Gerhard Richter will simultaneously bookend the legacy of AbEx: from early concerns with composition, opticality, physical gesture, and ego, to noncomposition, the conceptual evacuation of gestural subjectivity, and pastiche. And a panoply of shows this past spring have featured contemporary artists who have by and large taken the action of mark-

making—the “spatter-and-daub (-and-scrape-and-swipe-and-pour-and . . .),” in curator Harry Cooper's words—to new arenas not only in painting but in performance, film, and beyond. The question is, then: What is at stake in these various reframings and reinterpretations of Abstract Expressionism?

This special section of *Artforum* considers both the historical nuances and the contemporary persistence of AbEx—the ways in which artists are engaging its expanded notions of affect and experience, but to vastly different ends. If the initial efflorescence of action painting has long been caricatured as vulgar machismo, that vulgarity has been reclaimed by artists, not least women and queers, Amy Sillman argues here, because AbEx has everything “to do with



Amy Sillman's studio, New York, 2009. Photos: Amy Sillman.

the politics of the body.” Such a re-reading of Abstract Expressionism finds its echoes in work that pulls the gesture, the painted mark, and the viewing of images into performances or sprawling installations that upend ideas of agency and presence. (As the artist Ei Arakawa reminds us in his text for this issue, “Painting is watching.”) If, in the 1950s, art informel impresario Georges Mathieu was already selling his TV-ready painting events (described here by scholar Molly Warnock as “Gallic corn”) and Cy Twombly was discovering an “untutored rawness” in pencil and paint (per curator Ann Temkin), today artists as diverse as Josh Smith, Nicole Eisenman, Albert Oehlen, Richard Prince, and Leidy Churchman are exploring the visceral and the embodied within a world they know to be

mediated, networked, and marketed all at once. So rather than focus on the state (or dissolution) of one medium, or on monographic treatments of individual artists, the writings that follow pursue the more granular trail of materials, processes, and intricate social and medial dynamics. Several authors—Cooper, Sillman, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Daniel Marcus—look at the overlooked: the contradictions of AbEx (the “band of selves,” the “controlled accident”), which have come to shape much artwork today; AbEx’s trade in sexuality, camp, and vulgarity; the physical care of AbEx surfaces and their striking material properties; the figuration, the face, that AbEx seemingly left behind but which would now seem to have resurfaced. Other contributors, including David Joselit and Graham

Bader, plumb the way gestural abstraction and spontaneous mark-making are always already tied to systems of communication and exchange. And fourteen artists—from Rodney Graham to Julian Schnabel—weigh in on their own relationships to AbEx, while Temkin, Warnock, Carroll Dunham, Jordan Kantor, and Mark Godfrey each give close-up readings of five individual artworks or projects. Such a focused eye is needed. While much of the art world is constantly looking at the big picture, on the hunt for the next new (technologically or economically determined) zeitgeist, the texts here take the opposite tack: zooming in, remaining open to the reverberations, however slight or vague or low to the ground, that aesthetic acts may leave in their wake.
—Michelle Kuo



Donna Summer and dancers in concert, ca. 1977. Photo: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images.

AbEx and Disco Balls

IN DEFENSE OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM II

AMY SILLMAN

I FEEL KIND OF BAD FOR AB-EX. At sixty-something, the old bird's gotten the gimlet eye from just about everybody: It's vulgar, it's the phallocracy, it's nothing but an empty trophy, it celebrates bourgeois subjectivity, it's a cold-war CIA front, and, well, basically, expression's really embarrassing. A dandy wouldn't be caught dead doing something as earnest as struggling, or channeling jazz with his arms. An *old-style* dandy, at least. T. J. Clark's 1994 text "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism" made AbEx's connection to the vulgar perfectly clear, rendering it bathetic in all its ridiculous glory. But his writing touches only briefly on one of the most important aspects of this vulgarity—the fact that it is gendered. And it's precisely the gender vicissitudes of AbEx that I'd like to examine here: I would draw the dotted line back to 1964, when Susan Sontag mined this territory in her "Notes on 'Camp,'" declaring, "The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity."

How is it, exactly, that we forgot the new-style dandy? How is it that, despite the complexity of AbEx, its reputation has boiled down to the worst kind of gender essentialism? Its detractors would have it that the whole kit and caboodle is nothing but bad politics steel-welded around a chassis of machismo—that the paint stroke, the very use of the arm, is equivalent to a phallic spurt, to Pollock whipping out his dick and pissing in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace. (This sexualized reading is itself, of course, a reversal of Clement Greenberg's earlier—but no less testosterone-driven—notion of AbEx as a pure and transcendent optical experience.) Meanwhile, AbEx's legacy presents us with a tangle of still more gender clichés, a strange terrain inhabited by fake-dude-women like Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell, wielding their paint sticks like cowboys; and Pollock and de Kooning operating as phallic she-males, working from their innermost intuitive feelings, a "feminization" that introduces another twist in this essentialist logic.

I thought we were past simple butch and femme role-playing by now. The current acronym for queers alone has stretched out to six options, LGBTQQ (lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, and questioning). But with AbEx, it's always the same old, same old. This kind of simplification wipes away the possibility of looking at all the really interesting vagaries and conflicts within AbEx, like the fact that Krasner actually *was* man enough to bend hot-pink planes with her bare hands, and the fact that Mitchell was no feminist. Maybe it's possible for me to look at AbEx through rose-colored glasses because I came along too late to actually have to date any of those artists and I didn't have to sit on their laps at the Cedar Tavern. I'm sure they all probably *were* horrible in real life. But I'm still gung ho about looking at their work and finding in it tenderness, tragedy, contingency, and inverted color schemes; I'm still inspired by the rhetorical position of speaking from the gut, Walt Whitman style, by the AbExers' work with reimagined relations between parts and between forces, Gertrude Stein style, but in an anti-Platonic, improvisational, real-time mode of production.

Meanwhile, the only people worse than AbEx's haters are its defenders. And I agree, it makes you feel a little clammy to clap your arm around a form that seems to wear an American flag on its lapel, that is constantly being hailed as an American Triumph on public television and in bus shelters. AbEx: Saw it? Loved it! Got the tote bag—and it came with a free Charlie Parker record! (Poor old jazz, it's going through the same thing, but AbEx seems to have suffered a fate worse than jazz: jazz with money.) Of course, we know that the original AbExers were also horrified by the coming institutionalization. Art historian Serge Guilbaut cites a letter by Mark Rothko to his dealer, Betty Parsons, as early as 1948, in which Rothko writes: "Men like Soby, Greenberg, Barr, etc. . . . are to be categorically rejected." Once AbEx was thoroughly under glass, everyone involved tried to get away as fast as possible, either by acting irascible, or by



Above: Joan Mitchell in her studio, Paris, 1956.
Photo: Loomis Dean/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.



Above: Jackson Pollock painting *One: Number 31*, 1950, with Lee Krasner watching, East Hampton, NY, 1950. Photo: Hans Namuth. © Hans Namuth Ltd.



Above: Painter Grace Hartigan with friends at the Cedar Tavern, New York, 1959.
Photo: John Cohen/Getty Images.

fouling the “high” of AbEx by courting the low, or by screwing up the “Ab” part by embedding it with pictures, or by just moving away from New York. This evacuation left the entire property available for simplistic, ideological essentializing. But it also left us with a very nice plot of foreclosed real estate that, several generations later, younger artists could make use of—especially those who were supposedly barred from the place to begin with, as if we were squatters in Peggy Guggenheim’s house.

ACTUALLY, THE FEAR AND LOATHING that AbEx arouses reminds me of that ’70s punk button **DISCO SUCKS**. But disco *didn’t* suck, and the injunction against it was perhaps more about homophobia and racism than about musical taste. What do you think they were listening to over at the Stonewall, anyway? I spent my youth at bars watching high femmes in gold-belted slacks do the hustle with thick-waisted girls in mullets. They *liked* Donna Summer. Disco wasn’t just a corporate shill; it was the sound track for getting down with your marginalized pals.

Throughout the same decade that disco did or didn’t suck, the mid-’70s to mid-’80s (before the birth of homocore clubs, where they played both punk *and* dance music), I was a little undergrad painter-girl with a can of turpentine and a kneaded eraser, an earnest student with an old-guard teacher. If you attended art school in New York in those days, your teacher would most likely be one of these former AbEx party members who had gotten himself a teaching gig. I didn’t like him, and he warned me in return that I would certainly fail as an artist, but he was the only painter I knew, and he played Sinatra in class and called AbEx “action painting,” which sounded exciting, and I wanted to have his clichés and eat them, too. AbEx was great, in other words, because it involved erasure. And *Erased de Kooning* was a downright lifestyle choice, a physical embodiment of uncertainty, a praxis of doubt. It wasn’t just a defacement of AbEx; it was a recognition that a kind of negative capability was already there in de Kooning.

It pains me to admit how naive I was then, how little of the big theoretical picture I could see, but at the time, the art school system was completely divided between those who studied critical theory and those who studied studio art and painting. *They* studied the Soviet avant-gardes. *We* studied the School of Paris. Sontag’s famous list of qualities for camp—“the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive”—were the ones we studio students leaned on, and we were alive to the slightly outmoded feeling of AbEx, its sense of condemnation and failure. We didn’t really know much about art, but we knew what we liked. AbEx was something grand lying around the dollar bin at the secondhand-book store, something to be looked at, cut up, and used as material, like punk music or underground movies or other sloppy, enthusiastic things made by a lineage of do-it-yourselfers and refuseniks with a youthful combination of awareness and naïveté. As Sontag says, “In naive, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails.”

I wouldn’t call this negative way of working de-skilling, though; it was more like an active embrace of the aesthetics of awkwardness, struggle, nonsense, contingency. For better or worse, we didn’t glean the mythic aspect of AbEx, and therefore we were not limited by its ironclad gender identity, its masculine grandiosity. Since we weren’t selling anything ourselves anyway, the commodity critique of AbEx was also lost on us. I didn’t want to limit myself with the critical rhetoric around either disco or AbEx, because to do so would leave me—where? You have to ask yourself, What do you want to do all day and night, and how are you going to make a painting practice, anyway? AbEx was simply one technique of the body for those dedicated to the handmade, a way to throw shit down, mess shit up, and perform aggressive erasures and dialectical interrogations. If you want to make something with your hands, if you want the body to lead the mind and not the other way around, you may likely end up in the aisle of the cultural supermarket that includes painterly materials and AbEx delivery systems: canvas, oil sticks, fat paintbrushes, rags, trowels, scrapers, mops, sponges, buckets, and drop cloths. And it’s not that you’re going to be working “like” an AbExer, but that the tools themselves will mandate a certain phenomenology of making that emanates from shapes, stains, spills, and smudges.

Later on, I could perform a more sophisticated maneuver by doubling back on and reversing the injunction against AbEx, performing a critique of the critique, one that allowed me to appropriate AbEx as a practice back into my own hands and twist it into the form I wanted it to assume. Camp is alive to a sense of the doubled, and same-old-same-old AbEx was ripe for double *détournement*. This reclamation amounted to reversing the reversal of its fortune. AbEx



Above: **DISCO SUCKS** button, ca. 1978. Photo: Blank Archives/Getty Images.

Below: Outside the boarded-up Stonewall Inn following the Stonewall riots, June 1969. Photo: Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images.

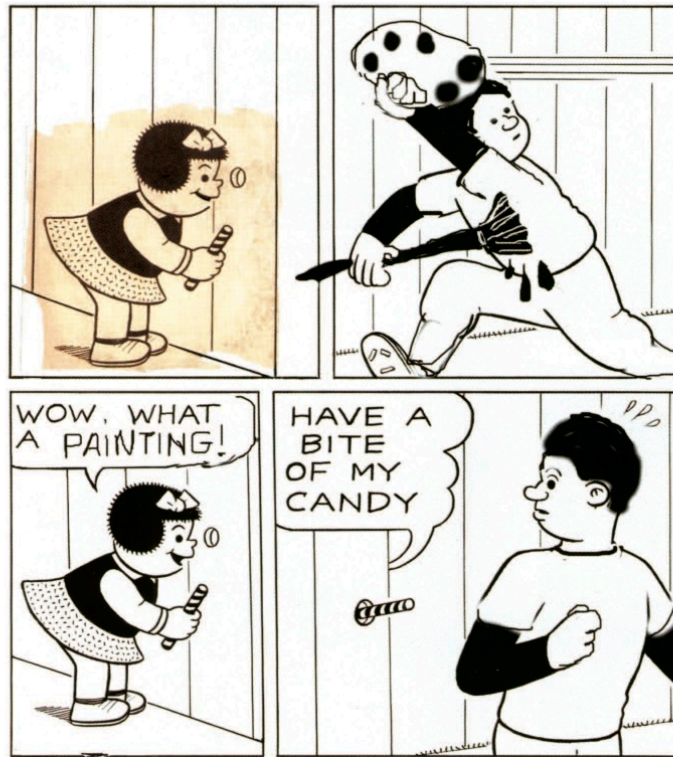


AbEx: Saw it? Loved it! Got the tote bag—and it came with a free Charlie Parker record!

was a form for the defiant optimism of our own remodeled and low-to-the-ground culture. Its very sentimentality and ridiculousness proposed a rich archive for future “conceptual painting,” painting that used the bad taste and bad values of the art world as springboards rather than as end points. Like disco, AbEx could be reclaimed as a Foucauldian materialist-discursive practice, connected to the “bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations and pleasures” described in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, volume 1.

And, of course, AbEx was already undone while I was still studying it. Warhol’s piss paintings, Morris’s cut felt, and Rauschenberg’s erasure—all the now canonical work that came on the heels of AbEx—had been doing a thorough job of referencing, reversing, and emptying out AbEx’s rhetoric and techniques. But still, in artmaking, things don’t necessarily happen in order. They happen simultaneously, or they circle around and repeat, or they are incomplete, or people realize things backward or feel a fondness for forms of obsolescence. In fact, while AbEx was already debased, de-skilled, materialized, and sexualized twenty years after it began, other people had been working adjacent to it all along, or just recently realized that they might do so. You might kill the father, but you don’t have to kill the already dead uncle.

So I don’t find it odd that AbEx practices have now been vitally reinvigorated by a queered connection of the vulgar and the camp. Many artists—not least of them women and queers—are currently recomplicating the terrain of gestural, messy, physical, chromatic, embodied, handmade practices. I would argue that this is because AbEx already *had* something to do with the politics of the body, and that it was all the more tempting once it seemed to have been shut down by its own rhetoric, rendered mythically straight and male in quotation marks. AbEx’s



Amy Sillman, *Nancy* (thank you to Bushmiller and Brainard), 2011, digitally altered comic strip, 3 1/4 x 3 1/2".



Leidy Churchman, *Painting Treatments*, 2010, stills from a two-channel color video, 19 minutes 54 seconds and 25 minutes 1 second, respectively.

AbEx was one technique of the body for those dedicated to the handmade, a way to throw shit down, mess shit up, and perform aggressive erasures.



Above: Happening and fashion show in Yayoi Kusama's studio, New York, 1968. Photo: Bill Baron.

Below: Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, 1973-76. Performance view, Studiogalerie, Berlin, June 10, 1976. Photo: Henrik Gaard.



own deterioration into cliché was a ripe ground, a double-edged challenge that, to quote Sontag again, “arouses a necessary sympathy.” AbEx was like a big old straight guy who had gone gay.

SPEAKING OF ROLLING IN MY GRAVE, when I saw Leidy Churchman’s videos last year, I thought, I can die now; my message to the world has been received, and gestural art is in good hands again. In Churchman’s “painting treatment” pieces, which were shown last year in “Greater New York” at MOMA PS1, Churchman and associate Anna Rosen performed improvisational acts of painting upon friends’ bodies, flaunting carnal pleasures via one of their most commonplace forms—as “treatments,” as in spa treatments. Even critical theorists like a rubdown, right? We who participated in the creation of Churchman’s videos were invited to come in, take off our clothes, and lie down under towels while Churchman-plus-Rosen did things to us. As they worked horizontally across our prone bodies, we lay languorously in an increasingly spaced-out, spalike state of mind, and the camera recorded a cropped image of the proceedings, *Flaming Creatures* style. They did excessive, polychromatic things to our bodies, like dipping a banana into a can of orchid-lavender paint and pressing it against our asses, or dragging a rake with green and brown paint in its combs across our legs, or letting chrome-yellow enamel dribble off random pieces of plywood onto the smalls of our backs, or tossing some green-gray grit on us.

As Sontag noted, “Camp is a *tender* feeling,” and it was nice being prodded, touched, stroked, and dribbled on with the warmish liquidity of paint. And meanwhile, the supposedly manly, authoritative, and triumphant discourse of AbEx had been displaced, not by a parodic emasculation or a cynical recapitulation, but with a newly enthusiastic form of painting as a nude activity. It was a way to spend the afternoon with your friends and do something both tender and sloppy. I actually liked the “paintings” formally, too, not so much the towels themselves, which were fairly arbitrary (and which Churchman judiciously did not exhibit), but the way the painting process and detritus looked on the video monitor, in a state of discarded materialist excess. These images reminded me of the films of Austrian filmmaker Kurt Kren, whose orgiastic and abject throw-downs are more fertile than they are masculine, with images of feathers, milk, eggs, and plant life falling on breasts, nipples, and lips. And that put me in mind of the party scene in Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*, and then the sight of Carolee Schneemann in her holster wielding crayons on the walls in her ’70s performance *Up to and Including Her Limits*. The list goes on: most of Paul Thek’s work, Yayoi Kusama’s ’60s film where she is shown painting dots on everything from her friend’s back to the surface of a pond, Hélio Oiticica’s street actions and “*Parangolés*,” etc. All of these are acts of sensuous and repellent aggression by artists responding to the AbEx vocabulary, artists for whom AbEx was essential as a reclaimed template for their own promiscuous and unessentialized surplus. And these works are slightly different from, say, Warhol making his piss paintings, because they seek not just to mimic or dismantle AbEx, leaving it as a sardonically depleted trace of itself, but to engage it in a dialectical conversation, with a sense of inquisitiveness, openness, and even the risk of actual delight—not *undoing* but *redoing*, if from an oblique angle. Even now, as we pass into a time when pencil smudges themselves are an increasingly exoticized thing of the past, the world is still tactile and material. To touch it is to know it.

Things have changed, but I still hear AbEx characterized fairly regularly as just a bunch of macho gestures, now collapsed and out of use. It reminds me of an occasion about a decade ago, when I went to give a talk somewhere in America at a university art department that was populated by self-described “content-driven” students and faculty. “Content-driven” was how you said it back then—meaning, “We work with politics and abhor the (supposed) emptiness of formalism.” So I naturally insisted extra hard on the *form* in my work, taking a certain perverse pleasure in describing myself as a kind of formalist. This didn’t go over too well with the crowd, who became audibly disgruntled. Afterward, though, some bearded guys came up to say how much they *loved* the talk, and when they walked away, I found out that they were transgendered men. It was funny for me to realize that the people who loved my formalist rap the most were the guys who had gone the furthest in their own personal lives to make specific changes to their own forms. We were both committed to an idea of the inseparability of form and content, and we were working with their interactions, their malleability; if you could change one side, you could change the other. This made for a funny alliance—funny ha-ha *and* funny peculiar. □

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