

Melissa Gordon
On Value at AJ Gallery 2016

In the essay “Notes on Gesture” the theorist Giorgio Agamben asks: what is a gesture?

He states: “What characterizes gesture is that nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported”.

A gesture is described as something that is ‘inscribed’ into the sphere of action, but it is neither production nor performance. Not the mark or the making of the mark.

How then, is the value of a gesture determined? This is a question I have been grappling with in my own paintings and writing for some time.

In reading Agamben, I began to understand a gesture as the flickering of firelight animating a cave painting of jumping animals, or the stills of film juddering together to make movement. I am imagining gesture as the imaginative jump in our heads that puts together and *believes in* the material evidence of the physical trace of an event.

There is a gap that opens up between the ideas of materiality and material goods. Can a gesture ever truly become a material good? Where does value ‘seep in’ to this discourse of gestures? And of course- why are the gestures of women, historically and now, still so ‘undervalued’?

I think we can say that the value of women’s art is still perhaps in the realm of the imaginative power of gesture, so I’m going to talk to imaginary characters in my head about it all.

Let’s begin our discussion with a Female Genius, hello there: can you tell me about the vital signs, vitalism, and vitriol of Female Genius? What happens when a Female Genius gets a migraine?

She coughed indignantly and sent an email titled “liveliness” with the following quote by Isabelle Graw in the book *Painting Beyond Itself* - “This view that painting has a life of its own and can therefore “think” or “speak” is prevalent among many French historians...Graw would argue that we are dealing with vitalist projections here...Painting is able to trigger such vitalist assumptions because of its specific language, or more precisely because of its specific indexicality...(and) once (these indexical signs) appear in the context of painting they forcefully point to the absent author who seems to be somewhat physically present in them.”

OK I say, but what about blood sweat and tears? That kind of presence?

Nn mm, says our Female Genius. More like this: "One measure of genius is *the life force*- what has been dubbed, referring to Samuel Johnson, "Falstaffian vitalism. "

Ah, I say, like a swagger.

That's it, but it's about where and when you do it she says:
She quotes Graw again "As a topos of appraisal, liveliness has had an "astonishingly long and continued history". The production of life and liveliness was elevated to the status of an ideal that painting and sculpture labored to achieve well into the nineteenth century".

So, I say, value arose from the artistic production OF liveliness (like Pygmalion's sculpture coming to life, or the stunning freshness of Dutch flower painting), and this segued naturally during Modernism into a valuation whereby the work of art, through and of the author, is vital, or *stores* the vitality of life?

That's about right, she says.

Like a spell or a pagan ritual? I ask.

She grimaces, and sends me the essay "How to Install Feminist Art" by Helen Molesworth, in which the conundrum of the genealogies of female and feminist artists is summed up as such: "Genealogies for art made by women aren't so clear, largely because they are structured by a shadowy absence."

I tell our Female Genius about a German translator who told me that my idea of the 'absent body' in my work doesn't exist in the language of German: a body had to be either dead or alive, with no room for ambiguity.

Our Female Genius laughed, and read aloud part of an essay by Eva Kenny:

"The role of women in the passage from figurative painting to abstraction has already been described, in a sense, by Franziek Kupka, whose 1911 painting of his wife, Mme Kupka Among Verticals, now at the MoMA...is considered as his first abstract painting and as such one of the first abstract paintings in the history of European abstraction. In this early and officially endorsed abstract painting, the female figure is not separated from and anterior to the abstract marks on the canvas, but is substantially involved in their production. What it means for Madame Kupka, however, is that she is not really there at all."

As in, the female form disappeared into abstraction, but something about the subjective gaze wasn't lost?

On that note, our Female Genius told me to call back once I'd gotten a bit further with things, and hung up the phone.

I decide to go for a walk to the park, down to Church street, and an email comes through. Squinting at my tiny iphone screen, I am coincidentally just meters away from Edgar Allen Poe's residence in London, whom the essay begins by giving credit to for creating the character of "The Diddler", ie., the confidence man- otherwise known as a con man.

I read an excerpt from the 1857 book "The Confidence Man-His Masquerade" by Herman Melville", a list of fantastic characters in the book, on a boat together:

"The passenger is right about this army of diddlers, except for one detail: the many scamps among the passengers- a doctor peddling herbal remedies, along with a stock trader, an employment agent, a philosopher, a man in rags, a couple of well-dressed men--- will prove in the end to be the same man, who, in his various disguises, raises wind from stem to stern, diddling passengers out of their money, their health, their dignity- and, above all, out of their trust in their own judgement".

I recalled an article I had read last year on Satoshi Nakamoto, the fictional founder of bitcoin. His complete absence, often portrayed as an outline of a head with a question mark inside, made bitcoin, along with its obfuscated means of value production, seem like a dangerous pyramid-like scheme.

In brief, if I remember correctly, miners of bitcoin create value by keeping alive (literally, on massive artically-cooled servers) an ongoing code, which records each transaction as a complete history of transactions. The value of bitcoin begins as a completely abstract fiction that becomes reality through a complex chain of agreement, and as I google it on my phone I see that of the 2nd March this year, one bitcoin surpassed the spot price of an ounce of gold.

Where am I going? I turn a corner and suddenly a burst of color hits my eyes, and I'm standing in front of a lawn of tulips of all different colors.

I studied in Holland, and everyone knows about the genre of Dutch flower painting, and of course the comedic Dutch tulip 'mania' that is dragged out to rerun every time a financial bubble bursts. But I suddenly connect the two in my head: obviously! It was absolutely to do with liveliness, and value. Tulipmania was one of the first bubbles of a contractual nature: it was the agreements being sold that were valued more than the goods themselves.

Is my imaginary character trying to tell me something about obfuscation and value?

What happens when a contract is treated as an abstraction? I wonder aloud.

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The highest price ever paid for a work on the secondary market by a living female artist is currently 9.8 million dollars for Bluewald by Cady Noland, sold in May 2015.

Noland has written very powerfully about the Con Man, in her 1990 essay "Towards a Meta-Language of Evil".

"The game is a machine composed of interconnected mechanistic devices... A con or a snow job is the site at which X preys upon the hopes, fears, and anxieties of Y for ulterior motives and/or personal gain... These machinations exist a priori of X or Y as an indifferent set of tools and could conceivably be picked up by anyone and used against anyone else"

In November, 2011, the night before a Sotheby's auction, Noland disavowed ownership of her work Cowboys Milking (put on auction just after her record auction sale months previous), thus effectively erasing millions of dollars from the world. There is no trace of the erasure, though, because it was completely imaginary. Those, say 6 million dollars never existed, and they never will exist.

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In a letter from Marcel Duchamp to his sister dated 12 April 1917, two days after the opening of the Independants in New York to which the Fountain was refused he writes:

"Tell this detail to the family: The Independants have opened here with immense success. One of my female friends under a masculine pseudonym, Richard Mutt, sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture...The committee has decided to refuse to show this thing. I have handed in my resignation and it will be a bit of gossip of some value in New York."

The original Fountain was photographed only twice. First by Alfred Steiglitz on the 13th April, 1917. The only other known photograph that I've found is in my research is a photo of the urinal hanging from the doorway of Duchamps studio in 1917, with a note calling the Fountain: Pendu Femelle: Hanging Woman.

It has been pointed out that the missing part of the plumbing of The Fountain, the bit that would connect the Fountain to water, is actually the sculpture God, by the Baroness Elsa von Freitag Loringhoven, a cross-dressing German Dadaist who was in love with Duchamp, and is considered to be the inspiration for Rose Selway. The sculpture God was attributed to a male artist until recently, when it was discovered he was just the photographer.

If you took God off the stool, and screwed it into the Fountain, and stuck it on the wall, you'd have a working toilet.

The next mention of the Fountain does not exist until Duchamp begins to attempt to sculpt miniature replicas for his Boite en valise in 1936, long after the Baroness died.

It has been, I realize suddenly, 100 years almost to the day that someone submitted the Fountain to the Salon de Independants.

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The con man, I understand, as I make my way home, is not a simple thief. He does peddle a concrete good: stories. In fact, all you might get from a good con, is the feeling of being swept along in the fiction of the moment: belief in what turns out to be lies, which feel good at the time. You've lost something, but you still have the fantasy.

As I open the door, I realize I think I've been led rather than followed.

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I realize I'm running out of time so I will only be able to ask one question to my final imaginary character, but I have no idea how to find her. She's told me she was dropping out and as far as I can tell she's walked right off the edge of the art world, so I think perhaps can find her in a mirror, like how they communicate with other dimensions in movies.

I stand in the mirror and ask a question about subjectivity.

If I am moved by a gesture, is this a subjective feeling? If, as an artist I attempt to produce a gesture of value, is this a subjective action? If someone attributes value to this, is that a subjective judgement?

