

*Nice Move*

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Recent conversations with fellow artists about our practices often hit the same wall - the wall of the market. That wall says "float or sink." The conclusions can be rigid - it is only success in the market that allows you to perpetuate both your ability to make and also to show the work. Is there nuance in these conclusions? Not much. Have previous generations had similar concerns? Yes. Critical discussions articulate how this sink-or-swim mentality can actually determine the way we make art objects. I can hear the echo of objective affirmations bouncing off of successful artists: *Make the work clear and bold, clear and bold, clear and bold*. Though this tight clench around the throat of art practices will always need to be redressed, I want to offer a few responses and observations on power and success that may offer insight into how we artists, especially women artists, can loosen these either/or conditions in our studios and in this restricted reality.

For the last year I have focused my free time on my health. I have experimented with several eastern and western practices, some formulaic new age. The unexpected side effect of this physical research is the possibility of linking my studio practice directly to my body. At first the connections between the studio and body and between more vast topics like gender and power are subtle. Yet recently, I have identified a conceptual fulcrum that opens possibilities of rethinking art practice and maybe even these desperate hard-lined market discussions. This fulcrum is quite simple: movement.

Movement is the mediation between body and mind, between thought and action, between concept and material. This mediation is at the seat of the academic theory we grapple with... dialectics within continental philosophy, and even metaphysics itself, right? Movement as mediator is at the core of our agency. I realize this is all quite simple and broad, but sometimes rethinking power requires restating the obvious, verrry slowly. Let us define an art object as the material that houses a series of movements projected onto it. It is a non-verbal contract with the artist's body and mind simultaneously. How does this elemental definition of art relate to the market and to concerns among artists as to whether or not we will sink or swim?

A recent podcast hosted by the artist Anika Yi addressed the viability of strong female networks. In the discussion, Amy Sillman, a well-known artist, expressed some observations about power and gender: "I am definitely aware of how people are seen when they walk into a room," she said. "If a chubby middle-aged lady walks into a room, that is not major power, let's just put it that way." On the other hand, "If a big dude with a very beautiful young wife on his arm walks into a room we will probably go, 'oh, here comes a potential, powerful figure.'" She even admits to experiencing and enacting these gendered judgements herself, finding herself asking "who is this, and what level of authority do they command?" The bluntness of Sillman's contrasting image of two kinds of bodies, one seemingly successful, one not, struck me. I realize her thoughts open up myriad issues on inherited structures of power that our culture perpetuates. But in addition to simply passing judgement, I think Sillman is also striking a chord about how the body not only looks but performs.

These contrasting female and male images are of course not born in nor relegated to the art world. The second most popular "Ted Talk" to date is about the power of body language. *Hold your body like a powerful man. Take up space. If you are not comfortable with this, fake it till you make it*, Anne Cuddy tells us. The powerful body language described is modeled on ways that men have developed to hold their bodies over centuries. The recent popularity of "Lean In," a book centered on women in the office space, is another example of verbiage that

calls on women to behave more like men as a way to ameliorate gender disparity. So, in order to be more successful, women are encouraged to move like men. This issue of gender mimicry elicits such an ambiguous response from myself and others, it wholly deserves to be another essay. Sanberg cites studies that show how women consistently attribute their success to the outside, not themselves, and also that they underestimate their abilities, while men tend to overestimate resulting in disparities in success. We know the interrelationship between these concerns as artists and citizens inform one another and are long-standing: Sheryl Sanberg's popular speech "Why we have too few women leaders" echoes Lynda Nochlin's famous essay from over 40 years ago, "Why have there been no great women artists?"

So how can we, women artists, attribute success to ourselves? How can we fairly estimate our abilities? One way is to change the way we move. I know this is a stretch, pun intended. This deviation in the equation about what makes successful art practice is certainly not a call for more action painting. But I do think we can ensure that our moves on our art can be attended to and as a result support our thinking around materials and concepts. And I'd argue, that is what Sillman does.

I cannot help but connect Sillman's blunt observations about power in bodies to her painting concerns which aim to fuse abstraction and figuration (Sillman addresses some of these concerns through an art historical lens in an essay she wrote called *Ab-Ex and Disco Balls*). Sillman's work takes head-on the challenge of mediating subject and object. Her work looks very physical; you can imagine the length of her arm in many of her images' repeated strokes. I am going to state the obvious here once again: Sillman's literal attention to the details of social performances are transferred to her work. Her movements, her resistance to accepting certain physical ideas of art power at the art party are woven into her practice of abstracting the body itself. Social performance and assumptions about the physical imprint of power on a body are intertwined. We know this. By breaking it down into these parts, both artistic agency and artistic content is found when observations become the movements that make the work.

A series of actions and moves are embodied by an art object. This orientation is an approach. It may open possibilities as to how our observations take their best physical form and how rote ideas can be renewed. A somatic therapist recently told me a story about his former teacher. She decided to quit working in the health profession and become an artist. She went to study an ancient Japanese painting technique in Japan. It was unusual for someone outside of the culture to apprentice. The reason the small school allowed her to join is because the masters liked one thing about her - the way she moved. This anecdote made me think of an art object as a film. Instead of capturing light it captures motions. Is it not funny that the word movement is also a group of people working to advance their shared political or creative ideas? I think that taking time to refocus on these physical connections will assist us in remembering exactly where and how we are to focus our actions in the studio. Remember: though Sillman observes others' power, she is in fact quite successful and powerful herself.

For over a decade I have grappled with the question as to where my generation's agency resides. Body language can take dimensional form in art. Philosophically, if we can turn metaphysics away from the cerebral and toward the physical, why can't we then also add to the Cartesian framework? I think therefore I move therefore I am. Movement is the first mediation between thought and action. Movement does not fit into the category of gas, liquid or solid. Movement is both literal and metaphorical. Before the paint touches the surface, the arm has a specific place from which it moves toward the destination. In response to the deadened (dead end) discussion on how the market impacts and determines the way we make art objects, let's reverse the order of operations. We can make new kinds of markets for clear and bold movements.