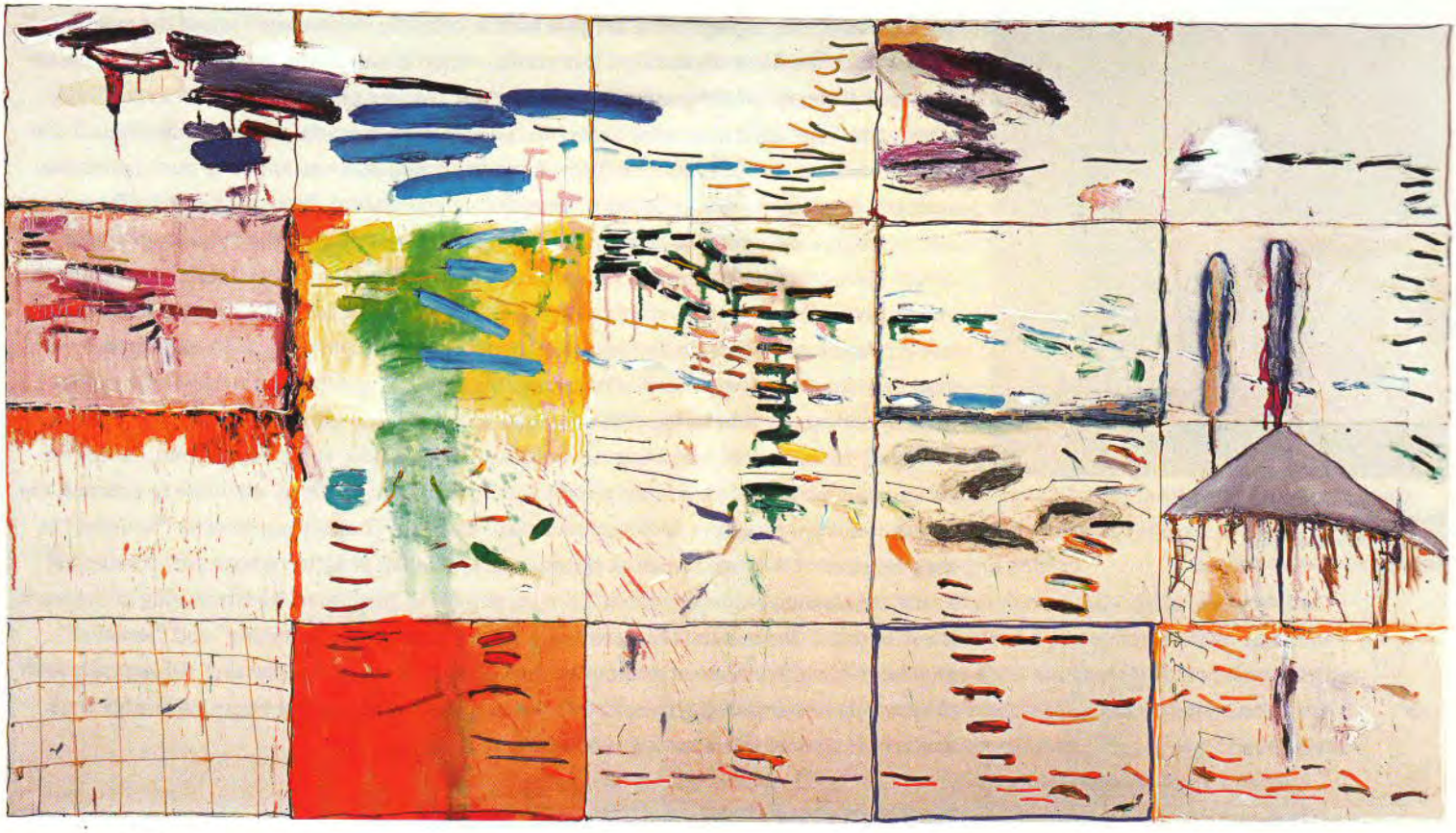
PAINTING WITH AMBIVALENCE



Joan Snyder
Woman-Child, 1972
Oil, acrylic, sparkle paint,
and spray enamel on canvas
72 x 108 inches
Private collection

Helen Molesworth

Although there are virtually no permanent collection galleries dedicated to feminist art in the major museums of modern and contemporary art, it is well known that artists informed by feminism pursued their art practices with particular zeal during the late 1960s and throughout the 70s, the liberation movement of feminism in the social and political arena being an undeniable catalyst for these energies. So too, the challenges to traditional definitions of art that came from Fluxus, Minimalism, Earth art, Conceptualism, and the like contributed to an abiding sense that business as usual—in both the world at large and the small corner of it called the art world—was coming to an end. It is a well-worn story that the time-honored medium of painting was buffeted by these sea changes. A historical form, shackled by centuries of tradition (from patriarchy to patronage), painting seemed less and less able to account for, demonstrate, or represent the conditions, both aesthetic and political, of the 1960s and 70s. And yet, despite its rumored decline, many women—many feminists—kept painting. At the remove of over thirty years I find myself increasingly interested in the tenacity of women who continued to paint, despite the seemingly readymade challenges to the medium. What did it mean to be an artist in the 1960s and 70s, to be a woman, a feminist, *and* a painter? If feminism is a methodology, a structure, a way of thinking, as well as a set of contents, then what might feminism do to the category of painting?[1]

For instance, what do we make of a painting by Joan Snyder called *Woman-Child* (1972)? Strokes of dime-store–candy colors sit or float on top of a gridded background that resembles a tiled wall. On the one hand, the painting contains the visual expressiveness of Abstract Expressionism; on the other, the conceptual ballast of modernism's grid. The tension between these two modes of painterly address is mirrored in the title's dualism, *Woman-Child*—woman then child, both together, equal or not, autobiographical or universal? The internal balance of the painting signifies a kind of portentous seriousness, one undermined nearly entirely by the everyday banality of the colors. Snyder's work is not alone in its categorical slipperiness. Howardena Pindell's cut-paper collages are equally resistant to proper assignation. Neither paintings nor drawings, these diminutive works comprise small circles of paper produced by a hole-puncher affixed with adhesive or string to a submerged grid. Pindell's paintings are a riotous explosion of visual tactility, in which color and texture vie for visual dominance—neither winning. Instead the viewer experiences Pindell's work as a kind of aesthetic stand-off of irreconcilable differences. Then there is Mary Heilmann's *Little 9 x 9* (1973), a monochrome fire-engine–red field upon which is draped a grid of black lines. But the lines appear to have been made with a finger as opposed to a brush, and the grid lines switch over and above one another like the warp and weave of tapestry, a conflation of modernism's lofty monochrome with more prosaic forms of mark-making.

The three artists discussed above share numerous characteristics: all paint abstractly, all use the grid, and all deploy a strategy of repetition, of both forms and ideas. Additionally, the three women share a strong identification as feminists, all the while participating in the rigorous abstraction associated with modernism. The question of what these paintings might mean—and how feminism might have changed the terms of painting—begins, for me, with

1
There are numerous feminisms. For the sake of clarification, in my argument, I maintain that a feminist methodology offers two incisive gestures. The first is a paraphrase of Peggy Phelan's definition of feminism: it is a challenge to the persistent organization of the world through the category of gender that consistently privileges men. The second is that feminism privileges self-criticality (as opposed to self-expression, per se) in political, aesthetic, and intellectual practice.

an attempt to try and square off some relation between feminism and modernism. The narrative of painting's decline is part of the larger challenges laid at the feet of modernism. Feminism, in all of its disparate political and aesthetic forms, was at the forefront of such challenges. Indeed, feminism's dispute with modernism often led to a blanket condemnation of it generally, and of painting specifically. However, Anne Wagner has supplanted this position by suggesting that "The antipathy of feminist theory toward the reified modernism of its own invention has helped to obscure just those protocols that have made modernism a serviceable, downright expressive choice for female artists."[2] The artists and the modernism that Wagner examined all existed before the strongest challenges to the field occurred. The paintings of Pindell, Snyder, and Heilmann both embody and extend this idea, as each turns to modernism when it is already under siege—from both feminism and the early winds of postmodernism. Hence their version of modernism is already a very complicated affair. Perhaps this is why even though these artists participate in the modernist legacy, their works are rarely discussed in those terms (nor does their work grace many museum walls in this regard). Rather, they find themselves in "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," situated in an explicitly feminist context. My argument suggests that paintings that are both abstract and feminist suffer from a kind of illegibility. It is precisely this difficulty I want to address in this essay.

Part of the discomfort aroused by these paintings, part of their unclear historical place, is due to the conditions—social, psychic, and aesthetic—under which women artists pursued painting in the late 1960s through the 70s. I want to propose that the larger umbrella under which women interested in both modernism and feminism operated was one of failure—of both feminism *and* painting. Painting's failure seemed manifest in the near completeness with which so many artists and critics turned away from it.[3] Feminism's failure is a more difficult one to articulate. One aspect of feminism's failure has been (and remains) the reticence of women to come together as such, as defined exclusively by gender. (Why should we, after all?) The putatively sexless nature of art (particularly that of abstract art) was for many women a refuge from the brutal gendering of the world as they knew it.

In her account of the troublesome category of feminist art, Peggy Phelan has argued that the feminist "awakening" was shaped as much by an experience of trauma as of liberation.[4] Such an account helps us to understand why feminism—or, more specifically, an identification based on gender—is so routinely rejected, whether by women artists during the 1960s or by feminist theorists and artists in the 1980s rejecting so-called essentialist feminism. The trauma Phelan described is the trauma of identification with the subaltern position, with the oppressed, with the "weak," with the very precisely sexed. Lucy Lippard, one of the foremost critics of the period, recounted her own feminist/woman aversion in the introduction to her volume of "feminist essays on women's art." In it, she wrote: "One of the first feminist artists' groups—W.A.R.—came out of the Coalition too, but I resisted them for over a year. I was decidedly not accustomed to identifying with female underdogs—with oppressed people and unknown artists, yes, but *women*—that was too close for comfort. 'I made it as a person, not

2
Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 16.

3
Of course only certain artists and critics, but those who held the purchase of the avant-garde or "advanced" art practices. Although many male artists continued to paint, it is historically fair to argue that the cultural and aesthetic value of painting slipped considerably as the hierarchies of media were radically reorganized as a result of the ascendancy of sculpture, photography, and the reception of the Duchampian readymade.

4
Phelan, survey for *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 32–34. I recently experienced this "rejection as trauma" acutely as I clung to the edge of my university quad on the day the undergraduates set up their "Take Back the Night" rally. To my horror, the other women participating in this staging of judgment ("How pathetic" practically audible as we silently walked by) were sorority girls. Of course, I thought, why would any of us want to walk into a space that asks us to identify with the trauma of rape? But where was I, between the sorority girls and today's nascent generation of feminists?

as a woman,' I kept saying."[5] If the awakening of feminism meant that one had to identify with other women, it also meant that one had to identify oneself as not equal to men—a position some embraced with the proper anger and others avoided with an equally reasonable ambivalence. This lack of equality seeped into discussions of aesthetic quality as well, placing women artists in a double bind—not equal in the society at large, and not equal in the history of art.

Part of the stirring of feminist consciousness in the art world came in the form of Linda Nochlin's now-legendary article of 1971, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" If the question feels audacious in 2005, one can only imagine the anger and frustration it must have generated thirty years ago. The text is foundational for feminist art history, for it answered its brazen question socio-historically, offering a detailed account of women's consistent lack of professional training in the arts.[6] Here was a history of art that did not begin and end with transcendental meaning. Quite the contrary, what feminism as a methodology allowed was the unavoidable messiness of the everyday—its politics and procedures.

What Nochlin's essay was also to insist upon (quite bravely) was the answer to her own question—that *yes*, until 1971 there *had* been no great women artists (Eva Hesse still too young to qualify, the impact of Louise Bourgeois not yet understood, perhaps). Certainly Nochlin was quick to bring the fullness of feminist methodology to terms like "great" and "genius," exposing them for what they are—ideological traps, moments of false consciousness, systems of exclusion designed to protect the status quo. And yet, it was not so easy for her to stop there. While she was prepared to question a "universal" idea of greatness or genius, she was not ready to abandon her own highly developed sense that the world contains deeply meaningful, even superb, works of art and that, as of yet, no woman painter—no matter how interesting or how overlooked—had offered Western civilization anything comparable to Michelangelo, Rembrandt, or Picasso.

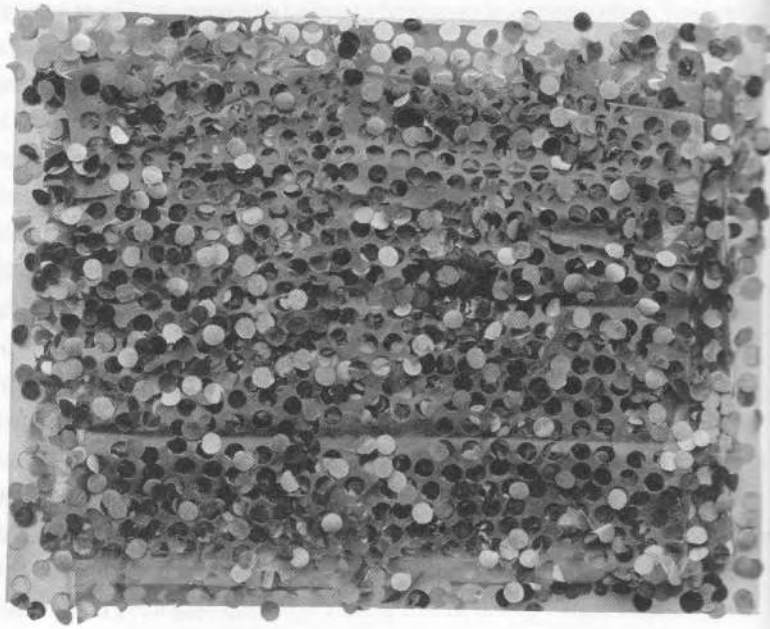
Between Nochlin's bald acknowledgment of women artists' historical lack of greatness and Lippard's public acknowledgment that for years she did not take women artists seriously, what could it possibly have felt like to be a woman, working in a painting studio?[7] Clearly, the editors of *Art News* were curious as well, as they ran seven responses to Nochlin's text concurrently. The replies were contentious; how could they not have been? The opposition to Nochlin's text began with an anecdote that went to the heart of the matter. Elaine de Kooning did the telling: "Well first—that term, 'women artists.' I was talking to Joan Mitchell at a party about ten years ago when a man came up to us and said, 'What do you women artists think...' Joan grabbed my arm and said, 'Elaine, let's get the hell out of here.'"[8] Addressed as a woman artist, Mitchell's reaction is one of consummate rejection and refusal—and not, presumably, of the category "artist." Yet, she does not flee by herself; grabbing de Kooning by the arm is a gesture of solidarity, after all, as artists definitely, but also as women. Nochlin's bracing question, and her devastatingly smart answer, engendered from its inception an avalanche of ambivalence.

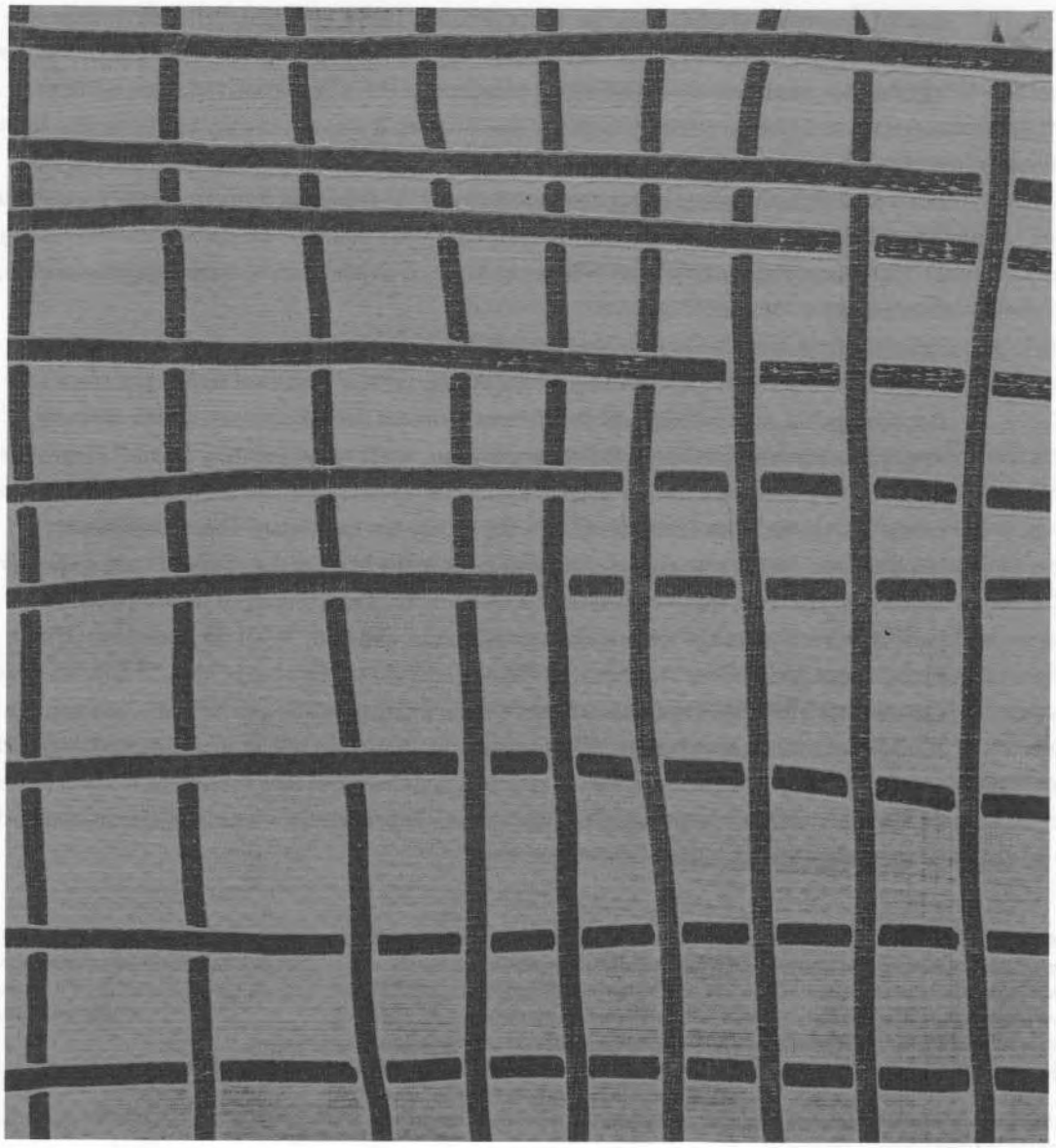
Lippard, introduction to *From the Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New P. Dutton, 1976), 3–4. The coalition refers to is the Art Workers Coalition, h she was a founding member.

lochlin argued that women were not ed the same training as men, most when it came to learning to draw from the live nude. Without this crucial aspect of representational painting, how, she asked, could women artists ever have equaled their male counterparts? "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *Art News* 69, no. 9 (January 1971): 22–39, 67.

7
In her catalogue essay for "Ten Artists (Who Also Happen to Be Women)," reprinted as part of "Prefaces to Catalogues of Women's Exhibitions" in *From the Center*, Lippard wrote: "I continued to go to men's studios and either disregard or matronize the women artists who worked in the corners of their husband's spaces, or in the bedroom, even in the kitchen," 47. Mary Heilmann and Joan Snyder were included in this exhibition.

8
Elaine de Kooning with Rosalyn Drexler, "Dialogue," *Art News* 69, no. 9 (January 1971): 40.





Howardena Pindell
Untitled #73, 1975

Mary Heilmann
Little 9 x 9, 1973
Acrylic on canvas
22 x 22 inches
Hauser & Wirth
Collection, Switzerland

I want to argue that this ambivalence was not only felt personally, at New York art world parties or in art magazine interviews, but that the ambivalence about artistic activity, feminism, and modernism seeped into the very groundwater of painting itself. Further, it did so in ways that are difficult to account for and hard to narrate with any "authority," as authority and triumph were two of the words that were being held at bay by women artists of the period. This ambivalence takes center stage in Heilmann's account of how she became a painter: "I was devastated not to be included in *Anti-Illusion*, a turning point show in 1969 at the Whitney. As a result, I abandoned the sculptural work I was doing and, as a rebellious move, switched to the much-maligned practice, painting. Color Field painting was going on, and I hated it then (love it now). What I turned to was a materials-based sort of conceptual, anti-aesthetic, earth-colored, ironic painting that was often hard to look at."[9] Rejected by the avant-garde establishment, her rebellious act was to embrace that which seemed nearly retrograde—Color Field painting. But she was to do so with enormous irony, deploying the colors of contemporary Technicolor cinema and commodity marketing as opposed to colors with putatively transcendental meaning. And yet, while Heilmann's colors may have been chosen tongue in cheek, she appeared radically interested in the very embodied feeling (specifically, the undefined spatial wetness of the tongue pressed against the inside of one's cheek) of how color is always already coded—with culture, with class, and, of course, with gender—and how this sometimes makes things "hard to look at."

Any artist working in New York during the 1960s and 70s did so under the long shadow left by Abstract Expressionism and its critics. Clearly Snyder, Heilmann, and Pindell made work deeply indebted to its legacy—the push-pull of Heilmann, the all-over composition of Pindell, and the expressive brush strokes of Snyder are each impossible to imagine without the aesthetic experimentation enacted by New York School painters. For women artists and for feminists, this was a particularly vexed framework. The freedom Abstract Expressionism embodied was deeply appealing, and the lived reality of the New York School was that it included a great number of women—Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and Mitchell, to name only a few. Despite this, Abstract Expressionism remained a boys' club par excellence. A leading example of the patriarchal misapprehension of the situation was the 1969 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition of 408 works of art by forty-three artists titled "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970." Although the exhibition ended with Pop artists like Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, and Robert Rauschenberg, it was definitively an exhibition dedicated to the new hegemony of American painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism. Frankenthaler was the only woman included in the exhibition.

Clement Greenberg's essay for the catalogue was a reprint of his 1962 article "After Abstract Expressionism," in which he acknowledged that the problem for painting was the discernment of quality. "The question now asked in their art is no longer what constitutes art, or the act of painting, as such, but what constitutes *good* art as such."[10] Greenberg suggested that the uniqueness of the conception is the bedrock of quality, this in large measure because "skill" had become so easily available (it is no mistake that this period witnesses the rise of the art

9
Heilmann, *The All Night Movie*, exh. cat. (Zürich, Switzerland: Offizin Verlag, 1999), 40.

10
Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," originally published in *Art International* 6, no. 8 (October 1962); revised and published in Henry Geldzahler, *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970* (New York: E. P. Dutton and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969), 369.

school). What Greenberg didn't explicitly say is that the language of quality was largely the province of the critic, whose role it was to put forward the robust discourse of affirmation and persuasion. Adjectives and adverbs abound, and quality is not so much stated as insinuated in the process. What this often meant for women artists was a gendered use of language that served to undermine the authority of the works themselves. Using Frankenthaler and the process of staining as a test case, art historian Lisa Saltzman has convincingly argued that the critical reception of Frankenthaler's work differed demonstrably from her male colleagues who used similar techniques (indeed who learned those techniques *from* Frankenthaler). After a careful parsing of the reviews of Frankenthaler's work, Saltzman concluded: "In their attribution of masculinity to canvases painted by male artists and femininity to those painted by female artists, critics asserted the fundamental primacy of sexual difference, and did so at precisely the moment when gender boundaries were seen as being in danger of disappearing, both artistically and socially."[11]

This is all a way of saying that while abstraction in particular, and painting in general, held out the promise of the non-gendered category "artist" to the women who operated within this realm, the audience—critics, curators, collectors, dealers—was not so willing to operate in a state of genderless suspension. Rather, they reinscribed these abstract works in a field of gendered language, insisting consciously or unconsciously upon gender as a primary tool with which to organize the world. Abstraction was not a genderless paradise after all. For Pindell, Snyder, and Heilmann, one aesthetic strategy seemed to be to acknowledge this from the start. In their works, color functions as a kind of preemptive strike against gendered interpretation: it is ever so slightly off, the combinations always a bit odd. The nearly putrid or acidic hues of their palettes suggest that they are willing to perform, in the space of the canvas, the dilemma of whether or not something is a "good painting." By using colors not typically associated with "quality," their paintings stage the problem of how to ascertain it, especially given the fact of their having been made by women. Pindell has recounted her artistic training (in the Josef Albers school of color theory) at Boston University: "Al Held was there and he made fun of the women. He got angry if a woman used certain colors in her work. (A guy could use white mixed with red, which is pink, but if a woman used it he would go into a tirade.)"[12] Pindell continued to use pink, of course, as did Snyder and Heilmann, sometimes to such an extent that their work feels like a bit of a dare—a cocky demand that the viewer look past, or better yet through, the sickly pinks and washy brush strokes of Snyder, or the off-kilter compositions and decidedly domestic references of Heilmann, or the glitter and talcum powder and self-destroyed drawings of Pindell to ascertain just what exactly in the end makes a "good" painting.

While many critics like Greenberg used a Kantian-derived formalism to render the self-expression of artists into a kind of culturally legible public language, this criticism did little to chip away at the desire of many artists to paint in ways that were more personally, physically, and psychically expressive. An alternative understanding of Abstract Expressionism came from Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" (1952), also reprinted in the

11
Lisa Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Painting," in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 379.

12
Lynn F. Miller and Sally S. Swenson, interview with Howardena Pindell, in *Lives and Works: Talks with Women Artists* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1981), 134.

13
Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" originally published in *Art News* 51, no. 5 (September 1952); reprinted in *New York Painting and Sculpture*, 342.

…rder
…phony for Women II, 1976
…edia on canvas
…each panel 23 ½ x 23 ½ inches
…llection

Metropolitan's exhibition catalogue, in which he argued that the picture plane was "an arena in which to act" and "the image would be the result of this encounter."[13] This encounter was at its best when an artist was able "Just *To Paint*. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value—political, aesthetic, moral."[14] Like all critics of Abstract Expressionism—for whom the difficulty lay in judging a good work from a bad one—for Rosenberg described the criteria thusly: "The test of any of the new paintings is its seriousness—and the test of its seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist's total effort to make over his experience."[15] Such language is open to a proliferation of interpretations, something Rosenberg seemed to know but only unconsciously, as this sentence is quickly followed by a paragraph in which he worried, deeply, about the encroaching "bad taste in the manner of Park Avenue shop windows"[16] into the field of the new abstract painting.

Snyder's diaristic approach to painting is a supreme example of a canvas being an extension of the artist's experience. Her washy expressive brush strokes often feel like angry jabs at the canvas, and her flamboyant use of color has been described as producing paintings "drenched with personal pain, stammered with rage."[17] However serious this effort (and I think it was very serious), there is also something about Snyder's work that flirts with bad taste—both in the publicness of such emotions and the disjointed colors. For this reason her paintings are sometimes discussed with a fair amount of objection; there is a sense in the criticism that Snyder's work borders on the inappropriate. In a recent scathing review, critic Maureen Mullarkey suggested that Snyder's work "illustrate[s] the vulgarity of a movement that traded on the susceptibilities of its audience."[18]

The extremity of judgment that Snyder's paintings engenders is emblematic of art historian T. J. Clark's recent arguments about Abstract Expressionism. For Clark, Abstract Expressionism's wild exteriorizing of emotion that produced canvases redolent with so-called violent emotion—generated in private studios but displayed on the public's living-room walls—is emblematic of the vulgar. He asked, "To what extent does Abstract Expressionism really

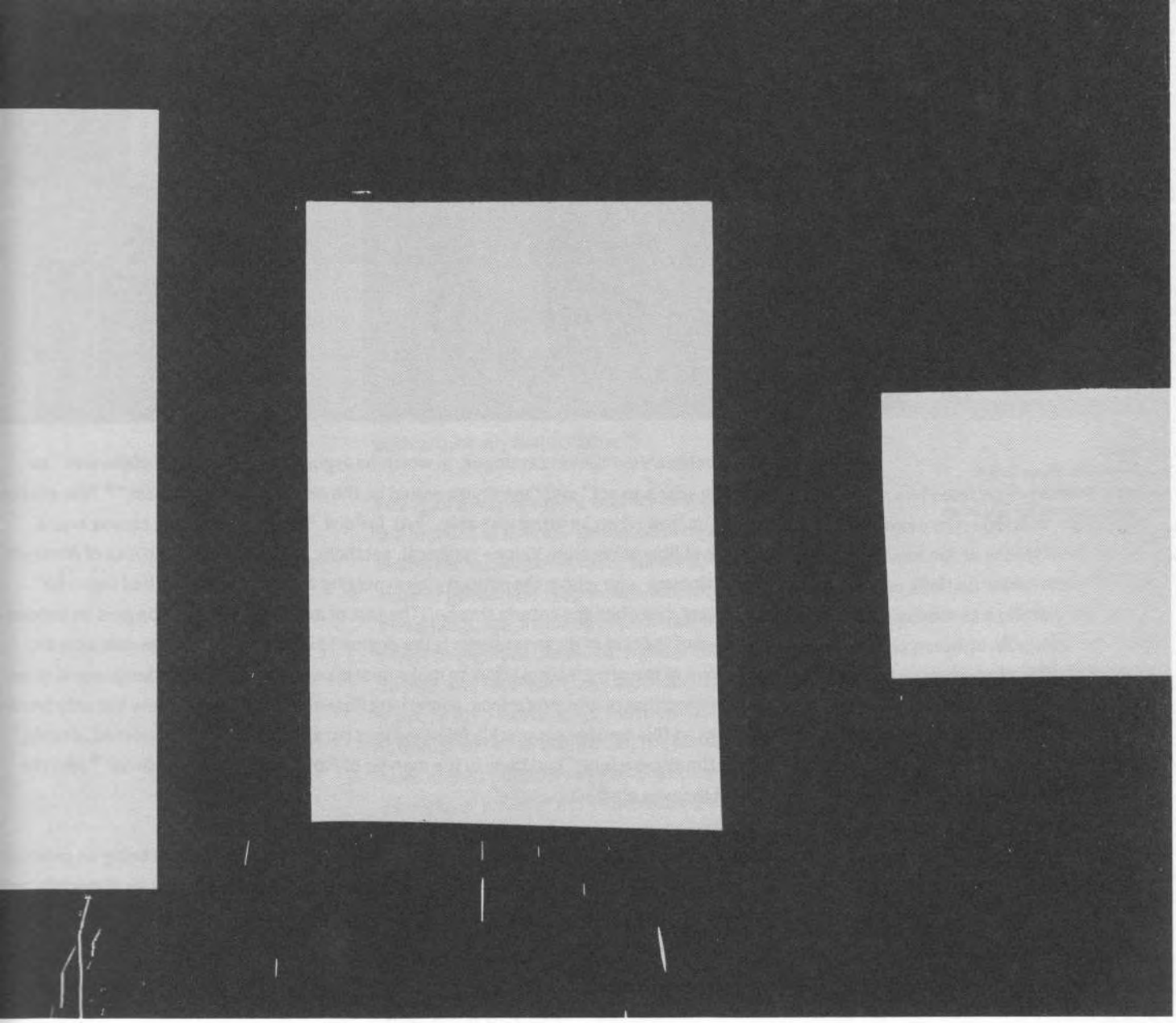
14
Ibid., 344.

15
Ibid., 346.

16
Ibid., 347.

17
Hayden Herrera, *Joan Snyder: Seven Years of Work*, exh. cat. (Purchase, New York: Neuberger Museum, State University of New York, 1978), 2.

18
Maureen Mullarkey, "Following Her Instincts: Joan Snyder's Womanart at Alexandre Gallery and Betty Cuningham Gallery," *New York Sun*, 18 November 2004. Available online at http://maureenmullarkey.com/essays/snyder.html.



Heilmann
the Last Dance for Me, 1979
ic on canvas
oo inches
te collection

belong, at the deepest level—the level of language, of procedure, of presuppositions about world-making—to the bourgeoisie who paid for it and took it on their travels?"[19] His answer, as one might presume, is "pretty fully." For Clark, "Abstract Expressionism...is the style of a certain petty bourgeoisie's aspiration to aristocracy, to a totalizing cultural power." (Certainly this account helps to explain how it made it into an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art so quickly.) He continued: "It is the art of that moment when the petty bourgeoisie thinks it can speak...the aristocrat's claim to individuality. Vulgarity is the form of that aspiration."[20] How else, Clark seemed to imply, could the shit browns, bruised yellows, and rococo pinks combined with the swashbuckling flings of housepaint and the smarmy smears of impasto

19
T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999), 374.

20
Ibid., 389.

have migrated from the bohemia of the studio into the living rooms of Park Avenue, unless they were thought to be expressions of radical individuality? What is deeply interesting about Clark's account of Abstract Expressionism is how seriously it takes the living room as a site of its reception—the seriousness, that is, with which it takes domestic space, the traditional province of women, being the site of her display of self, of family, of ideology (of the problem that has yet to be named "the problem that has no name"). Clark implied the artists were well aware of their place: "And above all it can have no illusions about its own status as part of that upholstery. It is made out of the materials it deploys. Take them or leave them, these ciphers of plentitude—they are all painting at present has to offer. 'Feeling' has to be fetishized, made dreadfully (obscenely) exterior, if painting is to continue."[21]

What happens to Clark's formulation if we substitute women for the petty bourgeoisie? Were women artists operating within the paradigm of Abstract Expressionism speaking a claim to individuality and personal expression that critics could not help but find threatening, perhaps even vulgar? And did some of the women involved in this enterprise perhaps stage this dilemma—unconsciously or not—in the works themselves? Such that Snyder's strokes look like the work of a crazed censor. Or that Pindell had to first destroy her own drawings with a hole-puncher before reassembling them into a complete work. Or Heilmann, who re-imagines Kasimir Malevich's black square as a pink rectangle that threatens to slink off the canvas. Might all of these gestures have about them a bit of canny knowingness? Far from the "pure" expressivity of their Abstract Expressionist forebears, these works instead seem to know that while the personal is political, its expression alone does not guarantee its success; indeed it might be emblematic of a kind of failure or vulgarity.

As fecund and successful as Abstract Expressionism might have been, many artists were suspicious of its overwrought emotionalism (perhaps the vulgarity?) and turned (and returned) to the more cerebral ground of the grid. This was especially the case as the grid remained a protected fiefdom where painting was still permitted and valued by the avant-garde (both artists and critics) of the 1960s and 70s. Its practioners were able to trace a lineage back to Malevich and Piet Mondrian, and its hold on the aesthetic imagination and practice of the day was complete. It dominated what little painting was still deemed important, and it was used as a trope or structural device in much Conceptual art, such that the perversity of the grid as a structure meant that it was used equally by Agnes Martin and Eleanor Antin, Ad Reinhardt and Gilbert and George, Andy Warhol and Louise Nevelson. The list is seemingly endless.

The grid was also subject to a critical enumeration. John Elderfield wrote a zeitgeist-defining article called "Grids" for *Artforum* in 1972 (in which both Snyder and Heilmann were singled out for commentary). So too, Lippard, in a catalogue essay for a 1972 exhibition called "Grids," wrote: "Perhaps by coincidence, perhaps not, many of the artists who have drawn from the grid's precise strains a particularly unique interpretation are women."[22] She too singled out Snyder for special consideration. Rosalind Krauss was to write the most persuasive and analytical text on the subject. In her 1978 article "Grids," she stated: "The grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."[23] And yet, like all structures, it contains within it the traces of historical forms. So, on the one hand the grid signifies the infinite space of art's autonomy and on the other the symbolist window. She went so far as to say that "behind every twentieth-century grid there lies—like a trauma that must be

21
Ibid., 397.

22
Lippard, "Top to Bottom, Left to Right," in *Grids*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1972), excerpt reprinted in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 68.

23
Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids" (1978), reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), 9.

repressed—a symbolist window."[24] Part of how this trauma manifests itself is the dialectical movement of the grid—both centripetal and centrifugal. The centripetal grid spirals inward, making the frame the content, establishing a quasi-spiritual realm in which art is utterly autonomous, a space for visual contemplation (Martin). The centrifugal model spirals outward, addressing the world and its structure (Warhol). And yet the grid always contains both modalities, such that Martin's paintings are also about the horizon and the sea, and Warhol's are about the unremitting flatness of the picture plane.

Snyder, Pindell, and Heilmann all deployed the self-expressivity, and perhaps the vulgarity, of Abstract Expressionism, and in so doing toyed with the vexed notions of quality that plagued the gendered criticism of the period. Yet they did so while simultaneously exploring the stringency of the grid's refusal or renunciation of language. And they actively took up the depersonalized structure of the grid when the rallying cry of the feminist movement of the 1970s was "the personal is political." The paintings they produced within this framework seem to stage some of the tensions and impossible contradictions enumerated above. Situated between the vulgarity of Abstract Expressionism and the dialectical nature of the grid, between the putative failure of painting and the medium's historical dominance, between the potential of feminist liberation and the entrenched nature of patriarchal power, the paintings of Heilmann, Pindell, and Snyder court notions of failure and abjection; they are rife with ambivalence. In this seeming miasma of theoretical and historical frameworks, many of these paintings have slipped through the cracks of canonicity—not only because they were made by women, but also because they are a bit like what Roland Barthes once called a "message without a code." For Barthes, the medium without a code was photography, but much of his language describes why paintings by Heilmann, Pindell, and Snyder are so difficult to place within the narratives of postwar art offered by most museums and art history textbooks.

For Barthes, the "message without a code" was an image that presents itself as purely denoted (rather than connoted) meaning, in which "the image no longer *illustrates* the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image."[25] Certainly, this describes the situation of criticism with regards to both Abstract Expressionism and postwar use of the grid. Barthes went on to say images that embody this kind of "pure denotation" are "perhaps not at the level of what ordinary language calls the insignificant, the neutral, the objective, but, on the contrary, at the level of absolutely traumatic images. The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning."[26]

The difficulty of interpreting or reading abstraction was hardly a new one, but certainly the wake left by Abstract Expressionism and the decline of painting's prominence made it even harder to do so. That abstraction would be taken up by women who were also invested in feminism seemed to augment this difficulty, partly because of the gendered language used by critics, partly because the artists themselves were carving out new terrain for what their art might mean, that it might in fact be personal—emphatically so, especially as the personal

24
Ibid., 17.

25
Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" (1961), in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 25.

26
Ibid., 30.

was being contested as being not purely that but political (and public) as well. Oddly, what was public, or political, in these personal gestures was color—particularly abject, vulgar, or gendered hues. Or, to be more precise, these artists explored how *even* color is gendered. The other public dimension of these works was the structure of the grid. Emblematic of modernism, the grid had evolved into the primary signifier for modern art—its coolness, its detached position from worldly concerns, its refusal of the everyday as a consummate statement of art's autonomy. Unlike artists like Martin, Jasper Johns, or Ellsworth Kelly, Pindell, Snyder, and Heilmann weren't using the grid as a way to reject the bombastic aspects of Abstract Expressionism. When they crossed the logic of the grid with that of Abstract Expressionism—these two seemingly antithetical modes of modernism—they created an instance of Barthes's message without a code—a denotative image that courts the traumatic inasmuch as it sits outside of language, particularly the critical languages developed to discuss Abstract Expressionism on the one hand and the use of the grid on the other.

Howardena Pindell in her studio on West Street, New York, 1972

While I don't want to contend that the paintings at hand are exclusively traumatic, I do think that the near-perfect silence surrounding Pindell's paintings from the 1970s, the outright hostility engendered by much of Snyder's work, and the lack of substantive critical and museological attention paid to Heilmann speaks to some kind of repression or inability to process the complication of both the images and the discursive field within which (as enumerated above) they were made. On the other hand, the silence (and repression) seems thorough enough to warrant trauma—especially as it is an almost organic point of contact between Krauss's essay on the grid, Barthes's on the photographic message, and Phelan's on feminist art. It cannot be a mere coincidence that all three theorists resorted to the idea of trauma as a means to express what was happening in image-making after World War II. Certainly each writer's use of the term carries a markedly different valence, but the point of contingency merits noting, particularly given the notorious difficulties posed by the category of feminist art, much less feminist abstract painting. While it is traumatic to be outside of language, for many feminists it was equally traumatic to be inside of it (I understand painting here as a kind of language).

Increasingly, I have come to understand the struggle to ascertain the "value" of these paintings (are they "good"?) as bound up with their disturbing use of abstraction and cloying use of color. So too the struggle to interpret these works (what do they "mean"?) is part and parcel of a simultaneous inhabiting and disavowal of the modes or languages of painting under patriarchy and, then more to the point, of patriarchal painting under the siege of feminism. In the end, the struggles for art's meaning and human equality converge in art made by women under the umbrella effects of feminism. Indeed, the struggles for the continuation of modernism's utopian promises and the idealistic promises of modernity—the failure and the absolute necessity of such idealistic pursuits—is splayed across the paintings of innumerable women artists in ways that are still radically difficult to account for or narrate, so much so that the paintings have yet to find their rightful place on the walls of permanent-collection galleries of that other great institution of modernity: the art museum.