This is the third, previously unpublished version of "an endlessly revised essay," that Amy Sillman started in 2009, during a residency at the American Academy in Berlin. The first version was published in The O.-G., *v. 1, "Zum Gegenstand / Das Diagram" (2009), that Amy Sillman elaborated in parallel with her solo exhibition,* Zum Gegenstand *at Carlier-Gebauer, Berlin, May 2–June 13, 2009; the second in* The O.-G., *v. 1–2, "American Edition" (2009), published on the occasion of a presentation of drawings by Sillman at the Sikkema Jenkins booth, Art Basel Miami Beach, 2009.*

Notes on the Diagram

In this sense, a subject is "a nothingness, a void, which exists". (Lacan)
—SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *ORGANS WITHOUT BODIES*[1]

A virtual particle is one that has borrowed energy from the vacuum, briefly shimmering into existence literally from nothing.
—DAVID KAISER, *AMERICAN SCIENTIST MAGAZINE*[2]

The Higgs boson is apparently the most powerful particle on Earth, but it has never been seen.
—WIKIPEDIA ARTICLE ON THE HIGGS BOSON[3]

Look who thinks he's nothing.
—PUNCH LINE OF A JOKE ABOUT A PRIEST AND A JEW

One paints when there is nothing else to do. After everything else is done, has been "taken care of", *one can take up the brush.*
—AD REINHARDT, "ROUTINE EXTREMISM"[4]

I can swim like everyone else, only I have a better memory than them. I have not forgotten my former inability to swim. But since I have not forgotten it, my ability to swim is of no avail and in the end I cannot swim.
—FRANZ KAFKA[5]

What happens next? Of course, I don't know.
It's appropriate to pause and say that the writer is one who, embarking upon a task, does not know what to do.
—DONALD BARTHELME, "NOT-KNOWING"[6]

1. Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2015), 61.

2. David Kaiser, "Physics and Feynman's Diagrams," *American Scientist* 93, no. 2 (March–April 2005), 157. The article focuses on the role, in quantum electrodynamics, of the diagrams introduced by physicist Richard Feynman in 1948 to represent the mathematical expressions describing the interactions of subatomic particles. [Editors' note]

3. Obsolete joke! (Dating back to 2009 and the second version of the essay.) The Higgs boson was eventually "seen" at CERN in 2012. [Editors' note]

4. Ad Reinhardt, "Routine Extremism" (n.d.), in *Art-as-Art. The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991; first edition, New York: Viking Press, 1975), 127.

5. Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, trans. Ernst David Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 297.

6. Donald Barthelme, *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme*, ed. Kim Herzinger (New York: Random House, 1997), 11.

In 2009, I got a grant to live in Berlin, arriving with barely any German language under my belt. An old friend, who seemed in the know, warned me: "German is a *spatial* language." I have no sense of space, so it sounded ominous. I got what she meant fast at my first German lesson, when they said that in German you can't just ask "where?"—you have to specify where *to* or where *from*. And German grammar went on from there, a thicket of specificities. And German history was a veritable morass. I was an American: I hadn't read Hegel or Schlegel! But once I got into it, I went into an accelerating state of diagram fever, going a little crazy thinking about how everything in the world is a diagram. I took a seminar on diagrams at the Freie Universität with Danish diagram expert Frederik Stjernfelt;[7] I got new diagram study-buddies, my mind stretched out with increasingly dizzying interconnectivity; everything started to make a weird kind of sense, and I got it: *everything was related to everything else*. The Enlightenment, Romanticism, Symbolism, modernism, Bad Painting, it was all locatable on one big map. I also sheepishly realized that I was probably the *last* person to figure this out—that this diagram thing had already been laboriously theorized by many others. But thinking about the diagram liberated my work. Abstraction itself suddenly seemed like one big diagram of moving time and space. The process of making something go away from "realness" to abstraction seemed like a big memory-diagram—things seen and then registered in the mind's eye undergoing a process of being stripped clean, or becoming a bit tattered and distorted

7. Frederik Stjernfelt is notably the author of *Diagrammatology: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Phenomenology, Ontology, and Semiotics* (Berlin: Springer, 2010). [Editors' note]

as they move off into your past. I was planning an art show at the time, and I also thought, if everything is everything, then why not hang things all together: satirical diagrams next to figure studies next to abstract paintings? I would just need some way to explain it all, a kind of translation device. And what is a zine if not a slapdash chance to present one's own epiphanies? And what is a diagram, but a way of holding disparate ideas together?

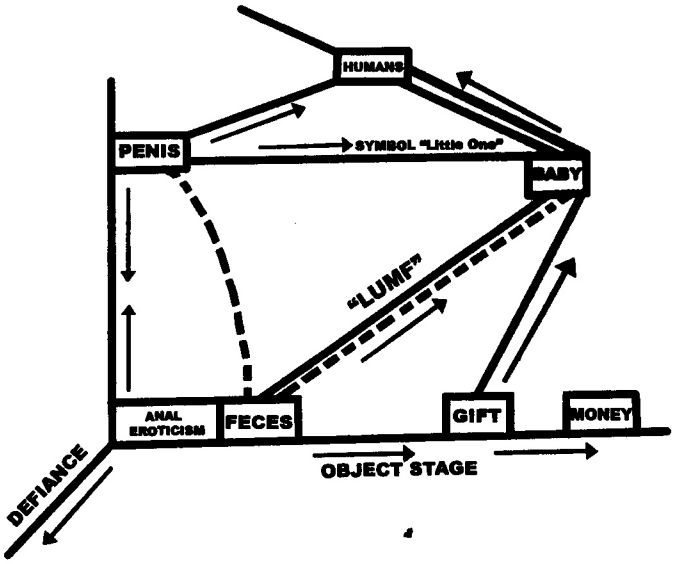
So I began planning my exhibition with everything in it, from abstract paintings to comical seating diagrams,[8] to figure drawings to a zine on a table. Let jokes *be* paintings, paintings *be* memories, and memories *be* meaning. I decided to write an essay about diagrams for my first zine (and I've been slowly adding to it ever since).

Diagrams are great because you can put anything in them. No wonder they have been so useful for generations of kooks, mystics, Cubists, ecstatic poetics, Dadaists, Futurists, and weird scientists. A diagram is a perfect visual schema for posing impossible things, invisible forces, enigmas like the future—all posed as perfectly plausible vectors. The diagram even outdid the camera as the early twentieth century's best new thing because it could depict things in the universe that exceed the eye, like particles, waves, and quarks. A diagram's scale is endless. It can indicate how dwarfed we are by the universe, or how busy the microscopic world is, all mapped out on the back of some envelope. Tides, black holes, white dwarfs, red rings around Saturn, crazy particles, the waves of the Big Bang, all teleporting

8. Sillman refers to the *Seating Charts* series she started then: see "Having a Voice," page 34, and the drawings reproduced pages 139-43. [Editors' note]

around in unstable ways, all this stuff and how it interacts can appear equally on the diagram, democratically, like the pedestrians in Times Square or the people in a Saul Steinberg cartoon all walking around together. The diagram's arms, its vectors, embrace everything at once. Parts are not distinct from wholes, and divisions between aesthetic formats don't have to exist. Diagrams aren't medium-specific: everything is a continuum; everything is relational. In this sense a diagram is utopic, showing how things *should* or *might* go, re-envisioning things expansively, not merely describing them categorically. It can include contradictory grammars, fragments, part-objects, nouns *and* verbs, acts *and* objects. As a painter, I was on solid ground, then, because I already knew that paintings are both things *and* events. And one of the first things artists learn is that scale and size are different. Scale is relational, whereas size is just measurement. Likewise, a mere page in a notebook, a flimsy joke, a drag act, can change the world. My own life was altered definitively by the aesthetic detonating charge of a confessional 16mm George Kuchar film, *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966) in which an erstwhile filmmaker from Queens tries in vain to complete a porn film. It affected me way more than beholding the majesty of the Pergamon Gate, or beholding the Mona Lisa. (Likewise, in Freud's famous diagram, the idea of a Baby holds the same valence as Shit!) Any little thing, impure as can be, can change your life.

My favorite diagram thinking was about painting and language: Gilles Deleuze, Charles Olson, David Joselit. In Deleuze's book on the painter Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*, the very concept of the diagram is an action, not a thing but a moment, a moment of transformation. Perhaps inspired



by the visual portals, stages, and furniture that Bacon sets his figures against, Deleuze's "diagram" is his way to describe the action of Bacon's figures as they transform agonistically.[9] David Joselit's essay "Dada's Diagrams," describes diagrams as a kind of container, a come-one-come-all structure for representing the polymorphous perversity, the rupture, of the early twentieth century: "Far more important than [Francis] Picabia's adoption of a vocabulary drawn from industry in his 'machine drawings' is the model of polymorphous connectivity between discrete elements that these works deploy in order to capture the uneven economic and psychological transformations and

9. See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981), trans. Daniel W. Smith (New York & London: Continuum, 2003); in particular chapter 12, "The Diagram," 99–110.

the jarring disequilibrium characteristic of modernity."[10] The poet Charles Olson's manifesto from 1950, *Projective Verse*, also describes a kind of spatial diagram of action.[11] He imagines language as a set of something like arrows—utterances as projectiles that ride out of the poet's mouth and land in the world, demarcating a sort of invisible forcefield. This kind of invisible language-force might be subtle but it's big: the relational aesthetics of language as a force.

I always felt that what made the painter Ad Reinhardt great wasn't the otherworldly clarity of his abstract paintings (I wasn't really that into the religious way that people would gasp when they finally SAW the colors); it was the fact that alongside his austere experiments with pure color and structure were his diagrams about the art world, which included puns, mockery, and sarcasm. It was the split of his greater whole, the parts mapped together, neither his solemnity nor his jokes, but the passage between such states (and, in between those two, his deadpan slide-show presentations of shape-forms). When I realized the larger diagram of his work, I realized that what was great was his circulation system, an economy of high and low parts given equal value. I had never been able to resolve the two coasts of my own sensibility, my love of cartoons with my love of serious-minded abstraction. But diagrams made me realize

10. See David Joselit, "Dada's Diagrams," in *The Dada Seminars*, ed. Leah Dickerman (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2005), 232. Joselit focuses on works by Picabia that were published in the pages of Dada journals such as *291* in 1915, and *391* in 1919. Fragments of the essay, annotated by Amy Sillman, were reproduced in *The O.-G.*, v. 1 and v. 1–2, accompanying the first and second version of "Notes on the Diagram." [Editors' note]

11. See Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). Olson insists on the "kinetics" of the poem with the idea of "composition by field": led by the breath and the ear, the poet transfers energy to the reader. See also "Some Thoughts on John Chamberlain," pages 190-91. [Editors' note]

that they were related, constituted precisely by the interactions between them. All the good funny modern art (like Daumier, Guston, Reinhardt, Beckett) was tragicomic. Making art came from the same psychic pneumatics that Freud mapped out as the origin of jokes: distillation and compression. The joke work, the dream work, the art work: all of these were ways to cope. Ways for the mind to grasp what it has seen, moving it from the optic nerve to the mind's eye as it moved from the present to memory, via abstraction. Jokes were the bailiff of high art, getting it out of its cramped quarters, and providing skepticism so you didn't love it *too* much.

At first I was in this love affair with diagrams. Weren't they wonderfully inclusive models of multiplicity, contradiction, and change? Weren't they democratic? That was before I read Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's sobering essay on Eva Hesse, "Facing the Diagram."[12] In his more critical eyes, the diagram was also a manifestation of social conditions, a state of quantification, surveillance, and bureaucracy. Diagrammatic works like Duchamp's *Network of Stoppages* (1914) or Hesse's drawings from 1966–67 therefore also registered "the total subjection of the body and its representations to legal and administrative control."[13] This diagram was not my protagonist! Was the diagram also a form of violence? Was the flip side of the feeling of the "authentic" body always bounded by the "externally established matrix" of conditions?[14] Was the body even possible

12. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram," in *Eva Hesse: Drawing*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (New York: The Drawing Center; New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 117–51.

13. *Ibid.*, 119.

14. *Ibid.*, 117.

without the conditions surrounding it? Oh god, Buchloh was probably right—I had been filled with euphoria, but the diagram and painting were linked, and in the bad sense: the same problematics that I had faced in painting were back to haunt me with the diagram.

Postwar painting, which I loved, was riddled with the same problems. It was the same sentimental stuff that Ad Reinhardt was attacking with his diagrams, with his stubborn refusal to be boxed in. When I first learned about AbEx painting as a student, I had felt liberated by it, not oppressed—the way it located thinking as something you do with your body—the way that by including the body in intelligence, you were attacking something. I felt that gesture painting was done with a kind of political body, maybe akin to the poets and their projective verses. I went for the idea that gesture painting was a form of expression lying *between* language and image, an utterance that implicates the maker, along the lines of "the personal is political." I got out of the AbEx-by-genius-men problem by seeing how many women painters there were, how many great painters of color there were, and thought the problem wasn't the art but the art history. Art history was wrong. Critical theory didn't seem wrong but I got out of the commodity problem by focusing on drawing, not painting. Could I also get out of the diagram-as-control problem by thinking about the way a diagram makes you think? Could emancipatory possibilities exist in new thinking? Could instrumentalization be defeated? Could diagram-thinking/studio practice/painting go "beyond control"? I felt intuitively that the answer *had* to be located in some way in something messy: accidents, negations, a spill, some excess found on the floor, some physical inexplicability,

the idea of desire, urges, pleasure, which I thought was exactly bound up with the not-knowing part of the art-making process, the drawing process as entirely separate from value-formation. This was not utopian, it was just practical: thinking and hoping that exactly where those arrows of *Projective Verse* land, is where something like being and life can be felt. As in Emily Dickinson:

I am alive—I guess—
The Branches on my Hand
Are full of Morning Glory—
And at my finger's end—[15]

At finger's end, beyond the graph, off the chart, in the realm of not-knowing, lay the weird unformed excess, the *chora*, not *information*.[16] The fact that I don't know what word will come out of my mouth next, exactly, when speaking a sentence, or what jerky motion I'll make when taking a step, or whether I'll continue living past the bus stop at all, made me turn to the idea of improvisation as a kind of conscientious reminder of how fragile everything is, how unstable and unknowable. The diagram's best form, painting's best aspect, seemed to lie in its unknowns, its silence, its way of not working out, or being at

15. Emily Dickinson, "I Am Alive—I Guess" (ca. 1863), in *Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them*, ed. Cristanne Miller (Cambridge, MA & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 276.

16. A concept elaborated by theoretician Julia Kristeva (who took the word from Plato's *Timaeus*) the *chora* refers to a pre-linguistic, non-expressive totality. It is maternal, instinctual, and rhythmic; it belongs to the semiotic vs. the symbolic, which is logical, naming, and castrating. For Kristeva the *chora* plays an essential role in the signifying and poetical process, as it challenges the closure of meaning. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). [Editors' note]

risk, a matter of fate, ruin, or possible resuscitation. Painting was dead, but it surprised me. So, isn't there an end-zone, an off-stage in the theater? The painter Charles Garabedian said making a painting is like purposefully stumbling around in a fog near a cliff.[17] It's a mess of unknowns, beyond diagrammable. So it seemed like the very idea of *knowing* was where the problem lay, maybe. The diagram only shows us the stuff arrayed in a space. The diagram doesn't consider its errors. Therefore, comedy, accident, mistake, is the corrective for the diagram, because it includes everything the diagram can't even hope to establish as a solid: spasms, screw-ups, sabotage, refusal, stupidity, the saggy droop between the vector showing "what you did" and what really resulted. Whatever is incalculable, including the feeling of a mistake. I'd like to see the diagram of that. Failure and dread. That's why I still loved abstraction, because we *knew* it didn't work, that it was a failure, a paradox, a realm of both potential *and* unchartability. David Joselit wrote that the "act of reconnection does not function as a return to coherence, but rather as a free play of polymorphous linkages which . . . remains a central motif of modern (and postmodern) art."[18] Diagrams are failures, paintings are failures, and life is a failure. The diagram can only do so much. The rest is as Donald Barthelme asks, "What happens next?" And then the answer is,

17. "[I]t would be really dull if you just went to the studio and did great work, because it couldn't be great. . . . This is what makes it interesting to be an artist. It's the idea of testing yourself and knowing you can be 100% wrong with each decision, each-brushstroke. The fun is wandering around in the fog, with the cliff nearby." *Charles Garabedian: Twenty Years of Work*, exh. cat. (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1983), 12. Charles Garabedian (1923–2016), an American painter who lived most of his life in Los Angeles, was included in the 1978 show *"Bad" Painting* (see "Shit Happens," note 3, page 146). [Editors' note]

18. David Joselit, "Dada's Diagrams," *ibid.*

"I don't know." That's what a good diagram indicates: that there are things beyond control. ♦