The Grid & The Jester

ON THE TROPE OF THE GRID IN ART

By Paul Michael Smith

When is the appearance of distance merely the effect of an object's vagueness? And when is the sensation of vagueness simply the apprehension of, no matter how fine the weave of your net, someone slipping away? Like nets, we describe grids either by looking through them, at what they encase and structure, or we see what clings to their surface. There must exist an algorithm for determining the fineness of screen door mesh—to avoid the opacity of when it's too tight, or the distraction of when it's too loose—to achieve a seamlessness when effecting a haze. Despite the totalizing appeal of the grid, writ large in high-modern aesthetics, weaves are the only functions of the grid—not the extant objects they are mapped onto. Modernism both hung onto, and was seen through, the grid. Images processed through today's grid don't only approach extant structures, they reformat them. ——————————————————————— Grids occupy even the most banal settings. The bar near my house has erected standing grids with holes nine inches square. A vine grows on them like a trellis, making a short partition between bar patrons and the pedestrians on the sidewalk. Because the vine is young you can still see through this grid, and use it to map out people eating on the adjacent patio—and thus divide, or separate, yourself from the patrons. But the window-screens inside the restaurant are ripped, and those holes disrupt a seamless division of what is outside and what is within. Grids occupy a central role in Rosalind Krauss' theories of modernity: "the grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief."[2] The seminal essay "Grids," published in *October* (1979), traced the tension in modernity between the secular and the sacred—"between the empirical and the transcendental," as David Joselit notes in his text "Mary Heilmann's Embodied Grids" (1990).[3] ——————————————————————— While the grid once possessed these polar qualities, David Joselit carefully outlines a shift in its characteristics as we approach the twenty-first century—the grid becomes a figure *proper*. Turning from Mondrian to 1960s Warhol, Joselit identifies a shift in the grid's dichotomy. The spiritual pole is subsumed within the concrete one, the latter an analogy of the organization of bodies in space, and the distribution of things within it. What modernism tried to empty, contemporary art attempts to fill.[4]

1.1 TERMS OF ANALYSIS

If the contemporary grid is for filling, it follows that we further refine its use as an icon. The work analyzed in this text continues where Joselit's essay leaves off—focusing on several recent instantiations of grids in contemporary art, with an eye towards the way medium-specificity is interrogated by, in, on, and through the grid. Grids are reminiscent of cages or prisons, entrapping the image and becoming architectural in scale. Grids are transformed into indexical gestures and point towards the history of canvas painting. How has the grid warped since the advent of the pixel? Each of these modes is traced through the work of Rebecca Morris, Lutz Bacher, Sarah Ortmeyer, Sam Moyer, and Laura Owens, among others.

2.0 CAGES

If the modernist grid peddled flatness and simultaneity, the effect of works such as Rebecca Morris' *Untitled* (2002), which features unevenly spray-painted grids, impress a sense of distance. Morris' strokes either *hold us back from* the painting or *hold the (landscape) painting down*. The grids become jail bars, and it is their exuberance and vibrancy that is most repressive—the image is arrested—or blinded—in its certainty. ——————————————————————— The restraining closeness of this painting's affect evokes a variety of other grids—fishnets, meshes, or screens—that, putting belief into revelation, give us a powerful sense of constraint. Perspective in painting is always an architecture that holds back the surface so as to acquire depth. Representations of the grid are themselves restrained by the weave of the canvas, while restraining the space of the canvas to create an illusion of depth. This illusion gives us illusory possession over the painting's proximity, and the pleasure of the image is this closeness. Morris' grids restrain vague color fields, their soft background neutrality suggesting that what is held back from us is little more precious than the world, or walls, we live in.

COMPARED TO FACTS WORDS ARE ONLY NETS. WE GO ON HAULING IN WHAT TRACES OF AFFIRMATION WE CAN CATCH.[1]

2.1 CHESSBOARD—CAGE ON THE FLOOR

The architectural inclination of the grid is evoked in strategies by Lutz Bacher, such as her 2013 exhibition at Portikus in Frankfurt, Germany, which features as its main work a giant chessboard, and Sarah Ortmeyer's *GRANDMASTER* series, which uses the grid of tiled floors as chessboards while staging sultry glamor shots of women chess-masters on the walls, as in her 2014 installation at Dvir in Tel Aviv. Bacher's chessboard does not easily demarcate white from black. Instead, the cardboard cutouts and uneasy sculptures (giant chess pieces, a camel, a replica of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, Elvis, a ferocious t-rex) sit on a near-camouflage of many grays. Camouflage patterns can be made from any pixellation of an even surface—these are "lossy images," meaning ones we tried to make bigger (or get closer to), but which resisted resizing and turned their distance into incomprehension. The grid of the pixel, and its subsequent loss, is as common an experience of grids as any other. By situating a

vague-cultural chess game on a vague grid—one with the function not of organization but of confusion—Bacher disperses our usual suspicions of the grid. She is not only locating exterior figures on a chessboard, but locating that same surface as exterior to its own gaming. In a similar way, Ortmeyer fashions the grid as an architectural inevitability—floor-to-ceiling reproductions of women chess champions abstract and obscure the flatness of the space through their scale, while original productions of oversized marble and onyx pawns, knights, and rooks scatter the floor of the installation in clusters. In a grid of this scale, where the whole room is a board, Ortmeyer stages a game uncomfortably situated next to its players.

2.2 GRID AS WALL

Freestanding grids seem a prescient emblem of the present. If the coordinates of the contemporary grid are unfixed, the grid moves around as we walk around it, plotting point lines along and into our usual surroundings, architectural systems seamlessly becoming display mechanisms. ——————————————————— When searching the term "grid walls," the first hit on Google is "Gridwall Warehouse - enhance your retail display space." Unlike the modernist grids Krauss described, whose composition and materials were part of a cohesive whole, the "gridwall" is a purely visual effect when evoking the cognitive mapping and scheming we apply onto peers at art openings, or a purely material effect when used as a frame for the hooking, hanging, and display of merchandise. The porosity gridwalls suggest lets us move from one mechanism to the other, from one side to the other, connecting platforms for playing or sales. ——————————————————— The latter strategy is evoked in another of Morris' works, *untitled (#09-13)*, where gestural, painted marks *hang off* the grid. The painting/grid is not filled, like Warhol, but sparingly populated instead. Similarly, Ortmeyer uses the grid for broader structures of architecture and their exclusions (filliping the austere positive and negative of the chessboard), just as Bacher explores the arbitrariness of the placement of icons on her faux game-board. Morris and, as will be seen, Laura Owens, make rich use of the grid's sales-rack aesthetic in painting. It seems that, no matter the medium, the grid reflexively calls on the medium, through strategies of holding and hanging.

2.3 HANGING OUT, OR, THE GRID AS BRAND

In a 1992 lecture delivered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Yves-Alain Bois said of the 1912 shift in Picasso's work that the grid was "now devoted solely to the syntactic function of linking discrete elements, as a basic structure on which to hook up the various marks."[5] The mirror of this idea of togetherness, of 'hanging out together'—basically structured—is like a slick sales tactic of lifestyle marketing. For Bacher, sculptures hang out, playing themselves on a game of calculation (underwritten by the ordered, but smudged, grid). In Morris' notations, the grid functions as though dredging abstractions from the sea, netting up whatever may wash up on its shores. ——————————————————— Sam Moyer's marble abstractions, such as *Malini* (2015), use a disordered grid to hold slanting planes of marble. The weighty material is arranged as though on display, as though selling its connotations to be rearrange-able in different lights. For Moyer, the surface is simply whatever is set best for sale. The grid is reduced to its most banal—and salient—function, the multifold referents of advertising.

2.4 WINDOW GLASS

In Laura Owens' work around the turn of the millennium, soft, cutesy landscapes and abstractions are thrown into relief as though viewers look through dirty glass. Splotches of color hang on the surface of the painting—here marks, not lines, create an architecture. ——————————————————— Writing on Owens' most recent work, Joanna Fiduccia observes, "the virtual sun is setting."[6] The drop shadow, a feature pioneered by Apple Computer Inc. with the 1983 release of the Apple Lisa personal computer, which separates our world from that of pixels—giving them a correlated space with a sun of its own—is being phased out of computer interface design. Owens isn't ready to let go, as she slips the drop shadow back into her paintings, deftly flattening and shadowing strokes of color. The real-world application of what look like Microsoft Paint gestures come laden with a digital sun. Fiduccia calls these "new gestures for a new body… just as [computer] interface looks to reject its corporeal concessions altogether."[7] ——————————————————— Owens foregrounds corporeality, by muddling the space of our apprehension. If the grid is our most accessible articulation of digital space, Owens makes rich use of the ocular changes it has wrought. In her 2012 exhibition at Sadie Coles, *Pavement Karaoke / Alphabet*, grids appear as paint-tool stroke textures. Here, the grid—belonging to the rigid, gingham, collage, or the classified-section variety—is both a place to hang onto, and a thing hanging onto a surface.

3.0 THE GRID AND THE JESTER

For Owens, grids are applied quickly in strokes or swaths—though the provenance of their digital-looking-gestures is handmade. In Owens' works, the specter of the author's mark begins to undermine the gesture even as it grids it. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's holy trinity of hand, eye, and canvas rests precisely on its 'ungriddability'—one could never seize the gesture and submit it to mapping, dividing, extrapolating, or resizing, as the gesture was supposed to be indexical. This formula was that of pure belief in the painting, without the cover of material. But in an era of "remote-control painting," networks subtend and transfer our work before it even happens.[8] Gestures are now *across* space.

3.1 MAGNIFYING GLASS

Grids on a painting magnify the weave of canvas and linen. Canvas found popularity because it is easier to transport (and thus sell) than panel pictures.[9] Painted grids, then, evoke the very warp and weft of painting, a history determined through the transactions its early-modern form facilitates. In the twentieth century "the grid came to coincide more and more closely with its material support and to begin to actually depict the warp and weft of textiles."[10] For Owens, the evocation of the medium itself with the grid is underlaid with a surface aesthetic, where broad strokes cling closest to our vision. And while Morris either slaps soft abstractions on grids, or blurs our vision with their intensity, Owens uses the tropes of painting to break the grid into display displaying itself.

3.2 FLEX—THE HARLEQUIN

A fabric was recently developed which changes color when stretched. Unlike the lossy jpeg, which creates grids and blurs others by offering a general camouflage out of pixels, this fabric uses the usual confusion to expand—like a sort of

analog vectorized image. ——————————— The harlequin print, associated with its namesake and court jesters, is a pattern resembling a slightly stretched grid. Its failure to be an even grid presumably makes games unplayable on its surface (unlike the perfectly square chessboard). But this fabric vests the wearer with the ability to actualize play in the space before them—in front of the surface, not on it. The grid is thus exteriorized. ——————————— While Morris' grids vacillate between the light touch of snakes-and-ladders and binding, bright jail bars, Owens inserts the grid *into* the gesture, producing endlessly predicative objects. Although occurring on different planes, Bacher and Ortmeyer's chessboards similarly rely on this gesture of the unruly jester—for where is the jester's place in the court of chess? As the one with the quality of *parrhesia*, or the tendency to speak the dangerous truth, the medieval court was structured around the jester as the exception that proves the rule. Perhaps his exclusion from the formal organization of chess has been recouped by these four artists, who locate him as the ordering principle which cuts across the grid, thus letting them disrupt it. ——————————— Though perhaps not as substantive a historical shift as the one Krauss elaborates in "Grids," the no-end-in-sight reverberations of unfulfilled classic modern thought has provided space for certain contemporary artists to recuperate the exclusionary principles that the modernist grid rested on. The contemporary grid is collapsed onto what is gridded, from the grid as cage that holds the painting, to the borderline loss of its legibility through pixelation, to its sales tactics. This grid becomes a specter of medium specificity, which it resists, too. Nets pulling things in often get pulled in themselves.

TITLE PAGE:
Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2012. Acrylic, oil, Flashe, resin, pumice and collage on canvas. 108 x 84 inches. Courtesy the artist / Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne

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PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Lutz Bacher, Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany. February 9 – April 19, 2013.

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BELOW LEFT:
Sarah Ortmeyer, *GRANDMASTER*, Haus Wittgenstein Vienna, 2013. Photo credit: Georg Petermichl. Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery

BELOW RIGHT:
Rebecca Morris, *Untitled*, 2002. Oil and spray paint on canvas. 60 x 60 inches

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FOLLOWING SPREAD:
Sarah Ortmeyer, *GRANDMASTER*, Haus Wittgenstein Vienna, 2013. Photo credit: Georg Petermichl. Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery

1 Howe, Susan. *The Quarry*. New York: New Directions, 2015. 123.

2 Krauss, Rosalind. "Grids," *October* Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 50.

3 Joselit, David. "Mary Heilmann's Embodied Grids (1990)" in Ryan, David, *Talking Painting: Dialogues with Twelve Contemporary Abstract Painters*. New York: Taylor and Francis Books, 2002. 104.

4 "Instead of emptying the grid... Warhol filled it." Ibid., 105.

5 Bois, Yves-Alain. "The Semiology of Cubism," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*. Qtd in Joselit, David, "Reassembling Painting" in *Painting 2.0*. Achim Hochdörfer, David Joselit, Manuela Ammera, Eds. Munich, New York, and London: Prestel Publishing, 2016. 185.

6 Fiduccia, Joanna. "The Shadow of the Virtual Sun," *Spike Art Quarterly* No. 41 (Autumn 2014). 90.

7 Ibid., 99.

8 Birnbaum, Daniel and John Kelsey. "Painting by Remote," in *Michel Majerus*. New York, Matthew Marks Gallery, 2014. 16-18.

9 As Isabelle Graw observes in *High Price*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010. 25.

10 Krauss, Rosalind. "The Grid, the /Cloud/, and the Detail" in Mertins, Detlef, *The Presence of Mies*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994. 145.