

# Even

## Dash, Fragment, Bracket

*by Andrianna Campbell*

Laura Owens's painting *Untitled* (2016) hangs on the wall in "Fine Young Cannibals," a summer show at Petzel Gallery in New York. I had sauntered over here, swimming in the heat in Chelsea; it reminded me of Chandigarh, without the consideration of those makeshift awnings. Somewhere along the way, writing this essay, looking at JPGs of paintings and photographs in a folder on my desktop called "Digital Art," I'd lost track of my argument; I had to see the Owens to be reminded of the physical grain of paint.

In the gallery, my friend Theodore Barrow stands there, akimbo, unfettered by the swampy weather. He's a specialist in 19th-century art history, and he asks me to explain what we're looking at. What real difference is there between these paintings, which are held up as indicative of a "digital" turn in painting, and Robert Rauschenberg's weddings of paint and preexisting materials in the 1950s?

Walking through the exhibition, you see a pixelated image here, a surface bedecked with halftones there. But these hardly make a digital painting, just as the Ben-Day dots favored by Roy Lichtenstein were not constitutive of Pop. What really makes them digital, I suggest to Ted, is how, similar to all contemporary media strategies, they borrow data from the outside world; how they evoke the interface and the transitory sensibilities of digital space through the use of movement, mutability, and organization.

Painting in the west has been traditionally defined by its relationship to the picture plane. If it is concerned with illusionism — think of the crudely phrased "window onto the world" of a classical landscape or an Italian Renaissance painting

— then the picture plane recedes, often into some kind of perspectival image. If it wants to assert the physical dimensions of the painting, then gesture overwhelms the plane, whether via Pollock's lashing splatters, or Fontana's razor blade. Leo Steinberg described Rauschenberg's Combine paintings as a dramatization of this shift from the vertical to horizontal in pictorial space. He saw the artist moving on from constructing paintings as windows onto nature, and making them into flatbeds of process, like stretchers on which the visual noise of culture accumulated. (1) These new digital paintings, in turn, evoke both culture and nature, both vertical and horizontal, and both the window and the process. They manifest these in the act of passing the threshold onto a liminal space where the painterly line and the digital format of the desktop screen play against and inform each other.

Many of the young cannibals on view at Petzel — among them Wade Guyton, Kelley Walker, and other artistic darlings of this kind of practice — employ Rauschenberg's tactic of flatbed printing. (2) But before many of these artists were even born, artists such as Frank Stella, Barbara Kasten, and Jack Whitten laid the groundwork for what we think of as digital space. A new generation of artists has incorporated these techniques in their work as not merely representations of a new digital culture, but, more importantly and enduringly, as a means to figure spatial relations in continuous flux.

Owens's *Untitled* confronts us with a violent amalgamation of schmeared dashes of paint. Matte Flashe colors of vinyl emulsion: chartreuse greens, aquamarines, and Pepto-Bismol pinks extend across a silkscreened background of flat brown and white imagery derived from game apps. The dis-

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inction between the floating, vivid brushstrokes in the foreground and the subtlety of the background is startling. A schmear, as in the act of spreading cream cheese on a bagel, connotes excess: it may come from an impulse to ingratiate, or to indulge. The smeared lines, so fat and textured, do flatter and repulse in person; in reproduction, though, the effect is all but lost. This is, therefore, not a painting bent on reproducing the minutiae of the digital screen. Rather, like the majority of superlative two-dimensional work of this genre, its pronounced lines emphasize the surface in direct contrast to the digitally manipulated, collaged pictures of the background. Pertinent to Untitled is Jean-François Lyotard's notion of art as a cultural object, and more — as “harbor[ing] within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its reception and production.” (3) Those associations, in turn, proliferate in a manner familiar to us from digital culture.

Seeing the surface and the picture simultaneously is a defining characteristic of painting in the information age. The paint acts not only as passage across the surface, drawing seductive emphasis to the material, but also reminds us of the thousands of fragmentary images we all now send and swipe each day. We know the former gestural technique from the history of painting and take for granted the latter. This is why the digital collage appeals to Owens and other painters of her generation as a means to mark the contemporaneity of their painting. (4)

The “material turn” in painting (and photography) in the last decade is a swivel away from rule-driven and conceptual practice and towards a renewed emphasis on tangible elements — line, gesture, plane, spatial abstraction, framing, integration of image with substrate, and evidence of process. This pivot represents a response by artists to the proliferation of “homeless” JPGs and GIFs, the disconcerting immateriality of the digital age, and the challenges they pose to our understanding of space. My neighbor and colleague Alex Bacon, in an earlier essay, wisely mapped out the features of this turn by speaking of a painting's surface, image, and reception. (5) My own terms are dash, fragment, and bracket, and they derive neither from computer programming nor from art history, but from rhetoric. Think of the dash, fragment, and bracket as three different kinds of aposiopesis — a sudden break in speech, for em-

phasis — before crossing the threshold into the space of looking. The dash, fragment, and bracket demand you meet the picture part way. They link the idea of virtual space and the act of seeing the digital in art.

### Dash vs. Dot

Last autumn, when I walked into the Whitney's Frank Stella retrospective, I paid closest attention to the striped paintings of the late 50s, and then the irregular polygons of the 60s, not knowing what to make of everything else. Roberta Smith, the New York Times's co-chief art critic, stood next to me and asked with a smile if I intended to write about the show. When I promptly said no, she said, “Well, what would you write if you wrote about the late work?” I responded, “I would say they were bad.” She changed the topic, mentioned that she had some questions about variations in the Bird series of the late 70s. And then, before she walked away, she asked me, “Bad why?”

There's a lack of coherence in Stella's paintings after 1983. Bulging from the wall, they take an approach to space that is irreconcilable with the balance of classicism, of the Claudian landscape, of Ingres, of Mondrian, and even of minimalism. They are bombastic, scaled for the corporate lobby. Yet something nagged me. A truly mediocre work of art is easy to walk past, but here is something attractive and nauseating, even downright offensive. The colors run amok; painted metal (a Greenbergian abomination) and illogical scalar shifts defy the cool intelligence of avant-garde practice or the irony still prevalent in art today. In the collaged metal pieces of the early 1980s, I could still question whether Stella was expanding the boundaries of painting into object. In the flat space of *Das Erdbeben in Chili [N#3]* (1999), however, I could see Stella thinking about the plasticity of space, about illusionism, about the vagaries of line.

If I had been as familiar then as I am now with the lectures Stella gave at Harvard in 1983, I would have seen that his foray into “bad art” was an intentional leap. Stella spoke about graffiti: not the sophisticated SAMO tags of Basquiat, but the spray paint that wallpapered New York in the 80s. Bad art lacked coherence. “Basically,” Stella claimed, “bad art makes us do more than we want to do.”

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This idea evolved from — of all unlikely sources — an experience while Stella was smoking a Cuban cigar. He wanted to capture the curling smoke rings, which he was not able to do until seven years later. A reporter for *Wired* spelled out how: with multiple cameras, and then using “off-the-shelf programs like Illustrator and Photoshop — and, later, more sophisticated 3-D imaging packages such as form-Z and Alias|Wavefront,” Stella’s studio assistants “turned the complex swirling forms into files and maps.” (6) The artist then printed these files and collaged the smoke rings into the mayhem enacted on the surface of *Das Erdbeben in Chili*. Swirling forms on the canvas are one such indication of the dash, a mark that lacks the elegance of a stroke. It is a splatter, a splash, and/or a roughly adulterated mixture of color that, like a hastily sprayed graffiti tag, has the energy to run across the surface. It is what comes to mind when art historian David Joselit discusses the subjectobject brushstroke, a dual act that is at once an expressive gesture and a component of a system. (7) In a digital composition, the dash is the subjectobject brushstroke in hyperdrive; it forms part of a digital composition; it ruptures the space of the picture plane and forces us to conceive of space anew.

Of course, Stella was not alone in this adoption of the computer as a tool to grapple with negotiations of space. Albert Oehlen’s *Gripensis Posterior*, a computer-generated painting from 1997, also features a white line that crosses the plane of the canvas, both on top of the painting’s other black lines and also behind them. Space is operating in that same irrational way that Stella noticed in New York graffiti, but with repetition and patterning, and with a sharp elegance that betrays advanced technological tools above and beyond the spray-gun.

Today, Trudy Benson’s *Script* (2015), with its five layers of mark-making, is not that far off from Oehlen or Stella’s earlier digital forays. That goopy, thick gray mark highlights a consistency of line rarely achieved in nature. How often is a brush so perfectly cylindrical that the stroke is a seamless circle extended out into an ellipse? In her paintings, when critics recognize “tropes culled from computer-graphics programs,” they are sensing the mechanical, strict character of the dash. (8)

Ken Okiishi’s *gesture/data (feedback)* (2015) goes

further, disrupting the perfection of the digital. Painted gestural lines sit on top of a television screen. The “base” is drawn from old VHS tapes that have been recorded over to heighten their deterioration. Then the artist adds what he calls “a visible digital layer of pixelation, glitch and flattening,” which, despite the brilliance of the screen’s light, still recedes behind the paint. Again, we take the digital, even when it is imperfect or glitchy, as a given. It is the gesture, the dash, that connects the viewing body to the paint and the virtual imaging behind it.

### Fragment vs. Collage

That “Digital Art” folder on my desktop dates to around 2014, the year after Daniel S. Palmer and I co-curated an exhibition, “Decenter,” that looked at abstraction in a digital era. We included Barbara Kasten in the exhibition because of what we thought were vaguely digital traits in her photography. I wanted to leave the whole digital mess behind and focus on my dissertation. But that year, visiting Kasten’s studio in Chicago, the photographer let me look through her papers and showed me photographs that she took in 1985 to advertise word processing software from Quark, then the industry leader in desktop publishing. “Were these photographs analog?” I ask her. “Of course,” she says. I insist, “But the photos that you took for the Quark advertisement, and later for their annual report, were used by the company to brand the aesthetic of digital mutability.” “Yes,” she says. So there was some connection after all.

For many photographers whose work figures in this material turn, Kasten is a hero. When we examine Kasten’s Quark ad, it exhibits two key tropes of today’s digitally mediated pictures. One is a flat fragmentation of objects in space, and the other is a capillary action: the bleed in a field of color. Kasten’s fragments of Plexiglas, sculptures within the image, have their roots in collage. (They also show the influence of László Moholy-Nagy, that early pioneer of multimedia; Kasten herself was trained as a painter, and cites the Bauhaus artist as an influence.) Yet the joining together of fragmentary images, the stenciling and stitching, has become a technique that we understand beyond its analog forerunners and now identify as a trope of the “digital.” We see this in Laura Owens, most clearly, when she manipulates video game graphics with Photoshop.

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Collage, once a 19th-century pastime, and then an avant-garde technique of the Cubists, Dadaists, and Surrealists, is a soldering together of often disparate materials. The discussion around collage is a heated issue in art history, but for our purposes, art historian Rosalind Krauss theorized the collage as “the image of eradicated surface” — one where the fragment reconstitutes a notion of the absence of the signified. (9) Thus the fragment is already in the history of the last century’s avant-garde, valued as a representation of representation itself. It can be skeuomorph: think of the folder on your desktop that resembles a physical manila folder, but is in fact a visual shorthand of a place to store documents with no physical relation to an actual folder. In addition, digital collage is akin to a hyperoperation: one of the infinite mathematical calculations that high-performance processors are capable of, a shorthand for understanding limitless space. Because paper, pencil, rope, etc. bounded the space of avant-garde collage, it always had enclosures. Digital working space does not command enclosure; it is a space of immersion, of masses, and often of an arbitrary distribution of objects. This I deem the aesthetic of “desktop publishing”: a space of mutability, in which unrelated and unfixed fragments come together in a temporary order but evade permanent connection.

Looking at *Charline von Heyl’s Moky* (2013), also exhibited in “Fine Young Cannibals,” I see elements of collage achieved through a panoply of techniques more proper to digital photo manipulation than modernist painting: layering one pattern on another, filtering an image through a mask, or repeating a glyph in the manner of Photoshop’s rubber stamp tool. But more than these, there is an indifferent relationship of each section of the painting to the next. Each element seems chosen with purpose, yet Moky harbors the tension of considered arrangement and the newer, digitally influenced one of happenstance. It is a dualism which, in Picasso’s time, would have been a bit of an impossibility.

The fragment, whether alluding to collage or the reproducibility of images, engenders a feeling of maneuverability in the art object. It could and can be anything, any image, any search result. Often in these paintings and photographs, it is the repetition of the quotidian, broken up and divided, nestled next to one another, that most evokes the stacked

folders on a computer’s screen. The picture plane has become the working space of the desktop.

### Bracket vs. Screen

When I was working on a review of Stella’s retrospective, I spent some time in the studio of Jack Whitten. In our conversation, he pointed me to some early works that he had made with a grant from the Xerox Corporation in 1974. As Whitten notes in an interview, “[we] were invited to Rochester to experiment with their instruments and work with their engineers. And my solution was to expand the gesture while taking my hand out of it... The total picture plane was conceived of as a single line.” (10) Whitten used the Xerox machine’s toner to distribute an even, monochrome surface of dry pigment. He then made marks with a flat scraper. His speckled grey surfaces do more than ape the aesthetics of the early computer screen, though; they bracket a space that allows a media event to occur. (11) Like oily fingerprints on your iPhone tracing your furtive sexting, maneuvers on screens today have a communicative function but also leave a physical trace. In the 1950s, the aesthetic of the screen was one of printing (i.e., screenprint); by Whitten’s time, we move to the communicable image, as enabled by the photocopier and Xerox’s own fax machine. This is the arena of bracketed space.

A painting by Jacqueline Humphries from 2014, whose title is simply { }, is a cunning play on the bracket as punctuation mark and on the bracket as this new working space. In other work from this series, with similarly glyph-based titles such as :) and O, translucent washes of color obscure repeated, stenciled characters. In { }, the patterning of the background is illegible, under a swath of pink; however, the working space of the picture plane becomes inhabitable as we register the idiosyncratic gesture of the color and the humor of using the bracket symbol both to title the work and represent an already bracketed space.

Alex Dodge, in his digitally mapped and then stenciled paintings, explores how making the screen into sculpture can also allow painting to interrogate activity beneath the pictorial plane. *Monument* (2016) is a red polka-dot mass on a light grey background. Although Dodge applies the paint by hand through a stencil, he has clearly rendered the mass in a digital program. The blurred perspective around the

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edges of the mass suggests a depth and speed of warp that does not happen in physical space. If the camera has fooled us into thinking we see as it does, then I find it oddly reassuring that the digital has not done so as yet. On the right, a urine-yellow goop of paint oozes from the mass in a corporeal manner; it is the only part of the paint application that is not squeegeed flat. The mechanical process of the flat-bed printing is like the coolness of hardware, chilly, and seamless. Inside, Dodge's red-and-white mass stands like software: mutable, shifting, and hard to grasp. Bracketing space, that yellow blob summons our capacity to inhabit the action of both worlds.



4. by Dodge, Mercurius 2017. © Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York.

It is another boiling day. I'll never finish this sprawling rumination. Over text and promises of caffeine, I convince Lucas Blalock to come to my side of Greenpoint. He gets an espresso, I order an iced coffee, and we sit in McGolrick Park to talk about photography. We are shaded by what, up until recently, I thought were maples, but the artist Butt Johnson told me are really London plane trees.

I ask Blalock about his recent photographs, in which he uses Photoshop in an intentionally crude fashion to bring elements of the picture to the surface.

"I'm concerned with the sculptural quality of photography," he says, "but always as it exists beneath the surface." I counter, "But isn't the predominant quality of the material turn in photography that it breaks the emulsion? What about John Houck's recent work, where he's painting on the photographs?" So much new photography reaches into the domain of painting, into the gallery space, and even into sculpture. Why is it not merely a painting surrogate? Blalock chuckles, turning to a recent interview he did with Jeff Wall in the magazine *Aperture*. In the park he paraphrased it to me, but here, I'll quote it properly to you:

"In the 19th and 20th centuries, "lower"-genre pictures were less constrained by the social and cultural ambitions that were woven into the structure of the higher types, so they became a less delineated space in which a process of experimentation took place.... Maybe now that there are apparently high genres in photography, the situation has evolved to the point at which it is possible to respond to their presence by moving away from them and, to an interesting degree, repeating aspects of what happened in painting a hundred or more years ago."

So the art photograph, now even further removed from its documentary status, is then able to explore form and materiality in a way that was reserved for painting in the last century. Blalock, now more solemn, turns to me and states that he would find it distressing if we were simply reenacting some of the same crises of modernism. Earnestly I reply, "No, I don't think so. We have different tools than we had a hundred years ago."

We agree on this point. If our predominant understanding of painting is no longer circumscribed by the use of paint, then it is surely time to think of formats instead of mediums. Why is process-based abstract painting — sometimes lumped into the category of "zombie formalism" — being denigrated while the material turn in photography is exalted? Are they that far apart? Aren't they both borrowing from the visual culture of the moment? Remember that Stella used digital tools early on to achieve his reimagined space; Whitten and Kasten, among other artists of the late 70s and 80s, helped to determine some of the aesthetic qualities of graphic user interface in the

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of graphic user interface in the burgeoning information industry — the very graphic qualities that would mature into today's digital aesthetic. When artists today deploy an emphatic materiality in both painting and photography alongside a digital collage, it is usually assumed that they are borrowing from the world. Perhaps they are borrowing from the web, which itself borrowed from art.

If so, then invoking the digital should not be seen as a cynical ploy to prove one's contemporaneity. Painting and photography do seem to be once again invested in what Alex Bacon calls the "material condition of our historical present." And yet the excesses of these paintings and photographs — their dashes, fragments, and brackets — are not merely the output of an endlessly expanding digital culture. They are a bridge to working space, a place of interface. They are what makes us do more.

(1) Leo Steinberg. "Reflections on the State of Criticism." 1968. Republished in *October* 95 (Winter 2001). pp. 27–32.

(2) Cf. Alex Galloway. *The Interface Effect*. Polity Press. 2012. pp. 30–32.

(3) Jean-François Lyotard. "Critical Reflections." *Artforum*, April 1991. p. 93. Emphasis is my own.

(4) For a discussion of the cynicism behind making paintings with allusions to the digital, see Seth Price, *Fuck Seth Price*. Leopard Press. 2015.

(5) Alex Bacon. "Surface, Image, Reception: Painting in a Digital Age." *Rhizome*. May 24, 2016.

(6) Steve Silberman. "Stella." *Wired*, March 1, 1999.

(7) David Joselit. "Reassembling Painting." In *Painting 2.0*, eds. Achim Höchdorfer, David Joselit, and Manuela Ammer. Prestel. 2016.

(8) Stephen Maine. "Trudy Benson." *Artnews*, Summer 2015. p. 94.

(9) Rosalind Krauss. "In the Name of Picasso." In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. MIT Press. 1986. p. 37.

(10) Jack Whitten. "Jack Whitten with Robert Storr." *Brooklyn Rail*, September 4, 2007.

(11) Cf. Michelle Kuo. "Jack Whitten: Portfolio." *Artforum*, February 2012. p. 195.