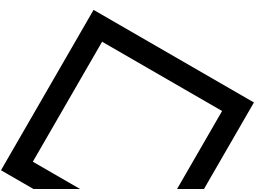


LINDA BESEMER

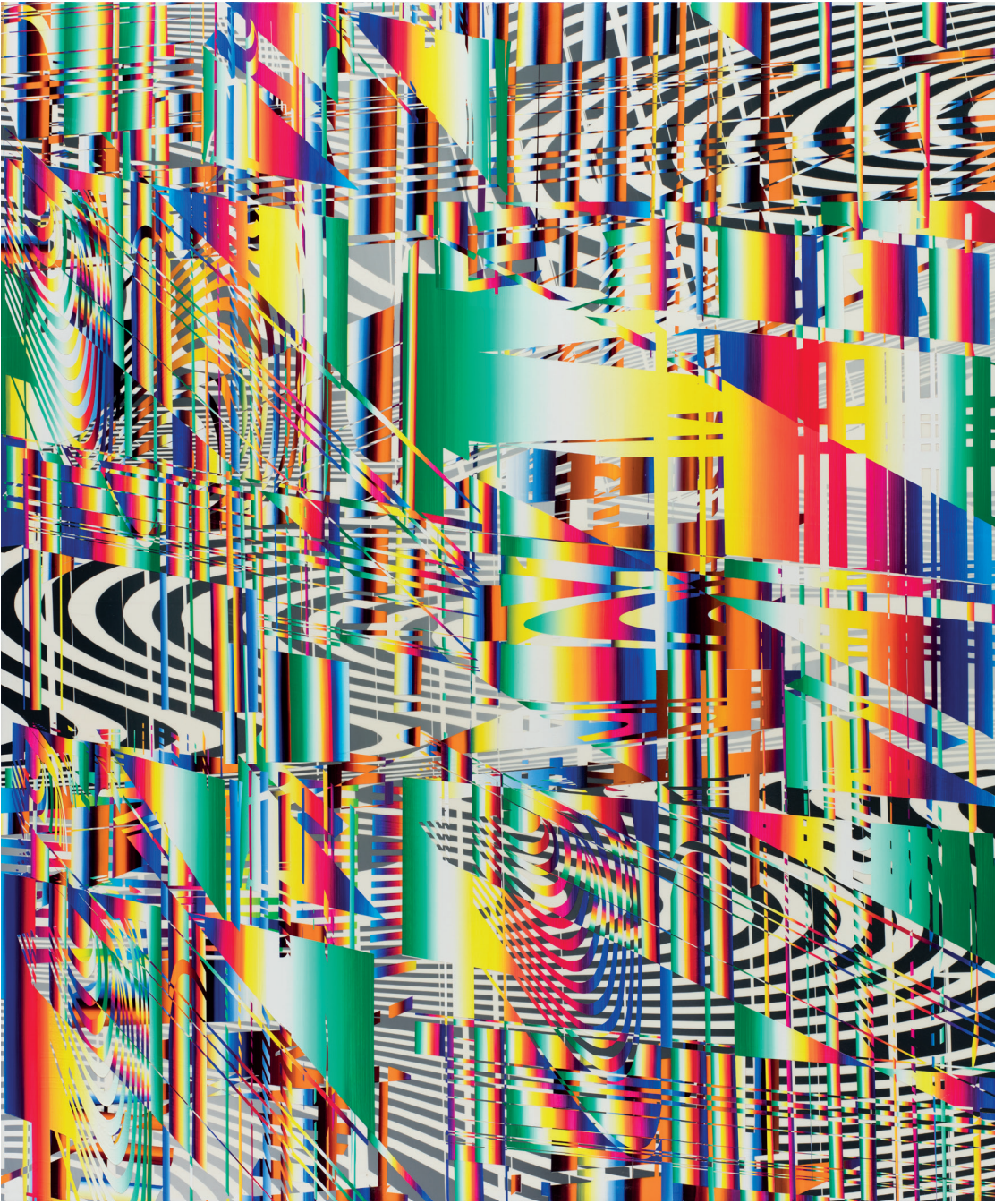
Stroke Roll Folds Sheets Slab Glitch

Edited by
KRISTINA NEWHOUSE

With contributions by
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Glitching OutwithLindaBesemer

LEX MORGAN LANCASTER

WHEN I WALK into Linda Besemer's Los Angeles studio, the panels on the walls seem to pulsate with bright colors and flickering patterns. While I know these are paintings, from a distance they are so precise and smooth that they appear to be digital prints. Moving closer, I notice thick strips of acrylic paint layered and collaged on top of one another. I see color gradients that are visibly hand-painted. Besemer's work is always seductive, but in my experience, the glitch paintings are jarring as well as sensual. In one work, *D+G Space* (2019; FIG. 20; CAT. NO. 17), straight and curving lines build a complex interplay between green, yellow, red, and blue striations—which capture both the synthetic brightness of digital color and the stutter of interference across the “screen”—while rippling black and white curves emerge from behind the irregular pattern. Recurring horizontal shapes cut across and interrupt the surface as planes slip and slide against each other. No framing device contains the glitch, which radiates out in a potentially infinite extension. Scaled at my own body's height of six feet, *D+G Space* destabilizes my physical senses. The act of viewing induces vertigo.

FIGURE 20

D+G Space, 2019. Acrylic on canvas over panel, 72 x 60 in. (182.9 x 152.4 cm). Collection of Palm Springs Art Museum, Gift of Donna J. MacMillan, 2020.20.

Here, I consider Linda Besemer's glitch paintings within the postdigital field of art and scholarship.¹ Besemer does not merely re-present computer error through painting; rather, the artist keeps us *in* the glitch with sustained attention to its indeterminate ruptures, shudders, and rattles. Besemer's "glitching out" offers queer, feminist, transgender methods for undoing normative technologies that control gender and sexuality. This work exemplifies the active material processes that I understand to define queer abstraction, a social and political strategy for generating alternatives beyond the surveilling demand to appear. A queer, nonbinary artist may refuse to "show up" in their work by pursuing abstraction; however, abstraction also offers viewers new ways of seeing and feeling.² Besemer's process of abstracting and intentionally erring (error making) makes evident that the glitch offers new spaces to act outside of limiting representational codes.

GLITCHING IN THE POSTDIGITAL CYBER FIELD

Besemer's paintings contribute to the current postdigital field and related "New Aesthetic" movement (named by the artist and writer James Bridle in a 2011 blog post). Both terms describe late twentieth- and twenty-first-century shifts in our relationship to technology, which greatly affects the production of images and how we see the world. *Postdigital* refers to how we think and live in the wake of digitization and the Internet. As our lives are mediated by computational ecosystems, we have become aware of their power to both liberate and oppress. Scott Contreras-Koterbay and Łukasz Mirocha, coauthors of *The New Aesthetic and Art: Constellations of the Postdigital* (2016), perceive the New Aesthetic as both a theoretical approach and a type of digital imagery that incorporates "an aesthetics of computational miscalculation" and "an eruption of the digital into the physical."³ The glitch, for them, is fundamental to the New Aesthetic because it makes visible the "understory" of software that would otherwise appear as smooth and

transparent as the digital screens on which they appear. Many authors writing about the New Aesthetic in general, and the glitch, understand that artists who take up the digital are making its seemingly opaque operations visible, and making us more conscious viewers in the process.⁴ The glitch is thus a *critical* practice because it exposes and disrupts the precise control of potentially oppressive computer systems.

The glitch is usually experienced as a technological malfunction—a blip—but because its aberrance already resonates as queer (in the sense of something strange or unexpected), its erratic behaviors can be rerouted for antinormative ends. According to the OED, *glitch* developed in American English as jargon for an electrical malfunction, a signal interference, a hitch or snag. Glitch is thought to derive from the Yiddish *to slip* and the German *to glide*. As such, the glitch is not merely a momentary interruption or unstable image, it is a verb, an active movement. It is also an *error*, a term derived from the Latin *to wander*. Wandering deviates from the norm and suggests doubt or uncertainty. As such, the glitch and error have become important for queer, feminist, and/or transgender interventions in art and media. In *Glitch Feminism* (2020), the curator and author Legacy Russell proposes that the glitch (as a critical error and failure to function) is a tool for refusing the binary codes of gender and racial projections that attach to bodies via social technologies. In Russell's cyberfeminist manifesto she identifies the Internet as a creative medium for world building, particularly for queer and BIPOC subjects, where the glitch opens a new politics of the body that slips beyond the surveilling constraints of a two-gender, colonial system.⁵ The artist and scholar Andie Shabbar has produced and described queer glitch art as a disruption of the biometric sexual surveillance technologies of the nation-state. In the essay "Queer-Alt-Delete" (2018) Shabbar notes, "glitch art exploits the instability of technology and harnesses failure as a creative tool to corrupt the familiar."⁶ The media historian Whitney (Whit) Pow positions glitch art as historically

trans, an “unmediation” that disrupts state powers and the computational systems that surveil transgender bodies and lives.⁷ Recognizing that racism, sexism, ableism, and transphobia are already encoded in the very design of our computational networks, critical glitch artists and scholars offer disruption as a way to create new possibilities where the “real” and virtual collide.

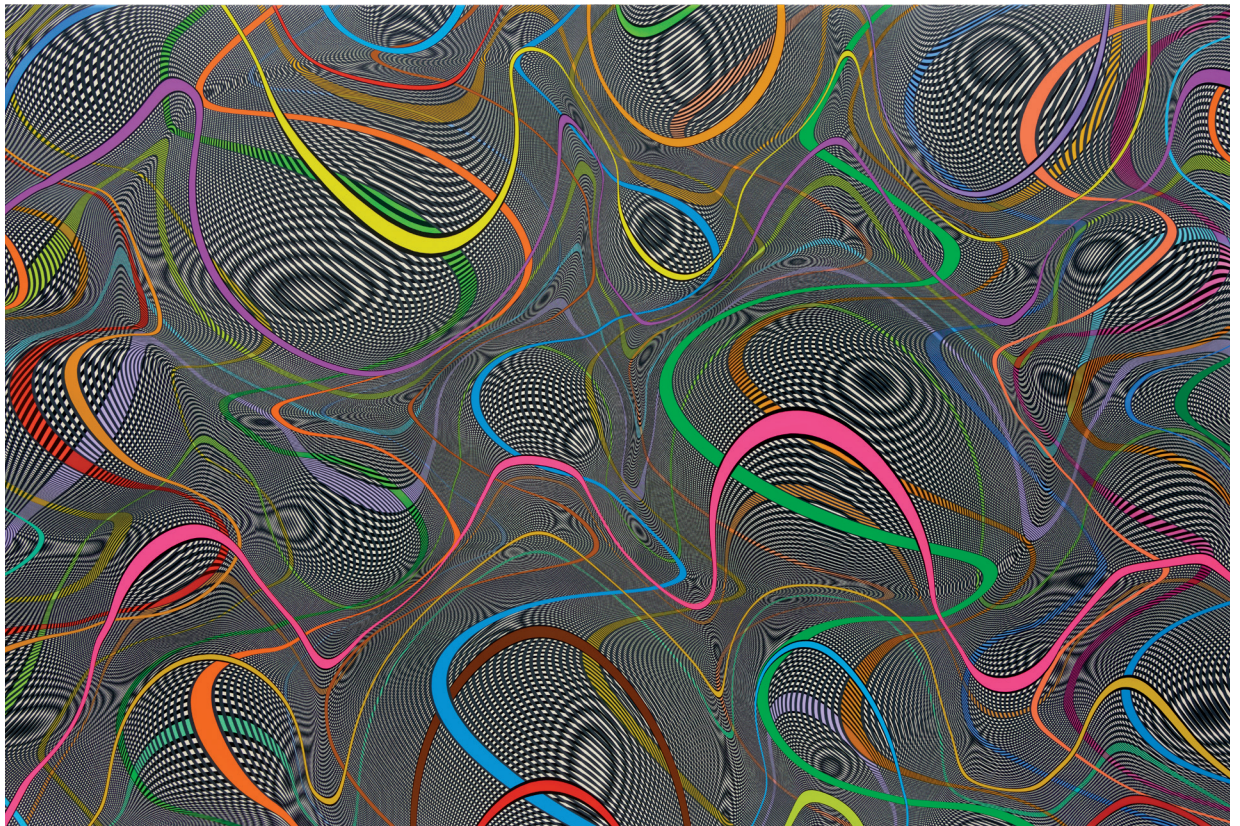
A glitch is a moment of representational breakdown, similar to an abstraction in art. While glitch art is often a manipulation of media that produces immediate and unexpected results, Besemer’s glitching is more deliberate—a sustained working and reworking of digital errors. In this respect, Besemer’s process of abstraction glitches in a mode of erring-as-wandering. The artist is quick to note that the glitch paintings evolved from a bunch of mistakes. While composing bulge and wave paintings with the 3D visual effects software Maya, Besemer’s efforts to create curves pushed the program beyond its capacities, causing the gridded representational space to glitch out. The artist was left with thousands of glitched grayscale and wireframe renderings. Rather than pitching them, Besemer layered these glitches on top of each other, collaging them together and coloring them, using Photoshop ramps to project gradient color maps and stripe patterns onto the static gray. The way Besemer applies color in these drawings and the subsequent paintings is not gestural, but instead mimics how a computer program colors things. Besemer’s genius as a colorist is evidenced by the new relationships established between color and form and the seductively smooth rendering of virtual effects in paint. Even as the end results are paintings, these works begin and evolve via digital means in a process that attests to the artist’s somewhat obstinate relationship to technology.

Like many artists who arrive at a technological medium in a roundabout fashion, Besemer uses it against the grain. Maya is designed to model 3D characters and scenes (as in Pixar movies). Besemer consciously undermines its programmatic mandate to mimic the construct of Cartesian space through geometry. Besemer

used the software to compose *Swoop Wavy Bulge* (FIG. 21; CAT. NO. 14) near the end of a series of layered acrylic paintings in 2013, pushing hard against the virtual grids typically used for mapping animated characters. We can see the underlying grid in crosshatchings of black and white lines, but they are warped into “bulges” that seem to swell up from the surface in undulating circular patterns. (I imagine the humor and eroticism of the “bulge” is not lost on the artist.) These warped, bulging grids are juxtaposed with erratic lines in fluorescent colors, wandering randomly around and through the widening and narrowing lines that would otherwise be consistently parallel in the grid. This fluid movement exceeds the grid’s capacity for control and thereby destabilizes a singular orientation or centralized perspective. Similarly, it evokes the conscious disruption of the function of state control—the grids of surveillance that manage our actual and virtual spaces.⁸ Besemer likes to “pervert the grid,” as the artist puts it, disrupting notions of a fixed geometry or perspective.⁹ It seems Besemer’s use of technology, paint as material, and the element of color have always been excessive in ways that resonate with glitching as a queer, feminist, and nonbinary trans *slippage*, refusing forced codes of visibility in favor of more errant aesthetic encounters.

GLITCHING BETWEEN THE ANALOG AND THE DIGITAL

Of course, the strategies of the New Aesthetic are not new. Their newness has to do with the postdigital context of the twenty-first century in which they evolved. Feminist art scholars might recognize, for example, a longer account of feminist technological trouble and innovations in video art. Besemer’s glitching converses with multiple art histories—Renaissance three-point perspective; modernist formalism, and its contested continuation in contemporary painting; as well as video and digital media art forms—and it brings these histories into relation. To Besemer, the glitch is not inherent in any form or technology, noting its emergence in media across art and visual



culture. While other painters introduce digital aesthetics into their work, I am more interested in glitching as a conceptual activity than as a stable form. I am not thinking of the glitch as merely a type of image or even an aesthetic category, but instead as a strategy or method. Glitching is a process of abstracting to destabilize and make strange that which otherwise seems transparent or neutral, and it causes a friction between abstraction and representation. Putting Besemer's paintings in conversation with three manifestations of glitching in digital media—from Dara Birnbaum, Jamie Faye Fenton, and Amy Sillman—allows us to consider what these paintings add to conversations about technological failure in contemporary art, especially the feminist, queer, and trans motivations of glitching across digital and analog processes.

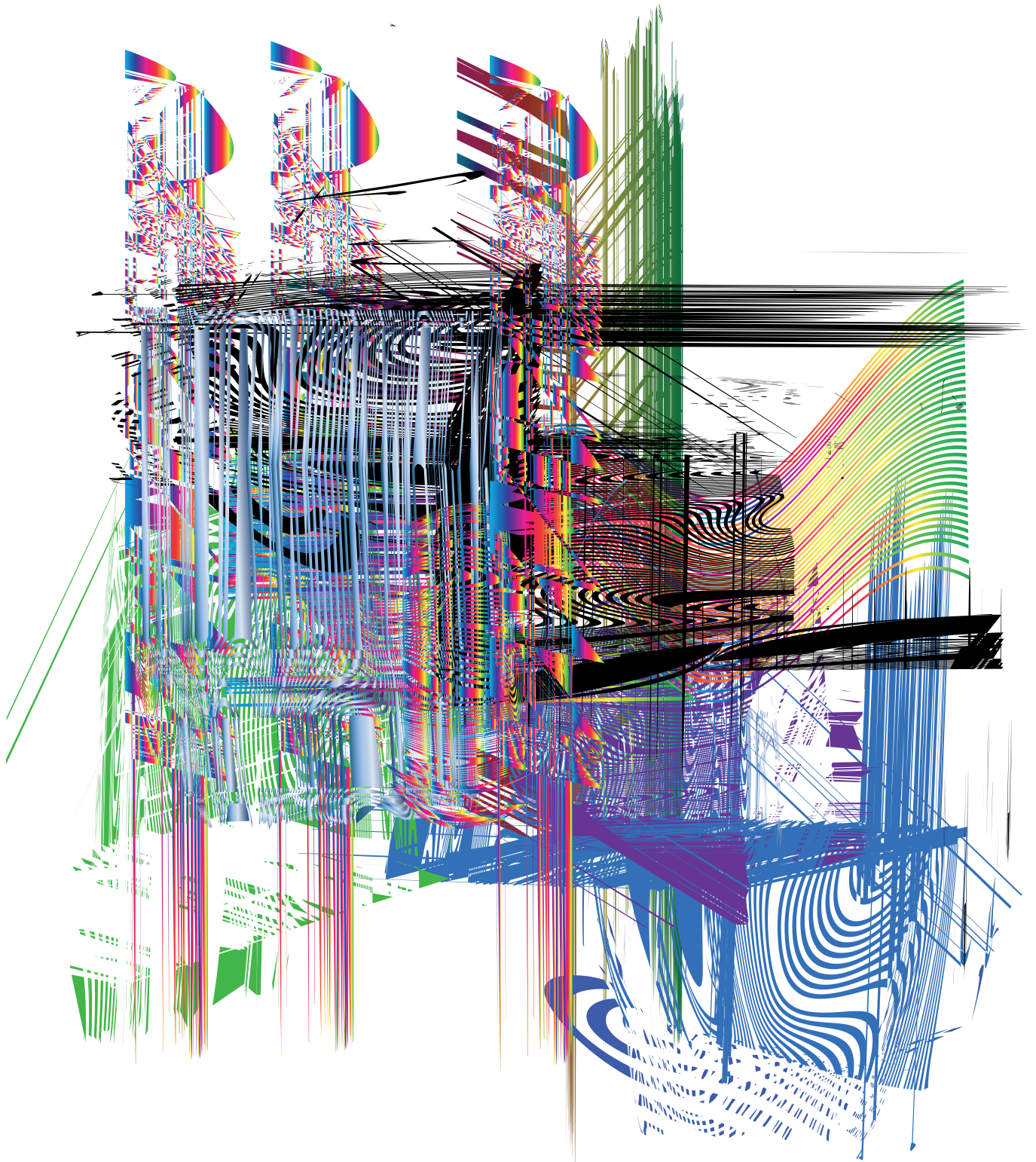
Looking back at feminist video art and digital appropriation, we see examples of glitching as a strategy of image disruption. Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79; FIG. 22) begins with a series of explosions. Fiery blasts and siren



FIGURE 21
Swoop Wavy Bulge, 2013. Acrylic on canvas panel, 80 x 120 in. (203.2 x 304.8 cm). Collection of the artist.

FIGURE 22
Dara Birnbaum, video still from *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978–79. Single-channel video, color, stereo sound, 5:50 min.

FACING PAGE: Maya glitch file from which *D+G Space* (2019; FIG. 20; CAT. NO. 17) was extrapolated. Collection of the artist.



sound effects give way to a moment of transformation—a glitchy repetition—when Diana Prince (the actor Lynda Carter) spins into the superhero Wonder Woman on the 1970s television show. Video-editing technology makes this transformation possible; we don't see Prince transform, because the explosion blocks our view of her body. Birnbaum's canny reediting of ready-made footage makes us even more aware that Prince's image is digitally manipulated. This feminist critique of media gender stereotypes highlights Wonder Woman's performance and reveals it to be *performative*. I think of Birnbaum's work in relation to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity because it emphasizes the *repetitive* processes by which gender is constructed and maintained.¹⁰ When we watch Wonder Woman perform the same actions over and over and over—spinning, running, blocking bullets with her wrist shields—we are increasingly aware of how she functions as “woman” in and through representation, further evidencing the ways in which technology produces us as gendered subjects. When this footage skips and plays on repeat, Wonder Woman is glitching out, her body rendered mechanical and subject to systems beyond her control while at the same time exploding the screen that mediates her image. The explosions become critical moments of abstraction when representation is obscured or made strange.

Although working in a different medium, Besemer similarly uses repetition and abstraction in ways that disrupt normative processes and categories. Besemer's repeating lines and curves create the visual rhythm that I also see in Birnbaum's staccato breakdown of Wonder Woman's actions on screen. Bringing these two artists into conversation helps us understand how Besemer's use of repetition as abstraction also speaks to social repetitions of norms that actively produce categories such as gender and race. Similar to Birnbaum's use of repetition in video to interrogate the truth value of gendered representation, Besemer's abstractions also utilize the disjunctive visual rhythms of the glitch as a social and political

disruption. Even though no person is represented, the paintings speak to a breakdown of those same digital systems that often force representations of difference (or sameness) onto bodies and attempt to force conformance to those ready-made codes. These codes determine, for example, how those animated representations of characters in Maya will conform to gendered and racial norms or shape the binary mis-recognitions of our own bodies when they are submitted to digital media and surveillance. Equally significant, Besemer uses paint to create innovative ruptures and movements within representational digital systems that we can engage with *materially*, away from our keyboards, in lived space. Legacy Russell similarly recognizes the importance of abstraction to a glitch feminism that refuses the “violence of. . . unconsented visibility,” even as othered subjects are constantly erased or misrecognized by mainstream algorithms.¹¹ We are subjects in the world by virtue of our recognizability, which becomes a tool for our subjection. The glitch offers an opening for self-realization somewhere between the violences of erasure and forced visibility. In this way, glitching mobilizes refusal to create new possible patterns of recognition.

Glitching has also been a critical trans tactic of abstraction and failure. One of the first glitch artworks was created by the transgender programmer Jamie Faye Fenton, along with Raul Zaritsky and Dick Ainsworth. *Digital TV Dinner* (1978; FIG. 23A, B) is a video recording of a Bally Astrocade, an affordable, ROM cartridge-based home computer and game console that Fenton designed.¹² To produce live glitches on screen, Fenton pounded the computer with her fist and pressed the cartridge eject button repeatedly while the system was still processing to disrupt the computational system that she herself had coded. The recorded video glitches appear as random pixelated abstractions, scrolls of lines unfurling downward, and a blank white screen with intervening black squares popping in and out, accompanied by the repetitive digital video game soundtrack. These moving patterns make

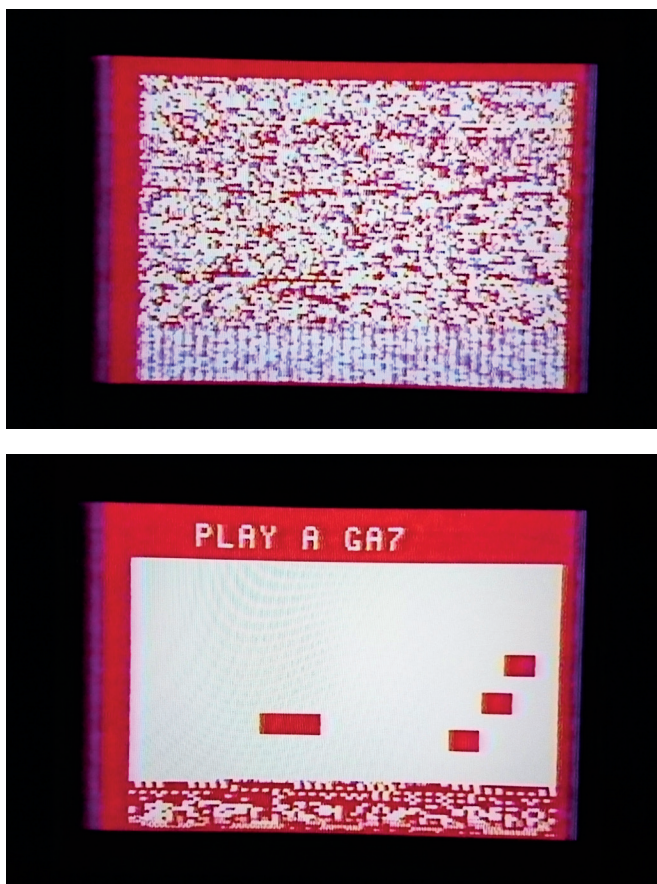


FIGURE 23A, B
 Jamie Faye Fenton, Raul Zaritsky, and Dick Ainsworth,
 video stills from *Digital TV Dinner*, 1978. Video, 2:42
 min.

us highly aware of the screen, which typically operates like a transparent window, and the disruption in the flow of information that it normally delivers.

Besemer and Fenton push things to a breaking point, or the point of breakdown in the ability of their tools to mediate information. Chance is a key element in Fenton's work, as glitches appear randomly rather than in predetermined compositions. Even though Fenton intentionally makes glitches happen, the resulting screen images cannot be anticipated in advance. In contrast, Besemer's glitch paintings are meticulous material renderings, even as their original glitches emerged by accident. Considered together, I notice how glitching operates via total abstraction, resulting from a critical failure to signify according to legible codes and linear informational processing. While we might not normally think of abstraction as failure, Fenton and Besemer show how abstraction can be a *willful* failure to resolve, for example, a coherent figure (an image of a body) in binary-gendered, racial, ableist, or otherwise normative forms or narratives. Besemer notes the glitch is "synonymous with failure; a literal material failure of technology to function, as well as a semiotic and ideological failure to achieve normative or hegemonic classifications."¹³ As a conscious process of failing, glitching is particularly interesting in the context of gaming. Fenton's glitches sometimes appear below the term *PLAY* and the phrase *PLAY A GAME*. Beyond the refusal to "show up" in the work, glitching is a form of play, experimentation with the unknowable, and materializing something deeply imaginative from a process of undoing—failing fabulously.

Amy Sillman, a queer feminist artist of the same generation as Besemer, provides a third point of contact. As a critical contributor to abstraction, Sillman makes gestural paintings that slip between abstraction and figuration, refusing straightforward legibility while still evoking relations between objects and bodies in the world. These struggles with and against the figure are not easy. Sillman describes them as a kind of transformation where one thing is

always changing into something else, "a series of appearances and then negations."¹⁴ Sillman sometimes composes on an iPad or iPhone, such as in *Draft of a Voice-Over for Split-Screen Video Loop* (2012; FIG. 24), a collaboration with the poet Lisa Robertson. A set of animated digital finger paintings, this video presents two continuously transforming vignettes, accompanied by a voice-over of Sillman reading Robertson's words. On the split screen, similar or related images often move at slightly different paces; they very rarely mirror each other. Sometimes, one side is more figural while the other is totally abstract. Sillman repeats Robertson's words throughout: "her pronoun is sedition unrecognized as such," "probably whatever the feminine might mean has to do with the intellectual relationship to change," "when women are exiled it seems normal," "she thinks she undoes her femininity to give herself pleasure," "she spirals wildly away," etc. The spoken text suggests difficulty for women and of femininity relative to the moving images, which convey a multiplicity of figures moving in and out of abstraction, struggling and transforming. We cannot attach the "she" and "her" of the text to Sillman's figures in the work—images shift so quickly that they defy a viewer's projection of gender onto a singular body. While viewers often project an image of "the body" onto abstractions in painting, the digital movement makes this impossible. Glitching out in their continuous undoing, a kind of violence against the figures is ambivalently implied, as well as their willful refusal, particularly when accompanied by Robertson's language. Glitching becomes a way of transforming in and through that difficulty.

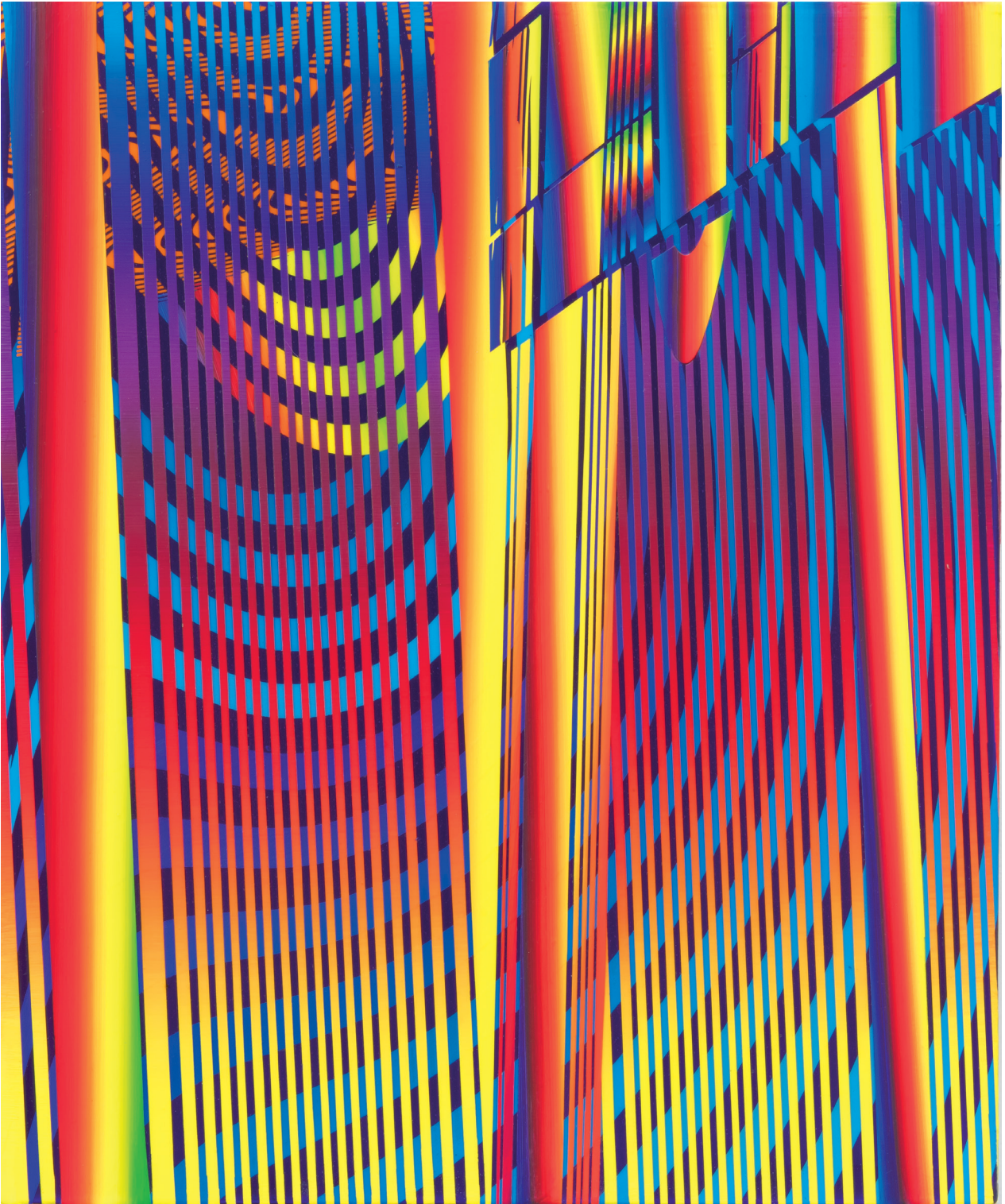
Besemer has used the film studies scholar Michael Betancourt's term *stoppage* to describe glitches in postdigital painting practices like Sillman's that interrupt the modernist Greenbergian or formalist binary of flatness and illusion. Besemer points as well to the art historian David Joselit's notion of "transmission" or "passage" of an image or viewer as they circulate across different sites and media.¹⁵ In Joselit's conception, no art object can be stilled, because it circulates so rapidly via digital imaging and information networks,



FIGURE 24
Amy Sillman, video still from *Draft of a Voice-Over for Split-Screen Video Loop*, 2012. Video, 6:06 min.

FIGURE 25
Lil' Red, 2019. Acrylic on canvas over panel, 18 x 15 in. (45.7 x 38.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

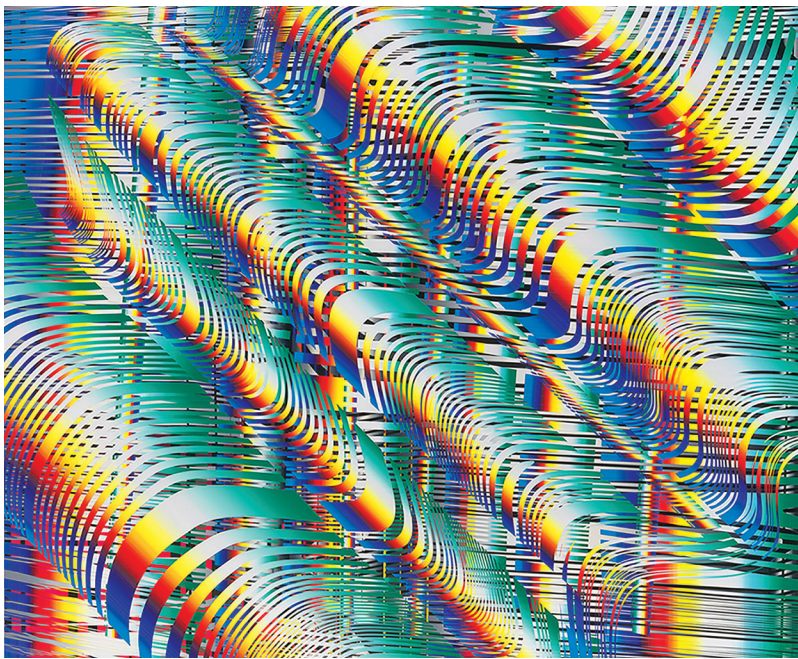
is consumed by vast global audiences, and is brought into all kinds of different relationships in multiple and unforeseen contexts. The movement and transience of contemporary art is similarly implied in the slippage of the glitch. We might compare the surface of the screen to the surface of a canvas, as abstraction historically has disrupted the notion of painting as a "window onto the world," which makes viewers more actively involved in producing meaning and interrogating how representation works. Glitching here has to do with the willful failure to portray layers of signs. Sillman and Besemer give us layers of errors in their paintings, each in their own way. In both practices, paintings move in our vision—Sillman's move through digital animation, while Besemer's move through optical effect (like how op art works to create illusory movement on a flat surface). Sillman's paintings are playfully imprecise and gestural, while Besemer's work is precisely rendered, with the expressive element coming through color and pattern. Both artists use synthetic color—cartoonish, digital, abject—as an excessive and affective queer material.¹⁶ In Besemer's *Lil' Red* (2019; FIG. 25; CAT.



no. 18), for example, dizzying patterns of vertical lines in bright fluorescent reds, pinks, yellows, and blues are layered on top of radiating spirals. Besemer's raucous patterns, coupled with the effect of near-glowing color, create a destabilizing viewing experience. I might say, while Sillman's figural subjects are destabilized via abstraction, Besemer's paintings destabilize *us* as subjects.

Linda Besemer's work is a queer delight in the surface play of total abstraction that nevertheless refuses "purity." The artist uses a very ordered process to render something that paradoxically feels like chaos. Besemer models an openness to error and a risky relationship to technology while also harnessing mistakes in more critical and intentional ways—failing in order to transform, and to do so in relation to others. What it *feels like* to be with Besemer's paintings has always been what draws me to them and where I find their most critical queer, feminist, nonbinary trans capacities.

From the early zips to the current glitches, Besemer's work pulls the rug out from under me. I feel ungrounded, precarious, contingent, on the verge of undoing and transforming at the same time. In this moment I feel a capacity for change, and it is not necessarily comfortable. The affective drama and humor of these paintings contributes something to Sillman's queer feminist transformations, Fenton's impulse toward intentional erring-as-playing, and Birnbaum's explosion of legible codes of gender via repetition, but Besemer's works also make us highly aware of our *being-with* them. Their ungrounding optical effects and bright synthetic colors pull us in and thrust us out—we feel it happening as a somatic response in our bodies—and I become highly aware of my perspective as it shifts from far away to close-up, from the front to side angle, my body precarious in relation to them. I am rarely so aware of my embodied looking. This must be, I think, what it feels like to glitch.



S Glitch, 2019. Acrylic on canvas over panel, 60 x 72 in. (152.4 x 182.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

Shown in the 2019 solo exhibition *An Abundance of Errors* at Vielmetter Los Angeles.