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FEELING THE GRID:

LORNA SIMPSON'S CONCRETE ABSTRACTION

LORNA SIMPSON'S *The Park* (1995) is a photograph of a city park at night, blown up and screen printed onto a large grid of six felt panels (Fig. 1). Approaching the image, our perspective is destabilized, even rendered sublime: we look down through the small forest of trees at a clearing of grass illuminated by scattered spotlights that suggest a walking path. In the distance, rows of buildings and skyscrapers create an expansive grid of windows that echoes the larger gridded structure of the felt canvas.

Two narratives flank the installation of the gridded, felt image. To the left of the image, a felt text panel reads:

Just unpacked a new shiny silver telescope. And we are up high enough for a really good view of all the buildings and the park. The living room window seems to be the best spot for it. On the sidewalk below a man watches figures from across the path.

And to the right:

It is early evening; the lone sociologist walks through the park, to observe private acts in the men's public bathrooms. These facilities are men's and women's rooms back to back. He focuses on the layout of the men's room—right to left: basin, urinal, urinal, urinal, stall, stall. He decides to adopt the role of voyeur and look

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out in order to go unnoticed and noticed at the same time. His research takes several years. He names his subjects A, B, C, X, Y, and O, records their activities for now, and their license plates when applicable for later.

Flanked by the perspective-shifting projection of these texts, the gridded image becomes a scene of observation and seriality. The grid of felt tiles offers an analogue to the sidewalk's squares of pavement and the side-by-side rectangular



Figure 1.

Lorna Simpson, The Park (1995), serigraph on felt, six felt image panels with two felt text panels, 68 x 67.5 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

openings of stall by stall. The shiny new telescope, which both enables voyeuristic habit and beckons toward the years of a sociologist's research, suggests a sense of duration that corresponds to the boundless intervals of the grid itself. Although no one appears in the images, the scenes offer multiple viewing positions from which to project narratives of private and public acts; such implied acts, like our spectatorship, are at once intimate and impersonal.

An image about the erotics of serial looking, *The Park* is not only comprised of parts but is also itself part of Simpson's larger "Public Sex" series. In each of these installations, black and white photographs of public spaces are blown up and screen printed onto separate felt panels arranged in grids. Pictures of uninhabited places become the implied locations of sexual and voyeuristic acts described in narrative text panels: they present a landscape, a city, a staircase, a theatre, a hotel bedroom, but they are devoid of bodies. Rendered abstract and fuzzy in their expansion to felt, the images depict scenes of sexual encounters we never see. The absence of bodies in this series may seem a departure from Simpson's previous work, which characteristically features black women as central figures. But the texts included with the "Public Sex" pictures also call to mind the absent bodies, as well as the oblique, abstracted body that appears consistently throughout her previous work—a body that is so often framed by different versions of the grid format. The encounter between text and image that populates the scenes and renders them as sites of sexual encounter and sexualized looking is notable, I argue, for its recourse to the grids that mediate the installation. In the context of *The Park*, the grid enables certain forms of relationality that, I maintain, do queer work. Not only do the narratives reference the gay cruising sites of public parks and men's restrooms, as well as the voyeur(s) who observe them, but also the gridded image further references the grid's ambivalent capacity for both surveillance and association, which the texture of felt makes all the more sensual. This essay explores how Simpson's work draws out the grid's latent capacities for queering in ways that prompt, in turn, a reconsideration of the grid in the earlier paintings of Agnes Martin. I make this transhistorical comparison between the two artists in order to show how Simpson's contemporary iterations of the grid allow for alternative readings of Martin's iconic work and the queer potential therein. Ultimately, I will demonstrate through a reading of Simpson's work (and its refraction of Martin's) that the abstract formal strategy of the grid is far from merely a figure of standardization (as many critics would have it) or a panoptic tool used in the interest

of bodily surveillance. The grid features instead as a vector for queer forms of relationality, a mediating structure that brings aesthetics and politics into intimate contact.

In her 1979 essay “Grids,” Rosalind Krauss famously defined the grid as *the* emblem of modernism, one that was profoundly contradictory and ambivalent in its connections to both matter and spirit, the universal and the concrete.

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The geometry of the grid [...] can offer a queer model of relationality that neither forecloses multiplicity nor settles around sameness.

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The grid serves this iconic function in part because it seems to declare art’s autonomous visuality: “Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature.”¹ The grid is perhaps the ultimate modernist abstraction: precisely not a mapping of mimetic representation (not the pre-modern perspectival grid) but

the literal surface of the canvas—“it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree.”² Yet Krauss and other scholars, such as Meyer Schapiro, have noticed that even as it withdraws from the real, the grid also acts as a kind of window that pushes our vision beyond its frame, opening up to a larger spatial continuum, a universal field of which it forms a subset.³ This modernist, purified, and universalizing model of the grid might seem a dangerous cruising ground for queer artists, to the extent that some may view specificity—rather than universality—as a necessary investment for queer politics. And yet the geometry of the grid, I maintain, can offer a queer model of relationality that neither forecloses multiplicity nor settles around sameness. For example, considering the grid in avant-garde utopian thought, Andrew McNamara argues that the grid was never meant to solidify the immutable “specificity” of art but rather intended to expand its possibilities: “the grid format,” he writes, “shifted emphasis to systems of relations—that is, a proliferating and seemingly endless network—which in turn suggested the futility of attempting to shore up the sanctity of the aesthetic.”⁴ This essay explores the grid’s operations both as a network of relations and as a demonstration of excess, a form of abstraction that exceeds its own borders. These particular qualities point to the continued political relevance of

the grid for contemporary artists whose work can be characterized as queer and feminist in their unsettling of binary categorizations of difference (male/female, black/white, hetero/homo) while also addressing particular counterpublics and forging non-normative affinities.

As a form of geometric abstraction and a fraught object of modernist discourse, the grid presents both problems and possibilities for artists who are engaged in contestatory politics of race, gender, and sex. On the one hand, the taxonomizing function of the grid might seem to foreclose, to block, or to contain non-normative identities. And yet, on the other hand, its anti-hierarchical focus on two-dimensional relations also opens up more utopian possibilities, as in the work of early twentieth-century European avant-garde movements such as De Stijl, Bauhaus, and constructivism. In the case of De Stijl and the grid paintings of Piet Mondrian, for example, a “universal plastic language” (such as the grid) aimed to produce a united, nonhierarchical field in which no single element is more important than another.⁵ As an avant-garde utopian strategy, the grid was considered to exhibit a democratizing logic: its infinite extension would convey “serial repetition suggestive of a collectivity without boundary or hierarchy.”⁶ This model of the grid is at once politically useful and problematic, for it can generate a commonality or affinity across difference as easily as it can homogenize and control.⁷

The grid is most often understood, however, to be predicated on this latter kind of homogenizing binary spatial logic and totalizing worldview. The grid is particularly resonant as a dominant matrix for modernity, for instance, because it was central to industrialism and colonialism and because it offers a visualization of the assertive rationalism that structures actual and virtual spaces, from urban landscapes to power grids.⁸ The capacities of the grid for systematic regularization came to the fore in the work of conceptualist artists who emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. Works by artists such as Sol LeWitt took on the “look of information,” as Eve Meltzer has written, its logic coinciding with structuralist understandings of human subjectivity as a product of preexisting systems rather than a sovereign consciousness.

Yet it was precisely in understanding that modern humans are inescapably governed by the territorializing order of the grid that both conceptual artists and structuralist theorists turned to grids for “a revolution in signifying structures.”⁹

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The grid [...] resonates ambiguously as both an object and an operating system, demonstrating the unruly capacities of formal elements that are seemingly benign: a series of squares or intersecting lines on a canvas.

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Along with a generation of artists engaged in postmodern methods of deconstruction and pastiche in the 1980s and 1990s, Neo-Geo (Neo-Geometric Conceptualist) painter Peter Halley has, for example, used a self-reflexive grid to evoke and critique contemporary human conditions of confinement: the grid and the rectangle became prison cells and conduits for technological power.¹⁰ Jack Williamson similarly notices a shift from utopian modernism’s validation of the visible mathematical coordinates of the grid to postmodernism’s claim for a reality beneath its surface, a surface that is understood to obscure or cover over actual political scaffolding and material life.¹¹ These artists, along with a chorus of postwar scholars, have noted how the grid’s rationalizing coordinates can reveal themselves differently, visualizing the very things they would seem to repress, such as randomness, variation, and precarity. Understanding the grid as inescapable and far from universalizing, contemporary artists have taken up the grid as a means for subverting and converting its parallels and meridians to alternative ends.¹²

For this reason, the grid’s ability to construct and transform its environment and to resist containment (even as it appears self-contained) still holds radical potential for queer, feminist, and critical race movements. The grid remains especially compelling because it resonates ambiguously as both an object and an operating system, demonstrating the unruly capacities of formal elements that are seemingly benign: a series of squares or intersecting lines on a canvas. Precisely because the grid can function as a panoptic apparatus of surveillance according to which bodies are organized and made ever more visible, it also can function in a way that reveals this apparatus by making abstraction itself undeniably perceptible. An oscillating form and a conduit for power, the grid works both in relation to sign systems that make bodies appear and cohere as raced, gendered, and sexed objects *and* in relation to material realities that resist the logics of these systems and renders their abstraction discernable.

Thus while grids can organize space in order to map deviations or to homogenize a field of observation, in some artists' hands they also have the potential to subvert and to exceed regimes of representation that demand that bodies be abstracted into encoded forms recognized by a hegemonic system. Artists working from the perspectives, and in the interests, of under-represented and disenfranchised populations may mine the hypervisibility of abstraction that the grid affords, using the grid against itself in order to signal, through the aesthetic, that which the hegemonic system has rendered abstract and invisible. The work of such artists is sometimes interpreted in bodily terms, or codified as subjective expressions of the artist's life.¹³ For example, in recent criticism about the paintings of Harmony Hammond and Betty Tomkins, the grid is seen to operate as feminist or as queer because it is somehow *embodied*, even though the artists' works do not present bodies as such.¹⁴ This is an interpretive move that understands a feminist or queer formalism to necessitate a reclaiming of a minoritized subject/authorial position through metaphors of the body.¹⁵ I argue, however, that such a perspective limits the material topographies of Hammond's and Tomkins's works to biography, and abstraction is then read as another form of representation or iconography. I propose instead that the grid is made to work queerly and in the interests of minoritized populations when it is shown to subvert a symbolic structure's power to cohere a signifying form or body and instead taps into the excessive and relational capacities that scholars have shown to be already operational in grids themselves. While the repressive implications of the grid will persist (indeed, we cannot disregard them), the grid is queered when its excessive and materializing capacities are radically camped, as in the work of Lorna Simpson.

My reading of the grid as a destabilizing and catalyzing queer form thus does not depend on the identities of the artists who deploy it, or on the content or context of their work. Rather, I argue that artists can queer the grid by bending the resistant materiality of non-representational form to political ends, undermining and exceeding the representational imperative to "show up" in ways that are expected. And my conception of "queer" does not bracket out questions of race, but rather insists that race is always implicated in issues of gender and sexuality. Simpson's work exemplifies this, tending to approach difference intersectionally. Moreover, concerns about race do not drop out when a black body is absent from the image. Indeed, my conception of queer abstraction proposes that we can productively discuss race and gender without the presence

of a body or by reading a body into the artwork. I have argued elsewhere that queer abstraction operates as a *catagchresis* by exceeding categorical boundaries of meaning (visually and textually), and thus falls in line with the work of David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Muñoz, who insist on the catachrestic agency of queering. “Queer” then becomes an active verb, a force or vector that works in excess of particular bodies or identities.¹⁶ This deployment of queer as a verb is useful for understanding how and why politically engaged contemporary artists such as Lorna Simpson take up abstraction. Departing from the arguments of other scholars who view abstract forms as encrypted references to bodies or sexualities, I do not establish the queer work of abstraction by seeking coded signifiers of the artist’s life or the context of their work. Nor do I use queer as a problematically generalizing term to describe all abstract aesthetics. Rather, the tension between specific identity markers and the potential for a more universalizing gesture is a productive point of departure for considering how abstraction can operate queerly.¹⁷ And it is precisely the threat of these queering gestures of abstraction (which exceed the specificity of their positions) to infect the ostensibly “universal” that I take as one aspect of their political potential.

A medium for channeling power in multiple capacities, the grid generates live wires of connection that produce a commons or commonality among people and environments. While the grid would seem to be one of the most formulaic and absolute figures in modernist art, producing an endless repetition of lines that demarcate and divide, this particular technology for organizing space in fact can generate intimate spaces of contact that do not collapse the specific into the general.¹⁸ There are two particular operations inherent in the grid that demonstrate its queering operations: *relationality* and *excess*. The grid, as a political tactic of abstraction, can operate simultaneously as a site for affective attachments while also exceeding the configurations of difference that would settle around an encoded sign.

This map, this system of interlocking integers—this grid—thus can be understood as an excessive spatial arrangement that can sustain, rather than resolve, contradiction, holding in tension what it would seem visually to repress. Its expansion points us continuously beyond the picture plane, beyond the sign, to what is not there and will not appear in a fixed image: unrepresentable, unimaginable, irresolvable tensions. The grid operates here in a gritty, even dirty capacity to obscure rather than organize, and to press up against borderlines

that otherwise insist on either equivalencies or strict separations. Subverting a modern project of commensurability—transcribing human experience into a shared or universal frame of reference, a common language—the queered grid produces a space of incommensurable contact. The grid does not resolve into sameness, but puts forth approximate relationalities that do not demand equivalence.

RELATIONALITY: THE GRID AS PRODUCTION SITE FOR INTIMATE CONTACTS

Lorna Simpson's work demonstrates the potentialities of the grid as a queer technology of association. While the grid structure is especially clear in the "Public Sex" series, grids continuously appear throughout her *oeuvre* as framing structures for the photographs. Through the expanded medium of photography, her work deals with intersecting issues of race and sexuality, often employing photographs that appear fragmented, repeated, and juxtaposed with text.¹⁹ While the photographs usually present what seems to be a black female body, these representations are always contingent and complicated, and never easily decoded. Already in this signature work, an interest in abstraction registers as a strategic removal of legible signs of difference or identity. Simpson's subjects often turn away from the camera, refusing to appear in ways that are expected or easily codified. Her work notably combines representations of reproductive technologies with gridded systems that have historically produced human types and taxonomies by which inner character could be interpreted through the body's outward signs. For example, the photographic documents used to justify eugenics in the nineteenth century often placed physical "types" together in grid patterns to evoke comparison and to produce the very raced and deviant bodies they wished to depict.²⁰

As an instrument of association, the grid brings figures and bodies into close contact, producing separations as well as comparisons. At its most oppressive, the grid imposes what Judith Butler identifies as a signifying system that structures the social field by producing "a social space for and of the body within certain regulatory grids of intelligibility."²¹ Following Butler, we can understand this field of visibility as racialized as well as gendered and sexed, and in accord with Maurice Wallace's understanding of a racial gaze that fixes the black subject within a "rigid and limited grid of representational possibilities."²² (Systems

or grids that bind and mark the body according to codes of cultural coherence are, surprisingly, precisely what readings of abstraction-as-coded-reference and attendant methodologies of visual de-coding continue to enact.) Ironically, even the word “grid” has been used to reproduce power arrangements and enforce the patterns of relationality upon which they depend: GRID was once the acronym for “gay-related immune deficiency,” an early term for AIDS. These patterns are disrupted, however, by queer deployments of the grid as a tactic of abstraction that draws near without drawing direct correlations, and with the capacity to maintain the spaces of contradiction that its borders might otherwise claim to resolve.

Lorna Simpson’s work uses the grid as an organizing strategy in order to evoke and disrupt borders in this way.²³ For example, *Bio* (1992) (Fig. 2) is a grid installation of eighteen framed photographs.

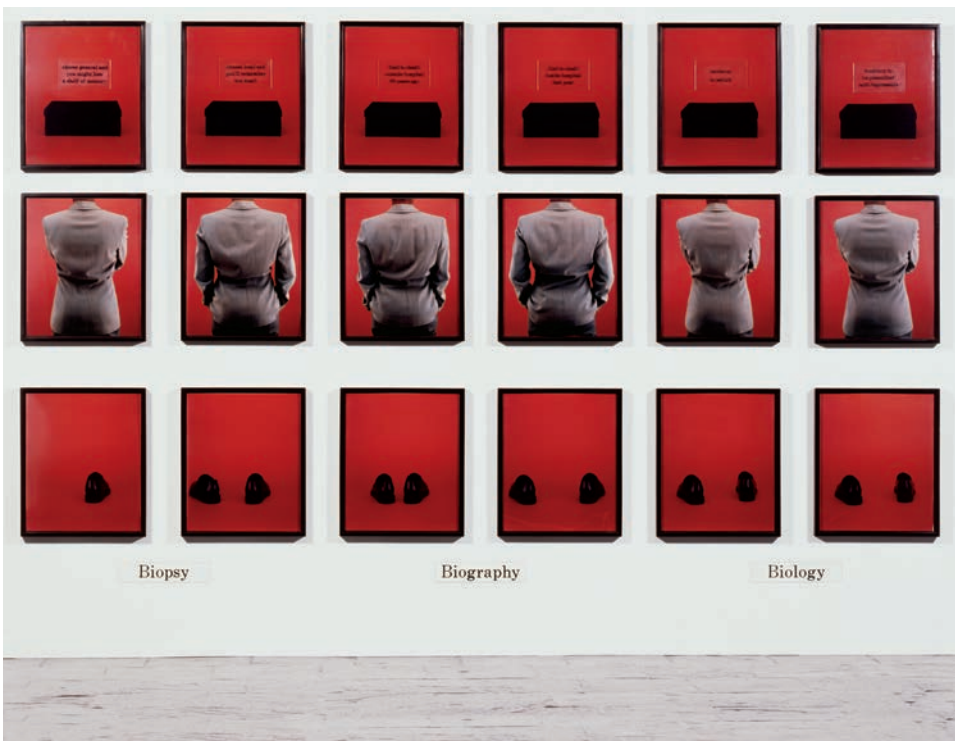


Figure 2.

Lorna Simpson, *Bio* (1992), 18 color Polaroid Prints, 9 engraved plastic plaques, 98 x 162 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

The bottom row of the grid installation features photographs of black dress shoes, framed in pairs. In the middle, multiple images of a figure's back in a gray blazer appear with the head cropped out. And on the top row there are shallow black boxes juxtaposed with text. All of the subjects and objects in these photographs are set against a bright red background. The short texts refer to medical and personal histories: "bled to death outside hospital 60 years ago," and "bled to death inside hospital last year," for example. Below the photographs are three plaques that read: "Biopsy," "Biography," "Biology." Kellie Jones has aptly discussed this complex work in terms of the medical discourses and racist institutional constructions of bodies it suggests, working in tension with personal/private histories implied by the text.²⁴ Here I am particularly interested in how the grid functions as the framing structure for these images, suggesting the language and visual documentation of medical history while at the same time subverting its power. Each row appears to picture the same object or subject, but each iteration is slightly different: a shoe is missing in one, shoes appear in different configurations, hands are in pockets or folded while shoulders are shifted. And, as we have come to expect of Simpson's photographs, the figures turn away from us. Gender is difficult to determine beneath the broad-shouldered suit, though based on Simpson's other work such as *She* (1992), we are encouraged to imagine this figure to be a black woman in drag. This indeterminacy not only troubles the photographic legacy of the grid to make difference visible and coherent on the body but also engages this form more broadly as a tool of abstraction that is then reinforced by the close-up and the framing of absences that further alienate us from settled meaning. Medical histories, after all, tend to include pictures and diagrams that are meant to be representational and literal, not abstract and ambiguous. The lines that define this grid frame absences, and separations between frames are not equivalent. (There is a wider spacing between the rows of torsos and shoes to suggest the legs between them, for example, while the closer stacking of boxes on torsos suggest the head or mind.) The entire body is suggested yet cut apart by this grid structure, as is often the case in Simpson's work from the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In the "Public Sex" series, there is a continuation of the grid used as both an organizational strategy and technique of abstraction. *The Rock* (1995) (Fig. 3) is comprised of twelve large felt panels arranged in a grid pattern on the wall, accompanied by a narrative text panel on either side.

While the central image is that of a single, enlarged photograph of a large boulder and a stream surrounded by trees, the scene is fragmented by the panels that separate the serigraph into equivalent rectangular segments and is further abstracted by the felt material foundation and over-sized scale that render the image fuzzy. The print is black and white, so that light and shadow define the forms, and flecks of light in the trees, water, and pebbles further the pixelated effect of the felt fibers. To the left of this image, a text panel reads,

Female Trouble: Divine has just left home after an argument over a Christmas gift, and storms out of the house. She is picked up on the highway by an auto-mechanic (played by Divine). They approach a wooded area and have frantic sex on a mattress, by the side of the road.

And to the right:

Driving all day long, has induced a hypnotic state upon both of us. It is definitely time to pull over. I recognize the state park that we are now in the middle of, and can endure a few more minutes of this drive in order to find the same spot I went to last time I was here. Hoping that this search will not turn into another journey, since I didn't make any mental notes of the surroundings during my last visit, I'm ill prepared, and not really wanting to appear too familiar with the area. I make an effort this time to commit this trip to memory. But here we are, sick of driving. We get out of the car and start to hike to find a spot and it will probably replace the last one, completely. Haven't seen any week-end hikers for a while and since we are miles away from any rest stops it seems plausible that we will not be patrolled. I asked, "How's this?" "Is it secluded enough for you?"

While the grid sometimes silences, this structure brings multiple narratives together in Simpson's work. These stories transform the environment that is represented, implying intimate relations that occur within the scene or just outside of it. Since the text is printed on smaller felt panels that are separated from the larger image, they could also describe scenes that are entirely separate from this photograph. There is no direct reference in the text panels to this particular printed image, only to a generalized secluded wooded area. *The Rock* thus confuses our spatial as well as our temporal location, suggesting scenes that may have occurred in the past or which might occur in the future. The narrative on the right panel oscillates between present and past tenses, creating an opening,

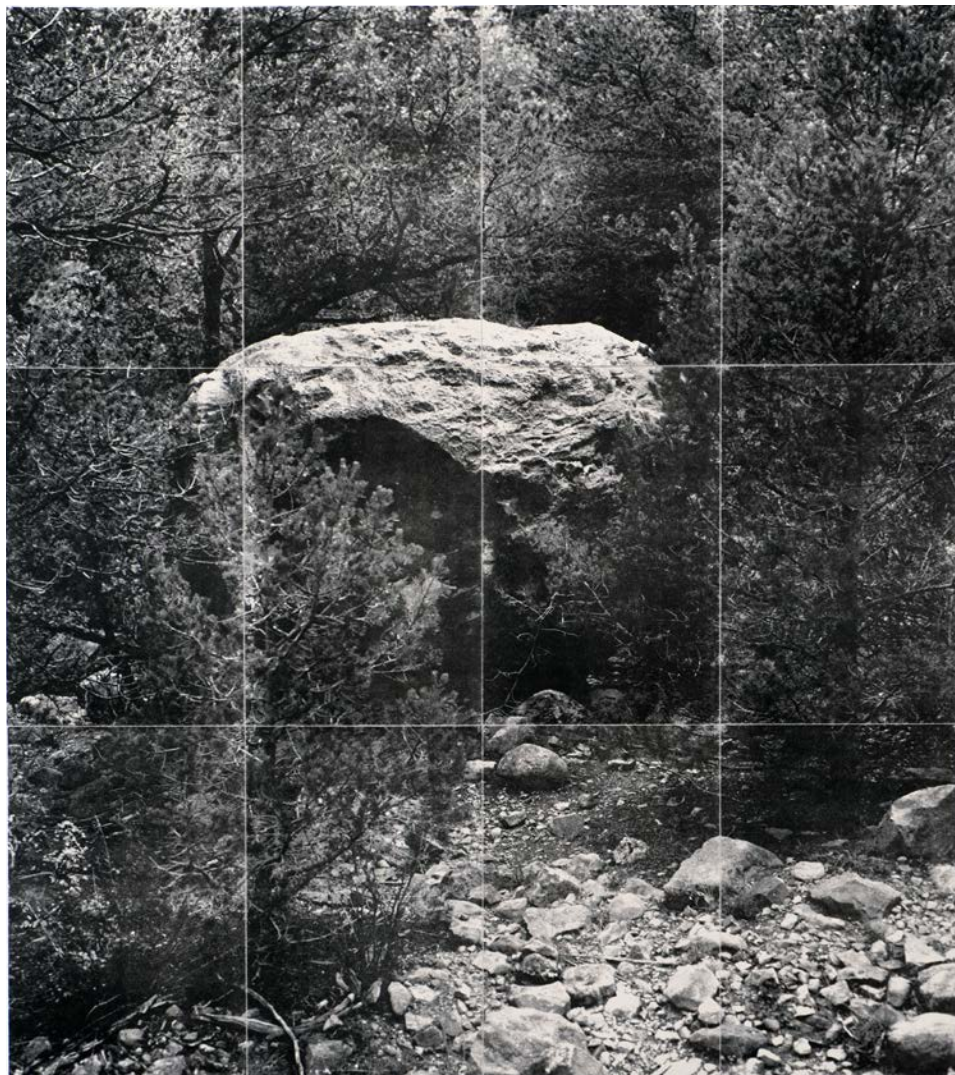


Figure 3.

Lorna Simpson, The Rock (1995), serigraph on twelve felt panels with 2 felt text panels. 100.5 x 94 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

an approximate spacing of contact in both time and space. It is unclear when and where these interactions occur, and whether voyeurism gives way to participation. As the “you” and “us” of Simpson’s right text panel suggests, we are already there. This grid not only maps a space but also opens an infrastructure for

our projection into the scene—we might project alternative narratives, or map our own bodies into this opening in time and space. It activates and unsettles the spectator, an unsatisfied voyeur with nothing to see but much to fantasize about.

“

***This grid refuses to produce
the bodies of others.***

”

This felt grid in fact becomes a cruising site for what remains unrepresented and unresolved, yet shared or “public” through a multiplicity of imaginative projections and participatory events in which we, the spectator, are implicated. The text points to what is not seen in the image, what remains just beyond the frame, but still tempts and teases us with indirect reference to a space of intimacy. While the right panel describes what seems to be a personal narrative,

the left panel references John Waters’s high camp cult classic film *Female Trouble*, and his muse and star, the drag queen Divine. The sex scene described here is between Divine and alternate persona played by Divine, so that intimacy occurs between two versions or performances of a singular subject. The trouble in this case is not only the illegibility of gender, and that perhaps multiple genders are performed by a single subject, but that the intimacy described between these two aspects of a self is also alienating, decidedly impersonal sex. Something is shared, held in common, but intimacies remain suggestive and anonymous. So while this grid is a site of intimate contact, it is also one where non-normative relationalities are activated without containing or fixing the subjects it would seem to describe. This grid refuses to produce the bodies of others.

Something similar occurs when we return to *The Park*. The photograph is taken from a vantage point high above the trees, and the “we” of the left text panel suggests that the viewer with a shiny new telescope occupies the position of the voyeur in a high rise apartment building. The right text panel describes a sociologist recording the “activities” in the men’s public restrooms—which are literally cruising sites. This figure within the park also occupies several subject positions: a sociologist, a voyeur, and perhaps a sting operator (he also records license plates). The various forms of looking described by these narratives are at once erotic and insidious. As spectators, we are implicated in the scene and the systems of oppression that are implied by both the form and content of these images. The absence of bodies in the “Public Sex” series also opens up a space for

the viewer's projection. In this way, we are drawn in more deeply by the abstraction of these images. While there is no figure with which to connect or identify, this absence also disallows the spectator's own refusal—the “not me” that distances us from the position of other and at the same time affirms their otherness.

While intimacies are most clearly suggested by textual narratives, the linear separations between panels and austere geometric format of the installation potentially alter the kinds of affective encounters that serial logic might otherwise produce. The grid acts as a support structure that imposes a linear system and repetition onto the landscapes depicted. Simpson's use of a grid structure plays with two seemingly opposed functions of the grid in two-dimensional art. In his 1972 essay, John Elderfield points to these: grids function either as “structures” that serve no mimetic purpose other than to map the surface itself, or as “frameworks” which organize pictorial elements or serve as a background scaffolding for representations.²⁵ Simpson's felt grids declare the “surfacedness” of the work (their tactile fuzziness draws us to the surface) while serving as demarcating frameworks for her serigraph images: the grid both coheres and fractures the surface, defining and dividing the space. This mapping of a represented space through the repetitive system of the grid offers a queered form of seriality that does not reproduce a signifier in order to reinforce its relation to a stable signified.²⁶ Rather, this is a deployment of seriality that fragments and abstracts a space of representation, an infrastructure in which bodies are never figured forth, but relations of desire are still active. If, thinking with Butler's theory of performativity, repetition stabilizes the categories upon which representations of difference depend, then perhaps Simpson's grids neither fix bodies on solid ground nor chart a territory for sanctioned sexual practice.²⁷ Rather, this fuzzy landscape, divided and multiplied by the lines and planes of the grid, produces a ground without figures that nevertheless manages to activate intimacy and to materialize queer forms of eroticism. Moreover, returning to some of Simpson's earlier work, such as *Bio*, one sees that the lines of the grid are used to signal absences, the cracks and seams where figures are fragmented and pulled apart. In contrast, the felt panels comprising her “Public Sex” images touch at their edges so that the larger photograph comes together as a whole. Yet those panels also curve and lift off from the wall at their edges so that the image is not entirely flat, implying continuation or incompleteness and the absence of a frame. Rather than encouraging rigid taxonomy, the grid is shown to be an organizational schema that generates affective and erotic proximity.

Simpson's grids ask us to rethink the import of repetition and seriality. Repetition is crucial to the production of the categories of gender and race: repeating patterns and formulas do not have the capacity to produce or represent difference and are therefore useful to the taxonomies used by hegemonic power. However, seriality also can create points of contact between distinct entities that avoid unity in the interest of setting up relationality between them. For example, feminist theorist Iris Young proposes a useful rethinking of gender as seriality to avoid the problem of taxonomic reductionism that would define women as a generalized and isolated group in ways that gloss over their race, class, sexuality, or ability differences. Young understands the series as a structure defined by each member's individual orientation toward objects, linked indirectly rather than through either mutual identification (a reduction of difference to the same) or sets of attributes that would define membership in a group (a taxonomic schema): "Thus, as a series *woman* is the name of a structural relation to material objects as they have been produced and organized by a prior history."²⁸ Our lives are gendered, sexed, and raced through our relation to a vast, complex array of objects and materialized histories that structure social spaces. But this model of gendered, serialized existence allows us to imagine how individuals move and act in relation to objects and within structures that position and constrain them. In other words, this model of seriality defines the grid as a system for mapping spaces—but also as a system that reveals how abstraction itself can work to foreclose difference and that offers relationality as an alternative.

We can think of the grid in this case as the cruising ground for intimate queer relationalities that place strange and disparate bodies and worlds into contact. This proximity brings them close and holds them in common but still acknowledges dividing forces of social and historical constraints and possibilities. I am using here a conception of relationality that extends the work of José Muñoz, particularly his formulation of the *incommensurate*: a proposition of queerness as a sense and a sharing-out that moves beyond the individual subject (in the manner articulated by Jean-Luc Nancy).²⁹ If, for Muñoz, queerness is about the incommensurable, a "sense" of the world that is incalculable and excessive yet also shared through proximity, then the geometric format of the grid offers a method for sharing the unshareable, for thinking beyond the register of the singular subject to produce a "map of life where singularities flow into the common."³⁰ In the grid, "irreconcilable integers" can also allow us to think beyond the register of the individual subject and to conceive a commons (rather

than an equivalence) of the incommensurable, even as crisscrossing trajectories of singular being remain violent and traumatic.³¹ I imagine these trajectories in the form of intersectionalities that modify identifications and positionalities. Life-lines travel in both parallel and intersecting capacities, moving with and beside, crossing and connecting, touching consistently but not constantly. This is a fuzzy system in which membership exceeds binary logics of either belonging or not-belonging, and indeed opens out to infinity.³²

EXCESS: THE GRIDS OF SIMPSON AND MARTIN

Even as it promises a clear division of categories and creates a closed sense of space that might suggest equivalence, the grid also has the capacity to place things into intimate proximity, bringing disparate aesthetics and media into close contact. Simpson's work crosses the minimalist geometric format of the grid with reproductive photographic imagery, furthering the question of how abstraction relates differently to the sign or exceeds signification. While the grid has a different history in painting than it does in photography, it is useful to compare Simpson's felt works with the paintings of Agnes Martin to consider excess as a strategy for undermining categorical divisions the grid might otherwise seem to secure. Martin's work exemplifies a continuation of the modernist grid in 1960s minimalism, and thus could be positioned on the border between modern and postmodern. Simpson's work looks back to Martin's grids and redeploys many of the earlier artist's strategies for complicating them.

As a mathematical partitioning of the canvas surface, the grid maps the literal space of the picture plane. A flat surface is broken up into equally measured segments that organize a "real" space that is also represented. The grid functioned within modernism to map the surface of the canvas (an already gridded textile) and ultimately to emphasize the flatness of painting.³³ In the case of Simpson's work, however, the particular medium of felt creates a surface of the picture plane that is compressed rather than woven, its precarious fibers interacting randomly. Simpson's division and multiplication of panels, cut and juxtaposed, produces a picture plane that is unbounded and unravels the interlocking grid.

The particular materiality of felt is crucial to my argument that Simpson's deployments of the grid also exceed or trouble its oppressive capacities. Fabric, for Deleuze and Guattari, constitutes a "striated space" of intertwining and

intersecting elements, necessarily delimited and closed. Felt, on the other hand, constitutes an “anti-fabric” of entangled fibers: “An aggregate of intrication of this kind is in no way *homogenous*: it is nevertheless smooth, and contrasts point by point with the space of fabric (it is in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes a continuous variation).”³⁴ Further considering felt as both a tactile sensation and affective experience, trans studies scholar Jeanne Vaccaro points out that this “anti-fabric” cannot

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be calculated mathematically, or mapped in the way the space of fabric is; rather, “It is the result of the destruction of a grid.” This composite material, “fibrous and fleshy,” challenges the spatial and corporeal division of interiority and exteriority.³⁵ In Simpson’s “Public Sex” series, the non-gridded anti-fabric offers a queer logic for alternative calculations and mappings of space and bodies. The composite and compressed here produces a picture plane that is not the ground of representation, but becomes a bushy and unruly site of contact. This work refuses the force of the grid to settle bodies and spaces, and instead uses the felt to connect affect with materiality, pointing to the textures of feeling that structure queer associations and relations.

Concerns with the material qualities of surface and space bring Lorna Simpson’s felt prints into close contact with the grid paintings of Agnes Martin. Simpson’s serigraphs are produced through a silk-screening process, bringing these photographs closer to the realm of painting. Their abstracted qualities also take on the facture of drawings, or graphite sketches rendered by hand, akin to Martin’s delicately drawn lines. Simpson’s prints are muted in tone; black, white, and gray, they share with Martin’s the subdued palette, drawing attention to the surface qualities of their supports.

Briony Fer has claimed that Agnes Martin’s grids evoke an infinite temporality: while linear time may be mapped on the grids of our calendars, the excessive repetition of the grid evokes a time that cannot be grasped as an object, and in this way it exceeds representation. Martin’s grids refuse a single totality: “The work of repetition marks the impossibility of completion.”³⁶ Fer and others have

already noticed that the modernist grid is not exact but excessive in its infinite extension (material and virtual), so while Martin's grids may appear to be self-contained, singular entities, their repetition also gives way to variability, to "incalculable [...] differences."³⁷ Yet in Martin's and, later, in Simpson's works, the grid emerges as an emphatically sensual form, and its textures can disrupt its regularity or cold austerity in favor of a more "touchy-feely" form of abstraction. Not only do these surfaces of the artworks invite touch; they also project outward to touch us. The grid is not simply a background framework, but is rather an active materializing force.

While Agnes Martin's deep engagement with the materiality of painting would seem at odds with the ordered system of the grid and her formulaic process of rendering, the surface terrain of the fabric on which she painted is doubled again by the woven structure of her pencil lines and paint strokes. In Martin's 1960 oil painting *White Flower* (Fig. 4), for example, the grid is punctuated by symmetrical white dashes that enhance the woven pattern of fabric.

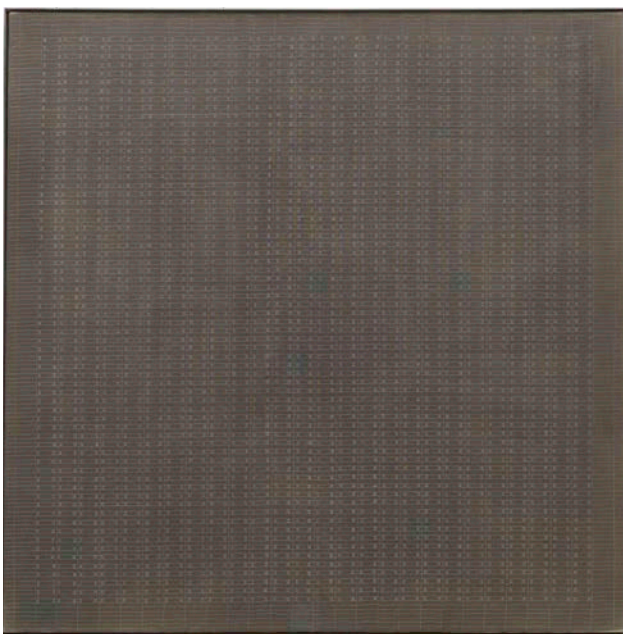


Figure 4.
Agnes Martin, White Flower (1960), oil on canvas, 71 7/8 x 72 in. © 2016 Agnes Martin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

While the tight grid pattern extends to the painting's borders, the dashes are maintained in the center, and where they end, the lines of the grid appear like the cropped and frayed ends of a woven textile. Moving "with the grain," her grids seem to constitute the fabric itself, which moves and responds in turn to the artist's touch.³⁸ Redoubling the pattern of her fabric's warp and weft, Martin's painting produces a second ground. As ground, in the sense of landscape, her works (like those of Simpson) are environmental in scale. (Simpson's felt arrangements exceed six feet on either side, and Martin was devoted to

a square six-foot format.) They relate directly to the body of the viewer as a landscape one could enter; at the same time, their gridded surfaces bar us from getting too caught up in an illusory depth. They demarcate space in order to call attention to their surfaces as material planes on which a picture is both rendered and abstracted.

I give only one example of Martin's painting here, and my purpose is not to account for the artist's immense body of work, though similar material surface qualities are evident in many of her other paintings from the 1960s to which the same logic could apply. Rather, my aim is to show that the sensuality of the grid's surface textures in Simpson's work also becomes apparent in Martin's painting through this backward cross-generational exchange. This comparison is meant not to conflate the work of these two artists but to bring them in contact to demonstrate the affinities that emerge across their handling of the grid surface. The excessive relational capacities and erotic tensions already latent in this modernist icon thus emerge through its continual redeployment and trans-historical associations.

The allusion to "nature" or the natural in both artists' work also demonstrates how they exceed signification. Much has been made of Agnes Martin's titles, which characteristically allude to landscapes—*The Beach*, *The Desert*, *Garden*, *Field*—and prompt readings of her grids if not as representing nature, then as projections of the affective experience of nature, as a transcendence also connected with the artist's interest in Buddhism.³⁹ Rosalind Krauss posits the grid as a closed system in Martin's work, which is formally and materially bracketed and closed off to readings of the "abstract sublime" or the social context of the work.⁴⁰ Alternately, Jonathan Katz has asserted the importance of the context, particularly Martin's biography, for reading geometry as encoded personal reference in this work. We might also ask if the grid could constitute a veil of self-repression at the same time that it offered an escape from the binaries and power structures that constituted the artist as a "closeted lesbian."⁴¹ Strangely, both readings mark the grid as a closed system, a signifying practice—a /cloud/ or a /closet/—even as it refuses the figure (the diagonal slash here importantly marks and contains a signified).

But the fluctuation between figure/ground operates both visually and materially in these works to frustrate notions either that the grid would bracket out the

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Both corporeal and representational boundaries are unfixed by these grids; they generate textures of charged affective attachment that demand more intimate forms of spectatorship.

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concrete or that understanding its cultural or political operations would necessitate a contextual biographical account. The “nature” in Martin’s titles may seem to specify (as in *White Flower*), but it corresponds to a boundless geography of coordinates that exceed two-dimensional mapping of longitude and latitude. The excessive material dimensions and the vibratory effects of figure/ground oscillation of these grids troubles a settled reference, or even a settled point of reference. The landscapes pictured in Simpson’s “Public Sex” series along with their titles similarly seem to specify a particular place (*The* rather than *A Park*), and yet, as I have shown, the thick materiality of their felt supports creates a ground on which no singular figure is fixed or naturalized. The linear slash of figure/ground might evoke a nearness of meaning or a conflation, but it is also a pause that does not enclose but maintains tensions without resolving into meanings that are entirely either abstract or concrete.

In Lorna Simpson’s “Public Sex” series, the grid also prompts a boundary transgression between public and private space. Both Simpson’s and Martin’s grids encourage passive viewing or voyeurism that gives way to participation and projection. The textures and tactility of their surfaces seem to demand that we touch, or imagine touching. The surfaces of both artists’ works beckon us, but Simpson’s printed felt is erotically charged as both a vehicle for the abstraction of the photograph and for the bristling contact of skin and hair.⁴² These sites of intimate contact exceed the borders of the individual subject or distinctly raced and gendered body. Both corporeal and representational boundaries are unfixed by these grids; they generate textures of charged affective attachment that demand more intimate forms of spectatorship.

While the queer seems diametrically opposed to gridded surfaces that might immediately foreclose affective, sensual, or erotic possibility, Simpson’s work reimagines this formal device in order to map the queerly projective spaces of

intimate contact as excessive sites for relations across the bounds of difference. Placed into contact with Agnes Martin's grid, we can see how this contemporary formal device also draws out the inherent queering capacities that now become activated, retroactively. Even as we can still feel the grid's punishing logic of surveillance and its relational force of equivalence, feeling the grid also opens it to flexibility rather than settling a space by and for certain bodies. This queer form performs by producing a space for intimacies to exceed bounds of difference, of public and private, of historicizing coordinates of here and now or then and there. The grid remains a problematic form of modernism (and postmodernism), but these felt and fractured deployments of the grid also show it to be already riven with transformative potential.

/ Notes /

Thanks to Jill Casid for pointing me to *The Rock* that prompted this essay, and for helping me to shape and polish it. Thanks to River Bullock for insightful feedback during the early stages of its formation.

1 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (1979): 50.

2 *Ibid.*, 50.

3 For Krauss, the grid "compel[s] our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame" ("Grids," 60); for Meyer Schapiro, Mondrian's paintings "take us beyond the concreteness of the elements and suggest relationships to a space and forms outside the tangible painted surface" (*Mondrian: On the Humanity of Abstract Painting* [New York: George Braziller, 1995]), 33. For Jack Williamson, the modern grid suggests the window of the canvas beyond which the grid extends to infinity; see "The Grid: History, Use, Meaning," *Design Issues* 3 (Autumn, 1986): 21.

4 Andrew McNamara, "Between Flux and Certitude: The Grid in Avant-Garde Utopian Thought," *Art History* 15, no. 1 (March 1992): 70.

5 Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 102-103.

6 Andrew McNamara, "Between Flux and Certitude," 66-67. Simon Schama also discusses Mondrian's ambition treat painting as universal by liberating it from the concrete world, in "True Grid," *New Yorker*, October 9, 1995, 42-43.

7 "When the ideal of universality is put into practice uncritically, it can quickly lead to a uniformity that excludes or represses everything and everyone deemed different." Mark C. Taylor, "From Grid to Network," in *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 31.

8 See Hannah Higgins, *The Grid Book* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009) and Taylor, "From Grid to Network," 19-46.

9 Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9.

10 See Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," in *The Geometric Unconscious: A Century of Abstraction*, ed. Jorge D. Veneciano (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 56.

11 Jack Williamson, "The Grid: History, Use, Meaning," *Design Issues* 3 (Autumn, 1986): 25-29.

12 Nico Israel has similarly written of spirals as a way artists and writers "swerve around" the punishing axes of the grid, avoiding the "historicity and foreclosed agency" following from it, in *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 190.

13 Kaira M. Cabañas points to the work of Latin American artists who used the grid in ways that both addressed political concerns and rejected the notion that Latin American art should appear realistic and overtly political, in "If the Grid is the New Palm Tree of Latin American Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 367.

14 On Harmony Hammond, see Clarity Haynes, "Queering Abstract Art with Wrapped Up, Grommeted, and 'Roughed-Up' Paintings," *Hyperallergic*, May 12, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/298095/queering-abstract-art-with-wrapped-grommeted-and-roughed-up-paintings/>. On the "feminist formalism" of Betty Tomkins, see William J. Simmons, "Betty Tomkins: *Fuck Paintings* (1969-74)," *Flash Art* 303 (2015): 45-47.

15 Rosemary Betterton considers non-representational painting as a reclamation of female authorship, where abstraction functions as a representation of the gendered body, in *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists, and the Body* (London: Routledge, 1996). Tirza Latimer said of Hammond's monochromes, "Paintings under stress signify bodies under stress" (Hammond: becoming/unbecoming monochrome," on the panel "Abstraction and Difference," Annual College Art Association Conference, February 18, 2014).

16 David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now: Introduction," *Social Text* 85 (Fall-Winter 2005): 3, 7.

17 Lex Lancaster, "The Wipe: Sadie Benning's Queer Abstraction" *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 39 (2017).

18 I am inspired to imagine this spacing by Jill H. Casid's formulation of "intimate distance" in "Handle with Care," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (2012): 126.

19 Brooke Belisle argues that the felt works are not a departure, but a continuation of Simpson's previous work, even in the absence of the body, in "Felt Surface, Visible Image: Lorna Simpson's Photography and the Embodiment of Appearance," *Photography and Culture* 4, no. 2 (July 2011): 157-178.

20 See Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 344-45.

21 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 178.

22 Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 135; Judith Butler, “Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia,” in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15. Both are quoted in Simone Browne’s *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 20.

23 Kellie Jones also points out Simpson’s engagement with this history of photography used to classify and control black subjects in “(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” in *Lorna Simpson* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 32; Okwui Enwezor discusses Simpson’s ongoing redeployment of minimalist tropes in ways that point to this history (though he does not investigate the grid) in “Social Grace: The Work of Lorna Simpson,” *Third Text* 35 (Summer 1996): 50.

24 Kellie Jones, “(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” 50-51.

25 John Elderfield, “Grids,” *Artforum* (May 1972): 53.

26 Briony Fer views repetition as the essential ground of all representation, even as it often gives way to difference, in *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 33. Rosalind Krauss describes the grid as a system of reproductions without an original, much like processes of signification, and this forms one myth of originality for Krauss in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 161-62.

27 See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

28 Young is drawing on Sartre’s concept of serial collectivity. See Iris Marion Young, “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective,” *Signs* 19 (Spring 1994): 728. Emphasis in original.

29 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

30 José Muñoz, “Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate: Gary Fisher with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” in *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political*, ed. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian, and Beatrice Michaelis (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2013), 112.

31 Muñoz “Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate,” 112-113.

32 This “fuzzy” logic is defined by Michel Serres: “Between yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear, and thus an infinite number of answers. Mathematicians call this new rigor ‘fuzzy’: fuzzy subsets, fuzzy topology.” To be “rigorously fuzzy,” in Serres’s terms, is not to resolve between two answers, but an expansive openness to infinite possibilities. See Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 57.

33 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 162.

34 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 475-76.

35 For Vaccaro this allows for alternative theories of transgender becoming, for a “trans-corporeography” that can imagine material processes of embodiment that are not stagnant topological points. Jeanne Vaccaro, “Felt matters,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 20, no. 3 (2010): 253-54.

36 Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 58.

37 Ibid, 53. See also Briony Fer, “Decoration and Necessity: Mondrian’s Excess,” in *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 33-47; Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” 59; Meyer Schapiro, “Mondrian,” in *Mondrian: On the Humanity of Abstract Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1995).

38 Christina Bryan Rosenberger, “A Sophisticated Economy of Means,” in *Agnes Martin* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), 104-05. According to Krauss, as the grid came to coincide more closely with its material support, the supposed “‘logic of vision’ became infected by the tactile” (“The/ Cloud/,” in *Bachelors* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999], 89).

39 The tensions between various readings of Martin’s work in relation to her titles is discussed by Suzanne Hudson, “On A Clear Day,” in *Agnes Martin* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), 121-22.

40 Rosalind Krauss, “The/ Cloud/,” in *Bachelors*.

41 Jonathan D. Katz, “Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction,” in *Agnes Martin* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), 190-91.

42 Kellie Jones has also discussed the sensuality of the felt surfaces in Simpson’s “Public Sex” series in “(Un)Seen & Overheard: Pictures by Lorna Simpson,” 68.