

# Notes on the Diagram

In this sense, a subject is "a nothingness, a void, which exists". (Lacan)

—SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, *ORGANS WITHOUT BODIES*<sup>1</sup>

A virtual particle is one that has borrowed energy from the vacuum, briefly shimmering into existence literally from nothing.

—DAVID KAISER, *AMERICAN SCIENTIST MAGAZINE*<sup>2</sup>

The Higgs boson is apparently the most powerful particle on Earth, but it has never been seen.

—WIKIPEDIA ARTICLE ON THE HIGGS BOSON<sup>3</sup>

Look who thinks he's nothing.

—PUNCH LINE OF A JOKE ABOUT A PRIEST AND A JEW

One paints when there is nothing else to do. After everything else is done, has been "taken care of", *one can take up the brush*.

—AD REINHARDT, "ROUTINE EXTREMISM"<sup>4</sup>

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

—FRANZ KAFKA<sup>5</sup>

What happens next? Of course, I don't know.

It's appropriate to pause and say that the writer is one who, disembarking upon a task, does not know what to do.

—DONALD BARTHELME, "NOT-KNOWING"<sup>6</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

*This is the third, previously unpublished version of "an endlessly revised essay," that Amy Sillman started in 2009, during a residency at the American Academy in Berlin.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

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

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

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

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

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

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



