



1. Approaching painting with a background in dance, it made sense to me to use my body in my work just as it made no sense to me that this suggested I was the subject of the work. A dancer is not the assumed subject of a dance. For years this incited in me the negative goal of making a self-portrait without biographical or self-expressive content. Although working from different motivations when I began this piece, representing my “self” was still not among them. It did not begin with both speech bubbles cut out, at first they were outlined in black marker and inside one I wrote, “yes,” and in the other, “no.”

I had a friend by the studio who had recently changed his mind about the role of self-referential content in his own work. You must, For him the role was that of artist. It frustrated him that I was not taking a position with my speech bubbles.

“To what?”

“It used to be all my motivations for making were contradictory, I didn’t want the work to be this or that or this other thing and whatever was left was the work. Now I am trying to think from what I want the work to be. So maybe yes.”

“No! The drawing is not speaking for me. I want it to represent the act of speaking, not a particular speech

“assume the role,” he had decided.

“Would you say yes or no?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter. If you had to pick one.”

“So it should say yes yes.”

act.”

Later I thought about it and decided my polemic wasn't empty enough. I cut out the speech bubbles.

2. The cortical homunculus is a representation of the body housed within the mind. The proportions of the body it pictures are determined largely by sensory information, so the genitals are usually huge. In *Volatile Bodies* Elizabeth Grosz writes that in the relevant literature the homunculus is often explicitly male and no mention is made of a female homunculus. In “Why Separate Women’s Art?” Lucy Lippard describes Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro’s theory about the universality of “‘empty’ centers in women’s art.” If my homunculus is a hole, why should I say yes yes?

But not all silences are the same. This same friend, the one so insistent about, has a theory about *The Man Without Qualities*. The Musil novel inaugurates this genre, in which the protagonist’s lack of qualities leave only place and time to form his character, but my friend is fond of citing Bartleby, Chance from *Being There* and Forest Gump as all men without qualities, pointing out how,

This seems an obvious point about cultural decline, that each generation is dumber than the last and ours, whoever we are, is the dumbest of all, but what I wanted to know is why have there been no women without qualities? This, after all, was what my work was aspiring to be, I even made a painting of Google’s search page with my name typed into the search bar and another of a mirror without a reflection and still, everywhere I was confronted with my qualities.

3. I invited Lee Edelman to speak at Cooper Union and his talk was on Bartleby. My friend was in the audience. Edelman argues for queerness as a position outside whatever demarcations the law draws in a given situation. So it is not just that the queer is associated with perversity in straight culture, but that the queer is whatever falls outside any line drawn by any social body. In the Q&A my friend asked,

“But yes no is an empty polemic! Assume the role!”

“assuming the role,”

“each successive man without qualities gets stupider.”

“Should we set fire to churches?”

Edelman reiterated that the queer is constitutionally not a sympathetic position. If you draw the line at pedophilia, than the queer is a pedophiliac. If you draw the line at rape, than the queer is a rapist.

It is easy to accuse Edelman of being a hedonist, but I think he is really a formalist. In my experience, formalists always have a “don’t shoot the messenger” attitude. They see themselves as operating at the level of structure and the content that fills the form isn’t their responsibility. But Edelman’s examples are all hyper masculine. Is the queer a masculine position? Obviously not, the law is a phallic operation. Edelman assumes one law and one outside. But who is the law in our town? If I demand consent in a rape culture, can I be queer?

After the talk we went to get pizza.

“Bartleby is a man without qualities as a figure of resistance,” my friend concluded.

This is perhaps counterintuitive, if the man without qualities is the product of his time it seems too that he would be its darling. But the mirror has this one quality, it flips the image; to be without qualities creates a window so clear that the bird can fly into it. I realized then why there are no women without qualities. A quality is a mark, to be without them you must be clean. In a patriarchal society, women are marked by our gender, we have at least one quality of discord between us and the place. A woman’s resistance is seen as hysteric, divisive, pathetic, but never inexplicable. Unlike Bartleby, we are not of the place, our withdrawal from it will not be a source of wonder.

Not all silences are the same. There are three empty centers in this work. The empty space of the speaking subject, the empty space of the other, and the gap between them.

