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Sightlines

BARTHOLOMEW RYAN

Painting as Score: Sarah Crowner on *Format*

BY
Bartholomew Ryan

FILED TO
Visual Arts

DATE
Nov 20, 2012

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Sarah Crowner in her studio, September 2012. Video still by Eric Crosby



In Studio Sessions, our ongoing web series, the 15 artists in the Walker-organized exhibition Painter Painter respond to an open-ended query about their practices. In this edition, New York-based artist Sarah Crowner discusses the spreads in her recent artist book, Format, published by Primary Information.

Primary Information is a nonprofit run by James Hoff and Miriam Katzeff. Its mission has been to reprint and make available books that aren't accessible to a wide audience today. Kids today might now know about *Avalanche* magazine or the *Great Bear Pamphlets* or Lee Lozano's sketches because of Primary Information's efforts. They've just started working with contemporary artists as well. Their mission is to get the books out to the public as cheaply as possible, so the cost is quite low—they're not fancy monographs.

They invited me to do a project about a year ago, and we've been working on it since then. What's really great is to be able to synthesize your ideas into a book format. It's helped me think about painting. It's become reference material, in a way. I like the idea that if anyone is interested in my painting, I can hand them this book and they might understand without me rambling on for hours about it. This explains in visual terms, rather than words, what my practice is about.

One of the things I am interested in is how painting can engage the body. I have a highly physical way of creating paintings. The way I make paintings involves a lot of stretching, a lot of muscle, a lot of "body"—cutting, taking apart, dealing with the material. I think of painting as a collection of mediums, which might be oil paint, and also linen and canvas and different kinds of cloths. The way I construct something is to make a collection of materials that engage each other physically rather than making an image that is flat.



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The title of the book is *Format*. It's about the format of the book itself, but also form and formalism. A lot of the way these pages are laid out is thinking about repeating forms from everyday life, and forms from painting's history. Building the forms together, and making a narrative with shapes.

For the last few years, I've kept a studio wall where I collect references and source material. Everything from a scraps of particular colors that I found in a fabric store, pages from art magazines, posters, or a postcard someone sent me from home that is really weird and has interesting visual elements. Maybe a Xeroxed copy of a drawing I've kept in my wallet for months.

I wanted to dive into these source materials with the cover, so the photograph on the right is of layers and layers of these sources glued together or stacked on top of each other. I found this picture of a work by Swiss artist Verena Loewensberg from the 1940s. She was part of the Concrete Art movement with Max Bill among others. It's basically a composition that's made out of circles, layered circles. It's a really pure abstract work, but to me it has a great sense of humor, as if they're thought bubbles.

I reversed the image and placed it on the back of the book. I'm interested in a book as an art form and what book-objects can do to images. I like to think about gutters, leaves, and bleeds, and the physicality of an art book.



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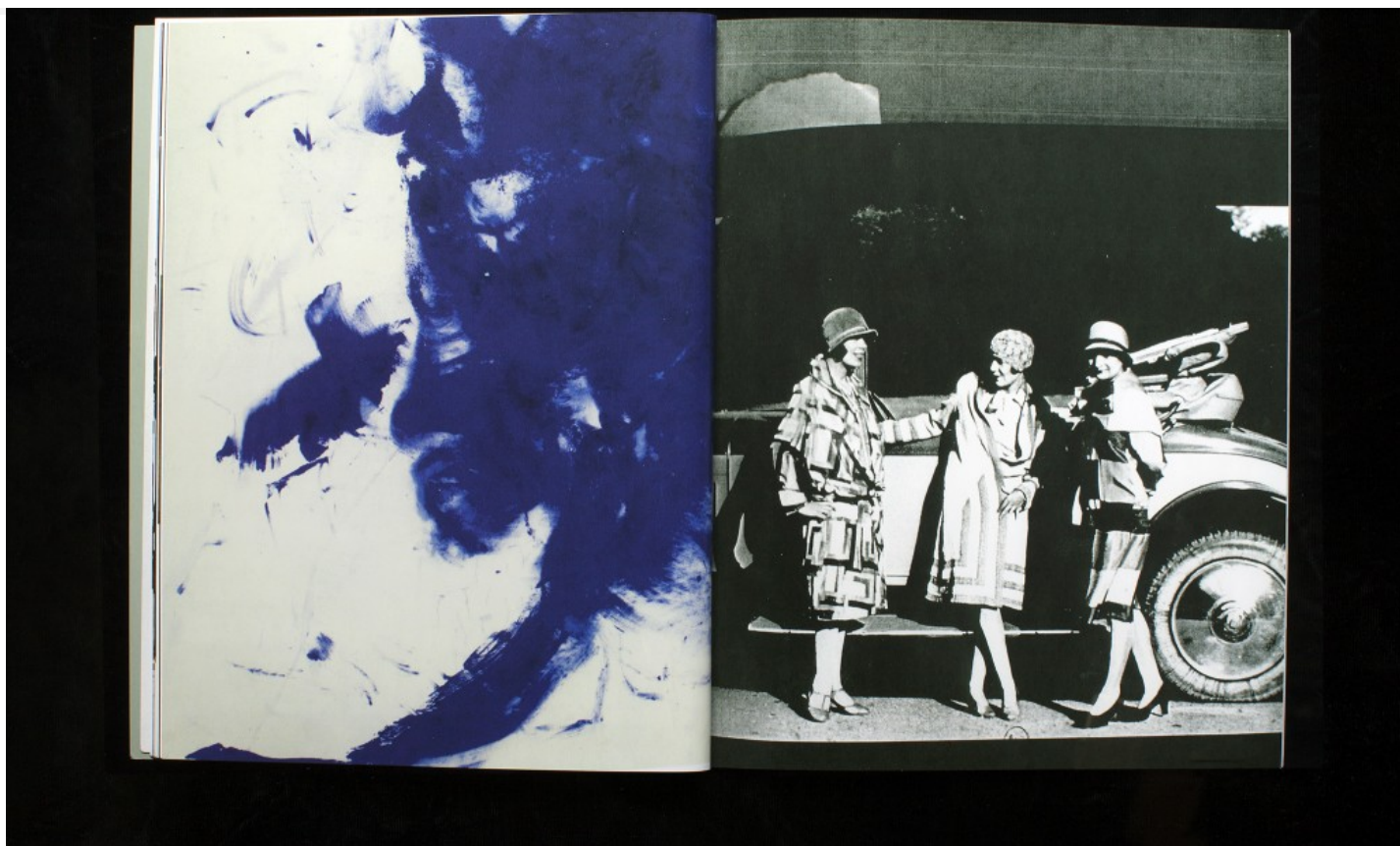
Last March, while I was in Sweden, I was introduced to the work of the painter Sigríd Hjertén (1885–1948). She is quite well-known there. Sigríd was also a mother, and one painting I love is a picture of herself in her studio with her family distracting her. As a mother who has a three-year-old always distracting me, I felt a personal connection here. You can't help but let your life come into your art. I did some research at the MoMA library and found some great books on her, and I made some copies. I don't read Swedish, but I love the image. I also found a photograph from a Guy de Cointet performance in the 1970s with this woman. I don't know whether she's putting up, taking down, or caressing this painting. It looks to me like she's installing it. Not quite.

I played with spot varnishing elements on some of the pages, such as the pink squares here. The printer sort of paints a gloss varnish on top of the page after it's been printed. This way I can liven up this black-and-white fuzzy image a little. I did it several times within the book in other instances where you have this glossy painted object sitting on top of something that's very historical. It's a way of inserting myself into this already digested historical content.

Somebody sent me this postcard on the right of a Liubov Popova painting that became a part of a collage in my sketchbook. Sometimes these collages happen by chance. Sometimes they're half chance, half composed. At the time, I wondered what would happen if we got these artists together and we all had a party? What would the conversation be with Popova and Guy de Cointet, and Hjertén and her husband, Isaac? I like the narrative it implies.



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The images are of Sonia Delaunay's clothing designs and a detail of an Yves Klein painting. The artists obviously have very different ways of approaching painting and the body. Yves Klein's paintings were really beautiful, but he used a woman's naked body like a paintbrush, like a tool. You think of Delaunay, the way she was thinking about painting and the body, in a different way. She turned her paintings into patterns that people could wear. She painted an automobile at one point. She did these stage designs, too. She was bringing abstraction into everyday life. Asking, "Can abstraction be a tool? Can it have a use? Can it have a function?" She was really doing that. It makes you think about painting in functional terms rather than pure fine art terms.

She's always interested me for those reasons. The same way that Sophie Taeuber-Arp interests me, and a lot of the early avant-garde artists. Truly bringing art into life, with a kind of humor. This contrasts with the distanced spirituality of Klein's paintings. They're not even his gestures. It's the woman's body print but he's calling it his own. She has to be naked. That's like the first thing, right? I don't know. It's ridiculous. But at the same time they're beautiful paintings.



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This woman's wearing an Hélio Oiticica *Parangolé*. It's this human body interacting with fabric and color and making a geometric form, moving in the real world. I wanted to see what would happen if I reversed it. Some of my paintings also have this symmetry. I was narrowing in on this orange geometric form that she's creating. Because it's a reproduction, no longer an object, it's just flat: it's a picture of something. Reversing that, you then see what happens when you place the two parts together. I also love this guy in the middle. He's sticking his arm out. The spread very intentionally has his arm creeping out. That's something that could only happen in a book because the way you hold a book has this dimensionality, this curve, so he appears to be falling in. He's looking really relaxed about falling into the gutter!



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This is one of the paintings that I've loved for a long time—Picasso's *La femme-fleur* (1946). I love how it's a portrait of a woman reduced to geometric forms: lines, circles, and wedge-type shapes, but then it's also a plant. The Picasso is very Picasso, but then there is this Leni Riefenstahl photographic still with the woman balancing on top of the painting. It was another object on my studio wall. You see how the stem is extending into this pole-type thing? She's an acrobat or she's a line that's engaging with this painting, which is already a painting of a woman. There are two representations of women, and they're both stuck onto a little drawing of mine behind.

On the left is an Alexander Calder acoustic ceiling in Caracas from 1952. These wedge shapes are reminiscent of the leaf shapes in the Picasso painting, so there's a nice rhythm there. Also, she seems like she's flying through air and there's this great space in the amphitheater photograph, so it's as if she's soaring through that space. It's a circular thing that's happening. That gestural line connecting the Picasso and the Riefenstahl is a watercolor line from a drawing that I had covered up, which look like beans or lips.



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I love this picture, the Vasarely painting on the left, with a fashion model from the '50s sporting a new look with her tiny waist. I was thinking, "Is the painting the whole thing, the experience of this red coat in front of these black and white forms?" I've had this fascination with Vasarely for such a long time. Vasarely was considered the first Op artist before Bridget Riley, and in his early period he made some really interesting paintings that were very proto-Op. Before he got all psychedelic, he made these great hard-edged geometric paintings that began to trick the eye, but were not explicitly giving you a headache or making you dizzy. It was this great moment in the early '50s. The first paintings that I made, which were made with a sewing machine and paint, were appropriated or borrowed from Vasarely's compositions. And since then, I'm always Googling "Vasarely1953" or "1952" to see what I can find.

I've been looking at René Daniëls for a few years. He did this whole series of bow tie paintings around 1986 or 1987. His bow ties are just simple geometric forms: two triangles with a square in the middle, say, or sometimes it's a triangle and a triangle. But what's more complex about it is that he thinks of the bow tie as a representation of the exhibition space, so it's also an architectural drawing of a space. He's thinking about the placement of paintings in museums or galleries while he's making the paintings. I like that on the one hand Daniels is making geometric abstraction, but on the other hand there is also something much wider and connected to life or the world.

I paired them together because I was looking at the black and whiteness of both paintings. But then the high-class formality of the bow ties with the model's evening wear appealed to me also.



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it would not become too pixilated. The only nice paper I could find at that moment happened to have a paint smudge on it. I had one piece of paper left. I stuck it through. So this page is not a photograph anymore; it's something taken from the Internet, inkjet printed, scanned, rescanned, blown up, it's taken down, and then you've got paint on it. It's become something new.



This image of the choreographer Eliot Feld and dancer Edmund LaFosse comes from this great book that I found called *America Dances*. It's from the '70s, this period of big hair and bell-bottoms and leg warmers, which I love on a personal level. I was born in the '70s. I always loved the movie *Fame*. But then I really love the color palette, those dirty brown monochromes of '70s New York. I can't say how it directly relates to my paintings—perhaps in this last body of work, where I've been thinking a lot about dance and looking at the aesthetics of modern dance, like Trisha Brown, as well as the circus and acrobats, jugglers, bodies in motion. I love the way he's leaping out of the gutter and seems to be balancing on this cane. It creates a great composition visually. You've got these two acute triangles pointing up toward his hands. Then you've got the ball of his Afro, the curve of his rear, and then the backs of these giant thighs. I think it could be a beautiful abstract painting, if you think about it in formal terms. I kept this page dog-eared in my library for a while.

The page to the right of that is another layering from my studio wall. The abstract shapes in black and white in the background come from a theater curtain that I was inspired by from Maria Jarema. Next to that, the great image in red and pink, is a rug advertisement from *World of Interiors* magazine. I love



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The silhouette of the woman with the arm on her hip comes from one of Cecil Beaton's scrapbooks. I carried it around for a long time in my wallet, so it's pretty rough and tumbled. Basically here are silhouettes of bodies on top of abstract backgrounds, but it's me thinking aloud again what if abstract painting could be a backdrop, and then suddenly you have LaFosse jumping out of the gutter.



This one is funny. It's the only time one of my paintings appears in this book and it's in the context of *Greek Vogue*. I had an exhibition in Athens a couple of years ago. Somebody bought a painting and placed it in his house. This house was then styled with ridiculous bunnies and kitties, and then the photographer took a picture of this model wearing shoes that match my painting. She was eating a lollipop. It's the stupidest thing, but I like it. I didn't know if I should put it in the book, but it's not really a picture of the painting. I didn't ever expect it to end up on top of this cat.

So, she's looking across the gutter at this other page and having a laugh. This one man is juggling these two striped balls and the striped balls are related to the lollipop. I've been looking at all these books on acrobats and thinking of these stretching bodies. I love these two women forming a "T." It's amazing that the human body can do that.



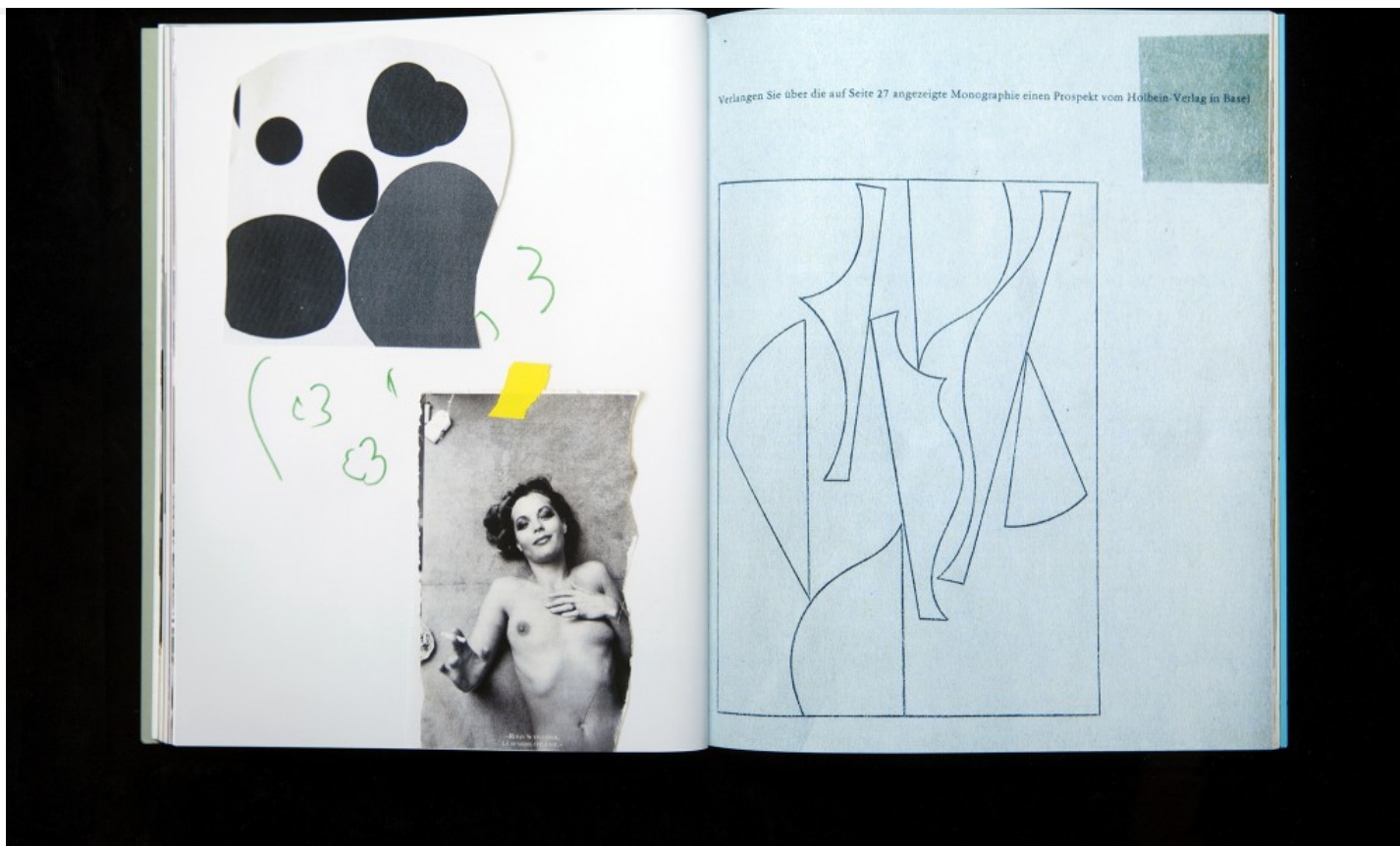
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We're still with the jugglers and acrobats. This man on the far right is juggling these flying plates that become white discs, and then the white discs fly over to the other page, which features this crazy Alexander Calder wallpaper from 1949. He also wallpapered the ceiling. You have the light sources looking like the plates, so it's as if the plates are flying over to the next page.

The wallpaper could have been printed on a fabric and then stuck on the wall somehow. It's really ugly, but I like what he's trying to do. I've always loved Calder because he was always pushing out of painting and sculpture. He did so many different things. He painted airplanes, and he made tapestries and rugs and the circus wire sculptures that we all know, and jewelry. And there didn't seem to have been a hierarchy among the practices.

With many of these artists that I've been mentioning, it's their open, almost generous way of working that I'm interested in. Sonia Delaunay might have said, "I'm an artist and this is one way that I work." Thinking about painting as a part of life, what if a painting can be furniture? What if a painting can be something we walk on? Can it surround us everyday? A lot of artists have thought about these ideas throughout time.



This is the “Romy” spread. At the top left, you can see the “thought bubbles” from the same Verena Loewensberg painting that I use on the cover. We were trying to make sense of the cover and I kept cutting it and cutting it and cutting it up, and it wasn’t working formally. The more I cut it, the more the image was ruined, so I stuck it on this page in my sketchbook, which had Romy Schneider already there. My daughter’s also named Romy. I’ve always loved Romy Schneider as an actress. I found this picture of her smoking a cigarette with her shirt off, lying there. It’s like she’s smoking and the bubbles are becoming smoke bubbles, maybe. Or that these could be her thought bubbles. I juxtaposed them with the back of a Sophie Taeuber-Arp art book from Basel in the ’40s.

I like the formal rhythm of history. I kept thinking back to this idea, “What if we all sat down to dinner at a party? What would we say to each other, Sophie, Verena, Romy, and me?” I had these imaginary conversations. It’s another way of humanizing this found material, this very formal abstraction. If you look at the Sophie cover art, this is very formal, reductive. It’s very beautiful, but then there’s also something humorous about it when you place it with these other things. I don’t know why, but I always laugh a little bit when I see Sophie’s piece. It has an innate a sense of humor somehow. She had also made some woodcuts that looked like this drawing. They were made by cutting out the negative shapes from other forms. You can see that one’s a negative and one’s a positive. Then I imagine she shook up the forms in a box frame. This is a chance arrangement of forms, which is nice and maybe why it feels so light and less rigid and composed.



WALKER



curtain that would function for this score, which was originally presented with electronic music. But I don't have any schooling in electronic music, and to me it was important to recognize my own point of view in reinterpreting his score, visually.

And, thinking about the idea of a score, and painting's history: what if this book, or a painting, is a score and you as a viewer can interpret it any way you want, or you as an artist can interpret it any way you want? You can reverse it. You can flip it. You can cut it up. You can treat artwork as something that can be engaged with, and manipulated, examined, and then physically worked with, rather than something that's fixed, stuck, and dusty on your bookshelf, but something that we can revitalize. Art history as a score.

Sarah Crowner lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She received a BA from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1996 and an MA from Hunter College in 2002. Crowner was included in the Whitney Biennial 2010, and has participated in exhibitions at White Columns, New York; Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis; Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit; de Appel, Amsterdam; Culturgest, Lisbon (2010), and DAAD Galerie, Berlin (2008), amongst others. Recently, Crowner designed the scenography for a revival of Robert Ashley's Perfect Lives, which travels to Marfa, Texas and then on to venues in Europe.

All photos by Gene Pittman

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