

Moving Metres:

Hilda Morley and Gestural Abstraction

“After reading Hilda Morley’s mainly unpublished poems,” Denise Levertov remarked sometime in the late 1960s, “I find myself shaking my head at the strangeness of what used to be called fate, a word currently out of fashion” (*Light Up* 265). The “fate” of Hilda Morley (1916-1998)—friend of H.D. in the 1930s, guest of the abstract expressionist Eighth Street Club in New York, teacher at Black Mountain College alongside Charles Olson and Robert Creeley—Levertov summed up briefly: “alive and unpublished at fifty” (*Light Up* 268). Levertov was reluctant to apportion blame, but some have been less willing to attribute the belated publication of Morley’s poems to the fact of her “*keeping them up her sleeve*” (*Light Up* 265). Reviewing Morley’s first collection, *A Blessing Outside Us* (1976), for instance, Hayden Carruth suspected that her neglect should be “ascribed to sexism” (103): “How else can one explain her consistent rejection for twenty-five years or more when so many less talented poets, chiefly men, have been accepted and acclaimed?” (103).

Carruth’s conclusion, blunt as it was, accurately reflected the inequitable process of recognition and acceptance within the early postwar American avant-garde. Of the forty-four poets collected in Donald Allen’s landmark anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (1960), only four—Levertov, Helen Adam, Madeline Gleason and Barbara Guest—were women. And the problem was not simply one of representation. Many texts in the anthology—Olson’s essay “Projective Verse” (1950), Jonathan Williams’s “A Little Tumescence” (1954), and Jack Kerouac’s “230th Chorus” (1955), for instance—frankly imagine the New American poem as a theatre of male sexual experience, upon whose stage women enter either as an emblem of the ineffable—Kerouac’s “Damema, Mother of Buddhas” (175) for example—or simply as the “woman in my bed” (89), whose absence Paul Carroll laments in “Father” (1959).

A similar inequity marked contemporary New York School painting, whose practitioners Morley had known from the early 1940s. Indeed, the movement’s critical and commercial

acceptance in the 1950s was made possible—as Marcia Brennan has convincingly argued—by appealing to conventional “notions of masculine vitality, freedom, and authenticity” (10), all of which were attractive at a moment when various social forces conspired to threaten orthodox bourgeois manhood in America.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary participation in the movement by women artists—Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Mercedes Matter, and Helen Frankenthaler, amongst others—was usually deemphasised, and often comprehensively occluded, by the critics.<sup>2</sup>

The orthodox heterosexual male subject cherished by the American avant-garde—including New York School painting and the influential early *oeuvre* of Morley’s Black Mountain College colleague Olson—is sometimes regarded as having precluded female artists from certain technical innovations of early postwar American modernism. In this view, the theatrical masculinity of the avant-garde did not simply exclude women (and gay men) from the emerging canon, but actually robbed them of formal practices that would otherwise have been available. The practice of abstract expressionism (particularly in its gestural form) or “projective” verse could not, according to this argument, be prised from the conventionally gendered languages that gave such practices their contemporary cultural legitimacy and avant-garde appeal.

This note has been sounded by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in a discussion of Olson’s “Projective Verse”. DuPlessis concludes that the “strongly torqued gender narrative of Olson’s essay”, especially its phallic and ejaculatory metaphors, “obscures any female participation in the inventing or performing of this poetics” (45, footnote). Michael Davidson thinks similarly, suggesting that Olson’s “genitalization of performance [...] limits its practitioners” (33). Historians of the New York School have concluded along similar lines. “Female Abstract Expressionists,” Michael Leja claims, “were structurally excluded from the construction of subjectivity embedded in the full experience and production of Abstract Expressionist art” (266). For Leja, female American artists were not only locked out of abstract expressionism commercially and institutionally, but were also—and more fundamentally—deprived of those aspects of abstract expressionist “production” that hinged upon the construction of orthodox American masculinity. Leja’s argument would seem

to apply particularly to the gesturalism of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, whose aggressive application of paint lent itself easily to what Hubert Crehan described, in 1959, as the “he-man cult” within New York avant-garde painting (quoted in Newman 215).

But the question remains whether the actual practices of the postwar American avant-garde, particularly “projective” verse and gestural painting, were separable from the overblown *machismo* that surrounded them discursively. In other words, were these forms of artistic production ever performed in ways that escaped the rhetoric of masculine initiative, assertiveness, and spontaneity that usually attached itself to what were, in reality, considered extensions of earlier modernist tradition? A second generation of New York artists—particularly Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly—would work their way through and beyond the masculine heroics of abstract expressionism via irony, parody, and new visual idioms. But was it possible to work *within* early postwar American modernism—within the practices of the New York City-Black Mountain College nexus—without investing in the reconstruction of the imperilled American male?

It is here that the work of Hilda Morley assumes a special significance. For as her prose essays suggest, Morley’s poetic practice was informed almost equally by projective verse and New York School gesturalism. That is, her early poetic practice combined the two techniques most closely associated—in Olson’s terms—with the “primordial & phallic energies” (173) of the avant-garde. Along with the work of female contemporaries and friends such as Elaine de Kooning and Mercedes Matter, Morley’s oeuvre raises the possibility that the American avant-garde’s methods of artistic production could be displaced from—perhaps even turned against—the “he-man cult” that claimed to author them. This is not quite to suggest, as Griselda Pollock does, that the early postwar moment in American art was itself “open to a radical destabilisation” (148) of sexual and gender identities. Rather it is to stress that, at least in the eyes of one poet, the techniques of the avant-garde—the gesture, the projective line—were not irretrievably hypostasised with bourgeois masculinity; that they could survive without the rhetorical armature of the “he-man”.<sup>3</sup>

Morley was uniquely placed to draw upon these two sources. She had been introduced to the New York School painters through her first husband, the painter Eugene Morley, and later attended the abstract expressionist's Eighth Street Club, where she met her second husband, the German composer Stefan Wolpe. Judging from her fragment of a memoir about the Club, Morley appears to have been especially close to two painters who defied its nominal ban on women: Elaine de Kooning and Mercedes Matter, both of whom worked in a gestural style which—unlike the mature work of Pollock and Franz Kline, for instance—retained representative or figural design. From 1952, Morley was also an instructor in literature and Hebrew at Black Mountain College, where she had a troubled but artistically generative relationship with Olson.

The abstract gesturalism of artists such as Mercedes Matter in particular—in which the individual stroke or smudge of pigment has a unique material presence on the canvas at the same time as representing a fragment of observed nature—strongly informed Morley's poetry. But it was hybridised with the breathing rhythms of Olson's "Projective Verse", which Morley would have read after 1952. The result was a line-based poetry of staccato rhythm—often representing a landscape, still life, or other work of art—in which a variable verse line represents, simultaneously, a single breath, a single perception, and a unique physical gesture on the page. Exceptionally in mid-century American poetry, Morley combined the advances of New York School gesturalism with the latest, "projective", incarnation of modernist anti-symbolism. The Eighth Street Club and Black Mountain College may have been inhospitable to women artists, but Morley's earlier poetry—in spite of the "he-man cult"—sought its measure between the two.

#### MOVING METRES

In "Organic Form", an essay published seven years after her death, Morley advanced an "organic" poetic—familiar from Romantic aesthetics—which gained a new lease on life amongst the poets at Black Mountain College after 1950. Almost paraphrasing Emerson's "metre-making argument" (263), Morley defines "organic form" as: "the movement of the poet's process using various

perceptions to get at the life of the poetic experience that gives rise to the measure, the movement of the metre” (“Organic Form” 325). Coleridge would have described the opposite of such organic form “mechanical” (83); a dichotomy Olson reinterprets in “Projective Verse” as the difference between “OPEN” poetry and “closed’ verse” (239). Interpreting the Romantic aesthetic at one further remove, Morley reads Olsonian open poetics in this essay through the prism of Levertov’s “Some Notes on Organic Form” (1965), which imagines the poem as “an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake” (*The Poet* 7). Unlike Levertov however, Morley lays special emphasis on what Olson called the “breathing of the man who writes” (242). For Morley, organic form is that which achieves authenticity by fastening itself to the “poet’s personal voice”; their “inward noise” (“Organic Form” 326), especially as that voice responds to the multiform pressures of sensation and perception.

In so far as it follows Robert Creeley’s dogma, “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (Olson 240), quoted approvingly by Olson in “Projective Verse”, Morley’s essay represents a standard account of post-Romantic organic aesthetics, with the difference that the “voice” of the poet is now taken as the first measure of legitimacy and naturalness. But Morley significantly complicates the picture by suggesting that an equivalent practice was found, contemporaneously, in New York painting. “As my poetic style crystallized at a time when I was closely associated with the abstract expressionist painters in New York,” she says, “I turned to some of their statements to see how they might shed light on my own perception of organic form in poetry” (“Organic Form” 325).

Morley was wary of claiming too much of a correspondence between poetry and visual art. The understated phrase “shed light” tacitly acknowledges the autonomy of the artistic medium; an idea reaffirmed by the New York School’s major formalist critic, Clement Greenberg, in his essay “Towards a Newer Laocoön” (1940). Even so, Morley’s account of abstract expressionism in “Organic Form” makes a claim for several conjunctions between experimental painting and poetry in the period, including her own. The poet’s appreciation of the New York School is made

distinctive, in fact, by its application to painting of *poetic* theories prevalent at Black Mountain College in the era of abstract expressionism. This comes to the fore in the poet's discussion of Mercedes Matter, whose gesturalism Morley interprets as subject to "process":

Mercedes Matter speaks of "the effect...which results from the order of correspondence that is true to my perceived experience." She goes on to speak of "the coherence of my experience, revealed as I work," that "guides me toward coherence in the painting." Commenting on Matter's work, the painter and critic Louis Finkelstein notes that "the balance between the openness and completeness of the entire painting...and the specification of completed shapes...is a precarious one." Both these statements stress the quality of process in the making of art as a paramount factor. ("Organic Form" 325)

"The quality of process in the making of art" recalls the third "principle" of Olson's projective verse: "the *process* of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished" (240). And Matter's suggestion that form is experimental rather than predetermined, emerging with "the coherence of my experience, revealed as I work", is consistent with a suggestion of Creeley's which Morley goes on to quote: the poet cannot "propose the assumption of content prior to its experience of that content" ("Organic Form" 326). The "precarious" balance Louis Finkelstein notes between "openness and completeness" in Matter's work could also be said of projective verse. On the one hand, Olson's manifesto called for poets to work "in OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form" (239). On the other hand, this was to be closed by the restrictions of respiration: "And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes [...] the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination" (242).

Morley's interpretation of Matter—particularly its exploratory, happenstance gestural design—also informs the poet's distinction between high modernist *vers libre* and the breath-based prosody of "Projective Verse". The processual "irregularity" and "unexpectedness" of the abstract expressionist gesture—the flick, drip, swipe, or smear of paint on canvas—becomes equivalent, in





Rosenberg's private "emotional and intellectual energy" (29)—the psychobiography of the artist—what Morley means by "experience itself [...] revealed to the poet step by step"?

#### "ORDER OF CORRESPONDENCE": MERCEDES MATTER

It is pertinent, in this respect, that Morley takes as her representative of New York School painting Mercedes Matter (1913-2001), an artist seldom represented in critical accounts of abstract expressionism. Morley met Matter for the first time in New York in the autumn of 1950, when she and Stefan Wolpe began attending the Eighth Street Club. As her memoir of the Club attests, the artist made an immediate impression:

Mercedes came up to us, tall, slender, finely boned, her eyes huge and dark, half-shy, half determined, and pushed her head between the two men who formed a little circle with us, one arm around each of them, so that she seemed at that moment like the tutelary goddess of the place. And, indeed, I was a little frightened of her at first as the reigning woman deity there (whose attitude toward the other women was uncertain) until Elaine de Kooning turned up. But she took to Stefan and he to her, their Mediterranean looks and seemingly banked fires making for an affinity. ("The Eighth Street Club" 104)

The daughter of the American modernist Arthur Beecher Carles (1882-1952), Matter had been a member of the American Abstract Artists group and was employed, like many of her contemporaries, by the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration during the Depression. Matter studied under Hans Hofmann at the Art Students League in New York and worked closely with Fernand Léger in 1935-6 on an ultimately unrealised mural for the French Shipping Line Company's pier in New York Harbour (Matter 2015).<sup>4</sup> After returning to New York from California in 1946, Matter developed a dynamic gestural style which shared the movement and energy of her contemporaries. In a brief autobiography written much later in life, she mentions



Mercedes Matter, *Tabletop Still Life* (1952). Oil paint and charcoal on canvas.  
36 x 30 in. Private collection.

seeing de Kooning's *Attic* (1949) at the Whitney Museum in New York as having a particularly "profound impact" on her practice (Matter 2015).

But Matter's contemporary works strike a balance between gestural expressionism and naturalism; between the dramatic theatre of the artist's "emotional and intellectual energy" and the representation of the object that prompted this response. Even in her most abstract gestural works Matter was still painting from nature, demonstrating—as Ellen G. Landau has said—a "never wavering commitment to the primacy of still life" (53). *Tabletop Still Life* (private collection, 1952), created the year Morley began teaching at Black Mountain, is a prime example of this.<sup>5</sup> The composition is structured around an abstract form situated left of centre which appears to be a fruit bowl on a wooden table. Apart from several dabs and smears, segments of the bottom left quarter of the composition are left mostly free of paint, revealing the light brown support beneath and thus suggesting the paint-strewn wooden floor of the artist's studio. Above this, a band of vibrant pink-purple indicates a tablecloth beneath or around the bowl. The top two thirds of the

composition are predominantly a chalky white, suggesting a curtain or white wall behind the table arrangement in the foreground. However, these features of the conventional still life also bear witness to a physical encounter between the artist and her medium, as well as a more formal, visual encounter between the artist and the objects. The handling of the paint is heavy and apparently unhesitating, giving the impression of spontaneity and speed of execution. The rough *cloisonné*, separating shards of yellow, red, aquamarine, and purple, likewise appears impulsive and cutting, recording the artist's evolving formal responses to the arrangement.

The spontaneous “process” Matter mentioned in the passage quoted by Morley could not refer to automatic free-association in a work such as this. It is not, in other words, the private, almost solipsistic experience of Rosenberg's action painting. Rather, the “process” represents a dense, prolonged, and unpredictable encounter between consciousness and object. Matter calls this the “order of correspondence that is true to my perceived experience”, and it is formed, in the representative case of *Tabletop Still Life*, by a marriage of forceful lines, movement, and brushwork with the stance of actual objects in space. To put this a slightly different way, Matter's “deft mastery of the painterly vocabulary of Action Painting” (211)—as Michael Zakian has said of this and a slightly earlier still life—was constructed through, rather than despite, her traditional still life subject. The energy of Matter's physical engagement with the canvas is given grounding, as Zakian notes, by the objects that gave rise to her experience: “still life provided her with a steady and certain subject that allowed her to invest herself fully in the physical process of painting” (211).

“Experience” then, in both Matter and Morley's terms, is not the “biography of the artist”, and does not emerge from an encounter between the artist and her medium alone. Instead, the “irregularity” and “unexpectedness” of organic form arises when the artist approaches the world and transcribes the thickness and happenstance of their meeting. Matter makes a gesture that incorporates a unique aspect of that engagement; Morley sets down an equivalent verse line. Painting and poem appear “in the form of sudden brakes and shifts” because they represent an accumulation of discrete and irregular responses to the physical world.

Of course, Matter's commitment to still life might support Michael Leja's contention that female abstract expressionists were excluded from the New York School's energetic, gestural reconstruction of orthodox masculinity. By retaining the still life subject, Matter refrained from entering the independent psychological theatre of action painting. But perhaps it would be truer to say that Matter turns action painting against its own tendency towards narcissism; its exclusive investment in the interior life of the American male. Matter gave confirmation to Morley that two closely related practices of the American avant-garde—the "process" of painterly gesture and "projective" line—could be separated from the authorising rhetoric of masculine spontaneity that made for their contemporary authority.

Morley's style may have "crystallized," as she puts it, "at a time when I was closely associated with the abstract expressionist painters", but her own account suggests that the strain of New York painting with which she made the closest affinity was the relatively underrepresented one characterised by Matter's gestural abstraction of the early 1950s; a style that combines a typically vigorous abstract expressionist technique with an emphasis on the complexity of the painter's encounter with—in Olson's phrase—"external reality" (163).

#### DISCRETE VANTAGES

In her statement on organic form, Morley identified poems by Olson, Williams, George Oppen and Levertov as examples of that organic practice she considered analogous to certain aspects of abstract expressionism. Of her own poems, she chose "Sea Lily" (1969), a poem which—while offering perhaps an homage to H.D.'s "Sea Lily" in *Sea Garden* (1916)—tracks its subject in a language attentive to fluxes of the speaking voice. At once the "process" and *ongoing* quality which Morley found in Matter's work becomes distinctive:

Inside the sea-lily light  
stirs  
a vibration.  
The pulse  
of water nourishing the flower



to that of an artist such as Matter, whose still-life adopts a dynamic, unsettled surface as the record of a complex encounter with physical objects. The halting, arrhythmic poem becomes, in this sense, comparable to the entropic angular forms of a work such as *Tabletop Still Life*, which evokes the object only through the “sudden brakes and shifts” of its engagement by the artist.

Those angular forms revealed how far Matter was drawing out the implications of cubism. The mostly triangular facets suggest a series of discrete visual aspects on her still life subject. Morley’s poem can be decoded in a similar way, the almost total absence of punctuation suggesting that the lines and phrases are related spatially rather than grammatically, in a disjunctive assemblage composed of individual instances of recognition: “The pulse”, “a vibration”, “a cup”, “giving”. Like Matter’s still life, however, these discrete vantages on the subject are not impartial, but are rather charged with the imaginative and metaphorical responses of the artist. Yet this is not the kind of expressionism that retires from the world into the privacy of an isolated subject. Nor is it the solipsistic encounter between artist and medium revealed in the distinctly masculine theatre of Rosenbergian action painting. Both Morley and Matter represent a conjunction between embodied private experience and the actual object world. They illustrate, in other words, the kind of claim made by Maurice Merleau-Ponty a few years before Morley and Matter met for the first time in New York: “The world is not what I think, but what I live through” (xviii).

In “Projective Verse” this was not simply a matter of poetics; it represented—purportedly—a new “stance toward reality” (246). In “Human Universe” (1951) Olson stressed that, following the development and use of atomic weapons, it was imperative that “man” realise his embodied consistency with the external world; not to do so would be to risk turning nature “against herself” (163). Whether or not Morley shared Olson’s speculative ethics—and his willingness to collapse aesthetic theory into metaphysics—her still life and landscape poems do foreground the juxtaposition of “external reality” with the experiencing subject. The ruptured, agitated surface of a poem such as “Sea Lily”, like still life works by Matter, find their subject at the boundary between perceiver and perceived.





Counterintuitive as this reading may be, the poet's emphasis here on the still life Matisse, in which vibrant colour represents one aspect of an active engagement with physical objects, was shared by those abstract expressionists, such as Matter, who continued to paint from nature. In Matter's contemporary works, Matisse's colour—which the artist draws upon via the work of her former teacher Hans Hoffman—fuels an energetic relationship between the still life subject and the perceiving artist. Saturated colour does not point in the direction of increased abstraction for Matter or Morley. Instead, it is a means of realising, on the canvas, an encounter between artist and object; the record of a confrontation between mind and things.

But if the final lines of a poem such as “Matisse: Red Studio” can be understood as gestural, as discrete records of an approach to the material world, they are also “projective” in the terms of Olson's essay of 1950. Indeed, although the novelty of Olson's principles has often been called into question, Morley's poems do certify to two precedents set by “Projective Verse”: the freer use of page space and a sincerer record of the knotty, irregular rhythms of the breath, both of which could be uncoupled from—and turned against—the *braggadocio* of Olson's writing. Moreover, Morley could find certain aspects of abstract expressionism suggestive of projective verse because the latter was—like the painting—an emphatically material and visuospatial poetics, utilising the negative space of the page as much as the printed word and foregrounding the individual line as *matter* as much as medium (in the final lines of this poem, for instance, the depicted object is given physical shape on the page; the “spurt” of the gull reflected in the pull of the lines towards the right margin). Above all, gestural abstraction (in the hands of an artist like Matter) and projective verse turned their disjunctive rhythms upon the world beyond the page or canvas, and beyond the sequestered biography of the abstract expressionist artist. Between Olson and painters such as Matter, Morley found a style which testified to the unanticipated, various encounter between the artist and—in Olson's terms again—the world's “larger field of objects” (247).



the insistence upon movement and series of perception, Morley's practice embodied advances within American late modernism without investing in its frequently conservative reconstruction of American masculinity. Though it occasioned their institutional marginalisation then, the "he-man cult" did not preclude Morley and the female abstract expressionists she admired from forging practices which, whilst oblique to the official styles of early postwar modernism, were well within the ambit of the American avant-garde. In the light of their work, the "New American" poetry and painting begin to appear—and not only stylistically—more various than they once did.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Brennan observes: "It should be emphasized that during the 1950s, a wide range of cultural critics identified a common set of factors that collectively threatened the well-being of bourgeois masculine selfhood. These issues included social conformity, sexual anxiety, personal repression, and the insatiable demands of materialist consumer culture" (Brennan 7-8).

<sup>2</sup> The exclusivity of the New York School (as a preserve of the white heterosexual male) is increasingly contested. See for instance, Ann Eden Gibson's early *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). The first major retrospective exhibition of Mercedes Matter's work was held at the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa in 2010-11. In 2016 the Denver Art Museum held an exhibition entitled 'Women of Abstract Expressionism', including work by Elaine de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, and Joan Mitchell, amongst others.

<sup>3</sup> As I have suggested elsewhere, Morley also looked to the example of Paul Cézanne to mitigate the more aggressively expressive, lyric aspect of New York School painting. See Mark Byers, 'Hilda Morley and the Painters', *Contemporary Women's Writing* 8.3 (2014), 262-80.

<sup>4</sup> See also Carolyn Lanchner, 'Fernand Léger: American Connections', *Fernand Léger* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 46. Other participants in the project included Willem de Kooning.

<sup>5</sup> A reproduction of *Tabletop Still Life* (as well as a brief biography of Matter) is included in Joan Marter (ed.), *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 185.

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