

PERIPHERAL VISION



Melissa Vogley Woods, *Boxed Part 1* (still), video performance, 2016

The Force of Ambiguity: The Videos and Paintings of Melissa Vogley Woods

in New Genres by Lisa Volpe

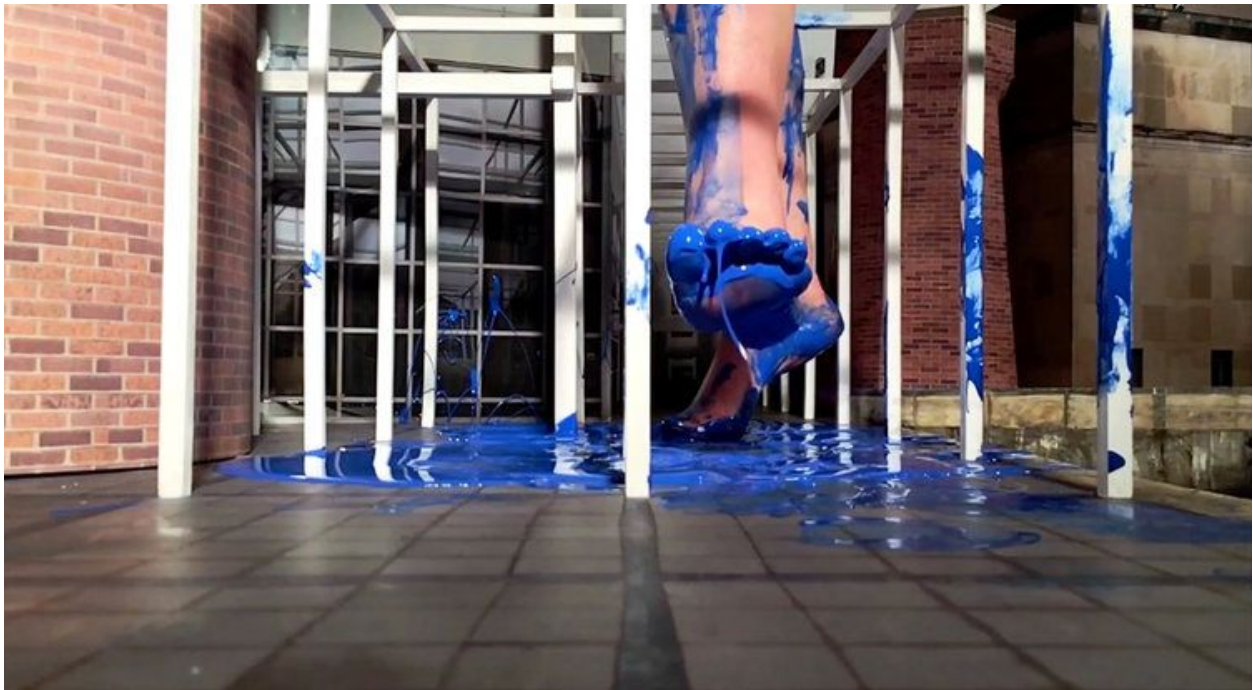
Melissa Vogley Woods' practice spans a range of artistic media—painting, sculpture, video and performance—often combined into multidisciplinary works of art or creating distinct resonances across media boundaries. Woods notes, “I search for the explicit and questionable modes of expression to force intimacy amongst viewers and between my work and the viewer.”[1] Taken as a whole, the artist's approach and aim thrive on poetic ambiguity.

Ambiguity, or in other words, slippage, is a common tool of poststructuralist critique. Poststructuralism often focuses on the moment of slippage in systems of meaning as a way to expose ideologies. Feminism, a critical branch of this theoretical approach, utilizes these slippages to encourage shifts in thought.[2] In her work, Vogley Woods deftly wields the critical tool of ambiguity in her feminist video performances and paintings.

Within Vogley Woods' work, 'ambiguity' is best defined by literary theorist William Empson. In 1930, Empson published his revolutionary text *Seven Types of Ambiguity: A Study of Its Effects on English Verse*. Empson's use of the word 'ambiguity' in relation to art did not suggest a misstep or sloppiness on the part of the artist, but studied, intelligent usages, “which give room for alternative reactions to the same piece.”[3] The ambiguities Empson describes create an atmosphere where a variety of ideas are activated in a short span of words or images. This approach implicates the viewer/reader as an active participant in the creation of meaning, identifying, sifting, and prioritizing possible meanings. This approach, in fact, is central to Vogley Woods' work and the Empsonian idea of ambiguity gives the work its poetry and power.

In her video/performance *Boxed Part 1* (2016), ambiguity immediately presents a variety of interpretive directions, each adding depth and dimension to the work. The video opens on a distinct architectural structure, Columbus Ohio's Wexner Center for the Arts. A built environment connotes something structured and solid. The viewer's ideological faith, however, in the physical hierarchy or monumentality of architecture is tested by the prompt appearance of a pair of legs and feet that match the architectural setting in scale. In time with an intoxicating burlesque soundtrack, the feet strut around the Wexner Center. They step over the Wexner's iconic scaffolding and slide against the rigid struts in a deliberate manner. There is a sudden shift in the angle of the camera, and then blue paint begins to pour from the top of the frame, in front of the feet. For the remainder of the video performance, the feet spread and splash the paint around the architecture and up the legs. Slow-motion segments reveal trails of paint flying

through the air. In the end, with the feet and legs completely covered in paint, the limbs close in on the camera and scene fades to blue.



Melissa Vogley Woods, *Boxed Part I* (still), video performance

During the video performance, as these feet move and interact with the posts and floors of the building, the viewer's sense of scale is questioned. Are these feet over-sized while the building is to scale? Or are the feet at a human scale and the building is a mere model? Architecture, which is designed and built in relationship to the size of the human body, is here rendered unfamiliar by the presence of body parts. This ambiguity is enticing, leading us to question our perceptions. The viewer's practiced understanding of size, both of architecture and of the body are presented together, and two ways of thinking about 'human scale' collide.

In Empson's text, this type of ambiguity would be labeled type two. "An example of the second type of ambiguity," in Empson's words, "...occurs when two or more meanings are resolved into one."^[4]In the case of *Boxed Part 1*, the idea of a human scale (an idea presented equally in Vogley Woods' presentation of architecture and the actual body) finds resolution in the artist's engaging overlap of the two. This is not to say that the ambiguity of scale in *Boxed Part 1* finds a definitive 'correct' reading. It is

never made clear which element is at true 'human scale.' Rather, the artistic intertwining of two possible meanings into one performance creates the intriguing ambiguity.

While these two possible meanings of 'human-scale' can be resolved via a singular image, Empson identified a similar type of ambiguity that could never be fully resolved. This seventh type of ambiguity is characterized by two opposite meanings within a given context. Unlike a type two ambiguity, these two meanings cannot be resolved into a singular image. Just as some words exist in opposition to each other and in fact derive their meaning from that contrast, Empson's seventh type of ambiguity emphasizes difference in order to create meaning. In *Boxed Part 1*, this type of ambiguity is manifest as a conflict of gender.

The emphatically gendered performance of the feet underscores their feminine attributes and thus renders the architecture masculine in comparison. As the artist stated, "by just using the foot, there is a...break from the confines of female biology." [5] Yet, several elements code the feet as feminine if not biologically female: the position en pointe (as if wearing high heels), the seductive music (typical of a strip show), the toenail polish, and the fluid steps and seductive engagement with the architectural elements. These feet and their sexualized performance are seen in contrast to the inorganic, static, and structured architecture. Thus rendered as opposite forces within the mise-en-scène, the architecture is coded as masculine.



Melissa Vogley Woods, *Consequences*, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches

The conflation of gender roles and architecture has a long history. Vitruvius first gendered the orders declaring the Doric as masculine and the Ionic matronly. Tracing architectural critiques from the eighteenth century onward, Christine Macy and Sarah Bonnemaïson summarize in *Architecture and Nature: Creating the American Landscape* that architecture is labeled masculine when the forms are “imposing, simple, and solid.” The feminine, on the other hand, “found its expression in interior decorations and smaller, precious buildings.”[6] In *Boxed Part 1*, Vogley Woods builds upon this historically gendered ideology, applying it to a museum setting.

The coding of a gallery space as masculine is certainly a pertinent concern within the realm of feminist art and institutional critique. In “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas,” Carol Duncan famously argued, the lack of female artists on display in addition to the use of female bodies by male artists, “actively masculinize[s] the museum as a social environment. Silently and surreptitiously, they specify the museum’s ritual of spiritual quest as a male quest.”[7] As a studied and historically interested artist, Vogley Woods is aware of her role within this discourse. In a recent interview, she builds upon the theoretical foundation provided by

feminist theorists such as Duncan, noting “I...use the actual institution as a dominant presence in the work itself and as a metaphor for systems of power.”[8]

Though Vogley Woods admits influence from Lynda Benglis, Cheryl Donegan, Andrea Fraser and Yvonne Rainer, the most direct comparison to the artist’s *Boxed Part 1* can be found in the work of peer Kate Gilmore. Like Vogley Woods, Gilmore’s artistic practice often involves constructing various settings and then interacting with them in ways that emphasize gendered, ideological conflicts. To create her 2010 work, *Standing Here*, the artist built a square column of drywall. In the video, Gilmore is dressed in emphatically feminine attire—a polka-dot dress and black pumps. She physically confronts the drywall column, kicking and punching holes into the surface. Through these destructive actions, she attempts to climb the column, freeing herself from the narrow space within which she is confined. As critic Lyz Bly noted:

[Standing Here]...has gender implications, as it is made by a young woman navigating the historically white, masculine art world...her body is shown as a power force, but the feminine accouterments—the dress, the pumps, the black stockings with runs in them—remind us that the role of women in art has historically been as object, and only recently as empowered agent-creator.[9]

Similarly, for Vogley Woods, the art museum/gallery represents a space from which feminist artists and artworks have been excluded. This specific point is further emphasized by the artist’s use of blue paint. Nearly two minutes into *Boxed Part 1*, bright, blue paint pours from an unseen source at the top of the frame onto the ground below. First, a puddle forms in front of the foot on the left side of the frame, then a second puddle is created in front of the other foot on the right side. For the artist, “This is a direct color reference to the artist Yves Klein, who claimed a color as his own possession.”[10] Klein also used naked bodies as ‘living paint brushes,’ dipping women into his signature blue paint and directing them to roll on a canvas. Notably, many of these performances took place within the walls of an art gallery. In this way, Klein takes the technique of the modern male artist that Duncan noted to its horrific limit. Klein literally used the bodies of women to reify his place and power as a male creator.

In her video, Vogley Woods turns this history on its head, using her own body and blue paint. She is in control. She notes:

Painting has historically depicted women as silent, passive objects for your viewing pleasure and accepting that as canon facilitates the narrative of male power and dominance. My interest is to appropriate movement and sexual performance to create agency and speak back to this history. It is a response from the model/object as author/subject.[11]

However, this critique does not take its full form in the video performance, *Boxed Part 1*. Vogley Woods' artistic program crosses media and many of these same gender and power issues linger in her other projects.



Melissa Vogley Woods, *Soundthief*, cut pillows, 2012

Ambiguity plays an equally important role in the artist's paintings. Predominately presented against a solid blue background, Vogley Woods creates stacks of multi-colored forms that resemble fleshy tissue. In *Consequences* (2016), these folded and mounded forms in a variety of colors and opacities seem alive and writhing. Yet, there is something mournful in the lumping, stacked forms, many of which can barely be perceived and are bordering on the transparent. In these paintings, another type of Empsonian

second-type ambiguity is present. Two meanings resolve themselves into one. The works are 'visceral,' in both definitions of the term. They seem to relate directly to the body and they connote different sensibilities or feelings. Certainly the scale of the work and the organic curves of the work recall the body, or at the very least something with a bodily form. Adding to this, "I conflate the body with the stacks as incomplete portraits of the vast quantity of loss,"[12] Vogley Woods states. This ambiguity, which turns on the idea of the visceral as both a body form and a mournful feeling, coalesces in the artist's paintings.

A seventh-type of ambiguity also lingers in the paintings, a gendered reading of these abstractions. As Duncan argues, abstraction has long been a realm dominated by artists such as Yves Klein, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock—a pantheon of great, white, male artists.[13] This masculine realm is called to mind not only by the style Vogley Woods employs but also by the emphatically blue background she creates. Blue—long recognized by children as a "boy" color, and of course wielded as a symbol of masculine dominance by Klein—here serves as a foil to the artist's engaging visceral stacks. Seen in contrast to this coded color and by virtue of their more organic, curving lines, the stacks in Vogley Woods' paintings come to represent the feminine.

In paintings such as *In the Behind* and *Heavy Lights* (both 2016), the somberness, textures, and curvilinear shapes of the stacked forms recall ancient grave stele, and thus suggest personal elegies to forgotten female artists of the past. In *Covered*, the artist's use of paint suggests patterned textiles, understood here as traditionally female craftwork or a reference to women's work and labor. The artist's previous sculptural work, such as *Soundthief*, used stacked pillows, quilts, and various textiles, cut and presented in cross sections. These striated sculptures resemble geological or subsurface studies, and hint at the forces of time and history. Traditionally, these crafts were not granted a space within the hallowed walls of the museum or gallery. As the artist summarizes, "they were part of an entire system of exclusion and devaluing of feminist things." [14] In these paintings, the absent is present and loss is nearly palpable. Within a feminist framework, these paintings mourn the lost and/or forgotten history of women. What has been lost? It's impossible to know for sure.

Ambiguity is a common tool of critique and a powerful tool in art. As William Empson first suggested, ambiguity creates opportunities for deeper understanding. Rich and motivating, ambiguities thrive in the video performances and paintings of Melissa Vogley Woods. Rather than obscuring meaning, these

ambiguities expose essential truths that persist beyond the frame of the artist's videos and paintings. As Empson wrote, "showing the nature of ambiguity, [shows] the nature of the forces which are adequate to hold it together." [15]

Learn more about Melissa Vogley Woods on the artist's Profile.

[1] "Melissa Vogley Woods — Peripheral Vision Arts," accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.peripheralvisionarts.org/vogley-woods-profile/>.

[2] In her 1998 text, *The Subjects of Art History*, Patricia Mathews clearly outlined the three goals of feminism in art history: First, recuperating the experience of women and women artists; second, deconstructing systems of authority; and third, rethinking the cultural and psychological spaces traditionally assigned to women. Summarized in Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History* (Laurence King Publishing, 2005), 63.

[3] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Chatto and Windus, 1947), 1.

[4] Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 48.

[5] “Feet First: Melissa Vogley Woods Talks Boxed | Wexner Center for the Arts,” accessed January 22, 2017, <http://wexarts.org/blog/feet-first-melissa-vogley-woods-talks-boxed>.

[6] Sarah Bonnemaïson and Christine Macy, *Architecture and Nature: Creating the American Landscape* (Routledge, 2003), 85.

[7] Carol Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual” (1995), from Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). 192

[8] “Feet First: Melissa Vogley Woods Talks Boxed | Wexner Center for the Arts.”

[9] “Love, Terror, and Happy Accidents: Kate Gilmore at MOCA Cleveland - Collective Arts Network - CAN Journal,” accessed January 22, 2017, <http://canjournal.org/2013/06/love-terror-and-happy-accidents-kate-gilmore-at-moca-cleveland/>.

[10] “Melissa Vogley Woods — Peripheral Vision Arts.”

[11] “Feet First: Melissa Vogley Woods Talks Boxed | Wexner Center for the Arts.”

[12] Melissa Vogley Woods, Painting Statement, 2016.

[13] Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Routledge, 1995).

[14] Melissa Vogley Woods, conversation with the author, September 2016.

[15] Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 236.