

## Figuring / Grounding

Curatorial essay by Meredith Birrell

We all know the experience of entering unknown territory, the uncertainty and the self-doubt that accompanies it. We try to 'figure out' our new orientation in this particular space; find a footing on what feels like unsteady ground. This Director's Show is a collaborative effort between myself (as an incoming Director), and the four existing STACKS Directors, Joanne Makas, Kaya Clarkson, Amber Hearn and Ioulia Terizis. As such, I cannot exclusively claim the curatorial title. The ground, as it were, was already laid. My job, as I saw it, was to look for or rather generate in my own mind the resonances between these artists' works, and to figure out my own relation to this very particular ground.

The figure/ground relation, or rather an interrogation thereof, occurred to me at some point in this process as a way of articulating both the ambivalence of my position and what I see as the intrinsic ambiguity of the works themselves. It may seem bizarre to claim such outmoded terminology, one so loaded with mid-century, masculinist and Western baggage, but perversely, this is precisely its attraction. I take my lead from Donna Haraway, who argues for "staying with the trouble,"<sup>1</sup> or in other words, not abandoning what seem like redundant or problematic terms, but rather trying to reinvent them along different and subversive lines. In this spirit, I intend to trouble the figure/ground relation, and use it as a springboard for considering the artwork as an instance of situated but active knowledge making - that is, an entity that both comes from and makes the world. This is why I have chosen the active forms of "figuring" and "grounding" as the title of this exhibition, as my attempt here is to energise the ground, or the matter from which the work is 'made' as an ongoing, active force in its own right and the figure - the work itself - as a becoming entity, not a fixed resolution. I take the figure and ground as mutually constituted, meaning that it is in the complex space of their entanglement that they create meaning, and thus, contribute the ongoing process of making the world and with it, the self.

The figure/ground terminology stems from Gestalt psychology, in which the 'figure' is conceived as the 'positive' form against a 'neutral' ground. Ellen Lupton writes; "the figure/ground relationship is the precondition for perceiving "objects," for articulating the complex, infinitely variegated image cast upon the retina into distinct relationships."<sup>2</sup> In this schema, the figure/ground relation is a phenomenological experience and is not something intrinsic to the thing being viewed. The act of perception, Lupton notes, "produces values." This emphasis on the valuation, or the subjective experience of the figure/ground relation implies that it may vary from subject to subject; there is no givenness to this relation. However, a certain rigidity developed around these terms once they became a key paradigm in mid-century art criticism. Even despite challenges to this formula, the discourse remained contained within the delimitations of the work of art as a discrete object, serving to only reinscribe the closed binary model under different guises. In Clement Greenberg's essay 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948), he notes the contemporary tendency towards "poly-phonic" and "all-over" painting, which he suggests constitutes a threat to easel painting and the 'values' of representation it espouses.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in reading Jackson Pollock's paintings, for example, as an attempt to dissolve the figure/ground relation, Greenberg reinstates a new figuration which, according to Francis Halsall,

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1 Donna Haraway (a), *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

2 Ellen Lupton, 'Modern Design Theory,' <http://elupton.com/2009/10/modern-design-theory/>, accessed 10/9/2016.

3 Clement Greenberg, 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture,' <http://mysite.pratt.edu/~morourke/common/CriticalParadigms/GreenbergCrisis.pdf>.

...re-inscribes traditional and aesthetic values within Pollock's paintings. It does so by re-inscribing resemblance back into the images by reading the fractal as an identifiable figure against the ground of the pictorial spaces behind it.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Greenberg falls prey to a teleological mode of thinking, framing painting as a series of movements from 'representation' towards 'abstraction.' The figure/ground relation needs to be expanded beyond the confines of the picture plane and placed in relationship with the worldly forces of which it is undeniably a part and the cyclical temporalities in which it is enmeshed.

The works in this show complicate the historical figure/ground relation, bleeding the positive and the negative into each other and dislocating the 'subject' from both its traditional material supports (canvas, wall and so on) and its 'grounding' in art history. They reject the bifurcation of subject/object and its overwriting with masculine/feminine, active/passive, nature/culture dichotomies. They all, in their own ways, engage in active processes of figuring and grounding.

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In the photographic prints of Ioulia Terizis, there is also an emphasis on the haptic. Terizis works with a film camera and undertakes the expensive process of making large prints of her work. By doing so, she references historical photography and the labour, cost and materiality of making a work, which is not always such a concern today with the availability of cheaper digital printing and the distribution of works via cloud technology. She makes an argument for the co-existence of different technologies, rather than thinking of each subsequent phase as 'superior' to the one before. There is a direct connection between her practice and that of the modernist experimentations of the early twentieth century, especially that of the Bauhaus and proponents of a new visual language such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Paul Klee. Yet, unlike these precursors, Terizis is not invested in creating a 'pure' or 'universal' language of form. Rather, her works confuse the borders between photography, drawing and assemblage sculpture, confounding the perceptual process for the viewer. Through a manipulation of materials within the 'ground' of her studio space - its textured walls and light-filled or shadowed corners - transparent, opaque, organic and manufactured materials are reconfigured in a performative process. In this ongoing re-negotiation of elements, Terizis refuses to settle on any one pictorial approach, or figure/ground relation. The final two-dimensional photographic object interacts with the highly textured, tactile and uneven materiality of its making, causing a frisson in our perception. We are not always sure just what we are looking at in these works where the figure and ground refuse to distinguish themselves and one's perceptual process is brought into play as an active contributor to the work's meaning.

The works in this show explore what it means when the figure is unmoored from its supposedly stable ground and is destabilised, fractured, and made vulnerable. Clarkson, Terizis, Makas and Hearn posit figuring as an active process of meaning making and grounding as a shifting terrain. They fuse and complicate the figure/ground relation, proliferating it to incorporate meditations on the 'figures' of art history, the self as becoming entity, our anchoring in particular conceptions

of self and our 'grounding' in a particular place and time as an active agent in our unfolding in and our enfolding with the world. Instead of attempting to make clear distinctions between the self and other, the artwork and world, or now and then, there is complication, mess, uncertainty, oscillation, and above all, process. The works centralise their performative qualities, their always-negotiable status and their enmeshment in the world. Rather than dichotomy, there must be resonance, Donna Haraway writes, and further, that an account of what she calls situated knowledges,

...require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes of the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of "objective" knowledge."<sup>5</sup> (My emphasis).

We can only begin from the ground up, from our located, situated contexts, but we need not equate that with an immutable, transcendent ideology of objectivity, which can never account for how the artwork actually functions in the world. This exhibition, as a collaborative process, emerged from a field of relations, a ground of intra-action. I hope, through this essay, I have been able to figure this relationality in terms that account for all of our specific, emerging and situated selves.

## References

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5 Donna Haraway (b), 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3. (Autumn, 1988): 588, 592.