

## LINKS TO EVENTS:

The Artists Voice:

<https://fransmasereelcentrum.be/en/artistieke-werking/vital-signs-writings-on-gesture/>

Book launch CONTOUR:

[https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0MMMfQtbKTfV6HtdusqDLgdTtRVP1X6S5GvHAvenSKMHY4aAqacJ1E6vTSFJtn66rl&id=100064569344455](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0MMMfQtbKTfV6HtdusqDLgdTtRVP1X6S5GvHAvenSKMHY4aAqacJ1E6vTSFJtn66rl&id=100064569344455)

Vital Signs Kunsthall Oslo

<https://kunsthall oslo.no/?p=14202&lang=en>

Vital Signs: Writings on Gesture:

<https://occasionalpapers.org/product/melissa-gordon-vital-signs-writing-on-gesture-artist/>

MUHKA Group show:

<https://www.muhka.be/en/exhibitions/kristien-daem-ten-women-dix-femmes-tien-vrouwen-zehn-frauen-portrait-series-iii/>

Contour Biennial:

<https://augusteorts.be/activities/contour>

Glean magazine: <https://archieff.glean.art/artikels/melissa-gordon>

Myopia Solo show: <https://cosar-gallery.com/exhibitions/own-exhibitions/melissa-gordon-myopia>

Hibernus group show:

<https://fransmasereelcentrum.be/en/artistieke-werking/hibernus-2/>

Periphery installation:

<https://extracitykunsthall.org/en/events/opening-new-lovin-and-myopic-view>

Vital Signs London book launch:

<https://tenderbooks.co.uk/products/vital-signs-writings-on-gesture-melissa-gordon>

PHOTOS OF WORKS AND PROCESS:



CONTOUR BIENNIAL



CONTOUR BIENNIAL

KUNSTHALL OSLO:



















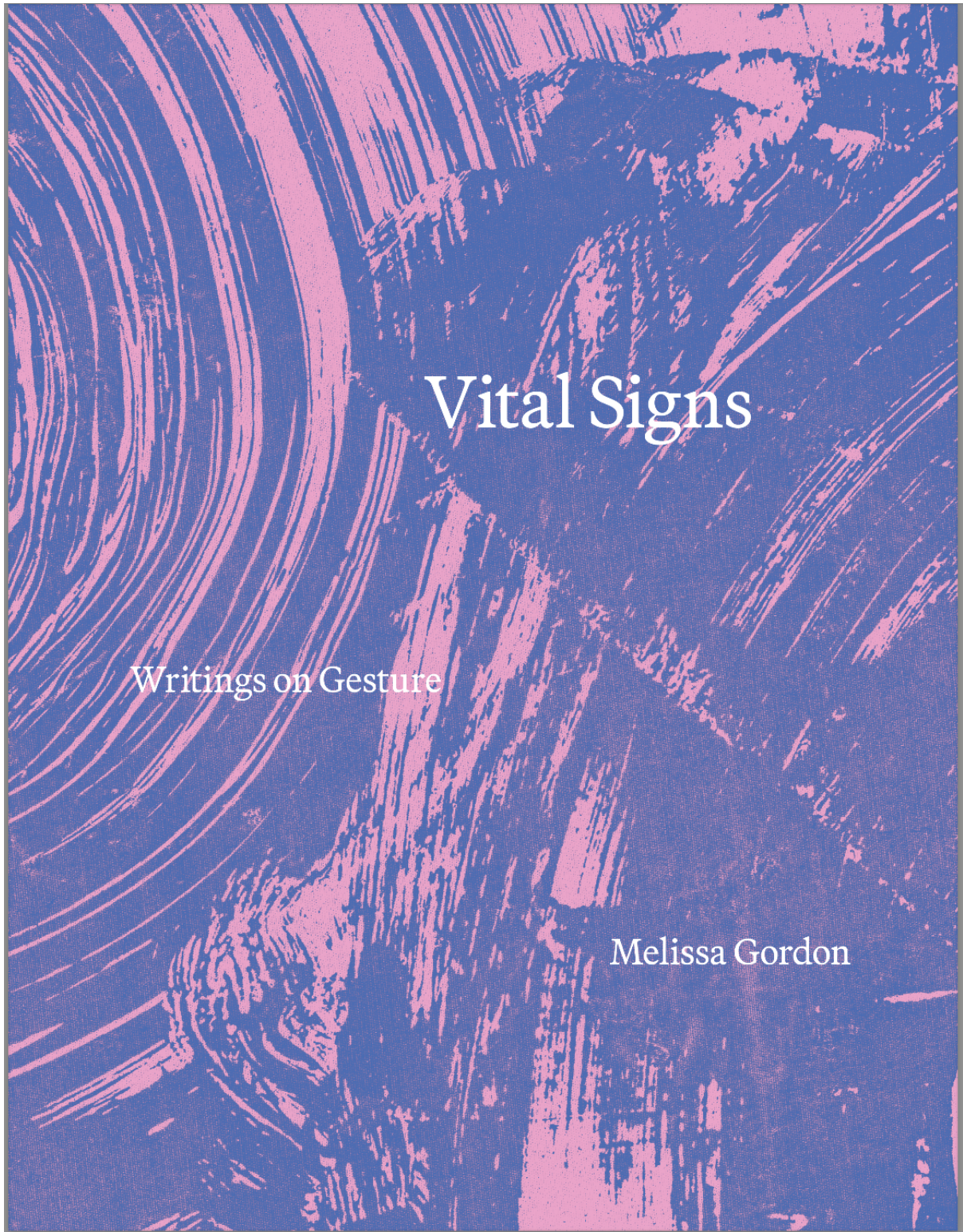
MUHKA:



MYOPIA:



VITAL SIGNS BOOK:



# Vital Signs

Writings on Gesture

Melissa Gordon

## Colour Code

Red: Contextual description of original delivery

Blue: Talking to myself

Dark Blue: Reportage voice

Green: Quotes of others

Purple: An alter ego that questions everything

Orange: Voice of my correspondents

Cyan: Repeating myself

Magenta: Me yelling

Grey: Stage instructions

## Presence and Absence

(This text was delivered as a talk at Artists Space in New York, on 1 October 2015. It was part of the project "WE (Not I)", which was co-organised by Melissa Gordon and Marina Vishmidt. "WE (Not I)" was a collective editing exercise, and brought over 100 artists, writers and designers together in London and New York for two week-long residencies and public programmes. Presence and Absence was later published in May Revue 16, which was guest-edited by artist Fulvia Carnevale in 2016.)

Increasingly as an artist, I have begun to feel that my voice is becoming disembodied from myself. Who is it that is "speaking"? It is strange to envision oneself as a construct, a concept, outside of one's own body, but that is the form perceived by others: an accumulation of objects, made by a non-entity with a vague persona, skewed and squared by gestures and contexts.

The intangible figure of the dropout speaks to this feeling of externalisation. The dropout is like a centrifugal force spinning into a spiral questions about power and relations between art objects, makers and lookers. The gesture of dropping out causes a whirlpool of escaping possibilities. In this sense, the dropout is the perfect cipher through which to view the role of the artist: the dropout deals in moves, gestures and the value at stake in these. As a character, the dropout acts outside the bounds of the playing field of contemporary art, and by doing so, reveals the edge of the field at any time.

"Dropping out" as a term could point to two specific histories: the psychedelic-driven spiritual phrase coined by psychologist Timothy Leary in 1966, "Turn on, tune in, drop out", or the condition of leaving the workforce, mid-career, as befalls many women, including many women artists. If dropping out could be thought of as a precondition for being a woman artist, let's say, during the time just preceding conceptual artist Lee Lozano's famous *Dropout Piece* (begun c.1970), then perhaps we can understand her gesture of dropping out as a biting critique of both Leary's slogan and of what was expected of her as a female artist. If we look more closely at the historic impulses of this action of leaving, I think we will see that the current and ongoing ramifications of dropping out in the art world, specifically for women artists, are more pointed and far-reaching.

The document that piqued my interest in the character of the dropout is the essay "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil" (1992), artist Cady Noland's entry in the Documenta IX catalogue, which accompanied her contribution to Documenta IX in Kassel the same year. In trying to decipher the motivations of the essay, one uncovers a text attempting, I believe, to make a powerful critique of the art world and art market, shortly pre-dating the discourse around institutional critique and globalisation. The text stakes out extreme positions on cause and effect, which are explored through the role-play of a psychopathic relationship. Noland begins her essay by stating that there is a "meta-game available for use in the United States. The rules of the game, or even that there is a game at all, are hidden to some." She goes on to describe in an oblique manner a relationship between X and Y, in which X is constantly in a Tom and Jerry-like scenario, trying to con Y:

*The game is a machine composed of interconnected mechanistic devices... A con or a snow job is the site at which X preys upon the hopes, fears, anxieties of Y for ulterior motives and/or personal gain... These machinations exist a priori of X and Y as an indifferent set of tools and could conceivably be picked up by anyone and used against anyone else.*

1 Cady Noland, "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil", *Documenta IX* (Kassel: Edition Conz, 1992), 416.  
2 Ibid.

3

4

Vital Signs PRINT.indd 3

18102023 11:42

Vital Signs PRINT.indd 4

18102023 11:42

*"So it seems that Noland's response to the most recent buyer Meuller was essentially warning him off from believing this work was what she had crafted or intended."*

**[OK, let's take a deep breath here.]**

What initially interested me in Noland's legal battles around the question of authorship was the fact that the highest price ever paid for the work of a female artist was for one no longer present in the art world. What kind of economy is that? Further, I became interested in her legal cases as the polar opposite of those of artist Richard Prince around appropriation, in which Prince and his gallerist Larry Gagosian defend his use of other artists' imagery in his works.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of accumulating all voices into a meta-voice, as in Prince's practice, it is Noland's declaration of the *absence* of voice that accumulates value (and thus points to the different types of economy circulating images appropriated by these two different genders and different positions in the market). I began to think of Noland's essay "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil" as a declaration of intent akin to Lozano's *Dropout Piece* (c.1970). I began to think that absence is in general used as a strategy of valorisation of women's art practices, and that this absence is the X to the Y of presence for women artists, both historically and now. I wonder if Noland's essay provides clues to the meaning of her dropout and how this dropout relates to what I see as perhaps an attempt at a performance of a con job in the art market. Has the original – the art object – become a prop for a larger theatre of value exchange? And if so, what role is the artist playing in this production? Is it a production of denial? As with many other dropouts, Noland's gesture to leave has been used to affect both abstract and real value, and thus can also be understood as expanding the mechanism of authorship.

The question remains as to whether we can judge Noland's actions as authored moves, and if the legal language that surrounds the movement of many of her pieces, and a general lack of display and new work, is in fact an artist's voice, or simply a lawyer's voice. It also remains to be seen where the story will end: will Noland's works continue to be desirable goods? Will the help pass legislation on the earnings of artists from secondary sales, or will her work be sequestered in storerooms for years to come?

[And now, in 2023, three years after the 2020 exhibition Cady Noland at Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, will her works exhibited there ever emerge again from their storage and private collections?]

Nevertheless, Noland is not the first artist to use dropping out as a conscious gesture, or rather, to use the presence of absence as a device. Lee Lozano, Charlotte Posenenske and Laurie Parsons, through different means, came to the same end of leaving the art world and art production because the possibilities of authorship were too narrow as an outlet for their wider practices.

I am interested in Lozano, Posenenske or Parsons because of their obscurity. I do not believe the myths that they were "not able to hack it". Perhaps they were smart enough to wash their hands of the situation in which they found themselves, but regardless, each of their gestures expanded the role of authorship precisely because these actions existed outside of the playing field of art. Their acts of dropping out were simply the natural progressions of their working practices: they took their practice to the extreme of authorship and followed through.

It takes a shift in perception to consider dropping out as an act or a gesture instead of a circumstance. To do this requires the removal of an artist's biography from the understanding of their work. This is often hard when many women artists, especially

those who have exited the art world, such as painter Agnes Martin during her mental breakdown when she left New York for the New Mexico desert in the summer of 1967, are shrouded in mystique. Forgotten or undervalued female artists can encourage a sense of discovery, a cat and mouse play: the finding of hidden histories as gems that we, in the art world, are trying to uncover like truffle pigs. If we, though, consider that historically the condition of dropping out was common and expected for women artists, the conundrum of presence and absence becomes more fraught, especially in a reevaluation or revaluation of these female artists.

From Expressionist-style works in the early 1960s, Charlotte Posenenske shifted to more sculptural and specifically machine-made artworks towards the mid-1960s, with monochrome painted aluminum sheets hung at angles on the walls. In 1967 she began her first work, *Series D* (1967/ongoing), in which a set of modular forms resembling architectural air vents can be assembled into any shape by the curator, artist, or at some point, the audience. These forms, first in cardboard and then in aluminum sheeting, are, as originally intended, sold at the cost of production in the factory where they were made. Unlike her male peers, Posenenske's modular objects were specific to their value transactions in the world – materials as form, used to create systems, ideas, not profit. As a strategy, her gesture runs in direct contradiction to her minimalist artist peers such as Carl Andre, Dan Flavin and Donald Judd, who literalised the value transformation of everyday materials, exemplifying the disembodied aura of authorship. Posenenske's authorship finds value in a more radical relationship to exchange, and has a "Drop Out" statement from 1968, titled *manifesto*:

*The things I make are variable, as simple as possible, reproducible.*

*They are components of a space; since they are like building elements, they can always be rearranged into new combinations or positions.*

*Thus, they alter the space.*

*I leave this alteration to the consumer who thereby again and anew participates in the creation.*

*The simplicity of the basic geometric forms is beautiful and suited to demonstrate the principles of rationalized alteration.*

*I make series because I do not want to make single pieces for individuals, in order to have elements combinable within a system, in order to make something which is repeatable, objective, and because it is economical.*

*The series could be prototypes for mass production.*

*Series DW (at Fischer) is made of corrugated pasteboard which is light and cheap, a material for consumption.*

*Often the elements or their combinations are very large in order to alter the spatial environment more thoroughly.*

*They approximate architectural dimensions and also for this reason differ increasingly from the former gallery objects.*

*They are less and less recognizable as "artworks".*

*The objects should have the objective character of industrial products.*

*They are not intended to represent anything other than what they are.*

*The former categorization of the arts no longer exists.*

*The artist of the future should have to work with a team of specialists in a development laboratory.*

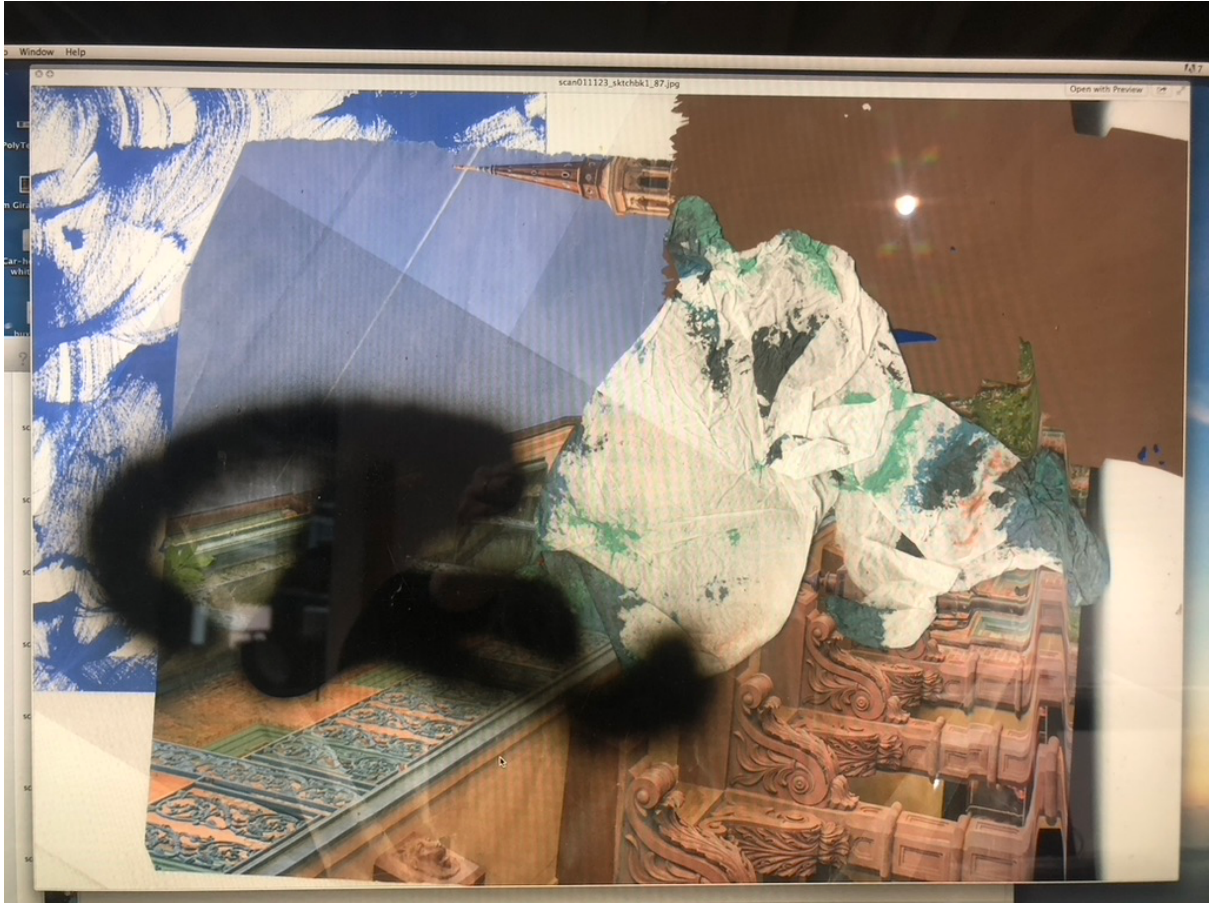
*Though art's formal development has progressed at an increasing tempo, its social function has regressed.*

*Art is a product of temporary topicality, yet, the market is minute while*

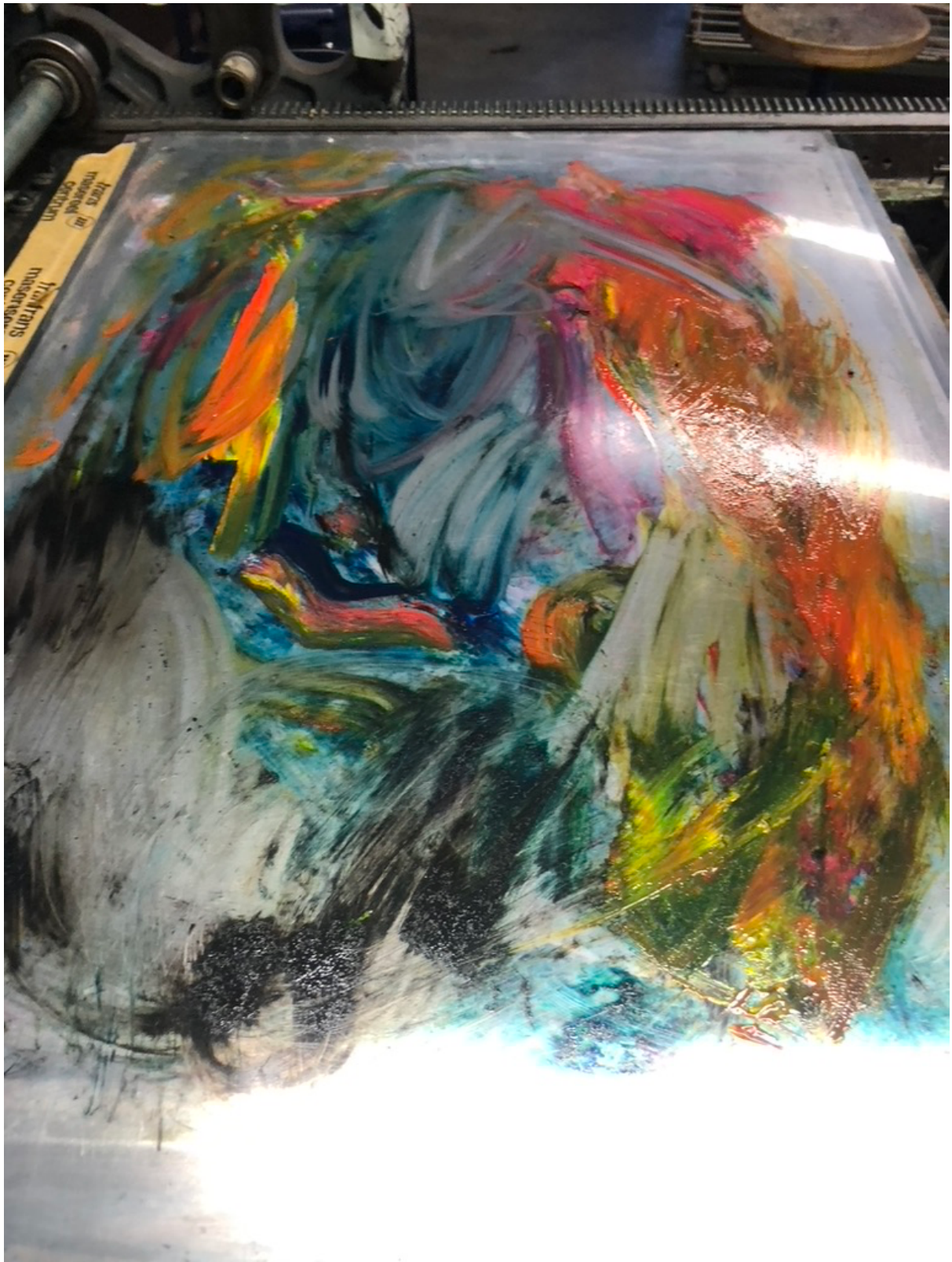
11 Ibid.

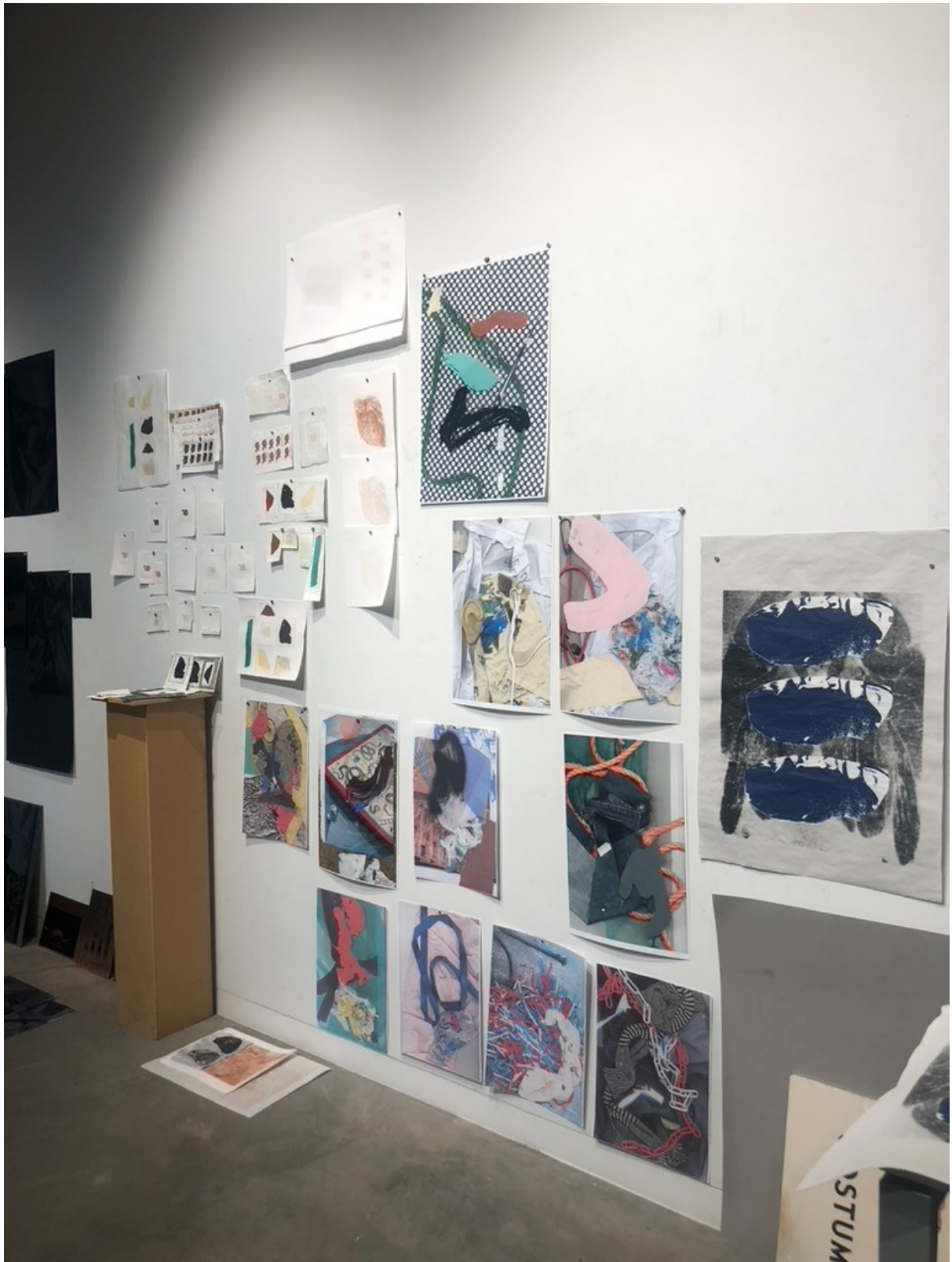
12 Donald Graham, plaintiff vs. Richard Prince, Gagosian Gallery Inc. and Lawrence Gagosian, defendants, <https://www.courtlistener.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/graham-prince-mj.pdf>.

PRINTING:





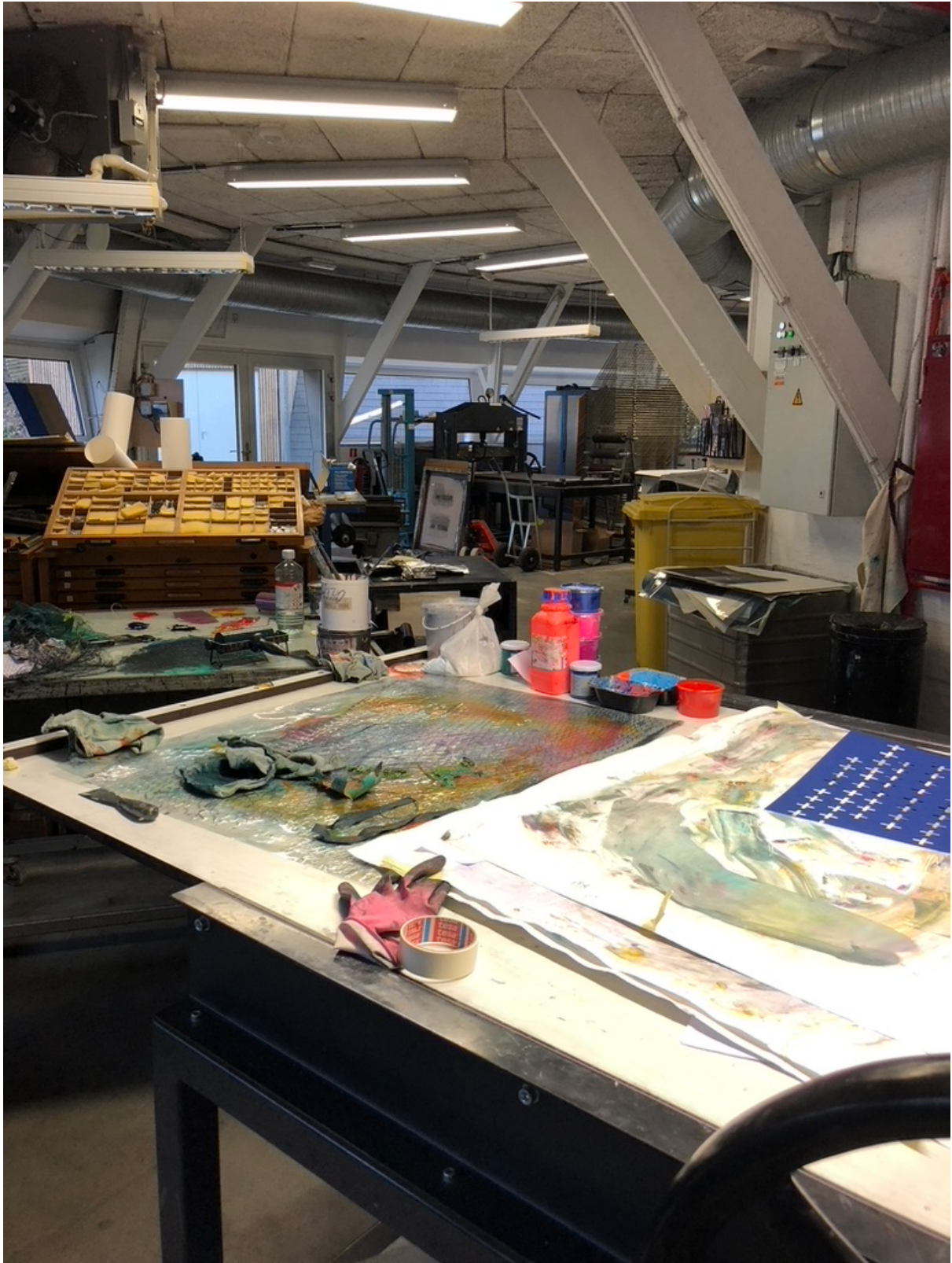
















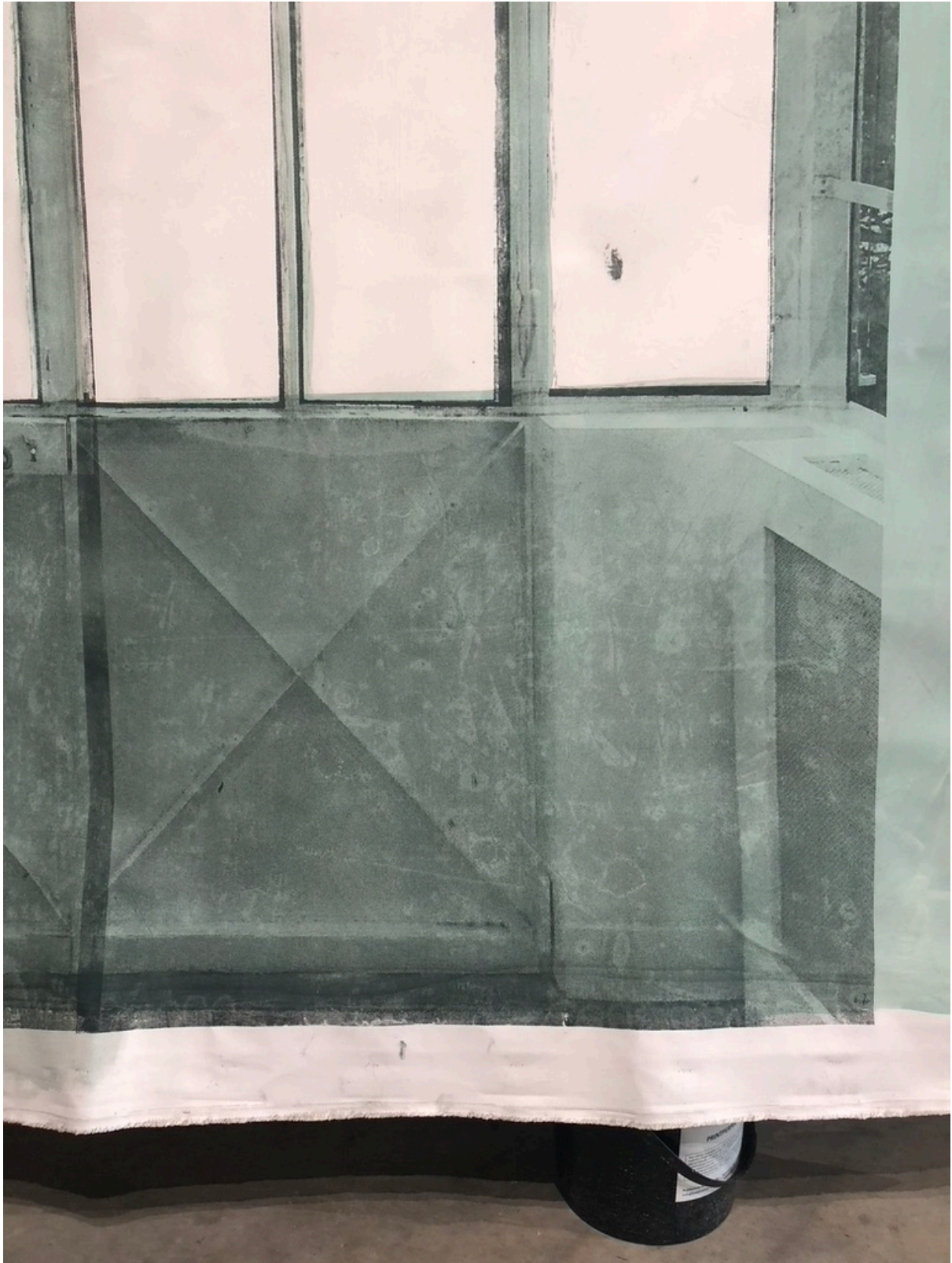




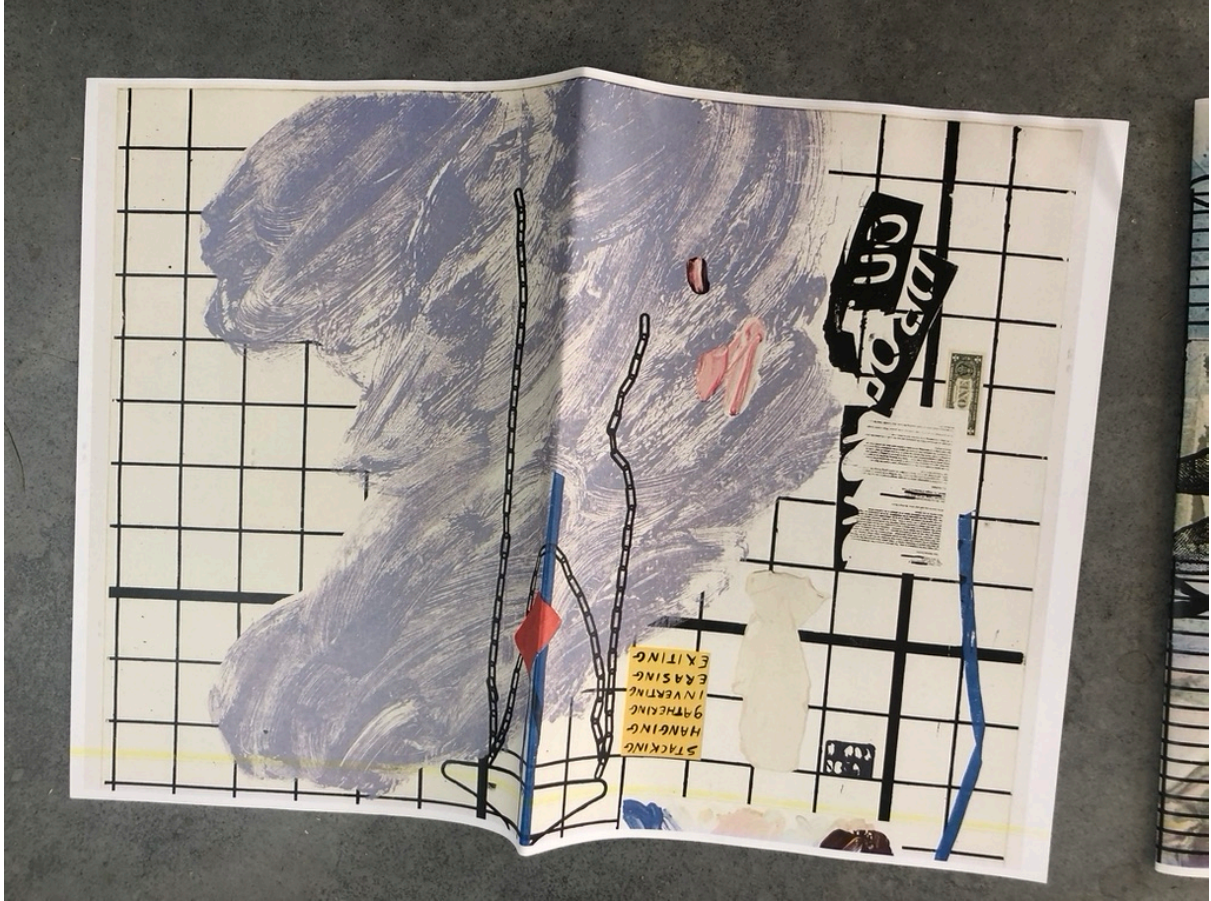






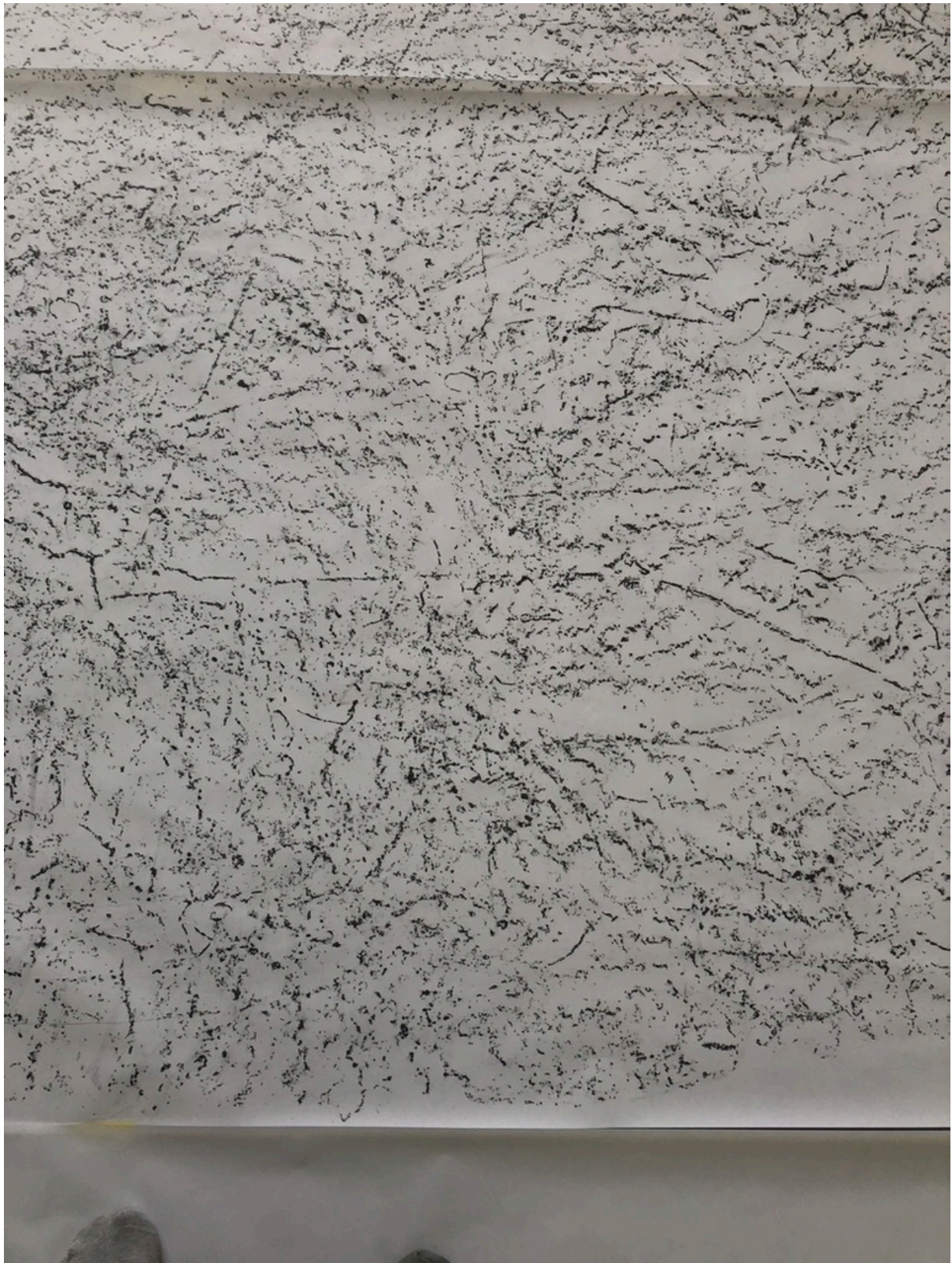


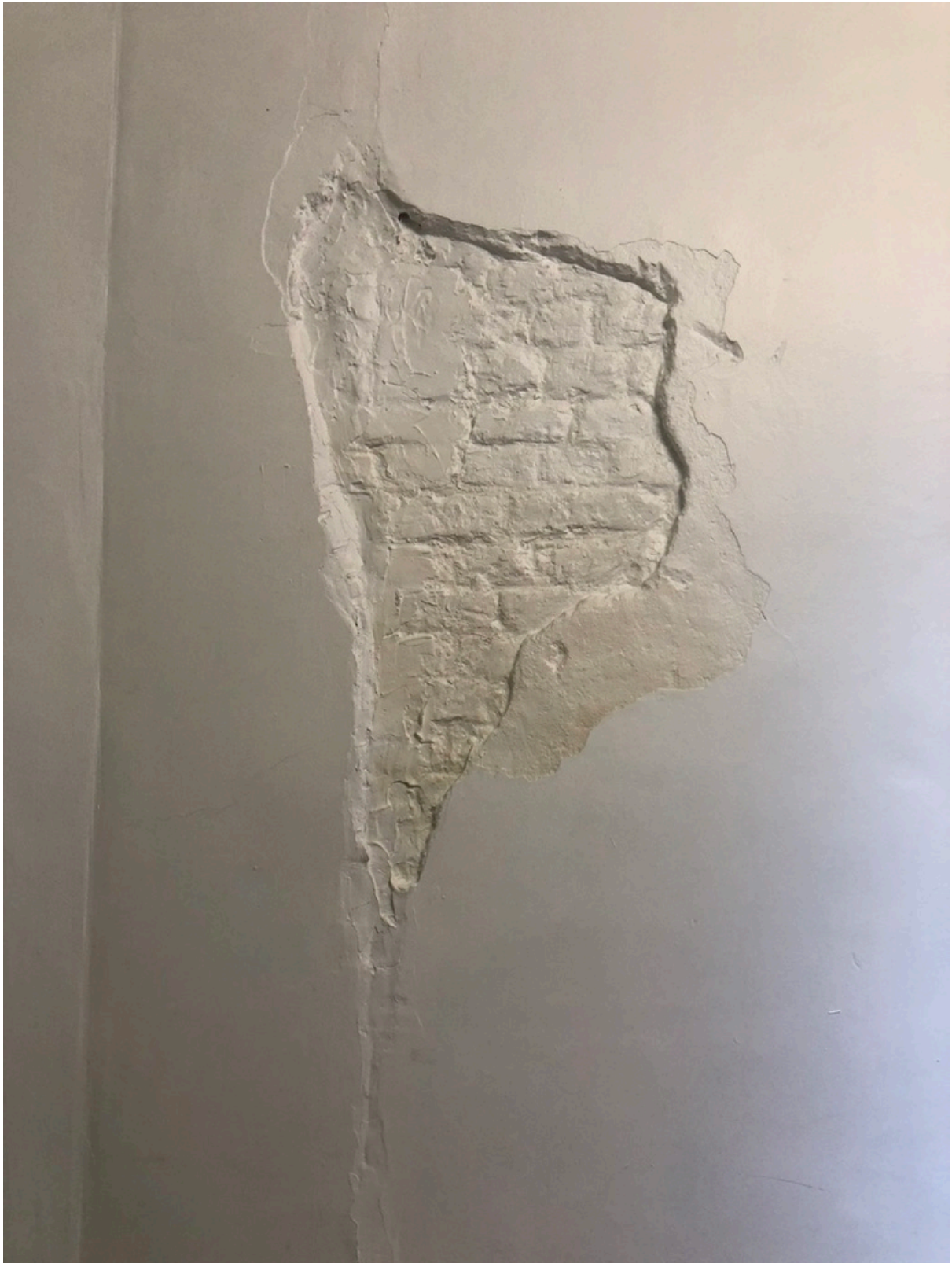


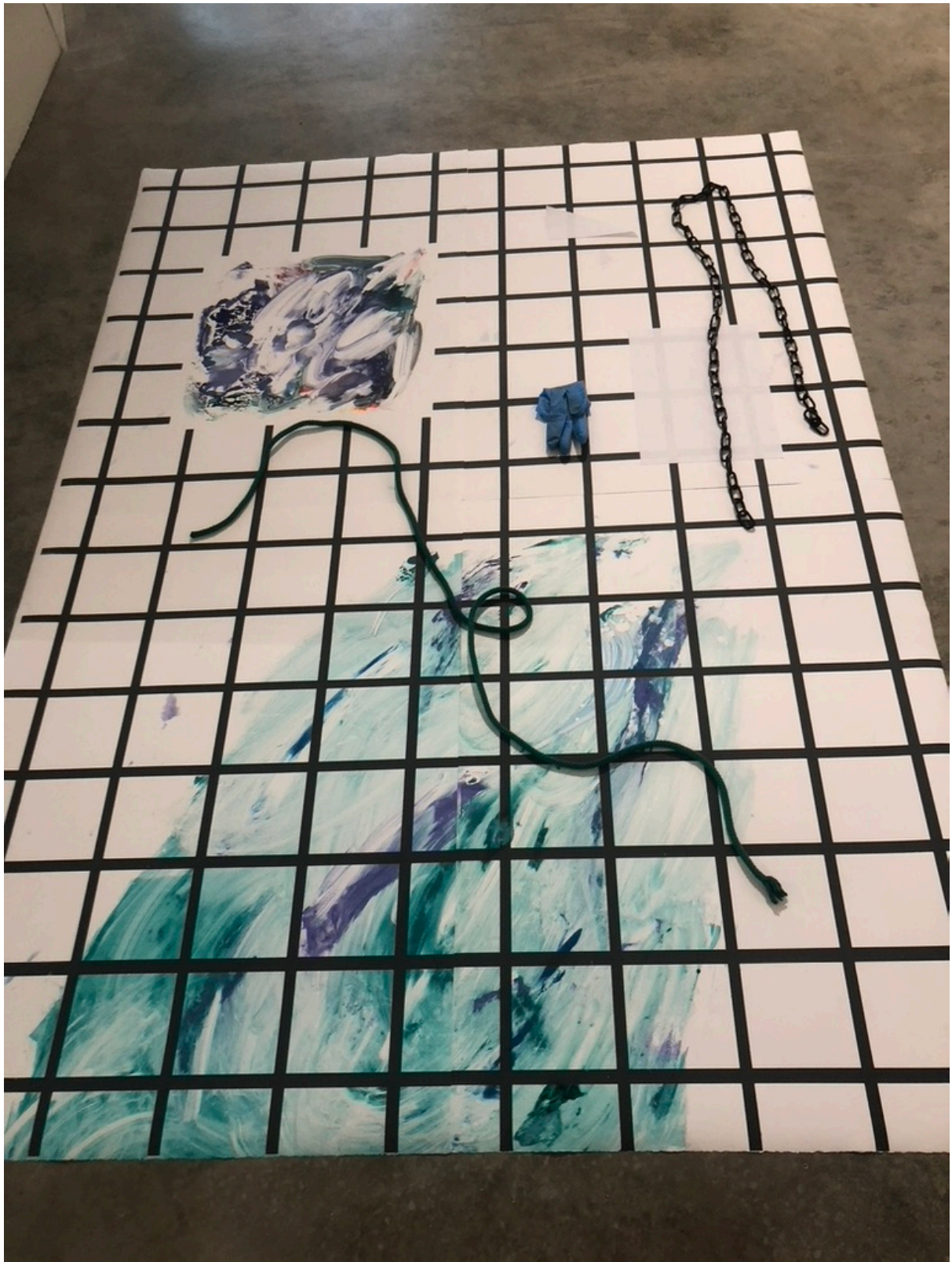












BOOK LAUNCH SYMPOSIUM FRANS MASEREEL :















