

In Conversation: Molly Zuckerman-Hartung

by [Lisa Darms](#) on April 12, 2014



Screenshot of Molly Zuckerman-Hartung's desktop with the artist's website visible (courtesy Molly Zuckerman-Hartung)

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung is a Chicago-based painter, teacher, and author of [“The 95 Theses on Painting.”](#) Her work reflects a deep engagement with process, material, and with painting's long history. Her abstract paintings often extend above the surface and outside the frame, via pooled enamel, collaged images, or sewn fabric, as in her painting “Notley,” currently on display in the [Whitney Biennial](#).

Molly and I are old friends, part of the same small punk community in Olympia, Washington, in the 1990s. Our conversation took place in two sections: first, via a long email exchange on a Saturday night the week before the Biennial opening, and then in person a few days after the opening. We began by talking about her early involvement in riot grrrl and punk's influence on her art practice.

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***Lisa Darms:** People often think of “riot grrrl art” as crafty, or cute, or self-expressive in a confessional or figuratively-self-portraitist mode — your abstract paintings are none of these things, and yet they make sense to me as a trajectory from riot grrrl and punk's anti-aesthetic — as embodying both a punk rejection of style and consistency, but also a willful insistence that knowledge comes from*

experience and engagement. Do you see your work as influenced by punk in this way?

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung: Oh, absolutely. That is an assessment I am grateful to hear. It is difficult to overemphasize the effect that riot grrrl and punk had on what and how I make. And at the same time, the cutesy stuff, the interest in 1950s imagery, the kind of soft version of Barbara Kruger that was happening in '90s punk is another mode I have reacted against.

For a long time everything I did was an antagonism, anti-aesthetic. All reaction. I'm getting older (we all are!) so the second part of your observation is increasingly relevant. The insistence that knowledge comes from experience and engagement. I think this has made me seem willfully naive in the past ... I make a big distinction between things I "know" and things I KNOW, through experience and often at great psychic cost. And I place a very high value on experience. I seek out people who have gone the hard way.

LD: *What is "the hard way" to you?*

MZH: With people who have gone the hard way, there is a deep sense of fragility, complexity and strength. Someone who has held onto ideals, but also lost. A way that people carry their experience that gives them understanding — it can make a person very large, capacious and yet incredibly sophisticated and specific in their speech — careful in their touch. My friend, the artist Doug Ischar is one of these people. People who have gone the hard way are very aware of, as Gregg Bordowitz says, how they touch the world and the world touches them.

LD: *I like that you list the characteristics of fragility and strength right next to each other. The tension between felt knowledge and intellectualized knowledge has really come up for me curating the Riot Grrrl Collection. I aim for a certain objectivity — this always coming-back-to-the-facts, the words on the papers. But at the same time, in response to some academic or mainstream interpretations of riot grrrl, punk, or "the '90s," I sometimes think "I just KNOW that is not true — because I lived it."*

MZH: I really admire the "always coming back to the facts" in you. It is part of your work as an archivist, right? I can definitely feel a lot of shame about myself as a pile of affective confusion in comparison to your adherence to evidence, to documents ...

My idea about an archive is that it is kept because we understand that interpretations will change again and again, but that this stuff can somehow serve as a corrective. I think truth, which is different from history or memory, involves a series of fluctuations, changes in direction, dialectics. The archive, or in the case of art, the object, serves, potentially as a kind of zero degree, or center point ...

LD: *Yes, absolutely, those are very astute observations about the archive and points I'm always trying (but mostly failing) to make. It makes me wonder how permanence and longevity factor into your choosing to be a painter?*

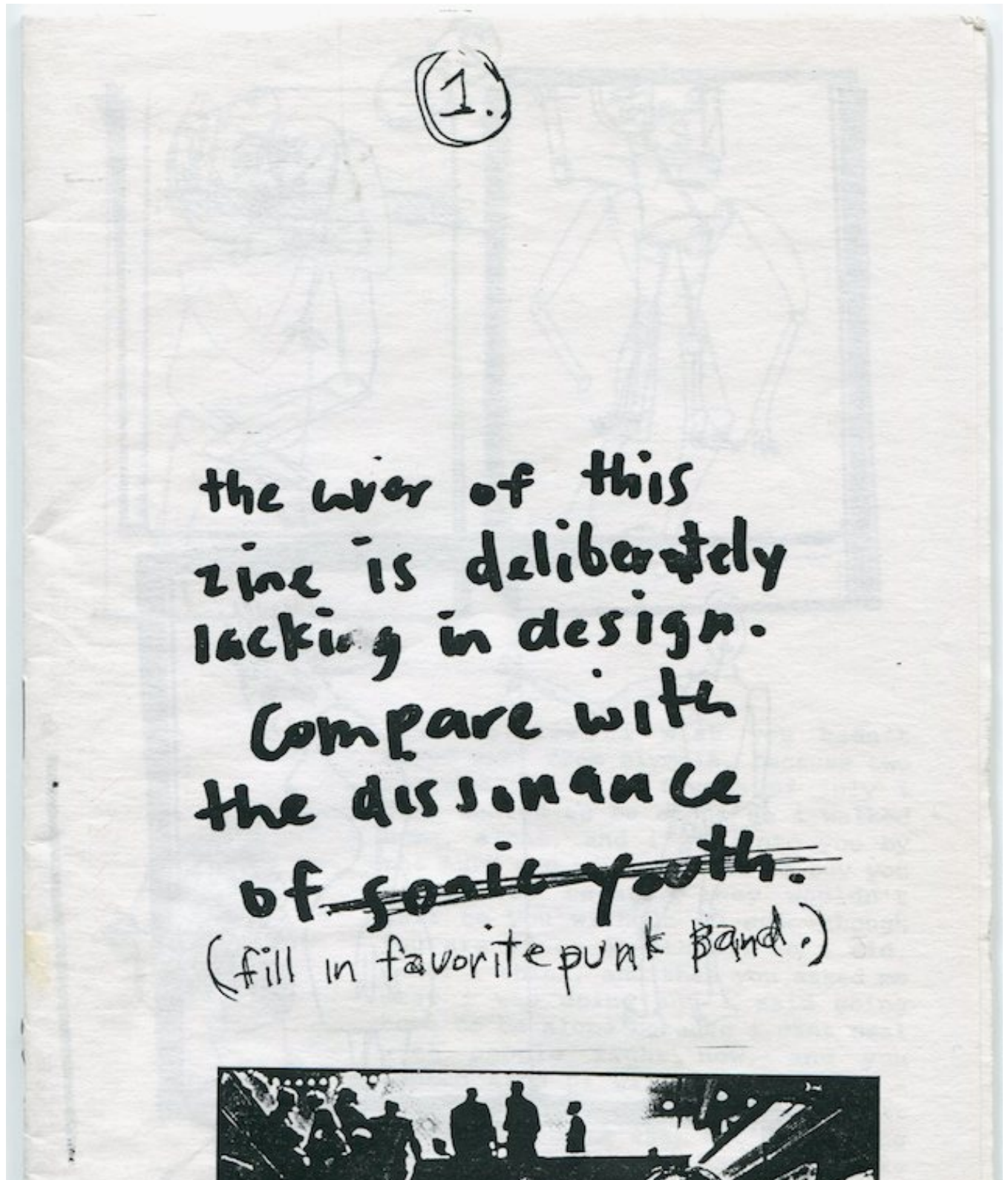
MZH: They definitely factor. I have located a strong fear of mortality, and a desire to uphold institutions, fear of the loss of permanence. And, as you know, this is very weird, seemingly conservative, at least conservational territory for a former punk.

LD: *Do you see painting as more permanent than other forms of contemporary art practice?*

MZH: I do. It is part of my chauvinism about painting. It helps me to feel that I am engaging in something that extends through divergent historical moments with dramatically different notions of what a painting can or should do. So when making a painting, I feel beholden to many different forms

of constructed subjectivity. It is the persistence of the form of "painting" that interests me, but with ceaselessly changing ways of dealing with form/content within the medium. Painting is my version of zero degree.

A few days after the Biennial opening, Molly and I met at the Fales Library & Special Collections. We sat in the Fales classroom, where zines, flyers and David Wojnarowicz's mask from his Rimbaud In New York series, were still laid out from a class I'd just taught on visual archives. Using Molly's untitled 1999 zine about Kathleen Hanna as a jumping off point, I asked her whether the zine's obvious anti-aesthetic was in part a response to the codified aesthetic in the Olympia punk scene.





Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, “Untitled zine” (1999) (courtesy the artist and the Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU)

I don’t think I’d even read Hal Foster’s *The Anti-Aesthetic* yet, but there was definitely that kind of thinking in my head, I was trying to figure out how to make visual things while defying any aesthetics or “taste.”

There were so many rules in our scene, it was almost militaristic. I learned the rules, I established a uniform, and I think I’ve kind of done the same thing in the art world. But also, I never felt in line with my community, and that’s why it’s so confusing to me to be included in the Whitney for example — yet I do feel that my rules are in line with the art world’s, and that is super confusing. It leaves me wondering: Where’s my critique, where’s my criticality? I’ve been trying to think about Michelle [Grabner]’s Whitney floor as a critical space, but in a totally different way.

LD: How do you think it’s a critical space?

MZH: Because the commitment is to other artists, to conversations with other artists, and to living. The work is the work, the life is the life — they’re not exposing that life. A sense of privacy is being highlighted in the work. As opposed to people photographing their lives for example, there’s a lot of work that is deeply intimate, touched, handled, lived with, but still “formal”, concerned with issues of form and composition. An online review I liked mentioned my work as allowing the reviewer to re-see Georgia O’Keefe, and vice versa. I guess what it keeps making me feel like is, rarely in culture do we see the possibility of making a life that is meaningful and rich and joyful or energized. I can “bring the pain” but that doesn’t feel critical to me, it feels fucking self-destructive. So there’s something about trying to live a life of joy.

LD: I’ve been thinking a lot lately about artworks and writing that are deeply personal, but not revelatory in any way.

MZH: I think that’s how I’ve been thinking about Michelle’s show — as you say, deeply personal but not revelatory, I think that’s a beautiful description of the goal, the desire, the kind of thing that feeds me ...

One of the things that is going on on Michelle’s floor is artists platforming other artists. Michelle is already an artist curating other artists, and the floor actually is a platform, and so you read the work through her subjectivity, or you read her commitments through the work. It’s the first kind of macro version of the conflation of performative self and self, in which you take other people in and on ... like Kathleen [Hanna] in her Evan Dando zine [My Life With Evan Dando, Popstar], or me through Kathleen ... talking through somebody.

This is happening in Michelle's exhibition. For example, Philip Vanderhyden "remade" a Gretchen Bender piece, that really collapses roles — it goes behind Sherrie Levine even. He's "just" an archivist, he's creating out of devotion and total subservience. By trying to parse what the relationship is between the two artists, one makes value judgments by default. Because of the collapse, they force ideas about what art is, what creativity is, who is authorship, what originality is, all those questions are brought to the foreground with practices that produce collaboration and question power. Like right now, is this an interview, or is this a conversation? Are we two artists talking? Who is the curator, the archivist, the artist?

LD: Well that also brings up the question of friendship. When I think of Michelle's Whitney floor, and about how she has taught many of the people she selected, some people could see that as—

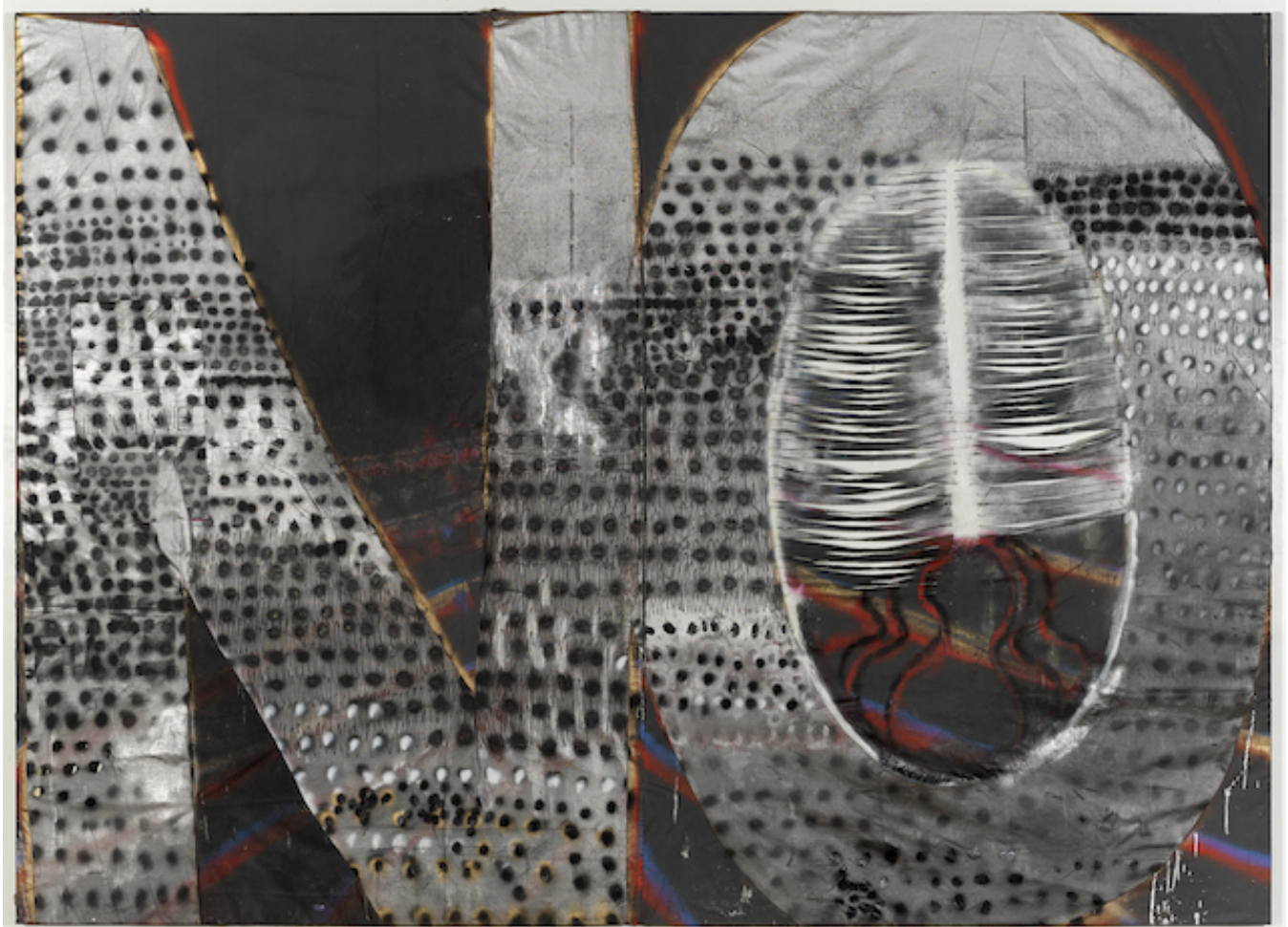
MZH: —nepotism—

LD: —yeah, but I also see it as one of the roles of a teacher, that you're a mentor, that you bring people up with you if you believe in the work ...

MZH: It's one of the ways that Michelle has influenced me over the years ... pushing against professionalism in her life ... even as a Whitney curator, she wanted to maintain the feeling of being with artists in their studios. The counter-argument here is recognition of the place of institutional structures — the Whitney, the schools where we teach and develop these relationships. This is the thing that is very different from Olympia and riot grrrl in the '90s.

LD: Your painting in the Biennial is called "Notley." Can you tell me more about it?

MZH: I was thinking of the Notley painting being "for" Alice Notley, kind of as a method of hailing her, like how gays and lesbians used to wear hankies in their back pockets and depending on the color, it meant that you liked different sexual practices. I am not hailing Notley for sex, but I love her writing, and I know she is a very private person, and I just wanted to make an overture of admiration.



Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, "Notley" (2013), latex housepaint, enamel, and spray paint on dropcloth (hinged, in two attached parts), 96 x 132 in (courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago) (photo by Tom Van Eynde, Chicago)

I'm a great fan. I have always admired excessively, often to the point of making people nervous, and also causing my friends and peers to think I am too quick to venerate, or reminding me of the dangers of idolizing, or letting me know that the person I admire has a very different life than mine — different privileges, structures, etc. I know all this, but still, role models for me are a way to find a forward, a future, they help me aim. I don't end up where I aim anyway. Perhaps this is made clearer simply by noting that the painting "Notley" only spells out "NO" so I have, potentially, two more paintings to make: "TL" and "EY." So in terms of language, it is a way forward, a negation and a misdirect all at once.

LD: *At a very basic level, the painting reads "NO," just as your zine cover metaphorically reads, am I right?*

MZH: Totally ... With the zine, the first thing is the lack of design, and then comes the request that you compare it to a musical form, a form that doesn't cohere into something beautiful, that appears to be disorder. I'm asking you to compare the two things, I'm not saying they're the same. And I think I remember my frustration with the assumption that punk was radical or rejecting, when it actually had its own modes and controls just as much as a designed culture ...

But the painting also poses the question: How do I as a woman occupy public space? That's not something I was born to do, trained to do, I don't have many predecessors for it. Does public space even exist? This painting is for Alice Notley; it's not for everybody. But it is a space where anybody

can have an experience of it even though it's not "for" them. I've done similar things in past works. Like I made a painting where there's a flap, and to view it you have to have the courage to lift the flap

...

LD: *So how about the fact that everyone is going to read it as "NO"?*

MZH: I'm trying to ask questions. So I know people will read it as "NO,"but I don't know what they'll do with it. Part of my questioning is, what does refusal mean to people, what does refusal look like? A representation of a refusal that takes part and participates, is that a refusal? Can an artwork be a lightning rod for the feelings of a public composed of individuals with an ambivalent relationship to participation?

2014 Whitney Biennial Molly Zuckerman-Hartung