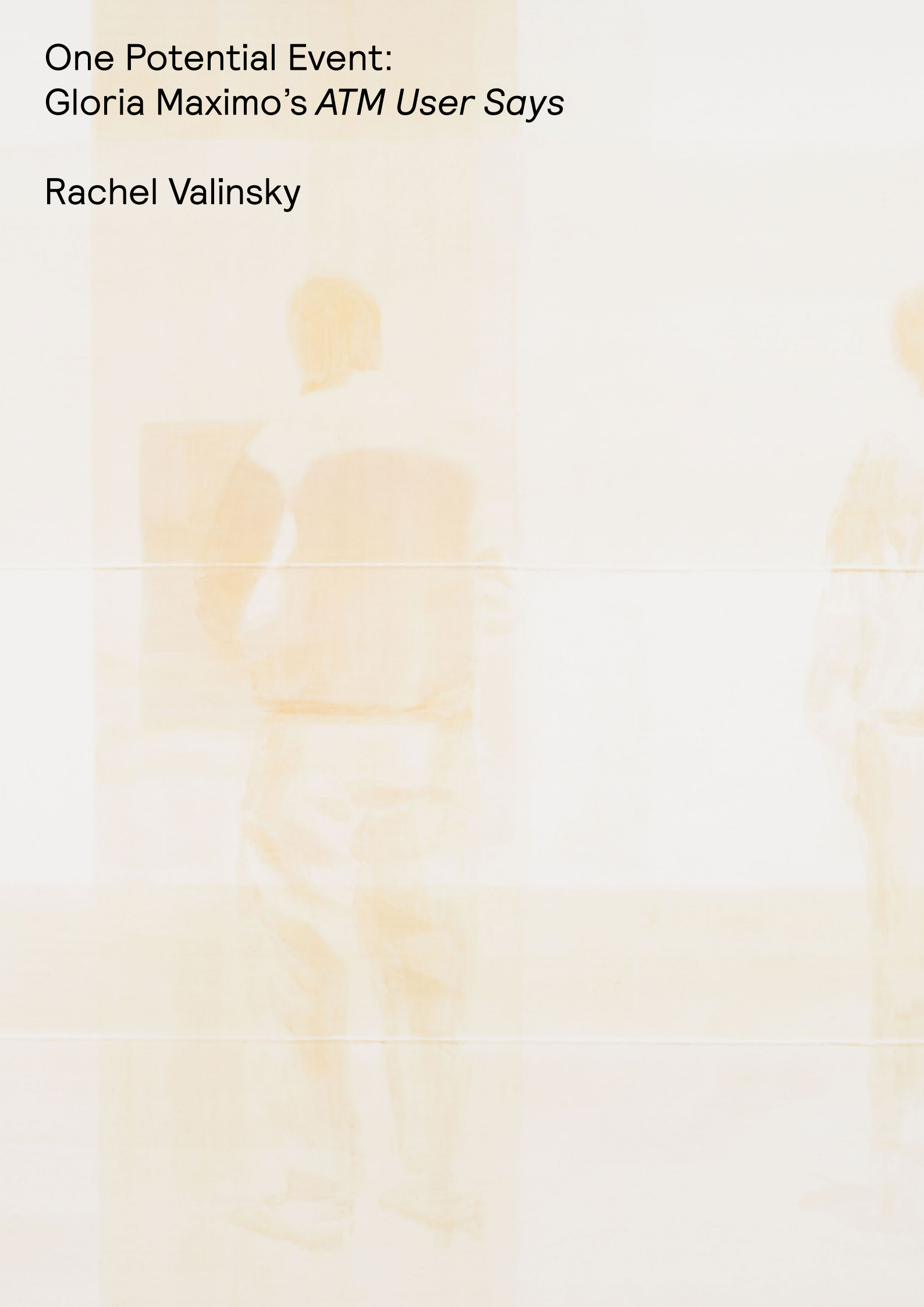


One Potential Event:
Gloria Maximo's *ATM User Says*

Rachel Valinsky



When she enters the frame, the first point of contact is between her arm, bare beyond her shirt's rolled up sleeves, and the plastic hull of an ATM machine. She stares out intently but somewhat absently, a bank card in her hand. Her movements are deliberate, persistent, idiosyncratic in their rhythmic cyclicity and quiet determination. A gesture spurred by curiosity, perhaps, as though the object were unfamiliar, in need of inspection: turning the card over, she balances it, her fingers slide atop the raised and embossed text on either side, its metallic strip, feeling its texture and the smooth plastic surface, its crisp edges, its weight. But this minor choreography is devoid of wonderment: the performer remains unaffected by what the exercise yields, and her facial expression is unchanged. Or, considered another way, the sequence could be purely calisthenic: the hand moves, shifts positions, her wrist wriggles, her fingers grasp, and her body tests its mobility, fine-tunes it. Or, is it that we are presented with an everyday gesture denatured by virtue of it being observed; a private ritual caught out of context and time. And that fraction of time the performer is in the frame—60 seconds in the video, to be precise—passes as she absent-mindedly enacts a sequence of routine movements.¹

The choreography is brief; it could be excerpted from a longer piece, but it isn't, or from the continuous temporality of the everyday, but that's not quite it either. Instead, the performance and single-channel video, titled *ATM User Says (Untitled)*, is one in a body of identically titled works in Gloria Maximo's first New York solo exhibition at Laurel Gitlen. Produced as a cycle, her paintings stage a sequence of interactions set outside of an unmarked deli between a standby panhandler and ATM users. On the walls, a series of acrylic gouache on canvas panels describe the figures and architectural setting. Opposite the video, at the other end of the room, a silicate on plaster work lays flat on a pedestal. Flanked and framed by this pictorial cycle, the video takes on new meaning. A hand in motion is also a hand that paints. If the video captures movement, so does painting, its surface the record of an accretion of matter produced through the careful deployment and repetition of gestural activity. A hand that paints is also a hand that performs.

Maximo's recent performance work, whether for video or for live audiences, has honed a formal economy of idiosyncratic and deskilled, brief but precise choreographic gestures. Through repetition and variation, Maximo composes scenarios that are formally and functionally abstract, but easily connote, through the roles she embodies and the settings they occupy (the office cleaner working after-hours in a corporate building in *Client States*, 2018; the sidewalk charitable solicitor/service marketer in *Woman Working*, 2018; the security guard in *Visitor Log, Institutional Building*, 2020) conditions in which low-wage, precarious, invisibilized, and transient labor is experienced, expressed, and encoded in the body. In her 2018 video *Payday*, whose theme she has reprised in this body of work, Maximo as a sidewalk cleaner, dressed in a uniform referencing a work program for formerly homeless men, stands in front of an ATM. It is nighttime. The machine becomes an unlikely prop for a sequence of corporeal exercises, illuminated by the green glare of the screen. What happens in the night, in the street, out of sight, Maximo seems to suggest, goes unnoticed, save for the surveillance camera above. There is always a viewer somewhere. Maximo attends to these experiences of *work* and *performance* at the threshold of recognition and visibility; where body language, positioning, and affect become signifiers of class, status, agency, and occupation. At the edge of legibility, her subjects are ambivalent, expressing a range of familiar emotions a viewer might project onto them—from anger, to frustration or exhaustion—but they resist expressivity's pretense to faithfully transpose psychic interiority, and unravel performance's injunction to render oneself visible.

1 This performance for camera was recorded in 2022 in the artist's home, where her studio is located, in Jamaica, Queens.

As both an iterative and reiterative operation, gesture mobilizes a range of possible discourses. Naturalized gestures are bound up, as many scholars from Michel Foucault to Judith Butler and beyond have argued, in a deeply citational practice, one that shores up a memory of movement internalized in the body (never an abstract, neutral body, but one marked by entrenched hierarchies and inequalities of race, class, gender, and power) that attests to its cultural and historical conditioning. In this reading, gestures are always excerpted from a continuum. But gesture is also performative: its enactment constructs realities, materializes social relations, and reframes our orientations toward the world, our ways of perceiving and knowing it. In this, gesture is also potentially interruptive. It is precisely gesture's quotability, as Walter Benjamin explained in his writing on Bertold Brecht, its repeatability, that interrupts that which, in the social order, has been neutralized through habit and familiarity. Gesture denaturalizes: it opens a critical threshold in which the artifice of compulsory social performance is stripped bare and presented in a new light. The socially transformative potential of gesture resides in the way it stages this interruption and transmits it, as currency that can accrue meaning by becoming legible. As Lauren Berlant writes, gesture is "only a potential event, the initiation of something present that could accrue density, whether dramatic or not."²



Gloria Maximo, *ATM User Says (Untitled)*, 2022. Performance (still).
Single channel video with color, approx. 1 minute.
Edition of 3 plus 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist.

Steeped in the myriad expressive, communicative, and social possibilities of gestural activity, Maximo's work, and the ATM series in particular, materializes gesture as a performative and pictorial practice that manifests at the surface. The screen, like the surface of the canvas, becomes a stage for conceiving and rehearsing various relations between forms and bodies in space, carried out across multiple (filmic) frames and (painted) panels. Flipping over the credit card in her hand, Maximo evokes the directionalities of transactional exchange, while dwelling in the standstill where nothing is retrieved, and nothing is deposited. Exchange becomes one potential event. Retention or inaction another. Considered as a prop, the card is also a planar object, like a canvas, a support to be painted on. Her manipulation of the card continuously shifts the spatial relations produced by this flat object as it moves and reorients through three-dimensional space. As a surrogate for the picture plane, which she so assiduously deconstructs in her paintings and causes us to perceive anew, the ATM card *generates* space.

² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 199. See also: Walter Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theater" (1931), in *Understand Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1983); Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theater Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519–31; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

The video frame becomes a space for extended pictorial activity. Another potential event: the dynamic interplay of forms.

In Maximo's work, the painted surface, like the screen, is a privileged space of encounter, where the temporality of the experience of viewing opens onto the temporality of process and relation. Placed horizontally on a pedestal, her mineral silicate paint on cast plaster panel most dramatically emphasizes the labor of its production. Uneven, raw edges reveal the sedimentation of accumulated matter, the stuff of which it is made. The touches of paint at its surface are more evanescent than elsewhere in Maximo's pictorial work, showing up the delicate process of painting on plaster. Oriented horizontally, the work shifts the frame of reference from painting to thing, from image to object. In her acrylic gouache on canvas paintings, however, Maximo doesn't consistently relay the time-bound labor of production in the surface detail, largely eschewing facture and visible bushwork. Especially when viewed from a distance, the works' demure palette, with their limited range of tones spanning gradients from whites, to ochres and peaches, obliterates formal distinctions. While their surfaces register variation, they just as easily subsume it, presenting nuance only as a function of (chromatic) restraint within a given system of representation that exerts an abstracting power over its parts. The perceptual field is blinding, continuous, bathed in a luminous, saturated, diaphanous sheath. At the perceptual threshold, vision is dissolved only to be slowly reformed, or reformed *through* slowness.³ Each image, as Darby English writes, is "the amalgam of what goes on the canvas, what one sees, and what becomes of the two." "Surface action incites," he continues "then enfolds perceptual action. Visual object and viewing subject entangle."⁴ The surface becomes the site of this entanglement.

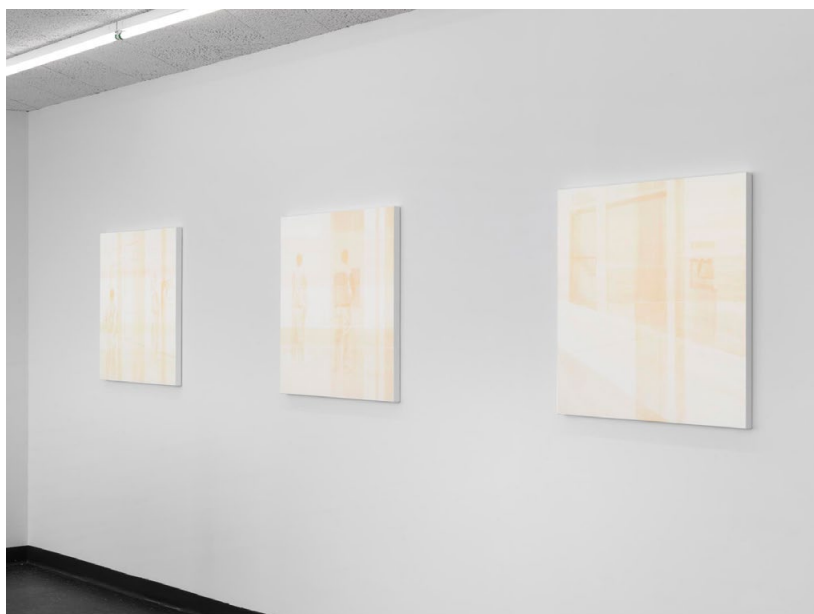
We could say that these paintings shuttle between figuration and abstraction; that they move between the representational and the unreal or non-naturalistic; that they emphasize surface at the expense of illusionistic depth. But this would only be to rehearse timeworn dialectical oppositions and dominant tropes that have informed much of the history of modern painting without quite accounting for the nuances of this entanglement. Of course, the paintings do oscillate between these registers: the functional distinction between figure and ground is held in precarious tension through the flattening of space. And this effect is masterfully produced. Note, for instance, how the lattice-like interlay of vertical and horizontal bands—some of which are constitutive of the architectural space of each scene, while others participate in abstracting that space toward purely pictorial means—doesn't quite suggest an above and below, as in a weaving's warp and weft. Or how her tonal variations are ever so slight in their delineation of forms and bodies from the ground. Three-dimensional, illusionistic depth becomes, for the most part, a function of tonal shift and the viewer's vantage point. And yet, Maximo does not do away with perspectival space altogether. Consider the lines that traverse one panel, most visible in the alignment of the upper and lower edge of a row of windows and accentuated by a lighter band: these perfectly model the precepts of linear perspective, in which spatial recession is produced through the diminution of elements in the painting along fixed diagonals that converge in a vanishing point. Here, if Maximo reveals the system of orthogonals organizing the painting, she locates the vanishing beyond the frame, out of sight.

These paintings in many ways threaten their own potential vanishing: they do not reproduce well, in all their complexity and tonal variation, in digital images or in print. But then

3 On *blinding* and the perceptual threshold, see Yve-Alain Bois, "On Matisse: The Blinding," trans, Greg Sims, *October* 68 (Spring 1994): 60-121.

4 Here, Darby English writes of Silke Otto-Knapp, a painter whose work can easily be considered alongside Maximo's for its formal economy and interplay of performance and painting. See Darby English, "Get on the floor," in *Silke Otto-Knapp: In the Waiting Room* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2020), 8.

there are interruptions: raised lines built up with paint that break out from the surface, causing bifurcations and disjunctions in the picture plane and disorienting the act of looking. Studiously placed, these passages of textural relief are like reminders that what we are seeing is a constructed space: one in which the application of illusionistic principles has a limit. The interruption is effective: Maximo brackets space, so to speak, in the painting, so as to achieve another dimension, a kind of cognitive architecture. The edges of the canvas demarcate an interior and an interiority that irrupt into the viewer's space, mapping our external position in relation to it. Here, potentialities are shored up and made to coexist. Lines, like vectors, extend out of the canvas. There is the suggestion of a grid, if irregular and incomplete. It offers structuration and openness, synthesizing, as Rosalind Krauss famously argued, the bivalent status of this paradigmatic modernist device: a grid "maps space onto and inside the frame," turning the surface of the canvas into "the actual object of vision" rather than dematerializing it; but it also evokes an infinity beyond the frame, of which the painting is only a specific crop or excerpt.⁵



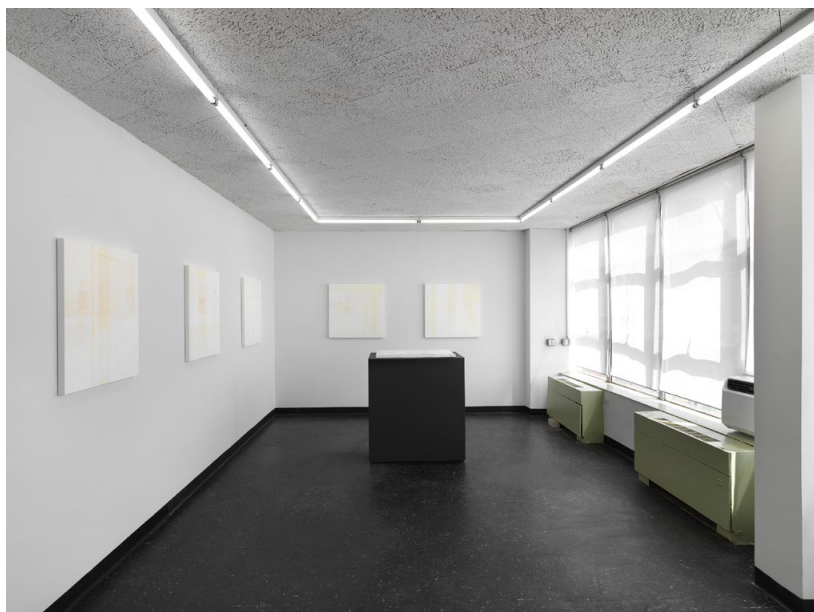
A panel, a video still, a crop, an excerpt, a gesture, a potential event—the locus of activity is at the surface. A surface that media theorist Giuliana Bruno has described as the tangible "communication interface of a public intimacy."⁶ A surface that bustles, suspended, in potentiality. The indeterminacy of the scenes and scenarios depicted turn the canvas into a space of appearance and disappearance, of fugitive embodiment, wherein figures elude the full grasp of perception. Figures, often in pairs, but sometimes alone or altogether absent, generate tension in each scene: a man, standing nearby a retail shop door, observes passersby using entering and exiting, and using an outdoor ATM machine. Sometimes he holds his hands behind his back, patiently poised; sometimes he seems to launch forward as if to address the other or open a door. His distance to the other varies from panel to panel, at times suggesting that an interaction has or may take place. Positionality within each painting, and in the sequence from panel to panel, produces the quiet drama of this series of works. In the standstill of the potential event, each painting becomes a threshold of negotiation: of relationships, as we have seen, between planes or between form and color, but also between public and private space, between privacy and surveillance, between stillness and movement, between bodies, between the panhandler and the passerby, between the person in need and the person with means.

If I'm considering the term *between* here, it is to echo the literary critic Eve Kosofsky

5 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, TK): 9–22.

6 Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 3.

Sedgwick, who takes other prepositions like *beneath* and *beyond*—common terms for modern painting, where the flatness/depth binary is at a premium—to think instead a condition of adjacency, of *besideness*. The paintings’ placement next to one another in the gallery opens the liminal passage from one panel to another and sutures the temporality of the interval through the atmospherics of the surround. The preposition *beside*, she writes “permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking,” refocusing instead on “a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.”⁷ The figures represented in these paintings might be enacting a sample of the dynamics she lists, and more. Lines in the canvases divide but they also unite: like social diagrams, they map distinctions of class, of gender, of race, of status, refiguring the act of looking as a process of social recognition. In this context, descriptors of volume and depth might also be refocused away from their spatial connotations, and toward a capacity for intersubjectivity that the surface as a “communicative interface” makes manifest.



In considering Maximo’s work, these relations and dynamics never resolve as fixed or stable. What the ATM user “says,” if anything, remains unknown. Instead, the scenes she

Gloria Maximo, *ATM User Says*, 2022.
Installation view, Laurel Gitlen, New York.
Photo: Dario Lasagni, courtesy of the artist.

Gloria Maximo, *ATM User Says (Untitled)*, 2022.
Mineral silicate paint on cast plaster panel,
30 x 22 x 1.5 inches. Photo: Dario Lasagni, courtesy of the
artist.

7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, introduction to *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

depicts are held in tension by a high degree of pictorial and narrative instability that is produced in her surfacing of the structures I've attempted to describe here. Maximo extracts these structures from everyday experiences, giving them a form and materiality that mirrors that of artmaking. She tends toward a kind of abstraction from which the figure emerges in its fleeting but persistent presence, as one among many potential events.

—Rachel Valinsky

Rachel Valinsky is a writer, editor, and curator based in New York. She is the co-founder and Artistic Director of Wendy's Subway, a nonprofit library, writing space, and independent publisher based in Brooklyn, and works as an Editor at Primary Information. Her writing has appeared in *Art in America*, *Art-Agenda*, *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *BOMB Magazine*, *Millennium Film Journal*, and elsewhere. Rachel has curated exhibitions, performances, and public programs at The Kitchen, The Queens Museum, BAM, Judson Memorial Church, Emily Harvey Foundation, and Knockdown Center. She was 2018–2019 Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow at the Queens Museum, 2017–2018 Curatorial Fellow at The Kitchen, and a 2017–2019 Friday Night Series Co-Curator at the Poetry Project with Mirene Arsanios. Rachel is a doctoral candidate in Art History at The Graduate Center, City University of New York, where her research centers on 1970s and '80s performance in the Americas.

Cover image and back cover:

Gloria Maximo, *ATM User Says (Untitled)*, 2022

Acrylic gouache on canvas, 30 x 30 inches

Photo: Charles Benton, Courtesy of the artist



GLORIA MAXIMO
ATM User Says
April 30 - June 4, 2022

Laurel Gitlen
465 Grand Street New
York, NY 10002