

THE ALIEN DISCONTINUUM: ON PAINTING AND PARTICIPATING IN THE WORK OF JULIE MEHRETU

From their first showing, the paintings of Julie Mehretu captured the spirit of our fragile, new century. Monumentally scaled and visually explosive, they resonated with a perception of the world irrevocably impacted by an accelerated consciousness of the simultaneity of events in time and place and the intersecting flows of economies, geopolitics, and people that were their engine. Critics described Mehretu’s early paintings as “sweeping matrices,”¹ and “a conceptual version of history painting, with hand-wrought depictions of loose data shifting and weaving through cyberspace.”² Seventeen years on, the concatenations of histories, places, and movements of these paintings have undergone a series of structural, compositional, and pictorial evolutions that chart not only a shift in the nature of the world in which Mehretu’s paintings have emerged and Mehretu’s relationship to that world, but also an intensely productive interrogation of painting as a medium capable of giving expression to the world as it is lived.

Before attempting to trace some of these shifts and the conceptual and pictorial decisions that inform them, it is worth describing a set of general principles that guide the construction of the works, what Mehretu has described as “the time of the painting.”³ I use the term “construction” intentionally to draw attention to the way in which the paintings are built up, physically as well as pictorially, through procedures of assembling, crafting, directed intervention, and personal gesture. It is a conceptually and logistically elaborate process that is in dynamic and productive tension with the intuitive impulse. Typically, stretched canvas is primed, with the first visual layers involving drawing, painted areas, and sprayed acrylic applied, sanded, and re-applied to create a hard, transparent substratum for the subsequent deposits of projected images, drawn lines, and individual marks. Digital downloading and compositional tools, graphite, sumi ink, acrylic paint, Rapidograph pens, pencils, brushes, and spray paint are all part of the arsenal. While the preparation of surfaces and first levels of visual information, involving underpainting, masking,

and tracing from projected images, are applied by studio assistants, all of the intuitive mark making is done by Mehretu. Similarly, the composition is defined by Mehretu, as are the adjustments and shifts that she directs throughout the gradual buildup of the work to the final field of gestural marks that she applies to populate her sedimented field.

The visual strata of the paintings are a combination of historic and contemporary archival sources, collected by Mehretu over many years and comprising photographs, architectural drawings, and blueprints, usually of sites and occurrences that have marked collective consciousness—from the utopian projects of Modernist architecture to bunkers and sites of natural and human-made calamity. They are animated by Mehretu’s own repertoire of mark making that also points to an archive of representational and nonrepresentational visual codes—what the architect David Adjaye has described as “a database of the visual,”⁴ spanning a history of Western painting from the Renaissance and Baroque to early twentieth-century avant-gardes, Abstract Expressionism, Chinese and Buddhist landscape painting, and the stylized rhetoric of the comic strip. These richly woven references constitute a form of “staging of culture”⁵—a phrase used by Roland Barthes to describe Cy Twombly’s evocation of the epic cycles of the Mediterranean through the abject inscriptions scratched and dragged through the surfaces of his paintings.⁶ Mehretu’s excavation of historic painterly conventions might be understood, too, as a kind of “alien discontinuum,” to borrow from the writer and cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun’s project: “to manufacture, fabricate, synthesize, cut, paste and edit,” eschewing continuity and genealogy as a means to decolonize aesthetic thinking.⁶ If Mehretu alludes to histories in her rendering of architectures and sites of catastrophe or failure, the flows of information and capital and the seemingly permanent scramble of geographies,⁷ her decolonization of the visual narrates epics of the present—“the ways in which,” collectively and individually, “we construct and live in the world.”⁸

The question “What does it mean?” (Ce qu’elle figure?) as Barthes wrote it, has long been the obstacle to the universality of painting: “In front of a painting, we want to make sense of it. ... We look for analogy.”⁹ In classical painting, the title reinforces that analogy. The titles Mehretu gives to her paintings are always meaningful. *System* (2002) [pp. 90-91] is suggestive on various levels—in its definition, the word connotes a set of principles or method according to which something is carried out; a network of interconnected parts; or an oppressive political or social order. All of these meanings can be understood in Mehretu’s conceptual appropriation of the language of the map and the chart, evident in early drawings such as *Migration Direction Map* (1996) [p. 83], *Index of Integrated Character Settlement* (1997) [p. 75], or *Character Migration Analysis Index* (1997) [p. 74], in which Mehretu subjected her intuitive marks to the structure of the timeline and the graph. These early drawings are all the more relevant in what they reveal about Mehretu’s elaboration of a visual lexicon of abstract mark making as intrinsically narrative. In his “experiment in art writing,” *The Sight of Death*, the art historian T. J. Clark observed:

Part of the appeal of perspective to painters, surely, lies in the way the bare linear structure involved sets up the promise, or illusion, of systematic determination—all the better for painting to play its coercive and generative games with. All the better to show the powerlessness of mere structure against the play of metaphor, of materials—format, physical size, light, touch, “grounding,” orientation of surfaces, shock of color, opacity and transparency of atmosphere. Of course it is these that put viewers most powerfully in relation to imagined worlds.¹⁰

The worlds conjured by Mehretu embody this sense of painting as both coercive and generative. *System* compositionally marks a move away from the centrifugal compositions, in which explosively receding perspectives built up from overlays of architectural drawings, vector lines, and floating blocks of color were elaborated with a multiplication of graphic scores and pictorial conflagrations, which had been a feature of her paintings prior to the collapse of the Twin Towers in September 2001. For Mehretu, “9/11 fundamentally shifted the ground. The world had changed, and there was a need to pull away and look at a bigger perspective.”¹¹

With *System*, we see a dispersal of focal points as Mehretu’s traced lines and freehand graphic movements occupy more evenly the breadth of the canvas, and a privileging of a reduced, almost pastel palette of pale pinks and blues for the lozenge and rhomboid shapes that orbit in and around the network of its graphic matrix. This mobility of lines and the structures they designate, reminiscent of the Situationist artist Constant’s labyrinthine drawings and

sculptures for his *New Babylon* project (1959–74), have a more provisional attitude—less a projected revolutionary vision for the future than the transitory encampments of military campaigns and displaced communities.

In the mid-2000s, Mehretu created a richly worked and ambitiously scaled body of paintings, their compositional matrix renderings traced from images and drawings of architectural sources. Historic forts and defensive architecture, arcades, stadia, and Modernist architectures were animated by flying motifs of colored streamers, swirling logos, and waving flags caught in a compositional maelstrom of vector lines and battalions of notational marks that seemed to march across a volatile aerialscape. While boldly demarcated strips and planes of color were still evident amid these swirling compositions, the linear quality of the blueprint and the plan assumed a semiotic density. Whereas earlier paintings suggested meteorological perspectives, and the trajectories of digital data whose satellite-driven paths invisibly crisscross our globe every nanosecond, paintings such as *Citadel* (2005) [pp. 102-103], with its smudged-over tracings of star forts, propose a view from above looking down onto the imprint of multiple archaeological layers that telescope through time. Produced in the same year as the visually dynamic *Arcade* [pp. 94-95], the camaïeu quality of *Citadel’s* sepia tones reveals Mehretu’s continued play not only between graphic and painterly atmospheres but also between the historic conventions of representation, from the linear perspective of representational illusion and the interlaced tracings of the medieval manuscript to the hieroglyphic markings of Sumerian foundation stones and the meditative symbolism of the mandala.

In the second half of the 2000s, Mehretu’s dense overlays began to give greater emphasis to processes of effacement and erasure, the traces of which added to the palimpsest of successive inscriptions. In parallel, her paintings achieved an increasingly monumental scale. The shift up in physical size no doubt owed to two commissions received during 2008, the first to create a new series of paintings for the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, and the second to create an ambitious new painting for the lobby of the new headquarters of Goldman Sachs in downtown New York. *Plover’s Wing* (2009) [pp. 158-159], which formed part of the Deutsche Guggenheim series, and *Fragment* [pp. 162-163], made in the same year, make visible the impressive range of Mehretu’s visual universe at the time. The linear tracings of architectures, overlapping in dense confusion in *Plover’s Wing*, constitute a barely visible compositional scaffolding to the brushed, feathered notations and scuffed gestures that establish a varying array of visual currents across the field of the painting. The diluted tones of pale red, ochre yellow, light gray, and blue assume the role of flattened volumes, interspersed by intersecting lines and arcs.

¹ Tim Griffin, “Exploded View: Julie Mehretu’s Paintings Detonate at The Project,” *Time Out New York*, December 6-15, 2001, 61.

² Holland Cotter, “Glenn Brown, Julie Mehretu, Peter Rostovsky,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/23/arts/art-in-review-glenn-brown-julie-mehretu-peter-rostovsky.html>.

³ Julie Mehretu and David Adjaye in conversation with Tim Marlow, White Cube, London, 2013, http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_auditorium/julie_mehretu_in_the_auditorium_2013/.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “la mise-en-scène de la culture.” Roland Barthes, “Sagesse de l’Art,” in *Cy Twombly* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2016), 29.

⁶ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1999), 3.

⁷ Tim Griffin, “Race Matters,” *Time Out New York*, May 24–31, 2001, 24–57.

⁸ Lawrence Chua, “Julie Mehretu,” *BOMB* 91 (Spring 2005): <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2714/julie-mehretu>.

⁹ Roland Barthes, “Sagesse de l’Art,” 49.

¹⁰ T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 141.

¹¹ Julie Mehretu in conversation with the author, April 2017.



Julie Mehretu,
Fragment (detail), 2009

The palette of *Fragment*, on the other hand, is restricted to varying concentrations of black, white, and gray. What we cannot tell from reproduction, but is evident when faced with the actual painting, is the role of transparency and light created through the worked surfaces in their buildup of successive layers and the survival of graphic and painterly inscription through repeated processes of removal and accumulation. It has been noted that the accretion of images and motifs in Mehretu's paintings in their mutual interference is also a form of erasure,¹² an effect that endows underlying structures with a haunting faintness. Mehretu also has spoken of the metaphoric association of erasure with respect to histories and, formally, allowing an intuitive freedom that combats the potential obstacle of her own pictorial language assumed as a given.¹³

It seems important to pause at this point to reflect further on the significance of drawing in Mehretu's oeuvre, as both narrative and process. Much has been written already on her graphic signs: "as figures that populate a cartography," with symbolic agency that refers to social systems, and as "factors of change" and "states of becoming."¹⁴ One only need look at the early group of ink drawings titled *Inkcity* (1996) [pp. 59, 62, 67, 71] and the dense concentration of cell-like notations, grouped around a set of axial coordinates, or contained within a self-defined ellipse or circle, to recognize a relationship of the individual component to the aggregate structure. Mehretu's community of marks, which bring to mind Agnes Denes's

series *Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space-Map Projections* (1973–79), topographical forms projected as isometric projections to give expression to environmental and global consciousness, suggest a similar propositional function of expressed concept. In the case of Mehretu, the explicitly hand-executed and intimate nature of her early drawings is equally expressive of the artist as an individual registering her presence in real time.

Mehretu's use of drawing in her paintings is also pictorially disruptive. The artist has talked of painting being "about building spaces," while "drawing is very investigatory."¹⁵ Early drawings composed of numbered and directional divisions and layers of acetate point to the composite abstract topographies of later paintings. Subsequent drawings on paper produced in ink, colored pencil, graphite, and watercolor are a reminder of their role as scripts or phrases used by Mehretu to create painterly atmosphere, that "indeterminate an inexhaustible sum of reasons, impulses, lazinesses that surround the act."¹⁶ Drawing in the oeuvre of Mehretu is also about empowerment: "The drawing is the wretched part of the painting, the life of the painting. So the architecture and everything else is consumed by the drawing."¹⁷ At the same time as the drawings constitute a parallel oeuvre, a free-style companion to the monumentally charged paintings, they are a means of rehearsing and testing out marks, to "take a line here, a curl there, even a moment of color and just follow it."¹⁸ We are reminded of the precepts of classical Chinese painting:

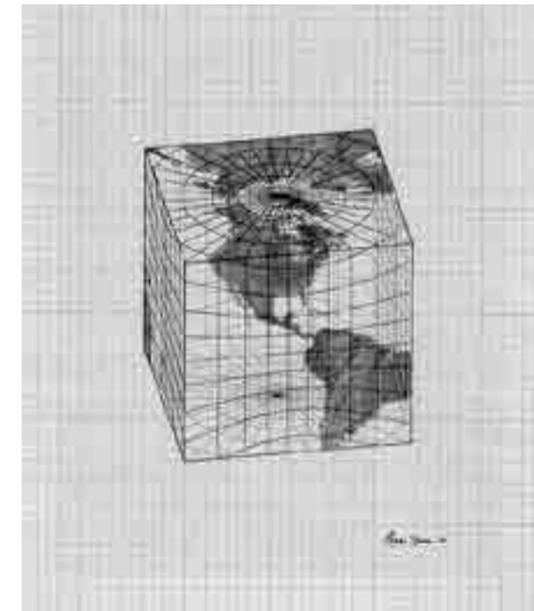
"Chinese painting, like Western painting, was familiar with clearly delineated clouds as well as with mists with indistinct outlines. The opposition was between the 'blue and green manner' with clear and precise outlines and the *yi pin* manner of the scholars, the 'manner without constraints.'¹⁹

A moment in the evolving glossary of characters in Mehretu's "cryptography" of signs is visible in the series of *new constructions* drawings from 2003. Here we see repetitions of the early, double-headed rods, hatchings, curls, and inky perforations together with folds, zips, fringes, fronds, swirls and spirals, stars, flags, and watery smears and stains. When applied to her canvases, these graphic characters become disruptive agitations that further fracture the multiplied viewpoints generated by the paintings. If the architectural plans and sections are the schema evoking place, the mark-making registers of Mehretu are her vehicle for "the manner without constraints," the supplement of gestures that confound legibility. Thus, from the schema to the drawing, to the drawing to the evaporation of meaning, we are presented with an object of contemplation.²⁰

With their explicit references to collective memory, drawing upon the architectural history of Berlin or the spatial mapping of the diasporic migrations of Jews, and the circulation of trade and markets that informed the *Grey Area* paintings and the Goldman Sachs mural, Mehretu's large-scale commissions announced a new body of work. Within this corpus, the panoramic *Invisible Line (collective)* (2010–11) [pp. 166–167] is an epic display of graphic and gestural intervention in black ink over graphite that contrasts with the more tectonic and Modernist-inspired composition of *Mural*, made in New York as Mehretu followed the news of the so-called Arab Spring unfolding in real time on radio, television, and social media. Architectures still hover beneath the surface, but they are submerged in a conflagration of ranked signs, sweeping brushes, and smeared gestures, evocative of a landscape painting from the Song dynasty given over to a mighty battle of warriors, whose episodes are marked by rectilinear markings in black, white, red, and green. The controlled tracings of arcades and arenas and the Modernist aspirations of civic buildings give way to an atmospheric chaos of sweeping plunder.

A further turning point in Mehretu's oeuvre comes with *Mogamma (A Painting in Four Parts)* (2012), commissioned for DOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel. The title, based on the name of an iconic government building on Cairo's Tahrir Square, the site of the pro-democracy demonstrations that led to the downfall of the then military dictatorship, is also Arabic for "collective." This majestic four-panel painting is constructed from the superimposition of architectural tracings of some thirty sites of social and political uprising in different parts

of the world. Originally conceived for the public access way for the DOCUMENTA-Halle, the work offered a further testing of the order of the painting as visual event on the scale of architecture.²¹ The context of architecture as integral to display—as opposed to its citation through reproduction—is significant, for it highlights the importance of the conditions of viewing that are inherent to the way Mehretu conceives her paintings. The very nature of the palimpsest as both inscription and overwriting, a term that is commonly used with respect to her work, is a strategy for seeing and reflecting upon the aesthetic and critical contemplation to which they aspire. The paintings function with a distant view—a landscape, a topography, a terrain that expresses as much the repetitions and the breaks, and the dynamic ruptures and "relational poetics," to use the term defined by Édouard Glissant, of history and cultural identity as it does a visualization of the invisible flows of our virtual hyper-present. Up close, the same paintings offer a teeming cosmos of myriad worlds of sedimented artifact, of image, incident, and action. They also act upon us, as mobile, perceiving bodies of these myriad sensations.



Agnes Denes, *Study of Distortions; Isometric Systems in Isotropic Space-Map Projections: The Cube*, 1978

Mehretu has talked about her paintings in terms of an environmental experience, an experience that is temporal and that also responds to the time that is embedded in the work through its making, what we identify with as its lived production.²² The creation of *Mural* for a corporate lobby that is visible to the public from the street took into account the history of Modern painting (and sculpture) and its relationship to architecture, from Le Corbusier and Alexander Calder to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Matisse's chapel at St. Paul de Vence. The production of *Mogamma*, its content and its context, called for a different awareness of perceiving positions. It was

12 Brian Dillon, "An Archaeology of the Air," in *Julie Mehretu: Grey Area*, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009), 49.

13 Julie Mehretu and David Adjaye in conversation with Tim Marlow.

14 Richard Shiff, "Earth Is Height and Depth, Distance and Proximity, Ease and Danger, Open and Confined Ground, Life and Death," in *Julie Mehretu: Mural* (New York: Goldman, Sachs & Co., 2013), 24–57.

15 David Binkley and Kinsey Katchka, "Conversation with Julie Mehretu" at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, as part of the series "Ethiopian Passages: Dialogues in the Diaspora," <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/passages/mehretu-conversation.html>.

16 Roland Barthes, "Sagesse de l'Art," 32, my translation.

17 David Binkley and Kinsey Katchka, "Conversation with Julie Mehretu."

18 Julie Mehretu quoted in Chris Abani, "Layer Me This," *Parkett*, no. 76 (2006): 40.

19 Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 221.

20 I owe this reflection on the trace and the gesture to Roland Barthes in "Cy Twombly ou 'Non multa sed multum,'" in *Cy Twombly*, 53.

21 For a complete description of *Mogamma*, see T. J. Demos, "Painting and Uprising: Julie Mehretu's Third Space," in *Liminal Squared*, exh. cat. (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery; London: White Cube, 2013), 55–61.

22 See Isabelle Graw's discussion of painting in terms of "lived production" in "The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons," in *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, ed. Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsch (Frankfurt am Main; Berlin: Institut für Kunstkritik; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 45–57.

through her collaboration with David Adjaye to present the series along with other works in London in 2013, that Mehretu achieved what she considered an ideal set of spatial conditions for the paintings. She has cited as points of reference the painting cycle *The Upper Room* (1992–2002) by fellow painter Chris Ofili, also in collaboration with Adjaye, and the Rothko Chapel in the Menil Collection, Houston.²³ It is this relationship to site, one that is universal within the history of painting, be it Lascaux, to medieval frescos, the paintings of Karnak and the Ellora Caves, or the paintings of Caravaggio, that informs Mehretu's ambition for her work to produce a comparable symbolic and social charge.

Creating paintings that speak to the times in which we live and to her place within that time has always been a driving force for Mehretu. Architecture, as a reflection of societal values and civilizational history, its aspirations and its failures, has played a central role in her paintings. With the series of *Invisible Sun* [pp. 202-203, 206-207] paintings, begun in 2012, Mehretu withdrew from the histories of the built and the rendering of "real space" in her work to focus on what she describes as "a post-futurist dynamic" of gesture and notation.²⁴ The *Mind Breath Drawings* [pp. 174-175, 178-179, 183] produced around the same time, with their spare impressions, hint at the frankly abstract language of the larger canvases whose scale and format, more portrait than panoramic, call upon the history of Abstract Expressionism. Mehretu described this new work as a necessary retreat from previous works that, in their impulse, and through the analogy of title, spoke directly to political and social urgencies in the world. This position of declared withdrawal was not, however, one of abdication of her engagement with wanting to ensure the contemporary relevance of her aesthetic production. The paintings of this time are, if anything, more personally charged and more immediate in their agitated brushstrokes of black ink and acrylic that sweep across the canvas. If in the preceding paintings

Mehretu evoked a cosmic march of collective time projected into the immediate present, in these new paintings she seemed to pitch the individual as the primary agent. The use of the subtitle (*algorithm*) is suggestive of digital information technology and data encryption, terms that evoke a certain conspiratorial paranoia. Algorithms can also relate to music, and it is perhaps in the interruption of the formula of the algorithm—like the variation of a chord—as chaotic and necessarily creative that Mehretu's *Invisible Sun* paintings can be understood on their own, irreducible terms.

The *Invisible Sun* paintings coincide with the introduction of the photographic image into the pictorial structure, no longer as the source for a graphic projection but as a blurred halo of emergent hue surfacing through the rational outlines and intuitive buildup of ink marks. *Chimera* (2013) [pp. 186-187] is one of the first of this new language, in which faintly visible ink lines set into the painting's transparent acrylic layers reveal the traced elements of an architectural structure in ruins. Drawn and smudged brush marks seem caught in vertical descent with loose garlands of perforated contours and handprints—an evocation of early cave painting and the *Body Prints* (1969–75) of David Hammons—as if the artist herself is struggling to emerge from the debris of hewn stone. The photographic image is unrecognizable as such. It is a ghostly presence, the celadon green tones that provide the painting's atmospheric perspective being its sole indication.

With what, at the time of this text's writing, constitute her most recent group of paintings, Mehretu stepped back into the arena of address to current events, notably the ongoing war in Syria as part of the aftermath of the cascading crises across the Arab world fueled by foreign intervention, and, closer to home, the crisis of race relations as a result of unchecked "police violence against black bodies"²⁵ in America. In doing so, she also moved to a new level of painterly expression that combines the encrypted image and the notational mark. In these works, which, according to

Mehretu, continue a dialogue with the heroic history of midcentury abstraction,²⁶ it is no longer architecture that gives structural foundation to the composition, but the blurred image, effaced to the status of bruised tones of a burning pink or aquamarine beneath a palette of predominantly black, white, and gray. The partially emerging forms of colossal figures, funerary monuments, and body parts, suggested by the language of the titles—*Steale*, *Conjured Parts*, *Sekhmet*, *Tongues*, *Eye*, *Damascus*, *Aleppo*, *Ferguson* [pp. 210-211, 214-215, 218-219, 222-223]—evoke a maelstrom of history, death, and hand-to-hand combat. In a recent and intellectually rich text, the artist Glenn Ligon likens Mehretu's new paintings and her use of the photographic image as unrecognizable presence to Gerhard Richter's overpainting of Holocaust imagery in his work since the 1960s.²⁷ We might also look at Cy Twombly's *Nine Discourses on Commodus* (1963), a cycle of nine paintings made in response to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, in which painting is lumpen mass, without contour or definition, against a largely empty ground.

If Mehretu's engagement with what is happening in the world in its violence and its injustices defines her as an individual and informs her work as an artist, we can only respond to the paintings and the drawings as they are presented before us. In the spirit of Mehretu's staging of culture in her work, we are drawn to other referents. It therefore seems relevant to quote from an elucidation of the principles of a Chinese theory of painting, as established by the eighteenth-century scholar Tang Zhiqi:

Painting should be recognized as a specific signifying practice. It is on the basis of that specificity...that painting should be considered in its relationship to reality—a relationship of understanding rather than expression of analogy rather than duplication, of working rather than substitution.²⁸

And T. J. Clark's position when he writes:

Here is why the stress has to fall...on the specificity of picturing and on that specificity's being so closely bound up with the mere materiality of a given practice, and on that materiality's being so often the generator of semantic depth—of true thought, true stilling and shifting of characters.²⁹

That we can follow the evolution of Mehretu's painting over time and for it to speak to us in its semantic depth as we attempt to negotiate the complex dimensions of our present is proof of the force of her art. For it is not simply a matter of composition and gesture, contour and image, substrate and surface, brought together to produce the powerful aesthetic effect of her work. There is the emancipation of the act of making and the mindful intelligence of physical abandon that reflects a vital grounding in the world in which we recognize ourselves, and in which we participate.

(P O R)

O ESTRANHO DESCONTÍNUO: SOBRE PINTURA E PARTICIPAÇÃO NO TRABALHO DE JULIE MEHRETU

Desde que foram mostradas pela primeira vez, as pinturas de Julie Mehretu captam o espírito deste novo e frágil século. Em escalas monumentais e visualmente explosivas, ressoa nelas uma percepção do mundo irrevocavelmente influenciada por uma consciência crescente da simultaneidade de eventos no tempo e no lugar, da interseção de fluxos econômicos, geopolíticos e de que as pessoas são o seu motor. Os críticos descreveram as obras iniciais de Mehretu como "matrizes varridas"¹, "uma versão conceptual da pintura histórica, com representações feitas manualmente de dados avulsos deslocando-se e entrelaçando-se no ciberespaço"². Dezassete anos volvidos, as concatenações de histórias, lugares e movimentos descritas nestas pinturas sofreram uma série de evoluções estruturais, composicionais e pictóricas que registam não só uma mudança na natureza do mundo em que surgiram as pinturas de Mehretu e na relação da artista com esse mundo, mas também uma intensa e produtiva interrogação da pintura enquanto meio capaz de dar expressão ao mundo tal como este é vivido.

Antes de tentar retrair algumas dessas mudanças e as decisões conceptuais e pictóricas que as norteiam, vale a pena determo-nos num conjunto de princípios gerais pelos quais se regula a construção das obras, que Mehretu descreveu como "o tempo da pintura"³. Uso intencionalmente o termo "construção" para chamar a atenção para a forma como as pinturas são elaboradas, tanto física como pictoricamente, através de processos de composição, feitura manual, intervenção direcionada e uma gestualidade pessoal. É um processo elaborado, conceptual e logisticamente, que se desenrola numa tensão dinâmica e produtiva com o impulso intuitivo. Por norma, o primário é aplicado sobre a tela engradada e são executadas as primeiras camadas visuais, que envolvem desenho, áreas pintadas e a aplicação de tinta acrílica em spray; esta é depois lixada e reaplicada para criar um substrato rígido e transparente para os subsequentes sedimentos de imagens projetadas, linhas desenhadas e marcas pessoais. Ferramentas de composição digital, grafite, tinta Sumi, tinta acrílica, canetas Rapidograph, lápis, latas de tinta em spray, são todos parte do arsenal. Enquanto a preparação dos suportes e a aplicação das primeiras camadas de informação visual — que incluem aplicar o primário preliminar e mascarar e delinear as imagens projetadas — são executadas por assistentes, toda a introdução de marcas intuitivas é assumida pela própria artista. Do mesmo modo, a composição é definida por Mehretu,

1 Tim Griffin, "Exploded View: Julie Mehretu's Paintings Detonate at 'The Project'", *Time Out New York*, 6–13 de dezembro 2001, p. 61.

2 Holland Cotter, "Glenn Brown, Julie Mehretu, Peter Rostovsky", *The New York Times*, 25 de junho 2000. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/25/arts/art-in-review-glenn-brown-julie-mehretu-peter-rostovsky.html>>.

3 "Julie Mehretu and David Adjaye in conversation with Tim Marlow", Londres: White Cube, 2013. <http://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_auditorium_julie_mehretu_in_the_auditorium_2013/>.

23 Julie Mehretu and David Adjaye in conversation with Tim Marlow.

24 Julie Mehretu in conversation with the author, April 2017.

25 Glenn Ligon, "On the Ground," in *Julie Mehretu: Grey Paintings*, exh. cat. (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, unpublished), 77.

26 Julie Mehretu in conversation with the author, October 2016.

27 Glenn Ligon, "On the Ground," 78.

28 Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of Clouds*, 224.

29 T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 122.



Julie Mehretu, *Mogamma*
(A Painting in Four Parts), 2012.
Installation view at
dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, 2012