

All cities are geological; you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors.¹ IVAN CHTCHEGLOV

SIEMON ALLEN

Destruction/Construction

Julie Mehretu's work is a multilayered event, built laboriously over time, stratum upon stratum, beginning with architectural scores sampled from sources at once diverse and precise, and materializing through an accretion of graphic shapes and expressive marks. Each painting is an occurrence preserved, but only for a moment, in an uneasy spilt-second resting point. Composition is action, a physical laying down of one snapshot over another. Stacked in transparent films, coexistent histories are embedded yet still visible in the terrain of a hyperreal city.

The territory is mapped. The territory is the map. We look with the sensation of seeing from above, through God's eye, and our viewing resembles a kind of excavation of the painting, the mirror opposite of its making (see fig. 1). Approaching the work in this way, we are like archaeologists trying to visually peel back the most recent actions to reveal those that came before. But the land is too unstable. Constant shifts in foreground and background (present and past) foil any such certainty. If these are layers of history, they are captured at the moment of a social rupture in what must surely be an irregular cycle of explosion, exposure, and re-absorption (see fig. 2).

Yet turbulent as the scene may be—elements tumble, streak, zoom, swirl, and torque—there is also evidence of order in the seeming chaos of its blueprint. Often a stabilizing center only just checks the forces that threaten the painting with unlimited expansion and total annihilation. In some paintings, this gravitational anchor operates like the core point of a centrifuge. Counter forces of push and pull spar for dominance. In others, this center is the source of an enormous prana exhalation caught at the moment of maximal expansion before a great inhalation occurs.

In *Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley explored notions of expanded consciousness, writing of his own experimentation with the psychotropic drug mescaline. He borrowed his title from a passage in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern."²

What are the "narrow chinks" through which we customarily peer? What is the nature of the "infinite" denied us by our human incapacities? For Huxley, citing philosopher C. D. Broad, the brain, nervous system, and the sense organs are in fact "eliminative" rather than "productive"³ and function to prevent the individual from being overwhelmed with sensory data. He considers how each of us is protected (and yet perhaps also limited) by what he names the "reducing valve."⁴ Is this the narrow chink? The very term sounds too mechanistic for a reading of the visionary Blake. And yet, quoting Broad, Huxley reflects on the notion of the infinite and writes "a person might at any moment be capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe."⁵ Here the bounds of first the temporal and then the spatial are reconsidered. In this sensory wash, space and time collide into a single phantasmagoric image.

To stand in front of one of Julie Mehretu's paintings is like entering this state of expanded mind. We experience the past and the future knotted into the present; the constructed histories, Utopian dreams, and lived experiences of a place joined in a terrifying simultaneity. The hidden foundations of the city's oldest structures, its constructions, its demolitions and reconstructions, and the traces of paths made by every living individual who ever moved within

its borders are suddenly made visible (see fig. 3). A global map is drawn and redrawn, as all maps must be over time, but with old borderlines of nations only partially erased, their provisional nature exposed. Events that customarily appear to unfold over time are perceived in a great co-instantaneous upheaval, a sight at once horrific and sublime.

Paradoxically, the construction of the painting is like a series of erasures, each stage eradicating the last. Seen in this way, however, history is still not entirely rubbed out. Rather, it is reinscribed. The story continues, but as one layer is added a previous layer is partially obscured and undeniably changed. Once stable forms are given new trajectories with the superimposition of thrusting vector lines and billowing propulsion clouds. A new composition is created with each addition. Erasure operates not as a destructive but as a generative force.

For Mehretu, the painting also behaves as if it were but a single frame in an endless sequence of occurrences. As if layer might pile upon layer until sheer density causes the multitudinous elements to reach a saturation point; as if the urgent restlessness of the composition, might propel the forms beyond the frame and out of our sight, leaving an empty ground. Our attention toggles between dense clusters of elements and the seemingly limitless space in which they move. The minute and the voluminous, the impenetrable and the porous, the dense and the fine coexist. The span of the work is great enough to embrace both deafening noise and profound silence (see cat. no. 8).

Disorientation is the risk of such expanded perception. We cannot remain detached. The painting will not remain fixed as an object, but rather becomes a window through which we fall into an unsteady world of churning restless movement. We lose ourselves in the deep space of this portal we call a painting. And yet the unbelievable whirling multitude of parts somehow comes together. Sharp point and gentle wash, frenetic scribble and fluid line, logos and blueprints, and everything imaginable and unimaginable under the sun somehow sing together. Frenzied and hyperactive as the painting may appear, what we see is not merely a cacophony but also a perfect score.

Unquiet Community

*Sound. Think of it as a dance of neologisms, an anemic cinema for the gene-splice generation where sign and symbol, word and meaning all drift into the sonic maelstrom. This is a world where all meaning has been untethered from the ground of its origins and all signposts point to a road that you make up as you travel through the text. Rotate, reconfigure, edit, render the form. Contemporary sound composition is an involution engine.*⁶

*No matter how much I travel, how much the global nomad, the troubadour, or the bard I become, this sonic collage becomes my identity.*⁷ PAUL D. MILLER

We look into the painting with the focus of a restless lens, directing our gaze from part to whole, from individual to collective, and back again. Looping. Side to side, top to bottom, in and out, we follow the signs. Holding onto a single element in the swirl we isolate it for a moment, and in doing so recognize that the seemingly abstract shape is in fact a diagram, a blueprint, a topographical map, or a high-profile corporate logo. Though transformed, each image brings with it its own faint memory. Plucked from an impossibly vast range of sources, each form carries lingering traces of previous lives, but appropriated for new uses (see fig. 4). The idea that an original reference point might be discerned with any real certainty eludes us. We are unable to reduce the multidimensional movement of the work to such a limited model. Once brought into the grander composition, every single mark, however identifiable or unidentifiable its source, sets up its own cascading trigger effect within the work.

The sheer range of visual languages that we can identify in this crazy stir steers us away from pinning personal style on any single kind of mark making. Style itself is here revealed as sample. The painting is another world, a new world; but at the same time it is very much of this world, constructed out of its (the world's) raw elements. The painting is mix. The painting is *noise*.

The clamor of the everyday racket in the industrial world was the raw material for early noise (music). Italian

futurist painter Luigi Russolo declared in his 1913 manifesto "The Art of Noises" that for the ears of those "educated by modern life... music developed towards the most complex polyphony and maximum variety, seeking the most complicated successions of dissonant chords and vaguely preparing the creation of *musical noise*."⁸ He visualized a futurist orchestra that would "achieve the most complex and novel aural emotions not by incorporating a succession of life-imitating noises, but by manipulating fantastic juxtapositions of these varied tones and rhythms." For Russolo the notion of noise music captured the optimism of unlimited possibility because the "variety of noises is infinite." In the emerging industrial world that he embraced and idealized, he extrapolated the possibility of a future where "every factory will be transformed into an intoxicating orchestra of noises."⁹ For Russolo this new sound was no longer "a thing in itself, distinct and independent of life"¹⁰ but rather of the world.

With these assertions Russolo complemented collage and anticipated such distinct but kindred actions as *détournement*, appropriation, and sampling. Though he performed with noise instruments (*intonarumori*) that he had constructed, his notions of making music in entirely new ways would later be revisited in experiments by composers who turned to found sound. In 1937, John Cage wrote, "Wherever we are, whatever we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of the truck going fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments."¹¹

In Cage's noisy world, if we try to ignore the overwhelming densely packed nature of our lived human experience it threatens to disturb us all the more. Mehretu's painting bids us to approach the *visual* noise that is part of our everyday lived urban experience and listen. Her work prompts us to ask if there is implicit empowerment in seizing the initiative and going toe to toe with the monstrous sensory overload that is our reality. Rather than submitting, we find a way to listen, to select, to reconfigure, and ultimately dance with it.

Is this how we converse with what Paul D. Miller calls "the delirium of saturation?"¹² If we use as a model the strategies of the DJ, we begin to recognize the empowerment implicit in the act of taking these samples from "the world,"

including the consumer world, and by recontextualizing them make them our own. In his 2004 work *Rhythm Science*, Miller links sampling to the history of working with found materials. "Sampling is a new way of doing something that's been with us for a long time: creating with found objects. This rotation gets thick. The constraints get thin. The mix breaks free of the old associations. New contexts form from old." The power is there to "reprocess the world around you."¹³

Sampling brings to the game two things: an unlimited possibility of sources and a wonderful slippage of authorship. With recording and infinite multiples comes the question of how to define original ownership. Where are you, where am I? What is past, what is now? Perhaps it all began with Edison's first recording. When the experience of sound could be copied, the past then became part of present experience.

The use of found or sampled materials in early noise music must surely have opened up questions about how seemingly disparate elements in a work could coexist; how many competing and colliding sounds from so many diverse sources could create music. Could such an inquiry lead us to also look at how we might newly define the one and the many, the separate and the collective, the self and the community? When does a singularity in the whole operate independently; when in tandem with other elements? How do we define an individual? When is a single element in a larger field independent and when is it relational? Is the very notion of a thing indivisible itself a concept worth reconsideration? When is a combination of individuals consonant and when dissonant?

The possibility exists for even the most dissonant musical note to pile upon note until a dense singularity results. In much the same way, the disparate marks in Mehretu's painting at times seem to organize around a center of gravity to seek and, ultimately, find a kind of unstable order. And yet to use this musical equivalence would imply a totality, a kind of resolution in her work that is untrue to its revolutionary spirit. The more fitting description is the mix, where individual sources operate not only as abstract sounds but also as cultural references; an action where tensions between sampled parts and coherent whole remain less reconciled. Samples are taken from the world, but with the tacit understanding that these represent but a fraction of a limitless number of options. It all inevitably comes together, but for a highly provisional moment (see cat. nos. 4, 5, 6).

If the painting forms a layered world then it is surely populated by individuals, represented by marks, with layered identities. Each is at once singular and part of a collective. They assemble and disassemble, swarm and scatter in gatherings of indeterminate size. Swirling in a current of colliding forces, we can imagine these characters as populations grouping and regrouping, driven by constantly shifting affiliations and by a call and response of alliances and antagonisms. The marks form unbreakable unions and fragile allegiances. They are transitory armies and flash rioters. In this surge and flow, this dispersal and assimilation is an undeniable fluidity of identity, and this movement calls to mind the very improvisational nature of community in the postcolonial world (see cat. no. 2; fig. 6). Transnational neighborhoods hover over the globe. Do we now cut and paste to construct identity?

Sublime Landscape

*Crucially, however, whereas his eighteenth-century predecessors would have presented a similarly sublime experience by looking on, positioning their viewpoint outside the phenomenon, [J. M. W.] Turner's ambition was to allow the picture to register the storm from within. The spiraling smoke, surging waves and swirling cloud produce a centrifugal vortex that engulfs the spectator.*¹⁴ SAM SMILES

Standing at some distance from the canvas we can take in the expanse of the entire landscape with the advantage of a bird's-eye view. As if looking from a mountaintop at two vast armies colliding on the plane below, we are removed from the fray as we watch in thrill and horror. And yet, from this perspective, the landscape can also seem a vertiginous panorama that threatens to swallow us up. As we move closer, we lose our vertigo, but at the same time we also relinquish our omnipotent gaze. We are on the ground, the field so large that our peripheral vision is filled. We have fallen into the painting's space and in doing so we participate in the work in a more intimate way. Hovering above a labyrinth, we see the

myriad of possibilities with the advantage of witnessing the trajectory of every path. We can see the layout of barrier and passage in its entirety. Moving inside the network we experience disorientation, but also perhaps the thrill of choice and uncertainty.

Mehretu's painting operates in this way. It offers us two kinds of landscapes. In viewing we inhabit one and then the other. From afar the painting might be about place but up close it is place. If the vertical portrait is associated with a single subject, then a horizontal expanse becomes a kind of social space that operates from both within the frame and between viewer and work. We are overwhelmed by the scale of the canvas; the sheer multitude and range of images; the impossibility of ever completely excavating the deep, multiple layers that form its typography. But at the same time we are mesmerized by the abundance of image, agile gesture, washes, and precise scorings. The painting's power resides in these barely reconciled opposing forces of the terrible and the sublime. The landscape of the painting is built with maps, blueprints, schematics, and topographical charts, but also flames, whirlwinds, explosions, and smoke. The scene might depict destruction, but it feels like ecstasy.

1. Ivan Chitchevlov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, Calif., 1981), 1–2.
2. William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York, 1988), 39.
3. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York, 1990), 22.
4. *Ibid.*, 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 22.
6. Paul D. Miller [DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid], *Rhythm Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 5.
7. *Ibid.*, 24.
8. Luigi Russolo, "The Art of Noises" (1913), in *Futurist Manifestos: The Documents of Twentieth-Century Art*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York, 1973), 75.
9. *Ibid.*, 87.
10. *Ibid.*, 74.
11. John Cage, "The Future of Music: Credo," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, Conn., 1973), 3.
12. Miller 2004, 29.
13. *Ibid.*, 25.
14. Sam Smiles, *J. M. W. Turner* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 74.