

Note: The Following is an extended review of the exhibition, *Dorothea Rockburne: Drawing Which Makes Itself*, which was held at the Museum of Modern Art from September 21, 2013 – February 2, 2014.

For artists of a certain generation, Emile de Antonio's *Painter's Painting* provided a subtle indoctrination into the codes of studio practice.¹ This significance was assured by its apostolic overtones. Recall the figure of Robert Rauschenberg atop a twenty-foot industrial ladder, the denim southerner set earnestly between vaunting gothic window tracings. However coyly the icon was intended, the myth succeeded. Rauschenberg's youthful optimism, his appropriation of Ab-Ex *Sturm und Drang*, somehow became emblematic of how to ground oneself in material operations. "The abstract expressionists," he says, "what they had in common, what *we* had in common was touch. . . . with their grief and their art passion and their action painting, they let the brush stroke show."² Rauschenberg smiles at the simplicity of this reduction, but his irreverence towards this tradition is precisely the point: "I wasn't interested in [their] precious states of isolation."³ From this refusal, Rauschenberg's work comes to be known for its radical enjoyment of popular ephemera. His move to secularize the picture plane – for some critics, effectively turning its orientations flat to suggest a horizontal spread of cultural materials – sets an important example for artists later wanting to develop their work within a re-imagined public space.⁴

The historical poignancy of de Antonio's film lies in its double-edged character: here the iconoclast of 1950s High-Modernism becomes the icon of 1960's proto-pop. If I harbor too long on this mythic transferring of guards, it is because the moment seems oddly contemporary to recent painting. Consider, for example, the attention paid to artists such as Christopher Wool or Amy Sillman – the latter of which diagnosed the persistence of gestural abstraction under the aegis of a

¹ *Painters Painting*, dir. by Emile de Antonio (1973, Arthouse films, 2010 dvd).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See: Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

friendlier (“camp”) regime.⁵ Consider also the set of commitments that are being tested today under categories of the *provisional* or the *casual* at MFA programs across the country.⁶ I wonder, is it the same tragic isolation that is compulsively dropped out of view? And if so, what kind of shift in sensibility does this entail?

In deciphering this present moment we do well to complicate the past - and to this end, the figure of Dorothea Rockburne, whose retrospective of early work recently showed at the Museum of Modern Art, presents an illuminating turn to the myth of the 1960s. Born in Montreal seven years Rauschenberg’s junior, a colleague at Black Mountain College and later a close friend and assistant, Rockburne’s career transpires at a precarious moment in American Art. Having moved to New York in the fall of 1954, a single mother without the community of Black Mountain, her development of a unique artistic lineage, and her navigation of a polemical 1960’s New York art scene, results in a body of work whose lasting critical import bears closer scrutiny.

Apropos to her earliest commitments, *Conservation Class* (1973) is a series of ten drawings in which Rockburne reconfigures the same size piece of heavy plain white paper. The paper shows traces of having been pinched, folded, cut and drawn into, with graphite lines precise yet chalk-broken. Though slight in their sculptural relief, the paper’s folds translate into graphic planes of light and shadow, gradually evoking not so much an object in pictorial space as the pictorial space *within* an object - its character defined by its suggestion of flex. Such effects are commonly attributed to Rockburne’s investigation of topology, the study of the continuous nature of objects and their surfaces. First introduced to her by Max Dehn at Black Mountain College, topology becomes for Rockburne a pictorial category for imaging objects, which, having been loosened at their seams and barriers, acquire a sense of temporal duration. As a point of comparison, the Futurists’ rendering of speed might be less helpful here than the cubist still lifes of Juan Gris or the abstract armatures of Richard Diebenkorn – both of which create the impression of a similarly inching slowness.

⁵ Amy Sillman, “AbEx and Disco Balls,” *Artforum* (June, 2011).

⁶ See: Raphael Rubenstein, “Provisional Painting,” *Art in America*, (May, 2009); Sharon L. Butler, “Abstract Painting: The New Casualists,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (June, 2011).

Beyond this inventory of visual effects, however, the work is also significant for the way in which its own process functions as a conceptual foothold. In *Conservation Class*, the serial transformation of paper - each page plain, white, redundant - becomes an occasion to transcend the same set of limitations. The fact that the stress falls on the act of preservation, and that the work draws attention to its own closed system of terms, means that it performs ascetically - its authorial register grounded in a kind of abstinence. This register is, of course, more pervasive to Rockburne, as to other artists working in the same period. As Robert Storr once reflected critically, it is infused by that Post-Minimalist ethos whereby art's "claim to 'seriousness' [. . . is] measured by its puritan restraint."⁷ Though likely true, this characterization may blunt some of the more precise consequences being fought out in the work of this period, both by artists and critics alike.

Take for example Mel Bochner's "Note on Dorothea Rockburne", published in the March 1972 *Artforum* (a first substantial feature on the artist). Here, Bochner's brief but emphatic endorsement boils to a simple conclusion: "This is not process art."⁸ In this claim is a defense against the work's potential solipsism. This is, in other words, about something more than the artist's performance of her own restraint. For Bochner, this something more is attributed to the development of a concrete yet non-representational form of language. He writes: "The works do not become objects but instead record the experience of how ideas infiltrate practice. They are records in the same sense that language is when it is transformed from the purely mental space of our thoughts and feelings and given this form on this page."⁹ Bochner's emphasis here on the linguistic act as an external public phenomenon, one which he obviously draws from his own critical orientations as an artist, provides important access to the discourse then surrounding Rockburne's work.

Amongst the various linguistic turns taking shape within American art criticism of the 1960's, recall that for Michael Fried, Merleau Ponty's essays on art and language had provided the

⁷ Robert Storr, "Rockburne's Wager," *Dorothea Rockburne: Recent Paintings and Drawings*, (Chicago: Arts Club of Chicago. 1987) 4.

⁸ Mel Bochner, "A Note on Dorothea Rockburne," *Artforum* (March, 1972) 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*

grounds to revitalize a formalist tradition on the principles of syntax.¹⁰ In his reading of abstractionists such as Frank Stella and Anthony Caro, the legibility of a work, its authorial intention, was seen as suffused with the precise attunements of its various internal relationships. By the late 1960's, however, a polemic had been waged, both by Fried against the Minimalists (in *Art and Objecthood*, 1967) but also by a new generation of American critics, including Rosalind Krauss, who argued that American artists of the 1960's – on the heels of Stella, Morris, Judd, and Andre – were drawing attention to a linguistic fact more radically severed from the intentionality of a private self.¹¹ Krauss went on to attribute the import of Post-Minimalist art practices to their activation of a distinctly public form of meaning – one which, in the spirit of the later Wittgenstein, confounded “our picture of the necessity that there be a private mental space (a space available only to the single self) in which meanings and intentions have to exist before they could issue into the space of the world.”¹² In retrospect, the difference between Fried and Krauss may have been more art-critical and less philosophical than the polemic suggests, since Fried's linguistic model never assumed intentionality as an act prior to making. The more pressing issue, however, seemed to be directed at whether American art of the period was capable of operating within a more radically public register than the art of its recent past. But public then in what sense? And forfeiting which traditions of privacy?

Rockburne's work holds a unique place within this particular history since it never quite aligns itself with any particular camp. While she was close to Minimalists and Conceptualists such as Bochner, Lewitt, et al., people with whom Rockburne obviously shared an interest in system and series, she recalls her sense that they had, in their approximation of art and language, “put the shoe on the wrong foot.”¹³ Implied here is her unmoved affinity to studio practice, conceived of visually as well as physically, and developed in the company of a slightly older generation of artists, including

¹⁰ See: Michael Fried, “Introduction to My Art Criticism” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 16 -19.

¹¹ Though published later, these debates are addressed in: Rosalind Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility: Reflections on Post 60's Sculpture” *Artforum*, (November, 1973) 44-53.

¹² *Ibid*, 48.

¹³ Dorothea Rockburne, catalogue notes cited in *Dorothea Rockburne: In My Mind's Eye*, (Southampton: Parrish Art Museum, 2011) 140.

Rauschenberg, Johns, Twombly, Marden, but also Cage, Cunningham, and the Judson Dance Theatre. Anna Lovatt has argued that it is by navigating these two sets of affinities that Rockburne's work from the late 60's and early 70's was able to define a unique point of intersection between the tradition of studio art as a private practice and the pursuit of an avante-garde conceived of, linguistically, within a public space.¹⁴

Rockburne navigates these divergent points of artistic orientation, first and foremost, through her choice of materials.

Beginning with the so-called wrinkle-finish paintings of 1967, a decidedly New York City povera tradition compels her into unfamiliar terrain: kraft paper, chipboard, crude oil, spray-paint (the color of which occasions the title for *Tropical Tan*, 1967-68). In interviews, Rockburne recalls that these decisions took shape from a sense of economic necessity, but also through a kind of bohemian solidarity with downtown artists such as Dan Flavin. "You simply worked with what was available to you."¹⁵ And if these industrial materials represented a common reserve available to all urban artists living in the contemporary moment, it seems that the use of paper, by contrast, represented for Rockburne a more elemental, even quasi-archaic, template for developing her work within a public commons. "I came to realize," Rockburne writes in 1967, "that a piece of paper is a metaphysical object. You write on it, you draw on it, you fold it."¹⁶ In a habit of association that will frequent her career, Rockburne's interest is to develop her work out of resources that are conceived of, both materially and thematically, as a meeting point between the archaic and the contemporary.

Arguably, however, these criteria for choosing her materials can also be read as part of a more basic resistance to what, for Rockburne throughout this period, seemed to be a highly gendered tradition of "throwing paint."¹⁷ Her lack of affinity with the reported machismo of second and third generation Abstract Expressionists, the so-called cowboys of Max's Kansas City, registered no less discomfort than Joan Mitchell's disclaimer that she could "drink, fuck and paint as hard as any

¹⁴ Anna Lovatt, "Dorothea Rockburne: Intersection," *October* (Fall, 2007) 31 – 52.

¹⁵ Tyler Green and Dorothea Rockburne in Conversation, *Modern Art Notes Podcast*, September 17, 2013; <http://manpodcast.com/search/dorothea+Rockburne>.

¹⁶ Dorothea Rockburne, *In my Mind's Eye*, 140.

¹⁷ Ibid.

man.”¹⁸ As a consequence of these factors (and likely others as well), what one finds within Rockburne’s choice of materials is not so much a desire to overcome her own subjectivity (no less, her subjectivity as a woman), but rather to register this subjectivity within a material language that was less encumbered by recent traditions.

It is through this combination of factors that the use of paper becomes fertile ground for establishing a new set of working parameters. In the mid to late 1960’s, her work will attempt to radicalize the properties of paper as a means of constructing meaning. This involves, in the first place, a shift towards recognizing paper as a pliable unit within its surrounding environment. Various combinations of crude oil, chip-board, folded vellum, and graphite provide the basic differentiations from which to organize these materials into a number of different groupings and arrangements. While an earlier construction uses the graphic symbol “+” as a way of securing the readership of two otherwise separated wall constructions, Rockburne soon asserts a greater degree of confidence as these borrowed signs give way to more inductive equations. In *Group/And* and *Disjunction/Or*, both installed in her first solo exhibition at the Bykert Gallery, Rockburne re-adapts her studio experiments to the empty space of the gallery.¹⁹ In this way, the quasi-sculptural reconfiguration of paper becomes a means of imagining a more literal space of transaction between her body as a maker and the body of the viewer.

While these first installations were reportedly prompted by currents of phenomenology then running through the New York city art world, Rockburne’s orientations within this discourse were clearly set apart from many of her Minimalist and Post-Minimalist contemporaries. Again, the difference seems to hinge on how, or under what terms, the artist remains in the work. While artists such as Tony Smith and Donald Judd took a generalized phenomenology of perception as an impetus to evacuate private artistic directives, Rockburne clearly retains from this discourse, not just the importance of a (generalized) perceiving body, but of her own body as artist and technician.²⁰ Like

¹⁸ Ibid, 139.

¹⁹ Dorothea Rockburne, *In My Mind’s Eye*, 141 – 142.

²⁰ See the account of “experience” in the work of Tony Smith in: Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, (Princeton:

others from her earlier Black Mountain circle, dance still provides an important, perhaps even quasi-utopian, model for how to activate within the artwork a transactional space between her own movements as an artist and the legibility of these movements as gestures for an audience.²¹ Thus, whatever linguistic properties were assumed by her organization of units into sets, her work steered clear of wanting to imagine these projects as somehow ontologically removed from her own authorial interventions. “These works were about making myself” she often insists.²² And thus, while Bochner may have been right to say that hers was not process art *in toto*, it was indeed her insistence on process by which she distinguished her work as both private and public in the very same breath.

In her most rigorously defined project from the period, Rockburne’s *Drawing Which Makes Itself* series exemplifies the artist’s effort to activate a distinctly transactional art space. Whereas previous projects had largely assumed the legibility of process within the configuration of material units, this series laid bare a more transparent set of working parameters. In *Neighbourhood*, (1973), a particularly lucid example from the series, a heavy translucent piece of vellum is placed just below eye-level at the centre of a wall. The paper unit is broken internally by two diagonal folds, which provide, along with the paper’s position, a set of guidelines for tracing graphite lines on the surrounding walls.²³ While restrained by these parameters, the work also asserts a small but significant degree of contingency. Unlike Sol Lewitt’s rote obedience of all possible variables - his famed commitment to following illogical ideas to their logical conclusions - Rockburne’s series retains the impurity of her own choice. Again observing the model of a dance performance, each station within the series serves both as a pivot foot and as a visual splay of some (and crucially not all) possible extensions into the surrounding space.

Princeton University Press, 2006) 89 – 90. By comparison, see also: Dorothea Rockburne, *In My Mind’s Eye*, 145.

²¹ Describing her earliest exhibits at the Bykart gallery, Rockburne writes: “The Viewer was drawn into the room, and that engagement comprised the completion of the work, much as a viewing audience does in dance.” Dorothea Rockburne, *In My Mind’s Eye*, 143.

²² *Ibid.*

When the series was originally exhibited at the Bykert Gallery in 1973, Rockburne had the room painted white all-over and exhibited works on both walls and floor. The architecture of the gallery was to be flattened into one continuous geometry, a desire that seemed to have been culled from a number of different sources. At one level, this was only a more dramatic appeal to the so-called pleasure of topology, a delight she often defines, cinematically, with reference to the figure of Fred Astaire dancing seamlessly between all four sides of his apartment bedroom (*Royal Wedding*, 1951).²⁴ But in the context of a gallery space, such delights recall an earlier constructivist effort to define, between the pictorial and the architectural, an unfamiliar set of volumetric conditions.²⁵ And while the conceptual basis for defining these conditions was derived from mathematical theories of the fourth dimension (as prompted by figures such as Dehn and Einstein), it seems that Rockburne was also informed by the social criticism that accompanied such traditions. She recalls, for example, being at the time a close reader of Edwin Abbot's 1884 *Flatland*, a novel in which geometric characters satirize the rigidity of Victorian social conditions.²⁶ Through this combination of sources, it seems that Rockburne's work was therefore primed for an art that would rub similarly against established conventions, imagining a public art space that could transgress socially through unfamiliar perceptual experiences.

It is possible, however, that the most telling ambitions for *Drawing Which Makes Itself* are reflected in Rockburne's reported satisfaction at seeing the footprints of visitors to the Bykart gallery intermingled with her own finger-prints at the outer edges of each station within the series. Like registration marks from two sides of the same transaction, this comingling of the artist and her audience represents a kind of apotheosis of Rockburne's effort during this period to imagine her art as a point of intersection between the tradition of private studio practice and its circulation within a public space. Today, such aspirations seem to count for less than ideal viewing conditions. Or at least for visitors to the MOMA retrospective, you will notice that Rockburne's original ambitions for the

²⁴ *Royal Wedding*, dir. by Stanley Donan, MGM, 1951.

²⁵ Recall here Lissitzky's definition of his Prouns series as "station[s] where one changes from painting to architecture." Cited in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*. Edited by Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992)

²⁶ Edwin Abbott, *Flatland*, (London: Bibliolis Books, 2010)

series have been somewhat neutralized by the platforms that have been installed to separate the floor-drawings from museum hoard. This is not a surprising decision, and is arguably only the last in the Museum's well-documented history of adapting constructivist projects into objects of a different currency.²⁷

But perhaps even for the artist herself, the aspirations behind the *Drawing Which Makes Itself* very quickly seemed untenable. Following this series, it is interesting to notice how Rockburne's work pulls back from making such overt demands on her exhibition space. Moving away from the larger wall installations, her supports become more precise and concentrated, attuning themselves to more subtle variations in color, transparency, curve, and fold. Whereas earlier wall installations attempted to translate precise graphic decisions into three-dimensional space, the work from the mid to late 1970's inverts this wish by setting out to translate various experiences of architectural space into meticulous pictorial structures. I am thinking here specifically of two series which emerge from the artist's trip to Italy in the summer of 1972: the *Copal* series, in which Rockburne uses oil treated Kraft Paper to elicit the light effects of a Romanesque Cathedral, and the *Arena* series, in which Giotto's Arena Chapel series are invoked both in color and cadence.

Given the terms I have laid out thus far, it is tempting to read this trajectory, cynically, as the artists retreat from the politics of public circulation into the well-trodden production of autonomous art objects; indeed, it is easier now, as it was in the 1970's, to trade in compact forms. It is also possible, however, that within this retreat, there was also an important advancement. Or put differently, that it was precisely by abandoning the desire to imagine her own works within the space of their circulation that Rockburne's work adopts its most profound legibility. "Concentrated yet branching" is how Rockburne comes to understand artistic process as a movement directed both inward and outward at the same time. "Past experience," she writes, "both in math and art, taught me

²⁷ For critical histories of Alfred Barr's institutional re-appraisal of Constructivism, see Hal Foster, "Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism" in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932*, eds. Henry Art Gallery, Richard Adams and Milena Kalinovska (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) 241 – 252; and Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* (Autumn, 1984) 82-119.

that when any material acts on itself it generates an energy as it seeks a wider field in which to act. Electrons behave that way and so do people.”²⁸

Finally, then, as with today, it seems unclear which work makes greater demands on our imagination of a public space. Is it the work which attempts to actualize that space under the name of the relational, or is it the work which forfeits that transgression for the sake of a more concentrated legibility? For artists of either orientation, Rockburne’s truth to her materials, her obstinate demands to see her own thought acting upon itself, provides a clearest indication that our most private traditions needn’t persist in isolation.

²⁸ Dorothea Rockburne, *In My Mind’s Eye*, 146.