

HANNAH QUINLIVAN

Hannah Quinlivan is a PhD candidate at the School of Art, The Australian National University. Her drawing practice spans multiple media, extending into two, three and four dimensions. Quinlivan is represented by Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne and .M Contemporary, Sydney. In 2013 and 2014, she held solo exhibitions in Singapore, Fukuoka, Sydney, Melbourne and Berlin. Quinlivan was awarded the Cox Prize for Sculpture in 2013 and the lucrative Art at the Heart Residency Award in 2014.

RHYTHM ANALYSIS AND CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACT DRAWING

Along with velocity and duration, rhythm is one of the constitutive elements of temporality. Yet rhythm has remained remarkably under theorised in contemporary drawing, despite its near universal presence. Here I bring Henri Lefebvre's *rhythmanalytic* approach to the study of contemporary abstract drawing as a means to grapple with issues of repetition, circulation, flows, interruptions, movement, stillness, cycles and so forth. In the spirit of Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook* I propose a typology of rhythms in contemporary abstract drawing. The analytic utility of these categories is tested through an analysis of the drawings of Julie Mehretu and Chiharu Shiota.

Introduction

Hannah Arendt could not have been more wrong. In her ambitious 1958 book *The Human Condition*, Arendt wrote that art works' distinguishing characteristic is their permanence. For Arendt, their "durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; [they] can attain permanence throughout the ages."¹ Yet while Arendt was writing, durability itself was becoming obsolescent, just another stifling orthodoxy to be destroyed in the quest for something new. For as we recognise in hindsight, 1958 was the year that gave birth to 'happenings'² and the volatilisation of art objects.

It is now clear that temporality is a crucial issue in contemporary art. The ephemeral forms of installation and performance art have been described as the paradigmatic aesthetic of our present time.³ Even painting, that doggedly durable and traditional medium of art production, has become entangled in this predicament, in content if not in form. For example, the Museum of Modern Art's first large survey of new paintings since 1958 titled "The Forever Now",⁴ is premised on the condition of an "atemporal" world, celebrating the death of the avant-garde. In this curious condition there is no sense of historical context. Instead, as playwright Alan Bennett might have put it, things just happen one after another.⁵

Temporality in contemporary art is not a monolithic concept. It operates in multiple registers. One might list velocity, duration and rhythm as its constitutive elements. In this paper, I will focus on the last of these elements, rhythm, and

¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 167–8.

² Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock."

³ Jameson, *The Aesthetics of Singularity*.

⁴ Hoptman, *The Forever Now*; Schjeldahl, "Is There Anything Left to Paint?"

⁵ Bennett, *The History Boys*.

begin a preliminary unpacking of its manifestations in contemporary abstract drawing.

To do so, I will use the tools provided by French social theorist Henri Lefebvre in his book *Rhythmanalysis*. In this book, Lefebvre embarked on an ambitious and ultimately unfinished project: to sketch the outline of a new body of knowledge, the analysis of rhythms.⁶ For Lefebvre, rhythm is a fundamental category through which to understand the world and provides a promising way to examine worldly processes. In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre outlines his notion and gives suggestive examples of how these categories may be applied.

In this paper, I use Lefebvre's rhythmanalytic method to investigate the work of contemporary artist Julie Mehretu. In particular, I will conduct a preliminary rhythmanalysis of Mehretu's exhibit *Grey Area*, a collection of six large works on canvas commissioned by Deutsche Guggenheim, produced in Berlin between 2007 and 2009 and shown in 2009. Though Mehretu's work is usually considered as painting rather than drawing, here I will follow curator Catherine de Zegher's lead, and use Robert Ryman's suggestion that any work with an emphasis on linear elements can be considered to be drawing.⁷

While my analysis of Mehretu's work will begin with formal matters, I aim to show how the rhythmanalytic method leads the viewer back to the broader societal concerns. I will therefore conclude by using Mehretu's oeuvre to make some remarks about the notion of a crisis of temporality with which I began this paper.

⁶ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*.

⁷ de Zegher, "A Century under the Sign of Line," 70; For a similar approach, see also de Zegher, *Julie Mehretu*.

Lefebvre's Rhythmanalytic Method

For Lefebvre, rhythm is not to be found solely in the realm of music but is suffused throughout the natural and social worlds. In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre identifies the characteristics of rhythm in general, conceptual terms: rhythms' dependence on repetition; the generation of difference through repetition; rhythms' beat or measure; and their cyclical or linear natures.

Although these categories are phrased abstractly, rhythm for Lefebvre is a material, concrete matter. He notes that "everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm."⁸ The most basic of these, and the starting point for analysis, are the rhythms of the human body. Rhythms can only be understood by comparisons to each other, with bodily rhythms of the heartbeat, the pulse and the breath providing the natural and most important referents.

Despite the terminology, rhythmanalysis is not particularly interested in the analysis of rhythms *per se*. Instead, rhythms are to be used as a tool for the analysis of the world, a method for understanding the hidden structures of things. Here, rhythm provides a mode *of* analysis rather than an object *for* analysis.

Indeed, one of the functions of rhythm analysis is to question the category of "the thing". Lefebvre warns us to be suspicious of the notion of things, if things are considered as discrete, bounded entities that exist as static constructs, separate from the world. He writes that "the act of rhythmanalysis integrates

⁸ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 15.

things – this wall, this table, these trees – in a dramatic becoming, in an ensemble full of meaning...”⁹

Rhythm analysis provides a method to raise and answer this question. The most crucial move for the analyst is to “listen” and to observe with patience.

In place of things, Lefebvre suggests that we live in a world of inter-related flows that change over time. “Nothing,” he writes, “is inert in the world.” There are “no things”, only “very diverse rhythms, slow or living.”¹⁰ If every *thing* is in fact a flow, the question to ask of an object is not “what is it?” but “by what process was it constituted and how is it sustained?”¹¹

Therefore, the conditions under which an art object is produced are important for rhythm analysis. In addition to the artist’s intentions, rhythm analysis should focus on the unfolding relation between the object’s materiality and its social context. The viewpoint of the rhythm analyst must therefore be wide, taking in not just the art object, but also its historical conditions.

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹¹ Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, 50.

Grey Area

The first thing that strikes the viewer about Mehretu's six large works for *Grey Area* is their scale.¹² Each canvas spans three meters high and well over four meters wide. While these might be considered large works by most standards, they are small by Mehretu's, being produced in the same time and place as a monumental 'Mural' commissioned by Goldman Sachs.

In content, these works are characteristic of Mehretu's body of work. Most straightforward are *Atlantic Wall*, *Berliner Platz* and *Believer's Palace*. These three works respectively reference: Nazi coastal fortifications; the vanished modernist architecture of Berlin before the destruction of World War II; and the destruction of the architecture of Baghdad during the second Iraq War. More enigmatic are *Fragment*, *Notations* and *Middle Grey*, in which the same notational language is deployed to describe less explicit spatial referents.

Each of these works deploys Mehretu's distinctive visual system, which proceeds by accretion and erasure in four separate phases. First, photographs of buildings, architectural plans, computer-aided drawings and archival material are traced onto acetate, projected onto the canvas and then reproduced in wireframe. Girders and lintels are overlaid in a transparent stratigraphy that is both faithful to actual built environments and generative of new spatial relations between them, integrating multiple vantage points and locations in a kaleidoscope of architectural forms.¹³ Atop these layers of urban geometry float dashes and other small marks that move across the canvas and "hover like dust clouds."¹⁴ These "characters" have a presence in the composition that signifies

¹² Young and Dillon, *Julie Mehretu*.

¹³ Young, "Layering and Erasure," 33.

¹⁴ Dillon, "An Archeology of the Air," 47.

the agency of individual actors.¹⁵ Third, calligraphic lines and translucent coloured vectors are overlaid, reminiscent of futurist motion blur or maps of spatial flows. Finally, new spaces are created through destruction, with sections of these complex strata removed with sandpaper, a literal erasure and smudging that evokes “allegorical obliteration or a seething dust cloud.”¹⁶ While only some of the works in *Grey Area* contain all four of these layers, all are made up of some of these elements, with emphasis varying from work to work.

A preliminary rhythm analysis of *Grey Area*

I argue that rhythm operates in these works in multiple registers. First, a visual rhythm can be detected by formal analysis of these works, a rhythm that is complicated by Mehretu’s method of layering and erasure. Second, her work generates a rhythmic mobility among her audience. Finally, I suggest that a close reading of her work reveals traces of the rhythms of the condition of their production.

Each of the four layers in *Grey Area* are associated with a distinctive visual rhythm. First, Mehretu uses a serial strategy to trace and overlay her architectural wireframes. Layer upon layer, by grid and girder, a complex series of cities and stockades is stacked, a staccato system of snapshots. A visual drumbeat, these layers regulate the rhythm of the canvas like a metronome.

Next come the multitudinous characters of Mehretu’s narratives: the migrants, rioters, commuter crowds and armies. Their rhythms are erratic, flocking like starlings, imbued with the speed and energy of the Futurist city and citizen.

¹⁵ Hart, “Mapping, Erasing, Drifting.”

¹⁶ Dillon, “An Archeology of the Air,” 50.

Third, coloured blocks and vectors, lines of force are laid down. Non-architectural and non-organic, these discordant notes cut-through or contain their characters, transitory rhythms that are concordant or cacophonous in equal measure.

Finally come erasure and smudging. These loose and gestural obliterations reverberate like echoes, the sonic booms trailing the flocks of characters or the ponderous density of accreting architecture.

These four components each have their own distinctive rhythm. Yet it is in their chaotic and non-linear interaction that the whole picture is formed. Like the harmonic interaction of the rhythms of various human organs within the body, the landscapes of Mehretu's *Grey Area* form what Lefebvre might describe as a "bundle" or "garland" of rhythms.¹⁷ This is how the paintings function affectively, through entangled rhythms in the visual plane.

The second register of rhythm is that which is generated among the viewers of her work. Due in part to their sheer spatial scale, Mehretu's works appear differently from different viewing distances. Like the migratory characters that are her subjects, viewers of Mehretu's paintings are themselves compelled to travel back-and-forth with a rhythm of their own.¹⁸

The final register of rhythm concerns the production of these works. Rhythmanalysts must ask: Under what conditions were these works constituted and sustained?¹⁹ Attention to their material form reveals clues about the process of their creation. For these six canvases are large and highly detailed,

¹⁷ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

¹⁸ Katchka, "The Meaning in Mobility," 62.

¹⁹ Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, 50.

requiring a substantial investment of labour time. What is more, these canvases were produced during the period that Mehretu worked on her monumental *Mural*, which alone covered the area the entire *Grey Area* series twice over. Such productivity is not possible alone. Indeed, Mehretu credits up to thirty studio assistants who helped to produce these two bodies of works.²⁰ Such was the scale of these works and their attendant workforce that their production was offshored from New York to Berlin, where rents on a large studio were more affordable.²¹ As such, these works contain the traces of the same transnational movement of ideas and people that Mehretu's work depicts.

Conclusion

Thus rhythmanalysis has led us back to the issue of temporality I raised at the beginning of this paper. Mehretu's *Grey Area* does not just describe the atemporality of our time. It is also produced by it.

It is through her archival method that Mehretu comments upon the temporality of the contemporary condition. By overlaying images from different locations and time periods, she achieves the simultaneity that Hoptman terms 'atemporal.'²² As Dillon argues, "[i]f these are history paintings... they are so to the extent that they explode the very notion of a discrete historical instant."²³

As Fredric Jameson famously argued, the postmodern mode of art making reflects the dominance of finance capital over industrial capital, the new era of

²⁰ Tomkins, "Big Art, Big Money."

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hoptman, *The Forever Now*.

²³ Dillon, "An Archeology of the Air," 47.

hypermobility, offshoring and deindustrialized, flexible workforces.²⁴ It is hardly surprising then that Mehretu's profound art works reflect the economic and social context in which they were produced. Rhythm analysis, with its insistence that we pay attention to the conditions of artistic creation, forces us to draw a direct line between mode of production and aesthetic content.

Mehretu is of course, conscious of this irony, and this is the great strength of her work.²⁵ She does not fail to engage with the economics and politics of our time, including her own position in it. As Mehretu put's it, her art is "...part of the larger system we all participate in. We're all part of it."²⁶

²⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

²⁵ Demos, "Painting and Uprising," 61.

²⁶ Tomkins, "Big Art, Big Money."

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