



Julie Mehretu/MATRIX 211

Manifestation

April 18 – June 27, 2004

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

MATRIX

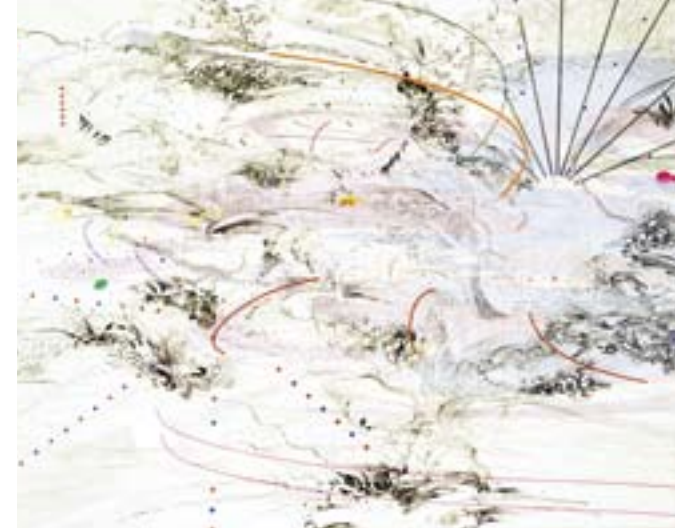
Julie Mehretu/MATRIX 211

Bursting with the same energy that has historically mobilized groups of agitated youth to push a revolutionary social agenda, Julie Mehretu's dynamic paintings and drawings evoke punk rock, propagandistic urban graffiti, and Berkeley's own Free Speech Movement. The desire to effect profound social change is, of course, not limited to youth: Rosa Parks was 42 years old when she refused to take a seat at the back of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, and the first two women to marry in San Francisco in February 2004 were 81 and 79 years old. As Walker Art Center curator Douglas Fogle wrote, "History is made by active subjects, both in our world and in [Mehretu's] works."¹ Inspired by subversive, antiestablishment impulses, the conceptual framework of Mehretu's paintings is the relationship between the individual and the community, the whole.² The artist says that the myriad marks in her work "signify characters that socialize."³ Her "private utopian fighters" maintain a sense of hope as they labor along within complex exterior sets and work to promote an ambiguous change.⁴

While much has been made of Mehretu's global background, the significant element is her birth in Ethiopia in 1970, a time when the country was trying to create a utopian society. Born into this context of resistance, she says, she grew up watching the trials and tribulations involved in passionately pursuing a dream. Her belief in the possibility of change remains strong, as is evidenced by the shared title of the exhibition and a signature painting, *Manifestation*. "Manifestation" is defined here as a culminating event, with connotations of riot and protest. Pictured in the painting are thousands of ink-drawn marks that signify bursts of cultural resistance amid the ebb and flow of systems and organic orders. The painting can be read as a reaction against the rapid growth of consumption while simultaneously posing the question, What can be working against this consumerist impulse with the same ferocity and intensity? What has existed and does exist where capitalism has been unable to manifest itself? The underpaintings of *Manifestation* and its partner painting *Immanence* combine to create the effect of a stretched-out, galactic space, perhaps suggesting where one must go to shrug off the reach of American capitalism.

Mehretu's marks have their own identities, the artist says; like characters in a fantastical narrative, they evolve and interact with one another. Certain marks are aggressors, some are constructors, while still others represent the "Everybody." The abstract narratives combine objects in motion, graphic brushfires, cartoon explosions, hatch marks, sickle shapes, and dots.⁵ Mehretu incorporates a cartographic impulse in all her works, dazzling arrays of color and line applied on a layered visual ground. She also adopts and distorts elements of consumer culture, ranging from street magazines with band listings to advertising graphics and sportswear logos. These diverse elements relate to each other in a superstructure that suggests systems of motion—flight patterns, wind and water currents, airports, highways, subways, phone lines, satellite trajectories, urban and natural places where

Cover: *Congress*, 2003; ink and acrylic on canvas; 71 x 102 in.; collection of Ann and Robert Fisher; courtesy of The Project, New York and Los Angeles.



people meet.

Congress, the centerpiece painting, evokes gates to a city or a stadium. With a distinctly urban feel, the characters are convening for a massive event—a political rally, a WTO protest, or a Super Bowl. The gathering occurs under a panoply of flags created from appropriated iconography from those of the United Nations, Arab League, European Union, and United States. The flags are interchangeable and could function equally as logos for a sports team or as billboard advertisements: the blue lines from the Israeli flag, the green triangle from the Palestinian one, the Southern Cross from Australia. Mehretu is commenting on economic protectionist policies that create "fortress Europe," as architect Rem Koolhaas called it. The expressive, small ink-drawn gestures that rest upon the layers of accumulated resin can be seen as little fists raised in the air or as gathered pilgrims bent over in prayer. The top of the work shows a tornado form whirling away, the exploding result of a stream of ideas, words, or perhaps a collective cheer. Though her forms often appear to be disintegrating or collapsing, the consistent formal element of Mehretu's work is a complex interplay of precision and chaos.

The *War Drawings* of New York-based performance artist and Vietnam veteran Kim Jones were an early and direct influence on Mehretu. This ongoing series depicts a two-dimensional world inhabited by two constantly warring factions: the x's and the dots. Graphite and erasers allow for a sense of progress, the evidence of the erased marks indicating the past. In an intricate labyrinth of land and sea, cities are forever being built and knocked down as "troops" are moved or killed—all by erasing and redrawing them. The small gouaches of American artist Laylah Ali, though substantially different from Mehretu's paintings in size as well as media, share with them their content: social and ethnic struggles fundamental to the contemporary human condition. Both artists present these struggles removed from a specific time and place, with the exact cause of strife left to the viewer's imagination.⁶

Immanence, 2003; ink and acrylic on canvas; 71 x 102 in.; private collection; courtesy of The Project, New York and Los Angeles.

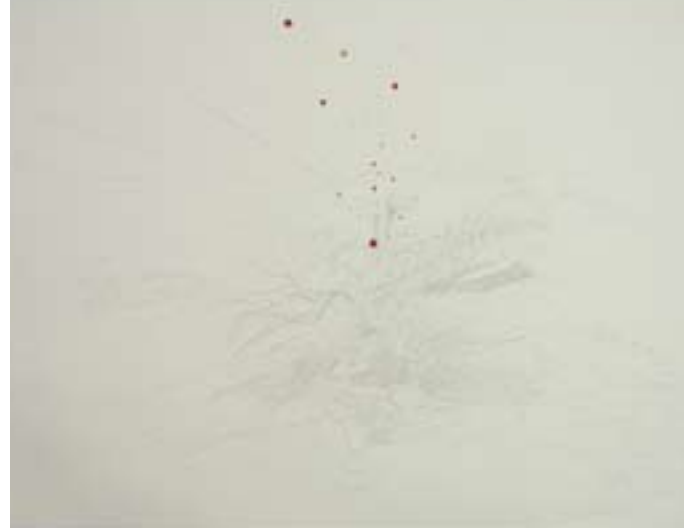


Asked about the existence of God in her work, Mehretu acknowledged the possibility of a higher being influencing, controlling, and weighing in on the activities.⁷ Many of Mehretu's paintings feature a form at the top of the work pushing down, sometimes subtly, other times less so, upon the action in the center or bottom of the frame. The compositions reflect those of reverential paintings and architecture, leading the eye and the energy of the viewer upwards. And like characters in a John Woo film—Christian-influenced tragic heroes caught in conflicts between loyalty and duty, friendship and honor, between right and wrong, good and evil⁸—Mehretu's abstract representations of the triumph of good can be seen as a call to action. Woo's films also share with Mehretu's work a frame full of frenetic energy and crisscrossing vectors.

The sources of Mehretu's paintings are also historical. In fact, the brushwork recalls that of Chinese calligraphy. *Siti shu shi* ("Calligraphic forces of the four script") by Wei Heng (AD 252–91) identifies writing with the patterns of dynamic forces in nature, thereby making a correlation between the order of the cosmos and the human order. There has been a progressive realization of the formal potential for visual expression of the written character, as well as a distinction made between script and style, the latter being individual and determined by various circumstances, including the calligrapher's inner state.⁹ Like Chinese calligraphy, which dictates the number of brushstrokes that making a tree requires, for example, Mehretu's marks connote the essence of the forms she depicts and the ideas she promotes. The awakening of the individual in relation to the collective whole as well as to nature itself, present in Zen practices such as calligraphy, mirrors the role Mehretu holds in her own art making.

Connections between Mehretu's work and that of Wassily Kandinsky are formal as well as intellectual. Kandinsky developed the notion of the affective purpose of art, based on the assumption that art must possess "soul" in

Manifestation, 2003; ink and acrylic on canvas; 71 x 102 in.; Hoffman Collection, Berlin; courtesy of carlier I gebauer, Berlin.



order to elicit a response from the spectator, and that this soul, manifested in the balance of colors and composition, is in turn dependent on the integrity of the artist.¹⁰ Mehretu is interested in this, and also in what Kandinsky referred to in *The Great Utopia* when he talked about the inevitable implosion or explosion of our constructed spaces out of the sheer necessity of agency. “The stadium, coliseum, amphitheater are perfect metaphoric spaces clearly meant to situate large numbers of people in a highly democratic, organized, and functioning manner,” Mehretu says. “It is also in these same spaces that you feel the undercurrents of complete chaos, violence, and disorder.”¹¹

Mehretu has referred to at least one of her works as “propaganda painting.”¹² Art historian Kendall Taylor posits that American artists working in the 1930s, such as Ben Shahn, traditionally referred to as Social Realists, might more precisely be identified as ideologists, implying a visionary, idealist approach. These artists viewed themselves as the conscience of American society and banded together in the common struggle to make a positive impact on society.¹³ Absent a larger working group, Mehretu in her paintings and drawings embodies this same visionary, idealist approach, what she calls her “language of resistance.” Keenly interested in the errors that form our current situations, she foregrounds not the failed utopia itself, but what failed and why, as well as what next and how. In the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations, governments, and social mores, Mehretu fearlessly maps the ever-idealistic utopian impulse. When one stands in the MATRIX Gallery surrounded by her creations, the rallying cry for positive social change is almost audible.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ Douglas Fogle and Olukemi Ilesanmi, *Julie Mehretu: Drawing into Painting* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 7. ² Ibid., 13–14. ³ Lauri Firstenberg, “Painting Platform in NY,” *Flash Art*, November–December 2002, 70. ⁴ Julie Mehretu, conversation with author at artist’s studio in New York, March 10, 2004. ⁵ Fogle and Ilesanmi, op cit. ⁶ Chrissie Iles, Shamim M. Momin, Debra Singer, Laylah Ali, *Whitney Biennial 2004* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2004), 147. ⁷ Julie Mehretu, conversation with author, March 10, 2004. ⁸ www.mediacircus.net/johnwoo.html ⁹ “Calligraphy: characters, scripts and style,” *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online* (Oxford University Press, Accessed March 15, 2004), <http://www.groveart.com> ¹⁰ “Abstract Art: Pioneers, 1912–1920,” *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*. ¹¹ Fogle and Ilesanmi, 13-14. ¹² Ibid, 16. ¹³ Kendall Taylor, “Propaganda: After 1900,” *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*

Julie Mehretu was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1970. She studied at the University Cheik Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal, obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from Kalamazoo College in 1992, and received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1997. She lives and works in New York City.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2004
carlier I gebauer, Berlin, Germany
- “Drawing into Painting,” Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; REDCAT, Los Angeles, CA
- 2003
“Drawing into Painting,” Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; PBICA, Palm Beach, FL
- 2002
White Cube, London, UK
- 2001
The Project, New York, NY
ArtPace, San Antonio, TX
- 1999
“Module,” Project Row Houses, Houston, TX

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2004
“Carnegie International,” Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA
“Whitney Biennial,” The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
“Sao Paulo Biennial,” Sao Paulo, Brazil
- 2003
“Poetic Justice,” 8th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey
“Lazarus Effect,” Prague Biennial 1, Prague, Czech Republic
“The Moderns,” Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Torino, Italy
“GNS,” Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France
“Splat Boom Pow! The Influence of Comics in Contemporary Art, 1970–2000,” Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX
“Ethiopian Passages: Dialogues in the Diaspora,” National Museum for African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- “Metascape,” Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH
- 2002
“Drawing Now: Eight Propositions,” The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

ABOVE LEFT: *drawings (new constructions) #10*, 2003; graphite pencil on paper; 26 x 40 in.; private collection; courtesy of carlier I gebauer, Berlin. ABOVE RIGHT: *drawings (new constructions) #2*; graphite and color pencil, acrylic and ink on paper; 26 x 40 in.; private collection; courtesy of The Project, New York and Los Angeles.

- Busan Biennale 2002, Busan Metropolitan Art Museum, Busan, Korea
“Out of Site,” New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
“Centre of Attraction,” The 8th Baltic Triennial of International Art, Vilnius, Lithuania
“Terra Incognita: Contemporary Artists’ Maps and Other Visual Organizing Systems,” Contemporary Arts Museum, St. Louis, MO

- 2001
“Urgent Painting,” Musee d’Art Moderne de la ville de Paris, Paris, France
“The Americans,” Barbican Art Centre, London, United Kingdom
“Painting at the Edge of the World,” Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
“Freestyle,” The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

- 2000
“Selections Fall 2000,” The Drawing Center, New York, NY
“Five Continents and One City,” Museo de la Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico
“Greater New York,” P.S. 1 Contemporary Arts Center, New York, NY

- 1999
“The Stroke,” Exit Art, New York, NY
“Texas Draws,” Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX
“Core 1999,” The Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston, TX

Selected Catalogs

- Julie Mehretu: Drawing into Painting*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, 2003
- Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002
- Painting at the Edge of the World*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, 2001
- Freestyle*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY, 2001
- Texas Draws*, Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX, 1999

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drawings (new constructions) #7, 2003; graphite pencil on paper; 26 x 40 in.; private collection; courtesy of carlier I gebauer, Berlin.

Work in MATRIX
Congress, 2003
Ink and acrylic on canvas
71 x 102 in.
Collection of Ann and Robert Fisher. Courtesy of The Project, New York and Los Angeles

Immanence, 2003
Ink and acrylic on canvas
71 x 102 in.
Private collection. Courtesy of The Project, New York and Los Angeles

Manifestation, 2003
Ink and acrylic on canvas
71 x 102 in.
Hoffman Collection, Berlin. Courtesy of carlier I gebauer, Berlin

drawings (new constructions) #1, #2, #3, #4, 2003
Graphite and color pencil, acrylic, and ink on paper
Each 26 x 40 in.
All private collection. Courtesy of The Project, New York and Los Angeles

drawings (new constructions) #5, #6, #7, #10, #11, #12, #13, 2003
Graphite pencil on paper
Each 26 x 40 in.
All private collection. Courtesy of carlier I gebauer, Berlin

drawings (new constructions) #8, #9, 2003
Graphite and color pencil, acrylic, and ink on paper
Each 26 x 40 in.
All private collection. Courtesy of carlier I gebauer, Berlin

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drawings (new constructions) #8, 2003; graphite and color pencil, acrylic and ink on paper; 24 x 40 in.; private collection; courtesy of carlier I gebauer, Berlin.

