

Julie Mehretu

Julie Mehretu: *Mind Breath and Beat Drawings*
Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris
26 January – 16 March

Its title referencing late beat poet Allen Ginsberg's book *Mind Breaths* (1977), Julie Mehretu's first show at Marian Goodman in Paris fans no less than 32 pieces of abstraction across the gallery's two floors. It includes the following: a series of five etchings realised with master printer Gregory Burnet in New York (*Untitled*, 2013), an ensemble of 16 works on paper (*Mind Breath Drawings*, graphite, 2012) and finally a mixed group of 11 drawings and paintings on canvases (all untitled, in graphite, acrylic and, except for three, ink, 2012). Stretching over every single wall in the vast exhibition space (including the front desk), this rich display somewhat echoes the Ethiopian-born American painter's aesthetic impulse to cover her surfaces almost entirely (apart from the edges) with a dense multilayering of restless scrawls and graphic shapes. Here, all these hyperactive hazes are described in the restricted palette of black, and only a few of them burst with sparse and colourful zips.

Over the past decade, Mehretu has accrued great critical attention for her large-scale, noisy abstractions, the backgrounds of which systematically offered contextual intrusions of meticulous architectural drawings. These detailed, in perspective or elevation, real urbanscapes that the artist selected for their strong historical or topical interest within contemporary geopolitics. An obvious attempt to break away from the burden of 1960s 'pure' formalism (art as an end in itself), urban mapping allowed her to coalesce abstraction and content into a self-proclaimed investigation of globalism and identity. If the tension between the rigid virtuosity of architectural drawing and the vibrant spontaneity of frenetic scribbling constituted a possibly pertinent metaphor for the lively dissymmetry of powers between governments and people, the actual urban references were nevertheless, and to say the least, often a bit subsidiary, a pretext for opening her truly abstract aesthetics onto a circumstantial political awareness or a level of significance beyond old-fashioned Modernism. At Marian Goodman, it's opportune that only one painting renders an architectural plan (Al-Manara Square in Ramallah, Palestine, which has been for decades the theatre of rousing protestations against Israeli occupation, but has very little to do per se with the overall show in Paris), while

the rest of the exhibition successfully unfolds successive medium- to small-scale full (I won't venture to write 'pure') abstractions.

Without a hot geopolitical allusion to counteract Mehretu's unquestionable and brilliant inclination towards abstraction – which becomes, here, the sole focus of scrutiny – latent tension is sustained even more strongly in her *Mind Breath Drawings*. Ready to implode, the more or less crowded clusters of nervous black markings at the heart of every sheet, which the artist refers to as 'characters', inherently suggest uprising forces within imaginary topographies. Lacking the immediacy of drawing, her five etchings convey the same impression of a confined chaos. Burnet, who supervised their printing, told me it took over a year and a half and up to 30 proofs per piece to achieve the series: the result is astonishing. Perhaps, less like a political activist than a radiesthesia practitioner – those mediums who claim they can detect radiation from human bodies, and thus find lost people, using a pendulum and a map – Mehretu's genius is to transmit into her art the vital energies she discerns from the observation of maps or the experience of her own psychogeography. Whatever it is, though, her abstract aesthetics comes from an obsessive practice of drawing, one that evidently doesn't need any pretext to flourish.

VIOLAINE BOUTET DE MONVEL

Heimo Zobernig

Heimo Zobernig
Palacio de Velázquez, Madrid
8 November – 15 April

The main gallery of Madrid's Palacio de Velázquez is an expansive, uninterrupted space well suited to theatrical gestures, but few artists have succeeded in pulling off quite such an eloquent *coup de théâtre* as Heimo Zobernig. As demonstrated by the 40-odd elements that make up this 30-year 'retrospective', his practice intersects with architecture, design and theatre while flitting with seeming ease between painting, sculpture, installation and video. Most of all, however, the Austrian artist engages with the staging of art, foregrounding not so much *what* is exhibited as *how*.

In the words of James Brown's 1970 funk classic, Zobernig's works are 'talkin' loud and sayin' nothing'. Borrowing from the Robert Indiana school of typographical tweets and, at the other extreme, from the modernist tradition of minimal monochromes, Zobernig treats both work-types as throwaway gestures, easily appropriated and slickly executed, but no more significant than the canvases he leaves blank. We find them hung on scaffolding and curtains (lots of curtains), framed by paper scrolls, propped against walls or assembled as sculpture. Or else only present by their absence, as in his museum-style storage racks that remain conspicuously vacated. And not only paintings. When even the curtains are parodied by video representation, it is clear that Zobernig's irreverent scavenging regards nothing as sacred.

Significantly, all the works here are untitled, the show slipping seamlessly from one installation to the next. In *Untitled* (1998), stretched canvases of loosely woven jute combine to form an enclosed structure hinting at Richard Deacon's 1980s aesthetic, while a vast arena of black curtains enshrines nine monochromes executed between 1993 and 2005 (although the dates are extraneous, the works being interchangeable). From 1992, a four-metre cardboard cube richly painted in black gloss references Mecca's Kaaba and thus Gregor Schneider's aborted 2005 project for Piazza San Marco in Venice. Mirrored walls in polished aluminium evoke Michelangelo Pistoletto; the metal grids of the painting racks recall Bruce Nauman's *Double Steel Cage Piece* (1974). Even the one canvas in which the brushwork lets rip could be a take on Juan Uslé or Bernard Frize.

However, Zobernig's appropriation of contemporary art is at best generic. These are artworld Rorschach tests, inconsequential in themselves but inviting our collusion in contextualising them within the familiar canon; quotations that, like his monochromes, have been whitewashed so that their reading barely bleeds through.

Voiding the work leaves only the methodology of display and its context. The iron superstructure of the nineteenth-century exhibition hall and the single partition wall, preserved from the previous exhibition, become as important as the works they enclose. In this theatre in the round where the props are laid bare, we become implicated in the staging, the sleights of hand that vouchsafe the seeming neutrality of the white cube and which here are replaced by relational aesthetics-style user-friendliness, interactivity and DIY: a kind of honest shabbiness that points up the tricks of the trade.

This laboratorylike openness draws obvious comparisons with the curatorial modus operandi of the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, except here there is no danger of the institution and its framing upstaging the artist. Zobernig's deadpan humour has taken over the asylum and, as in Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1963), turned it into a site of theatre all his own.

KEITH PATRICK

Julie Mehretu
Mind Breath Drawing, 2012,
graphite on paper, 56 x 76 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Marian
Goodman Gallery, Paris &
New York



Heimo Zobernig
2012 (installation view, Palacio
de Velázquez, Madrid). Photo:
Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores.
Courtesy Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte Reina Sofía