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THE ONTOLOGICAL RIOT:
JULIE MEHRETU AND THE VISUALITY OF (IM)POSSIBILITY

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Richard Shiff, Supervisor

Edward Chambers

THE ONTOLOGICAL RIOT:
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by
Lauren Karazija

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ABSTRACT

THE ONTOLOGICAL RIOT:

JULIE MEHRETU AND THE VISUALITY OF (IM)POSSIBILITY

Lauren Katherine Cruz Karazija, M.A.
The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

Supervisor: Richard A. Shiff

This paper addresses *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017, by artist Julie Mehretu (American, b. Ethiopia, 1970), two monumental paintings installed in the foyer of the newly renovated San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. In a bottom-up approach, moving from the underlayers of the compositions, this essay explores, almost exclusively, the contents of these two works. The text identifies curated images of 19th-century American landscape painting digitally enmeshed with the viral photographs documenting anti-police demonstrations in London, 2011, and throughout the United States in 2014 and 2015. Mehretu's procedure prompts me to investigate the contents of that exchange between historical and contemporary imagery as a point of entry to the paintings. Beyond their immediate readings, the images establish a context that perpetuates attitudes of anti-blackness and coloniality, sustaining discursively a

hierarchical structure of power. As part of her strategy, Mehretu obscures the digital content of the paintings beyond legibility. She introduces an alternative field of visibility, one based upon her own musings and improvisational, performative acts of abstract, gestural mark-making. Mehretu's mark becomes her means of searching for "the break," the fissure to be discovered in the discontinuities between the reality professed by dominant narratives and the realities of those whom such narratives purportedly represent. The visual field, a landscape, envisions a path paved by violence and the refusal that conditions black life. The radical dream to end this world and dream of something *other*, a flickering space of possibility—a dream that, indeed, may seem illegible, fanciful, criminal, and impossible—begins, first, with the "ontological riot."

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Notes on Painting

Push, scratch, mark, cut, stay.

A mark, a scratch, the sound of graphite on paper.

Ink gliding out of nib pulled by fibers in the paper on the surface of acrylic, like stone, like parchment.

Never tabula rasa, always palimpsest.

When drawing, pull out of myself, lose place.

Go deep into a pressurized state of disfiguration, disembodiment. Lose all sense of cultural self.

Get lost inside a beat, inside a sonic pulsing system of half-links, half-consciousness, half-wit.

Find the break.

The hand equals an instrument, device.

The hand, the wrist, the gesture.

Flow, place, spit.

The hand can throw a bomb.

Get at the strangeness of the future image experience rather than habitually view and decipher.

Sensory experience, emergent sensile form, tactile acoustic.

Regular, lingual.

Sensatory, auditory haunting knowledge.

Premonition.

Draw faster, last chance.

Oral clue.

The studio equals a machine. Super, super, lot of beats, breaks, compression, digestion.

Serve intuition, impulse, improvisation.

Symptomatic.

The emergence of something new from bits of now.

Past, place, data, mark, detritus, architectural parts, diagramatic language, maps, lines, shapes, color, hue, synth, tempo, sonic, mutant, pressure, collapsed time, mined for resources, for parts to a future.

Refusing past tendencies and past actions that manifest into repeat patterns and repeat social actions, repeat repression, expansion of power.

Take the parts without judgment.

Break it, fuse it with marks.

The creation of something other.

A physical, sensorial image that is a time-based emergent experience.

Find the break, the gap, the fissures, the undoing and pulling apart.

An open force of unraveling potentiality.

Improvisation can be radical possibility.

Painting as performative time.

The marks are percussive, repetitive motions.

Marks that shift with each motion, faster, accelerating to gain that wicked mass of marks.

Beings that devour, consume, digest and decimate their place until they morph it, shift it, fuse it, splice through, to find the break in the linear.

The mark is insistent. It is.

The map equals nonsense, which equals entropy, which equals the sublime.

Prove it futile, as futile as the marks themselves.

The battle of the small mark in this long view of time.

Layered, suspended into a long view back into painting.

All suspended in transparency, in medium, in paint, desire.

Compression of time, space, future, past, action, inaction.

Dualities and contradictions forced to one suspended time moment.

Splicing them together as mutant.

The painting is performance in making and seeing and looking.

The emergence of monstrosity.

To look forward, the bits, the data, infrastructure, symbols of power, solder them onto the new machine.

Fuse the parts with marks that come and try to form something else legible but descended their own illegibility.

The marks are comfortable with that. They create the headache.

Conjure ghosts and parts. Detritus data.

The drawing has become tired and loose.

Mimics writing but not words.

The new drawing has evolved out of the depth of past paintings into a surface seeping over a layered, stratified past.

It is morphed into new disruptions in the surface image.

The marks now drip, smear, print, stain the machine as it is scored and fused into the surface from above or emerging from within.

The marks are convective. They cluster and clog and strain under and in the machine, infecting its coherence, its machinations.

The marks are a contagion, contamination, the fallout, strategum.

The language is loosened but blank, notational.

Opacity equals radical potential.

Everything falls apart.¹

—Julie Mehretu, 2013

¹ Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu: American Artist Lecture Series." The included text is an accurate transcription I produced in listening to Mehretu read her notes. The written form appears differently in many facets: structure, use of capitalization, grammar, symbols, breaks, etc., and has been reproduced more faithfully in: Mehretu, "Notes on Painting."

An open force of unraveling potentiality.

In the newly reconstructed foyer of the San Francisco Museum of Art, the sweeping compositions, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017, by artist Julie Mehretu beguile and hypnotize in their own uniquely perplexing way (Fig. 1). The monumental canvases overwhelm at 27 feet high and 32 feet wide, measuring individually larger than Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, ca. 1495-8, and Raphael's *The School of Athens*, ca. 1509-11, and collectively larger than Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*, ca. 1536-41.² The rich colors of sunset—dusty pinks, blues and oranges—drift in and out of the surface, running across and underneath an unnavigable torrent of starkly black marks. Dense and chaotic, the ink gestures explode in layers and fragments across the paintings' surfaces. They crash into one another, they hover, they bend, they cross, they complicate—a complication further aggrandized by 8-bit-like diaphanous, screen-printed marks, rendered in monochromatic shades of grey on one canvas, an explosive palette of cool and warm colors on the other. The paintings are moody and mysterious in the cacophonous haze of their calligraphy, its unknowable neologism. Unable to focus on any one aspect of the works, decidedly emphasized by the very distance the architectural space mandates, the spectator's imaginative reception is over-stimulated and, inevitably, exhausted.

² Halperin, "How Julie Mehretu Created Two of Contemporary Art's Largest Paintings for SFMOMA."



Fig. 1: Installation view of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu. Photo: Matthew Millman Photography.

Beginning with an analysis of the artist’s maturation as a painter, moving from *Mural*, 2009, onto which a decade’s worth of stylistic and technical evolution collapse, and through her paintings on view in the exhibitions *Grey Area*, 2008-9, and *Liminal Squared*, 2013, this essay will consider the growth of Mehretu’s improvisational gestural mark as well as technical methods that developed in the latter period, which would become fundamental to the blossoming of *HOWL*. After elaborating upon the procedural processes involved in *HOWL*’s genesis, in a bottom-up approach, moving from an analysis of the underpaintings of *HOWL* to their overpaintings, this essay explores, almost exclusively, the contents of these two works. The text identifies curated images of 19th-century American landscape painting digitally enmeshed with the viral photographs documenting, what Mehretu committedly refers to as, “race riots” of

London in 2011 and Ferguson and Baltimore in 2014 and 2015.³ Mehretu's procedure prompts me to investigate the contents of that exchange between historical and contemporary imagery as a point of entry to the paintings. Beyond their immediate readings, the images establish a context that perpetuates attitudes of anti-blackness and coloniality, sustaining discursively a hierarchical structure of power, a correlation between periphery and center, settler and savage, master and slave. As part of her strategy, Mehretu obscures the digital content of the paintings beyond legibility. The images of the landscapes mutate into 8-bit-like pixelated, reductive versions of themselves and the photographs of the riots are diluted into amorphous blurs of color. The digital content materializes as two prints that become the paintings' canvases. Atop these surfaces, she introduces an alternative field of visibility, one based upon her own musings and improvisational, performative acts of abstract, gestural mark-making, which further complicate the decipherability of the surface. A fundamental question this essay considers, predominantly in the second half of this essay, is precisely why does Mehretu make inaccessible and bury the digital material.

The second half of this essay will attempt to grapple with those gestural marks as an illumination of a past that continues to haunt the present. Such a memory, or remembering, inaugurates an alternative mode of interpreting and experiencing the form of the riot. In addressing *HOWL*, she describes her paintings as in search of "the break,"⁴ the fissure to be discovered in the discontinuities between the reality professed by dominant narratives and the realities of those whom such narratives purportedly represent. Her determined refusal to duplicate the scenes buried underneath her digital manipulation and abstract gestural marks are indicative of a strategy of black performance, which Moten describes as "[an] ongoing

³ Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."

⁴ "The break" is a clear reference to Moten's book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, which describes an epistemology of blackness within a genealogy of black radical thinking and expression.

improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus—invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation.”⁵ Indeed, rupturing and swallowing the scenes set before them, but, moreover, the swarms of Mehretu’s gestural forms act as a transgressive multiplicity more apt to representing the riotous, social form of black, performative bodies than the viral photographs of such. Ultimately, this essay will conclude that visibility, as the site within which to struggle, becomes representative of a shifting landscape, an imagined site undergoing the violent, chaotic process of decolonization, a decolonization that was called for and summoned by the riot. The decolonized frontier is gained through refusal, violence, self-sacrifice—the placement of the body in relationship to violence seems to be a constituent element of black-led political action. The radical dream to end this world and dream of something *other*, a flickering space of possibility—a dream that, indeed, may seem illegible, fanciful, criminal, and impossible—begins, first, with the “ontological riot.”

In many ways, her works have been described and analyzed through her biography, in particular, her experience of migration, both as a child and as an adult traveling and experiencing the world. However, she resists the link, saying, “I don’t think of my biography as something that informs [the work.]”⁶ Instead, she fastens her work to a body of investigations that operate both within and outside her personal experiences. She says, “It can be tiresome because there is much more that [I am] trying to investigate in the work[, and] what I have been trying to investigate is not being linked to this biography—that is very clear to me.”⁷ Thus, in my essay, I place less emphasis on the artist’s personal biography and, instead, intend to explore the

⁵ Moten, *In the Break*, 26.

⁶ Mehretu was born in Addis Ababa in 1970. Migrating to the United States in 1977, her family fled the political violence that erupted in the wake of the Ethiopian Civil War. She spent her childhood in East Lansing, Michigan and, for nearly two decades, has lived and worked in Harlem, New York.

Mehretu quoted in Brown, “Julie Mehretu interview: the politics of abstraction.”

⁷ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu: American Artist Lecture Series.”

pronounced interests that Mehretu has expressed, namely, the frameworks and bodies of thought introduced by Fred Moten as well as those whom Moten refers to in his work—hence, Saidiya Hartman, to whom Moten describes his own work as in debt, and her essential text *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* will come up routinely. Regularly, I will refer to “the afterlife of slavery,” a term introduced by Hartman in her book *Lose Your Mother*. She defines the afterlife as the endurance of “a measure of man and a ranking of life” inaugurated by the institution of slavery.⁸ “Black lives,” she argues, “are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago,” whose consequences manifest themselves in the form of “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.”⁹

This afterlife of slavery has been thrown in stark relief as a wealth of graphic, visual materials

⁸ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

⁹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

Hartman expresses dissatisfaction with the value of attrition and progress directed towards a linear temporal reality. So, it’s important to note how things have not progressed in addressing systematic, institutional racism.

Some protections forged during the Civil Rights Era, monumental pieces of legislation prohibiting discriminatory practices based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, have been reversed, including Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act, which required certain jurisdictions, with histories of instituting discriminatory practices to inhibit voting, to receive clearance before changing their laws. The reversal has resulted in gerrymandering efforts that effectively cultivated greater black disenfranchisement.

Gerrymandering of school districts has resulted in the exclusion of people of color from predominantly white schools.

Richards, “The gerrymandering of educational boundaries and the segregation of American schools.”

The failure of Civil Rights cases to be brought against perpetrations of black-directed assault and murder, including George Zimmerman, who fatally shot Trayvon Martin, reveal the limitations of Civil Rights legislation. Political representation of black Americans remains proportionately low. According to the United States Census Bureau’s 2016 report, the rate of black unemployment is higher today than it was in 1950. The gap between black and white Americans’ rate of unemployment has not narrowed. While public accommodation have been bureaucratically desegregated, housing segregation still exists, with many public housing projects remaining predominantly occupied by people of color. Since 1950, the incarceration rate of black men more than tripled, despite the overall population of black men only doubling.

At a time when university credentials are of paramount importance for attaining employment, all state and federal prisoners, as of 1994, are ineligible to receive Pell Grants. Individuals, who have been in detention for more than 60 days, are denied access to welfare payments, veterans’ benefits, food stamps, and, in some cases, Medicaid, public housing, and Section 8 vouchers. The right to vote is denied to mentally competent individuals in detention facilities in all but four states, to convicts on probation in 39 states, to parolees in 32 states, and to ex-felons no longer under any criminal justice supervision in 14 states.

Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration,” 57-8.

Naomi Klein coins the term “sacrifice zones,” areas identified as to incur the damaging effects of industrial waste, “places that,” she writes, “don’t count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress.” These “disposable peripheries” are “bound up with notions of racial superiority,” disproportionately affecting neighborhoods with larger populations of people of color. Black Americans, moreover, are more vulnerable in the wake of environmental crises, recipients of slow or no reactions that do not effectively ameliorate the suffering (e.g., the Flint water crisis).

Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 169.

More black American adults are disenfranchised today than they were in 1870. Mass incarceration functions like the racial regime of the Jim Crow Era, with the criminalization of blackness accounting for the political domination of black subjects. At length, Alexander argues that the War on Drugs was a politically motivated intervention by the Federal Government responding to a political, rather than social, crisis. Overcriminalization of black life and the rendering invisible white crime has resulted in the racialization of crime.

Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 180.

capturing acts of state-sanctioned violence towards black subjects has been made prolific and available. Despite footage of police brutality presenting a case to recognize a war against black Americans, the visual evidence have routinely not been enough to gain convictions. In 2014, a Richmond County grand jury failed to indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo, responsible for the death of Eric Garner, a choice later upheld by the U.S. Department of Justice—although, as recent as August of 2019, five years after Garner’s death, Pantaleo has been fired. In 2015, the trials against Officers Edward Nero, Caesar Goodson, and Brian Rice resulted in their acquittal in the death of Freddie Gray, Officer William Porter’s trial ended in a mistrial. For black Americans, little faith is gained when stark visual evidence is not enough to mobilize prosecutors and jurors to convict police.

Mehretu actively cites and refers to black radical thinkers and artists whom she expressly holds dear: Moten, Amiri Baraka, Colson Whitehead, Sun Ra, Édouard Glissant, to name but a few. In conducting research for this paper, it became obvious the point that these thinkers operate as an ensemble, always moving and thinking in relation to one another, speaking not *for* but *with*. And, so, admittedly, in this essay, I almost never speak alone. The titles of each chapter directly tie and weave in exclamations made in “Notes on Painting,” written by Mehretu in 2013. I remain in constant dialogue with a Greek chorus of sorts, habitually figuring in thinkers Moten, Hartman, Glissant, Frank Wilderson, Christina Sharpe, Franz Fanon, among others. In my inclusion, they actively participate in the creation of this text as they do in Mehretu’s paintings.

The essay seems, to me, to be clearly divided into two sections. The first articulating the various systematic modes of thought and structure that operate in Mehretu’s field. However, as the paintings begin to build up, layer by layer, so does equally the legibility of the compositions

begin to unravel. Diving into the incomprehensibility of her visuality, my comprehension of that visual field, or the attempt to articulate a semblance of comprehension, similarly unravels and loosens. It's an effect I didn't necessarily mean for the paintings to instigate in me but that seems appropriate, an indication of her ability to "send you," without consent, someplace else. The second half of the paper in a futile effort attempts to seize the impossible possibility, or possible impossibility, of the artist's vision, a vision that is beyond the reach of language as it exists. Written with uncertainty in addressing the complexity of the paintings' imposed opacity, the essay mirrors, maybe, the paintings' reproach against a consistent declaration of certainty that structural regiments of thought falsely imply to possess. Antithetical to hope is certainty, to be sure of something, The unsure painting, the unsure essay reels in the consequences of the past that is not past, but, in that uncertainty, hope, I hope, resides.

The mark is insistent. It is.

In 2011, the San Francisco Museum of Art began planning the renovation of a new wing of the building. Its foyer would be modified along with it, with the goals to make the walls featuring artwork much more prominent, to join the upper and lower spaces in order to appear as a continuous site, and to make the natural light of the atrium more visible. Of course, there was a question as to *whose* work would be featured, following the steps of the site-specific works of Sol LeWitt (Fig. 2) and, more recently, Kerry James Marshall's murals *Visible Means of Support*, 2009. A recognized talent at a large scale, Mehretu's name was thrown around.



Fig. 2: Installation view of Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #935: Color bands in four directions*, 1999-2000 (right), and *Wall Drawing #936: Color arcs in four directions*, 1999-2000 (left). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Museum purchase by Phyllis Wattis in honor of Gary Garrels. © The LeWitt Estate / Artist Rights Society (ARS). Photo: Ben Blackwell.

When Gary Garrels, Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture at SFMOMA, approached the artist, she had finished *Grey Area*, a suite of seven large-scale paintings commissioned by Deutsche Bank and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.¹⁰ The cycle represented a shift in direction from Mehretu's previous commission *Mural*, 2009 (Figs. 3-4). The sprawling composition had then-recently been installed in the expansive entrance lobby of Goldman Sachs' new steel-and-glass headquarters in the World Financial Center, New York. The artist describes *Mural* as an "arc," "a kind of time capsule for all the work I had been doing up until that point[, collapsing a]most ten years of work."¹¹ The artist says,

*[L]ine played a role, and the architectural language played another role, then, the marks and lines would digest, colonize, or battle within the mapped strata of the painting... [As i]n previous paintings, there were all of these elements floating into one another, like a distant long-view of a system, a cosmos[, w]here all the elements signify, very clearly, what their source is.*¹²

Historical maps of trade and migration routes are integrated with architectural renderings of stock market buildings. Elements drawn from their referential materials, selected as representatives of capitalism's history, vibrate throughout the composition and become consumed within a torpedo of line and color. Gestural swarms accentuate the orienting currents, indicated by precise colored bands that clash, bend and swirl about. Vibrant colors rendered geometrically—abstract quotations of advertisements, logos, the activities of the stock markets—populate the routes of communication.¹³ Characteristic of Mehretu's work until this point, the procedural laying of information produces "a context, a map," through which the reader is invited to engage with the painting's underlying conceptual idea.¹⁴ "The entire

¹⁰ Commissioned for and included in: *Julie Mehretu: Grey Area*, Deutsche Guggenheim Museum, Berlin, 2009, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2010.

¹¹ Mehretu, "An Interview with Julie Mehretu," 793.

¹² Mehretu, "An Interview with Julie Mehretu," 784.

¹³ Shiff, "Our Life in Signs," 16.

¹⁴ Emphasis added. Mehretu, "An Interview with Julie Mehretu," 784.

painting,” she describes, “[is] constructed from... the internalization of the marketplace and the architecture of finance... and then the drawing [tries] to deal with this reality [and these forces].”

¹⁵ As part of a clearly established, well-organized layering, the architectural drawings determine the space, while color, geometric forms and ink marks animate the movement. That activity is dependent upon the initial imposition of space.



Fig. 3: Installation view of Julie Mehretu, *Mural*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist, White Cube, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. © Julie Mehretu. Photo: Jason Schmidt.

¹⁵ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu: American Artist Lecture Series.”



Fig. 4: Julie Mehretu, *Mural*, 2009. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 22 ft. 10 in. x 80 ft. Goldman Sachs, World Financial Center, Manhattan. © Julie Mehretu. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging, 2010.

Alternatively, with *Grey Area*, the artist makes the explicit decision to “turn to grey.”¹⁶ Immediately, this turn is represented by the almost exclusively austere grey chromatic scale, an immense departure from the supreme vibrant hues of *Mural*. In the painting *Believer’s Palace*, 2008-9 (Fig. 5), from the cycle, before hazes of gray that vary in opacity, softened architectural drawings appear before muted horizontal lines of varying tones. Like bullets through flesh, these strands strike through Mehretu’s ink marks. As the title indicates, the work depicts, in part, the Believer’s Palace in Baghdad. Along with its blasted interior, the architectural drawings emulate the devastated San Francisco cityscape following its 1906 earthquake and the New York ruins after the attacks on September 11th. However, unlike *Mural*, these line drawings do not alone establish space. Explosive forces of disruption erupt from the horizontal lines’ points of entry, and the architectural drawings are determinedly transformed by these collisions. Through the intervention of the mark, vertical line drawings either dissolve or appear reduced to rubble. Spatial understanding is decidedly complicated by the marks, which possess the ability to actively transform and morph the architectural drawing. The negotiation between form and gesture renders space indeterminate, unresolved. The artist calls this “a big shift away from the

¹⁶ Mehretu, “An Interview with Julie Mehretu,” 782-783.

distant observant perspective” as seen in *Mural*, and, indeed, this state of liminality signals her truer turn to “grey.”¹⁷



Fig. 5: Julie Mehretu, *Believer's Palace*, 2008-9. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 119 x 167 ½ in. Private collection. © Julie Mehretu.

The evolution away from *Mural* in successive works reflects the ongoing impact of the *Grey Area* series. The exhibition *Liminal Squared* featured paintings that retain, to a degree, the monochromatic palette of *Grey Area*. In cases where color is introduced, the color, unlike that of *Mural*, grows somberly in subdued pastel tones.¹⁸ A re-engagement with the site Believer's Palace, the painting *Chimera*, 2013, (Fig. 6) brings forward the understated hues of *Believer's Palace*. Faint line drawings echo the palatial bunker in ruins, a place of fortification stripped to

¹⁷ Mehretu, "An Interview with Julie Mehretu," 784.

¹⁸ *Julie Mehretu: Liminal Squared*, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 11 May - 22 June 2013.

rebar and brick following air strikes in 2003. *Chimera* introduces new referential materials: photographs blurred and impressed into the composition (Figs. 7-8). The recesses of dark space demonstrated by gray hazes express the stark contrasts of light and dark reflected in photographs of the underground bunker. Along with the gestural marks, more thickly applied, vaporous grays “glom onto” the architectural forms.¹⁹ “The light peering in from the bombed ceiling,” the artist says, “creates the ghostly shapes that loom in the quiet.”²⁰ Actively participating in the determination of space, the insistence of the mark in corroboration with these “large, dark void-like shapes”²¹ transcends the insistence of the architectural drawing. “Here line and mark are supreme, improvisational,” Mehretu underscores, “they generate the form.”²² As a confidence in her gestural mark grows, the artist decidedly wills and announces a change in her direction, departing from the structured, transparent map of *Mural* in favor for her developed automatism. *Liminal Squared* re-establishes Mehretu as a painter again.

¹⁹ Mehretu, “An Interview with Julie Mehretu,” 784.

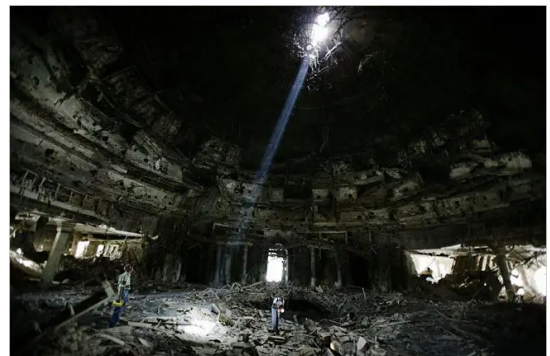
²⁰ Mehretu, “An Interview with Julie Mehretu,” 785.

²¹ Mehretu, “An Interview with Julie Mehretu,” 785.

²² Mehretu, “An Interview with Julie Mehretu,” 784.



Fig. 6: Julie Mehretu, *Chimera*, 2013. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 96 x 144 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. © Julie Mehretu. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.



Example photographs of a destroyed Believer's Palace.²³

Fig. 7 (left): "The bunker where Saddam Hussein is believed to have plotted his defense strategy was damaged by bombs and then looted. Culprits could be coalition soldiers, contractors or Iraqis." Photo: Christoph Bangert/Polaris, *The New York Times*.

Fig. 8 (right): "The main dome had enclosed a grand dining room with Romanesque pillars, elevated galleries and friezes that, Iraqis say, placed Mr. Hussein's initials above the word of God cited from the Koran. Now its inner surface is barren and cratered and the gallery is in tatters." Photo: Christoph Bangert/ Polaris, *The New York Times*.

²³ I am not asserting that these are the photographs Mehretu used.

The painting is performance in making and seeing and looking.

Having just completed the first cycle of “gray paintings” for *Grey Area*, Mehretu began discussing with curator Gary Garrels the possibilities for the paintings at SFMOMA. She submitted a proposal that included an image of two works from *Grey Area* digitally stretched and expanded onto the walls at the Museum.²⁴ Offering a nebulous window into Mehretu’s budding ideas, the proposal was a far cry from, as Richard Shiff describes in his essay “Our Life in Signs,” “[*Mural*’s] collaboratively generated proposal, informed by history and economic theory [and] citing Fernand Braudel’s authoritative account on capitalism.”²⁵ What the proposal did designate strongly was the artist’s commitment to her developing intuitive direction, one that metamorphosed her structured planning for the ongoing negotiations and renegotiations between form and gesture. “When does a museum commission an artist to make something when they don’t know what it’s going to be?” Mehretu says, “I didn’t give them a plan. There wasn’t a rule about content. Nothing. It was this very open commission to do something that they were going to own, purchase, and support, and it would take a year to make.”²⁶ A pact founded on faith in this instinctive automatism, and the project was given the green light.

A dominant governor of space in *Mural*, the architectural drawing the artist had routinely referenced waned in the execution of *Grey Area* and *Liminal Squared* paintings. When Mehretu began to think about beginning *HOWL*, she made the willful decision to abandon architectural drawing all together, instead, opting to build up from a neutral, clear surface. However, a visit to the Museum altered Mehretu’s vision. “I went several times to visit the [M]useum,” the artist

²⁴ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

²⁵ Shiff, “Our Life in Signs,” 11.

²⁶ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Started Her Majestic New Paintings Right After the Election.”

recalls, “and, on maybe the second or third site visit, I was staring at two walls.”²⁷ Confronted with the spectacle of a “cave-like,” “cavernous” construction site illuminated solely by the oculus above (Fig. 9), she was overwhelmed with the monumentality of the angled walls onto which her finished works would be mounted.²⁸ The existing staircase had been removed, replaced by caged construction elevators. “[M]aybe because of the landscape... in San Francisco and [its] majestic... enormity,” she recalls, “being inside that space, I started to think about that form, that landscape.”²⁹ Upon returning to New York, the artist began exploring and researching 19th-century American landscape painting, “thinking about the Hudson River School painters” and surveying the works of Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole, and Frederick Church. She travelled to Los Angeles, visiting the J. Paul Getty Museum to examine the landscape photography of Carleton Watkins.

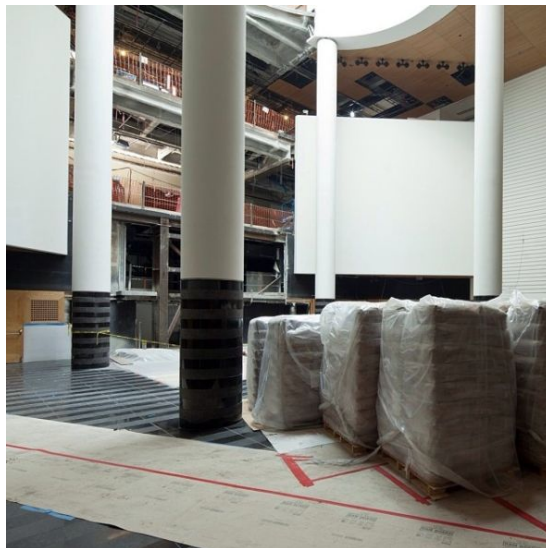


Fig. 9: “Behind the scenes of the Botta atrium, SFMOMA expansion.” © Henrik Kam, courtesy of SFMOMA. Photo: Henrik Kam.³⁰

²⁷ Mehretu, “Layering Histories,” 241.

²⁸ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

²⁹ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

³⁰ SFMOMA (2014, June 23). “Behind the scenes of the Botta atrium, SFMOMA expansion.” Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/pmWpvmqdfs/>.

Shortly thereafter, as Mehretu was finishing the works in preparation for *Liminal Squared*, she began working with Peter Sellars, who was staging and directing composer Kaija Saariaho's opera *Only the Sound Remains*.³¹ The opera is comprised of two short operas, *Always Strong* and *Feather Mantle*, and Mehretu produced two large canvases, one for each opera's set design (Figs. 10-11). The project introduced Mehretu to the printer Infinitus by Big Image Systems (Fig. 12). Frequently deployed in the service of theatre stage shows, this device is the world's largest digital printer on soft materials. "After I went to Germany and worked with this printer, I thought," the artist recalls, "I could really use that as a place to begin, even though I wasn't sure what these paintings were going to be... but I knew [that] if I was going to work with [this] printer, I had to do it before I finished this other show."³²



Julie Mehretu, *Only the Sound Remains*. Staging by P. Sellars. Lighting by James F. Ingalls. © Ruth Walz. Photo: Ruth Walz.

Fig. 10 (left): Set design for *Feather Mantle*.

Fig. 11 (right): Set design for *Always Strong*.

³¹ *Only the Sound Remains*, Dutch National Opera, Amsterdam, 15 March 2016, Finnish National Opera and Ballet, Helsinki, 12-29 April 2017, Palais Garnier, Opéra national de Paris, 23 January - 7 February, 2018, Teatro Real, Madrid, 23 October - 9 November, 2018, and Rose Theatre, Lincoln Center, New York, 17-18 November 2018.

³² Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."



Fig. 12: Infinitus, Big Image Systems, Berlin. Photo courtesy of Big Image Systems.

The landscape imagery continued to reverberate through the artist's mind, expressing, "[The] walls just stayed in my head, [and] I kept going back to American landscape painting."³³ The artist had already developed an archive of genre-related imagery. From this collection of information, she selected particular images extrapolated from the internet, including "Bierstadt's [painting of] Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Mountains, [Church's] painting of the view over the Andes [Mountains]" (Figs. 13-16).³⁴ Mehretu explains, "I took several paintings that I was most attracted to and reduced them to 8-bit images in Photoshop with the help of [studio assistant] Damien Young, who worked closely with me in this process."³⁵ In preparation of each canvas, two landscapes were then digitally layered and enmeshed with one another, "as well as one part

³³ Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."

³⁴ From the quote, "So, I had to take these paintings that I had been looking at, these images that I grabbed from the internet of certain Lake Tahoe, Bierstadt's Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Mountains, Thomas Cole's, the Church painting of the view over the Andes," I deduced that the artist included either or both Bierstadt's *In the Sierras* or/and *Among the Sierra Nevada, California* as well as either or both versions of *The Andes of Ecuador* by Church. Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."

³⁵ Mehretu, "Layering Histories," 244.

of an upside-down landscape.”³⁶ Although these 8-bit renderings served as the primary abstract underpainting for *HOWL*, the artist had yet to fully develop a concept for the project.³⁷



Fig. 13: Albert Bierstadt (German, 1830-1902, active USA), *Among the Sierra Nevada, California*, 1868. Oil on canvas, 72 x 120 1/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Helen Huntington Hull.



Fig. 14: Julie Mehretu observes Albert Bierstadt's *Among the Sierra Nevada, California*. A digitally altered version of the landscape can be seen in the background window. Still from *Art21 Extended Play*, "Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes." © Art21, Inc. 2017.

³⁶ Mehretu, "Layering Histories," 244.

³⁷ "[A]t first, my project wasn't about [the American colonial project]; it was more about an attraction to these paintings that kept coming back to me." Mehretu, "Layering Histories," 241.



Fig. 15: Frederic Edwin Church (American, 1826-1900), *The Andes of Ecuador*, 1855. Oil on canvas.. Honolulu Museum of Art.



Fig. 16: Julie Mehretu observes Frederic Edwin Church's *The Andes of Ecuador*, from the collection of the Honolulu Museum of Art. Still from *Art21 Extended Play*, "Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes." © Art21, Inc. 2017.

It wasn't until Mehretu decided to fold into the works the political happenings of the country that she began more completely realizing a concept. The contentious American climate amidst the 2016 Presidential election—a demoralizing Trump campaign—prompted the artist to engage with the reactivated, ongoing discourse on racism and nativism—a depressing and subject matter, indeed, but something necessary to address given how the election changed, or rather, revealed a thriving racist rhetoric.³⁸ She had already begun building a collection of “race riot” photographs—a controversial term the artist has chosen to use in reference to black-led protests.³⁹ “I had an archive of images of race riots, [including] the 2014 London riots that exploded that same summer as the Gaza war,” Mehretu continues, “and the many that took place in New York after various acts of police brutality and the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement,”⁴⁰ including the protests in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray.⁴¹ “I started to layer the blurred color images of these news photographs,” she explains, “into these historic landscape paintings.”⁴² As seen with *Chimera*, Mehretu had already begun adapting photographs into her work, and *Liminal Squared* features many photo-based paintings in which the photographic contents were projected and airbrushed or painted onto their surfaces or directly printed as canvases. The referential photographs of *HOWL* appear to have a similar effect or undergo the same process. Photographs of riotous acts are reduced to the haze of their palettes (Figs. 17-20). Buildings and cars set aflame, the vibrant sirens of police vehicles become cloudy

³⁸ “I think what was taking place also and what I was looking at and working with here... with the paintings I was engaged with at the time... what was taking place in our world was... the build-up to the election, and the campaign that Donald Trump ran, and that Hillary Clinton ran and what took place in terms of the discourse of race in this country and nativism.” Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

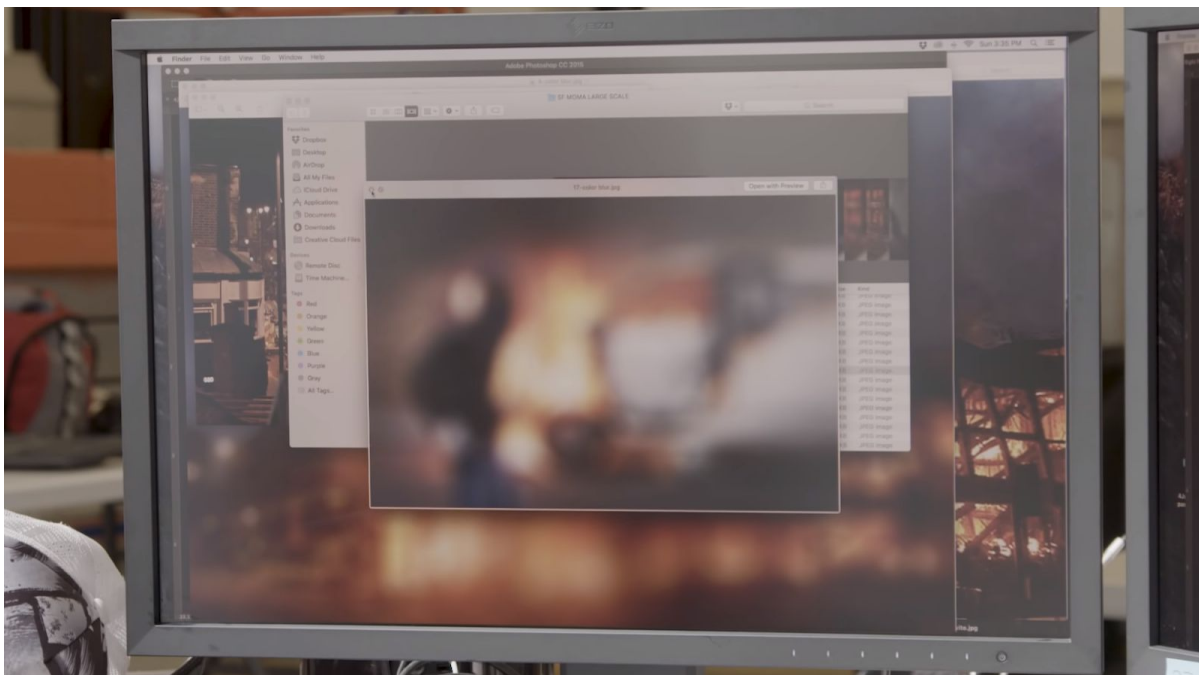
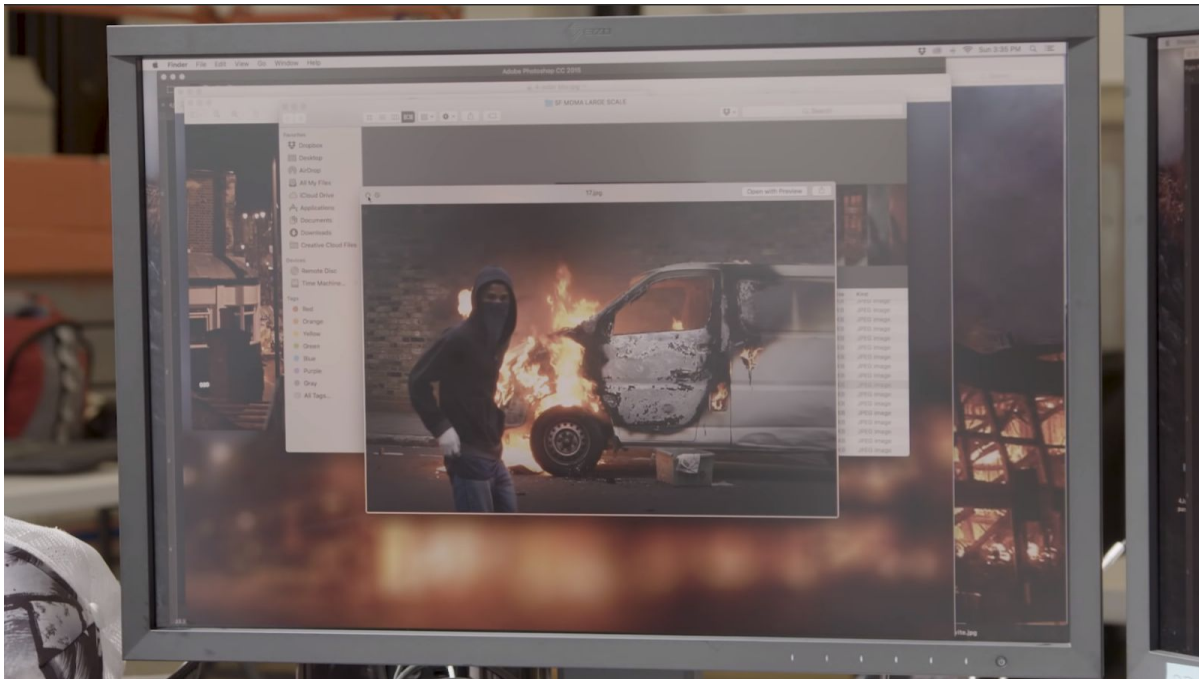
³⁹ “[R]ace riots, that is how I refer to them.” Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

⁴⁰ Mehretu, “Layering Histories,” 244.

⁴¹ The protests in Baltimore had just begun before she “started working on the first layers of these paintings.” Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

⁴² Mehretu, “Layering Histories,” 244.

mists varying across the landscapes' surfaces. "The color and light of those," Mehretu expresses, "inform that landscape."⁴³

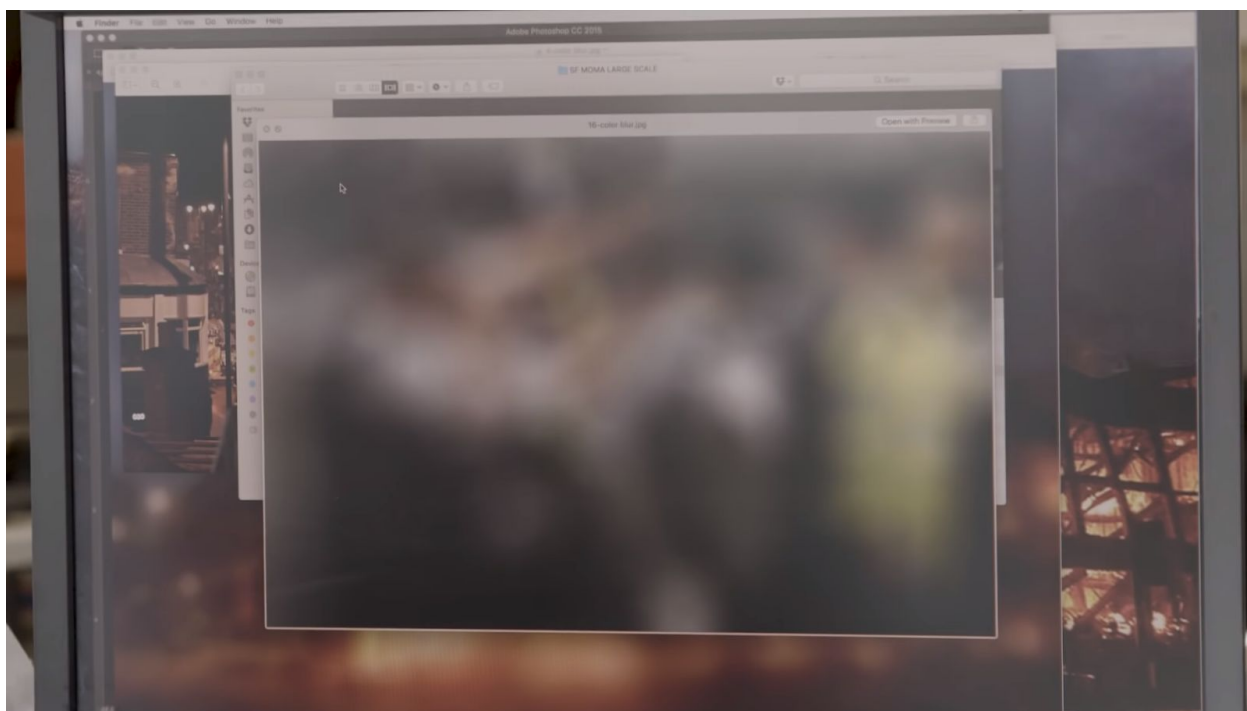
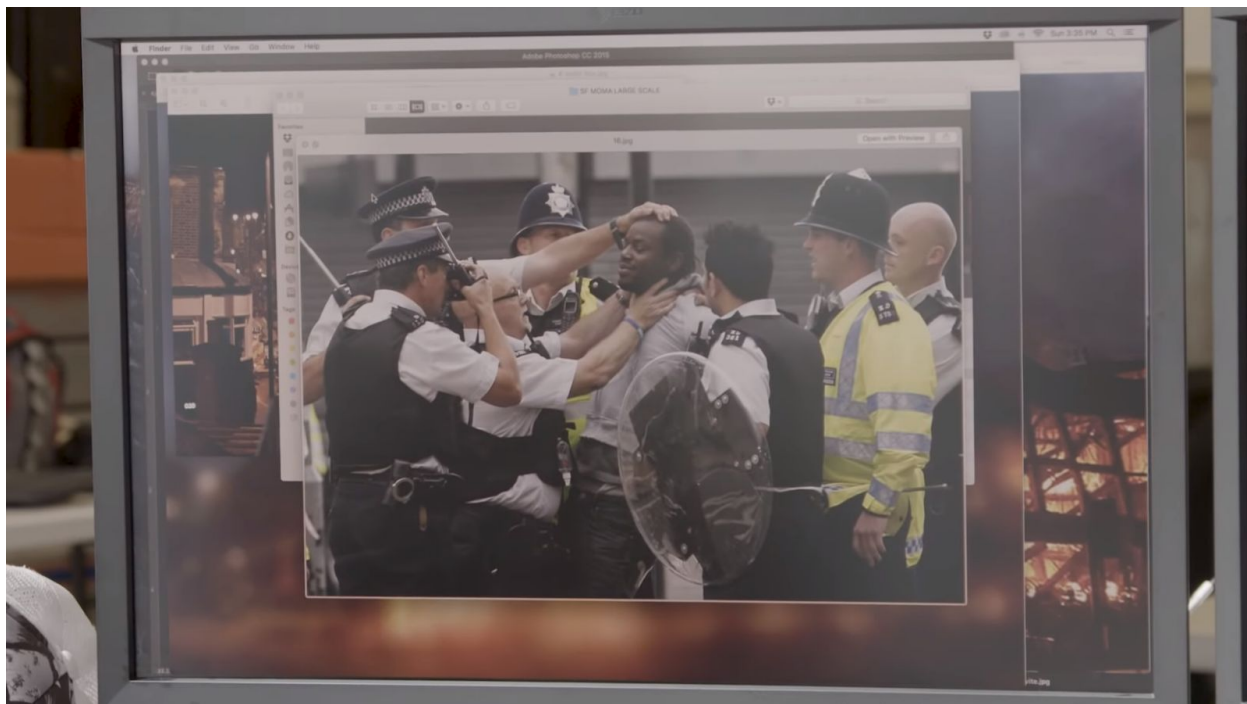


Stills from *Art21 Extended Play*, "Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes." © Art21, Inc. 2017.

Fig. 17 (top): Photograph of a youth walking past a burning vehicle in Hackney on August 8, 2011 in London appearing on Mehretu's computer.

Fig. 18 (bottom): Pixelated, reduced photograph of the above-mentioned youth.

⁴³ Mehretu, "Layering Histories," 244.



Stills from *Art21 Extended Play*, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.” © Art21, Inc. 2017.

Fig. 19 (top): Photograph of British police officers encircling and arresting a man in Croydon, south London, on August 8, 2011 appearing on Mehretu’s computer.

Fig. 20 (bottom): Pixelated, reduced photograph of the above-mentioned officers and man.

The obscured images and their multiple digital layers were combined in a single, comprehensible image, one for each canvas (Figs. 21-22). “Once we developed an image and worked on them at full-scale on the computer,” Mehretu says, “we sent them to Germany to be printed.”⁴⁴ The monumental prints, however, would not fit her studio. Following the search for a suitable space to work on the project, she prepared to work in the Church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem, a decommissioned historically black church selected for its proximity to Mehretu’s home. Walls were assembled inside the church at the same scale as the walls at the Museum. When the prints were completed and delivered to New York, Mehretu and her team stretched the canvases over these newly built frames. To each canvas, twenty layers of clear acrylic were then laid on with spatulas by her team, taking approximately four months to apply. After a session of intensive sanding, the surfaces of the canvases appeared as smooth as glass.

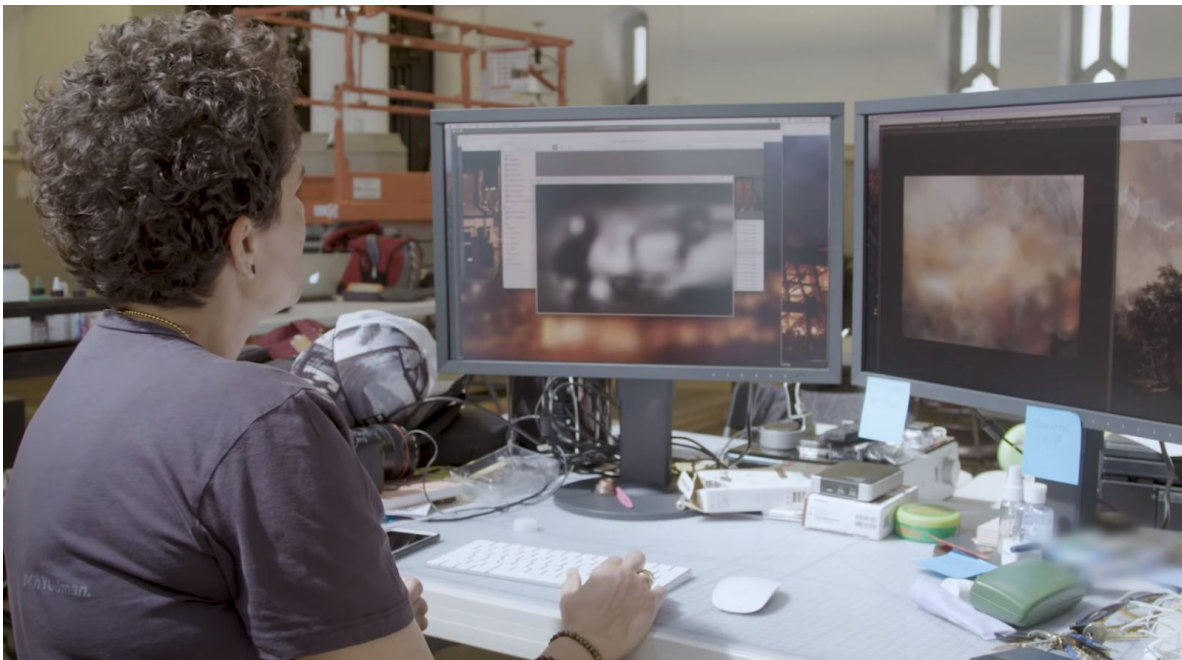


Fig. 21: Julie Mehretu observes her syntactically reduced and composited images. Still from *Art21 Extended Play*, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.” © Art21, Inc. 2017.

⁴⁴ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”



Fig. 22: In the foreground appears a cropped, digitally altered version of Albert Bierstadt's *Among the Sierra Nevada, California*, onto which reduced contents of photographs of protests have been layered. Still (cropped) from *Art21 Extended Play*, "Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes." © Art21, Inc. 2017.

The artist spent the month of October and the week leading up to election day night in November dividing her time between observing the works and petitioning people to vote. A surprise to Mehretu as well as the nation, Donald Trump had won the presidency, and New York fell into a sobering state of depression. "I just remember this energy of dismay," Mehretu recalls, "Everyone was just talking about it."⁴⁵ Immobilized by the canvases, "overwhelming," "too big" and "too finished," according to Mehretu, and the somber political climate, she found it difficult

⁴⁵ Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."

to access the works and initially was unable to begin drawing into them.⁴⁶ A couple days after the numbing win, her eldest son visited her studio. “Cade came to see me, and I asked him to... help me to get going... I gave him an airbrush, and we just started to loosen up... After that, I could work in that intuitive and free way.”⁴⁷ After that initial dislodging from the politically induced paralysis, the works began coming together quickly, their conviction unraveling before the artist in an extraordinary variety of gestures. She spent the Fall through April working predominantly on her own, drawing with brushes, painting with acrylic, using an airbrush, towels, “whatever [that worked] into the paintings.”⁴⁸ Although, as much as she drew into the compositions, she erased as well, removing marks too consciously laid down or sanding down and reworking entire sections.⁴⁹

Mehretu knew that she wanted the underpainting to have a stronger presence in the works. She developed an 8-bit map of each canvas (Figs. 23-25). From the map, she selected portions of each pixelated landscape to rise to the surface and interact more directly with the gestural marks. Screens would echo these curated cuts and be printed onto the canvases, appropriately and exactly in the location of their corresponding under-image. Despite the precision and rigor of the process, the development of the screens to add layers to the canvases was an intuitive one. There was no structured plan. An ongoing engagement between Mehretu and her team, led by her assistant Sarah Rentz, ensued. The screens would be printed onto the canvas, pushing the marks to respond. She would then request additional screens, which would be laid down and built up with the gestural marks. The constant dialogue between Mehretu’s

⁴⁶ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

⁴⁷ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

⁴⁸ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

⁴⁹ Mehretu, “Layering Histories,” 247.

marks and the screenprinting was a responsive interaction based upon the artist's intuition, and, eventually, the number of screens used grew to approximately 1,000 (Fig. 26).⁵⁰

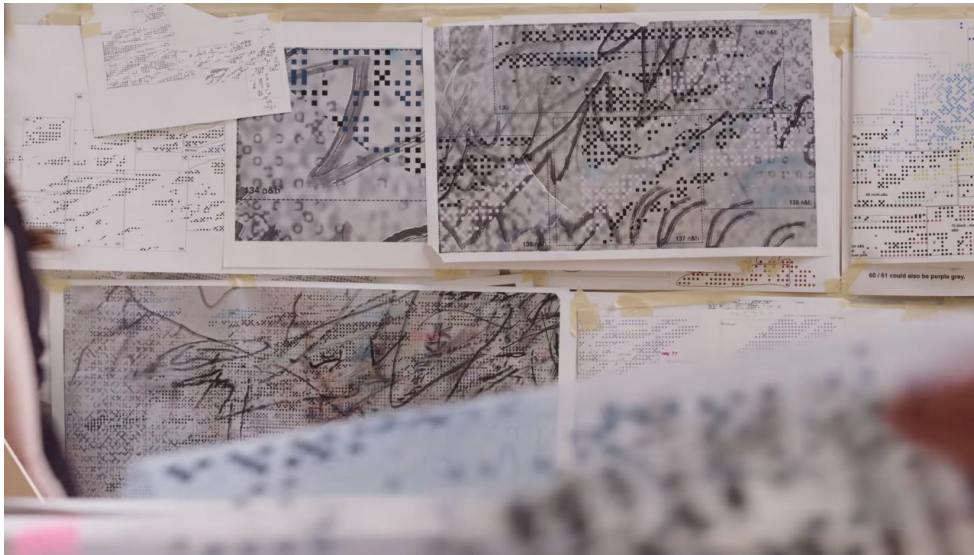
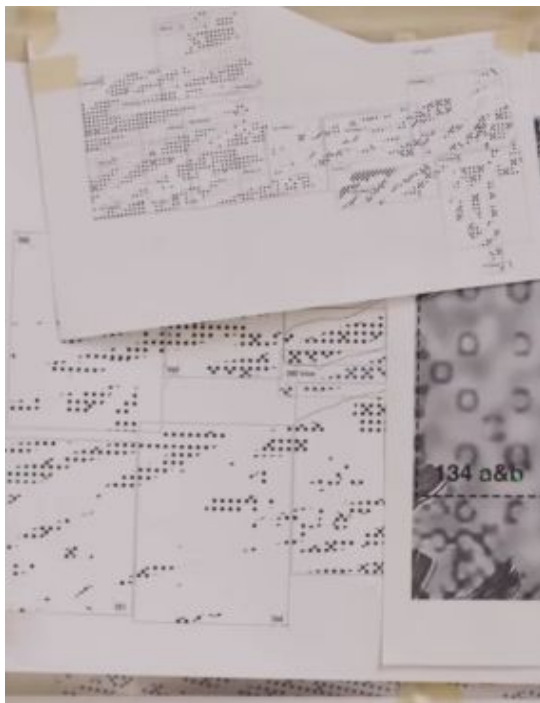


Fig. 23: Screen-printing plans. Still from *Art21 Extended Play*, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.” © Art21, Inc. 2017.



Stills (cropped) from *Art21 Extended Play*, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.” © Art21, Inc. 2017.

Fig. 24 (left): Details of the 8-bit mapping in preparation for screen-printing.

Fig. 25 (right): Additional details of the 8-bit mapping in preparation for screen-printing.

⁵⁰ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”



Fig. 26: Mehretu's team laying on a screen. Still from *Art21 Extended Play*, "Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes." © Art21, Inc. 2017.

Each canvas differs in their use of color. Through the underpaintings, the colors buried within, the colors of sirens, flames, the sun glistening on the lake, the clouds, etc., seep to the surface in hazy, muted tones. The artist accentuated the colors, marks, and screen-printing with airbrushed colors. However, the screens of one canvas is printed in chromatic greys, blacks, whites (Fig. 27), while the other prints its screens in a greater variety of colors: black, white, grey, purple, red, orange, blue, green, etc. In this latter work, an open, painted geometric shape, an abstract silhouette of a flame, is trailed by an 8-bit, screen-printed rainbow rail, materializing and dissipating like a softened breeze (Fig. 28). Despite the supremacy of this feature, its boldness is restrained. Daring as it may be, in the sea of mark and haze, its appearance is not intrusive; rather, the flame seems to be born from within the site it occupies. For this reason, the colors, despite a greater boldness in their deployment, learn the lesson of *Grey Area*. Unlike the flamboyant hues of *Mural* (Fig. 29), signifiers of particular features of economics, the colors of

HOWL do not act as quotations or interact, as social agents, with the surrounding marks. They neither reference nor stand for specific elements of the contextually rich compositions they're bound within. Instead, like *Plover's Wing*, 2009 (Fig. 30) from *Grey Area*, color appears atmospherically, developing and accentuating the space. As descriptors of the landscapes from which they emerge, color evolves naturally from the composition.



Fig. 27: The screen-printing, in this image, black and white, precisely corresponds with the pixelated elements on the canvas and in the underpainting. The screens appear both underneath and above the ink marks. Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, *The Chronicle*. Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

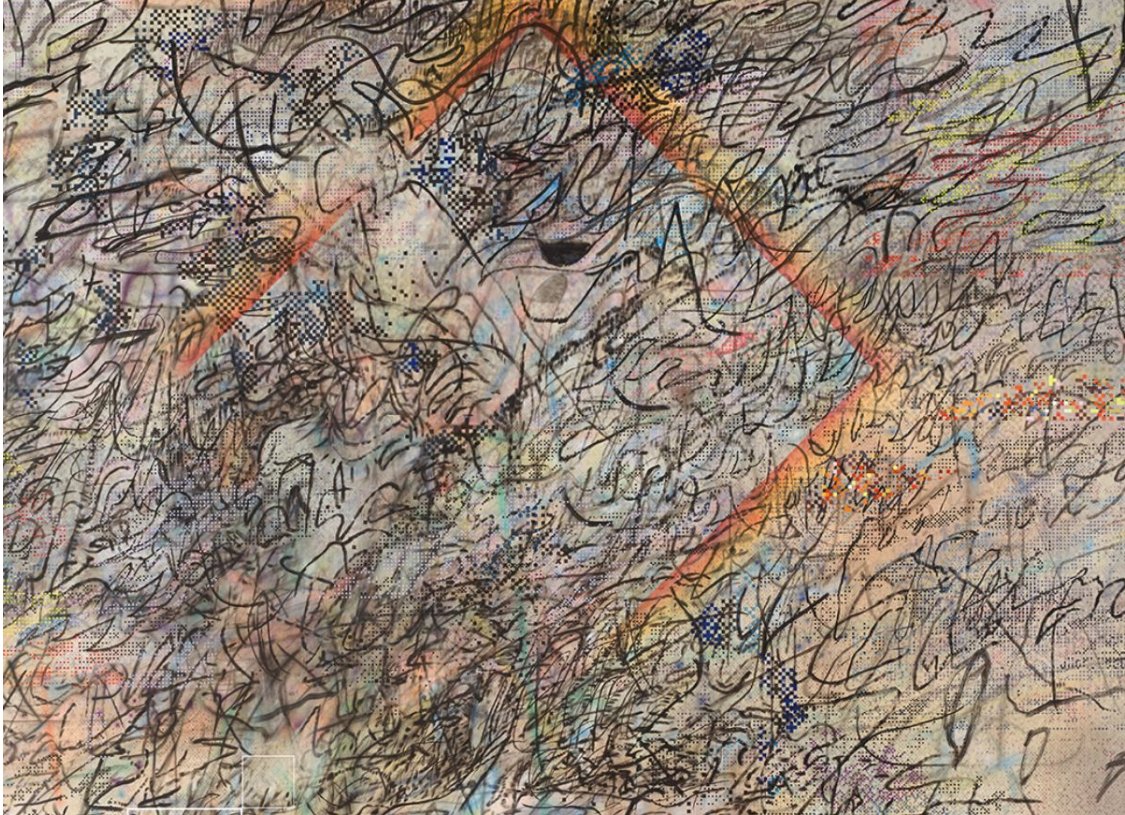


Fig. 28: Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

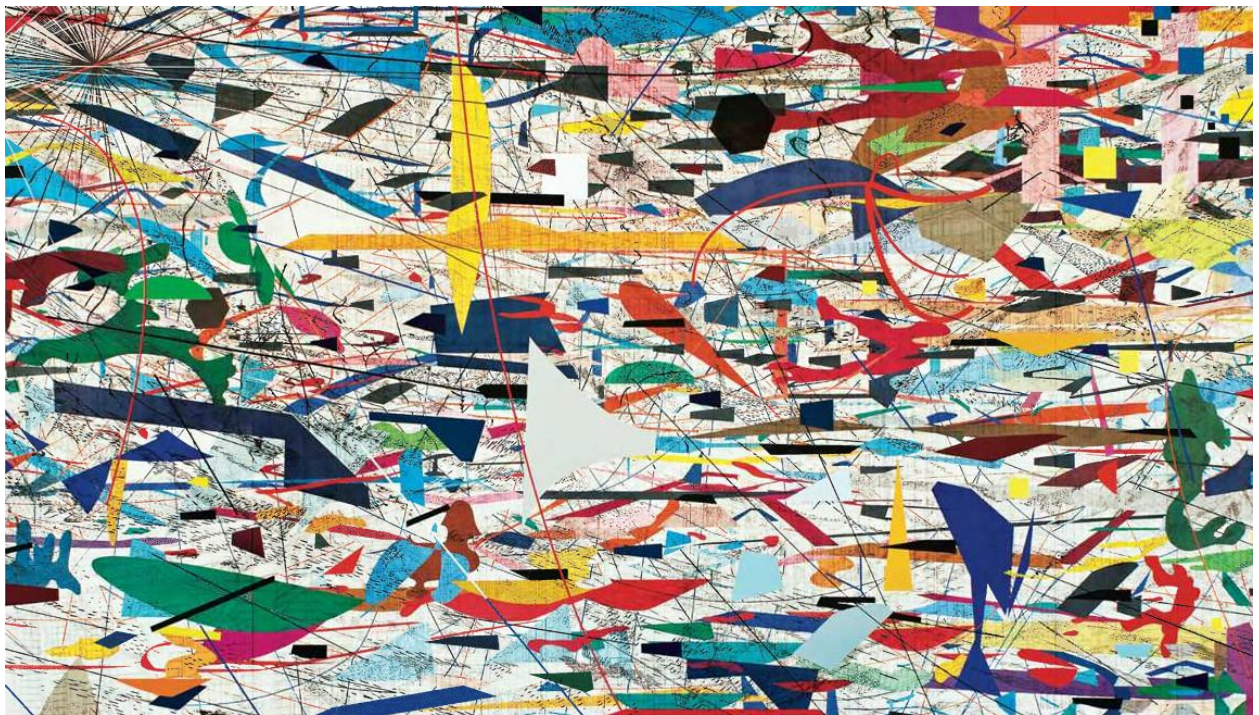


Fig. 29: Detail of Julie Mehretu, *Mural*, 2009. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 22 ft. 10 in. x 80 ft. Goldman Sachs, World Financial Center, Manhattan. © Julie Mehretu.

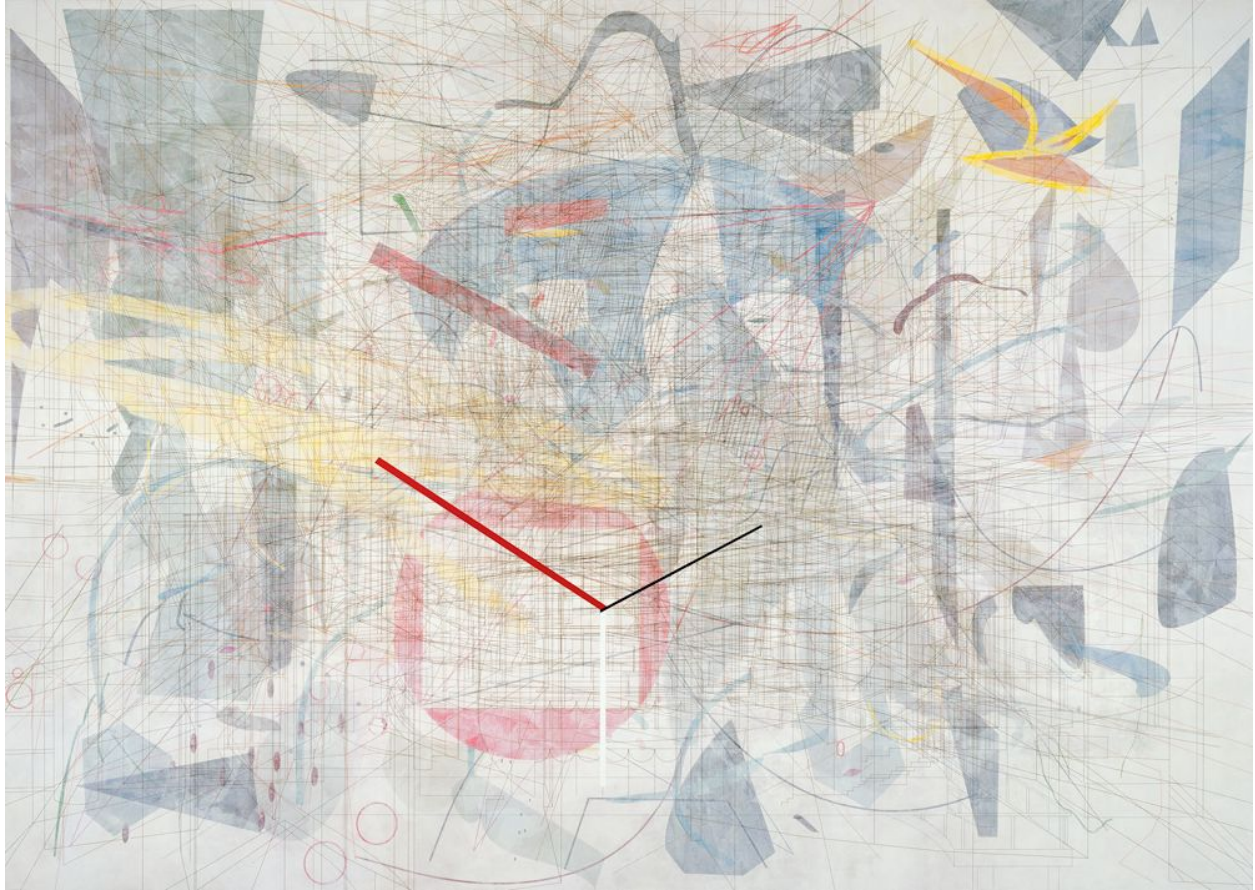


Fig. 30: Julie Mehretu, *Plover's Wing*, 2009. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 168 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. © Julie Mehretu.

After the canvases had been shipped and installed at SFMOMA in August of 2017 (Fig. 31), the artist continued to rework *HOWL* (Fig. 32). She had not had any distance between herself and the canvases while working in the church-turned-studio. She says, “I’m trying to make sense of them because[, of course,] they don’t look like they did in my studio. I want to do a little bit more on one of the pieces because the dynamic of the paintings and the columns has changed.” To the canvas opposite the staircase, she sanded down marks, laid down new ones, and continued to airbrush. Mehretu knew she had completed the works when, “they were bigger

than [my] memory and I was confronted with them in a different way... with something else.”⁵¹

She continues, “I wanted the paintings to be much more to me... to change me.”⁵²

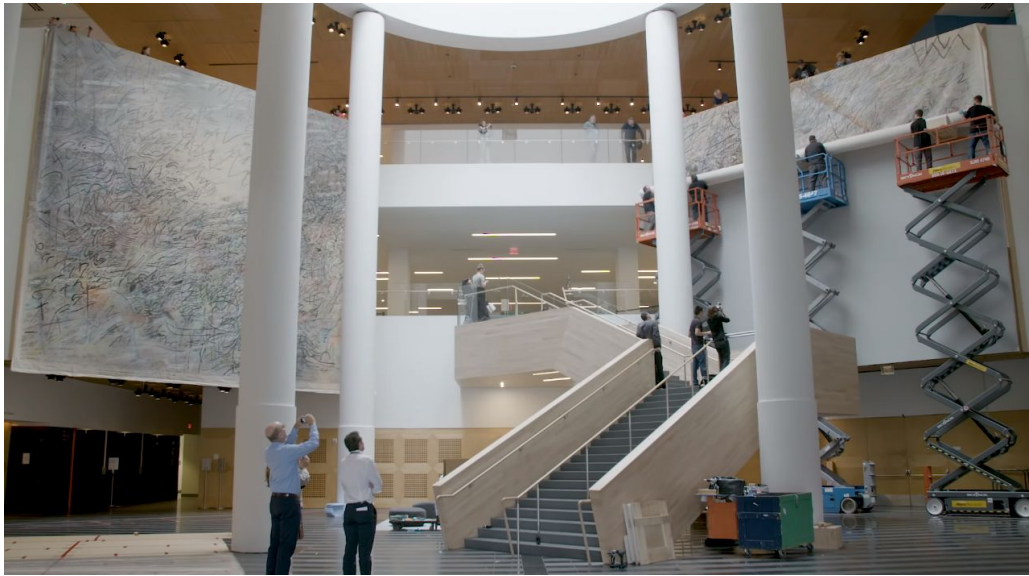


Fig. 31: A team of six assistants unroll the 300-pound canvas from three scissor lifts. Still from *Art21 Extended Play*, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.” © Art21, Inc. 2017.



Fig. 32: Julie Mehretu, on a scissor lift, reworking *Howl*.⁵³

⁵¹ The paintings debuted at the Museum on 2 September 2017. Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

⁵² Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

⁵³ Homme, Kitti (2017, August 28). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/kittihommephotography/>.

HOWL is a painterly tour-de-force. Indeterminate spaces refuse to proffer a composition that permits spatial understanding. Its effective layering completely abandons architectural drawing and moves towards opacity. With the organization of its content concealed, the painting dwells in its chaotic but beautiful ambiance. Intuitively generated marks, gestures of the artist's automatism, reach out to the viewers as much as they rhythmically secrete themselves into the compositions. They do not rely on historical archives to describe the conditions they illustrate, and they do not straightforwardly admit any guiding ideological principle. Meaning resides somewhere in the gesture.

The map equals nonsense, which equals entropy, which equals the sublime.

Although *Mural*'s mapping of the history of capitalism is fundamentally legible, accessible not only through its clear organization and explicit use of referential material but also by the very site in which it is installed, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, despite its apt concealment of its buried imagery, too charts something as a means to illuminate some aspect of our world. At the time of the project, the artist was concerned with the state-sanctioned executions of black Americans, the successful ascension of Donald Trump to the presidency, and the vitriol of the discourse that emerged as a result. She says,

*What's happening politically in the United States—this reinforcement, reengagement, rekindling of that [expansionist] dynamic, for Trump to become president—is in many ways not only destabilizing but also affirming. Coming on the heels of brutal killings and executions of Black people in this country, there is something in all of that language: the discomfort is visceral, deep in the core of your being, when a person speaks so horrifically toward another.*⁵⁴

In 2016, Mehretu expressed that the way in which she begins to make sense of an event is “within a cultural understanding and [from a] historical perspective, [a] political, social reality, which you try to decipher the world through. *This lens*.”⁵⁵ She continues, “There is a sense that there [is a historically Cartesian, rational] approach towards making sense of the world.”⁵⁶ The purposeful linking action bridging the genre of 19th-century American landscape painting to the photographs of black-led protest provides an intertextual, rich diagram, through which we may interpret and pull meaning from the political climate Mehretu illustrates.

⁵⁴ Mehretu, “Layering Histories,” 245.

⁵⁵ Emphasis added. Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu: American Artist Lecture Series.”

⁵⁶ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu: American Artist Lecture Series.”

Beginning from the underpainting and moving through its layered parts, 19th-century American landscape painting acts as the initial *lens*, the point of entry through which we may consider the contents of that exchange. The far-reaching painted vistas of Bierstadt, Church and Cole are not merely objects to derive pleasure from but moreover objects from which we may rationally glean and identify the attitudes of those whose interests they represent. *Among the Sierra Nevada*, 1868 (Fig. 13), by Bierstadt combines the utopian qualities attributed to the majestic landscape of the West. Ripe with bountiful forests, clean water, vast mountains, and thriving animal life, the image does not offer an entirely faithful reflection of Yosemite and displays little to no topographical accuracy to its subject. The painting is a *constructed* image, designed to market the exploration of the American West as it toured Europe and the eastern half of the U.S. In understanding their inclusion, it's important to acknowledge this particular genre of painting in the service of expansionism, inviting those who relished in the immenseness of their painted vistas to venture westward. Mehretu notes, "I don't think it's possible for me to think about the American landscape, or the *narrative* of it, without thinking about the colonial history."⁵⁷ Their excursion, of course, drew them to San Francisco. The artist says, "[T]his is the edge of [M]anifest [D]estiny."

Mehretu identifies this genre of painting as descriptions of "the colonial sublime,"⁵⁸ a term coined by Brian Larkin in his text *Signal and Noise* (2008). In developing the term, Larkin draws from Immanuel Kant's description of the sublime. Kant, in *Critique of Judgment*, redefines the sublime identified in Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Whilst Burke locates the sublime

⁵⁷ Mehretu, "Layering Histories," 244.

⁵⁸ Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."

objectively within the grandeur of Nature, Kant's understanding of the sublime exists within the rational personality's subjective experience of it. The oscillating feelings of terror and pleasure associated with the sublime indicate a tension between the concurrent confidence and insecurity in understanding the observable world sensibly. The threat of great but terrible Nature, in its purported boundlessness, is its escape from logical capture. In belonging in the great unknown, Nature ordains limitations upon human knowledge. However, Kant maintains that fear of the overwhelming, and, thus, the experience of the sublime, can be mitigated by the pleasure derived by seeing that which is overwhelming overwhelmed by deterministic understanding. In the case of the genre of American landscape painting, the painting themselves can represent Reason's triumph over Nature. While landscape paintings may attempt to impart upon its viewers the petrifying monumentality of Nature, in its very painted capture, the work breaks it down, reducing it to a consumable, knowable, observable object, rendering it conquerable and exemplifying man's mastery over the natural world.

Asserting that colonizers possess "the terrifying ability to remake landscapes ... by leveling mountains, flooding villages, and remaking cities," Larkin relocates the source of sublime experience from the natural world to the realm of industry and technology.⁵⁹ Man's ability to overwhelm the natural world with its intervention is the renewed source of awe and terror. Indeed, San Francisco, as a site symbolizing the edge of expansionism, bustles with the monumental accoutrements of civilization and urbanism that resoundingly altered its natural landscape. But it is significant to note the use of imagery to gain an audience onto the concerns of Nature's welfare. With the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad, a project co-financed by railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington, civilization successfully extended through

⁵⁹ Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 36.

the Sierra Nevada mountains. Threatened by routine snow drifts, severe cold, and avalanches, the railway had been most difficult to build and maintain at Donner Pass, a mountain pass named after the doomed Donner Party. Huntington commissioned Bierstadt to paint the railway at the site, a celebratory image of industry's triumph over the natural world. However, what Huntington received was not what he expected. Bierstadt's *Donner Lake from the Summit*, 1873 (Fig. 33), is a stark composition painted in harsh tones and featuring sickly, dying trees. The railway, as one San Franciscan art critic described, "hinted by a puff of smoke," is marginalized within the imagined wild, "indicated plainly enough without any obtrusion of its ugliness."⁶⁰ A message of mourning resounds within this pictorial lamentation on the destruction of Nature.



Fig. 33: Albert Bierstadt, *Donner Lake from the Summit*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 72 1/8 x 120 3/16 in. New York Historical Society Museum & Library, Gift of Archer Milton Huntington.

San Francisco, too, then represents the cultivation of environmentalism and preservation of the natural world through the National Parks system. "[I]f you go out, just drive north across

⁶⁰ McGrath, *Special History Study*, 118.

the Golden Gate Bridge,” Mehretu says, “and you’re in [Marin] Headlands, and you’re in the majestic landscape.”⁶¹ Muir Woods National Monument exists just north of San Francisco, named for the “Father of National Parks,” naturalist and San Francisco resident John Muir. While living in Yosemite, Muir developed a friendship with Carleton Watkins, whose photographs Mehretu examined in preparation for this project. In the mid-1850s, Watkins worked as a photographer in San Francisco, often visiting the Yosemite mountains southeast of the city. His photographs of Yosemite (Fig. 34) are credited with helping set national policy towards conservation, prompting President Lincoln to pass the Yosemite Valley Grant Act. The bill granted the site to the state of California to “be held for public use, resort, and recreation...inalienable for all time.”⁶² The 1864 legislation served as an important precedent for establishing the National Park System. In the age of colonial conquest, even the preservation of the natural world requires civil arbitrament.

⁶¹ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

⁶² Act quoted in: Jarvis, “How an Obscure Photographer Saved Yosemite.”



Fig. 34: Carleton Watkins (American, 1829 - 1916), *Further Up the Valley. The Three Brothers, the highest, 3,830 ft.*, 1866. Albumen silver print, 15 7/16 × 21 1/16 in. J. Paul Getty Museum, Museum Purchase.

Mehretu fundamentally acknowledges that the pursuit of mastery over Nature established paroxysmic sagas that constitute the history of colonialism and conquest. “[T]he Native Americans of the Sierras and the Western frontiers were completely annihilated by this expansionist project,” the artist notes, “But what was interesting was that... both annihilation and then preservation shortly after can exist on the same geographic landscape.”⁶³ Baked within her selected painted emblems of Manifest Destiny are the implicit reminders of the “horrific, atrocious violence that took place in [those] same landscape[s].”⁶⁴ There is an ephemeral quality

⁶³ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.”

⁶⁴ Mehretu, “Layering Histories,” 241, 244.

attributed to indigenous subjects in the paintings of Bierstadt, Church and Cole, a state of passing through or, at least, an immersion into the natural landscape, so as to not bend the natural world to their intervention (Fig. 35). Native inhabitants appear enmeshed with their environments, treated as indistinguishable from their surrounding natural forms.⁶⁵ Mostly, these painted sites remain unadulterated by human life, perhaps foretelling, as Mehretu says, “[the] complete eradication of people [and the] effort to completely destroy a community this land was immensely precious to.”⁶⁶ Bierstadt considered their demise inevitable, writing over the course of his 1859 Western expedition, “[N]ow is the time to paint them, for they are rapidly passing away; and soon will be known only in history.”⁶⁷ His most famous painting *The Last of the Buffalo*, 1888 (Fig. 36), matches a buffalo with its native subject. In this scene of finality, Bierstadt assumes that as one dies, the other will perish as well. At this point, the exploitation of the buffalo had brought the species to the point of extinction; and, with the authorization of the 1887 Dawes Act, federally sanctioned efforts to forcibly remove natives from their territories had begun. The practices of either indigenous people’s erasure or rendering them equitable to wildlife make assurances to a conquering sensibility. Kant arguably did not recognize the reasonable personality’s project of overcoming sublime experience as one shared with indigenous persons, whom he described, in the Dohna Lectures on Physical Geography, as the “inferior kind of human,” rarely possessing a civil condition.⁶⁸ In enfolding natives into the natural world, posing them with that monumental existence Kant encourages reason and

⁶⁵ Kant quoted in: Kleingeld, “Kant’s Second Thoughts on Colonialism,” 51.

⁶⁶ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Started Her Majestic New Paintings Right After the Election.”

⁶⁷ Bierstadt quoted in: Thomas, “Allegorizing Extinction: Humboldt, Darwin and the Valedictory Image,” 6.

⁶⁸ Kant quoted in: Kleingeld, “Kant’s Second Thoughts on Colonialism,” 51.

civilization to overwhelm, the paintings implicitly communicate: Indigenous Americans, like their surrounding environments, are subjects to be conquered.



Fig. 35: Albert Bierstadt, *Indians Spear Fishing*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 19 ¼ x 290 ¼ in. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum Purchase.



Fig. 36: Albert Bierstadt, *The Last of the Buffalo*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 80 x 118 ½ in. National Gallery of Art, D.C., Corcoran Collection (Gift of Mary Stewart Bierstadt).

The commission prompted Mehretu to consider San Francisco as a site, representing these complex dynamics oscillating between annihilation and survival. Her previous monumental commission too dealt with a site symbolizing seemingly contradictory yet infused relations. Embedded in Goldman-Sachs Headquarters, a colossal institution in the center of international finance, *Mural* exists adjacent to Zucati Park, which would erupt with the Occupy Movement's protests years after its installation. In 2008, as Mehretu worked on the project, the housing market collapse in the United States became a global financial crisis, considered the most severe economic disaster since the Great Depression. Goldman-Sachs had profited from issuing toxic mortgages and "falsely assuring investors that securities it sold were backed by sound mortgages, when it knew that they were full of mortgages likely to fail," says then-Acting Associate Attorney General Stuart Delery.⁶⁹ Moreover, the headquarters itself, the artist describes as "[a] small vertical city of 12,000 employees," is home to, of course, top executives making upwards of \$100 million a year but employs mostly service workers.⁷⁰⁷¹

San Francisco also represents something beyond the boundaries of continental expansionism. As part of the geographical region that has become synonymous with the information age, San Francisco symbolizes Manifest Destiny's metamorphosis into a global project.⁷² Larkin dwells upon media technologies in the service of a technical infrastructure, a system of exchange that "[create] channels [connecting urban sites] in wider... national and transnational [institutionalized] networks." Media technologies are the conduits through which

⁶⁹ Delery quoted in: Kasperkevic, "Goldman Sachs to pay \$5bn for its role in the 2008 financial crisis." *The Guardian*.

⁷⁰ Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu: American Artist Lecture Series."

⁷¹ Chairman and Chief Executive Lloyd Blankfein was awarded \$53.97 million of compensation in its 2007 fiscal year. He also earned \$45.76 million from the vesting of stock, bringing the total compensation to approximately \$100 million. Co-Chief Operating Officers Gary Cohn and Jon Winkelreid earned \$53.04 and \$52.91 million, respectively, as well as \$66.9 million bonus (payable in cash, restricted stock and options), Chief Financial Officer David Viniar, \$42.58 million and \$56.9 million bonus, and Chief Administrative Officer Edward Forst, \$39.85 million and \$43.4 million bonus.

⁷² "[W]hat San Francisco is now, as a site of that other project in a much more global... in a different way in terms of technology." Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."

cultural ideas are disseminated and social relations are shared.⁷³ Of course, the means to exchange content has grown beyond newspapers, television, cinema, and radio. Contributors and recipients, today, are able to tap directly into the network of interconnectivity and communication through the internet. The international breadth of the reach of technological powerhouses located in the Bay Area (i.e., Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, Google, etc.) represents, for Mehretu, San Francisco as not only operating within but actively conducting that global infrastructure.

The photographs Mehretu utilizes in her underpainting are examples of the images circulating in this new age stream of digital data. These images capture particular moments of violence that swelled from anti-police demonstrations, images routinely deployed in the assessment and reporting of the London, Ferguson and Baltimore riots. The 2011 London riots erupted after the police shooting of Mark Duggan, a black resident of Tottenham, North London, after being stopped by officers for suspicious activity on August 6. The various demonstrations throughout the United States were ignited by a series of police-related deaths of black Americans, including but not limited to: Eric Garner, arrested for selling cigarettes and killed after being placed in a chokehold on July 17, 2014 in New York City, Michael Brown, the teenage Ferguson resident shot after being stopped by police for walking in the middle of a residential street on August 9, 2014, and Freddie Gray, who died in Baltimore on April 19, 2015 after suffering injuries to his spinal cord while in police custody. The civil unrest that swelled in the wake of these deaths all began with protests against police brutality outside of their respective police stations in Tottenham, New York City, Ferguson and Baltimore. The demand for answers and justice metastasized into nonviolent demonstrations and civil disobedience,

⁷³ Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 6.

marches throughout the city, “die-ins,” traffic obstruction and, for some, escalated into episodes of violence and widespread destruction of property. Missouri and Maryland officials declared state of emergencies and deployed military forces. The Metropolitan Police stationed 16,000 officers on the streets of London. It is from these latter materializations of unrest and reactionary police militarization that Mehretu extracts her referential material, extricating from the internet photographs that emphasize the riotous nature of the protests. She enmeshes images of hooded protestors, covered in masks, setting fire to police vehicles, trash cans, and buildings, of protestors violently engaging with and/or being apprehended by police. Prolific, widely published across the web, on television, and in print, the curated photographs do not intently express the artist’s own perception of the events but rather reflect their own virality. They are demonstrative of a working contextual network, a navigable viral aggregation and circulatory system, from which we may draw key values.

In a survey of approximately 80 articles from the top six widely-read daily newspapers in the nation,⁷⁴ published during a six-month window in 2014, beginning one month before the death of Michael Brown, 22% of articles were found to have adopted a “riot frame,” emphasizing the general disorder caused by the protests, and 42% of articles utilized a “crime story frame,” focusing on specific criminal acts, such as arson, looting, and vandalism, committed by the individual protestors,⁷⁵ despite a comparatively small number of protestors and/or bystanders actually participating in criminal activity. An example of this, the article *TURMOIL IN FERGUSON; Ferguson’s anger builds and spreads; Many residents appear to be shocked by the destruction. Protests in other cities are more peaceful*, which was published by

⁷⁴ *The New York Post, The New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, LA Times, Chicago Tribune, and The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Leopold and Bell, “News Media and the Racialization of Protest,” 724.

⁷⁵ Leopold and Bell, “News Media and the Racialization of Protest,” 721, 727.

the *LA Times*, illustrates a destructive scene, describing, and a variety of quotes littered through this, a "peaceful" demonstration that "turned ugly," as protestors "[threw] bricks through windows... [rocked an empty police car] back and forth, smashing its windows and setting it afire... jamming traffic." "A teenage girl knelt in front of an armored vehicle, and officers picked her up." Ferguson "[awoke] to see... their community in ruins." Local officials "failed to prevent violence."⁷⁶ The description is supported by a photograph of white policeman standing in front of a destroyed building (Fig. 37). Included is a quotation from Ferguson Mayor James Knowles, who pleads for the "[deployment of] the National Guard to protect *our* people."⁷⁷ Missouri Governor Jay Nixon describes the protestors as "[c]riminals intent on lawlessness and destruction terroriz[ing] this community... No one should have to live like this. No one deserves this."⁷⁸



Fig. 37: "Police investigators meet in front of a burned strip mall at Chambers Road and West Florissant Avenue in Ferguson on Tuesday, Nov. 25, 2014." Photo: Wally Skali/TNS, *Los Angeles Times*.

⁷⁶ Muskall and Queally, "TURMOIL IN FERGUSON."

⁷⁷ Emphasis added. Knowles quoted in: Muskall and Queally, "TURMOIL IN FERGUSON."

⁷⁸ Nixon quoted in: Muskall and Queally, "TURMOIL IN FERGUSON."

Reports on the London riots were similarly arrested by the acceleration in criminal behavior. BBC News UK posted real-time updates to a map (Fig. 38) plotting the spread of illegal activities and to a timeline, beginning with Mark Duggan's death, cataloguing individual occurrences of disorderly conduct and successful arrests.

Thursday 4 August [2011], 18:15 BST - Mark Duggan, 29, is shot dead by police at Ferry Lane, Tottenham....

Saturday 6 August, 20:20 BST -The violence begins as bottles are thrown at two patrol cars close to the police station. One of the vehicles is set alight, while the other is pushed into the middle of the road before also being torched....

Friday 12 August, 00:22 BST - The Metropolitan Police say 1,103 people have now been arrested in connection with the riots and 654 people have been charged.

Greater Manchester Police said they had so far made 147 arrests and more than 70 people had already gone through the courts. Merseyside Police said they had made 77 arrests and charged 45 people. West Midlands Police said 445 people had been arrested and Nottinghamshire Police said they had arrested 109 people and charged 69.⁷⁹

Photographs of youths, faces concealed by ski masks or scarves, looting, confronting police officers with wooden sticks, gasoline bombs, and broken bottles, setting alight vehicles, trash bins, and buildings, often accompany the reporting. Politicians, eager to offer their opinions, commented on the egregious outbreak of violence. "There is no excuse for violence, no excuse for looting, no excuse for thuggery, and those who are responsible must know that they will be brought to justice," Home Secretary Theresa May said. "I think this is about sheer criminality."⁸⁰ Interviews were conducted with those working class business owners and neighborhood residents affected by the riots, some of whom, such as the Southall Sikhs, took up arms of swords and hockey sticks, prepared to defend themselves, their homes and their business. The

⁷⁹ "England riots: Maps and timeline."

⁸⁰ May quoted in: Burns and Somaiya, "Rioting Widens in London on 3rd Night of Unrest."

Metro UK described them as a “community” protecting themselves against the rioters.⁸¹ Tense race relations were carefully refuted by the centrality of individuals’ reckless criminal behavior in the reporting of the riots. Since rioters and the framed victims of the riots had various ethnic backgrounds, Prime Minister David Cameron said, “Let’s be clear: these riots were not about race.”⁸² The Guardian asked, “Did deprivation and poverty cause the riots?”⁸³ Cameron was clear to also deny that recent government cutbacks to social programs were not the cause either.⁸⁴ “No, this was about behavior,” Cameron states, “People showing indifference to right and wrong. People with a twisted moral code. People with a complete absence of self-restraint.”⁸⁵ He called for a war on gangs and gang culture.⁸⁶ On BBC’s current affairs program *Newsnight*, radio and television personality David Starkey countered Cameron’s dismissal of the race issue by controversially declaring in an absurdist and race-baiting comment, “The whites have become black,” as white youth assume components of “a particular sort of violent destructive, nihilistic gangster culture.”⁸⁷ Former Prime Minister Tony Blair sought issue with children’s resistance to mainstream values.⁸⁸

⁸¹ “Southall Sikhs defend their temple from London riots.”

⁸² Cameron quoted in: Stratton, “David Cameron on riots.”

⁸³ The Guardian quoted in: Frost, Phillips, and Singleton, “Commentary: Researching the Riots,” 5.

⁸⁴ “And these riots were not about poverty.” Cameron quoted in: Stratton, “David Cameron on riots.”

⁸⁵ Cameron quoted in: Stratton, “David Cameron on riots.”

⁸⁶ “England riots: David Cameron declares war on gangs.”

⁸⁷ Starkey quoted in: Quinn, “David Starkey claims ‘the whites have become black.’”

⁸⁸ Frost, Phillips, and Singleton, “Commentary: Researching the Riots,” 4.



Fig. 38: Screenshot of an interactive map, entitled “Riots and disorder spread across England.” BBC News UK, 15 August 2011.⁸⁹

In its description of the London riots, *The New York Times* reported “Nothing remotely like it had been seen in London since 1985, when another eruption that occurred mainly among black youths led to violent running battles with the police.”⁹⁰ Indeed, it seems not much has changed in the manner of reporting on eruptions such as these. In the examination of reporting on the Brixton and Toxteth riots of April and July 1981, respectively, social geographer Jacqueline Burgess found descriptions of the riots to be inaccurate, often employing extreme emotional tones and metaphors of war for sensationalist titles, “RIOT, TORN, RIOT RAVAGED, THE BATTLE OF BRIXTON, BLOODY SATURDAY, WAR ON THE STREETS.”⁹¹ The Brixton riots occurred after Michael Bailey, suffering from a four-inch stab wound, was taken into police custody, who transferred the youth to a hospital. During the exchange, witnesses accused the police officers of not moving quickly enough to save Bailey and

⁸⁹ “England riots: Maps and timeline.”

⁹⁰ Burns and Somaiya, “Rioting Widens in London on 3rd Night of Unrest.”

⁹¹ Burgess quoted in: Frost, Phillips, and Singleton, “Commentary: Researching the Riots,” 4.

demanding he be released to them. The man survived, although rumors of his death circulated the neighborhood. The Toxteth riots erupted following the heavy-handed arrest of Leroy Cooper. The photography student had intervened when the police attempted to arrest another man, then wrongly accused of stealing a motorbike.

Four years later, the arrest of a local resident for a traffic offense sparked the 1985 Handsworth riots in Birmingham. In his essay, “Through the Wire: Black British People and the Riot,” art historian Eddie Chambers examines the photograph of a Handsworth petrol bomber (Fig. 39), an image that was published prolifically, appearing in the *Daily Express*, *Mirror*, *Sun*, *Observer*, and *Daily Mail*.⁹² He writes:

*The lone youth pictured strides purposefully, [confidently], righteously (some might say menacingly) with petrol bomb in hand, presumably identifying and approaching his quarry during the course of a riot in Birmingham, Britain’s second city. In framing the lone petrol bomber, the media, inadvertently perhaps, bestowed on him an almost iconic status, even as some regarded him as an affirmation of their worst fears.*⁹³

The press photograph, according to Chambers, underscores a mediated attempt to describe the riot through a selected framework, one that emphasizes individual deviance and violent behavior. However, the “[chimes of] dominant pathologies of violent, homicidal Black youth” display an active mythology of thought that reduces the black man to “a new folk demon, the ‘black bomber,’ [formerly, in iconography, the] ‘black mugger.’”⁹⁴ This characterization, or caricaturization, of rioters, dismissed as delinquents, has the effect of silencing them. As seen in later reporting of anti-police, black-led demonstrations, routinely, rioters are not afforded opportunities through mainstream media to explain themselves and articulate their grievances.⁹⁵

⁹² Solomos and Back quoted in: Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 12.

⁹³ Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 12.

⁹⁴ Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 12.

⁹⁵ Frost, Phillips, and Singleton, “Commentary: Researching the Riots,” 5.

Without a voice, the outcomes or events directly affected by the contentious relationship between black people and police authorities do not, in their mediation, dwell upon these origins. As Chambers points out, in regards to both the Brixton and Handsworth riots, “apocryphal stories or rumors of casual police brutality meted out to allegedly delinquent Black motorists or, indeed, Black passers-by, [who] were identified as prerequisite sparks.”⁹⁶

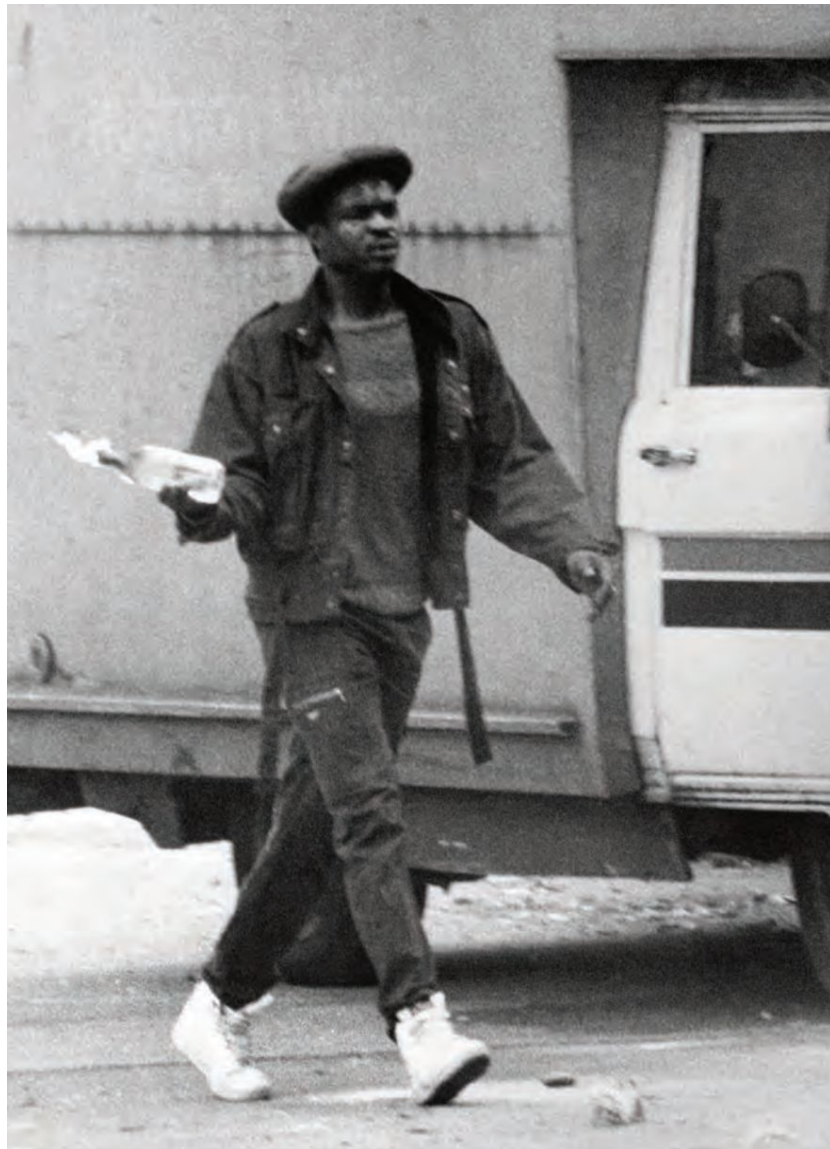


Fig. 39: “A youth carries a firebomb on the second day of the Handsworth riots in Birmingham.” © Press Association Images.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 9.

⁹⁷ Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 7, 12.

The particular criminal framing is, of course, not exclusive to black-led riots. Infamously, published in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, two press photographs capture subjects wading through chest-high water, carrying items taken from nearby grocery stores (Figs. 40-41). However, the captions for each are revealingly distinct from one another. The photograph of the black teenager reads, “A young man walks through chest deep flood water after *looting* a grocery store.” The caption for a photograph of a white woman and man reads, “Two residents wade through chest-deep water after *finding* bread and soda from a local grocery store.”⁹⁸ Reports of out-of-control black residents looting markets, firing guns at helicopter rescuers, committing homicide and gang rape, played across forms of media distribution. Although now to be determined as largely false and the results of over-reporting, the reports had very real consequences in the form of quasi-militia groups, primarily made up of white residents and local police officers intent on enacting racially motivated violence.⁹⁹ One of the most serious cases involved New Orleans officers, out of uniform and off duty, opening fire on unarmed black civilians, resulting in the death of 17-year-old James Brissette and Ronald Madison, a developmentally disabled man whose body Sgt. Kenneth Bowen stomped upon as he died.

⁹⁸ Emphasis added. Captions quoted in: Sommers et al., “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” 4.

⁹⁹ According to National Guard coordinator Lieutenant General Russel Honoré, “It was way over-reported. People confused looting with people going into survival mode. It’ll happen to you and I if we were just as isolated.... Some of the [media] were giving information that wasn’t correct...Much of it was uncorroborated information probably given with the best of intentions.” Honoré quoted in: Guarino, “Misleading reports of lawlessness after Katrina worsened crisis, officials say.”



Fig. 40 (left): “A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005.” Photo: Dave Martin, *Associated Press*.

Fig. 41 (right): “Two residents waded through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.” Photo: Chris Graythen, AFP/Getty Images.

In 2010, the Heinz Endowments’ African American Men and Boys Task Force led a three-month audit of local Pittsburgh news media coverage of African American males. Despite a quarter of the city’s population identifying as black, only 198 stories, approximately 9%, of 2,225 front-page articles featured news about or from black individuals. Of all the printed coverage of black males, 30% involved reports on criminal activity. On television, only 74 stories about or featuring black males were aired, 64, or 80%, of those stories were criminal reports.¹⁰⁰ The viral proliferation of reports of black criminality bears no objectively reflective vision on an impartial history. The little coverage of non-crime-oriented reports on black activity suggests *not* that blacks, in fact, are not partaking in non-criminal activities but *rather* that people simply neither care nor recognize the interests, experiences, lives and perspectives of black people.¹⁰¹

A point Chambers too elucidates in his essay. In January of 1981, several months before the clash surrounding Michael Bailey, thirteen black youths, aged 14 to 22, were killed in a

¹⁰⁰ The Heinz Endowments’ African American Men and Boys Task Force, *Portrayal and Perception*, 14-15.

¹⁰¹ The Heinz Endowments’ African American Men and Boys Task Force, *Portrayal and Perception*, 20.

house fire in New Cross. “The aftermath of the tragedy,” Chambers writes, “threw into sharp focus an apparent widespread *indifference* shown to these (and indeed other) Black deaths by the mainstream news media.”¹⁰² Neither the Queen nor Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher offered condolences to the families of the victims—a far cry from the immediate letters sent by both to families of the Stardust fire victims a month later.¹⁰³ Despite police officers arriving initially on the scene stating that the fire appeared to be the result of a firebomb, investigators failed to provide a determinate cause for the fire, provoking outrage in the black community. Chambers notes, “Such arson attacks on the homes of African and Asian backgrounds were not uncommon in parts of London.”¹⁰⁴ Intent on disproving the possibility of a racially motivated attack, police investigators leaked interviews with witnesses claiming to have seen a black man driving away in a white car—claims the witnesses denied or were forced into making.¹⁰⁵ The Daily Mail published a false story of black youths being arrested in conjunction with the fire, which was picked up by additional media outlets.¹⁰⁶ The Sun emphasized the rowdy nature of the party at the house, describing it as noisy, overcrowded—witnesses contradicted this portrait.¹⁰⁷ In 1981, the *Black Voice*, the official journal of the Black Unity and Freedom Party, published the article “New Cross Massacre” accusing the media of purposefully distorting the facts. This initial stir of confusion following the tragedy was then met with, as Chambers describes, “two months of screaming silence.”¹⁰⁸ With no diligent, trustful word from neither monarchy, police authority, nor media, the *Black Voice* considers the indifference shown towards the loss of life and asks,

¹⁰² Emphasis added. Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 8.

¹⁰³ The Stardust fire took place at the Stardust discotheque in Artane, Dublin on February 14, 1981, claiming the lives of 48 people.

¹⁰⁴ Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 8.

¹⁰⁵ “New Cross First Campaign Report,” 6.

¹⁰⁶ “New Cross First Campaign Report,” 6.

¹⁰⁷ “New Cross First Campaign Report,” 6.

¹⁰⁸ Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 9.

“Could it be that there was no news value because they are not concerned about Black people being murdered?”¹⁰⁹

During a 2016 guest lecture delivered at the University of Chicago, Fred Moten describes black life as existing “in an open field of cutting eyes.”¹¹⁰ “The double-edge of the phrase, ‘how you look,’” he says, “turns out to mark a prolific danger in black life.”¹¹¹ In a 2019 interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, Moten describes racism and race as “generally been conceived of as primarily visual pathologies.”¹¹² That epidermalization exists not only in how one looks (appears) but also in the very process of looking (coming to understand those appearances). In April of 2015, President Obama criticized the media's coverage of the Baltimore riots. “The [peaceful protests] were constructive,” he said, “and they were thoughtful. And, frankly, didn’t [get] that much attention. [But] one burning building will be looped on television over and over and over again.”¹¹³ In its comprehensive photographic survey of the London riots, *The Atlantic* posted 41 images (Figs. 4.10-.26) detailing the violence endured over the course of the riots: Hooded, masked figures against illustrious blazes swallowing the city’s outfits—the implication being that they are of the mob that committed arson, congregated masses facing the police or swarming upon and destroying local businesses, organized state forces marching into the flames and “acrid smoke,” black subjects apprehended, arrested and detained, unsuspecting families fleeing barbarity, and the aftermath of violence in the form of devastated business owners, blood-covered victims, officers, and volunteers “in a show of solidarity” assessing the overwhelming intensity of the damage. The photographs imagine the cities as war zones and

¹⁰⁹ “New Cross Massacre,” 7.

¹¹⁰ Moten, “Lecture by Fred Moten, 5.3.16.”

¹¹¹ Moten, “Lecture by Fred Moten, 5.3.16.”

¹¹² Moten, “FRED MOTEN with Jarrett Earnest.”

¹¹³ Obama quoted in: Somanader, “President Obama on Freddie Gray’s Death: ‘This is Not New, and We Shouldn’t Pretend that It’s New.’”

narrativize a great and impossible threat assaulting the city, a nondescript, faceless mass that threatens to take away everything good in the world. In the text *In the Break*, Moten writes, “In Wittgenstein ‘logical structure’ is shared between two objects.”¹¹⁴ It is grounds to explain the internal relations or similarities between two entities, grounds from which one may infer or assess certain continuities. If blackness is the object around which a logical structure or pictorial relation is developed, then the routine deployment of photographs of destruction and violence practiced by black individuals in protest provide the content from which we are prompted to glean the equitability between black subjects and criminal activity. Racialized subjects are identified along notions of moral delinquency, deviance, and criminal impulsiveness and, as Joshua Clover notes in *Riot. Strike. Riot*, “figured as natural, animalistic, irrational, immediate.”

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Fig. 42: “A hooded youth walks past a burning vehicle in Hackney on August 8, 2011 in London, England. Disturbances broke out late on Saturday night in Tottenham and the surrounding area after the killing of Mark Duggan, 29 by armed police in an attempted arrest on August 4.” Photo: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images.

¹¹⁴ Moten, *In the Break*, 91.

¹¹⁵ Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 112.



Fig. 43: "A double decker bus burns as riot police try to contain a large group of people on a main road in Tottenham, north London, on August 6 2011." Photo: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images.



Fig. 44: "A rioter throws a rock at riot police in Clarence Road in Hackney on August 8, 2011 in London, England." Photo: Dan Istitene/Getty Images.



Fig. 45: "A riot police officer directs his colleagues to clear people away from a burning car in Clarence Road in Hackney on August 8, 2011 in London, England." Photo: Dan Istitene/Getty Images.



Fig. 46: "Police officers wearing riot gear walk past a burning building in Tottenham, north London, on August 7, 2011. Crowds attacked riot police and set two squad cars alight." Photo: Stefan Wermuth, Reuters.



Fig. 47: "Policemen head into acrid smoke to help tackle a fire at Clapham Junction in London, England." Photo: Chris Jackson/Getty Images.

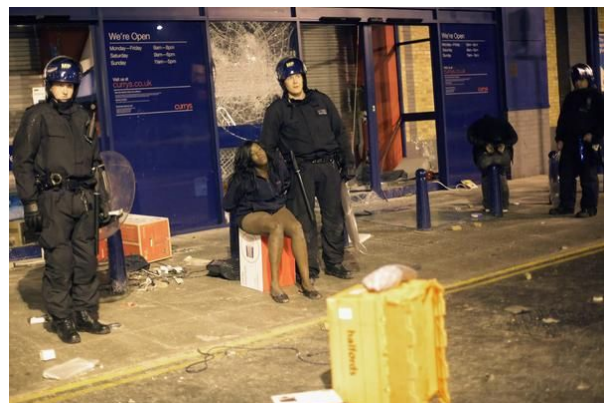


Fig. 48: "Two girls are detained outside the Currys electrical store in Brixton, in London, England." Photo: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images.



Fig. 49: “Youths loot a Carhartt store in Hackney on August 8, 2011 in London, England.” Photo: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images.



Fig. 50: “People walk with goods that they took from a shop in Hackney, east London, on Monday August 8, 2011.” Photo: Lefteris Pitarakis, *Associated Press*.



Fig. 51: “A police officer helps an injured officer as rioters gathered in Croydon, south London, on August 8, 2011.” Photo: Sang Tan, *Associated Press*.



Fig. 52: “Local residents flee Clarence Road in Hackney on August 8, 2011 in London, England.” Photo: Dan Istitene/Getty Images.



Fig. 53: “A police officer stands on a street in Tottenham, north London, on August 7, 2011.” Photo: Stefan Wermuth, *Reuters*.



Fig. 54: “A policeman walks past the charred remains of the Reeves furniture store in Croydon, south of London, on August 9, 2011.” Photo: Andrew Cowie/AFP/Getty Images.



Fig. 55: “Aaron Biber, 89, assesses the damage to his hairdressing salon after riots on Tottenham High Road, on August 7, 2011 in London, England.” Photo: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images.



Fig. 56: “Riot police face a mob in Hackney, north London on August 8, 2011. Riot police faced off with youths in fresh violence in London today in the third day of disorder after some of the worst rioting in the British capital in years at the weekend.” Photo: Ki Price/AFP/Getty Images.



Fig. 57: “Volunteers wait clear-up after overnight disturbances in Clapham Junction, in south London, on August 9, 2011.” Photo: Stefan Wermuth, *Reuters*.



Fig. 58: “People who have volunteered to clean up the damaged streets in a show of solidarity clean the remains of a burnt-out car on a street in Hackney, London, on Tuesday, August 9, 2011, following unrest on late Monday.” Photo: Akira Suemori, *Associated Press*.¹¹⁶

Media technologies, returning to Larkin, are not neutral. They represent “cultural ambitions, political machineries, modes of leisure, relations between technology and the body, and, in certain ways, the economy and spirit of an age.”¹¹⁷ As mediators of economic and cultural transmissions, media technologies, and the internet, lend shape to the events they describe.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Figs. 42-58 retrieved from: Taylor, “Riots in London.”

¹¹⁷ Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 2-3.

¹¹⁸ Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 10.

Integration into smartphones, broadband expansion, and social networking modes of interaction have produced a context in which navigable viral circulation and aggregation expose determined values of the distributor. Grappling with the political use of imagery is not a new frontier for Mehretu. In 2004, her *Stadia* series (Fig. 59) explores the mediated visual field that shapes the reception of war. In 2005, in an interview with Lawrence Chua, she states,

Having spent time in Istanbul, Germany, Australia and then back in the States, I was really interested in how our whole experience of viewing the world and the war was mediated through the television and newspapers. It felt almost like following a match or a sporting event. That's reductive, I know, but it was interesting because you could feel a nationalist sensibility in the responses to the war, even in the dissenting perspective... Here was this horrible situation happening and the reactive way each country was relating to it was as if it was a rugby match, as if we weren't all in it together. Then right after that was the build-up to the Olympics—it was super strange and ironic. I was interested in the kind of discussions everyone was having; we were talking about it as if it was happening in this massive arena. It felt like the whole world had been reduced to that kind of space. I just kept wondering, how could that happen, how could that look, how could I build that feeling?¹¹⁹

Through the architectural metaphor of the stadium, she unpacks themes of nationalism and revolution coded in the stadium, synchronously a battlefield and stage. By describing the visual field as “reductive,” Mehretu acknowledges a disconnect between reality and its mediation. The visual field is ultimately cultivated by an essentialist system. It simplifies the complex dynamics of social interactions and prioritizes some experiences and attitudes over others.

¹¹⁹ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu,” 26.



Fig. 59: Julie Mehretu, *Stadia I*, 2004. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 107 x 140 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Partial gift of Dominique Levy and purchase through the Accessions Committee Fund with the additional support of Gay-Lynn and Robert Blanding, Jean and James E. Douglas, Jr., Ann and Robert S. Fisher, and Pat and Bill Wilson. © Julie Mehretu.

According to Larkin, the use of technology can itself “represent an ideology of superiority[and] also an internalization of its logic.”¹²⁰ When the media technology exclusively represents postcolonial leadership, usually European civilization, an acquiescence to their standard means an internalization or maintaining of ideas associated with cultural differences and racial supremacy and inferiority.¹²¹ The experience becomes a sublime one when the use of such technology is inescapable, thus, imparting feelings of powerlessness upon the ruled over to not

¹²⁰ Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 8.

¹²¹ Larkin writes of British colonial officials recording, and circulating recordings of, Nigerians reacting to British technologies. Bianca Murillo interprets this as evidence of active efforts to maintain ideas about white supremacy. See: Murillo, “The Modern Shopping Experience,” 37

adjust the paradigm of power. “There is always a multitude of ways of seeing,” the artist states “The effort to control and delineate—that is really part of a different project. It’s a project of power. It’s how we’ve dealt with land and place, people and history, art and language over centuries.”¹²² In the age of de facto expansionism, 19th-century American landscape painting arguably dogmatizes the attitudes of the colonizing powers, effectively dehumanizing indigenous tribal communities and thus reasoning their exploitation. Moreover, the landscapes are orchestrated and exploitative constructs, designed to sell, say, the project of westward movement or the preservation of nature. In the artist’s linking action, the genre provides a framework through which we may assess the newsworthy photograph of black-led protest. Their interfaces exposed and in direct communication with one another, available becomes all their accompanying strings of information and significance to help the artist attempt to answer, “What does it mean to paint a landscape... *in this political moment?*”¹²³ And, as an audience to the work, we are prompted to consider what it means to look *at* the landscape in this political moment, what it means to look *through* the landscape *at* this political moment. The intertextual approach prompts us to consider the *constructed* image, the political uses of the visual field and mediated publicity in the age of digital information as a continued project of power.

In the organized production of the visual field, that which depends upon the social calibration of history, a narrative is inaugurated by a racialized mode of looking. The significance of a photograph, a document, is not located in its concrete mimesis of an event but in its deployment and organization. As crime imprints upon the black condition, the stage is set for black subjects to be disavowed. Adorned with Kevlar vests, military-grade helmets, armed

¹²² Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu interview: the politics of abstraction.”

¹²³ Emphasis added. Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.”

with rifles, pistols, and shotguns, police officers, standing against the flames, enter the discursive, pictorial assembly as the responsive force galvanized into action to mitigate the carnage. It is not simply that the photographic organization presents black subjects as criminals but logicizes the reactionary state-sanctioned violence as necessary, important and worthy of defending. In the canonical text *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman shifts the narrative that insists on the movement of black life from slavery to freedom. She argues, instead, that we exist in “the afterlife of slavery.” Slavery, neither a trace nor a shadow, is very much alive and active in the post-Emancipation time of juridical black freedom. “Freedom did not abolish the lash,” she writes, instead, it has been displaced with the cultivation of consciousness and the “repressive [instrument] of the law.”¹²⁴ Hartman expresses, “the recognition of humanity “grants the “blameworthiness of the free individual,” which leads to “forms of violence and domination.”¹²⁵ It is significant that the character Gus in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is a *freed* man. It is his very “freedom” that demonstrates he is indeed culpable and deserving of the brutalization that meets him in the end. Emphasis upon black criminality provides a way out from under the acknowledgement of the ways in which fundamental racism is lodged within state-sanctioned acts of brutality. Organized violence against black bodies is deemed permissible, defensible when they, whom such acts are practiced against, are perceived not as citizens worth protecting but as criminals whose lives are deemed less valuable.

Mehretu provides an alternative force to the dominant organizing principles of the visual field with her use of the montage. In 2016, speaking at the Tate Modern, the artist read a quote by Ernst Bloch:

¹²⁴ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 140, 118, 249.

¹²⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 5-6.

*In technical and cultural montage, the coherence of the old surfaces is broken up and a new one is constructed. A new coherence can emerge then, because the old order is more and more unmasked as a hollow sham, one of surfaces that is in fact fissured. While functionalism distracts one with its glittering appearance, montage often exposes the chaos under this surface as an attractive or daringly interwoven fabric... In this sense, montage reveals less the facade and more the background of the age than does functionalism.*¹²⁶

Mehretu's collected images reveal how, adopting Frank Wilderson's language, a structure of antagonism enacted a long time ago continues to linger, echo, reverberate and carry forward into the present.¹²⁷ Generated by a one-way gaze, the politics of pictorial organization is a politics of exclusion, promoting dominant voices, subduing subaltern histories, and leaving undisrupted this prevailing order of power. Consciously or not, through the montage, Mehretu documents the way in which, through the deliberate and registered fabulations enacted by the photographic document and its assembly and dissemination through the digital infrastructure, living black people are actively silenced by the images white subjects constitute as representing blackness. In its inauguration of a narrative that criminalizes black subjects and defends their interdiction, the pictorial field intimates how history presents less an objective vision of events and, instead, has come to resemble a damaging white supremacist fiction ("[the] hollow sham").¹²⁸ The discursive ethical gesture betrays a white morality predicated upon governing oneself against the ungovernable.

¹²⁶ Bloch quoted in: Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu: American Artist Lecture Series."

¹²⁷ Wilderson distinguishes antagonism from conflict. While conflict involves an opposition between entities that can be resolved either at the conceptual or practical level, leaving subject-positions in tact, antagonism underscores an irresolvable conflict, an opposition that cannot be overcome practically or conceptually. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 142..

¹²⁸ In conversation with Dagmawi Woubshet in 2014, Mehretu expressed, "[If you come from a queer or gay perspective [or being in a situation of extreme racism,] you realize all the fiction that exists around you."

Added quote from same interview. "When you realize that something that is such a deep part of who you are can be thought of in the most dehumanized way, you are able to think past the desire for the human in the humanist way. And that allows for this other potential that I think comes from all these perspectives of being. Whatever pushes that to happen, it can come from the queer perspective *or being in a situation of extreme racism*, whatever creates that feeling of dehumanization, the push or presence or force is so clear, so there, such a denial of your certainty, your existence, your knowledge. So seeing and understanding and knowing through that space of fugitivity, you are able to allow possibility, you are able to understand or create from a place of bigger freedom. You can be an agitator in a different way because you don't have a lot of faith in a lot of that convention. That is really liberating." Emphasis added. Mehretu, "An Interview with Julie Mehretu," 796-797.

The visual field, structured by the pathology of racism, conjures a particular blindness constituted by a way of seeing that doesn't properly see and/or actively mis-recognizes that which it sees. Citing Orlando Patterson's text *Slavery and Social Death*, which proffers a theory on the phenonemon of Trans-Atlantic slavery distinguishable from other slave regimes throughout history, Wilderson, in his text *Red, White, and Black*, argues that black lives are constituted as "socially dead," meaning, they are perennially vulnerable to gratuitous violence.¹²⁹ He contests that violence is not merely an aspect of black experience but, rather, a condition that fundamentally marks black life. "It remains constant, paradigmatically," he writes, "despite changes in its 'performance' over time—slave ship, Middle Passage, Slave estate, Jim Crow, the ghetto, and the prison-industrial complex."¹³⁰ Thusly, violence *against* black lives is structured at the ontological level, occurring at the level of being, neither limited nor consequential but, instead, foundational to the construction of identities and subject positions. However, deployed in a semantic field and sphere of meaning, as Wilderson argues, sutured and committed to anti-blackness, ontological suffering integral to the black condition becomes ontological criminality in the service of whtie supremacy. The framed reflection not only accounts for and upholds but embraces institutional violence and the wielding of brutality (and power) against black bodies. Purpose and legitimacy behind black movement are effectively challenged and overwhelmed by propagandistic rationalizations that validate its interdiction. Violence is only recognized as such when it is the sporadic violence practiced *by* black individuals and occludes

¹²⁹ Patterson argues that slavery is not simply about coerced labor but, rather, more about domination. He distinguishes Trans-Atlantic slavery by its particular kind and unwieldy form of domination: "permanent violent domination of neo-natally alienated and generally dishonored persons." Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 12.

¹³⁰ Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 75.

the routine violence done onto black bodies. Through this prism of a peculiar kind of racialized blindness, black brutality is thusly mis-recognized.

The issue of racialized optics as an unconscious governor of faculties is, conceivably, considered in our reception of photographs that do not represent explicit black-led acts of violence. The underpainting *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, per Mehretu's filmed interview with Art21, includes photographs of black protestors apprehended by police officers. One included photograph details a man encircled by Metropolitan police officers (Fig. 61). The basic framing of a young, black male surrounded by white authorities is a remediation of a strong schematized narrative of *The Birth of a Nation*, wherein the problematic character Gus, played by a white actor in blackface, is framed by the Ku Klux Klan members (Fig. 62). Tragic and epic, the photo describes a disproportionate heavy-handedness on the part of the officers to apprehend the figure. Similar in content, Mehretu's earlier painting *Conjured Parts (eye), Ferguson, 2016* (Fig. 60), embeds within its underpainting a photograph of a man with his hands up facing police officers in riot gear (Figs. 63-65). Like the underpainting of *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, the photograph has been blurred beyond recognition of its content and submerged within a blur of improvisational drawing. In the *Conjured Parts* series, Mehretu pairs a body part with each painting: "heart," "head," "eye," "tongues." In regards to the subtitles, the artist says, "[T]here's no explanation or answer."¹³¹ The interplay between the site, Ferguson, the body part, eye, the scene, an unarmed black man with his hands up approaching officers with guns drawn upon him, the camera scope and the sniper scope brings to the fore a complicated dynamism between witnessing and perpetuating violence. The photograph facilitates what Saidiya Hartmann describes in *Scenes of*

¹³¹ Mehretu quoted in: Pogrebin, "Julie Mehretu on Her Influences, Auction Pressure and New Paintings."

Subjection as a “slipperiness of empathy.”¹³² “What does the exposure of the violated body yield?” the author asks, “Proof of black sentience or the inhumanity of the ‘peculiar institution’? Or does the pain of the other merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection?”¹³³ Hartman explores empathetic identifications with black subjects, how their pain and suffering become sources of moral authority and pleasure for white spectators. Even if armed with the best intentions, these empathetic identifiers envision themselves undergoing similar kinds of experiences, prompting sentimental reactions rather than recognizing the brutalized bodies in order to facilitate action on their behalf. Ultimate is the need to replace the black body with the white body in order for empathy to occur, which is evidence of, Hartman writes, “the fungibility of the [black] captive body.”¹³⁴ The slipperiness of empathy obscures our own participation in that mental procedure, a violence itself, that turns black bodies into objects.

¹³² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 18.

¹³³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3-4.

¹³⁴ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.

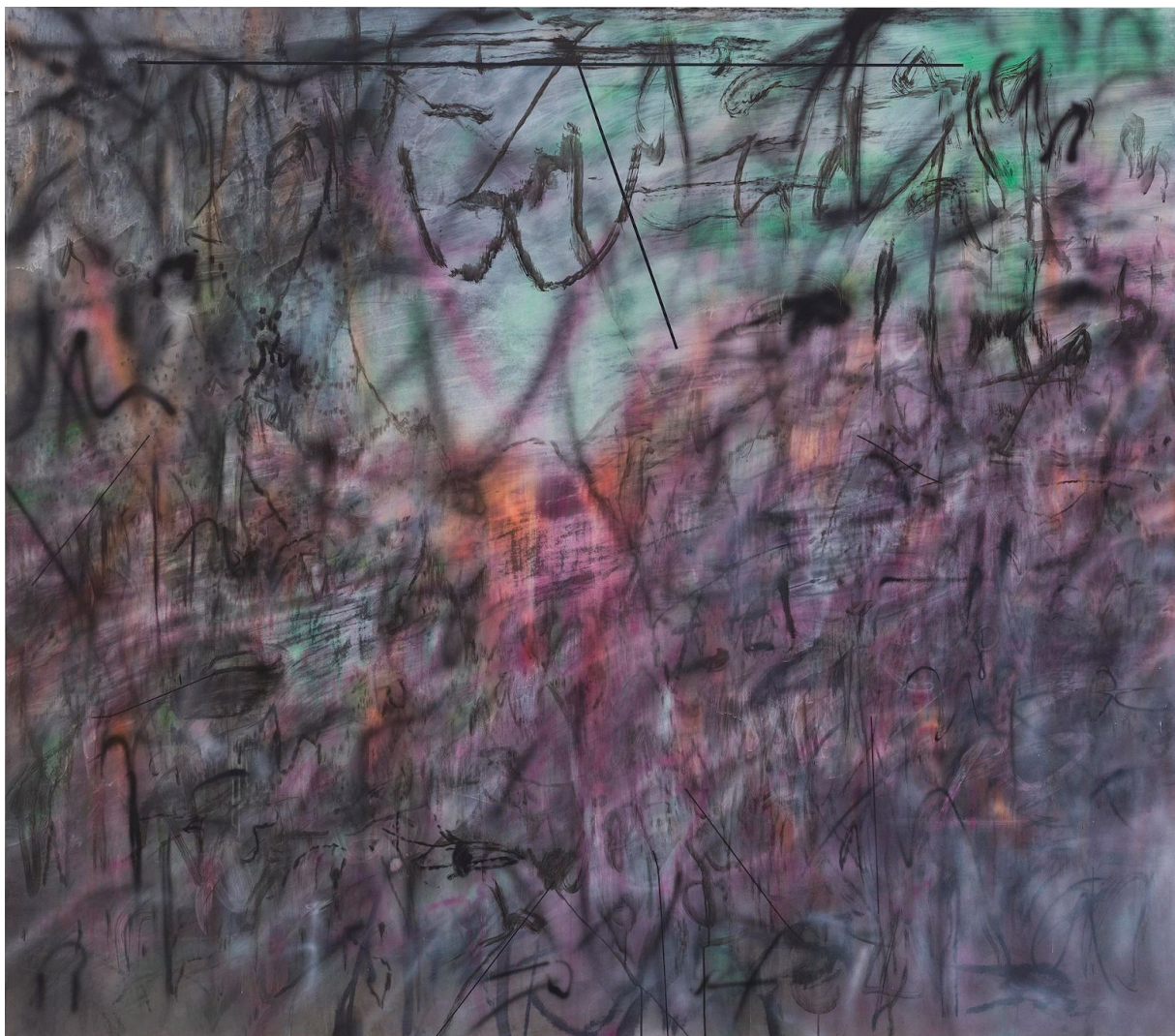


Fig. 60: Julie Mehretu, *Conjured Parts (eye)*, *Ferguson*, 2016. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 96 x 2 1/8 in. The Broad, Los Angeles. © Julie Mehretu. Photo: Cathy Carver.



Fig. 61: “British police officers arrest a man as rioters gathered in Croydon, south London, on August 8, 2011.” Photo: San Tan, *Associated Press*.



Fig. 62: “Actors costumed in the full regalia of the Ku Klux Klan chase down a white actor in blackface in a still from *The Birth of a Nation*, then the longest film ever made, directed by D.W. Griffith, California, 1914.” Photo: Hulton Archive/Getty Images.



Photographs fitting the description of *Conjured Parts (eye)*'s embedded image¹³⁵

Fig. 63 (top-left): "A man backs away as law enforcement officials close in on him and eventually detain him during protests over the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager killed by a police officer, in Ferguson, Mo., Aug. 11, 2014." Photo: Whitney Curtis/Redux, *The New York Times*.

Fig. 64 (top-right): "Police in Ferguson, Missouri, earlier this week. While crime has fallen to its lowest levels in decades, police departments are acquiring more hardware and finding more reasons to use SWAT teams and other heavy-handed tactics, regardless of the situation." Photo: Scott Olson/Getty Images.

Fig. 65 (bottom): "Police wearing riot gear walk toward a man with his hands raised in Ferguson, Mo." Photo: Jeff Robertson, *Associated Press*.

Mehretu's repetitious images, in concert, capture something beyond a single photograph.

In repetition, we are reminded of the photographs of violence that continuously land on our

¹³⁵ I am not asserting definitively that these are the photographs used.

doorstep, but, nonetheless, whose contents fail to move enough beyond disregarding, ignoring and/or tolerating black pain.¹³⁶ As Christina Sharpe writes in *In the Wake*,

*The anxiety that Hartman... articulate[s] around repeating this scene inheres in the awful configurations of power, desire, pleasure and domination to be found not only in the original scene, but also in its transmission, transformation, and renewal, to which we in the present are equally inured. We know that the repetition of such horror does not make the violence of everyday black subjection undeniable because presented in its most spectacular form, does not confirm or confer humanity on the suffering black body, but all too often contributes to what Jesse Jackson calls—in the midst of the catastrophe of and catastrophic response to Hurricane Katrina's devastating effects on black people and communities in the U.S. Gulf Coast—"an amazing tolerance for black pain... [a] great tolerance for black suffering and black marginalization."*¹³⁷

In addition to revealing the dominant discourse that enacts a mythology surrounding the black criminal figure, the montage underlines the appallingly ordinariness of black suffering and, moreover, the media's trafficking in the commodification of that violence.

¹³⁶ I would argue this, in part, because the viral amalgamation of photographs and video footage of police brutality against black subjects, arguably, recognizes a war against black Americans, but, nonetheless, the material evidence has not been enough to gain convictions. Little faith is gained when stark visual evidence is not enough to mobilize prosecutors and jurors to convict police officers.

¹³⁷ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 2.

Never *tabula rasa*, always *palimpsest*.

If a world of fiction exists all around you,, “how do you take what you’ve always thought of always being this convention or reality,” Mehretu asks, “how do you reconstruct it, how do you build a different possibility within, how do you imagine the *impossible*?”¹³⁸ The concrete entanglement of an optical pathology and categorization of racialized identities enforce the laws in viewing and being on view. Explanatory, descriptive, legible efforts are too often threatened by an unconscious repositioning into the politics of (mis)recognition. How, then, does one express, as Moten wonders, “the lived experience of the black” without exploiting the spectacle of black suffering?¹³⁹ “[W]ithout,” as Hartman considers, “exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?”¹⁴⁰ How to, as Toni Morrison addresses in a 1988 lecture, “[disentangle] received knowledge from the apparatus of control” and transform political referents into authors imagining themselves and their own stories?¹⁴¹

In looking upon these underpaintings, one, intently, is not interested in the contoured shape of the Andes Mountains of Church’s vision or the Conoco service station set ablaze. An amalgamation and simultaneous obscuring of imagery that renders the visual field opaque, sorted historical moments erupt to the surface through their cloudy, silken pixelation, emerging as singular, whole visions. An experiment in pixelation pushing towards its tactical possibilities,

¹³⁸ Emphasis added. Mehretu, “An Interview with Julie Mehretu,” 797.

¹³⁹ Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 187.

¹⁴⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 4.

¹⁴¹ Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, 132-133.

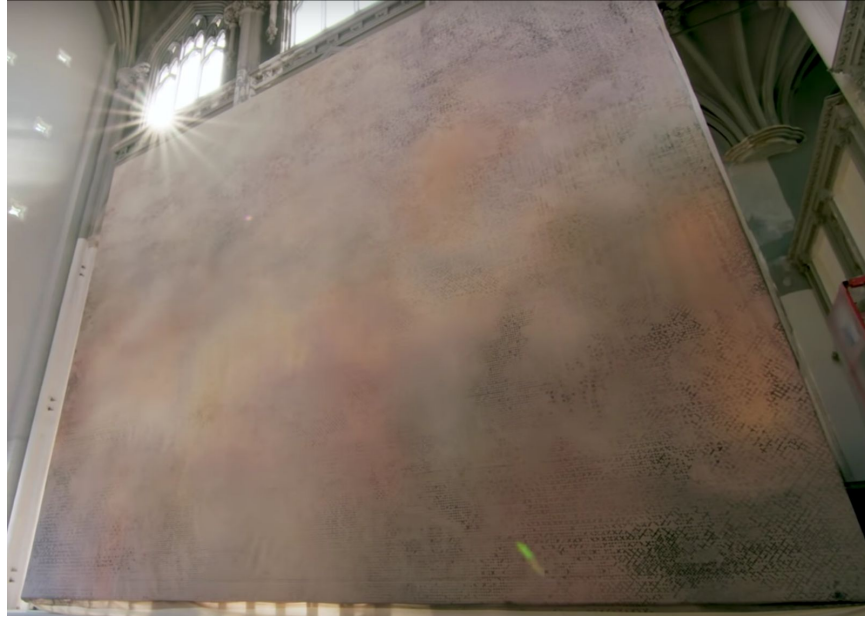
perception struggles to format itself. By “defamiliarizing the familiar,” as Hartman emphasizes, the artist’s resistance comes from engendered opacity in the material.¹⁴² “I have insisted on abstraction. There’s an opacity to my paintings that I hold on tight to,” the artist says, “Edouard Glissant said, ‘We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone.’”¹⁴³ The role of opacity, as Hartman underscores in *Scenes of Subjection*, quoting Glissant as well, is “to approach *a reality so hidden from view it cannot be organized in terms of a series of clarifications*.”¹⁴⁴ Mehretu’s automatized, syntactical reduction of the embedded images (Figs. 66-67), undercuts visibility and eschews the terms and structures of her address. Rendering and realizing in incomprehensible form the materiality of black suffering, disrupted is the habitual perception that makes sense of pictures in relation, or more generally, to make sense of the world. Any sense of order legible in the awareness of the initial process, upon reaching the surface, disintegrates and dissipates. Spotty, weak ephemeral articulations that comprise the artist’s “blur,” a term frequently used by both Mehretu and Moten, falter the ability to construct a narrative and extrapolate conventionally given answers.¹⁴⁵ Muted voices beneath the delicate pixelation offer no fragments to be controlled or mined from the detritus of mediation. Opacity, as a site of resistance, truncates the reproduction of the black subject’s narratively condemned status. Visibility becomes a thing-in-itself rather than a relation to a referent. An explicit deconstruction of its intricate, precise construction within reveals a consideration that the known, or visible, world is not all that we may now.

¹⁴² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 4.

¹⁴³ Mehretu quoted in: Simmons, “Julie Mehretu Insists on Opacity.”

¹⁴⁴ Emphasis added. Glissant quoted in: Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Moten described the idea of “blur” to his friend, the artist and cinematographer Arthur Jafa, as being defined by those moments “when the level of precision goes up but in a way that doesn’t allow you to make simple distinctions between all the elements of whatever it was you were trying to pay attention to.” Moten quoted in: Battaglia, “Every and All.”



Stills (cropped) from *Art21 Extended Play*, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.” © Art21, Inc. 2017.

Fig. 66 (top): The printed canvas—that which would become the more colorful of the paintings—lined up on its custom-built stretchers in Church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem.

Fig. 67 (bottom): The printed canvas that would become the more somber of the paintings.

The opaque canvases allow the artist to dwell within a position of pause, to ground herself and more clearly discover a means to accentuate the traces of life within the photographic assemblages. The pressure of their silences provide sites for new arrangements to be formed, alternative knowledge to be drawn, for something *else* to develop and speak.¹⁴⁶ Almost immediately, abstractions of wave-like forms appeared almost immediately. These transverse forms run diagonally across the compositions, bisecting with force and conviction (Fig. 68-69). Marks resembling the human form began, then, to emerge (Fig. 70-71). “[T]hese bodies were coming out,” the artist describes the process,

If something started to look like part of a hand, or a part of a... leg, or part of a back, or whatever, [then I w]ould push that[. I]t started to do that by accident, or by intuitive dynamics[.] I started to really intentionally push that or work with that. So, there are moments where you could see... a Neolithic mark or hand that [references a David] Hammon's body print [(Fig. 72)] that, then, could have a reference to an Augustine arm that could then suggest more... I think that these landscapes are filled with bodies, they can't not be... especially the disembodied parts.¹⁴⁷

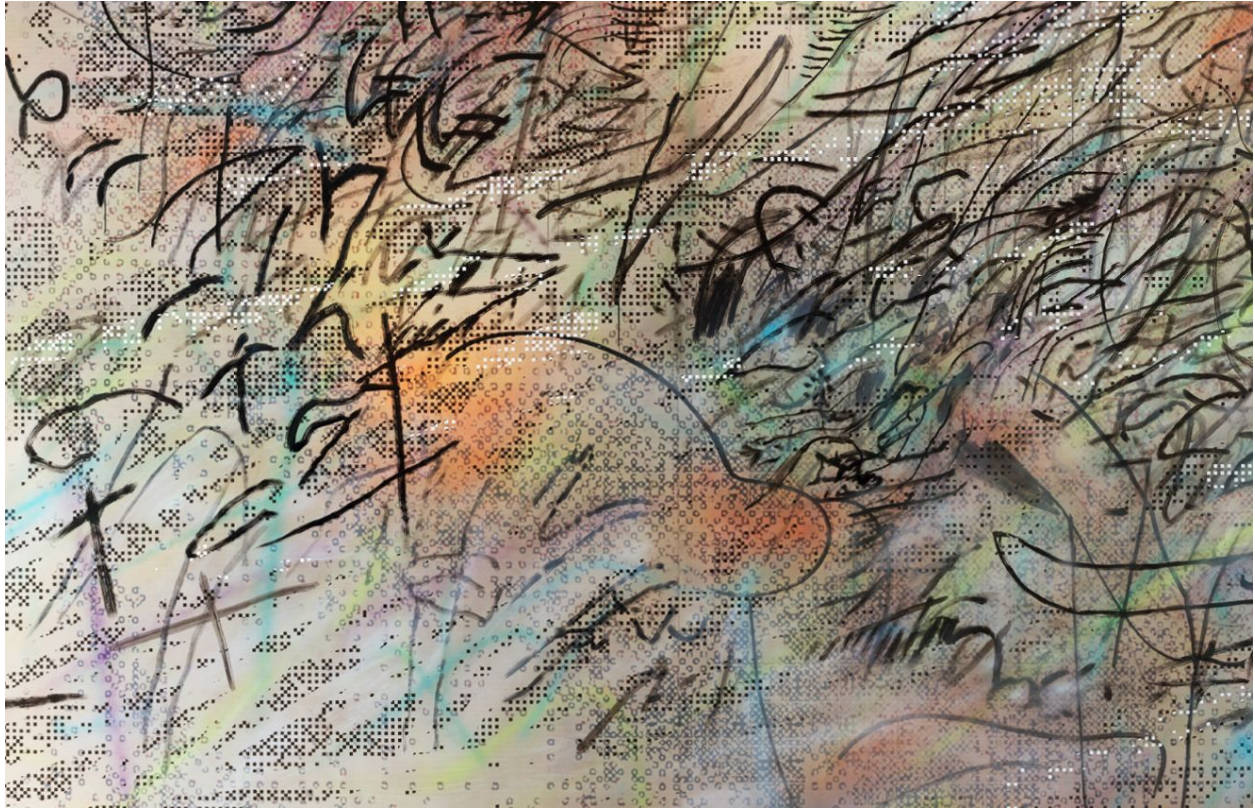
Their marked forms oscillate between continuous, delicately evanescent brushstrokes and starkly drawn, broken marks. The bodies never move straight, moving in, with, or against the rhythm of the tide. They appear beneath and above the waves, ascending from, submerging into Mehretu's abstract sea of ink. As the eye traces the waves, catching glimpses of the human forms that reveal themselves from their depths, a dizzying effect of nausea is induced, an unavoidable sea-sickness, an enforced empathy with their rendered characters the works mandate.

¹⁴⁶ “[T]here is this kind of urgency [of] working through... this kind of desire to make... something else with these paintings or go somewhere else.” Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

¹⁴⁷ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”



Stills (cropped) from *Art21 Extended Play*, “Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes.” © Art21, Inc. 2017.
 Fig. 68 (top): Gestural marks appearing on the painting that will become the more vibrant, in palette, of the two.
 Fig. 69 (bottom): Julie Mehretu at work.



Details of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

Fig. 70 (top): Figure appears to be kneeling over, back and buttocks exposed.

Fig. 71 (bottom): Simple gestural marks indicating a chest, or back, neck and shoulder.



Fig. 72: David Hammons, *Untitled*, 1969. Pigment on board, 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. Museum of Modern Art, The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, the General Print Fund, and Committee on Drawings Funds. © David Hammons.

Prior to beginning the commission, Mehretu had recently read Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*.¹⁴⁸ The novel describes the fugitive escape of Cora, a slave from a Georgian plantation, through a *literal* interstate railroad operating underground. This crucial, fantastic element applied to the story allows Whitehead to move beyond the novel's 1850 setting and thus throughout and around history, which would otherwise be unavailable to an author of a strictly "straight" historical novel. For example, Cora's experiences in the Carolinas reference

¹⁴⁸ "I had just read Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, which also infused my thinking of the American landscape." Mehretu, "Layering Histories," 244.

late 19th-century eugenics literature, early and mid-20th-century medical experimentation on black bodies, and the history of lynching that plagued the Jim Crow Era.¹⁴⁹ Deeply researched and yet imaginative, the text is an example of critical fabulation. Relinquishing the hold of “facts” in order to describe a deeper truth, its *fantastic* story and *alternative* history captures the very *real*, unique terrors central to the black experience and unfulfilled promises of a temporal, linear reality towards liberal progression in ameliorating that suffering. Whitehead’s representation of fugitive movements of escaped slaves are analogous to modern-day manifestations of black bodily interdiction. The slave catcher Ridgeway gains credibility in a language and philosophy that recognizes legitimacy in his pleasure of stopping black subjects, a reflection of the stop-and-frisk and petty stops that intervene upon black movement today. His enacted brutality towards the black body is analogous to brazen state-sanctioned violence and law enforcement. Reproductions of advertisements regarding runaway slaves render newspapers complicit in the upholding of the slavery system—a connection to Mehretu’s own use of newsworthy photographs meant to describe the black condition. Cora’s work as part of a living, museum exhibit, standing in a display case with other former slaves, gestures to the sanitation of episodes from the history of slavery in dominant narratives.¹⁵⁰ Offering parallels between “the

¹⁴⁹ Though the novel begins in a plantation in Georgia, within which the readers are opened to the legible, recognizable forms and manifestations of black bodily interdiction, it later opens to states routinely connected to progressive treatments towards black subjects. South Carolina, for example, is sold to Cora as possessing a government devoted to black uplifting. However, a sinister purpose behind the invitation to slaves to escape to the state is revealed in the form of medical experiments practiced on black bodies—a reference to not only the later 19th-century literature promoting eugenics but also its 20th-century manifestation in the unwilling and unwitting black participation in medical experimentation, including coerced sterilizations, unnecessary hysterectomies, and, specifically, the “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male.” The Tuskegee clinical study was conducted over the course of 40 years in the mid-20th century. Scientists observed the evolution of syphilis’ symptoms in approximately 400 black Alabamian sharecroppers, including blindness, paralysis, dementia, and premature death. The disease was never disclosed to the participants as the source of their illness, and, furthermore, the participants were never given penicillin, despite its ability to treat the disease. Her next stop, North Carolina, contests with the history of lynching, as Cora finds herself trapped in an attic overlooking a town park, where she observes a festival of lynching, a program of genocide that occurs and reoccurs every week—a story inspired by the better-known slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs, who hid for seven years in an attic in North Carolina.

¹⁵⁰ Three scenes in particular are represented in this living museum: life in continental Africa depicted as carefree hut habitation, life on a slave ship (Cora swabs the deck instead of being stowed underneath, covered in scabs, excrement, and vomit), and life on the plantation (Cora happily sews, no indication of her brutal subjection is displayed in the wounds left from the lash of the whip). Ultimately, these scenes underscore a common problem in representing enslavement.

past that is not past” and the present, the novel soundly confronts the reality of how a present condition is an inherited operation of historical subjugation.¹⁵¹ As Whitehead teaches that slavery has, utilizing Hartman’s term, an afterlife, he rejects the liberal philosophy of time and its reckoning, of a history that presumes temporality moves in unfolding progression, that things are getting better as subjects become more free. Instead, in line as well with Hartman’s argument, slavery has reconstituted itself, the novel considers, beyond formal abolition, and continues to clutch onto and hold back black life.

“I couldn’t look at these paintings,” Mehretu expresses, “and not think about [Whitehead’s] narrative.”¹⁵² Like the novel, the mined elements that gather in her vision bring to shape a history of slavery that shapes the present black experience. Necessary to understanding these paintings requires some sort of reliance on the codes embedded in black representation, or, more acutely, the representation of conditional suffering. Her imagined bodies amongst the waves take on, thus, a concrete meaning. In her book *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe describes black life as living “in the wake,” which is the author’s means of describing an existence in the afterlife of slavery.¹⁵³ She writes:

A ship moving through water generates a particular pattern of waves; the bow wave is in front of the ship, and that wave then spreads out in the recognizable V pattern on either side of and then behind the ship. The size of the bow wave dictates how far out the wake starts. Waves that occur in the wake of the ship move at the same speed as the ship. From at least the sixteenth century onward, a major part of the ocean engineering of ships has been to minimize the bow wave and therefore to minimize the wake. But the effect of trauma is opposite. It is to make maximal the wake. The transverse waves are those waves that run through the back [Fig. 73]; they are perpendicular to the direction of the motion of the

¹⁵¹ “[T]he past that is not past[, which] reappears always to rupture the present.” Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

¹⁵² Mehretu, “Layering Histories,” 244.

¹⁵³ Sharpe describes the wake as “the conceptual frame for living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery.” Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 1.

ship. Transverse waves look straight but are actually arcs of a circle. And every time, every instant that the boat is moving through the water it has to potential to generate a new wave."

Certainly Zong,¹⁵⁴ far away from any landmass, would have been in deep water, and any object, or person thrown overboard would have been in deepwater waves. Once in the water that thrown overboard person would have experienced the circular or bobbing motion of the wake and would have been carried by that wake for at least a short period of time. It is likely, though, that become many of those enslaved people were sick and were likely emaciated or close to it, they would have had very little body fat; their bodies would have been denser than seawater. It is likely, then, that those Africans, thrown overboard, would have floated just a short while, and only because of the shapes of their bodies. It is likely, too, that they would have sunk relatively quickly and drowned relatively quickly as well. And then there were the sharks that always traveled in the wake of slave ships.¹⁵⁵

The bodies of Mehretu's compositions are properly coded by their existence amongst these transverse waves. The waves provide a sense of place, albeit abstract and unlocable, and lend shape to the experience of the Middle Passage. Like the discarded "cargo" of *Zong*, the figures are overthrown, tossed to, turning within, being sucked into the wake of the slave ship. Hovering in suspension, between physical submersion and the ascension afforded by death, the extended arms and hands (Fig. 76), indicated by swift, fraught brushstrokes, appear as the hands of slaves desperately but in a futile effort reaching for an unattainable reprieve in J.M.W. Turner's painting *The Slave Ship*, 1840 (Figs. 74-75).¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Footnote added. The *Zong* massacre of 1781 refers to the 150 African slaves thrown overboard upon the order of the slave ship's captain, who did so as a means to cash in on the insurance policies taken out on "lost cargo"—the cargo referring to the slaves onboard.

¹⁵⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 40-41.

¹⁵⁶ This painting depicts the *Zong* massacre.



Fig. 73: "The wake of a cruise ship on the open ocean. Photo taken on March 20, 2011." © Bcbounders | Dreamstime.com—Cruise Ship Wake Photo.¹⁵⁷



Fig. 74: J. M. W. Turner (English, 1775-1851), *The Slave Ship*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 35.7 x 48.3 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund.

¹⁵⁷ Reproduced in: Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 24.



Fig. 75: Hands emerging from the sea. Detail of J. M. W. Turner (English, 1775-1851), *The Slave Ship*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 35.7 x 48.3 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund.

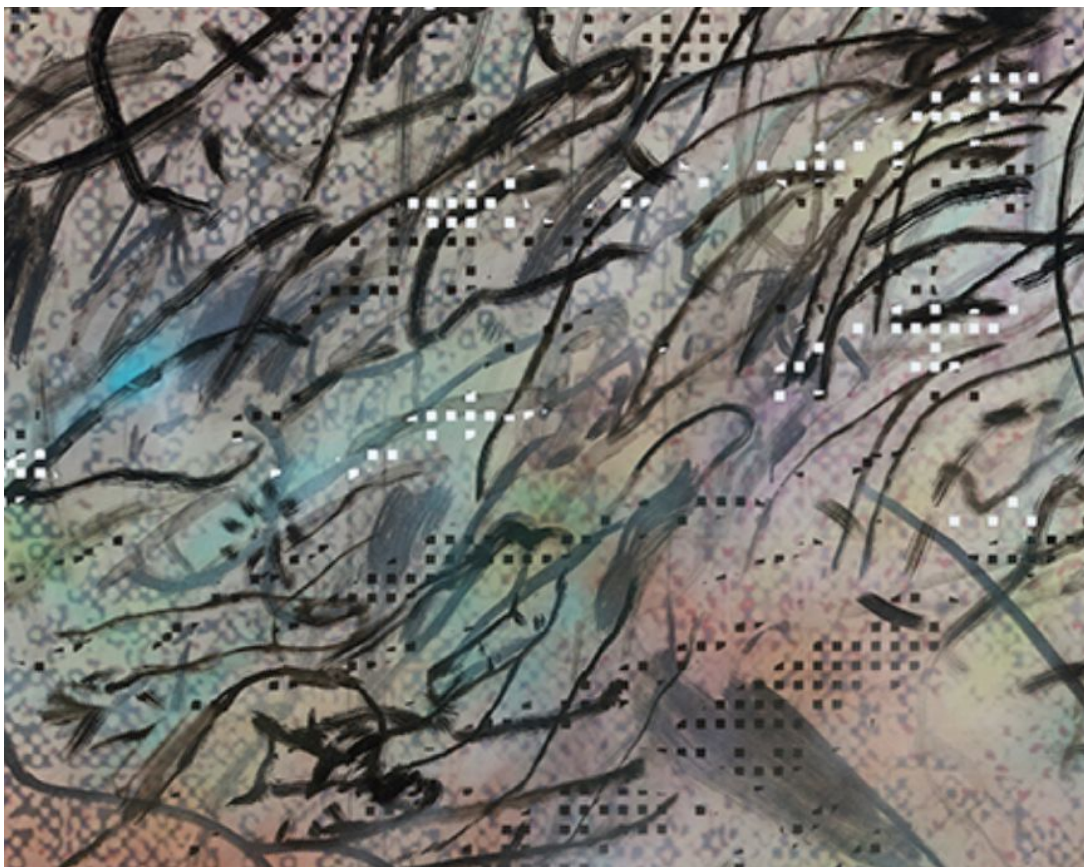


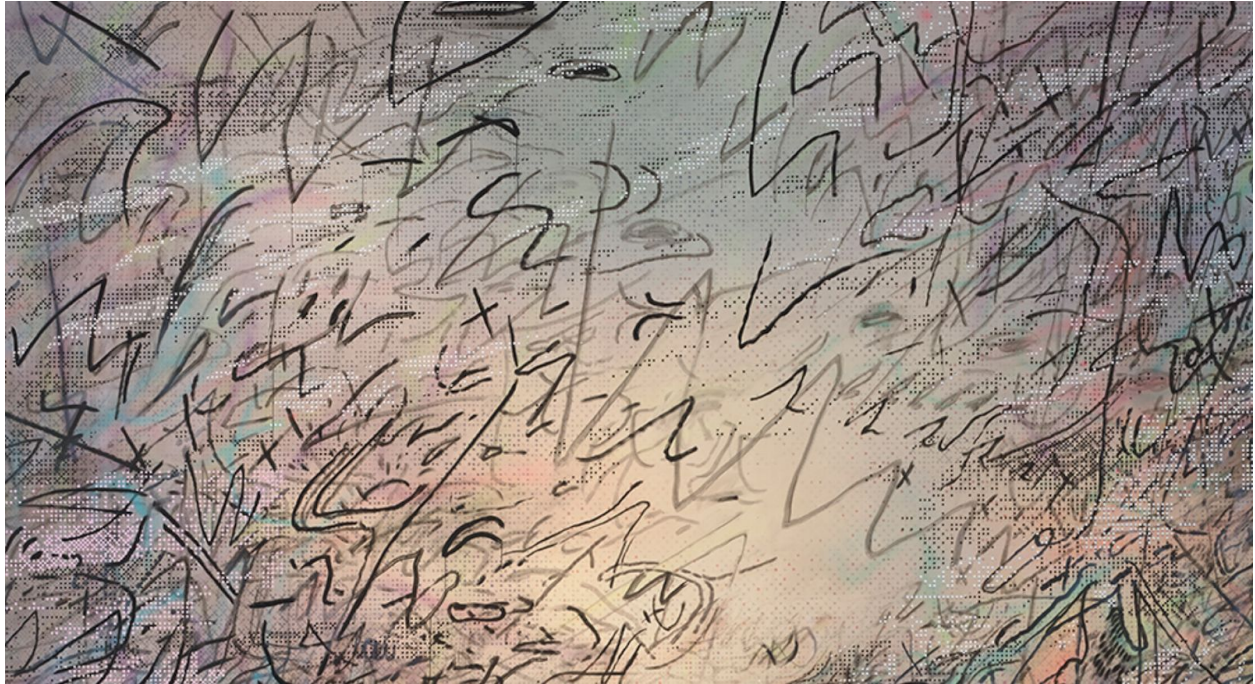
Fig. 76: Appearances of hands and fingers emerging from the marks. Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

Sharpe continues:

*What happened to the bodies? By which I mean, what happened to the components of their bodies in salt water?... They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues... The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time.*¹⁵⁸

In Mehretu's more somber painting (Figs. 77-78), installed to the far left of the Museum's foyer, monochromatic black, white and gray 8-bit screen-printed marks gracefully glide across the composition. Beautiful and delicate as they are, perhaps, they engender a different kind of violence onto the bodies with whom they share the site. Like ashes that blow in the wind, they threaten to take with them to an unreachable, unoccupable place the charred and discarded contents. A calculated absence, which occupies a central position in this more restrained composition (Fig. 79), appears as a dispossession and ostensible unfamiliarity that is registered despite the wealth of the forms about it, simulating, maybe, the absences within the dominant narratives regarding the history of slavery. Submerged beneath the wake of the slave ship and ascending towards a rendered omission forged by forgetfulness, Mehretu's figures represent an absence of the black body that was and never is true absence but an active erasure.

¹⁵⁸ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 40-41.



Details of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

Fig. 77 (top): 8-bit black, white and gray screen-printed marks emerge and disintegrate.

Fig. 78 (bottom): 8-bit black and white screen-printed marks glide across the surface.

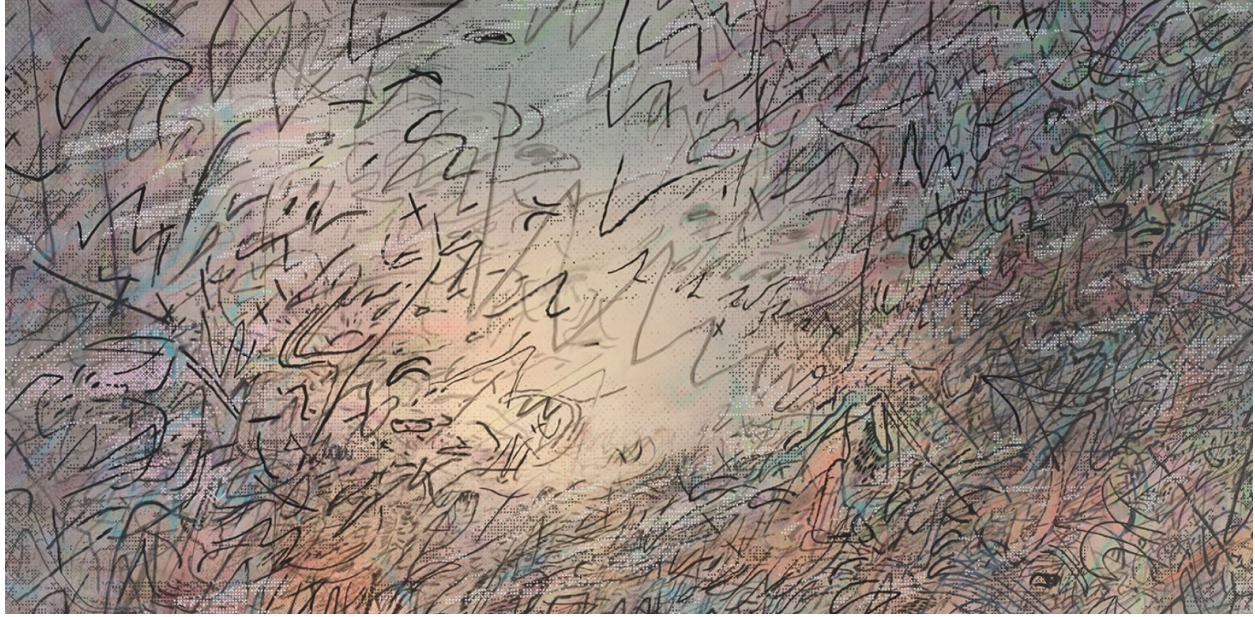


Fig. 79: A notable central absence appears in the more somber painting. Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

Stephanie Smallwood, in *Saltwater Slavery*, argues that, upon entering the economic field of the slave ship, individual identities are effaced and black subjects, now cargo measured as products, become wholly fungible objects. Wilderson too contests that the Middle Passage transforms black subjects into black flesh—indeterminate, indistinct objects upon which a vulnerability to gratuitous violence is enacted. In *Black and Blur*, Moten considered what can be gleaned from this transformation? He returns to Glissant:

*“Consent not to be a single being” is Christopher Wink’s translation of Édouard Glissant’s phrase consent à n’être plus un seul. The occasion of Glissant’s utterance is an interview with scholar and filmmaker Manthia Diawara in which Glissant is asked to reflect upon the irony of transversing the Atlantic on the Queen Mary II while having written and thought so devotedly and brilliantly on the [M]iddle [P]assage and its meaning... For Glissant, consent, which is not so much an act but a non[-]performative condition[,] is another way of approaching what he calls the “poetics of relation.”*¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Moten, *Black and Blur*, xv.

“A broken selfhood,” Moten expresses, prompts and enables a reflection upon the self that is dispossessed, that is denied the capacity for self-possession.¹⁶⁰ When one becomes the flesh, at first, one is lost, unable to see, at sea. But the capacity to see “allows me to see my abjection in you,” he says, “I am you, *we are one* in our abjection, which I can see in you, who are in my mirror.”¹⁶¹ Blackness, thusly, is predicated upon this poetics of *relation*, a social entanglement fundamentally drawn from recognized and shared abjection that is inaugurated by the Middle Passage.

The title *HOWL* gestures towards the artist’s preoccupation with that dynamic, *ensemblic* aurality of black suffering.¹⁶² “I was reading again Fred Moten’s *In the Break*,” the artist says, “and [the introductory chapter] is called ‘Aunt Hester’s Scream.’”¹⁶³ Moten’s chapter references, following Hartman’s lead in doing the same in *Scenes*, the event of graphic violence against Aunt Hester.¹⁶⁴ Described in great detail in Frederick Douglass’ 1845 autobiography, Hester, after fighting off the master who intended to sexually violate her, is stripped naked, hung up on a ceiling rafter, and violently beaten with a whip. The scene, Douglass acknowledges, serves as “the blood-stained gate” that marks his entry into slavery.¹⁶⁵ Moten dwells upon the howl in concert with Glissant’s philosophy, quoting:

Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse... Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized speech

¹⁶⁰ Moten, “Lecture by Fred Moten, 5.3.16.”

¹⁶¹ Emphasis added. Moten, “Lecture by Fred Moten, 5.3.16.”

Moten use of the word “abjection” is a direct reference to David Walker’s *Appeal*, who wrote, “that we Coloured People of these United States, are, the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began.” See: David Walker (1830). *Walker’s Appeal, In Four Articles; Together with a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to Those of the United States of American, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*. Chapel Hill, NC: Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [Web]. Retrieved from <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/walker.html>.

¹⁶² “I was thinking about sounds, and ‘Howl’ came.” Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

¹⁶³ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

¹⁶⁴ In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman identifies the scene as one of exploitable violence and decidedly elects not to reproduce Douglass’ narration in her own text. Moten refers to this passage and her overall text as fundamental in its influence of *In the Break*.

¹⁶⁵ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

*by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise.*¹⁶⁶

Uncontainable by legible, coherent language, it moves, like jazz, by way of ongoing disruption, an aurality, Moten describes, that exceeds language and “disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation.”¹⁶⁷ Resisting direct translation and distinct meaning, the howl constitutes the “wild notes,” the “rasping whispers deep in the throat” that become the “seemingly meaningless and incoherent” song, which Hartman describes in *Scenes*.¹⁶⁸ “Wrought by toil, terror, sorrow and composed under the whip and in fleeting moments of reprieve,” she writes, the sound communicates the “unsayable claims to truth” regarding the horrors of the institution of slavery.¹⁶⁹ An immeasurable objection, the shriek carries forward into and through all black performances, which, like the howl, express and exhaust “an irredeemable and incalculable suffering” possessable “neither in time nor in space.”¹⁷⁰

Mehretu believes that Hester’s call can be heard in her paintings.¹⁷¹ She gestures towards a musical emphasis in curving, diminutive parallel lines, resembling sound signals (Figs. 80-83). In broadcasting, these signals, after being translated into an electrical image, modulate either the frequency or the amplitude of carrier waves transmitted from an antenna, emitting an amplitude- or frequency-modulated (AM or FM) carrier wave transmitted in the radio broadcast (Fig. 84). The abstracted interrupting transverse waves, hence, occupy a second meaning. They pour forth excessively, an excessiveness predicated upon the very excessiveness of the violence that

¹⁶⁶ Glissant quoted in: Moten, *In the Break*, 14.

¹⁶⁷ Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

¹⁶⁸ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 35.

¹⁶⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 35.

¹⁷⁰ Moten, *Black and Blur*, xii.

¹⁷¹ “I think you hear them.” Mehretu quoted in: Schmidt, “Julie Mehretu Takes AD Inside Her New Studio.”

prompted their transmission.¹⁷² They broadcast the performance for which it names, that is the ongoing performance of Aunt Hester.¹⁷³ In his later text *Black and Blur*, Moten writes,

*This is why, as Wadada Leo Smith has said, it hurts to play this music. This music is a riotous solemnity a terrible beauty. It hurts so much that we have to celebrate That we celebrate is what hurts so much. Exhaustive celebration of an in and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured.*¹⁷⁴

The “enfolding rupture and wound” that is the materiality of black subject’s violation as well as the materiality of the violence that makes such violation possible, as Moten expresses, entangles black lives in an irreducible sociality that constitutes their ensemble—again, “I am you, we are one in our abjection.”¹⁷⁵ Two painted square white frames hover above the gestural marks (Fig. 85), denoting possibly an inability for a single captured moment to be “[reduced] to its phonic substance”—the soloist emerging from the collective that, still, “is an emanation of the ensemble.”¹⁷⁶ Through the frequencies of the disavowed, or the disavowed frequency through which “interdicted black social life” finds its sonic register, Mehretu uses echolocation to contour the complex aurality and sonic dynamism of the painting’s broken, bent bodies figuring and forming.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² Moten describes “the violence of which we speak” as “pouring forth.” Moten, *Black and Blur*, xi.

¹⁷³ Important to note, sound waves are *longitudinal* waves, however, commonly, in their depiction, they are drawn as transverse waves.

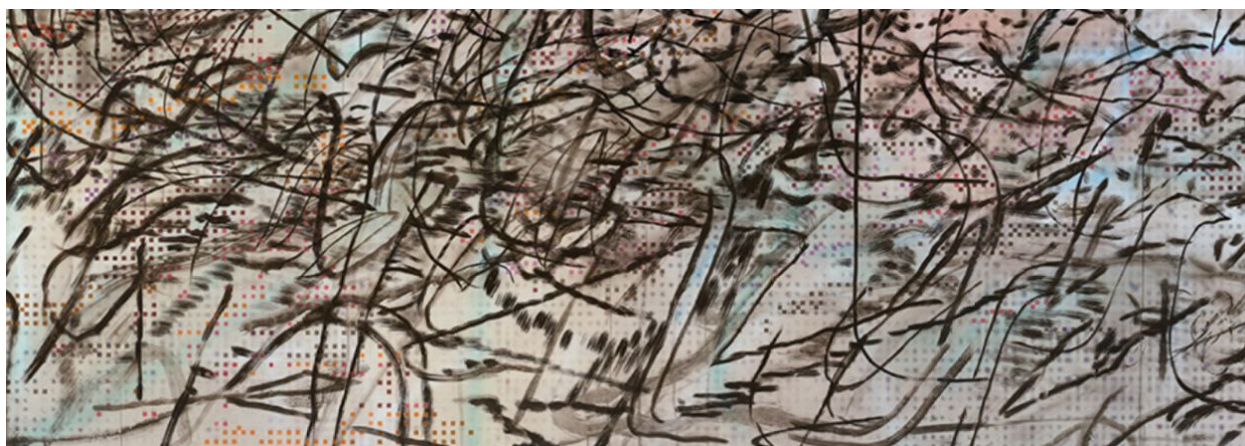
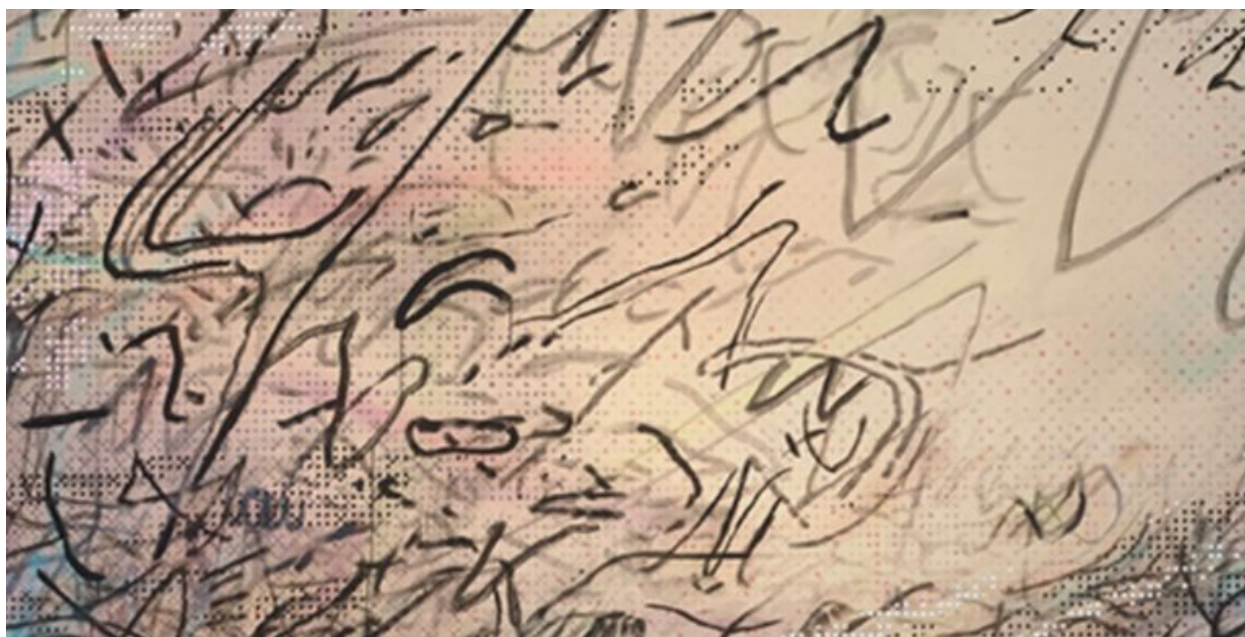
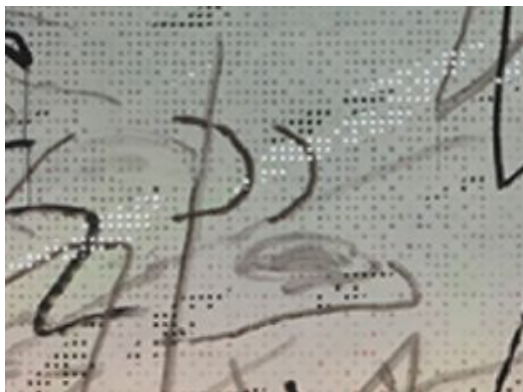
¹⁷⁴ Moten, *Black and Blur*, xii.

¹⁷⁵ Moten, *Black and Blur*, ix.

Moten, “Lecture by Fred Moten, 5.3.16.”

¹⁷⁶ Moten, “FRED MOTEN with Jarrett Earnest.”

¹⁷⁷ Black “social music” broadcasts on “frequencies that are disavowed.” Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 188.



Details of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

Fig. 80 (top-left): Two parallel sound-wave-like marks.

Fig. 81 (top-right): Sound-wave-like marks.

Fig. 82 (middle): Longitudinal sound waves drawn as transverse waves, which is commonly done.

Fig. 83 (bottom): Sound waves emerging from the composition.

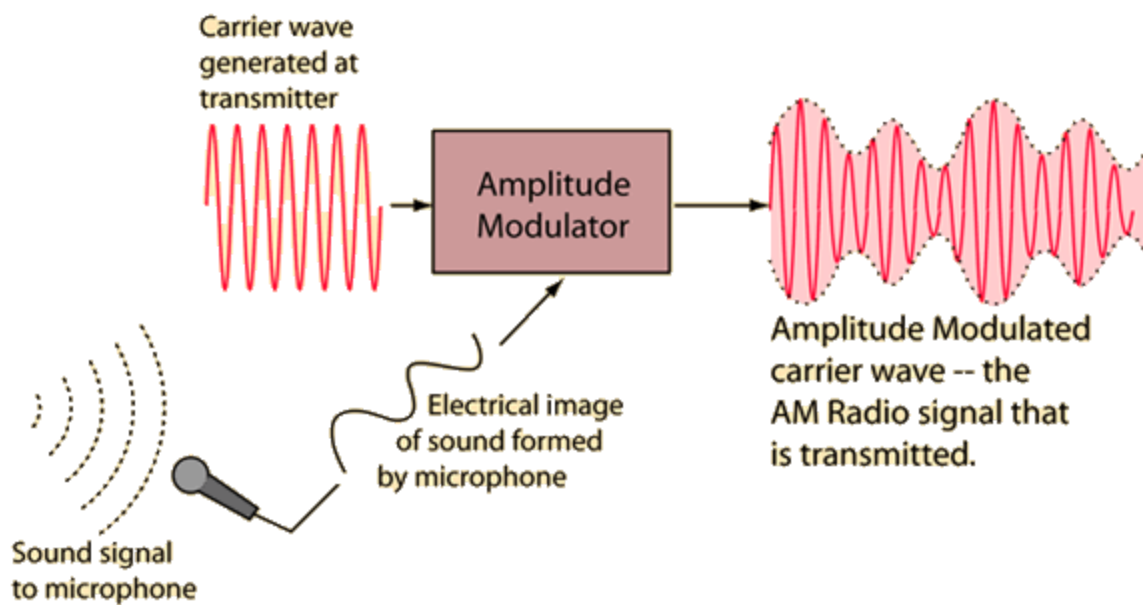


Fig. 84: Graphic detailing how a sound signal is transformed and broadcast via AM radio.¹⁷⁸



Fig. 85: Painted geometric forms. Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

¹⁷⁸ HyperPhysics, Department of Physics and Astronomy, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA. Retrieved from <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/Audio/bcast.html>.

Moten advises that the *description* of the ensemble “is only adequate if it is also [the] *experience* of the ensemble.”¹⁷⁹ Mehretu literalizes and enacts this social function of creating together, in expression and exhaustion of that suffering and violation, in her creative process. The jazz pianist Jason Moran was given an invitation by the artist to treat the decommissioned church, her temporary studio, as his own (Fig. 86). Seated on a balcony overlooking Mehretu’s canvases, he improvised arrangements of chords and tones while Mehretu intuited her painterly gestures (Fig. 87). The artist describes the experience:

*All of a sudden, this sound would take over the whole church... [H]e found these different sounds... I’d be sitting there... looking at the painting, and I would have to get up to work... Although I work with people around a lot... this was very different... [H]e kept playing one day, it was as if a call to get up, come on... [H]e kept pushing it, and I started to work, and I just tried to focus [and] started working... [T]here was a moment [when] I was completely lost in my work... I had never had that experience.*¹⁸⁰

Moran ultimately composed an avant-garde score out of the experience, recording the EP *MASS {Howl, eon}* in the Cathedral, whose scale and acoustics become obvious in the recording. With titles such as “Benediction,” “Confession,” “Responsorial,” and “Summon,” the sacred nature of the composition is reflected in the solemn moments requesting reflection and relaxation. However, it, like Mehretu’s composition, is fraught with moments of violence, as terrible and turbulent chords aggressively explode within and assault the score. Situated in the crucial dialect between celebration and terror, hope and despair, pleasure and pain, the music is an emanation, like all black performances Moten argues, through which black suffering is annunciated. No clear-cut politics explicitly presented, the sounds require your due diligence in indulging in its

¹⁷⁹ Moten, *In the Break*, 92.

¹⁸⁰ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

dissonant euphony. Seated between projections of details from Mehretu's final compositions, he performed the score in November of 2017 at *Performa 17* at the Harlem Parish in New York (Figs. 88-89).



Stills from *Art21 Extended Play*, "Julie Mehretu: Politicized Landscapes." © Art21, Inc. 2017.

Fig. 86 (top): Jason Moran composing on the church's balcony.

Fig. 87 (bottom): Moran performing as Mehretu paints.



Julie Mehretu and Jason Moran, *MASS {Howl, eon}*, 2017. © Paula Court. Courtesy of Performa. Photos: Paula Court.

Fig. 88 (top): Jason Moram performing his composition at *Performa 17*.

Fig. 89 (bottom): Jason Moran at the piano.

“I am looking for that space where you can’t have that *singular*, particular experience,” Mehretu says. “It’s about what is *undefined*, unstable.”¹⁸¹ In the process of clearing a space for poly-vocal, multiplicitous expression of black suffering, “[w]here speech turns song—remote from the impossibly comfort of origin,” Moten writes, “[that] lies the trace of our descent,” the artist induces a spatio-temporal collapse.¹⁸² The paintings’ sub-title *eon*, originating from the Greek word *aiōn* for *age*, refers to an occupation with the concept of time.¹⁸³ In the direct act of painting, the step-by-step processes of its digital (digits on the hand), as in the physical bit-by-bit, application are never lost, existing upon the painting’s surfaces. Potentially, the keen-to-know may unravel, unfold, and follow its diagrammatic mapping. Alternatively, Mehretu edits her *HOWL* compositions on the computer, digitally, as in applying changes to signals, electronic data, pixels. The underpainting adjoins the American landscape genre with these newsworthy photographs, and the processes lodged within those changes—those additions—and their relationships are remarkably erased once printed onto their singular surfaces. Time is connoted, understood differently—all is done at once, time compresses together in this impossible vision.

Aspects of the printed canvases rise to the surface in the form of 8-bit screen-printed pixels, which directly correlate with the underpainting’s entombed material. Mehretu’s pixelated molecules appear universal in form, 8-bit squares that glide across the composition, amassing as they flow and intermingle. Difference comes in their colored presentation. The somber painting, installed to the left of the foyer, contains exclusively monochromatic—black, grey, and

¹⁸¹ Emphasis added. Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu interview: the politics of abstraction.”

¹⁸² Moten, *In the Break*, 22.

¹⁸³ The term “eon” varies quite a bit interdepartmentally. In Astronomy, “eon” is a unit of time equal to a billion years. In Geology, it refers to eras, subdivisions of geological time. In Platonic philosophy, it refers to eternity’s power.

white—pixels; and its sisterly vibrant canvas possesses pixels imagined in the rainbow colors that appear as water breaks the sunlight. In her text *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand writes of socially constructed matter:

*There are ways of constructing the world—that is, of putting it together each morning, what is should look like piece by piece... Each morning I think we wake up and open our eyes and set the particles of forms together—we make solidity with our eyes and with the matter in our brains... We collect each molecule summing them up into flesh or leaf or water or air. Before that everything is liquid, ubiquitous and mute. We accumulate information over our lives which brings various things into solidity, into view.*¹⁸⁴

The montage constructed only in the service of its imminent deconstruction, the artist essentially materializes the pixelated marks, deliberate connections with the observable visual field that is structured by the visual pathology of racism, to posit its dematerialization, or liquidation. With and through the screenprinting, Mehretu's ghosts broadcast their haunting signal, on a wave uncontained by time or space—or, as Moten writes, “supplemented [by] the ghostly emanation of those last records, the sound that extends beyond the end of which it tells.”¹⁸⁵ He describes Hester's scream as a diffusion of sound that has not diluted.¹⁸⁶ Describing “the violence of which we speak,” he writes:

*[Its] concentration is both constant and incalculable precisely in its being non-particulate. At stake is an ambience that is both more and less than atmospheric.... It is a pouring forth, a holding or spreading out, or a running over that never runs out and is never over; a disbursal more than a dispersal; a funding that is not so much founding as continual finding of that which is never lost in being lost.*¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 140.

¹⁸⁵ Moten, *In the Break*, 119.

¹⁸⁶ Moten, *Black and Blur*, x.

¹⁸⁷ Moten, *Black and Blur*, xi.

It is the task of the artist's *cryptogrammatic*, fragmentary marks to reimagine, or reinterpret, the contemporary events the pixelated forms inhabit. The canvases are made open to the occupation and intervention of the gestural mark as the movement to bear the full imprint of the underpaintings' descriptions, to yield the paintings capable of *remembering* the violence of slavery that continues to reconstitute itself in the present. Sharpe writes,

Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which "everything is now. It is all now" (Morrison 1987, 198).

*The sea was like slake gray of what was left of my body and the white waves... I member.*¹⁸⁸

Contemporary lives impressed into the pixelated blur amidst the *Zong* passengers buried in the sea floor, *HOWL*'s double-burial is a memorialization of the violence that is not, was not lost. In the cycle of remembering and repression (or hopeful, hoped forgetting), the memory of the moment of slavery assembles, unassembles, and reassembles through the pixelation. Their interaction forging a praxis of articulating a "past that is not past," that continues to be in the present, the marks and the pixels underscore that black lives are still imperiled by a conjecture shaped by the institution of slavery.¹⁸⁹ To *remember* is a practice in staying afloat.

¹⁸⁸ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 40-41.

¹⁸⁹ "[T]he past that is not past[, which] reappears always to rupture the present." Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

Everything falls apart.

In 2003, after completing a commissioned untitled wall drawing (Fig. 90) for the National Museum of African Art's exhibition *Ethiopian Passages: Dialogues in the Diaspora*, Mehretu, referring to Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, calls her improvisational drawing "the wretched part of the painting, the life of the painting."¹⁹⁰ Her gestural marks in *HOWL* are the wretched, the abjected but, in its uncertain vision, not without hope, in its remembering, not without recovery. "[My project] in a sense offers another lens," Mehretu says of *HOWL*, "it's the *reversal* of the nineteenth-century project of going out west."¹⁹¹ The antithetical force of her paintings' is to imaginatively undo that violent project of colonization. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explores the concept of decolonization. He writes, "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder."¹⁹²



Fig. 90: Detail of Julie Mehretu, *Untitled*, 2003. Ink and latex, 172 x 170 in. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. © Julie Mehretu.

¹⁹⁰ *Ethiopian Passages: Dialogues in the Diaspora*, National Museum of African Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 2 May 2003 – 7 December 2003.

Mehretu, "A Conversation with Julie Mehretu."

¹⁹¹ Emphasis added. Mehretu, "Layering Histories," 244.

¹⁹² Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

An efflorescence of stylistic deviations, marks that contradict and contract, disorient through its aesthetic appearance of disorder (Fig. 91), Mehretu's abstractions fail to assuage and soothe. They do not reconcile their contoured figures, which appear suspended in immense agitation, of and into sparseness. Multiple voices—sounding off, calling out—and experiences—buried within, rising to—descend upon, ascend within the compositions. She describes her paintings:

*There is something about [the] amount of information, whether it's the screen-printing or the 8-bit marks[,] the drawing and the large brush strokes and the very small brush strokes and the airbrush. All of this language coming together is almost illegible. [I wanted] to push it to the point where you can't even understand it... The language breaks down to the point where it's just noise.*¹⁹³

Its opaque codes motion toward a contextual conscription through a language wrought into a peculiar dissonant form. Unafraid to bewilder, during an interview in 2014, she quotes Chinua Achebe, "Writers don't give prescriptions. They *give headaches*."¹⁹⁴

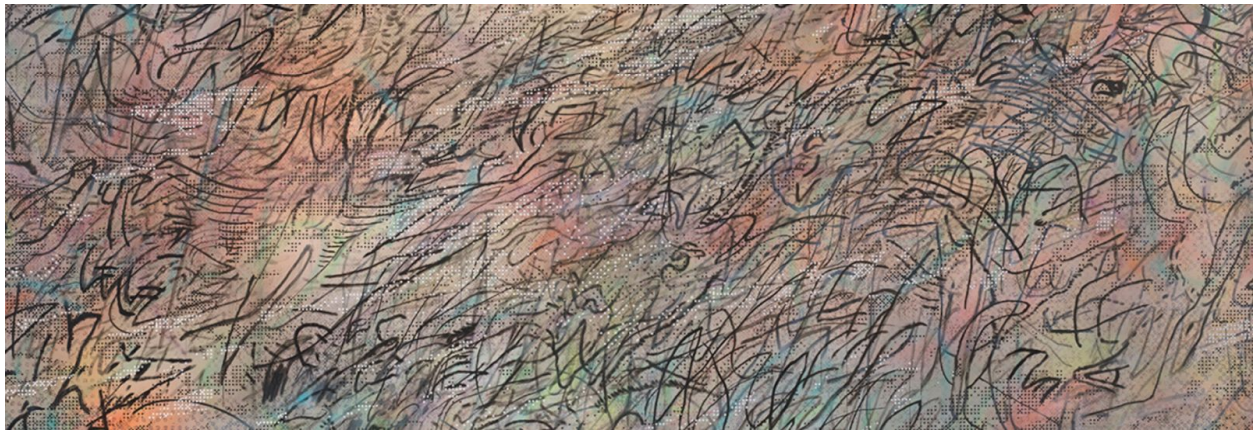


Fig. 91: A disorienting swarm of marks. Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

¹⁹³ Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."

¹⁹⁴ Emphasis added. Mehretu, "An Interview with Julie Mehretu," 795.

Fanon writes that the project of decolonization is not one willed or merely passively conjured. It requires the active acknowledgement of a sustaining interaction between “two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature,” whose “first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together—that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler.”

¹⁹⁵ Mehretu too understands her project as involving a historical process. She says:

*The information we get, how we understand our social context, is not devoid of history—it’s complicated because of social narrative and social struggle and slavery and genocide and land preservation and all of these dynamics that are part of the history of California. All of that is part of the bigger social dynamic that’s taking place right now as well. The issues are elliptical and cyclical in our narrative and experience. There’s this immense sense of possibility that’s suggested in these images, but there’s also this sense of horror. So all of those inherent contradictions are embedded in the gestures in the paintings.*¹⁹⁶

Wilderson, who too acknowledges Fanon’s contributions, argues that gratuitous, systematic violence gains coherence in its *logistical* rationalization, one predicated upon a system of power.

¹⁹⁷ “If [such violence] were to be contemplated on its own terms,” he writes, “[it] would be

¹⁹⁵ “Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies. Their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together—that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler.” Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

Fanon writes of a dominant logic forcibly made that dehumanizes the natives, that the artist more generally calls “the wretched.” But the natives, who know themselves to be human, recognize such logic as false. “At times this Manicheism goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man’s reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations.” Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 42.

But the natives, who know themselves to be human, recognize such logic as false. Mehretu, who grew up navigating between two cultures—black and white, American and Ethiopian—as well as coming from a queer perspective, she understands how “a deep part of who you are” can be made subject to various forms of dehumanization, be it racism, sexism, or homophobia. In 2014, she expressed, “When you realize that something that is such a deep part of who you are can be thought of in the most dehumanized way, you are able to think past the desire for the human in the humanist way. And that allows for this other potential that I think comes from all these perspectives of being. Whatever pushes that to happen, it can come from the queer perspective or being in a situation of extreme racism, whatever creates that feeling of dehumanization, the push or presence or force is so clear, so there, such a denial of your certainty, your existence, your knowledge. So seeing and understanding and knowing through that space of fugitivity, you are able to allow possibility, you are able to understand or create from a place of bigger freedom. You can be an agitator in a different way because you don’t have a lot of faith in a lot of that convention. That is really liberating.” Mehretu, “An Interview with Julie Mehretu,” 796.

Being subject to social conditions that deny you something you fundamentally know to be true, because it is you who are dehumanized and you know yourself to be human, provides a sense of liberation, a knowledge that the world around you is malleable, its harsh point moot.

¹⁹⁶ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Talks Music, Manifest Destiny, and Her Massive Mural for SFMOMA.”

¹⁹⁷ Specifically, he argues that the ethics of *genocide* practiced upon indigenous Americans gains its rationality through a conversation regarding *sovereignty* and colonial *conquest*. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 160.

otherwise incomprehensible.”¹⁹⁸ “Opacity implies a sort of blurring or obscuring, a complication,” Moten says, “but it [also] implies the capacity to see through [the] complication... even if that seeing through produces something that others might [view] as [distortion] or a lack of clarity.”¹⁹⁹ Mehretu’s inflicted opacity moves us beyond the legibility of dominant discourse and, instead, puts into relief the non-event of unbroken repression and devaluation of life that begins with the Middle Passage. We are in the moment of the Middle Passage, or in the afterlife of slavery. Black subjects remain vulnerable to gratuitous violence, and black pain remains fundamentally disregarded. Giving texture to the opaque vision, this moment of recognition offers the possibility of re-cognition, to modify and recalibrate what is means to be in and of the world, relate and understand others, and navigate the entanglement of being “other” and being on and in view.

When discussing approaching how to face the current tense American political climate, Mehretu adapts Wilderson’s use of the “incomprehensible.” She states, “In many ways, I feel there’s this disorienting blur, almost a sublime *incomprehensibility*, in this moment.”²⁰⁰ That incomprehensibility is made manifest in the aesthetic experience of Mehretu’s excessiveness and opacity. Her drawings take form in deformation, calling and returning the poly-vocal call, that cacophonous noise of Aunt Hester that is already, always present in the ether. Her gestures swarm as an ensemble, enacting the irreducible entanglement that, Moten argues, animates black sociality. Linked to the language of logic and representation, her lines move in excess of such, a performative declaration against legible arrangements and, thus, the conventional understandings

¹⁹⁸ Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 160.

¹⁹⁹ Moten, “Ensemble.”

²⁰⁰ Emphasis added. She additionally mentions “incomprehensibility” a second time in the same interview, expressing, “To me, that incomprehensibility, that blur, was something I was more interested in at this scale.” Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Started Her Majestic New Paintings Right After the Election.”

of reality they impose. Dreaming of an ecstatic release from the pictorial logic structured by and in reproduction of a racist visual pathology, Mehretu's drawing attends to the complex dynamism of collective bodies in formation against regulation. Her paintings precisely heed Wilderson's advice and "[wallow] in the incomprehension."²⁰¹

Wilderson, citing Fanon's text, writes, "disorder and *death* certainly characterize decolonization."²⁰² In the artist's hallucinatory act of imagining decolonization, Mehretu places the black body, in relationship to violence. Abstractions of broken, bent, harmed bodies,—fungible objects perpetually overthrown—gesture towards the precarity of black lives. However, its proximity is one not merely to present exclusively trauma or violation as such, rather, it gestures towards a black politics which requires the body, a politics that turns on, flows from, and is made out of the needs and desires of that body for freedom. Moten clarifies the project towards freedom in a 2018 interview:

*[Y]eah, there's a project, it's a social project, it's the project of what Amiri Baraka used to call "social development." And that project is an abolitionist project. It's a project that isn't just engaged in the abolition of slavery, which is still an ongoing project, of which the abolition of prisons is an extension. It's not just the abolition of slavery, it's also in a certain sense the abolition of freedom, insofar as freedom and slavery are so bound up with one another. Insofar as the abjection of the figure of the slave is inseparable from the exaltation of the figure of the master, or the figure of sovereignty. So, it's an abolition of sovereignty. It's an abolition of a certain horrible and brutal individuated notion of freedom. And it's an abolition of the world that is constructed on that conceptual framework. And if you want to put it in positive rather than negative terms, then it is the project of saving the earth. Or, as the great poet Ed Roberson would say, "the project of seeing the Earth before the end of the world."*²⁰³

²⁰¹ Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 160-161.

²⁰² Emphasis added. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 74.

²⁰³ Moten, "Ensemble."

Black subjects negotiate the tenses of freedom with the system of slavery, with constructions and confinements sustained by a white suprematist fiction and discourses of power. Approaching the long and desperate history of slavery and subjugation, Mehretu imagines what this freedom would look like if freedom takes its bearings *not* from a quest for property and happiness, that is freedom as an object to be in possession of and as a stable position to occupy, but, instead, from the breaking of chains.

Returning to the essay, “Through the Wire,” Chambers asks us to pause and reconsider the circulatory photographs of black-led riots. In particular, he describes a photograph capturing a dramatic scene of young black men pushing against a police van (Fig. 6.3). As the dominant logic permeates, the image positions the van as “[t]he hapless, sorry[, pitiful] vehicle[, a] wounded behemoth,” as Chambers describes. He recognizes the familiar accoutrements that inhabit neighborhoods in the photograph: Coca-Cola, Wall’s Ice Cream, a sign for a local restaurant. The young men in the photograph appear to be wearing school uniforms. He concludes:

*This scene is not one of exuberance... Instead it depicts a group of young men... determined, quite literally, to overturn what they regard as oppressive, tormenting presence in their lives, in their community, and in their midst.*²⁰⁴

In understanding the process of decolonization, Fanon addresses the need for such actions in revolutionizing and overturning a state and world of oppression and power politics. He writes:

The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. That affirmed intention to place the last at the head of things, and to make them climb at a pace (too quickly, some say) the well-known steps which

²⁰⁴ Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 7.

characterize an organized society, can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence.

*You do not turn any society, however primitive it may be, upside down with such a program if you have not decided from the very beginning, that is to say from the actual formulation of that program, to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in so doing. The native who decides to put the program into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence.*²⁰⁵

The black body, as Rizvana Bradley writes in her essay “Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion,”²⁰⁶ is the reminder [and] remainder of a history of interdicted and coerced movement.²⁰⁶ Bespeaking to a resilience and fortitude, as Chambers notes, the collective open formation of black bodies, a movement under restraint, provides the grounds for an eruptive potential and effective rupture, perpetually cutting away at its interdiction. The formation within the riot will always move as a force of violent disruption, in excess of and against the univocality of dominant power and the systematic gratuitous destruction it engenders. As Moten tells us, “the riot that’s goin’ on is a party for self-defense.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

“The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the native mean that, in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him.” Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 43.

²⁰⁶ Bradley, “Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion,” 23.

²⁰⁷ Moten, “necessity, immensity, and crisis.”



Fig. 92: “Black youth overturn a police vehicle in the Brixton area of South London, Saturday.” Photo: Peter Murphy.²⁰⁸

After the word “Howl” appeared in her mind as the compositions’ title, Mehretu thought of Allen Ginsberg’s poem by the same name.²⁰⁹ The reference to the infamous poem, written and performed in San Francisco, would further situate her paintings in its final setting. Moreover, the paintings reflects the poems’ celebration of disturbances to the system. In the time of desperation and decay, the revolutionary acts against exploitation, repression, subjugation, Ginsberg perceives, are acts of beauty. In the book *The Undercommons*, a collaborative effort written with Stefano Harney, Moten recognizes the London riots as “irruptions [of] logisticality.”²¹⁰ He expands upon this idea in the brief essay “necessity, immensity and crisis (many edges/seeing things).” Written in response to the riots, he describes the rebellious formation of black bodies as *poetry* performed in the open field, an imperative bursting out of the cell of containment and coming to bear all the possibilities of generation.²¹¹ Referring to this “sociopoetics of the riot,” he

²⁰⁸ Chambers, “Through the Wire,” 7.

²⁰⁹ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

²¹⁰ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 134.

²¹¹ Moten, “necessity, immensity and crisis.”

describes the poetics of black sociality as an “immersive, non-perspectival [enactment in] defiance of both natural description and metaphysical assumption.”²¹²

Mehretu imagines this *sociopoeticism* of the riotous form. Her presented renderings of black social life, bound by and to a shared abjection, tends toward death and, as Moten describes, “enacts a kind of being-toward death.” Towards death, the bodies move doubly, as the violated but also as a form of self-sacrifice towards black freedom. Moten writes, after all, “The freedom drive is a death drive.”²¹³ In the perpetual escape and evasion of the fatal occasion, their irregular, incomprehensible, poetic grammar and multi-vocal utterance produce a terrible but beautiful animation, a vitality exclusive to “being[s]-toward death” to kindle.²¹⁴ The collective swarms amass to generate an open-ended brazen structure (Fig. 93) that anchors the more vibrant of the compositions. Reminiscent of the approaching tempestuous storm into which the deep red sunset and burning clouds of Turner’s painting *The Slave Ship* (Figs. 94-95) bleed, Mehretu’s pixels, reflective of Turner’s same intense, vibrant palette, glide like a steady breeze, a mist (Figs. 96-97) that flows from Mehretu’s ascending geometric, burning form. The flames reflect themselves, in scattered pixels, as Turner’s crimson, scarlet wall advancing into the ocean, against the bodies that populate the artist’s vision. By reincorporating the fire within the buried photographic material, Mehretu engenders a reformulation of what that fire constitutes. If the police van represents a structure that not only contains black life but propels it towards death, as

²¹² Moten, “Lecture by Fred Moten, 5.3.16.”

The metaphysical assumption Moten refers to is, *perhaps*, the ontological criminality of blackness, or ontological blackness as criminality, which configures an assumption, the fiction, deployed, in the afterlife of slavery, to restrict and control black life. In *Stolen Life*, he argues that black sociality, deemed an uncontrollable public life, functions outside of normative behavior. The logic behind slavery deems impossible a black social, or public, life. It appears as discord or disorder precisely because it is configured to be criminal—or because black social life is configured to be criminal it appears as discord or disorder. These conditions enact and enable each other like a snake eating its tail. “To be black, to engage in the ensemblic—necessarily social—performance of blackness,” he expresses, “is to be criminal. This is essential to the construction of blackness.”

Moten, *Stolen Life*, 128.

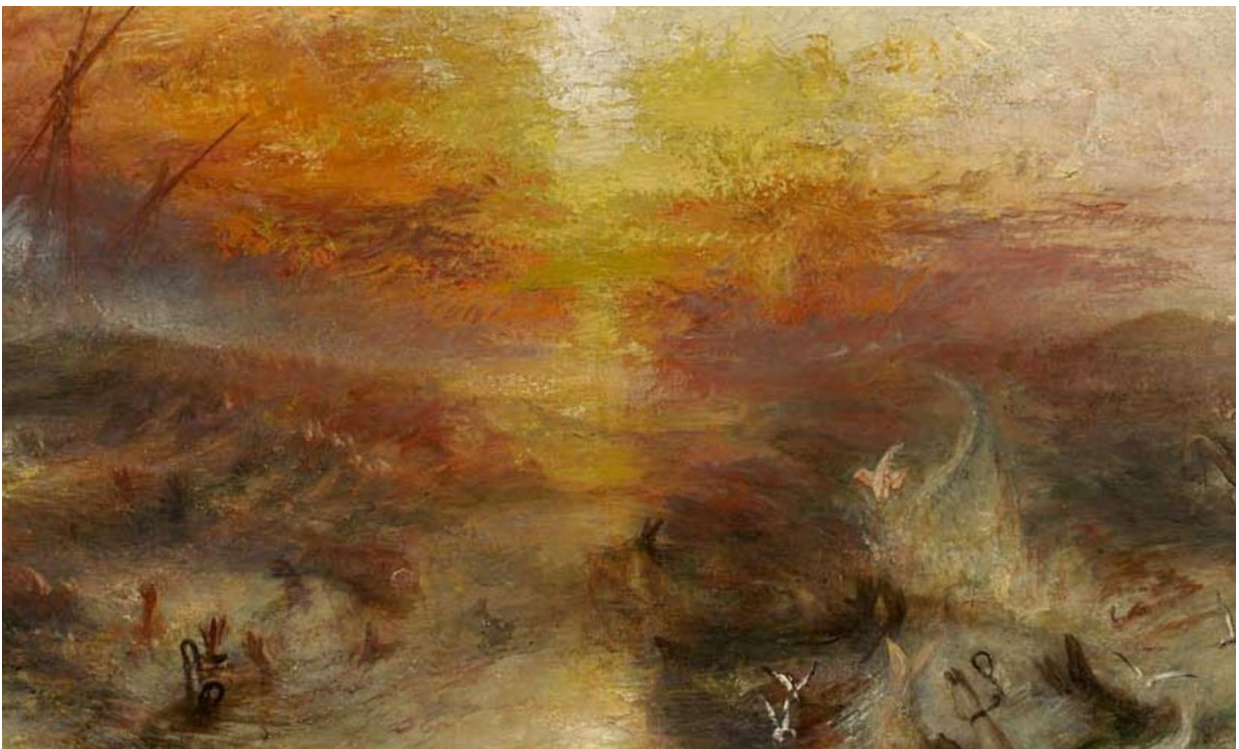
²¹³ Moten, *Stolen Life*, 263.

²¹⁴ Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 188.

it was in the case of Freddie Gray's untimely death, then its burning represents a refusal to consent or powerful resistance to that interdiction (Fig. 98-99).



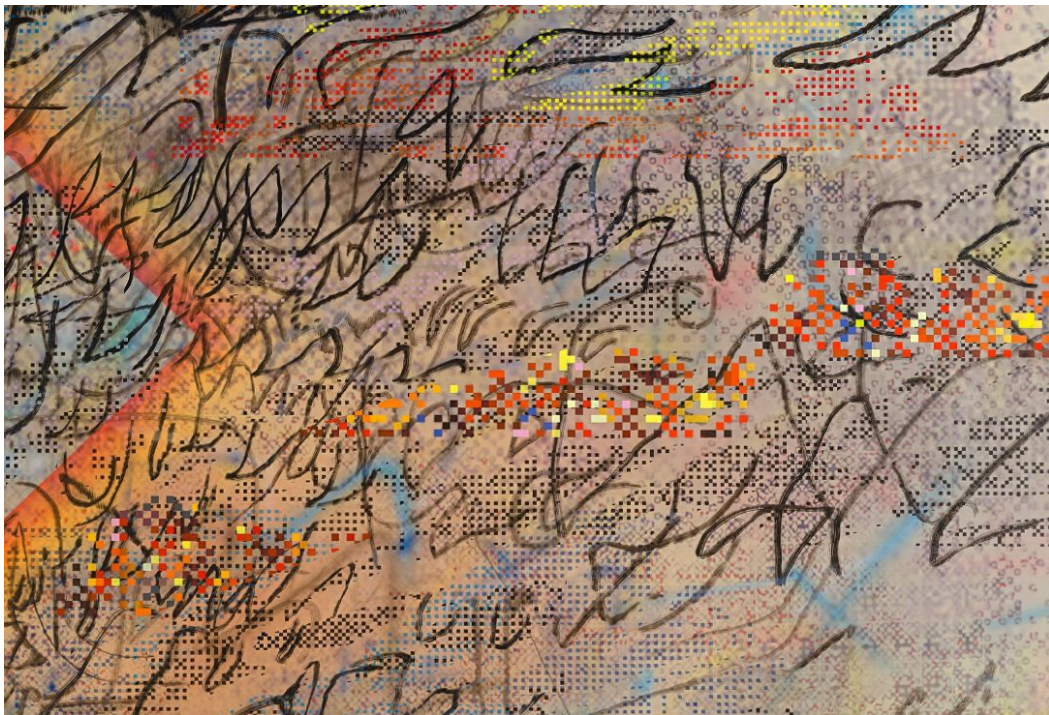
Fig. 93: Fire-like geometric structure. Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.



Details of J. M. W. Turner (English, 1775-1851), *The Slave Ship*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 35.7 x 48.3 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund.

Fig. 94 (top): Burning colors mingling with an approaching storm.

Fig. 95 (bottom): The colors of sunset at the horizon reflect upon the water.



Details of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

Fig. 96 (top): Pixelated screen-printed marks appear in the colors of sunset.

Fig. 97 (bottom): Pixelated screen-printed marks rendered in the colors of sunset, with spotty marks of blue, glide from the fire-like structure.



Fig. 98 (top): “A police vehicle burns on April 27, 2015, during unrest following the funeral of Freddie Gray in Baltimore.” Photo: Patrick Semansky, *Associated Press*.

Fig. 99 (bottom): “A boy throws a brick at a police van on April 27, 2015, during a skirmish between demonstrators and police after the funeral of Freddie Gray.” Photo: Patrick Semansky, *Associated Press*.

In service to the project of decolonization, which, according to Fanon, “[requires the whole social structure being changed,” the riot is the call to disorder that will always be referred to as cacophonous, “cast as ‘extra-musical’ for its desire is for a harmony that “is arbitrary and *in another world*[. Its] harmony would sound *incomprehensible*.”²¹⁵ Displaying a transgressive understanding of and sensitivity to other (for the “other”) ways of knowing and describing, Mehretu opens herself to a non-normative way of inhabiting the world. “I was thinking about [pushing the painting], what Amiri Baraka refers to as pushing the poem to actually be the cause of something else,” she expresses, “There is this kind of urgency to working through [this] kind of desire to make [something] else with these paintings, [to] *go* somewhere else.”²¹⁶ In *The Undercommons*, Harney answers why riotors “[fuck] up their own neighborhood.” “[P]art of it is,” he says, “they *don’t own* those neighborhoods. But part of it is also... ‘cuz there’s gotta be something better than home.”²¹⁷ The burning form stands for the radical aspiration to end the anti-black world and dream of something, somewhere else.²¹⁸ This dream may seem illegible, fanciful, criminal even precisely because it upends all that we know—an alternative geometry to undermine all geometry. That is the dream of the riot(ers) that blazes in and out of being.

²¹⁵ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

“[Decolonization’s] unusual importance is that it constitutes, from the very first day, the minimum demands of the colonized. To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up.” Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 35.

Emphasis added. Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond,” 7.

²¹⁶ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

²¹⁷ Emphasis added. Harney, *The Undercommons*, 141.

²¹⁸ To unmake the anti-black world, Wilderson argues, the world as we know it must be destroyed.

*well dere woz Toxteth
an dere woz Moss Side
an a lat a addah places
whe di police ad to hide
well dere woz Brixton
an dere woz Chapelton
an a lat a adah place dat woz burnt to di groun
burnt to di groun
burnt to di groun*

Excerpt from Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Mekkin Histi"²¹⁹

A force that reckons the world unstable, the fire like an apocalyptic, other world force, threatens an inevitable implosion of the field, to unmake the anti-black world constituted by master and enslavement politics, to summon into being another existence.

This allusion to the unimaginable transfer to another world is coded by an appropriation of the format of Titian's painting *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-18 (Fig. 100). In the Renaissance artist's vision, Mary, in a dynamic and violent upward thrust, is physically assumed into Heaven. The apostles below gesture in imitation of her upward flight. Angels gather around and tumble about the golden glow that generates behind her. Emerging in a dark streak, God the Father makes a gesture to embrace her. The power of Mary's physical appearance, presence, and ascension is fundamental in developing the drama and pictorial agitation. Yet, it is her dramatic action that also organizes to create a unified whole, ordering, as the anchor, the triangular composition imposed onto the chaotic scene. In Mehretu's appropriation of the serene spiritualized image made active and potent, a torso-like shape appears to be caught in the whirlwind of an upward, swirling motion that passes through and into the fire (Fig. 101). A densely painted mark that pours downward is situated within the geometric structure feasibly as an allusion to the site where God would embrace Mary and the assumption, the stealing or

²¹⁹ Johnson quoted in: Frost, Phillips, and Singleton, "Commentary: Researching the Riots," 6.

stowing away from the world we know, would take place. The black subjects ascend out of the pictorial plane and into the black hole.

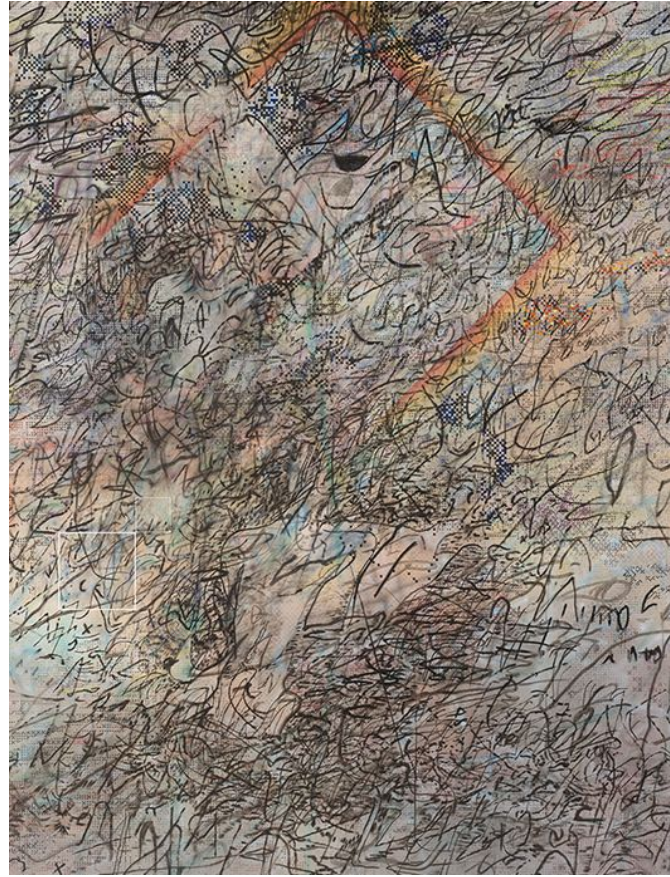


Fig. 100 (left): Titian (Italian, c. 1488/90-1576), *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-1518. Oil on panel, 270 x 140 in. Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice.

Fig. 101 (right): Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

Like the Middle Passage that dictates a sending off, the paintings send us.²²⁰ The ascension is doubled by the spectators' actions as they climb up the stairs (Fig. 102) in the Museum towards and into the painting, which, Mehretu says, "was part of the idea I was working with."²²¹ The light that descends downward from the Museum's atrium adds to the spiritual

²²⁰ I am admittedly adapting a phrase from Moten, who writes that M. NourbeSe Philip's poem *Zong!*, an experiment in poly-vocals, "sends" its readers, being submerged, being revived, enacting an impossible Middle Passage into multiplicity through broken sentences and broken wave lines. Moten, "to consent not to be a single being."

²²¹ Mehretu, "Julie Mehretu Artist Talk."

climate and atmosphere of the work. From this point, upon a platform below the painting, spectators would then look across to the other painting (Fig. 103). “[I]t reminded me of the images of the Grand Canyon,” she describes, “or when you drive [along] the Hudson and look across to the other side.”²²² While discussing *Grey Area*, Mehretu acknowledged a preoccupation with the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Fig. 104), two 6th-century monumental statues carved into the side of a cliff in Afghanistan. In 2001, the Taliban destroyed these structures, and “that image of their absence” began to haunt the artist.²²³ By gazing upon the vibrant painting that burns before you, its flames into which you climb into, the somber painting across the canyon presents an absence, a void in the place where the fire once burned. It brings to mind a passage from James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*:

*When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, What will happen to all that beauty?... And when I sat at Elijah’s table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God’s—or Allah’s—vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, What will happen to all that beauty then?*²²⁴

Its grey pixels are as the ashes to be lost in the wind, made invisible; but its particles are absorbed elsewhere, somewhere unknown, unlocable. It too wonders: what will happen with all that beauty (Figs. 105-106)?

²²² Mehretu, “Layering Histories,” 244.

²²³ Mehretu, “I’m Not Trying to Spell Out a Story.”

²²⁴ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 104-5.

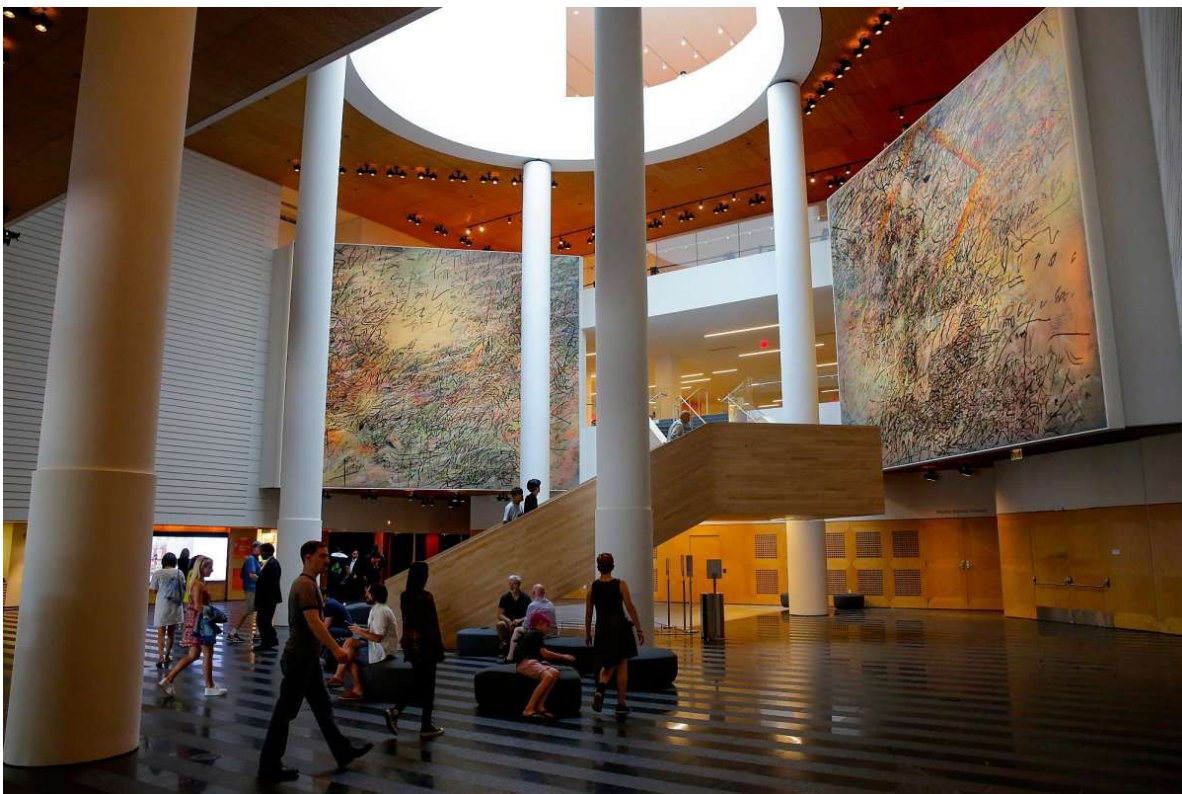


Fig. 102 (top): Visitors ascend the stairs in the Museum's foyer. Photo: Michael Macor, *The Chronicle*.

Fig. 103 (bottom): "Works by Julie Mehretu, titled 'HOWL, eon (I, II)' (2017), hang in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's lobby." Photo: Michael Macor, *The Chronicle*.

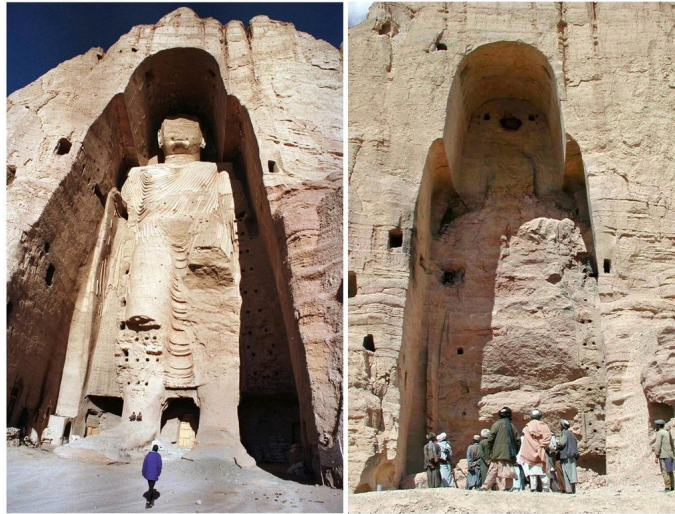


Fig. 104: “A combination photo of the 180-foot-high Buddha statue in Bamiyan, central Afghanistan on Dec. 18, 1997, left, and after its destruction on March 26, 2001.” Photo: Muzammil Pasha, Sayed Salahuddin, *Reuters*.

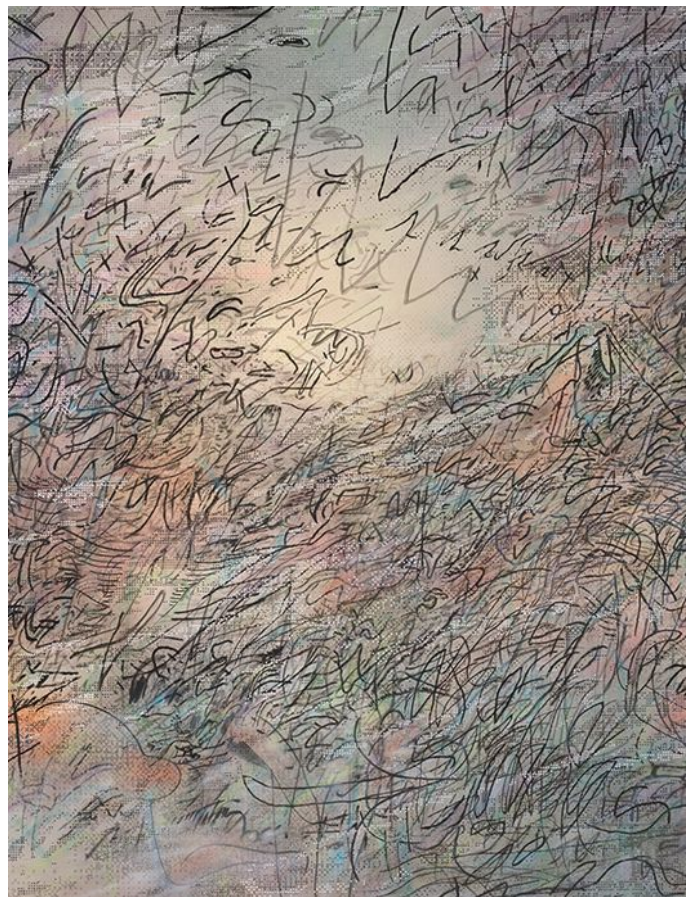


Fig. 105 (left): PhotoShopped edit of Titian (Italian, c. 1488/90-1576), *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-1518. Oil on panel, 270 x 140 in. Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice.

Fig. 106 (right): Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

HOWL's constellation implies a resilience among "the wretched" Mehretu represents, an adaptability to distress, trauma, a sense of elasticity that is not so much nurtured into being as it is fundamentally mandated. The utility of resilience—a stubborn refusal to go away, the stubborn not-dying—is positioned in the canvases that speak to one another. Between a fire that alludes to ascension, stealing away, and a void that means absence, in dialogue, Mehretu infers a fugitive abandonment of the world and being abandoned by the world. In this cycle of death and refusal, the artist embodies a tension between movement and immobility. Profoundly the experience of black subjects is to always be in motion but never arriving to that new state, new condition. Discussing Baraka's poem "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS," Moten describes the poem as expressing this tragic impossibility of a home for black subjects, who find refuge in neither the African motherland from which they were stolen nor the American land within which they were compelled to exist.

*... Inquisitors
of the cocktail hour. Trismegistus, have*

*them, in their transmutation, from stone
to bleeding pearl, from lead to burning
looting, dead Moctezuma, find the West*

a grey hideous space.

*... Why you stay, where they can
reach? Why you sit, or stand, or walk
in this place, a window on a dark*

*warehouse. Where the minds packed in
straw. New homes, these towers, for those
lacking money or art. A cult of death*

*need of the simple striking arm under
the streetlamp. The cutters, from under
their rented earth.*

... *Black scream*
And chant, scream,
And dull, un
earthly

Excerpts from Amiri Baraka, "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS"²²⁵

Intangible but fungible, possessed and evasive, neither slave nor free, Mehretu's figures denote a particular homelessness that Baraka and Moten identify as conditional to the black experience. The swarm, that transgressive multiplicity and riotous form, offers a fugitive strategy as the key to flight and liberation, but, as what the canvases tell, it's a perpetual cycle, a *perpetual*, unending seeking. Which canvas is *HOWL, eon (I)*? Which canvas is *HOWL, eon (II)*? The spectral presence each composition houses implies being neither here nor there. They, perhaps not ontological criminals but, rather, ontological fugitives, are continually in the process of becoming, reaching out from the ocean water to the heavenly, burning sky that is the beyond, the unknown world we hope to know. "[F]ugitivity is the realm of the (always anticipatory) afterlife," Moten writes, "Black life is anticipatory afterlife."²²⁶ In lingering in between, Mehretu places emphasis on the middle, the break, the rupture, defying the idea of expected resilience, of the return to that original condition that requires resilience.

"[H]ow do you take what you've always thought of always being this convention or reality, how do you reconstruct it, how do you build a different possibility within, how do you imagine the impossible?," Mehretu wonders, "I think Sun Ra said, "Everything has been tried and it didn't work, so I am interested in the impossible."²²⁷ Unlike the rigid, diagrammatic maps of her earlier works, the painterly *HOWL* offers an impossible geography of displacement that,

²²⁵ Periods added to indicate portions of the poem skipped over. Baraka, "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS," 314-316.

²²⁶ Moten, *Stolen Life*, 263.

²²⁷ Mehretu, "An Interview with Julie Mehretu," 797.

Moten says, is “not predicated on the fiction of a fixed point... [but, rather, is a] quantum geography.”²²⁸ Mehretu posits “a *futurist* type of going backward.”²²⁹ Like the cosmic challenge presented by the Russian Futurist opera, *Victory Over the Sun*, 1913, Mehretu adjoins characters in her spatiotemporally collapsed vision, envisioning and representing the world with a language that moves outside of ours and all the normativity it charges, bringing together literature, music, and painting in a radical, anti-real dream.²³⁰ But as Fanon suggests, “the possibility of [the change decolonization begets is] experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of... the colonizers.”²³¹ Mehretu’s vision is one that displays how the past haunts the present and, thus, compels one towards a future that one may not fully understand, a path to an impossible world paved by refusal, disorder, and death. Frenzied swarms do violence onto the canvases—swarming, amassing, deconstructing, abiding by no rules for the only rules they know have posed them in proximity to great violence, violence that has persisted against their bodies for centuries. Atonal music and visual assault, deconstruction of language visualize a strange world of the future, its whole effect seemingly illogical. A transformative experience of shock and dissonance (or experiential sea-sickness), the avant-garde landscapes (or, maybe, seascapes) instigate the effect of the sublime. But the final site, that utopian home, has *yet* to be imagined. The process of decolonization is still in effect, in the imagining, in the making. The shock continues. But, nonetheless, it summons the riot.

²²⁸ Moten, “Ensemble.”

²²⁹ Emphasis added. Mehretu, “An Interview with Julie Mehretu,” 797.

²³⁰ The opera imagines a war declared against the Sun, the symbolic figure of thought, the representative of a past full of decadence and sorrow, a pretext that enslaves people to its illusion of the world. Malevich had designed geometric costumes for the occasion. Its performers—singers and actors—were inexperienced. Its choir, thin, accompanied by no orchestra.

²³¹ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36.

If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!

Excerpt from James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time” (Fig. 107)²³²

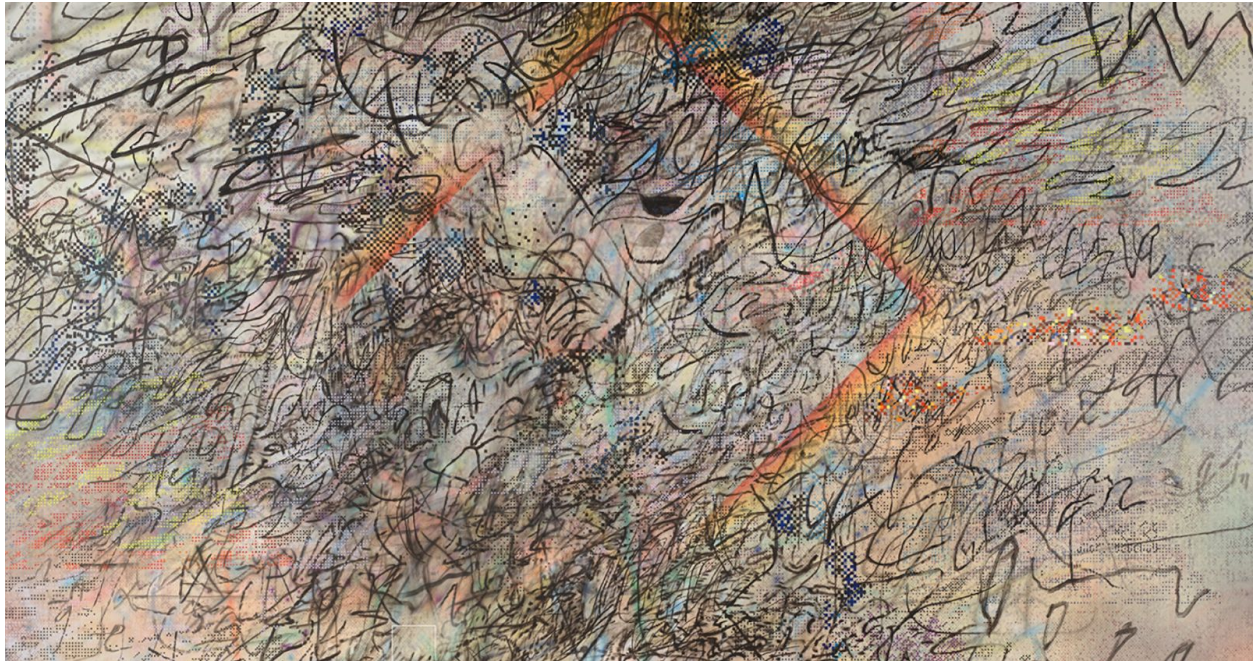


Fig. 107: The fire next time? Detail of Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

²³² Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 105-6.

Regular, lingual.

Mehretu laments upon “a feeling of being lost, like we don’t have the language to deal with this political reality,” the legacy of slavery and the convoluted evolution of politics within that context.²³³ She expresses:

*A lot of time, you have communities, who feel that they are... on the periphery[, who] are challenging or shifting culture or are not considered part of the central part of that culture, so, the neologism comes from this evolution of culture and place.*²³⁴

She talks of inventing a language, a “visual neologism” necessitated “because the language at hand isn’t enough.”²³⁵ “The lived experience of blackness is, among other things,” Moten writes, “a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence.”²³⁶ *HOWL, eon (I, II)* (Figs. 108-109) illustrates this demand and gives proper shape to its riotous formation that our language, insufficient as it exists, can only gesture to. Advocating the subtleties of language as code and signal, the artist imposes the fugitive condition into her encrypted language, a language worthy of representing this condition.²³⁷ She actively rewrites and re-describes the riot, challenging its dominant dismissal, reasserting its rich contextual history, humanizing it. The riot is not a mere single act or moment of insurrection but an emblem of deep-seated political tension and history. It is the exhaust and catalyst of violence. Toni Morrison writes at the end of *Beloved*, “This is not a story to pass on,” but it is a story to hold onto.²³⁸ Mehretu, in experimentation in

²³³ “In this country, slavery, its legacy, and the evolution of politics in this context is much more convoluted. To me, it’s more about being confused and not having the language for dealing with these issues. I was trying to invent [a visual language] and have something emerge from that.” Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Started Her Majestic New Paintings Right After the Election.”

²³⁴ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

²³⁵ Mehretu, “Julie Mehretu Artist Talk.”

²³⁶ Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 187.

²³⁷ Toni Morrison advocates pushing and challenging language to transform it, so, that it becomes “worthy” of representing “the complexity and wealth of Afro-American culture.” Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” 150.

²³⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, 324.

form and genealogical thinking of that form, intimates a relationship between contemporary lives and enslaved people—a proactive attempt at remembrance that is not so much bombarded with trauma, of telling that story that should not be passed on. Mehretu finds her voice in a collective way, with Moran, Moten, Barak, the phantoms of the past and the walking dead of the present, to speak against the rules that enforce the bodies' violation. But, moreover, her language develops an immersive experience. She follows Toni Morrison's advice:

It is abrupt, and should appear so. [It should snatch, yank, throw the spectator] into an environment completely foreign... Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. No lobby, no door, no entrance—a gangplank, perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching—this kidnapping—propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet, like the sounds in the body of the ship itself may have changed.²³⁹

A practice not in anti-visibility but anti-visibility (visibility and its dictations on looking), you experience the riotous form that photographs at best make reference to. The paintings become the real riot and not merely its sign. You ascend into the painting, she violently thrusts you towards that ascension. An inoculative shock to the system, you are momentarily suspended from your own skin and wrapt in that of “the ones who are not ones and who are not there, who have no standing, who cannot be represented” and, with it, all the visceral, nauseating confusion that comes with being involuntarily positioned—a maddening chain built upon the illogical, senselessness of racism.²⁴⁰ Visuality becomes the terrain in which we struggle. Like simultaneously standing in and observing the rain, our eyes, unfocused, cannot identify the individual raindrops, but we can experience their fall.

²³⁹ Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” 160-61.

²⁴⁰ Moten, “Manic Depression.”



Figs. 108: Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.



Fig. 109: Julie Mehretu, *HOWL, eon (I, II)*, 2017. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Helen and Charles Schwab. © Julie Mehretu.

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