

Ornamental Thickness in Four Variations

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Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

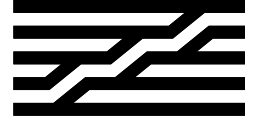
Symposium Proceeding *Women in Abstraction. Another History of Abstraction in the 20th Century*.
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There is an extensive art historical discourse on the ornament that is impossible to fully outline here. But I do want to point to the set of circumstances involving performances of power through which the ornament evolves and how it has been reimagined in the abstractions of four black women artists working in North America, Africa, and Europe from the early 1990s to today: Julie Mehretu (b. 1970, Ethiopia, lives and works in New York), Denyse Thomasos (b. 1964, Trinidad; d. 2012, United States), Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972, Kenya, lives and works in New York and Nairobi) and Ellen Gallagher (b. 1965, United States, lives and works in Rotterdam). They are important figures in the generation that follows the period of covered by the *Women in Abstraction* exhibition, and I want to illustrate the ways in which they employ thickness as an ornamental embellishment to illuminate how and why abstraction is coagulated and fleshy.

For them, the thickness of their work involves the conflation of concepts and techniques of abstraction in which ideas are materialized, and therefore, mattered in paintings, performance, installation, and video art. Their shared archaeological and anthropological process interrogates modernism and its conventions, functioning as an aesthetic of possibility within capitalism's systems of modernity that have instigated the conditions, affects, and contexts we describe as "blackness". Blackness is a *becoming abstract*.

Accordingly, their qualitative and relational peculiarities clarify the ways in which their works are "inventive of *subjective* forms,"¹ which is to say self-abstracting the abstract object and perspective of a black female life mutually in a coterminous event through a shared affective tone – the whole array of modes, means, vibrations, pitches, styles, manners, states, values assembled – sieved into the abstract work thick, dense, precarious, disperse. The mode, means, and methods are the dynamics and choreography of capitalism itself – accumulation, repetition, precarity, exhaustion, extraction, and so on. It is never as simple as the abstract work representing the system or black female life but rather that its very objectness has an attunement to and a tone in its qualities, in its affective tonality, that enable the viewer affectively to feel them both.



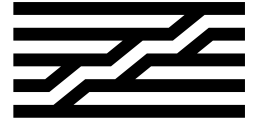
In such a theoretical framework, the ornament as thickness codifies the accumulation of historical refractions, and these “borrowings” are sedimentary semblances of demonstrations of social and cultural power.²

Their thickening process approaches the very tenets of the ornamental as a form, inasmuch as it adheres formally to our understanding of formal abstraction – their work is clearly recognizable as such – however their conceptual process and the materiality of the work are indications that the original significance and symbolism of formal abstraction – that it is void of social, political, and ideological capacities – is undermined, which is to say made ornamental, folded upon itself, abstracted to the extreme because the works are made to hold all their concerns. These artists traverse one epoch to the next, divulging how the ornamental, in its proliferation and circulation, becomes a generalization of a thing’s earliest incarnation, which is not to say that it is a reduction of the referent. Quite the opposite. However, the ornament’s performance, and by extension the thick embellishment of these artists’ works, is one of luxuriant excess, lavish surplus, and exorbitant nimety. Their art is imbued with and expresses their own internal power, radical, vibrant, thick matter as containers for their will, motives, and aesthetic choices.

The ornament of thickness functions as a visual reproduction of power, through an absolute absorption and incessant circulation not of the image, but of strategies of opacity and the productive capacity to obscure, from the vantage point of what lesbian sister activist poet Audre Lorde called “the shadows” that operates from within an aesthetic of the senses as Marx expressed, “not only the five senses, but the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (desiring, loving).”³

Julie Mehretu’s paintings before 2012 reimagine architectural plans, airport schemes, military projects, arcades, and stadia, which animate and index the artwork as a relational network of built structures emblematic of power, its systems, and its compulsions. Embedded within sanded-down layers of thin, translucent acrylic veneers, lending them a hazelike appearance that obfuscates the ways in which they collectively anchor the pictorial schema, these works reference structures materialized as metaphors of an ever forward onslaught of progression, dominance, and domestication.

Mehretu’s oblique characters, such as *Inkcity* (1996), *Conflict Location Index* (1997) and *Character Migration Analysis Index* (1997) are distinct from symbols since for her they are agential, a grammar, representational if only to materialize the impossibility of it, and indicative of a concern for opacity that would intensify over the years. Such an aesthetic move recalls Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant’s notion of errancy,⁴ or another way to put it as theorist Lauren Berlant has described Pope.L’s work is “showing up to withhold.”⁵ Errant acts, if we think of them as improvised choreographies, concern an imaginative pursuit of what is possible



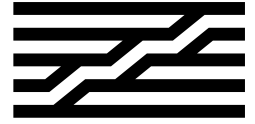
in the aftermath of world-changing occurrences, such as the *longue durée* of enslavement, colonialism, war, state-sanctioned violence, and capitalist extraction, in which the past is at times indistinguishable from the present or a desired future. Mehretu's art, then and now, has manufactured ways to contend with the systemic positions imposed upon us by placing into relation a range of material references, social, political, and historical experiences, as well as formal techniques and innovations.

Mind Breath Drawings indicate a turn toward a more expressionistic, performative facture that would come full circle in her suite of grey paintings, a five-year body of work, running from 2012 to 2017, in which she implodes her signature style exemplified in the architecture paintings, of which the monumental *Cairo* (2013) is the last.⁶ The political, social, and historical references evident in her previous abstractions did not so much disappear as they were pushed further toward the extremes of opacity, illegibility, and withdrawal. Ironically, the photographic image, the most representational of visual art forms, appears for the first time in the *Invisible Sun* paintings (2012-2015).⁷ However, here the image is blurred, a more maximal treatment of the erasure of marks in Mehretu's earlier paintings, and the palette restricted and decidedly dark, rendered in hues and washes of black, white, and grey. It is a moment in which the artist was conceptually concerned with visual nihilism when confronted with the failure of language, visual and otherwise, accelerating the capacities of formal abstraction to redress the social and political realities that led to the Arab Spring in 2011 and the extrajudicial killings of black Americans that fueled the creation of Black Lives Matter.

Mehretu recalls this moment as being:

Between two things where there's an erasure of something. It was blurring the image, rather than drawing it or using the architecture, that all of a sudden felt like a kind of absence, especially if you reduce it to black and white. It became a kind of phantom or what could be suggested but not completely told, but then it is not completely represented or depicted. The way I would draw was within or between that schism. So inside of that, what could grow, what could be found in the break, what was in the gap, what was in that space? Sometimes it was inside the drawing because it is not built structure, it is not time collapsed. This is like the ruin. What can emerge from within the ruin and from the erasure of all of that?⁸

The lucid black line transformed into the void of the black blur in Mehretu's most recent work has a sense of boundless space and mysterious time; unlike the indexical visual language of the characters, there has been a total collapse of the geographical, geopolitical, personal-collective, then and now. The blur signals both a limitless recession and an indeterminable advance, situated in the reality of earthly concerns but desperate to go beyond them. The darkness, now bright, as in illuminating, even revelatory, is the only adequate representation of the events at hand, which is also to say, those long gone, and mark the impossibility of charting them, grounding them as the earlier paintings painstakingly aimed to do. These works are remarkable for what they withhold, for their ability to insist upon the brink of invisibility and ravishing of their intense proximity to the abyss as muted



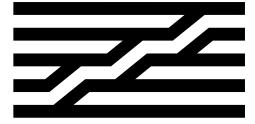
tones, soft yet dense chromas, and bizarre radiance. The grey paintings are like flickers of a dying light, on the brink of capture and release. Grey to convey the immediacy of the intermediate.

The result is a meditation on movement, relation, and errancy as indeterminant which we can correlate to Mehretu's evolved black line situated in a grey plane. Grey is metaphoric for the betwixt, a liminal space the viewer experiences as a vertigo haze that dissipates optical legibility. The radical ambiguity of such formal devices liberate structures and systems, which capacities we come to know through appearances that trouble the visual field through operations of dematerialization, repetition, and obscurity, wavering between a clearly delineated and blurred black line. For the black mark could be "something and nothing at the same time."⁹ The black mark *is* the event, conceptualizing, spatializing, mattering, sensualizing, generating the irreconcilable and the incommensurable as revolutionary acts of change and defiance.

Twenty years prior to Mehretu finding herself in the ruin of her work, Denyse Thomasos was already deeply exploring ruins herself, the event of enslavement and its afterlives. As if a call to which black studies scholar Frank Wilderson might reply, "We need a new language of abstraction to explain this horror ... (a) quest to forge a language of abstraction with explanatory powers *emphatic enough* to embrace the Black."¹⁰ In *Displaced Burial/Burial at Gorée* (1993), Thomasos's emphatic lines reroute and rearrange at the level of surface in order to approach the very impossibility of the site they index, knowing the absolute impossibility to ever represent such events, but they converge, overlap, and abide through the chaos they convey, a darkness that has anachronistically rearranged reality.

What I find intriguing about this work is the ways in which it demands that we sense outside the real and metaphorical frame of that which is before us; what theorist Brian Massumi has described as a "perceptual feeling," as that which resonates even in the absence of proof of presence.¹¹ It's a difference between what is seen as opposed to what is felt, as an excess over, beyond, and deeper than that which is actually physically in the work itself, at least in any literal sense. The theatrical, saturation, thickness, and color avoid the discursive and figurative language of representation while nevertheless posing a new sensual (visual, haptic, visceral) ideogram in abstraction that performs duality, a shape-shifting between the desire for representation and his terms for resisting it.

Displaced Burial exemplifies how non-visibility is not invisibility. It holds the unspeakable in reserve. By reserve I mean to hold out for a reparatory potential that resonates even in the absence of proof of presence. To hold in

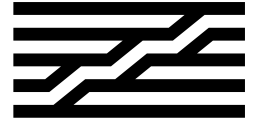


reserve is an act of distancing, of retaining for oneself, which does not in this instance concern itself as an act of care because to reserve neither takes responsibility for something it did not bring into fruition nor does it observe or squelch the unstinting desire to show itself as pained, but rather reserve is a taking asunder, gathering the bits, fragments, shards and setting them aside as an absolute requisition against our overwhelming visuality. The metaphorical capacity of the Black object—its uncanny plasticity—undermines the precipice of illegibility, the abject abstracting that structures embodied Blackness.¹²

Displaced Burial and *Jail*, made the same year, co-compose one another. Between them a joint activation contours a different attunement to the same event—the containment of embodied blackness, which is to say they relate abstractly, as abstraction, through systems with the intent to abstract – human life rendered as capital for individuals and the state. The mode, means, and methods are the dynamics and choreography of capitalism’s subjection upon black like itself – accumulation, repetition, precarity, exhaustion, extraction, and so on. It is never as simple as the black work representing the system or black life but rather that its very objectness has an attunement to and a tone in its qualities, in its affective tonality, that enable the artist to convey and the viewer affectively to feel them both. This occurs in Thomasos’s monumental abstract paintings when their subject matter of enslavement and prison appear as “detached-from-out” or “outed-in;” as if to be present, they must be “actively excluded.”¹³ The mark making is a kind of metaphorical embodiment, a tactility that lends a physical quality with the capacity to constitute its own corporeality as tangible, visceral, somatic presence. Not type but force, color, facture, scale, texture, thickness.

We see in *Mud Fountain* (2010) Wangechi Mutu’s practice of auto-ethnography, a mining of her own culture, society, and identity to create a conceptual and material system of meaning. In this instance, mud is incorporated as a medium with very specific associations. In this performance for the camera, Mutu, naked, stands in a dark narrow stone corridor as mud begins to slowly drip onto her shoulders. She barely sways as the mud escalates its flow down her back while intermittent sounds of flies, barking dogs, and ominous tones reverberate. Mutu’s vulnerability gives way to the barrage of mud, as she comports her body into a ball on the floor, covering her head. The mud does double duty as both the visual and sonic material of the work.

Mutu, who studied anthropology, understands the impact of it and ethnography as tools in the European colonial project, particularly as it relates to Africa and the ways in which these disciplines influenced Western modern art (for example, Cubism and Surrealism). Beyond mud’s signification as that which sustains life forms, mud is a material Mutu uses to reconsider the stereotypical notion of a certain kind of African femininity, which raises issues of class and begs the thoughtful consideration of who is the woman who works close to the earth. For her,

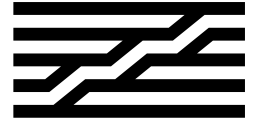


mud is also a geological force with immense potential to devastate. Further, she is recalling the soil of Nyeri, her parents birthplace in the Central Highlands of Kenya, and the Kikuyu's relationship to the land, where the earth's hue is an intense vermilion, resonating with a range of paradoxical metaphors such as life, blood, and capitalist resource extraction for minerals such as iron or bauxite.

Mutu's explication of the importance of mud in her work brings to mind the important contributions of Black and Third World feminists such as The Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, Trinh Minh-ha, and Gayatri Spivak, who have created a cartography of subaltern and particularly black women's double oppression and exploitation as the result of compounded gender and racial hierarchies. These thinkers trace the imbalanced division of labor and women's biological work in *reproducing* working class beings, which traverse nations and time, from the earliest manifestation of capitalism during the Atlantic slave trade to colonial period in Africa and South and Southeast Asia to the factories of multinational corporations. Further, these feminist thinkers also assert what the Combahee River Collective and Trinh have described as the triple jeopardy of being female, a person of color, and from a decolonized country, noting that oppression does not come in separate monolithic forms but rather as a perverse dominating interplay of all aspects of these identities, experienced as a reality operating through hegemonic systems.

Beginning in late 2014, Mutu began to transform paper she would typically use for her paintings and collages by shredding, dying, saturating, and fermenting it in large batches that was uncannily similar to the mud cascading over her in *Mud Fountain* and her more recent sculptures. The pulverized matter was incorporated into the sculptural installation element of her multi-media contribution to the 2015 Venice Biennale titled *The End of Carrying it All*. I invited Mutu to create a new work for the exhibition *Blackness in Abstraction*, which was presented at Pace Gallery in the summer of 2016. In an attempt to further amalgamate the body and matter, her response was *Throw* (2016), a private performance enacted over two evenings in which the artist used this dark, pulpy material to create a site specific, monochromatic abstract painting on a floating white gallery wall.

On the occasion of the Performa 17 biennial, I asked Mutu to create an evening length piece, one that would expand upon her 2016 performance and be shown to a public audience. Presented on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Grace Rainey Rogers's Auditorium stage, Mutu designed a set that was part arena, part white cube gallery with two floating white walls situated over a span of white marley, and custom white seating of varying sizes and widths; it was a theater turned into a blank canvas. Audience members entered an empty theater, proceeded down the aisles, and took their places on the stage. The lights dimmed, and a video of Mutu performing in tall grass and amongst ancient trees in Nairobi, wearing a dark casual clothing and boots with enormous palm fronds and eventually gigantic cow horns adorn her arms, as a voiceover of her reading Derek Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa" played on the white walls. In near total darkness, Mutu entered the

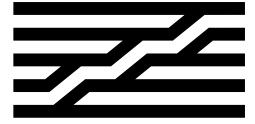


auditorium, emitting the sound of faint swooshes as she approached the stage: you could hear her but not see her. As the lights came up, Mutu was there in a black velvet jumpsuit, head turbaned; her feet and hands saturated with black dye. Like in the video, the length of her arms was extended by the four-foot long banana leaves, striking ornaments that doubled as paint brushes. Mutu dragged the leaves through troughs of the same black viscous matter used in *Throw*, though now less dense and more liquefied. Equally drawing upon movements, gestures, and choreographies employed in earlier works and harnessing the energy of improvisation and chance, Mutu made a site-specific live action painting over the course of thirty minutes as the accumulating aftermath of thick marks, wispy strokes, and furtive gestures clung to walls and floor, sullyng their pristine veneer with the remainder of her fierce, forthright, and poignant dance. As a coda to the event, a subtly altered version of the opening videos was cast over the paintings; they themselves destroyed after the performance.

Similar to Mutu, Ellen Gallagher engages the paradoxes she sets up and upon which she depends through a mode of archaeological extraction of history and matter. In her artworks, Gallagher relies upon what she has described as a “jitter,” a mode of becoming in which radical aesthetic possibilities emerge from seismic cracks in the surface of things; connoting unsteady movement, unreliability, impossible alignments, blind spots, and opacity as a means of escape and flight.

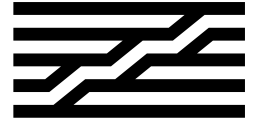
The surfaces of Gallagher’s black paintings have been built up to such an extent that they are rendered oblique; the quality of elasticity is distended through the persistent confrontation between the paintings’ layers. The canvases waver between their constructed layers only to be dismembered as Gallagher draws into them with a scalpel, which serves as a release valve, providing relief from the relentless compression of printed matter, thick gauge rubber, paint, and manuscript paper. These prescient paintings—thick with material and historical entanglements—are singular examples of the way Gallagher’s hand is sublimely resonant in her works, which she has described as “sentient geographies.”

For the exhibition *Blackness in Abstraction*, Gallagher created a new suite of four black paintings entitled *Negroes Battling in a Cave* (2016), which took as their point of departure the recent discovery of a racist joke – “Negroes battling in a cave” – handwritten under Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915). In this long-lost inscription, Malevich references writer and humorist Alphonse Allais’s earlier version of a black painting from 1897 titled *Combat des Nègres dans une cave, pendant la nuit* [Negroes fighting in a cellar at night]. Veiled by Malevich’s black square, scientific analysis revealed two hidden paintings – a proto-Suprematist work and a hybrid Cubist-Futurist composition – alongside the handwritten racist joke.¹⁴ These inscriptions trouble our common understanding of Malevich’s abstraction as the “zero degree” of painting.



Each of Gallagher's paintings begins with a stretched canvas painted in a sienna hue, which is then covered with a loose grid of penmanship paper that runs from top to bottom and left to right. After this, a layer of thick watercolor paper is laid down and Gallagher carves into it, inscribing a variation of the curvy, embryo-like forms that proliferate throughout much of her work, thus making a bas-relief of the canvas. These pseudophallic inscriptions are also reminiscent of batons wielded in fights. In this context, the question of who the "Negroes" are battling is left open (it brings to mind the rebellions by black citizens against state sanctioned violence in the United States, both historically and today). Repetitively interweaving layers of different types of paper and printed material only to enact cuts, carvings, and incised inscriptions, Gallagher gives the paintings a palpable physicality, as random pieces of paper are adhered, inserted into depressions, and cut with razor blades to flatten bubbles. The evolution of these paintings is purposeful, yet open to happenstance, responsive to the possibilities literally close at hand, as one thing leads to another through a process of experimentation and selection of materials. These paintings are layered with imagery from Gallagher's ongoing interest in marine biology, as well as advertisements from *Ebony* magazine. Taking a new approach, Gallagher overlays thick gauge black rubber with this printed matter. For her, it is a difference between forging steel and welding it, feeling the weight through the fleshy suppleness of the rubber underneath the paper. Gallagher then stains and shellacs the ads with shades of black paint, veiling the printed matter in such a way that the images and text come through in revelatory ways. The effect heightens the oscillation between types of cuttings, materials, and colors, as the initial layer of earth tone paint is glimpsed. Finally, Gallagher applies one coat of high gloss black enamel paint, sparkling like the surface of the ocean (a significant motif in her art) to "release the work."¹⁵

The optics of these paintings are complicated, both on their surface and beneath it, and as a result of Gallagher's archaeological approach, the outer edges are more pronounced, casting shadows through the dynamic oscillation between figure and ground. Taken together, the suite of paintings flow into one another, a conflation of the monochrome, landscape, figure, and text – sliding, folding, coalescing into a sensual whole, well beyond the bounds of any singular form. As Gallagher explains, "In these new paintings, the rubber is thicker and creates a stepped visibility that is about desire and lust. The grid has to do with covering the surface of something that will become more inscribable because it is paper ... The weave of the canvas is still visible despite the layering especially after adding the enamel. It is sensual. It is a sense. A working knowledge that is very tactile."¹⁶ Gallagher's formal technique of layering, inscribing, and cutting a range of matter allows the troubled anachronistic relationship between material, history, society, and culture to be buried and resurfaced like the Alphonse Allais reference in Malevich's work. These fugitive surfaces – hers and Malevich's – are paradigms of resistance, as what may have remained invisible rises through the cracks, animating from within, and up into the raking black light.



The question of what lies beneath concerns all of these works. For Gallagher, painting is a way of manifesting not only the work itself but also the ideas which animate it. She recognizes these lines of thought as historical, social, and political constructs to be unraveled and undermined through movement within these works; both in their relation to each other, and those of other artists. At first glance, Gallagher's works seem direct and to the point—they have an optical immediacy about them. Yet, the longer we take the artworks in, we realize there is a different temporality at play, a slow reveal of all that imbues them, which unfolds as the experience of seeing becomes a jittering trajectory of exchange along craggy, shaky, slippery, and yes, thick veneers.

Notes

This lecture draws upon several publications, including "Five Variations: Wangechi Mutu's Ornamental Feminism," commissioned by Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, 2013; "Relishing the Minor: Juliana Huxtable's Kewt Aesthetics," commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, 2015; *Blackness in Abstraction*, Pace Gallery, 2016; "Vectors and Veneers: The Thickness of Blackness" in *Accidental Records*, Hauser & Wirth, 2017; "Antecedents in Black," in Julie Mehretu, commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Whitney Museum of American Art, 2019; "A Splinter to the Heart: On the Possibility of Afro-Pessimist Aesthetics," *ASAP/Journal*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 5, Number 2, May 2020; "Some Thoughts on a Constellation of Things Seen and Felt," *Brooklyn Rail*, November 2020.

1. Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 14.
2. See: William M. Ivins, Jr., "The Philosophy of the Ornament" in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 5, May 1933.
3. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007); Angela Y. Davis, "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation," in *The Angela Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA., 1998), 179.
4. See: Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 20.
5. See: Lauren Berlant, "Showing Up to Withhold: Pope.L's Deadpan Aesthetic," in *Showing Up to Withhold*, ed. William Pope.L and Karen Reimer (Chicago: The Renaissance Society and University of Chicago Press, 2014).
6. Author in conversation with Julie Mehretu, January 25, 2019, New York City.
7. See: Suzanne Cotter, "The Alien Discontium: On Painting and Participating in the Work of Julie Mehretu," in *A Universal History of Everything and Nothing*, eds. Suzanne Cotter and Julie Mehretu, (Porto: Serralves Foundation, 2017), 16.
8. Author in conversation with Julie Mehretu, January 25, 2019, New York City.
9. Ibid.
10. Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 55.
11. Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 106.
12. See Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an AntiBlack World* (New York, New York University Press), 2020.
13. Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 153.
14. "Russia discovers two secret paintings under avant-garde masterpiece," <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/russia-malevich-black-square-hidden-paintings>. Accessed: May 1, 2016.
15. Ellen Gallagher, interview with the author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, March 13, 2016.
16. Ibid.