



BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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JOAN WALTEMATH: The Dinwoodies, 2005-8: graphite drawings on mylar

by Kara L. Rooney

Writing in the late 20th century, postmodern philosopher Vilém Flusser theorized that we had entered a transitional period between historical and post-historical thinking.

Linear thinking—based on writing and essential to history—is about to be put aside by a new form of thinking that is much more complex, multi-dimensional and visual, based on algorithms, and inspired by systems theory and chaos theory. As the image was suited to the prehistorical period and writing to the historical period, so the numerical code (and its visualization) is suited to the coming post-historical period. Digitally computed information reflects the character of the coming time, just as writing, from the Bible to Ulysses, reflected the character of the epochs of historical thinking and feeling.¹

Twenty years later, this transitional era has indeed marked a shift in consciousness, radically re-shaping our relational connectivity, not only to the world and to each other, but as it resides in art's primary structures. Flusser's theory has proven particularly prescient concerning our attachment to the two dimensional support. Its use value—economic and artistic—and romanticized connection between inscription and the wound are consistent sources of skeptical inquiry. Along these lines one finds the work of Joan Waltemath, whose tightly rendered graphite and colored pencil drawings on mylar denote the gridded structures of Minimalist composition, all the while alluding to a more haptic sensibility in their employment of densely layered gesture, scale, and repetition. The Dinwoodies, a series of these mylar drawings made between 2005 and 2008, is currently on view at Schema Projects in Bushwick. This is the first time the work has been shown, and it is Waltemath's first New York solo exhibition in over a decade.

The eight hanging mylar plots, ranging from a narrow 123 1/2 by 8 1/4 inches to a more substantial 81 by 25 inches, read as mathematically ordered versions of the universe, their only vulnerable tell revealed in the unsecured edges that hover, light as air, close to the bottom of the gallery wall. Repeated striations of layered graphite and colored pencil, bordering on the obsessive, completely occlude the work's underlying grid structure, its strictly calculated remains alluded to only by the rows of numerical coordinates that vertically line the left and right of the graphite marks. Waltemath generates each grid from a CAD drawing program using sets of harmonic proportions to determine its output. In this sense, the works' organizational relationship to Minimalism is not necessarily a misnomer—the meditative auras of Rothko's chapel and the Ryman room at Dia Beacon act as immediate references. So does David Zwirner's recent retrospective of John McCracken's sculpture, which features, most strikingly, a room devoted solely to the artist's "six columns" (2006), an installation consisting of six identically sized black onyx totems made of polyester resin, fiberglass, and plywood. The corporeal scale, repetition, and polished nature of these sculptures share an undeniable affinity with Waltemath's irrationally-based drawings,

wherein the coded language of mathematics speaks to dimensions beyond those marked by a linear understanding of space and time.

“of the east” (2008), for instance, consists of two diametrically opposed rectangles, the smaller stacked vertically atop the more elongated of the two, and separated by a 1 1/2-inch band of filmic mylar. A series of smaller rectangular bands embedded within the perimeter of the larger diptych are meticulously rendered in a variety of greys, from silvery graphite to warm brown to black oxide. These rhythmic shifts in scale and placement vary from image to image but are consistently recurring features, most likely typified by their originary inspiration—the ancient petroglyphs that dot the mountainous landscape of Sheridan, Wyoming, where the works were created.

“mind’s place” and “wind’s place” (both 2005), as well as “of the north” and “of the west” (both 2008), echo these sentiments in proportion and execution. But despite their rigid algorithmic geneses, the drawings reveal the delicate touch of a master draftsman, along with a tender sensibility for color and intricate patterning. Simply affixed to thin wood and metal plinths mounted near the ceiling, the metaphysical weight of the drawings is echoed in both their compositional structure and their bodily measure—the somatic references undeniable. Looking into these highly reflective surfaces becomes in itself a ruminative act, the body literally absorbed into the shimmering, disrupted planar space.

Jacques Derrida famously said:

What is thought today cannot be written according to the line and the book...the access to pluridimensionality and to delinearized temporality is not a simple regression toward the ‘mythogram’ (of oral culture): on the contrary, it makes all the rationality subjected to the linear model appear as another form of mythography.¹

Such dichotomies have propelled us into a new phase of myth: one where the ontological drives that fuel sentient awareness have gained a foothold over the hard-coded mathematics and binary coding that make up the tangible world. Yet in order to escape the trap of mere opposition, the invention of some third thing is required, a portal perhaps, through which we might encounter the world anew. Stand in front of Waltemath’s work long enough and that portal might just present itself.

¹Elizabeth Wilson and Andreas Ströhl, “On the Philosopher Vilém Flusser”, last accessed October 14, 2013.