

# VAN DOREN WAXTER

**artcritical**

the online magazine of art and ideas

## Thought Embodied: Dorothea Rockburne's Drawing Which Makes Itself

by [David Rhodes](#), Tuesday, January 28th, 2014

**Dorothea Rockburne: *Drawing Which Makes Itself* at the Museum of Modern Art**

September 21, 2013 to February 2, 2014

11 West 53rd Street, between fifth and Sixth avenues

The Paul J. Sachs Drawings Galleries, third floor



Installation view, Dorothea Rockburne: *Drawing Which Makes Itself*, Museum of Modern Art. Clockwise from left, on the walls and floor: *Drawing Which Makes Itself: Hartford Installation*, 1973, *Nesting*, 1972, *Neighbourhood*, 1973, *Arc*, 1973, *Diamond-Parallelogram Overlapping*, 1973. Digital Image © 2013 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In 1973, Dorothea Rockburne asked herself a question: “How could drawing be of itself and not something else?” Her answer, in a way, constitutes MoMA’s presentation of her works from 1972-73, “*Drawing Which Makes Itself*.” Materiality enters the process of making with a visual and conceptual concision that turns a support for drawing, such as paper, into an active and equal participant capable of making varied compositions of solid and linear geometric elements. A conflation of means and ends combined with stark and beautiful meditations on numbers and their inherent relation to form, resulted in a graphic process that is both intuitive and systematic.

Immersion in the consequences of mathematical sequence linked to a visual correlative was something that Rockburne established early in her career. Born in Canada in 1932, she studied at Black Mountain College in the the first half of the 1950s.. Attending a class at the famed North Carolina institution that was

described as mathematics for artists turned out to be hugely formative for her. The course focused on the underlying geometries present in nature and was taught by Hamburg-born mathematician Max Dehn (1878 – 1952) (Robert Creeley was a classmate.) Dehn, who taught at the college from 1945 until 1952, was the sole mathematician on the faculty where he continued his research into geometry, geometric group theory, and topology. Geometric group theory concerns the active influence of equations on geometric symmetries or fluid geometric transformations in a particular space, a theory that didn't become a discrete area of study within mathematics until the late 1980s. Its premise should appear somewhat familiar, even if not theoretically understood, upon viewing Rockburne's MoMA exhibition, which in turn revisits the installation of a show of the same title at the Bykert Gallery in 1973. Various square, diamond and arced shapes are poised along one wall in dialog with each other and with the works situated on two white low, wide pedestals raised inches from the floor. Originally, carbon from the floor based work spread around the gallery as visitors walked close to and around them, and used their hands to touch them, but the pedestals and a prohibition on touching prevents anything similar happening at MoMA.

The effect of the pedestals — although their purpose is to prevent the spread of carbon underfoot — is to reflect the wall-based works horizontally and emphasize a perspective that is dependent on the angle and distance of viewing. This actually enhances rather than detracts from the floor works and equalizes the space of wall and floor, echoing the equalizing of support and drawing within each work. The way in which geometry and surface generate extra visual content brings Ellsworth Kelly and Kasimir Malevich to mind., Kelly for activating of gallery wall through shapes connected to prior visual experience, Malevich for his use of black and white and his ambitions for transcendence.. Rockburne has said, "I came to realize that a piece of paper is a metaphysical object. You write on it, you draw on it, you fold it." Quotidian gestures, in other words, that have the potential of embodying and reflecting much more.



Dorothea Rockburne, *Neighborhood*. 1973. Transparentized paper, pencil, and colored pencil on wall, 160 x 90 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2013 Dorothea Rockburne / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

*Neighborhood*, 1973, comprises a series of diagonal and vertical lines in pencil and colored pencil on the wall, with a sheet of semi-transparent paper in a central position between them. The orientation of the lines and the regular geometry of the paper suggest a relationship between the two of movement and a tracing of

action. There is a visceral identification with the artist's construction of the piece in the evidences of performativity. There is a speed and subtleness in the turning and overlapping of line and the open center of the paper around and under which the action takes place visually and to which memory is caught up in reading the marks imaginatively. The folding in of different notions of media is referred to in Natasha Kurchanora's interview for MoMA with the artist when directly sighting Vladimir Tatlin as a point of reference. Drawing, sculpting and performance are all present, though it is drawing that is explored. Given the moment of its making it is impossible not to think of the expansion of possibilities in American art in this decade and the sense of discovery and invention, a connection to tradition notwithstanding.

Different papers and material are utilized as support and device in the exhibition. *Roman VI*, 1977, , for example, is made using Kraft paper, Copal oil varnish, blue pencil and Mylar tape. *Scalar*, 1971, is made with chipboard as well as paper, with nails and crude oil. In its wall position, although touching –and therefore appearing to be based on — the floor, it is both sculptural and architectural. The raw physicality of this piece, with its irregular perimeter edge of both vertical and horizontal elements, together with a surface that is subjected to a staining process (like weathering) – as if an exterior wall found inside – demands a complex associational reading. For Rockburne this is still within her definition of drawing as those associations further the idea of drawing.

Rockburne has said that her work contains sexuality, which of course in its surface and process sensuality, it certainly does. Often times intellectual rigor and sensual presence are easily separated, and in American culture sexuality is not so much connected to sensuality, as Rockburne herself has observed. It is striking that mathematic and geometric form is here always made as a very present surface, tangible and exposed to touch. Thought is therefore anything but disembodied, even if this idea might seem alien to Rockburne's searching formal and conceptual endeavor.