

In a Reuters photograph dated January 24, 2013, a Free Syrian Army soldier surveys the ruins of a building in Damascus. He wears a dark jacket, jeans, and a scarf, and he holds an assault rifle in his left hand. It is the second year of the Syrian civil war, and President Bashar al-Assad's forces have damaged or destroyed thousands of structures in the nation's capital. Although the war has affected millions of lives, this image of a single individual contemplating his next move in the face of the ongoing tragedy in Syria speaks to a resilience of spirit needed to affect any lasting transformation in a society. Using this photograph as source material, Julie Mehretu recently painted *Conjured Parts (epigraph), Aleppo*, 2016, one of a large group of ink and acrylic paintings that form the core of her exhibition *Hoodnyx, Voodoo and Stelae* at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York. *Conjured Parts (epigraph), Aleppo* began with the Reuters photo of the Free Syrian Army soldier, which Mehretu blurred and manipulated in Photoshop before projecting and airbrushing a version of it onto canvas. Using the abstracted image as her ground, she then drew, painted, and airbrushed on top of it, filling the canvas with a tangle of grayish-black marks that were compositionally guided by the underlying image but rendered it almost unintelligible.

Conjured Parts (epigraph), Aleppo, like most of Mehretu's oeuvre, is a painting traversed by history. It is grounded in urgent political and social questions while simultaneously troubling the limits of abstract painting. Each mark she has made on this canvas is both a response to the ongoing tragedy in Syria and a dialogue with the history of art. In this sense, Mehretu creates what we might call, using a phrase of the artist Mark Bradford's, "social abstraction": work that fuses an exploration of the genre of painting and an engagement with momentous world events. Like Bradford's massive collaged paintings, which reference urban unrest and the AIDS crisis, or Theaster Gates's firehose and tar paintings—which touch on the legacy of the civil rights movement and the value of black labor, respectively—Mehretu's paintings ask crucial questions about the role of art in the world in which we live and the world in which we want to live. Her work exhibits a seriousness befitting her subject matter, a gray sobriety that suits the crises unfolding in the Arab world, the disastrous aftermaths of our government's military strategies across the globe, and police violence against black bodies here at home. In his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history." To continue to act in spite of complex calamities is what Dr. King exhorted us to do, and it is just such ambiguities of history, and the refusal to be thwarted by them, that Mehretu's work addresses. An artist,



A Free Syrian Army fighter stands in front of the building destroyed by Syrian Army air strikes in the Arabeen neighborhood of Damascus, January 24, 2013. Photography courtesy of Reuters/Goran Tomasevic



Conjured Parts (epigraph), Aleppo



Police in riot gear, Ferguson, MO, November 24, 2014
Photography courtesy of Barrett Emke



Conjured Parts (eye), Ferguson

after all, is a citizen, not only of the nation in which they reside but of the world, and as a citizen Mehretu has seen it as her duty over the course of her career to witness and to act. The epic, turbulent abstractions she has produced are the result.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines an epigraph as "a motto or quotation, as at the beginning of a book, setting forth a theme." Although many of the paintings I will discuss in this essay predate *Conjured Parts (epigraph), Aleppo*, I'm using it as a way in to discussing a new chapter in Mehretu's practice. *Conjured Parts (epigraph), Aleppo* represents a major transition that has taken place in her work over the past five years, a shift from her earlier paintings, in which architectural renderings and schematics formed the matrix on top of which she worked, to more recent paintings that begin with abstracted news photographs or gray fields. If *Conjured Parts (epigraph), Aleppo* was inspired by an image of a soldier on the threshold of a ruin, contemplating his next move, let us think of Mehretu's current work in general and *Conjured Parts (epigraph), Aleppo* in particular as part of a new and evolving strategy, one being developed in light of constantly changing events on the ground. Before a discussion of what the conceptual shifts in her recent paintings are and portend, I want to examine the work of two other artists who, like Mehretu, have used abstraction to confront "the ambiguities of history." The first is Mazen Kerbaj, whose sound composition *Starry Night*, 2006, is a direct response to the aerial bombardment of his hometown, and the second Gerhard Richter, whose *Birkenau* paintings, 2014, grapple with key questions concerning the unrepresentability of Holocaust.

In the predawn hours of July 15, 2006, Lebanese-born musician, artist, and blogger Mazen Kerbaj went onto the balcony of his Beirut apartment to play with bombs. In response to the kidnapping of two of its soldiers by Hezbollah paramilitary forces, Israel had begun a bombing campaign targeting military and civilian sites in the city. Accompanied by exploding ordnances, barking dogs, car alarms, and emergency sirens, Kerbaj played on a prepared trumpet, producing a series of extended low rumbles, rattles, and stuttering sounds. The resulting recording, *Starry Night*, which he wryly describes as a "minimalistic improvisation by: mazen kerbaj/trumpet/the Israeli Air Force/bombs,"¹ was widely disseminated on websites and social media and was hailed both as a poignant sonic chronicle of what the Lebanese would come to call the July War and as an act of cultural resistance in the midst of the destruction of a city. "We all need sometimes a valid reason to start to work," Kerbaj said regarding the origin of

¹
mazenkerblog.blogspot.com

Starry Night, "and a good old war soundscape is OK as a starting point."² The "war soundscape" to which Kerbaj refers, however, extends beyond the events of the July War. Having grown up in Beirut, he speculates that his artistic production—with its roots in the improvisational techniques of musicians like Pharoah Sanders and Evan Parker—may have also been influenced by sonic memories of the Lebanese Civil War, a conflict that began in 1975, the year he was born, and which over the course of fifteen years killed more than 150,000 people. *Starry Night* is a composition born out of the necessity of making music in spite of disastrous circumstances, an act that was "better than just hearing it happening...waiting for each bomb to come down."³ For Kerbaj, catastrophe was a catalyst, and abstract, improvisational music was eminently suited to responding to that catalyst. The extended techniques he had used on recordings prior to *Starry Night*—circular breathing to produce a continuous tone, playing the trumpet through a long tube, using a balloon to force air through it, or altering its valves—all proved useful for this work, allowing him to echo, amplify, and contest the cacophony of sounds he heard from his balcony. While many musicians have made compositions in response to tragedies (John Coltrane's 1963 composition *Alabama*, written in response to the bombing of a black church by the Ku Klux Klan, and Steve Reich's 2009–10 string quartet *WTC 9/11*, which references the events of September 11, 2001, come to mind), listening to Kerbaj's music places you in the midst of the conflict in a visceral way.

This is not to say that Kerbaj didn't approach the July War with a sense of humor. In a blog post dated July 15, 2006, he wrote, "the Israeli pilots are real artists. they know how to keep their audience attentive. they never give you time to fall asleep; each time you feel the action is slow, they bring in some new emotional material to get you in again."⁴ The pilots are musicians and the bombs their percussive instruments, which they play by letting the weapons fall to the ground. When Kerbaj stepped out onto his balcony he was joining a small band, albeit one in which some members played without regard for their audience. Yet he had no choice but to be caught up in the sound. "I tend to think that music is much more aggressive and hard to accept than any other art/medium," Kerbaj said, "because it is the only one that penetrates you, while you usually have to go out to meet the work of art."⁵ Bombs penetrate people sonically, and sometimes physically. In response, Kerbaj made music that penetrated as well—although with a delayed effect, as it reverberated around the World Wide Web. Kerbaj witnessed destruction



Mazen Kerbaj
Beirut, 16 July 06, 2:10pm
13 x 21cm
Ink on paper

2
arabmediasociety.com/peer
_reviewed/index.php?article=40#
_edn38

3
theguardian.com/culture/
culturevultureblog/2006/jul/28/
strikinghome

4
mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2006/
kerbaj190706.html

5
issueprojectroom.org/news/nate
-wooley-interviews-mazen-kerbaj

in Beirut, but instead of dwelling in silence before the next bomb fell, he took out his trumpet and played.

In the issue of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published on February 11, 2008, German artist Gerhard Richter saw a photograph that had been taken in 1944 by a prisoner at the Auschwitz extermination camp Birkenau. It was reproduced in conjunction with a review of Georges Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of All*, a book-length meditation on that photograph and three others taken by the same prisoner, the only surviving images that show the actual process of mass extermination at the gas chambers. Richter clipped out the photo and hung it over his desk, placing it adjacent to reproductions of artworks he admired and images of his own works. Eventually he would make paintings based on all of the Birkenau photographs, a process that began with his projecting and sketching them out in graphite on four large canvases. He soon changed the direction of the project, covering the drawings with layers of red, green, black, and white squeegeed paint. The resulting large-scale abstract works were collectively titled *Birkenau*, 2014, and were first exhibited at the Albertinum of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden in early 2015.

In *Gerhard Richter's Birkenau Paintings*, a catalogue published in 2016, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, one of Richter's most perceptive interpreters, details the artist's use of Holocaust imagery throughout his career. As two important examples of the artist's attempt to reckon with that troubled period in his country's history, Buchloh cites Richter's colorization of news photos of prisoners at the liberation of the death camps, images that would end up in his magisterial work *Atlas* (1962–), and an early proposal for figurative paintings after photos from Auschwitz to be placed in the entrance hall of the restored Reichstag building in Berlin. One of the central issues Richter has faced in his work is the question of how to approach existing images of the Holocaust. The ethics of using these images in the creation of artworks addressing the Holocaust has been long debated in political and philosophical circles. For Buchloh, it is essential to ponder "whether and how iconic representations of Holocaust memory could possibly correspond to the social and the subjective desire for commemoration and representation. Or, by contrast, whether it is precisely one of the tasks of the artist to problematize any form of an iconically mediated reception of the unrepresentable, and therefore to delegitimize any of these attempts."⁶ Richter, Buchloh concludes, has constantly embraced the latter stance.

"Painting is the making of an analogy for something nonvisual and incomprehensible: giving it form and bringing it

within reach," Richter wrote in 1981. "And that is why good paintings are incomprehensible."⁷ If this is one of the guiding principles of Richter's artistic project, the question that must be asked is, how do the *Birkenau* paintings, which are based on actual visual records of the Holocaust, give form to the nonvisual and the incomprehensible? To wrestle with this issue, I want to briefly turn to a chapter on Richter and photography in theorist Kaja Silverman's significant 2009 book *Flesh of My Flesh*. In it, she details the ways in which Richter erases the distinction between figuration and abstraction in his practice, and she cites his blurred, photo-based paintings as an example. Citing Richter's own evocations of analogy, she draws a distinction between analogy—the bringing of "two or more things together on the basis of their lesser or greater resemblance"—and metaphor—which "entails the substitution of one thing for another"—and she argues that an analogy is a profoundly democratic arrangement, one in which "both terms are on an equal footing, ontologically and semiotically." Richter, she writes, creates analogies rather than metaphors: His photo-based work reflects a view that "the photograph inhabits the same world as its referent—the world of forms."⁸ While much of her discussion is focused on Richter's justly famous October 18, 1977 paintings, which use images of the Baader-Meinhof Group, a radical organization operating in Germany in the 1970s, her concept of analogy is also useful in a discussion of the *Birkenau* paintings, whose incomprehensibility is inextricable from their being an analogy for the subject matter depicted in their source imagery. As Buchloh writes, Richter's practice has long been about "erasing the possibility and negating the credibility of any iconic representation" of the Holocaust⁹, and the *Birkenau* paintings, which literally cover over images of the death camps, certainly fit this description. At the same time, they also work within Silverman's notion of analogy, in that the source photos—which were smuggled out of the camps and published by the Polish resistance to show a skeptical world the scale of carnage there—are a visual record of the bureaucratic efficiency, the magnitude, the sheer horror, and, ultimately, the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, an incomprehensibility to which Richter's paintings seek to give form. This deployment of the photographs seems to contradict their intended use as evidence, yet Richter's aim is not to contest their veracity but to question their use in the space of visual art.

When the photos from the Birkenau camp were first published, in 1945, black voids around two of the images were cropped out to focus attention on the scenes they depicted. It was only in the mid-1980s that uncropped versions surfaced, making it apparent that the photos had been taken from inside the gas

⁶ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter's Birkenau Paintings* (Köln, Germany: Verlag Der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016), 7.

⁷ Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962–1993* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 98.

⁸ Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 173–74.

⁹ Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter's Birkenau Paintings*, 8.



Gerhard Richter
State of Birkenau painting 937-2 on July 29, 2014



Gerhard Richter
State of Birkenau painting 937-2 on August 3, 2014



Gerhard Richter
State of Birkenau painting 937-2 on August 25, 2014

Gerhard Richter
Birkenau
2014
260 x 200 cm
Oil on canvas

chambers themselves. Reflecting movingly about the pictures, Georges Didi-Huberman writes:

The mass of black that surrounds the sight of the cadavers and the pits, this mass where *nothing is visible* gives in reality a *visual mark* that is just as valuable as all the rest of the exposed surface. That mass where nothing is visible is the space of the gas chamber: the *dark room* into which one had to retreat, to step back, in order to give light to the work of the *Sonderkommando* outside, above the pyres. That mass of black gives us the situation itself, the space of possibility, the condition of existence of the photographs themselves.¹⁰

This “mass where nothing is visible” is what Richter responds to and brings form to in the *Birkenau* paintings. His subject matter is the void. He covers over his own graphite representations of the photos, deeming them a false start, and opts instead to use a thick blanket of paint in a highly restricted palette, a significant departure from the many-hued abstract paintings that precede these works. These are sober, somnolent works, where Richter’s formerly grand, sweeping gestures with brush and squeegee are replaced with what Buchloh calls “almost a painterly stutter.”¹¹ This description of the work reminds me of an earlier painting, *Blanket*, 1988, in which a drift of white paint partially buries a rejected grisaille painting from the October 18, 1977 series, a meditation on the oscillation between historical reckoning and willful forgetting which could be said to characterize the post-World War II era. While *Blanket* explores the process of representation and its erasure, Richter’s decision to rename as *Birkenau* works that had originally been titled “Four Abstract Paintings” makes legible that which would have remained obscured. Given the resurgence of Holocaust denial and the rise of xenophobia in Germany and across Europe, this act of (re) naming is a political one, deliberately taken up by Germany’s most celebrated artist at a critical juncture in his country’s history.

In early 2012, when Mehretu began work on her Grey Paintings, they represented a sharp departure from her practice up to that point. For her paintings *Stadia I* and *Stadia II*, both 2004, and *Mural*, 2009, architectural renderings, site plans, and the like were projected and painstakingly drawn in ink onto large canvases before being sealed with a coat of clear acrylic medium. This was in turn covered with a layer of black, white, and colored lines,

painted and airbrushed marks, and colored shapes. The artist has referred to the flurry of marks on top of the renderings as “characters,” which function as a counterpoint to the highly structured drawings below. In an extensive text on Mehretu’s work titled “Julie Mehretu’s Eruptive Lines of Flight as Ethos of Revolution,” curator and art historian Catherine de Zegher writes, “Mehretu inscribes her own individual narrative into the folds of (art) history while mobilizing the small anthropomorphic pictographs, seen by the artist as social agents, in communities that overthrow ‘rulers’ and systems to make change possible.”¹² In a work such as *Mogamma (A painting in Four Parts); Part 1-4*, 2012, whose title references a massive government building on the edge of Cairo’s Tahrir Square, the marks on the surface suggest movement, struggle, and resistance by a collection of individuals operating in unpredictable ways over and against the imposing structures depicted below. One can see a hopefulness in *Mogamma*, which mirrored a sense of optimism and possibility at the onset of the Arab Spring.

Toward the beginning of 2012, Mehretu began to wipe the slate clean. The meticulously rendered matrix of architectural renderings, schematics, maps, and the like began to give way to atmospheric gray grounds or abstracted news photos, which were then covered in bold, gestural marks. Collectively titled the Grey Paintings, these works indicate a new trajectory in Mehretu’s practice, one in which more individualized conceptions of resistance and struggle have taken the fore. Her move away from marks that represent a collection of individuals to ones that reference the sweep of an individual’s hand or the scale of her body signal a new focus on the role each of us play in helping imagine a new world.

In a note written in 1985, Gerhard Richter expressed the view that painting was “change, becoming, emerging, being-there, thusness.”¹³ Mehretu’s Grey Paintings share this notion of painting as process, arc, a journey along forking paths. *Conjured Parts (epigraph)*, *Aleppo*, with its focus on individual decisions and actions, is emblematic of this new direction. That painting’s genesis was an image that was simultaneously about ruin and defeat and an illustration of resilience, resolve, and hope, as exemplified by the contemplative Free Syrian Army soldier. Mehretu’s Grey Paintings, similarly, operate out of a conflicted space. They hold a mirror up to the world while opening a window to another.

The earliest Grey Paintings, however, generally approach these themes through aesthetic and conceptual reference points rather than political ones. The titles of *Heavier Than Air (picture form)*, 2012, *Tsunemasa (next to Kaija, after Pound, after*

10 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008), 35.

11 Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter’s Birkenau Paintings*, 23.

12 Catherine de Zegher, *Julie Mehretu, Drawings* (New York, Rizzoli, 2007), 21.

13 Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, 112.

Fenollosa, 2014, and *Conjured Parts (tongues)*, 2015, reference the artist's interests in music, poetry, and language. A subset of Grey Paintings collectively titled "Invisible Sun" reference the writings of theorist and filmmaker Kodwo Eshun, the novels of D. H. Lawrence, ancient letterforms, and various mystical and philosophical traditions. These large works also jettison architectural renderings in favor of billowy gray grounds, sometimes interspersed with passages of pastel colors. For example, in *Invisible Sun (algorithm 1)*, 2012, thin, precisely drawn white lines are laid down over a misty ground, on top of which Mehretu has drawn in black ink and acrylic. The marks are small in scale, almost tentative, as if the artist is feeling her way around this new territory. At the top left of the canvas is a black handprint, a fragment of a body adrift in a field of abstraction. In a more recent work, *Invisible Sun (algorithm 8, fable form)*, 2015, the range and density of the marks has drastically changed, now filling the canvas edge to edge with an audacious, quirky cacophony and an undeniable confidence. The Invisible Sun paintings are still monumental in scale and ambition, but now, loosened from the strictures of architectural underdrawings, they better showcase Mehretu's inventiveness and gestural intelligence.

While the critical response to the Grey Paintings often cites Cy Twombly's languorous, sprawling canvases (particularly his famous blackboard paintings) as a point of comparison, Mehretu's canvases have always seemed less interested than Twombly's in referencing the classical age or pushing script towards gesture. Rather, they evoke a restless, diasporic view of world events and work to push gesture toward the present day. Her paintings also have a different sense of color and space than Twombly's. While his work is more riotous in its use of color, and his refined scrawls pull the viewer back to the surface of his canvases, Mehretu severely limits her palette and creates deep, moody expanses in her work by sanding back areas of the paintings and reanimating them with new lines, creating palimpsest-like images that pulse with energy. What the two artists do share is the belief that painting is an arena where big ideas can be grappled with.

In 2013, Mehretu started on a new group of Grey Paintings that hark back to earlier work but signal a radical new direction. In works like *Conjured Parts (epigraph)*, *Aleppo*, *Conjured Parts (head)*, *Aleppo*, and *Conjured Parts (heart)*, *Aleppo* (all 2016), abstracted scenes of the aftermath of bombings in Syria were the ground on which she worked. Gone are the "characters" which darted around her earlier canvases, replaced by gestural strokes that seem to be more about the sweep of the artist's hand and the diversity of gestures she can achieve with her brush. Scattered

within the paintings are suggestions of breast, buttocks, and eyes, at once a reference to the explosive scenes that underlie the painting and a sign that her sociopolitically engaged work has turned toward the body, a recognition that resistance can take the form of a hand raised in protest, a joy-giving erogenous zone, or a witnessing eye.

Although these works are grouped under the heading "Grey Paintings," many of their photo backgrounds are airbrushed in color, and in the finished works these register as areas of lights and darks behind a field of expressive marks. Mehretu is careful to retain these patches of color and light as they suggest a space beyond the black and gray strokes that fill the foreground of the paintings. In *Conjured Parts (heart)*, *Aleppo*, for example, a news image of large group of people standing at the base of bombed-out apartment buildings in Aleppo has been blurred and softly colorized in Photoshop before being airbrushed onto the canvas. After Mehretu had painted on top of this manipulated image, an area in the original photograph that showed huge, dangling pieces of concrete slab came to read in the finished work as a spot of light amid a tangle of black, gray, and blue gestural marks, reminiscent of the chaotic tangle of rebar and broken columns visible in the original image. In each painting, space is clouded by dust and debris, but patches of light and color suggest a world beyond what we immediately see. All too often, work that engages issues of politics and struggle has no air in it, as if the outcomes for the participants are already sealed or the goal is to show what the oppressed already know: that they are oppressed. In Mehretu's work, color and atmosphere, as well as infinitely varied lines, indicate possibility, a way out, even hope.

I started this essay with *Conjured Parts (epigraph)*, *Aleppo*, where the image of a soldier seemed emblematic of a turn in Mehretu's work toward a more individualized conception of what it means to witness and to act. "What must be done?" is the question she, as an artist, has asked herself in the face of horrific events, and the answer is far from clear. If the array of marks she makes on her canvases no longer evoke collective action by a mass of characters, their sheer diversity reflects the myriad of ways that people attempt to resist the forces seeking to annihilate them.

In a 2015 lecture at the New Museum in New York on the painter Chris Ofili, the critic Fred Moten said that it is easier to say what we *don't* want than to say what we *do* want. To be an artist is to strive to say what we want, to depict the world we want to live in. Mehretu's paintings, which squarely face the ambiguities of history, refuse to retreat into despair, reminding us that even in the midst of catastrophe we all still have work to do.

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