

UP NOW

Dorothea Rockburne

Jill Newhouse and Museum of Modern Art Through January 20

It's high time the art world caught up with Dorothea Rockburne's amazing early works. They straddle the endings of Minimalism and the frayed beginnings of the postminimal '70s—that moment of do-it-yourself, start-over-from-scratch radical experimentation (think of early Tuttle, Serra, LeWitt, and Rockburne herself). Rockburne's "Drawing Which Makes Itself" at MoMA is a stunning surprise: the artist has long been admired among her peers, but this well-chosen show elevates her to star status.

The installation is breathtaking. It opens with a large, stark-white gallery featuring two indigo-black carbon-paper installations on low, white platforms, plus another carbon-paper wall work, *Hartford Installation*, all from the series "Drawing Which Makes Itself" (1972–73). Smudged fingerprints on the wall reveal the processes of flipping and repositioning the carbon paper, and carbon directional lines trace the trajectory of each movement. Six deliberately creased white-paper works provide an understatement of intent. Against another wall is a construction of copper-toned chipboard, nails, and paper saturated with crude oil, titled *Scalar* (1971). Made well before the 1973 oil crisis, this seemingly prescient work used crude oil because, according to

Rockburne, it was less expensive than paint.

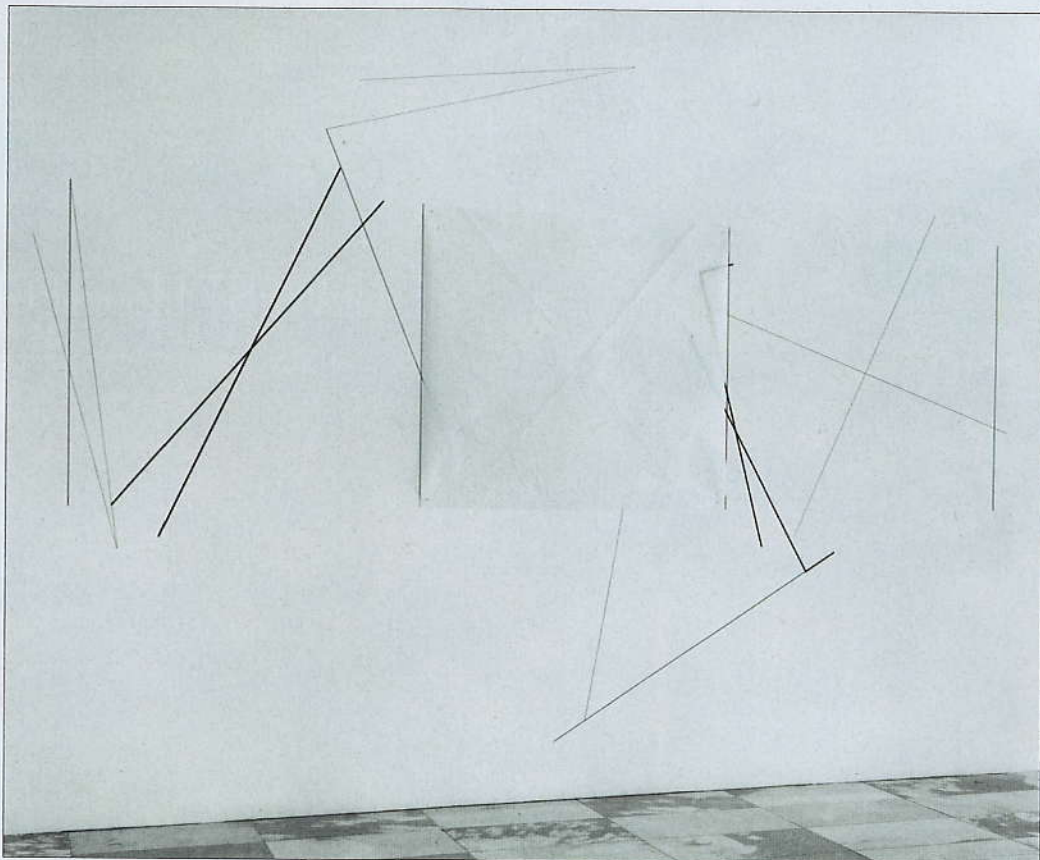
Rockburne studied at Black Mountain College in the '50s, working with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, but she also studied mathematics with Max Dehn, who wrote on topology. Her work is best understood as a visual equivalent of topology, the mathematical study of the conservation of space. Paper became for Rockburne a membrane whose surface remains constant, "a skin that can be marked, folded, layered, or flipped over a larger plane." She rendered transparent the mathematical processes. Her descriptions of these pieces read like dance notations: "Position A enters clockwise into left sheet's territory and is flipped.... Only its diagonal is marked." She thus redefined drawing.

The show also traces the progression of her '70s work with topology and found color: the "Golden Section" series (gesso and colored pencil); the translucent velum series with penciled curves; the transparent "Conservation" series based on Jean Piaget's theories of childhood mental development; and, later, the rich brown copal-oil-varnish series on rag

board, with Mylar tape, glue, and blue pencil. By the early '80s, she had begun to use paint and to think of her folded trapezoids and parallelograms as abstract angels, describing them as "a little devilish," thereby lifting them out of their religious context and plunging them into a purely mathematical realm.

Jill Newhouse Gallery showed ten "Indication Drawings" from the "Drawing Which Makes Itself" series. They hadn't been seen together since 1973, when they were shown at Bykert Gallery in New York. These carbon-paper pieces were not working tools but a means of recording the ephemeral wall and floor installations. One of them, *Milan Piece* (1973), rematerialized as a large wall drawing with carbon smudges, scored folds, and carbon lines. It is as if Rockburne were folding time and space together to occupy more than one position, seeking wormholes into the imploded black hole at the center of our galaxy. A more recent series—with gleaming copper orbs and elemental blue—related to Isaac Newton and revealed Rockburne as a cosmic visionary. Or simply a magician.

—Kim Levin



Dorothea Rockburne, *Neighborhood*, 1973, transparentized paper, pencil, and colored pencil on wall, 160" x 90". Museum of Modern Art.