

What is a Landscape: Representing Place in a Postmodern World

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Post Structuralism

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In 1981, Jean Baudrillard opened his pivotal *Simulacra and Simulation* treatise with a story. He recalled a Borges myth about an empire that attempted to create a map of everything on earth, eventually drawing one so large that it covered the earth's surface completely.<sup>1</sup> In light of recent changes in human geography, this story seems closer to prophecy than myth. Baudrillard's essay marks not only a change in ideas about the role and history of images in society, but a change in the definition of landscape itself. Dealing directly with the subject/object relationship between humans and their environment, landscape artists are faced with the challenge of adapting traditional depictions of the landscape to suit changing notions of place. In order to touch on the multitude of solutions to this landscape problem, I will examine the works of three artists whose approaches to the landscape greatly differ: Richard Diebenkorn, Dan Rice and Julie Mehretu. Hailing from different time periods and in spite of their enormous differences, each of these artists' works display evidence of the landscape as increasingly entropic, hybrid and dynamic.

The delayed use of the landscape as a primary subject matter in Western painting—a practice that did not develop until well into the seventeenth century<sup>2</sup>—should be indication enough that conceptions of landscape historically have been subject to significant change. In his examination of the history of landscape representation, Edward Casey suggests that landscape painting's deferred development in the West lies simply in the difficulty of re-presenting a space that is by its definition unlimited onto a restricted format—the very same problem that Borges' characters encountered with their map. The landscape, which he calls an “indecomposable totality,”<sup>3</sup> has here more to do with its German derivative, *Landschaft*, than contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, ed. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994) 2.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) 5.

<sup>3</sup> Casey 18.

definitions of word. Unlike the English word, *Landschaft* has a double meaning, encompassing both the unrestricted area of a land itself and the viewer's perception of it.<sup>4</sup> This is significant in that it defines the landscape first as an expansive, physical whole that is perceived, secondly, by an objective viewer. Contemporary definitions of landscape, however, alter the nature of this subject/object relationship. Rather than existing physically as fact, landscape is increasingly defined by the assemblage of objects and images that *produce* its appearance. As Baudrillard explains in his essay,

The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. ... But it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between one and the other that gave abstraction its charm.<sup>5</sup>

According to Baudrillard, and in line with much of contemporary human geography, we have entered an age in which the map from the fable has replaced the surface of the earth itself, in which neither the original surface, nor the map are distinguishable from one another.

Baudrillard's theory as it applies to the landscape has faced criticism, however, from artists, environmentalists and geographers alike. Among environmentalists in particular there is a tendency to posit 'pure' nature against 'artificial' simulation. But the problem with this good nature, bad simulation outlook is that it relies on distinctions made problematic by Baudrillard's own theories: What counts as natural? What counts as simulated? United States National Parks, for example, appear natural only in comparison to their surrounding environments. They are nonetheless human-altered and -inhabited areas of land designated by abstract demarcations. Reaching back, we discover a long line of simulations that have given these areas the appearance of purity. Even 19th century landscape paintings, which depict the figure dwarfed by an

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth R. Olwig, "Restoring the Substantive Nature of Landscape." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86 no. 4 (1996): 630.

<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard 2.

immense, immaculate nature, were years removed from the negotiating of these rivers, the breaking of the earth with plows—years removed from first-hand, physical experience with the landscape.<sup>6</sup> Would these constructed experiences not also be considered simulations? By choosing to label an area or an image as one side of the dichotomy, one ignores their interdependence. As Katherine Hayles writes in her essay “Simulated Nature and Natural Simulations”:

If simulation didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent it, for only so could the purity of nature be asserted in opposition to the artificiality of simulation. To choose simulation over nature is not to escape from this dynamic but to reinforce it.<sup>7</sup>

Because confronting Baudrillard's theory of simulation with denial only further enforces it, it is necessary for artists and geographers alike to recognize these theories not as a nail in nature's coffin, but as an expansion of the meaning and role of landscape in contemporary human life.

Above all, this change in our subject/object relationship with our environment means drastic changes in how we establish our sense of place. Place, once thought of in terms of a static location's essence or flavor, has become more subject to flux, more of a dynamic web than a specific site or location.<sup>8</sup> Globalization has led to an understanding of place that is multi-centered and dynamic, formed from a range of physical experiences as well as virtual interactions and media images. For many scholars, this change has been considered to represent a loss of place in Western society, but Karen Haltunen cautions against such nostalgic jeremiads. “They mistake change for destruction,” she says in her 2005 address to the American Studies Association, “As Lucy Lippard has observed, ‘Placelessness may simply be place ignored,

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<sup>6</sup> Katherine Hayles, “Simulated Nature and Natural Simulations: Rethinking the Relation Between the Beholder and the World,” *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995) 410.

<sup>7</sup> Hayles 411.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Oakes, “Place and the Paradox of Modernity,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 87.3 (1997) 510.

unseen or unknown.”<sup>9</sup> The challenge for contemporary landscape artists, then, lies in representing a place that no longer presents itself as a single, visual whole but is, by its very definition, a conglomerate of experiences, sensations and images. Place, Haltunen argues, has not ceased to be important. (Certainly, since pure objectivity is impossible, all of our knowledge must be considered particularly emplaced.) Instead, the artist approaches places that are hybrid rather than essential, global rather than particular, and dynamic rather than static.<sup>10</sup>

Although they predate Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, Richard Diebenkorn’s landscapes—first associated with the Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s, though he later broke from this movement—demonstrate a similarly fractured understanding of place. The paintings from his 1955 Berkeley series, for example, are composed of planes influenced by the area’s landscape that suggest, among others, cartographic and aerial views. Rather than coming together to represent a single viewpoint, however, these planes merge, fold and interpenetrate one another, forcing together several viewpoints within the same pictorial space.<sup>11</sup> The orange and gray aerial planes of *Berkeley No. 19* (fig. 1) butt up against a grouping of small, vertical marks in the upper fourth of the painting that suggest buildings stood upright. The central bluish square, scraped around and cut out, almost gives the appearance of bowl-like concavity. Throughout are suggestions of mapped regions, geometric shapes marked off with line, but if this is a map, it has been created in multiple languages with multiple keys. In his later cityscapes, Diebenkorn even embedded figures in the frontal plane that further skewed any suggestions of scale or perspective and interrupted the illusion of space. “The task of a painter such as Diebenkorn,” writes Edward Casey in his examination of the artist, “is to make one world out of

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<sup>9</sup> Karen Haltunen, “Groundwork: American Studies in Place: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 4, 2005,” *American Quarterly* 58.1 (2006) 2.

<sup>10</sup> Haltunen 3.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Norland, *Richard Diebenkorn* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1987) 62.

what would otherwise be a schizoid situation.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly, Diebenkorn achieves just that. By titling each of his paintings by its region, Berkeley, and a corresponding number, Diebenkorn evokes with his series a sense of the region’s place that is a conglomerate of different viewpoints. These constructed experiences that Diebenkorn creates, though perhaps they reach a more holistic conclusion than more contemporary work, nonetheless appear as a precursor to some of the changes in geographical thought that would emerge in the next few decades.

These characteristics are especially apparent in Diebenkorn’s 1972 Ocean Park series—his most famous body of work. Although these paintings even further abstract the landscape, they are especially exemplary of the compression of space and time begun in his Berkeley series. The works, which Diebenkorn assembled in part from views out his studio window in California, represent the landscape with large, geometric areas of flat color butted up against sections of smaller, compressed shapes. The diagonal and horizontal tensions created by this juxtaposition suggest the movement of planes through space in a way that is perhaps clearer than in his Berkeley series—in spite of their strict adherence to the picture plane.<sup>13</sup> Most notable, however, is the way Diebenkorn reveals his process in his Ocean Park paintings. The large areas of color display evidence of scraping and over-painting and, viewed closely, are found to be painted from multiple layered washes rather than a single color. The large blue rectangle in his *Ocean Park No. 54* (fig. 2), for example, is washed over with layers of white and pink, scraped into revealing underlying shapes and drawn over once more with graphite. The result is a compression of time that is entropic in its presentation. History is visible in the Ocean Park paintings, but it is presented all at once, compressed within the planes of the landscape. Diebenkorn’s Ocean Park

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Casey, *Earth-Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 135.

<sup>13</sup> Norland 116.

paintings, then, can be seen to represent not only a synthesizing of multiple viewpoints but of different experiences, different instances in time.

Dan Rice, whose work dates somewhat later, beginning in the mid-seventies and into the nineties, similarly compresses a history of experience within a single image. Rather than painting discrete events or areas in the landscape, however—which Diebenkorn arguably does, even if they are presented simultaneously—Rice uses his repeated experience in a particular landscape, mainly the Connecticut shoreline, as a reservoir of color and form from which to draw spontaneously in his studio. His paintings, then, represent “a continuous pattern of inhabitation in a group of places in close proximity to one another: a pond on a farm, a marsh, a certain beach.”<sup>14</sup> His 1997 painting *Woods to the North, Nightfall* (fig. 3), for example, though it refers in its title to a specific time of day and location, is the result of a continual, absorptive process of being in the landscape and represents linkages across time as compressed within a single image.<sup>15</sup> Formally, his paintings reflect this compression. Devoid of the broad, geometric planes present in Diebenkorn’s work, Rice does away with spatial illusion almost entirely, creating flat masses of smaller, colored marks. The brown rectangle in *Woods to the North*, for example, is built in layers of brown, green, blue and bright orange that suggest an entire universe of change in that particular location squeezed onto the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. Space and time in Rice’s work have been visually compressed in order to represent a regional essence, an end that, remarkably, reaches a modernist conclusion:

*Lands End NE* (fig. 4) is a painting neither of *a marsh or the marsh*; it is a painting of *Marsh*. ‘Marsh’ in a sense capacious enough to include almost any marsh and the particular marsh on which the painter resides, with space left over for remembered marshes and imagined marshes, not to mention marshes painted by other painters as well.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Earth-Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape* 154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 154.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 155.

Rice uses a similarly entropic representation of change over time as in Diebenkorn's work to reach an image of a regional landscape that is both general and particular, both expansive and definitive.

Perhaps most in line with Baudrillard's theories on simulation, however, is the work of Nigerian-born artist Julie Mehretu. The most contemporary of the three, Mehretu makes direct reference to Baudrillard's writing in some of the titles of her colossal works—*Palimpsest*, *Dissimilation and Empirical Construction*, to name a few. In the view book for her 2010 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, Mehretu included a telling excerpt from Alan Balfour's *Berlin: the Politics of Order*, subtitled "Palimpsest":

The reality produced by architecture is always the projection of fictions from the imagination on circumstance. Often that reality becomes no more than the residue of ephemeral desire. The presence of the past persistently infers with the promise of the future (and the present, for that matter). There are no dreams in isolation; all are in reflection and reaction, in a swirling confusion of past existence. This accumulation, on the land and in the mind, causes irreconcilable confusion in the order of things. In the progression of realities, the physical presence of so many pasts denies the operation of any simple struggle of opposites, and all attempts at synthesis seem to increase fragmentation.<sup>17</sup>

This passage perhaps explains the artist's attraction to architectural blueprints and city plans, a major component of her work, but it also highlights a characteristic of Mehretu's work that separates her from the previous two artists. Rather than drawing together landscape and architectural fragments to create wholes, Mehretu's work seems to encourage and even increase fragmentation. The colossal canvases, many up to ten feet in height,<sup>18</sup> "appear one way from a distance," the artist stated in an interview, "almost like looking at a cosmology, city or universe from afar—but then when you approach the work, the overall image shatters into numerous other

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Balfour, *Berlin: the Politics of Order*, quoted in *Julie Mehretu: Grey Area*, ed. Joan Young (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2009) 53.

<sup>18</sup> "Julie Mehretu." *Julie Mehretu*. White Cube. Web. 20 Oct. 2010. <http://www.whitecube.com/artists/mehretu/>

pictures, stories and events.”<sup>19</sup> Up close, Mehretu’s paintings are criss-crossed with the overlapping paths of small, repeated marks. These marks, which Mehretu has referred to as characters, suggest a seemingly infinite number of simultaneous narratives. *Empirical Constructions* (fig. 5), for example, from a distance appears as some kind of cosmic burst, but moving closer one finds imbedded a multitude of varied architectural forms leading to an endless number of perspective points, woven with trails of calligraphic ‘character’ marks. These ‘landscapes’ are really a complex fabric of numerous experiences, stories, images and viewpoints.

Time is of course also at play in Mehretu’s fragmented cosmos. The dense layering and partial veiling of information in Mehretu’s *Grey Area* exhibition, for example, has the viewer playing archeologist. These canvases, on which Mehretu physically erases to reveal old surfaces, suggest “the ghostly confluence of multiple realities,”<sup>20</sup> by actually smearing and removing evidence of the final layer (one could say, the present) to reveal the architectural forms underneath. This excavation is not solely backward looking, however. These erasures are part of the sweeping motion of the painting as a whole, often opening up spaces for new forms that are traced on top from blueprints or images of city space. More than simply borrowing its elements, the layering creates a metaphor for the presence and compaction of history within a city. As Alan Balfour writes in the *Berlin* excerpt:

An archaeologist might excavate traces of bygone times, uncovering relics and customs of past communities in the strata of sediment that settle amid the new. City dwellers, on the other hand, must live in a landscape of temporal shifts, routinely maneuvering through them as they go about their daily lives. In doing so, they create a unique personal negotiation of past, present and future.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Joan Young, “Layering and Erasure: An Introduction to Julie Mehretu,” *Julie Mehretu: Grey Area*, ed. Joan Young (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2009) 30.

<sup>20</sup> Young 31.

<sup>21</sup> Young 29.

Time, along with space, perspective and narrative, is presented kaleidoscopically. Far from posing these new constructions against nature, Mehretu embraces the interplay between all elements of the landscape, creating radically open spaces that transgress distinctions of time and place, objective and subjective. It is the openness of Mehretu's work that places her so firmly in line with Baudrillard's theory. She presents an understanding of place that is constructed, inclusive and subject to continual flux.

The works of Richard Diebenkorn, Dan Rice and Julie Mehretu, although dramatically different both in process and product, each represent the landscape as a constructed experience. This change in representation of the landscape from an indecomposable whole to a hybrid construction that synthesizes many images, experiences and viewpoints, is not a unique phenomenon to the art world. Rather, it reflects changing ideas in contemporary geography about humans' experience of and relationship to their environment. The works of these three artists offer solutions to the problem of presenting a landscape that has become increasingly multi-centered and dynamic within the constricted space of a picture plane.

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Fig. 1: Richard Diebenkorn *Berkeley No. 19*, 1954.



Fig. 2: Richard Diebenkorn *Ocean Park No. 54*, 1972.

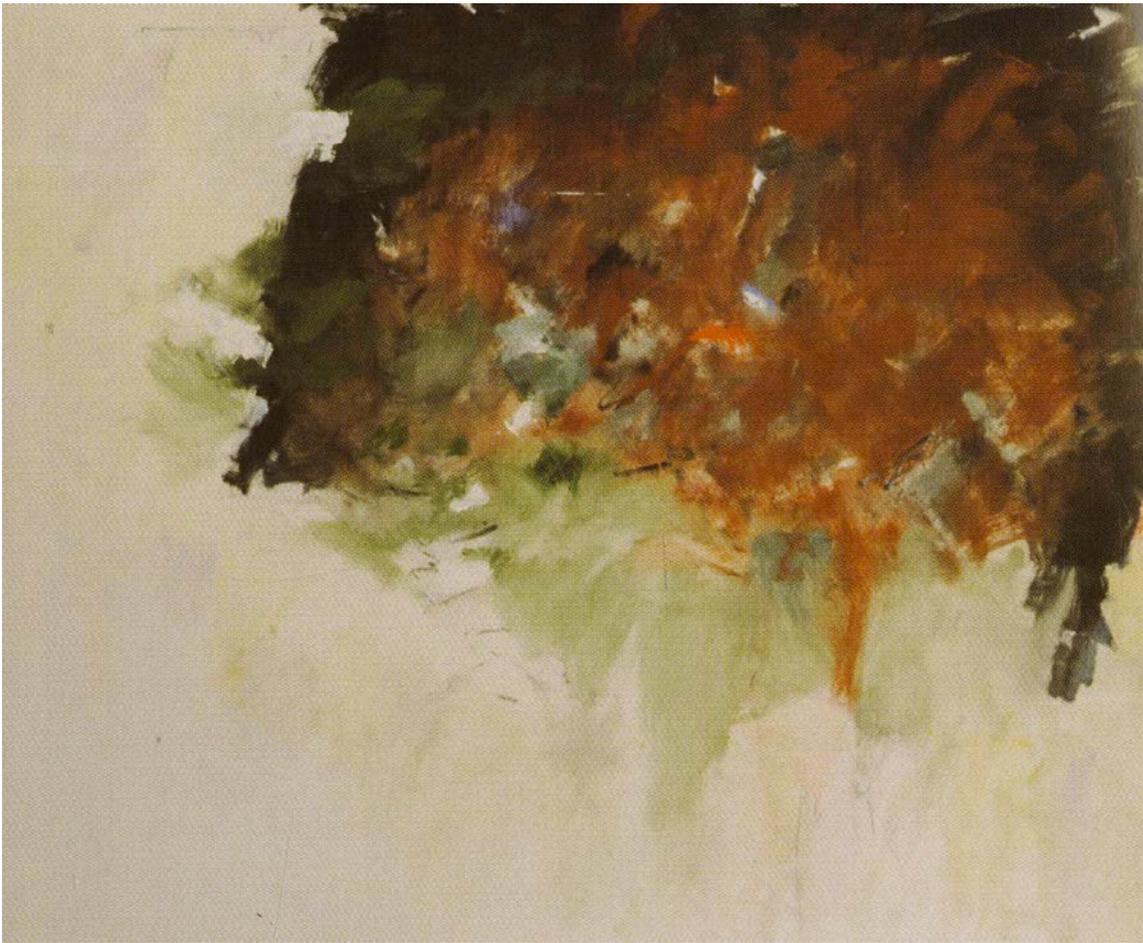


Fig. 3: Dan Rice *Woods to the North, Nightfall*, 1997.



Fig. 4: Dan Rice *Lands End NE*, 1976-97.

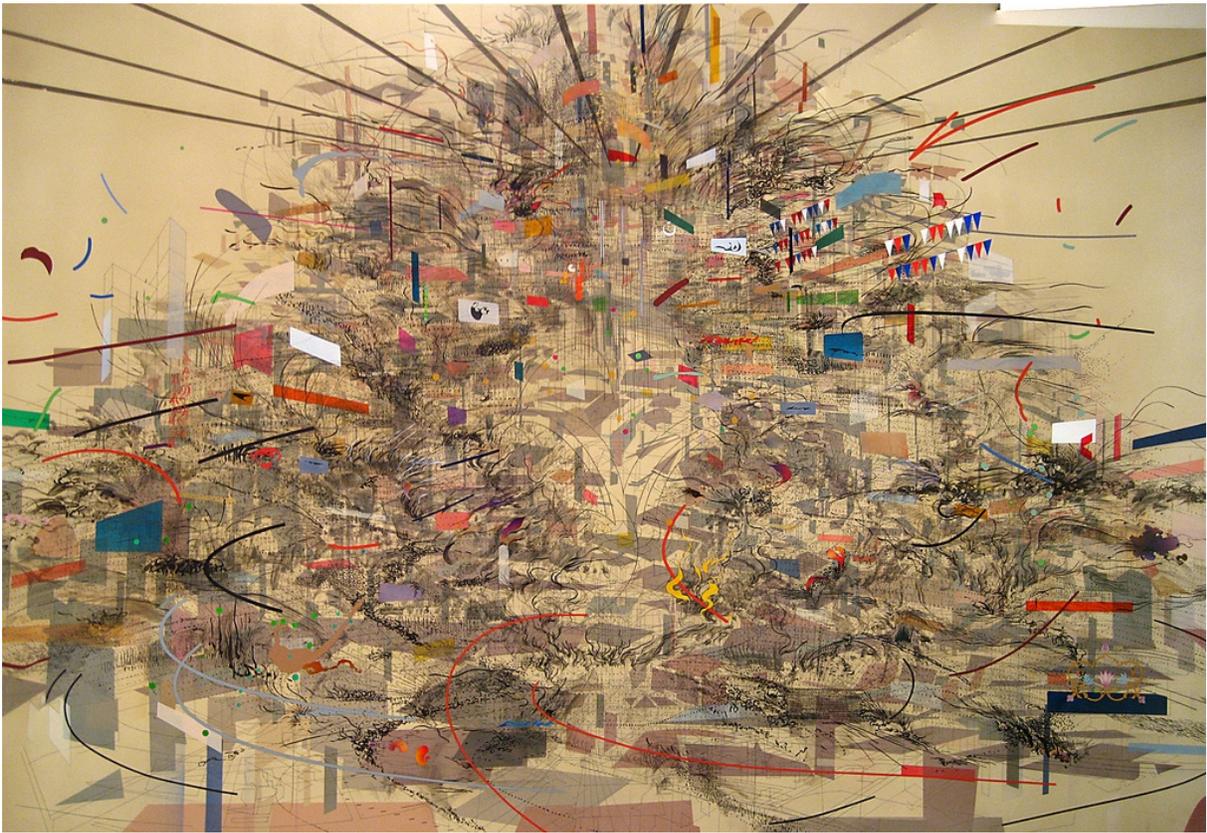


Fig. 5: Julie Mehretu *Empirical Constructions*, 2003.

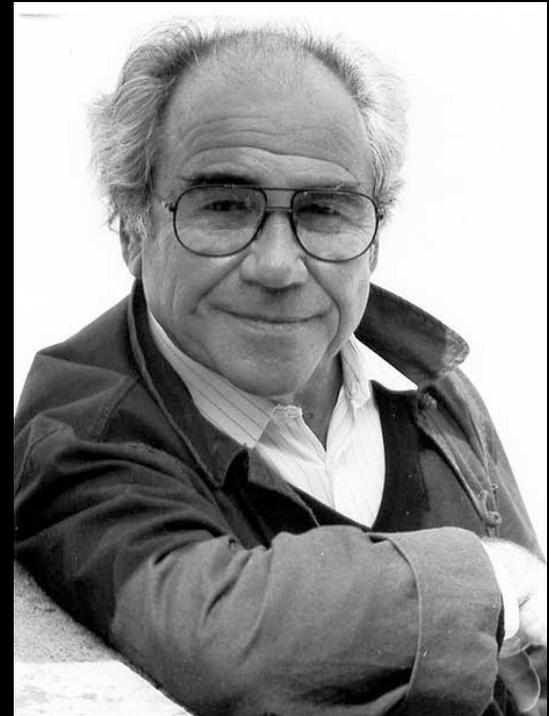


What is a Landscape?: Representing Place in a Postmodern World

“From a postmodern perspective landscape seems less like a palimpsest whose “real” or “authentic” meanings can somehow be recovered with the correct techniques, theories or ideologies than a flickering text displayed on a word processor screen whose meaning can be created, extended, altered, elaborated and finally obliterated by the merest touch of a button.” (630)

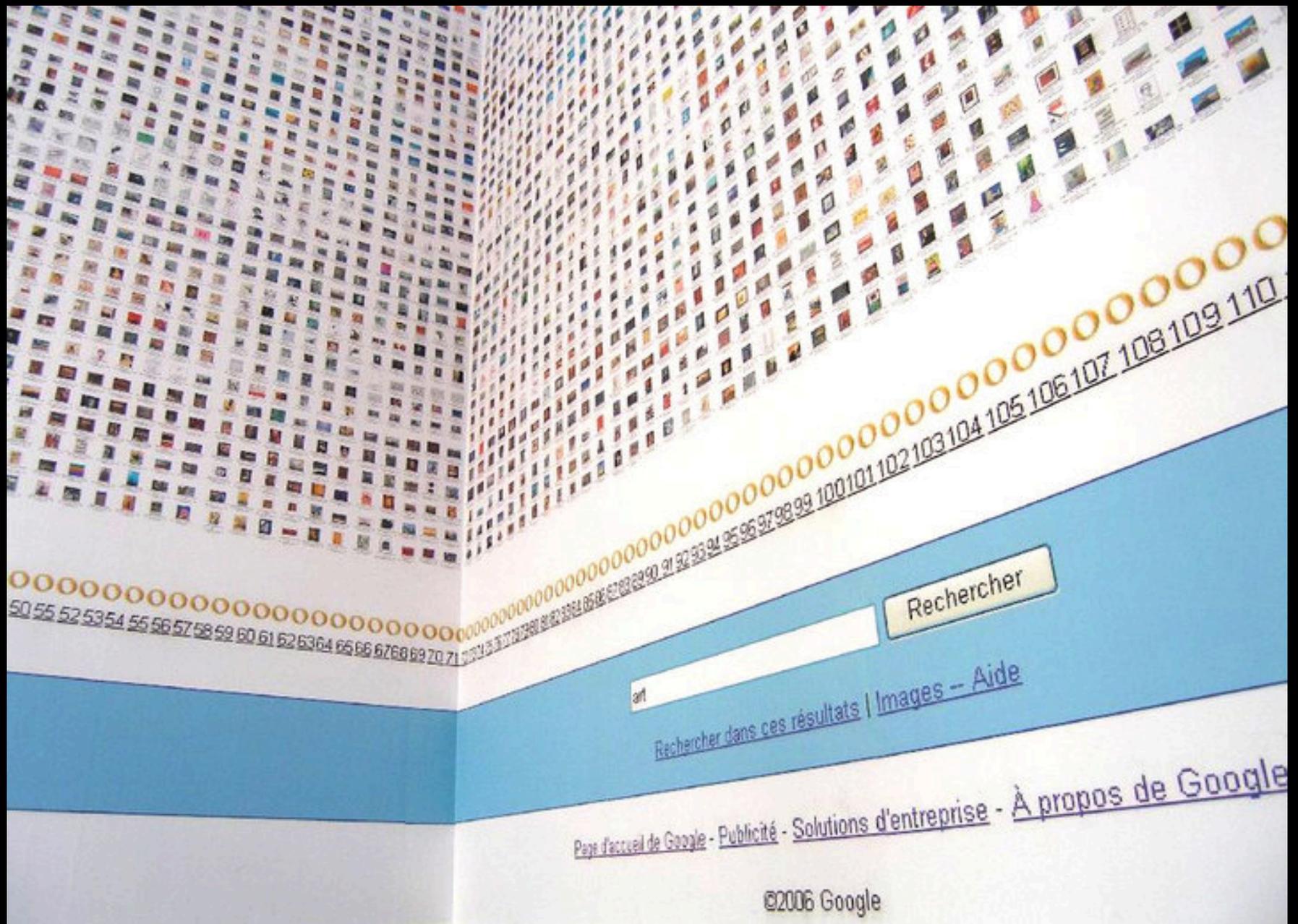
# Jean Baudrillard

- Simulacra and Simulation, 1981
- Introduced the idea of a hyper-reality in which simulations of reality are increasingly used to mask the ultimate fact that reality has ceased to exist.
- Introduces idea with the analogy of a society which attempted to make a map of everything on the earth.
- “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. ... But it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between one and the other that gave abstraction its charm.” (2)



# Jean Baudrillard

- *The Conspiracy of Art*, 1996
  - Argues that contemporary art has reached a *transaesthetic* state in which the desire for illusion has given way to aesthetic banality.
  - Modernism was fueled by the desire to ‘crack open’ the secret of the object. “Circling around the contours of the emptiness of the image, the object that is no longer an object.” (115)
- “Each image must take away from the reality of the world, but one must not give in to the temptation of annihilation, of definitive entropy, the disappearance must remain active: the is the secret of art and seduction. In art there is a dual postulate and therefore a dual strategy. An impulse to annihilate, to erase all traces of the world and reality, and the contrary resistance to this impulse.” (118)



Raphael Denis, Charles Pepiot, Adrian Lecuru, Gabriel Leger, and Martin Gautron



# Baudrillard and Contemporary Human Geography

- What is a landscape?
  - *Landschaft*:
    1. A restricted piece of land.
    2. Appearance of a land as we perceive it.
- Landscape in contemporary Human Geography:
  - Defined both as the assemblage of objects and images used to produce the appearance of an area and an area itself.
  - A landscape is considered a dynamic, multi-centered web rather than a static location.
  - It is more and more subject to change and flux, and can be understood to encompass an entire way of seeing rather than a single image or visual expanse.
- “A global sense of place is not closed but open, not essential but hybrid, not reactionary but progressive, not static but dynamic.” (2)

# Nature vs. Simulation

- Tendency to posit 'pure' nature against 'artificial' simulation. This becomes problematic because the distinctions between what is natural and what is simulated are blurred.

“If simulation didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent it, for only so could the purity of nature be asserted in opposition to the artificiality of simulation. To choose simulation over nature is not to escape from this dynamic but to reinforce it.” (411)

- Nature sanctuaries, preservations and national parks.
- “Wild West”
- In a sense, this was already the case in nineteenth-century landscape paintings, which depict the viewer dwarfed by immaculate nature. These images are made long after the negotiating of rivers, the breaking of plows — long after the realm of first-hand experience with the landscape — and represent instead “constructed experience,” ie simulation.

# Nature vs. Simulation

- Rather than choose a single side of the dichotomy, Hayles challenges us to recognize the interplay between nature and simulation.
- It is impossible for the observer to approach his or her landscape with complete autonomy. Every experience is both situated and mediated.

“The most we can say about what is ‘out there’ prior to our perception is that it is an unmediated flux, a stream of potential experiences that will happen differently for differently situated observers.” (413)

- This postmodern, Baudrillardian conception of the landscape has dramatically changed our subject/object relationship with our environment. How, then, have landscape artists adapted their work to suit notions of landscape and place that are increasingly hybrid, dynamic and entropic — less and less rooted in the real?

# Richard Diebenkorn

- Began as an abstract expressionist.
- Combines flat, quasi-cartographic shapes denoting an aerial view of a landscape with skewed shapes that suggest different perspectives.

“The task of a painter such as Diebenkorn is to see again together what has been severed in pictorial space—to make one world out of what would otherwise be a schizoid situation.”  
(135)

- Creates “place-worlds” — self-contained, harmonic wholes that “map” a region primarily through color.

“I do not know of any artist who was more responsive to his physical environment than Dick. If he moves down the block, it changes everything. He absorbed the aura of a place.” (136)



*Cityscape I*, 1963



*Ocean Park No. 129, 1984.*



*Berkeley No. 52, 1995*

# Dan Rice

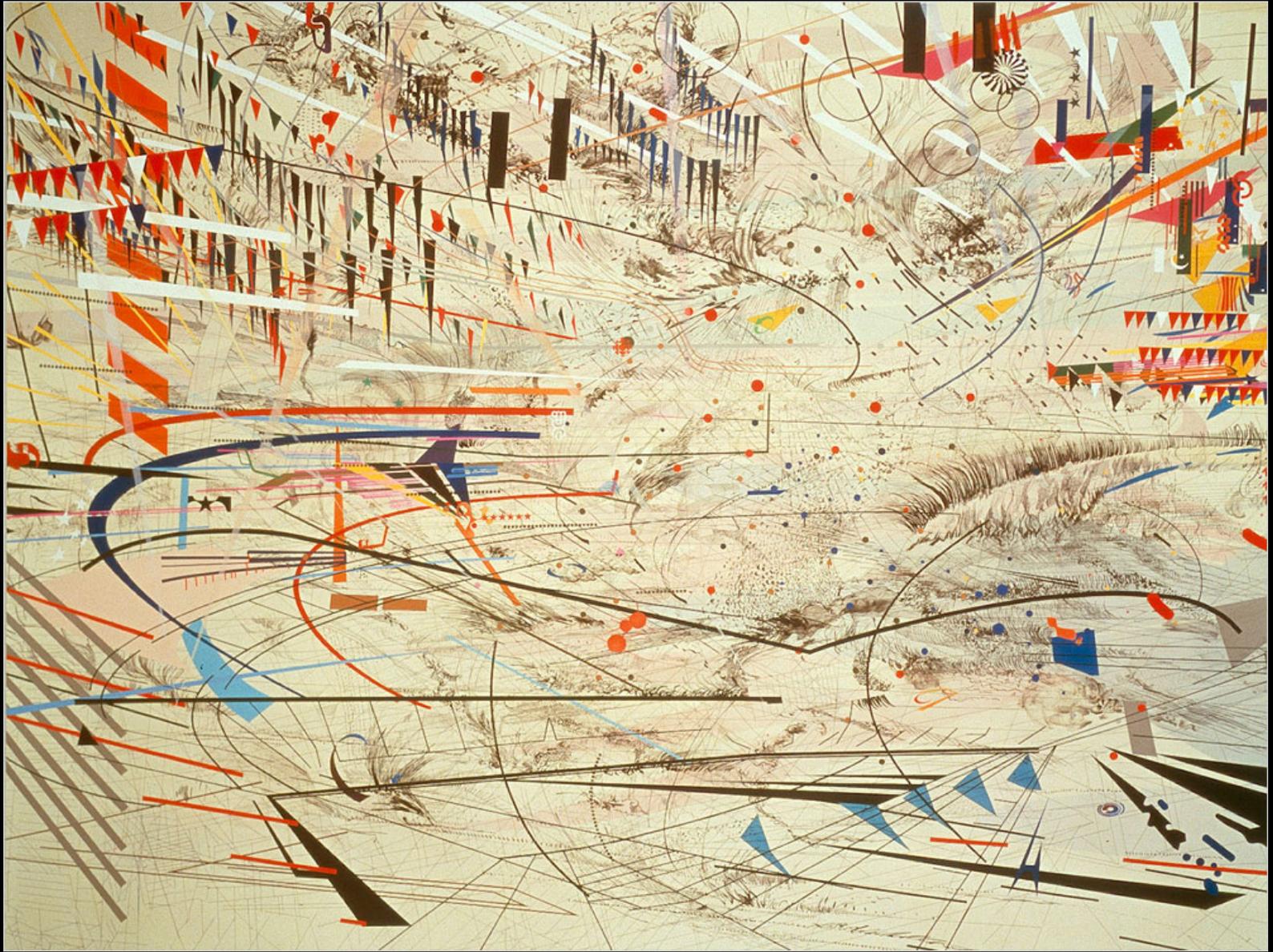
- Paintings represent not a single experience, but a continuous pattern of inhabitation in a group of places in close proximity to one another — often the Connecticut shoreline.
- Rice spends time out in the landscape to build a reserve of experience to draw on spontaneously in his studio. The result is a composite of experiences that overlap and color each other to emphasize a shared regional essence.
- Approaches the general through the specific:

“Lands End NE is a painting neither of *a marsh* or *the marsh*; it is a painting of *Marsh*. ‘Marsh’ in a sense capacious enough to include almost any marsh and the particular marsh on which the painter resides, with space left over for remembered marshes and imagined marshes, not to mention marshes painted by other painters as well. The painting repeats a great many marshes not so as to elicit their formal essence (that would be a universal), but so as to distill and instill their material or regional essence (a general).”

(155)

# Julie Mehretu

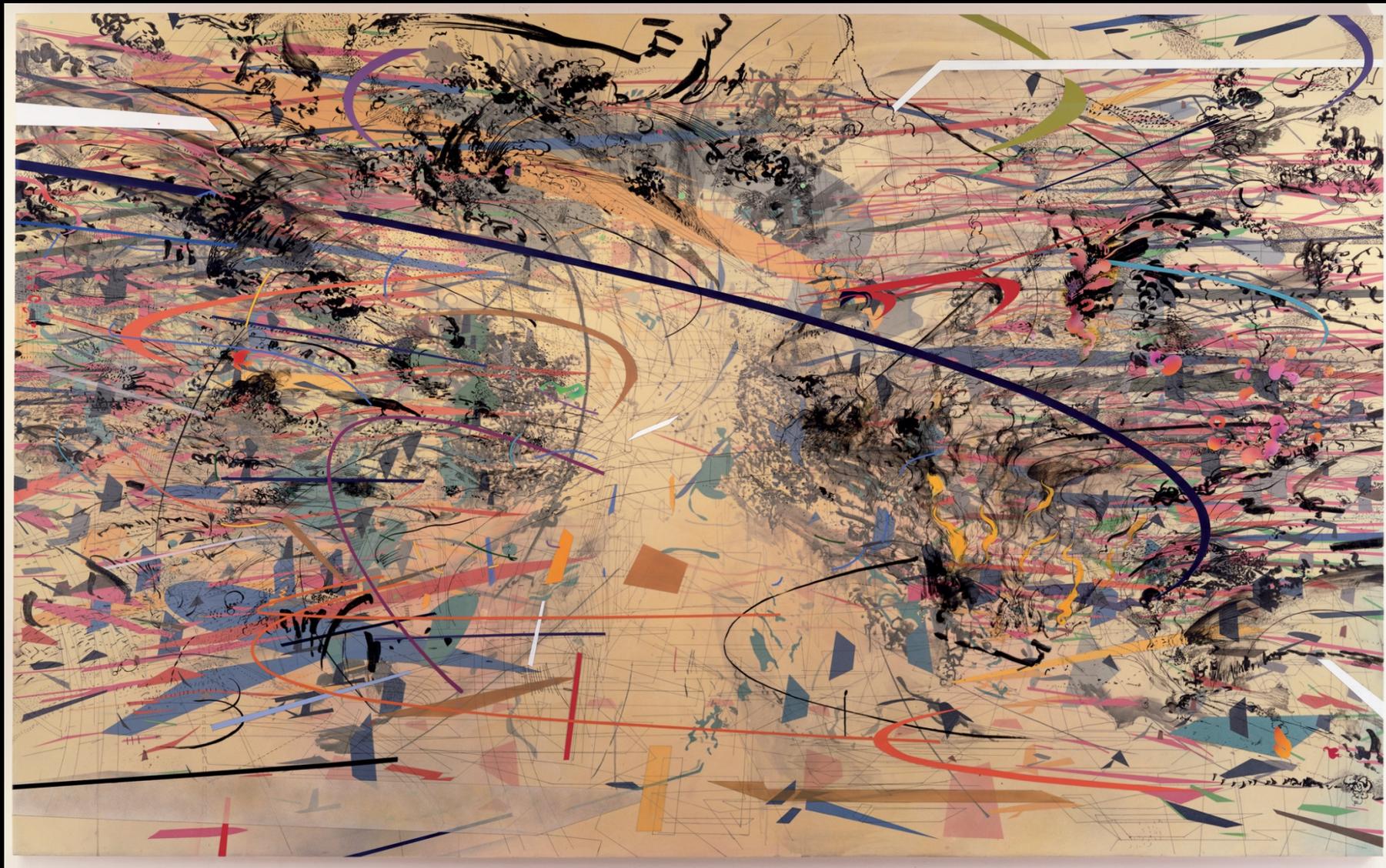
- Mehretu has been described as a truly global artist. She creates large, abstract paintings that explore issues of mobility, social organization, political entanglement, and global competition.
- She combines the vocabularies of maps, urban planning, and architectural forms as well as simultaneous viewpoints of dense, urban environments.
- Mehretu's work conveys a compression of time, space and place.
- "Her paintings present a tornado of visual incident where gridded cities become fluid and flattened, like many layers of urban graffiti. Mehretu has described her rich canvases as story maps of no location, seeing them as pictures into an imagined, rather than actual reality." (white cube)



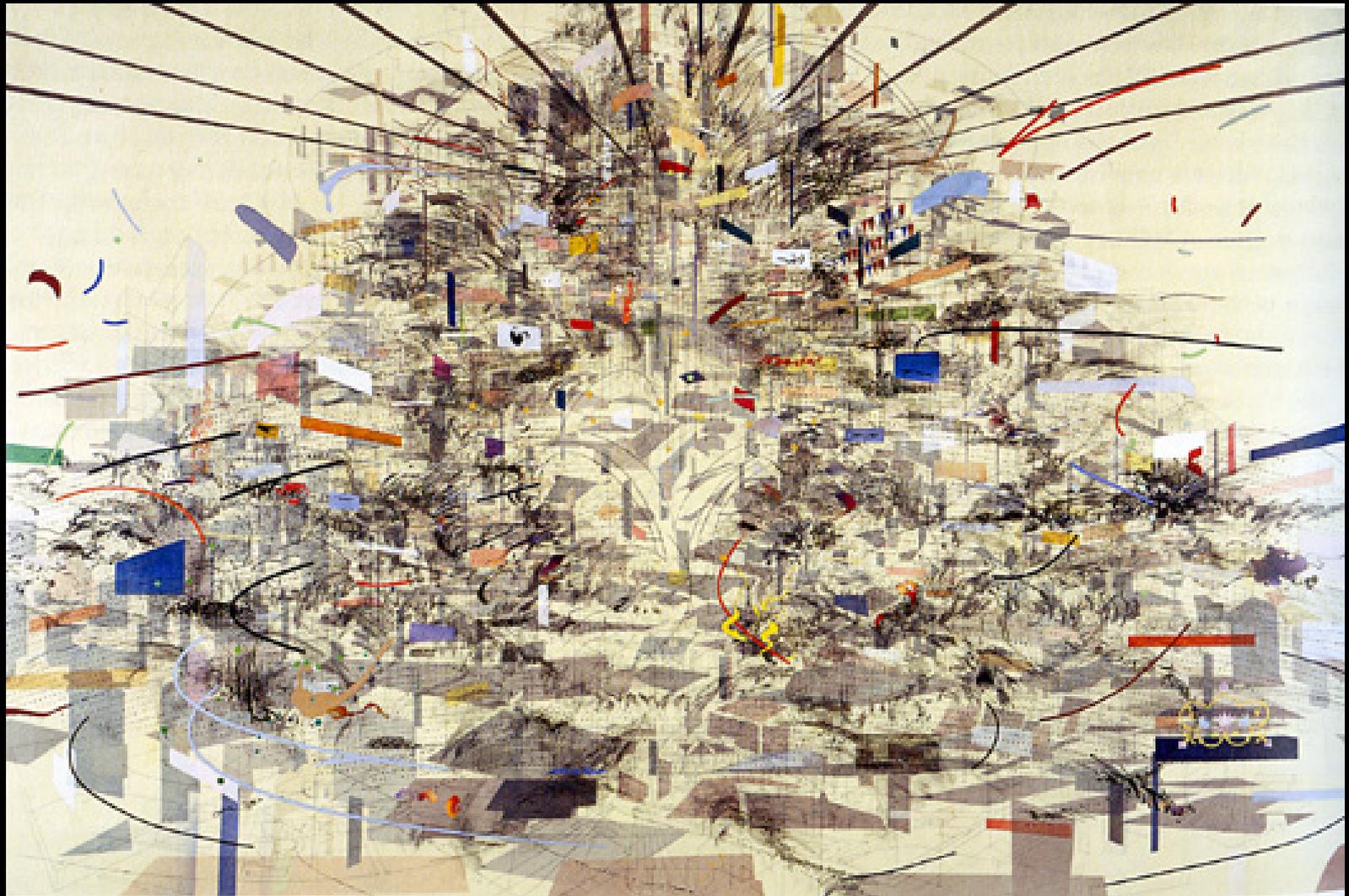
*Stadia 1, 2004*



*Stadia II*, 2004



*Dispersion, 2002*



*Empirical Construction, 2003.*