

## BOOK REVIEW

### Lines of Influence

Thomas Gould

Anna Lovatt, *Drawing Degree Zero: The Line from Minimal to Conceptual Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

Hot on the heels of Ryan Bishop and Sunil Manghani's 2018 *Seeing Degree Zero* – reviewed in last year's edition of *Barthes Studies* – Anna Lovatt's *Drawing Degree Zero* similarly imports Barthes' ambivalent concept into the domain of the visual arts, focussing on the graphic works of Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, Rosemarie Castoro, Dorothea Rockburne and Richard Tuttle. The broad argument is that these artists, all operating in late 1960s and early '70s New York, sought through various strategies to divest drawing of its referential attachment to the subject and the body, in a comparable way to what Barthes theorized as the aim of nouveau romanciers to inaugurate 'a colourless writing'. Lovatt modifies the zero degree in order to name a crucial twentieth-century art-historical moment, and makes a strong case for points of conjunction between Parisian intellectual debates and American artistic innovations in relation to the possibilities and politics of expression. Building upon art historical scholarship of the likes of Benjamin Buchloh and Margaret Iversen, it also joins Peter Schwenger's *Asemic: The Art of Writing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019) in an emerging critical trend of situating Barthes as a key influence on strategic graphic practices in the US.

Artists involved in the degree zero of drawing departed from the examples set by abstract expressionist forebears whose work emphasised gestural and autographic mark making, notably Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly, whose attitude toward the line is channelled, of course, in Barthes' own drawings (works which therefore, ironically, do *not* conform to the degree zero of drawing). Indicative practices include the effort to

negate the line as an instrument of the authorial subject, and to efface the age-old distinction between figure and ground. Sol LeWitt's famous Wall Drawings are a particularly notable example, as is Dorothea Rockburne's ground-breaking *Drawing Which Makes Itself*, which marked an effort to institute a fully automated drawing practice. Here, the surface of the paper dictates the form of the drawing, a method Lovatt reads according to a Barthesian erotism: 'conceiving the subject as a play of surfaces rather than a wellspring of expressive gestures' (p. 175).

Lovatt hedges somewhat on the extent to which the degree zero of drawing was directly informed by, rather than incidentally correlative with, French literary innovations and Barthes' theoretical descriptions of them. Lovatt's introduction claims that, between the French literary milieu of the 1950s and American drawing of the following decade, there are 'direct lines of influence and structural similarity' (p. 7), though efforts to substantiate the former claim are, in general, less persuasive than expositions of the latter. Lovatt concedes, for example, that Sol LeWitt appeared never to have read Barthes (p. 68). Perhaps most interesting is the apparent impact made by the publication of essays by Barthes, alongside works by the artists in question, in the New-York-based journal *Evergreen Review*, which Lovatt frames as directly influencing Bochner's experimentations with an 'objective' mode of drawing (p. 40).

More than the accidental progenitor of a movement, then, Barthes appears in *Drawing Degree Zero* as a frequent theoretical touchstone, a point of conceptual anchorage. In a particularly persuasive and representative example, Lovatt – making the familiar transition from the zero degree to the neutral – suggests that Barthes' insistence on the ephemeral plurality of 'figures' provides a good theoretical basis for thinking certain kinds of restlessness of artistic experimentation, the 'refusal to settle into a set of "signature" materials or techniques' (p. 168). As this suggests, a distinctly Barthesian resistance to standardized or 'paradigmatic' structures of expression pervades most, if not all, of the artworks discussed.

A concluding chapter on the political dissatisfactions of the zero degree builds upon feminist unease with a perceived post-structuralist effort to abolish, efface or anonymise authorial identity. Here, Lovatt focusses on Corinne Robins' 1976 exhibition at the SoHo Center of Visual Arts, *Drawing Now: 10 Artists*, which exhibited the work of women artists like Nancy Spero. Like Robins' exhibition itself, Lovatt's elevation of these works attempts to redress the hegemony of the much more prominent MoMA exhibition *Drawing Now*, also held in 1976, an exhibition that

afforded far less prominence to women artists. Lovatt reads these works as being productively suspicious of the zero degree, both challenging and re-articulating its strategies. The movement, as Lovatt puts it, therefore laid ‘the groundwork for further inquiry into drawing as a feminist strategy’ (p. 187): a promising gesture towards future research.

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