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[1 by 1](#)

## Dorothea Rockburne's Visionary Installation at Dia:Beacon

by [Joan Waltemath](#)



Installation view: *Dorothea Rockburne*, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York. © Dorothea Rockburne/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York, courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

Already open and much lauded, Dorothea Rockburne's installation works from the early '70s reconstructed at Dia:Beacon are light-filled and

dense meditations on ideal conditions that slowly and elegantly reconfigure themselves through the process of viewing into relational metaphors. The work is tweaked regularly and will change periodically as it responds to weather conditions and seasonal shifts.

Crude oil rolled out between two sheets of plastic climbs up the wall and then retreats from us as we stand at the entrance to the Rockburne rooms. The installation team informs me that she refers to *Intersection* (1971/2018) as her bed, like Rauschenberg's bed assemblage (1955) with her quilt on it from their days together at Black Mountain College.

Now it has become our bed, the bed we lie in as a nation, with our oil lobbies and our oil wars and our war dead, not to mention the absence of viable forms of sustainable energy, which is the place where we are now mired. These aspects of life determine the limits of our mobility, our habitat and equity in ways that were not being thought out at the time that Dorothea made this work. Then the US was at the top of its imperial game with Iran accomplished, Vietnam pending, and Chile still on the horizon. Revisiting her visionary installations from the early '70s reconstructed nearly 50 years

later at Dia:Beacon, these references are now a tragic history with dues to be paid by a generation who had no say in the matter and consequences borne out by those who know little of these origins or even if it matters.

Rockburne's timeless forms allow us a perspective from which to reflect on both her prescience and our predicament.



Dorothea Rockburne, *Intersection*, 1971/2018. © Dorothea Rockburne/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York.

The paper rolls out black until it curls up atop the stack of chipboard sandwiching the paper roll that lies between her plastic sheets absorbing the oil. It appears that the application of oil stops about ten inches before it reaches the wall that abuts the bed and serves as its headboard, but the oil seeping into the paper has crept all the way to the wall and ever so slightly rises above the floor as the paper ascends. The fragile edges of the plastic skirt the wall with a delicacy that belies both the political and social implications of her construction—now that *Intersection* is being represented. Robert Storr, in the opening presentation at Dia, spoke about the irreproducibility of experience—what isn't in an image of one of her works—and perhaps that accounts for some of the invisibility of this major body of work for so long. But that is not the whole story, as any (woman) artist working (not only) in the '70s and '80s knows: what women were doing, for the most part, was not taken on par with their male counterparts. They were not accorded the same opportunities or visibility in the public realm, even though they often maintained dialogues with their male counterparts that were formative and their work was also shown. The correctives have begun to reach a critical mass now and that allows the absence of female voices from the past, that naturally would have inspired and informed the next several generations of artists, to become apparent in a

new way. Now we start to see what a wealth of precedents have gone missing for some of us.

Who will ask, “Why don't I know about this work?” when entering Rockburne’s stunning rooms at the Dia:Beacon facility where Rockburne, along with Anne Truitt, Mary Corse, Charlotte Posenenske and Michelle Stuart have been accorded an opportunity to balance the masculine orientation of what we have all come to know as Minimalism. The effect is upending.

Taking note of the diverse relationships in play provides for an entry point: above, below, serial, analog, tangent, contingent, contiguous, and then the procedural and durational—where there is a mirror image, but then also how the repetition in a serial sequence flows evenly until ‘the odd one out’ disrupts the movement and dislodges our deep need for Reason. A precisely calibrated choreography of correspondences unfolds stimulating a thought to come to a threshold; it provides a catalyst for the recognition that the linear aspect inherent in the sequential nature of language itself describes only a single dimension of what is embedded in Rockburne’s work. The rupture demands, just as Rockburne herself, something unimaginable. It takes time

to tease the nonlinear into conscious awareness. And then, how do we take hold of our experiences? Rockburne's works are nothing if not challenging—and equally, deeply rewarding. They provide an antidote to, as well as reflect on our current milieu.

Carbon and oil are materials that are fundamental, like the ideas Rockburne plays with in her geometric constructions. In the Carbon Room there are six pieces composed of carbon paper and lines drawn in pencil and conté crayon on the walls and floor of a room painted totally white. The carbon is deep black, the sheen of the wall is absorbent, that of the black carbon reflective. These works with their inherent/apparent contradictions ask you to sit quietly and let the subtle vibrations of the mathematical thoughts embodied in them slowly emanate and begin to raise your awareness to a new level. If you can quiet *yourself*, there is no need for anything *else*, as the constructions in the room begin to envelop your entire being. The rhythms of their unfolding alight on and move through deeply rooted patterns, bringing the forgotten and the preponderant alike to the fore in a gesture that reconfigures the act of perceiving and ourselves in the process.

Simply, Rockburne's installation unfolds to the rhythm of the moving gaze. This means the way to apprehend it is to take pleasure in looking and take note of what happens in the process.

*Carbon Paper Installation: Hartford (1973/2018)* visible opposite the entrance to the Carbon room is an essentially symmetrical piece that is aligned to the floor; a red cross + in its center marks the intersection of two large X's drawn at minimally different angles atop of one another with one expanding slightly more outwards. One X is contiguous to a neighboring X, the other is free floating. The consequence of these simple decisions generates two squares, tipped up on end, but wait, now I can notice that the two outer X's are not actually the same. One is contiguous with the center's inner X and the other with the center's outer X, making the one on the right a bit larger. This leads to the formation of a square on the left side and a slightly off-square diamond form on the right. At first glance, the construction appears to be symmetrical, but no sooner is this determination made than its appearance changes, morphing in tune as Rockburne's consequent decisions unfold before our eyes. A deep breath returns us back to the center and to the question: what is the differential of the angles of the two central X's that allows for this marvelous magical play?

Through time as we navigate both the visually simple and linguistically complex relationships that comprise Rockburne's constructions, the correspondences embedded in them build a metaphoric structure that can hold reflections of things in our world that parallel the conditions diagramed in the ideal constructions Rockburne offers us. As the German philosopher Gottlob Frege explains in his "Foundations of Arithmetic" from the early 19th century—number is concept. The effect is a stimulating rhythmic movement of the eye through a geometric construction that deepens perception, yielding the pleasure of being able to see more.

Light falling from the skylight causes white afterimages to cascade across the wall when looking for an extended period at the carbon paper and mimics the evolution of thought evidenced in these works. I see that Rockburne tends to move from one thought to another, she doesn't do variations on a theme, but rather moves forward into the next thought. All her "sensuous particulars" are rendered more or less mute in description, try as I might to communicate them. Your presence is required to transform Rockburne's non-linear thought through your own senses. It might be a hard sell in light of today's "Attention Wars," but Rockburne's work offers a way



to make sense of the things around us: deeply personal, it renders the universal with astonishing clarity.

## **Contributor**

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Joan Waltemath is an artist who lives and works in New York City. She writes on art and has served as an editor-at-large of the *Brooklyn Rail* since 2001. She has shown extensively and her work is in the collections of the Harvard University Art Museums, the National Gallery of Art, the Hammer Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art. She is currently the Director of the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Painting at MICA.

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