

**Dorothea Rockburne's
new work**
Bruce Boice

"When near completion, it's as though the work and I exchange places; I no longer contain the information, the work does".

Dorothea Rockburne *

Dorothea Rockburne writes very well. When she writes about her work, what she says often seems vague and empty until one sees the work. Then it makes complete sense with unexpected clarity. Rockburne's sentence quoted above is rather puzzling. Her metaphor contains a strange usage of the word "information", as if giving information were like giving apples. However grammatically similar, the two predicates are different in kind. Unlike the situation of "giving apples", one retains the information even after one has given it away. Thus Rockburne's metaphor conflicts with the semantical sense of the usual situation of a transference of information. However, the situation she describes is not the usual situation; for normally, when we speak of giving information, we mean "giving information to another person", but Rockburne is describing the situation of giving information to an object. It is this latter consideration of the transference of information to an object that is Rockburne's most basic concern in her art.

"Information", in Rockburne's usage, is synonymous with "thought". "Thought" in this case means not the specific content of thought, but the processes of thought, which is to say, the logical thought structures of induction and deduction and its equivalent structures in set theory.

How an object exists is not the same problem as how an art object exists. The existence of objects is presupposed in the problem of how art objects exist. What distinguishes an art object from other objects is the fact that the art object is the product of certain intentions; the concept of the ready-made, presenting the situation in which the distinction between objects and art objects is least discernible, can also be seen in these terms. The ready-made carries an intentional load, which is absent in its counterpart objects. The not-art object, if man made, has a functional intention which is superseded by the intention of thought when the object becomes a ready-made, and therefore, an art object. How thought gets into an object or how an object can be said to contain thought, is extremely puzzling. Yet this notion of reification could be said to be what art is all about, and specifically, it is fundamental to Dorothea Rockburne's art.

The problem boils down to a matter of implication and inference. We can infer from an object, but an object does not, in any real sense, imply anything. However, an art object, by being a product of intention and

thought, can be said to imply in much the same way that a sentence can imply, by also being a product of intention and thought. This is not to get into the usual art and language analogy or to say that art is linguistic or like language in any significant respect. It is only to show that there is justification for inferring thought from art objects, which is not the case for inferences made from not-art objects. The parallel drawn between art objects and sentences as carriers of thought, is only in an effort to reduce the notion of reification to terms not quite so mysterious. But ironically enough, we have no clearer conception of how a sentence can contain thought than of how an art object can contain thought. So in putting reification in less mystifying terms, we don't really reduce the mystery.

The information contained in a work by its being a product of the artist's thought and intention, is retrieved from the work by experiencing "the evidence of intention". In this sense, it is true that when the work is complete, it contains the information, and Rockburne no longer does. The information is in the art object and can only be gotten from it. One cannot get the information from Rockburne; she can only give the information by re-doing the work, in which case, the information is still in the work, not in her. Though she literally retains the information, there is no possibility of retrieving it from her. Beyond this concern with the positing and retrieving of information in an object, thereby making it an art object, Rockburne's concern is in pushing this elusive operation into areas of information not yet known, which is to say less mysteriously, with the discover and presentation of new information.

Rockburne's best known works are those of up to a year ago using paper, chipboard, and cup grease, in exploring possible relations within a structure derived from set theory and related conceptions in logic. The point was never to present physical one-to-one correlations to set theory, or to provide an illustration for it, but to use set theory as an ordering concept within which new information—the information within the work itself, which was essentially the reversible contrast of heterogeneity within homogeneity—could be obtained and retrieved. Specifically, two sheets of paper of the same type and size, one permeated with oil, are of the same class of things but form a contrast within the class; the definition of the class is made complex with the introduction of chipboard, different in type but of the same size. The complexity is further increased with another piece of chipboard of the same size, but soaked in oil. Thus the complexity of the definition of the class increases as the definitions of sub-groups multiply and overlap. If these works contain a question, the question is: How do we experience an

object or objects? We experience an object or objects through the mental construction we put on what we perceive. Whether we refer to an instance of her work as "an object" or "objects", is just such a mental construction put on percept. Perception is not her concern—the mental construction, which is thought, is her concern. The information available in the work is (necessarily simplistically) an expansion of the ordering possibilities of experiencing the objects within the structure. The complex internal relations of the constituents of a work are not hierarchic, but are there as relations, the possibility of which is the subject for mental construction, and comes as something of a surprise.

In the last year, Rockburne's work has undergone a continual and almost radical change. *Syllogism*, shown at Documenta 5, represented a reduction in the diversity of kinds of elements within a work, as well as a shift away from the specific use of set theory to its equivalent in logic, the syllogism. The white paper elements in *Syllogism*, though only subtly distinguishable from one another and the wall on which they were "papered", could only be experienced as particulars. By the enormous size of the work, the whole could be grasped only by inference from the particulars which, in turn, were inferred as being constituents of the whole. *Series Ineinander*, exhibited similar intentions, but consisted in a row of discrete 30x40" rectangles of papers covered with tar and lined-up at the base of a wall. The elements form an infinite class of objects by their obvious similarity, and assert individuality within the class by their barely distinguishable dissimilarity. In the *Series Carta Carbone*, Rockburne introduced the use of carbon paper through which lines were formed on a white paper, leaving the "same" lines on the carbon. In each case, the lines were a product of the size, shape, and relative position of the carbon and the white paper. In several respects, *Series Carta Carbone* is prototypical of one kind of "Drawing Which Makes Itself".

Dorothea Rockburne's new work, "Drawing Which Makes Itself", shown at the Bykert Gallery in New York during February, really is new work. The only significant threads of continuity from the works using set theory to "Drawing Which Makes Itself" are Rockburne's underlying concern with getting thought into an object, and her continued use of paper as the container of thought. Paper is not a new material for art, but Rockburne's use of it has been and continues to be new. Paper is the physical material that forms her work, rather than simply receiving the forms of the work as in its traditional usage. Structure in all her work is contingent on the intentions of logic and the size and nature of the paper used. In "Drawing Which Makes Itself", the paper literally and actively forms the

work with a directness remarkable even in terms of her earlier work. The most significant difference in her new work, however, is the replacement of set theory, and related conceptions in logic, as a structuring principle imposed on the work from without, with a logic which structures the work entirely from within it. Though the structuring principle of the earlier work was not separable from the work but integral to it, still, if one could not speak of the work without in some sense speaking of set theory, one could speak of set theory without referring to the work; and it is in this sense only that set theory was a structure imposed on the work from without. However, the logical structure of "Drawing Which Makes Itself" is so completely of the work, that the work cannot be discussed without discussing its structure, and the logical structure can only be discussed in reference to the work.

"Drawing Which Makes Itself" is not a set of drawings, nor do any other traditional media categories make any sense when applied to Rockburne's art. However, this fact is only relevant to the problem of how to refer to the work. Rockburne's new work can be thought of as instances of "Drawing Which Makes Itself", and the two kinds of instances can be distinguished in terms of their material difference. The works in one room at the Bykert gallery are made with white paper and pencil, and the works in the other room are made with double faced carbon paper. The two kinds of "Drawing Which Makes Itself" look entirely dissimilar but are, in principle, remarkably close. The essential difference between them is that the carbon works, in a peculiar sense, extend outside themselves and the white paper works are internal; more literally, the carbon works extend beyond the carbon paper itself, the white paper works operate strictly within the paper.

For the show at Bykert, the entire floor of the gallery was painted white, the same white as the walls, which is a shade whiter than the white paper. The whiteness of the floor is disorienting and, perhaps, a potentially distracting element, but Rockburne uses it as an important element in the installation of the work, which is to say in the work itself. In the room with the white paper works, the floor and other usual spatial referents seem almost indeterminate, the works seem to just be there, as if floating in immaterial whiteness. However, the floor is clearly "fastened down" and material in the room of the carbon works by the existence of some of the works on the floor, but the experience of this situation is equally disorienting, only in a different way. The danger of the white floor is not so much in distracting from the work as in presenting the possibility of the work's being misconstrued as being, for instance, environmental. On the other hand, misconstruction is the

inevitable possibility always present in exhibiting art work. It should be clear in experiencing "Drawing Which Makes Itself" that the floor informs rather than confuses the work, but what will confuse whom is not something predictable.

The eight white paper and pencil instances of "Drawing Which Makes Itself" consist each in a 30x40" sheet of white paper, which has been folded and creased, but which is unfolded and "open" on the wall. Each sheet of paper has a few straight or right angled pencil lines on it. When a section of paper is folded, a corner for example, a pencil line is drawn using the overlapping paper corner as a straight-edge. When the situation arises, the pencil lines describing an overlap stop at a fold crease rather than continuing through the crease. How each work is made is synonymous with the structure of the work. The imprecision of the folding operation is revealed in the same imprecision of the relative positions of the pencil lines, which are a product of the folding. How the work is made is the first aspect one must deal with in experiencing "Drawing Which Makes Itself", for it is obvious in every case that these are not a bunch of arbitrary, impulsive, or formalist creases and pencil lines. They are a product of a logic internal to the works, which, however simple, is nevertheless elusive. To re-encounter the works is to come to grips with the "how" logic all over again for each case, but working out the "how" or the logic isn't the end of it.

The structure of Rockburne's new work and how it is made are identical, but "Drawing Which Makes Itself" is not process art. The difference is that her work presents a situation demanding a reconciliation of the information perceived (the creases and pencil lines), and the mental construction of what sort of information it is (the relation holding between creases and pencil lines); process art has been essentially involved with phenomenological considerations of physical causes and effects, of physical transformations. Process art is the product of a physical operation, Rockburne's art is the product of an informal logical operation. The relation of paper and pencil is one of structural synthesis. In the language of conventional criticism, the pencil line in conventional drawing is said to "activate" the paper or the pictorial space of the paper, which, metaphorically, waits passively to receive the pencil line and be "activated" by it. However in Rockburne's new work, as the folded crease of the paper determines the location and form of the pencil line, the situation of conventional drawing is reversed, for in this case, the paper "activates" the line. At the same time, the pencil line also "activates" the paper by being drawn on it in the usual way, and therefore both paper

and pencil line are simultaneously "activating" and "being activated" by each other. Considering the folded crease as a line, the paper is the line, and both "activates" and "is activated" by itself.

In the works consisting each of a 30x40" piece of double faced carbon paper, the paper literally activates all the lines and is activated by them, by itself bearing the lines which it caused on the wall or floor. In each of the four carbon works shown at Bykert (a fifth, larger work was shown at the Whitney Biennial), the rectangular sheet of carbon paper has two intersecting off-the-perpendicular lines, diagonals relative to the carbon paper. The lines of the carbon have been formed by folds and by the making of lines on wall or floor where the folds occur. Generally, the sheet of carbon paper is fixed to wall or floor and surrounded by sets of straight off-the-perpendicular black lines on the wall or floor, with relations clearly identical to those on the carbon. It is also obvious that the lines on wall or floor are in a position which has a direct relation to the position and size of the carbon paper. Like the white paper works, it is necessary to reconcile the lines on the wall or floor with those on the carbon, which means mentally constructing the "flips" of the carbon paper necessary to get those lines in those positions. The mental construction of these "flips" of the carbon involve an unusual sense of physicality; for in mentally resolving the "flips", it is necessary to resolve the physical, bodily act of "flipping" the carbon paper as well. Strange to say, this mental construction of the "act of flipping" the carbon involves a kind of bodily tension, a straining and tightening of the muscles, normally only associated with something like Berenson's notion of "the realization of movement"; for what is involved here is the mental construction of a bodily act. Also like the white paper works, this process of reconciliation of the carbon and the lines is never as easy as it seems it should be; once it has been accomplished, it is usually necessary to start all over again.

As the floor is white, it is no different from the walls except by being horizontal rather than vertical, and by having footprints and scuff marks. One of the carbon works on the floor is different from those on the wall essentially in these same respects. In this work, the carbon paper lies on the floor butting the wall. The lines on the floor are a consequent of "flips" of the carbon paper away from the wall. By being on the floor, the appearance of the work is different from those on the wall, as is what we construct to be the "flips" of the carbon; and the carbon paper and lines co-exist on the floor with the highly visible scuffmarks and footprints. Another carbon work on the floor is not on the floor in the

same way. The carbon is at the base of the wall and is "flipped" to the left along the base of the wall making lines on it; but the carbon is also "flipped" down, making intersecting lines on the floor that mirror those on the wall. The whiteness of the floor, and the fact that the works on it are each "on the floor" in a different way, emphasizes the physicality of all the instances of «Drawing Which Makes Itself», and seems to amount to an insistence that these works not be considered as two dimensional or as drawings.

A third work, the most complex of Rockburne's new work in this show, is also on the floor but in an entirely different way. An arc line made by the carbon, using its width as radius, and describing a quarter circle, begins at the point of intersection of wall and floor, and ends where the carbon paper is fixed to the wall. The intersecting lines of the carbon describe the diagonals of a square the size of the paper's width, and the carbon is fixed to the wall folded-up on one of the diagonals. The fold is mirrored in a line formed by a "flip" of the carbon from right to left. A third line, parallel to the mirrored diagonal line, describes the radius of the arc where the arc is not, and this radius line is "on-line" with the crease on the carbon intersecting the fold. Thus the position of the carbon paper on the wall, as well as the position and length of all the lines, is a direct function of the paper's size, and the relation of the work to the floor is one of "being tangent". Of the carbon works, then, one work is on the wall, one is on the wall tangent to the floor, one is nearly equally on all and floor, and one is on the floor butting the wall. A similar diversity of possibilities is explored in terms of whether the position of the carbon paper appears to be its initial position, final position, both or neither.

The sheer handsomeness of Dorothea Rockburne's new work is surprisingly undistracting and, on the contrary, attracts one into getting involved with the kind of thought the work demands and the kind of experience the work affords. It is only in this sense that "Drawing Which Makes Itself" involves perception. The appearance only presents the possibility of experiencing «the evidence of intention».*

**«Define an object. It must be that the prime way in which an object exists objectively, is the way in which I, subjectively, experience the evidence of intention. This is not perceptual».*
Dorothea Rockburne

* from «An Interview» by Jennifer Licht, *Artforum*, March 1972.

Christo's Valley Curtain Validation through enactment Jan van der Marck

The Valley Curtain is Christo's most important work to date. It offers clues to every aspect of the artist's esthetic and it allows us to define his place within that broad spectrum of contemporary possibilities. The exhibition (at the Rotonda della Besana from May to June) is an out-front, no-holds-barred documentary of the obstacle course that led from the work's inception, in the spring of 1970, to its completion, 28 months later. As the artist has worked in full view of his public, he is not about to edit or tamper with the evidence. There are few precedents for this procedure. In contemporary art, the exhibition of Picasso's *Guernica* along with all the studies leading up to it, is the only instance that comes to my mind. But then, the Valley Curtain itself cannot be shown at the Rotonda for it, already, has descended into a photographic and cinematographic limbo.

The Valley Curtain saga has esthetic and para-esthetic aspects. For an understanding of this work-as-art-as-work we need to consider both. It is impossible, though, to neatly separate the two, for who knows exactly what makes for a work of art? As observers or critics we tend to be more concerned with the esthetics; Christo, most definitely, is only concerned with the work. I therefore must deal with the para-esthetic aspects — the responsibility for which I shared with Christo — as well as with the esthetic aspects. If it weren't for the latter, the artist would not have gone through as much trouble as he did, and we would lay no claim to it being a work of art. If, in dealing with the two aspects at once, I am less than objective, so be it.

To give an account of the process instead of merely appraising the product is one of art criticism's less customary procedures. We are reminded of that old *Art News* stand-by "X-Y-Z Paints a Picture".

Yet, in dealing with the Valley Curtain, one is inseparable from the other. As a concept it germinated and matured in the artist's mind, was grafted onto a suitable landscape, scaled to the site by surveyors, calculated to bureaucrats, submitted to state and local authorities, and funded in advance by an international art community. It took more than a year before the concept started to take physical shape. In an all out effort, however, to raise the initially estimated quarter million dollars it would take to see the project through, Christo set up Valley Curtain Corporation and proceeded to find museums, collectors and dealers interested in the acquisition of works primarily related to the Valley Curtain — drawings, collages, photomontages, scale models, etc. — but

also including older work, in return for a cash pledge payable to the corporation. Sponsors received works they were free to select from among a wide variety at discounted fair market value. The scheme was sufficiently advantageous to attract 56 sponsors who each paid \$ 10,000 or a multiple thereof, directly into the coffers of the corporation.

On May 3, 1971, the contract was awarded for the construction of a Valley Curtain at Rifle Gap, Colorado. Lev Zetlin Associates, Inc., New York, had prepared the engineering drawings and Morrison-Knudsen Company, Boise, Idaho, undertook to build it in forty-five days. Land had been leased from two private owners, an order for the necessary hardware had been placed with United States Steel, and J.P. Stevens, the country's biggest synthetic fabric manufacturer, was finding a specialized fabricator to sew the curtain, following our engineers' design. On the local level, not all problems had been squared away with the Colorado State Highway Department which exercises authority over Highway 325, a secondary road leading through the Gap. Also, releases had to be obtained from two irrigation companies and telephone and power lines had to be put underground at the corporation's expense. The Rifle community, suspicious at first, became cooperative as they realized how concerned Christo was about their interests. If it were not for the good citizens of Rifle, the project might have aborted in its early stages. They rallied to its defense, when the Valley Curtain threatened to become a political football and the decision for allowing it to happen landed on the Governor's desk.

Excavations for the bottom anchor foundations started on May 24 while an official permit was still pending. The conditions with which the corporation had to comply were stiff and included the posting of bond to guarantee removal and massive insurance coverage. But one condition, that of an independent engineering study by a state appointed firm and to be paid for by the Valley Curtain Corporation, turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The Ken R. White Company in Denver had to see all our plans and sent out a geologist to inspect the site. As the latter examined the slopes, he found that what looked like solid rock (and our own engineers had never found necessary to probe!), was cracked sandstone, alternating with shale. The mountain ridges through which torrid streams once carved their way, had originally been mud flats near an inland sea; subterranean upheavals had pushed them into a vertical position, but the pressures had been uneven and had caused the soft, layered stone to break up. The geologist insisted that test borings be made to determine whether the slopes would hold the anchors Zetlin had designed for them. He innocently inquired, «Why doesn't