

Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo, *Florine Stettheimer: New Directions in Multimodal Modernism*, Toronto: Book*Hug Press, 2019, 314 pp. 23 colour, 27 b/w/ illus., \$ 25 (paper) ISBN 9781771665018, \$ 14.99 (eBook) ISBN 9781771665018

Margaryta Golovchenko

Volume 46, numéro 2, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085435ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1085435ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Golovchenko, M. (2021). Compte rendu de [Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo, *Florine Stettheimer: New Directions in Multimodal Modernism*, Toronto: Book*Hug Press, 2019, 314 pp. 23 colour, 27 b/w/ illus., \$ 25 (paper) ISBN 9781771665018, \$ 14.99 (eBook) ISBN 9781771665018]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 46(2), 144–146.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1085435ar>

parts of a more holistic search for knowledge. Her often novel comparisons between scientific illustrations and the details of Friedrich's paintings are compelling, because her analysis demonstrates a network of multi-directional relations. It is not only that Friedrich's portrayal of branches look like pulmonary veins depicted in scientific treatises, but also that anatomical illustrations of the eye and optical nerves, for example, have the appearance of a flower with petals. Human/nature analogies from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries abound in a way that support Amstutz's thesis that Friedrich's "landscape painting and the life sciences are both underpinned by a particular way of looking at nature, one that views each individual creation as part of an interconnected whole" (8).

The idea of an interconnected whole often leads Amstutz to treat Friedrich's paintings as unified narratives concerned with self-knowledge. The rock formation in *Rocky Ravine with Elbe Sandstone Mountains* is not just analogous to a human hand but becomes for Amstutz the artist's own hand, a "hand of stone," which "stands out as a dismembered relic of the artist's body, as a kind of premature funerary effigy" (174). *Cemetery in the Snow* (ca. 1827) not only alludes to *Naturphilosophie's* understanding of the physical circumstances of death, but is also an allegory. The airy abyss beyond the cemetery gate and the "chromatic continuity" between the grave and the gate tell a story of "the completion of the body's decomposition and return to the atmosphere—the macrocosmic body" (207). In these and other cases, what begins as an attempt to restore a way of looking at Friedrich's paintings becomes an interpretation that tries to unlock a larger meaning.

The strength of Amstutz's book lies in the development of what Michael Baxandall called "the period eye." Understanding the principles

of *Naturphilosophie*, in which forms in nature and the human body were often compared as micro-cosmic parallels to the macro-cosmic whole, forces the viewer to see Friedrich's paintings in a new light. Looking with "Romantic eyes" (15), as Amstutz describes it, is a way to recover how Friedrich intended his paintings to be seen and how his contemporaries (or at least those in his circle) would have seen them. In her introduction, Amstutz suggests that the historical evidence she garners for her readings of Friedrich's paintings may not convince her critics, but her interpretations "are self-consciously meant to approximate the tension between empiricism and speculation upon which *Naturphilosophie* as a method was based." Her book "seeks to recover a way of looking at nature that is almost unimaginable to us today" (17). Describing her method thus, Amstutz suggests that she is restoring what has been concealed by time. The challenge with period-eye arguments, as Baxandall recognized, is the impossibility of overcoming historical distance. As he so eloquently put it in his essay "The Language of Art History," "critical 'tact' and historical 'grasp' appear as very much the same thing." Amstutz's recognition of this methodological quandary emerges in how she frames her argument through uncertainty, Friedrich's and her own. She acknowledges "an element of doubt in Friedrich's project," which is realized through his "visual ambiguity, and the viewer's concomitant hesitation over whether the human form is really there" (87). Her tentative language, discussed above, highlights both her concern with narrow interpretations of Friedrich's paintings (à la Börsch-Supan) and the speculative nature of her enterprise. At the same time, Amstutz's study stays within the realm of art history's humanist tradition (Panofsky's "intuitive aesthetic recreation," for example), which assumes a bridgeable

distance between the historian and the object of study. At one point, Amstutz reflects upon whether Friedrich put hidden forms in his paintings or whether these forms are the result of her own projections. She concludes that Friedrich "re-presented" natural forms "to render legible nature's encrypted code," and, at the same time, it is up to the viewer to find "lingering signs of the hidden life beneath her [nature's] morphology" (86–87). As this passage suggests, Amstutz's dual project offers new insights into Friedrich's paintings by treating them as both documents of the past and as objects that exist in the present. ¶

Mitchell B. Frank is editor-in-chief of *RACAR* and Director of the School for Studies in Art and Culture at Carleton University.
—mitchell.frank@carleton.ca

Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo
Florine Stettheimer: New Directions in Multimodal Modernism

Toronto: Book*Hug Press, 2019

314 pp. 23 colour, 27 b/w/illus.

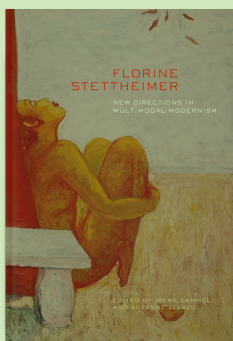
\$ 25 (paper) ISBN 9781771665018

\$ 14.99 (eBook) ISBN 9781771665018

Margaryta Golovchenko

In the publication that accompanied the first retrospective exhibition of Florine Stettheimer's work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946, which was curated by her friend Marcel Duchamp, art critic Henry McBride remarked that "Fame is a most uncertain garment. Yet fame, apparently, is what the Museum of Modern Art now desires for the late Florine Stettheimer."¹ Stettheimer's (relative) obscurity at the time was frequently attributed to her personality, which her biographers and other writers describe as a combination of eccentric and stubborn. Exhibitions like the 1995

Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica at the Whitney Museum of American Art might be seen as attempting to rehabilitate Stettheimer from her status as an underappreciated artist, introducing her to a new generation of viewers. The first solo exhibition of Stettheimer's work in Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry* (2017–2018), which premiered at the Jewish Museum in New York City before coming to Toronto, had a similar mandate of inciting a new wave of interest in the artist's work, but did not stop at that. As the exhibition's title suggests, the affective and tactile nature of Stettheimer's work was brought to the forefront by AGO curator Georgiana Uhlyarik, who framed the artist's practice as a modern form of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For those needing an intro-



duction to Stettheimer or wanting to learn more about, for instance, the rich iconography of *Family Portrait II* (1933)—which was the centerpiece of *Painting Poetry*—the official exhibition catalogue, published in 2017 and edited by Uhlyarik and Stephen Brown, curator of The Jewish Museum, provides a solid starting point.

Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo's edited collection *Florine Stettheimer: New Directions in Multimodal Modernism*, on the other hand, was produced at arm's length from the AGO exhibition. Assuming readers already have some familiarity with

Stettheimer's work, whether from seeing the Toronto exhibition or by encountering it elsewhere, Gammel and Zelazo's book of essays encourages its readers to think with Stettheimer. The book immerses readers in Stettheimer's work and social life and in the sights and sounds of New York City and the colourful cast of characters that graced the Stettheimer salon. Just as an exhibition, argues Uhlyarik in her essay about the AGO show, is "an encounter and a proposition" (39) that brings artwork and the visitor together in space and time under specific conditions, so does *New Directions in Multimodal Modernism* frame Stettheimer's practice as a crystallization of movements and influences, whether artistic or individual.

The interdisciplinarity of *New Directions in Multimodal Modernism* distinguishes the book from previous scholarship on Stettheimer, where her life and the question of her identity are placed at the forefront. Barbara J. Bloemink's 1995 biography, *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer*, continues to be a seminal text for the way it paints a detailed chronological picture of Florine Stettheimer's life. Although there is mention of Stettheimer's sisters Carrie and Ettie, as well as of her poetry and other multimedia examples, Bloemink's narrative inevitably centralizes parts of Stettheimer's life, like the evolution of her painting practice, while underemphasizing other parts, like Marcel Duchamp's dynamic with the Stettheimer sisters, leaving these parts to form a kind of periphery. *New Directions in Multimodal Modernism* embodies a new approach to scholarship on Stettheimer, both by those featured within the book's pages as well as by a new generation of scholars like PhD candidate Kendall DeBoer and her article "Florine and the Three Worlds" (2020). This approach chases the elusive question of Stettheimer's secret, that which makes her work so compelling while also allowing it to withstand the test of time. Rather than indexing her work, this new

scholarship is interested in conceptualizing the space of in-betweenness that Stettheimer cultivated, carving out a space for her practice that was dictated, first and foremost, by her own aesthetics and vision of creative production.

Gammel and Zelazo's book thus begins its work from these aforementioned peripheries and transforms them into centres. Although the title of the collection suggests a continued centering of Florine, *New Directions in Multimodal Modernism* gives more attention to Carrie and Ettie. The book uses the fact that each sister "cultivated an array of expressive modes" (4) almost as a guiding principle in structuring the collection, so that it revolves around the theme of collaboration. Bringing together essays that cover a broad range of topics—music, dance, epistolary studies, and chess as a form of oppositional relationality—Gammel and Zelazo paint a new portrait of Florine Stettheimer, one where her centrality is mediated by her lateral network of familial and personal connections. It is in this rich, ever-lively environment, the essays demonstrate that Stettheimer constantly found sources of inspiration that she plucked from life and translated onto the page or canvas, synthesizing to create a language of her own invention.

Following an introduction by Gammel and Zelazo, the book's first section, "(En)gendering the Artist's Space," is rooted in the question of posterity, whether from the perspective of curators and art historians, or in the case of Ettie Stettheimer's self-awareness through her correspondence with the artist Marcel Duchamp and her eventual role as an archivist and legal executor. In highlighting both active and retroactive forms of identity making, the section invites readers to further contemplate the reasons behind Stettheimer's state of in-betweenness in the existing canon of Western art history, remembered but not widely celebrated. The following

two sections shift the focus closer to Stettheimer's work, examining it on a stylistic and iconographic level. Section two, "The Temporalities of Art," draws parallels between Stettheimer's work and that of her contemporaries and stylistic predecessors, some of them obvious, like Duchamp, whose friendship is documented by her two portraits of him, and some more ambitious, like the parallels with Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams. Patricia Allmer's essay "Temporalities: Stettheimer's Baroque Modernism," which opens the second section and happens to be situated virtually at the middle-point of the book, captures the elusive essence of Stettheimer's canvases, once again cycling back to the notion of in-betweenness and memory. The authors gathered in part three, "Embodied and Performative Art Practices," analyse the multifaceted definition of presence and corporeality that Stettheimer constructs in her practice, with the collaborative opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* with Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson serving as a culmination. By reimagining what the body is physically capable of, how it carries itself through public space and how it chooses to present itself, particularly through clothing, the third section envisions Stettheimer as a kind of master planner, attuned to the sounds and affects of space and the body's ongoing need to negotiate its place on the grand stage that was early twentieth-century New York City.

In ending the book with a Coda on Stettheimer's portrait of Alfred Stieglitz and her resistance to being photographed, *New Directions in Multimodal Modernism* leaves the reader with the question of identity fresh in the mind. This time, however, it is Stettheimer's work and her network of personal and professional relationships that serve as the basis. The academic voice is muted, used as a frame to uphold rather than as a glue or a nail to definitively pinpoint

and lock-in, until the reader is left alone with Stettheimer no differently than they might be if they sat down in an empty gallery in front of one of her paintings. There is no conclusion; there is only Florine.

Notably, the book does not dwell much on Florine Stettheimer's privileged life in a social and economic sense, or on her politics. To some extent, and especially when it comes to race, this feels less like a deliberate omission, and more like an attempt to fuel the reader's curiosity and fascination with Stettheimer within her usual *milieu* of the salons. The discussion of Stettheimer's depiction of race in *Ashbury Park South* (1920), which Bloemink argues treats African Americans as individuals due to the range in skin tone "from light tan to the deepest brown" (29) and Cintia Cristiá broadly describes as a "case for the unravelling of racial borders in America" (196), focuses primarily on Stettheimer herself and ignores some of the broader socio-historical implications. The discussion of jazz as one of the new forms of modernity occurs with little discussion of the Harlem Renaissance and Stettheimer's potential engagement with the movement. Even Cristiá's description of the problematic figure of Nijinsky in *Music* (ca. 1920) stops short of acknowledging Stettheimer's role in directly replicating Nijinsky in blackface. *New Directions in Multimodal Modernism* therefore reinforces Bloemink's argument in her 1995 biography that Stettheimer did not paint that which was not palatable to her personal sensibility and aesthetic, while also recalling Linda Nochlin's 1980 essay, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive," that defines Stettheimer's support for "[B]lack causes" as being based on her friendships with those who were themselves strong supporters, like Carl Van Vechten.² Both the editors and the authors examine Stettheimer's practice using the standards and ideologies of her time, leaving the question of racial

(in)sensitivity and the separation between art and politics up to the reader's discretion.

Florine Stettheimer: New Directions in Multimodal Modernism captures all that makes Florine Stettheimer and her work, both written and visual, attractive. Although certain elements of her life, like the continued fascination surrounding her decision to never marry or the androgynous nature of the figures in many of her paintings, remain unexplored, thus leaving the door for queer multimodality wide open, the authors gathered in this volume nonetheless succeed in dismantling the long-standing myth that Florine's work is nothing more than surface-level pleasure, all while embracing the eccentric and bold personality of Florine Stettheimer and her familial, artistic, and social circle. ¶

Margaryta Golovchenko is a PhD student in art history at the University of Oregon.
—mgolovch@uoregon.edu

1. Henry McBride, *Florine Stettheimer* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 9.

1. See Linda Nochlin, "Florine Stettheimer: Rococo Subversive," in *Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica*, ed. Elizabeth Sussman and Barbara J. Bloemink (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 105.

Livia Stoenescu, ed.

The Intersection of Art and Relics in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art

Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020

185 pp. 51 colour illus.

€ 100 (hardcover) ISBN 978250358398

Catherine Harding

How do artists and artisans manipulate materials to create a sense of the holy for the faithful? That question lies at the heart of this edited volume as its authors explore the interconnection between art and sacred relics during the late medieval and