

Hedda Sterne *Metamorphoses*

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Il Capricorno, San Marco 1994, 30124 Venice, Italy

Inviting Miracles

Hedda Sterne likened the act of drawing to a ritual, performed ‘for the purpose of inviting miracles’.¹ Steeped in the Surrealist practice of automatism, she aimed to work in a meditative state, allowing her line to unravel in unpredictable ways. Yet, unlike the Surrealists, Sterne had little interest in the Freudian unconscious or the libidinal impulses that might be manifested by this meandering line.² She distanced herself also from the Abstract Expressionists, who turned automatic drawing into a monumental gesture, a virtuosic signature writ large. In an artistic milieu that was dominated by ego, Sterne described her work as ‘anti-ego’, suggesting that ‘the purpose is not to show your talent but to show *something*’.³ Rather than seeking to express herself, Sterne drew and painted with an attitude of watchful receptivity that she hoped to impart to viewers of her work.⁴

Born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1910, Sterne began travelling to Paris in the 1930s, forging links to the Surrealist movement with the help of her mentor, Romanian artist Victor Brauner. In 1938, Sterne’s *papiers arrachés et interprétés* (torn and interpreted papers) were included in the Salon des Surindépendants in Paris, where they caught the attention of artist Jean Arp and collector and art dealer Peggy Guggenheim. In these early collages, Sterne dropped scraps of torn paper onto an underlying sheet, staring at this chance configuration until images emerged. She likened this method to ‘watching clouds’, metaphorically and literally *drawing out* images from the inchoate paper shapes by embellishing them with graphite.⁵ This involved moving nimbly between manual actions of tearing and dropping, and cognitive processes of interpretation and extrapolation – a tension that continued to animate Sterne’s drawing practice after she fled Europe for the United States in 1941.

The *Baldander* series of drawings Sterne began in the 1960s exemplify this tension. A compound of the German words for ‘soon’ and ‘change’, the series title captures a sense of expectancy, as if the deliquescent forms of these large-scale drawings might shift and regroup at any moment. In the centre of *Untitled (Baldander)*, 1970, desultory lines turn back on themselves or trail off to nothing, deposited by an errant hand moving distractedly across the page. Yet on either side these lines coalesce into robust, densely-worked forms that unfurl towards the viewer with startling clarity and intentionality. This drawing demonstrates the ease with which she could move between ‘see[ing] line as a pull of energy, and the next moment as a present object’.⁶ Sterne’s technical pen facilitated precision but not erasure, meaning accidents had to be incorporated into image, prompting its burgeoning forms to swell, contort, and expand.

Sterne’s dual conception of the line – as both vector of force and concrete object – allows us to parse the differences between her approach to drawing and Surrealist automatism. In the *Surrealist Manifesto*, André Breton famously described the Surrealist group as ‘modest *recording instruments* who are not mesmerised by the drawings we are making’.⁷ The automatist line, Breton implied, was not subject to aesthetic considerations; he went as far as to suggest that automatism was ‘not a matter of drawing, *but simply of tracing*’.⁸ Sterne echoed Breton’s terminology when she described herself as an ‘optical instrument’, yet she allowed herself to contemplate and accentuate – even to become mesmerised by – the delicate tracteries left by her fine-tipped pen.⁹ She coaxed out forms suggestive of leaves, tendrils, and petals in *Untitled (Baldander)*, 1970; or chimerical figures with eyes, nostrils, and tongues in *Untitled*, 1970. Generated and generative, Sterne’s line departs from

the Surrealist conception of automatism to establish a complex dialogue between the corporeal trace and perceptual experience, ‘permitting visions that want to take shape to do so’.¹⁰

It is significant that Sterne began her *Baldander* series in the late 1960s, around the time she established a daily meditation practice that she sustained for the rest of her life. Sterne’s entry into meditation coincided with its popularisation in the United States, led by the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Significantly for Sterne’s practice, Transcendental Meditation offered a different understanding of the ego to that advanced by Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century. Whereas the work of psychoanalysis was to strengthen the ego, practitioners of meditation sought to transcend the individual ego in pursuit of a higher state of consciousness.¹¹ Sterne participated in this cultural shift from a Western understanding of the self to one informed by Eastern philosophy. She did not work directly with a guru, but taught herself to meditate through extensive reading and years of practice.¹² In her notebooks, Sterne described her experience of meditation as ‘a gathering & inward spiralling... towards a centre distinctly felt, one is and also inhabits’.¹³ This motion is captured in the swirling interiors of Sterne’s *Lettuce* paintings, such as *Untitled*, 1967. Here, lines crumple and curl around one another in roiling, concentric patterns. In *Metamorphoses XIII*, 1967, Sterne watered down the acrylic paint so that it took on the qualities of watercolour, coursing in sinuous rivulets of colour. As in her contemporaneous drawings, Sterne responded to these aleatory marks, reflecting upon and embellishing them with more considered passages of overpainting. The eye follows these eddies of paint and Sterne’s precise painted lines, which resemble the contour lines of a topographic map. It is easy to lose oneself in the winding pathways of this verdant microcosm.

While the circular forms of the *Lettuce* paintings occupy square canvases, Sterne sometimes adopted a tondo format that was even more evocative of the spiralling sensation she experienced while meditating. As early as 1953, she had displayed circular paintings on Lazy Susans so that viewers could orient them in any way they wished.¹⁴ Sterne suggested that later paintings such as *Untitled (Tondo)*, 1973, and *Untitled (Tondo)*, 1974, would ideally be mounted on a mechanism that makes them turn slowly before the viewer’s eyes. Even when static, these paintings appear to be in flux: ever-shifting, opaline fields of colour and light.¹⁵ The city of Venice, where Sterne held a Fulbright fellowship in 1963–64, is an apt context in which to view these iridescent works.

Over her one-hundred-year life, Hedda Sterne witnessed and participated in seismic cultural shifts, including two World Wars, the migration of the Parisian avant-garde and New York’s ascendancy as a cultural centre, and the challenges posed to Western ideologies by alternative systems of belief. The drawings and paintings brought together in this exhibition were made during a transformative period in Sterne’s personal life, as she embarked on a meditation practice she would develop for over forty years. The viewer is invited to greet these works with the attentiveness and adaptability evinced by the artist – as ‘strange, intriguing, interesting events... food for thought, wonder and meditation’.¹⁶

Anna Lovatt, 2022



Above: *Untitled (Baldander)*, 1970 Rapidograph ink on paper, 25·40 × 73·66 cm | 10 × 29 in

Overleaf: *Untitled*, 1967 Acrylic on canvas, 135·89 × 135·89 cm | 53½ × 53½ in
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Designed by Joe Hales studio

NOTES

- 1 Hedda Sterne Papers, HSP 29-108-r, The Hedda Sterne Foundation Archives, New York.
- 2 Sarah L. Eckhardt, ed., *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne*, Champaign, Illinois: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, 2006, 5.
- 3 Joan Simon, ‘Patterns of Thought: Hedda Sterne’, *Art in America* 95, February 2007, 112.
- 4 Sterne wrote: ‘As all my drawings and paintings, particularly the last years are done – while I am in a kind of *separate* condition (meditative? post meditative?) they are probably only apt to be seen *right* by someone in a similar state?’ Hedda Sterne Papers, HSP 28-016.
- 5 Eckhardt, *Uninterrupted Flux*, 5.
- 6 Sterne, excerpt from journal, c.1991. Hedda Sterne Papers, HSP 48-02-02. The Hedda Sterne Foundation Archives, New York.
- 7 André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, 1924, reprinted in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen Lane, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972, 27–28, original italics.
- 8 Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 21, original italics. For an important discussion of the graphic trace and visuality in Surrealism, see David Lomas, ‘Modest Recording Instruments: Science, Surrealism, and Visuality’, *Art History*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2004, 627–650.
- 9 Sterne, in ‘Interview between Hedda Sterne and Josef Helfenstein’, September 6, 2001, 3. The Hedda Sterne Foundation Archives, New York.
- 10 Eckhardt, *Uninterrupted Flux*, 13.
- 11 Sigmund Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’, 1923, in James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIX, 1–66. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, interview with Lyle Wallace, Humboldt, California, 1972, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rPc21m7024>.
- 12 Sterne, in ‘Hedda Sterne by Anney Bonney’, interview, *BOMB Magazine*, April 1, 1992, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/hedda-sterne>.
- 13 Hedda Sterne Papers HSP 28-078, The Hedda Sterne Foundation Archives, New York.
- 14 These works were shown in the exhibition ‘Hedda Sterne: Paintings’, February 16 to March 7, 1953, at the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York.
- 15 These works evoke the ‘murmuring panes and pools’ French writer Michel Butor perceived in one of his four poems on Sterne’s work, translated in Mary Ann Caws, ‘Hedda Sterne: Re-Cognizing the Last of the Irascibles’, *Art Papers*, September/October 2000, 24.
- 16 Hedda Sterne Papers, HSP 28-055-v.