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Review of Rachael Z. DeLue, *Arthur Dove: Always Connect*

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Charles Palermo reviews Arthur Dove

Rachael Z. DeLue. *Arthur Dove: Always Connect.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

311 pp.

Review by Charles Palermo

Rachael Z. DeLue's study of Arthur Dove's career makes some bold choices and reveals a remarkable array of forces at work in what is probably the best body of painted work in the circle around Alfred Stieglitz. DeLue avoids many classical approaches, questions, issues; instead, she delivers a visual cultural investigation of historical discourses—about weather, sound recording and broadcast, shorthand, and others—that pays substantial dividends when DeLue returns to discuss the paintings. This is an exemplary art historical appropriation of visual culture, and it puts forward a strong thesis about what motivates Dove's major works of 1921 to 1946.

The thesis identifies basic themes: language, translation, and intersubjectivity. A page from Dove's diary shows, at the top, a barometer reading ("30.35") and a temperature ("34°"); below, "ptl klw," "Sea gulls flying high in a mackerel sky," and "Warm 'soft' day" (p. 114). The entry combines instrument readings, speedwriting ("ptl klw"), a term of "weather wisdom" ("mackerel sky"), and a "verbal description" ("Warm 'soft' day"), thereby juxtaposing languages. Instrument readings describe weather. Speedwriting approximates sounds of spoken language. "Partly cloudy" becomes "ptl klw." Weather wisdom— clichés like "Red sky at night"—records weather like instrument readings, but unscientifically. (A "mackerel sky"'s clouds resemble the scales of a mackerel and supposedly foretell a storm [p. 108].) Finally, by describing a day metaphorically, Dove translates weather yet again (pp. 114–15).

This is intersubjective because—this is weather’s significance—weather connects us all. It impinges on us—as barometric pressure—and we represent that to ourselves. (Is a barometric pressure reading a representation? This becomes an interesting question.)

Now take a painting: *Sun Drawing Water* (1933). Thin blue paint mimics water. The shore rises toward a hazy sky. Two not-quite-vertical forms jut from the land into the clouds, visualizing the Sun “drawing water.” The expression is a misunderstanding of the shafts of light (“crepuscular rays”) that sometimes shine down from the clouds (p. 105). While one can see crepuscular rays (Dove paints something one sees), one cannot see evaporation (Dove paints what cannot be seen). Sinewy lines of paint trace the sky and plunge and rise inside the elongated ovals, picturing light piercing haze, water becoming vapor, and paths of birds flying across the clouds, rendering visual the pressure and substance of air (pp. 12–14).

Dove similarly translates recording technology to figure the angular formal qualities of modern music but also the pressure of sound on the Victrola’s diaphragm, the turning of the Victrola’s hand crank by the painter every four minutes, and the transmission of sound through the air as waves in a “record painting” like *George Gershwin—Rhapsody in Blue, Part I* (1927).

“The record paintings” are “pictorial translations of music, music-listening, and listening technologies that amounted to a reconstituted composite of these three things” (p. 159). Dove’s is music understood as a fully embodied and mechanical experience. Metallic paint and aluminum support, a clock spring, even the reference to the division of Gershwin’s piece into two parts (for the two-sided record)—all point toward DeLue’s view.

But if the work is a “registering system” meant to “‘play’ music” (p. 159) is it then like a barometer—a device for registering physical force visually? And if so, again, is the result a representation?

An antirepresentational dimension builds throughout DeLue’s argument. Discussing *Flight* (1943), DeLue writes of “the automatism resident in human-machine relationships” (p. 136) and affirms Dove’s attraction to the automaticity of the pantograph (which he used on *Flight*), the phonograph, and the barometer—to their “self-action” (p. 136). This is again a metaphor, according to DeLue. Barometers, and other such objects, work “by their own devices,” but “their automatic operations proceeded from a human-machine collaboration” (p. 137).

But even collaboration imputes to the device a human-like agency. So, do “things” have agency? “Thing” is Dove’s name for works that incorporate objects. It is also a key term in recent debates about their agency.

Martin Heidegger, Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell, Ian Bogost, and others join in DeLue’s reflection on Dove’s “things.” The field ranges from Heidegger’s deeply human (I might have said anthropocentric, but that sounds like an accusation) phenomenology to Bogost’s anticorrelationism. Where do DeLue and Dove stand? Things are “not alive,” but “have lives of their own” (p. 219). DeLue balances on a knife-edge, treating the agency of things now metaphorically, now literally.

Eventually, DeLue shows her cards. Considering Dove’s interest in natural history dioramas, she explains, they share with his works

an impulse to dismantle the dividing lines between seemingly opposed categories or realms, including human and animal, animate and inanimate, life and art, and even life and death. Although he worked in a context still flush with the possibilities of animation and animism, Dove, far from wanting to talk to the animals or wishing to claim that pictures are people too . . . instead identified a model system in the life group and the diorama that posited the featured specimens *as if* alive. . . . Diorama vitality, as a condition of lifeless aliveness, models the transference between animate and inanimate entities that Dove strove for in his assemblages, and in his paintings as well. [Pp. 244–45]

DeLue opts for a traditional account of objecthood and agency.

This knife-edge walk, the interpretive rewards of her visual cultural history, her readings of paintings—these are the great virtues of DeLue’s project. But it has also placed Dove within a modernism that often flirts with the power of literal presence and its hostility to representation. Dove always returns to representation.