

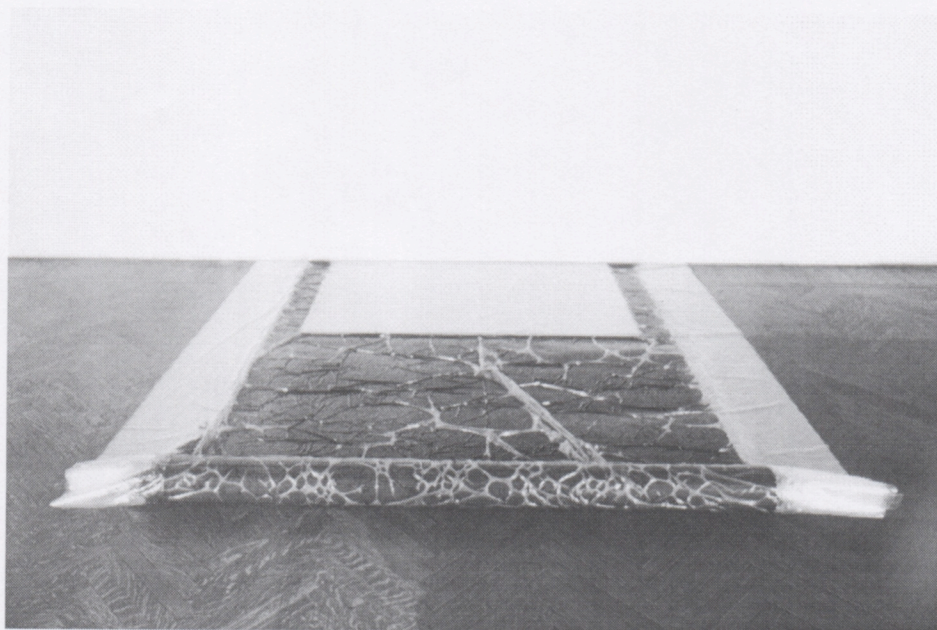
## Dorothea Rockburne: Intersection\*

ANNA LOVATT

In March 1972, Dorothea Rockburne described *Intersection* (1971) as part of a ten-page feature on her work in *Artforum*. Here is her full account of the piece: "The work is the intersection of *Group* and *Disjunction*. I synthesized the parts of *Group* and the remaining parts of *Disjunction* to form *Intersection*. I had always used a level line in my work and I decided to make it apparent as an autonomous element."<sup>1</sup> As Mel Bochner explained a few pages earlier, Rockburne "has found that rigorous algebra of thought, Set Theory, to be an intellectually unifying premise for determining the diversity of her operations."<sup>2</sup> In set theory, the term "intersection" denotes the area of commonality between two overlapping sets: that which is both A and B. Rockburne's piece used the elements shared by two previous works, *Group* (1971) and *Disjunction* (1970).<sup>3</sup> The result was a sheet of plastic attached to the wall at a level line and rolled down onto the gallery floor, where a piece of paper and a smaller rectangle of cardboard were placed on top of it. These had been covered with a measured quantity of crude oil and another sheet of plastic, which was rolled around the paper at each end, causing the dark, viscous oil to cling to the plastic and sink into the paper. When *Intersection* was shown at the Katonah Gallery the previous year, Robert Pincus-Witten observed that it was "even more intellectually stringent" than Rockburne's earlier work, "impressive and sober."<sup>4</sup> Through her use of set theory, Rockburne's practice was aligned with

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1. Dorothea Rockburne, "Works and Statements," *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (March 1972), p. 33.
2. Mel Bochner, "A Note on Dorothea Rockburne," *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (March 1972), p. 28.
3. Rockburne, "Works and Statements," p. 32.
4. Robert Pincus-Witten, "Reviews," *Artforum* 9, no. 10 (June 1971), p. 80.



*Dorothea Rockburne.*  
*Intersection. 1971. All works*  
*courtesy the artist. © Dorothea*  
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*(ARS), New York 2007.*

the Conceptual art of her contemporaries Bochner and Sol LeWitt, and couched in a similar vocabulary of stringency, rigor, intellectualism, and difficulty.<sup>5</sup>

But there was a discrepancy in Pincus-Witten's account. Because while he was clearly aware of the conceptual operations behind the work, and its intended abstractness, he could not help commenting that *Intersection* bore "a coincidental similarity to a flat bed at the corner of the floor with paper cylinders at the head and foot, 'made-up' in the room."<sup>6</sup> Pincus-Witten subsequently dropped this reference for a detailed description of Rockburne's actual materials. Yet looking back on *Intersection* twenty-four years later, Rockburne recalled the image of the bed, locating the work within an entirely different tradition to the set theory pieces produced by her peers in the early 1970s. "Bob [Rauschenberg] began the artist's modern dialogue with the bed. [Claes] Oldenburg did a bed and I did a bed in 1972 [*sic*] using Set Theory, that is a bed of oil. It's called *Intersection*."<sup>7</sup> Rockburne's bed of oil—which is only a bed in the most abstract sense of a layered horizontal field—appears to be the odd fellow in this trio: a mathematical set aligned with an encrusted, splattered assemblage and a skewed, hallucinatory vision of a bedroom interior. Yet like Bochner and LeWitt, Rauschenberg and Oldenburg shared aspects of Rockburne's artistic formation, which began not in

5. In September 1970, Pincus-Witten remarked approvingly that "Dorothea Rockburne's work is much more interesting and difficult," in "Reviews," *Artforum* 9, no. 1 (September 1970), p. 76.

6. Pincus-Witten, "Reviews" *Artforum* (June 1971), p. 80.

7. Dorothea Rockburne, "Excerpts from a Conversation with Chuck Close and Dorothea Rockburne," in *Dorothea Rockburne: The Transcendent Light of Geometry*, exh. cat. (East Hampton, N.Y.: Guild Hall Museum, 1995), n.p.

post-Minimalist New York but at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, in the early 1950s. In what follows I will consider the location of Rockburne's practice at the intersection of these two art-historical groupings, where it remains resistant to the categorizations and historicizations that have structured subsequent accounts of this period. In particular, I want to consider how subjective memory and tactile experience—vivid in the work of Oldenburg and Rauschenberg but systematically evacuated from that of Bochner and LeWitt—were rethought abstractly in Rockburne's early work via the manipulation, stratification, and inscription of sheets of material. Finally, I will argue that this topological play of surfaces is indicative of a moment in the early 1970s when the incipient phenomenon of installation art coincided with a renewed interest in drawing, and when "modernism" and "postmodernism" had as many points of commonality as of differentiation.

### *Beds*

Rockburne met Rauschenberg at Black Mountain College, where she was a student for three years, beginning in 1950. She was married at Black Mountain, and her daughter Christine was born in 1952 (she and her husband separated in 1956). Rockburne majored in painting, which she studied with Jack Tworkov, Esteban Vicente, Franz Kline, and Philip Guston; but the diverse intellectual community at Black Mountain meant she also took classes in philosophy with Albert William Levi, linguistics with Flola Shepard, poetry with Charles Olson, music with John Cage, dance with Merce Cunningham, and mathematics with Max Dehn. Dehn's lectures on group theory and topology introduced Rockburne to the concepts of set membership and surface mapping she would investigate in her artistic practice of the early 1970s. But the other students at Black Mountain were just as influential as the faculty. Rockburne's classmates included Cy Twombly, John Chamberlain, and Rauschenberg, with whom she remained friends after moving to New York in 1955. She also became close friends with Rauschenberg's former wife Susan Weil, and from 1963 to 1968 worked as his studio assistant with Brice Marden. While at Black Mountain, Rauschenberg borrowed an old patchwork quilt from Rockburne, which she had used herself for several years. Although some accounts say the quilt was a gift, Rockburne recalls that he took it without asking, perhaps challenging the often cited story that it just happened to be on hand when he had no materials to paint on.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the case, in 1955 Rauschenberg stapled the quilt to a stretcher, added a pillow and part of a sheet, and splattered the upper half with paint, scratching over the pillow with pencil. The result was *Bed*, one of his most controversial works, now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

8. Ibid.

In the March 1972 issue of *Artforum*, a few pages after the feature on Rockburne, Leo Steinberg discussed Rauschenberg's *Bed* in "Reflections on the State of Criticism," the essay later revised as "Other Criteria." With other works by Rauschenberg, *Bed* was seen to represent the characteristic pictorial surface of the 1960s: a surface Steinberg called the "flatbed picture plane." Borrowing its name from a horizontal printing press, Steinberg proposed that this new pictorial surface negated the anthropomorphism of the vertically oriented canvas, substituting for it the arrangement of information on an opaque, horizontal plane. Yet the flattening of this illusionistic cavity did not produce the decorative, all-over surface described by Clement Greenberg in "The Crisis of the Easel Picture"—rather, it opened the picture up to the "noise" of the world, rendering it a site for the mapping and processing of cultural data.

Steinberg's argument is well known, but I want to highlight the way in which he associates pictorial flatness with the openness of cognition, and thus with a kind of conceptual depth. He suggests that this new work surface might be understood literally—as a lateral spread of materials—and metaphorically, as a "symbol



*Robert Rauschenberg. Bed. 1955. © DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2007.*

of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field."<sup>9</sup> Rosalind Krauss took up a similar argument two years later in "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," explicitly likening the surface of his combines to the field of memory, "where things may be synchronously stored but temporally re-experienced."<sup>10</sup> For Krauss, Rauschenberg's work constituted a radically new, "materialized" image, produced by physically transferring objects rather than translating them from three dimensions into two. This indexical process is most apparent in the transfer drawings Rauschenberg made throughout the 1960s, when Rockburne was his studio assistant. But *Bed*, with its accumulation of found materials, also testifies to the insistence that "it is the stuff of experience—the things one bumps into as one moves through the world—that forms experience."<sup>11</sup> In what follows I want to suggest that a similar belief conditioned Rockburne's early work, and that her dialogue with Rauschenberg moved beyond the shared image of the bed to encompass this conception of the recording surface as a mnemonic palimpsest of past, corporeal events.

For Rockburne, the mnemonic associations of Rauschenberg's combines are compounded by more specific memories of *Bed*'s pre-history as a domestic object. She used the quilt throughout her time at Black Mountain, a period of rapid transition during which she arrived as a single student and left married, with a young daughter: "I know that quilt very well. When Christine was born and she came home she was on that quilt. I know that quilt."<sup>12</sup> When the quilt became part of *Bed*, it engendered another narrative, one Rockburne would later enter into with her own piece *Intersection*: "This great tradition that Bob started really of the bed, as an issue. In that work the bed was so vibrant, it loomed so big, when I first saw that bed it was as though it were six feet wide and twelve feet high."<sup>13</sup> Rockburne's memory-image of *Bed* is inseparable from this first encounter, when she perceived it as an origin-point, the beginning of a tradition. This scene refuses to tally with the sight of the work in its current condition, an aging masterpiece ensconced in the Museum of Modern Art since 1989: "Now when I go to the Museum of Modern Art I'm looking at an antique. . . . The quilt is all brown now, it's a different artifact from the one I know in my head."<sup>14</sup> If Rauschenberg's *Bed* conflates art and the everyday, the juxtaposition is particularly resonant for Rockburne. *Bed* marks the convergence of Rockburne's personal history and her conception of an artistic tradition—one that she would subsequently enter into with *Intersection*.

9. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria" (1972), reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 950.

10. Rosalind Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum* 14, no. 4 (December 1974), p. 43.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Rockburne, "Excerpts from a Conversation with Chuck Close and Dorothea Rockburne," n.p.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

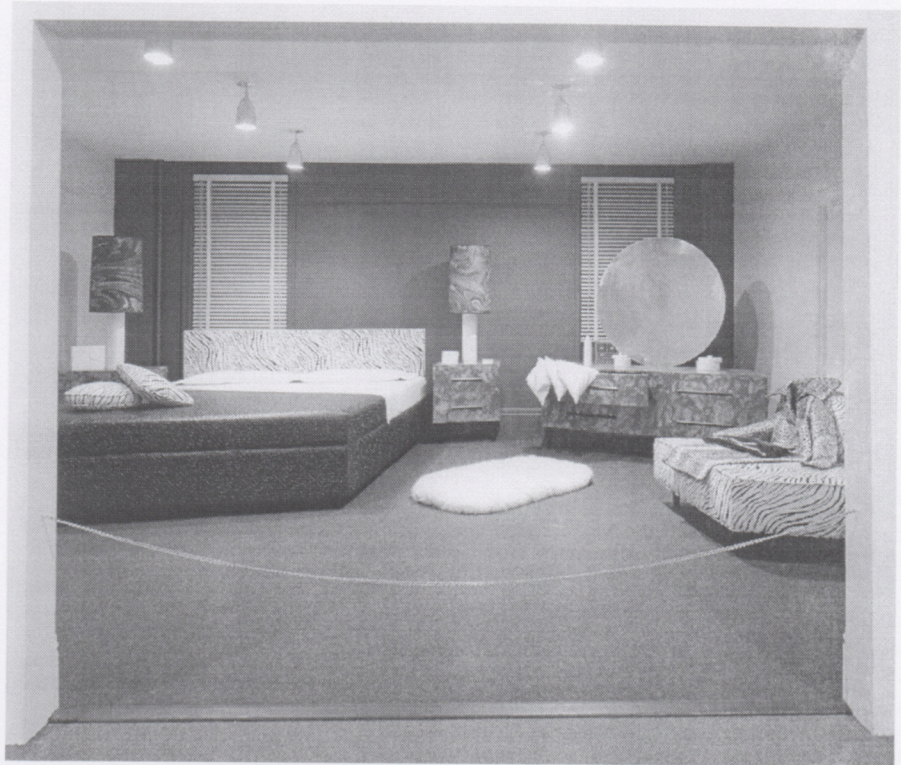
Like Rauschenberg's *Bed*, Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble* (1963) is, in his own words, "sticky with associations."<sup>15</sup> Based on his memories of a Malibu hotel room (which he could no longer find when he later searched for it), it is a three-dimensional representation of a two-dimensional, perspectival image (an image that is itself a representation of three-dimensional space). It thus offers the spectator an encounter with three-dimensionality twice removed, rolled through two dimensions and stretched incompetently back into three, like some infinitely malleable cartoon interior. For the perspective of the room to appear "natural," the viewer must adopt a fixed position: bodily movement warps the image and renders it nonsensical. The effect is similar to anamorphosis, which Hubert Damisch suggests "turns the perspective order against itself," using its principles for "hallucinatory or disconcerting purposes."<sup>16</sup> Damisch explains that while "natural" perspective leaves the spectator some freedom of movement, anamorphosis restricts vision to a single point, forcing the observer to adopt a particular position or to look through a hole in order to see the image.<sup>17</sup> With *Bedroom Ensemble*, Oldenburg pits this disembodied mode of viewing against the kind of phenomenological experience contemporaneously associated with Minimal art. Inside the room, bodily engagement seems to be invited by the turned-down bed and the coat on the chair: showroom contrivances stalled by the realization that both are impenetrable, sewn tightly shut. The organic elements in the room—animal skins, water, leather—are frozen into a range of synthetic materials whose tacky surfaces emphasize their artificiality. There is the sense that the whole *Ensemble* is an elaborately constructed illusion, which might collapse at the slightest touch. A silver chain cordons off the room, prohibiting physical contact by hitting the viewer just below the knee—a reminder of her corporality when surveying this scene petrified by pictorial conventions.

If the living body was conspicuously absent in Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble*, it was foregrounded in the Happenings he organized at the Judson Dance Theater and elsewhere in New York in the early 1960s. Rockburne became involved with Judson in 1963—at a time when she was dissatisfied with her work as a painter—and appeared in many of Oldenburg's Happenings, including *Washes* of May 1965. *Washes* was a scripted performance in ten parts, which took place in the swimming pool of Al Roon's Health Club at the Riverside Plaza Hotel. After four rehearsals it was performed four times, each time with additional alterations. Oldenburg's script for "Part Three" reads:

15. Claes Oldenburg, notes on *Bedroom Ensemble* (1976), in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995), p. 204.

16. Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 134 and 133. Thanks to Yve-Alain Bois for pointing me toward Damisch's text.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 136.



Claes Oldenburg. Bedroom Ensemble. 1963. Photo: National Gallery of Canada. © Oldenburg van Bruggen Foundation, New York 2007.

Dorothea and Max enter. Max launches the two oil drums, throwing them in the water with a great splash. Dorothea takes the folded giant American flag, walks to the center edge and there slips into the water with the flag. She wears gold gloves. Max composes a percussion piece slamming the barrels together with a variety of resonant sounds. Dorothea spreads the giant flag in the water. After a while the wet flag is draped over both barrels in a funereal effect. When the part ends, Max and Dorothea remove the flag and let it sink to the pool bottom.<sup>18</sup>

The deadpan script provides an amusing counterpoint to later accounts of Rockburne's sober and stringent practice. Yet her participation in *Washes* formed part of a sustained engagement with performance and dance, which had interested her since childhood. During her time at Judson, she participated in performances by Robert Morris, Steve Paxton, Rauschenberg, and Robert Whitman. Over a decade earlier, in 1952, she had been part of Cage's *Untitled Event* at Black Mountain College—retrospectively described as the first multimedia Happening. Like Rauschenberg, Rockburne had been drawn to Merce

18. Claes Oldenburg, *Washes*, in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 111–18.

Cunningham's dance classes at Black Mountain, but it was only in the late 1960s that she began to consider her experiences as a dancer in relation to her studio practice, regarding the floor as a gridded surface and the body's movements as a series of folds.

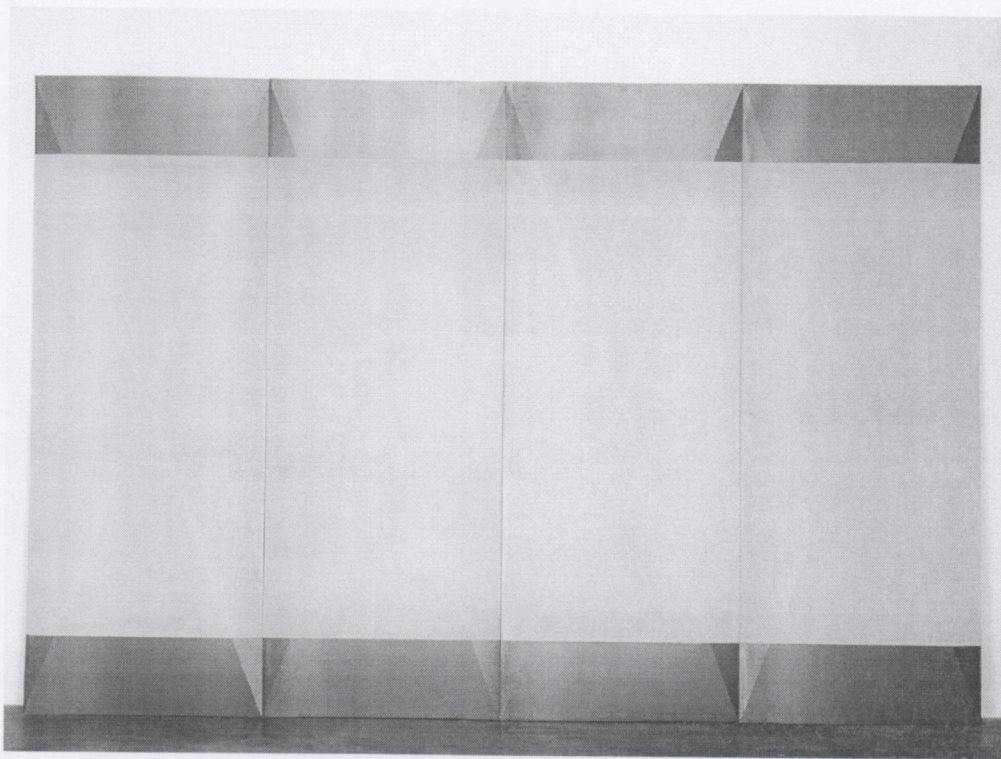
Having rethought Rockburne's work outside the post-Minimalist milieu—in the context of Black Mountain College in the early 1950s and the Judson Dance Theater in the early '60s—we might begin to understand more fully how she could think of *Intersection* as a kind of bed, entering into a tradition started by Rauschenberg and continued in Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble*. The physical processes involved in the making of *Intersection* come closer to "making" a bed than they do to making a sculpture, painting, or drawing, concerned as they are with pulling one sheet over another to produce a layered horizontal field. These repetitive, bodily actions relate to the background in performance Rockburne shared with Rauschenberg and Oldenburg, and *Intersection* also highlights the sensory and phenomenological experience of the spectator, like *Bed* and *Bedroom Ensemble*. The lowest, plastic stratum curls up like a protective skin in the seam between the wall and floor of the gallery, drawing attention to this architectural shell as a container for the work and for the body. And although Rockburne's installation could hardly be described as a picture plane, her efforts to translate the complex conceptual operations involved in set theory into "layers of correspondence through the work" resonate with Steinberg's contemporaneous account of the "flatbed picture plane" as a layered recording surface that allegorizes the mind.<sup>19</sup>

#### Sheets

In 1966, a year after performing in *Washes*, Rockburne met a group of people whose concerns were markedly different than those of her friends at Black Mountain, and even more distinct from those of the Abstract Expressionist painters and Beat poets with whom she had been friends when she first moved to New York. They included Bochner, Dan Graham, Eva Hesse, LeWitt, Lucy Lippard, and Smithson: artists and critics who were more or less deeply immersed in the nonreferential, noncompositional, anti-expressionistic ethos of Minimalism. When Rockburne returned to the studio that year it was primarily to painting, but to painting entirely divested of painterly affect. She began making works in spray paint on aluminium or pig iron, drying the paint with heat lamps that caused it to wrinkle against the resistant metal support. The paintings were named after the commercial colors of the spray paint, so that their apparently allusive titles rebound onto their blunt materiality. In *Tropical Tan* (1967–68), four panels of pig iron were scored diagonally to produce actual variations in light and shade, emphasizing the physical properties of the materials rather than creating painterly

19. Jennifer Licht, "An Interview with Dorothea Rockburne," *Artforum* 12, no. 6 (March 1972), p. 36.





Rockburne. *Tropical Tan*. 1967–68.

illusions.<sup>20</sup> What initially appear to be bands of gray paint at the top and bottom of the support are in fact strips of bare iron that were protected with masking tape from the tan-colored spray, producing sharp ridges where paint meets metal. Rockburne describes making these pieces as “literally pulling a skin over a skin”—equating the once-liquid paint and the rigid iron as two-dimensional sheets of different tensile strength.<sup>21</sup> The creases in the iron of *Tropical Tan* produce pale ridges in the overlying paint, pulling its wrinkled surface a little tauter and threatening to rupture its fragile integrity. They form a linear scar on the “skin” of Rockburne’s painting, a kind of drawing produced by damaging the surface rather than applying a pigment to it.

When making paintings like *Tropical Tan*, Rockburne used brown paper to line her spray booth. One day she picked up a sheet of this material and attached it to her studio wall, contemplating it for some time. She remembers: “Paper began to assume terrific importance to me. . . . I came to realize that a piece of

20. Pig iron is iron in its raw form, which is too brittle for general use and is usually remelted to produce cast iron or steel.

21. Dorothea Rockburne, interview with Marcia Tucker, in *Early Work by Five Contemporary Artists: Ron Gorchov, Elizabeth Murray, Dennis Oppenheim, Dorothea Rockburne, and Joel Shapiro*, exh. cat. (New York: The New Museum, 1977), n.p.

paper is a metaphysical object. You write on it, you draw on it, you fold it.”<sup>22</sup> The versatility of paper, its ability to span a range of forms and functions, was investigated in most of Rockburne’s work for the following decade. In her set theory pieces from 1969 to 1972, paper was combined with units of chipboard and crude oil, which Rockburne regarded as “a sheet, but not with tensile strength, it was a permeating sheet.”<sup>23</sup> These sheets were subjected to predetermined operations (soaking, hanging, rolling, layering), in order to draw out the physical properties of the elements and the similarities and differences between them. In *Sign* (1970), paper formed slings supporting three pieces of chipboard, one allowed to rest on the floor while the others were suspended on either side. The paper was fixed to the top of the wall with nails, and the differing weights of the chipboard caused it to tear at these pressure points. Intact, the thin rolls of paper could support the weight of the boards, but as soon as their surfaces were ruptured—even at a single point—this tensile strength was compromised. The jagged, linear tears in *Sign* produced an involuntary diagram of the forces of gravity: another kind of drawing-as-rupture.<sup>24</sup>

Rockburne’s inquiry into the nature of drawing was developed in a series of works she began in 1971, collectively entitled *Drawing Which Makes Itself*. In April 1974 she published the accompanying “Notes to Myself on Drawing” in *Flash Art*:

1. How could drawing be of itself and not about something else?
2. Construct an investigation of drawing which is based on information contained within the paper and not on any other information.
3. Thought acts upon itself.
4. It seems reasonable that paper acting upon itself through subject imposed translations could become a subject-object.<sup>25</sup>

Rockburne had been studying various drawings for some time and found that they usually had an illustrative function. Continuing the concerns of paintings like *Tropical Tan* and installations like *Intersection*—where variations in color, light, and form were produced by the physical properties of the materials—Rockburne

22. Dorothea Rockburne, quoted in John Gruen, “Dorothea Rockburne,” in *The Artist Observed: 28 Interviews with Contemporary Artists* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 1991), p. 311.

23. Dorothea Rockburne, interview with the author, New York, July 7, 2004.

24. Rockburne claims that her understanding of drawing was informed by skiing through fresh snow as a child, when she regarded the lines cut by her skis as a type of drawing produced by the entire body. This recollection not only stages drawing as a fully corporeal act, it also casts the drawn mark as a crease or trough—a fault line in a surface that otherwise remains intact. Dorothea Rockburne in conversation with Rolf Sinclair and Amy Sandback, in *Dorothea Rockburne: Ten Years of Astronomy Drawings*, exh. cat. (New York: Lawrence Rubin/Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art, 1999), p. 7.

25. Dorothea Rockburne, “Notes to Myself on Drawing,” *Flash Art* (April 1974), p. 66.