INVISIBLE CITIES: NEW YORK

Lesson 3. Picturing Urban Movement
One of the most ubiquitous forms of urban expression is graffiti. While some of its stylistic elements could be traced back to Cubism, graffiti in its popular street form arose with the invention of the aerosol spray can. While the location of its birthplace is sometimes disputed, NYC is undoubtedly the capital of its proliferation. It is important to note its development was an integral part of the Hip-Hop movement, and flourished in Black and Latino neighborhoods.

Graffiti art is diverse in form, but often reflects the physical energy of the urban environment—fast, fragmented, colorful, dynamic. If the modern city is dominated by the grid (think of the grid of NYC streets, or the grid of skyscrapers), graffiti is an expression that breaks out of this grid. While it is celebrated in contemporary culture, in the 1960s-1990s, it was largely classified as vandalism or property destruction.

For the purposes of this lesson we will focus on its formal properties and how they relate to earlier forms in art history (like Italian Futurism) and influenced contemporary fine artists like Julie Mehretu. While drawing direct links between these different artists is not necessarily simple, it is impossible to consider works of art that explore urban dynamic abstraction without honoring the legacy of graffiti culture.

You can read about notable graffiti artists here: https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/10-new-york-graffiti-legends-still-kicking-ass
Task:

Explore artists who use dynamic abstraction to talk about the urban environment. As you study their work, consider which formal elements they employ to create these highly energetic works. What types of lines? How do they establish rhythm? What other things do you notice about their work that is urban in nature? How does their artwork relate to graffiti and street art?

The Italian Futurists were a movement in Italy circa 1909 that (while problematic for some social reasons discussed in this link) centered on the theme of cities, technology, and a new future. Their work was an extension of the Cubist era, with a focus on movement:

http://exhibitions.guggenheim.org/futurism/

The contemporary artist Julie Mehretu creates artwork that explores the ordered chaos of global cities. Her early work is notable for its use of line, and the way she organizes lines to orchestrate congestion and illustrate dynamic activity:

https://whitney.org/exhibitions/julie-mehretu
Before beginning the lesson, refresh your understanding of directional lines.

**Horizontal** lines tend to express a sense of calm (think of the horizon line on a sunset) and can be grounding or stabilizing.

**Vertical** lines can express strength and power (think of a skyscraper) and can also stabilize or command attention.

**Diagonal** lines often represent energy and movement and can create a sense of speed.

**Curvilinear** lines can indicate meandering, confusion, and changing directions.

Your composition can employ all of these types of lines. How you use them will dictate the energy of the artwork. You may create a work that emphasizes speed, but controls how fast the eye reads the artwork by employing horizontal and vertical lines to “ground” or control the movement. Julie Mehretu’s painting “Stadia II” is a good exercise in examining this use of controlling eye movement with a variety of lines:

CREATE YOUR OWN DYNAMIC ABSTRACTION

Step 1:

Begin by sketching an outline of movement with pencil. Think about speed, and how to move your diagonals about the page. You can work intuitively by drawing quickly, and creating lines that feel naturally energetic. You will erase much of the pencil in the next step, so be loose with your mark-making, and allow yourself to sketch freely, generating something uniquely dynamic.
Step 2:

Next, use a pen to distinguish shapes within the pencil sketch you created. You can trace some of the shapes you drew with pencil, while also adding new ones, and abandoning pencil lines you don’t want to use. You can also use the pencil lines simply as guidance--rather than just tracing the pencil, you can draw shapes along the trajectory, using the pencil only to guide the movement of the composition.
Step 3:

Now begin to add detail to the shapes. You may want to use a thicker pen to outline dominant shapes to give them even more emphasis. You can also add repetitive lines to create rhythm and enhance directional cues. You could also add patterns, or whimsical details that relate to the urban environment.
Step 4: (optional)

You can also use marker to add color to your drawing. Consider how adding color will affect the movement. Color has its own rhythm, and can work in concert with your drawing, or create visual cacophony (which may create a desired chaos). You might start by picking only one or two colors to accent the drawing, and use them in negative space areas, or in the background of the dominant form.
Step 5: (optional)

Add collaged shapes on top of your drawing. You can take paper in a color that compliments your existing color scheme, or find a paper with pattern. Cut it into a variety of shapes, and then experiment with overlapping the shapes on the existing drawing to see how they add to the dynamism.
TIP: When creating collage, a good way to glue paper is to use a playing card or old credit card to smooth out the glue. If you want to create an archival work of art, there are neutral pH glues you can use (pictured on right). Use a scrap piece of paper underneath the paper you are glueing so you don’t get excess glue on your working table. Apply the glue, and then use the playing card like a squeegee, and smooth the glue across the paper so it is applied evenly across.
Step 6: (optional)

Create a digital collage from your drawing. (It might be helpful to document your work during each part of the process, that way you can choose to use the drawing without color, as I did in this case. As in Lesson 2, I simply digitally cut out part of the drawing, and experimented by placing photos of my other artwork in the background until I found a combination I liked.

This type of digital collage can also be helpful in establishing color combinations for your analog work. This method allows you to quickly experiment with different colors and patterns. You can then take this digital sketch and turn it into a painting or drawing.
After finishing your artwork, consider the following:

**REFLECTION:**

1. Are there ways that abstraction can represent the city more effectively than representation or literal illustration?
2. How is speed represented in your final piece? Identify where the work moves rapidly, where it pauses, where it stops, and where the most dynamic activity seems to occur.
3. If this artwork was accompanied by a soundtrack, what music would be on the “playlist”?