



FLORINE  
STETTMEIER

NEW DIRECTIONS IN  
MULTIMODAL MODERNISM

EDITED BY IRENE GAMMEL  
AND SUZANNE ZELAZO

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MULTIMODAL MODERNISM

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IRENE GAMMEL AND SUZANNE ZELAZO

## INTRODUCTION / “SEEN IN COLOR AND DESIGN”

FLORINE STETTHEIMER’S  
MULTIMODAL MODERNISM

Our Parties  
Our Picnics  
Our Banquets  
Our Friends  
Have at last a *raison d’être*  
Seen in color and design  
It amuses me  
To recreate them  
To paint them.  
—Florine Stettheimer, “Our Parties”<sup>1</sup>

**W**ith its integration of “color and design,” visual and verbal, painting and poetry, Florine Stettheimer’s poem “Our Parties” epitomizes the central themes of this essay collection. In the poem, artmaking and painting emanate from the social—from the conviviality of conversation, the enjoyment of food, even from the seeming levity that accompanies these activities. The poem posits art as a temporal



i.1 Arnold Genthe, *Miss Florine Stettheimer's Studio*, 1936. Photograph. Genthe Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. LC-DIG-agc-7a01973 (digital file from original negative).

and spatial event, a “party” or “picnic” in which characters—“Our Friends”—not only make an appearance, but also become the subjects of aesthetic contemplation by the poet. Here, the painting is an act of “recreat[ing]” a live performance, like an artful documentation of the event (figure i.1). As the speaker articulates her aesthetic philosophy at the in-between of media including painting, performance, design, and literature, Stettheimer’s poem crystalizes the multimodal aesthetic that is the focus of this book.

As salonières in New York’s fashionable Upper West Side during the war and interwar years, Florine Stettheimer (1871–



i.2 Florine Stettheimer, *Family Portrait I*, 1915. Art Properties, Avery Library, Columbia University, Gift of the Estate of Ettie Stettheimer, 1967 (1967.17.011).

1944), her older sister Carrie (1867–1944), and younger sister Ettie (1875–1954) stood at the vanguard of a dynamically evolving and quickly shifting universe in art and creative production (figure i.2).<sup>2</sup> As the epigraph illustrates, their multimodal art practice emerged from their famed salon, inspiring a collision of media and new integrated modes of expression. The defiance inherent in such an approach was in keeping with the deeply ironic and subversive feminism of the Stettheimer sisters, and their collective determination to be known as artists. Yet how exactly do we investigate such an integration, which, by nature, eludes typical categorization and analysis?

Implicit in this study of the sisters' art practice is the understanding that this integrated process was gendered. It was the theoretical practice of female artists who cohabited in Manhattan from 1914 to 1935, first in a townhouse owned by an aunt at 102 West 76th Street, and later in Alwyn Court on West 58th Street. Here they met with a large circle of avant-gardists,

including Marcel Duchamp, Albert Gleizes, Georgia O’Keeffe, Henry McBride, Juliette Roche, Carl Van Vechten, and Marguerite Zorach, to name but a few. Their work across the arts was rooted in their role as salonières, which in turn cultivated an array of expressive modes in each sister: Florine’s paintings decorated the walls of the salon space, instigating critical engagement among guests, while ongoing conversations provided the impetus for episodic narratives that would find their way into Ettie’s autobiographical novel *Love Days* (1923). Carrie’s planning of the practical details of the salon, including menu and culinary arrangements, bolstered her artistic talent for working to and through scale at the macro- and microcosmic levels in the construction of her diorama: a twenty-year work in progress and artful replica of the sisters’ salon space. Inevitably, the sisters’ creativity fuelled that of other avant-gardists who were constant visitors there.

While influenced by late-nineteenth-century Symbolism and fin-de-siècle Arts and Crafts, the sisters provided significant innovations that continue to be relevant. Indeed, the disintegration of boundaries between media so powerfully performed by the Stettheimers would become central to the “intermedia” of the 1960s Fluxus artists, as seen in the work of Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, and Yoko Ono, among others. In Canada, the generic “borderblur” of bpNichol’s art practice between poetry, prose, sonic performance, and illustration significantly altered Canadian cultural expression in the 1970s and ‘80s before his death in 1988, and continues to do so today. That the Stettheimers were developing their multimodal practice so early positions them as important precursors to some of the most experimental art of the late twentieth century.

This volume of essays was sparked by the vibrant 2017 *Florine Stettmeier: Multimodal Modernism* symposium, which we

organized collaboratively as part of Irene Gammel's graduate course in Communication and Culture at Ryerson University in Toronto. The symposium generated dynamic and novel theories and approaches to the understanding of multimodal Modernism through the lens of the Stettheimers' work. Amid this flourish of ideas, the concept for the book was born and expanded to include international contributions. Beyond offering a variety of methods and insights, these essays also cross-reference and inform one another throughout, emulating the interactivity of a salon where guests come and go, and ideas are tested and expanded from one soirée to the next. Mostly, this book hopes to convey a sense of the Stettheimer salon as a fertile site of the in-between, while addressing an important gap in the study of female modernist artists, especially those who have long been neglected in part *because* of the multimodality of their practices. Collectively we argue that these works must be brought to the foreground for a new twenty-first-century audience who, through its engagement with digital media, is literate in the multimodal approach promoted by the Stettheimers. Before we introduce the essays themselves, a few words on the terminology and methodological frameworks that propel this collection are required.

#### MULTIMODALITY AND MEDIA CONVERGENCE

To understand the modernity of the Stettheimers' multimodal art experimentation, it is important to note that the field of multimodality itself has been under-researched, especially in the Anglo-American context. As Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen argue, up until the twenty-first century, monomodality dominated the theorizing of cultural expression in the Western world, with each distinct medium ratified with its own



specialized language.<sup>3</sup> Monomodal analysis means looking at dance as the speciality of the choreographer, at painting as the expertise of the visual artist, and music as the domain of the composer. In contrast, as Kress and van Leeuwen show in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996), multimodal approaches consider all three equally, and in an integrated fashion. Expanding their approach in *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* (2001), Kress and van Leeuwen further suggest that multimodal texts should be analyzed on their own terms, recognizing that they operate in more than just one semiotic code simultaneously. This analysis, therefore, must consider two major codes of integration.<sup>4</sup> The first is the code of *spatial composition*, which studies elements that are co-present and interact with each other spatially. The second code concerns *temporal composition*, which unfolds over time and is found in dance, music, and speech, whereby elements of rhythm present the integrative mode.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the semiological approach to multimodality, we are concerned with cultural concepts of intermediality as a space of the in-between.<sup>6</sup> More than a juxtaposition of media, intermediality describes the convergence of media and the cross-effects among them, or, as Juergen Mueller theorizes it: "Intermediality does not mean an adding of different medial concepts nor a situating-in-between-media of separate works, but an integration of aesthetic concepts of separate media in a new medial context."<sup>7</sup> Thus the focus of this book is a spectrum of interactions between and among aesthetic media such as painting, poetry and prose, music, performance, design, and animation. Inevitably, this kind of artmaking highlights the materiality of media, while prompting questions that also reflect the interdisciplinary concerns of performance studies:

To what extent does the salon present an ephemeral live presence that is being translated through more permanent media (and materials) such as painting (canvas), literature (paper), and design (textiles, furniture)? Does communal subjectivity replace the politics of selfhood with the salon's art production, as Stephen Voyce has suggested?<sup>8</sup> These and other questions are addressed in the essays collected here, with an attempt to advance the expanding field of Modernism and modernity, which themselves require a brief introduction.

#### MODERNISM AND MODERNITY

Marshall Berman sees the shifting experience of temporality and identity as a constitutive element of Modernism. He writes: "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are."<sup>9</sup> Leo Charney describes the hallmark of modernity as a "drift": the experience of being unable to locate a stable sense of the present.<sup>10</sup> Many scholars have also theorized the body in Modernism, addressing somatic considerations that remind us that the Stettheimers were active during a period that witnessed the rise of expressionistic dance, performance, physical education movements, and athletics as spectacle, including the growing popularity of boxing and bodybuilding. Furthermore, scholarship on gender and Modernism has long sought to dismantle the codes of a patriarchal hegemony that governed, among other things, cultural production, exchange, and value.

Within this socio-cultural context of Modernism, earlier scholarship has recognized Florine Stettheimer and her sisters for several innovations. A first subfield is historically revisionist, seeking to reclaim the Stettheimers' contributions where they

have been overlooked or misattributed. Barbara Bloemink's book *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer* (1995) has positioned Stettheimer's contributions to art history, insisting on her sophisticated practice and technical innovation.<sup>11</sup> In *New York Dada, 1915–23* (1994), Francis M. Naumann, co-editor of Duchamp's correspondence, which includes letters to the three Stettheimer sisters, documents the sisters' role on the periphery of the New York Dada movement,<sup>12</sup> while others, most recently New York curator Stephen Brown, have highlighted Florine's roots in Symbolism.<sup>13</sup> A second subfield has highlighted the social and institutional context of the Stettheimers' collaborative artmaking in ways that question traditional concepts of authorship. The salon itself, as Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun argue, is a laboratory for the new, a generative context for the emergence of boundary-defying forms of expression, including the Stettheimer sisters' subversively campy and queered gender perspective, which anticipates twenty-first-century sensibilities.<sup>14</sup> Noting Florine's sharp satiric critique of her social milieu, Linda Nochlin argues that Stettheimer's camp is not depoliticized or disengaged but enacts the inherent subversiveness of camp by staging a self-mocking sensibility that Nochlin sees as a modern revolution against strictures imposed equally by old patriarchal systems and new male-centred avant-garde circles.<sup>15</sup>

While engaging this previous scholarship, we argue that the long-lasting contributions made by the Stettheimers lie in fostering sites of an in-between, which ultimately, to apply Mueller's words, "leave their traces in the material itself or the media products, but also in their meanings and in the interactions with their users and recipients."<sup>16</sup> The new scholarship presented here hopes to sensitize and nuance our thinking of multimodality, revealing the sophisticated multimedia strategies used by women who innovated a dynamic, novel, and prescient art practice. This is an

approach we first advanced in our article “Wrapped in Cellophane,”<sup>17</sup> discussing Florine Stettheimer’s consistent integration of poetry and painting, but which requires systematic and comprehensive exploration with respect to our Stettheimer case study. Why does the work of the Stettheimer sisters fascinate us today? What impact have women’s alternative art practices had in liberating female artists or keeping them confined to the home? To what extent can we recuperate the open-ended and ephemeral nature of the salon’s live performance through its documentation? How does temporal displacement of the original live event affect its impact through translation into another medium? Can we recuperate the corporeal of an original dance performance through gestures recorded in painting? And how do the salon dynamics affect the boundaries of media and authorship by encouraging collaboration? What is it exactly that makes the collision of media so fertile and open-ended? These are but some of the questions that are tackled by the international group of authors represented in this collection, including renowned art historians and curators; cultural, literary, and feminist critics; as well as emerging scholars whose work focuses on music, games, and performance.

#### PART ONE: (EN)GENDERING THE ARTIST’S SPACE

Part One emphatically reclaims a space for female artists’ experimental Modernism, reminding us that it has taken roughly 150 years since the birth of all three sisters for their contributions to be recognized in a venue such as this. As feminists who refused to get married, the Stettheimer sisters not only created art that pushed boundaries but lived in defiance of heteronormative patriarchal mores, creating a feminist domesticity that promoted and supported their lives as artists. The volume opens with Barbara Bloemink’s essay “Florine Stettheimer for the

Twenty-First Century: Moving Beyond Marginalization,” revealing the social, gendered, and familial dynamics that have consigned Florine to the shadows for so long but also account for her resurgence today. In contrast to frequent attempts to position Stettheimer as cloistered and unforthcoming about her own work, Bloemink’s evidence focuses on Florine’s very active, yet hitherto under-acknowledged, engagement in exhibiting her work, and on the artist’s bold feminist gaze in her self-representation.

Georgiana Uhlyarik, who curated the exhibition *Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry* at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 2017–18, approaches the artist’s multimodality from a curatorial perspective. In her essay “Florine Stettheimer: Staging Her Emergence as Artist and Woman,” Uhlyarik considers the painter’s unique mode of communication with her audience, as Stettheimer creates a world for herself in her paintings in which viewers are unbidden guests. By scrutinizing the borders of Stettheimer’s paintings and the materiality of her objects, Uhlyarik’s curatorial lens takes us inside Florine Stettheimer’s engagement with space and material culture, showcasing the nuances of performing the self for and through an audience.

In their essay “Configuring a Feminist Sisterhood: The Case of Ettie’s Memorializing,” Irene Gammel and Chelsea Olsen use Jacques Derrida’s notion of the archive as a threshold space between private and public, history and life, to conceptualize the salon as a site of the in-between, an archive in which live performance is translated into paintings, literature, interior design, and miniature modelling. *Ettie’s Memorial Volume* (1951) is a starting point for conceptualizing the Stettheimer home as a space of artful documenting, archiving, and memorializing. Fuelled by Ettie’s intense desire to keep the family narrative cohesive, the resulting archive we have today must

also be considered in light of Ettie's less-than-neutral editorial and censoring pen.

Epistolary exchanges were an important medium of communication in salon culture: surviving letters illuminate the sisters' salon practices and their art discussions. Zachary McCann-Armitage makes these the focal point of his essay "Very affectionately to all three of you': The Duchamp-Stettheimer Correspondence," exploring the artful play of Duchamp's correspondences with the three sisters, most notably Ettie. By contemplating the play of conversational reciprocity, McCann-Armitage establishes the epistolary genre as a dynamic and fertile site of the in-between.