

A History of Mark Making. What is Drawing?

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Drawing is a strange aspect of art although it can be a medium it is not as easily quantifiable as a practice like say painting, Petherbridge interestingly sums up that “Drawing is both itself and more than itself. Drawing is an independent practice but it is also identified within painting, printmaking, sculpture, architecture and design.” (Deanna Petherbridge, 2010). This presents us with a semantic problem that blocks us from pinning down any succinct definition of drawing, pointing instead to more of an abstract understanding of what we can recognise as drawings and instead encourages us to not worry about the classification of drawings. Allowing us to look at how they are valued in both monetary and qualitative terms historically and in a contemporary context. One of the more interesting articles written on drawing, by Karen Kurczynski, sums up drawings qualities as “The more minimal, delicate, and ephemeral, the more poetic and evocative it is. The more obsessive, the more expressive it is. The more monumental, the more paradoxical and contemporary it is.” (Kurczynski, 2011).

Though it begs the question how does this translate into other mediums when talking about drawing, it's fair to say here that Kurczynski is talking about the more conventional notion of pencil/charcoal on paper but we've already established drawing is identifiable in many other mediums/practices however in what ways do we talk about mark making then? For instance Do we remove the medium element and consider the purely performative act of mark making and discuss it as a method of recording. Joan Jonas talks on her experience with drawing via her performances “I was interested in ritual, when I began to do performance I read about other cultures and rituals and observed how drawing functioned as ritual. I experienced drawing in performance as a ritual... It was important that anyone in a particular culture could learn that ritual and make that drawing” (Jonas, 2014). The introduction of drawing as ritual is interesting here, it can be argued that learning to draw is a ritual for any artist, learning to draw from the life model to describe the contours of a form in a 3d space on a 2d plane is something that has fascinated many. But then to consider

performative action as drawing and further more as ritual is a peculiar thought; perhaps claiming that to perform in space is the same to attempt to describe something in space (on a 2d plane) thus bringing to light the almost omniscience of drawing when dealing with 3d forms. But then how do we talk about purely 2d forms of mark making? In a way drawing is the closest 'thing' to an original idea, in the sense that a line or mark can be deposited onto a page either consciously and with a deliberateness or completely unconsciously and be edited indefinitely or left completely 'barebones' as it were and this freedom of medium/subject is what makes drawing such an accessible but also complex medium. It opens a whole host of avenues to pursue in terms of identifying, quantifying and also practicing drawing and its potential in "expressing the ephemerality of all life, today" (Kurczynski, 2011)

The most simple form of drawing is line drawing or so Michael Craig-Martin states in the foreword of his book *Drawing*. There is definite truth in that statement in regards to figuration, a simple outline of an object can easily be recognised and there's an interesting statement in the afore mentioned book about line drawing that reads.

Line drawing permits and conveys the most precise sense of accuracy of any kind of drawing. The facts are laid bare with nothing fudged or obscured. The irony is that line drawing shares less with its subjects than any other method of drawing. There are planes, shadows and colours in the objects i draw, but no lines. The lines in my drawings are entirely invented. Line drawing consists of pure artifice. (Michael Craig-Martin, 2014)

Artifice is an apt word to describe drawing, especially in terms of figuration. The pretence of drawing is to convince the eye that what it is viewing is a 3d form not a flat one via the application of drawing techniques for example foreshortening. However this is only true when looking at figurative drawing the rules begin to blur when an artist leaves the figurative realm and works in the abstract. However that isn't to say that all rules are left behind when one works abstractly it is down to the artists discretion to question which rules to apply and which ones to break.

Mehretu's work on first glance strike the viewer as abstract collisions of hundreds of lines and colours when in fact upon closer inspection they are the superimposition of expressive mark making over technical drawings, graffiti and architectural markings which collide and clash coming together to create something other than entirely expressive or entirely factual. Mehretu speaks on this saying

There's a social element and political element that's unavoidably tied into that form, and architecture especially because it's the built environment that we have built over time with very many layers of social and political thought. Yet in here it's the opposite of physical form, you can see through everything. It becomes atomised and becomes these little parts and they fuse with the marks and become something else and so in a way you think you have a memory of this space as urban dwellers all know (Mehretu, 2015)

so in her endeavour to marry together the hard hitting structural diagrams and evocative mark making and use of colour she breaks down the physicality of both, literally in terms of architecture and more profoundly in the terms of the performativity of mark making, in order to at once delve into the man made divisive nature of the city but also to strip that back and look into more socio-political issues facing us whether that be a break or crack in the culture of a city/community due to an event or the modern issues we face today in terms of connecting with other humans physically and emotionally. It is interesting how much mark-making is able to accomplish through the architectural drawings which set Mehretu up to perform (perhaps a ritual?) a mixture of expressions and marks upon. The interference of the signified is a key aspect in her work however her recent work in the 2019 Venice Biennale seemed to stray away from this venturing more into the realm of pure abstraction. Clark wrote on her work in 2005 saying "When Mehretu maps the world it is an eddying ocean of signs, spaces and structures, as formless and shifting as a billowing cloud... an appropriate figure perhaps for the fluidity, mutability and violence of our planet, from the trauma and wreckage of our cumulative history." (Clark, 2005) this work still retains the architectural element but the remark about the work being "formless and shifting as a billowing cloud" the statement remains pertinent to her recent work as the surfaces explore pure abstract mark making only the briefest hints of anything structural remains and the

discussion moves towards the relations made between marks purely on the canvas.

Mehretu mentions her use of mark making as a language in an interview on her mural 'Cairo'.

The huge painting [Cairo] has a very different use and approach with the specificity of the language. And then Mural has a totally different use of the language and role as a painting. So Mural is not anything like a big painting made bigger and the big paintings are not anything like the smaller paintings only made big. The small paintings are not even a corner or section of a big painting. They are their own process and their own way of thinking and their own cosmology. They participate in the larger discourse and conversation with the other works but the language can be and operates as something completely other (Mehretu, 2014)

There is an innate interest in scale in her work and how the transition from small to large and vice versa isn't necessarily straight forward. Instead she argues that large marks communicate differently than small marks. Not in terms of importance or relevance but in terms of the mechanics of mark making. Think about the application of a 2 inch mark in comparison to a 2 metre mark, the act of placement is far more laborious in the latter which becomes relevant to the discussion on mark making as a language. It starts to open up the term beyond just the mark made and looks into the process of making the mark and how human touch is translated at different scales. This is a key point to draw upon when pondering the classification of drawings and its application and presence within art as a whole. An interesting artist to draw a parallel with here is Bridget Riley who's meticulous works manipulate line and form to create optical illusion.

Riley studied intensively at Goldsmiths' college before moving on to the Royal College and drawing had been taught as a crucial fundamental. In an essay she wrote, when discussing drawing, that "if the model is standing, the first thing your drawing must do is to give the sense of standing and the distribution of weight, long before you pay any attention to a single aspect" (Riley, 1988). It's interesting to apply this thought to both Riley's and Mehretu's practice and question whether the rules learnt in the life room, from the model, can be applied to their abstract practices. Riley talks on this saying her "practice is rooted

in my experience of drawing from the nude and from nature. But i found it could be moved across surprisingly easily to the elements of abstract painting, centring as it does on enquiry and what happens down there on the paper” (Riley, 1999). We touched on the notion of translating 3D forms onto 2D planes and to do so requires a trained eye and understanding of perception however when dealing with the abstract the translation becomes less direct and more between the gestures made by the artist and the balance, or lack thereof, of the marks/gestures on the surface. It becomes about the 2d marks and their relation to each other as opposed to the relation between drawing and form. Obviously Mehretu bridges that gap with the architectural drawings but her most recent work that lacks that anchor to the figurative realm explores these two dimensional relationships and the building of an internal structure within the pictorial plane. Riley’s work does something similar in regards to relationship between forms in that she manipulates line to trick the eye into believing it is seeing movement in a still image. The understanding of form is crucial within her practice to be able to manipulate shapes and line is the very essence of her work hence why the transition from figuration to abstraction came rather fluidly for her as she still plays by the same rules in a sense. However her work differs rather vastly from Mehretu’s for example there’s a performative element within Mehretu’s work that is absent within Riley’s instead it feels more meditative more reliant on the intricacies of the 2D surface less on each individual marks relation to another. However they are both interested in the idea’s of drawing and surface, both challenge forms and perspective each in a wholly unique way arguably challenging while using the rules of figuration to inform their abstract pieces and practice.

The notion of challenging form and perspective is a convenient segue into the next artist who’s work relates to drawing in a rather unconventional way. Richard Long specially his *Line Made by Walking* the piece was made by Long in 1967 and consisted of Long walking back and forth through a patch of grass until an impression was left, a mark made. He then documented it through a black and white photograph. Fuchs discusses this piece saying “it has a different quality: it is very much about laying down a perfect, controlled and yet vibrant form, intimate but without real scale” (Fuchs, 1986) the concept of laying down a “perfect form” is certainly present in Long’s practice with circles, lines and spirals forming

the majority of his body of work. However it's interesting how the material he's working with opens up the possibility of 'perfection'. For example would a straight line drawn on paper be considered perfect, probably not. Yet through removing all other mediums and only leaving himself and the earth remaining Long manages to accomplish a harmony between form and mark making. Fuchs says that the piece is without real scale yet the piece is made with and by the human form which we can use to inform the sense of scale. As argued by Vitruvius the body is strongly linked to the ideas of perfect geometry perhaps opening up a discussion on Long's method of mark making. There's a long studied and implanted connection between the human form and architecture but a lesser discussed one in parallel to the earth. In terms of scale the human form is minuscule in comparison to the earth there's not a comparison possible in term of how small a mark the human form can really make on the global scale however in terms of scale in reference to the body Long's work has an "ability to range between small and large, nearness and distance, past and presence" (D'offay 1988) which he challenges by creating forms by walking. An interesting practice of his is to choose a starting point and an end point and then proceed to walk regardless of distance, then at the end of the walk display the line walked and the time taken. This is a wholly unique way of drawing while perhaps the act of mark making is lost in the presentation of the line (he of course creates pieces and makes marks as he is in the process of walking) but the line having been created and mapped out by Long's conscious choice of path is reminiscent again of the act of drawing from the model. Based heavily in the 3rd dimension the 2d representation depends on a figurative element (himself as the model in this case) and understanding to begin to have real weight. For instance if the line hadn't really been walked and didn't have the documented series behind it to give 'body' it would merely be the start of an idea, a glimpse of a possibility. But in actually walking it, the line is given a significance of sorts through that it has been traversed by a figure. What's worth noting about the majority of Long's work is the inherent ephemerality of his way of mark making and how photography plays a role in revealing his work in a gallery setting. D'Offay brought up the issue of scale and photography does actually trick us slightly with the foreshortening on a flat plane. However it's necessary otherwise the work would never be seen which exposes a precarious time element within Long's work in that his work will

only exist for a short amount of time but also that he suspends that time through photography. However how does time affect and make itself known within drawing?

Long utilises photography to circumvent the entropic nature of his work whereas Roger Ackling uses time as an active participant to make his work. By utilising a magnifying glass he intensifies the sun's rays and uses that to burn a line into a surface, allowing the setting sun to dictate the length of the line. There's an interesting perspective granted by the use of time. It's a completely invisible factor made tangible via a process that makes itself vulnerable to elements beyond one's control, which is arguably similar to Jonas' who we mentioned earlier. There is a parallel in the ephemerality of the performance but permanence within the documentation, which is an interesting parallel to the ephemerality of time and light and the permanence of a burnt line. Drawing is quite a poetic thing always present, not always consciously at the time of making or even at the time of display; but it's notable how drawing is identifiable within these two vastly different practices and how it links to the ephemeral. On Ackling's work in particular the implementation of a unique, perhaps complex, medium benefits from the vastness of drawing which allows the medium to be more clearly and carefully examined. The use of clean simple lines speaks more about the medium than it does about the drawing but opens up the possibilities of mark making once again. By physically burning the marks into card the mark becomes almost like a wound rather than a drawn line and impacts the actual surface in a way other mediums wouldn't usually. So how does a mark embedded in a surface differentiate from a mark that sits upon a surface? It's an interesting dynamic not often discussed in many other mediums yet there is a definite exploratory language, similar to how Mehretu explores how scale affects the language of the mark. The presence of grooves or gouges in a piece is arguably inherently violent. It's technically a process of destruction however "Using this ritualistic and repetitive process Ackling burnt into his pieces an imprint of real time often keeping note of the exact time and duration taken to complete the work." (annelyjudafineart, 2008) which instead points away from something violent per se but instead something more meditative. Which in turn brings us back to Long whose work is also incredibly meditative. A noticeable correlation between utilising ephemeral mediums to 'draw' with and leave lasting marks in surfaces can be found throughout their work which perhaps points to the aforementioned

omniscience of drawing in artistic practice. These few artists use arguably the bare minimum to create, Long being subject to what he finds, Jonas subject to the body and Ackling to light, none of these would be considered drawing mediums yet through drawing they are able to address larger issues perhaps through the primacy of it or vice versa through the study of how medium and time are connected. The polarities that can be identified within drawing are what make it such a valuable asset to artists, whether they be a painter, drawer, performance artist etc the relevancy of drawing and looking will remain pertinent and so a strong understanding (not necessarily a traditional one though) of drawing and line and forms will always be of benefit.

Walking is obviously a main talking point when discussing Long but also brings another artist to mind, Giacometti whose sculptures explore the figure in space. Up to this point in the essay the forms explored within other artists work haven't been as sophisticated as the human form (arguably Jonas' work is, but it is dictated through a lens not through human touch) so the idea's we have used to address drawing have been subject to simple lines and shapes. Giacometti was famously entranced by the art of drawing from a young age he drew from life yet in interviews much later in his life he confessed in interview with David Sylvester that when trying to draw a table cloth on a round table that "the more i tried, the more difficult it would become."

(Stooss and Elliot 1996) which is intriguing in that hanging cloth has been a subject for life drawing for almost as long as the figure. So what exactly did Giacometti struggle with? One can see from his early portraiture work in the 20's that he could grapple with form and convincingly portray figures yet 40 years later he found drawing only getting more and more difficult. The answer lies in figuring out what exactly Giacometti was aiming to portray. An excerpt of text by James Lord who famously sat for Giacometti explains "his drawing was sculptural, the marks of the pencil appearing to carve and model spatial relationships very much as a sculptor would work with clay" (Stooss and Elliot 1996) an interesting notion on the idea of depicting what one can see on paper. He argues rather than depict lines and contours he could see, Giacometti instead focused in on the relationships between forms and the space between them. Sculpting is interesting when thinking about spatial relationships as the object being formed begins to establish its own spatial relationship

between itself and the sculptor and furthermore with the space wherein it exists. It's obvious looking at Giacometti's walking figures that there's an interest in the human form. Less the accurate depiction of it, more the pursuit of the essence of said form. His figures range in scale from less than a foot to over 7ft often depicted walking, while the actual model looks as though it has been whittled away until no more material could be removed. The skeletal like forms hold strong compositional forms with a particular focus on the vertical. For instance his sculpture '*Annette IV*' of his wife Annette is depicted walking as if frozen mid-step and as she takes a step forward her back leg lines up with her spine creating this long, slightly angled line leading from the heel to the neck. An interesting gateway into seeing what Giacometti himself saw and sought to convey as it reveals a lot about the relationships between the figure and its surroundings. It's as though Giacometti wanted to fit as much 'space' into the figure as possible without it feeling as though it's encroaching or overthrowing the stability of the figure. His paintings also reveal a lot about his practice and fascination with drawing and his methodical ways of working.

His Painting of James Lord is a good example of his painting style consisting of both swathes of paint and lots of linear marks to delineate the forms and angles of the face. But again this isn't an attempt to portray how Lord looks its about what Giacometti sees. He was never fully satisfied with his painting of Lord reworking the principle elements for weeks and ultimately stating that portraiture no longer had meaning as the photograph had replaced it. Yet he still endeavoured to draw and paint portraits, which begs the question what was he trying to paint really? Perhaps pure sensation or the emptiness of space or the volume of a space. The answer is something beyond perception which leads us back to drawing again. Like the other artists mentioned in this essay Giacometti is wrestling with something imperceptible but he does so within the realms of figuration and breaks the rules in an attempt to capture that something. The background in the portrait of Lord bleeds into the monotony of the face allowing the space to whittle away at the figure, much like his sculptures, while the sharp marks of the face give a preciseness or deliberateness and urgency which fights back the invading space. Perhaps giving physical presence to that idea of the imperceptible. The role drawing plays in Giacometti's work is one that couldn't be played without a ridiculously strong understanding of traditional methods of drawings

and being able to transcend beyond just portraying a figure or form and addressing the realms of human perception and the paradoxes identifiable within drawing.

An artist who was present around the same time as Giacometti was Constantin Brancusi who together with a handful of other artists revolutionised the art scene and brought upon the modernist era. His practice is interesting to follow in term of evolution and where his medium lead him. To Brancusi much like Giacometti the concept of being real was more than just looking like nature, both the artists challenged this concept in a pursuit of something beyond perception, and both did so with drawing. Brancusi's notorious *Bird in Space* was particularly controversial in his time as the concept of abstract or non-representational art was still new to the masses. Brancusi wrote that "My birds are a series of different objects based on a central theme that remains the same throughout. The ideal of it's realisation was to be an amplification to fill the whole vault of heaven" (Brancusi 1936 cited in Radu Varia 1986) a grand statement, however earnestly chased by Brancusi and arguably achieved. However beyond that the interesting aspect (in terms of drawing) of *Bird in Space* is the notion of portraying movement or a gesture as a static form or as its own unique figure. To draw an interesting parallel the actual form of *Bird in Space* could be, if scrutinised hard enough, be found within one of Mehretu's works as a 2D mark and these artists are separated by almost a century and yet still, non representational mark making and forms still find relevancy today. Which speaks of drawings inherent link to the human condition and existence and how it has this universal language that can be employed at any individuals will. Carrying on from this Brancusi's *Endless column* can be read as a direct gesture within the 3D realm. Much like a scar or gouge or an elevated mark on a surface *Endless column* interferes with it's surface. That surface being human perception. To elaborate, it can be said that a mark interferes with a 2d surface much like *Endless column* interferes with a 3D realm just with a different set of rules. For instance it changes as we move around it, you can't move around a 2D surface or mark in the same way. To begin to consider 3D forms as drawings opens up a large realm of possibility which we addressed early on with Joan Jonas.

Jonas' relationship to drawing is interesting, although primarily coined as a performance artist her works contain many drawings and she often turns the act of drawing into performance as well. However she goes further into the concepts of drawing and identifies it within her performances as a method of punctuation. Jonas mentions when discussing her original interest in performance that:

My concerns were mainly visual, involving issues of space and how to alter it for the viewer. I was inspired by various rituals and ways of dealing with iconography- for example, the Minoans, early Renaissance painting, magic shows, early French films, the circus, dances of the Hopi I saw in New Mexico, and the Noh theatre I saw in Japan." (Jonas 1990 cited in Hall/Fifer 1990)

It's interesting that even then Jonas was concerned with space and how to portray it to the viewer with such a direct medium. It's the same task Giacometti took upon to portray perception of a figure or space and challenge it but with a much more contemporary lesser explored medium so it came with its own language and possibility. For instance Jonas uses drawing as a direct technique within her videos and so the act itself becomes performance which is again just another form of drawing so in fact she manages to meld together several different languages. The act of moving through space is inherently linked to drawing, it's just that more traditionally it's been about being able to draw said movement, like Degas for example, whereas more contemporary artists tackle drawing and challenge it with a plethora of mediums performance included and by utilising video Jonas is able to record that movement the same way Da Vinci could record a figure on paper. If we consider video as we would a pencil drawing it becomes interesting how much more aware we are of a simple movement of the arm or leg and how poetic the medium truly is and how closely linked performance and drawing are.

Michaela Zimmer is a contemporary artist interested in the shared elements of drawing and performing and breaks down the barriers between the two by constructing/establishing a space wherein everything is dictated by her body and her movements yet revolves around a 2D plane. Zimmer works on both canvas and paper and employs several other mediums in her process. In an article written on Zimmer Savage notes that "it is apparent that her works

are constantly investigating the different possibilities of the spatial conditions we move in, and the images we create of these.” (Kim Savage 2016 cited on Michaela Zimmer artist website) once again the question of space is brought up and how we inhabit it and how the artist portrays it and channels it. Zimmer establishes her body as a framework/medium of distance and for the potential of mark making, rooting herself in front of a surface and allowing her reach to dictate how far a mark can go or what path it can take. By restricting herself in this way she opens up a pathway to understanding both perhaps the limitations of space but also how we are intrinsically linked to that space, exploring both, via the use of mark making. Similar to Jonas and Giacometti but interested in the primacy of lines and marks as a transitional language for herself which then when viewed superimposes the viewer into the space she occupied as the artist. Perhaps inviting us to stand where she stood and contemplate how a mark was made or instead communicate how even though the piece now inhabits a different space the original space of the artist exists within the surface. She furthers this exploration by utilising sheets of thin plastic that are drooped over canvases to challenge how the space recorded on the canvas is interfered with by the reflective sheen of the plastic which connects to the 3D space we occupy as viewers of a piece. It’s interesting how as disparate as the artists in this essay are there seems to be an inherent interest in space and the politics, history, elusiveness and our occupation of it runs throughout and how each artist has used drawing as a tool to grapple with the imperceptible. Surprisingly a similar process is notable throughout history within cave drawings, where early humans would chew up pigments place their hand on the wall and use it as a silhouette to apply the pigment around. Without the same level of perhaps Zimmer these early humans were expressing their experience of space, that being their relationship with the direct environment, via mark making very much like Zimmer does. Drawing seems to have a quality of being able to transcend the zeitgeist or time and many artists draw upon that to express ideas on space, existence and our relationship with them. However that is the greater relevancy of drawing as this unclassifiable medium that seems to leak into many other practices.

What is drawing is the question posed at the beginning of this essay and while there can be many interpretations there can’t be one all-encompassing, ‘correct’, definition. However to

reflect upon the musings of this essay and the artists utilised in the identifying of drawing's omniscience it can be argued that drawing is perhaps the most elusive term in the arts. While it can mean just that, drawing a line, the concept can be seen to be far more abstract than traditional methods. The identification of forms and contours in the 3d space translated onto paper is of course drawing. However so is a line made completely devoid of any relation to a 3D form, so is a performance in space, recorded or not. Even sculpture plays with the notion of drawing and defining forms, drawing is not impeded by dimension it exists in both. The act of mark making is possible on all planes and dimensions it transcends past these other mediums and leaks into them as well. It can even be argued drawing makes its way into mediums not strongly related to the visual arts Bachelard introduces an interesting idea when discussing the 'poetic image'

The poetic image is not subject to an inner thrust. It is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at which depth these echoes will reverberate and die (Bachelard 1964)

Bachelard argues that the poetic image an author or poet can 'draw' or evoke through text has the power to evoke memory and fill the space of the rememberable past. Drawing upon one's own, as well as playing to the reader's own, memories and knowledge to depict a space is the task of an author but much like the task of the artists in this essay to merely depict is not enough you must explore and push the space within the piece to truly achieve a notion of perceiving a space.

The act of drawing was always about portraying a space as it is seen, however the notion of perception perhaps became the endeavour after the appearance of the camera which replaced the need of painting and drawings and sculptures to depict things naturally. And from the modernists it can be argued the art world opened up to this idea of perception and a grander way of depicting space. Drawing is the first step in beginning to understand space as well as the means of portraying and exploring it. It becomes more and more about the artist the deeper one tries to depict perception as we are all locked within our own.

Giacometti's portraits can be seen to be more revealing of his own character than of his sitters and that is arguably the task of drawing. Drawing what you see.

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