

## **The Dirty Knowingness of Drawing**

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From November 2010 to February, 2011 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York mounted the exhibition 'On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century,' curated by Cornelia Butler, Chief Curator of Drawings, and Catherine de Zegher, former Director of The Drawing Center in New York.

The show's catalog begins with a definition of drawing as gesture, as "the formation of a line by moving some tracing tool from point to point on a surface,"<sup>1</sup> and takes Kandinsky's interpretation of line as its point of departure.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition, intended to be a survey of drawing of the past 100 years, is organized along this trajectory, with the stated purpose of "writ[ing] a new chronology of a period" and reflecting the "desire of the curators to invigorate the discourse around drawing through an investigation of line and its history."<sup>3</sup> To summarize: if drawing equals line, then the history of drawing must equal the history of line.

The exhibition is talking about line—a feature inherent not just to drawing, but all forms of art. Through this organizing thread of line, de Zegher and Butler remain in a safe zone, pledging allegiance to concepts of art history not entirely borne out by the multifarious developments in artistic practice, particularly in the past twenty years. They

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine de Zegher, "A Century Under the Sign of Line: Drawing and Its Extension (1910-2010)," in *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Frankel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 24.

<sup>2</sup> The catalog begins with a Kandinsky quote from his "On Line," 1919 publication

<sup>3</sup> Glenn D. Lowry, "Director's Forward," in *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Frankel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010) 6.

are not discussing the total history of drawing within the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rather the use of line in a selection of drawings from 1910, and subsequently creating an exhibition which stems from and supports the bias of the preeminent institution of the history of modernism – the MoMA.

Others have pointed this out as well. Prominent *New York Times* critic, Roberta Smith, points this out in not one, but two articles. In November 2010 she stated: “[‘On Line’] is... a self-identified attempt to rewrite Modernism by widening drawing beyond what the show’s curators call ‘institutional definitions of the medium.’”<sup>4</sup> And then in January 2011: “This is an institution, after all, that as much as ever wants to end up on the right side of history... In other words, ‘On Line’ once more traces what seems to be becoming the Modern’s sacred text: the ‘dematerialization of the art object; set in motion by Conceptual Art and its derivatives, Process Art, earth works and performance.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker*, states, “‘On Line’ invites caricature—its story of modern art, as an argosy of brainy novelties, is that extreme.”<sup>6</sup>

However, it is important to note that not everyone felt that way. There was plenty of praise bestowed, and even within the very same sources, such as the *New York Times*. Holland Cotter embraces the thematic approach of a history of drawing as line, and praises Butler and de Zegher for their choices, saying “discretion can have advantages.”<sup>7</sup> He takes it even further, stating Butler and de Zegher have “done what curators should

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<sup>4</sup> Roberta Smith, “The Week Ahead: Nov 21-27,” *The New York Times*, 19 November, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Roberta Smith, “Hold that Obit; MoMA’s Not Dead,” *The New York Times*, 2 January, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, “Between the Lines; What has Become of Drawing?” *The New Yorker*, 29 November, 2010; Vol. 86; 84.

<sup>7</sup> Holland Cotter, “Squiggly, Tangly and Angular,” *The New York Times*, 2 December, 2010.

do. They've dug deep into near-at-hand sources and pulled out little-seen material (most of the show is from MoMA's collection)."<sup>8</sup>

The danger is "to work, a survey show requires the imposition of a strong curatorial narrative, which risks fetishizing categories and cornering works. The remaining difficulty is that by its nature, a survey show tends to imply that the story is now told."<sup>9</sup> And when pulling together a survey show on a topic like drawing, you're no doubt going to give some areas of practice short shrift. As artist and editor of the recent Black Dog Publishing drawing survey, *The Drawing Book*, Tania Kovats states, "To create a context for drawing is to accept standing before an avalanche and knowing you only have a small box to put your rock samples in."<sup>10</sup>

But the consequences in this instance are high, and 'On Line' side-steps the central issue of why MoMA elected to mount such an exhibition in the first place: Why, in the last twenty years, have we –artists, curators, collectors, historians, academics, critics, and enthusiasts - embraced drawing with new (or is it renewed?) intensity and affection? Why have we argued for—and do we continue to argue for—a level of respect once reserved only for more 'sophisticated' forms of art? What set this most recent wave of interest in drawing in motion, a groundswell that has demanded the attention of the art world, and compelled an institution of MoMA's prominence to mount a survey exhibition

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Siun Hanrahan, "Review: Drawing Is a Verb. Drawing is a Noun. The Square Root of Drawing. Getting on Mother's Nerves – Psychological Drama in Contemporary Drawing", *Circa* No. 119 (Spring 2007): 62-65.

<sup>10</sup> Tania Kovats, "Traces of Thought and Intimacy", in *The Drawing Book: A Survey of Drawing, the Primary Means of Expression*, ed. Tania Kovats (London: Black Dog, 2005), 11.

of this magnitude to get the story right, primed and ready to be canonized in the text books of art history for the future? What has changed that both artists and audiences embrace with joy the same qualities inherent in drawings which once condemned them to secondary status as incomplete and unfinished, merely preliminary musings to superior forms of art?

MoMA gets snowed under by an avalanche of its own historical baggage. Digging through its own archive, and presenting only those drawings that extend the linear narrative of the history of modernism, they've ignored discussions that are most relevant, and let's be honest, most interesting, within the discourse on drawing today. The exhibition does not "invigorate" the discussion; rather it presents evidence for a story that much of contemporary drawing has begun to disavow.

I began with a discussion of the MoMA's exhibit because of it being both the most recent, and most lofty in its objective to chronicle and define drawing from 1910 through to the present. It serves as testament that questions surrounding drawing's status as an autonomous medium have, over the past 20 and some argue 30 years, been answered definitively, and affirmatively.

And the evidence is corroborated at every level: many international exhibitions have been mounted within the past 20 years devoted solely to drawing, such as the aforementioned 'On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century', MoMA, NY 2010-2011; 'The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing', a Hayward Touring exhibition, 2009-2010; 'Transforming Chronologies,' NY MoMA 2006; 'The Stage of Drawing: Gesture

and Act,' Tate International Programme Exhibition 2003; 'Drawing Now: Eight Propositions,' MoMA Queens, NY 2002; 'The Primacy of Drawing: An Artist's Perspective', a Tate Traveling Show, 1991, and 'Allegories of Modernism,' MoMA, NY 1992, to name just a few.

There are numerous and prominent artists whose medium of choice is drawing, or proclaim its centrality to their practice, such as Paul Noble, Richard Crotty, Michael Landy, Lucy Skaer, Kate Davis, Tania Kovats and Peggy Preheim amongst others.

In the past decade alone, books like *Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art*,<sup>11</sup> *The Drawing Book: A Survey of Drawing*,<sup>12</sup> and *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing(Themes)*<sup>13</sup> have been published in effort to take the pulse of the burgeoning number of artists for whom drawing of some definition is central to their practice. And not only major books but academic journals devoted to drawing have been created, like the online journal TRACEY, from the University of Loughborough.

Autonomous drawing programs at the Masters level have been created as well, such as the Wimbledon College of Art MA Drawing program, and it's Centre for Drawing Research, as well as the newly-affiliated Jerwood Drawing Prize.

Even support through commercial galleries exhibiting and selling the work of artists who choose drawing-based mediums has risen, and the formation of institutions

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<sup>11</sup> Simon Downs and Russell Marshall, Phil Sawdon, Andrew Selby and Jan Tormey, eds. *Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art*. London: I.B. Tauras & Co. Ltd, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Tania Kovats. "Traces of Thought and Intimacy", in *The Drawing Book: A Survey of Drawing, the Primary Means of Expression*. Ed. Tania Kovats. London: Black Dog, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Emma Dexter. *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing (Themes)*. London: Phaidon Press, 2005.

solely devoted to drawing has multiplied too. Most of these developments have taken place since 1990.

But with all the discussion and support for the creation, dissemination, and selling of drawings, and with all the effort to examine what drawing is, who is asserting the why and how? Why now, and how, and what has changed?

Brian Dillon, in his catalog essay for *The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing* 2009-2010, gives us a summary of the 19<sup>th</sup>—20<sup>th</sup> Century definition and view of drawing, highlighting the theories of John Berger, John Ruskin and Roland Barthes, which argue that inherent to drawing, or to achieve a successful drawing, the artist must reach a place of not-knowing, or “non-mastery”<sup>14</sup>. The ideas of discovery (Berger), innocence (Ruskin), and gaucherie / indolence (Barthes) have shaped our understanding of what a drawing is since the 1800s. This view relies on a perception of drawing’s “pure” quality, unsullied by graphic qualities—those condemnable characteristics of illustration, draftsmanship, ornament, and craft.

Dillon reaffirms this definition of drawing, which sets the stage for conceptual and performance artists to enter in the 1960s and 70s as an extension off the page and into space, essentially the trajectory Butler and de Zegher canonize in the ‘On Line’ catalog. Dillon notes that while conceptual and experimental art take the foreground, drawing recedes in attention from the late 1970s through the early 90s, as the

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Dillon, “On the Elements of Drawing,” in *The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing*, (London: Hayward Publishing, 2009), 8-14.

conventional assumptions of marks on surface, most often paper, are hard to shake.

During those twenty years, traditional figurative drawing was considered a throwback.

But, other than to suggest that many contemporary artists today are subverting the definition of drawing as put forward by Berger, Ruskin, Barthes (and now, “force-fed”<sup>15</sup> to us today from Butler and de Zegher), he hesitates to do more than describe what the attitudes are not. He states:

It is not with the didactic concepts deployed by our three theorists of drawing [Berger, Ruskin, Barthes] that the artists in ‘The End of the Line’ might be said to engage, but with the troublesome elements of drawing that those concepts were meant, in part, to defuse or placate. The artists risk (indeed embrace) the tendency of the drawing towards writing, ornament or caricature. Generic purity is abolished in the way many of the artists blur the lines between graphic design, comics and conceptual practice.

This suggests to me that the definition of drawing, at least for artists, has changed.

Laura Hoptman, then Assistant Curator of Drawings at the MoMA, took a first and somewhat risky stab at this back in 2002 when she mounted the exhibition ‘Drawing Now: Eight Propositions’.

Hoptman takes a bold stance and proclaims drawing is a noun. She even titles her catalog essay “Drawing Is a Noun.”<sup>16</sup> Hoptman pays her dues to MoMA, beginning with a concise summary of the trajectory of the modernist view of drawing as analogous to activity, which subsequently gave birth to the conceptual, environmental and performance drawings of the 1960s and 70s, and ties it up neatly with a reference to Pamela Lee and Cornelia Butler’s extension of the story of modernism, referencing their

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<sup>15</sup> Roberta Smith, “The Week Ahead: Nov 21-27”, *The New York Times*, Nov 19, 2010, regarding ‘On Line,’ states: “But the show may also be an especially full-blown instance of the prevailing curatorial orthodoxy, which favors the ephemeral and the performative over art objects..... The question remains whether we will feel force-fed.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Laura Hoptman, ‘Drawing is a Noun’, in *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, ed. Laura Hoptman (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002) 10.



show at the Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles in 1999, 'After Image: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art'. Hoptman's title in itself is a nod to MoMA's history, reusing the same title from the 1976 show 'Drawing Now' curated by Bernice Rose. It's after this point though, that things get interesting.

"Perhaps, however, this notion of drawing as process should be seen as developing from specific moments in time and taste, rather than as a given,"<sup>17</sup> Hoptman opines. She cites periods in which more finished drawings, not as indicative of their process, were prized, such as in France in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, or 19<sup>th</sup> century England with the popularity of the Pre-Raphaelites. She argues contemporary artists, and particularly the ones exhibited in 'Drawing Now', are making finished and autonomous drawings, examples of what Yve-Alain Bois called "projective,"<sup>18</sup> that "they depict something that has been imagined before it is drawn, as opposed to being found through the process of making".<sup>19</sup>

Hoptman's position stood in unabashedly direct contradiction to what the MoMA continues to proselytize, and it was noticed. Some criticized it as "historically confused"<sup>20</sup>, others as "refreshingly polemical"<sup>21</sup>, and some as "the most ambitious and riskiest show of relatively fresh art organized at the Modern in about 15 years."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* 11.

<sup>18</sup> Yve-Alain Bois. "Matisse and 'Arche-Drawing'" in *Painting as Model*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990) 3-64.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Hoptman, 'Drawing is a Noun', in *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, ed. Laura Hoptman (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002) 12.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Baird, "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions," *Brooklyn Rail*, Winter 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Jerry Saltz, "Good on Paper" *Village Voice*, October 30 – November 5.

<sup>22</sup> Roberta Smith, 'Retreat from the Wild Shores of Abstraction', *The New York Times*, 18 October, 2002.

exhibition precipitated debate and discussion amongst academics and other museums and galleries.

TRACEY, the electronic journal dedicated to contemporary drawing from the University of Loughborough, published its own survey book, *Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art* 2007, in response to Hoptman, arguing against her assertion of drawing as a noun, and firmly asserting it as an activity, or verb, once more.

What's most interesting in TRACEY's book, is the use of some of the very same artists Hoptman included in her exhibition, though effectively waving a different banner, including Elizabeth Peyton and Paul Noble. TRACEY's editors, including Simon Downs, Russell Marshall, Phil Sawdon, Andrew Selby and Jan Tormey, point out the sharp contrast between Hoptman's exhibition, and the one which preceded it by merely 16 years (not such a long time for the MoMA) and focused on the resurgence of gestural, process oriented drawing: 'Allegories of Modernism, Contemporary Drawing', in 1992 organized by Bernice Rose. In counter to Hoptman, they offer that "within the popular imagination at least, associations with drawing have persistently remained with figurative representations—a view that refuses to absorb either of these two exhibitions' assertions,"<sup>23</sup>. The book moves towards encompassing the plethora of drawing practice—from artists who embrace symbolic language and cobble together a shorthand for two dimensional representation, visual slang and slave-to-nature type drawing simultaneously (though, they argue, still subscribe to some type of un-knowingness in their execution), to those like Richard Serra, who whole heartedly champion drawing's affinity to activity.

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<sup>23</sup> Simon Downs, Russell Marshall, Phil Sawdon, Andrew Selby and Jan Tormey, eds. *Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art*. London: I.B. Tauras & Co. Ltd, 2007; p ix.

Indeed, Serra has become the poster boy, cited in most every text on the subject of gesture in drawing as coining the much used slogan, ‘drawing is a verb’ taken from a 1977 interview with Lizzie Borden.<sup>24</sup>

Coincidentally enough, this April through August 2011 the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) is hosting the first retrospective of drawings by Serra, organized by Bernice Rose (whom now works at The Menil Collection, Houston, with its newly established (2008) Drawing Institute and Study Center<sup>25</sup>). The exhibition defines his drawings not only as an activity, but also as an autonomous “art form independent from yet linked to his sculptural practice,”<sup>26</sup> and elevates Serra to status of pioneer for the use of drawing as corporeal experimentation - as a “system of thinking”.<sup>27</sup> The show fits nicely into the modernist trajectory, though what I keep homing in on is the timing of such a drawing exhibition surfacing now. It is 2011, and this is the first major exhibition of Serra’s drawings only. The creation of the exhibition alone seems to attest to the rising interest in, and subsequent concern to nail down what drawings are or are not, and what they can become in the future.

While the Met reflects current discussions by re-defining and elevating the drawing practices of stable artists—drawings once considered less valuable and as playing second fiddle to superior forms now become central, both conceptually (and monetarily) invaluable—other exhibitions at smaller, and more risk-taking institutions

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Serra, interviewed by Lizzie Borden, “About Drawing: An Interview” (1977), in *Richard Serra: Writings, Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 54.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Drawing Institute and Study Center,’ *The Menil Collection* website, <http://www.menil.org/collection/drawinginstitute.php> [accessed April 25, 2011].

<sup>26</sup> ‘Current Exhibitions: Richard Serra Drawing,’ *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* website, [http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se\\_event.asp?OccurrenceId={2C49726E-A17C-428D-A97C-60552A47D829}](http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId={2C49726E-A17C-428D-A97C-60552A47D829}) [accessed April 30, 2011]

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

continue to explored the debate. They opt towards firmly choosing a side for or against views like Hoptman's, or timidly avoid taking a stance, offering soft, topical threads for observing the greater breadth of references and links within drawing today. Title swapping and borrowing continues in one effort to usurp another, as with 'Drawing is a Verb. Drawing is a Noun' at Stone Gallery, Dublin, 2007.

Having considered the bold definition Hoptman asserts and the subsequent debate it precipitated before reading and examining 'On Line,' I was dumbfounded to discover the discussion is virtually omitted from the catalog, less one listing in the preface by Glen Lowry, the Director of the MoMA. Butler and de Zegher do not even include any examples of contemporary figurative or narrative drawing. To find that in their survey you have to look back, way back to the likes of Paul Klee.

How could the same institution that mounted 'Drawing Now: Eight Propositions' just eight years prior, ignore this discussion? It felt particularly disconcerting as Laura Hoptman went on to become one of the most powerful and noteworthy curators of the past decade, moving first to curate the Carnegie International in 2004, and then to the New Museum, and as of October 2010, back to the MoMA as Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture.

Holland Cotter, even in his obsequious review of 'On Line,' has the breadth of vision to reference 2002's 'Drawing Now'. He dismisses it, claiming that it was indicative of a "time when figurative painting was being pushed very hard"<sup>28</sup> and contemporary cartooning enjoyed a, hopefully, fleeting vogue. He felt Hoptman's proposal narrowed the definition of drawing.

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<sup>28</sup> Holland Cotter, "Squiggly, Tangly, and Angular", *The New York Times*, 2 December, 2010.

But I wonder if that interpretation stems from something else—a defensive impulse which surfaces when faced with an uncomfortable, even threatening situation: the recognition that new drawing may be establishing its own vocabulary, and one that moves in and disconcertingly out of the delineated parameters set by modernism and its derivatives. Even more discordant, that drawing by nature has an uncanny potential for subversion through its inherent democratization of medium.

The 2002 ‘Drawing Now’ show featured mostly figurative works, and the drawings relied heavily on those qualities that, as Brian Dillon relays to us, John Berger, Roland Barthes and John Ruskin were so eager to exclude from the high art forms of drawing. They referenced a vernacular language, one that was open and accessible, one that mirrored popular culture and the utilitarian use of drawing. Hoptman did not skirt around this fact, but made this allegiance to illustration and the graphic clear, not only stating as much in her essay, but categorizing the drawings into a taxonomy that essentially lists off qualities of drawings once synonymous with bad drawing: ‘Fashion and Likeness’, ‘Comics and Subcultures’, or spelling it out further ‘Ornament and Crime: Toward Decoration’. It is no wonder why this exhibition doesn’t fit, or rather refuses to fit, into the 2010 survey.

But that still has only to do with what drawing *is*. It doesn’t answer the question of why drawing, and why now?

In 1995, Michael Craig-Martin suggested that the characteristics inherent in drawings from across the ages are amongst those most highly valued in contemporary practice, including “spontaneity, creative speculation, experimentation, directness, simplicity, abbreviation, expressiveness, immediacy, personal vision, technical diversity, modesty of means, rawness, fragmentation, discontinuity, unfinishedness and open-endedness.”<sup>29</sup>

That these qualities can exist in drawing as well as contemporary art seems inarguable, but to suggest that artists, curators, gallerists, collectors, historians and art enthusiasts are able to distill the fashion of contemporary practice, compare it to the intrinsic values of drawing, and make the determination that drawing must therefore be elevated to equal stature of more complex forms seems like an expansion on merely correlative data, and not convincingly conclusive.

For example, Isobel Harbison, Exhibitions Organizer for the Hayward Touring, and Fiona Bradley of the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, point to something else entirely. In a review for the ‘The End of the Line’ Harbison states “The exhibition was planned before the current financial crisis, so I’m not saying these particular artists have responded to the crisis, but I do think now is the perfect time for drawing.”<sup>30</sup> And Bradley, “None of them are in any way using precious materials. It’s just one man and his spray can, or one gal and her pencil. I think the recession has a lot to do with that. It’s not

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Craig-Martin, *Drawing the line, reappraising drawing past and present*, (London: The South Bank Centre, 1995) 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> Isobel Harbison as quoted in Moira Jeffrey’s review, ‘The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing’, *Scotland on Sunday, The Scotsman*, 15 November, 2009.

easy to make big production numbers at the moment, but with drawing it's always possible to do something."<sup>31</sup>

By this way of thinking, Michael Craig-Martin had it right, or at least partially, when he included "modesty of means" in his list of drawing's highly-valued characteristics. For artists in the current recession, subject to the pressures and consciousness of the global environmental crisis for materials, maybe it all boils down to artists' frugality: frugality in the face of the highest cost of artists materials in history; frugality in consumption, perhaps also due to a growing global consciousness? You could extend this further to museums, galleries and collectors as well, looking to cut production costs down, and for that matter, all costs.

Critic Tim Griffin suspected this might be a driving force behind the resurgence of drawing, but pointed more towards the marketability of drawings; that Hoptman promoted them as autonomous "products" acknowledges drawings as a commodity."<sup>32</sup> And with drawings still historically regarded as a second-class medium beneath more sophisticated forms, this commodity might come at an attractively lower price tag. Maintaining a drawing over time might be less arduous too, at least compared to some verb-loving works, as say, cumbersome sculptures by Richard Serra. Why bother with sculptor's monumental pieces of steel when you can alternatively, just put the 'drawer' in the drawer.

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<sup>31</sup> Fiona Bradley as quoted in Neil Cooper's review, 'The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing', *The List*, 29 October, 2009, Issue 643.

<sup>32</sup> Tim Griffin, 'Drawing Now: MoMA Qns, New York' *Art Forum*, January 2003.

Institutions too might find the sheer manageability of drawings appealing, especially in the wake of the great many cuts to arts funding in recent years. The matter of mounting large-scale, public art projects—or ones that take hundreds of assistants—is undoubtedly a feat feeling the pinch, and more and more the financial burden is falling to private investors and galleries alike. With fewer resources at hand - both material and fiscal - and artists, collectors, and institutions subject to an increasingly competitive environment, straining themselves for the same dime, perhaps it is natural that back-to-basics, physically manageable drawings are rising in popularity.

But the economic prosperity and the attendant availability of discretionary funds for the arts has always fluctuated, and is always relative – while one country experiences a recession, another thrives, or another stagnates. Interest in drawing has not always risen in response to a financial recession, or collapse from economic growth. The current hardship being felt in the west may no doubt be a contributing factor, but could the back-to-the-drawing-board attitude be coming from something else?

Attitude is a word that keeps cropping up in the discourse. Most notably, in the aforementioned exhibition catalog, *The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing*, Dillon writes:

An attitude is only metaphorically a phenomenon of consciousness or language, a way of understanding or describing the world. It is first of all, etymologically speaking, a kind of frozen gesture, a posture of the body: more exactly, the word denotes the pose struck by a dancer or the sitter for a painting.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Brian Dillon, “On the Elements of Drawing,” in *The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing*, (London: Hayward Publishing, 2009), 11.



He goes on to describe the attitude John Berger deems necessary for drawing, as one of innocence, “without a sense that one is making sense.”<sup>34</sup>

But the criticism offered of exhibitions that showcased narrative or figurative work, describe a very different kind of attitude; a ‘personal enterprise’<sup>35</sup>, or even “a pack of mindless showoffs”<sup>36</sup>. The attitude of drawers which critics are picking up on is very much incongruous with that of Berger, Barthes or Ruskin, which may be exactly why it’s working.

Emma Dexter softly pointed to it in her survey book, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, and in conversation with Ana Finel Honigman in *Art on Paper*, she states that drawing became a favored medium in the 1990s as a reaction to ever-growing hype for a certain “monumentalism”; and that drawing blurred the divisions between artist and hobbyist, allowing artists to “behave childishly”.<sup>37</sup> Proffering an obstinate, do-it-yourself or rather do-it-myself predilection, come what may, is surely one tactic, given enough artists share the sentiment, to accumulate enough momentum to land drawing, or anything else, in the limelight.

But it is not just about behaving childishly. This idea of a new attitude—one that willfully subverts by ignoring the old—is a very important hint to why so many curators and institutions are left feeling uneasy, or even queasy.

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* 11

<sup>35</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, ‘The Drawing Board’, *The New Yorker*. 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Jed Perl, ‘Unity and Variety’, *The New Republic*, Jan 27, 2003. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Emma Dexter quoted in Ana Finel Honigman’s ‘Got Drawing?’ *for Art on Paper*, Jan/Feb 2006, 40.

If conceptual art resulted in drawings about process, requiring a certain naiveté, the drawings in shows like Hoptman's and some of the drawing in *The End of the Line* embrace the willful loss of this innocence; they embrace a certain dirty knowingness.

The primal nature of drawing as an extension of thought and of process that de Zegher and Butler canonize in 'On Line' has at this point in history a long, auspicious pedigree. Deanna Petherbridge captured it in the exhibition 'The Primacy of Drawing',<sup>38</sup> and book of the same name.<sup>39</sup> Bernice Rose drew attention to it in the 1970s, and now again at the Menil Collection. And before all of them Berger, Barthes and Ruskin brought this concept of drawing as a cognitive tool to the forefront of the discourse. Much of its durability owes to its being evidently true. You cannot deny the scientific and sociological evidence to the development of intelligence and its relationship to, perhaps dependency on drawing. Angela Anning, Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Leeds, describes this process as "meaning making",<sup>40</sup> in her demonstration of the relationship between intelligence and early drawing of children.

We all drew as children, and our drawings were in some way representative of our thought. The recognition of this proves drawing's power, not only as a way in which our intelligence manifests, but by extension drawing's intimate connection to the discrete individual.

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<sup>38</sup> Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: An Artist's View*, ex. Cat. (London: South Bank Centre, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Angela Anning, 'Reappraising Young Children's Mark-Making and Drawing', in *Writing on Drawing*, ed. Steven Garner, (Chicago: Intellect Books, University of Chicago Press, 2008) 93-108.

Modernism clings to drawing as experimentation, as activity, and as evidence of thinking and intelligence and uses this facility of drawing to further the romantic ideal of an individual's genius, to further the idea that drawing is forever in a state of becoming – or, incomplete. But it is this democracy of drawing, that “drawing belongs to everyone...we are all mark-makers”<sup>41</sup> that gives credence to the contemporary forms of drawing that stand in opposition to modernism.

In fact, drawing was at one time more literally equated with both democracy and capitalist forms of entrepreneurship, as James Faure Walker points out in his essay, ‘Pride Prejudice and the Pencil’, in Steven Garner’s *Writing on Drawing*.<sup>42</sup>

He researched the pencil industry in early- to mid-1900s in Britain, and though his focus was primarily on the technological advancements of drawing tools, he also illustrates how, through its marketing campaigns, pencil companies aimed to align their product with the war effort. Slogans capitalized on the ingenuity and industriousness of those patriotic, pencil-using imagineers, sternly poised over draughting tables designing weapons and drawing the defense of the realm with a keen lance of cold, unerring (but erasable) lead. He quotes advertisements published in *The Studio* magazine: “Is your pencil British?”, “Construction starts with a Pencil”, “Pencil Brities”, “Sketching for your Pleasure and Profit”.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps contemporary artists are holding fast to drawing's closeness to thought as the modernists did, but communicating by dipping in and out of differing styles—from

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<sup>41</sup> Tania Kovats. “Traces of Thought and Intimacy”, in *The Drawing Book: A Survey of Drawing, the Primary Means of Expression*. Ed. Tania Kovats. London: Black Dog, 2005. 7.

<sup>42</sup> James Faure Walker. “Pride, Prejudice and the Pencil”, in *Writing on Drawing: Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*. Ed. Steve Garner. Bristol: Intellect, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* 72-75.

the process-orientated, dematerialized expressive qualities of experimental drawing, to the graphic vernacular languages of their grandfathers, once drawing designs for industry and war.

Drawing as a means to communicate, even prior to the development of written language, is similarly well-attested. Our earliest records exist as drawings, such as those made over 30,000 years ago in the Chauvet cave, France. It is our best tool of visualization, from architectural plans to schematic business models.

Catherine de Zegher herself is perhaps best able to speak to the power of an idea proposed and disseminated through drawing, as in the summer of 2005 she was caught in a controversy that would ultimately result in her losing her job as director of The Drawing Center, New York.<sup>44</sup>

The story unfolds as The Drawing Center was nearing approval as one of several cultural institutions to be housed at the new World Trade Center Site, which would be partially funded by the government. But as the profile of the Drawing Center rose, so too did the scrutiny of it, and in June 2005, *The New York Daily News* ran an editorial stating:

The Drawing Center, a little-known cultural group in SoHo, has mounted works linking President Bush to Osama Bin Laden and showing a hooded victim of U.S. abuse at Abu Ghraib prison....Previous exhibits include a drawing of four airplanes swooping menacingly out of the sky - one of which is flying directly at a naked woman lying on her back, legs spread-eagled. The acrylic image is titled 'Homeland Security'.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Carol Armstrong, 'Back to the Drawing Board', *Art Forum*, Summer 2006; Armstrong recounts that although the board officially stated that they felt "she was more suited to curating than to the kind of fund-raising and glad-handing required of the director of an institution going through an expensive move. But published accounts and commonsense observation alike point to tensions over the Ground Zero fiasco."

<sup>45</sup> Douglas Feiden, "Kin Slap Art Center's 9-11 Pieces: VIOLATED...AGAIN", *The Daily News*, Friday, June 24, 2005.



(left: Zoë Charlton, "Homeland Security" 2004; right: Amy Wilson "A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country Can Be Like #6"(detail) 2004)

As news spread, less than 24 hours later, New York's then-Governor Pataki would back the *Daily News*' stance, and vowed, as the paper put it, not to let any "Tom, Dick and Lefty post odiously anti-American artist sentiments at Ground Zero."<sup>46</sup> He would demand an absolute guarantee from any cultural institution that they would precede with "total respect for the sanctity of the site."<sup>47</sup> *The New York Daily News* went further, describing past works exhibited at the Drawing Center as a "kind of political juvenilia"<sup>48</sup>, "America-bashing"<sup>49</sup>, "kooky"<sup>50</sup>, and "sad-sack stuff".<sup>51</sup>

De Zegher, in response, and in defense of freedom of speech and expression, retorted "The LMDC [Lower Manhattan Development Corporation] knows that we

<sup>46</sup> "The Guv Got The Picture," *The New York Daily News*, Saturday June 25, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> "The Guv Got The Picture," *The New York Daily News*, Saturday June 25, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Joe Mahoney and Douglas Feiden. "Zero Tolerance at WTC No U.S.-basing at Site, Pataki Sez," *The New York Daily News*, Saturday June 25, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> "The Guv Got The Picture," *The New York Daily News*, Saturday June 25, 2005.

would never be able to accept censorship,”<sup>52</sup> which inadvertently extending the news fiasco further, ultimately resulting in The Drawing Center losing its bid to be housed at the World Trade Center. And a few months later after talks with the board, de Zegher left The Drawing Center.

Similarly, ‘The End of the Line’ received attention fueled by outrage when installed at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MiMA). The drawing in question was by David Haines, *Ambiguous Myth* 2007 (see below) which depicts a boy tied to a tree, with two others, masked and standing by, holding clippers that have sneakers between the blades. The *Sunday Sun* reported outrage by community members who felt the drawing was “‘irresponsible’ and ‘glorifying torture and violence.’”<sup>53</sup> Those (mostly mothers) interviewed, cited the recent child violence in South Yorkshire, and expressed concern about the drawing, likening it to arguments made for violent video games and movies, fearing it could inspire further violence. The article goes on to invoke the real-life violence, giving updates on the current victim’s status, and chronologically detailing the event.

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<sup>52</sup> Carol Armstrong, ‘Back to the Drawing Board’, *Art Forum*, Summer 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Phil Doherty, ‘Drawing at Centre of Art Storm: Child Violence Depicted’, *Sunday Sun*, April 12, 2009, p. 10.



*David Haines, "Ambiguous Myth" 2007*

All of this—news scandals, loss of jobs, loss of a lease at the WTC, and fears of child-on-child violence—was inspired by a few drawings. That in a day when film, video, installation and performance art exist, drawings can still provoke such outrage, speaks to a visceral power they hold, for a very broad audience, as a representative medium. What is it about a drawing that could be so upsetting?

As several important writers and curators have remarked, drawing inhabits a place in the range of art methods which is so elemental it is almost proto-lingual—“[d]rawing

as a link between the hand and the brain”<sup>54</sup>, drawing as an activity closest to “pure thought”<sup>55</sup>— and that drawing is “the artistic medium which is least interrupted by technical considerations and therefore the chosen means for the initial formulation of visual ideas and the transfer or appropriation of visual culture.”<sup>56</sup> That a drawing of three boys, one tied to the tree and two looming over, can be more ‘real’ than seeing it enacted in film, or hearing accounts of it in real life. A drawing, with its visceral connection to the hand, is living, evidence of a forever-becoming, potential laden, unfinished, frightening thought.

Recognizing this power, proposal and proposition is all you need, and that’s what you have in drawing; a proposal for a thought, whether it be arrived at via performative (de Zegher/Butler) or projective (Yve-Alain Bois /Hoptman) attitudes. You no longer need to construct, install, perform, flesh out, dissect, erect, or mount art. You can just draw it. The proposition is enough.

Hoptman did not narrow the definition of drawing, but rather highlighted a significant attitude amongst artists towards the practice, one that does not continue the modernist trajectory. Indeed, it willfully disavows itself from the idealized, pure state of unknowing, and proudly proclaims itself learned of the dirty, vernacular visual languages of today, and eager to employ all the powers inherent in drawing, both verb and noun.

Looking back at her 2002 exhibition, in 2006 Hoptman states: “It was a finite snapshot of a moment, not an attempt to redirect the cultural tide. It was a show that I

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<sup>54</sup> Marc Treib, *Drawing/Thinking* (Abington: Taylor & Francis, 2008).

<sup>55</sup> Avis Newman in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act*, ed. Cornelia Butler (London: Tate, 2003).

<sup>56</sup> Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: An Artist’s View*, ex. Cat. (London: South Bank Centre, 1991) 7.



hope inspired some lively debate, but it wasn't *activist*.<sup>57</sup> It may have been a snapshot of drawing in the 1990s, but what she picked up on has not disappeared, and it continues to have influence today. In de Zegher's 2002 essay, 'The Inside is the Outside', she states:

If modernism was to be more and more dependent on alienation, separation, negativity, violence and destruction as strategies of the radical and inventive, the twenty-first century may very well be developing a changed criticality increasingly defined by inclusion, connectivity, attaching and constituting attitudes, and healing too.<sup>58</sup>

The new attitudes within drawing refuse to be generalized, or confined to one approach of execution. They are constantly shifting, developing new connections, trajectories, references and simultaneously rejecting and erasing prior lineage; they celebrate a state of abeyance, demand further inquiries, and expand our understanding of what drawing is, and why we we're so concerned about debating it today.

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<sup>57</sup> John Lekay, Interview with Laura Hoptman, *Heyoka Magazine*, Volume 3/Winter 2006

<sup>58</sup> Catherine de Zegher, 'The Inside is the Outside.' *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*. 2002

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