

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN ART AND VISUAL STUDIES

Gestures of Seeing in Film, Video and Drawing

Edited by

Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson
and Øyvind Vågnes



8 The Gesture of Drawing

*Ernst van Alphen*¹

In his discussion of the work of Cy Twombly, Roland Barthes wrote the following: "The line is a visible action. The line, however supple, light, or uncertain it may be, always refers to a force, to a direction; it is an *energon*, a labor which reveals – which makes legible – the trace of its pulsion and its expenditure."² The different notions Barthes uses to characterize Twombly's drawing practice, like force, direction, *energon*, pulsion and expenditure, come together in the notion of gesture. The gesture of drawing is transitive and intransitive at the same time. The gestures of the moving hand register, one could say, the movement of the thinking eye. The degree of coordination between the moving hand and the thinking eye is "susceptible to multiple external and internal influences and depending on the skill perfected by the artist." Petherbridge expresses this coordination in producing lines in yet another way: "In the sense that a line is a conduit of meaning or *ductus*, it induces qualities of movement at the same time as reproducing them."³ When the gestural traces of the hand result in a representation the lines become transitive; if not they are intransitive and the resulting lines can be read as indexes of gesture or as echoes of the body. In what follows I will especially focus on artists and philosophers whose practice of concepts foreground the gesture of drawing as intransitive. For it is especially through intransitive gestures that we can understand the importance of gesture. I will present notions of drawing as developed by the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida, German artist Albrecht Dürer, French critic Roland Barthes, American critic Rosalind Krauss and German philosopher Walter Benjamin. Their notions of drawing and gesture will be demonstrated by using them for a reading of the drawing practices of the German artists Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein the Elder, Dutch artist Armando, American artist Cy Twombly and Swiss artist Britta Huttenlocher.

Jacques Derrida: Drawing as Intransitive Act

In the drawings of the Dutch artist Armando broken lines move cautiously across the white paper. These lines, especially those in drawings from the 1950s, have something forced about them, as if putting them on paper had required great effort. It is the power that is needed to draw the lines that speaks from these drawings. Only in the drawings from the 1970s and

1980s do his lines become suppler, but this difference is merely relative, not absolute. The forced quality of Armando's drawings, in combination with their slow movement, suggests that they are the result of a particular activity: an exploration of the paper. The pencil explores the paper, searchingly or hesitantly, with a concentration that is directed at both the point of the pencil and the contact with the paper. The pressure that is exerted on the paper with the point of the pencil varies constantly, leaving lines that are not flowing but broken and always varying in width and intensity of black. The lines change from deep black to wispy gray (Figure 8.1).

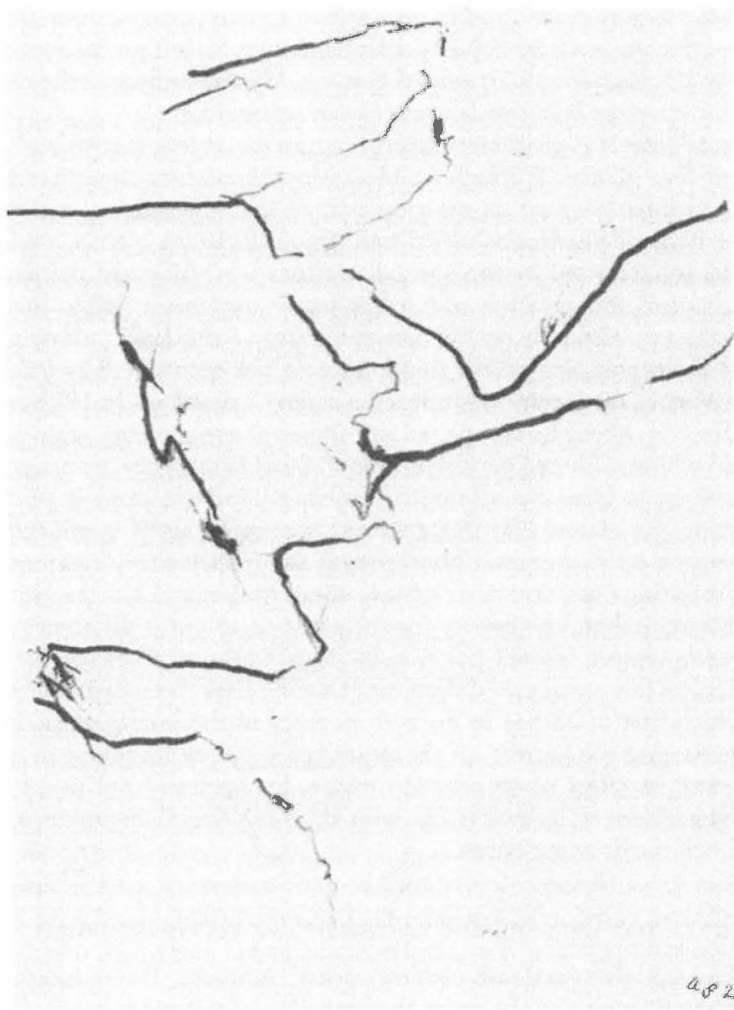


Figure 8.1 Armando, *Untitled*, 1982; pencil on paper, 18 × 13 cm. Collection EJ van Alphen, Amsterdam.

Because of the emphasis given to this exploration of the paper, the viewer's attention is concentrated on the movement in the drawing and the gestures made by the drawing hand. Any representation that may come about as a result is totally secondary. Armando's drawings are then only figurative by exception; we recognize a flag, a tree or a fence.

For French philosopher Jacques Derrida, writing in the catalogue he put together for the Louvre in 1990 to accompany the drawing exhibition 'Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines,' it is just this exploratory movement that is to be regarded as the definition of drawing.⁴ He asserts that the act of drawing has something to do with blindness. On the one hand the artist behaves like a blind man; he searches and gropes and may never reach his goal. But Derrida suggests that the drawing itself is also blind. He presents drawing as an intransitive activity; our attention does not focus on the image we perceive, a represented world, but on the representation of that world—as an activity of gestures. We see nothing in the drawing (transitive); we see only the drawing as intransitive act.

Derrida's general characterization of drawing is less surprising than it seems at first glance. Throughout the twentieth century there has been a regular emergence of artists reacting against the conventional assumption that the basis of drawing is visual perception. Drawing after a model, for example, was rejected by the Surrealist artists who followed the principle of automatism and gave free rein to the hand—no longer tied to the direction of the eye. Similarly, in the conceptualism of the 1960s, drawing was used as a weapon against the dominance of the retina in the visual arts. Robert Morris, for instance, produced a series of drawings in 1973 entitled *Blind Time* in which he completed self-imposed assignments with his eyes shut and within a limited period of times.⁵ Derrida explores his proposition that drawing is blind by turning to the way blindness itself is portrayed in drawing. He claims that this apparently random motif is self-reflexive. Whenever an artist chooses a blind person as the theme for drawings he or she is projecting onto that person ideas about the artist. Thus the blind person is no more than an allegory for the artist or, to put it differently, every blind person drawn is a self-portrait. By drawing the motif of blindness, the artist depicts the 'potency' of drawing. Derrida uses the word "puissance" here, which first of all has to do with potency in the sexual sense. By this he suggests that the 'power' of the drawings is not to be found in its persuasiveness, its effect or its goal (an image, for instance) but in a kind of underlying libido, or, by continuing with Derrida's sexual metaphor, a libido from which the drawing issues.

Albrecht Dürer: Drawing and *Gwalt*, or *Ars Versus Ingenium*

According to the sixteenth-century artist Albrecht Dürer there is a quasi-magical power of the artist that manifests itself most particularly in drawing. He called this power *Gwalt*. *Gwalt* cannot be learned or imitated,

and in this sense it can be compared with what has been called *ingenium* in classical rhetoric since the time of Quintilian. This ability is usually seen in opposition to *ars*, a skill or area of competence that can be learned or imitated. Thus *ingenium*, Dürer's *Gwalt*, refers to a kind of divine power given to the artist by God. This power is in evidence in everything the artist makes, but according to Dürer it is particularly apparent in the calligraphic line. This is why an artist's *Gwalt* is best encountered in his drawings.

In his impressive study of the work of Hans Holbein the Elder and Albrecht Dürer, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Joseph Koerner argues that the divine *ingenium* or *Gwalt* is invariably to be found in the artist's drawings. According to a theory that has become a classic topos, the ability of an artist to draw a straight line or a perfect circle freehand is regarded as proof of this divine power. The hand of the artist is thereby completely subservient to an idea in the artist's mind—an idea of a circle or a straight line, for instance. The faster the drawing or sketch is made, the more subservient the hand. What is 'modern' about Dürer is the way in which the hand is no longer directed by the idea but by perception in time. In Holbein's drawn portraits, each line contributes directly to the likeness being portrayed. Each line is true in the sense of being analogous to the person being portrayed. Dürer, on the other hand, makes the most of the effects of mistakes; he allows all his lines, both the successful and the unsuccessful, to breathe life into his self-portrait. "The large number of lines that go into portraying his thumb in such a variety of ways, or the intense mass of lines that describe his chin and wrist, make Dürer's likeness active and lively. All these lines, seen as a whole, document the work of representation."⁶

In other words, in his self-portrait Dürer depicted not only his appearance but also the acts or gestures that called the depicted image to life. The act of drawing is no longer present in the form of the product alone—a likeness—but it is also present as an activity of gestures. This recognition of drawing-as-act is more than the introduction of a new subject. It implies a paradigm shift. If the *ingenium* of classical rhetoric consisted of a divine power present in the artist, then Dürer transformed *Gwalt* into a human ability. For Dürer, it is the role of the maker, the artist, that occupies a position of prominence.

Armando's drawings radicalize those of Dürer. Working from the distinction between *ars* and *Gwalt* we can conclude that in Armando only *Gwalt* remains. The drawing as the result of acquired technique does not appear in his oeuvre. The emphatic absence of composition, combined with the 'primitive' broken lines, creates the impression that everything having to do with *ars* has been intentionally neglected. The activity of drawing and the power that drives it (for which Dürer has reserved space beside *ars*) has become an exclusive point of interest in Armando. Yet, the question remains whether the power given shape in Armando's drawings is the same as Dürer's *Gwalt*. Dürer's 'power,' after all, is no longer of divine origin. For him the artist

had become a special *person* possessing a special drive. In accordance with the humanism of the Renaissance, this uniqueness of the artist is a manifestation of the individualism that was on the rise during that period. So the most individual aspect of the artist, let us say his unique style, can be seen in Dürer's *Gwalt*. An early form of expressionism thereby makes its entrance.

But it is precisely here where the comparison between Armando and Dürer no longer holds. The contorted and sometimes aggressive power revealed in Armando's drawings does not originate in a 'condition' or 'characteristic' of the artist. Throughout his entire life, and within all the media in which he works, Armando has resisted expressionistic poetics. His goal has never been 'authenticity' of the maker but of the material. The power or energy manifested in Armando's drawings should instead be ascribed to the tension that develops whenever pencil is put to paper.

Roland Barthes: Drawing and Ductus

In order to better understand the specific aspects of Armando's drawings and the kind of power they express, a comparison with another artist is helpful—this time a contemporary one. In the work of the American artist Cy Twombly, both the paintings and the drawings appear 'drawn.' But his drawing style is specific. It is closely related to writing or graffiti.

If Twombly's work consists of a form of writing, this does not mean, as Roland Barthes has argued about this artist, that his work is calligraphic. Calligraphy is the art of a 'formed'—one might say a 'drawn'—writing. The essence of writing, according to Barthes, does not reside in its form, nor in the message or meaning that it might convey, but in the gesture involved. Twombly does not concern himself with the form—the product—of writing, but only with the act that produces the handwriting. When his work embodies 'the gesture of writing' that does not mean that it glories in what we might call a fluid hand—just the opposite. It has been remarked that it looks as though Twombly produced his work with his left hand. The lines are often awkward, clumsy. In Barthes' words, "by producing a handwriting that seems left-handed and awkward (*gauche*), he undermines the morality of the body."⁷ The effect of left-handedness eliminates any association with technique (*ars*).

Barthes' claim that Twombly has undermined the morality of the body also holds for Armando. Barthes suggests that Twombly's hand is no longer guided by the rest of the body, mind or will, or by a God-given power. What we see working here is the hand alone, under its own steam. A fitting expression for the movement of the hand severed from the artist can be found in the more formalistic vocabulary of paleography: the *ductus*. In paleography, handwriting is assessed not on the basis of the form of the visual product but on the basis of the path that the hand travels. It is the activity of the hand that forms the basis for the classification and definition of various letters. Indeed, it is the hand that conducts the line: from top to bottom, from

left to right, by stopping, breaking off and continuing somewhere else on the paper. According to Barthes, it is the ductus that is dominant in Twombly's work, or rather, that is indulged in his work. For Twombly does not obey the rules that govern the gestures of the hand; he plays with them. He explores the possibilities inherent in hand gesturing and breaks the rules imposed on the hand.

When we study the ductus in Armando's drawings, the 'left-handedness' is even more striking than in Twombly. Even in the drawings that evoke an image, such as a flag or a tree, the attention is drawn to the way the analogy is executed. The resulting image remains subordinate. The series of flags from 1981 consists of short, broken gestures.

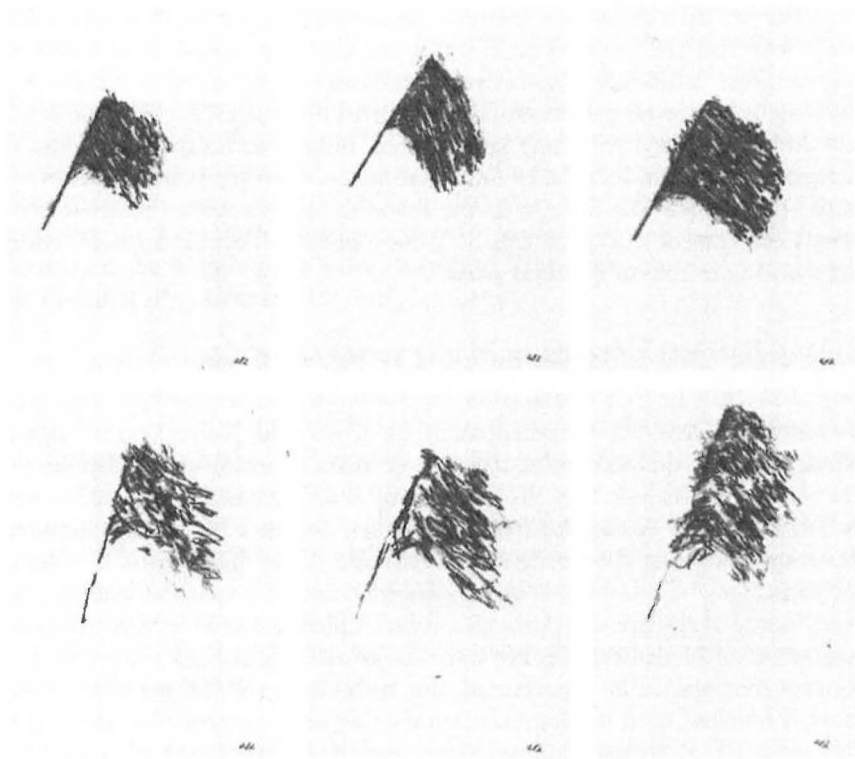


Figure 8.2 Armando, *Fahne* (Flag), 1982, pencil on paper, 18 × 13 cm (6 from a series of 13); courtesy Rob de Vries Gallery, Haarlem.

On the image level we might say that this makes the flags look frayed. But what really catches the eye is the agitation of the gestures that have called these frayed flags to life. But whether Armando's lines appear agitated and insecure or (what we also often see) aggressive and vicious, they are always the embodiment of a power, an energy. This power rarely evokes an

analogous image within another dimension, but when it does it is an image of subordinate importance. He moves in only one direction across the paper. In this sense the lines that constitute Armando's drawings are the traces of an activity. This is different to a product or result of an activity. What we see is **the activity itself, not the activity's object or goal.**

It is important that we deal here with the difference between Albrecht Dürer on the one hand and Cy Twombly and Armando on the other. Earlier it was proposed that Dürer's modernity can be found in the fact that he reveals the activity of drawing in the drawing itself. It is just this activity that is so prominent in Twombly. One important difference, however, is that the activity Dürer reveals is **purposeful**, and that he as **artist** is the seat of this activity. In this sense Dürer's activity is illustrative of a transitive act.

What we as viewers see, then, is not only the drawing that Dürer has made but also the Dürer who is doing the drawing. Twombly's drawings, on the other hand, are illustrative of drawings as an intransitive act. His drawing is no longer purposeful; he produces no images. As artist he is not the seat of his activity. He has 'surrendered' himself to his own hand and to the pencil it wields. It is the tension that arises when the pencil touches the paper that directs the activity of the drawing. In this sense **the artist** is no longer the subject who performs the action but the medium through whom the drawing is able to manifest itself.

Roland Barthes: Drawing as Marks versus Drawing as Markings

If we accept Derrida's statement that the artist who produces drawings is blind, and that the activity of drawing consists of intransitive groping, we are forced to conclude that the medium of drawing has reached full bloom in Twombly and Armando. Roland Barthes makes a distinction between drawings that consist of trace (or marks) and those that consist of tracing (or markings).⁸ Twombly's drawings are then extreme forms of tracing. The '-ing' suffix of the present participle, when added to the French word trace, suggests that the drawn lines are traces of an activity instead of an object or concept that was to be represented. But by focusing on the act of drawing, more is blocked than the representation of an object or concept alone. It is also the work of art itself, which forces itself as object upon the viewer.

Dürer seems to be referring to the status of paintings and sculpture as objects in the motto with which this essay began. In their autonomy, these media impose themselves as fetishes on the viewers, which makes them objects that derive a magical seductiveness from their static character. Drawings, however, have traditionally been regarded as 'temporary' things, that are not autonomous, but function as designs for a definitive work. It is because of this impossible and marginal position of the drawing as object that the activity of design is able to play such a central role. And it is precisely for this reason that Dürer attaches such special value to

the drawings of artists and even considers them more important than their paintings or sculptures. Paradoxically, it was because people in Dürer's time developed an eye for these qualities of drawing that drawings first began to be regarded as autonomous expressions. Having acquired this appreciation as an activity—as non-fetish—drawings began to be collected as fetishes.

Rosalind Krauss: Drawing as Graffiti

Thus far I have mainly emphasized the similarities between Armando and Twombly. The differences between their drawings, however, are at least as significant. Earlier I remarked that Twombly's work can be understood as handwriting on the one hand and graffiti on the other. If his lines remind one of writing, they mainly characterize Twombly's way of playing with ductus. I say 'playing' because his gestures evoke both light-hearted pleasure and a busyness caused partly by boredom. When his lines remind one of graffiti, it is because they look as though they were intended to appropriate the canvas by soiling or marking it. In this sense his work sometimes resembles a blackboard, or more strongly, public toilet walls. Even the drawings of genitalia that we sometimes encounter in these kinds of places, especially men's rooms, can be found in his work. Rosalind Krauss has concisely expressed the meaning of graffiti for Twombly's work:

Twombly took up graffiti as a way of interpreting the meaning of Action Painting's mark, and most particularly that of Pollock's radically innovative dripped line. For graffiti is a medium of marking that has precise, and unmistakable, characteristics. First, it is performative, suspending representation in favor of action: I mark you, I cancel you, I dirty you. Second it is violent: always an invasion of a space that is not the marker's own, it takes illegitimate advantage of the surface of inscription, violating it, mauling it, scarring it. Third, it converts the present tense of the performative into the past tense of the index: it is the trace of an event, torn away from the presence of the marker. "Kilroy was here," it reads.⁹

According to Krauss, Twombly's acts of drawing produce no images; they are violent acts that occupy the surface of the canvas or paper, in the sense of appropriating it or seizing it. His work mainly has to do with the confiscation of space. Armando's drawings, by contrast never resemble a men's room wall. The mood that his drawings evoke is very different to that of Twombly. And although here, too, the image is overshadowed by drawing as activity, the carrying out of this activity is not an appropriation of space by means of befoulment or inscription. His drawing consists of marking. The aggression in Armando's drawings is not aimed at seizing the surface. Rather it has to do with the tension between two opponents: the point of

the pencil and the surface of the paper. In the drawings from the 1950s, the confrontation is plainly violent. Armando's act of drawing was a matter of life or death. It expressed intense tension. He himself said, "For me, a line has to be what I also find in children's drawings. It has to have tension. If I were to begin a line and it lacked tension for just one centimeter, the drawing would be a failure and I would tear up the paper."¹⁰ In his later drawings there is no evidence of this unexpected, aggressive violence. It is as if the contact between the pencil and paper was a matter of continual mutual exploration.

Walter Benjamin: Sign versus Mark

A rather different notion of drawing is proposed by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. He develops it by differentiating drawing from painting. In his article "Painting, or Sign and Marks (*Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal*)," he distinguishes different kinds of lines, among which are the graphic line and the line of the absolute sign. This last line is inherently magical; whatever it represents does not imbue it with magic. It is striking that in his discussion of the graphic line, Benjamin constantly evokes the realm of landscape:

The graphic line is defined by its contrast with area. [...] The graphic line marks out the area and so defines it by attaching itself to its background. Conversely, the graphic line can exist only against this background, so that a drawing that completely covered its background would cease to be a drawing.¹¹

Notions of 'area', 'background', but of course also 'line,' are used ambiguously. They analyze the nature of the graphic line literally, that is formalistically, but at the same time they metaphorically built up the realm of landscape. The same expressions can be used to describe a landscape. This metaphorical dimension of Benjamin's discussion of the graphic line becomes apparent when he dwells on the background of a drawing:

The identity of the background of a drawing is quite different from that of the white surface on which it is inscribed. We might even deny it that identity by thinking of it as a surge of white waves (though these might not even be distinguishable to the naked eye).¹²

His comparison of the background with "a surge of white waves" introduces the dynamic movement in his description of the graphic line, a dynamism that also characterizes the composition of landscape.

Benjamin's discussion of the line of the 'absolute sign' radiates back on what he had to say about the graphic line, because every representational line also has an impact unrelated to its representational function. But in

order to explain the absolute sign he makes another distinction, this time the one between absolute sign and absolute mark. He claims that the sign seems to have more reference to persons, whereas the mark tends to exclude the personal. This intriguing but rather obscure remark becomes clear only later when he articulates a more basic difference:

... the sign is printed on something, whereas the mark emerges from it. This makes it clear that the realm of the mark is a medium. Whereas the absolute sign does not for the most part appear on living beings but can be impressed or appear on lifeless buildings, trees, and so on, the mark appears principally on living beings (Christ's stigmata, blushes, perhaps leprosy and birthmarks).¹³

The distinction between signs and marks as personal versus nonpersonal is made clearer; signs are intentionally made by a subject whereas marks just emerge or appear. Subjects are confronted with marks, but these are not intentionally made by them.

At first sight Benjamin's next step in his argument about the graphic line is rather puzzling. He declares that the medium of painting is that of the mark in the narrower sense, for it has neither background nor graphic line. He is very much aware of the strange implication of this logic because painting poses a 'problem':

The problem of painting becomes clear only when we understand the nature of the mark in the narrower sense, while feeling astonished that a picture can have a composition even though this cannot be reduced to a graphic design.¹⁴

Composition in painting is not the result of the difference between graphic line and background but between the reciprocal demarcations of the colored surfaces. Whereas in drawing the drawn line creates background, in painting there is not such a clear agency responsible for the emergence of the composition. Differences between colors reciprocally lead to composition. This different nature of painting's composition explains its status as mark. Composition emerges; it is the result of the qualities of the colors used, which come about differentially, that is reciprocally. These qualities are not intentionally made by an agent as is the case in the drawing of a graphic line.

The difference between drawing and painting can now be understood as the difference between sign and mark. Whereas composition in drawing is the result of an intentionally creative agency (the person who draws), in painting composition is only indirectly created by the painter. It is primarily brought about by the differential qualities of colors. The painter, of course, applies the colors, but she does not create their differential values; she only utilizes them. They have to be accepted as they emerge or appear.

Benjamin's understanding of the sign and the mark illuminates the work of the Swiss artist Britta Huttenlocher. One could now say that in her works she seems to explore the graphic line. The ordering of the compositions is at first sight the exclusive result of lines directed by the artist. However, there are also elements which emerge and are in that sense painterly. The drawn panels which she made from 1992 until 1999 convey a tension between the ordering, directing hand of the draughtsman and elements which have to be accepted when they emerge.

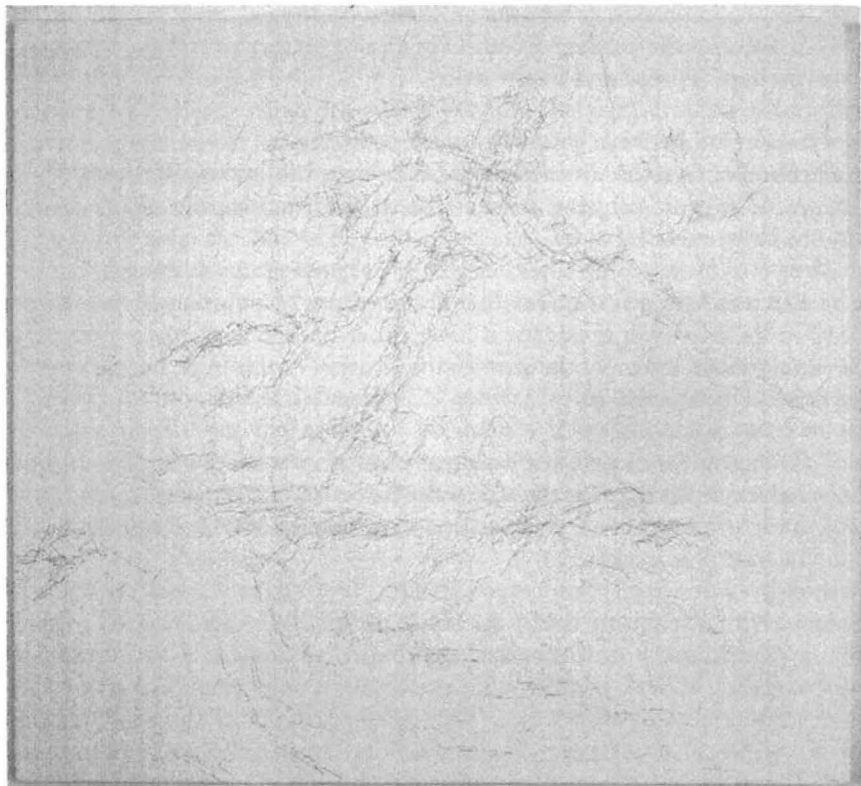


Figure 8.3 Britta Huttenlocher, *Untitled*, 1993, pencil on canvas on wood, 76.6 × 70.6 cm; Courtesy Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam; Peter Cox photographer.

The works in Figure 8.3 are emphatically drawn. They consist exclusively of graphic lines. But their compositions contain striking repetitions. Many lines are doubled, sometimes even ten or eleven times because they were drawn by a kind of comb-like row of pencils. Lines follow in the track of other lines. These lines fundamentally challenge Benjamin's understanding of the graphic line. They don't seem to be drawn by a directing subject. They exclude the personal, to use his words. They seem to have emerged in

the wake of other lines. Their appearance seems to find their origin in other lines, not in human agency.

In 1998 Huttenlocher started to make watercolors. It is striking that Benjamin mentions watercolor as an exception within his schematic distinction of sign and mark, of drawing and painting. "The only instance in which colour and line coincide is in the watercolour, in which the pencil outlines are visible and the paint is put on transparently. In that case the background is retained, even though it is coloured."¹⁵ Benjamin highlights the fact that in watercolor one can 'draw' with color. But with respect to the opposition between signs that are intentionally made versus marks that just emerge, watercolors seem to be sign and mark at the same time. Although one can draw lines in color, these lines are hard to direct. They flow and the artist has only limited control over them. A major part of the watercolored line just emerges. Watercolors are in this respect a medium in which painting and drawing meet.

Benjamin's notion of drawing as sign is the result of how he differentiates it from painting. This explains why his notion of his drawing differs substantially from those developed by Derrida, Dürer or Barthes. The latter all focus on the kind of activity, on the gestures of the moving hand, that is performed when an artist draws and that is symptomatically present in its resulting image: the drawing. For them it is the gesture of the hand that defines drawing. Benjamin, however, does not focus on the activity or gesture of the hand, but on formal features of drawings versus paintings and how certain formal features produce composition. Benjamin's perspective differs, which leads to another notion of drawing. Different as the discussed theoretical distinctions of drawing are, they all highlight crucial aspects of drawing. They allow us to see into and make sense of drawings.

Notes

1. An earlier, different version of this chapter appeared in *Writing on Drawing: Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*, edited by Steve Garner (Bristol: Intellect, 2008).
2. Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly ou Non multa sed multum," in *L'obvie et l'obtus* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), 170.
3. Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing. Histories and Theories of Drawing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 90.
4. Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990).
5. See Pamela Lee and Christine Mehring, 'Drawing is Another Kind of Language,' *Recent American Drawings from a New York Private Collection*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Art Museum, 1997).
6. Joseph Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 6.
7. Barthes, 151.

8. Barthes, 159.
9. Rosalind Krauss, 'Cy's Up,' *Artforum*, September 1994, 159.
10. Martijn Sanders, 'De galm van het verleden: Martijn Sanders in gesprek met Armando,' in *Armando: 100 tekeningen, 1952-1984* (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans Van Beuningen, 1985), 9.
11. Walter Benjamin, 'Painting, or Signs and Marks,' *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 83.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 84.
14. Ibid., 85.
15. Ibid., 85.