

Moving Marks

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Draw to Perform 3, live drawing performance symposium curated by Ram Samocha, The Crows Nest Gallery, London, July 30–31, 2016.

The resurgence of drawing within contemporary art comes at a time in the digital age in which it is important to trace the traditions and conventions of what it means to draw. This resurgence is seen in recent museum exhibitions such as *Drawing | THE BOTTOM LINE* at S.M.A.K in Belgium (2015–16), annual festivals such as Drawing Now in Paris or The Big Draw in the UK, and in contemporary spaces such as Drawing Room, London (founded in 2002), specifically dedicated to the drawing discipline. Over the past few years, the performative aspect of drawing and the role of the body in the gesture has become increasingly prominent. Evidencing the physicality of the body in the drawing process has risen in response to the continually advancing digitalized and technological versions of writing, drawing, and marking. By crossing over into the field of performance art, artists have begun to explore how far the gesture can be extended regarding method, process, materials, space, and duration.

This investigation of performative drawing was highlighted at the international live drawing symposium *Draw to Perform 3*. Curated by Ram Samocha, an artist who specializes in performative explorations of drawing, the symposium opens up a platform for inquiry, experimentation, presentation, and discussion. From eighteen different countries, thirty-six artists with diverse practices and artistic backgrounds are drawn together to participate in the two-day event. The connection between these artists is their constant query: “How can you make a mark and how can it be interpreted?” Organizing the event in two parts—a twelve-hour day of both short and long durational live performances, followed by a day of workshops mentored by six of the participating artists—the curator does nothing short of maximizing the opportunity for both artists and audiences to connect and share the experience of live drawing. With the first symposium introducing the convergence of drawing and performance, and the second maintaining a focus on duration, the third surrenders to the challenge of *collaborations*.

Earlier this year, I discussed the intersection of drawing and live performance with Catherine de Zegher (curator of *On Line: drawing through the twentieth century*, 2010, MoMA New York). While considering the intimate and individual aspects of drawing, de Zegher noted how, because of its subjective nature, to collaborate with another artist in the act of drawing (particularly in the performative context) can be a very challenging and difficult task.¹ For de Zegher, drawing forms “a kinesthetic practice of traction; attraction, extraction, protraction. Drawing is born from an outward gesture that links inner impulses and thoughts to the other through the touching of a surface with repeated graphic marks and lines.”² It is in the context of live performance that we witness drawing in all its forms: concept, process, and product. With the subjective in mind, *Draw to Perform 3* forms a response to these questions: Where can the gesture lead to and develop in the situation of live performance? How can it form an exchange, through a collaborative dialogue, between artists and audience as cause for its transformation?

The use of drawing as a tool to open up and explore aspects of the self (even those of repressed and unconscious thought) has been made evident by the Surrealists with André Breton’s methodology of automatic drawing. It is the fluidity and immediacy of the drawing discipline that makes it so accessible to projecting immediate thought. Emma Fält’s workshop *On Loneliness and Contact—Togetherness in Drawing* engages with the act of drawing to bring people together and discover “the space between energy and emotion, where the words have disappeared or not yet been born.” Fält helps to open up her participants by instructing them to reach together, to shift, to feel and become responsive to the present moment as the experience is made evident by the traces of ink across the paper. Covering the entirety of the gallery floor, the paper situates the participants in an expansive space of freedom to move and to mark. At times, the participants physically touch and move together, forming direct contact with each other’s rhythm and energy and how it influences the gesture and resultant marks. Fält’s practice asks: “Where are my physical limits and where are the limits of someone and something else?” Overcoming the physical limits and adapting methods of improvisation also release the psychological and emotional aspects of the self. I am reminded of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, in which such improvisational techniques created a journey towards self-revelation.

On Loneliness and Contact—Togetherness in Drawing extends this notion by using the act of marking to physically connect and communicate with multiple bodies at once. In this sense it moves beyond self-reflectiveness and focuses on the collective experience. The aspect of *touch* (to touch, to be in touch, to be touched) evokes an intimate experience. Live drawing enables emotional and personal exchanges between artist and participator to take place. In *Sensory*

Dialogues, Kimbal Bumstead discovers drawing as a way to trace the intimacy of an experience through the sensation of tactility. Here the participant is invited to sit within close proximity of the artist to explore portraiture through touch. This involves drawing directly onto a piece of paper laid over the face of both artist and participant or by feeling the contours of the face while simultaneously drawing the sensation. The performance provokes self-image and questions what it means to literally be in touch with others. The constant use of social media for portraying idealized versions of the self via controlled and edited images known as *selfies* is evidence of the distant relationship between oneself and others. *Sensory Dialogues* moves away from portraiture as “image” or “product” and focuses on the process of discovery.

In another sense, Kimvi Nguyen’s *Islands* demonstrates drawing as a tool to intervene and question the audience’s perception of space and experience of each other. Here the drawn mark begins to challenge the audience’s thinking and movement. Kneeling with her face to the ground and charcoal in hand, the artist slowly draws small, repetitive lines around the audience member’s feet. The artist’s rule: continue marking until the audience member moves or walks away. Nguyen shifts the audience between positions of observer and participant. Who is in control? Who is looking at whom looking at drawing? Even though the movement of the audience member dictates an artist’s actions, they also feel controlled in her presence. Nguyen proclaims, “Now drawing, that is how heavy drawing can be. You’re creating a boundary that is ephemeral.”

The marks form a record of time and a measurement of each audience member’s movement through space: how they sit, how they stand, how long they remained in one place. Here the artist explores the psychological weight of the material and how the drawn marks can physically intervene in the way the audience experiences the gallery space. People become *drawn* together, resembling connected islands. Nguyen physically raises the audience’s awareness of their situation in space and their relationship to others. As the fragility and ephemerality contrast with significant power and strength, they seem to affect how the audience interacts and moves. Nguyen’s marks begin to disappear as they imprint onto the bottom of a foot or are brushed away when a new roll of paper is laid out for another performance. This makes clear the importance of live drawing and its focus: the ephemeral experience. The lines signify what once was, the constant movement and subsequent transformation reflect the changing periods of time occurring in the symposium, which constantly weave in and out of coexistence.

Sound is emerging as a significant aspect within live drawing. In durational performances, artists such as Stelarc and Marina Abramović use the intervention of microphones to amplify bodily sounds (breath or heartbeats) and increase the

intensity of the performed action. In the context of live drawing, hearing the weight of the material, the exhausted breath of the body or the scrape of the tool, *sound* emphasizes the exertion of pressure and energy happening at this point of contact. Here, the role of sound in the experience of live drawing contributes to its tactile sensibilities and the transitioning stages of material and body. Jaanika Peerna explores her body in relation to the material (ice, pencil, mylar) while also becoming material and surface. In the beginning stages of *Glacier Elegy*, the artist's body moves slowly against a piece of suspended mylar (polyester film). With its expansive covering, the paper appears to consume the body as the body creases and slowly shifts the paper, changing its form. The unexpectedly loud sounds inherent in each slight movement of the body and crease of the paper vibrate through the gallery space, almost demanding attention. Sound continues to dramatize the artist's gestures: breath, pencils, and ice against the paper and the body. Throughout the performance, there is a growing sense of increase in the body's exhaustion, emphasized by the sound of materials being pushed to their limit; pencils drop while ice and paper begin to break.

Focused on the auditory senses, *Chalk Dialogue*, a collaborative performance between Nguyen and I, investigates the relationship between two "same" actions performed in two separate locations. The action: kneel with head to the ground and push a 3kg lump of chalk back and forth in front of your head until exhausted. Initially appearing as two synchronized actions, the performance discovers the impossibility of synchronization. Each action is inevitably subject to the performer's individual energy caused by their individual response to the immediate environment, physical body, emotion, and surface. The vinyl surface in Nguyen's space required her to push harder to make a mark. This caused her action to repetitively stop-start as her energy rapidly depleted. In contrast, my action performed on concrete remained a consistent motion throughout the one-hour duration. The rhythm of each sound emphasized the difference between the two actions. Audible from both spaces, the sound of the two actions created a traversing path, leading the audience back and forth, projecting the notion of the line as a locus of movement in space.

Alternatively, *Rotation/Binding* explores how, through the use of strategically imposed tool-based restrictions, the gesture could be expanded. Agnieszka Karasch and Ram Samocha's use of physical limitations and restraints in *Rotations/Binding* is reminiscent of Carolee Schneemann's *Up to And Including Her Limits* (1973–76). But in this case the two artists work with and against each other as an external force and further restriction. Schneemann uses a harness to suspend and alleviate control over body and the mark-making process, whereas Karasch and Samocha physically bind their wrists together with string and fix charcoal



Top left: Robert Luzar and Claire Undy, *Four Steps For Lighting Balls and Chords*, 2016, performance. Duration: Two hours. Photo: Courtesy David Myers. Top right: Jaanika Peerna, *Glacier Elegy (part 2)*, thirty-minute durational performance, ice, pigment, Mylar, sound. Photo: Courtesy Marco Berardi. Bottom: Kimvi Nguyen, *Islands*, 2016, three-hour durational performance, charcoal floor. Photo: Courtesy Manja Williams. All photos © 2016 Draw to Perform.



Top: Agnieszka Karasch and Ram Samocha, *Rotations/Binding*, 2016, drawing performance. Photo: Courtesy Marco Berardi. Bottom: Emma Fält, *On loneliness and contact—togetherness in drawing*, one-hour workshop held at Draw to Perform 3, Crows Nest Gallery, London 31 July 2016. Photo: Courtesy Loredana Denicola. All photos © 2016 Draw to Perform.

and erasers to their hands with tape. This aspect of resistance and interplay of control between the two bodies raises questions of who is drawing. At times the artists allow the medium to intervene and dictate their movement. The artist's body becomes material itself as one artist pulls and drags the other across the paper fixed horizontally to the floor. Sitting within proximity allows the audience to experience the tactile sensations and the intensity of the actions producing sweat, exhaustion, and trace.

The collaborative performances of Lezli Rubin-Kunda and Núria Guix, and artists Bruno Casanova and Kristian Vuksanovic, discover the ways two bodies can simultaneously work together with methods of marking and erasure. Robert Luzar and Greig Burgoyne move away from the need to leave a physical mark or trace, shifting focus to the movement and coexistence of bodies in a certain space. Interested in the spirit of drawing rather than visuality, Robert Luzar and Claire Undy's *Four Steps For Lighting Balls and Chords* explores drawing as a way of communicating thought by creating a dialogue through action based on the self and materials. In a small, intimate room with one window and an open door, the artists move between the roles of holding a light with a cord, moving small pieces of black tape across a wall, or rolling heavy metal balls along the ground. Continually in states of transition, Luzar and Undy remain constantly in dialogue throughout the performative process, their gestures forming as suggestions are made either bodily or verbally to each other. Inspired by Kandinsky's elements of point, line, and plane, *Four Steps For Lighting Balls and Chords* questions the gesture and perhaps how it can consistently remain in states of becoming and moving forward.

What next and where to now? Physical linearity and curves are recognized in the silhouettes of the artist's body or the tape adhered to the wall, but I believe the *drawing* in this performance is the concept of the gesture. Even so, the traceable forms of the silhouettes or tape will not remain for long and soon disappear with each subsequent gesture. It is almost as if the artist's body becomes the agency of movement just before and after the trace of human movement. Here, drawing is established without the need for the evidence of the mark. For Luzar, "Drawing is how you start something, how do you go on." This performance didn't leave a material residue or *drawn* mark behind, but rather left a collection of objects on the floor so that the only archival trace of this live drawing is solely in its memory. Luzar explains, "What I'm interested in is a kind of 'point': how do you make something that maybe doesn't leave anything behind, but maybe 'traces' something, towards a future form." This is where drawing and live performance intersect so adeptly; both of these artistic forms derive from a bodily gesture. It is through live performance that drawing's gesture can be expanded.

Drawing has evidenced itself as a tool for communication throughout history. We pick up a pencil to write, to mark, to show, to illustrate, to explain, to map, and to measure. It is a way of revealing the personal (perhaps even at times unconscious), or of evidencing and formulating knowledge. To make a mark is to make meaning. For de Zegher, "Drawing is characterized by a line that is always unfolding, always becoming and in the drawing's stages of becoming—mark becoming line, line becoming contour, contour becoming image . . ."3 In performance, when we only have gesture, movement, and the body in constant transition, is a final product relevant anymore? Throughout *Draw to Perform 3*, the majority of the live performances left material remnants which co-existed between the subsequent performances to follow. These traces evidence the accumulation of multiple periods of time which began and finished during the symposium. Interestingly, the multiplicity of performances happening within the same space reflects the constant stream of fleeting images found on a social media feed. Not long after the performance has ended, there is often the surging output of photographic or video documentation from the audience via social media sites, and sometimes even live streams. All of that becomes evidence of another way in which the audience participates by contributing to a perspective or further projection of the work. In this way, the ephemeral nature of live performance seems to be turned eternal through its online existence.

So why even see the live performance? Each fragment of documentation is one individual's perspective and is not comparable to the live experience: the tactile sensibilities, the opportunity to participate in a direct and intimate exchange, the intensity of sensations or the emotion which transpires. The presence and energy of the audience is crucial to live performance. Abramović constantly stresses that the performance would not be the same without the audience. For in the event of challenging her bodily limitations, she relies on the energy of the audience, stating: "I could never do this alone."⁴ This exchange of energy shows how the audience can play an integral role particularly in the event of drawing. As the marks made are direct communication of thought, feeling, and subjective experience (responsive to the present moment), the role of the audience and how they directly contribute and affect the live drawing performance is significant. Samocha reflects on the opportunity the live situation offers: "it gives you a different perspective on drawing, how much you can let go." The presence of the audience is significant in exploring the relationship and interaction between two artists within the space of a performance area as well as incorporating the audience through participation and exchange. Whether working with methods of improvisation, limitations and control, concepts and rules, emotional energy, or demonstrating a process, the live context opens up and enables a unique experience for realizing the potential of drawing. The symposium *Draw to Perform*

demonstrates the possibilities of drawing in the live context, and how a discipline of immediacy, fluidity, and tactility can enable such a transformative experience. It discovers where the gesture can lead, develop and unfold, perhaps to places where it doesn't even (need to) leave a mark.

NOTES

1. Personal conversation with Catherine de Zegher on June 7, 2016, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium.

2. Catherine de Zegher, *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 23.

3. de Zegher, *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, 23.

4. Biesenbach, Klaus, "Klaus Biesenbach in Conversation with Marina Abramovic" in *Marina Abramovic*, eds. Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach, and Chrissie Iles (London: Phaidon, 2008), 64.

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