

**ily cere-
cahier**

**some notes on drawing
amy sillman**

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Amy Sillman Faux Pas.

Selected Writings and Drawings

EXPANDED EDITION

Foreword by
Lynne Tillman

Edited by
Charlotte Houette
François Lancien-Guilberteau
Benjamin Thorel

Athene
Books

The following text is a revised version of a talk given at the symposium, “Figures of Conjunction: Experience and Interest in Politics, Theory, and Art,” a “temporary free academy” organized by Helmut Draxler and Monika Baer, at the Kunstverein Nürnberg, November 18–21, 2014, with the participation of a dozen art professors and their classes from different schools in Germany. Sillman delivered this talk again on January 13, 2017, at the Menil Collection, Houston, TX, as part of the Menil Drawing Institute series, “Draw In: Conversations and Lectures on Drawing and Its Resonances.” This previously unpublished essay is an edit of the 2017 text; it condenses the second and third parts of the original talk, which relied heavily on the use of images.

Some Notes on Drawing

I have never understood myself as a painter, but really only as a draw-er, and I think there's a huge difference between the two. In the philological task of dividing the world into neat groups, there have been a lot of binaries made, some of them useful: the Greek poet Archilochus divided knowledge into two groups, fox vs. hedgehog. ("The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog just one big thing.")¹ The artist/writer Manny Farber divided art into "White Elephant" art vs. "Termite art." ("The clogging weight of a masterwork" vs. "the 'small sensation' . . . the tingling, jarring excitement where he nibbles away.")² For me, you can divide painting and drawing into eagle vs. beaver. A painter is like an eagle, a canny and noble bird who soars above us, doing something enlightened, getting the big picture. A drawer is more like a beaver who builds a dam from the ground up stick by stick, without an overview, but just with an animal urge to keep going until the thing becomes a form. Henri Matisse, a

1. William Harris, "Archilochus: First Poet After Homer" (2002), *Research Resources* 48, 96; available online at https://fordham.bepress.com/phil_research/48 (last accessed July 5, 2022).

2. See Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," *Film Culture*, no. 27 (Winter 1962–63). About this text, see "Further Notes on Shape," note 5, page 95. [Editors' note]

real draw-er, once said: “I threw myself into it like a beast that plunges towards the thing it loves.”³ If painting is “an expensive hunk of well-regulated area,”⁴ as Farber says, then drawing is a literal underdog. It’s a promiscuous, mongrel form, the whole medium an inherently expanded field.

Literally *everyone* draws—but then, people are always claiming that they “can’t” draw. Yet everyone with a pencil in their hand is doing some form of drawing. Handwriting is a kind of drawing; you’re drawing when you idly doodle on a scratch pad, diagram directions to your house on a cocktail napkin, or play Pictionary or hangman. You’re drawing if you furtively scrawl a message on a bathroom wall. Robert Rauschenberg did it by doggedly erasing a drawing he got from Willem de Kooning’s drawers. Joan Jonas did it standing in front of a projector, tracing the tip of a long stick on the ground. Carolee Schneemann did it with gravity, swinging like a pendulum in a hammock and letting a piece of charcoal bang against the wall. Trisha Brown did it lying sprawled on large pieces of paper on the ground with the charcoal between her toes.⁵ Tibetan monks sit cross-legged on the floor and delicately tip sand out of their palms to make a shape.⁶ Drawing’s procedures include so many different

3. “From the moment I held the box of colors in my hands, I knew this was my life. I threw myself into it like a beast that plunges towards the thing it loves.” Matisse quoted in Hilary Spurling, *The Unknown Matisse. A Life of Henri Matisse: The Early Years 1869-1908* (London and New York: Knopf, 1998), 46.

4. See Farber, “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art,” *art. cit.*

5. Sillman alludes here to Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), also mentioned in “AbEx and Disco Balls,” page 134; to Jonas’ *Reanimation* (2010/2012/2013), a performance now presented as an installation; to Schneemann’s *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-76), a performance turned into an installation as well, mentioned in “AbEx and Disco Balls,” page 139; and to Brown’s work with drawing, that she developed in close connection to her dance practice from the early 1970s. [Editors’ note]

6. The creation—and destruction—of mandalas made of sand is a tradition from Tibetan Buddhism. [Editors’ note]

kinds of actions that you can attach a different verb to everyone's drawing, which is why when I originally delivered these notes on drawing as a lecture, I began with a list of hundreds of verbs, each verb attached to a different artist with a different action that showed how expansive drawing might be.⁷ *Everyone draws*—until around puberty, and after that for some reason they either announce that they can't draw, or they *keep* drawing. Maybe the only thing that marks an artist is the presence of a double negative: an artist is someone who *doesn't* claim that they *can't* draw.

For me the ground zero of drawing was marked by a twist of fate: I traveled to Japan at age 19 and found myself washed over by an exhilarating waterfall of cryptograms, curlicues, and sonic particles that I could not decipher. It was easy to pick up the sonic alphabetic parts of Japanese, the kana: “kah,” “kee,” “koo,” “keh,” “ko,” etc.—but it was nearly impossible to learn the complex constructions of the kanji. It reminded me of the vivid time as a child when I already knew how to read block letters but I could only stare dumbly at a blackboard of cursive, a delirious set of Twombly-like loops that only older people knew how to read. Going to Japan meant something like that, a place where language was deliriously unhinged from its regular tasks and more visually alive than ever. The first line of Roland Barthes' book on Japan, *Empire of Signs*, is: “The dream—to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it.”⁸

7. This part of the talk was adapted and published under the title, “To Do List,” in *The Drawings of Susan Te Kahurangi King*, ed. Tanya Heinrich, exh. cat. (Miami: ICA Miami, 2016). [Editors' note]

8. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (1970), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), 6.

This feeling of forgetting knowledge and starting fresh came in handy later as equipment for loving abstract art, that other great site of wonderful alienation. But first I passed through the study of Japanese language and calligraphy.

Calligraphy is a composite of drawing + writing: like writing, it's done with a brush and ink on a blank background; like drawing, it's a visual language based on shape, gesture, and tonality; and, like drawing, it's usually done on a blank surface, a negative space that is taken into consideration in its overall composition. The scale of drawing, like writing, is generally based on the size of the tool, which means usually that it fits into your hand, though any body part could really do the mark-making, from the foot to the hair. (The eighth-century Chinese calligrapher Zhang Xu, known as Mad Zhang, famously drew with his hair while drunk; 1300 years later the Bahamian-born artist Janine Antoni thought of doing the same thing in her 1993 piece, *Loving Care*.)

Kanji is an aggregate of ideograms and phonemes, to which calligraphy adds the writer's own personal style, their signature, to an already-composite situation of picture + text, image + not-image. A glut of calligraphy-based painting emerged in postwar American art, especially in New York. When asked what "painterly painting" was, De Kooning said bluntly, "it's done with a *brush*."⁹ Generations of painters have had the calligraphic urge to tilt their brushes against their surfaces like writing tools, making asemiotic squiggles, slashes, stains and

9. De Kooning, interview by Emile de Antonio for the film *Painters Painting* (1972), quoted in Richard Shiff, "Willem de Kooning: Same Change," in *Late Thoughts: Reflections on Artists and Composers at Work*, ed. Karen Painter and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 37.

jots, from Franz Kline to Joan Mitchell to Ed Clark to Joan Snyder to Keith Haring to Joanne Greenbaum. Likewise, generations of writers and artists have had the reverse urge, to work against meaning in writing, to transcend meaning and change texts into calligraphic drawings—notably the artists from the Russian Cubo-Futurist movement, like Olga Rozanova and Aleksei Kruchenykh, who made little booklets and illustrated pages, as well as writers like Henri Michaud, Antonin Artaud, or the Lettrists Isidore Isou and Gabriel Pomerand, who explored how wide the boundaries of language can be. All of this enterprise of scrambling the space between painting/drawing/writing establishes the aliveness in the grain of the urge to write.

In ancient Asian calligraphic traditions, value was literally placed on life itself, on the breath, and how well the calligrapher incorporated breath itself into the work. François Cheng, in his book *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, writes that “failure to capture the breath is the very sign of mediocre painting.”¹⁰ The brush and ink in Chinese painting were described anthropomorphically, like intimate partners in a sexualized relationship; and the marks or lines of the calligraphy were alive in partnership with the paper like a three-way. The ink, brush, and paper worked together, or in a familial division of labor, and the artist was a kind of switchboard operator, hooking up lines between mark making and meaning-making.

Eventually, in a long twentieth-century mishmash, specific medium distinctions between painting and drawing were blurred, and I came into art when this attitude was at its height,

10. François Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting* (1991), trans. Michael H. Koh (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1994), 63.

learning painting in college in the 1970s from older teachers who came from action painting and embraced this tradition of working from instinct and the body, and from younger artists whose work was organized around newer “time-based” forms like modern dance and performance art rather than the composition of easel paintings. But you can still look at what constitutes a drawerly thing to do. You could even decide, as I did, to be a draw-er, not a painter *per se*. Drawing, done at the site of that feverish thing, the body, was down and dirty. While painting requires canvas, oil paint, and expensive real estate, drawing, painting’s cheaper cousin, can be done with nothing but paper and pencil. So it could be done in the throes of a complicated encounter between substance, surface, and your body, seeing what emerged in an improvisational activation of haptic relationships between eye and hand, hand and tool, body and surface, the page and whatever lay beyond the page. Drawing was residue, surplus, a mere recording of whatever happened while doing it. It was of-the-moment, fragile, yet flexible enough to be erased, redone, *détourné*, changed, and therefore available to fluidly go backwards in time as well as forward. A friend of mine stated that “drawing is the thinking of painting.” That is true if you conceive of thinking as something that the body does, not just the brain. I always say I can only think with a pencil in my hand, and maybe draw-ers are people who need to feel something in their hand while thinking the world into existence. While making a drawing, you are looking down, out, across, around, and shifting boundaries between what is inside and what is outside, because as you draw your consciousness moves from inside your body toward the outside world, but you also simultaneously drag the outside world into your hand and

eventually down onto your page. So drawing serves as a kind of liminal thinking machinery, a kinesthetic field where limits are felt, re-negotiated, re-presented. Drawing, then, is a living thing, a go-between, a genuine medium. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes in his book *The Pleasure in Drawing*, “all pleasure aims toward the coming together of an ‘outside’ and an ‘inside’ whose distinction and relation are opened by *feeling*.”¹¹

Drawing feels its way both backwards and forwards in time. Far from being a preparatory or preliminary act, a sketch or a rehearsal, drawing is a constant respooling of chronological time and circular time, where “knowing” builds up over time, but also loops back onto itself. Drawing is a particular time-based art because not only can you see self-reflexively from both inside and outside simultaneously, but you might also be thinking about something else entirely. Nancy’s book constantly underlines process rather than the drawing object; he keeps saying that drawing is a form that is forming, a form opening by forming itself. There is an ecstatic pleasure of this simultaneity, this shimmer of something uncertain coming into being. All drawing is in this sense aleatory. You cannot memorize a drawing’s steps and recreate them exactly: to draw is never the same as to simply repeat or copy, just as when you walk, each step is not a copy of the step that came before, but a new step. The drawing emerges from the body as the moments of time unspool, each with its own little pulse or heartbeat. Therefore all drawing is a kind of free drawing. Drawings are propositions, posited in the present, iterated by its ground, its literal soil, negative space.

11. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing* (2007), trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 86.

John Berger wrote: “Drawings are only notes on paper . . . The secret is the paper.”¹² Paul Cézanne went even further: “There is no such thing as line, no such thing as modeling, there are only contrasts.”¹³ So a drawing can boil down to nothing more than a kind of pulse in a forcefield.

Farber again, on “Termite art”: “A peculiar fact about termite tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.”¹⁴ Recently I heard a scientist on the radio playing a field recording of a caterpillar scraping chlorophyll off a leaf. It was an almost inaudible, even-paced thrumming sound, and the scientist explained that in biology, this tiny rhythmic beat has the almost magical correlative effect on the plant to make it want to grow back more vigorously. I think drawing provides something similar on the human consciousness: seeing the network of lines, the strokes and rubbings of a handmade drawing brings us to the edge of something, a little bit of energy or moment of time unfurled. What we get from drawing is in its small particularities, and the tiny jolt of sensation, of desire, as the drawing communicates something across from one body to the other. Drawings, “whether graphic, vocal or colored, tactile or verbal,”¹⁵ as Nancy says, come from out of the body and stay close to the language of the body that makes the drawing. This

12. John Berger, “To Take Paper, to Draw. A World through Lines,” in *Drawing Us In. How We Experience Visual Art*, ed. Deborah Chasman and Edna Chiang (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 123; first appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* (September 1987).

13. See Maurice Denis, “Cézanne” (1907), trans. Roger Fry, *Burlington Magazine*, XVI (January–February 1910); reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (London: Blackwell, 1992), 40–47.

14. See Farber, “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art,” *art. cit.*

15. Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, *op. cit.*, 39.

makes drawing an impulse-driven thing. Like living in a body, it can be seductive, secretive, dirty, fun, ragged, uncertain, full of bloopers and gas and emission and decomposition. In finding form, drawing *in-forms*, *re-forms*, and *trans-forms*.

Thinking about termites and beavers, I looked for an essay from the world of biology or entomology that would extend my ideas about drawing. I found one from 1995, by the philosopher and feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, entitled “Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death.” In this essay, Grosz describes the actions of mating praying mantises. Her description of the sex lives of these strange insects perfectly matches what I would say about drawing, so I took a paragraph from her essay, and replaced the words “desire” or “sex” with the word “drawing.” Here’s how it goes: “DRAWING experience is uncertain, non-teleological, undirected. It upsets plans, intentions, resolutions; it defies a logic of expediency and the regimes of signification. Its temporality is neither one of development nor that of investment. Nor is it a system of recording or memory; the memory of ‘what happened’ may be open to reminiscence, but the intensity of DRAWING, the sensations of voluptuousness, the ache of DRAWING [has] to be revived in order to be recalled.”¹⁶ Doesn’t this sound just like that promiscuous thing that we all love, that thing called drawing? ♦

16. See Elizabeth Grosz, “Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death,” in *Space, Time and Perversion. Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 187–205.

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ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

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