

DO, UNDO, REDO:

On Recent Drawings by Peter Morrens

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‘Watt did not of course wonder all these things at the time, but some he wondered at the time, and the others subsequently. But those that he wondered at the time, he again wondered subsequently, together with those that he did not wonder at the time, over and over again. And many other things in this connexion also, of which some at the time, and the others subsequently, Watt wondered subsequently also, time without number.’¹

Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (1953)

Remaking Drawing

A long time in preparation but executed only recently, Peter Morrens’ new suite of drawings has, in line with his practice more broadly, involved the reworking of existing images, most of which were of his own making. The original intention had been to remake a selection of his previous drawings in a new, standardized format. However, having just left his life in Lier and relocated his studio and archives to Antwerp, a much wider array of material surfaced. This material presented itself as a kind of ‘time capsule’ of past ideas, memories and experiences, now newly available for reworking.² The resulting drawings, made with black charcoal and graphite on A3 paper, each translate some kind of personally resonant pre-existing image: Morrens’ own older drawings, yes, but also a variety of source images, found fragments from magazines, old installation shots, his own children’s early drawings, book illustrations, salvaged words and phrases, crude photocopies, and private photographs.

What is at stake here? Firstly, there is the question of drawing itself: its materials, its processes, its registration of bodily activity, its mediations. Secondly, and in a related way, there is the question of time and its inscription. Morrens presents us with a model of time that is radically incomplete and susceptible to vast shifts in tempo; one that is both haunted and projective. Thirdly, the project also bears upon the question of contemporary artistic identity. Here we find Morrens operating in the dynamic space between opposed positions: coherent sense-maker and champion of paradox; earnest communicator and mercurial trader in ironies and expletives; receiver of impressions and producer of the new. These tensions are never resolved, but rather generate the energy to keep on making.

In recent years, drawing has frequently been characterised by its indexicality.³ According to the American philosopher C.S. Peirce, an index is a type of sign that has some existential connection with its object, pointing directly to it. Imprints such as footprints, bullet holes, and analogue photographs silently indicate physical contact with that to which they refer.⁴ The drawn mark is an indexical sign for the artist’s hand and (via an extrapolation that is far from secure) his or her subjectivity. As well as contributing, perhaps, to the production of resemblances (‘iconic’ signs, for Peirce), or of arbitrary conventional representations of objects or ideas (‘symbolic’ signs), the drawn mark also

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, London, 2009, p. 111.

² Peter Morrens, email to the author, 20th February 2014.

³ See, for example, Michael Newman, ‘The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing’ in: Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act*, London and New York 2003, pp. 93-108, and Margaret Iversen, ‘Index, Diagram, Graphic Trace’, *Tate Papers* 18, autumn 2012 (online).

⁴ Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds.), 6 vols., vol. 2, Cambridge MA, 1934-1936, pp. 274-303.

evidences the process of production with particular directness. Here we find Morrens both exploiting this directness and, by way of a host of techniques of marking, erasing, sanding, masking and re-inscribing, also layering and complicating such traces, often rendering them indeterminate and ambiguous. Wildly diverse on the level of subject matter, the drawings are nevertheless set on a standard scale, use consistent media, are made by the same hand and have been collected into one book. If this is quite far from chaos, however, we should also not expect an elaborated thesis either, but rather an 'oxymorrens' and 'productive confusion'.⁵

LIFE, one part reversed

Z.T. (2007) was an important drawing for Morrens that constituted a fictive front page of the international edition of *LIFE* magazine, made using oil paint, watercolour and pencil on paper. Here, *LIFE*'s logo is accompanied by an outsized sausage, curled up like a desublimated symbol of eternity. A disruptive, comical coup, this was a work to be re-made for the current project. However, in returning to the original source material, other ideas displaced this first intention. Morrens cropped his image, leaving aside the irreverent sausage and focusing more directly upon the logo: four capital letters, very familiar and making up a word so loaded with meaning as to be flattened out under the pressure. Except that Morrens has reversed the 'F', has included the smaller word 'INTERNATIONAL' beneath it, and 'HISTORY' below that.

'HISTORY', however, has been subjected to quite an ordeal: rubbed, scraped, worn, ripped and smudged. The whole image, which retains the bold graphic impact of the magazine design, is nevertheless busy with the evidence of sustained handling: the black marks are bold, scored, heavy. Smudges and trails of powder, debris from the process of making, reveal the textured grain of the surface. Text justified left, with the right hand side of the page all but empty, the operations of asymmetrical cropping, juxtaposing, inscribing and erasing enter into a compressed and suggestive relationship with the words presented. What happens to the drawn words has implications for the concepts they indicate: 'History' struggles for presence amidst aggressive erasures; 'International' is far from seamless, riven as it is by smudges and dust; and 'Life' has been culled from a pervasive popular media, with one part reversed. The connotations, ricocheting from signifier to signified, soon pile in.

Vermeer, quickly

Vermeer's paintings are emblems of a kind of heightened temporal suspension. In them time is held up by an extraordinary lambency. These are not moments cropped from the continuous fabric of duration, but rather ones paused over, raised to the condition of internal images that have been woven together by the intensifying threads of recollection. Taken up by the febrile energy of Morrens' process, however, a blur renders the Dutch master's *View of Delft* (c.1660) like a landscape seen from a moving train: hurtling, fragmentary, merely glanced. Is this a new kind of 'slipping glimpse', to recall Willem de Kooning's famous self-characterisation, and one newly attuned to the splintered rhythms, currents and collisions of contemporary life?⁶ It should be stressed, however, that even when Morrens' work is 'fast', which is by no means always, this has little to do with the lightning speeds of digital transfer. Rather, its roughness and evident facture check that kind of limitless dematerialized speed. Indeed, time in Morrens' work has neither uniform tempo nor unambiguous direction. It is not a time of discrete successive moments, but one of recursivity, retroaction and incompleteness. As with this current project, his tendency is constantly to revisit and re-engage works that have not yet escaped the studio. The past is constantly hauled into the present to be configured anew.

Morrens' output also has a slow and, if not quite meditative, then at least decelerated aspect. His ongoing series of pictures based upon hi-fi speakers, with repetitive grids like 'perverse Agnes Martins', contaminated by explicit popular reference, for example;⁷ or his spare but laborious draw-

⁵ Peter Morrens himself made this neologism in an email to the author, 14 January 2014.

⁶ For a discussion of de Kooning's self-characterisation, see, for example, Richard Shiff, *Between Sense and de Kooning*, London, 2011, pp. 234ff.

⁷ This is Morrens' phrase, spoken in conversation with the author, Antwerp, 3th February 2014. The discussion could usefully be extended, given Martin's own very spare use of everyday fragments and detritus in her work from the early 1960s.

ings of gridded notepapers, which, scaled up by 300%, engage repetition and constraint to allow thought to fall away from the process of making. Morrens, since his first visit to Kyoto, has been fascinated by the the city's famous zen gardens. Here, experiencing these places in real time, the clarity of knowledge is balanced, exhilaratingly, by an equally strong sense of the enigmatic and ungraspable. The different but equally strong paradox between meditative and touristic experiences also struck him, and here it is apposite to recall the tragi-comic predicament of Italo Calvino's *Mr Palomar*. Visiting the famous Ryōan-ji gardens, Palomar, try as he might, is unable to bracket out his real, situated, jostled condition for the sake of the desired spiritual effects:

"If our inner gaze remains absorbed in the viewing of this garden," explains the pamphlet offered visitors, in Japanese and in English, signed by the abbot of the temple, "we will feel divested of the relativity of our individual ego, whereas the sense of the absolute / will fill us with serene wonder purifying our clouded minds."

[...]

These 'instructions for use' [...] seem [to Palomar] perfectly plausible and immediately applicable, without effort, provided one is really sure of having a personality to shed, of looking at the world from inside an ego that can be dissolved, to become only a gaze. But it is precisely this outset that demands an effort of supplementary imagination, very difficult to muster when one's ego is glued into a solid crowd looking through its thousand eyes and walking on its thousand feet along the established itinerary of a tourist route.⁸

Fast and slow, contemplative and distracted: Morrens tends to work with dialectical pairings so as to dramatize sets of opposed qualities without synthesizing them into a sublated whole – past and present, chance and control, crude and refined, oblique and direct, trivial and pressing. That Morrens makes artworks under different names (PM, Herman Smit, Point Blank Press) is not so much the issue as the way his work figures a distracted, receptive and mobile subjectivity. We might say that his work is propelled from a force acting in the gap where a fully integrated subjectivity might have been.

Point Blank (Shooting or Shot?)

As Point Blank Press, Peter Morrens acts as a piece of aural flypaper. Sitting on the train, in a café, on the street, reading a book, in the world, a phrase will stick. Public space abuzz with words thrown into mobile phones, issuing past a smile, rising from a page of printed text like a slap. Dutch, French, English and German words that stick in the mind, quickly noted down, salvaged from pure contingency:

"A certain brutality"

"I am what is around me"

"Die macht der dinge"

"Tinten orgasmus"

"Farce mental"

"I don't LIKE you"

"The arena of fragmentation and repetition"

"In your face"

Language that has been chanced upon, caught in the mobile net of attention, is then set down again onto pages from school pupils' exercise books. These pages, with their regular grids and lines, variously faded and browning, originally produced to aid in instruction and obedience, are then filled with urgent, crude, gauche, undisciplined writing. The writing has an anti-professional, punk flavour – it carries something of the expletive, the slogan, the insult, the plea, the powerful lyric.⁹ The title 'Point Blank' signals that no skill or aim is necessary: this is pure, inevitable collision. And the

⁸ Italo Calvino, *Mr Palomar*, translated by William Weaver, London, 1985, pp. 83-84.

⁹ Comparisons might be made to Raymond Pettibon's work, although Morrens' production is less readerly, less 'intertextual'. On Pettibon, see Benjamin Buchloh, 'Raymond Pettibon: After Laughter', *October*, vol. 129, Summer 2009, pp. 13-50.

artist, what is he doing? Registering, noticing, recording, selecting, repurposing, relaying: enacting, to borrow from Leo Steinberg's famous discussion of Robert Rauschenberg's work, 'the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.'¹⁰

A Vocabulary of Action

'Criticism must begin by recognizing in the painting the assumption inherent in its mode of creation. Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction – psychic state, concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked.'¹¹

Harold Rosenberg: 'The American Action Painters' (1952)

Energetically worked, overworked and reworked, Peter Morrens' drawings testify to an intense physical process: urgent, tactile, involved. The images that Morrens chooses to translate themselves often carry complex and ambiguous associations: a street-lit night scene, viewed from high above, somewhere between film noir and CCTV; the cabin in which Le Corbusier worked and near which he drowned; an ecstatic image of a woman's face, with blurred edges connoting the flush of bodily sensation; a Duchampian diagram of cylindrical stage lights; a sublime mountain landscape turned strange cinema by the presence of an uneven white rectangle; words drawn, smudged, erased, and deformed; the sheen of a metallic tray, playing with depth and flatness; a bent piece of paper; a car crash. The artist's facture of the drawings variously nuances or interferes with these associations. In one untitled drawing, for example, a candle and its mirrored reflection are rendered by rich, silky vertical charcoal strokes evoking the 'Big Arm Sweeps' of de Kooning, or the calligraphic boldness of Franz Kline. This confident gestural work of the body is set against an image that involves both spectral replication and, via the candle's central place in the symbolic tradition of still life, finitude. Often the work of Morrens' hand is less bravura, however: rubbings, smudgings and scuffings abound, building up the surface of the drawing with a patient deliberateness. Areas of dense graphic activity are also often cut sharp by a masked edge, cropping the image and leaving large parts of the page white. All this evidence of the artist's work is not really a question of manual style or expressive immediacy, but it does nevertheless have to do with intensity, and indeed humour. Morrens speaks of the centrality of strong personal experiences and feelings in his practice, with each drawing charged with the weight of private memories and associations, as well as with the sense of urgency, ambiguity and even ridiculousness that often accompanies reflection upon such resonant experiences. It is perhaps the urgency of the facture, eloquent of a physically concentrated working process, that indexes this affective content most directly for the viewer. While the artwork is not a transparent window into another person's consciousness, an apprehension of the 'grain' of the lively working body is unmistakable.¹² It is this 'grain', this interference and impurity, that Morrens' work feeds on, holds up and sets to work. In this way the manner in which the physicality of art's materials and processes is declared has something to do with a type of engagement with the extra-artistic world. Morrens' drawings above all give form to an attitude: unprecious, energetic, inclusive, disobedient and paradoxical. Obliquely, they suggest a *modus operandi* for negotiating the everyday world and, as such, constitute their own kind of interpretation of it.

¹⁰ I quote from Steinberg's classic invocation of Robert Rauschenberg's picture plane as an analogue for mental processes (Leo Steinberg, 'Other Criteria' [1972] in Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art*, Chicago, 2007, p. 88.)

¹¹ Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Oxford, 1993, p. 29.

¹² Roland Barthes wrote that 'The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. If I perceive the 'grain' in a piece of music and accord this 'grain' a theoretical value (...), I inevitably set up a new scheme of evaluation which will certainly be individual - ... - but in no way 'subjective' (it is not the psychological 'subject' in me who is listening; the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce – to express – that subject but, on the contrary, to lose it).' Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *Image-Music-Text*, selected and translated by Stephen Heath, Glasgow, 1977, p. 188.