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Everyone knows what drawings are, but the contemporary drawing, as a category, covers a multitude of sins—and joys. How do we now define drawings? Exhibitions called shows of drawings by the people who put them together are a place to start. Here, for some time now, it has been the practice to identify drawings as works on paper that are one of a kind, are not prints or monoprints, and leave it at that.

The material nature of an artwork is usually noted as, for instance, "pencil on paper," "acrylic on linen," and "oil on canvas"; and these dual constructions are referred to as the "medium." Nevertheless, for sake of clarity, in what follows I will use "medium" to mean that which is applied to the "support," which in turn will be defined as the physical nature of the plane. Please note, however, that although it is usual to emphasize the marking or coating material, the support material is by no means neutral but influences the reception of the application. Artists of any material sensitivity learn to adjust to, manipulate, and take advantage of this give-and-take. Out of necessity, "paper" in this essay stands for papers of many different qualities.

The support and not the medium, the method, or the linearity tends to be the defining characteristic of the drawing category when it comes to common, art-world usage. Graphite, watercolor, pastel, oil stick, and even paint applied to paper, according to this working definition, will result in drawings. Handmade paper forms an entirely separate category. Drawings must be paper, but as far as I can figure out artists also have to mark or coat that paper with another substance in order to have their work qualify as drawing.

Several other contemporary definitions of drawings must also be considered. Drawings can be defined as works on paper that eschew color and impasto; this definition makes a clear distinction between drawings and paintings. One could go even further: drawings are graphite, chalks, inks, and charcoal on paper. They may employ tone and value but must

never use hue. Texture that calls attention to itself is also disallowed.

Whether or not we need categories at all is a big question. It seems that we do if we are to be able to say—and perhaps see—anything at all. So if we must have them, why not make them aesthetically productive? Clear limits have been known to produce a focus not otherwise generally available. One could, of course, go further yet and limit our use of the term to the linear, but I for one would feel uncomfortable without the option of tonality. There is only so much history you can eliminate, just as there is only so much history you can embrace.

Defining drawings as compositions made of lines has the advantage of accommodating less traditional works but risks perpetuating the confusion between drawings as artifacts and drawing as an activity. Drawing is often thought of as delineation or the making of linear configurations, regardless of support or medium. One can draw on paper, but also on canvas, on the curved surface of a bowl, on a wall, or on an expanse of earth. One can even draw in the sky or in the air—as Picasso did with a flashlight, in a well-known film. (Or was he really drawing on film?)

If drawings are any artworks made with lines, they need not be made by hand, anymore than they need to be drawn from life: one can "draw" with a bulldozer. Computers take drawings made with the straightedge and compass one step further. One can plot a drawing now as well as draw one. Are all these examples drawings? Yes, if we mean by drawings the creation of linear configurations and little else.

Thus, I see three broad definitions of drawings now in operation: 1. a descriptive definition, 2. a proscriptive definition, and 3. a visual definition. The first restricts drawing by requiring that the support be paper; the second restricts drawing even further by requiring that the support be paper and that the media be only of certain kinds; the third restricts drawings to the linear but allows all media and any or no support. It should also be said that the first two definitions require that the work be limited to two dimensions, whereas the third can be stretched to include kinds of three-dimensional art that are sometimes referred to as "drawings-in-space" (selected works by Picasso, Calder, David Smith).

In any case, no matter how one defines the contemporary drawing or piles up the necessary and sufficient attributes to clarify the category, everywhere there are drawings in great numbers. Most of these are of the more or less traditional sort that would fall under my first two definitions. This was not so fifteen years ago. Drawings were then being produced as working sketches, as notes, as exercises in provincial classrooms, as nostalgia. And so-called nonart drawings in the form of renderings, diagrams, plans, doodles, and, alas, graffiti seem eternal. The difference is that very few of these were shown in art spaces, and if they were, critical and market attention was withheld. Because of the taste for the clean and hard-edge look, which may or may not have had some relationship to the Corporate Logo Syndrome; because of the rise of minimalism and conceptualism and their related aesthetic conundrums; and because of the need for emotional distance in reaction to social upheaval, personal expression that could be represented by drawings was not rewarded.

What then accounts for the current widespread interest in drawings? Exhibition follows exhibition. Surely connoisseurship has not reached such vast proportions that we can say a greater sensitivity to touch and

nuance has been the cause. In the past, drawings were thought of as reserved for the specialist. Their charms were subtle, intimate, and predicated on a more refined eye than required by paintings executed on a public scale. I am not so sure this was really the case. Then as now, a drawing, no matter how preparatory, done by the hand of an acknowledged master of painting or sculpture was worth more and was more prized than a drawing, perhaps more accomplished, by a lesser light. And a drawing that showed identifiable characteristics of the master's style in more public forms was even more valuable. This still applies; there is indeed an accounting for taste. Taste is usually economic and therefore embarrassingly conformist.

Paintings or sculptures by celebrated and theoretically risk-proof artists are very expensive. The next best thing is a drawing. Many a timid collector starts with prints, moves to drawings, and finally, full of confidence, graduates to what are considered primary forms. Drawings are not only cheaper than paintings, they are also easier to store, transport, and display. (They are not really all that easy to protect, but that is another matter.) For whatever reason—lack of personal identity, greed, status seeking, or genuine need for aesthetic kicks and illumination—there is such a hunger for art throughout the land that even works on paper are pressed into service.

Are drawings nothing but a product to fill an art market hole, a sideline to supplement the incomes of dealers and artists? I find it difficult to name one critically or economically "successful" artist who has made his or her mark solely on the basis of drawings. Sol LeWitt first established himself with works in three dimensions. His remarkable wall drawings seem to be a genre unto themselves. Whatever they are—inscribed directly on walls, usually not by LeWitt himself—they are not traditional drawings, either in scale or medium, and they have spawned no important descendants.

The economics of art reception are balanced by the economics of art production. Not only are drawings less expensive to buy, they are also less expensive to make. An artist does not need a large loft in Soho (or anywhere) and an army of assistants to make a drawing. Any kitchen table or desk top will do, or even a pad on the lap. Since storage, shipping, and display costs are relatively modest, for artists as well as collectors and dealers, drawings are more economical than paintings or sculptures, which must be enormous enough to provide a focus for corporate lobbies, luxury lofts, and monster museums. The production of drawings—and this may be why they have remained for so long a "minor" art—does not require a major investment in materials or real estate.

The art hunger that has created the new art public has also produced huge numbers of artists and would-be artists. The finished drawing, the drawing per se, is their salvation. Artists can work out their art ideas in the form of drawings; these drawings in turn will test a potential market. Artists who elect to make the drawing their chosen vehicle might not even have to leave for New York, Chicago, or L.A. to make their mark. Framing may be a problem, but shipping—compared with the cost of moving paintings around—is cheap.

There are, however, other and perhaps deeper reasons for the drawing explosion. Aesthetic permission is always important. Ironically, minimalism and conceptualism—owing something to Dada, whether the artists and critics involved wish to admit it or not—cleared the way

for the total destruction of what I have called elsewhere the material criterion for art. As in Dada, anything could be art. It took only one small step to include traditional media along with piles of industrial units and words. Although much new drawing can be seen as a reaction to minimalism because of its effort to regain a certain expressive quality, it was minimalism when it was further reduced to conceptualism that opened the door to narrative structures. Repetition became theme and variation, and theme and variation became story.

Can we go even deeper? Drawings, in spite of a general increase in scale and ambition, remain intimate. If properly made and properly stored, bound-fiber sheets of wood pulp or rags can last as long as woven lengths of cotton duck or linen, but paper still has the feel and look of the ephemeral and the fragile. Drawings are not a very public art; they are for hallways, cluttered walls, and portfolios. These attributes can be seen as virtues and not as drawbacks. Bombast can be repulsive. At a time when it is generally acknowledged that the personal, the tactile, and the subtle have been too often dumped somewhere at the other end of the delete button, drawings fill a need. They may be representational or even abstract, but the preference now is for those that show some evidence of the human hand.

One view of modernism in art is that it may be seen—with the exception of Picasso and Matisse, who are always exceptions—as an effort to circumvent drawing and all it had come to stand for: the academy, middle-class taste for schematic representation, craft, and labor. Art should be more like science or philosophy and religion; it should be universal rather than personal; it should be removed from manual labor. Underlying this idea was a Cartesian notion that the mind and the hand (the body) are not only separate but opposed. We see this in Marcel Duchamp, in Piet Mondrian, and in the later Kandinsky. We are no longer so naive. We are aware of the dangers as well as the forced glories of this fiction. The senses may contradict each other, but at least they keep us from being adrift, from sinking into solipsism, and from spiritual arrogance.

Drawings, insofar as they are composed of lines or discrete marks on a surface made by hand, provide an entry to the aesthetic for the layperson and the artist. Anyone who has used a pencil or pen or even a stick to mark out moons or bean-pole rows or special zones on the naked ground, has a kinaesthetic connection to a drawing. The eye/hand pathways already exist. Handwriting and practical markings are only specialized forms of drawing. Some aspects of the personal, particularly the signs of the handmade, are transpersonal. If this is paradoxical, then drawings are, too. And so is art: I mark a surface; I make an image or a line or a shape that clearly does not belong here. I have left my mark.

Drawings, therefore, are efficient and devious. We are fascinated with them again because they are sonnets and not epics, because they are songs and not symphonies. Whether they are delicate or bold, abstract or representational, whole worlds of temperament may be expressed in them. There is sentiment as well as energy in the way a line grows thick or thin, the way an area moves from gray to black. Yet each line is a cut into the surface; each line offers the illusion of sincerity. In a good handmade drawing the hand is in control; the hand and the mind are one.