

On Drawings and Drawers: An Exploration Part 1

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Abstract

You might think that this is an essay examining the contents of a bed-side cabinet. But it is actually an accumulation of thoughts exploring the action and outcome of drawings, and the ways in which the act, the process, and the results both reflect and affect the person drawing: as a method of uncovering or revealing; as movement like unravelling; as open-ended cognition or the processing of thoughts; as adventure; as science; and as art. The essay concludes by briefly examining the ways in which technology has sealed the demise of a technique and process, transforming it to be at the whim of algorithms for Part 2.

Keywords

#drawing #thinking #art #research #ideating #walking #exploring #representing #graffiti #sgraffito #pictograms #petroglyphs

Suggested music: [Horace Silver - Doodlin'](#)

"A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face." - jorge luis borges

Although marks, traces and notations made by people across time and space have tended to change as a function of change (and other forms of what we might consider vehicles of progress), the essence is often the same: to document, to express, to visualise, and to communicate. Drawing as a sum of these practices is arguably a fundamental arts technique, and method of scientific inquiry. It is also a precursor to most forms of design, traditional and contemporary communication. As a process, drawing underscores diverse ways of interdisciplinary thinking: from computer science to abstract expressionism. Over time it hardly ever changed: etched, scratched, painted, or stepped. Yet in recent years it has transformed as a result of the pressures of speed and efficiency, attributed to technology.

The practice of drawing often tends towards people's simpler, wilder and more 'freestyle' instincts; it manages to encode complexity while it visually documents people's lived or felt experience. As an entry point into how we perceive and understand alternative realms or dimensions, drawing crosses boundaries while its form challenges capital pursuits of power, standardisation and homogeneity.

Before civilizations ever learned to write, they would make marks and draw. Drawing, with its roots in sgraffito, has remained one of the main ways in which people communicated with one another, seemingly across all other obstacles. As the basis of decorating the infrastructure of our lives, it is more often than not very functional: to decorate and communicate, to count or account for grain, to dispel the evil eye. In many ways, drawings will often reflect the requirements and aspirations of a drawer and his or her community, to navigate or even relatedly, to map. In some ways, drawing is a process of projection of human intent.

The impetus to draw has propelled many technological developments across time and space in terms of how drawing relates to text and its dissemination: from papyrus to the evolution of petroglyphs and pictographs, to more complex image manufacturing practices such as etching, as well as contemporary digital emoticons, to name a few. Ketchup drawings on a plate, tracings in dust, snow or frost and footprints are spontaneous, impermanent examples of drawings; a personalised form of creating land art by moving the body through a landscape. These days, however, we draw through our smart phone GPS trackers, making visible both our routes and routines.

Drawing is an art and a form of memorialization which people use to code their lives, and sometimes to explain reality; memorialised ideas and objects of significance, frequently resulted in compositions that gave them individual or collective meaning. Reproducing drawn images - for consumption or for pleasure - is a communicative function of drawings under the pressure of technology.

Arguably, sculptures and buildings in and of themselves are simply drawings brought into a three dimensional world.

As scientific diagramming or as map-making, drawings can often contextualise the world around us with an element of science. The function of a drawing (although one is not always necessary) in these instances has sometimes been to make things visible for the rational world: whether as maps of places, or charts showing the trajectory of stars. The act of drawing has often been repurposed from these spaces as a constant challenge to both perception and reality.

In some instances, the act of drawing is an exploration of the nature of reality. Drawers (i.e. people who draw) not unlike writers or annotators, are important preservers and interpreters of common as well as individual experience. Drawers therefore traverse ways of thinking, of being, and of making.

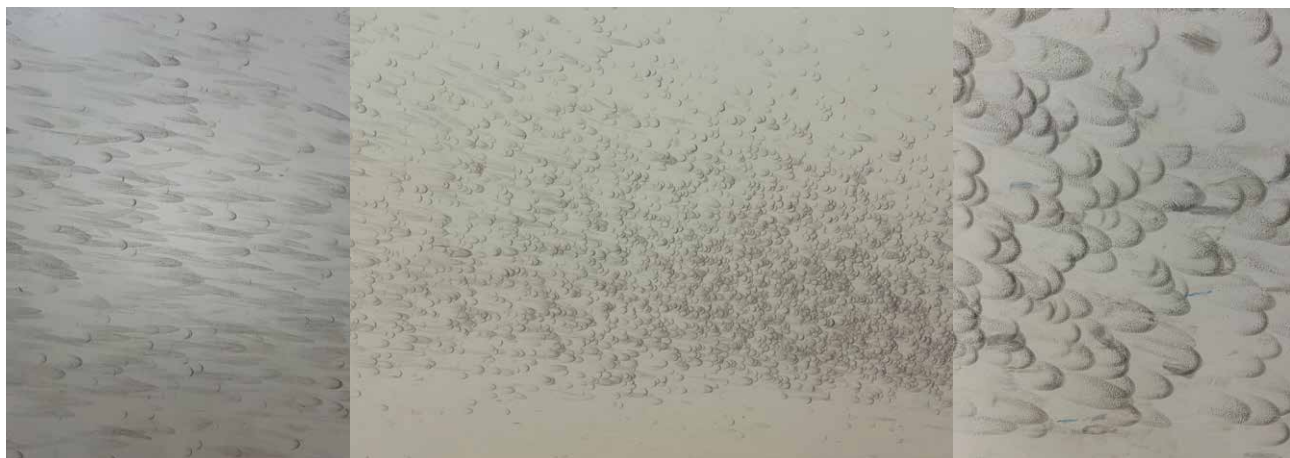


Fig.1 - Wall art as an amalgamation of squash ball trajectories over time.

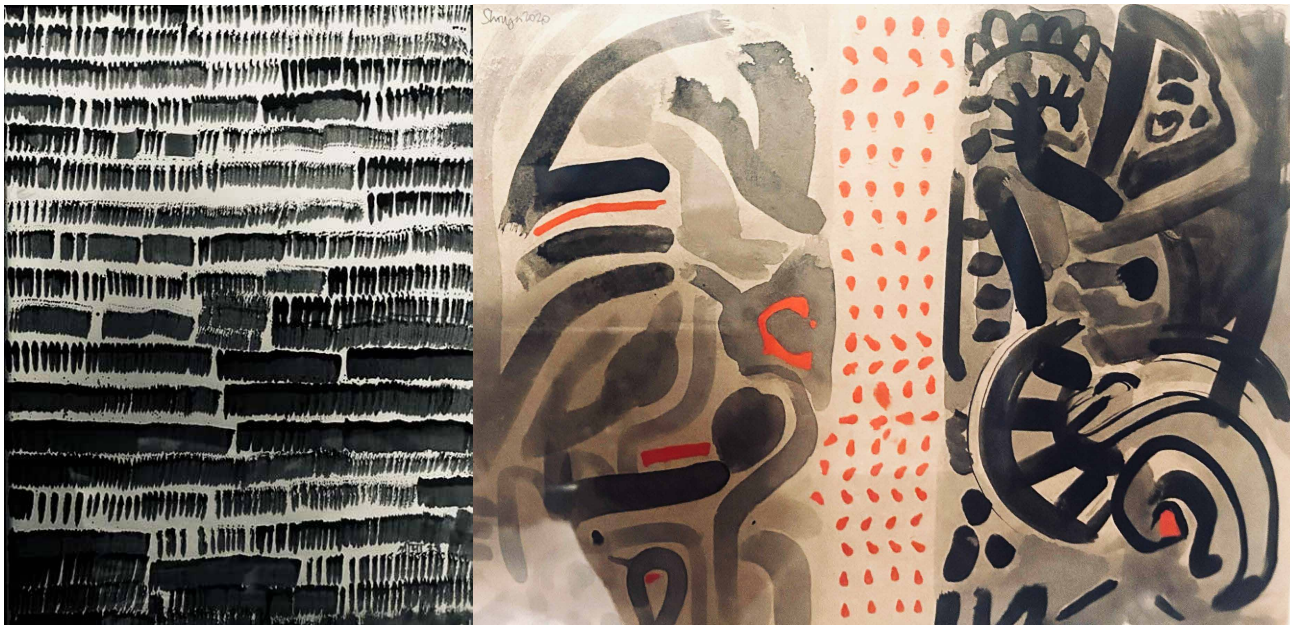


Fig.2 - A series of marks on paper document pace and percussion. A synchronistic painting as the negative space of academic painting.

Drawings, as a result, are also important socio-political and cultural relics: as artefacts and as modes of communication that remain in flux (in terms of form and material), subject to influence and transformations over time. They are sometimes random marks which resist the confining pressures of proportion, scale and function, drawing as an act of drawers often resists the parameters of digitisation and of the art world. This randomness, however, has changed over time often as a function of the impact of technological developments and the impetus for mass production. Interestingly, the function of drawings when viewed in retrospect is often cryptic to its viewers and analysts. Drawings are perhaps a precedent to codes.

Drawing is also often representative; it is how people used to write until digital fonts in this century replaced our personal scrawl. Nowadays, people make digital drawings – often very standardised, formatted, and efficient– the material properties of which have transformed how we communicate and how we think. Part of people’s experience of social atomisation is due to the increased ways in which technology fractures and attempts to replace ways of thinking and interacting.

People type with their fingers and press screens; they no longer draw to write, balancing a tool in hand—changing the basis of attempts to connect and to communicate. The process is cognitively different when we press for a result rather than process towards it. We may sketch ideas with efficiency, or draw with finger or stylus to screen, but given the domination of fonts and digital stylisation, we have also lost an aspect of what made our communication personal.



Fig. 3 - Magritte's work demonstrates how images and text as representation transform perception of reality.

The technological transformation of drawing has significant cognitive repercussions. Feedback loops, the satisfaction of your brain completing a thought and ascribing it to memory is being changed. We no longer draw or write and remember in our brains, an action which was fundamental to memory.

Drawing is often incorrectly considered as distinct from writing and text. But it is simultaneously a practice, a process and a product. Handwriting and drawing share many similarities and challenges in a digital era; in particular, the challenge of standardisation often leads to oversimplification. In the way that design can oversimplify information and conceal context, digitised or rasterized drawings tend to lose aspects of information ordinarily gleaned in process. Perhaps this is a lost in translation analogy; but with the transfer of knowledge through material changes, drawing as a form of knowledge and remembering undergoes a transformation.

Until recently, mysterious Peruvian petroglyphs on rocks, which were thought to be decorative or texts, have been hypothesised as the notation for music. While the intention and function remain debatable, it is clear that because the

tools and forms of drawing have undergone changes due to technology overtime, our understanding of these artworks has also remained limited. Stepping into the bounded world of archaeology, the reasons and practices of artworks made in the past are often cryptic for far longer than necessary. Not unlike paintings and other works of art, drawings are subject to the experience and the subjective analysis of the viewer. Although the tools and materiality differ they have implications on the drawer and the drawing. It is interesting to consider the relationship of a drawing to its creator, the drawer, and what that might reveal in the context of emerging technologies for communication as they blur boundaries of art and science.

The tendency towards thinking about drawing is to categorise and sub-contain it among other rigidly defined disciplines. But drawings, like drawers, perhaps need to be considered more independently. Whether drawings are the rational components of land art or the remnants of farming traditions to landscape, or paper-based flow charts, or elements in new dimensions, they warrant a distinct consideration in academia in order to understand the history of people’s expression and communication.

Planning a NGM vegetable garden and outdoor kitchen

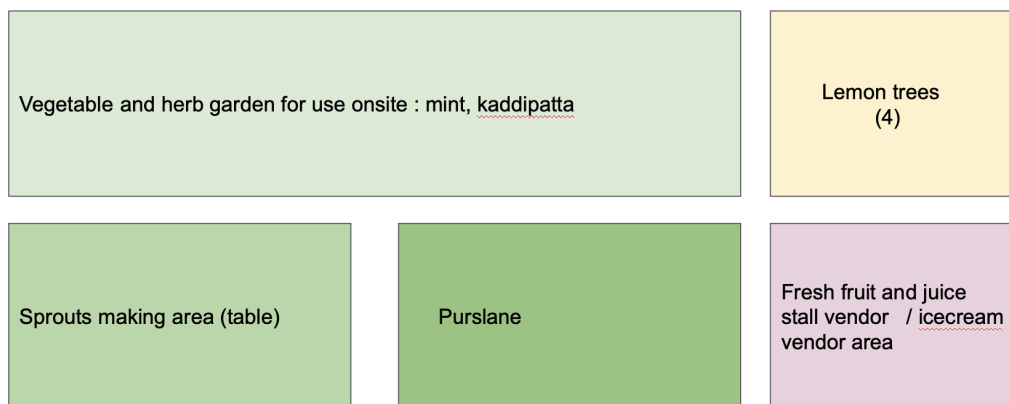


Fig.4 - A schematic for a vegetable garden and an outdoor kitchen at a national museum in Delhi sought to balance the built forms of a museum. What distinguishes this from architectural rendering is that there are no constraints of planning goals or parameters related to space; unlike architectural renders, this sought to connect place with natural landscape.

Drawings as a flow and as navigation was also reflective of cognition.

These days, artificial intelligence (AI) is able to draw and replace our imagination in an extension or the way in which contemporary information technologies seek to replace our memory. Drawing and drawers, resist this technological domination. And it seems in fact that for much of history, folk artists have incorporated styles and processes specific to drawing while scientific illustrators, architects and planners, and cartographers have also incorporated drawings as a form of expertise. Whether drawn by dancing with our feet, or with our hands. By drawing, drawers are exploring a dimension, where the hand and mind interact in a profound sense of place-making. Dancing, like thinking, is a discipline stemming from the desire to draw. Dancers in that sense are much like drawers in terms of how they think and make art - as performative and as process, as learning.

Owing to new often democratised technologies like apps, people no longer view drawing as a technical skill; we can now even draw lines by marking points across 3D space using our 2D phones. Drawing, its lines and dimensional considerations have often related it to disciplines in science like maths and geometry when it seems more suited to realms of art, anthropology and history. Art and mathematics are closely related disciplines particularly when they are isolated and disciplined. But both also exist in equal free flow formats - drawings which do not conform to geometry, grid or perspective, and graphing of mathematical derivatives which defy spatial constraints.

The history of drawing encodes different aspects of knowledge across geographies and places. The ways in which we might use ink and brush, or pencil on paper, the spatial and placemaking aspects and the tactile feel of tools on actual material surfaces is diminished by digitization and as a result a crucial, almost irreplaceable feedback loop is lost by digitising the tools of thinking and communicating.

The dance of groups as different tributes is used in order to communicate demands of weather while others understand physics or choreograph stories as the movement of bodies.

The drawing in this case emerges as the fluidity of footwork and hand gestures - often invisible and spontaneous. For the drawer, a lot depends on the tool you use: many of which blur the lines between construction and hobby, and can signify the level or stage in the cycle of progress.

Wall art is distinct for the ways in which it largely draws upon drawing practices. The love story of princess Shirin and the sculptor / stonemason Farhad, is an example of drawing (and carving) as decorative and functional, as well as of the ways in which surfaces are used to monumentalise stories. The story bridges the seeming divide of urban planning and portraiture as one in the same skill based on imagined utopian constructs: either love or the channelling of nourishment. In many ways it illustrates how drawing was a way in which oral traditions became more permanent artistic legacies. Drawing, like writing, is a way of memorising and memorialising.

There are stories about drawings in all contexts. In the classical Chinese style of drawn script, the word for music is the same as medicine; the character for medicine, yao (藥) is the same character for delight or music, yue (樂) with a component referred to as "a radical," (in this case also referring to herbs), seated on top.

Drawing as depiction is thus also the visual display of information contained by culture: whether as language, or aesthetic preference. In this case, the drawn script had encoded a hidden yet known aspect connecting traditional Chinese remedies of medicine and of pleasure.

In this case of classical Chinese, information has been coded through characters which are like little drawings. While often shrouded in mystery or relegated to the fringes of artistic experience and practices, drawings are actually fundamental to almost all creative and communicative practices.

Drawings using markings and symbols, known commonly as pictograms, have been known to depict complex interdisciplinary and often abstract concepts across time

and culture, from Egyptian hieroglyphics to emojis. By removing the process of drawing in a quest for efficiency, a lot of thought and process is also being standardised.

Arguably, fonts that comprise assorted languages are in and of themselves an example of micro drawings. This is reflected in language scripts particularly in their older more stylised and gestural forms where stylization resists the grid-like rigidity of western dominating contemporary design.

From Persian to Ancient Greek to Sanskrit – languages have evolved from drawings into standardised fonts. As a result what we may refer to as people’s graffiti has been replaced with fonts that are void of feeling, without any code or references. This is the risk of technological acceleration. It is worth exploring the shifts in drawing and drawers as a result of technological development influenced by product design.

Unlike most any other form of visual art, drawing (both the verb and the noun) implies connectedness: operating across multiple disciplines and dimensions, synchronising movement with thought, philosophy with image. Drawn scripts therefore present a challenge to design and digitisation. Drawing and writing are interrelated, and will likely remain inseparable.

Drawing as Walking

In western art history, drawing is seen as a precursor to painting and diagramming. But this is not all. It remains a funny thing about urban planning that the design of roads is always seemingly thwarted by the ways in which people will actually cross over space. Desire lines - or unofficial paths - have often been incorporated as user feedback from people regarding how they actually or informally use a space. They are also indicators of other non-humans that may traverse spaces. And in a sense, they are the drawings we leave, like a trail of graffiti, as feedback to the plans of experts that become etched into reality.



Fig.5 - Using the body and tracing or drawing shapes and trajectories in the snow. Trails and desire lines made by vehicles and people in the snow reveal how they move across shared and allocated space. Illustrations by Shriya Malhotra.

Footprints in the snow can inform architects about preferred routes and are almost a resistance to being handed plans; but rather than perceiving these lines as deviant, desire lines are an intentional way in which people draw with their feet as a way of visually depicting their reality, and their resistance. And what they are drawing is the preferred route, one that is often contrary to the imposed urban planning and artificial lines that are so frequently superimposed on the natural world (and onto the human condition, as well). They also confirm the limits of materials like asphalt, which tend to make us feel hotter by absorbing heat throughout the day, or which make the experience of walking harder on the knees.

The so-called people's resistance to the artificial lines imposed by computer drawings or unrelated planning and power structures reconfigure a necessary element to often artificial infrastructure and landscape. In this sense, walking is a form of more relevant map-making. Walking is also how we think; it is navigational. Long, almost endless walks - meanders - have been fundamental to the practice of many artists, as performance and as research, including writers like Richard Long and Vito Acconci. (Solnit, pg 180).

In western art history, drawing as an art discipline draws deeply from impressionism and the politics in France, where political and social revolutions created the impetus to write on walls. Walter Benjamin has reported that "around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them."

The flâneurs of Paris sought street life as inspiration for their art; later, the French situationists used the act of walking as a form of play. Although distinct periods that were many years apart, both demonstrate not just the ways in which cities were fundamental to the work of artists, but also how our trajectories and the ways in which navigate space informed the art works that emerged in the context of these times.

In our everyday lives, rushed by technologies that promote efficiency, drawing, like walking, is a way of maintaining a humane pace. It is an art. Solnit has noted: "the rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts" (p. 9) Movement is therefore just one of the ways in which people move through time and space, leaving their mark. And it is like music, often annotated or drawn for replicability.

Drawing as Thinking

Milani and Schoonderbeek (2010) locate the relationship between drawing and thinking as "cognitive representational instruments allowing for the construction of knowledge and communication, rather than 'simply' being the instruments that initiate an aesthetic pleasure via a visual appreciation." (2).

In *Drawing as Thinking*, Glaser notes that the absence of a text indicates a refusal to construct a narrative, giving no preconditions to how a viewer will experience it as either art or information. His discussions demonstrate that drawing is not simply a way to represent reality, but also a way to perceive the world. Unlike photographs or even drawings which tend towards realism, drawings capture both a visual and a perception, a process and a result. In these contradictions and dichotomies, drawings are experiential and experimental forms of communication.

The act of drawing in groups is a way of placemaking, of being in a space and interpreting not just the place but also the past and future. Drawing as a way of creative expression is a method of contained focus. Consider computer science drawings which encapsulate the action and flow of commands. In *Diagramming the Common*, Patricia Reed has argued that diagrams are a necessary way of thinking about the commons because they are descriptive and prescriptive. In this sense, they create a layer of depth in addition to dimensionality.

“Drawing emerges as a sort of ‘visual thinking’ (Milani & Schoonderbeck, 7). For drawing to be completely narrative free, however, they need to be distinct from science. Otherwise, drawings are also serving a rational economy or a purpose.

Viewing a drawing is a process of interaction and of perception. Handwriting is understood as reinforcing our memory and cognition through tactical interaction with materiality and space. Meanwhile, mind-mapping remains a more controlled planning and cognitive tool, “of drawings as a research tool for investigating various aspects of cognition, as well as the role that drawing has in facilitating learning and communication” (Nature). Drawing can unleash and make interactive images out of our perception, demonstrated in the way Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s sketches and annotations for his stories, along with that of other types of annotations which we often relate to edits. Dostoyevsky’s doodles reveal how his textual and visual mind interact.

Milani & Schoonderbeek (2010) survey the production of drawing practices in the context of architecture to observe that: “Drawing nowadays seems to be suspended in this in-between condition of objectivity and instrumentality, as image and information, as communication and science, whereas the theoretical field generated between these polarities seems to have lost its theoretical poignancy” (pg. 1).

Quoting Kent Fitzsimons on drawing and the body, they argue that drawing is a human and spatial capacity (pg. 4). However this is changing as a result of technological change and advancement.

Drawing as Exploring

In contrast to Western art history, Japanese poet Matsuo Basho is known for writing and painting his travels with Chinese ink. But his documentary brushstrokes are more akin to drawing with a paintbrush than to painting or placing pigments. Drawing, as demonstrated through his work, is a research method, an enabler of experimental forms of inquiry. It is a spatial practice, often seen in the work of professionals such as architects and urban planners.

The fight for free spaces of thinking are also arguably found through online derives, wandering through landscapes of information. Freedom from censorship is often found in the places that are not governed by other preconditions, including time. This method of meandering to explore, an adventure on dimensions and across them is also a function of drawing. It is in the same way that drawing allows a freestyle movement, uncontained and unrestricted.

Drawing serves as a form of visual documentation, and may be proposed also as a form of diagramming. In contemporary times, drawing is a function of coding (for instance languages of visual coding such as processing) that reveals that drawing, writing and coding are distinct but deeply interrelated aspects of a similar way of thinking that is evolving along a neoliberal economic trajectory.

Drawing as Understanding

Drawings make visible a stream of thought or a flow. They help us navigate our mind. As a way of making visible and visual the flows that connect our world, Mark Lombardi’s drawings epitomise the ways in which the act of drawing can render the visible and the invisible connections that surround us. They are precursors to all of the mind-mapping technologies that have been developed in recent years and demonstrate that proximity of and between different concepts makes overlooked things visible.

His work rose to prominence following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when the networked drawings became scrutinised as sources of information rather than simply cast aside as conspiracy theory: “visual narratives of the way money flows in our post-imperial, transnational economy: from corporations to political organisations, from individuals to various ad hoc groups, most of them acting outside of national boundaries —and often outside the law. Using graphite and red pencil, and information culled from newspaper accounts, television, and other sources in the public domain, Lombardi developed a new type of history painting that maps the economic underpinnings of our global society.” (ICI).



Fig.6 - Drawing as a process is a way of being present, and of simply being. Graffiti that emerged in the streets of France was a way of marking this presence in the place where life unfolded itself- the street, the extension of the home. The hidden drawings and the precision of Tibetan Buddhist *tangkas* as meditative religious practice which underscore the religious artworks adorning walls and canvases. In this sense, the practice of drawing ties in Tibetan Buddhism closely with Zen Buddhism, as emergent forms of art and practice from the east that underscore rituals of daily living.

Lombardi made visible networks of flows which had previously been unconsidered, and in a sense his drawings elevated the arts into a critical lens in the policy world. The lasting questions and discourses surrounding his work are made epic by the fact that following the attacks FBI agents attended exhibitions to scrutinise his drawings and his findings.

Drawing as Being

A certain materiality indicates that all natural things ultimately fade. Whether pigments, pencil marks over time they change. This however is being challenged by digitization. Drawings are no longer simply made by people - they are increasingly limited by algorithms and created by machines. These drawings can be told apart, and are less random. Perhaps they are a way of being for the machines.

Drawers are deeply engaged with the negative or non-space of the mind. They are the site of form – putting pen to paper, adding pressure, screaming on walls - not just for the enjoyment of expression and the adrenaline rush, but because by doing so they are. (No, I didn't end that sentence abruptly, I meant: that drawing is a way of being present,...an idea that has traversed time and was notably shared to me by my highschool art teacher, and reinforced during a recent visit to the Norbulingka Institute).

So: What about the drawers?

“The fight for free space—for wilderness and for public space—must be accompanied by a fight for free time to spend wandering in that space,” - Rebecca Solnit (pg. 193).

All drawings, in some ways, speak of the drawers. Drawers, much like their drawings, struggle with the consequences of technology which they are under pressure to keep up with due to the constraints of a capitalist system and technological developments.

Van Gogh is known for saying that drawings were the root of everything. Drawers are thinkers, doers and artists, occupying a space between conceptual and experimental. A drawing in and of itself is a work of art, and when it creates narratives within context is a form of diagramming

or mapping. Drawing a line, with its layers of context that make visible the power that shapes and constrains expression, form and process.

Drawing is “a balance between the seen, the felt and the intended. Because of this, reportage drawing elicits a connection to the inner-space of the artist but equally, the world of the subject. A world created new in marks and lines which, like our world, shifts and moves, acquiring new meanings and perspectives with every viewing.” (Netter, pg. 11)

Drawings reflect preoccupations of the drawers. But drawers and their drawings have also been influenced by rasterization. Technology has fundamentally transformed drawing and drawers, by transforming the meaning and practice of navigation (stay tuned for part 2 in which I explore this further).

Whether doodlers, sketchers, or graffiti writers, the human condition has always elicited that people leave their mark in the world by annotating reality. It represents forms of out of the box thinking, recently commodified by almost every ideating app available. But the drawers themselves are also practising a form of meditation, often memorialising the moments comprising their lives without constraints and using simple tools. They are marking the coordinates in a speeding world on the verge of over efficiency. They are the tabulators and mark makers who defy productivity and emphasise the functionality of beauty. The scars, the scratches, the lettering and the ways in which we grapple with complexity. The sketches, the prose, the expression.

Drawers like their drawings are being interpreted in a flatness which is a disservice to both the complexities and the nuances of real life. Many digital drawing features, like rasterization, eliminate depth.

By connecting the art of poetry with painting that is fundamentally the act of drawing, artists have over time represented the ways in which our interior experiences are not as isolated as one may think. Revealing and sharing our expression and experiences unifies many of us. The processes we make visible mimic the emotional landscapes

so many of us tend towards in a world where we are increasingly forced towards mechanisation, isolation and automation; drawing, releasing the brain noodle as a form of meditative being and as an antidote to almost every negative force that exists as a result of capitalism.

Is drawing and mixing art into our everyday life a way of coping, archiving and sense-making? Is drawing what makes us not-machines. Would that not be a better question to check if we are robots or humans? Is drawing linked with navigating? Ultimately, maybe: drawing is a form of resistance in a world bent on forced conformity and homogeneity. It may be a process of untangling a complicated existence; and a way of experiencing and challenging all of the forces that are responsible for urban malaise and the ultra commodification of life into images. It perhaps absolves an inner quest to decorate the world and reign it in: to connect the body, the street and the home, in the eternal quest to hold onto love and beauty. Knowing that drawers and their drawings strive for independence, embody the random, and resist the constant need to learn for efficiency and productivity I hope you will join me and celebrate the most underrated form of art and their practitioners.

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