

PhD THESIS

DRAWING AS INTROSPECTIVE SNAPSHOT

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Summary

The present doctoral research approached from different perspectives the status and the expressive specificities of drawing, as they developed in various eras of the European civilization and also trying to understand the social and cultural relations forged between drawing as a medium of artistic production and its ability to embed knowledge and to facilitate psychological and / or spiritual introspection. I also followed, firstly in a historical, synthetic and not exhaustive manner the evolutions of the reception of drawing in this civilizational context, from the perspective of its status in the system of the arts, emphasizing some moments that were crucially relevant for the change of vision that led from seeing drawing as something that precedes, prepares and assists the production of art as such to conceiving drawing as being art with symbolic and cultural value in itself.

The first part of the thesis takes as starting point the necessity, in the context of the assertions above, to scrutinize drawing in a historical perspective and to highlight the transformations of its status with time, in the context of the European / western civilization, as a medium for image production and as an artistic medium. Without aiming to constitute an exhaustive history of drawing, this section approaches some of the most relevant cultural definitions of drawing and some of the turning points in the cultural understanding of drawing as instrument of artistic production. Starting with the Paleolithic era, when the first forms of drawing represented sketches of animal silhouettes with ritualistic purposes, continuing with the Egyptian art, then with the first forms of Greek art, drawing is always present and indispensable in everything that has to do with representation, going through various stages, closely connected with changing worldviews. Thus, if in the beginning it has a more sketchy, synthetic character, it will later become more elaborated, with geometric features and respecting a canon of representation, in the case of the Egyptian art and that of the first Greeks and later acquiring a more fluid and expressive appearance, along with becoming increasingly anthropomorphic.

The Renaissance is the historical moment when the observation of nature and its artistic transcription become even more important. According to Leon Battista Alberti, drawing stabilizes the imitation of an object by means of creating its contour. It is thus the equivalent of the idea of defining what separates objects and arranging them in a composition. Since the Renaissance, drawing was connected to the logic of representation, and color to materiality and texture. It is then difficult to speak of drawing as an individual form of art, truly autonomous, as it has been seen mostly as a handy and even indispensable tool, used by artists to lay the foundation of a future work of art.

Drawing's itinerary from the status of technique mostly used for preparing the making of the art work itself, of an adjuvant of art as such to the status of an autonomous artistic medium is comprised of several stages and their results have a strong influence on the contemporary modes of artistic production, but also, more generally, on the methods of knowledge production in the mentioned civilizational area. Drawing, which long stood in the shadow of the other arts, without seeming to have an prime role in the system of the arts, starts to be perceived as a form of art in itself with the era of the modernist art.

In a very different manner that in the case of the traditional drawing, the force and the value of the modernist drawing resides more in gesture than in content, more in its materiality than in its capacity of transmitting symbolic concepts. The distinction between *disegno* and modernist drawing can be expressed using rhetoric terms: *disegno* indicates something that can be marked, traced, delineated, while the modernist one unfolds the energy of a trace. Starting with the ideas of the artists belonging to the historical avant-gardes, during the 20th century, the perspective on drawing changed dramatically: in contrast with being expected to elaborate narrative images or to imitate an object, mirror-like, drawings would be admired for the materiality of a trace. Regardless of style, a trace marks the effort of an aesthetic decision, the spontaneity of an accident, a phase of a process. Historically, drawing had been understood as a mark or a line on paper, a recording of a physical gesture, an inscription of the hand's action or an expression of the mind. Small scale drawings suggest intimacy, while the qualities of the surface of which it is inscribed, such as texture, absorbency, the way in which it absorbs or reflects light and so on, largely contribute to the quality and the atmosphere of a drawing.

The second part of the present research theoretically approaches the potentialities of drawing as a visual medium of introspection and research, not exclusively artistic research. Its

ability to lead to knowledge, be it self-knowledge or a broader knowledge of the complexity of reality, as well the ways in which drawing was actually used to reach such goals in various historical and cultural contexts are here analyzed. Art's capacity of being introspective and expressive at the same time is one of the fundamental elements that was bestowed upon it by the modern civilization, my particular interest for the medium of drawing leading to an attempt to distinguish specific modalities in which it can be utilized as an instrument for attaining such goals, which I consider to be essential also for my own art works. From description, often sketchy and synthetic, of the world to transcribing and rapidly representing inner realities, states of mind and spiritual experiences, all these cognitive and expressive endeavors may successfully involve drawing, its flexibility as means of constructing images proving over time to be both useful and fascinating, not just in the field of visual arts.

This chapter starts with the strong association made in the contemporary era between drawing and thinking, from the role that drawing played as instrument for searching and even scientific research. If it was for a long time placed in a relation of subordination to other arts, drawing becomes appreciated in modern times for characteristics such as finesse, transparency, fragility, as well as for its analytical, explicative potential. Although drawing begins gaining its autonomy, it is still difficult to ascribe a unique definition to it, given the multiplicity of the ways in which it is used and perceived, starting from a line or a contour that can be identified with the trace of someone's body in the grass, to the lines traced by a designer that makes explicit the functional possibilities of an object. Once the accent moves from seeing drawing as a object / objective to understanding it as a process, it becomes part of a thinking process that generates knowledge in the course of making the images, highlighting the relation between thought and the actions of the hand.

Even if the primary function of drawing, some time ago, was a rather pragmatic one, generated by the need to communicate and record, to precisely rendering the contours of a piece of reality or of a person, it is undeniable that, beyond mimetically representing reality, this medium also can reveal something about the personal, intimate nature or its producer. In the contemporary era, drawing continues to be associated with subjectivity. As its prescribed role of copying reality is progressively abandoned, or at least loses importance, it is increasingly perceived as a performative act, its conceptual potential is underlined and an accent is placed more on its potential to represent ideas and ways of thinking and less on its value as an

instrument for observation. Another value that is attributed to it is its fragmentary, slightly speculative character, which helped him resist over time, considering that it is a primitive and at the same time very accessible means of communication. Drawing is, like writing, a means of symbolic expression, be it seen as independent from the evolutions of art or as a less exposed and less visible part of it.

I have also analyzed the potential drawing possesses to be a tool for contemplation, paying an important role in the development of creative thinking, as well as its role in the contemporary artistic research endeavors, looking at what lays beyond its aesthetic role. Drawing is thus defining as an exploratory process that establishes spatial and temporal relations between the observer and the drawing's subject, representing at the same time an active and subjective engagement, appreciated by many artists for its ability to facilitate the access to thinking, but that thinking that occurs near the area of the subconscious.

I have brought in discussion the plurality of drawing, both in terms of its functions and of its definitions. Thus, one can conclude that, although in its beginnings it was attributed mystical functions, later, a descriptive function was emphasized. Still, recording and describing via drawing is impossible without a degree of subjectivity; when photography began taking over this descriptive function, drawing, as well as painting for that matter, was more free to exploit precisely this field. During modernity its autonomy was increasingly discussed, as well as its characteristics such as expressiveness of the line, spontaneity, immediacy. Drawing is also present as a footnote of many performances, sometimes becoming essential for transmitting the viewer the idea embedded in a possible of past action, often without deploying its aesthetic potential. Thus, if Leonardo used it as a means of knowing and understanding the physical world, in the case of a contemporary artist like Sol LeWitt, the aesthetic and the descriptive intersect in unexpected ways.

The third part of the thesis focuses on seeing drawing from the perspective of its relation, as medium of image production, with expressing states of mind and soul, with the act of communicating feelings and sensations, not just in the field of art. The idea that drawing is fundamentally characterized by a potential for spontaneity, that it is more capable than other art forms and other forms of human expression in general of transposing, in fresh, quick, and immediate ways the mentioned inner realities and phenomena, is repeatedly asserted in various cultural or psycho-social evaluations of the medium.

The final chapter of the thesis takes as starting point the idea that drawing was, in many historical contexts, including the contemporary world, often regarded as an artistic medium predisposed to facilitate a direct and honest expression, based on originality and authentic feeling.

There are epochs and aesthetic paradigms in the frame of which what I will call the spontaneity of drawing was considered to be an attribute that made it inferior to more elaborated artistic formulas, such as painting or sculpture. On the other hand, though, some historical contexts valued drawing precisely for his ability to embed spontaneity. From the modernist era, when the understanding of art changes drastically, one can speak of the emergence of art increasingly based on spontaneity, which, in various degrees, characterizes expressionism, abstractionism or surrealism. In the 20th century, the perspective on drawing changes dramatically: in opposition with it being required to achieve *mimesis*, it becomes admired by viewers, artists and critics alike for qualities such as the gracefulness of a trace of the freshness of a gesture. Regardless of artistic style, a trace marks the effort of an aesthetic decision, indicates the spontaneity attained by chance, reveals a process that is in itself relevant and has expressive value. Drawing, understood as a recording of the physical gesture or as expression of the mind, signals intimacy, while the particular qualities of the surface on which it gets shaped increase and refine the aesthetic quality, often the lyrical character, of drawing.

Realist art that employs a conventional imitation of nature is, in the above mentioned context, suspected of being able to reveal only a very limited part of reality, excluding the emotions that the artists actually translate into a work of art. Such art, then, doesn't have much to do with transmitting a deep meaning or revealing the intuition of a cosmic harmony, as it would presumably be the case with expressionism, who's excellence would reside in two features: revealing the inner, spiritual life, rather than the external reality and reflecting, via rhythm, dynamics, specific logic of composition, a unique inner world, from which original creation stems. The expressionist *credo*, therefore, implies bringing into the world, by the use of visual forms and the sovereign freedom of the creator, the harmony of the interior order of the spirit, the intellect being just a tool used in the process.

Abstractionism is seen, on one hand, as a summing up of geometric relations, alluding to purely mathematical qualities, involving, mechanistic and precise actions and, on the other hand, as having mystical implications, often being considered an expression that is both mathematical

and spiritual, of the artistic intentionality. The surrealists, with their strong personalities such as the writer Andre Breton, assume the task of getting rid of all academism and bourgeois ideology in art. Thus, their effort would largely consist in the ambitious attempt to destroy the barriers between consciousness and the realm the oneiric unconscious.

The second topic approached in this last chapter of the thesis is that of the relations between spontaneity, illusion and the psycho-physiological reactions towards the artistic image, which actually came to represent important topics in the modernist and contemporary definitions of art. Following E. H. Gombrich, I have analyzed the ways in which art produces illusion, including the illusion of spontaneity, freshness and immediacy, operating at the intersection between natural predispositions, presumed to be universal and cultural conventions specific to various historical contexts.

Thus, this final part focuses on viewing drawing, as medium of image production, in relation with expression of states of mind and feelings, with its presumed ability to spontaneously and freely translating them. The chapter follows several inflexions of these main ideas in scientific literature and places drawing in the broader context of the instruments of symbolic and spiritual expression used in the area of western civilization. From the perspective of my own artistic interests and expectations from the medium of drawing, this last aspect is essential, more explicitly the association of drawing with the informal and with the possibilities it offers for expressing intimate thoughts and spiritual experiences, for revealing subjectivity and building imprecise, yet authentic narratives. I have concluded that, if drawing can produce the impression of spontaneity and freshness and if this ability is positively valued by the art work's spectator, this is the result of a dynamic interplay between nature and culture. The spontaneity of drawing needs to be culturally constructed, accepted, embedded in the *Zeitgeist* of an era in order for it to be experienced –in a liberating or oneiric manner, in a hedonistic or spiritual way- at an individual, intimate level.