

## **On Mark Making**

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*This text was first delivered as a lecture in March 2011 at Duende, Rotterdam, as part of an afternoon with performances and lectures accompanying the exhibition Beside Itself, with works by Martijn Hendriks and Bas van der Hurk.*

Around 1780, artist and art teacher Alexander Cozens wrote a book called *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* where he describes how one can use inkblots in triggering the imagination while drawing and painting. Cozens was not the first to make use of inkblots. The concept had already been described by Leonardo da Vinci, and has been used by artists ever since, but Cozens systemised the process and made it into a proper method. In Cozens' case, imagination should be understood in the eighteenth century meaning of the word: as the mental faculty that allows the artist to supersede the accidental appearance of the visible world in order to achieve a more ideal form. The book also contains images with examples of how inkblots are to be employed within the constraints of the categories of eighteenth-century landscape painting. Of course, these constraints influence how the artist uses the inkblot in that there is already a certain direction in this moment of free, or imaginative impulse, which is set up in the clear aim of painting a landscape. Cozens book fascinates me exactly because of this; it shows how a certain result is anticipated and implicit in the constraints that he sets up for himself and within the resulting images. The book frames the imagination and shows the potential and limitations of mark making.

My interest in drawing and mark making revolves around a few of the issues that I mention above in relation to Cozens book. Drawing for me is a working method and not a goal. I am not interested in questions about the status of a medium in relation to other mediums, or formalism in the more narrow sense of the word. I am interested in the process of image, or object creation, and how this image or object then functions in its context, which could be an exhibition or something else. I find the complex relationship between the two phases of the life of a work of art—as a work in progress and finished piece—and the opacity of the transitional moment in between interesting. I like drawing because of its ambiguous status as potentially being both finished and unfinished. In mark making the acts of production and looking overlap, with the tip of the pencil acting as a tangible focal point between intention and experience.

It is this particular moment of mark making as a bodily activity that I want to discuss here. This moment is, in a way, a mixture of a very personal motivation to do certain things, as well as the experience of the drawing or object as it comes into being. For me, the decision to stop working on a drawing often depends on how a work can suddenly ‘open up’ (for lack of a more accurate description) in a moment that is often short and intangible by definition and therefore easy to miss. However, I believe it is relevant to constantly attempt to circumscribe it because it is at this very moment of tension and unrealised potential that the most interesting things happen. One of the challenges for me over the last few years has been to learn how to control this moment. To force oneself to go beyond a merely personal motivation to make something, but at the same time to keep the work in a state of promise or potential rather than realising all of its possibilities. In this text I would like to map the space that is offered through exploring drawing as mark making by addressing a few of the issues that are at stake for me.

In order to think about what mark making can do I would like to introduce the notions of distance and perspective. By the latter I mean not just pictorial perspective as a practical tool in painting and drawing used to compose images with foreshortening to create an illusion of depth, but as a cultural construction that describes a certain relation between the world and its beholder, between object and subject. The perspectival illusion of depth is just a visual exemplification of this model, describing one specific position one could take, namely that of the one-eyed gaze observing from a distance. Because perspective is a spatial metaphor, it implies the notions of distance and proximity, which remain relevant in how we relate to things. Common sense still tells us that in order to judge objectively—meaning to judge justly—one needs to distance oneself from a situation or object. Within this worldview, perspective is a model that separates the subject and object as two entities whose relationship is complex and, as the correlation of being objective and just shows, perspective can even imply morality. As I mentioned, being objective and just implies being distanced from a situation. When one is subjective, there is a certain proximity at play.

The metaphor of perspective and the relation between concepts like object and subject are not static and constant, but have changed several times quite fundamentally over the course of history. In his book *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary argues that, in the early nineteenth century, modernity produced a paradigmatic shift in terms of the relationship between object and subject. The scientific research of the time showed that many visual phenomena were actually produced by

the body of the observer. For instance, afterimages are the result of external stimuli that work on the eye and have a cause in, but do not necessarily correspond with, an object. Crary compares pre-nineteenth-century vision to the technique of the camera obscura, by which, via an 'aperture' hole in a wall, an image of the world is projected onto an opposite screen. Within this apparatus, the mind is a bodiless entity floating in the dark chamber of the camera, observing the representation of the world from a distance. Considering vision in terms of the model of the camera obscura reveals that we are in fact talking about the way knowledge is produced. Vision is not just an isolated function of the body, but a point in which many ideas about how we understand the world converge. This model collapses, however, with the discovery that the body is the actual producer of images out of raw sensory data. With this collapse, the distance between the subject and object, that was not just the basic mode of visual representation in the form of linear perspective, but in fact an epistemological model, disappears. Crary uses the stereoscope as a model for this shift. The stereoscope is an instrument that holds a stereoscopic photograph, which consists of two photographs, taken from slightly different angles. The user holds his or her eyes in front of the lenses, like a pair of binoculars, and, because of the proximity to the images, his or her mind combines these into one, three-dimensional image. However, the space of the image is very unstable. The photographs usually show an object in the foreground against a background, for instance a landscape, flattening these two individual layers in such a way that the space in between remains undefined. Crary argues that the stereoscope is the exemplification of modern vision, itself the result of a fragmented subjectivity in an abstract three-dimensional space.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, Walter Benjamin argues something similar. When he speaks of the loss of aura, he speaks of the collapse of distance as the result of the commodification of the image in the nineteenth century. In his critique of contemporary visual culture, Benjamin describes the stream of images one is confronted with on a daily basis as a film sequence, with individual images only having meaning because of their place within a series, in reference to other images. He argues that every image is interchangeable and without meaning unless captioned. It seems that this early critique of visual culture already contains some of the issues that more recent artists and theorists have worked with. However, I refer to Crary and Benjamin here to serve as a rather lengthy introduction to the proposal to broaden the metaphor of space in relation to vision. Proximity is not just a synonym for directness—one of the qualities that drawing is often praised for—, it also describes the relationship one has with images in a more fundamental way. Proximity in the sense of Crary and Benjamin results in abstraction, in a world of

images that are incomprehensible without captions. Drawing for me is a tool to think about these relationships between meaning and perspective. Mark making offers interesting possibilities in that it allows for a suspension of interaction. This is because of the ornamental and non-representational character of the mark. If one looks beyond what a line refers to, for instance by seeing the letter A not as the symbol that refers to the letter 'A', it is possible to see something else, that for me is just as much part of the meaning of, in this case, the letter.

There are some really fascinating historical examples of how this took shape concretely, for instance theories of what handwriting both does and tells. Many books have been written about graphology, or how to read handwriting, that do not investigate the text, but the writing itself. Founded in the late nineteenth century, graphology is now seen as a typical pseudo-science from that era. However, I see a possible contemporary relevance that is not based on the question of whether all aspects of such a theory are correct or not, or if the outcome is acceptable from a scientific point of view, but on the specific methodological possibilities offered by graphology. There are several approaches within graphology, one of which perceives handwriting as a gesture. This means that a handwritten mark on paper represents a bodily movement that expresses the character of a writer. The handwriting's orientation in terms of direction, the size and character of the curves, how open or closed the letters are, all these aspects directly express the writer's temperament, just as the corresponding bodily gestures and movements would. The following quote is from Max Pulver's *The Symbolism of Handwriting*, an influential graphological study from 1931.

“Considering it from the perspective of reality, we would basically have to treat handwriting as a flat shape. However, instinctively we place it in space. Speaking of the space of writing is not laziness and not just an intellectual matter of speaking, as it is rooted in a direct experience. We speak of an erected or steep, a laying or falling writing. In our understanding writing rises above the paper and creates a space around it.”

Again, it is not about the question of whether these assumptions are correct. What interests me is the graphologist's methodology, in which the most prominent feature of a piece of text, namely the representation of language, is consciously and consequently ignored. Instead, the text becomes a set of lines that form a collection of raw, abstract visual data, which can then be reinterpreted. The graphologist reconnects the lines with their source, namely the writer, thus connecting writing to psychology. Living in an age in which just about everything seems to be about psychology, maybe

this should not be considered such a strange thought. Perhaps some of the graphologists just went a step too far by completely ignoring how text functions, namely as a shared instrument to establish communication between members of a community and not just as a unidirectional theatrical expression of the individual's ego. However, it could be interesting to think of graphology as a way to reconstitute the Benjaminian sense of distance by considering letters as marks with an unmistakable ornamental value. Since the language aspect is temporarily put on hold, 'normal' interaction with the text is also suspended and letters become marks that open a potential to read something familiar in a different way.

Another reason to bring up this example is the aspect of time. The graphologist reconstructs an event from the past, namely the expressive gesture, assuming a certain transparency and directness in how the moments of expression and mark making are connected. The marks that form the text have a direct relationship to times past and make these accessible. Of course the mark is materialised history in a sense that it is the tangible result of a past event, but I believe this movement functions in a much more opaque way. Otherwise, reading a drawing would entail some kind of archaeological approach of trying to connect bits and pieces to form a narrative about what might have happened to this or that person in this or that situation. A line is not a witnessing observer in the sense that it testifies to anything in particular. The question of what a mark says, or what it does remains unanswered. On the one hand, maybe it is all about tuning in at the right frequency; a matter of understanding the kind of mode in which a mark speaks. For there are different kinds of attention, connected to the rhetorical modes in which one can speak, for instance a theatrical or poetic mode, which all imply a specific way of reading. On the other hand, perhaps the metaphors of speaking and reading are simply not appropriate or useful in this case and a drawing could be considered to be a mute witness. In this sense, there is distance, a disconnection between what an observer sees and what the image sees, while allowing the image a certain agency of its own. This directly relates to ideas that Crary puts forward in *Techniques of the Observer* when he describes the advent of a reconfiguration and abstraction of vision, the process of which is still happening today. To name just one example, consider the multitude of cameras in our cities that record every step we take. These apparatuses produce visual material but the question remains as to who is actually looking. Clearly it is not a human being who follows us on our way to work, school and the supermarket. Rather, it seems like these devices operate more and more independently from any human mediation with a kind of vision that is becoming completely disconnected from the human body.

To return to the relationship between a drawing and its history or history in general, an interesting perspective on this relationship is described in the book *The Sublime Historical Experience*, by the Dutch historian Frank Ankersmit. His study revolves around a similar question: if you consider history to be materially present in artefacts, how do you access it and what potential does it offer in terms of knowledge about the past? He uses the Benjaminian notion of the loss of aura to reconsider how works of art and other man-made objects can reconstitute distance. The first step Ankersmit takes is to make the very useful distinction between images that have a certain iconic power and images and artefacts from the periphery of art history. For Ankersmit, the problem with iconic images is that it is very difficult, but not impossible, to see what they actually are beyond the image of themselves. Opposed to that are the works made by minor artists and the decorative arts that have the advantage of offering visual material that can be looked at without too many preconceptions. Ankersmit introduces the notion of ornamental value to bypass a literal reading of images. Ornamental value is formed by the surface of the work, by the way in which the different elements of its physical appearance are organised. For example, he describes a wallpaper pattern that he remembers from his childhood that evoked something, which he later conceptualised as a historical experience. His aim is not to provide a way of talking with ghosts—there is nothing spiritual about his study—but instead to focus on looking as a material process that we can experience through certain objects. Experience implies a unity of subject and object, and the proximity that Benjamin saw as the cause of the collapse of the possibility of “free floating contemplation.” However, there is a different kind of proximity at play in Ankersmit’s thinking. Instead of the proximity of the objectified image from Benjamin’s essay, his focus on ornamental value ensures, through experience, a reconstitution of distance and the possibility to learn about a historically determined way of looking.

Of course I am not doing justice to the richness of Ankersmit’s book by highlighting just a few ideas from his study. However, I find his understanding of what history is as a discipline very insightful, because it provides a model to rethink the way in which meaning is mediated through images. One could say that a mark or drawing, or, more generally speaking, an image, is a materialisation of a way of looking and therefore a mute witness. As I hope to have made clear, making for me is inseparable from looking as an artistic activity in itself. However, I do believe there is a potential in a certain distance or detachment from what one is observing. This leads to questions of attitude that I have touched upon, but not really talked about explicitly, partly because I

am not sure if taking a position—or choosing a perspective to be consistent in the sense of terminology—is really the way forward. At the moment, I see as much potential in looking for a moment of wonder that I described earlier on, as a way of being affected by an image, as I do in indifference. Certainly in mark making, which is all about inscription and surface, emotional and mental detachment is just as important as direct experience. I strongly believe in a suspension of interaction, in spending time and looking as opposed to a mere utilitarian approach of images. So, moving around this space of the mark is not just about experience in the sense of the direct effect a work has and one's connection to it, for there is also an enormous potential in not acting and not being creative. In this sense, positions and perspectives are spaces that one can temporarily inhabit, where questions about the relation between artistic activity and the way images work materialise.

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