

Roles and uses of drawing in postwar art

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Abstract: *Despite being one of the oldest media of expressive communication, drawing keeps playing a crucial role in the creative work of some of the most relevant contemporary artists. Drawing facilitates relations between imagination and observation, perceptions and the depths of the psyche, hand and mind, possessing a particular potential for expressing emotions and feelings, as well as remarkable ability to give form to concepts. Its intimacy and immediacy, its inquisitive character and its status of unpretentious mode of expression made drawing the perfect laboratory within the boundaries of which much of the effort of reinventing the art's role and possibilities took place, especially after World War II. The present paper presents the concrete manners in which drawing was deployed by some of the most significant and innovative artists of the contemporary era, who either use it as main artistic medium of choice or embed it creatively in larger ensembles of semantically complex artistic practices.*

Key-words: *contemporary art; drawing; knowledge; expression; concepts; intimacy.*

1. Introduction

Despite being one of the oldest medium of expressive communication, drawing keeps playing a crucial role in the creative work of some of the most relevant contemporary artists. Drawing facilitates relations between imagination and observation, perceptions and the depths of the psyche, hand and mind, possessing a particular potential for expressing emotions and feelings, as well as remarkable ability to give form to concepts. Its intimacy and immediacy, its inquisitive character and its status of unpretentious mode of expression made drawing the perfect laboratory within the boundaries of which much of the effort of reinventing the art's role and possibilities took place, especially after World War II. The present paper presents the concrete manners in which drawing was deployed by some of the most significant and innovative artists of the contemporary era, who either use it as main artistic medium of choice or embed it creatively in larger ensembles of semantically complex artistic practices.

2. Functions of drawing

If, during prehistoric eras, humans had attributed magic connotation's to drawing, believing perhaps that tracing the contour and likeness of things on cave walls would facilitate their

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mastery, thousands of years later in the evolution of the human societies, and especially in the Western modernity, the medium of drawing was to become an indispensable tool for every artist. Initially in the Renaissance, it was both ubiquitous and secondary in the practice of art: *disegno* was the necessary support of other expressive media, such as painting, sculpture, tapestry and so on, but it wasn't really appreciated as an autonomous artistic expression, thus being somehow inferior to the "real" arts. Giorgio Vasari, for example, defines drawing as a starting point of an art work, essential to its conception and production (Vasari 1998, 85), but not an art work as such. This axiological position made drawing an expressive means rather scarcely discussed from a theoretical perspective, despite its undeniable usefulness, in comparison to other artistic media.

In the times of the modernist art (by which I mean the era of the historical vanguards, roughly from post-impressionism to postwar American abstract art), as, among other factors, photography increasingly "liberated" art from the burden of compulsory *mimesis*, drawing commenced to be regarded as a medium with autonomous, intrinsic expressive potential and value. Although in the context of modernist and contemporary art, it is still used as an adjuvant in projects of sculpture, design and stage design or as medium of choice for preparing painterly endeavors and later performances, in various artistic productions, drawing was to be used as such, being particularly appreciated by artists and publics alike for its finesse and immediacy, for its ability to capture the transient moment, for being a particularly suitable means of direct, fresh transcription of emotions and feelings. Nevertheless, in other circumstances, it will be deployed as medium of choice for its features that are rather complementary to those above listed, namely its capacity to embed reflection, abstract, conceptual content and its aptness for analytical, visual inquiries into the nature of the world, the society or the self.

In the context of contemporary culture, providing a single and all-encompassing definition of drawing proves to be a difficult task, given its multiple uses, functions and expressive modes and the variety of stylistic paradigms within the context of which it is deployed. Therefore, what I will further attempt would be to rather circumscribe the field of contemporary drawing by briefly introducing some of the most frequently used functions and attributes of it, in the larger context of the contemporary artistic production.

In an article titled "Drawing on paper", John Berger identifies three such modalities in which drawing can function. He coins them as the mimetic function (related to its usefulness for the rendering of external reality, based on observation), the conceptual function (at work when it is used for the embodiment of ideas and abstract realities) and the evocative function (having to do mainly with memory, with bringing something back or out of the depth of the mind). (Berger 2008, 33) In the practice of the arts, but also in other communicational contexts in which it is deployed, the three functions of drawing actually get often, more or less intertwined. As Zegher notes, „drawing plays with appearance; it oscillates between seeing, thinking, remembering and imagining, controlling and being controlled as the image emerges. It is continuously and simultaneously shifting itself in the course of its making” (Zegher 2010, XIII)

Thus, if one presumes the mimetic function of drawing to be the most prominent one, it would be still impossible, in the process of realizing a copy of reality, for subjective elements not to emerge. Stephen Farthing concludes that the realistic intentions are nevertheless subordinated to the author's personality and intentions, exemplifying this

relation by several possible situations. Thus, in the production of the contemporary American artist Chuck Close one would find several self-portraits and could rather easily and poignantly notice not just the passing of time as revealed by the artist's aging complexion, but also differences in the technical approaches employed by Close in different phases of his artistic career.

3. Uses of drawing in contemporary art

Since the modernist era of art, attention shifted from description and representation of objects or fragment of reality to visual embodiments of mental and emotional states, as well as a varied typology of social and political beliefs. Drawing would be increasingly used for describing an internal reality, in artistic endeavors that focused on knowledge expression and on introspection.

Coming to the attitudes towards and the uses of drawing manifested in the production of contemporary artists, in relation to the above mentioned evolutions and characteristics of the medium, a clear tendency to move away from the heritage of academic drawing is noticeable in the work of Martin Kippenberger or Jean – Michel Basquiat. Discarding traditional conventions of representation, they decidedly opt for a more spontaneous and dynamic use of the medium, in which the emphasis on technique or mimetic realism is abandoned in favor of a more personal, emotionally charged and self-referential approach. Their own lives and interior battles (with depression and addiction, in the case of Kippenberger, with identity issues, in that of Basquiat) become the readily available source of their drawn imagery.

Another facet of drawing often manifested in contemporary visual art is its performative quality, more efficiently deployed once the medium is liberated from mimetic tasks. It can thus be perceived as a form of performance, given its fragile, fragmentary, somewhat fleeting nature, a performance in which every trace of every gesture remains visible and significant (as opposed to painting, in the case of which, early strata are often covered by those later superimposed). Each intervention in the process of drawing remains in the final image, a drawing thus being the perfect testimony of its own making. Its immediacy and fragility, its self-containment render the medium suitable also for artistic endeavors that are more poignantly interested in the conceptual aspects of artistic production. Thus, a species of conceptual drawing was to be developed in the decades when the field of contemporary art was being structured, namely the sixties and the seventies. „What might be termed ‘conceptual drawing’ encourages a journey around associative thought that does not have to be logical or resolved, provokes an aggregation of memories and impedes access to any resolved meaning”. (Zegher, C. de 2010, XV)

Undoubtedly, it was the American conceptualist Sol le Witt who managed to make the most impressive use of the potential of drawing within the aesthetic boundaries of conceptual art. He was one of the first artists who would use abstract schemes and systems to structure its art works, using either the paper or the surface of the wall background of his mathematically, almost machine-like constructed drawings. For him, the indications that he offered, in often concise, even sketchy manner, for the completion of an art project were more important than the actual execution of the work as such, his so-called wall drawings being no exception.

Thus, le Witt integrated drawing in an artistic practice in which the artist provides the pattern and the indications that followed by assistants, in a spirit reminding one of the early or even pre-modern systems of artistic and image production. By doing this, the conceptual American artist was challenging some very fundamental beliefs about art, which had come to be seen as almost natural in the mindset of artistic modernism, such as the importance of the artist as unique creator of unique, perfectly controlled masterpieces.

Another dimension of drawing that is frequently exploited in contemporary art is that of embedded knowledge, of being an extension of the thought, of incorporating and expressing intellectual contents. This is a function not exclusively reserved to drawing-as-art. There is a stark similarity between, for example, the way that a designer explores various possibilities, via various drawing techniques, before reaching a visual conclusion about a certain product and the manner in which a sculptor might use drawing for searching the final form of an autonomous piece or art. Many times, especially in the realm of contemporary art, this process of searching, approximating and discovering becomes more important than actually reaching a visual, definitive conclusion. This emphasis on the value of the thinking process supported by drawing, understood as special link between gesture and thought, can be often encountered in the artistic production of Tacita Dean or Joseph Beuys, among others.

Tacita Dean uses the medium as integral part of the narratives of her films, but in most cases, her drawings function very well, visually and conceptually, as independent art works. Using school type blackboards as support for her rather large scale works, she often evokes the cinematic black and white aesthetics. The series *The Roaring Forties: Seven Boards in Seven Days*, constructs a fragmentary narrative in seven episodes, on the topic of sea storms. Alluding to the resemblance between the creative processes involved both in film and in drawing, Dean complements the shapes she traces with chalk on black board with discursive annotations that strengthen the epic dimension of the images. Thus, in her work, drawing, as well as film invite to meditation, to contemplation, to escaping the aggressive rhythm imposed on the human being by modern societies.

Joseph Beuys belongs to that family of artists who, like Leonardo da Vinci, believe that drawing is a modality of thinking, capable of generating knowledge. In this regard, it has been noted that “Beuys’ drawing is a process of going beyond usual patterns, of giving shape to what is impossible to say, as he believed that thinking is equivalent with creating form”.² (Garrels 2005, 16)

During the fifties and the sixties, the German artist produced thousands of drawings, on various supports. The works are alchemic, exploratory, intimate and allegorical. These drawings possess the ambition of contributing to individual and social change; they compose a particular, alternative language for art, imbued with spiritual elements. Thus, his numerous, deceptively simple and naïve drawings are excellent epitomes of his belief that art is meant to merge the poetic and the political in order to facilitate a renewal of the individual and of mankind.

Endeavors in the medium like those of Joseph Beuys remind us that drawing is present in our lives quiet early and significantly formative. Thus, „drawing may have a transitory and temporal relationship with the world or it may provide a record of lasting permanence. It may be propositional, preparatory, visionary, imaginative, associative, factual, generative, transformative or performative. Drawing as an investigative, transformative and generative

tool for the realization and transference of ideas is at its best when the means of making are harnessed to the realization of ideas and concepts, when it is fit for purpose and inventive within its means.” (Garrels 2005, 9)

4. Conclusions

The oldest medium for image production, drawing remains relevant in the realm of modern and contemporary art, given, paradoxically, both its association with freshness and immediacy and its ability to embed concepts and knowledge. Even more, during the last hundred years or so, drawing has moved from the status of marginal, preparatory, adjuvant medium for artistic expression into a far more central, prominent position in the field of art. Its function of giving visual shape to concepts, to embed meanings and to expressively, uniquely and comprehensively communicate them has been exploited often by relevant contemporary artists. Thus, for artists like Sol le Witt, drawing is a mental operation and, at the same time, a matrix of a visual structure that may or may not be actually translated in concrete image. In the oeuvre of Joseph Beuys or Tacita Dean, it becomes a means of melting together poetry or narrative, respectively and politics, thus epitomizing one of the main procedures deployed in the field of contemporary art and culture. Still, for someone like the troubled and profound German artist Martin Kippenberger, drawing is the perfect medium for producing an imagery that is both deeply idiosyncratic and reaching beyond the realm of personal misfortune into a strange universality.

5. References

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