

Catherine de Zegher / *Future, Tưỡng Lai*, Sàn Art, Vietnam

Past and Future Drawing as Resistance and Relation

Drawing can be seen as a primary response to the otherness of the world. For drawing is an outward gesture that links our inner impulses and thoughts to the other through the touching of an inscriptive surface with repeated graphic marks. To begin with, the gesture itself is more important than the mark or the gaze, and thus the drawing speaks more through its tracing than in its trace, more through its process than as a product.

Undoubtedly, there is in the inscriptive act of drawing a profound connection between the primitive memory of the infantile “body in pieces” and the current thought of the decentered and scattered body, associated with the experience of increasing fragmentation in our daily lives. It seems that drawing as a fluid, fractured, and open-ended medium can very aptly encompass these deeply felt anxieties of uncertainty, loss, disrelation, and displacement. Drawing meets the present-day requirements of embodying a destabilized sense of existence in a fragmented, yet globalized, world. Open to the imminence of events and social conditions of dispersal, drawing with its inherent characteristics of incompleteness and potential for large diversity seems to be a most pertinent materialization of our current experience of the world. As drawing is largely not geared to closure or completion, it can deal with an idea of lack as well as with the phenomena of increasingly greater amounts of information. When there is a complex correspondence between the intrinsic qualities of an art practice and its capacity to resonate with our perception of the world, that practice becomes most relevant to society. It may therefore be that drawing, for long the least considered of mediums, has in recent years become all-pervasively present, receiving an unaccustomed attention in the art world as much by artists as by institutions and collectors.

Moreover, in a society of spectacle, where people are constantly subjected to simulacrum, lies, and illusions, drawing has become a medium of resistance, because drawing defines itself by the fact that there is no possibility for covering up, for hiding, for lying. As Walter Benjamin already wrote (in “Painting, or Signs and Marks”): “The graphic line can exist only

against the background, so that a drawing that completely covers up its background would cease to be a drawing.” This is very different from the space of painting in which the supporting ground would be covered over, again and again, without reserve. And obviously, it is also different from the space of photography, film, video, and digital media, in which image manipulation has increasingly replaced so-called objectivity. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to observe how, where previously one medium had existed as the dominant mode of expression, contemporary art practice encourages the hybridizing of disciplines. Again, it is drawing, which having gained independence during the twentieth century is at once permeating all fields (from architecture to literature). Although standing independently in its new twentieth-century status, drawing answers to this demand for interaction and interdependency, while it refuses homogenization and manipulation.

Elaborating on my former argument, I would add that one thing is certain: Drawing concerns a front-lit world, while digital media have to do with a back-lit world. It concerns the difference between the passive consumption, in fact the imposition experienced in the back-lit world—often resulting in the subjection of subjectivity—and the active participation experienced in a front-lit world in which creativity and mutuality are stimulated. Because of its reflexive quality, drawing can indeed be recognized as a core medium of exploration. From simple doodles and preparatory sketches to elaborate pictures, drawing engenders several interpretations of what it actually achieves: It always stands at this critical point of transition—a transition between self and other, attachment and separation, imagination and realization, idea and plasticity of form, be it fluid or fixed. Historically, drawing—in its most ephemeral as well as its most realized stage of appearing—has sustained, in its marks and contours, mutual relationships. Of course, it is well known that drawing plays a crucial role in the development of creative thought and in the arts.

In a media-saturated world, we may say that drawing’s potentially unfixed and fluent relation to process allows a distance from this model. Always in a state of uncertainty, fragmentation, and flux, drawing can be considered as a possible and perhaps even an inevitable subversion of a virtual world. At once formless and potentially becoming form, it refuses to be overwhelmed by the authority of form, because it is, at once, both tenacious and mercurial. As this development is being recognized, drawing may in a crucial way illuminate the

importance of the process of making over a product. There is a sense that drawing as antidote to a media model has become the ideal latency of our time, appropriate because much of our understanding needs to be rethought and renegotiated. Ideas of art, culture, and society are in a period of profound change, and drawing can very well be seen as the most “valuable” medium for enacting this inquiry. Presenting *becoming* more than *being*, drawing is always in motion: active, shifting, and changing—as close as it can be to the life of language. Looking at a drawing, one may see “not the thing itself but its possibility, its suggestion, the uncertainty as to what stage it is in its becoming...” In an era of eclecticism and electronics, it is this vitality of the moving hand and the exploring mind that remains a poignant and fascinating subject of an oppositional culture of drawing in the face of an ever-expanding and hegemonic system of techno-scientific practices and forms of knowledge.

In addition to the other qualities, drawing’s essential immediacy remains a vital factor in its appreciation. Considering drawing as relational, the aim is to question and depict the part the medium performs in the imaginative process. Though drawing may be the most resistant to definition of the arts—and perhaps because it is so difficult to specify—the medium offers a wide range of productive and analytic possibilities. In fact, like handwriting, drawing has always been connected to a prime conceptualization with the line as symbolic abstraction of the entry into language. In processes of inquiry, the discipline of drawing has traditionally been considered both poetic and scientific, with high intellectual references, even when it expressed the unintentional and spontaneous. Alternating between the casual sketch and the elaborate picture, the preparatory study and the technically labored and finished work, drawing has often been divided into the preliminary and the accomplished.

Since drawing is a generative space of thought and sensation, the medium rehearses primary processes of exploration not only in the separation and binding between self and other, but also in the relation with other disciplines. As such, in its continuous effort of connecting, drawing acts counter to separation, including the division of media, and its development is reflected in those media. Viewing drawing within this experimental position is a reemphasis of drawing not as marginalized but as a center around which circulates its origins, inspirations, and projections. This means that the aesthetic fields to be covered are very broad, encompassing notations for choreography, theater, film, installation-based practices,

musical scores, architectural design, and other arts, to drawings that are fully executed and self-contained representations. Understanding drawing as a transitional space necessitates an engagement with recent critical scholarship and historical thought as much as with the thinking that grows from the multitude of possible expressions of drawing. In other words, drawing becomes not the center of attention valued above all other mediums, but rather a crucial juncture at which all these themes and threads gather together. This, of course, is a changed notion of drawing, but one that carries with it—rather than simply abandoning—the existing conventions, while situating them within the larger context of our experience and the changing condition of our world. As it is defined here drawing is not then isolated from the things to which it gives birth, but is most intimately a part of an unbroken set of relations: the self with the other with the artist with the institution with the audience with society at large... Collaborative on its own, drawing epitomizes mutuality, inclusion, and reconstruction, which are increasingly to supplement and partly to substitute modernist notions of alienation, separation, and negativity as strategies of the radical and inventive.

Being a means of resistance and relation that creates an open space in our contemporary society, drawing can be considered as one of the most powerful and incorruptible mediums with regard to the formation of subjectivity. It is therefore surprising that the medium with its long-standing traditions and important contributions to Asian culture doesn't find more applications and interpretations in contemporary Vietnam. Art history teaches us, however, that a wide range of skilled techniques and methods were used in the country during the twentieth century, promoted in particular by the School of Fine Arts in Hanoi. Artists such as Nguyen Cong Do (1930–), Nguyen Van Da (1928–), Nguyen Thu (1930–), Quang Tho (1929–2001), Truong Hieu (1939–), and Vu Giang Huong (1930–) have created incredibly beautiful and meaningful work, shedding new light on the medium of drawing as a recording device for the war era's many multifaceted experiences of resistance and survival. Their amazing drawings, and also of many other Vietnamese artists, have explored the complex role of imagery in influencing perceptions about the people and the land, and its events. Though refined and fragile, the socio-political significance of drawing as an intimate, critical, and subversive tool cannot be underestimated. It may even be that drawing has been and will always be the most brilliant and efficient medium to question our world, in particular our new world of globalization.