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Rethinking The Graphic Trace In Performative Drawing

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ABSTRACT

This article critically investigates the ‘graphic trace’, commonly perceived in drawings as marks left from physical actions. It is a notion fundamental to current art practices engaging performance and experimental drawing. The graphic trace is investigated through ‘inscription’, which is popularly interpreted as the visual expression of thought through marks or imprints of physical movements, from free-hand sketching to tracing choreographic movements. A critique of this inscriptive ideology shows that the inscribed trace as ‘line’ expresses thought under vitalist schemas exemplified by Bergson’s notion of multiplicity, that life is prompted by a creative event, and Deleuze’s articulation of such an event as ‘lines of thought’. The critique proposed in this article is that a more radically discursive and exceptional event, or ‘multiplicity’, does not really take place. An overview is made of performative, choreographic and process-led practices since the 1970s, while unpacking philosophical concepts of gesture, movement and embodiment. The conclusion lays out the paradox that the graphic trace stultifies thinking, offsetting a more materialist kind of event that affirms discourse in exceptionally different ways.

Keywords: Drawing, Performance, Trace, Thought-Event, Line

One of the most popular perceptions of drawing today is that it happens as a ‘performative’ practice. From live-art performance to experimental choreography, drawing can be found in either a scenographic display of artists tracing their physical actions live and throughout spaces shared by audiences, or in reflecting upon the interior of one’s being (Lajer-Burcharth 2015). The prevailing perception is that making marks of movements expresses or inscribes a creative event. Throughout this article I will examine drawing as it is engaged through performance and, more broadly, a problem of what is called ‘inscription’. The relation between performative drawing and inscription is fundamental for understanding what is a graphic trace. Etymologically drawing relates to inscription via the term ‘graphie’, not merely to write but mark out and put something into display.¹ In experimental choreographies this is articulated further as ‘dance writing’ (Bokaker 2014). I will look closely at inscription in terms of the mark as a graphic trace, the imprint that supposedly ‘choreographs and orchestrates thought’ (Brody 2008, 13) by expressing ‘(im)material events’ (29). Such a claim I argue conflates vitalist and phenomenological ideologies of event. The graphic trace complicates how artists and theorists perceive a curiously immaterial movement that confuses physical absence with metaphysical presence. This regards the actual absence expressed by marks as ‘lines’, tracing physical actions that inevitably disappear while expressing a presence that is invisible yet substantive, thinkable through touch. My thesis is therefore that such an event is problematic in thinking traces completely different to the metaphysical substance expressed in performative drawings today. To examine this problem I shall make a contextual overview of relevant artists and debates; and deconstruct the graphic trace to investigate whether other possibilities of rethinking the graphic trace can take place.

To set-up my overview of practices engaging both performance and drawing today I ask two questions: How is the graphic trace used and perceived in drawing through performance? And why is thought regarded as an ‘(im)material event’, an ‘affective excess’ exceeding material and bodily engagement? The second question regards a philosophically complex notion of the trace expressing a ‘multiplicity’ of sorts. To understand why the graphic trace is conditioned not only by physical movement but also thought, or multiplicity, I will need to delve into philosophical debates which cut across deconstruction, phenomenology and vitalist schemas.

Both visual and choreographic, artists such as Trisha Brown, Anna de Keersmaker, William

Anastasi, and Robert Morris, combine drawing and performance to display an event of making, being and thinking. In other words, these artists *perform* drawing by indexically displaying their gestures, tracing their entire body – and more. Materials such as graphite or charcoal are used to index these actions by tracing physically. As I will show, such artists and writers have renewed drawing since the late 1960's in North America and Europe, with a penchant for revealing this performative process conceptually and – though paradoxical – materially too.

TRACING MULTIPLICITY

It often happens that artists prefer not to say or write any more than whatever their works express. In some cases the works remain profoundly mute. Traces can be open to multiple interpretations while eliding insights toward proper meanings. The *Blind Time Drawings* (c. 1973) by Robert Morris however not only express but also provide audiences with insights made throughout the drawing. Morris makes these drawings by imprinting paper in proportion to his torso, using his hands and fingers. He does this 'performatively' by placing a blindfold over his eyes. Interestingly he writes directly onto the lower part of the paper a few sentences stating how he will make the drawing. He covers his hands in dark iron oxide pigment and then moves toward the paper and wall behind. From the drawing that results, it is quite obvious that his gestures are expressive, spontaneous to a degree, investigatory no doubt – probing, touching, seizing and grasping at the paper's surface. But to what purpose? The drawing traces what appear to be abstract forces: lines but also hazier markings, imprints tracing physical exertion. This plainly is movement. It resonates with some metaphysical interiority of being, a desire to express forces immaterial, absent, momentary, invisible. Morris' gestures comply with directions stated in his pre-written instructions. The action is brief in time; in the span of a few minutes the paper is stained by a gestural flourish of dark and bold strokes. These dark imprints reflect the movements of his hands. But the imprints as traces express his entire being and thoughts. In this way his drawing is an event. The physical exertion of pressing fingers into the paper and against the wall is for some emblematic of a 'kinesthetic practice of traction' (deZegher 2001, 23). What this overall event means for Morris is more complicated to say the least.

A certain feature of Morris' thought event is worth examining further. Not only does Morris performatively make each drawing he also writes an analysis of his thoughts around this ongoing series. In later instances, such as *Blind Time IV*, he also invites the analytic philosopher Donald Davidson to contribute writings. By inscribing his own thoughts and reflecting upon Davidson's, Morris states his intentions and the impulses or desires underlying the performance. 'He has put his

viewers in a position to triangulate with him the location of his creative acts' (Davidson 1993, 614). The space shared between audiences is scenographic in terms of a discursive interchange of reading and looking. By drawing blind, though, he delves into a 'conceptual absence' that staves off complete rationalization, a 'voluntary renunciation of control and judgment... leading to revelations of a certain somatic knowledge that has nothing to do with the theorized wholeness of vision' (Morris 1993, 618-620). This absence, one might even say interior *spacing*, poses a kind of discontinuity in any supposed continuity. It interrupts the substratum structured by his desires and beliefs. Although contemplative vision or theory in the stricter sense is sidelined Morris affirms intellectual insights that occur during and after the drawing. Touch is used to reveal knowledge. The question is what 'revelations' are offered by his finger-pressed traces and afterthoughts? Fundamentally little. Questions of being and thinking are conditioned by 'dark reason', which he believes is the 'economy of an excess' (Morris 1993, 627). The excess is *prima facie* the economic flows of psychophysical energies, the mental bound kinesthetically with the physical. It is worth keeping in mind that 'dark reason' complicates any underlying principle of meaning production such as Davidson's theory above. Dark reason interrupts meanings produced by all thinkers, notions of reason keeping anyone from becoming a 'languageless animal' (Davidson 1993, 608). Instead Morris tries to use visible traces to display, touch, and grasp insights of a complex event. One might say that this entire event is 'multiplicity', a precondition used in expressing meanings that, in this case, triangulate between artist, viewer, and the artwork.

Multiplicity should really be examined for its philosophical sense, especially in what is called vitalism. Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze establish this tradition. They claim that being and thinking happen in one total event, immanent in life as such. Life is thus made vital by multiplicity. The importance multiplicity plays in drawing, and the arts more widely today, is fundamental. For this is one of the defining conditions in making inscription 'performative', able to produce meanings that are thought provoking. In other words, drawing is used to perform thinking in a 'line' tracing or inscribing one's entire being in presence. In Morris' work, for example, multiplicity would visually be the line of physical energy expressed on paper via the dark imprints left by his fingers and hands. But the line is not merely visual and material. For multiplicity is mentally expressed, one may say *vital* in presence. It is the beliefs and desires expressing Morris' presence, his inner life. In this way inscription supposedly depicts (im)material events. Multiplicity conditions the conceptual absence expressed by performative drawing practices. So what is 'multiplicity'? Thinking *is* an event, a multiplicity, if it affects and transforms ideas into 'conceptual variation,' to quote Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – theorists often cited in current art practices and exhibitions that explore the line.

Thought in its multiplicity is ‘creative’ in that it makes ‘mental objects determinable as real beings’ (Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 2003, 207). For artists engaging performance through drawing this event, this ‘vital multiplicity’, involves indexing the human body and being throughout the process of marking and, in terms of recent choreographic performances, notation too (Maranca 2014).

Vital multiplicity resonates with indexing, tracing the gesturing body. The act is indexical by *incarnating*² a conceptual variation expressing inner life. Plainly put, multiplicity is the event of thinking, living and embodying total change. If drawing is really performative then life is the thought one fully incarnates in presence, perceiving that the act is continuously productive. For me this presupposition is fundamentally problematic. The aim of this event is to live and thus materialize thought in its immaterial multiplicity. Any connotation of embodying, or incarnating, thought comes up against more peculiar metaphysical notions of immateriality. The fundamental problem lies here. A graphic trace such as the line implies that by drawing live, in real time, the artist is incarnating invisible forces and thus embodying the act of ‘ceaselessly becoming-other’ (Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 2003, 177). So the presupposition is that this vitalist event is ‘making the invisible forces visible in themselves, drawing up figures’ (Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 2003, 182).

The thought-event, as seen so far through Morris’ performative drawings, places the body immanently in the abstraction expressed by immaterial forces. Thinking is intertwined with physiological and mental exertion. The drawing visually expresses this event by non-representational compositions, wave-like imprints smeared across the paper. Such visible traces are to be interpreted by viewers as ‘invisible forces’. In some ways these forces are inward and energetic, neuronal and biological in kind; however the abstractions of line should be considered further in terms of its substratum, its total metaphysical complexity. By inscribing and delimiting figures of lines, contours and scribbles, drawing is used to express investigations at the kinesthetic level.

Using physical exertion to elicit thought can also become ‘antiproductive.’³ A paradox arises here. We should consider that the thought-event of vital multiplicity *counters* the bodily inscription of immaterial forces: ‘to end up not with the self-presence of the body, but to obtain it while dissolving it, in *diffracting this presence in the presence of beings and things*’ (Gil 1998, 120; emphasis added). So the artist’s inner life, his vital multiplicity as ‘self-presence’, is *not* continuously productive. His attempt to express himself more inwardly, his being as some immaterial thing, is discontinuous, diffracting immanently.

Where now does this antiproduction leave artists and writers/theorists? The presence of the

artist as having access to a continuously productive core poses insurmountable problems. The problem is that there is no proper substratum, no underlying force of life, immaterial line, or metaphysical energy. The performative act is interrupted by its diffraction, an absence at the core of being. The act of marking for instance reduces bodily movement to a supposedly productive, creative event. But this I believe conflates bodily presence with abstract forces, which paradoxically express 'conceptual absence' as Morris rightly says. The diffraction interrupts the very sensation of a kind of unmarked gesture. For writer Carrie Noland 'performing gestures can generate sensations that are not-yet-marked, not-yet-meaningful' (2009). The 'not-yet' denotes something of a yet-to-come sense of drawing/writing performatively, of both anticipating and embodying abstract figurations of the line. This figure fulfills a cultural desire for graphically tracing and, by sensory stimulation (touch, sight, sound), embodying sensations believed to be immediately meaningful. In this way presence *seems* substantive, full in meaning and selfhood. What is ignored by such claims is the radical absence conditioning 'presence', that being echoes an index of 'meaningless meaning' (Krauss 1989, 206). Instead the presumption is that an underlying meaning structure or continuum exceeds signification and is beyond representation while still affective.⁴ For the inscriber feels him/herself tracing and producing a meaning yet-to-come that is somehow already grasped. Gestural tracing is therefore deemed 'productive' by evidencing immediate and spontaneous 'movement'. The gesture is intentional toward expressing the becoming-other-of-the-body.

Throughout the inscriptive gesture, the artist tries to nevertheless touch upon a substantive agency. He/she makes an extraordinary effort to embody forces channeling through the physical body. It should be clear that this effort to force profounder meanings, to supplement a conceptual absence, is intellectual as much as bodily and emotional. (Implicit here is a phenomenological operation of self-touching, of engaging oneself and others in existential 'presence', which I will unpack later.) The underlying paradox of this gesture in embodying what's not there, even if yet-to-come, has no way of being critically understood. The line is the expression of an immaterial event that seems axiomatic, unquestionably productive. But this I believe makes such a trace dogmatic. For this 'often leads to a different form of *stultification*, which uses the blurring of boundaries and the confusion of roles to enhance the effect of the performance without questioning its principles' (Rancière 2009, 21; emphasis added).

EXHIBITING PERFORMATIVE DRAWING

I now turn to look at contemporary drawing exhibitions and how they incorporate performance-based

artworks. Since the 1970's, predominantly in North America and Europe, drawing has re-emerged with a greater focus on conceptual invention, expansion of mediums and immediacy of form. It is multifactorial and reconfigurable, while not being a specific art-form per se. At its core it is 'antimedial' (Kurczynski 2014), in the sense that the conceptual and material sense of drawing is mutable, multiple in form. So my overview looks beyond the standard definition of drawing as works-on-paper, or two-dimensional objects. By creating crossovers, for instance between sculptural and time-based forms of art, drawing has been honored for arising out of the last vestiges of modernism (Kantor 2005, 14). Exhibitions in New York, starting with Bernice Rose's 1976 exhibition *Drawing Now* (The Museum of Modern Art), have presented artists, such as Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Marcia Hafif, and William Anastasi, who explore drawing experimentally. Moreover, these artists focus on the intellectual properties of indexing physicality and material engagement. Take for example Anastasi's *Subway Drawings*. These works are scribbled patches of coloured graphite floating on hand-sized paper, which display an automatic response to Anastasi traveling in subways throughout New York. Meandering lines on paper 'record' the event by tracking movements of the hand, suggesting a reflection of the momentary state they were rendered in. The enthusiasm this body-to-surface recording can spark is exemplified not only by the artist, rapidly and repetitively inscribing, but also from curators and writers. Laura Hoptman, for example, embraces this activity as 'the most direct and unmediated method of catching the creative process as it happened' (2002, 11). Process though is not as benign as it creatively seems. Dark reason, conceptual absence, lines that cut away the inscriber from within: these are some of the problems examined so far that clearly indicate something more antiproducer is happening too.

Rose's initiative to make such a survey exhibition of contemporary drawing continued twice more, with *American Drawing: 1963-74* (The Whitney Museum of American Art; New York, 1976), and *Twentieth-Century American Drawing: Three Avant-Garde Generations* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; New York, 1976). By 1999 the question of drawing and its relation to processes of making was re-examined in Los-Angeles with *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process* (1999), curated by Cornelia H. Butler.⁵ This was one exhibition that fostered mark-making as being exemplary for depicting 'process', that is the genesis of a work of art in the cyclic and reflexive activity of drawing and creating anew. However the urgency to reveal what are usually the unseen acts of the creative process focuses everything on (making) marks. The art-object, which is conventionally bought and sold, is secondary to this process. And the artist's presence is peculiarly conditioned by absence, the disappearance of his physicality and immediate gesture. The mark then is what appears, remains visually primary in trace.

The relationship between drawing and performance became a subject explored by lesser-known exhibitions. A notable exhibition – and arguably one of the first – to propose a direct relation of the two was *Performance Drawings*, which took place in 2001 at New York’s The Drawing Center. Works by artist exhibited such as Erwin Würm and Milan Grygar emphasized live performance to engage drawings as acts either made by the artist himself or, even, performed by audiences themselves. In the case of Würm, for instance, audiences would do actions based on illustrations found on objects, which each person would then use for the performed action. Here as well, the mark was primary. It resonated with performative action. In the words of Catherine De Zehger, the Drawing Centre’s executive director, the drawing of the mark connotes ‘gesture’: a movement expressing ‘the artist’s decision between thinking and doing’ (2001, 2).

Tropes such as ‘process-art’⁶, ‘experimentation’ and ‘expansion’ are subsequently given attention throughout debates about momentary ways of drawing.⁷ For Cornelia Butler, drawing ‘can physically embody moments of great agitation and experimentation,’ which means that one could have ‘a glimpse of the artist’s presence captured in a work on paper with both radical simplicity and ideal messiness’ (1999, 88). What is meant by ‘presence’ though? In an Anastasi scribble, for example, there is a hand-gestured attempt at seismically recording the artist’s being-there (Krauss 1989, 95); but more importantly the line remains empathic, that is to say it can have us ‘glimpse’, perceive and reflect as the artist does while making the drawing... to something else. It is questionable if Anastasi’s automatic scribbling ‘captures’ something as profound as his presence; or the prosaic action of plainly moving along (stationary and seated) whilst inscribing within the train. The prosaic action suggests an existential temporality immanent to the line’s presence, which one may say is fundamentally abstract and devoid of content. It is a time conditioning the possibility of the drawing, that economy of excess (Morris) that the artist continuously works through and struggles to think as much as embody. While creating within a state of being on the move Anastasi may inwardly perceive himself doing this. The audience around him may or may not engage in this event too. Everyone is implicated in the movement and space of the train of course. The graphic trace is prioritized in its offering a glimpse of this entire scenography. It is a space oriented around Anastasi’s spontaneous physiological responses to the train’s mobility. Whatever seems to be happening, all these elements and the metaphysical conditions of space and time are couched in the train as a kind of *mise en scène*, ‘but such chronotopes do not form synthetic or kinesthetic units; there is neither fusion nor correspondence among [these elements]’ (Pavis 2013, 72). At best the multiplicity of lines Anastasi inscribes reveals this complicated itinerant scene. ‘For what it [process, line] reveals,’ comments Pamela M. Lee, ‘is that drawing is not simply a means to an end. If anything, it reveals that

its very ends are mediation – on the way to something else’ (Lee in Butler 1998, 48).

MOVEMENT-BASED THINKING

A choreographic approach to drawing reticulates movement entirely. A key exhibition in this regard is *Move: Choreographing You* (Hayward Gallery 2010-11). Here the urgency for posing different possibilities of drawing⁸, in definition and materiality, shifts into further questions of mark-making and notation. Such mark systems are employed in dance and visual art toward indexing bodily movement, which I believe resonates with a form of time immanent to vital multiplicity. Works by artists such as the late Trisha Brown or Robert Morris are exhibited around notions of gesture as *tracing movement* – this term being one of the designated sections of the exhibition. For example, in *Its A Draw, Live Feed* (2003) Brown uses hand-sized charcoal sticks to inscribe trajectories left by her arms and legs onto a large sheet of paper fixed on the floor. The actual traces made by Brown express movement as being physical, one may say even lines-of-thought. Drawing is then performative, rather than choreographically pre-constructed as a dance. This exemplifies what Peggy Phelan calls, in the accompanying catalogue as, ‘movement-based thinking’ (Phelan in Rosenthal 2011, 22).⁹

In *Its A Draw / Live Feed*, Brown augments dance materially. All this is viewable by audiences in real-time, the inscriptions happening over the space delimited by a square sheet of paper comfortably fitting Brown’s entire body. Inscription is clearly exemplified here as ‘dance writing’. She inscribes her entire physicality by mapping spontaneous gestures, pressing and delineating trajectories cast by her arm or leg onto the paper, creating fragmentary contours, tracing and encircling where she moved. The malleability of the charcoal enables her to later alter an initial mark, rubbing and smearing inscribed lines into multiple tracks; a composition generated from ‘a formless splattering preventing figurability’ (Lepecki 2006, 71). Audiences watch Brown toppling and falling – hardly assertive and self-controlled. Her physical movements look variable and fragmentary. As André Lepecki observes, the ‘lines traced with hands as well as feet – vaporize in dust, twitch in hesitation, break under her attack, initiate flow, reflect precision, and fall into error’ (2006, 71). What happens though to all the conceptual variations expressed by Brown’s postures, of toppling and falling, which I believe indicate not merely weight but a different ineluctable spacing? Why do her physical movements ‘vaporize in dust’, as if the charcoal lines Brown traces depict a ‘flow’ of (metaphysical) energies disseminated by psychophysical exertion, markings imprinted and exfoliated on paper? Indeed Brown moves by displaying her gestures. She lets the audience view her body err under gravitational forces while displaying an array of limber body-shapes; and yet the figuration of

boldly pressed and rubbed lines inevitably obfuscate the complexity of – and multiplicity of thought immanent to – the performance. Audiences stand around watching, left to perceive the traces graphically displayed. Inscriptively the lines draw-out a spiraling vertigo that reiterates a continual process of dematerialization.

The perception of (physical) movement therefore expresses a thought that is always already becoming different and, to reiterate the hermeneutical contradiction found earlier, embodied metaphysically. As fellow choreographer Simone Forti confides, this gesture of expending and channeling of physical energy ‘has to do with sensing movement in your own body, sensing your body’s changing dynamic configurations’ (1974: 29-31). In other words, the sensation stimulated by physical movement seems to give the artist thoughts of a profounder causal movement, the sense of becoming vital in presence, continuously productive (Schneekloth 2008). It is precisely here that drawing is employed, namely to mark out and sustain this existential sensation with a haptic quality. The indexical marks are to render visible a process of curiously dynamic inner change. However the process is doggedly metaphysical. It smacks of a ‘contemporary ideology,’ as philosopher Alain Badiou aptly states, ‘which is materialistic and democratic,’ even ‘vitalist,’ presenting ‘performance as a pure immanent becoming opposed to representation or reflection’ (in Crone ed. 2012, 23).¹⁰ The stultification underlying the graphic trace is central to this materialistic and democratic ideology.

RE-MARKED, TRACING AGAIN

Given that tracing is perceived to depict movement-based thinking it is important to now see how the mark appears as a graphic trace, this time in its inscriptive/linguistic sense. An inscribed imprint indexes a causal and semiotic operation. Here the mark is an index. The index is ‘where the sign is related to its referent, as smoke is to fire, or a track in the snow’ (Newman and deZehger 2003, 93). The paradox is clear: there is no causal agent/signified, no fire or foot to which the effect corresponds. And yet ‘the paradox is of [the referent] being physically present but temporally remote’ (Krauss 1989, 217). The dance that Anna de Keersmaker presented at the blockbuster MOMA exhibition *On Line* in 2011 is a clear example of this complicated operation. Audiences, observing from above as well as around her, watched de Keersmaker stepping, pirouetting and spiraling over a room-sized layer of sand. Her movements produced circular markings that branched together by symmetrical lines, footprints protruding out from the point where she started. Each step kicked up sand, partially exposing the concrete floor while, later, re-marking her tracks again. Her tracings became visible patterns of protruding lines within a giant wheel-like disk that appeared somewhere between a cosmic spiral and a grand industrial cog. Though she was, of course, present to the audience, the tracings

from the sand expressed a more sublime space and ineffable event.

In semiotic terms this excess, which regards the immaterial event interrupted by conceptual absence, makes the indexical notion of tracing problematic. The problem regards how the index is constitutively emptied: ‘an empty linguistic expression that derives its sense from the context in which it is performed, such as “this”, “that”, “now”, and the personal pronouns’ (Newman and deZehger 2003, 94). Brown, Anastasi, and de Keersmaker all show quite plainly that their bodies become an elemental ‘this’ indexed via ‘that’ mark. Though ‘empty’ the linguistic expression leaves a conceptual space absent. Audiences are left to supplement this absence – a constitutive spacing of sorts. The dancer particularly keeps in play ‘the physical manifestation of a cause,’ which elicits ‘the message of pure presence’ (Krauss 1989, 211). As shown earlier however the thought-event of multiplicity, so to say, empties this cause immanently. In principle this correlates to expended physical energy. Interpretations remain open around this ontological interruption, or deconstructive spacing of meanings. This is not to say that the artist is prompted by a metaphysical void; rather physical engagement expends an energy that is antiproductive at its core. Presence is perpetually emptied.

To unravel this paradox it is worth examining one of the primary examples of the origin of painting. This is often dubbed ‘the origin of plastic arts,’ which appears as a short tale by Pliny the Elder. In this tale a pottery maker named Butades invites his daughter to inscribe the outline of her lover’s shadow, cast by candlelight against a wall.¹¹ The Corinthian maid tries to fix this line by having her father sculpt a ceramic form around it, helping her reinforce and trace the plastic form of the man she may never see again, who departs the next day – Pliny’s short account does not tell us if he ever returns.¹² According to Michael Newman neither the sculpted supplement nor the lover represent the paradoxically mnemonic sense of trace.¹³ Rather it is *in* the outlining of the trace itself that ‘the site of departure... is also a place of mourning’ (Newman and deZehger 2003, 94). The outline is a ‘figure’, an epiphenomenon of something that is substantially absent, *never* present as such. This non-substantive absence is crucial to note. In it one neither deciphers a profounder time, immaterial substratum, nor agency. Lover, shadow, or maid all remain refused in the inscribed trace. Hence the signification produced by inscribing the figure is that it ‘*stands in* for nothing’ (Lyotard 2011, 81). What is the mnemonic sense of the graphic trace fundamentally if its figure refers to an abstract ‘this’ or ‘now’ that has never been, that depicts *nothing*?

What we have with the figure of the outline is the ‘line’ at its most primordial: an utterly abstract presence. Even though the figure displays the visible mark the trace indexes and *doubles* ‘insofar as it is recognizable as such, is *always already re-marked*’ (Newman and deZehger 2003,

100; emphasis added). As a figural and material outline, the trace intertwines its visual effect with a supplemental and immaterial act of empty, abstract forces. The act *sustains* the expressive doubling of a differential movement. And here a key insight comes to light: this intertwinement enacts a kind of conceptual variation affecting the inscription of the trace. Smoke *becomes* in its smoking; the effect *affects* its continual and automatic coming-to-presence while emptying the cause of any content or object.¹⁴ Conceptual absence looms right here. Through its reiteration the indexical outline indicates thoughts about presence beyond *and* prior to the physical gesture. And yet gestures mark out and attempt to embody the event in its momentary sense, here in the now... and then gone. In this doubling of mark and gesture, materializing and momentary display of an immaterial movement, the notion of presence seemingly takes place. Linguistic and phenomenological readings will nevertheless claim then that presence ‘has to do with the genesis of the work of art as such’ (Newman and deZehger 2003, 103).

In his critical analysis of drawing and the phenomenology of touch Jacques Derrida – one of the few philosophers to investigate drawing and its inscriptive ideology – deconstructs Pliny’s myth. The inscriber’s hand movements and stylus are interrogated as magical devices in the following passage:

The movement of the magic wand that traces with so much pleasure does not fall outside of the body. Unlike the spoken or written sign, it does not cut itself off the desiring body of the person who traces or from the immediately perceived image of the other. It is of course still an image which is traced at the tip of the wand, but an image that is not completely separated from the person it represents; what the drawing draws is almost present in person in his *shadow*. The distance from the shadow or from the wand is almost nothing. She who traces, holding, handling, now, the wand, is very close to touching what is very close to being the other *itself*, close by a minute difference; that small difference - visibility, spacing, death - is undoubtedly the origin of the sign and the breaking of immediacy; but it is in reducing it as much as possible that one marks the contours of signification. (Derrida 1993, 234)

According to Derrida the inscribing device – be it pencil, brush, or even indexical finger – is magical. Its ‘magic’ is that the wand as drawing-device inscribes and maintains a distance, a *minimal difference* between what is seen and touched, the shadow and the tracing. This distance is ‘minimal’, ‘almost nothing’. It is a form of separation that refers to an ontological interruption of signification and the dissemination of presence. What one signifies or interprets is never what is really there. Thoughts surround a presence that *separates* not just the audience as other but also artist as self. In

deconstruction, this interruptive separation is also called ‘spacing’. For Derrida the mark as sign is prompted by death. Absence is radically devoid of substance. To my knowledge drawing discourses and wider inscriptive practices rarely, if ever, affirm this separation. Minimal difference is the spacing of ‘the breaking of immediacy’. Indeed I have shown elsewhere (Luzar 2016) that this constitutive separation or discontinuity exposes the human condition to a more post-phenomenological sense of weight, of thinking ineluctably through a traceless action. Although I cannot further elaborate this here, it is important to consider that thinking can be worked through singular notions of bodily weight and immanent ‘point’. Such notions pose very different discontinuities to the rather one-dimensional continuities perceived in ‘line’, embodied gesture, and movement-based thinking.

The desire to feel pure and substantive presence goes to such lengths that the thought-event is dogmatically sustained. In this regard the line is specious in movement: ‘the line records neither the signifiers of a discourse nor the outlines of a silhouette; it is the trace of a condensing, displacing, figuring, elaborating energy, with no regard for the recognizable’ (Lyotard 2011, 232). This disregard for rethinking the recognizable unearths a definite stultification of the thought event. It echoes a desire for tracing immaterial events that seem possible through touch, touching beyond the visible to feel one’s being there.

EMBODIED LIMITATIONS

To properly unpack this phenomenological problem and shortly conclude this article I will need to analyse the haptic sense of inscription. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers one of the most infamous concepts of the haptic. Self-touching, or *chiasmus*, is a complex mode of apperception that involves intertwining perception and (bodily) movement. In a chiasmus one touches upon the possibility of thinking throughout perception and mobility, which is subjective yet empathically shared with others. As Merleau-Ponty claims: ‘it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general...’ (1968, 142). Distinct from ‘I’ or ‘he’, from individual/ego or other, this generalizing visibility ‘is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching; there is a circle of the visible... there is even an *inscription of the touching in the visible*, of the seeing in the tangible...’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 143; emphasis added). Here the individual as ego struggles to properly engage this chiasmatic act within his body. There is no underlying necessity or causal substratum that guarantees this attempted embodiment. One will venture to incarnate this act by even *coinciding* with the anonymous operation that reflexively circulates an inscription of thinking-as-perceiving.¹⁵ The chiasmatic act is held by the belief that ‘there are parts of this body which can indeed be perceived by touch but cannot be seen’

(Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Book 2: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution* 2002, 152). To keep the anonymous operation of inscription from being utterly distant, completely abstract and meaningless, one keeps the body *in* movement. This is the means or process of being ‘reflexively related to [oneself]’ so that in turn, in this circle of the touch, is produced a ‘psychophysical whole’ (Husserl 1960, 97).

Such is the problematic sense of drawing through performance: that marking gesturally, spontaneously inscribing a graphic trace, not only alludes to making tangible the chiasmatic circle sustaining inscription but also rendering this causal operation visible and certain. Morris’ drawing blind and uses of touch struggle with this viscous circle. The re-mark of the graphic trace, the imprints audiences are left to see, can be perceived less as supplemental or metaphorical and more as metaphysically certain. In this way the ‘apodictic evidence’ (Husserl 1960, 103) posed by phenomenologists becomes vulgarly dogmatic. It leaves inherent beliefs unquestioned. Critical interpretations remain suspended. That is if one believes by perceiving through touch – rather than think through some minimal difference – that a creative principle of origin, substance or pure presence is continuously present. This curtails minimal difference, the contingency of spacing and discontinuity. It resonates with what in Merleau Ponty’s theory is interpreted from the French *écart* as ‘divergence’.

Morris’ *Blind Time III* (1985) is worth considering for understanding how this separation-in-contact happens, this divergence of self to anonymous other. For theorists such as Catherine de Zehger the artist attempts to inscribe ‘an outward gesture linking inner impulses and thoughts to the other through the touching of a surface with repeated marks and lines’ (2011, 23). Note how she describes the line as ‘linking’ inside with outside, a recursive intellectual and externalizing act. In addition to blindfolding himself Morris deliberately places a tape-line along the center of the paper, which he removes after his performance. The white gap left by this tape-line appears uniform and, even, *untouched*. If the inner impulses are believed creatively productive and spontaneous, why though does Morris make a didactic representation of what his intuitive touch is principally blind to? For Morris actually writes a rather enigmatic note about experiencing this haptic inscription, a note that appears in addition to the pre-written task: ‘a gap inevitably appears in the self’s dedicated pursuit of its own narrative. In that pause the weightless drift is buoyed up on the void’ (Criqui 2005, 198). Combine this written reflection with the fact that the tape guides his hands throughout the performative marking. I claim that the vertical strip and the written reminder make his engagement with drawing blind ambiguous and expedient to the act. By adding to the drawing another inscription, a supplementary note that reflects his thought, Morris focuses upon an immanent yet displacing

movement integral to the mark-making process. What both types of mark/inscription help us see is the degree to which the artist is impelled to touch upon an anonymous movement. Touch remains inherently blind to the anonymity that makes presence not fully substantive but radically absent.

NON-GRAPHIC TRACES

In light of idioms such as ‘movement-based thinking’ it would seem that contemporary art has capacities in critiquing anything thinkable through practice. As I have shown the graphic trace poses a certain obstruction to this critique and event. Amongst other findings, the main conclusion I can make now is in saying that the graphic trace both displays and obfuscates an irresolvable contradiction. That contradiction is in the presumption that the inscriber has continuous access to an immaterial precondition when in fact this presence of infinite change is conditioned by radical absence. Morris’ mention of conceptual absence and economies of excess are important in this regard. This resonates with the kind of spacing or interruption that precedes any conceptual and material invention. In other words, the creative process happens by working through spaces that inwardly leave practitioners to engage discontinuities, uncertainty, or completely different processes. Performative drawing and art practices need not turn ‘process’ into existential odysseys about finding pure presence or feeling oneself – and others too – in being fully there. Nor does the drawing need to fixate on performing a purely graphic trace. A real thought-event ‘does challenge us to think a new, non-graphic meaning’ that regards ‘interrupting the tracing of the trace’ (Malabou 2011, 63). In effect what is obscured by the graphic trace is the role that the spatial and bodily has in momentary works. Time is important no doubt. But choreographic and scenographic elements I have been teasing out here are elements fundamentally obscured by the visual primacy given to the mark as graphic trace. As the works by de Keersemaeker, Brown and Anastasi show, the roles of the artist’s physicality, audience’s location, rooms, and items structuring such spaces play a secondary role to the ‘mark’. This is why inscription is ideological: perceptions narrow to viewing traces that are dogmatically believed to express some immaterial precondition of infinite creative becoming. To properly conclude then I will make two comments regarding inscription in its expression of ‘embodiment’ and ‘becoming’.

The embodiment expressed through the graphic trace is believed to be creatively operative as a ‘graphic continuum’ (Petheridge 2010). ‘Tracing movement’ is based on the desire not to affirm a total event, not to think radically and create something completely different, but to keep moving throughout ‘a kind of para-logical suspension’ (Krauss 1989, 13). Marking/tracing expresses ‘a message that translates into the statement “I am here”... one that repeats the message of pure presence in an articulated language’ (Krauss 1989, 211). Does this message not however revert to an obscure

feeling (Agamben 2013, 119), an intuitive intellectual engagement with the ‘not yet’ or ‘yet-to-come’ of something that is believed hidden and non-representable? Indeed the graphic trace is couched in metaphysical conundrums of infinite continuums, of magically bridging irreducible conceptual spaces. And this narrows the performative act in doing nothing more than make para-logical suspensions of meaning. Such suspensions of meaning can be better understood throughout a broader desire for keeping presence beyond representation. Linking the material imprint with an immaterial movement reverts to a form of empathic embodiment, an enjoyment that traverses vitalist multiplicity. ‘To enjoy aesthetically,’ writes Wilhelm Worringer (a thinker that Deleuze references around art), ‘means to enjoy myself in a sensuous object diverse from myself, to empathize myself into it... to expand my inner vision till it embraces the whole line’ (1997, 5).

The line privileged by drawing today flags up a general criticism of Deleuzian vital-multiplicity. This I believe correlates to the empathic enjoyment implicating performance-drawing practices. Here bodily exertion is used to touch upon a multiplicity of thought. In this case multiplicity is a movement of forces, thinking within an infinite continuum expressing pure presence. However as Slavoj Žižek aptly states, ‘there is no infinite; infinite is just the subjective urge to go beyond, the creative “in-between”’ (2004, 69). What kind of agency is gained through the urge to go beyond materiality, to coincide with such an in-between state of self-enjoyment? Becoming pertains to ‘a third mediating agency’ with ‘no positive substantial Being since, in a way, its status is purely “performative” (i.e., it is a kind of self-inflamed flame, nothing but the outcome of its activity)’ (Žižek, *Organs without Bodies, Deleuze and Consequences* 2004, 119). I would call this the *paradox of the performative*. This calls up a contradiction expressed by gestures of linking, of fully coinciding with Being while depriving oneself of a radically exceptional event. The practitioner thus reverts to ‘something puppet-like’ (Žižek 1997, 110). Embodying the graphic trace augments the trace’s anonymity, engages a ‘third mediating agency’ that is always dematerializing yet, in effect, is obscure in movement and feeling. This process boils down to producing not meaning as such but, rather, a nullifying effect of embodying abstract forces.¹⁶

In such ways tracing graphically stultifies meaning structures. The expansion of drawing through inscription is pinned to a desire for expressing inner impulses as some ‘living discourse’. Rancière elaborates this as ‘a way of seeing while on the move, of fixing the *sketch* in which nature presents itself to one-self, reveals itself as presentation itself’ (2004, 17). Conversely, drawing uses the performative to enact an embodiment of incarnation, of rendering presence substantially present to oneself. The practitioner that traces this operation, to use Rancière’s repeated criticism, seeks

‘material presence, the spirit made flesh, the absolutely other which is also absolutely the same’ (2007, 8). In this way the graphic trace is the incarnation of an anonymous presence. It is ‘the imprint of the thing, the naked identity of its alterity in place of its imitation, the wordless, senseless materiality of the visible instead of the figures of discourse...’ (Ibid.) Does this mean that any attempt in generating discourse in, around, and through performative drawing is but left within some kind of para-logical suspense? Of course a multiplicity distinct from the phenomenologico-vitalist figure, expressed through the line, involves rethinking the graphic trace. The notion of ‘rethinking’ an event of thought may seem obliquely philosophical. The deconstructive approach will make rethinking an impossible task; thought can seem nothing more than an anonymous movement that, within the core of our being, generates itself throughout viscous self-encirclement, visualizing one *totalizing* figure. The effect of totalizing discourse lends performative drawing its philosophical predicament. And this marks a vestige of drawing’s multiplicity.

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Notes

[1] Inscription also refers to displays of a ‘visual scrawl’ (Brody 29). This can be examined in two ways: a semiotic process that produces a series of signs (chains of signifiers that collect and designate a signified meaning); and, a scrawl of graphic strokes, lines viewable but indecipherable, that is a figure that elides signification and depicts a form of expressive, abstract desire.

[2] Incarnation also entails metamorphosis: ‘This capacity to disappear, to be able to be absorbed in each exfoliation, defines the metamorphosis of the body. Metamorphosis is the condition of the activity of code translation: each exfoliation is the metamorphosis of (Spinoza 1992) all the other forms in a spatial one’ (Gil 1998, 143).

[3] ‘Desiring machines, on the contrary, continually break down as they run, and in fact run only when they are not functioning properly,’ write Deleuze and Guattari (2000, 31).

[4] Embodiment and endurance in vital multiplicity derive from philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s injunction, that thought or intellect can only be expressed by a question of bodily capacities to undergo this expression of speculation – ‘what can a body do?’ See Part IV, ‘Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions’ in *The Ethics* (1992); and for Deleuze’s articulation of endurance see Chapter Fourteen, ‘What Can a Body Do?’ in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (2005).

[5] Subsequent exhibitions have continued to address the process-of-making-marks, and to this I note their focus on the line as *the* mark and figure: *Drawing from The Modern (1975 - 2005)* (Museum of Modern Art; New

York, 2005), *The Intertwining Line* (Cornerhouse; Manchester, 2008-9) *The End of The Line: Attitudes In Drawing* (The Fruitmarket Gallery; Edinburgh, 2009-10), *On Line: Drawing Through The Twentieth Century* (Museum of Modern Art; New York, 2011), *Drawing The Line: Japanese American Art, Design and Activism in Post-War Los Angeles* (Japanese American National Museum; Los Angeles, 2011-12), *Lines of Thought* (Parasol Unit; London, 2012).

[5] Process-art is largely referred to Lucy Lippard's infamous document, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (1973), which surveys conceptual experimentations by American and European artists. 'Conceptual', 'performance' and 'process' are some of an array of terms that Lippard's book notes, terms which express qualities of art making in general. These qualities emphasize expansion rather than defining parameters of a venerable art-form. Process-art per se would, in this case, not be a genre but rather an attitude toward making conceptually and materially.

[6] See Cornelia H. Butler, 'Ends and Means,' in Butler (1999).

[7] Avis Newman addresses the aspect of expansion as a fundamental process of ontological transformation: 'that nevertheless proposes a process of becoming more than being, analogous to the practice of drawing in which one may see not the thing itself but its possibility, its suggestion, (and) the uncertainty as to what stage it is in its becoming...' (Newman, in Chelsea Space 20).

[8] Patricia Cain also associates processes of moving with conceptual invention when she writes, 'ideas often appear to emerge as the activity progresses' (Cain 29).

[10] W. Benjamin Myers similarly argues that performance discourses conflate vitalism with spiritual notions of force, such that 'the body becomes subservient to mysticism' (2012, 69).

[11] For an impressive study of the shadow presented in the myth of Butades see: 'Around The Uncanny' in Stoichita (2001). Here the tracing of the lover's shadow expresses 'an affirmation of body, volume and flesh' (127). And the collaborative delivery of this activity will have 'authenticated the incarnation' and 'the presence of the author' (Ibid.).

[12] See Books XXXIII-XXXV in Pliny the Elder, *Natural History – A Selection* (2004).

[13] In his essay 'The Trace of Trauma,' Newman explores, albeit with some difficulty, Maurice Blanchot's radical claim – that there is no 'origin of the trace' – a claim that fundamentally informs Derrida's notion of the trace. As Newman writes, 'the marks are effaced because there is no present in which they can be present' and the traces are 'forever cut off from that of which they would be the traces' (165).

[14] José Gil similarly contextualizes the remark of trace within anthropology, describing affection and movement apropos of a multiple, differential force of doubling: 'The operator's [force] role seems to be a double one. First determining what the force is, then transforming it,' which in turn means that 'force doesn't exist: when it is the

movement from one sign to another. But as movement, with its characteristic feature of energy, it is final and irreducible' (1998, 11).

[15] Writer Ian James identifies the Christian characteristic of Merleau-Ponty's chiasmus, whereby embodying the inscription-of-touching-in-the-visible associates with the statement made in the Gospel of St. John: 'And the word was made flesh' (2006, 114-151).

[16] Terry Eagleton comments on 'this grandly generalizing gesture' by writing: 'What makes me what I am, the will of which I am simply a materialization, is utterly indifferent to my individual identity, which it uses merely for its own pointless self-reproduction. At the very root of the human subject lies that which is implacably alien to it, so that in a devastating irony this will which is the very pith of my being, which I can feel from the inside of my body with incomparably greater immediacy than can know anything else, is absolutely unlike me at all, without conscious motive, as blankly unfeeling and anonymous as the force which stirs the waves (1990, 161).'

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