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Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art

Transitory States: Becoming and Continuity in the Drawing Process and Object

Ming Ying Hong

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University
in St. Louis, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Contents

Table of Contents	2
Essay Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Drawing Motifs	6
Drawing as Process	17
Conclusion	21
Endnotes	22
List of Figures	24
Bibliography	25

Abstract

This thesis explores the influences and content of the visual artist Ming Ying Hong and in particular, examines her drawings created during her Master of Fine Arts degree program at Washington University in St. Louis. In theorizing about the practice of drawing, this document investigates the instability in meaning found in both her motifs of explosions and wounds, placing her research in larger philosophical context regarding the transformative potential of Giles Deleuze's "becoming" and George Batailles's "continuity." Ultimately, the intersection of these two terms is exemplified in the paradoxical conflation of binaries, upsetting clear categorization and suspending concise meaning. As a result of these fluid boundaries, there is an inability to delineate abstraction from representation, calm from violence, and presence from absence. Furthermore, this document examines the practice of drawing as a means of obtaining an embodied state of becoming and continuity, enabling a sense of cohesiveness between self and world.

Introduction

Drawing shares an interdependent relationship with its surface. As opposed to painting, which traditionally covers the entire canvas, drawing often has areas of paper exposed. Outside of merely existing as background, the untouched areas serve as an integral component of form. So intertwined is this relationship between drawing and its background that in the essay “Painting, Signs, and Marks,” Walter Benjamin writes “the graphic line marks out the area and so defines it by attaching itself to it as its background. Conversely, the graphic line can exist only against this background, so that a drawing that completely covered its background ceases to be a drawing.”¹ Thus, the empty areas of a drawing flirt with the idea of both space and plane.

It is this particular duality that makes the unmarked spaces of the paper the subject of exceptional conceptual fertility. At once, these areas both signify an emptiness that constitutes nothing, but also possess the potential to contribute to an infinite number of forms. It is this fluctuating dynamic that is the subject of instability. Emma Dexter, in *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, notes that this “reserve, a blank space, therefore functions as a device to keep at bay the desire for obvious structure, composition, and totality.”² Such remarks as Dexter’s can be tied to the idea of *becoming*, an embodied state which is characterized by a lack of distinct identity and form, a term Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explore extensively in *One Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

The act of becoming disables the ability to clearly define a subject, as it exists in a nomadic state, “always without definition, essentially creating the condition for transformation.” This identity-less mode of existence dodges the constraints of a singular subject, essentially allowing for the freedom of various modes of being and enabling a sense of holistic interconnectedness. The practice of drawing alongside subjects that encompass various polarities

such as representation and abstraction, violence and calm, emptiness and fullness, presents the possibility of dissolving the ontological separations, enabling new ways of seeing.

Drawing Motifs

The rupture is formless, insofar as the boundaries of its shape are unclear. In fact, the form of a rupture, takes the form of its surroundings, evaporating and integrating into its environment, establishing a sense of unity that aligns with the notion of becoming as well as George Bataille's idea of *continuity*. In the case of my drawings, there are two types of ruptures exhibited: wounds and explosions. This document will compare and contrast these two different elements in relation to the idea of continuity.

Continuity and Becoming

There are commonalities between Deleuze's and Guatarri's notion of becoming and Bataille's idea of continuity. The former brings to light a re-configuration of root-like knowledge structure, forcing the subject to no longer occupy the realm of stability and instead take shape as an amorphous *legion*, following a rhizomatic structure. Their proposal of becoming, addresses a concern regarding structuralist hierarchies that divide rather than unify.

Fifteen years prior to the publication of *One Thousand Plateaus*, George Bataille wrote on the topic of continuity in his book *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. Like Deleuze and Guatarri, Bataille was concerned with the disruption of pre-established patterns and implicit social order that defined and separated individuals. In search of a totalizing consciousness, Bataille advocated for a restored sense of continuity between the Self and World, Self and Nature, and Self and Consciousness. While Deleuze and Guatarri avoided the closure and resolution of clearly defining "becoming" (since the concept is never exactly about one thing), Bataille provided a less ambiguous road map towards diffusing the boundaries between self and other. He proposed the indulgence of and violence towards flesh in order to escape the boundaries of the body. Death and witness of death becomes the ultimate means of symbiosis. In

the introduction of his book *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, Bataille writes, “A violent death disrupts the creature’s discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all experience with which the victim is now one.”³

Pain, Ecstasy, and Continuity

Once, Bataille was gifted a photograph of a Chinese man chained to a pole undergoing lingchi or “death by a thousand cuts” (Fig. 1) The man’s arms were severed, exposing raw flesh; the legs were cut below the knees; and a large gash on the chest revealed the viscera of vital organs. While the wounds were horrendous in themselves, the most disturbing element of the photograph was the seemingly ecstatic expression on the face of the dead or dying man. This violent imagery of tearing, rending, and eviscerating the body, coupled with the expression of ecstasy transfixed Bataille and served as a crucial site of his philosophical reflections on the notion of *anguished gaiety*.⁴



Fig. 1

In "Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice" Bataille provides a complicated framework for understanding the term. "On the contrary, gaiety, connected with the work of death, causes me anguish, is accentuated by anguish, and in return exacerbates that anguish: ultimately, gay anguish, anguished gaiety cause me, in a feverish chill, 'absolute dismemberment,' where it is my joy that finally tears me apart, but where dejection would follow joy were I not torn all the way to the end, immeasurably."⁵ What becomes immeasurable and un-definable in this circuitous loop of bliss and torment is meaning. By conflating two opposing entities, gaiety and anguish, meaning is suspended in the realm of non-knowledge where the paradox of violence and joy can co-exist.

The notion of non-knowledge can be understood as the sensation of having a "hold on nothing."⁶ But Bataille notes, this space of non-knowledge is not a cause for feelings of uncertainty, but rather where meaning (more specifically the absence of meaning) settles without "awkward gesture."⁷ In *The Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge*, Bataille envisions a world where "thoughts fail" and meaning is outside of the categorical structures of knowledge, thereby embracing a nothingness that enables continuity and becoming.

The Wound and Meaninglessness

My work involving the wounded, dead or ecstatic body stems from interests in Bataille's philosophies. The subjects of the drawings are always in a state of unconsciousness, unaware of their surroundings, existing in a liminal state between death and ecstasy. Their faces are both peaceful and disturbingly inanimate. A sweeping sense of calm is emphasized in the handling of their depictions, in which the soft smudges of graphite carefully mold to the contours of their face. These serene qualities are offset by the aggressive and hard-lined application of "wounds."



Fig. 2

The wound complicates the conventional understanding of the body as an entity that is neatly packaged within the clean confines of skin. The body becomes carcass and flesh. The subject (Fig. 2) continuously alternates between human and corpse, face and head, face and gesture. The inability to define and identify enables continuity and becoming. In *The Logic of Sensations*, Deleuze discusses the works of the painter Francis Bacon, who provides a visual rhetoric that informs his notion of becoming-animal. He writes: “As a portrait artist, Bacon is a painter of heads, not faces, and there is a difference between the two. For the face is structure, spatial organization that conceals the head, whereas the head is dependent on the body, even if it is the point of the body, its culmination. It is not that the head lacks spirit; but it is a spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit. It is the animal spirit of man: a pig-spirit, a buffalo-spirit, a dog-spirit, a bat-spirit...Bacon thus pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: to dismantle the face, to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the

face.”⁸ Like the Bacon painting, my drawings move away from a definable subject, in this case the face, in order to bring forth a ubiquitous entity that entertains the possibility of any identity.

Additionally, the delicate depiction of aggressive violence underscores the dual meaning of death. Bataille writes, “On the one hand the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life; on the other an element at once solemn and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly.”⁹ Death enters a state of ambiguity where the opposing ideas of repulsion and fascination are contaminated, where divine ecstasy and extreme horror infinitely reverse roles, rendering them both meaningless. This dissolution of meaning parallels the disintegration of the body enacted by the wound.

The Wound as Gesture



Fig. 3

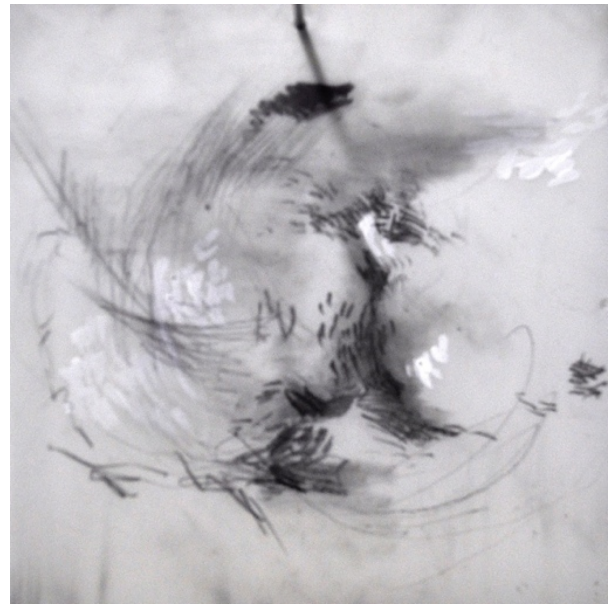


Fig. 4

In an *Untitled Series* consisting of one hundred, three-inch by three-inch drawings, the wound is both depicted representationally and gesturally. Throughout the collection of drawings,

the graphisms are either imposed onto the body (Fig. 3) or isolated without additional context (Fig. 4), as if depicting a close-up of the rupture. Regardless of scenario, the quality of the gesture remains the same. The marks are located in the sphere of movement, functioning on the outskirts of meaning, therein establishing a correspondence with the nomadic existence of becoming.

Roland Barthes, in an essay regarding the work of Cy Twombly (Fig. 5), suggests that the gesture “abolishes the distinction between cause and effect, motivation and target, expression and persuasion...it [does] something to garble the chain, to make it rebound to the point of finally losing its meaning.”¹⁰ For Barthes, meaning and language are intrinsically tied. So when language is pushed to its limits, the result is gesture, which is symbolic of aesthetic excess that parallels the overwhelming nature of violence and death. And as an image of excess, the gesture which is seemingly meaningless, is as Barthes argues, a simultaneously “all-inclusive sign.” The gesture, in effect, abolishes the divisions that are created via language.



Fig. 5

The gesture tests the limits of language and subsequently, the limits of reason. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben suggests that the human gesture; “in itself has nothing to say, because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as a pure potential for mediation. But since being-in-language is not something that can be spoken of in propositions, in its essence gesture is always a gesture of non-making of sense in language.”¹¹ Thus the gesture remains somewhat paradoxical. At one end, Agamben suggests it is at the center of meaning; on the other, it constitutes absolutely nothing, situating itself precisely in the area of non-knowledge.

Existing inside language and outside of meaning, the gesture is an encounter of non-thought, functioning on the outskirts of signification. In comparing Cy Twombly’s works to poetry, Barthes writes that the writer cannot simply express with graphic energy—though it is a goal for certain categories of avant-garde literature, particularly poetry. Instead, language always signifies before impressing itself as image later. Whereas, the gesture represents the loss of speech or ability to communicate, thereby, evading reason. Furthermore, the gesture is essentially the physical manifestation of an impulse, whose form is not regulated by the aid of vision. Without help from the eyes, which for Barthes considered a critical component of “reason, evidence, empiricism, verisimilitude,” the connection between the hand and eye are free from one another, liberating the prevailing sense of logic that we use to understand our surroundings.¹²

Undermining the Violence of Explosions

An explosion, whether man-made or natural, is typically violent; the result of a sudden release of energy, destroying whatever comes in its immediate contact. Despite its destructive

implications, the image of the rupture is ephemeral and delicate, teetering on the razor-thin edge of either being a static whole or a dissolved body. The rendering of the subject reflects this categorically evasive circumstance by depicting a normally violent image as a fragile entity. An effect that is created by the precise application of hair thin graphite lines, set against the filmy backdrop of the translucent, crepe-like mylar.

Like the wound, the explosion functions as gesture. In addition to the juxtaposition of image with graphisms, the edges of the explosion deteriorate into spurts of loosely strewn marks. The rupture reinforces the idea that it is an “exhibition of mediality,” holding in suspension rigidity and movement, evading the specificity of articulation and meaning inherent in language. It is through such a subversion that the violence of the images is once again negated.

For it is language, often viewed as a medium of non-violence (as asserted by Walter Benjamin in his “Critique of Violence”) that is the main perpetrator of brutality according to Slavoj Zizek. He writes, “When we perceives something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the “normal” non-violent situation is—and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as “violent.”¹³ This is why language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence.” He continues by adding that language is also the “first and greatest divider,” preserving an inclusive and exclusive environment, casting people as either belonging or other. However, in gesture, the strangle hold of a rigid classification system is non-existent.

The violence of the explosion is further undermined by the fact that there is no depiction of anything being destroyed. Rather, the image is floating within a field of blankness without the

anchor of place, a quality that is in direct contrast to the wound, whose site is the body. Free from the binds of context, the image of the explosion focuses on form rather than function.

The Explosion As Formless Nothingness

Like the wound, the explosion evades the exactitude of a precise category, as it is represented as both a thing of violence and calm. The conflicted meaning stems from the formlessness of the explosion, which is embodied in plumes of flowering smoke, whose shape is contingent on its surroundings, evaporating and integrating into its environment. Often times, the space it occupies is the open air, and in the case of my drawings, the empty page. The edges of the blast are never clearly delineated and instead are made of an infinitesimal gradient of grays, making it impossible to define the beginnings and ends of its body—causing the distinction between figure and ground to collapse. The breakdown of such boundaries dismantles the system of privileging one meaning over another, ultimately making the explosions in my drawings equally about presence and absence; representation and abstraction; something and nothing, as they gradually shift into the emptiness of the page.

In *Keeping Things Whole No. 4* (Fig. 6), the boundaries between figure and ground are non-existent. Without the crisp defining border of an outline, it becomes impossible to separate background from form, emphasizing the fluid boundaries of an actual explosion. The drawing of the explosion, inhabiting the space of nothingness and form, has an unstable identity that adheres to the notion of becoming. Furthermore, by relinquishing the containment of form, the image fluidly shifts between abstraction and representation, a point that is underscored in the use of ink. The ability for this medium to flow effortlessly, suggests movement, an inability to remain still even when placed in the framework of a static picture. It is this exact property that is highlighted

in the drawing, in which the sprays of ink both emphasize the force of the rupture as well as underscores the formlessness of its form.



Fig. 6

In another drawing entitled *Nothing Is Happening* (Fig. 7), the disruption of the figure ground model is exemplified by placing emptiness, which traditionally functions as background, into foreground; while shades of graphite and imagery exist along the periphery of the page. The formless emptiness functions as an explosion as well, as it is uncontainable, diluting the concentration of graphite into shades of gray.



Fig. 7

Bataille, notes that the formless, as exemplified in the hazy boundaries of an explosion, evades classification or meaning, much like Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *becoming*.¹⁴ This definition serves as a point of departure for Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss writings on the subject. For them, the formless is a way to explore entropy, a condition that disrupts and muddies existing structural binaries, such as figure and ground. However unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Bois and Krauss acknowledge the impossibility for physical bodies to infinitely and interchangeably traverse through the categorical distinctions of figure and space, and alternatively propose the plausibility of such a condition through the act of viewing. They write, "we as viewers might easily slide –or glide– in an effortless, souring, purely optical movement."¹⁵

Drawing as Process

Like the act of viewing, drawing has potential to erode boundaries. Lost in the process of translating what one sees onto paper, the distinction between self and object begins to slip and erode. Roger Callois, in describing schizophrenia, writes about such a sensation, which parallels the degradation of barriers enacted by drawing. He states, “The individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever of space. He feels himself becoming space...He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar.”¹⁶

Seeing and Drawing

My drawings are carefully crafted and exercise a sizable amount of precision in order to describe form. However, even in creating something representationally, drawing is not simply about establishing semblance. To draw is to occupy a mental realm that transgresses the physical body.

Indeed, the compulsion to draw stems from a yearning to animate internal expressions. In Jean Fisher’s essay *On Drawing*, she notes various renderings of the same supposedly empirical study of a botanical specimen, although similar, are markedly different because the drawings are influenced by the moods and thoughts of the artists. No line is handled the same way; no gesture evident of the same feelings.¹⁷ Drawing is not a copy of the visible world, rather, the marks contain a different logic that circumvents the representational and instead, bears the singular vision of the draftsperson.

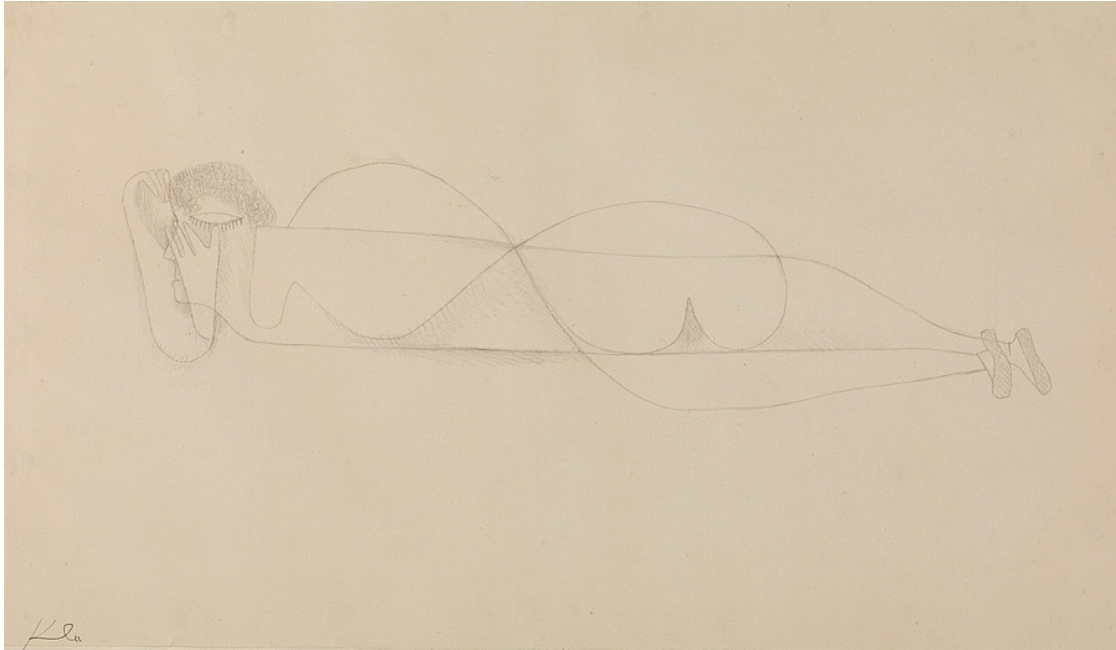


Fig. 8

For Paul Klee, the impossibility of drawing to accurately reflect the natural world rests on the idea that our perception of the object is continually shifting. He writes, “Form as semblance is an evil and dangerous specter. What is good is form as movement, as action, as active form.”¹⁸ *In Readiness* (Fig. 8), Klee’s fluid lines weave in and out of each other, effortlessly shifting our reading of the image towards something figural, only to be pulled into abstraction again. Drawing is not meant to provide a likeness of an object but rather, a re-envisioning of it. To draw an object is to hurl our conceptions of the thing we see so clearly in order to be pleasantly surprised and perplexed by that same object. The meaning of the object is in constant flux.

Being inside of an Object

Drawing then, as John Berger notes, is “an act of discovery.”¹⁹ Drawing forces the artist to see what is before him, dismantling the object into abstraction and assembling it again to form

a new coherent whole. The genesis and growth of such a form is the product of persistent looking, continually confirming or denying the accuracy of the image in relation to the object, plunging into a hypnotic rhythm that liberates the draughtsman from an awareness of self. The artist ceases to participate in his surroundings and comes closer to understanding the object, until he finally becomes “inside it.” Though Berger admittedly calls such a phrase needlessly metaphysical, the thought is far from preposterous. Each mark on the paper is the result of the artist internalizing what he sees, as if the object is apart of him, and creating lines to reveal the visceral nature of this subjective experience. The spawn of each new mark is created by the mesmerizing cadence of seeing then drawing, diverting attention from the physical spaces between the two entities and instead, generating a place where the self becomes part of the object and the object apart of the self, creating a shared world of sensations beyond representation.

When completely immersed in such mediations, you momentarily retreat from the your physical surroundings, engrossed by the object of your fixations. In the ecstatic flight from the body, you are *becoming-paper, becoming-pencil, becoming-line*. To draw is to dissolve the split between subject and object. “[When] you draw,” writes Pierre Klossowski, “there is only one subject, only one body and its own enjoyment realizes that this body, this enjoyment comes into meaning from itself.”²⁰ The boundaries and edges of the self dissipate, creating a singular entity.

This brings into question the ethics of drawing images of violence. Using the logic of *becoming*, the artist can inhabit the role of the aggressor, re-enacting violence as a way to quench the thirst of what is socially unacceptable. At times, the images can be read as sensationalizing and romanticizing aggression and bodily harm. However, this is an inaccurate reading.

Rather than simply a perverse indulgence in the taboo through the re-enactment of “wounding,” the drawings are images of non-violence that supplant language for image, thereby

eliminating the divisions inherent in a tumultuous world constructed by words. Furthermore, I become what I am drawing—a rupture, formed and formless, inhabits a state of in-betweenness that suggests a continuum of dynamic and fluid movement. It is through this embodied state of nothingness that I succumb to the seductions of wholeness.

In the installation *Keeping Things Whole No. 8* (Fig. 9), the experience is not relegated to my own body but is shared, transforming the mobile body into line. The floors, ceilings, and walls of the space disappear as a dense mist of fog transforms the small room into an expansive three-dimensional page. The confines of the body, engulfed in haze, disappear, enabling a sense of becoming. Titled after the Mark Strand poem of the same name, the installation enables the moving body to “part the air” mapping a trajectory of voided space.²¹ The body, as absence free from the restraints of identity, parallels the sensation of drawing, confronting our ingrained methods of perception and cognition by eliminating the static distinction between subject and object in favor of an interstitial passage through which completion and incompleteness, meaning and non-meaning, being and becoming are realized as image, thereby, cultivating a new way of seeing.



Fig. 9

Conclusion

As I finish placing a line among the existing mass of graphite, another one immediately emerges on top of it, building onto an already tight network of silvery crosshatches. Each mark is a reaction to the previous one, an impulse that requires no decision-making. No other medium is capable of providing such an accurate record of the instinctual desires that exist in the human psyche. The drawn line, which is intimately linked to the expressions of the human hand, proves to be extremely responsive, commanding its presence immediately with the slightest pressure, without forfeiting its delicate nature. It is this receptivity that transforms the line into a manifestation of a type of thought that has yet to filter through reason and exists outside of our current structures of knowledge.

As I work, my body is only a few inches from the drawing surface, disabling me from viewing a cohesive whole and instead, my focus is placed on building an abstract web of lines. The act of drawing one line and then the next soon enters an ecstatic rhythm. I enter a space where I am no longer trying to build form but rather my attentions are placed on the miraculous relationship between line and unthought. In this moment of rupture, I am no longer aware of the confines of my own body and my surroundings cease to be. Through this erosion of bodily boundary, the act of becoming is enabled.

Thus, to draw is to be entangled in one's own desires and thoughts, to convey something so deeply moving and yet so enigmatic that it is impossible to give a coherent account of it. The act expresses, with immeasurable conviction the thoughts that elude the precision of words, but are nonetheless meaningful. Drawing creates experiences that exist prior to signification and challenges current modes of interpretation and perception.

Endnotes

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume I (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 83.

² Emma Dexter, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing* (London: Phaidon, 2005), 6.

³ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 22.

⁴ Louis Kaplan, "Unknowing Susan Sontag's Regarding: Recutting with Georges Bataille." *Postmodern Culture* 19, no. 2 (2009): http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v019/19.2.kaplan.html.

⁵ Georges Bataille. "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 25, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.wustl.edu/stable/293011>.

⁶ Georges Bataille, and Kendall Stuart, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota, 2001), 199.

⁷ Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge*, 199.

⁸ Giles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensations*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 20.

⁹ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 45.

¹⁰ Cy Twombly and Roland Barthes, *Cy Twombly at the Hermitage: Fifty Years of Works on Paper* (American ed. New York: D.A.P., 2003), 30.

¹¹ Isobel Harbison, *The End of the Line: Attitudes in Drawing* (London: Hayward Pub./Southbank Centre, 2009), 12.

¹² Twombly and Barthes, *Cy Twombly at the Hermitage: Fifty Years of Works on Paper*, 29.

¹³ Slavoj Zizek, "Language, Violence, and Non-violence." *International Journal of Zizek Studies* Two, no. Three, 2.

¹⁴ Georges, Bataille and Allan Stoekl. "Formless," In *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.

¹⁵ Yve Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss. "Entropy," In *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 75.

¹⁶ Bois, Krauss, *Entropy*, 75.

¹⁷ Jean Fischer, "On Drawing," In *The Stage of Drawing--gesture and Act: Selected from the Tate Collection*, edited by Avis Newman (London: Tate Pub, 2003), 218.

¹⁸ Paul Klee: *Notebooks Volume 2: The Nature of Nature* (London: Lund Humphries, 1973), 263-269.

¹⁹ James Berger. "Drawing Is Discovery," *The New Statesmen*, August 29, 1953, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/art-and-design/2013/05/john-berger-drawing-discovery>

²⁰ Fischer, "On Drawing," 220.

²¹ Mark Strand, "Keeping Things Whole"

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

Mark Strand. "Keeping Things Whole," Poetry Foundation. Accessed March 17, 2015, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177001>.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Photographer unknown; Lingchi, the cutting of the left leg; date unknown; photograph; book illustration; Chinese Torture / Supplice Chinois website.

Figure 2. Ming Ying Hong, *Untitled*, 2013, graphite on mylar, 3 in. x 3 in.

Figure 3. Ming Ying Hong, *Untitled*, 2013, graphite on mylar, 3 in. x 3 in.

Figure 4. Ming Ying Hong, *Untitled*, 2013, graphite on mylar, 3 in. x 3 in.

Figure 5. Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1972, pencil and wax crayon on paper, 19 ¾ in. x 27 5/8 in., Gagosian Gallery, New York.

Figure 6. Ming Ying Hong, *Keeping Things Whole No. 4*, graphite on mylar, 2014, 36 in. x 28 in.

Figure 7. Ming Ying Hong, *There Is Nothing Happening*, graphite on mylar, 2014, 42 in. x 36 in.

Figure 8. Paul Klee, *In Readiness (Bereitshaft)*, graphite on paper, mounted on paper, 12 ¼ x 21 in., Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Figure 9. Ming Ying Hong, *Keeping Things Whole No. 8 (Installation View)*

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