

LINE STUDIES: STANDARDS AND POSTULATES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis essay examines a drawing discourse that is not defined by graphite on paper but rather by an axiomatic construction of space that entails a distinct and interwoven relation between line and surface. In order to examine this formal relationship between line and surface, and the conceptual repercussions, I will address relevant work from my own studio practice, theoretical discourse, contemporary examples and historical precedent. Specifically concentrating on Mel Bochner (and the conceptual drawing practices of the 1960s) Francis Alÿs and Robin Rhode. The lines considered here cut across grids, reposition objects and direct/obstruct the flow of bodies, they delineate space, cleaving an undefined surface into an object and a ground, and open spaces into bounded areas. Drawing then becomes an apparatus through which to think differently about the surface that is being marked, the world sustaining that mark. The work examined in this thesis has been distilled to lines and line-makers, basic elements and primary structures that can expand to other forms. Here drawing is seen not as a material, but as a stance out of which to make gestures affiliated with a medium that explicitly resists determination. This paper will outline the ambivalent or multi-valent nature of the line: vibrating continually, never being fully one thing or another, never fully mimetic or fully abstract. The work examined seeks to understand the structural nature of lines, how they delineate looking, acting, and create moments of transgression. This thesis asks: how can space be constructed along alternate base lines? And what changes when we are asked to look at the standard itself instead of being corralled into seeing along the standard?

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1.1 Introducing the Line and its Surface

Through the last two years of my studies at Emily Carr University I have been systematically progressing through the histories and diverging practices of the medium of drawing. The work I will address in this written thesis is primarily concerned with lines and line makers, looking at how they approach the surface for inscription and construct the spaces they inhabit. These lines delineate, cleaving an undefined surface into an object and a ground, dissecting an open area into bounded spaces. In particular I am addressing this ability of the line to mark out an area and define its surface, and the surface's ability to simultaneously contextualize the line. This paper will explore the ambivalence attributed to the drawn line, in both discourse and practice. It will embrace this ambivalence as a stance and as a tool for creating difference through mutability. In my thesis work drawing becomes an apparatus through which to think differently about the surface that is being marked—the world sustaining that mark.

In drawing, it has been suggested that the graphic line is innately linked to its background; more so than other mediums, “drawing tends to cover its supporting surface only incompletely; the ground retains its own participating presence in the image” (Rosand 1). In general terms, where painting is additive, obscuring the picture plane, drawing pins itself to the background and pulls the already existing surface into itself. In a frequently used description of drawing, Walter Benjamin outlines this quality:

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 would cease to be a drawing. This confers on the background a specific role that is indispensable for the meaning of the drawing [...] the graphic line confers an identity on its background. The identity of the background of a drawing is quite different from that of the white surface on which it is inscribed. (Benjamin 84)

Looking at my work through this particular lens of object-ground relations and therefore, as drawing, I will keep in mind the power relations between surface and incision, viewing this defining ability of drawing as a means for the surface to reassert itself as active agent rather than as passive receiver. Therefore, acting as mediation, not medium, drawing becomes the act of ‘slipping between’, or as Richard Serra puts it: “There is no way to make a drawing—there is only drawing” (“Writings” 51).

Highlighting the indefinite/non-finite nature of drawing, the drawing research collective TRACEY outlines the nature of drawing as an ambivalent or multivalent actuator:

Uncertain, defiantly idiosyncratic, marking specific difference rather than aspiring to universal values, stubbornly refusing resolved forms, and incorporating the principle of erasure—the will to unmark. It is unstable, and balanced between abstraction and representation; [drawing’s] virtue is its fluidity. (TRACEY xi)

As the surface reasserts itself, the mark shifts into the act of *marking*; it becomes temporal, challenging its nature as a static object that might be held, exchanged or sold. In the act of drawing a space is opened up where assumed realities can become fluid and reconfigured.

1.2 Contextual Parameters

With a practice deeply rooted in the history of drawing, my thesis work traces a trajectory back to the early conceptual art movement of the 1960s, where “[the] notion of disengaging drawing (or the internal differentiations of a pictorial surface) from expression, and thus from privacy became a paramount concern” (Krauss 13). At the time, artists were grappling with the distinction between “drawing as illusionistic projection—pointing to something beyond itself—and drawing as a species of marking on this world” (Krauss 10). By looking at, and attempting to resituate, such artists as Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, William Anastasi, Fred Sandback, and Carl Andre, I have chosen to study lines that were made not to create an illusion, or to remain inside an illusionistic space, but rather to mark on the world, to delineate space, or to pull the surface of the world into consideration of the work. My research has taken these concerns into the work of

contemporary artists: Francis Alÿs, Ceal Floyer, William Kentridge, and Robin Rhode. Continuing the discourse of marking, these artists show a particular engagement with materials and how substance informs the object or line: they create forms, or make gestures, that are mimetically ambiguous, never fully resolute as one thing due to layers of meaning determined by material, title, or context. Grounding my work in relation to this specific history, and the residual concerns of this history in the context of these contemporary practices, my thesis reflects research undertaken in the Masters of Applied Arts program. In general this work has focused on making lines and working with line makers that construct and dissolve space through varying layers of meaning. Weaving descriptions of my own studio work throughout a discussion of influences (historical and contemporary) and readings, I hope to set up a web of alternate (at times contradictory) paths rather than a single trajectory culminating in one graduating project. My thesis aims to look at the structural nature of lines: how they operate formally and how they (implicitly and explicitly) indicate an external construction of looking and acting. By looking *at* these lines can we begin to question, reconsider and reconfigure the axiomatic structures that sight and space are built upon.

2.1 Variations on a Line

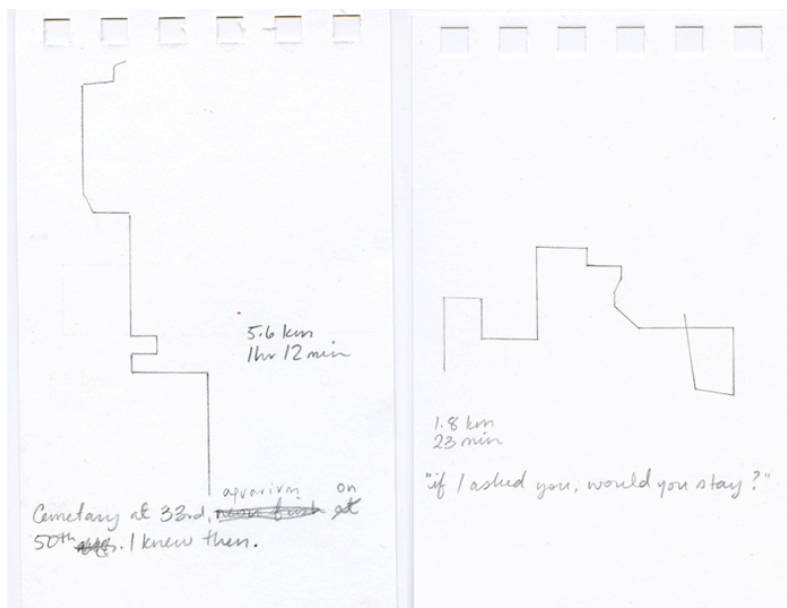


Figure 1

Setting up this inquiry into the line, the first project I embarked on was an exploration of the semiotic layers that can be added to non-representational lines. Unraveling drawing to its simplest mark I was trying to understand what made a line become one thing in its signification and not another. To generate these lines I plugged two coordinates into Google maps: I asked Google for walking directions and the program produced a path, a distance and duration. I drew the directional lines on white paper, independent of the map, annotating my drawings with the distance and duration. These numbers were a quantitative description that provided a scale for each line, as well as indicating that there was movement along the line, that it was a vector rather than representational. Although pointing at an external event these drawings were not witnessing or documenting the walks: many of the walks were impossible or improbable. Rather the idea of a walk served to generate the line and contextualize it as ‘something’ but the line itself remained the central focus of the project. Along with the numbered notation I added a sentence; sparse, poetic, this line of text added a qualitative, experiential layer to the line. It did not explain the line, rather it hinted at an experience, a quote, a place, a person; never fully providing enough information to the viewer to let them in on the exactness of the journey, the place or the event. I wanted to see what kind of meanings these lines could acquire through external factors associated with them (scale, distance, duration, text). They went from abstract marks to indicators of an event, and yet could just as easily unravel back into lines. This representative vibration, or ambivalence, became fundamental to my thinking about drawing. These lines vary significantly depending on the interchanging variables assigned to them, and yet they are also just that—lines. As I learned from my research, however, a line will never be just a line.

2.2 Apelles, Protogenes, Giotto

Let me explain this paradox in an anecdote about a series of drawings that are said to have occurred sometime in the 4th century. The ancient Greek painter Apelles pays a visit to his

rival Protogenes, finding him to be out he leaves a single fine line on a prepared panel as indication of his visit. On his return Protogenes finds the line and recognizes the work of Apelles. In response, he draws a line directly above it, of equal, (perhaps surpassing) fineness and simplicity. On his return, Apelles recognizes Protogenes through his line, not to be outdone, Apelles draws a third line crossing through the two, subsequently on viewing this final stroke, Protogenes could only accede superiority to Apelles mastery.

With a single stroke of the brush, Apelles left a mark of his presence. In that line Protogenes recognized the identity of his visitor. The line is the mark of the artist: at once a demonstration of his skill and testimony to his authorship, it is both work and signature and thus a declaration of his professional self; as an index, a pure trace, it is without representational responsibility [...] The line of Apelles is self-indicative; its reference is to itself, and, through itself, ultimately to its maker. (Rosand 7-8)

These three mythic lines are comparable to the perfect circle that was drawn without aid of a compass by Giotto, a performance that won him the approval of the Pope for a commission in St. Peter's Basilica sometime in the 12 or 13th century. I recount these stories not to emphasize the importance of skilled mastery of the hand required by drawing, nor to suggest the particular genius of these artists, or any artist in general, but rather to outline a Platonic understanding of the line being as a line, i.e., the understanding that the perfection of a drawn line rests in the way the line presents itself rather than its ability to mimetically represent an outside reality. There is a complexity to the line, to these lines, an intricate history, mythical narrative and nuanced discourse that belies their deceptive simplicity.

3. Lines (Smooth and Striated)

Fundamental to this discussion is the existence, affect and nature of the line itself. Operating with a Minimalist attitude, stripping the creative and communicative imperative down to its simplest and most direct form, I can only conclude my own deconstruction with, and at the line, the simplest gesture of abstract mediation: "A primal means of symbolic communication, which predates and embraces writing and functions as a tool of conceptualization parallel with

language.” (Petherbridge “Primacy” 7) Recent findings of etched Ostrich Shells, from the Western Cape of South Africa, show a collection of parallel lines intersected with oblique and perpendicular marks. These have been dated to about 60,000 years ago. It is believed that these marks are an early form of abstract communication, and are unique in that their numbers indicate a complex system of symbolic thought (and communication), rather than unique moments of expression, a development that was key in human evolution (Amos). In a catalogue essay on the work of Fred Sandback, an artist whose entire body of work is concerned with, and uses only the line, curator Gianfranco Verna states:

Our perception is oriented to lines, both those that are concealed and those that are visible. Lines depict space and construct perspective. The line likewise lends itself to the delineation of surfaces and bodies. Even scant constellations of lines possess the character of a sign. (5)

The line acts in a variety of ways—indicating direction, mapping space, representing languages and things, doing so through a division of undefined space: structuring, binding, eliminating and producing forms, concepts and areas.

The activity of the line can be read through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari’s smooth and striated states of being:

The striated is that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms, and organizes horizontal melodic lines and vertical harmonic planes. The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favour of the production of properly rhythmic values, the pure act of the drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and the horizontal. (Deleuze, Guattari 478)

If a blank piece of paper / wall / floor / air can be seen as smooth and undefined, the ordering line can striate this space, producing orientation, boundaries, directions, beginnings and formal ends.

The identity of the background of a drawing is quite different from that of the white surface on which it is inscribed...The pure drawing will not alter the meaningful graphic function of its background by ‘leaving it blank’ as a white ground. (Benjamin 84)

However, there is an inverse to this (ambivalent) line due to its complex relationship to surface and the complicated existence in space that any surface has. The surface for inscription has traditionally been viewed as virginal, passive and awaiting incision, and the act of inscription written about as an erotic encounter between the masculine marker and the feminine marked.

I feel my hand move, turn, join, dive, and lift, and often, through the act of correction, delete or expand a line, taking the space right up to the margin. I am an artist, not because I am representing an object, but, in a more basic sense, because in writing my body knows the joy of drawing on and rhythmically incising a virgin surface. (Barthes 1)

But what of the surface that is already teeming with cultural meaning, already full of inscriptions, histories, boundaries and political ideologies? This surface pushes back, asserts itself, and claims its place in the picture plane. As these lines cling to their ground, lassoing the spaces they inhabit, previously unlooked at, or unrecognized details emerge from the supporting substrate. No paper, wall, floor, or open area is truly blank or white (as the case may be), and so the line can also serve to smooth a striated space, blank or otherwise. These lines can cut across grids, reposition objects, or direct/obstruct the flow of bodies and/or gestures. “In smooth space, the line is therefore a vector, a direction and not a dimension or metric determination” (Deleuze, Guattari 478). Reading much like Paul Klee’s description of a single line in the Pedagogical Sketchbook: “An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk’s sake. The mobility agent is a point, shifting its position forward” (Klee 16). Lines smooth and alternately re-striate space differently (be it paper, wall, gallery, city). An interesting correlation is drawn between the point and the line in these alternating spaces and shows the ambivalent actions that the line can take, being a point moving through a space, or being the parameters by which we navigate a space: “in the case of the striated, the line is between two points, while in the smooth, the point is between two lines” (Deleuze, Guattari 480). Distilling my practice down to lines and line-makers I am exploring this basic element as a primary structure that can expand to other forms. Though simplistic the consequences of these lines can be dramatic.

Banal facts, passed over in silence, no ones responsibility, a matter of course. But even if we think we can get by without having to describe them, they describe us. They relate, with far more acuity and presence than most of the institutions and ideologies off which sociologists habitually feed, to the history of our bodies, to the culture that has shaped our gestures and our bodily postures, and to the education that has fashioned our motor function at least as much as our mental acts. (Perec 74)

4.1 Transgression (Gold and Cocaine)

No Vantage Point / My Eye Level Cross-section of a Wall (2010) is a thin line of 24 carat gold that traverses the gallery space creating a horizon line set at 59"—my eye level. It is similar to Mel Bochner's *No Vantage Point / Eye Level Cross-Section of a Room* (1969), a conceptual work proposed in a drawing but never executed. Talking about his 71" horizon line (the artist's eye level), Bochner stated:

In any room which one occupies, such as my studio or your office, you establish your presence as a line of sight. Everything above and below is then subconsciously related to that imaginary horizontal cross-section. My piece will force you to become aware of your own eye level as a physical boundary, the literal plateau from which you see the world. My intention is to change the work of art's function for the viewer. Art would go from being the record of someone else's perception to becoming the recognition of your own. (Bochner, "Thought" 168)

Subsequently in 1971 Bochner installed a slightly different version of this work titled *Room Series: Eye Level Cross-section (Estimated and Measured)*: two lines drawn with coloured pencils (blue and brown) wavered together in an uneven parallel encircling the room.

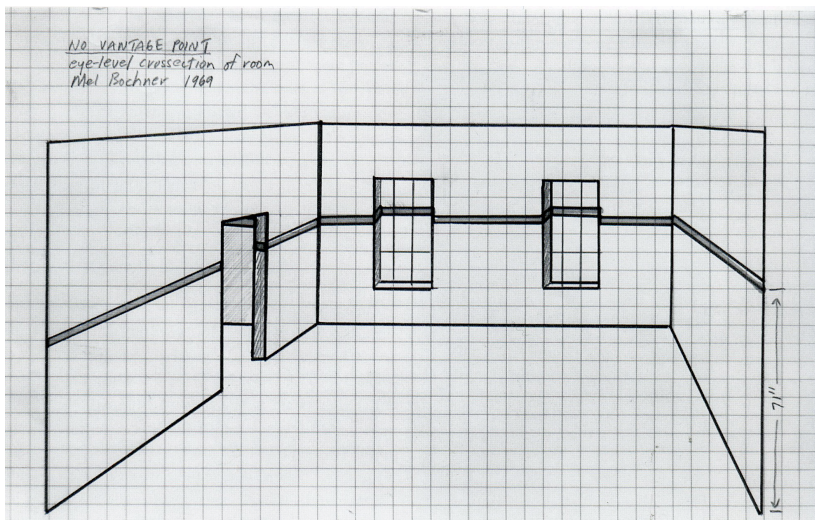


Figure 2

My reproduction of Bochner's 1969 drawing, in installation, sought to understand the gallery space I was in, my own body's experience of space through my 'eye level as a physical boundary', and how the introduction of this line would affect the subsequent viewers sight and body. I was interested in how the gallery becomes a seen space rather than receding into the background, behind the work—how the gallery now might be seen as inseparable from the work. I was intrigued with how the introduction of a new material (gold) that is mutable, culturally and artistically historic, charged and taboo would affect the perception of this line that obstructs sight, implicates surface and body, and seduces the eye: all through an economy of means with a very un-economical use of substance. Pure gold leaf beaten down to the thinnest form of this solid substance becomes virtually inseparable from the wall. I wanted to use a mutable material, something that could shift from object to object and would not be pinned down to a specificity of form. I was also interested in how such a potent material could still act through such a minimal expression. A mythical golden thread, this line binds the wall, drawing attention to a specificity that belies its imperative as white cube to recede, to erase, to elude perception. Brian O'Doherty, in his influential book Inside the White Cube: Ideologies of the Gallery Space, describes how the gallery as 'white cube' is meant to act as a segregated environment:

A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life.' ...Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of 'period', there is no time. (15)

Once called into question visually the conceptual and structural integrity of the wall, and by implication the gallery space, begins to falter. Uneven paint, cracks in the drywall, misplaced outlets, light switches—the outside world—begin to creep in and disturb the sterilized perception. In a relevant conceptual drawing, Rob Pruitt drew out a minimalist inspired 16' line of cocaine in a New York City artist space. Traversing the floor of the gallery on a Carl Andre-

like line of mirrors, Pruitt's *Cocaine Buffet* (1998) was offered up for the New York art world to consume. This white line implicated the social sphere of the art scene. Reflecting the social artifice of the gallery and the larger art scene, this line acted back on the viewer/consumer as they publicly bowed down on their knees to erase. Pruitt's line exposes a boundary not of sight, like Bochner's horizon line, but a literal social boundary that was transgressed through its removal as well as through its very presence.

To help place the social significance of source material—the physical nature of Pruitt's cocaine line, as well as my own interest in working with gold leaf—we might look at the work of anthropologist Michael Taussig. In his book *My Cocaine Museum*, Taussig examines the intricate and surreal natures of both gold and cocaine, exploring their strange mimetic mutability, tendency to transgress and elicitation of desire:

What gives gold and cocaine their peculiar and privileged status—half-stone, half-water, half-fixed, half-mutating contingency—is the way they slide by means of seduction through the life and death owed to transgression. (Taussig 252)

Formally these lines divide up the physical space of the gallery, yet they do so on a social level as well. Although minimalist in form, due to their potent materiality these gestures refer beyond themselves in a very un-minimalist way. Their materiality causes the line to conceptually vibrate—by binding themselves to their surface (context, space, institution), they produce spaces of operation, creating a plateau of experience that the viewer is invited to step over, look under, re-assess, transgress: “to transgress is to suspend the rule such that it is heightened in its dissolution” (Taussig 126) As the viewer transgresses the line (through looking or doing) s/he becomes aware of the very existence of these invisible lines, their presence is heightened, and the surface they implicate is thrown into relief.

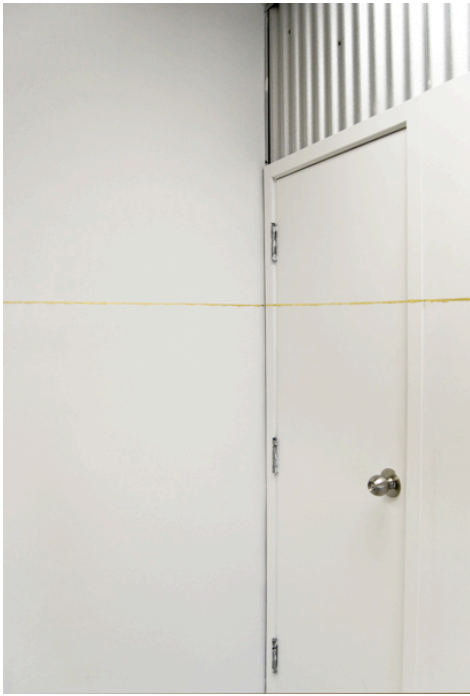


Figure 3



Figure 4

4.2 Standards and Constraints

The line, at my eye-level of 59", sits at around standard gallery hanging height: between 54" and 60", depending on the gallery, a measurement calculated as an average of viewer's eye-lines. This somewhat arbitrary measurement establishes the viewing horizon for two-dimensional work, a 'golden standard' for artwork. But what changes when we are asked to look at the standard itself instead of being corralled into seeing along the standard? In a catalogue to the exhibition "Minimalism and Post-minimalism: Drawing Distinctions," Bochner's number drawings are explained in relation to a story--one that deeply influenced his own practice. He describes how the stencils used by Jasper Johns to make his number paintings could only be manufactured at a certain width, thus the constraint of the stencil (a banal and industrial inconvenience) determined the size of the canvases:

Bochner was fascinated by the fact that the physical measurements of the number stencil that Johns used to lay down the painted numbers is what at least partly defined the side-long boundaries of the image. Thus, in Bochner's words, 'both the visual and the conceptual parameters of what is there to be looked at are present by the procedures necessary for its realization. (Spencer 104)

The base parameters of construction resulted in determining something as seemingly romantic as a painting, albeit a post-war American painting that was questioning the romanticism of that era. My work seeks to look at basic tools, and the restrictions therein, like Johns' stencils, that more complex structures of perception are built upon.

5.1 Ambivalence or Multi-Valence

I recognize that positioning my work within the context of a single medium can be seen as problematic, particularly when contemporary art praxis tends to dictate that concept rather than technique should determine material. However, my interest in drawing is not with its status as media, in the traditional sense, but as a stance out of which to make gestures affiliated with, and generated by, the conceptual parameters of a medium that explicitly resists determination. Conceptual parameters developed by a long and complex history where drawing has acted as an underbelly to the arts, sustaining and generating more complex forms of expression. Giorgio Vasari, an eminent 16th century writer, suggests the primary/formative nature of drawing: “disegno [or drawing] is the parent of [the] three arts, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting, having its origin in the intellect.” (Vasari 29) Its prolonged usage by the arts has resulted in drawing being given a fluid status, in which it is seen as being able to morph into many things rather than being a resolute, fixed and defined medium. Due to this historicized mutability, drawing has often been attributed with an attitude of ambivalence and I have found that this term (or its equivalents: ambiguity, irresolute etc.) is used or implied in almost all writing about drawing that I have come across. Embracing this mutability, I position my work within a discourse that is not confined by a focus of graphite on paper, but rather by an understanding of drawing as an axiomatic construction of space that entails a distinct and interwoven reaction between line and surface.

The line does not only inscribe the surface, it indicates ‘that which is to be looked at’, and this looked at surface contextualizes the line, describing the inscribing line. With drawing, more

so than other mediums, mark and surface sit uneasily together; competing for dominance, they push against one another, each forcing the other to surrender aspects of their assumed transparency. In other words, the mark is read in relation to its surface, and the surface will only be looked at differently when framed by an impinging line. David Rosand in Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation argues that the mark is essentially ambivalent: “Ambivalence is an essential and functioning aspect of drawing. More insistently than the brush stroke in painting, the drawn mark resists surrender to the mimetic imperative, to pictorial illusion.” (2) This ambivalence comes about partially due to the line’s reliance on the background for support. In turn, the resurgence of the surface denies the line’s seamless illusionistic projection. Although in common usage ‘ambivalence’ is sometimes used to denote ‘indifference’, here I am using this word as it is defined: indicating contradictory attitudes or feelings, a continual fluctuation, or an uncertainty to approach. Coming from the Latin *ambi*, meaning both, and valence from the Latin *valentia*, meaning strength, this duality, or multi-strength definition outlines the stance I am taking in drawing. Referring not only to its mimetic ease and ambiguity, but also to its very resistance to definition, ambivalence outlines the saccadic nature of drawing: vibrating continually, never being fully one thing or another.

Deanna Petherbridge, in an essay titled “Nailing The Liminal: The Difficulties of Defining Drawing” states that:

The urgencies and difficulties of defining drawing reflect its irresolute status—neither entirely medium nor message [...] Drawing is an immanence, always pointing to somewhere else—to a chain of serial development, another condition, another state, even when, as a gestural flourish it appears to have said everything in the most economical manner. (Petherbridge, “Nailing” 37)

The ability of drawing to refer both beyond itself and at itself simultaneously, through its resistance to accede entirely to illusion, allows a complex and nuanced exploration of how space is constructed, as well as deconstructing an unfailing belief in sight.

Between its reality as material mark and its mimetic responsibility in the creation of the visual fiction of an image the drawn line exists like the surface on which it is applied, *in potentia*. As a graphic sign it is both self-referential and representational, maintaining its own identity even as it alludes to something beyond itself, the object of representation. This semiotic ambivalence invites the interpretation that is requisite for its very functioning: the active participation of the viewer in the construction of meaning. (Rosand 2)

5.2 Against Blindness and Coercion

Drawings ask us to participate in this construction of meaning and, as the viewer navigates their own perceptual participation, an awareness of the allowances made to deception become apparent. In order for the viewer to access the lines' semiotic meaning, the exposed surface of the drawing requires our vision to fill it in or ignore it, to excuse it its self-referential nature. A parallel can be drawn to the 'fourth wall' in theatre, where the viewer suspends their disbelief in order to participate in the enjoyment of the fiction at play. Artist William Kentridge breaks down our perceptual journey, not only through an artwork, but through our visually saturated world as well:

One crosses one's thumbs and wags one's hands, and we have three things: a pair of hands crossed and wagging; and a shadow, which is two things—a shadow of two hands with the thumbs crossed wagging and a shadow of a bird or a butterfly flapping its wings. And what is fundamental is that we understand it as both, and the pleasure we get from it has to do with this understanding. This ambiguity, this picture accompanying self-deception seems to me to be fundamental in what it is to be a visual being. (Kentridge 20)

Although these allowances are present in all forms of visual perception, I am exploring them through drawing, where, with its sparseness of execution, the most is sometimes asked of the viewer. This willing suspension of disbelief can be as benign as shadow puppetry, where the viewer agrees to allow herself to believe, in exchange for entertainment and wonder, Kentridge, however, goes on to warn us about the dangers of surrendering all doubt to these illusions. The implications of doing so goes beyond artistic expression and enters into the realm of the political:

It is remarkable how we naturalize our seeing into something purely objective. All calls to certainty, whether of political jingoism or of objective knowledge, have an authoritarian

origin relying on blindness and coercion—which are fundamentally inimical to what it is to be alive in the world with one’s eyes open (Kentridge 20).

Where the drawers of the 1960s denied illusionistic projection through an ascetic sparseness, Kentridge rather allows the surfaces of his expressive drawings to emerge forth as they are marked with traces of his representational lines. The materiality of the paper competes with the illusion of the line and the fourth wall of suspended disbelief is broken down. Varying quite drastically from the minimalism of the 60s, Kentridge’s expressive and baroque drawings aim to deconstruct the allure of representation by throwing the viewer out of their willful belief by revealing the materiality of the surface. Viewing a film by Kentridge is to be constantly seduced by the timbre and sophistication of his drawing, while simultaneously being shown the ‘smoke and mirrors’ that produced the simulation. In his films this revelation of the surface is not simply a formal component, it is fundamental to the meaning and affect of his narratives: emphasizing memory, loss, and the ambiguities of personal responsibility within the political. As line and surface compete for visual primacy an ambiguous space is pushed open where one can question the implications of sight itself as an aid to an assumed objective understanding of the world.

6. Drawing of the 1960s (Mel Bochner)

In the early 1960s drawing took on a dominant role in the practices of the artists involved in the Conceptual, Minimalist and Process-art movements. Although still used by many as a preparatory sketch for sculpture, these drawings took on a new relevance in and of themselves due to their sparse, unmediated, transparent nature, where any trace of expression came about due to the act of doing rather than any psychological imperative.¹ During an era where artists were searching for the ideal way to dematerialize and demystify, drawing emerged as perfectly suitable to the “ascetic, even puritanical, anti-decadent aspects of Conceptualism” (Dexter 7).

¹ “Anything you can project as expressive in terms of drawing—ideas, metaphors, emotions, language structures—results from the act of doing.” (Serra, ‘Drawing Now’ 11)

Artists were disengaging themselves from the mythical internalization of the abstract-expressionists, and drawing in its simplest form as line and notation (with its close ties to language) provided a formal means for marking that had the conceptual and aesthetic tenants of Minimalism as its defining characteristic:

Part of the effort of Minimalist sculpture was to strip away that metaphorical aspect of drawing, to make the allusive qualities of edge or contour coincide exactly with the physical boundaries of the object. (Krauss 17)

This ‘stripping away’ is what Mel Bochner’s measurement drawings refer to as part of a continued effort to “force the background to surrender its transparency” (Bochner, “Language” 137). Marking directly on the wall with tape, paint and chalk, Bochner pulled the architectural and cultural space of the gallery itself into the consideration of the mark and the measure. Black lines delineated the edges of the gallery, interspersed with letraset numbers indicating the lengths of walls, doors and windows, brought into contention the assumed blankness of the wall. One was therefore forced to look at the room rather than what is in the room. The surface became the thought. The line mimicking the architectural forms attached itself to the wall, and this wall “retain[ed] its own participating presence” (Rosand 1) the surface cannot recede into invisible support.



Figure 5

When we consider the wall, we must also consider the institution that constructed that wall, what that institution represents as a social and political tool, as well as how this frames the way we view the art and ultimately how we view the world. “The significance of the wall as medium for line or drawing is, then, that it becomes the ground for refusal to separate idea from existence.” (Krauss 19) In a recent “October” article, Bochner was posed the question ‘Why would anyone want to draw on the wall?’

My answer is that eliminating the object was the result of a desire to create an unmediated experience. By collapsing the space between the artwork and the viewer, a wall painting negates the gap between lived time and pictorial time, permitting the work to engage larger philosophical, social, and political issues. That was the motivation. But beyond motivation and historical circumstances, there was something more inchoate. It was a dream, perhaps unrealizable, that this work might somehow achieve an existential unity between reality and appearance. (Bochner, “October” 140)

7. Robin Rhode (Performative Drawings)

The drawings of Robin Rhode mark off an area ‘in play’ to be engaged with as spaces separate to yet intrinsically linked with the surface upon which they are inscribed. Once drawn a new space is created that can be acted in and upon according to the rules of the lines, rules determined by a deliberate belief in the crude signification of these lines. Rhode creates illusionistic objects and scenes as he crudely marks off areas on the wall. As soon as the image is complete and begins to signify, the bounded object becomes animated as the thing itself, and the solid impenetrable surface that the drawing is on opens up into accessible space that Rhode can interact with, and in (much like the ambiguous accessibility/reality of a painted black tunnel in old cartoons). In an early seminal piece *Classic Bike* (1998) Rhode draws a bicycle on a wall and subsequently tries to ride the bicycle away: a gesture that can be seen as both an act of wish fulfillment—a conjuring up of a desired object—and vandalism—the stealing of a desired object. His willful belief in the actuality of the represented object draws the viewer into a real time animation, only to be flung back out as the illusion falls apart. In the series *Hard Rain* (2005) Rhode walks into the frame, notices some ‘raindrops’ beginning to fall. He opens an umbrella

and the downpour becomes steadily heavier (smears of black paint slowly fill up a section of the wall). In the last few frames, Rhode closes the umbrella and walks away leaving on the wall the remnants of the rain, now jarringly returned back to black marks on the wall ending where the convex curve of the umbrella just was. Rhode calls this the walk-off, referring to the moment in baseball when a home run wins the game and the team immediately walks off the field:

This is the walk off, the moment when Rhode leaves the field and hands the work over to the viewer. It's a point which reflects the dimensionality created by the drawing and the interaction, if any exists, between what is real and what is not. (Rosenthal)

Rhode's lines act differently than Bochner's, in the sense that they do not only pull the ground into the picture plane, but they also push the picture plane open into an activated space: "the graphic imposition turns the actual flatness of the ground into virtual space, translates the material reality into the fiction of imagination" (Rosand, 1). Rhode's practice, although rooted in drawing, has recently expanded to sculpture, yet continues to retain a strong performative element. However, it is not important that his performances are witnessed, or that they are even done by himself, he often uses a doppelganger, or a 'minstrel/mime' like character for public performances. In this sense, the performance moves away from a traditional notion of the body as substrate, and functions rather in order to emphasize the action or gesture made over any art object that may be produced. Alternately, Rhode indicates a performance by objects or traces that imply the action that produced the mark, and therefore the presence of a body necessary to wield the object. Recently Rhode has started making sculptures that can make or unmake marks: shoes cast in chalk or charcoal that can be worn or danced in (*Frequency*, 2007), a bicycle cast in soap that is then left out in the rain (*Soap and Water*, 2007). *Spade* (2007), is a shovel made out of gold plated bronze and charcoal, the handle of the spade, cast in charcoal, dissolves while making a mark on a wall, pouring into a pile of charcoal that the spade seems ready to dig. The

spade being a reoccurring motif, referencing Johannesburg and its history of gold mining: “digging, burying (a wish), covering over, forgetting, and remembering” (Rosenthal).

8. Fields of Play

White line # 1 (Cantilever) (2010) consists of a chalk line extending diagonally out of the gallery wall. At the end of the line sits a sports field liner, excess chalk piles up around the machine, that is itself full of more chalk ready to extend that line. Reminiscent of Carl Andre’s *Lever* (1966) that bisected the Jewish Museum’s “Primary Structures” show and William Anastasi’s excavated wall in *Issue* (1966), *Cantilever* visually strips the white of the wall down to the floor, pulling it across the space of the gallery, dividing the spatial arrangement of the floor. The sports field liner used to chalk the lines of a playing field, sits, re-contextualized, in the gallery space, as a ready-made sculptural object--a line maker, it holds yet to be determined lines in its bowels. Outside the space, a scuffed, rain dissipated chalk line leads up to/out of the white cube, disconnected from the formal sculpture it serves to cognitively remind one of the other. The line, determined by myself, sits truncated, asking to be picked up and continued in varying combinations. The chalk marks, and yet it can be swept up, washed away, or remolded by hand. The actual function of the chalk-liner exists outside of the gallery, marking lush green fields, or bisecting traffic lines, and crosswalks. It speaks to the act of walking and requires the force of a person to move it, actuating it into drawing out the chalk. However I question the impact of this machines use as a guerilla art tool, serving only to make pretty moments of passing absurdity for a public completely unaware of their origination. A staged performance would engage more with the spectacle of making, rather than the implications of the line itself and would still need to be condoned, articulated by and documented for an institution (of some sort) for it to have any extended consideration or meaning. I also wonder what it means for me to determine the line, do I draw with the field liner, using it merely as quirky oversized pencil? Or is it enough as it is, a line-maker containing speculative lines? And so my dilemma is that by bringing these lines into

the gallery space must I either critique or condone the already much contested, cracked open modernist cube? If one is to think of the function of a chalk-liner, it is to delineate the parameters of the field of play. Primarily the boundary of inside (game) and outside (non-game), there is also the secondary division inside the parameters of 'play': of sides, areas, positions, centers, bases, fields, etc. and the flow of bodies is thus determined by these arrangements. The lines are dictated by the rules, and if the lines change, the rules change.



Figure 6

With the chalk-liner I am beginning to grapple with the gallery space as a playing field (one of many), one that I can critique or celebrate, but that remains the space where the rules of the game are operational. Arbitrary as ever, these lines structure the belief system that states that within the lines “this equals that”. *White Line #2 (Parameter / Perimeter)* (2010) is a chalk line that runs on the floor alongside the gallery wall, following the contours of the space it stops just short of connecting and forming a plane. The chalk-liner sits at the end of the line, leaving a

space open that invites the viewer inside the form, indicating a door this gap further emphasizes the architectural nature of the line. Bounding off an area, this line produces a clear division of inside and outside, and it asks the viewer to physically experience and navigate these delineations. Formed for the duration of the installation, these lines continue to exist only as documentation.

Working in a series I aim to do more complicated drawings with this object--line building upon line. At this current stage, I am operating within the parameters of my own situation, creating lines that speak to the gallery space or studio space, outlining areas that my actions are condoned within. I suspect that with a change of context the nature and location of these lines will too change. It has become clear that each line will be determined by its surface and context (institutional and historic) and that no surface lassoed by this line can be without implication.

I am particularly interested in the idea of a 'field of play'. We have long been operating with the understanding of context determining what is seen as Art (*Fountain*, 1917) but the notion of fields of play where, when within, art assumptions hold true, goes beyond the notion of 'gallery' (white cube, baroque, commercial or artist run). Public art works and works of ephemeral or relational nature, rather than negating the gallery space bring the rules of the gallery space outside into a non-gallery area where they act differently, as much as bringing a non-gallery object into a gallery re-determines its reception. In 1969, the Whitney Museum of American Art produced the pivotal show "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials." This show, a definitive moment in the Process Art or 'Anti-Form' movement (a movement nestled in with Conceptualism and Minimalism, having many of the same players but very different intentions), engaged with notions of action, process and material. Staged in a Museum space, the show had a completely new curatorial agenda, one where artists were picked to make sculptures rather than sculptures picked or commissioned by curators. These sculptures were concerned with doing, and artists were shown in the 'act of' in the catalogue.

The implications of time indicate a new attitude toward the creation of non-precious objects. Some works come into being at the moment of their execution in a specific location and cease to exist when they are removed from that environment. The relationship of work to location becomes one in which the artist also dictates the temporal duration of the piece. (Tucker 37-38)

An area is thus cordoned off where the ‘game’ is on, and the notion of duration or the event comes into play, these boundaries are not explicit guidelines; rather they are axioms of conduct, determined by history, theory and practice, and which are constantly changing. Here, I would like to return to the notion of the smooth and striated which is continually in flux: “smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space.” (Deleuze, Guattari 474). The interesting part comes when regular objects are in irregular locations, or when regular locations contain irregular gestures, and so on, transgressing invisible lines of play, each forces the axioms of the other to surrender transparency.

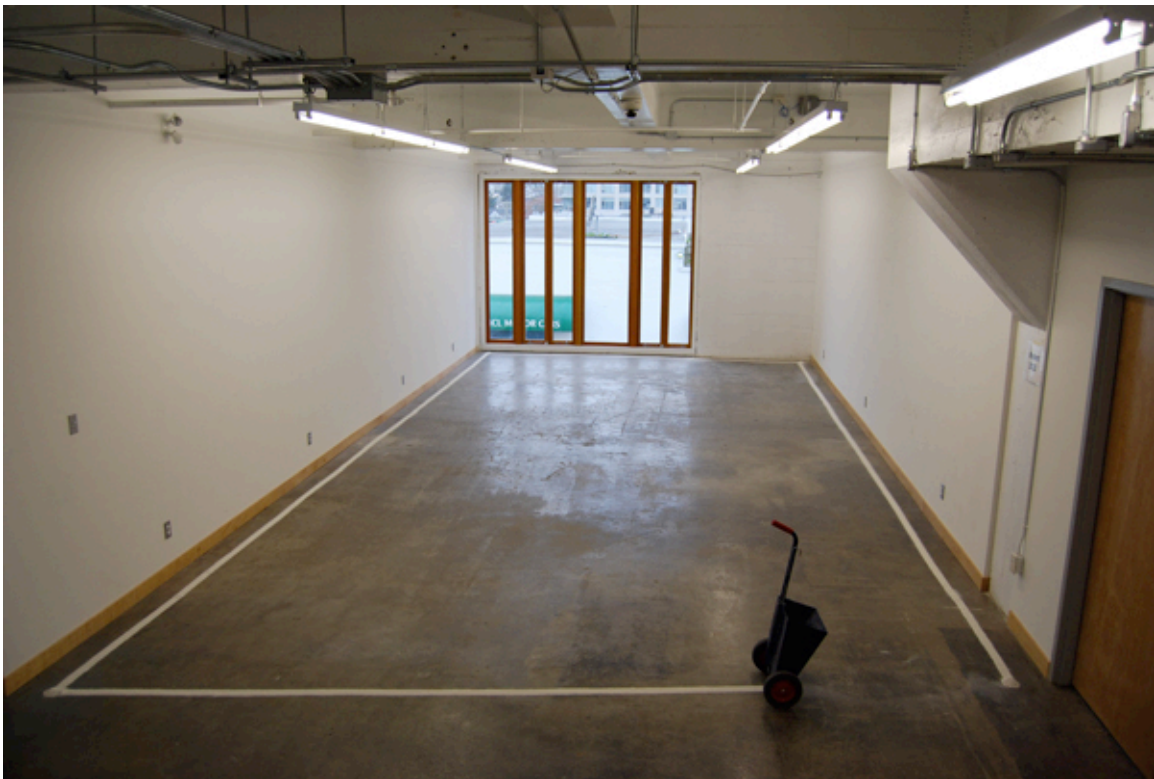


Figure 7

9.1 Francis Alÿs...takes a line for a walk

Francis Alÿs is an artist who takes his lines outside of the institutional perimeter, yet his lines still deal with and can illuminate the relationship between mark and surface. Grappling with the socio-political implications of a geographical environment his work is documented and disseminated within the art community, from “preparatory work to event to re-presentation [...] the three successive and distinct lives of the project” (Fisher 112). Alÿs records the path of his drifting strolls through various means: a punctured can of paint dripping behind him (*The Leak*, 1995 / *The Green Line*, 2007); an unraveling sweater trailing his steps (*Fairy Tales*, 1995); a cleared path (*The Collector*, 1990/92 / *Los Zapatos Magneticos*, 1994); a melting block of ice (*Paradox of Praxis I*, 1997). Much like Richard Long’s walks through the English countryside, Alÿs’ walk through the city carves a line through space, witnessed and recorded by the following trace. This act is intrinsically linked to the public space, to the flashes of sights and sounds along the way, as well as being the means to generate the line itself (stretched out behind him). Here he acts much like Deleuze and Guattari’s urban nomad: a Henry Miller who “makes the city disgorge a patchwork, differentials of speed, delays and accelerations, changes in orientation, continuous variations” (Deleuze, Guattari 482). These walks smooth and alternately re-striate the city differently, drawing on/in the city itself. His lines are connected to the urban space he encounters as he wanders aimlessly, and it is this space/ground that generates any meaning that the line (which is witnessing the walk) may have. Here one can see a slightly different variation of what Benjamin outlined formally, Alÿs’ surface is not a paper or canvas support, nor is it the wall within the confines of the gallery arena, rather he is working in the public sphere: “meaning lies not in Alÿs’ gesture but in what its absurdity discloses of the historical and sociopolitical framework that surrounds it” (Fisher 120). This line cannot define the city, but rather the city-as-ground is what transmits any meaning that the line may have, be it absurd, poetic or political. For example, in *The Green Line* (2007), Alÿs dribbled green paint as he walked along a line that had

been drawn on a map (in green) following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, indicating the land now under control by Israel. He literally re-enacted, on the actual ground, to scale, a mark that had been made on a map, one that has had far reaching political implications. The line does not merely incise a virgin surface, endowing meaning upon it as is stated in Benjamin's definition of drawing, rather it is the charged geographical surface that animates the line.



Figure 8



Figure 9

This graphic line that holds onto its ground, bringing the surface into consideration, can be set in opposition to another work done by Alÿs, namely *Narcotourism* (1996). In this piece the artist walked the city of Copenhagen under the influence of various drugs, striving to be 'physically present in a space but mentally elsewhere'. During the course of these walks he leaves no mark, deliberately absenting himself from the environment. The surface is pushed away from the act instead of being pulled into the work. This piece is documented with a variety of methods, but no graphic mark is made on the city itself, allowing the required negation of the physical space to occur. With his urban drawings Alÿs shifts the surface in question from the wall to the ground, marking the picture plane with a different deliberateness. He lassoes the

traversed ground into a consideration; rather than measuring its presence he indicates it by marking it; bounding the surface, the ground, the walk, and the line into one event.

9.2 Ceal Floyer (Performing Objects)

The works by Francis Alÿs that I have mentioned are lines acting as vectors, moving through space and documented in relation to his body as it produces the line. Inversely to this I am interested in line-makers, objects that do not make a line but imply the production of lines. With these the line is infused with potential and separated from my dictation of their form. Expanding my previous discussion around the chalk-field liner, I have been influenced by the sculptural forms of Ceal Floyer that imply performativity without being witness to the performance. Additionally, her sculptures are not absent of signification: they are ready-mades, quotidian objects, and one must navigate their associations of use and the language we have to talk about them. In a sculptural piece like *Wish you were here* (2008), an empty postcard rack sits desolate, looking remarkable like Duchamp's readymade *Bottle Dryer* (1914 / 1964), this sculpture however counters a purely formalist reading, the object itself holds meaning, narrative and heart-broken longing in its wire frame. A multitude of actions are implied by its emptiness.



Figure 10

In *Ink on Paper* (1999), a nipple-like drawing is made by holding a marker against a paper until the ink has bled out, and in *Taking a Line for a Walk* (2008), lawn marking paint loops around the gallery for the duration of five minutes. These objects are used as quotes, having the ability to signify through their cultural and historical associations, linked to their usage but not shown in the moment of their use.

The object is only commonplace in its use, at the moment of its use...But the object ceases to be commonplace once it begins to signify: as we have seen, the ‘truth’ of the contemporary object is to serve no purpose other than to signify, to be manipulated not as an instrument but as a sign. (Baudrillard 19)

10.1 Plumb Line (Alternate Constructions)

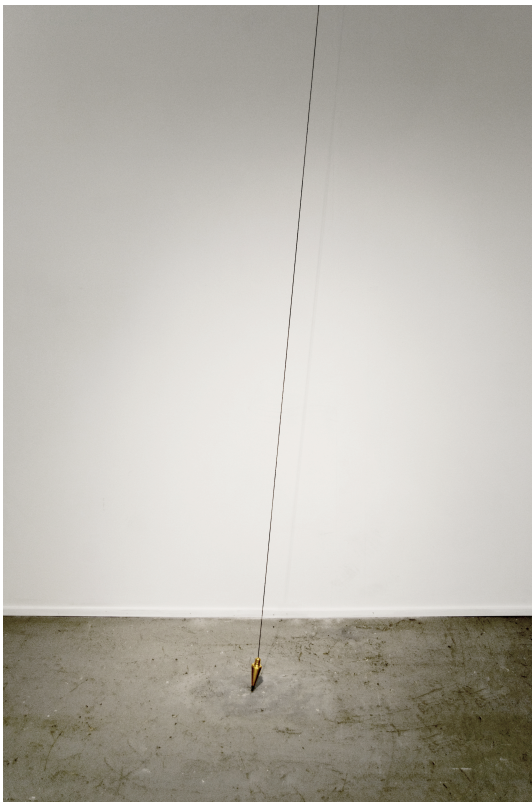


Figure 11



Figure 12

An alternate to Alÿs and Bochner's attached and implicating lines is *Oblique Plumb Line* (2010): a line drawn with string in space, anchored at the roof, it is pulled taut by the weight of an ornate plumb bob. However, here the plumb bob is pulled off its regular gravity-induced right angle (to the ground) by a strong rare-earth magnet inserted into the floor and concealed in order

to be indiscernible by the eye. This line divides a three dimensional space with a diagonal stroke. As the viewer moves through the space the thin black line obstructs sight, dissecting whatever space falls behind it, pulling ones perception vertically, from floor to roof, rather than along a horizon. This vertical line thus implicates architectural zones of the gallery that are rarely considered, spaces overlooked start to emerge. However, this piece is not just a line pulled diagonally; it has an identity as a plumb line. And due to its irregular action in the face of its function, it takes on an illusionary quality. Although not materially producing a line, the plumb bob takes on the role of a line maker. Due to the strength of the magnet and the alternate (to gravity) force exerted by its anchoring, the line stays rigid with only the very tip of the plumb-bob touching the floor. (Alternately the plumb bob can be made to hover at this angle, held a few centimeters above the floor within the field of the magnets force. This, however, requires more testing with stronger magnets to be stable enough for installation at this point.) The resulting angle is perceptually off-putting, as the plumb line appears to be obeying laws other than gravity yet within a dimension where that gravity still applies. The diagonal of the oblique line divides up (and in doing so changes) a space that tends to operate in terms of right angles, grids and cubes, and, depending on the lighting, the shadow cast along the floor and up the wall to the roof creates a planar form cutting across all dimensions. Although similar to a Fred Sandback sculpture that uses strings to create a form that sits airily in space, this line refers beyond itself, not just a formal line/object but opposing the function of its duty as a plumb-line: a line hanging ‘plumb’ or holding true. While stripped of representational qualities, through the ‘magic’ of the invisible magnet, the line still holds onto metaphorical implications. The plumb bob starts to act not as an instrument but as a sign, signifying its cultural usage, while remaining unusable. The plumb-line is an ancient tool of construction: a heavy weight on the end of a string suspended freely (and subject to gravity) will find a true vertical, construction then follows along this line, ensuring that all buildings will be ‘straight’ and in accordance with gravity. Placed in a gallery

setting this line speaks to the construction of the gallery space: walls emerge and disappear with each exhibition, floors stretch and crack. If the horizon line and gallery standard are invisible axiomatic structures for sight, then the plumb line is a physical postulate for constructing space. If the line is not plumb then what follows? How will/can space be constructed, literally/metaphorically along this alternate base line? This piece does not provide any answers or options for an actual alternate construction, rather it confounds expectation and opens the door back to illusion. Although speaking with the formal language of minimalist sculpture, *Oblique Plumb Line* takes strategies of previous generations and complicates the structure with the ornamental, archaic plumb-bob and through the object, with metaphor.

10.2 Snap Line (Crumpled and Vacated)

Unsharpenable Pencil #2 (2010) sits forlornly on a shelf, its innards spilled out of the side: tangled, frayed, knotted, incapable of executing its function. A snap or chalk-line (I will hence refer to it as a snap-line in order to avoid confusion with the previously discussed chalk-lines) often used in tandem with the plumb line, is an age-old construction tool used to make straight lines that are too long to be easily made with a straight edge. Only recently supplanted by a laser, these lines are used as a level reference or to indicate a cut-line. Wound up like a fishing reel in a container a string is coated with chalk (usually a light blue or red), pulled out, the string is held taut and then plucked leaving a precise line as a point of reference with a slight spray of chalk splayed out around it. The broken snap-line is a quoted object, signifying its usage as a construction tool, meant to be precise, rational and utilitarian, a line-maker, yet now defunct, vacated. Similarly to the plumb line this object is confounded, unable to aid correctly in the construction of space.

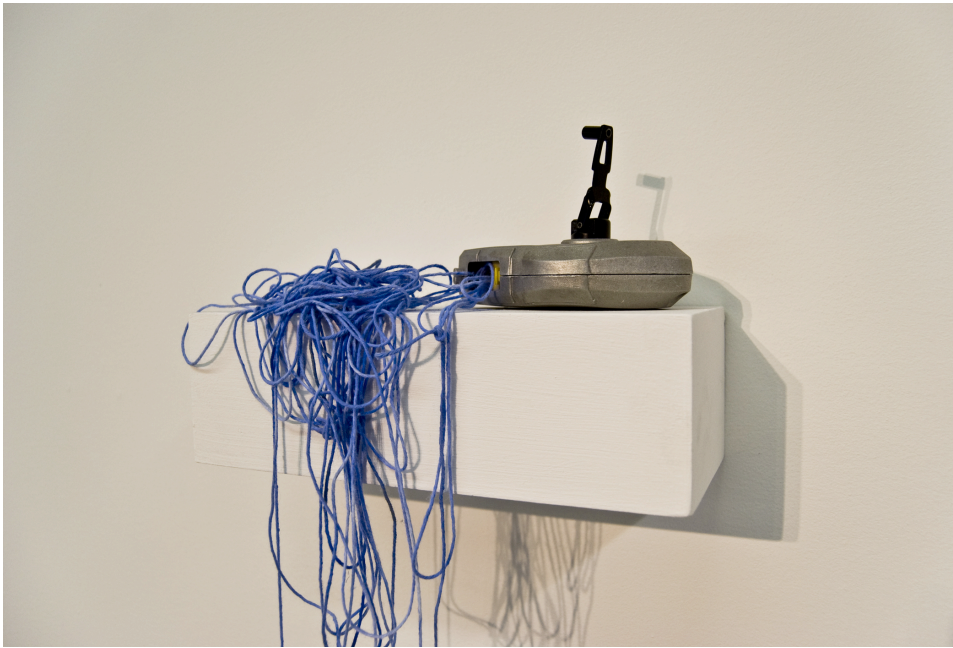


Figure 13

11. Conclusion(s): Never Resolute, Always Ambivalent

Operating as a ‘drawer’ the work I make, whether two-dimensional, installation or sculptural, progresses as a series of propositions rather than as definitive discrete pieces. Not exactly working with the ‘serial attitude’ that Bochner and LeWitt outlined, as the work is not based on a mathematical system, these pieces, however, have direction and act as varying ways to say a similar thing. Perhaps indicative of the ambivalent stance, these gestures connect in varying tandems, each hinting at a unifying concept but no one alone stating it. By making minimal impositions into space, I have been searching for axioms of conduct, both dictated by the physical institution containing the gesture and the canons of history that frame and generate these gestures. An axiom being an assumed truth, a fundamental thing that we must take for granted in order to deduce more complicated ‘theory-based’ truths (and I use truth in its loosest form). By returning to such simple lines I am exploring the propositional statements that are “not designed so much to create an object as to create a set of conditions which we experience as art” (Leider 10). Referring constantly back to the 1960s and 1970s, I am looking at an era that redefined art production; so effective were these artists that they became the institution

themselves. The revolutionary gestures that were made then, have become standard to contemporary art practice. In the foreword to the Tate Modern's catalogue of the exhibition Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970, then director, Vicente Todolí states emphatically: "One thing is certain—the innovations of then are regarded as the foundation of art now, and for this reason alone it is important to revisit it" (Todolí 6). Subsequent artists have been borrowing the language of minimalism and conceptualism: quoting, inverting, and expanding for different purposes, fluctuating between "pure abstraction and referentiality, moving fluidly between these two poles without radical shifts in formal terms." (Spector 22)

My thesis work has been exploring the fundamental formal actions of a line on a surface. Concentrating on the interplay between these two elements through the practice and history of drawing, I have been thinking about how a boundary is inscribed upon a surface and how these lines dictate our bodies. In relation to this what does transgression do to the boundary, and how can the boundary be reconfigured—erased, redrawn, restructured? The pieces I have talked about do not offer alternative constructions; however, they the beginnings of looking, and aim to combat the insidiousness of assumption. How often do we overlook the tenants of seeing and acting? By looking at these fundamental lines I have been exploring the complex unraveling of the simplest gesture: how the lines can alternate between smoothing striated areas and re-striating differently an undifferentiated plane: never resolute, always ambivalent. The tools that I am reframing are line makers, all designed to make a straight line, a 'true' line, and a useful line that enforce and advance Cartesian modes of existence, construction and movement. My lines however are crumpled, obvious and oblique, their belligerence seeks to confound and expose the systems in action rather than critique them overtly. Although I am exploring ambivalence as a tool to examine the multiple actions and causations of drawing, the lines stand resolute, dividing space they bring the viewer up to the limits of power where one must navigate everyday delineations of looking, acting, and transgressing.

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