

Drawing the Flesh of the World: The Walking Drawings

“To speak as the first man spoke ... To make visible how the world touches us...”
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Some of the most ancient of humanity’s gestures in the world were the tracing of fingers through the soft mud of cave walls and ceilings. The fact that most of these finger tracings rarely appear figurative or “naturalistic”, but rather a tangle of gestural “volutés and squiggles” indicates a sense of a non-narrative knowing of the qualities and limitations of the space. These are often interpreted as attempts to invoke invisible spirits, as magical acts. Without an accompanying written history we can never know. It could just as easily have been almost purely experiential, an unmediated touching and aesthetic appreciation of the materiality of the world common to human beings across the millennia. Rather than engaging in nature in a detached way as a spectator, this type of encounter with the sublimity of the glistening clay lit by the flickering of torches or animal fat lamps involves an “absorbing and arresting, hypnotic, even stupefying” and desirous mode of seeing and is a state of sensory engagement where “the distinctions between touch and sight are unknown.”

“I would say drawings are blind and they are about blindness, because they deeply involve the body. A drawing also begins in blindness... At the moment when the artist sets pencil to paper there is nothing to see, and the first mark is made in isolation and framed by emptiness. As the pencil travels along the page, it always moves into blindness, leaving behind a narrow path of vision....A drawing is an expression of a dialogue with blindness, and the most beautiful drawings are beautiful because they show it is sometimes possible to win the battle and produce a form out of nothing.”

- James Elkins

The walking drawings in this exhibition seem to emanate from some newborn in slow motion as it stumbles through the terrain, shifting, bumping, tripping over what would otherwise be negotiable ground, its two halves connecting or disputing the space covered by foot, as in this same moment it draws from the left and the right on a sheet of paper or metal what is seen as it is felt. Negotiating the world in this way buffers the experience from being an all too common attack by a leveling stare aimed to de/form this terrain into landscape. Instead of a place and space objectified, exploited, and consumed without kinship it remains something more delicate, doubting, respectful.

This approach to both the acts of walking and drawing and the context of the terrain covered continually pits the more normal assertion of self as an experiencing individual separate from the environment against the loss of that very separation and its comfortable type of knowing. This current journey is smoothed out only when self is no longer separated from the ‘otherness’ of the world or partner. Environmentalist Neil Evernden likens this reciprocal relationship with the environment to philosopher Martin Buber’s I-Thou authentic encounter. Rather than creating a detached viewing situation that constitutes the world as a series of objects to be identified, named and understood (an I-It relationship), one could consider this “a kind of deliberate naivety

through which it is possible to encounter a world unencumbered with presuppositions.”

It is interesting that these drawings come out the way they do with their finely executed, almost tentative, and fibrous interconnecting of lines: this web of translated experience reflects the deep ecological notion that humanity itself is part of a web and not the top of the pyramid of the stuff of the world.

“One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it”

- Julia Kristeva

So many within and without the art world consider art making as a symbolic enterprise. In this particular case it is not, certainly not at the level of the act of drawing. Perhaps the later naming of the pieces, the technical work of making these scratches into prints, the matting, framing and other presentation based concerns would drag these drawings into the social world of artistic convention in relation to communication, rules and valuation, what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would have called the symbolic order, but the originating process by which the marks are made is a pre-symbolic immersion in materiality, the natural and the real. Following from Lacan, psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva has emphasized the lack of separation in this pre-symbolic state of being where there is no distinction between self and other, a place dominated by a chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings and needs. She calls this the chora. We exist in this place just after we are born, in our environment that is the mother. We also enter this state after we die in that there is a literal breakdown between being subject and object, our identity crumbles. The chora is untidy, ambiguous and, because it lacks definition, it is transgressive and culturally dangerous.

“The flesh is neither some sort of ethereal matter nor is it a life force that runs through everything. Rather it is a notion that is formed in order to express the intertwining of the sensate and the sensible, their intertwining and their reversibility.”

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his last writings before his untimely death, spoke of the ‘flesh’ of the world. It was probably the most radical of his writings in phenomenology and the most poignant. Where phenomenology seeks the essential nature of things in the world (things-in-themselves, before we name them or think of them in terms of their use to our lives, things-for-us), he took that idea one step further. ‘Enfleshedness’ is the lived experience of where and how we meet the world – the world touches us as we touch the world – never are they, nor can they be, separate. All perception is always experienced through an already present being in and of the world and that state of being present in our perception is full and organic (fleshy). If conceptualism is of the mind first, an idea holding precedence in the artwork, then this work is not conceptual. These artists are no longer two stilled, detached bodies with objectifying gazes that have agreed in principle to collaborate, but are now an awkward, if engaged, stumbling, malleable, new body. There remains only a faint conceptual bracketing that gets the ritual/process going. As the artists reach their stride in the final body of larger drawings done in Banff in 2009, they have set aside a certain reserve and adherence to separateness. This work holds the residual tracings of an authentic, ‘enfleshed’ relationship.

Phenomenological approaches have been criticized for their essentialism in claiming that there is a pre-linguistic form of perceptual experience prior to knowledge yet basic to it. It is very difficult to accept this premise if one sees oneself and the world in terms of linguistic construction and socio-cultural convention, which in recent postmodern decades has been indicative of the semiotics of a Foucauldian or literary theoretical perspective. Though often thought of in diametrical opposition to the essentialism of phenomenology, a Foucauldian or literary theoretical approach does not necessarily negate a phenomenological one. So many of the possibilities for action and thought within society are shaped by the various institutions we live through, particularly in the now globalized version of late post-industrial capitalism. This does not mean that we cannot experience aspects of the world from an intuitive mode (art making counts on it), or know the world we negotiate our way through tacitly.

“The world is not what I think, but what I live through.”

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty

In many so-called primitive cultures social participatory activities such as art, music or dance create a space where the boundaries of individuality, in fact most boundaries, dissolve, where all beings become part of a greater gestalt that is the activity in that space. Ideally this is what art making does anywhere. We are not used to making art together but have mythologized it, throughout modernity particularly, into a hermetic activity. Even in many of the collaborative works so popular these days in contemporary art world practice, there is an adherence to separation, working back and forth, carrying on a conversation, a dialog, where ideas direct actions. The collaboration here I believe is different. Although it may be possible to construe an inherent story in the interaction of two people, and view this as a type of conversation, a questioning and response both to the other and the environment, I believe this would be a highly reductive reading. Intuitively and immediately we are solicited by the appeal of an undifferentiated but vivid atmosphere of sensuous qualities across the surfaces of these drawings, and we are appealed to in this way because these are not conversations. I would liken this difference to trying to explain through genetic code what it is to be in a body. Like those wondering gestures of our earliest ancestors in the mud of the fire lit cave walls this is the trace of an intertwining touch, joying in its transgression.

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