



Lines in Exile: Toward a Phenomenology of Situated Mark Making

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Abstract

This submission forms part of an ongoing inquiry in my interdisciplinary practice focused on developing an approach toward a phenomenology of aesthetic mark making. Rather than treating the line as a mimetic or purely graphic device, this research approaches it as the visible residue of negotiation between material, transcendental, and social conditions.

The proposed contribution takes the form of a hybrid visual essay and project report. It reflects on earlier site responsive installations (<https://amirhariri.com/section/447282-Installation.html>) in which drawing is embedded within provisional architectonic structures and introduces a series of related project proposals currently under development. In these environments, wall drawings, suspended surfaces, and fragments of structural frames create spaces in which, through a haptic encounter, viewers engage with unstable and partially constructed environments referencing displacement and exile.

Within this framework, the line operates less as representation than as an index of spatial negotiation. Marks accumulate across surfaces, responding to material resistance of collapse and the physical constraints of temporary structures. Drawing thus emerges through interaction between bodily gesture and environmental conditions. The impulse to mark surfaces under constraint has a long history, from inscriptions produced in conditions of confinement such as detention centers and refugee camps to informal markings that record presence, memory, or resistance within restricted spaces. While grounded in contemporary installation practice, the inquiry situates itself within a longer history of drawing as an embodied and situated act. From prehistoric cave markings and ritual inscription to narrative image-making and philosophical reflections on gesture, the line has often functioned as a trace of presence and movement rather than a neutral graphic element. Reconsidering the line through the lens of situated practice highlights how each mark registers both a moment of contact and a gesture unfolding over time.

Keywords: drawing, architecture, arts based research, expanded drawing, visual essay, phenomenology, social art, public art, civic art, urban interventions.

Rather than treating the line as a mimetic or purely graphic device, this inquiry approaches it as the visible residue of a negotiation between material, transcendental, and social conditions. Adopting a practice-based artistic research perspective, the projects and installations discussed in this essay serve as a series of interrelated case studies through which such mediations are experimentally tested. Drawing is understood neither as a neutral act of representation nor as a synthetic abstract, but as the extension of a situated activity unfolding under specific constraints. Here, the body's encounter

with surface and circumstance creates the ground for emergence.

Nothing reveals the reliance of visual representation on an abstraction more clearly than the persistent use of the line. As a construct inherently absent in nature, the line does not merely approximate observed reality but organizes perception itself. While delineations exist in the world, drawing can condense complex and disparate gradients into a comprehensible whole. In doing so, as articulated by the art historian Carl Einstein, drawing (as



Figure 1. *Cobweb Afternoon* (2020), acrylic and graphite on panel with wood assemblage

visual art) determines seeing as a self-complete *totality* and, thereby, an object of cognition (Einstein, 2019, p. 28).

The line functions not only as a graphic device but as a cognitive instrument through which form becomes apprehensible and, thereby, acts as a notional scaffold for perception. This condition is further articulated by Merleau-Ponty: “The line is no longer the apparition of an entity upon a vacant background, as it was with classical

geometry. It is, as in modern geometries, the restriction, segregation, or modulation of a pre-given spatiality” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 184). A similar formulation appears in art historian Yve-Alain Bois’s analysis of Piet Mondrian’s abstraction, in which Mondrian’s principle of reduction is understood as one of maximal tension: not one that eliminates complexity, but one that concentrates it, condensing the drawing into a site of felt forces (Bois, 2004).



Figure 2. *The Future Was Now* (2024), wood with fasteners, strings and reflecting pools

What emerges here is a condition that may be described as a kind of *drawingness*, describing a system in which not only traces and structures but ideas emerge as conditioned impressions. The line is no longer primary, but the effect of relations unfolding under constraint. Drawingness is distributed, relational, iterative, and emergent, revealing how drawing operates across various conditions. Drawing is not merely a way of arriving at structure but becomes structure itself.

These dynamics become particularly visible when drawing operates through constructed space. In *The Future Was Now* (Figure 2), a dilapidated sculptural installation, evoking both a collapsing advertising sign and a melting iceberg, line quality is conceptualized as the spatial framework for a tectonic system. The installation approaches drawing through construction: dimensional differences within the structure function analogously to strokes in a drawing (wood, string, fasteners, shadows

and reflections), guiding the viewer's eye across surfaces and through space. Elements shift in height, depth, and orientation so that the spatial arrangement itself becomes a sequence of visual gestures.

The structure is intentionally imbalanced, approaching a state of collapse. Just as a drawn stroke carries tension between forces acting on the hand, the architectural elements produce a spatial composition in which imbalance directs perception. The directional pull of repeated members, intersecting diagonals, reflections, shadows, and shifts in depth, organizes the viewer's movement through an unstable field. The viewer reads the structure the way one reads a drawing, namely as a sequence of tensions distributed across planes.

This relationship between embodied perception and the world is articulated by the architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa: "the composition of an abstract painting is



Figure 3. *The Future Was Now* (detail)

experienced as tensions in the muscular system, and the structures of a building are unconsciously initiated and comprehended through the skeletal system.” (Pallasmaa, 2012, p.72).

Fragments of advertising text appear dispersed across the structure. Removed from their original communicative function and subjected to processes of decay and fragmentation, these textual elements transcend their utility. The dispersal transforms them into visual traces within the broader field of marks, reinforcing the installation’s condition as a drawing extended into architectural space. This transformation aligns with Gordon Matta-Clark’s account of his *Building Dissections*, noting: “There is a kind of complexity which comes from taking an otherwise normal, conventional, albeit anonymous situation and re-defining it, retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present” (Matta-Clark, 2023, p. 22).

The drawn line is also inherently temporal. Unlike the geometric ideal of a line existing outside time, a drawn line unfolds through gestures. Each stroke records the movement of the body across a surface and registers a moment of contact between hand and material. Yet these instants accumulate into duration. The drawing becomes a record of time passing through the body, occupying both the immediacy of the instant and the continuity of lived experience (Bachelard, 2013; Bergson, 1910).

A closer view of *The Future Was Now* (Figure 3) reveals how lines emerge through friction with material conditions. Structural fragments intersect with drawn marks so that the image becomes inseparable from the surface that carries it. Drawing does not sit upon the structure but emerges from it.

These concerns were also explored in earlier installations where drawing operates within architectural environ-



Figure 4a. *Fracturing Half Moon - South Wall* (2019), cement, clay and wood with reflecting pool and wall drawing



Figure 4b. *Fracturing Half Moon - North Wall* (2019), wall drawing with wood assemblage



Figure 5. *Non-Empty Many-Fold* (2020), wood with fasteners, thread, wire and Mylar

ments. In *Fracturing Half Moon*, created in the Sunroom at Wave Hill (public garden and cultural center, Bronx, NY), drawing expanded into a total spatial composition occupying the entire room (Figure 4a-b). The installation functioned as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, allowing drawing to migrate across multiple media, beginning on sheets of paper, extending onto construction materials, and ultimately spreading across the windows and walls of the gallery.

Within this environment, the drawn line traversed multiple surfaces, inviting the architecture itself to participate in the drawing. The Sunroom windows became temporal mediators looking outward toward the George Washington Bridge and the expanding city, while reflecting inward toward cycles of decay and renewal within the surrounding landscape. Both mark and architecture are altered by

the changing external conditions, making drawingness felt through the passage of movement across otherwise discrete surfaces, where space, duration, and reflection act as notional collaborators without resolving into a single medium.

A related inquiry informed *Non-Empty Many-Fold*, developed in response to the brutalist architecture of the Pomerantz Center lobby, Fashion Institute of Technology, New York (Figure 5). The project explored how expanded drawing might function within an environment shaped by fashion and the circulation of bodies. In particular, the work drew inspiration from the structural logic of line in the work of designer Issey Miyake, whose garments translate drawing into spatial form through geometric construction.



Figure 6. *Non-Empty Many-Fold* (detail)



Figure 7. *Colony Collapse Aperture* (2021), acrylic, cement, clay, plaster, LED and wood with fasteners

Architectural surfaces function as extensions of the drawing elements that configure the layout of the lobby. Lines and shadows distributed across space respond to patterns of movement and observation within the building. Visitors, students, and passersby become participants in a field of dimensional marks unfolding across various modes of perception. The fixed architecture, in dialogue with the sway of suspended materials, shifting shadows, and moving bodies, continually reframes the perceptual field. The autonomous line is thereby transformed from defining spatial boundaries to describing underlying relationships.

The social dimension of these spatial conditions became particularly visible in *Colony Collapse Aperture*, developed for the NARS Foundation, an artist residency and exhibition space in Brooklyn, NY (Figure 7). The installation emerged through dialogue with the surrounding com-

munity during the early days of the Covid pandemic and the upheaval following the Black Lives Matter protests. The work incorporated found objects gathered from the neighborhood, allowing everyday materials to function as both sculptural elements and carriers of social memory. Within this context, drawing extends beyond traditional media to include assemblage and spatial arrangement, a practice with roots in Cubist constructions. Picasso's impulse toward a sum of destruction is later synthesized by Gilles Deleuze as the decomposition and recomposition of movement in Cubism (Deleuze, 2002, p. 49). These ideas reappear in the interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark and in the Failure Drawings of Pope.L. Found objects operate as lines within a broader compositional system, registering the pressures and transformations shaping the neighborhood.



Figure 8. SculptureCenter proposal (installation rendering)

Community dialogue, memory, resistance, and material exchange form a distributed network whose interactions leave traces within the work. The installation therefore registers a social field much as a drawing registers a material one, with relations made perceptible through constraint. Across these projects, the constructed line functions less as representation than as a register, suggesting that drawing may emerge through interactions within a system rather than a gesture that initiates a mark.

Looking to the future, this manner of inquiry continues in several ongoing proposals that extend drawing into provisional architectural systems. In a proposal developed for SculptureCenter (contemporary art museum, Queens, NY), drawing is distributed across plywood platforms and building fragments that viewers physically navigate (Figure 8). Instead of confining drawing as a framed object, the installation treats lines as elements within an inhabitable spatial system.



Figure 9. SculptureCenter proposal (detail)

This gesture draws on the long history of mark making on walls under conditions of displacement and confinement, where drawing becomes a means of asserting presence in spaces of uncertainty (Figure 9).

Such proposals extend this hybrid approach by referencing provisional shelters shaped by displacement and collapse. These structures evoke temporary architecture, fragments of buildings, improvised shelters, or refugee camps awaiting reconstruction, within which drawing records the interaction between body and instability.

The impulse to mark surfaces under environmental constraints has a long history. Prehistoric cave drawings provide early examples of lines embedded within spatial environments rather than detached from them. These marks follow the contours of rock surfaces and chamber walls, suggesting that drawing emerged through a dialogue between early humans and the landscape they occupied (Chippindale & Nash, 2004). Alongside animal figures appear abstracted symbols and repeated handprints. These gestures register presence as much as representation. Art historian Wilhelm Worringer interpreted such abstraction as emerging from a desire for stability in the face of an uncertain world (Worringer, 1997).



Figure 10. The Shed proposal (installation rendering)

Worringer's abstraction may suggest an advanced mode of thinking rather than a retreat from the world, one in which disparate perceptual and existential pressures are condensed into marks through which relations become apprehensible. Seen in this light, early drawing can be understood not simply as depiction but as a visceral response to existential conditions.

More recent proposals developed for large-scale spaces such as The Shed (multidisciplinary arts venue, Hudson Yards, NY) continue to explore drawing as an inhabitable environment (Figure 10). Structural frameworks distribute lines across suspended surfaces and architectural fragments, transforming drawing into a spatial field through which viewers are encouraged to navigate.

Relationships between marks appear gradually as viewers move through the installation. Anthropologist Tim Ingold has described lines as traces of movement through space rather than static graphic elements, suggesting that drawing emerges from the act of wayfaring through environments (Ingold, 2007).

As drawing expands into the extended field, occupying architectural edges and thresholds, it approaches what Jacques Derrida describes as the *parergon*, where the boundary between work and frame becomes unstable. In this way, the frame becomes less a limit than a generative site of the work itself, something the drawing works through rather than against (Derrida, 1987).

In relation to our ever-changing technological landscape, this line of inquiry has also extended into experiments with computational drawing systems. In a past collaborative project exploring generative drawing, marks produced by the artist were observed and interpreted by a

computational system that generated responsive lines in real time. The drawing evolved through a feedback loop between human gestures and machine analysis, allowing marks to emerge from the interaction between intuition and algorithmic response (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Sample generative drawing produced through a past collaborative computational system

Contemporary practices have pursued related questions more explicitly. Sougwen Chung's *Drawing Operations Unit* (2015) stages drawing as an exchange between the artist and robotic systems trained on human mark making, while Patrick Tresset's *Human Study #2, La Grande Vanité au coquillage* (2017) explores machine drawing through robotic systems that observe and render subjects. Such practices complicate the distinction between tool and collaborator and situate drawing within distributed systems of human and technical agency (Bidgoli et al., 2019).

A more scientific yet heuristic approach appears in Nawata and Unemi's (2017) co-drawing experiments, using imitation and interference to evaluate machine behavior during a shared drawing process. More recently, in projects such as *Reframer* by Lawton et al (2023), research has shifted toward agency and relational interaction within human-AI drawing systems. While expanding on previous research, the main drivers of the interaction remain grounded in localized narrative analysis and semantic extrapolation rather than compositional totality.

In both cases, the main drivers of machine input remain relational and highly dependent on the nature of human mark-making. These approaches nevertheless raise a distinction central to the present inquiry: the difference between modelling the appearance of a mark and modelling the conditions from which a mark emerges. Computational systems can reproduce stylistic tendencies or learn correlations within an archive of gestures, but drawingness shifts attention toward the constraints, relations, and perceptual tendencies that make those gestures possible. The question then becomes not how machines might replicate human strokes, but how the conditions that generate marks might be translated into computational perception.

This distinction also resonates with Eric Kandel's account of reduction in art and neuroscience, in which abstraction can intensify perception by reducing visual information to elements necessary for recognition and response (Kandel, 2016). Through drawingness, such reduction can be understood not simply as simplification but as a form of optimization under constraint. Relations are selected, sup-

pressed, or intensified until a legible structure begins to emerge. A computational system need not reproduce the artist's line so much as negotiate the conditions through which a line becomes possible. In this way, we can perhaps imagine a path that addresses what Pallasmaa referred to as the computers' passive visual manipulation (Pallasmaa, 2009).

The drawn line therefore collapses several conditions at once: the instant of contact between body and surface, the duration through which a drawing unfolds, and the environments in which marks acquire meaning. Across the works discussed here, the line emerges not as a neutral graphic element but as a trace of negotiation between felt forces. What begins as embodied practice gradually extends into conceptual inquiry, elevating drawing to, not only a way of thinking through the instability inherent in experiencing time and space, but a fundamental act of perception itself.

In this sense, the line operates as both structure and idea, as a minimal gesture capable of mediating relationships between body, environment, and the evolving systems through which images are produced. If the drawn line has historically mediated between body and world, can it also serve as a bridge between human perception and machine intelligence? And if drawing emerges through interactions rather than impulses, might the line itself be understood as part of a distributed network of agencies through which perception and meaning emerge?

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