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**Sue Williams, *Stabilized*, 2009**, ink and acrylic on acetate, 19 x 24 in. (48.3 x 61 cm) (artwork © Sue Williams; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

Painting and drawing are back. That's the big news.

—Peter Schjeldahl

Drawing is the new Painting. Drawing reveals processes that painting hides. Drawing in paint enlivens painting. Drawing is marginal. Drawing is handmade and expressive without being outmoded or too commercial. Drawing defies mass mediation and the digital. Drawing is free from convention and there-

fore it is the ultimate expression of freedom. Drawing is unpretentious and partial. It is a fragment of a new world, or it is a partial memory of the past. It captures a moment in time. Drawing never died. But drawing is threatened: there is no more life drawing; design is now all done on computers.

**Karen Kurczynski**

## Drawing Is the New Painting

Drawing can be done in any medium. Drawing is cheap and always available. It is uniquely suited to expressing the ephemerality of all life, today. Anyone can do it, and everyone does it. Drawing is the first art we all produce as children, and therefore it is universal, raw, spontaneous, and innocent. Drawing is an international language. Drawing is the oldest art form, even before writing. The animals at Lascaux are actually drawings, not paintings, and they preceded any other art form by millennia. Drawing is the foundation of all art and design since the Renaissance. Chinese ink painting and Islamic manuscript illumination are actually drawing. Photography is the “pencil of nature.”

Drawing is closest to the original kernel of an idea. Drawing is private. Drawing is the trace of a unique human subjectivity. Drawing returns us to narrative but without objectivity. Drawing always connects to writing. It links directly to literature. It is always a fiction. Drawing is irrational and rational, done on both sides of the brain. Drawing uses the newest digital technologies. It creates a virtual reality. Drawing is the foundation of all art departments, so important that it does not even need a concentration of its own. Drawing is very valuable, and must be shown only rarely, protected by glass. The more minimal, delicate, and ephemeral, the more poetic and evocative it is. The more obsessive, the more expressive it is. The more monumental, the more paradoxical and contemporary it is.

Drawing is the newest oldest medium. Drawing is impossible to define.

Writing about drawing is plagued by truisms. If these sound like your grandfather's art criticism, it is because they can be found in both texts from the 1950s and writing from the 2000s, though the older texts tend to ascribe these values to painting. It has so far gone largely unnoticed that a knot of assumptions about pure expression, with a dash of narrative storytelling and a pinch of subcultural references, filters contemporary drawing through the aesthetic theory of painting in the postwar period. In a wide range of contemporary criticism, drawing means a return to traditional values of authenticity and expressive freedom—the same values so strongly attached to painting in the postwar era that they became taboo for the generations that followed. In the 1960s these values became hallmarks of a counterculture, even as the art world rejected them in Pop art and Minimalism; they have more recently been recuperated by what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call the “new spirit of capitalism,” the ideological justification for the capitalist economy that since 1989 has developed virtually unchallenged around the globe. Boltanski and Chiapello write that “neo-management aims to respond to demands for authenticity and freedom, which have historically been articulated in interrelated fashion by what we have called the ‘artistic critique,’ and . . . it sets to one side the issues of egoism and inequalities traditionally combined in the ‘social critique.’”<sup>1</sup> Authenticity and freedom seem to be modernity's permanent aspirations, appearing alongside and in reaction to technologies

The epigraph is from Peter Schjeldahl, “What's New: The Whitney Biennial,” *New Yorker*, March 22, 2004, 100.

1. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2007), 97.

of mediation that appear to threaten them at every stage; but what happens when the threat is a moving target such as capitalism, which constantly evolves to internalize and defuse every criticism it receives? What happens when a drawing like Sue Williams's *Stabilized*—impressive, vibrant, edgy, and personal, but also political, calligraphically styled, and highly finished work on mylar—can now simply be sold by the gallery as a painting in order to elevate its value? How can drawing respond to a situation where its historical associations with freedom from all the economic, social, and political constraints attached to Western painting seem to dovetail perfectly with the rise of an art market that uses drawing's purported autonomy and authenticity to continually transform it into economic and social capital—in other words, when the autonomy from commerce, the public sphere, and technological reproduction that used to define drawing's value seems to have evaporated even as its meaning still depends on them?

Yet the situation is always more complex than our existing theoretical models. Free personal expression is only part of what contemporary drawing has to say. It can also defy public stereotypes of identity by reconfiguring them (Williams's bodily phantasmagoria), reveal social ideologies by materializing them (Richard Prince's jokes), or make hidden connections newly visible (Mark Lombardi's networks). Drawing is a significant site of social mediation, evoking fundamental longings for unfettered expression, universality and timelessness, childlike innocence, immediacy and spontaneity, delicacy and vulnerability, and of course social distinction. It thus delineates in unique ways the socioeconomic structure of the art world, which mediates the public reception of personal expression. The art world functions as a celebrity machine, elevating the artistic expression of some people over that of others, so that artists become the professional expression specialists. Drawing allows art-world outsiders, like Henry Darger, Martin Ramírez, and Raymond Pettibon, to become insiders precisely because of their perceived purity of expression. Most writing on drawing today lacks a critical perspective on the social values critics, artists, and collectors are actually investing in when they speak about the rise of drawing. Rather than returning to individualist notions of freedom of expression, however, many contemporary artists use the radically heterogeneous possibilities of contemporary drawing as an antimedium. Artists like Seher Shah, Pettibon, and Glenn Ligon, whose work I will examine here, creatively reframe the common understanding of personal expression for an age of unprecedented technological mediation. These artists view subjectivity not as universal, but as contingent, continually constructed in dialogue with or against other subjectivities, as well as with the conventions of social identity circulating in the mass-mediated public sphere.

An enormous surge of interest in drawing has registered in contemporary art discourses of the past fifteen years, when several important museum exhibitions and publications identified its newfound relevance.<sup>2</sup> The institutional recognition of drawing as a medium in its own right began in the 1970s and was revived in the late 1990s. The founding of major drawing institutions in the 1970s chronicles the institutional recuperation of Conceptual art's initially oppositional use of drawing as a critique of artistic reification, a prelude to the situation today.<sup>3</sup> The recent exhibition *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process* addressed Conceptual artists who used drawing as a diagram of process itself, rather than a finished product.<sup>4</sup> Such works directly critiqued the "commodity status and

2. The publications include Laura Hoptman, *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002); Emma Dexter, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing* (London: Phaidon, 2005); *The Drawing Book: A Survey of Drawing; The Primary Means of Expression*, ed. Tania Kovats (London: Black Dog, 2005); Simon Downs, Russell Marshall, Phil Sawdon, Andrew Selby, and Jane Tormey, *Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); and the website for the American Folk Art Museum exhibition *Obsessive Drawing* ([www.folkartmuseum.org/default.asp?id=1266](http://www.folkartmuseum.org/default.asp?id=1266), accessed March 29, 2011).

3. The institutions include the Drawing Center (founded 1977, New York) and the Tate Gallery in London, which began to systematically collect works on paper in 1975. Among the exhibitions are *Drawing Now* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1976), and the German triennial of drawing, *Zeichnung heute: 1. Internationale Jugendtriennale der Zeichnung* (Nuremberg, Kunsthalle in der Norisshalle, Ehrehalle im Rathaus Wolffscher Bau, 1979). On the Tate, see *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act*, ed. Avis Newman and Catherine de Zegher (New York: Tate Publishing, 2003), 7.

4. See Cornelia H. Butler, *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

market orientation” of the art world.<sup>5</sup> For those artists, Abstract Expressionist painting stood for the artwork as luxury commodity and modernist institution. Yet just as the Conceptualists did not anticipate their institutional recuperation, they did not anticipate the attachment of signifiers for traditional ideas of spontaneous expression they distrusted to a medium they considered oppositional.

After a two-decade hiatus, a host of new institutions devoted to drawing were founded around the turn of the millennium, and the market for drawing has greatly expanded.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in the marketplace drawing still lags financially behind other mediums like painting and photography.<sup>7</sup> For the sake of the art, that may be for the better, since drawing’s rise depends on its status as (once-) marginal, materially accessible, and existing for so long beneath the cultural radar.

Many of these exhibitions aspire to answer the question, Why drawing now? Responses range from drawing’s universal availability to its fundamental or primary status, from its relative freedom of expression to its tendency toward the marginal and ephemeral, all of which are essential concerns. Yet the social and political implications of these properties have not been analyzed or historicized, especially the politically charged question of expressive freedom. Freedom only exists as a claim, never a state of being.<sup>8</sup> It only becomes an issue once it is threatened. Direct expression appears threatened today technologically, as digital media become ever more sophisticated and ubiquitous; economically, as market concerns increasingly determine what art gets exhibited, pushing art toward the monumental, spectacular, and entertaining; and politically, as civil liberties are eroded as part of the so-called war on terror. In the past ten years, the word “freedom” has been abused by politicians in the United States, used to justify military involvement in other sovereign nations. The meaning of “freedom,” already difficult to conceptualize, has become politically skewed to such a degree that no medium can be understood to simply embody it. To assume drawing means freedom is to uphold the marginalization of art as what Julian Stallabrass calls a “zone of freedom” confined to a political, social, and economic elite, and to support the internalization of neoliberal ideology in the art world as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Rather than freeing the flow of ideas, however, the market limits discourse to the circulation of easily marketable clichés. This essay insists on a relationship between the discourse of freedom of expression and the current political and economic rhetoric of freedom. I argue that far from simply embodying expressive freedom by default, the medium of drawing is in fact uniquely suited to critique the limitations of the concept in broader social discourse because of its specific history and the assumptions surrounding it today.

Those projects which manage to foreground drawing’s embodiment of freedom with skepticism toward the broader political and economic uses of the term are most relevant in this context. The most significant drawing, then, comments on its status as a sphere of “freedom” directly. Seher Shah, a Pakistani artist based in Brooklyn, creates large-scale drawings based on Mughal architecture and fantastic illustration, such as *Interior Courtyard II*, 2007.<sup>10</sup> Drawing here takes the public scale of painting. It manifests as a multicultural fantasy of courtyard spaces related to Shah’s memories, fusing courtyards from her childhood in Belgium and London with Islamic sites visited in Pakistan and elsewhere. These sites are populated or invaded by modernist and science-fiction references,

5. Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), xiv.

6. The new institutions include the First Canberra Drawing Biennial (1996), the opening of the Marcia Simon Weisman Works on Paper Study Center at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1998); the First Central European Drawing Biennale (Pilsen, Czech Republic, 1998); the UK-based Drawing Research Network (2002); the Drawing Room (London, 2003); and the online journal *Tracey* (2000; [www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ac/tracey/index.html](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ac/tracey/index.html), accessed March 29, 2011). The fifth Salon du dessin contemporain in Paris in 2011 announced the theme—or what the organizers called the “brand”—of “Drawing Now” ([www.salondudessincontemporain.com](http://www.salondudessincontemporain.com), accessed March 29, 2011).

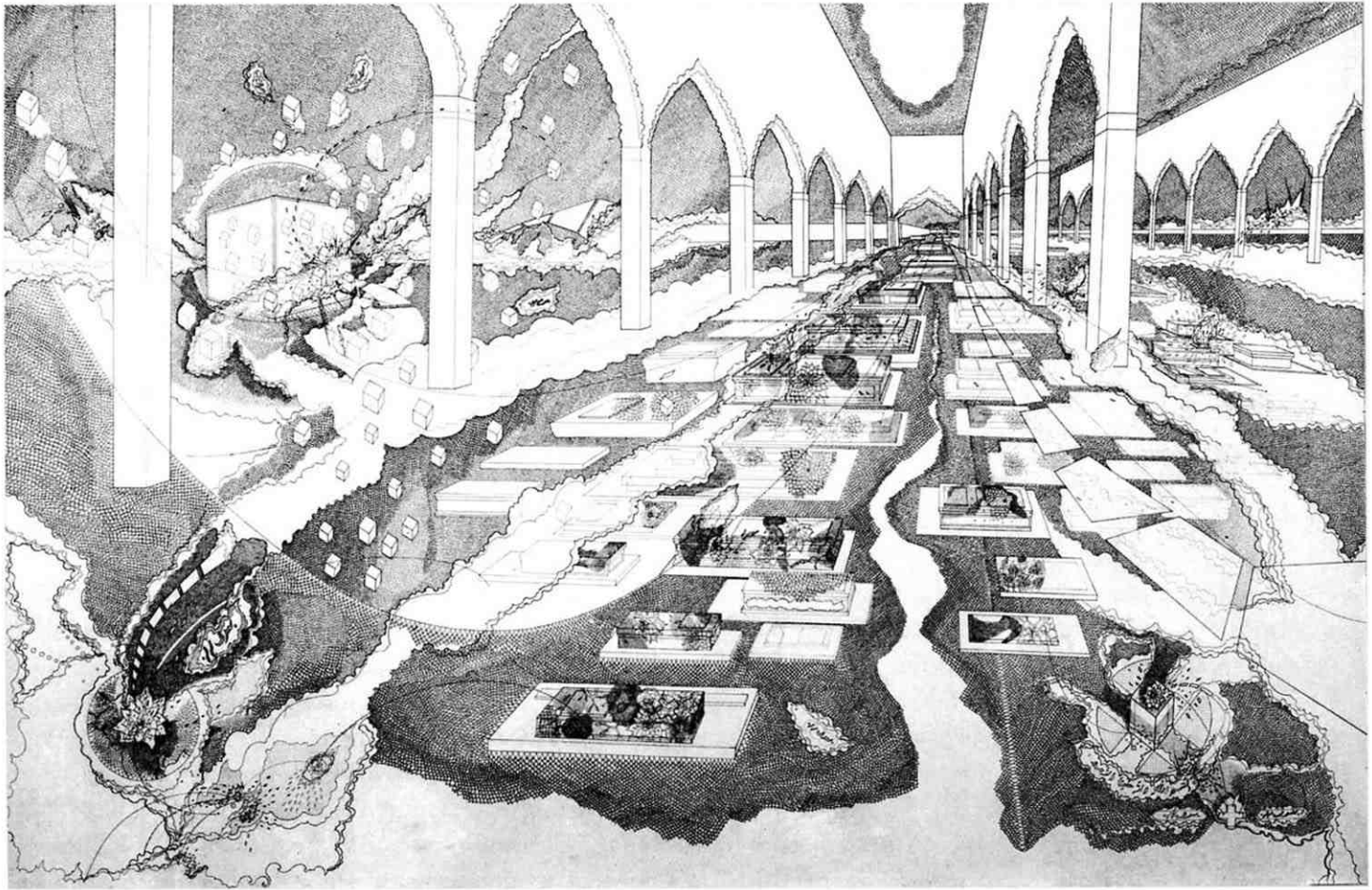
7. See “The Contemporary Drawing Market,” *Art Market Insight*, 2007, at [www.artmarketinsight.com/en/art\\_article.aspx?id=377](http://www.artmarketinsight.com/en/art_article.aspx?id=377) (accessed March 29, 2011).

8. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), 30.

9. Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–18.

10. See Shah’s discussion at [www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/bloggers/2009/05/04/a-visit-from-artist-seher-shah/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/bloggers/2009/05/04/a-visit-from-artist-seher-shah/) (accessed March 29, 2011); and Tom Finkelpearl, “Jihad Pop: An Interview with Seher Shah,” *Queens Museum of Art Blog*, July–August 2007, <http://queensmuseum.blogspot.com/2007/06/pakistan-born-artist-seher-shah-moved.html> (accessed March 29, 2011).





**Seher Shah, *Interior Courtyard II*, 2007,**  
graphite on paper, 6 ft. 8 in. x 10 ft. (203.2 x  
304.8 cm), Brooklyn Museum, New York  
(artwork © Seher Shah)

elements of Islamic architecture, and anonymous tombs made into transparent containers for decorative forms. Minimalist cubes recall both intimate souvenirs and public markers as they transform into architectural monuments, evoking modernist architecture and religious symbols such as the cross and the Kaaba. The large scale turns a private fantasy into a public architectural scheme, collapsing the formats of sketchbook and architectural drawing to situate the viewer in an unstable, transcultural, public-private space. Shah's drawings interrogate the meaning of traditional Islamic sites as sites of idiosyncratic fantasy, exhibited in a Western culture where public signs of Muslim identity have become an excuse to take away civil liberties. This investigation is personal for an artist seeking to understand her own transnational identity. But it is also crucial for a contemporary Western audience to interrogate our public clichés of Islam as a projection of fear and exoticism which denies the reality of complex subjectivities, perspectives developed in relation to a much more diverse range of personal experiences than is reflected in the mainstream media. Shah's drawings demonstrate that nostalgia and memory are everywhere shaped by traditional cultural iconographies which are both highly mediated and politically charged. The human imagination, Shah implies, is not as free as we would like to believe, even as it remains an important conduit for political freedom.

## Indefinition

Drawing can only be defined provisionally, just like contemporary painting (which has not been limited to the physical medium of paint for decades). It is precisely their resistance to definition that keeps these mediums interesting—though, like all contemporary art mediums, they are defined by their diverse histories. As Deanna Petherbridge observes, “Drawing is an immanence, always pointing to somewhere else.”<sup>11</sup> For many artists and critics, the prominence of line defines drawing, but this is more a historical than a contemporary definition.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary drawings need not depend on line, but they do depend on the idea that in drawing, something else besides line—color, background, composition, finish, frame, resolution, intention—is withdrawn or absent. Drawing is an antimedium in that contemporary drawing defines itself in opposition to, first, what drawing was in the academic and modernist traditions, and second, the Greenbergian medium-specificity of painting in the postwar period. Its characteristic hybridity is what makes it so significant. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, defines drawing as any work on paper that is one-of-a-kind, but its recent encyclopedic exhibition *Compass in Hand* foregrounded drawing as a hybrid medium, including photographic and appropriated work, dance diagrams, Chinese ink painting, collage, watercolors, installation, digital files, and vinyl wall text.<sup>13</sup> This deliberate expansion of the definition of drawing did not reify drawing as the universal foundation of all creativity; rather, it considered drawing a vital area of contemporary experimentation precisely because of its relatively open status—unlike Laura Hoptman’s exhibition *Drawing Now*, which recognized drawing as a “noun,” meaning a “finished and autonomous” product worthy of institutionalization in neomodernist terms.<sup>14</sup>

Emma Dexter defines drawing more romantically as any kind of human markmaking, emphasizing its universal quality, as an indication in any medium or format of the presence of the human—from airplane vapor trails to Richard Long’s walks through a field.<sup>15</sup> This broadest possible definition encompasses every human gesture, collapsing all behavior into drawing. It would be more productive to consider drawing as something once defined as prior to painting or any other form of image display. Drawing’s “prior” status now exists under erasure. Its marginality or oppositionality must be directly argued or questioned, for as the Hoptman show made clear, it can no longer be assumed. Drawing should be understood as a practice potentially oppositional to other sorts of markmaking or gesture, involving presentation, finish, social application, and use or instrumentality. Otherwise the term risks becoming meaningless.

Drawing’s contemporary relevance relates directly to the avant-garde tradition of deskilling that, from realism and Impressionism to Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism, turned painting rather polemically into drawing. In each era, the most “advanced” painting manifested as what appeared to be an unfinished sketch. This deskilling was a direct challenge to the separation of art from life, specifically the isolation of art as a professional sphere whose function was to create luxury objects for an elite. Even if the term “avant-garde” may seem hopelessly elitist and outmoded today, art that reaches beyond the socially marginalized sphere of culture into politics or everyday life lives this tradition. In this regard, the immanence or unfinish of drawing makes it uniquely suited to

11. Deanna Petherbridge, “Nailing the Liminal: The Difficulties of Defining Drawing,” in *Writing on Drawing*, ed. Steve Garner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 37.

12. Paul Klee defined drawing poetically by calling it “a line on a walk”—but his phrase still resonates today because rather than defining the difference between drawing and painting, he collapsed it. Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, trans. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (Kent, UK: Whitstable, 1968), 16.

13. See Christian Rattemeyer, *Compass in Hand: Selections from the Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009).

14. Hoptman, 12.

15. See Dexter, “To Draw Is to Be Human,” in *Vitamin D*, 6–7.

creatively oppose established theory and practice. Drawing's resistance to finish helps it manifest as an implicit demand or claim on the world, suggesting new possibilities. Drawing remains potentially critical in part because of its history as preliminary, marginal, or unseen, in part because of its ability to continually suggest change, and in part because of its refusal to envision results, at least inasmuch as it distrusts finish and skill. In part, because as drawing, it remains a part, meaning a share, a fragment, and a separation.<sup>16</sup>

Insidiously, however, this embodiment of immanence elides with contemporary capitalist values in a world ruled by the circulation and flexibility of finance capital, making drawing as a medium at the same time radical and absolutely banal. In the postindustrial economy, drawing's associations with individual expression, accessibility, easy or automatic production, and flexibility, coupled with its newfound economic viability as a commodity, make it uniquely suited to both counterculture and business interests. Drawing now takes full advantage of having it both ways. "The value conferred on mobility and the ability to make new links," observe Boltanski and Chiapello, "tend to exclude . . . the form of freedom expressed in the option for stability, the prioritization of loyalty, and receipt of a heritage . . . without any consideration of the profits it might bring."<sup>17</sup> Again, a freedom is identified only when it is withdrawn. Recent attempts to investigate the fading legitimacy of history through drawing (Fernando Bryce's *South of the Border* series) or to make drawing monumental as site-specific installation (insert your own reference here) become apparent attempts at resistance to economic precariousness. Boltanski and Chiapello also suggest resistance on a more intimate scale, "in challenging mobility as a prerequisite and incontestable value. . . . Slowing down, deferring, delaying, spacing."<sup>18</sup> In the current economic climate, flexibility and mobility are no longer inherently critical values, but they may be applied as such given the proper context. Drawing's link to handmaking as delay may also powerfully critique the business values of productivity, mobility, and networking—as long as the discourse of the hand does not revert to the automatic fetishism of authenticity characteristic of the postwar era, when industry was more conformist and techno-utopian, and handmaking was itself enough to signify criticality. The key to drawing's power remains its tendency to resist communication and instrumentality, its potential dispersal and recombination of languages both textual and visual (e.g., mimesis, visual symbols, languages, codes, maps, and diagrams) while it simultaneously resists any artistic language unique to itself as medium.

Shah's *Interior Courtyard II* demands a certain evident slowness in the sparseness of its framing of negative spaces, the smoothness of its steady but not calligraphic contour lines, and the idiosyncratic connections it develops between effectively unrelated images. This work may not seem overtly political, but it makes symbols of permanence and ancient cultural markers seem to float lightly above the specificity of place and time. Yet this is no animated entertainment, turning political conflicts into escapist personal stories. The drawing's political demands for freedom become inseparable from the formal suggestiveness of the process, its demand that the viewer reconsider the world as she or he knows it. The drawing's refusal of narrative and finish separates it from principles of economic productivity which continually mandate results. Shah's abstraction,

16. My language here is indebted to Jacques Derrida, whose writing on drawing has been an inspiration for this project, though my critique of his approach will have to await a later essay. See Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

17. Boltanski and Chiapello, 468–69. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this reference.

18. *Ibid.*



presented as a process operating on overtly ideological elements rather than a modernist endpoint in itself, tends to deform, rather than form, unraveling established narratives.

### Free at Last?

Freedom and direct expression are leitmotifs in writing about contemporary drawing.<sup>19</sup> While such ideas may be productive as aspirations, the belief in drawing as total freedom is precisely that—a belief. Norman Bryson refers to this fallacy as “drawing’s myth of transparency,” observing that drawing is always also a discipline.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of what materials are used, drawing is a medium in the sense of a physical manifestation. It involves both physical limits and, even before the mark is made, mental limits, formations of thought that redirect any sort of physical expression. Nevertheless Dexter’s important overview of contemporary drawing links it to “personal unfettered expression” and “authenticity.”<sup>21</sup> It is striking the extent to which high-modernist notions of pure, individual expression in painting have become central to contemporary descriptions of drawing, despite (or in reaction against) the widespread contemporary shift to an understanding of subjectivity which largely rejects the basic premise of expressionism, that subjectivity is entirely internal and autonomous.<sup>22</sup>

Drawing is often understood as more authentic than other expressive mediums because it is viewed as closer to the creative impulse of the artist’s mind and united with a universal tradition. In his classic 1967 study, Daniel Mendelowitz writes that “drawings provide an intimate contact with the act of creation and thereby permit the viewer to come closer to the kernel of the artist’s being.”<sup>23</sup> Curators of the 2008 *Drawn to Detail* agree, writing that “through these artists’ gestures we have a direct connection to their thought processes.”<sup>24</sup> Separated by forty years, these accounts foreground the same idea of the drawing’s truth to the inner emotion of its creator, without considering that authenticity of expression is actually conceived retrospectively. Both identify the privacy, lack of finish, and visibility of process evident in drawings as sources for this sense of authenticity. These sentiments in fact revisit ideals ascribed in the immediate postwar period to painting.<sup>25</sup>

Ideas of spontaneity and authenticity were essential to the postwar generation in the face of the sudden spread of mass-media technologies such as cheap color printing, television, and color cinema, which had the dramatic cumulative effect of making mass mediation an intimate aspect of everyday life. Since then, the ubiquity of the mass media has only increased, with the development of technologies like the VCR, the PC, and the Internet. The widespread use of software like computer-aided-design and illustration programs in both art and design training has everything to do with why drawing, so intimately associated with the hand, is now so prominent. The desire for authenticity is directly linked to the ever-expanding presence of mass mediation. Mediation, it must also be recognized, no longer means a passive spectacle, as the Situationists theorized, but also interactive possibilities.<sup>26</sup> Drawing, then, must be considered in all its possible mediums, including drawing using digital technologies and software.<sup>27</sup> The fact that drawing with software is the least studied area of the growing literature on drawing indicates the strong attraction to ideas of handmaking,

19. See, for example, the artists’ statements in Judy K. Collischan Van Wagner, Judy Collischan, and Thomas W. Leavitt, *Lines of Vision: Drawings by Contemporary Women* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1989).

20. Norman Bryson, “A Walk for a Walk’s Sake,” in *The Stage of Drawing*, 154.

21. Dexter, “To Draw Is to Be Human,” 8.

22. See, for example, the discussion of “singular” as opposed to “individual” subjectivity in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Anne E. O’Byrne (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

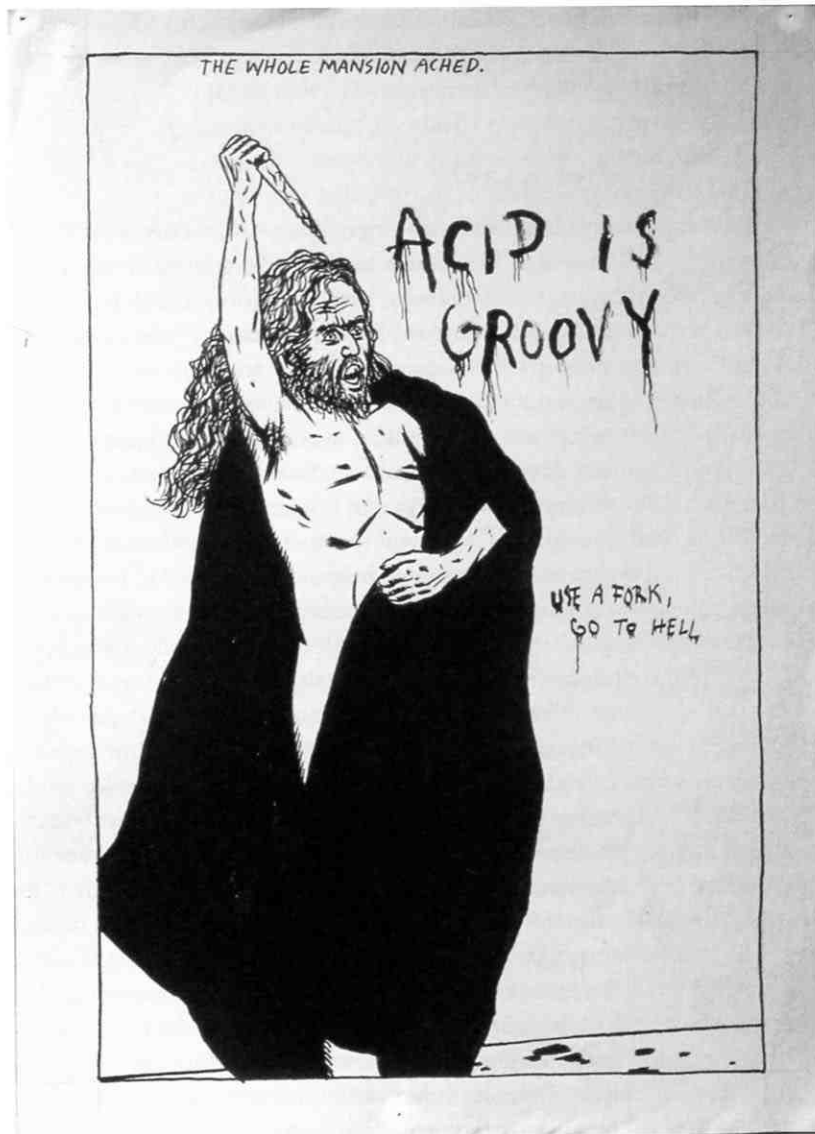
23. Daniel Mendelowitz, *Drawing* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 3.

24. Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, Kate Erin Dempsey, and Nina Bozicnik, “Drawn to Detail,” in *Drawn to Detail*, exh. cat. (Lincoln, MA: DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, 2008), 7.

25. Witness Jean Dubuffet’s proclamation in 1951 that painting is the most direct conduit to prelogical thought: “Painting is a language much more immediate, and, at the same time, much more charged with meaning. Painting operates through signs which are not abstract and incorporeal like words. The signs of painting are much closer to the objects themselves.” Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 196.

26. As Guy Debord summarized, “The Spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: ‘Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.’” Thesis 12, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994), online at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/tsots01.html> (accessed August 14, 2009).

27. Indeed, as James Faure Walker observes, paper and pencil are also technologies, just older ones. Walker, “Pride, Prejudice, and the Pencil,” in *Writing on Drawing*, 84–90.



**Raymond Pettibon, *No Title (The whole mansion)*, 1984**, pen and ink on paper, 14½ x 10½ in. (36.8 x 26.7 cm) (artwork © Raymond Pettibon; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

which relates equally to the return of craft in all artistic mediums since the 1990s. Yet drawing does not inherently reject technology. Rather, it evolves in relation to it, just as it evolves in relation to painting. In this context, Albert Oehlen's painting-collages generated using Paintbox software on a Texas Instruments laptop have as much if not more to tell us today as Cy Twombly's use of drawing as graffiti within painting.<sup>28</sup>

The work of many contemporary drawers, in fact, sits uneasily with notions of authentic expression. Raymond Pettibon, once an outsider artist working in a postpunk subculture, became an insider artist in the 1990s because of his work in drawing. Pettibon has no formal art training, but for years did homemade 'zines and album covers for rock bands like Black Flag, the hardcore band his brother Greg Ginn cofounded in southern California. His installations embody key elements of contemporary drawing: its fluid movement between writing and image-making, and its morphing of images into others in a breakdown of con-

28. See "Albert Oehlen in Conversation with Andrea Tarsia," in *I Will Always Champion Good Painting, I Will Always Champion Bad Painting*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Bristol: Arnolfini, 2006), II.

ceptual categories. Pettibon's installations incorporate a wide range of semi-abstract and conceptual strategies that recur in contemporary drawing. These include subcultural styles, based on comic books and music ephemera, drawing as diagram, drawing as bodily trace, drawing as a pattern or meditative process, drawing as decoration or marginalia, and drawing as writing (whether poetry, graffiti, literature, philosophy, diary, song lyric, announcement, or anything else). All of these together manifest drawing's important hybridity, a built-in resistance to categorization. Benjamin Buchloh describes Pettibon's radically heterogeneous practice as a "practice of counter-memory" resisting the normalizing and homogenizing tendencies of Enlightenment values of techno-rationalism.<sup>29</sup> Pettibon's drawings resist advertising, spectacle, cliché, propaganda, and all other ideological forms of communication. They register the contemporary collapse of the public and private spheres and the dramatic failure of social role models.

Pettibon's dystopian art is too acerbic to be called "neo-romantic," Dexter's term for the return to narrative, representational imagery, and fantasy in contemporary drawing.<sup>30</sup> In the 1980s, his work became more complex than the 'zine culture from which it arose, as it began to operate around the paradox of the basic desire for emotional expression constantly frustrated with the clichés which are its only means of communication in a media-saturated culture. Since the 1990s, his work has ironically become much more painterly, but remains driven by the deskilled gesture and the scribbled quotation. Pettibon produces drawings freehand, by copying, or by putting his paper on the TV screen and tracing. Pettibon's aesthetic of accumulation, a tactic (dating back to German Expressionism) of creating lots of images quickly so that they seem more direct, rejects one of drawing's critical strategies, slowness, in favor of another, delirious accumulation.

The critical dimension of Pettibon's practice comes from multiple directions: its origin outside the professional art world, its exploration of figures that are explicitly outmoded, ridiculous, or antisocial (such as Gumby and Goo, or Charles Manson), and its circulation of textual and pictorial fragments by means of a seemingly amateurish and fumbling hand. Nothing indicates when a phrase was written by the artist himself; in a post-postmodern art world obsessed with appropriated messages, even Pettibon's own statements appear as inauthentic appropriations. Buchloh argues that in Pettibon's drawings the sole possibility for actual critique of the industrial-capitalist image regime lies in the textual quotes incorporated on various sheets from the artist's range of postpunk, comic, vernacular, and high-art references.<sup>31</sup> Buchloh exhibits utter cynicism regarding the possibility of expressive or critical images to oppose the constant inundation of visual clichés in mass culture. Yet drawing's ability to create radically heterogeneous, spontaneously hybrid imagery spanning the linguistic and the visual is what allows it to subvert language not just in quoting or fragmenting it, as Pettibon does so thoroughly, but in transforming appropriated visual elements into a singular "text," withdrawn from the impersonal media of the public sphere in which the clichés circulate (that is, until the work is exhibited for a more specific, perhaps more exclusive contemporary-art public).

The character of Vavoom that frequently appears in Pettibon's work is a prime example of the cliché as expressive avatar. This 1950s character "emits gusts of deafening sound capable not only of stopping traffic but of sonically

29. Benjamin Buchloh, "Raymond Pettibon: Return to Disorder and Disfiguration," *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 51.

30. Dexter, "To Draw Is to Be Human," 6, 8–10.

31. See Buchloh, 50.

# WAVOOM

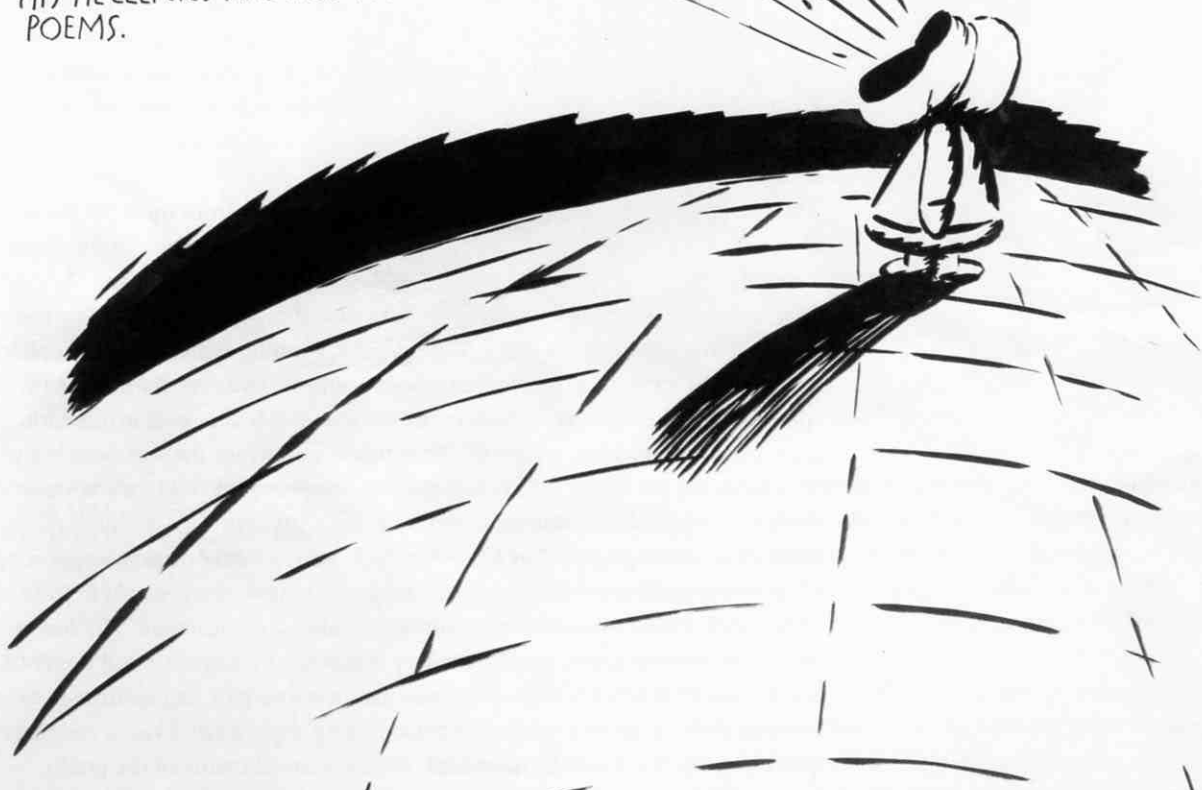
HE READS AND  
SOMETIMES WRITES  
ORATIONS IN LATIN.

HE IS NOW PUBLISHING  
A NEW VOLUME CONTAINING  
HIS HELLENICS AND ADDITIONAL NEW  
POEMS.

IN THE MORNING HE WENT  
OUT UNDER THE CYPRESSES TO  
WRITE LATIN VERSES, WHICH  
HE READ TO THE PROFESSOR  
AT BREAKFAST.

'WELL,' SAID FELIX WHEN  
HE HAD FINISHED, 'DON'T  
YOU THINK THAT'S EXACTLY  
WHAT CICERO WOULD  
HAVE SAID?'

'VERY MUCH,' SAID THE  
PROFESSOR, 'IF HE COULD.'



'WELL,' SAYS THE PRO- FESSOR, 'THAT'S EXACTLY  
WHAT I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT. I NEVER SAID SO PERHAPS, IN  
SO MANY WORDS, BUT IT WAS ALWAYS IN MY MIND.'





**Raymond Pettibon, *Untitled*, 2002**, mixed-media installation, installation view, Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany (artwork © Raymond Pettibon; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

**Raymond Pettibon, *Vavoom*, 1991**, ink on paper, 17 x 20 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches (43.2 x 53 cm) (artwork © Raymond Pettibon; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

protecting the weak.”<sup>32</sup> Vavoom is the ultimate punk icon: a figure of direct, angst-filled, modernist expression, pure in its absolute incoherence and (formerly) totally outside high culture, turned back on the world that expelled it. The rage Vavoom seems to encapsulate is, as Robert Storr describes, the rage of members of a post-1960s generation whose ideals had been betrayed, who realized that the North American neoliberal ideal of freedom as freedom-to-consume reduced freedom to little more than a dirty joke. Yet to convey this rage Pettibon does not imitate Vavoom in the name of originality, the way a modernist artist would imitate a child’s drawing, because Vavoom is already inauthentic, a funny little copy of the postwar cliché of the primal scream.<sup>33</sup> Instead, Pettibon accompanies his character’s antics with equally vapid phrases, such as “Vavoom speaks for me as well.” Pettibon does not speak directly; he speaks through fake avatars, in a kitsch language that belies both academic virtuosity and modernist originality.

While drawing may begin as private, in order to be recognized it must become public. It can easily be re-monumentalized, in two ways: as installation, where drawing manifests its inherently hybridity, or as overly finished, finely crafted product, for example in the work of prominent artists like Julie Mehretu and Matthew Ritchie. By the end of the 1990s Pettibon, too, was making large-scale installations, such as the one at Documenta 11 in 2002. Yet this particular monument contained multiple built-in resistances to reification. It epitomized the way Pettibon’s installations tend to abstract visual representation and language, revealing imagery as an ideologically charged semiotic system. Few events made the ideological nature of language more evident than those of September 11, 2001, after which pundits defined whole cultures reductively as good or evil.

32. Robert Storr, “You Are What You Read: Words and Pictures by Raymond Pettibon,” in *Raymond Pettibon* (New York: Phaidon, 2001), 50.

33. As in Barnett Newman: “Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void.” Newman, “The First Man Was an Artist,” in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (New York: Knopf, 1990), 158.



**Raymond Pettibon, *No Title (While he lives)*, 2006**, pen and ink on paper, 23¼ x 39¼ in. (59.1 x 101 cm) (artwork © Raymond Pettibon; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

**Raymond Pettibon, *No Title (It Is Still)*, 1991**, ink on paper, 22 x 17 in. (55.9 x 43.2 cm) (artwork © Raymond Pettibon; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

Planes and skyscrapers, Christian and Islamic imagery took on newly charged meanings, here thrown together without clear messages. Producer, consumer, author, and reader were put into a state of flux. Pettibon's installation further disrupted the association of the gesture with authentic expression by including artwork by the artist's young nephew, then six years old, as seen in a crayon image of a falling man and green buildings on a scrap of ripped newsprint.

Pettibon's installation revealed drawing not as a discourse of freedom, but as a medium haunted by the ideology of freedom, by the suppressed discourse of apocalyptic violence, and by the rejection of modern technology in both high modernism and religious fundamentalism. The installation made drawing into something monumentally important precisely because it refused the monumental, historic because it was incapable of presenting history (which is supposed to be objective). Drawing as history painting is even fuller of contradictions than drawing as gestural expression. If drawing is the new history painting, it is both diminutive and grandiose, individual and collective. It is crucial that history be represented as partial and subjective today, in order for viewers to internalize a sense that it directly involves us, that we are more than mere spectators: we have the power to shape it. For this task, drawing is uniquely suited.

## Whose Freedom?

An important paradigm shift occurred when the Abstract Expressionist formulation of expressive freedom became a politicized weapon of the cold war, despite the artists' own intentions.<sup>34</sup> Abstract Expressionism's refusal to engage in politics or marketing left it notoriously open to cooptation. Critics like Alfred Barr, Jr., and Meyer Schapiro maintained that abstraction embodied the profound social values of freedom, democracy, and internationalism.<sup>35</sup> By the end of the 1950s, however, the critics' views were officially ratified as cold-war ideologies, when the movement became institutionally recognized and the United States began actively promoting its cultural values abroad in exhibitions like the *New American Painting*, officially foregrounding Abstract Expressionism as an exemplar of Western freedom.<sup>36</sup>

During this time, competing versions of liberalism circulating in the 1940s had become a relatively coherent doctrine of postwar liberalism, exemplified by the "vital center" of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Schlesinger believed that individual freedom, with its accompanying existential anxiety, was the "lifeblood" of liberal democracy.<sup>37</sup> Schlesinger's position remains a touchstone of the shift from classic liberalism, the doctrine of civil liberties combined with government's resistance to economic and social interference, to cold-war liberalism, which combined the rhetoric of freedom with Keynesian principles of military and economic intervention abroad.<sup>38</sup> Personal freedom became an American idea aggressively marketed to the world in a manner anathema to any real notion of freedom.<sup>39</sup> Cold-war liberalism and its subsequent shift into neoliberalism went hand in hand with explicit limitations on freedom of expression, from McCarthyism in the 1950s to the surveillance campaigns of "homeland security" in the 2000s.

The co-opting of modernist freedom of expression into a politicized national rhetoric of freedom was apparent to Barr in 1958, and it should be recognized now, in the age of neoliberalism.<sup>40</sup> The modernist conception that freedom of expression depended on total autonomy from politics could no longer hold in the face of its political recuperation. Freedom of expression becomes even less meaningful today when the arts have become a marginalized sphere of entertainment, this time because a neoliberal economy enforces the separation of art and politics co-opted from modernism. Neoliberalism proposes that freedom of the economic markets and of individual consumption means freedom tout court. As David Harvey describes, this ideology depoliticized all claims to freedom by social-justice movements over the course of the 1970s as it consolidated its hold on political power.<sup>41</sup> This was the period of drawing's rise to prominence, and the shift from a conceptual and process-art use of drawing as oppositional to a predominant discourse of drawing as authentic-expressive blue-chip art. Today neoliberalism structures the field of art as a field of consumption, entertainment, or both, one that allows every freedom—as long as it is separated from political claims to freedom that may actually threaten the contemporary capitalist structure.

In the age of neoliberalism, projects which problematize the presumed link between freedom of expression and political freedom become crucial. Glenn Ligon's work draws sophisticated connections between the social implications of liberation and the role of personal expression in works that defy definitions of

34. See David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

35. See Meyer Schapiro, "The Value of Modern Art" (1948), in *Worldview in Painting—Art and Society: Selected Papers* (New York: Braziller, 1999), 133–57.

36. See Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 159.

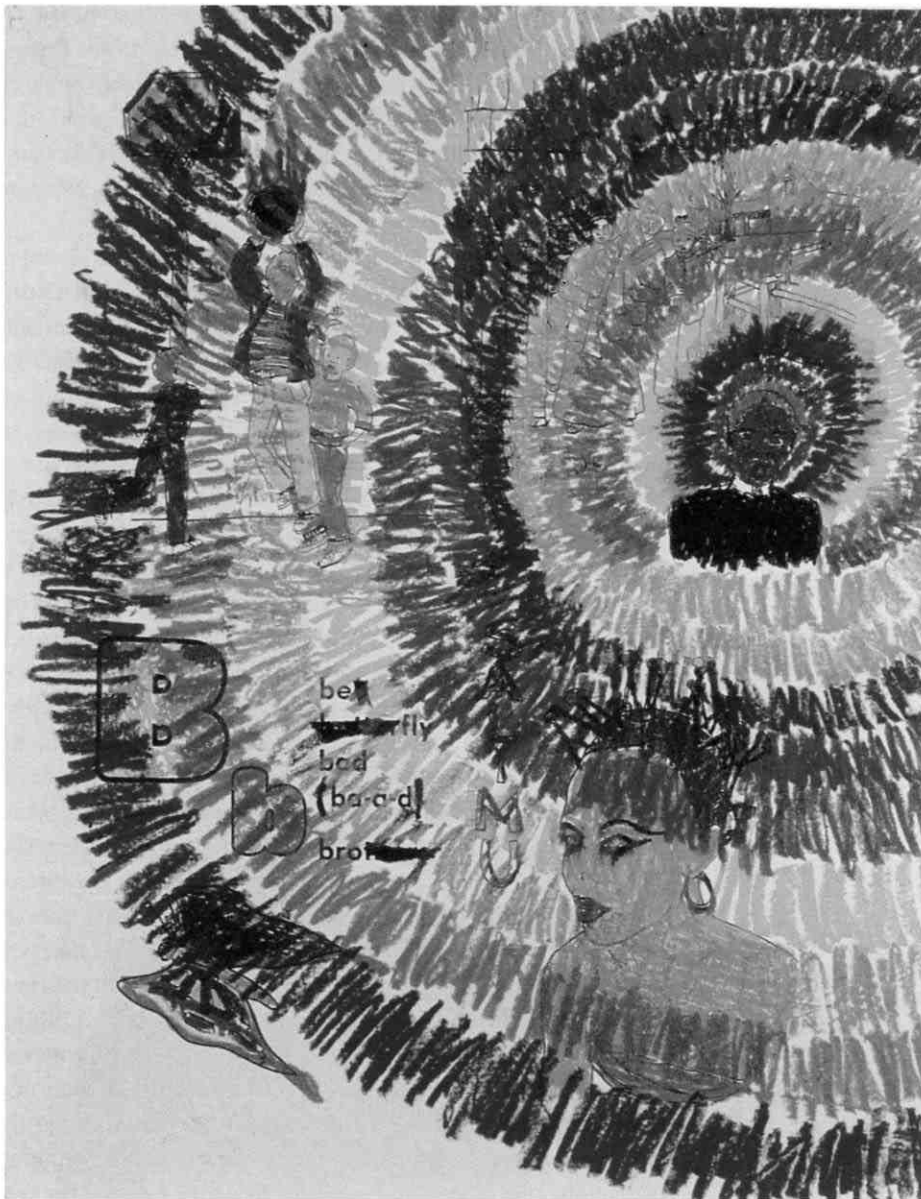
37. *Ibid.*, 127.

38. See Craven, 44.

39. See Nancy, 1–7.

40. Barr asserted that the Abstract Expressionists' concern with freedom was not a political position "even though their paintings have been praised and condemned as symbolic demonstrations of freedom in a world in which freedom connotes a political attitude." Alfred Barr, "The New American Painting as Shown in Eight European Countries, 1958–1959: Introduction," in *Defining Modern Art*, ed. Irving Sandler and Amy Newman (New York: Abrams, 1986), 231.

41. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.



**Glenn Ligon, *Boys with Basketball, Harriet Tubman, Salimu, Letter B #3*, 2001**, 23 x 16½ in. (58.4 x 41.9 cm) (artwork © Glenn Ligon; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

writing, drawing, and painting. In his *Coloring* series, Ligon provided urban children ages three to five with pages from coloring books printed in the late 1960s and 1970s to promote African-American culture, explaining to them who some of the famous people were: figures like Malcolm X, Othello, and Isaac Hayes. Ligon reproduced the children's colorings on a larger scale, first as drawings on paper, using oil stick or felt-tip pen over the coloring book images silkscreened in black. To make still larger canvases, Ligon painted the background white, silkscreened the images in black, and applied the drawn marks based on the children's drawings freehand (without the use of overhead projection), in oil crayon or water-based Flashe paint. The works on canvas differ from the drawings only in scale and support and thus maintain drawing's appearance of unfinished.<sup>42</sup> Ligon says the works "are about breaking free of constraints by using children's drawings

42. Ligon refers to the works on paper as "practice" rather than "sketches," reinforcing the idea that the paintings are, oxymoronicly, spontaneous copies, like drawings. Glenn Ligon, e-mail to the author, August 5, 2009.



**Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (Malcolm X)*, 2008,** pencil, acrylic, and Flashe on paper mounted on panel, framed, 11 ft. x 8 ft. 11 in. (335.3 x 271.8 cm) (artwork © Glenn Ligon; photograph provided by Regen Projects, Los Angeles)

and inhabiting their casual, indifferent relationship to the images and the whole project of liberation that those images were about in the first place.”<sup>43</sup> In his description of the series, Olukemi Ilesanmi predictably remarks that the children’s marks manifest a “freedom forever lost to the grown-up world,” while Ligon “allows himself the marvelous freedom to make spontaneous markings against the canvas.”<sup>44</sup> What the project really says about freedom of expression, however, is more complex.

What makes Ligon’s approach so contemporary is his exploration of the modernist, primitivist longing for authenticity in children’s drawings as a sort of experiment that questions what the adult artist seeks in them. The children’s drawings read as expressive by means of their dialogic relationship to the printed text and images: the kids give a basketball red flames or add a massive rainbow halo to Harriet Tubman, eradicating all other images on the page. Perhaps most poignantly in our racially polarized culture, they color people the “wrong” colors. Malcolm X becomes white with clown makeup, Isaac Hayes yellow. Are these children then free of the trap of racial identity? In a work that plays on equating skin color with coloring, the question itself becomes shallow. In fact it becomes meaningless, given that the project hinges on the active transmission of culture through imagery given to the children in school or at home.

Already heterogeneous, the coloring book drawings and texts were themselves copied from news photographs or other sources, chosen as exemplary of a specific culture. The imagery was mass-produced at a time when African-Americans were attempting to reclaim stereotyped identities as positive signifiers, to express freedom from the roles established by a white culture. The coloring books responded, perhaps, to Malcolm X’s strident claim, “We want freedom by any means necessary. We want justice by any means necessary. We want equality by any means necessary.”<sup>45</sup> The massive social claims for freedom in the 1960s directly acknowledged that freedom from slavery had turned out to be a false promise. They avowed an inherent distrust of the rhetoric of freedom by people who had lived the hypocrisy of that claim not just in 1863 or in 1964, but also in the present day. The coloring-book designs project a certain sincerity which is entirely related to their historical disconnect, their now-clichéd desire to create positive depictions of a marginalized people, rather than their gestural expressions. Ligon asks openly how young people today might view these relics of an earlier era of relative political certainties, a time when freedom could still be claimed with righteousness, without evoking neoliberalism’s false promises.

What is the children’s perspective on the liberation icons of their parent’s generation? As manifested in their drawings, it appears incoherent, scribbled, and colored wrong. Color becomes reduced to a meaningless effect like makeup, a shaky framework on which to base a culture’s whole social structure. Ligon’s interpretations of the children’s marks are copies which belie modernist notions of the original gesture. Nor are the children’s gestures themselves original, because they are so generalized, as clichéd patterns or anonymous scribbles, that their gestural expressivity is in effect minimal. The focus shifts from the modernist nostalgia for children’s freedom of expression to an acknowledgement of the role of education in shaping their understanding. Ligon frames the role of culture as that of transmitting claims for freedom as opposed to freedom itself, which cannot be transmitted. Ligon transforms the children’s “expressions”—

43. Ligon, in “A Conversation with Glenn Ligon,” in *Coloring: New Work by Glenn Ligon*, exh. cat., ed. Kathleen McLean (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001), 32.

44. Olukemi Ilesanmi, “Still Frames, Moving Pictures,” in *Coloring*, 25.

45. Malcolm X, “The Founding Rally of the OAAU,” in *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 37.



their following or not following of instructions—into copies, themselves clichés. In doing so, he does not destroy the possibility of expression, but rather reveals its cultural and technological mediation, ultimately to retrieve some of its oppositionality despite these conditions. The project multiplies the codes of authenticity to such a degree that the concept becomes reframed as a thoroughly historical discourse, revealing the complex way authenticity appears as an after-effect. Authenticity is a longing that manifests in a particular historical context, rather than an essence.

The rise of drawing makes clear that while freedom of expression is far from universal, the longing for it is. While Western modernism once saw in drawing a simple and immediate technique that could spontaneously externalize our inner thoughts, the contemporary understanding of subjectivity as contingent, permeated by clichés, and mediated by material technologies makes it impossible to view drawing in the same way today. It may be tempting, on the other hand, to cynically posit that drawing's very rise to prominence and commercial success will inexorably sap its criticality and leave it a luxury commodity just like painting, with all the burden of history which that implies. Yet painting never died anyway, neither in form nor in critical purpose. Painting remains vibrant in part through the impetus of drawing, continually finding new ways to complicate its marginalization and social exclusivity. There is enough possibility for experimentation in drawing's inherent heterogeneity and its history of marginal perspectives, envisioning alternatives, and embodying sheer potential to ensure its continuing vibrancy, as a dialogue with painting, history, the physical and social body, thought, and expression itself.

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