

## Drawing as Intimation (or Infatuations with Lines, Contours and Shades)

Ernst Van der Wal <sup>1\*</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on drawing as gesture and bodily intervention – in specific moments where the process of drawing closer, drawing out, or drawing in has significance. While specific attention is paid to drawing as scopio-somatic practice (that is, as a visual tool for illustrating, marking and mapping out, plotting and delineating), this article also nurtures other etymological roots, such as drawing as that which impels someone or something to pull (move, stir, sweep), withdraw (drain, transfer, absorb, siphon, bleed) and attract (mesmerise, invite, desire). At the hand of select visual artists, including Katherine Bull, Tim Knowles, Yayoi Kusama, Hentie van der Merwe and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, this essay explores how closeness between different bodies (the self and the other, the human and non-human) and different substrates (be it parchment, pigment or skin) is facilitated through drawing. Particular attention is paid to drawings that dwell at the intersection of affection, sexuality and disease, while ideas surrounding unlicensed looking and unreciprocated intimacy are also explored.

### THE FIRST LINE: AN INTRODUCTION TO DEVIL DRAWINGS AND USEFUL DEFINITIONS

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Drawing is such an illicit affair. Despite its simplicity, or perhaps because of it, it nurtures those desires that often lie in excess of words.

I see, I dream, I desire, I draw.

I draw too much: I'm around 4, perhaps 5 years old, not in school yet, and I draw obsessively. I draw the devil, over and over, in blue, in black, in red. He carries a pitchfork, he has a pair of horns, he has a massive penis. He has everything you expect in a devil. I am drawn to him, I cannot stop myself. Upon discovery, my mother destroys all my devil drawings. She burns them. Draw flowers, she tells me, and I do. For a while. But there's a life in images, whether they come from my own hand or the world around me, that just wants to be explored and touched. I find an illustration of the male reproductive system with a cross-section view of the penis in an old version of the *Reader's Digest Family Health Guide*. I imagine a grown man sliced open from the groin up, carefully redrawn for the viewer's pleasure. And then there is a small photograph of a bodybuilder printed in a local newspaper. I remove the page that carries his image, fold it up, and keep it under my pillow.

Looking, drawing, burning, cutting, folding.

My attraction to drawing also springs from its deep and by now quite twisted etymological roots. These are roots I often turn to. Drawing is, first and foremost, a gesture – a process of drawing closer, drawing out, or drawing in by means of some bodily or technological intervention. We draw to represent – we illustrate, we mark, we map and we plot. But drawing can also be that which impels someone or something to pull (to move, stir, or sweep), to withdraw (to drain, transfer, absorb, siphon, or bleed) and to attract (to mesmerise, summon, or tempt). Drawing is a force that compels, it is the grounds for action, it sets the scene for desire. As Michael Taussig maintains:

to draw is to apply pen to paper. But to draw is also to pull on some thread, pulling it out of its knotted tangle or skein, and we also speak of drawing water from a well. There is another meaning too, as when

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<sup>1</sup> Stellenbosch University, SOUTH AFRICA

\*Corresponding Author: [evdw@sun.ac.za](mailto:evdw@sun.ac.za)

I say 'I was drawn to him or her' (...) Drawing is thus a depicting, a hauling, an unravelling, and being impelled toward something or somebody. (Taussig, 2011: xii)

For John Berger (2005: 3), drawing is *discovery*, a point of entry into this and other worlds.<sup>1</sup> For Emma Dexter (2005), drawing is a *return*, a drive towards reconnection with personal and shared pasts.<sup>2</sup> Carrol Clarkson (2014: 1) takes a different course of action by emphasising drawing's capacity for creating boundaries – drawing, Clarkson argues, *marks a limit*.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Jacques Derrida (1990) is taken with drawing's ability to make the human subject *lose sight* of the world,<sup>4</sup> while Michael Newman (2003: 95) posits drawing as a sign of *withdrawal* that, 'with each stroke, re-enacts desire and loss'.<sup>5</sup>

'When do we draw?', asks Hélène Cixous and Catherine MacGillivray (1993: 92). 'When we were little ... As soon as we draw, (as soon as, following the pen, we advance into the unknown, hearts beating, mad with desire) we are little, we do not know, we start out avidly, *we're going to lose*' (*my emphasis*, 1993: 92). Drawing makes us little; it makes us small in the face of that which escapes us. Sometimes we draw things closer, sometimes we draw away. Grasping and losing are both part of our experience of drawing.

I am taken with the multiplicity these definitions offer, but also the weight that each carries in our everyday lives. I draw the face of someone I love. I draw blood from a vein. I draw my own breath. Every moment I am drawing in a world that is drawing with me. If I do not draw, I die.

When approaching this essay, I wanted to write as I draw, or as close to it as I could imagine; being attentive to the way that I move from one surface to another, my pen travels, my eyes wander. Some lines, be it of mark or argument, intersect and cross, while others fade as they move closer to some edge, be it of thought, concentration, or interest. Sometimes I press harder, sometimes I touch lightly. Among the arcs and trajectories, I look at the work of various artists, including Katherine Bull, Tim Knowles, Yayoi Kusama, Hentie van der Merwe and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who have all used drawing to think about the human body and the technologies and rituals that sustain it. I also turn to my own relationship with drawing and the way I have used it to think about intimacy, care, and illness.

The wider context, or expanded field,<sup>6</sup> within which I draw sets the scene for this paper. At the hand of my own art practice, as well as the work of other creative practitioners, I think about closeness between different bodies (the self and the other, the human and non-human) and different substrates (be it parchment, pigment, or membrane). Three important concepts guide my thinking and recur throughout this essay, namely drawing and its grasp of

time, proximity, and placement.

<sup>1</sup> Also see Anita Taylor (2008: 9), who thinks of drawing as a world-building exercise that, 'through signs and symbols, by mapping and labelling our experience (...) enable[s] us to discover through seeing – either through our own experience of seeing, observing and recording, or through the shared experience of looking at another's drawn record of an experience. Drawing may have a transitory and temporal relationship with the world or it may provide a record of lasting permanence. It may be propositional, preparatory, visionary, imaginative, associative, factual, generative, transformative or performative' (2008: 9).

<sup>2</sup> For Dexter (2005), the carnal desire to draw speaks to a return to some origin, be it our own childhood or our human ancestry. 'Drawing has a primal and elemental character: it enjoys a mythic status as the earliest and most immediate form of image making', with its roots being 'evidently archaic' (Dexter, 2005: 6, 8). Madelon Vriesendorp (2016: 10) echoes some of these sentiments in her definition of drawing as 'a universal, formal language. It's the hieroglyphs of communication'.

<sup>3</sup> Writing in the context of transitional justice, Clarkson (2014: 1) expands on G.K Chesterton's idea that art and morality share a desire to 'draw the line somewhere' by arguing that 'the act of drawing [a] ... line is an art as much as it is a question of morality. A line drawn reconfigures space: It divides yet juxtaposes two entities: it connects two distant points. Figuratively, it includes some and excludes others; it marks a boundary between standing for and standing against, or it traces a path along which places are invested with significance, words are understood, and lives are lived'.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida (1990) claims that drawing leaves the artist blind – the very process has the psychological effect of rendering the human subject sightless, searching, and groping, Derrida maintains. As an intransitive act, drawing allows the human subject to find themselves lost in the act of drawing, to draw *a* world into being that is not *the* world. Drawing has the potential to suspend the tenuous claim to reality that representational media often make, exactly because of its immersive and idiosyncratic mark-making properties (also see Van Elphen, 2009: 60–61).

<sup>5</sup> Also see Pamela Lee (1999: 31), who argues that drawing is bound to a double time, being both a trace and a leftover, offering 'a clue as to its formation' and being 'a remainder left behind'.

<sup>6</sup> I use the term 'expanded field' to refer to the idea of practicing and reading a discipline, such as drawing, through the lens of another. I engage with the expanded field as an interdisciplinary practice that 'challenges, blends, reframes and expands conventional (...) disciplines and methodologies' (The Kiosk, 2010), which is a central tenet of the art practices I discuss in this paper.



**Figure 1.** Katherine Bull. *Drawing Breath*. 2020.

## THE SECOND LINE: DRAWING WITH OTHERS

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I start drawing the second line of this paper thinking about intimacy, specifically the intimacy shared by a group of strangers. They might be sitting together in a room while attending a conference, or waiting in line while doing their daily shopping. I imagine these strangers inevitably *drawing on each other*, each inhaling the exhalation of someone else. If their breath left any visible trace, they'd be ever-expanding drawings, with lines running from one pair of lungs to another.

There's a bodily democracy to this drawing, as humans breathe indiscriminately. But also not, as we make decisions on who gets to breathe and who fights for air. We restrain, we choke, we strangle. We all draw, but we do not draw the same. Our breath is invisible, but inevitably marked by, inter alia, race, gender and sexuality; by colour, by comportment, by relation. Our breath is regulated – this drawing has parameters and endings and repercussions.<sup>7</sup> As Achille Mbembe (*my emphasis*, 2020) holds, there's a universal right to breath, a fundamental right to existence that belongs to a global 'community of earthly inhabitants, humans *and other*'. This right should not be confiscated, Mbembe warns, neither should it be imagined as a purely human right. Hence, the need to reclaim and rethink the lungs of the world, to think about everyone and everything that breathes.

Inspire, respire, expire. Drawing on breath is a proposal towards continuity, but it also holds us accountable. The burden of contamination, the fear of what my own breath carries, made drawing difficult over the last two years. I kiss someone, I talk to my mother, she gets COVID – I cannot help but draw some conclusion. Another illicit drawing – this time not of a devil, but of a virus. I have a friend who drew breath in the same way, his mother dies. Be it with paper or air, these drawings carry the weight of substance and substrate. They are heavy.

The cathartic quality of drawing is poignantly demonstrated in the work of Katherine Bull, whose series *Drawing Breath* (2020) – see [Figure 1](#) – speaks about forging connections and celebrating life in the face of loss.

Dedicated to her grandmother whom she lost to COVID, Bull sees her drawings as a place of solace. As objects, they are the residue left after each concentric movement, each departure and return, each attempt to remember. As process, drawing becomes both commemorative act and meditation. This performance situates the drawing – of breath and of mark – as the nexus of presence. Armed with a pencil, each hand travels its own route, with two circles slowly emerging on the paper, growing stronger with each lap. These circles mark the outer reaches of her arms – this is as far as she can go. The resultant shapes remind me of eyes, seeds or lungs; of things that grow or belong together. Here, drawing is a slow, reiterative act that is dedicated to life. It testifies, it encircles, it embraces.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I am reminded of George Floyd's last words, 'I can't breathe'. In Nigel Gibson's (2020) forceful interrogation of police brutality in America, he turns to breath as a coded signifier of inequality. At the hand of Frantz Fanon's concept of 'combat breathing', Gibson demonstrates how experiences of suffocation, imprisonment and smothering mark the lives of those living in fear of state-sanctioned violence.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy's seminal *The Pleasure of Drawing* (2013) emphasises drawing as the formation and medium of desire. For Nancy, drawing activates the 'gestural body' (2013: 39) that performs and inscribes its own presence by means of rhythmic mark-making processes. Drawing often operates by means of somatic rhythms, Nancy maintains, which tap into a vast libidinal economy. This sentiment resonates with Bull's own drawing practice in which the rhythmic qualities of drawing facilitates a range of experiences and desires to come to the fore, ranging from grief to affection.

Bull's work reminds me that drawing can play an important role in sustaining the care and affection that we, by necessity or choice, often experience from some distance. We intimate – we state, disclose, share and show – by means of the image, which forms part of the larger circulation and consumption of affective media. Intimacy is not only the result of some productive coupling or serendipitous moment, but it is also a form of expression that has its own aesthetic qualities and performative expectations. Intimacy is crafted, be it for oneself or for the sake of someone or something else. As much as we'd like it to be spontaneous and direct, intimacy is often encountered in a repeated, rehearsed and/or represented format. It is geared towards the private *and* the public, and we draw on a wide range of media to explore and communicate our secret and shared affections.

As Lauren Berlant (*my emphasis*, 2021: 93) reminds us, '*the intimate is everywhere*: you bring it everywhere and it circulates everywhere. It registers as intensities of attachment and recognition, inferred and explicit, that pass across people, groups and movements'. Meanwhile, Emma Dexter (*my emphasis*, 2005: 6) claims that:

*drawing is everywhere*. We are surrounded by it – it is sewn into the warp and weft of our lives (...) It is the means by which we can understand and map, decipher, and come to terms with our surroundings as we leave marks, tracks, or shadows to mark our passing (...) breath on the window, vapor trails of a plane across the sky, lines traced by a finger in the sand – we literally draw in and on the material world.

Intimacy moves, registers and marks. Drawing enfolds, traces and tracks. In both drive and outcome, the similarity between the two is striking.

I also see this circular, affective register in the work of Tony Orrico (2016), who treats drawing as a commitment to the human body as sensory instrument. In these performative drawing exercises, his body reads the surface of the paper, it motors and moves in response to what it feels, and its sensitivity to stimuli translates into marks that speak of movement and disco very.

This act of reaching out need not be limited to the human and its own corporeal delineations, but can also extend to non-human others. I recall Mbembe's invitation to think of both the human and non-human lungs of the world. I see this in the work of Tim Knowles, who draws with trees. By attaching pens to branches and then placing sheets of paper under these mark-making appendages, the life and motion of a tree, as well as moments of stillness and rest, are slowly recorded. 'Like signatures', Knowles explains, 'each drawing reveals something about the different qualities and characteristics of the various trees as they sway in the breeze: the relaxed, fluid line of an oak; the delicate, tentative touch of a larch; a hawthorn's stiff, slightly neurotic scratches' (Knowles, 2008).

I also think of Cameron Robbins, who created a solar-powered machine to draw the weather. The strength of the sun, the presence of a cloud, the fall of a shadow – this machine bears witness to the world around it. 'A bright day (...) makes the pen fly across the paper, forming dense shapes like flocks of starlings or ink-dot explosions. Overcast conditions tend to produce slower swirls and loops' (Robbins cited in Munro, 2017). He draws the world around him by drawing *on* the world around him. We see a machine facilitating a slow, intimate relationship between human and non-human actors. Drawing is the trace of this extension that reaches from the human to other environments, bodies or forces.

But drawing can also reach in to expose that which makes us human. I think of Chloe Piene's intimate drawings of masturbating women. Her work takes a pleasure that is mostly private, that belongs to (and is often geared to) the self, and brings it into public, or shared, fruition. The lines of her drawings share the 'jerky, compulsive rhythm' of the masturbator, 'urging herself towards release (...) There's a physical energy that's just on the edge of exploding, the tremor of a self in search of dissolution' (Schwabsky, 2005: 256). Piene's work shows the incredible intimacy of drawing, especially when complex private and public divides are being toyed with.

Yayoi Kusama's drawings also speak of such an expansion and dissolution, albeit in a radically different way. Kusama is well-known for her obsession with dots and for the way she slowly reproduces each of them by hand. In this instance, drawing is remedy, as every dot bears testimony to Kusama's will to survive; to understand and embrace her own mental illness (Davis, 2017). But these drawings are also remedial<sup>9</sup> in their capacity for connecting her to the world around her. 'Dots can't stay alone, like the communicative life of people', Kusama says.

Two and three and more polka dots become movement. Our earth is only one polka dot among the million stars in the cosmos. Polka dots are a way to infinity. When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment. (Kusama cited in *Christie's*, 2019)

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<sup>9</sup> While this essay is mostly oriented towards arts-based applications of drawing, it is important to acknowledge that drawing has long been used as both diagnostic and remedial device. The onset and severity of both Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease, for example, are often screened by means of drawing exercises (Zham *et al.*, 2012; Wolf-Klein *et al.*, 1989; Kirk and Kertesz, 1991), while HIV/AIDS education and treatment campaigns have often turned to drawing as a pedagogic and therapeutic tool (Mutonyi *et al.*, 2011; Govender *et al.*, 2011), to name but a few examples of drawing's remedial application.

Again, we see how drawing encircles, accentuates, expands, and suspends.  
Like breath, it connects us to lungs that are not our own.

## THE THIRD LINE: DRAWING THE OTHER IN

We open up, we show ourselves, we invite the stranger in.

I'd like to spend some time with the drawings of Hentie van der Merwe, as his work speaks in interesting ways to his interpretation of intimacy, especially when it comes to the idea of being intimate with a stranger.

Exhibited under the exhibition title *Shooting Selves* in 2020, these drawings are inspired by photographs that Van der Merwe found on blogs and websites where men share images of themselves with a larger public audience. The original photographs were sent into the world as nude selfies, all taken with a cell phone camera. While the original photographs focus on the naked body, Van der Merwe is more interested in the face. As he explains,

I am fascinated by the way that they look at themselves, the way their gaze is angled with their eyes slightly downcast. It almost seems as if they are looking *through* themselves, as they are looking at but also with a screen when they engage with their own bodies. It is as if they have become lost in the image and the process required to produce it. (Van der Merwe, 2022)

Van der Merwe's engagement with the medium shows how drawing can change and even subvert the time of the original, as it requires a form of mediation (or meditation, perhaps) that takes longer than photography to produce an image. It takes care and patience. *Untitled (selfshot #1)* – see [Figure 2](#) – slowly came into being over a period of ten years. Van der Merwe started working on this piece in 2010 and returned to it every now and then until it was finished in 2020. Drawing was at the root of this decade-long intimacy with a photographic image that was produced in a second. As Van der Merwe (2022) also explains,

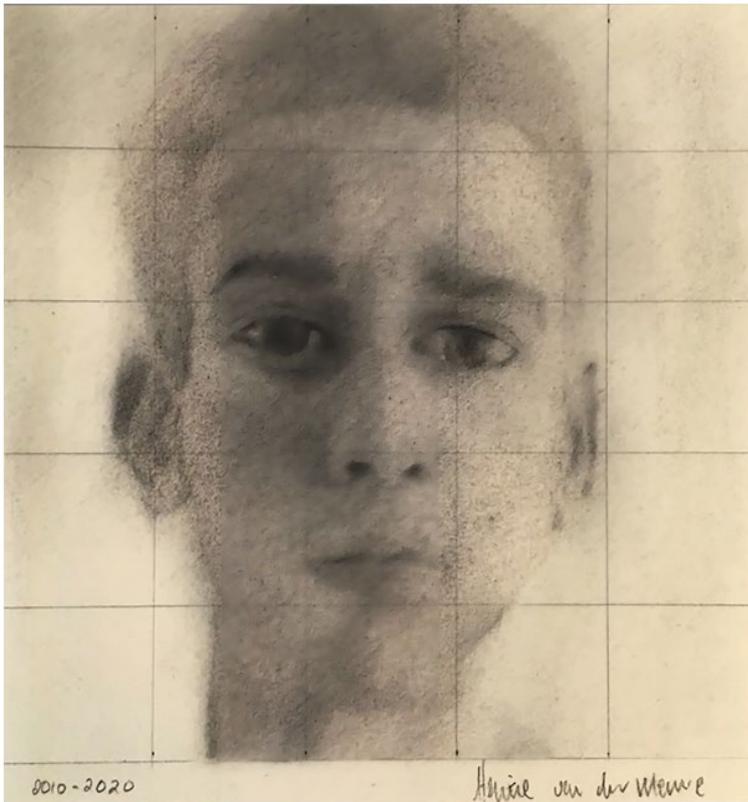
in my own reworking and redrawing of these images, photographic detail gets lost and it becomes impossible to identify them as individuals. These are not the same public documents anymore. My fixation on the eyes also means that I don't focus on the body, per se, or the sex of the subject. I want to spend time with their faces more than anything else – it's a slow process of intimacy. With their downcast eyes, it almost seems as if they are waiting for a lover. They are playing with themselves while playing with another.

It also takes time (the time of the collector, the archivist, the scavenger) to find the right image to draw. 'I work through a lot of photographs to find those that trigger some response of intimacy,' Van der Merwe explains. 'It's usually some vulnerability on the part of the subject. Sometimes I return to the same person, again and again. I redraw them when I'm compelled to do so' (2022). I'm reminded of Sara Ahmed's (2014: 145) view of the body 'as a congealed history of past approaches', as the cumulative (and ever-becoming) result of our orientation 'towards and away from others'. Van der Merwe's drawings are in many ways a slowly hatched and crafted return to a site of desire – here, a vulnerable, anticipating body – that has long sparked his interest.

This desire to spend time with a stranger's face also speaks of a complex engagement with proximity. The concept of 'stranger intimacy'<sup>10</sup> immediately resonates, especially in our contemporary environment where sharing economies, affective technologies and screen-based interactions are of growing importance. In Van der Merwe's work, overt reference is made to the process of sharing oneself with strangers by means of the image. We see some form of intimacy at play, albeit intimacy without proximity.<sup>11</sup> Being at hand but also stretching beyond our tactile world, the screen facilitates forms of desire and connection that allow for the suturing – the stitching and drawing – of self into the fabric of imagined communities and fantasy worlds (Bowen, 2008: 569–570). While overtones of

<sup>10</sup> Here, I draw on Regan Koch and Sam Miles' (2020: 1) definition of stranger intimacy as 'a potentially generative form of encounter involving conditional relations of openness among the unacquainted, through which affective structures of knowing, providing, befriending or even loving are built'. As these authors maintain, online platforms and screen-based interactions allow for intimacy and trust to be negotiated between strangers in multiple ways, with 'digital technologies (...) multiplying and extending the times and spaces where people engage in dialogue and exchange' (Koch and Miles, 2020: 2; also see Bialski, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> I find Jacob Metcalf's (2008) usage of the term 'intimacy without proximity' helpful when thinking about certain human encounters with non-human species that occur across some distance. While I'm speaking to screen-based proximities in this particular context, the concept of intimacy without proximity has bearing on the visualising technologies we use to encounter human (or non-human) others, but it also relates to our interpretation of disease and infection – an idea I return to later.



**Figure 2.** Hentje van der Merwe. *Untitled (selfshot #1)*. 2010–2020.

predaciousness, lurking and voyeurism often mark screen-based sexual encounters (Bowen, 2008: 574), Van der Merwe's drawings seem to do (or *want* to do) something else. We see how a carnal encounter with digital and online technologies, which stand at the root of the photographic images that Van der Merwe collects, feeds into a different temporal and spatial existence. The frank immediacy of the original photograph is conveniently suspended in this translation, to such a degree that it seems as if the drawings bring into softer focus a reality that can seem quite harsh and glaring. Drawing as process trades the evidentiary value of photography for something hazy, ambiguous, perhaps less disposable and in some ways, more intimate.

*We aren't photographs anymore*, these drawings seem to whisper, as they simultaneously acknowledge and distance themselves from their photographic source.

In terms of placement, Van der Merwe uses an important device, namely the grid, as a means to plot the drawing, but also as a reference to the screen. As he explains,

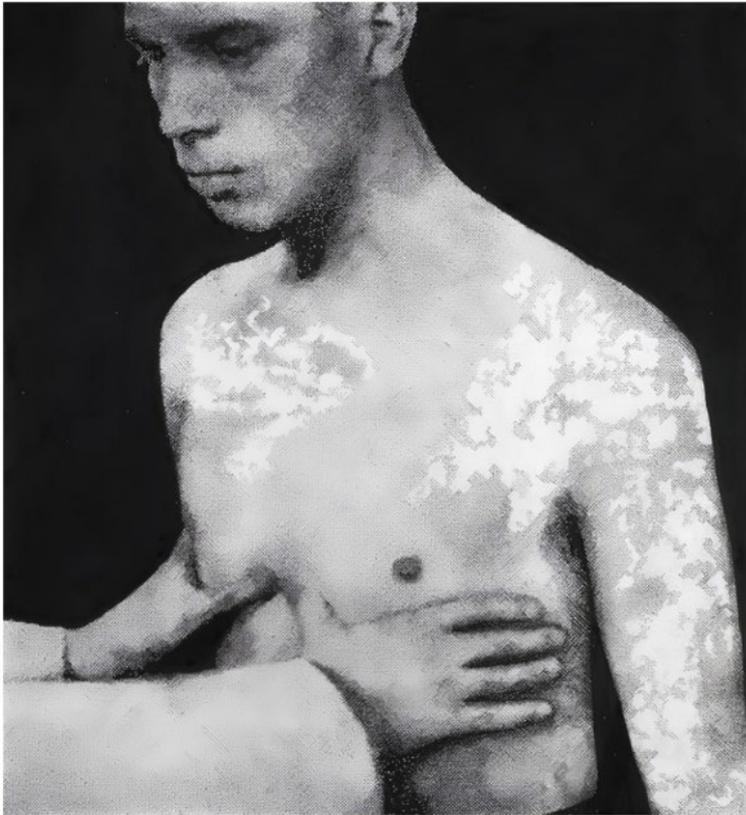
the grid is a visual placing mechanism that divides a surface into more manageable parts. The grid is also a means to initially place the image. Some transformation occurs in the drawing process when more organic marks react to and break with the grid. (2022)

The lingering presence of the grid in the final work seems to draw the viewer to the surface or the skin of the paper. It pulls you back to the surface, you can't lose yourself in the illusion. It is as if the grid is hanging between you and the subject, like a surrogate for the screen of the computer or the phone. In the words of Van der Merwe (2022),

we live in an era in which people are constantly involved in the production and manipulation of images of themselves. Our images are shared on grid-like structures (be it through apps, websites and social media networks) where images are ordered according to and accessed via a grid. It's a scheme for plotting and lying out, but also a means to plug in and consume, to carve up and make something legible in a very specific manner.

At the same time, Van der Merwe also sees the grid as a highly personal and emotive device. As he explains, the grid

is one of the first ways we engage with drawing. When I was young, I told my mother that I wanted to make art, and I asked her to show me how to do so. She took a photograph of Donald Duck, placed a grid over it, and used that to enlarge and redraw the original. And I thought, 'wow, that's amazing!'. So,



**Figure 3.** Ernst van der Wal. *Untitled*. 2015.

to me, it also has that emotional connection to my mother who taught me how to use it (Van der Merwe, 2022).

There is an intimacy to the drawing process and a form of return that the grid facilitates.

It is interesting how the very grid that calls the memory of a mother to the fore also holds the image of a naked man staring into a screen.

## **THE FOURTH LINE: DRAWING MYSELF OUT**

My own drawings share many of these concerns with time, proximity and placement, while I also find myself returning to my childhood obsessions with image-making when my experience of duration and closeness was somewhat different.

I am still drawn to photographs that appear in newspapers and medical textbooks, especially those printed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century – a time when they seemed to carry the most weight as indexical markers of ‘truth’. I collect these images obsessively, waiting for some spark that triggers an affective response, or that thrills me. One such example is a drawing that was inspired by a photograph that appeared in a book on skin diseases – see [Figure 3](#).

The original photograph, like most of those I use as reference, is about three centimetres in width, which makes for a small, intimate image. At first glance and from a distance, the dotscreen method that is used for printing such images gives the impression of a seamless image, of a smooth tone and an intact body. Images printed in this way don’t immediately reveal their secrets. Yet, when taking a magnifying glass to such an image, the viewer will see thousands of dots of varying sizes running along a gridded network. It is upon this structure that the image is suspended like skin.

My own drawing practice relies on finding the grid in each original image. I study it, try and understand it, and then I blow it up. I enlarge the original by resizing the grid, and then slowly start populating it with dots, each drawn by hand, carefully positioned to give the appearance of something made by a machine. Inevitably, marks

and misalignments occur, so while the feeling of a printed interface is there, my own hand is always visible. One cannot escape being human, after all.

Van der Merwe and I share an interest in the potential of drawing to refigure the found image. We both use drawing to interpret and distort photographs we encounter in books or on the internet. In many ways, these drawings are vehicles for reshaping the time – the historical contingency – of the original photograph. This resonates with Laura Allen and Luke Caspar's (2016: 69) argument that 'drawing can become a site for deviating and challenging the historical, whether through imaginary flights away from the past or the methodological re-analysis of it. Drawing can serve as an analytical tool to reveal the real history of spaces, its inherent subjectivity offering a different means of inquiry to the photograph or text'. It is important to consider that photography and drawing are both marked by complex entanglements and conflicts, especially within scientific discourse where they have long served empiricist aspirations. Both media have been used in the search for and codification of 'knowledge', 'order' and 'truth', albeit in different ways.<sup>12</sup> While the original images that I study and interpret are steeped in this tradition, it is in their redrawing that fissures appear. They become fragile, I would argue, once they are exposed for the constructed things they are.

I find Michael Taussig's reflection on the relationship between photography and drawing especially compelling in this context. Drawing, Taussig (2011: 22) holds, 'is like a conversation with the thing drawn, likely to involve prolonged and total immersion'. Drawings *enclose*: while 'photography is a taking, the drawing is a making (...) a photograph stops time, while a drawing encompasses it' (Taussig, 2011: 21). Drawing solicits a corporeal engagement with the world, an 'intimacy (...) between the drawer and the drawn' (Taussig, 2011: 21), that *takes care* (commitment, engagement, time) in a way that photographs do not, or that they do differently.

Dot by dot, line by line, the drawing shown in [Figure 3](#) took three years to complete. I probably spent more time trying to understand this face than those of many people I've claimed to love.

Similar to Van der Merwe's work, these drawings take time – a time that isn't instant or easy. As Elsy Lahner (2015: 19) contends, the time that drawings often require sets them apart from the instantaneous and cursory, as they call for a commitment to the mark and its making. But the time at play is also of a different nature – this is a queer time, I would argue, a nonlinear time that resonates with José Esteban Muñoz's work on queer futurity.<sup>13</sup> As Muñoz (2009: 28) maintains, queer time is a temporal project that is sensitive towards those relational formations that refute the 'autonaturalising' trajectory of 'straight time'<sup>14</sup> by 'not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now (...) the purpose of such temporal maneuvers is to wrest ourselves from the present's stupefying hold.' For Muñoz, queer time is anticipatory, a forward-dawning futurity that lies in a burning anticipation, a critical desire, to travel 'beyond the limited vista of the here and now', beyond the 'hopeless heterosexual maps of the present where futurity is indeed the province of normative reproduction' (2009: 22, 28). In many ways coming as a posttraumatic response to the AIDS crisis, Muñoz's work is a forceful reminder that time, like breath, is not shared equally.

An awareness of time – of the ways in which it is taken, claimed, and represented – is central to my own drawing process. In this regard, I find E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (2011) engagement with queer time *as practice* particularly helpful. Queer time, they propose, speaks to the 'temporal complexities between life – as a becoming, as a dynamic process of an individual's vital and embodied engagement with the environment – and language – as reading and writing, narrating, or analysis – [which] have the power to *open up innovative forms of intimacy* that betoken not only new modes of becoming, but new ways of affiliation with others and alternative modes of transmission' (*my emphasis*, 2011: 13). In my own experience, drawing offers the possibility of a queer time that is intimately engaging with and refiguring a past whilst being attentive to the present (a present in which I am *here, now, drawing*), and hopeful for a future.

Intertwined with this experience of time is my awareness of *proximity*. While I was drawing the male subject seen in [Figure 3](#), for example, I became aware of what felt like the slow erosion of distance and time. I was spending time with *him*, with 'him' being a man I was simultaneously observing in a photograph and slowly teasing into existence on a piece of paper. The drawing started with his face, from which his body spread like a slowly

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<sup>12</sup> See Ann Thomas (1997) on the art-science intersection of photography and drawing. As Thomas demonstrates, both media have been used in the quest for laying bare and copying the seen world, especially in the life sciences where botanical, zoological and anatomical reproductions are of great importance.

<sup>13</sup> Muñoz's seminal *Cruising Utopia* (2009) speaks of the need to develop a critical methodology of hope – in his words, a 'queer utopian hermeneutics' – that questions the heteronormative constraints of the past and the present by reimagining and reigniting the future.

<sup>14</sup> Muñoz specifically speaks of 'straight time' as the normative spectacle of reproductive heterosexuality that promises a future only for those who participate in its rituals. In their reading of Muñoz's work, Jack Halberstam (2005: 20) maintains that queer time offers a specific 'temporality that emerges (...) once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance (...) [of] straight time'. Also see Stephen Moore *et al.* (2018) on the conflict between queer and normative temporalities.



**Figure 4.** Ernst van der Wal. *Untitled*. 2020.

unfurled map. Eyes, nose, lips, ears, neck, nipples. However, as the drawing progressed I became increasingly aware of another presence, that of the doctor whose hands and starched white cuffs I was also drawing into existence. I was not alone – as I was drawing, I rested my hand on a hand that already rested. I have come upon a scene of intimacy that has, in fact, already begun.

I started to imagine myself being part of a complex triangulation where different characters were touching and being touched, where various skins – those of patient, doctor and artist – were rubbing against one another by means of a paper-based substrate. A feeling of unease also became pervasive as this drawing progressed, as I thought about the touch of a stranger whose hands rest uncomfortably on the skin, like the cold hands of a doctor who invites himself to touch on the basis of his own dispassionate, though caring, disposition. These are hands that touch to know. Subsequently, this drawing's allusion to skin-on-skin contact has taken me on other trajectories, leading, for example, to Sara Ahmed's (2014) work on the politics of comfort and care. In her poignant description of queer discomfort, Ahmed speaks of 'an acute awareness of the surface of one's body, which appears *as* surface, when one cannot inhabit the social skin, which is shaped by some bodies, and not others' (*author's emphasis*, 2014: 148). The skin is both a personal and a social substrate, Ahmed holds; it is a surface that is sometimes more visible *as such* and, as a result, can feel more disorienting.

From this, my drawings have turned to various other faces and surfaces, such as those of planets, moons, viruses and bacteria – see **Figure 4**. These are still intimate encounters with bodies, albeit non-human ones. An interest in proximity, specifically those forms of attachment that are non-reciprocal or sometimes even violent, lies at the centre of these drawings. While working on these images, I increasingly tortured the surface of the paper by means of erasure, cutting and scarring. At times, these faults and blemishes reminded me of a spreading disease, of something creeping by its own volition into and onto the human body. I also thought of invaded or colonised territories, which we often encounter in aerial representations where we see an environment in the wake of destruction. As I drew and scratched, redrew and re-scratched, these abrasions came to feel like violence. Sometimes, I worked so deeply into the surface of the paper with sanders and grinders that it disintegrated beyond repair. With time, I learned to notice the moment when the paper started losing its skin-like quality to offer support. At the point where I ran the danger of completely losing the drawing, I stopped.

These drawings also provided a key moment for contemplating ways in which I understand the concept of placement. They form part of a series in which I decided to reference the circular lenses of the telescope and microscope – two devices we use to understand the bewildering environments within which we find ourselves or we carry under our skin. These technologies have become entangled with our perception of self, so much so that they constitute a way of looking, or a lensing culture,<sup>15</sup> that in many ways exceed and challenge traditional ideas of embodiment and placement. One of these drawings shows a planet observed through a telescope, the other shows a virus seen under a microscope. Both share the same grid, the foundation of both images is the same, the way each is populated by dots and marks and scratches might differ, but when I look at them, the planet and the virus become almost indistinguishable.

Once drawn, I do not always know which is which.

It is in these later images that the grid as a placing and positioning device becomes particularly meaningful, especially when read in the context of larger art historical and socio-political frameworks. As Rosalind Krauss (1979) points out, the grid has long been treated as *the* formal and ideological apparatus of modernity that, in both its spatial and temporal dimensions, signifies a crystallisation of reality and order. The grid, holds Krauss, imagines

<sup>15</sup> I'm drawn to Don Ihde's (2001) definition of 'lensing' as a form of scientific vision that is mediated through, inter alia, telescopes and microscopes. As Ihde maintains, these technologies have significantly altered our sense of time and space, insofar as they transformed 'ordinary', or direct, embodied vision into a more radical, instrumentalised scientific vision. Ihde proposes the term 'second sight' to speak of such imaging technologies and the way they challenge and augment embodied vision.



**Figure 5.** Felix Gonzalez-Torres. “Untitled” (*Bloodworks*). 1989. Graphite, colored pencil, and tempera on paper, framed 12 1/4 x 19 1/2 inches. Two parts: 12 1/4 x 9 inches each © Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres, courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

time along straight lines, as something that unfolds and expands from a demarcated, geometric foundation (1979: 50–52). As Margarita Tupitsyn (2009) also maintains, the grid has long been imagined as a checkpoint of modernity – as an imagined slice of ‘the real’, of ‘the here and now’, that is made manifest through science and logic.<sup>16</sup> As artistic implements, grids have often been used to call to order and justify delineation. At the same time, I cannot help but be reminded of GRID – or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency – as the first acronym that was used to describe HIV/AIDS. Colloquially, casually, it was referred to as ‘gay cancer’. A virus that holds no preference for a particular gender or sexuality was long imagined as strategic and vengeful; a grid ‘with a plan’, where intimacy, identity and death intersected in a devastating way.

The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, better known for his installations of everyday objects, turned to drawing to speak of his experience with this particular grid. “Untitled” (*Bloodworks*) – see [Figure 5](#) – forms part of a larger series of works that Gonzalez-Torres referred to as ‘graphs’ or ‘bloodworks’.<sup>17</sup> “Untitled” (*Bloodworks*) features two drawings showing the upward and downward curve of a diagonal line. This can be interpreted as a plummeting or rising T-cell count of an AIDS patient, for example, but it also offers larger commentary on issues ranging from the visual abstraction of illness to forms of medical discrimination. If read as a visual representation of an immune system, these drawings offer an abstracted record of a rapidly changing human body. These drawings speak to a context in which progress and decline, growth and destruction, was often measured at the hand of the grid – a device that has long been used to imagine order and control. These drawings rest on but also resist the authority of the grid – while each individual line runs its steady course along the gridded intersections, the starting point and end of each drawing differ significantly. As a pair, these drawings leave the viewer suspended, as they cannot be entirely sure about the outcome and implications of the softly pencilled lines.

As Nancy Spector (1995: 166–167) explains in her reading of Gonzalez-Torres’s work:

The diseased body is itself a representation; it is linguistically constructed through the rhetoric of medicine and science. It is defined, diagrammed, and controlled by a biomedical authority whose value system adheres to deeply entrenched cultural and historical precepts. This ‘authority’ treats the AIDS patient (...) as an abstraction, a compilation of symptoms where there is no place, or need, for an account of the human side of infirmity (...) The graphs, with their cool, neutral geometry – ever reminiscent of

<sup>16</sup> Alternative art historical readings of the grid also abound, with even Krauss admitting that, despite its overwhelming association with materialism and logic, the grid can encompass both the secular *and* the sacred (1979: 54–55, 58). Also see Jennifer Scanlan (2015) on grids as ideological meeting points for opposing tendencies, and Damjan Jovanovic (2016) on the intersubjective potential of the grid in contemporary drawing practice.

<sup>17</sup> Gonzalez-Torres made twenty-two artworks that he referred to as ‘graphs’ (or occasionally as ‘bloodworks’). These works consist of a range of materials, with some comprising of a single framed sheet of paper with graphite and gouache, and others consisting of multiple parts of painted and drawn canvases. For this article, I refer to two specific drawings from his ‘graphs’ collection, namely “Untitled” (*Bloodworks*).

the Modernist grid – ironically emulate the hygienic dominion of the medical system, and yet they signify the mortality of the corporeal self.

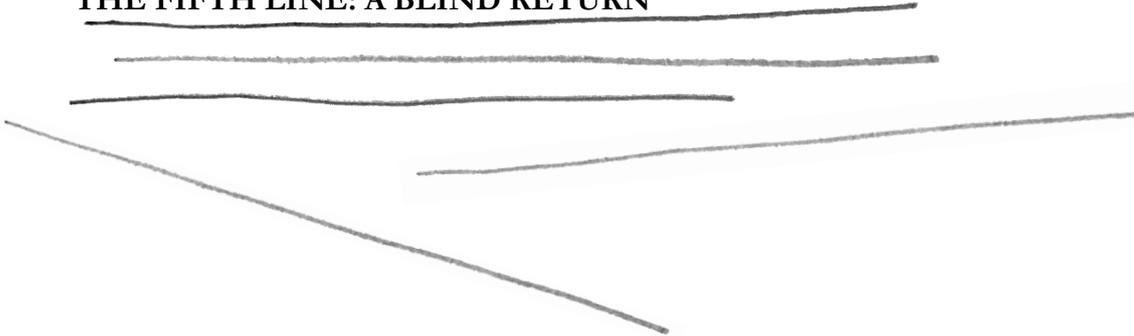
Today, these drawings mark an encroaching destruction that proved to be impossible to escape – Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS-related causes in 1996 following on the death of his long-term partner Ross Laycock in 1991.

Roland Barthes's reading of the photograph as *memento mori*, as 'anterior future of which death is at stake' (1981: 96), also comes to mind. Although executed in a different medium, I read a similar sense of dread and anxious anticipation in Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled" (*Bloodworks*). To me, these pieces show an awareness that the human subjects often don't outlast the marks that commemorate them. At the same time, I'm reminded of Sara Ahmed's (2014) writing on the politics of grief and the question of how the loss of queer lives is negotiated. As Ahmed (*my emphasis*, 2014: 156) maintains, 'queer lives have to be recognised *as lives* in order to be grieved'. Ahmed draws directly on Ann Cvetkovich's (2003: 427) argument that traumatic encounters with death, 'like the AIDS crisis (...) has challenged our strategies for remembering the dead, forcing the invention of new forms of mourning and commemoration'. Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled" (*Bloodworks*) speak to these questions and challenges, as they can be interpreted as a way to mourn the loss of queer life – be it of friends and lovers, or even his own.

I think of his work, again and again, while I'm grappling with my own drawing practice. The artworks in the 'graphs/bloodworks' body of work haunt me. They remind me of the complex, sometimes devastating entanglement of drawing with technology, of the way both have developed in tandem with one another<sup>18</sup> while being in service of larger socio-political institutions. These images also compel me to return to an act of drawing that was mentioned at the start of this essay, namely the drawing of blood from a vein. Technology is central to this act and it carries significant weight in the conclusions drawn from it. As Keith Wailoo (1997) maintains, the drawing, reading and interpreting of blood was central to the monitoring of a 'sick' and 'infectious' homosexual subject in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with technology playing a seminal role in assigning a discreet identity to a spectrum of diseases, infections and deficiencies, all of which we now classify as HIV/AIDS.<sup>19</sup> The drawing, visual identification of this disease and the technologies that facilitated this process speak of a complex entanglement of interiority and exteriority, of the self and the social.

To me, Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled" (*Bloodworks*) offers a complex answer to this entanglement by being a self- and a group portrait all at once.

## THE FIFTH LINE: A BLIND RETURN



It's time to draw this essay to a close.

I've wandered far, admittedly digressed at times, and indulged various lines of thought. But if I look back at this drawing, this sketch made in word and image, I feel a sense of relief. It's time to set my pen down.

Looking back, I'm struck by the different ways in which drawing adds shade and contour to our world, the way it marks us as human. *Here you are*, it seems to suggest, or *there you were*. It places and locates us in ways that speak of our experience of time and proximity. Sometimes, drawing speaks of a desire for continuity. At times, it shows our own awareness that it, too, will stop. We draw lines to underscore, to connect, to separate. We draw them to cross out. We draw them to say that this is as far as we'll go.

<sup>18</sup> As Laura Allen and Luke Caspar Pearson hold (2016: 7), 'drawing has always had an implicit relationship to technology. While drawing is often framed as an instinctive and intuitive act, we should not forget that many of the principles we take for granted today were developed through technologies as much as through the hand'.

<sup>19</sup> Wailoo demonstrates that, far from being neutral and uncontentious, diagnostic technologies, such as the HIV test, are marked by a range of social, political, moral and medical debates (1997: 1–2). Our understanding of HIV/AIDS is thus the result of 'a constellation of technologies, attitudes, and social relations', all of which 'inform how we define disease' and the subjects affected by it (Wailoo, 1997: 15).

Drawing is such an intimate affair. It nurtures those desires and fears that often lie in excess of words. I see, I desire, I lose, I draw.

And I draw.

And I draw.

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