

Drawing on the Edge of the World

Michael Namkung

A half-million years ago, on the island of Java, one of our human ancestors was sitting on a rock, closely examining a mussel shell, having just pried it open for food. With a shark tooth in hand, they began to engrave a zig-zag onto the shell's surface. This fossil, discovered in 1893, is our earliest evidence of human drawing.¹

What impulse drove this early version of ourselves to scratch out this geometric pattern? Was it a diagram? A demonstration? A doodle? Perhaps it was an *artistic* decision, one made with tools and materials in hand; a creative impulse to answer the question, "What happens when I...?" And finally, what kind of value did our ancestors place on this activity, on this object?

Whether a mark is made on a mussel shell, a sheet of paper, or in a digital environment, the long history of drawing continually registers the development of the human capacity and necessity to represent what we perceive. Emma Dexter emphasizes that drawing has always been with us: as a part of the human condition itself--and indeed, as a tool for understanding this condition:

...we use it pragmatically to sketch our own maps and plans, but we also use it to dream—in doodles and scribbles. We use drawing to denote ourselves, our existence within a scene. Drawing is part of our interrelation to our physical environment, recording in and on it, the presence of the human. 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. Footprints in the snow, 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.²

Drawing is a practice that dwells in the space between forms and ideas. "To draw," means to pull, deriving from the Old English *dragan*, meaning to drag. In dragging a tool across a surface, an image is pulled, from somewhere, into existence. Our most basic visualization tool, drawing is a technology that gives form to our abstract cognition. It operates in a nexus of physical and mental processes, and movement occurs in both directions: as ideas are distilled from what is perceptible, these ideas reciprocally inform our corporeal engagement with the world. The story of drawing is the story of this relationship between forms and ideas, between the concrete and the abstract ways in which we exist.

The specific type of drawing handed down through Western tradition privileges the ethos that empirical observation of the world is the most truthful method for understanding it. Like handwriting, drawing was once a part of our formal education. If you wanted to record something visually, drawing was the most practical means.³ The invention of photography was the beginning of the end for this version of drawing, at least in public consciousness, and technological advancements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have made the practice of hand drawing seem increasingly obsolete. But the conventional image of putting pencil to paper is simply our most recent iteration of a thread that runs back to our human origins. Once we can relieve ourselves from the idea that markmaking is strictly a graphic activity that occurs on a two-dimensional surface, we begin to approach the essence of drawing as an irrepressible human impulse to engage and understand our world through a direct negotiation with its materiality. This mode of practice resides in the body and is irreplaceable by technology; and it is a persistence in making *with their hands* that connects the artists in this exhibition to the drawing, and indeed, to the labor of our ancestors.

In trying to understand the value of drawing or the value of labor, we already have a familiar tool. Time and Materials is a formula that helps one determine the value of one's labor: it is the cost of the materials and equipment required, plus a rate multiplied by the time it takes to complete the job. While the equation allows us to arrive a specific quantitative value, this project presents artists whose work puts its variables into play. The exhibition examines the work of six South Florida artists who mix a language of drawing with labor-intensive processes that deconstruct, conflate, and transform ideas about both labor and drawing, and who propose new models through which we may consider the value of one's labor. Each of the artists has produced new work for this exhibition.

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The objects that Ernesto Oroza makes are functional and utilitarian. The plants need to be watered. The calendar pages need to be turned each month. The newspaper, *The Tabloid*, a tool for articulating and disseminating his ideas, is to be taken with and read. His placement of these objects indicates the way they should function. His aluminum can planters, entitled *Cobra*, are placed in a direct line of sight of the office manager, so that she can appreciate them, and remember to water them. Held with a push pin, Oroza's *Acumulación y materia prima. (After ...)*, is a calendar that occupies a narrow slice of wall between a corner of the gallery and the door to the reception area, where the office manager sits. This is befitting of a calendar; placed where it can be easily seen when one walks into the office, it doesn't take up wall space designed to frame and imbue value upon artworks. The item was 2014 giveaway from a local doctor's office with generic, picturesque landscapes decorating each month. If not immediately thrown in with the junk mail, it should have at least been recycled at the end of the year. Instead, Oroza has

inked each square with the correct dates for 2015, extending its use value. Each landscape has been inked over with texts that expand on the concept of accumulation. The text for September, the month currently visible, states:

Al acumular un objeto o sus partes, se aplaza el momento de su desecho, se elude el ciclo de vida asignado por el diseñador, la industria o el mercado.⁴

By accumulating an object or its parts, the time of disposal is deferred, as we bypass the life cycle assigned by the designer, the industry or the market.

Through accumulation, the time value that is built into generic, disposable objects is refuted and reimagined. According to Marx, capitalism causes us to live as abstract beings: it requires that individual labor be measurable according to a system of universal equivalence (i.e., money), in order to function as a commodity for exchange, alienating workers from their labor, and disconnecting individuals from what they produce.⁵ Oroza's practice reinserts use value into the activities and objects that capitalism has abstracted from us.

The mass production of generic, standardized objects makes them widely available and easily accessible. It is in Oroza's use of these readily available raw materials of our everyday consumption—aluminum cans and printed advertisements as the mussel shells that kindle the popular imaginary of our modern era—that echo the immediacy of drawing as an impulse that runs throughout human history.

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Like Oroza, Felice Grodin is interested in the significance of generic, mass produced material. To make *Exchange Abstraction*, Grodin enlisted the labor of C. Modesto and former student Ashley Aguiar, forming the collective AA.CM.FG.

While the art world elevates abstraction as an aesthetic characteristic assigned to objects, AA.CM.FG uses the process of abstraction itself to turn the market exchange system inside out, revealing the numeric values circumscribed by the exchange. To begin, Aguiar 3D modeled a generic corporate graph, and Grodin and Modesto laboriously hand built over hundreds of hours what a 3D printer can do in minutes, using cheap, corrugated plastic on a handmade grid. Grodin calls these "dumb" materials, void of the values of fine art or craftsmanship. As they originate in and are a product of digital environments, when they are physically made, they become the material deposits of the virtual world.

Much of Grodin's work has been concerned with trying to understand the physicality of the virtual world that surrounds her by transcribing the digital through the labor of hand drawing. In this case, however, the drawing medium is not ink on mylar, but box cutter

on corrugated plastic. Each segment of the constructed “graph” is cut to the exact specifications of the designer. But because the tool of labor here isn’t designed for cutting big chunks of plastic, the lines aren’t very clean—the hand of labor is present.

Accompanying this piece is a poster, made digitally by Aguiar, of roughly equal dimensions that sits alongside the model, forming a diptych. The poster is a blueprint that indicates the exact height of each of the over one-thousand corrugated plastic modules, but it is also a ledger, recording the chasm between the project’s income and expenses, represented by three figures: the artist stipend, the cost of materials, and the number of labor hours the collective spent to make the work.

Several hierarchies are reversed here: the top down master-apprentice relationship; cognitive vs. manual labor; the digital vs. the handmade; the art object vs. the disposable detritus of capitalism. The result is simply a product of the market system, a perverse abstraction of the artist’s labor, reduced to numbers and values on a grid; and a disturbing actualization of capitalism’s need to police perception by measuring the value of everything. It provokes us to consider our complicity in sustaining this abstraction, for the knowledge and security in knowing how things stack up against each other allows us to create order from the messy incommensurability of human activity.

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The work of Frances Trombly manipulates this orderliness as well, employing the close attention of classical observational drawing, but without the virtual space of the blank page. Her sculptures are meticulous recreations of mundane objects—convincing replicas in and of themselves, but her deception is further advanced by the nuance of their placement within the institutional framework of the gallery.

A few of Trombly’s ongoing series of *Miscellaneous Receipts* lay in a disorganized pile on the gallery floor, as if someone had casually dropped them while cleaning out their wallet. The pieces do not reveal themselves to be anything other than this until one examines them with the same acuity of seeing required for Trombly to make them. They are small rectangles of intricately embroidered fabric, complete with creases, crinkles and folds that typify how receipts are handled. A receipt is something like an art world certificate of authenticity. It is proof of a financial transaction, documenting a transfer of currency for goods or services. If you want your money back, a receipt is required in order to reverse the exchange. In this sense, the receipt is a placeholder for currency, just as currency itself is a placeholder for value. Also, Trombly’s currency *has* currency. The newest additions to this series are based on three receipts from the airport during her recent trip to Cuba, made after the US eased travel restrictions in 2015. Notably absent from this grouping, however, are receipts *from* Cuba, because, as she stated, “There were no receipts in Cuba.” They don’t simply document her purchases; they also reflect conditions on the ground.

The handle of Trombly's *Mop* leans against the gallery wall, as if a custodian took a break and is returning to retrieve it shortly. The hand spun silver wool and cotton of the mop head is a uniformly dingy grey; seemingly, this is a mop that is well used. The deceit is so effective that in a previous exhibition at Florida International University's Frost Art Museum, the mop disappeared, only to be found later, in the mop closet.

Trombly's work challenges us to reckon with the values we assign to different kinds of labor—in this case, artistic labor versus the labor of maintenance. And this kind of custodial labor has an intimate relationship to art—it's a labor whose prime objective is to create and protect the white wall, the clean floor—the completely physical yet seemingly virtual space that disappears from perception in order to foreground and imbue works of art with value.

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Nathalie Alfonso's *Can You See Me?* enacts this invisible labor of cleaning and maintenance. During her youth in Colombia, Alfonso was a competitive speed walker. Since arriving in the US, she has made her living as a housecleaner, and in her artwork, the repetition of steps has transformed into the repetition of the bodily gestures of cleaning. It is significant that although she refers to her work as drawing, the verb she uses to describe her mark making is not *to draw*, but rather, *to scrub*.

Cleaning is a labor that conceals itself, and performs an erasure of double magnitude: the goal is to remove all marks and traces of activity, while also leaving no trace of one's own activity. Evidence of the physical labor, materials used, and markers of time are all hidden in favor of presentation of the clean ground, the white wall, the ordered space.

Using blackboard chalk, Alfonso scrubs a twelve-inch wide line along each wall of the gallery. The value (degree of light or dark) of the white of the chalk is identical to the value of the wall paint, distinguishable only by its slightly warmer color tone. She scrubs the wall until the surface is uniformly smooth, with a cleanliness that belies its dusty reality. The line sits at eye-level, but not our own; its height corresponds to Alfonso's body on her hands and knees—literally below our level of perception, furthering its disappearance. But like the labor of cleaning itself, her drawn line is not really invisible, but as viewers, we must shift our focus to the threshold of perception if we are to see it.

Alfonso's line has no beginning or end; it's a linearity that encompasses, without measurable length. This understanding of labor is in stark opposition to the romanticized idea of artistic transcendence, instead suggesting a labor of immanence and pervasiveness. In surrounding us with invisibility, she delineates both the power of the institutional space to produce value, as well as our collusion as performers in the

system. Technically, Alfonso's line is broken by the passageways in and out of the gallery, but when we enter through these thresholds, we complete the circle and seal the deal—enacting an hermetic enclosure of the authority of the institutional space to create value.

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Like Alfonso, Agustina Woodgate's primary gesture is one of erasure. But rather than erasure as concealment, Woodgate reveals. In both *Globe (Under the weather)*, an outdated world globe, and *Hellmann*, an outdated world map, Woodgate delicately sands off the printed surfaces—both topographical features and geopolitical borders—revealing the tenuous paper scaffoldings upon which our conceptions of the world are built.

Globe (Under the weather) is deteriorating from water damage, evoking both rising sea levels as well as a general global sickness that has caused the bonds that once held it together to begin to disintegrate. Whereas the globe signals a planet in desperation, the map seems to suggest hope. Found in an abandoned factory, *Hellmann* has several large tears, some showing evidence of having been carefully bandaged with scotch tape long ago yellowed, expressing a desire for repairing and sustaining our world.

Whereas the labor of sanding is, like cleaning, usually a smoothing over that imposes order on surface irregularities; Woodgate's sanding is a removal of the order of things. But true erasure is difficult. Marks can be completely concealed behind the addition of something else; lines can be redrawn and areas painted over. Subtraction is always more laborious. And so the demarcations and divisions on these maps aren't truly absent—their vestiges remain, as shadows of what they once were, as abraded surfaces, stubbornly resisting complete removal. Interestingly, Woodgate erases everything but the map's bounding rectangle and the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates that frame it—an ominous reminder of the power of the grid.

The work suggests not that we simply visualize a world without borders, but rather that we return to the drawing board in order to reimagine concepts of territorial division and the shared humanity that transcends them. Woodgate's erasure is not a gesture of invisibility, but the prefiguring of a new form of vision.

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Odalis Valdivieso's form of vision is intimately connected to her process of making. Her studio practice is a laborious and repetitive one. She works serially, making a large number of individual pieces that seemingly result from the same set of procedures. In

her most recent body of work, *Arrhythmic Suite*, Valdivieso moved back and forth using repetitive gestures, covering and recovering the surface. The paintings are overworked, at least in a pictorial sense, as the initial figural marks become disturbed by what is happening at the surface, muddying the relationship between figure and ground.

Valdivieso's installation, *Double Re-Representation*, is a grand gesture that depicts and unifies several bodies of studio work. The ensemble of oil paintings, ink on paper or canvas, photocopies, and stretched unused canvas spreads across the wall as a singular yet fragmented line, both a connect-the-dots diagram and a representational drawing. Scans of previous work mix with their originals, and paper photocopies masquerade as painted canvas on stretchers. Individual elements behave as signposts that signal each other, but these formal connections obscure a deeper and more complex relationship of the parts, all of which point back to Valdivieso's studio process.

Her use of the scanner and printer as a tool is not a random choice; no other technology mirrors the artist's studio process more closely. The way in which a photocopier reproduces an image mirrors the technique of classic observational drawing, in which the artist makes a coordinated effort between eye and hand, drawing directly what is seen, as it is seen. It's as if Valdivieso is both scanner and printer simultaneously, observing herself as she covers the picture plane from edge to edge. But instead of scanning or printing a singular image or object, the subject is the complex experience of making itself: the constant painting over and reworking of the surface suggests a search for meaning in her process that doesn't hide feelings of doubt and uncertainty about what is being made.

In using recycling as an economy of time, material and labor, Valdivieso defies the demand of originality and newness; she interrogates the societal role of the artist, the meaning of her labor, and our expectation that the artist is endlessly "productive." Through repetition and overlap, Valdivieso confounds our understanding of the relationship between labor and value, revealing the overlap and entanglement of our material and abstract selves.

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The artists in this exhibition propose useful models for rethinking our anxious dependency on collapsing our time and material surroundings onto the all-measuring grid. Their works reveal our preconceptions of how we evaluate and understand one's labor, and not just within the art world. It is not until these values are foregrounded that we can see more clearly, communicate more directly, and begin to create the conditions for substantive and productive work on the issues we care about.

The need to understand the world through observation and to engage it with tools and materials in hand hasn't changed since our ancestors first scratched lines into the sand.

The drawing impulse is persistent. For the seekers among us who desire to put something in the world that has not yet been seen, who create prototypes for the future, for whom things are not fixed, returning to the drawing board is both a relevant metaphor and a practical ground upon which to build.

One way in which we express our compulsion to quantify labor and assign value is in asking the seemingly innocuous question: *How long did it take?* Implicit in the question is our need to weigh figures against each other, as the answer allows us to understand it in relationship to other things whose value has been predetermined. Any attempt to answer directly, to provide a figure in terms of hours, days, years, etc. participates in the exchange abstraction, and ignores any temporal or material qualities specific to its production or reception that it may have. This forecloses the possibility of dialogue on its potential value, including value produced by the fact of the dialogue itself.

Perhaps a good place to start is with simply asking a better question: one that draws on our critical faculties to deal with the complexity of human experience; and one that draws us out of our abstract lives and into the work of concrete dialogue—no matter how long it takes.

¹ Helen Thompson, “Zigzags on a Shell From Java Are the Oldest Human Engravings,” <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/oldest-engraving-shell-tools-zigzags-art-java-indonesia-humans-180953522/?no-ist>

² Emma Dexter, “Introduction,” *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, Phaidon Press, 2005. p. 6.

³ Michael Kimmelman, “An Exhibition About Drawing Conjures a Time When Amateurs Roamed the Earth,” *NYTimes.com*, July 19, 2006
http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/19/arts/design/19draw.html?_r=0

⁴ Ernesto Oroza, *ParaISO Tabloid I*
<http://www.ernestooroza.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ParaISO-Tabloid-I.pdf>

⁵ Pier Vittorio Aureli, “Intangible and Concrete: Notes on Architecture and Abstraction,” *e-flux*, journal #64, 04/2015
<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/intangible-and-concrete-notes-on-architecture-and-abstraction/>