

Figuring Futility

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Using a spirit level, a three-metre horizontal line is drawn across of a sheet of paper pinned to the studio wall, a few inches below its uppermost edge. It is from this line that the others will fall: beginning at its far left-hand side, the artist bangs in a nail and from there hangs a plumb line.¹ As the weight is pulled down and the string inside unreeled, the device coats the string with vine ash. The taut cord is then pulled away from the paper's surface and released to snap back against the sheet, leaving a powdery vertical line minutely broken by the string's grain. The nail is pulled from the wall with the hammer's back end and hit in again a millimetre or two to the right; the plumb line is again lowered, pinched and plucked, and a new impression appears. This process is repeated hundreds of times, sometimes over many months, until the surface of the paper is adequately covered: 'a pointless activity', the artist remarks.² The individual lines are materially fragile, degraded at their upper and lower extremities and vary in both length and density depending on the force with which the string has hit the paper (as well as the extent to which it has become frayed, or even worn through). What finally results from this repetitive work is a wide screen of closely woven vertical lines, bordered on each side by several inches of white paper. Far from pristine, this border space carries all the scuffmarks and smudges accumulated during the process.

Susan Morris describes her *Plumb Line Drawings* as drawing 'Degree Zero': the basic form of that primary graphic practice so closely bound up with the origins of language (and therefore existing as a kind of text).³ Throughout the twentieth-century, and especially since the 1950s, drawing's 'zero degree' has been interrogated in light of the internalisation of deskilling and the abandonment of faith in expressive practices.⁴ Whereas once drawing was seen as a first step towards the production of a mimetic likeness (as in Pliny's famous account of the daughter of Butades),⁵ or as the purest means by which to display remarkable manual facility (exemplified by the competitive demonstrations of Apelles and Protogenes, or by Giotto's celebrated freehand circle), in the post-War period drawing has instead been set to tasks that imply a very different conception of art's work (and indeed of subjectivity). In this, the hand has been restricted to the by turns rigorous and absurd elaboration of pre-determined and frequently interminable production processes: erasure (Robert Rauschenberg), repetition (Eva Hesse), sequential iteration (Hanne Darboven), extension (Giuseppe Penone), duplication (Vija Celmins).⁶ The *Plumb Line Drawings* enter this constellation of practices. Here, materials and technical procedures are reduced to a minimum: paper, a suspended string, ash and the repetition of a minor disturbance of gravity's path. The hand's work is confined to the performance of simple mechanical tasks (although the body is powerfully registered), and the marks are constituted by the sparest of material means (although the works are insistently physical).

The drawings are activated visually by a fine texture of variations that play across their surface. Each plumb line appears as if suspended in the process of emerging or receding from view, and these 'accumulations of disappearing marks', as the artist calls them, are at once suggestively indistinct

1 The device Morris uses is actually a chalk-line reel rather than a plumb-bob; the reel coats the string as it is extended, whereas a plumb bob is simply a weight that is suspended from a plumb line. Morris has also experimented with other kinds of plumb line drawings, using a combination of blue and red chalk coating; with these, the choice of a line's colour was determined by the toss of a coin.

2 Conversation with the artist, 22 June 2009.

3 Email correspondence with the artist, 15 June 2009. Morris's phrase clearly refers to Roland Barthes's first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith), New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.

4 On the question of deskilling, see John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*, London: Verso, 2007.

5 For an excellent discussion of the implications of Pliny's story for a conception of drawing, see Michael Newman, 'The Marks, Traces, and Gestures of Drawing', in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act*, London and New York: Tate and The Drawing Center, 2003, pp.93–108.

6 While their production processes have been thoroughly deskilled and shorn of any expressive rhetoric, it nevertheless remains crucial that these works have been *made*, that they are the result of specific material and bodily processes.

and strangely opaque.⁷ The shifting fields of infinitesimal difference take on a veil-like, diaphanous quality, inviting the eye to project coherent forms into their indeterminate (perhaps even *undead*) liveliness. Yet such projections cannot gain sufficient purchase to stabilize and endure, and the surface remains quizzically blank. (Indeed, this alternation between imaginative prompt and literalist statement is just one of a series of qualitative opposites that these works switch between: integrated unity and discrete fragment, weightless cloud and tactile surface, compulsive symptom and remedial procedure.)

The tension here between cloud-like weightlessness and resistant objecthood connects the *Plumb Line Drawings* to aspects of older debates surrounding post-War American abstract painting. As large-scale abstract pictures which dramatize the action of gravity, they set themselves in (albeit rather distant) relation to the drips of Jackson Pollock, the stains of Helen Frankenthaler and the translucent veils of Morris Louis. Pollock poured, pooled and spattered his paint across the floor-bound canvas.⁸ The subsequent raising of the painting from floor to wall, from horizontal to vertical, so the account goes, enabled these densely material surfaces to be 'sublimated' into the sheer optical fields championed by modernist critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried.⁹ Viewed through the lens of such priorities, then, both the unruly 'base materialism' and the corporeal, performative dimension of these paintings were repressed.¹⁰ Exclusionary tactics of this kind would also be necessary to make the *Plumb Line Drawings* over into purely optical fields; just as Pollock's pictures retain a 'lowness' that resists such sublimation, so, too, do Susan Morris's drawings exceed any such reduction to purely visual terms of engagement.

The weightlessness of the *Plumb Line Drawings* is that of an intense dryness, like that of dust or ash, of a 'thinglike nothingness'.¹¹ Although slight, the works' materiality points towards a bodily performance which is in stark contrast with the improvisatory and expressive fluency of Pollock's liquid gestures: Morris's pictorial field substitutes Beckett's stage for Rosenberg's arena. Moreover, both material density and tactile immediacy are diminished to the extreme and do not yield any of the empathic pleasures associated with the latter. Nevertheless, traces of bodily performance are visible and, once registered, prompt an imaginative reconstruction of the process of their production. This imaginative supplement opens up a gap between the drawings' aesthetic register and the implications of the kind of work involved here. The unintentionally produced yet consciously preserved smudges, heaviest above the puckered line of small holes where the hammer has scuffed the paper when removing nails, evidence a (protesting, struggling?) body behind the marks. It is by way of imagining this labouring body that the drawings lose their cloudy weightlessness and begin to harden into objects proper – mute and opaque.

7 Conversation with the artist, 22 June 2009.

8 On watching Hans Namuth's film of Pollock painting, Douglas Kahn recounts, Allan Kaprow 'observed how the space above the plane of the glass/canvas was infused with the loops and stretches of paint hanging foreshortened in midair before falling to be fixed on the surface. Quite remarkably, he likened these delicate quasi-objects delineated in air to the nature of sound and their inscriptive collapse onto the canvas as a form of recording.' See D. Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1999, p.274. The *Plumb Line Drawings* also carry such an imaginative aural supplement: the visual 'noise' of the activated surface (of which more later), the vibration of the plucked string and the twang and slap of its impact against the paper.

9 See, for example, Clement Greenberg, 'American-Type Painting' (1955), in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993, especially pp.217–36; and Michael Fried, 'Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella' (1965), *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp.213–68. As Fried argues, Louis furthered Pollock's pictorial logic, replacing a materially dense surface with liquid veils of pigment, which soak themselves into the canvas. Manual and bodily performance was also reduced to an act of pouring, distancing pictorial effects from the rhetoric of subjective revelation.

10 For an extended and wide-ranging critique of the sublimations effected by modernist criticism by way of concepts largely drawn from the work of Georges Bataille, see Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York: Zone, 1997; on Pollock specifically, see pp.93–103. For Krauss, Pollock's pictures powerfully resist such sublimation and instead retain the lowness of their horizontal origins in their insistent (indeed, *base*) materiality.

11 Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006, p.100.

The amount of work necessary to complete these drawings is mechanical and repetitious, absurd in its combination of doggedness and futility. Mounting a chair, reaching up to hammer a nail, hanging the thread, descending again to steady the weight, then ping-ponging the suspended thread against the paper to create not only a line, but also an impertinent slapping noise. The routine is repeated hundreds if not thousands of times: a film version might star Buster Keaton. The distance from improvised and expressive forms of bodily gesture does not require elaboration: Susan Morris certainly has more in common with the systems and repetitions of Minimalism and Process Art than with the Action Painter's spontaneous performances. Nevertheless, a comparison with the work of Agnes Martin, an artist who in some senses bridges this generational divide, will be of use here. Martin's grids share with the *Plumb Line Drawings* their spareness, linearity and serial repetition. Martin's hand leads a pencil line evenly across the grain of the surface, with a light enough touch so as to allow it to respond to the slightest textural variation. The action is calm, quiet and meticulous.¹² The heightened and contemplative cognitive mode involved in the production of Martin's grids rhymes with the similarly attentive comportment they elicit from the viewer, encouraging as they do a corresponding perceptual deceleration (and also enlivening).¹³ Briony Fer argues that 'What Martin does is to isolate something precarious – like the infinite differences of her grids – and make of them something temporarily cohesive in a way that enables the loss of oneself in the infinite fabric of surface.'¹⁴ With Martin's drawn grid, the surface is scanned (by both artist and viewer) with a rare attention, and its grain welcomed as a collaborator, reciprocally activating and being activated by the mark. Morris's surface is more undecidable; it receives the mark and supports its fragile materiality, but the process involved implies a less friendly relationship. Indeed, here we have moved a long way from what Fer calls the 'aesthetic of revelation' still present in Martin's work (albeit articulated very differently from the dominant artists of the New York School; Fer refers to Martin's 'metaphysics of the ordinary').¹⁵

Donald Judd described Martin's pictorial field as 'woven'.¹⁶ Indeed, weaving and thread provide something of a *leitmotif* in Morris's practice. Establishing some distance from the familiar association of weaving with femininity and domesticity, the artist refers to the following passage from W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*:

...before the industrial age, a great number of people, at least in some places, spent their lives with their bodies strapped to looms made of wooden frames and rails, hung with weights, and reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages. It was a peculiar symbiosis which, because of its relatively primitive character, makes more apparent than any later form of factory work that we are able to maintain ourselves on this earth only by being harnessed to the machines we have invented. That weavers in particular,

12 On Martin, see Briony Fer, 'Infinity', *The Infinite Line: Remaking Art After Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, pp.46–63.

13 Rosalind Krauss, developing the implications of Kasha Linville's phenomenological reading, famously reads these grids, viewed from a zone between the close-up registration of fine details and the block-like opacity that the works take on from further back (where all variations fall below the threshold of perception), through Hubert Damisch's concept of */Cloud/*. For Damisch, */Cloud/* designated the pictorial unit that escapes a given system's logic, the element that cannot be accommodated to linear perspective's mode of knowing, but is nevertheless necessary in constituting that system as a system. See R. Krauss, 'Agnes Martin: The */Cloud/*' (1993), in *Bachelors*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1999, pp.75–89; see also Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Towards a History of Painting*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 (first published in French 1972).

14 B. Fer, *op. cit.*, p.58.

15 *Ibid.*, pp.47 and 61. As Fer argues, 'Martin always maintained something visionary, something that took vision beyond the merely literal.' (p.48) But this 'sublation of self' paradoxically opened the way for the 'blinking out of the subject' performed in the serial strategies adopted by Eva Hesse and Hanne Darboven (p.61). Fer recalls Lucy Lippard's characterisation of Darboven's work as a 'sea of numbers' that threatens to overwhelm the spectator; see L. Lippard, 'Hanne Darboven: Deep in Numbers', *Artforum*, vol.12, no.2, October 1973, pp.35–36. Morris's interminable accumulations have a similarly immersive draw. Encouraging a reading of the *Plumb Lines* as a kind of text, Morris also expresses identification with Darboven's project of 'writing without describing'.

16 Quoted in B. Fer, *op. cit.*, p.48.

together with scholars and writers with whom they had much in common, tended to suffer from melancholy and all the evils associated with it, is understandable given the nature of their work, which forced them to sit bent over, day after day, straining to keep their eye on the complex patterns they created. It is difficult to imagine the depths of despair into which those can be driven who, even after the end of their working day, are engrossed in their intricate designs and who are pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling that they have got hold of the wrong thread...¹⁷

The quality of unfreedom and distress here is twofold: it is a result of physical constraint within the assemblage, but it is also bound up with an internal sense of despair in the face of the real possibility that all this repetitive work has been for nothing, that is has been based on an untraceable mistake. Eric Santner has compellingly described the affective atmosphere of Sebald's writing, characterised as it is by an agitated melancholy, in terms of 'creaturely life'. Far from being the point at which the human demonstrates its underlying affinity with the animal kingdom, creaturely life is that 'peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference'.¹⁸ Such points of difference can be located, for example, at the outer extremities of the systems of law, sexuality and signification. It is not participation in these systems that renders the human creaturely, but rather an exposure to the liminal, obscene zones that establish the conditions for their structures to function at all – their unlawful supplements, states of exception, internalised injunctions, and the violent cycles of 'natural history'.¹⁹

Santner tracks a constellation of German-Jewish thinkers who use the concept of creaturely life to elaborate upon the human being under the conditions of modernity.²⁰ That is, subject to the accelerated rhythms of natural history, the furious production of 'enigmatic signifiers' – commodities with what Marx called 'phantom-like objectivity'²¹ – and the dispersal of sovereign power across 'a field of relays and points of contact that no longer cohere, even in fantasy, as a consistent "other" of possible address and redress'.²² In response to the accumulation of 'undead' objects surviving the form of life in which they held their meaningfulness, of surplus excitations and unlocatable injunctions, such authors diagnosed 'a state of emergency running through the fabric of everyday life'.²³ Modern melancholy, Walter Benjamin argued, takes on a manic aspect, an extreme excitation and agitation brought on by the flooding of the mind by stimulation and its simultaneous failure to cohere into stable meaning.²⁴

This 'paradoxical mixture of deadness and excitation, stuckness and agitation'²⁵ proper to creaturely life articulates Morris's *Plumb Line Drawings*. In this respect they take on the quality of an hysterical symptom, manifesting as manic activity driven by a compulsion to repeat.²⁶ The drawings begin to appear as if made under duress, which is quite at odds with their initial air of weightlessness (which

17 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (trans. Michael Hulse), London: Vintage, 2002, pp. 282–83.

18 E. Santner, *op. cit.*, p.12.

19 *Ibid.*; see especially Chapter 3, 'Toward a Natural History of the Present', pp.97–142.

20 *Ibid.*, p.12.

21 *Ibid.*, p.82.

22 *Ibid.*, p.22.

23 *Ibid.*, p.86.

24 *Ibid.*, pp.80–81.

25 *Ibid.*, p.81.

26 In my conversation with her on 10 August 2009, Morris suggested a kind of 'hysterical boredom' as the impetus for these drawings, referring to Roland Barthes's account of his perennial boredom: 'As a child, I was often and intensely bored. This evidently began very early, it has continued my whole life, in gusts (increasingly rare, it is true, thanks to work and to friends), and it has always been noticeable to others. A manic boredom, to the point of distress: like the kind I feel in panel discussions, lectures, parties among strangers, group amusements: wherever boredom can be seen. Might boredom be a form of hysteria?' See *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, p.24.

comes to seem more like *volatility*).²⁷ The innumerable encounters with the wall become part of an interminable and unwinnable struggle. The paper takes on a new aspect: it becomes a kind of wall that is hit against and nailed into – an obdurate, resistant presence, a surface to be covered over or blanked out rather than gazed into.²⁸ As is especially dramatized in *Plumb Line # 9*, where the scuff marks left by the artist's shoes have accumulated across the bottom edge of the sheet, Morris's body is jammed up against the surface. Recalling Jasper Johns's *Study for Skin I* (1962), in which the artist pressed his oiled face and hands against a sheet of engineer's drafting paper and dusted the resulting traces with black pigment, there is the suggestion of a trapped body behind the surface. In relation to Johns's work, Benjamin Buchloh has described a paradoxical, simultaneous elimination and maintenance of a corporeal ground – leaving only an 'extract of corporeality'.²⁹ This is enacted by way of a shift from the *soma* to the *derma*, a powerful reduction of the tactile which relinquishes the sensual pleasures of touch but retains the body as an inscriptive surface.³⁰

This account of Johns is situated within Buchloh's broader discussion of the 'diagrammatic', a theorisation which has some purchase on Morris's practice. Set against the 'heroic chorus of abstraction', the diagram constitutes 'the one variety of abstraction that recognises externally existing and pre-given systems of spatio-temporal quantification or schemata of the statistical collection of data as necessarily and primarily determining a chosen pictorial order'.³¹ Artists involved in elaborating diagrammatic practices forego the 'voluntaristic self-deception' of any claims to deliver an 'authentic corporeal trace', in favour of enacting a 'voluntary self-defeat'.³² This self-defeating or suicidal tendency in twentieth-century drawing, whereby illusions of corporeal or psychic freedoms are renounced, offers, Buchloh argues, a genuinely critical registration of the extent to which subjective life under advanced forms of capitalism is pervaded by externally established systems of administration and control.³³ This conceptual framework provides the interpretive lens through which Buchloh then interprets the adoption of serial structures and repetitive manual processes in the work of, for example, Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Sol LeWitt and Eva Hesse. Indeed, it is in Hesse's series of untitled drawings from 1966 to 1967 that Buchloh identifies drawing's 'endgame' being played out, announcing drawing's historical disappearance.

Buchloh is emphatic in setting the diagram in opposition to more dominant modes of modern drawing: '[The diagram] would not only oppose all expressionist or automatist drawing practices, it would also replace them with the gesture and grapheme of an anti-aesthetic – with the *paroxysm*

27 Henri Focillon wrote compellingly of drawing's 'volatility' in *The Life of Forms in Art*, describing it as 'a process of abstraction so extreme and so pure that matter is reduced to a mere armature of the slenderest possible sort, and is, indeed, very nearly volatilized. But matter in this volatile state is still matter... Its variety, moreover, is extreme: ink, wash, lead pencil, charcoal, red chalk, crayon, whether singly or in combination, all constitute so many distinct traits, so many distinct languages.' Quoted by Pamela M. Lee in 'Some Kinds of Duration: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art,' in Cornelia Butler (ed.), *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process*, Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass.: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 1999, p.31.

28 While there is a spaciousness in Martin's grids, the 'weave' of Morris's fields is tighter and more airless. If there is a vibrant charge to the way in which Martin's canvases 'go atmospheric' and become */Cloud/*, then it is because Morris's drawings are more like the bleak, entropic rings of Saturn, composed as they are of dust and ice crystals.

29 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Hesse's Endgame: Facing the Diagram', in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Eva Hesse Drawing* (exh. cat.), New York: The Drawing Center, 2006, p.119.

30 *Ibid.*, p.144. Buchloh quotes Susan Bordo's formulation of the body as '...a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed... The body is not only a text of culture, it is also ... a practical, direct locus of social control.'

31 *Ibid.*, p.119 and 117. 'Most accounts of abstract art have asserted the historical priority and superiority of paradigms of abstraction that are totally opposed to the order of the diagrammatic, celebrating those that supposedly traced the waves of universal cosmic energy and spherical musicality (e.g. Delaunay, Kupka, Kandinsky), or mimetically recorded the body's biomorphic foundation and libidinal flows (from Arp to automatism), or claimed to signal, with their shift towards the non-representational, the emergence of a revolutionary social egalitarianism, anchored in the universal laws of geometry (e.g. Mondrian with his grids and Malevich with his geometricity).' (pp.117–18).

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*, p.122.

of drawing, a graphic readymade.³⁴ While the notion of drawing as 'paroxysm' invokes contact with the creaturely, Buchloh's naming of the ready-made signals that for him the diagrammatic has its most significant foundation in the graphic practice of Duchamp. Molly Nesbit has compellingly argued for the significance of Duchamp's education in the 'language of industry',³⁵ a schooling in 'a disciplinary and instrumentalising kind of technical competence',³⁶ which Duchamp set about to consistently undermine, forcing it into dialogue with the forms of bodily excitation and desire that it had renounced. In his *Network of Stoppages* (1913), Duchamp subjected a Cézannesque painting of elongated nudes to a system of plotting and measurement, overlaying them with a network of his 'diminished' metres – measuring devices (derived from his *3 Standard Stoppages*) deranged by the aleatory effects of the action of gravity.

Buchloh's discussion, although not in any neat alignment with the priorities of Morris's practice, nevertheless helps us further situate the latter in relation to wider social and psychic structures. Morris's instruments are directly drawn from the functional, everyday world of measurement and construction: hammer, nails, plumb line and spirit level. Coupled with these materials, her repetitive working methods resonate with the manifold varieties of alienated labour that dominate contemporary life. While these drawings might be driven more by internalized prohibitions and compulsions than by a will to critique modes of productive labour, the implications of the latter should not be ignored. (Rather like the 'absurdist metaphysics'³⁷ of Piero Manzoni, however, this critique is laced with a good deal of black humour, as the artist constantly verifies her vertical axis with absolutely no intention of building anything).

Although sharing a resistance to instrumentalisation, Morris cannot be said to share Duchamp's 'work avoidance'³⁸ – the amount of labour that goes into the production of each drawing is, importantly, inordinate. But then again, should all this activity be counted as *work*? There is in fact a good measure of indolence in Morris's process, which distances it from any submission to a work ethic. This is figured not least in the way in which she cedes, as Duchamp had done, a significant dimension of her agency to another kind of externally imposed force: gravity. For Morris, the action of gravity is employed not to deform an object, but rather to provide a consistent, reiterable line.³⁹ As with Duchamp, this enables her to entertain a register of passivity in her practice, and to bring the drawings into contact with the non-human. Here the lines are not so much inscribed as registered – or even *precipitated*.

Roland Barthes wrote of Cy Twombly's marks that 'Everything flows and tumbles, showers like a fine rain or falls like grass – erasures made in indolence as though it were a question of giving a visibility to time, to the very tremor of time.'⁴⁰ Twombly's marks rain down without concern for any cursive elegance or signifying responsibility; for Barthes they are the product of a permissive indulgence of the body's inclinations. Morris's marks are similarly resistant to co-option by any injunction to signify or explain; but unlike Barthes's Twombly, rather than figuring an escape from subjection, Morris

34 *Ibid.*, p.119.

35 Molly Nesbit: 'The Language of Industry', in Thierry de Duve (ed.), *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1991, pp.350–84. See also Molly Nesbit, *Their Common Sense*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000.

36 B. Buchloh, *op. cit.*, p.120.

37 B. Fer, *op. cit.*, p.34.

38 Helen Molesworth, 'Work Avoidance: The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades', *The Art Journal*, vol.57, no.4, Winter 1998, pp.50–61.

39 The force of gravity has a history of being used to figure futility and absurdity – think, for example, of Bas Jan Ader's *Fall* series (1970–71), or, in a different sense, Eva Hesse's *Hang Up* (1966).

40 R. Barthes, 'Non Multa Sed Multum' (1976, trans. by Henry Martin), in Julie Sylvester, et.al., *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper*, New York: Schirmer/Mosel, 2004, p.30.

instead excessively mimics its effects. The lines seem to fall without exerting pressure; like a cast shadow or light rays imprinting themselves on a photosensitive surface, drawing here aligns with the operations of photography: 'a zero degree that cuts the human out', Morris comments.⁴¹ As Michael Newman closes a recent theorisation of drawing, 'If writing with light began by imitating drawing, as analogue photography itself becomes an archaic medium, drawing will aspire to the condition of the photograph, not as a projective representation, but rather as a resemblance produced by contact, like a life cast or death mask, an image not made by human hands, a relic like the stain on a shroud.'⁴² Morris's marks share this indexical status, and similarly waver on the boundary of human and non-human; they are, rather, *creaturely* deposits.

Yet these drawings do not mark time like most photographs in a single, brief exposure; they imply a far longer duration and register a more complex 'tremor of time', to use Barthes's phrase. On the one hand this tremor is visual: a liveness in the perceptual encounter as the infinitesimal variations play across the surface. In this they recall the weird animism of television sets, which, on receiving only a weak signal, or no signal at all, generate random static, or 'snow', from inside the apparatus. 'In response,' writes Richard Shiff, 'the amplifier seeks out a strong signal or any signal. In lieu of anything better, the receiving medium will produce a transient moving pattern of its own upon the raster – variations in illumination at or near the scale of the individual pixel, patterns which never coalesce into an intelligible "picture".'⁴³ The device produces a kind of meaningless visual noise, in lieu of a coherent or recognisable signal.

The question of movement and duration is more insistently introduced by the *cinematographic* aspect of these drawings, however. Like a projected film image, they comprise hundreds of discrete imprints, sequentially registered (indeed, 'snapped'). Of course the location of movement is different: whereas films are animated by the uniform motion of the projection device, drawings gain their dynamism from the unstable attentive and perceptual comportment of the viewer. Henri Michaux used the phrase 'cinematic drawing' to describe his repeated attempts, spanning several decades, to 'draw the consciousness of existing and the flow of time. As one takes one's pulse.'⁴⁴ Drawing, he asserted, provided a language more adequate than formalised French for the registration of the singular intensities of his duration. Writing, in its dependence upon the pre-given articulations of language, has a suicidal dimension (the point was made explicit by Louis Aragon in 1924).⁴⁵ Instead, then, Michaux created a multitude of 'illegible' characters – physiognomic glyphs that do not signify in the conventional sense, although they do address the knowledge and excitements of the body. Susan Morris makes the muteness of Michaux explicit, and evacuates the mark almost entirely of its expressive, improvisatory or indeed *human*, dimension, insisting instead upon an unyielding opacity.⁴⁶ Yet the problems are in some sense shared: that of the struggle to mark time, to construct an adequate record of presence, to make something that stands.⁴⁷ Morris's evacuated marks, however, lay no claim to sufficiency, preferring instead to concentrate on the compulsive drives brought about by such an impossible predicament.

41 Conversation with the artist, 6 September 2009.

42 M. Newman, *op. cit.*, p.105. On 'the stain on a shroud', see Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)' (trans. Thomas Repensek), *October* 29, Summer 1984, pp.63–81.

43 Richard Shiff, 'Photographic Soul', in David Green (ed.), *Where is the Photograph?*, Brighton: Photoworks, 2003, p.106.

44 Henri Michaux, 'To draw the flow of time' (1957), in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux* (exh. cat.), New York: Merrell and The Drawing Center, 2000, p.7.

45 For a discussion of Aragon's poem *Suicide* within the context of the work of Marcel Broodthaers, see B. Buchloh, 'Open Letters, Industrial Poems', *October* 42, Autumn 1987, pp.67–100.

46 The sense of production under duress is, however, not absent in Michaux, especially in light of his accounts of his experiments with mescaline. See, for example, his *Miserable miracle: la mescaline*, Paris: Gallimard, 1956.

47 Santner offers a multifaceted discussion of the 'signifying stress' associated with creaturely life, and the desperate search for more durable meanings amidst a landscape of 'enigmatic signifiers' that excite one's need and desire but remain restlessly opaque. See E. Santner, *op. cit.*, pp.33ff.

Michaux once dreamt of a kind of infinitely supple, liquid language that would be able to register the continuous shifts in the intensities of subjective life. The reality of such a language was explicitly figured by Marcel Broodthaers in his *La Pluie (Projet pour un texte)* (*The Rain: Project for a Text*, 1969).⁴⁸ Sitting outside at a makeshift desk, a deadpan Broodthaers engages in the Sisyphean task of writing in the rain. As soon as the ink touches the paper, the ink dissolves into a small sea of eddies and wash. Writing degenerates into drawing, and drawing into a mere stain. Here, a liquid language is a *flooded* language, one without proper articulation and therefore degenerating into an entropic glut. Onto the final frames of this short film the words 'Projet pour un texte' are superimposed. The sense of futility underlying Broodthaers's project is closer to the affective atmosphere of Morris's work. Indeed, Morris can be seen to be 'writing' such a text – one that is reflexively engaged with the problems of signification – but she is I think performing a rather different role. Her labour is as much Penelopean as Sisyphean. That is, it might be interminable, but the effort is backgrounded by an affective investment and perhaps even by a shadow of hopefulness; the artist's attention retains the implication of *waiting*.

In what sense is this procedure akin to the analytic session? The question is perhaps too speculative, but it is posed by the artist's reference to Georges Perec's short account of his own analysis, '*Les lieux d'une ruse*' ('The Scene of a Stratagem', 1977).⁴⁹ After years of taking notes on his dreams, Perec began to feel that they were only being dreamt so as to be transformed into texts. He did not want the same to be the case with the yield of his analysis and, instead of recording the details of his sessions, he would simply make a cursory notation in his diary of when a session took place; in '*Les lieux d'une ruse*' he lists the perfunctory notes that occasionally accompanied his entries (usually registering disappointment): "sad", "drab", "long-winded", "not much fun", "a pain in the arse", "crap", "pretty dim", "pretty shitty", "depressing", "laughable", "anodyne", "nostalgisome", "feeble and forgettable", etc.⁵⁰ There is something of Perec's resistance to representing and narrativising his experience that resonates with Morris's methods. Perec writes of the necessary destruction of 'the great wall of ready-made memories' and of 'the rationalizations I had taken refuge in' before he could gain access to his own story and his own voice: 'I had to retrace my steps, to remake the journey I had already made, all of whose threads I had broken.'⁵¹

Progress was slow, he reports, but the 'drab' and 'anodyne' sessions provided 'something resembling a fold, a pleat, a pocket'⁵² in the continuity of everyday life; a space that was 'far from the din of the town, outside of time, outside of the world'.⁵³ By undergoing this ritual two or three times a week for four years, and by way of such 'repetitive and exhausting gymnastics',⁵⁴ an unpicking of a too familiar weave of narratives and well worked-out phrases could occur. Walter Benjamin famously referred to the 'Penelope work of forgetting' in Proust, and, as I have indicated, Morris's drawings might be seen as the residue of such a Penelopean labour.⁵⁵ Worked on over many months, their seemingly absurd repetitions install a kind of blankness that claims not to present any kind of solution, but might

48 See H. Michaux, *Emergences/Resurgences* (1972), in *Drawing Papers* 14, New York: The Drawing Center, 2000; especially p.11. See also Richard Sieburth, 'Signs of Action: the Ideograms of Ezra Pound and Henri Michaux', in C. de Zegher (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 211ff.

49 Conversation with the artist, 22 June 2009.

50 Georges Perec, 'The Scene of a Stratagem' (1977), *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (trans. John Sturrock), London: Penguin, 1997.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*, p.167.

53 *Ibid.*, p.169.

54 *Ibid.*, p.172.

55 Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', *Illuminations* (ed. Hannah Arendt), London: Fontana, 1992, p.198.

nevertheless (and with a certain canniness proper to Penelopean labour) still deliver a pocket of time in which the 'nihilistic vitality' of various addictive fictions is 'deanimated'.⁵⁶ This 'pointless activity' – hiding a surface – might be read as the making of a hole in the fabric of discourse, engineering a 'dent in falsity', to use Broodthaers's phrase, and as a refusal to fully identify with the rules, codes and seductions of the symbolic order (hinting instead at the obscene dimension which guarantees its efficacy).⁵⁷ Under duress, then, drawing's constraint is made over into a stratagem for clearing a space from the restless injunctions and compulsions to which we are normally subject.

⁵⁶ E. Santner, *op. cit.*, p.81.

⁵⁷ Marcel Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward', *October* 42, Autumn 1987, p.40.