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THE SENSE OF THE LINE
BETWEEN DRAWING AND WRITING

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Whilst categorical distinctions between writing and drawing practices often separate cerebral sense-making from the sensuous encounter of bodies and materials, they also rehearse hierarchical, if not straightforward class-based, values. 'The sense of the line' develops what Jean-François Lyotard calls the 'energetics' of the line, its capacity to touch us, by *reading* and *looking* at two drawings by Raymond Pettibon. Insisting on the inseparability of the line in writing and drawing, this essay not only explores the deep intervolution of *both* lines on a material and bodily level but also traces the drawing-writing distinction to a desire to *see-as*, rather than to see, thus imposing categories to limit an otherwise complex and irreducible encounter. As the line's graphic and plastic qualities cannot be neatly separated into distinct writerly and drawerly practices, looking at art and the reading of words are already intervolved with one another.

Rather than reduce writing to its verbal content and drawing to its material instantiation, this essay pursues the line that draws both the letter and the picture as an indivisible constituent of both practices. In doing so, it aims to disturb the common assignation of intelligibility and sensoriality to writing and the picture, respectively. This division carries forth into the presumed binary of theory and practice, which, despite the elegant articulations of drawing research, persists, not least in the phrase *practice*-led/based research or in the reluctance or hesitance of drawing artists or drawing writers to commit to their written lines in the manner they do to their drawn ones (cf. e.g., Adams 2014; Quinn 2020; Robson, Brady and Hopkins 2010; Taylor 2014). The purpose of the undertaking is thus twofold, not only does it embed the drawn mark in writing, but it also shows the verbal in the drawing. Any social potential of either mark is therefore illimitable to an exclusive understanding of its sensuous and intelligible or sensory and cognitive appeal. Though this essay proceeds along a theoretical trajectory, it explores the drawing-writing of Raymond Pettibon and draws on my own linework that continuously engages with the written and the drawn mark.

If any categorical distinction between drawing and handwriting can be drawn, Tim Ingold has repeatedly argued that it may be difficult to locate exactly where such a line of division would separate one practice from the other (2007: 3; 2011: 181; 2013: 125, 129–131: 2015a). In fact, he has frequently emphasised the need to consider linework as coextensive between the word and the picture, and even as the thread running between a whole host of practices, from walking to weaving and from observing to storytelling (Ingold 2011: 177–226; 2013: 125–141; 2015b: 53–59). To invoke a distinction between drawing and writing on the basis of pictures and the verbal would be merely diversionary by averting the entire attraction of the problematic through the displacement of two complex practices with two others. Moreover, the snap connections made between drawing and pictures, and writing and language, respectively, simply rehearse counterparts – or worse, umbrella concepts – that can only arrive at (pre)determined categories. The expanding field of *Medienphilosophie* that explores the intervolution of writing and the picture (Driesen et al. 2012; Krämer, Cancik-Kirschbaum, and Totzke 2012; Mersmann 2015), as well as recent ekphrastic scholarship about the non-antagonistic relations between the picture and the verbal (Louvel 2011; Kennedy 2012; Kennedy and Meek 2018), are testament to the limitations of ontological categories that can only contain themselves. Tellingly, a procedure that separates writing from its graphic instantiation or drawing from its verbal image distances the debate from the very line that constitutes and animates both practices. Rather than following the tortuous bends of a shared line, the picture-writing distinction insists, from the start, on two straight lines, via arrows that indicate two sides of a split that replicates only itself.

The flow of one line between alphabetic characters and their unique pictures of themselves is publicly and testimonially exercised in every signature. It draws together the seeming divergence of allographic characters, whose precise formation only requires that one letter is distinct enough from another, and their specific autographic inscription evidencing the particularity of every push and pull that gives form to and differentiates this letter from any other form of itself. In the stroke of the signature we can trace the lineage of writing and drawing through their common graphic gesture, as the Latin transmission (*graphicus*) of the Greek root suggests (OED 2016, s.v. *graphic* adj./n.; cf. Derrida 1993: 30; Elkins 2001: 83; Harris 1986: 125; Heidegger 1994: 125; Ingold 2007: 136; Lerm Hayes 2004: 63; Miller 1992: 75). Furthermore, though not unconnected from the aspect of the letter's form, the signature also only inscribes itself on this sheet, yet its reproducibility is caught up in an economy of administration that both insists on the authenticity of unique strokes and the possibility that they may be duplicated. The

philosophical interest that the signature generates lies precisely in its demonstrative and demonstrable insistence that writing in general contradicts any assumption of unique and absolute referral to one context because its functioning relies on the possibility of repetition. Jacques Derrida thus summarises that signatures must be repeatable in order to function in their pure singularity:

> *Effects of signature are the most common thing in the world. But the condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously […] the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity. In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal (1988: 20).*

The overall effect that Derrida traces, however, is much broader and illimitable to notions of the graphic line as a necessary confluence of writing and drawing. Underpinning all writing is iterability, that is, the repeatability of a mark that cites itself and thus its sameness in its difference. The line of drawing and writing is therefore a line that is altered in the repetition between them. It is different in the sameness between them. Pettibon's signature in *Untitled (To whom it …)* (2001) (Fig. 1) presents itself as drawing and writing, not only because writing is the drawer's practice here, but, as the artist rarely ever signs the recto of a work, his performative signature thus not only elaborates itself as a conventional mark of ownership and debt but also the flow of lines is inseparable from what constitutes the work itself.
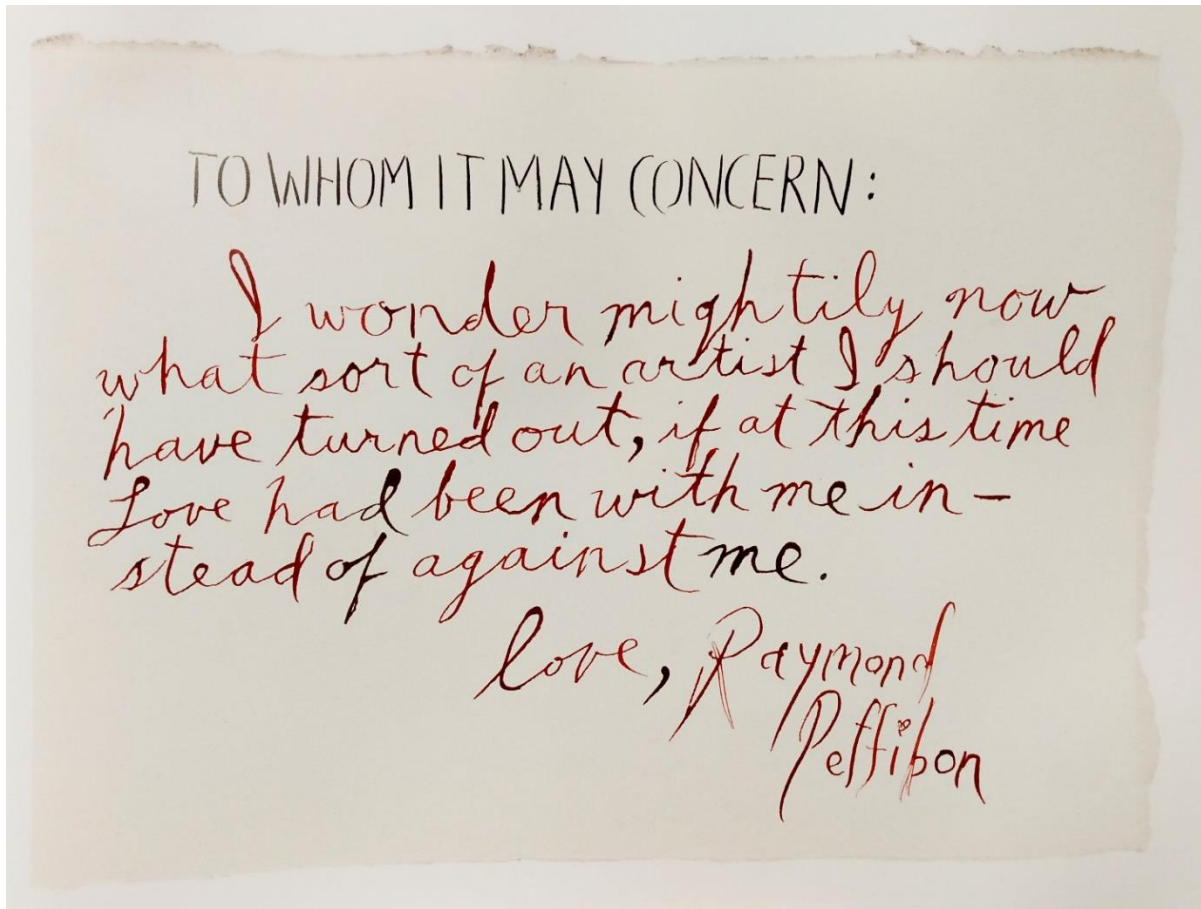

FIGURE 1: RAYMOND PETTIBON *UNTITLED (TO WHOM IT …)* (2001), PEN AND INK ON PAPER, 29.2 X 38.7CM

This is not to suggest that other artists' signatures are ever isolable from their works, rather, that inscribing 'Raymond Pettibon' in this work demonstrably broaches any neat boundary between its inside and outside by playing with the convention and boundary. Like the title of a self-portrait that appears to affirm the status of the work in relation to a viewer, artist and mirror, the signature, as the 'parergonal border' of the work, belongs neither to the work nor sits outside it (Derrida 1993: 64; cf. 1987: 1–147). Pettibon's drawing signs the work, but he also signs it to show the signing of the work, and he signs it to show Raymond Pettibon, the artist who seldomly signs the work, signing the work, and thus he signs it to show another, an artist who signs the work, as signing the work, both his work and that of the other, and so on in an iteration of deferral and difference that repeats in alteration. And yet, signature and drawing are inseparable in and out of the work.

Every stroke in drawing – whether brush, pencil, charcoal or else – already bestows the singular, and nevertheless repeatable, sign of its maker and material onto the work. Each mark, as autograph, signs the work 'before even the undersigning of the proper name' (Derrida 1987: 193). In adopting the character of 'Raymond Pettibon', the artist with the signature that makes the work, Pettibon signs the work with his 'good little' patronym (Kimmelman 2005) where he had previously signed it through every line and flick of the nib. And thus, the signature itself is signed multiply, repeatedly, over and over inscribing the mark of its author in order to inscribe the name of its author. While every autographic mark must repeat itself in order to be autographic to Pettibon's work, it also differs and therefore splits any absolute referral, pointing at once to its forebears and heirs. The possibility of its repetition allows it to be read in its singularity. However, as the signature constituted by many signatures indicates, the autograph is not whole, not one, not replete. It must be repeated to function, and no flick of the brush is lacking or complete. In the leg of the signature's R, as in the downstrokes of d and b, Pettibon's line railroads — one line showing itself to be already two — as pressure on the nib forces the tines apart and the swift spread in line's width starves the reservoir of ink. The pen-form of the signature therefore also reminds us of the inseparability of the stroke's material and gesture, and thus, moreover, of the indivisibility of alphabetic legibility and drawerly idiosyncrasy. Each letter rehearses no absolute, ideal form but a differential iterability (see, Reifenstein 2018a). The jots, skits, minims, and lobes of the artist's signature may be identifiable calligraphic or drawerly elements but signing needs no name to sign in another's and its own. The stroke is neither complete nor broken as its signing does not have a metric.

Besides, the inky line on paper is only part of a stroke that precedes and succeeds this mark. Its uninterrupted beginning belongs to a material gesture that traces a stroke in space and briefly touches the paper. The line shows the dynamics of a stroke lead around and on paper, a manuduction that momentarily draws out the remainder of an autographic ductus of writing bodies or, differently, inscribed in the signature in the artist's hand are its past and future drawings. While we may call the process manual, its bodies are not divisible (Reifenstein 2019: 114–15). Neither anatomical nor medial categories limit its trace. Hence, the line carries forth a stroke that never began in any originary sense but has been ongoing and continues into every signature — whether in drawing or writing. In this ongoing familiarity of drawing and writing in the signature and in Pettibon's drawing-writings, the sensuous intelligibility and intelligible sensuousness of the line shows itself as what *matters*. As the inky deposit in and on paper, the line is illimitable to medial or sensory ascriptions; it belongs and energises drawing and writing: the affective and the cerebral, the sensuous and the rational. It opens up drawing to the possibility of reading and the written word to sensuous movement. Any paradigm for the

conception of knowledge therefore needs to encompass the illimitability of the line across the sensory, the sense-making, and the sensuous.

Though writing's marks have 'a dimension of visibility, of sensory spatiality', for Jean-François Lyotard they facilitate the eyes' scanning of the page in the recognition of particular signals: for example, letters, syllables, and words (2011: 63). Writing is here an expediency of communication where '[r]eading is hearing, not seeing' (2011: 211). In as far as writing possesses a sensory and spatial dimension, it is as a signifier and not (its) signified, designated, or reference. However, Lyotard swiftly interjects that this conventional usage does not prevent artists and poets from providing testaments that the sensible of language and writing may include the sensory. As in Pettibon's drawn writing, the division of writing's content and its form can be shaken when words are themselves dispersed on the page to 'make [...] visible, [...] thereby smuggling the [...] emblem of contingency [...] into the sign' (Lyotard 2011: 57; cf. Reifenstein 2018b). However, for Lyotard, the intrusion of the sensory rests on the disposition of words and not their printed or written form:

> *Where does it [the sensory] dwell? Not directly in the 'matter' of words (what would this be, exactly? their written, printed figure? their sound? the 'color' of letters?), but in their disposition. One will counter that the sensible too — signification — depends entirely on the disposition of units. But our understanding of disposition—the poetic dispersal across the page — is a disturbance of the disposition that ensures signification; it upsets communication (2011: 68).*

Lyotard detects how written words may act as their own visible reference, yet, significantly at this point, he limits their power to dispersal across the page, keeping the closed integrity of the signifying unit. Importantly though, this observation marks the interdependence of writing as signifier and writing as plastic space. It is worth noting the exact phrasing Lyotard employs, on one single page of the translation of his *Discourse, Figure*, to show the extent to which he emphasizes the separation and intercutting of ordinary use and artistic licence. Lyotard restricts such usage of writing to artistic practices, because art speaks differently from 'everyday language', in which the 'linguistic signifier' can 'become completely transparent in favor of the signified' (2011: 78). Conversely, art seeks 'to highlight the signifier', with the consequence that 'linguistic matter' may be 'burdened with sensory value.' Poetry may thus affect 'that the term's natural transparency be clouded [...] thanks to the ordering the poet has imposed on verbal matter' (2011: 78).

The tense pursuit to uphold both, the transparency and unity of the signifier for the sake of communication, and the burdensome umbrage imposed on it by art, 'is answered', as Kiff Bamford writes, 'by the inevitable recognition of the figural at the heart of discourse' (2013: 887). For Lyotard, the *figure* works to produce excess or a transgression of signification, thereby provoking a thickness or opacity in discourse or art that hints at the limitation of signification, designation, and their combination to constrain the play of meaning. The figural partakes in discourse and perception but it is ontologically different from the figurative and the textual, though not in opposition to them. For linguists, the figure in (poetic and artistic) discourse effects 'violations of the system's order [that] produce [...] meaning-effects that cannot be the result of the normal interplay of semantic and/or syntactic givens' (Lyotard 2011: 283). The violations may occur within linguistic space but cannot be explained by it as they disturb the arbitrariness of language in discourse to impact the body sensorially. Pettibon's own use of writing as illimitable to referential meaning exceeds Lyotard's initial emphasis on the disposition of words on the

sheet of paper. Though he is a voracious reader, Pettibon is, of course, no writer in any conventional use of the term. And yet, writing is his drawing practice in many works. And it is in his drawerly approach to writing that the convergence of Lyotard's figure in discourse and art may be glimpsed. Despite its scrawly script, Pettibon's alter ego's signature fulfils the requirements of transparently recognisable letters, and yet — as the foregoing account has shown — its interpretive opacity and irreducibility to limitable meanings emerges in the artistic practice as writing and writerly practice as art.
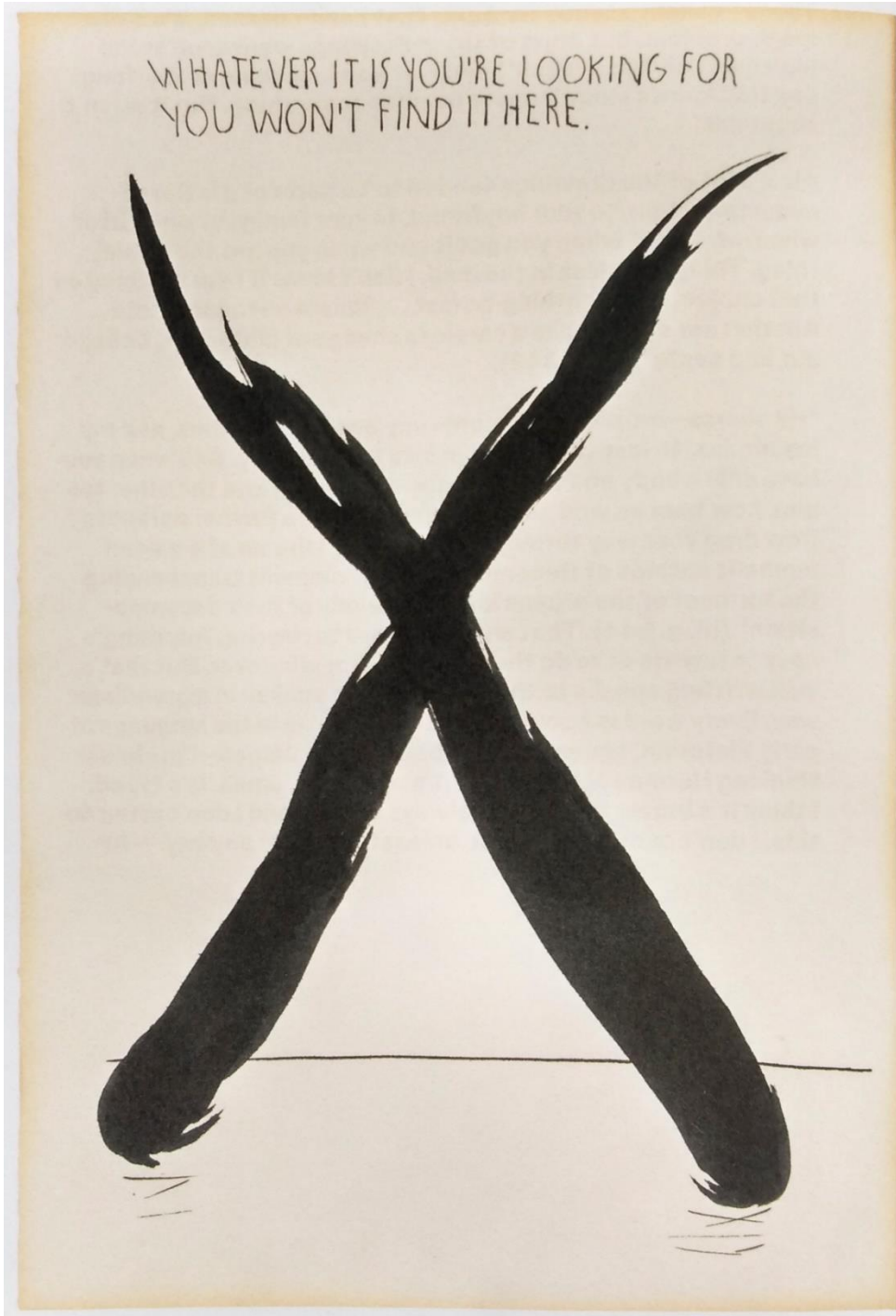

FIGURE 2: RAYMOND PETTIBON *UNTITLED (WHATEVER IT IS …)* (1991), PEN AND INK ON PAPER, 45.5 X 30.3CM

In *Untitled (Whatever it is …)* (1991) (Fig. 2), Pettibon confronts the viewer with a large-scale letter that refuses to only be read as such. At first glance, especially when the work is approached from a distance, the alphabetic letter X is perhaps most noticeable, while the smaller text above it frames it to be read in the manner of the ideographic marker (*here*) on a treasure map. Thus, X also merely becomes a(n algebraic) variable (x) for the 'whatever it is you're looking for'. Moreover, X still crosses off further readings that do not exclusively belong to discursive conventions in its appeal to a wide contextual, material, and bodily reading and looking in- and outside of drawing practice. Multiplying the readings and viewings in this way, X's linework is encountered repeatedly, but at once, between careful scans and saccadic skits. X does not merely show itself full frontal with absolute attention: an isolated object in front of a detached observer. It is seen and read marginally, obliquely, intently by bodies whose eyes adjust for themselves and trace not just lines, but an abundance of space around an X-shaped void. Linework is here not a noticeable exception in but part of the world. It is insolable from the ecru ground that bears it, not because it obscures the paper's colour but because paper and ink require another to be read and seen.

That artistic practice already instantiates writing's inherent capacity to violate the supposed systematization of language and its grammar points not at the failure of art but rather at the shortcomings of the supposed system. As Derrida frequently states, the necessity to marginalise and exclude occurrences on the basis of their non-ordinariness indicates, on the contrary, that they carry structural significance (Derrida 1988: 1–23, 29–110.). If they are prevalent enough to have to be excluded, they already structure the phenomenon. Derrida keenly turns the usage of these terms around and, in particular, recycles the use of 'parasitic' in a reversal and displacement of the term (Derrida 1988: 16; cf. Austin 1962: 22, 104; Searle 1977: 205). The point is not to illegitimise the possible distinction of artistic use from an ordinary one but to show that concepts of distinction not only carry an 'axiology, in all of its systematic and dogmatic insistence, [which] determines an object' generally but also necessarily induces 'value-judgements' (Derrida 1988: 92). Concepts in and of themselves impose structures, often binaries, because by necessity they seek to limit and legitimise: they decide what is inside and outside, what belongs and does not. The limits and distinctions may be necessary and legitimate because they belong to the notion of 'concept'. The differentiation by degree still works within the same framework, oscillating between clearly delimited margins.

Thus, to focus in again on the line, why does Lyotard limit the sensory space of writing to that of the dispersal of words on the page, strongly opposing other registers and in particular greater magnification? Looking at the lines that constitute writing, whether handwritten or printed, Lyotard detects a bodily difference in contrast to some (not all) lines in art. The lines of writing are recognised, and their decipherment does not engage the reader bodily, because the reader is looking for predetermined differences of signification in a closed system. 'Whatever it is you're looking for' turns out to be exactly 'whatever it is you're looking for'. As a reader, Lyotard recognises the lines of writing without seeing them; he approaches the sheet of paper as a reader not a viewer.

The graphic value of the written word is for Lyotard the descriptor for a signifier that can '*induce directly the recognition of what it represents*' (Lyotard 2011: 169; italics in original). A plastic signifier, on the other hand, requires to be seen, slowing the process of looking. The plastic form of a letter is without value. Tracing the shapes of a plastic signifier induces a bodily resonance, whereas the shapes of letters

are entirely meaningless beside referring to their verbal values which have the acute capacity to oppose one letter to another. *Untitled (Whatever it is …)* recognises the illimitability of looking at, not reading of, art and the X that marks the spot, with its precision and bounty, negotiates the shared difference of the verbal and the plastic.

As the verbal sign is arbitrary in relation to the body of the reader, writing is an '*informational* space', in so far as 'the letters' "rhythm," "position," and "sequence" refer to a position occupied by the reader, which serves as reference-point, this calibration owes nothing to the body's aesthetic power' (Lyotard 2011: 208, 207; italics in original). The body only faces the text to identify the differences, or oppositions, between a limited number of letters in a system. Lyotard's appeal to the 'aesthetic' and 'bodily resonance' is critical in describing the sensory as open to information and form. His distinction verges on an opposition between the two and a difference that requires displacement and reversal (cf. Dews 1984: 43; Bennington 1988: 68–70; Lydon 2001: 17; Hudek 2011: 11; Bamford 2012: 62, 2013: 887; Helms 2013: 129). Bamford proposes that Lyotard upholds the categorical distinction between the letter's line and drawing's line

> in order that the figural aspect of the line is not enclosed by the letter—that the visible aspect of the line is not written out when it is written about: this is the paradox that is at the heart of Lyotard's writings on art. (Bamford 2012: 62)

Lines themselves are not limited to the status of graphic signifier, in Lyotard's sense, but rather torn 'between the highest degree of legibility' and 'the potential energy accumulated and expressed in graphic form as such' (Lyotard 2011: 210). The line of writing oscillates between 'plastic meaning' and 'articulated signification', between 'touch[ing] upon an energetics [and touching] upon writing' (Lyotard 2011: 210), between being seen and saying. Pettibon's line, in its vacillation between alphanumeric character, ideogram, pictogram, and drawerly marks, highlights this intervolution of sensuous, material, bodily, discursive, and so on touch. For Lyotard, the potential energy of the line provides an ambiguous state to resonate with the body gazing at it. But this resonance arrives at the detriment of reading, because legibility 'does not impede the eye's racing', whilst 'with the energetics of the plastic line one must stop at the figure' (Lyotard 2011: 210). Reading only touches upon each line lightly, running across it swiftly, without intending to take in its graphic energetics as plastic. Considering the linework of writing as plastic space requires time, and Lyotard suggests that the slowness that the figural requires is difficult to accept and give when the line is so easily reducible to verbal language. Despite its initial simplicity, Pettibon's X slows the racing of the eye — and thus its reading — showing the simple glyph to have a body and a space. A low set horizon line shows the alphabetic character as a character on a stage, towering proudly on sturdy legs. Inseparable from the off-white and space of the sheet, the character is seen lit almost equally from all sides, casting only a minimal shadow of itself through its miniature offspring on the ground. As if by ironic wink at the viewer, Pettibon's cross hatches a short shadow at its own feet. The crosshatch as conventionalised spatial form of drawing practice meets itself and its other in the conventional space of the alphabetic X. In this way, the X of the alphabet and drawing's cross occupy a graphic and plastic stage that belongs to neither and both.

As the convention of the crosshatch indicates, even the line of drawing may lose itself easily in the rationalism of signification or designation, especially in a culture that 'has rooted out sensitivity to plastic space' (Lyotard 2011: 212). Such a drawn line is, for Lyotard, a scripted line that can be read as signifier and thus verbally, or a line that is ruled by geometric optics and the orthogonal space of perspective which results in representation. Like Derrida's trait, Lyotard draws the line, as though strained by

multiple hands, on and through itself, though not linearly between poles but curvilinearly, undulating itself. In the desire of the line to connote, to become a signifying language or to make visible, 'the figure submits to language' it becomes open to recognition and writing. (The possibility for perspective to institute a kind of language is also variously problematised by Derrida; for a succinct discussion, see Brunette and Wills 1994: 4; Lyotard 2011: 213).

The other figural line, however, which does not translate the sensory into the intelligible, is the line that works on its own accord. This line may be seen as Lyotard wants us to see it, laterally and not focused; its figure never in the centre, never in our vision, and yet able to be seen, with eyes and without. Lyotard's line, as exemplified in Pettibon's work here, struggles and meanders between its own plasticity and its verbal exigency, between seeing and articulated vision. The line describes the necessary overlap of the discursive and the figural, 'suggesting that a (discursive) principle of readability and a (figural) principle of unreadability shared one in the other' (Lyotard and van den Abbeele 1984: 17). As Bamford puts it, Lyotard's concern for the line is also a 'desire for unity where there can be none' (Bamford 2012: 49). And thus, Lyotard's line sinuates without unity or centre through an impossible opposition. The line that is integral to the letter is also its end, going beyond the letter, somewhere: 'The line is the letter's life, its rhythm, and at the same time its death, its obliteration, as in a signature' (Lyotard 1988: 463).

The line of the signature, like that of calligraphy, is not exceptional to handwriting or even writing at large, rather it is merely a marginalised line that nevertheless already structures ordinary use. And it is not just the ordinary use of the line of writing, but also itself as the line of drawing. How can the line of drawing not be the same line as the one that writes? Or differently, for there are not two, how can the line of drawing not be its other in writing? Stretching the tinglish line of the blind sketch continuously along, honing in on itself, finding the line in the space between lines, to inscribe it with a note that barely signifies but does, and which enacts the missing link of lines, the line becomes its own extension in words or pictures.

> The ambiguity of writing, object of reading and of sight, is present in the initial ambiguity of drawing. An open line, a line closed on itself. The letter is an unvarying closed line; the line is the open moment of a letter that perhaps closes again elsewhere, on the other side. Open the letter, you have the image, the scene, and magic. Close the image, you have the emblem, the symbol, and the letter (Lyotard 2011: 264).

The drawn line is the parasitic disturbance of writing, smuggling its visible figure into the one of discourse whose verbal signs become clouded by their own plasticity, burdened by their own weight.

The line has no originary status to drawing or writing: it does not create, though its inscribed trace runs in both. And the recognisability of letters is a seeing-as not seeing. The knowledge of letterforms is also the knowledge of seeing again and again, and of not wanting to see differently. It is recognition despite seeing. Learning a new script, we reread our writing as drawing. Every skit, every stroke, every curve, every loop is skit and stroke and curve and loop again, before, eventually, they become the minims, lobes, and bows of something legible. Until then they move the body with the force of lines that move themselves. And, right at that point, they work together, insolable, the illegible legible telling us not to see but read. They perform as Lyotard's plastic signifiers unrecognised for their verbality. Here, seeing is at the point of inarticulate vision. In order to make sense of the line then – both the line in the alphabet and the one in the picture – we need to read and look, to draw and write, to sense the energetics of the line without wanting to classify before our eyes.

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