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## **Drawing the letter**

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### **Abstract**

Considering a drawn letter in one of Raymond Pettibon's works, the article seeks to unravel the putatively facile distinction between drawing and writing. It asserts that the lack of iconic 'motivation' of alphabetic characters does not prevent them from harbouring further meanings that are indissociable from their form. The article thus questions the persistent legibility–visibility dichotomy in which writing's letters are trapped between mere allography, whose graphic appearance beyond readability is irrelevant, and sign, whose semantic value is constituted multiply through its verbal and pictural qualities. Instead, this binary logic is displaced through the recognition of the mark that is both drawn and written, yet irreducible to either, and thus capable of pointing beyond itself and yet refer to its own form. In showing how the mark in Pettibon's drawing may be read and viewed in multiple non-exclusive ways, the shared graphic capacity of writing and drawing is highlighted. The article promotes a perspective on writing that requires the acknowledgement of its graphic form without demanding a new dubious graphology. The writing of the article itself continuously engages its own inextricable entanglement in the issues discussed by accentuating the play that writing already entails if it is also seen and not merely read.

### **Keywords**

writing

drawing

graphic

language

Jacques Derrida

Raymond Pettibon

sign

**Figure 1:** Raymond Pettibon (1998). *Untitled (No man goes)*. © Raymond Pettibon.

In this *entre-nous* spirit, then, old confidant, before we join the others  
[...] I privately say to you, old friend (unto you, really, I'm afraid),  
please accept from me this unpretentious bouquet of very early-  
blooming parentheses: (((()))).

—— J.D. Salinger, *Seymour: An Introduction*

Raymond Pettibon writes 'I NO MAN GOES TO THE GUILLOTINE WITH GREATER APPREHENSION THAN I SIT DOWN AT MY DESK'. More accurately, he does not type, he does not print, his hand draws brush and pen across a sheet of paper in a gesture that *leads* a line tracing itself in pictural inscription. Written and drawn, what remains belongs to both the picture and writing yet without a line of division, without a line that splits and divides itself to belong only in parts. And though remaining written, we cannot say that he marks it with a giant lyrical 'I', for he may return and give us the remainders of his list: II No man is more cauterized than I

smoothing the page. III No man plunges lower from the gallows than I from the end of my pen. Between the letter ‘I’ and the Latin numeral ‘I’ we find the rehearsal of a history of pictures, letters and numbers that is deeply intertwined. The ‘I’ is here also the iconic notch in the tally stick or the stroke that illustrates that only one finger of the counting hand is extended (cf. Keyser 1988; Ifrah 2000). Rather than a description or signification, the numerical sign is a depiction and instantiation. Vilém Flusser describes numbers as ideographs – ‘signs for ideas, for images seen with the “inner eye”’ – that promote a ‘formal, entirely abstract thought’ that is distinct from what he considers the linear progression of the alphabetic one (2002: 27, 1988: 24, author’s translations). Flusser’s choice of words is of course noteworthy, for he seeks to identify a rivalry at the heart of the alphanumeric system that pulls towards the old foes of image and sound at once. The thought that arises out of the image is formal precisely because it is contingent on the mark’s form. Yet it is the formality of the stroke itself that allows it to be an alphabetic, numerical and alphanumeric sign. Moreover, the mark is not exhausted as a multiply readable sign because Pettibon’s hefty ‘I’ offers us also the side-view of the guillotine’s priapic post, the beam of a gibbet, the logogrammatic self-portrait of the artist, the homophonic eye looming large and looking at us, hell’s double doors opening after the guillotine, the graphic *cut* that separates head from trunk etc. The typographic transcription of the mark through a crude capital letter ‘I’ in 9pt *Palatino Light* [to be amended according to publication’s typesetting] has long lost its adequacy as no translation as an alphabetic ‘I’ can capture the scope of Pettibon’s ‘I’. Or perhaps it can. What if the viewer and reader of Pettibon’s work continues to read ‘I’ as the letter ‘I’ without limiting it to any *pure* verblivity of the ninth letter of the alphabet? The silent enunciation of ‘I’ does not preclude the singular stroke from signing itself as letter, numeral, ideograph, personal pronoun, post, homophonic organ, space between doors and so on. ‘I’ is iconic of ‘I’ and acts as the deictic, enunciative referral to an illimitable mark. Conversely, it marks the

singular stroke that continues to exceed a reading limited to reading. ‘I’, its anaphoric substitute, already contaminates every other letter ‘I’ that may be read elsewhere.

When Tim Ingold observes that writing used to denote ‘a practice of inscription’, leaving hardly any difference ‘between the craft of the draughtsman and that of the scribe’ (2007: 3), we recognize the author as inscriber, not the typist or wordsmith. Pettibon’s pen and brush are not simply tools for neutral transcription of speech – or more specifically: oral signs – into graphic marks of similar or even equivalent *signification*. This is not to say that the pen is boundless or superior to the typewriter, word processor or printer; all remain constitutive of writing. They produce writing whose graphic qualities are incommensurate with notions of mere speech reproduction. Because alphabetic writing relies on conventional signs, it is understandably straightforward to insist on a clear separation between their legibility and visibility. Jean-Gérard Lapacherie notes that the *visibility* of typography, in other words, to read (*legère*) typography as typography, is often seen to spell the end of reading the text.

A page is meant to be read. It is not meant to be looked at. Printed words on a page are barely noticeable. As soon as reading begins, our perception of typography ends. Typographic artifices force the reader to look at the text. They make it visible as a thing and as a thing endowed with an existence of its own. (1994: 64)

From a historical perspective, visibility and legibility of a text are often regarded as irreconcilable oppositions (Leenhardt 1994: 82). Lapacherie provides a puzzling nineteenth-century French example, according to which some psychiatrists had shown an interest in writers who displayed an overenthusiastic use of typographic marks, characterizing the authors as ‘fous littéraires’ (literary madmen) (Raymond Queneau cited in Lapacherie 1994:

63; cf. Schäfer 2009). The particular perception of the relationship between typography and writing, although no longer regarded as a medical issue, extends to contemporary use. Journal articles, book chapters and theses are to be submitted according to stipulations that were drawn up for typewriters and that seek to insist on an impossible neutrality between writing and its own form, ironically by highlighting that, for academic purposes, only one particular visibility–legibility relationship is permitted. Multi-columnar texts with parallel discourses, overwritings, strike-throughs, divergence from typographic uniformity, explorations of different material constituents etc. remain rather exceptional, especially in scholarly publications. W. J. T. Mitchell sums it up, when he notes that the spatial dimension of script is ‘normally backgrounded’ and the physical characteristics of a text are usually determined by means of *production*, economic considerations or marketing (1980: 550).

That readers may equally and at the same time be viewers who are acutely perceptive of the visibility of script is apparent in graphic design *products* in which typographic forms are used to enhance messages, produce memorable letterings, create typo-pictographic brand associations, subvert or supplement images and so on. Nonetheless, at other times writing is treated as a transparent text whose individual graphemes have to be subsumed into the singularly definable characteristic of a commercially and administratively efficient Unicode. The typographic experiments of Dada, Futurism, Lettrism, Situationists International, Fluxus and concrete poetry receive occasional if, however, marginal interest, but Johanna Drucker observes a hesitance amongst contemporary writers and perhaps hostility amongst editors and publishers towards typographically experimental work (1991: 232–33). Although her observation predates this study, the commercial and administrative limitations on the graphic scope of writing are still pronounced, as is the interpretative criticism that deals with writing in art through an immediate reduction to language. That the commonplace graphic standards of our computerized writing habits are impositions of particular forces and desires is perhaps

as easily overlooked as the consequences that they have on our understanding of writing. Lapacherie gives the example of *Champ Fleury*, a 1529 treatise on typography by Geoffroy Tory, which was written to harmonize the use of typefaces, leading and spacing (1994: 66–8). Although the texts produced subsequently became more standardized, the impositions of these restriction were also perceived to be in contradiction with the demands of some texts. Writer-typographers, such as Restif de la Bretonne, worked deliberately against this standardization and set their texts in a variety of typefaces and sizes: important characters and actions were capitalized or set in a larger font and phonic durations were indicated through spacings or reduced type size in lower-case letters. Lapacherie describes the effect of such work as producing a ‘synaesthetic relationship between phonic sensations which are perceived by the ear and visually perceived graphic sensation’ (1994: 68). Despite the conventional origins of alphabetic characters, their mimetic, iconic and affective potential as visual instantiations of language – and thus as part of the realm of the drawn mark – is not automatically debarred.

Differentiating texts according to their relationship between visible form and content, Leon Roudiez describes those texts that do not point at their own material make-up as readable or *transparent*, and contrasts them with others that are *opaque* and show themselves visibly (1978: 232–33). This understanding is interwoven with and a deliberate distortion of Roland Barthes’s *readable* and *writable* texts. The former are restrictive, authoritarian and closed; they have a determined set of possible, predictable readings. The latter are open and fluctuating, irreducible to a single meaning (1974: 10–12). Roudiez adapts this notion to include opacity and fullness, the quality of texts to affirm their own material visibility and audibility, respectively (1978: 233). Roudiez’s opacity thus also appears to echo Jean-François Lyotard’s use of the term to signal the incommensurable gap between the sign and its meaning, and the shift from reading text to seeing in light of *this* uncertainty of meaning.

Lyotard himself exploits this visibility-through-opacity dynamic typographically in his ‘Veduta’ chapter in *Discourse, Figure* by using an inverse roman–italic typesetting (2011: 157–201; cf. Lydon 2001: 17). In Roudiez’s conception, writing’s visibility exceeds its necessity for a text’s legibility, an understanding that differs strikingly from any transcriptural idea of writing as a form of speech notation.

Perceived as transcribed speech, writing acts as a storage vessel for a language whose chief purpose is vocal articulation and aural perception. Such explicit vocal primacy is consistently reinforced in linguistic scholarship that claims that written words ‘have no visual worth [and] reading is generally a visual experience only physiologically’ (James 1985: 439). Underlying such presumption is an assumed neutrality of the graphic sign, a *transparency* of the mark that allows unmediated access to a signification. The putative meaning or essence of writing is located somewhere behind the text or in it, but not bound up with it. Drucker conjectures that the disregard for typographic exigencies is indicative of a continued belief in a higher linguistic transparency that grants unmediated access to an underlying *truth*. She suggests that employing the visibility of texts *productively* and experientially works ‘toward negating the transcendent character of logos by refusing to allow the linguistic sign to be represented in a supposedly transparent visual mode’ (1991: 254). For Drucker (1995), written alphabetic characters, although arbitrary, are still capable of embodying meaning in their own right, and have done so in religious, philosophical, scientific and other practices since the ‘invention’ of the letter. She thus advocates a writing that refuses to neglect the mark that is, after all, a precondition of the writing act. Roudiez follows the same agenda, when he identifies a double paradox in an understanding of writing as transparent speech transcription (1975: 75). First, this kind of reading of texts must acknowledge the visibility of the sign but equally disavow the selfsame visibility: ‘[N]o sooner do those black signs become visible, if the text is transparent they almost at once become invisible again, having been replaced with mental



images of various kinds' (Roudiez 1978: 233). Second, because the purpose of transcriptural texts is a meaning wholly outside of its graphic make-up, their 'materiality could be termed immaterial' (Roudiez 1978: 233). The recognition of writing's visual characteristics in the generation and promotion of meaning, affect and sensation will not be produced, however, through instituting another semiotic layer that seeks to dissect and categorize a graphic mark into isolable aspects. The intervolution of iterable graphic traces through material and motor-sensory contingencies and affordances forms a differential mark that may be read, seen and interpreted but not absolutely unravelled and reduced to a signifier.

To discuss the formal qualities and iconic potential of the linguistic sign without limiting it, it is necessary to disentangle two different connections that (written and oral) language may have with any imaginable referent. To affirm the conventional – and possibly arbitrary – character of the linguistic signifier to its signified is not the same as (or even a necessary condition for) demanding a unitary, dichotomous relationship between the sign's form and content. Simply because a signifier has an established conventional relationship to a referent does not preclude the selfsame mark from also having or accruing multiple other, even contradictory, reference values or contingencies that exceed notions of univocal, linear signification. A simple example based on the grapheme <x> may illustrate the point. As a character of the Latin alphabetic script, it has a conventional, representative function in relation to a phoneme. Nevertheless, this does not prevent it from maintaining or accumulating supplementary and irrevocably linked values, for instance: Christ (through the nomina sacra: XP, XC, XPC), kiss (verb, noun), cross (verb, noun, adjective), map position, mistake or incorrect answer, indication of a vote, chiasmus, adult-content rating, death or unconsciousness (if replacing eyes), signature of the illiterate, indication of a hybrid, abscissa, the unknown or variable and so forth (cf. Green 2006). That these relations may be assigned a syntag- or paradigmatic status only reinforces that the iterable <x> does not preclude the

continuous accumulation of such meanings. To read <x> is therefore, to see and read it within an illimitable and contiguous field that includes signifieds and designates, and the potential of the sign's *figure* to exceed both. <x>'s relations to other referents and meanings are not merely one of linguistic abbreviation, rather it is one of the indivisible overlap of phonetics, ideographics, iconicity, picturality and so on. Precisely because <x> has a *visually* representative function for a phoneme – without being reducible to that phoneme – it maintains the capacity to be (re)linked and even codified iconically, ideographically, picturally etc. Like Pettibon's 'I', <x> operates as a letter irreducible to itself. That Pettibon's 'I' is not yet an <I>, i.e. that we have to *quote a particular* 'I' – disregarding the tautology – rather than a notional grapheme <I> that contains a variety of glyphs that are considered allographic, is an indication that the reading and viewing of 'I' has not been conventionalized to the same extent, although Pettibon's work (and this reading) are instances of this process. The possibility of quoting the mark at all, to iterate it outside of its proper context and locus, is, however, already enshrining that the mark may function as a sign whose identity is not identical to itself. Even in this very paragraph, the text relies demonstrably on the reader's ability to see the *silent* markers that indicate that the following is considered either a linguistic grapheme, <>, or a quotation, ' ', and read them through their unutterable form, in their irreducibility of form and content.

If the towering 'I' contains both the notion of the static character of legibility and the variable mark of visibility, how *ductile* is this sign that can be repeated and altered yet identified? How can we reconcile this apparent gap in the graphic of the sign that has form and yet also remains free from any particular form? David Scott Armstrong and Patrick Mahon ask this question seemingly also in view of Derridean iterability.

Is it possible to subtract a materially inscribed mark from its context, from itself? Material language takes place within a field of inscriptions, exchanges and erasures, forever repeating itself – and also always differing from itself. It traces a path between itself and other, between form and formlessness, ultimately offering itself as a site of negotiation and transition between the receiver of language and the world. (2008: 12)

Nelson Goodman's analysis of the notational character of different symbol systems provides a fruitful point of friction. His structural approach indicates how the above questions arise out of categorical impositions that seek to constitute writing, rather than respond to it. Discussing authenticity in art, Goodman differentiates *autographic* art, in which the distinction between forgery and original is significant, from *allographic* or non-autographic art, in which no copy of a text may be considered a fake and that 'is amenable to notation' (1976: 121). Drawing, like painting, sculpture, printmaking and others, falls into the category of autographic practice, whilst no musical performance, copy of a literary text or poetry, or enactment of a play can be considered a fake (unless it changes the source text) and are therefore allographic. The precise distinction shall not interest us here; what is, however, relevant is Goodman's terminology. We may recall that one aim of *Languages of Art* is to delineate the semantic and syntactic rules governing notation. In very abbreviated form, notational systems are those symbol systems in which each symbol refers to only one characteristic of the world it describes; conversely, every single characteristic belongs to only one symbol in the system (Goodman 1976: 128–30). Musical scores are almost full notational systems because every note played may be associated with only one symbol and vice versa. There are, however, certain aspects, for example, volume, tempo and choice of cadenza, that are imprecise and

cannot be sufficiently captured by a score, which is therefore not fully notational (Giovannelli 2010). Crucially for Goodman, poetry and literature are not full notational systems because of certain semantic characteristics of *language*, although they may qualify syntactically. Importantly, Goodman conflates language, speech and writing through their implicit comparison with the musical score. The only time that Goodman comes to consider the *visibility* of writing – its drawn or typographic characteristics for example – as distinct from language, he comments on the need for clearly differentiated alphabetic characters (1976: 148). He does not, however, consider writing's marks outside of narrow alphanumerical parameters, for instance in his neglect of extra-alphabetic characters or the variability of writing's visibility through typefaces, sizes, font styles, styling (italics, bold, underlined), etc. Or, not to forget, there is also the need to consider the illimitable multitude of handwritten marks whose status is also inevitably one of drawing. Drawn or typographic marks on the page cannot easily be encircled under the header of *language* – not to mention *speech* – yet are inevitable considerations within *writing*. The marks' semiological relationships to language are thus not uniform but heterogeneous and exceed any order that tries to relate signs to each other either via a limitable syntax or through paradigms.

By necessitating the clear syntactic differentiation of alphabetic characters, Goodman manifests that writing is neither transparent nor invisible to him. Yet, how does he arrive at a position in which writing has again lost its visibility? He probably does not arrive there, but sets out from there. In terming literature and poetry allographic, he marks them as linguistic events rather than acts of writing. Sentences, clauses, words and more closely letters are for Goodman units and characters of and in language. Again, writing is legible alphabetic language, not visibly written or even drawn. Allographs are all possible forms and alternatives (graphs or glyphs) of a character or other grapheme. Hence, all possible graphs of the letter <a> indicate the same undifferentiated signifier and are interchangeable, whether drawn,

typed, printed, minuscule, majuscule, uncial, cursive, italicized, superscript, subscript, black letter, Gothic, single story, double story, with exit strokes, without, calligraphed, cacographed and so forth. Goodman observes that in a notational symbol scheme all marks of a character are interchangeable, viz. there is ‘character-indifference’ between the graphs of a character (1976: 132). Consequently, as long as graphs remain legibly assigned to a specific grapheme, Goodman is *indifferent* to their visibility. To assign writing to the category of allographic art is therefore not a deductive conclusion, but predetermined by Goodman’s application of the linguistic principle that is symptomatic not only for the discipline but also for juridico-political forces of control and efficiency. Any possible significance of the graphic qualities of texts, any heterogeneity between language, speech and writing, and the participation of verbal texts in an autographic category is thus a priori ruled out. This prearranged *conclusion* may therefore be abbreviated to its implicit tautology: writing, which is allographic, is also a non-autographic art.

Although technical, this analysis permits us to understand that any approach to writing that disregards the graphic qualities of a text, is not concerned with writing but *allographic writing*. Of course, there is no singular *general* writing – a writing without any attribute – yet the character-indifference of allographics only insufficiently addresses what it *sees* in writing and limits the *scope* of possible writings even further. Recognizing texts as mere language events does not account for the visibility and legibility of writing inside and outside of language. To address the multiple motions that Pettibon’s writing offers satisfactorily requires a reading-viewing that considers the graphic visibility of texts beyond an allographic notion of legibility. *Allographic reading*, a seemingly translatory practice that transliterates all corresponding allographs into the unitary value of one resultant grapheme, is visually only concerned with a(llographic) legibility. This should not be misunderstood as advocacy for a revitalization of mystical graphology or the establishment of a new graphic typology but to

acknowledge the irreducibility of writing to linguistics. Similarly, the difficulty of reading and seeing writing, which cannot exclude the contingencies and characteristics of *other graphic* practices – drawing, for instance – is an inadequate reason to ignore the impact of visible *traits*. In *regarding* the differential quality of the graphics of writing with indifference, or more precisely, by not *regarding* the visibility of writing, we are *disregarding* not only its *accepted* semantic and syntactic import (headings, paragraphs, pull quotes, emphases etc.), but blind ourselves entirely to the possibility of love letters, (concrete) poetry, rebuses, ludic writing, writing in tables, footnoted texts or any other writing whose iconic or otherwise graphic capacity is considered *significant*. That this significance may exceed the sign should now be evident. Had Pettibon inscribed his page with a minuscule we would have found him decapitated: i beheaded I, a capital punishment, prone on the ground, a little head a little ahead, the microcephalic toppling the phallic. That such writing is not ‘parasitic’, ‘exceptional’ or ‘marginal’ in view of ‘conventional’ and ‘normal’ use becomes apparent when we try to rid even the most ‘ordinary’ writing of its graphic investment. What writing may absolutely exclude its graphics? Jacques Derrida offers a response that exceeds but inculcates the graphic, noting that ‘[t]he exteriority of the signifier is the exteriority of writing in general, and [...] there is no linguistic sign before writing. Without that exteriority, the very idea of the sign falls into decay’ (1976: 14). According to Derrida, any serious graphology, i.e. any attempt to pursue a cultural, historical, ethnographic, sociological, psychological study of writing would need to come to terms with the *graphematics* of writing. Such a study would be required to engage writing’s fundamental exigencies:

as to the articulation of an individual and a collective *graphie*, of the graphic ‘discourse’ so to speak and the graphic ‘code,’ considered not from the point of view of the intention of signification or of

denotation, but of style and connotation; problems of the articulation of graphic forms and of diverse substances, of the diverse forms of graphic substances (materials: wood, wax, skin, stone, ink, metal, vegetable) or instruments (point, brush, etc., etc.); as to the articulation of the technical, economic, or historical levels (for example, at the moment when a graphic *system* is constituted and at the moment, which is not necessarily the same, when a graphic *style* is fixed); as to the limit and the sense of variations in style within the system; as to all the investitures to which a *graphie*, in form and substance, is submitted. (Derrida 1976: 87, original emphasis)

Derrida himself considers any serious and rigorous pursuit of such a vast and contingent field impossible; nevertheless, he persistently draws on graphematics to disturb any facile conflation of writing and language, and the avenues that he opens in *Of Grammatology* are still trailed in much later texts, such as *The Post Card* and *Paper Machine* (1987a, 2005). Juliet Fleming is more optimistic about the possibility that such studies may be ‘local and general’ and ‘attentive to the materials, forms, practices, and institutions of writing in the narrow sense’, whilst acknowledging the impossibilities of such an address and attention (2016: 15; see also: Mersmann 2015; cf. Grube 2006: 114–18). Also in many senses, this very article, too, in its address and attention on those elements identified by both Derrida and Fleming, engages somewhat optimistically in the same process, if, however, in view of the collocation of drawing and writing. The result, if we can speak of *one*, of Derrida’s, Fleming’s and this study is not a(nother) *system* of writing – here one in relation to the shared differences with the graphic marks of drawing – but an adestinate arrival that must open up its own material, form, practice and institutions. There is no singular route or X on the map of

theoretical exploration that can limit the intervolution of drawing and writing. That the graphematics of writing are not limited to 'writing in the narrow sense' is one of Derrida's refrains, precisely because writing is not external to any conception of language and therefore always inscribes itself in speech as well. The aurality or orality of seeing and reading could therefore be similarly investigated. It does not have to be written down for the *articulated* practices to be writing.

The complexity of the inherent confluence between the need to read writing and the implicit, overlapping and in part contradictory necessity to see it, is even perceptible in two aforementioned sources, although both authors had themselves drawn attention to the visual qualities of texts. Strictly speaking, Roudiez's notion that some signs can 'point away from the material body of writing that they constitute' whilst others point towards it (1978: 232), cannot be upheld once we accept that writing is constituted both visibly and legibly. Rather than a referral to another place issuing from the sign itself, the institutionalization of signs – to return to Goodman's term – can promote an indifference to the graphic and promulgate writing as allographic, without, however, being able to limit the graphic potential of each instantiation. Similarly, despite Lapacherie's attempt to remain a clinical observer of typographic history, he notes that it requires 'typographic artifices' to awaken the reader to become a viewer (1994: 64). What, however, is a typographic artifice? When does non-artifice typography trail into artifice typography? If there is typographic artifice, whom should psychiatric professionals examine today? Is 'italicization' more or less of an artifice than *inverted commas*? Arguably, writing as an irreducible instantiation of language as a system of conventional (and arbitrary) signs can hardly be measured on a scale of artificiality. In effect, such a measure proposes to register the level of naturalism in a system described as artificial. Lapacherie is careful to analyse the chasm between legibility and visibility but even he cannot avoid wanting to read a text allographically. And how can such a reading be avoided anyway?



Does the reader of this text contemplate the beauty, meanings and illimitability of the type underlying these marks, especially since they, too, were likely first marked out in a drawing? Notwithstanding, Lapacherie notes that typography possesses the heterogeneity of a system that on the one hand replaces language by a sign, yet on the other exhibits signs that have no – or no clear – referent.

Capitals *A*, *B*, or *E*, among others, do not have the same design as their corresponding lower cases: *a*, *b*, *e* [...]. From a semiological point of view, punctuation marks, underlining, numbers, blanks (and other typographic devices) are very different from letters and stand at the opposite pole from the alphabet. They do not replace any unit of language. They have no value (in the sense that they do not stand for a unit), but they signal a meaning, a rupture, a hierarchy, an analysis. As a result, a printed text which retains punctuation marks, blanks, upper cases, etc. [...], cannot be uniform because it is made up of heterogeneous signs. (1994: 69, original emphasis)

To understand graphic qualities as constituents of writing's signs is to recognize the physicality of writing that exists and asserts itself within, without and despite of language. Indeed the graphematics of writing already overlaps with the graphic marks of drawing; after all, we talk of dash, stroke, underline, ellipsis, hash, rule, asterisk, obelus, circumflex, highlight, slash, solidus and so on. The nomenclature suggests writing's investment in the material, gesture, form and iconicity of the practice and work of drawing. The work of Antonin Artaud, Jean-Michel Basquiat, El Lissitzky, Saul Steinberg, Mark Rothko and many

others is furthermore testament to the long-standing artistic exploitation and exploration of the intervolution of drawn and written marks.

As soon as verbal text enters the rectangular frame of the page, Michel Butor suggests, it is inevitably also constituted as an image (Butor cited in Reid 1994a: 18). Therefore, any difference between legibility and visibility of verbal signs should not be confused with the rigid permanence or impermeability of distinction and category. Drawing and writing, their visibility and legibility, parallel each other to meet in infinity.

[They] confirm each other, notch each other and each signs in some way in the body of the other, the one in the place of the other. They sign there the contract without contract of their neighborhood.  
(Derrida 2007: 74)

The trait that separates and connects the two neighbours is marked with their difference. Yet, rather than just being the cut between two ‘adversaries’, Derrida recognizes in it what ‘attracts adversity toward the unity of a contour [...], of a frame, of a framework’ (2007: 78). The adversity attracted between the legibility and visibility of writing concerns the shape and form – and the process of shaping and forming – and the iterability of alphabetic (typographic or chirographic) characters: the *ductus litterarum*. For visibility, the ductus (literally ‘leading’) is semantically and syntactically significant. For strictly linguistic legibility, however, ductus only decides on allographic assignation, ultimately between illegibility and legibility. Indeed, if writing is contingent on the faithful reproduction ‘of an established set of signs [...] “sanctioned” [...] by various authorities, from school on’, it always teeters on the edge of illegibility (Reid 1994b: 6). Language, recognizable as writing, but allographically illegible, leaves visibility alone, redrawing the writing-drawing relation. As Martine Reid asserts:

Illegible writing indicates in fact that the sign has been remorsefully eaten away by its own figurative nature, and that it does indeed take almost nothing at all for the figure to resort back to its status as a mere drawing. (1994b: 6)

It is thus perhaps in writing's interest not only to be legible but also, threatened by illegibility, to impugn its own visibility. As Ingold remarks, ductus in writing, as in drawing, '*describe[s]* the movement of a gesture and *inscribe[s]* it] in the trace it yields', its 'quality, tone and dynamic' becomes part of the semantics and syntax of the *script* (2007: 128, original emphasis). As ever, the choice of words is significant, for ductus draws out that the process of writing writes itself – through the gesture of the pen – into its mark. The navigation of the pen across the page is then the description of its (own) journey along the edge of illegibility as inscription on the page. If *led* too close to the edge, ductus crosses the line to dys-scription, a *bad* writing in which writing has begun the description of its own dis-scription; it works towards an *un*-writing of writing. Crossing the edge to linguistic illegibility, the line, however, remains as description of a dis-scription of writing's legibility. Many genitives inscribe themselves in the line of writing. It is the line as inscription of its own description, description of its inscription, inscription of its dis-scription, description of its dis-scription, dis-scription of its inscription. However, it is not the dis-scription of description. Neither will it ever be completely dis-scribed, for as long as it inscribes itself as dis-scription it will be the rem(a)inder of its own description. The *il*-legibility that cannot assign marks allographically to a particular character is therefore neither a *without*-legibility nor a *not*-legibility. It does not

describe a lack of legibility. Rather, it underwrites the excess of too many contingent legibilities that inscribe themselves as a line traced between writing and drawing.

In the stroke of Pettibon's 'I' that refuses to be an <i>, we recognize Derrida's differential trait that neither bridges nor divides writing and drawing, and cannot be contained by either. It breaks the truce of their co-mingling, their normally easily differentiated nature. Pettibon's 'I' is Derrida's

rebel to appeased commerce, to the regulated exchange of the two elements (lexical and pictural), close to piercing a hole in the *arthron* of discursive writing and representational painting, is this not a wild, almost unnarratable event? (Derrida 1987b: 160, original emphasis)

The rebellious 'I' remains unrepresentable to drawing's picturality because with every glance the 'glottic thrust of reading' (Derrida 1987b: 160) wants to enunciate it, wants to pull it back into discourse, where it cannot remain either, as it already retreats (*retrait*) into the figure of the picture that also belongs to writing. The trait that marks 'I' also marks the attraction (*attrait*) and traction between legibility and visibility. '[T]he *trait*, it induces, precisely, *duction*, and even the "ductus"' (Derrida 1987b: 192, original emphasis). The duction that leads and draws (*dūcēre*) the 'I's production, induction, seduction, conduction sooner or later its inevitable abduction and reduction by this not 'ductile enough' discourse (Derrida 1987b: 195). Notwithstanding, this will not have been the last attempt of discursivity to draw a bead at, draw in and then draw the line under an 'I' that withdraws (*retrait*) from being an <i>. This text, too, as part of the *articulation*, the *joint*, of writing and drawing, of drawing and its iterable signs, of writing and (its) pictures, tries to show how it pivots the scales in an attempt not to capture the pictural of the I (and other texts) and return it to a discursive centre, where

it can be contained and silenced by speaking for it and about it, but to draw it out, show it, let it be seen without showing it. The desire – administrative, institutional, logocentric, metaphysic – to command and restrain the differential trait that *joints* verbal and pictural links also permeates every mark on this page.

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