

“Some Notes on Liveness: Chapter Four”

By Peter Walsh



“Yog Raj Chitrakar posing in front of the Ellis Island drawings,” from Nikhil Chopra’s *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing IX*, 2009, at the New Museum, New York. Photo by Carolyn Wachnicki for Redhead Canvas, courtesy of the New Museum”

Drawing and writing take place in time. Each has a start, a period of activity, and an end.

Drawing and writing are live performances. There is always an audience. If no one else, the maker watches - even when they close their eyes.

Drawing and writing are ways of making marks. They leave behind documentary evidence of action taken.

Writing in its most basic form tends to be linear, one drawn letter following the next. For example, this sentence in English moves from left to right; in Arabic, it would move from

right to left; and in Chinese, it would move from top to bottom. This structure helps indicate movement in time. Indeed, the reader and the writer appear to move through time together.

Drawing is also linear in that it methodically follows, as it must, “time’s arrow.” An artist is as bound by the forward moving constraints of time as anyone else, but the marks appear with only partial indication of when they were made or in what order they should be seen. This creates a kind of temporal non-linearity that makes a picture, created step by step over days or even months – pop – seemingly instantly, into a complete image in front of a viewer. As with writing, the distance between the mark maker and the mark viewer is collapsed. This is true both in terms of the different amounts of time that each spends in front of a drawing and the actual time that separates them, whether it’s minutes, decades or hundreds of years. They stand together in front of the drawing, gazing across its surface, at the same moment: right now.



“Yog Raj Chitrakar working on drawings at Ellis Island,” from Nikhil Chopra’s *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing IX*, 2009, at the New Museum, New York. Photo by Carolyn Wachnicki for Redhead Canvas, courtesy of the New Museum”

Yog Raj Chitrakar, the “wanderer/draughtsman/mapmaker” created by artist Nikhil Chopra, spent three days at New York harbor’s Ellis Island sketching Manhattan’s blocky grey skyline across several massive canvas panels. The Statue of Liberty stands in the center of the right hand panel, majestically atop her pedestal, looking out over the charcoal images as they disintegrate into outlines and then simple smudged marks. Unlike the brief but authoritative slice of a camera’s shutter, which would have captured the view in a fraction of a second, Chopra/Chitrakar’s hand and eye left the panorama noticeably incomplete, even after a dozen hours of labor.

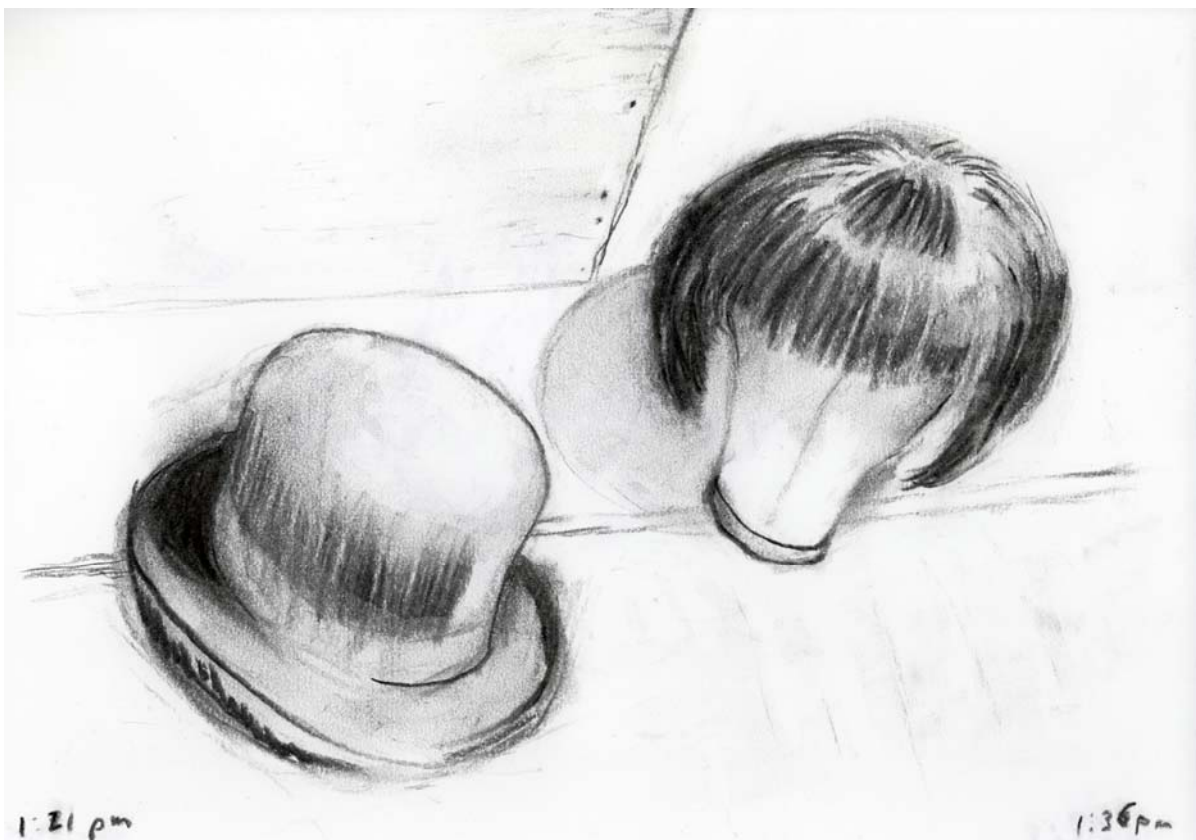
Well then, why draw? What does drawing add to performance that video or still photography doesn’t?

There are several advantages.

First of all, the slowness of drawing turns the process of image-making into a theatrical performance. “It was like drawing in a schoolyard!” beamed Chopra with amazement as he described his Ellis Island sessions to curator Eungie Joo in an interview for Performa TV. With his canvas drawing-field staked to the ground like Harold Rosenberg’s “arena” of action and classes of kids on their fieldtrips huddled around him, Chopra/Chitrakar created a picture that was at once a document that captured and possessed the harbor skyline and an event that revealed the process that transforms marks into images. The drawing process rewards the patience of spectators.

Secondly, the sheer powerfulness of new electronic technologies tends both to democratize access to image making and to make the mechanisms of image-making opaque. Exactly how does that little picture appear on my cell phone screen? Could I try my hand at building a digital camera? No, not really.

With a drawing like Chopra/Chitrakar’s, however, the process of image making is illuminated by the graceful solidity of a hand persistently inscribing a surface, in this case pushing the soft blackness of a charred wood stick onto woven cotton duck. The work of a mind seeing becomes apparent. The machine precision of a photograph frequently hides this labor, and in fact is usually prized for doing so.



“Peter Walsh, *Documentary Sketch from Nihkil Chopra’s Installation at the New Museum, New York, November 11, 2009, 1:21pm – 1:36pm.*”

This simplicity of form allows drawings to function in multiple ways simultaneously. For example, I returned to Chopra’s installation at the New Museum several times after he finished his full five day performance. I drew. I was hoping that drawing’s process of

“extended looking” might act as critically in interpreting and transforming the objects left behind by Chopra’s performance as this piece of writing might. I made a number of drawings on several occasions, all of them on my lunch break from my day job.

The drawings are documents, no different from forensic photographs taken at a crime scene in that they attempt to capture details left in the aftermath of an event. Unlike most photographs, drawings - when functioning like documents - are altered by the obvious presence of the document maker, the drawer. We expect a human hand to interpret the world. We naively expect a machine like a camera to stay out of the picture. This lends an inherent transparency to drawing’s means.

A drawing adds significance to an image by binding photography’s power of framing to the expanded clout of that same image being simultaneously processed by a human intellect. And, because the process of drawing is so expensive, eating up time, skill and labor, any individual drawing makes an implicit economic argument about the importance of the image based on that investment.

A well crafted essay implicitly suggests the same. I hope that the details of this particular essay and the precision with which I am attempting to fashion it argue for its importance and for your attention as a reader. And if successful, the drawing reproduced above should give you some portion of information that neither my words nor a camera can convey.

For example, the drawing represents a fifteen minute moment of focused looking that seems partial and fragmentary. The sketchiness of the rendering suggests a marginally successful attempt to capture this moment, while the presence of a hat and a wig suggests that performers are absent and an event has been missed. They are, and it has been. On the other hand, videos or photographs frequently suggest that you need never have shown up in the first place. The performer and the event are yours.

[Insert Image: Photo from Yeondoo Jung’s *Cinemagician*: Image not yet available]

Caption: “Eungyeol Lee drawing on stage during Yeondoo Jung’s *Cinemagician*”, Asia Society, Friday, November 20, 2009.

I was thrilled and relieved to see South Korean magician Eungyeol Lee set up an easel and begin drawing on stage in Yeondoo Jung’s *Cinemagician* performance at the Asia Society. I love experimental theater and contemporary dance, but I come from a visual arts background and find it appealing and engaging. *Cinemagician* is a complicated and playful meditation on the fakery of movie-making, photography, stage sets and image-making of all sorts. While clearly articulating the legacy of renaissance perspective by bolting down his primary video camera to capture the stage play’s action from a single static location, Jung used drawing in a wholly different manner that also activated the power of mark-making to shape the world.

Like Chopra, Jung used the act of drawing as theater. Where Chopra’s character Chitrakar performed a classically descriptive landscape panorama that was then installed as a stage device and photographic backdrop, Jung, with Lee as his stand-in, used a small landscape drawing to “prescribe” the actions of his entire stage crew. A simple sketch created live in front of his audience became a blueprint and guide for the rest of the performance. Piece by piece the elements of the drawing were gathered together as objects for the camera’s eye. A tree in the

drawing became several cardboard segments separated by many feet on stage. Eungyeol Lee could walk between these “logs,” yet on Jung’s master video, they magically reassembled into a single trunk.

Jung’s stage performance was completely wrapped up in and reliant on the use of photography and video, yet it was a hand making marks that, guided by a human intellect and imagination, activated the artwork.

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