

CONCEPTUAL SURFACES

INTRODUCTION

Drawing is defined by the dictionary as “producing by making lines and marks on paper”. This definition has a few implications. First, the drawer is limited to lines and marks. And second, the drawable surface is limited to the two dimensions that make up a piece of paper. Of course paper can come in many different sizes and can be bent or folded to occupy a third dimension, but the material itself, in essence, remains flat.

The physical surface has to be seen as a part of the drawing and the drawn lines as a dialog with the surface. As art historian Norman Bryson explains it: “Drawing accepts the painterly conventions that every square centimeter of the surface is actively recruited into a total design, without gaps or blanks.”. The untouched surface is referred by Bryson as the “reserve”: “an area that is technically part of the image, but in a neutral sense - an area without qualities, perceptually present but conceptually absent.” [1]

A conceptual surface provides a way to give materiality to an abstract idea without being defined in any specific form. This concept of ‘dematerialisation’ of the art object, first published in 1968 by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, characterises art in two ways: ‘art as idea and art as action’. Dematerialisation in this connection aims to de-emphasise the material aspects of art, and especially of art as an object, and its prevailing orthodoxies of ‘uniqueness, permanence, and decorative attractiveness’ into an ‘anti-form’ or ‘process art’. [2]

When the paper from the dictionary definition is replaced by another surface, some questions will arise. What happens if the surface of a drawing is no longer what we have in front of our eyes but needs further examinations to be truly observed? How is the process of drawing affected by the choice of surface? And what are the consequences of the chosen surface on the viewer? The drawing can reach into further dimensions, those who are not visible at first glance, but which stand as a fundament for the drawing to exist. The choice of surface is strictly connected to the concept that is behind the drawing.

Susan Sontag wrote an essay “Against Interpretation” where she is calling for a certain minimalism: “What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back on content so that we can see the thing at all.” [3] By turning towards intangible surfaces we open up to actually observe how the drawing is executed. The content of the drawings is the conceptual surface which communicates through how it is performed.

CONCEPTUAL SPACE

Throughout his works, Claude Closky, a french conceptual artist, tries to perform actions that express a minimal intention or personal expression. Most of his work deals with everyday activities, where Closky tries to focus on the action and context of these activities. By doing so he tries to trigger the viewer to think about the process by which his work is created and the meaning of the items used.

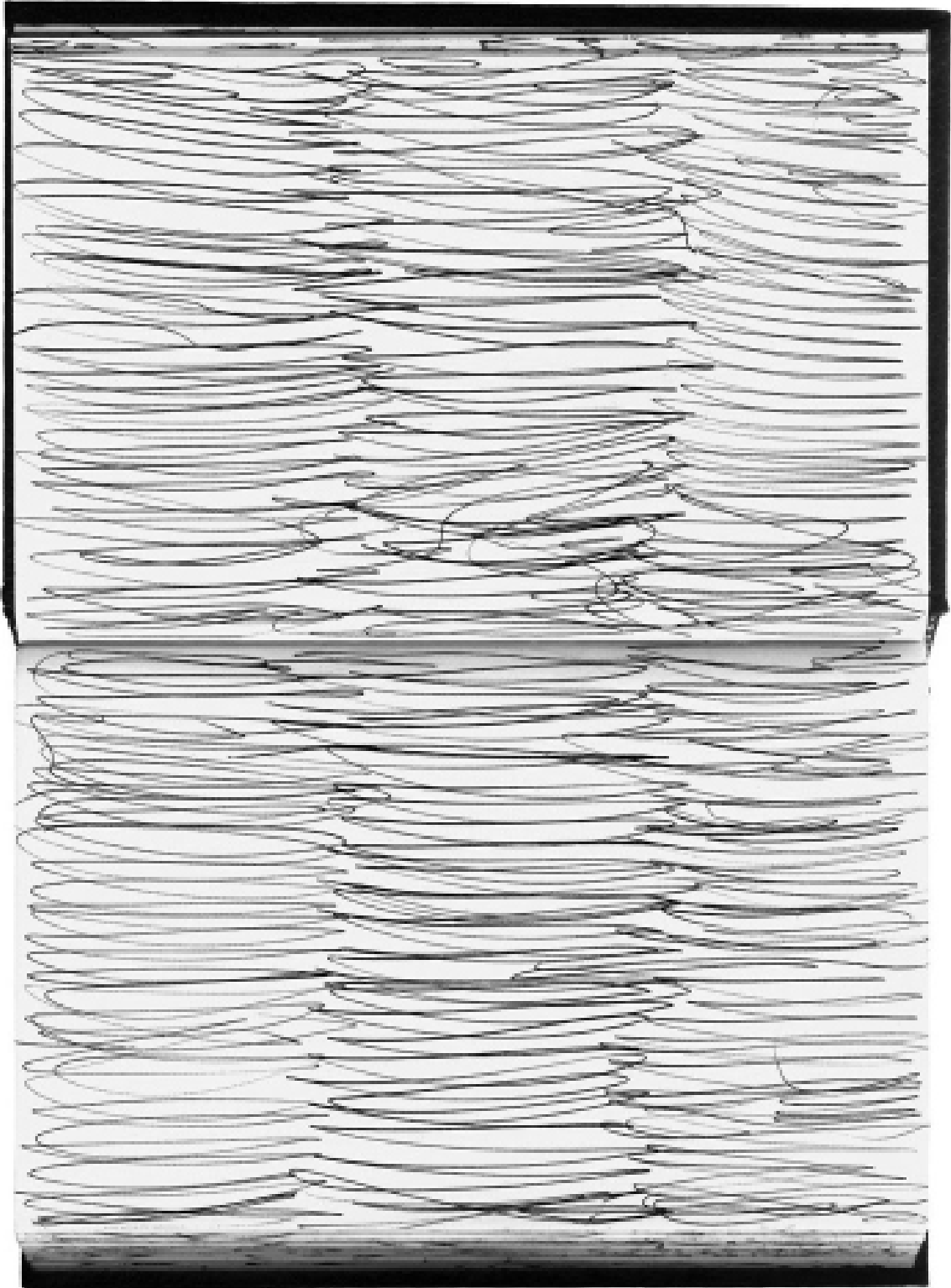
In his piece “Used sketchbook” Closky covered an entire sketchbook with an oscillating ballpoint line. Each page is divided into three rows and on each row a line is plotted left to right, up and down, mimicking the direction and flow of writing, but not containing any readable content. Page after page is filled with the same monotone pattern of black ink. By doing so, Closky renders the sketchbook used, useless, full and empty at the same time. It’s full and used because all the space is consumed, taken by the lines. There is no room to write anything in the sketchbook. Yet at the same time it’s empty and useless because the line doesn’t meet the common expectation of a sketchbook: there is no written text and there are no recognisable images.

As a viewer it is impossible to understand the work by looking at it on the scale of a single page, but on the other hand the viewer is also not obliged to look at every page to make sense of the work. The drawing Closky made doesn’t exist on the surface of a single page but on the surface of the sketchbook. Each individual page can be seen as meaningless, having a minimal intent, but all the pages together are exerting Closky’s vision.

Closky is showing, in a very minimalistic way, that the space in which a drawing is created and interpreted is essential for the perception and experience of the drawing. One of the pages tells a different story than the entire sketchbook.

Through his work it becomes apparent that, when exchanging paper for another surface, this surface doesn’t necessarily have

to be a spatial surface but it can also be a conceptual space. In the case of the sketchbook, the continuous surface is created through the concept and intended use of the sketchbook: because the function of a sketchbook is known, the collection of pages can be perceived as a continuous space.



Claude Closky
Used Sketchbook (1990)

HABITABLE SPACE

Jan Fabre, a Belgian artist who is passionately involved with drawings made with blue ballpoint pen, takes the position of the drawer and viewer at the same time in his work “Ilad of the Bic Art”, a performance of drawing and writing, in which he locked himself into a white room for 72 hours.

The room was completely white at the start and the floor, walls, ceiling but also all the objects in the room, like a bed, pillows and tables became part of the work. This performance brought Fabre as close as possible to the drawing, transforming his entire environment into a part of the drawable surface. He was literally living inside his drawing.



Jan Fabre
Ilad of the Bic Art (1981)

Fabre's work shows that a drawable surface can take any shape, can be dynamic and can even be a habitable space: a space that's actively being used, that can be walked on and slept in. The more the drawer tries to understand the surface,

the better the drawing can adapt to it, or as John Berger, an English art critic and novelist, tries to explain: “Whenever the intensity of looking reaches a certain degree, one becomes aware of an equally intense energy coming towards one through the appearance of whatever it is one is scrutinizing.” [4]

SPACE OF A PROCESS

Nedko Solakov is a Bulgarian artist who deals with the collective truths and contradictions of human existence when he creates narratives within his work. In “A Life (Black & White)” two painters will continuously cover each others work, creating a process of layering black and white paint and portraying a struggle between night and day, light and dark, life and death. The white paint creates an empty wall with no content. Time and again, black paint slowly fills up the seemingly empty space with content until it becomes empty again.



Nedko Solakov
A Life (Black & White) (1998)

The process of layering counteracts with the rules of order. It destroys the traditional order of seeing his work: there is no beginning and no end. It is an ongoing process of painting. The whole painting has to be seen from the beginning of the process to the end.

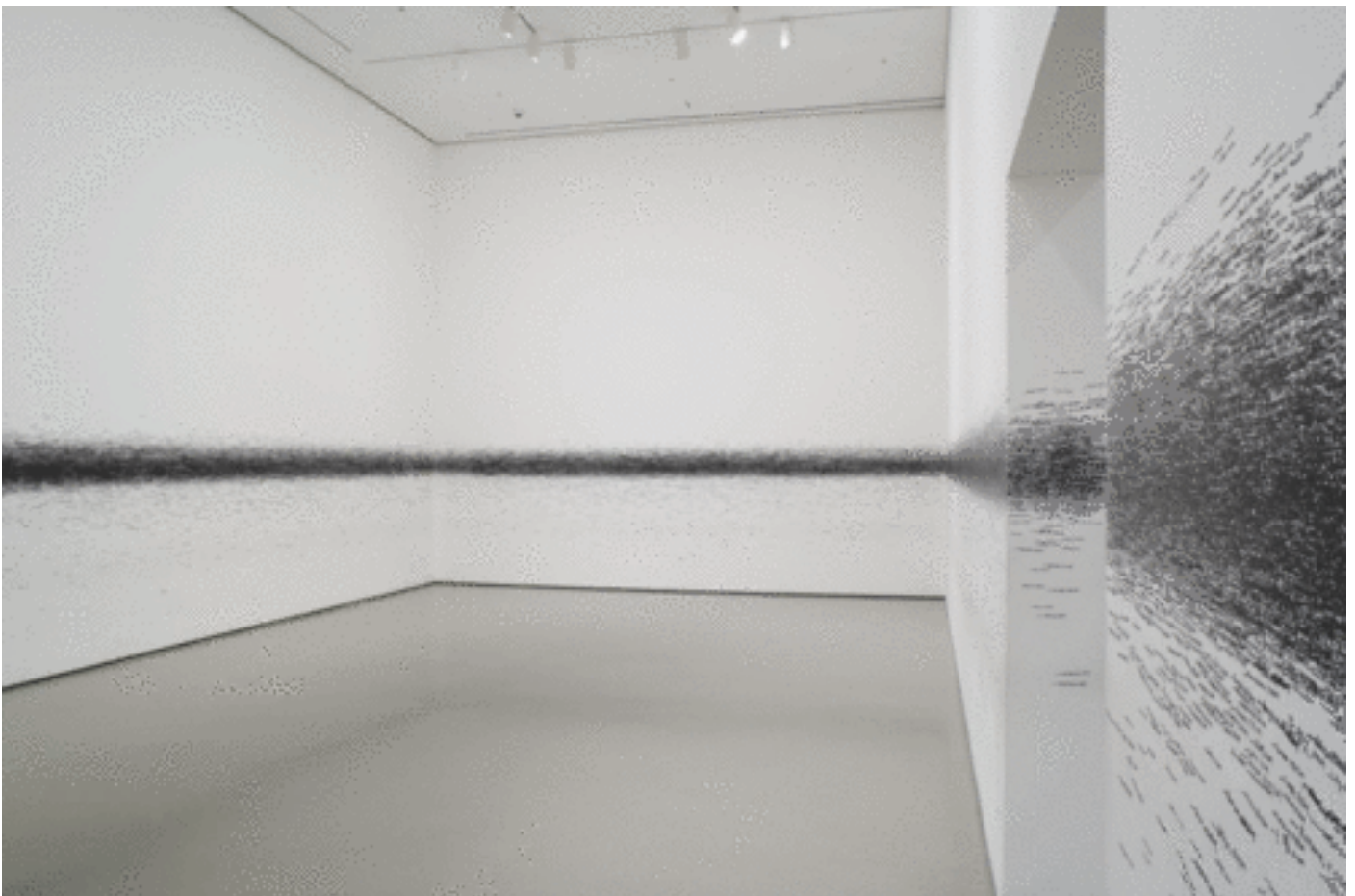
Physically the work becomes a sum of layers of paint, but it is not about the physical result at all. It's the process itself that is the artwork. The meaning and narrative are not readable from the painted walls but become clear when watching the process of painting.

The process of painting is almost a direct negation of painting as it is constantly erasing the created work. The painting itself becomes a space: a conceptual space that enables the viewer to contemplate, feel and become part of the process.

SOCIAL SPACE

Drawings can exist in different dimensions. This happens when the conditions that make up a drawing are changed or added to. Human factors can change these dimensions as well and create a social space that is going to be an integral part of the drawing to be made.

“Measuring the universe” is a piece of installation art created by the Slovakian artist Roman Ondak in 2007. It’s a white room, filled with what at first glance seem to be black lines. It almost resembles a swarm of bees circling around the space of the room in one of the modern galleries. Upon closer inspection, the black lines turn out to mark the height of each visitor. Each person coming by is marked on a wall according to their height, name and date. After some time the accumulation of the marks becomes like a fingerprint, a drawing marking time and people visiting.



Roman Ondak
Measuring The Universe (2007)

There is no final outcome. Every time a visitor faces the drawing, they become part of the ongoing process. In time, more people contribute to the drawing so that it becomes more dense; the black cloud thickens. The drawing becomes a reflection of physically occupied space in time and the conceptual surface can be seen as the collection of contributors throughout the lifetime of the artwork.

The space is dynamic due to the human factor. There is an ongoing interaction between the physically occupied space and the drawable surface. The increasing amount of visitors in the period of time will contribute to the changes in the drawing. Each person who is looking at the wall will also be recorded on the wall. The observed surface undergoes constant changes and each observation will differ from another. Ondak doesn't mark an empty room with meaningless lines and letters, but records the real actual physical presence of people who are turned into an object.

LINGUISTIC SPACE

Sol LeWitt is considered as one of the founders of conceptual art, making a separation between the concept behind an artwork and the execution of the artwork. In his manifesto “Sentences on Conceptual art” he wrote “Ideas can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.”. In another document, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, a more elaborate version of the sentences, he notes that “When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” [5]



Sol Lewitt

Wall drawing #260 All combinations of arcs from corners and sides; straight, not straight and broken lines (1976)

In 1968 he began to create a series of artworks within the principles of conceptual art: “Wall drawings”. These drawing primarily exist as written instructions on how to create the drawings. The concept that LeWitt has, is made tangible in the form of written instructions, that can be used by anyone to create a visual representation of the concept. The instructions are written

in an algorithmic way: "The descriptions and instructions sound bone dry but the result is startling. It is beautiful, chaotic and overwhelming. The finished wall drawing shows the inadequacies of language in describing what we can expect to see" [6], says Elisabeth Millqvist, curator for a Sol LeWitt exhibition.

Following this idea, LeWitt was never in charge of making his drawings. His part was preparing instructions that later on could be conceived by anybody to create their personal interpretation of a Sol LeWitt piece. Each of his wall drawings exists primarily as a concept: the idea itself that can be spread around and reproduced very easily by others.

By not drawing himself he gives room to variations between the versions of his drawings. Saul Ostrow wrote, after interviewing LeWitt: "Giving the script over to someone else is adding another variable to the formula and has been interpreted as an attempt either to de-aestheticize the work or at least to distance the artist from the results so that it wouldn't be about the artist's taste." [7] Each person can, for example interpret "non straight line" differently and draw their own image of a "non straight line". Each person understands words differently and each person draws a line differently. The conceptual surface for Sol LeWitt work is a space of language and the drawings reflect on the language itself.

SPACE OF A LINE

The emergence of Conceptualism in Poland can be dated to the day when Edward Krasinski, a pioneer of conceptual art in Poland, replaced works delayed at sea on their way to the 1970 Tokyo Biennial with a telex that repeated the word „BLUE” 5000 times. Around this time there was a movement of experimentation and rethinking social order; of struggles against established power structures and institutions of all kinds, including museums.



Edward Krasinski's studio in Warsaw Poland

Krasinski was a precursor of this trend and chose his studio as the the start for creating and displaying a series of blue tape works: “Blue Scotch Tape, 19mm wide, length unknown. I place it horizontally at a height of 130cm everywhere and on everything. I encompass everything with it and go everywhere. This is art, or is it? Yet one thing is certain: blue Scotch Tape, 19mm wide, length unknown.” [8] The spaces in which he was placing the blue scotch tape, such as gallery space, his own studio and drawn spaces, can be perceived as one continuous space as the line is always placed in the same manner, at the same height and in the same colour.

The line becomes a living creature; we can see it sneaking through different spaces, laying on top of everything: walls, objects, trees, people and even the air, bringing awareness to the spaces in which it appears and therefore making the space more real. The blue line instructs the viewer to look closely, to follow its trajectory as it connects things, people or events.

On the other hand, the line will pull the space into the artwork, transforming the space into something surreal. The endless process of sticking blue tape gains its own dimensionality: it starts to exist within its own space. The blue tape transfers objects and the whole space into art: the whole space becomes one thing, reduced to that simple line. Therefore, the space loses its importance and the reality of the space becomes, ultimately, the reality of the line.

Next to real space Krasinski used drawings of other spaces, geometric reliefs depicting other dimensions on which the blue stripe will fold just as in the real architectural space. In the end each of the spaces turns out to be illusionary and the conceptual space of Krasinski interventions is a utopian infinite surface.



Babette Mangolte
Edward Krasinski studio in Warsaw (2012)

URBAN SPACE

Francis Alys is called “architect of the absurd” and not without a reason. Alys studied architectural history at the Institute of Architecture in Tournai. In an interview with James Lingwood he explains “When I decided to step out of the field of architecture, my first impulse was not to add to the city but more to absorb what was already there, to work with the residues, or with the negative spaces , the holes, the spaces-in-between” [9]

The space of Francis Alys works is a city; it’s his surface. While making his work he enters a dialogue with the social and urban space of the city, moving away from the traditional art scene. In his piece “The Leak” he started at a gallery, walked around the city of Sao Paulo and ended back at the gallery, leaving behind a trail of blue paint leaking from an open can of paint. A 14 minute video is the documentation of his intervention in which a camera follows him on his walk.



Francis Alys
The Green Line (2004)

Walking doesn't have to be seen as a mean of transportation only. Walking can be a destination itself, providing a way to transform the city into a drawable surface in which one can move freely to display a concept. Each of Alys walks creates that surface and transforms it into the conceptual space where every move is an expression of his idea.

In the abstract space of a walk Alys draws with lines or paths, showing a shadow of the walk, a reflection or evidence of his body movements. Each of his performance is another way to produce these paths. In one of the works the path is produced by a melting ice cube that he pushes throughout the city. In another work "Fairy Tales" from 1995 he uses a string of his jumper that he lets unravel and left behind on the streets of Mexico City.

"The Green Line. Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic" is remake of his 1995 "The Leak" walk. The action was reprised in 2004 and he chose to make a work in Jerusalem. Using green paint Alys walked along the armistice border, known as 'the green line', pencilled on a map by Israeli general Moshe Dayan at the end of the war between Israel and Jordan in 1948. This remained the border until the Six Day War in 1967 after which Israel occupied Palestinian-inhabited territories east of the line.

By marking "the green line" Alys brings back the old border to life, metaphorically. An action such as painting a line in a certain context can lead to a political meaning. At the same time, painting the political border can become aesthetical and visual aspects that add to the environment.

The concept Alys has for his artistic walks is to present an urbanism of the imagination, to reinvent the city on the level of stories, without adding anything to its structures but rather change the existing structure. Alys doesn't have the need to add something permanent to the city. He even thinks that his ideas can exist purely on the conceptual level, like a story being

told. A verbal recording can be just as good a representation of his work as an actual observation of the walk.

CONCLUSION

A drawing always consists of two parts: the drawn and the surface. These two parts are inseparable from each other. Unlike what the dictionary defines as drawing, limiting it to paper, anything can be a surface for a drawing. A surface can be found in interior spaces, exterior spaces but also in conceptual spaces.

The perception of the surface is affected by the drawing. When a drawing is created on a surface, it forms an inseparable connection to the surface. The drawing transforms the surface. Because a drawing doesn't have to cover the whole of the surface, a viewer looks at a drawing in context of the surface and in return, the surface has to be observed in relation to the drawing.

Conceptual surfaces don't need to be seen at first glance. In the work of Roman Ondak where the measures of people's heights are taken, the drawing exists physically as lines on the museum wall. Conceptually it is a drawing that is a shadow of the audience, a process where audience is creating a drawing. So the conceptual space on which is drawn is the audience itself.

A conceptual space is defined by the rules that the artist makes beforehand. The visual outcome depends on the process that will proceed according to the rules. A conceptual surface forces viewers to think about the process in which the surface exists.

The process that creates a drawing can relate to processes occurring during a lifetime. Conceptual surfaces exist naturally in the space of life. Simple actions such as measuring height or writing instructions can transform everyday actions into artistic tools.

In this perspective Joseph Beuys' famous statement "Everyone is an artist" [10] is not so much about the ability of everybody to convert concepts into artworks but rather about the

participation of people in a single concept. Everyone could become a producer rather than a consumer of a meaning.

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