

## BEFORE ART BECOMES ART

THE HISTORY OF ART began with a drawing. At least if we are to believe the myths and legends of ancient Greece it did. In one of these we are told that it was a shepherd surrounded by pastoral innocence who performed this significant act. He was watching his flock grazing and dozing in the heat of the afternoon sun, leaning on his crook in his usual attitude of disinterested attention. Soothed by the tunes of a distant flute and the slow course of that uneventful day, drowsiness immersed his soul in a sea of boredom. Shadows floated on the sunburnt ground, and his thoughts wandered aimlessly among them. Before long, however, an urge arose and grew, gently at first but gathering strength, to become a pulsating need that burst into a sudden idea. Not knowing where this would lead he used his staff to trace around the edges of his shadow, making furrows in the dry earth. This act struck him with awe. He had separated sunny ground from that which was shadow-covered and himself from everything around. His identity posited itself as a singular event against the eternal flow of time. Seemingly fleeting existence was defined and history was born. What this meant, he was to find out only later. The day had gone, and it was a new morning when the shepherd put his flock out once more to pasture. There he found his drawing, motionless and unchanged, but greeting him with a hollow smile.

AGES LATER IN LESS MYTHICAL TIMES we are confronted with a sheet of ordinary drawing paper, 24 inches high and 18 wide. On the back it reads simply "Jan 1, 1972, M. Hafif" while its front is completely covered with short, vertical pencil marks, each about half an inch long and tilting slightly to the right. They start in the upper left corner and are drawn side by side in a regular succession of dense rows. Row after row the marks of the pencil work their way diagonally downwards across the surface like an avalanche, the tops of the lower rows reaching up and intersecting with the bottom of the upper ones. Stroke follows stroke until the entire surface is finally full with the setting of the last in the lower right corner of what used to be a blank sheet of ordinary drawing paper.

Seen as a whole this sheet shows a delicate but lively texture of undulating areas of darker grey alternating with brighter ones forming centres of varied density without ever creating distinct shapes. This is due to the fact that the placing of the marks is only roughly regular. Some strokes are slightly longer or thicker, some are slightly closer to or further away from the neighboring ones, and the intersecting of the rows is irregular, building a structure of interwoven marks, darker fields and contrasting light.

One might at first think that the purpose of this excessive marking had been that of toning down the whiteness of the sheet into some darker shade of grey by way of hatching, like a preparation of the ground for further work. A similar practice is quite known for artists who tone their drawing paper in order to overcome the initial horror on confronting the vast emptiness of the white surface of picture plane. On closer inspection one can notice, however, that this marking of the sheet is only slight reminiscent of hatching, and not to be mistaken for it, as the distinctness of the single

stroke is still retained. Close attention must have been paid to the placing of the single mark in its relation to the preceding and the following and their position within the framework of the drawing plane. The eventual result of the whole as a coloured field is secondary. The characteristics of this field - its suggestions of shape, its rhythm and expressive quality - are fortuitous as are those that allow one to discern shapes and structures on a printed page when attention slips away from the text, and the page is viewed as a whole. The printed page becomes a mere surface filled with marks.

THIS ODD SHEET OF DRAWING PAPER turned out to be a turning point in the work of Marcia Hafif. The type of painting she had practiced in Rome during the 1960s ended with her transfer to California in 1969 where she experimented with film, photography and installation. On moving then to New York in 1971 she found herself truly in the midst of the rise of video, performance and installation art in addition to continuing Minimal, Pop and Concept Art. With the ending of what had been the epitome of American modern art, Abstract Expressionism, and the exhaustion of Color Field, the practice of painting seemed no longer viable. Sustaining beliefs in painting were in question and continuing on without examination made no sense. The modern idea of progress had suddenly become meaningless because the goal or destination towards which one was to proceed was completely lost and out of sight, and, as was then increasingly suspected, had probably never existed. It was the dawning of the postmodern era and the very idea of history was about to eclipse itself.

She had struggled with painting in the fall of 1971 but it was not until January 1, 1972, that Hafif did begin again, the desire for work materializing itself in this drawing. We can imagine her sitting down at her drawing table, placing a sheet of paper on it together with a freshly sharpened pencil, realizing that thinking about what to draw does not lead anywhere and deciding that it might be best to simply start without any thought as to where her work should lead. Then making a first mark in the upper left corner of the sheet - just as one would when starting to write - a mark, slightly diagonal, that even recalls the shape of a letter or number. Then another mark next to the first - an almost identical one, because there was no obvious reason to change the second - and then another one, and another one until finally the whole paper is covered with row after row of pencil strokes. When the last stroke is set, she turns the sheet over to write her name on it, and the date, Jan. 1, 1972, which is then to become the drawing's title.

In the months to come she made more of these drawings. All were based on the rules set by the first, allowing variations only as regards the point at which to start, the direction of the drawing process, the length of the stroke or the spacing either between the marks or between the rows. Out of these variations there developed about a half dozen different types of drawings.

The first comes very close to some sort of writing, with straight rows from left to right, and a regular spacing between the single strokes. January 6, 1972 may serve as an example.

For the second kind Hafif starts a row of marks that goes across about one third of the way, re-starts below left to where the upper has its stopping place, jumps and continues this row to two-thirds of the page. The next row is begun, continues to one-third, then jumps up to the second row and continues this to two-thirds to finally jump up again and finish the first row to the end of the page. This slight modification at the upper rows creates gradually enlarging waves as the work approaches the bottom of the page as can be seen in January 10, 1972.

In a third variation she works in dense columns, dividing the page into three to five vertical sections as in February 16, 1972.

February 8, 1972 belongs to a fourth type that marks a standardization of the very first drawing in that the strokes work their way diagonally across the page, though the marks are more disciplined and regular now. Within this spectrum of types there can be mixed modes. One of them can be seen in October 21, 1973, in which a basic pattern is that of straight horizontal rows, but Hafif extends the lower marks into the next row above, thus creating a structure of overlapping vertical and horizontal lines.

Outside of these general categories one can find eccentric groups such as those in the drawings from the early 1980s in which one sees a pattern of strongly tilted marks creating an effect of concentric curves, as in February 28, 1982.

Different as these drawings are from each other, they nevertheless exhibit a great deal of conformity making up a homogenous body of work in which it is clear that the basic idea has always been preserved: to cover the drawing surface with a plethora of continuous similar, short marks within narrow margins.

Some 180 drawings were produced over a period of ten years, alike and differing at the same time, keeping a balance operating between automated technicality and organic liveliness within a basic framework of strict rules. In this respect it is rather futile to try to ascribe any evolutionary line to these works. Already in the first few weeks Hafif had developed most of the patterns she was to apply in all her drawings and disciplined her pencil to shorter and less casual strokes. They all seem to be filial variations of the first one and defy any attempt to apply the idea of progress as they continuously repeat the original experience without any obvious goal in sight. One even has the impression that Hafif deliberately refused to give them a history, and the fact that she discontinued this way of drawing in 1982 can therefore be seen as an arbitrary act of completion.

THESE DRAWINGS OPENED A WAY for Marcia Hafif to approach painting again where earlier she had not found it, and her monochrome painting then grew logically out of these drawings a few weeks after she had begun to make them. Does this mean these are preparatory drawings? One has to think carefully about what the notion of preparatory drawing means before applying this term to Hafif's works on paper.

Traditionally, drawing served a single purpose: that of developing an idea that was later to be carried out in a painting proper. With pencil and paper one was spared the additional problem of colour and could concentrate on composition and content. Corrections could be made more easily, the provisory status of a drawing allowing constant changes until the theme was fully developed for transfer to canvas. This use of the drawing to arrive at a painting relegated drawing to a status that was negligible when the final work was completed.

But this is not true for Hafif's drawings. During Modernism drawing became acceptable as a viable artistic medium in itself. With the formalist idea that artists must remain true to their means and devices, drawing became one medium with specific characteristics that lead to specific results, those which can be reached only through drawing and not through any other medium. Some tasks now demanded drawing as their model.

To call Hafif's drawings preparatory would thus imply that she had reverted to a practice that had long been bypassed, that of transferring her drawings into paintings in a one-to-one relationship. They are artworks too clearly intended to be independent works to allow the acceptance of this notion. They explore the picture plane in a way specific only to drawing. They concentrate on the single stroke and its relation to other strokes and to the surface as a whole. In her paintings each brushstroke, though distinguishable, forms only a part of an entity that goes beyond mere marking since other factors come into play there such as the material of paint and the physical presence of colour. Seen against this background Hafif's drawings must be seen to be autonomous, related primarily to the other drawings making up this body of work done between 1972 and 1982.

Yet within a framework of strict classifications these works are still poised in a somewhat uncertain position and one has to consider others of their aspects. While drawing traditionally was a method of circumscribing and describing distinct entities such as shapes and their respective position in an imaginary space, here we encounter a different approach. The single pencil stroke does not describe definite shapes upon a surface, it does not mark anything other than itself, but taken as a whole, the complex of strokes describes or marks the entire surface. The paintings present a surface covered with single marks of colour, and the drawings convey an image similar to that of her paintings. Not only or without reason does she refer to her drawings as Pencil on Paper as though they were a variation on her paintings, but she also includes them as the first chapter in her meta-project of "The Inventory," her own catalogue of classifying genres and media. This indicates that these works on paper do not only refer to themselves but are related to her other artworks, mainly paintings. Thus, the drawings are linked to the paintings, not as preparatory sketches, but more subtly, as a model.

SEARCHING WORKS OF THIS KIND for their meaning one can feel a bit at a loss. There is certainly an object present to which meaning can be ascribed, but that object does not offer any satisfying clue as to what it is intended to mean. In circumventing this dilemma apparent help comes through associations that inevitably arise as one

attempts to label each drawing by comparing it with elements from one's own experience of life. Thus some drawings might be called wild or calm, some recall the textures of things such as fabrics, fur or running water; some call to mind the results of a stone having been dropped into a pool. Some even suggest a story unfolding itself in a row of pencil marks, a story the precise content of which remains a mystery. However much one finds pleasure in these associations, and indeed those are not a small part of the fascination that emanates from these drawings, one has to be careful not to take them for the answer to the dilemma. While the material bases for all these associations are actually there, their interpretation as references to phenomena from the outside world are missing the point. Moreover, any label that is ascribed to a drawing is felt as being nothing more than a label, awfully at odds with the work in question. It is an inadequate reduction to a conclusion that, while perhaps making the drawing more accessible to human cognition, is still devoid of any justification. It merely refers us back to ourselves leaving us to our own devices. Taken positively, this attempt at labeling Hafif's drawings - and its eventual failure - can at least make one aware of how much human thought depends on subjective and artificial constructions in order to cope with the world. It is an instance of how wide the gap is between language and what language is supposed to be about, and that shows how easily these predetermined assumptions can be caused to collapse. One finally has to accept the idea that these drawings have to be seen as ends in themselves, serving for nothing and no one but themselves. Their sole intention is to put one stroke next to another and to show how one stroke takes its place next to another in the act of covering a surface.

Seen as such Hafif's work is in line with a tendency in Modern art to ban content from art in order to attain what was then called "pure form." But are Hafif's drawings really an instance of "pure form?" During the 1970s artists became suspicious of theories developed by proponents of pure abstraction realizing that it is logically impossible to have form without content as one is always the condition of the other. Artists working then in a non-representational mode faced a new challenge, that of going back to the roots of their medium to examine more closely what they were doing and why. The question of content then shifted to its own inner workings as artists explored how content was created and how artworks related to other meaningful ways of expression, such as language.

**BUT LET US TAKE A CLOSER LOOK** at the drawings before we enter too deeply into speculation. In most of them Hafif started in the upper left corner of the page and finished at the bottom right. The single strokes are rather short and never exceed a limit that would allow us to call them lines. And they are spaced in such a way that they do not merge with their neighbors to form a plane.

We previously noticed the similarity of Hafif's drawing procedure to that of writing. There are even two sheets within the body of drawings that take this idea almost literally. They were not done with short vertical strokes but with actual letters: one is covered with rows of h's and the other with rows of a's (November 1972). It is necessary, however, to understand that these two sheets remain unique, and that Hafif immediately

discontinued that approach for the reason that actually writing upon a sheet is not what her drawings are about. Tracing single letters requires a sort of attention inconsistent with that which goes into marking a homogeneously covered surface, and even the viewer will be too drawn into following the rows of letters, that is, with reading, difficult as it may be, instead of seeing the work as a whole. For these reasons the work on those two sheets has to be considered an erratic experiment.

The sense of writing in Hafif's drawings can be seen to be of a more essential nature. Here writing is referenced in the primal gesture of inscribing a mark upon a surface. The single vertical strokes are not to be considered as proper signs. They are more like suggestions of signs, as if a sign in the process of become a completed one. Before any of these marks can be considered to carry a specific meaning, i.e., that of a letter, they are nothing more than a trace, the trace of inscription done with intention to create meaning.

Deconstructivists call this the principle of Differance, that is, the movement causing difference or the movement that enables differences to appear, the condition basic to any meaning.

Applying this idea to Marcia Hafif's drawings it can be said that they create the potential for meaning and not meaning itself. They demonstrate a process allowing the emergence of meaning while preventing its full development. To use actual letters would be to go too far, even spoiling the game her drawings are about. In order to create meaning one has to create differences and make distinctions, and it is in this manner that one must look at Hafif's works on paper. One has to look at the mass of strokes and their relation to and difference from the surface to which they are applied. One has to look at the single sheet and its relation to and difference from the other sheets. It is in all this that the meaning of Hafif's drawings resides. In all their details, even and especially in the empty spaces between. Those empty spaces between strokes or on the margins of a page, those between the pages when they are installed for an exhibition, those are not empty, they are full of information. Because it is they and only they that enable the movement of Differance to ensue - the creation of meaning by being deferred, so to speak. One could say that these drawings are not just dealing with the strokes of the pencil but also, and perhaps primarily, with the spaces between.

TO PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT IS NOT THERE in order to understand what is there is a thought common in Far Eastern philosophy. In Lao Tse's Tao Te King we can read under chapter 11:

"Thirty spokes are joined together in a wheel, but it is the centre hole that allows the wheel to function. We mould clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that makes the vessel useful. We fashion wood for a house, but it is the emptiness inside that makes it livable. We work with the substantial, but the emptiness is what we use."

It is to be noticed that until now there has been little writing on the importance of Taoism and Zen for Marcia Hafif's work, although she has mentioned it often enough in her own essays. This is the more remarkable when one realizes how easily her drawings can be related to the passage quoted above without the need of explanation.

Through their visual appearance alone one also cannot help but perceive a certain meditative quality inherent in the drawings. The seemingly endless repetition of the same gesture of inscribing a mark is not only reminiscent of a mantra, but too the apparent want of some deeper meaning can be related to one of the basic principles of Taoist philosophy. It is the conviction that one should not interfere with the natural course of things, but instead allow them to proceed as they would by themselves. This attitude, somehow contrary to Western practice, is a way of thinking that seems paradoxical and difficult. In reference to art it claims that the aim of art is to be artless, the effort to be made is to be effortless, and the intention of an artwork is to be without intention.

In this sense Hafif's drawings are meditations on the artlessness of art, attempts at a meaning without having to look for one. The constant flow between being and non-being, as exemplified by the interchange of stroke and non-stroke, finally produces a work that has come into existence without design. It is supposed to be just as it has to be and in complete accord with the order of things. A drawing like this is not a representation of this order of things; it is rather to be seen as an acting out of this order. Simple as this act may sound it is probably the most difficult thing to achieve, requiring a mind disciplined enough to be able to forget all its discipline. One emptied of subjective impetus in order to allow the energy inherent in the object to express itself through the hand of the artist. This must, however, not be confused with an attitude that lets everything go falling subject to the turmoil of the world like a leaf in an autumn storm. Making art in the way described above demands a sophisticated degree of reflection.

Understanding this attitude of avoiding any artful intention may also help to explain the obvious similarity between all of Hafif's pencil works. It is as if it was always one drawing that manifested itself over the course of ten years. It only changed slightly every time in order to adjust itself to its proper being. Hafif's habit of titling her drawings according to their date of execution merges the one drawing, or meta-drawing so to speak, with all its singular instances in order to exhibit the delicate balance between the general and the particular that is specific to all of Hafif's work.

HER PRACTICE OF NAMING also introduces another aspect of these drawings it is indispensable to understand as it is perhaps one of the most important. It can be explored by looking at what was done at the back of some pages.

Apart from the author's name and the day, month and year when they were made, several of the drawings from 1972 carry other inscriptions. Most often there is a note on the hour a drawing is begun and when it was finished, the time ranging from thirty

minutes up to a whole day. In some instances notes included names of people and references to events such as meals, movies or weather indicating interruptions occurring as she worked on that particular drawing. Although she gave up that practice very soon this fact provides us with an important clue in raising the notion of the diary.

Keeping a diary is an intimate affair involving the writer, the pen and the paper that it is written upon. A drawing is often rather like that, as opposed to a painting that carries with it the notion of the public. Artists in the 1970s invoked this difference in the roles of the public and the private when they re-discovered drawing and its immediacy as a suitable medium. In their attempt to restate this medium for art making many used what could be called a diaristic form.

To a certain extent Marcia Hafif can also be counted among these, but there is more to her drawings that unsettles this classification. Hafif here employing a diaristic mode transcends the realm of the personal. While a diary usually records a given period of time in retrospect attempting to recover time already passed, Hafif's drawings record time itself. Each stroke has been made during the time it is supposed to record, and so this diary of hers does not translate the events of a given time into some other medium but is the event itself. As a consequence each drawing is a materialization of time on a pencil-covered sheet of paper; time is made visible and palpable. Even when the exact time frame locating a sheet precisely within the flow of time disappeared from the notes on the back, the idea of a work carried out in time persisted in all the drawings. Time as history and the clock define it becomes meaningless - it is enough to see that each work took time, not what time. In this way each drawing exempts itself from the universal framework of counting time by creating its own time, unrelated to any other notion of time. It creates a micro-history of its own and refuses to be absorbed by Big Time as represented by the clock and notion of historicity.

The importance of time for art since Modernism cannot be overestimated. When time became something precious that could be saved, artists realized that it also could dry out and become sterile. There are several ways to deal with time in a medium that per se is supposed to be timeless and during the 1960s time played an important part in many arts then emerging such as video and performance. But as long as these do not purvey it via a formal appearance they remain at the level of subject matter. In order to illustrate this I would like to quote a diary writer from a time when Modernism was still young. On February 29, 1897, Leo Tolstoy wrote:

"I did the dusting in my room, and after I had finished my rounds, I came to the sofa and could not recall whether I had already dusted there or not. As these movements take their course in such a wonted and unconscious way, I could no longer remember them and even felt the impossibility of doing so. When I did the dusting and then forgot, i.e., when I acted unconsciously, it was just as if I had not done it at all. (...) When the whole and complicated life of the masses goes on unconsciously, then this life has actually never existed."



For the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky this passage from Tolstoy's diaries served as an example of what the purpose and final essence of art is, and in a way it applies even to the drawings of Hafif:

"And so this whole life becomes meaningless and is lost. Habit devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique or device of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the making of an object; the object itself is not important."

HAFIF EXPLORES IN HER DRAWINGS the temporality of time as art, while at the same time she experiences the artlessness of art. Although this seems to be a probable conclusion, it does remain strange. But I think we will have to get to like the idea that her paths often take an unexpected and unfamiliar turn. In all the areas we have so far examined Marcia Hafif's drawings have appeared to be elusive, they have constantly resisted attempts of pinning them down to a set of well-defined and fixed categories. Although they are so simple in their making it is just this simplicity that makes them difficult to grasp. One is tempted to conclude from this that it is exactly this refusal of interpretative means that these drawings are about. Taking refuge along the paradoxical lines of argument represented in Taoism then proves to be the most helpful.

Paradoxes are often rejected by minds trained in the tradition of Western logic, but exactly for this reason they have become a useful device for Postmodern thinkers in their attempt to bypass those very traditions. Leaving the paradox unresolved and accepting indeterminacy as true to nature enables the mind at last to embrace things just as they are. It expands the borders of thinking by claiming that there are none, that it was the notion of borders that created the borders rather than the reverse.

Marcia Hafif's drawings are her attempt to face the Postmodern challenge in rethinking and restating worn out assumptions about art as we know it, its purpose, meaning and history. In reducing her artistic means for a time to the most simple ones, pencil marks on paper, Hafif re-discloses the complexity of art as a unique activity within time and space. The reclaiming of the indefinite is her way of circumventing the cul-de-sac that the supposed progress of art has run into. In this respect Hafif's drawings are not only a reflection on the bases of art but also on their potential for history. But let us finally go back to our shepherd who still stands in front of his drawing and tries to figure out what this all means.

WE REMEMBER that his casual deed tore his existence out of the flow of time by stating it as something definite, thus fixing it as finite or mortal. As a consequence the story of the shepherd also shows that the idea of art is irrevocably linked to the idea of history, just as every birth is a death into time. Art cannot be made without history and

vice versa. But in times when the teleological idea of time is put into question as in Postmodernism, the question of art is at stake as well.

This dilemma is hard to solve. Because in order to overcome history in art one is still compelled to act within the historical restriction of art. One possibility is to try to go back to an indefinite moment before art becomes art and causes history to ensue, to a state where any meaningful ways of expressing human spirit are still one, be they drawing, writing or speaking. It is a state where time is allowed to just be, continuous and indefinite. Of course we cannot go back to Arcadia, though perhaps to a between state, where history is just about to evolve, where it is still about to play before all play becomes serious. It means to postpone the birth of history by stopping the shepherd's hand before he can finish his drawing and make him begin again instead, setting one casual mark next to another.

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