

The desert begins behind the hill

ANDREA ITEN
MAX SPIELMANN

Is drawing ecological? Can a drawing be understood as a call or blueprint for climate-friendly behavior? In this text, artist Andrea Iten and her collaborator Max Spielmann engage in a dialogue about the medium of drawing. Iten's technique combines body, paper, charcoal and space, which she and Spielmann connect to artistic discourses as well as a formulation of their position. They claim that drawing arises from an interconnectivity/interrelationship that is a prerequisite for ecological action.

Andrea Iten studied painting with themes that suggested motion in the 1980s. It was a time of political upheaval and change, both socially and personally, which led to her video art and experimental film work. At the onset of postmodernism, feminist perspectives began to shape the canon. In addition, the possibility of cutting the power, deleting the image, or flickering on the screen was seen as positive side-effects: "erasing the image" freed her from hundreds of years of the classical painting tradition. These themes were then expanded to include installations, performance interactive text, media, and photographs. Yet drawing as a daily artistic activity remained. While an emphasis on physical, spatial, and performative artistic interventions remains to this day, the trace left by such interactions with the audience can also be applied to drawing. More specifically, this essay deals with the question of how the medium of drawing can play a mediating role in an ecological understanding of the world. In this dialogue, we show how our own awareness of the politics of ecology and drawing has developed in Andrea Iten's work over the decades, particularly regarding the challenge of global heating.

Keywords: drawing, world experience, nature, ecology, exploitation, posthumanism

O desenho é ecológico? Pode um desenho ser entendido como um apelo ou um projeto para um comportamento amigo do ambiente? Neste texto, a artista Andrea Iten e seu colaborador Max Spielmann estabelecem um diálogo sobre o meio do desenho. A técnica de Iten integra o corpo, papel, carvão e espaço, elementos que ela e Spielmann associam a discursos artísticos e à construção da sua própria perspectiva. Defendem que o desenho emerge de uma interconectividade e inter-relação essenciais para a ação ecológica que ela e Spielmann relacionam com discursos artísticos e com a formulação da sua própria posição. Afirmando que o desenho surge de uma interconectividade/inter-relação que é um pré-requisito para a ação ecológica.

Andrea Iten estudou pintura com temas que sugeriam movimento na década de 1980. Foi uma época de convulsão política e de mudança, tanto a nível social como pessoal, que conduziu ao seu trabalho de videoarte e de cinema experimental. Com o início do pós-modernismo, as perspectivas feministas começaram a moldar o cânone. Além disso, a possibilidade de cortar a energia, apagar a imagem ou a cintilação no ecrã eram vistas como efeitos secundários positivos: "Apagar a imagem" libertava-a de centenas de anos de tradição da pintura clássica. Estes temas foram depois alargados a instalações, performances, textos interactivos, meios de comunicação e fotografias. No entanto, o desenho como atividade artística diária manteve-se. Embora a ênfase nas intervenções artísticas físicas, espaciais e performativas se mantenham até hoje, o traço deixado por essas interações com o público também pode ser aplicado ao desenho. Mais especificamente, este ensaio aborda a questão de como o meio do desenho pode desempenhar um papel mediador numa compreensão ecológica do mundo. Neste diálogo, mostramos como a nossa própria consciência da política da ecologia e do desenho se desenvolveu no trabalho de Andrea Iten ao longo das décadas, particularmente no que diz respeito ao desafio do aquecimento global.

Palavras-chave: desenho, experiência do mundo, natureza, ecologia, exploração, pós-humanismo

ANDREA ITEN

MA Transdisciplinarity in the arts

Andrea Iten was born in Glarus, Switzerland, and lives as an artist in Basel and Berlin. She studied painting and audiovisual communication at the Basel School of Design, and currently works in drawing, video, installation, photography and new media. She was an assistant to Prof. P. Jenny, ETH Zurich. From 1999 to 2023 she was a Research Associate at the Basel Academy of Art and Design (FHNW).

Mestrado em Transdisciplinaridade nas Artes

Andrea Iten nasceu em Glarus, na Suíça, e vive como artista em Basileia e Berlim. Estudou pintura e comunicação audiovisual na Escola de Design de Basileia e atualmente trabalha com desenho, vídeo, instalação, fotografia e novos media. Foi assistente do Prof. P. Jenny, da ETH Zurique. De 1999 a 2023, foi Investigadora Associada na Academia de Arte e Design de Basileia (FHNW).

MAX SPIELMANN

Max Spielmann studied medicine and has worked in Media Theory and Practice since 1985. From 1999-2023 he was a Professor for Process Design at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, Hyperwerk. He was also a Lecturer in the MA Media Design at FH Joanneum Graz (A). His main research topics are participative media and design and living archives.

Max Spielmann estudou medicina e trabalha em Teoria e Prática dos Media desde 1985. De 1999 a 2023, foi Professor de Design de Processos na Academia de Arte e Design de Basileia (FHNW), Hyperwerk. Lecionou também no Mestrado em Design de Media na FH Joanneum Graz (A). Os seus principais temas de investigação são os media e o design participativos e os arquivos vivos.

AI: Summer 2024 - it's been oppressively hot for a few days now. The thermometer climbs above 30 degrees. The shutters are closed during the day. It's cool inside. When I open the window in the evening, it's dead quiet. Not a bird can be heard, the gossiping sparrows have fallen silent. Why have I never noticed this?

I drive past the nearby park. The drug scene here is monitored by camera. A woman shouts after me. Her unfiltered rage hits me.

I respond with a drawing. A lotus leaf with a swan lying underneath. He is sleeping, with his long neck folded underneath his wings.

MS: We create an image of nature and call it a landscape. By doing this, we separate nature from ourselves and hang it on the wall as a painting.

AI: When I go swimming the next afternoon, I see two powerful white water birds on the ramp that leads to the river. Everything is full of shit. It's been like that for weeks next to the two snow-white feathered swans. While standing in the middle of a garbage dump in New York, Slavoj Žižek says,

"This is where we should start feeling at home. Part of our daily perception of reality is that this disappears from our world. When you go to the toilet, shit disappears. You flash it, of course, rationally. You know it's there in canalization and so on. (...)

Another myth which is popular about ecology, namely spontaneous ideological myth, is the idea that we Western people in our artificial technological environment are alienated from immediate natural environs, that we should not forget that we humans are part of the living Earth. We should not forget that we are not abstract engineers, theorists who just exploit nature, that we are part of nature, that nature is our unfathomable, impenetrable background. I think that precisely is the greatest danger." (Žižek, 2008)

MS: We take a picture of nature and call it a still life. Objects such as fruit or flowers are placed on a table. The plate becomes a tableau. We tilt it from horizontal to vertical on the wall and create ephemerality. In French: *nature morte*. We separate, we exploit, we destroy, while at the same time we exaggerate its presence and seek to merge with it. In all our interconnectedness, we overlook the fact that we are part of it. We are blind. Drafting counteracts this passivity by involving us as agents who influence the development of every line. In this way, the process remains open-ended.

AI: I also encounter swans on a rasterized newspaper clipping from a feminist newspaper (Iten, 1988, p. 14), which has been digitized and archived by the ETH. Even back then, I was already drawing on a sheet of paper, sitting or lying on the floor moving exuberantly with a piece of charcoal in my hand. That's how I (or rather we) imitated the artist Maria Lassnig back then. Even today, I sit down on the floor, pause, take a piece of hard charcoal in my hand and draw what emerges from the memory of my body.

MS: Diego Velázquez looks us straight in the eye from his painting (Velázquez 1656). We, the viewers, observe the room from behind the canvas. The model, the king's five-year-old daughter Margarita, is surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting and attendants, who give the painting its title: *Las Meninas* (The Court Maidens); but it is she, not the royal patrons, who is recognizable in a mirror in a way that doubles the viewer's perspective. Michel Foucault uses this painting as the point of departure for the beginning of modernity: "nul regard n'est stable, ou plutôt, dans le sillon neutre du regard qui transperce la toile à la perpendiculaire, le sujet et l'objet, le spectateur et le modèle inversent leur rôle à l'infini." (Foucault, 1966, p. 21)². The viewer becomes an eyewitness to the creation of representation. As today's observers, we can transport ourselves back to the Spanish Baroque — however, we remain trapped in its symbolic order and the figurative arrangement used by the painter.

THE PRESENT

AI: A plant grows out of me as I watch it grow. Fingers, charcoal, movement, and gaze are one (not a becoming). Sometimes I am curious or amazed, wondering what wants to come to light. I imagine that the whole surface is covered with an infinite number of lines, and all I have to do is follow them. I used to combine this approach with painting, but later I put the brush away completely. The agile charcoal offers resistance, slows down the movement and allows for new paths. It becomes the tool of discovery. There are days when I am unfocused or want to achieve something that eludes me. Fragments emerge they feel incoherent. I stop. I will have a look again tomorrow.

MS: The drawing, the line, the paper, the charcoal, the resistance. There is this process of discovery that arises from the direct dialogue between mate-

² In the English version, this reads "No gaze is fixed, or: in the neutral furrow of the gaze that penetrates the canvas vertically, subject and object, spectator and model reverse their roles indefinitely" (Foucault, 1997, p. 23).

rial creation and the acting subject; ultimately, it is up to the viewer to shape the image. Who or what guides the hand? Who or what draws? Who reads the image and how? And where does the power of imagination take us?

AI: I usually find a solution in the following way. I draw a somewhat vague-looking line, see it in a different context, and smudge it with a kneaded eraser so that new openings in space lead to more clarity. This has resulted in rolls of up to 10 meters long, but mostly in individual sheets or series of 50 x 70 cm. This format enables a good working connection to one's own body.

A friend says: "I have the sheet hanging in my bedroom". A Judge adds: "I look at the picture before I go into the courtroom, following one of the drawn lines with my gaze. I take this attitude with me into the hearing in order to find a solution. Am I missing something, is there something else to consider?"

For me, drawings are a means of connection or communication with our shared world, which doesn't just start with the plant in my front garden but is already reflected onto my retina and travels right into my brain, and which spreads its essence through my legs, arms and fingers while I am drawing. I find this same attitude in the drawings of the natural scientist Florianne Koechlin (2008), who has researched communication between plants, particularly how they exchange information regarding dry soil or waterlogging. Concepts such as concrete and abstract are not sufficient. Associations must be considered, as they enable us to communicate. They make us agents. The drawing establishes connections. A dynamic of shared performative negotiation is built. Isn't this what it means to be ecological?

MS: In the conclusion to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault leaves behind an enigmatic phrase that has been hotly debated ever since. He makes a bet. What happens when the modern dispositifs of knowledge and knowledge production start to crumble? He bets "alors on peut bien parier que l'homme s'effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable" (Foucault 1996, p. 398)³? The accusation of anti-humanism is evident straight away. I ask myself: why didn't he use the more comprehensible image of a footprint?

I CAN(NOT) DRAW

AI: Peter Jenny has been publishing on this subject for decades and has trained hundreds of fu-

ture architects at ETH Zurich. He refers to Joseph Beuys' expanded concept of art. Beuys' statement "everyone is an artist" (1979, p.17-19) is based on a sentence by Novalis (2012, p. 50)⁴ and is still relevant today. Everyone can draw, whether it is scribbling during a phone call, sketching while explaining concepts or signing a contract. From the head to the hand and onto the paper, drawing helps us to develop thoughts by visualizing and communicating them. Of course, there is the craft that is divided into different genres, such as the perspective drawing, scientific or comic drawing, graffiti on walls or the technical drawings of machines. There are also abstract drawings that blossom with associations created by artists ranging from Cy Twombly to Rebecca Horn, who passed away while this text was being written. In her work *die Malmaschine / Arie in schwarz* (1991) she transferred traces of her body onto sheets of paper as if by sleepwalking, or climbed into a plumage, became a bird, or allowed paint to fly onto the wall by machine, using gestures that were uniquely her own.

MS: What do we take away from Rebecca Horn or Maria Lassnig? What do we take away from two generations of artists who re-calibrated the image, the practice of drawing and the visual arts in such a way as to bring the complex performative aspect of making art into life itself? Together with Joseph Beuys' claims, these counter-images produced the demand for a social sculpture — that is, the practice of social action. With his prescient environmental engagement, Joseph Beuys' concept of the social can already be extended beyond the human being.

MORE THAN A TITLE

AI: The title we chose for this text is "The desert begins over the hill", but what does that have to do with sitting down in front of a blank page and drawing? We wanted to evoke the idea of embarking on a new journey, one that is not understood as another extractivist expedition to recover raw materials under the sand or pack ice, but rather a sensual experiment with a cautious approach, stroke by stroke and particle by particle. It allows for fragility and indeterminacy and includes the viewer—or allows them to grow with us—into an intentionally sustainable future.

MS: We arrange signs of presence. We hang them on the wall for reference, as a source of imagination for our future existence in the world. The presence of the lines offers us all this.

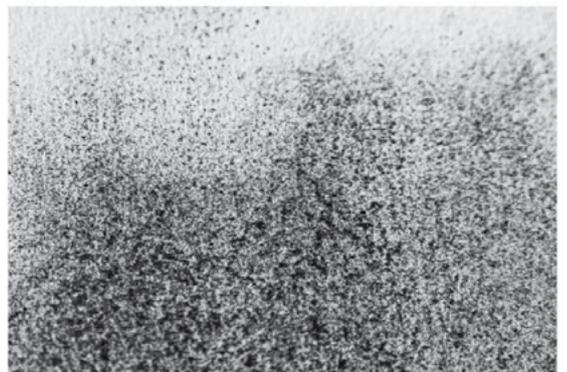
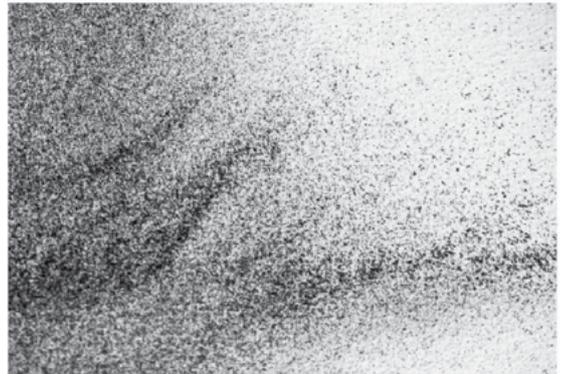
³ In english: "that man will disappear like a face in the sand on the seashore" (Foucault, 2005, p. 422).

⁴ "Jeder Mensch sollte Künstler sein. Alles kann zur schönen Kunst werden." (Novalis, 2012, p.50)

Fig. 2 *Sub rosa*,
embroidery on cotton,
Series three out of
five, 38x38cm, 2005.
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Fig. 3 *Pyrolyse*,
digital print on
Hahnmühle/bamboo, six
parts 50 x 70 cm, 2022.
© Andrea Iten.

THE CLOUD OF DUST

AI: During COVID-19, I started a compost in the backyard under the trees. It was one of the few opportunities during this time to be active outside without coming into contact with other people. The nurseries were practically sold out of plants as a green trend emerged: balconies became oases in no time at all, and flowerbeds sprang up around city trees in Berlin, tended to and cared for by residents of the neighborhood. This trend has continued to this day.

PYROLYSE - A TURNING POINT

A brown bag caught my eye at the checkout of the nursery. It held vegetable carbon from the municipal industrial works. Curious, I bought a small amount to add to my compost. It would prevent rotting and unpleasant odors, store nutrients and water, and bind CO² to the soil. But when I scattered a handful over the compost I couldn't believe my eyes: A dark cloud of dust silently formed around me, until it expanded and flew upwards before gradually sinking down onto the compost again. I immediately began researching the pyrolysis process and learnt that plant waste is burnt at over 400 degrees without the use of oxygen. The carbon was as light as a feather waiting to be used.

MS: In many parts of the world, the production and use of pyrolytically produced vegetable carbon has a long tradition. The soil turns black and fertile—in Portuguese the *Terra preta* is a visual symbol of a circular economy and thus of the ecological behaviour and self-understanding of the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin.

AI: In my studio, I laid out large white sheets of paper and began to drop handfuls of vegetable carbon over them. I felt like I was in a movie by William Kentridge where a fog of charcoal haze blocked my view of the future (Kentridge, 1991). Still holding the bag of charcoal in my hand, I realized that something was happening that I couldn't put into words, but could only summarize with a feeling: I was very moved. Once the charcoal pieces and particles descended they began to develop a momentum of their own. They drew. But they could not and would not be fixed or controlled.

MS: To return to Michel Foucault's bet. Why the face in the sand and not footprints? Footprints would suggest that man has not entirely disappeared from the world but has just moved to a different place. The face in the sand disappears completely with a

single wave, and with it the human being. This disappearance can be understood anti-humanistically as complete destruction, or also as a fundamental new beginning in a post-humanistic age. This image requires an understanding of the human being as part of a dynamic, interwoven, self-organising system called Earth or, more precisely, Gaia. This new understanding is a process, networked and non-hierarchical.

AI: The descended coal suggests a whole continent, with a rain cloud, ash rain or a snowstorm in the mountains with a fir tree in the middle, which reminded me of fast rides on a snowboard. At the end of the process, I gently lifted the paper and tried to set the powder and pieces of coal in motion so that they would flow back into the container. The result was a sheet of paper with a mourning pile. It still makes me think of the many COVID victims in Bergamo.

Ephemeral moments in artistic work can neither be forced nor repeated. There are no originals aside from the first instance, but I still record them in photographs. For me, the printed documentary images are powerful, hauntingly delicate indicators of a chemical process that has its place in the sustainability debate. We don't see carbon in its "purest" form as diamonds or brown coal, which are still unfortunately being plundered from our planet's reserves. Instead, we witness a careful process that binds CO₂ into the soil. This type of drawing thus becomes a means to an end and connects us via a transformative cycle to each other (as viewers and practitioners) and to the Earth.

MS: We are not creating a likeness, but a symbol: a black square, for example, or a cup made of fur. We want to find answers with such recordings, photos and videos. Metaphorically speaking, we are standing in a fog of coal and trying to respect a space that we cannot even fully grasp. The coal was once a plant and will become a plant again. While the photograph can be hung on the wall as an artifact and image, it seems to be separate from our direct experience as a memory. As a narrative, it remains alive and opens up to our imagination.

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