

The Sketch in the Work of Frances Stark, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Sue Tompkins

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Abstract:

What happens when the quickness of the sketch is translated into other media—and, indeed, becomes a sign of this quickness—and of the sketch’s fabled close proximity to thought? In this essay, the author discusses the role of the sketch in the work of three artists who extend the temporalities of sketching by using media including printing, animation, and performance: Frances Stark, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Sue Tompkins.

Full text:

What are the temporalities of sketching, and what happens to the immediacy of the sketch in a highly mediated context? What happens, in other words, when the temporality of the sketch becomes engulfed in the complex temporalities of other media, in which the quickness and immediacy of the sketch have not been directly presented to audiences but, rather, have been indirectly *represented* using other media? What happens when the fetish of immediacy—the fabled closeness of the sketch to thought—becomes frozen, even reified, with the help of film, animation, photographs, art markets, audiences, and performers? Here, I’d like to briefly consider how three contemporary artists—Frances Stark, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Sue Tompkins—rethink the temporal logic of the sketch, both accelerating and decelerating its imagined speed by extending it into photography, animation, and performance.

Frances Stark often builds a provisional quality into her work, troubling the distinction between the finished product and the process of getting something down. She suspends the line between literary and pictorial conventions, and asks viewers to think about the complex relations between that which appears and how it comes to be; between subjectivity and media; between “private” experience and printed matter. Often, she does this with a light touch—as if she’s telling a joke. In *Bicornate Bicornous (That which is Below corresponds to that which is above, and that which is Above corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracle of the One Thing)*, Stark presents one of her drawings of a pair of legs, wearing trousers and Nike sneakers, sticking out of a bin overflowing with collaged bits of printed matter. The thin, delicate lines scarcely delineating the legs, sneakers, and bin give way to a cacophony of textures in the paper coming out of the top of the bin, far more prominent than the figure itself: a ripped piece of what looks like wrapping paper, a dark background with a snowflake print; bits of text and what look like images of some of the artist’s other works; and right in the centre, a small, stuck-on drawing of a pair of upside-down legs, that echo and refract the “real” legs of the sketched figure. Stark’s drawn figure is a scavenger of printed matter, one who must navigate between that which can be saved and that which must be discarded. With a splash of pages in her wake, she dives into the disposable, into all that must be subtracted to manage the relationship between printed matter and thought.

The digital print depicts the drawing tacked onto a rough, off-white studio wall. A figure—Stark herself—crouches at the base of the drawing, in sneakers and a white dress with a long white zipper, holding a pencil in her right hand, which rests on the edge of the drawn bin. The photographed and drawn figures—one right side up, one upside-down—oppose one another. Stark’s hair is swept into an up-do fashioned so that two small, horn-like tufts of hair stick up on the top of her head, intersecting with a diagonal line that punctuates the bin’s centre. This draws attention to the term “bicornate” (two-horned), appearing in two forms in the title; the drawn legs echo the hair’s two-pronged-ness, and foregrounds the relationship between the drawn and photographed figures. The subtitle (*That which is Below . . .*) hails from *The Emerald Tablet*, one of the Egyptian-Greek *Hermetica* written in the second century BCE; these wisdom-texts are attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, who founded the hermetic tradition of esoteric thought, and they describe how the microcosmic and macrocosmic are interconnected. Here, “Below” and “Above” latch onto the image, to playfully explain the relationship between the differently described bodies of the drawing and the drawer.ⁱ

The lower body, by way of the pencil, practises a communion of sorts with the drawn and collaged image above. The photographed and the drawn (then photographed) figures extend and undo one another’s temporalities—layering the drawn instant onto the photographed instant, for a fleeting, multi-layered stillness. This suspended, momentary stillness of the Below and the Above opens up a complex reflection on the relations between subjectivity and medium. Why, after all, refer to drawing’s performative dimension in this way? Why represent both the drawer and the drawn figure?

Both the drawer and the drawn become characters within the print’s layered narrative structure, speaking to a breakdown between the literary (here, drawn) character and the author-as-character. A commentary on media far beyond drawing and photography, this piece anticipates a much greater erosion of the distinction between fictitious characters, on the one hand, and authors and readers, on the other, that is endemic to the contemporary media landscape. As Wendy Chun has argued, “We are now characters in a universe of dramas putatively called Big Data,”ⁱⁱ with the corollary that the distinction between literary characters and readers no longer stands. D. A. Miller wrote, thirty years ago, that readers and characters, however alike, could never blur into one another because the reader, reading in private, was not “inside out” like the character—an interiority watched from the outside.ⁱⁱⁱ Today, in an age in which readers are easily tracked—their reading, clicking, and highlighting habits closely analyzed online and on Kindles and other devices—no such distinction exists between readers and characters; big data makes characters of all of us. Stark’s photographed figure—working between the older technologies of drawing, collage, and digital photography, but with its eyes also fixed on newer means for disseminating images and data—produces a means to watch the drawer, and thus cannily explores the shifting relations that new media afford between art and life, author and character, artist and figure. The drawn figure, held in the orbit of the paused, almost-drawing hand, holds these tensions in its suspended moment.

If Stark extends the sketch by photographing the drawer, Jacolby Satterwhite extends sketches by building animated worlds around them. In Satterwhite’s *Reifying Desire* series, sketches, bodies, and objects float together in an ever-changing animated space. Satterwhite assembles, animates, and reimagines multiple elements to create three-dimensional video collages: starry backgrounds; animated part-bodies; elaborately rendered three-dimensional spaces; illustrations from medical textbooks; family photographs; and excerpts from his

mother's extensive collection of rough sketches, which she made by the thousands, detailing ideas for products that she could sell on The Shopping Channel. In fact, this series could be described as a collaboration between Satterwhite and his mother, whose drawings expressed her entrepreneurial designs, but also, as Satterwhite recounts, her mental illness.

Satterwhite translates his mother's drawings—with their accompanying scrawled notes and characteristic forty-five- and ninety-degree-angle grids—into colourful animations suspended in impossible spaces. Animated, naked figures pause next to bright, hovering sketches for “blowers for the house and yard,” “body bands,” or “fire poles to escape.” A voguing, cat-suited dancer—Satterwhite himself, captured in front of a green screen—dances above partly assembled animated bodies, poised inside one of his mother's drawings for a “water tub seat” to soak in. The animated figures have huge, flaming-bush merkins and fantastic, disproportioned hair. Satterwhite's small, dancing avatar showers them with an animated bubble bath labelled “Pussy Power.” The viewpoint pans around and the strange, collaged space shifts. Multiple Jacobys, riding animated drawings of a levitating bed and car as if they were chariots, now wield animated, glowing laser-swords that send light beams onto the animated women as Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon* speeds by. Passing family photographs, hair sculptures, strangely elongated Louis Vuitton bags, and other impossibilities, the scene arrives at an animated hermaphroditic woman, who ejects multiple tiny Jacobys from her enormous, mouthed penis, next to a male attendant holding a drawing for “a slicing tray.” Glowing, pink notes float in the air: “Lipstick for the [*sic*] between the legs, the genitals, flavours, scented.” Strange, pulsing tumours move through the hermaphrodite's animated flesh. The tiny, ejaculated Jacobys dance in silver suits, slowly assembling themselves onto the “slicing tray” sketch.

The *Reifying Desire* series is an extended meditation on sketching, its relationship with the body, and its relationship with desire. Extended through animation, Satterwhite's mother's sketches (which were his introduction to drawing as a child) take on a new medium, a new suspended-ness in space, and a new sense of time. His improvised voguing performances, transferred by the handfuls into animated worlds, are loosely based on re-enacting the products in his mother's drawings. Fascinated by dance as an extension of drawing—as a way of quickly conjuring into being what is not there—Satterwhite creates rituals through which he explores how to rethink his mother's products through motion. The fleetingness of the gestures offsets the relative stasis of the animated figures, and the slowly circling viewpoint through which they are presented.

Satterwhite queers the drawings' desire: whereas his mother's sketches pledged allegiance to the world of The Shopping Channel, Satterwhite transforms them into strange, outsized emblems in a landscape of queer, shopping mall, video game utopias. Cake designs become towers; water tub seats become vehicles for animated characters. Bodies are continually stretched and reinvented, brandishing new growths and anatomical features at every turn.

A complex meditation on how desires come to be reified, “set” in a certain form, Satterwhite's works question what it takes to reinvent the desires associated with the world of The Shopping Channel. What subjects most desire is often symptomatic of the structures and strictures in which they must live; the desire for commodities, for instance, articulates a widespread power relationship in capitalist societies. However, as Jacques Lacan argued, some subjects can rework their symptoms through the sheer pleasure of language or form—translating symptoms into *sinthomes*: a subject's *own* symptom, which has the power to

reposition the subject with respect to the symbolic order.^{iv} Satterwhite, hovering around the desire encapsulated in sketching, repositions the sketches' desire, producing his own symptom in an altogether queerer form.

Sue Tompkins, too, produces idiosyncratic relationships between subject and symbol. In conjunction with her show *Milk, Gluck, Handel, Fame* at DKUK Salon in Peckham, London, Tompkins presented a new performance, *Mob de Mob*, at the nearby Four Quarters Pub on January 23, 2018. The attendees crowded into a small basement chamber. Tompkins, in sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers, and holding a microphone, reads from a thick sheaf of sketches. A3 newsprint sheets, lined notebook pages, and other slightly weathered sheets of paper form a disorderly pile of loosely scrawled phrases, typewritten words, and quick coloured-pencil lines. On one sheet, the phrase "A holiday in time" has been hastily scrawled in pink. "Middle," says another. Tompkins reads from these quickly sketched phrases one after another—"the noise," "behind gates," "want it louder," "fossils," "top of the bench chemist," "strange how things work"—as she runs on the spot, back and forth a little, in the small space in which she performs. Some of the phrases are chanted repeatedly in a childlike, singsong loop. Her performance is punctuated with pauses during which she runs on the spot or shakes her microphone back and forth around the edges of her performance space, as if to ask the building to speak up, too. At points, she races through several sheets of her ersatz score in one go, leafing through in quick succession. After each sheet is sung or spoken, Tompkins lets it fall to the ground. By the end of her reading, she is running through a pile of loose-leaf pages.

Tompkins reanimates the temporalities of her quickly scrawled sketches through sing-running, matching scrawled and spoken quickness. Assembling a provisional whole from these fragmented parts, she draws attention to everything that is fragmented about the relationship between language and thought—sounding, at times, almost like a radio tuning in to bits of half-familiar tunes and phrases that always come from elsewhere. She tunes in to each sketch and scrawl, thinking alongside it in utterances and phrases that say nothing about the subjectivity of the artist (except, perhaps, through their exuberant singsong style of delivery).

In the 1920s, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote about the multi-voiced quality of language—the sense that language always comes from elsewhere, and always contains echoes of many voices, even when it is spoken by only one voice.^v Tompkins extends these reflections, presenting a dialogism that is more suitable to our hyper-fragmented yet hyper-connected times. Radio-like as much as subject-like, tuning in to sections from her own scrawled script, Tompkins's multi-voiced phrases fragment their own subject. They seem aimed to reposition the utterance in an information-saturated age: to try to find and replay an utterance's point of origin, but always after the fact of its production.

Stark, Satterwhite, and Tompkins each extends the sketch, its temporalities, and its relationships with other media. In doing so, these artists think through the complexities of how the sketch relates to subjectivity and desire—and how, indeed, these relationships might be repositioned, given changes in the contemporary media-scape. On the one hand, they reify the sketch—reproducing sketches as images or ideas of themselves. On the other hand, perhaps this capture of sketching opens itself to new forms of acceleration between subject and symbol, subject and object of desire, drawer and performer, drawer and drawn.

ⁱ Stark's composition nods to Diego Rivera's 1931 San Francisco mural *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, which features a trompe l'oeil scaffold layered over the image of painters working on the mural that depicts workers making the city. Rivera's ample backside, perched on the painted scaffold, occupies the centre of the image.

ⁱⁱ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Big Data as Drama," *ELH* 83, no. 2 (2016): 363.

ⁱⁱⁱ D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 208, cited in Chun, "Big Data as Drama," 368.

^{iv} Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 23* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016).

^v Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).