

Line: the Beckett drawings

An introduction to the exhibition at Galerie Förster, Berlin, 2009

Ray Malone

"Murphy, all life is figure and ground." (Samuel Beckett)

Line is a fundamental of drawing, and a drawn line the simplest demonstration of the relationship between figure and ground. A line drawn on a sheet of paper represents a minimal world where the paper becomes a field, the ground, and the line itself a figure. An essential, indelible dialectic is set up between them, serving as an image of our relationship to a world we daily negotiate in the same fundamental, if mostly unconscious way, constantly discriminating between the one and the other.

Of all lines, of all drawn elements, the *straight* line is the most tenuous, presenting as it does, at one and the same time, an apparently groundless rigidity, and the boundless possibility of destabilization and extenuation—in much the same way that what we call equilibrium is not weightlessness, but a more or less delicate balance of opposing forces, and so too ultimately *tenuous*.

Straight lines everywhere structure our world—identifying frames and parameters, defining and delimiting spaces and everyday objects, and even activities, guiding the writing hand for instance, orientating the writing itself, no matter how much of a scrawl it may be—and ultimately, however hidden and obscure, structuring our thoughts. In a way, we elaborate our daily tensions and hesitations, our leanings and tendencies, away from a 'line' that is insistently, if in reality utterly inconsistently, *straight*.

We may waver in our direction, or wander in relation to this or that goal, but however drunkenly we make our way, our 'intention' is always in one sense 'straight'—as if we were always aware, as we 'draw' an arc in the air with our hand, of the imaginary line between the two points of the arc, between its 'beginning' and its 'ending', as if the gesture were the arc of the bow and the line the string of it. The line of tension that 'runs through' the arc, from one point to another, is a straight line, and the more tenuous for being so.

the Beckett drawings

"to draw is to make an idea precise" (Henri Matisse)

The title, *the Beckett drawings*, was chosen for want of a better. In one sense the drawings have nothing to do with the *writer* Samuel Beckett, other than the fact of the words being taken from his writings, mostly titles of prose texts or dramas. In a more important sense they have nothing to do with the *writing* either—so, in a way, the titles are entirely arbitrary, in the same way that the connection between the words and drawings themselves is arbitrary.

The drawings are made up of nothing but straight lines, drawn with varying grades of pencil, arranged according to an arbitrary system of connection between the lines and the letters of the alphabet. According to this, the letters of the word, or words,

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determine the order of the lines, and the established order of the alphabet determines the distance, or *interval*, between them, that is, the letters are numbered in alphabetical order, the numerical difference representing the length of the interval.

The straight line is not merely the basis of the drawings, but their absolute principle, in that each one is the sign of both a physical *presence*—that is, establishes itself as an identity—and a metaphysical *absence*, that is, a relation to what is not present, other than another line, or what is not itself, a letter of the alphabet.

There is no logical connection between the lines and the letters forming the words, or between the words and the drawings themselves. The latter might well be said to function in their own right—drawing as they must on the fundamental notion of figure and ground, and so drawing the spectator into the endless play of distance and proximity—to resonate perfectly well in the absence of the words.

And yet, while there is neither a necessary, nor essential connection between them, a connection is made, as tenuous as the lines themselves, and once made, once acknowledged, the titles, the words, cannot be forgotten, cannot, that is, be *un*-acknowledged, once known cannot be *un*-known. Once read there's no reason to refer back to them—it is perhaps in the nature of titles—*unless* it be to try answering the question only the drawings can answer.

A minimal fragment of language, a word, a phrase, is made to connect with a drastically reduced, restricted drawing of lines. The strange waywardness of words is *set beside*, *set against*—how best to describe it?—is *met by*, the apparently merciless straightness of the line, and something happens. Where there is no connection, where there is at bottom and at best only an arbitrary connection, something nonetheless 'goes on' between them. What that is, other than the act of looking itself, is, of course, the question.

If there is an aesthetic, rather than a formal principle here, it is that very uncertainty. Between two systems with their own rules, a space opens up, an uncertain space, a space open to interpretation, but also itself opening up the possibility of the poetic, the possibility of relating to the least detail, to the tenuous fragment of the whole, as sign of the world itself—in the same way that any one thing, a poem, say, a piece of music, or a person, may be said to open up a whole world for us.

The drawings are dedicated to Pascale Casanova, whose thoughts on Beckett, in her book Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution, allowed me not only to see the possibility of connecting the letter and the line, the word and the drawing, but, more personally, to pay tribute to a writer who has accompanied me along the way.

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