Drawing/Thinking, ed. M. Treib (Routledge 2008)

Drawing/Thinking: An Introduction

Marc Treib

Despite advances in technology that might suggest otherwise, many educators and design professionals still believe there are direct links among and between the practices of thinking, observation, and drawing. For some younger people that proposition may be difficult to accept at face value, given all the mechanical supports now at one's disposal, principal among them the computer. But the computer reflects rather than thinks—at least up to this stage in its development—and it can process only what has been entered into its memory by key, mouse, or stylus. Electronic processing does not yet substitute for thinking, although one must assume it may, given time—at least to some degree. Of course, drawing itself is hardly congruent with thinking, but it does demand a more active apprehending of the subject before it than does the machine. This connection between drawing and thinking provided the major impetus for making this book: that link between how we draw (with or without the aid of a machine), how we observe, how we imagine—and by extension, how we dwell in the world.

The earliest human graphic expressions in Europe and the United States appear as petroglyphs, and as drawings and paintings in caves such as Lascaux and Altamira. Today, many seeing them for the first time might term them "abstractions:" despite their legibility, the images do not employ the systems of representation later conventionalized through many centuries of artistic production. Those who produced them drew upon the key features of the animals and hunters involved, presumably for effigistic or ceremonial purpose. "Ab-stracted"—"drawn-from"—the forms of the living beasts and the men who hunted them, these images, it is believed, sought to embody the power of the animal or perhaps a deity for which the animal was a surrogate.

Naturalism, of course, is neither the only manner of representation, nor is it universal. Cultures such as those of Asia often have depicted idealized scenes more fraught with feeling and emotion than with any regard for enacting pictures of specific places. In tribal cultures throughout the world, condensing the power of the depicted subject ranked over any attempt to capture its precise proportions, colors, or features. The image, embodied and epitomized, expressed rather than recorded. Perhaps, it is this distinction between expression and representation that has come to distinguish drawing in the art world as opposed to drawing as used by the design professions. Perhaps it is time to question that distinction.

Although the systems of representation and media increased in sophistication over time, until the early Renaissance, a symbolic aspect governed most serious imagery in the West. Giotto, for example, constructed his panels with multiple views or multiple time frames, portraying the most important personages through position or size. In many respects, the viewer shared the space of the depiction given his or her sharing of the symbolism it expressed. In Europe, that all changed with the rediscovery and adoption of linear perspective during the Renaissance.

Whether that formulation is credited to Leon Battista Alberti, Filippo Brunelleschi, Leonardo da Vinci—or all of them, at least in part—the certitude of a conventionalized representational structure displaced the viewer to a point outside the picture. While the precise location of the viewer determined the nature and proportions of the rendered scene, the observer was left looking through a transparent plane at a scene rigorously constructed—creating pictures much like a city or a landscape secured through a window. The advent of photography further separated the maker and the representation from the space of the viewer, although, given the mechanical nature of the photographic process, even the maker was somewhat removed from the prospect captured on film.

Drawing is inherently different from taking a photograph. To draw, we must look carefully, more fully immersing ourselves in the dimensions and life of the place. To draw a café, we must consider people and physical elements individually as well as collectively, noting and recording the idiosyncrasies that distinguish each from the next. Arresting light upon light-sensitive materials, the photograph collects the scene as a whole and demands no such degree of mental attachment although, without question, one *makes* rather than *takes* photographs. The maker and viewer stand to some degree detached from the scene despite the wealth of detail that may be collected through their lenses, although all serious photographers are correct in disputing this point.

Digital media have further distanced us from the subjects of our purported scrutiny, its reasonable price and ubiquity supporting an exchange of quality for expedience. While capturing an image digitally, people are less likely to even look through the viewfinder, or at the screen, than they did while taking conventional photographs. Compounded by the small scale at which many images are viewed today,

a greater detachment results. Similar limitations accompany the process of computer-aided design, where one works on a relatively small screen, line by line constructing drawings with no real scale, encouraging the study of parts removed from wholes. These limitations are not conclusive condemnations, however; constraints are a characteristic of every medium and drawing system. But the seeming immediacy and conquest of space and time through vehicles such as cell-phones to some degree disguise a consequent removal from the complexity and propinquity of life.

The chapters in this book calmly argue for resisting these trends towards ever-greater displacement and detachment. Many of the authors suggest that through drawing one more fully connects with the non-virtual world. Four ideas inform the thinking of almost all our authors, although each of the chapters was written independently with no real knowledge of the work of the other authors. The first idea addresses observation: drawing demands more careful scrutiny, a closer regard for the parts as well as for the whole. The second concerns how we design: using digital media affects how we think and thus how we design and produce architecture, landscape architecture, products, books, and perhaps even art. One cannot state that this new manner is bad or wrong; but it is fundamentally different. Computer programs are precise even when we want to be fuzzy. Existing programs channel, and delimit, what we can do and how we can do it. There are greater rewards. Rendering programs, as colored-light-on-a-screen, allow a novice with almost no artistic skill to produce images more vivid and more seductive than those created by even an experienced draftsman. But the rendering's visual appeal can easily conceal a lack of understanding or a dearth of beauty, smothering shortcomings in the design with affect. The third point involves the relation of hand to eye, and ultimately their relation to the brain. Capturing cell-phone images requires little premeditation and quite often they are taken without even a look at their subjects (some people may say that constitutes their very charm, however). Drawing affords us no such luxury; drawing demands consideration.

The last idea—in some ways a summation of the prior three thoughts—questions our being in the world. Electronic media tend to distance us from our location. While the far is made near, conversely, the near is made far. Drawing, in contrast, requires time, attention, and a focused acknowledgment of the particular place. Beginning and experienced artists and designers maintain sketchbooks for a reason:

drawing demands an immersion in a situation, drawing tests our observations; drawing within the confines of a sketchbook nudges us to take more care, to learn from the previous page and improve on the next one.

We believe that there are great benefits in knowing how to draw without the aid of the machine: the immediacy in some instances, or slowing down in others; the value of designing with the rhythm of the hand as well as the nano-second of the computer. The essays in this book are not intended as either Luddite proscriptions against technology or formalized prescriptions about how to "correctly" use a pencil. Instead, as a group, they beg a recollection and reevaluation of the value of drawing—drawing as a practice that requires the brain as well as the eye and hand.

This book is by no means intended as a condemnation of the computer and those truly astounding programs we currently use for processing words and images. The computer has given us a world in which graphic replication has reached unforeseen heights, where the possibilities for non-orthogonal environments are now viable, where the untutored and underrepresented have access to graphic capabilities never before achievable. There is no question that the computer will endure, and that over time it will come to play an even greater role in design and in daily living. But if there is any condemnation involved in these pages, even a small one, it is addressed to those who believe that the computer will do everything for them, and that there is no longer any necessity to draw by hand. We beg to differ. As landscape architects, artists, architects, or even simply as normal human beings, everyone benefits from knowing how to draw. That seems simple enough, although such a blanket assertion, one must admit, is certainly open to challenge.

Written by architects, landscape architects, architectural illustrators, historians, and curators, the chapters trace personal stories and professional situations. As will be evident throughout the essays in this book, the word "drawing" is taken very broadly, with multiple interpretations. A drawing may be a scribbled gesture understood by only its maker, or a precise projection strictly following graphic conventions. It may be graphite on paper, scratches in stucco, or incisions in the earth's surface. It may be of any size. In sum, drawing here is taken as more or less coincident with depicted thought, in any medium, on any surface, at any scale.

[6]

More than Wriggling Your Wrist (or Your Mouse): Thinking, Seeing, and Drawing

Laurie Olin

Drawing and experience

I love to draw. I have drawn as long as I can remember. I draw more than a lot of people, even in my profession. I draw because I like to. I draw to learn. Why? Because drawing is a way of thinking while acting, or of thinking through acting. It really isn't a parlor trick, or some low intensity athletic activity, or a wriggling of the wrist. Drawing is about seeing and visualizing. It's about memory and finding a sequence of marks that engage observation and thought. In the act of drawing a lot happens in a very short period of time, often almost instantaneously. Watching a person draw is like watching an internal combustion engine power an automobile. You can't see the inner workings, the fire and explosions, the air sucking and fluids circulating, the movement of the parts. All you see are the wheels turning and the pencil moving on the page.

Our society privileges verbal skill and intelligence to the point that by the time they reach middle school, most people abandon other forms of mental imagination and expression such as mathematics, music, or drawing. If these alternative methods of comprehension and expression had a generally perceived social utility they would be pursued beyond puberty by more than the minority that does persist. Those who continue to draw as they approach adulthood, more often than not, gravitate toward fields where drawing still has value and is either useful or needed to perform well. While many today in the so-called "fine arts" have moved away from traditional visual skills in search of conceptual methods that don't require the hand of an author or graphic representation, the fields of architecture and landscape architecture continue to employ visual representation in their design processes, and for marketing and communication within their disciplines and to the world. The recent proliferation of computer-generated imagery may bring an end to the long tradition of drawing skills in these fields as well, but it is not clear that this will completely or ever really happen. The issue of computers versus hand drawing has become a tedious subject, which I will leave to others.

One of the peculiarities of drawing that resembles language, despite their many differences, concerns how it is learned. After decades of teaching I can say with confidence that drawing can't be taught—but it can be learned. By this I mean that you can put people in a situation where they can figure it out through practice, but you can't make them

"get it." This is a characteristic shared with language. We all learn to speak the language of our social group before we learn to read. We learn a vocabulary and a series of complex structural rules, exceptions, inflections, and a particular accent, all before attending school. We do so by constant practice and a striving for understanding. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year we listen to others, copy them, try things. We listen in order to build a repertoire of noises and associations until it finally clicks, with our brain and mouth working together in a lightning-fast but accomplished way.

Paul Goodman once noted that if we tried to learn our parent language in a modern school setting—studying it only for an hour or two in a day broken up by bells with competing material and only desultory homework —we would be a nation of stutterers. As it is, as toddlers we work at acquiring language constantly with enormous attention, seeing it as the way to obtain food, love, and the things we can't reach, much less understand. While nearly everyone learns to speak, only a few go on to use language in an elevated manner as artists, as poets, writers and critics. Yet, there is general acceptance that there is a connection between language and our ability to think and conceptualize.

Learning to draw is almost as demanding—but equally possible—often taking years; but also in many ways it is just as rewarding. Those of us who have been somewhat successful "teaching" drawing have done so by immersing our students in its practice, with lengthy sessions, tons of assignments, hours of practice with criticism, trips to sketch in interesting places (zoos, parks, museums, the city), and lots of exercises with fundamentals (still lifes, set-ups of various objects, plaster casts) and of great interest (life drawing both clothed and not). We make our students do quick sketches (30 seconds, 1 minute, 2 minutes, 5 minutes) as well as mechanically constructed perspectives of increasing difficulty. We show them all sorts of drawings by famous artists from history to help them see how others have solved some of the problems they themselves are now facing. We make them draw from slides and produce copies of old master and modernist drawings. In short, we make them do what infants do when they learn a verbal language. In the end some begin to draw well, often in their own way. Others never succeed, largely, I believe, because they do not really care enough and haven't made the time commitment or necessary mental investment.

[6-1]
Laurie Olin, Saxman, near Ketchiken, Alaska, 1963.
Pen and ink.

Because every individual must learn to draw from scratch there is no such thing as an analogue to culture or historical progress in drawing. People in one era don't draw better than those of another. Differently yes, but better, no. Despite changes in society, material culture, economics, the environment, and beliefs that constitute the perpetual flow of changes we call history, drawings over the past 20,000 years trace a recurring number of individual achievements of heightened sensibility and ability. Does Delacroix draw a lion worse than Rembrandt? Of course not. Is it better? Again, no. How about Rubens? Does Constable draw a tree better or worse than Claude? There is no answer, since each is the result of a particular moment of concentration, acute perception, and succinct expression. Good drawings are records of being alive, of seeing something intensely at a particular moment, in a particular way, and of getting some compelling record, an insight or feeling down in graphic form.

Proof of this phenomenon can be had in many places, most conveniently in any of the great museums. A 2005 exhibition of Van Gogh drawings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York stunned the crowds that came —and justifiably so. As I left the exhibition I wandered through a gallery of other nineteenth-century artists and past some fifth-century Greek vases that were no less observant and successful in presenting glimpses of life as it was lived and experienced at other times and places. Another humbling yet inspiring encounter with drawing from another era resulted from a visit I made two years ago to the Rouffignac Cave in the Dordogne region of France. Nearly a mile from the mouth of the cave, deep underground, were a series of beautifully executed drawings of wild animals made over 13,000 years ago that were full of life. Made with an economy and deftness that Matisse would envy, and deeply observant of the anatomy and movement of these creatures, these drawings are as good as any ever produced. Whoever made them was certainly as conscious of being alive and of capturing an aspect of his world as anyone ever. Here was something seen, studied carefully, known and felt, experienced, and clearly recorded through drawing.

Consider, too, drawings by an early beholder of this Paleolithic art, Abbé Bruel. Despairing of photographing them, he simply recorded the spectacular drawings of the Lascaux cave by making copies of them himself with pastel crayons. Some cultural anthropologists have written

that these early graphic adventures were key events in the formation of humanity, in our socialization and spiritual development. In any case they offer further proof that there is no such thing as "progress" in art, or at least in drawing. There are only some moments when individuals rise to a state of heightened awareness and skill, becoming able to express their vision and feeling for life with great clarity and intensity. We can only hope to become as observant and sensitive to life and its events, issues, creatures, and objects as others who have come before us.

A life of its own: Drawing and the reflexive gesture

Many things happen when drawing without any accord to a prior plan or preconceived visual result. As soon as one puts several marks down on the page the brain reacts to them; from a lifetime of visual associations, feelings about composition, balance, and movement, unexpected thoughts occur about where or how to make the next ones. Drawings often develop a "life of their own," we say. Some would ascribe this to intuition, which in this case is actually thinking so rapidly that we don't perceive it.

Most people forget that our eyes are composed of a complex of ingenious light-sensitive cells that are portions of the nervous apparatus of the brain bulging slightly through two holes in our skull. We like to think of them as separate organs, but they are literally extensions of the brain and, as such, provide an enormous amount of the material our mind processes. Sensitive to an almost infinite amount of detail and nuance, they are in turn tied to several levels of conscious and unconscious activity of the brain. People who have spent a lot of time feeding visual material to their brain become adept at manipulating the elements and processes that go into drawing, much like writers who have become attuned to language, words, and diction. If, on the one hand, as Emerson says, "As I am, so I see," so too, as we see, we interact with what we see, and begin to manipulate it. The architect Michael Graves put it thus:

> *While it is probably not possible to make a drawing without a conscious intention, the drawing does possess a life of its own, an insistence, a meaning, that is fundamental to its existence. That a certain set of marks on a field can play back in the mind, and consequently bring forth an elaboration, is the nature of this quite marvelous language. Good drawing, by virtue of this intrinsic reciprocity between mind and act, goes beyond simple information, allowing one to fully participate in its significance, its life.*

Ideas and intentions: Drawings as exploration, discovery, and research

Most of us today are comfortable with the concept of inventors and scientists in various technical fields performing investigations and research, testing hypotheses through various applications and observing the results, of trying things out, varying the process and learning from the experiments. This is part of the story of humanity and the development of our world. Around such activities we have organized fields of special endeavor called disciplines, sciences, and professions. When the results can be quantified we call them "hard" science. In some fields, especially those that rely upon evolving technology, there has been a cumulative series of developments, of one theory and principle, or one gadget or technique after another, building upon and adding to those which came before. This phenomenon, linked with the discovery of biological evolution, helped produce a view of human endeavor that was linear and thought "progressive." Although change and additive events are easy to document in fields such as metallurgy, medicine, and physics, one cannot make such a case in the arts—or especially with drawing. One could even say that to some degree all artists are forced to recapitulate the history of art in some way in their own lives and work, with the hope of rising to an elevated level of understanding and expression such as has been achieved in the past. It is also the case that many in the arts, including myself, conduct research and investigations, invent problems, study them, and try out solutions in and through drawing.

We learn an enormous amount about various things, not the least of which might be a series of unquantifiable, but speculatively knowable, things: the nature of various places, the quality of light at different times, the manner of other people (or ourselves), the beauty of things—vegetation, animals, youth, human bodies—the pathos of age, destruction, death, and so on. We learn through seeing, thinking about what we see, studying, and recording it in various ways by drawing.

Art learns from art: Art learns from experience

Like most people who continued to draw after childhood, I have moved through a series of stages in my interest in drawing, as well as a progression of levels of skill. A considerable mixture of artistic or graphic models interested me. From kindergarten through fifth grade the most readily

available were comic strips, and magazine and book illustrations. Favorites were Harold Foster's *Prince Valiant*, Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates*, Al Capp's *Li'l Abner*, and most of the work of Walt Disney. These were superbly drawn, and I scrutinized and copied them assiduously. There also were Ernest Thompson Seton's ink drawings in his adventure and animal stories, Holling C. Holling's remarkable illustrated books, Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice and Through the Looking Glass*, and E. H. Shepherd's illustrations in *Winnie the Pooh*. Locally there was a famous Eskimo illustrator, George Agapuk, from Shishmaref, whose work I loved. I scrutinized reproductions in art books and pamphlets either given to me by my parents and friends or I purchased by myself. I scrupulously avoided art classes all four years of high school while utilizing their materials and equipment to make posters and sets for nearly all of the school dramatic and musical productions. Walt Kelly's *Pogo* and *New Yorker* cartoons were often brilliantly drawn. So too were the pen and ink illustrations in *Scientific American* of this period. Sketches and letters by the cowboy artist Charley Russell, color reproductions of watercolors by Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, Edward Hopper, and Thomas Eakins I found in books. Drawings by Auguste Rodin in a translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's, which a teacher gave me, added to the mix. It was a thorough stew of really good stuff.

From high school through college, unlike my classmates and friends, I drew what was around me—the people, the animals, and the places [6-1]. I was concerned with producing a "likeness" and experimented with fountain pen, felt pen, soft pencil, and watercolor. I drew in class and on my own time through winter and summer, learning by looking and scrutinizing the work of people that I admired and knew only through books and reproductions. There were no art museums where I lived in Alaska at the time.

My technical knowledge of drawing grew considerably when I left Alaska, and the study of civil engineering, and transferred into architecture at the University of Washington. There I found myself in a studio culture. I drew nearly every day for the next four years. We drew freehand, learned and practiced mechanical perspective, and were drilled in Beaux-Arts *analytique* wash rendering techniques with sketch problems every Wednesday. We drew from plaster casts of the Parthenon frieze. We drew from life. We drew indoors in the winter and outdoors in spring. We drew in class and out. We were required to take at least one

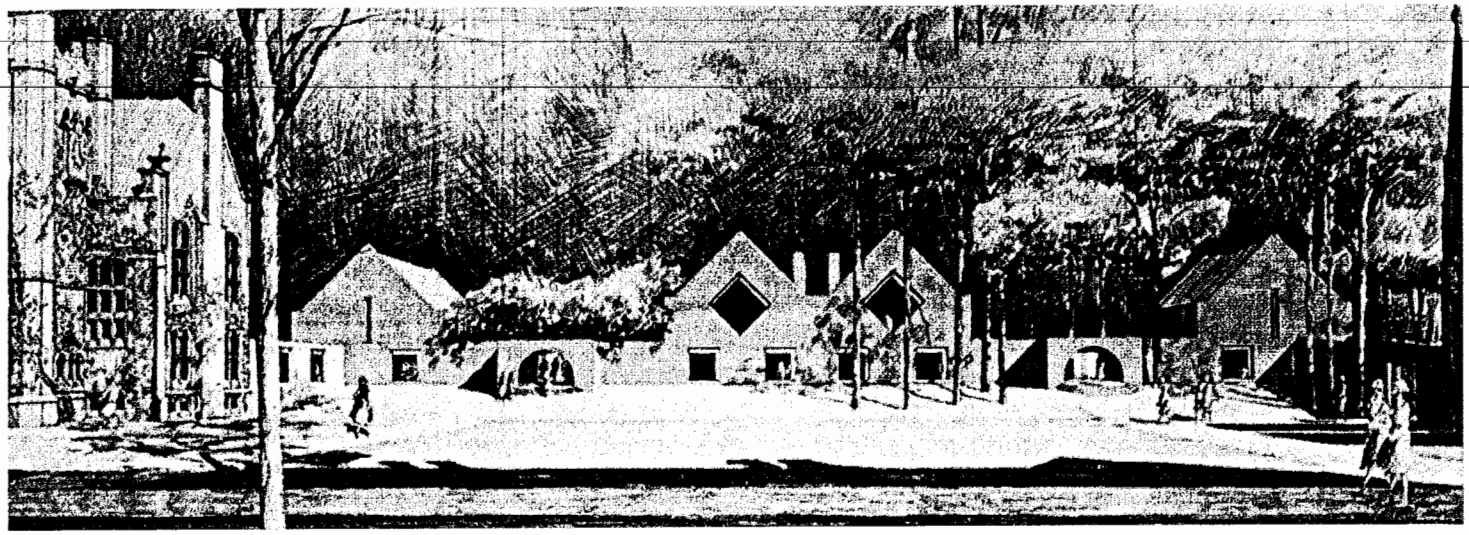
semester of watercolor painting in the art department. Standards were high and a considerable number of students dropped out along the way. Like music students in a conservatory we practiced and were drilled in technique and composition for years. Drawing was seen as fundamental for designers. As an outlet I let off steam as the principal cartoonist for the campus humor magazine, which was banned by the administration after my first year of participation.

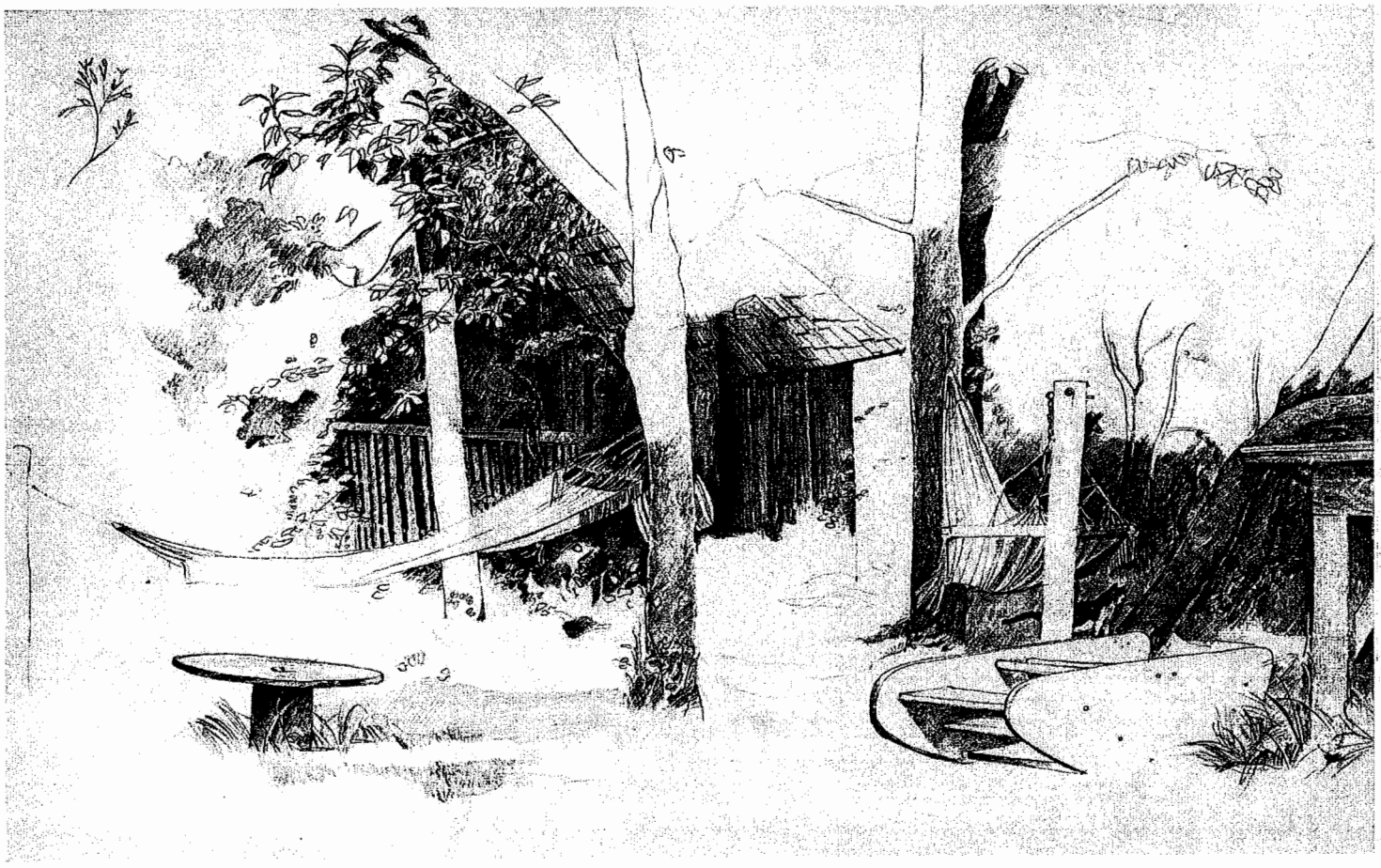
[6-2]
Edward Larabee Barnes, architect; Laurie Olin, delineator; Fine Arts Building, Emma Willard School, Troy, New York, 1965. Pen and ink.

After a hitch in the army, during which I continued to draw wherever I was stationed, and several years of architectural apprenticeship I left architecture [6-2]. For two years, 1967–1968, I retreated from the city, drawing, painting, and reading in a small cabin near Amagansett on the eastern end of Long Island or in an apartment on the edge of Spanish Harlem. For several months I tried not to make elegant or lovely drawings. I had faced prejudice from those in the New York architectural community educated in Ivy League schools with a deep suspicion of excellent draftsmanship. Their education had revolved around theory not craft. Many I knew at the time had a distrust of elegant drawing, considering it to be related to advertising and deception, implying that a handsome drawing was too much a thing of its own standing between the viewer and whatever was being drawn. I still encounter this attitude from time to time in the field, especially among some academics removed from practice.

[6-3]
Laurie Olin, Hammocks at the Cabin, Amagansett, Long Island, New York, 1968. Pencil.

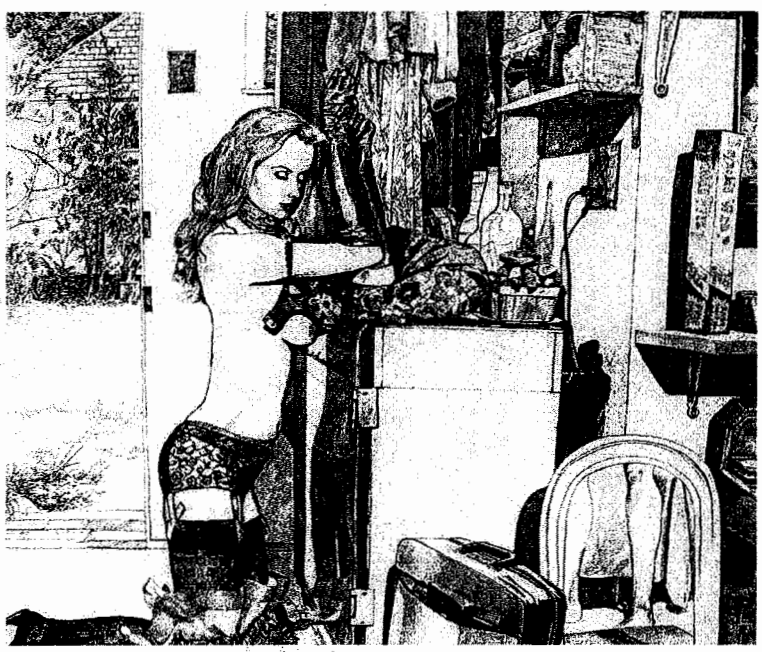
In between painting sessions I attempted to make drawings that eschewed elegance. I used a stick and tried to make lines that were "dumb," that resembled strings dipped in ink then dropped and trailed around the sheet of paper. It didn't do much for me. Next came a series of "dumb" brush drawings—a dreamy set that dealt with the issue of the loss of American wilderness and the suburbanization of the West. Ghost herds of various creatures came pouring out of carports; the spray from lawn sprinklers resembled antlers. They really weren't very good. I needed to try something else. One day in the cabin I turned to pencil on clay-coated paper, starting over, this time trying to be very careful [6-3]. Over that summer, between paintings, I filled a sketchbook with studies from life, odd drawings in some ways that were filled with minutia and detail, often of extremely ordinary things, or of things seen more out of the corner of the eye: quiet drawings. Returning to the cabin the following year I set out to make a series of large-format, sharply focused—but for me quite experimental—





drawings [6-4]. Mixing modes of representation—precise rendering with values and tones combined with linear contour drawing, pattern and saturation of the visual field with empty areas—I began to see what I could leave out. They became rather fevered and intense. Outside, the world was truly blowing up: war in the Middle East; trouble in Eastern Europe; Vietnam spiraling beyond control; civil rights strife; confrontation and riots across America. Who was not disturbed at the time? Some of the drawings became truly obsessive with all manner of things that were strange, puzzling, wonderful, and disturbing—sex being only one of them. It was exhilarating, however, to make these drawings. Although they began in my mind as a series of preparatory studies for paintings, as so often happens in art, they took on an unexpected life of their own. I showed them to a few galleries and museum curators, but they were profoundly out of fashion in New York at the time. It didn't matter. I was doing them as an experiment for myself.

[6-4]
Laurie Olin,
In the Cabin,
Amagansett,
Long Island, New York,
1968. Pencil.



The following year, back on the West Coast, I moved into another cabin, this one in the woods above a beach on Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound. I settled down to draw for the next year and a half. The first product was a small book of sequential pen and ink drawings I made as a distillation of part of the trip. While it appears to be a sketchbook, it was actually a carefully composed set of drawings. Each page had two images with some relationship to each other, but which convey a fair amount of tension, graphically and thematically. The drawings were made using a triple zero Rapidograph drafting pen on a cold-press manila paper. Almost immediately I began another suite of drawings, also in the format of a small book. Made with terrible, cheap, rough oatmeal-colored paper it was unfortunately highly perishable due to the sulfite it contained. The challenge (difficulty) of drawing on it with an extremely fine drafting pen amused me. This book I filled with drawings of my surroundings: the beach, the trees, the rocks, the waves, and the plants. In both of these projects the influence of music with its themes, variations, and development; its flow, beginning, middle, and end; or of film with its constantly changing sequence of images, shots, and narrative, were undoubtedly an influence—as they must be for all visual artists of my generation. But drawings are not music or film.

I continued to draw there on the island, working with a trove of Japanese paper brought to a painter friend in Seattle by

a Pan American Airlines pilot. On sheets of rice and mulberry paper the size of the drawings grew and the focus narrowed to the forest floor and the surface of the beach itself. I produced a series of mushroom studies and another of ancient stumps sprouting with regenerative plants of various sorts [6-5]. Next came a group devoted to small, unremarkable, hardly noticeable native flowers and another of the detritus and along the tide line. There is no question that years of looking at Japanese prints and Chinese ink drawings had left their sediment in whatever part of my brain that makes decisions about how things might fall upon the page.

Returning to the city once more I turned my attention to Seattle's Skid Road community [6-6]. Again, the question of how to draw this new material forced a change in manner and technique. The size and shape of the page as well as the viewpoint altered. I stepped back, looked more broadly from a medium distance, and drew in a looser manner. An almost neo-classical contour technique resulted. I suppose my admiration for many of the pen and ink studies of Picasso and Matisse is as clear as is their admiration for the timeless drawings of Ingres, Delacroix, and Degas. Now I was searching for overall gesture combined with a few key details—the crumpled shape of a person and their eyes, a worn shoe, and a sagging body.

My work in architecture and planning, and my discoveries among the lives of the poor, led me to an engagement in the politics of urban design and an exhausting and successful fight to save Seattle's Pike Place Market from demolition. In counterpoint to these ink drawings, I made trips with friends to the Cascade Mountains; impatient with both the slow, controlled, and laborious, pen and ink drawings of Agate Point and the human dilemmas of Skid Road, I shifted to a softer medium and larger format. This time I used Conté crayons on high-quality rag paper. Through all of these experiments with drawing was an engagement with might be termed "thingness," a concern that runs through a particular tradition of modern American poetry and art, namely close study and representation of the physical presence of something, its imminence and being. From Ezra Pound through William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens to Charles Simic, this concern for "the thing itself, not ideas about the thing" has led many in the arts to engage particular aspects of the world, to move through sight and feeling into an understanding beyond appearance, and strive to reach the essence of

[6-5]
Laurie Olin,
Mushrooms,
Bainbridge Island,
Washington, 1969.
Pen and ink.

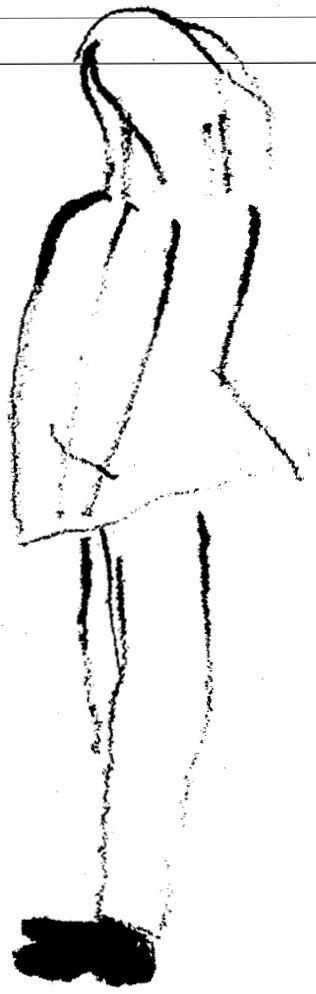
things: mountains, stones, trees, blossoms, clouds—things separate from the observer. While this may suggest pathetic fallacies or Zen exercises, it is literally what many people who draw seriously are up to.

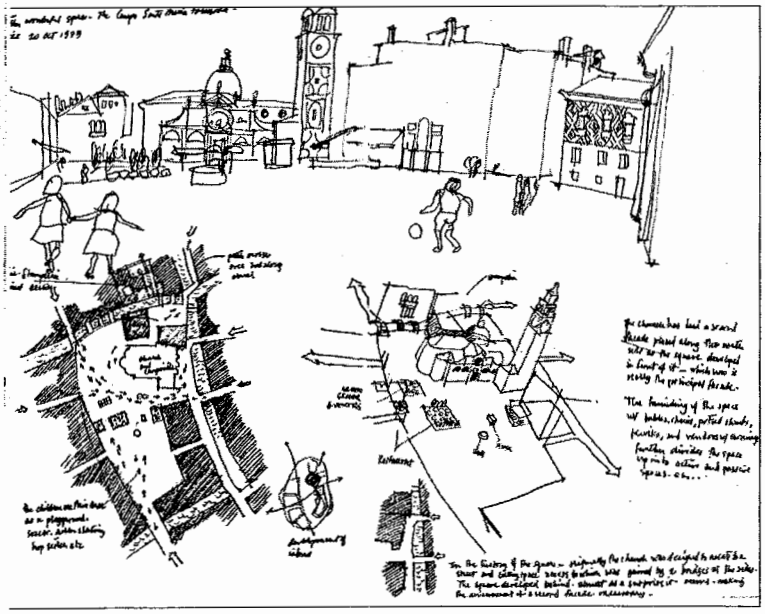
Rocks in water had become my new problem. I had been drawing them since my days in New York. I felt comfortable with rocks and their infinite shapes; it was the water that was the problem. It would be several years before I came upon the many studies that Claude Lorraine had made in the seventeenth century of a stream and small rapids below one of the cascades at Tivoli in which one sees him struggling with the problem. There is a dilemma posed by the brain's ability to shift the focus and depth of field of our eyes from one place to another, and the improbability of conveying it adequately in graphic form. We can clearly see an object, say, a stone, above the surface of water. Then we can shift our focus to see that portion of the stone below the water. Finally, we can see the surface of the water with its reflections and light as well. But we cannot really see all of these aspects at the same time, even while knowing they exist simultaneously. There didn't seem to be a way to draw such a perception or knowledge adequately, and that bothered me.

[6-6]
Laurie Olin,
Man reading
at a mission,
Skid Row, Seattle,
Washington, 1970.
Pen and ink.

This problem led me to Lake Whatcom, where standing in a stream at the bottom of a waterfall I made sketch after sketch: studies of an island and the memory of several other islands, which could as easily have been merely rocks or clouds, each representing a class of objects. In Chan (Zen) Buddhism one must concentrate on an external object—say, a mountain—until it ceases to be that thing, becoming nothing (and everything). The awakening that follows returns consciousness to the original object. Now, one sees it as it is, as part of the great flow of existence —but with greater knowledge of its essence. It would be pretentious to say that I reached some sort of enlightenment, but I did produce work unlike anything I had made before. Such concentration is also not far removed from an obsessive concern for particularity and essential gesture that leads to abstraction, and back to absolutely fundamental concerns regarding harmony versus contrast—an issue that Stravinsky noted was a central problem in art, or at least for him in music.

I had again become impatient with my tools. Thinking back several years I remembered the reed drawings of Van Gogh and Rembrandt and the brush drawings of China and





Japan. I put aside pen, pencils, and brushes, and for several months drew only with sticks that I cut from shrubs in the woods about me [6-7]. Immediately there was a freedom and clarity. The lines that resulted were highly variable and expressive, unlike those produced by the pens I'd been using until then. The stick held very little ink, forcing me to stop and dip it in the bottle quite often. The drawings were made a few lines at a time, built up with each stroke and squiggle. I had to slow down in order to be more free, but going slow felt like going fast. Once more a sequence of studies developed, often portraits of friends and acquaintances drawn from memory. But these drawings are as much about fluid lines as they are of the people. I went against the grain in several, testing and fighting with the ease I'd developed, in some stuffing the drawing with texture as I had in the earlier Amagansett dream sequence, but in an entirely different way that enmeshed figures in their context on the page.

This period ended as I went to Rome, returning to design, becoming a landscape architect. Now drawing had a different purpose and changed again. Seen as art, my next drawings were regressive [6-8]. They were in service to other purposes. Drawing once more was a tool for recording, for observing sites and places, for note taking. For the next several years I used drawing to study environments, structures, details, behavior, and form. I produced some truly miserable sketches in Rome but didn't really care because in the act of making them I was learning an enormous amount about many things and how they had been made. I was looking keenly.

The study of the English countryside and landscape garden began while visiting a friend near Oxford. I was deeply moved by the beauty of the setting and thought maybe I would do some drawing [6-9]. I embarked on a week of walking and sketching, but couldn't find a method that seemed to suit the place or my mood. I explored charcoal, pencil, ink wash, and even oil sketches. All seemed inadequate. There was a calm about the place that was both expansive and pellucid. There were great sweeping skies full of activity and exquisite details and textures close at hand. It all hung together, yet my drawings seemed to be keeping it at arm's distance. They weren't engaging the place at its various scales, nor with clarity and focus. One day I cut a large piece of heavy manila stock into several sheets the size of a tall narrow book page and set off for the fields with a fine drafting pen that I'd used for several

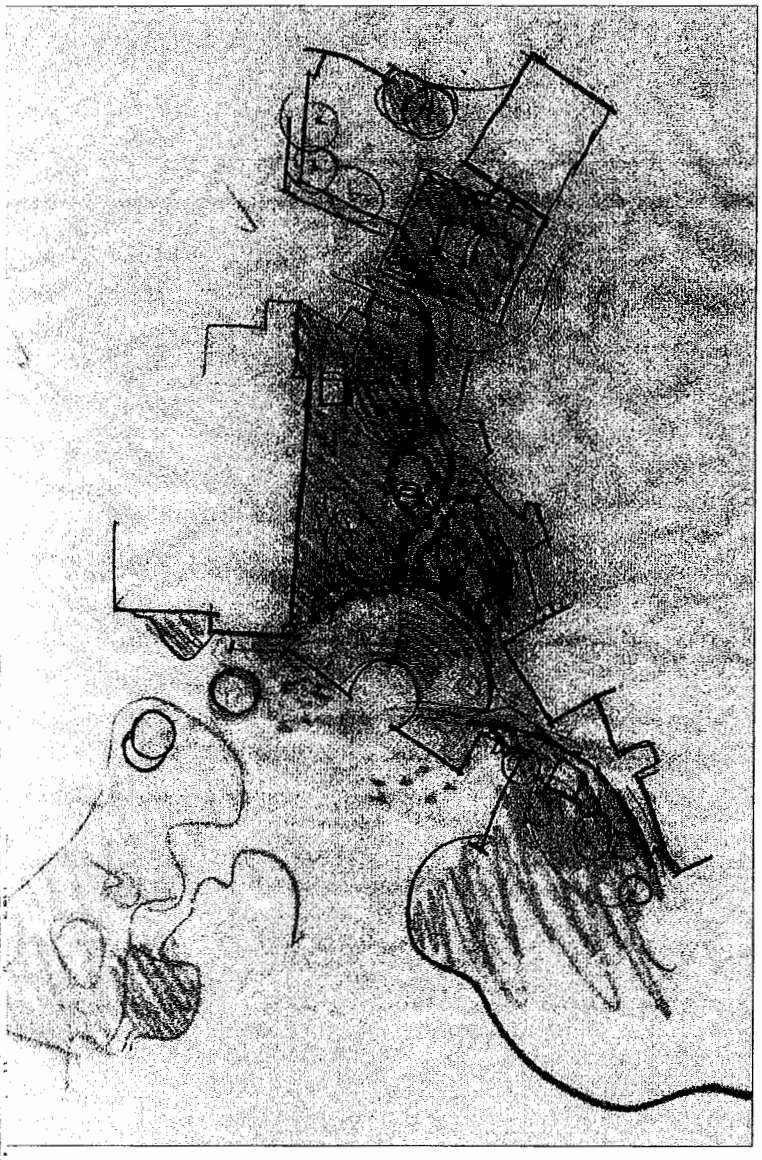
[6-7] *(opposite above)*
Laurie Olin,
Young man,
Bainbridge Island,
Washington, 1969.
Stick drawing
with ink.

[6-8] *(opposite below)*
Laurie Olin,
Campo Santa Maria
in Formosa,
Venice, Italy, 1973.
Pen and ink.

[6-9]
Laurie Olin,
Fields and Poppies,
Berkshire, England,
1970. Pen and ink.

years for architectural work. I went back to a spot where I'd made several unsatisfactory drawings.

This time it clicked. I remember the poet Ted Roethke's telling me that Yeats once remarked that when he finally completed a poem it snapped shut like a box. Intuitively I had returned to the scheme used for the southwest road trip several years before—a vertical diptych of near and far aspects of the same place. The floating elements and a page of this shape had a world of precedents, of course. One has only to think of nineteenth-century Japanese woodblock prints like Hiroshige's popular views of Mount Fuji. Characteristically careful detail of a closely observed thing, often objects in the foreground, coupled with a completely different technique of representation in the distance—that of dots, dashes, and various shorthand gestures and notations. The mountain frequently appears only as a distant reminder of the excuse for the drawing.



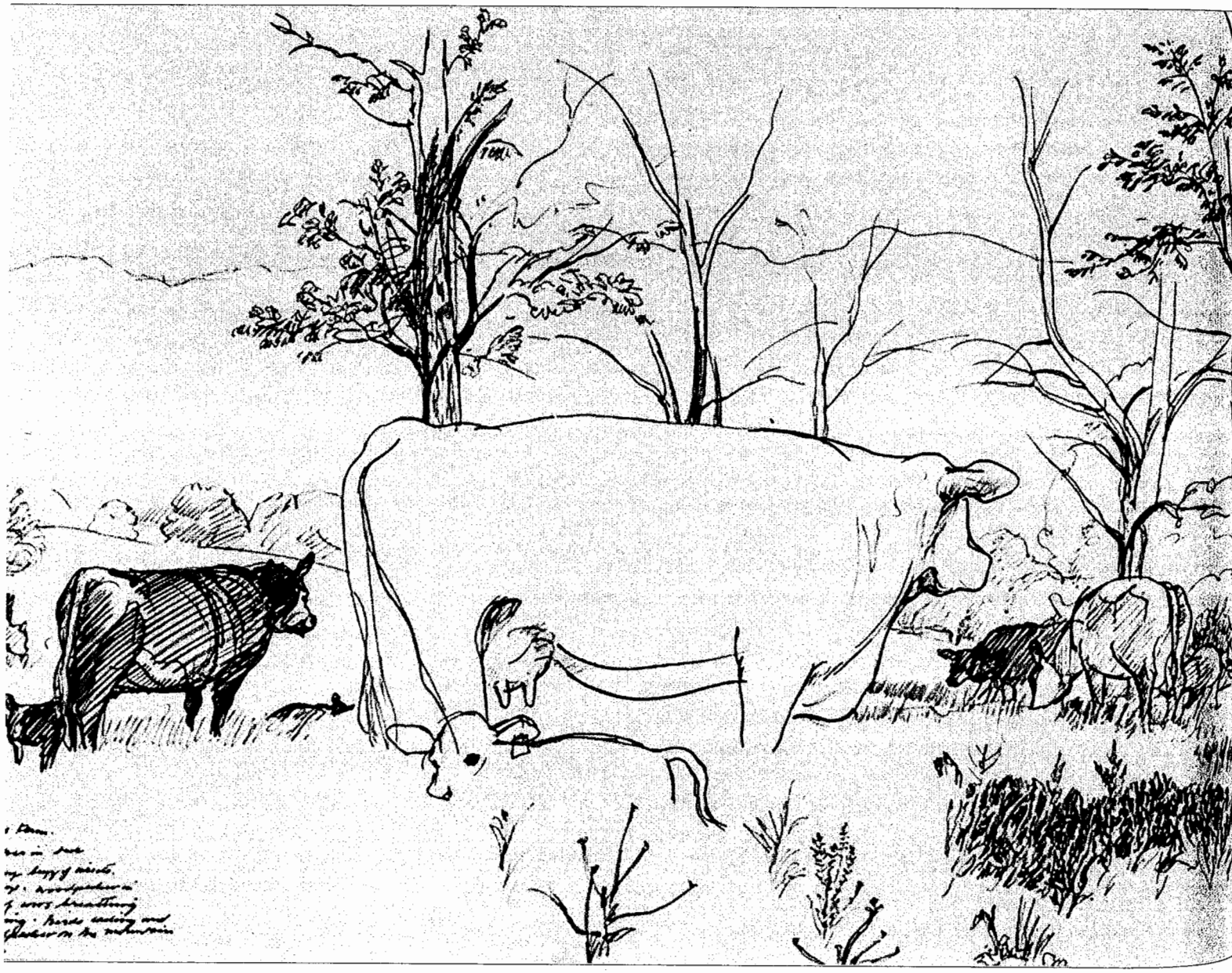
I drew outdoors avidly nearly every day for the rest of the summer. Two years later, on returning to Europe, I picked up where I had left off, experimenting once more with how to engage the page. One example: tall and full, was of a tree up close and absolutely centered on the page. The next drawing was nearly empty, leading the eye to race fast and far into the distance, into deep space past the distant village lying low on the page. Putting them together as a horizontal diptych assumed the banality of a normal view. This sort of exercise went on for quite a while, producing literally bags full of ink drawings. By now I was selecting subjects around an unfolding ecological and historical narrative while continuing to experiment with working the page: how to run up or down the sheet, how to shift from close focus to distant, with a recurring interest in seeing what and how much I could leave out. I was fascinated by parallel structures and analogies, for instance, in shifting and redundant forms: cows in a field, clouds in the sky, trees on the horizon, roofs in the village, happenstance patterns, and significant form. In one way the book I eventually published containing many of these drawings. *Across the Open Field* is a complete failure because it has text. Most people today, including many of my visually unsophisticated if not illiterate friends, regard the drawings as illustrations of the text. The truth is the opposite. For me the drawings came first. The text illustrates them. I should have published the drawings alone in a separate folio with the text as a companion volume and then instructed people to spend an equal time with each page regardless of the volume.

Since returning to America in 1974 I have devoted my efforts to the medium of landscape itself and the exploration of its design. My drawing has atrophied. Used in the service of something else—as a tool for analysis, for studying situations and speculating about changes and inventions in the environment—my drawing just isn't as involved with itself as it had been in earlier years. My drawings now often verge on becoming cartoons or merely illustrative diagrams [6-10]. As a visual person it is easier for me to produce analytical work in graphic form rather than verbal or mathematical. Sketching is a natural method for me to explore and speculate about design, and for me even doodles are charged with three-dimensional implications. While some of my architect friends like Frank Gehry use models to sketch and study ideas, it is through drawing that my partners and staff communicate with each other: how we pin down problems, figure out how to build things, and explain things to clients, other professionals, or the public. A discussion of drawing in our practice would be an essay on its own, easily as long as this has been, and must be left to another time. Until I decide to step away from my practice and teaching for substantial periods of time I will not be able to draw again seriously. I will continue instead in the modest way I have for the past 30 years, mostly while traveling or on vacation.

Finally, let me point out that I have yet to see anyone make a sketch from nature with a computer. I honestly don't see how anyone, while typing on a keyboard or wriggling a mouse, can ever really develop a spatial sensibility or a feeling for form, materials, structure, and weight—whether that of a landscape, a building, plants, or other life forms. These are things that drawing can do well, and has done for me. Along with shaping the environment, building things, writing books, and having children, drawing may also be about leaving something that outlives one's perishable and imperfect self. It is one of the ways humans attempt to capture moments, to stop time, to hold the sunlight on the garden, to preserve seed heads and ripe fruit, the tipped bell, to record animals moving along in the deep grass, clouds blowing past high above the trees swaying in the cool wind—in all, to leave a record that we have been alive, and have been there [6-11].

[6-10]
Laurie Olin, Stata Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999.
Pencil on tracing paper.

[6-11]
Laurie Olin,
Cows with calves,
Steiger farm (detail),
Mercersburg,
Pennsylvania, 1998.
Pen and ink.



Endnote

This has been intended to be an essay on drawing, not art. Although drawing has been involved in the development of art for many thousands of years, art often has had little or nothing to do with drawing, and there are aspects and some uses of drawing that have little to do with art, or amount to bad or failed art. My interest in drawing has led me to write about it on several earlier occasions. These can be found in "Drawings at Work," in Marc Treib (ed.), *Representing Landscape Architecture*, Oxon: Routledge, 2007, pp. 140–159; "On Drawing," and "Why Sketchbooks?" in *Transforming the Common/place, Selections from Laurie Olin's Sketchbooks*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press,1996, pp. 5–8; "On Buckland and Drawing," in *Across the Open Field: Essays Drawn from English Landscapes*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, pp. 19–21, 28–62; "Place, Memory, Poetry, and Drawing," *Places*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1985, pp. 33, 34; statement in exhibition catalog *On Site: Travel Sketches by Architects*, New York: Bertha & Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College of the City University of New York, April 2000; and "Techno-madness, or Dilbert Does Design," in the essay "A Vast and Mercurial Subject: Thoughts from 37,000 Feet," *GSD News*, Fall, 1996, p. 6. Numerous scattered remarks and thoughts about drawing may be also be found between the lines in various articles, reviews, and essays such as "Breath on the Mirror, Seattle's Skid Road Community," 1972, and "Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect: Reflections on the Recent Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art," *Landscape Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Spring 1995, pp. 138–155.

About art, although I have blurted out many things from time to time, whenever I hear academicians or critics on the topic I feel they are telling me that I am really not qualified to write about it. They make it quite clear that those of us who actually make the stuff, who stick our necks out and perform the psychological and artistic equivalent of standing naked in public are some sort of idiot savants who don't know what we are doing, lack sufficient theory, and are hopelessly retarded in our philosophical and aesthetic notions. Personally, I have always found what artists write to be very engaging, and in some cases the most enlightening and profound utterances on the subject of art. Examples range from Robert Motherwell and Elliot Porter, to John Ashberry and Anthony Hecht. Then there are Delacroix, Valéry, Constable, Olmsted, etc. Charles Simic may be one of the most important poets in America today. His essays, criticism, appreciations, and interviews are among the very best things I know being written today about life and art.