

# Jorrit Paaijmans

## Drawing between man and machine

English

Drawing is the discipline of refinement, handwriting and frailty. A wobbly line, a stroke, a scratch on paper: a drawing contains the tangible traces of human presence. A drawing shows the movement of the hand of the maker, including little hesitations and corrections. Drawing is also the invisible force behind many new developments, both inside the realm of art and beyond. The medium lies at the root of knowledge transfer and research, and is the fundament of magnificent paintings, buildings and technological inventions. Over the past century, drawing has emancipated, it has grown into an autonomous medium. In his artistic practice, Jorrit Paaijmans conducts research into the confines of drawing – in order to explore and cross these boundaries and eventually return to where he came from. What happens when you let a machine do the drawing? What happens when the handwriting is no longer that of the artist, but that of an apparatus? Paaijmans does not use the medium as an instrument, rather, he puts his artistic practice at the service of the discipline. Paradoxically, it seems as though this quest leads him ever farther adrift from drawing.

Draughtsmanship serves as the springboard for all of Paaijmans's works: whether it concerns a drawing, a performance or a kinetic installation. He regularly outsources the production of drawings to machines that he himself has developed and built manually. Usually they're capable of repeatedly performing one particular action, most of the time that comes down to depicting a line. Although Paaijmans was in search of lines he would not be able to produce manually, his machines, in performing their task, ultimately seem to offer less precision and possibilities than a human hand, or more specifically, the human hand that has created them. The handwriting of the maker shifts from drawing to machine.

Polished, handcrafted cogwheels are a sight to behold – much the same way that similar, shiny technological objects left the Futurists in awe at the start of the twentieth century. Shiny steel seems to take the observer back to a supposedly lost faith in technology. However, Paaijmans does not proclaim a new technological utopia: his objects do not symbolise progress. He feels a closer affinity with the artists of the ZERO movement from the 1950s, who deployed instruments, movement and light in inquisitive ways and brought about a shift in focus in art, which moved from final result to creative process. The essence of Paaijmans's work lies in the way in which the machines have been manufactured and in the status he awards to them. They show a love for the craft and demonstrate both the study of and the struggle for drawing. The impressive handmade machines as objects in an open space provide greater visibility to the art of drawing, they literally and figuratively aggrandise it. And yet, however beautiful, the technological object is not significant because of its aesthetic qualities, but because of what it represents: it illustrates what the machine is and is not capable of, and it highlights the complex relationship between man and machine; and between draughtsman and drawing. If the craftsmanship is manifested in the construction of the machine, what role is left to play for the drawing? Paaijmans erodes the very foundation upon which these relations are built.

These tensions clearly come to the fore in the performance installation called *Radical Drawing Device*, a tattoo machine which is capable of drawing a single, straight line and is applicable in one place only: the arm of the artist. Paaijmans built the machine around an epoxy moulded model of his own lower arm. The arm of the drawer becomes the paper, the machine replaces his hand. Contrary to the line of a pencil, the line of the machine is indelible: the first (test) execution is at once the definitive one. Hesitation, doubt and little errors cannot be remedied and become part of the final result. Paaijmans had the line tattooed on his arm during a two-hour public performance at the Verbeke Foundation (Kemzeke, Belgium), whereby the dimension of

time was introduced into the exhibition space as an important element. The drawing was produced in front of the viewers' eyes and there was a shift in focus from the final result to the creative process. The final drawing is nothing more than proof of the act that transpired within a certain amount of time; it shows the traces of the collaboration between the artist and the drawing machine. It is the former who, during the performance, 'surrenders' to the latter as if he were a blank sheet of paper. After having created all elements manually, Paaijmans subsequently gives away control to a piece of engineering which is enabled to move freely within a strict framework. The work is a balancing act at the intersection of the controllable and the uncontrollable, and provides insight into this area of tension.

Transparency and openness are characteristic of Paaijmans's work and expose the way he relates to drawing. Pencil lines are not erased, materials used for the build-up of the exhibition remain visible in the presentation and the functionality of the machines is evidenced before the public. By means of traces in time and space, the functioning systems of the discipline of drawing become visible, and simultaneously are being disintegrated. In his quest, Paaijmans is not tied down by anything or anyone: within a conceptual framework he intuitively makes all intermediate steps and allows himself a considerable amount of freedom. Paaijmans is no stranger to classical works, such as *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), the book in which Wassily Kandinsky sets out the fundamental principles of drawing and painting. This text is of great importance to him. However, whereas Kandinsky's work and writings are based on methodological research, Paaijmans's working method is rather associative. Whereas the Russian avant-gardist artist writes down all possible variations of a point in *Point and Line to Plane*, Paaijmans easily adds a few more to the mix. He does so for example in an installation called *Body #1*, where all the points and lines from Kandinsky's text are being translated into wooden circles and tightly stretched blue ropes: the result is a constructivist-looking structure which at first sight eradicates all connotations of drawing. The structure is a machine without any functionalities, a hand without a pencil.

*Body #1*, an installation composed of 'points and lines', hangs above a steel construction. This frame supported the build-up of the installation, after which it lost its purpose but was left untouched as an expressive element. The traces of the build-up become part of the installation – tacit evidence of both a process that has come to pass over a certain period of time, as well as that of the humanity which is always present in Paaijmans's oeuvre. Here, it is not the arm of the maker, but his exhibition space that has become the drawing sheet; the objects in space are the result of a search for the right composition. Owing to its abstract visual language and theoretical references, the work may be categorised as conceptual art. Nonetheless, the abstract installation does appeal to the imagination; it resembles a reclining body which leans on the frame of a ship. Inside the 'body' there is the heart in the shape of spinning fluorescent tubes. The reclining body is a motif in art history and in this case it is also, or above all, a personal confession that inadvertently entered Paaijmans's artwork. Only afterwards did he notice the resemblance to a body that was so dear to him. Unintentionally, the work then *also* carries this meaning. Paaijmans artistic practice exists between the poles of formalistic and personal research. By means of abstract machines and installations, he renders visible the man behind drawing; the man who serves the discipline with full commitment.

- Sanneke Huisman