

“On Line”

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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WHAT IS A LINE? I used to think that a “line” was a pure mathematical concept, something that did not exist in nature. I also used to think about line in terms of its meaning within a linked series of oppositions: the linear versus the coloristic, the draftsmanly versus the painterly, the “essence” versus the “difference,” the “masculine” versus the “feminine” of pictorial art. And of course, there is linear versus nonlinear thought. But now, having seen the fabulous exhibition “On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated by Catherine de Zegher and Cornelia H. Butler, I see I must begin to think otherwise.

Including everything from actual drawing on paper to collage and cloth and construction, to what used to be called painting and sculpture, to dance and video and installation, “On Line” embraces work from twenty-five countries on six continents. Thus it is truly, and quietly, global in its purview. It is, moreover, and also without fanfare, truly equitable in its gender distribution: Work by women constitutes roughly half of the exhibition, intermingled with work by men rather than set apart as if

representing a special-interest group in need of assistance. This makes for a marked contrast to the AbEx show downstairs at MOMA, which is at best grudging in its inclusion of women. (At the very least, Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler surely merit more than the four not-very-good examples of their work included in that New-York-is-the-center-of-everything exhibition.) What makes “On Line” a marvel of feminist as well as globalist curating is the thoughtful pragmatics of its inclusiveness: It proceeds according to the straightforward propositions that a) this is some of the best work out there, and b) it is work like this—produced all over the place, by women and by men in equal measure, for over a century—that serves to expand the definitions of “line” and “drawing” well beyond narrow medium-confines and old-fashioned time lines. Simply put, then, all of this work, by all of these people from all of these places, *belongs*, no apologies needed. In this regard as well as others, “On Line” calmly goes about its business of countermanding the parochialism—indeed the provincialism—of the New York-centric view of modern art.

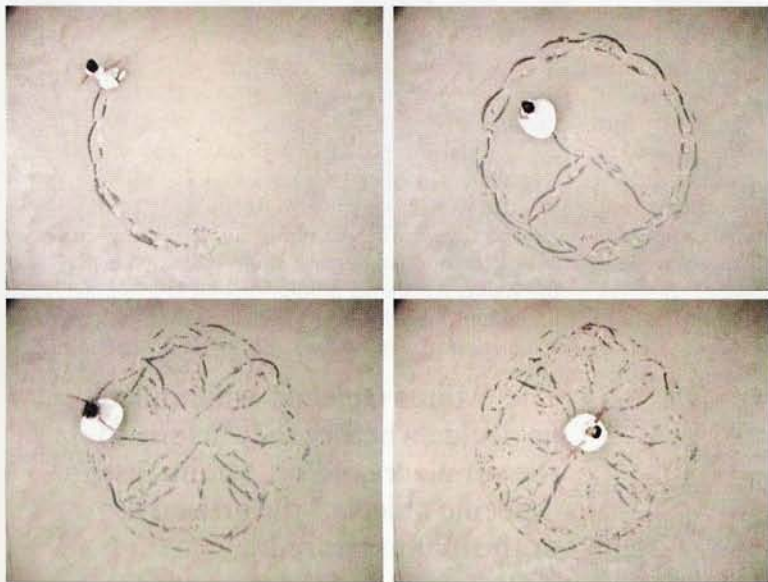
So, I come back to the question of what a line is. Yes, among other things, a line is a thought construct, derived from the geometricians: a string of no-dimensional points that together make up a one-dimensional CS (coordinate system), theoretically infinite in both extension and divisibility. And in the history of human ideas (which include the idea of history itself), it was straight, it was continuous, it was unidirectional, rational, and teleological. Most of the kinds of line that “On Line” opens onto are not that kind of line. Instead, they are lines that curve and loop, start and stop in real space and time. They are material lines, made of physical *stuff*, like wire and hair and tape. They dance and gesture, they repeat and circle back on themselves. They make up networks and constel-

lations and grids that fold space into itself. They divide space more than they bound it. In addition to pen and pencil and paint marks, they are scissor cuts and indexical traces and lines of writing. They are as thin as horsehair and as thick as tire tracks. They are scribbles and inscriptions; they are figurative and abstract. Sometimes they are made of dots, sometimes woven of thread. They are often hybrid, though sometimes they are as simple as can be. They are body movements and words, bringing line into line with the orders of corporeality and language. They are phenomenological and conceptual. They are fundamental to art, which is to say, to being human.

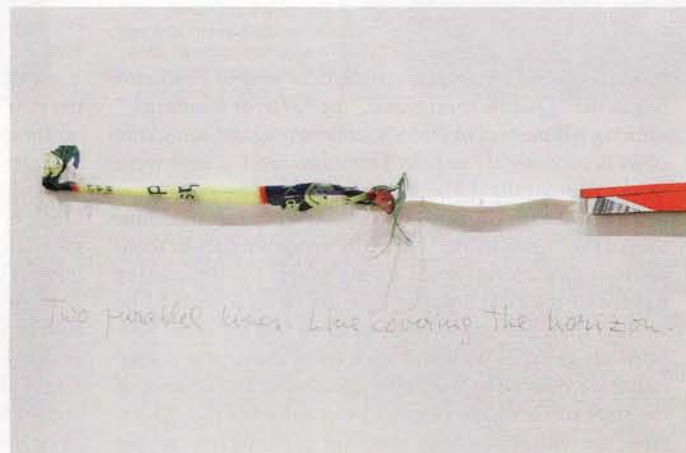
Giuseppe Penone’s *Propagazione* beautifully instantiates the larger logic of “On Line” itself. It is a perfect image of expansion ever outward—not only beyond the boundaries of the paper but also beyond the works-on-paper definition of drawing.

There is no telos to this world of line. And the last thing that it is is unidirectional.

I have too many favorites in this exhibition, some well known, some less so, to settle on any one of them: I could mention Gego’s delicate wire matrices that make the two-dimensional grid mutate into reticular nets, self-multiplying in what used to be called three-dimensional space but now begins to look *n*-dimensional; Alexander Calder’s always delightful drawings in space; Eva Hesse’s hilarious *Hang Up*, 1966, a “picture” that, instead of being hung from an unseen wire, elongates and extrudes a wire thickly into the space and onto the floor in front of



Opposite page, from left: Giuseppe Penone, *Propagazione* (Propagation), 1995–, typographic ink and graphite on paper, felt-tip pen on wall. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2011. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. © Giuseppe Penone/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Ranjani Shettar, *Just a Bit More*, 2005–2006, beeswax, pigments, thread, 36 x 24 x 12". This page, left: Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Thierry De Mey, *Top Shot*, 2002, stills from a color video, 16 minutes 4 seconds. Right: Luis Camnitzer, *Two Parallel Lines*, 1976–2010, mixed media and pencil on wall, dimensions variable.



it while its bandaged frame is emptied of its painting, which in turn moves onto that frame in the form of shades of gray paint and thus performs painting's transformation into sculpture before our eyes; Robert Ryman's signature white on a slightly cockeyed piece of unstretched linen from which a line extends to the corner of the museum wall; Emily Kam Kngwarray's dotted "aboriginal" paintings where the dots stray beyond the lines; Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Thierry De Mey's sexy video of an elegant star-pattern dance filmed from above. All of these throw new light on works—painted, collaged, or constructed—we thought we knew, by canonical figures such as Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock (also in the show).

There are, however, several works that can serve to allegorize the exhibition's utterly nonlinear profusion. I also find them particularly compelling works of art. Giuseppe Penone's superb *Propagazione* (Propagation), 1995–, is prime among them. Each drawing in this ongoing cycle begins with an inked fingerprint—an indexical mark of the body—in the rough center of a vertically oriented piece of paper. Handmade lines waver out from that print like the concentric rings in a tree trunk until they outgrow the paper. That they could grow infinitely and have stopped doing so arbitrarily for the space and time of this exhibition is implicit and inherent in the logic of the work, and thus beautifully instantiates the larger logic of "On Line" itself. *Propagazione* is a perfect image of expansion ever outward—a movement not only beyond the boundaries of the paper but also beyond the works-on-paper definition of drawing, not to mention the reductive compartmentalizations of museum departments. This is truly drawing "in an expanded field," embracing the real space of the wall. *Propagazione* is an excellent illustration, too, of the way the exhibition confounds oppositions: between the index-

ical and the iconic; the abstract and the figurative; the image and the gesture; the kinetic procedures of conscious automatism—that well-worn trope of serial repetition—and somatic, biomorphic growth processes.

Ranjani Shettar's *Just a Bit More*, 2005–2006, is another encapsulation of the spiraling movement of the exhibition. *Just a Bit More* is similar to Shettar's *Vasanti* (Spring/Transition), 2005, a cat's cradle of hanging nets made of tea-stained thread and beeswax nodules that was presented in the 2006 group exhibition "Freeing the Line," at New York's Marian Goodman Gallery, and that first brought her work to my attention. (That show was also curated by de Zegher, erstwhile director of the Drawing Center. Indeed, a number of artists in "On Line" were also in the earlier show, and it could be said that "Freeing the Line" was a working sketch for the current exhibition at MOMA.) Evoking everything from stellar constellations to spiderwebs to computer networks to sacred spirals to the growth patterns of Indian cities, and thus combining models of accretive artmaking from East and West, from artists including Gego and Hesse (who now, in this context, look like major formative figures, mothers of a generative pattern of dispersed, global development), *Just a Bit More* makes a stunningly graceful entrance to "On Line." I wished only to be able to go inside it and become entangled within it, an impossible desire that is sponsored by the work itself and is in some sense satisfied by the show onto which it opens.

Inside the exhibition, Pierrette Bloch's multiple *filles de crin* (Horsehair Lines), 1985–97, also stand out from among the many works that exemplify the pluralizing and physicalizing of line: The seven finely snarled lengths of horsehair and nylon take the construct of the straight line and its many associations—lined paper, musical scores, stringed instruments, lines of script, measurement

marks, and so on—and knot it up, repeatedly, into pinned-on-the-wall trails of delicately hairy scribble, pulled taut into a fragile kind of handwriting. And that brings me to the last, but not the least, of the works that seemed to me to allegorize this show's originality: Luis Camnitzer's *Two Parallel Lines*, 1976–2010. Consisting of, as its title indicates, two parallel lines, one a penciled, stream-of-consciousness string of handwritten words, the other made of scavenged lengths of tape, electrical cord, plastic, metal, and other bits and pieces of jerry-rigged junk, this work starts outside the exhibition entrance, far below eye level and almost unnoticeable at first, and winds its way continuously around corners, finally coming to a stuttering stop, unfinished and still at the bottom of the wall, in the second room of the exhibition. Bending down to read the handwriting—TWO PARALLEL LINES. LINE COVERING THE HORIZON. A SHADOW OF THE HORIZON. FRAGMENT OF THE CURVATURE OF THE EARTH. AXIS OF A CORNER. NARRATIVE CONSUMMATED . . . , and so it goes—one becomes aware of one's own bodily movement in space as one follows the trail of words into the exhibition, only to want to turn back around at the end and begin again. The work is discreet and unassuming, and yet endlessly, playfully resourceful; it calls into question the disembodied geometric construct of parallelism, not to mention the linearity of thought, language, narrative, and creative invention and development. And thus it is another perfect metainstance of "On Line"'s multimedia, multidimensional, multidisciplinary work on line. □

"On Line" is on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through February 7.

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