

Drawing for Sport

MICHAEL NAMKUNG

Florida International University

Abstract

Art and sports are located at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum and do not easily mingle, but artists and athletes have more in common than we may think. There are parallels between the disciplines of drawing and athletic performance that can enhance our understanding of how attention and perception function in both sports and drawing. This article shares an approach to a hybrid art practice that merges drawing traditions with the discipline of athletics, and suggests that athletic drawings can shed new light on the body's role in shaping the processes of observation and perception. This multifaceted exploration has taken various forms over the past decade including studio drawings, live performance and the participation of others.

This art practice refigures prevailing ideas of observational drawing by extending the concept of observation beyond the primacy of the visual. Performing athletic drawings creates a state of heightened bodily awareness in which observation is a complex corporeal phenomenon. In addition to visualizing bodily limits in time and space, athletic drawings also reveal the psychic boundaries we draw between our environment and ourselves, providing a different lens through which we may understand our physical relationship with the world.

The goal is to move forward on all fours over the grass, keeping the torso as low as possible to the ground without touching it. The only points of contact are the hands and feet. As one hand reaches forward, the opposite foot reciprocates, dragging an arc through the sod. As they accumulate over a distance, the marks left by this drill called "Spiderman" form staggered pairs of serpentine lines that wind their way across the field in tandem. The drawing is the residue of bodily movement, but it is more than a mere graphic trace. The precise length, depth and curvature of each shallow trench, as well as the distances between them, index the physicality of a particular body and its relationship to the materiality of a particular surface.

My art practice explores the intersection of drawing and athletics by focusing on the body and the marks it makes in physical engagement with its environment. A deep knowledge of athletic regimens gained over a 20-year career as a professional athlete directly informs this practice. Combining strenuous exercise with traditional drawing tools results in athletic drawings that measure the body in time and space. Beyond visualizing these literal spatial and temporal measures, however, the drawings open a space of introspection in which we may understand the limits of our bodies and the contours of our own embodiment—the psychic boundaries we create between ourselves and the world.

There are significant parallels between the tradition of observational drawing and the discipline of athletic training and performance. Over the past decade, these interests have evolved into a multifaceted methodology in which I explore both drawing and athletics as a hybrid practice, within which conventions and concerns of each discipline are infused by the other. These investigations take various forms including studio drawings, video, live performance, and the participation of others. Sensitivity to the formal qualities of line creates parameters for exercise rituals; patterns of studio practice are informed by the necessity of daily athletic routines; experiences of athletic performance give shape to the framing of live drawing performance. Throughout, observation and attention in drawing is merged with observation and attention in the body.

An observer may employ a variety of gestural drawing techniques to capture the energy of a body in motion, or use video or photography to record the appearance of moving bodies. But what happens when observational drawing is practiced *by* a body in full and dynamic motion? It is essential to recognize that neither the act of observation nor the act of drawing is strictly dependent upon vision. Originating from the Latin *ob-* (toward) and *servare* (look at), observation as a concept privileges the eyes and implies unilateral and direct action by a sensing subject upon objects external to the self. Maurice Merleau-Ponty contends that vision does not actually work this way, and that perception is neither an autonomous consciousness that looks out at something, nor is it ‘a simple result of the action of external things on our body.’ (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 368). Instead, there is reciprocity of perception between the observer and the observed. In discussing the experience of the painter, he writes, ‘Inevitably the roles between him and the visible are reversed. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them.’ (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 261). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the senses are not discrete in human experience, but are unified through the body as a perceptual whole. ‘Synesthetic perception is the rule and, if we do not notice it, this is because scientific knowledge displaces experience and we have unlearned seeing, hearing, and sensing in general.’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 238)

A body fully immersed in an activity creates a state of heightened awareness in which multiple sensory elements are continually woven into a dynamic perceptual tapestry. The influential drawing instructor Kimon Nicolaides echoes this idea by emphasizing the necessity to test the veracity of our sight by opening perception to the accumulated experience of all of the senses. He states, “Because pictures are made to be seen, too much emphasis (and too much dependence) is apt to be placed upon seeing. Actually, we

see *through* [emphasis in original] the eyes rather than with them.” (Nicolaidis 1941: 6) The use of the preposition *through* is instructive. The eyes are not the final destination of perception but rather a conduit through which perception occurs, on its way to being inscribed in and understood by the body. This is why the athlete in training rarely brings his or her eyes into sharp focus. Sight must be coordinated with the complex whole of bodily perception and action. In practice, the athlete’s gaze is soft and open, receptive to a multitude of dynamic variables, helping to organize vectors of bodily movement or potential movement in space.

In *A Straight Line* (Figure 1), for example, the goal is to draw a line as long and straight as possible while swinging upside-down from the ceiling and contending with continual disorientation. Vision plays a key role in helping the body to propel itself along this linear trajectory, but rapid spinning and swinging means visual information comes in bits and pieces. The eyes have no option but to be receptive and responsive. The simultaneous integration of visual, aural, tactile and proprioceptive perception is what allows the body to respond to rapid observational shifts and stay on course, to keep the line straight.

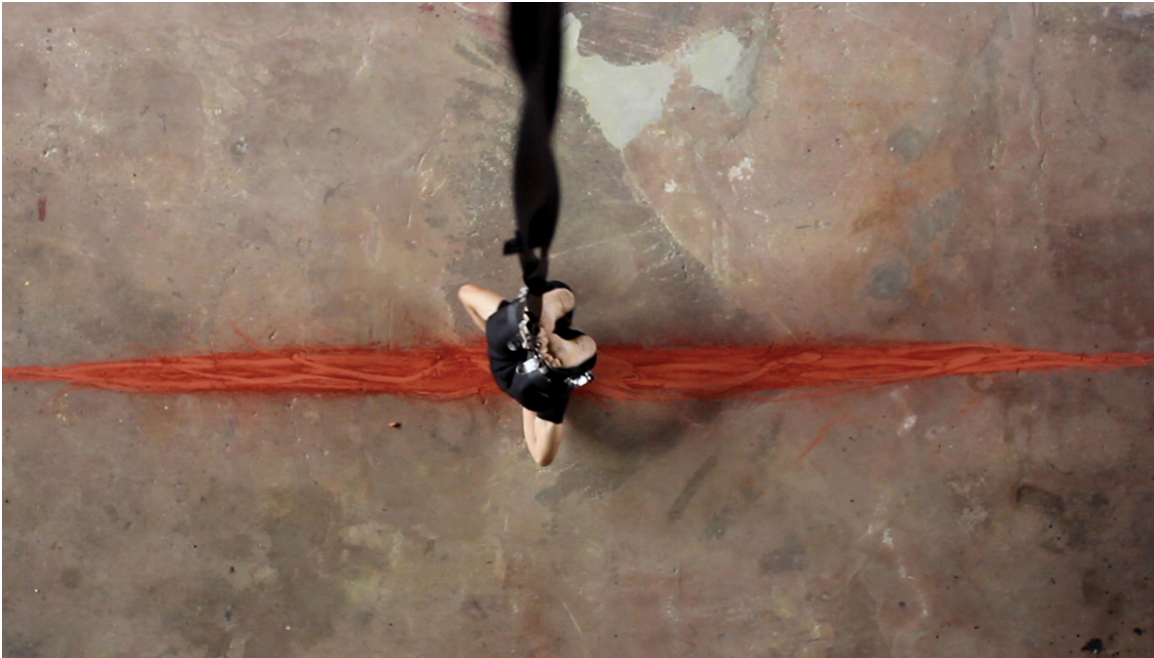


Figure 1: Michael Namkung, A Straight Line (2015) Video still / ink-jet print.

In contour drawing, Nicolaidis stresses the importance of such sensory coordination, particularly between sight and touch, so as to observe the objective world more fully and to register perceived nuances with greater sensitivity. He emphasizes correct observation as “physical contact with all sorts of objects through all the senses” (Nicolaidis 1941: xiii) and asserts that learning how to draw is dependent upon this expanded sense of observation.

Nicolaidis also links progress in drawing with a high degree of determination and discipline. He gives special weight to the experience of drawing itself:

The effort you make is not for one particular drawing, but for the experience you are having ... There is a vast difference between drawing and making drawings. The things you will do—over and over again—are but practice. They should represent to you only the result of an effort to study, the by-product of your mental and physical activity (Nicolaidis 1941: 2).

This way of thinking echoes the mental state that athletes cultivate in practice. Sport-specific drills and other patterns of movement are done repeatedly during individual sessions and then over days, months or years in order to develop proficiency, fluency or mastery. The great majority of time spent in athletics is dedicated to practicing, and close attention to the sensory experience of practice is essential in not only developing awareness of progress—which is often difficult to detect—but also inscribes habits of perceptual awareness into one's body that will be required during performance. The highest levels of competition involve the fluid execution of what has been practiced—this is when coaches tell athletes and athletes tell themselves simple mantras that remind them to call upon the habits of mind and body that they have spent endless amounts of time cultivating. *This is just like practice.*

A contour drawing is like climbing a mountain as contrasted with flying over it in an airplane. It is not a quick glance at the mountain from far away, but a slow, painstaking climb over it, step by step (Nicolaidis 1941: 11).

Climbing a mountain one step at a time is an apt metaphor for the athlete in training. Not only does it describe the shape of attention required in the long term as incremental and involving small, often painstaking (and painful) steps, it also identifies the goal as larger than the present moment and not perceivable as a whole at any given instant. In contour drawing, the capacity to perceive subtle distinctions of the edges between forms is honed through a slow and determined pace. Engaging in athletic drawing over time gives visual form to the perceived edges—or contours—between body and environment. Just as proper technique and attention are necessary to develop the perception of contour and its faithful translation to the page, deliberate attention to proper form is prerequisite to developing speed and fluidity in all physical training regimens.

Running footwork patterns through an agility ladder must initially be performed at a slow tempo in order to gain kinesthetic and proprioceptive awareness of each component of the overall motion (Figure 2). As a contour is a perceived edge between forms, the points of contact between foot and floor constitute the perceptual edge between body and environment. When these points of contact are registered as a drawing and given visible form, they become not only a trace of motion, but also a mechanism of biofeedback that provides the athlete with useful information. Eadweard Muybridge's use of photography to sequence the movement of a running horse in the late 19th century prefigured the way in which athletes dissect and study the components of their own movement, as well as the nuanced movements of their opponents through the strategic analysis of slow motion video. Muybridge's sequence of individual frames revealed what was previously imperceptible (that all four hooves of a galloping horse are simultaneously off the

ground) by breaking complex movement down into incremental steps. Similarly, examining athletic drawings illuminates areas of deficiency or improper form on which further attention may be placed.

The marks of athletic drawing in *Footwork* provide visual feedback on a variety of movement proficiencies including angles of attack, range of motion, accuracy of foot placement, lightness of touch, asymmetries of movement and sensitivity to surface. In other words, the drawing is a multifaceted index of the training experience that registers concrete differences in line weight, balance, proportion and the relationship between figure and ground. For artist and athlete, observation is embodied; consciousness is corporeal. Both are absorbed in and by the milieu in which they perform.

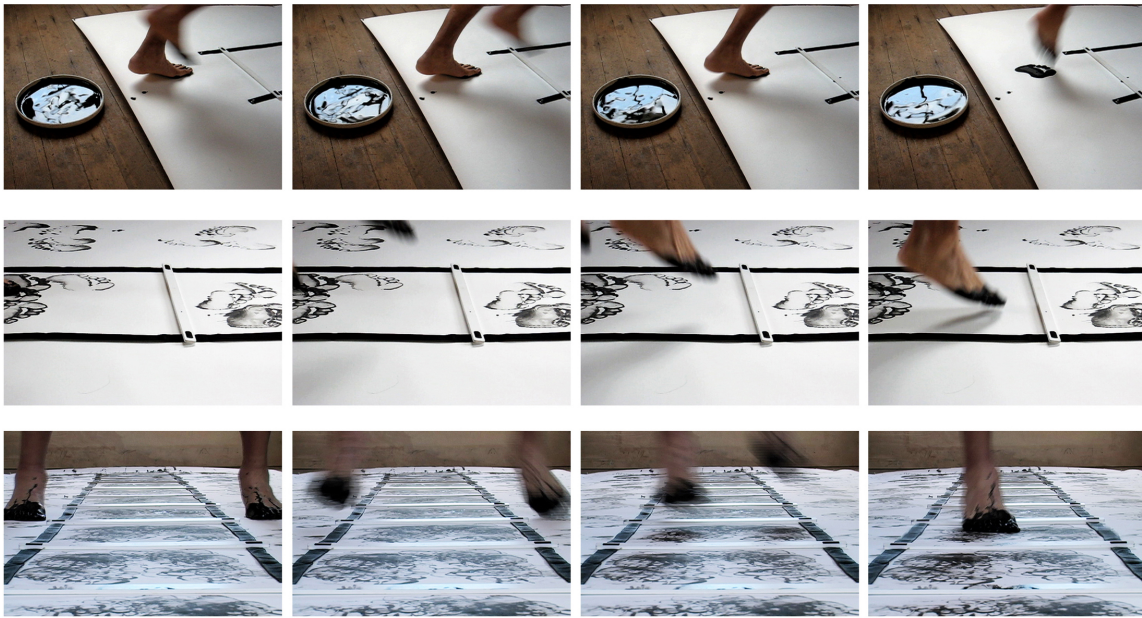


Figure 2: Michael Namkung, *Footwork* (2010) Video stills / ink-jet print.

Like dance, athletic training and performance is structured by choreographed movement, a disciplined sequence of fine-tuned maneuvers that assimilate into fluid motion. As the body internalizes these motions, a vocabulary of movement becomes embedded in the body as knowledge of itself. Trisha Brown has always used drawing as an extension of her experimental choreography, and since 1999 she has made drawings with the moving body, holding ink pens, charcoal and pastels between her fingers and toes as she dances on paper. While we may be tempted to read her streaks and smudges as sketchy or rudimentary traces of movement, the residual marks do not indicate a deskilling that is often associated with contemporary drawing practices. On the contrary, in the hands (or feet) of a skilled dancer, the drawings register technical nuance and refinement that is readable by those fluent in the language of dance. In this sense, Brown's drawings not only provide insight on the relationship of the body to the act of drawing, but also reframe the relationship of skill and representation. Peter Eeley suggests that Brown is 'restoring the primacy of the moving body' and is 'working back towards Muybridge and

against the vacuously instantaneous image we've ended up with.' (Eleey 2008: 32) In drawing from the specialized vocabulary of her own moving body, Brown works towards representations that attempt to align with her bodily experience as a dancer. However, one need not be fluent in the language of dance to get these drawings. Helen Molesworth acknowledges the role of her own yoga practice in creating the conditions for her to understand them through her body:

... the intelligence of Trisha Brown's drawings, which is an intelligence that emanates from her body, was only legible to me in the wake of my own attempts to sidestep my own logocentrism and rearticulate for myself my own mind/body equation. (Molesworth 2011: 11)

Catherine Lord sees a continuous line of energy running through and constituted by the drawing and Brown's body. While the dancer simultaneously draws inside and outside her body, the movement is not unilateral; there is reciprocity of action and agency between the observer and the observed:

The dance is the current of line that courses over paper and along the muscles and tendons and bones of the body that the dancer draws inside herself. There is no distinguishing the dance from the drawing. The drawing dances the dancer. The dancer draws the drawing. (Lord 2011: 20)

Body and environment are in mutual physical relationship. As a body marks a surface, the materiality of the surface marks the body in concert, creating a continuous line that is at once internal and external. Although not strictly visible, this line is nevertheless observed by the dancer or athlete in a state of heightened bodily awareness that the activity of athletic drawing engenders. While one can feel this current in the drawing with the performer in absentia, under specific conditions of live performance this current of line can course through the viewer's body as empathic response, absorbing the bodies of others into a more fluid conception of where the drawing begins and ends.

The presence of spectators is not incidental to the athletic performance event, but the social framework that defines the event itself. In fact, the athlete's training in developing full bodily attention to his or her environment as he or she moves through it is the very quality that makes the performer hyper-aware of the presence of others. It is a commonplace that athletes both feel and feed off of an audience's energy. The power of these sensory experiences with audiences has led me to develop a framework of live drawing performance that enlists the bodies of others in the work's execution. At the beginning of each performance, the audience agrees to two simple guidelines. First, the body is the sole recording device. By prohibiting other recording devices, the audience must rely upon their bodies' innate capacity to remember, to engage in the social context and create meaning from it. Second, proximity is power. The audience is asked to come in close. There is a direct relationship between human proximity and the ability to empathize—to feel each other's presence. These simple instructions orient the audience's attention to the relationship between the performing body and their own, and to their physical and social entanglement in the performance. This method makes boundaries

porous, allowing the current of line to be drawn across a surface, through the performer and into the bodies of others. Although the material conditions of athletic drawing performances are often ephemeral, neither the drawing nor the performance disappears in the wake of the event, but are dispersed through and carried by multiple bodies.

Another method of engaging the bodies of others has been to create conditions for direct participation in the athletic drawing process. In *Drawing Gym 2: This Time It's Personal*, I studied to become a certified personal trainer and worked with individuals over several months to create drawings that registered participants' bodily limits in space and time. In visualizing these limits, the drawings also served to establish benchmarks that motivated and inspired participants in subsequent sessions to push beyond what they had previously drawn.

The goal is to draw a spiral for as long as possible. With chalk in hand, a participant pivots on the balls of her feet as she draws a line that slowly arcs away from center (Figure 3). As the spiral's radius extends steadily outward, her weight shifts from her legs to her arms. Gradually her shoulders take on more of the load, and finally, her core engages in order to support her body as it inches towards full extension. In contrast to athletic training regimens that structure activity around a fixed choreography, number of sets or interval of time, this one involves a moving target. The drawing activity is performed until the point of failure, in order to set a benchmark that signifies an edge—a perceived bodily limit that may be used to trace progress or regress over time. In order to perform the drawing for as long as possible, the drawer must reckon with bodily limits, both actual and perceived. As she spirals outward and the task increases in difficulty, she approaches the outer limits of her reach, strength and determination. Although trying to manage increasing discomfort while maintaining a plank position and dragging a piece of chalk over concrete may not appear to be the most conducive space for trying to parse the difference between actual and perceived limits, this is in fact, an ideal condition for such an assessment to occur. How far can I go? How long can I sustain? How much pain can I tolerate? What are my physical limitations? To test these questions at the moments in which they arise in consciousness is the athletic *modus operandi*.

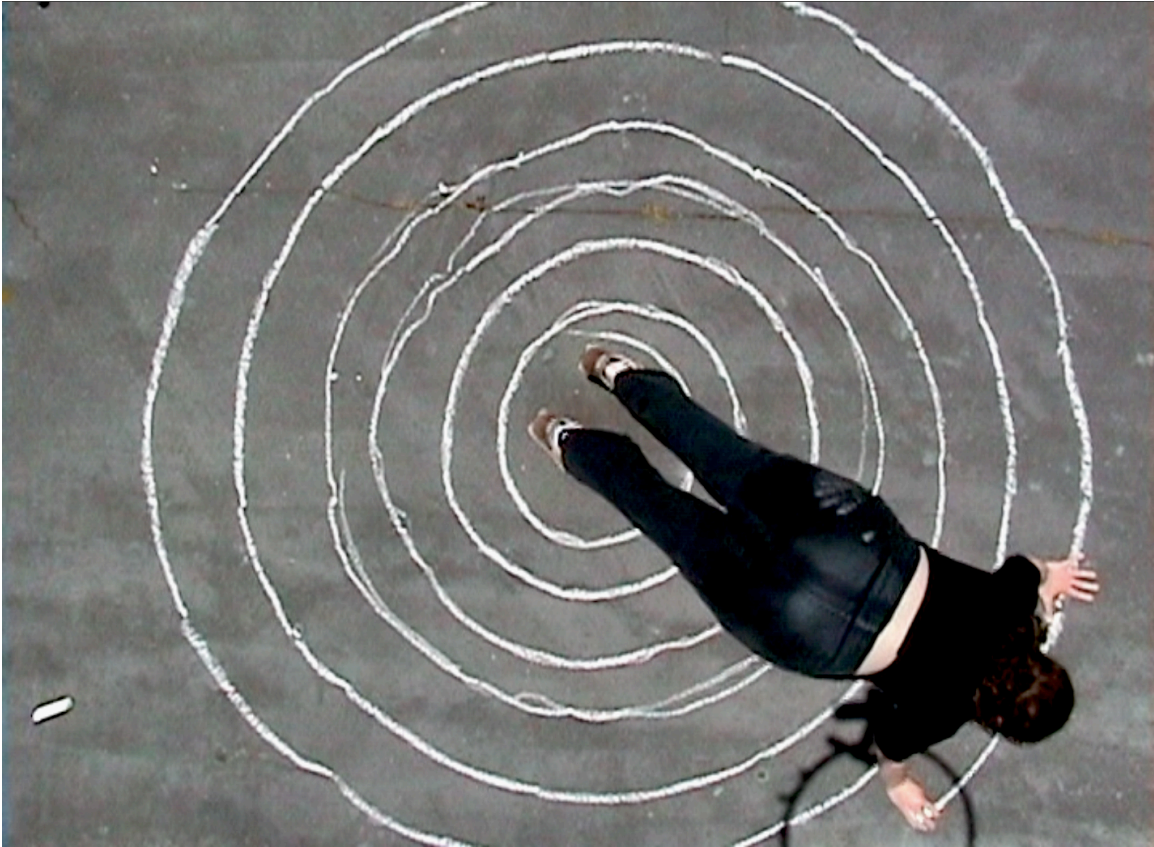


Figure 3: Michael Namkung, Drawing Gym 2: This Time It's Personal: The Spiral (2012) Video still / ink-jet print.

Towards the end, the marks take on characteristics that reflect the quality of the drawer's mental state and physical efforts. As the ability to endure wanes, line quality becomes less fluid and more tenuous. Tighter concentric arcs at the periphery register the determination to extend beyond the contours with which the drawer has previously circumscribed herself, whereas increasing space between arcs suggest a mounting urgency to finish as quickly as possible. The drawing delineates not only bodily space but also interior psychic space; it measures and reflects the degree of desire for transformation in attempts to either shift or submit to one's own boundaries.

In drawing during athletic performance, the making of marks creates a heightened awareness of the body and the surface over which it moves. Observation is a complex corporeal phenomenon that occurs between a fully engaged sensorium and the entire perceptual field. When we stop and look at the drawings themselves—these extensions of our bodies into which we have poured our physicality, they look back. They are also extensions of the physical world, reminding us that the world has poured its physicality into us. The drawings visualize this relationship—they remember the encounter and propose when and where we might meet again.

References

Eleey, P. (2008), *Trisha Brown: so that the audience does not know whether I have stopped dancing*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center.

Lord, C. (2011), 'Out of Line', *Dance/Draw*, Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

Merleau-Ponty, M. ([1945] 2012), *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. D. Landes), Oxon: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1969), *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty* (trans. A. Fisher), New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

Molesworth, H. (2011), 'Dance/Draw: An Introduction', *Dance/Draw*, Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

Nicolaides, K. (1941), *The Natural Way to Draw*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Biography

Michael Namkung is an interdisciplinary artist and world champion Ultimate player. In his Drawing Gym project, he uses strenuous exercise and traditional drawing tools to explore the sensory experience of drawing under duress. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at venues such as Locust Projects, Miami; The Frost Art Museum, Miami; Niterói Contemporary Art Museum, Brazil; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He is the recipient of The Center for Cultural Innovation Investing in Artists Grant, a Cannonball WaveMaker Grant and a Tanne Foundation Award. He is currently Assistant Professor of Drawing at Florida International University.

List of images

Figure 1: Michael Namkung, A Straight Line (2015) Video still / ink-jet print.

Figure 2: Michael Namkung, Footwork (2010) Video stills / ink-jet print.

Figure 3: Michael Namkung, Drawing Gym 2: This Time It's Personal: The Spiral (2012) Video still / ink-jet print.