

Where the Pencil Meets the Road

by Michael Namkung

As the technological mediation of our daily lives expands, we can communicate with each other faster and do more in less time, having greater access to information than we have ever had before. But information and knowledge are not the same. We increasingly dwell in virtual space, becoming more sedentary and solitary, losing touch with our bodies, and the bodies of others. Our body of knowledge on the human condition is abstract—literally disembodied, and set adrift from lived experience. As a physical act that requires attention and engagement with the material world, drawing offers a return to the body. And so does getting outside and running around the block, the playground, or the pitch.

There are shared behaviors between the activities of athletes and the traditional practice of drawing from observation: a state of intense concentration; a high degree of technical, perceptual, and motor skills; and the need for disciplined practice. Essential to both drawing and athletics is perceiving the objects in one's environment and responding to them through highly coordinated body movement.

But drawing is not simply putting a set of skills into practice. The process of translating one's perceptions and experiences of the world onto a flat surface is a conceptually complex exercise. Every drawing instructor repeats the axiom that learning to draw is learning to see, but the act of perception itself isn't so straightforward; seemingly direct observational drawing techniques require substantial leaps of faith. An examination of the time-honored lessons of basic drawing shows them to be downright mind-bending. In Kimon Nicolaides's seminal 1941 text, *The Natural Way to Draw*, in the first exercise on contour, he implores his students to:

Sit close to the model or object which you intend to draw and lean forward in your chair. Imagine that your pencil point is touching the model instead of the paper. Without taking your eyes off the model, wait until you are convinced that the pencil is touching the point on the model upon which your eyes are fastened.¹

Immersed in the drawing process, the body is an active conduit between the drawing and the objective world. Nicolaides emphasizes developing perceptual sensitivity--especially in regard to the sense of touch--in order to make a meaningful mark that reflects one's sensory engagement with the world. The directive to *lean forward in your chair* orients the body towards this task of engagement. When drawing to comprehend gesture, he stresses the importance of an empathetic, bodily response:

To be able to see the gesture, you must be able to feel it in your body. You should feel that you are doing whatever the model is doing. If the model stoops or reaches, pushes or relaxes, you should feel that in your own muscles likewise stoop or reach, push or relax. If you do not respond in a like manner to what the model is doing, you cannot understand what you see. If you do not feel as the model feels, your drawing is only a map or a plan.ⁱⁱ

Verisimilitude in drawing is not as significant as a truthful record of one's particular drawing experience. A sense of being present in one's own body and being sensitive to the bodies of others is prerequisite to knowledge of perception itself—to *understand what you see*. For Nicolaides, this form of knowledge exists in the body as a whole—in the corpus—not as an isolated intellectual activity of the mind. That perception occurs in the physicality of the body is the basis of the phenomenological thinking developed by philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He suggests that the lived body is both object and subject, and therefore, the connection between an individual and the object of perception is reversible. In discussing Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in the book *The Materiality of Stone*, Christopher Tilley suggests:

The act of perceiving the world binds the subject with the world of which he or she is already a part...I touch the stone and the stone touches me. To feel the stone is to feel its touch on my hands...Consciousness from this point of view is not a private awareness of the interior of one's mind but an active relation to the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Engaging the body as a multisensory whole in active relation to one's environment is a fundamental element in athletic training and performance. And as in drawing, sensitivity of touch is given special privilege. There are precise forms for doing any exercise—whether stretching a hamstring, placing your feet at the optimum angles to change direction, or properly coordinating movement with breathing. In the athletic sensorium, these forms are primarily *felt*: the firmness of the ground under one's foot, the nuanced grip of the hand, the hip check of an opponent. Kinesthetic perception is incorporated with visual, spatial, auditory, olfactory, proprioceptive, and even emotive sensations into a synaesthetic body of knowledge that is used and understood by its practitioners—a corporeal consciousness. This heightened bodily awareness is an immersive condition in which the distinction between self and other disappears, and mind and body lose their separateness. In drawing, the focused attention and expanded awareness of the drawer mirrors the consciousness of the athlete. For both drawer and athlete, the body is an actively engaged conduit. This meditative, body-dwelling state is called being *in the zone*.

The activity of drawing is a physical relationship between body and environment. Drawings define the site of perception, where the self and the world physically touch, and record points of contact between body and environment. As the self marks the

world, the world marks the individual in return, and manifests reciprocally in the physical work one does. In this sense, drawing is not something that one does to a surface, space or environment, but an outcome of a negotiation between a material body, with a material set of tools, in a material space. When a body moves across a surface or through a space, it makes a mark: a cut in damp sod from digging in a cleat; a swimmer's wake; an arc traced by the body in motion. Whether or not a body makes a conventionally graphic or even visible mark is beside the point. The drawing may exist as a vestigial flicker on the retina, a line of sound traced through space, or a pattern of movement inscribed into muscle memory for future use.

What does it mean to approach drawing from this point of view? Instead of perceiving the world as external to the self, with the drawing mediating the space between, we collapse the distance, and transform it from a space to an interface. Here, we remove the idea of the drawing *medium*—i.e., the something in between—and instead, perceive a state of immersion, of direct flow between the world and ourselves. This is not an abandonment of observational drawing traditions, but a promotion of the form itself—one in which we observe ourselves in physical negotiation and mutual cooperation with our environment, in which we physically touch the world and are touched by it. The moment of truth, for the drawer and for the athlete, lies in the nature of our physical connection with the world itself, where latent energies are actualized and given form—where the pencil meets the road.

ⁱ Nicolaides, Kimon. *The Natural Way to Draw*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941, 9.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tilley, Christopher. "From Body to Place to Landscape: A Phenomenological Perspective," *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*. Oxford: Berg, 2004, 17, 19.