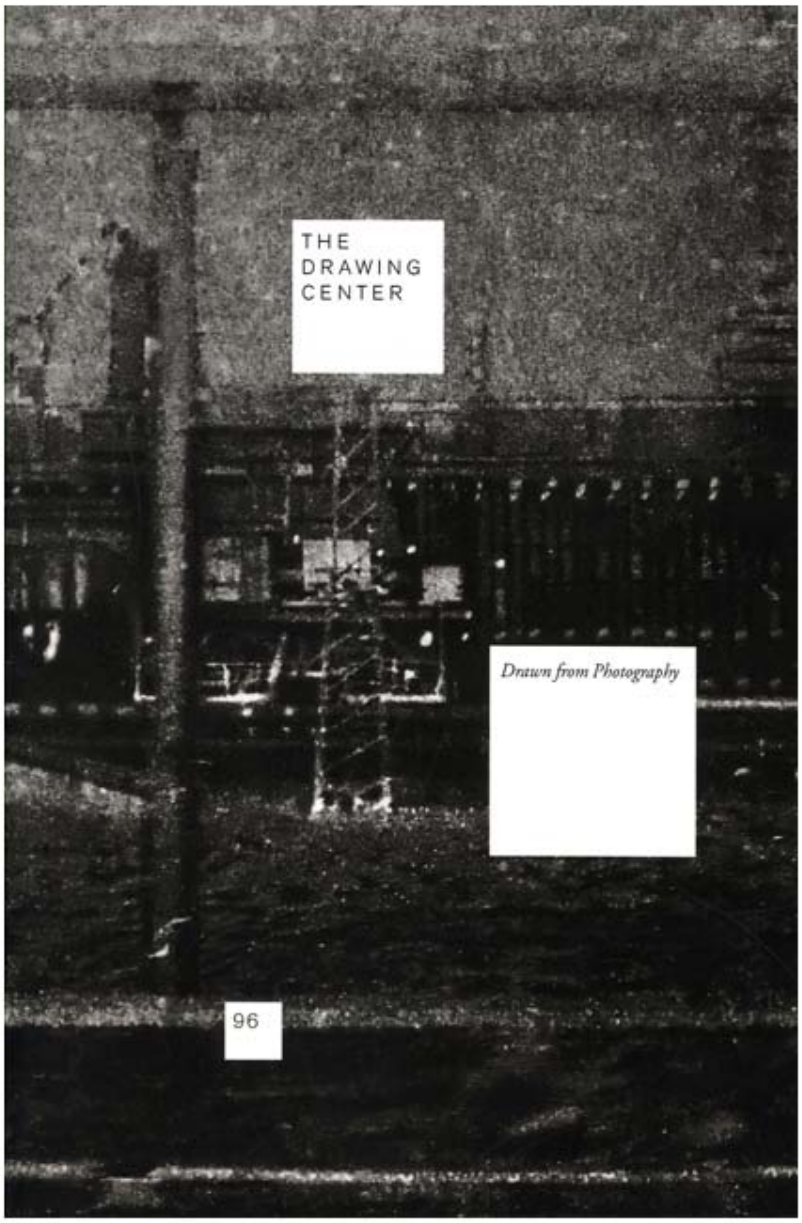
THE
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Drawn from Photography
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OBAMA SIGNS SWEEPING FINANCIAL OVERHAUL INTO LAW

Drawn from Photography[1]

Claire Gilman

In 2000, shortly after moving to Los Angeles and beginning graduate school, Karl Haendel made what he refers to as his first mature work. *Untitled (Birthday Drawing)* is a detailed pencil-on-paper rendering of the front page of *Pravda* newspaper from July 1, 1976, the day Haendel was born, reconfigured at about three times its original size. According to Haendel, finding the Soviet periodical was not easy, although he finally located it on microfilm at the University of California research library. After making a slide and projecting it onto a four-and-a-half-by-three-and-a-half-foot piece of drawing paper, Haendel began painstakingly transcribing a text he could not read in an alphabet he did not know. The result is an astonishingly faithful yet imperfect transcription in which subtle shifts in shade and tone transform word into image and, by extension, this now outdated activist reader (the paper was officially shut down in 1991) into an aesthetic object.

Haendel is one of thirteen young artists featured in *Drawn from Photography*, all of whom are engaged in a peculiarly conservative procedure: the meticulous translation, through drawing, of images originally received through photographic or photo-based media. The drawings frequently picture newsworthy events such as wars and political protests, and they are often derived from appropriated imagery, but not always. For example, since 2001, British artist Ewan Gibbs has been traveling to different cities, taking photographs of urban monuments typical of tourist brochures, and

1 This essay began as a talk given as part of the Contemporary Drawing panel, convened by Gary Garrels, at the 2009 College Art Association conference in Los Angeles, and its ideas are developed further in my "Marking Politics: Drawing as Translation in Recent Art," *Art Journal* Vol. 69, n. 3 (Fall, 2010), 114-127. Here I address an expanded roster of artists and offer a much wider look at a developing trend in contemporary art.

bringing them back to his studio where he carefully copies them onto A4 paper via a complicated system derived from knitting patterns. Similarly, for the past ten years, fellow Brit Richard Forster has made precise renderings after his own snapshots of seascapes, factory interiors, and industrial buildings. This is drawing reduced to its most basic application, a kind of anybody-can-do-it approach that is high on effort but not necessarily on imagination which raises the question of why spend the time at all? Is this exercise merely an homage to other people's achievements (urban development, political activism, etc.)? Or is it, as in Haendel's case, a pessimistic testament to the impossibility of reclaiming an already defunct history? (Haendel has asserted that *Pravda* represented for him a kind of unrealizable dream, since by the mid-'70s it was clear that radical socialism wasn't working). Or is there perhaps some value in the *time* spent, as if careful attention to other people's achievements is itself a form of commitment, one that might redefine the nature of creative expression and drawing's role in it?

More than any other art form, drawing is traditionally understood to be an inherently intimate and spontaneous activity, one that is often seen as occurring outside of social codes and conventions.[2] The studious recreation of images first made by a camera's impersonal lens must be understood therefore as undermining the notion that authorship equals invention or creative freedom, and as accepting, by contrast, the degree to which we operate within ideological systems and without exclusive control. In this, the artists in *Drawn from Photography* join their postmodern predecessors who appropriated media imagery both as confirmation of the demise of heroic individualism and as a means of critically subverting dominant culture from within. And yet, signaling an immediate difference from the concerns of this earlier generation is the artists' choice of source material, which is often emotionally loaded and personally motivated. Consider, in addition to Haendel's *Birthday Drawing*, Mary Temple's *Currency* (2007–present), a daily project in which Temple peruses Web-based news sources, selects a story,

2 Perhaps the most well known example of drawing understood in this sense is Surrealist automatic drawing in which artists engaged in a form of random mark making with the goal of bypassing rational thought and accessing unconscious, psychic depths.

and renders an image of a world leader from that story in pen-and-ink on a tabloid-sized sheet of paper. Temple positions the image on the page according to her own feelings of hopefulness about the day's events (hopeful, high; pessimistic, low) and arranges the images in a calendar format in order to underscore the diaristic nature of her enterprise.[3]

A similar urge to humanize the abstraction of news reporting motivates Emily Prince's pencil memorial to all the American soldiers who have died in Iraq. Prince embarked on this seemingly Herculean venture in 2004 when, in an effort to lend a face to the conflict, she began transcribing onto three-by-five-inch pieces of paper photographs of every fallen American serviceman and woman from the website Military City. Like Temple's, the project is ongoing, and Prince lends order to the whole by arranging the individual drawings in a grid-like wall hang. Accompanying each photograph is the soldier's name, hometown, age, date of death and, where applicable, anecdotes assembled from online obituaries, all rendered in Prince's hand. Notably, Prince considered, but rejected, seeking images from the families directly, observing that it seemed wrong to ask anything of the bereft or to insert her needs into the project in any obvious way. "I wanted my own personality to be submerged, besides my hand in the drawings," Prince has explained. "I believe that using a public source of information, available to anyone, makes me a more anonymous figure… I would rather be invisible as an artist."[4] This is a peculiarly egoless definition of authorship, albeit one that must be distinguished from postmodernism's loss of faith in human agency and the possibility of authentic investment in the world. By contrast, desire is acknowledged and attention manifested, even as no effort is made to reevaluate the depicted subjects either in themselves or in relation to the artist's own life. Artists like Prince and Temple face the overwhelming availability of information that constitutes today's media landscape by deliberately eschewing intervention and instead

3 Temple began her project on the occasion of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial speech at Columbia University on September 24, 2007. She notes that she found the event, coverage and images of Ahmadinejad compelling and that "drawing his face connected me to him—I wanted to know more about his past as well as Iran's history." Temple, Unpublished Artist Statement, 2008.

4 Emily Prince, email to the author (November 6, 2010).

Forster also situates drawing in a spatial context pairing twelve drawings after photographs of coal vents located on one side of the train track—the photographs were taken at fractionally different moments in time on twelve consecutive days, approximating the appearance of the plant to its disappearance from view—with a model covered with hand-drawn wood grain. Forster based the model on composite photographs of the steel refinery across the track, and he positions it opposite the drawings so as to replicate his original vantage point from the moving train. Not incidentally, the plant was the subject of political controversy in the summer of 2009 when the threat of closure risked putting hundreds of people out of work. Forster's title—*Reheated Inability to Know this (Un)place*—plays on the ambivalence associated with a place that, in his words, is representative of "unhonesty, unfriendliness," and yet whose protection has served to galvanize the community.[11] By positioning himself as an ordinary tourist reduced to approximating the plant through a series of quickly mapped moments, Forster accepts the fragmentation that defines one's experience of our fast-moving world as well as the literal and metaphoric instability that characterizes his subject. At the same time, however, his steadfast dedication to his inevitably incomplete reconstruction bestows its own kind of value. In both his and Tomaszewski's installations, moreover, physical intervention forces the viewer to re-live something of the artist's own experience. It is as if such commitment necessarily requires like investment of us.

Fundamental to the work of the artists in *Drawn from Photography* is the egalitarian nature of their approach. Copying is a skill children practice, one that does not require extensive schooling or expensive equipment. As Prince has observed of her monumental undertaking: "It is my own eyes and hand tracing out some very slight acquaintance with what's occurring. As an investigation it is little, and it is incomplete."[12] Similarly, Bowers has explained that her decision to draw from photographs emerged from a desire to be more respectful of her subjects, as if copying would place her on their level. "I decided that my labor and care in rendering might elicit a

11 Richard Forster, email to author (November 8, 2010).
12 Statement by Emily Prince (http://www.whitneymcintosh.com/emilyabout.php, 2007).

more empathetic reading. I wanted my work to recognize that I was part of the system I was addressing."[13] For his part, Evan Gibbs has described his process—along with his initial decision to limit his images of New York City to views he could see from atop the Empire State Building—as a way of avoiding that "daunting subjectivity" that comes from too many options.[14]

Much like Prince, Gibbs consciously endeavors to leave his own needs out of the equation. "While I don't change that much," he observes, "the world is changing around me."[15] In a further effort to reduce the legibility of his role as the privileged author of his enterprise, Gibbs grids out his drawings and reconstructs his images through a precise system of dashes and circles that are loosely based on the notational system of knitting patterns. In this, his work submits to a process of manual decision-making distinctly at odds with our more conventional image of the artist as uncompromising visionary. In place of any manifestation of creative expression, Gibbs substitutes a demonstration of care. He explains that he spends a lot of time determining which mark and pencil grade is appropriate for which part of the image and that, like Bowers, he hopes to elicit a similar appreciation on the part of the viewer for the now overly familiar monuments he takes as his subject. To be clear, Gibbs does not deny personal meaning or creativity so much as he redefines these terms. He proposes a model of authorship in which a contemplative engagement with the outside world replaces the need either to produce something new or to radically intervene within it.

Ultimately, what unites Gibbs and his peers is the need to find a manner in which to assemble, confront, and process a wide array of images and information. Indeed, it would seem that this kind of active contemplation is increasingly necessary at a time when the availability of free-floating information across cyberspace offers

13 Bowers and Ewenique Jones in conversation, in *Nothing is Neutral: Andrea Bowers* (Los Angeles: The California Institute for the Arts/REDCAT, 2010), 3.
14 Evan Gibbs, interview by Beau Gilsdorf, *Dailyscrawl.com* (February 3, 2010). The first New York series, depicting images taken from atop the Empire State Building, dates to 2003. Gibbs has since returned to New York on several occasions and his most recent series dates to 2008.
15 Marina Cashdan, "Evan Gibbs: In the Studio," *Art Asia Pacific* (January, 2010), 81.

us only the appearance of a connection to, and so little genuine knowledge of, the cultures and events that bear on our own political reality. Fernando Bryce, for one, observes that what is currently needed are "collectively controlled forms of organization" and an ability to step back, observe, and weigh different positions rather than blindly acting, something he replicates in his own field of expertise via his careful, mimetic gesture.[16] At the same time, the artists in *Drawn from Photography* are intent on making work. Many of them discuss the importance of having a studio practice, of knowing that they have a specific task to fulfill and that, at the end of the day, work will be done. As Karl Haendel has noted of *Birthday Drawing: 15 July 1976*, the dream of the October revolution, was over, "I realized that I could use my work to align myself with a spirit of activism and revolt, but I would only do it symbolically, in my studio, not on the street. I would do it with my labor, the many, many hours I spent drawing."[17]

That Haendel, Bowers, and Durant's quiet, reconstructive labor is of a different order than the practical movement for change their work illustrates is not incidental but purposeful. Just as copying photographs undoes the neutrality of the original document, so too does the photograph check the authorial impulse of drawing at a moment when the role of authors remains uncertain. But in producing by hand a material document, these artists exercise their own form of agency, one specific to their area of expertise. At a time of global uncertainty, when it is unclear what to do or how to respond, this kind of slowed-down, labor-intensive rendering confirms that action is still possible. If we are unsure *what* to do, what is still true is that

16 Bryce quoted in Kevin Power, "Fernando Bryce: Thinking with History," in *Fernando Bryce*, 177. Interestingly, Bryce has noted that he likes the way his handwriting demonstrates his source images so that, in his words, they "all become equal, there is an iconographic democracy that allows me to arrange the images and give the history a more or less narrative body. The only hierarchies are located in the value judgments I may make, sometimes relatively subtly and others, more openly, in the counterpointing, in the weight I give to the pictures, in their number etc." (Bryce, interview by Helena Tatay, 378). But another way, the act of hand drawing undoes the very relevance of questions of value in and of itself. The source images are instead determined to be valuable for the artist via nothing other than, and whose judgments are made, they are immediately attributable to that artist.
17 Karl Haendel, email to author, October 28, 2010.

we can do.[18] To quote Haendel once again, drawing from photography is about "articulating that moment of not knowing where to go but still wanting to continue."[19] It is this desire and this capacity that the artists in *Drawn from Photography* preserve.

18 This emphasis on work for the sake of work raises some potentially troubling questions that deserve a more judgment if not in-depth consideration here. For instance, it might be argued that the manifest presence of labor, time and energy registers not only an anxiety about agency but also an anxiety about value in a marketplace in which monetary determinations are increasingly divorced from material conditions. Thus, from all the potentially political content that becomes vehicle for a kind of abstract agency which might be aligned with Marx's critique of abstract labor. The difference is that the work in question is produced almost exclusively by the artist (sometimes by assistants), or at least bears the stamp of the artist's personal connection to the source images, and this connection therefore renders the final product meaningful in a way that distinguishes it from abstract labor in the capitalist sense.
19 Haendel, interview by Gabriel Ritter in *No Cell Phone: Karl Haendel*, Gabriel Ritter and Gloria Sutton, eds. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010), 85.

engaging in a kind of active contemplation to which the labor-intensiveness of drawing is particularly suited.

It is notable that several of the artists in *Drawn from Photography* take as their subject past periods when political intervention was more visibly cohesive: 1960s counterculture and the civil rights movement, for example, or 1980s nuclear activism, moments remembered for their impassioned solidarity in pursuit of shared political goals. From Andrea Bowers' fragmented drawings of nonviolent protestors, through Sam Durant's graphite renditions of iconic photographs of sign-wielding political demonstrators, to D.L. Alvarez's obscured renditions of found images of the Manson family and Black Panther party, one senses both an intense desire for access as well as a peculiar impotence. The latter is particularly evident in Alvarez's drawings, which recreate their source photos in shifting, gridded registers so that the final images hover between legibility and abstraction. Alvarez is especially drawn to organizations whose utopian ideals were unrealized or tragically betrayed, although he tends to focus on the time before the demise of these aspirations was a *fait accompli*. A striking example is his portrait of Manson girl Ruth Ann Morehouse (\\\, 2013), who sits looking up innocently, a gleam of hope in her eyes. In Alvarez's words: "I follow more in the path of memory and throw parts of the image out of focus. … In some ways those drawings are about the fragility of history, which is subject to both faulty memory and the agendas of future generations."[5]

Opacity also haunts Bowers and Durant's drawings even as their regard for their subjects is less conflicted. Bowers has stated that she chooses subjects that resonate with her personally, and it is hard to mistake the admiration that she feels for the women activists she typically depicts. *Still*, Bowers does not enforce an agenda on her viewers. In fact, although her titles tell us what is going on, precise content is often beside the point. Cropped and isolated on the white page, the figures in her non-violent protest drawings appear like graceful, dancing forms. It is not so much that Bowers ignores content—her Abalone Alliance Camp drawing is often presented alongside a newspaper clipping featuring her source photo—as that she carefully sets it aside, shifting the focus from what is taking place to the physical gesture involved and, by extension, to her own drawn recreation of it. Durant achieves something similar in his drawings of iconic images of demonstrators bearing protest signs, when he literally traces other people's writing with his own hand. In *Core (Congress of Racial Equality) Civil Rights Demonstration, New York, 1963, Index* (2009), it is the sign-bearer's resolute silence that makes the image so powerful. Holding her sign steady amidst the chaos of fallen bodies, what registers is the time she has taken to make something, to literally craft her appeal, however humble its presentation. Similarly, what distinguishes the artists' drawings from their source photos is that they do not disappear before the scenes depicted. Rather, they stand their ground as a parallel action, a visible form of labor, related to, but also separate from, the activity at hand.

The effort to highlight the constructed nature of image-making unites artists as diverse as Frank Selby, Serkan Özkaya, Fernando Bryce, and Paul Sietsema, each of whom is as interested in the form images assume as in their specific content. Frank Selby's drawings after photographs of wars and political clashes deliberately invoke conflicts dating from the nineteenth century to the present in order to foreground the common tropes and miscommunications that haunt the images that frame our cultural heritage. In Selby's words, "the images of riots, wars, uprisings and clashes found in my work are approached as instances of groups of people for whom a failure of language has created a crisis," and he foregrounds this failure by repeating exaggerated postures or bleaching out significant moments in his monochromatic renderings.[6] Selby is particularly attracted to civil war photography because of its concomitant centrality—the American Civil War is known as the first fully photographed war—and its inherently peripheral nature—long exposure times meant that close-up photographs of people were limited and necessarily staged. For *Laughter* (2008), a drawing on Mylar of three men dressed in Union uniforms warming themselves by a campfire, Selby blew up the print before transcribing it so that the resulting drawing is both larger and more attenuated than usual. Here, the artist's own missteps join the photo's original

5 D.L. Alvarez, email to the author (November 2, 2010).

6 Selby, "A House that Will Never Be Built," Artist's Unpublished Statement (July 2007).

distortions—a soldier's over-exposed face, the blurred smoke from the fire, scratches in the print—to reveal the tangible past of this work and its continued life in the present. Like Prince, Selby prefers to use images that have been canonized by the culture, observing: "My project would lose meaning if it was not related to something meaningful for someone else."[7]

A parallel impulse motivates Serkan Özkaya who has explained his penchant for copying—Özkaya has rendered broadsheet newspaper pages that have been printed in place of the typeset originals, entire literary texts, and, for this show, the very essay you are reading—as an attempt to insert a physical work of art between readers and their expectations. As in Bowers and Durant's drawings, transparency is hereby ruptured as the reader is forced to consider not only what is depicted but how it is depicted and by whom. Similarly, Fernando Bryce explains that after years of being obsessed with obscure histories—the Spanish Civil War, the Cuban Revolution, and the history of Peru are a few of the subjects he has tackled—"a moment came when I was seized by the need to give form to what had always been there."[8] Bryce typically works serially, copying entire caches of documents or, in the case of *Lenin/Mayakovsky* (2009), assembling images from the internet around a specific theme. There is choice involved in Bryce's masterpiece, and certainly he is drawn to the Marxist politics he frequently references, but his point is less to promote a specific reading than to reveal the way in which histories are recorded and remembered. Indeed, Bryce's selections are dependent on what is available in libraries, archives, or on the internet, and he frequently selects images and texts that were themselves forms of propaganda in their own day. Finally, a work like Paul Sietsema's *Boat Drawing* (2010) memorializes the investigatory impulse freed from any specific agenda. Hence, this image of an explorer's vessel accompanied by an equally detailed rendering of the photograph's blank backside, both images tilted and frayed at the edges to reveal their physical wear and tear. This ghostly other is the silence at the heart of speech, the quiet resistance to meaning

7 Frank Selby, conversation with the author (October 12, 2010).

8 Fernando Bryce, interview by Helena Tatay," on *Fernando Bryce* (Barcelona, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2005), 373.

that accompanies the work's material opacity and that undergirds Sietsema's own non-interpretive gesture. Paul Sietsema has described his work as looking back to a time before Wikipedia when historical discovery relied on a certain nonnegotiable materiality," insisting further that he wants his work "to have the intentionality of having passed through my head/hands."[9]

Navigation is here depicted as a physical act, something that is conveyed in equal measure in Christian Tomaszewski's *Hunting for Elements* (2007-08), an ambitious installation that invokes the hand-drawn Polish poster school of the 1960s and '70s, and Richard Forster's *Rehearsed Inability to Know this (Unfplace* (2009), a reconstructed train ride in which the artist photographed a steel plant on twelve consecutive days from the window of the train he habitually takes from his home in northeastern England to his studio in nearby Middlesbarough. For Tomaszewski, the Polish poster school represented a unique merging of lowbrow and highbrow, with one-of-a-kind movie advertisements often serving to mask subversive, anti-government messages. Tomaszewski's homage presents hand-drawn posters of photos found on the internet depicting famous political assassinations from the past two centuries: Malcolm X, JFK, Yitzhak Rabin, and Che Guevara, to name a few. The drawings hang flesh against each other on the wall, which is painted with colored stripes reminiscent of TV test patterns or filmstrips, while a wooden barrier keeps the viewer at a distance. In this way, Tomaszewski literally slows down our approach, infusing a virtual world with weight and substance and recalling something of these tragic figures' original impact. At the same time, Tomaszewski gives form to a history of communication that includes the poster, film and television, the internet, as well as his own anachronistic hand rendering.

9 Paul Sietsema, *2010 Words PaulSietsema Talks About Figure 3*, *Artforum* (March, 2010), 259-260. The full statement reads: "We live [today] by the 'Wikipedia model.' Things get cached on, corrected and reviewed. Everybody can present his or her own model of history now, which then competes with all the others. Am I going to pick up a history book and read only one person's version, or am I going to Google for a while and try to construct my own story? This kind of searching out and choosing what I want makes history impossibly cumbersome, detailed, relative. And it undermines our reverence for the material within history."

10 Sietsema, interview by Bruce Hainley, in Connie Butler, *Figure 3: Paul Sietsema* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 43.