

INFORMAL TALK GIVEN BY DAVID SMITH, MARCH 26, 1959  
AT BENNINGTON COLLEGE  
(In conjunction with an exhibition of his drawings)

There is one great secret about drawing. This secret is that it is a very simple act. The more one draws the better one gets. It is the fastest to realize in all the acts of art. It is just that easy. But most people are lazy.

Drawing especially is the life force for the sculptor who, of necessity, works in media slow to take realization, and, where the original creative impetus must be sustained during labor, drawing is the fast moving search which keeps physical labor in balance.

Even the slightest drawing made before the performance of painting or sculpture is often greater, more acute and truthful, than the formal production later made from it. Such a statement will find more agreement with artists than from connoisseurs. Drawings usually are not pompous enough to be called works of art by the officials. They are often too simple and easy.

The lay art lover might think of drawing as something hasty and preparatory before painting or making sculpture—as a preliminary before the great act, a sort of purgatory between amateurism and accomplishment, because everybody can draw some, children are uninhibited about it and do it so easily, and handwriting itself is a style of drawing, and it is common on sidewalks, board fences, phone booths, etc.

But actually, only an innocent artist, or an experienced artist who has worked back to innocence, dares to accept the challenge because it is so common an expression. It is also the most revealing, having no high expectancy to maintain, not even the authenticating quality of gold frames to artificially price or lend grandeur to its atmosphere, and by its very simple act comes closer to the actual bareness of the soul and the nature of free expression.

It is not expected to carry the flourish, the professionalism of oil painting, nor the accuracy and mannered clarity in the formal brushing of the watercolorist.

If it is pompous, insincere, mannered, it is so evident, so quick to be revealed,

and like the written line it is a quickly recognized key to personality. If it is timid, weak, overbold or blustering, it is revealed much as one senses this in the written letter or a signature. There is not the demand or tradition for technique and conformity. The pureness of statement is laid bare in a black and white answer of who that mark-maker is and what he stands for. Drawing comes closer to his truth than other media with technique and tradition, more truth than words can express. Drawing is more shaped as he is shaped because it is more free of the professional performance and gets closer to involuntary action, and the performance from surprise.

The drawing that comes from the serious hand can be unwieldy, uneducated, un-styled and still be great simply by the superextension of whatever conviction the artist's hand projects, being so strong that it eclipses the standard qualities critically expected. The need, the drive to express can be so strong that the drawing makes its own reason for being, putting logic and tradition back in the mouldy leaves.

Drawing is the most natural liberation of man. It came before words, it may have been the first celebration of man with his secret self—even before song.

But its need doesn't stand on primitive reconstruction. Anyone knows, everyone feels the need to draw. I truly believe that anything anyone has seen he can draw, and that every one of us has now seen everything he ever will see and that all that stands between his drawing anything in the world is his own inhibition. What that is I won't speculate on. Each must dig himself out of his own inaction and liberate the reflex of drawing to the memory vision.

If drawing could come now as easily as when man was six, he would not doubt or think, he would do. It would be a joy. But since he approaches it more consciously, and not with the child's freedom and innocence, he must admit to himself that he is making a drawing, and he approaches mark-making humbly, self-consciously or timidly. Here he finds intimidation and inhibition. But suppose he defiles the white sheet with one black line. This stroke is all it takes to make a drawing. He must be himself in the stroke. He dominates the line related to the image of line and does not

permit the image to dominate him and the line. Not a line the way others think the line should be, not how history says it once was, nor what multitudes say they cannot do with a straight line. For a line so drawn with conviction is more truly straight, if that is the image of line, than can be drawn with a ruler.

The only naturalism in drawing is the nature of human-made line. What the uninformed call inaccurate or bad drawings of nature are often other images trying to assert themselves in association. The truth of image is not single; it is many. Any image memory is many actions and many things often trying to express its subtle overlapping even in one line.

Simply stated, the line is a personal choice line. If more is needed, the first stroke demands another in complement. The second may demand the third in opposition, and the approach continues, each stroke more free because confidence is built by effort.

The great secret is revealed. It is very simple. You can experience it by doing—a hundred times faster than you have listened to me inadequately talk about the act of drawing.