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*doi*: 10.1017/S1359135525101425



What agency does drawing exert over the architect? This article questions whether an active line can ever take itself out for a walk, exploring the conundrum of agency within a flat ontology of drafting.

# The thing about lines

*Harry Thompson*

In the notebooks from his Bauhaus years, artist and pedagogue Paul Klee describes the line as *a point set in motion*: 'It goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly for the sake of the walk.'[1] This romantic suggestion endures in contemporary art, anthropology, and architecture practices.[2] It provides a window into Klee's wider creative ethos, where the processes that give rise to forms are more significant than the forms themselves.[3] Yet Klee's expression is often mis-repeated – as '*taking*' the line for a walk[4] – pointing towards a significant and perhaps neglected question: how can the point possibly stroll into a line without an intentional agent to navigate it? Does the line '*go out*' for a walk, or is it '*taken*' for one? In other words, do the point, the line, and various other potentially unconsidered actors, exert agency in drawing, or is this something reserved for the artist – or architect – alone?

In etymological terms, '*agency*' is *the capacity of an entity to act or exert power*.[5] Yet in philosophical contexts, it is a notion typically reserved for humans. Within wider theories of mind, psychology, ethics, and morality, it particularly denotes the performance of '*intentional*' actions. Thinkers including Donald Davidson, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Alfred Gell share such an intentional doctrine, with Gell defining agency attributable to entities 'seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention […]'.[6] In this anthropocentric context, the line could never be considered able to *go out* for a walk itself, due to its lack of *intentionality*, or *consciousness*. Yet I suspect that Klee would disagree: 'The primordial movement, the agent', he writes, 'is a point that sets itself in motion […]. A line comes into being.'[7] For Klee's line to sincerely go out for a walk, we must imagine an expanded concept of agency beyond intentional limitations.

What follows will explore this prospect. I employ the philosophy of *Object-Oriented Ontology* (OOO or 'Triple-O'), alongside creative drawing practices, to critique and sever tensions between agency and intentionality. I will first outline the metaphysical foundations of OOO and the associated concept of a 'flat ontology'. Next, I will foreground the levelling ambition of such an ontology and normative hierarchal conceptions of agency. And, lastly, I will introduce drawing as an applied philosophical study, considering normative modes of architectural production and my own creative practice *[1]*. I will propose that agency is not constituted within the distinct parties engaged in any interaction, but rather in the interaction itself. This small shift in perspective has the potential to radically challenge, and change, how we approach the world through our designs: a means of empathetic co-existence and kinship, over ordered imposition.

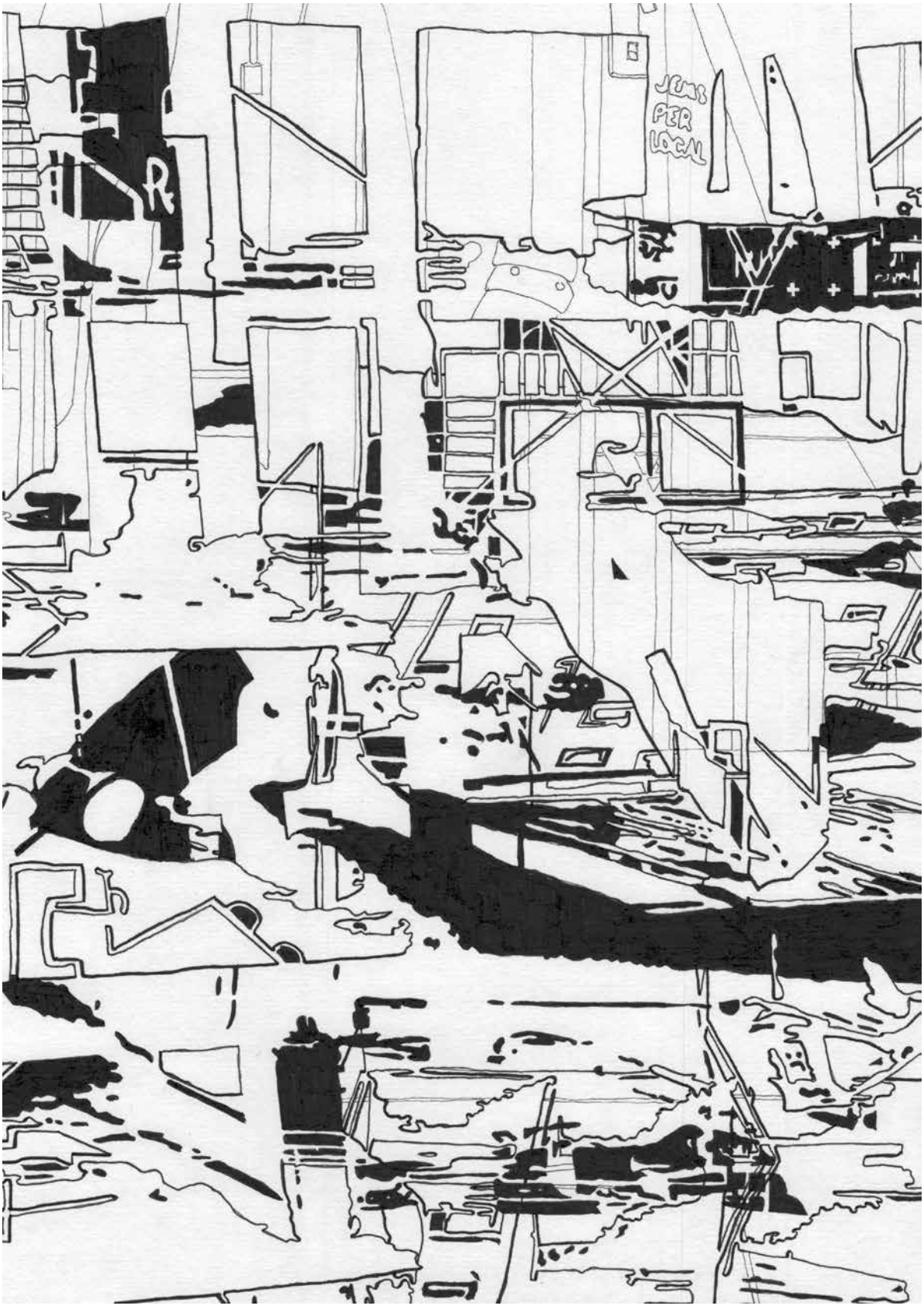
## Objects and things

OOO is a relatively new school of realist philosophy, established in the 1990s, which holds the entire cosmos to be made up of 'objects' – synonymous here with 'beings', 'entities', or 'things'. Contrary to expectations, an object, for OOO, need not be solid, small, natural, living, literal, or non-fictional.[8] Rather, object-oriented thought – particularly that developed by philosopher Graham Harman – holds that every real thing is an object, including me myself, my pen, this piece of writing, and the event of me sat here typing at my desk. It suggests that an ontological 'theory of everything' cannot be limited to the human mind and what we, as unique beings, can encounter.[9] For OOO, humans have no more *a priori* significance than the most mundane inanimate objects of our daily lives.

Harman's philosophy will be central to this paper. His *Circus Philosophicus* catalysed the creative drawing practice explored below. Yet similar thought has been – and continues to be – explored in a variety of contexts, with parallels and divergences. Ian Bogost explores computational media and videogames critically as a form of philosophical – and explicitly object-oriented – 'carpentry', making things that explain how things make their world.[10] Katherine Behar's Object-Oriented Feminism brings together a series of essays that turn OOO toward more agential, political, embodied terrain.[11] And Jane Bennett's vital materialism contemplates potential 'thing-power' among nonhuman beings, rendering manifest a subsistent world of more-than-human vitality.[12]



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1 'Ten Years' (detail), 2023, ink on paper. This image is a part of *[6]*.



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Indeed, OOO itself constitutes only one particular strand within a wider group of 'speculative realists': a collective initially united by ambitions to bring 'things-in-themselves' back into contemporary philosophical discourse, but which was relatively short-lived because of disagreements over the protagonists' respective philosophical frameworks.[13]

OOO's framework is established by rejecting the idea of knowledge being the primary form of access to things beyond ourselves, which is arguably the most common approach to experiencing anything in our world. Consider a pen, for example: this particular pen, shown in figure *[2]*. If I were to ask you what the pen is, you would likely tell me either what it is made from, or what it does. It is a somewhat faded black and chrome ballpoint, you might say, used mainly for writing, and perhaps some sketching. Harman asserts that these are the only two possible kinds of knowledge we can have over any thing. He refers to these approaches as 'undermining' and 'overmining', respectively, holding that they substitute a loose paraphrase of the thing in place of the thing-in-itself.[14] The former prioritises some privileged basic element from which all macroscopic beings are constituted. The latter sees a thing's reality being exhausted through its relations with other entities.[15] OOO instead holds that an object has its own reality, which emerges beyond its pieces and endures through changes in its relational arrangement. I am able to set the pen down, chew on it, change its cartridge, or watch it wear away over years of use, without exhausting its reality: it is still 'the pen'. And this is not just the case for pens – or the typical philosophy school examples of hammers and tables – but for all things. There is something more to any 'object' than can be totally grasped by our knowledge of it.

The question therefore remains: what really *is* this pen, if not a well-used writing implement? Harman here draws influence from the tool-analysis of philosopher Martin Heidegger, interpreting an answer to the 'question of being' as that which is not 'present-at-hand'.[16] This reading suggests that the being of any thing is not identical with its presence in human consciousness.[17] The reality of the pen is a rich and mystifying interior, and my perception is merely a caricature: an interpretation of mine, and mine alone. To see the pen in my hand does not grant me that pen in its entirety, but only a shadow of its individual being. For OOO, the real pen 'withdraws' into Heidegger's 'readiness-to-hand': its reality apart from any distortion by human access.[18] Ecological philosopher Tim Morton writes of such withdrawal as no violent sealing-off, but merely an open secret: the unspeakable unicity of this pen, incapable of being anything else in this given moment.[19] The object is beyond our reach. Any means of approach will only ever give us a present-at-hand distortion, whether lucidly theoretical or unconsciously practical.

This distinction between objects of 'distortion' and 'withdrawal' paves the way for perhaps the most radical steps in object-oriented thought. For, if we can appreciate another human's encounter with the pen as differing from my own, then we might acknowledge that a butterfly, delicately landing on the pen, also merits its own interpretation. For OOO, the butterfly equally fails in reaching the withdrawn reality of the pen, translating it into a particular set of 'butterfly-ish' phenomenal qualities. 'Other features of this instrument', writes Harman, 'which may be of the greatest relevance to mosquitoes, bacteria, angels, or nails, are left untranslated, ignored as if they did not exist.'[20] Whether the butterfly is conscious of its interaction with this particular writing implement is irrelevant. A relation has been formed, but the reality of the pen has not been exhausted.

Taking this one final step further, OOO holds that is this not reserved solely for living things. As the pen scrawls across the surface of the paper, pen and paper only encounter translations of one another. If truly all methods fail in their attempted contact with that frustrating pen of withdrawal, then consciousness is merely one futile means among many. To interact with any object, in whatever means possible, is simply to form some kind of relation with it. Our conscious perception of the pen might seem like it grants us some privileged powers over our



2 The 'withdrawn' pen: a somewhat faded black and chrome ballpoint, used mainly for writing and some sketching.



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non-sentient companions in the world, but for OOO these powers are merely one specific case of what must be called 'relations' more generally. In the object-oriented cosmos, experience is not limited to living beings alone.[21]

This thinking constitutes the so-called 'flat ontology' of OOO, which holds that an object is anything that cannot be totally exhausted by either its pieces or its effects, and that no object can fully access another directly. For philosopher Levi Bryant, who first coined the phrase object-oriented ontology, to abide by the flat ontology is to treat no object as the mere construct of another.[22] In other words, the pen is simply itself, without cease.[23] That we might typically use it for writing or chewing upon, or that we even refer to it as a pen in the first place, is merely a surface understanding of this rich entity lying before us – one that misfires from its withdrawn reality in favour of a comprehendible fragment: a caricature.[24]

In this way, object-oriented thought takes a step beyond the transcendental idealism of Immanuel Kant, where there is not only a human inability to know things-in-themselves, but one that pertains to all beings.[25] There are therefore no *a priori* hierarchal structures of certain objects higher than any other, no 'premature divisive taxonomies' being smuggled in beforehand.[26] We must instead start with a metaphysically level playing field. In the object-oriented cosmos, the architect, the pen, and the butterfly are all objects. Each holds its own independent reality which eludes the full grasp of another.

## A bumpy ontology

A curious conundrum emerges from this line of thought, however, when we contemplate agency and causation in such a radically flat ontology. To consider an action as merely a relation between two or more beings is to suggest that all real things have the capacity to act. The pen, being forcefully led across the page by a heavy hand, exerts its own force in the process. Both in the sense of Newton's Third Law – for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction – but also in how the pen is entangled with myriad other beings in any given situation, whether a human is presently engaged or not: the page beneath it, the butterfly that lands on it, or the swarm of photons diffusing around it. If only humans could act, then nothing would happen beyond what we graciously permit. Yet trees fall in forests and bears do what they please in the woods, without any need for human agents to manifest them into reality through intentional observation or thought.

This balancing of us clever humans with the many behavioural or inanimate objects of the cosmos has occasionally led OOO into the charge of 'panpsychism': suggesting that it projects human features too deeply into the nonhuman sphere, ignorant of distinctions between the two.[27] Yet while the pen may well act upon the human as they do upon it, this is not to suggest that it can do so consciously: '[P]rojecting mind into matter, or calling matter the root of mind, are equally miserable options,' writes Harman. 'Both take the lazy approach of reducing one realm to another.'[28] His aim is not to raise all nonhuman objects 'up' to our elite realm of existence, nor to lower ourselves 'down' to theirs. Rather, it is to suggest that no such fundamental distinction exists. Human cognition is no different in kind from the physical relation between pen and paper.[29]

In this way, 'agency' can be seen as a paradigm for various dualities straining upon the flat ontology of OOO, those of: mind and matter; subject and object; nature and culture; and human and world. These dualities inherently split the ontology into two distinct realms with active agents in one, and passive things in the other. And it is the typical anthropocentric definition of agency – again, 'events caused by acts of mind or will or intention' – that is classically employed to determine which entities are permitted access into our privileged reality. 'We expect rocks to play their part,' writes Morton, 'which is to say, be totally passive. We're the top, they're the bottom and we expect them to stay that way.'[30] Yet the level playing field of OOO calls any such hierarchy into question. We are all objects.

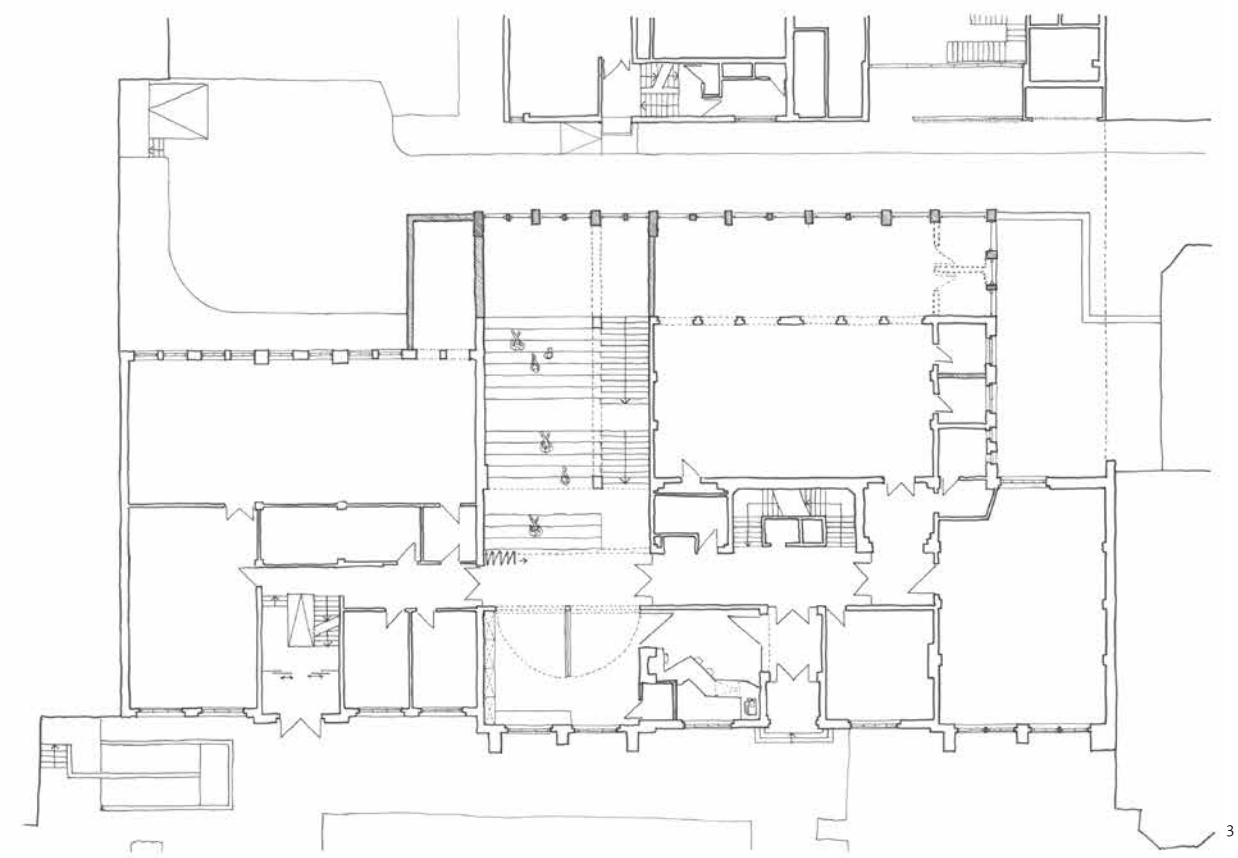
On the other hand, if the flat ontology of OOO is sincerely flat, where rocks act no less than humans do, then it does little to acknowledge any fundamental differences between the many beings of the cosmos. It is to treat all things in the same way, ultimately offering a curious starting point for philosophy but a disappointing finish.[31] While it may well be a beneficial move in terms of eradicating any such divisive taxonomies of modern philosophy – between human thought on the one hand and everything else in the universe on the other[32] – the flat ontology offers a dissatisfying lack of insight into those distinctive features between myself, the butterfly, the pen, the point, and the line, each as individual entities. I am not the butterfly. The pen is not the line.

In short, agency is unresolved within the flat ontology, either levelling out all beings to a point of equivalent banality or highlighting OOO's inability to transcend the anthropocentric dualism that formed a central tenet in its origins.[33] Agency thus foregrounds the tentative results found in grounding the flat ontology within the world it theorises over. A reconsidered formulation might thus suggest some fundamental topography, without diverting to a twofold prejudice of active versus passive. Both Bennett and Bogost broadly share this ambition. The former calls not for a perfect equality of actants, but for a polity with more open communication between members.[34] The latter poses a thought experiment that holds all things to equally exist, yet not to exist equally.[35] Not a sincerely flat ontology, nor starkly stratified, but perhaps just a little bumpy.

In this article, I will apply this object-oriented flat ontology within architectural design, borrowing from Bogost's concept of 'carpentry' in order to expand beyond the conscious realm of intellectual rumination: 'contend[ing] with […] material resistance […] making the object itself become the philosophy.'[36] In other words, this paper asks whether design is a solely anthropic endeavour. Is it possible



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3 A reimagined floorplan of the architecture school in which I work, with regulations and conventions that govern our creative efforts in drawing.

for a design to 'set itself in motion' as with Klee's active line, or must it be 'taken for a walk' by some controlling, conscious (human) instigator? What follows will offer one response: not solely 'about' design, but also through it.

## The withdrawn design

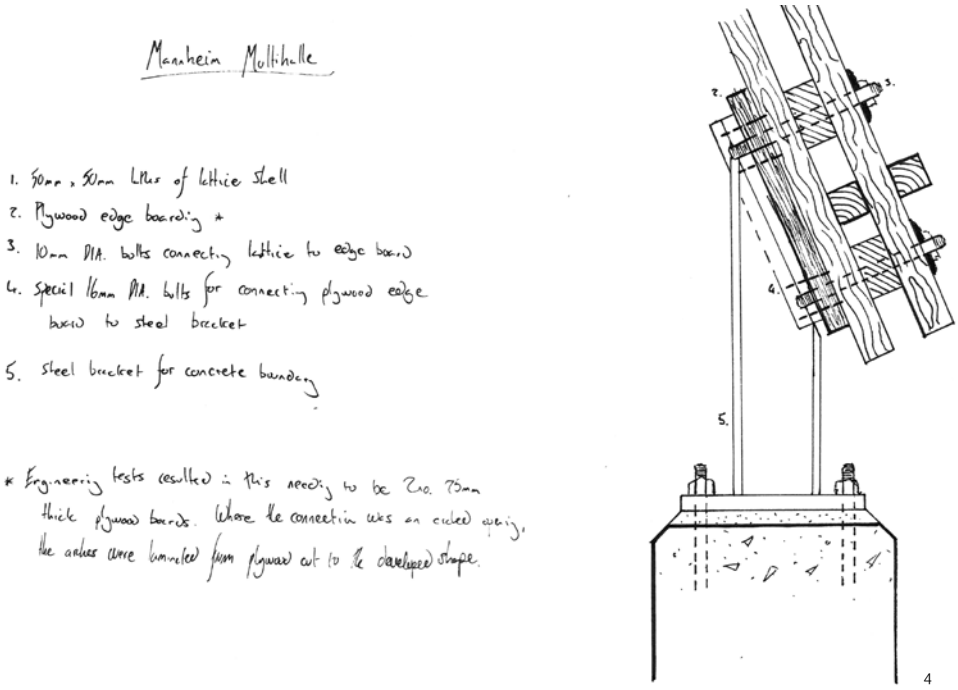
The term 'design' itself – like agency – is conventionally seen as another anthropocentric notion:[37] as 'a plan conceived in the mind.'[38] It is typically deemed to be an exclusively intentional act, where architects have the capacity for design, but pens do not. Painters, but not the canvas. Sculptors, not the stone. A long shadow cast by Aristotle's 'hylomorphism' – a division between form and matter, thinking and making – accompanied by the *Ten Books* of Vitruvius and Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, has left a lasting impression of architectural practice that suggests only those with potential 'flashes of genius' could ever possibly design.[39] Yet the bumpy ontology questions any such inherent intentionality, suggesting that pens and points might act as much as the human architect does. It queries whether Klee's wandering line is a mere passive tool, waiting for some clever human's ordered intellectual direction, or rather an active participant in the developing process itself.

In one sense, lines have specific meanings and purposes within architects' normative drawing practices. In the production of a floor plan or section, for example, a single continuous line means very little until bound with others to form a wall, a gestural door swing, or a chimney pot *[3]*. We create such 'technical drawings' with mechanical precision using set squares, rulers, and pens of fixed thickness – or a variety of CAD programs – to accurately represent the physical manifestation of a built form, whether imaginary or material.[40] The physical world is not experienced in mathematical points and precise lines, but in rough planes and edges of things with material thickness and depth. The ends of any line are thus never formally manifest in such drawing, and the line itself loses focus in favour of its function within the whole. In this sense we draw comparably to Klee's so-called 'primitive child', discovering that regulations and conventions govern our creative efforts.[41] The free motion of the line is thus subordinated to anticipation of a final effect.

To be clear: in OOO terms, an architectural design is an object like any other. It is as real a thing as the building that it typically leads toward, with its own 'ready-to-hand' being that exceeds our efforts to grasp it, understand it, or ground it on paper. And such technical drawings seek to under- or overmine the design, misfiring from its rich withdrawn reality in favour of a reductive fragmentary translation.[42] This primarily refers to drawings intended as



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4 A sketch detail analysis of the Mannheim Multihalle, designed by Frei Otto. In OOO terms, such technical drawings can be read as under- or overmining the withdrawn design-in-itself.

'information exchange', including those that constitute a tender package or project contract documents, often alongside a written specification.[43] Whether through detail sections, material elevations, site analysis diagrams or formwork sequence mapping, these drawings quite literally strip the design into what it's made from and what it does *[4]*.[44]

However, architectural drawing is not only mimetic, but projective. We design to imagine a future world, where drawing is not only used to directly represent preconceived ideas on paper, but rather to engage the architect's creative imagination. Paul Emmons writes about how such imagination is crucial for architects, helping to foresee the material and human life of the future buildings they design.[45] For him, our drawing practices facilitate such foresight: travelling into the design as if on site, forming a dialogue between drawing and drafter as a drawing continually evolves.[46] Countering the reductivism of technical description, drawing here becomes both source and record of architectural thought – a mode of active thinking, where design emerges from within. A means of designing through fictional inhabitation rather than literal explication. Such responsive, iterative, and necessarily temporal practices similarly form what social anthropologist Tim Ingold refers to as the 'textility of making'. Rather than directly replicating a preconceived idea, the 'textilic' artist follows the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being.[47]

For the object-oriented architect, this fictional projective design is a real thing. Any drawing, model, thought, or built form regarding this design will thus only ever be a shallow individual interpretation of its infinitely withdrawn being. This is not to deny these manifestations their own independent existences, but to focus on the design-in-itself as the object of contemplation for this study. The means by which we draw is metaphysically entangled within notions of understanding, imagination, and reality in design: whether reporting information about a predetermined intentional conception, or a way of thinking invested in a way of acting.[48] In the first sense we have a rather passive mode of mimetic replication. In the second we have an active moment of dialogue-driven creativity. In object-oriented terms, the former offers a 'reductive' understanding of a design through literal qualities, while the latter presents a form of textilic 'tuning' with the design as it develops.

Morton writes of tuning as a kind of living dynamic resonance between objects, which brings out some of their strange and hidden properties.[49] Such tuning here offers a route of object access which differs from our conventional knowledge-driven practices. Given that things cannot be known directly or totally, we can only ever attune to them with greater or lesser degrees of intimacy.[50] Such thinking aligns with Ingold's distinction between lines of 'navigation' and 'wayfaring'. The former involves an efficient and direct course, while the latter emphasises a sense of meditative dwelling in the world.[51] To use his illustrative examples of seafaring and shipping, the first focuses on life at sea and the second on routeing across it.[52] For Ingold, wayfaring requires a kind of melding with the world, following its ways as they open up, rather than recovering a chain of connections on a route already travelled.[53]

Klee's own documented teachings are strewn with numerous drawings exploring similar distinctions, as central considerations within his theory of form and artistic creation. His book *The Thinking Eye* – which includes his famous idea about a line going for a walk – consists of copious notes accompanied by illustrative drawings, formulating his creative insights in language. Much of this focuses on a dialectic between the static and dynamic, and active and passive pictorial elements. His 'analysis of genesis', in particular, considers a tacit balance between



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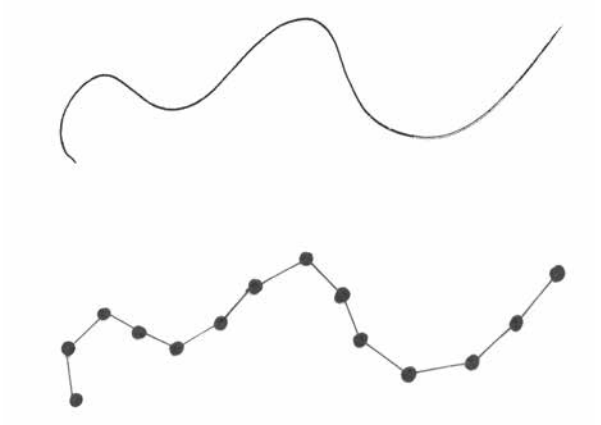
understanding and technique in representation.[54] Here he discusses variations of linear elements, two of which are reinterpreted in figure *[5]*. While both are seemingly active, the first embodies a certain duration with its dynamic, self-contained motion. It leaves an enduring trace which we are still able to read. Klee holds the second to be more like a series of appointments than a walk: where the linear tension of each active straight length is discharged between points of tension lying on the path.[55] Although born of a sequence, Ingold suggests that the second presents a determined virtual object from the start. To complete their pattern is not to join the line for a wander, but to engage in an instructed process of assembly.[56]

My proposition here is that Ingold's wayfaring, Morton's tuning, and Klee's wandering, are three sides of the same coin, so to speak. Each suggests a means of being at one with the line – or any object – rather than trying to literally understand it, explicate it, or assemble it from an epistemological distance.

Our precise and static lines of navigation, efficiency, or control neglect the potentially wondrous depth of a design's withdrawn reality, choosing instead to represent it in simplified, comprehensible qualities. They imply an element of mastery over a design: the idea that one could 'get it right', reinforcing an anthropocentric conception of agency as strictly intentional. However, if the system is dynamic, and temporal, then getting it right never stands still.[57] Wayfaring with the line, wandering alongside it, and engaging it in conversation might offer the means to reconsider agency in design: as something not just for the human drafter, but myriad actants, sentient or otherwise.

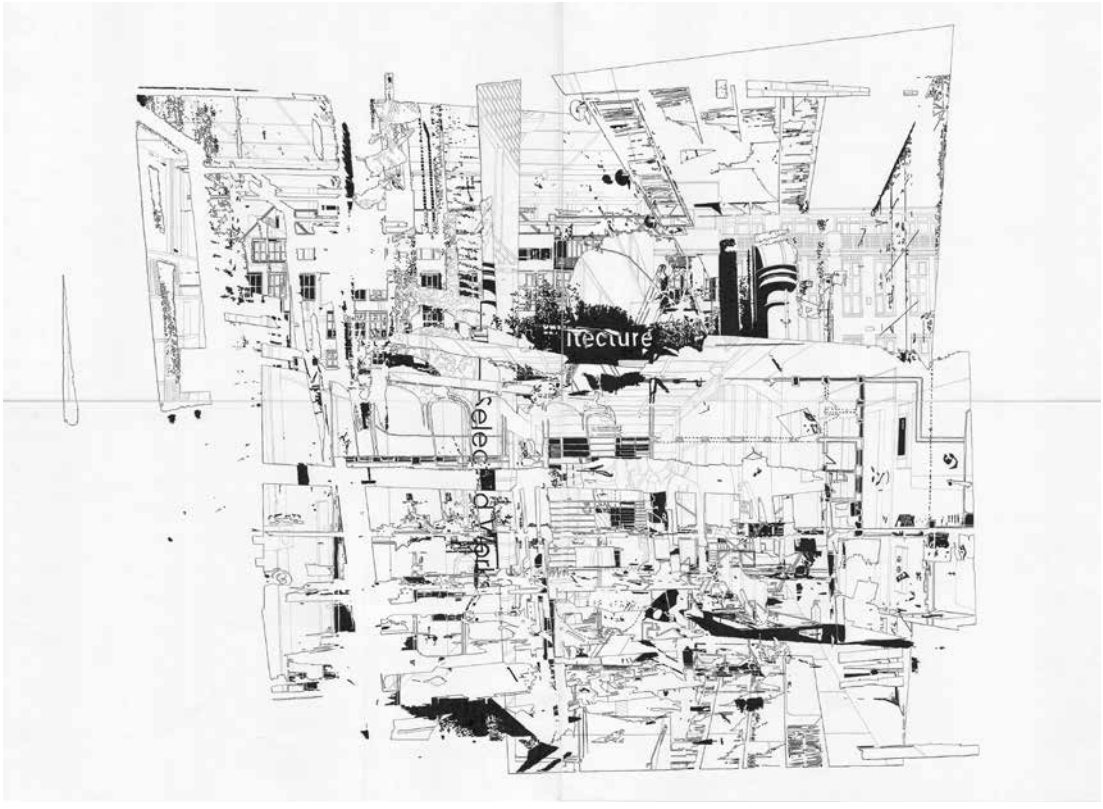
## 'Ten Years'

The drawing shown was created with such a possibility in mind *[1 refers, 6]*. It sought to limit the control of the human drafter – myself – in its production: to restrict any sense of mastery, and give space for further voices to be heard within the



5

5 Visual depiction of the distinction between Klee's lines of active self-containment, and static tension between connectors.



6

6 'Ten Years', 2023, ink on paper, 1682 x 1189mm. Visual information regarding the particular building of focus is spliced, scrambled, obstructed, and collaged as a means of limiting intentional understanding, urging a practice of 'listening' in creative drawing.



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7 The 'ghostly interaction'. Each image is clearly traceable, although with unexpected emergent qualities generated from their loose fusion.

conversation. In material terms it is a drawing made in 2Ao fineliner of the architecture school in which I currently work. Its title of 'Ten Years' is a disconcerted nod to my arrival here more than a decade prior. Yet the drawing was borne of a process inspired by Harman's tale of 'The Ferris Wheel' in *Circus Philosophicus*, where he illustrates his object-oriented philosophy with a series of mythic narratives. In this particular tale, he uses the image of an eternally revolving wheel to depict the dramatic interplay of object and network that makes up our world.[58] And his narrative offered an engaging means by which to begin developing a creative practice.

Harman's story asks us to imagine an indestructible wheel, miles in diameter, with innumerable cars hosting a curious array of things: radioactive plutonium; a molybdenum Buddha; colourful flags; and a brass band, for instance. As the wheel perpetually spins, the objects enter and exit an assortment of interactions with other beings residing outside. Some relations trigger an array of emotions, he writes, while others start riots. Some emit a deadly form of radiation, while others have little effect whatsoever. Some objects are destroyed entirely, while others sail on by without notice. But the wheel turns onwards, forever circling. The myth imaginatively illustrates how the 'events' founded in each instance of relation generate their own realities – thus being objects themselves[59] – and how the objects riding in the cars similarly emerge from their own set of constituent relations. 'No point in reality is merely a solid thing', writes Harman. 'In this respect, the cosmos might be described as a vast series of interlocking Ferris wheels.'[60]

'Ten Years' is a visual analogy of this tale. It emerges from the interaction of a series of interlocking projections. Two allegorical carousel projectors were first directed towards a shared surface, and populated with photographs containing myriad objects of varying size and complexity. Each 'slide' displayed differing aspects of this particular architecture school: a few atelier spaces; some student exhibitions; various books and magazines; a floor plan for proposed alterations which never saw the light of day; a rather short banana tree; and my individual desk from seven years ago. The projectors are allegorical through their now-digital constitution, although their function derives from a prior analogue practice. As the carousels turn, the various objects housed within are perpetually exchanged into and away from a dramatic interplay taking place on the surface before them. Each pausing moment between slide changes thus presents an assembly of ghostly interaction, with projections hovering over one another while blending into a single image: whether vibrantly overshadowing each other; standing side by side together; or delicately diffusing into one.

Each interaction forms a somewhat unpredictable emergent composite.[61] Figure *[7]* shows one such instance, comprising both a drawing of the school's rear elevation, and a photograph looking along its length. The two images are distinct and traceable, retrospectively, but with varying moments of strength and clarity. This new composite is then filtered through a '*threshold*' adjustment layer, exchanging the faded blurring of images for a stark, harshly defined silhouette *[8]*.[62] Certain features remain identifiable, such as the in-built skew of projection, or the rhythm of windows in a façade. But the clear distinction between the two no longer holds such force. Lastly, each threshold silhouette is placed over another separate image, with everything beneath then torn away and placed into an empty white space. Figure *[9]* displays one torn photograph of a central interior space, taken during a visual survey several years ago: a few larger segments have a clear external boundary, with the contained imagery interrupted only by a few isolated branches or the pattern of paving tiles; some become far more diffused, heavily fragmented by the hatched brickwork; and others are excluded entirely, beyond the bounds of the respective silhouetted outline.

Running this process three or four times, each with a different ghostly interaction and a distinct image for tearing, results in a digitally layered collage – a complex composite image. This is subsequently projected over an empty sheet of recycled cartridge paper, and traced by hand *[5]*. The interactions are

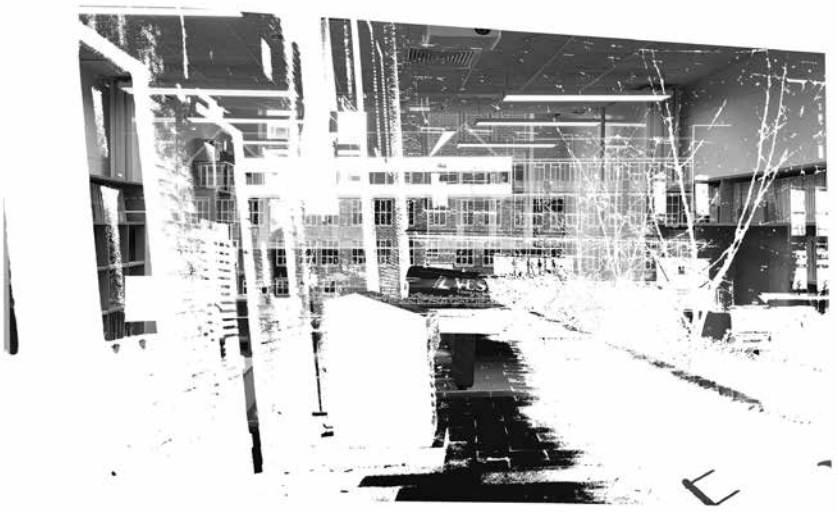


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8

8 The 'threshold silhouette'. Flattening the interaction into a single image through a binary determinate value. A traceable faded blurring exchanged for a stark geometry, still alluding to its two constituent pieces though far less coherently identifiable.



9

9 'The torn fragment'. A partial slice of a wider image, in which the previous threshold and ghostly interaction each hold presence in the fragment's determined outline. An object containing other objects.

thus documented archivally in an emergent pen drawing: numerous conversations between carousels; between silhouettes and surveys; between torn collage fragments; and between human drafter and projection. A wealth of information is weaved into the process, where some objects from the initial carousels are still recognisable within the concluded piece, while others never made it into the throws of projective relation. Some speak loudly within their interactions, with high-contrast imagery and stark, well-defined boundaries. Others whisper so quietly that it becomes difficult to know where they begin. Those toward the edges tend to find enough space to be heard with minimal interference, where others find themselves hopelessly entangled within the soupy centre of the page *[1 refers]*. While there are aspects that may be identifiable, perhaps even comprehendible, there are many which I, 'the draftsman', cannot explain.

In this way, 'Ten Years' makes use of familiar media and information typically employed within architectural design practices, centred on this particular building, including: orthographic drawings; a photographic survey; isometric strategy diagrams; and inhabited views. Yet the drawing simultaneously resists practices of direct understanding and explication of preconceived intentional thought. Someone certainly could, if they so desired, use this drawing to gain some form of knowledge about the architecture school it portrays such as some incomplete signage; several small, dispersed moments of a floor plan, or a few regular ceiling tiles. Yet 'Ten Years' was not established to provide us with 'unmediated facts' regarding this building, but rather to explore varying capacities for relation to one another. Previously clear information has here been collated, projected, filtered, torn, and interpreted: an imagined projection of the architecture school, after riding Harman's wheel.

Each step of the process became a tussle between a habitual desire to understand what I was creating, and philosophical ambitions to relinquish



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intentional control. In this sense 'Ten Years' resonates with Surrealist practices of automatic writing and the 'exquisite corpse': exploring creative processes in the absence of control exercised by reason.[63] After all, the ambition was not to derive order from a complex interrelation between beings, but to accompany the active line as it wanders: an 'intimate bond', as Ingold writes, which couples locomotion and perception in continuous exchange.[64] Rather than plotting a path from any controlling distance, 'Ten Years' required that I jump right in: guided in my motion through a topography created by the very interactions taking place before me. There was no 'view from outside' by which I could plan or predict the emergent outcome. As Morton writes, there is no 'away' that isn't merely relative to a certain position within it. We are already inescapably in.[65] As I lean into the drawing, resting my weight on the wall behind, I become an integrated component myself. The drawing and I meld together as we proceed to develop symbiotically.

Drawing in this way acknowledges sincerely the inherent role of dialogue in design, comparable to that discussed by Emmons above: as source and record of creative thought. It relies on the voice of numerous beings within the process aside from the human drafter. It also resonates with Bennett's proposition that an actant never really acts alone. Rather their efficacy always depends on the entanglement of many bodies and forces.[66] The many bodies which contribute to this dialogue are not limited to the human designer, nor even to those specific books, bananas, and buildings being represented on the page. Rather, there are always myriad beings holding sway within any interaction of the cosmos: the radiant heat of projectors on my neck while I draw; the daylight trickling through a nearby window; and even the developing drawing itself, continually luring me into different spaces through feelings of excitement, discomfort, and perplexity. There are potentially limitless beings wrapped up in this somewhat small and localised dialogue, unfolding on the wall before me.

## The thing about lines

To recognise a possibility for dialogue between drafter and drawing is to appreciate some form of power that an object can have over an intentional human. Such power is an attunement with the thing. It cannot be controlled. It cannot be dismissed as some unreal, ideological effect. It is already happening, emanating from the object.[67] This reflects Bennett's notion of 'thing-power', where she calls for the recognition of human participation in a shared vital materiality.[68] Building on Baruch Spinoza's notion of 'conatus' – as a trending tendency to persist, found in any thing[69] – she develops a similarly flat ontology through contemplation of active matter: 'not by denying humanity's awesome, awful powers', she writes, 'but by presenting these powers of our own constitution as vital materiality.'[70] Human power, for her, is itself a kind of thing-power. By embracing this idea, 'Ten Years' thus became as much an act of 'listening' as it was of 'speaking'.

Similar lines of inquiry can be found in the 'relational' or 'composite' drawings of architect and representational theorist Perry Kulper. His methods typically seek to resist 'temptations of reduction' and the ease of homogenisation in design, often employing surrealist 'automatic' practices and 'syntactical' rule sets or operational procedures.[71] His drawings for the Central California History Museum competition display a variety of collage, orthographic, perspectival, and notational graphic media, in an enigmatic yet wholeheartedly alluring form of visual thinking. They appear seemingly architectural at first glance, though ultimately demanding a different kind of examination upon reading. While not tailored toward object-oriented thought, Kulper's drawing practice offers a curious alignment through its resistance to the fixation of known figuration, and the 'thickened space of possibilities' borne of the multiple, evolving, and sometimes erratic relational ecologies developing on the page.[72] His work highlights the many potential actants to be found through unexpected relations, uncovered through the act of drawing.

Both the line and I – only two actants among many within the dialogue of 'Ten Years' – are in perpetual states of listening and speaking as the drawing emerges: every dip in the page; every split nib of the pen; every outline drawn and hatching filled; every accidental slip of the hand; and every conscious decision made. These features, among so many others, all have some form of influence within the active line and where it wanders, to varying degrees of strength. In this reading, our own role within the process shifts from being that of an overarching controller, into that of an orchestral conductor. '[F]ar from standing before us as a fait accompli, complete in itself', writes Ingold, 'each [thing] is a "going on" – or better, a place where several goings on become entwined.'[73] We too are entwined within the drawing: not simply viewing it from outside, but becoming an integral component of this gradual 'going on'.

In this way, we might consider the process – or 'event' – of drawing having agency in its own performance. It is, in the terms of OOO, an object in its own right, constituted by multiple things, including me, my pen, the point, the line, the building, the banana, and the paper. Remove any one of us and the drawing, in this very particular context, cannot take place. Yet while we are each complicit in this drawing's creation, it is itself a reality that emerges beyond us. And it is this composite event-object that emanates such power over its own ingredients. A power not present in any individual constituent alone, but one that emerges through our entwined goings on. 'Surely, neither the cat nor the flap possesses agency', writes Ingold, 'they are rather possessed by the action.'[74] This is in line with Harman's 'mereological' view of causation as vicarious: every relation forms a new object, and any object is only ever able to retroactively affect its own constituent pieces.[75]

In the object-oriented cosmos, it would thus seem that agency unfolds internally. Or in other words, any thing has agency in its own individual 'thinging'.[76] The



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very 'lining' of the line resides in the way it collectively gathers the forward motion of drawing into its gestural flourish across the page.[77] It is only as unable to go out for a walk without me, as I am unable to draw without it. This is not to suggest that all lines inherently rely on a human participant for their existence: the tunnels of an ant colony, the shape of clouds, or a continuously shifting coastline seem to do just fine on their own. Rather, it is to recognise that this particular active line, surfing its way across the page of 'Ten Years', is a real being of its own accord. A being that has truly immeasurable things within its own constitution, only one of which is me. I am but one voice within this complex wandering conversation.

Yet the coming together of beings in drawing – as in dialogue – is never a binary state of active versus passive. Anyone who has held a conversation before will recognise there is variety in the amount one listens, and the amount they speak. The best instances require sincere investment in both. Such conversational drawing is a nuanced, complex, and personally invested mode of tuning with the design, which Morton writes is a dance between completely becoming a thing, and perpetually warding off that thing.[78] Perhaps neither extreme is possible. To speak without listening would be to assume such total control of the process ourselves that we would be unable to let the line take part – for to draw in even the most navigational means would be to allow another being to enter the fray. To listen without speaking would be to have no personal involvement in the act, becoming observant bystanders rather than active participants.

In any mode of creative drawing, we are thus neither in total control nor fully absent. We dance somewhere in between. But the closer we get to 'becoming' the thing, the more intimate bond we can cultivate with its wondrously rich reality. 'Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression', writes Bennett, 'but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.'[79] If we follow these thought-worlds of objects and thing-power, it stands that such wayfaring, wandering, and dialogical drawing could offer a sense of collaboration and kinship between beings that our anthropocentric foundation of agency would simply never allow. We would thus do well to let the line wander, to empathise and resonate 'with' it, rather than try to 'control' it.

The pen and I are simply ourselves: nothing more; nothing less. We have both been sincerely possessed by the 'active line' emerging on the page before us, setting itself in motion. This line is an object, a real thing with its own reality exceeding its various pieces and effects. This does not neglect my own role within its creation, but rather seeks to shift the perspective. I am not the sole active agent within design, but merely one voice entangled within the ongoing conversation. No action is a simplistic linear progression of 'A causing B', but rather a vast and complex interplay between numerous forces beyond our reach. And to regard the line as active itself does not ask that I step away entirely, but merely encourages me to listen to the limitless other voices equally immersed in the emergent process. This synergistic, conversational foundation for agency offers a radically empathetic appreciation of the myriad real beings beyond ourselves.

The line really can 'go out' for a walk, it seems, if only we're willing to walk with it.

## Notes

1 Paul Klee, *Notebooks Volume 1: The Thinking Eye* (London: Lund Humphries, 1973), p. 105.
2 Tim Ingold relates the phrase to theories of mark making and dwelling, and Paul Emmons cites it with imaginative inhabitation in drawing. Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 72–103; and Paul Emmons, *Drawing Imagining Building: Embodiment in Architectural Design Practices* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 101.
3 Tim Ingold, 'The Textility of Making', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34 (2010), 91.
4 For one example, see Ray Lucas, '"Taking a Line for a Walk": Walking as an Aesthetic Practice', in *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, ed. by Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), p. 183.
5 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. 'agency (n.), sense II.4.', October (2023) <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7988786272> [accessed 6 November 2025].
6 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 16.
7 Klee, *Notebooks*, p. 105.
8 Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), pp. 38–41.
9 Ibid., pp. 19–24.
10 Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 93.
11 Katherine Behar, *Object-Oriented Feminism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 3.
12 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 17.
13 Graham Harman, 'The Road to Objects', *Continent*, 3:1 (2011), 171.
14 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, pp. 43–4.
15 Graham Harman, 'Undermining, Overmining, Duomining: A Critique', in *ADD METAPHYSICS*, ed. by Jenna Sutela (Aalto: Aalto University Digital Design Laboratory, 2013), pp. 43–6.
16 Not 'vorhanden', to use Martin Heidegger's terminology. See: *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp. 95–107.
17 Graham Harman, 'Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos: A New Theory of Causation', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 6:1 (2010), 3.
18 Ibid., p. 4.
19 Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2013), pp. 16–17.
20 Harman, 'Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos', pp. 3–4.
21 Ibid., pp. 11–12.
22 Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011), p. 19.



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23 Graham Harman, *Circus Philosophicus* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), p. 74.
24 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, p. 161.
25 Harman, 'Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos', p. 6.
26 Harman cites both the historic occasionalist view and the thinking of Hume and Kant, all as holding one special entity as the site of all causation. See Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, p. 55.
27 Harman, 'Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos', p. 69.
28 Ibid., p. 69.
29 Ibid., pp. 11–12.
30 Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 180.
31 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, pp. 54–5.
32 Ibid., p. 56.
33 Harman, 'The Road to Objects', p. 171.
34 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 104.
35 Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, p. 11.
36 Ibid., p. 93.
37 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. 'design (n.), sense I.1', September (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8944083446> [accessed 6 November 2025].
38 Michael Baxandall traces a resistive translation from Italian 'disegno' into English 'design', moving from an embodied metaphysical practice into a dominantly intellectual act. See: 'English Disegno', in *Words for Pictures: Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 95–7.
39 Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. by Morris H. Morgan (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), pp. 174–5.
40 Emmons notes the dominant idea of the section drawing solely as a 'technical explanation of a building's structural assembly'. See Emmons, *Drawing Imagining Building*, p. 70.
41 Klee, *Notebooks*, p. 103.
42 Or 'duo-mine', as a combined effort at both. See: Harman, 'Undermining, Overmining, Duomining', p. 46.
43 To quote terminology from the widely adopted RIBA Plan of Work. See RIBA, RIBA Plan of Work 2020 Overview (London: RIBA Publishing, 2020), pp. 38–9.
44 Harman, 'Undermining, Overmining, Duomining', p. 43.
45 Ibid.
46 Emmons, *Drawing Imagining Building*, p. 41.
47 Ingold, 'The Textility of Making', p. 97.
48 Emmons, *Drawing Imagining Building*, p. 13.
49 Morton, *Realist Magic*, p. 23.
50 Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), p. 139.
51 Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, p. 83.
52 Ibid., p. 79.
53 Ingold, 'The Textility of Making', p. 97.
54 Klee, *Notebooks*, pp. 99–100.
55 Ibid., p. 109.
56 Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, pp. 76–7.
57 Morton, *Being Ecological*, p. 207.
58 Harman, 'Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos', p. 4.
59 Ibid., pp. 4–6.
60 Ibid., p. 12.
61 Harman discusses predictability and emergence in his rejection of 'smallism'. See Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, pp. 29–33.
62 This is an inverted filter, which uses an adjustable value where all pixels lighter are converted to black, and all pixels darker are converted to white.
63 André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 26.
64 Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, p. 81.
65 Morton, *Humankind*, p. 189.
66 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 21.
67 Morton, *Being Ecological*, pp. 164–5.
68 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 14.
69 Ibid., p. 2.
70 Ibid., p. 10.
71 Perry Kulper, 'Instinctual Marks, Relational Fields, Sites of Wonder', in Nat Chard and Perry Kulper, *Pamphlet Architecture 34: Fathoming the Unfathomable* (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2014), p. 24.
72 Ibid., p. 22.
73 Ingold, 'The Textility of Making', p. 96.
74 Ibid., p. 95.
75 Harman writes: 'If we see one thing influence another, this is merely a retroactive effect of a joint object that unites the two, or once did.' See Harman, 'Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos', p. 14.
76 To use Heidegger's own terminology. Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', in *Poetry Language Thought*, trans. by A. Hofstadter (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 163–82.
77 Ingold uses the comparative analogy of a kite flying in the wind. See: Ingold, 'The Textility of Making', p. 96.
78 Morton, *Being Ecological*, p. 163.
79 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 13.

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**Competing interests**
The author declares none

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135525101425 Published online by Cambridge University Press