

DANCERS
ON A SHAKING
BRIDGE

Shveta Sarda walks with Parul Gupta through her space-drawings and the city of Delhi.

A line space (on a typewriter, typesetter, printer, or the like) is the horizontal space provided for a line of typing, typesetting, printing, etc.

Dictionary.com

Legibility is not something wrested out of a prior undifferentiated illegibility; rather, it is legibility that produces illegibility as its effect, an unacknowledged underside or shadow.

Jane Caplan, 'Sensor-Census-Censor: A Report', November 2007, Sarai-CSDS, Delhi

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The ceiling of the warehouse was high. She was a child, ye high. There were mounds of rice, mountains of them. They had a scent, a smell that saturates you. There were silos of oil, many storeys tall. When the family business crumbled, it all sold as scrap.

It's a beautiful box.

It's pencil drawing from 2012. One of these scrolls is the base drawing. From it, the other drawings expand. I told you, the family business collapsed. There were these fax rolls, and my father brought them for me. They were on my table for a long time. They're going to take a while to open.

We first saw her draw in 2012.

I had quoted Klee: 'When a line goes for a walk'. The question of what it means to inhabit a space without occupying any space came intuitively to me. I was taking drawing and space, and trying to correlate the two. I made a floor drawing, stretching black tape at angles across the short skyway-corridor that connected the two wings of the building. I wanted to try and understand what happens when everyone walks on the drawing.

There were also surreptitious lines. Open lines made deceptive by quiet, insidious lines. Lines with a calm capacity to remain unseen even in full view but beget presences that loiter.

I won't open the scroll entirely; it's too difficult and not possible. It goes like this: I start from here. Every frame is 21x21 cm, and has 21 lines. This is the first frame of the first drawing. It's horizontal lines, and slowly with each frame, the lines will keep slanting and come back to

being horizontal by the end of the drawing. In that movement a few points will come, four frames—a horizontal, the first diagonal, a vertical, the second diagonal—before they become horizontal again. Each of these frames becomes a start for another drawing, another scroll, with lines parallel to the lines of that frame, and then they too begin to turn.

I had stood at the door and looked in. She'd placed precise, fragile lines with transparent tape into a black metal frame partition in a corner of the large hall — one of the many scaffolding-like curatorial insertions emplaced for multiplying space. The transparent lines cast shadows. You could sense the shadows, but not immediately gauge what made them appear. Suddenly, in a space where you came to expect partitioning frames, the solidity of this one scaffolding-frame dissolved and released other, intangible presences. They conjured an ambiguity of numbers, sources, and direction.

It's all numbers. It's the division of a page with numbers, keeping the same number of lines all through. Paper is also space; it's a question of how I divide it. Each drawing starts from the other, but they all move in completely different, random ways, though the number of lines remains the same. Look here, it's still moving; it's moving ever so slowly from frame to frame. The viewer has to move forward and backward to make sense of what is happening. When you move a few frames, you don't immediately know the change, and you come back to see what has happened, and then you move forward again.

When it will stop, when it will crowd, when it will displace others — division is a mysterious unraveling testing limits, shape, and containment. It is a play and a threat, both thickening the visible and edging out space and all that is



in between. 'Read between the lines' is both a riddle and a reminder of its own impossibility.

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Clouds hung low; it was going to rain any moment. She went looking for some quiet to clear her mind, but the forest was thick with sound. She found an edge of a rock to sit on and look out. There was this mosquito that kept buzzing nearby somewhere. Suddenly there was silence—the deepest kind of silence—and drops of rain began falling. The forest saturated once more with noise.

It's early morning. We are standing on a bridge.

To me space is both material and canvas. Built spaces are plans by architects where we as people are always performing. At the same time, in that performance, as we move in a space, our vision doesn't go everywhere. This is a constraint but it gives us focus points. When I go into a space, I walk a lot in it. I try to

figure out how a body will move there, and how I can create realignments. Understanding how a space lets me move, I reposition that experience in varying ways, and bring in more elements. It becomes about fabricating a specific experience of space.

The Signature Bridge is a newly inaugurated, 2,214-foot, or 675 meters long, cable-stayed, asymmetrical bridge built over eight years across Delhi's river Yamuna. It's been widely reported that people climb the suspension cables to take selfies. They strip and dance on the bridge; the videos go viral. They park everywhere, and refuse to follow one-way rules. A biker's foot caught in a stray wire from a streetlight as he sped through the bridge while taking a selfie. It was a terrible accident.

Beams, columns, white paint — spaces have a language; there are similarities. I try to read what if one thing is taken from one space, and into another. I showed you this work in which I put a photograph of one place inside another place — it didn't look like it has come from another space; the spaces merged. Then I extended a line from inside the photograph, out into the space, so it forms something else

Durational Drawing II, 2017
Ink on Archival Paper



entirely. These are experiments to understand how a line leaves paper, and leaps into space.

The bridge shakes with every passing vehicle. We watch two-wheelers and four-wheelers, private cars and goods carriers, slow down and stop by its railing, and people step out to look around and to pose for selfies. It's nearer the morning rush hour now than when we stopped, and the sound of traffic has increased.

Every space has a particular language and character. I try and build something through that character. How the body feels somewhere is important to me, not only what I see. This is a first time on this bridge for us both, and we've been standing here and talking for over an hour. The constant shaking defines the experience of this bridge to me. If I have to draw now, I will start from this. Maybe all thought starts from moments of shaking of the world. Solidity does not impress me.

A line is not only an expressive wonder but also a threat. When lines criss-cross, get mixed, and you can't figure out what's behind, it also produces an occlusion. A bridge joins but perceptually astonishes.

Have you seen children draw? They draw outlines. Even when making human forms, they make outlines. I follow the same principle sometimes. If a space is full of things, I have, on occasion, given the things outlines and the space becomes its own illustration, as if. It's a way to make space habitable and mysterious at the same time. A bridge is like a line. A line makes space infinite. A constant movement along a line is never-ending. A line itself is never ending; it moves in both directions. Standing here, on this bridge, you can sense this wonder.

When you walk under the suspension cables, it feels like lines falling. Moving on the bridge is like moving between infinity and an imminent crash.

She had come back after her Masters. Things had shifted; she was a painter before.

See that portrait of mine? I made it when I was going through my divorce. I was very angry. I got divorced, started studying. I was documenting my hair fall. It's where I started wondering what are these lines. I didn't see them as hair; they were organic lines. I started thinking of them in comparison to mechanical lines a hand can make — a straight line.

A line is also a faultline. A hairline is also a way in which fractures are described.

Line for me is not an end in itself; it is material to build on the kind of experience I want to create. It's not the end, but a way in which I approach what I want to do. I relate with it instantly, I connect with it. I use this material so often that it talks about itself in a lot of ways. When I draw a square, it too is made of lines. I follow lines into space. In space there are straight lines and structures.

In the thousands of lines that you make, is there not a single line which is 'not that'?

I've practiced it so much, each line becomes a carbon copy of the other.

And sometimes it literally is a carbon copy.

Yes, but also the focus should not be on the line itself but on what I'm trying to create with it. It is a material for me, comes easy to me. Even when I made this portrait, it was done in lines.

But this line in the corner is different.

I was interested in perspective and the illusion of perspective, and perspective is about illusion. I take joy in creating a disoriented space. Like a recent work I made in an elevator, which is a very difficult space because it doesn't hold people for long. But it's a space of

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Site Specific – Outline Drawing, 2016
Black Paint on Wall

purpose, where I can't add too much space, or delete space from it. I tilted a wall. So one wall, four points, I pulled one point out, and now it's not 90 degrees. So when you enter it, there is something askew. One wall is so askew it looks like it will fall.

It becomes a vectorial force. It is no longer inert.

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While drawing in a large space, time emerges as a latent presence. I was working from 10 to 5 each day for 10 days. I was making lines. It leads to thinking about labour, specifically labour that goes into making a work. Labour is challenging work for the body.

Like a workday? A day of only making lines?

The work ended on the tenth day at 5 PM. The only guideline was to make straight lines. If while making, some forms came into my conscious and subconscious mind, then that was ok. I'm not consciously thinking a lot. Just making lines. When you're making, as a mechanical process, you can't think at the same time, at least I can't. I had to depend a lot on my habit of drawing lines. The main idea was to sense a time of making inside a space. The idea of the work is to challenge the body as machine — what does it mean to hand-draw something that looks so decidedly non-hand drawn. Without taking many breaks while making the drawing, the body is programmed to mark repeated lines where both body and mind are engaged, moving in methodical, rhythmic motion.

How many lines do you think there are in this?

Don't ask. So this drawing is almost 24 feet long, but I calculate it as 10 days. It's not possible to know the number.

But you are working on numbers as an idea?

I showed a work in the India Art Fair. I cut the drawing into five. It was drawn as one drawing, but I cut it into five parts, with each part

a legitimate drawing. The idea was to think through the process of sale, resale, and commissions that runs the art market. When you buy property, it can always go to resale. As artists we don't know where our work goes. I wanted to make it a little difficult. So each collector gets part of the work — each can only buy one part of the work. I used the documentation of the work, via a video of the making of the entire work, and each time the work is shown, it has to be with the video.

So they see other parts of the work, they see the whole work being made, but they can own only a fragment of the work. Never fully graspable, always incomplete.

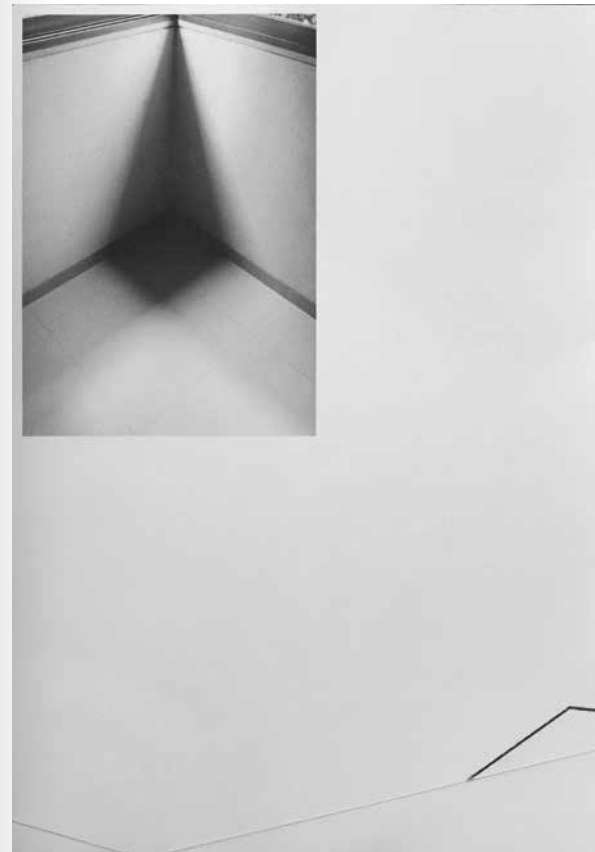
Yes, but nothing sold! I keep trying to create a drawing with the idea of erasure. Whoever sees the drawing will retain it in memory, but that's it. I haven't done so much work in this direction yet. I have some ideas that work on erasure. I'm thinking of working with dancers. I did try an experiment at the Kiran Nadar Museum in Delhi, though it's not recorded in any way. Three people look intently at one another, forming three points of a triangle, with their glancing at each other forming the tension of the lines, and then they change the direction of their look, changing the direction of the movement of the triangle. I want to do this exercise with dancers.

Dancers work so much with an embodied memory. Do you ever work from memory into a space?

I don't want to make any work that has a certain quality of emotion to it. I rarely work with colour, because colours bring emotions, sometimes nostalgia. I only want to work with cognition and perception. Emotions bring an overload of histories and baggage. My attempt is to stay close to the experience of the body, personal and always unraveling.

Light from the sun takes eight minutes to reach us. At a cosmic scale then, there is a sense that light has already been cast before it is seen, or every moment is a presence with both anticipation and a rehearsing.

Extending the line - Drawing #2, #9
Oil pastel and digital print on Hahnemuehle paper, 2013
21cm x 29.7cm



Of course there is pre-knowledge. That corner work I showed you, which is one simple thread and one shadow on one side, I spent almost a week to just reach there, to those two lines. Sometimes there are massive calculations that I do, to reach a point of precision.

What comes to your mind when you think of a zebra crossing?

I have to be there to figure it out. Where it is, what the other elements surrounding it are, who are the people crossing it. Crossings become important here, more than the stripes of the zebra.

You are relocated, and there is a relocation you do, with each line you draw. A dancer will have a repertoire of movements, ways in which they perceive their body, but when the movement is performed, the relocation cannot be without its own measure, its own history, and its memory. Interruptions and interferences will happen. We are always making crossings. A body at a crossing anticipates, and has already rehearsed, the traffic, its structure, and its randomness.

It's like working on a skewed graph paper. A skewed grid is a beautiful starting point. I made a square out of it. It was a very elegant and expressive square. I need planes to play with. Landscapes, for instance, are without constraint and structure. They have to yield planes for me to work them. In a residency in Goa, when I looked out of the window, there was a forest and, framed by the windows, it was almost like a painting. It was as if I was being pulled in to draw on this painting with my lines.

It's very meditative.

I was observing how light falls. It's such conditions of space that make me sit in a space for hours. I have to expunge all my preconceived ideas. I move around, I touch. All these works, once arrived at, are very simple to look at, but it takes a long process to create them.



Site Conditioned #10
Permanent color markers on fishnet wires
on window grill, 2017