

# Contemporary Drawing Seen Through the Prism of Artistic Techniques and Conservation Problems

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Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the use of the term “drawing” corresponded to a practice and creation that was more or less defined by its functions and materials; classifying a work of art as painting, sculpture, drawing or print was therefore essentially a straightforward affair. But the transformations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have totally revolutionised these traditional concepts. The evolution of fundamental concepts and artistic practices have provoked an explosion of these notions without a new terminology coming into being to define the richness and variety of the new artistic offerings. The word “drawing”, for instance, appears far more restrictive with regard to a multifaceted reality that is constantly evolving, and is inventive, open to influence and stimulating for the spirit and sensitivity.

Logically, the definition of a contemporary drawing should identify all current drawn art. However, the idea of “contemporary art” often refers to an avant-garde art that claims a break with so-called traditional forms. We might ask ourselves what, then, are the (chronological, historical or technical) criteria distinguishing traditional art from the contemporary? Can we, therefore, simply reduce “contemporary drawing” just to the existence of innovative artistic techniques? Does the conservation and restoration of this artistic heritage constitute a new field of specialisation justifying the creation of a new professional profile? Does the vast area of research into the restoration of contemporary art systematically oblige us to call into question the code of ethics of the restorer’s profession?

Through a global approach, the present article will make it possible to outline drawing as it is today within a precise historic context, as well as underline some conservation problems relative to the artistic technique and the reading or form of the work. It will also invite the observer to look beyond the simple technical characteristics to try and find a global definition for a contemporary artistic practice that is often given scant consideration in training and in important conferences dedicated to restoring contemporary art.

## Autonomy in drawing

During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of drawing—as is true of many other art forms—underwent great change and attained what art historians unanimously define as a status of perfect “autonomy”. A fundamental discipline taught in art schools, drawing passed from a condition of being a sketch, a preparatory study, to one of creative autonomy, revolutionising the classifications, and diversifying techniques and supports. Two factors helped modify this new consideration of drawing: recognition of the aesthetic value of the unfinished and of sketches, and the inventions of lithography, a technique of mechanical reproduction that led to the spread of “printed drawings” into everyone’s home.

Traditionally associated with preparatory work, drawing was for a long time relegated to a marginal phase in the production of a work. Even though drawing did not have to wait until the 20<sup>th</sup> century to receive full recognition of its artistic value (the collections formed in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are proof of this), it is nevertheless significant that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new way of considering the practice of drawing developed, enabling artists like Robert Longo, Nancy Spero, Marcel van Eeden, Sandra Vasquez de la Horra and others, who worked almost exclusively with drawing, to attain a success and status comparable to those of a painter or sculptor.



The use of paper began to change towards the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving its traditional field, changing from a simple support for studies or sketches to form the basis for an autonomous work, at times appearing torn, burnt, folded, perforated, twisted or scraped. In particular, it is important to remember the example of Robert Rauschenberg, who, in 1953, acquired a drawing by Willem de Kooning and erased it out of his own work in *Erased De Kooning Drawing*. The artist went beyond the transformation of the work: making De Kooning's drawing disappear is a metamorphosis more than a gesture of rejection of the past. This sacrilegious "cancellation" calls into question the sacred nature of the work of art; despite this, the eraser is not able to cancel out everything, and the drawing survives and contributes to the creation of a new status for the work of art on paper, thereby becoming one of the symbols of a new approach with art and creation.

The division into major families of artistic techniques here below aims to give an idea of the great changes and numerous re-definitions that drawing has undergone since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. We start with collage, which is often seen as one of the principle unorthodox productions of drawing, followed by a succession of inventions that run counter to a traditional use of graphic techniques.

## Collage

The generic term of collage includes various forms that range from *papier collé* to photo-montage and from cut-out paper to the assembly of various overlaid materials on top of more traditional artistic techniques. This artistic technique was fundamental for Cubism for a certain period and is an invention of the draughtsman. The format, the tools, the light, flexible materials and the rapid work recall the world of the draughtsman, who would henceforth need not only paper, but also scissors and glue.

The invention of collage is generally associated with the *papiers collés* of the Cubists<sup>1</sup>. The collages made by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, full of apparently arbitrary forms cut out from newspapers, wallpaper, packets of cigarettes or labels from bottles, thrust us brusquely into the noisy and untidy intimacy of simple things. The collage does not try to depict or reproduce the world, but seeks to make us feel its energy and reveal its functioning through the use of cut-out, ripped-out and glued materials that beforehand were usually relegated to the world of applied arts, industry and everyday life. This practice thus introduces some decisive formal changes, exploding words and encouraging a play with materials, surfaces, space and colours. A preference for industrial products also emerged, the preparation of which required no intervention on the part of the artist. These early trials very quickly led to immense, unexpected consequences. And installations today could not exist without collage.

While Cubist collages used the most commonplace materials to rediscover the simplest and most objective reality, and while Dadaist collages sought to dismantle this same reality with irony, Surrealist collage draws us into the fantastic, especially with Max Ernst. During the Forties, collages of cut-out paper enabled Henri Matisse, with a single gesture, to effect a synthesis in which the work of the draughtsman, sculptor and painter all blended. With the apparently incoherent images applied to paper, instead, Rauschenberg presented the election of John F. Kennedy and uprisings of Afro-American ghettos on a single support, demonstrating a critical and committed view of reality.

When collage no longer makes use of images, it can then form an abstract, poetic or conceptual reality, as in the collages of Alighiero Boetti and Erik Dietman, who assembled heteroclitic materials<sup>2</sup> (pencil, ink, varnished oak leaf, button, cork letters, letter paper, lettraset letters, plasticine, cotton and razor-blade).

Collage can present all the problems encountered in restoring contemporary art because of the multiplicity of materials used for its realisation: materials that are at times ephemeral or incompatible (such as paper and metal, for instance)<sup>3</sup>, printed illustrations, stamps, lots of rapid-drying adhesives that facilitate rapid work but remain visible because they have oozed out or been laid irregularly, or with the presence of

self-adhesive tape that becomes hard and friable over time. The glue in the tape migrates into the work and stains it, while losing its adhesive power and weakening the cohesion of the assemblage, to the point that there may be some losses of material.

## Transfers

Frottage, prints, transfers, samplings, erasures, etc. All these techniques require a single or multiple approach and reveal a material, an image or a volume. Thus, in the Twenties, Max Ernst depicted the trees of a forest by rubbing over sheets of paper placed on his parquet with a pencil, Pierre Alechinsky produced rubbings of manhole covers, unique images bearing witness to the artist's visit to a town or country. Using commercial rubber stamps instead, different artists, like Fernand Léger, Arman, Louis Cane and Alighiero Boetti, communicated the pleasure of compulsively multiplying an inked form or form on a sheet of paper.

With these techniques, starting from a known reality, emerged a series of other images generated by the automatism of gesture that liberates an inner vision which, according to the Surrealists, could be attributed to the unconscious. The prints, rubbings, transfers and erasures, render an image tangible and reveal the voluntary and involuntary roots of the creation.

The great difficulty in the conservation of these works derives from the identification of objects, forms, stamps and tools used to create the images, which often leave reliefs, undulations, irregularities and accumulations of pigment requiring a careful study of the work together with considerable research to identify the origins<sup>4</sup>, a source of information on the artist's world and his oeuvre. The work becomes a bas-relief whose surface, recto and verso, is rich in clues and traces that cannot and must not be reduced or cancelled out by a generalised treatment or heavy-handed smoothing.

## Maltreatment

Torn, dirty, ripped, burned, pierced, paper underwent a widespread and broad range of unusual and innovative interventions around the Fifties. While the torn sheets of Hans Arp may be considered forerunners of this trend, it is important to observe how artists of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made this "maltreatment" a point of reference, creating a new relationship with the supports. The works of artists like César, Arman, Raymond Hains, Mimmo Rotella, Lucio Fontana and Marcel Duchamp clearly reveal this: the support becomes a battlefield.

On the one hand we see the maltreatment of the support in such an artist as Fontana, who would slash or pierce the canvas or paper in a random fashion to create spatial concepts suggesting free space, or in Cai Guo-Qiang and Arienti, who instead worked on the support, burning it to create images with gunpowder in the first case, and with a heated metallic point and flame in the second. On the other hand, there is the maltreatment of an image to create a new one, as in the case of the "arracheurs d'affiches" in Nouveau Réalisme in which artists like Hains and Jacques Villeglé reveal out-of-date information, sedimented images and patches of colour by tearing and stripping the various layers of overlaid advertising posters, creating a new relationship with the work, with the city of that period, which becomes tentacular, dominated by the economy and by the new culture of communication.

Naturally, these works present artistic traces that can be compared to the commonplace accidental deterioration of paper. And this is the nub of the problem: how to understand where the deliberate deterioration stops and the accidental, evolutionary one begins? Would it be better to fix the fragments of burnt paper or let them fall? These are the most common, but not the only questions we ask ourselves before a restoration of this type of work which requires deep knowledge of the artist's work and a perfect documentation of the state of conservation if one is to restore it properly.

Likewise, we need to make use of the artist's archival images so as to be able to trace the evolution of



the support and technique. In doing this, we also set up the means to identify any problem of deterioration that could emerge in future.

## New materials

A study<sup>5</sup> effected of 20,000 drawings in the Musée National d'Art Moderne (MNAM) Centre Pompidou revealed that 99% of them are on paper.

However, the existence of new supports cannot be denied. Sheets of plastic used as a support are typical of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup> and raise some fresh questions for conservation professionals on both the historical and technical level. The terminology used to define them (Celluloid, Folex<sup>®</sup>, polyester paper, synthetic transparency, acetate, tri-acetate, etc.) indicates the confusion that exists in just the field of identification<sup>7</sup>.

These supports raise numerous questions touching on the understanding of the deterioration (fig. 32) and restoration strategies to adopt. Preventive and curative conservation of these supports remains a relatively undeveloped field both in terms of the indicators of deterioration and of maintenance, cleaning, flattening and consolidation. Given the specific nature of the chemical and physical characteristics involved, the conservation of these materials requires the definition of a new professional profile specialising in plastics<sup>8</sup>.

Today's artistic techniques present a less clear-cut reality. Some have always existed but have undergone some transformations during their history. Just as the pencil (leadpoint) used by the Romans and Egyptians has nothing in common with the sort used today, which is made of a mix of powdered graphite and clay. And the binders used in watercolours and tempera paints differ according to whether made industrially or by hand. These modifications form part of the history of these technique, developments typical of each period and of the use made of them by each artist. Overall, these techniques do not present the complicated problems of conservation thrown up by the techniques of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; this certainly depends on their use since antiquity, which has enabled time and history to be selective and researchers to find answers and solutions to the problems raised.

20<sup>th</sup>-century art has seen the arrival of a large number of new techniques and materials, including acrylic and vinyl paints, ball-point pens<sup>9</sup>, felt-tip pens<sup>10</sup>, stickers and correcting fluids (although these last two are rarely used singly). Although they have not long been around, these techniques already reveal some instability and new problems might emerge in future. Some research has been done in recent years to characterise these techniques and evaluate the impact of the restoration options. While the research into acrylic emulsions seems well advanced, the study for the definition<sup>11</sup> and potential stabilisation or restoration of ball-points and felt-tip pens (fig. 33) have given few results in conservation terms. Here, therefore, are some research projects worth developing to learn more about these materials, to determine the causes and mechanisms of deterioration and establish strategies of conservative treatment, although the fact of their being historically close to the moment of production perhaps makes it hard to distinguish what is a characteristic from what should instead be considered an alternation.

Here, the difficulty seems to be of another nature compared to that concerning the support: while the modification of traditional techniques seems to have been absorbed and accepted by history, the new techniques raise the question of the characteristics to be conserved, given that some deliberate or unforeseen alterations that succeed in stabilising may be considered characteristics of the technique itself, as in the case of the *cracquelure* of some paints and the yellowing of some papers.

## Format

Large-format works<sup>12</sup>, solo or made of a series of small drawings creating a single work or marked by the absence of a frame are typical features of contemporary drawing. Although not exclusive to this period, they

do help set it apart from drawing in other periods. The production of large formats noticeably increased from 2000 to 2009, during which almost a third of drawings exceeded 120 cm per side.

Large-format drawings can be framed or freely placed on the wall; in both cases, there are advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, the frame on a large-format drawing protects the work and enables handling without direct contact with the support, but it can be extremely heavy, difficult to transport and require some study of the stability of the materials used, of the rigidity of the work itself and of the hermetic and damp-resistant nature of the work/frame whole, not to mention the wish of some artists who see the frame as a traditional form of display limiting the perception of the drawing.

On the other hand, there are also simpler systems for hanging, the most important of which is the use of drawing pins and pins generally (fig. 34). This is a cheap and simple system to use, easily adapted to the various exhibition rooms: it conserves the lightness of the paper, creates a continuity between drawing and wall, frees the work from the constraints of the frame.

However, this type of display can lead to tears, loss and deformation, rendering any handling more hazardous, especially in the case of large-format works, which are often stored rolled up. Without the protection of the frame, the drawings are exposed directly to light, dust, gaseous pollutants, contact with the wall (an unknown quantity as regards the quality and type of paint used), as well as those acts of vandalism that contemporary art sometimes attracts.

Large-format works need consideration and solutions that can adapt to each specific case, in some cases modifying the traditional mounts on neutral card and hinges in Japanese paper. Other lighter and easy-to-use techniques (Ivyek<sup>®</sup>, magnets, Velcro<sup>®</sup>, etc.) can also be used, giving a preference to mounts allowing for the slight variations in size of paper and so limiting tensions. The mounting must be associated with a precise protocol accompanying the work from when it leaves storage to hanging, and which covers display conditions, removal from display and return to storage.

## Off the sheet

Traditionally, and in particular in museums, a drawing is often identified as a "work on paper". And even though history contradicts this limiting definition, it is interesting to note how many comments and discussions on the graphic arts lead to the "departure from the paper sheet" that supposedly developed only with contemporary drawing. This transformation raises evident questions not only for the restoration of these works but also for the definition of new areas of collecting. Bernice Rose<sup>13</sup> is certainly one of the first to note this phenomenon as a characteristic of contemporary drawing. However, by leaving its traditional support, contemporary drawing paradoxically renews techniques that have been forgotten in the West for some time: it has rediscovered skin, the wall and sand, which become the new receptacles of lines and curves.

A drawing effected directly on the wall, generically called "wall drawing" is a common practice and its administration can present some problems for long-term conservation. Wall drawings are often distinguished by the simplicity of the technique, the lightness of its forms, the work in a relatively undefined space, its integration with the architecture and the use of a wall that is often white.

Thus, since a wall drawing is often temporary, the problems of conservation are limited, even though one must record the *modus operandi* in a certificate or contract linking the work to the subject, be it public or private, that wishes to include it in its collections<sup>14</sup>. The fragile, spontaneous aspect of a wall drawing, together with the artistic technique frequently used in these cases (graphite, charcoal, ball-point pen) recalls graffiti, which wall drawing resembles in nature and which makes a "vandalistic" intervention, at times hard to see quickly.

It is different when the wall drawing produced by an artist is a permanent work. Its conditions of



conservation and display cannot be the same as for a framed drawing as the space of a wall drawing is not always clearly delineated, and can sometimes be in spaces such as a corridor or stairwell, in which lighting must be at a high level for reasons of safety. It is indispensable that any institution wishing to include a wall drawing in its collections consider the various possibilities and parameters of conservation and choose documentation as the sole form of conservation.

After presenting an enormous wall drawing at the São Paulo Biennale of 2004, Brazilian artist Paulo Klimchauska succeeded in dismantling the drawing in fragments and displaying it to the public once more mounted on green or pink panels (the colours of Mangueira, the artist's favourite samba school), thus giving the drawing a second life.

Skin offers a number of ways to draw on other than a sheet of paper; artists like Jean-Luc Verna, Wim Delvoye (fig. 35) and Mike Giant have introduced tattooing into the world of art by offering drawings realised in line with tribal and popular styles, adopting a bewildering iconography in which death and eroticism are omnipresent. Wim Delvoye in particular produced a tattoo on Tim Steiner's back (fig. 36) which was then sold—the tattoo, that is—to a collector authorised to display the tattoo on the bearer's back three times a year, with the right to resell it and to recover the tattooed area of skin after Tim's death.

Leaving aside the media buzz—that was deliberately sought-after and achieved—this action raises some interesting questions. Can the human body become a support for art recognised by the art market and, in the future, by institutions too? And what is the position of the person's dignity in all this? After Tim Steiner's death, can his family require the return of the whole body as increasingly occurs with regard to human remains in museums (Maori heads, Hottentot Venus: "Sarah Saartje" Baartman, Mexican mummies, etc.) invoking the right to human dignity?

## Animation

Animated drawing constitutes a creative area at the confluence of various forms of history, drawing, cinema, video-art and performance, revealing the intrinsic relations between drawn forms and animated ones, and vice versa.

A series of video-performances by Dennis Oppenheim, *3 Stage Transfer Drawing*, 1971, is central to any reflection about animated drawing in the current reality. In the videos, one can see the artist using a felt-tip pen to draw on his daughter's back, who in turn repeats her father's gestures on the back of her brother, who finally repeats the drawing on a sheet of paper on the wall. Each child tries to recall the feeling of the marks made by the felt-tip pen to repeat the composition, and the final drawing on paper is the culmination of a process that insists on the dimension of gesture and the sensitivity of the line.

Other artists, like William Kentridge and Hans op de Beek, draw their animated drawing by experimenting personally with the animation, plunging the observer into a state of poetic meditation.

## Conclusions

Contemporary drawing can do without paper and pencil and take the form of a line traced out on trodden-down grass (Richard Long), a continuous line kilometres-long (Piero Manzoni), a cut (Fontana), an embroidery (Ghada Amer), shadows (Amparo Sard), patches of blood and sperm (Jan Fabre), solid or liquid faecal matter (Chris Ofili) or sewn hair (Sebastien Bruggeman). Contemporary drawing has transformed itself into a whole creative field and has become an independent, autonomous field for creativity; the study made confirms this and enables us to say that the criteria of support, format and technique certainly make it possible to organise its conservation but give no precise idea of its specificity.

The collection of examples discussed show that artists have over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century radically transformed the practice of drawing. The supports have broadened to include sheets of plastic and new

artistic techniques have appeared, presenting new problems of conservation, to the point that it now seems indispensable and even urgent to assure an assiduous, constant collaboration in this field between scientific researcher, art historians, artists and specialists in preventive and curative conservation.

The cases of intangible works<sup>15</sup> or linked to the discussion that installations create with time, space and variability of any re-installations, concern wall drawing above all which is often, however, an ephemeral, allographic work. There are few examples of problems associated with technological obsolescence as occurs with works based on the digital world, or images integrated with technological devices. This family of works could develop over the next few years and might make use of the methodological approaches and research already under way in the fields of video-art and performance.

To end, it seems important to recall that the statistical studies effected are representative of a museum situation in which the acquisition of a work of art must accord with the museum's acquisitions policy and be filtered by the curators, restorers and acquisitions committee. It is legitimate to ask whether in that case a collection is truly representative of the creative artistic world and of the art market, or whether there is a gap between artistic production and the constitution of a cultural heritage. In other words, does everything that is art today become cultural heritage tomorrow?



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<sup>1</sup> The genealogy of the use of collage is attributed to Picasso who made repeated use of it in 1912, but the technique of collage deserves to be considered in a broader context than that of Cubism alone. Collage associated with graphic art-forms was widely utilised in Dadaist contexts, as shown by the works of Hannah Höch, Victor Brauner, Kurt Schwitters and Max Ernst.

<sup>2</sup> The term "mixed media" is frequently used to define an identified artistic technique, but for an art restorer the term is wholly meaningless and leaves an enormous gap needed to classify a work of art, in order to understand the properties of the materials used and to have an idea of the universe and poetic environment of each artist.

<sup>3</sup> The presence of metal on paper presents problems of conservation similar to those raised by iron gall inks, in which the presence of the iron amplifies the two mechanisms of deterioration typical of cellulose: oxidation and acid hydrolysis.

<sup>4</sup> Through scientific and historic research, contacts with the artist or with his / her assistants and a in depth discussion with the client or the curator.

<sup>5</sup> The study was realised using a simple statistical method derived from the table by Carl Drott. The table makes it possible to define the level of reliability of statistics: the interval of confidence of margin of error and size or numerosness of the sample. The level of reliability chosen was 95% with a confidence level of  $\pm 3\%$ .

<sup>6</sup> Although cellulose nitrate appeared around 1856.

<sup>7</sup> Some national and international research, together with training courses are creating an interesting development in the study of plastics.

<sup>8</sup> The situation might be compared to the development of the role of the restorer of photographs or of ethnographic material 30 years ago.

<sup>9</sup> The first patent for a ball-point pen, the "style", was registered but expired without being used in 1939 by John J. Loud, who sought a system for marking leather. In 1938, the Biro brothers, Hungarian immigrants in Argentina, developed a new point comprising a sphere that turns freely within a small socket and which, on rolling, carries the ink from a cartridge to the paper. After perfecting its functioning, they sold it in 1943 under the name of Birome, which is still used in Argentina. A pirate copy of the Birome was launched in 1945 under the name of Reynolds Rocket, for \$12.50 by the Reynolds International Pen Company. A certain Marcel Bich bought the patent from the Biro brothers and managed to make a 50 cent pen and launched it in 1950 under the Bic brand, and called the Cristal.

<sup>10</sup> The *Kaweko signier*, the first felt-tip pen in history, was made in Japan in 1911, but was only sold on a mass basis from the Forties onwards.

<sup>11</sup> Undertaken above all in the field of criminal investigations and published in the *Journal of Forensic Science*, the main aim of which was to put science at the service of the law.

<sup>12</sup> The frontier between medium-sized and large formats is fixed at A0 (a standard format of 1 m<sup>2</sup> measuring 841 x 1189 mm ISO 216 does not foresee any standard format larger than A0). From this size upwards, any handling becomes more complicated and requires the assistance of a second person. Storage of these works, whether framed or rolled, demands thinking as to its administration, handling and manner in which they are to be displayed.

<sup>13</sup> *Drawing Now* (New York: MoMA, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> An interesting example is the project of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, where an exhibition of Sol Lewitt's wall drawings has been installed. The exhibition has enabled the publication of the catalogue of drawings and describes the use of materials, drawing techniques and information needed for future installations. The conservation has been organised by Yale University Art Gallery, where a restorer of graphic art is responsible for training the future installers of the artist's wall drawings.

<sup>15</sup> For the moment, there is only one definition of intangible heritage, ratified on 17th October 2003 at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris: "The 'intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity."



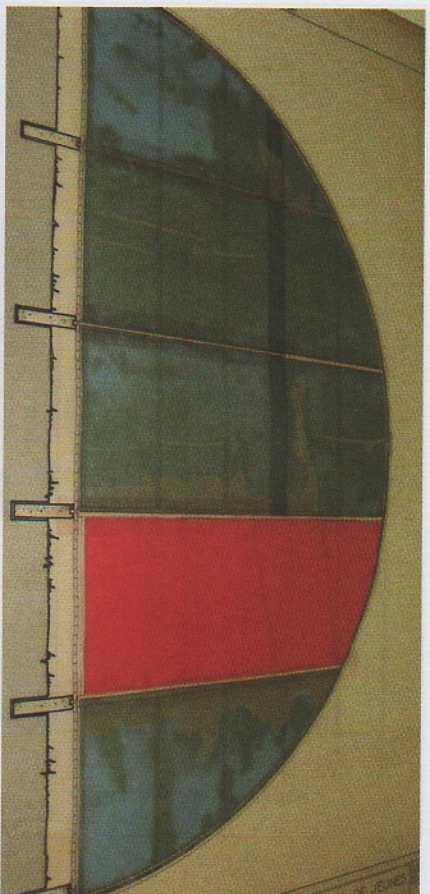


Fig. 32 - An example of ageing of plastic sheets

Fig. 33 - The combined action of felt-tip pens and the glue of self-adhesive have caused a major lateral shift in the medium



Fig. 34 - Sandra Vasquez de la Horra, MNAM Centre Pompidou, March 2011. The assembly using pins enabled the artist to create a new installation of her drawings, combining various series of works produced over a number of years

Fig. 35 - Pigs tattooed by Wim Delvoye

Fig. 36 - Wim Delvoye, Tim Steiner's tattooed back

