

Synapses. Expressive and Relational Pathways in Drawing

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In the vast majority of cases, the outcome of research may be understood not as the simple discovery of a datum that already exists, but as the generation of new meaning: an emergent result arising from the encounter, tension, and synthesis between two or more previous bodies of knowledge. New knowledge is therefore not an isolated element, but the outcome of a process of connection, resembling a dynamic structure in continuous evolution.

This intelligent network of knowledge, progressively constructed over time, may be metaphorically associated with an organically living synaptic structure and, as in the nervous system, the pathways, signals, and interactions among the components of the system activate unprecedented relationships between concepts, methods, disciplines, and perspectives, giving rise to new and unpredictable configurations of knowledge. This metaphor is not merely poetic but reflects

one of the dominant intuitions in contemporary philosophy, according to which knowledge is not a static repository, but an emergent architecture built through reciprocal influences, exchanges, revisions, and negotiations of meaning. In this sense, it can be affirmed without hesitation that this network is all the more fertile when the figures engaged in research are capable of moving beyond the established boundaries of knowledge and venturing into unexplored conceptual territories. This requires the ability to adopt a far-reaching vision, one not confined within the limits of traditional disciplines, and to practice an authentically transdisciplinary approach, capable of crossing, connecting, and developing different forms of knowledge.

Without a shadow of a doubt, those who had the opportunity to work alongside Massimiliano Ciammaichella will recognize these qualities in him, both in his human and scientific

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nature: it is therefore to him that issue 18 of the journal *disegno* is dedicated. As editors, we sought to promote a critical reflection orbiting around the themes that best represent his originality and his commitment as an attentive observer, experimenter, and innovator: in a word, as a researcher.

Massimiliano's presence never went unnoticed: certainly not because of his physical stature—in no way diminished by his total black look—but because of his active participation in every debate, always sharp and always marked by a passionate desire to share his knowledge. He had a natural predisposition to be, with his whole self, what he communicated: through facial expressions, bodily gestures, and words. Hence the reflection on performative synapses, which, in this sense, represent one of the most evident manifestations of the active nature of Drawing. Performativity, in fact, implies moving beyond the idea of representation as a mere duplication of the world: drawing does not simply describe reality, but enacts it, modifies it, and makes it experienceable. Every graphic gesture, every spatial construction, every analog or digital device produces cognitive and perceptual effects that transform the relationship between subject and the environment. Drawing thus becomes a choreographic and relational act, capable of organizing the movement of bodies, the perception of space, and the construction of identities. In this scenario, architecture, the performing arts, fashion, and design share a common processual dimension: knowledge has a strongly dynamic character and emerges through action, through making, through the continuous dialogue between idea and material transformation. Knowledge then manifests itself as an event, as an experience that happens and evolves over time and takes place in space, involving body, technique, and imagination.

In describing Massimiliano's 'performative being', we wished to emphasize the consistently passionate way in which he manifested himself in the primary activities of his work: teaching, research, and the important task of dissemination. These were the expression of a knowledge born from a capacity—perhaps innate in him—to feel fully, to open himself to listening and communication, making use of the multisensory dimension.

In the performative experience, both the author and the recipient of representation play a primary role: the former designs, while the latter participates, with the full involvement of the sensory apparatus being anticipated.

While Western tradition initially privileged for a long time the domain of sight as the principal form of access to knowledge, today knowledge is increasingly interpreted as a multisensory and embodied phenomenon. Drawing does not belong exclusively to the sphere of the visible but is constructed

through a complex network of perceptual relationships involving touch, sound, balance, bodily memory, movement, and temporal duration. Representation takes shape through the specific qualities of an immersive and synesthetic experience, in which the body is not a simple passive recipient, but an integral part of the cognitive process. Alongside the reflection on performative synapses, there therefore develops a reflection dedicated to sensory synapses.

We might state that sensory synapses restore to drawing its biological and environmental dimension, bringing forth a form of knowledge that arises from concrete interaction with the world. In this context, designed space is no longer merely a geometric configuration, but an experiential environment, a field of emotional and perceptual resonances. Knowledge then becomes a sensitive appropriation of reality, a practice of listening and crossing through that overcomes the traditional separation between mind and body.

The possibility of using sensory pathways other than the visual one—considered primary in the case of representation—makes knowledge accessible also to those who do not possess the same abilities and receptivity of the human body. Representation thus also fulfills an indispensable social role. It is therefore not surprising, as an almost inevitable consequence, that Massimiliano was fully committed to this front. The social synapses honor his commitment to making every barrier, every boundary to the transmission and interpretation of knowledge, visible and surmountable. This commitment was recognized both in the private sphere of personal life and in the public dimension he shared with students, colleagues, and with/in the UID scientific society, where he served, in particular, as the promoter and first coordinator of the Gender Commission.

The social synapses are therefore intended to encourage reflection on the ethical and political dimension of Drawing. Every form of representation is always at the same time a cultural construction, the production of imaginaries, the definition of inclusions and exclusions. Drawing participates in the construction of social space and contributes to determining the way in which individuals and communities perceive themselves and the world they inhabit. From this perspective, representational practices become critical tools capable of questioning dominant paradigms, stereotypes, and cultural impositions. Social synapses make a shared knowledge possible, open to the plurality of identities and experiences, capable of transforming Drawing into a place of dialogue, resistance, and redefinition of collective meaning. Representation thus assumes an emancipatory function:

not only a means of communication, but a practice through which new forms of individual and communal freedom may be imagined and constructed.

Massimiliano was an example and will remain an inspiration for a form of knowledge production that does not correspond to a simple linear or mono-methodological model—one that we might say now belongs to a distant tradition—but rather to a plural, processual, and dialogical paradigm: a process in which languages, experiences, technologies, bodies, societies, and cultural contexts together contribute to defining what may be known, as the outcome of a relational event, the result of material, sensory, technical, and symbolic interactions: an open process and, therefore, always perfectible.

In this scenario, the synaptic network also becomes the structure that keeps memory alive, making it possible not only to preserve the past, but to reinterpret it, reorganize it, and re-adapt it into a fertile basis for further advances. From mere archiving, memory thus becomes the vital foundation of every new form of knowledge: a dynamic archive that sustains continuity and, at the same time, makes innovation possible.

Within this overall vision, the synapse becomes the very symbol of contemporary research on drawing: a model of knowledge founded on connection, cross-fertilization, and the continuous transformation of knowledge. Drawing then emerges as a living space of relation between body, technique, perception, and society; a territory in which knowledge and reality do not merely reflect one another but are continuously produced and redefined through experience.

“The Theatre of Life”

During the extended, nocturnal dialogues with Massimiliano Ciammaichella—a friend as well as a colleague—the subjects explored were diverse, drawing upon a vast foundation of experiences and knowledge, thus engendering a profound exchange of ideas. With energy, determination and enthusiasm, these discussions would often stretch on for some time, using language that was not exactly stilted or conventional, impersonal or neutral, but rather concise and passionate, direct and provocative.

The conclusion of a written or spoken dialogue did not always bring peace and put an end to the exchange of thoughts; rather, it fueled reflections and doubts that might find their way into the usual academic working environment, whether linked to teaching in close contact with students or to ongoing research activities.

“I am always here for the Theatre of life and for research on theatre” [1] is one of the many phrases that best outline and summarize the complex profile of a scholar who reflects on his own existential condition and seeks to explore the infinite facets that present themselves to him. Undoubtedly, his passion and his involvement in ‘theatre-making’ led him, a few years ago, to engage academically with the broad subject of the documentation, analysis, study, dissemination, and promotion of the artistic and cultural heritage of Italian Baroque theatre, a line of research that, in 2022, saw him serve as promoter of the research theme and head of the Research Unit of Università Iuav di Venezia within the PRIN SCAE-NAE - *Italian Baroque Theatre. Paradigms of Scene and Cultural Memory* project. He recognized that seventeenth-century Baroque theatre—based on the intertwining of reality and fiction, on the interplay between mask, deception, and truth, and on life’s oscillation between drama and comedy—was the result of interactions between aspects of performance and the environment linked to his—and our—human condition. The very fact that this form of theatrical spectacle belonged to a lost memory, of which only fragmentary traces remain amongst the Venetian streets and squares, had sparked in him a keen curiosity to reconstruct a vanished theatrical geography that brought together economic, religious, and social interests, and within which the roles of the theatre architect and the set designer had emerged.

Those lost buildings, characterized by oval or horse-shoe-shaped halls flanked by tiers of boxes, with stages repeatedly adapted to accommodate countless stage machinery set-ups, equipped accessible lofts and any additional service rooms, represented a spatial organization upon which the very concept of the ‘Italian-style theatre’ was founded or, rather, described the theatrical space as a set of functional elements which, over the centuries, have undergone modifications, evolutions and interpretations, resulting in a model recognizable throughout the world. Yet, if one looks beyond the ‘petrified’ machinery, one realizes that the theatre is, first and foremost, a shared social space which, beyond its concrete manifestation in an architectural setting, serves as a metaphor for the theatre of life. The words “I am always there for the theatre of life” precisely express this attempt to understand what surrounds us and, above all, to regard theatre as a democratic form par excellence, referring to the very act of being together.

The nature of theatre as a collective and communal ritual that brings together performers and audience in a square, a garden, on stage and in the orchestra—in a space conceived, designed

and set aside for performance— is one of the most powerful aspects of being together and of forging connections, interactions and relationships that give rise to new and unpredictable ways of understanding. The sharing of experiences amongst the actors—who take on various roles, whether as leading actors or extras—and amongst the audience, made up of a multitude of individuals, is a fundamental aspect of the work, one that Massimiliano admired and studied with passion.

Although the relationship between the stage and the audience space has undergone significant changes depending on the various architectural structures—ranging from open-air venues to enclosed buildings, from fixed to variable stage elements, from natural to artificial lighting, and from the boundary between actors and spectators—acting has always created, and still creates, a connection with the audience in an atmosphere of shared experience and participation that very often transcends everyday life. Massimiliano explored the performance as the starting point for a reflection on democracy, on the power of the image and of communication, as a place where something 'happens' and, for it to happen, people must come together; establish rules and assign themselves roles.

The expressive and relational dimensions of theatre offer rich insights into today's social situation, starting precisely from the golden age of ancient Greece—the cradle of shared spectacle—where theatre served as a means through which one could learn, reflect and experience emotions [Molinari 1997; Cruciani 1992]. Greek theatres, and later Roman ones, were organised according to orderly relationships between people (actors and audience), spaces and functions. The progressive organization of space in Greek theatre—which is regarded as the archetype in European culture—is closely linked to the concept of democracy, as it served as a privileged vantage point from which to observe cultural, legislative and economic transformations.

The French philosopher Alain Badiou himself, in his famous book *Rhapsody for the Theatre: Art, Politics, Event* [2015], analyses the history of theatre, highlighting its intrinsically relational nature as a space where an indissoluble relationship unfolds between actor, stage and spectator. It is a place where visual communication and interpersonal relationships intertwine, leading to the unfolding of the stage action and the formation of a mutual bond. Collective commitment and a shared creative process, in which individual efforts come together; generate a product that is at once tangible and intangible, concrete and symbolic. Theatre, as a form of collective and ritual expression, has spanned different eras, cultures and languages, adapting to social changes without

ever losing its fundamental role: to explore the human soul, tell stories and present visions, whilst seeking to escape its use as a means of oppression and control, particularly under dictatorial regimes. Theatre, therefore, serves as a fundamental tool for deciphering and reshaping reality, fully realizing its predictive potential.

The theatre, interpreted as a form of entertainment, education and engagement, has undergone a significant evolution, moving from performances linked to religious celebrations to platforms for ethical and philosophical debate. Over the centuries, the role of the spectator has undergone a transformation, evolving from a passive act of mere observation to active participation in a collective dialogue on the human condition. This transformation has passed through various historical phases, moving from Christian values and religious themes to autonomous forms of performance linked to psychological depth.

In his book *Il teatro delle passioni*, Giovanni Macchia reflects on theatre: "It is theatre that establishes an eternal confrontation with the world. The world itself is a theatre, and theatre is the world" [Macchia 1993, p. 138], drawing on the famous Shakespearean topos "All the world's a stage" found in the pastoral comedy *As You Like It* [Shakespeare 1623, act II, scene VII; cfr. Yates 1969].

This demonstrates how street theatre can be recognized as the quintessential space for social interaction, where the urban dimension takes precedence over the theatrical dimension associated with buildings, and which best embodies the concept of democratically sharing the performing arts: "the aim is to transform the space of everyday life through the foreignness of the performance space and the ways in which it is enacted [...] it is a social space, defined by the relationship between the performance and the local area, created by a manipulation of the surrounding reality and by the radicalisation of the stage space as a special area" [Cruciani 1992, p. 91]. It was precisely the ability of words, gestures and staging to merge into a language capable of speaking to every individual, regardless of social class, anywhere in the world, that had led Massimiliano to admire the theatre for its universal and communal spirit, as well as its capacity for criticism and social commentary. Today more than ever, theatre embraces new technologies, hybrid forms of expression and participatory approaches, blurring—or rather erasing—the boundaries between actor and audience, whilst preserving the stage—a meeting place between the physical and the virtual—as a geometric space of wonder, where things appear and elude perception.

The performing arts become a means of inclusion, intercultural dialogue and social transformation, in line with Massimiliano's tireless and unwavering commitment to policies of inclusion and to combating all forms of discrimination. As chair of the CUG (Unified Guarantee Committee), he worked tirelessly to foster a welcoming, respectful, and inclusive environment, where everyone can feel valued and realize their full potential. Individual and collective well-being, linked to social harmony, was based precisely on the celebration of differences and on cooperation and shared objectives – values that the theatre world has always pursued and to which the professor also referred in terms of their therapeutic nature.

Finally, Massimiliano saw theatre as a form of therapy – a way to put himself out there, to perform and to reveal himself through different characters and situations, all of which, however, relate to the human condition. Experimenting to understand. The ability to create a shared, vivid and unique experience – a voice on contemporary issues, human rights and social inequalities. The theatre is a place where diverse voices can be heard, helping to build communities that are more cohesive and open to dialogue. At the heart of these reflections lies what the director Peter Brook [Brook 2005] defines as 'the human element', linked to the exposure of the body – a physical presence that is both a limitation and a striving towards freedom, towards the other. Taking space to rediscover oneself and to represent the feelings of someone else. Theatre exists in the realization of an encounter between individuals, between those who act and those who witness this action.

From these considerations, theatre – as the 'comedy and tragedy of life', but also as a 'network of relationships' – becomes a metaphor for a space of performative, sensory and social connections capable of fostering symbolic, critical and scientific reflection.

Seeing with the body, seeing from below

I get an indirect sense of Massimiliano Ciammaichella through the memories of colleagues who, unlike me, had the chance to get to know him, but from what I read, it feels as though we've had several long conversations. We were interested in similar things: the total black look; academic research from a transdisciplinary and intersectional perspective. And the power of Drawing as a disruptive tool for the production of knowledge and the transformation of our environment. In this figurative conversation, which unfolds in the very act

of writing and drawing, I wish to sketch out two key points that I believe would have been dear to both of us. Two ways of understanding drawing not as a docile representation, not as a mere mirror of reality, but as a means of alternative vision – embodied and performative. Drawing can help us to see differently, from the body's gaze. Western tradition, however, has long trained us to do exactly the opposite. We have learnt to think of Drawing as a conventional system of representation, a tool faithful to the rules of perspective which, from the Humanist period onwards, have imposed a specific way of looking at the world: from above, from a single centre of projection from a sovereign eye that organizes and hierarchizes space in a supposedly neutral manner. That very same eye made possible the modern European colonial project, capable of measuring, labelling and violently appropriating territories, natural resources and the bodies of others. But what if we dismantle this apparatus, what if we overturn its perspective? What if Drawing ceases to be an instrument of control and instead becomes a radically different methodology?

In the performance *O.R.G.I.A. Ways of seeing (Coñovisión)*, performed in December 2025, with our reinterpretation of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* [2025], we have attempted to do precisely this: no longer to see with our eyes (those that train the gaze to replicate the hierarchies of the visible), but to see with our bodies. To see from below, from that marginal, excluded position from which we have always inhabited otherness. And to transform this into a political force. Drawing then becomes the gesture that allows us to shift our vantage point. No longer a divine eye, nor even a hyper-technological one that embraces everything, to use Donna J. Haraway's terms, but a hand that savors, a tongue that touches, an ear that pricks up, a skin that listens. It is a movement that produces a perception that is distorted, decentralized and deliberately at odds with the conventions of perspective. And in this deviation, the drawing does not merely reproduce the world: it affects it at the very core of its disciplinary status. Concretely, what does this 'affection' mean? It means that the graphic act becomes capable of making perceptible not merely what is hidden, but what the dominant regime of the visible and disciplines such as art historiography have actively removed, obscured or declared unrepresentable. Genealogies that have been emptied, left unnamed, erased. The memories of women, of racialized people, of sexual dissidents. Our desires. Our culture. The carnality that modern history has transformed into mere objects of gaze and analysis, denying them the possibility of

being subjects who shape their own narratives, subjects of an alternative vision. Perhaps this could be the 'without models or certainties' that Irit Rogoff and Peggy Phelan refer to when they describe the 'without' as a productive space: that which might emerge from the unsaid and the unseen, simply by speaking and showing in one's own way, moving forward without looking back.

Here, Drawing would serve as a practice for filling in the gaps, and thus also as a form of genealogical repair; by bringing to light what has only been fantasized about, forbidden, never depicted, or blacked out. It is not a question of illustrating an alternative official history. Rather, it is a matter of activating as a method what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation". In *Venus in Two Acts* (2005), she questions how to recount the life of a young slave of whom only anonymous fragments remain in the archival records of the Atlantic slave trade. She cannot restore its authentic voice because that voice has been violently erased. But she can, through the imaginative act of writing (or drawing, or sketching), bring to light the possibility of its existence. She can restore dignity to that which the archive has silenced. It is neither a lie nor a falsification, but rather the evocation of that which has been rendered impossible to recover –and the creation of an 'elsewhere' that challenges the questions themselves. In this sense, performative drawing can conjure up unspoken impulses, symbolic imaginaries never dreamt of, and missed genealogies.

And it is here that this approach finds a precise philosophical foundation, rooted in the theory of language and branching out into the politics of the body and identity. John Austin [1962] argues that saying something is not always and merely a matter of describing a state of affairs. It is also, and sometimes above all, an act. When one says 'the session is adjourned', one is not merely stating a fact; one is performing an action through words. This utterance does not describe reality: it produces it. Judith Butler [1990] took this concept and radically reoriented it towards the fields of gender and subjectivity. For her, gender is not an essence that one possesses, but an effect produced through performative acts repeated over time. 'I am a woman' does not describe a biological or spiritual substance: it is an action that takes place every time one puts on a dress, adopts a certain posture, responds to a name, or is addressed as 'madam', which defines a role and a social expectation. Performativity is the power of language and gestures to constitute what they merely appear to describe. Indeed, performative drawing works exactly like this. It does not describe a world that already exists: it produces a world that would otherwise

remain unseen. When I trace the outline of a body that history has rendered invisible, I am not illustrating an absence: I am making it happen on the paper, through the mark. It is a performative act in every sense: the graphic mark is the action that convokes, that names, that generates. Just as, for Butler, the repetition of gendered acts produces subjectivity, so too, in performative drawing, the repetition of lines –deviant, obstinate, affectionate– can produce alternative genealogies, desires that would otherwise be unrepresentable, and memories that the official narrative has expelled.

There is a second point, which follows on from what has been said. If drawing is a vision through the body, then it cannot be merely an optical phenomenon. Drawing means moving a hand, exercising pressure, following a curve, speeding up or slowing down a stroke. It means that the whole body (not just the eyes) is involved in a practice of embodied knowledge. Here, alternative epistemologies take centre stage once more –those that decolonial, feminist and queer philosophies and practices have learnt to value in opposition to the Western primacy of abstract and detached vision. Knowledge conveyed through touch, movement, breathing and muscular exertion. Ciammaichella, in his studies on dance notation, had come to understand this: the sign that records a movement is not an inert residue, but a performative device that can reactivate that movement, bringing it back to life in a different physicality, in a different time. The choreographic score does not describe: it triggers.

What if we were to apply this principle to historical and political memory? What if drawing were to become a way of embodying a performative memory? Not the cold, archival kind, the one that preserves documents in cardboard boxes. But one that becomes a gesture, that is reactivated every time a hand retraces a mark learnt from other fingers, from another generation. Drawing to remember. Not in the trivial sense of creating a shape that depicts a scene to be remembered. But in the deepest sense: the act of drawing that becomes an act of remembrance. As in the practices of certain indigenous cultures, where tracing lines on the ground or on the torso is not about depicting a myth, but about bringing it to life. As in feminist practices, where embroidery or sewing are ways of passing on women's memories through their hands and fabrics.

This is the integration of memory: do not think of a memory as information to be extracted outside, but as a form to be inhabited from within. Ensure that memory resides not only in documents, but in the muscles, the articulations, and the coordination of hand, heart and breath. Repeat the

stroke until it becomes a habit, a posture, a reflex. In this way, the drawing becomes a tool for activating the archive from within –not to consult it, but to perform it. And with this approach, those emptied genealogies, those erased bodies, those unexpressed desires can finally find a place. It does not recount them: they pass through the physicality of the person drawing. It restores them to the materiality of the gesture, of the pressure, of the duration. We draw to embody a story; we draw knowing that we could never truly restore certain things, but that we can conjure up their spectral presence, hold it with us, and give it a space on the paper, in the world.

Perhaps stepping back as an all-seeing author allows the drawing's action, its evocations, and its effects to come to the fore, without ever fixing anything in a definitive form, but always keeping open the possibility of the next move, of the stroke that veers off course, of the line that breaks off and restarts elsewhere. And within this openness, perhaps, there is also a small shared gesture: writing this text as if it were a drawing. Sketching out words that attempt to see from the body, from the memory of someone who

is no longer here. And allowing something invisible, for a moment, to become visible.

Massimiliano was, without a shadow of a doubt, a creative and multifaceted researcher; qualities that inspired this issue of *diségno* and the preparation of the present contribution itself. Within a collective project and collaborative undertaking, the scientific curators wished to offer the reader three converging images of Massimiliano: three personal perspectives originating from three distinct points of view. In the first part of the text, Graziano Mario Valenti highlighted Massimiliano's ability to traverse and connect different fields of knowledge; Gabriella Liva, in *The Theatre of Life*, emphasized his performative identity and his extraordinary and perceptive interest in the architecture and art of theatre; finally, Tatiana Sentamans, in *Seeing with the body, seeing from below*, recalled his revelatory and social dimension. These are three images of Massimiliano's multifaceted figure among the many held by those who had the pleasure of knowing him: "But then, who was Massimiliano? You are right, Master Pirandello: you taught us this yourself! Massimiliano is the one each of us will remember: 'Thus it is (if you think so).'" [2].

Notes

[1] Conversation between Massimiliano Ciammaichella and Gabriella Liva at 9.37 p.m. on 27 May 2025.

[2] Excerpt from Graziano Mario Valenti's address dedicated to the memory of Massimiliano Ciammaichella on the occasion of the 46th International Conference of Teachers of Representation Disciplines, held in Rome from 11 to 13 September 2025.

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