

Theory Essay: *Conditional Drawing, Conditional Painting*

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For this essay I chose to question the practice of a group of young designers whose collaborative work I came across early this year and followed since then. Luna Maurer, Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey and Roel Wouters. Together they issued a manifesto¹ stating their practice as such, naming it Conditional Design. The coming development will focus on a selection of their works on paper, involving the giving or progressive definition of a set of rules to four participants creating one piece together. They will here-after be referred to as *Conditional Drawings*².

Early in the research I started, I've been advised to look at Bernard Frize's paintings. His working processes share similarities with those of the *Conditional Designers*, defining conditions, parameters, but the importance both give them seem to differ. 'The process is the product', the Conditional Designers state in big characters on the home page of their web site. Interviewed about his work, Bernard Frize answers: 'Process painting does not exist; or rather: Every good painting shows the seamless transition from process to product'. We will try to investigate, in both practices, the role processes are invested with and how they speak through the works.

An other interesting issue in comparing Frize's paintings and the Conditional Designer's drawings is that, drawing from overall similar practices, they seem to belong to two different fields—respectively art and design—but both consciously coin their practice as 'work'. We will then attempt to question the practical and ideological standpoints behind these two practices and their implications.

All the works we described here as Conditional Drawings involve four contributors drawing in turn, each using a different coloured felt marker or roll of tape. These contributors are given, along the making or from the start, a set of rules they

must execute to create the final piece. The processes of making are first of all collaborative ones. This was made evident during a small workshop I set in the class with four fellow students, roughly re-enacting the workshops held by the Conditional Designers in the 18th of November, 2008 and the 2nd of December, 2008 (see pages 5 and 6). No matter how precise the rules the participants give themselves, only good will and communication will help creating a strong image. A recent entry on the Conditional Design web site shows this awareness; they end the series of instructions to create the drawing presented by specifying: 'In general, try to cooperate to create the most beautiful drawing.'

The concern Conditional Designers confessed having with form—or rather the consciousness of the necessary effort to produce a satisfactory one—seems to contradict their statement that 'the process produces formations rather than forms', that the defined working method should, as such, be enough to produce an interesting work without an additional care for form. Still, going back to their assertion that the process *is* the product, it becomes more evident that their works are not the drawings produced but the conditions and events leading to them, this concerted activity of making. To that extent, the expectation of 'beautiful drawings' is no more than another constraint, rule the participants are given and have to deal with together. The formation produced is the group engaging work within the given set of parameters—'Constraints sharpen the perspective on the process and stimulate play within the limitations'. This is made clearly visible in the way recent works are displayed on the Conditional Design web site; from a presentation of the set of rules next to a picture of the finished drawing, it evolved into an accelerated video of the making, shot from above the table on which the drawings are executed, next to a picture of the finished drawing and the set of rules.

It could be regretted that, for these works, the video documentation of the making focuses on the action of drawing—the framing of the video is very close to the edge of the piece of paper on which the drawing is made, only hands drawing

¹ The Conditional Design Manifesto is reproduced page 6. If not precised otherwise, quoted texts about the principles of Conditional Design come from this manifesto.

² The Conditional Designers use this same term to describe another, more narrative, collective drawing practice. Because we won't examine these works in the present essay, I'll use the term *Conditional Drawings*, which I think suits best, for the rules-based works described above. The links to see these works online are listed page 6.

can be seen—rather than on the communication and decision making. This could for example be achieved by letting voices be heard, body languages speak for themselves by broadening the focus or letting time lags before the performing of decisive drawing steps be visible, may it compromise the exciting rhythm these speeded-up (from approximately six to twenty-five times) videos.

Bernard Frize’s oeuvre, even though tightly framed by outspoken theoretical and ideological principles—manifesting, according to Dominic Van der Boogert, a strong unity in method, transcending forms—, remains quite diverse, I believe, in relevance towards these principles. This will probably become clearer in the light of the coming development but I could mention here—and by the same exclude—works like the one consisting of the dried-up surface layers from several cans of paint, applied next to and on top of each other until a canvas was completely covered, which title gave instructions to re-make a similar painting or the pourings of paint I would, for the method alone and even if the products of it speaks differently, rather relate to Louis Morris’ *Unfurled* series or Lynda Benglis’ floor paintings.

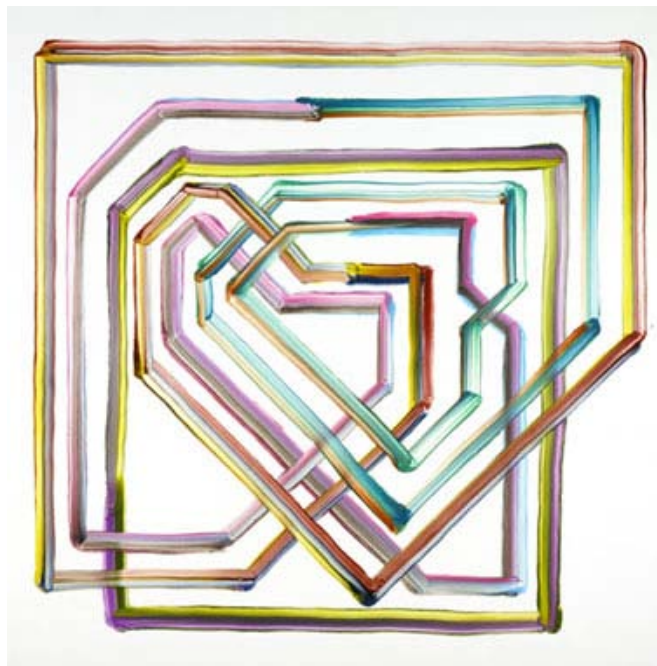
As we concentrated our attention on the constraints-based drawings of the Conditional Design group, we will limit our analysis of Frize’s work to the paintings showing long, clearly identifiable and generous brush strokes, mainly from series realized between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s. Because, probably out of ideological reasons we will later try to discuss, Frize creates important series of very similar works, we would discuss one work as an example taken for that series.

Interviewed in April 1998 by Dominic Van der Boogert, Bernard Frize gave a remarkably concise definition of his approach to painting:

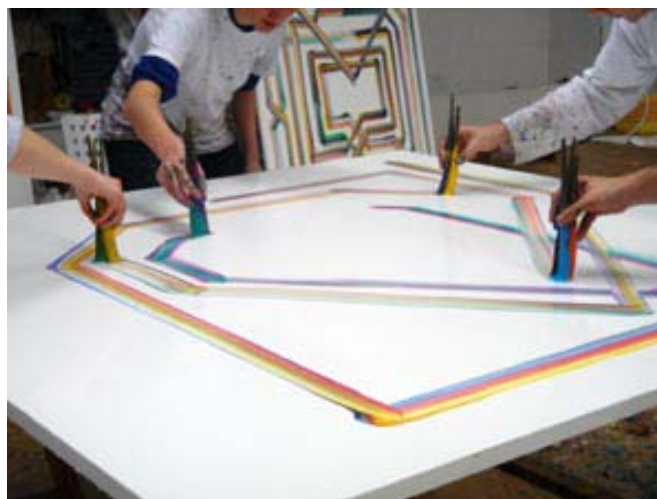
‘I thought that my work should consist of very plain images, paintings that arise directly from the materials, the tools, the techniques. I opt for a way of working, and the painting is simply a result of that. Once I have decided how I want to work, I concede to the result. Though I cannot predict precisely the outcome of the working process, I will almost never change it. I’d rather start all over again.’

In other words, each painting is the relatively short execution of a previously defined rule, ‘way of working’. That execution might require the help of assistants, as mere extra hands in the performance of a scripted working process. For instance the paintings from the series *Faces et Profils*³ requested three assistants to paint at the same time following

a series of guide pencil marks, incidentally left visible in the final piece, the overlapping of the brush strokes on the final work triggering the question which makes Robbie O’Halloran draw a parallel with photorealist painting: ‘How is it done?’.



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It seems here could be a community of meaning between Frize and artists from the post-painterly abstraction. In Louis Morris’ words: ‘The painting is the image and the image is the painting’. That is to say, both could stand against personal expression, put the emphasis on facts. As Van der Boogert puts it: for post-painterly abstraction, ‘paintings are tasteful artefacts, designed, fashioned, produced and manufactured as deliberate at-

³ First displayed at the Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin in spring 2005, more pictures available on Frize’s web site: <http://bernardfrize.com/>

⁴ Bernard Frize, *Diamant*, 2005.

⁵ Frize’s working process on the series *Faces et Profils*.

tempts to achieve the impeccable and the absolute without reverting to a personal handwriting'. The shift Bernard Frize's work manifests might then lie in its outrageous painterly quality, discarding from the start this concept of the absolute. The medium is treated in a way that outlines its artificiality, it is not anymore its essence itself. It is no coincidence Frize says valuing 'a painting that makes you figure how it's been made'.

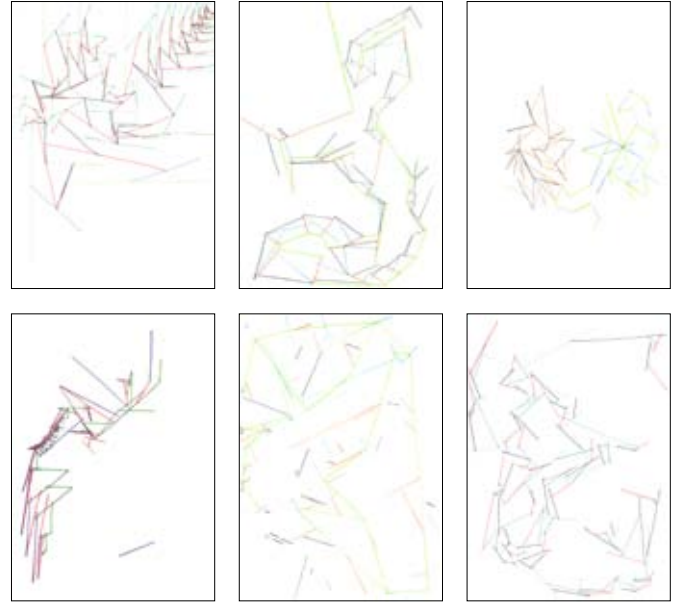
If both Conditional Designers and Bernard Frize use working processes based on a defined logic: Setting up a system requesting the short performing of a carefully prepared plan, their approaches differ in a number of aspects and open up very different possibilities.

For the designers involved in the Conditional Design project, logic—understood by them and Frize as the principle behind the plan before every work—is purely rational, opposed to 'arbitrary randomness' (sic). 'Logic is our tool. Logic is our method for accentuating the ungraspable'. This ungraspable I understand as the collaborative dynamics, what happens between participants during the making process; decisions taken and achieved solutions. For Frize, logic is lucidly seen as nonsensical, 'reasoning with jokes, puns and misunderstandings'⁶. He develops: 'The nonsensical logic of Lewis Carroll acts as an ideal model for painting. My work, too, is built upon impossibilities and contradictions'.

These definitions of the principle behind their works brings the question of their exact nature. The Conditional Designers' production is the process of making they become involved in when practicing the Conditional Drawings. To that extent, all documentation and artefacts produced, from the written rules to the videos and the final drawings, aren't much more than *photos-souvenirs* were for Buren. Frize, as we saw, produces paintings that, more than illustrate, *are* the fluid transition from process to product.

Process itself, then, is only for Frize, and to a greater extent his assistants, the almost passive execution of a plan where chance has a role to play (we could think of the randomness in the selection of the colours used, from house painting, and the way they change when crossing another layer of fresh paint), whereas for the Conditional Designers it is a time for 'relationship and change'. When defining themselves as in search for 'unexpected but correlative, emergent patterns', they investigate aesthetics from the formal—the seducing, half-way

mechanic-organic look of the drawings produced—to the relational, in the collaborative patterns they created.



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The practices of Bernard Frize and Conditional Designers then seem to have very different, almost antagonistic interests. These interests seem to be, or are stated as rooted in ideology. An interesting issue would then be to question how and to what extent these systems of thought formed the performative practices, working processes of both.

We could then go back to the terminology—art and design—evoked earlier and question the relevance of these terms to describe both approaches and works.

Bernard Frize, consistently with the similarities of his practice and the one of artists from the post-painterly abstraction, says rejecting the idea of an 'artist-as-god'—i.e. expressionist. He adds, in that same 1998 interview, working on the basis of Marxist ideology, thinking his practice in terms of hours and production, as 'participation'. As we evoked earlier, works within one of his series often share a common method and display applications of this working rule with little variations—the setting of recent exhibitions, such as *Fat Paintings* at the Kunsthallen Brandts Kladefabrik, confront that monotony by displaying all paintings in a row, with very little space in between them. If not a product, the painting becomes an artifact, product of one working activity, amongst many other.

⁶ Dominic Van der Boogert

⁷ Conditional Drawings, 'Test runs' for the workshop 'Custom Rules', held on the 12th of May, 2009. Internet link page 6.

Conditional Design practitioners, as prolific but not producing goods so far, started, in the spring of 2008, by describing the workshops they documented on their web site with a terminology of the play. Participants were referred to as players and the Conditional Drawings as games and the end product of the making process the goal. By the end of the same year, this lexical field moved towards near neo-Marxist with the replacing of these terms by workers, naming the workshops as such—the term is repeated three times in the last entry on their web site—and soon exploring Stakhanovist aesthetics with workshops such as ‘4 long lines’⁸, asking the four participants to each draw one continuous line on a sheet of paper without stopping for one and a half hour.

The common terminology used by artist Bernard Frize and designers mentioned above—most of which are professional graphic or sound designers—, respectively (and put rather bluntly) to escape a romanticist idea of the artist and legitimate their practice as a credible working method, would suggest a process-based practice escaping the fields of both disciplines. This idea of such a common practice in between art and design that could simply be called *work* would add to an interesting debate⁹ in which Hal Foster advocated for a socially, politically and self-critical design, not necessarily concerned with the production of material goods, as foreseen by product designers Dunne&Raby’s *Critical Design*¹⁰.

Nevertheless, the Conditional Designer’s practice could be read in much simpler terms, almost as training. Similar to Lars Van Trier’s *The Five Obstructions*, a documentary where Van Trier asks fellow director Jørgen Leth to remake five times, with heavy and confronting constraints each time, his 1967 short film *The Perfect Human*. Work as merely school assignments. That perspective, for interesting as a way of developing improved working interactions, turns at the same time this practice into an avatar of high performance culture, pretty far from the original idea of either work as ‘participation’—in Frize’s words—or critical design.

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⁸ See Internet link page 6.

⁹ Brought up recently by, amongst other manifestations, the exhibition and symposium *Wouldn’t it be nice... wishful thinking in art and design* in Geneva.

¹⁰ Their Critical Design FAQ is available on their web site: <http://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/13/0>

Conditional Drawing #1

Mike makes triangles, she has the color blue
 Her rule is: Line has to start in a corner and has to be 5cm long.

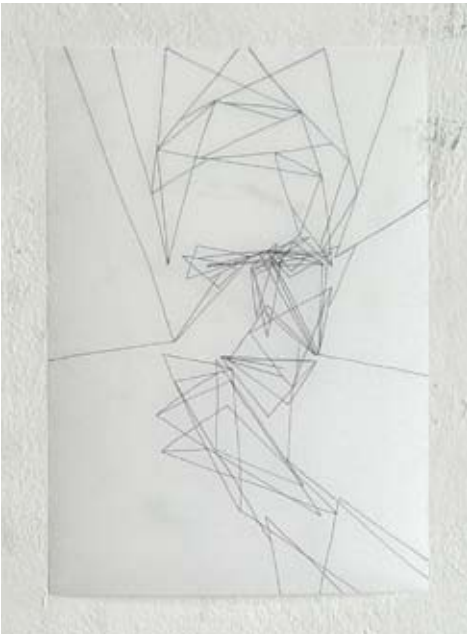
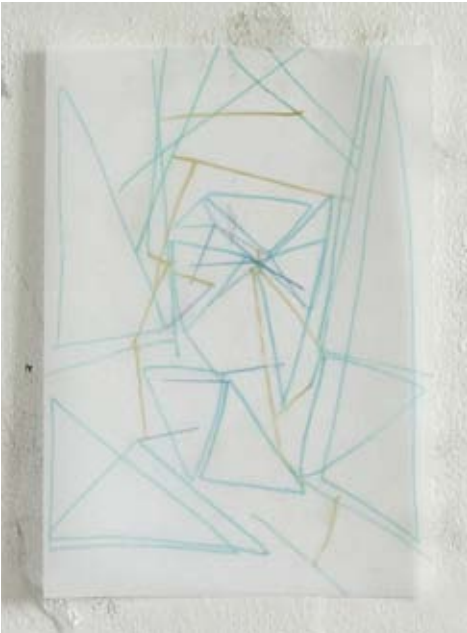
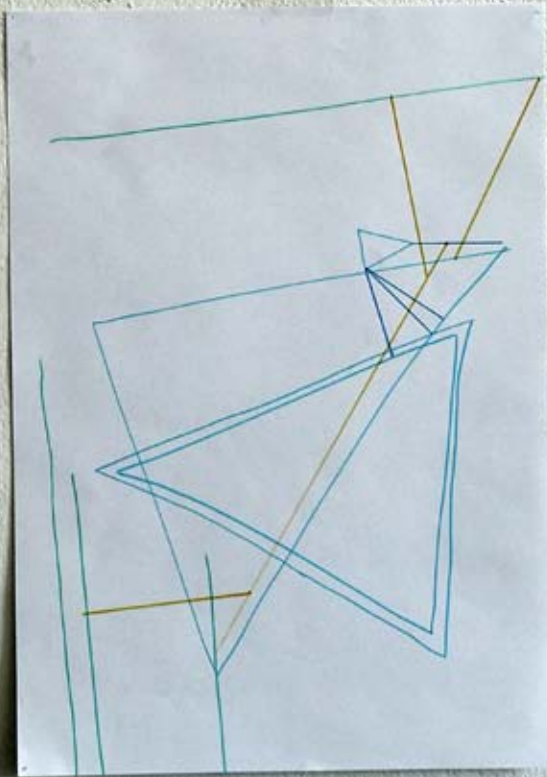
Julian makes his line and his shape blue
 Her rule is: Line has to start any where and end out of the paper.

Evgenia's line starts at dark blue and ends at green. She has yellow
 Mike has to make a bigger triangle than her last.

Julian's line has to start from a corner of a triangle and ends at the other triangle. Again 5cm.

Hanspi makes outline and not touching the triangles
 Evgenia has to connect 2 lines and not cross the triangles.

Mike's triangle has to be bigger than last and cannot touch the outline.



Left: Collaborational drawing realized during a workshop set up with classmates. Four players with a coloured felt marker each play clockwise, they start with a basic rule (drawing a line or a triangle) and give an extra one to the next player each turn. They stop adding new rules after two turns.

Right: Four other classmates are asked, with the same felt markers and associated set of rules, to trace a portrait of Robert Delaunay on calque paper (2nd picture from the top). To investigate the importance of coordination, I tried to execute the same exercise alone, with more time (last picture).

The works we identified as Conditional Drawings can be seen on the Conditional Design web site at the following addresses:



<http://conditionaldesign.org/workshops/changing-the-rules/>



<http://conditionaldesign.org/workshops/conditional-nationality/>



<http://conditionaldesign.org/workshops/the-perfect-circle/>



<http://conditionaldesign.org/workshops/4-long-lines/>



<http://conditionaldesign.org/workshops/custom-rules/>

Conditional Design A manifesto for artists and designers.

Through the influence of the media and technology on our world, our lives are increasingly characterized by speed and constant change. We live in a dynamic, data-driven society that is continually sparking new forms of human interaction and social contexts. Instead of romanticizing the past, we want to adapt our way of working to coincide with these developments, and we want our work to reflect the here and now. We want to embrace the complexity of this landscape, deliver insight into it and show both its beauty and its shortcomings.

Our work focuses on processes rather than products: things that adapt to their environment, emphasize change and show difference.

Instead of operating under the terms of Graphic Design, Interaction Design, Media Art or Sound Design, we want to introduce Conditional Design as a term that refers to our approach rather than our chosen media. We conduct our activities using the methods of philosophers, engineers, inventors and mystics.

Process

The process is the product.
The most important aspects of a process are time, relationship and change.
The process produces formations rather than forms.
We search for unexpected but correlative, emergent patterns.
Even though a process has the appearance of objectivity, we realize the fact that it stems from subjective intentions.

Logic

Logic is our tool.
Logic is our method for accentuating the ungraspable.
A clear and logical setting emphasizes that which does not seem to fit within it.
We use logic to design the conditions through which the process can take place.
Design conditions using intelligible rules.
Avoid arbitrary randomness.
Difference should have a reason.
Use rules as constraints.
Constraints sharpen the perspective on the process and stimulate play within the limitations.

Input

The input is our material.
Input engages logic and activates and influences the process.
Input should come from our external and complex environment: nature, society and its human interactions.