Small Outline of a Theory of the Sketch

It is striking so little space has been devoted to the *sketch* in pictorial semiotics, measured against its central role in the process of creation in many pictures as well as against its central role in recent art history – not to talk about its role as a general tool of thought and memory.

    Here, we shall attempt to draw some preliminary lines to a sketch theory. For a crude art history overview, it seems clear that before modernism, the sketch plays the role mainly as an introductory phase in creation, as a working tool on the road towards the finished work. Presumably, it seems just as clear that one central effect of modernism has been to focus upon various features of the sketch, isolate them, cultivate them and see them as just as essential - or even more so – than the finished work of art. This has lead to the fact that many genres of modernist painting and drawing share qualities with the sketch – as well as to the fact that the sketches inherited from earlier phases of art history have been subject to a revalution so that they in many cases are seen as more interesting than the finished pieces of work which they gave rise to. And it is probably, finally, equally clear that now, when we turn back to form an overview over modernism's different currents, the sketch can not claim neither more nor less prominence than the finished work of art – the polished, overworked piece and the raw, unfinished fragment now appear as parallel possibilities, and there is hardly any point in attacking one of them on behalf of the other – so much more because the artistic reverence for the sketch or the fragment with a strange necessity makes *it* into a work of art.

We shall here conceive of the sketch in the light of the Belgian Groupe μ's pictorial semiotics as it has been presented in the treatise *Traité du signe visuel* (1992). They here present (p. 136) a triangular model for visual signs in general:
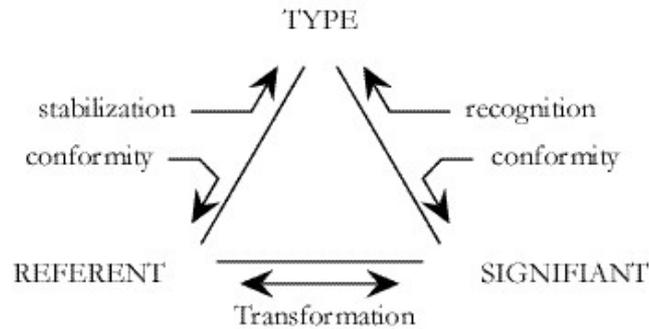
The overall architecture of the model is hardly schocking for any experienced semiotician; what is at stake is an updated version of that set of distinctions between sign, meaning, and object (here, signifiant, type, and referent) which in various variants date back to antiquity. Yet, Groupe µ's version of it contains some decisive accents. When the category of meaning is here rendered by the concept of "type", the group explicitly refers to a *visual* type. This aspect of the Group's visual sign concept is explicitly turned against the linguistico-centrism of much pictorial semiotics since the 60's, partially evident in the import of linguistic terminology in pictorial semiotics, partially, and more dangerous, in the accompanying assumption of the primacy of language so that all visual types presumably can be described exhaustively in ordinary language or in the metalanguage of theory. By emphasizing the visual type, Groupe µ points to the inexhaustibility of the visual sign: it is no superficial vehicle for the communication of a more proper, linguistic or symbolic content; it has in itself, already on the visual level, a stability thanks to the typicality of its content. It is, of course, hard to exemplify in text, because ordinary language in many cases has an expression ready to cover a related content, as soon as any visual type for some reason has demonstrated its interest – but a good example might be those spheres with a marked equator that occur in many of Magritte's paintings along with easily recognizable everyday interior. Magritte scholars often refer to them as "bells", but they can not be identified with any ordinary utensil and remain enigmatic objects in the context of the space of the picture. This does not, on the other hand, hinder them in begin strikingly easy to recognize from one painting to the next; here we have a purely visual type without any corresponding denomination in ordinary language (and even if the "bell" of the art historians should become widely known, it would not, of course, exhaust the specific visual typicality which permits them to be recognized – not any old bell will do). Of course, the routine recognition of both concrete and abstract everyday objects is to a very large extent made possible precisely by the existence of visual types: when we see and recognize a bicycle, a chair, a car, etc., we do so because we recognize its visual appearance – only on that basis do we add our linguistically articulated knowledge and identify that object by means of our linguistic denomination.

But this visual type is not determined by the linguistic etiquette, quite on the contrary it functions, in many cases, as a prerequisite to the linguistic denomination.[i] The concept of visual type thus points to the fact that there is a strong pre-linguistic generalizing intelligence in perception able to extract types of (series of) particular visual impressions, and able to keep these types stable, able to vary these types so that different concrete phenomena become visually understandable by being categorized as tokens of that same type, and able to compare and distinguish different visual types.

The other special property in Groupe μ's version of the classical semiotic triangle lies in the appearance of the term "transformation" at the basis of the triangle. It refers to the fact that visual signs function by means of similarity, that they are Peircean "hypoicons" – and this implies that some or other property-saving transformation holds between the signifier of the sign and that object it refers to. What is kept invariant in the transformation between the two is exactly the type. A large and useful part of Groupe μ's evolution of its sign concept is the listing of how many different visual transformation we have at our disposal when gestalting visual signs. The fact that visual similarity is no simple property, as too often assumed by many[ii], is demonstrated by the many different geometrical, analytical, optical, kinetic and other transformations which permits one sight to resemble another.

The sketch as a sign is characterized, now, by making use of a special selection of transformations making aspects of the object *discrete*. Groupe μ does not explicitly treat the sketch, but they remark *en passant* (during their development of the rhetorical figures made possible by the so-called analytical transformations): "... your can subdue certain lines so as to leave only those judged important. In that way you get the *sketch* which provides a synthetic vision of the subject and often delivers regulating layouts which may be used for the correct interpretation of the final work." [iii]

This implies that the sketch presupposes an analytical transformation of the object to a structure of lines. The Group here takes "analytical" to refer to the differential calculus which (among other things) permits to decide where a mathematical function has its maxima and minima (where its first derivative equals zero). But if we envisage the surface of an object as the graph of a function, then it is precisely these points of its surface that interests a draughtsman, because they give rise to lines in the sketch's analysis of them: contour, folds, etc. The drawing thus provides an analytical transformation of the seen object, reduced to a set of lines. In addition to this, a further analytical transformation follows on the level of colour – by discretization typical colours of the object may be isolated, adding a new set of lines distinguishing e.g. areas of light and shadow, areas with different colour, different texture, etc. Whether these colours and textures are added to the drawing or not, this set of transformations add another set of possible lines for the draughtsman. The spontaneous extraction of lines from the perceived object is the basis for the

construction of the sketch. As emphasizes the Group, the retina is constructed with the aim of extracting lines separating qualitatively different zones in the perceived (typically contours, of course, but also borderlines distinguishing different colours or textures in one object), because the visual cells of the retina are connected in a network so that two connected visual cells getting approximately the same impression tend to annihilate this small difference in a phenomenological *Verschmelzung*, a merging into one continuous coloured surface, as the result. If, contrariwise, two close visual cells receive strongly deviating input, while each of them at the same time belong to a cell-community with related inputs, the network reacts in a characteristical curve (Groupe μ, 66):
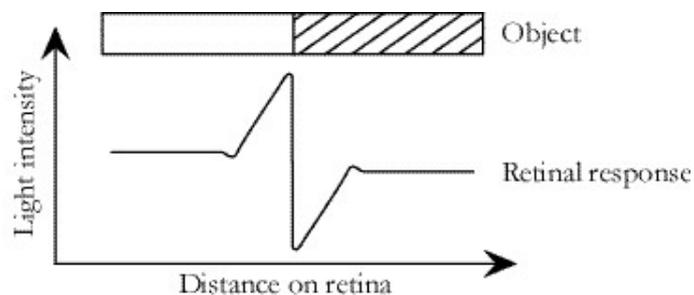
The radicality of the edge is "exaggerated" by the eye which thus in its very construction is aimed at analyzing the visual object into a structure of lines.

Given this inventory of lines in the phenomenon, the draughtsman may now make a further selection among them and doing so obtain a sketch. Whether he does this in order to get a first structuring of his work which later will be fully orchestrated with detail depth colouring, etc. – or whether he does it for its own purpose, is not significant for our basic observation. On the other hand, the draughtsman may *add* further lines in the sketch as a trial-and-error attempt at reproducing the line structure offered by the visual system – he may indicate a number of strokes in a zone where the final line would appear only if the drawing is taken further than the sketch phase. Thus, we may distinguish between different sketch techniques:
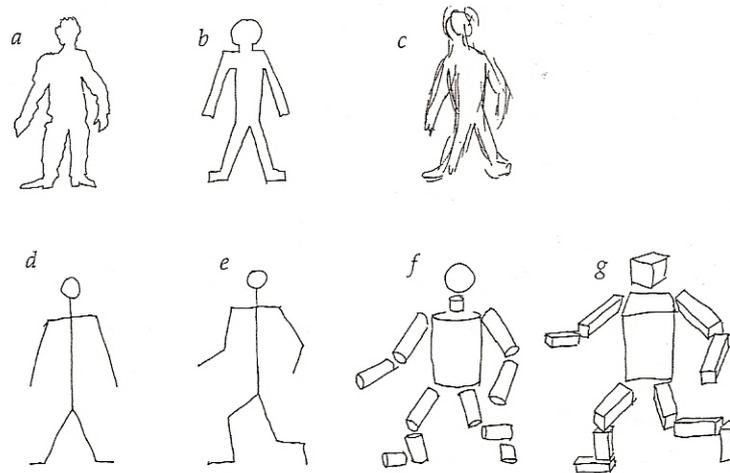
a) contour, b) stylized contour   c) contour doubling
d) stylising of oblong object into lines
e) d) plus line bendings as symbol of functional bending
f) analysis of the object into cylinders
g) analysis of the object into prisms

Here is selected seven typical among many different possible sketch techniques. They may be combined, more may be added, but all of them build on the simple set of lines in the visual phenomenon synthesized into an object. We must add, that the basic definition of the sketch by the analytical transformation seems too simple. In many cases, the sketch adds what Groupe μ call *stylization* which systematically exaggerates and suppresses a series of features with some pragmatic aim of making certain aspects of the type more easily read than others. Stylization is strictly speaking another set of devices than sketching proper, but in the ordinary perception of the sketch both procedures occur, because the sketch itself builds on a hasty stylizing of the object: it does not reproduce the exact contour of the object, but a simplified, stylized rendering of it. Among its techniques count the following: the subsumtion of the lines drawn under a certain and limited class of types (most often straight lines and a few curves), the subsumtion of angles under a few angles with selected, discrete values (45 and 90 degrees, e.g.), the "stretching" of lines to continuity, even rectilinearity, exaggeration of symmetry, etc. (Groupe μ, p. 365-8). All these transformations may be found in the examples above, with the addition of the subsumtion of volumes under a certain selection of simple types (e.g. cylinders, spheres, cubes, straight lines, etc.). The uniformization of colours and textures to be subsumed under a small selection of types of these is another possibility which we can not here illustrate.

        The single sketch technique selects its set of lines with a semiotic purpose, determined by whether the aim is the precise or approximate appearance of

the contour, whether (aspects of) the construction of the object, its function, its relation to other objects, etc. is the goal. The sketch thus possesses a rich variation of different transformation possibilities with a corresponding selection of lines, determined by which properties in the object is to be represented. Sketching and stylization may, on the other hand, be driven so far that the effect becomes, in fact, diminished readablity rather than increased.

In addition to this comes the possibility that the scarcity of the sketch can be utilized to point to indeterminacy, both in the object depicted and in the perceiving subject. The visual sign's being a type makes it general and implies that it may subsume several possible objects under it. This effect may, of course, be countered by the appearance of indices in the picture, disambiguitizing who or what the sketch refers to. This typicality is strengthened in the sketch case, the sketch being typically even more general than the more detailed visual sign. With reference to this (deliberate) indeterminacy in the object, the sketch may provide a Peircan diagram of the object. In a sketch like the following:
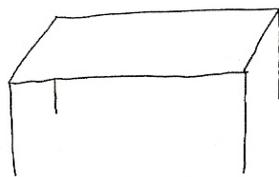
this aspect is evident, just like in construction diagrams, function diagrams, etc. which are sketches selecting certain sets of disambiguous information of the object depicted. It is striking, however, that this indeterminacy may, in artistic contexts, be turned 180 degrees against the observer. Maybe he is a cool, technocratic, schematic person who not only regards isolated diagrams with precise purposes this way, but perceives his surroundings in general in this formalized and sterile way? Or maybe he is a confused marginal existence to whom objects only appear as vague clouds? Even more striking is the interpretion of subjective vacillation of the sketch in cases like the following:
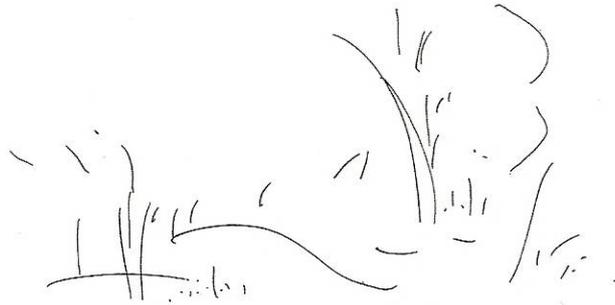
The many competing contours may be given several different interpretations: maybe they are a series of still more precise approximations to the object – or they bear witness to the fact that the object is hard to grasp in a precise way, maybe because of a very faceted morphology (a face), or maybe due to the fact that the object is moving or in a process of change. In the same way, the missing completion of the contour hints into whole, completed objects is ambiguous: maybe a process in development is hinted at here. These interpretations of the sketch is still objective – but in many cases they are spontaneously supplied with subjective interpretations: it may the the instability of the perceiving subject which makes it difficult to focus precisely on the object. This instability, in turn, may be ascribed to properties in the perception apparatus (it is difficult to keep eye and head completely still, difficult to synthesize the different profiles of complicated objects from different points-of-view) or to the more emotional or volitional instability in the subject (an angry, upset, ecstatic, traumatized, drunk, confused person has more difficulty in concluding precise perceptions successfully or drawing correct sketches) – so to speak an impressionist versus an expressionist field in subjective imprecision.

　　　　We shall assume that the objective use of the sketch and its obvious connections to epistemology is phenomenologically primary (the sketch as a proto-diagram). But the artistic sketch, even if it has its root in this objectivity, should not necessarily be measured on the sketch as a diagram. As always, when art takes over a device, the aesthetic judgment criteria of art itself take over as well, and from this point of view the subjective and objective aspects of the sketch yield equal possibilities for further aesthetic use.

To conclude, we shall propose the distinctions between 1) sketches depending on which lines in the the object or in the understanding of it are highlighted, and with which semiotic aim – and 2) between objective and subjective uses of the indeterminacy assumed by the visual type in the sketch.

[i] Of course, the linguistic term has other prerequisites alongside with the visual type: knowledge of its use, bodily experience with that use, the object's relation to other objects, etc. – see the discussion of Eco's Cognitive Type and Nuclear Content in ch. 3.

[ii] Cf. ch. 3.

[iii] Translations from the *Traité* are my own. "... on peut supprimer certaines lignes pour ne laisser substister que celles jugées importantes. On obtient ainsi l'*esquisse*, qui fournit du sujet une vision synthetique, et livre souvent des tracés régulateurs utiles pour l'interpretation correcte de l'oeuvre finale." (310).