

The Production of Performative Drawings for Studying Spaces of Everyday Life

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Abstract

This article is part of the author's doctoral thesis on 'performative drawing' in artistic research. It focuses on researching the spaces of everyday life using the 'multi-perspective + live performance' drawing method. First, this article briefly describes the theoretical development from the term 'performative utterance' to 'performative urbanism', 'performative research', and finally to 'performative drawing'. Then, based on several examples of 'performative drawings' conducted by the author in villages in Austria and China, the specific production steps of the 'performative drawing' process are demonstrated in detail. Finally, the text describes means of observing, analysing, and recording the spaces of everyday life through the drawing process and offers information on creating an artistic research text based on graphic language.

Keywords

performative drawing; multi-perspective; performative urbanism; performative research; artistic research.

1. Introduction

Can multi-perspective, precise, realistic drawing processes be used to research the space of daily life? Is the objective and detailed image drawing process a research process? Is the drawing itself also a research text based on graphic language? These are questions that this article attempts to explore. The text starts with the action-oriented concept of 'the performative', enumerates its common principles in linguistics, urban design methods, and paradigm research, and uses this to explain the concept of 'performative drawing'. Then, based on drawings of several villages in Austria and China, created by the author, the six steps of a 'performative drawing' process are discussed in detail: 1. participating in daily life; 2. sketching the street outline; 3. systematically shooting scenes on both sides of the street; 4. sketching and observation on-site; 5. improvisational communication caused by artistic practice; 6. recognising the spaces of everyday life through pencil and paper.

2. Performative Utterance\Design\Urbanism

In this part, I will introduce the concept of 'the performative' in linguistics and urban planning theory, and extract three

common characteristics: participation and intervention, flexibility and open-form, and mobility and productivity.

In the philosophy of language and speech-act theory, the term 'performative utterance' denotes a type of sentence that not only describes a situation or reality but also produces the reality that is described. The British language philosopher J. L. Austin (1911-1960) discovered that in the process of speaking, part of an utterance also realises its content, expressed in language, through speech acts. For example, a prospective couple holding a wedding in a church, answering the priest's question with, 'Yes, I do', in the act of saying these words, also realises their willingness to marry. The performative aspect of such a sentence of 'what you say means what you do' and 'doing by saying' perfectly describes a 'performative utterance'. J. L. Austin pointed out in his book "How to Do Things with Words" (1975) that in the philosophy of language and speech-act theory, performative utterances are sentences that describe a given reality and simultaneously transform the reality they speak about.

In 2013, Sophie Wolfrum hosted the symposium “Performative Urbanism, Generating and Designing Urban Space”, and co-edited a subsequent publication together with Nikolai Freiherr von Brandis (2015). Both this seminar and the corresponding book can be regarded as the first comprehensive and systematic exploration of the characteristics of ‘the performative’ in the fields of design, architecture, and urban planning. The two authors pointed out that “Performative Urbanism seeks to go beyond the mere interpretation or analysis of urban phenomena. The focus is not on perception or interpretation, rather on action, politics, design” (Wolfrum and Brandis, 2015, p. 5). This new object-oriented design concept emphasises a bottom-up, action-oriented, open-process production strategy of both social and urban space. By respecting the needs of the general public and taking spatial behaviour as a guide, performative urbanism reacts to the structure and behavioural impact of architecture and urban space. Physical space defines personal behaviour and event reality, and the occurrence of personal behaviour and event reality also reshape the content and meaning of material/physical space.

The concept of ‘the performative’ has been extended from linguistic philosophy to design, architecture, and urban planning, and is still open to a variety of interpretations, whose common features can include:

Participation and intervention: Designers or artists collect data on and participate in the public use of space to create bottom-up influence. This differs from the previous position of designers as bystanders and also from the creation of formal results produced by pre-set goals, or the guidance by top-down institutions.

Flexibility and open form: Performative approaches do not pre-set fixed creative goals, design goals, or definitions of space, and use improvisational strategies, such as stage performances, to openly respond to the development of events, human spatial behaviour, or unpredictable emergencies, while dynamically guiding creative output. The openness and dynamic renewal of the process may have a broader social impact and longer-term influence than processes aimed at a fixed result.

Mobility and productivity: The production of performative works will be based on real social events. The open production process and results of works also produce new social realities, or catalyse changes into social facts.

3. Performative Research and Performative Drawing

At the beginning of the 20th century, the ‘performance turn’ occurring in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, and the concept of ‘performative language’ proposed by J. L. Austin (1975), also affected the field of qualitative research. Due to the limitations of textual media in describing the diversity, dynamics, and visuality of human behaviour and social life, some qualitative researchers began to look for other symbols to substitute or complement text to match the corresponding research results better. Moreover, in orthodox qualitative research, with its strict research methodology and research procedures, even though the process allows researchers to incorporate certain personal emotions and judgements, it is hard to avoid certain blind spots or ambiguities, due to question-led research designs. “Again, in moving toward performance the investigator avoids the mystifying claims of truth, and simultaneously expands the range of communities in which the work can stimulate dialogue.” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 6) Of course, not all qualitative researchers are happy with the messy forms, created by applying performance in research. Many are keen to pursue orthodox methods of qualitative research, and adhere to long-standing fundamental principles, which has led to a shift in the ‘performative turn’ away from qualitative research.

Meanwhile, “[r]esearchers in the arts, media and design often struggle to find serviceable methodologies within the orthodox research paradigms of quantitative and qualitative research” (Haseman, 2006, p. 99). ‘Performative research’, on the other hand, has an external cause and an internal demand for independence. That is why Brad Haseman (2006) defines ‘performative research’ as a third research paradigm, besides qualitative and quantitative research, in his article “A Manifesto for Performative Research”. He pointed out that ‘performative research’ would be more applicable for designers and artists, distinguishing it from quantitative and qualitative research, which have long divided mainstream approaches to research. He also declared that quantitative

research was based on data, while qualitative research was based on text. Both are question-led, with the purpose of proving or disproving certain hypotheses, while moving towards a predetermined goal within a predetermined range of results according to strict research procedures. However, 'performative research' is practice-led, and does not set a limited research scope, formula, or goal. To describe the outputs of these artistic practices, Haseman (2006, p. 105) mentions several common forms: "forms of still and moving images; forms of music and sound; forms of live action and digital code, which are all referred to as Symbolic Forms."

The term 'performative drawing' refers to a static or dynamic hand-drawn image, digital drawing, or photo. In the case of hand-drawn images, the production process of images constitutes a long process of inscribing visual information (images) on paper with pencils. Images are derived from observation, conjecture, analysis, and discovery of the immediate scene, the surrounding environment, and individual perception. The visual information, created in a hand-drawing, can be continuously viewed, interpreted, recognised, disseminated, and communicated by the artist and other audiences. The corresponding visual knowledge can be obtained by experiencing the image. In 'performative drawing', the physical entity of the image can be regarded as the materialised result of research, and the drawing process of the image itself as the implementation process. In other words, the image in 'performative drawing' is the result of a research technique and a carrier of knowledge at once. This kind of exact, realistic, and narrative image conforms to a specific law of graphical reproduction (perspective principle). Its graphical language, just like data, words, and other traditional academic texts, has the same value for describing the world.

4. Producing Performative Drawings

In this chapter, I will use several 'performative drawings' of villages in Austria and China as examples to introduce 'performative drawing' as a research method, based on a description of the drawing process and the use of drawing as a technique for performing a visual language. The drawing process can be divided into six steps, which are described in detail below.

4.1 Participating in Daily Life

At the beginning of the 'performative drawing' process, researchers do not need to set specific research goals. Instead, they could go to any town that they can reach, stay for a certain period of time, and try to eat, live, and work together with the locals. This method is different from quantitative research or qualitative research, which is usually problem-led, while inferring a predetermined hypothesis within a limited scope. Rather, it is similar to an artist's creative activity in the process of improvisational participation in local life, using open, flexible, and active artistic practice to discover problems and perform research at the same time. For example, in China, only when entering a village, I as a researcher can encounter real-life stories, such as inhabitants having two meals per day, heating in the soil bed, defecating in a dry toilet, and slaughtering winter pigs on the street at the end of a year. These scenes are completely different from daily life scenes in the city but are part of ordinary village life in China. When I personally participate in village life, local customs, dialects, diets, or timetables are in sharp contrast with the urban reality that I am used to.

Although these on-site and ongoing perceptions are personal and one-sided, the entire participation process actually contributes to keen observation, proactive adjustment, random attempts to capture spatial realities, and an open sense of research. Arriving at a new research site, the sensitivity brought about by the initial sense of strangeness is very precious and deserves to be recorded immediately with sketches, photos, and words. At this stage, I try not to ignore or cover up my discomfort but use the artist's real individual 'self' as a research tool to constantly observe, experience, and record the entire participation process.

4.2 Sketching the Street Outline

After participating in the daily life of locals for a period of time, I begin to take systematic pictures of the streets. In repeated street walks, I use my body to become familiar with the street layout and sketch the street outline. This street knowledge is established through individual on-site experience, which is difficult to obtain by sitting at a table while checking a paper or digital map. In the process of walking around the village, I can also bring along village maps

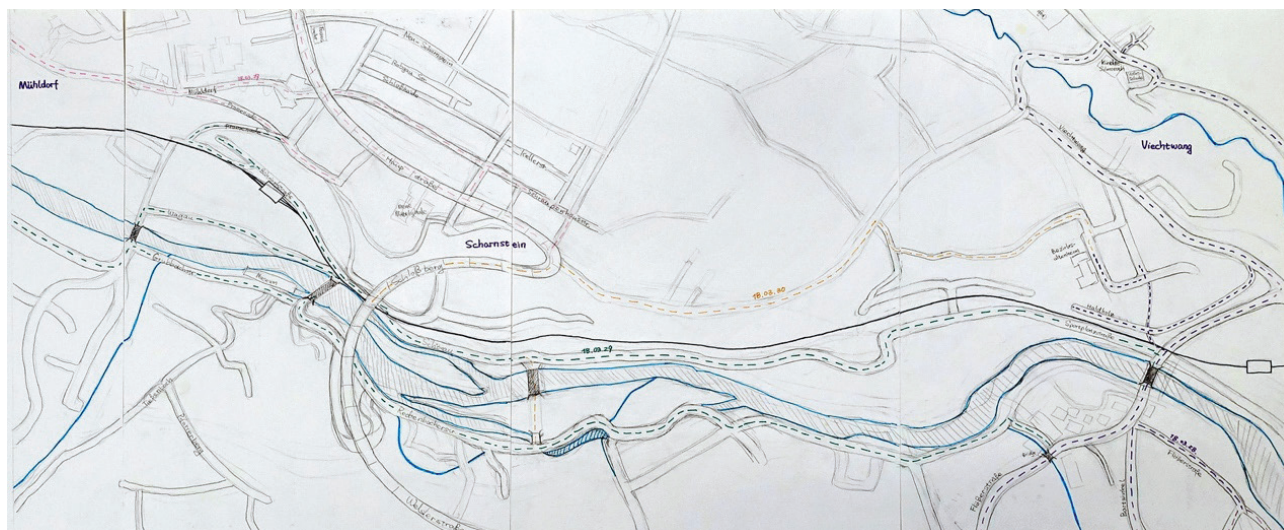


Figure 1. Sketch of street outlines of Scharnstein, 2018. Source: Author-made.

from previous years. Comparing current sites with former locations of streets, houses, churches, or ancestral halls, and looking for reasons for the changes, can produce unknown, new research topics.

Gradually, I lose the opportunity and pleasure of getting lost in a new village or city, and I am able to roughly distinguish the village's zoning and spatial characteristics, such as the location of residential areas, farming areas, village offices, or city halls. At this point I usually draw the map of street outlines as the first version of a performative drawing of the local area. Through the process of drawing this map, I gain a comprehensive understanding of the overall layout of village streets, rivers, and mountains. At the same time, the abstract and fragmented bodily cognition of wandering in various sections of the street is also transferred to paper by drawing, while creating precise and continuous visual information.

4.3 Systematically Shooting Scenes on Both Sides of the Street

By drawing the overall road outline of the village in the previous step, I often found out that new areas of a village,

new suburban residential areas, or developing scenic parts of traditional villages are often based on a road-grid layout. However, traditional village structures and older areas of villages often follow the flow of adjacent rivers and mountains, providing a free layout. In agriculture-oriented villages, it is customary to set aside smooth and continuously flowing land as much as possible for large-scale cultivation or grazing. In this phase of village research, I will systematically take pictures of the scenes on both sides of each street. If the village has a square street layout, I only need to number the streets, walk around one by one, and shoot scenes on both sides, while walking two turns. If it is an irregularly laid out street, I will walk and take pictures in the street first, and then mark and exclude documented places on the map. I save all the street photos from the camera to the computer each day, and name them in digital documents as 'road number + photo's date'.

4.4 Sketching and Observation On-site

For this step, I will reintegrate random fragments of daily life and stand on the street, to perform the artistic practice of 'observation + sketching + taking photos + conversation'.

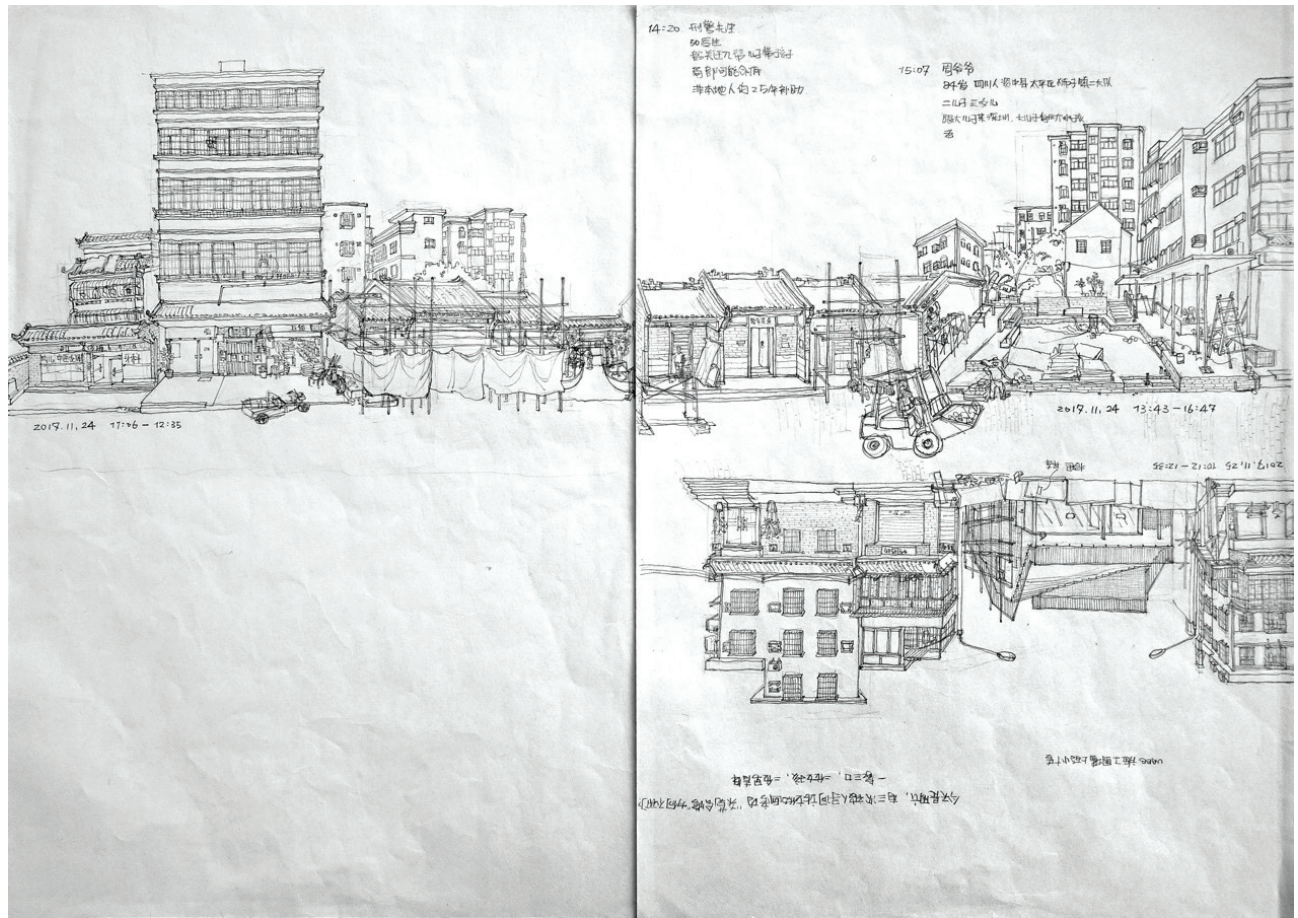


Figure 2. Sketch of both sides of a street in Shenzhen, 2017. Source: Author-made.

This step can form many new and open-ended research opportunities, such as being invited to locals' homes to hear their daily life stories and draw their daily living space. Or discovering the fuzzy spaces of the village more deeply, such as the cross-street corridor between two village houses, the pile of tools around the dry soil toilets in the backyard, or the ditch for planting greens or breeding chickens in between the front yard and public streets. These informal, temporary, and composite spatial uses in the village arise from real

daily needs. They are different from uses of urban space, with clearly defined boundaries and functions. Also, they are full of the improvisational wisdom of village life. Fuzzy village space is a direct spatial transformation of daily spatial surroundings produced by each villager according to their daily life and daily work, as a demand-led spatial production. Can it be said that daily life in the village is a specific kind of spatial production under 'performative urbanism'?

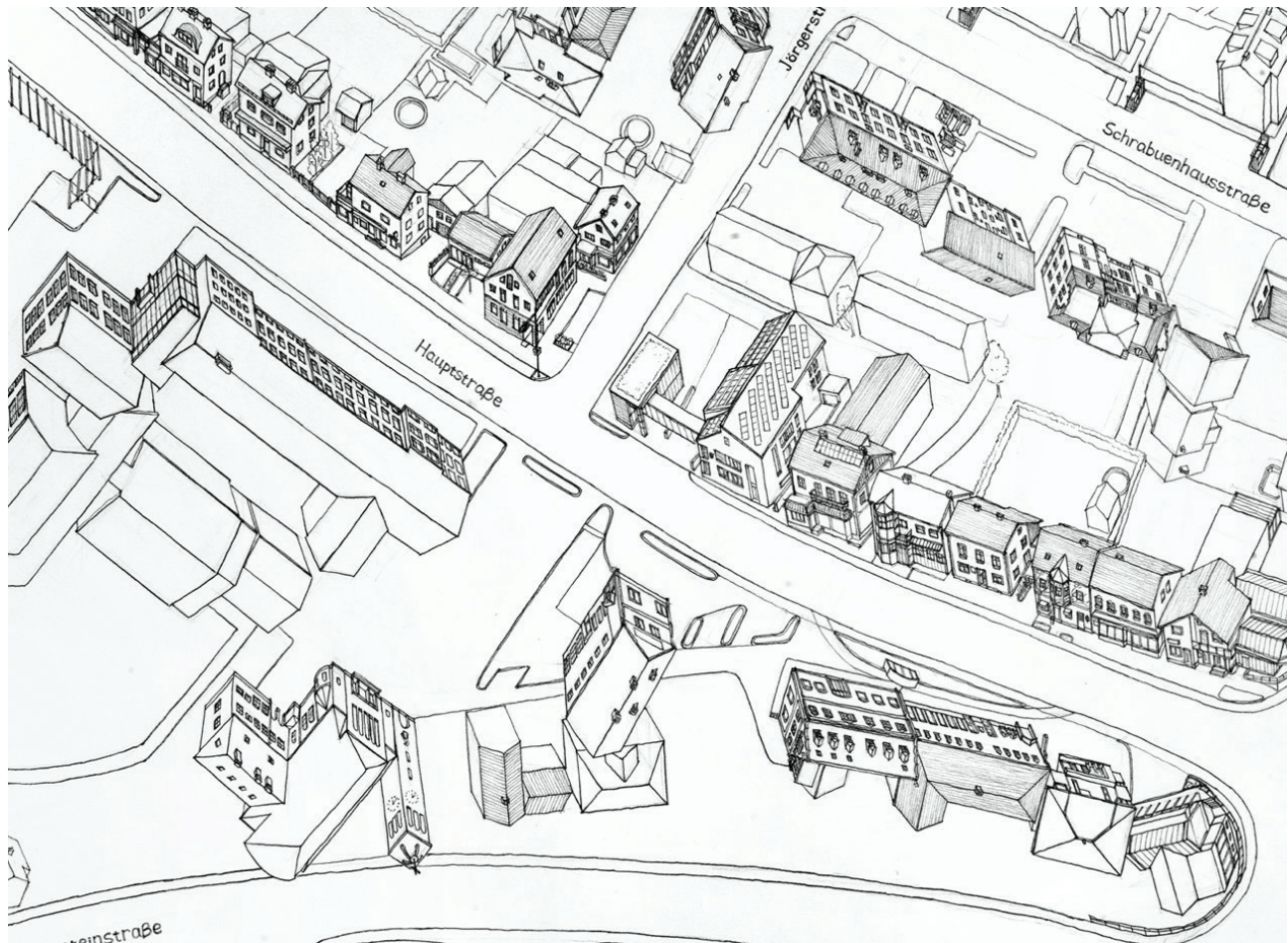


Figure 3. Sketch of both sides of a street in Scharnstein (detail), 2018. Source: Author-made.

4.5 Improvisational Communication Caused by Artistic Practice

Improvisation is the most precious part of live performances. When the audience cheers or even boos for a performance on the theatre stage, the actors, according to the audience's response, will make corresponding adjustments to the originally pre-set performance. Watching and being seen are two relative concepts that interact with each other. When the mood of the audience changes due to the performance

and affects its content, the audience itself is involved in the production of the performance. This kind of improvisational, open, temporary adjustment and mutual influence, although vividly reflected in live performances, is not exclusive to performance activities but is reflected in all aspects of our daily lives. This is the logical basis for the 'performance turn' in the early 20th century and its impact on various disciplines. At the same time, it is one of the most important values of 'performative urbanism' and 'performative research'.

When I observe, take photos, and sketch in a long-term process on the village road, in the eye of locals, I am an outsider who is performing temporary drawing activities in their village. From time to time, residents along the road and villagers passing by would stop to look at my sketches, so a conversation that could not be preconceived could occur naturally.

This kind of casual conversation on the road seems aimless, as it just breaks away from the pre-set research goal, without a potential link to research results. And since the conversation started, based on the interest in artistic activities, this not only reduces the alertness of strangers but even produces a sense of resonance through art. A stranger standing on the street sketching and photographing often causes villagers to ask: Who is she? Why does she come to our village? What is she drawing? What is there to draw in this village? Can she make money from her drawings?

As an artistic practitioner or drawing performer standing on the road, my uninvited presence may enrich local village life but may also disturb or invade the usual tranquillity of the countryside. I have an obligation and responsibility to respond politely and improvisational to the villagers' incidental enthusiasm, curiosity, and censure. I am answering the villagers' questions, and meanwhile, I am also harvesting precious stories about the trivial matters of their lives, which may lead to new research interests. Artistic practice and improvisational dialogue on the road are not only a way of generating research data but also aim at the production of research issues and topics, through both instrumentality and implementation.

4.6 Recognising the Spaces of Everyday Life through Pencil and Paper

Drawing Tools = (mechanical) Pencil + Eraser + White Paper

Pencils are interchangeable. The mechanical pencil can maintain the uniformity of the line. Implementation of the first five steps: participating in and observing local life, sketching the street outlines, systematically taking photos of each street, exploring fuzzy space, sketching the details

on the road, and holding improvisational dialogue with the locals—these are all elements of the process of 'performative drawing research' based on artistic practice in a rural or urban site. The next step entails visualising my internalised cognition externally: How to construct a precise, realistic, scientific, and comprehensive knowledge image from scattered information I collected in the village? I use the outline map of the village street as a base map, determine the size of the drawing in a scaled-up manner, and draw the outline of the street and the location of the house lightly. Then, I look at the photos of the village streets, determine the viewing angle of each street and each building, and faintly draw the 3D outline of each house. Next, I need to repeatedly check and compare all the photos of a house to draw its specific details. For artistic practitioners, this long and meticulous drawing process is a re-recognition of village life, based on the pencil tip and paper surface, while it is a way to graphically re-study the village. To the viewer of this drawing, a detailed picture of everything from the overall layout of the village to the spatial details of the villagers' daily lives serves as a two-dimensional documentary of spatial reality and quasi-scientific image.

Depending on the area of the village and the size of the drawing, the drawing size of a two-story village house is usually about 4 cm, and it takes an hour to draw each building, on average. Therefore, a village with 400 houses requires more than 400 hours of drawing time. If I draw five days a week and five hours a day, it will take more than four months to complete a 'performative drawing' of an entire village. The long process of freehand drawing is a mechanical task, which requires repeatedly comparing photos, recalling village experiences, analysing spatial structures, and drawing specific houses. This mechanical and repetitive manual task may seem boring, because of constant repetition, but it is also a process of discovering and mastering artistic skills in time. When drawing, I have to look up and compare thousands of village photos, quickly collage the photos and on-site spatial memories, while drawing lines in the brain to make a realistic map of village life with accurate proportions and precise content.

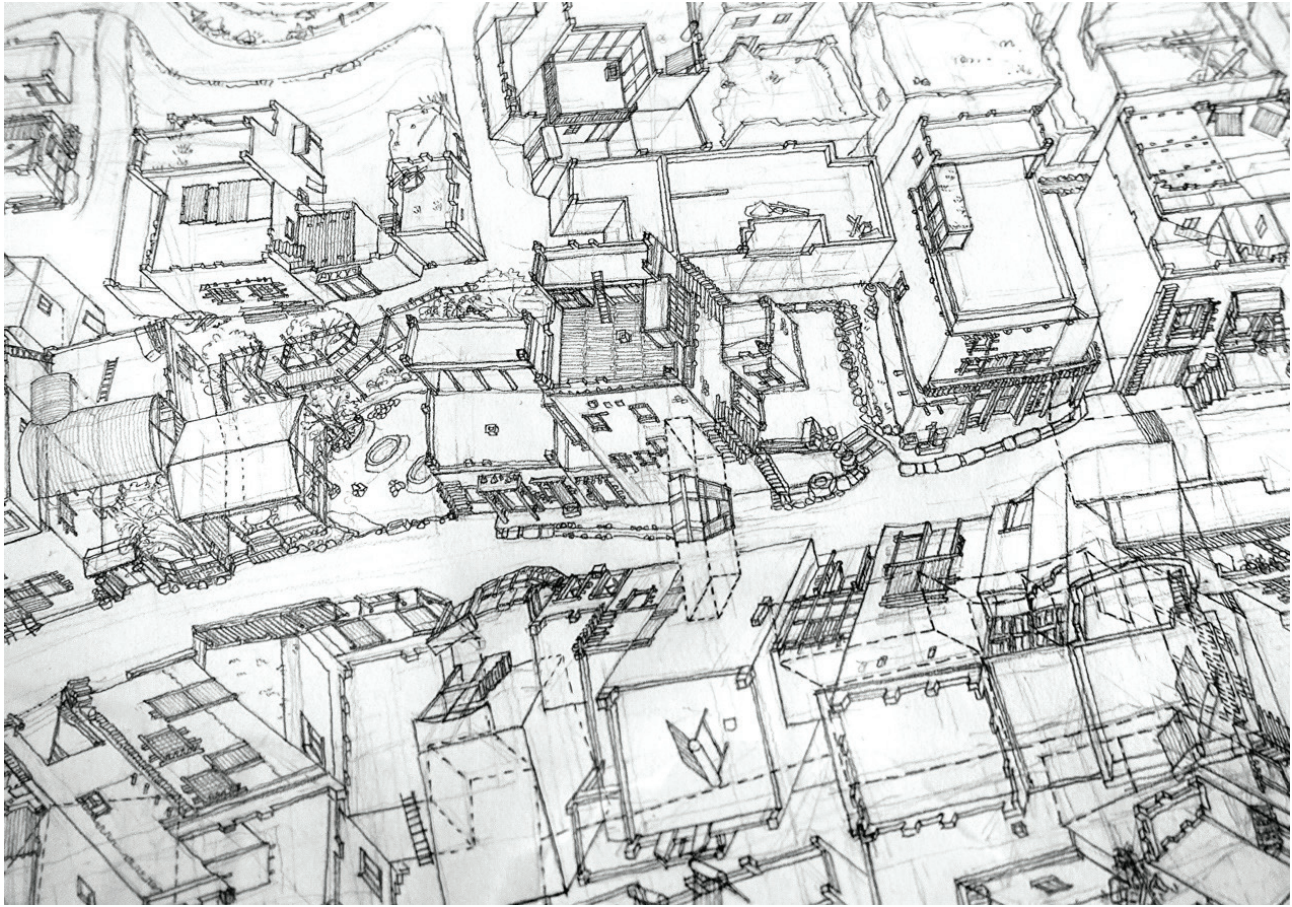


Figure 4. Performative drawing of Dong Men Kou (detail), 2021. Source: Author-made.

The unique drawing perspective of axonometric drawing with scattered points perspective allows the drawing angle to change with the viewing angle of the village. I found many spatial traces in the village scenes that were not detected in time. For example, in the village of Dong Men Kou, the walls of the original old buildings have a stone structure, and the doors and windows of the facades of buildings present an irregular layout. However, in the newly built houses, even though similar wall decoration stones are used to create the

effect of an old building, the door and window holes of the facade present an unnatural, regular layout. Therefore, this kind of repeated paper drawing exercise not only improves my hand-drawing skills but also my observation ability. In the process of documenting village scenes with pencil and paper, I found more spatial stories that were neglected and that form a second level of village (re-)cognition through drawing.



Figure 5. Performative drawing of Dong Men Kou (in frame), 2021. Source: Author-made.

5. Conclusions

In the 'performative drawing' process, when I draw outdoor spaces, I use the multi-angle axonometric drawing method to make the two front facades of each street visible at the same time and to avoid mutual obstruction of streets in different directions. When I draw interior spaces, I use a combination of plan, elevation, section, and perspective drawings to allow multiple elevations of space to be presented on one piece of paper at the same time. However, the content, process, and results of a particular drawing are not set by a single research goal in advance, but are guided by observation, while following a meticulous drawing process to analyse and discover more details and elements of space. It can be said that the processes of drawing and researching are linked by repeating steps of mutual advancement.

'Performative drawing' is a form of 'performative research', which uses drawing as an artistic practice and a research approach. My drawing technique, described above, presents street layouts, architectural forms, courtyard objects, details of everyday spaces, and the multifaceted relations between spaces and spatial objects in a village or urban space. The practice of 'performative drawing' is based on the principles of 'performative research'. Its flexible, long, and open-ended drawing process embodies a research process of observation, analysis, cognition, and visual recording. Through repeated, detailed, multi-angle observation and meticulous drawing of things or spaces, the spatial information of any three-dimensional space of daily life can be understood more comprehensively and can be recorded in a quasi-scientific, two-dimensional image.

Conflict of Interests and Ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects' anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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