

“So one must begin again from scratch,” announced the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in 1948. Writing about the work of Alberto Giacometti, Sartre identified the impulse that many artists felt to forge a new visual language in the aftermath of World War II. This feeling was shared by the young, New York-based Claes Oldenburg more than a decade later, in 1961, when he declared, “I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.”

Modest, immediate, and direct, drawing was the ideal medium for the period of renewal bounded by these statements. During these years drawing took many forms, from the abstract to the figurative, the organic to the hard-edged. Mimicking the look of language, it appeared as graffiti-like scribbling or borrowed from traditional calligraphic practices. While rhythmic gestures asserted the primacy of the individual, reduced geometries sought to communicate universal ideals, and accretions of marks mirrored an increasingly consumerist society’s urge toward accumulation.

Gathering approximately eighty works from MoMA’s collection, this exhibition looks across movements, geographies, and generations to invite connections between diverse artists who experimented on paper. At a time when the world faces another “degree zero” moment, these drawings offer templates for beginning again.

Organized by Samantha Friedman, Associate Curator,
Department of Drawings and Prints.

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