Working in the U.S. and Israel for more than four decades, Joshua Neustein (b. 1940) makes art that traverses conventional boundaries between artistic media, often with the effect of questioning and challenging the divisions, borders, and distinctions that shape our social, political, and personal lives. His works on and with paper in particular have contributed significantly to redefinitions of drawing in contemporary art. A Guggenheim fellow, Joshua Neustein represented Israel in the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995, and his work is included in numerous museum and private collections. In 2012, in addition to an upcoming retrospective at the Israel Museum, he will have a solo show at Untitled Gallery, New York and will be featured in “Ends of the Earth: Art of the Land to 1974,” a major historical survey of land art organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Catherine Craft, Adjunct Assistant Curator for Research and Exhibitions, spoke with Joshua Neustein in New York at his SoHo studio.

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CC: Early on, were there other artists that you saw as role models for that alternative type of artist?

JN: I think my most influential godfather was a historian, not an artist. I took every course he ever gave at City College. His name was Hans Kohn, and his specialty was the history of nationalism. Hans Kohn was enormously influential on my thinking in art.

CC: In what way?

JN: In his philosophical ideas, he being Central European, originally of Czech origin, and then associated with Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt. If you look at their history of totalitarianism, you see that it's not a straightforward history at all. This whole notion of labels is very misleading. Hans Kohn was the first person I met who had an encyclopedic view of the world: everything fit together. He said all movements — psychoanalysis, Marxism, capitalism — have several stages. In the beginning all these movements are very constructive.

Take Abstract Expressionism. In the beginning of that movement, it was tremendously constructive. It explored new possibilities. It opened up new ways of doing art, and perhaps even more important, it opened up new ways of thinking about art. What great movements do, is they change the language that describes it. And that opens doors for artists but also for you as a curator. What do we mean when we say drawing?

CC: It does seem that drawing has become this practice that moves between other disciplines and media that tend to exclude each other.

JN: And energizes them. I am a total advocate of drawing. I think drawing today is the most exciting of the practices in art. More than sculpture, more than video. The only one that perhaps is as exciting or more, or at least was until recently, is modern dance, because of John Cage; and because of [Merce] Cunningham, and because of [Robert] Rauschenberg and Robert Morris... I unfortunately was in Israel when all this was going on here, but I was making my own explorations. On the one hand I functioned in a kind of a vacuum; on the other hand, it gave me the chance to do my own thing.

CC: It's interesting because the life you led early on as an artist, being in two places – Israel and New York – that's much less unusual today.

JN: And there's less prejudice against people living outside the so-called center. I think museum curators today do look at art developing in other places. Whereas before they looked at New York, Paris, London, but that was it. Maybe Berlin, but that was already a reach.

CC: So it sounds like with this exhibition at the Israel Museum and also generally, you're seeking an expanded definition of drawing.

JN: It is going to be an expanded definition. I’m going to have 72 works in that show. There will be 5 videos as drawing, including one you saw, Making and Erasing. In that video, I sometimes make and erase a scribble, other times I make and erase the alphabet, then I make and erase sentences, then I make and erase iconic symbols like the swastika, the dollar sign, the Star of David, the cross.

CC: Do you still make erased drawings?

JN: I make erased drawings but I don’t erase these fancy symbols. But I will – I have a few left from making the film that I didn’t throw away. You know artists collect everything, like ants. In other words, I don’t edit myself historically. Some things I just lose interest in. But the carbon copy drawings are different.

CC: Those are the first works I saw by you. They’re made from carbon sets, those sheets of blank paper interspersed with carbon paper, and you cut, fold, tear, and mark the different layers. You’ve been making these for a long time.

JN: Yes, since 1968.

CC: When you started making them, carbon paper was still being used to make copies of documents. And all this time that you’ve been making these drawings, what that paper is has changed – it’s now obsolete. Has that changed the way you thought about what you’re doing with the carbon sets?

JN: Too late. Too late. The nostalgia aspect of it I keep hearing from other people. But of course I’ve been working with
They're not part of the base, because the base is supposedly not part of the sculpture, but with material on it and adhering to it, then he would need to think about the patina of the sculpture to some extent, still visible as a base, if it was sculpted, I assume, I would imagine, that for him the base was the back of the work.  

JN:  – it's difficult –  

CC:  – it's difficult to do again. (laughter)

JN:  Absolutely right. The first time you do it, it's original. Wow! This is great! Then you go through a period of being so self-conscious, that it becomes frustrating and the work doesn't look right. After a while, you forget that you're going to use this as the final product. Then you no longer care.  

CC:  It becomes just something else in the studio.  

JN:  Then it comes back. This is fairly recent, but there was a period between the first one that I thought was acceptable, and then came a series of drop cloths that looked designed, looked like I'd made them. They have to make themselves. I just have to walk around and live on this floor and not think about it. When that happens, I'm back in business. And that's what happened. I usually throw them out, but I keep these drop cloths. I have a whole mess of them right here. I'll keep them, and show them off and on.  

CC:  One thing that strikes me about the drop cloths, also about the carbon papers, and your involvement with paper generally, is that there is a certain democratic sense to these materials. Anybody has access to them, anybody can use them.  

JN:  Absolutely…Right on.  

CC:  And they're also portable. You don't really need a studio, or a special space to make them.  

JN:  It's totally portable. Also, if anything happens to it, it doesn't matter. I once had a guy who wanted to buy my first carbon paper, and pay me for my last carbon paper. My last carbon piece? Who knows? When and where is it written that he will live longer than I will? [laughs] But I couldn't tell him what my first carbon piece was – very likely it was discarded. I could however commit to selling my last carbon piece, given that they can be certain that that's my last carbon piece. An intriguing idea.  

CC:  Well, hopefully that won't be for a very long time! Thank you so much, Joshua.

JN:  Very mutual. I've had a wonderful time.