

FIGURE 2-1  
ROY LICHTENSTEIN  
*Electric Seascape #1*, 1966  
Collage (rowlax and paper),  
22 × 28" (55.9 × 71.2 cm).  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.  
Gift, Mrs. Louis Sosland, Kansas City.  
Photograph by Robert E. Mates, (79.2528)

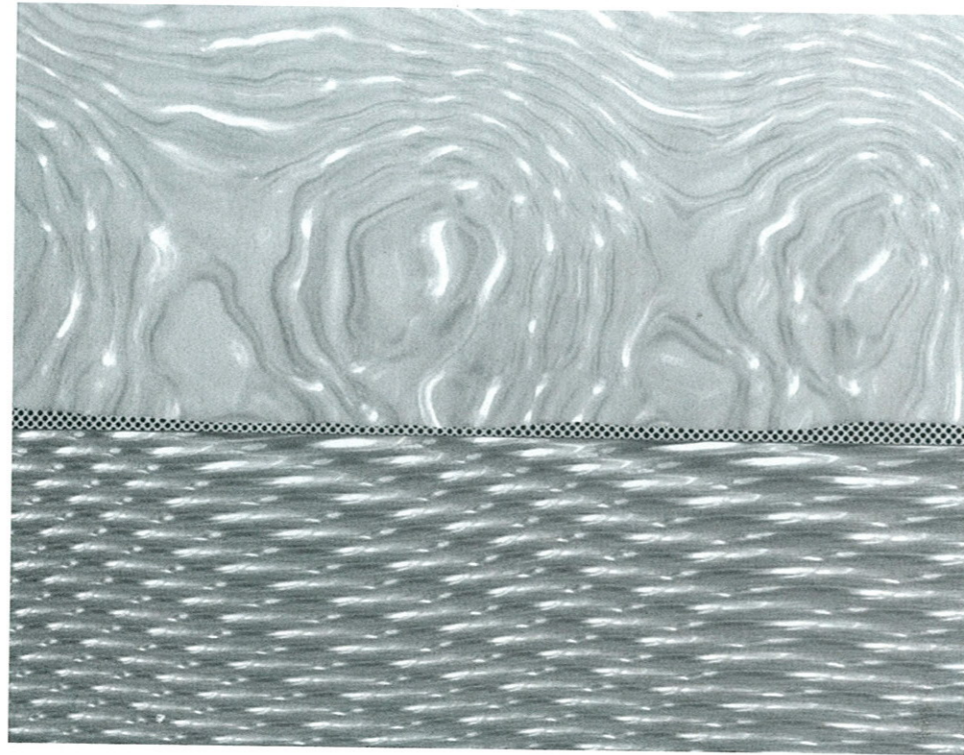


FIGURE 2-2  
BRUCE CONNOR  
*Untitled*, 1960  
Mixed media (oil, wire, nail) on  
canvas, 9 1/4 × 8 1/2" (24.8 × 20.7 cm)  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.  
Gift, James J. Hanafy, 1976. Photograph by  
Robert E. Mates, (76.2265)



## The Shape of a Drawing

The paper we draw on has a shape. (By *shape*, we mean a flat area with a particular outer edge, or boundary.) Since a sheet of paper is itself a flat shape, it follows that any image we draw on it will be, first and foremost, a shape. Let us take, for example, the drawing of a banana flower by Georgia O'Keeffe (Fig. 2-3a). It looks quite "real," suspended in space and thrown into relief by strong lighting. And yet, common sense tells us that a banana flower does not really exist on that page. Instead, we respond to a drawn image of that object, an image that is convincingly modeled with charcoal to look round but is, nevertheless, in its truest physical definition a flat shape.

## Positive and Negative Shape

From an artistic standpoint, subjects in the real world consist of two basic realities: the *positive forms* of objects and the *negative spaces* surrounding these forms or contained by them (such as the space between the handle and body of a coffee cup).

When you draw, the positive forms and negative spaces of your subject are converted into their pictorial counterparts on a flat surface: *positive* and *negative shapes*. To clarify this, let us look at Figure 2-3b (in which we have reduced the drawing by Georgia O'Keeffe to its simplest shape state) and consider the following two points:

1. The entire rectangular surface of the O'Keeffe drawing is divided into two distinct shape areas: no. 1 (positive shape) and no. 2 (negative shape).
2. The illusion of the banana flower as a positive sculptural volume and the space that surrounds it occur within the actual shape divisions of the flat picture plane.

In truth, then, whenever we represent an object or a space on a page, we are creating a shape. And the first shape that is made automatically creates one or

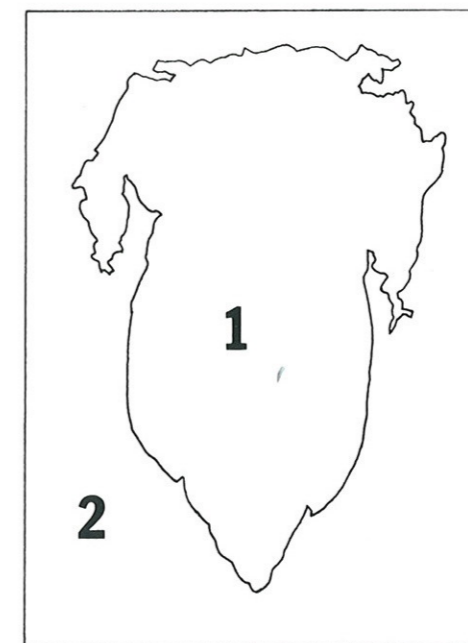
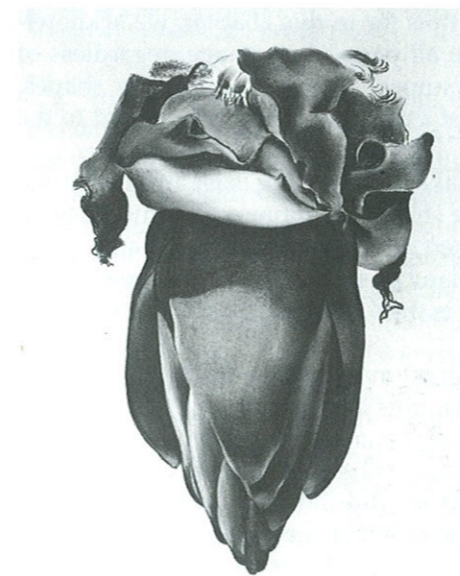


FIGURE 2-3a (left)  
GEORGIA O'KEEFFE  
*Banana Flower*, 1933  
Charcoal, 21 3/4 × 14 3/4"  
© 2003 The Georgia O'Keeffe  
Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York

FIGURE 2-3b (right)

more additional shapes from the area of the drawing sheet. These shapes are designated as either positive or negative.

### Implications of the Term Negative Shape

The term *negative shape* carries connotations that may interfere with an appreciation of positive and negative relationships in a drawing. Unfortunately, negative shapes are sometimes defined as the empty, or passive, areas of a picture that remain after the positive image has been drawn. This may lead students to believe that negative shapes are somehow "second-class" and thus do not require the attention given to positive areas.

A related problem is the tendency for students to label as "background" all the areas of their drawing that lack prominent object symbols.\* Referred to in this way, *background* really means "backdrop," or the subsidiary part of a drawing against which the positive image stands out. This tendency is caused in large part by the material conditioning of our culture; those things we can name usually take precedence in our minds.

But negative shapes aren't simply a backdrop, or what's left over when a positive image is drawn. *They are an integral part of a drawing.* When beginning to draw, be sure to regard the *entire* shape area of your empty sheet of paper as important. So it follows that *all* the shapes resulting from a division of that surface are also important and deserving of careful attention.

Each time you draw a positive shape on your page, you are simultaneously shaping the negative areas of your drawing. This means that positive and negative shapes have an immediate and reciprocal influence on one another. Therefore, any approach that neglects the negative shapes of a drawing will flaw the wholeness of a work and its expression. It will also limit your ability to take advantage of the total visual potential in both your subject and its translation onto a sheet of drawing paper. In view of all this, we are inclined to say that decisions about how best to break up the surface of your picture plane into positive and negative shapes are among the most creative of the drawing process.

### Accentuating the Positive or the Negative

In summarizing what we have established thus far in this chapter, we acknowledge that a drawing surface is flat and that all parts of an image, regardless of how convincingly they are modeled as volumes, are most essentially shapes. Thus, we may conclude that the substance of a drawing is crucially linked to the quality of its positive and negative shapes.

Furthermore, each of the shapes we make in a drawing exist apart from the forms and spaces they portray. So a positive shape that represents something we recognize from the natural world is not inherently more important than a negative shape that stands for an uninhabited plane or space. The way shapes *do* derive their level of importance in a drawing is from the specific artistic treatment they receive.

Although the five-bladed saw is the subject matter in Figure 2-4, it is the exchange between positive and negative areas in this drawing that confers meaning and compels our interest. Note how the negative zones switch from a recessive role in the upper portion of the image to a suggestion of mass and volume at the bottom. (The handle can be read as sitting at the threshold of a dark cavity with the effects of chiaroscuro illuminating the surfaces that curve away from it.)

\*The term *background* as used here is not to be confused with its spatial application in Chapter 1, where it was grouped with the terms *foreground* and *middleground*.

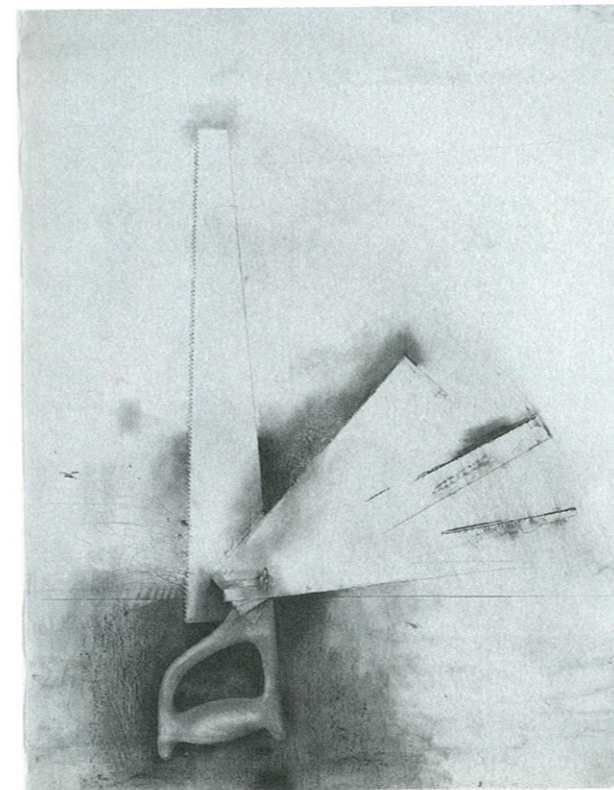


FIGURE 2-4  
JIM DINE  
*Untitled from "Seven Untitled Drawings (5-Bladed Saw)," 1973*  
Charcoal and graphite on buff paper, 25% × 19%  
© 2002 Jim Dine/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
Gift of the Robert Lehman Foundation, Inc. (484.1976.1)  
Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/  
Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

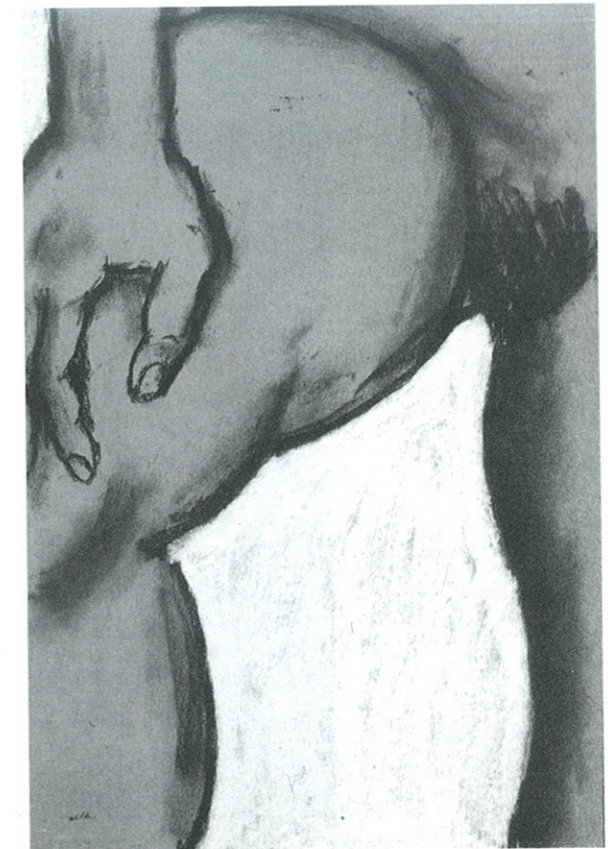


FIGURE 2-5  
GEORGE SEGAL  
1965-4  
*Conté on newsprint, 18 × 24"*  
© George and Helen Segal Foundation/  
Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

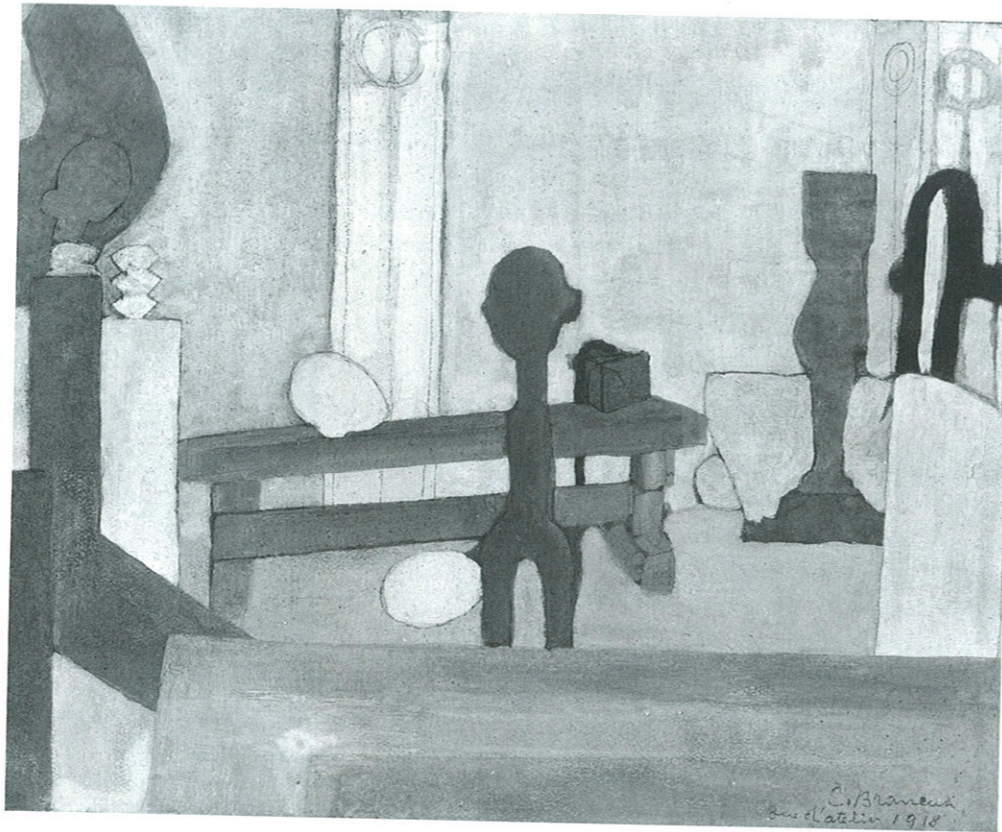
In the center of the drawing, the presence of the blades is implied by employing selective contours (observe the variety of marks and lines used to punctuate the edges of the blades). Visually, this bare-bones conception enables the flat planes of the blades to engage the back space, transforming the negative ground into positive form and convincingly placing the blades into the light and atmosphere of the spatial illusion. Expressively, the contrast between the sturdy, well-defined handle and the fleet gesture of the blades is directly associated with the differing functions of the tool. In this way, positive and negative treatment is inseparable from the drawing's content.

In the pastel drawing by George Segal (Fig. 2-5), it is the negative shape that presses for our attention. Thus, Segal heightens viewer fascination by providing what is least expected: a negative, "empty" shape occupying the central portion of the drawing, a place typically reserved for positive shapes.

As we have indicated in this chapter, many of us are so accustomed to looking at positive forms that negative spaces often go unnoticed. Yet by virtue of their unpredictability, the negative spaces of a subject can have greater visual and expressive potential than their positive counterparts (Fig. 2-6). By isolating them for interpretation as flat shapes, this exercise will heighten your awareness of the "hidden" resources of negative spaces.

#### Exercise 2A

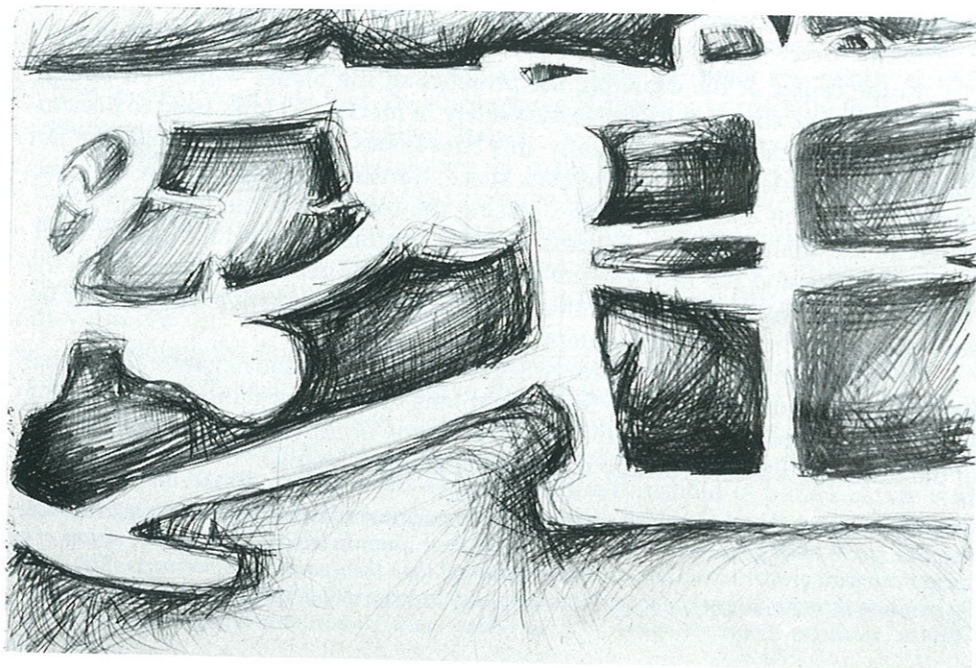
FIGURE 2-6  
 CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI  
*View of the Artist's Studio*, 1918  
 Gouache and pencil, 13 × 16¼"  
 © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
 New York/ADAGP, Paris



Select some objects that have distinct negative spaces. Ladders, chairs, stools, tires, and the like make ideal subjects for this kind of drawing. Jumble and overlap these items to maximize the number and variety of negative spaces. If you turn some of these objects upside down you will find it generally easier to ignore their real-world function and concentrate instead on their shape potential. Negative spaces may also be accentuated by keeping the room light low while turning a strong spotlight on the setup.

Next, find a viewpoint that offers the best assortment of negative spaces and translate them into darkly toned shapes on your drawing paper. Avoid using an outline to describe these shapes; instead, select media that come in a block form (such as lecturer's chalk, compressed charcoal, or a graphite stick) and draw the negative shapes by applying broad, vigorous strokes (Fig. 2-7).

FIGURE 2-7  
 PAUL FLEMING, Arizona State  
 University  
 Student drawing: bold  
 positive-negative layout  
 Pencil, 18 × 24"  
 Courtesy, the artist



## Ambiguous Space

At the beginning of this chapter we discussed how many modern artists have de-emphasized (or rejected entirely) the illusion of three-dimensional space, wishing instead to accentuate the two-dimensional character of pictorial art (Figs. 2-1 and 2-2). This does not mean to imply, however, that these artists abandoned spatial interplay in their work, but rather that they wished to achieve the sensation of space while maintaining for the viewer a firm awareness of the flat picture plane.

One of the most enduring ways for modern artists to accomplish this seeming contradiction of space and flatness in pictorial art is by creating what is often referred to as *ambiguous space*. Ambiguous space can be described as a visual phenomenon in which the spatial relationships between positive and negative shapes are rendered perceptually unstable or uncertain. To clarify this description, we turn now to a discussion of three kinds of ambiguous space: interspace, positive-negative reversal, and figure-ground shift.

### INTERSPACE

The term *interspace* is sometimes considered synonymous with negative space, but in the work of many modern artists it is more appropriately defined as a subtle combination of negative shape and the illusion of positive form. To grasp this concept, look at a watercolor and pencil landscape by Cézanne (Fig. 2-8).

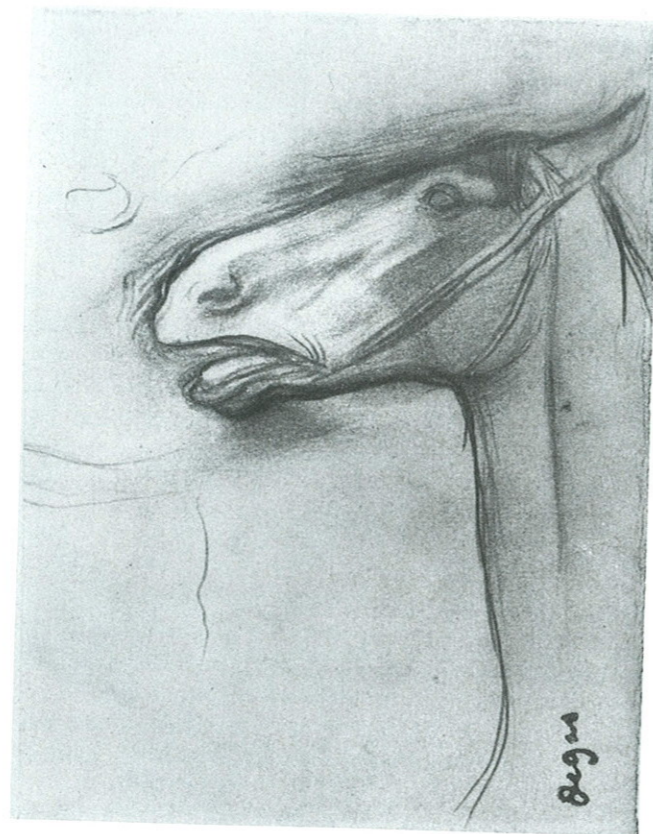
Can you detect in this work that each of the negative interstices appears to be a slightly rounded plane (think of a contact lens) through which the hints of space and atmosphere are seen?

To understand how Cézanne achieved this effect, allow your eyes to follow the contours that mutually describe tree forms and negative areas. Note that these contours vary in their sharpness and light and dark tonalities. This fluctuation in edge conveys the impression of negative planes that are alternately raised or lowered in relation to the cylindrical tree forms (the sharper darks may be seen as shadows cast on the tree forms by the negative shapes).



FIGURE 2-8  
 PAUL CÉZANNE  
*La Grande Arbre*  
 Pencil and watercolor,  
 12 × 18½"  
 Bequest of Theodore Rousseau, 1974.  
 Jointly owned by The Metropolitan  
 Museum of Art and the Fogg  
 Museum of Art, Harvard University  
 (1974.289.1)

FIGURE 2-9  
EDGAR DEGAS  
*Head of a Horse*  
Pencil on paper, 6 $\frac{1}{16}$  × 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ "  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of  
A.E. Gallatin, 1923



So, Cézanne provides enough visual clues in his treatment of the negative areas to give them the barest suggestion of volume. Although they do not compete with the more concrete tree parts, they are, nonetheless, more full than "empty" negative spaces are often deemed to be.

In other words, we have a *tactile* response to the areas of interspace in the Cézanne; that is, our visual reading of the negative shapes is influenced by how, in our mind's eye, those slightly curved surfaces would feel to the touch (think of buckled puzzle pieces). And by calling attention to the negative areas as *shapes*, Cézanne also reaffirmed the expanse of the flat picture plane.

Thus, the term *interspace* implies that instead of being merely flat and "passive," negative shapes may in fact be given a suggestion of volume and thereby assume a more "active" role in the spatial illusion of a two-dimensional work of art. Note in this regard, the drawing by Degas (Fig. 2-9), in which the negative area appears to swell and push against the horse's chin and down its neck, as if it were a cushion, to effectively bolster the quivering presence of the head.

#### POSITIVE-NEGATIVE REVERSAL

Ambiguous spatial relationships may also be achieved through *positive-negative reversals* which occur when shapes in a drawing alternate between positive and negative identities. These alternations make the artifice of illusion more apparent and thereby acknowledge the presence of the work's actual two-dimensional surface. A good example of positive-negative reversal can be found in Figure 2-10, in which the white shapes may, at first glance, appear to be positive "islands" floating forward against a dark ground. But stare at the central black zone for a moment and the reverse begins to happen: the black, formerly negative shape emerges as a positive "presence," and the white shapes seem to drop back like the

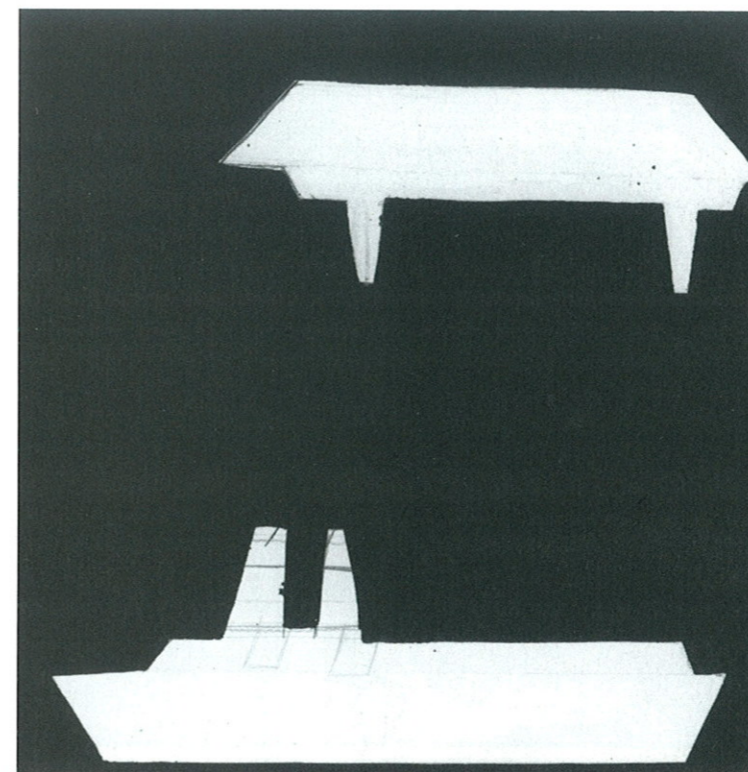


FIGURE 2-10  
DONALD SULTAN  
*Menorca, August 17, 1978*  
Ink and graphite on paper,  
12 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.  
Gift, Norman Dubrow, 1984. Photograph by  
David Heald, (84.3196)

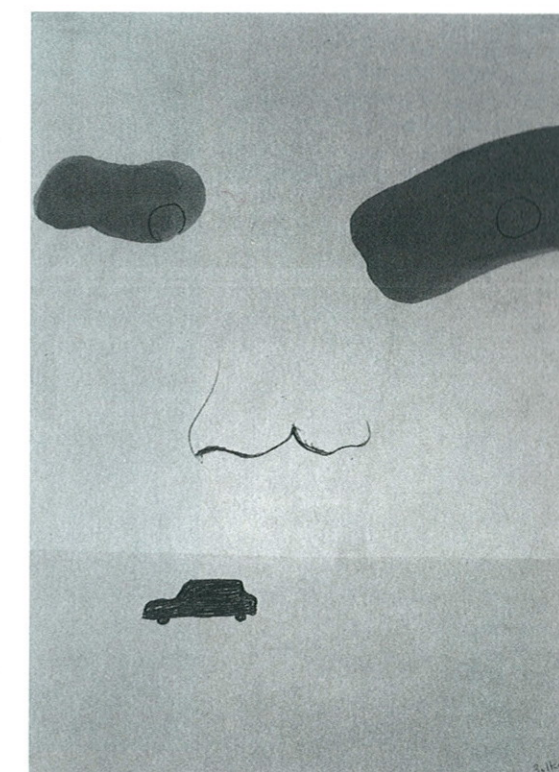


FIGURE 2-11  
SIGMAR POLKE  
*Physiognomy with Car, 1966*  
Ballpoint pen and gouache,  
11 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift  
of the Cosmopolitan Arts Foundation

sides of a box. What we may conclude from this is that either the black or the white shapes in Figure 2-10 may be understood as positive or negative according to viewer perception.

This phenomenon may also be used to great effect in drawings that feature some level of representation. Look, for instance, at how the two dark shapes at the top of Figure 2-11 may be read as either positive cloudlike images on a gray ground or as negative cavities representing eyes on a face. The reversal of the right-hand shape is especially apparent; it seems to change its positive-negative identities continually. This is because one end of this shape coincides with the edge of the format, which heightens our variable reading of it as either an area drawn on the paper surface or the illusion of a shape cut out from that surface.

#### FIGURE-GROUND SHIFT

The two previous topics have indicated ways in which individual shapes in a drawing may have two different identities. This may happen either simultaneously (as in the case of interspace) or alternately (as in the case of positive-negative reversal). A third type of spatial ambiguity aggressively combines aspects of both interspace and positive-negative reversal. It is commonly known as *figure-ground shift*.

Figure-ground shift occurs when all or most of the shapes in an image are given a suggestion of volume, and when virtually all the shapes appear to be

FIGURE 2-12  
WILLEM DE KOONING  
*Black Untitled*, 1948  
Oil and enamel on paper mounted  
on wood, 29 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ "  
© 2003 The Willem de Kooning  
Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York.



constantly shifting, or slipping in and out of positive (figure) and negative (ground) identities.

In large part, figure-ground shift is the result of concentrating on the edges of shapes in a pictorial work of art. Varying the tone, thickness, and speed of edges can impart a positive, or figurative, weight to all the shapes in an image. And by making different portions of edges dip and rise, these variations also create an intricate webbing of overlaps that reinforces the physical existence of the flat picture plane. Consider, for example, *Black Untitled*, by Willem de Kooning (Fig. 2-12), in which each of the shapes interlock, with edges that twist back and then forward, to create complicated spatial puzzles that the viewer cannot rationalize or solve.

**Exercise 2B** In this drawing you should attempt to create a sense of interspace by giving equal weight to positive and negative shapes.

Choose a subject with a considerable number of framed negative spaces, such as a construction site, playground equipment, a large plant, or a still life. No special lighting is required.

As you draw, give simultaneous emphasis to both positive and negative shapes. It may help to think of all shapes, positive and negative, as shallow volumes. This is the case in Figure 2-13, in which the spaces between objects may easily be perceived as interspaces.

**Exercise 2C** In this drawing you will again be looking at positive and negative shapes, but this time you will be weighting and distributing these shapes so as to effect a positive-negative reversal.

Although traditional dry media such as charcoal or pencil will work well, you might consider as an alternative the use of black ink on paper or black and white paper collage.

Again construct a suitable still life or seek out in your environment a subject that suggests strong shape possibilities, such as a collection of items mingled with the drainpipes under your kitchen sink. Draw the objects using only black and white shapes. As you draw, be especially aware of how the shapes relate to each other and to the entire shape of your page. Your ultimate goal is to set up a relationship in which the dark and light shapes can be read as either positive or negative (Fig. 2-14).

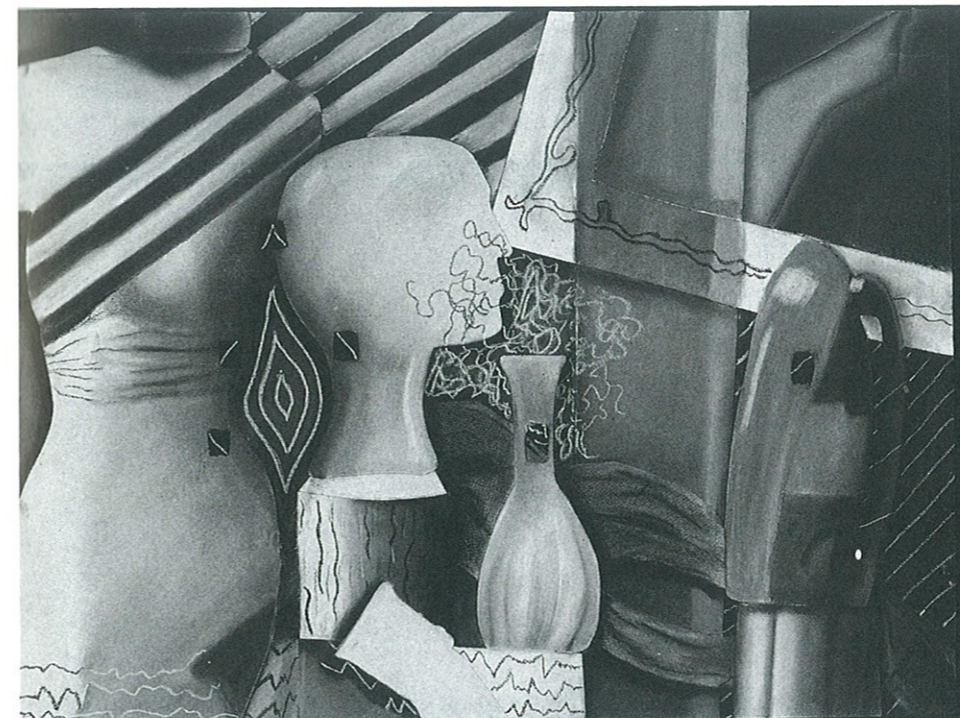


FIGURE 2-13  
DACEY VANDER WAL, University of  
Wisconsin at Stevens Point  
Student drawing: negative areas  
emphasized to create a sense of  
interspace.  
Courtesy, the artist

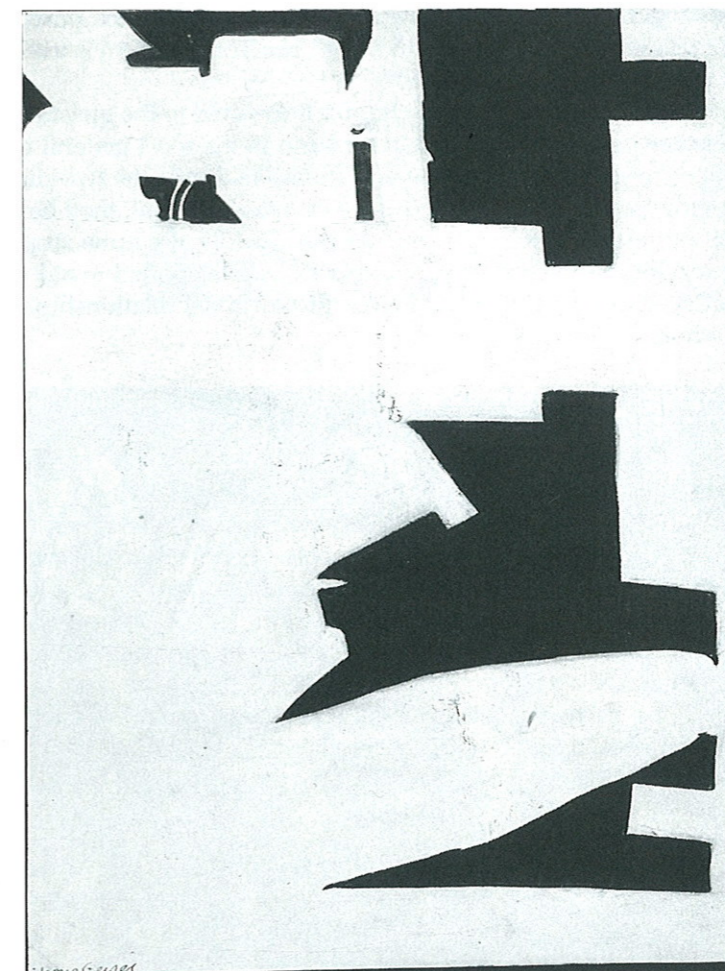


FIGURE 2-14  
JAMIE GEISER, University of  
Wisconsin at Stevens Point  
Student drawing: weighting and  
distributing dark and light shapes  
to create the effect of  
positive-negative reversal.  
Charcoal on paper, 18 × 24"  
Courtesy, the artist