

# DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

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# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Barry Le Va: *Voltage* @ David Nolan Gallery  
January 11 – February 9

By Ben La Rocco

Thought, as I experience it, is generally an unpredictable, often murky process. Sometimes a whole strain of interesting thought may spring on me fully formed and unannounced, one facet leading smoothly into the next, complete and beautiful. If I'm lucky, I have a pencil handy. But those are rare and beneficent days. For the most part, the act of thinking is a muddled disappointing and tedious journey over well-worn ruts and patches of quick sand up to my neck. Writing is most like quick sand because in writing, you must actually organize your thoughts and, beyond a vague notion of electricity in the brain merging with cumulative life experience, I have almost no idea what thought is.

Except when I see art. To be clear, most of what is presented to me as art, I do not experience as such. This is not a qualitative judgment, but a statement of fact indicating that these objects do not do what I want art to do which is to stimulate a nerve in me that recognizes the presence of thought embodied in a physical object. To make anything, one must think. And all of that which I am told is art clearly does involve a type of thought. The maker must first think that he is going to make something, then make decisions and adjustments in the process of its making. Along the way all sorts of aberrant thoughts may also drift through the maker's mind. This is not at all what I'm talking about.

When I look at Barry Le Va's drawings, I see the way his thought *works*. At this point, it becomes very difficult to articulate my feelings, because it involves explaining what art means to me – why I think it has meaning at all today. I'll start with what's apparent. According to press material distributed at the gallery, Le Va's new drawings and prints at David Nolan derive from "energy diagrams." The exhibition is entitled *Voltage* and comprises a portfolio of prints and drawings in graphite and in ink on paper. The compositions are simple and abstract and seem to derive from floor plans for energy production plants, overlaid by sets of arrows and other angular forms that I imagine designate Le Va's conception of the paths of energy within these structures. The large graphite drawings, which preoccupy me most, are rendered in an agitated graphite line over a predetermined composition. Le Va lightly pencils in the geometric contours in two lines about a half inch apart, then fills in this line with the kind of jagged scribble that the wrist naturally makes with a pencil on paper like a common tick when the mind wanders. In the

exhibition these drawings are arranged in diptychs and triptychs indicative, it would seem, of the order of their conception. The drawings are not overly careful or neat, but they are extremely deliberate.

None of this sounds very exciting (I sometimes think it is the inevitable fate of art criticism to take what is inexplicable and exotic and make it dull). But in fact it is. To me, it is one of the most extremely exciting things there is and to explain why is the reason I'm writing. These drawings present thought as a product of bodily experience. An early performance piece by Le Va, entitled "Impact Run," The work consisted of an audio recording of the artist running back and forth from one end of a long corridor to the other and flinging himself against the wall until he collapsed. The piece went on for hours and left Le Va the worse for the wear. Documentary photographs of blood on the wall along with written explanation accompanied the recording in exhibition. I mention "Impact Run" not because it is necessary to understanding Le Va's drawings, which I think speak for themselves, but because it helps corroborate my assertion that thinking is a physical act and that art proves this. "I think with my flesh," wrote Gilles Deleuze. I believe that the mind/body duality associated with Cartesian rationalism is a lie. Le Va is not just drawing his thoughts, he is allowing his experience to flow through his wrist onto the paper to produce evidence of what his thought looks like. The subject matter of energy systems is secondary to the portrait of the artist as a whole that emerges from the merger of his thought and body in making art. This cannot be fully conveyed in language; it can only be seen. This astonishes me and what is just as astonishing is how similar the thought in these drawings is to the thought in "Impact Run," like a proof of nature's consistency. It is certainly a proof of Le Va's complete presence in his work.

So why is this experience of art so important? It's important because it makes my own thoughts real to me and allows me to understand thought as the creative principle in our formation of ourselves. So much of what we are is given in advance by circumstance, and this is the one small tool we have with which to chisel the corner of life that is our own. So art is a saving grace. It is our ration of emancipation from the quotidian and when I see an artist achieve it in his work I know that it is also possible for me.