PROJECT REPORT

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Project essay: From cradle to parlour

Abstract

This co-authored project report considers the polarity of the ephemeral (concept, memory, recollection) with the material aspect of creativity, as it manifests itself in the related yet complimentary practices of writing and drawing. The craft of drawing is complex and hybrid, more akin to writing processes as a means of embodying and making physical through gesture, than many other art forms and processes that rely on material presence. Writing and drawing materialize memory, ideas and projective thought and attempt to manifest their transience. The joint project research (Clarke|Rohr) was originally presented as a contribution to 'Drawings of, Drawings by and Drawings with …' chaired by Ray Lucas (Manchester University) for the conference Art, Materiality and Representation, *Royal Anthropological Institution, SOAS/British Museum, in June 2018. We are grateful for the opportunity to further evaluate and publish*

the progression of the project in this issue of DRTP. The idea for a collaborative drawing project that involves text|image translations was borne from conversations between Niamh Clarke and Doris Rohr. Clarke perceived visual, structural and textual affinities between the modernist novel The Waves *by Virginia Woolf and the drawings of waves by the Latvian American photorealist artist Vija Celmins. This prompted an experimental project: what type of textual responses might be found in another's drawing, and, in turn, what type of visual drawn image might be generated in response to a short text of creative writing? We decided to limit the postal exchange of material to three A4 drawings and three individual short excerpts of poetry or prose. It was agreed that we would monitor our personal reactions, emotions and analysis of the process and store the responses via a shared digital platform (Google drive). The project's premise was to interrogate image and text relationships and the possibilities to translate or influence one through the other. Our aim is to explore materiality and subject matter through drawing with a mediated sense of authorship.*

Cultural contexts and premises

Unlike Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* of 1953 (Katz 2006), in our project, the identity of the drawings and texts were to remain intact and not become a platform for mutual intervention or erasure. The art historical iconoclastic precedent of Rauschenberg implies, according to Vincent Katz, the destruction of subject matter. The gesture of slow obliteration being an act of 'genteel iconoclasm', performed with de Kooning's consent, who wished to contribute to a Neo-Dada style of performance (Katz 2006). However, a relevant conceptual aspect to our project was the implicit re-negotiation of authorship: as de Kooning volunteered the drawing to Rauschenberg, the drawing was deemed to be no longer de Kooning's personal property and has become attributed to Rauschenberg in the official literature. This is surprising as the drawing in our view is co-authored bringing together additive and subtractive mark-making of two collaborating artists. By contrast, we chose not to physically intervene with each other's drawings. The drawing had to be a spontaneous reaction to the text. As a result, the text became edited on reception, and excerpts were chosen to turn into images. At the early experimental stage of the project, we wanted to avoid storyboarding text and the temptation to illustrate each other's stories. Drawing, therefore, became a response, a metaphorical gesture to translate words, specifically metaphors, into visual images. This, by necessity, infers a loss and a gain of meanings, a substitution and development.

Surrealist parlour games, such as the 'Exquisite Corpse' (*Cadavre Exquis*), contribute to a complex understanding of collaboration and authorship in a different way:

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> The conflation of images which make up this drawing not only point to the spirit of communal art-making which incorporated both artists and non-artists, but also to the notions of chance and automatism so fundamental to surrealism. […]. With their juxtaposition of unlikely objects and alliance of disparate words or images, the *cadavres* were seen by the surrealists as highly significant documents of the workings of the mind.
>
> (Askew 2005: n.pag.)

Surrealist drawing practices are indebted to (misunderstood) Freudian concepts. Freud undermined the enlightened idea of individual rationally driven thought and action through the concept of the unconscious. The relationship between Surrealism and psychoanalysis remained unresolved, as Freud's therapeutic objectives of analysis were not shared by Surrealist founder member Breton, whose cultural and political aspirations intended to assimilate methods of accessing the unconscious to liberate art process and production (Esman 2011).

Freud's recognition that mankind was far from as rationally driven as enlightened modern thought presumed led to a reinvigoration of artistic processes and opened the door to creative experimentation of lasting impact to contemporary practices of drawing. One might say that such experimental playful activities as 'exquisite corpse' have become an unquestioned staple of drawing pedagogy. An important aspect to our project was, however, that such practices undermine a more conventional understanding of individual authorship. Hence, of further relevance became the questioning of what it means to be an author, as championed in structuralist discourse (Barthes 1977), when economic and cultural structures – systems of power and production – became 'authors' of the production of culture.

Methodology

Such attempts of positioning our project helped define its methodology that is situated in action (practice-led) research. We did not want to intervene in each other's drawings or texts, yet we wanted to stimulate each other to create a partially visual, partially textual dialogue. This dialogue was further complicated through the alternation of responding with text to a given image and image to text, leaving sufficient marginal error for creative (mis)reading and (mis)translation and ample scope for poetic and lateral reinterpretation of subject matter by free association. Out of hindsight, the debt is larger to associative creativity than to Neo-Dada (Rauschenberg's) iconoclastic concept.

Our project's ground rules were established with the conceptual starting point of Clarke's fascination with lateral convergence between Vija Celmins' *Ocean Drawings* and Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness:

In viewing Celmins' Ocean drawing and reading Woolf's description of the waves, I am struck
by the similarity of my interpretation. I as the viewer|reader am aware of the visual of the vast
expanse of the ocean, its physical properties, the feel, the sound, its movement and flux. I am
aware of the passing of time and have a foreboding sense of death. I am also aware of the
bodily action and consciousness in drawing and writing of both authors. There are layers of
thought, memory and emotion which remain unsaid, yet the materiality of Celmins' drawing
and the use of language or writing methods of Woolf have been relayed to the viewer.

(Clarke 2018: n.pag.)

Newman describes drawing as 'the materialization of a continually mutable process […] the move-
ments, rhythms, and partially comprehended ruminations of the mind' (2003: 57). This descrip-
tion can also be true of the writing process. Meaning and sentiment is imparted in words, whether
consciously or unconsciously. Do writing and drawing perform the same, or can one do things the
other cannot? Could unconscious thought be made apparent through another's interpretation?
What influence does personal experiences and collective and personal memory play? We wondered
what happened to authorship when images were generated directly or indirectly by another writer's
text and vice versa. Is one illustrating the other? Who 'owns' the image or text, or are they jointly
authored? What role does dialogue play in the joint project – a text|image conversation – and in
relation to the reader and viewer as third party who *consumes* images through passive interaction?

These questions became apparent during the process of exchange and remain of interest. Far
from being able to provide answers to above all, it seemed that each layer or stage of this ongoing
project suggested further questions. At this stage of the project, however, we both felt that individual
authorship has been retained, but enriched through each other's prompting.

From Barthes' (1977) and Foucault's (1979) deconstruction of conservative models of author-
ship, dialogical models of communication have established inter-subjective exchanges as alternative
approaches to production (Kester 2004), as well as a return to a reformulated concept of author-
ship (Burke 1992). We became interested in Paul Ricoeur's position that interpretation goes *beyond*
the structure of the written text and its syntax (Ricoeur cited in Thompson 1981). Ricoeur presents
the reader (of texts, but we laterally expanded this to the drawn image) as a co-author of meaning,
requiring a dialogue of reader with the text and its implied authorial origin. Participation happens
through interpretation. Ricoeur's critique of structuralism asserts that text has to go beyond its
internal relations to generate meaning. It requires a subject, represented through the author and
the reader being 'double eclipsed' by the text (Ricoeur cited in Thompson 1981: 147). The author
and reader are *indirectly* present, masked by the text. Ricoeur defines interpretation as *appropria-
tion:* 'the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth
understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself'

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(Ricoeur cited in Wood 1991: 158). This appeared relevant and applicable to us in the way drawing communicates through the author as the originator of drawn images, and the viewer, who performs shared authorship of meaning through interpretation. This applies equally to the author of written text, as Ricoeur indicates.

Our objective is to create images from the texts. We found that the capability of text and images to operate metaphorically initiated a visualization process when reading text, and, in turn, images triggered poetry and miniature narratives. Rohr found herself writing a fragmentary short story based on Clarke's drawing of a parlour. Clarke visualized descriptions by Rohr of the interior of a Catholic church, prompting childhood memories of attending mass. The documentation of such observations happened in project notes we both kept independently and privately shared via Google drive.

Significantly, associations took both of us back into memories of childhood. The drawings and texts acted as objects given to release stream of consciousness and free association. Another common denominator was that texts existed as fragments and images behaved like stills. The fragmentary character of deliberately curtailed truncated narratives leaves meaning to the viewer/reader to complete. This echoes Ricoeur's model of co-authorship. (As readers, we include ourselves as well as others who happen to listen to or see the results of the exchange.)

Subject, object – A genteel erasure of boundaries?

Another aspect of interest to us was the question of materialization of subject matter. What becomes materialized? Thought? Body movement? Gesture? If the material aspect is defined through paper, pen, pigment, how material are written words or drawings on paper? If poetry is immaterial, why should drawing be material? What happens if drawing is not representational, but rhythmical, repetitive, a structure? Or if a drawing is interpreted, performed, sung even (e.g. Kurt Schwitters sung/performed poetry, and concrete and visual poetry as a genre)? Ricoeur comments, '[r]eading is like the execution of a musical score; it marks the realisation, the enactment, of the semantic possibilities of the text' (Ricoeur cited in Wood 1991: 159). Josef Beuys, for example, described his performance drawings as equivalent to musical scores requiring enactment (Temkin 1993: 56–57).

In our project, the *translation* of drawing to text and text to drawing contributed to creating surplus meaning for the collaborator in the project and beyond to any further audiences or readers. Ownership or authorship become thereby further complicated. Who owns meaning? In 'Life in quest of narrative' (Ricoeur cited in Wood 1991), Ricoeur re-introduces authorship, but not through a traditional masterly concept of author. Instead, any reader becomes an author. 'My thesis is here that the process of composition, of a figuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative' (Ricoeur cited in Wood 1991: 26). Ricoeur proposed an internal dialogue to define participatory co-authorship as an act of *composition*, a theme we return to in our interim conclusion.

Text/Image relations – Case studies and reflections

The first image/text exchange is given as an example for the process. Clarke's drawing *Untitled* (Figure 1) was the starting point to Rohr's text *Parlour*:

Parlour
A clock ticking. Dust in the air.
Frame after frame depicting events long past, the shroud of former lives, of youth and child-hood, places visited, a school event, a wedding, a christening. Trapped in mahogany and ebony and glass. An oval picture is placed amongst many rectangular ones holding men like flies or beetles, or maybe butterflies, pinned to the wall as evidence that once they lived. Ornaments and photos; the most prominent depicting an object that looks like a table with four legs oddly placed. Perhaps a mirror. The time is set somewhere in the 1950s or may be earlier, even. A room of someone who had lived in the early part of last century. I can hear and smell it, my grandparent's parlour – *die gute Stube*[1]. No one ever sat in there – it was a graveyard of a room holding all that was deemed too precious, too vulnerable to be tainted by life. Apart from the wineglasses which on occasion were given leave, filled for rare social occasions next door and then washed haphazardly and put back into the ebony shrine of a petty bourgeois glazed cupboard, leaving behind a musty faintly alcoholic smell that encapsulated my grandmother.

(text response, Rohr 2018: n.pag.)

Clarke commented in her project notes on the process of making the drawing *Untitled* and Rohr's responsive text *Parlour*:

This is a found image from an old newspaper. I am drawn to images of photographs or frames, memories deemed special or important enough to display on the wall. I consider this a performative act, nothing that is ugly or unpresentable will be framed and presented in this way. There is a link to drawing from photographs, the redrawing of a lost moment and the interplay of time and memory. The photograph described by Roland Barthes as a "weightless, transparent envelope" (Barthes 1981: 5) has connotations of death and is something which Doris [Rohr] has picked up on in her descriptions. While I consider the physical drawing as a residue of the activity, I link this not only to the consciousness of thought and bodily action in drawing, but also to the memories and associations attached to the image, both private and collective.

(project notes, Clarke 2018: n.pag.)

1. German, translates as 'front parlour', indicative of aspirational middle-class culture prevalent in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to have a specifically reserved room to receive guests in.

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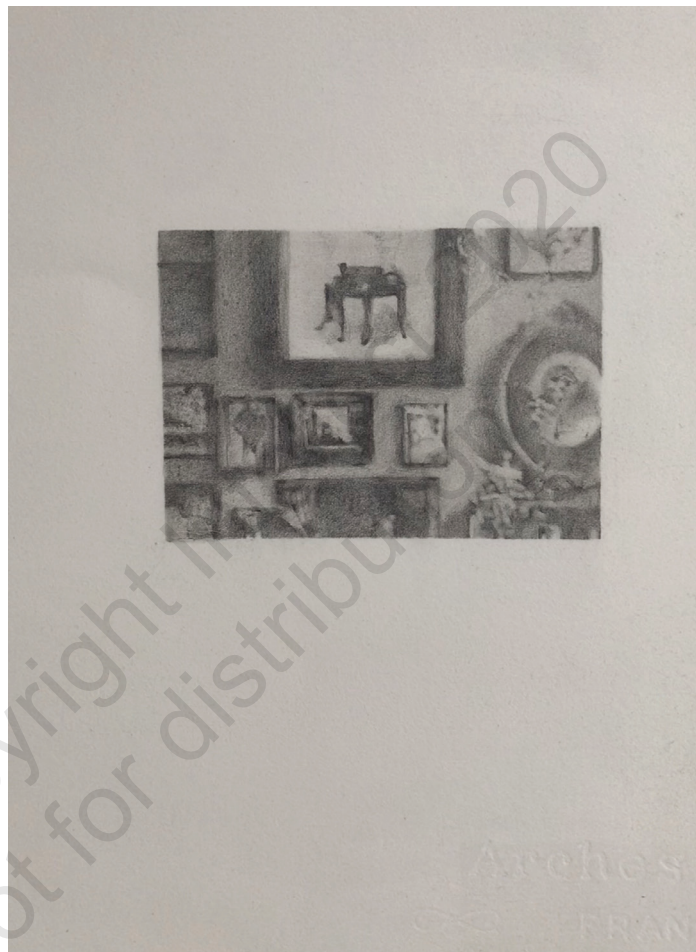23.
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Figure 1: Niamh Clarke, Untitled, *2018. Graphite on Paper. Paper 28cm × 25cm, drawing section 11cm × 8 cm. © Niamh Clarke.*

An example of literary response by Clarke to the initially untitled drawing by Rohr follows below. Rohr decided to title the image *Chevron*.

> The descending blackened air threatens to envelope the land below.
> A lone tree mediates.
> Blue-green reeds lean gently to the right, anticipating.
> A body of water silently waits.
> This place doesn't hold them, they move on blindly, following.
>
> (text response, Clarke 2018: n.pag.)

In the project reflections, Rohr comments, 'the word that struck me here was "anticipating". It fulfils many of the subtexts of my drawing. It could be the beginning (but not the title) of a short story not yet written' (project notes, Rohr 2018).

Clarke reflects on her process of transposing Rohr's drawing *Chevron* into text:

> I feel the presence, the sounds and smells of being within the landscape when viewing. The sign, this manmade object placed within the landscape seems to be unnatural in the setting. The entirety of the page is filled with watercolour; however, this sign is rendered in graphite, which creates an unnatural, uncanny separation. This particular sign warns of the danger of an upcoming bend in the road.
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> (project notes, Clarke 2018: n.pag.)

Clarke further comments on her intentions when writing texts for exchange, stressing the importance of 'visually descriptive cues which could lend themselves to drawing'. She continues,

> Considering my drawing process and what could be interpreted as a static image, through the materialisation and temporality of drawing, multiple memories and thoughts become embedded. While I am interested in the stream of consciousness, I want to attempt to layer memory and thought within the text. I would like the texts to be considered as drawings invoking the same reaction a drawing would. I want the reader to react when reading, to remember the bodily movement, the smell of the perfume or the clean sheets.
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> (project notes, Clarke 2018: n.pag.)

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Figure 2: Doris Rohr, Chevron, *2018. Graphite and ink on paper. 18cm × 26cm. © Doris Rohr.*

Rohr's thoughts on her visual response to Clarke's text are,

> When producing drawings in response to [Clarke's] texts I found myself searching for the visual vocabulary, the descriptive, the parts easier to imagine and envisage. Furthermore, I searched for the thought I shared with her. Perhaps this process is akin to identification with a protagonist in a novel? This was the road into it, the factor of comprehension. An act of translation. It was harder to move beyond the already known. How do I translate into a drawing the fluidity and ambiguity of [the] poetic?
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> (project notes, Rohr 2018: n.pag.)

One of the poetic texts Clarke sent to Rohr involved metaphors, such as 'huddled trees', 'liquid light', 'cotton-like folds' and 'floating and swerving fabric' and words pregnant with imagery. But the stumbling phrases were 'a dull ache holds', the intimation of the subject as author and her feelings, and, most of all, the phrase 'her perfume lingers'. How can one draw scent? Is it possible to materialize scent? Through text, the written word? Through images, invented, drawn or painted? On failure of producing an image as portent as the text, we concluded that scent, sound, memory and the related emotions are all intrinsically immaterial, although it is possible to become triggered by a visual or textual clue. The German Marxist cultural theorist Walter Benjamin (cited in Arendt 1968) describes the release of scent as an *aide memoire* provoking involuntary memory, when discussing Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* ([1913] 1992). In the relevant passage of Proust's novel, the Madeleine biscuit releases involuntary memory when dipped into tea. Scent pervades the story, and so Proust's evocation of an era is released through its suggestion. It is an anchoring of scent in the slippery materialism of words. Neither writing nor drawing can materialize that sense, yet these practices open up a field of possible meanings that prevent drawing or writing from ossifying.

Interim conclusions

Continuously throughout this project, Clarke likened the drawing process to a stream of consciousness, when one thing led to another, time became displaced, and memory became anchored in the body. In Clarke's view, an image is contemplated long before it is materialized through drawing, and this thought process is integral to the drawing. She says,

> There is a need to draw to solidify the memory of the moment, the act of drawing brings the image close again, the intimate moment of drawing reawakens the moment of viewing. The path to the image, the thoughts, intentions are not explicitly translated, yet through the

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materialisation and the bodily movement, there is a transfer of emotions, of thought? The unsaid, remains unsaid, but it is passed over.

(project notes, Clarke 2018: n.pag.)

Memory manifested as a visceral response in Rohr's drawing. Clarke recalled sensory knowledge of being within the landscape and began to remember sounds, smells and textures of the place.

Rohr and Clarke filled each other's contributions with personal memories, unique to either of them, yet becoming enmeshed as shared ground. As a reader of words, we imagine pictures, a glimpse into a past or future imagined, half true, half fiction – a parallel world of others, their dreams, aspirations and disappointment. When consuming each other's images, we filled this with imagined stories and explanations – verbalized interpretations. This process of association dematerialized words and images and took away a clearly demarked sense of self, as self-creating and self-mythologizing. As a result, the process of generating images and texts remained linear in an extended approach to exquisite corps – one image leading to another text, another image arising from a text, but also collaged in merging yet not fully subsuming wither contributor's associations from their personal lives.

While drawing attempts to materialize memory and thought, the material presence of a drawing is insufficient to contain the complexity of associated or intrinsic meaning. It shares this with writing. Meaning is intrinsically immaterial and inter-subjective in the sense that it requires the reader of texts or images to interpret authorial intentions and thereby inevitably compromises them. Interpretation is nevertheless anchored in the material presence of a drawn or a written text, which to some degree embodies the originator and the memory of gesture. Of interest to develop further as a theoretical and practical concern is the importance of composition. Composition exceeds structure. Rohr believes that it has much in common with the plotting of a narrative, a topic Ricoeur investigates in 'Life in quest of narrative' (Ricoeur cited in Wood 1991). Ricoeur establishes a relationship of fiction to life via narration and that the plot is a compositional device that unifies otherwise disparate incidents and events, akin to the process of assemblage or montage. For Rohr and Clarke's purposes, plotting becomes a compositional device in visual and textual narration – in the capability of drawing to tell stories. Clarke adds that Celmins' seemingly anti-narrative repetitive structural image-making of immeasurable textures, like the shape of water (waves) or clouds, has a hidden narrative and is by association also part of a story, an autobiographical device (author). The viewer (or reader) who constructs meaning generates part of the story, to become subsequently revised through familiarization with the primary author's or artist's biographical contexts. This allows for the construction of narrative identity (Ricoeur cited in Wood 1991: 4). Plot is an integrating process. Ricoeur defines 'the process of emplotment as a synthesis of heterogeneous elements. […] Synthesis between the events or incidents which are multiple and the story which is unified and complete' (Ricoeur cited

in Wood 1991: 21). This equally applies to composition when disparate elements of visuals are put together. Linearity is challenged in pictorial 'plotting'; the visual image allows for multiple access points, beginnings and endings.

Multiple questions were asked at the onset of this project, which we were unable to answer fully. The project report primarily aims to clarify and record our initial motivations and observations. At this interim stage, we became enriched through sharing and developed a more complex understanding of authorship, which implied that naming an image or text is a process and label for origination rather than full possession. As the project is also a description of a free-wheeling method, it will change its direction and it is possible that terminologies such as authorial possession will become no longer important.

Epilogue

Since writing up this initial exchange, the project has become an extended collaboration between five artists who in addition to text image exchanges are currently embarking on a postal object/gift exchange project with each other. To gain a fuller sense of this project and subsequent developments, we refer the reader to https://thedrawingjournalnet.wordpress.com/page/1/https://www.instagram.com/thedrawingjournal_/.

A group exhibition of selected works by the group *The Drawing Journal* will be held at Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, 216 Falls Rd., Belfast BT12 6AH, United Kingdom, in November 2020 (https://www.culturlann.ie/ga).

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Contributor details

Doris Rohr is senior lecturer at Liverpool Hope University where she teaches theory and practice for fine art and design students based at Hope University's *Creative Campus*. Her Ph.D. 'Drawing on nature: The legacy of Ruskin's Moral Cosmos' (2016) investigates the continued relevance of John Ruskin's thoughts on drawing and the environment. Practice-based research entitled *Jetsam*

was shown in the Storey Institute. Recent publications are 'Art and science in the age of the Anthropocene' (2019) in Alannah Robins (ed.) *From Dream to Dream: Where Art Meets Science* and 'Drawing in and out of place' in *Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology* (2018–19) 30:1. Rohr jointly edited DRTP 3:1 *Drawing on Text* with Charlie Gere. She recently presented notebook drawings as part of 'Drawing Conversations 3: Drawing Talking to the Sciences' (2020) in *The Ruskin*, Lancaster University. Rohr is part of the Ulster-based collective *The Drawing Journal* – outcomes of the collaborations with other drawers from the collective will be shown in *Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich* in November 2020.

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Niamh Clarke graduated 2019 with a first-class bachelor degree in fine art, Belfast School of Art, University of Ulster. Clarke's drawing practice reflects an interest in memory and temporality. Exploring the relationship between the photograph and drawing, a focus is placed on the embodied presence in gesture and materialization through re-description of found and personal photographs. Since graduating, she has exhibited in RDS Visual Arts awards Dublin and RUA exhibition Belfast.

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