

Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice

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## EDITORIAL

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# Drawingability

### Storying ability: An introduction

We had to draw a jam jar full of random objects for our exam. Splinters of wood stuck in my back teeth as I bit through my pencil. I can still feel the sheer frustration of making that drawing. Mrs Nicely looked up from the front desk, smiling encouragement.

I got a B for that drawing.

A B is OK but it's not an A.

(Penketh 2011: 7)

## Claire

My formal art education came to a halt until I fell almost accidentally into studying fine art as a minor subject at university. This set a somewhat circuitous path to becoming an art teacher and it was in this role that I spent a significant amount of time teaching drawing almost intuitively before assimilating a range of methodologies from peers and fellow art educators. It was not until much later, and as part of my postgraduate studies, that I began to explore and enjoy a productive relationship with drawing. Central to this was a sustained relationship with a fellow art teacher whose mantra ‘every mark counts’ supported an expansive definition of drawing as a means of experiencing and responding to the world. More recently, as an academic working in the field of disability studies, I have drawn on insights from critical disability theory to inform my understanding of pedagogy and practice, examining historic and contemporary relationships between art education, drawing, skill and ability. More specifically, work on ableism (Kumari-Campbell 2009) and disability aesthetics (Siebers 2010) have offered theoretical tools to de-centre, taken for granted assumptions about how and what we learn in the arts. For example, the limited association of drawing with particular forms of vision and/or visuality might result in the exclusion of children and young people with visual impairment on the mistaken assumption that it has little or no relevance or that they would be unable to participate (Hayhoe 2008). However, my encounters with work by Siebers, and others (Derby 2012), have positioned the generative nature of disability in arts practice over its usual orientation to deficit. Disability studies enable us to recognize drawing as essentially anti-ableist since the diverse methodologies opened up through and with drawing generate multifarious forms of participation, which in turn enable us to expand our preconceptions about drawing ability.

## Doris

When I took my A level in art I was told that it was not the responsibility of my class teacher to teach drawing skills; the teacher’s role was to introduce concepts of contemporary and historical art. This experience is probably quite typical on some levels: certainly from Foundation level onwards in art education in the United Kingdom a shift change appears away from copying or ‘realistic’ drawings – the type of drawing which often impresses for technical ability and skills – towards issue and concept-based arts practices. Contemporary drawing cannot escape a demand for social relevance, which as a subtext drives the process and defines new sets of skills. After my Baccalaureate I learned to draw from observation during a two-year apprenticeship in a German state school for the applied arts. I was literally asked to place specified objects on my desk, such as bottles, a wooden fire log, or wildflowers gathered from the nearby fields, and told to draw from observation and in total silence (no music, headphones or talking in class!). Strange as it may sound, I enjoyed this experience. Needless to say, when commencing my undergraduate studies in England, drawing classes were

of a very different type. At West Surrey College of Art and Design during the late 1980s there was a team of two visiting artists who arrived from London each week, who surprised their students with eccentric installations, and who set tasks ranging from having to draw walking life models, to capturing film stills from black and white movies. I found some of the tasks bewildering, although I now respect the energy and creativity of these two visiting tutors even more. Within a period of approximately ten years I experienced vastly different approaches to drawing, requiring very different sets of skills and perceptions of ability. Having taught in art school for several decades since, my understanding of skills in art, and more specifically of drawing skills, has become pluralistic and adaptive to curricula, accommodating the various dominant ideologies enshrined in course validations, and in the cultural contexts of specific places, regions or countries, even, contributing towards a sense of *appropriateness* of skills. The adaptability of skills to context provokes a disruption to any decontextualized monolithic idea that might prevail regarding drawing ability.

### **Skill perceptions of drawing**

This Special Issue emerged from a conversation at a *Big Draw* event at Liverpool Hope University. Although the day was designed to welcome students and colleagues to participate in a range of activities, many students and staff were adamant in identifying an inability to draw. This outright dismissal of their skill frustrated any further conversations regarding their understanding of what might qualify as a drawing. This prompted our deliberations regarding the origins and persistence of such a constraining belief. At some point our students and colleagues had learnt that drawing was not for them, regardless of its function or definition. The fundamental act of making a mark had become a thing to be feared and avoided. The claim 'I can't draw' was a pre-emptive strike: an act of self-elimination. Our subsequent discussions about drawing and societal perceptions regarding ability have resulted in this publication. Drawing is as expansive in its definition, roles and functions as this Special Issue suggests and interpretations of ability have proven to be similarly complex, defined by context and determined by social, cultural and educational circumstances.

A pedagogical surplus value of drawing is listed by the Campaign for Drawing as developing 'a range of skills, intellectual and emotional' (2009: 4). The emphasis is here on re-evaluating visual literacy as a catalyst for personal growth and development, complementing mainstream school education. The Campaign for Drawing asserts that drawing aids 'analysis, interpretation, expression and communication' (2009: 4). Further it is claimed that spatial and motor skills are supported, and that drawing promotes empathy, imagination and creativity (2009: 4). It is perhaps an unintended irony that the education of children now promises a whole remit of transferable skills surplus, when considering that modernist approaches to drawing revered children's art for their unskilled rawness. Re-evaluating untaught 'natural' forms of children's drawings for their transferable skills in turn

poses uncomfortable questions. In formal compulsory education our perceptions of skill and ability are bound to assessment systems that codify learning in ways that can be as unhelpful for arts practice as they are to education. The tensions in the promotion of drawing practice expressed here are at the heart of discussions regarding the role and value of art and its place in education (Biesta 2017). Co-opting drawing as a curriculum subject necessitates a sense of conformity to norms and removes it from the anti-skill agenda of the avant-garde and its continuation in post conceptual arts practices.

## Shifts in modernity

Modernism did away with idealized concepts of nature and the body, yet the once radical new values associated with modernism became eventually enshrined. The Tate Gallery succinctly states that:

certain underlying principles [...] define modernist art: A rejection of history and conservative values (such as realistic depiction of subjects); innovation and experimentation with form (the shapes, colours and lines that make up the work) with a tendency to abstraction; and an emphasis on materials, techniques and processes.

(n.d.: n.pag.)

Moreover, during the period of high modernism values of representation and technical skills handed down from previous generations became obsolete (photography 'liberating' the visual arts from representation), wilfully embraced the 'de-skilled' as desirable (children's art, amateur art, outsider art, the art of the institutionalized deemed mentally ill) or in-discriminatorily appropriated non-western cultures ('Primitivism').

For the Swiss modernist Paul Klee to return to the raw and energetic language of children's drawing was a proposed ideal, one might say, a new skill had to be acquired, that of unlearning western art rules, and finding a mechanism of accessing the uneducated in oneself. As Ellen Marsh points out:

[T]he fundamental link between Paul Klee and child art lies in the creative process involved in each. But there is a fundamental difference. What the child is doing for the first time, in a process of unfolding visual activity, from simpler stages to increasingly complex ones, Paul Klee is doing as a mature artist in a life process of overcoming the visual clichés of past art and finding for himself the most direct and cogent handwriting with which to express himself in relation to nature.

(Marsh 1957: 132)

Differently from an appropriation of other cultures ('Primitivism') and from the search for unconscious sources of creation (Surrealism), Klee's interest in the art of children is rooted in wanting to 'reorganize the world of nature' (1957: 133). For Klee the study of children's art was key to building a new aesthetic relationship between the artist and the world. Marsh points out that children, when they start to draw, are not attempting to copy what they see, but want to be creative. Acts such as scribbling, emulating drawing or writing, are indicative for this innate desire in all humans to want to create.

Drawing in perspective and other related cultural western norms of representation do not *naturally* occur in a child's development, but need to be introduced by an adult. Klee was no longer convinced that 'correct' representation was desirable, as he believed that it stifled creativity. Klee thereby redefined drawing skills in his search for 'inner certainty' (Marsh 1957: 136). In 1902 (aged 23) Paul Klee wrote the following in his diaries:

I will be like a newborn child, knowing nothing about Europe, nothing at all. [...] Then I will do something very modest, think of something very, very small, totally formal. My pencil will be able to put it down without any technique. All that is needed is an auspicious moment; the concise is easily represented. [...] It was a tiny but real act, and from the repetition of acts that are small, but my own, eventually a work will come on which I can build.

(Klee cited in Marsh 1957: 137)

What is clear from Klee's writings is that a rejection of western norms is at the heart of his proposed route to creativity, to innovative and truthful art making. Such belief in truth has since been rejected as essentialist, and post-structuralist philosophers have contributed the concept of critical inquiry to a set of cognitive skills. As Nur Balkir Kuru aptly summarizes:

Art education in higher education must set out to create a dialectic thinker in the student – one who is able to criticize in order to reformulate ideas and ideologies. [...] Thus, the role of the instructor evolves to a facilitator of the learning activity.

(Kuru 2012: 491)

This requirement to show critical awareness does in our view not only apply to situations of formal learning and training, such as schools or university, but also apply to professionals and even the

self-trained or self-educated amateur artist. Kuru considers criticisms associated with pluralistic and multi modal approaches to this when stating:

[A]n art education based on deconstructive approaches would thrive on differences and possibly reconsider original contexts, bringing together elements and welcoming all the ambiguities and surprises that arise from multiple references. [...] Since art education cannot be confined to narrow disciplines and technical qualities of art any longer, the key to new learning is to make connections and integrations between things, regardless of their artistic qualities.

(2012: 491)

Nevertheless, one can see problems with this, in some ways seductive, understanding of the role of visual art education. There is an implication that Fine Art is a distinct mode of thinking, separate from the domains of design in its social application of creativity. Critical thinking needs to embrace functional skills and adapt design functions to demands which may well be prompted through critical enquiry: such as making aspects of the home or wider environment more accessible, more inclusive, with lesser carbon footprint, to state some examples. The domain of socially relevant visual or other creative art processes depends on ethical codes and shared, yet interrogated norms of social interaction.

Within the history of the visual arts, and within early modernism, Dada and Surrealism also promoted de-skilling, through chance and random actions, and iconoclastic acts, such as deliberate destruction of cultural artefacts considered obsolete for the twentieth century. This is illustrated through the frequently cited example of Tristan Tzara's instructions to cut up an artefact (a text), to put the scraps into a hat, and then to draw words and phrases at random, thereby determining the new form of the poem (Tzara [1920] n.d.).

Congruent with Kuru's demands above is the questioning of authorship, a de-authoring implying lesser emphasis on the individual creator, an initial step towards a critical visual learning and making process. There is a direct relationship between avant-garde methods to postmodern practices prevalent in post Second World War conceptualism. Such as Sol LeWitt's 'found drawings' in *Autobiography* (1980) and associated activities of CoBrA. Similar to another postmodern movement, Art Brut, the artists represented in the collective CoBrA wanted to bring raw energy to the activity of art making, and amalgamated chance (Dada) with automatism (Surrealism). Ratcliff argues that CoBrA 'considered automatism to be the most promising weapon in the struggle for the utopia the avant-garde had often promised but never delivered' (n.d.: n.pag.). One may add that the questioning of individual creativity in art making was not only evident in early modernist ideals, such as expressed by Klee, and were furthermore differently explored in avant-garde movements such as Dada, Surrealism, resurfaced in neo-Dada and (post) conceptual art movements. These are

prevalent in recent models of dialogical and collaborative art projects, which frequently blur the line between art and life. (Multimodal organizations such as Littoral [The Littoral Arts Trust] or Forensic Architecture, function as multidisciplinary research groups using blended methodologies and technologies in collaboration.) At this stage drawing, digital or analogue, acts as a sub-skill, contributing to the larger umbrella of social and political projects.

### **Performative: Drawings as durational and part of performance**

The skills associated with critical enquiry are congruent with the project of dematerialization of the art object in post-conceptual practices of the late 1960s and 1970s (Lippard 1973). Dematerialized practices in their orientation towards process rather than marketable end product, lent themselves to time-based practices such as performance art. Drawing, as durational physical enactment, and through expanded approaches of drawing such as collecting and re-making via collage or assemblage, becomes an agent in a continued search for a morally less corruptible purpose of art. The achievement of producing an art product with high auction value becomes the anathema of the post-avantgarde, in search for a space that is not for sale. Drawing becomes the didactic tool of teaching, explaining, reinforcing or replacing the spoken word and action. To mind come Joseph Beuys' performances, using the ubiquitous blackboard as a teaching tool, covering the surface of the board with diagrams, drawings and intrinsic formulae. Here skills become located in agency: through intervention, ecological action, site specific and socially relevant – the project of social sculpture embracing and reconnecting with the evolutionary history of humankind. Performative practices of drawing move traditional drawing skills that objectify the world into the process of time, duration, spatial exploration and social dialectic. What becomes clear is that representational drawing was required to find new forms, beyond the time-honoured ocular-centric practices of a static understanding of science that objectified the body and mind, architecture and environment (Jay 1995).

While Beuys evokes an evolutionary use of schemata, signs and diagrams, connecting the practices of drawing with prehistoric early writing systems, in a different way conceptualist feminist Mary Kelly in her *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79) also refers to evolutionary, developmental aspects: here specifically the growing up process of her child and the changes motherhood had brought to her practice. Here involuntary mark making (nappy stains, uneducated scribbles of a child) overlay the parental and clinical psychological authority of the typescript, witnessing the process of socialization of the child whose disruptive scribbles are contained in neat box frames. Kelly (arguably) lets her child's scribbles and mark making coexist alongside the authorial scripted forms of the medical behavioural and psychoanalytic gaze, and thereby invites a critique of patriarchal structures through the 'not knowing' subject of the child.

## Erasure

Drawing is relational as practice, and frequently relates coded meaning (diagram/ symbol) to the wider world. Anthropologist Tim Ingold reminds the reader in *Lines: A Brief History* that the origin of the word drawing in the English language is *writan* 'to incise runic letters' (2007: 43). If the origins of drawing are to be found in the trace, subtractive, incised and gestured, then what remains to be discussed here is the line that *becomes* erased and acts iconoclastically. A well-cited example, Robert Rauschenberg's erasure of one of Willem de Kooning's drawings (1953) asks the question of how subtractive mark making constitutes innovative methods of drawing, inventing new parameters to measure drawing ability with. Iconoclastic acts of mark making enter the pool of potential and actual 'skills' within a complex set of ethical boundaries. When does it become acceptable to add to or detract from another person's artwork or cultural artefact through drawing or over drawing? This invites a discussion larger than drawing, especially when considered in the context of cultural and political coercion and colonial and postcolonial practices. The wounds created in cultural political contexts are immeasurable – for example the destruction of aboriginal dream lines which we might refer to as drawings actual or imagined in space and time, or the mutilations of icons and other religious figurative artefacts during periods of iconoclasm in Byzantium and during the period of the Reformation in Europe. Graffiti as urban and street style provide bottom-up responses to the politics of space and ownership in cities or landscapes and raise positive questions about political borders. Such is implicit in Kathy Prendergast's *City Drawings* (1992–present) erasing elements of the city as a map and reconstituting the urban space as a network of non-recognizable, non-standardized boundaries.

## Considering drawingability

Pertinent to the questions formulated in our call, Chloe Masi proposes a theoretical framework for learning mechanisms through drawing, of value to both instructor and individual drawing practitioner, identifying three key developmental stages: perception, elaboration and production. Eirini Boukla adds the reassertion of hand drawing that accommodates, even benefits from what is deemed an operation failure. Boukla reasserts the indexical relationship of the hand to the artist's concepts, who capitalizes from the error of reproduction in machine or digital drawing and reunites drawing with the authentic personal mark or trace. If Boukla asserts the hand as embodied practice intimately linked to drawing as human activity, then Helen Farell's research study into Maurice-Merleau Ponty's handwritten and annotated manuscripts, invites an embodied understanding of mark making, irrespective of linguistic meaning. Positioning herself to 'impersonate' Merleau-Ponty's habit she shares with us how the act of copying his manuscripts gives us a unique insight into the relationship of hand to paper, of mind to body.

Norms of vision and visuality appear central to representational systems that have traditionally defined a skilful drawing. George Themistokleous shares his experiences of keratoconic vision. Although described as a degenerative disorder, Themistokleous acknowledges the keratoconic eye as one that enables new ways of experiencing space that draws received wisdom regarding perspectivalism into question. Joanna Neves offers a complex examination of the relationship between indexical line and conceptions of beauty via an exploration of historical and contemporary processes of skilling and unskilling. Central to this is the role of drawing and the place of technologies to negotiate ethical representations in conceptual work. Neve concludes with a powerful discussion of an indexical line whose beauty emerges from its success in sharing the linguistic ambiguities and experiences of ableism in the works of Irma Blank and Christine Sun Kim. William Platz also draws on ableism to inform his exploration of dexterity as an element of (good) drawing. Platz addresses skill through the use of draughts puppets offering playful and innovative insights into drawing practice and performance that inform pedagogy.

Mark Graham and Fidalis Buehler work with contemporary approaches that acknowledge more radical and inclusive practices to figure drawing in order to critique and disrupt western definitions of skill in representing the body. Theirs is a timely request to decolonize a curriculum that has promoted skill as the ability to represent white, able and privileged bodies. Art historian Vanessa van 't Hoogt's and artist Henrike Scholten's joint project made pedagogical use of the redundant drawing practices of the academy, such as drawing from plaster casts. This culminated in a semester-long teaching experiment that involved critical reflection and a practice based as well as reflective reconsideration of norms from the academy's past in relation to contemporary values.

David Modler's and Sam Peck's democratic drawing project develops drawing as part of a dialogical open-ended participatory model of social engagement. The task involves sitting people around a table to facilitate knowledge exchange on a non-hierarchical level of discussion and shared visual thinking through drawing collaborations. This playful art action asserts the importance of face-to-face communication, thereby reversing social trends towards disembodied digital communication. By contrast Robin Schaeffer and Hélène Aarts propose that a certain range of cognitive and embodied skills are specific to architectural drawing. The architect's work is dependent on field work, where the practice of drawing evidences high-level skills of perception, imagination, communication and individual expression.

Tânia Cardoso engages with the illustrator's experiences of the city as a physical and social space. Drawing is explored here as a means of revealing the interplay between the observed and lived environment. For Cardoso as an urban researcher, drawing in situ requires the skill to draw *in* the city in order to fully represent it. This discussion of drawing as a form of urban research resonates strongly with a presentation of ethnographic drawing by Xiyuan Tan. Here the ability to capture sometimes subtle interactions between participants relies on the speed to render dialogic gestures as well as the

selectivity to recognize the importance of what happens between people in place. Nick Aikman's featured drawing brings to mind that drawing requires adaptation to post-human critical consciousness and proposes an environmentally cognizant form of drawing that addresses GM crop modification. The drawing deliberately juxtaposes highly controlled lines and repeats formal elements with what appears to be an uncontrollable leakage of painterly gestural mark making.

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