

REFLECTIONS ON DRAWING

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ABSTRACT

This article is presented in three parts. An introduction considers the current emphasis on drawing within the visual arts and literacy debate. An analysis is then offered of key strategies and counter-strategies (including trajectories and cornerstones) in the recent history of drawing as a complex arts practice predicated on different and often contestatory assumptions about how we understand and visualise our world. The third section explores connections between drawing and registers for visual communication and literacy, with specific attention to Umberto Eco's semiotic typology of modes of sign production.

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of Western art, drawing has traditionally been under-acknowledged in favour of painting, sculpture and architecture. Even today, drawing is seldom offered as a major subject in tertiary art schools, and often seen as a support discipline aimed at facilitating outcomes in other areas.

In recent decades, however, drawing has claimed a central place for itself within much of international contemporary arts practice. At the same time, a growing body of scholarly research on drawing has uncovered some of its complexities, while also connecting it to other fields of interest such as, for example, communication studies, semiotics and visual literacy investigations.

International networks of scholars and artists who focus on drawing exist today as expanded fields of interest functioning across geographical and disciplinary boundaries. For example, the International Drawing Research Institute operates between the Glasgow School of Art, the College of Fine Arts of the University of New South Wales in Sydney, the China Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and artist-academics involved (e.g. Robert Palmer, Roger Wyatt, Blair Cunningham and Gordon Hookey) have been in residency at the School of Art in Dunedin, New Zealand, where the author of this article works as a drawing researcher. Another example of drawing's recent international collaboration is the connection between the United Kingdom Power Drawing Project and the Drawing Australia Research Program (DARP) at Macquarie University in Australia. Eileen Adams, who leads the project in England, writes: "Drawing provides the means for learning to see. In this visual world, drawing provides a vivid shorthand. It is an extraordinarily versatile tool in many subject disciplines, ranging from tiny sketches containing big ideas to whole sets of drawings that give all the information necessary for building a house or an aircraft"(2001: 2).

With regard to the above-mentioned projects, literacy researcher Shirley Bryce-Heath states: "The future curriculum needs to integrate visual, verbal and other representational modes as schools move closer in goals and process to non-school communities and organisations" (2000:121). In an era of visibility and the so-called "pictorial turn", we read the following in conjunction with drawing research initiatives: "Effective learning in our increasingly visual environments requires educators and others to reconsider the importance of visual learning and literacy and to re-evaluate learning methods and teaching strategies. In a world dominated by visual concepts and communication, the agenda... in the 21st century requires attention to visual intelligence." (DARP 2005:2)

This article argues that key strategies and counter-strategies within the recent history of drawing as an arts practice suggest a field of activity connected with semiotic modes of sign production which can function as registers for visual communication and literacy. Before making connections between drawing and such registers, a brief analysis of the relevant key strategies and counter-strategies in the recent history of drawing follows below in part 2 of this article.

DRAWING

Students in the fine arts have traditionally been expected to attend the life-drawing class, where observational drawings of nude models and of still-life objects were produced. One justification for such exercises was that they would teach students (and thus future artists) to look adequately at the world around them, and that this act of looking would make it possible for them to represent that world on a two-dimensional surface. In the twentieth century, another justification was that drawing could make it possible for students or artists to then translate from such renderings to a vocabulary of abstract forms, especially in painting; or to use such renderings as a basis for graphological expression through personal “handwriting” or gestural marks on surfaces. These expectations respectively harked back to the history of drawing as a practice positioned as “preparational” within Western arts academies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; to a modernistic focus on the language of visual abstraction; and to the expressive, emotive freedom gained within the context of abstract expressionist painting by the 1950s.

While students and artists in that decade still worked towards fulfilling such expectations, other initiatives were already afoot which would shift the centre of gravity for drawing towards its own domain, although it would still be deployed within the practices of painting, sculpture and architecture (and later increasingly so within other media too).

This shift occurred along four trajectories. One of these foregrounded drawing as a *connective act* across surfaces, as in the work of Cy Twombly. The second of these registers referred back to older traditions of drawing as deployed in sinopias (large preparatory drawings for fresco paintings on walls) and cartoons (underdrawings for paintings) in order to lift the drawing out of the sketchbook or off the page towards a *sculptural and architectural scale*, as in the work of Sol LeWitt. A third trajectory focused on drawing proceeding within the *expanded field* of the landscape, as where Walter de Maria imposed perspectival lines on the surface of the Mohave Desert. The fourth trajectory is exemplified through the work of Joseph Beuys, where he created his dense *mindmaps*, tracing ideas and arguments with chalk on blackboard.

It can be argued that drawing by the late-1970s had undergone a revolution which claimed spaces of its own for drawing. These spaces seemed to be predicated on four cornerstones.

Line itself is considered the main constituent of drawing. Leymarie, Monnier and Rose (1979: 243) write: “The line itself is always seen as line even as it merges with other lines to build tone, even when confined within the scheme defined by the motif.” Furthermore, line was seen as tracing “process”, as so famously insisted upon by artist Richard Serra. In the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at Kingston University in London, drawing as process research has, for example, resulted in postgraduate courses, conferences and exhibitions.

A strong *conceptual focus* – rather than an expressive one – was claimed for drawing. The story of drawing from the mid-fifties onward is the story of a gradual disengagement from painting and an emotive cooling of the basic mark, the line itself. Bernice Rose (1992: 10) would later add: “As drawing has moved toward its new status, it has asserted both its linear autonomy and its conceptual control over other [visual arts] disciplines.” This shift – from the expressive to the conceptual – also involved an acceptance of the reproducibility of gesture and image, “...so that the idea of drawing as graphology, as a kind of personal handwriting, [became] a dead issue, as was spontaneity” (Leymarie, Monnier & Rose 1979: 248).

The shift towards sculptural and architectural scale increasingly included *corporeality* in the act of drawing as the whole body of the artist or audience became involved in the work. One has to move inside or alongside LeWitt’s drawings and has to walk between the lines in a De Maria landscape. Leymarie, Monnier and Rose (ibid.) write about the former’s transference of drawings to the wall: “This made his drawings coextensive with the viewer’s real [corporeal] space in an attempt to further cut down on illusionism and [to] totally enfold the viewer in his subjective mental space.”

The mental space of many artists involved a testing of their own approaches to drawing “...in relation to previous styles and to previous notions and conventions of drawing by reappraising them at what may be described as an ironic distance, by isolating their specific conventions, conceptualizing them, and recreating them as... paraphrase” (Leymarie, Monnier & Rose 1979: 247). Rose (1992: 12) would later add: “Remembrance of the past is iconographically integral to the new language of art. Within this general idea of agreement, there is an enormous range of play inherent in the new mode, and drawing, with its enormous potential for overwriting, has become a primary vehicle for this...” Thus an *engagement with the history of art* speaks through the drawing revolution after the middle of the previous century. For example, when one is looking at a drawing by Cy Twombly, one is simultaneously aware of *his* connective line across the surface, while reading it as an *historical reinscription* of Alexander Cozens’ late eighteenth-century experiments in drawing and printmaking.

The abovementioned cornerstones of the mid-twentieth-century drawing revolution culminated in a changed discourse within the discipline by the early 1980s. However, within this very discourse were already inherent the counter-strategies which would increasingly problematise and complicate its assumptions. Again, these can be summarised through four (counter-) cornerstones.

It has been demonstrated that line can be subsumed within *surface* as can be seen in some of LeWitt’s own drawings, in which it is almost impossible to distinguish individual lines. Theorist Vilém Flusser considers the relationship between line and surface. He talks about how surfaces have become ubiquitous and metaphorically ever more important in our surroundings today; as against the importance of lines in the Cartesian model. He argues that in our era of visibility we seize the totality of a picture’s surface at a glance and then proceed to analyse it; that is, we work from synthesis to

analysis; while reading along a line works from analysis to synthesis, just as we have to follow a written text if we want to get to its message. "...this points to the difference between the one-dimensional line and the two-dimensional surface: the one aims at getting somewhere; the other is there already, but may reveal how it got there. This difference is one of temporality...the times involved in the two processes are different...we may say that the reading of pictures takes less time because the moment in which their messages are received is denser; it is more compacted. It also opens up more quickly..." (Flusser 2002: 23).

The strong conceptual focus on drawing as process has been questioned through a *pictorial turn* aimed at reinstating the importance of visuality in all its material physicality, including subject-matter and recognisable motif. Laura Hoptman has curated the third in a series of major contemporary drawing exhibitions (1976, 1992, 2002) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the publication concurrent with the 2002 exhibition, she writes as follows of the works: "...these drawings are finished and autonomous and to some degree representational. They are also what Yve-Alain Bois has called 'projective', that is, they depict something that has been imagined before it is drawn, as opposed to being found through the process of making...With all respect to Serra, for many artists today drawing is not a verb but a noun" (Hoptman 2002: 12). Ugo Rondinone's careful topographical renderings and Thoba Khedoori's precise architectural drawings are cases in point.

The *corporeality* of drawing has become increasingly *integrated with* post-media, *interdisciplinary performance and immersive environments* in the arts. Two explanatory examples can respectively be mentioned here. South African artist William Kentridge recently exhibited his "7 fragments for Georges Méliès" – an early French filmmaker – at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. As has been the case with many of his animations, this work is also the result of drawings made, erased, redrawn and filmed intermittently into sequence through a short walk between drawing board and camera. In this cycle, however, the boundaries between the artist's own body and the drawings are increasingly erased. Jason Smith writes: "...they form an immersive environment...[depicting]...the artist at work in his studio or interacting with one of his signature animated drawings. The main protagonist of Kentridge's films is the artist himself...in the studio as creative laboratory...images and graphic phenomena emerge and disappear before our eyes, as a torn self-portrait of the artist magically reintegrates and morphs into man himself...we are witness to [his] hesitation and uncertainty, his tentative mark-making yet intuitive sense for the ambiguity of particular forms and their suggestion of an alternative state" (2006: 6).

Another example can be found in a 2005 project entitled "Grayscale drawing" by New Zealand artist Kurt Adams. He draws digitally to create a large archive of elements and creates digital soundbites. These are then introduced into enormous 40-minute moving image and sound environments through a complex rendering process utilising thirty computers at a time. The dramatic black, white and grey result on large screen envelops and overwhelms the audience in a sublime land and cityscape through which sound

becomes visual and drawing becomes audible. Adams (2005: 2-3) writes that painter Claude Monet “walked across bridged ponds, diverted water to create veined reflections of [water-] lilies. Adding and subtracting from the orchestrated landscape, he surrounded himself in canvas; painting a picture already designed to be painted...This feedback is a method I also use. Initially drawing from real life I then began to draw in front of the screen. Sketching from my own fabricated habitats...[engaging] with Brian Massumi’s descriptions of ...virtual...‘infoldings and unfoldings, redoublings and reductions, punctual events falling away from themselves.’ The digital noise and artefact ruptures the surface of my drawings, the artificial horizon aches under erasure and relocation, the grey porridge mountains curdle with pencil...a concrete garden shimmering like an enormous futurist machine [made with] utopian playdough...”. The reader realises how the language used here strains to relay the corporeal impact of the drawing on the artist and the audience.

Historical reinscription in drawing has itself been overwritten with more overt *political* engagements, as artists today are often acutely aware of the implications and effects of their alignments with the world around them. One can mention here that drawing as an arts practice which tends towards the incomplete and fragmentary is eminently suited to the concerns Kentridge has famously revealed in South Africa, namely that he is “...interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings...” (Smith 2006: 3). Ralph Sykes points out that “...when a drawing [and by extension a print] deals with social injustice, it can have a quality of [political] indignation...the sharp thin line can sharpen the bite of a message, increasing the sting of an attack” (1969: xxiv).

Current drawing practitioners who particularly engage in the political overwriting of historical reinscription are, for example, Bucharest-based Dan Perjovschi and Filipino artist Jose Legaspi. Perjovschi explored public graffiti in 2003 for one of his many projects. By that time, graffiti had already entered the hallowed halls of accepted artistic practice (as against its position some decades ago). The artist played with the short history of graffiti as theorised art in postmodernist practice (which in turn, of course, also references its historical antecedents harking back to, for example, lurid inscriptions on walls in early Acadian settlements around 2000 BCE). Perjovschi’s overwriting involved public walls at Essen in Germany; public memories of graffiti historicised by their long-term inhabitation of that part of the town; and his new inscriptions with their direct references to current political events in Europe.

Legaspi’s recent drawings have been arranged as one thousand A4-size chalk and charcoal drawings on paper covering an enormous wall and depicting scenes of extreme violence: obliteration, castration, impalement. Exploring the work further, one comes to realise that the artist refers to the Filipino past with its Catholic connection to regional monuments such as the “Spolarium” in the National Museum in Manila – where an enormous nineteenth-century mural realistically depict dying Roman gladiators being dragged out of the Colosseum. On the other hand, the drawn images suggest all too recent atrocities, both personal and public, where private and domestic

violence overlaps with suggestions of homophobia and political torture, as well as with reflections of the appalling social conditions in contemporary Manila.

Practices such as those discussed above are the stuff of critical conversation between internationally networked research communities in the visual arts, particularly for those artists and academics involved with drawing. Outside these contexts, such practices may arguably sometimes seem difficult to access. However, David Rosand reminds us that through drawing we can all reach out and be put in active touch with the world (1999: 23). Amongst many other researchers, Dexter points out that this act is part of everybody's daily life: "Drawing is everywhere, we are surrounded by it – it is sewn into the warp and weft of our lives; we practice it as one of our earliest experiences as schoolchildren... People draw everywhere in the world; drawing can even be used as a global visual language when verbal communication fails" (2005: 5).

The next part of this article explores connections between the key strategies and counter-strategies (including trajectories and cornerstones) identified in recent drawing practices and modes of sign production as registers of visual communication and literacy.

VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND LITERACY

Visual communication can be seen as a sub-discipline of communication studies. However, Sandra Moriarty and Keith Kenney (2006: 1) have pointed out that it is also a multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional effort. For example, Sol Worth's *Studying visual communication* (1981) came from visual communication theory; Arthur Asa Berger's *Seeing is believing* (1989) from semiotics; John Berger's *Ways of seeing* (1972) from Marxist discourse analysis; and Deborah Curtiss' *Introduction to visual literacy* (1987) from aesthetics. All of these examples agree to some extent that visual literacy is a learned process. This view was challenged in favour of "natural process" by Paul Messaris in his *Visual literacy: Image, mind and reality* (1994). This article argues with a range of scholars from theorists Nelson Goodman (*Languages of art: An approach to a theory of symbol*, 1976) to Umberto Eco (*Semiotics and the philosophy of language*, 1984) to art therapist Rawley Silver (*Art as language: Access to emotions and cognitive skills through drawings*, 2000) that visual literacy is indeed a learned process similar to language acquisition.

Eco (in Lechte 1994: 129) insists on the conventionality of signs. "...Even where there appears to be a clear case of an object, or behaviour, which seems to exist outside any conventionalised format [or language], i.e. beyond the code...such instances rapidly become conventionalised." Eco identifies four modes (physical labour; recognition; ostension; and replica) in his typology of code production (1976/79: 183-184) and these modes can be useful for an understanding of how (visual) literacy can be acquired and thus how (visual) communication can be effected. In the third part of the article, these modes are reviewed briefly in relation to the material presented in part 2 above.

“*Physical labour*: effort required for the production of a sign.” Contemporary drawing does not only involve such physical labour, but also signals it as, for example, when John Baldessari makes the sharpening of a pencil the subject-matter of his *Pencil story*; or when Kentridge utilises the marks of erasure made with a rubber to “materialise” movement in the filmic translation of his drawings. Writing about the history of drawing, Emma Dexter focuses at one point on the ideas of Paul Klee, the early twentieth-century artist who theorised this mode of production from a practitioner’s perspective. Klee’s (1925) book, *The pedagogical sketchbook*, “...connects drawing with all the physical phenomena of the world. Klee used the working relationship of bone and muscle, the flow of the bloodstream, waterfalls, the flight of birds, the motion of the tides as examples of ‘coordinated linear motion’.” He argued furthermore that an understanding of physical acts leads into an understanding of drawing outcomes. The increased corporeality of drawing practices in recent years – referred to already – is relevant in this context.

“*Recognition*: object or event is recognised as expression of a sign content, as with imprints, symptoms or clues.” Contemporary drawing does not only provide an “imprint”, but also foregrounds its expression of a sign content. Michael Newman explains that in drawing each stroke is a sign of the hand’s agency and its withdrawal, unlike painting which covers its surface and hides its moment of making. He writes that drawing’s “...peculiar mode of being lies between the withdrawal of the trace in the mark and the presence of the idea it prefigures” (see Bryson 2003: 95). Drawing’s revelation of its own processes has also been indicated earlier in this article.

“*Ostension*: an object or act is shown to be the exemplar of a class of objects or acts.” Contemporary drawings do not exist in a vacuum, but are rather doubly contextualised. On one level, they are contextualised through our recognition in them of the physical acts necessary for their performance. On this level of “natural process”, Messaris is correct in arguing that visual literacy does not depend on (visual) language acquisition. However, contemporary drawings are also contextualised on another level precisely by behaving as exemplars within the limits of a language. Just as we can read a map through understanding the codified relationship between the map and the geographical terrain it refers to, so too can we read a drawing through understanding its codified relationship with the art historical and theoretical terrain within which it is located. Artist Simon Evans even makes this relationship the subject-matter of his drawing entitled *Map of the world*. Elsewhere, Jean Leymarie acknowledges the codified nature of drawing before commencing with an analysis of exemplars: “[Drawing is a thing as mysterious and primordial as language itself...” (1976: vii). The various drawing discourses in recent practice – as indicated in part 2 of this article – can be seen as subsets of a visual language with its own rules, codes and communicative outcomes.

“*Replica*: takes on features of codification through stylisation, examples are emblems, musical types, mathematical signs.” Contemporary drawing is highly stylised in conjunction with a recognition that all representational outcomes are constructed by a practitioner rather than merely reflective of objects and events. So confident is

contemporary drawing of its replication of code that it can play with the limits of its own language. An example is when Mel Bochner organised an exhibition in the codified space of a New York art gallery in 1966 with the title: “Working drawings and other visible things on paper not necessarily meant to be viewed as art.” Dexter (2005: 7) writes: “For this show he borrowed numerous drawings and other works on paper...working drawings, a bill, a mathematician’s calculations and a page from Scientific American.” Bochner then photocopied these items and presented them as artworks on plinths. Visitors were left to wonder where the art was and arguably it was in the idea that drawing shares vital characteristics with other modes of learning. Drawing happily embraces other modes of learning and new technologies and often makes them the subject-matter of its own outcomes. An example is where Australian artist Donal Fitzpatrick incorporates the effect of the photocopier in his drawings in such a way that the drawings become an archive of a copying process, rather than being reflections through an observational act.

In summary and conclusion, Umberto Eco writes about a process resulting from his four modes of sign production: “*Invention*: unforeseen by the existing code, it forms the basis of a new material continuum.” Contemporary drawing has reinscribed historical instances and has then overwritten such reinscriptions (see part 2 above). Old forms and formats have been the basis for new material continuums, for example where LeWitt deploys the historical format of the sinopia or where Dan Perjovschi overwrites the history of graffiti. Where she discusses drawing’s relationships with the past, Emma Dexter writes: “Drawing...is the medium through which the past has often spoken most clearly and directly...As artists have sought out new narratives and new versions of history...social histories have been best expressed through the informal and anecdotal codes of drawing...Drawing provides the locus for [a] reconnection with aspects of [earlier] culture” (2005: 9-10). Sibyl Moholy-Nagy claims that drawing “urges on to further explorations, both in space and spirit” (see Klee 1925: 63).

This article argues that the above modes of sign production can form the matrix for visual communication and literacy learning through an engagement with drawing practices. It argues that contemporary drawing provides a field of activity through which visual communication and literacy are performed *and* through which it can be learnt and understood by analysis of exemplars and their relationship with the codified art historical and theoretical context in which they are located. The article attempts to make connections across the disciplinary boundaries of drawing practice, its historical and theoretical framing, and semiotic modes of sign production as registers for visual communication and literacy. Making such connections is predicated on an agreement with many current researchers – such as Graeme Sullivan (2005: 129) – that visual literacy and visual knowing is a “transcognitive” activity, an activity that involves language, context, modes of signification and the materials and processes particular to an arts practice (such as drawing).

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