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Drawing is playing with words

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Drawing Board is a 2 day research workshop of invited participants on 7 and 8 July 2006, organised by the Faculty of Art Architecture and Design, University of Lincoln and hosted by The Collection in Lincoln.

Drawing Board *what drawing is not what is drawing*

Drawing is playing with words

∞

The **abstract** is a **Prologue** as a **preface** to **Something** ... thought (?)

Found words are a source of available readymade words. Found words feature in this paper in numerous guises as bricolage to provide a 'no-space and everyplace'¹ where the writing can shift its focus.

- ***Drawing is a readymade proposition***

I will explore the proposition that *drawing is ... playing with words* and that drawing is an ambiguous and equivocal practice capable of more than one interpretation. I will prove it with string and iodine and a note from my mother (Eddie Izzard, 1998)².

In 1976 for Richard Serra (Drawing Now: MoMA, New York) drawing was a verb and then in 2002 for Laura Hoptman in Drawing Now: Eight Propositions (MoMA, New York), it was a noun again. A dictionary will usually inform us that it is both.

John Berger in *Berger on Drawing* (p.80) reminds us that when words are applied to visual art, both lose precision. So impasse and I may draw a blank. You may well ask ... so what!? Why is this of any interest, relevance and importance to a drawing research community?

My honest answer is ... I'm not sure, it may not be, and that perhaps I am attempting to critique the invitation to propose a drawing proposition rather than extract an argument, as a strategy of withdrawal, in an attempt to pursue the position of impotently representing impotence in drawing research.

Thanks to Robert Ward.

¹ Nicholas Paley, *Finding Art's Place: Experiments in Contemporary Education and Culture*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995, p. 9

² Eddie Izzard, *Circle*, Video, Ella Communications Ltd. 2000

Something is an **unspecified text**, a **written version** of **Something**

I am [Phil Sawdon](#) and I am drawing myself.

A process of self-examination is also known as reflexivity.

Reflexivity requires awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research.³

Phil Sawdon is a Lecturer at Loughborough University School of Art & Design, a co-editor of [Tracey](#) the online journal for contemporary drawing research, and he is a practitioner who produces artefacts some of which incorporate drawing.

I am Phil Sawdon and I think I draw thoughtfully.

My drawing is not automatic, involuntary or unthinking it is not of or by reflex.

Oh yes it is (confirmation)

Oh no it isn't (negation)

- ***Drawing is a reflective practice*** = (*that equals*) Drawing that is a critical reflection

It is worth noting at this point the serendipitous title of Paul Middleton's paper, *Drawing as a reflective tool*.

I might argue ...

... that an element of any personal, professional or vocational development/practice should be that you look carefully at what you do and engage in critical reflection upon it, analysing your experience, taking account of perspectives other than your own, and sharpening your awareness of any

³ D. Nightingale, and J. Cromby, (Eds) *Social constructionist psychology*, Buckingham: Open University Press 1999 p. 228

illogicalities in your thinking and of any inconsistencies and discrepancies between your expressed intentions and what you actually do.

In silent/mute conversations with myself as to whether I would confirm with John (Plowman) that I would embark on an involvement with Drawing Board and subsequently prepare these pieces of 'paper' (one of Rawson's drawing 'supports'⁴), my initial thoughts (*I think*) were to query what I understood a 'proposition' to be, coupled with my imbedded association with a 'proposition' as being almost exclusively part of the Drawing Now series of exhibitions/outcomes at MoMA, New York from 1976. Drawing Now ... Eight Propositions ... 2002, you can see the line being walked ... or not, as your case may be.

Aside: As this (pro) position is 'on paper' is it 'in theory' as opposed to fact. Is theory only useful when its proof can be located in the drawings themselves? If I 'beg the question' am I avoiding giving a direct answer by posing another question?

Does framing a question imply an answer?⁵

A response to art and design' text' might be to locate some of the keywords into 'everyday' language as a means of transient understanding, a potential for play and creative association.

What attracted my attention with 'proposition' was that it can be a statement, a wordless expression of an idea that affirms *or* denies **something**.

Oh no it isn't

Oh yes it is

Oh no it isn't

Oh yes it is

⁴ Philip Rawson, *Drawing*, Oxford University Press, 1969

⁵ Michael Biggs, The Foundations of Practice-Based Research: Introduction in *Working papers in art & design*, vol. 1, 2000, <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol1/index.html> p.5.

- ***Drawing is pantomime***

Pantomime is wordless storytelling. Drawing is mute. (It does not speak).

George Whale asks:

What do we mean when we talk about visual language? Are we saying that pictures are in some way similar to speech or text? Or is the term simply a figure of speech, or worse, a piece of meaningless jargon?

In the same short article on Tracey Whale goes on to ask several further questions:

When is it legitimate to speak of a drawing as an expression of visual language and what are the similarities between visual language and natural language? Can visual artists be said to employ vocabularies and grammars, and to what extent is it necessary to know an artists language in order to derive meaning from the work?⁶

I rehearsed 'drawing is' ... *pause* ... over and over again in a sort of word association mantra with increasingly psychedelic answers and took some temporary shelter (not for the first time) in Eddie Izzard's statement on research:

I don't do active research I do passive research. The easier version where you let the research come to you. Come on research; come on research (with the telly control). Oh a program about sharks, ...and then I know about sharks.

He also states that

Aristotle said the sun goes round the earth. Wrong, wrong. But in his day you didn't have to prove a theory. Nowadays if you say, "I think soot is the elixir of life if mixed with water!" Well then prove it. "I will prove it with string and iodine and a note from my mother." But in Aristotle's time you could say the

⁶ George Whale, *Is 'visual language' anything more than a figure of speech?* Tracey, <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ac/tracey/idal/whale.html> September 2001

sun went round the earth and people said well done that's a theory, fantastic, and just a few photos all right.⁷

One of my initial responses was that drawing is ... *pause* ... 'never having to say you are sorry'. As it turns out this was an imprecise reflex to 'Love *means* never having to say you are sorry' from the book *Love Story* by Eric Segal. Interestingly the film version from 1970 was advertised with the slogan 'being in love means never having to say you are sorry'. The allusion was intended as an easy way for me to get to ... drawing is never having to say you are sorry, now it more accurately should read drawing is means never having to say you are sorry. However certain verbs (Richard Serra again) cannot be paired with forms of the verb to be. I should consider using the simplest form of these verbs (without the "i n g") when I write about present or past action.

- ***Drawing is love***

Drawing Restraint 9: Mathew Barney. Initially conceived as facilities to defeat the facility of drawing DR9 is a return to film and represents the most ambitious of the series. Shot largely on a Japanese whaling vessel, the feature-length film transforms the oceanic mythologies of the great cetacean mammal. It is a cannibalistic love story drawn, as it were, from the inky depths and offered up to the public as a strange and compelling spectacle⁸.

I offer no apologies for having little confidence in being able to propose any certainty as to what drawing is ... the third person singular present indicative of be. Others [pro (noun)] may be more convinced of their abilities to draw a conclusion. I propose simply that drawing is ambiguous and an opportunity to also 'trace (y) etymological lines'⁹

The opening line, I am [Phil Sawdon](#) and I am drawing myself, may for some have echoes of a fellowship of drawing anonymous (*DA?*)

⁷ Eddie Izzard, *Circle*, Video, Ella Communications Ltd. 2000

⁸ Neville Wakefield, *Drawing Restraint 9: Mathew Barney* in *ArtReview* May 2006 p 97

⁹ Robert Ward, email correspondence with Phil Sawdon, Loughborough University, May 2006

I wish to state that I am a follower of Hawkwind, the space metal band formed in 1969 in Ladbroke Grove, London and still working. The same responses that offered 'Love is' also paraded the lyrics to The Black Corridor which opens with:

Space is infinite, it is dark
Space is neutral, it is cold
It does not speak

So with sincere apologies to Michael Moorcock (1969) here is an adaptation

Drawing is infinite (∞), it is dark
Drawing is neutral, it is cold
Drawing cannot be measured, it cannot be angered,
It cannot be placated
It cannot be summed up, drawing is there
It does not offer truth and neither does it lie
Drawing is a remorseless, senseless, impersonal fact
Drawing is the absence of time and matter

Aside: That's ringing a bell (a warning bell?). It reminds me of something, somewhere ... maybe later, perhaps.

Quotation is reproduction rather than repetition, an erasure of genesis that restores authentic meaning. What is most memorable is what is skewed out of context. In the mosaic of quotation, discourse is released from its reified environs and flexibly recomposed to weave fresh correspondences across language.¹⁰

With Terry Eagleton in mind what if I try a (bri) collage?

- ***Drawing is infinite space***
- ***Drawing is fictional space***

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London, Verso 1981

I may be moving into ekphrasis/ecphrasis¹¹, a form of poetic writing concerned with the visual arts. I would love to see drawings from the hand of Phlebas the Phoenician¹² ... so does it follow that ...

- ***Drawing is poetic space***

Is it too fanciful to see a relationship with Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological analysis¹³ of how we experience intimate architectural spaces? Is this a link too far as a consequence of extended ekphrasis? Are there wardrobes, cellars, attics, and drawers of emotional and lived experience as reflective and reflexive tools in drawing practice?

Phil Sawdon in *Drawing with Prose*¹⁴ a moving image paper on the */seconds* website hosted by Leeds Metropolitan University in a response to questions concerning narrative in drawing asks us to consider drawing as prose, language that is not poetry.

Negation ... confirmation ... antonym ... synonym!?

Deborah Harty a postgraduate drawing research student at Loughborough University writes:

... drawing, body as machine, manoeuvring across the surface with methodical, rhythmical motion, mind disconnected from the activity, a robotic, almost liminal state and yet grounded, all too aware of the now, the space is confined, a tension in the body as the only contact with the surface is through the tool, an extension of the hand, perforating the paper as it negotiates the surface, rasping and grating sounds reverberating around the room, the chalky air, an awareness of dust particles floating, visible in the shaft of

¹¹ Ekphrasis, alternately spelled ecphrasis, is a term used to denote poetry or poetic writing concerning itself with the visual arts, artistic objects, and/or highly visual scenes. Although poetry about works of art is the most obvious form of ekphrasis, it need not be the only one as ekphrasis can be about any visually powerful scene or subject.

¹² T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Faber and Faber Limited 1940. *The Waste Land* is cited as an example of ekphrasis. Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead, Forgot the cry of gulls and the deep sea swell And the profit and loss. From *IV Death by Water* in *The Waste Land*

¹³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958). Boston, MA: Beacon, 1994

¹⁴ Phil Sawdon, *Drawing with Prose*, */seconds*, <http://www.slashseconds.org> Leeds Metropolitan University, 2006

daylight streaming in through the window, a distinct smell and residue flowing in and out with the breath, a discomfort in the hand as pressure is applied and released, a heightened awareness of self amidst the apparent removal of thought – a meditative contemplation of self, as soon as recognised all but gone and the tedium of the process is apparent again, calm and ease dissipated, irritation and unrest again discernible, the dark and weighty semblance belying the actual delicacy of the ruptured surface¹⁵.

Aha ... pause ... I've remembered.

Let me take you to a conversation between Avis Newman (AN) and Catherine de Zegher (CdZ) from *The Stage of Drawing; Gesture and Act*¹⁶

CdZ: Drawing is thus not to do with perceptual illusionism, but with infinite space as mental possibility. Is the drawing itself, the ground, a space of transience? p 167

AN: I would definitely identify drawing with the infinite space of sensation: both the sensations of the body and the sensations of the mind. The consciousness of that limitless space is embodied in the reality of the white page, which I would say is a space of fragmentation that has, since modernism, been an interminable potentiality, symbolically the dreadful place of boundlessness. p 233

AN: I think the paper is an undifferentiated space in that it references the primitive undifferentiated space of the infantile body that has to be claimed as the self.

CdZ: Is the undifferentiated space language, that Other, everything that is outside of us? It is, I think, the entity of possibility.

AN: Yes, and I think the fascination and the fear of the white page is the site in which one enacts differentiation as soon as a mark or sign is made. It

¹⁵ Deborah Harty, *Drawing Response*, 2006 p.3

¹⁶ Avis Newman and Catherine de Zegher from *The Stage of Drawing; Gesture and Act* Tate Publishing and the Drawing Centre, New York 2003 – 2004

changes the non-ness and establishes a place of action. As soon as that act occurs the paper becomes something. p 237

Hawkwind are also responsible for Orgone Accumulator (Robert Calvert and David Brock¹⁷). Calvert and Brock are referring to Dr. Wilhelm Reich the discoverer of Orgone, primordial cosmic energy, a basic essence of all organic life, and the Orgone Accumulator that he invented to gather and concentrate Orgone. To paraphrase part of the song: The Orgone Accumulator is no social integrator, it's a one-man isolator, it's a back brain stimulator, and it's also a Cerebral Vibrator.

- ***Drawing is a Cerebral Vibrator***

It is an intellectual oscillator involving thought as well as emotions, an academic and conceptual massager that might resonate back and forth rapidly (negation/confirmation/negation/confirmation/*to drawn from/to drawn form*¹⁸) but it is not a device with a vibrating part or tip, used as a dildo. That would be an object used as a substitute for an erect penis. Catherine de Zegher talks of the oscillation between the imagined and the concrete in her discussion concerning 'abstract' where language as the symbolic (covering the gap between the real and the imaginary) became an obsession in semiotics and psychoanalysis and was understood to bring a conditional order to the chaotic and unthinkable of the world by standing for an imagined structure¹⁹.

Note: [Tracey](#) sees drawing as a fundamental thinking tool.

Jean Fisher (written with Stella Santacatterina) in *On Drawing*²⁰ states that:

¹⁷ Robert Calvert, and David Brock, Orgone Accumulator from *Space Ritual, Hawkwind*. CD. EMI United Partnership Ltd. 1996.

¹⁸ Catherine de Zegher, 'Abstract', in *3 X Abstraction New Methods of Drawing Hilma Klint, Emma Kunz Agnes Martin*, Edited by Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher, The Drawing Centre New York, Yale University Press 2005

¹⁹ Catherine de Zegher, *Abstract*, 2005

²⁰ Jean Fisher 'On Drawing' in *The Stage of Drawing; Gesture and Act* Tate Publishing and the Drawing Centre, New York 2003 – 2004

Indeed the impulse to draw is not to capture appearance so much as a demand to animate thought. Thus drawing is always beyond perception, the other side of perception, even the humble “life” drawing! p 218

And that

To draw is never a transcription of thought (in the sense of writing) but rather a formulation or elaboration of the thought itself at the very moment it translates itself into an image. p 222

Bernice Rose in 1992²¹ talks of the special intimacy of drawing in being revelatory of the artist’s most personal thoughts something she argues is peculiar to drawing alone.

Deanna Petherbridge the year before (1991) states drawing is the primal means of symbolic communication, which predates and embraces writing and functions as a tool of conceptualisation parallel with language²².

Philip Rawson is adamant that drawing is not seeing.

It is one of the commonest fallacies that a work of art is a record of something seen. On the contrary, works of art are in fact, *made*; they are artistic constructs, based on ingrained scanning procedures.²³

Aaaaaaggggrrrrrhhhhh ... decisions or questions eh? Matrices and/or narratives, scanning and/or spanning, oblique conversations and a dialogue with ambiguity (herself) and how we do not (cannot?) say 'the table is under the book' or 'the tree is under the monkey' and how all these things are determined by prepositions²⁴

Oh no it isn't

²¹ Bernice Rose, *Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1992

²² Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing, An Artists View*, The South Bank Centre, 1991, p 7

²³ Philip Rawson, *Drawing*, Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 21

²⁴ Jane Tormey, email correspondence Loughborough University, 2006

Oh yes it is

Nothing is **Something** of no importance ... monkey business?

We might wish to ask ourselves over these two days as to why we find it desirable to say what drawing is?

Is it in response to art and design research insecurities and institutionalised auditing through such devices as the Research Assessment Exercise 2008?

Anthony Thornton in his July 2006 review for NME of Muse's *Black Holes and Revelations* asks ...

... why does music have to be so serious, so *authentic*? Rock is the only artform where authenticity is held supreme – more important than moving or provoking you. It is as if the whole rock canon has been assembled by a committee of sociologists rather than hedonists, madmen and geniuses. When did using the imagination become a crime?

There are occasions when I am tempted to substitute several words in that statement as a platform for ... my position ... striving to impotently represent impotence in drawing research is mischief making, monkey business. *Le singe est sur la branche.*²⁵ I am co-opted and I collaborate.

Oh no I don't

Oh yes you do!

In the words of the Secret Machines ... No language we've got flags of our own²⁶

Robert Ward in *Evasive Display* (it's a fair co-opt!) states

Art reverts to tautology because art is capable of delivering itself as *reference*. The Emperor's invisible attire is only invisible because it continually transcends appearance.²⁷

²⁵ Eddie Izzard, *Dress to Kill*, Video, Ella Communications Ltd. 1998

²⁶ Secret Machines, *Nowhere Again*, Warner Bros, 2004

I am reminded again of a reference to the 'forum on The Function of Criticism' in the novel *Small World* by David Lodge at which leading international literary academics debate The Function of Criticism. After numerous prepared diatribes one delegate who 'is not wearing an identification badge' steps up to the microphone and asks, "What follows if everybody agrees with you?" The reply from the panel after much consternation is, "The members of the forum don't seem to understand your question, sir. Could you re-phrase it?" The delegate responds, "What I mean is ... "What do you do if everybody agrees with you?" The panel agree it is a very good question, 'a very in-ter-est-ing question'. The delegate replies "I don't have an answer myself, just the question."²⁸

Perhaps some of the very last few words should go to Edward Hill:

- ***Drawing is a participation in the language of Drawing.***²⁹

Full stop

... or so I thought

Post script

I recently found myself in a social conversation with a colleague who said that she had been in a conversation with a friend and she had suggested that some 'works of art' can benefit others by providing a discursive space in which the unsayable can be discussed at a safe distance. The friend responded with a word of caution against using the word 'space' as her editor had pulled her up on this word and said it was 'so '90s' and carried a lot of 'baggage' that one might not want to be associated with.

²⁷ Robert Ward, *Evasive Display (it's a fair co-opt!)* paper delivered at Co-option, Co-operation, or Collaboration: The Artist and Institution in Focus. The Tate Liverpool Research Forum, 2nd March 2006

²⁸ David Lodge, *Small World*, Penguin Books UK, 1985, pp. 316-320

²⁹ Edward Hill, *The Language of Drawing*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966, p.8

Therefore I now conclude with the proposition that I am not only sartorially but also academically unfashionable!