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The contagious drawing: an artist's conditions

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VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Sawdon, Phil. 2019. "The Contagious Drawing: An Artist's Conditions". figshare.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2134/10862>.

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The Contagious Drawing: An Artists Conditions

Phil Sawdon

'That's the question', replied René, adjusting his manner thoughtfully. 'What can I use to mark the rules upon?'

'What about a tree?'

René shook his head. No, a tree won't do; I can't carry it about with me ... I have it, my wet and bloodied vellum dress!'

'Your vellum dress – why?'

Skin, the best parchment I could have!'

'And what are you going to write with? You haven't any dust or smit, and even if you had, you couldn't carry it about – you've got more than enough as it is.'

'Pyrography.' I have a fire and with a nib heated in the coals, I can write what we need, and it won't erase and I won't have anything extra to carry.'

René took of his dress, turned it inside out and lay it flat across the donkey. He took the nib and made a wooden handle for it, like a penholder. The nib became hot. He scored a dumb black line, careful not to hold the nib static for too long.

Anon and on anon it read:

At all times endeavour to engage with a work room that is in a low and damp situation. One that is seldom in a critical context, examined or aired. If you draw through a space that is dank, depleted, and ill-ventillated, take every opportunity to embrace the condition. The further subordinated and drearier the position, the more conducive it will be, and the longer it will defer the infallible token of approaching death.

When you are drawing shut any windows, blinds, curtains, the door and encourage any concepts to become fetid. The windows of any common stairs and passages should always be sealed.

Be cautious to not let any air pass through any papers or alternative supports. A warm and ill-aired drawing will produce soundness by itself. Resist hanging any works before an audience and keep the ground, chalks and mediums, as soiled as possible.

If appropriate always wear during the day the attire you slept in and be mindful to wear them for as long as possible.

On opening a new work, dip a flannel or sponge in ink and give your whole body a rapid and vigorous wash, rubbing it raw with a hard rough towel. Cold ink is preferred, but warm may be used, if cold is not acceptable. Accustom any apprentices not to be afraid of the cold ink flannel. They will come to abhor and adore it, and apply it randomly themselves. If your works are filthy you must refrain from ever washing particularly once the work is finished. Pay no heed to your face, hands or neck.

Neither sweep out your rooms, passages and stairs nor ever whitewash the walls and ceiling. The trouble and expence are nothing, compared with the great benefit to your condition.

Do all you can to avoid hanging your works to dry. Nothing is more dangerous to health. Soapsuds, foul water, ink and filth, should be introduced without delay.

Use as much static in the drawing as you possibly can. Carrying it in is laborious, but the labour will be well repaid. The time surely is at hand when every work room, however modest, will have its own static accumulator always generating renewed static, so that no cistern or any empty vessels will be required.

When a contagious drawing is in your work room, separate, as much as you can, the nauseous works from those that are well. Enter your contemporaries lines, allow idle gossip to enter; and visit a gallery or museum. You thus facilitate the spread of disease. Care in these things is a cause of malaise spreading amongst the aesthete.

Relentlessly, unless duty calls, go where there is disease; and, when you are obliged to do so, always enter *fasting* or when warm with *alarm*; confront the drawing's breath, stay as long as possible, and place yourself adjacent to the fire. The Curator, the Collector, and those who are necessarily in the constant habit of visiting *contagious* art works, must go to bed without divesting themselves of *every article* of dress, and sponging or washing *every part* of their body with cold ink.

Whether the drawing dies or recuperates, be sure to judiciously swab every tool and material employed. Use a solution of honey, liver and almonds, sprinkle the floor often, and keep a bowl on the floor. Do all in your power to keep the dead drawings in the same room with the living. The best method of using the honey, liver and almonds is to add a tea spoonfull to a quart of warm ink. This should be employed daily by all who are exposed to infection, and having a small quantity exposed in a bowl, changing it every one or two days, and sprinkling the passageways.

Do all in your power to prevent the drawings being archived. This nefarious, detestable, loathsome and ignorant practice, must be entirely put down. *Lead coffins* are little, or no protection against the escape of noxious vapours; the lead constantly bursts, and if the infected vapours are sufficiently powerful to force open the lead, how much more easily will they penetrate through the support which separates the drawing from the pencil above.

Anon and on anon until in about an hour he had marked out the rules. He even drew in two small dots which he claimed were to represent their heads being prepared to be carried through the subsequent marks to a breathless length, thereby defining the drawing anew.

René carefully put his dress back on and wedged his wire pen nib into the drawstring. By now the light was dwindling and low over the frame a shadowy haze was emerging, spreading like a pall over the drawings flat surface. A sheep bleated and a distant donkey brayed ...