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Triptych : reflecting on drawing practice as knowledge

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Duff, Leo, Brian Fay, Siún Hanrahan, Phil Sawdon, and Andrew Selby. 2019. "Triptych : Reflecting on Drawing Practice as Knowledge". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/3491>.

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Triptych is a collaborative research group originated by Kingston University, Loughborough University and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in 2005.

Triptych's strategic intention is to improve the recognition, use and understanding of drawing pedagogy, whilst investigating the use and application of drawing in professional practice.

Practice and theory will be explored to contribute to knowledge of the act of drawing. This includes investigation of diverse and contemporary aspects of the fine arts, design, built environment, pedagogy and theory on drawing.

Triptych is built upon the research interests and expertise of its members. This can be evidenced not only through individual practice based research but also in projects such as TRACEY (Loughborough), Drawing – The Process (Kingston, to be followed by Drawing - The Purpose) and The DrawingLab (DIT).

**‘Δ’: A Collaborative Practice-based Research Project:
Reflecting on Drawing Practice as Knowledge**

Leo Duff, Brian Fay, Siún Hanrahan, Phil Sawdon, Andrew Selby
May 2008

Triptych, as a research group, is built upon the interests and expertise of its members and the diversity that exists at each institution is multiplied by bringing three drawing-centred research groups together. After an initial meeting in January 2006 at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) of most of the researchers involved in Triptych, ‘Δ’ was selected as a common focus that might lay the ground for the emergence of shared interests. Each member of Triptych was to respond to this mark in a way that made sense in the context of her/his practice, and to record this on a project blog (<http://triangleprojecttriptych.blogspot.com>). There are twenty-two project contributions/research conversations, on the blog, made by a total of twenty-three individuals.

Jake Abrams, Alastair Adams, Bernadette Burns, Simon Downs, Leo Duff, Sarah Dyer, Brian Fay, Cathy Gale, Joe Hanly, Siún Hanrahan, Mark Harris, Deborah Harty/Phil Sawdon, Anna Macleod, Adriana Ionascu, John Mayock, Liz

Minichiello, Mario Minichiello, Nick Rodgers, Andrew Selby, John Short, Kerry Walton, Yijia Wang

I

Reviewing the blog, the ‘ Δ ’ mark, prompted in the first instance by the tripartite constitution of the research group, seemed an apt metaphor to anchor a reflection upon the initial stages of this unusual research collaboration. At a general level, taken as a directional metaphor – an arrowhead pointing in different directions – it captures a sense of the diversity of practices and interests brought to the project through its members. Not only do the members come from a range of different art and design disciplines (illustration, textiles, typography, graphic design, fine arts, and critical theory) but the nature of their interests within a given discipline and consequent approaches to drawing are also different. Within their collaborative contribution to the project, Deborah Harty and Phil Sawdon [fig. 1] explore something of the challenges posed by this diversity in visiting and revisiting ‘you, me and us’, the question being what ‘us’ might mean.

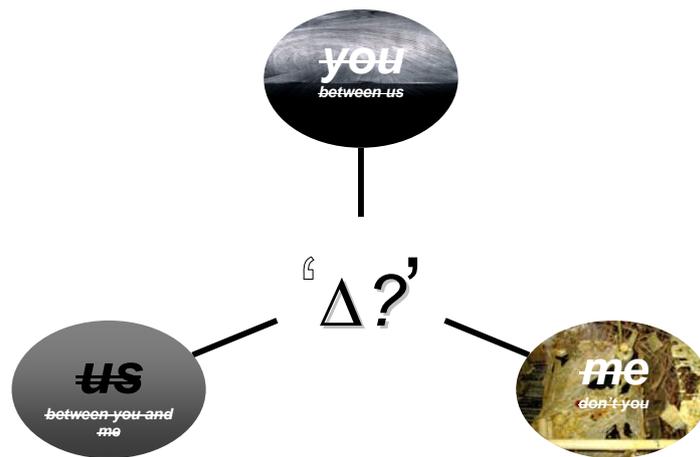


Figure 1: *Diagram*, Deborah Harty and Phil Sawdon, 2007

Further, if that directional metaphor is reread as an expansive spatial metaphor, attention is drawn to the ubiquity of drawing that makes it, as a ground for collaboration, somewhat arbitrary. The coming together of this research group is unusual in its open-endedness; it was an experiment to see if three groups of researchers, each based within a particular institution, *could*, in fact, collaborate in some meaningful way as well as to find potential strands for individuals from each institution to link and contribute within smaller pockets. The collaboration emerged because key people within each of the institutions’ drawing research groups happened to know each other, happened to believe that they might have a similar approach to collaborative ventures, and so decided to see whether

some sort of collaboration could be devised, sustained and deliver meaningful research outcomes. The real test – meaningful research outcomes – has yet to come but the project has been remarkable thus far in having been productively sustained. Following several smaller meetings, the formal launch of the Triptych research group took the form of a symposium and international public seminar, *Drawing Perspectives*, at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in January 2006. The agreement to work from the ‘Δ’ mark so that convergences of interest might emerge was agreed, captured through the project blog, and followed up at a second formal meeting of the research group in Loughborough in November 2006. At this point a number of common research themes were identified: artists’ notebooks, observation, process, language and meaning, and narrative.

II Convergence

Perhaps unsurprisingly, continuities or convergences do emerge in terms of interests, processes and outcomes – yet another ‘Δ’. Indeed, Deborah Harty and Phil Sawdon created actual ‘thought process’ diagrams specifically on the subject as part of their reflection on drawing practice as knowledge; they equated the triangle to ‘you, me and us’ and examine the ways that these three states connect and disconnect. While, Joe Hanly talks of the triangle in terms of the rational, the intuitive and the instinctive, and also talks of the third element (side) of the triangle being what happens when two opposites begin to work together/against each other (e.g. black v white = grey).

Convergent interests

One shared interest that emerges from the blog centres on the typographic mark, and juxtaposes the work of Deborah Harty and Phil Sawdon, Cathy Gale, Clare Bell, Simon Downs, and Siún Hanrahan. The nature of each individual’s interest in the typographic mark and their approaches to it vary significantly: there is the play of text, image and concept in the collaborative dialogue of Harty and Sawdon; Gale’s exploration of multiplicities of meaning through a playful approach to the humble ‘graphic device/symbol/icon’, so that a connection is forged between a fascination with ‘X’ and ‘Δ’ through ‘Y’; Clare Bell’s interest is as a professional designer and typographic historian and theoretician with a strong interest in the materiality and semiotic significance of typographic forms; Simon Downs’s approach is also that of a designer, embracing the challenge posed by a triangle as the foundation for an alphabet [fig. 2]; the point of connection to the typographic mark for Siún Hanrahan emerges from an interest in the materiality of text, as a resistance to a cultural tendency to see through the text to ‘the meaning’, rather than attending to all the means (including the typographic) by which a text composes meaning.

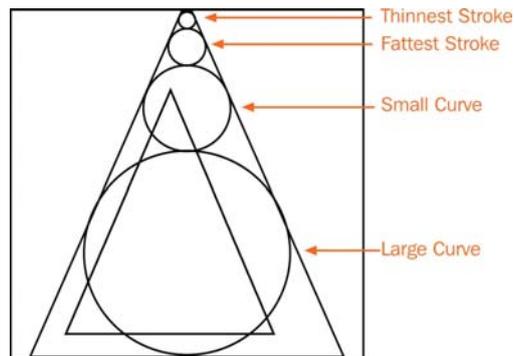


Figure 2: *Triptych-Delta*, Simon Downs, 2007

Another shared interest is ‘conversation’, which pulls together the work of Deborah Harty and Phil Sawdon, Siún Hanrahan, Joe Hanly, and Cathy Gale

In the work of Deborah Harty and Phil Sawdon the interest is self-evident as the work emerges from and incorporates a conversation– about the nature of collaboration, what it is to make a mark, what it is to do research – as well as capturing something of the overlaps, interruptions and silences of conversation in the composition of the work [fig. 3];



Figure 3: *Exchange*, Deborah Harty and Phil Sawdon, 2007, still image from a moving image sequence

Siún Hanrahan’ s [fig. 4] work is about conversation – conversation serves as a metaphor for the nature of meaning, for its formation in the exchange and contest between people – and emerges from an engagement with texts rather than people, a shortfall to be addressed through Triptych;



Figure 4: *Tale of Bread*, Siún Hanrahan, 2005

Joe Hanly's work traces random triangulationships in a public square outside his studio, a light hearted projection that nonetheless captures something of the complexity of our social constructs [fig. 6]; for Cathy Gale [fig. 5], "meeting and exchanging in (a) space through the language of drawing" is at the heart of her exploration of 'X' (where two paths cross, perhaps without meeting, and speech may be prevented) and 'Y' (the point at which three paths meet), multiplicity and trialectic.

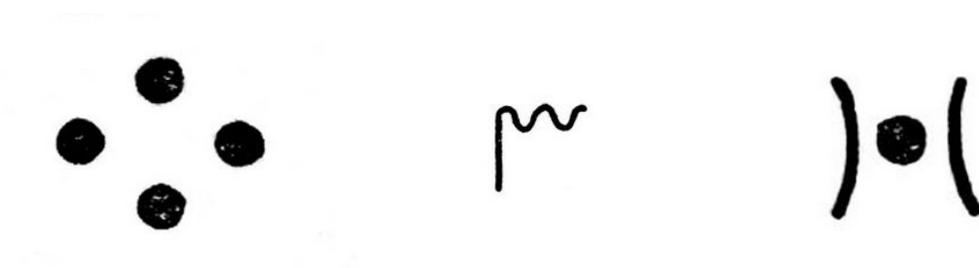


Figure 5: *Three Postcards (for response)*, Cathy Gale, 2007

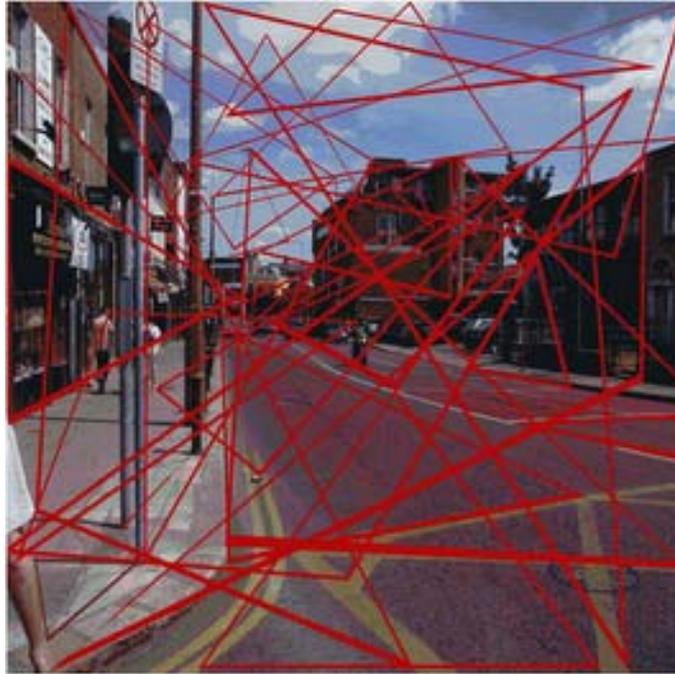


Figure 6: *Entrianglement*, photograph of Rathgar/Rathmines junction, Joe Hanly

'Audience interaction' is another interest shared by a number of the Triptych members, such as Liz Minichiello, Andrew Selby, and Adriana Ionascu. Liz Minichiello's work explores the gap (and interaction across that gap) between text and image and between picture storybook and reader [fig. 7];

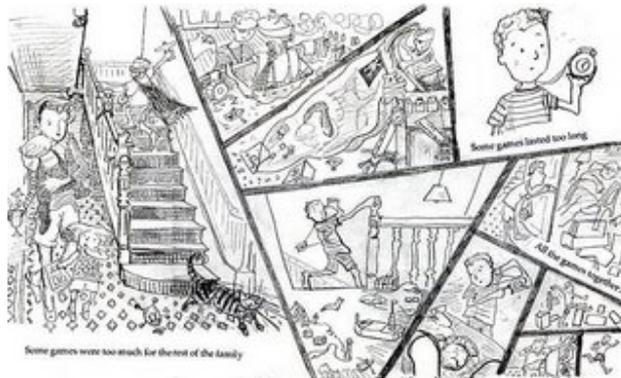


Figure 7: *Child*, Liz Minichiello, 2005

Andrew Selby sets out, in his research, to explore narrative and the subversion of narrative in the relationship between triptych paintings and viewers/audience;

Adrianna Ionascu too embraces 'triptych' as a concept to explore the act of seeing as performative, and as a vehicle to explore the dynamics of viewer-image-maker [fig. 8]. See Norman Freeman's taxonomy of viewer/image-maker highlighted in his paper from the Drawing Across Boundaries symposium, Loughborough 1998 (Freeman, 2000).

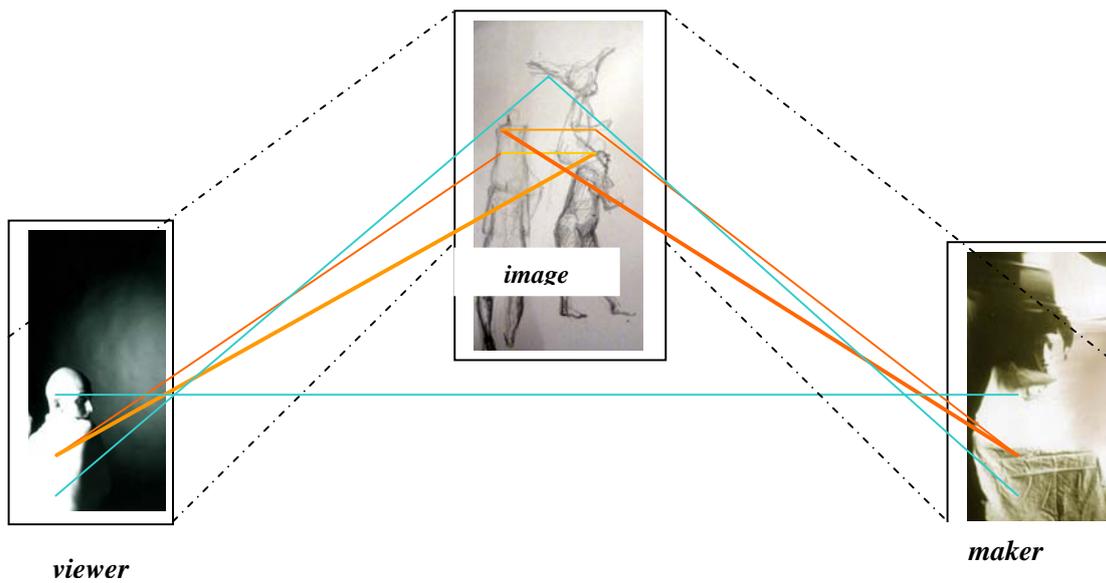


Figure 8: *Viewing as three dimensional exchanges*, Adriana Ionascu, 2007

An interest in buildings and the changes they undergo is shared by Leo Duff and Anna MacLeod. In reflecting upon her work, Leo Duff describes the “constant demolition and rebuilding and the waxing and waning of the use of buildings in many parts of Ireland”, and indeed throughout the world, as a key theme [fig. 9];



Figure 9, *Fly Over Dead End*, Leo Duff, 2007, Mixed Media

Anna Macleod's layered drawings and photographs explore changes in the vernacular architectural landscape and in social interaction in Ireland's pubs in response to the smoking ban brought in several years ago [fig. 10].



Figure 10: Transparent Drawing,

Convergent processes

An approach to drawing that explicitly involves a layering process is an important facet of the work of Brian Fay and Leo Duff. In Brian Fay's work [fig. 11] – which focuses upon notions of time, particularly duration, and (literally) traces a relationship between contemporary drawing practice and the work of the Masters – an explicit engagement with layering, multiple images and transparency values is evident in response to 'Δ'. Brian Fay explores issues of transparency and the use of multiple images. His subject matter is to do with existing objects that are affected by the passage of time and the interference of both human and natural acts, thus investigating through the exposure of existing layers and re-interpreting them through a process that builds them up again in the creation of new works.

Where Brian Fay uses layers which build immediately on top of one another, referring directly to the reality of the original art work studied, Leo Duff layers conflicting materials, scale and meaning in her subject; the construction and deconstruction of the built environment, "the mix of scale and perspectives, the conflicting amalgamation of drawing and painting materials" that it allows is central to the process of her work and her exploration of our relation to our environment.

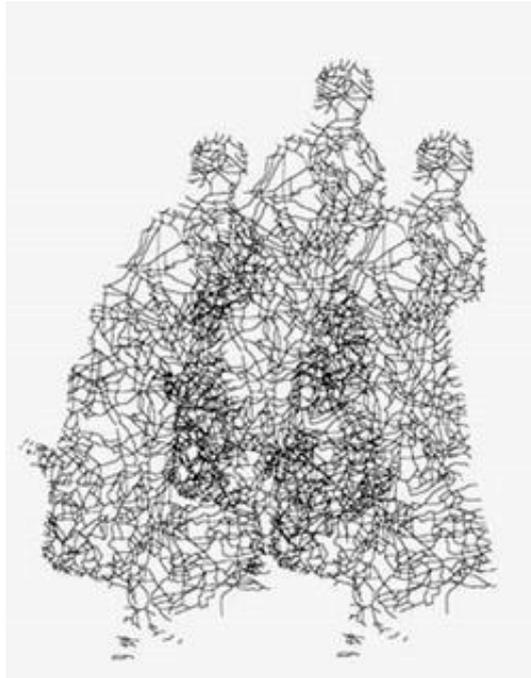


Figure 11: *Chardin*, Brian Fay 2007, digital drawing on paper

The work of John Mayock, Nick Rodgers and Kerry Walton is developed through a process that seeks to harness the capabilities of a particular computer programme, particularly its iterative processes. In the work of John Mayock [fig. 12] this is part of an ongoing exploration of the active relationship between artistic and scientific processes, and a play with the limits and potential of a specific programme, Photoshop, within a creative drawing process;



Figure 12: *Swing*, John Mayock, 2007

For Nick Rodgers fig. 13] his work begins with an intuitive response (in this case to 'Δ'), and has developed as an exploration of randomness and resistance to the emergence of an image within the mark making process using a range of programmes such as CAD and Photoshop.

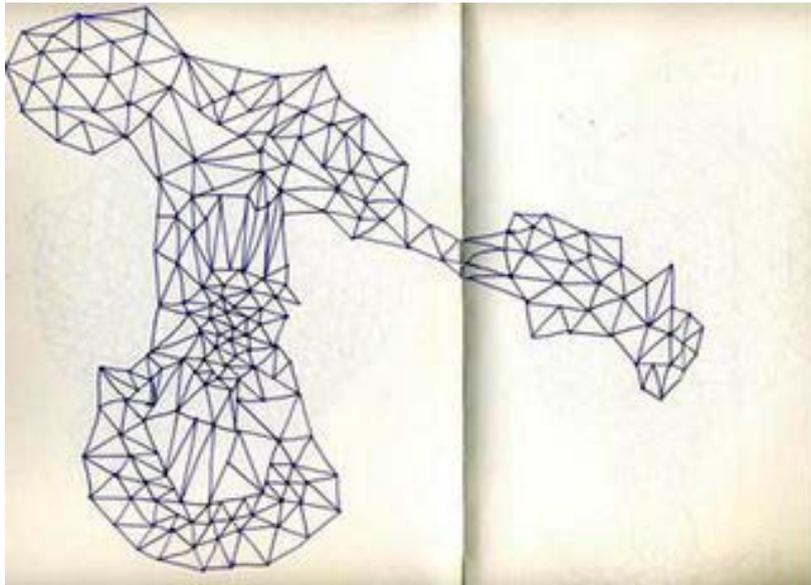


Figure 13: Nick Rodgers, 2007

Themes such as “repetition, sequence, tonal gradation, shading and layering, and repetitive use of line and simple geometric forms” lie at the heart of Walton’s work in which the triangle symbol is used to create a range of net-like effects[fig. 14].

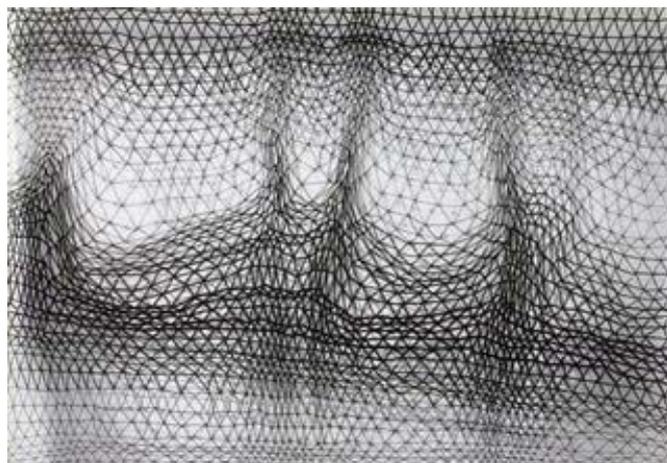


Figure 14: Kerry Walton, 2007

The notebook is central to the work of John Short, Sarah Dyer and Leo Duff. Observational drawings and sketches, documenting bathers at a famous swimming-site in Dublin, are at the heart of John Short's practice, and are combined to create complex, amusing and whimsically anecdotal watercolours of a particular local community [fig. 15].



Figure 15: *Bathers*, John Short, 2007

For Sarah Dyer, “playing in her sketchbook is key” – in it stories are born, images take shape and characters are created, to be worked up and out into story books [fig. 16].



Figure 16: *Monkey*, Sarah Dyer, 2007

In Leo Duff's work, drawings made in notebooks over years – such as aerial views made during air flights – are the starting point for drawings, and the vehicles for a layering process within her work. For John Short and Leo Duff their use of the notebook extends to a shared approach to putting those sketchbooks

to work, recording materials as well as logging research information and both combine source images from their notebooks to create a composite whole. A new development in the work of all three through the Triangle project has been a move into thinking three dimensionally with drawing, either by the intentional use of folding concertina notebooks by Leo Duff and Sarah Dyer to explore connectivity between images, or as a stepping stone to creating three dimensional maquettes formed by cut-out drawn shapes by Short. The other evident link in the notebooks is the sense of purpose, the lack of indulgent musings or tinkering, all three working with determination.

Leo Duff, Sarah Dyer and John Short are also using the notebook as a vehicle for developmental work; it provides a systematic method for working on one theme or subject. John Short on location, Sarah Dyer to avoid preconceptions and to seek new places in scale, motion and message when creating a narrative, and Leo Duff for progression of work both in the studio and on location, moving between pocket size/large scale books while researching a theme.

An explicit exploration and reviewing of art historical sources is an approach shared by Brian Fay and Andy Selby. For Brian Fay this involves mapping the traces of time on the cracked surfaces and x-rayed layers of historical paintings, recording its effects on both the materials and supports, and invoking the time of the painting's creation, the time since the painting was completed and the time of the drawing's creation; triptych paintings by van Eyck, Daddi, and Giotto are the vehicle for Andrew Selby's exploration of narrative structure, not so much for the wealth of their stories and teachings but for the form through which these stories were illustrated for their audiences.

Convergent outcomes

Unsurprisingly, a number of the outcomes converge around more or less explicit derivations of 'Δ':

A curious tangle of triangles emerges from the work of Nick Rodgers, Kerry Walton, Joe Hanly, Jake Abrams, John Mayock, and (to some extent) Yijia Wang, although most of Wang's drawings reflect on notions of stability and instability prompted by 'Δ' [fig. 17].

A tripling within the image takes place in the work of Brian Fay, Mario Minichiello [fig. 18] and John Short and the triptych format is explicitly engaged in the work of Andrew Selby and Alastair C. Adams [fig. 19].

And yet ...divergence (antonym) is undefeated ...



Figure 17: *Chair*, Yijia Wang, 2007



Figure 18: *Smoking*, Mario Minichiello, 2007



Figure 19: *Triptych*, Alastair Adams, 2007

Participants interpretive use of 'Δ' as a symbol or icon might imply that a strand appears to follow a quantitative research methodology as its core. This indeed could be of significance if we are measuring i.e. using the works as a form of data with a view to understanding how those artists became involved with the idea of exploring a practice-based outcome centred on 'Δ'. However, there is more scope to analyse further streams in this argument centred on interpretation and whether this signifies greater meaning or more scope for ambiguity. It can be argued that by placing the creator in the role of the reader, at an earlier stage as part of the developmental research surrounding the research question of 'how

has your project evolved in this way?' the emphasis is further taken away (not exclusively) from "the outcome".

III 'Δ' metaphor

Returning to the Triptych project as a whole, the 'Δ' metaphor may serve a further purpose in inviting reflection upon the potential of an apparently arbitrary collaboration.

If drawing is so diverse and ubiquitous that it is inherently arbitrary as a sole basis for collaboration (apex one of a triangle), and if the will to identify convergences (in the thematic strands that emerged in Loughborough and in this review of the blog material) is a gesture to counteract that arbitrariness, to create the coherence that typically underpins collaboration (apex two), then what train of thought might the third suggest?

A 'directional' possibility suggests that the train of thought would concern the outcomes, but these are early days yet. At this stage what we have is a process, and the possibility of reflecting on that. To date the process has been a curious mixture of 'enthusiasm and commitment' and 'confusion and ambivalence' – reflecting the premises given as apex one and two above. The former is reflected in participants' willingness to put time and effort into meeting up and developing the project along with a reticence to post work on the blog. This is reflected in an overall lack of new work specifically focussed on the agreed theme posted on the blog (with a few notable exceptions). At present the will to identify and exploit convergences is uppermost – both in response to the experience of confusion and ambivalence, and as an important gesture toward achieving a valuable research outcome from this initiative.

In suggesting the use of 'Δ' as a metaphor for this paper's structured reflection on 'Δ' we should be mindful that as a 'thing', i.e. some 'thing' conceived as representing something else (in this instance a paper (text) incorporating the material/stuff (images and texts) submitted by the contributors to date), that we allow ourselves to be aware of the potential for textual play and further creative theoretical association. A 'something' might/can be a further unspecified 'text', a written version of something; 'something' unspecified as constructively and strategically indeterminate, vague and indefinite, where any 'visual' ambiguity testifies to the intimacy of writing and drawing as marking gestures.

The apex is/can be the highest point however that is not what we think we are intending. The literal visual association between 'Δ' and a mountain, amongst other things, allows us to speculate as to whether we are running/climbing/drawing (up) the mountain to the/an apex or perhaps the further notion of Sisyphusⁱ condemned is a mythological association too far given the

current fashion for tracing drawing theory through Pliny to the present day. The rock always fell/falls back. Richard Wollheim (1980: 185) asks us to think of 'Criticism as retrieval' where 'criticism' is the process for coming to understand a particular work of art and he sets 'where evidence is lacking' as a limit for that retrieval process, so Triptych should be OK as we have plenty of evidence. What we don't seem to yet acknowledge through the contributions is a shared and or convergent notion of critical reflection. Is that desirable and or helpful?

The notion of the apex as a point of culmination and potential hierarchy would seem to further compound the difficulty and question the Triptych process as somehow aspiring to a summit, a 'point' of arrival and or conclusion. Indeed, one could argue that it pauses or even breaks the line that draws 'Δ' as a continuous line of self-reflection and reflexivity. The authors of this paper suggest that Triptych's drawn line ('Δ') as a graphic sign is (David Rosand, 2002: 2) both self-referential and representational. If we aspire to maintain its ('Δ') identity even as our line alludes to something beyond itself, the object of representation, then this semiotic ambivalence invites the interpretation that is requisite for its functioning: the active participation of the viewer in constructing meaning.

We can speculate as to the apex as the pointed end of an object such as the apex of a leaf, the leaf in this instance as the sheet of paper that makes up a book but probably not a blog, however that might be a speculation too far. We agree (we have no choice) that to be pointed is to be critical, meaningful and incisive but with regard to an 'end' we can argue that the object is 'Δ' and that to be critical is embedded within the space and place of 'Δ' as theory is in theory, the mind is stimulated by the practice of the hand, and that an 'end' should not be the immediate goal... Perhaps the text of the object ('Δ') acknowledges Jonathan Swift's Big and Little-Endiansⁱⁱ arguing over the right way to crack an egg, and that a text can and should be interpreted in different ways, which perhaps argues against an end as an immediate priority.

The apex is sometimes the vertexⁱⁱⁱ, the vertex is sometimes the apex. In anatomy a vertex is the highest point of a body part, especially the top of the head. Off the top of our head is it more helpful to think about the point where sides of angle meet, the point where two sides of a plane figure or an angle intersect, the point where three or more planes of a solid figure intersect, the point at which the axis pierces the surface, the point of a triangle or pyramid opposite to and farthest away from its base? The metaphorical complexities implicit within this shift from apex to vertex may serve us more appropriately.

This is further supported if we look at vertex in astronomy as a point on the celestial sphere towards which, or from which, a group of stars appears to move. It is the point toward which the stars in a moving cluster appear to travel, or from which the meteors in a shower seem to radiate. We don't think we are claiming to be stars or celestial, not today anyway. The convergent and 'directional' possibility of some apparent movement(s) through the Triptych process to date

may be a façade, however we suggest it is more likely to be an outward show (does this imply 'exhibition'?) that is emergent and developing towards a convergence.

The use of 'Δ' as a theme presented the benefit of choice within a flexible set of 'restrictions' that each contributor could manipulate for the benefit of their explorations. Three situations - in which to work, through which to approach work and through which to analyse work (the 'you, me and us') still afforded all a continually mobile space. The blog has witnessed the emergence of definite discrimination by participants on methods and theories and this applies not only to those working actively as team players, but also to those working on their own and benefiting from involvement and being a part of the community. For example, Leo Duff, Rebecca Davies and Brian Fay took part in a two week drawing residency at Stonehenge Riverside Project (2007) along with three other artists, a collaboration which benefited from the communication brought about by Triptych and the opportunity to share personal view points at IMMA.

We end this reflection with the thought of convergence as a union, a meeting point(s) drawn, geographical and spatial ... pause  ... to be continued ...

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ⁱ Sisyphus, in Greek mythology, is the cunning king of Corinth who was punished in Hades by having repeatedly to roll a huge stone up a hill only to have it roll down again as soon as he had brought it to the summit. This fate is related in Homer's *Odyssey*, Book XI. In Homer's *Iliad*, Book VI, Sisyphus, living at Ephyre (later Corinth), was the son of Aeolus (eponymous ancestor of the Aeolians) and the father of Glaucus. <http://www.britannica.com/>

ⁱⁱ Big-endian and little-endian derive from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in which the Big Endians were a political faction that broke their eggs at the large end ("the primitive way") and rebelled against the Lilliputian King who required his subjects (the Little Endians) to break their eggs at the small end. Big-endian and little-endian are now also terms that describes the order in which a sequence of bytes is stored in computer memory. Big-endian is an order in which the "big end" (most significant value in the sequence) is stored first (at the lowest storage address). Little-endian is an order in which the "little end" (least significant value in the sequence) is stored first.
http://searchnetworking.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid7_gci211659,00.html

ⁱⁱⁱ A comprehensive online set of links to various definitions of vertex is available at:
<http://cancerweb.ncl.ac.uk/cgi-bin/omd?vertex>