Resemblance perception as an epistemic process: drawing analogous morphologies from the ‘Ancient Doctrine of Signatures’ to Philip Rashleigh’s Mineral Nicknames

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Abstract

This paper explores ‘Resemblance Perception’ as an epistemic process, and argues that drawing reveals and evidences resemblances or ‘signatures’ of plant, animal and vegetable bodies more effectively than any other epistemic or artistic tool.

Until the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in knowledge formation in Western culture. This traditional epistemological scheme is exemplified by the ‘Ancient Doctrine of Signatures’ and can be addressed through the agency of drawing. I explore how drawing can be used to challenge, extend and continue the Doctrine’s scheme, challenging current epistemic models of classification. This will be evidenced through a discussion of the hermeneutic and polymath approach I have developed for drawing specimens from mineralogy, botany and zoology. I will discuss two of my recent works referencing Foucault (Prose of the World), Findlen (Jokes of Nature) and Dupre (Disorder of Things), which illuminate how the observational drawing process generates and tests ideas in the construction of knowledge.

I will explore the following works in this Paper-

1. Re-Drawing the ‘Ancient Doctrine of Signatures’
The species drawn in the ‘Ancient Doctrine of Signatures’ or ‘Phytognomica’ (1562, Della Porta) have not been formally identified. I have identified the species of the plant and animal species in the original drawings (aided by Natural History Museum) and I will discuss the process of re-drawing the species, introducing analogous mineral specimens into the drawing and therefore developing the theory. (Copper Etching/Drawing 2012)

2. Jokes of Nature and Rashleigh’s Nicknames
The Philip Rashleigh (1729–1811) Mineral Collection at The Royal Cornwall Museum is accompanied by Rashleigh’s catalogue, which lists Cornish Miners Nicknames for the mineral specimens in the Eighteenth Century. The Nicknames are consistently based on physical resemblances, for example ‘Beetle Ore’ and ‘Wood Tin’. I have drawn Rashleigh’s Nicknamed mineral specimens (signs), in place of their associated resemblance (signifier) and I will recount the epistemic process of observing specimens which express forms of semblance and how this can be explored and represented further through mathematical understanding. (Copper Etching/Drawing 2012).

This paper argues for the continuing practice of drawing resemblances as epistemic process, and questions how this process could be utilized as a method of classification in a wider educational context.