Contemporary Drawing Research

Fragmentation: If drawing and seeing are fragmentary, what guides selection, interpretation and (re) construction?
DRAWING WITHIN THE CHIASM

Tracey Bowen, artist and lecturer, University of Toronto
tracey.bowen@utoronto.ca

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges of consciously systematizing the drawing process as a form of data analysis. It focuses on ways of examining data fragments in terms of drawn gestures and marks and 'reading' those marks in the name of research. The drawing practice examined here, my own, is affected by the space in-between two different perspectives on inquiry and the redefining of research as a working through various spaces of interpretation created by this in-between ness. This particular investigation is a trajectory, independent yet connected, of another ongoing collaborative research project exploring the relationships between writing and drawing as forms of inquiry.

Contextualizing the inquiry

This paper is part of a work in progress. It is itself a fragment that follows a trajectory from a larger investigation on the affordances of constructing drawing/writing relationships as a form of inquiry. The points of departure used as inspiration for this paper, are the reflections and notes that developed from discussions with my colleague who is teaching a course that focuses on researching writing, and my quest to marry my drawing practice (that has emerged from years as a 'fine' artist) with academic research and inquiry. Both

my colleague and I are grounded by our interactions with students who struggle to make meaningful relationships with the fragments of information they collect in the name of doing research in an academic institution. Our common ground is our individual and collaborative initiatives to help students learn to read the relationships between different research findings through the use of maps, drawings and symbols as visual explanations of their usual text-based practices. Our hope is that the exercises (we borrowed from examples such as concept mapping, work flow diagrams and feedback loops) we develop will help them see new relationships that might challenge, contest or confirm their interpretations of their various readings and investigations. Rexer (2009) suggests that constructing visual/symbolic connections is a form of enacting possibilities. He says

> If disparate phenomena share any apparent characteristics, no matter how fugitive, they participate in each other absolutely. And to invoke them in a picture or a map or a piece of writing is to cause the connections to be enacted (p.39).

We want students to recognize, describe and critically analyze these new sets of relationships which can only be realized through some form of drawing/mapping that departs from text-based thinking.

This paper also began as a series of small drawings, responses to the discussions on how this talk about drawing as a form of data analysis would affect my actual mark making practice and notes I made on our shared ideas about research such as: 'gathered information is unprocessed' (we observed students as information gatherers not data collectors); 'data is used to create something else – not an effect (of data fragments) of one on the other but a transformation due to interaction'; 'research spawns data which interacts with the world and the transformation occurs to both the date and the individual's worldview' (sketchbook notes dated February 2009). I found that my drawings were responding to the rhythms of our discussions. The work of drawing became a fragmentary language that did not describe, but rather continued the inquiry

through a series of conceptual examinations of what it was we were trying to do pedagogically. The practice was evolving through interaction and movement. The activity of drawing enabled new conceptualizations for sharing ideas through a kind of 'spatial play of the hand' (de Zegher 2009, Art Gallery of Ontario lecture). I found that the drawing and mapping movements enabled as Rexer states, the connections to be enacted within the gestures.

What am I analyzing?

Conceptualizing and drawing my ideas about research and data analysis as I articulated them to my colleague inspired a set of new relationships between the thoughts in a way that was not necessarily representational. I was not visually describing her thoughts, but rather using her thinking process, our discussions, as a new lens for looking at the way I use gestures, marks and symbols to explain the world albeit still mindful of the academic context we were both working in. Heidegger contends that we 'explain' to make sense of the world around us. Explaining in this sense is not describing but an ongoing activity of research, of looking at relationships in the moment and making sense of what those relationships mean to us (Heidegger, 1977 p.121). Explaining however, happens by exploring within a context.

The context for using the drawings as a form of data analysis and explanation is also affected by spatializing theories and the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as interpreted by Cathryn Vasseleu in *Textures of light vision and touch in Irigaray, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty.* Vasseleu (1998, p. 44) examines the relationships between sight and touch; seeing and perceiving and the spaces of in-between ness that present as a form of *chiasm*. As our discussions about mapping and drawing research continued, I experienced a different kind of space, a chiasm of sorts. The experience was not collaborative, but it was informed by the tensions, collisions and complements afforded by collaborative activity. The chiasm however comes from 'the crossing over of a double field of vision' not a combining of two particular views of the world but a vision/expression that is

created by an 'inbetween existence' of the two (Vasseleu, 1998 p.44). The chiasm and my understanding emerging from Vasseleu's interpretation of Merleau - Ponty's theory, is a dynamic space where two fields of vision – two aesthetic sensibilities interact to become something different, much like our understanding of the effects of interaction on data.

The act of research involves collaboration, interpretation analysis and expression. The research itself is constructed from fragments that are examined from both inside and outside their contexts – a vision/expression that crosses over at the double vision. New ideas form within the in-between-ness of these activities. This particular collaboration (between my colleague and me) occurs as fragmentary responses, both verbal and visual in-between researching text-based language and gesture-based language; between writing and drawing the interchange of ideas. The resulting marks are not translations, but rather conceptualizations that develop within the in-between spaces. My colleague's text-based notes and speech presented one set of perspectives, my understanding of those ideas interacting with my own worldview represent another position. I have come to see my drawing activity as a way of explaining the space, the chiasm in-between these positions, a form of analyzing the fragments of contributing data. This paper represents my preliminary findings in relation to the work and practice of selecting, editing, analyzing and reconstructing through the drawing activity I have engaged in within the chiasm.

Defining the work of researching and analysis

Drawing within the chiasm as a form of research and data analysis can be likened to a working-through inquiry. I am borrowing and manipulating Morra's ideas of reclaiming 'the work of research' not in a psychoanalytical sense (Morra uses Freud and George Perec's essay *The Scene of a Stratagem*) but more from the perspective of 'labor we carry out [as] a form of critical interrogation that produces new conclusions' or 'alternative interpretations' (Morra, 2008 p.48). Morra contends that research itself has been commodified and it is the work of

'working-through' that is the process fuelling the inquiry and producing alternative positions. Part of Morra's reclamation work is to look at the similarities of what we do as both process and practice. Drawing, writing, speaking/writing, gesturing, marking, mapping, all can be experienced as independent yet connected activities that further the process of analyzing, interpreting and meaning making, yet they are all activities that we practice within different contexts that inform what we analyze and how we interpret the world. Morra uses artist/curator Tacita Dean's concept of writing as an 'aside' to the art piece, again, 'independent, yet connected' ideas (Morra, 2008 p.54). The drawing activity I have enacted in the space I name as the chiasm is a form of *aside*, playing with ideas in the form of marks and gestures in the in-between spaces of what I know as an artist and the academic conventions I have learned and perpetuate through text-based research. The drawing activity *explains* my process and practice of working-through. However the chiasm problematizes the various positions or views contributing to the process in that it is not a space of double vision, but rather an intra-vision where one position is affected by the interaction with others in a transformative fashion. This in-turn, affects what fragments are selected, edited and then reconstructed into a whole.

Manipulation and the systematic transformation of data

Fleckenstein (2007, p.16) suggests that we do not see the world as a whole, but rather in fragments as the retina of our eye becomes a platform for various light points that 'stimulate sensitive rods and cones that fire messages to the brain'. We move from stimulus to stimulus collecting fragments of light in a multiplicity of symbol systems. However, we also select and edit as we move from fragment to fragment. Fragments on their own are impending information sources. They hold the potential for creating a relationship with something else;

> . . . any image is the result of a highly active process of organizing the chaos of stimuli into a recognizable or nameable form whether that stimuli is present or absent (Fleckenstein, 2007, p.16).

It is through interaction with other fragments developing as a whole that the isolated fragment under examination becomes something other than a piece of information. It is transformed through its relationship – it becomes data to be analyzed in relation to the whole. These fragments I am speaking about are marks, lines and gestures of movements recorded in the moment. They are the data that waits to be manipulated through intentional and unintentional or accidental movements. These movements are the spatial manipulations (spatial play of the hand perhaps) that transform the fragments – gestures into meaning. Drawing is a form of doing research whereby research spawns data and invokes the transformation of information to meaning. Data interact with the world and the transformation occurs to both the data fragments and their relationship to the world. The drawing as a piece of research about the world arises out of, and by means of in a Heideggarian sense, the activity of the artist /drawer. In this case, drawing as research opens up the world and drawing as research and analysis both opens and projects the world in a Heideggarian sense of explaining (Lippit 2008, p.186). The research is concurrent with the writing/drawing process, not as preparation (Bal, 2008, p.198). Fragments evolve as data and analysis happens.

Fleckenstein (2007, p.19) also contends that cultural codes and norms inform what we choose to see and what we do not see because we are not supposed to. Drawing as data analysis is an active process of revealing, concealing and opening what we choose to lay bare and what we choose not to. 'You can't hide in drawing' (de Zegher, 2009, Art Gallery of Ontario lecture), as drawing demands accountability to the fragments, the lines, marks and to the interaction of coming together to make meaning. The researcher/drawer is accountable for laying bare all claims about the mark in relation to the world. What becomes apparent is that accountability does not offer control over meaning as the artist releases these gestures in the hope that they are read again as a whole, beyond a series of marks. This release of control is a consequence of selecting, editing and then re-releasing data into the world.

When the artist/researcher/drawer focuses on one fragment or another, one gesture in particular, they are removing the gesture from its context of shared meaning and universality in order to see it differently – to see the world differently. It is this point of seeing both the gesture outside of the context and the context itself that creates a chiasm, a space for interpretation and further investigation – a process that invites more gestures and more fragmentation. Manipulating the fragments, marking gestures as bits of information then systematically, albeit often intuitively, transforming the bits and fragments through developing relationships is a form of analysis and interpretation, activities that are a part of research processes. What guides selection, interpretation and re-construction is a sense of inquiry, a desire to make sense of the chaos of fragments as a meaningful whole, a desire to read the drawing beyond a set of marks and symbols. Selecting and editing the fragments are actions that move between randomness and systemization, intuition and deliberate-ness. Selecting and editing are ways of negotiating the world and how we position ourselves within the world. For those of us who draw, selecting and editing is our way of working manifested in the marks and gestures – fragments of what we choose to see and what we choose not to see.

Other informers

Mark Lombardi's data-based drawings from the series titled *Global Networks* have informed my understanding of mapping data fragments as a way of making sense of the whole by developing new sets of relationships between the data. Lombardi was working with very specific pieces of information attached to live (and sometimes dead) bodies in an effort to open up avenues of corruption and deceit by 'selecting discrete portions of his data and assembling them into related groups' (Hobbs, 2008, p.16). The process enabled Lombardi to see his text-based research work collected and documented on index cards, in a new way. The resulting works are complex visual mappings of the sets of relationships he uncovered through his research, and the dynamic interaction between the data fragments he had previously been archiving. The archive itself was not just a

catalogue of facts because he saw the physical process as 'a means of redirecting, constraining and reshaping such data' (Hobbs, 2003, p.17). Lombardi's drawings however hold to a central (however tentative) hypothesis that is explored through the interaction of his data fragments. His story telling and conspiracy unraveling emerges within the spaces between the networks of relationships. He explained that these relationship and network mappings united his writing, research and art-making efforts which previously had been disconnected (Hobbs, 2003, p.34) He 'needed to see rather than merely read' (Hobbs, 2003, p.46). Lombardi's process included selecting, editing, arranging and rearranging in order to see the research, in order to see the interactions of fragments moving toward a narrative whole, albeit, open, a world in itself as well as a projection on the world.

The findings of this preliminary inquiry

My ongoing participation in a drawing/writing collaborative experiment with another researcher has made the investigative processes inherent in drawing more transparent to me. I have attempted not to illustrate the experience of visualizing my research process symbolically versus textually but rather conceptualize my interpretations of our speech-based conversations about alternative forms of doing research within the academy (both in and outside the classroom) through gesture, examination, analysis and re-interpretation. I have tried to make the selecting and editing activities of what I choose as data, conscious and transparent. The primary challenge of this process is to avoid translation, illustrating how I understand her ideas mixed with my ideas about using symbols and maps as a pedagogical tool for examining the research process.

The resulting work has become a series of mappings selected from fragments of data. I have been working with two drawing fragments as a starting point for further conceptualizations. The first (see figures 1 and 2) conceptualize the research process as continuously evolving around a core - a narrative or a

question that inspires layers of other questions as well as trajectories of related thoughts. This relates to Lombardi's concept of central narratives for each network he draws and Heidegger's concept of explaining in context. The core narrative is continually affected by new information and new data that challenge, confirm, contest and/or complement what is already known. These small disturbances inform the process of editing and selecting in a way that affects the rest of the data fragments within the whole. Figures 1 and 2 are just a few of several permutations that used the core idea symbolically as the starting point to explore new variations on the core narrative. I continue to use this core narrative to explore the effects of disturbances on the dynamic relationships I see within my drawing practice of gesturing and my process of thinking through.
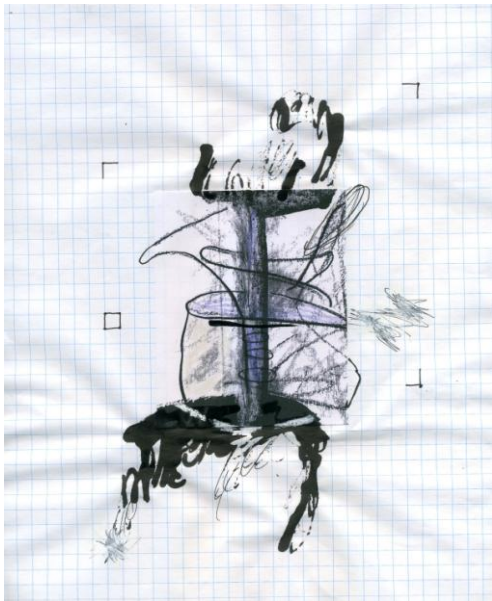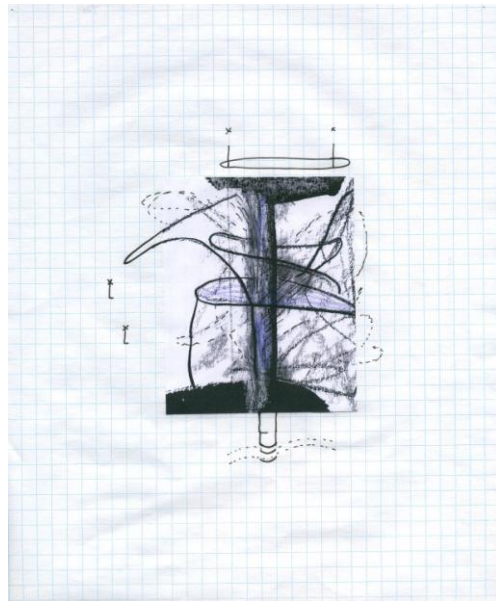

Figure 1

Figure 2

The second drawing fragment involves a re-mapping of a piece of information from another drawing project that investigated feedback loops (see figures 3 and 4). I had been using feedback loops as objects to be investigated, looking at the architecture inherent within the systems rather than the processes and new ways of thinking about practice that they inspired. The data sources I introduced to the systems were actually verbal exchanges – ideas about analyzing text-based data (i.e. students' research notes for final essays) in terms of patterns between words

and phrases, patterns of ideas that related to each other explicitly and 'coding swamps' (my colleague's term), coagulations of themes found in the research that needed unpacking. The dialogue (verbal exchanges) became the stimulus for making the gestures. The drawing activity was a way of working through what was said – how it was said. The spaces in between the aural stimulus and my physical gestures enacted the chiasm where alternative positions and interpretations became possible (Morra, 2008 p. 48) The dialogue did not focus on the content of the text, but rather the myriad of patterns that are possible. I analyzed these patterns in terms of symbols, networks and flows.
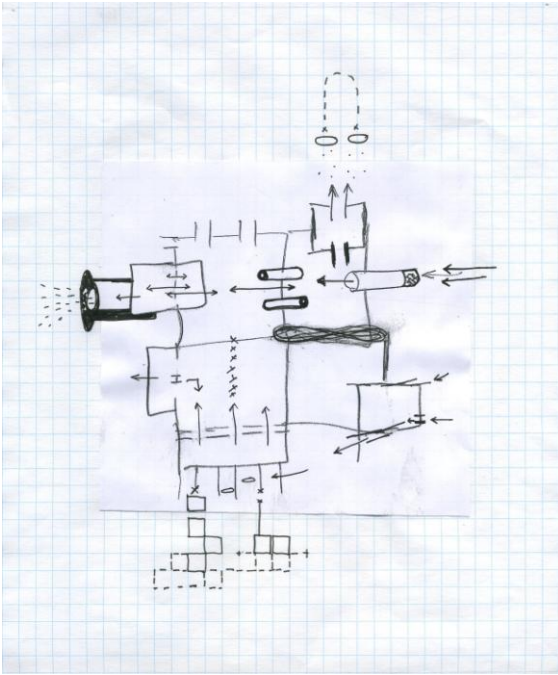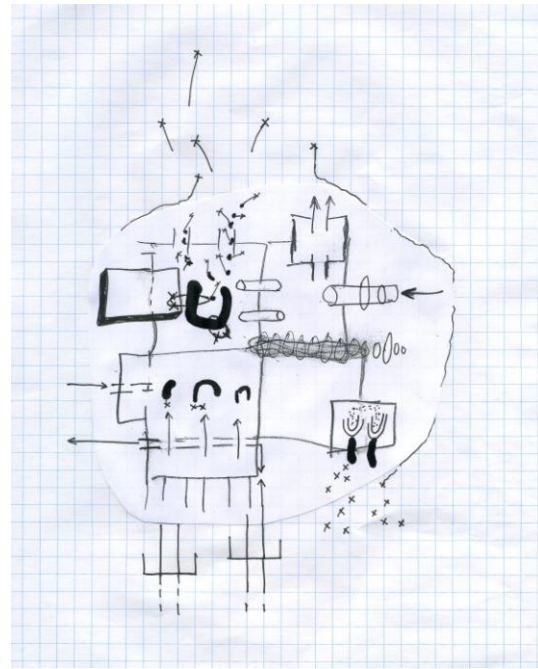

Figure 3

Figure 4

The research collaboration and these drawing experiments are still ongoing. They have illuminated how I see drawing as a way of working through thinking and how I see myself as the researcher/drawer. My own inquiry is fueled by my 'need to see rather than merely read' as Lombardi suggested (Hobbs, 2003, 46). This seeing is felt bodily, in a different space than sight alone.
The experience has also brought to light Vasseleu's claims that,

To see is first and foremost to see oneself as being seen by an other. Being seen is a vulnerability which is essential to visibility . . . seeing and being are inextricably bound up together (Vasseleu, 1998, 52).

Drawing within the chiasm means always reconsidering what I think I see. The 'findings as drawings' presented here explain the patterns of what I choose to see in the world and also open up questions of what I choose not to see. The continuing challenge is to teach this to my students so they may *see* what else is possible in their own inquiries.

Works cited

Bal, M., 2008. Research Practice: New words on cold cases. In: Holly, M.A., & Smith, M. (eds.) *What is research in the visual arts? Obsession, archive, encounter.* Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamston, MA., New Haven: Yale University Press distributors, pp. 196-211.

de Zegher, C. *What drawing can be.* Lecture presentation at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, January 28, 2009.

Fleckenstein, K., 2007. Testifying: Seeing and saying in world making. In: Fleckenstein, K., Hum, S., & Calendrillo, L.T. (eds.) *Ways of Seeing, Ways of Speaking: The Interegation of Rhetoric and Vision in Construction of the Real.* Indiana: Parlor Press, pp. 3-30.

Heidegger, M., 1977.*The Question concerning technology and other essays.* (W. Lovitt, trans.). Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1977.

Hobbs, R. (2003). *Mark Lombardi: Global networks.* New York: Independent Curators International.

Lippit, A. M., 2008. The world archive and universal research. In: Holly, M.A., & Smith, M. (eds.) *What is research in the visual arts? Obsession, archive, encounter.* Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamston, MA., New Haven: Yale University Press distributors, pp.183-195.

Morra, J. 2008. The work of research: Remembering, repeating, and working-through. In: Holly, M.A., & Smith, M. (eds.) *What is research in the visual arts? Obsession, archive, encounter.* Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamston, MA., New Haven: Yale University Press distributors, pp.47-64.

Rexer, L., 2009. Weather magic: Making sense of Zdenek Kosek's drawings. *Art on paper.* Vol. 13, No. 5, pp.36-45.

Vasseleu, C., 1998. *Textures of light, vision and touch in Irigaray, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty.* New York: Routledge.