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# A GARLAND OF THOUGHTS: RUSKIN AND CONTEMPORARY SIGHT/SITE SENSITIVE DRAWING

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This paper explores a particular feature of contemporary drawing practice: that of the visual artist, and particularly the draughts-person, who works in close collaboration with other professionals from cognate investigative disciplines, and in research relationships and environments where drawing might not normally be expected to operate. The paper lays out some of the historical and contemporary context, the social and cultural pressures and opportunities and, with reference to Ruskin and four exemplary British artists: Sian Bowen, Jill Gibbon, Leo Duff & Sarah Simblet; seeks to establish and illustrate this distinctive aspect of their drawing practices and asks what we might gain from it.

## INTRODUCTION

There is growing appetite among contemporary artists to work collaboratively and across previously separate disciplines, and in drawing we see artists leaving the studio to seek out ever more specialist, rare and unusual applications of drawing. This reveals a particular, fluid approach in drawing, a new sensitivity in which drawing is used by artists as a way of analysing, communicating and reflecting upon aspects of lived experience, some of which might normally be the province of other research professionals. This practice of going out into the world, to look and seek out information and engage in dialogue through drawing bears similarities to John Ruskin's statement on the purpose of drawing in the preface to his *The Elements of Drawing* (1857). Ruskin's intentions are clear, he sees drawing as an instrument for gaining knowledge rather than an end in itself, he says

*I believe that the sight is a more important thing than the drawing; and I would rather teach drawing that my pupils learn to love Nature, than teach the looking at nature that they may learn to draw. (Ruskin, 1970, p.13)*

In reading Ruskin we take 'sight' to mean the capacity to seek and understand, and where he elevates the value of 'sight' over the worth of the artifact- the drawing- we interpret Ruskin as imploring the artist to engage with the subject above and beyond whatever benefits it may have for the drawing as an artwork. For Ruskin the subject was Nature as God's work. We interpret the term 'environment' broadly as sites, places and relationships. For the artists we look at in this paper the environment ranges from the body and medical investigations to archaeology and the international trade in weapons. What unites these artists and ideas is the will to use drawing to better understand the world.

The relationship we see between Ruskin's ideas and the in-situ drawing discussed in this paper is the notion that drawing in the environment requires an artist to put their competencies to the test. In doing so s/he has to be adaptable and inventive, conforming to the restraints and protocols of that particular environment, while also ensuring that the drawing captures the specificities of the encounter.

While the epistemology of sight is a rich and diverse field offering numerous relevant insights ( e.g. Plato, Arnheim), this paper is specifically concerned with Ruskin's advocacy of drawing practice and pedagogy as a tool of investigation and communication.

As teachers of drawing and artists whose practices take us to usual and unexpected environments, where conventional drawing is counter intuitive, even impossible, we have come to realise a wider community of artists developing drawing in this way. Additionally, and as a consequence of accepting the challenges to conventional drawing processes, of new locations and environments, we see in these artists (and others) high levels of formal innovation. These are innovations arising from deep, sustained and sensitive engagement

with events and activities outside the studio, in the world around them. This is not innovation for innovations sake.

This marks a shift firstly towards artists asking - not what drawing *is*, but what it can *do*, and secondly towards what Steve Garner argues research in drawing should do, namely to identify “*the borders where the drawing world abuts the world of other disciplines, and to suggest where we might or should explore*” (Garner, 2008, p.13).

Despite a number of artists now working in this interdisciplinary way, there has yet to be any substantial research or exhibitions which critically evaluates and reflects upon the collective significance of these practices.

## WHAT DRAWING TEACHES US

In *The Elements*, Ruskin takes the reader through a number of ‘letters’ and step by step exercises designed to engender a ‘*perfectly patient*’ approach and a ‘*delicate method of work*’ that would, ‘*irrespective of differences in individual temper and character*’, result in a ‘*refinement of perception*’ (Ruskin, 1970, p. 12).

This aspect of Ruskin’s teaching encompasses two tenets: that of observation of phenomena in the world or going out with curiosity and using drawings as a means to ‘see’, and secondly, that this practice is sustained and involves patient and insightful engagement. For Ruskin a key value of drawing is that it could make available to us features and phenomena that we might not otherwise truly see or comprehend. Ruskin’s lessons encourage a type of engagement that comprises many and different acts of scrutiny, including drawing mimetically and through interpretation, a mix of drawing sensitivities that enables us to sense, perceive, analyse and comprehend information in a deeper, embodied or perhaps holistic way.

This, for Ruskin is ‘seeing truly’, and with this in- *sight*, judgement and perception we may draw from the natural world and lived experience with a ‘subtlety of sight’ that transcends the value of the drawing at hand. Ruskin envisages a union derived of a synthesis of the draughts-person and the material world; a union in which the drawing weaves observation and accuracy with the senses to achieve a blended language that includes the emotions and poetics of the encounter.

As the art historian and theorist Ian Heywood writes

*Ruskin insists that there is a quality of profound thought at work in imaginative transformation. He argues that imagination is selective and synthetic; the ‘threads’ of nature are picked out and then spun together making something stronger, forming a ‘garland of thoughts’ (Ruskin (1987), p. 359). This is perception at its*

*highest power –also referred to, paradoxically, as ‘dreaming’– showing the object as it truly is, a moment of thought that reveals a deeper connectedness of the object and the observer, the natural and human worlds (Heywood, 2013).*

What does this enriched encounter lead to, or mean? While notions of objective ‘truth’ and sight are now open to challenge and negotiation, we are not talking here about the veracity or otherwise of any single act of perception. What we take from Ruskin and what we see emerging in some contemporary practice is that a regular and sustained depth engagement with a subject or site makes available to the artist a richer understanding not available in a cursory encounter. We see this joining of knowledge and experience in cognate subjects, e.g. the contemporary environmental writing of Robert MacFarlane (*The Old Ways*, 2012) and the poetics of Paul Farley (*Edgelands*, 2011).

If our understanding is deepened through sustained drawing in situ or we take away more than the mere drawing, what is it? These are the questions we ask of contemporary art practice.

## DRAWING APPLICATIONS

Drawing is reserved; among the fine art disciplines it is valued for its immediacy and prized for its economy of means. Drawing is portable, easily transported from one place to another in the sketchbook. Fitting in the pocket or small travel bag, the sketchbook or notebook is discreet and can be produced and hidden at will. All qualities that have made it ubiquitous and a tool for anthropologists, botanists, naturalists (even policemen) set on gathering information about the world, at its best traversing new frontiers of knowledge, for instance in Charles Darwin’s notebooks of the Beagle voyage 1831-36 (Darwin Keynes, ed., 2009) . Drawing was not limited to exploring geographical environments but also conceptual fields of knowledge, as found, for instance, in Andreas Vesalius’ opening of the body (1543) and Robert Hooke’s discoveries of a newly visible microscopic world under the microscope (1665).

Taking drawing outside the studio is both a new phenomenon, and simultaneously, a far older impulse. We might think of terms such as ‘collaboration’, ‘inter-disciplinarity’, the ‘post- disciplinary’ or even ‘anti-disciplinarity’ as very contemporary. However, the history and legacy of drawing is replete with examples of artists working for patrons, agencies and professions far from their immediate expertise: Leonardo’s drawing of a flying machine (1488-89), Wenceslaus Hollar’s mapping of Tangiers (1669) and Barbara Hepworth’s *Hospital Drawings* (1947-49) which we return to below.

Since Hepworth, drawing and its teaching has changed substantially. Art schools have been conflated into New Universities and drawing has joined the Arts and Humanities to become a research discipline with funding council and auditors. Institutions, universities

and funding bodies set research agendas that require not only formally structured questions and projects, but also outcomes that demonstrate value for money, impact and knowledge transfer. Other professions now invest value in interdisciplinary exchange and artists' capacity to ask difficult questions and muddy the water. Similarly these pressures and opportunities have encouraged artists to reach out to science and other fields to establish sustainable relationships within a research environment.

Whether emergent as a result of institutional pressures, a growth in interdisciplinary or 'in situ' practice can be observed. With the advent and subsequent demise of Modernism the canon of drawing has undergone complete revolution. In the 'expanded field' new modes and conceptual approaches to drawing have emerged, including artists inhabiting entirely new arenas of activity. Artists such as Mary Kelly and Nancy Spero conflated their aims and values as artists with their experiences as mothers, members of communities, social activists and political beings. Some of the drawing we see today, for example in the practices of Jill Gibbon and Leo Duff, have grown from extending the remit of drawing into the public sphere as a fully engaged practice.

## DRAWING TRANSPORTED

Among artists working in new contexts and outside the studio we notice a particular type of practice. Not simply drawing in situ, going out into the world and recording what is seen, but drawing re-positioned, not merely re-located, to set itself up in a new dialogue with the world. This is drawing as navigation, as movement 'with', 'against' or 'past'. Drawing that asks how can I account for this unusual fascinating object or this distinctly different terrain? A self-reflexive drawing that seeks to adapt, change and gain from interaction rather than seek to simply observe and record.

One example of this type of drawing is Hepworth's *Hospital Drawings*, made in operating theatres between 1947-49. These drawings depict more than observed fact but communicate what is felt; they convey the *experience* of being in surgery (Hepburn, 2012, p. 81). In these drawings we see Hepworth becoming sensitised to particular qualities of the operating theatre – the brightness and direction of light, the concentration in the eyes of the surgeons – developing 'subtlety of sight' and looking for graphic equivalents. We see parallels between the surgical procedures depicted and the artist's process; Hepworth uses a bone dry gesso surface, scrapers and sharp points to incise, the edge of a razorblade to scrape back. These are newly developed tactile and haptic techniques specifically designed to marry with the particular actions and intentions of the surgeons.

Here we note an important distinction that underpins our argument. In the example of Hepworth, we claim that that the experience of drawing in the surgery brought about a change in Hepworth's drawing, and manifests an increasing graphic specialisation. This is distinct from the example of, say the nineteenth century naturalist. In the latter, the artist

goes out to record exotic flora and fauna deploying the conventions of the day. The language of drawing is unchanged by the observation, remaining demonstrably that of botanical illustration. This example of the naturalist might be conceived of as a 'colonial' approach- using drawing to record, and gather, without the drawing 'going native', i.e. the languages of drawing being altered by the experience.

The difference in short is that engagement with drawing in the example of Hepworth's *Hospital Drawings* results in innovation within drawing alongside a 'refinement of perception'. A specific and specialist technique is refined, developing and expanding existing graphic conventions and an understanding of what drawing can do.

If Modernism cast off the necessity for literal mimetic verisimilitude in favour of the kinds of formal innovation and emotional and spiritual authenticity that we see in Hepworth, then one of the most striking features of the artists here is an avoidance of the emotional image or rhetorical statement. What they favour are cool and measured graphic strategies and processes for selection and sifting. Each artist carefully weighs appearances, information and evidence to find accurate graphic equivalents. Rather than straightforwardly represent, they draw translations from one phenomena and context to another, or as in speech from one language to another, and in this way achieve *poetic verisimilitude*.

Paradoxically their poetics are achieved by restraint. Subjective and emotional expression will be a consideration, yet these will not be as crucial as finding the most appropriate conceptual and technical innovation for developing the relationship with the new subject. Theirs is a 'situated' approach aimed to bind two elements together in a synthesis of interior and exterior.

So, this is situated and synthetic drawing, where intimacy traverses into the public realm and the privacy of the intensely personal moment becomes culturally and socially engaged. While we might see and interpret some of the artworks as ambiguous or elusive, there is no indeterminacy here. These works are deeply grounded in specific contexts and articulate with high degree of precision the particularities of the subject. For example Bowen's *Nova Zembla* drawings respond to prints found frozen in ice for hundreds of years off the coast of arctic Svalbard (Bowen, 2012). This body of work includes drawings bound as books, which are intimate and hand held in form. The technique of water marking is used to imprint images and handwritten text into the fabric of the paper, when viewed literally bringing the subject to light. Here the artist finds sympathy with the environment of the drawing.



FIGURE 1. SIAN BOWEN *DESCRIPTIONS TRUE AND PERFECT* (2012) [WATERMARK ON PAPER UNIQUE BOOK].

However, in the case of Sarah Simblet's studies of cadavers we also see the direct impact and integration of the environment on the drawing. Paul Thomas describes the effects of context on her drawings made in the morgue wearing gloves

*'the lines appear to have a slight wobble... this is not an affectation or stylistic device but simply a by-product of working in a morgue in very cold conditions for a long period of time'*(Thomas, 2003, p.28).



FIGURE 2. SARAH SIMBLET ANATOMICA STUDY (1997) [PENCIL ON PAPER]

Simblet has embraced these effects, and along with adopting a razor sharp line like that of the scalpel she embodies the experience in the drawing.

A further example is Jill Gibbon's drawings, made at the front line between civic and military authorities and those that protest against the industrialisation of war and weaponry. In her pen and ink drawings we can identify adaptations and specialisations to drawing language that respond to and articulate the subject in an almost narrative manner. The works are full of urgency, abrupt changes of direction, rendered with indelible kinetic marks that capture the fluid dynamics of figures in motion.





FIGURE 3. JILL GIBBON. *ARMS TRADE ALLIANCES* (2012). [INK ON PAPER, UNIQUE BOOK].

These are all examples of how *“the process of drawing can be understood as an integral part of drawing’s subject matter”* (Flam, 1996, p.12). They are evidence of sustained and developed relationships within the drawing practice, relationships between the self and other and between our skills and competencies and the abundant strangeness of the world.

## DRAWING ADAPTED

In the drawings we discuss, we see departures from convention in the process or the materials used as the artist seeks to marry content and form by finding an appropriate parallel with the subjects they confront. The search for new and appropriate visual analogies and the matching of procedural and technical decisions to the demands of new conceptual and physical environments has direct material consequence on the drawings. How a work is made, what it is made with and what it looks like is changed by its genesis in the new relationship and environment.

The drawing support is more often than not unconventional. Where it is paper, the likelihood is that it has undergone adaption and sometimes radical change (scraps of wallpaper). Often the support has been treated with instruments, chemicals or procedures

that do not simply mark the surface; sometimes photo chemicals, piercing, water marks are used to change its very materiality. Alongside these adaptations Jill Gibbon has re-designated the format, use and presentation of the sketchbook. Commonly a private activity and artefact, in Gibbon's practice it is assigned absolute centrality. The notebook drawing is the principal site and tool for witnessing and recording public protest. The status of the book is changed, not only is it exhibited as final and finished work in its own right but is also thought of as a semi-legal 'witness statement'.

Other examples of adaptation are evident in Sian Bowen's *Ream* series. These large scale works depict hand held and personal artefacts, such as scissors, combs, on surfaces compiled from collaged recycled papers and old letters. These are papers which have been handled, held, bundled up and kept; they are personal, intimate and have passed through generations. The surface is drawn upon with techniques of burning and piercing, leaving and indelible mark of the artist's touch. This process recalls the touch of handling which of course leave a patina of age over time as the acids in our fingers stain and erode delicate supports of paper and fabric. The choice of support, and indeed the method of drawing have been critically, thoughtfully, selected to communicate specific qualities of marks left by time and touch. A clear parallel is constructed between the subject, method and materials and process. In *Ream* the method is not literal descriptive image making, but achieved by the creation of graphic similarities and material equivalents.

This approach to drawing is explored by the TRACEY authors in *Drawing Now* (Downs et al., 2007) which acknowledges that "*there are other ways of mimicking reality in imitating behaviour and processes, making sense of experience and rendering it concrete*" (Downs et.al., 2007, p.xii).

We have asserted above a distinction between mimetic verisimilitude, the rendering of visual similarity, and poetic verisimilitude which privileges the feel and sense of a subject. However, this distinction can be further refined by taking into account the argument advanced in *Drawing Now*, that "*representation can incorporate other modes of mimetic faculty besides the compulsion to imitate appearance*" (Downs et al., 2009, p.xiii). We see this type of representation in Bowen's drawing where both the processes used and choice of support echo qualities of the subject. This consideration of process, form and materials underpins the mechanism for achieving poetic verisimilitude. We will call this mechanism 'performative mimesis'.

We propose that there is a spectrum or continuum of performative activities where artists seek to find equivalents in how they might draw the phenomena they are faced with. Performative mimesis might be understood as a re-enactment or copying of initial activities in graphic form. These activities rely on analogy, metaphor and the invention of visual simile. For example, the incisive line and the surgical cut in the medical drawings of Sarah Simblet as the pencil replaces the scalpel, or in Bowen's techniques of staining and

burning which recall the damage of touch. This mimicry might be quite apparent, for instance, the layering of dust and particles in Leo Duff's Stonehenge drawings closely resembles the actual activities performed by the archaeologists in the field. Elsewhere, the chosen process might rely more heavily on simile – Simblet does not actually cut the paper. However, it is important to note that this mimesis is far from a direct copy. It is a transformation, an activity of translation which resides in the artist's ability to make analogies with what is seen and observed to the languages of drawing.



FIGURE 4. LEO DUFF. *THE DIG AND THE MUSEUM* (2010) [ MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER].

Through conversations with artists and as artists ourselves, we know that when faced with an unfamiliar environment or subject we often find our habitual ways of drawing challenged and often fall short. Confronted with this inability to make sense of what is seen and the challenge of drawing it, we are forced to scan through our knowledge of modes of drawing, dipping into our mental repository of styles, techniques and applications, to search for an appropriate 'fit' with the phenomena in front of us. In our own drawing this can be seen in Davies's *Cave Drawings* (2011) where the repeated mark of process drawing finds a sympathy with the slow accretion and erosion of geological formations underground; or in Casey's use of the renaissance technique of blind stylus in *Hidden Drawers* (2012), using scoring alone, to make drawings of garments hidden in archives that will fade over time.

So performative mimesis is twofold: the re-enactment of activities or processes observed, and the marrying of these with existing graphic practices. The resultant drawing is both innovative and highly refined, specific to the subject. We might say that in doing so these artists develop new languages of drawing, but it is perhaps more appropriate to consider these adaptations as syntactical – these are parts of graphic languages put together. For example, just as compound words might be created in spoken language, such as German.

## IMAGINATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

The examples manifested in these artists and practices of adaptation, heightened perception and making unexpected connections reflect many of the tenets in Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing*.

In Bowen and Duff complex relationships to history and archaeology are established. They synthesise empirical and subjective material to realise coherent and layered reflections. In their drawings each strings ideas, thoughts, techniques and materials together, reflecting Heywood's interpretation of the 'garland of thoughts'. While both Gibbon and Simblet make representational drawings, both do so as fully informed and engaged artists. Neither is just an instrument of sight, nor merely an illustrator but an insightful artist and being.

Lawrence Campbell in the introduction to the 1970 Dover edition to *The Element of Drawing* identifies Ruskin's differentiation between the illustrator and the artist which is founded upon the use of imaginative transformation 'For it is the imagination unrestrained by scientific knowledge or preconceived ideas, which enables the artist to travel beyond appearance' (Campbell, 1970, p.xii).

All four artists accomplish through drawing 'a refinement of perception' and 'subtlety of sight'. By analysing the subject *and* the method of drawing, by finding a marriage between what they draw and how they draw it, they synthesise experience and knowledge to develop a fully informed drawing. This manifests both a refinement of *perception* and also a refinement of *articulation* achieving poetic verisimilitude.

This type of drawing reveals information and experience that we might not otherwise comprehend or even see. We have seen in the practices of the artists discussed modes of drawing that make vividly apparent connections between historical processes, material objects and events in ways that enrich our understanding of ourselves and of the world.

## CONCLUSION

We believe the approaches and features we have identified in this paper are significant for artists and researchers today. For us they offer the potential for drawing to develop new graphic forms, methods, technologies and conceptual approaches and open up the possibility of new areas for solo, collaborative and interdisciplinary research.

This approach addresses concerns in drawing research; it enables the mapping of relationships between drawing and the world of other research disciplines (Garner, 2008, p.13). We have identified practices which re-establish drawing's relationship with the family of investigative procedures and demonstrate drawing to be a valuable research activity.

Our interpretation of Ruskin, Duff, Gibbon, Simblet and Bowen offers evidence of drawing's significance as a valuable research methodology to institutions, funding agencies and the wider community of researchers and scholars. Ultimately this re-positioning of drawing offers new models for working on, with and through drawing.

### *Postscript*

This paper arises from a new research project *Walking the Line*, led by the authors at Lancaster University.

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