

DUALITIES WITHIN DRAWING AND THE WORK OF ARTISTS IN AN EXPANDED FIELD

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Today drawing is no longer merely a preparatory aspect of an artist's practice but a recognised art discipline with artists making and exhibiting drawings as complete works of art. In their attempts to define drawing, and in the way that art writers talk about different aspects of drawing practice, there is a tendency to identify dualities and some of these are explored in this essay. Although it can be useful to define what something is by what it is not, the result can be a limiting paradigm. These dichotomies may provide neat categories for the art writer, but do not necessarily match the diverse works of artists. In this essay it is argued that drawing becomes more interesting when it occupies a place between the binary positions established by art writers. The following sections will examine several definitions and theories of drawing and how they relate to the works of four contemporary artists, including my own work.

PROCESS VS PRESENTATION

Two predominant alternatives have been identified by Laura Hoptman within the history of drawing – process-based and presentation drawing.¹ For the former, she cites as an example the process works of the 1960s and 1970s. These works are the result or evidence of actions, whereas the presentation drawings of the early 18th century are examples of works which were collected as mounted and finished works independent of a process and valued as art in themselves.

Hoptman observes that drawings of the 1980s and 1990s span a broad spectrum of style, medium, scale and technique, yet all resist the categorisation of process-based works. What they do have in common is a sense of autonomy, representation and finish. Hoptman quotes writer Yve Alain Bois² who describes contemporary drawings as “projective” works that “depict something that has been imagined before it is drawn as opposed to being found through the process of making.” It could be said therefore, that contemporary drawing has more in common with 18th century presentation drawing than the process works of the 1960s and 1970s.

Hoptman's definition of drawing includes the influence of forms of popular culture such as illustration, applied decoration and also architectural drawing which further distinguish these drawings from process-based work. Hoptman concludes that current drawing is not a verb but a noun. It is not the means, but an end in itself. This conclusion and the polarisation of drawing into process and presentation works is problematic, however, as there are always exceptions within each period of art history.

Artist and curator Avis Newman observes that drawing by nature is intimate because the eye and the hand are perpetually engaged in the space of action and event.³ Drawing embodies or reveals many layers of thinking. It demands an intimate engagement with the work and subsequently brings us as close as possible to the thought process of the artist. Whereas Hoptman defines the new mode of contemporary drawing as a noun, as leading to finished autonomous works, Newman's idea of drawing is based on act and process.

Bernice Rose suggests drawing encompasses not only finished drawings which are made to be independent and complete works similar to painting, but also fragmentary works such as observational, preparatory drawings and designs for further work.⁴ Fragmentary work often connects drawing to the participatory aesthetic and the gestural act in performance.

Rose claims that post-modernism has brought about a changing role for drawing. It has achieved a new status as a discipline in itself, as well as a medium which interacts with other mediums. It no longer serves only as a preparatory function for other disciplines such as painting or sculpture, but has become part of a new type of visual language. The interaction of drawing with other disciplines has blurred the distinctions between those disciplines. This has created new ways of understanding drawing, resulting in work that utilises an expanded field of operations.

The multidisciplinary relationship of drawing to sculpture has been an important contributor to the development of an expanded field of operations with both the process of drawing into new spaces and the experimentation with new materials in drawing. Interdisciplinary work involves not only the mixing of media but also elements from outside the normal confines of art and its disciplines. Rose argues there is an inherent balancing act between written language, visual language, and body language to which drawing is pivotal.

A new perspective is outlined by Emma Dexter that identifies two aspects of contemporary drawing.⁵ Firstly, the conceptual and theoretical where line is an abstract mark that relates to the ground, creating a symbolic potency. The second aspect is not based on theory but on human experience. Dexter defines this type of drawing as a feeling or attitude conveyed in its making and materials. These two elements in drawing can also respectively be described as semiotic and nonsemantic.

My work, *Island People* (2005, Figure 1), is an example of what Hoptman calls a presentation work. It is not a preparatory work for sculpture, performance or painting, but a direct expression of a preconceived idea. The drawing uses charcoal and coloured pencil on board and depicts a group of figures on a headland with islands in the distance. This work tells its own story, creating an imaginary scenario built on a personal narrative. It is informed by observational drawing but is not an observational drawing in itself.

Drawing is central to all areas of my practice and serves several roles. As well as complete works, of which *Island People* is an example, I use preparatory drawings in the exploration and development of ideas for sculpture and performance. These drawings can be described as fragmentary. I have also used the act of drawing in performance. These are both examples of the process-based work referred to by Rose. This shows how an artist can incorporate both process and presentation drawing in their work.

FIGURE AND GROUND

An examination of the underlying principles of figure and ground theory is useful in understanding drawing. In the history of art the relationship between figure and ground has been explored as one of the basic principles or foundations of picture making. Figure and ground theory is an idea that has been developed in many different disciplines aside from art, including philosophy and psychology.

Figure and ground is a fundamental element in drawing that signifies a contrast between one thing and another. Contrast creates meaning and therefore the theory of figure and ground helps us to explore the idea of meaning in art and drawing. Bouman⁶ identifies the qualities of ground as “form(less), loose, empty, less articulate, less dominant, soft, receding, enclosing, concave, primitive.” If the figure is to be seen as ‘other’ this establishes, by way of opposites, the qualities of figure. These could be imagined as form, control, positive, articulate, dominant, hard, aggressive, convex, and developed.

Collier bases his idea about figure and ground on technique in drawing.⁷ He discusses how differing figure and ground relationships can create various effects in artworks. Collier uses three examples of figure and ground relationships. Firstly, when the ground is behind the figure, no competition is perceived between the two. Secondly, when figure and ground are on the same plane, there is a balanced interaction. Thirdly, figure and ground are interactive and compete with each other. The viewer perceives tension or struggle between the two. Collier allocates to each of these possibilities various moods or differing energies, respectively: neutral, a sense of resolve, and disturbance.

In support of Collier, Harlan elaborates on the relationship of positive and negative areas in design where there is equal interest in the shape of background as in the figure itself.⁸ Where figure and ground compete, he argues that the viewer is forced to participate to make sense of the work and identify what is figure and what is ground. He

describes the work as a struggle between aggressive and introvert, active and passive. This concurs with Bauman's explanation of a figure and ground duality which also underpins other competing binary metaphors such as male and female, or mind and body.

When considering the differences between figure and ground it is easy to see how a hierarchy has developed where the active quality of the figure has become more important than the neutral or passive background. Rose, however, contends that modernism challenges the hierarchy of figure and ground, claiming the lower element (ground) is essential to the status of the upper (figure). What becomes interesting is the negotiation within these dualities or the possible relationships that they can represent, and how these relate to drawing. As Elkins says, it opens the field of drawn figures and ground to "metaphorical exploration".⁹

In the 20th century pictorial space was compressed and organised within the picture frame, but Rose explains that over time the figure was expelled from the frame to eventually enter the space occupied by the viewer, that is, the gallery space. The resulting space – the ground – became an expanded field where the viewer, as a physical presence, became the figure in the ground relating to the other objects and elements in the space. Rose describes this as the displaced figure which has become both the subject and object of the work. This notion has brought about a new way of seeing the figure and ground duality with all the existing ideas of separateness, interaction, conflict and emergence, taking on new possibilities.

Rosalind Krauss's version of modernism rejects the idea of background as solely a setting or surrounding for the figure and establishes the ground as equal and co-dependent with the figure.¹⁰ She demonstrates new ways of dismantling the conventional figure/ground oppositions by taking into consideration the place of the viewer and other disciplines. Krauss argues that the expanded field is generated by setting up problematic situations between oppositions. New relationships are created, for example, when the artist interacts with the work as material or tool, the viewer as participant becomes the figure in the 'ground' or the use of time delays the resolution between figure and ground.

Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang's art practice opens the field of drawing into the disciplines of sculpture and performance. Through his work he explores the body as figure, and our relationship to the environment as ground. Guo-Qiang works with a diversity of media and art forms. He uses, for example, the medium of fireworks to make large-scale drawings. By experimenting with the effects of gunpowder on paper, canvas and walls, he has created images which look like aerial maps of cities or war zones. In *Fetus Movement II* (1991), the ignition of gunpowder on rice paper leaves a residue of marks and lines.¹¹ The resulting work, designed in response to a specific location, uses new materials for drawing in an expanded field of operations.

Guo-Qiang overlays the image of his drawing onto the surface of the land. According to Merewether, he explores the land as a form of draftsman's ground, similar to a piece of paper.¹² The initial drawing on paper becomes part of a process that extends the concept into a new field on which to draw. Excavations into the earth and the detonation of firework trails replicate the image in larger scale on the ground. The drawing on paper, even though it is a preparatory drawing, exists as a permanent record of an event that has happened in a brief moment in time. Guo-Qiang considers his proposal drawings, even if not realised, as independent works instead of a means to an end. In this way he crosses the boundaries between preparatory and autonomous works.

In my work *Untitled* (2006, Figure 2) the field of drawing is expanded into sculpture. The drawings were made on tissue paper then laid on to a relief of a face. The face is a paper cast that creates an illusion of solidity. Through the use of wash a sense of depth in the form is created, yet the surface drawings ignore the three-dimensionality and appear as if on a flat surface. This creates a tension between the different types of marks on the work and the way in which the figure appears to emerge from the ground. The relief becomes a figure in the expanded ground of the gallery wall. The work occupies the position of both drawing and sculpture.

FROM SIGN TO GESTURE

Within drawing another duality exists between the act of drawing and the content of the work. These can also be described as gesture and sign or nonsemantic and semiotic. Semiotic elements are defined by Elkins as those that



Figure 1 (top): Juliet Novena Sorrel, *Island People*, 2005, charcoal and colour pencil on plywood, 38 x 110 cm, private collection (image courtesy of the artist).



Figure 2 (left): Juliet Novena Sorrel, *Untitled*, 2006, papier collé, ink and wash, 23 x 14 cm, private collection (image courtesy of the artist).

Figure 3 (below): Juliet Novena Sorrel, *Animal*, 2005, charcoal, pencil on plywood, 10.5 x 14.5 cm, private collection (image courtesy of the artist).



are prone to systematic, linguistic, and structural descriptions. It includes elements that convey specific meaning, signs and symbols. The nonsemantic, or non-semiotic, involves gesture, the mark, line, smudge and stain. Elkins claims pictures are simultaneously semiotic and nonsemantic.¹³ He comments that pictures are partly inside and partly outside logical structures of meaning and that what happens in the space between understood representation and the non-semantic makes images more interesting than when they are seen solely as a set of symbols.

Avis Newman defines drawing as the embodiment of thought by the gestural act. She states that gestural marks are nonsemantic because they are non-verbal and supplement the language of image and text. She implies they have no meaning in themselves, yet believes they are as important to communication as spoken or written words because they contribute to our understanding of the overall text or image. According to Newman, this is an example of how drawing extends the boundaries of language¹⁴.

Michael Newman questions the idea that the mark is meaningless and claims that drawing "enacts a becoming".¹⁵ The mark, when seen in context with other marks, constitutes its own meaning and becomes part of a visual language. Elkins also argues that graphic marks are not meaningless or beyond analysis and that they add to, but do not produce, signification.

In the 1970s the mark and the process through which it was made became the subject of drawing and the conceptual and mark-making aspects of drawing merged. The work of Sol Le Witt is an example of the use of gesture and isolation of the line as a conceptual device. According to Rose, Le Witt's drawing occupies a position between gesture and concept.¹⁶ This duality becomes apparent in his wall drawing where both mark and design are present.

The title of Le Witt's work, *All Possible Crossing Combinations of Arcs, Straight Lines, Lines Not Straight, and Broken Lines* (1972), reads like a list or poem, but it is also the instructions for the work to be carried out by the draftsman. The directions are brief and uncomplicated. According to Michael Newman, Le Witt believed the resulting lines did not represent anything but themselves and were the residue of a process which transferred a concept from text to image.¹⁷ Although Le Witt intended the work to be non-gestural, Godfrey claims that the authorial gesture was not ruled out and that the resulting drawing was influenced by those who drew it.¹⁸ In effect, Le Witt transferred the authorial gesture to those who carried out his instructions.

Godfrey describes Le Witt's work as the opposite of the abstract expressionist idea of line where the impulse to draw is determined by self-expression and gesture.¹⁹ In contrast, Le Witt's work is ordered and coherent, premeditated and executed within defined parameters. Drawing to Le Witt is non-gestural, a system and a method. Rose describes it as an affirmation of the consistent and universal nature of language.²⁰

The art of John Reynolds bridges the gap between the nonsemantic world and that of semiotic representation of real maps. His work, *Western Springs/Bloody Angle* (1998), employs the semiotic language of maps with nonsemantic gestural drawing to communicate a personal understanding of time and place. Two roughly drawn maps overlay the surface of an old mobile chalkboard. The first, which overlays this ground, is of Gallipoli Peninsula, the place of the Anzac battlefield in Turkey. The second map is of Western Springs, a suburban New Zealand park, which evokes other places through its borrowed English place names, while Gallipoli bears the Anzac names superimposed on the ancient Mediterranean landforms. The work communicates a connection to place through the recognised symbols and signs of maps. The gestural marks, made by oilstick, add a sense of emotion and immediacy which convey grief and loss. This results in a sense of rewriting history and reclaiming landmarks and places. It is a work of multiple layers that Reynolds calls "overlaid geographies" which exist as part of a continuum of repeated reinterpretation of sites.²¹

The gestural marks in Reynolds drawing contribute to the meaning of the work. As Elkins explains, graphic marks are inconsistently semiotic and nonsemantic, which means they cannot be overlooked in favour of pictorial signs when looking at works of art. Elkins concludes that semiotics is an inadequate tool for deciphering art works because it overlooks the otherness of marks. To speak only of what exists in spite of marks, or of the represented figure, is to avoid the illegible and incomprehensible as valid elements in the understanding of an artwork.

CONCLUSION

Amongst different theories about drawing a pattern emerges where art writers create dichotomies to define and discuss different aspects of drawing. Hoptman identifies process-based and presentation drawing, while Rose refers to fragmentary and finished works and this idea is expanded upon by Dexter. Further dualities have emerged in our exploration of the theories of figure and ground, and semiotic and nonsemantic. However, both the artwork of Cai Guo-Qiang and my own work, show how artists can work across both process and presentation drawings even within a single work.

My work *Animal* (2005, Figure 3) is an example of a fragmentary work in that it is one part of a series of small images exhibited as a group. However, because this particular work has been sold and separated from the group, it could now be considered an autonomous work. Its new context changes its definition. This work is also an example of how several dualities can exist within a drawing. The work is a charcoal drawing on plywood. The grain of the wood, which is the ground for the drawing, affects the application of the drawn marks of the figure. The conflict between figure and ground suggests a sense of impermanence or temporality in the image. The small criss-crossing lines in the upper right quarter of the work seem meaningless when isolated. Yet when seen in relation to one another they create meaning in that they could signify a receding flock of birds or swarm of flies. The deliberate, yet non-specific, marks create a dynamic where semiotic and nonsemantic co-exist.

The problem with the above-mentioned dichotomies is that they tend to define drawing within one position or another. Drawing, however, should test rather than exemplify these theories. What makes drawing interesting is the place it negotiates between the binary positions. This is described by Harlan as a struggle between positions.²² What engages the viewer and encourages participation or a sense of blurring, merging or emergence is the negotiation within the dualities or the possible relationships between them. This is evident in Reynolds's work which creates new meanings by bridging the gap between the semiotic and nonsemantic. As Elkins points out, the dynamics of all the elements which make up an individual artwork often do not fall neatly into one side or another, but somewhere in between.²³

The traditional relationship of drawing with other disciplines has been changed by the work of artists in an expanded field. The work of Le Witt, Guo-Qiang, Reynolds, and Sorrel show how artists can use the expanded field to shift drawing into other disciplines, creating new directions for their work. This is evidence of an interaction and hybridisation between disciplines where drawing plays a vital role in the interdisciplinary practice of contemporary artists.

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- 1 Laura Hoptman, *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* (New York: MoMA, 2002), 11-12. Hoptman's polarised positions of process and presentation works attributed to each period are artificial constructs that do not always match reality, 11-12.
- 2 Yve Alain Bois, in Laura Hoptman, *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* (New York: MoMA, 2002), 12.
- 3 Avis Newman, "Conversation: Avis Newman/Catherine de Zegher". In Catherine De Zegher (ed.), *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act* (London & New York: Tate Publishing and The Drawing Centre, 2003), 93-111.
- 4 Bernice Rose, *Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing* (New York: MoMA, 1992).
- 5 Emma Dexter, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing* (London, Phaidon, 2005).
- 6 Jan C Bouman, in James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91.
- 7 Graham Collier, *Form, Space, and Vision* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972).
- 8 Calvin Harlan, *Vision and Invention: A Course in Fundamentals* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970).
- 9 James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91.

- 10 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", in *Modernity and its Discontents* (1979), 281-298.
11 Cai Guo-Qiang, *Cai Guo-Qiang* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002).
12 Charles Merewether, in Emma Dexter, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing* (London, Phaidon, 2005), 48-49. ames
13 James Elkins, (1998), 4-6.
14 Avis Newman, (2003).
15 Michael Newman, "The Marks, Traces, and Gesture of Drawing", in Catherine De Zegher (ed.), *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act* (London & New York: Tate Publishing and The Drawing Centre, 2003), 93.
16 Bernice Rose, (1992), 14.
17 Michael Newman, (2003), 95.
18 Tony Godfrey, *Drawing Today* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1990).
19 Ibid.
20 Bernice Rose, (1992), 14.
21 John Reynolds, "A City Street. A Sign. Dusk," in *SUMWHR*, 51-57 (New Plymouth & Auckland: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery & Artspace, 2002), 55.
22 Calvin Harlan (1970).
23 James Elkins (1998), 4.