

Bergen National Academy for the Arts – November 2005  
Presentation to Sensuous Knowledge 2:  
Aesthetic Practice and Aesthetic Insight

# Draw Attention: Ecology As Art

drawing water  
a single act of drinking  
in dialogue

drawn in the same breath  
all the time, everywhere  
same flowing water

## **FEAR OF DRAWING - Why don't more people draw?**

Ronald Searle's book, 'I Leonardo', includes a cartoon of the great artist's studio with his attendant retinue and a giant white canvas centre stage. Crumpled before the canvas, Leonardo stares out at the reader in fear and horror. It is interesting compare this figure with one in Michelangelo's 'Last Judgement', in the Sistine Chapel and, of course, Munch's 'Scream'. We are all familiar with the angst and anguish of the blank canvas or 'writer's block', but I have become increasingly interested in the general inability of the population to draw.

As young children we draw freely without inhibition and we are encouraged to express ourselves. Then around puberty drawing becomes reserved for the 'artistic' or 'talented', and the rest of the class are expected to drop these childish pursuits in favour of 'real', 'useful' and grown-up subjects. In the UK, in general, a similar shift takes place with regard to environmental subjects.

But this abrupt excommunication of arts practice from normal society is, I believe, the cause of a profound state of creative neurosis – a catatonic inability to apply graphic instruments to anything that may be judged as drawing. One may wish to trace the route of this societal expulsion to 19<sup>th</sup> century 'division of labour', and follow it through to the eruption of conceptual art in the 1970s. Of course, this trajectory also marks the separation of art from popular understanding – Art becomes the preserve of the cognoscenti.

The result of this drawing denial of practical skill is an estrangement from some core skills including:

- eye hand coordination
- cognitive/language stimulation
- a useful form of communication
- a means of analytical observation and reflection

- and the creative process.

And this reduces our ability to see and conceptualise relationships (ecology if you like), and form questions, and envision the future, critically.

So, as part of my 'A Walk On The Wild Side Project', I am working with an environmental psychologist and a sociologist to develop, '**The Fear of Drawing**' project for community groups to overcome their phobia and adopt drawing as a means of generating critical capacity to counter the UK Government's lobotomising 'Sustainable Communities' programme and promote mental healthcare. [ASIDE: Although I read the other day that 'Sustainable communities need arts at their heart'.

## PRESENTATION FORMAT

So, delivered as a performed drawing, this presentation will include verbal, physical and visual elements, combined in a 'live' event.

## CONTEXT

Last year I presented an action based research programme **A Walk On The Wild Side**, a project based on transformative reflective practice. That presentation included notions of 'phenomenological drawing' (a re-sensitisation of pattern recognition in our everyday experience and a means of valuing that which has drawn itself), the drawing of an ecosystem and Hockney's notion that 'the way we depict space determines what we do with it'. This presentation will build on those ideas by adding my **Drawing on Life** and **Fear of Drawing** projects to develop further understanding of the language of drawing.

## ETYMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The English words **draft (draught), draw, drawing, drag**, have many related meanings and diverse applications that bring richness and subtlety to what we as visual artists practice. In particular, notions of measurement, gathering, water and the trace or trajectory of objects that have their roots in Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse and Old High German. In some instances, finding similarity with the French word, **design**, or **diagram** and **graphic** from the Greek may help us further understand the complexities.

So if we pursue an inclusive attitude to the subject, we may see how drawing as a metaphor projects the action into patterns of thought – 'drawing on the brain', as it were. And the word 'see' in my last sentence, itself connects to the metaphor 'seeing is believing'. So, drawing can provide a 'perspective on life', or witness a whole belief system.

## DRAW ATTENTION

[lasso audience and draw together]

There is a sentence, written by Michelle De Certeau in the catalogue of Helen Mayer Harrison & Newton Harrison's 'Lagoon Cycle' that I have referred to in a number of papers, partly because, like the grain of sand in the oyster, it irritates me:

"Pay Attention to the Flow – Art is what attention makes with nature".

This rather awkward instruction demands of us a second, or third reading – what does it actually mean? For me, it encapsulates an entire research methodology and offers the possibility for a theory of ecological art. Interestingly, the transformative metaphor of Art is Nature is extended and brought sharply in to focus, to include the practical – it's not just a concept, it's an experiential reality.

And so, in this creative intervention, I wish to take my leave from De Certeau and Steiner, I wish to **draw your attention** to the possibility of an eco-centric culture...

This is a transparent methodology, a form of self-reflexivity to engage you (the audience), so you have to consider your own position; thereby drawing you into the discourse and incorporating your perspectives. This is basically the oldest form of storytelling.

The problem, as I see it, is with science, or the assumption our society makes in believing that science (and we may include engineering and economics) has the highest and most appropriate solutions – including the method of communication. Judging by the investment being made into projects for art to illustrate science, based on the common misconception that science is bad and art is good at communicating, we have got a dog chasing its tail situation.

However, when it comes to 'research' it is assumed that knowledge may only be communicated in accordance with the scientific linear formula – this is the solution to the problem and it is the most economic with regard to time ... after all 'time is money'. So, I would argue that there is a problem for the creative arts being represented in scientific form.

Through Anthroposophy, Steiner's practice included a mix of education, medicine, agriculture, politics, economics, science, cosmology, ecology, art and many other disciplines – 'I believe that the significant element in the future development of spiritual-science will be that in desiring to understand art it will create an art of comprehension, filling the work and activity of ideas with imagery and reality, thus bringing today's dry-as-dust and abstract science closer to the artistic realm.' Walter Kugler, Cosmic Poetry. Rudolf Steiner's Blackboard Drawings Pp13

Steiner's greatest achievement, said Beuys, 'was not to have "invented" anything, but to have brought forth through his heightened perception only(!) what human beings long for in a higher sense, even if they do not yet know it'

‘Each aspect, thinking and drawing, word and picture, is carried by a poetic spirit and stirred up in the innermost depths. Yet they are far more than merely imaginative. They are an endeavour to bring about a synthesis, an endeavour – of which perhaps Steiner himself was unaware – to find an artistic process by which scientific content might be given expression. And more than this: they are an endeavour to bring about a synthesis between science and art. As such they should be read and contemplated by both scientists and artists. May the inspiration they bring into being become a stimulus to reconsider our own perceptions and the forms in which we bring them expression’. Wolfgang Zumtack, Upon a Black Background. Notes on Rudolf Steiner’s Move towards ‘Artistic Science’. Pp33

### **OBSERVATION: COGNITION**

Lakoff & Johnson’s notion of the embodied mind implies a complete integration of mental and physical activity. This may find resonance with the activity of drawing as a means of heightening cognition and even touch on human evolutionary development. This, in turn, suggests that drawing, through eye-hand coordination and stimulation of parts of the brain that construct language, may lead to understanding our embodied ecology, through drawing.

### **STRUCTURE: MATERIALS**

Today, drawing implies impermanence, partly derived from the shop bought media used in the activity of drawing. Charcoal, graphite, pastel, ink and wash lack the supposed longevity of tempera, oil and acrylic paint. Likewise, paper as a substrate appears fragile compared with canvas, stucco and board. But what of the mason’s guidelines, the furrow drawn by a millstone, or the principle of weighing a ship’s cargo? In Pompeii you can still see today the ruts drawn by chariots and carts in the streets.

### **PATTERN: FORM**

Perhaps, there is greater understanding to be derived from the language of drawing and drawing as a metaphor – to draw upon, draw together and to draft a proposal? Maps, diagrams and the drawings of architects and engineers provide utilitarian languages of science and technology, now appropriated by electronic and virtual data systems. And, of course, we must not forget the development of written forms themselves, derived from the hieroglyphs of ancient civilizations.

### **PROCESS, ITERATION, PERFORMANCE & NARRATIVE**

The activities of observation, enquiry and exploration have lent heavily on the practice of drawing and in many disciplines, like botany, still do – the iterative process demands that we notice more than the instant image of a photograph. The studies of Leonardo da Vinci still provide insights from an enquiring mind. Drawing as physical

acts of engagement reveal verbs like pulling, pouring and drinking. Paul Klee took his line for a walk. Steiner, Einstein, Bezan and Beuys demonstrated, presented and performed through the act of drawing. When used by non-literate societies, drawing tells the story of the way we see things, as much as what we see. Since Quantum Theory, we must accept that there is no fixed reality, but our myriad of perceptions.

## REFLECTION, TIME & TRANSFORMATION

Drawing takes time. Drawing makes time and brings about reflection. Time to understand differences and relationships. Time to question. Perhaps, it is in Michel De Certeau's assertion, " Pay attention to the flow ... art is what attention makes with nature"<sup>iii</sup>, that we find the transformation from observation to proposal to *poesies*. Drawing becomes self reflexivity - and then engages the viewer so they have to consider their own position. Drawing the possibility of new art forms – tracing the transition from one state to another. To create new metaphors and make new knowledge. And when evolution 'draws' us into the future, we may understand climate change, the meaning and the potential of our embodied ecology.

## NOTES FROM THE FRONTLINE

# DRAWING ON LIFE: The Draughtsperson's Contract

A six week programme of life drawing/seminars, exploring our (human) relationships to each other and to our environment – life drawing meets ecology.

**Open to ALL MIRIAD postgraduate and research students.**

1. 1.30 – 4.30 pm Tuesday **9 November**  
"Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going?"

Ecological art -

**Ecology:** the study of organisms in relation to one another and to their surroundings, derived from the Greek word, *oikos*, meaning house, or dwelling

**Art:** *rt* from an Indo-Aryan noun/adjective of the *Rg Veda*, meaning the dynamic process by which the whole cosmos continues to be created - virtuously

**Eco-art** '...the most moral act of all is the making of space for life to move onward'. – Robert Pirsig, *Lila: an inquiry in to morals*.

Gauguin – Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? 1897

Darwin – Origin of Species 1850

David Haley – Destiny of Species – 2004

Ewan Ugly

David Hockney ‘The way we depict space determines what we do with it’

Paul Klee "For the artist communication with nature remains the most essential condition. The artist is human; himself nature; part of nature within natural space."<sup>iii</sup>

Joseph Beuys “Social Sculpture” “everyone is an artist”  
“thinking is form”

Alan Kaprow “Lifelike Art”

Robert Pirsig "Every language is also a means of categorising experience"<sup>iiii</sup>.

Michel de Certeau "Pay attention to the flow...'(Sixth Lagoon)' Art is what attention makes with nature"<sup>iv</sup>.

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## DRAWING ON LIFE: The Draughtsperson’s Contract

1. 1.30 – 4.30 pm Tuesday **9 November**  
“Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going?”
- 

14 students attended, mainly from Media Arts route, but also, 3D Design, Bioclimatic Design and AAE. Very mixed abilities. Generally, tentative approach and lack of command of materials. Hand/eye coordination not too bad.

The model, Marie-Claire Cadillac was very good as she had yoga training and the students started to respond to her.

I brought topic sheets, Ewan Ugly and Joseph Beuys (Thinking is Form) books. A weeping fig and Indian scarf brought small touches to the baron stage.

This was, as expected, very much the first week, with students needing to find safety and trust – ‘we need you to grant us permission’. Showed students the view from the model’s perspective.

Introduced the ‘life drawing stage’. Poses included 1/2 hour warm-up, 6 x 5 minutes – lying, sitting, standing and breaking out of the stage area. Students reluctant to move positions – explained comfortable position and seeing-ability – cognition. 1/2 hour

drawing with dramatic lighting conditions suggested different media and approach to drawing. Final 3/4 hour pose to take time to reflect.

I maintained the 'performance', finding a rhythm and started to gain response. It was too early to cover much of my agenda, other than to introduce the notion that I had one and it was different from usually life drawing classes – exploration of research ideas and lack of drawing/reflective practice. By the end some of the students did start to respond.

Told story of Ewan Uglow (red lentils, bed springs, plaster casts, strict with models), Norburg Shultz, 'axis mundi' notion of Homo Erectus. Ecology idea of relationship to each other and to our environment. One student picked-up on my induction week presentation. Brief mention of Gauguin's title and Paul Klee's Pedagogical Sketchbook – taking the pencil for a walk.

Students requested assistance. 'Standard' of drawing increased dramatically over the session. Students commented on tiredness from concentration and keenness for more. The atmosphere warmed and was very positive. Jocelyn Briscoe very good!

NEXT WEEK: Asked students to bring different sizes of paper and materials.

Week 3: Bring newspaper, sellotape, wire, string, etc.  
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### **Phenomenological Drawing**

Given the idea of *rt*, and the original meaning of design - a form of drawing, or creation, that which draws itself – we may consider the concept of phenomenological drawing? Neither illustration, nor interpretation, but a form of drawing that is 'autopoietic' - silverfish hydrofoiling in the sink, a slug twisting up to a leaf, snail trails and sweat peas climbing, the patina of rust or lichen. It's a matter of awareness, of being aware, of being sensitive.

Things drawing themselves – autograph or self drawn – the growth trajectory of a foetus and its consequential decay could be seen as a life cycle drawn, a sculptural intervention in minerals and water. Ultimately the drawing is erased, the only remaining 'trace' of the physical body being the consequences of that person's actions – ecopraxis.

Drawing may, also, be considered as the 'definition of relationships'. Here the dictionary definition of ecology comes to play in looking at the web of connections between organisms and their environment. We may start to understand form, or pattern as 'living drawings' – the ripple, flow and vortices of water, the edges of the coastline as the drawing of the tides' marks the land. Drawing as a way of thinking, or thinking as a way of drawing, moving on from illustration to interpretation to integration – form, materials and process as one.

Let us then consider new understandings for what art and ecology might be. Not definitions, but the potential for diverse meanings. A capacity from which further possibilities might flow. The evolutionary biologist, Lynn Margulis, quotes her student and continues, "Gaia is just symbiosis as seen from space": all organisms are touching because all are bathed in the same air and the same flowing water." And finally, Robert Pirsig, from *Lila: An Inquiry Into Morals*: "The most moral activity of all is the creation of space for life to move onward."

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**Dear Mary**

The notion of 'Drawing on Life' came from several issues; first that life drawing is rarely practised in UK university art schools now. This means that core skills such as observation and reflection are being lost. Having been very keen on drawing in my youth, I learned to draw from several very strict academic artists, almost as an apprenticeship training. Having rebelled against the dogma of this form of learning, the skill and ways of approaching the world are what lead me to become an ecological artist.

At present, the six-week pilot course combines readings and dialogue while drawing human models. I insisted that we book as many different 'types' of model as possible to help understand some basic cultural diversity and I always engage the model (by name) in the activity of the class - there is no point hiring a nude human being and boring them to death by insisting on objectifying them to abstraction. So, the dialogues revolve around deep ecology issues about humans being a part of the environment we inhabit and how we are each related to each other. It's then an organic process of letting the students (and models) develop these ideas for themselves, in their work and in their lives.

I'm pleased to say that things are going well, with some students (from across the MA Arts and Design disciplines) radically changing the way they approach computer based design technology and others rediscovering ethnic arts techniques (Chinese brush & ink). The class is, above all, fun! It's the noisiest life drawing class I've ever attended - people talk and work very hard.

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**4. 1.30 – 4.30 pm Tuesday 30 November**  
**The Model's (Paul Barbour) Story & The Draughtperson's Story**

Stream of consciousness

Ulysses

Embodied mind – mind & body

Narrative

Meditation – suspended internal conversation

If “thinking is form”, then drawing may be found in the dialogue between organisms - or the relationships between people. If ecology is the study of relationships between people, then the dialogue generated by these relationships may be a form of drawing and drawing may be a method of studying ecology. Could the creative activity of drawing/studying ecology be an art?

So, we may ‘draw’ our own future - not predetermined mapping but improvised, inventive drawing – a flexible response to change. Drawing the relationships from which and with which we may creatively intervene.

I then realised that I had touched on a ‘deeper’ understanding of my own research (“Creative interventions: drawing in the art of ecology”) and that despite my geographic separation from the people of Shrewsbury, we are inextricably linked by the deepest concerns to face our species since its creation. [IMAGE 14 - Paul Klee drawing]

So, I had drawn a ‘creative intervention’ to understand the ‘art of ecology’! A drawing with words, a drawing as a metaphor – an experiential<sup>v</sup> shift in meaning – from drawings of water to drawing with water, and the clepsydra drawing in time.

For me, many things fell into place: ‘pattern recognition’ – survival on the savannahs – Zen ‘seeing’ – Leonardo’s understanding of ecology – ‘phenomenological drawing’ – ‘drawing in the art of ecology’ - the concepts of ‘ecopoiesis’<sup>lvi</sup> and ‘ecopraxis’<sup>lvii</sup> – witnessing the evolution of our kind – *species nova*<sup>lviii</sup>.

Sometimes reaching an ‘insight’ is like watching an accident taking place in front of you - everything goes into slow motion but the impact is inevitable – the arrow hits home even if the philosophy takes a while to catch-up. An intuitive improvisation: its like realising a great joy or a terrible secret – Globalisation? Debt? The profit of fear – insurance? It’s important to find expression for such understandings, unlike Charles Darwin (a son of Shrewsbury) who became subsumed by neurotic fear of releasing his blasphemous evolutionary secrets. Adrian Plant, the Museum’s Director, is contributing this area of research to the project. [IMAGE 15 – cliff edge / shoreline]

Meanwhile ... regardless of our monoculture, the sea continually re-draws the land and rivers re-draw their needs, adapting to each situation as it occurs – this is drawing as making / invention and improvisation.

1. Reference: Leonardo’s drawings and writings and the writings of others about his drawings and writings.

After drawing, write what the drawing is about. What were you trying to explore / capture? What is special about the model and his pose? What could you draw and not write? What could you write and not draw? What are the differences and similarities between your drawing and writing styles?

2. Consider a piece of descriptive writing [Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* / *To the Lighthouse*; Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*; Ted Hughes poetry]. What can that writing achieve that drawing cannot, and visa versa? How precise are the marks or the words you use to describe what you see and what you want to achieve? What are the narratives of drawing? How do our stories connect with those of the model?

3. Swap drawings twice and return to your own drawing. How do you let go of your drawing to some one else? How do you take on the drawing of another – style, medium, seeing?

### **DRAW TO A CLOSE: Not a conclusion ...**

[Tai Chi]

the embodied world  
there is no reality  
only perceptions

the embodied world  
drawing water in air  
connecting all life

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<sup>i</sup> De Certeau, Michel. *Pay Attention: To Make Art*. Included in Harrison, Newton and Mayer Harrison, Helen. *The Lagoon Cycle* exhibition catalogue. Ithica, New York (1985).

<sup>ii</sup> MOHOLY-NAGY, S (1989) [quoting KLEE, P (1919-1923) *Paths of Nature* . Yearbook of the Staatliche Bauhaus, Weimar .] *Pedagogical Sketchbook*. Faber and Faber, London

<sup>iii</sup> PIRSIG, R. M. (1991) *Lila: An Inquiry Into Morals*

<sup>iv</sup> HARRISON, HELEN MAYER & NEWTON (1985) *The Lagoon Cycle* exhibition catalogue: DE CERTEAU, MICHEL, *Pay Attention: To Make Art* – Ithaca, New York

<sup>v</sup> LAKOFF, G & JOHNSON , (1980 ) *Metaphors We Live By* University of Chicago Press

<sup>vi</sup> HALEY, D. (2000) "O Brave New World": A Change In The Weather - [www.ub.es/escult/water/tress/haley.htm](http://www.ub.es/escult/water/tress/haley.htm)

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* HALEY (2000)

<sup>viii</sup> HALEY, D. (2000) *species nova: part I - Seeking an Unacceptable Profile* Between Nature International Conference, Lancaster University.