



Imagining Truth: The Role of Drawing Within the Creation of Knowledge

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Drawing and Visualisation Research

IMAGINING TRUTH: THE ROLE OF DRAWING WITHIN THE CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE

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Although it has close associations with art activity, drawing in itself is not necessarily art.

Richard Hickman¹

To the question of the 'cognitive significance of art' I say directly although many works in many arts can and do give us knowledge of many kinds, nonetheless if this knowledge were the key and limit to the love of art, the world would be even sorer than it now is.

Douglas N. Morgan²

Drawing, however, seldom attracts consensus views. Instead it invites frustration or obsession in attempting to clarify something which is slippery and irresolute in its fluid status as performative act and idea; as sign, and symbol and signifier; as conceptual diagram as well as medium and process and technique.

Deanna Petherbridge³

Talking about drawing invariably produces definitions and boundary setting. What is drawing? When does drawing become a painting, sign, map, or part of another reference system or classification? And when is drawing *art*? What value or surplus value does drawing need to demonstrate to make it eligible to be classed as *art*?

Drawing can trigger free association or help to put a wardrobe together; it may guide the way to a place (the map), or inform us of accurate perception and dimensions to scale (life drawing, perspective drawing). Observational and diagrammatic forms of visual

¹ Hickman, Richard, "Visual Art as a Vehicle for Educational Research", The International Journal of Art and Design Education, 2007. Quote thanks to Spike Joyce in an email directed to me generated via Drawing Research Network 18th December 2007

² Morgan, Douglas N., 'Must art tell the truth?', Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 26, 1967, pp 17-27; quoted in Hospers, Introductory Readings in Aesthetics, New York: The Free Press 1969:231; above quote taken from Graham, Gordon, Philosophy of the Arts, An Introduction to Aesthetics, London: Routledge, 1997, p 43

³ Deanna Petherbridge. "Nailing the Liminal: The difficulties of Defining Drawing", in Garner (Ed.) Writing on Drawing, Bristol: Intellect, 2008

communication often intend to convey a form of objective content. Observational drawing may be slipping out of the territory of *art*, and bring other functions of drawing to the forefront: to observe from nature, to create records furnishing empirical demands of scientific methodologies, for example. Within observational approaches the sketchbook plays an important part: sketches fuse concepts with observation and memory, as each sketch takes into account the accumulated memory of knowledge of the object. With life drawing or still life drawing, a schema of the object depicted becomes reinforced and hardwired into the brain.⁴

Observational practices are grounded in empiricism. Drawing which is guided by observation originally formed part of scientific modes of thought developed during modernity, alongside practices like anatomy, natural history and the exploration of plant, animal life and fossils. Drawing visualized records and constituted a form of knowledge; it *produced* knowledge. To some extent the visual, including drawing⁵, continues to play an important role in scientific knowledge production. Other modes of drawing are less clearly defined in their relationship to knowledge; historically much drawing has contributed to the distribution of religious thought, to moral instruction or enlightenment, and thereby formed part of a social commentary⁶. Poetic, metaphorical, symbolical, and other non-verbal forms of visual narratives form part of the way drawing is used as a creative tool for the representation of ideas. Some of these may not be classed as art, being an aid to communication or a form of instruction instead. The division between art and what is not deemed art is not clear-cut: what constitutes art to some does not fulfill criteria for inclusion to others. Aesthetically the demand for truth, or some form of enlightenment beyond mere entertainment, is a well-established aesthetic theory underpinning such an understanding.⁷ Hence drawing qualifying as art, like poetry or the fictional truth of the novel, alludes to a different kind of truth: truth not as ascertainable and measurable

4 See E.H. Gombrich in *The Image and the Eye*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1982. Making a point about painting, Gombrich's premise is equally valid for drawing: "[...] the painter's starting point can never be observation and imitation of nature, [...] all art remains what is called conceptual, a manipulation of a vocabulary, [...] even the most naturalistic art generally starts from what I call a schema that is modified and adjusted till it appears to match the visible world." (op cit, p 70)

5 Edmundo Saavedra Vidal, Lucy Smith, both winners of Margaret Flockton Award, Sydney Botanical Gardens (Source: <http://melissabrattoni-melspumpkinarium.blogspot.com/2011/07/red-box-gallery.html>; anatomical illustration continues to inform scholarly research and teaching in medicine, see <http://www.burtonreport.com/infspine/AnatLatSpinalSten.htm> .

6 Some historical examples: Hogarth, Rembrandt, Ford Maddox Brown, Wilhelm Busch, Picasso. The academic alliance of the visual arts to the Arts and Humanities Research Council is an indicator of the importance attached to the humanities when assessing the merit of the arts as research. The art /science division in funding and academic landscape is nevertheless problematic, some of these problems may be alluded to in this essay, but the topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

7 Gordon Graham in *Philosophy of the Arts* devotes chapter 3 (op. cit. pp 42-63) to the topic of aesthetic cognitivism, examining in how far the imaginative component of the arts can contribute to enlightenment or knowledge as a criteria for judgement of merit. One of the points made is that art deals with the particular, whereas science and knowledge delivers universal knowledge. In respect to the role of scientific illustration this argument does not hold, as observed details are often made to represent the typical (see above footnote 5: examples of anatomical and botanical illustration) - unless a scientific illustration is intended to observe a freak phenomenon, for example Cornelia Hesse-Honegger. <http://www.wissenskunst.ch/en/projekte.htm>.

'objective' fact, but truth as insight into social behaviour, human needs, emotional complexities and dependencies, as well as projections of desire or ideals onto landscape, environment and constructions or reconstructions of history. Moreover, within the fine arts, a self-justifying system of knowledge production has been established, building on the increased importance of autonomy in and of the arts during the 19th and 20th Centuries. However, *arts for arts sake*⁸, (more relevant in contemporary terms is the term *self-referentiality*), remains suspect. Is it possible for drawing to be self-reliant, autonomous from social, moral or other dominant ideologies, including those of scientific and technological systems of knowledge production?

Technological processes may have rendered redundant some of the more traditional functions of drawing as illustration serving the distribution of factual knowledge. Photography first of all, followed by computer visualization, has replaced illustrative drawing to a great extent. However, drawing informs the development of the diagram as a visual mode of some complexity, as the diagram is neither observational nor imaginative, but relies on data (observed or measured) communicated more effectively through a form of visual mapping than verbal discourse.

In his publication *Visual Explanations* Edward Rolf Tufte⁹ explores the role of diagrams and charts as conveyors of knowledge. Diagrams¹⁰ are closer to materialisation or objectification than the sketch due to their anchorage in accepted systems of representation of knowledge. Diagrams logging empirical data are a code comprehensible to an international scientific public and community of researchers. These diagrams become highly dependent on their research contexts, and whilst in aid of solving a problem or answering a question, systemized visual data, (despite Tufte's claim otherwise), do not necessarily replace lengthy verbal narratives, nor provide a shortcut or lesser ambiguity. Diagrams of a scientific kind are highly dependent on a pre- or accompanying level of textual or verbal narrative context (the research question, the problem, the field of enquiry). So they may present at best a shortcut to the initiated, but remain in need of verbal contextualisation to the layperson. In these categories drawing is seen as a specialist language which can be learned, but which behaves according to set rules. The drawn visual diagram facilitates data comparison used by a community of specialists. An example for such a type of comparative chart would be biological or botanical illustration, for example

8 <http://arthistoryresources.net/modernism/artsake.html> offers a good summary.

9 Tufte, Edward R, *Visual Explanations* Cheshire, Connecticut: Graphics Press, 1997.

10 This website derived from Tufte's publication offers a good range of examples: http://a.parsons.edu/~rothe839/fall04/thesis/summer_research/analysis/analysis.html

Graham (op cit, p 51) also devotes a section on the difference between a map as diagram of a landscape and the photograph of the same landscape, analysing their different contributions to knowledge. Both have given us knowledge of the area, to paraphrase, and both were not replaceable with each other.

when a drawing compares the reproductive organs of a range of plant species on the basis of visual analogy¹¹. Scientific drawing is objectifying. It employs constant and replicable methods of visualisation. Systems of measuring have to stay the same to allow for true | false claims. Scientific disciplines like anatomy¹², botany, biology¹³ or archaeology, use drawing as illustration within their conventions, and usually employ numerical systems to convey scale in relation to three-dimensional reality.

Crucial to the question of what role drawing fulfills within the categories of objective, scientific, illustrative or of 'independent' art (autonomy), is its status inferred to it by contemporaries, as well as through historical hindsight. A fine art drawing is categorically distinct from illustration. The latter illustrates other concepts than that of the artist's own making. Yet in art history drawings would often testify to the taste or patronage requirements of the person who commissioned a drawing – state, church, aristocrat, and rising merchant class alike would have exerted their influence on an artist in the choice of subject or even scheme of depiction. Hans Holbein the Younger is no untypical example, his career changed from church artist to court artist due to the upheaval of the reformation. A series of magnificent drawing portraits testify to Henry VIII and other merchant patron's taste and preference of iconography. One can hardly speak of the artist inventing his own subject matter, yet this seems a main staple of requirement in current fine art training, education and artist's professional practice nowadays. Do we discredit such commissioned drawings as not being art, because artist did not have the power to invent their own 'research' territory? Of course we would not do this. Art history also supplies many examples where the artist pursued own interest and subject matter or ideas *alongside* the bread and butter of commissioned art.¹⁴ The difference between illustrative art, and art which illustrates some of the values of its time becomes a matter of degree and relation - all art has been and continues to be subservient to a system of ideological dominance, religious, scientific or other. Perhaps, one may say out of historical hindsight, artists of the type Renaissance individualism gave birth to, (and the market place co-opted

11 Smithsonian Institute: <http://botany.si.edu/botart/> Plant search Lycapsus: example of reproductive organs of plant, comparative chart.

12 Compare for example a website published from a scientific source on this matter: http://www.rsna.org/anatomical_drawings.cfm with a website interested in the history of arts in relation to history and the history of science, as well as humanities: <http://www.hsl.virginia.edu/historical/anatomical/briefessay.html>.

13 Whilst there is a lot of dross on the net, there are also wonderfully refreshing sites, like this one, which takes a polemically critical approach towards James Elkin's interpretation of the discipline of Visual Studies: <http://www8.georgetown.edu/centers/cndls/applications/postertool/index.cfm?fuseaction=poster.display&posterID=3707>. The example of the 'bug' (anon.) is of course relevant. More interesting for illustrating my paper, or the complexities of the relationship between fine art concept and scientific method, is Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, see <http://www.wissenskunst.ch/en/projekte.htm>.

14 Rembrandt, Wright of Derby, Leonardo da Vinci to name a few famous examples; with the advent of Modernism as art movement individual territory becomes a category to separate society artists (Whistler to some extent, Sargent, Klimt etc) from those pursuing their dreams (van Gogh perhaps one of the most extreme examples, Gauguin, Monet... the lot).

subsequently), battled to remain free from being totally enslaved to the patronage of those in charge of the knowledge or belief systems of their time. The desire for *one's own practice* divergent or different from the themes supplied by patrons becomes a hallmark of a sensibility taken for granted in fine art thinking nowadays. Those who could manage to develop a critical subtext within the iconography of a prescribed patron's taste are valued more highly in theoretical or aesthetic terms, than those artist who uncritically reflected the demands for taste and status depiction of their patrons.¹⁵

If some form of autonomy is a requirement to satisfy the category *art* in drawing now, than central to the question of autonomy of the arts is authorship – the role of the human subject. By autonomy I don't mean total independence from social contexts (as high modernism or formalism postulated as an ideal), but a freedom to interrogate and use other knowledge systems for creative purpose or pursuit, or indeed critique. In the context of evaluating drawing in relation to knowledge production, the fluidity of the term *drawing* remains an obstacle.¹⁶

Drawing is a technique, an act, a verb, and a noun, simultaneously. Action is included in its definition. It requires a human subject as author, even if only as point of origin (i.e. automated or computer-aided drawings require data originating from a human subject at some stage, however these data may be mathematical or numerical and may become self-generating). If there is or was confusion as to when drawing becomes graph, diagram or computer model, and whether the automated process renders the idea of artistic ownership redundant, than similar confusions existed during the 19th Century during the discovery of photography as a permanent process of fixing a natural image. Photographic equipment had aided the production of art for centuries (*Camera Obscura*, *Camera Lucida*, *Claude Glass*), so it may become more plausible that inventors like Henry Fox Talbot resorted to the term *drawing* when referring to the negative process. Auto-generation manifests a quasi-religious subtext of this Victorian gentlemen's exploration into the scientific *and* imaginative terrain of invention. Photography is an interesting topic aside, as it combines experimental science aiding a technological process (fixing the image permanently, finding correct and reliable chemicals to do this preferably without deadly toxic side effects), with the imagination and playfulness often associated with the practices of art, craft and design. Like drawing, photography also is now divided into non-fine art 'functions' (factual, documentary, editorial) and fine art photography (relying on the author/creator/artist vision to develop the concept). During the early phases of dark room

¹⁵ Vermeer van Delft, Holbein (The Ambassadors), Velasquez, Goya are examples of artists highly esteemed for their ability to create visual codes exemplifying critical thinking in the conventions of pictorial representation. Drawing, perhaps for its immediacy and relative low material cost, and etching (for reproduction) are more clearly associated with political awareness; the satire (see Goya, Daumier, Hogarth etc).

photography, Henry Fox Talbot refers to the process of *fixing the shadow* as the 'pencil of nature' (*The Pencil of Nature* was published in London 1844).¹⁷ Accordingly photography was considered a form of *drawing* expressed in its name: *photo*, derived from Greek *phos* or *photos* for light, and *graph*, derived from Greek *graphein* for line. Henry Fox Talbot himself referred to photography as *Heliography* (sun's drawing) with the implication that non-human authorship was made explicit through the evidential process of capturing the shadow via human intervention.

Why is the idea of the *ready-made* so interesting or pervasive in the context of autonomy? Partially because modernism's subsequent application of the term to art objects of Dada and Surrealism negates the autonomous authorship associated with the model of the artist as genius and inventor since the early days of modernity.¹⁸ It is such negation of lofty ideals of truth or autonomy that informs much of contemporary fine art drawing. If some of the Victorians thought of photography as a *ready-made* drawing of non-human (divine or natural) authorship or origin, so in modern art, for different reasons, artists had become preoccupied with the *ready-made* (see Man Ray's photograph of dust gathering on Duchamp's *Large Glass*¹⁹). What were those different reasons, I wonder? The art historical canon prescribes that the very invention of photography liberated fine art to find its own objectives, its own *raison d'être*. In standard accounts²⁰ of the history of modernism this led to a rapid development of styles from Impressionism, Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, and the more analytical mode of Cubism. Conceptualism (1960s onwards as movement) broke traditions of high modernism's ideals of non-objective representation of truth through abstraction. Conceptualism also reconnected with Dada and Surrealism, through the investigation of chance encounter and non-conformism. Dada's autonomous object rather than the autonomous artist became a reaction *and* a conclusion of art creating and simultaneously questioning its self-asserting status. Surrealist practices draw heavily on claims to access the subconscious (inspired perhaps rather less-autonomously through the reliance on psychoanalytic theory, hypnosis or drug use).

Prior to Dada and Surrealism artists attempted to find techniques for accessing the unconscious through parlour games, drug use and hypnosis, 18th Century artist Alexander Cozens used subconscious interpretation of accidental mark making and promoted this as his *blotting technique*.²¹ Here within an automated or semi-automated process of mark

17 The University of Glasgow keep a facsimile – see also the webpages on: <http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/month/feb2007.html>

18 Modernity here equates enlightenment, modernism a movement and style within the arts.

19 <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/69.521>

20 Honour/Fleming A world History of Art London: Macmillan, 1984 ; Hughes, Robert The Shock of the New, London; Thames and Hudson, 1991; Chipp, H. Theories of Modern Art Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968 (to name some of the standard literature in that respect).

21 http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/a/alexander_cozens_blot_landscap.aspx

making, structure and form is sought which can then be related back to generate forms of representation. In summary, whilst above drawing processes remain doubtful agents to reveal unconscious thought (as they provide no scientific evidence), such intuitive mark-generating techniques may help to free up a habitual language of drawing, and refresh or counteract the stale conventions of established visual academic language. More so, the playful, or quasi-playful interaction with processes of mark making or drawing, creates an understanding of drawing as art which is not in the service of contributing to knowledge, but emphasizes the individualism of creative production, idiosyncratic, only obeying its own rules invented by the artist alone. If autonomy can be defined as *making one's own rules*, than this seems a strong aspect informing 20th and 21st C drawing practices developed for the initiated public or viewer, (perhaps lesser so for the general public).²²

When talking about “Pleasures of Boredom” in his essay on four centuries of doodles, E.H. Gombrich makes the ‘creative urge’ responsible for activities such as marginal notes, doodles in meetings, and other absent-minded activities, not necessarily exclusively practised by artistic minds. The collection of doodles found in ledgers of Banco di Napoli (17th and 18th C) show that doodles were an acceptable social activity. Gombrich divides the distracted²³ activities of the scribes into two kinds: one “derived from writing, the other from image-making”.²⁴ He creates a link between the unskilled boredom activities of Renaissance and Baroque bank scribes to artists like Dürer and Leonardo, and then closes the loop by relating the skilled doodles of artists to the untrained activities of outsider art and ‘primitive’ tribal art, which influenced in turn much of 20th C art. Surrealism through the catalyst of psychoanalysis would have been formative as an agent of change of status for the doodle. E H Gombrich’s tacit disapproval of the de-skilling of contemporary art is note-worthy, but in the end makes little difference to the argument presented: dating back to 16th C Italy these scribbles prove that visual thinking and unconscious or absent-minded image making has formed part of the human psyche for generations in history. It was not called art and was not intended as art.²⁵ Doodling, scribbling and other unself-conscious

22 However, the latter is contestable in the sense that museums in particular take on the role of mediating contemporary arts practices to the public.

23 Gombrich, *The Uses of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication*, London: Phaidon, 1999: “[D]oodling tends to occur while one is either ‘unoccupied’ or in a state of distracted attention, i.e., when the ego is fully occupied with something else.” (op cit, p. 222). Doodles are a form of displacement activity according to Ernst Kris (ibid, p. 223). Gombrich expands on this in the following section (p. 224) when he investigates the various functions doodles can perform, perfectly acceptable to him for aiding imagination, concentration or as a form of play, but remaining unconvinced by doodles as a sole form of diet to feed to training professional artists.

24 Gombrich (op cit, p.213). Unfortunately all these marvellous ledger’s drawings are copyrighted, but it is easy enough to find Dürer’s and Leonardo’s marginalia online. See also interesting essay by David Maclagan “Beyond the doodle” on <http://www.escapeintolife.com/essays/doodle/>

25 It would be a different matter if those scribes asserted their activity as art, however, which infers that a degree of conscious attribution, including self attribution as being an artist, contributes towards whether we call something art or not. (Back to the ready-made).

drawing activities speak of creative imagination, which is a key driver in contemporary drawing. Gombrich points out that Leonardo advocated ‘using all the approaches’ to stimulate creativity, advising students to seek *form in accident*. However, one needs to be cautious here - if one examines Leonardo’s ‘scribbles’ closely, most of them are either mathematically constructed or derived from observation and based on an empirical foundation, but rarely random activities. And here the loop closes, as experimentation, the free and random experiment, is a type of method of chancing on discovery which is shared by the non-applied sciences and the arts. To be able to repeat an experimental discovery makes the findings worthy. This holds true for science (to make the result part of universal knowledge) as much as for the professional practice of an artist (Max Ernst use of *frottage* and *grattage* as example here – informing an artist’s style and invention). And this is also where the analogy stops, as the objectives and reasons for carrying out the experimental research activities are not congruent. Drawing techniques like the *grattage* don’t contribute to empirical knowledge, but they may contribute to an enhanced understanding of the complexity of the human mind, its motivations, associations and emotional make up.²⁶ The role of the subconscious imagination has not left us cold. It has fed into the culture industry from the days of Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945) to Kathryn Bigelow’s sci-fi drama (*Strange Days* 1995), and continues on.

Imagination forms part of the knowledge the artist brings to the understanding of the world and the personal environment. Imagination is irreverent and refuses to obey rules. This includes the rules modernity has imposed on what constitutes research or knowledge. This very irreverence of the artist’s mind becomes even more subversive if cloaked in skill. Skilfully presented *non-sense* intrigues us. Edward Lear expresses the tension between knowledge and irreverence beautifully in his illustration of the alphabet. The letter A stands for Apple, which also exemplifies Newtonian laws of gravity.²⁷ We have been indoctrinated by such *truths* including the illogical ‘nature’ of language, and the teaching of language with method, from our school days.²⁸

The level of skill with which Dürer turns marginal scribbles into ornaments in the *Prayerbook of Emperor Maximilian* (1515), creates a link with medieval monk’s illuminated manuscripts, where the grotesque visual description of beasts, fable animals, and floral

26 This leads of course to the use of drawing as something to analysed by the scientific gaze or in the service of psychology or psychoanalysis: Collections of drawings by the ‘insane’ were valued for the insight these gave to the human mind (*Beyond Reason Art and Psychosis: works from the Prinzhorn Collection*, London; Hayward Gallery 1996). Ehrenzweig in the *Hidden Order of Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1967) investigates drawings, doodles and musical annotations, applying psychoanalytic theories mingled with scientific ones (de-differentiation).

27 ‘The letter A’, Drawing, Edward Lear, (poss 1880) Victoria and Albert Museum, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/images/image/14406-popup.html> (accessed 13/1/2012)

28 Foucault tells about such indoctrination methods of modernity in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault, M, *Surveiller et punir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975 (*Discipline and Punish*, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon, 1977).

scrolls forms a subtext to an otherwise unrelated mainstream narrative of biblical story telling. Dürer's beasts in the marginalia are polite 'classicised' versions of mediaeval bestiaries. Marginalia are a particular plotting technique: the main narrative becomes destabilised by a second narrative frequently humorous or subversive.²⁹ These are 'cultured' forms of doodles, but the systematic and consistent application of what looks like a scribble turns these into a different category and elevates them into the status of art.

I am interested in the idea of drawing's status as *marginalia* – being marginal or off centre to the dominant knowledge or other production machines of the contemporary 'developed' world. Indeed most contemporary fine art produced for the public gallery endeavours to make the public think, question and consider aspects of the world taken for granted. This may be done through humour, sensationalism, shock tactics, intellectual pursuit, and most of all by posing questions through art, which are difficult if not intentionally impossible to answer. Is fine art drawing to continue in this role of backbencher mentality? To form a *marginal* sub-narrative, a subversive take on the established categories of knowledge and art, the certainties of the modern world?

Lucy Skaer's work is contemporary, drawing-based, and works with familiarity and de-familiarization. Whilst it seems to ask a lot of questions of the viewer, it does not provide any definitive answers. In that sense Skaer operates within a conceptual tradition, linked with the subversive practices of Dada, but also with the poetic dimension of Surrealism. Lucy Skaer's³⁰ drawing of a whale's skeletal bone makes perhaps some allusion to evolutionary time (see below), it certainly engages with systems of objects re-interpreted through drawing, fusing this intellectual (or conceptual) pursuit with the eclectic and idiosyncratic visual language more typical of so called 'outsider artists'. Her drawing approach is more *Prinzhorn Collection* than *Academy of the Arts* (i.e. self-made, 'knitted' drawing style, creating her own vocabulary, not obeying set conventions in drawing styles). This irreverent style of drawing has become main stream in the contemporary revival of drawing. Publications like *Vitamin D*, *Drawing Now* etc³¹ include a plethora of drawing styles, but none conform to academic or naturalistic practices. Naturalism would only be possible if this were to frame conceptual thought through an iconoclastic reading of an academic convention, as a paraphrase in inverted commas perhaps. Such examples of paraphrasing would be Adam Dant's Jerwood Prize winning entry of an *Anecdotal Plan of Tate Britain* (2002)³², Christine Mackey's use of quasi-scientific diagrams³³, Chad

29 See here also: <http://www.culture24.org.uk/history+%26+heritage/literature+%26+music/art49743>

30 <http://www.doggerfisher.com/artists/artistdetail.php?id=58>

31 Downes et al (editor) *Drawing Now: Between the Lines of Contemporary Art*, London: Tauris, 2007; *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, London: Phaidon 2005.

32 <http://195.194.24.18/jerwood/archive/2002/winners/dant.htm>

McCaill's³⁴ adoption of a quasi-visual communication style of drawing, all for very different personal objectives, subverting objective drawing languages through imagination and deviation from the norms investigated or toyed with.

But if the intention is subversion of the dominant paradigm, questioning of universal knowledge claims, and single-strand meaning, what value does fine art drawing bring to human knowledge of the world? Regardless as to where to position the beginning of such subversive intentionality, (indeed above section on doodles throws up considerable doubt as to the privileged role of artists in this matter), it seems clear that philosophical questioning is a key aspect of a category of drawings, which do not aid ease of communication but complicate it, which do not solve problems, but create additional ones, which do not illustrate a dominant narrative, but de-stabilise the notion that such dominant theories can be valid or truthful. It is doubtful that drawing can be autonomous from its social and cultural contexts and conditions, but can it create its *own* knowledge rather than being subservient to that of other dominant ideologies or disciplines of its time?

Smithson's seminal drawing *A Heap of Language* (1966)³⁵ is underpinned by a philosophical concept: time is constituted as human and superhuman, with their distinct narratives. Human civilisation and its productions, including the masses of texts generated throughout civilisations been and gone, are inevitably superseded by time and destruction, here represented as a quasi-geological layer of sedimentation. Smithson's drawings may look like scientific diagrams, or charts, but they adopt such visual languages as a veneer to questioning objective truth or knowledge, adopting scientific concepts about the origin of matter and its destination for a future as destabilising agents for a human centred world view. (As with Foucault's critique of systems of knowledge, the point remains that it is the human perspective which is attempting to create a standpoint outside itself or one's own cultural vantage point, so to say – a paradoxically impossible situation).³⁶

Brian Fay's drawings explore the ravages of time as expressed in the finely cracked surface textures which one can observe on ancient surfaces of paintings and other iconic art productions (celluloid film)³⁷. A series of his drawings are based on X-Rays made of Vermeer van Delft's paintings, for the purpose of logging the destruction of time and pollution for conservation reasons. Dematerialisation and transformation of cultural matter into otherness is also the theme of Ortero-Pailos, whose ready-made print / drawing on

33 <http://www.christinemackey.com/drawings.html>

34 www.chadmccail.co.uk

35 http://www.robertsmithson.com/drawings/heap_p104_300.htm

36 A point made during seminars in Philosophy when studying Foucault taught by Beatrice Han, University of Essex (2000/2001).

37 http://www.radicul.org/?page_id=107

latex of the surface of a heavily polluted ancient wall has become an exhibit of the 2009 Venice Biennale.³⁸ I can see a connection between Smithson's project and the borrowing of scientific methods for an artist's own idiosyncratic projects of deconstructing human-centred knowledge and value, and that of Skaer, Fay and Ortero-Pailos. There are parallel intentions at work, of those of contemporary and 20th C thinkers who have questioned the certainties of modernity, empiricism and a pursuit of truth, and that of conceptually challenging contemporary drawing and art. I am not claiming that Adam Dant, for example, is *illustrating* Foucault, nor that Smithson was interested in a consciously taken deconstruction of modernity. Reading Smithson's own texts, he was fascinated by scientific concepts, which he personalised and adapted to his own ends, and subverted into a theoretical subtext – that of entropy. He was also interested in bygone civilisations like that of Aztec and Maya cultures, and in future science, that of science fiction.³⁹ The point is that artists don't *need* to be systematic or logical, conform to knowledge systems provided by other academic disciplines, yet they can contribute to knowledge, via scepticism, humour, play and irreverence as well as through sheer imagination and fantasy. They don't even have to understand the theoretical or scientific contexts they are *pilfering*, at least not on scientific terms, but instead artists offer a different cultural perspective. Artists understand sufficiently to want to comment, to disassociate, to question.⁴⁰

Leonardo da Vinci's effortless analogical switching from observational data into inventive engineering shows a rare historical point where the drawing as art works hand-in-hand with science contributing and making new knowledge.⁴¹ Perhaps contemporary drawing re-asserts the need to be a (co-) author of knowledge, to offer a critical perspective on claims of objectivity.

Deanna Petherbridge points out that contemporary fine artists refuse to conform to demands of universally intelligible visual production, "drawing's ability to be a shared and participatory tool of non-verbal exchange is considerably suppressed."⁴² She holds responsible post-modern and post-structuralist relativist positions for contemporary artist's distrust in universal truth. Such is deemed indicative of complicit participation in systems

38 <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/jorge-otero-pailos-and-the-ethics-of-preservation/21139/>

39 Robert Smithson's writings edited by Jack Flam: Robert Smithson: the collected writings, Berkeley: University of California Press, c1996.

40 Indeed it is questionable that artists did – did the Futurists really understand Bergson? The Cubists the 4th dimension? Did Smithson really understand entropy? Hesse-Honegger is a different matter here as she was trained as a scientist.

41 Since then the two disciplines have grown more and more apart, and perhaps only now, in the early 21st C attempts are made to make the disciplines reflect on each other, though it is more the arts reflecting on science than the other way round!

42 Deanna Petherbridge, "Nailing the Liminal: The Difficulties of Defining Drawing" in Garner, S., Writing on Drawing, Bristol: Intellect, 2008.

of control or order.⁴³ Post-structuralism has dismantled claims of unambiguous meaning, which rely on evidential proof to uphold their privileged position to hold knowledge⁴⁴. In contemporary visual art meaning is complex, multi-coded and constructed symbiotically with the viewer/ recipient. Petherbridge is outlining a distinctive quality of conceptually-led fine art drawing: the wish to escape easy co-option into a market place and into the mainstream of accepted belief systems. The collector's market in turn has created a desirable fetish quality of this refusal to participate, a trademark linked with celebrity cult status of artists, distinguished for their status as shakers or movers in the history of art. Like rare species, in their evolutionary aberrancy the most idiosyncratic artists of the 20th and 21st C become preserved species in the collections and archives of those who crave status legitimised by educated taste.

Contemporary conceptually grounded fine art drawing subverts systems of references. Underlying this is the critique of materialism and of its systems of knowledge production. The failed or failing knowledge production machine has become the hallmark of the critique of modernity: the desire for function epitomises the desire of modernity; disfunction lays bare the pathology of this desire as a system error.

43 The sceptical interrogation of modernity is Foucault's subject pursued in *Discipline and Punish* when analysing Jeremy Bentham's panopticon as apparatus of surveillance, for example. In the *Order of Things* Foucault traces the preoccupation of classification and systems of measuring as part of a hierarchy of rationality imposed through modernity. The psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan question the modernist gaze as developed during the Renaissance period by infiltrating the rational gaze with the subversive and irrepressible force of desire (*Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*).

44 However, it is doubtful that a potential but unlikely infiltration of art theory taught in European art schools has such a direct effect on artist of today. Rather than advocating an quantitative research study into this matter, I propose that the 20th and 21st century has a tenor of scepticism towards any universal truth system, which artists, or in this case drawing, communicates through its own discipline.