

A story about a drawing

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MA Fine Art, 2018

Abstract

This story about a drawing narrates the inner world of the page and its populace of lines, their struggles and their peace, and how all this internal drama hangs contingently on the vast physical and historical world that it is a part of. The story is extrapolated from video essays in which I film myself hurriedly attempting to verbalize fragments of the accelerated decision-making process accentuated by my flitting wrist while drawing. *Talking Drawing* is a method of historical restoration taking place at the site of the moving hand that questions what its choreographic inheritance has to say about the plethora of semantic decisions explicit in the drawing.

There turned out to be very little I could glean of my hand's wisdom; it scarcely seems attached to me, so possessed is it by the gestures of other artists, those I have never met and many of whom were dead long before I was born. But just as sagas, which through a few stories retold by narrators excavate a genealogy of Nordic heroes and outlaws, the hand that draws is the hand that lives to tell the tale of those that came before it. The singular drawing as narrative, as history, is considered here as an iteration in an evolution concerning hands, eyes and lines spanning enormous timescales of innumerable individuals. This enormity is emphasized in order to appreciate the economy of a drawing, which contains all this

history effortlessly, and whose ingenuity far surpasses my imagination. The following account, both technical and narrative, attempts to locate points at which the pragmatic approach in drawing appears inseparable from semantic concern and meditates on the relationship that these decisions have with the identities of the artist, her ghosts and readers of drawings.

Keywords

line

empathy

drawing

signification

text

habit

script

embodiment

Drawing as a narrative

Here is a story about a drawing. Like all stories (and all drawings) it is not imagined out of nothing. The story of this drawing was told many times, and has a deep history extending long before I was born. Because it takes time to make a drawing, whether regarded at the scale of a singular drawing, the entire *oeuvre* of its maker or the history of drawings at large, narrative can accompany a drawing quite fittingly. Narrative can draw attention to the drawing's temporality.

To tell this story, I first made a *Talking Drawing*. I filmed myself making a drawing, all the while attempting (with much difficulty) to speak aloud a continuous report of the nebulously quick decision-making process taking place in the conditioned muscles of my hand. The text to follow is an edited transcription of this live video account.¹

It seems to me that when drawing is narrated, or performed, it is very hard to ignore the dance of the hand: whether in a time-lapse digital drawing or when Picasso paints on glass in the 1956 film made about his process, *Le Mystère Picasso* (Clouzat). It is a chance to consider a perspective on drawing that is less about the drawing as an image and more as a choreography – implicating the body. To remember the hand in a drawing is to remember that it is a practice, involving minds and bodies spanning many generations of *oeuvres*, and that the historical lineage of any drawing is overwhelmingly pervasive, that in fact my hand movements are learnt, as are the nuanced meanings attached to their correlating marks that give way to such expressive potential in the medium. A great many hands have danced in their time, and they continue to do so in mine.

To tell this story is to trace the historical lineage of the drawing in question by means of a kind of archaeological restoration taking place at the site of the moving hand: to ask what those movements have to say about their own origins (as Foucault might ask of statements in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) – searching for the historically constructed ‘rules’ underpinning meaningful sentences). This is to look at the drawing as – not inevitable – but to some extent determined by the drawings that

¹ The video for this narrated drawing, and others, is available on my Youtube channel under the ‘Talking Drawing’ playlist at <http://www.youtube.com/user/KatDrinkTea/>.

surround it contextually, historically, an expanded notion of authorship as readership.²

² An idea famously raised by Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay, 'The death of the author', in which he places emphasis on reading and interpretation as the site at which meaning is reckoned. This opposes the more traditional view that meaning is *inserted* into a text at the moment of writing, by the author, which is problematic because it imposes a fixed notion of meaning that is not compatible with the diversity of interpretations that always spawn from a text.

The idea is taken further by philosopher Jacques Derrida in the way that he writes, anticipating in his own text that it will take the acknowledgement of the other, or the future, to determine what his own text does. The author is just another reader, the drawer another spectator, because the author reads what she writes and the draughtsman watches what she draws, hence the formulation 'authorship as readership' above.

Derrida echoes Barthes in his 2002 essay, 'As if it were possible, "Within Such Limits"...'

It is like a postcard whose virtual addressee will have to decide whether or not he will receive it and whether it is indeed to him that the card is addressed. The signature is left to the initiative, to the responsibility, to the discretion of the other. To work itself [*au travail*]. One will sign, if one signs, at the moment of the arrival at destination, not at the origin.

In the videos I wonder aloud how it is that a single line can so expressively assert its personality; why this line reads as pompous and robust and the other reads as flimsy and insecure. As drawing maker I identify all kinds of lines and drawings that I have encountered before, from Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* (2000) comic strips to Da Vinci's drawings of deluges, and whose language I see seeping into my own. In that sense it is possible to think of even improvised 'doodles' such as the one under discussion here, as inscribed, or scripted, by historical predecessors, and indeed that this contingency is a precondition for its ability to carry meaning. A drawing repertoire is a manifest script worked out from a general evolution of hands and lines and reading, a culturally and biologically hereditary trace. This is the trace that, in this narration, I attempt to read, or parse parts of, aloud.

Even so, as has been of particular interest to me in other work,³ the script underpinning my hand movements when I am drawing, the habit and the bio-cultural lessons instructing them, if left to work, will produce novelty. This itself is not a revelation, especially to artists. In Cally Spooner's collected performance texts *Scripts* (2016),⁴ she comes to the same conclusion via one of her script's characters:

³ See my article, 'Unborn lovers: Scripting for agency', Curating the Contemporary, <https://curatingthecontemporary.org/2016/05/02/unborn-lovers-scripting-for-agency>.

⁴ *Scripts* is a collection of texts and performances that take a life of their own through personifications of her theoretical texts (footnotes, actors, editors and authors are all characters that battle it out with interpretations of texts she is reading, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'Indirect language and the voices of silence'.

Eloise: It's the 24th of November 1859, and complete newness is a dreadful modern fallacy. I know, because I checked.

There are only ever new formations and very old material and this is perfectly fine by me. Absolute newness arrives through absolutely new deviations, which means that novelty is a repetition, and an inaccurate replication; the same thing, performed again and again, in a very different way each time.
(2016: 24)

A drawing practice is not just any script, but a creative script, one designating unforeseeable results, a deterministic surprise, and although this seems like an oxymoron, we are accustomed to this idea of a creative script in genetics, from which we learn that a pair of twins with the same DNA script grow up to become two profoundly different people. It is in this sense that an understanding of social identities as constructed, or scripted artworks that can never be 'completely new', can hardly be regarded as pessimistic or reductionist outlooks on free will and creativity.⁵ In other words, as was pointed out to me, *Le Mystère Picasso* retains the word 'mystery' in its title, even after scrutinizing every angle of Picasso's method with the camera. I am fascinated therefore by artworks that investigate their own mechanics, such as the work of contemporary Dutch artist Hedwig Houben, who moulds lumps of clay and talks about what is happening in her hands and in the clay

⁵ Something for which post structuralist thinkers such as Judith Butler or Jacques Derrida are often unfairly criticized, that their emphasis on the fluidity of identity, ethics and meaning should relinquish responsibility by virtue of no fixed, universal standards.

in her performance lectures. In these, any explanation seems only to lead to more bafflement.⁶ Understanding creativity as formulaic may not therefore undermine the mystery of the results that it produces. I am surprised as much as anyone about what happens in the story about my drawing.

I have been using terms pertaining to historical studies and conservation such as ‘restoration’, ‘archaeology’ and ‘genealogy’. In relation to this I have come across an artist collective, Teaching and Learning Cinema (comprised of Louise Curham and Lucas Ihlein), who are interested in the challenge of archiving works of Expanded Cinema of the 1960s and the 1970s – works famously impossible to reproduce without ‘missing the point’, given that they relied so heavily on their ephemerality. The artists’ suggestion is to make ‘scores’ for reenactments of works of Expanded Cinema, and that these pared-down instructions (what I have called scripts) may serve as more faithful archives of Expanded Works than photographic or filmic documentation.⁷ I am interested in how this approach of a ‘living archaeology’ may be useful even when thinking about apparently static artworks like drawings. Emphasizing their temporality in this article is a means of conceptually loosening the drawing from its stasis and seeing it float in a historical continuum.

⁶ See my article ‘An empathetic affair: The embodied practice of Hedwig Houben’, Curating the Contemporary, <https://curatingthecontemporary.org/2015/12/21/an-empathetic-affair-the-embodied-practice-of-hedwig-houben/>.

⁷ Visit the Teaching and Learning Cinema website at www.teachingandlearningcinema.org.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the drawing that I am making in this story follows a particular approach within my practice called 'Empathy Drawing'. As mentioned above, I am struck by the way in which lines, whether in commune or in isolation, seem to have a character, a personality, and the line's propensity to soak up characteristics and insist upon them with every point along its body is something that I am investigating in my research. Not only in drawings do lines exhibit this property of 'character absorption'; the line of a guitar string for example, once plucked, takes on a certain shape, and the tone with which its sinuous wave sings is its 'character'. It is as though the line is that very shape that offers itself up to becoming other shapes – a characterless entity that can accommodate any other character.

In Empathy Drawings such as the one narrated below, I am attempting to take advantage of the idea that a line can hold qualities, and because my hand is attached to those gestural traces, the idea that I can assimilate my personality to theirs, or, empathize with the lines. This means that as I draw I am regarding the lines as prosthetic extensions of my body, or 'wearing them', like a skin. The Empathy Drawings are usually not particularly figurative (although sometimes they are) and yet my experience on the page is as though I am soaring through its space, as though I am the lines that I draw. I find pleasure in it because I can masquerade the line's qualities as my own and feel like I have become something else. To draw again a comparison with choreography, I think this is what a dancer might feel about their own body as a medium. This body is trained and stretched into a nimble line that can then break into a great variety of characters and allow the dancer (and, as will soon be seen, anybody watching him or her) to become *other*.

This kind of 'empathy' on the part of the artist towards the medium is a mirroring that in any case is quite integral to the experience of looking, and can be recognized in a portraitist who reflexively contorts his or her face to assimilate with the one that they are drawing.⁸ It is in fact this empathetic looking (or listening) that I think draws closer the agencies of 'reader and writer' in Barthes' sense. Empathy Drawings as a method simply approach this empathetic feature of what I think may be common to all drawing (and looking) in a deliberate way.

The opportunity to live in the lines and become 'other' presented by the hand-eye coordinated loop of authorship-readership presents an opportunity for the artist to appease certain artistic desires that I refer to as 'jealousies'. In this case my jealousy is the frustrated pleasure that I feel in watching someone else draw or in seeing lines themselves that make it irresistible for me to attempt to replicate what I imagine to be the experience of making that line. The following story is about a drawing, told by my wrist, translated by my mouth.

A story about a drawing

The drawing in question features two competing lines: the Red line and the Blue line: two inks, two colours, two opacities, two densities, two tools inviting discriminate

⁸ This is a phenomenon that I have noticed only in myself and the few others I have observed drawing, and it may be interesting to conduct a more extensive study of the facial expressions of portraitists and whether these indicate an emotive assimilation towards the subject of the portrait. As for the empathy implicit in any form of looking, see Winerman (2005).

handling. I like using the red pen: it feels thick, archaic, heavy. I like using the blue ink: it is thinner, and the lines feel airy, slippery, translucent.

At the beginning, the clean page is charged with potential, a plot upon which certain qualities promise to take root. Before even touching it I have approached the page with this spatial-semantic understanding/prejudice. It is the space in which I am going to be, and it has an up, and a down. There is a sense of gravity, and the bottom of the page invites weight.

The initial cluster of marks made on the paper is an appreciation of the medium itself. Lines appear, their alluring liquid bodies presenting themselves as inevitable fixations of my jealousy. I proceed to invest myself in the body of the line. Using the blue ink, I begin to 'branch out': winding tentacles of line become corporeal extensions with which I probe a virtual world in its becoming.

Figure 1: Katarina Rankovic, *Talking Drawing: Coinciding Futures*, 2014. Video (still), 33 min. Note: Although parts of the drawing are highlighted in coloured felt pens, this story focuses only on the schism between inked blue and red lines due to a specific interest in the properties of lines. The video, however, does comment on the reasoning in the colouring.

Embodying the line is a liberating pursuit of ability. In moving with these lines I contemplate a future as yet unpictured upon the page, and like other evolutionary systems, I want to keep my options open. As a mathematical logic of incremental unravelling that tends to crop up in vastly disparate scenarios, branching out is a

strategy opted by systems as diverse as my meandering lines, biological genealogy and trees extending themselves to drink in the sunlight. Each branch of line suggests possible futures upon the charged plasma of the page, across which projections of fate begin to coincide from all directions. Maintaining ambiguity in the future of the drawing is an attempt at repressing the burden of a mark and its connotative meaning within the emergent web of signs upon the page, which is to say within its expanded contextual meaning derived from all the other lines that I have encountered, from Rembrandt's etchings to the marks on an aeroplane runway. A singular line opens a grand conversation with its historical predecessors that is far noisier than what can be encapsulated by a phrase in a Talking Drawing.

Where a certain logic emerges in the architecture of the Blue lines increasingly beginning to dominate the page, the dense and stubbly clusters of Red lines associate themselves with something of a counter-logic. When the Red and Blue lines interfere, so do the respective structures of their reasoning. Sometimes they cooperate: The Red line outlines and adheres to Blue structures that it encounters, in a graceful, obedient resonance with the Blue's (acquired) distinct character. But sometimes the Red lines disrupt, infiltrate or sabotage these structures, by defiantly scribbling themselves straight on top of what previously lay there, or creeping into crevices of Blue lines with their imposing skeletons. Then they once again simmer back into obedience, an ebbing and flowing of conflicting arsenals of mannerism denoted by the materiality of one line or the other ensues. The challenge here, then, I think as I draw, is to maintain a measure of conformity and coherence that pulls together a nuanced string of anomalies and violences that manifest in modulating systems of logic such that these can be contingent upon one another and gain value

by coexisting in a common framework. The Red and Blue lines are part of the same universe, but follow different ideologies, and in this they declare their own character against one another.

Figure 2: Katarina Rankovic, *Talking Drawing: Coinciding Futures*, 2014. Video (still), 33 min. A moment in the drawing where the blue line was dominating.

In the spirit of maintaining my own freedom within the drawing, I use either line to disrupt a settled logic: where one line dominates, the threat of monopoly prompts a guerrilla attack by the other. The proceedings bear resemblance to those of a child playing with toys on a carpet, alone in a room. All at once, the child leads conflicting military factions, making zealous soliloquies on the part of alternating sides. The same child elicits multiple voices in a game in which delight originates from the staging and restaging of elaborate schisms, being this guy and then that guy, or being killed only to be reborn with a vengeance. There is no notion of winning a game that is based on this (enabling) logic of self-contradiction that keeps alive the spectacle of eternal dispute.

Like the role-playing child, on video I catch myself 'voicing over' the lines made in the drawing, saying things like, 'I am going to be stealthy here' or 'I am going to be obedient here'. I continually breach the code of conduct assigned to me by previous lines. Red/Blue, heavy/light, hairy/stringy, fleshy/skeletal. As mature structures emerge from either faction, I develop 'area-specific jealousy': a jealousy of either line, a longing to inhabit that line. On the recording I lean towards a bare zone on the page and announce, 'I feel jealous in this area'. In devising stratagems for resisting

the very logic underpinning my own marks, I seek out methods of relieving myself from the burden of their connotative meaning. 'I'm operating in double lines', I explain at one point, referring to parts of the drawing that adopt the language of 'sketch', to once again make room for ambiguity. The sketch marks out a margin of variability in the form of multiple lines that signify the same boundary. The sketch says, 'this is a generalisation, not an explicit delineation'. The direct manner in which these fluid significations are wired with the manneristic movement and habit in my wrist accelerates the process of unfolding mutual signification within the drawing.

Figure 3: Katarina Rankovic, *Talking Drawing: Coinciding Futures*, 2014. Video (still), 33 min. The hand moves like a ghost.

Adding to this complexity, however, is the transformative feature of performativity and repetition that affects not only the provisionally fixed identity of signs but also the identity of the one producing the signs. In addition to accelerating the emergence of difference between signs, habits and mannerisms implicit in making drawings short-circuit the relation between jealous desire and the prosthetic extension of the paper-bound body lent by the medium of the line. The draughtsman finds herself embodying her line. She is smudged across its unravelling gesture like the elusive pixels of movement in a blurry photograph, her reality thoroughly implicated in the very displacement of her being. In the performance of line making, therefore, it is not only the identity of a mark that is simultaneously consolidated *and* recontextualized, affirmed *and* reformed, but also that of the one who is embodying the line. Unfolding alongside the trajectory of conflicting lines, drawing becomes an arena for shape

shifting. In Empathy Drawing, one asks not 'what am I going to draw here', but, 'who am I going to be here?'

Figure 4: Katarina Rankovic, *Talking Drawing: Coinciding Futures*, 2014. Video (still), 33 min. There is nothing but prosthetics. Look at all the bits and pieces dangling off this mechanical marionette: hands, hair, cables, pens, feet, page, lines, floor, ceiling. In Empathy Drawing, all this paraphernalia becomes one being.

Contributor details

I am a London-based artist and writer concerned with wriggling into my own work and wearing it like a second skin. I work in jealous drawings, a one-woman empathy circus, a novel about a 'lethargic line' and fake Youtube tutorials.

Recent works involve a series of theatrical scripts written with the intention of being 'run' like programming code or 'expressed' like genes, through the iterability of performance. My MA research in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins explores the open-ended potential of "blind scripting" and the programmability of creativity and self-governing systems.

www.youtube.com/user/KatDrinkTea

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