**The Thinking Line: Defining Drawing**

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To draw is to pull. One draws a plough across a field as one draws a splinter of burnt wood across a cave wall or a pencil across a sheet of cartridge paper.

The simplicity of this action, our familiarity with it as a mode of expression, means we rarely consider the strangeness of this instinctive urge to make marks at all. Drawing is a primal act.

Electricians and carpenters draw, as do as artists, architects and children. But drawing is more than simply a transcription of thought, the articulation of an idea. It is also an encounter. The hand encounters the pencil, or stick of charcoal; this tool encounters a surface. It is a silent grappling with materials, a form of strife between what the mind envisions and what the hand is capable of wielding. Strife is struggle but it is also striving, a movement towards something; whether a response to the naked being of the life model or the answer to a riddle involving electrical currents and connections. John Berger (1987a) described this encounter as a “ferocious inarticulated dialogue” (p.77). Berger rightly understood drawing as a ‘dialogue’, a back and forth between hand and eye, between eye and object. The marks on the page are revised according to other marks on the page; according to the unfolding of the idea, or slow apprehension of the visible.

In his essay ‘Drawing on Paper’, Berger (1987b) tells three anecdotes, each describing a mode of drawing. They may not be intended as a complete theory, but these categories are useful when thinking about drawing.

The first anecdote speaks of an experience of drawing the life model. This mode of drawing is observational; “...the lines on the paper are the traces left behind by the artist’s gaze” (p.47). The convincing rendering of a perception is commonly seen to be the result of skill or technique, but experience demonstrates that it is actually to do with seeing, perhaps what Roger Fry (1920) described as the “disinterested intensity of contemplation” (p. 21). It is to do with how the gaze interrogates appearances; ‘disinterested’ rather than emotive. One can look at the whole of nature with the same gaze. However, Berger (1987b) indicates that there *is* something emotive in drawing from the life model; “I learnt to question with my eyes a little more probingly the mystery of anatomy and love” (p.44). We respond to flesh differently to the way we respond to cold marble.

The second mode is drawing as a form of communication, a back and forth between two people who speak different languages. Everyone can draw to communicate, but not everyone can draw a likeness well. A drawn circle containing a line and two dots represents the notion of a human face as much as a naturalistic portrait. The ability to render a literal likeness is the biggest nuisance in the game of Pictionary; the game is about matching motifs with concepts through the most economic means. A schematic representation matches our conceptions, just as the written word refers to our inward storehouse of pictures; “...we look through a window onto a man’s capacity to dream up, to construct an alternative world in his imagination” (p. 48). This visual vocabulary crosses linguistic boundaries but still requires a shared understanding, just as spoken language does.

Thirdly, there is drawing from memory. Here Berger muses over an unsettling drawing by Picasso. This drawing, he feels, is a kind of exorcism; drawing as an expression, drawing as self-analysis, drawing as catharsis, “...to take an image once and for all out of the mind and put it on paper” (p.49). Such private, sometimes impenetrable images may still be a kind of dialogue: but a dialogue with oneself. Thus the possibility of art as therapy, or self-knowing, is opened.

We may see elements of these three modes in one work. We may identify other modes of drawing. There are certain abstract drawings about process and the nature of the materials themselves; graphite, charcoal, chalk, ink, blood. A drawing might make a point about how it has started from nothing, the nothingness of the unmarked sheet; how it is a generative thing which grows and diversifies through motion. As Paul Klee (1920) once said, “When a dot begins to move and becomes a line, this requires time. Likewise when a moving line produces a plane, and when moving planes produce spaces” (p.184). This is not merely Klee’s trademark technique; a drawing is always the action of taking a ‘line for a walk’.

There is another kind of dialogue which takes place in an exhibition - that between work and spectator. The more we look, the more we have to adjust our understanding before the work. The work demands something from us and we respond. The circular act of interpretation takes us beyond the mute understanding of the visible. Discussion and criticism translates the visible into the linguistic, into understanding. For many artists in the Twentieth Century, particularly since Marcel Duchamp, it has been the spectator who completes the work, who provides meaning. Even in private works, artists stand as spectators before their creations; they analyse, criticise, interpret and in some sense discover themselves.

This is an exhibition of both the celebrated and the obscure. The breadth of work from Christ Church staff and alumni and from the British Council collection seems to defy the need for categorisation. And yet there is a human need to order and interpret objects in the world, as there is in the urge to draw. Thus, as curators, we have sought to encourage active engagement in the process of interpretation. In the entrance to the exhibition, definitions of the verb *to draw* are presented, providing a starting point for thinking. There is a participatory chalkboard to encourage the development of a working definition of drawing, or perhaps to do a drawing. Here we may challenge the dictionary definitions in light of the works and the works in light of the definitions. But the root of the word brings us back to the physical action of *pulling* a tool across a surface - the physical action of thought.

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