

DRAWING IN THE AGE OF DISTRACTION

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The aim of this paper is to explore how pedagogically drawing can be used as a means of slowing down the speed at which students observe & look.

It is through drawing that we explore the world around us - it is the simplest form of communication, allowing one to articulate often, complex ideas in visual form. Especially for students it offers a space to allow their ideas to gestate - to visually think, outside of the constant pressure for immediate visual gratification.

The act of drawing is a slowing down of time. Through observation, enquiry, and self-reflection the process of drawing is trying to understand a subject. This daily practice allows one to explore ideas or subject matter over time. A process of enquiry that is important to fully understand your own practice.

In my own practice I use drawing as part of the research methodology & as Polish poster artist Henryk Tomaszewski referred to as 'professional hygiene' in sustaining enquiry through drawing.

Beyond the material outcome of drawing workshops, they play a vital role in slowing down students - providing an environment to explore through drawing comprehensively, rather than grazing imagery on the Internet. Time seems especially important - to have reflective time beyond the multitude of distractions that avail us in modern life.

Because of the Internet a student can easily access contemporary art without necessarily understanding it, or learning it in the appropriate order. The same can be said of observing the world around us & having something to say in the work. A gestation period seems very relevant to allow students the time to develop a visual language that is both personal & sustainable.

"Distracted from distraction by distraction"
T.S. Elliot

In my time as a lecturer on the BA (Hons) Illustration course at the University of Brighton I've gradually noticed a change in recent years in how students engage in drawing. Awareness of drawing techniques or styles is very apparent & fed in many ways by access to work via the web. Whilst this may not be an obvious problem, the way students access images today makes it necessary to re-adapt how we teach and the importance of drawing. Not simply as an outcome but primarily as a learning tool to concentrate and focus. Students are being bombarded all the time with images without the previous contextual background of how they came about, or the wider art historical significance of the work. It is within the act of drawing that we can slow down the world?

In an age where the digital is all pervasive, the very technology can be argued is effecting how we consume information and how we think. In Nicholas Carr's 2010 book 'The Shallows' he explores how the Web has effected the way we read. How in depth reading of books has been replaced by scanning, of the search for keywords & hyperlinks rather than concentrated reading. He points out that "Our use of the Internet involves many paradoxes, but the one that promises to have the greatest long-term influence over how we think is this one: the Net seizes our attention only to scatter it. We focus intensively on the medium itself, on the flickering screen, but we're distracted by the medium's rapid fire delivery of competing messages and stimuli. Whenever and wherever we log on, the Net presents us with an incredibly seductive blur." This sense of gratification of images, especially in the context of blogs such as 'It's Nice That' has speeded up the search for the 'new'. Perhaps even the very way we consume images has accelerated as we look for the 'new' everyday?

The sense of value that we place in images, our perception of images is changing as questions of authenticity affect the very way that we live. To recall Guy Debord's 'Society of the Spectacle' our consumption of images has confused us. Is influencing how we relate to one another, as we come to terms with our virtual self. The Internet frames images in such a way that it becomes more difficult to define a sketch from that of a finished drawing in this world proliferated by web based portfolio platforms and blogs. Indeed images lose their metadata after re-blogging 3 times on Tumblr, leading to questions not only of copyright but also our value of such images. The accessibility of visual information has widened our reference points but also homogenize the work that we do? The digital has accelerated the dislocation of what Walter Benjamin referred to as the 'aura' of a work of art. As he stated in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' – "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."

Ziming Liu, a library science professor at San José State University, found that "the digital environment tends to encourage people to explore many topics extensively, but at a more superficial level," and that "hyperlinks distract people from reading and thinking deeply." We perceive images differently within the digital? Whilst digital photography has led to us taking many more photographs, how many times do we actually look at our iPhoto albums? Images are perhaps more transitory now, so requiring focused sessions to help re-acquire the uniqueness of the object itself, both in terms of appreciation and in the participation of drawing as an activity.

The Swedish neuroscientist Torkel Klingberg has written that we tend "to seek out situations that demand concurrent performance or situations in which [we] are overwhelmed with information." Part of the brain's way of looking for anything visual that breaks a pattern, a means of alerted us to anything out of the ordinary that might possibly pose a threat? Perhaps an in-built scanning system that seeks to perceive differences around us, so we seek new information constantly in the everyday.

Distractions are not necessarily always a negative attribute or universally bad for us. Research by Ap Dijksterhuis, a Dutch psychologist at Radboud University in Nijmegen, has indicated that distractions can be the mind's trick to offer up time to grapple with a problem. His experiments have indicated that, "We usually make better decisions... if we shift our attention away from a difficult mental challenge for a time. But Dijksterhuis's work also shows that our unconscious thought processes don't engage with a problem until we've clearly and consciously defined the problem". Therefore a kind of self-reflection induced by the timeline of a drawing. The South African artist William Kentridge has referred to the need for distance, or perspective from the drawing whilst in the act of creating it. The analogy of stepping back from the easel whilst drawing, as a means of pondering, taking a different viewpoint, self-reflection, or as Kentridge puts it gathering the psychological strength to draw the next line, make the next mark.

It is also less about the technique of the drawing, the finished outcome, but more about the process of drawing. The looking involved within the action of drawing, the decision making, committing to a mark on the paper, correcting at each point as a form takes shape, the editing involved. Illustrator Ian Wright alludes to drawing being akin to writing. As with each sentence, each drawn line affects the previous one. You build a structure through the process of writing or drawing that requires time and concentration. A regular practice is vital to keep the momentum and to attune to the sensory act of drawing. Perhaps akin to an athlete training everyday, building up reference points and a visual language. David Levy, in his book 'Scrolling Forward' explores how our reading has been affected with the migration of printed matter into electronic documents. He makes the point that there are many kinds of reading, some as a glance, street signs and menus. Whilst at other times there is a lengthier engagement, a novel takes more duration and commitment. Similarly should not the university be a space to cultivate drawing as an activity of engaging with imagery at a greater depth? Drawing is the primary means of communicating without use of words, and can be used for a whole host of visualisations of ideas, concepts, narratives, and emotions – processed through a personal visual language.

Rather than acquiring a skill or technique of drawing it is the process in itself that is important, more than the finished artwork or eventual artifact. John Berger states, "A drawing slowly questions an event's appearance and in doing so reminds us that appearances are always a construction with history." Later in the book 'Berger on Drawing' he goes on to elaborate, "To draw is to look, examining the structure of appearances. A drawing of a tree shows, not a tree,

but a tree-being-looked-at. Whereas the sight of a tree is registered almost instantaneously, the examination of the sight of a tree (a tree-being-looked-at) not only takes minutes of hours instead of a fraction of a second, it also involves, derives from, and refers back to, much previous experience of looking." It is also the basic form of communication, of understanding through images how things work, of expressing emotions that we can identify with.

At a time when students have a wealth of information at their fingertips, the pressure to be constantly connected can be paralyzing for students. Drawing workshops provide the opportunity for lengthy investigation of a subject matter, but perhaps only if students leave their smart phones outside of the classroom? Anecdotally it has become apparent in recent years, whilst teaching, of the impact of performance tables within education and how undergraduate students are finding it difficult to develop an independent practice, when not given a project to do. The lack of personal sketchbooks also, I may suggest, is evidence of a lack of ownership within their creative practice? The acknowledgement as well that drawings are a journey, not always a destination. Albert Camus once said, "A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened."

The importance of drawing within the university is not about turning the clock backwards against digital technology to some halcyon day of dusty life rooms drawing studios. Education should embrace digital in combination with the analogue. As Turner Prize nominated artist Dexter Dalwood talking at the London Art Book Fair 2011 in Whitechapel Gallery, for a discussion entitled 'Elegant Gloom' he stated that, 'Young people need to look forward and not learn the skills of the past.' It is how students can use various tools to express ideas, emotions, a point of view, opinion that is probably most important. Writer Sam Anderson stated in his New York magazine article "In Defence of Distraction," in 2009 - "It's too late to just retreat to a quieter time." We have to accept the changing needs of students and find new ways of challenging beyond drawing as novelty, or as fashion. We change in the way that we live and as Friedrich Nietzsche sensed 'through the tools that we use.' In the case of Nietzsche his writing changed with the adoption of a typewriter – his prose according to his close friend, the writer and composer Heinrich Köselitz, observed that his prose became tighter and more telegraphic. Students need to deploy a range of techniques, media and processes to help creativity. Often it is through process that you can disengage from the perfect. An acceptance that experimentation, and more importantly failure is a vital part of creativity and the learning process without the burden of perfection.

The exhibition "A Bigger Picture" by David Hockney at the Royal Academy in 2012 revealed the potential for drawing when it embraces technology. It was not only the use of iPhones or iPads in rendering drawings that was significant, more importantly how their use informed Hockney's practice when using traditional materials. The use of this new technology stimulated him as a tool enabling a stronger graphic edge to his drawings of the Yorkshire landscape. The touch screen on iPhones and iPads are backlit, resulting in a bold graphic language to them, that you could see influencing Hockney's paintings. Always an advocate of technology Hockney has referred to his use of the digital as, "Anyone who likes drawing and mark-making would like to explore new media... Media are about how you make marks, or don't make them." He later went on to comment about the restrictions imposed on the drawings by using such technology, "Limitations are really good for you. They are a stimulant... After all, drawing in itself is always a limitation." The digital is simply another medium to express oneself through drawing.

As a greater range of tools become available to artists the question of what exactly your practice is, or what you want to say becomes paramount. The Turner prize-winning artist Grayson Perry has spoken much regarding digital media, in how it throws the question back to the artist as to what they want to say in the work. In conversation with Decca Aitkenhead at the Guardian's Open Weekend in 2012 he stated that, "I'm not a Luddite concerning digital media. One of the interesting things about digital media is that, because of the vast menu choice it offers, you can literally do anything with it in some ways, it throws back onto you (the artist) what it is you want to do. Whereas if you are given the stub of a pencil to make some art, you've got to make a pencil drawing basically." How one is creative is very personal, and is something brought to the craft of the drawing act.

Now there are limitless digital media in which to articulate your self, a well-grounded visual language becomes important. Drawing allows ideas to gestate over time without the instant

gratification that the digital allows. Jon Wozencroft, the Graphic Designer & founder of Touch, an independent multimedia publishing company, has talked about the space needed for ideas to be nurtured in the studio space rather than the isolated 22inch screen environment. Also about the notion of value within work as opposed to the immediacy of the digital, "The process of creation always starts in a room, a space in which to think, to create."

Brian Eno talking about the act of reading from the screen said, "What is missing is sensory seduction and narrative pull" to this mode of reading. Perhaps it is in the authenticity of drawing that we see this narrative or history? The cognitive act of drawing, as with reading, is about looking and the tactility of the act. Nicholas Carr makes the point on reading, "The shift from paper to screen doesn't just change the way we navigate a piece of writing. It also influences the degree of attention we devote to it and the depth of our immersion in it."

Sat with my final year students conducting tutorials in the past year I began to notice that they use the desktop of their laptops the same way that I had used a physical divider at my desk ten years previously. Rather than pinning postcards, photocopies etc on a piece of studio architecture, they do so on their digital equivalent. Multiple windows opened during tutorials including the prerequisite Facebook and YouTube, students switch effortlessly between messaging to their friends and discussing their latest project. Pinterest epitomises this content sharing phenomenon of social networks, of sharing one's life in the virtual. In tandem with this digital interface the need to slow down through the act of drawing seems vital. To concentrate over time the act of looking, enquiring and questioning - important at a time when the 'ping' of an incoming text or email can avert our attention. The painter Michael Raedecker has talked about his own work needing to 'slow the image through craft', and that seeing the mistakes within the drawing produces a tangible connection for the audience, that imperfections remind us of the making the artwork.

According to Nicholas Carr in studies of office workers in the United States it is not uncommon for people to check their inbox thirty or forty times an hour. We have an array of platforms to communicate through, Text Messaging, Email, Facebook, Google Chat, Skype, RSS feeds... All active wherever we may be, and whilst that may free us to work from anywhere, it also means that we are constantly checking. As attention spans are seemingly shortening it becomes ever more important to create time away from the immediacy of digital communication, to the slower activity of drawing.

Nicholas Carr makes the point that, "The Net is, by design, an interruption system, a machine geared for dividing attention. That's not only a result of its ability to display many different kinds of media simultaneously. It's also a result of the ease with which it can be programmed to send and receive messages". Perhaps all that we need to do is re-set the frequency that we check for incoming emails? In an age of multi-tasking we need to slow down and train our brains to take one activity at a time without distractions.

Internet usage has rapidly increased over the past decade with findings indicating in the Forrester Research, entitled 'Consumers' Behaviour Online: A 2009 Deep Dive,' that "... people in their twenties were spending more than nineteen hours a week online. American children between the ages of two and eleven were using the Net about eleven hours a week in 2009, an increase of more than sixty percent since 2004. The typical European adult was online nearly eight hours a week in 2009, up about thirty percent since 2005".

A 2008 international survey by TNS Global, entitled 'Digital World, Digital Life' indicated that of 27,500 adults between the ages of eighteen and fifty-five found that people were spending thirty percent of their leisure time online.

According to the Social Times 2011 info graphic entitled "How Social Media is Ruining Our Minds" over the course of the last ten years the average attention span has dropped from 12 minutes to 5 minutes. In this YouTube generation advertisement have to catch the viewer's attention within seconds to sell, and the rise of the 20 second film format on shopping websites to sustain dwell time indicate a lessening of attention. This information revolution presents modern life with a correspondingly lowering of attention. In 1971 the economist Herbert A. Simon wrote succinctly about this future struggle, "What information consumes is rather obvious: It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it."

But this should not necessarily be seen negatively - In the New York Times Magazine 2010 article entitled 'The Attention-Span Myth' writer Virginia Heffernan counters this suggestion by saying, "In other eras, distractibility wasn't considered shameful. It was regularly praised, in fact – as autonomy, exuberance and versatility. To be brooding, morbid, obsessive or easily mesmerized was thought much worse than being distractible".

Drawing has to go beyond technique or the acquisition of such skills for their own sake. Artists need to have ideas beyond the skill of drawing – to say something. We need to go beyond a certain middle class notion of technique prevalent at the turn of the century. A time when there were highly skilled travellers making watercolours whilst on the Grand Tour – Representations of what they saw without commenting or having a point of view. Not all art needs to be formalised within the institution. It is perhaps pertinent to remember that Quentin Tarantino didn't go to film school – unconventionally he learnt from watching films whilst working at a video rental shop. Tarantino's filmic language was developed through the obsession of looking. Dexter Dalwood has also made the point, "I think you have to love painting to study it and spend so much time doing it and looking at it. It's a bit like Martin Scorsese or Quentin Tarantino ... they're obsessive about watching and making films. I am obsessive about looking at and making paintings."

The Internet can be a great resource for knowledge. And yet with the proliferation of examples of art on the Internet, some students do become seduced by technique, or an aesthetic without any historical context of the art that they see. The analogue can quickly become a 'style' a 'look' in an age with a ferocious appetite for images. Paul Morley, the music journalist, has said that this fashion for the analogue may be a sign of modern anxiety over the rapid pace of the digital in our lives. However these can't perhaps account for the rise of people wanting to enrol onto art courses, to attend life-drawing sessions. A scant glance at the bookshop at Tate Modern demonstrates the multitude of titles for learning to draw, such as the phenomenally successful title by Betty Edwards' 'Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain' - a course in enhancing creativity and artistic confidence. Perhaps further evidence of people's need to return to something real, or as social activity? At the London Art Book Fair 2011 Young Kim, former collaborator with Malcolm McLaren, talked about the proliferation of live events, perhaps as an antidote for most of our communication & social interactions being virtual – concerts, print fairs, art openings, conferences and talks, are very popular and perhaps a search for the authentic?

Winifred Gallagher, the author of 'Rapt', a book about the power of attention has suggested that the increase of neuroscientists investigating Buddhist's meditation shows this to be an activity beneficial in strengthening concentration and attention. She later says, "Once you understand how attention works and how you can make the most productive use of it... if you continue to just jump in the air every time your phone rings or pounce on those buttons every time you get an instant message, that's not the machine's fault. That's your fault". So acquiring responsible skills helps to counter the myriad visual stimuli that surround our modern lives. Perhaps drawing is an antidote – a chance to slow the pace of life? Martin Heidegger saw our engagement in "meditative thinking" as vital against the technological overload. He was later to observe that there was a, "tide of technological revolution" that could "so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking."

Finally it was Marshall McLuhan who in response to a previous new media called television was to state, "When a new form comes into the foreground of things, we naturally look at it through the old stereotypes. We can't help that. This is normal, and we're still trying to see how will our previous forms of political and educational patterns persist under television. We're just trying to fit the old things into the new form, instead of asking what is the new form going to do to all the assumptions we had before." This assumption that you do the same thing with new technology, that print culture is linear, compared with new digital technology that zigzags.

In an age of uncertainties in life, beyond the single linear career path, we need to adapt to new forms and technologies. Students need to learn to both embrace the 'new', but also to find time for traditional working methods within the act of drawing. Finding time to look properly, through the activity of drawing.